

Book Reviews

A BREATH OF COUNTRY AIR, Part One, Henry Williamson, with a Foreword by Richard Williamson and an Introduction by John Gregory. The Henry Williamson Society, 1990; pp. x, 101; standard edition £7.95; £6.95 to members; limited, finely bound edition £35; £30 to members.

John Gregory is to be congratulated for assembling this most recent collection of fugitive articles by Williamson, this time from *The Evening Standard*, 14 February – 18 December 1944. It will be followed in due course by Part Two, continuing the articles which appeared in this newspaper in 1945.

As John says in his Introduction, these pieces form a pendant to *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*. The material in a few of them was worked into *Lucifer before Sunrise*, but most will be new to the reader, and all have the extraordinary vividness and attractiveness which is the hallmark of Henry's writing. As Richard points out in his admirable Foreword, these articles were written at a dark period of Henry's life, but they are not sombre; on the contrary they have much joyous magic in them. This is partly because many of them recount delightful episodes which Henry shared with his youngest sons, Rikky and Robbie. He did indeed, as Richard says, relive something of his own childhood with them. However he was also the wise and kindly father, delighting in the children's pleasures and showing them things they would have missed. The reader will be deeply moved by the portrayal of the relationship between Henry and Richard; respect and love on both sides, exactly the sort of relationship between father and son that Henry believed was necessary for the happiness not just of individuals, but of the nation as a whole. I am not surprised that reading these articles moved Richard towards tears; I found my own eyes moistening at the piercing beauty of the end of 'The Snipe's Nest' p. 27, and I am sure that everyone reading it will feel the same.

Most of the articles deal with life on the Norfolk farm, but some have a Devon setting. It is the humanity of them which is their most striking feature, but as one would expect, the passages of natural description and the portrayal of the activities of birds and animals have Henry's characteristic clarity and insights. Apart from the family and the farm workers we meet the RAF pilot who is a welcome visitor (identified by Richard as George Mackie, happily flourishing as an artist) and the eccentric priest who fired his shot-gun at a Doodlebug. In 'The Magic of a Poor Farmer's Boy' Henry pays fine tribute to Richard Jefferies and his influence upon him, recalling the joy of his first reading of *Walks in the Wheatfields*, but seeing the continuing value and relevance of Jefferies's writings; a view which we can still share.

The book is beautifully printed and produced; to buy a copy is an absolute *must* for Williamson enthusiasts.

J.W. Blench

A SHADOWED MAN: HENRY WILLIAMSON, 1895–1977, Lois Lamplugh, with a Foreword by Richard Williamson; illustrations and cover design by Peter Rothwell. Wellspring; Springside, Swimbridge, Devon EX32 0QB, 1990; pp. vi, 190; £9.95; £7.50 to members of the Henry Williamson Society.

This important, totally absorbing and very well written book has a twofold value. First, it increases considerably our knowledge of Henry Williamson the man and secondly it provides a generally sound and sensitive introduction to Williamson's writings. These two aspects are skilfully woven together into a pleasing unity. Readers of Lois Lamplugh's

The Streamway (1948) will already know that in the earlier 1920s Williamson was a frequent visitor to her parents' cottage in Georgeham where he would read from the current 'work in progress'. In the book presently under review Miss Lamplugh much enlarges this early sketch and quotes some fascinating passages from Williamson's letters. It is obvious that Williamson received much kindness and encouragement from Aubrey and Ruth Lamplugh who lived with their daughter Lois (then a small girl) in Chertsey Cottage, opposite the church lych-gate and a little up the street towards the King's Arms from Skirr Cottage. That Williamson appreciated their kindness is shown by the dedication (quoted by Miss Lamplugh) inscribed on his presentation copy to them of the first edition of *The Dream of Fair Women*: 'Aubrey and Ruth Lamplugh with Henry Williamson's love. October 1924. Oh, the pains and miseries caused by this book and my words so patiently listened to by you.' The Lamplughs were among Williamson's most important confidants at this time, and it is interesting to learn that in fact it was Aubrey who recommended Henry to consult the Barnstaple solicitor George Lefroy, a churchwarden of Aubrey's father's church, to help him get some redress for the disagreeable stories being put about concerning him in the district. Readers will remember that Williamson presents Mr Lefroy satirically as Mr Lamprey in *The Sun in the Sands* and as Mr Wigfull in *The Innocent Moon*, where in accordance with the topography of that novel he is moved to 'Queensbridge'. Williamson could share in good fun with the Lamplughs, and sent them a very amusing postcard taking off the speech and attitudes of the sculptor Jacob Epstein, whom he had met in the Café Royal in London. It was in fact the Lamplughs who helped the Williamson at the time of the birth of Windles, described in the first edition of *The Children of Shallowford* (1939), where they appear as Valentine and Ruth. It would seem that Henry used some fictional licence when describing the problems on the journey to Braunton in the Lamplugh's Trojan car, which, Lois declares, was like all such models, extremely reliable — unlike their earlier Arrol-Johnson! Arguments would develop between Henry and Aubrey who held diverse views. This did not lead to a breach at the time, although later, we read, there was a temporary estrangement following upon Henry's gossiping about Aubrey's affairs to a third party. This was fortunately healed, but sadly there was a final breach when Aubrey cut Henry dead in the street, having been at Dunkirk in 1940, and disapproving of Henry's attitude towards Hitler. Lois believes that this rankled badly with Henry and that this explains his portrayal of George Pole-Cripps (though she does not name this character) as somewhat of a military impostor in *Lucifer before Sunrise*. Although Lois does not mention it, perhaps the same rancour is behind the satirical presentation of the Pole-Crippses in *It Was the Nightingale*. Happily, this does not seem to have affected the friendship between Lois and Henry. It is very pleasant to read that, as was his wont with younger writers, he took a kindly and encouraging interest in her literary work. His advice to her in a letter of 1942 is not only good counsel, but illuminates his own works also: '. . . if you keep a notebook or a diary and note down things which strike you, every day, you will find this INVALUABLE in the years to come, when your real work begins . . . observe and think, note down, and store up. . .'

Miss Lamplugh's presentation of Williamson's character and personal development is, I think, admirable. She sees him as in many ways a divided personality, 'a shadowed man' as her title puts it. On the one hand he had joy, optimism, kindness and understanding, and on the other depression, pessimism, and over-sensitiveness towards others. Her description of him in his early years in Georgeham, as being like the young Goethe of the *Werther* period, seems to me to be very just. He could be difficult with those closest to him, and Miss Lamplugh does not shirk this fact. Furthermore she grasps firmly the nettle of his enthusiasm for Hitler, seeing this as an admiration for an imaginary Hitler given the qualities Williamson *wanted* him to have, rather than the real sinister being that

he was. Generally speaking, I am sure that this is true, and while Williamson did indeed never deny that the *earlier* Hitler was in his opinion a man of spiritual grace and a peace-lover, nevertheless he recognized clearly that at the end he had become a virtual demon. I think that Miss Lamplugh should have stressed this more.

As one would expect, Miss Lamplugh writes excellently about Georgeham in the 1920s, its topography and people, and it is good to know that she finds Williamson's presentation in the 'village books' as *true*. She is helpful also about the originals of some of the characters in Williamson's books apart from her family, already discussed. It is interesting to learn that Volstead-Wrink in the *Gold Falcon* is drawn to some extent at least from S.P.B. Mais, and that the original of Barleybright was a girl whom Williamson met in the 1930s and not as most readers would expect, in the 1920s. She does not reveal her actual identity, nor of Williamson's secretary Ann, nor of Spica Virginis (although this last has been revealed by Stephen Clarke in his *Henry Williamson Catalogue, Code name 'Spica'* (1986) as Gwendoline Rendle).

The critical approaches to Williamson's opus which Miss Lamplugh provides are clear, helpful and profound. Doubtless some readers will disagree about certain details (as I myself do) but in general I think that her insights are just. In particular I think that her pages on *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* provide an excellent introduction to that work.

Although this book is marred by some uncorrected misprints, and the binding of my copy at least, is inadequate, and I should have preferred fuller annotations, nevertheless it is very well worth buying and keeping on one's shelves next to Williamson's work. Peter Rothwell's illustrations are a delight and the photographs are fascinating. And as we read Lois Lamplugh's pages we are given an increasing and satisfying insight into Williamson's complex but essentially good personality. In making us know Henry and his work better, she has helped us to love him in imagination more deeply.

J.W. Blench

THE TARKA PROJECT

There are several small publications to which your attention is drawn: *The Tarka Project: Annual Report 1989* which summarises work done to date and outlines the programme for 1990. This is an official publication but is valuable in that it tabulates all the aims and objectives very succinctly. *Tarka Country News — Spring 1990*, 4pp., A4 folded. A newsletter outlining the work achieved and in progress to protect and enhance Tarka Country, very readable and covers a wider range than the formal Annual Report. *Tarka Country* is a small folded leaflet produced by the West Country Tourist Board, which gives a great deal of information about Henry Williamson and *Tarka the Otter* in relation to north Devon. *Tarka Line*, a small folded brochure describing the Exeter to Barnstaple Railway, and its relationship to the surrounding country.

All these leaflets are available from: The Tarka Project Officer (Nicola Oliver),
Eric Palmer Community Centre, Torrington, Devon EX38 8EZ.

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The Henry Williamson Literary Estate has fully supported and encouraged The Tarka Project from its onset. Their approach to the wider implications is very sensitive indeed and we were very happy to allow them the use of the name 'Tarka' and for them to use quotations in their publicity handouts and to co-operate wherever possible. Indeed, we consider it a great compliment (though thoroughly deserved) that North Devon should honour HW in this way.

Tourism is coming to Devon regardless, and if Tarka Trails and Guides can influence people to think about ecology and conservation rather than being a destructive, polluting force, we know that HW would have deeply approved.

Anne Williamson