

## A REPLY TO RICHARD RUSSELL

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As a newcomer to the Henry Williamson Society I should like to take up the challenge, or should I say challenges, that Richard Russell threw out in the October 1983 issue of the journal. Richard's contention concerning the *Chronicle* is that the second half of the series contains a political viewpoint that reduces the books to "ideal stuff for throwing in the dust-bin", and that these books are "at odds entirely" with the sensitivity and clarity of the earlier *Chronicle* novels. This is the challenge, yet within this argument lie three other implicit challenges to the reader. Firstly, there is the question of how one's own ideology (be it conscious or subconscious) affects one's interpretation and understanding of any art, not just the works of HW. Secondly, there is the question of historical perspective; I would venture to suggest that HW in writing the *Chronicle* in the aftermath of the Second World War nevertheless managed to capture perfectly throughout the series the historical context of each of the novels, and that Richard Russell in his analysis totally fails to take an historical perspective, but rather he regards the works with hindsight alone. Finally, there is the general question of art and politics, especially important when the politics happens to be both discredited and hated. I intend to deal with each of these three points in turn in an attempt to argue that the whole of the *Chronicle* should be on your list of the real literary heritage of HW.

Richard's article spells out fairly clearly, at least in part, his own "ideology". I would be surprised if it were not the case that he is involved, emotionally or physically, with the present peace movement in Britain. His comparisons between the First World War and the Falklands certainly point in that direction, as do his deserved praises of the anti-war nature of the Great War section of the *Chronicle*. This is not to condemn, or otherwise, Richard's attitudes, it is merely to point out what is so obvious that it might be missed, namely that one's own attitudes and beliefs are actively engaged by any art worth the name. This is all the more so when that art contains a clear political message. For many today Fascism is not only a defeated creed, but a hated and feared memory of brutality and total war. Indeed, the very term "Fascist" is the ultimate political insult, conjuring up as it does all the horrors of a man-made hell. Is it small wonder then that our own ideology, shaped by our country's war against Fascism, produces an instinctive rebuttal of all things tainted by this creed, even the writings of a beloved author. I would argue that Fascism is one of the few historical and political phenomena that people are not prepared to be rational about. For myself, born fifteen years after the destruction of National Socialist Germany, I should like to appeal for a rational analysis of Fascism in HW's novels, an analysis based upon a proper historical perspective.

Richard implies that HW "went into print giving public encouragement" to brutality, torture and all the viciousness of Fascism. Can one accept this? Was HW giving encouragement to the very brutality and tunnel-vision that he so totally condemns in his portraits of a Trident-reading, German-hating, British public? I doubt it. So what was HW encouraging in the Fascism he supported? Richard briefly mentions some of those things HW was encouraging, only to slide over them into emotive talk of "vicious Newspeak". HW's "overriding motive" for being a member of the British Union of Fascists was indeed a desire for peace. Richard mentions that we do not find HW a member of the Peace Pledge Union or the ILP, as if these two organisations had a monopoly of peaceful desires, but what of the record of the man that was leader of the BUF? At the beginning of his political career Sir Oswald Mosley had vigorously supported the League of Nations (from 1919 to 1923 he served on the Executive of the League of Nations Unions) which he saw as a great hope for enforcing the claim that the First World War had been the war to end war. Mosley only abandoned the League when it became clear to him that it would be a hopeless weapon in the fight for world peace, as it proved to be. It was Mosley too who played a leading role in alerting Britain to the reign of terror of the "Black and Tans" in Ireland. Again, it was Mosley and the BUF who pushed for peace through strength, advocating a stronger Britain as a force for peace, not appeasement from a position of military weakness; the policy pursued by successive governments in the 1930s, with terrible results. And it was for advocating European peace that Mosley and 800 of his followers were interned without trial in May 1940. Allly this record with the programme for full employment through government economic management that Mosley promoted, and it is not hard to see why HW saw in Fascism the only hope for an ordered, efficient, materially better-off Britain, co-existing in friendship with Germany; a dream that would have partly vindicated the sufferings of the Great War in which the slums were supposed to have died in Flanders, to paraphrase "Spectre" West. Love of his fellow countrymen and his country - a strong emotional patriotism of the best kind - was a characteristic of HW: these feelings also found political expression in Fascism; they do not, I think, conceal "lesser motives". As far as these "other motives" are concerned, may I make a few observations? Richard lists these "lesser motives" as "xenophobia, mistrust of democracy, a dislike of "The Jews". One thing that stands out in the *Chronicle* is that, from the soldiers in "feldgrau" to the people at the "parteitag", HW has nothing but sympathy and admiration for the Germans. Is this "xenophobia"? Another failing is "a mistrust of democracy". Is this so hard to understand when it was a "democratic" government that led Britain into the First World War and it was those proud instruments of "democracy", the newspapers, that whipped up the hatreds of both wars; newspapers characterised as "the bungaloid-tabloid-respectability-pornographic-leery-sneery papers" in *A Solitary War* (p.332)? Finally, there is the question of HW's "dislike of the Jews". This impression is there in the *Chronicle*, but I would like to draw attention to two counters to this. Firstly there is the statement of the hero of the First War novels, "Spectre" West, in praise of two Jewish officers: "So when any of you ever feel like damning Jewboy profiteers in this war, chalk up against it John Monash, and the Third Australian division!" (*Love And The Loveless* p.369). That is the division in the novels, a division between those who suffered, like the troops, and those who profited and hated; it is not a division between Jew and Gentile. Secondly, there are the continued references throughout the *Chronicle* to Richard Maddison's disparaging remarks about Thomas Turney being of Jewish stock. In the context of the novels is this not something that is condemned? In sum, today we see Fascism as through a glass darkly, it is

a defeated and hated creed. Yet this is not how it appeared to many in the 1930s with the promise of order and efficiency (two of the central themes of the "farming" section of the *Chronicle*); vindication of the sacrifice that HW's generation made, in a society "fit for heroes" led by an old-soldier and, above all, the promise of peace with the soldiers and men in "feldgrau" must have been only too clear to HW. And who will blame him for treading that path which enticed other great writers such as W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T.S.Eliot, Roy Campbell, Drieu la Rochelle, and many others?

Finally, there is the general question of art and politics. Should we condemn a man's work, refuse to listen to him on any subject, solely because we take exception to his politics? I think not. In a previous age Oscar Wilde went unread in the houses of the respectable middleclasses because of his sexuality. Would we think of such a thing today? Today, we live in the shadow of the last war: total war, Nuremburg, Belsen, Dachau. These things are still with us, yet what is the connection with HW? Should we refuse to read the works of any writer who supported the Allied war-effort when one considers the morality of thousand-bomber raids on unprotected, and even "open", cities like Dresden, in which upwards of 500,000 perished? These things happened, yet I would argue that HW's political beliefs arose out of a desire to prevent them occurring, something that is quite clear from a reading *A Solitary War* and *Lucifer Before Sunrise*. To suggest, as Richard Russell does, that the second half of the *Chronicle* should be thrown in the dustbin is a reflection of the same 'un-understanding' that led Nazi university students to burn the works of "decadent" writers. In any case, how can we in the HW Society limit discussion of HW only to the politically safe works? What sort of veto have we got on others reading what they will? Do we seek to prevent the publication of the politically suspect books, and do we raid public libraries in order to consign existing copies to Richard's dustbin? The *Chronicle* calls to be taken as a whole; it is the story of Phillip Maddison, it is the story of a people, it is the story of a "Europe..sharing one death". This epic of literature is told with honesty, clarity, beauty, and sensitivity *throughout*. For myself, not one single copy would be consigned to the dustbin.