

Letters

I am prompted to write to you about item 11 of the AGM agenda. (I write looking out over Baggy: we are on holiday here at Pickwell!)

Whether conservation can be considered to devolve from the Aims of the Society is perhaps a moot point although it was clearly at Henry's core and is no doubt dear to most, if not all, members of the Society.

My main purpose in writing is to draw the Society's attention to the deterioration of conservation at Braunton Burrows caused, *inter alia*, by the larger spaces given up to car parking etc., and to the use of jet skis and jet mobiles at the White House sector of the Estuary which, in no time, will vanquish all the bird life. The tendency seems to be to develop both areas towards a leisure playground rather than a protected conserved area. (Incidentally, the sand dunes and burrows on the South Glamorgan coast at the Ogmere estuary are a fine example of what can be done.)

I am certain that both Henry Williamson and Dr Elliston Wright 'would' commend any representations the Society may feel able to make to encourage the authorities to further protect these areas which are so central to Henry's writings. In my experience local authorities find it helpful to hear from societies such as ours. I hope you may find this helpful in advance of the meeting.

May I say how much I value the Society and its Journal.

Ted Wood
The Farmhouse
Coles Farm
Backwell Hill Road
Backwell
Farleigh
Bristol BS19 3PL

Dr Blench's excellent article 'How good is Tarka the Otter as literature' (HWSoc. Journal No. 22, p. 22) encouraged me (as I

hope it did many of you) to examine my own thoughts and feelings about Tarka.

On the whole I belong to the school of thought that Tarka is, certainly in parts, overworked. I personally prefer the fresher Salar the Salmon written in the 'Dickens' mode; i.e. each chapter or story phase being sent off as written. Certainly, some improvements in the phrasing of certain passages in Tarka can be seen and in some passages brilliant reworkings heighten the dramatic effect (*viz.* the end scene), but in other places there is a self-conscious stilted seeking after perfection so that one can see only too readily how it came to be lampooned. (Incidentally, my own understanding is that 'The Doom of the Otter' appeared first in Punch?) I do not mean such criticism to refer to, or detract from, the outstanding merit of the story but I think it has to be taken into account in the overall view of it as a piece of literature.

But again I do not think that Tarka was actually rewritten 17 times. If there had been 17 rewritings there would have been 17 versions (albeit allowing for that mythical 'lost' one). There are 7. Is it possible that a '1' crept in front of the 7 at some point and has stayed there ever since? We know that a 'fact' once assimilated by HW could quite firmly become 'fact'. It is only too easy to fall into the trap of taking myth as gospel truth and I think that I want firmer evidence than is available to substantiate that particular legend. Certainly the story was carefully revised several times but I cannot quite see a total of 17 complete rewritings.

A particular point that caught my attention in Wheatley's argument was his statement (on p. 32) about HW's interjection of himself into his own carefully woven web of enchantment. It is a flaw. And a very odd one. It cannot have passed by accident because it has been established that the book was gone over with such great care. And why didn't the publisher's reader and the editor pick it up? For me it lifts the reader out of the story with quite a jolt. Contrast the two scenes discussed by

Wheatley with that at the end of Chapter 8, when a man playing the hollow willow-stick whistle enters the cave where the seal and otter are sheltering. That man is surely also HW? In spirit, if not in fact – for HW was actually very fearful of the dangers of Baggy Hole (though he did venture down in the early days). Here the human intrusion is handled in a sensitive manner and the third person narrative removes the immediacy of shock tactics so that the story remains whole, and suspension of disbelief maintains.

There are one or two points that Dr Blench does not mention but which seem to me quite important to the structure of the book (and thus to its importance as good literature). Firstly, how HW moves Tarka up the Torridge to Dartmoor, or rather, how he doesn't! Tarka opens with an idyllic scene set on the Torridge at Canal Bridge and ends there in tragic Wagnerian fashion. Obviously to write yet another scene set in this area would detract from the fine drama, so HW wisely and I'm sure quite deliberately, refrains. Thus retaining his overall tight structure.

The last sentence of Chapter 11 always seems to me to be a masterpiece of dramatic construction. We are about halfway through the book and HW throws in an apparently most innocent sentence – 'an empty cocoa-tin, sank into the pool beyond, sent up bubbles, and would play no more'. A *déjà-vu* of that last devastating sentence of the book. An extremely important sentence indeed, a calculated ploy; a pivot on which the book turns.

There is a similar ploy around the fight with Deadlock at East Lyn waters in Chapter 15. Here Tarka wins. We have a minor crescendo.

Which brings me to the point which I find overwhelmingly powerful and all pervading. That the structure of Tarka is comparable to a musical score. HW was passionate about the music he liked (and

utterly dismissive of everything else) but he knew nothing of the technicalities of music. So any such inherent structure will have been instinctive and not deliberate.

I know practically nothing about musical structure myself and many members will be able to expound on this much more expertly; but can I plant the thought that we have here a symphonic poem, a pastoral symphony? There is an idyllic opening movement (sonata form) which returns with variations and interweaving themes – the Dartmoor scenes are *allegro*, those on Exmoor fugue – and a final movement of great *crescendo*. I don't really have the knowledge to do justice to my theme! But for me it is this structure, this musical form, no less than the content, which marks Tarka the Otter as a great work of literature..

Anne Williamson
Keepers
West Dean Woods
Chichester
West Sussex PO18 0RU

I must apologise for an error of dating quoted in my article Flossie Flowers Revealed? printed in the current (No. 22) issue of the Journal.

The visit by Phillip Maddison and Major 'Spectre' West to Flossie Flowers' Hotel, after returning from the Battle of Third Ypres, took place during the winter of 1917/8, not 1916/7, as quoted.

May I also comment on my Biographical Note? Although I vividly remember World War II, it was not until 1955 that I received an invitation from Her Majesty to join her Armed Forces.

John Homan
Oxford Grange
Marsh Lane
Barrow
Barrow upon Humber
S. Humberside DN19 7ER