

More from *Dandelion Days*

Fred Shepherd

When I first wrote of Henry Williamson's relationship with his old school in our *Journal* No. 6, I emphasised the great hurt which had been felt at Colfe's over many years as a result of the publication of *Dandelion Days*. Recently this reaction was amusingly recalled by the famous thriller writer, Eric Ambler, who was at Colfe's when the book was first published.

He relates in *Here Lies Eric Ambler*, his successful autobiography, "All we learned about the novel at the time was that an old boy had done something discreditable. We were not told what he had done and were not encouraged to enquire. The police were not involved, it seemed, so we lost interest."

Ambler, writing with the full maturity of a successful writer, is just as critical of many of his teachers as Williamson had been when writing as a young man. He is particularly critical of T.S. Simons (Mr Crookane of the revised version) of whom he admits Williamson drew a recognisable portrait.

Other great writers have been far less kind when remembering their Headmaster. H.E. Bates in the *Vanished World* suggests his Head "behaved with dismal, lamentable stupidity" when he relentlessly whipped him without even explaining why! Anthony Burgess's hilarious descriptions of his Head in *Little Wilson and Big God* are also most revealing and cause us to wonder why so many Colfeians found Williamson's sensitive descriptions of the late F.W. Lucas so disturbing, especially as Williamson's work was in the end, fiction.

In July 1969 the 'Colfeian' magazine published a fine explanation of Williamson's early work in an article entitled 'Memories of Rod and Line'. Although written by a prominent Old Colfeian, P.S. Keyte, the article produced a most heated response from a number of Williamson's contemporaries and other Old Boys, mostly defending their Headmaster Frank Lucas (Theodore William Rore).

Henry himself wrote to the Editor confirming that he liked the review of Colham School and considered it "comprehensive and balanced and fair — good, creative criticism." There were however many other views printed in subsequent editions of the 'Colfeian'. C.H. Fream declared the book nauseating, "not for the reasons held by the staff, who were mostly the victims of unkind pen portraits," but because he believed the book to be "sickeningly immature and deals with events of no moment." He declared, "I suspect that Williamson would, if he could, omit it from the canon of his work." Amongst the many old boys who responded to this was Brian Sanders, now well known in our own Society, who suggested that *Dandelion Days* was not simply a school story but an important part of *The Flax of Dream*, and suggested that Fream should "re-read (or read?) the novel".

Dandelion Days has of course been republished yet again since that day and many regard the book as the finest description of school life in the English language. An *Observer* critic wrote that the book "gets as near to the heart of a boy as anything I have read for many years. Willie Maddison is a person and a representative. His history is beautiful — and important." I am most aware that Henry was proud of this work for in my copy of *Dandelion Days* is a dedication by Henry to the writer H.A. Marhood, signed and dated July 1930, "This bad book is given in the knowledge that it is a damned good one."

In my original article I did promise to identify some of the masters and boys of *Dandelion Days* as some of the characters were still alive at the school which I attended from 1946. The then deputy head was W.N. Morley who as Mr Worley had been barely disguised and had been particularly displeased with his portrait. He always had a very serious

disposition and had been at the school since the end of the last century for he was School Captain in 1904.

The Headmaster, Frank Lucas, retired in 1923 but lived until 1931, long enough to see his worst pupil win the Hawthornden Prize for Literature. I only hope he did have the grace to write congratulating Henry as suggested in the *Chronicle*.

The drawing master Mr Worthy ("useless" Mr Worth in the novel), died in 1932 after 25 years at the school. Henry described him as having the temperament of a minimum poet: he often lost his temper and would bellow, "I won't have it, I won't have it." He did however give up much of his spare time to lead the Field Club in excursions to the nearby countryside, and the young Henry often enjoyed these.

S.W. Kelland (Mr Waugh) the chemistry master who reigned over what was a huge laboratory by school standards, died in 1930 whilst still on the staff, and the German and French master Mr R.A. FitzAucher (Mr Rapson of the shining blue serge trousers) retired in 1932. His knowledge of German took him to the Foreign Office for special duties where Colfe boys believed he would have made a splendid spy.

Just two masters were depicted with sympathy and affection: Mr R.W. Creech (Mr Beach) who was known as 'Sam' and taught Latin until his retirement in 1936, and Frank Bennett (Mr Kenneth) the history master, who retired in 1941 and who lived until his 86th year. They were both kindly men, who despised the 'whack', yet were much respected by the boys. In his school obituary it was suggested that not the least tribute paid to Bennett was the sympathetic portrait which Henry Williamson sketched in *Dandelion Days*.

Bennett is remembered as a good shot and this would have impressed Henry as it was his best sport. Williamson represented Colfe's at Bisley in 1911 when the school came 6th on the list for the Captain's Cup, the nearest the school came to carrying off a big prize at this prestigious event.

I particularly remember the school caretaker, Mr Cockle, for he had a prominent carbuncle on his bald forehead. Although he was about to retire and had been at the school since before the Great War, he had changed little and obviously still enjoyed a position of great influence over the younger boys. He had worn a smart uniform of navy blue, with scarlet flashings and gold braid and looked the part.

The best known of the boys were Hoyes, Manning, Swan and Yeates. Dudley Hoyes enlisted on October 1st 1914 a few weeks before his 17th birthday and saw service in Mesopotamia, reaching the rank of Captain. A journalistic diploma at London University set him on a writing career which was to see over a thousand short stories published under a variety of names and in several countries. He regularly wrote for the *Strand*, *Blackwoods* and *John Bull*, as well as a couple of novels and a play called *Chinese White* which had runs both at Dalys and Royalty Theatres in 1936. He retired to the Lake District where he continued to write 'Old Will' articles for *Country Life* and an interesting guide called *Below Scarfell*. He died in 1980 aged 81.

Maurice Manning left Colfe's in 1912 with a scholarship to the Leathersellers Technical College. He had a very successful business career and an active involvement with the Old Boys and School all his life, culminating in his being Master of the Leathersellers Company and thus Chairman of the School Governors. During the Great War he had served with the ASC in France, often ferrying supplies to the troops in the 'line' over roads frequently subject to heavy enemy shelling. He died in 1972.

F.A. Swann left Colfe's in 1913 after becoming School Captain. He had a distinguished career at the Board of Trade where he reached the rank of Assistant Secretary. His work involved the negotiation of trade agreements with various European countries. Like Hoyes, Swann remained a life-long friend of Henry. A colleague at the Board of Trade was R.F. Clemon, another of the *Dandelion Days* boys.

Victor Yeates must surely be the subject of a separate article, for his involvement with Henry in publishing *Winged Victory*, a classic novel of the 1914-18 war, is most important. Apart from those who died at the front like Rupert Bryers, he is the only one of this group who failed to live to a ripe old age. His death in 1934 was however a direct result of his war experiences.

As the 'Colfeian' continued to publish articles under the general title 'Memories of Rod and Line', several old boys were able to recall their association with our famous author in his early life.

L.T. Hinton recalled his first meeting at school in 1911, when Henry was a big boy, very thin, with elbows and knees seeming to jut out in all directions and with a dark complexioned face, looking very fierce. "Williamson, he's crackers," he was told — "goes up on Chislehurst Common with Worthy catching tiddlers in the ponds." Hinton went on to compare this memory with the "white-haired and moustached, benign-looking naturalist whose picture appeared quite regularly in the *Daily Express*!"

Another memory was of Henry at a Colfe Football Supper at the Green Man on the night Carpentier fought Backett. Henry had laid on to be called to the phone and when he came back he dramatically announced, "Beaten, by a ——— Frenchman."

Another remembered parties at his parents' billiard room in Catford to which both Williamson and Hoyes often came. They had their own small band with Hoyes on the banjo. He remembers playing football with the Old Boys on Blackheath with Henry Williamson playing in goal on a wet afternoon under his umbrella!

I could continue but more memories, although amusing, are not important. They do however show Henry to be a complete man and not the war-shattered recluse as sometimes suggested. The novel however was and still is important.

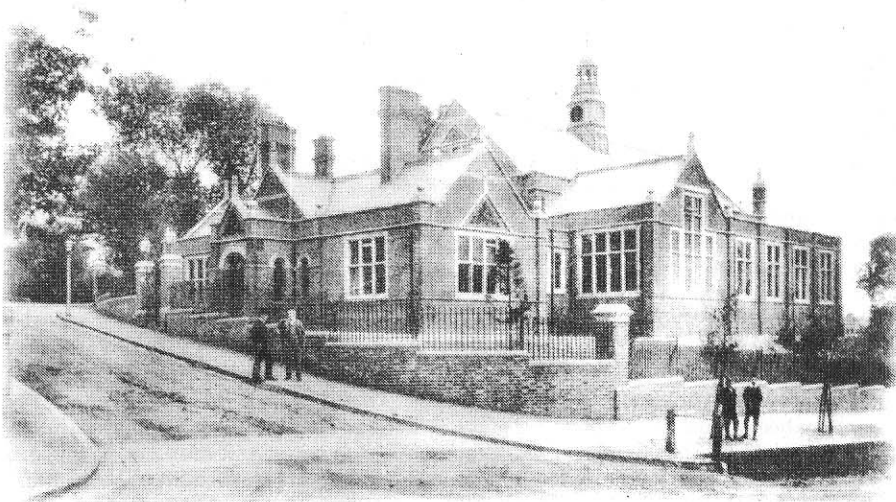
Henry wrote to Hoyes as editor of the 'Colfeian' in May 1922 when he was awaiting the proof sheets of his second book, and explained that he felt "Strongly, very strongly, about the methods existing in most schools today. But it's no good just making a savage attack against schoolmasters, Euclid, and evening preparation. An author must, as it were, wear a mask; the characters must speak for themselves. My schoolmaster characters that I have invented to bear the burden of most of my story, speak for themselves. Indeed, some of them shout . . ." He closed the letter beautifully, with a touching reference to his Headmaster: "Give my kind regards to any of our old friends, I often think of them and of those glad springtimes when we used to gloat over the treasures of our birds' eggs. Well, well; the leaves fall, and the swallows come and go; I simply loathe the idea of growing old. But these things must be; 'One can but do useful work and take what light it brings.' I quote one of my characters of whom I am quite fond."

Many years later Williamson was to write of his school days in an article for *The Spectator* which he entitled 'Out of the Prisoning Tower'. Sadly, his warm praise and affection for his old school and in particular its distinguished Headmaster F.W. Lucas, went unrecorded in the 'Colfeian'. The sensitive article concluded with this paragraph: "My tears have been clouds these many decades; my hate, or strangled love, was never strong. 'The Old Bird', I have often thought, took on a heroic task; he should not have worn himself out in a London suburban school of 300 boys, but have been a tutor, soon surely to have become Master of, one of the colleges at the ancient universities; for his mental range was wide and he lived to instil and to pass on his abiding love of the flowers of our western civilization, based on 'the radiance of Hellas'. I remember him with affection, as I remember most of the faces of my time at school, including the hundred or so of my generation who were killed in the 1914-18 War." Later, in 1961, this article, with others from the series, was published by Hutchinson under the general title *John Bull's Schooldays*. Other contributors included Kingsley Amis, William Golding and Angus Wilson.

Readers often wonder why Henry did not attend the local West Kent Grammar School which was situated opposite his home in Brockley, and fail to realise that Henry won a much coveted scholarship to Colfe's, a venerable academic establishment governed by a powerful City Livery Company, The Worshipful Company of Leathersellers. The annual fees in 1909 were up to £15.15 at Colfe's, substantially more than at most other endowed schools in South London. Emanuel with 427 boys charged £10.25, Alleyn's with 613 boys charged £11.20 and St Dunstan's College with 463 boys charged £9.00. Only Dulwich College with 700 boys charged more.

Colfe's was sustained by the support it received from the professional classes who lived in the fashionable homes leading off Blackheath, whilst the residents around the Hilly Fields where Henry's family lived were in the main clerks and artisans. Freame in his letter to the 'Colfeian' claimed that in Lucas's day, snobbery was endemic in the school, caused by the fusion of the fee-paying pupils with a small number of scholarship boys. *Dandelion Days* does not however suggest this.

Although young Willie is credited with very little formal education before joining Colham Grammar School in *The Beautiful Years*, the young Phillip of *Donkey Boy* in the *Chronicle* does win a coveted scholarship to enable him to join the Heath School, in which Mr Rore becomes a much more reasonable Magister. Hetty had every reason for being proud of her little boy when his wonderfully descriptive essay won him the scholarship to the 'School on the Hill' and today, Colfe's, now a very successful Public School, can be just as proud of Henry Williamson and his vast literary achievement.



Colfe's Grammar School, Lewisham.