

## Secretary's Notes

### THREE YEARS ON - A PERSONAL VIEW

I believe that those of us who met in May 1980 primed with the idea of forming a Henry Williamson Society, but unsure if the idea could reach sufficient interested people to make it a viable proposition - to meet the cost of the 'nuts and bolts' necessary - can now, with some justification, say that their vision, dream, desire or what you will, has been a success.

We have a Society, and it has, in very real terms, achieved a great deal. For this we must thank first of all the members of Henry Williamson's family whose support has been with us from the very beginning, and without which the Society would have had little chance of success. We owe them all a great debt not just for their moral support but for their active and constantly helpful attitude. To you, the members who have joined the Society, we are also thankful, for without your support in the form of subscriptions to meet necessary costs, and other generous donations, projects such as the restoration of the Writing Hut and a plaque for the Brockley (Lewisham) house, could not even have been contemplated.

Important as these projects have been, I do see them as peripheral to the overriding twin aims of drawing together people with a common interest and focusing the knowledge of a growing membership rich in varied talents and expertise. The appreciation, fellow-feeling and love of Henry Williamson and his work, was previously very often shared with at best a handful of people. (For many a sense of frustrated isolation has at last been dispelled.) And we are increasingly able to fulfil the major aims of the Society laid down at the inaugural meeting. For example, if last year we were badly prepared to counter the often ill-informed, inaccurate and sometimes virulent reviews of Dan Farson's book *Henry*, this year our response to the BBC's *Omnibus* programme was swift and forceful, and it appears that the BBC were surprised by the volume of complaint. We may hope they will take due note for the future.

And what of the future? This will depend greatly on your continued support, which we hope to maintain. There is already excellent news (see below) which could not refute more completely the miserable cawings of those determined to confine most of Henry's works to oblivion.

### NEW EDITIONS OF WORKS BY HENRY WILLIAMSON, ALREADY ISSUED OR SHORTLY FOR PUBLICATION

*Norfolk Life* by Lilius Rider Haggard and Henry Williamson. Alan Sutton. (Paperback) (Already published - no price to hand)

This delightful book proved immediately popular when it first appeared in 1943, and enjoyed numerous reprints. It has been out of print for many years and this new edition will surely prove to be equally popular.

*Life In A Devon Village* by HW. Breslich and Foss. (Paperback) £3.95.  
Publication date: 29 September 1983.

To be issued in the publisher's 'Country Classics' series, this will be another most welcome return to print. With its companion volume *Tales Of A Devon Village* (both Faber, 1945) it sold well and called for several further impressions in the late 1940s. Both works had an earlier origin as *The Village Book* and *The Labouring Life* (Cape, 1930 & 1932), but Williamson was never wholly satisfied with these tales of human and natural life in a Devon village in the decade following the Great War in their original form, and so cut, revised, discarded and re-arranged them into their present form and titles. It must be hoped that the second volume will appear in due course.

*A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* by HW. 15 vols. Macdonald and Janes (Hardback).

Vols. 1 - 6 (*The Dark Lantern - The Golden Virgin*): 1984.

Vols. 7 - 15 (*Love and the Loveless - The Gale of The World*): 1985.

*A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. Arrow Books (Paperback)

Vols. 1 - 4 (*The Dark Lantern - How Dear Is Life*): by 1985.

No decision has been taken on the remaining eleven volumes.

Without doubt this is the outstanding news of the year and will represent a major achievement in the process of placing Henry Williamson firmly among the leading and most important English writers of this century, a position denied him during his lifetime by a relatively small but powerful lobby of detractors. Not even the most ardent admirer of the novel-sequence can deny its defects here and there, but if there were none it would perhaps qualify for being graven on tablets of stone, rather than ink upon paper. Surely this news would gladden Henry's heart above all other?

'SPRING RETURNING' - A PORTRAIT OF JAMES FARRAR, BBC RADIO 4, 8 MAY 1983

In the pre-dawn hours of 26 July 1944 a Mosquito aircraft on patrol over the approaches to the Thames and London was ordered to intercept and destroy an incoming V1 flying bomb. Radar at Operational Headquarters showed attacker and target close, merge, and then suddenly disappear from the screen. The body of the pilot was later recovered from the sea, but of the navigator no trace was ever found. James Farrar died just a few weeks short of his twenty-first birthday.

Normally in this war of immense destruction, apart from the grief of family, and sadness and regret of friends and comrades, that would have been all; but James Farrar, or Jim as he was known, was a young man of exceptional writing talent, both of prose and poetry. In his moving programme Christopher Palmer told the story of his brief life, and the acclaim which followed the publication of his collected work in 1950.

Jim's parents had parted company when he was very small, and with his elder brother David, was brought up near Sutton in Surrey by his mother. A love of nature and the countryside grew in him, and from the age of fifteen he kept a journal in which he kept notes, impressions,

short stories and poems for some possible future use. This was found after his death, together with diaries and his letters home written after he had joined the R.A.F. at the age of eighteen. His mother, Margaret Farrar, was well aware of her son's talent and it was she who, after his death, laboriously taught herself to type so that she could collect together his work. It was a task of love; as she wrote to me recently, she could not bear to think of this being done by some 'little typist'.

Soon after the war Mrs Farrar sent a few selected pieces to John Middleton Murry, founder and editor of *The Adelphi* magazine, for his appraisal. He published them immediately and they were seen by Henry Williamson, himself a frequent (and often unpaid) contributor to that magazine. Amazed by what he read, he hurried to see Murry to learn more about this young writer whom he wished to meet, only to learn with sorrow that he had been dead for almost two years. Of this visit he wrote later: "Murry...told me that he had accepted the essays and poems from Mrs Farrar, almost before he had finished reading them. At once he had felt the indefinable shock of reality in the pages. James Farrar had genius. This was what I felt too."

Saddened but undaunted Williamson wrote to Mrs Farrar, not knowing that she was working in Hertfordshire, her Surrey house let to an Army major. Fate, however, was kind; the letter was forwarded (Mrs Farrar still treasures it) and in her reply he learned that his own work had been one of the two great influences in Jim Farrar's life. (The other was the music of Frederick Delius; "Subtle, intangible. The last chord before despair, but yet never despair," he wrote of the songs, which provided the complete world of nature mysticism he had felt to the depth of his being.) A lesser man might have found advantage in such homage as he learned of it, but in Williamson it merely strengthened a growing determination that he must bring to public attention the work of a dead youth who he believed to be "an authentic voice of those who fell in the war, and of those who survived". Indeed, he paid his own tribute soon enough with the character of the young American airman-poet portrayed in his novel *The Phasian Bird* which preceded by two years the publication in 1950 of the collected writings of James Farrar. The title, *The Unreturning Spring*, was chosen by his mother.\*

Thus Christopher Palmer filled in the background of this remarkable story, and with extracts from his work demonstrated the growing maturity of James's writing between the ages of fifteen and twenty that showed an observation and understanding of his fellow men no less deep than his love for the natural world. If some of his early beliefs and assertions seem parochial at times this is understandable in one so young and home-bound; but after joining the R.A.F. his vision widens markedly and with an astonishing maturity far beyond that which forces itself upon the young. Critics who had expected his work to show the defects and inexperience of youth were astonished by the honesty and simplicity of

\**The Unreturning Spring* by James Farrar, edited by Henry Williamson. Williams and Norgate, 1950. Second edition, with a revised introduction, Chatto and Windus, 1968.

writing coupled with a sensitive maturity and mastery of language, beyond all writers but the few to whom the appellation 'genius' may be given. Had James Farrar survived and continued to write there seemed to be no doubt in their minds - nor indeed in the minds of those who have followed - that he would have become a leading figure among English writers of this century.

When presenting the life of a young man or woman who has died in tragic circumstances it is all too easy to slip into tones of regret and sadness, but Mr Palmer avoided this trap. For him, Jim Farrar was a young man who enjoyed life, every minute of it. He was invariably happy and bore with resilience and determination the war and the worst banalities of Service life. He had no illusions as to the dangers of war. His best friend was killed in North Africa. Nor did he believe in the invincibility of self. In the following almost mystical writing, he seems to sense the future. This was written in the early summer of 1944.

*One does not fly to and fro at night. One hangs thunderously beneath a still dome of stars, always in the middle of a void, never moving. All life is suspended here in this vibrating shell holding its station in the dark. Ten minutes, and the same Polaris over the starboard engine, the same curved Plough drooping upon the wing. Looking back, one sees the same planet mounted like a navigation light at the top of the fin. Then a turn is given. Slowly one wing rises against the stars, and remains tilted. And slowly, slowly, those stars begin their procession past it. Greenish figures on the gyro slide round one after another, until the required one is reached, and with a slight lurch the wing sinks down, and we are level as before, but with a new set of sentinel stars gazing at us down the fore-shortened top of the fuselage. Always we fly towards them, but nothing about them ever changes. The same sea waits beneath us. We are heading for Nowhere, and we never get any nearer.*

*Far away, back in the world, they sit in a shaded room watching a screen which sparkles regularly. We are a blob on the edge of the screen, lighting six times a minute, slowly fading, lighting again. The blob is moving. It is more ourselves than we are, because we hang motionless in space with our illusions of stillness and eternity.*

In conclusion I should like to quote - as did the programme - from a late prose piece, 'The Imagination to the Wraith', as it was later that the living spirit of the Wraith served the memory of the Imagination. If this had not been so this programme would never have been written.

*I am sitting by your sea of a generation ago, having come to a time when I feel myself to be unified with you.*

*There have been times when in arrogant orthodoxy I have denied you, though that was seldom... Now I have come naturally into the track of your way of thinking I have no need of self-questioning or introversion. Tonight you and I are one, sun and sea bind me to you as night upon the earth.*

*Your sea: ...This is in its fundamentals yours, the conception and spirit of it, the deep inspiration, and only the present pigment of fact is mine, your brain being dust and your eyes sightless. I see for you the sun thrown back in brilliant sheen by the ruddy grains of sand: mine are the pearly scalloped shells and wine-stained pebbles whose round smoothness is a story of sea-life: herring-gulls aslant the breeze, the white blown sky of sunset like smoke over the town, the dark old rocks cluttering the shore. The people on the front - I think of the Leas - are of your time as of mine.*

*All these things you know and gave me, and tonight I understand the nature of the gift genuinely, instead of by assumption. I can never hope to attain the meticulous vision of your mind when confronted by cosmic beauty, but there is much I can learn.*

*They pass, the timeless vacant faces, who shall say there is no Evelyn, no flax-dream among them?*

*The sun is dying. Oh, Maddison, your sea speaks to me...*

Note: Christopher Palmer, whom we welcome to the Society, has very kindly agreed to address the Spring Meeting in 1984, when it is hoped to provide a re-run of his programme. Further, and this would be welcome news indeed if confirmed, he is actively negotiating for the production of a new, but abridged, edition of *The Unreturning Spring*. Now out of print, it is not easy to find and even a revised edition would do much to relieve the disappointment of those who, having heard the programme, now wish to acquire the book. See also below.

#### THE DELIUS SOCIETY JOURNAL

The full text of Christopher Palmer's programme about James Farrar, with a new photograph of him, is scheduled for inclusion in the January 1984 issue of the above Journal. By kind permission of the Delius Society, and and by arrangement with the Journal Editor, Stephen Lloyd, copies will be available by post to members of the Henry Williamson Society. Please use the order form enclosed and ensure your order is posted to arrive by 1 December latest.

#### THE DELIUS SOCIETY

Like James Farrar, Henry Williamson was deeply moved by the music of Frederick Delius - his books contain many references to this fact - and indeed he had the good fortune to see if not the first then perhaps the second performance of his opera *A Village Romeo and Juliet* at Covent Garden in 1920. "Silver to Tristan's gold," he wrote afterwards.

The Society has a world-wide membership, and local branches in this country, and members receive a copy of the really first-class *Journal* quarterly. Full membership costs £8.00 and for students £3.50, and subscriptions should be sent to the Treasurer, Peter Lyons, 1 Cherry Tree Close, St Leonard's-on-Sea, Sussex, TN37, 6EX.

J.H.