

HENRY WILLIAMSON AND WILFRID MEYNELL

Father Brocard Sewell

In 1877 Alice Thompson, one of the two daughters of a rather obscure friend of Charles Dickens, married a young Catholic journalist from the North, Wilfrid Meynell, who was making a name for himself in London. Alice Thompson was born in 1847; in 1872 she was converted to Catholicism, and in 1875 she published her first book of verse, *Preludes*. Some time previously the Thompson family had settled, but only for a while, in the Isle of Wight. Here they got to know the Sewell family, then prominent in the Island, one of them being the novelist Elizabeth Missing Sewell, whose novels were then as popular as those of her friend Charlotte M. Yonge. While she was on the Island Alice Thompson fell in love with Arthur Sewell, a nephew of the novelist's, who was then a choral scholar at New College, Oxford. Miss Thompson's feelings, however, were not reciprocated, and what had seemed a promising friendship ended rather sadly. A little later Alice Thompson became engaged to Wilfrid Meynell, who soon established himself as an able journalist, and became known as a writer of verse, and the editor of two important magazines, *The Weekly Register* and *Merry England*. He became a trusted friend of Cardinal Manning, and a director of the Catholic publishing house of Burns and Oates.

In 1911 Wilfrid and Alice Meynell, with their family, left London and settled on a property which they had bought at Greatham, near Storrington, in Sussex. Alice Meynell, who had become a famous poet and essayist, died in 1922; her husband lived on until 1948.

In London the Meynells lived in Palace Court, Bayswater, and among their friends were Douglas (later known as Hilary) Pepler, his wife Clare Whiteman, and their children. After the Meynells had moved to Greatham, the Pepler family moved to Ditchling, where Hilary started his famous St. Dominic's Press; so they remained friends and neighbours, even though Greatham is rather further from Ditchling than is Palace Court from Hammersmith. In the 1930s I was working at the St. Dominic's Press, and that is how I came, in 1934 or 1935, to walk over the Downs with Hilary's Dominican son Father Conrad from Ditchling to Greatham, where we spent the night under Wilfrid Meynell's roof at Humphrey's Homestead. I remember him as a patriarchal figure with silver hair and beard, who talked to us at his library fireside after supper until we retired for the night. No doubt he talked to us of many things, but I remember none of them. I knew that he was the man who had rescued Francis Thompson from penury and homelessness, and had established his fame as a poet; but at that time my interest in the literary figures of the 1890s had not really begun to develop.

Many years later, in the late 1970s, I was staying at Rackham, barely a mile from Greatham, with Wilfrid and Alice Meynell's grand-daughter Mrs. Barbara Wall (the novelist Barbara Lucas). Also there was Mrs. Wall's daughter the late Gabriel Bergonzi, who took me over to Greatham, where once again I found myself in Wilfrid Meynell's library, which seemed to have altered hardly at all in the intervening years. On the shelves of the library I noticed a copy of *The Pathway*, by Henry Williamson. On inspection, this proved to be a first edition, inscribed by the author to Wilfrid Meynell. Inside the back cover was pasted an envelope addressed to Mr. Meynell in Henry Williamson's hand, and inside this envelope was a long two-page typescript letter from Henry, with his written signature.

Loosely inserted in the book were a short holograph letter and postcard from Williamson to Meynell, the first page only of another letter, and an autograph letter from Loetitia Williamson to Wilfrid Meynell.

Some of these documents are undated, but all appear to have been written either in 1928 or 1929, at the time of, or soon after, the publication of *The Pathway*.

Nothing could have been more appropriate or natural than for the author of *The Pathway*, a novel full of 'echoes' of Francis Thompson, to have presented a copy to Wilfrid Meynell. It is clear that Henry had been to Greatham before *The Pathway* was published, because in chapter seven of the novel there is a description of a bust of Shelley in the library at Greatham, and Wilfrid Meynell is named as the owner of the bust.

Pasted inside the front cover of Meynell's copy of *The Pathway* is a large photograph of Henry Williamson, cut from some newspaper; on the facing flyleaf is this inscription in Williamson's hand.

For Wilfrid Meynell
from Henry Williamson

Greatham 18 November 1928

I feel diffident about writing in this book, because you are the father, brother, friend of Francis Thompson: and it is only at rare moments that I believe in myself. Nevertheless, you are so re-affirming, O falconer, that I venture to remain, slightly haggard, on your gauntlett where the royal feet have pressed.

[Drawing of a bird]

No falcon: perchance an owl.

The text of the letter in the envelope pasted into the inner back cover of the book is as follows:

Georgeham, North Devon. 26 October 1928

Dear Mr. Meynell,

Please forgive a typed letter; but my hand is tired. I write with a crabbed fist, my index finger looped like a caterpillar, and it gets weary. Thank you so much for your letter; I wish I could feel that the book was worth so much care and thought. I believe you are filling its bare and false passages with your own nature, but perhaps this is because I am tired, and it rains and rains, and this room which has a tin roof is very damp and chill. Also, I think that the book wore me out to write it; certainly wore me down thinking about it, and living it - hence my doubts, for perhaps it is too personal.

Someone wrote this morning:

Personally I don't think I ever disliked a character in any book more than Maddison. Not that I don't absolutely agree with his views, but he seems to think he's the only one to hold them, whereas thousands of people do - only thank goodness they don't preach. It was a jolly good thing for Maddison to die when he did, before he discovered he wasn't a lone voice after all, for I don't think (judging by the egotistical way he told about Christmas 1914) that he would have liked to find himself in a crowd.

and it makes me feel sad again, and I hoped all that was behind me. Why I don't know; but I suppose it is another aspect of egotism.

I hope to be coming down your way during the first week in November - I shall be passing in my small car about Nov 12 or 13, on my return to Devon. I have to write up the Cenotaph service for the Daily Mirror - goodness knows what I can say that they will print. Well, one can always report and just describe - perhaps that is the best writing. I passed near Greatham last month, and hesitated about coming in, but next (time) I shall burst in.

I fancy my only chance (for I must hurry back to Devon as my wife about that time will be going into a nursing home for her 2nd "tiny") will be on the afternoon of the 12th. I shall probably be spending the night of 11/12 with Petre Mais at Southwick; may I come over about 3.30 in the afternoon of 12 with Jill Mais in my small Peugeot?

Does Sebastian still sit at the table in the lamplight, doing mysterious things with bundles of letters? Do the leaves lie in your garden pool bed? I can see your wide hearth vividly as I write.

I don't know what to say further, being very dull today, and half in the mud of Passhendaele (*sic*). I am haunted by those old days; and one day must sit down and write the book of my greatest ambition, a novel sequence of the war, trying to show all Europe in one family, with a calmness and actuality that will make the Pathway but a wisp of painted smoke.

I recall reading F.T. again the other night, after a lapse of years; he has a colossal throw of pinions, and soars beyond the source of gravity. My own stuff seems weak and turbid when I read him, and I feel I must away to other fields. As a fact, in my own small way, I very nearly became like him, in that time before you saw the hand round the doorway. Now I am married, and have a son; and next Monday, when my old father-in-law reads the book (I can't keep it out of his hands) heaven knows what he will say to the character of Sufford Chychester. Anyhow, he can't be displeased with Mary.

Yes, I feel about baptism much as you do; I *can't*, however much I feel the spirit of it is generally lost, sniff at the gentle thoughts of parents. As for Maddison, I might have been like him, but am not now; although sometimes I think that if I had gone out in 1920 it would have been better.

Au revoir, Sir: I just remember, with a certain horror, that I mention you in the book without your permission.

Henry Williamson

A few days later - the postmark is illegible - an undated postcard with the printed heading 'From Henry Williamson, Georgeham, North Devon', with Henry's owl-drawing reproduced in the bottom righthand corner, reached Wilfred Meynell at Greatham. On it Henry had written:

It does not seem that Henry Williamson had any further contact with Wilfrid Meynell. The explanation may be that the Mais family had moved from Sussex, so that he no longer visited them in that county.

Wilfrid Meynell lived on until October 1948, a much loved and greatly respected figure, dying at the great age of 96. He is buried in the Catholic cemetery at Storrington, close to the church and priory of the Premonstratensian canons. He was a remarkable man, and it is good to learn that an American student is planning to write his biography. In the mean time, those who wish to know more about him may be referred to Viola Meynell's *Alice Meynell: A Memoir* and the same writer's *Francis Thompson and Wilfrid Meynell*, and June Badeni's recent biography *Alice Meynell*.

© I am grateful to the custodians of the Henry Williamson Estate and of the Meynell Archives for kind permission to reproduce these letters of Henry and Loetitia Williamson to Wilfrid Meynell.

For Wilfrid Meynell
from Henry Williamson
Glaston 18 November 1928.

I feel different about writing you
this letter, because you are the
father, brother, friend of Francis
Thompson and it is as if now at once
reminds that I believe in
myself. Nevertheless, you are so
reassuring, O father, that
I can remain, slightly
haggard, on your garment
where the royal feet have
pressed.



No. 1. purchase an owl.