

IN HONOUR OF HENRY

Richard Williamson

This is the text of the speech given by Richard Williamson on the occasion of the Opening of the Restored Hut on 15 October 1983.

MY FATHER WOULD HAVE BEEN HONOURED to have seen such a gathering of friends here on his behalf. It may be as well to remind ourselves of why we are here. Sixty years ago this enclosed field with its banks, pine trees, buildings and literary significance, did not exist. It was part of a bigger field, with bullocks grazing, and a rabbit trapper tilling his gintraps in the roadside hedge. One or two people rode or drove past. Sometime in the early part of this century my father came here, before the First World War. The view that he saw was to help determine the major part of his life. He saw the purple outline of distant Dartmoor. In the middle distance were the estuaries of the two rivers, gleaming in the sun. To one side he saw the island of Lundy, and closer at hand, the headland of Baggy Point. Then in the foreground was the village of Georgeham. Here was a complete world, and he felt at once that he belonged here, and not in London.

Unhappy after the horrors of the war, my father fled the city and settled here. Working at first in Georgeham but later here in this little wooden writing hut, the land having been purchased with his prize money from *Tarka the Otter's* Hawthornden Prize, my father began work recording all that he saw. His pen was like a needle, and this hut was like the wooden sounding box of the recording gramophone, supporting him.

Eventually this landscape was to become familiar to hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world, people who have never been. The landscape is the world of *Tarka the Otter*, of *Salar the Salmon*, of *Life in a Devon Village*, of *The Pathway*, of *The Dream of Fair Women*, of scores and scores of short stories, newspaper and magazine articles and broadcasts. In short, it is of high literary significance.

Thank goodness it is protected. Dartmoor is a National Park, the coast line is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Baggy Point is owned by the National Trust. Braunton Burrows, nucleus of many of the famous animal stories, is a National Nature Reserve, managed by the Nature Conservancy Council. Georgeham, recently, has won Best Kept Village Awards. All this shows how jealously guarded is the beauty of this rare landscape.

How fortunate, too, for the literary heritage with which North Devon Devon is endowed. Think of Dickens's landscapes in London and Portsmouth, or Arnold Bennett's Potteries, or Thomas Hardy's heathlands today. They are largely unrecognisable.



How fortunate we are, too, to have the actual writing hut which gave birth to many of the unique stories and descriptions. Because, you see, there are other landscapes which have been recreated in this little hut. There is the landscape of Edwardian London. There are the landscapes of Passchendaele and the Somme, of North America after the Great Depression, of East Anglia on the boundaries of wartime invasion, the landscapes of dream and fantasy, human love and fear: the landscape of Twentieth Century Man.

One day people will come here as they do to Dove Cottage in the Lake District, the home of Wordsworth, or to the Wakes at Selborne, the home of Gilbert White, to Walter Scott's home at Melrose by the Tweed, or to Robert Burns's house at Alloway in Ayrshire.

And they will thank God that a few people had the foresightedness to form themselves into a Society, and contribute their money and their muscle and expertise into rescuing this time-machine from falling into ruin.

This little hut is almost as Henry Williamson left it. He would be happy and joyful that you have restored it because it is the one place on earth when life for him became dark and at a low ebb that he did not turn against, and where he was able to continue his work almost to the end of his life.

On behalf of him and his family, and on behalf of all those in distant lands and here in Devon, I thank the Henry Williamson Society, and in particular Tony Evans and his son who carried out the work, for this valuable and timely rescue operation which will be remembered in this century and the next.