The Influence of Richard Jefferies upon Henry Williamson - Part II

J.W. Blench

The influence of Richard Jefferies upon Henry Williamson's earlier sequence of novels, the tetralogy *The Flax of Dream* (1921–8, revised 1929–31, further and finally revised in one volume, 1936) is readily discerned and of great importance. As in the case of the books which I have discussed already, this influence is fused with Williamson's own sensibility, so that it becomes an integral part of a larger unified whole. The published *Flax* was preceded by three unpublished novels, the last of which is entitled *The Flax of Dream*, although a considerable portion of the action is different from that of the Published *Flax*, even in its first edition. This third unpublished novel, written between November 1919 and March 1920 is much better artistically than the earlier two. The reason for this is not merely that Williamson was gaining more competence in the craft of fiction, it is also that this novel embodies the more profound spiritual outlook which he acquired by reading Jefferies's *The Story of My Heart*. It shows the influence of *The Story of My Heart* both in its fine descriptive passages and in its conclusion, in which the hero, called Willie Maddison as in the published *Flax*, reaches, after a passionate and ultimately unhappy love-affair, the conviction that nature can exercise a healing power upon his wounded psyche. [61] The published *Flax*, especially in its finally revised version, it itself much superior to the third unpublished novel and it shows even more clearly the benign influence of Jefferies's writings.

Before discussing how this influence shows itself, it is necessary first to clear up possible misconceptions about the importance of Williamson's statements about his aims in the *Flax* to his actual artistic achievement in the sequence. It was the opinion of John Middleton Murry that in the Foreword to the 1936 edition of the *Flax*, Williamson was 'seeking to impose a conscious mental purpose upon a work that was originally without one'. [62] It is indeed true that Williamson himself declares in the notebook containing the manuscript of *The Beautiful Years*, the first novel in the sequence: 'This story was written anyhow. I never knew what to write next. My characters grew as I wrote'. [63] Nevertheless while it is obvious that the book welled up from the depths of his creative imagination and was written spontaneously, it was in fact meant from a very early stage, if not from the start, as he himself admits in the same notebook, to be 'one of 4', thus:-

The Beautiful Years (8–11)
Pauper Spirits (14–18)
The Flax of Dream (18–22)
The Bludgeon (The Life of Mary Ogilvie & W. Maddison coming in half-way, and then le fin)'. [64]

In the published *Flax* these become:-

The Beautiful Years (dealing with Willie Maddison's life between the ages of 7 and 9 years)
Dandelion Days (14–17 years)
The Dream for Fair Women (21–22 years)
The Pathway (25–26 years)

At the end of the first edition of *The Beautiful Years* (1921) Williamson informs us that it was written between June and November 1920, that is immediately after the unpublished novel entitled The Flax of Dream referred to above. He dates the manuscript note which I have quoted '21/1/21', which is very shortly after the completion of *The Beautiful Years*. That the plan of a sequence of four books is not a mere afterthought, is I think confirmed by the fact that he adapts material from the unpublished novel *The Flax of Dream* for use in *The Beautiful Years* as well as in *Dandelion Days* and *The Dream of Fair Women*. The whole published *Flax* can be seen to have grown organically in Williamson's mind from November 1919 onwards. 'Loaded' chapter headings in the first editions of *The Beautiful Years* and *Dandelion Days* together with the 'Epistle Apological to Andrew Dakers' in the first edition of *Dandelion Days* show clearly that Williamson had a moral aim from the outset which accords with that described in the Foreword to the 1936 edition of the *Flax*. As he himself puts it; in revision he 'cut out and replaced by new pages' various 'untruths, exaggerations, incidents of false characterisation and false writing', but did not alter 'the spirit of each Book'. [65] As I tried to demonstrate in a previous article in this journal, 'he brought out more clearly the underlying unity of the whole sequence, but did not change his essential tone, temper or purpose.' [66] In *The Flax of Dream*, Williamson tells that he wanted to tell 'the story of one human unit of Europe [i.e. Willie Maddison] immediately before and after the War,' and by it to express 'the vision of a new world, dreamed by many young soldiers in the trenches and shell-craters of the World War'. [67] Thus the *Flax* is both a *Bildungsroman* and a 'thesis novel' which by the attractive power of its vision of the possibility of a new order based on imaginative sympathy and understanding within families and nations, and thus between nations, 'would help to alter the thought of the entire world'. [68] This vision, inspired initially by Williamson's experience of the Christmas Truce of 1914, certainly owes something to his enthusiasm for Shelley, but it is also profoundly influenced by his reading in Jefferies. As he himself recounts, the 'seed idea' of the sequence was 'loosed upon the frozen ground of the battlefield;' it lay dormant, but was quickened three months after the Armistice (i.e. in February 1919) 'on reading an old copy of Richard Jefferies's *Story of My Heart* in a second-hand bookshop in Folkestone'. [69] I have discussed the liberating effect which this discovery had on Williamson in Part I of this article, but I should like to suggest that a passage in Jefferies's *The Dewy Morn* also played a vital part in helping Williamson's 'seed idea' to grow. At the time just before and while he was writing *The Beautiful Years*, Williamson was working in London as a journalist and free-lance essayist and he took the opportunity to buy and read as many of Jefferies's books as he could get. He tells us in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* 'with what joy and eagerness' he would find ' a new Jefferies in a second-hand shop, in those London days of 1919, when working for *The Times*, canvassing advertisements from suburban auctioneers!' [70] Although the books he names in this passage as having obtained are *Wood Magic, After London* and *Greene Ferne Farm*, I think that it is a moral certainty that he read *The Dewy Morn* also at about this time. This would seem to be indicated by a passage in chapter 5 of *The Dream of Fair Women* (whose fictional time is 1919) where Willie Maddison (based in many ways, as we have noticed, upon Williamson himself) wonders what he should read as he looks at his bookshelves upon which, amongst others, there are 'the volumes of Richard Jefferies – *The Amateur Poacher, Bevis, Field and Hedgerow, Amaryllis at the Fair* and *The Dewy Morn*...' [71] The passage in *The Dewy Morn* which I think influenced Williamson's intention in *The Flax of Dream* occurs in chapter 21. Jefferies has been describing the joy with which Felise, the heroine,

romped when a child in the meadow grass with her spaniel. This leads him to reflect:

> *No matter how kind their parents may be, no matter how fortunate their circumstances, the children in cities never know the joyousness of the country.*
>
> *The grass to walk in; the flowers to gather; the horses to watch; the new milk; the delicious butter; the brook to ramble by; the pond to fish in; the hay to throw about; the very ladders to climb; and the thick hedges to get in as if they were woods. No gold can purchase these things in cities. They are to be pitied whose youth has been spent in streets, though they may succeed in the counting house where millions are made.* [72]

Jefferies then addresses the reader in memorable words, which for me are among the truest as well as the noblest which he ever wrote:

> *All of you with little children, and who have no need to count expense, or even if you have such need, take them somehow to the country among green grass and yellow wheat — among trees — by hills and streams, if you wish their highest education, that of the heart and soul to be completed.*
>
> *Therein shall they find a Secret — a knowledge not to be written, not to be found in books. They shall know the sun and the wind, the running water, and the breast of the broad earth. Under the green spray, among the hazel boughs where the nightingale sings, they shall find a Secret, a feeling, a sense that fills the heart with an emotion never to be forgotten. They will forget their books — to know the holiest of emotions — take them to the woods and hills, and give them the freedom of the meadows.* [73]

In answer to a possible objection that if the children have toys, story-books and have been to the sea-side and Paris, they cannot want anything more, Jefferies replies:

> *But they do want something more, without which all this expensive spoiling is quite thrown away. They want the unconscious teaching of the country, and without that they will never know the truths of this life. They need to feel — unconsciously — the influence of the air that blows, sun-sweetened, over fragrant hay; to feel the influence of deep shady woods, mile-deep in boughs — the stream — the high hills; they need to revel in long grass. Put away their books, and give them the freedom of the meadows. Do it at any cost or trouble to yourselves, if you wish them to become great men and noble women.* [74]

In the 'Compiler's Note' to the first edition of *The Lone Swallows* (1922) Williamson relates the personal development of the child through association with nature to his hope for a better civilization:

> *My own belief is that association with birds and flowers in childhood — when the brain is plastic and the mind is eager — tends to widen human sympathy in adult life. The hope of civilisation (since we cannot remake the world's history) is in the fraternity of nations, or so it seems to myself, who adolescence was spent at the war; the hope of amity and goodwill of the nation is in the individual — in the human heart, which yearns for the good and the beautiful, and the individual is a child first, eager to learn, but unwilling to be taught. therefore it would appear that the hope of*

civilisation is really in the child. Sometimes heredity may be too great a handicap, but a sweet environment is a gradual solvent of inherited vice, at least it will prevent hardness, whence springs un-understanding and hate. [75]

Here we see very clearly his belief in the importance of nature in the development of the human personality from childhood onwards. The seed of this thought was sown, he declares, on that Sunday in May 1920 when he saw in a tramcar at Catford some children 'returning to the slums after a day in the country'. [76] He used this experience in the essay 'London Children and Wild Flowers' (retitled 'The Passing of the Blossom' in the second edition of *The Lone Swallows*) already discussed. [77] The experience is his own, but his interpretation of it owes, I believe, much to the influence of Jefferies. Looking back upon this period of his life, in an article entitled 'Quest' written in 1946, Williamson recalls the same convictions:

How could a new way of life be brought into the minds of millions of people — the world where all would be wide friendliness and trust, because every man would have faith in himself, out of a naturally developed instinct in man's higher destiny?

The new way could only come from early contact of children with Nature; the pure thoughts given by the elements must be the philosophical basis of the new world. Every child must have a fair chance, not to be warped, as at present, by the economic system, and so often ruined in thought and body by inevitable frustration. [78]

Again the influence of Jefferies is obvious.

When we turn from Williamson's declared intention to his actual achievement in *The Flax of Dream*, we see very clearly the influence of Jefferies throughout the action. In *The Beautiful Years*, as already noticed, he tells the story of Willie Maddison between the ages of seven and nine years. The disadvantage under which Willie labours is that he is an only child whose mother died at his birth, and whose father, subconsciously resenting him for this, is distant and harsh towards him, although consciously all he wants to do is to bring him up to be a good man. However, Willie has some great advantages which help him to mould him into what he eventually becomes, a 'light-bringer' who has attained to a wisdom akin to that of Christ, and who wants to convert mankind to a better way of thought, and thus a happier, more fulfilled and peaceful life.

First, he lives in the country and is able to absorb the benign influences coming to him from nature. The many intensely beautiful passages of natural description in the novel carry with them into the reader's mind something of the message which Williamson wishes to convey. For example, when Willie is only seven years old, he and his friend Jack Temperley decide to go to the woods on a fine spring morning. Their way thither is through a meadow where the life of the earth is stirring in the sunshine:

In the meadow the tame bees from skep and hive were crawling over the bright yellow flowers of the celandine. Their petals were light as with gold-dust, varnished and gleaming, and stained at the hub whence radiated the petal spokes. The spiders had come from their long winter sleep, and their airy prospecting lines, breathed along by the warm south wind, shone and glistened; busy in the short grass were the blackbirds, in the hedge a robin sang; above trilled a lark, striving with fluttering wings to lose itself in the blue vision of re-awakened heaven. [78a]

The boys subconsciously absorb the feeling of the season, but nevertheless its

reality does reach them:

> *The fresh smell of the stirring earth was borne with the wind; although the dog-violets raised on slender stems had no scent, yet they too gave forth an essence that spoke to the two children, for suddenly, without any reason or cause, they flung out their arms, kicked their legs into the air, and shouted.* [79]

When they arrive at the woods, the boys call upon old Bob Lewis the gamekeeper and with him they hear the thin piping of the returned chiff-chaff:

> *'Aiy! aiy! he said, 'I'il grass bird be back, aiy, aiy!' It was the first of the passage birds to be noticed in the covert. Across the great ocean it had travelled, with a million others, the forerunners of a joyous and ecstatic multitude soon to pass by way of the old Nile, as when Cleopatra dipped in its ancient waters; some falling into that dim and uncaring sea, weary of wing, little fluttering things that they were; the survivors to arrive exhausted, yet soon refreshed to light and love in the sweet green shadows of the woodland spring.* [80]

In these passages Williamson's perceptions of the spring and his grasp of its meaning arise from his own observations and feelings, but they have been enriched, I suggest, by his reading of Jefferies's fine essay 'Hours of Spring' in *Field and Hedgerow*. In this essay Jefferies remembers how in winter the seeds of new life lie under the snow:

> *Locked in sleep lay bud and germ — the butterflies of next summer were there somewhere, under the snow. The earth was swept of its inhabitants, but the seeds of life were not dead... Beneath the snow, and in the frozen crevices of the trees, in the chinks of the earth sealed up by the signet of frost, were the seeds of the life that would replenish the air in time to come. The buzzing crowds of summer were under the snow.* [81]

The spring comes and birds, plants and animals rejoice in the season:

> *The touch of the wind, the moisture of the dew, the sun-stained raindrop, have in them the magic force of life — a marvellous something that was not there before. Under it the narrow blade of grass comes up freshly green between the white fibres the rook pulled; the sycamore bud swells and opens, and takes the eye instantly in the still dark wood; the starlings to to the hollow pollards, the lamb leaps in the mead. You never know what a day may bring forth — what new thing will come next: yesterday I saw the ploughman and his teams and the earth gleam smoothed behind the share: today a butterfly has gone past, the farm-folk are bringing home the faggots from the hedgerows; tomorrow there will be a merry, merry note in the ash copse, the chiff-chaff's singing call to arms, to arms, ye leaves!* [82]

Willie responds to the joy of spring, to the exaltation of summer as he and Jack gather 'whole armfuls of flowers from the new swathes' of hay cut by the mowers, and to the sadness of autumn as the swallows gather to leave:

> *... by the lake the swallows were having a final banquet before leaving for distant lands. As the hour of departure drew night, they grew more and more excited. Every afternoon Willie went to watch them, sadly. His beautiful swallows were going to*

leave him. One day he went there with his father, resenting his presence, to bid them farewell, but he was too late. The lake was deserted.

At night the Voice had spoken: in a vast cloud they had fled towards the southern stars.

Willie was inconsolable. All that afternoon and evening he wandered about singing softly to himself. [83]

Mr. Maddison fails to understand his son's emotional reaction, pointing out that the swallows will return; he cannot understand how for Willie 'it won't be the same'. [84]

However Willie has a substitute father in Jim Holloman, crowstarver and casual labourer, who nevertheless has not only a rich fund of practical knowledge about nature, but also a mystical appreciation of its beauty. Willie's friendship with Jim is the second great advantage which he has. Jim's appearance, as Williamson admits in the manuscript notebook containing *The Beautiful Years*, is modelled upon that of Richard Jefferies as described by Sir Walter Besant in his *Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (1888). Here is Besant's portrait of Jefferies:

In appearance Richard Jefferies was very tall — over six feet. He was always thin. At the age of seventeen is friends feared that he would go into a decline, which was happily averted — perhaps through his love for the open air. His hair was dark-brown, his beard was brown, with a shade of auburn; his forehead both high and broad; his features strongly marked; his nose long, clear and straight, his lower lip thick; his eyebrows distinguished by the meditative droop, his complexion was fair, with very little colour. The most remarkable feature in his face was his large and clear blue eye; it was so full it ought to have been short-sighted, yet his sight was far as well as keen. His face was full of thought, he walked with somewhat noiseless tread and a rapid stride... He had great power of endurance in walking, but his physical strength was never great. In manner... he was always reserved,... He made few friends...[85]

Compare with this description that of Jim Holloman as he lies in the entrance to his shelter in the spinney, where he lives when 'crowstarving':

In appearance the man who sprawled in the opening was very tall and thin. His hair and beard were auburn; his eyebrows drooped as though for ever he were meditating. His face had very little colour, except for the large and clear blue eyes which were so full that they ought to have been short-sighted, yet his sight was far as well as keen. He had great powers of endurance, but his physical strength was not great. In manner he was reserved, almost morose; he never visited the inn; the villagers said that he was mazed.

He had no friends among them, they treated him with contemptuous indifference; the children shouted after him. His only friend appeared to be Willie Maddison, who was reputed to be mazed as well, taking such an interest as he did, in birds and animals. [86]

This similarity, declares Williamson, is deliberate; it is to point the reader towards and understanding of Jim's role in the novel. Of course Jim is dissimilar to Jefferies in many respects; in social origin, marital status, occupation and ability as a write: however he does exercise a benign influence on Willie, providing some sympathetic companionship, knowledge of the ways of the countryside and an initiation into the mystical power of nature. Some of Williamson's finest passages of natural

description in the novel are associated with scenes in which Jim appears, [87] and it is he who introduces Willie to the mystery of the dawn and the morning glories, to which Willie can respond with a feeling akin to his own. This important scene occurs near the end of the novel when Willie is staying temporarily with Jim in the spinney, having run away from home to escape yet another thrashing from his father for being caught by a gamekeeper while liberating jays on a neighbour's land — even though his father recognizes that such trapping is both disagreeable and illegal:

> *'Look', whispered Jim, pointing to the east. Over the dark outlines of the beech wood hung a star, a lustrous globe of radiance, larger than any star Willie had ever seen. They watched it in silence. Slowly it moved higher glowing with a softer and purer blaze as it was lapped by the light now flowing into the eastern estuary of heaven.It was neither white nor golden, nor would any colour describe it: the darkness paled before the spectral dawn. Looking up into the sky, he saw that the stars were keener than before. Light, mystic light, the life of the world was flooding like an incoming tide into the dusked shallows of dawn. Gradually, the footpath through the field showed up; from among the corn a lark rose singing in the sky — he too had seen the Morning Star... As it rose higher the light-bringer shone with whiter fire; one by one the stars in deeper heaven grew wan and sank into the waters of day. Like a motionless sea, light swept up the sky, purging it of darkness, glowing in the lofty empyrean, bringing life and joy to living things.* 88

The particularity of observation and the emotional quality of this description are individual to Williamson, but I should like to suggest that, as in the case of the description of spring discussed above, a passage of Jefferies was in Williamson's mind as he wrote. The passage occurs in the novel *Green Fern Farm*, where Jefferies describes the dawn which Geoffrey sees after spending a night in the open air, and renders his reaction to it:

> *Out of the first fringe of mist shone a great white globe like molten silver, glowing with a lusciousness of light soft yet brilliant, so large and bright and seemingly so near — but just above the ridge yonder — shining with heavenly splendour in the very day spring. He knew Eosphorus, the Light-Bringer, the morning star of hope and joy and love, and his heart went out towards the beauty and glory of it. Under him the broad bosom of the earth seemed to breathe instinct with life, bearing him up, and from the azure ether came the wind, filling his chest with the vigour of the young day.* [89]

It is the sight of the dawn and the early morning sunshine which makes Willie feel not only that 'school and history lessons' are 'unimportant', but also that his calf-love for Elsie Norman means but little to him compared to nature. Like Jefferies, Jim Holloman is a 'light-bringer' — Williamson's term, borrowed from the morning-star for a man who brings spiritual illumination to his fellows if they will but heed him. In this he anticipates what Willie himself will become. Like Jefferies, both Jim and Willie will die young, although in different circumstances. Jefferies died of disease, but Jim and Willie die accidentally; Jim being burnt to death in a lime-kiln into which he has fallen when asleep near the edge, Willie being drowned in the estuary of the rivers Taw and Torridge. All three are in Williamson's view disprized in their life-time and their wisdom disregarded.

Jim loves Dolly, an attractive and affectionate maidservant at the Temperleys'

farmhouse, but, comments Williamson: 'it is decreed that men in whom is a mystic understanding and love of the wild are tied forever to loneliness.' [90] Although Jefferies was happily married, he was a reserved man and had few friends;in Besant's view this was a necessity to a writer of his sort:

> *In order to read this book [of nature] aright, one must live apart from one's fellow men and remain a stranger to their ambitions, ignorant of their crooked ways, their bickerings and their pleasures.* [91]

Probably at the time of writing *The Beautiful Years*, Williamson felt that loneliness was to be his fate, and Willie Maddison, in *The Pathway*, the last novel in the sequence, breaks off his engagement to Mary Ogilvie before leaving on his last journey which he intends to lead to a crusade to get his ideas about nature and human regeneration accepted by those most likely to respond actively to them — the ex-soldiers of the War.

The third advantage which Willie has is his friendship with Jack Temperley, a yeoman farmer's son, who lives in a find traditional farmhouse, which bears some resemblance at least to Coate Farm, Jefferies's childhood home. Willie comes from the minor gentry and lives at Fawley House;his father is a retired barrister, but his grandfather was an army officer who squandered the family fortune and land through intemperance. In spite of the social difference the boys are devoted to each other and Willie draws much support from Jack's affection for him. Their friendship is drawn very largely, I think, from that between Williamson and his boyhood friend Terence Tetley, although it owes something also to the happy relationship between Williamson and his 'country cousin' Charlie Boon, at Aspley Guise. With this basis in personal experience is fused the literary reminiscence of the friendship between Bevis and Mark in Jefferies's *Bevis*. Of course Willie and Jack in *The Beautiful Years* are younger than Bevis and Mark, their adventures are more varied, and the action of the novel is considerably longer. Furthermore there is nothing in *Bevis* to correspond with Willie's precocious unrequited love for Elsie Norman. However the delight which Willie and Jack take in nature is foreshadowed in the attitude of Bevis and Mark, and Jefferies's comments about the benefits which come to the boys from nature [92] blend with Williamson's own intuition in this matter, reinforcing the influence of Jefferies's reflections in *The Dewy Morn* noticed above. *Bevis* is one of Willie's favourite books and when wondering if he should re-read it, he wishes ruefully that *his* father were more like Bevis's cheerful and understanding 'guv'nor'.

Some further influence of *Bevis* and of *Wild Life in a Southern County* can be discerned in the topography of *The Beautiful Years*. The landscape is an ideal one but its location owes something to Jefferies's Wiltshire, with the downs and Coate Reservoir, which blend with Williamson's recollections of north-west Kent, especially Holwood Park, Keston [93] and the countryside around Aspley Guise. The general tone of *The Beautiful Years* is elegiac and Williamson draws upon some aspects of his own childhood in the book. He hints at this as well as his debt to Jefferies by using as epigraph a sentence from Jefferies's late essay 'My Old Village' in *Field and Hedgerow*: 'The sun shone there for a very long time, and the water rippled and sang...' [94]

A theme introduced towards the end of *The Beautiful Years* forms the major concern of *Dandelion Days*, the second novel in the sequence, which deals with Willie's adolescent years from the age of fourteen to seventeen. This is the contrast between the unwisdom of the schooling of the period and the enlightenment which

comes to young people through contact with nature. While this is in the tradition of Blake and Wordsworth, the immediate influence on Williamson is undoubtedly that of Jefferies, which blends with his own experience and reflection. [95] It is Jefferies's essay 'Nature and Books' in *Field and Hedgerow* which provides most of the epigraphs and suggests the title *Dandelion Days*. In this essay Jefferies contrasts the spontaneous natural growth of the dandelion, which can convey wisdom to the man who contemplates it imaginatively, with what he regards as the dead knowledge and unwisdom in books, laboriously accumulated by sterile rationalisation: 'I hope in the days to come future thinkers will unlearn us, and find ideas infinitely better... let us get a little alchemy out of the dandelions'. [96] So, for him: 'there is nothing in books that touches my dandelion'. [97] The flower grows naturally, as the human being should do, but in Williamson's view all too often does not. Nevertheless as Jefferies realized, it can be a symbol of human natural growth which ought to be not only physical but mental and spiritual:

> *It grows, ah yes ! it grows! How does it grow? Builds itself up somehow of sugar and starch, and turns mud into bright colour and dead earth into food for bees, and some day perhaps for you, and knows when to shut its petals...* [98]

Thus it is that Williamson can endorse Jefferies's thought in his essay 'Pigeons at the British Museum', in *The Life of the Fields*: 'In the sunshine, by the shady verge of woods, by the sweet waters where the wild dove sips, there along will thought be found.' [99] He believes with Jefferies that men who have received a conventional education must unlearn it to allow them to attain to the illumination which can come to them by the contemplation of nature:

> *Thus men's minds... are unlearning, the first step to learn. As yet we are in the fact stage; by-and-by we shall come to the alchemy, and get the honey for the inner mind and soul. I found therefore, from the dandelion, there were no books, and it came upon me believe me, as a very great surprise... It is nothing but unlearning I find now...* [100]

The classroom scenes in *Dandelion Days* are wildly funny, and the schoolmasters are not totally unsympathetic. Nevertheless the reader can recognize clearly the limitations of their educational methods, and respond with approval to Williamson's intention to show how important contact with nature is to growing boys. After the class has been irritated and exhausted by a particularly tiresome French lesson, and cheated of four minutes of its 'break', the boys rush into the playground:

> *The sunlight absolved them of all hatred. They continued their rush down the steps into the lower playground, yelling joyously as Burrell released a semi-skinned tennis ball for a kick about.* [101]

Williamson succeeds very well in making us feel the contrast between the oppressiveness of the dim, stuffy classroom, and the attractive, more wholesome sunlit world of nature outside:

> *The windows were often closed, even in sunny weather. Through the glass rendered opaque by moisture the morning sun glowed like an immense shine-bedraggled dandelion, soon, too soon, to move away from Willie's desk and leave him in shadow. He dreamed back into the ancient sunlight of his past happiness. In the gloomed*

school arose the working hum of learning. So for hundreds of years, hid from summery beauty, the hum of learning had filled the school; centuries of wasted sunshine, while under the northern eaves the martins built their nests, and flew at will in the blue air of heaven, heedless of the everlasting drone within the shut and shaded rooms. Sometimes their happy twitter came through the window, heard by Willie as he endured the days. [102]

The contrast is not merely physical, it is also spiritual; it is that between the 'mill of the mind' in W.B. Yeats's phrase [103] grinding unproductively on dead material and the instinctive appreciation of life which brings with it genuine insight into reality. Sometimes the headmaster, Mr. Rore, striving with almost manic dedication to impart what he considers to be important knowledge and 'drive home his ideas' of excessive application to acquire 'mental power', asks the boys to remain late as he deals with 'a problem of Differential Calculus or the Binomial Theorem'. The result is that 'on many occasions after 5 o'clock a mutinous 5a' leaves 'the inspissated atmosphere of its classroom, wearily and grumbling'. But Willie 'cycles home through the cornfields', is 'recharged by the spreading colour' and 'the effect of the day' is shed. [104] Mr. Rore is well-meaning, but he does not see how important it is to implant a *love* of learning in the young, rather than merely drive them towards it by the will. In a highly significant sequence, he walks in the countryside but is not open imaginatively to its benign influence. He is blind to qualities of an English reaping scene before his eyes, turning from it to recall Virgil's *Georgics*. [105] To have responded to the immediate living scene and then by association of ideas to have remembered Virgil's art would have been a vital transition, but to dwell only in the realm of art shows a serious defect in his approach to nature. He sits on a log at the edge of Rookhurst forest, but remains imperious to its beauty; he ignores it and makes notes for a talk to his staff. [106] Insensitiveness of this sort is found in two of Jefferies's bad characters; the hard and tyrannical old farmer Andrew Fisher in *Greene Ferne Farm* and the oppressive and cruel steward Robert Godwin in The Dewy Morn. However, although Willie in later years refers to Mr. Rore as 'a slayer of minds' [107] he is not treated so severely by Williamson as these characters in Jefferies's novels. He does not in fact kill Willie's imaginative life or repsonse to nature, and the reader takes great delight in his orotund and unconsciously ludicrous 'pep talks' to his pupils. The really evil character in *Dandelion Days* is John Fry, the hypocritical lay-preacher who catches chaffinches to blind and sell. Such cruelty and lack of respect for innocent birds is part of the same vileness which leads him to treat his adoring and long-suffering old mother with loathesome ingratitude.

Willie is well able to have a life outside of school; he enjoys bird-nesting, keeps a nature diary, races in a catamaran on the Longpond against Jack in a canoe, and joins with some friends in the formation of an 'Owl Club' to study the ways of the bird and keep owlets as pets. [108] Like Jefferies, he dislikes change and has feelings of nostalgia about the past, [109] sometimes even wishing that time would stand still:

O water, shine always — O trees, be green forever with these same leaves — O summer cornfield, wave with wheat forever and ever as thou wavest this morning when Jack and I walked through you, and I was nasty to him, and we quarrelled — O summer sun, shine on our homes forever like this, and shine on our friendship.[110]

Towards the end of the novel when he is distressed by Elsie's failure to reciprocate his love, Willie goes each day to the downs, and like Jefferies in *The Story of My*

Heart he is able to leave behind the cares of life and fee free, surrounded by nature:

> *Here on the highest hill with a view of many miles of plain and the unseen sea beyond, the longings would be taken away by the wind. Here he might lie, and think himself away into the sunlight, like the spirit of the ancient Briton whose bones for centuries had lain under the mound. Here the singing lark, the gliding kestrel, and the wandering honey bee were free in the sunshine and he was free with them.* [111]

After the complete failure of his love-affair with Elsie, he turns for consolation to the stars, which he can identify , having learned to know them from a birthday present book:

> *All the bright company were his friends for evermore. Arcturus as brilliant over the downs, lancing a ray of blue then flaring with sudden crimson. Aldebaran glowed low in the east, near Capella, a yellow star that was in the night sky never setting. He would purify his heart of human love and weakness, he would lift his heart even above the flowers and the birds.* [112]

However he cannot hold to this resolution; on the verge of tears at his disappointment the starry sky becomes 'but a high vain wilderness'. [113] For full consolation he needs also the friendship of the ever faithful Jack who is awaiting him in the spinney where Jim Holloman dwelt. Strengthened by this he can bid farewell to his earlier life, and with Jack advance 'down the right-of-way through the wheat that swayed and sighed in the wind.' [114] It is July 1914, and the boys advance in fact to the dangers of the Great War in which Jack will be killed. During his visit to Rookhurst, Willie's cousin Phillip, who takes great delight in the countryside and the ancient rural customs, tells of the ravaging of nature by urban spread near the south London suburb in which he lives, and Williamson will link this with other manifestations of the corrupt spirit which brings about the war and which must be fought by the sounder vision of life that Willie will preach in the third and fourth novels in *The Flax of Dream*.

In *The Dream of Fair Women*, the third volume in the sequence, which tells of Willie's life in the summer and autumn of 1919, shortly after his demobilization, we find that Willie has matured considerably, and is moving towards a wisdom which he will seek to propagate in *The Pathway*. He is writing a book, *The Policy of Reconstruction, or True Resurrection* which owes much of its substance to his reading in the works of Jefferies, especially *The Story of My Heart*. Like Williamson himself, he has bought a copy in Folkestone, and he is fond of quoting passages from it. [115] The thesis of *The Policy of Reconstruction* is in many ways that of the *Flax* itself; that a mistaken system of education has helped lead to the war by damaging the natural psychological growth of children. In the following passage, which Eve reads to Pat Colyer, Willie recalls his last term at school, already described in *Dandelion Days*, [116] but now he realizes what was wrong about it:

> *'And the term went on, preparing us for " the conflict of a mature life" stealing the wind and sun which makes the genius of man. On the tower of the school floated the national flag, frayed and bleached in the white air passing over all lands with the secret gifts of heaven, the white wind fraying and bleaching all flags. And the term went on in the shadowed classrooms, the last term for me and Jack, Bony and Rupert, Fitzaucher and Burrell, all the friends who had swatted and played together — the summer of 1914, which was to see the apotheosis of ideas and methods which*

everywhere had crushed the imaginative tissues of childhood, as the young leaves of dandelions on the Gadarene slopes.' [117]

The boys named have all been killed during the war; for them the system has had a literally lethal effect. Against this and traditional religions, including Christianity, Willie sets the 'Great Earth Spirit to which his thought rises when contemplating nature:

'Truth pours down in the sunlight! The sun pours its beams on the worn stones of the cathedrals — Canterbury, Cologne —' [118]

This is clearly inspired by some key passages in *The Story of My Heart*, although the objective existence of the Earth Spirit is closer to Wordsworth than Jefferies. Somewhat later in the novel when Willie has got to know Eve, he himself reads to her a passage, composed while she was in Folkestone, which describes how he and Jack delighted in nature when boys. He comments:

'...I feel in my mind all the flowers and the songs of boyhood are stored, and must pour them out, giving them shape and form in sentences which will ring in the hearts of all who read and soften them, and bring back to them the simplicity and clarity of the child-heart. For the hope of the world, of the human race, is in the child.' [119]

Attempts by revolutionary idealists to regenerate society are doomed to failure, he writes, 'until the extra wisdom has come into men's minds.' The reason for this is that they 'neglect the secret of the woods and fields, and how they expand man's spirit if he knows them when little'. [120]

Willie's way of life in his lime-burner's cottage on the coast of North Devon is one of simplicity; he shares the cottage with a strange assortment of wild creatures for whom he has an imaginative sympathy, and on the beach he indulges in reverie, inspired by his readings in Jefferies. He is fascinated by the shells on the beach and tries to identify them 'from the hand-coloured plates of the Conchology book'. [121] Contemplation of them leads to a mystical apprehension of the life that was once in them:

The sun shone on them all, alone knowing of their ancient dreaming; and he dreamed with them, holding them in the palm of his hand, until it seemed that the sun was shining through him to that ancient life again. [122]

On Peace Night Willie goes on to the downs behind Folkestone to see the beacons lighted. In the manner of Jefferies, he thinks of the pagan dead buried there, and then of his dead comrades:

Ancient Briton and alien Roman, Saxon and Norman, Colonial and Englishman, all had breathed the salt wind of the hills, and pondered the star-meaning at night; were they of Something that strayed and lingered awhile, and found itself again? [123]

Later in the novel he returns with Mary Ogilvie, who tells him that she often comes there. Unlike Eve, she has an affinity of spirit with Willie and Williamson will recount the story of their love in *The Pathway*. Willie's love-affair with Eve prospers much more than that with Elsie Norman. They do become lovers for a time, but at the end of the novel she rejects him for Naps Spreycombe, who is to be the Earl of

Slepe. As he has not yet come properly to appreciate Mary, Willie feels bitterly disappointed, just as he did at the end of *Dandelion Days*. Jack is now dead, but he still has nature, which he believes, does not betray the dreams it gives. He goes further, finishing *The Policy of Reconstruction*, in the last paragraph of which he records his belief in his mission to preach a new reign of love — which has behind it Jefferies, Shelley, Blake and his own hard-won experience.

> *'And thus have I arisen from my dead, my educated, my European self; and I arose completely and finally in that moment in Canterbury Cathedral while God was being thanked for our victory in the war: reading in the New Testament during the scale-eyed words from the pulpit. I found a text that brought the tears to my eyes in glory of what I beheld — "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again, until Kristos be formed in you". Therefore shall I live, therefore shall I work until the night cometh, therefore shall I love from everlasting to everlasting.'* [124]

He will seek to form a Christ-like spirit in himself and others in *The Pathway*. His interpretation of the scriptual text, (Gal. iv.19) may not be traditionally orthodox, but it will allow him to become a 'light-bringer' as Williamson believed Jefferies to be, in common with Christ.

The Pathway, the last and finest novel in the *Flax* sequence tells the story of Willie's life from January 1923 until his death in September of that year. An early reviewer saw it as 'almost a great novel', but I agree with Fr. Brocard Sewell that it is a great novel. [125] Two themes are interwoven in it; Willie's mission as a prophet of a new order in society and his love for Mary Ogilvie.

Both are strongly influenced by Jefferies, but the total artistic achievement is magnificently individual to Williamson. Since the end of the action of *The Dream of Fair Women*, Willie, affected by the break with Eve, has for a time taken to drink. However, after a collapse in the Adelphi Gardens, needing a therapy he has gone to France to work as a labourer with the War Graves Commission. He has also visited Germany and been distressed by the deprivations suffered by the population there. While there he has encountered Hitler, although he does not name him, referring to him as:

> *...an ex-corporal with the truest eyes I have ever seen in any man, now rousing the young men and the ex-soldiers to save the nation from disintegration; a man who doesn't smoke or drink, a vegetarian, owning no property, living for the sun to shine on the living.* [126]

This experience will contribute to his conviction, towards the end of the novel, that it is necessary to 'rouse the ex-soldiers' in England to carry his own vision into actuality. [127] His ideas are still essentially those of *The Policy of Reconstruction* held more firmly and articulated more clearly. In his views we continue to detect the strong influence of Jefferies. There is a supreme need, he believes, for a change in outlook, which can come only from better education. The old narrow ideas must be supplanted by new broader ones, for as he puts it: 'Change thought and you change the world.' [128] In *The Story of My Heart* Jefferies writes about what he considers to be the folly of asceticism, and about his contempt for 'the pageantry of power, the still more foolish pageantry of wealth' and 'the senseless precedence of place.' [129] Instead of these he desires physical perfection and 'soul-life'. He expresses the wish to contribute to the good and happiness of the human race in the future, realizing that 'probably the whole mode of thought of the nations must be altered before physical

progress is possible.' [130] It is his belief that 'fullness of physical life causes a deeper desire of soul-life'. [131] We must acknowledge our ignorance:

> *Begin wholly afresh. Go straight to the sun, the immense forces of the universe, to the Entity unknown; go higher than a god; deeper than prayer, and open a new day.* [132]

In Willie's desire for reconciliation between the former enemies of the war, the literary influence is predominantly that of Shelley; however this fuses with his ideas derived from Jefferies about personal regeneration as a necessary start to the attainment of international harmony. He laments the contrast between the beautiful Allied war-cemeteries and the vast ugly concentration graveyard for Germans at the Labryrinthe, decreed by the hate-filled French. This cruelty comes, he believes, from people who 'don't see the earth and sea and stars plainly.' [133] Williamson contrasts the sincere but limited and conventional Christianity of the vicar, Mr. Garside, with the more vital and creative notion of the Kristos held by Willie, which he thinks of as the Christ-like state, 'the flower of the tree of life' attainable by human beings. Like Jefferies, Hitler and Christ himself he is not appreciated by the conventionally minded — Miss Goff, Mrs Ogilvie and some of the local gentry. However, he is appreciated by Mary Ogilvie, who has an affinity of spirit with him, partly based upon their appreciation of Jefferies and Francis Thompson. [134] The central story of the book is that of the love between Willie and Mary. This love begins truly to blossom as they walk over the Burrows and sands, surrounded by the benign spirit of nature, to which both are sensitive. The natural descriptions in the novel are memorably beautiful. The countryside described is not an ideal realm as in *The Beautiful Years* and *Dandelion Days*; rather, like that of the first part of *The Dream of Fair Women* it is a real area of North Devon, although not just a repetition of it. Georgeham, Baggy Point. Putsborough Sands and Croyde Bay are particularly featured in *The Dream of Fair Women*, whereas in *The Pathway* it is the district near Braunton, with its Great Field and Burrows which receives prime attention. In these descriptions Williamson has absorbed the influence of Jefferies in that they are both vivid and magically attractive, but he has now attained to complete independence of any specific passages in Jefferies' writings. As I tried to show in the earlier article in this Journal referred to above, these descriptions are blended very successfully with the events of the story, [135] but here I should like to give but one example among many of Williamson's supreme art in the creation of a scene. I choose his depiction of the 'Valley of the Winds' in Braunton Burrows. A sudden impulse to be alone has led Willie to part from Many and run off into the dunes:

> *A track of footsteps in the loose sand led round the mullein and up the slope to the sky. The others were ahead somewhere, and fancying the track might be Mary's, he followed it, up and down the purring sands, until he reached a long dry slope, ribbed by the last wind, which ended at a broken summit. He stood on the summit, above a cliff hung with loose roots of marram grass, and looked down into an immense valley of sand, lying north and south. Sunlight and silence brimmed the wide empty place. Above the uneven level of the Burrows the white lines of breakers on the estuary bar crinkled in the air arising off the hot sand.*
>
> *The footsteps led down the long slope, which bore of the wind's winnowing innumerable white shells, like beads, and larger grey shells of Roman snails worn thin and holed by sun and sand of the wilderness. He saw a round leaden bullet that lay on the sand near a rusty shrapnel case, relicts of olden artillery practice, and dead men rose up before him among the litter of skulls and bones and shells. Placidly the*

wraiths flowed away in air, and he walked on, his body light as sunlight.

A plain lay between the bottom of the slope and the seaward hills, where plants of hawkbit, dove's foot, crane's bill, ragwort, plantain, and scorpion grass were starving, each dwarf, in the dampness of the poor soil. Some grew big, among taller grasses, where white bones lay. A beautiful cry came from along the level way as he walked, for he passed near the tuft dreamed on by a sandpiper for her nesting place. [136]

In this magical place memories of dead war-time comrades are benign and are soon dissolved by nature. Although remote, it is not a dead world; plants can grow there, and a bird is seeking a nesting place.

It is in the seclusion of the Valley of the Winds that Willie first begins to declare his love, and to realize why he is attracted to Mary:

He saw that nothing had changed since her childhood, that her spirit was simple as water, sky, grass and wandering air, whose product she was. Therein lay the life of the future, for her mind was the essence of these things stored in the young consciousness. [137]

In this description of Mary, Williamson is probably influenced by Jefferies's words about Felise, the heroine of *The Dewy Morn*:

Her natural body had been ... perfected by a purely natural life. The wind, the sun, the fields, the hills — freedom, and the spirit which dwells among these, had made a natural woman; such a woman as Earth meant to live upon her surface, and as Earth intended in the first origin of things: beauty and strength — strength and beauty. [138]

However Mary's character is by no means a mere repetition of that of Felise; she is gentler and more complex — and unlike Felise does not marry her lover. Willie comes to feel that he cannot bring Mary lasting happiness; he breaks off their engagement, believing that he must leave on his reforming mission. As he leaves on his last journey he feels that his heroes, Shelley, Jefferies, Blake, Francis Thompson and Jesus are with him, and that he is 'of the everlasting light and life of the world'. [139] At the end of the novel, after he has been drowned, Mary sees Willie as a light-bringer whom she has failed, and endorses totally his message: 'thinking of the darkness of men's minds, pierced in vain by the shining light of Kristos, and of the agony of Christ at the end of the Pathway'. [140] Williamson came to recognize that as an artist he had been too much on Willie's side in the Flax. He tried to be more impartial with Phillip in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. Furthermore, as I have sought to argue elsewhere, the 'message' of the Flax although wise, is limited. [141] I should venture to say the same of Jefferies's 'message' which influenced so strongly *The Flax of Dream*. Traditional Christianity in its fully orthodox form and as expounded by its soundest theologians seems to me to be not only richer and more satisfying but truer as well. However, one must not be led into the error which T.S. Eliot embraced in *After Strange Gods*, and judge imaginative writers too simply and crudely by their overt and extractable philosophy. Williamson's philosophy at this stage of his career is expressed more successfully, I think, in the Flax than in his symbolic fable in *The Starborn*, reputedly written by Willie Maddison (1933, revised edn., 1948). Jefferies had an influence on *The Starborn* also; it is that of *Wood Magic* (1881) where the birds and animals, together with the elements speak to the child Bevis, although indeed the stories and situations are different.

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