ONE MAN'S WILLIAMSON

Bryan Wake

ON A DAY OF RARE AUGUST SUNSHINE in 1979 I returned from a visit to Georgeham churchyard to sit in the garden of my sister-in-law's house, a short half-mile below Ox's Cross.

Rabbits moved cautiously in and out of the hedge tangle across the shallow valley. A family of three buzzards circled widely overhead, their calling strange to my East Anglian ear. It would have been easy to relax into a confortable dream of Tarka, of Chakchek and of my old favourite, Nog. But I had more urgent ideas in mind, impelled by thoughts of the extraordinary chain of coincidences which through thirty-seven years had brought me to this place. For me, *the* place. The irony of arriving too late to meet the man in person, the regret for several missed opportunities, had combined with the spirit of the place to break at last the feeling of inadequacy which had always held me back. I had now determined to write an appraisal of Henry Williamson as a writer of our time.

I was not hopeful of success. I had preached his worth to friends at school, to fellow students at university, to colleagues in a variety of workplaces. I could remember no one who knew of him other than as a 'nature writer'. I knew many who considered themselves cultivated in a literary sense, well versed in the wry convulate humour of Waugh, the soprano intellectuality of Angus Wilson, the labyrinthine politicking of Snow and the elegant triviality of Anthony Powell, but who has not even heard of the *Chronicle*. I seemed alone in my enthusiasm, which had grown in me from childhood through to middle-age, and unlike so many enthusiasma of youth had been fed by a mature, sometimes aggressive strength by my own experience of life. I was, of course, professionally neither writer nor academic, and utterly unknown. No matter, it was what I had to do. So I sat down that day to put a few words on paper as an outline for future work.

Our Devon holiday passed. We returned home to a daughter's wedding and to daily work. Every so often there was time to add something to my brief notes, and for intensive re-reading.

There must be many others in our Society who, like me, thought themselves alone in their appreciation of Henry, and had come to regard him as peculiarly *theirs*. They will understand me when I say that it was with profound shock, almost distress, that I learned of the intention to form a 'Henry Williamson Society!'

To go to Barnstaple in that May of 1980 was imperative. But I drove the 330 miles, following much of Henry's route from Norfolk, with mixed feelings. If there was a nucleus of people sufficiently motivated to form a society then there must, after all, be others besides myself who valued him very highly. But would their evaluation of his achievement tally with mine? Would a society do more harm than good to what I felt

to be his proper standing? I arrived at The Royal and Fortescue after a nine-hour drive, and skulked, feeling conspicuously alone. Then I found my way into an upstairs lounge where a small group of elderly North Country folk were watching a snooker match on television. Somehow this felt wrong.

What followed, when I had found the right room, was both reassuring and disconcerting. I had brought with me three questions, the answers to which would determine whether I could join the proposed society: Of what kind was the interest of the initiators? Were there sufficient younger people to ensure continuity? Had any approach been made to the Williamson family, and with what response? Reassurance was so evident on all these points that there was no need even to raise them. But it was indeed disconcerting to discover the extent of professional scholarship already devoted, and to meet so many folk who knew so much more of Henry, and more personally than I, was humbling.

So now the need to record my own evaluation of Henry's work is transformed from a desperately lonely task into something which can be shared. If our Society is to be a powerhouse to generate a wider appreciation of his stature its driving energy will be the lively exchange of thought between members of widely various life experience. In this exchange it will be the personal views of those who are neither professionally nor academically engaged in literature which will be of special value. Those of us who are not so engaged *need* our professionals and academics. Their work is invaluable in bringing new insights, heightened awareness and unknown sources to our attention. But what makes the achievement of this complex man so worthy of wider recognition is its essential relevance to all of us as people of whatever occupation, as parents, as children, as twentieth century Europeans. We can none of us escape the fact that, however different in details our lives and our responses may be, we are caught up in the same tangled cultural and geographical environment, as contributors to, and as sufferers from, those same dilemmas which Henry met as man and as writer. It is my view that he met them with a unique, devastating and too often self-destructive honesty.

I write this now, as one might say, 'after *Ominibus* - that grossly ill-balanced exposure of the perils inherent to the inept editing of valuable material by programme makers who have only the shallowest knowledge of their subject; also, after many readings and re-readings of the article in No. 4 of this Journal, "In the Monkey-House" by David Hoyle, whose knowledge of Henry's work no one could call shallow.

Both the *Omnibus* broadcast and David's article oblige us to face what must for many be the crucial difficulty in our appreciation of Henry: his apparent support for fascism. However, where *Omnibus* was damaging in its over-exposure of the excitement-catching Hitler connection, which overburdened the allotted time and rendered sterile any germ of deeper interest there might have been to encourage new readers, it was, thank God, ephemeral and is gone. "In the Monkey-House" is still with us.

David Hoyle's is no glib media-presentation, but a deeply thought-

out study, and as such deserves our full attention. To me it shows just how easily the abhorrence of racial prejudice, in this case anti-semitism, can overlay critical judgement, even leading to errors of fact. To strengthen his point that the 'fascist' Henry of 1939 was prone to the re-interpretation of his earlier feelings, David says: "In *The Pathway*, 1928 edition, Lenin is even described as 'a keen flame of heaven to purify mankind', although he was, of course, purged from the later versions." Note that "even" and that "of course". Notice how they are slipped in so smoothly to reinforce a false political point. For was Lenin "purged"? Not from my 1936 *Flax of Dream*, with the notorious "I salute" Foreword. In this, p.1345 has Lenin as "genius as a keen flame of heaven to purify his nation". Note that "nation", not "mankind". That passage from *The Flax* is remarkable to me for the undoubtedly honestly felt (whether re-created from life or created from imagination), forcefully expressed responses of dear old Julian Warbeck: "You know Lenin by intuition! You're talking bosh, utter bosh, Maddison!"

The character of Julian, who for all his ranting sarcasm is never portrayed unsympathetically, would itself be an interesting study, woven as he is into the fiction and neo-fiction of the pre-Mosley years. How he is needed by Wilbo of *The Phasian Bird* and by Phillip of the later books in the *Chronicle*! His disappearance has significance.

But to return to the "Monkey-House" passage, chosen by David as a key piece in his study of the paradox which truly faces us in Henry's work. David calls it "an insidious, nasty little peice of prose". But is it? For me, such a description puts the value of the whole article in question, because as a phrase it falls outside the limits of critical integrity. Let us look into the experiences, the encounters, and the prejudices of our own lives with what honesty we can, and then look again at the passage from *The Golden Virgin*.

I call to mind my journey home from the last AGM in Devon. My wife and I stopped at a pub on the edge of Sedgemoor, currently the cockpit of disagreement between farmers and conservationists. We had to force our way through a noisy, heavy-shouldered, overweight, crop-necked scrum of fat-wadded farmers, who made no attempt to give way to folk not of their circle. In the empty space away from the bar we learnt of the reason for this herd behaviour. They had a crisis. Their well-loved landlord was leaving that day. If I was to write these people accurately, as they were, into a novel with the theme of conflict between conservationist and commercial interest, I could well be accused of prejudice. The point I make is that they were, at that time, in their raucous, back-slapping insensitivity, behaving as victims of their own stereotyping. They were trying, competitively and overhard, to be what they felt they should be. From time to time we all do it. We create our own stereotypes out of our need for identity, for belonging. They are as much self-imposed as imposed by others. Jewish communities have historically been more prone to this self-victimising identification than most. This is observed without suggestion of approval for those who react with prejudice against any 'alien' identity, whether of group or individual.

Is it not possible that Henry's description of the Monkey-House episode was not simply imagined, but accurately reconstructed from his

experience of one or more real occasions? David Hoyle's detailed analysis of the passage is a masterpiece of special pleading, but to the conclusion he draws (that this is dishonest writing) I can only echo Julian Warbeck's "Bosh, utter bosh!". It is precisely because a great many recognisable, self-stereotyped Jews did behave in the manner described that the vile disease of anti-semitism spread so rapidly among those who felt themselves deprived. Even were *all* the graves at Tyne Cot set with the Star of David, we would do those brave men, and the later victims of the holocaust, a greater injustice if we argued that their sacrifice renders untrue a faithful description of how some of their people behaved, and how this was interpreted by others not of their own kind. It is noteworthy that David does not remark on the fact that Henry puts the really snide and damaging comment into the mouth of Gene - himself portrayed as a Latin sponger and coward - for my money potentially the most fascist of all Henry's lesser, half-seen characters. Had he remarked on this perhaps he would have awarded yet another point for malicious cunning. No. All our knowledge of the courage and achievement of Jewish people cannot make this passage less truthful in the selection of detail which accords perfectly with the quality of perception given by Henry to the character of Phillip, nor the comment less consistent with the meanness of character he gives to Gene.

But worse is to come. David Hoyle's conclusion, to which again I must say "Bosh!", strikes at the very nature of literature and literary criticism. He claims that "what we have every right to expect authors to do for us is to tell the truth: not just the truth as they see it or would like it to be, but the truth as is is. This is fantastic. By what authority do we as readers have any 'right' to expect authors, or indeed any free creative artist, to do *anything* for us? And 'truth'! Which of us can distinguish "truth as it is" from "truth as we see it"? We see things as we see things. An author gives of himself in his work, with all his hopes, fears and prejudices, however hidden or controlled. We similarly bring our whole selves to the words on his page. We have no special right to expect some high moral objectivity in him because he is an author. To make such a demand of an author betrays, I feel, a wish to impose on him one's own idea of what 'truth' is. It becomes an obsession, as perhaps it did with Henry himself: "To see as the sun sees, with no shadow". Things, and people seen with no shadow, have no substance, no significance. The sun can also blind. Such demands have run down a long and vehement tradition of repression, overtly 'puritan' and 'reforming', from the Holy Office, through Reichchancellery to Kremlin and Whithouse. This is the point on the vicious circle of censorious prejudice where fascism and communism meet. I *do not* think this is what Henry intended. I believe he sought an openness, a freedom, where "without shadow" meant "without prejudice and fear".

The work of a writer, once published, has a being of its own, quite separate from that of its author, with as many meanings and significances as it has readers to respond to it. We each bring to it the responses of a unique self, making it ours with our own individual patterns of acceptance and rejection or indifference. These may be quite other from the intention of the author. I first came to Henry's work, in *Tarka*, as a town-bred child who had already found release in the nearby countryside from the stresses of home life. I was quite unaware that his early work

might have stemmed from feelings similar to my own. Although I soon read, and enjoyed, *The Beautiful Years* and *Dandelion Days*, I count it as fortunate that I missed the collected *Flax* edition until very much later. I could not have read it, and as a child of the War was very anti-German. What I had recognised, in my own life and so tellingly told by Henry, was that humankind was unique in its capacity for deliberate, calculated cruelty to its own kind, using physical violence in the defence and attack of abstract ideas, and abstract (mental) violence to gain physical advantage. An understanding of this is, I think, crucial to an appreciation of Henry's achievement as a 'nature' writer, as compared to so many others who are grotesquely anthropomorphic in the motivations they attribute to their animal 'characters'. More significantly perhaps, it underlies much of the popularity, amongst Europeans, for the preservation of wildlife as a 'moral' cause.

The *Chronicle*, of course, is the central achievement. Almost anything said about it at less than book-length must be inadequate, and a few words must seem partial and perhaps trite. The challenge that it presents to me is that it seems to offer the most comprehensive account of the life of a peculiarly typical, sensitive man, felt and written with what I have called devastating honesty. 'Typical' man, because here he is, self-admittedly fallible and often in the most banal way struggling with the fact which most of us work very hard to ignore: that the very principles of our given, taught, cultural inheritance are denied in practice by the institutions created to uphold and advance them. That is the size of it. Equally immortal, thanks be, is the sheer living pleasure of reading it, and re-reading it.

From a Book of Clippings....

APRIL FOOLS

Tonight the Sette of Odd Volumes has its annual out-of-town dinner, usually held at an Oxford or Camnrisge college, in the India Room at Sandhurst, where Brig. Peter Young, who speaks on Shakespeare, as military expert is a senior lecturer.

Bernard Quarith, the antiquarian bookseller, founded this literary dining club in 1878 and for its purposes each of the 21 'volumes' has a club name. Henry Williamson, for example, is Brother Lutra (Latin for otter). S.P.B. Mais, a member since 1935, is Perambulator.

Their motto is "Dulce est desipere in loco" and tonight they may play the fool with impunity. Bed and breakfast are offered.

The Times
23 April 1968