

What Time in Mists Confounds

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In the early spring sunshine on a day in 1944, a sleek Beaufighter and its two-man crew took off from the airfield at Fairwood Common, Swansea to carry out an operational training exercise across the Severn Sea. The young navigator of that aircraft has left us a vivid description of their journey:

In the afternoon we flew towards North Devon – Lundy, a scar in the haze, floating in distant sea-sky: to our left the coast, cloven by the gleaming wishbone-shapes of the Two Rivers. Lundy Island grew clearer, and the Island Race was beneath us in the sun, blue water woven with brown stains of recent floods issuing from the river estuary.

Our nose lay over the island. Lundy gained detail, opening like a flower before us. Not the barren bird-haunted rock of my imagination, but tamed into the patterns of agriculture, with here and there a cluster of farm buildings among the quilted fields. At the south end, perched on a line of rocks like bird-droppings, is a lighthouse – the wan light whose flashings swelled and faded through Atlantic vapours to that headland watcher of twenty years ago. The light then was almost lost in distance, the island beyond a half-thought – now I could span my fingers over the lighthouse and the headland and the sea between, and without memory there would be no magic in this country which lay in simplicity about us.

But it had not changed. To a watcher on that coast now we were only a thread woven into the fabric of a spring day: a remote speck murmuring away towards the sun. For him there would be the old birdsong, the bright flames of the gorse, the hushing of the sea far below. Then again would come the throb of engines from the heights of the sky as we came eastwards again. The land was as rich as ever. We were the exiles.

We turned three miles off Appledore. These mottled wastes of sand with the ivory smoothness of the tideline were Braunton Burrows. They seem plain and very limited. But of them Williamson wrote, "All sense of time and place is lost, and a man becomes a spirit of sea and air and sky, feeling the everlastingness of life while larks sing shrilly overhead and the bones and skulls of rabbits lying in the desert are a glowing whiteness of eternity." Here below us are a couple of miles of greyish sand – all spirit of place is lost from the air.

We were too high to see the white specks of gulls gliding past the headlands (those specks with still-held wings which shoot past like rockets at lower altitudes). But they will have been there; and jostling into the red furrows inland where the ploughman barks at his team. Everything down there was tiny, smooth, unpeopled: lanes like hairs, villages a few grains of brown earth among the red and green squares of their fields. Here in these few miles of bland countryside lay buried a million words. I thought of the travail of the one man who formed them: would his bitterness embrace us, looking for one minute into his life through the wrong end of a telescope, ignorantly?¹

Having read thus far, you will no doubt have determined that the above fine piece of writing came from the pen of the brilliant 20-year-old James Farrar who was lost on a wartime mission over the English Channel, just a few months later. We are indebted to Henry Williamson for recognising Farrar's great promise and providing us with an anthology of extracts from his early writings: it is tragic to see what a great talent was lost to English literature. I have chosen this extract to demonstrate what powerful attraction the North Devon seascape has had for many since *The Flax of Dream* first began to weave its subtle magic in the early 1920s.

James Farrar was drawn to this area by the fortunes of war. George D. Painter, the celebrated biographer and reviewer, also came this way on a rain-soaked walking holiday in 1935. In a pocket of his rucksack he carried a copy of *Dandelion Days* but it was not until some times after he had returned home and read the remaining novels making up the *Flax* tetralogy, that he discovered the special significance of the coastal scenery so recently tramped through:

I realised too late that I had walked through a landscape as haunted as the Brontë moors or the Beauce of Proust. Willie Maddison had left that ruinous cottage for his pursuit of the temptress Eve Fairfax; over the white desolation of Saunton Burrows he had roamed with the gentle Mary Ogilvie; and in the estuary beyond he had been crucified by drowning. I never returned though sometimes I have seen the faint Burrows spread out like the Flax of Dream, from the edge of Dartmoor. Nothing now remains of that lost young man who walked along the North Devon cliffs that rainy summer; but here is that Dandelion Days stained with rusty water, and the presence of Henry Williamson who has stayed living within me as one of the permanent experiences of my life.²

Over the years there have been many such pilgrims, the roads and green lanes around Georgeham have resounded to the footsteps of the Faithful seeking the trail of Willie Maddison and his creator. Since the formation of the Henry Williamson Society, Georgeham and in particular, the little Writing Hut in the field atop the 'Hill of Winds' have become the focal point of our annual migration westward. However, as the autumn meeting is always held in October when rain-bearing equinoctial gales frequently sweep in from the Atlantic, it is difficult to appreciate how beautiful North Devon can be in the springtime. That is why the May meeting there in 1990 was a special joy. Hedgerows ablaze with vibrant colour, sunlight reflected on bright petals of Red Campion, Ragged Robin and the Dandelion's burnished disc. Hawthorn bushes along the sunken lanes clothed in a snowdrift of white blossom: the true harbingers of spring, Primrose and Bluebell dusting the foot of Pickwell Down in a haze of yellow and blue. A landscape awakening at last from the cold grip of winter with that fresh, emerald green mantle that lasts but a few weeks before taking on the darker hue of summer. Westward the dark shape of Lundy discernible as a misty leviathan at the sea's rim.

Henry Williamson first came to Georgeham in May 1914 at the beginning of that long golden summer before the outbreak of the Great War. He came back again we are told, in June 1916 whilst on sick leave from the Western Front, where the terrible battles of the Somme would soon be raging. In those days the countryside around Georgeham and the village itself, would have been quite unspoiled and its natural beauty must have filled the young soldier's heart with wonder and joy after London's urban sprawl and the filth and horror of the Ypres Salient and blood-soaked battlefields of the Somme. It is not hard to imagine why Henry retained a special regard for the place all through his life. Even now, in spite of the tourist invasion and building development that has taken place, a certain indefinable atmosphere and charm remains.

It was in the early Sixties that I made my first pilgrimage to North Devon in search of Henry and his countryside. We had been on holiday in Cornwall on the Lizard peninsular and I suggested that we might make a detour on the way home and try and find the Braunton Burrows. It was a slow but memorable journey along the coast of North Cornwall past Padstow and romantic Tintagel: on to Clovelly and down into Bideford. We crossed the Torridge over the old stone bridge which we recognised from the Tunnicliffe drawing in *Tarka*. Onward then to Barnstaple and the threshold of Williamson Country. In those days I was naive enough to believe that most of Henry's

literary landscapes were constructed from the imagination and only loosely based on familiar locations known to the author (as of course it is in the case of Rookhurst and Colham). *The Flax of Dream* had made a great impression on my boyhood reading and at that time I was eagerly devouring each new Panther edition paperback of the *Chronicle* as it appeared on the bookshelves. Not yet having read any of the *Village* books I had no knowledge of Georgeham's significance or that of any of its environs, so we were really quite ill-equipped for this early sortie into the Williamson heartland. However, our goal was the Burrows and the golden sands of Saunton which were well known from the pages of *Flax*. Our journey there continued along the Braunton road following the shining sandbanks of the estuary. Excitement began to build, and when at last the Saunton Sands Hotel was reached and we got our first glimpse of the Burrows, looking out towards the distant Bideford Bar, my joy was complete.

Finding a place to park the car we made our way down onto the Burrows. The sun was sinking westward into a silver sea and the sand dunes of the Burrows were bathed in a golden haze as we walked amongst them towards the sea. I half hoped that we might glimpse a tall distinguished figure of soldierly bearing, come striding out of the sunset's glow. Alas, that did not happen but nevertheless it was a memory to cherish and I felt then that we had indeed entered a land of enchantment.

Since that first visit I have often pondered on just what it is about this particular corner of North Devon that produces such a pleasurable feeling of warm recognition and an unfailing sense of having 'come home' with each return. Of course, the scenery and coastline is quite stunning and the thousands of summer visitors who flock here, having no knowledge of the 'Williamson connection', are also enchanted by the natural beauty of this estuary of the Two Rivers. However, for us the enlightened ones, there is a subtle alchemy that permeates the soul and intensifies perception. For it is true that even before having set foot in Devon a clear image had been etched in my mind of this romantic land: so that, when later I came amongst the actual locations used by Henry as scenes in his novels, they were at once familiar and identifiable. The beauty of the landscape was being observed through the eye of the writer drawing attention to its secret, hidden features and special delights.

Such is the dramatic power of the narrative, the writer's ability to set down on the page a scene so full of detail and realism that the vivid word-pictures thus created transport the reader through a warp of time and place into a living world of colour and drama. It is this remarkable gift, and the skill and complexity of his writing technique that stamps Henry's work with a unique originality. In the foreword to Lois Lamplugh's fascinating book about Henry, *A Shadowed Man*, Richard Williamson refers to this talent:

One of the strengths of my father's writing lies in his ability to capture the resonant atmosphere of place and time, in particular that of North Devon³

To ensure the success of a novel it is not mandatory for the story to be constructed around well-known locations. A literary work of depth and creative imagination will generate a life of its own without need for the reader to have any knowledge of the geography or place-names quoted. Nevertheless, a sense of time and place is an emotive sentiment: its existence, if skilfully employed, can stimulate the imagination and give valuable insight as to how the writer developed his characters or was inspired by the landscape out of which the narrative grew.

With few exceptions, Henry Williamson chose to make use of, and describe in great detail, real locations for his novels and articles. This faithful representation of actual places in the landscape contributes much to the true feeling of authenticity and reality in

his work. No doubt this ability was a feature that Williamson instantly recognised and admired in the work of Richard Jefferies, the 19th-century prose poet and mystic.

Towards the last years of his short and tragic life, Jefferies was inspired to compose some of his most moving and poignant essays, scarce able to lift a pen so that his devoted wife was required to write down as he painfully dictated his thoughts to her. These were stories about the old farmhouse at Coate and scenes of his boyhood years spent amid the countryside around Swindon. But Wiltshire had long since been left behind many years before, and although time and distance had not dimmed memories of his homeland, these thoughts were mingled with an amalgam of reminiscence and sad experience now much closer to Jefferies' life in Sussex. As a result the beautiful word-pictures he created were a combination of observations based on hours spent in the fields, woods, and Downland of Kent, Sussex and Wiltshire.

Of late there has been something of a revival of interest in those pioneer writers of the rural tradition. Notably these include the work of W.H. Hudson, Gilbert White, Edward Thomas and H.J. Massingham along with many others. Despite this, sadly Richard Jefferies hailed by Williamson as a 'Lightbringer' and innovator of the countryside genre, remains today largely unread. Unfortunately, many of those who do make an earnest effort to sample Jefferies' books abandon the attempt finding his style too Victorian for modern taste. This is a sad reflection as his acute attention to detail embraces all the wonders of the natural world and provides us with vivid images of the delicate tracery of a green leaf's form and the grace and power of a wild bird's flight as fresh and true as the day the ailing writer first penned it. Fellow writers from Edward Thomas to Henry Miller have recognised and praised Jefferies' unique individuality. The Richard Jefferies Society (Henry Williamson was its President for a number of years) has done much to redress the balance. Surely the time must come when truth and fine writing receive their just reward?

Apart from Samuel J. Looker who did so much to bring Jefferies' work to the notice of the general reading public by deciphering the nature notebooks and publishing them along with previously unknown manuscripts, Henry Williamson stands out as perhaps Jefferies' most passionate disciple. Dr Blench has demonstrated how Henry was captivated by Jefferies' writings and how his own earlier nature essays owe much to the Wiltshire writer's unique style. However, as Dr Blench goes on to show us in his excellent series of articles, Williamson later developed and perfected that early 'prentice work until with experience and maturity it became his own. Influenced by Jefferies, yes, but unmistakably stamped with the very original Williamson hallmark.⁴

We are all familiar with the tale of the dramatic revelation experienced by Henry in 1919 when in the Folkestone bookshop, he came across for the first time a copy of Jefferies' *Story of My Heart*. This of course was not his original encounter with the works of Richard Jefferies. Since early boyhood Henry was well acquainted with many of the books. In a preface to the 1966 Everyman edition of *Bevis* Henry writes:

When I was ten years old I read the book by day during the from school, and by night in my cave deep in the chalk of the downs, by the light of what was then called an electric flashlamp. My father found me reading one night – suddenly my secret cave was only my bed again – and I thought that I would be punished. But no. My father had read the book when he was a young man; his father had bought Bevis when it was first published in a three-volume edition in 1882. He shared its magic, and was kind about my disobedience, knowing that I was not very strong and too excitable. He reminded me that I was working for a scholarship (which I won a year later), and that if I did not sleep properly I would be 'fagged out' in the morning.⁵

I was about the same age as Henry when I first came across an illustrated copy of *Bevis* on the shelves of the children's section of our mobile public library (do not think you will find the book in many children's libraries today?). No doubt it was those wonderful black and white illustrations drawn by E.H. Shepherd that first caught my eye but I took the book home and was enthralled by the story of boyhood adventure. Mock battles between rival gangs, sailing on a lake, and overnight camps on a real island. How I longed to share those exciting adventures with *Bevis* and his great friend Mark. It was 1938 and I was unaware of the dark clouds that were once again gathering over Europe. The book went back to the library and, in the turmoil and fear of the violent years that followed I quite forgot the name of its author, but the memory of the story and its young hero stayed with me. How strange that years later when I had in turn discovered Henry Williamson, it was his regard to Richard Jefferies that roused my curiosity and sent me off in search of his books. This led me back to stumble upon the identity of the author of the magic book that had thrilled me as a young boy. The foundations thus were laid for a lifelong admiration and regard for this tragic writer. Henry speaks of the charm of *Bevis* and what it is that makes this story of boyhood so compelling where:

... every moment of life is wonderful; before the 'real world', or 'the other side', replaces the enchantments of the young imagination; before they grow up and become captives of circumstances, like Richard Jefferies himself, wasting away with an unknown illness while he wrote Bevis, while re-living in his mind the enchants of his boyhood in Wiltshire, on his father's farm under the downs near Swindon. All good things have to end. But to those whose lives have been enriched by reading this story, the magic does not depart with the last page. It remains. Bevis and Mark have been sailing, in the wintry storm, in their new boat, 'Pinta'. They furl the sails, and leave the 'Pinta' shipshape. By the time they had finished it was almost dark: the night had come.

On the way home they paused a moment under the great oak at the top of the Home Field, and looked back. The whole south burned with stars. There was a roar in the oak like the thunder of the sea. The sky was black, black as velvet, the black north had come down, and the stars shone and burned as if the wind reached and fanned them into flame. Large Sirius flashed; vast Orion strode the sky, lording the heavens with his sword. A scintillation rushed across from the zenith to the southern horizon. The black north held down the buds, but there was a force in them already that must push out in leaf as Arcturus rose in the East. Listening to the loud roar of the oak as the strength of the north wind filled them –

'I should like to go straight to the real great sea like the wind,' said Mark.

'We must go to the great sea,' said Bevis. 'Look at Orion!'

The wind went seawards, and the stars are always over the ocean.⁶

It is Jefferies' sublime enjoyment of the natural world that grasps our attention and gives us this clear vision of its wonder and beauty. He holds our hand and we are made to see as he does, the sheer joy of living. There is a grand simplicity about Jefferies' writing that gets straight to the heart of nature, as in this extract from one of his later essays, *Wild Flowers*:

If we had never before looked upon the earth, but suddenly came to it man or woman grown, set down in the midst of a summer mead, would it not seem to us a radiant vision? The hues, the shapes, the song and life of birds, above all the sunlight, the breath of heaven, resting on it; the mind would be filled with its glory, unable to grasp it, hardly believing that such things could be mere matter and no more. Like a dream of some spirit-

land it would appear, scarce fit to be touched lest it should fall to pieces, too beautiful to be long watched lest it should fade away. So it seemed to me as a boy, sweet and new³² like this each morning; and even now, after the years that have passed, and the lines they have worn in the forehead, the summer mead shines as bright and fresh as when my foot first touched the grass. It has another meaning now; the sunshine and the flowers speak differently, for a heart that has once known sorrow reads behind the page, and sees sadness in joy. But the freshness is still there, the dew washes the colours before dawn.⁷

There are a number of ways in which the lives of Jefferies and Williamson bear a close resemblance. Both writers looked to nature as the spring source of their genius. Both triumphed over adversity, for Jefferies it was the ever-present burden of pain and poverty, and for Williamson it was overcoming the challenge of a neglected farm, forcing himself to fight off weariness in order to write, night after night, to support both family and farm. This cost him dear in his personal relationships. Both writers shared that common occupational hazard of the creative artist, periods of deep depression. It was to the countryside that they turned for escape from the treadmill of enforced writing routines and the constraints of family life. Spirit of place was always very strong. For Henry Williamson it was Baggy's bluff headland and the lightning steep of a Peregrine Falcon. The white desolation of Braunton Burrows and the shining waters of the estuary of the Two Rivers. A ghostly Barn Owl quartering the mouse runs above the field at Ox's Cross, and the thin whistle of a dog otter in a dark, star-mirrored pool up on the Chains of Exmoor. For Jefferies his totems were the high hills, Liddington Camp and the Vale of the White Horse, Wolstenbury Hill and Ditchling Beacon, together amid the golden, ancient sun, azure blue sky and the restless ocean. Through all these potent symbols he sought revival of the depressed spirit:

. . . the haze hangs over the wide, dark plain, which soon after passing Redhill, stretches away on the right. It seems to us in the train to extend from the foot of a great bluff there to the first rampart distant South Downs. In the evening that haze will be changed to a flood of purple light veiling the horizon. Fitful glances at the newspaper or the novel pass the time; but now I can read no longer for I know without any marks of tangible evidence, that the hills drawing near. There is always hope in the hills.

The dust of London fills the eyes and blurs the vision; but it penetrates deeper than that. There is a dust that chokes the spirit, and it is this that makes the streets so long, the stones so stony, the desk so wooden; the very rustiness of the iron railings about the offices sets the teeth on edge, the sooty blackened walls (yet without shadow) thrust back the sympathies which are ever trying to cling to the inanimate things around us. A breeze comes in at the carriage window – a wild puff, disturbing the heated stillness of the summer day. It is easy to tell where that came from – silently the Downs have stolen into sight.⁸

Henry Williamson felt that through the medium of his own writing he was carrying on the tradition pioneered by the Wiltshire prose poet and he was convinced that the presence of the dead writer was very close to him:

When I was a young man, after the First World War of 1914–18, in which I served as an infantry soldier on the Western Front, I believed that the spirit of Richard Jefferies was helping me in my early struggles to write. I thought about him most of my waking hours. He was with me in my solitary walks in the country south of London.⁹

It was of course Jefferies' controversial *Story of My Heart* that so dramatically caught Henry Williamson's mood of spiritual reconstruction at the end of the Great War. 'Some sudden thought some careless rhyme, still floats above the wrecks of Time.' The *Story* is a strange and disturbing book, an autobiography of the spirit, a courageous attempt to express the deepest yearnings of the soul: and a fervent hope for the future of mankind. There is much in this book that Henry would have found to be greatly in tune with his own ideals. Like Jefferies, as Henry moved about in the sunshine he felt himself to be in the midst of immortal things. Henry's dreams of a war-shattered Europe's Phoenix revival no doubt gained strength from Jefferies' observation:

Probably the whole mode of thought of the nations must be altered before physical progress is possible. . . . When the ambition of the multitude is fixed on the idea of form and beauty then that ideal would become immediately possible.¹⁰

Whatever our views concerning Jefferies' philosophy on life and eternity, the wonderful description he gives in the book's opening chapter of a summer's day up on the Wiltshire Downs is unforgettable. The little blue thyme flowers, the 'sweet short turf' and the dry crumbling chalk, the 'unattainable flower of the sky' and the purity of the 'fresh and wandering air', the sun 'bursting through untrodden space'. All are vibrant images which capture the very spirit of the Downs and the emotions they arouse in the heart:

There were grass-grown tumuli on the hills to which of old I used to walk, sit down at the foot of one of them, and think. Some warrior had been interred there in ante-historic times. The sun of the summer morning shone on the dome of sward, and the air came softly up from the wheat below, the tips of the grasses swayed as it passed sighing faintly, it ceased, and the bees hummed by to the thyme and heathbells. I became absorbed in the glory of the day, the sunshine, the sweet air, the yellowing corn turning from its sappy green to summer's noon of gold, the lark's song like a waterfall in the sky. I felt at that moment that I was like the spirit of the man whose body was interred in the tumulus; I could understand and feel his existence the same as my own. He was as real to me two thousand years after interment as those I had seen in the body. The abstract personality of the dead seemed as existent as thought. . . . Sweetly the summer air came up to the tumulus, the grass sighed softly, the butterflies went by, sometimes alighting on the green dome. Two thousand years! Summer after summer the blue butterflies had visited the mound, the thyme had flowered, the wind sighed in the grass. The azure morning had spread its arms over the low tomb; the full flowing noon burned on it; the purple of sunset rosied the sward. Stars, ruddy in the vapour of the southern horizon, beamed at midnight through the mystic summer night, which is dusky yet full of light. White mists swept up and hid it; tender harebells drooped; the wings of the finches fanned the air – finches whose colours faded from the wings how many centuries ago! Brown autumn dwell in the woods beneath; the rime of winter whitened the beech clump on the ridge; again the buds came on the wind-blown hawthorn bushes, and in the evening the broad constellation of Orion covered the east. Two thousand times! Two thousand times the woods grew green, and ring-doves built their nests. Day and night for two thousand years – light and shadow sweeping over the mound – two thousand years of labour by day and slumber by night. Mystery gleaming in the stars, pouring down in the sunshine, speaking in the night, the wonder of the sun and far space, for twenty centuries round about this low and green-grown dome. Yet all that mystery and wonder is as nothing to the Thought that lies therein, to the spirit that I feel so close. Realizing that spirit, recognizing my own inner

*consciousness, the psyche, so clearly, I cannot understand time. It is eternity now, I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it, as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air. Nothing has to come; moment, by this tumulus, on earth, now; I exist in it. The years, the centuries, the cycles are absolutely nothing; it is only a moment since this tumulus was raised; in a thousand years more it will still be only a moment.*¹¹

With our knowledge of Henry Williamson's own intense feeling for the natural world, tempered with a strong spiritual awareness, one can imagine the shattering impact Jefferies' beautiful prose would have had on the perceptive imagination of a young ex-soldier still scarred, mentally and physically, from the effects of his experiences on the Western Front. Earlier, in the first chapter there appears a short paragraph which encapsulates Henry's preoccupation with the past and contains the genesis of his theme of fled springtimes of lost youth and innocence, expressed in the evocative imagery of 'Ancient Sunlight':

*I came to feel the long-drawn life of the earth back into the dimmest past, while the sun of the moment was on me. Sesostris on the most ancient sands of the south, in ancient, ancient days, was conscious of himself and the sun. This sunlight linked me through the ages to that past consciousness.*¹²

Jefferies felt a strong bond with that old Bronze Age chieftain buried under the brow of Liddington Hill. Williamson could identify with those mystic feelings of kinship with the Past. But his thoughts ran back across a much shorter span of time to those lost legions of the Crater Zone, out in the darkness of the Ypres Salient and the shattered downlands of the Somme. An awesome silence had but recently fallen upon the devastated woods and ravaged farmlands where the great and costly battles had been fought. Out of Jefferies' glimpse of eternity, and those nightmare memories of violent death and lost comrades, was forged the vision of 'Ancient Sunlight'; a link with the past which enabled the sad survivor to keep lasting faith with dear friends left behind in the mud of Flanders.

*I shall remember while the light lives yet
and in the nighttime I shall not forget.*

In July last year a party of us, mainly members of the Henry Williamson Society, stood in the searing heat of high summer at the gates of Ovillers Military Cemetery. From that vantage point we looked out across the early harvested corn stubble of Mash Valley to the place where Phillip Maddison led his platoon into action on that fateful bright, early morning of 1st July 1916. One particular chapter in *The Golden Virgin* entitled 'The Cakewalk' describes so well the horror and tragedy of what took place amid the green, undulating chalk downland of the Somme. The scenes of courage and senseless slaughter are recounted with such vivid detail and historic accuracy that it is hard to believe that there can be any doubt that Henry was there in Mash Valley on that dreadful day to witness the battle. However, Paul Reed's research confirms that in writing this most moving chapter, Henry must have in fact drawn on the recorded experiences of the unfortunate men of the 2nd Battalion, Middlesex Regiment who were in the line, facing the German trenches in that sector of Mash Valley, on the 1st July. But is it *really* important whether Henry was there at that time? Not one scrap – we are speaking of a work of *fiction*. Too often we tend to fall in the trap of speculating on just how much of the writing is autobiographical. It is fascinating to follow these clues that

beckon throughout the *Chronicle* novels. But in doing so, I feel that we are in danger of losing sight of the true blue of the work's literary merit and the skill of its author in producing a novel of such compelling realism and truth. We do know however, that Henry did have first-hand knowledge of the dreadful experience of what it was like to go into action 'over the top'. He also knew the area of the battlefield and the surrounding countryside well, having spent some considerable time there whilst serving as his battalion's transport officer. This was an experience that he was able to use to considerable effect when constructing the narrative. The 'Cakewalk' chapter is a gripping piece of writing, but to illustrate a further example of Williamson's fine sense of time and place let us turn to a later description of that same old Mash Valley battlefield which is taken from *Love and the Loveless*, the chapter called 'Ancre Valley'.

Six months have passed since that terrible morning in July. It is now winter and Phillip, recovered from his wounds, is back as the company's transport officer, leading his mule teams each night up to the front line with supplies. After dinner on Christmas Day, Phillip rides down to Albert from Colincamp in order to pay a nostalgic return to that old battlefield of July the First:

Through the cleared streets of the town's square he passed, coming to the Bapaume road, a rising riband of grey mud red in patches from shell-holes filled by bricks, and ground by wheels and feet of men and beasts into liquid. Mules and horses were moving where once it would have been death to be seen in daylight. The transport animals had come across the battlefield tracks, their bellies looked as though swallows had been building nests under them, their ears were dejected, as slowly they walked back home to picket line and stable. He came to the old front line, now flattened and dragged about; littered, like the verges of the road, with rusty rifles, Lewis guns, helmets, shells, and other debris. Dismounting, and giving the reins to his groom, he walked, with clogs of loam clinging to his feet, about the old Noman's-land of Mash Valley, where he and his platoon had gone over in July. Little was recognisable. Lips of the mine craters were trodden down, paths wandered among thin stems of weeds which had sprung up during the past summer. Many of the dead still lay where they had fallen, each an almost level suggestion of something wasted into the soil with relict bone and fragment of uniform covered with little heapings of earth thrown out by tunnelling rats. A few runs were still in use, judging by the smoothness of entry and exit.

A brass buckle; fragment of leather; skull with curls matted upon it; puttee coiled about leg bone; broken helmet from which sandbag covered had fretted away, leaving only the faded paint of divisional colours – everywhere the dead had merged with the ground. Where is Rose Avenue? He was lost, helplessly, in chalky waste. Ovillers was a disturbed whiteness, a frozen sea with thin, black masts. He moved on, searching, Pimm – Howells – Sergeant Jones – Marsh – Clodd – Hammond – Smith – Rybell – Johnson – the summer print of faces faded in the cold ruin of winter. Was this litter of burst and broken sandbags, collapsed and spilled, the trench where he had clambered out on that summer morning? This the wicker pigeon cage carried by Pimm, lying near a scatter of ribs, and, immediately by the handle, a cluster of tiny white finger and knuckle bones? Was that the torn-open petrol tin of water Pimm had been carrying when it seemed that shell had burst near and thrown scalding water upon his own thigh? Was that his pelvis bone, in which three small coins, a franc and two 10-centime pieces, had been embedded by the shell explosion? He felt the scar in his buttock tingling as he stood beside what was left of Pimm; and closing

his eyes, gave the emptiness of himself to prayer. Poor little terrified Howells, would be identifiable by his bullet-proof vest, or had the phosphorus bombs which had caught fire while he carried them consumed bones and all to ash?

Thousands upon thousands of helmets lay among the grass bents and thistle stalks. Anguish rose in him; wherever he looked, to whatever horizon – eastwards, to north and south from where he stood, the grey wilderness extended an arc of sky-line fretted by stumps of trees, soil and subsoil burst up, to fall and be tossed up and down again, abandoned, fossilized under the cold shearing of wind, and the helpless pity of the rain. His mother's face came to him, while he thought that the spirit of a million unhappy homes had found its final devastation in this land of the loveless. He went back the way he had come, riding into a low pueple sunset down to the valley of the Ancre, and up the track again to Colincamps.¹³

How well that extract portrays the senseless wastage and cruel futility of war! We all have our favourite passages from Henry's writing which one turns to time and again. Hugh Cecil writing in Fr. Brocard Sewell's *Symposium* on Henry, takes up this point:

The test of a really good book is the degree to which it repays repeated reading. The war novels of the Chronicle sequence, especially the two earlier ones, How Dear is Life and Fox Under My Cloak, yield more and more with each return to them. They are like memory itself – small, bright, mysterious patches of sunlight, recollected misery and guilt, affection, sense of loss, embarrassment and beauty, with the recent and far past mingling always together. After reading them I had at times the illusion – so intense is Williamson's vision – that I had actually seen the men who marched away in the autumn of 1914 and that even, perhaps, I was among their number. I felt suddenly close to cousins killed at Villers Cotterets and Hooze nearly thirty years before I was born. A writer who can do this to one is going beyond simply shocking, horrifying, moving and informing his readers. He is actually bringing them to share his own thought so that they can see the war as he does, with moments of clear recollection as well as with the mind's confusions and dreams. That is probably as close as a reader can ever get to knowing what it was like to have fought in the Great War.¹⁴

The Great War was never far from Henry Williamson's thoughts. In 1928 he wrote a long essay for the *London Mercury* entitled 'Reality in War Literature'. This later appeared with a collection of Henry's other essays in *Linhay on the Downs*. In an introduction to this essay Henry comments on how the senses can unexpectedly arouse haunting memories from the past. (Most of us I am sure will have experienced an example of this phenomenon. For my part I have a vivid recollection of how, for months after the end of the Second World War, the drone of an aircraft or a car could, without warning, produce the same sick feeling of dread that once heralded the sound of a fast approaching German V1 'Flying Bomb':)

The noise of a motor car suddenly slowing in the lane outside my window in this year of grace nineteen twenty-eight puts out the sunlight for an instant; I admit that I encourage the visitation of old scenes of the war. The sunlight, an agent of life, is often stronger than the haunting wish to be back again: firelight darkness in the best medium, with winter rain flat and quivering on the window.¹⁵

As far back as 1919 Henry had begun to contemplate the writing of the 'London' trilogy, a series of novels recounting the story of Willie Maddison's town cousin, Phillip. The

years went by and although much research and preparatory writing was done during that time, the project continued to remain an ambitious dream. Henry had intended to commence work on the saga in 1931 but other demands prevented this. Finally, in 1945 with the Second World War at an end and the Norfolk farm sold, Henry returned alone to his hilltop hermitage. Back amid that fair Devon landscape, source of so much of Henry's creative inspiration he felt, like Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, again the old desire to 'rescue from decay' memories of the past:

*I would give,
While yet we may, as far as words can give,
A substance and a life to what I feel:
I would enshrine the spirit of the past
For future restoration.*

After the years of carrying the dream and the reality, the moment was at last at hand to begin writing the trilogy (Henry little realised at that time to what lengths the story would expand the grow). In spite of the earlier groundwork done by Henry there were all manner of problems with the first novel. Henry was convinced that *The Dark Lantern* was doomed to fail, no one would read it; but he persevered, 'chipping every word from the breastbone', as with *Tarka* and *Salar*. Much later when the book was published and widely acclaimed, Henry realised that he was back as an objective writer, to use his won words, ". . . the artist had taken over and the subjective poet was burned out." Despite the passage of years he was able, through the power of memory and imagination to re-create powerfully evocative scenes of youth and childhood. An inventory of recollections and painstaking research which maintains an extraordinary fidelity to historical fact.

The early 'London' novels of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* provide a marvellous evocation of life in a rural suburb at the turn of the century. In these books the author holds our attention on so many levels. A gripping family drama told with mounting excitement and interest. The rich prose flows on, crowded with intriguing characters and vivid detail; full of social, and local history of the period. One is constantly being reminded of the author's perceptive observation, and the meticulous care he took to give the books their authentic flavour of life and historical accuracy. As a case in point I had thought for many years since reading the books, that the village of 'Cross Aulton', family home of the Turney's, was a name that Henry had invented in order to provide a fictional identity for the real name, Carshalton. However, recently in Edward Walford's absorbing book *Greater London* (first published in 1883) I came across a reference which confirmed that an earlier spelling of the name Carshalton was indeed written as Cross Aulton. It demonstrates how good was Henry's knowledge of local history. The novels thus in their entirety comprise a major social document, a microcosm of the common man facing up to life's bitter-sweet joys, disappointments and tragedy, set against the green countryside of North Kent, already in retreat from the vast, creeping housing developments of London County Council. Part of my early boyhood was spent just a few miles from Henry's Brockley birthplace so the locations and settings referred to in the *Chronicle* are particularly special for me. As we have found from our ". . . wanders with that old wraith of myself in the well-loved places", many of the original streets, buildings and pubs still exist as they were in Henry's youth. Much of the topography can still be identified from the wealth of information contained in the novels themselves. It is this very 'Spirit of Place' that gives the story a unique appeal. The following extract

from the first chapter of *The Dark Lantern* illustrates that special quality:

Over the Hill at night shone the stars of heaven; but they were seldom observed by those walking there, for northwards lay the city of London, with its street lights seen on a clear evening winking away into the haze by the river; while to the east and south of east lay the high roads into Kent, the vegetable garden of London, marked by the diminishing gas-flares of the borough. Turning towards the west, where the last of the sunset was lost in the smoky dew, the solitary walker pausing in his constitutional beheld here and there in the dark spaces below him steady points of light which were windows of farm-houses lit by oil-lamps, and weather-boarded labouring men's cottages showing a glimmer of dip or farthing candle. Arable farming was, towards the close of the nineteenth century, still being carried on in the fields yet unbuilt upon south of the Hill.

The gentle winds of evening in May, eddying from the chalk downs of north-west Kent and pushing back the smoke of London across the marshes of the river, brought the cries of owls, and sometimes, when the scents of lilac and hawthorn blossom were in the still air, the voices of nightingales answering one another across the moonlit spaces of the night. Occasionally when the wind was from the south-east the chatter of warblers could be heard among the reeds of the randisbourne brook beyond the railway station half a mile away.

Upon the acid pastures of the Hill, clover-diminished owing to the steady descent of soot, an occasional straying hare was to be seen, uncertain and depressed of ear, as though having heard the rumour that the forty acres of immemorial glebe were to be sold, and to that distending and parvenue county whose only claim to arable and pasture, beyond its city parks, was by its suppression of farmlands under the weight of its burnt subsoil, a clay variously yellow and umber, made into brick houses in rows – the county of London.¹⁶

There can be few finer openings to a novel than this; no matter how many times one reads it the magic of the writing remains. For many it could be said that the *Chronicle* symbolises the story of Henry Williamson's heart. Its theme – '... that love is courage, is honour and for the loveless, redemption through love which gives harmony; and by which, Art the flower of human living comes to being.'¹⁷

Until the formation of the Henry Williamson Society in 1980 most of that secret army of faithful readers ploughed a lonely furrow. Once the society came into being all that changed; there was now the chance for kindred spirits to gather in warm friendship to share in a common regard and appreciation for the genius of a great writer. Even those prevented by distance or circumstance from attending meetings can maintain a close link through the medium of an excellent and informative journal. The society is greatly strengthened by being given enthusiastic support and active encouragement by Henry's own family. We also have the means by which we are able to visit many of those special places associated with the writer's life and work. We are privileged to enter Henry's private world and in so doing explore where the author lived and wrote: Lewisham, the Hilly Fields and Eastern Road. The Norfolk farm at Stiffkey, Apsley Guise, Bedford; and more recently the old battlefields of the Western Front. Of all these locations so full of nostalgic memory perhaps the one place where we feel most close to the writer (with the exception of St George's churchyard, Ham) is the little wooden writing hut at Ox's Cross. For it is from here that one may see the blue hills of Exmoor and the distant Dartmoor Tors. Below, the Estuary of the Two Rivers glitters in the sunlight. Around us are so many reminders of what was achieved in this miniature power house of the imagination. In that small hut shut away from the world for thousands of hours, day

after day from dawn to moonrise; millions of words 'chipped from the breastbone', countless revisions and re-drafts striving to re-create a vanished age. Driven on by his daemon, despite weariness and the burden of years to complete his final great masterpiece.

Carved in the woodwork of the writing hut by Henry's own hand there are these words:

*Their tears are clouds these many centuries*¹⁸

The lonely old writer again looking back to where distant footsteps echo through the corridors of Time:

*Therefore I believe this so-strong feeling for the past is not sentimentality, as some critics have declared: whether or not it has a basis in nervous weakness I am not sure; all I know today is that without it I would never have become a writer, a traveller to other worlds, of the past, and the future. Yet sometimes it happens that the present comes fully alive for me, when I think of you with whom I have shared so much, so that now it seems our inner lives flow as one. Shakespeare's 30th sonnet says it so much better than I can. I drink to you in ancient sunlight.*¹⁹

Shakespeare's sonnet so well reflects Henry's ethos and vision of youth and innocence lost in ancient sunlight that I make no apology for using an extract from it here:

*When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear times waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unus'd to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight . . .*

To borrow the words of George Painter, Richard Jefferies and Henry Williamson have ' . . . stayed living within me as one of the permanent experiences of my life'; their books have accompanied me and influenced my thought since boyhood. Long ago they opened my eyes and ears to the natural world. As Wordsworth puts it:

*I have learned to look on nature, not as in the hour of my thoughtless youth; but hearing off-times the still sad music of humanity.*²⁰

Few of us will encounter a mystic experience similar to that of Richard Jefferies up in the clear air and sunshine on Liddington Hill, but reading the nature essays and countryside descriptions from the pen of these two great writers always evokes a sense of wonder and appreciation of visual beauty. When the dark heavens are ablaze with countless stars, and green hedgerows a mass of blossom with the return of spring; I feel a deep gratitude to Jefferies and Williamson who have allowed me to share their own natural passionate joy. This brings me at last to the somewhat obscure title of this paper. A quotation not from Henry's beloved Shelley nor from the soldier poet, Wilfrid Owen; they are in fact the words of that tragic wraith of the Thames Embankment, Francis Thompson, from his epic *Hound of Heaven*:

*I dimly guess what Time in mists confounds
yet, ever and anon, a trumpet sounds
from the hid battlements of Eternity.*

We began this quest in search of ancient sunlight in the blue, springtime skies above North Devon. Let us return to that fair country and end with a message of hope:

Today the sun shines; the yellowhammer sings; the woodbine grows in lustiness; we are happy under the great sun of Devon:

'It is the same beautiful old country always new. Neither the iron engine nor the wooden plough alter it one iota, and the love of it rises in our hearts as constantly as the coming of the leaves.'

The words of Richard Jefferies, arising in spirit out of ancient sunlight, make the spring the more beautiful for us this April.²¹

NOTES

1. *The Unreturning Spring*, James Farrar. Edited and Introduction by Henry Williamson. See pp. 222-223 (Williams & Norgate 1950)
2. 'The Two Maddisons', George D. Painter, *The Aylesford Review* vol. ii No. 6 Spring 1959, p. 214
3. *A Shadowed Man: Henry Williamson*, Lois Lamplugh, Foreword by Richard Williamson (Wellsprung 1990)
4. 'The Influence of Richard Jefferies on the Writings of Henry Williamson', Dr J.W. Blench, *Durham University Journal* 'The Apprenticeship of a Novelist, The Early Unpublished Fiction of Henry Williamson' Dr J.W. Blench, *The Henry Williamson Society Journal*, No. 17 March 1988 Part 1 pp. 5-19; *ibid.*, No. 18 September 1988 Part II pp. 39-49; *ibid.*, No. 19 March 1988 Part III pp. 31-45
5. *Bevis, The Story of a Boy*, Richard Jefferies, Introduction by Henry Williamson (Dent, Everyman's Library 1966)
6. *Ibid.*
7. *The Open Air*, Richard Jefferies (Chatto & Windus 1913)
8. *Nature Near London*, Richard Jefferies, 'To Brighton', p. 183 (Chatto & Windus 1931)
9. *Bevis, The Story of a Boy*, *op. cit.*, see note 5. Also see *HWS Journal*, No. 20, Sept. 1989, p. 4
10. *The Story of My Heart*, Richard Jefferies, Ch. VII p. 131 (Longman, Green & Co. 1908)
11. *Ibid.*, Ch. III pp. 37-43
12. *Ibid.*, Ch. I p. 14
13. *Love and the Loveless*, Henry Williamson, Ch. 6 'Ancre Valley' p. 103 (Macdonald 1958)
14. *Henry Williamson, The Man, The Writings" A Symposium*, Fr Brocard Sewell p. 69 'Henry Williamson: Witness of the Great War' Hugh Cecil (Tabb House 1980)
15. *The Linhay on the Downs*, Henry Williamson, Part 2 'Reality in War Literature' p. 224 (Jonathan Cape 1934)
16. *The Dark Lantern*, Henry Williamson, Ch. I 'Camberwell Beauty' p. 1 (Macdonald 1951)
17. BBC Records and The Henry Williamson Literary Estate, *The Broadcasts of Henry Williamson*, cassette Vol. 1 'I Remember' Side 2 Band 2 'World of Books'. A short treatise on the novel sequences of *Flax* and *The Chronicle* (1963)
18. I have sought for some years to trace the source of this quotation and can only conclude that it is indeed 'original Williamson'.
19. *Goodbye West Country*, Henry Williamson, '31 December' p. 397 (Putnam 1937)
20. From Wordsworth's 'Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey'
21. *The Lone Swallows*, Henry Williamson, 'April' p. 235 (Putnam 1937)

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