

Thoughts on Reading Dan Farson's *Henry, An Appreciation*

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I preface my opinion of Mr Farson's book by acknowledging the difficulties of the task. It is clear Henry is a controversial figure in some spheres and any biographer would have to tread warily through the consequences. Moreover, he has researched and furnished many interesting factual details of his life which, hitherto, were unknown to me.

However, this is where my appreciation ends. My chief criticism of the book is Farson's failure to free this great artist from the very chains that for so long have bound him to comparative obscurity. A glance at the 'Contents' page reveals a preoccupation with his life as a battleground waged over his political affiliations and his personal relationships. Hence: 'A beautiful war', 'Traitor or patriot', 'Tarka the Rotter', 'Henry takes his revenge', 'Problems of friendship'. A great chance has been missed to present the great man and artist that *transcends* these distractions. This could have been achieved by concentrating instead on two qualities which illumine his work:

His natural faculty for poetic prose which places him in the greatest tradition of literature, equal to and indeed sometimes excelling, Thomas Hardy. This faculty is rare and embraces the kind of power to make the reader actually gasp in wonder and which effortlessly enters heart, mind and memory — to remain for ever. He becomes a part of our consciousness. If an artist can achieve *that*, he is truly immortal. Yet, this is given scant reference and (I'm forced to feel) quite by chance where it occurs at all! Space given to irrelevances, blind alleys, and cheap sensationalism, should have been employed in quoting parallel texts from Hardy (poetry and prose), and many poets including Manley Hopkins, Ralph Hodgson, Walt Whitman, Dylan Thomas (especially 'Fern Hill' and 'Poem in October'), John Clare and, of course, Swinburne. It could also have been used to relate more of the influences and relationships in the literary world and indeed, the other Arts. He was obviously very musical (which his interest in dialect alone, proclaims). But this is a field given little reference other than bouts of Wagnerian unsociability. In all, Henry's context in the whole artistic sphere should have been secured.

The other quality is his wholeness: his ability to perceive unity behind every seeming discord or division; his sense of 'oneness', the completed circle. If this had been given central rather than peripheral treatment, the book would have had spirit, strength and cohesion. It would have offered the reconciling thread through a life too often portrayed as egocentric, weak or irrational.

It explains his capacity for forgiveness, and seeing the other's viewpoint. It explains his abhorrence of war, the impression made by the Christmas Truce, his realistic attitude to the natural world and the interdependence of one life form upon the other. It lies behind his anguish in the discordant, isolating influence of writing — and its effects upon family and friends. The quote from the last chapter offers illustration of the depth of his intuitive sense: 'The beauty of the plucked, trampled flowers — passes on — is not lost, because of the joy reflected in the eyes of the weary, street-bound Londoners.' Yet Farson, completely missing the point, tamely states that like every good naturalist, Henry puts people first. For him there was no first or last, — all are one and exist, not in isolation but as a whole.

This is a truth the world desperately needs to relearn if it is to have any spiritual validity — and physical continuance — on this planet. The fact that he was a 'spiritual ecologist' first and last, should have merited at least two chapters of contemplation. Mankind *needs* Henry Williamson as never before in its history. His message of unity is constant. It

was not for material self-interest nor self-glorification for which he wrote and thereby suffered, — but to convey this very relevant message. If 'his heart was broken at the end', — the reason was that he equated lack of honours with its rejection.

In short, it is time to take Henry Williamson *seriously*. Farson would retort that over-seriousness does not sell a biography any more than does a preponderance of literary criticism. Rightly so, — because the ethos of the age is receptive to superficial and — preferably — instant gratification rather than a deep detection of true worth. The age persuades us to drift along on a tide of compliant trivia rather than pursue fundamental depths. So, with a view to sales, — it is not the fault of the biographer.

Apposite in this context, features a large cause of my anger: the *self-appointed* 'intelligentsia', well represented by F. Raphael, are given four pages in which to expound prejudice and ignorance, which is at best irrelevant and totally unworthy of its somewhat obsequious inclusion (and I would refer this element of the 'eclipsing Curse' to the significance of Shelley's 'Adonais' — and to 'ponder' the line "whose sails were never to the tempest given").

If my criticisms are too harsh and my passionate belief in Henry too simplistic, — I hope Mr Farson will forgive me.

It is my hope that Time will continue to sever the links that bind Henry to the old disputes that Time alone created. I represent the generation born with the outbreak of the Second World War, and discovered him in the early — mid 1950s. My lifespan covers the blatant rise of a decadent materialism and the corresponding demise of the natural world and people's insight and understanding of each other. Henry's wild-flowers recede before human encroachment and his swallows are made increasingly homeless by the destruction of 'old' farm buildings and 'developers' 'barn conversions'. But there is a change of attitude. People, especially young people, are increasingly aware of the loss and *do* care. There is also a growing awareness of social wrongs largely instigated by 'economic' considerations.

Henry's work therefore forms a part of a new enlightenment amongst the thinkers and for this reason *alone* his work should be projected *forwards* for the Future, not back to the old rut. After all, 'times change'.

His retention of childhood innocence and his horrific confrontation with human mortality in the Trenches, merge his unabated 'song' with a vaster and eternal Presence and renders the last two lines of 'Fern Hill' applicable to his life:

*Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.*

In all, I intuitively feel Mr Farson's personal knowledge of Henry is superficial and 'lacks insight', and his book relates more to the product of a capable journalist than a biographer with perception of his subject. Hoping for a feast, I received a few dry crumbs and put the book down with disappointment and irritation while sighing wearily for the *real* biographer.

[Editor's Note. There seems to be a general misapprehension, compounded by review critics throughout the national press, that Mr Farson's book is a biography of Henry Williamson. It is an intensely personal view of one aspect — one shake of the kaleidoscope, as it were. Mr Farson himself calls it 'an appreciation'. A biography would have at least to attempt to look at the whole picture.]