

'BEST MAN' - A Tribute to Richard de la Mare

Peter K. Robins

In March this year, the publishing firm of Faber & Faber lost its Chairman. Richard de la Mare, eldest son of Walter de la Mare, died that month aged eighty four. Sixty years earlier, on 6 May 1925, he had been best man, or groomsmen, at Henry's marriage to Loetitia Hibbert at Landcross Parish Church, near Bideford.

Richard de la Mare was born on 4 June 1901 and, after an Oxford education, began a career in publishing in 1923, when he spent two years in his uncle Roger Ingpen's firm of Selwyn and Blount reading manuscripts.

Whilst there in 1925 he accepted Henry's 'otter story' on condition that it was published in a limited edition for sale to otter-hunt membership. This was not acceptable to Henry and two years later after seventeen revisions of the manuscript, Constant Huntington at Putnam took it up to publish *Tarka the Otter*.

Richard meanwhile had joined Faber & Gwyer in the autumn of 1925 as assistant manager and shortly afterwards was made a director.

In the *Chronicle* Richard forms the basis of the character Anders Norse, described as Phillip's agent. (See Editor's note at end.)

Norse, a man of about thirty with a healthy red face and prematurely white hair, was holding in the palm of his hand five sovereigns, an uncommon sight since the war.

The Innocent Moon

This description, set in 1921, doesn't square with the photograph of Richard at Henry's wedding, reproduced in *The Children of Shallowford* (Macdonald & Jane's 1978), which shows a twenty-three year old best man with slicked-back black hair and a moustache. Whether he had a healthy red face cannot be determined.

When Phillip is a struggling journalist in Fleet Street, there was ...

... Anders Norse's steady encouragement; whenever Phillip called at the Adelphi basement there he sat, cheery and optimistic, behind his table with piles of books on the floor and an old typewriter in front of him.

The Innocent Moon

Anders pops in and out of the *Chronicle* but seems to disappear without trace after *The Power of the Dead*, despite the fact that Richard de la Mare and his wife were the proposers that Henry move to Norfolk.

In *The Phoenix Generation* the idea of farming in East Anglia is Phillip's own, originally sown by Melissa's father wanting to move there and encouraged by a fellow-member of the Barbarian Club, who had made a considerable success by writing his autobiography *Farmer's Boy*. This was A.G. Street

and his book *Farmer's Glory*. "Now is the time to buy land, it's never been so cheap," he advises Phillip.

In reality, Dick, his publisher, and incidentally A.G. Street's, persuades Henry to spend a few days with him and his wife at their Norfolk cottage, which I guess to be at, or near, Sheringham.

It was time to leave the West Country. I needed new impressions ... there was no stimulation left in that valley; all the excitement of staring at Salmon was in Salar. My life there was a closed book.

The Story of a Norfolk Farm

Richard de la Mare had been offered the salmon book by Henry for Faber and Richard had paid a £750 advance, which to be earned had to sell at least 10,000 copies. Henry's publisher at the time, Jonathan Cape, was none too pleased having published four of Henry's books were confidently looking forward to the next.

... now I am sending off sections of the salmon book without revision, to be set up in page-proof. As he received them he (Richard de la Mare) sent them off to the printer without reading them. Not a moment could be wasted; and since the book was printed in pages, no additions or alterations could be made afterwards without entirely upsetting the pagination

Goodbye West Country

This must have been torture for Henry who usually couldn't leave any proof alone.

Salar the Salmon was published on October 1935 and Faber were able to report to Henry that it had beaten all day-sale records for the firm, selling 3,000 copies in one day, making a total of 10,000, and thereby earning the hefty advance, much to the relief of de la Mare, presumably.

At the de la Mare's Norfolk retreat, Henry is enticed to view a derelict farm. He is attracted to the landscape and its lack of summer trippers. Could he be a farmer?

There was farming blood in me. My mother's family had been farmers; some of them had farmed the same land under the dukedom of Bedford for more than four centuries. My father's family had been landowners until comparatively recently in the Midlands and in the North of England. Surely, I would be able to succeed as a farmer?

The Story of a Norfolk Farm

With further encouragement from Dick, including the prospect of trout in the river, Henry bought Old Hall Farm, Stiffkey and its notorious 'Bad Lands'. After a ten-year struggle to impose order, Henry was beaten by the farm. Loetitia leaves him and divorces him at the end of the war; His son Windles emigrates to Canada. Henry returns to Ox's Cross.

Although Faber continued to publish his books after the war, including *The Phasian Bird* in 1948 and *Scribbling Lark* in 1949, sales are poor and the

Williamson public gone.

At the end of 1949 Henry starts on the *Chronicle* and, 'presumably because he has parted company with Faber, offers the first volume to Collins, who decline it on the grounds that Richard Maddison is an 'unattractive hero'. Pushing his luck Henry took the manuscript to Faber, to find they were not very receptive. "Faber's have lost their touch," commented Henry petulantly. At MacDonald, their reader Malcolm Elwin, persuades the firm to publish *The Dark Lantern* and it appears in November 1951.

There is much to speculate on here. Did Richard de la Mare write off Henry when Faber's last two books of his failed? As the public were unable to forgive Henry for his fascist and German sympathies, was this the reason the valued name of Williamson did not return to Faber?

Richard de la Mare continued his successful career at Faber becoming Chairman in 1960. For one who was Henry's best man, who had stuck his neck out for *Salar* and had been the catalyst for Henry's Norfolk years, 1950 must have been a sad year.

(Whilst it is agreed that HWW certainly has Anders Norse as his best man at the marriage of Phillip and Lucy towards the end of May 1925 *The Power of the Dead* and that thus he would appear to equate in real life to Richard de la Mare actually being best man to Henry and Loetitia in May of that year, earlier references to Anders Norse in *The Innocent Moon* do not equate with R. de la M., including the description, as Peter Robins notes. It would appear that HWW starts off with Anders Norse based on one person, Andrew Dakers, and then blends him in with another (i.e. de la Mare) and from then on perhaps takes bits from both people to make his fictional character. ED.)

