A READER ON THE COAST

John Millar

> *"I must once again resort to metaphor in order to characterise for you this great melody that encompasses the whole dramatic composition .... Initially it should have a similar effect on the mood of the piece as a beautiful forest has on the solitary observer on a summer's evening .... No matter how many voices or individual tunes he hears, the singing, swelling sound that overwhelms him seems to be merely the one great melody of the forest."*
> (Wagner, on the concept of 'infinite melody')

The road journey to the West had the nostalgia of our returning to a revered part of North Devon. Four of us (Jack and Doris Whitehead, David Stokes and myself) had first met when living in the Two Rivers country in the 40's and 50's, and there was the hint of a reunion about this visit to Georgeham and our attendance at the 1982 AGM of the HW Society. It was our first time at a Society meeting and I had a strange sense of returning to the past in the guise of modern organisational man, a long-time reader of Williamson who was tentatively and doubtfully visiting the old shrine with a fresh identity-card pinned to my chest.

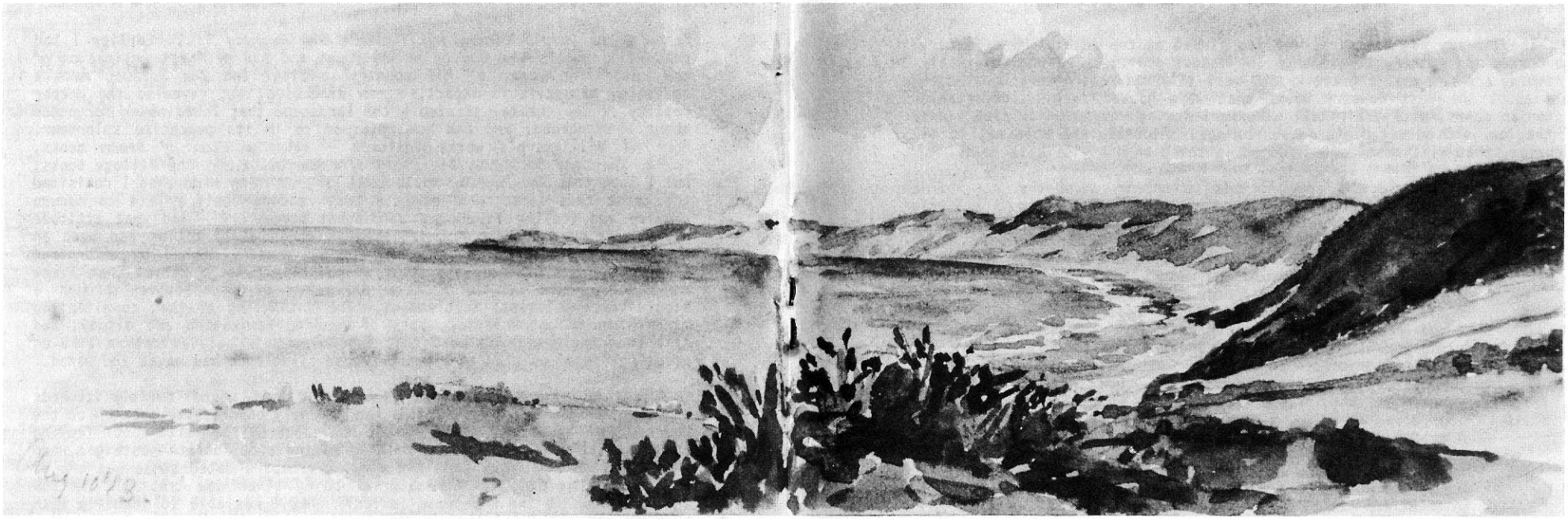
How would it be, I wondered, in Georgeham's village hall? School-mastery expositions on the latest research on real-life sources in the writing - or the mild recollections of an uncritical follower who'd tramped in the places so richly evoked in the books? Not that I could afford to be cynical and detached in representing myself as a reader on 'the coast' and of harking back to a time when it had seemed more remote from modern influences and certainly less subject to the summer influx of tourists. I was one who had met Williamson at Ox's Cross; and what were my reactions on seeing him and hearing him read from his latest work? I might get asked about that at an informal gathering at Georgeham. Had I my answers ready? As the prospect loomed of a hurried reintroduction to the old places I'd neglected seeing, I welcomed the drawn-out nature of the approach and the chance to ponder on 'the way it was'.

There was a 'golden age' in the reading I did on the coast after the Second World War. Certain books that I read in an atmosphere of re-found freedom and fresh hope have never been forgotten - Hardy's *The Woodlanders*, Stevenson's *The Pavilion on the Links* (from a book of short stories), Smythe's *The Valley of Flowers*, Lawrence's *Kangaroo*,

Bates's *The Purple Plain*, Williamson's *The Pathway* [1] ... Earlier I had read Williamson's *The Linhay on the Downs* and had my first intimation of the compelling power of his country writing, and *The Pathway* made a ravishing naturalistic impact, a new dimension that revealed the deeper reality of the coastal stretch - the landscape that I had never forgotten about when abroad, and had now returned to in its peacetime splendour. More of Williamson's works followed - all *The Flax of Dream* books, *Tarka*, *The Lone Swallows*, *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, the Village books; but I knew that *The Pathway* would loom largest in my mind when I revisited the coast this time. And how did that reading spell relate to modern enquiry and feeling in a more astringent atmosphere - and what attitude did I have towards the *Chronicle* novels whose early titles had been an absorbing new departure for a Williamson reader, marked by a broader compendium of experience and depth of maturity? But a series that I saw as running into an unfortunate narrowing of perspective through a single-track political involvement. The untangling of that complicating mixture in my appreciation, both of reading admiration and dismay, had also been neglected - a word that hung over this belated return like an accusing finger pointed at a reader whose allegiance had waxed and waned.

But by now we were in Devon, and had moved swiftly towards Barnstaple. *The Son in the Sands* had a finely descriptive section on the journey to the West, I remember - it had captured the build-up of feeling as the coast drew nearer, the writing having a deliberate nostalgia when the book came out after the last war. (Perhaps a dated sense was one of the factors leading to the material being given new treatment in *The Innocent Moon* in the *Chronicle* series). Yet I was able to identify with much in the earlier description when I went on some weekend-trips years ago, driving a pre-war car from London to the Atlantic coast and keeping to the A303 route. It brought glad moments of recognition when I compared it with Maddison's chequered ride on his belt-driven Norton. I would pull into the car-park at Saunton at around midnight on a Friday evening, would wander on to an empty beach and hear the soft thunder of surf and sense the negative pressures of the urban world ebb away ... and would feel the divide at its strongest in summer, for it was then that the surf was plunged into ...

Now, in approaching Barnstaple from the Taunton direction, the landmarks were slotting into place like a half-forgotten sequence in a jig-saw; the slipping into awareness of the valleys becoming wider and smoother, the old streets in Barnstaple being driven down, the old buildings seen as having escaped the ravages of post-war developers, the going by idyllic meadows where the Taw ran languidly in Tarka-like naturalness; and coming to the Square and seeing the Clock Tower standing in its old isolation, the High Street curving away pleasantly, and the Athenium, whose aloof exterior belied the memory I had of it - the genial friendliness of those I met in there, long ago, when I used to call in and make for the library.



This is a photograph of a watercolour sketch by Alexandra Cardew; she was one of the talented family who lived at 'Saunton Cleve'. It depicts part of the coast from Putsborough to Mortehoe, and when painted in 1913 the stretch can be seen as being enviably free from human intrusion. This must have been how it was first seen by HW; in *The Last Summer* he glances back fifty years to when he took a train from London to North Devon, prior to the 1914-18 war - "The days were wide and shining, the sands bore only prints of gull and shore-rat and my own wandering tracks. Sky and sea were fused in a candent blue. I walked all day and every day ... and on the last day (I) visited my near and familiar sands and headland and to all I said Goodbye..."

The visionary dream of a coast that stood apart, the ultimate contrast to the hideous life negation of flanders, drew him back as one shattered in mind and spirit. The coast enshrined all the healing qualities of natural beauty creating a harmony of existence. It gave wings to the visionary revelation that his post-war writing was to portray with such a clarity of instinctive feeling and literary power.

Life in a Devon Village - Summer Afternoon

At sunset they scrambled along the rock and jumped off above the tide. Slowly they went along the sands and up through the dunes and over a waste land where grew vipers' bugloss and tall mulleins among brambles and tufts of burnet rose, and so through the heather and ling to the down, often turning in enchantment of the ocean seen from the high ground. On the horizon Lundy now was grape-coloured, and rising baseless in a golden fume between sea and sky. Two mated buzzards were soaring in tranquil circles a mile above the world. In silence they sat and looked across the sea. They were alone with the wandering air and its birds. His heart yearned for the meaning of beauty, wild emotion rushed to him as he thought of the everlasting lovliness that one day he must leave. His spirit said that it was immortal, that freed of earthy thrall It became merged into a glory which forever irradiated matter, manifesting Itself in bird and flower, in animal and man. From the germ or the seed It built Itself in the form of an intellect or a blossom, a soft coloured wing or a reedy note of song. She cared nothing for the abstract. Her heart desired a perfection of life for herself, for a love completed and lasting;

...Both felt a sadness because in thought they faced the unknown, the inapprehensible. He thought with wild sadness, I want to go out to this beauty, to lose myself in the sky, so that I can be myself. She thought as tears brimmed in her eyes, I want something for myself in this beauty; I want to grasp it for myself, to take it into my heart. It will always elude me.

The Dream of Fair Women

The library was upstairs, and you paused at the desk of Myra Foster, who worked there then, to exchange the latest gossip. She was invariably welcoming and was most attractive and well-informed, being very knowledgeable about the West Country books that were housed in the comfortable Victorian rooms, with their tall windows allowing you to enjoy fine views of the Taw, and Barnstaple's famous bridge. Recently she told me, to my surprise, that Williamson often popped in there on his visits to town.

> *Henry would come in and disappear among the bookshelves. If I went to put away books, or to look up something, he would corner me and start talking - I was a willing listener as he held forth on his favourite subjects (the Great War, T. E. Lawrence, nature and so on), but I often found it difficult to escape back to my desk and to other 'customers' waiting to return or take out books. Like many others I had come under the spell of* The Flax of Dream, *and found* The Pathway *incredibly romantic and sad, and even now, on my yearly visits to Devon I still remember the flavour of it and how I was affected by it in my early twenties. It saddens me that in these analytical and character-destroying times, Williamson's great claim to fame seems to be not the beauty of his writing, but his political views.*

Another friend, Judy Fowler, also remembers the occasion when she met Williamson in Barnstaple. Judy was in charge of an exhibition held at the local gallery, wherein the paintings were by Brian Chugg, a Devon artist of note who also gives lectures on art and presents TV nature programmes. Among the paintings displayed were those that showed Brian's fascination with both the decay and stark beauty inherent in bleak landscapes, particularly by his concentration on the inanimate objects found on local beaches - bold close-ups of wood pieces, branches, shells etc., whose surrealistic designs were partly shaped by the tides and the winds.

Business was sluggish; Judy could only see it as wishful thinking to expect that it would be different on the last day. But later she knew that it was Williamson who had slipped into the gallery - and he pointed at three of the largest and most expensive paintings on the walls, and bought them on the spot. Then he departed with them as unobtrusively as he came in. Judy was specially grateful for this gesture of support for a local artist; there was the added possibility that he was genuinely drawn to the paintings, to the visions of a shore that was of fundamental significance for both artists.

Judy, who now lives in Sussex and is known for her poetry, has recently written of this chance meeting with Williamson -

He was supposed to have had a reputation of being attractive to impressionable young girls like myself - or as I think I was then - and as I recall it in retrospect, why did I not react a little more positively to him? Well, I can only imagine it was my own personal view, and also because in appearance he somewhat resembled my uncles. I had four of them. One of them was Michael Cardew, a leading English potter who was instrumental in reviving the English slipware tradition, inspired, incidentally by the Fremington potter, E.B. Fishley. Maybe HW seemed like one of the family coming to see me, and therefore nothing to get excited about although he was famous. I also thought, I am sure with the optimism of youth, that I would be likely to see him again again somewhere, and be able to have a chat with him. In the event, I never did.

I think HW is a very significant writer - perhaps a great one. His politics, actions, etc. do not seem to me to be important. His books are his monument - he lived a solitary emotional life because he was an artist, and his art demanded that he do that. It was the force of the artist inside him that made him lonely, apart, inexplicable. How could he fit into conventional, provincial, Devonian society? In the next century, when the controversies have died down, he will come into his own. I do think this.

We had left the Square and were passing the block where Bromley's restaurant had been located. An altered version was still in existence, though the cinema was closed. The restaurant stirred a memory, of an event held there during the Festival of Britain in 1951. I was passing through Barnstaple at the time, having travelled down from London by train, and I saw a poster telling of a lecture by Williamson. I had attended some lectures in London that were part of the Festival, seizing the chance to listen to novelists and poets and biographers expound on work that was conceived in the post-war spirit - Dylan Thomas reading from *Under Milk Wood* [2] in a heavy raucous voice that suited his verse, Irving giving a perceptive account of Bernard Shaw's career, Muggeridge, as editor of *Punch*, declaiming on the arduous business of producing modern humour ... And it was with growing anticipation that I made my way to an upstairs room in this block in Barnstaple, feeling like an HW reader returned home to his natural base. And although the others in the small

audience were unknown to me, there was the difference in atmosphere from London, the feeling of sharing in a common allegiance to a revered piece of the West Country and to the writer who'd given it memorable expression.

The Chairman underlined the feeling when he made his introducion. He had come into the room, a genial dark-haired man who wore a smart business suit, and was closely followed by Williamson who looked alert and purposeful, ruddy-faced from the effects of open-air living, tweed-suited and clutching a neatly-typed sheaf of papers. His manner was casual and modest, but I had the sense that he had prepared this lecture carefully, that it had importance for him - that we, his audience in North Devon, had importance too. Though it might be questioned how far this sparse gathering, which included a greater proportion of women than men, fitted into a scheme of things that went beyond the ad hoc audiences that I would join at literary lectures in London. Yet there *was* something extra, I reflected, more of the atmosphere of a family gathering. But I was mindful of HW's literary reputation being undermined by the sustained political stance he had committed himself to since the Thirties - the recent history that a new generation of readers had come through, or not, as their most fundamental experience in a global form. Here could be an indication of his attitude in a post-war emergence - in the reassertion of his pre-eminent power as a writer, one who had appealed to such readers as these in his earlier books.

The Chairman in addressing us (I have unfortunately forgotten his name) conveyed an air of close friendliness and bonhomie, as if we had all come from the same village down the road. We learnt that he also was a resident of Georgeham and had keenly followed Henry's career over the years, and he listed the books he had been most impressed by, stressing how Henry had brough credit to the area through the power of his artistry, of his loyalty as a valued friend and neighbour in the village. I recall a phrase that summed up this affable, relaxed introduction, so different in its folksy style from the textbook correctness of many put over at literary functions, a homely request that we welcomed having among us - "*our* author who lives on the hill".

Some time had passed since I had listened to Williamson reading from his work, but as he began his lecture with the audience following intently, my impressions of the former occasion came back in full. Again the sentences couched in his luminously clear English, his quiet voice unforced with a regular modulation and timing, his eschewing the artificial stressing of words and conveying meaning and emotion in a plain untwisted way, going for the broader effect from swathes of paragraphs, and the whole intuitively conceived to convey a natural clarity of feeling and intellect.

It would be interesting to see a transcript of the lecture he gave. I was reminded of a last sermon preached by a well-liked chaplain at school, he reaching the end of his career, and we, expecting some weighty reflections on a world scale, having our sights directed more on ourselves

and on our immediate surroundings. Williamson spoke not of distant and grandiose matters but of the natural world close to us: of the great heritage of the West Country and the life-style that was evolved over the centuries - the adaptation to its natural features in the villages and lanes, and the utilising of the land. There was, perhaps, a harking back to an earlier piece he had written during a time of exhaustion. It has remained as one of my favourites among his fragments, *Dimmit Light* (from *A Linhay on the Downs*):

> *Standing by the river at nightfall, one became aware of the changing water-noises. At that moment the air was cold; for windless air flows as water, and since sunset the chill air of the moor had been coming down the valley. Now it was upon the stream as mist. Star-points which had been wavering in the gentle ripples of trout-rings were dimmed immediately. Looking up beyond the black fringe of the oak-leaves, I saw that the smaller stars were gone. Silence and mist seemed one. I say silence, for my mind had obliterated the sound of the river for the past few hours, as I moved slowly upstream casting a large brown cock's-hackle fly called the Tarka Twilight.*
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> *Loud rang the tongues of the water over the stones. Mr. de la Mare's phrase from* Memoirs of a Midget *renewed itself in my head, from out that Christmas ten years ago, sitting at his dinner-table in candlelight, with his autographed copy of Edward Thomas's* 'Richard Jefferies' *in my pocket ...*
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> *Yes, the water voices were suddenly loud. One was aware of them in the colder air. The great oaks and sycamores which had stood through hundreds of winter spates echoed and confused them. Periodically it seemed that a new sound arose startlingly as by some new obstruction in the swift runs, or by dog or otter shaking itself, or a snag shifting and altering the set of currents. The new arresting sound grew less, and sank to an undertone; another arose. After a while the mind accepted the truth that the river at low summer level was flowing steadily and consistently; that all the sounds were there all the time ... The conscious mind of man is timid and uncertain, and often persuades him that this or that is what he should do or believe; whereas the fundamental powers of his being are strong*

> *and simple, and know their own work, and do it serenely ... The river is flowing all the time, whether we sleep by it, lie awake by it, or never go near it ...*

The impression I had of the lecture was on the lines of a river that flows by quietly. He gave a deft portrayal of his natural background and one that stayed in the mind. There was no reference to the Second World War, and I pondered on the direction that his literary renaissance might take in the end, though I had gathered that he was beginning an ambitious novel series and it would deal initially with a period before the First World War. I had a slight feeling of unease that the series could reach into the controversial time of the Thirties ('the low, dishonest decade', in Auden's phrase) and be linked with attitudes that played on the raw nerve-endings of the generation involved, particularly when linked to a conflict that had spread to civilian populations being subject to massive aerial attacks. But the Barnstaple lecture, staged as part of a national celebration, gave an ex-serviceman reader new grounds for optimism.

In addition to the lecture, we were told that some of his manuscripts would be put on display elsewhere. I came on them unexpectedly when I visited an exhibition at the Athenium, coming on some worn pages that I recognised, without first reading the typewritten caption, as being filled with his writing. Each page was pinned neatly to the green baise in a glass case. They deserved to be studied at some length, being the originals of one of his nature stories; but the inked lines were engulfed in swirling clouds of corrections and new additions, and I felt that even the most conscientious follower would be hard put to extract a final meaning from the revisions. I sensed that HW's impish side was involved in all this, that through the lively spontaneity of his creativity, he sought to dispel the oppressive effect of reverential entombment in a glass case. Instead of the cleaned-up image, the selective media presentation, we were given the plain truth of his artistic birth-pangs. Here was the familiar honesty at work, the touch of vulnerability in his search for true expression; and the Williamson reader could again feel that he was at home.

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1. This list of some of the books read is given merely as an indication of my interest in writing that has an intuitive and sensitive perception of place, a felt authenticity. Sometimes I could identify directly with the background scene of the books. Hardy is an obvious example for those who both love and know Dorset and the wider world of his Wessex. Bates's book evokes a western serviceman's perception of an eastern landscape, of living under a mercilessly pulverising sun (in the guise of a survival story), the sort of landscape I knew from my years in India. Smythe's book is about a mountaineer's

visionary feeling for a beautiful Himalayan valley set high among the 20,000 ft. peaks. I chanced to camp and climb in this valley before I read his account of it which rightly presents it as a dreamer's paradise, an ultimate retreat. *The Pathway* formed a distinguished part of this reading pattern, its immediacy being the more vivid in my responding to its literary riches when I lived in its unique setting.

2. *Under Milk Wood* was not completed until 1953 had received its first radio broadcast in 1954, but sections of it were available earlier and, if my memory is correct, one such was included here. Dylan Thomas died in 1953, aged 39.

(To be continued, John Millar envisages this as the first part of a series of four articles. Ed.)