

**From:** Miss McGrath, Copyright Department

**Subject:** WEEKLY READINGS IN LIGHT PROGRAMME: WED. Y. 4.00-4.15 P.M.

**To:** Mr. James Langham

24th October 1945

Thank you for your memo of 23rd October. I am afraid however, that according to D.S.A.'s Staff Administration memo of 1st July 1943 we are forbidden to broadcast the works of Henry Williamson.



SL/PC

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# HENRY WILLIAMSON, BROADCASTER

## Valerie R. Belsey

WILLIAMSON'S BROADCASTING HISTORY starts in 1928, a year after the publication of *Tarka*. In the archives there is an inter-departmental memo from one producer to another suggesting that they use Williamson's work in an Armistice Day broadcast. However, the idea was dropped as his thoughts on war were considered too 'gloomy' for broadcasting, although how it is possible to have jolly Armistice Day thoughts is a matter left undefined.

In 1932 Williamson approached the BBC offering to read a passage from *The Labouring Life* (later published in *Tales of a Devon Village*) entitled "The Fox in the Moonlight". This piece was to be read in an exciting immediate manner, later achieved so successfully in the "Red Deer" broadcast. Williamson threatened to read the piece backwards into his wireless set - or 'blaterphone', as he called it - if the BBC would not accept it. They would not; but when the BBC wrote back saying that "the whole of your letter shows that you have the right ideas about broadcasting", they were bearing him in mind. And in 1932 Williamson was asked by the BBC to write 2000 words for an Armistice Day broadcast to be entitled "To An Unknown Warrior". This was to be one of a series which had such eminent contributors as H.G. Wells writing "To An Adolescent", and Hilaire Belloc "To Someone Who Is Always In Debt". However, as Williamson relates in *Goodbye West Country*, he got into a terrible muddle writing the script, and when it arrived - late - it was found to be unacceptable, "too wordy and abstract in philosophy".

After a successful voice test in 1935 Williamson finally got started on his broadcasting career. His first piece for "Men Talking" in that year was about "all things I like - country things - my wood fire - my children - trout in clear water etc.". He received twelve guineas for this plus ten shillings and sixpence expenses. There is a delightful note in the archives from Williamson to his producer sent after this broadcast. It is written on blue bond G.W.R. notepaper with the Filleigh station address and states that he is sending him some fresh poached salmon, meaning a copy of *Star the Salmon*; the producer's name was Salmon! From this moment Williamson was in popular demand; Schools Broadcasts, Children's Hour and the Empire Programme all wanted him to broadcast. The recordings fall into three categories and original scripts are available in the archives to illustrate all three.

1. "Green fields and pavements." These are delightful pieces about Williamson's early days in Devon: Braunton, days out on Exmoor and so on. The style is immediate and riveting. Contrast these scripts of life in Devon in the '60s (tape still available). When recording these pieces from Filleigh, Williamson used to travel to Bristol by train on BBC travel vouchers, but sometimes he would go by car. (You may recall the story about the Silver Eagle in *Goodbye West Country*.\*) He was always

\*Elsewhere in this issue.

scrupulous in reimbursing the BBC should his car expenses come below the value of his travel vouchers. In *Goodbye West Country*, where many of the BBC Bristol talks are printed, one realises Williamson's fascination with the talkies. This was mentioned to Marguerite Cutforth in 1961 and resulted in his recording a most unusual script "On Seeing Marilyn Monroe - Going To The Cinema at an Edwardian Seaside Resort" (Ilfracombe). This was reviewed very favourably in *The Listener*.

2. "Close to Earth." These scripts tell of his days in Norfolk and are vivid accounts of his day-to-day life there. During this period his broadcasting style was improving and Pennethorne Hughes of Radio Bristol had only one criticism: "His material is usually first-rate, although it is not always possible to get it out of him as early as one would wish". This led to endless telegrams being sent to Shallowford and for one broadcast Williamson even lost his copy.

3. The broadcasts which seem to have made the most impact were those dealing with individual animals - the Red Deer, Otter, Stoat and Badger broadcasts. The Red Deer broadcast was thought to be a risky proposition by his producer who wrote to him afterwards: I would rather that the following talks were 'straight' as we call them. I expect you will agree with me about it. To have brought off the Red Deer like that was something of a tour de force, but one can't be too prodigal with tours de force". Williamson foresaw the use of sound effects to create atmosphere in nature broadcasts. A broadcast about the red squirrel based on a childhood memory was suggested by his son Richard, and the story of this will also be found in *Goodbye West Country*.

During his lifetime five versions of *Tarka* were broadcast as well as extracts from *Tales of a Devon Village*, *The Beautiful Years*, *The Lone Swallows*, *The Sun in the Sands* and *Young Phillip Maddison*. However, Williamson's broadcasting career was cut short in 1945 by the famous internal memo.

In 1949 Williamson's agents Heaths wrote to Frank Gillard, Head of Western Region, offering some of Williamson's pieces for broadcasting. Gillard wrote back stating that he did not want a man coming into the studios again who had once entered them with a revolver in his pocket. A few broadcasts did follow, however, but nothing in the nature of the thirties series of broadcasts was to evolve again.

It is ironic that Williamson's final recorded broadcast, "Something Common in Flanders Field", was not transmitted on Armistice Day itself but on 17 June 1971. Williamson always wanted to be remembered as the old soldier who hated war, but the public would never listen to this part of his message (do they ever?), and even in his broadcasts he will be remembered not as a pacifist but once again as a brilliant nature writer.