

The Difficulties of Rural Writing

Henry Williamson

By rural writing I mean the kind of books I myself have recently written, 'The Village Book' and its sequel, 'The Labouring Life' (which is a very bad title). The difficulties are personal difficulties. The first or chief difficulty is to get at the truth of any human action. I do not see that it is possible to be impartial when writing about one's neighbours. You may dislike a particular man for years; he may seem to have a prize-fighter's face and no humanity. Then something happens: you perceive he is not without grace, charm, sensibility. He becomes human. You become his friend. After a while he is a thoroughly decent fellow, much superior to the man for whom your liking is not so pronounced, the fellow who put your wall up badly, and overcharged you.

The author of a village history will probably say it is a good book, while those who dislike him will certainly say it is full of lies and caricatures. If the author has a glimmering of sense he will exclude all that he has written in criticism of his neighbours, especially if he feels a sense of his own moral superiority. Again, how to discern between his prejudices and what he believes to be true? The modern trick of writing with what looks like impartiality may conceal his prejudices, but they will be there. For example, see the account of a thing I wrote ten years ago. It was intended to be the most truthful account ever written – there it is, Chapter 1 of 'The Village Book' – but is it true? I have many qualms today. I actively hated what at that time seemed to me to be cruelty and insensibility: I was there to show it up. The one true feeling I had was a desire to make something out of what I had seen and heard.

The point, as far as I am concerned with myself and all that the search for truth entails, is that the sooner one abandons any ideas of direct truth the better for one's life and work; for if such ideas don't lead to Tom o'Bedlam's land, they certainly make a waste place of one's life. The late Bernard Gilbert attempted to write the truth about his neighbours, and it broke his back. In the uncompleted 'Old England' series, there is a monumental warning how not to write. When the poor fellow, for instance, wanted to write the truth about market day, he tried to get everything down on paper; and he devised a method of writing dialogue in tiers or layers, one above the other on the printed page – several people talking at once in the bus going to market – everything they said, repetitions as well, and all talking at the same time. but how about the market place, or the High Street? Why not three hundred voices going at once, with three hundred tiers of dialogue?

The seeker, or would-be grasper of Truth, serves himself, or his Art, for awhile in the wilderness; but in the wilderness there are no roots. In the wilderness, too, one learns to see the normal life, left behind, through a mirage. Bernard Gilbert's characters, like many of those of Mr. T.F. Powys, are not true or normal characters. The commonplace or fiction-market writer, following along the high road to the magazines and libraries, often writes less untruly than the lesser saints who have been trained in the wilderness of reaction. The commonplace writer will create a villain, and then win the reader's facile sympathy by making the villain do something noble towards the end of the story; even so, such feeble art is less untrue to life than the consistent villains of better writers.

I am, or was, a wilderness writer; but I have had to unlearn what I learnt in the wilderness. When I began to see the scapegoat bones by the wayside, and the sanded horizon apparently melting in swooning air, yet remaining static in its barren leagues, I hurried back, hoping it was not too late to lose myself among the sheep once more.

While yet in the wilderness of my illusions I began to write 'The Village Book'; and although fatigued from the conception and writing of the four novels ending with 'The

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Pathway', I still felt I had the power to write a new truth, to transmute, by the ardour of vision, sand into air ascending. Now that I have finished the job – which, after all, was hard and often tedious work – I wish that I had perceived before the only truth that I can now accept: the truth that Truth is not so much a vision of reformation as an understanding of things as they are. Have I, for example, written truly about the character called the Rector? I call him an imaginary character, because I have manipulated him, for the purposes of fiction, while writing the various stories in which he appears. Therefore the character is a Williamson-rector; the Rector is not, by reason of the manipulation, a truthful portrait of any living man. At the same time it would be contemptible and dishonest to deny that the character is based upon the incumbent of the village where I lived for several years. It is based upon the late Rector of the village; and the other characters are based upon living people, too.

When I said above that I wished I had returned from the wilderness before I began 'The Village Book', I meant that as man and writer I would like to be as the sun, which divines the true or inner nature of living things. When the rain drifts grey and cold in winter, when the north-east wind dries the lanes and withers fields and gardens, when the frost racks earth and water in agony, then it is not seemly to seek Truth; but when the sun shines, there is a Being which unlocks and discovers the spirit of man or beast. The sun is entirely truthful; the sun sees no shadows.

It is possible, by a sun-like understanding, to discover among the crotchety and cantankerous, among the so-called cruel and vicious, the same person as oneself: the human being which has grown from a child to its present shape, and in its heart still has the solar innocence of the child. To be like the sun is to see all things plain, and to draw all like to oneself.

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Your President Richard Williamson, has taken a major part in the production of the official guide to the Trail to be published at that time, by writing short introductions to each section of the route.

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