Some Thoughts on Class in the Novels of Henry Williamson

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To say that Henry Williamson was a writer for whom issues of social class were important is, in one way, to say no more than that he was a product of his own times, and, especially, of his own native social class. An awareness of class issues is what we might expect. But the matter goes further than that would imply. The more one reads the *Chronicle*, the more one is struck by the important parts played in the series by class matters; and it is by no means always the case that Williamson was explicitly aware of them. Certainly, there are many fine passages in which we have a very penetrating analysis, consciously given, of the ramifications of social class, especially as they affect Phillip. There are many other moments, too, in which the matter of class is there, but implicitly; where we are left to deduce for ourselves that here is a writer for whom such issues may have presented a personal conundrum; a writer for whom a need to 'fit in' with different sectors of English society at different times in his long career exists as something that quite clearly marks and shapes some of his fiction, and has much to do with his analysis of social values, of character, of historical event.

Given the time span of the *Chronicle*, and the nature of the period it deals with, it would be surprising if the series failed to deal with such issues. It takes us from the stability (perhaps apparent rather than real) of the late 1890s, to the period of the post-war Labour Government in Britain. It would, as it were, have been unthinkable to Thomas Turney, although not perhaps to Dora, that this would be so. Put another way, the *Chronicle* moves from the 'Candlelight and Mahogany' of 1897 to a post-Hiroshima world of 1946. In that long journey, we can trace an almost total, volcanic disruption of the strata that a young Richard Maddison might be thought to be able to take fully for granted. And if we set alongside that historical change the changes that have affected Phillip himself, we can begin to see how class, and the relationships between classes, cannot but be active themes in the series. If the century moves from 'Victorian Values' to the values of socialist nationalisation programmes, it is also true that Phillip moves from lower-middle-class suburban schoolboy to Army Officer, journalist, writer, landowner, 'squire', journal editor, and then literary man in retreat. Again, to take a snapshot of the evolution that has come about, it is necessary only to compare the image of Phillip, furtive in the Free Library of *Young Phillip Maddison* with the Phillip who receives the Hawthornden Prize, or the same Phillip, but different, the 'Captain Maddison', 'friend of Lord Cloudesley', established if neglected writer whom we encounter in *The Gale of the World* (p. 319). He has come a long way. But he is the same person.

If it were possible, or indeed useful, to try and summarise what might have been HW's attitude to social class, as it exists in his published works, it might at least contain some of the following points. He undoubtedly believed that background, whether it be genetic inheritance or physical environment, had a strong, though not insurmountable, influence on character and behaviour. I would also argue that, in presenting character to the reader, Williamson very often draws on the 'short-hand' which is possible when ascribing that character to a particular class. I am not suggesting anything as crass as an introduction of a character as 'lower', 'middle' or 'upper' class, from which all else follows. Rather, that a person's class, as he or she is presented in the fiction, is often used to account for and explain many aspects of their behaviour. Once their social 'rank' is established, it is there to help us account for their actions, for their relationships with

others. I also believe that, although drawing upon this categorisation as a technique of explanation, Williamson is nevertheless drawn and attracted, as a writer, by the exceptions to these rules, if that is how they should be described. That a strong and recurrent motif in the fiction is an interest in those who manage to escape the restrictions of class: either by transcending those restrictions, or by finding in others qualities which cannot be accounted for in class terms.

If I had to sum up my ideas tonight in a few words, I would have to say that in the matter of HW and social class, there is yet another paradox. His unfailing and often quite penetrating concern with class issues sits alongside, and produces, an even stronger interest in character when it breaks the rules of class. Class might be one of the main structures on which the *Chronicle* is built, but those who challenge that structure, and succeed, are so often the heroes or heroines of the fiction. If I had to try and account for the paradox, I suppose I would have to guess that such an interest in the fugitives or escapees from class restrictions was dear to HW's heart because he, too, was such a person. And that, among all the other things that it is, the *Chronicle* is also the account of one man's progress. A progress not just away from the social station into which he was born, but, much more importantly, away from what he (at least) perceived to be the restrictions on vision, on thought and compassion which that station tried to impose. For example:

> *Streams of people were moving up to the crest (of the Hill) by all the paths. . . Parasols bobbed over all the heads to the far distance. The path was about ten feet wide. A dry and extensive crunching noise filled the air all along the ridge, made up of thousands of boots and shoes pressing upon the yellow gravel surface. It was the Sunday parade of Wakenham's upper classes. Accompanying the parasols was a black bobbing of top-hats. There were all shapes and sizes of faces, some smooth, a few bearded; there were big moustaches, some curling upwards, others drooping at the ends, as though with resignation to middle-aged respectability; there were black frock coats and newer morning coats, one or two pairs of lavender kid gloves, a great many brown gloves. Phillip knew by the clothes, shape of starched linen collars, gloves, sticks, and the way they walked which part of Wakenham they came from — from the big houses in Twistleton Road to the new little red-brick ones on the other side of the Hill.*
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> . . . . . .
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> *Beside the main concourse on the grassy areas beside the gravel path, other people were strolling, or stopping to chat in groups around the bandstand. Some had with them children on their best behaviour conscious of everyone else being in their Sunday best.*
>
> *On the other side of the bandstand, on the slopes above the Warm Kitchen, were the lesser lights of Wakenham, the people who did not go to church, most of them bowler-hatted or with strawyards slightly tilted, and wearing blue serge suits. Some of them wore yellow or brown shoes with tweed jackets, celluloid collars, and ready-made bow-ties, content in the knowledge that they too had their place in the English Sunday, the Day of Rest, envying no man, for they could pay their way, and therefore could consider themselves respectable people.*
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> *Away in the distance, under much-climbed thorn trees, played the hatless children, the urchins, the partly cared-for and the partly-uncaring; human sparrows of the congested lower streets nearer Thames . . .*
>
> *Phillip saw Cranmer near the bandstand. He waved. That was enough for Cranmer. He had come up for no more than that: recognition from his friend and hero . . . He did not dare to, or indeed want to go among the toffs on the path, the splendid people so far above him, who wore shiners.* Young Phillip Maddison, p. 115

The point-of-view in this passage is, largely, Phillip's own. We are told that 'Phillip knew . . .' the relationships between physical appearance and behaviour and social standing or class. It is a microcosm of a world in which appearance, rather than substance alone, is seen as the determinant of status. There is no questioning of the relative stations of those who walk on or below the hill, either by Phillip, by the authorial voice, or, of course, by those depicted there. Even Cranmer, who might be thought of as a victim of this hierarchical system, fully accepts that it should be so. He has no desire to breach the rules and climb the Hill. It is all as it should be. For most of the principle characters in the *Chronicle*, certainly at this stage of the series, the Sunday parade could be said to represent a desirable and natural order. For Thomas Turney, for whom 'the poor are always with us'; for Richard, with his fear of 'the lower orders', even for the milder Hetty, all this is normal. Hetty, from innate kindness and sensibility, will feel pity for the poor, and do what she can to alleviate their miseries: but there is no evidence in the texts that she questions the arrangements which produce them.

The exception, of course, is Dora, and we must say a little more about her later, for she is one of those 'escapees', those characters who are shown as able both to question and challenge the assumptions about class, and the merits it seems to confer.

But to return to Phillip. There is no doubt that he fully accepts the view of society that is depicted here; it would, after all, be surprising and, in the fiction, quite incredible, if he were presented as a nine-year old social revolutionary. But the passage from *Young Phillip Maddison* that we have just read goes on in a very significant way.

> *Phillip's life was without inward glow, without contentment. He was transfixed by his anxious quest (to give his photograph to Helena), aware that his straw-hat was old and second-hand, slightly too big for him despite paper behind the leather band, that his Eton collar was much mended at the stud holes, that his hands hidden by gloves were unwashed, his boots not properly blacked, that he swore and was ill-mannered, that he was a scholarship boy because his father did not have enough money to pay for him at school, that he did not really belong to such nice people: by which he meant the Rolls family, whom he dreaded to meet, whom he hoped to see.* Young Phillip Maddison, pp. 116–7

It could be said that Phillip's fixation with Helena Rolls springs as much from simple calf love (as Aunt Dorrie puts it) as from an attraction to the apparent opulence and security of the Rolls family and household. In this passage, they are represented as the 'nice people', as far 'above' him in moral and social worth as he is for Cranmer. Thoughts of the Rolls induce following thoughts of worthlessness and shame; a sense, most of all, of 'not being good enough', one out of place in the little social world of Hillside Road, the whole world for the young boy.

The interpretation is enforced by another passage from the same novel, the scene in which Phillip attempts to post his Valentine card through the Rolls' letter box:

> *If you open a letter box on a cold foggy night, and you feel warm air on your brow above your eyes and you hear charming voices and see a well-lighted hall and a dining room door open, and smell a roasting chicken — a house where they have dinner at night, and not just cold mutton for supper — it is like seeing into an enchanted palace . . .*
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> Young Phillip Maddison, pp. 24–5

A palace from which you are ignominiously chased, by a bulldog, back into the fog.

The 'enchanted palace', one could say in passing, calls into question the attempts by Williamson in these early novels to account for people's unhappiness in terms of their

environment. It's what goes on *inside* the Rolls household, rather than the urban setting in which it is placed, that is seen to determine their lives. It can't be the 'town' that makes Richard unhappy; not that alone, for others are shown to live in it quite successfully.

Perhaps more than in passing. For we have to ask about the origins of Phillip's feelings of inadequacy and distress. When we do, we can see that they are in part attributable to these problems of social class.

We have just seen that he feels unworthy of associating with the Rolls because he swears, because his clothes are not new or especially smart. We have been reminded of his friendship with Horace Cranmer. In a way, Phillip is shown to live in a kind of hinterland between his native class and something else. He is, to *most* outward appearances, a bona fide member of the middle classes. But, like Richard, he nevertheless feels not to be completely a part of that class.

For Richard Maddison, there is an over-riding sense of precariousness about his own station. The personal history is shown to be important. Descended from a prosperous, land-owning, quasi-gentry background; the money and then the land dissipated by a drunken father; the children dispossessed from their expected inheritance, and left more or less to fend for themselves. Failing his entrance exam for the Navy because of defective eyesight, Richard takes what work he can find, as a clerk in a bank. The sense of guilt and failure is reinforced rather than alleviated by his marriage to Hetty. Her people may be only 'in trade', not gentry at all, and even of suspect racial origins; but they are more prosperous than him, more secure in their middle-class values. And the wider the gap is perceived to be between their solidity and his weakness, the more Richard is inclined to sneer at their apparent vulgarity.

In this way, lapses of feeling between him and Hetty are often translated into, or seen as, mismatches of class and background. It is Hetty who is not 'good enough', who can never live up to the image of the beautiful, graceful, dead Jenny, whose people are, at bottom, vulgarians and frauds. They breed bounders like Hugh and Charlie. They are, despite their comfort and security, somehow of a lower order than the Maddisons. All of this, though, lies silent and boding in the relationship of Richard and Hetty. It is there, but it comes to the fore on only one occasion to confirm its presence, in the terror of the Chapter 'Family Distraction' in *Donkey Boy*. There, Richard loses his temper, ostensibly because the toast is smirched with soot from the fire. But it soon becomes obvious that much more is waiting to be expressed.

> *'If I had any sense I would have left years ago, instead of remaining in a completely false position! Yes, that is what I feel about it! What sort of people are you Turneys, to insult a man as I was insulted in the past? Who then seek to insinuate himself into his home, with never so much as an apology, never a hint of regret for the disastrous effect of caddish behaviour towards me years ago? . . . What was my crime, can you answer me that? I was a young fellow making his way in the world, and you yourself encouraged me in my suit! Therefore, as is usual and honourable in such circumstances, at least among my own sort of people, I presented myself to Mr Turney to ask his permission to pay my addresses to his daughter! And what was the result? Disgusting insinuations, unbearable insults! . . . That's the sort of people you are! Now you know what I think of you all!'*
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> *Hetty . . . had always been conscious of the difference between the Maddisons and the Turneys, and from the very first had realised that gentlemen to the manner born, like Richard, had a power of restraint denied to other men who had not had their advantages. . .*
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> Donkey Boy, pp. 364–5

Well, through the terrible grimness of the passage, terrible because it is so well conveyed through Phillip's eyes and ears, there is a shaft of irony running. By this early point in the fiction we have already seen that Richard is fundamentally a querulous and weak man. That his regard for the feelings of others, his wife or his children, can be overlain at any time by his perception of his own desires or deserts.

That the carapace of 'gentlemanly' behaviour, of 'duty', of 'good breeding', to put it more crudely, covers but does not control a whole range of unsavoury, bullying, obstinate and domineering characteristics. And yet Hetty still believes in his essential superiority, because it is the product of the class difference between them. Even though it is shaken by the scene quoted from above, this faith is not destroyed. Richard is somehow 'better' because of his background and breeding, and there is no more to be said.

Phillip is shown to inherit, or absorb, this same kind of class awareness. The idea of the 'beastly' Turneys lives in his imagination, is at times used by him to account for his own 'cross-grained' or awkward nature, the product, as he sometimes puts it, of a hybrid marriage, as hybrid as that between different races.

Now, whether any of this has any biographical basis in Henry Williamson's own life is impossible to say. But that doesn't matter at all, because what is being explained is the growth of Phillip's mind, his progress towards becoming a writer. We have seen two sorts of thing which explain how Phillip can be thought of as conditioned towards a hypersensitivity to class issues. His feelings of insecurity in his own class, of not being good enough to associate with the Rolls, and the internal insecurities about class within his own home, where his mother is shown to feel herself the social inferior of her own husband, and Richard's use of this class issue as a means of disguising and dealing with his own feelings of failure. Even in another era than that which produces the Sunday parade on the Hillies, it would be difficult to see how Phillip could, with such a background, be expected not to have an acute consciousness of social status.

There is the odd aberration, if we can call it that, of Horace Cranmer, the poor boy from the slums of Wakenham whom Phillip befriends. There is, of course, a measure of pained condescension in that friendship, but it is genuine all the same. 'Things always go well' when Phillip is with Horace, though I have to say that I don't think this is very well explained in the fiction. It remains a mystery, as perhaps it was to Williamson himself. Most of all, that friendship does not really alter Phillip's view of the society in which he lives, and as he grows and becomes outwardly and inwardly more like Richard, that view is hardened rather than altered. His pride in his City job in *How Dear is Life* is bound up with the feeling of being one of the 'select' 100,000 City men who rule the Empire; he basks in the status and the security of his position, lowly as it really is. He accepts, wholeheartedly, the social order of which he partakes.

Of course, the authorial voice in the fiction is at work challenging that security and the values on which it is based. The thunderstorm which frightens Phillip during his Devon Holiday, and which precisely mirrors and predicts his entry into battle, is one form of such a challenge, telling the reader that Phillip's apparently solid and everlasting world, the status quo, is about to be ruined and is already vulnerable. Dora, in her Choric role, makes similar points, either in her visits to the poor or in her conversations with other Suffragettes. But we have to set this authorial commentary alongside the continuing complacency of Phillip himself. It is the reader's task, if not duty, to use one as a gloss on the other, so that between them they could be said to make up the whole truth of the fiction.

So it is that we have to ask ourselves about, for example, the 'Leytonstone Louts' episode.

Phillip's tent, one of twelve in 'B' Company Lines, was third from the bottom. The next tent down was occupied by what he thought of as the Leytonstone Louts, owing to the slight Cockney voices of some of the occupants . . . several of them came from Leytonstone, a district he knew only from the many renewal notices he had made out, and from Downham's remark about it being a ghastly place to live in . . . How Dear is Life, p. 181

I hope we would all agree that this is unforgivable of Phillip. It is an important scene because it shows how very far he has to go, not just as a growing man, but as a writer. The prejudice based on half-truths and hearsay, reflecting the blind and snobbish values of Downham, will always be a block to perception, shutting him off from others. It is a scene returned to, and reflected on, in several later moments, where it is seen with great regret. It is made clear, too, that such an attitude will cut Phillip off from others. I maybe wrong, but I suspect that this incident is based on biographical reality, a mistake that was to haunt Williamson.

The experience of the Great War is, of course, the chief factor in breaking down the excesses of Phillip's views about class. His closeness to the regular soldiers, and the support and kindness he receives from them, could be said to open his eyes and to lead him to question his values. But Williamson is quite careful, and successfully so, to handle this process very slowly. It is by no means an overnight conversion. Again, the problem is shown to be a difficult and complex one. It isn't a case of a young, middle-class man encountering the rough friendship of the troops, and thereby discovering faults in the class- and value-systems he may have brought to bear. That could well have been the scenario for other temporary officers, for whom the trenches were the first encounter with members of other classes. In fact, thinking of parallels, even this revelation is exceptional. In the writings of A.P. Herbert, Robert Graves, Seigfried Sasson, Edward Blunden and C.H. Mottram, it is quite hard to detect any genuinely 'revolutionary' (using the word loosely) new attitudes towards social class. The men, brave and warm-hearted as they are seen to be, remain 'the men'. The British Army seems to operate as, indeed, be designed on the principles of, a perfect microcosm of the class system of the civilian world.

In fact, glancing through the works of those officer-poets and memoirists, one is struck by the very absence of close, detailed references to 'the men' except as such; they are 'the company', 'the troops', 'the platoon'. Now and again, eccentric or troublesome characters stand out, but we would have to look fairly hard and long in Great War writing to find any detailed account, from the officer-class, of the daily tribulations of the ordinary soldiers themselves, let alone signs of a deepening consciousness of class divisions. That is in British fiction; in Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, of Ernst Junger's *Storm of Steel*, the perspective is different, and that may well be related to the historical fact of the mutinies that were eventually to beset the French, German, and, of course, the Russian Armies.

The complexity of the problem for Phillip relates back to what I have already described as his precarious sense of being really middle class, combined with his acute sense of class values. *A Fox Under my Cloak* is the novel in which those difficulties are fully exposed, and handled extremely well. Here we find Phillip the 'Temporary Gentleman'; a system which can coin and use such a phrase would require much explanation to a bemused Martian. Being made an officer, even a second-lieutenant, is seen to confer privileges and status; one becomes a 'gentleman' not in the sense of being made gentle, but a gentleman as a member of a certain class: the class from which Richard stems, and from which he has been banished. But this is a 'temporary' elevation; the officer is reminded that it lasts only for the duration. After that, like Bill Kidd and so many others, it is back

to the reality of whatever class one comes from. You may have been an officer and a leader of men at the time, but when all is over, you must be grateful for a job as a cinema doorman, barrel-organist, travelling salesman, hack journalist, or whatever you can get.

But that is to jump ahead. For Phillip, the Second-Lieutenant's pip is an entrée into a new world, the phrase which Williamson uses to describe the visit to the Kingman's house. But the system doesn't admit newcomers quite so easily. There are rules to be learned, very quickly, and new principles of behaviour to grasp. If, as you strive to do so, you are aware that your credentials are suspect, then, like Phillip, you are open to trouble.

In one way, it was prefigured for us in the scene in *How Dear is Life*, at Bleak Hill, when Richard and Hetty come down to take their leave of Phillip. In the dining room of the Beacon Hotel, the family sits among officers, and Phillip is driven to agonies of self-consciousness and anxiety lest his family 'show him up' or let him down.

> *'By the way, before I forget, Phillip' (says an impervious Richard), 'it was most kind of you, old chap, to offer us all to the use of your salary while you are away . . .'*
>
> *'Thanks,' said Phillip hastily, hoping that Father would not mention the amount. Some of the fellows in the battalion were quite rich, and he did not want them to know that he had been earning only fifty pounds a year. Hastily he sought another subject.*
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> How Dear is Life, p. 196

A Fox Under my Cloak is full of bogus people. I think there is a very strong case to be made that Williamson's major point in the novel is summed up by a passage in *Reality in War Literature* in 1928. There, he wrote that

> *. . . the whole war was based on lies, and . . . most tragically, the lies were not deliberate, but arose from the obscurity or denseness of the average European's mind.* (p. 246)

It is not really the place here to pursue that line, although I do think it important to say that the various types of pretence, deceit, bogusness and self-deception that litter the novel are there as deliberate commentaries upon the falseness of the war-spirit in 1915, a falseness which is revealed, for Phillip, by the events of the Christmas 'Truce' at the end of 1914. Here, it is worth saying that one particular aspect of this pretence or deceit takes the form, frequently, of attempts to be misleading about social class. That is the aspect I would like to look at here.

There is the, in one sense, parallel example of 'Major' Deveraux-Wilkins, the bogus cavalry officer who stages a parade on Blackheath. His importance, perhaps, lies mostly in the contrast he comes to represent with Westy, whom we encounter for the first time in this novel. The two men could be described as moral and social opposites, in the terms in which they relate their backgrounds — we have to guess about Wilkins' — to their present circumstances. More needs to be said about Westy in a while. Although Wilkins' dishonesty — he is the 'bogus major' — is a serious offence both to the military code and to ordinary decency (he stages the parade, after all, to impress Mavis), it is related to Phillip's own behaviour. On becoming a second-lieutenant, he quickly conceives of himself as 'Second Lieutenant P.S.T. Maddison, 10th Battalion the Gaultshire Regiment, with a private income!' (*A Fox Under my Cloak*, p. 129). The private income is, of course, the pay he still receives from the Moon Fire Office; the salary of a junior clerk.

It isn't just a private fantasy. When the dyspeptic Cox complains about trying to keep a family on 7/6d a day, and challenges Phillip with 'I suppose you've got private means?', Phillip relies, 'Well, sort of . . .' (p. 155). We are reminded of the scene in the Bleak Hill

tea room, and Phillip's terror lest any of the Regular Army types discover how poor he really is; or at least, poor in the terms of these new social surroundings. An officer and a (temporary) gentleman on the pay of a junior clerk.

The self-deceiving fantasy is shown to grow both from Phillip's own need to protect himself from his awareness of his own origins, and from a steadily growing awareness that being truthful is not always the best course. The 10/- note which bribes the orderly in the hospital in Étretat probably saves his life. It seems, for a moment, to awaken a new perception in him. The perception comes in this marvellous passage about the 'East Surrey man', the poor soldier who hasn't the 10/- bribe to spare; and who, as a consequence, must return to the line for the coming 'hard fighting'.

> *The East Surrey man packed up one morning, for a base camp. Phillip felt sorry for him. From the base camp he would go with a draft up the line. . . The East Surrey man was bound to be killed. The regulars on 19 December had had to make attacks against uncut barbed-wire, as there were not enough high-explosive shells to cut it . . .*
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> *The East Surrey man looked worried all the time. He had far-staring eyes, and looked white about the face, and muttered a lot in his sleep, poor devil. He had no ten-shilling notes to spare; his wife lived in Bethnal Green, on a tiny separation allowance. Phillip felt bad when he had gone away.*
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> *Alone in the room, shaded electric light by his bed, he lay and tried not to think of the truth of things. The truth was a sort of dry-rot, like there had been under the downstairs lavatory floor before Father had scattered carbolic acid about. . . Father had shaken the bottle, and a dollop had burned his leg. He hadn't cried, he remembered; and Father had come up to his room when he was in bed, and looked at the blister with a candle, and then given him a bar of Callard and Bowser's cherry toffee, on condition that he ate it in the morning, since had had cleaned his teeth; and he had sucked it when Father had gone, then wrapped it in the silver paper again, in case Father came back, and said that he could not be trusted.*
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> A Fox Under my Cloak, pp. 77–78

This, if there can be such a thing, is a typical piece of Henry Williamson writing. It looks at first like a fairly realistic picture of a chain of consciousness, its central link that striking image of the truth as a 'sort of dry rot'. A strange simile, but one which, in the context of Phillip's development at this stage, seems perfectly acceptable. The dry rot here is the truth of the unfairness, even the horror, of what he has witnessed and witnesses; the sad and strange distribution of privilege that condemns some to escape and others to almost certain death. But the image leads away from the central puzzle; it takes Phillip to the memory of the Callard and Bowser toffee, and that in turn brings the paragraph, the thought, full circle. We culminate in yet another moment of Phillip's own self-doubt: the fear that 'Father' will catch him out, detect his basically untrustworthy, 'Turney' nature. It isn't, I think, stretching the interpretation too far to suggest that that old guilt, revived here apparently at random, is closely linked to the new guilt, the sense of what he has somehow *done to* the 'East Surrey Man', for whom the passage is the only epitaph.

But those are night thoughts. In daylight, the sense of his own salvation, the knowledge that he is to be sent home, buoys Phillip up. As does his power to impress the Orderly with an assumed social superiority.

> *'You're posh, aren't you?' the (orderly) said to him suddenly, as though to surprise him into admission of a secret.*
>
> *Phillip smiled modestly. He had an idea, all the same, that he was not really posh; as regular army officers were posh, for example. Most of the officers in the battalion had been*

> *partners or directors of firms in the City, if they had been in business; some were above business, and owned land. They went to Oxford University; perhaps to Cambridge; but not to London University. They were* really *posh. He was a sort of mongrel, a half-and-half person. All the same it was rather nice to be considered 'posh', in spite of the fact that the soldier could not really tell the difference. He was like Cranmer, who had believed that he was of another world.* A Fox Under My Cloak, p. 77

The pleasure of being considered 'posh' is, in terms of the whole *Chronicle*, more than just locally significant here. Phillip is shown to acknowledge that the orderly can't really tell the difference (as Phillip feels *he* can) between social classes, so that Phillip is left free to act the part of 'Second-Lieutenant P.S.T. Maddison . . . with a private income'. To be something that he is not. We have to contrast this successful pretence with the utter failure, as he sees it, to convince the Rolls that he is out of the right drawer and socially worthy. And yet, the confidence which the successful act lends him is, at the very same time, undercut by the same nagging feeling: he is a 'sort of mongrel', a 'half-and-half person', neither one thing nor the other. If you like, half a Maddison, but also half a Turney; half a member of the secure middle classes, but also half a renegade from those classes. In the passage, too, we see precisely the same naive and unformed ideas about class that have been with Phillip since *Young Phillip Maddison*. There, as we saw, it was outward appearance — hats and coats — that summed up value and status. Here, it is only a slightly more sophisticated version of the same perception. The idea of the officers' social backgrounds, whilst it may well be based on some truth, surely can't be the whole truth; they can't *all* be City partners or rich landowners, even in 1915. We might ask where these images have come from. A passage in *How Dear is Life* gives us some clues. When the London Highlanders march through Hyde Park, this was Phillip's reaction:

> *The man next to him, with whom he had exchanged names, Baldwin, told him that they were in Hyde Park. The big houses opposite were most of them occupied by millionaires — this was Park Lane! "Good Lord! Of course!" He stared at them with wonder and amazement, for here came the heroes of magazine stories, poor but aristocratic, handsome and debonair, raising faultless Lincoln Bennetts and often misunderstood by vulgarian millionaire fathers of heroines.* How Dear Is Life, p. 147

It is the perception of an unsophisticated schoolboy, a reader of magazine fiction, in which the same stereotyping shorthand ideas about class are found. One is reminded of George Orwell's marvellous essay of 1939, 'Boys' Weeklies'. Orwell's major point is that such fiction as is found in 'Boys' Own Paper', the 'Gem' and 'Magnet' serve to reinforce stereotypes about class, race and nationality; they present a picture of a world in which nothing ever changes, into which the working class never really intrude. Although Orwell was writing just before the outbreak of the Second World War, he argues convincingly that nothing in these magazines has changed since the end of the previous century. The picture of rigid and immutable class divisions they present is made to apply to 1939 as much as to 1899. He goes on:

> *A few years ago I was a teacher at two of these (small private) schools myself. I found that not only did virtually all the boys read the 'Gem' and 'Magnet', but that they were still taking them fairly seriously when they were fifteen or even sixteen. These boys were the sons of shopkeepers, office employees and small business and professional men. . . .*

> *The working class only enter into the 'Gem' and 'Magnet' as comics or semi-villains (race-course touts etc). As for class friction, trade unionism, strikes, slumps, unemployment . . . not a mention . . . There is no facing of facts about working-class life, or, indeed, about working life of any description . . . Nearly all the time the boy who reads these papers — in nine cases out of ten a boy who is going to spend his life working in a shop, or in some subordinate job in an office — is led to identify with people in positions of command . . . The Lord Peter Wimsey figure, the seeming idiot who wears a monocle but is always to the fore in moments of danger, turns up over and over again.*
>
> George Orwell, 'Boys' Weeklies'

It is in Chapter 18 of *Young Phillip Maddison* that we are told that Phillip has "given up taking 'The Scout', 'The Gem Library' and 'The Magnet' ". The novel also contains references to some of his other reading; 'Boy's Own Paper' and 'Boy's Life'. Orwell's argument is that part of the implicit function of such magazines was to keep things the way they were; to reinforce ideas about social worth and social class by, among other things, consistently attributing qualities of courage, gentlemanliness, valour, decency and cleverness to the members of a ruling or upper class. At the same time, although such qualities were denied to those not lucky enough to belong to such a class, they could indulge their fantasies of belonging, in spirit, to that class. I don't want to dwell too long now on Orwell's argument, although I would commend the essay as a marvellous piece of analysis. My point is that I think Orwell's explanation of the workings of that kind of fiction on boys' imagination would seem to account for much of Phillip's view of the world. It is also the case that, as a lowly office worker and son of a poor member of the middle class, the fantasies he finds in 'Gem' and 'Magnet' (and perhaps in 'The Scout', too) could be said to have a special appeal. At very least, they explain the naivity of his vision of Park Lane, and of the background of the officer class. They acount, in part, for his instant self-elevation to that '2nd Lt., PST Maddison . . . with a private income'. The temporary commission acts to fulfil the fantastic promise held out by the magazine fiction. It may be just coincidence that he does indeed buy himself a monocle and acts out the part of the 'masher', the 'K-nut with a K': the role of the upper-class, devil-may-care young blood.

Looking a little ahead in the series, we find an almost exact parallel. Bill Kidd, another young man from a modest home; another 'temporary gentleman' who acts the role of the dashing officer, the inspiring leader of men, the fearless blood-and-thunder merchant:

> *P* — *"You know, Bill, I think you're the perfect hero of the old 'Gem', 'Magnet' and 'Union Jack' Libraries!' "*
> *BK* — *"Did you read them, my mad son?"*
> *P* — *"I did indeed! Those ha'penny weeklies will win the war!"*
> *BK* — *"You've said it, old boy!"* A Test to Destruction, p. 173

But unlike Bill Kidd, Phillip has, besides and in parallel to these Boys' Own fantasies, that darker vision; truth seen as a kind of dry rot; a sense of being only a mongrel; the 'dark shadow' at the edge of his being. It is those things that help save him from the total immersion in the fantasy.

But the salvation has to be fought and paid for. When we read on in *A Fox Under My Cloak*, we come to the memorable and in some ways terrible Heathmarket scenes, where fantasy comes into direct conflict with reality. Here, in Chapter 10, is a foretaste of that conflict. An Officer of the Green Howards, shortly to go to France for the first time, asks Phillip's advice:

He asked Phillip if he could suggest anything, outside the prescribed officer's kit, essential for the trenches. "Bearing in mind, of course, that one's kit must not exceed thirty-five pounds in weight. . ."
The others gathered around the veteran.
"Well, yes, now you come to mention it. Take plenty of newspapers."
"Newspapers? I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."
"Well, you know," replied Phillip, "they are very scarce at the front. For going to the latrine."
"But why not take the real thing?"
Phillip was puzzled. "I don't know what you mean by the real thing."
"Well, a box of Bronco."
A Fox Under My Cloak, p. 154

An embarrassing moment, altogether.

The embarrassment is to return, multiplied many times over, when Phillip joins the 'Cantuvellaunians' in Heathmarket. Before looking at that episode, it might be worth asking now what we can say about Williamson's own attitude to regimental traditions, the idea of the 'brotherhood' of officers. It seems to me, later in the series and in other writings, that he came to take these things very seriously; that he found in the real comradeship of fellow officers perhaps one of the truest homes he was ever to find. Most of his later life could be explained as an attempt to regain that sort of fellowship. It may even help account for his political leanings. Given this affinity for and understanding of the meaning of comradeship, the depiction of the Heathmarket scenes is very cleverly handled, because it does seem there that the officer class is, for the most part, a hostile, snobbish, even violently repressive culture. Certainly, Phillip plays the bloody fool. It isn't just the rushing about on a noisy motor-bike, the setting fire to the Colonel's newspaper. Worse than that kind of thing is his callow and insensitive assertion of experience. 'It isn't done like that out there'; 'That's not the way we do it in France'; 'That wouldn't work in the trenches'.

That sort of thing would be enough to annoy anybody, and in that sense, Phillip deserves what he gets. But we have to look at his, and our, first encounter with this new Regiment.

(Its) company commanders and subalterns . . . were drawn from members of the established provincial middle-class — lawyers, doctors, schoolmasters, yeomen farmers . . . who, to improve their own family standing, had sent their sons to public school and university . . . All (the Colonel's) junior officers had been approved by him for what he called their autochthonous associations with the county; and it was therefore with some slight dismay that this regional patriot heard from his adjutant that half a dozen young temporary officers from 'band-box' establishments of the New Armies were to come to the battalion. . .
A Fox Under My Cloak, pp. 163–4

Enter Phillip on an unsilenced motor-cycle. And these are the Colonel's questions:

"What is your name, did you say?"
"Maddison, sir."
"Where were you at school, Mr Maddison?"
"Heath's, sir."

The Colonel listened to his voice, trying to place the young officer . . . Was there a hint of Kent, or was it Cockney, in some of his vowels? After a few moments he said:

"Where do you come from?"
"Wakenham, sir.,,
The Colonel seemed to be considering this reply . . . he could not be sure about the youth before him.
"Where is that?" A Fox Under My Cloak, p. 165

Odd questions, one might think, but placed perfectly by Williamson in the ethic of this regiment. Phillip does his limited best to fit in, even if it means a change of voice:

"An awful good idea," said Major Howes. "Awful good," he repeated. Phillip had heard the Colonel use this expression: it seemed to be rather the fashion among those officers who were "vars'ty m'n". Another expression was "awful bore", the opposite of anything "awful good" A Fox Under My Cloak, p. 170

But he still remains a 'blasted little Cockney' with 'abominable manners'. It all culminates, of course, in the buckets of water in his bed, and then with the mock court-martial. After that fearful experience, the kind-hearted Dimmock does his best to try and explain to Phillip where he has been going wrong:

"Well, I don't want to preach, but when I heard that you had not been to school, I mean the kind of school most of us go to, with fags and prefects and particular codes — At Harrow if you turn up your trouser-ends in Lower School you get beaten, elsewhere if you don't turn them up you do, sort of thing — what was I saying . . . Well the best thing is always, when one is new in a job or school or 'varsity regiment, to lie low, conform like blazes . . . don't you know."
"I see," (said Phillip). A Fox Under My Cloak, pp. 227–9

Dimmock's advice is presented as kind enough, but it breaks down, as he utters it, into almost incoherence and platitude. He is right, but his explanation, which would be that of the whole officer core of this regiment at least, is based on a great many assumptions about class, behaviour and 'good form'. Later, when we see the Cantuvellaunians in battle for the first time, they are desperate for Phillip's help. Even that cannot save them; they are cut down almost to a man in the first few minutes of action. And yet that military failure isn't shown to be related to a particular sort of class blindness, just to bad luck. We also have to say that, at the end of his period with the regiment, Phillip has come almost to be accepted, even if it is as a figure of mild fun. Some small progress is made. But there is nothing in this experience that really affects him. He still plays the fool, acts the part of the 'masher'. Heathmarket could be said, most of all, to confirm the 'Boys' Own', 'Hilly Fields' view of class and society; still leaves Phillip struggling with his own image of himself, and still convinced, inside the play of buffoonery, of his own deep sense of unworth.

Given that I believe *The Golden Virgin* to be the climactic novel of the *Chronicle* in many ways, it isn't surprising that I also feel it's the one in which ideas about class come closest to being resolved, or at least most fully expressed. I have mentioned before my belief that Williamson places great emphasis and value on those characters who seem able to transcend their own class; again, not just in the sense of 'getting on', but transcending them by finding a wider perspective than that initially provided by their class. It is in this failure of perspective that the Cantuvellaunians are most guilty, and it can be fairly summed up, I think, by Dimmock's well-meaning, but practically meaningless list of commonplaces.

One importance of Dora in the early part of the *Chronicle* has been that she has been able to demonstrate the possibility of escaping from the inherited values of a particular class. The mechanism of that escape was Girton College and a reading of the Classics, but concern for the poor, for women's Suffrage, are the outcomes, as well as a willingness to question conventional ideas at all times. It is important that she is seen as one who supports and encourages Phillip's early attempts to be, if not yet a writer, then at least another challenger of accepted wisdom.

We first encounter 'Spectre' West in *A Fox Under My Cloak*. The contrast between him and the Regular officers at Heathmarket could not be greater. He is shown as 'revolutionary' in his thought, as far as that is possible in the military structure of the time. He challenges command decisions and tactical ideas; he rails against Staff stupidity. 'He was not like any regular officer he had met before' (p. 276). He even reads Nietzsche: something it would be hard to imagine Dimmock doing. And yet West is a curious mixture. We learn later that his parents keep a public house in Lime Street. From those relatively humble beginnings, he went on to Oxford, thence, via schoolteaching, to the army.

He describes the 'real war, the *only* war' as being 'between the infantry and the staff' (p. 284), and yet this heretical view sits alongside another, apparently incompatible with it; a view that is unashamed acceptance of and praise for the regimental and class status quo. He tells Phillip about the Duke and Duchess of Gaultshire:

> *Before they left for France . . . every officer was presented with a pair of field-glasses. The Duchess, too, made it her job to go round and visit the wives of the rank and file, in their cottages, to see that they lacked nothing.*
>
> *"And that!" said Captain West . . . "is Good Eggery. That is the minimum that one expects from an Englishman with responsibilities going with high station."*
>
> A Fox Under My Cloak, pp. 288–9

This is hardly revolutionary stuff, but, in combination with his class background, his criticism of the plans of the Staff, and his impressive soldierly qualities, West adds up to a very unusual character indeed. Perhaps the only true 'hero' in the whole of the *Chronicle*, and one whose values could be said to inform Phillip's own for the rest of his fictional life. In *The Golen Virgin*, he becomes more and more of a dominant influence, until Phillip resolves to emulate him entirely: "What 'Spectre' West could do, he could do." And so he does, not just in terms of his military service, but in developing a social, even a political, view that is at once staunchly in favour of traditional values, of hierarchies, of 'noblesse oblige', and is at the very same time capable of challenging, forcibly, commonplace perceptions and values. He becomes, if you like, the Willie Maddison of *The Pathway*.

Dora, Westy, and third but most important, Lily Cornford. We know about her place on the Hill: she was there as a ragged urchin, begging a turn of Phillip's cricket bat.

As he may be said to have had to learn a new language in the Officers' mess at Heathmarket — 'Awful good' and 'Awful bore' — so he finds, when speaking with the grown-up Lily, that language and the class ideas it embodies, can cause problems in the other direction: she asks him if the Lake woods are where the bluebells used to come from:

> *"Where they* used *to come from, before all the lou— I mean the fellows on bicycles pulled them up. No, that's not quite fair. They lived in, well—" he checked himself from saying* poor streets— *"away from the countryside, and wanted to take some of the beauty home, I suppose. . ."*
>
> The Golden Virgin, p. 191

We kn of course, that this is the central idea of the essay in *The Lone Swallows*, 'The Passing of the Blossom'. Those who spoil the woods are forgiven, because Williamson understands their need for this beauty. If we compare that essay, and the passage from *The Golden Virgin* above, with those that express the attitudes of the officers at Heathmarket, we can see again that Phillip has already gained a level of perception that transcends the norm for his own class. I think it is significant that the word 'louts' almost springs to his lips to describe the people from poor homes, but it is checked, as is 'poor streets'. We need only to think back to *How Dear is Life* and the Leytonstone Louts to see how far Phillip has now come.

It is more than just a verbal correction. In his first encounters with Lily, Phillip naturally enough shares the common view of her; that, because she is a woman from those poor streets, she must necessarily be, at best, amoral. That her personal history — the aborted child, the affair with Keechey, must condemn her to being 'bad', unworthy of his serious thought. In the story of their love affair, all this is broken down, as, indeed, is Phillip's general idea about the ways the 'working classes' might live. In Chapter 28 of the novel, he visits Lily's house, and meets her mother. He is surprised by the quiet orderliness of the household, by Mrs Cornford's instinctively good manners:

> *Mrs Cornford came from the scullery to welcome him. She was impersonal, as before; contained within herself, keeping her amiable reserve. He thought how very nice she was; much calmer than Mrs Neville at her creamy best. Lily's mother kept back her personal feelings, she was a natural lady, he thought.* The Golden Virgin, p. 420

The importance of 'reserve', or impersonality, is often stressed in the *Chronicle* and other writings. It is consistently seen as the sign of a gentleman; its opposite, a too-free desire to expose emotions, is a sign of 'bad form'. 'Speech is given us to conceal our thoughts', we are told, not altogether jokingly. This class-value was to stay with Williamson throughout his writing career, and sits oddly beside the parallel need to be honest, to say what one means, to put the truth into written words.

Although I would say that Phillip's love for Lily, and hers for him, is shown to be the single greatest factor in his development, we have to ask whether it would have been possible at the time of, say *How Dear is Life*. I think the answer is that it wouldn't. Certainly, the more he grows to know her and her family, the more his ideas about class break down, but I think the process could be said to have started before that. In the comradeship of West and some other officers, in the fellow-feeling for his men in France, from the stage of beginning to 'think for himself' at the end of *A Fox Under My Cloak*, a state of mind is reached which makes possible the acceptance of Lily and an openness to what she has to offer despite the social gulf between them. The love follows, but confirms and deepens the new understanding. Significantly, *The Golden Virgin* also marks the end of the long fixation with Helena Rolls. I find the passages describing that transition very muddled, but the outcome is there all the same. If my reading is correct, that a large part of Phillip's attraction to Helena stems from the class values or status she represents, then his ability now to 'forget' her might also be the product of his new attitudes to class. Feeling that he has somehow arrived at his own proper station, he is less dependent on what she might be able to confer: a recognition of his true worth as a member of the right class. That has come from other, and far more significant, experiences.

At the heart of *The Golden Virgin* is a curious passage, the meaning of which seems to me to be difficult to pin down clearly. In Chapter 21, 'The Home Front', Williamson describes Phillip's visit to 'Georgiana, Lady Dudley'. This worthy lady has volunteered for the task of allocating country houses to convalescent officers, places where they

might go and recover before being sent back to the front. The 'splendid ones' of 1914 and 1915 have long since gone, and now she must deal with the new 'temporary officers' of Kitchener's Army:

> *What did Georgiana Lady Dudley think of them? They were the half-and-half people, so very polite, poor dears, so formal, trying hard to appear above themselves; but all was forgiven them for what they were. Had they not come out of their unknown places and answered the call, from their obscure streets and small houses, to replace, with their names in the casualty lists, those of the splendid young men who had fallen in 1914 and 1915? This lady with the face of youth and the bright friendliness of age . . . arranged the immediate future of captains of eighteen and subalterns of forty-five, in slacks and trews, kilts and breeches, . . . dear boys all — a tick against a long list, a name written down with a gold pencil set with diamonds, and one more was sped to Yorkshire or Cumberland, to Dorset or Flint, to a house by the sea or a lodge on the side of a strath, to have the time of his life.*
>
> *From the watershed of the Somme, from charred wood and desolated valley, amidst the fragmentation of steel and flesh and the dust of detonated village hanging in the sun, was coming the thought that would not only bring about the end of the old order, but the end of ideas that had endured a thousand years.* The Golden Virgin, p. 340

Who, in the passage, has this vision? It certainly can't be Lady Dudley, because it is made plain that she sees these new officers as no more than substitutes, brave as they may be, for the 'real' heroes of the old order. Nor is it really possible to conceive that her experience of dealing with these new 'half-and-half' people has affected a change in her view of society. Indeed, the episode ends with a strong if implicit criticism of her. She doesn't even notice that Phillip has sprung up to open the door for her:

> *Accustomed to footmen all her life, she no more thought about doors than Phillip had about those in his ward until he had learned to walk again, on crutches.*
>
> The Golden Virgin, p. 341

Like so many other characters in *The Golden Virgin*, she is indeed shown as 'blind' to reality, totally secure in her own class, acting from kindness, not from any wish to challenge the accepted order. Her kindness is a form of duty.

So it is the authorial voice that sees this 'watershed' between one age and the next. The Battle of the Somme, certainly, is often conceived in such terms, as the true beginning of the end of the old order, the true beginning of the 20th century. But is this apocalypse really going to come about because temporary officers are sent to the homes of the rich? To have, just once, 'the times of their lives'? It seems very unlikely. The opposite might be more likely, that the time spent there will serve to reinforce the status quo for all parties. Does this imagined break down of the old value system give us a small hint of Williamson's political views? That the ideas which had endured 'a thousand years', ideas about class divisions and hierarchies, should be dispensed with, that what had been learned in the war laid the ground for an entirely new way of thought? I would find it hard to answer that question. But what does seem significant to me is that this grandiose statement about the break-up of 'the old order', and other versions of the same idea in other of Williamson's novels, is far less convincing than the detailed, personal, careful account of Phillip's own growth away from the strictures of class and background. That what we have pre-eminently in the *Chronicle* is the account of the growth of a writer's mind, and that an important part of that growth is shown to be a coming to terms with, and an understanding of, the ways in which class-based perceptions can both inform and

restrict the depiction of reality. I am not saying that Williamson was always clear, nor always even right, about this issue; but I would argue that to read his major work without an awareness of just how important this matter was for him, is, potentially, to miss a great deal.

I have chosen to stop at *The Golden Virgin* partly through a constraint of time, but also because I think that that novel offers a natural breaking off point in the *Chronicle*. It takes Phillip to a high-point of understanding of the whole matter of class, and would seem to leave him with a clear vision that will sustain him in the future, inform his work as a writer. We need only glance ahead to *A Test to Destruction* to realise that isn't to be the case, and that in that novel and in much of the *Chronicle* to come, the old problems of class and its effects on human relationships will remain. This, necessarily, has been no more than a first brief skirmish with the issue. My hope is that other readers will share my view that an acknowledgement of the importance of class in Henry Williamson's writings is likely to add even further to the pleasure of reading them.
