

## HERMIT OF OX'S CROSS

Maurice Wiggin

HENRY WILLIAMSON lives in a field 560 feet above the estuary of the Twin Rivers, Taw and Torridge. He bought it with £100 when "Tarka the Otter" won the Hawthornden Prize in 1928.

The hill is crowned by a crest of trees which he planted thirty years ago. Atlantic gales have worn and whittled them, but they still make a solid windbreak to the north, and below them the goldfinch-haunted field slopes gently and is green.

You turn in through a palisade gate and there is Henry Williamson's hut. He built it in 1928 with the help of two local boys, Davy Jones and Lionel Jefferies, who lie in Georgeham Churchyard now, at the bottom of the hill. The hut is about ten feet by eight. The outer walls are of overlapping planks of elm, cut with the natural curves and bumps of the trunk untrimmed, and pinned to an oak frame.

There is a stone fireplace in one corner, and a weathervane in the shape of a salmon. Aptly, for this is the hut in which *Salar the Salmon* was written.

The scythe blade and the bow saw hang on the walls, with line-driers, and a photograph of infantrymen lying dead in Passchendaele, and a map of the battlefield of Cambrai. Carpenter's tools are neatly stacked in slots at the back of the workbench. There is a cupboard, a leather chair and a neat, narrow bed. All these things tell you something about the man who lives in the hut.

In fact, there are two more huts now, newer erections, spaced out in an arc along the curving line of his trees. The Williamson home is a settlement, a kraal. To get from one room to another you swish through ankle-deep grass. But it all began with this one little hut, the hut which Tarka made, in which Salar was born.

A new book by Henry Williamson will be published next Friday. When I read an advance copy of *A Clear Water Stream* I realised that it was in the direct tradition of *Tarka*; and, brooding over the fluctuating reputation and fortunes of a man whom I had not seen for years, but always venerated, I asked him to receive me in his home.

"Do come," he replied, "We will enjoy ourselves."

At 62 his hair is white but he is still erect, slim, quick and tireless. He still has the visionary's eyes.

We walked over to Baggy, the gutting headland, to picnic on the close-cropped grass above a wrinkling, cloud-shadowed sea and we could look across the bay to the deep, twisting gully, now choked with blackthorn, down which Tarka slid to the sea.

Later we ate a meal beginning with Mrs Williamson's delicious cabbage-and-potato soup. As night fell, cool and calm, blackbirds chattered derisively at an owl poaching in the dense trees, the lamps of Appledore glittered below and Hartland Light flashed through the pines.

To honour a guest, Henry Williamson lit a great bonfire in the field, and we stood warming ourselves at the blaze while sparks shot crackling skywards like tracer. He is a wonderfully neat, tidy man - all his vast store of manuscripts in flawless order - and he can light a fire, without paper with one match. In the leaping light he looked like a boy again, wholly immersed in the sensual moment. Then he quoted from his favourite Francis Thompson the stanza which begins

*Beware the black rider, through blasted dreams borne nightly,  
Saved may you bin, from Venus Queen, and the dead that die unrightly..*

and again his face fell into the stern and stoic lines of the mystic which at heart he is.

He read to us a chapter from the next-to-be-published novel *Love and the Loveless* his face animated as he acted out the dialogue. Then it was time for bed. He lit a fire of twigs in the magic hut in which *Salar* was written, and before it had died down I was sleeping where Lawrence of Arabia had slept before me.

He woke me with a mug of tea. A gallon can of water stood by the door. I poured some into a bowl on a tripod standing in the wet grass of the field, and washed in the open air.

Then it was porridge and coffee and farewell, and the long ride home across the great plain of England, brilliant in the foliage of May, thinking about greatness and reputation.

"Everybody" knows Henry Williamson as the author of *Tarka* and *Salar*, the greatest English writer on the natural world since Richard Jefferies. But the passion to tie neat exclusive labels on an artist misfires disastrously with Williamson. His books on wild life are still only a fraction of the man's tireless output, and it is, in fact, his two major series of novels, *The Flax of Dream* and the un-finished *Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* which occupy his heart and life.

Williamson takes the fluctuations of critical esteem stoically. After 1928 the greatest were quick to call him genius. Arnold Bennett could not praise *The Pathway* too highly. Thomas Hardy and John Galsworthy did him honour. The war very nearly broke him, but he has realised that its cathartic experience helped him to harmonise the diverse impulses of his own chameleon-like nature.

For a dozen years now he has lived like a hermit in his field, unsought by the smart literary world slogging away with a sort of desperate humility at his prodigious output. (He is the most meticulous worker. He wrote *Tarka* seventeen times, mostly at night, sitting by candlelight with a sick child in his arms.) It takes a visionary to write about nature as Henry Williamson does, and the vision does not stop short at the animal creation.

However that may be I believe that the tide is turning again for Henry Williamson. The years of neglect have not been wasted. One day the hut in the field called Ox's Cross will be a place of pilgrimage.

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### "AS THE SUN SEES"

On the evening of Wednesday, 6th February, Will Harris gave a lecture on Henry Williamson to a small but select audience at the Sutton Library and Arts Centre. Taking as his title "As the Sun Sees", Will presented Henry Williamson as a writer committed to truth, a writer whose compassion and understanding never led him to sentimentalise or falsify life. Henry tried to see men and women "as the sun sees", without shadows. Consequently, the human figures in the *Chronicle*, even the disagreeable ones, are subjects for tolerance and sympathy.

Of particular interest to his audience were the topographical links Will had researched, and now presented, connected with Sutton's neighbouring village, Carshalton, the *Cross Aulton* of the early volumes of the series. Richard Maddison's courtship of Hetty came to life even more vividly as the lecturer identified some of the place-references in *The Dark Lantern*, despite Henry's endearing but frustrating mystifications.

To illustrate the lecture, Will's wife Pam read with sensitivity and feeling from the novels, and we also saw some evocative projections, on a wide screen, of the author himself and of Carshalton Village as it was at the turn of the century.

The lecture, which lasted over an hour, was not only scholarly and impressive but served as a propaganda exercise for the uncommitted, who were encouraged to enrol among the faithful. Various copies of Henry's works were on display, loaned by the Library itself, and there were issues of our own Journal for sale. The display seemed to arouse considerable interest.

The occasion was marked by some excellent posters in the Library, advertising the event, but some of us felt that such an informative and enjoyable lecture ought, with the obviously appropriate adaptations, to be heard before too long at one of our Society meetings. It richly deserved a wider audience.

Ronald Walker