

## More Comments on Nature Writing

*John Homan*

I recently came across the following comments on Williamson as nature writer, the first being by Aubrey de Selincourt who, many will remember, wrote a fair and constructive criticism of *The Beautiful Years* as sometime Literary Critic for the *Manchester Guardian*. This is part of a long article entitled 'Animal Heroes' that appeared in *Collins Magazine Annual for Boys and Girls*, Vol. 3, 1950.

*I want now to say something about two books . . . both of which everyone should read if he cares at all about wild nature; or even if he does not because they might make him care. It's a queer thing how people's interests shift as time goes on; a couple of hundred years ago anyone who wrote a long and serious book about an otter would have been considered cracked . . . it was only people in those days who were supposed to be interesting. All this has changed now; indeed there are a number of writers who . . . devote all their curiosity and love to the unhuman and mysterious life of the wilds. Such men were W.H. Hudson . . . and Richard Jefferies.*

Another writer of this kind is Henry Williamson. He has also written about people, but my private opinion is that he is more at home with otters and fish. Indeed, he is at home with otters and fish to an almost uncanny degree; and the effect on me, at least, of reading his *Tarka the Otter* and *Salar the Salmon* is to make me feel that I have slipped the ties which attach me to my ordinary workaday world and entered a wholly different one which is both exciting and beautiful. The reason for this is that Henry Williamson has not only watched for years with passionate intensity the way that otters and salmon behave (after reading him I have a sharp picture in my mind of every least physical movement of an otter in swimming, diving, floating, hunting, and of a salmon idling in a pool under the tree-roots or marvellously ascending the perpendicular torrent of a weir), but he has also so deeply entered into the whole surrounding scene of the lives of these creatures that one comes to know as vividly as from touch or sight the sea-reaches, rivers, streams, rocks, moors, woods, or whatever else it may be amongst which they live. He has an exquisite awareness too of every least change in weather and season, and in the quality of light at dawn, dusk or noon, and makes us see these things and feel them along our pulses. His description of hard winter in *Tarka* is an experience no reader will forget. Best of all he knows water: estuary, pool or inland stream — the movement of it, the light in it, the very sense and smell of it. He knows it so well and describes it so cunningly that I think he must have lived in it once, with the otters, before he was born a human.

And then there are all the other creatures, besides the central ones: hundreds of creatures, of water, air and earth which haunt about their homes, so that the picture we get of the otter or the salmon is filled in for us and made more coloured, rich and real. I don't know which is the better book, *Tarka* or *Salar*; but *Tarka* is my favourite, though in some ways *Salar* is a greater achievement. I mean, it is a more extraordinary thing for a man to be able to express, as Mr Williamson seems to have done, the very essence and 'feel' of fish-life than animal-life — because fish are much further removed from us than animals are. In this book, as in *Tarka*, it is not only the knowledge of the habits of creatures which makes it so remarkable (I suppose anyone with enough time and intelligence could acquire that); it is the author's power to imagine, as it were, the whole watery world, in its relation to times and seasons, sun, stars and earth, and to invite us to enter it. Yet I prefer *Tarka*. I think it must be because of a certain blind savagery in the watery world, blinder, more frightful, than the savagery of the earth or the air. I cannot help sympathising with Keats,

*who felt the same thing when sitting on a rock by the seashore at Teignmouth, he suddenly*  
*'saw too distinct into the core*  
*Of an eternal fierce destruction.'*

*Well, so it is, and so it must be; so, no doubt, it should be.*

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The second, much briefer comment, comes from a writer familiar to many, dear to some; 'BB' or, unmasked, Denys Watkins-Pitchford. In his latest book, *Fisherman's Folly* (Boydell Press 1987), he writes

*The greatest appeal which coarse-fishing has for me is the utter peace and harmony of one's surroundings; . . . I know of no other sport, save wildfowling, in which you can withdraw from the workaday world so successfully, where all worries can be forgotten, where nature can hold you so mesmerised, so entranced.*

*I am sure the heron feels this in his own way as he stands among the green sedges hour after hour. Mind you, I am the last to believe that animals and birds feel and reason in a way that is comparable with our own. That is utter nonsense — one only has to read the second-rate 'animal' stories to realise how false it is. Henry Williamson's Tarka the Otter rings true from beginning to end. Tarka does not think of life as we do, his awareness is in the passing second. That is why a child lives so vividly.*

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The following was a letter published in *The Cream of Devon* booklet published by Devon Federation of Women's Institutes, Diamond Jubilee Year, 1980. The writer was either a Mrs Foulds or a Mrs Ward.

#### *A Brief Memory of Henry Williamson*

*Christmas 1958 was our first Christmas in Georgeham where we bought an old, large house on retirement from the Army.*

*We had chosen Georgeham for a holiday the year before because at the age of 8, my husband had known and respected Henry Williamson, who was then writing Tarka the Otter, as his tutor.*

*Henry welcomed us on our arrival and joined with us in our Christmas activities.*

*We had five girls from my old school staying with us as their parents were abroad.*

*Henry asked me in his diffident manner if I thought the girls would like him to read some of his stories to them.*

*Would they!*

*I chose New Year's Eve and at about 10 p.m. a series of blasts on a hunting horn marked Henry's progress from his house at the top of the hill, down our long drive to the front door.*

*From our largest armchair, in front of a roaring log fire, he read in his 'Devon' voice the story of "A Crown of Life" from Tales of Moorland and Estuary. By the time the old grey sheepdog walked up the aisle, the icicles hanging from his coat making 'a small chiming and clinking in the air' we were all completely happy and bathed in tears; behind his tin spectacles on the end of his nose Henry too wept happily.*