

## A REVIEW OF 'THE STARBORN'

Frank Kendon

By his title-page and introduction Mr. Henry Williamson would have his readers believe that the author of *The Star Born* (Faber, 15s.) died in 1923:-

'What can one say,' asks Mr. Williamson, 'about a young man who died in circumstances which seemed to his friends to be the apotheosis of his tragic life? Whose life's end, moreover, was already written by himself - written in the fore-knowledge that he who loves life with all the deep truth of himself shall be denied love in his own life. This is *The Star-Born* ... Its sub-title, we are told, by Warbeck, was 'A Celestial Fantasy! The author believed it would be a revelation of Truth.'

Mr. Williamson has contemplated his own shadow for so long that he begins to believe it is somebody else's shadow. But Henry Williamson, not Maddison, wrote *The Star Born*, as anyone who cares may judge. Here is the same conflict between greatness and weakness as is present in all of Mr. Williamson's works; the personal emotions overwrought and out of focus, the descriptive writing as good as the best of his master, Richard Jefferies. Observations of everything else written out with a genous of the senses, in this an ability to see everything minutely and accurately, and to seize the significant facts and set them down in words; but an inability to see within, to distinguish between the rhetoric of mood and a sigh of Truth - as in that sentence quoted above: 'He who loves life with all the deep truth of himself shall be denied love in his own life. This, pronounced as if it were some law of nature, is no truth at all, but a mood taking revenge on itself. So is the whole story, *The Star Born*, of which it is the author's epitome.

The complete lack of humour is hard to believe. Mr. Williamson is known to be a patient reviser, yet *The Star Born* in conception and plan is like the work of a youth who mistakes ambition for greatness. The conversations of the Air-Spirit, the Mind-Spirit and Quill-Spirit, and all the others, with the queer creature called Wanhope, bear every mark of verbal refinement and revision, but still remain half-baked. As for the Star-born himself, when he comes to earthly life as Mr. Starr, I felt that if Mr. Williamson had meant him to be an embodied argument for a higher humanity, he had failed to make him anything more than a nuisance. A Messiah of this sort might very well be a nuisance to the conventional, but he would surely have more power than this ineffectual person. For what does the Star-born do? He wanders lonely about the rivers, communing with the nature spirits; he tames birds and cratures; he stops a school-thrashing and tells the children stories; he saves a mouse from a cat and then is sorry for the cat; he saves a hare from the hunt; he collects stones from the river for their pretty markings, and then throws them all back because they belong to the river.

It is strange that all Mr. Williamson's books have the same failure, the same ineffectual figure at the heart of them. Maddison in *The Pathway* is the only unconvincing person in the book. He is, in fact, not a person, but an embodiment of an incomplete ideal. In this fantasy he appears again, a half-realized theory among living people. He fails at last in his mission; but there is no irony in that, for he was created to be a failure. In fact, the same remark might, I think, be applied to the book itself. It reads as though the author decided, before he began, that it was not the slightest use

writing it.

Mr. Williamson has not found himself yet. This book is the record of another false clue followed out to the end. But that he will succeed seems certain. At times he writes as nobody else can write. I could quote twenty passages from *The Star Born* which do justice to his gifts. I must be content with one:-

The flash lit the eastern room of the house in the forest, and the girl in the balcony above the hall cried to the woman sitting by the hearth below: "Mother, Mother, did you see that light?" The answer of the mother was lost in the clashing-to of a door upon the landing, and another door downstairs. A wind was rushing through every chink and crack and keyhole in the southern face of the house. The daughter took a step towards her mother's bedroom door, in order to close the window, when another but lesser flash lit the wall opposite. There was a third flash and crash, and the baying of the hound by the fire. A storm of hail drove against the window. The girl forced open the door, and with difficulty closed the lattice. Her face and hands tingled with the beat of the icy fragments, some of which were nearly as big as acorns.

We cannot be content with what books we have of an author who can write like this.

(Despite every effort the Editor apologises that she has been unable to trace Mr. Kendon in order to obtain permission to reprint this review).

MYSTERY QUOTATION

Can you identify the following quotation from Henry's work?

'HIS MUSIC WAS A SIMIAN RUNE OF MELANCHOLY FOR THE FOREST HE HAD NEVER SEEN ...'

Answers to your editor, by 1 May 1986 - all correct answers will be put into a box and the first one drawn out will receive a small token prize.