

Secretary's Notes

THE A.G.M. - with programme and buffet, will take place at the Putsborough Sands Hotel, on Saturday 10 October 1987.

In addition, to mark the DIAMOND JUBILEE of the publication of *Tarka the Otter* (12 October 1927) an extended weekend will be offered commencing with DINNER and SOCIAL (with optional video films) on THURSDAY 8 October. For FRIDAY 9th, an activity suitable for afternoon - this to allow those booking for DINNER/ACCOMMODATION that night, to take part. DINNER, as noted, followed by social and probable speaker. SATURDAY 10 October - possible EXCURSION - with stop for lunch. Return in time for A.G.M. etc. SUNDAY 11 October - morning; an appropriate activity.

Hotel A reasonable package deal option will be offered, especially to allow SATURDAY night participation for those unable to join the whole weekend. Probable 'PACKAGE' offers: Thurs.- Sat. accommodation, plus Thurs. Fri. dinner; Fri.- Sat. accommodation, plus Fri. dinner; Sat. night accommodation.

Dinner ONLY Thurs. - Fri. or Fri. ONLY, for non residents by
Advanced booking only.

Society Option

Sat. excursion plus Sat. buffet; OR Sat. buffet only.

Remember: This is NOT a fixed itinerary, but a guide only to what will surely be a most memorable weekend, and to allow you to start a "Tarka Bank" now!

Exhibition We hope to mount a small exhibition in the Hotel Foyer particularly devoted to 'Tarka' type items. If you have anything you would like to loan please contact me.

DEVON - OCTOBER 1986. ST. MARTIN SMILED AGAIN

It is said that even in an otherwise happy marriage there comes a time when the eye suddenly roves, there is a restless desire for change, and that this often happens at a certain time; it is the Seven Year Itch. As far as our Society is concerned this does not seem to have happened - other than a sad loss of a founder-leader. Indeed, perhaps after seven years the affair was re-affirmed as over seventy members, wives and friends, joined in their annual visit to Georgeham - a figure that would be considered quite outstanding in other societies of a similar membership.

The excellence of our speakers who have given us such a wide variety of papers, talks, presentations, reminiscence and readings has undoubtedly been a major attraction to the event. To be in the heart of "Williamson Country" which, despite the march of over seventy years progress since Henry first saw it, before the Great War, still retains a great deal of that which stole his heart long ago. To anticipate the meeting again with friends who were once just strangers and meet new ones, is another real pleasure. But seven years on, and unspoken though it may often be, it is the lasting feeling of affinity, admiration and often real affection that touches us in many and varied personal ways, that is the underlying bedrock on which our fidelity rests.

So too are we fortunate in the range and scope of his works which fall into three main genre, (with some overlapping); the Nature and Natural History writer, the Autobiographer (and here I mean works such as *Goodbye West Country*, *Norfolk Farm*, *A Clearwater Stream*) and The Novelist - the

latter also being autobiographical in varying degrees. Further, and this does not apply to too many writers, the books span over fifty years of the writers life, from young manhood to old age, and as they were written often contemporarily or nearly so with events they reflect truly the character and feeling of their period. The high ideals, the new approach, the ecstasy and pain of young love, through to the reflective; the dissection of character and events, the binding love grown over years, the sifting of wheat from chaff; the true loyalties. Thus, if we are fortunate enough to start with Williamson in our salad days we will recognise the authenticity and contemporaneity of his work, and continue so as the years advance. Williamson knew only too well the changes wrought by the years. In the 1960s, when being interviewed over the forthcoming publication of the *Collected Nature Stories* there was a genuine longing in his expressed wish that he could write then as he had almost forty years before.

You may see a major flaw here in relation to the *Chronicle* where the early books did not appear until fifty and more years after the events they contain had taken place. Truly much is imaginative re-creation and this may not be generally realised, before he finally set out on creating his magnum opus, he had accumulated an enormous amount of contemporary material often written in parallel with but not used in books then being published. This is now being demonstrated for the first time by Dr. Wheatley Blench in his appraisal of the earliest and unpublished novel material, dating back as far as 1917, and now in Exeter University Library. This was eventually resurrected and used, and gives to the early *Chronicle* novels their contemporary ring that memory alone could never achieve.

Well, the regret in our seventh year came when John Glanfield affirmed his intention not to stand for re-election as Chairman; not a wish, but forced upon him by outside pressures of work. Those of us who had worked with him knew that he did not believe in 'figurehead' offices, and that if he could not pull his full weight he would go for the sake of the Society. In accepting with sadness this decision, the meeting was also clearly pleased to adopt Tim Morley as successor. Then, as the A.G.M. drew to a close that useful item 'Any Other Business' allowed George Heath to pay a warm and truly deserved tribute to John Glanfield, before proposing we offer to him, as first Chairman, our highest form of tribute - an Honorary Life Membership.

Our President swiftly followed-up with his own - and the family's - warm sentiments of thanks and sorrow, for all that John had done so well right from the start when it had soon become clear that he must inevitably be our first Chairman. On behalf of the committee he presented a silver photograph frame, suitably inscribed, and containing a family gift of a photograph of Henry as a young soldier.

Clearly touched, John nevertheless, and as ever, found 'le mot juste' for this happy - sad moment.

To be given today a contemporary view of Henry Williamson as he was seen at the very start of his writing career is an increasingly unusual event, but this was just what our main speaker, Rosalind Wade, was able to give us. Her late husband, William Kean Seymour, a near contemporary of Williamson, was also brought up not far from Brockley/Lewisham. Just when or where they first met, Miss Wade did not say, but it was certainly if not in the latter part of the Great War, soon after it when Henry was still living at home, and during his quite brief sojourn in Fleet Street. Together they visited (amongst other literary events) the early meetings of the P.E.N. Club, founded by Mrs. Dawson Scott - well described first in *The Sun in the Sands* and later, in disguise, in *The Innocent Moon*. In common with others, Henry enjoyed the

vogue for a high life and was much given to harmless pranks (an addiction he retained for life). There was really no sign that he would become an outstanding writer amongst his contemporaries, and the idea that one day a Society would be formed in his memory and honour would have seemed incredible to those who knew him then.

In 1921, having thrown-up his Fleet Street job, time in London was running out for Henry Williamson. Along with William Seymour and others of his young literary acquaintance, all were determined to make their names as writers. Finally Henry left home for a cottage in north Devon, making the complete break for good or ill. William Seymour went on to publish several novels, and a number of volumes of biography and poetry, but in his case all were written in his spare time for he never left the Bank where he worked until his retirement.

"Under each gravestone a world lies buried", wrote the Jewish poet Heine ...'. So quoted Miss Wade from *Lucifer Before Sunrise*, asking us to reflect on just what this meant. Indeed a whole world, the totality of a human life each individual and unique, is locked away by death. In the case of a writer, such as Henry Williamson, just how much of his life is deliberately or freely given to us through his writings, and how much more may we learn or discover later outside that revealed in his books? That he wrote with great sincerity and openness on occasion cannot be questioned; he articulated very well many of those fears and emotions - from fear to ecstasy - that lie deep within us all, but which are seldom revealed, even clumsily, even to those closest to us. For many no doubt this is why he is such a personal almost private writer with whom they share a form of communion.

That does not mean of course that Henry Williamson reveals the whole truth of himself and others, or of events. In some cases it is certain his writings are an absolute reflection, quite unembellished; in others a factual start or basis is but a framework around which grows an increasingly imagined scenario, and in time no doubt much of this fiction or imagination becomes a part of the truth; of his life. So, whatever other roles it may set itself, a literary Society can never reach a point where it can say it has captured its subject in totality.

And so progressed a most interesting and stimulating talk although sadly little time was left for questions to be put to our speaker at its conclusion.

After an excellent buffet, Robert Williamson gave to a suitably mellowed audience his personal appreciation of his father. It was a most revealing and heartwarming piece as I am sure you will all agree having read a transcript elsewhere in this Journal.

As an additional treat Richard and Anne Williamson had brought along a video on loan to them - and strictly for showing in private - of the first film treatment of *Salar the Salmon*, a production by West Deutscher Rundfunk - *Salar der Lachs*. An optional viewing of this was arranged to follow the buffet on Saturday evening, which I had to forgo with raffle and other matters to attend to, but which might be repeated on Sunday morning, a "date" I intended to keep, even if it meant missing the Putsborough Sands walk led by Richard Williamson.

I should note here that once again the blue wing of Halcyon had passed over to give us perfect weather, and the missed walk had a compensation; indeed in a sense set the scene. Immersed in the beauty of the scene I had fished at Vention on Saturday morning, casting far out to the breaking rollers, still quite big enough I thought to deceive a silver bass to grab a

bait anchored in the maelstrom of water. I caught nothing; even in the latter part of the year dusk or dark are still usually best times to fish from the shore. The tide slowly forced me landward to the first, and very large, pinnacle or rock rising out of the sand. Atop this in the westering sun of a summer evening long ago Henry had sat as the foam-nets of the waves first closed around the rock then marched on landward until, aware of the worried gaze of a woman and her child-daughter standing above the tide-mark, he had dived off and swum underwater until he emerged close to them. Folding with exaggerated care his soaked tunic, he had bowed and said, "Madam! You have saved my life! Henceforward it is yours." Heavens! That was sixty-five years ago, and yet, and yet ... if one ignored the surfers - unknown then - a handful of people on the beach, the hotel above, and in the distance above Woolacombe the most recent boxes despoiling the skyline, it was as it was then, in 1921, and for long before that. A boot-full of water halted such musings but proved to be the last push of high tide. Henry's rock was barely circled, but then it was a neap tide.

Once or twice as I had watched the combers just at the point of collapse I had seen a silver flash in the translucent green - salmon or bass, I was not sure? But earlier in the week, down on the estuary of the Two Rivers, several leaping bars of silver had been glimpsed including, at well under a hundred yards away, a magnificent fish of twenty pounds and more, slamming down to break the hold of gnawing, irritating parasites. I remembered the film of *Salar* was to be shown and determined to see it.

So it was that I gave up Sunday walk for screen. For a moment I wondered if I had done right when I realised it was a cartoon - though how otherwise it could have been made even in these days of 'high-tech' natural history filming had not occurred to me until then.

I need not have worried; within a few moments it became clear that the makers of the film had taken a great deal of time and trouble in the transcription from page to screen. Not only had the storyline been followed faithfully, but the artwork was quite outstanding in presenting sympathetically the story and its characters in a wide range of settings and moods which cannot have been easy to achieve. That it succeeded in doing so without allowing the things to lapse into the sort of 'goosey' sentimentality, so often observed in American animal/nature films, was particularly pleasing as many American film makers trace their origins back to German or Middle European backgrounds, where a lush almost maudlin sentimentality (at its worst) has long been recognised as an odd national trait. Here, the note generally was right, with moments of almost farce as where the poachers car, simply nobbled by removing a lead or cap, is virtually torn to pieces by the men in their efforts to start the engine. Throughout the river scenes The Watcher is dimly or clearly present and the whole range of feelings and actions he takes to help the fish were conveyed in a most memorable way. Naturally the voice-over commentary was in German and seemed very true as far as my rusty knowledge of the language allowed. The music, if obviously largely evocative of water in its myriad moods, was pleasing and never unduly intrusive. My children - who had not read the book - were entranced throughout, which was a rare compliment, although there is no doubt the film will capture many adult hearts as well and it would be a great pity if this screen version of probably Henry's second-best known book is never screened in this country. An English commentary - perhaps by that fine actor-fisherman, Sir Michael Hordern, would crown a fine production.

The walk I heard later was a great success and was interspersed with appropriate readings by Richard Williamson. Ox's Cross too looked fine, the Hut freshly dressed by Tony Evans with preservative and seemingly standing

up well to the worst winter storms. The big bronze bream still sat in his glass case by the door, a faded label indicating that it was the prize awarded for the worst Nature book published in 1935! On the floor a sack was spread bearing the words:

HENRY WILLIAMSON
STIFFKEY

Outside the sun filtered through the trees and one suddenly realised that in front of the original windbreak planting - now massive trees - others from saplings to quite sturdy boles were encroaching around the Hut, so that in a few years it will be almost surrounded in a fairy dell when no doubt many more Speckled Woods might be seen than just the solitary insect watched resting on an apple tree leaf, wings spread to the sun.

As ever, it was hard to finally pack the baggage away and say farewell, for the time had passed by in a flash. BUT, something to look forward to already with the plan for 1987 to be a special long weekend in honour of *Tarka's* Sixtieth Birthday.

We are sorry to have to announce the death of Mr. P. Woods of 52 Rostrevor Avenue, South Tottenham, London N.15, who was a member of the Henry Williamson Society for a number of years.

QUESTIONNAIRE - SOCIETY'S MEETING

A total of twenty-six (only) of the questionnaires sent out last Spring, were duly received back, and the votes for the various options listed were as follows:

<u>A.G.M. (Must remain annual)</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>No.</u>
Duration: Unchanged	16	Remain ANNUAL	16
Duration: Special - ALL Sat/Sun	8	Become BIENNIAL	5
Duration: Special - ALL Fri/Sat Sun a.m.	3	Duration: Unchanged	13
Duration: EVERY year: ALL Sat/Sun	3	Duration: Special: ALL Sat/Sun	7
Duration: EVERY year: ALL Fri/Sat Sun a.m.	2	Duration: Special: ALL Fri/Sat Sun a.m.	1
		Duration: EVERY year: ALL Sat/Sun	1
		Duration: EVERY year: ALL Fri/Sat Sun a.m.	0

Although this sample represents only about 1/8th of total membership, the message seems clear, that the A.G.M. remains Sat/Sun a.m. + Fri. night option except for Special Occasions when it would be ALL Sat/Sun + Fri. night option - this package would be basically Sat AND Sun night accommodation.

The Spring meeting clearly should remain an Annual event, duration unchanged, except for Special Occasions when again ALL Sat/Sun + Fri. night option is most popular.

RAFFLE OF PICTURE 'HALFPENNY BRIDGE'

donated by

SHIREEN FAIRCLOTH

THE WINNER WAS MRS MARY HEATH (BLUE No.43)

who most generously put the picture in

again for AUCTION and the

TOTAL

raised for Society funds

due to the generosity of all

was

£135 (net)

A SPLENDID ACHIEVEMENT : THANKS DUE TO ALL

THE THINGS THEY SAY

"Audley picked up a book ...

'Henry Williamson's - *A Fox Under my Cloak*.' He made a thoughtful face. 'Paul would approve of that. Ypres 1915, is it, this one?'

'Among other places.'

Elizabeth turned towards the voice.

'I've just discovered him properly. I thought he was merely the author of *Tarka the Otter*, who ruined himself by backing the Fascists in the thirties. It makes me ashamed, how ill-read and how ill-informed I am.'

(From: *Here Be Monsters* By Anthony Price. Victor Gollanz, 1985 and paperback, Grafton Books, 1986. Quoted from the latter, p.109)

I am indebted to the Rev. Peter Lawson for supplying this 'snippet'.

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN AN OTTER IN THE WILD?

As you will already know, it is intended that our next Journal will be a Special Issue to celebrate 60 years since *Tarka* was first published, and suitably orientated contributions have already been requested by our Editor. It occurred to me that at least some members will have been fortunate enough to see live otters in the British Isles, during their lifetime. Alas, as we sadly know the chances today are remote over much of the country, and probably most sightings will have been by older members, but old or new, sightings for all but the ultra fortunate for whom they are common, are memorable. If you have such a memory please do put pen to paper even if briefly and send your account to our Editor. I am sure she will be only too pleased to publish as many entries as space permits.

J.H.