

Secretary's Notes

The Margaret Clarke Memorial

As past Chairman, Tim Morley wrote in his appreciation of Margaret Clarke in 1988, that all of us who knew her will long remember her for many things, not least her devoted support of the Society and the cause of Henry Williamson.

To perpetuate her link with the Society Margaret's husband, Laurie, wrote to the committee earlier this year expressing his wish to make a Gift to the Society for the setting-up of a Memorial.

After mutual discussion it was agreed that the generous monetary Gift should be suitably invested so as to provide an annual income to fund a range of awards to be made under the title of The Margaret Clarke Memorial.

Initially there will be an annual award chosen by a judging panel, for the best article submitted by a member and published in the Society Journal of that year. The timing for presentation and amount of the award are to be decided, as is the composition of the judging panel.

It was also agreed that at least two other categories for awards would be considered, though not necessarily on an annual basis. Firstly, to the member adjudged to have contributed most to the furthering of the stated aims of the Society, either within a specific year or retrospectively. Secondly, an award for the best item of individual research into the life and work of Henry Williamson with a similar timing for any such award.

More details will be supplied later, but in the meantime I am sure that you join with the committee in tendering sincere thanks to Laurie Clarke for his inspiration and generosity in setting up this Memorial.

The Barn Owl Trust

In 1966 Henry Williamson wrote of ". . . the white or barn owl, the most beautiful of birds to me . . ." With his famous totem, this was just one of innumerable references and many stories about owls, especially the Barn Owl, that appear throughout his books. He was also only too aware of the threat to the survival of this particular owl in our countryside. Indeed today it has become a rarity in many parts of the country. Thus when we heard of The Barn Owl Trust, based and working mostly in Devon, representatives (as you will have read elsewhere in the Journal) were invited to come and talk to members at the Spring Meeting in Devon.

To those who were not at the Meeting, you may like to know that The Trust, which is a registered Charity, also has national aims to aid the survival and increase the numbers of owls throughout the country, especially through a planned re-introduction programme. The Trust works mainly through volunteers — there is no formal membership or fee, and provides *free* information nationally including a range of leaflets (also free) to groups and individuals. If you would like to know more about the Trust, write to: The Barn Owl Trust, Waterleat, Ashburton, Devon TQ13 7HU. Tel. (0364) 53026.

Claimed by the Infamous 'Black Chair'

It was only right and proper, and a matter of time before a competitor in the BBC's long-running quiz series, 'Mastermind', elected to choose Henry Williamson as a specialised subject. For the benefit of those who hate quizzes, or inadvertently missed the programme of 15th April, the contestant was a Mr Gavin Hyde, a lock-keeper from Tring, who received nineteen questions in his allotted two minutes, scoring ten points. I refuse to admit my

score out of nineteen, but you may yet have a chance as I think our Editor may be running the questions in lieu of the 'Mystery Quotation', in this issue. If this is so I will only add that no one will go near their bookshelves, will they?

Another TV Appearance

I am indebted to John Millar for drawing my attention to an ITV programme that went out on a Sunday evening last June. This was one of the regular 'Highway' religious programmes that comes from a different town and church each week, although unfortunately I do not know *which* town in this case.

The programme was fronted by Sir Harry Secombe, and for this section he was interviewing Dan Farson.

HS (to camera): "Conservation was always important to Henry Williamson, author of *Tarka the Otter*. Dan Farson, Williamson's biographer, knew him well."

DF (to camera): "North Devon and the rivers Taw and Torridge have been immortalised by Henry Williamson in such books as *Tarka the Otter*. He came to the village of Georgeham on his Norton motorbike shortly after the First World War, an experience which altered his life altogether. Outwardly he was unscarred, inwardly he was in turmoil and he needed to recover. The peace of North Devon helped him in that recovery and he found a new strength as a naturalist and as a writer. And writing in *The Dream of Fair Women* he wrote of himself as the character William Maddison —

He slept all that Sunday and on the Monday morning he awakened with a feeling of deep and luxurious contentment, never known since the days of lying naked in the sun on Heron's Island, so long ago — nearly five years. And now he was quite old — twenty-two — and had no more illusions about Love: he was old, and henceforward would be serene, for he had found salvation in Nature. The mood of contentment had remained with him during the days and weeks that followed, while he revised his manuscript, and walked many miles every day, arising with the sun and sleeping dreamlessly. He bought the spaniel pups from Brownie, and carried home two kittens with them; and finding a seagull with a broken wing, on the shore, he took that, too. Very soon he had an otter cub, and various fledgling birds, a buzzard hawk, carrion crow, jay, magpie and jackdaw.

Henry Williamson was a fine man and a great writer whose words have enhanced this glorious part of England."

Assessing the Non-fiction Books

It was good to see a lengthy — eight page — assessment of Henry's non-fiction, by Helen Macleod in the January 1990 issue of *Book and Magazine Collector* — with a promise to cover the novels in a future article.

As a general introduction to the non-fiction, Helen Macleod has produced a very useful guide with some brief synopses and a thumbnail biography in her article which concluded with a useful guide to current prices for the first editions which she headed as a 'Complete Henry Williamson Bibliography of Non-fiction Books.'

Having allowed that it is difficult sometimes to divide Williamson's work into 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' she really should not have omitted from the guide *The Linhay on the Downs* (Cape, 1934) nor from her text, although strangely the title-page of the book is illustrated. Similarly she omits the Woburn Books limited edition consisting of the essay of the same name and 'The Firing Gatherer'.

I was not very happy with her opening sentence which suggested that Williamson is best remembered "... for his two classic children's books, 'Tarka the Otter' and

'Salar the Salmon' . . ." I have never considered either as having been written for children; indeed the first *schools* edition of *Tarka* was not published until 1949. (The fact that *Tarka* is usually found in the Junior section of Public Libraries today does not alter my view.) There are one or two other oddities such as the caption below an illustration of the title-page and Tunnicliffe frontispiece of *The Lone Swallows* which refers to it as, "This 1933 edition of Williamson's first book. . ." However, these are minor problems and we should applaud this article, largely generous in its praise, that hopefully may have drawn new recruits to the Williamson readership.

My thanks, again, to John Millar for drawing attention to this item.

Georgeham Parish Church — Appeal Fund

As previously recorded, your committee made a donation to an appeal for funds to carry out urgent work on the parish church of St. George. In a very pleasant letter received early this year, the Rector, Rev. David Rudman, wrote:

"Thank you so much for the gift that you have sent from your society. Could you please pass on to all your members our most sincere thanks for their gift. We too appreciate your society's link with the Church and (in) particular this gift."

Your Society Needs You!

Some years ago now I drew attention via these Notes to the possible dangers of having no 'back-up' names that might be called upon to fulfil various committee offices should for any reason a current incumbent resign whilst in office. A few good souls did respond and have mostly been used up and served their term, or are currently in office.

When I made that first appeal our membership was much smaller; in fact it is now about DOUBLE the size. Naturally this means more work for at least some committee members, but we now have NO BACK-UP or RESERVE of members for potential committee work.

In fact, not long ago we were faced with filling TWO vital offices at short notice and this was only achieved in one instance by an existing committee member volunteering to take on another office, and by an approach to an ordinary member we thought MIGHT, and who very readily did, take on an important office at almost no notice.

With somewhere around six hundred members it really did appal me that existing committee members felt they must needs double-up their work and carry out more than one function. It is patently not fair on them, and is not desirable from the point of introducing new blood and ideas onto the committee from time to time.

I am aware that all of us have our lives and commitments outside the Society, and we have varying amounts of spare time to offer or make available, but I cannot believe that out of our large membership there is no one else with any time to spare for their Society?

Your present committee come from various age groups and really have a lot to do either in business, family commitments or other work of all sorts and intensities.

May I, we, please hope then that some more of YOU will give thought to volunteering for committee work? Your experience may suit you to a particular office, or you may wish to put your name into a central 'pool'.

If you feel you could help, please write either to me, or to your Chairman, Will Harris, NOW!