Reflections of a Brother

F. Brocard Sewell

The late E. J. Rogers, of Oxhey, near Watford, a printer's and publisher's proof-reader by profession, was a devoted, but highly critical student of the works of Henry Williamson, about which, in the 1960s, he wrote me a number of very long letters, virtually essays in criticism. One of these, on Henry's novel *The Power of the Dead*, was printed in *Journal* No. 10, October 1984. The piece that follows, on Henry Williamson and T. E. Lawrence, is taken, with a few minor editorial adjustments, from a letter to me dated 21 August 1963.

At the end of this letter, which he sent with the copy of *Genius of Friendship* that he sold me, he says: 'I am still very hard up . . . for I am really a sort of destitute person down almost to the tramp level.' I was happy to be able to buy several of his Williamson editions, including the illustrated edition of *Salar the Salmon*, with Tunnicliffe's pictures in colour, and his copy of *Genius of Friendship: T. E. Lawrence*. These, and several others of Mr Rogers's Williamson books, are now in the Henry Williamson Society's Collection deposited in Exeter University Library.

Mr Rogers had no thought of publication when he wrote these letters, and I wish I had kept more of them. He had been a great cyclist in former years, and knew the Henry Williamson country intimately. He spoke of cycling from Oxhey to Aylesford Priory, to see me; but increasing infirmity prevented this.

It has not been possible to trace Mr Rogers's executors; perhaps there were none; but it seems reasonable to presume their consent to the publication here of these interesting reflections on TEL and HW.

Henry Williamson's book on T. E. Lawrence, Genius of Friendship, *is somewhat disappointing when read by a Williamson fan as just another Williamson book; but as you will see from its general layout and type, it is a collector's piece, and not easily come across. But its value lies in the fact that future biographers must have the book by them, for Williamson's association with T. E. Lawrence must be closely examined and evaluated in the future. There is one thing that gives me a query, and I cannot get rid of it.*

From 1924 onwards, when I was 17, I was a motor-cycle 'fiend' or madman, and I used to read the weekly magazines The Motor-cycle *and* Motor Cycling. *I used to go grass-track racing and competed, or acted as travelling marshal or assistant with several others, on the big motor-cycle reliability trials which were held among the steep hills in the West of England; so I knew the motor-cycle game of that era. Now, Lawrence went in for Brough Superior motor-cycles, and because of this his name was often in the motor-cycle journals.*

The Brough Superior was an exceptionally large and powerful 10 h.p. twin-cylinder machine, and it was very costly, being the Rolls Royce of the motor-cycle world. When at rest, this machine always collected a crowd about it. Its builder, George Brough, knew how to get a crowd around himself too, and was good at obtaining publicity for himself. The Brough Superior would last for ever; the early 1924 models can still be found running on our roads today. These early models would do about 80–90 m.p.h., and by 1926–30 could do over a hundred miles per hour. But there was one snag about them, and this really kept them from becoming everyman's mount. The powerful engine and high speeds simply tore the tread of the rear tyre, and tyres were not as big then as today. An average powerful motor-cycle, generally about 5 h.p. or 500 c.c., would wear out a tyre in about 5,000 to 7,000 miles; but on a Brough a tyre would last only 3,500 miles. On a powerful, fast machine you must have a good rear tyre or you cannot get road adhesion for braking at high speeds.

Every time Lawrence bought a new Brough Superior, and he would have three in about

five years, George Brough managed to get him photographed leaving the factory on it. I remember a columnist in The Motor-cycle *quoting George Brough as saying that Lawrence brought his Brough into the works for refitting the rear tyre about* once a week. *(The factory was somewhere in the North, so presumably this was when Lawrence was stationed at Catterick.) Now, a Brough Superior never wears out, and Lawrence apparently indulged in the luxury of a new model every time one came out, at considerable expense. From about 1928 onwards Lawrence became something of a legendary motor-cycle figure; people, that is motor-cyclists, reported seeing him all over the country. He was easily recognized, for he was a small man on a very large machine. On it he used to look like a little weasel, for his arms were always stiff and straight on the handlebars, rather as a weasel's short, stiff front legs are always braced in an alert attitude. He always wore his blue Air-Force uniform with puttees, the regulation dress of the time, and his peaked RAF cap was held on by a chin-strap. He was easily distinguishable. I once caught a glimpse of him as he flashed past the door of a shack-tea-house on one of the long straight roads in the New Forest.*

One thing I noticed about these reports of 'Lawrence seen on the road' was that they nearly always came from the North of England, where many keen motor-cyclists dwelt. In those days, 'seeing a Brough' was something to be talked about afterwards. What was Lawrence doing on these trips? The question is a natural one, for who would drive 200 miles, from Bovington or Calshot, merely to have a tyre changed? The explanation will be found on page 50 of Genius of Friendship, *where Lawrence is quoted as saying: 'I spend my days and nights working on motor-boats, still, and chase all round the English coast after them or in them . . .': this suggests motor-cycling in connection with his work on developing the new speed-boats for the RAF Air/Sea Rescue service. Now an aircraft-man doing this work would normally use Service transport, at that time the two-seater Austin Seven (45 m.p.h. maximum) or the olive-green 350 c.c. Service Douglas or the 500 c.c. 'P' model Triumph motor-cycles, both of them side-valve models, and very slow. Lawrence would save two hours on a long journey if he was riding his Brough.*

RAF personnel had plenty of leave in those days, especially those assigned to special work. We know from his letters that he visited many different people at this time. To go the 80 miles from Plymouth to Williamson's Devon village would have been nothing to him. The query that continues to worry me is why he never visited Williamson. I cannot rid myself of the idea that there was not so much Genius of Friendship here as Williamson would have us believe. I think Lawrence liked him as a writer, but that this Eastern-desert wanderer, who had known many men of different breeds and conditions, must have sensed the element of weakness in Williamson's character.

Before leaving the matter of this book, you no doubt remember my repeated criticism that Williamson has an almost feminine faculty of remembering happy or sensual occasions by the details of the meals taken at the time? A woman, for example, remembers meeting a friend and what they had for lunch years afterwards. A man has usually forgotten it a week afterwards. Well, look at the imposing list of food Williamson has remembered from his one meeting with Lawrence. Could you *remember all this unless you had made a careful note of it at the time?*

I do not know if you can remember the period about which Williamson is writing in Genius of Friendship, *but at the time Lawrence was considered a 'mystery' man, and he was almost 'on the run' from Press and Public. It was generally believed that he had not finished his espionage work completely, and was 'up to something'. From 1929 the popular rumour was that he was dashing about the country on a motor-cycle trying to organize ex-officers into a new political party, of which they were to be the leaders. A leading ex-officer politician of the day was Sir Oswald Mosley, with whom Williamson was associated. It is speculation, but one may wonder: was Mosley perhaps approaching Lawrence through Williamson? Biographers of Henry Williamson will have to consider this possibility, and look in to it.*[1]

In 1967 Macdonald and Company published *Lucifer Before Sunrise*, the fourteenth and penultimate novel of Henry Williamson's *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. *Lucifer* contained Williamson's final thoughts on Hitler. The two previous volumes of the *Chronicle*, *The Phoenix Generation* and *A Solitary War*, had described the association of the *Chronicle*'s hero, Phillip Maddison, with Sir Hereward Birkin (Oswald Mosley) and his Imperial Socialist Party (British Union); so the shadow of Hitler was over those two books also. In *A Solitary War* Phillip Maddison says: 'If only Hitler, at this crisis in the world's portending misery, were shown some sign of friendliness, some *understanding* of his spiritual gifts, for so long frustrated and therefore turned to poison within his being — driving him to do the opposite of his idealistic nature. If only his magnanimity could be set free by friendship with the country and nation he admired — Britain — his true inner self might be brought forth as a light uncovered.'

Was this at any time a possibility? For myself, an ex-combatant of the second Anglo-German war, I believe it was. At least up to the time of the mysterious death of T. E. Lawrence, who might perhaps have been a key factor in any such possibility. But the whole truth about Hitler and the origins of the second world war will not be known for many years yet; if ever. Discussion of this question will probably continue indefinitely.

In 1967 the successive volumes of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* were still being discussed in *The Aylesford Review*; in the number for Winter 1966/Spring 1967 *A Solitary War* was reviewed at considerable length by E. W. Martin. In the same year, 1967, Henry received in his fan mail a letter from one Albert Smith, living in south-east London. He replied to this letter, and then received from Mr Smith a second communication. This Henry forwarded to me a few days later, together with his letter of reply. At the top of the first page of Mr Smith's letter he had written, in red ink: 'This man has an original viewpoint of the Chronicle. Please post my reply when you have read it.'

I made a copy of Henry's reply, which I kept, together with Mr Smith's letter, which Henry had not asked me to return. Although it has not been possible to trace Mr Smith, it seems to me that perhaps, twenty years later, the text of these letters might be published. They are surely not without interest and value.

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30.6.67

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your letter of Midsummer's Day — and its shades of Phillip; i.e., 'I replied at length last night, but this morning deemed it better . . .'!

I'm glad you did.

You were right not to end at 'A Test to Destruction'; only by what follows can one understand the effects of that war on those who survived. I now know the appeal of Hitler, and something (impossible to know all) of the terrible pain deep down of those who had to return and live in the post-war world.

The effect on you of writing comes through — only in loneliness can one read the books; each reader must enter into lonely communication with the world of Phillip. Whatever else you have done, you have made a world for people like me to enter in order to wonder, and learn that we have much to learn. You have killed my enjoyment of Dickens and other authors because you have used the novel to build a memorial. I'll recover; but I'll never be the same again. Even the Bible at the height of my religious years never had the effect of the 'Chronicle' — 'The Flax' is lighter, and a relaxation between reading of what seems a previous life.

Willie comes across as someone I knew, whereas Phillip, curse him, is someone I was! And is!

I ought to explain that my working life is spent in reading proofs — a world that for all its up-to-dateness is unreal! Like contemporary history! You cite D. H. Lawrence — did you mean T.E.? Why, oh why, did he have to die so early? Lucky for future generations that Phillip never acquired a 'Brough'!

I visited Cloud Hill one year — it is lonely, apart, haunted — I was not sure at that time what it was, but I now know.

Why did you dedicate 'The Golden Virgin' to Aldington? — the man who so slanderously wrote of T.E.L. Perhaps after recent events T.E.L. is better dead! The war of '39 has created more problems and solved none — it was wrong, and I appreciate your efforts to prevent it; but I do not yet understand fully who is to blame.

Away from your books I am still enough of a person who grew up in the London blitz to be unsure of Hitler's motives for good.

I must be a husband and a father and not live only in the world of Phillip Maddison — so back to the present; and tomorrow I take my family down, past you, to Cornwall and the Scillies — to camp for a week and visit the uninhabited isles and the birds and seals.

Last year it was the Tarka country; but it was too crowded in July.

Please excuse me if I trouble you by writing — you perhaps understand.

Meanwhile, many thanks again.

Yours sincerely

Albert A. J. Smith

Ox's Cross
1 July 1967

Dear Mr Smith

'Why did you dedicate The Golden Virgin *to Aldington? — the man who slanderously wrote of TEL.'*

Aldington was my friend. (There are 20–30 letters from him, to me, about his biography, starting puzzled, and ending scathingly.) R.A. was lonely, we liked each other. T.E. was my friend too. Do you consider that brutalities and partisanship are preferable to loyalty, or understanding, towards both *sides? E.g., Churchill and Hitler?*

Surely a writer's aim should be to understand humanity and all its varying and conflicting loyalties, frustrations, angelic and *satanic acts?*

I hope you had/have a good holiday — we are a weeping country in summer.

Yours

H.W.

Blame. *Everyone alive is to blame; for both good and ill. Ref. the late war, Oswald Mosley, a great friend of mine, has said: 'It took a man of genius to frustrate another man of genius; but Churchill could not build.'*

NOTES

1. See 'Editorial' p. 4.