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# Henry's Owls

*Peter Lewis*

I recently acquired a copy of *The Village Book* first published in 1930. I was intrigued by the frontispiece, a photograph taken in 1921 of Henry Williamson outside the door of his cottage in Georgeham on which is painted 'Skirr' together with a representation of an owl (see p. 14). This owl was soon to become familiar to Williamson devotees, and it is carved on his gravestone in Georgeham churchyard. I have attempted to trace the origins of this owl and if possible to find out why it meant so much to Henry, throughout his long life.

Also in *The Village Book* there are two strange illustrations by the author in both of which are tucked away small owl figures (see the end of this article). They are somewhat similar to the owl daubed on the door in the frontispiece except that the feet are shown below the body of the owl, as in the 'official' emblem. Close scrutiny seems to indicate that the owl on the door is in two colours. Getting off his motor cycle on one occasion[1] Henry 'went towards the cottage door, seeing gladly the outline of my owl totem painted in yellow on a white background' — this implies that it was the front door.

Richard Williamson believes that it was his father who renamed the cottage Skirr Cottage (some think it had been Church Cottage) and painted the owl on the door. Incidentally it occurs to me that the door might be the back door, for there is no sign of the wooden arch above the front door or of its shadow in the strong sunlight; it is on the back door of a rented cottage that one would perhaps expect to see graffiti and a cat-hole. (But was there a stone wall at the back, and could the arch have been constructed after 1921?)

In the story 'My Owls' in *The Village Book* Henry tells us that his cottage was called The Owlery by the villagers. This story was adapted to become 'Birds of Skirr Cottage' in *Life in a Devon Village*, and in this version he refers to his 'owlery' but the reference to the cottage being known as The Owlery is omitted.

The caption to the frontispiece in *The Village Book* says that once the cottage had been a barn, but Henry tells us elsewhere that it was a 400-year-old cottage. It is unlikely that the original row of buildings consisted of three or four cottages with a barn stuck on the end. It is more likely that as the internal walls were only thin lath-and-plaster divisions the whole building was at one time a single barn, converted into three or four or even five cottages (there are five chimneys). There is in Croyde village nearby today a dilapidated thatched cob-built barn which has an opening in the end wall under the roof exactly as described by Henry in 'Birds of Skirr Cottage': 'an angle-shaped opening where the wall does not fill the apex . . . the opening is large enough for a man to scramble through, with the aid of a ladder'. Such openings were made, or left unfilled, to encourage barn owls to live under the roof to keep down rats and mice. (For a good drescription of the owls' nesting sites — they don't actually build nests — above the ceiling of Skirr Cottage see Ch. 13 of *The Sun in the Sands*, where Henry and the very young Barleybright ('Owls are beautiful things') explore the roof space; also the story 'Birds of Skirr Cottage'; also 'The Owls that went Bump in the Night'.[2]

When Henry left Skirr Cottage after some five years he was dismayed to see the new tenant (on the landlord's instructions) fill up the triangular opening leaving a space just large enough for the birds to fly out. In 'Science, or Sentiment'[3] the new tenant 'walled up the birds' and Henry fears that his 'white owls, dear totems and dream-friends of my youth, won't be seen any more floating across the churchyard on summer evenings.'

When the Williamsons moved to Shallowford in 1929 Henry had the hearth remade,

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and in spite of his instructions the blue slate hearthstone was replaced by a concrete slab. Henry, disappointed, lost no time, though, in gouging the owl outline in it before the concrete set hard.....[4]

In *Children of Shallowford* we read of Windles finding a dead white barn owl. "Windles ought to get it stuffed," says Henry. "It's our family totem, the owl, and the eldest son shall have it to hang over his bed, with wings in flight."[5] Earlier in the same book, '. . . a white bird sailed over the farmyard opposite . . . It was my owl, crying skirr-rr-r.' An omen! An immense excitement obsessed me, and with tears blurring my eyes . . .'"[6]

When Henry visited Thomas Hardy he signed the visitors' book with his name, probably, he says, with the 'barn owl outline'. He later sent Hardy a copy of the vellum *Tarka* 'published by Mr Williamson, Bookseller at the Sign of the Owl, Georgeham.'[7]

Not long after moving to Georgeham, and before his marriage, Henry dressed up as an Owl and went to the Fancy Dress dance at Croyde. Wearing his pyjamas and make-up he went to the dance on his motor bike, cheered by the village lads, ran up the steps and announced his arrival with a loud screech — a wasted gesture, he was largely ignored, it seems![7a]

Henry's affection for the owl seems to have been firmly established by now, but after reading Ted Hughes' Address at the Memorial Service in London in 1977 it is somewhat surprising that Henry's totem was an owl at all, or rather, that he did not transfer his allegiance to the otter after the success of *Tarka* as early as 1928. Quote: "Henry was hunted (haunted?) by the fame of that book. As if he had never written anything else. At the same time, he was passionately attached to Tarka. He knew just how important it was for him. In a very real sense, that Devon otter was his totem, something truly sacred to him, deeply and mysteriously kin, and it remained so throughout his life."[8]

Until recently all I knew about owls was that they flew by night, ate mice and said 'To-whit, to-whooo'. I know a lot more now about these beautiful creatures, and, tongue in cheek, provide some details which may be of interest to Society members, well aware that there must be many Williamson devotees who are keen naturalists and know more about owls than I have been able to discover in the last few weeks.

I understand that it is only the Tawny Owl which utters the familiar cry, the purpose of which is twofold: to keep in touch with its mates or its fledglings — one owl cries 'To-whooo' (where are you?) and another owl cries 'To-whit' (over here!) — and also to warn rival owls away from their territories. The Barn Owl is a comparatively silent bird, and utters mainly whistling or hissing and snoring noises, but does sometimes let rip with a blood-curdling screech — this must be Henry's 'skirr-rr'. The owl flies in silence, its wings and feathers designed for this purpose, for two reasons: it needs to hear the tiny squeaks of small rodents and the rustle of leaves above the sounds of its own flight, and of course it does not want its prey to hear it coming. It seems logical that any noise the owl makes when actually hunting would terrify its prey into immobility and would therefore be counter-productive. Apparently the owl depends more on its hearing to detect and locate its prey, and depends more on its legendary eyesight to avoid obstacles when hunting.

From ancient times owls have been associated with bats, witches, evil spirits, graveyards and things that go bump in the night. They have long been thought to be the harbingers of death and bad news, as in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. Pliny the Elder wrote of the owl, 'When it appears it foretells nothing but evil and it is more to be dreaded than any other bird.' Spenser referred to the owl as 'Death's dreadful Messenger'. Merlin the (original) Welsh wizard carried an owl on his shoulder. The long ear tufts of long-eared owls were thought to be devils' horns. But owls were also thought to be worldly-wise and even today are often depicted wearing schoolmasters' gowns,

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spectacles and mortar boards. *Athene noctua*, the Little Owl, only fairly recently introduced into Britain, was named after Athene, the Greek goddess of Wisdom. At one time, the Romans used representations of owls to combat 'the evil eye'. (Could this be one reason why Henry daubed an owl on the door of Skirr Cottage?)

As far as I can tell there are five species of owl normally resident (sedentary) in this country, i.e. the Barn Owl (*tyto alba*), the Tawny Owl (*strix aluco*), the Little Owl (*Athene noctua*), and a small number of Short-eared Owls (*asio flammeus*) and Long-eared Owls (*asio otus*). The Tawny Owl is the Big Brother of the British owls — the others tend to keep clear of him; it is he who utters the familiar to-whit, to-whooo. Strixly speaking (sorry) there is no such owl as the 'Strix Flammea' about which Henry writes in the story of that name in *The Lone Swallows* —he describes it in the early dawn as being 'indistinctly white', and by suggesting that it was not 'a wood or brown owl' seems to indicate that it was a Barn owl. In Ch. 31 of *The Dark Lantern* Richard Maddison took an owl's breast-feather from between the pages of his father's journal and held it under baby Phillip's nose to see if he was breathing — the filament waved, the baby lived, thank God, thank God! 'It was a feather of *strix flammea*, the white owl.' (But, Latin, *strix* = screech owl, *flammea* = flame coloured or fiery.) Henry sometimes refers to the 'wood' owl, meaning the Tawny — there is actually a Wood Owl, or rather a Brown Wood Owl (*strix lepto grammica*), not seen in this country, I understand. If the patient reader now feels that he knows all he needs to know about British owls, I leave him with one last item of invaluable information: even the heaviest owl, the Tawny, stripped of his feathers (to what?) is not a large bird; weighing in at 500 grammes (17½ ozs) he is lighter than a wood pigeon.

Henry wrote stories about all three main species of British owls, e.g. 'A London Owl', 'Strix Flammea' and 'Stories VII' and 'XXXIX' in the *From a Country Hilltop* collection (*strix aluco*, or Tawny owls): 'My Owls' (*tyto alba*, or Barn Owls); and 'A Very Bad Bird' (*Athene noctua*, or Little owl). There may be more, and there are of course a great many references to owls throughout his writings. In none of these, however, can I discover any real clue as to why he appears very early in his career to have adopted the Owl. Of course he often took long walks at night, and he loved the dawn and the dusk, the owls and the stars his only companions; thus may his affinity with owls have developed.

I have tried to place in some sort of chronological order the stories and passages in the writings, or at least some of them, together with odd references to owls, in an attempt to trace the origins of the owl influence.

On Henry's first ever visit to Georgeham in May 1914, aged 18½, on his very first day there he saw and recorded a white owl floating silently over the tall grasses of the glebe field.[9]

In 1916, if the date appended to the story, 'A Very Bad Bird',[10] is correct, he wrote about the Little Owl. This yarn is particularly important for my purpose for it is here that Henry, as far as I can find, first declares his affinity to, or kinship with, the owls. In bright early afternoon sunlight Henry observed a Little Owl sneaking about in a hedge and robbing a chaffinch's nest of its fledgling young. 'A weasel will do this, or a rat, and often a crow. But an owl! I was ashamed of my own kin.' Henry decided to advise the gamekeeper to shoot or trap the Little Owls. Then he found the nesting platform and tried to dislodge the mother Little Owl, but she would not desert her eggs. Henry, impressed, told the gamekeeper that the Little Owl was harmless after all. 'Besides, she was an owl, and blood is thicker than water,' he concluded. But we are not told how this beautiful relationship came about.

Henry tells us in 'A London Owl'[11] that he had discovered that the large Tawny Owl of this story, too, crept about the hawthorns thick with spine and twig, climbed up the

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branches and caught the small birds roosting there. It is not too difficult to date this later yarn because it was certainly after Henry came back from the Great War and before he went down to Georgeham — say 1920. Henry meets the local brown (tawny) owl in Brockley, presumably (the vast Ladywell cemetery with its many trees is nearby) and learns that there were in fact two owls nesting and well known in the district. Somebody who must have known of his interest in the birds told him of another tawny owl which had nested locally for eight years and which lived in a dangerous tree. After a dramatic rescue Henry 'tamed' one of the owlets, clipped its wings and allowed it to fly free. The owl was pinched by a rag-and-bone man, was bought back and lost again. The story is also interesting in that one of the owls uttered 'ghastly skirling cries' — the first mention I have found of 'skir', and uttered by a Tawny Owl at that. (But, dictionary, to skirl = to make sounds like bagpipes!)

Henry moved to Georgeham in 1921. Talking of his early days at Skirr Cottage[12] Henry tells us that his household 'consisted of the dog and himself, a small black-and-white cat with one kitten, and a pair of white owls'. The owls were not actually part of his household, of course — they lived above his ceiling. From a story called 'Star-flights of Swifts'[13]:

> *'Under my roof of thatch two kinds of birds are nesting. They are strangely different. One is large, white, silent in flight as a cloud. It is a barn owl. . . .'* (The other is a swift.) *'The owl has her eggs and downey fledglings in a corner . . . The chalky eggs and dough-like owlets lie amid bones and beetle-shards and the dust of fur and crumbled rats' tails . . . During the night the male owl frequently comes to the hole under the eaves, skirls his thin grey throaty cry and floats away. He comes, I believe, for the same reason that a human father looks in the night-nursery where his small children are asleep. Sometimes the male owl brings a mouse or a young rat. At dimmit-light, or dimpsey as we say in Devon, the owls leave the loft, and float through the lopped elms of the churchyard to the meadows and corn-fields beyond. The swifts . . . espying the owls, dash down and scream around them. The owls fly on, unheeding. They separate and go their ways to the sun-set mouse-runs . . . The owls float through the elms, skirring as they glide away pale in the midsummer sky glowing with sea-quenched sunset.'* And[14] *'Outside in the night a throaty bubbling cry tore the darkness — skirr-rr-r! Signal of the parent owl's coming.' 'Skirr-rr-r, the old bird floated away. . . .'*

In *Tarka the Otter* (completed by 1927), Ch. 16, Tarka passed along a 'stream which flowed below a churchyard wall by a thatched cottage. The door was pulled open and a spaniel rushed out barking. A white owl lifted itself off the lopped bough of one of the churchyard elms, crying skirr-rr.' The cottage was obviously Skirr Cottage, Georgeham. Here the skirr-rr cry appears to be a cry of alarm or anger.

Tarka himself of course was born in a fallen oak called Owlery Holt, and shared his first home with a white (barn) owl. In the film made in 1977/78 the birth-place scene is beautifully depicted, the story of its making charmingly told by Director David Cobham in the Tarka Diamond Jubilee Issue (No. 16) of the Society *Journal*. Sadly Henry died before the film was completed, but every time I watch my video tape recording I wonder whether he ever saw the rushes of that marvellous scene. I like to think that he would have been deeply moved to see his 'totems' in action together, as it were. Practically on the first page of the book itself the hunting owl's 'skirling screech . . . made a mouse crouch in a fixity of terror.'

In Chapter 9 of *Tarka the Otter* Henry describes the arrival on the harsh but brilliant scene at the frozen Burrows of the Arctic Owl (note the capital O), Bubu the Terrible. The thickset bird with its white-barred plumage spotted with dark brown and feathered feet was large enough to attack the fox Fang-over-Lip and to challenge the otters for possession of the

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dying swan (Ch. 10). There is no Arctic Owl, as such, I believe, but there are two owls, the Eurasian Eagle Owl (the largest and most powerful of all owls) and the fabulously beautiful Snowy Owl (*nyctea scandiaca*), both of which could fit the bill in that they populate, and occasionally wander from, the Arctic regions (among other places), except that the Snowy Owl is a much smaller bird. The latter, almost totally white, as its name suggests, is perhaps too lovely a creature to instil more terror into the already fearful winter scene as I think Henry intended — the Eagle Owl with its more fearsome aspect is the more likely candidate. To clinch the matter, in my mind at least, is the fact that the Eurasian Owl's latin name is *bubo bubo*. (With apologies to Tim Osborne who in his article 'The Ornithology of Tarka the Otter' in the Jubilee Issue of the HW Society's *Journal* No. 16 refers to the Snowy Owl, but I don't think that this bird is named as such in the book.) In Ch. 3 of *Young Phillip Maddison* the Rev. Mundy thought he saw a specimen of either the Snowy Owl or the Eagle Owl (both correctly named in Latin) on the Hill, and asked the librarian for a book of reference to identify them. It is unlikely, however, that he had seen either of these birds in the mild early Spring of 1908, and even more unlikely that he would have found descriptions of them in Gould's *British Birds*, for British thev were certainly not. But this passage is only part of the story of Phillip's graffiti in his library book and is perhaps not meant to be taken seriously.

The winning of the Hawthornden prize-money of £100 (for *Tarka*) enabled Henry to buy his beloved field at Ox's Cross. He recalls buying the field near Windwhistle Spinney[15]: he 'had first known the spinney and the small square field . . . with a view over thousands of square miles of fields and valleys and sea and moor and estuary. And, finest thing of all, a white owl lived in the wood, and flew around the field every evening as the sun was sinking down to the Atlantic to the west.'

> *'The field was beloved of a barn owl. Year after year he was there, curling over the hedge to quarter the field above the mice runs. During the late summer he fanned over the bleaching stalks of the wild grasses, sometimes in broad daylight, wafting himself up and down, pausing, hovering, his dark eyes peering below; then he was volplaning down, lost in the forest of grasses nearly three feet high . . . to flutter up and sail over the bank and away.'*[16]
>
> *'. . . my barn owl drifted low over the northern hedge, coming from the plantation of beech trees . . . he lives there. I have known him six years . . . He has a big wing-spread for his weight. Wings, white under and yellow-grey above, span about a yard, and are broad, with soft feathers for silent flying. Yet the body is smaller than a pigeon's. His round head, set with two large, dark eyes, looks to be six inches in diameter, set with a ruff of white featherlets . . . He knows me to be harmless; indeed, I think we like to see each other about the place.'*[17]
>
> *'Although the barn owl in flight looks twice, and in some lights, thrice the size of a pigeon, its body is no larger than a pigeon's.'*[18]
>
> *'Owls came to the beech plantation at night, calling to others in the valley below.' One night Henry and his two younger sons Robert aged thirteen and Richard aged ten were eating kippers for supper in the hut, with the door open; a young (tawny) owl called nearby: 'oo-oo-woo-loo'. Henry and the boys teased it by uttering owl-like replies at first, then by imitating the cries of the cuckoo and the crowing of cockerels. The confused owl retreated, and 'after a while we heard two owls bubbling and wauling and baying among the trees'.*[19] *(Perhaps they were complaining about the kippers.)*

Strange to find the following passage in *Goodbye West Country* in a chapter dealing almost entirely with Henry's visit to Germany in 1935, but there it is: Henry, at Ox's Cross, is taking a very early morning walk — the stars are still out. 'An owl was suddenly wide-winged and dark above my head, and I saw two feathers like horns above its eyes as it floated past,

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the spirit of silence. The first of the autumn migrants had arrived from Scandinavia.'[20] The ear tufts of long-eared owls are depressed in flight — if it were a short-eared owl Henry would have needed eyesight at least as good as the owl itself to detect the tufts in the circumstances described. Both long-eared and short-eared owls are permanently resident (sedentary) in this country, but a little short-ranged migration does occasionally take place, in search of voles and other small rodents which, apparently, vary considerably in numbers from time to time and place to place, mice, for instance, sometimes assuming plague-like proportions in Britain, like their cousins the lemmings in Scandinavia. Neither variety of owl migrates from Scandinavia in the autumn on a regular basis as Henry suggests — rather, they should be described as being occasionally vagrant.

In the autumn of 1937 Henry saw 'a woodcock owl' shot by a neighbour — on its back (the owl's, not the neighbour's!) was an exhausted wren which had hitched a lift from Scandinavia. Henry probably meant that the vagrant owl preyed on woodcock and similar game birds. On the same page he calls it 'the dreaded short-eared owl', and describes it as 'a yellow owl', with a hawk-like flight.[21] The short-eared owl is mainly diurnal, it seems (i.e. not nocturnal), and could indeed appear to be yellow-brown, or tawny, in the wintry afternoon when Henry saw it. (This is as good a place as any to mention that in fact the Tawny owl is not really tawny at all — its colour is chestnut brown.)

Still at Shallowford, Henry tells us 'An owl flew across the window, not seen, but sensed; a howling, rattling cry filled the coombe. It was one of those dwarf owls which were introduced into England about eighty years ago, and have since increased a millionfold. They have many cries, not exactly mimicking, and not mocking, but between the two. I have heared them wauling like a cat, barking like a dog, wailing like peacocks, and uttering low, muffled cries which seemed to be an echo of the snipe's spring drumming.'[22] My library books (my only source of information) assert that the cry of the Little Owl is a monotonous 'kiew, kiew'. Personally I think that the sounds Henry heard were the baffled cries of the elf Cold Pudding who hadn't had his supper. Owls' binocular forward-looking eyes are fixed and they must turn their heads to look around — they can in fact turn their heads more than 180 degrees (and up to 270 degrees) to look directly behind them. In addition, the Little Owl can, apparently, stretch its neck and turn its head upside down, but why it should want to do so I can't imagine. It would be a nasty surprise, no doubt, for Cold Pudding, going about his lawful business in the oak-tree at dimmit-light, to come across a Little Owl with its head upside down and back to front!

Henry had one occasion at least to rue the sighting of a barn owl. Turning a corner when driving back to Shallowford in his Silver Eagle he took his eye off the road to watch a white owl which had just flown across his windscreen. The car hit the bank, turned on to its side and lay quietly in the road, a sad sight recorded for posterity by Henry's Rollieflex.[23]

In the *Eastern Daily Press* in July 1943 is a true story about a half-tame tawny owl called Hooly (after Hooliflap in *The Star-Born*?) at the Norfolk farm, Stiffkey. When trying to shoot small birds to feed the owlet Henry comments, interestingly, "Starlings were rank-tasting, I suspected, as the hawks and owls I kept as a boy never ate them."

I wondered if I were more likely to discover the origins of the owl influence in Henry's (dare I say autobiographical?) fiction. I flinched somewhat from this Herculean labour, but received some encouragement, at least, from the opening pages of *The Beautiful Years*, where Willie Maddison is ushered into this world (and his mother out of it) when Old Willum and Biddy the housekeeper believe that Jinny Oolert, the owl, with deep bubbling cries quavering from the walnut tree, foretells a death in the family. (Jinny Oolert, not encountered elsewhere — is this name from Kent or Bedford, perhaps?) Did the owl perhaps have, for Henry, Cassandra-like characteristics with which he was able to identify from personal experience at an early age? (Cassandra, a Trojan prophetess fated to make correct prophesies but not to be believed.)

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At school Willie ("Owls are the loveliest birds") and his pals Bony Watson, Rupert Bryers and Jack Temperley form an Owl Club. All have been in Form 5b for one year already, so they must have been about sixteen years old.[24] The objectives of the Club are not revealed; it is merely a group of friends with a common interest in Nature. In the foreword to *Winged Victory*, by his school friend Victor Yeates, Henry records 'we formed an Owl Club, and explored woods, fields and ponds. We climbed after rooks' nests and were chased by farmers. We had a half-tame owl. That was a year before the Great War.' (Actually it was a little earlier than that.)

When composing his 'Policy of Reconstruction' Willie hoped his mind would become 'like a White Bird in a shining void where it could spread its wings and be free. The White Bird perceived Truth in a timeless flash, Light within light, but the intellect could not understand or interpret the vision.'[25]

Continuing his Policy, he adds 'Sometimes I have the power (to express myself clearly), when my thought soars like a White Bird above the world, and I am absorbed in the core of life, where there is no emotion or fret, struggle or longing. Then . . . I have the vision of Keats, but for words I strive in vain.'[26]

Once, after a long night in the Nightcrow Inn, Willie lies in the lane a little the worse for wear. At dawn he is visited by his half-tame barn owl. 'A symbol — my White Bird flying in the starry dawn,' whispers Willie. The weary poet/philosopher greets the new day and indulges in a little morning-after self-pity. 'O God, I have betrayed ——,' he moans, no doubt clasping his head. Who or what he has betrayed we are not told. Could it be the memory of his fellow founder-members of the Owl Club, none of whom survived the War? This was perhaps an opportune moment for Willie to explain the significance of the White Bird, but he remained silent.[27]

After the roof of Rat's Castle falls in Willie rents Scur Cottage below the western wall of the churchyard. Skirr Cotage, Georgeham (Henry Williamson), Valerian Cottage, Malandine (Phillip Maddison) and Scur Cottage, Speering Folliot (Willie Maddison) are one and the same, evidently. The Temperleys' farm at Rookhurst, where owls have lived under the thatched roof for two hundred years, is Skirr Farm.

Very early in the last of *The Flax of Dream* tetralogy Mary Ogilvie thinks she hears Willie outside her bedroom window, and hoots like a wood (tawny) owl to welcome him to the house for supper.[28] Such signals were no doubt remembered from their childhood days. (In the same chapter we see in a glass case at Wildernesse a stuffed Snowy Owl with white plumage and great eyes and talons.) Willie realises with a shock that he loves Mary. "When I saw Mary plain, I saw the White Bird that hovers over the one-ness of life, the phoenix that flies through heaven, and flaming Sirius, and all the roaring suns of the night, whose wings are the beautiful shining Truth of Khristos," scribbles Willie in his note-book.[29] Heady stuff, but what does it mean? Willie has been in love before, of course, but here I think he is telling us that this time it is the Real Thing, a Divine Revelation.

But who, or what, is the White Bird? Has the conventional Almighty become to Willie a Spirit of Nature in the guise of a giant Barn owl, benevolently sheltering all beneath its broad soft wings? If we knew, would it help us to trace the origins of Henry's owl device? He who would see into Willie's mind, on occasion, it seems to me, must first get past Henry, flanked by William Blake and Richard Jefferies, a daunting task best left to a keener mind than that of the average reader and certainly keener than mine.

In his 'A Boy's Nature Diary' (*The Lone Swallows*) and elsewhere, for example in *Young Phillip Maddison*, where Henry is undoubtedly re-living his own boyhood experiences through Phillip, Henry constantly refers to his observations of owls and the searches for their nesting sites in his country 'preserves'. In Ch. 30 of *Young Phillip Maddison* the 16-year-old Phillip, the avid egg collector, and his pals on the Bagmen's Outing find an owl's nest.

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'Phillip held the egg in his hand. A hundred dreams of twilit nights, of stars and wind in darkness passing, passing, arose from the oval white egg. He decided to put it back.'

In *The Sun in the Sands*, that enigmatic mix of fact and fiction (Ch. 19), Henry shows the young Queenie over his bedroom at Skirr Cottage, horse-skin and all. Queenie is not impressed. Henry says lamely 'One hears the owls overhead.' Queenie replies 'O yes, I forgot, you love owls, don't you?' Henry has no need to answer. But he did at least once, though, admit his weakness — in an article called 'The Green Desert' in *The Daily Telegraph Magazine 1966* he wrote ". . . the white or barn owl, the most beautiful of birds to me . . ."

It is, in the end, one of Henry's earliest essays which may well provide the best indication of the reason for his affinity with owls. This is Winter's Eve, again in *The Lone Swallows*, written in 1914 when he was aged 18. The story ends: 'Woo-loo-woo-loo-woo-o-oo! the brown owl calls in the night. And while I am here on earth, let me be in the fields where I can see the bright stars, and dream as my birds of mystery pass in silence and alone.'

Henry's emblem, or totem, the colophon itself is something of a mystery. (Dictionary, colophon = tail piece in old books, often ornamental.) Henry had drawn simple caricatures of owls for many years, I understand, but I believe that the colophon was drawn or designed by a better hand than his, a professional artist employed or commissioned by the publishers of his early work, perhaps — this may be why the colophon was not used in all Henry's books.

As far as I have been able to establish, the colophon was first used in *The Beautiful Years*, the first novel, published in 1921. Fred Shepherd, our esteemed Treasurer, has a First edition of *The Lone Swallows*, published in 1922, which also bears the emblem. This is of course some ten years before the arrival on the scene of C.F. Tunnicliffe, R.A., illustrator of much of Henry's work, whom I once thought had designed the colophon.

Although unmistakably an owl, the emblem seems to me to be a sort of composite owl. Henry drew (he thought) a *barn* owl outline in Hardy's visitors' book and also a *barn* owl outline[30] on the tank of the motor bike he drove down to Georgeham in 1921. The Barn owl has much more of a heart-shaped facial disk than has the colophon where the eyes appear to be strangely slit instead of perfectly rounded as they should be. The breast is white, or unmarked, at least, as is the barn owl's. But in full frontal photographs of perching barn owls the birds display their fine long white legs to advantage, while only the feet of most other owls are visible when perching, the legs modestly concealed by a skirt of breast feathers, as in the colophon. The dark outline feathers of the head and of the folded wings in the colophon suggest a Tawny owl; the white breast a Barn owl.[31]

Owls have a total of eight talons or toes, four per foot, naturally! One toe on each foot is reversible, enabling the owl to have four toes pointing forwards and four backwards — no doubt this helps him to grasp his prey. In all the hundreds of photographs and illustrations of perching owls I have looked at lately all the owls show a total of four toes pointing forwards (and four backwards) while the colophon shows six toes. I'm sure Tunnicliffe would not have made this mistake, if mistake it is. The colophon was evidently never intended to be more than a mere representation of an owl.

The following books did *not* bear the owl device: *The Ackymals* (1929), *The Gold Falcon* (1933), *The Star-Born* (1933), *On Foot in Devon* (1933), *Devon Holiday* (1935), *As The Sun Shines* (1941), *Norfolk Life* (1942), *The Phasian Bird* (1948), *Scribbling Lark* (1949); neither do some recent paperback editions such as *The Lone Swallows* (Sovereign 1984) and *The Pathway* (Zenith). *Salar the Salmon* (1935) (and reprints) has instead the device of a leaping salmon. The colophon was used at the end of the text in all other books after *The Beautiful Years*, except that it is on the Title page of *The Old Stag* (1926) and the very early *Tarka the Otter* (1927) editions. For this bibliographical information, and other assistance, I am indebted to our learned Secretary, John Homan.

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NOTES

1. *The Sun in the Sands*, Ch. 5.
2. *Days of Wonder*, a Society publication 1987.
3. *Linhay on the Downs*
4. *Children of Shallowford*, Ch. 7, p. 91.
5. ibid., Ch. 16, p. 171 et seq.
6. ibid., Ch. 5, p. 77.
7. *Goodbye West Country*, Ch. 9.

7a. *The Sun in the Sands*, Ch. 19.

8. *Henry Williamson, The Man, The Writings*, 1980, Appendix 3.
9. 'Surview and Farewell', (*Life in a Devon Village*).
10. *The Lone Swallows* (story originally entitled 'A Feathered Waster' in 1st ed.).
11. ibid., (story first appeared in *Peregrine's Saga*, 1st ed., 1923).
12. *Goodbye West Country*, Ch. XI.
13. *The Labouring Life*.
14. 'Birds of Skirr Cottage', (*Life in a Devon Village*).
15. *Children of Shallowford*, Ch. 17, p. 188.
16. From a piece in *A Book of Gardens* edited by G.J. Turner (*Journal* 6, HWSoc., Oct. 82).
17. *Goodbye West Country*, Ch. XII.
18. *Children of Shallowford*, Ch. 16, p. 171.
19. From 'Words on the West Wind' in the *Adelphi* 1949 (*Journal* 6, HWSoc., Oct. 1982).
20. *Goodbye West Country*, Ch. IX.
21. *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, Ch. 47.
22. *Goodbye West Country*, Ch. IV.
23. ibid., Ch. IV, see also photograph.
24. *Dandelion Days*, Ch. 12.
25. *Dream of Fair Women*, Ch. 3.
26. ibid., Ch. 11.
27. ibid., Ch. 12.
28. *The Pathway*, Ch. 2.
29. ibid., Ch. 10.
30. *The Sun in the Sands*, Ch. 1.
31. See letter in *Journal* 15, HWSoc., March 1987.
32. *The Village Book*, included in illustration by HW in 'A Farmer's Life'.
33. ibid., included in frontispiece photograph.
34. ibid., included in illustration by HW in 'The First Day of Spring'.
35. Included in HW's handwritten dedication of a First edition copy of *Dandelion Days* to H.A. Manhood, July 1930.
36. Included in HW's handwritten dedication (tiny, in green ink) of a *Tarka the Otter* to Harold Collins, March 1929. Note initials HW, as in the colophon.

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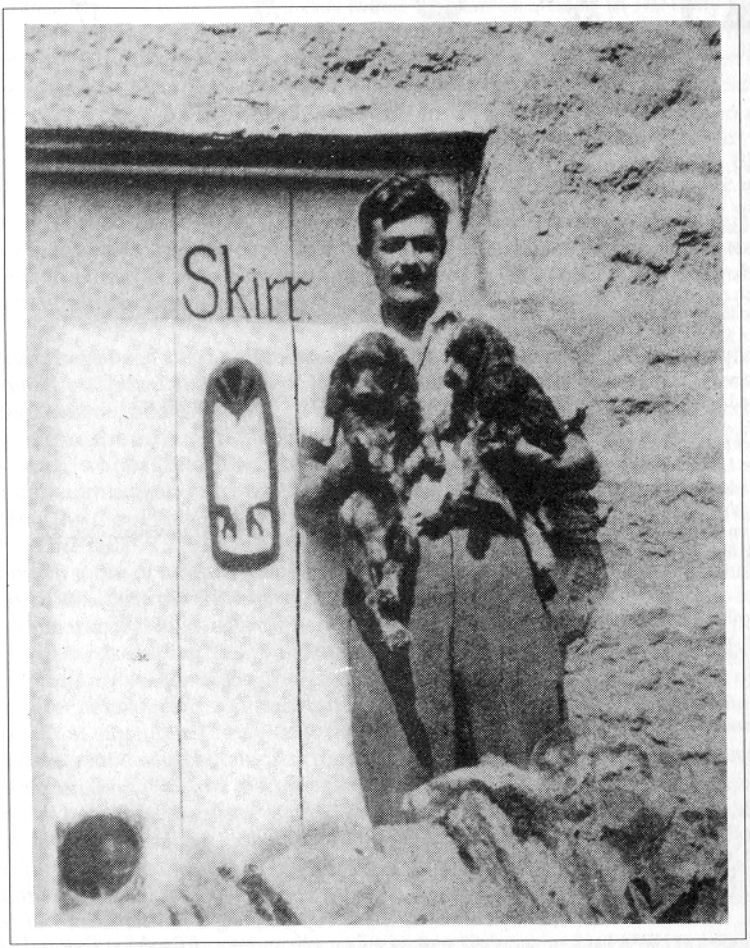


Frontispiece photograph from *The Village Book*. Henry Williamson outside Skirr Cottage, Georgeham.

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*At the risk of sounding pedantic I must put right a few errors in Peter Lewis's article 'Henry's Owls',* Journal *No. 22, p. 5.*

*He says, 'there is no such owl as the Strix flammea' and in the modern nomenclature that is so but in the late 19th and early 20 century bird books which Williamson would have looked at, Strix flammea was indeed the latin name used for the Barn Owl.*

*Regarding the Arctic Owl which visited the Burrows in the winter scene in* Tarka, *this could only have been the Snowy Owl. No other owl has the 'white barred plumage spotted with brown' and the statement that it could attack Fang-over-lip fox may not be greatly exaggerated. That Williamson called it Bubu the Terrible has always irritated me but then Nyctea the Terrible hardly has the same ring. But above all the Snowy Owl is the only true Arctic owl and is the perfect choice to bring home to the reader the atmosphere of that terrible winter.*

*In the same paragraph Peter Lewis asserts that neither the Snowy nor Eagle owl would be found in Gould's* British Birds. *Perhaps illogically British birds in the accepted terminology means any bird which has been recorded in the British Isles in a wild state and Gould's* Birds of Great Britain, *to give it its correct title, certainly does include both birds. I must add that the mind boggles at the enormity of Phillip's crime in defacing such a magnificent book, the complete five volumes today being worth somewhere in the region of £40,000!*

*Tim Osborne*