

AN AFTERNOON IN 1968

Don Cook

I MET HENRY WILLIAMSON ONLY ONCE, in May, 1968, and left with the image of an extremely energetic but lonely recluse. Succeeding issues of the Society *Journal* give the lie to that, as he seems to have had such a constant flow of friends, visitors and correspondents that I have hesitated over adding my own account.

I first wrote to him in the early sixties, mainly queries about aspects of his work, and had received perfunctory replies. It was not until September 1966 following publication of appreciation of the *Chronicle* I had written for *The Contemporary Review* that I received an unexpected letter from him.

He expressed his thanks, and was agreeably surprised that the magazine had shown interest in his work. Furthermore, he had instructed his publishers to give me a copy of *The Solitary War* which had just come out, and would I call in next time I was in North Devon?

It was not until May 1968 that I went to stay on an Exmoor farm near West Anstey having previously written to him to let him know the contact address for a possible meeting. When I arrived at the farm there was a letter waiting. He asked me to telephone him at Ilfracombe to arrange something at Ox's Cross... "We can meet, perhaps for a walk, and sandwiches and a glass of beer. All I can manage, I fear, with over 1000 letters, from 1964 onwards, unanswered."

He also mentioned problems with his publishers over the final novel of the *Chronicle* which he hoped would be resolved that week so that he could see me with an easier mind. I phoned him, and we agreed on the following Friday afternoon, as I was returning home the next day.

When I arrived at the field, nobody was there. It was blowing hard from the south-west, and the rain was horizontal as I stood by the locked hut wondering what to do next. A moment later he appeared. I was immediately struck by the youthful spring of his step, and the firmness of his handshake.

The interior of the famous hut was spartan: there seemed to be a military touch about it, of the Great War, not the last one. So, here I was, sitting by the fire with Henry Williamson, and a kettle brewing on the hob.

I knew little of his personal life other than from his books, but that afternoon he told me much that is now well known. Then, when the kettle had boiled and the mugs were filled, he started talking about the last book of the *Chronicle*.

"I have just finished correcting and re-writing parts of it. Could

you take it to the publishers for me?"

For a moment I was really shaken, but I put it to him firmly... The trust was gratifying, the responsibility considerable. Suppose I had an accident, or the work got lost or stolen, what then?

To my relief, he nodded. "Yes, you're quite right." He paused, and added, "But you'd like to hear about it? I've called it *The Gale of the World*."

My assent produced what was to be one of the most unusual experiences in my life. He virtually acted the story, his voice at times trembling with emotion, and his eyes burned with the passion of his words. Adding to it was the fury of the gale outside and the beat of the rain on the windows which seemed to echo the elemental climax of his exposition. I remember thinking then that if Henry Williamson had failed as a writer, what the stage would have gained!

Although when the book was published it was maligned by some critics it has to be taken in context with *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* as a whole or it can be misunderstood. I have no doubt of its quality, nor of the passionate sincerity and spiritual depth of its author.

The rain had eased, and we went over to the library, past the great pile of logs he had already cut against the winter. Inside he showed me the bookshelves and his desk. It was then that I broke all the Henry Williamson rules by asking him to sign my first edition of *The Old Stag* which I happened to have brought with me.

"I don't do that," he said, giving me a sideways glance. "I'll tell you what, though. As soon as I can get hold of a copy of *Tales of a Devon Village* I'll sign that, and send it on to you".

I shook my head, recognising the escape-route. "Bear in mind this may well be our only meeting. I have spent twenty years collecting your books, and I'm not interested in financial gain from your signature. I simply want a record of our meeting today in a book that I prize very highly."

He smiled then, and, to my surprise, signed without further ado. "May 1968, Ox's Cross, Henry Williamson." With that, he suggested we drive down to Braunton for a beer and hot meat pie, which we did.

FROM THE EDITOR: My apologies to Joan Skipper for printing her STD code number incorrectly in the last issue of the Journal. Also in the last issue, there was mention made of a piece by E.J. Rogers to appear in this issue. Lack of space (truly a matter for rejoicing) has made it necessary to hold over Mr Rogers's piece until the October 1984 issue (No. 10).