

A Chronicle Character

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One of the *Chronicle's* strongest characters is A.B. Cabton who turns up unexpectedly over a number of years and who inevitably overstays his welcome. His manner was awkward and at the worst embarrassing and he was near-contemptuous of nearly all the things in which Phillip tried to interest him. It is believed that this peculiar fictional character was based upon the writer H.A. Manhood, whose early work was much praised by Williamson, Galsworthy and Edward Garnett.

Manhood's book of essays *The Nightseed* received much critical acclaim and in 1930 Williamson wrote a glowing tribute in the foreword to Manhood's long essay 'Little Peter the Great'. This was an attractive little book illustrated by the now very famous Rowland Hilder. Williamson closed the foreword extravagantly, "Sometimes I feel that the time will come when my chief claim to fame will be that I divined this spring of rock-water as soon as the hazel-twigg was held out in that room in the Adelphi sometime at the beginning of the second quarter of the Twentieth Century."

In his novel *A Solitary War* published many years later in 1966 Williamson describes Cabton's writing in great detail and is very critical. 'Yet despite the originality of his imagery and the luring pliability of his prose there remains something baffling about his work. He had remained a precious writer, fanciful rather than factual. He was an inventor of country detail. . . . But afterwards came doubt, the pathos was unreal, the sense of pity used as a trick; the similes were too startling; the rural life too bizarre.'

George Jefferson in his excellent biography of Edward Garnett, *A Life in Literature*, records incidents which link Manhood and Williamson, both of whom were helped and encouraged by the great critic. When writing *Laughter in Pocket* in 1929 Manhood wrote to Garnett, 'Williamson tells me to write like hell — regardless of style or anything else, — but I can't — it isn't my way — I write just as slowly, laboriously now as I did at the beginning — but I don't think he can quite understand that. His letter put me out of gear for three days — I had to forget before I could start again.' Later he wrote again to Garnett, 'I have seen Williamson — wanted to know the hows and whys — where my stuff comes from — origins — I couldn't satisfy him of course, but it was good to talk a time — to hear him swear — I'm damned if I really know where some of my stuff does come from — more than that I manage to sweat it out, I cannot say — do you think the Hawthornden has done Williamson any good? I am hoping so. He is certainly unique.'

Recently I was able to speak to Manhood's wife and to learn that he had enjoyed an active but simple life at their Henfield, Sussex cottage until about two years ago. Harold Arthur Manhood is now at 85 years old, most unwell and his wife did not want him disturbed even to discuss his literary achievements. She remembered Edward Garnett with much affection, a lovely man who had been so kind to them both. Henry Williamson had been an interesting companion before the War, but in later years had become 'quite mad'.

After the War the Manhoods had deliberately cut themselves off from the smart literary circles, preferring to spend their days in the country. She claimed that although her husband had not achieved the fame or success once expected of him, he had continued to write beautifully all his life, regularly having his country essays published in London newspapers. Alas, his one novel, *Gay Agony*, is forgotten and his books of essays have also been out of print for many years.

Although the Henfield museum had never heard of his works an elderly visitor to the museum remembered him well. He had been a great village character, known locally as 'Rookie' and was renowned for his home-made cider.