

Time to Forgive?

OMNIBUS: 'WRITERS ON THE RIGHT', SUNDAY 6 MARCH? BBC 1

FROM THE START we might have guessed what was coming. The safely-established Richard Baker quoted someone else's maxim that "there's no such thing as right-wing art". Then there was a mention of Zenith Books re-issuing *The Flax of Dream*. Then we saw the gum-booted figure of Dan Farson striding over the Burrows, to a background-reading of Henry's prose. We were told the old, old stories: the First World War, the Christmas Truce, the flight to Devon, the early struggles, the success of *Tarka the Otter*. Benevolently, Richard Adams spoke of the influence of that book on his own *Watership Down*, then went on to praise Henry's concern for the survival of wild life. Then we heard about the proposed rally of ex-soldiers in the Albert Hall, the telegram to T.E. Lawrence - and now the real, the tendentious shape of the programme began to disclose itself.

Henry admired Hitler - shots of jack-booted Nazis, shots of Hitler in one of his most demagogic moods. Henry flirted with the BUF - shots of Mosley marching, Mosley shouting, Mosley waving his arms. Frederic Raphael came on at his most sanctimonious. No glittering prizes here for Williamson! Raphael related one of the most harrowing stories about the concentration camps, as one who should say, "This, by implication, is what Williamson condoned". Williamson believed that Hitler was the only true pacifist. Williamson was hoodwinked by the glamour of the Nazi rallies of 1936. Williamson dedicated *The Flax of Dream* to "the great man across the Rhine". Williamson was naive. Williamson looked for simplification, for someone "to do it all for him". Williamson was a "political escapist". Williamson was "ludicrous and obstinate". Quite a surprising amount of mud-slinging for a programme billed in the *Radio Times* as an argument that "it is time to forgive the politics and re-assess the writer".

Dan Farson was not allowed to help much. Right at the beginning we were shown again that awful dust-jacket, and much of what he said was a mini-version of parts of his book. I was saddened that the questions he put to a little company of some of our best-loved and hardest-working members were so tame, so impossible to respond to on the spur of the moment and before the unblinking stare of the television camera, as they crowded together in the little writing hut. Stephen Clarke was not permitted to expatiate on why, at the age of 14, he felt that Williamson's writings had altered his life. (The programme was about politics.) George Heath was quizzed as to the importance of Williamson's political stance to members of the Society, not his importance as a distinguished and neglected author. At this point I was tempted to parody Roy Campbell:

You analyse his awful politics
(He was a dreadful blighter!)
The blackshirt and the otter-lover mix,
But *where's the bloody writer?*

Towards the end there was a faint attempt to adjust the balance. Thank God Stephen had the opportunity to mention Henry's "compassion". And someone wondered if Henry's indifference, as a creative writer, to the political implications of what he so obstinately defended was no more than a tired man's idealism, a hope that Britain and Germany might be exemplars of the brotherhood of man. Henry, we were told, would have driven off with a pitchfork any Germans who attempted to invade his farm. So that was all right. He loved England, after all! He would not, as Ezra Pound did with Mussolini, have sold himself actually to work for the enemy.

"Time to forgive"? Richard Baker seemed to think not, reminding us yet again, in the fade-out, of what he was pleased to call "that infamous preface". Dear committee-members, you hadn't really much of a chance! It isn't time, yet, to forgive. And whilst Henry, one of the most outstanding writers of his generation, a skilled practitioner of powerful, moving, and refined prose, a man whose humanity and vulnerability meet us on so many pages of his major novels - whilst Henry has friends like this producing programmes for the BBC, he won't need any more enemies. But those who still wish to chide and castigate and condemn should also remember the sobering proposition that Hamlet put to Polonius: "Use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping?"

RONALD WALKER

Following the showing of the Omnibus programme, the Chairman of the Henry Williamson Society, John Glanfield, wrote a formal letter of complaint to the Complaints Commission of the BBC. The letter appears overleaf.

The Henry Williamson Society

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The Complaints Commission
British Broadcasting Corporation
Broadcasting House
Portland Place
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28th March 1983

Dear Sirs,

I write on behalf of this Society to make a formal complaint to the BBC over its treatment of Henry Williamson, in the Omnibus programme shown on 6th March.

We are a literary organisation dedicated to the study and promotion of Williamson's writings. The Society has no political interests or motive. We believe the programme will have seriously misled very many viewers who are unfamiliar with the author's fine work, save for 'Tarka'. Its ill-researched superficiality was an insult to Henry Williamson, and to all who still value objective scholarship in the appraisal of writers and their literature.

This respected Arts programme elected to give a strident political account of a writer of international standing, incredibly omitting even a brief reference to his ample formative writing in the chosen context. Viewers were thus denied the basic information, without which they could neither understand nor evaluate the processes by which Henry Williamson arrived at his wrongheaded political beliefs.

Such disregard in a critical review is contemptible, and reduces to absurdity the integrity of the programme and its sponsors.

The general tone of the presentation was typified by its repeated punctuation with film of Hitlerian ravings. These considerably exceeded in duration the 70 seconds allocated to the single extract from Williamson's writing, itself a nondescript choice, in a total running time of some 25 minutes.

Williamson's voice was given an accompaniment of some Nazi band. The end result of this selective and overheated polemic, and perhaps its purpose, was to submerge a lifetime's outstanding literary achievement beneath a one-dimensional presentation.

When BBC assistance was sought from the Society, we were led to believe that the programme aimed to give a rounded view of this writer and his work, with special reference to the reissue of his 'Flax of Dream' sequence. Our Vice Chairman was asked to produce a selection of extracts for readings.

It is a customary courtesy for BBC interviewers to preface recording sessions with a general indication of the direction of questions. This did not occur when Society members attended for a long interview in Devon. Instead, the very first question was an enquiry as to the Society's concern about Williamson's politics.

The recipient was quite unprepared for this, in attempting an answer, and we share his feeling of exploitation. Indeed, a false and damaging ambiguity resulted, with the possible inference that the Society may have political inclinations. The interviewer was well aware, as also the Director, that this was not so, but no attempt was made at the editing stage to rectify the matter.

Intelligent critical analysis of Henry Williamson's literary and political motivation has been published increasingly since the 1950s. It was ignored.

Similarly overlooked were those who knew and understood Williamson, and who could have interpreted his sometimes perverse genius, in intellectual rather than journalistic terms.

On any objective appreciation, we feel the programme displayed a meretricious and trivialising treatment quite at odds with the BBC's normal standards. Since much damage will have resulted, we ask for an early opportunity to discuss a further programme for broadcasting in the near future on a less hysterical level.

Yours faithfully,



J.A. Glanfield
Chairman.

cc · Mr Alan Hart, Controller BBC1.