

Recollections of *Tarka* First Editions: Stephen Francis Clarke

I was in my late 'teens when I first saw a first edition of *Tarka the Otter* — the real first edition, handsomely bound in full vellum and limited to just one hundred copies, signed and numbered by the author and printed on handmade paper. It was a very splendid volume and — already a rabid Williamson collector — I was considerably impressed by the full-page presentation inscription from the author to Arnold Bennett that nearly covered its fly-leaf.

I had discovered the book whilst visiting the London Antiquarian Book Fair at the National Book League rooms (held annually in June and since moved to more lavish quarters). As I recollect it was on Peter Eaton's stand. I desired it very much: however, it was priced at £60 and as a 16-year-old apprentice bookseller, earning about £6 or £7 a week, it was well beyond my means. I agonised about it for a few days but eventually decided I had to let it go. I think that was the last time in my Williamson collecting career that I failed to buy an item because of the cost!

When I next came across that copy it had transferred to the stock of C. K. Broadhurst in Southport, and the price had almost doubled. But I bought it anyway — it really was irresistible! It was copy number 100 (of 100) and the presentation inscription read:

To Arnold the Great (who said this book is overwritten: by which the vain author infers that he is considered a superwriter) from Henry Williamson Christmas 1928

Arnold Bennett His Book, containing several misprints. A present from Ham in the friendliest spirit.

The book was intended as a small and local record: I can't help it if it gets out of its locality, and suffers strange scrutiny. H.W. Not to be let or sold! And no need to cut the pages!!

It was gleefully added to my growing shelves of H.W. first editions.

All that I can remember about the next copy that I came across was that it was number 48. I don't remember where I got it from. I was about 17, working for a different bookseller and doing a small amount of 'dealing on the side'. I had recently purchased quite a good H.W. collection from Ireland and probably this *Tarka* came from that collection. I catalogued it (Valentine Books, Catalogue 2) as 'original vellum in mint condition' at £25.

It was many years before I catalogued another first edition of *Tarka*. During that time I had sold my own Williamson collection, and found myself working as an independent bookseller. A dealer from Devon offered me a copy he had purchased from the Chichester family (cousins of the author, I believe). It was a lovely association copy, having been presented by H.W. to his wife's grandmother, with the following inscription:

For Sarah Catherine Augusta Hibbert — Dear Grannie, from Henry Williamson.

(Beneath the printed Dedication [To William Henry Rogers] he added:

who said 'the cover was good, so was the paper and the print'

And, he added, 'the story is too poetical' Well, well — (the above was written by the disgruntled egotistical author on 15 August 1927)

A subsequent presentation inscription (probably to Patrick Chichester) had been added beneath the original:

This copy was a gift to my wife Loetitia's Grandmother, a most gracious lady & one whom I was fully en rapport.

(Like most inscribed copies of the original edition there were one or two corrections in H.W.'s hand in the text.) I catalogued it (Clearwater Books, Catalogue 21B c.1982) at £250, but actually sold it at a book fair to the late Christopher Radmall.

About the same time yet another copy came my way. This one had been turned up by a couple of friends in a West End bookshop. It was very expensive, yet as it was another fine association copy I allowed myself to be tempted. This copy was inscribed by H.W.:

To Ann Thomas, for her 23rd birthday, August 1934 [and for her daughter Rosemary] from Henry Williamson — this is the original and only first edition, which was for sale in Georgeham village in August 1927 by myself as bookseller.

Ann was the daughter of the poet Edward Thomas and two years previously she had interviewed H.W. in Devon for an article ('A visit to Henry Williamson') which subsequently appeared in the Summer reading issue of *John O'London's Weekly*, June 1932.

Although by then I had sold my Williamson collection I held onto this copy for quite a while. Eventually, however, I parted with it — for quite a lot of money — in my first special H.W. catalogue ('Chronicle', 1983).

It was not until earlier this year that I was able to buy another copy. An old friend had been slowly dispersing his Williamson collection and in March he parted with his first edition of *Tarka*. Yet again it was an excellent association copy, with the following presentation inscription:

For S.P.B. Mais from Henry Williamson — Dear Petre.

(This copy and the one he gave to his wife's grandmother have a little in common, for H.W.'s *The Village Book* (1930) was dedicated: 'in gratitude for much help and encouragement . . . with love and respect to . . . Mrs

Hibbert and . . . to our old striding friend of the Sussex Downs Petre Mais.)

There were also one or two copies that 'got away'. Perhaps the most interesting and desirable was the copy that H.W. inscribed and gave to the girl he called 'Spica Virginis'. I bought a collection of inscribed items from her daughter last summer, but she elected to keep the copy of *Tarka* as a memento. On the other occasion when I was unable to buy the first edition of *Tarka* when bidding for a Williamson collection it was simply because the owner felt it was worth a great deal more than I did. That was probably fifteen years ago, and only last month I discovered it was still in his possession and he was once again seeking a purchaser.

I have no idea whatever became of that £25 copy back in 1967, and I believe that the copy Chris Radmall bought from me is still in stock at Bell, Book and Radmall: however all of the others found excellent homes in cherished private collections.

