MORE MEMORIES OF HENRY WILLIAMSON

Guy Priest

AS RECOUNTED IN MY EARLIER REMINISCENCES (October 1982 issue of the *Journal*), Henry Williamson signed the deeds of purchase for the Norfolk farm in the field at Georgeham in August 1936. But it was not until the following May that the family migration actually got under way.

In the meantime, at the end of August, somewhat dispirited by living in a tiny tent under primitive conditions and without proper meals, I decided to return to my parents' home in Cambridge and concentrate on my novel.

During early September my girl friend in Combe Martin, still working in the guest house, suggested she and I have a short holiday together when the summer guests had gone. On impulse, I wrote to Henry asking if we could have the use of his loft, if it were to be unoccupied at the time. Looking back over the years, I am surprised by my audacity in making this request. As a partial excuse for my letter I enclosed some information regarding East Anglian farming which I had gleaned from various sources.

A few days later a letter with a Devon postmark reached me. Writing from Filleigh, Henry had typed:

Dear Guy Priest,

I enclose a photograph for you to examine and admire. And I thank you for your most kind information and efforts on my behalf, farming.

We shall be at the field during the coming weekend 25-27 September, and shall be using caravan and loft. If you care to have a loan of the caravan from 6 p.m. Sunday 27 Sept until Friday 2 October, 6 p.m. inclusive of those times, you are welcome. I regret I cannot lend the loft to anyone, as it is not officially passed as a dwelling house, and also my past experience has compelled me to keep it apart.

Also I regret I am unable to read or advise you about your book. Only necessity compells me to keep working, as I am now. 10 hours a day at fiddling broadcast articles etc and a vast correspondence. When I say that your two successors to the field both want use of loft, and advice about writing etc, you will see that one small enfeebled human unit must close down or perish.

I may be at the field some of the time offered to you: and I trust you will bear in mind that I go there to be alone, a condition very necessary for recupaeration from this work. Dont take this personally, please; but I must be ALONE. One day you may experience how energy is drained by people merely being near

one. The writing life is highly unnatural, and is a great strain after the first million words.

And 50-60 people wanting to see me about this and that is simply hell, believe me.

He must have handed this to his wife to read, for she, with her gentle and sympathetic understanding (she was, of course, the original of Mary in *The Pathway*) had added a postscript:

Dear Mr Priest,

I am sure you will understand that Henry is really terribly busy just now, & cannot see anyone, or look at any MS. Please don't think, however, that he minded you writing to him, as long as you don't mind a frank answer!

As he says, we shall be using the caravan next week-end, until Sunday evening, when you are welcome to it.

Yours sincerely

I.L. Williamson

P.S. The photograph has unfortunately been mislaid. It will reach you one day however.

I was, of course, delighted by this invitation and was preparing to reply, expressing my thanks, when a second letter arrived. Undated and without heading, it was obviously written in haste to clear the matter from his mind and enable him to attend to more pressing affairs. There was now an enclosure:

Dear P

Heres the photograph.

You should send your MS. to a publishers reader who is paid for his discernment and patience in dealing with young writers works. Not to a creative author who has enough of his own stuff to deal with; and knows only about his own stuff. I used to spend hours reading stuff and advising and got nothing but objections to what was suggested that I learned it was all wrong to try and remake others into ones own image. Why dont you try an agent -- say John Paradise in Fleet Street. Its their JOB; it isnt a poor wretched overworked author's job to look after a flock of idiots like himself.

Perhaps you will send a brief note to Georgeham saying if you wish to occupy the caravan during the next week; then Ill leave the keys at OVEYS pub. Im sorry I cant make it longer; but we shall be returning next Friday week to the field.

I have no sympathy with your monetary plight. You chucked a job to be idle and please yourself, and you get no pity from me. You have only yourself to find for; you're free, and to be envied. So drop the mention of cash. Earn it; work for it.

Yrs HW

In case the gentle reader may be tempted to think I was trying to

'touch' HW for a loan of cash, let me affirm this was certainly not the case. It was true, I had quit my job in order to be free to write. But that had been a calculated risk, following four years of the Depression when I had achieved no advancement but been thankful to avoid joining the growing ranks of unemployed. But by 1936, with an upturn in the economy, I had reached the decision that it was 'now or never' if I was to change direction and attempt to live by my pen. Certainly at the time I was considering only myself and living with my parents at minimum cost; so to HW, struggling to maintain a growing family, my situation may have appeared enviable. But for me all that was soon to change. My escape from the toils was only temporary. Meanwhile, I was rather chuffed with the photograph Henry had sent. (This was the picture taken in the hut during the earlier summer, as already described in my previous narrative.) It showed me seated in Henry's chair, hands clasped over bony corduroy-clad knees, and staring into the hearth with intense, slightly mystical gaze: as I imagined, a sort of youthful William Blake. I was wearing a navy blue fisherman's sweater, and needed a haircut.

The artlessness of youth. My letter of thanks was promptly despatched.

When Eve, my girl friend, and I arrived at the field on the evening of the last Sunday in September, having collected the keys from Charlie Ovey at the King's Arms in the village, we found the caravan neat and tidy, prepared for our occupation. Inside was a note from Henry, hastily scrawled in indelible pencil on a paper bag:

> *Sorry we couldn't stay to greet you. A can of water here for you. Drinking. Wash water is in the eastern rainbutt. Eat any lettuce you require. Always keep gate shut. If you have time to wet-sandpaper woodwork only of outside caravan, please do so, preparatory to painting. But please do nothing about it unless you truly understand art of painting, only on a dry, clean surface, etc etc -- and thin coat of paint -- otherwise it will involve my cleaning all off again and 300% extra labour. And paint only if a fine, dry day. All the outside panelling has been cleaned with soda. I hope to come up later in week. You can stay on after Friday if you care to. HW*

To Yorkshire-born Eve, who was both practical and accomplished in matters concerned with house decorating - as well as cooking, gardening, needlework, knitting, baby-care and allied subjects! - these precise and detailed instructions (step-by-step for beginners approach!) were the cause of some initial irritation. Teaching her grandmother to suck eggs! But, of course, Henry was always inclined to regard others as less practical than himself, unless they happened to be experts in their field. He had a mania about leading others in the way that they should go, correcting their mistakes and making good their shortcomings. Insistence on minutiae could sometimes become very off-putting, particularly to someone who had been raised in the hard school of Yorkshire life, and who was both intelligent and diligent to an extreme degree.

From the outset, Eve refused to be overawed by Henry; whilst I,

admiring his work as a writer, was inclined to regard him as a rather omnipotent figure. I think this was the case with many of his friends and admirers, particularly females, initially at least. He was certainly a man who liked his own way and resented criticism, from any quarter. Eve never hesitated to express her opinion if it were based on previous experience. Henry was to quickly recognise this quality in her and to treat her with cautious respect; while she in turn used to tease him with bantering good humour.

But all that was in the future, as the following morning in the Autumn sunshine she and I set to work after breakfast rubbing down the exterior of the caravan. Feeling a natural obligation to our host, we had decided to get at least some of the work done without delay, and, happy in each other's company after many weeks of separation, we were content to devote part of our holiday to what might otherwise have been an irksome chore.

From the outset Eve assumed command of operations, insisting the work be carried out with her customary thoroughness. By nature, I am often impatient to complete a task and show results, even if this involves cutting corners. I admire perfection in the work of others, but am frequently in too much of a hurry to achieve it myself. Thus, laborious preparation is a thing I tend to skimp. With female tenacity, Eve always affirmed that "If a thing's worth doing...". So the preparatory work, prior to applying paint, was scupulously carried out.

At first I jibbed a bit at this, but in the fine September weather Windwhistle Cross was a delightful place in which to work, particularly in company with the girl of one's choice. So the first few days passed in blissful harmony, with occasional visits to Artie's shop and post office, to the village pubs to drink cider and play table skittles, and to the beach. Then about mid-week Henry arrived.

The first indication of his presence was the writing hut door standing ajar when we returned from an afternoon swim. Recalling his request for privacy, we carefully avoided that corner of the field and made our way to the caravan some distance away. Here Eve commenced preparing supper on the blue flame oil stove. Presently we heard the sound of footsteps on the gravel path, and HW's head appeared in the opening of the half-door.

"Hullo there! Everything alright? By jove, that supper smells good!" He sniffed like an appreciative schoolboy, fixing Eve with a disarming look from his brown eyes. She glanced up from the sizzling frying-pan with a welcoming smile. We exchanged introductions. Then she said: "Would you care to join us for supper?", an invitation which was promptly accepted. From then on, during the remainder of our stay, Henry ate his main meal with us, preparing his breakfast mug of tea in the hut.

After supper he inspected our work on the caravan, now shining in a pristine coat of Lincoln green. After rubbing down and filling of rough spots, we had given it two undercoats and a finishing coat with paint left for that purpose. We were both rather proud of the result, but,

after close examination, Henry apologised that a heavier-bodied paint would be necessary to withstand the onslaught of wint-er gales. He confirmed that we had done a good job, but next day while shopping in Braunton he purchased a half-gallon can of dark brown bitumastic paint which he later proceeded to slap on to the exterior woodwork and part of the panelling in a very haphazard manner, while Eve and I looked on in dismay as our meticulous bruskwork was obliterated.

"This will give extra protection to the joints," Henry affirmed, ignoring the fact that he had completely ruined our professional finish. Surveying the camouflage effect the mixture of brown and green had produced, Eve protested angrily at our wasted effort. But as her remarks appeared to be ignored she decided no purpose would be served by making a scene - after all, it was his caravan. But certainly she would be doing no more painting, she declared!

This was our first small disagreement with our host. Others were to follow.

On several occasions when the evening meal was ready to be served Henry failed to appear, although advised beforehand of the time we intended. On one particular evening we had finished our meal when he arrived. Eve had kept his plate hot over a pan of boiling water, and as she placed it before him she ticked him off in no uncertain manner. With shame-faced look, then an upward glance of dark eyes, he suitably apologised, and harmony was restored. After this Eve tended to treat him as an incorrigible schoolboy.

Henry spent most of his time in the hut - he was not on holiday, he had emphasised. But we did go about together occasionally. One afternoon we all set off for a walk round Baggy Point to Croyde, following very much the route of "First Day of Spring' in *The Village Book*. From Putsborough we walked down Vention Lane to the sands, from where, at Henry's suggestion, it was decided to climb the cliff and reach the fieldpath above. This was by no means a dangerous ascent, and Eve and I made our way up without much difficulty, although I haven't a good head for heights.

After leading initially, Henry dropped behind, and reaching about half way, we stopped and looked back, to see him apparently stuck lower down. We waited a few minutes and called down words of encouragement, but he replied rather anxiously that it was too steep and dangerous and that we all ought to return. This Eve and I declined to do, continuing our climb to the clifftop; whilst he, after further protest, scrambled back to the beach and followed a circuitous route by a distant well-worn path.

When presently he joined us he was obviously out of humour. Aware that he had, in effect, 'chickened out', he angrily accused us of taking unnecessary risks, while I for my part enjoyed some restoration of self-esteem after the painting episode. After all, I regarded myself as a very indifferent mountaineer, while Henry claimed to have scaled heights in the Pyrenees - see *The Sun in the Sands*.

This incident had a salutary effect on my tendency to hero-worship. Of course, in later years, in *The Chronicle*, in the character of Phillip, Henry frequently admitted to lack of courage. But in these earlier times I had tended to admire him without question. With Eve it was very different, for although she appreciated his writings she was critical of him as a person. His not infrequent condemnation of others while ignoring his own imperfections annoyed her. It was all very well being a theorist, with pronounced standards of correctness, but how one conducted oneself was the test, she maintained.

The last few days of our holiday were spent on our own in the field, Henry having gone off on business. Then, all too soon, it was time to leave. The days were closing in; another year coming to its end. We tidied up the caravan, locked the gate and departed on my motorcycle, leaving the keys at the King's Arms as we passed through the village.

A few days later a postcard reached us at Bynoll, Eve's home near Wootton Bassett, where we were then staying:

> *I am glad you arrived safely and without rain. It has blown steadily up there since you left, & cold. Thank you for leaving the caravan so neat and clean & the wick trimmed...I wonder whose idea that was?*
>
> *Best wishes for the winter. HW*

The wick referred to was of an Aladdin lamp, used in the caravan after dark. Eve was familiar with this type of paraffin lamp, since there was no electricity in her home at that time. Henry's perception and appreciation served to restore him a little in her esteem.

Back in Cambridge, I resumed work on my novel, completing this shortly before the year end; after which, at Henry's suggestion (he didn't read the manuscript) I posted it off to Faber and Faber with high hopes. I then took a temporary job as publicity agent for the Arts Theatre in Cambridge, selling blocks of subscription tickets in surrounding villages. I still continued my nature rambles round Grantchester, sometimes accompanied by a young friend who lived at The Mill House.

George's father, Henry de Lapp Winter, was a kindly, professorial gentleman who tutored or 'crammed' backward students intent on entering the University. His wife, small as a jenny-wren, short-sighted and maternal, was to me like a favourite aunt. In addition to George, still at prep school, there were two further sons. John, just down from Trinity, 14 ft. dinghy-sailor, winner of the Prince of Wales Cup; and Bill, also at Trinity, reading medicine. In that mellow, rambling house with its large garden beside the mill pool (beloved of Rupert Brooke), theirs seemed to me an ideal family life.

Among frequent visitors to the house were Uffa Fox, designer and builder of sailing craft, and Peter Scott, then known chiefly as a dinghy yachtsman and painter of wildfowl, who had a studio in a disused lighthouse on The Wash. This was, of course, later to be the setting of *The Snow Goose* by Paul Gallico.

About this time, Sir James George Fraser, author of *The Golden Bough*, with Lady Fraser and a secretary, took up residence at The Mill House as paying guests; and my girl friend came from Wiltshire to assist Mrs Winter and drive the family car, a Standard Ensign saloon, recently purchased. Thereafter my visits to Grantchester became even more frequent.

One day, towards Christmas, looking round the shops in Cambridge, we noticed some napkin rings made from teak salvaged from a famous battleship. Each bore a small metal plaque with the inscription 'H.M.S. Iron Duke'. Thinking these would make attractive and historic gifts, I bought several together with linen napkins which Eve emboidered with initials, some then being despatched to Devon. Early in the new year a letter reached me from Shallowford:

Christmas 1936

Dear G.P.

It was most thoughtful of you to consider those napkins and table rings, embroidered with initials by your lady. How can one return such generosity? A wearied kelt feebly wags its fungused tail in the hope of leaping to some idea. And the children thank you for the toffees. You really are too kind; and I cant see the prospect of ever being able to merit such consideration. The book which accompanies this may be some slight token of our gratitude.

I have no news of your MS. with Faber. The writers road is long and rough and lonely; and when at last one tops the first horizon, and basks awhile in the rewards of success, one is liable to regret the old rough road gone forever; for the other newer road is often a treadmill. Thats all the consolation I can offer you. But if you have a real companion by your side, the road may appear pleasant travelling. I cant tell.

I didn't answer your letters before, as Ive given up letters. Simply a question of fuel, or nervous energy. So don't expect a letter for months, maybe years. Id never write another word if I had my choice.

I believethe geese are down here but dont know and have no interest in such things. The tramp going from Spike to Spike sees only the trodden road just before his toes.

With best wishes and lots of good fortune to both of you.

HW

I had only just digested this when another letter arrived:

Shallowford 2 Jan 1937

Dear GP

Ive heard nothing from Faber. They read a promising book or MSS several times, i.e. all partners read it. But if they turn it down, try Putnams, C. Huntington Esq, and say I advised you to send it to them.

I am worked hard, this house to be completely scraped, boiled,

painted and distempered properly; work up at the field; the Jefferies book to be finished; etc etc etc etc, and much stuff about wills and properties in norfolk. So have no time to read, which means no energy. But I see a clear space for writing about 1939, possibly. Until then I shall have no time for normal contacts. Yrs.HW

I shall be coming thro your way next month, to norfolk, and shall call in and see you if you are still to be there. OK?

So now I looked forward eagerly to his arrival in Cambridge, with which he had some earlier connection as a subaltern at Newmarket during the First World War, as related in *The Chronicle*.

H.Williamson

September 1919.

Given to his friend R.J. Nicholson, at Christmas, 1919. . . . he hopes that the expeditions in 'Foxgrove', at all seasons of the year, which first commenced in the summer of 1916, have kindled in his heart a love for all the wild and free things .... even as 'Boris' in the fable within the book.

In particular, he hopes Roy will read, again and again (but only if he so wills!!) the message of the Wind in the last chapter of all.

That is the message his friend has always wanted him to read when, in Foxgrove, the cuckoos called, and the sun shone down over the lake.

 This inscription appears in Mary Heath's copy of Richard Jefferies's Wood Magic, *new impression, 1916.*