HENRY WILLIAMSON, TODAY AND YESTERDAY

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I was saddened to read recently that pollution is killing salmon and otter in the River Torridge. An article in the *Daily Telegraph* of the 25th March 1986 told how the waste from some 4,000 cows is destroying the life of Henry Williamson's famous river to such an extent that 'the average annual rod catch of around 500 salmon in the 1970s has fallen to less than 50 a year' today. Reading of how the slurry and silage from farms in the area is destroying insect, bird, fish and animal life I could not help thinking that Henry Williamson had appealed, fifty years ago, for an end to such practices. And that at a time when British agriculture was in the grips of what seemed like an eternal depression, stemming in some areas back to the repeal of the Corn Laws. How ironic that as farming in Britain has found its "salvation" in a European policy of co-operation and assistance, the Common Agriculture Policy, that the land itself, so beloved of Henry Williamson, should be suffering so much. It is testimony to how Williamson's message is just as relevant to us today as when he was alove that such connections between news items and his writings spring so naturally to mind. And it is not just in the realm of nature and the land, for even in the political sphere there are echoes of Williamson's warnings yet to be heard. Indeed, for Williamson the political could not be readily disentangled from such questions of man and his relations with the natural word:

> *He said that under the existing System an increase of soil-erosion was inevitable, with the pollution of rivers by sewage, and the silting of estuaries; while the same System produced the piling-up of unsold goods for export, with consequent increasing unemployment, leading to the inevitability of war. The golden tapeworm had enfeebled the body politic; only if all in Britain saw this, only if all worked for the idea of People and Soil, together with the Empire in service to the ideal of building a great new civilisation, could war with anti-Money resurgent nations, leading to the extinction of Europe, be avoided.*
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> *The Phasian Bird*, 1948, p167.

'Wilbo's' words in *The Phasian Bird* were not to be read by the public until after that second European civil war that has lead to the apparently permanent enfeeblement of our continent. Yet, in the final volume of the *Chronicle* we see that Phillip still possesses hope, even after the second brothers' war, that Europe might find itself, as he and Melissa quote Birkin, 'all will be achieved by the final order of the European.' *The Gale of the World*, 1969, p 360). Perhaps with clearer vision, or a more realistic outlook, we might say that Birkin's order had no hope of implementation, certainly not after 1945. So, placing the details and plans of "Imperial Socialism" on one side, can we still find pointers to Henry Williamson's hope for Britain and Europe? What were his central themes and predictions? And how far do the painful realities of today show that Williamson was right?

It is commonly held now that the Great War was, indeed, a war of economic rivalry. By 1914 the three great powers of western Europe, Germany, Britain and France, had reached fever pitch in their economic and

political competition. It has been said that the economic strengths of these three nations in that fatal year could be represented as 3:2:1. The strains that such a simple formula hid found expression in an intense form of popular jingoism. In the resulting war that the young Phillip Maddison was flung into he was quick to feel sympathy for his enemies, in 1914 an unknowing, simple feeling born of pity:

> *... that the cries of Mutter-Mutter-Mutter among the wounded were the same as Mother-Mother-Mother heard from the Iron Colonel's grey lips when he had opened his eyes wide, just before dying, as he lay in the lee of the cornstack? It was a terrible thought, that the Germans were like themselves: a thought that he could not bear to think of at all, even to himself.*
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> *How Dear is Life*, Panther rev.ed., 1963, p264.

The experience of the Christmas Truce, and four years of murder, ensured that those early, child-like feelings became sure knowledge that the soldiers in 'feld-grau' were victims of the same 'terrible mistake.' That the underlying causes were to be found in a combination of the industrial mentality, financial machinations, and Trident-like jingoism was also apparent to Phillip by the time that the guns fell silent. Yet for Phillip (and, one supposes, for Henry Williamson himself) the retreat into the natural world in the years immediately following the war meant that it was to be sometime before he would formulate these thoughts into a trenchant criticism of the decadence of industrialism, and the mentality that it engenders.

Henry Williamson, both in his novels and his autobiographical work, exalted not so much a system to ensure a new world, but an attitude of mind, and a redefining of priorities. This is clear in the early post first war volumes of the "Chronicle", before any overt political content is apparent. The belief that honest toil is a thing to be valued, even by an 'intelectual':

> *The slow rhythm of the body, the insistent rhythm of the wit, were they becoming irreconcilable in modern civilisation? The sedentary life, frustration and irritability; work with the body, fatigue - and peace of mind.*
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> *The Power of the Dead*, 1963, p18.

Phillip in the *Chronicle*, and Henry in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* both exhibit this strong belief in the natural rhythm of toil. Not only is it to be valued as the solution to the dark tuburculous spots on Phillip's lungs, but, Williamson argues, the victory of the natural rhythm over the febrile rhythms of industrial civilisation brings forth truth. This belief in the redeeming nature of physical work was one of the weapons Henry Williamson brought to bear upon the liveral and communist intellectuals of the 1930s. Arguing, in 1937, against the drift to war he wrote :

> *The sad truth is that, while the great masses of workers never feel love or hate - they're usually too tired after the day's work to want anything but food and relaxation - the intellectual minority which formulates and, generally indirectly, makes their destiny, doesn't want peace. They don't want war; but they don't want peace.*
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> *Goodbye West Country*, 1937, p244.

Yet it was not just a matter of work, for, at root, Williamson perceived that the coming of the second brothers' war was due to the entire anti-natural rhythm of industrial civilisation. Criticising *Inside Europe* by John Gunther he wrote :

> *Such writing seems to me to be the emanation of an intelligent mind, checked by inefficient education, formless growing-up on sidewalks, in steam-heat, amid cocktail nothingness - all part of a bricks-and-mortar decadence... The by-products of that city toiling, of those nervous strains are mental confusions, spurious humanitarianism, maladies of ill-adjustment, no roots in the soil; these, and these only, are the causes of modern war.*
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> *Goodbye West Country*, 1937, pp53/54.

In these withering assaults on the egotism and decadence of 'western' culture and civilisation we see pointers to two of Henry Williamson's proposes solutions, the 'masses of the workers', and 'roots in the soil.'

Goodbye West Country is to a large degree a desparate attempt by Williamson to stave off another European war; "must we die again?", he asks. That he was against a second bloodletting on our continent is clear, but, to a degree, his Europeanism was strangely limited. For, throughout his work it is the need to avoid war with Germany that, again and again, rises to the surface of narrative and commentary. In part this is because Germany was seen as a 'natural' enemy by so many. Yet, it still seems strange that, in fact, Williamson's 'Europe' often only appears to include Britain and Germany; the old Napoleonic Empire notwithstanding. Was this a weakness in his argument, in his defence of Germany, by the 1930s a National Socialist Germany? In France the ex-combattant and fascist writer, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, echoed the themes of Henry Williamson. But, although Drieu was to fatally embrace Nazi Germany in a strange self-destructive gesture, his view of Europe was wider than Williamson's. As early as 1922 Drieu was urging a Federation of Europe:

> *If Europe does not federate she will destroy herself or be destroyed by others. And the war generation, who do not seem to have realised this, will have to do it or else it will*
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> *Mesure de la France*, p76, quoted in F. Field, *Three French Writers & the Great War*, 1975, p96.

And by 1931 he had produced a plan for real European unity in *L'Europe Contre Les Patries*. A similar call from another fascist of 1914, but with wider vision than that possessed by Henry Williamson. Yet for good or ill, he continued to urge life for Europe by defending Germany revived, the Germany of the NSDAP.

The most 'political' of the *Chronicle* novels, *The Phoenix Generation*, contains a clear statement of the policy and attitudes of the British Union of Fascists, but also, in chapter 8, 'Hakenkreuze', a defence of Hitler's Germany. Williamson's defence of the ideology and personalities of German National Socialism has been the main reason why his books have gone unread - his talent unrecognised. From the now infamous dedication to the German fuhrer, to the *Gale of the World*'s fantasy of a glider-borne release of Hess, Williamson pulled no punches in his defence of National Socialism. What was it that he saw as defensible in this ideology? It does not appear to have been any plan

or programme, but rather an attitude to life, a mentality. Just as he repeatedly attacked the anti-natural mentality engendered by industrialism and the 'golden tapework', so he praised what he saw as the renaissance of the spirit in Germany:

> *How easy to write off soulless militarization, the mechanization of the individual in the totalitarian state! I didn't see one bit of paper thrown down anywhere. The streets, as well as the Luitpoldfeld, were clean when they had gone. Again, esperit-de-corps! The power of an Idea, brought through a living personality ...*
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> *Goodbye*, p240.

The espirit-de-corps! The central exclamation here. Right or wrong, Henry Williamson wished to see service and this espirit-de-corps triumph as the values of a new post industrial England and Europe:

> *My ideal, my hope, is to be able to work and to live so that I may serve the English people by making coherent their inner geist or aspirations, and so accelerate the making of the nation into one large family. Natural man on his natural earth : the highest philosophical truth.*
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> *Goodbye*, p313.

So, although he identified himself with a clear political current, and a movement - the BUF - Williamson's message is one that goes beyond political programmes and action, as they are commonly understood. Instead he argues for "the highest philosophical truth." The virtues of the ex-front line soldier's mentality were to have been harnessed to the good of the national community and the soil, wherein it would find its foundation. "People and Soil", as Wilbo put it. This phrase is close, very close, to the title of a pamphlet by a BUF smallholder, Jorian Jenks, entitled *Land and People*; and doubtless the similarity was intentional. It is in the close connection between people and soil that, I would argue, Williamson saw some solution to the ills that afflicted, and afflict, society. Men and women could only find their natural rhythm within this framework. It is a statement, unusual in England, of the common European theme of the peasant life. A theme found in other great works of European literature, such as Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil*, (1917). A theme indeed, that found scant echo in the modernist, statist, BUF, but had a strong presence in the ideology of the NSDAP; a facet of German National Socialism that has only recently gained recognition in Dr. Anna Bramwell's *Blood and Soil, Walther Darre & Hitler's Green Party*, 1985. Williamson's arguments then, can be seen to form a logical unity, beyond the temporary manifestations of inter-war politics. The Great War is seen to be a result of an attitude of mind and body, bred by the decadence and alienation of industrial civilisation - the anti-natural rhythm. In turn, Phillip and Henry, the frontline soldiers, the sufferers of the industrial haemorrhage of war, attempt to return to the natural rhythm, of work with the land. To this ideal he brings his beliefs in service and unity, expressed in fascist and National Socialist politics, a new attitude of mind, an esperit-de-corps, which he saw as a solution for England, for Britain and Europe.

Such hopes, ideals, can be seen to rise above the historical context of Williamson's writings. And, returning to the recent *Daily Telegraph* article in which we read of the outcome of industrialism in its agricultural guise - a result of a wrongheaded attempt at European co-operation, a 'unity' based on commercial values alone - we can see the truth of Henry Williamson's

predictions:

> *The leaves of beet plants, from turning yellow, were now in July curling dry and brown. For many years now the field had been robbed of nearly all its moisture-holding humus, and the chemical plant food broadcast from the bags of fertilizers could not be absorbed by the fine surface-feeding rootlets of the beet without moisture. The field was drying out; there was nothing in the earth to hold the water; nothing to bring up by capillary attraction during the season of growth the six hundred tons of water needed to bring an acre of sugar-beet to maturity. Worms, by whose patient tunnelling and digestion of dead and dying leaf tissue the soil is renewed and made gracious, were nearly extinct on the top-soil; rapid plowing by the multiple mouldboards of tractors had exposed, during the early springtimes and back-ends of the years, the worm population of the field to the flocks of black-headed gulls which swirled behind the plowings; chemicals in the soil had killed their eggs.*
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> *The Phasian Bird*, 1948, pp103/104.

and wonder if we should look again at his solutions.