Works of Henry Williamson

Idealist and Nature Lover, Whose Novels, Studies and Books on War Have Won Distinction

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[This article taken from HW's Review Scrapbook appeared in a provincial paper in the USA in 1931. I have been unable to trace the author but felt that such an excellent and sympathetic summing up of HW's writing at this period should not be withheld from Society members; Ed.]

'Henry Williamson is one of the newer luminaries on the English literary horizon. It is just ten years since his first book appeared, and even yet he is not widely known to the reading public, but his star is in the ascendant and it seems to be quite certain that within a few years he will have won general recognition as an artist of high rank, a writer of rare charm and living beauty. His work so far represents three distinct aspects — the nature sketches and stories in which he renders the life of wild creatures and conveys infinitesimal detail of the English countryside with the accuracy of the naturalist and the deep-veined passion of the poet; the studies of war, in stark simple, unforgettable record of "Patriots' Progress" and in reflective anguished revisitation of the battlefields of "The Wet Flanders Plain;" and the tetralogy of novels, "The Flax of Dream," which mirrors a single life-experience born into and moulded by the war years and radiates a mystic gospel of spiritual transfiguration, skin to that of Blake and Shelley. Each of these aspects is distinct, individual; but the qualities that make them so are infused in all. Thus, precise observation of nature and intensity of sympathy for all living creatures infiltrates the novels, and rebellion against the stupid utilitarianism and mass-cruelty of man's world smoulders beneath tragedy of idyll of wild life. Henry Williamson is an idealist, nature lover and poet; at once pantheist and Christian mystic; sensitive to every quiver of agony in sentiment being, and drawing strength and solace from earth's manifold loveliness.

His nature books represent so far, I think, his finest work, in unity and in sustained beauty of prose. It may be remembered that in 1928 he received the Hawthornden Prize for his story of animal life, "Tarka the Otter," a book that must surely take its place among the "little classics" of modern English literature. This was my own introduction to Williamson, one of those sudden discoveries of a hidden vein of precious ore which is the thrilling joy of the adventurer in literature.

"Tarka the Otter" is set in the domain that Mr. Williamson makes his own — the vales and water-country of Exmoor, Dartmoor and North Devon, portrayed by Hardy and Blackmore and Kipling. Basically, it is the familiar "nature book," but transfigured by poetic imagination, electrified by the deep vital currents of earth. This chronicle of the "joyful water-life and death" of an otter is unusual in matter and manner. It holds the tang of the old Dartmoor words of soil and stream, it is neither interpretation nor description, but with amazing reality it conveys self identification with the outlaw, hunted tribe of otters — so ancient in lineage, fighters to the death; wary, tenacious. Gradually as you read, the transformation is effected. You are an otter yourself, sharing these excursions and alarums of otter existence; untiring play, ever-present danger, escape and danger again, constant pursuit and excitement in the seeking of food, the mastery and excitement

and skill involved simply in living. The breath of Dartmoor, fresh and strong, blows through the book; it holds constant movement, like streams that channel the water-country; it is not softly tinted and reflective but swift and vigorous, with nature's pristine savagery and the cruelty of the eternal struggle for life, underlying man's savagery for his own amusement in the wanton death-dealing and terror of sport.

Before "Tarka" other nature stories and sketches had appeared, in separate small volumes in England, and among them "The Lone Stag" was perhaps the first to bring the attention of a discriminating few to this writer of new and original talent. These stories were brought together in an American edition in a single volume a few years later, with the collective title, "The Lone Swallows, Sun Brothers, The Lone Stag." They carry on the tradition maintained by Gilbert White and Richard Jefferies in English literature, but to me they seem even more in direct succession to W. H. Hudson's studies and sketches of animal and bird life and renderings of natural backgrounds.

But Henry Williamson's most ambitious achievement, and the one that is reaching a growing audience, is his tetralogy — the four linked novels, or as he says, the "set of panels," that make up the work to which he gives the corporate name, "The Flax of Dream." In these is set before us, from birth to death, the life-experience of William Maddison, poet, mystic and sensitive rebel against the world as it is. They are, in due order, "The Beautiful Years," "Dandelion Days," "The Dream of Fair Women," and "The Pathway"; with a "pendant" to the composition, "The Star-Born," which is soon to appear. The first three novels of this sequence were originally published some ten years ago in England; the fourth "The Pathway" appeared in 1928 and immediately directed attention to the preceding "panels." Now comes a revision of "The Dream of Fair Women," to take the place of the first version, long out of print; virtually an entire rewriting (it is said that only a few lines of the original text remain unaltered) made by Mr. Williamson in 1930, in New York. Each book, of course, is an independent, separate novel, arresting and rewarding if read alone; but to really know the work, to judge it fairly and to realize its significance and quality as literature it must be read as a complete composition designed and constructed in these four panels, one opening as the other folds away. And every reader who does this will, I think, accept it as a noble and beautiful work of literature, even though uneven in execution and unequal in the excellence of its several parts.

Taking the four "panels" in their sequence, in "The Beautiful Years" we have the chapter of childhood, the shaping of child-nature under the moulding touch of early influences and environment. When Willie Maddison was born in the old Devon manor-house, his young mother died, as the owls hooted in sinister portent. The child lived alone with his stern, matter-of-fact and aloof father, and through his seventh, eighth and ninth years, the reader shares his experiences in home and countryside and school, and comes to understand the potentialities, the inhibitions, of the nature revealed in greater fullness but in entire consistency in the succeeding chronicles. Willie Maddison's complex nature is revealed with subtle penetration — the acute sensitiveness that in a child becomes the shrinking agony of fear, the wildly romanticizing imagination, the high-strung nerves with their constant variation in mood; the passionate, poetic idealization of nature and her creatures; and the isolation of spirit established by the opposed temperaments of father and son. "Dandelion Days" carries the boy through adolescence, telling of his later school-days, the friendship carried on from childhood, the joy and pain and

self-conscious miseries of first love, the opening of college plans, and then the coming of the war and the youth of seventeen swept off on the first flood of ardor and idealism to an undreamed of reality of horror in the Flanders fields.

"The Dream of Fair Women" brings Willie Maddison at 22 back to England after four years at the front. Essentially it portrays youth shattered and disorganized, in spirit if not in body, by the holocast of war, seeking vainly some meaning to life, in a post-war world that is already indifferent to the wreckage left by war. He is still the idealist, now led by an inner vision of spiritual reconstruction for a war-torn generation. He takes refuge in a sort of hermitage in Devonshire, surrounded by the birds and beasts he rescues and cares for, absorbed in the creative writing that entrances him; and here he is caught in a deep and disillusioning love affair that at last sends him off, frustrated and lonely, to seek forgetfulness and self-mastery.

"The Pathway" gives us the last chapter in the life of Willie Maddison. It, too, is infiltrated with and exhales memories of the war, and shows the psychic effects of war experience upon a sensitive, poetic nature, passionately individualistic and idealistic. Maddison in both books is a figure not of his own day, but a visionary tinged with the spirit of Blake and Shelley, who has returned from his war years with an intense personal gospel of compassion and spiritual equality that sets him apart from others and winds about him a net of misunderstanding and distrust from more ordinary minds. He gives expression to this gospel in the writing of his book, "The Star-Born," a "celestial fantasy" for the liberation of man's spirit. But the world is filled with simple everyday human beings, neither mystics nor enthusiasts, who live in practica, traditional acceptance of life as it is. And Maddison is enmeshed by the conventional, old friendships, by love; his gospel wounds or offends those who care for him; his own love seems to offer him no fulfilment; and at the last, like Shelley, he goes alone to seek his own inner vision at the end of the pathway of life.

Of the four panels in this sequence the first and last seem to me the finest. "The Beautiful Years" and "The Pathway" are richer in content, more even in texture, more arresting in theme and more beautiful in sustained noble or poetic prose than are "Dandelion Days" and "The Dream of Fair Women." To these panels will soon be added the final "pendant" — Willie Maddison's "celestial fantasy," "The Star-Born," thus completing a structure of creative art that must be counted a permanent contribution to English literature. It is impossible within allotted space to consider adequately this elaborate and remarkable composition or comment as I should like to do, on Henry Williamson's own life — which is so curiously and exactly parallel in much of the experiences of Willie Maddison. I can only urge all readers who care for beautiful writing, who yield to the spell of earth-magic, or who would follow the questing spirit of the poet-mystic, to know for themselves the work of Henry Williamson.
