The Influence of Richard Jefferies upon Henry Williamson

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Part I

The vast majority of young writers, when they feel the creative urge and are mere apprentices in the art of writing take as models earlier writers whose works they admire, and with whom they feel a special affinity. In due course they absorb the influence of their models and attain to their own style of writing, which nevertheless frequently continues to show to some extent as an element in the whole, these early influences. In the case of Henry Williamson, the work of Richard Jefferies exercised a crucial early influence upon him, while throughout his life his enthusiasm for Jefferies continued to show itself as an important element in his artistic achievement. In this article I shall discuss Williamson's own statements about the influence of Jefferies upon him, and try to trace this influence upon his works.

In his Introduction to Jefferies's *Bevis* in Dent's Everyman's Library edition (1966) Williamson recounts how as a boy of ten years of age he 'read the book by day during holidays from school, and by night in' his 'cave deep in the chalk of the downs by the light of what was then called an electric flashlamp' (p. viii). In fact the cave was his bed; he was hiding the book and the light under the bedclothes when he should have been asleep. Caught at it by his father he was not punished, as he expected to be, because his father remembered the magic of *Bevis* which he too had read a a boy, in *his* fathers copy bought when it was first published in 1882 in three volumes. Furthermore, Williamson tells us, in the *Selection* which he made from Jefferies's writings in 1937, that his grandfather much admired Jefferies's work and 'went to visit him at Brighton to tell him what a superb writer he was: and how a future generation of Englishmen, his grandchildren perhaps (then not born) would really appreciate his books.[1] It would seem that Williamson had inherited an enthusiasm for Jefferies together with an affinity of temperament with the earlier writer. As a small boy, he tells us in the 'Epigraph' to his *Selections* from Jefferies, that he 'lived a secret life' in his 'grandfather's copies of *Bevis, The Amateur Poacher* and *Wild Life in a Southern County*'.[2] The vivid and detailed observation of nature in these books did not merely provide the young Williamson with a beautiful imaginative realm into which he could escape; it accorded also with his own increasing habit of looking carefully at natural phenomena, especially bird-life in the woods of north-west Kent near his home in Lewisham (much nearer the open country than now) and in the Bedfordshire countryside near Aspley Guise, known to him through visits to relatives there.[3] The piece of writing of earliest date of composition which Williamson in due course allowed to be published is the fragment of 'A Boy's Nature Diary' (22 February - 27 April, 1913) which he included in the second edition of *The Lone Swallows* (1933).[4] This shows him as the budding field naturalist, excitedly exploring with friends and his cousin Charlie the fascinating variety of bird-life to be encountered on short trips on foot or bicycle. To help him identify birds and understand their habits Williamson did not rely on on Jefferies: he took the fortnightly parts of *British Birds* which he shared with one of his friends, probably Terence Tetley,[5] and it seems very likely that he had been given a copy of Richard and Cherry Kearton's' *Our Bird Friends* (1900).[6] The quality of the writing in 'A Boy's Nature Diary' is that of an

apprentice, but it shows Williamson's correct intuition that careful observation is a necessity in one who aspires to be a good writer. He was to praise Jefferies for his 'keen sight and hearing'[7] and it is obvious that he realized early the importance of seeing things freshly for oneself. Like the young Jefferies, Williamson was not averse to enjoying some shooting.[8] However, just as Jefferies came to prefer watching birds to shooting them, even if he carried a gun with him out of habit, so Williamson in a revealing passage about his boyhood in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1941), recalls that although 'his ambition was to stay at school for always' so that he could 'be in the country and watch birds', nevertheless:

> *I wanted to be a farmer, vaguely, if I must be something. The picture of myself as a farmer was always the same, and very simple: wandering with my gun under my arm slowly, meditatively across a field as the sun was setting. I supposed I would be after rabbits: though the gun was always under my arm and I was thinking of boyhood days gone for ever. (p. 24)*

In his case too the gun has become, in imagination at least, a mere habitual companion rather than a weapon to be used.

Williamson's earliest genuinely literary efforts are some short nature essays included in *The Lone Swallows*. The first of these, 'Winter's Eve', dedicated to the great friend of his boyhood Terence Tetley 'in memory', was written, he tells us, in Flanders, during the winter of 1914/15.[9] The particularity and freshness of the observation in the essay is akin to that of Jefferies who has doubtless influenced him in this way. Also the feeling of regret which permeates the piece has some affinity with one of Jefferies's moods, although the total impression is individual, and could only have been produced I think, by Williamson himself. Already he has absorbed an influence from Jefferies and is able to create something distinctly his own. The whole essay is a pleasing blend of vivid sense impressions and elegiac feeling. Set, I believe, in the Kentish countryside, perhaps at Holwood Park, it begins with an evocation of the mysterious hooting of two brown owls.

> *"Woo-—oo–oo–"*
> *Long drawn out as though the note is bubbling through water, it quavers from the dark wood yonder, seen in the dim light of the stars. From the other wood across the grassland, a plain hoot floats back.* Woo-loo, woo-loo! *No sound of wings beating – the flight of the wood owl is silent, his broad wings, covered with the softest down, fan the air as he proceeds through the wood.* (The Lone Swallows, *revised edn. 1933, p. 214)*

Williamson goes on to describe with great clarity and vividness the manner in which the owls hunt their prey of field-mice, voles and rats. Having caught a rat the owl calls to its mate. This allows Williamson to reflect on the impression this sound makes upon human listeners:

> *Heard thus in the loneliness of the winter night, there seems an infinite sadness in the deep mellow cries of these night fliers. To hear an owl hooting repeatedly around the cottage at night is supposed, in the country, to portend death. (p. 215)*

He leans up against a barred gate alone, yielding to his feelings of awe and longing as he looks at the stars. A brief encounter with a farm hand on his way home from the inn points up the difference between the man with poetic feelings and the ordinary man; the labourer speaks politely but thinks that Williamson is 'mazed'. Suddenly a barn owl

passes over his head with its harp high-pitched cry. This is the bird which was to become Williamson's totem, and he describes its appearance and habits simply but vividly. This leads to a recollection of his finding, one day in summer, the body of a barn owl thrown among thorns; it had been shot and died in agony, slowly he believes, remembering its mate.

> *Owls pair for life, and like most birds, their lives are ideal. It seemed to me, regarding the skeleton, a sadness that all that was left of a beautiful bird was a wasted bundle of bones and feathers, flung among the thorns. (p. 218)*

In the winter of 1914/15 many young men were dying in agony, and although Williamson does not mention this, I suspect that the fate of the owl was all the more poignant to him because of it. The essay ends as it began, with the hooting of the brown owl, and Williamson's reflections on it, possibly influenced by the end of Jefferies's *The Amateur Poacher* with its expression of enthusiasm for being in the open air, but again individual to Williamson's sensibility:

> *Woo-loo-woo-loo-woo-o-oo! the brown owl calls in the night. And while I am here on earth, let me be in the fields where I can see the bright stars, and dream as my birds of mystery pass in silence and alone. (p. 218)*

Other early short pieces in *The Lone Swallows* which show clear observation and knowledge of the habits of birds but are without the emotional quality of 'Winter's Eve', are 'A Very Bad Bird' (about the Little Owl) and 'Cuckoo Notes'. These date from 1916 and show promise but are unremarkable in themselves.

Like those of many other front-line soldiers of the War, Williamson's earlier perceptions were dulled by his experiences of battle and by the hectic social life out of the line. He lost his delight in nature and bird-life for the time being.[10] However he did not lose his impulse to write; helped towards self-knowledge by his readings of the poems of Francis Thompson during the summer of 1917, he began to write a novel in the winter of 1917/18.[11] It seems that he abandoned it in October 1918 only to begin a second novel in November 1918, which he finished early in 1919. Although these novels have great interest they are distinctly apprentice work, and are not so good as the early nature essays in *The Lone Swallows*. Clearly Williamson needed some new stimulus to help him develop successfully as a writer. This came in the summer of 1919, when he was still a serving officer in the Bedfordshire Regiment. By a happy Providence he went into a second-hand bookseller's shop in Folkestone, where he was stationed, and came upon a worn copy of Jefferies's *The Story of My Heart*, which he had not read before. The effect upon him was immediate and striking, partaking of the quality of a spiritual illumination. It was the blend of beautiful natural description and the sense of the past, in a notable passage in chapter 3 of *The Story of My Heart*, that effected the transformation in Williamson.

> *'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 the ante-historic times. The sun of the summer morning shone on the dome of sward, and the air came up softly from the wheat below, the tips of the grasses swayed as it passed sighing faintly. It ceased, and the bees hummed by the thyme and the heath-bells.'*
>
> *I stood there while people passed in and out of the shop. Mysteriously my mind had reached back to before the war years, to the great summer of my boyhood..*[12]

It seems that Williamson suddenly began to relive with great intensity his happy experiences in North Devon during a holiday there in the summer of 1914 before the War. He describes this holiday in an article 'The Last Summer' in *The Sunday Times* Colour Supplement for 2 August 1964. During the journey from Waterloo Station to his destination 'a village of thatched cottages and orchards' (in fact Braunton, although not named here) he was fascinated by the many new sights which he saw, especially seven buzzards soaring above a west-country valley; 'a bird seen hitherto only in photographs of the fortnightly parts of *British Birds*, by Richard and Cherry Kearton'. Once arrived at the village where he was to stay (Georgeham, but again not named), conveyed thither in a jingle driven by a humorous Devonian, he gave himself to a rapturous enjoyment of the magic of the region:

> *The days were wide and shining, the sands bore only prints of gulls and shore-rat and my own wandering tracks. Sky and sea were fused in a cadent blue. I walked all day and every day and in the mystic night of dew rising on corn and the voice of the crake in the later milky mists of moonlight. The white owl floated over the hedge and down the lane. Heather was nearly in bell, and the paler blossoms of ling wee appearing among the stunted furze bushes of the moor. Twelve, fifteen, once nearly thirty miles in one day, to Exmoor and back, my face dark brown, my bone limbs all sinew. I fished in the brook, using a dark hawthorn fly, and caught my first trout. And on the last day visited my near and familiar sands and headland and to all I said Goodbye, I shall return, speaking to tree, cliff, raven, stonechat and the sky as though they were human like myself.*

In the bookshop Williamson continued to read Jefferies's account of how in imagination, stimulated by the beauties of nature which surrounded him, he felt that he could enter the life of the ancient warrior buried in the tumulus.

> *'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 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 2,000 years after interment as those I had seen in the body.'*[13]

This passage stimulated Williamson's memories of his dead war-time comrades, and made him realize that as a writer he could re-create their lives. He purchased the book and it became for him 'a revelation of total truth'. His purpose in life, he believed, would be 'to extend Jefferies's truth of redemption through Nature' to his 'fellow men'. It was, he admits, 'not so much the ideas' which shook him at first in Jefferies's book, 'as the descriptions of the beauty of the English scene which arose out of the print upon the pages and took possession of the spirit.'[14] Williamson's pre-war delight in nature revived, but it was richer and maturer; not only could he re-live the past, but also he could look upon nature anew, receiving finer impressions coupled with insights unattainable to him earlier. He read Jefferies's last essays, with their characteristic blend of sensuous richness and profound personal feeling. The result was that he was able to write some intensely beautiful and moving nature essays, which show the strong influence of Jefferies, but which are nevertheless unmistakably his own. One of the earliest of these is 'Midsummer Night' written in 1919. This essay, although in places

somewhat precious in style, is a fine evocation of the sights and sounds of the ending of a summer day. It is not specifically localized, although the landscape in it has many of the features of Georgeham and its surroundings. Williamson skillfully blends sharply focussed detail with a wide general view. He begins by noticing a little money-spider weaving its web, 'although so small', yet it is 'easily seen in the waning light, a dark speck moving with great care'.[15] It is evening, and the bird chorus has almost ceased. He remembers the glorious sunlight of the daytime, now fading as the sun sets , and listens to the singing of some children as they go 'slowly homewards through the closed buttercups and daisies'.[16] The rest of the essay continues the description of the scene, adding to it the profound emotions which it causes to arise in the observer's mind:

> *Three swifts passed above, wheeling in final flight before creeping into their nests of straw-peck and saliva under the tiles of the church. The sons of the warblers and thrushes as the light drains away find an echo in the heart of the poet, for they sing of the beauty of summer: the swift's cries belong to the special light of the stars and the mystery of infinite space.*[17]

The stars appear, described in a passage which owes something to Bevis's appreciation of the zodiac;[18] the moon rises, a breeze stirs the green corn and then dies away. The village sleeps and Williamson is left alone in the stillness 'with the sapling wheat'. He lies on the earth, remembering the many centuries during which wheat has been cultivated, and echoing Jefferies's wisdom in his essay 'Walks in the Wheatfields' in *Field and Hedgerow*, reflects upon its great importance in the life of man.[19] Then, with a feeling for the past akin to that of Jefferies in the passages from *The Story of My Heart* which I have quoted above, Williamson experiences a mystical union with the spirit of the corn:

> *Faint as the sea murmur within the shell, the voice of the corn came to the inward ear. Ever the same was the earth that it knew, the east washed with faint rosewater in the dayspring, the lark-flight loosened upon the bosom of the dawn wind, and the golden beams of the sun breasting the hills of the morning. IT was but a moment since the wild men had goaded the sullen oxen, and with rude implements torn a living from the earth; all the great power of the wheat rested above the growing corn now, of kin to the grains beaten by oxen, and later by the flails of the wretches who were ever hungry.*[20]

This leads to an even profounder union, as Williamson continues to lie there in the moonlight:

> *The moon floated in the night pool with the swan, the distant roar of the surf floated from over the clover fields, and still I lay there, one with the Maker of Life ...*[21]

Jefferies had come to the sad conclusion that nature is indifferent to man, although contemplation of its beauties could stimulate valuable thoughts and feelings.[22] Here, however, Williamson is more akin to Wordsworth and the seventeenth-century writers Traherne and Vaughan, in having a positive intuition of and communion with the Divine Presence lying behind the phenomena of nature. Into this exalted state of mind, in a change of tone, comes a reminder of the harsh side of nature; a barn owl catches a rat and Williamson walks towards the village 'saddened by the consciousness of life's tragedy – every form of life depending for existence on the death of another form.'[23] The essay ends with a tribute from Williamson to Jefferies as the inspirer of the experiences

recorded in it:

> *Antares was a dull red ember in the south: the star of summer that Richard Jefferies loved. My thought was with him – he was near me, though the body had long been lying in Broadwater. Had he spoken to me in this mystic June night, I wondered; and then a blackcap warbler sang in a thorn bush; my thought was as old as its song, and I doubted no longer.*[24]

Another essay in *The Lone Swallows* which shows very strongly the influence of Richard Jefferies, yet has its own individuality, is 'Meadow Grasses', written in 1920. The style of this piece is rich and evocative, and happily lacks the occasional preciosity of 'Midsummer Night'. The first part of the essay renders with fine clarity and satisfying detail the sights and sounds of a meadow in high summer. It is obvious that Williamson has been influenced by Jefferies's essays 'The July Grass' in *Field and Hedgerow*, and 'The Pageant of Summer' in *The Life of the Fields*, but the observation is his own; he has learned to use his senses acutely and receptively. The details build up into an ecstatic celebration of the vitality of summer in the meadow.

Williamson's essay begins as does Jefferies's 'The July Grass' with the observation of an insect; Williamson's with a butterfly:

> *A brimstone butterfly drifted with the wind over the waving grasses, and settled on the shallow cup of a tall flower, John-go-to-bed-at-noon.*[25]

Jefferies's with a fly:

> *A July fly went sideways over the long grass. His wings made a burr about him like a net, beating so fast they wrapped him round with a cloud.*[26]

The essays develop differently however; Jefferies delights in the grasses ' in corners and out of the way places' left after the mowers have done their work in the meadows; Williamson recreates the life of a meadow just before mowing is to begin. The feeling of the surging energy of summer is more akin to that of Jefferies's 'The Pageant of Summer'. 'The sound of summer was everywhere' writes Williamson.

> *... the earth filled with swelling ecstasy – everything so green and alive, the waving grasses and the hawthorns; the green kingdom charged and surcharged with energy, from the wild strawberry to the mighty, sap-surfeited hole of the oak..*[27]

Recollection of the shortness of the life of the dragonfly leads to the reflection that 'all wild things live but to secure the future of their species'.[28] However, in anticipation of important passages in his later work, where he develops the thought more fully, he expresses his belief in a meliorative evolution:

> *Everything strives for the beautiful, the ideal, without conscious effort maybe, but the ideal is there – for all the species. The nightingale that silvers the dusk with song has finer notes than his ancestor of olden time; he has learnt much during the centuries; through generations of faithful loyalty to an ideal his tiny soul-flame has become brighter, and his voice speaks with sweeter poetry.*[29]

The wild creatures celebrate life in simplicity; following the thought in Jefferies's essays

The Pigeons at the British Museum' in *The Life of the Fields* and 'Nature and Books' in *Field and Hedgerow*, Williamson recognizes that whereas:

> *Men ponder the high meaning of life, studying in cities amid the smoke and cluttering hum of traffic; the wild ones have never needed to seek – they have been happy by the brook with its laced sunpoints and swallowy song of summer over the pebbles and the mossy boulders: they have had no illusions. They have not needed philosophies or discarnate paradises.*[30]

Williamson responds to the joyous love which the birds and insects have for the meadow, but the call of the peewit brings sadness to him, 'like the memory of those passed springs that were in boyhood so glamorous'.[31] The elegiac note skillfully effects the transition to the second part of the essay which begins by describing the mowing of the meadow with ruthless efficiency by a mowing machine:

> *The horses tossed their manes and swished their tails, drawing along with magnificent power the light machine, and leaving behind a swathe of broken grasses and coloured flowers whose fragrance and hue availed no longer – in an instant life was gone – whither?*[32]

Williamson contrasts this with the old procedure of mowing done by men with scythes, which he remembered from his childhood. He recalls the fun he had following the mowers, gathering up armfuls of flowers and wantonly pulling their petals apart. Jefferies has a fine description of traditional hay-making in his novel *Greene Ferne Farm*,[33] but he could not have had the thought that comes to Williamson, a survivor of the carnage of the First World War, as he remembers that:

> *Very soon swathes of dead youths were lying in ruined cornfields, and the righteous were condemning others for the results of their own unclear ways and thoughts.*[34]

Although he often regretted that he could never again experience directly the joy of his childhood summers, nevertheless I think that the reader can recognize the liberating effect of Williamson's first encounter with *The Story of My Heart*, described above, in his assertion that:

> *The breath of all the springtimes, the light and shade of summery months, the colour and song of the fields stored, layer upon layer, in the boy's mind, return a hundredfold, and with them a desire, never ceasing, for others to share in this secret happiness – the thoughts given by nature.*[35]

The contrast between the inhuman efficiency of the mowing machine and the more humane older, now superseded, method of mowing by hand, leads Williamson to lament the passing of the traditional rural order:

> *The old spirit of the country is dying, for the spirit of the factory and the town has overlaid it. The 'big house' is sold, and a new squire has arrived, a merchant and rich man; the sons of the old squire lie somewhere in the deep sea near Jutland, so why retain the estate, heavily taxed and scarce self-supporting, when it will eventually pass away into other hands.*[36]

The essay however ends on a positive note; although Williamson can never believe the meadows he now knows in adult life can be the same as those remembered from childhood, nevertheless nature itself is eternal and memories stimulated by contemplation of it can make the past live again in imagination:

> *I lie in the flowery fields, seeing the quaking grass against the sky, and a wild bee swinging on a blue columbine, while a lark rains joy from on high. These return, these are eternal, and with them a voice that is silent, a gland that is gone.*[37]

Having read 'Meadow Grasses', the reader is, I think, well able to endorse Williamson's formulation of his attitude and aims as he began to come into the fullness of his powers as a writer, recalled in the first edition of *The Children of Shallowford* (1930):

> *The town mind had lost touch with the truths of sky, grass and sunshine. Only from nature could the truth arise. Richard Jefferies, the poor farmer's son, slain before his time by hateful nineteenth century industralisation, was the prophet of a new world waiting to be born: I his disciple. (p.72)*

Williamson's compassion for the sad, deprived lives of the London poor, cut off for most of their lives from the beauties of the countryside is seen clearly in the expertly crafted and deeply moving essay 'The Passing of the Blossom' (1920)[38] dedicated to Walter de la Mare, which also is included in *The Lone Swallows*. Like 'Meadow Grasses' this essay is in two parts. The first part creates with wonderful immediacy the sights, sounds and inner spirit of late spring in the countryside of north-west Kent which Williamson had visited and enjoyed since boyhood. He delights in the singing of the stream, the brightness of hawthorn blossom, the happiness of the birds as they build their nests and in the busy activity of the bees. However, recollection of the transience of all natural things make him feel with greater poignancy the deprivation of city dwellers:

> *Nothing remains for long. A brief life and they have gone whither all things that draw upon the earth-energy must go. Though the blackbird sings so leisurely, the flowers stand gently timorous in their fragility, the veined leaf stains itself with the sunbeams, and I am exalted in "the light and fire of summer" yet for all there is so little of time. Therefore, it seemed to me so pitiable that millions were confined in factory and office, breathing the air fouled by exhaust of petrol engine and chimney, while the brook rippled so sweetly, and the living air formed a passionate stream with the energy of the sunbeams.*[39]

These reflections lead in the second part of the essay to recollection of woods nearer to London, dear to Williamson because of memories of visits to them with 'the friend of his boyhood'. Doubtless he is thinking of the woods near Southend and Whitefoot Lane where he often went from his home in Lewisham with his friend Terence Tetley, whom I have mentioned earlier. Although a busy tram terminus is but half a mile away, the wild birds still frequent these woods, because 'the wild things in freedom love their haunts and are not easily driven away'. However, he laments:

> *... in the higher wood – beautiful in spring with apple blossom, uncurling brake-fern, silver birch and sheen of bluebell – no birds sang as alone I walked among its violated sanctities.*[40]

As he walked there appropriately at the solemn evening hour, he found a scene of

complete devastation:

> *The paths were beaten into mire by the passing and repassing of a thousand feet, acres of bluebells had been torn up and taken away, many trampled and crushed, or gathered and cast carelessly on the paths. The apple blossom was stripped from the trees.*[41]

The area is to be developed for building, and the despoilation of the woods has been done by 'people who had come from Walworth, Shoreditch and Woolwich'. Williamson's reaction, when he sees the passengers in the tramcar in which he is returning to London, grasping flowers and blossom, is not one of anger, as the reader might expect, but of joy. This is because he is able to share in *their* happiness and understand the reason for it, even if they themselves might be unaware of it:

> *I looked at the transfigured faces of the children – old or young, they were all children – who breathed in the smoke and worked in the shadow, and saw that the beauty of the wild flowers had passed into their eyes; although the woods were ravaged, the spoiling and pillaging had not been in vain. For two or three days wilting flowers and stolen blossom would remind them of the sunlight and the fresh air, of the cloud-shadow that swept up and the warmth that followed when the beams of light lacquered the branches of the trees.*[42]

Jefferies had written in 'The Pageant of Summer':

> *My heart is fixed firm and stable in the belief that ultimately the sunshine and the summer, the flowers and the azure sky, shall become, as it were, interwoven into man's existence. He shall take form all their beauty and enjoy their glory. Hence it is that a flower is to me so much more than stalk or petals.*[43]

Williamson has, I believe, absorbed this thought and is able to apply it to the poor people in the tramcar. The difference is however, that they are not likely to get much chance of experiencing directly the beauties of nature. Like Jefferies, Williamson wanted to help make mankind happier.[44] If for the moment at least the ideal of everyone having easy access to the countryside is not to be realized, nevertheless Williamson recognizes that as an artist he can portray nature and the reader can in imagination appreciate something of its therapeutic power:

> *The tram drew nearer to London with its ragged children; had I doubted it before, no longer was the ideal of the artist obscured from me – you must hear it. It must be the ideal of man to beautify the lives of those who pass nearly all their days in the places whence the wild birds and the flowers have gone for evermore.*[45]

The essay ends with a return to the scene described at the beginning; listening to 'the voice of the brook mingled with the love-whisper of [the] little bottle birds' and the droning of the bees as they visit the bluebells. Williamson reflects upon the perennial richness and beauty of nature, lamenting that 'never enough of these do the little ones in the city see ...' Thus he reaches his consoling conclusion:

> *And I saw the children of the trams reflected in the light-burthened brook, and was glad, even though the buttercups had gone from the meadow and the wandering bees*

sought in vain in those other woods for the lovveliness of the 'stained apple-blossom.'[46]

In 'Prosperpine's Message', the second part of 'Drought and Aftermath' written in 1921, Williamson develops his theme of the importance of contact with native in childhood, believing that it will lead ultimately to a happier and less mercenary society than that which he reacted against at the time, and which alas! we in the 1990s find has become even more subject to the Money Power:

The orange hawkbits are everywhere at my feet – common weeds perhaps, but very dear: each yields a thought of beauty, each is a gold coin of our true heritage of the earth. The metal coin that they stamp with the die is false: I would have all the children of the earth spend the dandelions. Therein lies our hope – in the wild flower and the sunlight, in what they symbolize – let the children spend these. The more they spend, the richer they will be. They will never forget the flowers: and to remember them is to yearn towards goodness and beauty.[47]

Jefferies too, loved the lowly dandelion, and I think that we can see his inspiration in Williamson's exhortation, which I have long felt expresses admirably the wisdom which he tried to impart throughout his writing career:

Let us spend the golden treasure of the dandelions, now, on earth, while me may; so that those who follow may enjoy a more sunlit life.[48]

It is therefore, entirely appropriate that Williamson should have dedicated *The Lone Swallows* to Jefferies. I have concentrated upon those essays in which his influence is obvious and paramount, but the whole collection shows to some extent his inspiration. The essays grouped together in the section 'London Papers' give in many ways Williamson's version of *Nature Near London,* as do 'A London Owl' and the delightful 'The Old Pond'. This last essay is about Southend Pond (although not named as such) which Williamson knew well in childhood when it was still clear and beautiful as it lay beside a mill:

The acre of water was fed by a brook, where wild duck splashed in winter. Sometimes at night the miller heard the whistles of a roaming dog otter, and the moon jigged in broken gold where its flat head set the ripples spreading. The spirit of the water was joyous as it flowed through the green Kent country, Long ago.[49]

Now, owing to urban spread it is devastated and polluted:

Nowadays the waters of the pond are false-coloured with tar and oil from the road. The trout are dead, and hundreds of metal caps of beer bottles lie below the culvert, dirty-white in the water, the saloon-bar trade of the red-brick public-house nearby. The fire-bellied efts and the nine-spined sticklebacks are dead, too. Beetles remain, and the red wriggling larvae of the gnat.[50]

The pond has been reduced in size by one third, when the road was widened for the tramcars of the L.C.C.; The cherry-tree that grew upon the island in the middle has been replaced by a flag-pole. Yet upon this island live a pair of moorfowl. Williamson tells their story with a blend of humour and compassion. Only one of their eggs is hatched, and the birds become a centre of attraction for the local population. The hen builds

another nest and lays more eggs two of which hatch, although the chick from the first nest is shot as she feeds one morning on the allotments nearby. The pond is then drained to be cleaned up, but the moorfowl survive, as they can move to water-cress beds a little upstream. Williamson moves to Devon and feels that never again can he 'go near the poor spoiled waters, where once a springtime snow of wild cherry blossom had floated above the grass-green roving roach'. However, one night some years later when staying in London after a visit to the battlefields of the Ypres Salient, he dreams of the pond as it was in its old beauty and freshness. He feels compelled to visit it again:

> *So we returned, my memory and I, and stood by the railings, while the cold wind of a late winter afternoon blew about the road. The mill-house was gone, and the hawthorn, and the little wooden shop whee without shame we could ask the old woman for a ha'porth of mixed biscuits. She called every child "Dear', and no-one made a row in her shop, or cheeked her, she was so old and tiny.*[51]

New shops and a garage have appeared since Williamson's last visit, and the old inn 'The Green Man' has been replaced by a new larger building. He laments the increasing urbanization of the whole district and takes his last look at the pond. The island has been cleared of its undergrowth, and has been made circular, its edge bound with wooden piles. On the former allotment a boathouse has been built, and 'many small coracles' are stacked around it. As in the case of 'The Passing of the Blossom', the reader expects the essay to end in anger and bitter indignation, but once more Williamson changes the mood because of his sympathy for poor children and his hopes of a happier life for them:

> *A notice-board said that this was the Childrens Pool, and that all moneys from the hire of boats would be paid to a Children's Hospital in London. Then the pond had been cleared so that tiny limbs should be set straight, and tiny faces made to unpucker, and lips to smile. I knew then why the spirit of the water, which might be of Bethesda, had come to me in a dream with a vision of its olden loveliness to be written not with sadness, but with joy.*[52]

He has, he believes, received an illumination from nature, and the essay ends on a note of affirmation and reassurance, as he hears the call of the moorfowl:

> *An omnibus with guardian lamps bore swiftly upon me, and as I turned to climb upon the step I heard from over the glimmering pond a watery cry of Teank! and an answer, Teonk!*[53]

This essay bears upon it the hallmark of Williamson's style and outlook; it is individual, but absorbed within it is the influence of Jefferies whose work continues to be an element living within the very substance of Williamson's writings throughout his career.

Although apart from *Bevis* Jefferies is best known for his nature essays, he did write well about people both in descriptive essays and books about country-dwellers, and in fiction. In *The Lone Swallows* Williamson includes some essays, dealing with people he knew in his early days in Devon; such are 'Ernie' about a neighbour's son, 'Tiger's Teeth' which recounts an exploit of a villager who nearly lost his life when he got into difficulties during the ascent of a cliff after robbing a raven's nest and 'Boy' which tells about a 'crowstarver' or bird-scarer in Bedfordshire. I do not detect such obvious and

important influence of Jefferies upon these essays, although I think it likely, that having read with appreciation *Hodge and his Masters* and essays like 'The Acorn Gatherer' and 'The Legend of a Gateway' in *The Life of the Fields* or 'The Country Sunday', 'Country Places', 'Field Words and Ways' and 'Cottage Ideas' in *Field and Hedgerow*, Williamson was stimulated to try his hand at portraying the deeds and characters of country people he knew. Certainly the sharpness and vividness which he admired in Jefferies is to be found in these essays also, as it is in similar essays in *The Peregrine's Saga and other Stories of the Country Green* (1923, revised edn., 1934), *The Old Stag and other Hunting Stories* (1926, revised edn., 1933) and *Tales of Moorland and Estuary* (1953), although the stories were written in the 1920s).

There is no doubt that *Hodge and his Masters* exercised a general influence upon Williamson's village books, *Tales of a Devon Village* and *Life in a Devon Village* (1945) revised from *The Village Book* (1930) and *the Labouring Life* (1932) written between 1919 and 1929. In the Foreword to his revised version of *Hodge and his Masters* (1937) Williamson explicitly associates his *Village Book* with Jefferies's *Hodge*. He lists Jefferies's portraits of country people of his day and their activities, praising them for their truth:

> *The young would-be lady governess and her inferiority-complex (as we should call it today), ashamed of her parents when she comes home to the farm of her youth; the curate who wears himself out trying to alter the nature of men and things in his parish; the disillusioned parson, who also feels the weight of the time-large upon him; the rich young scientific farmer, the old chap gong downhill, the poachers, publicans, market-day dinners – how good and true they all are! 'A cataloguer', they called Jefferies. But what a catalogue! (pp. viii-ix)*

It is in his comments on this that he brings in a reference to his own book:

> *'anyone could have written it', remarked a young writer of painted stories, when criticising the long chapters in my own* Village Book *describing Barnstaple Fair as I saw it in 1928. Yes, anyone could have written it; anyone could have written* Hodge and his Masters *– but, here's the difference, not everyone could stay the course. (p. ix).*

It is clear from this, I think, that Williamson saw his village books as in a sense his equivalent of *Hodge and his Masters*, in which he strove for a similar truth to life. While this may be so, the observation as well as the tone and temper of the books are very much Williamson's own. Whereas Jefferies draws his portraits from that area of Wiltshire around Swindon, Williamson writes of the people and activities of the village of Georgeham in North Devon, where he lived in the 1920s. His social range is narrower, being largely confined to the villagers, but he does not merely provide discursive descriptions; he frequently gives also dramatic vignettes of episodes of village life. Like Jefferies he strove for truth to life, a truth to live in art; he based the characters in the books on 'originals' living in Georgeham at that time, but gave them fictional names,[54] and like Wordsworth sought to cast a certain colouring of imagination over them. In this he succeeded admirably, his portraits (to name but some), of his neighbour 'Revvy' Carter (so called because he worked for the rector before he married) of old 'Muggy' the rabbit collector, of 'Stroyle' George the farmer whose land is infested with couch-grass, of the local policeman, P.C. Bullcornworthy and of Billy Goldsworthy whose barn contains a fascinating collection of old farm implements – all these live vividly as we read the pages about them. Williamson sees the humorous side of their lives, but also the sorrows and frustrations they endure, and the heroism with which

some of them face the tribulations they undergo. Let me take but two of them. Williamson writes with compassion of the difficulties facing 'Revvy', wounded during the battle of the Somme and not always in work after the war, but he also sees the funny side of his family life and is amused at his wife's analysis of his own mental state, when a struggling young writer:

> *"Mazed as a brish", declared Mrs. "Revvy" to Mrs. "Vanderbildt", her connexion by marriage. "I reckon he's not all there, supposed to be studying' for the writing of a book, he says, and his garden only a passle-ole-crawsclawsmaws".*[55]

Again, Williamson describes well the eccentricities of Billy Goldsworthy, who spends hours during the night in his barn, arguing with a neighbour or working on his own, ('proper old oyl [owl] he be' as Revvy says) but also Williamson conveys admirably his courtesy, intelligence and sense of the past.

There is considerable variety in the village books, not only are there portraits of people, but also descriptions of episodes like a badger dig or the long-drawn out dispute about where to locate the new village cemetery. The life and atmosphere of the two village pubs, the 'Upper' and 'Lower' House, the multifarious activities of the Fair in 'town' (i.e. Barnstaple), are conveyed with great immediacy; there are also excellent pieces on the owls which live between Williamson's cottage ceiling and thatch, and on a walk to the sea and back which he makes on a fine Spring day. At times he sounds a profoundly spiritual note, and this I think links the village books with the deeper insights of the essays in *The Lone Swallows*. In 'First Day of Spring', Williamson, on his way back from a walk during which he has delighted in the varied beauties of nature, stops to speak to old Grannie Parsons as she is 'peeping out of the door of her cottage like a jenny wren out of its nest'. 'Nodding and smiling with the shyness of a young maid' she tells him 'in her soft voice': '"tes proper weather midear, tes butiful weather, and the li'l grass bird be back by the stream"'.[56] Her courtesy, and generosity of heart elicit in his mind a deeply sympathetic response, fresh and original to Williamson, but having behind it a joy akin to that of Wordsworth:

> *So Grannie Parsons, whose children have long since grown up and flown away, heard it this morning – the little grass-bird – the chiff-chaff, the celandine among birds, whose plain-song is so precious as it comes hopefully over the border of winter; and Grannie Parsons called me midear, a usual term of greeting, but truly a thing of sweetness and light when spoken, scarcely more than whispered, from the small brown face, with the bright eyes and smiling, withered lips. All the beauty I had known that day: of wandering air and bright water, the white innocence of thorns, the scent of wild thyme on the headland, the happy burr of the honey bee, the sunward lark song, the glistening flowery constellations and red plastic mud of windy spring: all the beauty of the day was fused and made one for me.*[57]

Then again, after the heat and dust of controversy about its siting are over, the new cemetery is consecrated, and Williamson, highly critical of the local rector for his over-dogmatic 'cut and dried' approach to religion, nevertheless responds warmly to the wise words of the old and experienced Bishop Trefusis who performs the ceremony and addresses those attending it:

> *"I, who am old, and son to die, have seen the graves of those I have buried pass away in time, forgotten or lost, until nothing is left but grass, and a lessening mound. Such is*

God's intention for all living things: to be, to bloom, to mingle in earth and air, in the hope and faith of resurrection in radiance beyond the hills of our mortal mornings grey. All of us have the journey down into darkness, even as the lonely hero of all, the Man among men, our blessed Jesus, whom we call the Christ."

So the wise and gently words ceased and the white head was bowed in prayer; and in the moment of silence following, while our thoughts prayed for us, we were glad that we had listened.[58]

However the predominant note of the village books is celebration of life on earth. This is very much in accordance with Jefferies's outlook, and Williamson ends *Life in a Devon Village* with the essay 'Surview and Farewell', in which, looking down on the village from the church tower, he recalls something of the changes he has seen there since he first came in May 1914. His final memory is of Granfer Jimmy Carter defying medical opinion about the immediate necessity of an operation for a rupture, going to vote as it is an Election Day, and replying to Clib the postman's question about how he is: '"LIVING!" ... in a loud voice'.[59] So, as he prepares to descend the tower, he asks himself 'what is my finest memory, outside the elements of earth, sea and sky?' to reply:

LIVING! cried old Jimmy Carter, at the verge of the grave. LIVING! shone the great landlord of the sun, burning bright over all, I would see all things as the sun sees them, without shadows.[60]

(To be concluded)

NOTES

1. *Richard Jefferies: Selections from his Work, with details of his Life and Circumstance, his Death and Immortality* (1937) p. 249. See also, Henry Williamson, *The Sun in the Sands* (1945), p. 180
2. *Richard Jefferies: Selections*, p. 417. The 'Epigraph' is more correctly termed the Epilogue in the second edition of the *Selections* (1947) p. 315
3. See Tom and Joan Skipper, *'Henry Williamson's Bedfordshire Roots'*, *The Henry Williamson Society Journal*, no. 6 (October 1982), pp. 26-31; 'A Gaultshire Guide', ibid., no. 7 (May 1983), pp. 23-9
4. 'pp. 78-108
5. See 'The Glorious Days of Bully Hunting', *Daily Express*, 28 June 1969
6. I have not found a place in his writings where Williamson states directly that he possessed a copy of this book, but in *The Gale of the World* (1969) the last novel in the sequence *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, Phillip Maddison tells his Aunt Viccy that a book which she had given him in childhood helped him very much; it was Richard and Cherry Keartons' *Our Bird Friends*, of which he declares: 'It changed my life' (chapter 8, p. 86). As is well known, Phillip is to a considerable extent a self-portrait of Williamson, and I think it very likely that in this passage he is drawing upon his own memory. It is noteworthy also, that in *The Beautiful Years*, the first novel in the tetralogy *The Flax of Dram* (1921-8, revised 1929-31, further and finally revised in one volume, 1936). Willie Maddison, a character also drawn from aspects of Williamson himself, receives from his father a copy of *Our Bird Friends* (Flax, 1936 1 vol. ed., pp. 243-5).
7. *Richard Jefferies: Selections*, p. 24. In defending Jefferies against the charge brought by 'an old literary gentleman' in Carmelite house that he was "a mere cataloguer of sights and sounds', Williamson asserts the importance of acute senses to writers of the first class, to which he believed Jefferies belonged (ibid., pp. 12-14, 21-24). See also Williamson's Introduction to Jefferies's *The Gamekeeper at Home*, Jonathan Cape's 'The Travellers' Library' series no. 205 (1935), p. 9. The same introduction with the same pagination appears in the editions of *The Amateur Poacher* and *Wild Life in a Southern County* in 'The Travellers' Library' series (nos. 202 and 203). CF. further, Williamson's Introduction to *An*

Anthology of Modern Nature Writing (1936), p. x
8. See 'A Boy's Nature Diary', The Lone Swallows, ed. cit., pp. 85-8
9. *The Lone Swallows*, ed. cit., p. 217
10. See Henry Williamson, 'Some Nature Writers and Civilization', The Wedmore Memorial Lecture, read 9 October 1959, *Essays by Divers Hands, being the Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature*, new series, vol. xxx (1960) p. 1. In an interview with Clive Jordan in 'Books & Writers' series on the B.B.C. European service (1 June 1970) Williamson declared that after a life during the war of 'binges in the Mess' between battles, he thought that his feeling for nature had gone, but it came back to him as he read *The Story of My Heart*. This broadcast is included on the tape cassette, *The Broadcasts of Henry Williamson*, Vol. 2, 'The Hopeful Traveller',, released by arrangement with B.B.C. Enterprises and the kind permission of the Henry Williamson Literary Estate; it is available only to members of the Henry Williamson Society.
11. See Williamson's Presidential Address to the Francis Thompson Society, 'In Darkest England', in K. Krishnamurti (ed.), *The Hound of Heaven: a Commemorative Volume* (1967) p. 10. I consider Williamson's early attempts at fiction in a three-part article 'The Apprenticeship of a Novelist: the Early Unpublished Fiction of Henry Williamson', *The Henry Williamson Society Journal*, Nos. 17, 18 & 19.
12. 'Reflections in an Ancient Sunlight', *Daily Express*, 28 December 1968. Williamson quotes extensively from chapter 3 of *The Story of My Heart* in his *Selections* from Jefferies, pp.222-7
13. 'Reflections in an Ancient Sunlight', loc. cit.
14. 'Some Nature Writers and Civilization', loc. cit., p. 1
15. *The Lone Swallows*, ed. cit., p. 109
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 110
18. Ibid., p. 111; cf. Richard Jefferies, *Bevis*, chapter 35, 'The New formosa – Bevis's Zodiac', quoted in Williamson's *An Anthology of Modern Nature Writing*, pp. 32-42
19. *The Lone Swallows*, pp. 113-14. Williamson includes the entire essay 'Walks in the Wheatfields' in his *Selections* from Jefferies, pp. 326-63
20. *The Lone Swallows*, p. 114
21. Ibid.
22. See *The Story of My Heart*, chapters 4, 7-9, 12; 'Hours of Spring' in *Field and Hedgerow*. Williamson includes 'Hours of Spring in his *Selections* from Jefferies, pp. 378-401; see especially pp. 382-8, 391-2.
23. *The Lone Swallows*, p. 115
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 134
26. 'The July Grass', *Field and Hedgerow*, ed. Samuel J. Looker (1948), p. 57
27. *The Lone Swallows*, p. 134. Cf. Jefferies, 'The Pageant of Summer', *The Life of the Fields*, ed. Samuel J. Looker (1947), pp. 59-81
28. *The Lone Swallows*, p. 135
29. Ibid., pp. 135-6. I shall discuss Williamson's views on meliorative evolution in part II of this article.
30. Ibid., p. 136. Williamson includes 'The Pigeons at the British Museum' both in his *Anthology of Modern Nature Writing* (pp. 42-70) and in his *Selections* from Jefferies (pp. 265-70). 'Nature and Books' may be read in *Field and Hedgerow*, ed. Looker, pp. 38-56
31. *The Lone Swallows*, p. 137
32. Ibid., pp. 139-40
33. Chapter 4, 'The Wooden Bottle'
34. *The Lone Swallows*, p. 141
35. Ibid., p. 142
36. Ibid., p. 143
37. Ibid.
38. This essay is entitled 'London Children and Wild flowers' in the first edition of *The Lone Swallows* (19220.
39. *The Lone Swallows*, 2nd ed. (1933), pp. 128-9

40. Ibid., p. 129
41. Ibid., pp. 129-30
42. Ibid., p. 131
43. *The Life of the Fields*, ed. Looker, p. 62
44. See Jefferies: e.g. *The Story of My Heart*, chapter 7; 'Hours of Spring' in *Field and Hedgerow*.
45. *The Lone Swallows*, p. 132
46. Ibid., p. 133
47. Ibid., p. 122
48. Ibid., Cf. 'Nature and Books', *Field and Hedgerow*, ed. Looker, pp. 38-9, 42-3.
49. *The Lone Swallows*, p. 201
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., p. 212
52. Ibid., p. 213
53. Ibid.
54. Information given privately by Mr Bill Brown, of Georgeham; and see David Stokes: 'Living in Georgeham', *The Henry Williamson Society Journal* no. 12 (September, 1985) pp. 41-9.
55. 'My Neighbour "Revvy"', *Life in a Devon Village* (1945) pp. 12-13. Williamson explains the dialect expression 'mazed as a brish' as 'idiotic', and 'a passle-ole-crawsclawsmaws' as a 'reference to' his 'neglected garden – "a parcel of old crow's-claw's roots", based on the presence there of a kind of weeping buttercup with roots more like a white octopus than a black rook's feet' (ibid., p. 13).
56. *Life in a Devon Village*, p. 80
57. Ibid.
58. 'Consecration of the New Burial Ground', ibid., p. 268.
59. 'Surview and Farewell', ibid., p. 288. Cf. Jefferies, 'Hours of Spring' *Field and Hedgerow*, 'Never was such a worshipper of earth. The commonest pebble, dusty and marked with the stain of the ground, seems to me so wonderful; my mind works round it till it becomes the sun and centre of a system of thought and feeling' (in Williamson's *Selections* from Jefferies, p. 385). Cf. also 'Nature in the Louvre' also in *Field and Hedgerow* ((in Williamson's *Selections* from Jefferies pp. 363-78). Jefferies's major discussions about what he considers to be the folly of ascetiscism and the need for mankind to live a full and happy sensuous life and thus to have a deeper desire for soul-life is found in *The Story of My Heart*, chs. 7 and 10.
60. *Life in a Devon Village*, p. 288.

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