Reviews

A Breath of Country Air, Part II, Henry Williamson, with a Foreword by Robert Williamson and an Introduction by John Gregory. The Henry Williamson Society, 1991; standard edition £8.50, £7.25 to members; limited, finely bound edition £35, £30 to members.

Once again, one must compliment John Gregory for putting together this delightful collection of fugitive articles by Henry Williamson. The first part of this collection completes the reprint of Williamson's articles which appeared in *The Evening Standard* in 1944 and 1945, with those published in 1945 (1 January - 4 December), whilst the second comprises fifteen linked pieces, with the general title of *Quest*, which first appeared in *Women's Illustrated and Eve's Own* between February and October 1946.

The *Evening Standard* articles, as in the case of those reprinted in Part 1 of *A Breath of Country Air*, are short, beautifully crafted vignettes of life and nature on Williamson's Norfolk farm and to a lesser extent in Devon. The reader who knows Williamson's *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* will see that some pieces were woven into the fabric of *Lucifer Before Sunrise*, the penultimate novel of the series. However as in Part I, these articles are very well worth reading in and for themselves. Some of the most notable deal with the healing power which nature can have upon the tired and depressed human spirit. This is a Wordsworthian theme, and Williamson's pieces on this topic illustrate magnificently Wordsworth's profoundly true observation in *Tintern Abbey:*

> *...that Nature never did betray*
> *The heart that loved her... (II. 122-30)*

As a young man, recovering from the traumas of the First World War he delighted in the owls which lived above the ceiling in his Devon cottage:

> *The white owl symbolised for me the peace and beauty of the countryside, the spirit of the wild, of starlight, the sunsets of the Atlantic, the soft murmur of the stream arising in the quiet village night, and the eternal truths of nature. (p. 8)*

With these benign companions, whose lives he felt that he shared, and who became his totem, he began his writing career having 'found freedom'. Many years later, during the Second World War, he tells how, to escape from the stresses of farm and family, he would go to the Home Hills to enjoy the fine views and receive solace (pp. 16-18). On a different occasion he is strengthened by the feeling of 'the heat of the sun being absorbed by the plants of the wheat' (p. 28), and observing lapwings arising from the fields he reflects:

> *We love the lapwing; in their voices are the very spirit of wild places, of freedom from the cares of civilisation. The lapwing's cries are the voices of the elements, of water, and air and the truth of the sunshine. (ibid.)*

Then again, he cannot bring himself to cut down an old twisted blackthorn, useless to the farmer; it has become a friend, and its yearly putting forth of delicate white blossoms brings home to him that beyond the pain necessarily suffered by humanity if it is to learn wisdom lies 'the simple virtue of the elements of clear and simple living' (p. 31). Gong to Devon for a much -needed holiday towards the end of the war, he is revivified by the grand scenery at Baggy Point, and confirmed in his grasp of the truth

that:

> *...however sophisticated or disillusioned a man may think himself to be, he is, and always will be, an elemental creature: made out of the elements, maintained and restored by the elements (p. 64)*

As always in Williamson's writing, there is in these articles not just fine observation, but also deep feeling and sometimes prophetic thought. He regrets the diminishing number of corncrakes owing to changes in their environment (pp. 41-2) and realizes clearly the dangers of 'factory farming' in a percipient article more likely to be appreciated now than when it was originally written. 'Revolution on Britain's Farms' (pp. 38-40). He feels sorrow at leaving his Norfolk farm, but recognizes that all is not lost; now he has an opportunity to return to his writing full-time, and therefore at the auction of his stock he will 'not feel too keenly' that he is a failure (p. 65). Although as Robert Williamson points out in his Foreword, these articles were written at a time of great stress both in his father's life, and in the world in general, the predominant tone is positive and hopeful, and the reader is likely to feel considerably strengthened by them.

The *Quest* pieces form a continuous whole and are longer in themselves than the *Evening Standard* articles. They tell the story of the break up of the family at the end of the Second World War when Williamson's wife Loetitia left the farm with the younger children feeling that she could no longer carry on; Williamson's purchase of Bank House Botesdale; his visit to Loetitia and the children in Yorkshire; the re-uniting of the family at Botesdale and the new happiness which all experience there. This narrative is conducted with great sensitiveness and delicacy, and the reader becomes deeply involved n it. Not only does he rejoice in the healing of the breach, but also he romps in spirit with Williamson and the children as they enjoy their games in their fascinating new home. Furthermore, he shares something of the elation of the creative writer newly established n this large, light writing room at the top of the house.

There is much more however in *Quest* than a well-told and engrossing narrative. The 'quest' of the title is not in fact one for 'happiness and security' as the editor of *Woman's Illustrated* puts it, rather it is, in Williamson's own words one for 'harmony or truth' (p. 119). Williamson's description of his mental and spiritual development and the importance of nature to him is something from which we ourselves can derive much wisdom (pp. 93-5, 101). He writes well about good and bad relationships between parents and children; a major theme throughout his work (pp. 100, 117-19, 122-5). He is surely correct to stress the need for sympathy and understanding rather than the use of repression. furthermore, he gives us an example of the right relationship which should obtain between a father and his children in his descriptions not only of the fun which he shared with the children, but also more particularly in his rendering of his relationship Rikky, his youngest son with whom he shared not only a deep affection, but also a genuine affinity of spirit (pp. 96-7, 119-22). Perhaps even more remarkable is the tribute which he pays to Windles, his eldest son, who he had hoped would succeed him on the farm, but with whom he quarrelled. After the collapse of the farming venture he saw where he went wrong in his treatment of Windles. He took him away from school far to young and worked him too hard and unremittingly on the farm throughout the war. However he recognizes:

> *...my boy was a good boy; he stuck to the job of ploughing seven days a week without pay – for the bank account was overdrawn and to keep down the overdraft we regarded the farms as a family unit... (p. 103)*

In *Quest* we see Williamson attain 'clarity', one of his key words, meaning self-knowledge and insight into the lives of others. Also we rejoice in the hope which he feels for the future, and thus he teaches us by example how important it is in life to be resilient and never to give up. I am certain that *Quest* can be read and re-read many times, not only for pleasure but also for profit. J.W. Blench

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The Habit of a Lifetime, Brocard Sewell, 192pp, Illus: cased, demi-octavo, April 1992, £18.95. ISBN 0 907018920

This is an advance notice that Father Brocard Sewell's autobiography is to be published in April.

Brocard Sewell has enjoyed a long and varied life, spent half in journalism and private press printing and publishing, half in monastic life and the priesthood, with a wartime interlude in the RAF. He has worked in four private presses: the Saint Dominic's Press at Ditchling, the Press of Edward Walters at Primrose Hill, the Hague and Gill Press in High Wycombe, and the Saint Albert's Press, of which he was the director, At Aylesford. He has experienced monastic life in three major religious orders, the Austin Canons, Dominicans, and Carmelites. Of these 'private worlds' he offers an inside view. At the same time he has pursued since 1965, a literary career, as editor of the *Aylesford Review* and author of some sixteen memoirs or biographies of writers, among them Montague Summers, Cecil Chesterton, Olive Custance, and John Gray.

In the course of a long life the author has known a number of famous personalities, among them G.K. Chesterton, Eric Gill, Henry Williamson, Sir Oswald Mosley, Fr Vincent McNabb, and the poet Frances Horovitz.

In his final chapter the author reflects on the pattern or patterns of his life, and ponders its twin elements of achievement and failure.

A full review will appear in our next issue but we thought you would like to know of its imminent publication. AW

Growing up with Just William by his sister Margaret Disher. The Outlaws Publishing Company 1990. Paperback £9.95

Not at first glance a book especially to interest Henry Williamson admirers but there are many references to locations which feature in the 'London Novels' of the *Chronicle.*

The author of the William books, Richmal Crompton, lived most of her adult life at Bromley Common in Kent and the prototype of the William character was her nephew, Tommy Disher, the brother of Margaret Disher whose family also lived nearby.

The book describes the escapades of young Tommy in this part of northwest Kent which were later immortalised by his aunt in her very popular William stories. Tommy was born in 1915 and there are accounts of his boyhood excursions with his friends to the Rookery at Bromley Common owned by the Norman family, Hayes Common, the Fish Ponds at Keston and the woods through which the little river Ravensbourne flowed. All these places were well known to Phillip Maddison twenty years earlier.

I found it strangely pleasing to know that the settings of the William books, which I loved as a schoolboy, were in many respects the same as those where, many years later, I discovered the young Phillip having similar adventures.

The book is well illustrated with photographs of the period and some of Thomas Henry's drawings of William and the outlaws. Pat Murphy