

From the Back of a Picture

Fred Shepherd

One of the unexpected pleasures of being a picture dealer is to be found in removing watercolours from old and dilapidated frames. Often a dirty, unidentified picture can be attributed to a renowned artist or the subject identified and dated from inscriptions found on the reverse of the painting or on various backing papers. Recently I found an attractive watercolour by Whitacre Allen, a successful Bath artist who had inscribed the reverse Dinan and padded out the back of the frame with copies of *The Times* for 1860. This was particularly significant because that was the year in which the magnificent viaduct featured in the picture was built and clearly he had painted the view to commemorate the event. Such details all help to sell a picture!

A coastal scene with a magnificent sunset proved on removal from its frame, to be by Frank Beresford, an artist with an international reputation and was of Blakeney in Norfolk. The frame was padded out with a copy of the *New Statesman and Nation* for the week ending February 22nd 1941, and inspired this article for both scene and the year have poignant associations for readers of Henry Williamson.

Obviously such a paper today makes fascinating reading as it was addressed to a nation which was under seige. The Ministry of Food is quoted as suggesting that one should make potatoes an exciting pink by mashing them up with shredded orange peel. "Blah de jour", as you might say, was not however considered likely to solve the most serious food problem that had ever confronted this country.

The paper claimed that at that time anyone with money could get all the food they wanted in restaurants without using any food coupons, whilst poor families queued for basic necessities and evidence of scurvy could be seen on our children. By coincidence Henry Williamson was farming at that time near the scene of my fine watercolour, and producing record crops to help feed the nation. Sadly, however, we are led to believe that he was immensely unpopular because of his political views and so it is surprising to find him quoted at length in one of the leading articles in this copy of the *New Statesman*. Entitled 'A Challenge', the article, discussing the value of not smoking or drinking and not eating meat, also quotes from Dr Johnson and Mr Shaw, "born with ten times an ordinary man's share of good humour!" The author writes that Mr Henry Williamson had argued that "the survival of stag-hunting on Exmoor made for the greater happiness of the stags"! He did not say that stags enjoy being hunted, but he maintained that stags are now cared for and enabled to lead healthy and happy lives till the day of their death, whereas, if stag-hunting disappeared, they would be neglected and become verminous and ultimately be exterminated by farmers, who looked on them as a nuisance. "It is better for a stag to live a happy life and then be hunted, or not to live at all." These are surprising views for a left-wing journal and even more so should Henry have at that time been as popular as a chocolate cup with mould. The journal contains advertisements for John Middleton Murry's important series of articles in *Peace News*, and an all-London mass demonstration to demand the removal of the ban on the *Daily Worker*. Virgin Gold is 1s 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ d an oz. and you can stay at the Kingsley Hotel for 9s 6d per night. A lady refugee seeking accommodation in return for housework reflects the troubled times.

The literary content of this *New Statesman* has much to commend it with contributions from Stephen Spender, V.S. Pritchett, Cyril Connolly and George Orwell. The leading book review, by Geoffrey Trease, is entitled 'Gone to Earth' and is a highly complimentary account of *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, just then issued by Faber at 10s 6d. The review commences by suggesting that:

Mr Williamson possesses the two qualities, not over-frequent in combination, of high sensitivity and courage. The former was immediately revealed in his earliest writings: the latter is displayed on almost every page of this new book, from the Oswald Mosley quotation beneath the title, with which he defiantly nails his colours to the mast, to the declaration of faith on the final page.

Many years ago, as his large public is aware, he left Fleet Street for the West Country, where in due course, after years of struggle, he established his literary reputation as a writer of fine prose about the wild-life of the English countryside. He could have stopped at that. He could have settled down as a popular steady-selling author, a Hawthornden Prizeman. He could have been the pet of the libraries – "you know, my dear, that man who writes so wonderfully about animals." Libraries love authors who serve up the same dependable mixture – "we've the new Williamson, madam, you always like his." He could have gone on almost indefinitely, exploiting Exmoor, curlews, solar-geese, and stars. The temptation to a recently poor man with a large family must have been considerable, but it was resisted. He realised, he tells us, that he had "outgrown Devon". It was time to go away and do something different.

Like his friend, T.E. Lawrence, Mr Williamson feels he is unusual and craves desperately, by forcing himself into contact with commoner men on their own ground, to achieve normality. He has a sound instinct that writing cuts one off, that it isn't a man's job (some would prefer to say not a 'full' job for anyone, man or woman), and that some other work, more practical and directly utilitarian, is needed to normalise one's relations with the community. So, heroically, he determined to become a farmer. Heroically, because, however great his knowledge of Nature, he was as ignorant of agriculture as any townsman, and because he entered farming almost at the nadir of its depression, before the economics of war-time came, temporarily at least, to the rescue.

Of course, this is much more than the story of a Norfolk farm. It is another chapter in the story of Mr Williamson, who is as little reticent about the results of his self-analysis and his family-life as he is about his business. There is a little – tantalisingly little, but this is the publishers' responsibility – about his conversion to Facism by a titled lady who was driven up to the granary one day. It would have been interesting to trace the transition whereby the writer of *The Pathway* became the reader of *Action*, and one wonders if the publishers were right in persuading him not to prejudice the hearing of his main theme by the inclusion of controversy.

His style is plainer than usual, as befits his subject. There are no pyrotechnics; only, occasionally, the genuine gleam of a finely observed moment, finely recorded, when his eye has wandered from the furrow to what is flying above. There is the usual intense sincerity, which sometimes, because of a constitutional deficiency in humour, becomes solemnity. And always there is the abiding impression of courage – the courage of a man who realised in time that a living artist must never doze in the niche of fame which he has carved or he will awaken to find it has become a shelf.

The Story of a Norfolk Farm proved to be a big success for Williamson with several impressions coming out over the following years, indicating that he still had a loyal following even during the worst period of the War. Later this same year Faber also published what many consider to be Williamson's most sensitive book, *Genius of Friendship: T.E. Lawrence*. This is a moving book as Williamson regarded Lawrence as a kindred spirit. It was well received by his loyal readers and a second edition was soon called for.

Many picture dealers claim to have discovered a bundle of old Fivers padding out a picture, as this is thought to have been one of the favoured hiding places for simple cottage folk. However, such a hoard is unlikely to give me as much pleasure as this faded copy of *The New Statesman and Nation* of 1941, especially as I also made a handsome profit on the picture.