

## A FRAGMENT

Brian Sanders

Touring with the Donald Wolfitt Shakespeare Company in 1944 I saw *Dandelion Days* in a Cheltenham bookshop. I remembered how, two or three years before, the English master at Colfe's, 'Beaky' Southern, had told the boys in Upper 4 Remove that we might care to read the book as it concerned the school. I bought the copy - The Faber Library No.9 New and Cheaper Edition 1932 - and read it at my digs after performances at the Opera House and in the weeks that followed. I basked in Ancient Sunlight (an expression then unknown to me) on account of the description of the school buildings which I had known before they were destroyed by bombs, and also because I recognised in Mr. Kenneth the person of 'Bunny' Bennett who taught me History and who retired in 1943 after teaching at Colfe's since 1900. As time went by I bought the other Flax of Dream novels and read some of the nature essays and stories. In 1949, after National Service, I rejoined the Wolfitt Company. The Autumn tour included Plymouth and I had my first glimpse of the South West. I determined to return at the earliest opportunity, and so in 1950 I set off on a hitch-hike tour of Devon and Cornwall. Some days before leaving I had phoned Faber and Faber.

'I'm an old friend of Henry Williamson's (only a 97% fib) and I'm visiting the West Country. I should like to see him but I don't know his address.'

'I see. I'm sure Mr. Williamson wouldn't mind me giving it to you. Just a moment please' - and I copied down 'Oxford Cross, Near Georgeham, Barnstaple, North Devon'.

After attempting to cross Dartmoor from Chagford to Lydford via Cranmere Pool (Tarka) without an Ordnance Survey map (I failed), I travelled through Okehampton and Launceston to Tintagel, which was then unspoilt. I spent two days exploring the cliffs and beaches and then journeyed up the north coast to reach Bideford on Saturday 15th July. After spending the night in the Youth Hostel I walked to Barnstaple and then through Branton, Saunton and Croyde and up to Georgeham. I reached the gate of Windwhistle Spinney at about 2.30 p.m. and entered the field. I saw the hut in the corner and nervously tip-toed towards it. The door was closed and looking through the window I saw Henry reading a Sunday newspaper. Near him was a lady nursing a baby. I couldn't possibly interrupt their Sunday afternoon relaxation, I thought. I tip-toed back to the gate determined to return the next morning. Instead, walking round the headland south of Croyde I saw, for the first time, the marvellous sweep of the sands, burrows and estuary. I spent the rest of the day sunbathing on the edge of the Burrows and listening to the sea. Next morning I caught the bus to Branton, walked along the lane near Lobb, climbed over the hill to Barracott and up towards the Cross. Just short of the Spinney I found a dead mole lying in the narrow lane. Odd the things one remembers. I can see it today.

I re-entered the field and marched up to the hut still feeling extremely apprehensive. It was a warm day and the door was open. I saw Henry sitting behind a desk reading some papers. He was engrossed and did not notice the intruder. I stood a moment by the doorway, took a deep breath and then rapped on the wood. Henry looked up.

'Yes?'

'I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Williamson, but I wondered if I might talk to you for just a few minutes. I'm on holiday and passing through. I've read some of your books.'

Henry put down the papers and came to the doorway. 'How far have you come?' 'From Colham.' 'Colham? What do you mean - Colham?' 'Well, Colfe's or Lewisham, whichever you like.' 'Were you at Colfe's school?' 'Yes. I've read *Dandelion Days* and one of the masters, Mr. Kenneth or 'Bunny Bennett, was still teaching when I was there. He taught me history.'

'Oh, but he wasn't the only one mentioned in the book who was there in your time,' Henry said. 'There was another.'

'Who on earth was that?'

Henry chuckled. 'I simply inverted the initial letter of his name. I can't make out why I've never been sued for libel. I think Mr. Worley is still teaching there.'

'Worley?' I said. 'Oh! Morley! Ding Morley! (The nickname derived from Morley's piano shop in Lewisham.) I splayed my feet outwards, assumed a slight nasality and said in a highish pitched voice, 'Now then, you boys!'

'I think you'd better come in,' said Henry.

He offered me a chair and sat down again behind his desk. 'It's strange you should have come from Colfe's. Only the other day I was checking on the number of chaps I knew who died in the first world war and who went to Colfe's. Eighty three altogether. Look, I've got a record here somewhere.' He looked at me and frowned slightly. 'You're not a reporter, are you?' 'No. I'm an actor.' 'Oh. Then you're not a writer?' 'Heavens no.'

He nodded. Then he searched the desk, took a book from one of the drawers and looked through it. 'I must have put the list somewhere else but I know there were eighty three altogether. I made the list out because I shall use some of them in the Phillip Maddison story. It's awfully difficult to think back accurately to about 1912.' He looked hard at me again. 'You're sure you aren't a reporter?'

'No, honestly. Whereabouts in London did you live?' I asked.

'Brockley - on the side of the Hily fields. It was meadows then with sheep grazing and hurdles to fence them in. I used to walk through what is now the recreation ground to Catford and then on through seven fields to open country: all along the Ravensbourne.'

'That's where I live; beyond Catford, near Southend Pond in the Bromley Road. They call it Peter Pan's Pool; it's a children's boating pool and playground.'

'I remember that very well indeed. I wrote a short story about it. There used to be trout in that part of the stream but they died out. Do you know Whitefoot Lane?'

'Yes, I live in the road opposite; in Southend Lane.'

'Phillip's mother's going to feel her first labour pains near that crossroads.' Henry picked up the neat stack of papers which he had been reading when I called. 'I'm correcting the final draft of a new book. It's the first of a tetralogy about Phillip Maddison, a cousin of Willie. He's a thoroughly bad lot. He has a row with his parents and is continually downright rude. Finally he just walks out. It's in rather a similar way, but much harsher of course, that Willie and his father never agreed. The Willie Maddison books are written from the point of view of the boy, but the Phillip Maddison story is as seen by the parent. This first book is called *The Dark Lantern* and it begins on the Hilly Fields. The first chapter is entitled 'Camberwell Beauty' after the butterfly. I remember seeing them there once but no more. May I read you the opening paragraphs?'

I listened to the quiet, modulated voice.

'..... but why did she never come to see her Richard?' Henry put down the draft.

'Thank you very much. You know, I was born in Algernon Road, round the corner, as it were, from your house by Hilly Fields. Both my parents were born in Lewisham and my grandfather opened the first family butcher's shop in the village in Loampit Vale. That was about 1877.'

'What was the name of the shop?'

'Sanders, the same as mine. My uncle, Tryon, went to Colfe's but that would have been before your time.'

'You must have visited the ponds at Keston?'

'Yes, we used to go on to the common as a bank holiday treat. My father would claim that he knew a short cut back to Hayes station but somehow we always get lost.'

'I used to go bird watching in Holwood Park and in Wickham Court Woods.' Henry chuckled again. 'I remember freewheeling on my bike down Westerham Hill at about sixty miles an hour. Quite mad. Mad Willie! That's what they called me at Colfe's and how I invented the name Willie Maddison. Isn't it strange that Willie tried damaging the school with a double-barrelled shot gun and Hitler did it later with two flying bombs!'

'Have you seen the pre-fab buildings?'

'Yes. Awful. I went round there not so long ago; heavily disguised with a false beard.' He grinned. 'Where are you making for?'

'Nowhere in particular. I'm exploring the West Country for the first time. I'll probably go along the north coast and I'd like to spend some time on Exmoor.'

'I would ask you to stay for a couple of days but I'm behind with this draft and I've the next book as well to get on with. I really must get down to it. I'm afraid I shall have to turn you out shortly. But have a drink before you go. I've only lemonade to offer.'

He tried to remove the metal top on a nail. The bottle cracked at the neck. 'I'll get another.'

'Certainly not. Ground glass - a Japanese torture. A dreadful end!'

He opened the next bottle successfully.

I finished the drink and he led me to the gate and across the lane. 'Go down the side of that field. You'll find a footpath that takes you to Vention cottages and the beach. At the far end of the beach is Woolacombe and the way to the north coast. Half way along the beach turn and have a look at Baggy. Goodbye. And thank you for calling, it's revived old memories.'

We shook hands and I thanked him for his welcome. After about a hundred yards I turned. We waved to each other and then he was gone.

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Subsequent visits were equally entertaining with invigorating discussion at more depth. But that first visit to the Spinney left a lasting impression of a man who has had a considerable influence on me. And I had discovered the Burrows as well.

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KINGLEY VALE YEW FOREST, NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE  
(Nr. Chichester, West Sussex.)

Members Annual Walk and Picnic

Sunday 14 June 1987

Once again our Society President, and Warden of Kingley Vale, Richard Williamson and his wife Anne, have kindly agreed to join members on a day out at this highly diverse and scenic Nature Reserve which boasts a truly fine Yew forest.

No separate advice with map will be sent out this year

If you intend to come along for the first time this year and require directions a LOCATION MAP to use in conjunction with your road map is available at NO CHARGE from JOHN HOMAN - address inside back cover of your Journal - but please do enclose a return stamped and self-addressed envelope.

Meeting Point:

West Stoke Car Park. TIME; 11.30 a.m. latest.

Lunch etc.

Picnic and bring own drinks etc. NO FACILITIES.

Clothing:

Your usual with wet/chilly provision. Stout shoes, or what you wish if very dry.

Flowers:

All protected. Draw or snap only.

Dogs:

Under control.