

## HENRY WILLIAMSON AND 'THE AYLESFORD REVIEW'

*A revised version of a talk given to The Henry Williamson Society, meeting at The Putsborough Sands Hotel, N. Devon, 12th October 1985.*

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In 1954, as a newly ordained priest, I was assigned to the Carmelite community at the ancient priory of St. Simon Stock at Aylesford, in Kent. The beautiful old buildings, recently recovered by the Order after 400 years of secular occupation, were still undergoing restoration, under the direction of the prior, Father Malachy Lynch, who was immediately responsible, however, to his brother Dr. Kilian Lynch, prior-general of the Order in Rome. I was instructed by Father Kilian to organise a library for the newly-occupied monastery, and also to establish there a small printing office, whose main task would be the printing of a new quarterly magazine for the Order's tertiaries (lay associates) and other friends. But in the end this magazine turned out to be not quite what its founder had envisaged.

Unexpected problems impeded the setting-up of St. Albert's Press; it was intended to train laybrothers in the craft of printing, but it soon became clear that the available work-force would be too small to cope with setting up and printing a quarterly magazine; so after the first two or three issues its printing was transferred elsewhere.

For want of a better title it was decided to call the magazine *The Aylesford Review*. My instructions as its editor were to produce a small magazine of a suitably edifying character, that would interest the Order's tertiaries, of whom there were about a thousand in the country. The first number appeared in the autumn of 1955. There were sixteen pages of text, the three principal contributions being on matters of Carmelite and more general religious interest. The price of the magazine was one shilling. Greatly to my surprise, it elicited little or no comment from any quarter. After the third number had been similarly received it was clear that the 'lay Carmelites', as we may call them, were not interested.

I was then told by the prior-general that I could, if I wished, experiment with producing a magazine on different lines, but that there would be no financial support available for such an enterprise. From that point onwards the magazine became increasingly literary in its orientation, with a certain religious and theological content also. In the end it ran for thirteen years, growing slowly to a size of sixty or more pages, offered at an ever-increasing price. From the start, the response from established writers whom I invited to contribute was markedly generous; among those whose names appear in the index published in 1984 are John Cowper Powys, George D. Painter, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Muriel Spark, Malcolm Elwin, Stevie Smith, Henry Miller, Henry de Montherlant, David Lodge and Elizabeth Jennings. Among younger writers, relatively little known in the early 1960's, all of them established writers today, are Angela Carter, Penelope Shuttle, Frances Horovitz, Michael Hastings, and Ruth Fainlight.

The magazine ran for thirteen years before 'folding' in 1968, a victim to financial insolvency and other troubles of the times. Its circulation at one point reached the 500 mark; but it mostly hovered between 450 and 400. Usually we printed 500 copies, although for the special Henry Williamson

number in 1957 the print-run was 800. All issues are now out of print, and hard to come by.

In 1956 it had occurred to me that it might be a good idea to issue from time to time a 'specialist' number, given over to articles on the life and writings of some one specific writer. The first of these was devoted to Elizabeth Myers, the novelist and short story writer, who had died in 1947 at the age of 32. This number was well received, and led to others: on Henry Williamson, Arthur Machen, M.P. Shiel, John Gray, E.H. Visiak, and the French writer Joseph Delteil. Other numbers were planned on Radclyffe Hall, Oliver Onions and the French poet Saint-Pol-Roux; but these, though partly written, were never achieved.

Of course, the one that aroused the most interest was the Henry Williamson number: volume II, number 2, winter 1957-'58. Its principal contents were articles by William Gore Allen, 'Williamson, the London Novels'; John Middleton Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson'; Malcolm Elwin, 'Henry Williamson: an English Proust'; and a long and important contribution from Henry, 'Some Notes on The Flax of Dream and A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight'.

One purpose of these special numbers was to bring to public notice forgotten or neglected writers of merit. Henry Williamson, of course, was not forgotten, but in those post-war years he was certainly neglected. There was not much hope that so obscure a magazine as *The Aylesford Review*, with such a small circulation, could do much to remedy that state of things; but still, already it was subscribed to by quite a number of university libraries - in the end there were eighty, most of them, but by no means all, in America. So possibly in the academic world the Williamson number could be set in motion, as it were, the famous writer himself had to be consulted; a letter of inquiry resulted in an invitation to meet him at his daughter Margaret's house in Fulham. The meeting, over supper, passed off very pleasantly; so began Henry Williamson's association with *The Aylesford Review*, and a personal relationship with its editor which extended over the next twenty years. In all, some thirty articles, book reviews and letters by or relating to HW were published in the *Review* between 1957 and 1968. A descriptive list of all these will be found in *The Henry Williamson Society Journal*, number 5, for May 1982.

Henry was the most generous of the magazine's supporters. He did all he could to make it known, and took out a number of subscriptions on behalf of friends. Everything he wrote for us was contributed without payment. To most writers of articles we made a token payment of three guineas, but of course one could not offer such a tiny fee to a writer of his eminence; nor would he have accepted if we had.

After the publication of the Henry Williamson number Henry paid the first of several visits to our priory. Some very young writers and artists had been coming to Aylesford for weekends, and a small informal group had developed, who all knew each other in London, and liked to meet at our priory from time to time. We had a large guesthouse, and they seemed to find the quiet of the place, and its friendly atmosphere agreeable. In 1964 Henry met at Aylesford Michal and Frances Horovitz, France's friend the painter Jane Percival her friend Nicola Wood, a gifted textiles designer, Michael Hastings, and Oswald Jones, professional photographer, who made many fine photographic studies of Henry, and became his travelling companion on many journeys.

It was in 1964 that Henry brought to the priory the young *avant garde* writer Ann Quin, whose first novel, *Berg*, was the literary sensation of the

moment. This was not a book that one would have expected to appeal to Henry; however, writing in *The Aylesford Review* he said that although *Berg* was superficially 'a sordid story', beneath the illusion of its reality one perceives a talent of rarity and grace'. Henry did a great deal to help Ann Quin, securing for her two financial grants, which made it possible for her to travel, and to stay for some time on D.H. Lawrence's former ranch in Mexico. Ann, however, was unable to extend much reciprocal admiration to Henry's writings, which she regarded as 'old-fashioned'; and like many of her generation she could summon up no interest whatever in the 'Great' war. Ann's temperament was mercurial, and she may have expressed her criticisms of Henry's work too freely. She went on to write two good novels, more carefully written and more thoughtfully planned than *Berg*, and without *Berg's* near-obscenities. She was grateful to Henry, and understood how much he had done for her, always mentioning him with affection and respect.

In the summer of 1964 the *Aylesford Review* sponsored a series of literary lectures in London. These were held on four successive Wednesday evenings at the Newman Association's house in Portman Square. At one of these meetings Henry read his lecture *Some Nature Writers and Civilization*, which he had given not long previously to the Royal Society of Literature. On this occasion Henry's friends Sir Oswald and Lady Mosley, and Lucy and Richard Rhys (subsequently Lord and Lady Dynevor) were present.

This series of lectures was very successful, and led to the institution of the annual Aylesford Review Literary Conference at Spode House, in Staffordshire. Henry attended several of these; at them he came to enjoy especially the company of Roger Smith, who was then teaching typography at the University of Liverpool, and the late Edward Morris, antiquarian bookseller, alleged Prince of Afghanistan, and Hereditary Captain of the bodyguard of the Czar of All the Russias.

Among the friendships which Henry formed at Aylesford was that with the poet Michael Horovitz and his wife Frances, whose poetry was just beginning to be published. If Henry was staying in London he would often meet Michael and Frances at their flat in Colville Terrace, where they would spend the evening, or perhaps go on to a film or concert. In August 1965 Frances visited Henry for a few days at Ox's Cross. A letter she wrote to me from there is worth quoting in part, at it gives a very clear impression of how things were, or sometimes were, in Henry's famous Field. Frances says:

I have been so busy that almost literally I have not had a spare moment - at 9.30 or 10 p.m. I have just enough energy to make up the caravan bed and flop into it.

I am very loth to leave the country - I love being in the field and waking up to see trees and grass and sky even if the weather is awful (sometimes) - apart from which I seem to be in charge of the domestic arrangements (cooking, shopping, etc.) for five sometimes seven people. I enjoy this very much, but it can be something of a strain under Henry's military eye.

Sarah is here with a friend - also Robert (3rd son, I think) who has come to paint the caravan. Henry is at loggerheads with Sarah over a number of things and I am the point of communication between them - awkward on occasions.

Henry reads his mss. to me by the hour - particularly *The Phoenix Generation*, which I also think is very fine. There is a wonderful Chekhovian feeling for inter-relation of character. Some scenes are

written so perfectly that they are like Mozart symphonies - never a note wrong. I want to read the whole thing straight through, but Henry reads me the parts he wants a certain opinion about - though often the very reading to another person is enough ...

Henry is certainly exhausting - but beyond a certain level of minor irritations, this draining is a liberation - leaving one more free and pure - or at least so I find it ...

I have to go and do the day's shopping in the nearest village. Henry *talks* so much - each meal takes 2 to 3 hours - not that we don't enjoy listening - the trouble is, Henry is the one who insists on military organisation - and also the first one to throw it all out of gear ...

I have almost finished *The Golden Virgins*; I think it is a superb book - beautifully written - the battle description - particularly of the lull leading up to it - the finest I've read.

The rain it raineth - and drips in through the caravan roof - fortunately Henry has whisky and a roaring fire.

Henry's last contribution to *The Aylesford Review* appeared in the autumn number for 1967 (volume ix, no.1). In that number there is a long review-article by Sylvia Bruce on *Lucifer Before Sunrise*, the thirteenth novel in the *Ancient Sunlight* series. The reviewer found much to admire in this book, but had certain reservations. Some parts of an article on Henry by Colin Wilson that we had published in 1961 had made Henry a little uneasy; I thought that perhaps he ought to see Miss Bruce's article before we printed it. In the event, Henry was quite pleased, and wished the article to be published; but he asked if he might be allowed to make some comments on its pseudonymously. In the circumstances, I thought the request not unreasonable, so when the autumn number of the magazine appeared, Miss Bruce's article was followed by an article of some length headed 'Lucifer or Eosphoros?', and signed 'Greenjacket'. The disguise was fairly thin; I doubt if anyone who knew Henry's work at all well could have failed to identify the author. Both parties were satisfied.

In the autumn of the following year publication of *The Aylesford Review* came to an end: the combined result of financial insolvency and the editor's departure to take up a new post in Canada. However, Henry's collaboration was not yet at an end. My Canadian hosts had invited me to establish and edit the first numbers of a new magazine, to be published from the Department of English at Saint Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, N.S. Accordingly, in the spring of 1970 there appeared the first number of *The Antigonish Review*, similar in format to *The Aylesford Review*, but running to 130 pages. Among the contributors were some of *The Aylesford Review* writers: Marianne Sinclair, Alan Neame, Penelope Shuttle, Sylvia Bruce, Frances Horovitz, Fleur Adcock, Dom Sylvester Houedard - and Henry Williamson. Henry's article, 'An Affirmation', a moving account of how he heard the news of the German surrender at the end of the second world war, is somewhat similar to chapter 32 of *Lucifer Before Sunrise*. Prefixed to the article, for the benefit of Nova Scotian and other transatlantic readers, is a four-and-a-half page 'Note on Henry Williamson'.

Henry's most generous act in support of *The Aylesford Review* deserves special mention. In 1960 the *Review's* finances were in a precarious position. A few months previously Saint Albert's Press, the *Review's* publishers, had had their offices transferred from Aylesford to St. Mary's College, a Carmelite house of studies at Llandeilo, in mid-Wales; and along with the Press had been

moved its manager and the *Review's* editor (one and the same person). This arrangement lasted for only a year, after which the Press ceased its printing, though not its publishing operations, and the magazine's editor was relocated in Aylesford. In 1960, then, as a means to help keeping the magazine afloat, Henry offered to allow us to print five chapters of unpublished autobiography that he had written, I think, some years previously, all proceeds from its sale to be donated to *The Aylesford Review*, the author forgoing all royalties.

This small book, *In the Woods*, was printed at St. Albert's Press, Llandello, and published in 1961. In format the book is a compact small crown octavo. The text was set in Monotype Baskerville by a firm of commercial typesetters, and was 'over-run', so as to secure the best possible spacing, by us before printing. The book was issued in a limited edition of 950 numbered copies, in stiff wrappers, with fifty cased copies, printed on special paper and signed by the author. The book received uniformly good reviews, the best, and fullest, being by Maurice Wiggin in *The Sunday Times*. It sold out rapidly, and proved to be St. Albert's Press's bestseller. The author's objective was successfully realised.

Probably few people knew that the dust-jacket, or outer wrapper, of *In the Woods* exists in two states. The jacket as originally designed and printed has between the title and the author's name a reproduction of a Bewick woodcut, showing a swan on a pond. By some accident not enough copies were printed, and a little later a reprint was needed. At that point the electrotype of the Bewick engraving could not be found, so the new wrappers were issued with only the title and the author's name on the front outer wrapper. (In revised form these five chapters were incorporated in *Lucifer Before Sunrise*, published in 1967).

After my return from Canada in 1973 I was no longer assigned to the priory at Aylesford; and, of course, *The Aylesford Review* was extinct; but I continued to be in close touch with Henry, and saw him from time to time. In 1975 he agreed to give a talk at Spode House in the following spring; but when the time came he was not well enough to attend.

Many complimentary things have been said and written about *The Aylesford Review* since its demise. The one-time editor, however, is probably more aware than anyone else of its shortcomings and demerits. The proof-reading left something to be desired, and there was an unsureness of judgement in the selection of poems to be published. The work of many poets of distinction appeared in its pages; however, our aim of encouraging the work of young unpublished poets led to a number of geese being misidentified as swans. But certainly it is a magazine which is likely to be consulted and read by 'Eng. Lit.' researchers for a good while to come; not least because of the quantity of material it contains relating to Henry Williamson. Henry's goodness and generosity were principal factors in enabling the magazine to achieve its eventual high reputation. It may not have done as much for him as he did for it; but I think that *The Aylesford Review*, and its gatherings of writers and readers at Aylesford Priory and at Spode House, were the means of his meeting members of a younger generation of writers whose friendship meant much to him in his final years.