

## 'THE INCALCULABLE HOUR'

J.W. Blench

IN THE HENRY WILLIAMSON JOURNAL No. 7 (May 1983), p.25, Tom and Joan Skipper mention that neither they nor Stephen Clarke have been able to trace Henry Williamson's aunt J. Quiddington West's book *The Incalculable Hour* (1910) from which he tells us that he took the phrase *The Flax of Dream* to use as the overall title for his tetralogy of novels *The Beautiful Years*, *Dandelion Days*, *The Dream of Fair Women* and *The Pathway* (Foreword to the 1936 one-volume edition of *The Flax of Dream*, pp.8-9). Although I have failed to find out anything about the author from the standard sources (J. Quiddington West is doubtless a pseudonym), nevertheless I can supply information about the book itself, which I have read in the National Library of Scotland's copy in Edinburgh (reference number L.105.h). This in turn allows me to suggest something of its importance for an understanding of Williamson's aims and achievement in *The Flax of Dream*.

*The Incalculable Hour* is a slim volume of forty pages, bound in white boards, the title on the outside being printed in green. The title-page inside appears as follows:

THE INCALCULABLE HOUR

By

J. QUIDDINGTON WEST

London

HAZELL, WATSON & VINEY Ltd., PRINTERS

52, Long Acre, W.C.

1910

There are two epigraphs, printed as follows, which suggest the nature of the contents:

Earth's crammed with Heaven

And every common bush afire with God

E.B. Browning

Gardens where a place is found for

Rosemary and rue

Michael Fairless

The first is from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Book VII, lines 820-1. The second is from Michael Fairless's (i.e. Margaret Fairless Barbers's) series of prose sketches *The Roadmender* first published in 1902 and reprinted many times, most recently in 1981 by Wildwood House. The full sentence from which this epigraph is taken is worth quoting, as it throws further light on the contents: "Above all

let us see visions, visions of colour and light, of green fields and broad rivers, of palaces laid with fair colours, and gardens where a place is found for rosemary and rue" (pp.113-114, Wildwood edn.). Rosemary and rue are evergreens, which symbolise remembrance: in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita says to Polixenes and Camillo in the Sheep-shearing Feast scene:

Reverend sirs,  
For you there's rosemary and rue: these keep  
Seeming and favour all the winter long:  
Grace and remembrance to you both,  
And welcome to our shearing.

Act IV, scene iii, lines 73-77)

In *The Incalculable Hour* itself J. Quiddington West relates how, looking from her window across the bay to Mount Aenos (in northern Greece) on a morning of sleet and rain mixed with occasional sunlight, she sees a sudden gleam of sunshine light up a misty valley to form a rainbow and make the village there seem heavenly - recalling to her mind the rainbow which followed the Flood and was the sign of the Covenant which God made with mankind (Genesis ix, 8-17). This leads her to reflect:

*Life, I thought, as I watched the rainbow splendour is like that. About it lies the glory of a spiritual beauty, no less real than the sweet and intimate beauty of the world about us, though it is fashioned only of the hopes and dreams, the aspirations and desires and prayers that are born of the soul's constant longing; but it needs the light from Heaven to reveal the hidden prism to our startled vision.* (p.8)

Then follow the passages containing the quotations made by Henry Williamson in the Foreword to *The Flax of Dream*, although he alters the order of the material somewhat. The ancient artists, states J. Quiddington West, expressed spiritual longing, and although we can learn from them to "cull an immortal beauty from the mortal dream", nevertheless we cannot ourselves fully behold their vision. When we realise this in disillusion, we are ready to receive our own personal moment of vision:

*Thus it is that the Master of Dream comes to us in the Incalculable Hour; a swift weaving of shadows about our feet, a whisper against the ear, a strange leaping of thought to wed with thought; and the Portals of Dream are flung wide. We have come not to the kingdom of those others, but to our own, and the beauty of their land, which we knew only by relection, is as nothing to the new beauty.* (pp.11-12)

Our particular vision is, she declares, ultimately unique: "Our Land of Heart's Desire is woven of our own thoughts and longings and aspirations, and no two weave alike" (p.12). We must however take care not to weave the Flax of Dream hurriedly, lest we spoil the web; that is to say, lest the quality of our vision be less fine and the artistic expression of it lack the clarity and coherence which it should have. We need, she believes, experience of life and the willingness to accept self-sacrifice before we can achieve a vision of the highest value. If we have once wandered in the Land of our Heart's Desire we will wish to return to it,

for it has become our true home. Yet in these days we have, alas, "little leisure for weaving even if we have the flax" (p.14). Most people cannot accept the old ideals and no longer have the visionary faculty. This is regrettable, because in this materialistic age we need more than ever to have spiritual ideals. However, she hopes, the Divine inspiration may yet come again to bring a deeper understanding, and our dreams may be translated into reality.

Following these general reflections, J. Quiddington West attempts to set down *her* particular vision. This takes the form of a symbolic narrative. She sees a landscape with rain, which ceases before sundown. A quietude falls over the earth and the rich colouring of the summer world fades into twilight. She discerns a cottage standing back from a long road which stretches shadowless into the dusk. The cottage looks forlorn and in its neglected garden stands a woman sombrely clothed, who has tried to cultivate the garden but has found the task too much for her. The woman regards the garden as an image of her own fruitless life and feels ready to give up all further effort in despair. However, God plants a seed in the garden which grows; it becomes a flourishing tree, but someone comes and cuts it down before it fruits. Now the woman feels a greater bitterness because of the failure of the thing which God Himself has planted. Consolation and enlightenment nevertheless are at hand. Christ appears as a radiance and speaks to her, showing that behind apparent failure lies the love and sustaining power of God. The finest fruit is that of the spirit, which comes to perfection only through travail. The woman is thus made ready to accept adversity and striving; she realises the glory of service and becomes willing to leave the judgement of effort to God. In her realisation of Christ's Sacrifice of Love as the ultimate truth she finally attains a deep spiritual joy.

This 'vision' of J. Quiddington West is of course essentially that of traditional Christianity, as indeed is that of Michael Fairless in *The Roadmender*, a book which has obviously influenced *The Incalculable Hour*. However, the tone and temper of the 'vision' together with its own form and expression is in each case very much the author's own. Henry Williamson in *The Flax of Dream* wishes to present in the story of Willie Maddison *his* vision of the need of the individual to grow spontaneously from childhood to maturity surrounded by the beauty of Nature, so that all men may show love and understanding to each other and thus bring about a new era of peace and harmony. Of course he has learnt from the insights of Shelley and Richard Jefferies, but he has been enlightened also by his own experience, not least during the First World War; he has won illumination by striving and travail, and the achieved vision of the novels is unmistakably his. We, his readers, can share in this vision, which will help us enrich our own.

Although Williamson's vision is less close to orthodox Christianity than that of J. Quiddington West, it is interesting to note, I think, that his Nature Philosophy is in fact compatible with an aspect of traditional theology. The Church teaches that the whole Creation was not only made out of nothing by Almighty God, but is sustained by Divine power in every moment of its being. In spite of the Fall, behind the

grand forms of Nature as we experience it on Earth, lie the beauty and love of God Himself. It may be suggested that this immanence of God in Nature is apprehended by intuition and imagination, even if it is not fully accepted intellectually, by writers like Richard Jefferies, W.H. Hudson and Henry Williamson. They can convey it to us by their art, even if we do not always recognise it.