

Secretary's Notes

IS THE THAW SETTING IN AT LAST?

Is the outside world and the media perhaps at last beginning to take a more active interest in Henry Williamson and his books?

At the beginning of July *The Sunday Times Magazine* published a long article by Brian Jackman, 'Hunting for Henry's Otter'. After a respectable brief biography, the main theme of the article was to draw comparison between the north Devon — rivers, countryside, estuary and sea, and inhabitants animal and human — that Williamson wrote about in the 1920s, and the changes that have come about in the intervening sixty years. Some of the more obvious changes 'on the ground' were noted — urban and village growth, traffic, the horrendous screech and roar of jet airplanes from Chivenor and more, but much space was also given to the largely hidden and insidious threats of water pollution. Among those interviewed, comments appear from Richard Williamson, Daniel Farson and Trevor Beer. All in all, this was an excellent leader article, but it seemed necessary to take issue with two particular points asserted; namely that from leaving the Western Front Williamson had embraced the fascist beliefs of Oswald Mosley, and that Daniel Farson's book, *Henry* . . . is the definitive biography. Accordingly a letter making the necessary corrections was sent and the portion relating to 'politics' was printed in *The Sunday Times* the following week under the caption, 'A Man of Honour'. As a result of the article a number of interesting letters were received from members of the public — some of whom have subsequently joined the Society — and it was most interesting to note that all were 'pro' Williamson.

In September the BBC ran a short season of selections made from the early nature books by Brian Sanders read on Radio 3 over three consecutive nights by Bill Wallis. (More about these in the notes on the Devon weekend.)

A brief, interesting item was noted on the 28th of the month during the *Wogan* programme on BBC1 TV. Lord Hailsham, talking of the horrors and experience of serving on the Western Front in the Great War (in which he was not personally involved of course), commented that if one wanted to know what it was actually like one could do no better than read the war novels of Henry Williamson!

Next, the *North Devon Journal* carried an article, largely about the special *Tarka* celebrations, on 8th October. Nothing very new, but three half columns with a photograph of Henry, tin spectacles on nose, in 'a pensive mood'.

Over the weekend celebrations a crew and director, from BBC TV South West arrived at Crow Point to film members arriving from the Friday morning boat trip down the estuary from Barnstaple. The film crew were back on Saturday at the field where your President, Richard Williamson, and Mrs Williamson senior were interviewed, and the resulting film went out, regionally only, the following Monday evening. This was videod and so may be seen at a later date.

Other reports of the event were also recorded by BBC Bristol and ITV Plymouth, and also by BBC Radio Devon and Devon Air Radio. Items also appeared in the local *Express and Echo*, the *Western Morning News*, *Bideford and North Devon Gazette*, *Okehampton Times* and the *Tiverton Gazette*. On a national level there was coverage in *Country Life*; while keeping the flag flying in the north country, Dr Wheatley Blench was interviewed for a broadcast by Radio Cleveland. Richard Williamson did sterling work with the local press, television and radio of Sussex.

Finally, to round off October the BBC broadcast, as their tribute to the anniversary,

Tarka as 'The Book at Bedtime' on Radio 4, read by David Davis; a name, and voice, familiar to many of more mature years. Naturally two-and-a-half hours reading time meant abridgement, no doubt anathema or barbaric to some, but I, and I hope others, were able to accept the cuts in order to enjoy a sympathetic but unsentimental reading.

It was also good to see on the front cover of the October edition of *Devon Life* one of the full page illustrations from the new *Salar*, with another plate alongside an interview inside, headed *Leaps & Bounds*, with Mick Loates, Society member, and, of course, the illustrator of the book.

DEVON 1987

A long weekend that was indeed a memorable happening — full of interest and enjoyment; of old friends met, and new made.

Thursday saw a good number of members arrive for dinner and a social evening, where our Chairman thoughtfully introduced those there for the first time to more seasoned campaigners.

The next day dawned dry although windy and over thirty members were taken by bus to Barnstaple and welcomed there by Trevor Beer before embarking on two of Terry Grace's boats. Throughout the trip Trevor Beer pointed out sights of interest and there was competition to identify the numerous birds coming in to feed as the water lapsed rapidly back to the estuary on the ebb of a big Spring tide. Sadly the proposed afternoon walk was officially cancelled as the rain came down in torrents, although a few hardy souls stayed the whole course.

In the evening a large audience welcomed Dr Graham Wills for his pre-dinner talk on *The Tarka Project — and Trail*, which feasibility study he is leading. Speaking essentially from a personal, rather than official viewpoint, he stressed his own concern for adequate conservation, and that safeguards would have to be built-in, especially over sensitive areas, with controls if necessary. Individual comments were always welcomed said Dr Wills, and he would be pleased to hear from anyone if they would contact him at the address given under his article in the *Tarka* special issue of the Journal. Tackled in the right way and over quite a long term, if approved, the Project would offer locals as well as visitors with genuine interest a whole new part of Devon to explore away from the coastal strip and the two Moors, although they too had their part to play in the *Tarka Trail*. Indeed, a good deal of the Trail route was already accessible as the map in the Journal showed. Copies of the full Report could be obtained from him on application. In his vote of thanks the Chairman endorsed this as an exciting enterprise and said that someone from the Society should liaise with Dr Wills, and the committee discuss how best the Society be involved over the longer term.

Dinner over, Brian Sanders, who first met Henry in the 1950s, described the genesis of his idea for broadcast readings from the early nature books. In making his selection, the aim was to attract the listener who was not familiar with the author and to demonstrate the wide range of subject matter covered, although the bias of personal choice had to be admitted. Then followed the three programmes of twenty minutes, with comment between each, all received with wrapt attention. It seemed very timely that some of Henry's finest lyric prose was heard so very close to where it was written almost seventy years ago.

By Saturday the weather relented sufficiently to allow many members to make their annual pilgrimage to Ox's Cross in the dry; even to partake of a cream tea in the open outside the new house. The Writing Hut was noted to be in excellent order inside and out and the Maintenance sub-committee will ensure it stays so by regular waterproofing of the woodwork. Unfortunately the AGM overran its usual compass by so long that it had to be adjourned until Sunday morning, and Hilary Scott, Regional Organiser of

The Vincent Wildlife Trust in Devon, had to put back her prepared illustrated talk to Sunday. However, this was well worth waiting for and brought us right up to date on the otter scene and the valuable work done by this organisation.

The pre-dinner wine and sherry Reception proved most successful — if somewhat crowded as by now about one hundred members and guests were present, and among the latter we were pleased to welcome Tony Speller MP for North Devon, Dr Graham Wills on behalf of the Devon County Council, Richard Emeny representing the Edward Thomas Society, and Daniel Farson — writer and broadcaster.

A very comprehensive professional biography by our President introduced our after dinner speaker, Patrick Garland. To open he recalled his own 'First Meeting with Henry Williamson' which dated back to the 1950s. In his second year at Oxford he found himself in Barnstaple taking part in an early Arts Festival, held at the Queens Hall. Waiting for a drink in the bar one night, a door suddenly burst open in the vicinity of the stage and an elderly white-haired man rushed in and in an agitated voice called out, 'Quick, quick, there is a madman in there setting off fireworks. A lunatic burning fireworks — a mad Devon author; he's called Williamson. Have a drink? What's your name?' 'Oh, I'm Patrick Garland, who are you?' 'I'm Henry Williamson.'

Years later, and by then familiar with Williamson's work, director Garland was to make a film with Williamson to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme — *The Survivor*. Later this was followed by a film — *No-Man's Land* — to mark the 50th year of the end of the Great War. Initially both director and (as he confessed to his Diary) writer were in some trepidation about meeting. The former had heard that Williamson could be difficult . . . In the event it was all quite easy. 'I let the cameras roll, and Williamson spoke until he had finished, and it all worked out very well,' he said. Probably it was not quite as simple, but a strong regard and friendship was established. That this regard was still strong was apparent as Patrick Garland continued his talk with anecdote, admiration and affection. A captivated audience gave our speaker prolonged applause as he moved to sit down.

As a memento of the occasion, and to Henry's family there assembled — to the great pleasure of us all over the weekend — Bill (Windles) from Canada, John, soon to leave for Australia, Margaret, Robert and Richard, and as a specific gift to Mrs Loetitia Williamson, our guest Daniel Farson presented a framed enlargement of a photograph of Henry he took in 1951. Perched atop the arms of the old Ox's Cross signpost, Henry is precariously balanced, angular frame and head almost in silhouette as he gazes to the West.

There remained the Raffle — organised by our Chairman — to draw, the winners being picked and announced most charmingly by Robert Williamson's daughter Sarah. The amount raised by this item for Society funds was over £100.

Another highlight of the weekend was the 'Tarka Exhibition' arranged and mounted by Tim Osborne. Ultimately the memorabilia collected together for the occasion utilised a whole room off the foyer, and came from a number of sources including Messrs Penguin, the Williamson family, The Devon County Council, and John Gregory. Copies of the book ranged from one of the Hundred Vellum Private Printing to Russian and Japanese editions; letters written over the years to and from the various publishers; mementoes of the Cheriton Otter Hunt, and miniature otters in various materials from Henry's writing desk, including one in pottery made by Robert Williamson, aged 13. A truly informative and exhaustive display for which all who loaned items must be thanked, and for which Tim must be congratulated.

John Gregory brought along a selection of Society publications and did brisk business especially with *Days of Wonder* freshly available from the printer. Also on display were advance copies of the new *Illustrated Salar the Salmon* which provoked great interest.

If all was not perfection, there is no doubt that the general comment was one of

satisfaction and happy memories, and we may hope that if Henry's spirit was somewhere near in the air, he approved. Certainly there was a strong spirit of goodwill apparent, and for this alone I am sure he would have been content.

T.E. LAWRENCE SOCIETY

Formed in 1985, the T.E. Lawrence Society already has a good membership spread worldwide although the strongest contingent live in Dorset. Their main purpose is to further knowledge and encourage research into the life of Lawrence, and various projects such as compiling an archive and preparing a Centenary handbook (1988) are under way. At least four meetings are held annually and have included lectures and visits to places associated with Lawrence. There is a Society newsletter. Membership costs £5 per annum for up to two people at the same address, in this country, or Europe £7 per household, other Overseas £8 per household. Application forms and further details are available from:

The Secretary: G.R. Williams
27 Wright Close, Plymouth PL1 4SS

I feel sure many members will welcome this news, and there is obvious potential and scope for liaison and friendship to develop between the two Societies.

JH

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THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 1988

will be held over 7–9 October

at

THE PUTSBOROUGH SANDS HOTEL, GEORGEHAM

with a

FULL PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

Details will be included in the Autumn Mailing
to be sent to members by late AUGUST 1988