

## The Amazing Storm that attended *The Pathway* in the USA

Taken from one of the publicity broadsheets sent out by E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., (Henry's American publishers at the time) mailed to 13,000 Editors, Librarians and Booksellers, the following extracts set forth the nub of an argument that raged briefly throughout the American press like a prairie fire.

It shows how passionately John Macrae believed in the worth of Henry's writing in general and *The Pathway* in particular. The whole broadsheet was devoted to various aspects of this argument but it is not possible to reproduce it all.

We are very grateful to E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc. for permission to use this material and for their staunch support of Henry by publishing his work in America in the 1930s.

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### JOHN MACRAE'S LETTER ON *THE PATHWAY*

#### Sent to 500 Editors and Critics With a Copy of Henry Williamson's Novel

I am sending you a copy of Henry Williamson's latest book, a novel, "*The Pathway*," which I am publishing February 28th. In 1927 I took the unusual liberty of sending a personal letter to a number of American leaders in critical thought and a copy of three of Mr Williamson's books, including "*The Old Stag*." Since the writing of my letter in 1927, Mr Williamson has received the Hawthornden Prize for his work in "*Tarka the Otter*." Now that Mr Williamson has been recognized by the best writers and critics in Europe, including Thomas Hardy, Edward Garnett, John Galsworthy, J.C. Squire, Llewellyn Powys, Walter de la Mare, etc., my first letter is all the more significant.

I am purposing to intrigue you in this letter to give personal attention to Henry Williamson's work and with that in mind I am repeating a part of my first letter, especially that part dealing with its origins. In August 1914, Henry Williamson was a shy, retiring boy of seventeen, rather backward from the standpoint of the animal man. In other words, he was a highly strung, sensitive boy. Early in that month he arrived in his little native village of Devon. Seeing that the village was in a tumult of excitement over the war, he walked up and enlisted for foreign service. The next morning he found himself in London and by the following afternoon he was a part of the great British Expeditionary Forces in France. This boy fought for four years, in and out of the trenches of France and Belgium, never being absent more than forty-eight hours at one time from active military work during those four years, and during all that time the boy was so sensitive that he recalls the uncomfortable and disagreeable feeling brought upon him by the necessity of having to dress and undress before the men of his regiment.

After the Armistice, Williamson's regiment was sent to Folkestone to muster out. And one day in March, when the rain poured down with its cold, biting wind, he found himself in Folkestone with nothing to do. That day he entered a book shop and taking up a book he began to read. He continued reading the book for several hours, forgetting all sense of time. Suddenly he saw the kindly old book-seller's eyes revited upon him and he asked him if he might go on reading the book. The book-seller asked him to go over to the light and sit down where he could be comfortable and finish his reading. The book was Richard Jefferies' "*Bevis*." Henry Williamson tells me that he was educated at a good English school for boys and had spent four years in the army, but that "*Bevis*" was the first book he had ever consciously read. It was the beginning of his power to read and the beginning of his interest in literature.

In some way Lord Northcliffe heard of this boy Williamson's power to express himself and invited him to the Daily Mail. Williamson worked for some eighteen months on The Mail until he could not stand the job any longer. An old aunt had left him a workman's cottage in Devon and the boy had managed in those eighteen months to save out of his small pittance six pounds. With six pounds in his pocket he walked from London to Devon to save train fares. On arriving at his cottage in Devon he bought only those bare necessities, such as a cot and a few cooking utensils. From time to time he was able to sell a short story for a small sum, but during those meager years, until he received recognition in 1927, Henry Williamson lived under most uncomfortable conditions. He has literally been a disciple of the great St Francis, a little brother of the poor in literature.

Henry Williamson has drudged and worked and written and rewritten his stories so that each of his books bears the marks of a real work of literature. "The Pathway," for instance is, in my humble judgment, the most beautiful and the most illuminating novel I have read for many years. I cannot comprehend how any one with an ear for good literature can fail to clasp "The Pathway" to his literary soul.

I am taking an unusual course in writing this letter. It seems to me that the world is travelling over-fast. There is an enormous amount of back-scratching in the writing of criticism. Many people write and talk of the writing and making of books who have no personal taste for the books discussed. In short, we are in danger of having our reading prescribed for us in very much the same way that Mr Ford carries on the manufacture and the distribution of those excellent little Ford cars.

This particular book, "The Pathway," was offered to the Book-of-the-Month Club because I was so very anxious that my friend Henry Williamson should get the compensation the use of the books by this important institution could give him. "The Pathway" was very seriously read and considered by the following critics of the Book-of-the-Month Club: Dr Henry Seidel Canby, Christopher Morley, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, William Allen White and Heywood Broun. They made their decision and have taken "The Cradle of the Deep," by Joan Lowell, instead.

I raise this question solely in the interest of literature. Should our reading public be led by its nose, following the judgment of these eminent men and women or any other groups of critics? I wish in this letter to express my personal belief in "The Pathway," and to set my judgment against that of these critics. I believe "The Pathway" is one of the greatest and most beautiful novels of modern times and I submit my letter to you in the hope that you will read this novel, believing that I will find a response to my own judgment in yours.

The purpose of this letter, if I have any power to interest you, is to bring you to the reading of "The Pathway." If you read the book and if it grips you as it gripped me, I believe you will do your part in letting the American people hear of it and of Henry Williamson.—Signed John Macrae, President of E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc.

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#### MR MACRAE REPLIES—Letter sent to 1,000 Editors and Critics

About fifteen days ago I wrote a letter to a number of American newspapers and critics raising the question of the choice of its outstanding book for March by the Book-of-the-Month Club. The occasion of this letter was brought about by the selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club of "The Cradle of the Deep," by Joan Lowell, a most interesting document of experience, but a series of episodes which is not exactly a book, and the rejection of "The Pathway," by Henry Williamson, a book which seems to me to be one of the most beautiful novels of modern times. The purpose of my letter was to discover, if possible, whether or not the public is interested in the methods used and the choice

of the books by these important book clubs. The response has shown that there must be a great many people in this country who are very much interested in the selection of these books, in the publicity given to them, and in the problems arising therefrom.

It is of no particular importance to me whether or not the book-buying public misses the reading of a great book for the moment. The purpose of my letter was to develop the position of these large books clubs which have stated in their advertising, and in every other way, that they are choosing the most important and outstanding book of the month from the lists of all the publishers. Although from the very beginning the Book-of-the-Month Club has had as its selecting committee five of the most important critics in this country, men and women whose opinion carried great weight where the worth of a book is concerned, the Book-of-the-Month Club saw fit to challenge my letter through one of its subordinates. Since then, Dr Henry Seidel Canby, Chairman of the Committee, in a letter to the *New York Times*, has attempted to explain why "The Pathway" was thrown aside and "The Cradle of the Deep" was chosen as the outstanding book for March. Dr Canby, I am glad to say, frankly admits in his letter that their selection is not *the* book of the month, but *a* book of the month, selected by him and his advisers to meet the requirements of 100,000 subscribers. If this is the function of the Book-of-the-Month Club I have no quarrel with them whatever. But I would suggest that in the future they spread this fact across their advertisements.

My decision in raising this question of the book clubs is not one of disappointment as Dr Canby suggests in the *Times*. I have the very definite purpose of expressing what gradually has been growing in my mind for several months that if these clubs are allowed to continue their evasive advertising the people of this country should be warned, for if they are to follow the leadership of the book clubs for their reading they are going to miss a great many of the best books being published today. I have personally been opposed from the beginning to the idea of a Book-of-the-Month club, solely on the ground that such an organization would eventually commercialize and standardize our reading as a nation. Up to this time literature has been one of the avenues of our national life which has remained independent, and it seems to me to be of great importance that it should remain independent and free from mass action. If we are to be a free and independent people we must do our own thinking. And if our reading is to be prescribed for us by a few men whose object seems to be to increase the number of subscribers to their book clubs, then our independence of thought and feeling must inevitably roll along into the well-known American Machine.

It seems to me that this controversy has brought out several important questions which should be asked by the public of these book clubs and which should be answered by some responsible men in a perfectly straightforward way:

(1) What is the object of the Book-of-the-Month Club? Is it to recommend to its members the BEST and MOST OUTSTANDING book of the month in the opinion of the five judges responsible for that selection?

(2) How do these judges arrive at their decision? Is proper care taken that each book submitted for consideration receives consideration? How is the long list of candidates for that particular month weeded out and the selection narrowed down to a comparatively few books? Who then reads and decides which title is to receive the honor and advantage? The 100,000 members of the Book-of-the-Month Club and the public at large have a right to know all the details regarding the selection of the book of the month, who the five judges are recommending that particular book, how they vote, and what their opinions are.

(3) Is it true that books are not admitted into the final test unless the publishers are willing to give a discount of at least 70% and in some instances more? This is a very serious

and important question for the book clubs to answer as it has been emphatically stated that the judges charged with the selection of the book of the month are in no wise concerned with the question of discounts. A 70% discount means that the club buys a \$2.00 book for 60 cents which gives to them the large profit of £1.40 on every book sold.

(4) Is any question ever raised regarding the amount of advertising the publisher is prepared to do providing his book is selected as the outstanding book of the month?

(5) Is it true that the large discounts demanded by the book clubs are resulting in cutting off a large part of the author's royalties in those cases, of course, where his book is selected as the book of the month?

(6) Is it a fact that the direct method used by these book clubs is taking the sale of current books out of the bookseller's shop and passing them on to these large mail order organizations? Is it not a question of national importance if the booksellers of the country are losing this business, for are they not our only national means of distributing books?

(7) To what extent are substitute books bought by the subscribers of the book clubs?

The Book-of-the-Month Club naively states that their choice of the book of the month is offered to their members and that each member if he does not like it has the privilege of returning the book and may receive any other recommended book in its place. This fact is emphasized by the Book-of-the-Month Club in its advertising and Dr Canby in his letter to the *Times*, but they must know by actual experience that comparatively few of these books are ever returned. The Book-of-the-Month Club and Dr Canby have both emphasized the fact that "The Pathway" is highly recommended to their members as a substitute book. It has also been stated that the Book-of-the-Month Club put in a starting order for 50,000 copies of "The Cradle of the Deep." To the date of the writing of this letter the Book-of-the-Month Club has ordered from us ten copies of "The Pathway." Over a period of months the Book-of-the-Month Club has listed books published by us as highly recommended. Yet the purchase of these books by the Book-of-the-Month Club has been negligible.

It would seem that both the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild have become mail order devices for the selling of books to their subscribers, both getting discounts from the publishers far in excess of the discounts allowed by the same publishers to the booksellers of the country. It has been my understanding that the distinguished critics used by the Book-of-the-Month Club have contributed their expert knowledge with little or no pecuniary compensation and that the same thing has been true of the Literary Guild. A recent announcement tells us that Nelson Doubleday, Inc., of the mail order division of Doubleday, Doran and Company, has bought a substantial interest in the Literary Guild. This announcement raises the question as to whether or not both these organizations have not definitely embarked into the commercial field of distributing books for profit without regard to the high ideals and aims set forth in their early announcements to the American public.

The publishers of this country throughout their history have been noted for their independence and courage. As a body we have sought as best we could to give to the American people the best in literature which the genius of the time has been able to produce. As a publisher I am concerned as to whether or not the future will still give us the right of free choice. If a group of men and women is to be allowed to state that a particular book is the outstanding book of the month from the lists of all the publishers without individually acknowledging their responsibility for their choice, how are we to protect the rights of authors whose names and books fail of the opportunity of getting before these groups?—Signed, John Macrae, President of E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc.