

## ONE MAN'S PUTSBOROUGH

Ronald Walker

A last-minute SOS from the editor calls on me to record something of our AGM week-end at Putsborough last autumn. I took no notes, so must rely solely on unco-ordinated diary-entries: fleeting impressions such as are, for most of us, all we ever take back from our happy, fugitive escapes from the routine of life.

With the Henry Williamson Society, I have found that familiarity breeds the very antithesis of contempt; breeds, rather, warmth, affection and confidence. One experiences 'fellowship' with none of its solemn, ecclesiastical overtones.

Friday evening: the lonely, wind-teased hotel on the cliff-top is picked out in the headlight beams. The foyer at first seems empty, unseasonably inert; then one by one the known and companionable fellow-guests arrive. Some are by now almost 'old' friends, though it all began only in 1980. Over dinner, and in the bar, one sees new faces, encounters new personalities. The unifying spirit is already at work, that of the masterly, but still half-recognised, author whom we meet to celebrate.

Saturday morning: the writing-hut, newly furbished and perhaps less easy of access now the house has changed hands, draws together a little knot of members in wellingtons, anoraks, deer-stalkers. We try to feel what it must have been like to write here, to have written so intensely, so alone with memory; to assess the mellow but uncompromising quality of that ancient sunlight. A little cat joins us, intrigued by so many earnest, unaggressive, philosophical human beings. We must emanate some of Henry's life-accepting peacefulness, for a row of pullets on the top bar of the gate remains undismayed, only an arm's length away from us.

Saturday afternoon: a walk up and down the deserted landscape of the Burrows. In the grey autumnal day they have a desolate kind of beauty. We take the opportunity of telling a young couple who have lost their way not only what track to aim for but also about Henry Williamson. It's called sowing the seed.

Vention beach: the long, melancholy glaze of the sands, human forms and voices hardly troubling sight or hearing. "Poised selflessly in the murmur of the waves": so Henry described it in *The Sun in the Sands*. Even without the sun, the authentic experience is communicated.

Saturday evening: in the absence of our genial John Glanfield, the warm and meticulous personality of George Heath presides over our AGM. As ever, the agenda is got through less like the normal uninspiring list of items that we are used to in committees elsewhere than as topics of family discussion.

For 'family' we certainly are. I am never nearer to Williamson than when reading loud to this audience which unanimously reveres his art and his sensibility. Members of Henry's own family are there to hear the

the authentic words resurrected from the page; their generous response at the end refines and deepens the experience.

Trevor Beer's detailed, loving, accurate account of Tarka country - such knowledge of natural history wedded to Williamson's interpretation of it. There are readings to illustrate salient details; a superb, mounted otter to add verisimilitude. One envies research and scholarship deployed among these lovely Devonian scenes.

Sunday morning: the lucky ones remain for activities we have to miss. The journey back to Surrey is a long one. Because we are now a family, the months before our next meeting will not sever the connections. Threads of old conversations will be taken up, the oddities and ironies re-assessed, the latest state of Williamson re-issues discussed. It will all begin, delightfully, all over again.

