

Letters

At the Spring 1987 Norfolk weekend we sang (or croaked our way through) the 'Wreck of the Hesperus', as you may have heard.

During the practice the question of the origin of the line "she leapt her cables length" came up (poor ship!), I kept quiet as I didn't want to bore the company with nautical technicalities, but as some people may still be wondering I felt I ought to clear up the matter.

I think that Longfellow was confusing the length of a ship's anchor cable — a variable quantity for each vessel — with a cable's length, which is a tenth of a nautical mile or 608 feet. It would make more sense if it read 'a cable's length'. If you see what I mean.

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Having read the most interesting letter about the Etaples mutiny in the latest issue of the Journal, it occurs to me that the following information may assist.

My late father was a QMSI in the MGC and was posted from Grantham to the MGC Base Depot at Camiers, 6Km N of Etaples, in May 1916. He remained there as an instructor until the beginning of August 1918 when he was posted to 21st Battalion MGC to participate in the final Allied Offensive.

The question is, are the MGC course records from Camiers still existing, or did they suffer the same fate as those from Etaples? I expect Mr Reed has already followed that avenue, and the latter is the case.

From my father's letters home (300 survive covering the period 1914–19) MGC training courses were a continuous feature at Camiers, and MGC officers would certainly have been sent there. Of course, there's no reference in the letters about the

mutiny because they were censored, but my father knew all the details and told me about them often enough in later years, and also commented that HW's account was the first he'd seen.

Even if the MGC records have gone, I suggest that it's virtually certain that HW was at Camiers at the time of the mutiny and would have seen what was going on virtually next door. Furthermore, both HW's and my father's versions of the events coincide in that it was a low-key, short-lived, less violent affair than the over-dramatised TV series portrayed.

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I was delighted to see the letters from John Homan and Timothy Osborne in the *Sunday Times*. As an expatriate I receive it rather late, and haven't seen the Magazine referred to, but was very pleased to see that Henry Williamson is receiving some of the attention which is his due.

I 'discovered' Williamson in the late fifties, when I was about twelve, and from that time on it's no exaggeration to say that he had a tremendous impact on my life. I grew up in Rochester, Kent, and was quite familiar with the south east London suburbs he described so well. More than that though, his descriptions of the childhood of Phillip Maddison had so many parallels with my own that I found comfort in them. It was only later that I read his nature books.

With me today, I have a 1936 edition of *The Flax of Dream*, the New Portway edition of *The Star Born*, and a late autographed edition of *The Scandaroon*. At one time I had various editions of nearly all his other books, but, in a painfully dismissive moment which, I'm sure, Phillip/Henry would have understood, I left them all with a now ex-wife who probably didn't want them anyway!

There is no doubt to my mind that he is one of the greatest English writers of this century, and perhaps of all time. His writing has an authenticity and a revelatory quality that is extremely unusual.

Prompted by this letter, I have just picked up *The Flax of Dream* for the first time in years, and felt immediately the powerful evocation that sent me off to the West Country years ago, to seek the same peace that Willie sought. I suppose we all have our world wars, and our 'battles of the brain'.

This wasn't supposed to be a personal memoir, but I remember how I wanted to write to Williamson, and was afraid to. I so regret that he died before I learned that we all like to know we have been important to others.

Is there anything I can do in the USA to help you? I don't have a lot of time, but this seems very worthwhile. I once had a copy of *The Golden Falcon*, which suggested that Henry wasn't terribly fond of the USA. Then, I don't suppose he was too fond of what happened to North Devon, either.

It maddens me that Williamson's interest in fascism makes him such a scapegoat. I think it was used by an establishment that felt threatened by him for a whole stack of reasons. At last they had a justification for refusing to listen to many of the truths he propounded.

This does not mean that I accept everything he said. Far from it. Like many complex people, he appeared to have a huge need for simple solutions. But I have the greatest respect for the writer, and for what I know of the man. His failure to be received easily into the cosy niche that absorbs more acceptable British writers seems to me to have been as great a compliment as any that could have been bestowed on him.

It is very satisfying to have my enthusiasm for Williamson and his work re-sparked. I look forward to your reply.

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I wonder if any readers know of any other parts of Britain called 'No Man's Land' as the short road between Georgeham and Branton is called. I walked and cycled over the route (en route) to school and later work. Happy, sad, drunk, sober, but I always enjoyed that super view. The only other 'No Man's Land' that I know is a village in Hampshire. There must be others. It would be interesting to know if other members of the Society know of them.

Dave Stokes

Parkside Flat

Hotham Park House

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Ever since it was formed, I've been intending to join the Henry Williamson Society. The recent *Sunday Times* article has however reminded me and I'd be grateful of further information, joining fees, etc.

From my early teens, on reading *The Lone Swallows*, I've been a passionate admirer of the author and his lack of recognition — apart from *Tarka* — in the literary world has been almost a personal hurt! It was not until many years later that I realized the cause which you include in the *Sunday Times* letter of July 12th 'A Man of Honour'. (Indeed!)

Why politics should so cruelly eclipse such a superb artist, — is something only the modern world with its distorted and diminished values can answer. Too long he has been cast aside by the influence of little minds in 'high' places. But people are not fools. A *real* artist will always have his followers and in time, gain true and rightful recognition. To my delight this appears now well under way.

I will go further and predict that as man continues to destroy the Earth and her inhabitants and generally sink further into decadence, — Williamson's work will find an increasingly large audience. The wise, discerning and caring amongst us will seek his perception as reinforcement and guidance.

My particular favourite is *The Flax of Dream* series. I know *The Pathway* almost by

heart and often make a pilgrimage to the Burrows — and of course, Georgeham. Is it partly autobiographical? I've always longed to know the background.

Sally Elliott
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Having enjoyed so very much the AGM weekend in North Devon with the Henry Williamson Society, I feel that it is only right to thank everyone for what was done to make it possible.

After reading so much over the years about Georgeham and the writing hut, seeing them for the first time was an unforgettable experience.

I also thoroughly enjoyed the film put out by Spotlight South Coast on the BBC and hope that members of the Society will be able to see a copy at some future meeting.

John A. Bruce Stevens
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Dyfed, Wales

Extract from a letter from HWW's grandson:

Thank you for the copy of the Journal. I've almost finished it and most of it seems very good. The first article ended up very interesting although its initial detail as to the colour of the ink etc. made me think that I was going to get bogged down.

I liked the editorial very much; the summary of the word 'romantic' was very good. David Cobham's article was good as well and brought back memories of the filming (and the rain flooding out our tents). Two very nice touches were the Tunnicliffe etchings placed through the Journal, obviously chosen with care, and the Press clippings. Most importantly, the Journal has inspired me to re-read *Tarka*. Let's hope it has also done so to others, my guess is that it has. I enclose my answers to the *Tarka* quotations, not to put in for the competition but because I enjoyed doing it.

Brent Williamson
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TAILPIECE

Peter Lewis of Newport, Gwent, sent in two items from the *Western Mail*, the first from the edition of March 6, 1987 and the second from that of May 14, 1987, which he thought would be of interest to members because of the connection of Charles Tunnicliffe with HW.

They concern the difficulties facing Anglesey Borough Council, who bought the Charles Tunnicliffe collection, consisting of over 300 bird drawings and sketches, for £400,000 in 1981 with the help of a £100,000 grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, on the understanding that a gallery would be constructed to house and display the collection.

Six years later with no gallery forthcoming, the NHMF had apparently made it clear that they would request the return of the original grant.

According to the newspaper reports a spokesman for Anglesey Borough Council said that the main problem had been in finding a suitable site but that plans were now in hand, and that their explanation had satisfied the NHMF.

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Although it is well known that Charles Tunnicliffe had hoped that his collection would go to the Royal Academy, it is most fitting that they should end up in Anglesey where Tunnicliffe had lived and worked. Anglesey are to be applauded for their farsighted purchase, and it is to be hoped that they can carry out their plans to fruition in the reasonably near future.