

A VISIT TO HENRY WILLIAMSON

Ann Thomas

SOME MONTHS BEFORE I CAME TO SPEND MY HOLIDAY IN DEVONSHIRE my mother, the widow of Edward Thomas, the poet, killed in the War, had met Henry Williamson. I wrote and asked if I might call on him, and received an invitation to spend the day with his wife and children in their home about nine miles from the sea - for he had moved from 'Ham', the village which appears in so many of his books. Upon leaving the bus on the London road from Barnstaple I walked along a lane, according to the directions contained in my invitation. It was a pleasant walk, with a beautiful deer park on one side and a trout stream on the other. I came to a group of thatched cottages at the end of the lane, and I walked up the path of the 'big house', as one of the cottagers described my destination.

Mr Williamson was examining something on the lawn, very intently, and when we had shaken hands he showed me the remains of a large salmon.

"Caught by a cursed otter, on its way up to the head-waters under Exmoor, to spawn," he told me. "The water is low, because of the drought, and the poor things haven't a chance in the shallows. The otters take most of the trout, too. The Deer Park waters are their annual nursery; they know I wrote 'Tarka', and like Leigh Hunt and his numerous family foisting themselves on the patronage of Byron, the lord of liberty...curse the otters!"

THE SCARRED UNDER-JAW

He pointed out some scars on the jaw of the salmon, which, he said, were got by the fish's attempts to jump the high and rocky weir, two miles down-stream. Again and again he had seen them trying to get up it, many of them being stunned after falling on the rocky base of the waterfall, and being swirled sadly seawards, dead or dying. Every fish that ascended had the scarred under-jaw.

"On the Barle, every fish has an abrasion under its fore-fins," he explained. "On other rivers you see fish with tails worn down."

After lunch, a basket of tea-things was packed, and we walked by the lovely river and lit a fire for our kettle. I was allowed the privilege of climbing up Williamson's special tree to watch the trout in the pool below, and the 'red' salmon (ready to spawn) lying there waiting for the flood to come so that they could get up the river.

THE TROUT FEEDING

When we had returned, and I had been talking to Mrs Williamson about the Braunton Burrows, Henry Williamson's voice called me:

"Come and see the trout fed."

I ran after him, striding down the path and through a gap in the hedge, and found him standing, tin in hand, on one of the miniature islands in an exciting series of pools and rippling runs.

We stood looking into the pool, surrounded by wire-netting against poaching otters, and as the spoonfuls of rank-smelling fish meal were thrown in the young trout splashed and darted for the food.

"This is my snail and shrimp factory," he said, as we jumped over a small duct to another pool, where watercress grew. "Very good food for trout."

I was also shown the hatching-box, in which thousands of opalescent trout eggs lay. He moved them gently with a heron's feather. "There should be some hatched out very soon," he said, brushing away some fragments of moss adhering to one of the eggs. He described how he had made this water-garden, leading in water from the nearby runner or brooklet, through a leat or channel beside the small weir. The leat flowed to the ponds. Coke and gravel filters ensured clear water.

THE TURN-COATS

He told me many interesting facts about trout; one I particularly remember: he had put some Loch Leven trout, which have bluish-grey backs, and chocolate and yellow spots, in this Devonshire stream, and in a few months they became like the native trout, which are brown, with red spots.

The supper-bell rang just then, and I prepared reluctantly to leave this absorbing place. Mr Williamson, however, gave no indication that he had heard. He began to tell me about the migratory salmon-trout, or peal, which come up from the sea in summer. Time went by like flowing water, and the bell rang again. His narrative ended, he then began to shift some stones in the burn which made a shallow run with bubbles to aerate the water. I could see that he was imagining a different course for his beloved stream. Again the bell rang, this time near us, and Mrs Williamson stood at the gap in the thorn hedge which bounded the garden.

"Supper's ready," she called.

"All right, all right!" cried the author. "Just coming!" Half an hour later we went in. Meanwhile his tweed suit was soaking wet about the ankles, and mud was on his hands, knees, and face.

"I hate regular meals," he said, and I smiled to myself, remembering what he had said at luncheon, which had been at three minutes after one, instead of one o'clock. We walked back to the long, low, lime-washed house, with thatched roof and sentinel yew trees on the lawns. Three small heads peered at us from an upstairs window, two dark ones belonging to Windles, the eldest boy, and his sister, called Baby Margaret; and the fair head of John, the younger boy, who looked

exactly like the infant Hermes.

"Good night, Dad," they shouted.

THE OPEN HEARTH

We sat down to the meal, which was delicious in spite of the time it had been kept waiting. It was laid on a beautiful old oak refectory table, the loose top of which needed three men to carry it. It was eleven feet long, and shone with the flames of the wood fire. Mr Williamson drew my attention to the open hearth, which I had already noticed with pleasure.

"We had to take away four different fireplaces before we came to this one." He told me he had designed the sloping back to give the best heat; and certainly it was a fine log fire that sparkled and cracked as gently he used the bellows.

"Most people exhaust the embers with a villainous draught from the bellows," he said, "but fire is like any other life: it has its rhythm, which should be respected."

"I like the owl," I said, looking at a bird's outline carved on the hearth, with the initial H.W. at the base.

"I did it when the concrete was wet," he said. "I didn't want concrete; I wanted the old slate slab, but the mason cracked it up when my back was turned. Slate carries the heat; concrete is a dour, spiritless thing."

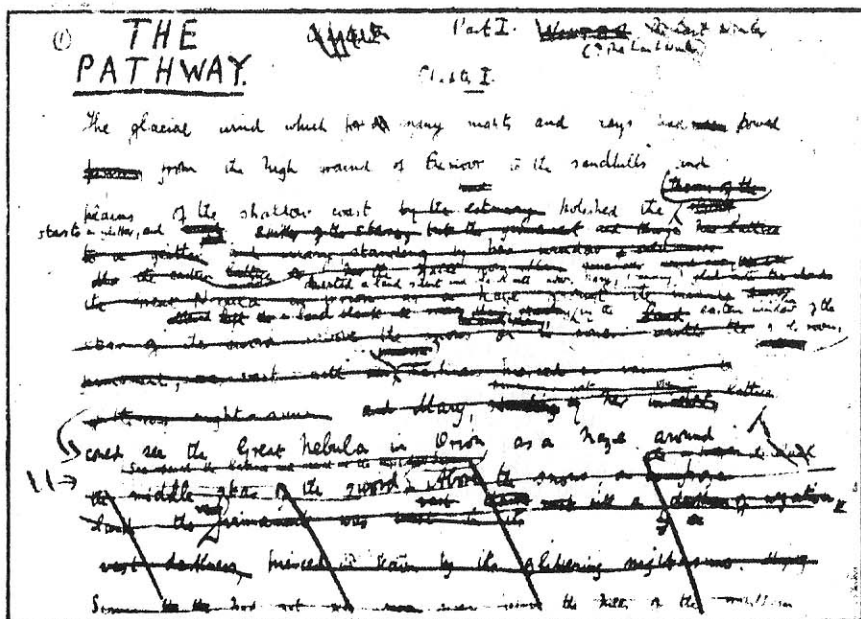
TEN-YEAR-OLD CIDER

After the pleasant meal, with cool cider like champagne, which had been in the wood for four years, and in bottles for six, we went to the comfortable sittin-room. I was shown bundles of withies from Sedgemoor, an old flail, the lapping crook bearing the iron kettle, the French boar-hunting horn from which my host blew an old hunting call, coloured balls from submarine nets washed up by the Atlantic on the long, flat sands of the famous Braunton Burrows.

Williamson asked me if I liked Delius. Yes, indeed. And Wagner? I nodded. He gave us a recital of gramophone records. *Brigg Fair* and the Rhinemaidens' song from *Gotterdamering* were my favourites. He compared the theme of *The Pathway* to Wagner's great cycle, and read and played extracts from both to illustrate his meaning. He was an entrancing talker, often using vivid similes to emphasise an idea. Mrs Williamson sat quiet and sweet, knitting socks for Windles, who was to go to the village school in a few days' time, she told me.

"My writing-room is upstairs. Come up, if you'd like to."

We went upstairs. On the landing and in the hall were two old ships' lanterns of read and green, port and starboard, lighting the way.



The beginning of the manuscript of The Pathway. HW Literary Estate ©

At the door of his room I stopped to read a notice, written in bold letters:-

GREAT DANGER!!

Inmate is condemned

to

Hard Labour for Life!

So please

K N O C K ! !

Beware Blasting Operations

AWFUL WARNING! SAFETY FIRST!

On no account imperil your

Sense of Humour!

YOU ARE WARNED!!

This puzzled me, until he removed it, and there I saw:-

FILLY FICTION FACTORY

Please

Be a nice girl

and

K N O C K !

Apparently his joke had been misunderstood by a timid maid, who feared it was intended for another reason.

WAR BOOKS

Here in the study, set with sturdy oak bookcase and Nevinston war drawings on the walls, were more owls; a Copenhagen china owl sat on a sheaf of papers, a brass owl on the door as knocker, an iron owl above the mantelpiece with matches at his back. There were books and books. A whole bookcase was reserved for War books, I noticed, many of them published during the War.

"One gets more facts in the War-time books," he remarked. "The post-War books are truer in feeling, but most of them lack the facts. Now here's a good book!" He took out *The Case of Sergeant Grischa*. "And here's another..." It was *Under Fire* by Barbusse. "*All Quiet On The Western Front* was pollinated by Barbusse," he said, "but I don't think Remarque could have been in battle. He is a haunted man - which means that he is not experienced. The book is taut with imagined dread. I may be wrong, but it seemed to me to lack a body, although its spirit is true of the very young soldier."

"Your *Patriot's Progress* seemed to me true and fine."

"That is nothing to the book I want to write about the War. A minnow compared to a salmon! For eleven years I have been preparing for it. None of the War books seem to me to be able to recreate a vanished world. They are all too limited... But don't let me talk about the War." His eyes seemed to be looking far, far away into the vanished world.

RARE FIRST EDITIONS

He pointed out to me the rare first editions of the three early novels of *The Flax of Dream*. He told me he had bought them when they were remaindered by the publishers, at 9d. a copy. They were now worth almost as many pounds as he had paid pence for them. I saw with secret pleasure that he had several of my father's books on his shelves, also my mother's book, *As It Was*.

How neat and orderly was Henry Williamson's writing-room. I had imagined an author's study as a dusty place, with piles of cobwebbed books and papers littering table, floor, and desk: entrance to servants forbidden. But here baskets in tidy rows filled the shelves that were bookless, the round table was bare except for a blotting-pad with three pens kept in place by a miniature bronze otter.

I asked if I might see some of his manuscripts.

He reached up for a basket labelled 'Labouring Life'.

"The type-script is with the publishers," he told me. "I have made alterations and additions to almost every sentence; these are the

raw material."

I picked up a bundle of papers, the pages neatly tied with thread at the corners. The front page of the story, entitled *The Mystery of Dark Cottage*, was gaily illustrated with amusing drawings in green, red, and black ink. The manuscript was written in a small, legible hand, with many corrections, all very neatly and clearly marked.

Underneath was another story. The bold red letters of the title-page said: *The Fox in the Moonlight*.

CHANGED OUTLOOK

Hesitatingly, shyly, Williamson asked if I would like to hear this story. Eagerly I said "Yes, please."

He began reading in his soft, rather sad voice. Often he would stop and make a wry face and put the story down. He needed, I could see, constant encouragement. I assured him it was strong and fine. It seemed to me that the story was entirely true to life, and yet as exciting as any thriller.

"I expect you have noticed how my outlook has altered," he said, when the story was ended. "I see things differently now. In *The Village Book* the sensitive reader will detect the despair at the narrowness and cruelty of the villagers. Afterwards I realised that this apparent narrowness and cruelty were ephemeral, vanishing in the light of understanding. I was like any other villager; I complained of my neighbours."

"But *The Village Book* is full of understanding and insight," I protested.

"Do you really think so?" he said doubtfully. "I often lay awake at night, seeing myself as someone limited by prejudices and facile judgements."

He read me other stories which were to appear in his new book, *The Labouring Life*, a sequel to *The Village Book*. I marvelled at his tolerance, his humour, his gift of sight, and the rarer gift of using words to translate sight into the imagination of others.

Sitting opposite to Henry Williamson, reading to us, I suddenly recalled the only time I met D.H. Lawrence, who came once to our cottage in Kent for a week-end. It was Williamson's eyes that first made me remember Lawrence so vividly. What a pity, I mused, that these two men did not meet. I believe they would have made the friendship that Lawrence was always seeking in his life; for both were strong in themselves: both would have respected one another and kept their integrity, like stars each in its orbit. There would have been none of the confused disharmony described in Mr Middleton Murry's book, *Son of Woman*.

LAWRENCE AND WILLIAMSON

In small things, when I got to know Williamson better, I saw a great similarity. Lawrence immediately impressed me with his practical common sense, especially in household matters. I remember he gave my mother a delicious recipe for a salad, containing all kinds of unorthodox ingredients. He enchanted us with a description of a new dress he had designed for his wife. Williamson also is interested in such things. There is no repairing job in the house that he is not equal to. He perceives instantly the technique of any new thing. He resents the jobs at first, but when he begins - planting trees, making new hatches for his trout farm, making an original kind of dam in the river, of potato sacks filled with concrete, each filled with an anti-scouring device, defeating the tunnelling of rats with broken glass, wire, and cement, or repairing a dry-rotted floor, cutting and laying a hedge - he is absorbed in his creations. He can cook, too. His omelettes are the best I have tasted.

Both Lawrence and Williamson seemed to be most at their ease with children. Williamson would turn into Willie Maddison when playing with his three merry children, entering into their games with unselfconscious keenness. I remember there was a child staying in the cottage when Lawrence visited us. He spent a whole morning looking with her through her two favourite books - Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* and a volume of Goya reproductions. He fascinated her imagination with his stories of the pictures, and would hurry past the bull-fights and battle scenes of Goya. 'The Man with the Beard' made a great impression on the child. Yes, they were much alike, these two, their eyes alone proved their sameness - bright, alive, keen, true, but unalterably melancholy.

THE RACING CAR

At last midnight tolled from the clock of Castle Hill, Lord Fortescue's seat across the Deer Park. It was time to go.

"I'll drive you back," said Mr Williamson, as we walked downstairs. I said goodbye to his beautiful wife, and we walked to the garage in the starlight.

"It looks a beauty," I said, admiring the graceful lines of his racing car.

"It is. The engine is at last almost perfect. But I had a dreadful time to get it right. It went twice to the makers, but their work left it as before." He opened the bonnet and turned on his flashlight. "It has three carburettors, you see. The acceleration isn't bad now. Listen to the note of the engine." He started the car, and after some minutes to warm the oil we roared gently towards the main road.

A FEELING OF DOOM

We had reached my destination almost before I had realised we had turned the corner into the main road. He stopped at the gateway of the

of the three-mile cart track along the sea-wall where I was staying. We said good night, and he drove off. I stood listening to the drum-like roar of a harmonious engine until I could hear nothing but the faint lap of the tide against the sea-wall.

As I walked back along the lonely path, the river dark and mysterious and rather sad, I thought of the poet I had left, and imagined that my father, killed under Vimy Ridge a whole world of time ago, must have been like him: so alive, with such a sense of fun, so interested in everything, and yet, in moments of silence, changing so rapidly, as though the world of 1914-1918 were coming back upon the youth who survived where most of his friends perished. I thought of Richard Jefferies, Edward Thomas, and Wilfred Owen, and my heart grew chilled, for it seemed that he, like these other men, who felt things so deeply, was doomed, and that he himself was conscious of this doom. To adapt Edmund Blunden's phrase, something had flown between him and the sun.

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FROM THE EDITOR

My apologies for not getting this issue of the Journal out in time to be included with the September mailing. I forgot that we had decided to bring forward the publication date in the autumn as well as in the spring. The fault is mine alone, and in future the Journal will be sent out with details of spring and autumn meetings.

Will Harris wonders whether any members would be prepared to lend him transparencies of Williamson country and scenes to illustrate a talk he is to give in February 1985. The talk, provisionally entitled "As the Sun Sees...", will be given under the aegis of the London Borough of Sutton Library Service, and transparencies are required of Lewisham (then as well as now, if possible), and Devon. Please contact Will if you are able to help.

Finally, my apologies to Robert Williamson for not giving his name in the caption accompanying the photograph of the carved otter presentation that appeared in the previous issue of the Journal.

PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS ISSUE by Kenneth E. May ©

Inside front cover: Children from Brockley School, dressed in Victorian costume, standing outside No. 21 Eastern Road.

Page 38: The Plaque unveiled. From left to right: Mrs Loetitia Williamson, Richard Williamson, John Glanfield, Joan Read (whose attention, it appears, has been caught by the antics of one of Zippy's descendants).