

## Letters

Recently reading Fishley Holland's 'Fifty Years A Potter' (Pottery Quarterly, 1958) I came across the following reference to Henry Williamson, which others may be interested to see. Holland started work with his grandfather in Fremington at the turn of the century, later setting up his own pottery in Braunton before finally moving to Clevedon. The reference to HW relates to his Braunton period when the writer, after mentioning some of the visitors to the pottery, goes on to say:

*Henry Williamson lived in a small cottage at Georgeham while he was writing his books on Devonshire life. I well remember his motor-cycle with the owl device on the tank. That was his trademark- and you see it in his books. We made some pots for his daily use. One day he came with me for a cup of tea and told my wife she must have known he was coming, as she had left the sugar out of the cake and he preferred it that way. He told me that whenever I was up in Ham, I should go in and help myself to bread, cheese and beer if he were out, as he always left the door unlocked. We thought him a character then, and how we enjoyed his books as they came along, especially as we knew some of his characters.*

One of them helped to build our pottery, and I often relate a story I heard him tell. His son was building a piece of wall between the pottery and the kiln shed when father came along and asked: "Be 'ee upright, my son?" "Yes, father," said the lad. "Well,

don't be like Bill Smith. His Maister saw he was out of line and told him so, but Bill said, "Ees, Maister, 'tis upright." "Well, have you plumbed it lately?" "No, Maister." Bill then ran up the plumbob and said, "Ees, Maister, 'tis upright and fower inches over!" One often heard such humorous stories from those grand old boys.

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With three more chapters of *The Gale of the World* to read I am almost at the end of a marathon run through *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. This for the second time, having read the books, as they were published, one by one.

I must say that it has been a most satisfying experience although the latter part of the *Chronicle* has some remarkably tedious moments, *Lucifer Before Sunrise* having tautological farming detail and *The Gale of the World* being a semi-neurotic ramble! No wonder Henry Williamson was so shattered when he wrote the final words; he must have felt like a prisoner released after a very, very long sentence of penal servitude.

I have noticed a number of typographical errors in *The Gale* and wonder whether Henry, running out of steam, paid less attention to correction of galleys towards the end. The earlier books are almost faultless.

I have always believed that matters of fact stated by HW, even

though in novels, were utterly accurate. And his pronouncements about natural phenomena, in books like *Salar* and *Tarka*, I have trusted completely. I was therefore astonished when I read the following on page 241 of *The Gale of the World*:

*They (Phillip and Laura) left the Silver Eagle in the village and walked beside the Lyn, where waterflies were swimming as nymphs...*

*"Tell me about them," Phillip.*

*"Well, as the atmospheric pressure lightens, what we call a rising glass, the nymphs are hatching on the surface of the stream. The trout are rising, too, for fish with their swim-bladders are most sensitive to air-pressures...whether one is a fisherman or not, one shares in the general lifting of the air, for the pressures upon the body always effect (sic) the mind."*

Williamson is, of course, 180 degrees off course. A rising glass is caused when atmospheric pressure increases. The conditions conducive to a good hatch of aquatic flies - especially ephemeroptera - are:

1. A high or rising barometer (not a lightening of atmospheric pressure.

2. A sunny day.
3. Soft, mild weather.
4. Warmish weather.

(See *The Fisherman's Vade Mecum*, G.W. Mansell, 4th ed. A.&C. Black, 1959.)

Furthermore, fish do not rise because of a lightening or an increase of atmospheric pressure; they rise to take upward-swimming sub-aqueous insects or surface food.

And what's more, the fishes' swim or air-bladder is a device to control buoyancy, just like a submarine's air tanks. Henry was speculating recklessly and wrongly!

I'd like to quote from a book which was published about the same time as *The Gale of the World*. It is *The Trout* by Drs W.E. Frost and M.E. Brown, both biologists specialising in trout behaviour.

*The specific gravity of a fish depends on the amount of air in its air-bladder... There may be receptors in their muscles indicating... contraction, and there may be pressure receptors, but we still have very little information about the trout's sense organs and sensory discrimination apart from studies on the eyes and sense of sight.*

Having now indulged myself in the above corrective and, I suppose, negative pursuit, I shall have to re-read *Salar the Salmon*. I hope Henry didn't speculate too much in that opus, for errors which are forgivable in novels about human relationships would not be so in a semi-documentary about a salmon!

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Don Cook, who contributed to the last issue of the Journal, writes to inform us that his article 'The Great War and its Effect on Henry Williamson' has been published in the June issue of the *Contemporary Review*. "I think that the article is of importance in that it may lead to a wider appreciation of the *Chronicle*." We hope so, and wish Don and his article well. Ed.