

Letters

SADDAM HUSSEIN AND THE NORFOLK FARM

No, this isn't another smear on the good name of the unfortunate Henry Williamson, attempting to link him with yet another unsavoury politician!

Last February, while the Gulf War was raging across our television screens, I retired into rural Norfolk, fifty years back in time. This escape was not to be. The misfortunes of the Iraqis followed me and appeared on page 51 of *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, in the form of a quotation from T.E. Lawrence.

I was so astonished that I wrote a letter to a newspaper for the first time in my life, and even more astonished to find it in print a few days later! For those who did not read *The Independent* on 16th February, here it is again! It was too complicated for the purposes of *The Independent* to explain that it was a TEL quote via HW.

I meant to make a new nation, to restore to the world a lost influence, to give 20 millions of Semites the foundation on which to build an inspired dream-palace of their national thoughts. So high an aim called out the inherent nobility of their minds and made them play a dangerous part in events: but when we won it was charged against me that the British petrol royalties in Mesopotamia were become dubious, and French colonial policy ruined in the Levant.

I am afraid that I hope so. We pay for these things too much in honour and innocent lives . . . we were casting them by thousands into the fire, to the worst of deaths . . . that the corn and rice and oil of Mesopotamia might be ours.

Are our aims in this part of the globe any nobler than in Lawrence's day?

Hamish Carlisle
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I was pleased to learn from the Daily Telegraph Saturday Review that there was a Henry Williamson Society. Reading the article brought back memories of the influence HW had on my pre-war years.

Though brought up on farms, on leaving school in the rural depression of the '30s I was compelled to find employment in London with a 6 days a week clerical job. I hated the city life and longed to get back to a country life. Just at that time an Aunt gave me Tarka, then recently published.

From then on I sought every HW publication – The Old Stag, Lone Swallows, The Village Book, Labouring Life, The Flax of Dreams and so on. During this time HW introduced me to Richard Jefferies and I was absorbed by Wild Life in a Southern County concealed in a half-open drawer in the office where I was employed.

To a youth in those far-off days Devon was a distant country as romantic as many countries far overseas – I still recall a golden sunset shining low from the west up a city street and imagining the same gold light shining over Devon. I resolved to visit the west of England and discover Henry Williamson.

Office workers were fortunate in having 2 weeks holiday in those days. With very small savings I set off on my bicycle. I can't recall how long it took – I stayed at Youth Hostels at a shilling a night – I still have the well-worn ordnance map that revealed the whereabouts of Shallowford. It was all as glorious as I had imagined.

I took lodgings in a little thatched cottage almost opposite the Williamsons, now demolished.

I soon met the Williamson children on the Humpy Bridge in the park, and shortly after, Henry – I recall an exciting drive in Henry's open sports car and conversations over several days – some walking up the Barle to the viaduct. To my great regret I was unable to take up an invitation to a high tea as it was time for me to start pedalling the long way back to London. I still have various snaps of the Williamson

family that surface from time to time from archive boxes.

This pilgrimage had a rapid effect on my return to city life. I determined to return to a more natural rural life in the open air, in sun and wind and rain, and often the bitter cold. I cycled down to my home county Sussex and arranged to become a working pupil on a farm well known to me.

So began fifty plus years farming from the horse age to the combine harvester. Alas, the country ways, characters and values have all but vanished. Whether I would inevitably have gone back to a rural life it's hard to say. I firmly believe the works of HW and the journey to Devon to meet him face to face changed my life.

I'm glad that Henry Williamson and his writing are remembered by a Society – I wish it well.

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I was very interested in Jonathan Sale's article on Henry Williamson in Saturday's (April 20th) Daily Telegraph.

I have read Tarka the Otter and all fifteen volumes of A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight – of which The Dark Lantern and Donkey Boy deal with the Brockley and Ladywell districts in which I was born and still live.

It was fun identifying the places of interest to which, of course, he gives fictional names. My late husband's great-grandfather built the still-standing Ladywell Inn (the 'Roundswell' often mentioned in Donkey Boy). The district was then, and until the early years of the century, still quite a rural part of West Kent.

As a child I was very interested in butterflies and moths and although I never pursued moths with a 'dark lantern' on 'The Hill' (Hilly Fields), I took much pleasure in watching great hawk moths and gaudy butterflies in my own garden. Now, so built up has the area become, one would

be lucky to spot a 'red admiral' among the 'cabbage-whites' – let alone a rare 'Camberwell Beauty'.

Perhaps, one day, Henry Williamson will receive the wider acclaim he deserves.

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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!

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