One of the Seventeen: Being Extracts from an Early Version of *Tarka the Otter*

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The history of the writing of *Tarka the Otter* has been told innumerable times over the years, by Henry Williamson and many others. More than three years in the writing, seventeen versions in all, each in turn seeking to portray more truthfully and accurately a portrait of otters and other beasts and birds as they *actually* led their lives, and not, as so many other writers have done, how they would like them to have lived.

The chance to actually see how the book developed through its various drafts was for long impossible until, in 1965, Henry Williamson donated a number of the draft Mss and Tss to Exeter University, where they then became available for study, at least to serious students. Only recently we enjoyed the fruits of such research when Terence Jones[1] identified at least seven versions of the early part of the book. Useful and enlightening though this facility may be, it is hardly likely that a transcript of an early version — or even part of a version — could ever be made public. Despite this I had often wondered if anything that one could tie directly to *Tarka* had been published and which ante-dated the book? In fact Henry does refer to a short story of an otter hunt published in *The Tatler* — but not when — and, later in the same book wrote:

> *I had already written about a dozen short stories linked together which I called* The Otter's Saga *and sent them to magazines. Two were taken and printed; the others I withdrew, later knowledge telling me that they were not true.*[2]

It is probably a fair guess that one of the published pieces was, in fact, the *Tatler* item; but where had the other appeared? Chance, or what you will, may have provided the answer recently, for when looking through some old numbers of *The London Mercury*, I came across a ten-page essay, 'Otters in Winter by Henry Williamson', in the issue for January 1926: (Vol. XIII, No. 75), the monthly magazine edited and run by J. C. (Sir Jack) Squire. It is interesting to note that many years later Henry recalled Sir Jack with warmth, suggesting that it was he who had most strongly promoted *Tarka* for the Hawthornden Prize.

A quick scan of the essay showed that it was an important piece, covering substantial parts of what became Chapters 8–10 of the book, which include the great Winter Scene and the trapping of Tarka.

It would seem that this item is little known — unless members disabuse me of this belief, as enquiry to date has located only one other copy. In the light of this, a synopsis of the essay compared with the book and a short selection of passages from both to illustrate the changes between this, I believe, quite late draft, and the published work, may be appropriate. I feel that this method, rather than to give copious examples of word or phrase changes in isolation from the text, will provide a much fuller idea of what Williamson strove so hard and long to achieve. In all cases the book text quoted is from the first Trade edition — unlimited edition (October) 1927.

The essay opens with text similar to the beginning of Chapter 8, p. 89, the narrative continuing to the mêlée with Garbargee the giant conger eel, pp. 92–93 (part). The remainder of the chapter is omitted from the essay which continues immediately with the opening of Chapter 9, p. 103 and again broadly follows the book, though with some re-arrangement of matter, until p. 105, where the paragraph, one of the finest in the book,

introducing the Greenland falcon, is missing from the essay. Book and essay re-join thereafter until the foot of p. 108 where the remainder of the chapter is omitted, the essay continuing with two short paragraphs describing Tarka and Greymuzzle's search for food, which were dropped for the book.

Again, Chapter 10 of the book and essay are quite similar in content; both include the highly charged scene of the swan hunt, the tragedy of the starving cub, and the farmyard scenes with otters, fox and badger — the latter two not given their Williamson names in the essay — until the scene where Tarka is caught in the gin-trap. Here, the essay radically departs from the book as it is Greymuzzle who is trapped, a remarkable reversal, not only contrary to the book, but also to the often repeated story of Williamson's own (or his friend's?[3]) pet *dog* otter similarly maimed. The essay ends when Greymuzzle, having bitten through her toes to free herself, moves to follow Tarka, but recalling her starving cub attempts once more to reach the ducks which sets the farmer's dog barking. She seeks refuge in an outhouse where she is found and killed, the farmer then returning to his house to drink with those who helped him trap the otter. The remaining paragraphs of Chapter 10, pp. 124–125, including the remarkable ultimate lines written in the first person, do not appear.

As will be seen, the essay is considerably shorter than the same sequence in the book — I calculate about 6,500 words compared with 10,500 — the most significant 'missing' portion being that making up the bulk of Chapter 8 in the book, followed by the final pages of Chapter 9. Without sight of the Ms, if it still exists, it is impossible to say whether the 'missing' portions had actually been written and were 'cut' for reasons of space, or whether they were added to a later draft. My feeling tends to the former view, as already noted, and I provide some evidence to support this view later.

Here, then, are some examples from the two texts, commencing at the beginning of Chapter 8 of the book, p. 89. The opening paragraphs of the essay read thus.

> *The trees of the riverside wept their dry tears, and the water carried them away; and after a "fresh", when salmon came over the bar to feed in the estuary, broken leaves were strewn on sand-bank and gravel ridge. In November even the poplars had shed their topmost leaves, which usually cling long after the other deciduous trees (except the unemotional and proud beech which grows in the hedges) are bare: one or two or three leaves sometimes flutter on the tops of the poplars when the tree has been stark for months, like a bedraggled gull feather stuck in the ground.*
>
> *The gales of November gleaned their last leaves, and one evening, when the ebb-tide was leaning the fairway buoys to the west, and gulls were flying low over the darkening waters to the distant headland where they roosted, Tarka and Greymuzzle set out on a journey. The otters had followed the salmon up the rivers, and Greymuzzle had returned for a purpose. The bright eye of the lighthouse standing among the sandhills was clear in the cold air. *Below the long, low, misty horizon the winter sun was sinking as though it were a star spent in space, a sphere swollen and quenching in its own steam and decay. A vaporous pallor hung in the pans between the sandhills, for no wind was blowing.*
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> *The lighthouse stood in the aquamarine twilight like a great bleached bone on which had lit a gold and shining star-fly flown from celestial regions to the Atlantic deathbed of the sun. The otters were carried down in the swirls and breaks of waves in the wake of a ketch, while the roar of the waves pounding the sandbanks of the bar grew in their ears.*

*This sentence was discarded from the book equivalent of the above that follows, but not lost entirely, being carried forward to Chapter 9 of the book where it appears on p. 105: 'Beyond the shaped and ever-shifting heaps of sand, beyond the ragged horizon of the purple-grey sea, the sun sank as though it were spent in space, a dwarf-red star quenching in its own steam and decay.'

The waves slid and rose around the masted ship pushing the white surge from her blunt bows. A white crest rolled under her keel, and she pitched into a trough. On the left a mist arose off a bank of grey boulders, where a destroyer lay broken and sea-scattered on the Pebble Ridge.

And now the same section from the book:

The trees of the riverside wept their last dry tears, and the mud in the tide-head pool made them heavy and black; and after a fresh when salmon came over the bar, beginning their long journey to spawn in the gravel where the rivers ran young and bright, broken black fragments were strewn on the banks and ridges of the wide estuary. In November the poplars were like bedraggled gull-feathers stuck in the ground, except for one or two or three leaves which fluttered in their tops throughout the gales of November.

One evening, when the ebb-tide was leaning the channel buoys to the west and the gulls were flying silent and low over the sea to the darkening cliffs of the headland, Tarks and Greymuzzle set out on a journey. They had followed the salmon up the river, and Greymuzzle had returned for a purpose. The bright eye of the lighthouse standing like a bleached bone at the edge of the sandhills, blinked in the clear air. The otters were carried down amidst swirls and topplings of waves in the wake of a ketch, while the mumble of the bar grew in their ears. Beyond the ragged horizon of grey breakers the day had gone, clouded and dull, leaving a purplish pallor on the cold sea.

The waves slid and rose under the masted ship, pushing the white surge of the bar from her bows. A crest rolled under her keel and she pitched into a trough. On the left a mist arose off a bank of grey boulders, on which a destroyer lay broken and sea-scattered.

At first glance, the economy of the book version — seventy-five words less — may not be apparent; all the major actions and scenes remain, but it is the new economy of the descriptions that is remarkable. That describing the poplars in paragraph one, overlong and awkwardly constructed, not to mention 'unemotional' beech trees, has been swept away into a concise and rounded sentence only half as long. Again, the first description of the lighthouse in paragraph two is adequate in the essay, but then goes flamboyantly and fancifully 'over the top' in paragraph three. The image is now confused until from the gaudy wreckage is extracted the phrase 'bleached bone' which, when added to the orignal description, proivdes the reader with a viable analogy in their descriptive power.

I now move on to Chapter 9 of the book, where winter has come to the Burrows. Compare the following from the essay:

Owing to the wildfowlers in the 'daggers' of the pond, the otters slept during the day among dwarf willows and reeds near a cattle shippen, and everything beyond a circle of fifty yards was made feathery and grey in the mist. For two days and nights the vapour lay over the Burrows and then came a north-east wind which poured like liquid glass from Exmoor and made all things distinct. The wind wailed in the dwarf willows and sighed among the reeds. The claws of the marram grass scratched wildly at the rushing air which passed over the pans where larks and linnets crouched from its glassy touch. (The next long sentence is virtually as the book.)

At night the stars of first magnitude flickered like the wings of lofty gold falcons, the watching and waiting hosts of creation. Under these high immortals the cries of wildfowl

were hurled by the wind of the estuary where the otters sought their food. Empty shells of snails and rabbits' skeletons lying bare and scattered on the plains of whirling sand, were worn thin by the wind and broken up, and the dust of them aided an older dust to wear away other shells and bones and withered trees. Vainly the sharp and hard spines of the marram grasses scratched their circles on the sand: the Icicle Spirit was coming, and no terrestrial power would exorcise it.

Much of this was re-arranged to become in the book:

The otters lay up near a cattle shippen, among reeds with white feathery tops. A dull red sun, without heat or rays, moved over them, sinking slowly down the sky. For two days and two nights the frosty vapour lay over the Burrows, and then came an icy north wind which poured like liquid glass from Exmoor and made all things distinct. The wind made whips of the dwarf willows, and hissed through clumps of the great sea-rushes. The spines of the marram grasses scratched wildly at the rushing air, which passed over the hollows where larks and linnets crouched from its invisible clutch.[4] The snow fled in the wind, over the empty shells of snails and rabbit skeletons lying bare and scattered, past the white, sand-stripped branches of dead elderberry trees, and the dust of them aided an older dust to wear away the living tissue of the Burrows. Vainly the sharp and hard points of the marram grasses drew their circles on the sand: the Icicle Spirit was coming, and no terrestrial power could exorcise it.

The changes here are less radical; 'icy' is added to describe the nature of the wind, but is really superfluous (see Note 4); the wind no longer 'wailed', but 'hissed' through reeds, much better and stronger than sighing (soft) among reeds. On the other hand I am not sure that the 'scratching spines' (book) of the marram grass is better than 'claws' (essay), although later 'sharp and hard points drawing' is better than 'sharp and hard spines scratching'.

Essay and book continue with a similar description of the coming of Bubu, the Arctic Owl, then:

Above the southern hills at dusk strode Orion the Hunter with Sirius the Dogstar baying green fire at his heels. At midnight Hunter and Hound were rushing bright in a glacial wind, which polished into flashing his starry spear. Tarka and his mate paused in their fishing of the duckponds to harken to the trumpetings of wild swan and the gaggle of geese which came with the cries of the golden plover and the liquid bubble-link of the curlews' chainsong. The blizzard howling its way from the north star brought the snow, which lodged in the skulls in the sand and choked the buries of the warren. It was fine snow and it ran races with the grains of sand. Night was like day, for neither moon nor sun nor stars were seen. All were hid in whirling white chaos, and while Bubu hooted loudly his dread hunting-cry, Greymuzzle in her hover of reeds and bulrush-floss lay on her side, and Tarka's son was born.

Essay and book here part company in the sequence of the scenes, and here too the book expands, rather than compresses, as follows:

Clouds moved over land and sea with the heavy grey drifting silence of the ice-owl's flight; night came starless, loud with the winds rue in the telegraph wires on the sea wall. As Tarka and his mate were running down to meet the flood-tide

in the pill, a baying broke out in the sky; whiskered heads lifted to hearken. For a minute the otters did not move, while the hound-like baying passed over. The long skein of south-wending geese swung round into the wind, flying with slow flaps and forming a chevron that glided on down-held wings beyond the pill mouth. Cries of golden plover, twined in the liquid bubble-link of the curlews' chain-songs, rose up from the saltings.

The white-fronted geese, eaters of grass and clover, had come before the blizzard howling its way from the North Star. A fine powdery snow whirled out of the sky at night, that lay nowhere, but raced over the mossy plains and hillocks, and in the Burrows, faster than the grains of sand.

(Then is added the coming of the Greenland Falcon, followed by the sentences noted earlier, and then ending:)

. . .Night was like day, for neither moon nor sun nor star was seen. Then the blizzard passed, and the snow lay in its still pallor under the sky.

And the sky was to the stars again — by day six black stars and one greater whitish star, hanging aloft the Burrows, flickering at their pitches; six peregrines and one Greenland falcon. A dark speck falling, the *whish* of the grand stoop from two thousand feet heard half a mile away; red drops on a drift of snow. By night the great stars flickered as with falcon wings, the watchful and glittering hosts of creation. The moon arose in its orbit, white and cold, awaiting through the ages the swoop of a new sun, the shock of starry talons to shatter the Icicle Spirit in a rain of fire. In the south strode Orion the Hunter, with Sirius the Dogstar baying green fire at his heels. At midnight Hunter and Hound were rushing bright in a glacial wind, hunting the false star-dwarfs of burnt-out suns, who had turned back into Darkness again.

If the description of the essay is a very fine piece of writing, what can one say of the revision, which is superlative?

To conclude these extracts I move to Chapter 10 of the book, where it and essay follow each other quite closely to the incident where a skein of wild swan landing on the estuary are subject to a thrilling and successful underwater attack by Tarka and Greymuzzle upon one of their number, which ends thus:

> *When the otter swam up to breathe the swan lay quiet on the water, and the waves lifted gently the drowned white bird. For the last time it heard the swan-song of its brethren, as under the protective star-group of Cygnus, flying where no mortal eye could follow below the winter horizon, their pinions beat out a rhythmic pulse of sound; the bird had a sensation of gliding in a luminous void, and its earthly life went out of its frame forever.*

And from the book:

> Across the pull of the tide, among the grating ice-floes, the otters took the swan, whose flappings were getting feeble as the death fear grew less. Tarka had bitten the artery in the neck. When the otters rested the bird lay quiet on the water. It heard the wings of its brethren beating out the flying song of swans, *Hompa, hompa, hompa,* high and remote in the night. It flapped thrice, and died.

I must say that I find the essay version most appealing. It has a luminous, almost ethereal quality and creates a vivid image, but is it too anthropomorphic? I believe that this is

I was unable to find part 2 of this book anywhere in the Archive at Exeter, and I am unable to say whether or not it was ever written. Furthermore, I found no typescript text of any of Book II. I shall now describe the action of Book II in so far as the text available permits.

Chapter 1 of part 1 of BookII opens in 1917 some two years' later than the end of Book I, with Willie sitting near to the Atlantic Ocean on what the Williamson reader is likely to identify as Venton Sands, although the place is not named. He watches gulls wheeling in the sky and sees a peregrine falcon kill a crow and then take a stock-dove. Gulls eat the crow which he has thrown into the sea. He lies down in the sun and as a swallow passes, he remembers the events of his boyhood. A desire to bathe is frustrated by the absence of a costume when he hears a slight cough made by a girl wearing a white jersey and blue skirt. She has long hair flowing down her back and her legs and feet are bare. As she moves away Willie passes her without speaking, returning to the village.

In chapter 2 Willie is found that evening in the Rock Inn (obviously in Georgeham, although the village is not named). John Gammon, the landlord, Williamson recounts, wanted the Roc (fabulous bird encountered by Sinbad) as his inn sign, but the local painter who did the job gave him a cockerel instead! Willie has rented a cottage in the village and he enjoys a convivial evening with the locals, who treat him with great politeness. He sits by Tom Brown, a ploughman and great drinker of ale, who if he becomes drunk is likely to be ordered home by his wife. Also present is John Smith who is playing whist with Bill Brown, a one-eyed shepherd, who wears an eye-patch and a glass eye on alternate nights. Willie is fascinated by John Smith's tale of how his father went down a cliff (doubtless at Baggy Point) and took two young ravens from a nest. The angry birds attack his cottage, and in the end he has to let the young birds go.[22] John Smith is a notable *raconteur*; he will, he declares, tell ghost stories if invited! Willie buys a drink for everyone in the bar at a total cost of 2/8d and at the end of the evening witnesses the arrival of Mrs Brown to collect her husband. This scene recalls that described in the prologue to noval A, and looks forward to those in chapters 2 and 12 of *The Dream of Fair Women*.[23] The scenes in the published novel (set in 1919 not 1917) are much better presented. The characterization of the locals is more skilfully handled and the scenes themselves are more firmly linked to the main narrative.

In chapter 3 of part 1 of Book II of novel C Willie walks along a flower-scented lane towards the sea. The lane itself is excellently described as are the birds which he sees — some swallows and a kestrel. Willie wonders sadly if this idyllic place will soon be developed for summer visitors and its simple charm spoiled. He is on his way to the beach for a bathe and notices as he approaches it a woman in the distance. Can it be the same girl he saw a few days ago, he wonders?

In chapter 4 he goes down to the beach but is disappointed not to see the girl whom he hoped to meet, believing her to be like himself, a nature-lover. He is gratified however when she appears and goes into the sea for a swim. Willie does the same and is then given an opportunity to speak to her. After she inadvertently swallows some sea-water, he gallantly escorts her ashore where she expresses pleasure that he has spoken to her. Both are on leave; he from the Army, recovering from trench fever; she from the Air Ministry at Bolo House in London. In reply to his question what the book was that she was reading as he approached the beach, he is delighted to learn that it was Richard Jefferies's *The Story of My Heart*. He has found a kindred spirit, which of course Elsie was not. The reader will remember at this point that it was in the spring of 1919 that Williamson bought a second-hand copy of *The Story of My Heart*, which brought him great spiritual refreshment and illumination. Willie speaks of his home in Rookhurst (named now for the first time), which interests her greatly; probably it was to be revealed later

door neighbour. The spines of the grass scratching at the air very good, but what a come-down to the air's clutch, in the last line!' Interestngly, H.W. removed 'icy' and 'invisible clutch' from the edition of June 1928, 'slightly revised following suggestions of T.E.L.' Note that 'icy' does *not* appear in the essay!

5. *Devon Holiday* (1935) p. 233.
6. *Goodbye West Country* (1937) pp. 80–81.
7. *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga* (1960) pp. 15–16.

My thanks to the Literary Estate of Henry Williamson for all quotations used.