READER ON THE COAST - 4

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> *"...Delius and the orange groves of Florida, the blind Delius hearing again the first cuckoo in spring echoing from the pale, remote colourdream of childhood in Yorkshire, lost loves and friendships, the longing to merge all into the elements again, with their purity of form, and their unchanging integrity. I incline to believe that the elements are the basis of Art in man, he but the medium - straying sometimes and losing the pathway - but returning in the end..." (Norfolk Life Henry Williamson and Lilias Rider Haggard 1943)*

This is the concluding article of the series. I have preferred to roam freely when brooding over the state of my appreciation of HW's writing and of the pattern of my approach to it. It has been the writing rather than the biographical side that has caught my eye though I readily acknowledge the aura of fascination that surrounds the man. I do describe a visit by David Stokes and myself to Ox's Cross when we found HW and Christine at home, and had a most enjoyable discussion and reading session. As was already mentioned I travelled with friends on the journey to the '82 AGM - Jack and Doris Whitehead, and David and Elsa Stokes.

The sea was quite close, though to the visitor passing through Braunton it could seem distant enough as the car was driven down an urban thoroughfare. My thoughts were of how the ocean had looked from our house on East Hill, and the frequent walks I made to where the village ended in verdant fields that were the introduction to the Burrows, I soon treading the springy turf and patches of scrub and seeing the village recede behind me, quickly absorbed into the background of hills. A moment when I was most aware of submerging into the simple harmony of land and sea.

I made for the sea by wandering over the Burrows and basked in the freedom that went with the openness and serenity, moving over sandhills and losing my way in sun-dried valleys and dawdling in a favoured one, drawn by a pool of stillness. Then the moment as the sea came into view between smooth mounds fringed by marram grass, and the contrast of empty space and sands. What I remembered most was not the surf at high tide with its frenzied spray and urgent waves, but a vast beach that had dried off in the sun and the distant surf-line, steely and grey-blue, with an air of pent-up force as of some elemental power held back. You could fancy it rushing over the shallow sands and flooding the Burrows and the plains beyond. All of it was finely realised in HW's descriptive and fictional pages. I thought of my own impressions in the nostalgia of passing through Braunton, for they were formed on my first arrival on the coast - small explorations of place done before I buried myself in *The Linhay on the Downs* or *The Pathway*, my re-living the scenes I had just exulted in.

The car moved to where the railway used to cross the road, part of the Barnstaple - Ilfracombe line which, a victim of the cuts in local branch services, was only a wistful memory now. Our wheels ran on uninterrupted - no red lights of crossing gates and no remembered bumps of the rails. And I

could not see the grocery of Ma Chugg's; that had gone as had other premises. I remembered her thick-set, friendly features, and her liking for a conspiratorial exchange of village gossip; the sight of a supermarket that was recently built signalled the change of scene, like an imposed uniformity. But I noticed the butcher's shop on the incline which still had Moon's name on it.

I felt disorientated for a moment. It was decades since I first set eyes on his shop - and on the man himself with his penchant for fitness pursued out-of-doors. He was known for his daily swim at Saunton, the ritual of making for the coast and for bounding across the beach from his wooden hut, his compact figure as familiar as the configuration of rocks at Down End. His regular dip was kept up through summer and winter, and seemed the product of a private commitment that fulfilled his desire for regular exercise and a deep feeling for this home coast. Someone in the car said that Moon still went on occasional trips to Saunton and the sea. If so, his form of dedication had taken on an awesome quality.

Flurries of rain and wind swept in, October was more like December. We made for the dark of the Saunton road. Ordinarily I doubt if any of us would have chosen this late time to come back here; but a feeling of satisfaction came to me - the awareness of the elements chimed in with the bias of my allegience to this coast, a consciousness of natural forces nakedly exerting their power and influence. It was a bias that I read into HW's literary interpretation of it; sometimes it was especially underlined as in an earlier work like *The Pathway*. As late as 1943, HW was underlining how the elements were significant in true art, and in his introductory chapter in *Norfolk Life* he wrote of his relief on seeing the work of Lilias Rider Haggard, a writer who did not ride away from "the mysteries" - from seeking their interpretation in "words that are the gift of the elements alone". One of his own examples was a semi-mystical passage in *The Pathway* when Willie Maddison was unexpectedly glimpsed by Mary as he was hurrying by in a rainstorm on the Burrows, hovering, as it were, on the edge of daytime reality and the elemental mystery of a storm:

> *... Incessant flashes lit the garden; she could see through the open door the red flowers of the sweet williams in the bed at the edge of the lawn, and the glittering slant of rain. The veins zig-zagged in the sky amidst a lilac haze while the trees stood out of the night as though turned to stone by the thunder. She heard singing; and then in a great flash and its crackle and instant shock she saw him crossing the lawn; he glimmered as though phosphorescent, strangely fish-like, and the rain dissolved sight of him.*

In our bowling along the Saunton road and passing lines of bungalows that were mercifully hidden in darkness, I heard someone make reference to a *Chronicle* novel. In my mind I went over the mixed attitude I had over the novels, the major achievement of HW's career. It had not been easy to untangle conflicting impressions of them among the readers affected by the Second World War, nor to come to them clear-sighted amid the pressures of post-war changes in customs and attitudes, like the revolution in the status of women, or the breakthrough in communications technology: and a myriad other aspects that had changed our way of life - all that led to war consigned to a melting pot with ingrained attitudes openly questioned by the young especially.

It seemed worth reminding oneself of this confused, evolving climate in thinking of the novels, with HW's literary power concentrated on a past beset by influences of very different hues to our nuclear ones. His literary

embrace of multitudinous elements in that mass culture, bringing to light an intricate panorama of War and Peace was on a scale to make you gasp. It was a measure of his extraordinary qualities that he struggled and persevered and created with total dedication to his artistic vision. The body of work may justly invite controversy and endless discussion, but belongs to the major category of modern fiction.

Some have felt the *Chronicle* books need to be viewed as a whole, and I came on some observations of Stephen Spender's in *The Thirties and After* that seemed to bear on the overall concept. Spender thought the early poems of T.S. Eliot showed this artist as too sophisticated to be a Ruskin, a Pater, or a Wilde, but they did show this deep nostalgia for a past - almost any past - to which "men hold by their visions". He suggested as well that at the centre of Eliot's work was an explanation of the truth that in our time there cannot be "a synthesis between the modern city of the industrial world - bound entirely by the temporal and gambling at every moment with destruction - and the eternal city with aims of civilization outside the temporal. And, therefore, true art has to be, for us, fragmented art".

This was paddling into deeper water and my interest was mainly that HW's Chronicle pointed to a literary goal that reached beyond "fragmented art". Undoubtedly by bringing in the involvement of the elements, the natural world, into the earlier work, HW moved it towards the broader unity he sought. The shift into the influence of a time-scale in the *Chronicle* had the benefit, in spite of much diffusion, of suggesting an overall cycle of unfolding reality, but of course this musing on it in brief, transitory ways was self-evidently inadequate. Though as a reader whose background did reach back into the period of its later books the matter of the main stumbling-block ought to be mentioned.

Inevitably it had to do with the emphasis on politics, a subject that oughtn't to loom so large that it can affect the appreciation of a literary work, but the question allowed of no easy resolution in that it was brought forward as a philosophical base that did in the end suffuse the whole.

Instinctive feeling and the even play of intelligence, a closeness to fact that can move into imaginative freedom, gave the *Chronicle* the low-key feel of realism. The Edwardian setting so intuitively grasped, the uneasy shadows and then the unrelieved darkness of the First World War that broke a generation - a long-standing reader could feel a pleasurable anticipation that the 20s and 30s were being approached in this way. No easy compromises made, a self-lacerating honesty kept to, as Philip sought his pathway through an increasingly tormented landscape. But what occurred led to the complete severing of old ties, to Phillip's or HW's bitter alienation in a society he had served with such unceasing dedication as soldier and writer. *Goodbye West Country* left its threads in the air - I rued the amount of fine writing talent lavished on its bitsy composition, for some passages were wonderfully brought off and showed HW at his best; but all was harnessed to the diminuendo of plan "goodbye".

In trying to form a view of the whole *Chronicle*, I used to think the books on the First World War constituted the apex of the whole and a falling away then ensued. I came to revise that estimation; certainly in literary standard his writing had notable consistency and accomplishment in the later books, and I realised that like *The Dream of Fair Women* in which there is an apparent slackening of momentum in places, a different reading appraisal can unearth new rewards, (as it can with D.H. Lawrence), like having greater empathy with a writer's mood in its waywardness and his atmospheric "feel" for a place and period. Thus a static time in inter-war years had its own light-and-shade

of dramas, of introspective questions put with no answers given, as in a book like *It was the Nightingale*. One passage particularly caught my eye in that book, putting Phillip's inner division amidst the penetrating reflections:

> *As he passed by Stonehenge in the moonlight he told himself that he must always avoid what Conrad had called 'the terrible tyranny of a fixed idea.' Was there a way to free human beings, including himself, from personal constriction: so that the true self would shine before all men, arising above the obscurity of the petty self? Could this come only through social revolution, as Willie had declared? Or was it a personal matter of self-discipline and self-training as Jesus had indicated?*

You could fairly say that the contradictions and complexities of living were being held in precarious balance, the web of possibilities unveiled in Phillip's sympathetic anguish in being conscious of dramatic forces clashing with the traditional values and beliefs that were followed with complacency. In the succeeding books, when the more fixed idea and the social revolution were resorted to with willed determination, readers who cleaved to his earlier more open and more catholic direction of writing were now caught up in a growing dilemma. Much as the writing exerted its quiet appeal of polished excellence - and the sinewy, racked prose in the *Chronicle's A Solitary War*(1), say, carried an extra charge from the constant tension between Phillip and the world about him - the political tone had the willed quality that coursed through the snovels to the end like a river overflowing its banks. I recalled a TV interview between HW and Kenneth Allsop in 1968 when the issue was not sidetracked but brought out plainly by Allsop - "The central contradiction in you, or so it appears to many of your friends and admirers, is your Fascism..."(2)

In the context of the period, when relentless interviewing of well-known figures was in fashion on TV, the HW broadcast did not seem unduly rigorous. I recall my own impression of it as not particularly advancing or retarding HW's cause. And that Allsop, who was a keen admirer of HW's writing as many of us were in the category of readers emerging from World War II, was raising an issue that cast a perplexing shadow over our appreciation. As I remember, the two men were seen to be clutching hands at the programme's end, as of old friends who had met and not flinched over a set ordeal, both preserving their honesty and their warm, compassionate feeling for each other.

As I imply, it was not easy to come to a confident assessment of the creative achievement of the *Chronicle*. Possibly, with the lapse of time, a more objective judgement would take hold. A personal incident came to mind, one that concerned a journey I made to attend the Wagner Festival at Bayreuth in the 60s. I was standing on the platform of Munich railway station, one among a British party waiting to catch a local train to Bayreuth. I noticed on a destination board, which like the rest was brightly painted in blue and white, a name of notoriety. "How the name Dachau strikes a chill in the heart", I said.

A young girl in the party, ginger-haired and a music teacher I believe, came to me and said amiably if quietly and brutally - "I suppose we are going to have to wait for your generation to die out before there is a chance of returning to a Europe that is itself again and comes into its great culture with all that this can mean."

I offered no answer, realising the simple sincerity in her approach. Perhaps I was also thought to be making oblique reference to the sensitive matter of the composer in whose name the trip was being made, as being

associated with the Nazis. Modern interpreters of Wagner's work have shown the way the music-dramas were used in selective fashion for political ends, and that other aspects were left out.(3) The case of Wagner's "Parsifal" was an interesting example, a sublime religious consecration on the stage to which some occasional references appear in HW's books:

> *Then the music of the Flower garden in the Pasifal took him away to a world of dream in which beauty, nobility, loyalty and truth were one. He lay back in his chair, feeling that one day this truth would be paramount in the world. (A Solitary War)*

The passive hero and the redemption theme did not connect with the hothouse of Thirties' politics, and performances of the work were banned in Germany in the last war. Not least remarkable, when you attended a performance now, was the parallel with modern concerns such as that of wild-life conservation. When the unaware Parsifal shot a swan early in Act 1 and was roundly admonishd by Gurnemanz for his desecration of Nature, the careless destruction seems to foreshadow (from the standpoint of 1882) the urgency and importance that combatting it had assumed in our threatened world.

Of course the political aspect has tended to retard the true recognition of HW's full artistic standing. The passage of time confirms how the *Chronicle* style enlivened with contrasts of scene and close-to-ordinary-life treatment conforms to a fashionable technique in modern fictionalising. There needs to be an appraising eye bestowed on this literary art to help put the politics in the clearer proportion that a modern approach demands. Spender in *The Thirties and After* had some pertinent points to make over a political colouring mixing with the art of Yeats.

> *... it is not simple, for a writer of genius writes out of his unique vision of life, and not to demonstrate shared attitudes. Orwell appears to think that Yeat's symbolism, mythology, imagery - his poetry, in a word - are projections on to the plane of the imagination of his political and religious beliefs. It is really the other way round. Yeat's religion and politics are attempts to relate his intuitive poetic vision to beliefs and political action. Yeat's fascism, not his poetry, was an excrescence. It grew rather approximately and grossly from the centre of his poetic imagination which was neither approximate nor gross ...*

A similar approach might clarify and work towards a truer appreciation of HW's artistic imagination.(4)

We had nearly reached the coast and were driving up through Saunton and past the large hotel that was a dominant landmark as long as I could remember. Shortly before it, we must have passed "Saunton Cleave" in the darkness, the house where the talented Cardew family lived until it was sold in 1936. A friend previously referred to, Judy Fowler, spent her holidays there, and remembered how her mother, Penelope, who was one of the family, deeply venerated the Burrows as beyond question the loveliest stretch she knew, a place that she roamed in from her childhood days. One of Alexandra Cardew's watercolours, in the set depicting the coast, featured "Saunton Cleave" as a lone red-roofed house that looked out on the Burrows and the loneliness of sands; and as the painting was done around 1898, you wonder how long the Cardew home was the sole building on the Saunton edge of the Burrows, as the watercolour seemed to show.

Judy's mother had a set of Williamson's books and wholly revelled in their beauty of language and truth of description. One of the Cardews had been famous as a potter, and another was well-known in show business, and most interesting was to learn how the family expressed their cultural interests and abilities, for apart from Alexandra's paintings, each played an instrument and delighted in performing as a quartet, with the house echoing to the music of Bach, Haydn, Beethoven and Brahms - perhaps being played against the distant surf-roar in summer when the windows were open. Ballad singing added to these evenings, which were redolent of the cultural style of the time.

I think this atmosphere of artistry, of a talented family living in a lone house beside the Burrows, may have been an influence in HW's conception of the Ogilvie family in *The Pathway*. There was no merit in pushing the parallel too far since the fictional home of "Wildernesse" seemed to lie near to the White House (located at the other end of the Burrows), but the background culture of *The Pathway*, of a story-association with the Cardew's setting, did suggest that "Saunton Cleave" was known to HW when the book was conceived.

We moved smoothly out of Saunton and up the hill. The darkness had a lighter pearly tone over the ocean. A favourite stopping-point lay along this headland road; from it you gazed on the serried lines of rollers and had a new angle on the coast's appeal. Not that a darker side was not likely to occur to you: there was my memory of a girl looking fixedly out to sea here (in 1950), oblivious of time and cold, staring at the spot where a jet-fighter flown by her boy-friend had swooped low and dived into the sea there. No trace of him was ever found, or was likely to be.

Finally the descent into Croyde Bay with dark blurs standing for the sands and for Baggy Point with all its memories. Where would we put up? It turned out to be in Croyde village, a pleasant bed and breakfast place. We settled in and rested from the long drive. I had a strange feeling of needing to return to Braunton that night, being reminded in all the years I'd spent on the coast that Croyde always had a touch of foreigness, just as Braunton had to the people in Ham. I wandered up the street for a breath of rain-soaked air, dawdling at the bridge and remembering how a small band of locals used to stand on it in distant summer days. The stream was visible by the road, its waters swollen from the rain; the rock walls were correctly preserved, but they had a polished look under the street lights like a reconstructed relic in olde worlde engineering.

Bewildering the next day to visit former villagers, to meet with acquaintances who might gaze warily at you at times, unsure of the direction of your interest. Why were you down here now? Ah yes, Williamson - you've come here on account of this group that they've got together. Well, I suppose there's no harm in it. And in the evening you moved up the high-hedged road to Georgeham, an approach still resolutely narrow and not concerned with more impatient motorists; and coming to the Institute which had a confused jam of cars outside it and the sight of the crowdedness bringing a few doubts. Inside a surprising number of people - surprising only in that you had never seen so many readers of HW together - and lines of chairs and a long table at one side with a glistening spread of white cloths. The tables played on my Georgeham memory, of coming here when these tables were part of a village bazaar, the air aswirl with fruity Devon voices. We were back in the old setting, the velvety night air, the remembered cluster of cottages whose lights glowed about us, but sensing an indefinable strangeness in the 80's atmosphere.

Time to make a start. To sit in obedient rows and a church-like hush. "Good evening" - the chairman excellent, and intent on avoiding the stiffness of over formality. But could it be avoided given the nature of the occasion? How did memories of Williamson - haunting and provoking, someone so un-formal in his darting, unpredictable, irreverent, highly reverent, fun-loving and totally artistic way, the fused complexity of the man and his writing - fit into this? How far were we finding our old sense of belonging coming back? Questions put - and the answers struggled with!

Time to reflect, during the course of that evening, on the experience of meeting HW at Ox's Cross. I ran over it in my mind, recalling the uncertainty that had preceded it. Generally one of the unwritten rules among us readers on the coast was a resistance to bothering him in the slightest way. We might meet him at some function (or usually be told the impressions of those who did), but forbore pushing in as others did - and did mostly from outside in what we saw as excessive numbers. I suppose my acceptance of this was changed when I knew that very soon (in '50) I would be leaving the coast permanently, and thus would lose all chance of a meeting. I consulted David Stokes in Georgeham, and mentioned how it mightn't be taken amiss if we paused in walking past Ox's Cross and perhaps exchanged a few words with HW - he might be cutting the hedge or such-like. David responded with more direct intention. "If you would like to go up the Hill and wish to meet him, let us go then. Shall we say next Wednesday afternoon?"

It all sounded so simple, and as the afternoon came around, I joined with David as we strolled up the hill with studied casualness. Suddenly the incline felt higher than it normally did. We reached the gate at Ox's Cross and David said with affectionate cheerfulness, "You cannot know what mood Henry may be in. He may try and shoo us off with a shotgun". We entered the small clearing where the caravans were standing at one side, with the writing-hut withdrawn too into the background of trees and shrubs. I had travelled by this plot many times: to be inside it was to see how finely proportioned it was. This was exactly where a writer who so evocatively conveyed the natural world, belonged. No sign of anyone being there. Perhaps we should return to the gate and depart, and the thought struck me almost with relief.

Of course I had not made allowance for the basic requirement of a prolific author - the need for silence. He would be at his busiest in this silence. The silence was of a living, breathing kind, a wind rustling through the beech-trees with the cries of birds echoing along it. In the distance a dog barked. Suddenly a caravan-door opened; I recognised the slender figure of Christine as she stepped out. I had met her before when she called at one of the pubs in Georgeham. Now she came over and we chatted like old friends. Yes - we learnt that Henry was there working in the writing hut; Christine said she wouldn't break in on him straightaway, to which we agreed very readily. Perhaps we would not be able to meet him but would enjoy having a talk with her.

We stood talking in the clearing. I pictured Henry working in the hut, sitting straight-backed and committed ... a bare table ... and his scribbling, scribbling. All of Ox's Cross's simplicity seemed charged and it fed into my imagination and the details have stayed vivid. The talk progressed to a discussion of Henry's work and I mentioned the extent to which his earlier books like *The Linhay on the Downs* and *The Flax of Dream* stood high in the estimation of some of us on the coast. From Christine I gained an idea of the new direction that was being pursued. HW's immense labours in the former mode had been taken to the limits of possibility; he had explored every corner in rendering impressions and fictions of this country whose villages and

fields and sea and beaches were 'home'. He had driven himself into producing his conception of its realism seen in factual closeups and against Atlantic horizons of dreams and vision, and had reached the stage of being "written out" in this way.

The assertion had been made long before, (e.g. in *The Linhay on the Downs*), and it had led to a marked change of course, in the switch to the more physical challenge, farming and writing in Norfolk. So would this return to Devon also result in a different direction in the writing? I had heard reports of his experimenting with the traditional novel-form with its spacious unravelling of character and incident. But before we went further into speculation, Christine thought she should go in the hut and see Henry, and enquire whether a meeting between us was on. We watched her go inside, and were quite prepared for a disappointment.

But fortune was with us: she came out saying that Henry would join us soon: he had almost finished what he was doing. And soon he stepped out and I was struck by his modest manner in greeting us with warm friendliness and giving an impression of mental vigour and alertness. In spite of all the buffeting he received in the crisis years in Norfolk I had a sense of a renewed purposefulness, that he was back in harness with his Muse. He was soon exchanging anecdotes and recollections on the past Georgeham that David and he had known, the sharing in a feeling of community that established villagers carried with them as they did the imagery of cob cottages and the two homely pubs. Henry's dedication to it was manifest in his writing, with the warmth and affection often showing in a mere passing allusion, as here in making a return after a long time away -

> *'Beg pardon, zur, but mis'er zays would 'ee care vor a cup of tay?'*
>
> *'Dear Walter Chang!'*
>
> *'After tea of toast and eggs in the kitchen with familiar and friendly faces, he felt new life and hope coming upon him. He would clean the cottage on the morrow, and then go to see the baby. Now he must go down to the sands and dedicate himself anew to the elements he had nearly forgotten...'*

Later, away from the bright appeal of the earlier times, Henry as seen in the eyes of many villagers might emerge in a contradictory and ambiguous light; but there was the vast undertow of his loyalty that he built up through all the years he spent among them. His portrait of a neighbour could pass through various stages, and not omitting the engaging humorousness, but it could sound the deeper chord in the ultimate, a villager's indomitable spirit expressed simply and in heartfelt terms of remembrance -

> *'I left the village after ten years, and when I went back, I felt myself to be half a stranger. Where one summer visitor used to walk along the lanes, now there were a hundred; and nine hundred more were passing through on wheels. I was not sure of myself when I saw Ernie, Babe, Tikey, and the others, standing by the ditched wall at the top of Church Street, after their day's work. The Ernie I knew was no longer a little boy, playing with the water, and the Tikey I used to see fitted into a rubber motor tyre, bounding and wobbling down the street into the stream, was a pert youth ...*
>
> *Old Revvy was still about. He had moved to another cottage, drier, lighter, with more room in it. One day I went to see him,*

hearing he was ill, and there he was, lying on the bed, unable to move, unable to speak, perhaps unable to hear. Revvy had had a stroke; it was his turn to die. I did not know what to say. The stones of every cottage wall cry out their history, of the hands that shaped and placed them, of the lives they sheltered: the very stones cry out in the silence of the heart.' (6)

Henry suggested that we move to their caravan. We entered one that had more room than I thought, sitting and spreading ourselves, with Henry settling at one end with a file of papers before him. This was a golden opportunity to bring up anything on his work, on his literary aim in trying for such fluent smoothness in portraying people and places, on the marked importance he put on realism in the creation of fictional backgrounds ... But an enquiry into finer points of his artistry could feel near to pedantry when you were in his presence, to belong to the schoolroom and the salon mentality. The very naturalism and simplicity of Ox's Cross was like a permanent outpost that used Nature as its defence against the less-rooted literary forces of a metropolitan culture. So the talk flowed on as the mood dictated, and the phrase about being "written out" lingered in my thoughts and made me wonder if Henry had ever spent some weeks on Lundy Island where the Devon coast was replicated in the spectacle of its gaunt cliffs echoing to the cries of puffins and guillemots and the bark of seals. I had just returned from a stay there, joining in the activities of a local field society, and I described to Henry their work in ringing the seabirds for observation, and their keeping copious records. I imagined his masterly interpretation of the Atlantic remoteness governing the island's human and non-human life. There was the rising before dawn and walking down to one of the few beaches to swim and find the sunrise brightening the Atlantic before you, then at day's end being on the island's other side and observing the sunset in the more familiar setting of the western ocean ... all of which had its interest all right, but as we continued the conversation, the conviction grew that although we veered widely and at one point discussed the American scene and pondered on the appeal of Hemingway with his stripped-down writing style, and of Faulkner's characters being moulded and governed by their pasts - the whole current of Henry's creative interest was centered on the manuscript that lay before him. Henry referred to this tantalizing manuscript at last; he asked if we would like it read out - it was the work he had just been engaged on. We were naturally keen to be his privileged listeners.

It is at this point that the initiated are liable to smile knowingly and see it as an example of Henry having found his audience again, those who might oblige him as listeners and be treated as a sounding-board for his getting an objective perspective on the material. Which may have had a kernel of truth in it but did not affect my sense of being privileged to hear him read from his latest manuscript. For what other distinguished author would provide a reader who'd just called round with the latest from his pen? Most authors in my experience preferred to keep their current manuscript firmly under wraps. Henry's openness was welcome and refreshing, treating you as someone who was invited to share in his creative process. And I knew that the reading would point to his new departure in fiction, perhaps reveal the creative challenge he was facing.

One pointer to it was mentioned by David long after we made this visit, and it had to do with Henry calling once or twice on David's mother at Ingleton Farm cottage in Higher Ham, enquiring about the domestic life in her childhood days and seeking for authentic detail in framing the material for the early Chronicle series, intent on securing the right intuitive feel of a period. Mrs. Caroline Stokes, as one of a large family in a vicarage, had corrected Henry's assumptions that life tended to be dull and strict and restrictive in

that peternalistic milieu, contending that it was full of fun and laughter, and she remembered the oceans of freedom felt by a child (the roads having little traffic and their surfaces making memorable playgrounds).

Henry's reading began with a passage that was not quite the same as the following extract, but the change in style with its wash of details of a long-ago London gives an approximate idea of the mode we heard. He spoke quietly and casually, but with all the fascination of his total commitment as I had heard it in the lecturing and on TV and in radio talks -

> *Richard went on down the road. Movement over the snow lying upon street and side-walk was silent save for the cautious muffled footfalls and the soft slur of the sled runners. No one was about in the high road where the elms held up black leafless branches amont the stars. He looked for Orion, but the lower southern hemisphere was dimnmed by frozen mist and smoke. He turned into Charlotte Road - houses built in the reign of George the Fourth, intermediate in size between those of Comfort and Twistleton Roads - and quickened his pace as he heard the distant cries coming from the slopes of the Hill in the distance. Wonderful the white silence, the winking lines of street lamps, the stars overhead! He trudged on expectantly ... (7)*

When Henry had begun reading, David had leaned back in his chair, thrust his legs out, and had his eyes closed. The effect was rather disconcerting, since it gave the impression of slumber. He might adopt this position when in an audience, saying he could sometimes concentrate better this way. I wondered if it might affect Henry's concentration, but he read on unperturbed. Perhaps a villager could claim special dispensation!

I sought to gain more appreciation of Henry's artistic thrust by noting not only the form of words but the way they were read out. A smooth, sensuous effect was emphasized by his even moderation of voice and manner, but more was suggested by the surface sheen, for it was like a stream whose reflections might be transparent enough to allow glimpses of the resonances beneath, the pedal-notes of vision and intuition. Within it the characters were conceived as figures in a landscape, or against a large time-span as they were here, the scenes and dialogue patterned in a vast design ... which was why his reading seemed moulded for longish sequences, with sentences that unfolded in the ambit of Nature's natural growth, and less an artificial effect of imposed narrative. The natural above all in clarity of expression? To turn to another and later quote where his voice drew you gently into the scene, the low-key pace going with the unexaggerated texture of truth to the subject -

> *As the cold weather continued many water-pipes froze in the houses of Comfort Road, but the warm air arising from the dark lantern placed at night on the kitchen floor, directly under the iron piping, kept the water flowing in Comfort House. One by one the neighbours came with pails in the mornings, and to them all Hetty gave a smile and said that of course they were no trouble. She was glad to be of help to them, and everyone was so nice, she thought. First old Mr. Pooley came from the little cot built on to the house opposite, then someone seven doors away, until in the third week of February nine houses were being supplied. Hetty did not tell Richard of this, as she thought it might worry him on her behalf; and the callers understood, and made their last visits of the week with their pails on the Saturday morning, saying that they "would not disturb the master" on Sunday." (8)*

When he reached the end of the Mss., Henry murmured briefly to himself and I interpreted the moment as his acceptance that the particular essence of what he sought was there, the cumulative effect in unforced words, the moment quite private to himself. And with nice timing came the sounds of the family outside, the caravan door opened and a childish arm was pointing between us, Henry relaxed, his face lit up in smiles as he leant forward to hold the small hand. Art had moved into the background as family life took over, the one complementing the other as is so often implicit in his pages. Such was my impression of Ox's Cross; and while it may sound a little rosy and indeed quite benign, maybe this was due to the effect the reading had had, or maybe it was just as it often and ordinarily was on the creative days there.

We strolled down the hill observing the quiet cluster of village homes, feeling a quickened appreciation of the wealth of inspiration and belonging that Henry must have felt when he travelled this way, with the road dropping down to Higher Ham. There was the gaunt beauty of the church beyond, and the two cottages near it where he had lived earlier, applying his rare gifts to becoming a writer of the most demanding kind - of his never sparing himself in seeking the perfectionist goal of pure literary expression. (9)

NOTES -

1. Readers who first grew interested in HW through reading a late Chronicle novel like *A Solitary War* would certainly have found his writing strongly motivated, and it touching a modern nerve in the anguish of alienation and a personal crisis that reflected the outer one. The singularity of political feeling has a distinctive strand that I view as an indigestible element in the process of appreciating the powerful literary quality.

2. A transcript of the interview appeared in the Society's Journal No.9. Allsop raised the political matter in the context of a host of other matters. Contrast this with the notorious film on BBC TV (March 6th, 1983) in which the political element was trumpeted to a paranoid extent. The fall-out from the damage it inflicted is still in evidence (e.g. even four-line Press notices on HW books usually include a political label). I was disturbed by the innuendo on film that members of the Society had the same right-wing attitudes. As for the presentation of the North Devon coast (crucial to portraying HW's work), pure farce took over. The camera zoomed feverishly over old haunts so that nothing could be deduced and HW's words were made to sound disconnected and null.

3. Interesting how the adverse political side with Wagner receives the perspective that is withheld in HW's case. Political association is treated as a historical event on the way to directing full attention on the artworks and their composition. When Humphrey Burton presented Wagner's complete 'Ring' cycle on BBC TV, he included footage of the Thirties' political scenes (Hitler visiting Bayreuth, etc), but as an incidental, a footnote.

4. Critical writing on HW's art? I am an avid reader of it, but seldom come upon the kind of sustenance that is enlightening for myself. It is difficult to reflect the nuances and fulfilments obtained from HW's pages. David Hoyles' lecture on "The Golden Virgin" stood out (for me) like a clarion call that was the Aroduct of challenging research and depth of insight.

5. From the Chronicle's *It was the Nightingale*.

6. From the last paragraphs of *My Neighbour 'Revvy'*, as featured in *Life in a Devon Village*.

7. From the Chronicle's *The Dark Lantern*. The passages HW read to us were definitely of early London scenes, and I merely seek to convey my impressions of the marked difference in his writing - of it taking in the urban experiences in relation to his source-inspiration of the Devon coast and country. He set aside the Two Rivers region in the Chronicle writing, doubtless wishing for diffused effects (and less traceable portraits) by rendering the coast as in South Devon. Some loss of intensity and identity may be felt by those coming to the Chronicle by way of the swirling eloquences of earlier Devon writing.

8. More from *The Dark Lantern*.

9. In reflecting that the beauty and power of HW's writing had a dominant part in my reading enjoyment, it was specially interesting to attend this year's Eva Turner lecture (given by Bryan Magee at the Wagner Society) and find such illuminating attention given to the beauty and power of Wagner's music. Magee included a spot of personal background in his account, setting out the circumstances of his awakening to the music, how as a child he had slept in a music-room at home and regularly listened to Wagner records played by his father in the evening, so the music sounding supremely wonderful in his childish experience came to him always out of total darkness - making its total appeal in the purity of sound alone. He went on to mention his inter-war visits to the Proms and his being 'sent' by Eva Turner's singing in Gotterdammerung and the way that the music has remained vital and totally pre-eminent with him. Yet Wagner, who published so much on other matters, had little to say about the process of his musical creation, and this may have owed something to the part intuitive factors played in its final form. Magee wrote his book on the composer *Aspects of Wagner* and it has become highly thought of in the category of shorter studies, and he is a keen observer of the modern Wagner scene - noting the attention given to ancillery issues that might be of biographical or philosophical kinds, or take in issues like Wagnerian connections with Christianity or Socialism or with a political movement like that of the Nazis (a leading debate in contemporary Germany is over the question of Wagner's alleged anti-semitism). There are new scholarly developments there in some improved ways of Wagner score-analysis, but little of major significance to illuminate the music in its own right.

By general consent the lecture was immensely powerful and effective. Whether you could draw feasible parallels with the approaches to HW's intuitive artistry was another matter, but I did sense some similarities in my thinking of his literary power (even if the historical circumstances were so different); that the process of HW's creativity was left in the shadows with the ongoing debate on a great deal else. And in the shadows the resonances and irrationalities that are present like pure music, as they mingle and glow under the realistic surface of the prose.