

Letters

I regret that two errors crept into the typescript of my article 'Places and Associations in *Young Phillip Maddison*' in the Spring '87 issue of the Journal, and thence on to the printed page.

In the note on the Lewisham Hipodrome, page 318 of the book, I quote its name after it became a cinema as 'the Rex'. This should have been 'the Eros'. And in the Appendix, in the final entry regarding Phillip's list in code, I stated that the Stanhope family's house, Chevening Court, was presented to the nation for use as a country residence by the Foreign Secretary. 'Foreign Secretary' should have read 'Chancellor of the Exchequer'.

Robert Tierney
15 Penn Lea Road
Bath, Avon BA1 3RF

If ever there was a time when emotion needed to be recollected in tranquillity it was in the weeks following the first Williamson Tour of the First War Battlefields this year. Our journey through Flanders and the Somme gave us, the lucky few, much to reflect on — Talbot House, Ypres, the Menin Road, Loos, July 1st 1916, Passchendael, Albert . . .

And the cemeteries and memorials — so many of them, a constant reminder of the terrible slaughter.

But there was good humour and lively talk, necessary and acceptable ingredients to lighten our diet of facts and places.

Our thanks then to Brian Fullager, officer in charge of transport and baggage, cook, administrator, chauffeur extraordinaire, and to Paul 'Boy General' Reed, navigator, interpreter, guide and historian, who between them gave us a glimpse of the background against which HWW's magnificent war novels are set.

Hopefully there will be opportunities to share our experiences with other members.

Eric Shaw
15 Hawthorn Way
Nailsea, Bristol BS19 1QQ

(It is hoped that a detailed report of this visit will appear in a future issue. Ed.)

The gentlest of complaints. Presumably a gremlin in the works. It was I believe I who sent John Homan the Anthony Price quote reproduced on page 52 of Journal No. 15. I was fascinated to discover it and will keep my eyes open for other references.

By contrast I was amazed to see references to 'Howson Road' on page 15. My background is north London and I had no idea there was such a road, or that David Jones spent his childhood in it.

I regret that a posting in Germany prevents my attending meetings.

Rev. Peter Howson
c/o Chaplain's Office
The Queen's Own Hussars
British Forces Post Office 30

(My sincere apologies to Rev. Howson for calling him Lawson in a moment of mental aberration. John Homan.)

When reading novels it has often struck me as to how the authors have chosen the names for their characters. Why did Dickens choose David Copperfield, Ian Fleming James Bond, Agatha Christie Miss Marple, etc.

In Henry's case there is some speculation on my part that he took names from gravestones or memorial tablets in churches. For some characters he may have used synonyms as he did for places or things such as Barbarian Club for Savage Club, Bivouac coffee for Camp, etc. Sometimes the transition from fact to fiction would be humorous as when Wells, on the North Norfolk coast, becomes Whelk.

When Henry farmed in Stiffkey I feel he lifted at least two names from local churches. At St John the Baptist Church, Stiffkey is a memorial to the Wordingham family; surely the inspiration for Henry's name for nearby Walsingham.

At Blakeney, beside the coastal road between Cley and Morston, about three miles from Stiffkey, stands the church of St Nicholas. Here is the grave of Sir Henry 'Tim' Birkin. Birkin was one of the greatest racing drivers of the Twenties and although he never lived at Blakeney he honeymooned at the White Horse and later stayed many times at the Blakeney Hotel.

Is it just coincidence that Sir Oswald 'Tom' Mosley is Sir Hereward Birkin in the Chronicle? Birkin is not a common name and there is but one in the modern Norfolk telephone directory and only eight in London.

Do members have any more evidence to support this theory?

Peter K. Robins
Pembroke Cottage
10 Strawberry Hill Road
Twickenham, Middlesex

In response to the request by J.H. in Journal No. 15 regarding sightings of otters in the wild state. About 8 years ago I was visiting the R.S.P.B. Reserve at Leighton Moss, Lancashire, and during an evening session in a bird-watching hide at dusk, or rather, 'dimmy', I was fortunate to see not one but two otters playing together in the waters of the Reserve. I watched them through binoculars, for about half an hour when they slipped away. I feel very privileged to have been able to witness this delightful scene.

May I take this opportunity to tell you 'How I Became a Member'. I 'discovered' Henry Williamson many years ago when I bought a Penguin copy of *Tarka* whilst on holiday in the West Country. This book led me on to *Salar* and the *Village* books. Soon I was reading all I could find in the library of *The Flax of Dream* and *The Chronicle*. I think I read, eventually, most of the *Chronicle* but not in correct order but as the novels became available in the library, and it became one of my ambitions to own all of Henry Williamson's works. For years I pored over maps of London and Devon trying to identify towns, districts and place names, with not too much success. Where is Rookhurst? I never found anyone who thought as I did about H.W. and

his writings, apart from a few who had read *Tarka*.

After the death of my husband in 1985, I turned yet again to H.W. to try to lighten my spirits, and last year, with my cousin and her husband, went to stay in Croyde for a week in early October. I told them about H.W. and 'his' district, and they were happy to accompany me to Georgeham and to stand by the gate at Ox's Cross.

Being in the area, I was, of course, searching for H.W. books and in the Post Office at Croyde, bought *A Symposium on H.W.* in which I discovered a single sheet leaflet about the Henry Williamson Society. What a revelation! There were other people who appreciated this writer (I really didn't think I could be the only one). I joined the Society and am now well on the way to achieving my ambition in acquiring my books. I also bought as many of the Society's back numbers of the Journal as were available, which give so much information; in particular about place names, the identity of which had so long eluded me. The article by Robert Tierney in Journal No. 15, for example, was a joy to read.

The pure chance of finding the Society's leaflet in Croyde last year, has indeed opened up for me a much wider insight into Henry Williamson and his work.

Along with my previous companions, I am again going to Croyde in early June of this year and will visit the places where the man, who has had such an influence on my life, lived and worked.

I hope the note on the otters at Leighton Moss will be of interest.

Mrs Eileen Smith
Trelawney
29, Stoney Lane
Winchester, Hants. SO22 6DP

Terry Russell raises an important point in his letter printed in the Spring 1987 issue. It seems important that due recognition is accorded to Henry Williamson who was almost certainly the first person to describe in print an incident of mutiny in the British Army in France in 1917. As Terry Russell notes, this incident is related in the chapter entitled 'Mutiny' in the novel *Love and the Loveless* (Macdonald, 1958), where it appears to have passed unnoticed.

My own research, and more significantly that of Society member Paul Reed who has examined many hundreds of books on or about World War I published after 1918, has revealed only one book other than Williamson's which describes a mutiny that took place at the Infantry Base Depots (I.B.D.), Etaples, in the autumn of 1917. That second book was *The Monocled Mutineer* by Allison and Fairley, published in 1978. Like Williamson's book it did not have mass media appeal and it was not until it was adapted by Alan Bleasdale, and shown as a four-part serial on BBC TV during September 1986, that the whole matter of the mutiny came to prominence.

Although centred on a Nottinghamshire miner's son, Toplis — who turned from

volunteer private to impersonator of officers, deserter and mutineer, the story covered much wider issues than the fate of one soldier, raising again such matters as the yawning gulf between the Staff and the Front Line soldier, being one item in a long catalogue of Great War blunders, but in particular the mutiny at Etaples was given great prominence and claimed to be the first exposure of this incident. At the time Bleasdale was censored for the license taken on facts and the very free adaptation of the book, and criticised too for what was seen as a Left Wing view of History although a first exposure — or so it seemed — of a disgraceful incident, was welcomed. (In fact investigations done by Paul Reed indicate that research for both book and television adaptation was poorly done and distorted the truth, and was based almost wholly on oral history. Valuable though that may be very little essential checking to endorse it had apparently been carried out.)

What is certain is that Williamson's record in *Love and the Loveless* is at this time the first known published account.

While clearly on nothing like the scale of the mutiny that beset the French Armies in the same year it may still seem surprising that the affair at Etaples remained virtually unknown for so long. One significant factor for this is that there has never been an official statement or release of details, and it is unlikely now that there ever will be. Investigations have revealed that the records for officers and men posted to Etaples at that time for training have disappeared, although this in itself does not necessarily indicate a cover-up as only 25% of Great War service records survived the 1939–45 war, due to enemy action. That the mutiny took place in

an area subjected to strict military discipline and control is a much more significant reason for lack of publicity at the time. Further, in contrast to *The Monocled Mutineer* version — of a progressively more serious, violent and long-lived event — the much more low key, less violent and short-lived version given by Williamson is probably much nearer the truth and so would have excited much less contemporary rumour or myth.

That credit for the first record of the mutiny was not accorded to Williamson has already been partly explained because it only reached a restricted audience, but more importantly the book was published as a fictional novel — at least as far as the world was concerned — and the mutiny would have been accepted by all but a very few expert or questioning readers as merely an imaginary event in a work of fiction.

That this is so is demonstrated in that only in a few rare cases are Williamson's Great War novels of *A Chronicle* mentioned by military historians or writers, simply because they are novels in their eyes, and not catalogues of fact. In contrast *The Monocled Mutineer* was written as a biography and thus, even if dramatically presented, accepted as a reconstruction of facts.

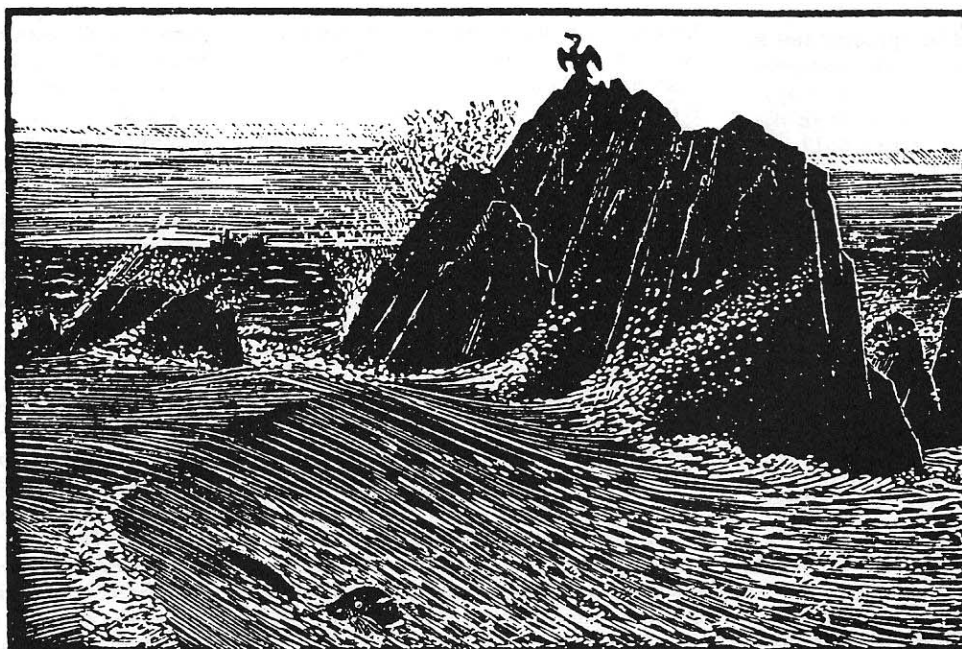
The question as to whether Williamson wrote of the mutiny from personal experience or not cannot be answered conclusively, but on the evidence so far obtained — and here I must again thank Paul Reed for providing details from his meticulous research through official sources — it seems at least probable.

What is certain is that in December 1916, Lieut. Williamson, transferred from the Bedfordshire Regiment to the Machine Gun Corps, was sent to France as a Transport

Officer with No. 208 Machine Gun Company (numbered '286' in the novel) serving under 62 Division. Present at the opening of the Battle of Arras in April it remained in the sector until at least well into June, although in that month novel and history part company. When 'No. 286 MGC' are posted north, Phillip Maddison witnesses the opening of the Battle of Messines Ridge on 4 June, No. 208 MGC were in fact out of the line at Bihucourt S.E. of Arras — over 100Km away — and from here the War Diary for 9 June records that Lt. Williamson reporting sick had been sent to hospital on the coast. Unfortunately there is a War Diary gap until November, when No. 208 MGC, still under 62 Div. take part in the Battle of Cambrai, as also recorded in the novel. It is during this 'gap' that 'No. 286 MGC' finds itself at Venheule Farm near Wieltje on 31 July, as Third Ypres starts, followed by Maddison being sent on the Etaples course at the beginning of September. As noted, the course records for Etaples at that time are missing, so here too proof positive is missing.

In conclusion it must be repeated that no book recording the mutiny is known to antedate Williamson's 1958 version, that is from which he might have gleaned the information. That he was told about the event, and in detail, shortly afterwards by a brother officer who had been there is a possibility but unlikely, and that credit for the first publication on the mutiny is, therefore, Williamson's alone.

John Homan
Ryburn House
Camp Road
Freshwater
Isle of Wight PO40 9HJ



The Morte Stone and Isle-of-Wight Parson meditating