

# WILL THE REAL LITERARY HERITAGE PLEASE STAND UP?

**Richard Russell**

I SHOULD LIKE TO THROW OUT A CHALLENGE to the Society.

A friendly challenge, of course. It is this: which of Henry's books do we think fits that phrase in all those leaflets we had printed with the owl device, advertising the Society? Remember the one: "To achieve a wider appreciation and a deeper understanding of the literary heritage of...etc."?

If we each drew up a list of our own various choices, in order of heritable value, I wonder what we'd find. Obviously, some of us would favour the nature writing while others would prefer the Maddison novels.

I would unquestionably opt for the first half of the *Chronicle*. So important do I think these to be, in contrast to all the other books, that I think we should invent a title which covers just those from *The Dark Lantern* to *A Test to Destruction*. *Early Chronicles* suggests only the London books, whilst *The War Novels* specifically leaves these out.

While we are pondering this problem let me explain why I think these books are important.

To me they are the most potent anti-war prose ever written - about the First World War, at least. I am re-reading them now. Somehow they seem more relevant today than at any time in the past. I well recall my state of mind last spring when the news of the *Belgrano* and then of the *Sheffield* came over the air. It was the same feeling Phillip had when he heard the first intimations of war:

*Life was tremendous fun, really.*

*And yet - and yet - somehow, under everything, a feeling of coldness, of longing, of dread, was growing; and the feeling became centred on the talk of war, which, stealthily, and in secret, was a thing to be desired... Secretly, awfully, fearfully, one part of him desired the excitement that was war to become more and more; while another part of him quailed before a vast, fathomless darkness. As these feelings grew side by side in his mind there, persisted a vision of hatless French soldiers slouching along a road, treeless, houseless, bare, a road leading nowhere, from nowhere. (How Dear Is Life, pp.116-7)*

And later, just before Phillip first discovers what modern warfare is really about:

*A wild half-thought faded in his mind of a policeman in uniform*

to stop it all. (How Dear Is Life, p.239)

The only forces under control last spring were the ones stirring the whole thing up.

I was not deceived by talk of "softening up" the Argentinians, or of "acceptable loss of life". I was not deceived by these Newspeak terms because having read the War Novels I was able to live in my mind with the British regulars looking for "excitement" (or escaping the boredom of the dole queue) and with the Argentinian conscripts - prisoners of a warlike power.

"Softening up" was bodies raised by mothers, embraced by lovers, torn apart by British cluster-bombs that exploded overhead into a thousand spinning jagged edges raining downward.

"Acceptable loss of life" was container-crates of black-bagged jumbled bodies unloaded at Southampton Docks where there was no one to cheer or waggle a Union Jack in the air.

But I must not get morbid. It's all there in First Half of The Chronicles, and they are, after all, only novels. So too are the delightfully simple books of *The Flax of Dream*, the challenging, earthy *Phasian Bird*, the wonderfully free flight of fancy of *On Foot in Devon*. But wait - how far do we want to take this? Will someone please nominate for me *The Scribbling Lark* as literary heritage of 1949?

You see, we do have to draw the line *somewhere*! So, to return to our owl-emblazoned leaflet, just what is Williamson's literary heritage and what is - well, not exactly the work of a latterday Longfellow? I do think it is time, now that we are engaged in an attempt to wrangle with the powers that be in the media for a bit more appreciation of Henry's good writings, to ask ourselves what the good writing are. This is not entirely unconnected with the P.A. problem - that is - the awful question of the man's Political Allegiance.

I mean the fact that while all over Europe, and especially in Germany, anti-democratic organisations with thoughts of power and destiny in their heads were advocating and practising brutality upon their fellow men and women, a few authors (oh, the allure of being a voice in the wilderness!) went into print giving public encouragement to it all.

Only Henry wrote of this as being a part of his deep aspirations for order, clarity and the sight of salmon in London rivers. Yet there is irony in all this, for Henry's overriding motive for being a fascist was to avoid the horrors of war all over again - as the recent *Omnibus* programme pointed out. He had other motives, to be sure; xenophobia, mistrust of democracy, a dislike of "The Jews". We do not find Williamson among the Peace Pledge Union or in the ranks of the Independent Labour Party. But it is when these lesser motives are conveyed in another kind of Newspeak that a literary society must raise its eyebrows.

We find, for example (*Goodbye West Country*) the beating up of Jews excused because of the administrative confusion of the Third Reich's

early days. We find (*Lucifer Before Sunrise*) that the systematic genocide of the concentration camps is explained away as only to be expected if you bomb Germany. Hitler is merely the other side of idealism, whilst Russians, we are told in *The Gale of the World*, are 'Oriental Commissars' whom we were lucky not to have had all the way up to the Channel ports.

This is vicious Newspeak of a deliberate kind. I am not deceived by it because I have read more than just Williamson and know the brutal reality behind anti-semitism and racist fantasy about 'orientals' (or was their crime one of being 'commissars' whatever they are?).

Yet this is what Williamson wrote. It is at odds entirely with the sensitive, evocative, thoroughly honest description of war and brutality perpetrated upon frail humanity - and of the Newspeak lies used to perpetuate these - in the first half of the *Chronicle*. Are we to accept both as worthy of future heritage?

We cannot ignore it, of course, for there it is in the books we are promoting. But neither can we promote it as being merely the wrong-headed work of a misled idealist. Such wrong-headedness is the ideal stuff for throwing in the dustbin, not handing down to our literary heirs. So where are we going to draw the line?

Should your taste, on the other hand, be for wildlife, natural beauty and the wild flowers of literature, you will be looking in quite a different direction for literary heritage. On how many of our lists will *Tarka* be at the top, still? Or maybe the much neglected *Lone Swallows*, a wayside wealth of natural observation?

No thorny problems there about man's brutality to man (and woman). Only the wild flowers of a dreaming imagination. Should we, perhaps, gather these while we may, lay aside the war and the political wrangling, and press these small tokens between the pages of our favourite volumes by "the major twentieth century writer Henry Williamson"? There is in these precious writings a suggestion, after all, of the peace which the dead of Flanders and of the Malvinas now have in common. But is that enough - for any of us?

What is going to be on your list of the real literary heritage of Henry Williamson?

