JACOB TONSON AND THE REHABILITATION OF HENRY WILLIAMSON

Alan Dilnot

WHO WAS JACOB TONSON? Anyone with a good dictionary of literature can answer that: he was a publisher who lived from 1656 to 1736, published Dryden and Addison, was Secretary to the Kit-Kat Club, and was gently touched upon by Pope in the *Dunciad*.

What then was Jacob Tonson doing writing in the *Eastern Daily Press* for a few weeks in the middle of 1943? Readers of Henry Williamson with a fair knowledge of his tone and concerns will find that easy to answer too, even easier if they have seen John Gregory's admirable collection of Williamson pieces, *Green Fields and Pavements*: Jacob Tonson was Henry Williamson.

Why did Williamson adopt this pseudonym, or, indeed, any pseudonym? This is not so readily answered, and deserves consideration at some length.

The years 1939 to 1943 were possibly the most difficult in Henry Williamson's by no means smooth career. The self-imposed tsak taken on in 1937 of raising a derelict farm to productivity consumed his daylight hours. Efforts to supplement the family income by the earnings from his pen absorbed his evenings and nights. His family life was cracking up under these pressures. Most serious of all, by his association with Mosley and his opposition to the war, Williamson found himself estranged from his neighbours, suspected by the local authorities, and to a considerable extent avoided by the literary world. "'In fact...your name is Mud,"' the Chief Constable says to Phillip Maddison.[1] While Williamson may have over-dramatised his unpopularity, there can be no doubt that the outbreak of war opened up a serious cleavage between Williamson and his reading public.

In such circumstances, perversely, the need to write became of paramount importance, not only because money was desperately wanted, but more deeply because a writer who feels divided from the dominant tendencies of his age needs the reassurance which comes from knowing that someone, somewhere, is reading and understanding. Yet the nature of Williamson's views, and the opinion held by some that he and all Mosleyites were really traitors, made it most unlikely that such outlets would readily come his way. (We may note also that when after the war he took over the editorial chair of the *Adelphi* from Middleton Murry, the effect on the magazine's fortunes was disastrous, almost destroying it.) Any editor employing Williamson would surely be risking the sales of his newspaper.

Unfortunately, Williamson was never a man to hide his views. His

fear of the consequences of another war between Britain and Germany was so great that he had become an active crusader, at times from B.U.F. platforms, against the trend towards war. Inevitably this had come to the notice of the *Eastern Daily Press*, a provincial paper of a kind more common then than now, intelligently edited, with good news coverage and a high standard of feature article. However, Williamson had appeared there fairly regularly from 1938 to 1941 on the Letters page and elsewhere, and almost invariably voiced views reminiscent of Mosleyite policy. Not all, of course, were exclusively Mosleyite. For example, Williamson constantly, and with reason, attacked the neglect of British farming; in this he was writing within a long tradition, stretching back at least to Cobbett. Nonetheless, his emphasis was Mosleyite:

> *There will be no change, unless the gold power of the City, the financial dictatorship, is dissolved, and wealth created by work in Britain is used here in Britain for the good of our people.*[2]

In the 'Barley Price Protest' (November 17, 1938), he writes what amounts to a press release for Mosley:

> *This barley business is only one of many symptoms of the economic malaise of democracy; democracy which means the rule of the many, the vast mediocrity of mind, heart, and spirit, instead of rule by experts, the pedigree part of our nation. By pedigree is not meant privilege by birth or wealth, but of talent, irrespective of what social class the brilliant mind springs from...*
>
> *So far as I know there is only one Englishman who has devoted his life to preaching, in our country, this new conception of human contentment and happiness. And, of course, being a pioneer, he is generally derided and disprized by 'most people'. This man, this patriot, who has nothing in common with the old selfish jingo-patriot of pre-war days, is coming to speak in Fakenham on Sunday...*

Shortly after, Williamson wrote three pro-German letters. The first gave a sympathetic account of Germany's problems and aims.[3] The second virtually accused Britain of forcing Germany to war, declaring that British agents had purchased Rumanian wheat to prevent Germany acquiring it.[4] The third justified the German occupation of Bohemia.[5]

These views, naturally enough, became unpopular after the war broke out in 1939. In 1940 Mosley was interned, as were some of his supporters. Williamson was not interned, though he may have been held briefly in police cells.[6] At all events, there was no alteration is his sympathy for Mosley and his opposition to the war. On the contrary, he drew attention to the apparent gap between his own concerns and the nation's war effort by objecting to military damage on his farm,[7] even though he kindly offered to lecture the towny soldiers, or write a pamphlet for them, on how they could minimise their disruption. Probably there were very few of the community who could perceive behind the sarcasm the tragic elements in Williamson's situation:

> *I wept, thinking of men drowning in water and burning in the air, or lying in the searing desert sands and the icy steppes of Russia; and such was my illusion, I believed that the ruined condition of the roads and that of the Western world were one and the same thing; and I could not do anything about it any more.*[8]

Rather, people would think of him as an unrepentant Fascist, idealistic perhaps, or eccentric,, but at all events out of step with an otherwise united nation. 'The Seed Goes In' and 'Farming in Wartime' would only deepen this impression, with their presentation of the conflict as one between a European crusader and the bankers of Threadneedle Street.[9]

Here, then, was a problem, a large one for Williamson, who needed regular journalistic work, but also for the *Eastern Daily Press*, which must have been keen to use the talents of this brilliant and experienced writer living locally, yet feared the repercussions that might follow the announcement of a regular column by him.

The solution was 'Jacob Tonson' and on 19 April 1943 appeared the first of a series of nine pieces, under the collective heading *Thoughts From A Country Window*. Even so, this first item, 'War and Peace', must have caused some uneasiness in the editorial office. It begins with the familiar Williamson theme, the neglect of rural England. It then draws a parallel betwen 'our times' and the Napoleonic period depicted by Tolstoy. There is an implied linking of Napoleon and Hitler, and the former's life and aspirations are treated sympathetically. With an application to present circumstances, Williamson writes:

> *And in 1815, when Napoleon was finally taken, he made a prophecy. He said: "These British will rue the day that they did not co-operate with my system. In a hundred years, they will be at war with a great European Power, arising from the valley of the Rhine." A Br itish officer, one of his guard on St Helena, that lonely ocean isle, was deeply moved at the ex-corporal's death, feeling that something great had gone from his life, that he would never find again. All most interesting for us today.*

Williamson could scarcely have come closer to saying that the death of the other ex-corporal, Hitler, would remove something great from his life too. Nor could he be understood to say anything other than that in a long-term view Britain's war aims were fundamentally mistaken.

To follow this by a paragraph sketching what a modern *War and Peace* would show was to move to safer, if more personal, ground. Here was a programme for the public side of *A Phoenix Generation* and *A Solitary War*. "I hope I live to read it," ends Jacob Tonson; and Henry Williamson fully intended to live to write it.

Had the editor taken on an awkward property in Tonson? Fortunately, the only reader to write in referred merely to Williamson's remarks on contemporary hedge-making.[10] Even so, Tonson's next two pieces

show an endeavour to identify himself with the mood of the nation.[11] But there was a war on, and a responsible journalist could not totally exclude reference to it. In the fourth piece, 'A Cuckoo Singing', a significant alteration in Williamson's view of Hitler is evident. Formerly, he believed that the British were being misled by the Press as to Hitler's personality. Now Williamson himself views Hitler as a 'case', rather interestingly expressing this new thought in parenthesis:

> *(The effects of sexual frustration are general knowledge today: and a very prominent European figure of our times will make most interesting biographical material when the present-time of obfuscation of fact gives way to the clairvoyance of history.)*

It is a little rich of Williamson to suggest that he is specially clairvoyant, since writers of his political position had probably done most to 'obfuscate' the fact that Hitler's was a deeply-disturbed personality. And even here, Williamson still suggests that 'blame' should be placed on those who do the frustrating, not on the frustrated:

> *In fact, every living thing, or organism, or human organisation, from great industrial nation to the little man... needs territory or living space. They struggle for food and they struggle for immortality (sometimes called love), and if one or another individual or racial instinct be frusrated we see a cuckoo going crazy or, on a larger scale, we hear the bursting of bombs.*

Still, this Hitler is some way from the all-wise, benevolent, self-disciplined Hitler of *Goodbye West Country* (1937). Hitler has ceased to be a wise father, in fact, and has become a difficult adolescent.

In 'The Little Ports' (17 May, 1943) we have a restatement of Williamson's rather simple-minded theories of economic history, with a Morris-like conception of the mediaeval community and its craftsmanship. But the direction of the article is not towards hate, but towards promoting a love and appreciation of the countryside and the rural economy. As this might lead us to expect, the remaining Tonson pieces pursue this typical and attractive Williamson theme.

In 'Topsy-turvydom' Tonson says that the "true artist has always lived dangerously", but Williamson had now found a tone which stimulated but did not startle. His audience was listening, and on 21 June, 1943, he reappeared *in propria persona* with *Green Fields and Pavements* and 'The Story of Cheepy'.

The mood of England was changing in any case. The tide of war had set against Germany following the Russian campaign. Already articles were appearing in the *Eastern Daily Press* discussing the terms which would be given to a defeated Germany. Whether the surrender should be conditional or unconditional was debated, and some readers felt that to avoid future conflicts Germany should this time be treated leniently. Clearly few now thought that Britain might be defeated. In these comparatively relaxed circumstances, it was hard to see what harm a man like Williamson could do.

However, Jacob Tonson did not quite disappear. Williamson referred to his article 'topsy-turvydom' in 'Peace and War', and Tonson himself came back once more with 'Of Men and Books'on 19 July. This was ostensibly because Williamson was in hospital; but since Williamson was writing the article, another reason must be found. One was that Williamson thus had a chance to push Lilias Rider Haggard's book *'Norfolk Life*, for which he had supplied material. Later in the article, too, he praised a book by Sir Arnold Wilson, who had been pro-German in the late 'thirties, but who on the outbreak of war had enlisted as a rear-gunner in the R.A.F. and was shot down in 1941.[12] After this gesture of sympathy with a patriot of the right, Tonson fades from view.

Who then was Jacob Tonson? He was a bookish man, not writing books, but never far from them. He was a man of large human sympathies, of an unblemished political record, and he used his influence to rehabilitate Henry Williamson, begetting some of the latter's best journalism. Perhaps it was with this episode in mind that Williamson, writing to the *Eastern Daily Press* on 10 January, 1944, concluded

> *And my real name is*
> *HENRY WILLIAMSON*

REFERENCES

1 *A Solitary War*, Chapter 24

2 *Eastern Daily Press*, 10 October, 1938, 'Farmers and the Barley Crisis'

3 'Pacification of Europe Has Begun', 29 March, 1939

4 '"Crush-the-Others" System', 23 March, 1939

5 'Prague Under the Germans', 1 April, 1939

6 See D. Farson, *Henry*, 1982, pp. 110 ff.

7 'Military Damage on the Farm', 1 April, 1941

8 'The Winter of 1941', *The Pleasure Ground*, ed. M. Elwin, 1947

9 *Eastern Daily Press*, 12 March, 1941 & 30 March, 1942

10 26 April, 1943

11 'Faith, Hope, and Clarity', 26 April, 1943 & 'News of England', 3 May, 1943

12 See R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, 1980, passim

---

I wish to acknowledge assistance from the library staffs at the County Library, Norwich, the British Newspaper Library at Colindale, and the University of Exeter Library.

A.D.