

'BEACHCOMBER' REDISCOVERED

John Homan

In an earlier issue (Journal No.7 - May 1983) was reprinted an excerpt from the *Daily Express* Beachcomber column for 15 November, 1934 being a skit in the style of *Tarka the Otter*.

In the next issue a letter from Brocard Sewell discussed the original Beachcomber - D.B.Wyndham Lewis, and his successor, J.B.Morton, both of whom he met in his own Fleet Street days, and who were friends of Williamson's; Wyndham Lewis especially so. As Fr Sewell also noted, both men appear in *The Sun in the Sands* which describes their first meeting with Williamson in the *Daily Express* offices early in 1924, and the subsequent amusing and sometimes fraught walking holiday in the Pyrenees that followed, where they were hardly disguised - Wyndham Lewis as 'Bevan', (his second christian name), and Morton as 'Johnny'. (As many readers will know, this episode, somewhat revised, was later included in *The Innocent Moon*, where the fictional names of Bevan Swann and Rowley Meek respectively, were used.)

Fr Sewell also recalled that by 1934 Morton had taken over as Beachcomber - or so he believed - although the 'style' he felt was more akin to Wyndham Lewis than Morton, and he concluded by wondering if perhaps he should revise his chronology of which 'beachcomber' was responsible?

By chance I recently came across three books which, in varying degrees, all throw further light on the Williamson - Beachcomber(s) association.

The first, *Beachcomber: The works of J.B.Morton*, Ed. Richard Harris, (Frederick Muller, 1974), was published to celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of Morton's incumbancy. Thus Fr Sewell was quite correct in his original assumption. In his Introduction, Harris makes several references to Williamson and particularly records the 'Pyrenean Journey' from Bayonne to Pamplona and the overnight walk back over Roncevaux by moonlight to St.Jean Pieds-de-Port.

John, (Johnnie) Morton, Francophile, ex-Harroviaan, served in the Great War, first as a Private in the Royal Fusiliers. As an officer (Suffolks) he was shell-shocked on the Somme and ended the war in M1(7B). He joined the *Sunday Express* in 1919 - contributing essays on walks; also fairy tales and poems. He joined the *Daily Express* in 1923, where he met Wyndham Lewis, founder of the 'Beachcomber' column which he took over when Wyndham Lewis left to join the *Daily Mail*.

The second book was *Stuff and Nonsense* (Cape 1935) by 'Beachcomber' - J.B.Morton - being selections from his column for 1934. Turning immediately to the entry for 15 November, I was a little disappointed to find

the Tarka skit was omitted. However, the selection for 6th April is of interest.

Ten years ago this month there took place one of the most famous marches in the history of warfare. For in April 1924 I and my three companions set out from Pamplona to carry the Pass of Roncevaux in one superb night attack, and to subdue the tenacious and hitherto fearless Basque of the foothills.

In the villages on that great mountain road, all the way between Pamplona and St. Jean - yes, and right on past the Mauleon cross-roads to St. Palais - they still tell stories of how we came roaring by, invincible in our youth and strength.

We carried the Pass, and fought our way, foot by foot, down into France. My exhausted companions went to sleep after the fighting, but I marched on, covered with honourable wounds, and finally surrounded St. Palais single-handed.

Of these four demi-gods, one is the inventor of the kind of column I write every day, and also a historian of note. The second is a novelist and dramatist. The third has an astounding knowledge of animals and trees and flowers, and has won the Hawthornden Prize for a book about animals. I myself, the fourth, prefer to be known as a public-school man who has always played the game.

I have been unable to ascertain the full identity of the fourth member of the party, the "... novelist and dramatist" other than he was a cousin of Morton's named Guy, described by Williamson as "... another literary aspirant, admirer and disciple of Leonard Merrick, ...", two statements that are rather contradictory.

The third book which turned-up at a Jumble Sale was *At the Sign of the Blue Moon*, (Andrew Melrose, 1924) and consists of a number of pieces by D.B. Wyndham Lewis first printed in the *Daily Mail* of that year. The extract quoted below is from a chapter entitled, "Of Rain; of Roncesvalles; and a Problem of Conduct".

For myself, when it rains in the country, I commend the agricultural population to Providence and find solace in strong tobacco and red-blooded books; that is to say, books full of roaring and the winds, of violence and loud songs, of swords and tall ships, of wine and hot sunshine, of steel and trumpets ... As for the puling, sickly, neurotic, Freudian, namby-pamby, introspective, snivelling, complex-ridden, wire-drawn, decomposing, O-how-daring, pasty, thin-blooded, cleverish, peevish, mingle-mangle stuff they print nowadays, I would not throw it at a Higher Thoughtist, let alone give it to a Christian. A few months ago I went on a pilgrimage through Europe to see the place in that high, dark pass of the Pyrenees where Roland fell and Oliver, and all the Peers of France; it is on the way from Pampeluna to Val Carlos; a terrible place, with woundy high rocks and furious waterfalls, inhabited, I think, by devils.

Thus the great 'Pyrenean Adventure' is recounted in one sentence, but the extract is interesting on two other counts. The first sentence is Bellocian; hardly surprising as the writer was devoted to Belloc, (as also

was Morton), and the second sentence might have been lifted from the dialogue in the relevant chapter of *The Sun in the Sands*. Williamson certainly studied his characters.

"Let them hear me!" yelled Johnny. "I wish they understood English, they don't unfortunately, being a gang of belly-cramming dagos. Look at their pale and beastly faces!" He swung his arm. "Degenerates! Modernity! Pah!" More food came. "What's this poison, this fungus, this filth?"

Whether this dialogue is accurate or a fiction it is quite clear as to whose style this is, yet Williamson attributes it, and all the passages in similar vein throughout the chapter to "Johnny", i.e. Morton. Why he employed this rather crude artifice it is hard to say unless he thought that both men would be either amused, or perhaps annoyed when (if) they read his book?

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