Henry Williamson's *The Flax of Dream:* a Reappraisal

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Henry Wlliamson's early sequence of novels, the tetralogy *The Flax of Dream* (1921–8; revised 1929–33; further and finally revised in one volume 1936) continues to attract readers. The most recent reprint is that issued in 1983 in four volumes by Zenith Books (Hamlyn Paperbacks) although regrettably the text followed is not that of the definitive 1936 edition.[1] *The Flax of Dream* continues also to stimulate criticism: the comments of I. Waveney Girvan (1931) have been succeeded by those of Herbert Faulkner West (1932), Malcolm Elwin (1946), Brocard Sewell (1958 and 1965), John Middleton Murry (1959), Colin Wilson (1961) and David Hoyle (1980).[2] Henry Williamson himself commented critically on *The Flax of Dream* in several places, most notably in the article 'Some Notes on "The Flax of Dream" and "A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight" ' which first appeared in *The Aylesford Review* (Winter 1957–8).[3] A work of such powerful appeal as *The Flax of Dream* will, I believe, make successive generations of readers wish to formulate afresh their appreciation of it and to explore more deeply the nature and quality of its art. It is in this spirit that I offer the following analysis and reappraisal. First, I shall discuss Williamson's intentions in writing the novels, and secondly what I take to be his actual achievement, which will allow me to suggest what I consider to be the work's characteristic strengths and weaknesses.

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In the Foreword to the one-volume edition of *The Flax of Dream* Williamson tells us that during the Christmas Truce of 1914 on the Western Front at which he was present, 'the seed idea' of the book was 'loosed upon the frozen ground of the battlefield' (p. 7). He had 'a conversation with a young soldier of the 133rd Saxon Regiment in no-man's-land, in front of the Bois de Ploegsteert' and 'although he did not fully realize it at the time, that experience altered his entire conception of the world' (ibid.). There are many places in his writings where Williamson refers to this experience, which had in it something of a spiritual illumination.[4] He had accepted without thought the notion that the Allies were fighting for freedom and justice and that the Germans were fighting for mere domination. As he tells us in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1941), while some of the troops 'mingled and talked in no-man's-land' on Christmas Day, others buried the dead, marking the shallow graves 'with crosses knocked together from lengths of ration-box wood, marked with indelible pencil "For King and Country", "Für Vaterland und Freiheit" (pp. 223–4). This led to the moment of revelation:

> *Fatherland and freedom!* Freedom? *How was this?* We *were fighting for freedom, our cause was just, we were defending Belgium, civilization . . . these fellows in grey were good fellows, they were — strangely — just like ourselves. "How can we lose the war English comrade? Our cause is just, we are ringed with enemies who would crush us economically, we asked only for a place in the sun, and now we are defending our parents, our homes, our German soil. No, we cannot lose the war — for right is on our side." A most shaking, staggering*

thought: that both sides thought they were fighting for the same cause! The war was a terrible mistake! (p. 224)

Of course after a few days both sides were ordered to resume fighting: 'So Hope sank into the mud again, but did not die, despite a withering anew as each poor human unit fell in machine-gun mort-blast and colossal reverberating rending of the 'shells of those four years . . .' (p. 225).

In 1918, in an attempt to escape in imagination from the War, Williamson had begun to write *The Policy of Reconstruction*,[5] but it was only after the War, in 1919, when by a happy Providence he discovered Richard Jefferies's *The Story of My Heart* (1883) in a second-hand bookshop in Folkestone, that he was able to begin with true creativity to develop and express the 'seed idea' of the Truce. He found articulated in *The Story of My Heart* thoughts and feelings about Nature which were in many ways similar to those he himself was moving towards in a less fully conscious way in the pre-war days when he had delighted in the countryside of North-West Kent and Bedfordshire, but which had been stifled by the terrible and deadening experience of the War. Something of his former self revived, and helped him to interpret the meaning of the experience of the Christmas Truce. This was that the War had been unconsciously prepared by the unhappiness of children both within the family and at school, thus leading to a thwarting of the social instinct which he believed could 'only be developed by imagination freed from mental fear'.[6] Such children grew into adults whose characteristics were irritability and lack of understanding of others. Williamson believed that an essential aid to the growth of a wholesome social instinct was ready access, from earliest childhood, to Nature in the countryside: as he put it in the first of a series of articles entitled 'Quest' which deal with the development of his moral ideas and aims as a writer:

How could the new way of life be brought into the minds of millions of people — the new world where all would be wide friendliness and trust, because every man would have faith in himself, out of a naturally developed instinct in man's higher destiny?

The new way could only come from early contact of children with Nature; the pure thoughts given by the elements must be the philosophical basis of the new world. Every child must have a fair chance, not to be warped, as at present, by the economic system, and so often ruined in thought and body by inevitable frustration.[7]

He wanted, then, in *The Flax of Dream*, to tell 'the story of one human unit of Europe [Willie Maddison, the hero of the novels, who is drawn from certain aspects of Williamson himself] immediately before and after the War', and by it to express 'the vision of a new world, dreamed by many young soldiers in the trenches and shell-craters of the World War'.[8] He hoped that the attractiveness of this vision of the possibility of a new order based on imaginative sympathy and understanding within families and nations, and thus between nations, would help 'to alter the thought of the entire world'.[9] Like Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* he wanted to show the possibility of a reign of love, which could and should replace an oppressive and frustrating society. This is why he took the title *The Flax of Dream* for his tetralogy, from a phrase in his aunt J. Quiddington West's symbolic narrative *The Incalculable Hour* (1910). The key passage, which Williamson quotes in the Foreword to the 1936 edition of *The Flax of Dream* runs as follows:

Our Land of heart's desire is woven of our thoughts and longings and emotions, and no two weave alike. And it is well if, returning thence, we bring with us gifts worthy of acceptance. For many, to whom the Weaver gives the Flax of Dream, weave hurriedly, and

the web is spoilt. It needs time to gather the joy and sorrow, the love and suffering, the wisdom that go to make a perfect design; and through all the weft of it must run the thread of self-sacrifice like a scarlet flame, touching it to inconceivable beauty. (pp. 9–10)[10]

In *The Flax of Dream* Williamson wished to present in carefully wrought art a vision of *his* Land of Heart's Desire, to explain its qualities, to make his readers wish to reach it with him, and to suggest how this might be achieved.

It is, I think, important to recognize that this purpose was the essential initial impulse towards the writing of these novels, as well as the continuing sustaining power behind them. John Middleton Murry, in his article, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', one of the most distinguished pieces of Williamson criticism which has so far appeared, nevertheless seems to me to be mistaken when, referring to the portrayal of Willie Maddison's childhood and schooldays in the two earlier novels of the sequence, he suggests that in the Foreword to the 1936 edition of *The Flax of Dream*, Williamson 'was seeking to impose a conscious mental purpose upon a work that was originally without one'.[11] On the contrary, in the first edition of *The Beautiful Years* (the first novel in the sequence) Williamson directs the reader's attention to his 'message' more explicitly than in the revised version, where it is implied rather than stated. For example, in the first edition the chapters when Willie starts at Colham Grammar School are called 'The Alien Corn' and 'The Shattering Begins', whereas in the revised version they become merely 'Chapter 23' and 'Chapter 24'. Again, in the first edition, in the chapter 'Deviating Roads' Willie struggles with his homework and, states Williamson, 'after much mental anguish he learned the useless dates and repeated his lesson to his father, who never thought of the fret that he gone into the forced learnings of unwelcome knowledge when the mind was in the plastic state of childhood'. In the revised edition, in Chapter 26, Williamson omits this comment and is content to allow the significance of the scene to emerge from its dramatic presentation:

For an hour he struggled with history dates, but all that would remain in his head was William the First ten sixty-six, William the Second ten eighty-seven — *and there he stuck; thinking about Elsie, and the owl hooting in the wood far away, and if the nightingale were singing in the hazel-woods yet, and if Chapman — oh, lumme, he would get it tomorrow . . .* William the Second ten eighty-seven Henry the — *oh, he hated the muck, damn history!*

He made another effort, and attached to the memorised dates the fact that Henry I *succeeded to the throne in 1100. Then he thought he would do arithmetic, but he could not concentrate on that: his brains* would *race. Again the owl called through the dusky April evening, and he went to the window and looked up at the stars flickering above. A great longing came to go out under them, to watch them winking in the lake, and see the new moon as it rose in the sky . . . Father was coming!*

(p. 196, 1936 edn of *The Flax of Dream*. All subsequent references to the revised text of *The Flax* are to this edition.)

Furthermore, in the first edition of *Dandelion Days* (the second novel in the sequence) not only does Williamson use 'loaded' chapter titles such as 'Saturday Morning in the Hothouse' to refer to life at Colham Grammar School, while in the revised edition mere chapter numbers are used, but also he explains his aim in a Preface which takes the form of an 'Epistle apological to Mr Dakers' [his literary agent] which is omitted from the definitive version. This 'Epistle' anticipates very clearly some of the ideas in the 1936 Foreword. Answering a possible objection by Dakers that it is excessive to spend two

full-length novels in recounting Willie's life up to the age of eighteen when his character is still unformed, Williamson states that he believes his character is by then fully formed, adding: 'nothing that happens afterwards will alter permanently that character' (p. viii). He asks Dakers to 'contrast the value of what is learned in the muggy atmosphere of the class-room with the sweet and lovely things seen in the counrtyside', stating: 'it is to show this contrast, to exemplify it dispassionately and with truth, that I have written the book'. From 'the tragic loadings of heredity', he believes, 'spring intolerance, un-understandings, miseries — and needless tragedy' (p. ix). He recalls the sufferings of the War and points out the tragic rony that the individual soldiers did not want the War at all: 'I knew how the human heart yearned for goodness and for beauty; I knew that every human being loathed war, and yet how they were dying!' (ibid.). After the War, enlightened by his reading of Jefferies's *The Story of My Heart*, he felt that there was a way to avoid a repetition of this disaster by a better method of education, and that he could project his discovery into the story of Willie Maddison.

A comparison of the revised versions with the first editions of the novels in *The Flax of Dream* will show, I think, that Williamson did exactly what he claimed in the 1936 edition: he 'cut out and replaced by new pages' various 'untruths, exaggerations, incidents of false characterisation and false writing', but did not alter 'the spirit of each Book' (p. 4). He brought out more clearly the underlying unity of the whole sequence, but did not change its essential tone, temper or purpose.

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It is a commonplace of criticism that it is a fallacy to think that one can fully understand and appreciate a work of creative literature merely in terms of the author's conscious and known intentions in it. D.H. Lawrence's well-known advice: 'Never trust the artist, trust the tale'[12] is perhaps expressed too boldly; one should, I believe, have due regard to an author's intentions, but one should not be circumscribed by them in appraising his actual achievement. What then *is* Williamson's achievement in *The Flax of Dream*?

The key to the mood of *The Beautiful Years*, which tells the story of Willie Maddison's life between the ages of seven and ten years is given by the epigraph from Richard Jefferies's essay 'My Old Village' in the posthumous collection *Field and Hedgerow* (1889): 'The sun shone there for a very long time, and the water rippled and sang . . .'.[13] Jefferies wrote 'My Old Village' (about Coate in Wiltshire, near Swindon) when he was dying; in it he recaptures some of the joys of childhood which seem permanent at the time, but when looked back upon in adult life inevitably carry with them something of the sadness of loss. After the turbulence of the War, aided by his reading of Jefferies, Williamson was able to feel again some of the joys of his lost boyhood, but from a more mature, adult point of view. As he recalled in his article, 'The Western Front':

> *It was a grey world in 1919. Anti-climax. But for me there remained, or recurred, the love of wild life which I had deemed to be dead in the war, but this love of wild life and places came back to one, of sun and air and leaf and feather which had formed the magic of boyhood.*
> *One was entranced again; one had found the way back . . .*[14]

Williamson was thus able to draw on his personal memories to create the life of Willie Maddison in a finely imagined countryside, supposed to be in Wiltshire, and which has a distinct fictional reality. We feel that we know Willie's home at Fawley House, Rookhurst; his friend Jack Temperley's at Skirr Farm; the woods nearby, the Longpond, the Downs and the neighbouring market town of Colham. Although Williamson used his memories

of places in North West Kent to which he bicycled as a schoolboy from Lewisham, and of the area surrounding Aspley Guise in Bedfordshire where he had relations,[15] together with his reading about the countryside and reservoir near Coate which Jefferies described in *Bevis*, he was able nevertheless to make from these elements an imagined realm into which we can enter with him. Within this realm Williamson shows Willie's development, in the manner of the *Bildungsroman*, through a series of personal relationships and through his contact with Nature. The first of these personal relationships is that with his father, John Maddison. Instead of the instinctive love and sympathy which should naturally exist between father and son, and which should lead to mutual trust and understanding, Williamson portrays a tragic division. Willie's mother died while giving birth to him, and this has caused his father to sink into a settled grief and to place a barrier between them. The scenes between the two are well presented, and we become involved in the distressing tensions which arise. Feeling unloved, and having no brothers or sisters, Willie becomes difficult, and in his father's eyes, irresponsible. Thrashing the boy, which in fact his father hates doing, does not improve matters, and on one occasion, he stifles the good impulse to hug his wayward son instead of beating him, because having threatened punishment if Willie were to be rude again to Biddy, the Maddisons' cook-housekeeper, he feels that he must administer it when he catches Willie in the act.[16] Willie feels ashamed of his father's beard and old hat when he comes to watch him play football at school,[17] and when wondering if he should re-read *Bevis*, a favourite book, Willie ruefully wishes that *his* father were more like Bevis's cheerful and understanding 'guv'nor'.[18] Finally, the relationship deteriorates so far, that to escape yet another thrashing for being caught liberating jays by a gamekeeper on a neighbour's land, even though his father recognizes that such trapping is both disagreeable and illegal, Willie runs away from home.[19] After he returns, he apologizes very sincerely, but his father cannot respond properly to him. Instead of attempting to heal the breach in the only way possible, by an overwhelming expression of love for Willie, he speaks, as though in unconscious justification for his failure with his son, of his desolation at the death of his wife, asking Willie to try to be as good as she was. In his immaturity, Willie is unable to cope with this, and when his father gives him a book for his tenth birthday, which falls on that day, he cannot take any pleasure in it, although it is Kearton's *Our Bird Friends*, which by its subject ought to delight him. On the contrary he wishes that his father had not got it for him. Stifling his sobs, which he knows his father will think unmanly, he forgets, in his distress, to take the book with him as he leaves the room.[20] In later years Williamson came to think that there was some lack of verisimilitude in his presentation of John Maddison's attitude to his son. He felt that if John had experienced such a great love with his wife as he is said to have done, the memory of it would have made him love and cherish Willie for her sake.[21] However, because this love between John and his wife has not actually been presented to us in imaginative fictional scenes, we are, I think, willing to accept that he might have been unable, as Willie himself believes (having overheard a conversation between Biddy and Big Will'um), to have conquered a resentment caused by his knowledge that in a sense Willie had killed his mother by the abnormality of his birth.[22]

Willie's unsatisfactory relationship with his real father is offset by a happy and fulfilling one with the 'crowstarver' and Nature-lover Jim Holloman, who becomes in many ways a substitute father to him. Jim is the illegitimate child of a gamekeeper's son and the wife of a local landowner Colonel Tetley; he is unable to settle to regular work and fights shy of the responsibility of marriage, but like the young Richard Jefferies, whom he resembles in appearance, his apparent fecklessness conceals a deep knowledge of and a feeling for Nature which approaches that of a mystic.[23] Willie's instinctive love of

Nature is fostered by this friendship, and it is to Jim's shelter in a spinney that he goes when he runs away from home. The next morning, under Jim's tutelage, Willie sees the dawn for the first time:

> *'Look', whispered Jim, pointing to the east.*
>
> *Over the dark outline of the beech wood hung a star, a lustrous globe of radiance, larger than any star Willie had ever seen. They watched it in silence. Slowly it moved higher glowing with softer and purer blaze as it was lapped by the light now flowing into the eastern estuary of heaven . . . As it rose higher the light-bringer shone with white fire; one by one the stars in deeper heaven grew wan and sank into the waters of day. Like a motionless sea, light swept up the sky, purging it of darkness, glowing in the lofty empyrean, bringing life and joy to living things.* (Chapter 30, *Flax*, pp. 234–5)

Later they go to the lake for fish, and on the way 'never before had Willie felt that school and history lessons were so unimportant'.[24] Jim is a 'light-bringer' — Williamson's term, borrowed from the morning star, for a man who brings spiritual illumination to his fellows if they will but heed him. In this he anticipates what Willie in his turn will become. Jim loves Dolly, an attractive and affectionate maidservant at the Temperleys farmhouse, but, comments Williamson: 'it is decreed that men in whom is a mystic understanding and love of the wild are tied forever to loneliness'.[25] He asks Dolly to listen to the song of the nightingale:

> *From far across the corn had floated a Voice, a Voice as pure as the wan fires of the moon, a Voice seeming to express the sadness of the beauty that was ever fleeting and elusive. It seemed to tell of all the springs that had passed with their sweet violets and windflowers, of the song that had been amid tragedies of the little unknown wild things. And now it sang with a tranquillity of longing, low and fluting, calling something beyond the trees, higher than the wind, changing to ecstasy, rising with passionate yearning, dying in a wistful cadence, a Voice aiding the world-old strugle of genius to express the unknown, the longing for a fuller happiness, a loveliness of life for all things under the ancient stars.*
> (Chapter 30, *Flax*, p. 226)

He is able to appreciate this, but to her it is only a bird; she cannot enter into his rapture, and fears it. However she is not to know even a settled mundane happiness with Jim; he is killed accidentally, when, asleep, he falls into a lime-kiln whither he had gone with Willie, to try to keep the boy warm when bad weather comes in their third night together in the shelter.[26] His unhappy fate foreshadows that of Willie, who is to be accidentally drowned at the end of *The Pathway*, the last novel in the sequence.

Although his mother died in childbirth, Willie receives some maternal affection from Biddy and from Dolly. Biddy incurs his father's anger when she tells him that he doesn't understand children when he is about to thrash Willie for being rude to her,[27] and she weeps with relief when Willie returns home after running away, while his father goes 'out of the house without a word'.[28] Dolly has a warm and loving nature together with a considerable sense of fun, but neither she nor Biddy can really become a substitute mother for Willie in the way that Jim becomes a substitute father.

Willie has, however, a friend, Jack Temperley, who becomes in some ways, almost more than a brother to him. Certainly some of Bevis's friend Mark has gone into his creation, and probably also something of Williamson's boyhood friend Terence Tetley (who appears as Desmond Neville in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*) together with aspects of boyhood Bedfordshire friends, but I think that Jack is portrayed with imaginative reality,

and his relationship to Willie is artistically convincing. Willie finds a second and more welcoming home at the Temperleys' finely described thatched farmhouse,[29] and the boys not only enjoy pursuits like bird-nesting,[30] but they share a delight in the traditional activities of farming and country life; lambing in spring,[31] mowing in summer,[32] and a shoot in autumn.[33] They delight in visits to old Bob Lewis the gamekeeper on Colonel Tetley's estate to watch him at his work and discuss it with him.[34] Willie, however, has gifts which the loyal and kindly Jack lacks; he is a born story-teller,[35] and he has a poetic feeling for Nature and its seasons. In spring he sees 'two male lapwings . . . flying above in erratic flight, then flinging themselves downwards towards the ground as though they would die for joy':

> *He watched them, feeling sad and yet happy. He could see their broad wings as they turned, then 'see-o-sweet', 'see-o-sweet', calling to their mates walking on the damp furrows below. Behind, the sun was going down, and the sky was a lake of draining crimson and yellow.*
>
> *For a long while the boy watched them, then he began singing to himself. If was not one of the songs or hymns that he knew and was wont to pipe as Biddy vamped on the piano when his father was out of the house . . . but an improvised chant in a minor key, sad and wistful as the lapwing's song. Quite unconscious of what he was singing, or why he was singing, yet his words were almost in the form of a prayer . . .*[36]

He asks God to make him like the birds; denied love at home, he tries instinctively to enter into the life of Nature. His sensibility is precocious, as is seen when on another occasion he laments the passing of summer and weeps at the memory of past springtimes:

> *He could no longer lie amongst the grasses, and gaze at the white clouds drifting, drifting ever so slowly across the blue. The feeling inside him amounted almost to despair; the spring had passed almost before he had ceased to tell himself that it had arrived, and with it the feeling of utter joy that he had felt on looking into a nest with its fragile eggs, or litle naked young ones. He remembered how he had watched these young birds grow up, and how he had fed them; the nest of robins in particular, hidden in the thick ivy that was slowly killing a mighty elm. After a very few days, he had been able to stroke the back of the mother bird as she sat brooding over her babies, and seemed all soft skin and gaping yellow beak, without causing her any anxiety. But these had very soon grown up, and left the nest. How terribly sad was an ampty nest! And now it was almost the end of summer.*[37]

His sense of beauty leads him when he is only eight to fall in love with Elsie Norman, a painter's daughter, who is however unable to appreciate him,[38] and who causes him much unhappiness later. Through Elsie he meets Mary Ogilvie who comes to stay with the Normans; she takes to Willie immediately, although obtusely it is many years before he is to realize her great worth and her patient devotion to him. Significantly it is Mary who comes to comfort Willie, when he has a terrible nightmare during the night that he sleeps at the Normans before going home, after he has realized that he must return after running away.[39] Williamson's portrayal of these childish loves in *The Beautiful Years* is executed with rare delicacy and insight, and I think that we are able to enter into them with a deep sense of involvement.

The last of Willie's relationships which Williamson presents in this novel and which he develops with great verve in *Dandelion Days*, the second novel in the sequence, dealing with Willie's life between the ages of fifteen and seventeen years is that with his schoolmasters and schoolfellows at Colham Grammar School, whither he follows Jack.

The portraits of the schoolmasters are drawn from Williamson's own teachers at Colfe's Grammar School, Lewisham,[40] but it is by no means necessary to know this; within the novels they have a magnificently vivid comic life. We cannot really see them as mere life-destroyers, although we recognize that their teaching methods are in many ways mistaken; the artist in Williamson sees them in a kindlier light than does the reflective moralist in him. Chief among them is the Headmaster, Mr Rore, pink of face, balding, whose pale blue eyes behind half-moon spectacles seem 'to look through each boy' and produce awe; eyes which are 'distantly kind', 'bright with thought, straight with the intentness of a poacher'. Mr Rore is an idealist, whose maxims are 'Work is the only good'; 'Mental power is the servant of good'; 'Sport a good servant, a bad master', and 'What should be, shall be';[41] but he fails to realize that the constant repetition of them does not have the desired effect. The boys may find them awe-inspiring at first, but they soon find them (as does the reader) a cause for merriment. The speech which he makes to the boys when they return from a summer holiday is typical of his manner:

> *'The holidays are over. Some of you will be sorry, more of you will not be unhappy. Now to work boys. The only thing of value in this world is work! Why!' — the voice lowered as though scorning imaginary hecklers — 'Why, without work, where should we be? Lying on our backs in the jungle, waiting for ripe bananas to drop into our mouths! Some of you no doubt would prefer such a life; an ideal of a soft snug job after leaving school. Boys, don't be pauper spirits! All your days, boys, I urge you to cultivate that mental power. Mind you, the brain won't keep going without sport, so I say to you, when the half-days come, play hard, hard at it, all the time! Then home again, sit at your study tables, and* master *your difficulties.* Ad astra per aspera*!' he apostrophised sublimely. 'Only pauper spirits would fail to be moved by such a thought. Now to your classrooms: make the most of every moment!'*[42]

He is undoubtedly well-meaning, but he does not see how important it is to implant a *love* of learning in the young, rather than merely drive them towards it by the will.[43] Walking in the country he is not truly open to its benign influence. He does not see the qualities of an English reaping scene before his very eyes, he turns from it to recall Virgil's *Georgics*.[44] He sits on a log at the edge of Rookhurst forest, but he does not respond to its beauty; he ignores it and makes notes for a talk to his staff.[45] He is strikingly unlike Richard Jefferies who in the epigraph to the first section of *Dandelion Days* declares: 'there is nothing in books that touches my dandelion'; and who in the epigraph to the whole novel suggests that the way to new and better ideas lies in the imaginative contemplation of Nature: 'let us get a little alchemy out of the dandelions'.[46] However, Williamson shows him in a sympathetic if somewhat ridiculous light, when, on his way home from his country walk, he comes upon Willie and Jack wrestling in the roadway. The boys quickly adopt an attitude of respect; Mr Rore smiles benignly upon them, indicating that he well understands that boys will be boys, but he cannot resist moralizing upon the occasion:

> *'Maddison, I perceived that you were groaning. Temperley was perhaps a little rough? The instinct for individual domination is still manifest in us. Evolution is tardy. We must not depend upon evolution solely. Otherwise we follow the mastodon and the brontosaurus to extinction.'*[47]

When Willie points out that they were only playing, Mr Rore admonishes them to 'remember that nothing but play is injurious', and continues: 'Make the most of your

boyhood. Life is ever fleeting. Happiness haps! Seek happiness and we lose it. But you are young and should always be happy!' The boys admit to being very happy, whereupon the Headmaster points out to them that 'there are sharks and tigers in the world . . . as you will find. The pathway to righteous happiness is beset with difficulties'.[48] He means to be friendly and in fact is, but the effect after he has gone is to reduce the boys to a state of helpless laughter which makes them roll about under the hedge.

The other schoolmasters are drawn with fewer strokes, but Williamson gives a varied gallery of portraits. He shows us the irascible French master Mr Rapson, ('Rattlethrough') who when roused to anger unconsciously vibrates his right knee in nervous exasperation;[49] the popular English master, Mr Kenneth ('Bunny') with his habit of throwing up and catching a piece of chalk;[50] and the timid drawing master Mr Worth ('Useless') who finds it difficult to keep order, but wins Willie's respect by not reporting him when he had foolishly tied a flintlock blunderbuss to the school railings to be fired by a piece of string at the weathercock. Mr Worth removes the gun, soaks it in water, and with agreeable humour gets his class to draw it.[51] We read also of Mr Croodrane ('Taffy') the physics master who plays the piano with painful incompetence in the school Hall,[52] of Mr Zimmerman ('Zimmy') the French and German conversation master who has a frequently expressed animus against *les sacrés prusses*,[53] and of Mr Beach the Latin master, who 'rags' Willie when a new boy, but quickly realizing his hyper-sensitive nature, at once desists, and gently draws him out about his interest in wild birds.[54]

The classroom scenes are presented admirably, and show clearly that a rigid system of education inevitably provokes a measure of resistance among the boys. Williamson succeeds very well, I think, in making us feel with him the contrast between the oppressiveness of the dim, stuffy classroom, and the attractive and more wholesome sunlit world of Nature outside:

> *The windows were often closed, even in sunny weather. Through the glass rendered opaque by moisture the morning sun glowed like an immense shine-bedraggled dandelion, soon, too soon, to move away from Willie's desk and leave him in shadow. He dreamed back into the ancient sunlight of his past happiness. In the gloomed school arose the carking hum of learning. So for hundreds of years, hid from summery beauty, the hum of learning had filled the school; centuries of wasted sunshine, while under the northern eaves the martins built their nests, and flew at will in the blue air of heaven, heedless of the everlasting drone within the shut and shaded rooms. Sometimes their happy twitter came through the window, heard by Willie as he endured the days.*[55]

One is reminded of Blake's poem 'The Schoolboy' in *Songs of Experience* as Williamson continues with passages describing the almost manic dedication of Mr Rore as he strives to impart knowledge and 'drive home his ideals'. Sometimes in his 'unflagging zeal' he asks the boys to remain late as he deals with 'a problem of Differential Calculus or the Binomial Theorem'. The result is that 'on many occasions after 5 o'clock a mutinous 5a leave 'the inspissated atmosphere of its classroom, weary and grumbling'. But Willie 'cycles home through the cornfields', is 'recharged by the spreading colour' and 'the effect of the day' is shed.[56]

The finest school scene of all is, however, I think, that of the lantern lecture on 'Tea Growing in Ceylon' given by the distinguished old boy Sir Heland Donkin (drawn from the historian of Lewisham, L. L. Duncan). The boys behave increasingly mischievously as the light in the lantern slowly fails, but the voice of the lecturer flows on gently, until at the end: 'Sir Heland, editor of *The Old Colhamean*, gentle bachelor, well-wisher of all men, got down amid a roar of cheers, which gradually diminishing, gave place to various admonitions of ''Don't move till you get the order, boys''.'[57]

To offset the portraits of the staff, Williamson gives us an equally vivid collection of those of the boys. Again they are drawn from originals, from the boys Williamson was at school with, but they have a fully convincing fictional life. There are those of the bullies Chapman and Dennis, of whom Willie early falls foul, of the rebellious Effish and the insolent Cerr-Nore, but, in contrast, of the clever and sensitive Rupert Bryers, and of the ungainly but good-hearted 'Bony' Watson who shares with Willie and Jack an interest in wild-life.

Although Willie gains more true spiritual development in the countryside, nevertheless when the time approaches to leave school, he has to admit to himself that he has in fact enjoyed many aspects of school life, and is sorry to leave.[58] He comes, as do the other leavers, to a more mature appreciation of the good if limited qualities of the Staff.[59] Here again Williamson's artistic conscience corrects the bias of the moral theorist.

The true life-destroyer in *Dandelion Days* is not, I think, Mr Rore, but rather the hypocritical lay-preacher John Fry, who catches chaffinches to blind and sell; who behaves with vile ingratitude towards his adoring and long-suffering old mother; who lusts after Dolly and who finally meets his well-deserved downfall at the hands of the sturdy Tom Sorrell. Williamson wisely tones down the over-melodramatic version in the first edition of the fight between them, in which John Fry unintentionally kills his mother by striking her above the heart, and then himself falls into a lime-kiln. In the revised version there are no deaths; Fry's mother is left to her misery and he to nurse his vindictiveness, as Dolly accepts Tom Sorrell as her husband.[60]

Willie and his father continue to grow apart; the full tragedy of their relationship being shown, when at the end of the novel on the night before he leaves for London to take up a job, Willie rejects the rich meal which his father has prepared for him, preferring to dine with Jack and his family.[61] His relationship with Elsie Norman also remains unsatisfactory, and ends in disappointment when she speedily leaves a loft in the Temperley's farm in which Willie has set out a secret feast for her. She fails to see the romance, noticing only the dirt, insects and rats.[62] Still Willie does not realize Mary Ogilvie's worth and devotion to him, but their future love is hinted at in a fine scene when they sit together on the Downs the day before Willie is leaving home, talking of the past and the future.[63]

At the end of *Dandelion Days* however, Willie is most conscious of being left with two friends, his London cousin Phillip Maddison and the ever faithful Jack Temperley. During the previous summer holiday Willie has been on holiday with his London cousins to Hayling Island,[64] and at Christmas his father invites Phillip to visit them at Rookhurst. Phillip's arrival is rather undignified; as he is getting out of the train, he trips over his fishing rod and falls on the platform, but he quickly earns golden opinions of all there whom he meets. Even the austere John Maddison is moved to unwonted geniality. Phillip shows an affinity of spirit to Willie, delighting in the beauties of the countryside and the activities of rural life, such as the ancient customs of Plough Monday which Mr Temperley keeps up on his farm.[65] He is of course to be the protagonist of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, and like Willie is drawn from aspects of Williamson himself. It is interesting to notice how he introduces a theme which is to be developed further in the *Chronicle*, when he laments the encroachment of the city upon the country near his suburban home, regretting in particular the felling of the elms on the road to Bromley.[66]

Jack has for a long time hero-worshipped the more complex Willie with a single-minded devotion. He declares that he is willing to die for him, and although Willie replies that he is willing to do the same in return, nevertheless as he says it, he cannot help thinking about Elsie Norman.[67] In a scene of fine delicacy and truth, shortly before Willie's final débâcle with Elsie, Jack, who as yet has not fallen in love with a girl, expresses his hurt

feelings at Willie's neglect, warning him that Elsie does not really appreciate him. The boys solemnly pledge friendship, which Jack seals with a chaste and almost sacramental kiss on Willie's cheek.[68] Williamson's control of the reader's response is absolute; the essential purity of the occasion is conveyed by perfectly controlled art. After the devastating failure of Willie's meeting with Elsie, when he goes in desolation to the crowstarver's shelter once occupied by Jim Holloman, he finds the thoughtful Jack already there to greet him. They light a fire, and enjoy together the feast originally intended for Elsie, which Jack has rescued from the loft. Once more he promises his continuing devotion, but as is likely with boys of their age, sentiment is soon succeeded by exuberant hilarity. However, the scene ends on a note of sadness and foreboding as Willie bids farewell to his boyhood.

> *Alone at the edge of the corn, Willie was standing. 'I shall return one day', he whispered, his eyes on a dull red star above the beechwood. It was the planet Mars. 'Jim, are you there? Goodbye Big Wheatfield. Goodbye spinney — Jim, Dolly, Bill Nye, and now Willie — goodbye'.*[69]

The boys leave in silence, with arms linked: 'down the right-of-way, through the wheat that swayed and sighed in the wind. The wheat was tall, and soon would be ripe for harvest: it was July 1914'. The harvest of 1914 is to be not only of corn but of men. We learn that Jack has been part of that harvest in a masterly postscript to the novel which takes the form of a letter from Mr Rore to Willie, now serving in the Ypres salient. We see revealed in the letter the conventional 'home' unthinking partisanship: 'Never was there a more righteous war — civilisation against military despotism' . . . 'our cause is the cause of liberty, humanity and true Christianity'.[70] It is this attitude which Willie is to transcend and reject.

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Williamson does not, in *The Flax of Dream*, present Willie's war-experiences except in so far as he gives some reminiscences of them in Willie's conversation. He was still too close to his own war experiences to render them in art. His purpose rather is to show how a survivor copes with the peace. In *The Dream of Fair Women*, the third novel in the sequence, he presents Willie's life in the summer of 1919, after demobilization. There are two principal and closely interwoven aspects of this life; first his struggle for mental clarity and secondly, his struggle for fulfilment in love with Eveline Fairfax, an attractive but promiscuous married woman, who is no more able to bring him lasting happiness than Elsie Norman was, although for different reasons. Like Williamson himself, from aspects of whom as we have already noted he is drawn, Willie is writing a book, *The Policy of Reconstruction, or, True Resurrection*. He is living in a lime-burner's cottage on the North Devon coast, recovering from the War. His love of animals and birds has been intensified by the sufferings and illuminations of the War; turning to some extent away from human society, he shares his cottage with a spaniel, a cat and various wild birds for which he has an imaginative sympathy. Like Williamson himself, he has been at the Christmas Truce and has been enlightened by reading in Richard Jefferies. Although he delights in the company of the genial and humorous villagers who frequent the Night Crow Inn, he is shy of visitors, and Eveline, who has heard of him from Phillip, finds it difficult to meet him. However in the company of her friend Pat Colyer she finds in his empty cottage the manuscript of *The Policy of Reconstruction* in which she reads Willie's views (which are those of Williamson himself) on what he believes to have been the disastrous faults of the education he received at school: