The Apprenticeship of a Novelist: the Early Unpublished Fiction of Henry Williamson

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Part I

Among the treasures in the Henry Williamson Archive in the University Library at Exeter, are three early unpublished novels written by him in the period 1917–20. They are apprentice work, and artistically are not so good as any of his published novels, but nevertheless they have much interest and significance. In this article I shall give a description and critical account of them, seeking to show how Williamson's art develops in them, and relating them to his published work. As the first two of these novels are untitled, and the third is called 'The Flax of Dream', but differs very considerably from the published tetralogy of that name, I shall refer to them in order of composition, as novel A, novel B and novel C.

In the case of published work, the critic can assume at least some knowledge of the text, but in the case of unpublished work it is necessary to describe it as well as criticize it; otherwise the reader has no way of testing the critical opinions offered. For this reason, and also because I think that an account of the action of these novels is likely to be of interest to the student of Williamson's writings, I shall include full summaries of their plots in the course of this article. I shall seek to demonstrate that novel A, the earliest of the group, presents cruder, less rich and less well-written drafts of some scenes later developed with great success in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, but that nevertheless it has at times a certain freshness and charm. I shall suggest that novel B, which is much less realistic than novel A, and is further removed from what we know of Williamson's actual life, represents in some ways a false development; but that novel C shows a considerable advance upon the earlier two, and reaches out towards the satisfying achievement of the published *The Flax of Dream*.

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Novel A is found in two quarto notebooks in Williamson's handwriting. The first of these bears the inscription 'Lieut. H.W. Williamson, 1st Battn. Bedf. Regt., 5 Division B.E.F.' It is undated and the pages are unnumbered. The novel begins on what is in fact page 25, and is preceded by various military notes, including some on the organization of gas-warfare in France. The second notebook is inscribed: 'Henry Williamson: His Book. Written during June, July, Aug. Sept. & Oct. 1918. During the war at Felixstowe.' From this I think that we may fairly deduce that the earlier part of the novel, that is the portion found in the earlier notebook, was written in the months immediately preceding June 1918. This accords with the statement made by Williamson in a broadcast talk about his novels in the series 'The World of Books' (1961) that he began as a novelist in the winter of 1917–18, with the intention of recreating his 'world before the war'. He tells us in his Presidential Address to the Francis Thompson Society, 'In Darkest England' (1967) that reading the poems of Francis Thompson during the Summer of 1917 in Flanders, 'the wettest summer for fifty years', led to 'a discovery of' his 'true or inner

self, while the field-gun barrages advanced in six lines of rolling fire and smoke before the struggling movements of the infantry'.[1] Williamson had indeed begun as a Nature essayist before this; he wrote 'Winter's Eve' during the winter of 1914–15, and 'A Feathered Waster' together with 'Cuckoo Notes' in 1916, including both pieces, probably after some revision in *The Lone Swallows* (1922).[2] However, I think that the self-knowledge which he attained as a result of reading Francis Thompson's poems gave him the essential stimulus to try his hand at fiction.

According to 'The World of Books' broadcast referred to above, the first scene which he tried to create for a novel was not in fact from his 'world before the war', but from 1916; it is that of a country lane in Devon near the Atlantic, along which he walked in June of that year. Using his mature technique Williamson brings vividly before our eyes the details of the scene:

> *A scene of summer and a rocky lane above a calm blue Atlantic ocean. Dust glinted on the deserted lane and upon the dust, scarcely to be seen, were the footmarks of small birds; goldfinches, a lark and a yellowhammer . . . I was alone in the world, listening to the faint sound of summer wavelets breaking on the miles of empty sands, three hundred feet below. Rising out of the hedge of blackthorn and ash, and twined with honeysuckle, wild roses and teazles, was a small bleached telegraph pole carrying a single wire of green copper to the next coast-guard hut. Upon the wire sat a corn-bunting uttering its reedy little notes. Far up in the blue sky herring gulls were passing, chalky-white, looking to my upturned eye to be oaring themselves with little jerks of crooked wings.*[3]

However, he tells us, what he actually wrote, with a mixture of apprehension and elation, as he sat in a cubicle in an asbestos army hut all those years ago, under the impression that he was conveying this scene, was: 'the weather was beyond reproach and the sun shone in a cloudless sky.' He goes on to recount, as he had already done in print,[4] how about a year after the armistice, he had an early nature article returned by Sir Theodore Cook, then editor of *The Field*, with the advice: 'You should avoid *clichés*'. This led Williamson first of all to revise, and then to scrap the draft of a novel, so that he could start again and recreate in fresh and vivid words the scenes and characters which arose in his imagination. he had learned a vital lesson about literary style.

It was a rewarding moment for me as a researcher when I read the beginning of the manuscript of novel A:

> *A man was wandering along one of the deep narrow lanes of Devonshire. It was in the month of May and the weather was beyond reproach. The sun glared down brilliantly from an absolutely cloudless heaven. High up in the sky a lark was singing — its notes seeming to merge into each other in one long rambling trill.*

True, this passage is slightly more elaborate than the thirteen-word sentence which Williamson declared was the start of his first attempt at a novel, but it is recognizably similar, and it seemed likely that I had discovered a draft of Williamson's very first novel.

How then does novel A develop, and what are its literary qualities? The opening sentences quoted above are from a cancelled prologue, through which Williamson had drawn a line, but nevertheless it is of great interest, and deserves attention here. The fictional time of this prologue is some years after the war, then still in the future for the young author. It recounts how the man (as yet unnamed) looks over a gate and sees an unchanged scene, remembered from some years ago: 'the old sheep pen in the corner, sheltered from the wind by the sides of the hill . . . the quarry cut into the hill, and the small heap of reddish brown slates at the bottom.' The man watches a kestrel hovering

and diving, and then as he climbs the gate he notices the letters: 'W.H.M. and E.F.D. underneath them'. They must have been carved, he recalls: 'the summer that he had spent in Georgeham years ago during the war, when he and his boyhood friend John Temperley were on leave together'. He fills his pipe and reflects:

> *"Good Lord", he soliloquised, "fancy coming across those initials after all these years. I must have been with Jack when I carved them. Ah well, it's no good thinking of those days — it only makes me despair to think that they are dead and can never come again."*

The reader will by now have surmised, as Williamson reveals a little later, that the speaker is Willie Maddison, and that the initials are his own and those of a girl whom he loved. The girl's name is also given in due course; it is Elsie Donaldson, and as I shall point out, her character is a first sketch of the Elsie Norman of the published *The Flax of Dream* and the Helena Rolls of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. For the identification of the 'original' of these three fictional characters, we shall have to wait for Richard Williamson's eagerly expected biography of his father, but there is little doubt, I think, that Terence Tetley, Williamson's boyhood friend, is to a large extent the original of Jack Temperley both in novel A, and in the published *Flax*. In this connection it is worth noting that in the chapter 'First Day of Spring — the Engboo' of *The Village Book* (1930) Williamson writes of the 'sands, where in 1916 my friend and I ran naked and shouting into the sea: the days before the Somme, when the illusion of youth wandered over the sea and the sky' (pp. 157–8). It would seem that it is this leave which he is referring to fictionally in the Prologue to novel A.

Having lit his pipe, Willie walks up the slope towards the quarry until from the higher ground he sees the sea. To the right is Morte Point, Wollacombe is three miles away round the bay; in front is the open sea with gulls upon it. This is of course the scene which was to mean so much to Williamson throughout all his life, and which is now familiar to the members of the Henry Williamson Society through their visits to the Putsborough Sands Hotel. The narrative continues with an early tribute to Baggy Point — always a very special place for Williamson:

> *Turning his head to the left, he saw Baggy Point — the el Dorado of his youth. What scenes had this rugged black promontory not held for him! He remembered how, years ago, also in the month of May, some mischievous boys had set fire to the gorse and bracken on this headland, and how he had been out all night, warmed by the fire, and catching rabbits as they rushed frenziedly out of the crackling furze-roots — some also, alas, badly burned, and squeaking with agony.*

Next day the headland was smoking and Willie was sad because so many of his beloved birds must have perished. He recalls also how he found a buzzard's nest in the cliff, and had a difficult climb back, nearly letting go twenty yards from the top.

Then follows a fascinating description of Willie in which we can recognize aspects of Williamson himself, although I do not think that it is intended to be, any more than in fact it is, a complete self-portrait:

> *His face was rather a curious one — to a student of faces. High cheekbones, dark hair — not black but rather mouse-coloured — and brown eyes. The eyes of a dreamer — of a sentimentalist. One could imagine that they would easily fill with tears — that their owner was quickly moved to joy and sorrow — chiefly the latter. Dark eyebrows, and a somewhat pale complexion . . . About six feet tall, of average breadth, and a thin spare figure, but not without a certain wiriness.*

Maddison gives people the impression of having an artistic temperament, although unlike Williamson himself, he is not *creative*; he can only *appreciate* music, poetry and paintings. Such men, comments Williamson, are idealists, and 'are capable of deep . . . affection — whether it be for friend or maiden'. Willie's memories of his youthful adventures at Georgeham now only make him melancholy. He has had a wasted life: 'ideals broken and cast aside by his own weakness of character, and by opportunities deliberately lost or neglected'. In this he is very unlike the Willie Maddison who appears in the published *Flax of Dream* tetralogy; *he* is indeed an idealist, but he remains true to his ideals and seeks to convert others to them.

To return to the action of novel A, Willie retraces his steps, and as he climbs back over the gate he utters a contemptuous exclamation at the carved initials. He proceeds up the lane to Georgeham (named without fictional disguise) where he is staying at the Rock Inn. Now he regrets coming back, and feels foolish for returning. In the taproom of the inn he meets an old roadmender who is still using a gift which he gave him in 1916; a gun-metal Service matchbox, bearing his name: 'Lieut. W.H. Maddison, September 1916'. Memories of the taproom come to him; he recollects how he and Jack Temperley would play whist with the 'natives' as he terms them. Old George, the roadmender, leaves, and Willie goes out into a field nearby. He lies down, falls into a reverie, and then sleeps. He dreams about scenes from his past life, and these form the rest of the novel, which is however, unfinished, at least as far as I could discover in the Archive at Exeter. This prologue is rather naïve in tone, and shows little of Williamson's later mastery of language, but it does, I think, show promise. It is significant in that it indicates that Georgeham and its surroundings had already at this early date entered deeply into Williamson's imagination. He chose it and Baggy Point as the first scene for his first attempt at fiction.

The novel develops, not as one might expect, by giving an early draft of the action of *The Beautiful Years*, but by giving a first version of some of the scenes in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*; scenes which give the impression of being fairly close to those of Williamson's actual life, rendered indeed with much less richness and vividness than in the *Chronicle*, but nevertheless not lacking an attractive and appealing simplicity. Book I, chapter 1, gives a 'flashback' to the activities of the Bloodhound Patrol of Boy Scouts, later to be portrayed in much greater detail and variety in *Young Phillip Maddison*. Phillip however is a character not yet created by Williamson; his role is here played by Willie, who in novel A lives in Bromley, not at Rookhurst as in *The Flax of Dream*, nor at Wakenham (Lewisham) as does Phillip in the *Chronicle*.

'It was a Saturday afternoon', Williamson writes, 'and consequently a half holiday. Parade for the patrol had been ordered for two o'clock, and it was now two-thirty'. No-one has yet arrived at the parade ground, and Willie is swearing with annoyance. He is 'a tall, thin, dark youth of about fourteen', and when a girl approaches he reacts with excitement: 'curiously enough his heart began to thump under his scantily covered ribs in quite a funny manner'. Needless to say, the later Williamson would never have written so clumsily as this, but the reader is fascinated to recognize in this girl, called Elsie Donaldson, a first portrayal of the Elsie Norman of *The Flax of Dream* and the Helena Rolls of the *Chronicle*. Willie reflects delightedly upon her prettiness: 'her large blue eyes and long dark lashes, and her lovely long plait of brownish hair'. Her manner to Willie is pleasant but cool, and he feels unhappy that it is not warmer. Then a small boy comes towards him: 'a boy in a grey suit and a cloth cap, and worsted stockings that showed his bony brown knees'. He is called John Temperley, not Desmond Neville, as in the similar scene in the *Chronicle*, but doubtless both characters are drawn to a large extent from Terence Tetley. The boy doffs his cap, and says 'in a shy throaty voice': ' ''Please, Willie, Mother says may I join your patrol?'' ' Thus already Williamson has introduced the two important characters in Willie's young life; the 'maiden' and the 'friend'.

Jack is welcomed into the patrol, and after three other members appear, they march off down Hayes Lane to Hayes Common. During the march the scouts engage in some 'ragging' of each other, but Willie pays little attention, absorbed in his thoughts about Elsie. He is not, however, the complete young romantic; when they pass some elms with rooks in them, he thinks that he must bring his catapult there, an instance, comments Williamson, of the instinct for the chase which is in every boy. After they arrive at the Common, they rest for a time, drinking from Boer-war water bottles, and then begin the exercise, which is to consist of Willie and Jack trying to get through an outpost line thrown by the others. As is the way with boys, the exercise is not taken very seriously; instead of attempting to infiltrate the others' position, Willie and Jack chat to each other, and thus begin to become acquainted. Willie asks Jack if he has ever done any birdnesting, and upon his reply that he has done only a little at Nottingham where his uncles live, suggests that perhaps in future they can go birdnesting together:

> *Jack expressed great keenness and so the first link was forged that was to bind them together and make them two most perfect friends — during boyhood and early youth at any rate.*

As it is a hot day they lie down and snooze, only waking up with merry laughter after the time for the exercise has gone past. They return to the others who also have abandoned the exercise and are cooking a meal over a fire. Willie helps with this, frying some sausages and chips. Sausages were good then, remarks Williamson ruefully, not the miserable things served to the Home Forces in 1918! As they sip tea Willie confesses that he and Jack had snoozed rather than tried to get through their ranks, and he is very interested to learn that during this time the others had seen Elsie and her sister cycling on the Common.

At this point Williamson attempts an analysis of Willie's personality. He is mercurial, having much of his gentle mother in him. Reflecting on the future, he resolves never to drink or gamble, because he has seen waxworks at Madame Tussaud's depicting the downfall of a young man through cards, wine and women. He is inexperienced of course, comments Williamson! Willie recalls his holiday the previous year at Hayling Island, already feeling regret for the past, which is to become one of his prime emotions. As the boys march home, Willie delights in the beautiful evening; it is an evening like that described in Gray's *Elegy*, one of his favourite poems. This strain of melancholy is found also in his liking for sad music. There are, comments Williamson, dangers in such a temperament.

After the break-up of the parade, Willie and Jack walk home together, and arrange to meet the following day for a walk. Back at home, Willie is relieved to find that his father is out, as he has returned rather late; it is after nine o'clock. Willie is the only son in the family, Williamson informs the reader, although he has two sisters, 'one of seventeen and the other eleven'. This was of course Williamson's position in his real family; he was the middle child, not the eldest as Phillip Maddison is. The chapter ends with Willie telling his mother about Jack, who goes to the same school, although they had not known each other much hitherto. However on the following Wednesday they will make an expedition to Chesham Park.

A comparison of this chapter with chapters 9 and 10 of *Young Phillip Maddison* ('The Big Parade' and 'Bloodhounds on the Trail') will show very clearly the difference between Williamson's apprentice work and that which he did when a master of the craft of writing. The narrative of novel A has something of the attractiveness of the spirit of youth, but it is much less rich and fine than that in the *Chronicle*. It is but an early sketch; the later work is a detailed and complex canvas. There is nothing in novel A about the rebellion of the corporal (Peter Wallace in *Young Phillip Maddison*) and his setting up of a rival patrol,

the Greyhounds. Again, there is nothing about the part the adults play in the background of the scouting venture — Phillip's mother, grandfather, and uncle Hugh. The main difference of course is that the tone and temper of the *Chronicle* passages is infinitely more mature than that of the sketch in novel A. Nevertheless the sketch is distinctly alive, and it is worth noting that in this first attempt at fiction, after Georgeham it was his pre-war scouting days that Williamson wanted to recreate.

The 'Purley Prout' episodes do not appear in novel A; in chapter 2 of Book I Williamson proceeds immediately to describe how Willie and Jack share a delight in nature and begin to forge a close relationship. The narrative continues directly with an account of a visit which Willie and Jack make on the day following the scout parade to some woods near Bromley, adjoining the golf-links. Walking in these woods is forbidden, but this merely adds excitement to the boys' excursion. Two ponds adjoin the woods, 'one small and one large, covered with water lilies and bordered with rushes'. In these ponds are carp, perch, roach and dace, but fishing is not allowed. As the boys sit by the large pond, Willie tells how he found a kingfisher's nest, and as they walk through the woods, he recounts how he found nests of other birds. Jack is fascinated by Willie's stories and Williamson comments that nature study is good for boys. At this very early stage of his writing career, before he had read Richard Jefferies's *The Story of My Heart*, Williamson does not express any mystical feeling for nature, as he was shortly to do in *The Beautiful Years* (1921) and in many of the essays in *The Lone Swallows* (1922). Nevertheless he does render the absorbing excitement which an interest in Nature can bring to boys of Willie's and Jack's age.

After hiding from a keeper they find an owl's nest in an elm. The owl flies forth, mobbed by other birds; there are three eggs in the nest, but Willie is careful to take only one. The owl as we know was to become Williamson's totem and it is not surprising to find it making an appearance both in the early essay 'Winter's Eve' already referred to, and in this first novel. After the boys see a nightjar, Jack finds a hedgehog which he decides to take home for the garden. When they return to Bromley Jack asks Willie into his house to meet his mother. The hedgehog drinks some milk, but is not allowed to stay in the house because hedgehogs usually carry lice. It is put into the garden, but next day it has gone. Willie stays for supper, and so the friendship between the boys is cemented. Williamson's comment on this has a pleasing simplicity and purity — and for the reader of today something of a 'period' flavour:

> *The two boys were already very fond of each other, and it was the beginning of an ideal friendship, that very few boys really possess.*
>
> *A boy has many friends of course, but he can have only room for one friend — I mean a friend he confides in, one who knows him thoroughly, and understands him and in whom he can trust. Very few of these perfect boyhood friendships stand the test of time, and they are usually broken by some trivial occurrence. But it is generally through trivial things that the tragedies of life occur, at least at the beginning.*

Again one notes that the verbal expression is rather clumsy, but the feeling is genuine and the comment has a measure of truth.

Chapter 3 of Book I recounts how for the next three years Willie and Jack are 'inseparable'. They both possess bicycles, and on every possible occasion they go out into the country to fish, tramp in the woods and search for birds' nests. However, while Willie particularly delights in birds, Jack is more interested in fishing. Willie keeps pet birds, taken when fledglings. In different years he has two jackdaws, a jay and a brace of kestrels. His custom is to let them loose when strong enough to fend for themselves; they come back for a short time for food, then return to the wild. During the three years

of their friendship, relates Williamson, both boys have grown considerably, but Willie remains thin; Jack, although three years younger, has become the bigger and sturdier of the two.

The action of this part of chapter 3 may be compared with chapters 18 and 19 of *Young Phillip Maddison* ('Spring Fever' and 'Woodnotes Wild'). Again the *Chronicle* is very much richer and more complex. In novel A, Willie does not write letters to local landowners requesting permission to visit their woods as Phillip does, and the incidents in these chapters of the *Chronicle* are more varied and vividly rendered.

Chapter 3 of Book I of novel A continues with an account of Willie's apprehensions about leaving school. He is now seventeen, and will leave school at the end of the summer term. His father wants him to join an uncle in Australia to work on a sheep farm, but Willie does not want to do this. The thought of leaving his mother is unbearable, and he would miss Jack terribly. He does not want to go to Cambridge to study at the University, nor to a farming college in England — which at least accords with his father's view that British farming is played out. Finally, he does not want to leave Elsie, although she is still indifferent to him, adopting only an attitude of 'gay camaraderie' towards him. He continues to worship her from afar; her people are neighbours and he is able to see her at church, or out walking.

A comparison of this part of chapter 3 with chapter 29 of *Young Phillip Maddison* ('Ghosts') shows once more how much Williamson's art had matured in the *Chronicle*. The *données* of the story of novel A preclude of course the description of Phillip's visit to Rookhurst, and the handling is more deft of Phillip's dread of leaving school and reluctance to go to his uncle Hilary in Australia. He has never got on with Hilary, and a visit to the Voyager's Club to dine with him does not go well. Furthermore, Phillip's decision not to go to Australia is reinforced by Willie's similar reluctance to go.

Chapter 4 of Book I of novel A deals with the end of Willie's schooldays. He has been rather a slacker, and in his last term is in the 'special class' which is for those not proceeding to a University. However he retains his interest in the countryside and its wild life, he is writing a 'Nature Diary' as Williamson himself did.[5] His friend in this class is 'Bony' Watson, a bespectacled six-footer. Occasionally they go out together, but Jack, although in a lower class, remains Willie's constant companion. One day Willie suggests a 'rag' to the class; as an exercise they have been told to write a letter to a newspaper, so they all choose the same topic — when they first heard the cuckoo that year — to the discomfiture of Mr Roberts, the junior housemaster.

With the end of term comes the parting; Willie bids farewell to the staff who are now very 'jolly' to him:

> *'Taffy' the Physics and Maths master, who used to be so sarcastic, and had such a heavy hand. 'Old Scratch', that dear old sportsman, the favourite master in the school, grey-headed and understanding the* genus puer *thoroughly. Then there was 'Bunny' Bennett, another sportsman, who specialised in History.*

'Bunny' had been amused rather than angry when one day Willie brought his pet white rat Timmy to school. Then Willie takes his leave of the headmaster:

> *A fine man, the Head, a scholar and a gentleman. But he did not quite understand boys. He believed in work and its value to a tremendous degree, and tried to instil some of his enthusiasm into the senior boys. On the subject of 'that mental power' he was almost fanatical, or so it seemed to his pupils. The result being of course, that a good deal of hypocrisy went on. After a rather fine piece of Ovid or Vergil, he would ask "What boys enjoyed that 10?" (the maximum). A show of hands. "Five?" A show of hands. "Nought?". Two boys.*

"Headaches, boys?" "Yes Sir". "Minus Ten?" This was often an opportunity for Willie or a similar miscreant to make himself prominent. "Why not?" the 'Old Bird' would ask. "Well Sir, I don't exactly know, but I don't like the stuff at all". Rather tactless of course, but then quite honest. Quite frequently though, Willie's hand would go up with the majority.

A comparison of these passages with the depiction of Willie's life at Colham Grammar School in *Dandelion Days* even in the first edition, but more particularly in the revised edition, will show how much Williamson had learned about the humorous portrayal of school life, carrying with it an *implied* comment. Mr Rore and his staff are presented in *Dandelion Days* in such a way that their very words and behaviour make the reader see what is wrong with them as educators, in scenes of extraordinary liveliness and humour.

The headmaster's message to the leavers is rendered 'straight' in novel A:

'. . . Work is the only thing, as you will all find out sooner or later. Work brings happiness generally.

The world is full of tigers and sharks, waiting to seize their prey. Keep straight, live clean, and you will avoid them.

. . . Keep your honour untarnished, boys. Play the game. Then if things don't go well, you will have done your best at any rate . . .'

In *Dandelion Days* a similar message is given with comic exaggeration when Mr Rore comes upon Willie and Jack wrestling in the dust of a country lane. After he goes, they collapse in helpless laughter.[6] In the *Chronicle* the presentation of Phillip's last days at school has a somewhat different tone. The episode of Milton's possible copying of Phillip's answers in the arithmetic examination and Mr Rore's attempts to get at the truth gives a certain uneasiness to the end of Phillip's school career.[7] There is nothing in novel A comparable to the Bagmans' Outing which forms a lively and varied chapter in *Young Phillip Maddison* (ch. 30). Chapter 4 of Book I of Novel A ends with Williamson's comment that Willie's schooldays finished in July 1913, and that 'since that date, nine out of the twenty-two' in the special class have been killed in the war. In particular:

Burrell lies buried somewhere near Gommecourt, having fallen in the tragic and fruitless assault on that stronghold on 'July the first'.

'Bony' Watson was observed to fall out of control, flames issuing from his machine during an encounter with the 'Baron' over 'Mossy-Face' Wood.

As for Willie 'perhaps it would have been better had he joined the nine out of twenty-two', — presumably because as Williamson stated in the Prologue, he has had a wasted life.

Chapter 5 of Book I of novel A opens with the rather jejune comment: 'The next year of our hero's life was an eventful one, as far as experiences went'. Willie joins a firm of brokers in Mincing Lane, of which his uncle is one of the partners. He dislikes being cooped up in the office but at least the hours are short (10 a.m. — 4 p.m.). There is nothing in novel A to correspond to the richly humorous depiction of Phillip's life in the Moon Fire Office in Wine Vaults Lane (*How Dear is Life*, chapters 1–6). At this point in the action of the *Chronicle*, Desmond Neville is away at a school near Chelmsford, but in novel A Jack Temperley is still at Bromley, and Willie's friendship with him is 'still the *force majeure* of his life'. The boys continue their nature rambles, and as a different diversion sometimes visit the Lewisham Hippodrome. Often Jack pays for Willie's seat because he is 'a very generous boy'. In this he is unlike Desmond Neville who borrows from Phillip and does not repay him. On Saturday afternoons and Sundays the boys fish in the lakes in Chesham Park; they catch few fish but enjoy being together. One Saturday

afternoon they sit by the lakeside, when Willie has just returned from a holiday on his own in North Devon. He has had a good time, but wished that Jack had been with him. The holiday itself is not described, unlike Phillip's Devon holiday which is rendered with great vividness in chapters 7 and 8 of *How Dear is Life* ('Excursion' and 'Summer's Lease'). It is a peaceful evening; the birds are singing and the water lilies are in bloom. (At this point the first manuscript notebook described at the outset ends and the story continues without a break in the second notebook.) The boys smoke, although Jack is only fifteen, and they reminisce about their first Scout camp with 'old Price', who stole their patrol tent 'when the row came and he was kicked out of the troop'. One wonders if old Price refers to the same 'original' as Purley Prout. Before the boys go home Willie hides his fishing rod, but never goes back to use it; it is July 1914. So ends Book I of novel A.

Book II takes the reader into the war, and covers more or less the same ground as that part of the *Chronicle* from chapter 9 of *How Dear is Life* to chapter 16 of *A Fox Under My Cloak* where the action of novel A breaks off unfinished. In his essay 'In Darkest England' already referred to, Williamson tells us that 'a great soldier' who had befriended him (possible the original of Spectre West), having remarked, as they walked together in 1917 towards Passchendaele, that the slums had died in Flanders, added: 'You must write what you saw and learned.'[8] These chapters in novel A seem to be his first attempt to do this.

Chapter 1 of Book II opens on August Bank Holiday 1914. There is a great feeling of excitement in the air, and after a game of tennis, Willie and Jack go to the High Street in Bromley in search of news. War does come, and on 5 August 1914 Willie goes to his office to inform his colleagues that he intends to join up. He joins the territorial battalion of the London Regiment, in the expectation that he will do only 'home service' and 'be home by Christmas'. He is still too shy to call on Elsie to say farewell. At first things are quite slack and for a week he is able to get home most evenings. However when the news of the reverses in Belgium comes through Willie volunteers for Imperial Service abroad on 'lines of communication'. The march of the troops to Camp Hill at Crowborough is described in its various stages. They march over London Bridge and reach Wimbledon Common. Sleeping accommodation is provided in a County Council school nearby, but before turning in Willie goes with a new friend and fellow volunteer, Baldwin, to a pub 'The Checkers' for a beer and a game of billiards. The next night is spent in barns in a village adjacent to Horsley Towers, the seat of Lionel, Earl of Lovelace. Thence they proceed to Bisley camp, where Willie encounters Lance-corporal Mortimore, who has been there for some time, and finally they reach Camp Hill near Crowborough via Guildford and East Grinstead. This account of Willie's early days in the army is close to Williamson's actual experiences, described in the Foreword to the facsimile edition of *The Wipers Times* (1973). Conditions in the camp are poor; the troops have no food on the night of arrival. After a period of training Willie gets a short weekend leave in early October. He goes home and has tea with Jack on the Saturday; during a walk on the Sunday he sees Elsie.

Willie Maddison's war experiences are not described in the published *Flax of Dream* but this chapter of novel A may be compared with chapters 9–11 and 13–18 of *How Dear is Life*. Again one notes the greater richness of the later novel. There is nothing in novel A corresponding to Phillip's quasi-mystical experience in the sunshine in the street near his office on the Friday of August Bank Holiday weekend. In novel A the tennis match on 'the Hill' on August Monday is between Willie and Jack only, whereas in *How Dear is Life* the players are Richard, Willie, Desmond and Phillip, with Eugene (Desmond's new Brazilian friend) as spectator. On Tuesday 5 August Phillip and Willie go to the West End to witness the exciting scenes taking place there, and when they return home Richard plays the *Liebestod* from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* on his gramophone. On

Wednesday 6 August, Phillip visits Mrs Neville and is put out to find that Desmond and Eugene have gone to *his* 'preserves'. Phillip is already in the London Highlanders, and Willie decides to join the London Rifles. There is nothing in novel A of the Bishop of London's 'pep talk' to the troops, nor of the episode when the King inspects them from a grassy mound as they march past. There is nothing either to correspond to Dora's recollection of conditions in Dublin on the eve of war nor of her reflections on the conflict and its causes.

Chapter 2 of Book II of novel A recounts how in late October, training being completed, active service is announced for Willie's battalion. He telegraphs his parents, who come down to see him and give him lunch at the Beacon Hotel. The next day Willie gets a short leave and goes home once again. He feels very sad; he is only eighteen and a 'home boy'. His father plays Gounod's *Maying* on the gramophone. Willie cannot summon up the courage to call upon the Donaldsons to say goodbye, so Jack sees him off at London Bridge Station.

This chapter may be compared with chapters 16 and 17 of *How Dear is Life* ('A Luncheon Party' and 'Cigar for a Soldier'). In the later novel Phillip's 'last look' at his bedroom is rendered with a richness and sensitiveness well beyond the powers of the apprentice novelist. The social scene at home is more varied; in the sitting-room are Richard, Mavis, Doris, Petal, Mrs Neville and Desmond. Later Thomas and Marian Turney call. Phillip has a private talk both with his father and his mother, and discusses his feelings for Helena Rolls with Hetty. The parting with Desmond at London Bridge Station is delicately presented, catching just the right emotional tone:

> *". . . Well Des, I can't tell you how glad I am that you are my great friend".*
> *"Phil," said Desmond, looking at him steadily, "I shall miss you very much". He had gone pale . . .*

However within a short time the reader is brought back from high sentiment to the wry humour of ordinary life when Phillip's cigar disagrees with him, and ends up 'on the permanent way, more or less in line with instalments of his tea' (p. 208).

Chapter 3 of Book II of novel A deals with Willie's journey to France from Southampton to Le Havre and thence to a rest camp. The day after kit inspection, wire-cutters are given to the NCOs. The troops consider that this is ominous, as such equipment is not needed on lines of communication! They leave for the front on a very slow train in trucks marked 'Chevaux 8, hommes 32'. Having reached St Omar, the GHQ of Sir John French, they spend the night on straw in an artillery barracks. The next day they move to an empty convent about six miles away. In the grounds Willie and Baldwin see a pheasant fly up and from an adjacent hill they see the gun flashes of the Ypres salient.

In chapter 4 of Book II the troops do some field training and then move towards the front in slow stages, spending a few days in Hazebrouck and Bailleul; finally reaching Romarin near Ploegsteert where they are billetted with peasants. As with the episode of the cigar Willie realizes that he is still not a complete man of the world; the spirits which he imbibes with the peasants lead to another stomach upset. Letters arrive from home; Willie receives seven from his mother and sisters and three from Jack. The troops are told that they will go to the trenches that night. On their way to Ploegsteert they experience shelling for the first time and see tired, unshaven men coming back from the front line. They arrive at Ploegsteert Wood and come under fire; finally when they get into the line they find that the 'regulars' are very kind to them. On sentry duty, the edgy Willie fires at a cat, and it is not long before he becomes 'itchy koo' (i.e. lousy). He experiences for the first time the phenomenon of the 'wind up' towards Ypres.

These two chapters may be compared with chapters 18–24 of *How Dear is Life* and

chapter 1 of *A Fox Under My Cloak*. Although there are a few similarities, the narrative in the *Chronicle* novels is essentially different and richer. In some of the most memorable scenes in the whole series, Phillip and the London Highlanders take part in the first battle of Ypres. Furthermore, Williamson varies the action by interspersing some chapters set in London and Wakenham with those describing the battles. In chapter 21 of *How Dear is Life* ('Moonrise') Richard hears the sound of the distant guns as he crosses London Bridge. In chapter 24 ('Incident in Charlotte Road') Hetty cannot bring herself to have Timmy Rat put down when she hears that some neighbours' sons in the London Highlanders have been killed in Flanders. In chapter 27 ('At the Guildhall') Tom Turney attends the Lord Mayor's Banquet and in chapter 31 ('Prieu Dieu') Hetty and her father watch the funeral procession of Lord Roberts on its way to St Paul's. It is interesting to note that in chapter 30 of *How Dear is Life* ('Rest') the London Rifles arrive to go into the line, although Phillip misses meeting Willie. This accords with the time when Willie goes into the line in novel A.

Chapter 5 of Book II of novel A continues the account of Willie's experiences in the front line. Before him is a cottage with a sniper in it; on the right a road, at right angles to the trench. He can see cottages at Le Gheer and two hundred yards distant are the German lines. He is able to have breakfast in the wood with Baldwin, although when four 'whizz-bangs' burst the young soldiers fall flat on the earth. In a letter from home Willie's parents tell him that Mr Blatchford had stated in the *Despatch* that the war would be over by Christmas. However there is no sign of this likelihood at the front! A territorial soldier and a sergeant in Willie's section of the line are killed by snipers. The frost gives and the trenches become flooded. After a rest-period in billets in Ploegsteert, Willie returns to the line. One day he is in support of an attack which fails, and that night he goes with a party up to the German wire to dig rifle pits. Baldwin is shot through the mouth and dies. A German soldier comes in to surrender bringing with him a half-drowned, wounded Englishman. The German gives Willie a watch looted from a Frenchman. After a brief rest period in Armentières where the troops get a bath in a distillery and have their clothes cleaned, they return to Ploegsteert.

Phillip has largely different experiences much more expertly presented in the first two chapters of *A Fox Under My Cloak* ('Into the Line' and 'Reality and Appearances'). In December 1914 he is amongst the troops inspected at St Omar by King George V. He wishes that he had applied for transport work during a rest period, and he quarrels with another soldier, Church. Like Willie in novel A he is in the line when the thaw comes, but unlike Willie at this stage, he is forced to report sick. His sister Doris sneaks a photograph of Helena Rolls and sends it to him.

Chapter 6 of Book II of novel A describes Willie's experiences during the Christmas Truce. The account which Williamson gives of these is clear and powerful; it stands up quite well in comparison with the later accounts which he gives both in his autobiographical works and in chapter 3 of *A Fox Under My Cloak* ('Heilige Nacht'). In novel A, we read that two days before Christmas Willie's company is in support, in Ploegsteert Wood. They are in blockhouses built of tree trunks with sandbags on top and round the sides. Their duty consists of putting up barbed wire. On Christmas Eve frost returns, and Willie's platoon is sent on a dangerous fatigue — to drive stakes into the ground against which hurdles can be placed, to protect the troops from enfilading fire, as the communication trenches are flooded. However, no shooting comes from the enemy lines; the Germans have kindled fires and are singing hymns. Willie's platoon returns to sleep, and the next day they are astonished to see German and British troops fraternizing in No-Man's-Land. Willie eagerly joins them, and learns that the Germans are in the 133rd Saxon Regiment. They are tired of war, they declare, and urge the British to kill the Prussians who will relieve them in a few days' time. *They* are the ones who

began the war, aver the Saxons, and it is they who want it to continue. The Saxons believe that if the war carries on, Britain and France will be defeated, but they say that if they themselves are ordered to attack, they will come over and surrender. The Germans bury their dead, writing on rough wooden crosses *Für Vaterland und Freiheit*. Willie now realizes that each side feels it is the attacked one and not the aggressor. He takes the chance to explore the cottages at Le Gheer and discovers two dead Germans inside them. There is a frozen ditch with a plank over it at the bottom of the garden. In the ice is the body of a dead British soldier; it had been floating in the water before the frost. A German officer orders his men to return to their trenches. They do so and the British return to theirs also. Further fraternization is forbidden, but no shots are fired. A German comes over with a note warning of an impending inspection, when there will probably be firing — so he warns the British to keep under cover. The firing which ensues is aimed high, but when the Prussians relieve the Saxons death returns to the front. This chapter may be compared with chapters 3 and 4 of *A Fox Under My Cloak* ('Heilige Nacht' and 'Bicycle Ride'). Like Willie in novel A, Phillip goes on a fatigue to drive posts into the earth to support hurdles; similarly he is amazed not to be fired on; but he sees a Christmas tree hoisted on the German trenches, not mentioned in the account of Willie's experiences, and the hymn which he hears is specified; it is the famous Austrian carol *Heilige Nacht*. On Christmas Day, as well as fraternizing with the Germans, Phillip goes on a bicycle-ride which takes him behind the German lines and finally to a meeting with Willie who speaks of how both sides believe that they are fighting for the same things. The cousins both see the dead British soldier under the ice at Le Gheer before each returns to his own position. Once again the episodes in the *Chronicle* are richer and more varied, but the account in novel A does have its own poignant simplicity.

In chapter 7 of Book II of novel A Willie experiences, in early 1915, several months of comparative quiet at the front. One day, however, during a rest period at Armentières, he feels ill and is constrained to report sick. He is sent to a field hospital suffering from dysentery, then moved to Bailleul and in due course to Étretat in Brittany. His condition worsens and he writes a letter to Elsie to be sent if he dies. In this he declares that he 'likes' her; 'loves' is what he really means, but he is too shy to say so. He improves, and before being sent to England to convalesce, he destroys his letter to Elsie. In chapter 8 Willie spends six weeks in hospital at Manchester and then is sent home to Bromley for three weeks' leave. The ever faithful Jack meets him at the station; he has himself been in the army since Christmas, as a sapper in the London Electrical Engineers, based at London Headquarters. At home, Willie's younger sister opens the door; he feels desperately sad, and goes to his bedroom where he weeps bitterly. His mother comes to him and asks if he is not well, to which he replies: ' ''Yes mother, only I feel so funny. This isn't a bit like home. You all seem changed. It's all so different somehow.'' ' When his father arrives Willie feels tense with him, but, comments Williamson, love *is* there, deep down. Willie is quite frank about his life at the front. It is 'filthy hard work', he declares, and he doesn't want to return. Rather than stay at home that evening Willie wants to go out with Jack; his mother is rather hurt by this, but explains Williamson, sons *have* to leave the nest. His authorial comment to mothers with similar sons is worth quoting:

> *They do realize your love for them, and they do return it. But as they grow older, they fly further and further from the nest, and begin to live their own lives. It seems to you, quite naturally, that as they need you less, they must love you less. Oh dear no. Deep down in their hearts is the love that can never turn to anything else. But it is deep down, and seldom shows its real character.*

The verbal expression is rather clumsy, but the observation is true to life, and it is significant that Williamson goes on to draw an analogy between young humans and young birds which he had observed with loving interest during his boyhood.

In chapter 9 of Book II, during a Sunday evening walk with his mother, one of his sisters, and Jack, Willie encounters Elsie Donaldson, accompanied by her mother and sister. Mrs Donaldson enquires in a kindly manner about Willie's health, and praises him as a 'brave boy'. Elsie looks at him with interest and Willie is much affected. In chapter 10 Willie's leave ends and he reports to his depot in London. However he is granted three weeks' more leave, and has his application form signed for a commission. At the War Office he learns that there are no vacancies in the artillery or the A.S.C., only in the infantry. Two days later he is commissioned as a Temporary Second Lieutenant in the Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, and is ordered to go to 'Eightoaks' in Kent for training. Willie plucks up courage to call on the Donaldsons, and sees Elsie and her mother. Jack once more bids farewell to Willie at the station.

These chapters may be compared with chapters 5 – 9 of *A Fox Under My Cloak*. Once more the *Chronicle* chapters show greater richness and variety. The main thread of the narrative is fairly similar, but there is nothing in novel A like the episode of Phillip's impression that he was warned to get out of a flooded trench by the ghost of Tommy Atkins who died that morning (chapter 5). Again there is nothing in novel A comparable to Phillip's letter to the Magister nor to his giving an orderly 10/- to mark his sheet 'bunk' to get him home to England (chapter 6). Phillip's homecoming is similar to Willie's in novel A, in that he is overcome upon arrival, but there is nothing in the early novel like his visit to Freddy's bar with Desmond. Furthermore, it is not at home, but to Desmond after their visit to the pub that he admits that life at the front is hell. Then again there is nothing in novel A like Phillip's trip with Desmond in an open car to Crowborough; nor like his sad recognition at Knollyswood Park that his old feelings for nature have gone; nor like his visit with his mother to his Bedfordshire relatives, where he has an affair with his cousin Polly (chapter 8). Finally there is nothing in novel A comparable to Phillip's visits to his father's office and his own old office in the City, nor like his visit to Hilary and Beatrice in Hampshire.

Chapter 11 of Book II of novel A describes briefly Willie's pleasant life at Eightoaks. He buys a motorcycle for himself and a gold brooch of the badge of his regiment for Elsie. In spite of his mother's warning that Elsie will not be allowed to accept such an expensive present from him, he offers it to her, only to be told by Elsie that she must ask her mother about it. Willie says that he will call upon her that night, but funks it, giving the brooch to his mother for safe keeping. This chapter corresponds to chapter 10 of *A Fox Under My Cloak* ('Helena'). Here Desmond drives Phillip to Sevenoaks, he does not merely see him off at the station. At Sevenoaks, in a humorous scene he is mistaken for Phillip's batman. Phillip's life at Sevenoaks is presented in greater detail, and his room-mates are described. He offers a brooch to Helena, who feels that she cannot accept it, but he follows this up by getting Mavis to set up a visit to the National Gallery which will include Helena in the party. However, a neighbour, Alwyn Todd, tells Phillip that in fact Helena does not like him.

Chapters 12 and 13 of Book II are the last of novel A to appear in the notebook, and I was unable to find any further chapters in the Archive. In chapter 12 Willie is sent for further training to Newmarket. He enjoys life there, although he makes what Williamson calls 'a few mistakes' in his behaviour. One night in the Rutland Arms Hotel he offers a drink to some senior officers, not realizing that this is bad form for a subaltern. A lieutenant (unnamed) in due course pours some whisky and water down Willie's neck, so he reciprocates by pouring some water over the lieutenant. Back in the billet Willie is ragged, having water thrown over him as he lies in bed. He retaliates by throwing

the lieutenant's bed and other items out of the window, but, comments Williamson, 'the lesson is learned'.

In chapter 13 of Book II Willie exchanges his Connaught motorcycle for a T.T. Norton. He becomes friendly with Frank Bryan, the garage manager and goes for joy-rides with him in the firm's cars. One day they stop to help two girls whose motorcycle and sidecar has broken down. The girls are sisters, Mrs Beverly or 'Fairy' and Mrs Dawson. The young men tow the girls' vehicle to the cottage at Halesworth which the girls have taken for the summer. There the rescued young women cook supper, and afterwards Fairy plays the piano. First she renders the current song-hit (by Jerome Kern) 'They Didn't Believe Me', then at Willie's request for classical music, she plays some pieces by Grieg. Frank takes Mrs Dawson to the car, and Fairy, left alone with Willie, asks him to kiss her. He is uneasy about this, but is reassured when she tells him that her husband is in London, and that in any case she doesn't like him. The young men extricate themselves and leave, but decide that they will return the next day, even although Willie will have to miss Mess Guest Night to do so. Back at his billet a telegram from Jack awaits Willie, telling him that he is about to leave for service in France. At this point the novel breaks off, and as I stated above, I found no continuation amongst the material in the Archive at Exeter.

These two last chapters of novel A may be compared with chapters 11 – 16 of *A Fox Under My Cloak*. The central narrative thread is similar, but is handled with greater verve and panache in the *Chronicle* novel. Also the social context of Phillip's life is rendered much more richly. His mess-mates, such as the kindly O'Connor or the foolish and snobbish Baldersby are sketched vividly as are his superiors, 'Crasher' and 'Strawballs'. The bad side of Phillip's new hectic life is indicated by his loss of feeling for wild birds and the wider world of nature in the spring. Contrast with the scenes in Suffolk is provided by chapter 13 ('Lusitania'). This describes the effect of the sinking of the *Lusitania* on public opinion in England, leading to the internment of German nationals. It also recounts a visit made by Hetty and her father to Dora, who is working in the East End among the poor whose living-conditions have been made much worse by the war.

To sum up; novel A shows promise, although Williamson has still much to learn not only about verbal style, but also about the methods of presenting characters to imply moral judgements upon them rather than directly to state them. In a sense it is not fair to compare it with the *Chronicle*, but in fact the comparison ultimately redounds to Williamson's credit by showing how great a master of the craft of fiction he became ultimately.

Finally one might ask (presuming that there is no more of novel A than is to be found in the Archive at Exeter) why did Williamson not finish it? I would suggest that the reason was that his experiences of the war from the Battle of Loos onwards were too close in time for him to be able to treat them with the artistic detachment necessary for good fiction. Much more time was needed before they could arise 'in ancient sunlight' in his imagination. Furthermore he recognized that he needed much more technical skill as a writer before he could begin to do them justice and integrate them into a larger artistic whole. He needed too a more comprehensive view of life which would give him greater insight into their causes and meaning.

All these conditions had been fulfilled by the time he began the *Chronicle*, which he was to carry through to a successful conclusion.

(To be continued)

NOTES

1. K. Krishnamurti (ed.), *The Hound of Heaven: a Commemorative Volume* (1967) p. 10.

2. *The Lone Swallows* (1st edn, 1922) pp. 196–203, 145–9, 160–5; ibid. (revised edn, illustrated by C.F. Tunnicliffe, 1933) pp. 214–18, 71–7. 'A Feathered Waster' is entitled 'A Very Bad Bird' in the revised edition.

3. The lane seems to be that leading from Georgeham to Vention Sands; cf. 'April' in 'The Country of the Rain', *The Lone Swallows*, revised edn (1933) pp. 233–4. If this is the case, Williamson's fear that the lane would become a major road has proved to be groundless; it is today a very minor road. Cf. further, 'The First Day of Spring', Section 'The Engboo', *The Village Book* (1930) pp. 157–8.

4. See 'The Writer's Trade', I, *The Eastern Daily Press*, 8 November 1943; 'Notes of a 'Prentice Hand', *The Adelphi* (vol. 25, no. 2; January–March 1949) pp. 111–20; *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1941) ch. 4, p. 50.

5. See 'A Boy's Nature Diary' in the revised edn of *The Lone Swallows* (1933) pp. 78–108.

6. See *Dandelion Days*, ch. 10; *The Flax of Dream*, 1 vol. revised edn (1936) pp. 348–9.

7. See *Young Phillip Maddison* (1953) ch. 29, pp. 376–82.

8. *The Hound of Heaven: a Commemorative Volume*, p. 12.

Editorial Note

You will have noticed that this issue contains two major articles by Dr J.W. Blench, and I deem it sensible to explain my decision on this matter. It is not usual to carry two major articles by a single author in a journal of our size and type, and when it became apparent that the file for this issue did indeed hold two such articles, your editorial committee debated the pros and cons of the problem. It is only fair to Dr Blench to tell you that his tri-part 'Apprenticeship of a Novelist' has been held on file for well over a year. We did not want to interrupt the flow with the *Tarka* Special Issue and some time ago had decided to 'hold' and to publish in this current issue so that the three parts can be read consecutively. The Bedfordshire piece had also been presented some time ago and as the Spring meeting is based on Bedford, I am sure that you will agree that it is apposite to publish that item in this issue.

It is again only fair to Dr Blench to tell you that I wrote to him as soon as we realised that we had this problem and he immediately replied stating that he quite understood and would of course abide by our decision, whatever it should be, but that he was anxious that the 'Apprenticeship' piece should be published as soon as possible, particularly as it had already been considerably delayed.

In the event, the problem solved itself, for once I had decided (on the advice of my editorial assistants) to hold over all 1st WW pieces for the autumn issue (see notice on page 45) it became possible spacewise to take both these pieces in this issue, and that is what I decided to do. AW/Ed