

Bedfordshire in the Writings of Henry Williamson

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This article gives, with some revision and expansion, the substance of the talk which I delivered to the Henry Williamson Society at Woburn on 10 May 1986. The talk was illustrated by readings, rendered with his customary sensitivity and flair, by Ronald Walker. As the passages read by Ronald are too lengthy to quote in full, I provide the first and last sentences only, with references, which I hope can be followed up.

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It is a truism, but an important critical point nevertheless, that the 'spirit of place' is very strong in Henry Williamson's writings. In this article I shall discuss the use which Williamson makes of Bedfordshire in his work and try to analyse the literary qualities of some of the passages set in that county, relating them to the works in which they appear. In the case of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* I shall also discuss the roles played by some of the characters whom Phillip Maddison first meets in 'Gaultshire', or who have a strong link with the county and its regiment.

Bedfordshire, or 'Gaultshire' as Williamson calls it in the *Chronicle*, is for him a 'Great Good Place' in the sense in which Henry James uses the phrase in his story of that title,¹ although it is a real place, and not a dream place as in James's story. It is a place of great natural beauty and magical charm; of benign family tradition and harmonious living, to be contrasted with the ugliness and restricted, frustrated life of Lewisham, or 'Wakenham' as it is called in the *Chronicle*. The role which Bedfordshire plays in Williamson's writings is akin to that of his 'preserves' or 'secret places' in North West Kent, with which indeed it blends in the creation of the ideal 'world' of Rookhurst and Colham in *The Flax of Dream*.² These 'Great Good Places' are however subject to change and destruction at the hands of an advancing industrialism or urban spread, caused in Williamson's view by the worship of merely material values and the overweening desire for wealth leading to the baleful influence of the 'Money Power' which he criticized and fought against, as did two of his mentors, Richard Jefferies and Sir Oswald Mosley.³ Natural beauty is destroyed; the traditional rural order falls prey to suburbanism and the Machine Society. Williamson both recreates the joy of his Great Good Places 'in ancient sunlight' and moves the reader to regret, with him, their ravaging. This regret is not merely vain; Williamson himself worked for nature conservation, and the reader is, I think, stimulated to join forces with him to try to take some practical steps to save what remains of our rural heritage. Just as Dickens's social criticism stimulated people in his day to work for a juster and more compassionate society, so, I believe, Williamson's criticism of the wicked folly of destroying the beauties of the countryside and traditional rural life is making people today do what they can to halt and reverse this process.

Two places, drawn from originals in Bedfordshire, stand out notably in Williamson's work, as being presented with memorable artistic vividness. The first is a spinney drawn to some extent, but not I think exclusively, from Brogborough Spinney. The second is Beau Brickhill House, drawn, as Tom and Joan Skipper show in two fascinating articles in earlier issues of this journal, from no. 34 Mount Pleasant, Aspley Guise.⁴ A spinney in Bedfordshire first appears in Williamson's writings in 'A Boy's Nature Diary' written in 1913 although not published until 1933 in the revised illustrated edition of *The Lone Swallows*. Henry is staying during the Easter holidays with Charlie (Boon) later to be the original of Percy Pickering in the *Chronicle*. The boys enjoy some shooting, and on 22 March walk over the Duke's moors to Woburn to get more cartridges. As they proceed

on their way thither, they observe birds and wildlife, and as they return home 'across the old familiar paths of boyhood days' memories of bird-nesting come back to them. On 'the path over the wheatfield' they encounter a well-remembered sight, that of a 'crowstarver'; a boy of about twelve, who as they approach 'seizes an old pair of noisy wooden clappers and shouts, apparently to a black speck in the distance feeding in the furrows, "Hulooo-a, hull-oo-a" meanwhile clapping vigorously.' They wonder if he has ever baked moor-hen's eggs in his fire, recalling how they themselves 'six years back, in the small fir-copse, scarcely a quarter of an acre, in the middle of the cornfield here . . . caught two young rabbits crouching in the grass, and . . . cooked them on a similar small fire' (p. 87). The fir-copse referred to here cannot be Brogborough Spinney which lies north of Aspley Guise (where Henry would be staying); Woburn is situated to the south. However, an examination of the Ordnance Survey Map for Woburn shows a 'Carter's Grove' which might possibly be the place in question. One crowstarver whom Williamson certainly would have remembered from an early visit to Bedfordshire when he was seven years of age, is mentioned in chapter 2 of *A Clear Water Stream*. He was a carter's son who accompanied Henry and his cousin on a fishing expedition. Having climbed a tree above the pond, he brought down two ring-dove's eggs, blew them and later shyly offered them to the young Henry 'at the gate leading to the courtyard' of Henry's uncle's house. Williamson continues:

The boy who wore with pride a new celluloid collar, was a crow-starver during those Easter holidays, earning a shilling a week. How romantic it was to hear his wooden rattle, coming from the spinney of pine and beech in the brown sloping field's centre, followed by faraway Hulloo-as, as he drove away rooks from the spring sown corn.

(*A Clear Water Stream*, revised illustrated edition, 1975, p. 23)

Tom and Joan Skipper suggest that this boy might have been Jim Holliman who lived in San Remo Road, Aspley Guise, the entrance to which is opposite no. 34, Mount Pleasant.⁵ He, like Henry's cousin Charlie, was killed in 1916; both are commemorated on a list of the fallen at St Botolph's Church, Aspley Guise, seen by members of the Henry Williamson Society on 11 May 1986. Be that as it may, Williamson used a variant of this boy's name to give to the remarkable adult character Jim Holloman in *The Beautiful Years*, whom I shall discuss later.

The passage which we have noticed in 'A Boy's Nature Diary' is of course apprentice work, written when Williamson was but seventeen. A spinney and a crowstarver are described, however, with masterly vividness and clarity in the essay 'Boy' also in *The Lone Swallows* (entitled 'The Crowstarver' in the first edition). This spinney could well be an artistic fusion of that mentioned in 'A Boy's Nature Diary' and Brogborough Spinney. The crowstarver also is possibly an imaginative amalgamation of originals, in which that of *A Clear Water Stream* is but a small element, if indeed he is used at all, as *this* boy is a cruder and coarser figure than he. The construction of 'Boy' is firm and shapely, and the transitions of mood within the essay are handled excellently. Williamson begins by describing how the boy speaks angrily to the branch of pine he is dragging towards his fire, which becomes temporarily entangled with some brambles: "'Ah, ee would, would ee? Ha-aa-eh! Ee would, would ee?'" He continued with a lively description of the boy at his work:

Reading I. *The Lone Swallows* (revised illustrated edn., 1933)

p. 45: 'I had walked to the spinney along the right-of-way through the cornfield' . . .

p. 46: 'A length of iron rail hung from a low hornbeam branch, and he beat it with a hammer made from a holly stick pushed through the hole in a flint.'

The boy makes tea in an old marmalade pot and drinks it without milk unless he can get some from the goats in the vicarage garden or from the cows in the water-meadow. He bakes potatoes in the embers of his fire and eats 'sweet brown turnip in slices'. Williamson recounts how he would visit the boy at night as he lay in the opening of his shelter. He is happy in the spinney, and, comments Williamson humorously, it would be ungracious to look too closely into the embers of the fire:

. . . after all, there were many rabbits, and an occasional one, found with puffed face in a pegged noose of brass wire was anyone's property. 'A didden till the snare, a' only found'n in 'n.' (p.48)

Williamson goes on to describe, with compassion and sympathy, the crowstarver's lonely life, and then looking back in elegiac mood, he comments on the change which he sees when he revisits the spinney after the First World War (admirably characterized as 'an immense darkness and corruption, a vast negation of all beauty, as of life broken and moving backwards to its original void' (p. 50). Everything seems to have shrunk; the magic of his boyhood feelings has gone; now he regards them as illusions, and the crowstarver is 'dead in the war'. Nevertheless with another change of mood, Williamson recognizes the continuing hope which humanity can find in the perennial freshness and beauty of nature:

Reading II. *The Lone Swallows*, ed. cit.

p. 48: 'Sixpence a day, from dawn till sunset, banging the rusty tins and whirling the clapper' . . .

p. 50: 'There is hope in the open sky.'

This spinney reappears in Williamson's fiction. In *The Flax of Dream* it is transferred to Wiltshire, as the abode first of Jim Holloman, a Jefferies-like figure who acts in many ways as a substitute father to the young Willie Maddison who is at odds with his real father, and secondly as the home of the poor, ragged boy Bill Nye, who is in essence a fuller portrait of the crowstarver in the essay 'Boy'. Probably Bill also is drawn from various Bedfordshire originals with perhaps a dash of 'Winking Wooldridge' and other poor boys in Lewisham whom Williamson befriended when a schoolboy.⁶ In chapter 13 of *The Beautiful Years*, Jim, having rescued Dolly from the pool in which she thought she was drowning, returns to the spinney and lies on his back contemplating the stars. With his appreciation of nature mingles his recollection of Dolly's beauty, which then becomes the dominant thought in his mind. Williamson renders Jim's feelings with great delicacy and truth to life:

Reading III. *The Beautiful Years*, chapter 13 (*The Flax of Dream*, 1 vol. edn., 1936)

p. 99: 'The night was witched with the light of the moon in its third quarter, riding on high and shedding its light among the wheat flags' . . .

p. 100: 'He went into his hut, to think of Dolly, with her little pink ears and black silky hair, lying in his arms, her eyes shining like those stars, yielding herself.'

It is to Jim and the refuge of the spinney that Willie flees at the end of *The Beautiful Years*, in bitter distress at his father's lack of understanding of him and in fear of yet another thrashing, after he and Rupert Bryers have liberated some jays from traps in the woods owned by the retired bookmaker Isaacs, given the name of Brogborough Woods by Williamson (although I suspect that he merely borrowed the name rather than had specific Bedfordshire woods in mind). Dolly is with Jim, and after he has taken her home, he

welcomes Willie to stay with him, temporarily at least. They sleep in Jim's shelter, and the next morning, under Jim's benign tutelage, Willie begins to appreciate something of the mystical joy to be found in the beauties of nature. In particular, we note Willie's delight in the Morning Star, 'the light-bringer', which is to become an important symbol in Williamson's work for men of vision (as Willie himself will become) who seek to illuminate the darkness of men's minds. We notice also that the beginning of the dawn chorus makes Willie realize 'that the world was one great chorus'. Not only school lessons, but also the pretty Elsie Norman whom he admires, fade into insignificance before the morning glories. The passage is highly coloured in style, and richly romantic in feeling; it captures admirably Willie's youthful exaltation, which the reader shares with him in imagination:

Reading IV. *The Beautiful Years*, chapter 30 (*Flax*, 1 vol. edn., 1936)

p. 234: 'When Jim returned he found that the boy was sitting by the fire, staring into the flames, all his life in his eyes' . . .

p. 235: 'No wonder Jim lived in the spinney.'

Jim dies tragically in the lime-kiln at the end of *The Beautiful Years*, and in *Dandelion Days*, the crowstarver is, as noticed above, the under-sized and ragged boy, Bill Nye. Bill lacks the wisdom and insight of Jim Holloman, but he does begin to develop from very inauspicious beginnings towards a finer humanity. 'He had been an unwanted baby', recounts Williamson:

pale of face and little of body. The child-mother who had borne him had turned common market troll and died young in Colham. She had asked to see the boy just before her death in the dreaded Grubber — as they called the Union, or Workhouse in the town — but her grandmother Aholibah Nye, had refused the child of sin to see her lest he might be tainted even more. Bill Nye grew up with a sealed heart.

(*Dandelion Days*, chapter 21, *Flax*, 1 vol. edn., 1936, pp. 434–5)

He teases little birds, pulling out their feathers, he steals their eggs, stones baby rabbits and is given to lying. His great grandmother resents him and shoos him away from old Bob Lewis the gamekeeper's door, although Dolly, now acting as housekeeper there, gives him food.⁷ Dolly indeed is habitually good to him, 'but nothing in him cared for her except his stomach.'⁸ Although Jim Holloman had sometimes allowed him to sit by his fire, the boy had been afraid of him. Willie he admires 'in his distorted way', but he fears Jack Temperley. 'His affections', writes Williamson, 'were writhen like one of the pollard beeches in the spinney that the winds and frosts of early spring upsweeping and drear had blasted immaturity.'⁹ However, the ill-shapen mongrel bitch puppy Tiger goes to his shelter and after initial hesitation Bill gives her a home. The sap of kindly feeling arises in him, for 'never before had Bill Nye had anything to love him.'¹⁰ This relates to one of the major themes of the *Flax*; the need for children to be loved if they are to grow up happy and balanced in outlook. Tiger repays Bill's kindness and affection in a practical way; she leads Willie to him when he is lying helplessly ill in his shelter. He is thus allowed some hope of happiness with Dolly and Tom Sorrell after he had recovered. His happiness however, is short-lived; during the War he is 'shot as a deserter.'¹¹

Just as Willie ran to the spinney as a distressed small boy, so after his romantic failure with Elsie Norman, it is to the spinney that he goes for relief and solace. He finds the kindly and thoughtful Jack already there to greet him. They light a fire and enjoy together the feast originally intended for Elsie, which Jack has recovered from the loft. Jack reaffirms

his devotion to Willie, but, as is likely with youths of their age, sentiment is soon succeeded by exuberant hilarity. However, the scene ends on a note of sadness and foreboding as Willie bids farewell to his boyhood. As in the essay 'Boy', Williamson's management of the changes in emotional tone in this scene is masterly:

Reading V. *Dandelion Days*, chapter 32 (*Flax*, 1 vol. edn., 1936)

p. 544: 'They lit the fire, and soon the spinney lost its pale shade' . . .

p. 546: 'The wheat was tall, and soon would be ripe for harvest: it was July 1914.'

The harvest of 1914 is to be not only of corn, but also of men, and Jack is to be part of that harvest.

Just as the essay 'Boy' ends on an elegiac note, so the last appearance of a Bedfordshire spinney in Williamson's fiction is a threnody for lost beauty and romance. In chapter 4 of *A Solitary War* Phillip Maddison takes Lucy and the children, in November 1939, to stay for the time being with her brother Tim at No. 2, The Glade, Gaultford (drawn from No. 2, The Dell, Bedford). While there he revisits some of the places nearby which he knew in boyhood. Brogborough Spinney (not given a fictional name) 'once so remote and enchanting' now overlooks not 'meadows and fields' but 'an immense brickworks'. His cousin Percy Pickering with whom he had found his first chaffinch's nest in a hedgerow nearby, has been killed in the First World War, as were the crowstarver in 'Boy', together with Bill Nye and Jack Temperley in the *Flax*; now during the Second World War Phillip discovers that the surroundings of the spinney itself have been devastated by industry:

Reading VI. *A Solitary War* (1966) chapter 4

p. 61: 'During his stay at no. 2 The Glade he walked in some of the places he had known as a boy, pretending he was farming the fields which he passed, while knowing that those heavy lands had broken many a farmer' . . .

p. 62: 'The next day he was going back to the farm.'

We remember the passage in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* in which Williamson's dying mother tells him, in 1936, that 'no-one can make farming pay nowadays . . . farming is finished in England. It is all industry now' (pp. 47-8). Some farming relatives have had to give up their farm after many years, having lost their capital in a short time owing to the adverse circumstances of the period. Then some months later, on their way to spend a short camping holiday on their Norfolk farm, Henry, Loetitia and Windles call to see a distant cousin of his mother in Bedfordshire and hear 'an unhappy, pessimistic tale of farming in the face of cheap imported food; and all capital finally lost' (p. 103). Brogborough Spinney is shown as being close to Redfield Farm on an extremely helpful map of the area which accompanies Tom and Joan Skipper's article 'A Gaultshire Guide' (see *Journal* no. 7). They identify Redfield Farm as 'the land which H.W.'s Turney ancestors had "farmed under the duke for four centuries"'.¹² It would seem likely therefore, that behind Phillip's sorrow at the destruction of a 'sweet especial rural scene' (to borrow a phrase of Gerard Manley Hopkins¹³) lies a personal sadness of Williamson himself. When members of the Henry Williamson Society visited Brogborough on 11 May 1986 we could not find the spinney; it seemed to us that it has now vanished completely. We are consoled however by the fact that the destruction is not total; the spinney lives on for us imaginatively 'in ancient sunlight' in Williamson's literary art.

Let us turn to Beau Brickhill House (drawn as noticed above from no. 34 Mount Pleasant, Aspley Guise) and the Pickerings, as they appear in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. We learn in *The Dark Lantern* that Tom Turney, who is to become Phillip's grandfather,

comes from some fifty miles north of London, and that he and his wife Sarah were born on neighbouring farms; Tom's people having been copy-holders from the seventeenth century and Sarah's having been tenants of the Duke for four centuries.¹⁴ Then in chapter 20 of *Donkey Boy*, Phillip, when he is nine years old, goes with his mother and sisters for his first holiday to his relatives at Beau Brickhill. His first impressions of Uncle Jim Pickering, Aunt Eliza, his cousins Percy and Polly and old Mr and Mrs Thacker are very pleasing. On the first night a bolster is placed between Phillip and Percy in the bed they share in case they should not be compatible, but in fact they get on very well together. Phillip is astonished to learn that, unlike his own case, Percy's father never beats him. Percy, for his part, expresses warm appreciation of the 'spiffing lantern' which Phillip has brought with him, little knowing that Phillip has taken it without permission. Meanwhile downstairs the adults discuss family affairs in the kitchen parlour, and an amusing exchange, of the sort that Williamson can present admirably, ensues between Jim, a man of radical views and Hetty, whose husband is a staunch Conservative:

"And how is your husband, Hetty? How does he like insurance after banking?"

"It is more interesting work, Dickie says. The people there are easier to get on with than was the case at Doggett's."

"Look who bank at Doggett's!" exclaimed James, removing the cherry-wood, and appearing to glare. "All the rich Tories, the great landlords! Your husband is well out of such an atmosphere, I should say." His pipe glowed, smoke issued from his nostrils in two streams. "The Duke banks there of course, all the landlords stick together! Give me a local bank anytime, though more and more are being swallowed up by the big ones with headquarters in London, more's the pity."

"Still, they can't do that with the gas, thank goodness, Jim," declared Eliza, and Hetty had to restrain herself from laughing as Jim blew another cloud of indignant smoke from his nostrils. James Pickering was secretary of the local gas company, whose ironwork adjoined the railway station. (*Donkey Boy*, 1952, chapter 20, p. 264)

It is the next day when Phillip fully realizes what a wonderful place he has come to. He thinks the house to be 'the best in the world' and the inhabitants fascinate him, especially Grandpa and Grannie Thacker with their old-fashioned clothes and manners. There is too the exciting prospect of going fishing with Percy; he is about to experience in reality what he has read about in his father's books about fishing:

Reading VII. *Donkey Boy*, chapter 20

p. 264: 'In the morning all were assembled for breakfast in the parlour of Beau Brickhill, as they called the house among themselves' . . .

p. 266: 'He had read all Father's books in the bookcase about fishing, and knew about paternoster tackle, live bait, spinning for pike, and brandling worms for perch.'

During breakfast Phillip has a lively conversation with Grandpa Thacker, at first mistaking his name for Thwacker, which causes much laughter among the adults, although Phillip cannot understand the reason. The old man offers him a ha'penny if he can say 'Thacker' correctly six times, but Phillip, as might be expected, remains silent. Uncle Jim then intervenes, and a passage of gentle humour and shrewd insight into the child mind ensues:

. . . Uncle Jim said: "And I'll give you a penny if you can say 'Theodore Thacker threshed a stack on Saturday and thickly thatched the stack with straw' six times without fault, my boy."

"I'm not so clever as you are, Uncle Whipper," said Phillip, and this time he knew why everyone laughed.

Uncle Jim said: "He's as sharp as a needle, your lad, Hetty."

"Go on, try it," said Aunt Liz, but still Phillip did not attempt it. He wondered where the catch was. Grandpa Thresher gave the cane to Grandma Thacker — Thicker — Thocker — Thugger — B — but he must not think the word cousin Ralph used, for it was a very bad word and meant something awful, like its sound. (Ibid., pp. 266–7)

The fishing expedition with Percy proves to be a very rewarding experience for Phillip; he catches two perch, and then has the joy of seeing some fascinating birds; reed-warblers, sand-martins, and most exciting of all, a kingfisher.

Reading VIII. *Donkey Boy*, chapter 20

p. 267: 'The fishing was almost as wonderful as the books Phillip had read' . . .

p. 268: 'Phillip thought the Duke must be a very big person, and with a very dark, black beard, a sort of giant, or even ogre.'

The next day is Sunday, and everyone except Doris who has a cold, walks to church (drawn from St James's, Husborne Crawley).¹⁵ Phillip's experiences in church are rendered with a wonderful mixture of humour tinged with recollection of the sadness of Hugh Turney's wasted life, not fully understood by Phillip, but making its effect upon the reader all the more strongly because of this:

Reading IX. *Donkey Boy*, chapter 20

p. 269: 'It was suddenly cold inside the church, where the ropes went up and down quickly as men pulled them' . . .

p. 271: 'That had been a long time ago, at the New Cross Empire.'

After church, Phillip's mother tells him to look at the Turney tombstones in the churchyard, hoping to give him a sense of family tradition, but he is too immature to understand this, and slips away with Percy to see 'a jackdaw who could talk, after its tongue had been slit' (p. 271). In the afternoon the children play happily in the garden, Phillip entertaining the others with his mock public speech. Polly Pickering is introduced, who is to play a minor but significant part in Phillip's life later. She is five, as Doris is, but is 'stronger, lithier, more direct, merrier than the round-faced, white-skinned Doris, who, her father declared, took after her German grandmother.' Polly has 'the Irish colouring of her great-grandmother, who had been Thomas Turney's mother: red cheeks, dark curly hair, grey eyes.' In accordance with this appearance she has 'a definite will of her own, where her parents are concerned. Polly would do only what Polly would do'. (p. 273)

Phillip's sense of liberation and spontaneous enjoyment is short-lived. His father gets an inkling from the Bigges that he has taken the deer-stalker hat and dark lantern to Beau Brickhill without permission. Williamson stresses the contrast between the free, joyous life of Beau Brickhill and the constrained unhappy life of Hillside Road, Wakenham. Richard accuses Phillip of taking the lantern and putting a perch into the rain-butt, declaring that if he does not own up that night, he will be sent to the reformatory. The day is spent not entirely happily by Phillip in spite of being taken for a motor-ride by his Uncle Hilary, and in the evening, although he does confess, nevertheless he is thrashed. The reader cannot help remembering Percy's statement to Phillip: 'Dad don't beat me' (p. 259) and realizing that this is partly the explanation why Percy is so much more obedient than Phillip. That Phillip retains happy memories of Beau Brickhill is shown by his basing his composition in the scholarship examination for the grammar school 'A Walk by the side of the River'

on these memories. Now eleven, he remembers the Duke's moors and the Satchville brook (drawn from the Crawley brook);¹⁶ the Duke's ducks nesting in the pollard hollow oaks by the path and the trout and kingcups in the stream. Exercising his burgeoning imaginative powers he adapts these memories, together with those of his old nurse whom he loved, coupled with wish-fulfilling fantasies of the girl he admires from afar, to the theme of his composition, which earns high commendation:

... making the brook much wider, into a river, and putting swans on it, like a real river, and the sunset beyond made it alike on fire, and the rings of rising trout breaking the smooth fire into ripples, to be carried away on the water, and the river was like life flowing past, never to return, and yet always there in flow. And he saw the blue eyes and fair hair of Helena Rolls smiling at him, and she was dead, she had died as a little child. She was his best friend who had asked him always to her parties, and now her spirit was in the water and the sky and in the singing of the birds, and he thought of her like Minnie, she was Minnie, and very near him as he walked alone by the river at sunset, and wherever he went on the seas or across the great spaces of the earth, she would be near him, for she loved God and love was God. (p. 394)

Phillip pays five more visits to Beau Brickhill, one just before, two during, and two shortly after the First World War. At Whitsuntide 1914, Phillip, now working in the Moon Fire Office, goes for a holiday to Beau Brickhill accompanied by Doris. More adult relationships begin to form between the cousins; Phillip feels attracted to the pretty and vivacious Polly, while Percy and Doris begin to fall in love. Williamson captures admirably the beginning of the intrigue which is to develop between Phillip and Polly. On the way back from a visit to Aunt Hepzibiah in the village of Marston Conquest (drawn from Marston Moretaine)¹⁷ he admires 'her red cheeks, so pretty with her black curls' and thinking her 'a sport' decides to stay an extra night 'if she — would she? Polly would' (p. 86). Inevitably he misses the early morning train and has to face the annoyance of his colleagues at Wine Vaults Lane. The whole passage in which these episodes occur is rich in incident and humour, and again we notice the contrast between the easy joyousness of Beau Brickhill and the restrictions of London, although Phillip is now resilient in a way he could not be when a boy of nine:

Reading X. *How Dear is Life* (1954) chapter 6

p. 86: 'Beau Brickhill had always been a lovely place' . . .

p. 87: "'Well, don't let it happen again,'" said Mr Howlett quietly as he went upstairs.'

Perhaps one might see a symbol of foreboding when the young people 'as a memento of the walk put some oak apple sprays, tied to brass wire, in the Satchville brook, whose waters after a year or so would turn the sprays to stone' (p. 86). The relationships between the cousins do not ultimately reach a happy fruition. Phillip exploits Polly sexually, and then as he admits to himself later, virtually jilts her; Percy is killed during the war, and Doris never fully recovers from her sorrow.

Phillip's relationship with Polly is handled very well by Williamson as it develops from adolescent curiosity and experimentation through a troubled physical lustfulness to a sad ending when Polly falsely declares that she is to bear his child. Particularly powerful is the account of Phillip's visit to Beau Brickhill with his mother, early in 1915. He is about to get a commission in the Gaultshire Regiment (drawn from the Bedfordshires) and is happy and proud about this, but is beset by fears for the future. Polly teases him so much that he feels nettled; but nevertheless their affair does flourish up to a point,

although it is overshadowed by his memories of the terrible events of the war and his apprehensions about what he is likely to have to face upon his return to the front:

Reading XI. *A Fox Under My Cloak* (1955) chapter 8

p. 120: 'Exasperated within himself, he walked beside her unspeaking, hoping she would take his arm again' . . .

p. 122: 'He could not say what was in his mind: Polly coming into his bed.'

Polly does come to his bed, but Phillip is cold; petrified like the spray of oak apples he had taken from the brook. On his way to Grantham for his 'transport' course early in 1916, Phillip calls at Beau Brickhill and finds Uncle Jim and Aunt Eliza worried about Percy's imminent departure for the army. Polly once more comes to Phillip's bed, and this time he feels more relaxed with her, having already made love to her at Wakenham the previous autumn. However, his attitude towards her is that of an exploiter; he tells her that she is 'a jolly good sport' and thinks to himself that he will 'pay her out for being a girl'.¹⁸ All his idealistic and more spiritual love is reserved for the unattainable Helena Rolls, and after exploiting further Polly's complaisance while on leave at Lynmouth, the affair ends in sadness and disappointment on Polly's side, which she is too proud to admit to Phillip. When he sees her during his journey south in 1919 for demobilization, he has just learnt that she is to be married to a cousin at Round House Farm (drawn from Brogborough Park Farm).¹⁹ He keeps the conversation light, calling her 'my dear old sporting partner'.²⁰ When in due course they meet before her wedding, Phillip asks her if she loves George, her fiancé, to be told that she is fond of him, but does 'not expect to find true love'. He follows this by asking her if she was hurt by his behaviour after the visit to Lynmouth in 1916, to which she replies: "'I wasn't aware of any particular behaviour on your part.'" ²¹ She has, he reflects, Gaultshire strength, like 'Spectre' West;²² but after the wedding he is forced to recognize that in fact he has broken her heart. In his *Journal* he writes:

At the back of my mind a vague feeling that all was not well with Polly; and that when later, after she had changed into a going-away tweed coat and skirt, she said privately in the little conservatory where withered bunches of grapes hung above us, that she might need my help some day, I felt that, underneath her calm appearance of strength, her heart had broken when I more or less jilted her in September 1916, at the time when the telegram came that Percy was killed and I saw her off at Euston.

(*A Test to Destruction* (1960) chapter 21, p. 390)

After this Phillip's relationship with Polly is virtually over, and she drops almost completely out of the narrative of the *Chronicle*. She is present at the reading of Grandpa Turney's will,²³ and many years later at Hetty's funeral,²⁴ but then we hear of her no more.

The relationship between Percy and Doris, which has fair hope of lasting happiness, is more simply and brutally ended by Percy's death in battle on 15 December 1916. A sad epilogue to their love is given in chapter 3 of *It was the Nightingale* at the séance at the Pole-Cripps's house, when Bob Willoughby, Percy's friend and now Doris's husband seems, as he acts a medium, to look rather like the dead Percy.

To return to an earlier point in the narrative of the *Chronicle*, a profoundly moving elegiac note is struck when Phillip, on his way to be demobilized, calls at Beau Brickhill. He arrives after dark at the house 'where in childhood he had known so much freedom and happiness'. This darkness is not merely physical; Grannie Thacker, now very old and somewhat confused and darkened in mind, mistakes him for the dead Percy returning as though he were still alive. Her brother Grandpa Turney, now eighty, Phillip learns,

has been seriously ill with influenza. There is too in the passage a sombre sense of the past and an impression of shrinkage: the disused stables with their cobwebbed windows, the old calendars in Uncle Jim's office, Grannie Thacker 'dressed in black as always', the horse-hair sofa still there in 'the little room between the office and the kitchen parlour', seeming smaller than ever to Phillip, and Aunt Liz 'small as a pawn on a chess-board'.

Reading XII. *A Test to Destruction*, chapter 20

p. 374: 'Night had fallen, when having passed through Derby and many other towns, he arrived at Beau Brickhill; and turning into the courtyard of the house where in childhood he had found so much freedom and happiness, stopped and dismounted and drew back the Norton on its stand' . . .

p. 375: 'Poor old fellow, he is eighty, and has had this Spanish influenza which is still going about.'

This looks forward to another elegiac passage in which Phillip, late in 1939, when taking Lucy and the family to Tim's house in Gaultford, and seeing many run down farms, remembers the failure of many of his Gaultshire farming relatives during the depression between the two world wars:

Many of mother's Turney cousins, first, second and third removals, had given up during the 'twenties and 'thirties. One farm, after four hundred years from father to son, had lost heart when corn, mutton, and vegetables had ceased to pay. Like Phillip, the son had fought with the regiment in France, but had been defeated after the war by the importation of cheap food — the interest on foreign loans. Howard ploughs had rusted in idleness; the teams of heavy horses sold to Belgium for food; the last thin stubble tumbled down into weeds and after a year or two were that substitute to pasture, called rough grazing. Farmers could fight the blue of gault, but not the blue of Tory Government.

(*A Solitary War*, chapter 4, p. 56)

However by this stage of the *Chronicle*, the reader believes with Phillip, in the value of farming, and has been moved, by the persuasive power of Williamson's art, to resolve to try to ensure that such disgraceful conditions should never return to the English countryside.

One other place in Gaultshire plays a significant part in the *Chronicle*. This is Husborne Abbey, seat of the Duke of Gaultshire, drawn from Woburn Abbey, seat of the Duke of Bedford. As a child, Phillip hears from Percy about the Duke's park, containing 'every kind of pheasant in the world . . . besides ostriches, emus, bison, and hundreds of other animals'.²⁵ In 1916, when on his way to Grantham for his transport course, Phillip decides, as we have noticed, to call at Beau Brickhill, and rides on his motor-bicycle 'past the wall of dark red brick, with massed trees behind its coping' before turning down the lane which leads to Uncle Jim's house, where in the course of conversation with Polly he defends the Duke and his ancestors against her radical strictur echoed from her father.²⁶ Phillip does not know then that he will, later in the war in 1918, live for a time at the Abbey, in the military hospital in the tennis court ward there, convalescing after he has been temporarily blinded by mustard gas. Williamson captures with extraordinary accuracy both the sardonic humour and the human tragedy of life in the wards. As Phillip lies with his bandages on his eyes, he listens to the conversation of the other patients in the ward, interrupted by the sound of the gramophone, playing a song sung by Clarice Mayne, *Give me a little cosy corner, and the boy that I love*:

Reading XIII. *A Test to Destruction*, chapter 12

p. 218: 'Day in the Royal Tennis Court ward of the Duchess of Gaultshire's hospital

meant relief from night — but day brought another kind of endurance, voices talking, talking.' . . .

p. 219: 'He dreaded the time coming when the bandages would be off, he could not face things again.'

However, when he realizes that he can in fact see again, he is overwhelmed with relief, and feels that his hero 'Spectre' West (for whose death he blames himself, falsely as it turns out) is with him, assuring him of pardon:

Reading XIV. *A Test to Destruction*, chapter 12

p. 223: 'Thank God the night sister was coming down the ward' . . .

p. 224: 'He began to cry with relief, he felt that 'Spectre' was with him, telling him that he was forgiven.'

It is at Husborne that Phillip first encounters Melissa, then a child, who is later to play a significant part in the story as one of the girls with whom he has a troubled love affair. From their earliest acquaintance, in spite of the difference in their ages, each is attracted to the other. In the 1930s, Melissa is interested in Phillip's literary work and is able to discuss his political ideas with him. They share some exciting experiences; such as the bathe in the sea off the Norfolk coast in 1939, just before the Second World War, when the water glows with phosphorescent light,²⁷ or the destruction of a restaurant in which they are dining during the London Blitz.²⁸ After the war, Melissa comes to Devon to seek solace in the 'Diaphany' treatment at Oldstone Castle, two of her brothers having been killed on active service, and she herself having been slashed in the face by an Indian ex-P.O.W. in mistake for the woman who had let him make love to her. Melissa has by now developed considerable powers of insight and thus she is able to understand Phillip's difficulties very well. At the end of the *Chronicle* she is going to help him with his great task of writing his long meditated sequence of novels, with which he hopes 'in a very small way to complement Birkin's dream' of regeneration 'by the final order of the European.'²⁹ Phillip thinks that he can now understand different kinds of people, a vital quality in a novelist, and he realizes that this understanding comes from love; the sort of love which Melissa has brought to him and his sister Elizabeth — love which dissolves arrogance and hatred — love by which one can see all things as the sun sees them; without shadows.³⁰ He is thus able to make his ecstatic cry of wonder and triumph: "'O my friends! My friends in ancient sunlight!'"

In Williamson's *Chronicle* some of the characters most notably revealed 'in ancient sunlight' are those in the Gaultshire Regiment in which Phillip chooses to apply for a commission because of his connection with the county.³¹ The noblest of these is 'Spectre' West who plays a vital part in Phillip's development. 'Spectre' represents the best of the volunteer officers; he is a brilliant tactician whose bravery surmounts a bitter hatred and fear of the war. He is kind to Phillip when he is gauche and inexperienced, helping him in his turn towards a difficult courage and self-respect. In spite of serious wounds and partial disablement, 'Spectre' insists on returning to the front, but he never sees victory and the return of peace, being drowned in the Channel when the hospital ship on which he is going home seriously wounded yet again, is sunk. For some time Phillip mistakenly blames himself for his death, having (when temporarily blinded) ordered O'Gorman, his batman, to 'leave his clobber', including he presumes his lifebelt, to go to 'Spectre's' aid when the ship strikes a mine. In the highest traditions of chivalry, 'Spectre' insists that O'Gorman take *his* lifebelt. Phillip learns later that O'Gorman never had a lifebelt, and is thus relieved of his feelings of guilt. However, it is in fact the act of a merciful Providence that 'Spectre' does not live. He has gas gangrene in his wounded

leg, which could well have led to amputation; his love for his cousin Frances has gone unrequited, and the reader is by no means sure that his hopes of becoming a parson in the country after the war would have been realized. Furthermore, we learn at one point that really he does not want to survive the war.³² He lives on in Phillip's memory as a heroic friend to whom he will always be grateful, and at least in imagination if not as an objective benign spiritual presence, he is there to counsel Phillip against suicidal despair after the end of the Second World War.³³

A very different, but for me an extremely attractive character, is Bill Kidd. Although at first he seems to be somewhat of a *miles gloriosus*, referring to himself in the third person, he is in fact brave to the point of rashness. He assists Phillip to capture some German troops, leading them into captivity playing upon his mouth organ.³⁴ By jumping out of a trench and shouting insults at a German aeroplane pilot, made the more vigorous by the use of a 'two-fingered salute', he is able to infuse some steadiness into very young, inexperienced, nervous troops.³⁵ However, he is foolhardy and insubordinate when he refuses to leave his outpost, although ordered rightly by Phillip to retreat.³⁶ Nevertheless we cannot help admiring him as he marches into captivity, playing yet again on his mouth organ, this time in defiance.³⁷ He reappears after the war, having returned to his original job as a cinema commissionaire. A rumour that he has been killed while serving with the Black and Tans in Ireland proves to be false and he goes to Russia with Ironside to assist the Whites against the Reds.³⁸ However, there is something false about his heroics; Phillip realizes later during his visit to the Fawley estate that Bill was originally and to some extent still is, frightened and evasive, but that he has acquired, by admiring imitation of his superiors coupled with sheer will-power, his *persona* of the tough soldier, and that he really does deserve his M.C.³⁹ Nevertheless, still a 'temporary gentleman', he tells outrageous lies about being an 'old Wick' (by which he means Wykhamist) and the nephew of 'Tiny Tinribs' (General Ironside) to boot. He is not above poaching fish and imprudently gets into financial difficulties.⁴⁰ However, when he reappears at the Norfolk farm the reader rejoices. His unwise suggestion about clearing the water-pipes in the old castle with acid merely results in an explosion,⁴¹ but nevertheless his zest and irrepressible vitality mean that we cannot dislike him, and we remain convinced that underneath all his follies he has a good and generous heart.

During Phillip's brief marriage to Barley, the young husband and wife enter 'the Abbey' (drawn I think from St Alban's Cathedral) as a service for the laying-up of old colours of the Gaultshire Regiment is in progress. Deeply moved, Phillip feels at one with the worshippers of previous centuries:

Life was the same moment of Truth, from century to century; the spirit was from everlasting to everlasting.

In that feeling it was neither strange nor ironic that the Colour Party marched up the aisle with fixed bayonets, corks on the points, to deliver the Colour to the Bishop, to receive the Benediction.
(It was the Nightingale (1962), chapter 1, p. 14)

I have long felt that after the priesthood the most noble profession is that of arms, in that both demand heroic self-sacrifice. The death of Father Aloysius from wounds received on the battlefield as he takes spiritual succour to the casualties is part of his vocation, which by its very nature is above every secular calling; but is not 'Spectre' West also to some extent if in a somewhat different way, an *alter Christus* in his sacrifice, and thus permitted to share too in the Passion of Christ? And if so, can it be 'unchristian' for the clergy to accept symbolically in the Colours all the other sacrifices made by members of the regiment, and offer them, by the ceremony of the laying-up, to Almighty God? Surely not. Ultimately Gaultshire for Phillip is more than a 'Great Good Place'; he has

received more than refreshment from it; he has received wisdom and spiritual illumination from reflection on the deeds of its sons. So also can we as readers, and so of course did Williamson as Phillip's creator receive from Bedfordshire a fine inspiration for his art.

NOTES

1. 'The Great Good Place' first appeared in *Scribner's Magazine*, January 1900, and may be read conveniently in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (12 vols., 1962-4) vol. 11, 1900-1903, pp. 13-42, or in *The Novels and Stories of Henry James*, ed. P. Lubbock (35 vols., 1921-3) vol. 21, pp. 195-231.
2. See my article 'Henry Williamson's *The Flax of Dream*: a Reappraisal', *Durham University Journal*, vol. lxxvi, no. 1 (December, 1983) p. 84.
3. This is a major theme in Williamson's writings, as the following catena of references will show. In his autobiographical and reflective writings, see: *The Wet Flanders Plain* (revised edn., 1929) pp. 19-20, 32; *Goodbye West Country* (1937) p. 237; *The Children of Shallowford* (1st edn., 1939) pp. 270-1; *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1941) pp. 29-30, 47-8, 103, 331, 363; *The Sun in the Sands* (1945) p. 83; 'So we poured our Barley into the Gutter', *Daily Express*, 14 November 1938; 'The God Gold', *The Eastern Daily Press*, 4 October 1943; 'Finance and Farming', *ibid.*, 3 January 1944; 'Fuel for the Cutting', *ibid.*, 13 March 1944; 'Seven Years After', *The Adelphi*, vol. 20, no. 2 (January-March, 1944) pp. 46-7; 'Quest', *Woman's Illustrated and Eve's Own*, vol. xx, no. 497 (11 May, 1946) p. 13. In Williamson's fiction, see: *The Pathway*, chapter 4 (1 vol. edn. of *The Flax of Dream*, 1936) p. 1080; *The Phasian Bird* (1948) pp. 11-12, 87, 104, 109-110, 119, 121-3, 135-6, 167, 207-8; *The Dark Lantern* (1951) chapter 29, pp. 397-401; *How Dear is Life* (1954) chapter 12, p. 165; *The Power of the Dead* (1963) chapter 1, p. 32; chapter 16, pp. 354-5; *A Solitary War* (1966) chapter 8, p. 116; chapter 9, pp. 137-8; chapter 23, pp. 322-3; chapter 24, pp. 347, 364-5; *Lucifer before Sunrise* (1967) chapter 5, p. 76; chapter 20, pp. 312-13; chapter 26, pp. 388-9; chapter 29, p. 425; *The Gale of the World* (1969) p. 171. Please note that these and all subsequent references to *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* are to the hard-cover edition (1951-69).
- Cf. Richard Jefferies: 'Walks in the Wheatfields', *Field and Hedgerow* (1889) quoted in Henry Williamson (ed.) *Richard Jefferies: Selections of his work, with details of his Life and Circumstances, his Death and Immortality* (1st edn., 1937) pp. 326-63; *The Story of My Heart* (1883) chapter 7, quoted in Williamson's *Selections*, pp. 231-2; *Amaryllis at the Fair* (1886) chapters 20-5 *passim*, especially the end of chapters 20 and 24. Cf. further, Sir Oswald Mosley, in his books: *The Greater Britain* (2nd edn., 1934) pp. 59-88, 126-33, 158-77; *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered* (1936) questions 47-51, 59, 60; *Tomorrow We Live* (1938) pp. 3-9, 19-22, 33-52, 61-2, 65-6; *The Alternative* (1947) pp. 54-7, 110-12, 158-60, 244-7; *Europe, Faith and Plan* (1958) pp. 22-3, 61-5; *Mosley - Right or Wrong?* (1961) pp. 55-8, 131-7. Cf. further, Sir Oswald Mosley, in his speeches: Speech at the Albert Hall Rally, 28 October 1934, *The Blackshirt*, no. 80 (2 November, 1934) p. 2; Speech on 22 March 1936, *Action*, no. 6 (26 March, 1936) p. 13; Speech at Ridley Road, Hackney, 27 August 1939, *ibid.*, no. 184 (2 September, 1939) pp. 10-11. Mosley's ideas on these topics are reflected in those of Sir Hereward Birkin in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*; cf. *The Phoenix Generation* (1965) chapter 6, pp. 140-3; chapter 8, pp. 191-2; chapter 14, p. 301; chapter 17, pp. 349-50.
4. See Tom and Joan Skipper: 'Henry Williamson's Bedfordshire Roots', *The Henry Williamson Society Journal*, no. 6 (October, 1982) pp. 26-31; 'A Gaultshire Guide', *ibid.*, no. 7 (May, 1983) pp. 23-9.

5. 'A Gaultshire Guide', loc. cit., p. 25.
6. See *The Annabel Cash Collection of Letters from Henry Williamson*, letter no. 51, 21 April 1970. Williamson writes of his efforts to bring 'others to CLARITY' and how when he was but thirteen years old he 'helped a band of poor boys & got food for them etc. And one died beside me at Ypres battle in 1914 — "Winking" Wooldridge, he joined the Guards "to get a crust" — "soldier" in 1914 was a term of contempt among the working classes — who looked down on the shoeless, ragged trouser'd starving gutter boys —' It seems that Cranmer in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* is drawn partly at least from 'Winking' Wooldridge, although the name is given to an unsympathetic bully in the story 'Chronicle of Halbert and Znarr', *The Peregrine's Saga and other Wild Tales* (1st illustrated edn., 1934) pp. 90–117. In the *Chronicle* the bully is called Mildenhall; it is of course not unlikely that these fictional characters have more than one original.
7. *Dandelion Days*, chapter 8 (*Flax*, 1 vol. edn., 1936) pp. 328–9.
8. *Ibid.*, chapter 21 (*Flax*, 1 vol. edn.) p. 435.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 434.
11. *The Dream of Fair Women*, chapter 8 (*Flax*, 1 vol. edn.) p. 633.
12. 'A Gaultshire Guide', *The Henry Williamson Society Journal*, no. 7, p. 29.
13. See Hopkins's poem 'Binsey Poplars, felled 1879', the last line.
14. See *The Dark Lantern*, chapter 9, p. 133; chapter 13, p. 184.
15. See Tom and Joan Skipper: 'Henry Williamson's Bedfordshire Roots', *The Henry Williamson Society Journal*, no. 6, p. 26; 'A Gaultshire Guide', *ibid.*, no. 7, p. 29.
16. 'A Gaultshire Guide', loc. cit., p. 28.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
18. *The Golden Virgin* (1957) chapter 8, pp. 128–9.
19. See *A Test to Destruction* (1960) chapter 20, p. 376; Tom and Joan Skipper, 'A Gaultshire Guide', *The Henry Williamson Society Journal*, no. 7, p. 28.
20. *A Test to Destruction*, chapter 20, p. 376.
21. *Ibid.*, chapter 21, p. 390.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, chapter 23, p. 454.
24. *The Phoenix Generation*, chapter 10, p. 245.

25. *Donkey Boy*, chapter 20, p. 268.
26. *The Golden Virgin*, chapter 8, pp. 122–5.
27. *The Phoenix Generation*, chapter 17, pp. 352–3.
28. *Lucifer before Sunrise*, chapter 1, pp. 27–8.
29. *The Gale of the World*, chapter 25, p. 360.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 361.
31. *A Fox under My Cloak* (1955) chapter 8, p. 116.
32. 'Spectre' figures prominently in the following chapters in the *Chronicle*: *A Fox under My Cloak*, chapters 18, 20, 22, 28; *The Golden Virgin*, chapters 15, 17, 19, 23, 27; *Love and the Loveless*, chapters 12, 14, 17, 21; *A Test to Destruction*, chapters 3–13, 22–3. It is in chapter 12 of *Love and the Loveless* (p. 214) that 'Spectre' (referring to the advances in medical science which the war has brought about, through the treatment of the wounded, himself included) says to Phillip: "'What more can a man ask than that sacrifice be asked of him for the well-being of his own sort? Personally, I should be sorry to survive the war.'"
33. *Lucifer before Sunrise*, chapter 34, pp. 485–6.
34. *A Test to Destruction*, chapter 8, pp. 138–40.
35. *Ibid.*, chapter 9, p. 168.
36. *Ibid.*, chapter 10, pp. 179–81, 184–6.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 190, 192.
38. *Ibid.*, chapter 23, pp. 439–41; *The Innocent Moon* (1961) chapter 6, p. 129; *The Power of the Dead*, chapter 9, p. 208.
39. *The Power of the Dead*, chapter 11, p. 255; chapter 12, pp. 274–5.
40. *Ibid.*, chapter 11, pp. 252–4; chapter 12, pp. 270–2; chapter 14, pp. 319–28.
41. *The Phoenix Generation*, chapter 11, pp. 271–2.

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