The Honour of Life

Ronald Walker

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It was some words found at the very end of *The Gold Falcon* which suggested to me a suitable title for this talk:

> *The dove and the falcon, the phoenix and the turtle, this is the honour of life...*
> *So thinking, he looked straitly at the sun: at the light and fire of sun pouring into him: the honour of life clear within him. (The Gold Falcon, Faber, 1933, pp. 388-9)*

Apart from the symbolism of 'the light and fire of the sun', familiar to all readers of Henry Williamson, together with kindred expressions such as 'ancient sunlight' or seeing all things as the sun sees them, without shadows, the words offer us what has often struck me as one of the secrets of Williamson's genius — his deep sense of 'the honour of life'.

To begin with, he is one of a select band of authors who have such a passionate concern for truth that it overrides everything else. For it is, after all, arguable that it is truth that most honours life, the 'light and fire of the sun', the vision that has no shadows.

As for the other symbols here: 'the dove and the falcon, the phoenix and the turtle' — these are integral to his work, in the sense that we often find the dove's gentleness in his writing alongside the ruthless, piercing vision of the falcon, and the soaring idealism rising on phoenix wings matched with the tender homeliness of the turtle-dove.

And there is a further, no less important, sense in which I find Henry Williamson honouring life. He belongs to that generation of novelists who could speak truth without recourse to those crude Anglo-Saxon words so beloved of the modern novelist, to clinical descriptions of the function of human sex-organs, to the deliberate exploitation of squalor and ugliness. Life, for Henry, was not a kitchen-sink or a midden. He knew that loyalty, compassion, and beauty are as much a part of 'realism' as any of life's sleazier aspects.

'The honour of life within him.' I would like to put this concept before you as one of the reasons why, to me, Henry ranks among the major writers of this century. What I have chosen to offer you in this talk is designed to illuminate some of the obvious (and less obvious) aspects of that 'honour of life' which he celebrates so intensely throughout the novels.

Perhaps I could not begin more tellingly that with a certain journal-entry, fictionally ascribed to Phillip Maddison when, in the last chapter of *Lucifer Before Sunrise*, he is at Malandine in South Devon. We find him writing a passage which surely must reflect Henry's own memories and reflections:

> *Here is peace: a man alone on the sands with the song of the larks, the cries of the gulls flying high overhead, the murmur of sea on the rocks.*
> *Each wave breaking tranquilly upon this deserted shore ends a pulse from ocean primeval. Convoys, depth-charges, agonies of men in open boats and rubber dinghies, colossal flash and spout of bomb and torpedo — I have drowned with them, I have*

drooped with them over oars they are too weak to move. I have known both the courage that breaks and the spirit that bears a man beyond the heaviness of air. I have lost honour and betrayed myself, I have felt affection for my enemy and been thoughtless and cruel to my wife, to my dead son — all states of one man who yet knows that such things are but momentary and slight if he be able, at last, to trust to the grace within which is his liaison with the Creator, who is, despite all, Love.

I pray, but beyond words, through what Keats called the Imagination, that I may arise from my entoiled and entombed self, that I may put all self-willed thought away, that I may be simple with the sun above the mirage-shimmer on the sands when the mist arises and the wavelets are seen to break in think and fragile lines of white — my life is of these and the friends I have laughed with; of beauty seen in curve of cheek, breast, shoulder, thigh — a smile, a soft voice, a glance innocent and gentle; dark silhouettes of fishermen with their net at night when the moon is full. These and many other visions are of me, of this moment while grains of sand trickle idly through my fingers.

The waves fall gentle in summer, the sun shines, gulls cry, jackdaws beat above the jetsam line. Over my head fly a pair of ravens — those birds always in company with each other. The cock bird croaks as he looks down on me; he croaks again and half-rolls on extended wings and flicks back again all in one movement. He is happy, he calls reassurance to his mate.

Two buzzards soar above the ravens. I hear plaintive cries from the blue halls of the wind, and once again my heart lifts with that phrase of Richard Jefferies — 'I am in the midst of eternity; it is all about me in the sunshine.'

(Lucifer Before Sunrise, Macdonald, 1967. pp 488-9)

It is in the sheer poetry of passages such as these that I feel we come face to face with the inner spirit of our author and most readily take him to our hearts.

And already, you see, we have identified Phillip Maddison, the dominating central figure in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, with Henry himself. (In conversation with Kenneth Allsop in 1968 he frankly admitted that Phillip was himself, despite the fictionalising treatment.)

The journal entry we have just listened to, so full of inner peace and tranquillity of spirit, is the voice of the dove. But now, to follow, from *The Power of the Dead*, is Maddison/Williamson in one of those moods of bitterness and anger which suggest the pitiless vision of the falcon, turned here not only outwards upon the dilatory and extravagant Copleston family and the dereliction in which they work, but also inwards upon himself. It is in this passage that we meet those awful words of self-revelation: 'He was LIKE FATHER'. And readers of the whole *Chronicle* will be aware how skilfully, how imperceptibly, this transmogrification comes about through the narrative:

After a while he moved away to the store-room, where stood a half-opened case of one gross tins of grease solvent soap, sold to a compliant Tim by some commercial traveller telling a hard-luck story. He opened one, and started to clean the basins. There was no water in the tank. He went outside, and found two pails by the kitchen door, emptied their rotting garbage on the ash-heap, and walked up the lane to draw water from the well. He borrowed a clean pitcher to dip in the water, and returned with full pails.

Muttering to himself, he began to clean the lavatories. It took several pails of water to free the passages after removing wads of newsprint and scraping with a wire brush. Then the scouring with abrasive, while he kept all feeling under control,

breathing steadily against a mounting sense of horror at the indifference, the neglect, the unawareness due to what seemed to be a total lack of sensibility — butterflies without antennae. It only wanted shell-fire to complete in miniature the appearance of the Somme battlefield where all the underlying purpose of life — the created order and beauty of the species — had been denied; like working backwards to chaos, far beyond the simple, the natural order of death succeeding life.

He could no longer control his feelings, he began to shout at himself. Taking a broom, he swept the floor of the machine-room. The inner self collapsed; with a wild scream he went to the Office. Here was no relief; here everything was in chaos. A feeling of despair rushed out of him, leaving a sense of appalling lifelessness within. He stood still, knowing his real self to be destroyed beneath the personality he has assumed during the war, covering the distraught inner core of his earliest years. In a frenzy he struck the back of his right hand on the bench, again and again until the blood came from the base of the finger-nails. It a flaring moment he saw the truth of his life which, despite all he did, could never change its pattern. He was done for. A man's life, right through to its end, was as his beginning. He had never done what he wanted to do; it was always prostitution for others, who DID NOT WANT HIS INTERFERENCE. Therein lay the truth; he was like Father, trying to change others because he was weak and unable to change himself. He had always PRETENDED with Lucy. What would become of him? Was he doomed to the same sort of misery all his life, always more or less at odds with those about him, always trying to explain, to make things clearer — Doris, Mother, Father, Cousin Arthur, the Coplestons — Uncle Hilary and his damning of the miners' leaders — damning strikes which were only a mass demand for a decent life — damning the General Strike in the spring. A European generation had died upon the battlefields in vain.

(The Power of the Dead, Macdonald, 1963, pp. 75-6)

Yes: 'he was like Father' — and we are made to realise how powerful and influential a figure in the *Chronicle* Richard Maddison is presented to be. To me, he is one of the most skilfully-realised characters in twentieth-century fiction: the shoes wiped on the mat, the umbrella on the stand, the gramophone firmly locked, the cut of hot water last thing at night 'to flush the system', the trousers pressed under the mattress, his contempt for women's suffrage, his uncritical acceptance of everything written in *The Daily Trident* — infuriating, consistent, and funny.

I choose a favourite episode of mine from *The Golden Virgin*, at the very point where Phillip has been laid low leading his platoon on to the battlefield of the Somme, struck down by bullet and phosphorus bomb. As this takes place, Richard is setting out for his allotment. And that allotment! It is tellingly presented to us as an extension of Richard's character, and his concept of the war:

Bran mixed with powdered naphthalene had accounted for the slugs. A maze of black thread, thought of as barbed wire defending his main crop position, had kept sparrows off the peas. Thin lines of lime around the lettuce plants in their straight rows were his outposts against skirmishing snails...

(Richard) knelt to release the seeds and sand carefully between finger and thumb, looking through his gold-wire reading spectacles to make sure that the line was absolutely straight... in order to hoe within half an inch of the drill and so catch the weeds before they grew to the two-leaf stage.

(The Golden Virgin, Macdonald, 1957, pp 319-20)

This is Henry enjoying himself, and entertaining us, with brilliant characterisation.

(Perhaps some day someone will write an article for our Journal on the character of Richard Maddison, in the manner of the one entitled *'The Constancy of Hetty'*, by Olive Smith, in a recent edition.)

The guns that morning were heard in south-east England... heard most clearly by Richard Maddison, who had gone up early, drawn by the beauty of the morning, upon the pleasaunce of the Hill. He wore his old striped flannel trousers and white shoes with brown leather borders, pleased that the clothes he had first worn for tennis in the 'eighties were still comfortable. He felt the warmth of the sun upon his face and bare head; his old tennis 'togs' gave him a feeling of youth. He was now in his fifty-third year, and was good, he told himself, for another twenty years. Nothing like digging to keep a man fit!

He had the Hill to himself, except for the rooks busy in the grass where the sheep had been grazed until a fortnight before, when the fly, of both the blue and green bottle variety, had begun to be active, from so many dustbins in the streets which had arisen out of the burnt subsoil of the clay like continuous reefs or cliffs around the Hill. There was danger of spotted fever, the dreaded cerebro-spino-meningitis from such flies. He must get some chloride of lime for Hetty's dustbin...

He had a new romantic feeling that morning; for as he walked upon the crest of the Hill, before going down the gully, he heard all about him, in the air of the splendid summer day arising, a continuous heavy undertone... a heavy undertone, with dull faraway boomings, which remotely seemed to thud upon the ear. The guns in France! The Great Offence, of which so much had been spoken and speculated upon in the City, had started that morning!

He kept the news to himself when he arrived home; and having had his cold tub, and put on his City clothes, he went down to breakfast with a feeling almost of freedom.

In this benevolent mood he banters with Hetty about the guns in France 'going great guns'. 'Something is in the wind, you mark my words!' He eats his bacon, helps himself to his favourite pot of Cooper's Oxford Marmalade and, looking at his half-hunter gold watch, thinks he might 'have a turn or two upon the Hill before descending to the train'.

At that moment he heard Mavis walking along the passage to the bathroom.

'Now I want to clean my teeth, Mavis must of course choose this very moment to lock herself in the bathroom! All this prinking and prettying of herself is ridiculous! Why cannot she come down to breakfast at the proper time, like any normal, decent person?;

'Well, Dickie, she waited until you had had your cold tub. She didn't want to be there when you came back.'

'That is no reason for lying in bed, and on such a beautiful morning, too! Why, bless my soul, in my young days, my sisters and I —'

Richard went into the front room, and sat down, tense with resentment that he should have to wait to get into his own bathroom; and his wife's attempts to make things easier, by saying that he had plenty of spare time before leaving for the station, only added to his irritation. His routine was put out; the habits formed during thirty-five years in the City, whenever once had he defaulted, as he put it, by being late at the office. If only he had been twenty years younger, or even ten, he might by now be in France, living a comparatively free and spacious life, instead of slaving to keep going a family that had no understanding of responsibilities and duties.

The brushing of teeth, preceded by work with a rubber band to clear spaces of food, made him feel less burdened by himself, but when he walked up the gully again, into quiet air, romance was gone from the Hill. *(The Golden Virgin, pp. 287-8)*

The narrative at this point continues: 'Phillip was then lying down in No Man's Land, with the fragments of his platoon...', a splendid example of Williamson's craft in juxtaposing the trivial and the tragic, with the added irony of Richard's reflection that he wished he were in France 'living a comparatively free and spacious life'!

The irreconcilable difference in attitude of father and son in relation to the war, the imagination of the one nourished on the empty patriotism of *The Daily Trident*, the experiences of the other scarring him for life, is brought to a head in the narrative of the opening scene in *The Sun in the Sands*:

The dissension between us had come to a head when my father, reading a leader in his paper, had declared that the Huns should be bled white, that the Junkers were treacherous brutes, as he had said on many occasions. I had retorted that the newspaper he read was evil: for it made men hate others that they had never seen: that the German soldiers had been brave and clean fighters, and that they had been betrayed, like all the European generation of youth, by old and hateful men in power. Never before had I seen my father so agitated.

(The Sun in the Sands, Faber, 1945, p.10)

The resentments and bitter criticisms which Richard heaps upon his son as he orders him out of the house are hard for Phillip to bear, yet he apologises to Richard, and the two shake hands. 'He was always courteous towards me; it was I who was discourteous to him. I did not realise how much I had worried him with my irregular ways.'

Nor did I realise why my father was so often irritable: a proud and sensitive nature feeling himself disprised, first by his own father when he was but a small boy, and later, too, after his marriage. Father was so reticent about himself (in contrast to my facile garrulity) that I learned only years afterwards that he was suffering from sleepless nights in the war, on duty as a special constable, and particularly from the effects of being blown several yards by an aerial torpedo from a Zeppelin, through the plate-glass window of a shop. In those days only one thought moved in my mind: the tragedy of Mankind, and the world's redemption through the truth I would reveal in my work... but quiveringly I dared not think further. It was after the age of thirty, six years later, when I was beginning to develop many of the traits I had formerly deplored in my father's nature, that I began to feel understanding and therefore sympathy for him. *(The Sun in The Sands, pp 10-11)*

Even with his less pleasant characters an author must paint a balanced picture, lest they degenerate into caricature. With Richard, of course, we are not dealing with a fictional portrait; the author is realising (albeit in fictional form) a person — physically and emotionally — indissolubly close to him, his own father. And at this particular juncture, Hetty is there too, touchingly depicted as saying, 'You will write, won't you? And say something nice that I can show your father, won't you? He feels very lonely, you know.'

Did Henry's concern for consistent and fair characterisation ever give way to his incurable sense of fun and allow him caricature? Sometimes I think I find this element in his work — Mr Purley-Prout, for example, or Phillip's batman, Twinkle

— and yet in the sense that even caricature is a kind of truth, all we really have is the absurdities of human nature blown up to reveal the essentially farcical element that we unknowingly present to others. What do we make of the Rev. Aubrey Garside, Vicar of St. Sabinus, in this delightful dialogue with the humourless Mrs Ogilvie, from *The Pathway*?

Recently Mr Garside had been worrying about himself; for he had moments of which he was ashamed, when he disliked Mrs Ogilvie. He found himself, in her company, repeatedly having to repress remarks upon what he, in facetious self-excuse, was wont to call 'the serious side of life'. Thus the previous Sunday evening... he had pronounced, in Benjamin's absence, the results of his 'little talk' with that disobedient and furtive boy.

'I spoke to him in a friendly fashion, Mrs Ogilvie, as you requested me to, and my diagnosis, if I may use a term that is perhaps permissible, is that he has a pronounced Oedipus-complex.'

'An Oedipus-complex? Whatever is that?' had asked Mrs Ogilvie.

'It is one of a series of terms instituted by Professor Freud of Vienna, to describe a pathological state wherein the patient behaves morbidly owing to inhibitions and repressions. It should not trouble a healthy boy; indeed, it is often the source of much that is best in a man.'

'I am afraid that does not explain Benjamin, Vicar.'

'Well, you see, Mrs Ogilvie, the Oedipus-complex is complicated.'

'Oedipus? Whoever or whatever is Oedipus?'

'Well Oedipus was a Greek who, as you know, of course, er — well, how can I express it now, well, Oedipus, as you know, committed incest with his — er — maternal parent.'

'But how absurd!' had said Mrs Ogilvie.

(The Pathway, Faber edn., 1993, pp 125-6)

At this point in the novel, Henry embarks upon an hilarious account of the episode which follows Mr Garside's embarrassment. The evening meal, as he describes it, is one of general disorder. It is easy to imagine the author deriving as much fun from it all as a reader does. A particularly naughty child, Jean, plays a key-role here:

'Mum,' said Pam, hugging herself with delight at being home, 'a girl at school called me a guttersnipe when I said we cleaned our own boots at home, but I didn't care, so that was sucks to her, wasn't it?'

'A peculiar word, sucks,' remarked Mr Garside humorously, 'but very expressive. Children are expressive in their vocabulary, aren't they?'

Miss Chychester, who sat next to him, touched his hand and said, 'You are not eating your beef and pickles, Vicar.'

'I am getting on very nicely, thank you, Miss Chychester.'

'What did you say?' asked Miss Chychester.

Jean, who had been staring moodily at the table before her, said suddenly, 'He said, "Sucks to you".'

The old lady was puzzled. 'To me? I do not see any. Where are they?'

Mrs Ogilvie looked worried. 'Do be quiet, Jean. It's not fair to talk like that to Aunt Edith.'

Jean's answer was to pick up a leg-bone of a rabbit and drop it on Miss Chychester's plate. 'There's one.'

'Jean, do please behave,' said Mrs Ogilvie.

'I merely gave her a bone to suck to keep her quiet. Here's another one, Aunt Edith!' and Jean picked one half of a skull off Benjamin's plate and dropped it beside the leg-bone.

The three children waited eagerly for more fun. Mr Chychester ate on, Mary sat still, Maddison moved a crumb on the table, Diana looked bored, Aunt Edith looked puzzled.

'And here's a sphere to float in your pond,' as she dropped a pickled onion in the old lady's glass of water.

'Jean, please behave, or leave the table.'

'Hurray, that's what I wanted! I can't stick you people. Mustn't do this, mustn't do that, it's bad form, it's unconventional, it's — except Will. You ought to have heard the Old Jig's indignation because you went up the tower on Easter Sunday morning! I would have remained up there, if I'd been you. I jolly well admired you when you walked out the other morning. Wish I'd done the same. Well, cheerio, chaps.'

She went out of the room, slamming the door. *(The Pathway, pp. 129-131)*

The last two extracts have led us into the realm of Henry's skill as a humorous writer and, once there, it is tempting to linger, so entertaining and so successful are the episodes. I would like to share with you two more examples. The first concerns Phillip Maddison's obsession with motor-bikes, a recurrent theme in the early volumes of the *Chronicle*.

Phillip is on a training course at what seems unmistakably to be Newmarket, and resident at Godolphin House in the High Street. He has bought a very noisy motor-cycle, which has been frightening the horses. He sees 'the very thing for a silencer' on one of the market stalls — a coffee-pot. 'The percolator would muffle out most of the gasses, and he might even fit a whistle on the spout, as a cut-out'. Then come the significant words: 'It seemed to him to be frightfully funny'. Both Phillip and his creator are here. Phillip the joker will have a coffee-pot on the end of a pipe on his motor-cycle which displays the letters OHMS. He explains to the local garage proprietor what he wants, who remarks to Phillip, 'You're the fool of the family, I can see that!' It is when the proprietor, Monty, calls the bike 'an old rattle-trap' that Phillip asks indignantly, 'What's wrong with it?'

'What's right with it? Why, it's falling to pieces! The head's loose! Look for a speed wobble, my lad! The wheels want rebuilding, half the spokes are loose. Listen!' He ran a pencil round them. 'Hear that twanging?' He squeezed the horn. 'Moo-cow! When d'you milk the old girl?' He laughed with a gurgle in his throat. 'You don't need a speedometer, old boy! At twenty miles an hour the spokes rattle, at thirty your ribs rattle, at forty a red light glows, and at forty-five a gramophone record plays Down Among the Dead Men! What you want, my boy, is a nice little light car — like that two-cylinder monoblock Swift over there, going for only sixty quid. I'll let you have it cheap for sixty-five! Or how about this Sizaire? A spiffing car! The spiffs come out of the radiator when the dam' thing boils. Then there's this White's steam car — roast your kippers and chestnuts while you drive! Only a mere bag o' shell — one hundred and fifty quid, sixty percent discount for cash!'

(A Fox Under my Cloak, Macdonald, 1962, p.176)

When Phillip tries out 'Helena' across Newmarket Heath we are told that 'the spout made a pleasant, high-whistling sound when the engine was running, and when he opened up it sounded rather like a cock-pheasant rocketing out of a spinney.

The comparison of its sound to that of a bird is characteristically Williamson. His knowledge of birds, their habitat and their cries, was that of the born naturalist and meets us everywhere in his work. He liked to imitate them and Will Harris has amusingly told us of an occasion when Henry was the guest speaker at a literary conference in the south of England, and being bored with the platitudes of the chairman's preamble, punctuated them with a series of bird-calls, notably that of the cuckoo.

In both *The Sun in the Sands* and *The Innocent Moon* he records the incident of the fancy-dress ball in aid of the Girl's Friendly Society at Turnstone, when he himself arrived dressed as an owl. This is a splendid example of how he could handle farce, and also of his own puckish humour, for Phillip Maddison is clearly the author himself again. I choose *The Sun in the Sands* version. The narrator has gone to great pains to look the part:

> *Overcoming an inner reluctance, I went to the dance. How many times had I written in bed at night, remembering my sudden idiotic appearance at that dance, in home-made costume assembled from pyjamas, riding boots, leather jerkin, with my face white-washed and burnt-cork black circles round my eyes, a baby's woollen cap on my head stuck with two turkey feathers, and carrying in my mouth a motheaten lambskin tied with rope in the shape of a mouse! Village boys cheered as I arrived on my Norton. Quickly up the wooden steps to the Dance Room I ran: it was an interval between dances: uttering a great screech, I announced myself as a Barn Owl. My joke or fancy at the Fancy Dress Dance fell flat and lifeless as a slab of wet putty. An old lady with white hair and a baby's complexion said, in my hearing, 'Why was that drunken outsider invited, I wonder?' The room revolved about me: I felt the shock right through me. Desperately I thought of the Spartan boy and the fox, and stood in mock ease and interest by the doorway. I heard one of my new acquaintances saying to a friend a few minutes later, 'My dear, he's quite harmless, only a little queer, from the War. At least an original costume, don't you think? Pyjamas are hardly original, surely? Well, it's all fun. Oh, how do you do, Mr Williamson? So you're an owl, are you? Well, you are certainly original!'...*
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> *Another fear struck me: supposing there was a hole in the seat of my pyjamas! As soon as I could I slipped away, ashamed of the flannel pyjamas tucked into my riding boots, and of my entire display. Dropping the baby's cap in the stream, I leapt on my Norton, and went away up the valley, throttle wide open, cursing myself for an utter idiot and complete bloody fool. Never again, never again, never again! In future I would be entirely solitary.* (*The Sun in the Sands*, Faber, 1945, pp.147-8)

In *The Innocent Moon* he adds the comments of the harvest beer-drinkers in the pub opposite: 'Well done Mis'r Masson, you look praper midear. What be 'ee, a bliddy g'rt parrot?' 'What, be 'ee just out of bade? You'm equipped for the young leddies, I reckon.' And when he tells the eighteen-year old Jacky, his dancing partner, 'You know, I felt a little doubtful about wearing my pyjamas, 'even she is satirical: 'You should have taken them off, and then what a howl would have gone up!'

Recalling for a moment the passage read just now describing Richard's allotment, we cannot help but note the extraordinary gift Henry had for accumulation of detail. His method is meticulous, especially with anything mechanical or of practical value, even at times, it seems, unnecessarily fussy.

We remember Phillip's bicycle, the Murrage's Boys' Imperial Model costing £2.19.6, with its 'fairly small gear, 68', brakes of the long lever type, the dented bell which clucked instead of ringing; or Uncle Hilary's *Panhard et Lavassor* motor-car,

with the brass headlamps and extra long brake-lever handle; or Phillip's journey to London on joining the Moon Fire Office staff; the office itself, with frosted glass, mahogany counter, gap in the ceiling, rolled-down calendar, electric light with green shade — every detail specifically presented.

Yet it is not only with objects of what might be considered to be purely masculine concern that he offers us this precision. Let us look at an episode now which may mean more to the ladies in the audience than to the men. This makes it all the more surprising; that is, in its ability to recall those tiny, feminine details of dressmaking which preoccupy Phillip's sister Mavis when, at the Spring Sales of 1916, she buys some material from which to make the so-called 'Freedom Skirt'. A pattern has been given away in *Weldon's Home Journal* (how many times did I see that periodical on my own mother's sewing-machine?) and her friend Nina has promised to help her, but is late arriving.

This, to Mavis, is almost a disaster.

> *Twenty-three inches, said Hetty. This was awful news, for the tissue pattern of the gore, or long triangular piece, twelve of which were to be sewn together to make the Freedom Skirt, was for a waist of twenty-five inches. The problem, or disaster, presented two alternatives; one, to cut the material to the other pattern, and allow wider margins when sewing together; the other, to reduce the paper pattern by the difference, two inches, in proportion.*
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> *'Of course, after I've had my tea... but I don't always get blown out... No! We must cut for what I am, twenty-three inches!... If only Nina were here! She is better at mathematics than I am. Two inches off all round, divided by twelve! That's one-sixth of an inch. Doris! Doris! Bring your ruler, please! Quick! No time to be lost!'*
>
> *Doris came in from the kitchen, where she was doing her homework. Her opinion was asked for; and immediately afterwards she was asked if Mavis's opinion was correct. Before she could adjust herself to this, Mavis said, 'No! It would be fatal to take off one-sixth of an inch all down each gore! Don't you see, one-sixth of an inch at my waist would be the equivalent of ever so much more at the hem, for the hem is wide! The waist is narrow! So how can it be the same? Mother, stop laughing! Oh, you are silly! Now you've upset all my thoughts, and I'll have to start again!*
>
> *(The Golden Virgin, p.160)*

Then Nina arrives, and Williamson describes the three girls working out sums on paper, how to reduce the pattern by two-twentyfifths. Doris works it out to three places of decimals and, on being scorned by her sister for this, leaves the room saying, 'Do it yourself'. Two pages later, Williamson describes the result; it seems to me that here both the setting and the conversation are brilliantly evocative:

> *Another manifestation of vernal hope was showing itself in the front room of the house in Hillside Road, where Mavis and the faithful Nina were busy completing the Freedom Skirt, in the sunlit air coming in through the open windows of the front room, and slightly stirring the leaves of the aspidistra on its tall stand.*
>
> *Doubts, anguished and devastating, tightened within Mavis when first... she saw herself in the long looking-glass in her mother's bedroom. The skirt was a complete failure. It hung on her like a punctured balloon. And the pleats! They looked shapeless, some thin and other puffy. The skirt did not swing when she turned round, it did not swish, the pleats followed sluggishly. It was the pattern which was wrong. She had known it all along. If only Mother had not laughed, just when Nina was calculating the amount to be cut off the pattern. (The Golden Virgin, p.163)*

It is, of course, characteristic of Hetty that she should suggest lamely, 'Why not keep it, dear, a little while, and see if others are wearing it first?' The test is to see what Grandpa Turney and Aunt Marian think of it, and to their inspection Mavis resorts. The Turneys are given the privilege of seeing Mavis in her new ensemble, and here again we note Henry Williamson's total recollection of what the well-dressed woman was wearing 75 years ago:

> *The dernier cri was examined, every exterior part of it: the material, the cut, the jacket with the roll collar, the new large hat, the parasol, the new Norvic glace kid button boots, with patent leather toe-cap and cuban heel. O, the doubt and hope that had flowed away from Mavis, and Nina, in choosing those boots! First it had been a cloth-topped patent golosh; then a velvetta calf with mother-of-pearl buttons, until, with almost a fracture of the mind, Mavis realised that cockney pearly men and women wore such things when they drove out, with feather hats and great vulgar boas, from their awful homes on Bank Holidays, usually singing and the worse for liquor. So the unexceptionable first pair she had tried on were finally chosen... at the very stiff price of 19s. 6d.* (*The Golden Virgin*, pp. 164-5)

The arrival of Phillip plunges Mavis into anxiety. 'If he were sarcastic, she would die!' But Phillip is slightly tipsy (and too busy showing off to his grandfather by trying to talk like Uncle Hugh) to notice Mavis, so she is spared the humiliation.

The whole episode is a telling example of the author's skill in recall of the smallest details, and in sheer verisimilitude. We are convinced of their complete truth to nature.

Our excursion into Henry's happier, more humorous vein may seem to have taken us away from the concept of his being a writer absorbed by 'the honour of life', but not necessarily so, since life is a comic as well as a serious experience. All the same, as I draw towards a conclusion I should like to return to the deeper levels of the Williamson interpretation of life, in particular the two great themes which hold him in their grip throughout the major novels — love and war.

Henry's World War I experiences need no examination here. We have all been grateful to our friend Brian Fullagar for the valuable articles he has written about the Western Front, specifically the one on the Battle of the Somme. (HW Soc. *Journal*, No. 23 March 1991, pp.6-9) Time and again Henry alludes to those experiences; they haunt him ineluctably, leaving an indelible scar on his mind and sensibility. And no one can talk about his work without at some point becoming aware that he has known both love and the loveless, has survived a test to destruction, and is thereafter held by the power of the dead.

Williamson tells us in *The Sun in the Sands* that the quarrel with his father 'had come to a head when my father, reading a leader in his paper, had declared that the Huns should be bled white, that the Junkers were treacherous brutes... and I had retorted that the newspaper he read was evil, for it made men hate others that they had never seen.' He recognised this as the fundamental evil of all warfare, that 'it made men hate others that they had never seen', undermining and destroying the honour of life. He told his father that the whole European generation of youth, in that monstrous carnage of 1914-1918, has been betrayed 'by old and hateful men in power'.

(Has anything changed very much since he wrote his war novels — even though the scene has shifted from Flanders to the Middle East, to Iraq, to African and South American states, to Northern Ireland?)

I should like to remind you of a well-known but ever-memorable passage from

the book which has, perhaps, the saddest title of any of his works, *The Wet Flanders Plain*. The section is called 'The Genius of the Salient':

> *Near St. Julien, opposite Triangle Farm, at a place called Vancouver, stands the most beautiful thing in the Salient. People call it the Canadian Memorial but for me it is the memorial for all the soldiers in the War. It faces towards Ypres, not towards a vanquished enemy, as do many of the war memorials to be seen in France today, such as the Gallic cock crowing triumphantly on a broken cannon at Roclincourt, or the caribou roaring eastwards from Beaumont Hamel, or the defiant artisan-soldier standing firm and fierce at Lens.*
>
> *Do the dead feel cock-crowing triumph over the dead? The crowing is for the industrial magnates, the Lens or the Ruhr mine-owners, not for the poor unknowing working-men who fell in the Great Horror, and became part of it.*
>
> *No; the colossal head and shoulders of the soldier with reversed arms emerging from the tall stone column has the gravity and strength of grief coming from full knowledge of old wrongs done to men by men. It mourns; but it mourns for all mankind. We are silent before it, as we are before the stone figures of the Greeks. The thoughtless one-sided babble about national righteousness or wrongness, the clichés of jingo patriotism, the abstract virtues parasitic on the human spirit, fade before the colossal figure of the common soldier by the wayside.*
>
> *The genius of man rises out of the stone, and our tears fall before it.*
>
> *(The Wet Flanders Plain, Faber, 1929, pp. 97-98)*

There is a somewhat crude slogan much in favour among the liberated young people of today: 'Make love, not war', but it is one which, elevated to its nobler aspect, would, I think, appeal to Henry were he alive now.

Phillip goes through many love-affairs in the *Chronicle*: to name but a few — Helena Rolls, Polly Pickering, Spica, Sasha, Lily Cornford, Barleybright, Anabelle, Melissa, and supremely of course his wife Lucy. To what extent the portraits drawn are realistic or idealistic, or even idealised concepts of one visionary woman for ever haunting him, it is impossible to say even if it were a desirable line of enquiry to pursue. I shall keep off all these mysterious, magical, sensitised episodes, and for my final excerpt go right back to the boyhood of Willie Maddison in *Dandelion Days*.

One of my reasons for choosing a passage which so feelingly illuminates a boyhood passion, rather than the complexities of mature love, is that *Dandelion Days* has a special memory for me. It belongs to my first acquaintance with Henry Williamson's work. I was a boy in my late teens and, on top of a number 16 bus, returning one summer's evening from a visit to Lord's Cricket Ground, was reading the novel with all the avidity of Keats's 'watcher of the skies/When a new planet swims into his ken'.

Because of my own adolescent love-problems of that time, I was moved deeply by the story of Willie Maddison hoping to show his beloved Elsie Norman the loft over the disused stable at Skirr Farm, where he had prepared a private supper for her. As you will remember, she is disappointingly unromantic about it:

> *The surprise that he had so longed for was a disaster. Willie rekindled the insignificant flame, by whose light, bending in the draughty night air, several cockroaches were seen to be crawling over the floor. Some already were squashed.*
>
> *'I'm going,' decided Elsie. 'It's a terrible place you've brought me to. Oh dear, I think I've got a bat in my hair. Take it out, take it out!'*

'It's only a moth' he beseeched.
'I don't care, I want to go home."
'Elsie, I swear it isn't a bat! Look, it's only a daddy-longlegs.'
'I don't really care what it is,' she protested, calm again,
'but I know that I'm not going to stop here any more.'
'Oh, if only you would. Listen, I've got cakes and sandwiches, and four pasties, a bottle of father's claret half filled up with water, some lemonade, six sausage rolls each, and —'
'I'm not hungry, thank you.' I'm going home.'
(Dandelion Days, Faber, 1932, p.300)

They walk back in silence, Elsie relenting a little but still reproving Willie for choosing 'that dirty, rat-eaten old loft' for the picnic, Willie excusing the choice because 'it's a place sacred in my memory, because of old times'. All the way to her house, he struggles to speak, but cannot. Then, outside her gate, he holds her by the sleeve and hears an unfamiliar hoarse voice saying, 'Elsie, this can't go on any longer'. Her manner in replying is utterly daunting:

'What can't go on?'
'This — this terrible business. I — I, O, I've never been so bad before, so unhappy I mean. It can't go on, it can't! I can't stand any more.'
O, never had she seemed so calm and remote from him as from her lips came the insistent, 'What can't go on?'...
Again the calm, the merciless, the far-away repetition, 'What can't go on?'
'Oh, this between us. You know. This — this —'
'This what?'
She waited, quite still.
The black earth seemed spinning round him.
'This what? Tell me.'
'Elsie,' he gasped, 'Elsie, don't you know I love you?'
Would she never answer, would she never answer?
'Can't we be just friends, Willie?'
'Elsie, do you love me?'
'Only as a friend, Willie. I'm very sorry, but I can't help feeling nothing more for you.'
'I'm sorry,' she repeated softly. 'But I can't help it.'
'Don't be sorry,' he gasped, 'Don't be sorry. It's all my fault. Please don't tell anyone, will you? I — I— O, I always thought — I — don't tell anyone.'
'Now go to your father, there's a good boy.'
'I — I— you—'
'Remember you're all he's got. I don't want to rub it in, but you haven't been the best of sons, have you? And he's such a dear, too. Promise me you'll go straight home.'
He was still spinning away in utter blackness, only his feet on the earth; and a tiny part of him seemed to be watching. If only he could have some terrible accident, jumping before a train, and dying under the wheels to save a child. He clutched the hope. It vanished, leaving him in the utter blackness of onrushing grief.
'Goodbye,' her voice was saying, far away in the darkness.
'Good luck,' she softly cried, from the other side of the gate.
Gone, gone, she was gone; he must rush after her, and implore her to love him. Finished, finished.

The wind was rising, but no stars shone. Then he noticed a speck of light in the road, and knelt down, and took it in the palm of his hand, speaking in a voice low and sad and tender, as though the wan shining were of himself.

He placed it in the bottom of the hedge, and lay beside it, his face on his arm pressed into the earth. Patiently in the night the glow-worm wandered with its pale green fires, never heeding the slight form shaking among the grasses withered at the roadside. *(Dandelion Days, pp. 301-2)*

Re-reading this in the hard, harsh world of the 1990s, we realise how the passage is over-touched with sentiment, and have to bear in mind that the style belongs to the Williamson of the 1920s, that the softer sensibilities of authorship were still a part of his trade. Nevertheless, the episode is a wonderful precursor of the power he displays, in the later novels, to delineate both the ecstasy and the despair of human love. It is true to life, true to adolescence, true to feeling. It is the voice of the dove and the turtle-dove, not the falcon or the phoenix, and it makes me realise that, even in these apprentice novels, 'the honour of life is clear within him'.

Williamson could, as we know, be awkward, quarrelsome, touchy, slow to forgive; he was a genius and geniuses can be difficult people to live with. But the soul of the man is in these superb novels. They seem to me to bear out time and time again the heroic truth of the brotherhood of man, expressed by W. H. Auden with a similar urgency in his poem 'September 1939'.

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.
(W.H. Auden, *Another Time*, Faber, 1940, p.114)

Society Photographic Archive

As newly appointed keeper of the H.W. Society photographic archive I am appealing to members to submit their shots of meetings, local events or anything associated with the Society. All material received will be considered for inclusion in the album and if not used will be returned. Beatonesque quality is not expected and each photograph used will be captioned and credited to its originator.

A group of us discussed the importance of a visual record at the last Woolacombe meeting and it seemed a shame that the idea had not germinated at the Societies inauguration.

I anticipate displaying the album annually for all to view, so please, let's have your shots, dated, with a brief comment for captioning together with an S.A.E. Send to: Mick Loates, The Elms, 20 Duncombe Street, Kingsbridge, Devon, TQ7 1LR

The Genius of Friendship — Part I: T.E. Lawrence

Anne Williamson

Thomas Edward Lawrence was born in August 1888, thus being just over seven years older than HW. He was the second of five sons. His accidental discovery at a fairly early age that there was a mystery surrounding his parentage led him to believe that he (alone) was illegitimate. This was to affect him greatly, as it would any sensitive child, especially in those days, and especially as he apparently discussed this with no-one. He did not learn the truth until after his father died in April 1919, and the facts were not made public until Richard Aldington's book *Lawrence of Arabia, A Biographical Enquiry* was published by Collins in 1955. Readers wishing to clarify points surrounding the life of TEL should also read *Lawrence of Arabia* by Jeremy Wilson (William Heinemann, 1989, Minerva paperback ed. 1990).

The facts are, as is now well known, that TEL's father was Thomas Chapman, second son of a wealthy Irish gentleman landowner. His mother, Sarah Junner, was herself the illegitimate child of Elizabeth Junner and John Lawrence, the son of the household in Sunderland where Elizabeth was a servant. Sarah Junner later took the name Lawrence and entered the Chapman household as governess to Thomas Chapman's daughters in the late 1870s. She was apparently much liked in the household especially as the wife was very sternly religious. Sarah became pregnant by Thomas Chapman in 1885, and then left the household, living in rooms rented by TC for her. Their first son, Montague Robert, was born in December. Thomas Chapman later left his wife and family and set up house with Sarah, at first briefly in Wales where Thomas Edward was born in August 1888, then moving first to Scotland and then to Brittany where TEL's early childhood was passed. Then back to England in 1894, first to the New Forest, then finally to Oxford in 1896.

Thomas Chapman had given up his life interest in his family estate in return for an annuity which together with other income gave them a modest living. He also changed his name to Lawrence. (See *Lawrence of Arabia*, Jeremy Wilson, Heinemann 1989, Appendix 1 'Note on T.E.L.'s Ancestry, pp.941-944)

T.E.Lawrence entered Jesus College Oxford in the autumn of 1907, reading History, but continued to live at home due to lack of funds (a small two roomed bungalow was built in the grounds for his use). His specialisation was Military History and Strategy. He had studied medieval architecture, visiting castles and churches whilst on cycling tours of France in 1906 and '07 and was to use this as the basis, along with research garnered on a tour of the Middle East in his last year at Oxford, for his eventual thesis — 'The Influences of the Crusades on European Military Architecture', eventually published as *Crusader Castles* in 1936 (reissued by Oxford Clarendon Press 1988).

After finishing University in the summer of 1910, TEL was involved in excavating expeditions in the Middle East, learning Arabic by inclination and necessity. When the First World War began in 1914, Lawrence with his now specialist knowledge of the Middle East, offered his services to Military Intelligence. He was put on hold until such time as Turkey entered the War, and meantime was employed in map-making, finally leaving for intelligence work in Egypt in Dec. 1914.

This is not the place to chronicle Lawrence's involvement in the Arab War. The subject has been well covered elsewhere, particularly in the books already cited. Suffice it to say here that his war was very different from HW's. TEL became famous because of his unique contribution to that war (whatever conclusions one