

Notes on *Days of Wonder*

John Gregory

I had only recently discovered the writings of Henry Williamson when I opened my parents' copy of the *Daily Express* on 29 June 1966 (in pre-tabloid Beaverbrook days) to find 'The Somme — just fifty years after' on a centre page. The *Express* had been advertising the feature well in advance, and I read it and the subsequent two parts eagerly: not because they were by Henry, but because of the subject matter, which then, as now, haunted me. I bought extra copies of the newspaper, and cut out the articles.

I knew of Henry in those days only as the author of the best war novels I had read: *The Golden Virgin*, *Love and the Loveless* and *A Test to Destruction*. I had never heard of Tarka! I kept a subsequent close eye on the *Express*. Nothing more appeared, for months. Then, some small time after the 'Torrey Canyon' disaster, another: 'Oil will hang the black drapes of death . . .' It did not mention the oil tanker: in those days it did not have to, there was talk of little else. It joined the other clippings. Soon after came 'Vimy Ridge', and over the following months occasional others, until in the summer of 1968 the articles began to appear regularly, accompanied by delicate line illustrations signed R.A.R. They too were cut out and carefully kept.

Meanwhile, my knowledge of Henry's books broadened, and I wanted to find out more about this man, whose writings held such a curious fascination. I have already described my research at the British Newspaper Library into his earliest journalistic efforts in my introduction to *The Weekly Dispatch* collection (H.W. Society, 1983, £3.95) and it was at about this time that I first thought of gathering together, and perhaps publishing (though how, I did not know) all his *Express* contributions. I wrote to *Express Newspapers*, and soon received a reply listing over 170 articles, going back to 18 August 1920. (Henry subsequently told me that there were earlier articles, written under the pseudonym of John Dandelion.) Over the next months I obtained photocopies of these, and over the subsequent years laboriously typed them on to foolscap sheets — a task still not finished.

The *Daily Express* articles stopped appearing in 1971 and, although not forgotten, nothing more was done with them. I was determined though that I should 'rediscover' as much as I could of Henry's journalistic writings, so that they would not be lost forever. If that sounds rather fanciful, it must be remembered that in those days I was unaware of the underground readership that the formation of the H.W. Society brought to the surface. Gradually, a fairly comprehensive library of material built up.

When I became responsible for Society publications, my first thought was: At last, I can use some of this material — for surely they would be of interest to members of the Society, if to anyone! The *Express* articles of the '60s and '70s seemed ideal, offering a mix of Great War and nature writing, and coincidentally neatly forming Henry's entire post-war contributions to the paper, as far as I have been able to ascertain.

Quotations for printing were obtained, together with permission from the Henry Williamson Literary Estate. The project was approved by the Committee of the Society. A welcome bonus came when Anne Williamson readily identified the artist R.A.R. as Richard Richardson, a family friend, and we were given permission by his estate to use the illustrations. I was even more pleased to see how well the sketches reproduced, taken as they were from yellowing 20-year-old cuttings.

Production of the book was not without its problems, as those members who paid for it in advance — and then waited so patiently — are well aware! More unexpected was the difficulty of tracing the date of one of the articles, which I had forgotten to annotate at the time. A letter to the *Express* this time produced nothing; records are no longer

kept. Success took two days of searching at the British Newspaper Library, leafing through issue after issue — not as monotonous as it might seem; this after all was the swinging sixties, and as my eyes flicked over the gossip columns and familiar faces, twenty years ago seemed like yesterday.

Knowledgeable readers will perhaps recognise that at least six of the stories in *Days of Wonder* are re-workings of earlier writings, though losing nothing in the retelling. Indeed, 'Rooked — as anarchy reigns in the house!' is the third version of the same tale, which appeared first as 'The Sex Life of Rooks' (*The Linhay on the Downs*, Cape, 1934, p. 29), broadcast recently on Radio 3 as part of Brian Sanders' excellent anthology Henry Williamson's Nature Writings; and second as a contribution to The Co-operative Society's *Home Magazine*, for which Henry wrote a monthly column called 'From a Country Hilltop' between 1958 and 1962.

It will be noticed also that the two other articles are very similar. The reader must bear in mind, however, that Henry was writing as part of a wider campaign to ban otter-hunting, and that they appeared almost two years apart. Otters in England and Wales became protected by law in 1968, and in Scotland some years later.

Editing was kept to an absolute minimum, correcting basic mistakes and inconsistencies in the text that may well have arisen in the *Express* composing room. For example, towards the bottom of page 14, 'The 34th Division — smashed to hell' originally read 'The 32nd . . .' It was not until the book was at page-proof stage (the very last chance for making any corrections) that I realised that the 32nd had been mentioned a few lines earlier. A quick reference to Martin Middlebrook's excellent *The First Day on the Somme* (Allen Lane, 1971) revealed that the 34th must have been intended.

I debated long whether to include the date of each article, and decided to do so: they are obviously relevant to the anniversary articles on The Somme and Vimy Ridge and, I feel, add to the immediacy of the others. Most appeared on the last Saturday of each month, or occasionally on the first Saturday of the next month — perhaps because Henry missed his copy date?

Designing the cover was not a problem: the marvellous drawing by Richard Richardson of a hobby at the moment of striking a butterfly was the perfect candidate.

The book was finally published in September, three months behind schedule. I think it has been worth the wait, and I hope that others do too. If you have not yet bought one — there are plenty of copies left!

[Apply to John Gregory, Publications Manager, 14 Nether Grove, Longstanton, Cambs.]

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[See Review of this book on p. 50. Ed.]

NEWSFLASH

News has just arrived that the National Portrait Gallery's major Autumn exhibition in 1988 will be devoted to the life of T.E. Lawrence to celebrate the centenary of his birth.

Further details in the next *Journal*.