

Secretary's Notes

DEVON - OCTOBER 1982

Sun and blue skies - 'Williamson weather' as we have come to know it - at last deserted us for the first event of the Autumn Meeting, a walk in the Deer Park beside the River Bray to Shallowford. Rain driven before a westerly gale faced a hardy and determined band led by Mrs Loetitia Williamson and Margaret Bream. River keepers in the pub at Stag's Head reported a reasonable run of salmon, but I heard no reports of any seen during the walk; hardly surprising as the river was colouring and rising fast. Despite the weather the walk was voted a success and clearly must be repeated on another occasion.

Later some seventy members met in Georgeham and after the business of the Annual General Meeting much enjoyed a discussion led by Dr Wheatley Blench who had persuaded two lifelong village residents, Mr Bill Brown and Mr Bill Jones, to come along and tell us of their memories of Henry's early days there. It was most interesting to hear them confirm something long suspected, that the events depicted in the Devon books were closely based on fact, and his characters faithfully and sympathetically drawn from local figures. Although names were changed, many villagers would easily have recognised themselves and hardly have taken exception to their mirror-images. One suspects that the warning said to have been passed about, "Doan ee zay owt to Mr Wisson or e'll 'ave ee in one of uz books", was not taken too seriously. Mrs Williamson later confirmed that many of Henry's stories were based on fact, and as a Devonian herself it was good to hear her defend the dialect employed by Henry, sometimes criticised for inaccuracy and invention.

Following another excellent buffet prepared by Irene Jones and her lady helpers of Georgeham, it was time to introduce the established West Country writer, artist and poet, Brian Carter, who for many years has been an understanding and sympathetic admirer of Henry Williamson. In a memorable talk it soon became clear that his love and enjoyment of nature and his native Devon countryside, especially Dartmoor, is very much akin to that expressed in the best of Henry Williamson's own country writing, and that equally he observes that world with a keen and sensitive, but unsentimental eye. Like many others, Brian Carter believes that only strict conservation will save the ever dwindling wildlife and its habitat that we hold so dear but which, through greed, carelessness, ignorance and an unthinking attitude, we allow to be destroyed. He also talked with much feeling about his own writing and how a lifetime of patient study and observation had helped him, he hoped, to present a realistic and faithful picture of the creatures he writes about, not least the much maligned fox. Indeed, a Dartmoor fox is the central character in his first novel, which has enjoyed success both here and in America.*

* A Black Fox Running, J.M. Dent, 1982.

Warm applause from an enthralled and appreciative audience signalled the end of a talk, the memory of which will long remain with those who heard it.*

To end the evening it was a great pleasure to welcome J.H.B. Peel who, although not fully recovered from a severe illness, had insisted on keeping this engagement. A writer of many country and travel books, and a poet highly praised by his peers, Mr Peel, who lives in a cottage perched high up on the edge of Exmoor, gave us an authentic glimpse of this wild and beautiful country that he knows so well, and of some of the characters in its history, and of others he has known personally. We learned some of the history of Exmoor interspersed with anecdotes told in what was afterwards declared to be the most perfect old dialect, the audience kept captivated and often almost in tears from laughing. We were all most grateful to Mr Peel for speaking to us when less than fit, and to his kind neighbours, Mr and Mrs Musche, for providing his transport to and from the meeting.

That, alas, was all; or almost so: for a finale Alan Bristow sang one of his own songs to the guitar, and was joined by the audience in another before retiring to the hotel for further refreshment and much talk.

A provocative seminar on Sunday morning, led by David Hoyle, on the success or otherwise of *The Pathway* drew a large audience, many of whom went on to visit Ox's Cross and the writing hut where the fine and accurate rebuilding of the roof, painstakingly done by Tony Evans, was admired. A few souls, including your reporter, walked on Putsborough Sands, an exhilarating experience that was not marred by stinging sand and spray and a final torrential squall driven before a westerly gale. After a quick change, inland and up to Ox's Cross for a short communion before a log fire in the little hut - scene of so much creation - while the gale boomed and roared in the trees outside.

OX'S CROSS - THE WRITING HUT

The remaining work needed fully to restore the hut - new exterior elm-board cladding, replacing windows and so forth - will be completed by early summer when the interior will be refurnished as nearly as possible to the state it was in when last in use. Members are welcome to visit the hut at any time during the summer, but please make prior arrangements as detailed in the circular distributed last year.

It is hoped to arrange a 're-opening' of the restored hut during our autumn and Annual General Meeting to be held during the weekend of 15-16 October 1983 in Georgeham.

*Brian Carter himself writes about the Georgeham weekend in this issue.

\$Tony Evans writes in this issue about his work on the writing hut roof.

COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUE - LEWISHAM

Plans are now well in hand for the supply and installation of the plaque at 21 Eastern Avenue ('11 Hillside Road') and the formal unveiling is provisionally arranged for a date during the spring next year. A full Society function is not proposed for this event, but naturally all members who can attend will be most welcome. Final details will be circulated to all members well in advance of the event.

FILMS

Film producer and director David Cobham (*Tarka the Otter*, *The Vanishing Hedgerows*) tells me that a series of Jack London stories he filmed in Canada in 1981 has been bought by Channel 4 T.V. and will be shown in this country later in the year.

BOOKS

As members will already know, Zenith Books are issuing a new paperback edition of *The Flax of Dream* during 1983. Publication dates are:

The Beautiful Years and Dandelion Days - 10 March (£2.50 each)

The Dream of Fair Women - 26 May (£2.75)

The Pathway - 15 September (£2.75)

A small item that may be of interest:

Tarkina the Otter by John Goldsmith. Pelham Books, 1981. pp.vii,
37. Illus. £4.95

Do not be put off by the title. For older children, this little book tells of the rescue of an orphaned Scottish otter cub and her growth and rise to stardom as the young Tarka in David Cobham's film. Grahame Dangerfield adds some facts, and maps the tragic decline of the otter during the past two decades. The book contains photographs, and most attractive water-colours by Ken Turner.

And two books by Society members to be published later this year:

In the Dorian Mode by Brocard Sewell. Tabb House, Padstow. Illus.
July 1983. £17 approx.

John Gray, the subject of this biography, has intrigued Fr Sewell for many years. Of humble origin, Gray as a young man was taken up by Oscar

* Brocard Sewell (ed.) John Gray and Andre Raffalovich, a Symposium, (*St Albert's Press*, 1963) and B. Sewell, Footnote to the Nineties: A Memoir of John Gray and Andre Raffalovich (*Cecil Woolf*, 1968).

Wilde and became one of the most successful *fin de siècle* poets and was renowned in society as one of the most attractive young men in London. Later he became a convert to the Catholic faith - as did many of his contemporaries - into which, having finally renounced the temporal life, he was ordained a priest, becoming a Canon towards the latter part of his life. This book will be published on the fiftieth anniversary of his death.

The War Walk: A Journey along the Western Front by Nigel Jones.

Robert Hale, October 1983. pp272, illus. with maps. £9.95 appx.

This will be the first published book by Nigel Jones, currently working as a journalist with the Press Association. The author has been fascinated for many years by the First World War and the book tells of his 400 mile walk along the lines of the old trenches as a personal pilgrimage. It will also discuss the military and political background to the war, and record the reality of trench life as related to him by 35 survivors, British, French and German. The author has a high regard for the war novels of Henry Williamson.

FUTURE MEETINGS - PROGRAMMES AND SPEAKERS

From the Society's inception members have been urged to contribute their own work for inclusion in the *Journal*. A glance at back numbers will show how successful and enlightening this policy has proved to be.

Just as important are the two weekend meetings arranged for members each year. The consistently high attendance at all our meetings to date has shown how popular they are as events where members may meet and get to know each other. Before the Society was formed I am sure that many of us believed we would never meet anyone whose face would light up with knowledge at the mention of the name 'Henry Williamson'. Now we have met many such people, and often found a great deal more in common after meeting.

Clearly too, the programmes devised for each meeting, which the committee has tried to make as varied as possible, have been much enjoyed, judging from the same faces which have appeared at every meeting. However, there can be no resting on laurels; the committee exists to serve the membership, and your views, suggestions and criticisms are needed to direct meetings in the way you would like to see them go. Do write to me with any suggestions or comments you may have.

Just as the *Journal* has revealed much writing talent in our membership, so do I feel sure that there are others who could speak at meetings as some, by no means all professionals, have done in the past. A glance at past programmes will show the diversity of subjects chosen for lectures and talks, and providing the subject-matter has some relevance to Williamson, the arena is open for anything from a formal paper to personal reminiscence. If you might be willing to stand before a friendly and informal audience, please let me know.

J.H.