LIFE WITH FATHER

Robert Williamson

I would like, in this short talk, to try to paint a picture of our growing up with Henry. It was a time of great change, both in the family and in the world. New responsibilities, new ideas, new pressures, new needs, all worked on Henry, and through him, on us. When one considers the work load that he imposed upon himself, it is little wonder that he expended so much nervous energy in trying to overcome the frustration he felt, when things did not go as he had imagined they could.

This was never more evident than while he worked the farm, the time that was the "very seedbed of my life" as Richard so elegantly expressed it in his essay on Chichester Harbour. There were many times when Henry would seek out one or other of us for special treats, and other times when we would come together fortuitously, or otherwise.

But to try to understand why he did what he did, it is necessary to look back at the very beginning, of Henry the family man. That he was a complex man has never been in dispute, and with such complexity, it comes as no surprise to accept the empathy that he always had with young children. This empathy is expressed most markedly in the early chapters of the *Beautiful Years*, and *Donkey Boy*, while later, in *Dandelion Days* and *Young Phillip* we feel the stress and tension that Henry felt in his own growing up. Finally, in the later novels of the *Chronicle* he achieves a much more balanced and sympathetic view of the growing children and their parent.

I would not, could not, attempt an analysis of Henry's ideas on child-raising and the education of the young. I am too much involved in his mental processes to be sufficiently objective on the matter. I believe him to have been an honest man, and to have honestly recorded his feelings and ideas as a young father when he wrote *The Children of Shallowford*. The descriptions of early family life are recorded with the same meticulous detail as when observing the birth of a mayfly, or the movement of fast water. Also recorded are his doubts on his ability as a parent. This passage from the first chapter of *The Children of Shallowford* is, I feel, most enlightening:-

> *Often I felt a sense of my own failure when I came upon mother and child, in the little downstairs nursery, hardly more than six feet square, with its cast-iron grate scarcely larger than a scallop shell. What have I done, I said to myself, to interrupt that gentle life, and bring her here to a new environment of ideas, with almost perpetual girding against the present human world. And that poor little boy, can I look after him, that tottering thing with curly hair over his eyes who now carries cake on a plate, cup and saucer, or jug, to the pantry or kitchen, helping his mother, the two of them in this small dark house under a hill, with its down-draught chimneys. And if he models himself on me - there he is copying me by cleaning his teeth, copying me by using brush and comb, copying me by walking with his own stick in the lane - and sometimes trying to shave his four front teeth with my safety razor. He was just three feet high, as measured against the door.*
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> *Children of Shallowford* 1978 Edn, p17.

Although the family increased in number - Henry's ideas remained steadfast, and as Windles approaches scholarship time, Henry reflects on education, again an honest appraisal of theory and reality:-

> *The problems of writing were hard enough ... but I was thinking selfishly, I was a father of four male children, who would sooner or later become four adolescents to be settled in life. Vaguely I had thought, or put off the thought, of their education. Some time in the past their names had been put down for a West Country school, although I had doubted if there would be enough money to pay the fees when the time came. If not (my idle fancy had run) they would remain at the village school, learn to read and write, and receive their education from me. The basis of this education was to have been work in the open air. If at the age of eighteen they were deficient in self-confidence, poise, good manners, graciousness, strong bodies, natural ease in all contacts with their fellow men, determination, punctuality, and ability to act efficiently and reliably in whatsoever kind of work each young man wanted to do - well, the fault would be entirely mine. All young creatures, whether men or animals, learned by imitation. Speech, accent, the way to behave towards others, the formula or technique of doing a job of work economically - that is, to do it artistically, with pleasure - all would be imitated from me, the father, and those working with me.*
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> *All would be imitated from me.*
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> *And what a model! What had they learned from me? A number of oaths, as inoculation against swearing in later life; to shout at their mother and other women in the house; unpunctuality at meals; the life of Cold Pudding; to trespass on the viaduct of the Great Western Railway in order to launch paper sailplanes from that dizzy place; to tell the truth and not to be afraid of grown-up people.*
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> *Children of Shallowford* 1978 Edn, p176

Throughout his life Henry wished, above all, to be in friendship with his children. We did not then look upon him as an important writer - he was Dad or Father, a figure of whom to be wary, as we grew up, and in his eyes, were capable of greater responsibility. On the Norfolk Farm we each had jobs, to give us, he believed a "stake in the farm".

Although life for him seemed always to be one crisis after another, there were moments when we as children, either individually or collectively, and he as parent, entered the same world. These were precious moments and in retrospect are seen with a kind of wonder.

One winter, there was much snow. Anything that could be used as a sledge was used by the village children on the slopes around Stiffkey. The children from the Rectory had a "St. Moritz" style sledge - much admired, and an invitation to use it, one "go" in twenty, was almost to be fought over. We had no sledge, and so Henry set to to make one for us. What would it be like, could he do it? Would it be any good? We stood silently as timber was selected, shapes cut, style discussed, yes discussed, two seater or three - three would be heavier to pull up the slopes, so a two and a half-seater was finally made. We longed for it to be finished, but daren't ask when - steel runners were fitted, holes bored for the pulling rope - we suggested a large nail to be hammered into the back to pull *another* sledge, but no, said Henry with a smile, that could be very dangerous for growing boys - we looked at each other and giggled. The job took a Saturday morning and half the

afternoon to complete, and from the first was a great success. We all had a go, even Henry, and then for the rest of that winter it came into the care of Richard and myself. It wasn't as fast or as elegant as the "St. Moritz" but it *was* robust, or as Henry might say, it didn't "bust". In fact it outlasted the St. Moritz, which collapsed one day, spilling four or five children down the slope with much shrieking and yelling. Our sledge finally fell to pieces years later, in the winter of 1950, I fancy.

One of the most evocative smells for me is woodsmoke. Woodsmoke means fires, and fires meant Henry as this next episode will show. There were occasions when Henry made an expedition for two. When in America, he had bought a 4 ft. steel trout rod. Sea trout had been observed on the seaward side of the larger sluices that drained the land behind the marshes. Now and then he would slip away from the cares of the farm and fish in this sluice. One evening he took me with him. There is not much for a small boy to do while father is fishing, but it was peaceful and warm, and I fell asleep. When Henry woke me it was twilight, and he had lit a small fire and was grilling two trout. We ate them straight from the spit, getting into a terrible mess with the fat. "Never mind" said Henry, as he wiped his fingers in my hair and I in his "waste not want not". I don't think mother felt quite the same about it as the very fishy smell came into the house that night.

Before we left the "camp site" Henry showed me how to kindle a fire in the open - paper was scorned - a pyramid of small twigs - dry grass in the centre - gently blowing, and if you were very lucky, or Henry, the twigs caught and the fire was made. I was very impressed by this, and longed to try it for myself. It was impressed on me how dangerous fire could be - "a good servant, but a bad master." We must never light fires near crops, woods or buildings. We must always think carefully about lighting them because of the danger to other people. We were not forbidden but had to be responsible. All this was duly noted, and I was desperate to try out my new-found skill. But where - where was safe - away from the woods, crops or buildings? This was in the time of war, and hanging in our school room were two or three sand buckets, to be used in case of incendiary bombs - sand was safe from fire because it was used to put out fires, therefore ... the sandpit!

This was situated son the top of Camping Hill, above the farm buildings. Pine trees grew there, and at one time Henry's old caravan had stood there. Here was the perfect place - plenty of shelter, plenty of wood! We had an enormous fire there, roaring and crackling safe from crops, buildings and woods, but - right in the middle of the best building sand for miles around - use of this sand would save time and money for all the building work needed on the farm - and here it was full of ash and charcoal - useless. He didn't rage, but just turned tiredly away - how many more straws of this kind were heaped thoughtlessly upon him by well-meaning people during his life-time.

There was one occasion when he *was* angry with me. I was very young, six or so, and, with Richard, was free to wander the farm from dawn to dusk. We knew hundreds of birds' nests "Always look with your eyes, boys, *never* your hands, for if you touch the nest the birds will desert, and the young die in the eggs." With solemn faces we swore we wouldn't hurt the nests and wouldn't show the village boys who we knew collected eggs and smashed nests. And then I found a new nest - a blackbird's nest, but it was high in the fork of a tree that was covered with a bramble bush - very hard to get to - but it was necessary to count the eggs to add to the records we were keeping. I could just see a way up to it, and as I struggled up, a slender branch broke - I grabbed at another, broke that, dislodged the nest and as I fell into the bramble bush, I was covered in scratches and broken blackbird eggs.

Somehow Henry found out; maybe he saw me, maybe I tried to explain what had happened, but the result was that I was to present myself in his house (we were living in a row of renovated cottages at the time, and Henry had his office/writing room at one end, while the rest of the family lived in the other three) at six o'clock, to be punished! (this was mid-morning). I cannot believe that Henry was being deliberately sadistic in keeping a small boy waiting all day for some unnamed ordeal. Certainly he was angry at such wanton destruction, but none of us have ever remembered him as deliberately cruel. However, the appointed hour came, and I knocked on his door. "Come in" said a terrible voice, so unlike the one he used to the youngest of us. A lecture followed and then "I am going to give you the cane, Robert, one stroke for each of the eggs you broke - bend over!" I did so in absolute terror, partly for the awful thing I had accidently done, but mostly because of Henry's anger. A stillness settled over the room - and eternity - and then one very light tap on my bottom from his walking stock - I collapsed in tears, which he let run on for a moment, and then I was being comforted with a piece of special barley sugar, and being told a story about a small boy who became the friend and protector of all birds nests. I avoided all nests from that time onwards, or like to think that I did - but each spring, when children at my school tell me of nests that they have found, I remind them, as Henry did us - "to look with your eyes, never your hands".

Those of you who have met Henry will remember how difficult he could be - but he could also be very compassionate. One summer, while staying at the Field, it was necessary for both John and I to keep an appointment with the family dentist in Barnstable. Henry starts and finishes a delightful story in that dentist's chair, that some of you may know, one of the *Tales of* or *Life in a Devon Village*, I fancy. However, John and I presented ourselves, preliminary surveys completed, the work then commenced. I had two sessions that afternoon, about three hours all told, and at the end, was physically and emotionally drained. It must be remembered that the drills in those days were "hot", and however slowly the drill went, the pain built up and up. By four o'clock, both the dentist and I had had enough, and feeling utterly wretched, I left to meet with Henry. I think I started to cry as I left the surgery, and however much I tried, just couldn't stop. As soon as Henry saw us he was full of concern and spoke very quietly and gently - "I know how you feel - it was just the same coming out of the trenches, we just couldn't take any more - imagine - grown men crying just like you, exhausted, just like you. We had hot, sweet tea, do you fancy some?" I nodded. "In here then - tea for three, please, and don't spare the sugar". He carried on talking in this vein until two or three cups had been drunk, and all was well again. "Now you boys stay on here, get the bus back, I've got to finish an article for Monday post - don't be too long", and he was gone. I believe that on that day I began to grow into a different relationship with Henry - no longer was he Dad - but someone to respect, and to a certain degree emulate.

Naturally many of the episodes of our growing-up were woven into the various books. There is a most moving passage in *The Phasian Bird*, where Wilbo and the young airman listen to Bach's Mass in B minor on the gramophone. The inspiration for this came from the performance given in the Chapel at Blundell's School, with both Richard and I in the choir. Henry sat at the back and covered his, and several other people's, programmes with notes. He was most moved by the music, and thanked us for our part in the performance.

I would like to finish by reading from *Lucifer before Sunrise*. Richard and I were cast as David and Jonathan, and in this section from 'Recession', three little episodes are used with such skill that they flow naturally together - indeed it is difficult for me to separate them. The backbone is the odd

friendship of the two cats - it happened exactly as written - into this comes Cheepy - again exactly as told, but in fact a year or so later - the "rough shaggy dog" was real, only it was Eric who saw him off, very violently. But see how skilfully and naturally they blend to make the whole:-

"It began one morning, while Lucy and David were looking for hens' nests, and David saw, at the edge of a nettlepatch near the farm buildings, a lone chick, not more than a day old. Whence it came, or how it got there, neither knew. Perhaps it was one of a brood hatched by a hen which had laid away from the premises, said Lucy, but the mystery was, where is the hen and the other chicks, if this was so? David suggested the hen had been taken by one of the soldiers in the searchlight camp. Anyway, the solitary chick, found shivering by the nettles, was picked up, carried home, and put in a basket with bits of flannel in the kitchen hot-cupboard. The children peeped at it, breathed tenderly upon it to warm it, and watched with delight as its eyes closed sleeping, and it uttered faint sounds of happiness. So it was called Cheepy.

After a couple of days Cheepy was running about the kitchen floor, and by the fourth day it had found its way into the parlour, where it used to sit on one or other of the small boys' laps. There were kittens on the floor, too, but Cheepy showed no fear, and why, indeed, should it, for they were all friends together. Even Eric the mother cat did not object when Cheepy perched on her head one day and went to sleep.

When Cheepy was ten days old, and its feathers were beginning to sprout from soft grey quills, five guinea-fowl eggs hatched in the incubator, and soon five small chicks like clustered bumblebees were in the hot-cupboard. They fed with Cheepy, and to Lucy's astonishment the chick was to be seen leading them on the garden bed by the patch outside the farmhouse door, and even scratching for them, and when they ran to her for shelter she dropped her minute wing-stubs and was immediately a little hen. Sheepy had adopted them.

She led them into the kitchen at evening time, and they all got into the basket. Down below, in the basement, so to speak, two other families lived, each occupying its own basket. In one were four kittens, sons and daughters of Torty the tortoise-shell cat; in the other, another quartet of kittens, belonging to Eric, a rough and brindled rat-eating creature that they had thought to be a tom, until one day Eric was seen to be in kit; and when the kittens arrived, Eric, who had been almost untouchable before - liable to bite if stroked anywhere below the pate - became soft, pliable, and acquiescent. Torty, as a tiny kitten, nearly drowned, had been rescued from the river by David, who had brought it home to his mother.

Every day Eric looked in at the other basket to see how Torty's little lot were getting on. Torty's litter was smaller than her own, having been born two weeks later. Once one of Eric's kittens was put in Torty's basket; after sniffing and hesitating, Eric lifted it back to its own basket.

The days went on, the chicks grew in size and speed, the kittens learned to climb out of their baskets and to explore the cupboard and the paved floor of the kitchen, while their mothers learned to appreciate the blessings of tranquillity a few yards away from their offspring, from the unscalable higher level of chair or window-sill. Cheepy used to wait for the children's return from the hayfield, to jump on heads as they sat taking off boots and pick seeds of clover and rye-grass out of their hair.

The back, blank flint wall of the farmhouse was against the narrow coastal road, and often within the room would resound the rolling trundle of steel tracks and the deeper hum of rubber tyres; a dangerous place that road outside, with its blind curve just below the farmhouse.

One afternoon Cheepy and her adopted family were dusting themselves in the path worn by many boots leaving the farmhouse door, where was fine dust, glinting in the sun. The tortoise-shell cat sat near, waiting for her especial friend, the boy who was her owner - ownership in this case meaning a lavishment of affection in terms of crooning talk and much smoothing of soft hair. Soon would be time of coming home from school, and the cat was usually there to greet her friend.

A rough old shaggy dog looked round the gateway in the wall by the wood-shed, stared at the chicks, and trotted forward to satisfy its curiosity. Dogs are always on the look-out for something interesting. Perhaps it found the sight of so small a hen, only partly covered with feathers, a matter for investigation, without the least intention of interfering, of course. Just a slight and momentary curiosity. But Torty thought he meant harm, for she ran forward and swore softly in the face of the inquisitive dog. With a stifled cry, more of injured innocence than pain, the shaggy dog turned tail and trotted away. Torty sat at the edge of the road, flicking her tail.

She watched Cheepy and her brood crossing the road, which lay narrowly between two flint walls, where the heavy rubber wheels and the steel tracks rolled. Suddenly round the curve appeared a great dark green object; there was a squeal of brakes, and heavy wheels slowing down, Torty running forward to the scattered chicks; and when the convoy had passed, on the way to Southern England and the invasion of Festung Europa, there she lay, with teeth showing, and glazed eyes, beside the feebly kicking Cheepy.

David was inconsolable. At the supper table he sat unmoving, with red eyes and pale face. Jonathan, more practical, buried Torty and Cheepy side by side in the garden, and set up a small cross of willow. Later he removed the willow, and planted two runner beans in its place.

Lucifer Before Sunrise, 1967; p.372

Eric or Litter by Litter as she soon became known, came with us when the farm was sold, and finally died as a very old cat, not quite quick enough to avoid a car on an icy road - and as Jonathan buried Torty, so Richard buried Eric and dug her up again to have the skeleton.

It has always felt odd for us to see our lives opened up to all who read Henry's books, but that is one of the penalties of Life with Father.