

'THE POWER OF THE DEAD'

E.J. Rogers

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

During the 1960s I received a large number of letters, mostly of great length, virtually essays in Williamsonian criticism, from a Mr E.J. Rogers, living in or near Watford. Mr Rogers never disclosed his age, but it was clear to me that he was not young. By profession he was a printer's proof-reader. He was very much a Richard Jefferies man, and knew the Jefferies country well; and also Williamson's North Devon. (In one letter he told me he had found that Negley Farson was much better liked in Georgeham than Henry was!) He had been visiting those parts since 1929, usually on his bicycle, and with not much more luggage than his sleeping-bag. He suffered much from rheumatism, and made no secret of the fact that he was one of those people who "live right down on the poverty line, the hand-to-mouth line". He sold me, on advantageous terms, not a few books from his Williamson collection, including the fine illustrated edition of Salar the Salmon, with Tunncliffe's pictures in colour.

He had been reading Williamson since he was a young man, and knew all his work, including the contributions to periodicals, intimately. But as well as admiring Williamson, he was a relentless and probing critic of his work. Mr Rogers never, to my knowledge, published any of his writing; but many of his letters to me could have been worked up into valuable critical essays. Unhappily, most of them have now disappeared from among my 'portable property'. I still have a very interesting one about T.E. Lawrence, which discusses his relationship with Henry.

The letter here printed was sent to me on 31 December 1963, and is virtually a review of Henry's novel The Power of the Dead, and a critique of A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight as far as it had got by the end of that year. It seems to me to deserve a wider readership; accordingly I have subjected it to a certain abridgement, for the full text is very long, and have made a few editorial adjustments in the interest of smoother reading. It must be remembered, however, that it was written without any thought of publication.

BROCARD SEWELL

EDITOR'S NOTE: I have been unable to trace Mr E.J. Rogers to obtain his permission to publish this article. The editorial committee of the Henry Williamson Society apologises if it has in any way caused offence to Mr Rogers or his Estate. W.H.

SURELY *THE POWER OF THE DEAD* MUST BE THE LAST NOVEL OF *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, for it seems to work out the central problem faced by Henry Williamson in his own life, and to end in a sort of coda. If this is not the final volume, then Williamson will find it hard to close the series without producing an anti-climax. What point is there in going any further? The three previous novels (*A Test to Destruction*, *The Innocent Moon* and *It Was the Nightingale*) have been weak, and all that has been said in them could have been said in one book. Unless it was Williamson's intention from the start to write what I have called his pseudo-ficto-biography, which would serve only to confuse genuine biographers of integrity in the future. It is worth noting that one reviewer of *The Power of the Dead*, who had read none of the earlier volumes in the series, accepted it immediately as autobiography.

The closing chapter is noticeable, to any serious student of the previous novels, for one thing. The author states that the aim of the book is to do justice to the sufferings of the dead of World War One, and to the living dead that survived them. But in the closing chapter, 'All Soul's Eve', there is precious little about them, but plenty about Maddison (or Williamson), resolving, on paper, his own life-problem. That is to say, the conflict in himself between becoming a landed estate proprietor and manager or - a somewhat easier role - a professional writer.

The book has the usual quota of Williamsonian faults. For instance, events tend to be remembered - for the work is biographical - by the meals which accompanied them. There is in this writer a feminine trait whereby every little item on the table - and even what the beaters at shoots have for lunch - is remembered and recorded. Once again, we have 'fancy' names for the girls in the story. This is part of the old stunt of Williamson dreaming of life as he would like to see it; but I doubt if any of the rest of us would want it that way. This is a misdirection of the Greek Ideal, which men have forgotten was only an ideal, and false and impossible. The beer, bugs, bibles, and tobacco of Goethe for me.

We have too the same old incantatory music of certain words ending in 'ity'; e.g., amity, Felicity, fidelity, etc. And the same old Weeping Willie, or, rather, Phillip, whose childhood neurasthenia was later to blight his whole life. Hard work would have cured this, but he could not discipline himself to it. In the closing scene of *The Power of the Dead* Williamson gets everybody weeping with him; but in real life it is more likely that his characters would have been cursing.

The truth is that Williamson's later work - but not the early Nature books - is diseased. Anybody who doubts this will see it at once if they leave the *Chronicle* and go straight to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, a novel of the Waterloo era, or Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

If only Williamson had set himself to become the well-tweedied and well-respected villager, the local cultural stalwart, the village hall lecturer for the Workers' Educational Association, or a University Extension lecturer on English literature, contributing perhaps a weekly Nature chat on the BBC; an equable receiver of visitors of all sorts, with a

sociable and sensible manner, devoid of showing-off or 'fireworks'. If he had been able to do this, how much Williamson, English literature, and all of us would have gained from it. His disciplined background would have sobered and tempered his life and work into a later maturity becoming to a man who before his 35th year could give us such excellent *Nature* and *Village Life* books.

The books that make up the *Chronicle* at its present stage can be divided into three classes: the pre-war suburban London life; the 1914-1918 war years; and the after years to the period of the Slump. The pre-war novels are the best, simply because in them Williamson wrote of a period and a family life that he really knew. They are the best for their author too, because they should provide his bread-and-butter (or, as he would put it: wholemeal bread, butter, cheese, crisp celery, an apple, an orange, a nut, a fig, and a date), and also keep him warm, in his hoary-headed, self-pitying old age. The novels dealing with the war years are a bit 'cooked'. Unfortunately, the Williamson who drew many readers to himself by his oft-repeated account of how he fraternised with the German soldiers in No-Man's Land at Christmas 1914, an event which he said shaped his future thought and life, and determined him to be the God's-truth interpreter of the 1914-1918 debacle, now appears to have been behind the lines with a county cavalry regiment at the time. His description of the after-war period is terrible stuff. This is strange, because Williamson knew these years at first hand in London, and should have been able to interpret them to readers similar to those who knew the pre-war years, with whom they should have found a big sale. This ought to have been easy for Williamson, for even after 1923, when he left for Devon, he used to dodge backwards and forwards between Devon and London on the open roads of the time, and must have gathered plenty of material. Strangely enough, although in the novels the scene is supposed to be set in South Devon, he frequently forgets this, and unconsciously centres the story on Georgeham and its district in the North. But as in *Tarka*, his geography is inclined to be weak, and is not clearly conveyed to the reader's mind.

There can only be one reason for the retreat to Devon, and the betrayal in the final novels of his war comrades of whose self-sacrifice and suffering he was the self-appointed interpreter. Pseudo-ficto-biography is easy to write; it does not require too much 'thinking up', for most of it is already written in the author's mind. It was an easy and a lazy way, by which Williamson tried to get rid of his pathological self, by having a dig here and a poke there at all who had wounded his over-sensitive self in the past. The result for the reader is often yards of pointless and banal conversations that do not carry the story forward, but slow the novels down, and so require patient and laborious reading at times. All these factors constitute what T.E. Lawrence would have called, in his RAF terminology, a 'bind'.

Henry Williamson is regarded as one of the three or four main propagators - not 'experts' or scholars - of the thought of Richard Jefferies. One would have expected that some of Jefferies' thought would have been found running, threadlike, through the whole of this series of novels; for Williamson has said in his earlier *Flax of Dream* novels, and elsewhere, that his whole attitude to life was inspired and shaped by Richard Jeff-

eries' book *The Story of My Heart*, of which he had picked up a copy on a Folkestone bookstall at the time of his demobilisation in 1919. As it is, two of the early novels in the *Chronicle* contain a few brief references to Jefferies, and then there is silence; so it is an agreeable surprise to find in *The Power of the Dead* the comparative abundance of three references to Jefferies. Something seems to have moved him?

The closing chapter of *The Power of the Dead* shows a flash of real brilliance. What a closing scene to this long family saga Williamson has drawn, with the floating of illuminated Chinese candle lanterns in the form of pink lotus leaves on the artificial lake in the grounds of the ancestral home, symbolising the spirits, or the indefinable remaining being, if I may call it that, of those who have dwelt there before. What a marvellous closing scene this would make for a film, in colour.

This episode makes an excellent closing scene to the *Chronicle*, and I hope Williamson will not spoil it by introducing another novel, which would be an anti-climax. But of course Williamson goes half-way to spoiling it by having the leading actors in his tale weeping on each other's shoulders at the end; almost as bad as the mythical 'Shakespeare's' closing scene in *Hamlet*, where he quickly ends the play by having all the leading characters killed off. To the end Williamson is the little boy doing his secret weep under the stairs. As I must say again, in this last chapter, Williamson has forgotten the Dead he must write for, and has been more interested in trying to resolve his own life-problem. The lighted lotus-petal lanterns that drifted across the lake were not the spirits of the Great War's dead, but those of the Mad-dison (or Williamson) family.

By these criticisms I do not wish to disparage Williamson, so I would like here to recapitulate what I think about him. I believe that he is a writer who has failed to realise where his real strength lies, so that he has been less than fair to himself. He was the first in the still rigid-minded post-Victorian England of the first quarter of this century to give animal characters in fiction what might be called the dignity of 'human' characteristics and emotions, thus taking animals seriously. Williamson was not without intellectual courage when he was a young man. True, Richard Jefferies had voiced such ideas before him, but Williamson stepped in where the Master left off; so that he is the father of our modern school of young Nature writers. Williamson is not a nature mystic, as Jefferies was; he never had the experience of what has been called 'cosmic consciousness'; but in his stories of animals he made a new departure, getting 'inside' the beasts, birds, and fish that he wrote about, identifying, and running and swimming, with them.

To sum up, I feel that if only Williamson had realised where his real strength lay - in the animal sagas, the early Village books, and his other nature writing - he would today be a greater writer, with a greater reputation.