
Letters

I would like to record my appreciation of the Henry Williamson Society's Journal. As a newcomer to the Society, and indeed to the literature of Henry Williamson, I found my first issue, No. 20, September 1989, most enlightening, especially the excellent article by Dr J.W. Blench on the four novels comprising The Flax of Dream.

It came as quite a shock though to learn of HW's early admiration of Hitler, which I read about for the first time in John Homan's bibliographical notes on The Flax of Dream novels (p. 44, remarks on the Faber & Faber Ltd collected edition).

Even allowing for his traumatic experiences in the Great War, and the encounter with the German infantryman during the Christmas 'truce', it is hard to accept how a man of his sensitive nature and deep love and insight into the minds of animals and human beings could ever have been drawn towards Hitler or Fascist ideology.

One can understand, however, that like many soldiers of World War I, he felt that another holocaust must be avoided at all costs, including an attempt to understand the German people, the loss of their national pride, and the efforts of Adolf Hitler to restore order from the chaos of the post-war era.

However, it came as a relief to read Dr Blench's comments on HW's remarks in the Foreword of the 1936 edition of The Flax of Dream, regarding Williamson's idea of Hitler,

and that he never praised Hitler for his evil qualities, but realized the 'Lightbringer' had become the 'Prince of Darkness' (p. 21, HW Journal, No. 20).

So I shall put aside the 'Hitler episode' and go on to explore the works of this truly great writer of, to quote Dr Blench, 'unusual power and appeal'.

I look forward to further copies of The Journal to supplement that exciting prospect.

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As the person primarily responsible for John Terraine's invitation to speak at the Society's 1988 Devon Meeting, may I be allowed to comment briefly on Ronald Walker's letter in Journal No. 20.

Haig's role in, and conduct of, the War: Haig has had a 'bad press' for decades. Was this just, and is there nothing to be said for him? Is thought there might be. I believe John Terraine has said it, both to the Society in Devon and at length in his books. Re ending the war earlier, surely Sassoon was referred to the mental hospital as a result of the pleadings of his friends to avoid a court-martial for sedition. At a different level, the Pope of the day, Benedict XVth, made peace proposals in 1917 (from memory, in April): the outcome we know. The problem of how to persuade the German Army to return

to Germany (remembering that all the land fighting in the West took place in France and Belgium, and no soldier from that Front set foot on German soil until after the Armistice — it was Paris, not Berlin, that was shelled) remained unsolved until November 1918. I do not share Ronald's faith in the trustworthiness of Lloyd George's 'War Memoirs'. The War Cabinet, let us remember, was envisaging the war continuing into 1919 and even 1920, when Haig believed it could not be allowed to do so, and ended it in 1918.

War as an instrument of policy: Ronald is opposed to it. It is difficult to avoid the bathos implicit in saying "So am I. So are all sane and right-thinking people of both sexes and all nationalities." Nevertheless, wars happen. If — or rather, when — they do, it is better in the long run to have good commanders rather than incompetents — pace Stalin's purge of the Soviet staff and field command in 1937/38, and the consequences for the Red Army and the population at large, in 1941/42. As to some other points in Ronald's letter, I feel they are met and answered in the Terraine talk.

The propriety of discussing and/or considering these matters in a spirit of detachment in Society circles: (I take it as axiomatic that it is possible to discuss things in such a manner without feeling any the less strongly about them.) I can think of few subjects of a general nature (as opposed to the personal, where I can think of lots) which have 'no place in the Henry Williamson Society'. Therefore, in principle I do not agree with Ronald's final pronouncement. On the contrary, it is the airing only of orthodox and generally held views on matters of public concern, and the denial of contrary views (and especially the denial that any such contrary view can exist) that should have 'no place in the Henry Williamson Society'.

I should add that I have discussed Ronald's letter with 'Autolykus', who was about to reply separately, but has generously agreed that I should speak for both of us.

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I recently discovered that Mary Gade the daughter of Felix Gade, the agent for Lundy Island who died in 1977, actually remembers meeting Henry twice on Lundy. The last time was when she was around 14 years old. To her eyes he appeared an 'eccentric looking man', to use her own words.

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What a lovely weekend in Blackheath back in the Spring. I enjoyed it very much, and thought Bob achieved a splendid balance between organised activity and time to chat to old friends. I enjoyed Will's presentation too, and found it very moving. I thought he had made an excellent interpretation of the two books — it isn't often that one enjoys other people's interpretation of one's favourite writers.

I am frankly rather disturbed by the productions of John Theobald, which were being handed round at the weekend: the sightless bust of Henry, languishing like so much furniture under his arm, the desk-top model of the writing-hut, the unnatural three-in-one-poster. This sort of thing is fine as advertising hardware for lesser things, such as holidays in Margate perhaps, but not for a writer of Henry's stature. If we are to spend our time buying knick-knacks from each other then this is a poor result of Henry's vision.

However, the thing that appalled me most was the suggestion (I think I overheard correctly) that a memorial block of some sort should be put on Baggy Point. Baggy is a place of sun and grass and falcons, a place for lying on the ground, feeling the wind on your skin and trying to see things clearly. Henry's spirit is all around there — James Farrar didn't need a monument.

I may be the only person who thinks this way about publicity hardware, but I feel it very strongly. If this is the way the Society is going, then I shall not be going with it.

It would be interesting to hear the views of other members.

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