

Henry Williamson's Contributions to Mosley's *Action*

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Henry Williamson's association with Sir Oswald Mosley, the controversial leader of the British Union of Fascists, is a well-known, even notorious, feature of the novelist's life. Whenever Williamson's achievement as a writer is assessed, his links with Mosley are often taken as pointers to his flaws as a writer. Certainly his Fascist connection has often been held to account for the under-appreciation of his works: "Why, then did a man whose books portray our countryside with such rare tenderness go to his death unhonoured? He offended. Henry Williamson was a supporter of Sir Oswald Mosley and an admirer of Hitler."¹ Williamson stood by his belief in Mosley throughout his life: "He was a great man and I was honoured to be the friend of such a true patriot. But he was before his time."²

There can be no doubt that Williamson was of considerable use to Mosley and the Fascist movement in the late 1930s. British Fascism found its main support among the upper-working and lower-middle classes, with a sprinkling of landed gentry among the leadership, but it was not strongly supported by British-born intellectuals and writers, who were more frequently sympathetic to the political Left. Writers of conservative views, such as T.S. Eliot, were not close to Mosley, although they sometimes treated his politics with respect. It is true that Ezra Pound, the formidable and idiosyncratic modernist, contributed to *Action*, but the American-born, European-based Pound did not possess the glowing credentials of Williamson. To have Williamson in the BUF was to display not only a writer of some considerable standing, but one who could now speak as a practical farmer as well as an authority on the English rural tradition, and, above all, as one who had fought for Britain in the Great War.

Equally, Mosley and his movement were of great use to Williamson. With a highly-developed sense of self-pity, Williamson delighted in viewing himself as a misunderstood, idealistic outcast, who, being gifted with deeper insight into spiritual and social realities than the misgoverned, miseducated and mentally unhealthy mass, was ostracised for his mental superiority. His early fictional heroes — Willie, Manfred, John Bullock — are overwhelmed by 'ununderstanding'. His political heroes, with whom he strongly identified himself — Hitler, T.E. Lawrence, Mosley — were men who, if only lesser mortals would allow them to do so, could turn the tide and issue in a new era of light and sanity. He thought that what he was trying to do on his Norfolk farm, Mosley was trying to do for England.

It must have been gratifying for Williamson to be billed by *Action* as one who "almost alone among contemporary writers keeps alive the literary tradition of the English countryside", and to have *The Patriot's Progress* serialized in *Action* as 'Everyman's War', described as "the most powerful book on the war ever published". Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that Williamson turned himself into a hack propagandist for Mosley. The bald statement that he was a contributor to *Action* gives no idea of the difference between the tone and content of Williamson's pieces and the rest of the paper. A closer examination is called for.

Action was begun as the organ of Mosley's New Party in 1931, when it ran from May to December. It was revived in 1936 as the voice of the British Union of Fascists, and continued until suppressed in 1940. It appeared as a weekly during most of that period. Contributions credited to Williamson are 21 in all. They are:

- No. 116 7 May 1938 "Good Neighbours"
- No. 130 13 Aug 1938 "August 1914"
- No. 143 12 Nov 1938 "November 11"
- No. 149 31 Dec 1938 "Christmas of 1914"
- No. 153 28 Jan 1939 "Am I A Crank Because I Put My Country First?"
- No. 156 18 Feb 1939 "Youth On The Threshold"
- No. 160 18 Mar 1939 "Advice from Henry Williamson"
- No. 177 15 Jul 1939 "My Life's Purpose"
- Nos. 171 to 184, 3 Jun to 2 Sep 1939 (except for No. 177), 13 episodes of *Everyman's War*.

The first point to make is that this is a rather short list — much shorter than those of Williamson's contributions to the *Eastern Daily Press* or to *The Adelphi*. It grows shorter still if we subtract the thirteen episodes of *Everyman's War*, simply reprinted from *A Patriot's Progress*. Similarly, "Good Neighbours" was reprinted from *Goodbye, West Country*. Of the remaining seven, "Youth on the threshold" and "Advice" are very short, being letters to Williamson with his replies and comments. "My Life's Purpose" is more substantial, but was evidently written in the early 1930s when Williamson was still in the West Country. We are left, then, with only four articles specially written for Mosley's *Action*, and three of those — "August, 1914", "November 11th" and "Christmas of 1914" — include material used by Williamson in many other places. While every article has a Mosleyite application, the pieces essentially reveal Williamson's two preoccupations: one, the need to persuade Britain to avoid a repetition of the First World War; two, the need to revitalize Britain through employing healthier (and therefore more truly efficient) farming methods.

It is true that these articles were more appropriate to *Action* than any other journal. For while there were many people then who would have declared themselves "against war", most would have defined their positions differently from Williamson and Mosley. Leaving aside Pacifists, there were many who were against war with Communism and not necessarily against war with Facism. Comparatively few thought like Williamson that Britons and Germans were brothers and that war between them would therefore be fratricidal. Of the small pro-German group, even fewer were equally passionate about reviving British agriculture. To Williamson, Mosley's party must have appeared as the only one strongly concerned to promote both his objectives.

Williamson joined the BUF in 1937,³ but his first piece written specially for *Action* did not appear until 13th August 1938. One has the impression that Williamson, while anxious to assist Mosley and the cause, did not have much time to supply original writing. Indeed, this article begins: "I have come in from the harvest field to write this." But it contains the essentials of Williamson's politics. It commences with an account of the steady purposefulness of the day's harvesting, a renovated pre-first-war reaper-binder following a modern light tractor. The date of the binder's last patent, May 1914, reminds Williamson of his last pre-war summer, and then, inevitably, of August 1914, and the ensuing sudden, savage destruction, with its impact on the imagination of the young and innocent. This prompts him to think of the prospects for the young of 1938: "To me it is plain that the way many people are thinking in England today is the way to prepare another war." This thinking, says Williamson, is based on mistaken views of the Nazis and Germany. Germany is really a land of "spiritual freedom" with a "united will to peace", whereas "intellectuals" in Britain are physically "feeble", and "mediocre and commonplace in their ideas, in that they think alike about cruelty, persecution, lack of liberty, freedom, etc."

But "we love our cornfields. To work in them is good for men. . . . By 'we' is meant

the old soldiers of Britain, Germany, France, and all others of the generation sacrificed for the new idea. Britain for the British, Germany for the Germans, France for the French, Italy for the Italians — that is the new idea." In pursuit of the New Idea, Britain should "be friends with Germany of the New Idea", since the "Leader of Germany, inspired common soldier of the great War, is a master of peace."

Subsequent contributions did not add anything substantial to this simple, if not simple-minded, position. The recollections in "November 11th" and "Christmas of 1914" served to document the horror of war, and the great similarity of Englishman and German. National reconstruction should start in the countryside ("Am I A Crank?"); agricultural work was valuable for itself and for its production of healthier minds ("Youth on the Threshold"); the pro-German BUF would be the best custodian of Britain's future ("Advice").

These opinions fitted comfortably enough with Mosley's. Is there any evidence, though, of Williamson embracing other parts of Mosley's programme? Does he show any interest in Mussolini-style syndicalism, or in reform of the banks, or in the opposition of small shopkeepers to "chain stores"? Specifically, does he share Mosley's anti-semitism, which increasingly disfigured *Action* as Mosley found his popular appeal diminishing?

Williamson's views, perhaps unfairly, might be characterized as simplicity masquerading as incisiveness: a fair day's pay for a fair day's work; the individual should pay his way, but paying one's way should not be made superhumanly difficult by middlemen and financiers. This generally is Williamson's position, uncontroversial — and unoriginal.

But there is a more disturbing tendency to search for a scapegoat. Everything would be fine if it were not for "international finance" — part of the "old idea". "International finance" is not patriotic. It, like intellectualism, comes from "rootlessness", and rootless intellectuals write anti-German books.⁴ True, none of this is explicitly racist, but there are anti-semitic undertones, for by "international financiers", "intellectuals" and "rootless cosmopolitans" the readers of *Action* understood "Jews". When Williamson wrote of "Left Wing aliens",⁵ he left it open to interpretation that he too meant "Jews".

Admittedly, this was an isolated example, but it might have been enough to lead readers to assume Williamson's sympathy with the following declaration:

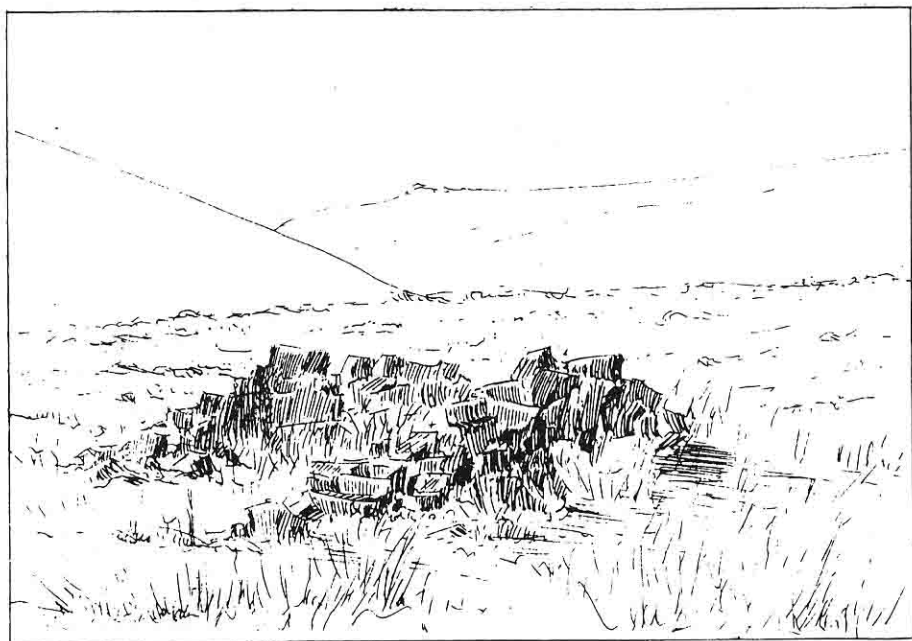
*There are only three methods of dealing with the Jewish menace in Britain — the first by liquidation, a method which has had to be adopted by exasperated Gentiles from time to time; the second method is economic strangulation, and the third method, that put forward by Mosley, deportation by international agreement to a part of the earth's surface where they can utilise their undoubted talents in building a home and a national culture of their own.*⁶

Each of the later issues of *Action* carried similar statements. It is unlikely that Williamson was ignorant of these, because he had "a quantity of Mosley's magazines" which he had thought it wise to conceal.⁷ We must assume that Williamson was so gripped by his memories of the First World War that he believed that all considerations should give way before the main one, that of preventing another war with Germany.

With the knowledge that we now have of the horrors generated by anti-semitism we must be uncomfortable at seeing Williamson lending his talents to *Action*, but it is fair to recognize that in the late 1930s there were few alternatives to that journal as an outlet for Williamson's special point of view. His contributions command respect for their anti-war, pro-farming idealism, and for their tone of urgency and conviction. Unfortunately, because of the material that appears beside them, Williamson's writings for *Action* will probably be remembered as a symptom of his political naivety rather than as a sign of his concern for mankind.

NOTES

1. Farson, D., *Henry*, 1982, pp. 5-6.
 2. Lacey, R., "The Spirit of Henry's Piece of Mother Earth", *Radio Times*, 17 August, 1972, p. 9.
 3. Farson, p. 156.
 4. H.W., "August 1914", *Action*, August 13, 1938, p. 5.
 5. Loc. cit.
 6. Extract from reported speech by G.F. Thomson, *Action*, Jan. 28, 1939, p. 17.
 7. Farson, p. 113.
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A tumbled pile of old stones. Ink. 5½" x 8".

John Christian

(see article 'Searching for a Picture' p. 40)