

A Ballad of Spring

Peter K. Robins

A bonus of collecting second-hand books is that it is not unusual to find an item of interest tucked between the pages. Whether a bus ticket, a shopping list, postcard or press cutting, I feel it links us to the previous owner and we wonder in what circumstances they parted with the book.

Recently, I bought a copy of James Farrar's *The Unreturning Spring* (Williams & Norgate, 1950) at a bookshop in Epsom, now sadly gone, like so many others. Inside the copy was a press cutting with a headline "A Ballad of Spring" above a photograph of Flying Officer James Farrar taken in 1944, the year he died.

The piece itself was about a Sutton-born poet, Trevor Hold, who had written a song cycle for soprano, baritone and orchestra based on *The Unreturning Spring*, which had just received its London premiere. This was most intriguing and I decided to track down Mr Hold.

The press cutting was not dated nor was the newspaper it had come from identified. Fortunately the reverse of the article included personal announcements and I was able to pin down publication to some time in June 1976. In the piece, Trevor Hold was described as being a lecturer in music at Nottingham University. In fact he was a student there but did teach at the universities of Aberystwyth, Liverpool and finally Leicester, who were kind enough to give me his address in Northamptonshire.

I asked him how he came to set some of Farrar's poems as a song cycle.

"I first came across *The Unreturning Spring* in 1959 and was immediately attracted to it. Not only was I impressed by Farrar's skills as a writer, he also struck a chord with me: I was of a similar age to him when he was writing his poems and stories and we shared an enthusiasm for the books of Henry Williamson.

"In the previous year I had made a pilgrimage to Ox's Cross to see Henry and subsequently corresponded with him. I had four letters from him and the first, dated July 1961, was written after I'd sent him a short-story for comment. I still possess the copy which he sub-edited. The other three, dated 1966, 1970 and 1973 were all concerned with *The Unreturning Spring*.

"The first public performance, at which Margaret Farrar was present, was given in May 1970 at the University of Liverpool, conducted by Howard Williams. It was subsequently performed at Kensington Town Hall by the Kensington Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Leslie Head, in May 1976 [the performance referred to in the cutting]. To my knowledge it has not been performed since.

The seven poems set in the song cycle are: 1. A Song of Autumn 2. The Wind 3. Blackthorn 4. Blossoming 5. The Beloved 6. Airman's Wife 7. After Night Offensive. The scoring is for two soloists, soprano and baritone, accompanied by an orchestra of wind quintet (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and horn) and strings. There is no 'narrative' to the sequence; instead a movement from Autumn through to Spring to another Autumn (and this time 'unreturning spring').

Regrettably there is not space in this report to reprint the seven poems from *The Unreturning Spring* but those readers fortunate enough to have a copy will understand the great poignancy of their content from one who was shot down over the North Sea on 26 July, 1944 at the age of only twenty. His body was never recovered. A bright flame extinguished.

Trevor Hold gave up full-time university teaching in 1989 to concentrate on creative writing, music and poetry. In that year he compiled and edited *A Northamptonshire Garland* for Northamptonshire Libraries, a highly-acclaimed anthology of

Northamptonshire poetry. I can recommend it to anyone interested in pastoral poetry, particularly John Clare.

Since then the BBC has broadcast a symphony and song cycles based on his own poetry. *The Countryman* has published his work and selections have appeared in three volumes Trevor has published himself; *Time & the Bell* (1971), *Caught in Amber* (1981) and *Mermaids and Nightingales* (1991). The latter includes a poem dedicated to Henry Williamson, which Trevor has granted us permission to reproduce:

ANCIENT SUNLIGHT
for Henry Williamson

Through the glass of Time,
discoloured with the dust of passing years,
the sun still shines.
Its fire has gone: it is no longer bright
but parchment-ochre, cracked with age,
yet it illuminates, like specks in its shaft
fields as beautiful with their flowers and grasses
thrusting upwards to the ancient sunlight
in all the eagerness of that year's spring,
as those in which I walk today.

Copies of *Mermaids & Nightingales* are available at £3.00 (plus 50p p&p) from Trevor Hold, Dovecote House, Wadenhoe, Northamptonshire PE8 5SU

Apologia

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The Editor apologises for the error on the Contents Page (3) of the last Issue, where the issue number and publication date are incorrect. A gremlin crept in when some other corrections were made at the proof-reading stage and the error went unnoticed. Please would you all amend this to the correct information.

A Breath of Country Air, Part 2

The last line and the date of the article 'Spring is a little early' were inadvertently omitted from page 22. The missing words are:

yet, at any rate. March 5, 1945

John Gregory apologises for this error and has prepared a small Addendum slip which he will supply to anyone who requires it (address on inside back cover).