

## Letters

Your contributor Sally Elliott's thoughts on reading Dan Farson's *Henry, An Appreciation* are more charitable than my own. I found it a deeply offensive book. It not only contained a number of inaccuracies, but also displayed a facility to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds which so often afflicts journalists when they write books. One can only conclude, charitably, that Mr Farson enjoyed his love-hate relationship with Henry Williamson — as his father Negley did before him. It is not an uncommon phenomenon, but to prolong it after one of the protagonists is dead, is pretty cheap, and reveals more about the writer than about his subject.

Farson may find it hard to distinguish between 'appreciation' and character assassination. In his latest book *Sacred Monsters* published last year — a series of essays on people he has met in a varied career — he gives the game away.

*When I met Henry on Barnstaple Station [just before his 80th birthday] . . . I had forgotten his vindictive portrayal of my parents and we walked across the bridge together for a drink at Mugford's. It was market day, when the pub stayed open all afternoon, and Henry should have heeded the warning: like father like son. With a sudden flash of filial loyalty, I remembered the Gale [of the World] and tried to think of something which would hurt him in return. With unerring aim, I struck at his Achilles heel, remembering a remark made to me by Oswald Mosley: 'We like Henry so much, but he will take it all so seriously.'*

Yes, as Sally Elliott writes, Henry Williamson was serious: serious about the thought of another war; serious about unemployment; serious about the threat to the natural world posed by greed and market forces; serious in his love of music; above all serious about the sanctity of language. His voice may be disregarded today, but it is a voice that echoes more and more what serious men and women feel in

their hearts. It is a voice for the future.

Dan Farson concludes his essay with the observation that "it is time to forgive him." He is wrong. It is time to listen to him. It is Dan Farson we have to forgive.

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I read the review of the 'Aylesford Review' reprint by The Paupers' Press. I think that the reviewer's remarks are valid and important, and you will be interested to know that we have in preparation a book by Father Brocard Sewell giving a brief history of St Albert's Press both as a printing house and as a publisher, and of *The Aylesford Review* which he founded and edited. Henry Williamson's connexions with both of these literary enterprises, and with Aylesford Priory, will be covered and there will be a check list of the St Albert's Press publications.

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I was not present at the Devon meeting last year to hear John Terraine give his discourse on General Haig. Having now read it in the *Journal*, I wish there had also been space for some of the comments it must have evoked afterwards.

At least, I hope that there was some expression of dissent from its bland, somewhat inhuman apologia for this man, who was instrumental, along with others of that bone-headed, class-conscious, arrogant military class to which he belonged, in prolonging the slaughter of the years from 1916 to 1918 to unprecedented dimensions.

If the loss of over a million lives from just

one participating nation in that war entitles the planner and organiser of such carnage to rank in fame with Marlborough and Wellington — may God preserve us from all such generals in the future!

John Terraine seems to ignore the fact that there was always an alternative to the gruesome continuation of the horrors on the Western Front (which Haig never physically shared for one moment), and that was peace and reconciliation. Siegfried Sassoon sought it, and was promptly classed as mentally unstable. Henry Williamson portrayed the miseries of that was in outstandingly vivid detail; he saw its suffering and degradation, he saw it as a monstrous affront to the brotherhood of man. I feel that giving further publicity to John Terraine's suavely approving views of Haig's conduct of the war does a real disservice to the witness against war and violence that Henry made in his writing. The glib use of Henry's words, "Well, of course, I'm a Haig man" as some kind of endorsement of Haig's blood-blind mentality sickens me. (This goes for "Autolytus", too.)

Nothing that John Terraine offers can re-define my vision of Haig as just the man whom Lloyd George describes with such perspicacity in his "War Memoirs". I was born in the Great War, survived an even greater, and have lived for over forty years since in a world that has seen the infliction of death and mutilation, through war and terrorism, somewhere or other on the planet every day since.

Generals carry out the wishes of warmongers and death-bringers. Adulation of their function as destroyers of men has no place in the Henry Williamson Society.

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References made to areas known as No Man's Land have not yet given the origin of the name, so yer 'tis. It was the name the farmer gave to the corner of a field that was too difficult to plough because of its

acute angles and its slope. There's such a corner just up the road from Shallowford, on the outskirts of South Molton and opposite "the Reccry" (though goodness knows it may be full of houses by now). My informant for the origin of the name was a man well known to the Williamson family — Harry Ridd, horseman to Lord Fortescue, husband of "Riddy" (see Chapter 15 *Children of Shallowford*), real name Mary, and father of Dolly (who lives in South Molton). I last visited them in 1938 when I was but 16; my Mother (now 96) used to live in South Molton and was a friend of Mary's. At the time of our meeting they were full of regrets that the Williamsons had moved so far away. I can remember also how sympathetic he was about my having to work indoors (I was an apprentice compositor) — that from a man who rose at 4.30 to start work at 5 am! I'm sure that much of HW's knowledge of dialect came from the Ridds — Mary would say that he was always scribbling while she was talking in the kitchen, often stopping her and asking her to "say that again". I don't visit North Devon nowadays, much preferring to live on the memories of happy childhood holidays such as sitting on a roadside seat to watch in the distance the bus and perhaps a train — the only moving objects in the clear sunshine of a quiet summer day.

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I am sure that many members will share my disappointment on reading Gordon Watkins' recent article on Henry Williamson in the *Daily Telegraph* for it echoed the distortions of Dan Farson, Frederic Raphael and the notorious Omnibus programme of 1983.

Should Mr Watkins actually visit some of our libraries he will be surprised to find just how often the *Chronicle* novels are taken out by readers. It is nonsense to suggest that only *Tarka* is available and then only to be found in the Junior section. The

illustrated edition of *Tarka* was most successful and although the novel was at one time included in the Puffin series for children it has for some time been the flagship of Penguin's popular Country Library Series and is available in all good bookshops and libraries.

The *Chronicle* did not fail when reissued as suggested by Mr Watkins. It was in fact produced as a library edition and only became remaindered when there were insufficient full sets available to circularize this very large market. Only at certain large stores such as Foyles, who themselves supply libraries, were the books available as individual copies, and these clearly sold well.

The paperback edition did not fail after the fourth volume because the public could not forgive Henry, as suggested by Mr Watkins, but because the publishers were taken over and that series of paperbacks discontinued. Previously *The Flax of Dream*

had been reissued and well received. Clearly the *Chronicle* will always be a publishing problem for shops do not wish to order a book in an expensive edition of fifteen volumes (costing about £200 for the whole set), for when sold out of sequence they become difficult to stock and to market.

Although the article in the *Daily Telegraph* was warmly welcomed by our Chairman and other Society members, I personally feel that a great opportunity was lost and that we shall damage our cause by so often repeating well worn excuses concerning Williamson's Fascist sympathies. A new generation of readers have been introduced to the *Chronicle* and many have joined our Society. I am sure that they could all find so many more important things to say about this great writer.

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