

## THE GERMAN 'BEAUTIFUL YEARS'

Horst A. Reschke

THE YEAR WAS 1940. I was a boy in Germany, celebrating my tenth birthday. One of the presents received was a book. Its robin's-egg blue linen binding bore the imprint of three dandelion leaves. Its title was *Die Schönen Jahre - Roman von Henry Williamson* (S.Fischer Verlag, Berlin).

*The Beautiful Years*, albeit in German, was to become a very important book in my life. For a boy in Hitler's Germany the world of Willie Maddison was strange and wonderful indeed. My English lessons would not commence for another two years. Thus the pronunciation of names and places suffered a great deal. The terms 'Mr' and 'Sir', retained, no doubt, to preserve the British flavor, looked foreign and exciting to me in the German text, one more reason to involve and initiate my closest playmates in the secret world of *The Beautiful Years*.

In 1941 the government sent us to Austria - then annexed by Germany - and my Austrian friends, too, became enthralled with my book. We all came to know its characters quite well and easily slipped into the roles of Willie Maddison and Jack Temperley. We fell in love with Dolly, Elsie Norman and Mary Ogilvie, admired Jim Holloman, the crow starver, and feared Mr Rore.

None of these good people would have recognized their names had they depended upon our pronunciation of them. I recall, by the way, that 'Bony Watson' had been translated as 'das Gerippe Watson', a term we found tremendously appealing because it had a connotation somewhat closer to 'skel-eton'.

The book next followed me to a two-year permanent school camp, called 'KLV-Lager'. From 1942 to 1944 we were sequestered in the Solling Mountains. Again *Die Schönen Jahre* was widely read. As we had only the one copy, it suffered a good deal of wear and tear and although it did endure to this day, its spine did not survive.

In 1952 I emigrated to the United States and of course my beloved book went with me. In Salt Lake City, Utah, where I was to live for 22 years, I looked for the English version of *The Beautiful Years*, but to no avail. Finally, in 1957, I found a copy of *The Flax of Dream*. I was overjoyed to discover that not only did it contain my book, but in *The Dream of Fair Women* and *The Pathway* Willie's life was extended far beyond the time during which I 'had known him' in Germany.

Although at age 26 I was a grown man, married and with two children, I could not suppress the euphoria which enveloped me as I read *The Flax*. It was in that frame of mind that I wrote to Williamson, never dreaming that he would respond. But he did not keep me waiting for very long. My letter was written Feb. 19, 1957; his bore the date of Feb. 26.

Our correspondence continued for a year. Although I never was quite

able to escape the feeling of intruding - a sensation conjured up by an effort to put myself in his place - Henry had a way to almost compel a response. I am sure those who have had the good fortune of carrying on an extended conversation with him know whereof I speak.

Henry alternated between being in high spirits and feeling extremely low. I strove gingerly to tread between these fluctuating emotions, attempting to provide the equilibrium which I felt he needed.

As our correspondence progressed - if that is the proper term for what happened to it - and under the influence of Henry's vivid description of his life in a little hut at Ox's Cross, with a pair of brown owls nesting under his roof, I embarked upon an ambitious program to revive an interest in his books in the United States. I wrote scores of letters to many prominent people, as well as to publishing houses, confident that it was just a matter of time before Williamson's star would once again rise in the United States. Alas, it was not to be.

One of the people to whom I wrote was Pearl S. Buck. She responded twice, telling me once, "I am interested in what you tell me about Henry Williamson and I shall try to get some of his books.

"It is sad when a writer falls into undeserved oblivion. I was in China during the years when he was publishing in the United States, and therefore did not know of his book. After I have read the books I will write to you." The second time she told me that she was getting a copy of *The Golden Virgin*.

On his part Henry told me, "I was delighted with your letter, telling me about your activities on my behalf in the U.S. In fact I was exalted by what you told me; then I wondered if you were putting yourself out too greatly on the behalf of an old author. But I do indeed know the feeling when I was your age, I lived with my writers, they were my companions, although the chief one of my youth had been dead before I was born. Man is a creature of spirit, and lives by the spirit."

What impressed me about Henry's letters was the fact that he had the capacity of making you feel as though writing to you was important and interesting to him, as though it really mattered that you receive more than a perfunctory reply, even though he must have had scores of people like me with whom he maintained an exchange of letters, or tried to.

When *The Golden Virgin* was finished in the fall of 1957 Henry mailed me a copy. Unfortunately it never arrived. Still, I have always appreciated his generosity.

He also granted me permission to translate the Christmas 1914 chapter from *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* into German. It was subsequently read before an audience of the German 'Kulturkreis' in Salt Lake City in 1957, and it greatly moved those who heard it read.

It is worth mentioning that the letter from Mr Rore to Willie Madison, at the end of *Dandelion Days*, according to Henry was not to be

taken at face value. He told me it was put there by him 'as a supreme irony, a letter from a brain-buster master who believed all that nonsense he wrote in his letter to Willie'.

"The irony," he went on, "was the Nazi people thought that letter was meant to be an expression of the author, that HE believed that nonsense at so late a date as 1935, and they told Fischer, the publisher, that they didn't want any more."

He noted that Fischer was a Jew, and he promised Henry to publish *The Flax* in one volume, "so that the letter of Mr Rore - an actual letter written to me by my old Headmaster - in 1914, would be seen for what it was."

As time went on Henry's letters became more morose and depressed. Describing the burden of writing his "Phillip books" he said "it is a task almost beyond my strength". He went on to confide that he was being hounded by elements "in this very district", speaking in particular of "one of my mental figments, an American writer who lives near, a chap who fights alcoholism and when he breaks out, seeks me as a scapegoat...and gives me hell, so much so that if he sees me in a pub in the town, on market day, he shouts out his insults and taunts. I could have him for slander again and again, but try to pass it over". My recent reading of Dan Farson's book *Henry* has shed more light on this episode.

Wrapped up as I was in Henry's life, I felt helpless and small in the face of such adversity. Although I thought I had much to give by way of encouragement, I felt trapped in the dichotomy of wanting to help while not wishing further to intrude and thus become part of the problem, even though he had once written "do write again whenever you feel like it: your letters (& their spirit) are most sympathetic to me".

It took me years to sort out the details bearing on Henry's attitude regarding the "great man across the Rhine". Although having grown up in Nazi Germany, I nevertheless had been raised in a Christian (Mormon) home, had seen a Jewish friend, whom we were hiding, arrested and taken away, and had had a close-up view of Nazi persecution, as my parents' humanitarian attitude was adversely interpreted by Nazi officials.

I thus felt somewhat pacified when Henry wrote to me, "I did think that Hitler would never start a war, but I know that it is bad to be a fanatic, whether Mahomet or Hitler or anyone who deals with the souls of men as artistic material". Yet it required another 25 years for me fully to understand Henry's motives, to learn that they were not at all political, but had to do with his separate, sensitive, almost imaginative and private world as a writer.

Although I am now a member of the Henry Williamson Society, I am perhaps the least informed among those interested in the life and writings of Henry Williamson. Having experienced everything at a distance and having felt the initial impact of Henry's writing in translation and altogether lacking the 'flavor' of the English language - not to mention the delightful Devon dialect - I know that I have much to learn and ab-

sorb. I had never met an Englishman until after the war (except for a few British 'turncoats' in German uniforms with whom we had to share a bombshelter in Hildesheim). In 1946 I was privileged to become acquainted with a British army officer, appropriately named Tom Williamson, who was part of the military government in Hannover, my hometown. Over the years I have known many English-born people and have learned to love and appreciate them. But I know it will require a personal visit to 'Williamson Country' to firm up some conceptions and to give form to my somewhat vague ideas of what Henry Williamson felt and experienced. I look forward to such a visit.

Many years ago Dorothy Kornold, an American newspaper writer, commenting on *The Pathway*, wrote, "This young author who probably never will be widely read in his own generation, but will be best beloved by an intelligent few, stands even now in the light of immortality". Whether or not her sensitive observation was prophetic remains to be seen. But as Henry had told me, "Man is a creature of spirit, and lives by the spirit". For me, a man German-born, then shaped and molded by years of life in the United States, the spirit and essence of Henry Williamson has never been more clear. It will always be bright and exuberant and I hope it will yet be felt by those future generations who will experience it without political encumbrances, free and soaring like a proud bird.

*Letters, © the Henry Williamson Literary Estate, quoted with permission.*

