

Letters

I have been browsing through the latest Journal and again feel that one's thanks should be passed on to those concerned in its production - even in its overall design it is a better production than the dullish journal of the Hardy Society which I see is due to be revamped anyway. But I am becoming uneasy about the absence of comments on the Journal material by members: not necessarily of a critical nature, though some wider outlet for that is surely desirable, but of general observation and reaction.

What is happening is that certain statements and assertions are being printed which deserve to be challenged. If they are not, it seems that the silence denotes acceptance by the overall membership. A case in point was the assertion by Nigel Jones in his paper on HW's war writing about HW's pioneering role. It was a view that I queried during the questions that followed the lecture (that he delivered at a Society meeting) and he made no defence but acknowledged that I might be right. His lecture material is then reprinted in the Journal with the assertion unchanged, as if the critical point raised at the meeting had never been raised. I sent you a letter that referred to this point of disagreement, and you chose to ignore this letter to judge by the contents of Journal No.10. To which I'd say, all right: perhaps the letter did not fit in in some way. But it does not resolve the point at issue: that material

being printed has attracted dissent and the fact that it *has* surely should be mentioned.

Earlier I praised the Journal in general terms but this does not indicate that I did not find things to disagree with. I thought the Robins article on HW and the BUF quite naive and mostly unhelpful on a sensitive subject. Robin's ability to put a later generation's gloss on a period involving Mosley (that some of us did live through), is fairly extensive. He talks, for instance, as if the declassification of Mosley's papers has been complete whereas some of them have been held back, of course. He seems to play down the influence of the BUF and the following it had, of which the membership figures are no true guide. He appears to be tilting the balance in the weighing of the factual situation, and that does no good now when we live in a period saturated with factual information of every kind, on which the ordinary person can draw his own conclusions. There *is* a more helpful approach in connection with HW which starts with the make-up and nature of an artist's world, and one hopes that someday a really perceptive commentary will be written on HW that moves into the deep end and doesn't eternally splash around in the shallows of Thirties politics.

Perhaps the trenchant critical monologue given by E.J. Rogers is designed to catch the eye and perhaps stimulate the more sluggish reader of the Journal. It is to be welcomed in this light, but strikes me as decidedly wayward and personal stuff that exhibits something of the unbalanced response that scores illuminatingly at one point and descends into bathos at another. Meantime I felt a degree of frustration in reading another article in the Journal: that of

Ann Thomas's in which she writes of a meeting with Henry. It is an early article that is here reprinted, but is nevertheless one that begs all kinds of questions. Her allusion to music and the recital of records is as cursory and glancing as it is readable. Is there any chance of finding out more about HW's reading of extracts from *The Pathway*, and playing passages from Wagner's Ring cycle to illustrate the meanings? Actually I read this passage out to a friend who is a specialist in Wagner, and he shook his head in disbelief that a work of such immensity as the Ring should be so sketchily mentioned in connection with Williamson.

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Will Harris replied as follows:

I take your point about the absence of comments by members on Journal material. I agree that much of what we print deserves to be challenged. But I cannot invent challenges, and, with very few exceptions, yourself included, members just do not write. We did not print your letter of 30 March, and I think perhaps we should have done. I believe John Homan wrote to you about Nigel Jones's views differing from his own; both John and I felt the Journal was not the place for John to put his case. I think there we were right. So, on the issue of the Jones talk, I think you have a fair point to make, and a similar situation in the future I think we might handle differently.

Of course you disagree with some things in the Journal. I am sorry you found the Robins article naive. I found it interesting, and I think you would concede it does at least have the virtue of brevity. Frankly, I don't think there will ever be total agreement about HW and the BUF, and our handling of HW's politics, in the

Journal, between those who lived through the war years and those who did not. As one who did not I can only say that while I agree that we need a "perceptive commentary on HW that moves into the deep end", "splashing around in the shallows of 30s politics" seems inevitable so long as the lifeguards fly their warning flags.

You appear not to have liked the E.J. Rogers piece particularly. I am sorry about that. Wayward and personal stuff, as far as I am concerned, is frequently the most rewarding reading. Bathos, perhaps. But Roger's piece seemed to me to be intellectually honest and refreshingly direct. I don't agree with everything he says, however.

And of course Ann Thomas's article begs question. Perhaps some will be answered in due course. I am glad you found her allusion to music readable. It would certainly be an excellent idea to try to find links between *The Pathway* and *The Ring*. I am sorry your friend shook his head over the HW/Wagner connexion. I too am a Wagner specialist, and I nodded my head like anything: an instinctive, *felt* response. There is a future Journal article out there somewhere on this theme. Would it interest you? Or your friend?

Thanks very much for writing. I wish a few more people would. Meanwhile, we do try. And we do like to receive suggestions for future issues.

It is possible that I am the only survivor of Williamson's contemporaries to have actually been with him at Colfe's Grammar School during the 1906-1911 years. I was born in January 1895 and he some 9 months later in the same

year. We did not really rub shoulders until the Autumn Term of 1911, when I moved from the 6th Form into "The Specials" to acquire German in addition to my French and Latin. I found myself by accident seated next to Williamson who had been moved summarily into Specials at, according to him, his father's request to catch up academically on Maths, Chemistry, Physics and English Grammar before he left Colfe's. I had heard of his habit of coming to school with field mice, voles etc. concealed about his person and a lamentable deficiency of homework in his satchel. But in the Specials I found him also secreting the current boys' weekly *The Union Jack*, featuring Sexton Blake's detective adventures. Williamson bribed me with loans of this Penny Dreadful to elucidate for him the answers to the Maths etc. papers set for him by the Form Masters concerned. I left Colfe's at the end of that term and our brief acquaintance ended.

In the Sixties, however, after an appearance by him on T.V. I wrote to him with belated congratulations on *Tarka* and *Salar* etc., but also rebuking him for his lampoon in *The Beautiful Years* and *Dandelion Days* of our school both of which stories denigrated a very good and ancient Grammar School, and moreover pilloried staff and fellow-pupils alike. He replied characteristically on a Shavian postcard, asking whether I had any photos of our contemporary school mates. I sent him some, for which he thanked me over the phone, and that was our last exchange.

A further letter says:

By all means send my letter to the "Old Colfeians". I was a member of the Club in the Fifties, and produced one or two plays for their Amateur Dramatic Society,

including "The Happiest Days of Your Life" - more descriptive in title of my years at Colfe's Grammar School than those of H.W. Sometime later I moved after retirement to N.W. Hampshire and dropped out of membership. Incidentally, when the School was destroyed in the last war by a V1, I went along next day to inspect the ruins, and found that the Entrance Hall and the Headmaster's Study, with the part of the Great Hall where in one corner I had sat alongside H.W. in "The Specials" were still standing though roofless. A truly sad moment for me, in which I peopled the desolation with ghosts.

I was then, as I had been since boyhood, resident on the eastern side of Lewisham, and H.W. in Braxfield Road, Brockley, was on the western side, with Lewisham Obelisk, Library and Hippodrome representing the dividing line. The whole of this area was very familiar to me as with H.W.'s young Philip Maddison, and I was much nearer to Whitefoot Lane and the Seven Fields than H.W. at Braxfield Road, Brockley.

Regarding your kindly suggestion of an article for The Journal, I have enough memories of *Dream of Flax* and *Young Philip Maddison* period of H.W.'s life to fill many pages of The Journal, but penning them is another matter. Both I and my wife are house-bound by the infirmities of old age, and I can no longer cope with my typewriter. But if some contribution from me would furnish more light perhaps upon H.W.'s years in Brockley from 1907 to 1912, leading up to his entering the Army in 1914, I will do my best.

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We are very pleased to print this

letter from a contemporary of Henry's and sincerely hope Mr. Lyle Sutton will feel able to provide us with more information in due course.

EDITOR

While welcoming the short article on Henry Williamson and the B.U.F. in the October 1984 Journal, I feel that some of the statements Mr Robins makes are incorrect.

Fascist Week was not in fact a B.U.F. publication, but an independent journal, edited by a South African, Rex Tremlett.

It is in the sixth paragraph of his article though, that I believe Mr Robins makes his worst mistake. The membership figures he states, and his assertion that the British Union were in decline, do not accord with the evidence of Robert Skidelsky in his book *Oswald Mosley*, (Macmillan, 1975), or with Mosley himself, in *My Life* (Nelson, 1968).

Skidelsky, quoting from a Trevelyan Scholarship Project of 1960, which examined support for the B.U.F. in Yorkshire, gives the total membership in that county alone, as 5000 in 1939. He also states that on a national level maximum membership was 40,000 in 1934, and that by 1939 the *active* membership was 9-10,000. With approximately three inactive supporters for every active member, this means that the total figures for 1939, were in the region of 36-40,000.

If we accept these figures, it seems doubtful to claim that the party was in decline, and indeed the fact that some 20,000 spectators attended the Earls Court meeting in July 1939, would suggest that there was something of a groundswell of support for

the B.U.F. as the nation moved towards a second disastrous war. The Daily Mirror, hardly likely to be ardent in its support for Mosley, said after the July meeting:-

There is no doubt that numerically the adherents to fascism are increasing. To have filled Earls Court, which is about the world's largest meeting hall, is a considerable achievement.

Mosley, in *My Life*, states that

The rise of our movement continued throughout the full seven years until 1939, with only temporary fluctuations.

While I realise that these defects in Mr. Robins article are only minor in character, I feel that in the interest of accuracy they should be mentioned.

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As a child, youth and father I spent many hours from 1914 onwards on the Hill. My earliest recollection is looking for cigarette cards in the packets discarded by the soldiers billeted in the Army huts ranged round the outside walls of the school and being so upset when, after finding many packets and no cards, to be told because of the war they were no longer being put into the packets.

I was an early caller at the pawnshop of Mr Sprunt to pledge my father's clothes and later, seeking redemption, to be told it was too late as they had been left

over the year and a day! Later, I learnt that Mr Sprunt was a governor at Brockley Road School.

As a member of the Boys' Brigade I too went to Crystal Palace for the youth festivals as I also played football in the area mentioned by Henry in his Philip Maddison.

The present head of Brockley School has asked me to relate, either on tape or in writing, my recollections of the school and the way of life in those years and perhaps, a little later, it is

possible that I could offer some of that which will by then have been written for the school.

Yes, it was a delightful morning on the occasion of the dedication made all the more happy because we were all at one level: to honour a local man who, apart from his literary genius, was a local man.

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