

A Correspondence

George Porter

I had always admired the writings of Henry Williamson and I carried a copy of the Willie Maddison books, *The Flax of Dream*, in my knapsack while serving with the 8th Army in the Western Front and Italy. In 1944, my unit was disbanded at Taranto and members dispersed to various other services. I was transferred to the Royal Engineers. However, early in the year I got together copies of the verse and doggerel I had written for the Battery's 'Wall Paper' and copied them out in an exercise book which I had the cheek to post to Henry Williamson at his Stiffkey Farm, seeking advice about possible publication. He was kind enough to write back on 18th February 1944:

Dear Gunner Porter,

I read your Odyssey with amusement. Forgive delay in replying; have been ill in hospital and no secretary, overworked; 9 a.m. – 12 p.m. daily, farm, overwhelmed. Can't reply to friends' letters even! Sounds very selfish but h.p. is low.

All good wishes. Am trying to write 2 books, but 5 children, farm, etc. I've sent your Mss to Dersingham.

All luck and thanks for your letter, and forgive this miserable reply.

H. Williamson

Old England is all right, much more efficient now than Germany! We all feel the war, and for you chaps.

G. Porter, Dersingham.

Stiffkey, Norfolk,
18th February 1944

Dear Sir,

I am sending this as requested by Gnr Porter. Regrets for delay — have no secretary and am really overwhelmed with work 9 a.m. — midnight, seven days a week.

I don't know any outlet for light verse, but Herbert Jenkins Ltd might consider it; a typed copy of course. There has been no light verse this war, so far as I know.

Yrs.

Henry Williamson

I was delighted to get so kind a reply, but on second thoughts decided against trying to get a publisher for my verse. Fortunately the 1942 issues of our Wall Paper were printed for local consumption in two volumes — editions of 250 only. The Imperial War Museum have copies.

In 1947, in the summer, I visited North Devon and explored the Williamson country, including Ox's Cross. But during that year I made no attempt to contact Henry Williamson in Norfolk or Devon, but I read articles appearing under his name and bought his books.

In 1948 I ventured to write to him on the occasion of the publication of *The Phasian Bird*. I was working in Boston as a Land Drainage Engineer at that time. I congratulated him on the good job he was doing in editing 'The Adelphi'. I commiserated with him on the adverse criticism he had been receiving in some sections of the press, and affirmed that his admirers were as strong as his enemies. I said I liked *The Phasian Bird* which

made me nostalgic for the autumn fields of Norfolk. I then mentioned Eric Gill whose letters I had been reading, and whose work in stone carving and lettering I admired greatly. I said I thought he and Gill had a lot in common — idealism, the belief in craftsmanship and simple living. I asked whether he knew Eric Gill as a kindred spirit. In hindsight, I fear it was another case of awful cheek. I don't recall getting a reply.

I was married in 1948 and the next few years, during which I moved to Sussex, tend to be unclear in my memory. I have no copy letters from that period, but I must have written to Henry early in 1953 as I received a letter from him on 6th February 1953.

Georgeham, N. Devon

6th February 1953

Dear Mr Porter,

Many thanks for your letter which cheered me up after a long spell of writing this day, starting at 6.30 a.m. on book 3, which nears its end; and will, I think, force readers to take notice! (D. Boy was a flop, a "nasty child" said PUNCH).

It ends on the Messines Ridge in October 1914, where nearly 600 of Phillip's battalion of more or less donkey boys lay dead, and about 2,000 German donkey boys, in the light of blazing cornstacks and a windmill while the dead man in the moon looked down upon the inevitable scene.

Yes, Phillip survives, but thereafter is the complete Jack-in-the-box, doing incomprehensible things which madden, shock and finally sever him completely as a personality, from his parents, uncles and aunts. He has already, of course, physically departed; and lives in wild escapism and delayed shock until the new visionary world is formed of the places in 1919. Until the (inevitable) climax in 1945; which lies about 4 books ahead!

Oddly, there was another Jack-in-the-box on the other side of the Messines Hill in 1914. We shall see within; we shall see why things happened in the West as they did.

Did you read all the account of the defence of the poor boy who killed mother and father? A sweet sensitive child, they said; thrashed by a 'sadistic nurse' and shut up in a cupboard, to scream away all contact between his two upper and lower minds. A fearful little boy; telling 'lies for no object'; strangely mute when ragged or bullied.

When that happens to a genius of the first rare order; who goes through the hell of the crater zones and survives and dreams itself into phoenix resurgence and carries youth with it in its fearful and wonderful visions . . . you get the causes of the effects of 1939-45.

I work 70 hours a week, and pray to live just so long as to complete my work, which I saw, though not in all detail, in 1919.

Neither Faber nor Collins wanted Dark Lantern. Indeed, Collins commissioned it; then begged to be excused. I tried to stammer what it portended; no reply came. I rewrote it ten times, trying to make it 'attractive'. It originally began at what is now part 2.

When 'Richard' died in 1946, he cried out to his Father, for understanding. "Don't, don't don't," he cried to a ghost.

Just as Miles Gifford the boy who, in the papers now, cried out to unseen ghosts when at school at Blundells, with my boys. The boy who killed his mother and father, who had stopped him from going to his 'love', which was the light in the dark cupboard; even as it was symbol, I suppose, of light and love to damaged Richard Maddison, as Helena Rolls was to the donkey boy.

Yours faithfully,
Henry Williamson

Postcard

2nd July 1953

E.G. Porter, Martyn Lodge, Henfield

A 45 minute broadcast on West Regional 10 p.m. – 10.45 p.m. 7th July might interest you.

H.W.

Martyn Lodge, Henfield

17th August 1953

Dear Mr Williamson,

Many thanks for your postcard reminder about Apollo in the West Broadcast. I am sorry I have left it so late to express my appreciation of your kind gesture.

The broadcast was a rare enjoyment and I was only sorry it had to finish after three quarters of an hour. The criticism of your earlier work was provocative and, perhaps, in the main correct, though I think the analytical, psychological approach tends to destroy rather than construct.

I had to agree largely on the assessment of *The Flax of Dream*. When I first read *The Pathway* at the age of 19, I thought it magical. The snow scenes on Braunton Burrows had a dream-like quality and Mary Ogilvie moved me to tenderness and pity. I like *The Dream of Fair Women* least of the four books. However, after re-reading *The Flax* a short while ago, I have come to see the great merit of *The Dream of Fair Women* and I'm afraid the old magic of *The Pathway* seems lost to me. I do feel a sense of loss that the old magic is gone, and my youth is gone with it. That may seem a strange thing to say at 33, but it is undoubtedly true. I suppose the process of reconciliation to life and the acquisition of a firm discipline of mind and conduct is bound to be temporarily saddening.

The world has seemed a less pleasant place to live in with each succeeding year since 1948. In that glorious summer of 1947 I had a holiday on East Lyn at Rochford and toured North Devon between Barnstaple and Lynmouth. It was a wonderfully happy and carefree holiday. Somehow N. Devon seems to spell freedom of spirit to me. In my imagination the peregrines are always soaring above Hart Point. I must get back to Devon for a holiday again soon.

Meanwhile, I find Sussex delightful except for its increasing popularity among elderly people and my inability to find kindred spirits in the rather false society. A congenial job and a book of wild flowers doesn't altogether compensate for the lack of mental exercise. The people up in Boston (Lincs) where I used to live are much more vitally alive than the local variety.

To return to your broadcast. The excerpt from Young Mr Maddison was a delicious aperitif and I am awaiting with keen anticipation the publication of the book.

I was interested to hear Malcolm Elwin. He edited the first numbers of *West Country Magazine*, I remember. As a matter of fact I had a lively correspondence with Waveney Girvan on the issue of the change of policy of the *West Country Magazine*. I withdrew my subscription and said I disliked the so-called broader base of the magazine. He wrote back and genuinely upset to think I had imputed bad faith to him in respect of yourself and Malcolm Elwin, saying that he had wanted to avoid forming a coterie, and that he'd always been a good friend of yours. He had compiled the first bibliography of your work. He seemed to be very injured that you should have broken with the magazine.

The scope of the *West Country Magazine* is now so broad that it has no further interest for me. Its literary quality has gone, and from a publication of style and taste is now a vehicle for mediocre reporting on country life like any provincial weekly.

Yours sincerely,
E.G. Porter

I have no record of a reply to this letter and I didn't think it needed one.

In 1955 I moved from Henfield to Shoreham-by-Sea and wrote again to Henry at Georgeham.

1 Kingston Way
Shoreham-by-Sea
Sussex

4th February 1957

Dear Mr Williamson,

I was disappointed to find that you had not published another book at your usual time last year. When you kindly answered a letter of mine two or three years ago, you mentioned an episode from the between wars period and I have been waiting with keen anticipation for more of the Maddison history.

I enjoyed your *How Dear is Life*, particularly the earlier chapters which are fresh and lively. The battle scenes are absorbing but have a dream-like quality which I suppose prompted one critic to say that it was written in the style of an adventure story for boys. I should imagine that one can only be impressionist when recording the grim horrors of the trench warfare of the first great war. One couldn't stand apart, otherwise the stupidity of it all would kill the story. Is it possible to write a good story with bitterness in the heart and a feeling of disillusionment?

I was reading your story 'Winter 41' in Malcolm Elwin's miscellany 'The Pleasure Ground' the other day and I found it rather depressing because you yourself were at a low ebb. It was interesting biographically, but I should say your best work has been done when you have been looking back on life from your Devon home with no axe to grind and no chip on your shoulder.

I'm afraid I could not prove the hypothesis in general, except in regard to poets. By and large novelists from Defoe to Graham Greene and Colin Wilson, seem to have been reformers and innovators. Though that doesn't mean they wrote in anger or contention. I suppose depression is the great evil and the feeling of emptiness (which prompted you to go to Norfolk to farm).

I hope your Devon life, since your return, has been rich in inspiration again (as I think it has).

I have read your book reviews in 'Time and Tide' on several occasions which gives good hope that you are in good health and a new work will appear soon.

Television seems to be having a serious effect on the reading habits of the country and I suppose book sales are at a poor level these days, except of course books serialised or made into plays ('David Copperfield', 'Kenilworth', etc.) which come into great demand as soon as the great public is stimulated into curiosity. I find it difficult to read in my own house except in bed where recently I have been reading again about Revvy and your other village characters. The world has become a good deal worse to live in since the days when you wrote those tales. Nationalism, the ingrowing life and the Welfare State — the sapper of energy and willpower, seem to have destroyed hope in so many of us. A Renaissance is needed in the West and I hope MacMillan and his Government will take the lead however unpopular. The proper union of Britain with France and the other European countries needs to be carried out straight away. The Channel Tunnel ought to be started now. We have more in common with our Brothers in Europe than with our up-shot cousins of America and the Aussies.

Yours sincerely,
E.G. Porter

On 27th March 1957 I received another letter from HW referring to a letter of mine of 7th March of which I have no record:

Georgeham, N. Devon

27th March 1957

Dear Mr Porter,

Apologies for delay in replying to your letter of 7th March. 25-year old trees to be dug up, transplanted; others to be polled; 3 acres quite a lot to tend. Writing hard also. Funerals of old friends, one involving 600 miles journey. Also trying to finish book by 1 April to get £250. Failed; too much to do. Book is about a Devon trout stream, it goes well, will be short thank God, and out I hope in spring of 1958.

Meanwhile No. 6 in series has had much tribulation. I revised one 175,000 autobiography this last year; scrapped it once again (10 recastings since 1943); ditto another novel, 225,000 words. Both accepted, both withdrawn. So had to get on with a new one, did hope to rest awhile from series. But slogged on, produced 225,000 words, which Murry read, said tired and stale first 60,000; so I cut them and recast, stronger characterisation; then rewrote much of it, and it went to printers, unread by publishers in toto owing to time short, as it is due to be published either June or July 1957 as *THE GOLDEN VIRGIN*, easily best of series and very dramatic I think. We shall see.

The Winter of 1941 was taken from an autobiography of which is the above-mentioned . . . the 175,000 work. The 225,000 novel (not the *Virgin* but of Phillip at start of World War 2. Too big a gap) is made from autobiography, of a previous period, just before the 1941-45 autobiography. My drawer has also four or five unpublished Mss. I am now going ahead to get them in final order. But must rest for a bit.

J.M. Murry said the novels (new series) were best contemporary novels he knew. He said this at length in a recent book, about 50 pages of it, but his PUBLISHER refused to publish it, so Murry excluded it.

Yes, the rock and roll children enjoy themselves and don't care. They are in a clearing made by the sweat and agony of their immediate forebears. If the clearing grows in upon them, they will have to gird up and get lined faces like their parents and grandparents. Rock and roll damn good exercise sweats out the rubbish.

Richard Jefferies is buried near W.H. Hudson in the NEW Goring cemetery. Not the sad old churchyard.

Must go to bed now 11 p.m. been working since 9.30 a.m. am now over 60 — age, not temperature or oil pressure.

The novels only just clear overheads. But we all hope the *G. Virgin* will do the trick. It is strong, and to my mind, about 50 times as good as *Dear Life* and *A Fox put together*. But this may be a dotard's illusion.

Yours truly
Henry Williamson

I wrote again to Henry on the occasion of Father Brocard Sewell's celebration of his work in the *Aylesford Review*.

1, Kingston Way
Shoreham-by-Sea
Sussex

26th March 1958

Dear Mr Williamson,

You kindly replied to a letter of mine in March 1957. I have intended writing to you

again for some months. In fact, since the appearance of *The Golden Virgin*, but the fear of burdening you and having nothing of interest to say held me back.

I was most grateful for your letter giving news of your work. Your publishers seem to have kept reasonably to schedule and I see that your trout stream story is advertised for this spring as you predicted.

I have been prompted to write to you at this moment through my great satisfaction and pleasure at the gesture of the Carmelite Fathers in devoting the current issue of the *Aylesford Review* to an appreciation of your work. The whole thing is excellent and all too short. It deserves wide publicity and, of course, is a long overdue tribute to your life's work. It is most heartening to me personally, to find that a Catholic Review should come forward in this way with a timely tribute. I was an admirer of you and your writing long before I became a Catholic (in 1945) and on reflection it seems probable that your writings helped me unconsciously towards finding the answer to spiritual unrest in myself, in the Catholic Faith.

In a world where you have not been understood, perhaps wilfully, it is good to know that the Carmelite Fathers and many like myself are with you all the way.

In *The Golden Virgin*, I thought your treatment of the Catholic upsurge in the country following the emancipation of the previous century, had a most authentic air. One felt that, though the question of religion wasn't obtrusive, Catholic parishes were being established and that it was a part of life in the England of the day. I could say a lot about trends in religion at the present, but it is enough to say that there is lapsing from Belief everywhere not least among the Catholics. Modern life is making more and more people want to cast off responsibility and the disillusionment seems to be highest in my age group — thirties and forties. The youth who fought the last war in fact. The Welfare State we all wanted wasn't really good for us and TV which we all want now, saps our initiative. The youngsters have fortunately gone over to playing discs and pops and stand a chance of coming out all right in the next ten years if we start giving them a lead now. But who of the older generation is going to lead us?

I need hardly say I have enjoyed the London books. As a River Board Engineer, I happened to be speaking about fishing and country matters with one of the Board members representing fishing interests: I mentioned your books and he said that he had gone to your school when he lived at Lewisham, where apparently in his day, your *Dandelion Days* had considerable celebrity as some of the masters of your time still taught there. He was most interested to hear about Randisbourne and the London books which he had not read, particularly as he was secretary of the Randisbourne Angling Club. He said he was looking forward to reading the series.

You have said that *Dandelion Days* is rather out of spirit with the rest of *The Flax*. It is, nevertheless, a wonderfully true picture of Grammar School life and the country boy. There is nothing else quite so good.

My Mother-in-law was ill in bed last autumn and although she doesn't read much as a rule, I lent her *The Flax of Dream* amongst other books. She became absorbed for days on end and said it was really beautiful. She also said, "If you liked this book as a young man, it explains a lot of things about you I didn't really understand." She met me first in 1946 after I had been demobilised so perhaps she recognised a lot of Willie's ideas in me, or saw something of the universal dreamer, idealist or misfit in me.

I have been thinking recently how well the stories of Revvy and village life in Devon would come over on the BBC. Some of the stories would dramatise very well and would be good television as a series maybe. Revvy is a very full character and word pictures, perhaps, alone can do him justice.

I hope you are having good luck with No. 7 in the series and enjoying good health

and that your belt of trees kept away the worst of the East wind during this very cold March.

*Yours sincerely,
E.G. Porter*

Henry wrote again on 10th April 1958 about No. 7 of the Chronicle:

*River Cottage, Bungay, Suffolk
Dear Mr Porter,*

10th April 1958

Your most interesting letter has remained unanswered too long. This writer has been rushing in Devon since November last towards a book's climax, then had to give up as a hare's pace was substituted for that of a tortoise. Plus nicotine. But the amazing part of your letter was the information that there was a Ravensbourne (old name Randisbourne) Angling Club. I have thought for years that that poor stream, once holding roach and trout, had died many years ago. But perhaps it is still alive in its upper waters. I do not know. To me a polluted stream (decadence) is the same thing as the human condition; though the reverse may be the truth. Again, I do not know. Oddly enough I have just had forwarded from Devon a letter from Fr Sewell, of the Aylesford Review: he is now for a few days in the West, while I am in the East.

What you say about some of the Village Book sketches going well over the BBC . . . I used to hope that was so, but in the West, anyway, they seem to employ people to go and see places (for a day or hour) and then to write up or record superficial impressions. This writer therefore suffers a handicap, having known most of the places for nearly half a century. It is so kind of you to suggest writing to the TV Bristol people. As it happens, one of them — now a free-lance, wants to come to the field with TV cameras to get my 'views' — which means answers to questions I suppose, and I am wondering how poor a show one would make under such guidance or direction, especially if little or nothing be known of the subject's work. I feel that for all to be at their best, again, some knowledge of the subject should be known; knowledge perhaps is appreciation.

No. 7 is 3 chapters off the ending. Like Virgin, it took its own line, away from my planned synopsis. But I hauled Phillip back, in at least one forking chapter, when he went to the Gaultshires instead of back to the Machine Gun Corps, after his adverse report and the Etaples mutiny where he was sent to do an infantry course by Major Downham, his CO and one-time senior in the Moon Fire Office. But I sacked Downham instead, and P. returned as transport officer, as he had been since Dec 1916 in France (it was now Sept 1917). But the character which I care for is 'Spectre' West; one who takes a major part in this book, as a roving GHQ CSO 2, throughout Third Ypres.

I am taking the liberty of sending your letter to Fr Sewell in Cornwall, he will return it; it is good a letter, all round, that I feel he must see it.

Oddly, I have a small book on my experiments with fish and a river in the West Country coming out with Faber in June; it was severely cut and I think now justly, to remove all literary excrescences and confine itself to its subject!

*With many thanks,
Yours sincerely,
Henry Williamson*

In the summer of 1960 I wrote again to HW but have no record of the letter, although I must have commented on Richard Williamson's first book *The Dawn is my Brother*. On 29th August 1960 I received a letter from Ox's Cross written by Richard on behalf of his father.

Ox's Cross, Georgeham, Braunton, N. Devon

29.8.60

Dear Mr Porter,

My father has asked me to reply to your letter on his behalf: he is, I'm afraid under heavy pressure from work, and I'm sure you will understand that all his energy should be devoted to his book. His next work will be published in the late autumn: the title is still under discussion.

I was interested to see that you had read my own small book. It is, I hope, the first of many. I entirely agree with you about its lack of construction. It is more a collection of essays linked by a narration. The next book will be a more professional job.

You are quite right in assuming that the Sgt John Williamson about whom you heard in the Telegraph is the former holder of the British Height record. His record was beaten this year by an RAF Officer who flew to about 31,000 ft.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Williamson

It was about this time that I learned that HW was to give a reading and answer questions on his work for the Newman Society in Westminster. I attended that meeting and met Henry for the first time — a tall man, white haired dressed in grey-green tweeds — a countryman come to town and every inch as I had imagined him.

I shook hands with him at the end of the meeting and introduced myself as someone with whom he had corresponded and shown great kindness for nearly twenty years. He remembered me, but I cannot now recall what we said, but it would have been small talk due to the number of people waiting to speak with him.

I don't even remember, after 28 years, what HW read; but I do remember that soft, spell-binding voice as he read of the countryside he loved from his published works. It was the same magic I remembered from his BBC broadcasts in the late 1930s. Those short broadcasts about his North Norfolk farm and such things as bird migration, were fascinating. One piece about a snow bunting was absolute poetry!

Meeting Henry was a sort of consummation. I didn't believe then in pressing myself on someone I admired. A chapter closed and I have always believed in travelling hopefully rather than arriving. I am by nature reticent. My great regret is that he didn't live longer to enrich our lives with more great books. And also that he didn't get the recognition he merited in his lifetime.

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Stiffley 18 Feb 1944

Dear G. & Annie Porter

I read your Odyssey
with amusement. Forgive
delay in replying: have
been ill, in hospital: &
no secretary, removed;
9 AM - 12 p.m. daily,
farm: overwhelmed.

Can't ref. to friend
letters here! Sound
very selfish but L.P.

is low. All good
wishes. Am trying to write
2 books but 5 children,

farm, etc. I've sent you
MSS to Dersingham.

All best, & thanks
for your letter, & forgive
this merely ref.
H. Williamson

Stiffley Worpell 18 Feb 1944

Dear Sir

I am sending this
as requested by Gnr. Porter.
Regret for the delay —
have no secretary & am
self overwhelmed into
work 9 AM - midnight
seven days a week.

I don't know any market
for light verse but Herbert
~~Stiffley~~ Jenkins Ltd

might consider it: I have
a typed copy, of course.
been no light verse this way
so far as I know.

Yours faithfully
J. H. Williamson