

## Editorial

On Boxing Day at 6pm a programme called *The Perfect Stranger* was broadcast on Radio Norfolk and hopefully will be sold on to Radio 4 for countrywide transmission at a future date.

BBC Radio Norfolk commissioned David Clayton and Neil Walker to make a one-hour programme based on the book *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* and the 'perfect stranger' is, of course, Henry Williamson. The brief was for the programme to reflect farming in Norfolk in the 1930s as described in the book with references to how farming has changed; to explore HW's views on farming; to recapture the lyrical nature of the book and to involve local people who remember him; a serious documentary which explores not only the character of the author but the character of Norfolk people as well.

And very lively and interesting listening it makes. Featured strongly in the programme are Loetitia, as calm and philosophical as ever, and Robert, with Douglas Jordan who worked with Henry, Tom Pearson and Billy Gidney, the blacksmith. Extracts from the book are read by Peter Whitbread and are blended expertly into the narrative (though one misses that rather fey note of Henry's own voice).

You will see that Douglas Jordan has also written up for us a vivid account of his involvement in the programme. His writing has such power and immediacy that you will find yourselves transported right back to those Norfolk farming days. Interestingly, Douglas made one small slip in the handwritten account. He calls Neil Walker, Neil *Runner* — which is exactly what Henry would have done! Douglas wrote this piece from a bed in Cromer Hospital where he was having a hip replacement from which he has had a very slow and tedious recovery, coping also with his wife's serious illness. Henry was in that same Cromer Hospital in 1944 having his appendix out!

It is nearly fifty years since *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* was published, forty since *The Phasian Bird*, twenty-five since *A Solitary War* and *Lucifer Before Sunrise*. All have been reprinted and remain as brilliant candles illuminating the darkened room of wartime and that final period of agricultural depression in Britain. Thus these additions of first-hand memory are particularly welcome.

The period for Henry was a metamorphosis. He shook off Devon, altered his perspective of it, and returned refreshed for the last thirty years. The transformation, his middle period, was not without its joys. He would have remained a much frustrated man if he had not 'worked with his body', turned furrows, driven the Ferguson, shot wild duck and battue pheasants, sawn up logs and lit great bonfires. He wore Norfolk jackets, trod his own acres, mixed with the landed classes of Britain's premier farming county; in short, held hands with his Exmoor ancestors and the Bedfordshire background. But the period sharpened his appetite for the political arena too; not surprisingly, given the confrontation with local people, the migrant armies over his land, the proximity to invasion, the beginnings of social and agricultural revolution.

Whichever way we look at that Norfolk period, we must clearly state that HW acquitted himself honourably. With no experience or training, he set out to farm, to grow food for a nation at a time of crisis. He made mistakes and he had failures, of which he was more aware than anyone, but in the main he made a success of the venture. He was faithful to his talent by recording objectively and thus we have a vivid picture of what was not just a period in Henry's life, but of life at that time — 'a microcosm of the macrocosm' — success and failure, determination and misery, allegory and transformation, over zealous politics and comedy, revolution and tradition. Thanks be that it happened.

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