

Book Reviews

DAYS OF WONDER by Henry Williamson; Introduction by Richard Williamson. The Henry Williamson Society, 1987; 108pp., with 17 illustrations by Richard Richardson and Don Roberts. Card covers. £7.50 post paid.

Due to the foresight, hard work and dedication of John Gregory, Henry's writings for the *Daily Express* were collected together in typescript some years ago. This volume presents those which appeared in the late period 1966-71. Since relatively few will have read all these articles, and fewer still have kept them as they appeared, this selection is clearly most important. All of the articles — 38 in number (although some are in several parts, serialised over a number of weeks) — are included.

The series starts with 50th Anniversary recollections of the opening of the Somme Battle, and it is quite clear that the heroism, endurance, and enormous tragedy suffered by the New Armies, had assumed a new clarity, not a dimming, in his mind, over the passage of half a century. Similarly, his eye for the world of nature remained sharp but increasingly took on a different view. No longer the lyric prose recreating what the eye had seen and other senses experienced, but from a 'molt of experience' warning that almost all of our natural world, birds, beasts, fish and growing things are fragile and finite and demand conservation with a growing urgency; from deliberate destruction of the great whales, to ignorant feet destroying the habitat of the Large Blue butterfly in its last British stronghold. This ultimate phase of Henry Williamson's writing, of almost thinking aloud at times it seems, is important; not just for the quality of much he had to say, but how important he considered the work necessary to assure the survival of all the natural world — including ourselves — whose fate lies totally in our hands. Richard Williamson provides an excellent Introduction, both sympathetic and revealing of his father's penultimate years.

John Homan

THE ILLUSTRATED SALAR THE SALMON by Henry Williamson. With an Introduction by Richard Williamson. With illustrations and a Foreword by Michael Loates. Webb and Bower, 1987; 208pp; Frontispiece and 5 other photographs from the Estate of Henry Williamson, and with 16 full page and 15 half page colour plates; 21 pencil sketches, of which 4 are repeated twice. £14.95.

Under pressure from his publishers to write another animal book akin to *Tarka*, Henry reluctantly accepted a handsome advance in late 1934, started the book early in 1935, and completed it that August by dint of chapters being sent off as written, and returned in page-proof — with no chance of revision — the book made an October publication and (fantastically) sold 10,000 hardback copies by Christmas! None of the painstaking slog and revision of *Tarka*; here a white-hot feverish burst of creation that left the author drained and fit only to rush off to Germany with his friend John Heygate in an MG car.

And yet, despite this initial success, and the added lustre it brought to its author's name, it has steadily lost ground over the years in the reprint and new edition stakes to *Tarka*. This newly illustrated edition is the first with coloured plates, in addition to the black and white vignettes, to be freely available for over fifty years, copies of the first illustrated edition now being extremely scarce.

It had long been the aim of Mick Loates to illustrate a new edition of this book. He is a devoted and vastly experienced fisherman who has angled for many species of fish,

in freshwater and salt, since he was a boy, with an especial devotion to all the game-fish including salmon. As with many good anglers this has led on to becoming a keen observer-naturalist. Read his Foreword where he describes what he wanted to do and why, and the methods, materials and technique used to produce his paintings.

The plates are fifty per cent reductions from the originals, giving an increased sense of detail, but inevitably such reduction brings its own problems, and the colour printing is not always faithful to the original. However, there are many paintings to linger over, covering a wide range of subjects and situations. I also particularly like the delicate and beautifully executed pencil sketches used mainly as vignettes. Overall a fine production that deserves success and that may well become a classic edition in its own right.

John Homan

THE WET FLANDERS PLAIN by Henry Williamson. With an Introduction by Richard Williamson. 192pp; 8pp of photographs (plus one to front cover). Gliddon Books, 1987, Norwich; £10.95.

When first published in book form in 1929 (some sections having appeared as articles in various national dailies a year or two before), the book evoked little interest in a market swamped with other Great War books. Perhaps also the book's theme, the nostalgic return to now silent battlefields, and descriptions of post-war life in Belgium and France, rather than the more usual recollections describing the writer's war as it happened, attracted fewer readers. The book was put together from basic diary entries and notes made during two short visits to the old battlefields of Flanders and the Somme in 1925 and 1927; the first as part of his honeymoon, and the second with an old war comrade. In his Introduction Richard Williamson suggests that Henry needed a companion before he could return, in one case his wife, who could be seen as a replacement for the mother that he (and a million others) desperately had needed when first thrown into the reality of battle. When he returned two years later he was no more sure of himself, needing a friend to replace the wife now nursing a baby at home.

Ostensibly the reason for returning is given in the opening Apologia . . . that it was necessary to re-live the War so that the real Truth for which his comrades died might be made plain. As usual Henry's sharp eye saw and recorded many little but relevant details, and post-war life is nicely balanced against the remembered scenes and sights of the war. As a bonus there is a new Postscript to the book reprinting for the first time a series of articles commissioned in 1964 by the *Evening Standard* to mark the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War.

The photographs are interesting, pages of the album containing them having been filmed direct so that holograph comments made by the author could be seen. A good idea, although in two cases multiple photos in the album mean a rather minute reproduction in the book.

Essential if you do not have the book, and very worthwhile for the new material if you have either of the 1929 editions.

John Homan

SOME SPIRIT LAND — FOUND POEMS FROM THE ESSAYS OF RICHARD JEFFERIES. Colin Blundell, 1987. Obtainable from: Hub Editions, 15 The Ridgway, Flitwick, Bedfordshire MK45 1DH. £5.00 incl. p&p (116pp). Cheques payable 'Colin Blundell'.

This year, to mark the 100th Anniversary of the death of Richard Jefferies a number of new books about the great nature writer and prose poet have been published, together

with several further editions of some of Jefferies' own works. Of this interesting crop, Colin Blundell's *Some Spirit Land* is perhaps the most original. In his book, Colin Blundell has taken some of Jefferies' finest essays and re-structured them into a verse form (called 'found poems'). To the diehard Jefferies enthusiast this will sound like audacious tinkering but, by turning to the pages of the original essay it will be seen with what skill and sensitivity the transition has been wrought. This too, without loss or mar to the richness of Jefferies' writing.

Cyril Wright, Secretary of the Richard Jefferies Society, in the preface to *Some Spirit Land*, recalls an occasion when Henry Williamson was addressing a meeting of the Society in Swindon. He was asked by a member of the audience if he thought that, had Jefferies lived longer, might he have turned to writing poetry? Henry's indignant reply, "But all Jefferies essays are poetry!" *Some Spirit Land* gives a clear indication that Henry was right.

Brian Fullagar

P.E.N.: THE EARLY YEARS 1921 – 1926. Marjorie Watts. Archive Press, Hampstead, 1971.

Members wishing to discover more information about the 'To-Morrow Club', 'Sappho' Dawson Scott and the genesis of the 'P.E.N. Club', so nostalgically remembered for us at the 1986 Devon A.G.M. by Mrs Rosalind Wade, may care to peruse a small volume by Marjorie Watts entitled *P.E.N.: the early years, 1921 – 1926* which was published in 1971 by the Archive Press. Written by Amy Dawson Scott's daughter with a foreword by V.S. Pritchett, it gives a detailed and intimate picture of this particular literary coterie, of which Henry Williamson was perhaps little more than hanger-on; 'literary spiv' is the term he uses to describe himself in a letter to the author which is printed in part in the book:

I, a mere vagrant of 1920, see only the (to me) intense days of its inception in Long Acre and later Caxton Hall; in both places I was a mere literary spiv, externally, at least. And I remember, later, the beautiful sands of Constantine where I stayed with my bride, and we all — Dennis Arundell, Hermon Ould, your mother and me — walked barefoot around Trevoze Head and elsewhere along the breaking blue sea. And the dim-seen mullet, salmon, and bass on the shelly seafloor, pursued by seals . . . and the new potatoes grown on seaweed in the sandhills, like partridge eggs clustered in a nest . . . Looking back, one sees all things en clair. The sad thin figure of the Rhodes Scholar, Colby Borley — T.S. Eliot speaking — Swinnerton — G.B. Shaw — May Sinclair — the thrilling afternoon when Lauritz Melchior sang and revealed a great talent. And, of course, the excellent Alec Waugh, Violet Hunt . . . What a cluster of talent your mother drew about her, then and later.

The book is an elusive title on the secondhand market, but is available on Public inter-Library Loan (there is a copy in Bristol's Avon County Library, for instance).

Stephen Francis Clarke