

## Chairman's Address, Woolacombe Meeting, October 1992

*Preliminary to his address, the Chairman introduced two guests to all those members present, offering a warm welcome to Rosemarie Pitts, Arts and Museums Officer of the North Devon District Council, based in Barnstaple, and to Michael Gee, Director of the Dartington North Devon Trust. He hoped there had been some useful exchanges of ideas for the forthcoming centenary celebrations.*

It is customary in an address such as this to give an indication of the success of the preceding year. If we state that it has been a successful year, we need to be clear what criteria we are adopting when we make a judgement like that. How was it successful? Because we had an excellent weekend at Folkestone? Because our membership continued to hold at a steady 600 or so? But if we measure success in terms of our aim — 'to encourage... a wider readership and deeper understanding of the literary heritage left to us by... Henry Williamson' — how successful have we been? And what should our criteria of success be now? The entire population of Great Britain comes to love Henry's work? A literate percentage of the population of Great Britain comes to love Henry's work? Huge increases in library borrowings of Henry's work? Massive republishing drives by book clubs of Henry's work? And what is the correlation between the size of our membership and our effectiveness in meeting our aim? Do we want our membership to double? How would we accommodate a weekend gathering twice the size we have here tonight? Our real success must surely be measured in terms of our aims, and the work here goes on all year round. And it is the forthcoming centenary which provides such an excellent opportunity for the work to gather pace and to focus on our aim.

Well, the work has been going on, and we are grateful to Terry Russell, Tony Brown and Ronald Slater who this time two years ago agreed to serve on a centenary working party. Terry has kept in touch with me, and a report will be presented to the AGM tomorrow. I have no wish to pre-empt what is in the report, but some general principles are beginning to emerge, and I think it is in order to mention these here. They identify themselves as a set of needs:-

- \* The need for a rationale: we must be clear why we are celebrating the centenary. Back to those aims again.
- \* The need for liaison — we cannot work in isolation. Hence the very welcome presence here tonight of our guests.
- \* The need to make links with other organisations so that our efforts can be co-ordinated.
- \* The need to be realistic — we must recognise what is achievable, and go for that.
- \* The need to be clear about timescales: of preparations for the celebrations, and for the celebrations themselves.
- \* The need for the centenary to point forward. The celebration will not simply be the marking of Henry's birth, or the end of a one hundred year period. It will be marking the opportunity for a fresh impetus in our work, the beginning of the next hundred years.
- \* The need for relevance. We must not be side-tracked into activities and events that do not address the central issue of our aim.
- \* The need for initiative. There will be many opportunities for individuals, groups and the Society as a whole to take a leading role, to instigate, to show originality.

- \* The need for communication. We all need to know what's going on.
- \* The need for publicity. This speaks for itself.
- \* The need to be opportunistic. Here is an extract from a letter I received recently from the Lewisham Engineering Department:

*I have noted the suggestions in your letter, and I am particularly interested to note Williamson's association with the broader Lewisham area. I am always being asked by developers to suggest appropriate names for new streets and with your Society's consent I should be only too happy to try to use the suggestions locally to Adelaide Avenue and Brockley. If a developer does show interest in using any of the names suggested by you, I shall inform you of that interest.*

- \* The needs of the Society and the Williamson family, separately and together. Here, I'd like to take the opportunity of welcoming members of the family to our gathering, and to recognise again the sense of privilege we feel in having their interest and support.
- \* *The need for every member of HWS to take part.*

The need for every member of the Society to take part provides an introduction to the next section of what I have to say tonight. Everyone will know that John Homan is standing down as secretary at this year's AGM, and it is not too fanciful to state that an era is coming to an end. I shall be talking some more about John in due course, but I wish now to explain how the new era will begin.

When I appealed, in the form of a flyer that was part of the mail-shot a year ago, for members to put their names forward for the General Secretary vacancy, I stated that 'no one could pretend that it (the post of General Secretary) has anything but profound implications for a great deal of hard work, frustration, disappointment and irritation as well as the far more positive aspects of involvement and challenge and achievement. We need someone who has energy, flair, imagination, tenacity, diplomacy, and, perhaps most important of all, time'. I also offered a job description. As a result of my appeal, one member, somewhat hesitantly, put his name forward. He explained that he was a busy man, and had projects from which he would not be deflected. The one commodity he had major reservations about was time, and he felt he was probably too busy to take on the role of secretary. In these circumstances, the committee decided it would be best not to co-opt this person as secretary just at present, while remaining grateful that he had put himself forward. With the forthcoming centenary celebrations in mind, and aware of the inevitable transition period as a new secretary eased himself or herself into the role, the committee considered the possibility of farming out jobs among its members. However, under the terms of the Rules, we must have a General Secretary as such, and it was felt that a possible way out of the difficulty we were facing was for me to be co-opted as General Secretary.

I recognise the apparent audacity of this move. I am not retired, and I am constantly busy. I am already Chairman of the Henry Williamson Society. How could I reasonably be General Secretary as well? I hope the following points will reassure members.

1. I am a founder member of the Society, and so have a pretty good idea of its workings.
2. It is not my *intention* to retain the dual role for more than a year.
3. There is a natural overlap between the two roles.

4. As I have pointed out, some of the jobs have already been taken over by other members of the committee, and further similar moves could take place.
5. This particular move could ease the inevitable transition period between John Homan and someone new to the committee and the workings of the Society.
6. One committee member holding two key positions is not unprecedented.

Since the committee decided to co-opt me as General Secretary, I received a further enquiry by a member, but he withdrew his interest. However, he and the gentleman who responded earlier may decide to offer themselves as firm nominees in time for our next AGM in 1993. We can certainly hope so. But, the fact remains that out of a membership of some 600 people, only two have put themselves forward as possible secretaries, and I wish now to explore a little further the business of looking for new personnel.

To have only two people showing interest in such a key job as secretary may not be surprising, but it is nevertheless disappointing. A year or two ago we experienced a total lack of response in our search for a new Events Secretary, and Fred Shepherd, already the Treasurer, assumed the role. I myself pointed out at the time that a re-think of the role of Events Secretary might be a good idea, and, as I hope I have already made clear, I do not see anything inherently wrong in one person taking on two roles. In the event, we have ended up with an outstanding Events Secretary, whose vision and imagination have continued the tradition of quality meetings and have also led us along some very fascinating and worthwhile new paths. But the fact remains that a small group of people are running the Society by re-jigging their responsibilities, or taking on extra ones, because new names are very slow in coming forward. While the committee naturally feels reassured that the membership is apparently happy with what it is doing, it nevertheless has the distinct impression that apathy is rife, and it is becoming increasingly concerned that at this crucial time in our existence we are experiencing difficulties in the challenges that lie ahead. As one committee member said to me recently, 'Will it mean that whenever a vacancy occurs on the Committee an existing member will have to take on the job?' I sincerely hope not, and I urge members to ask themselves whether, at the appropriate time, they could consider offering themselves for the committee. It may be that we are all naturally reticent about putting ourselves forward, and that is entirely understandable. But I think support from other members would be guaranteed. No one expects instant expertise, and everything in the Society is achieved through teamwork.

Let me spend a few moments talking about the members of the committee. I have already mentioned Fred Shepherd, and I hope you will agree with me that he has again done us proud. Fred's enthusiasm is always apparent, and his ability to come up with new ideas has served the Society well. I am sorry that Anne Williamson cannot be with us this weekend, but our thanks are again due to her for work as editor of the Society Journal, and — *and* — as Publicity Manager. We have had another two excellent editions this year. Our publishing interests have also continued to be well served by John Gregory, whose skill and enterprise in producing high quality volumes of Henry's work is admirable. John, incidentally, has taken over one of John Homan's former jobs, that of organising the Society stationery. Pat Murphy continues to look after the membership interests,\* and Brian Fullagar has worked hard as our mailing manager and as an editorial assistant, and our thanks go to them. Thanks are also due to John Homan and Paul Reed for their work as editorial assistants, to Wheatley Blench who serves us magnificently as our archive and research officer, and to Mary Heath our publicity assistant. June

Emerson is our very efficient minutes secretary, and I offer her particular personal thanks for recording the deliberations of our various meetings. We are also grateful to Bob Tierney and George Heath, our two vice-chairmen, and, of course, to Richard Williamson, our President.

No doubt you will have spotted the one job that has not been mentioned: the General Secretary. At the inaugural meeting of the Society, John Homan took on this mantle, and from that day to this he has guided the Society with efficiency and despatch in the conduct of its myriad affairs. This has been no ordinary job. From the outset the Society needed someone who could tackle the responsibilities with initiative and resourcefulness, and John has provided these in full measure. His work ensured that the Society got off to an excellent start and continued to flourish. He has written innumerable letters, liaised with other organisations, kept committee members on their toes, performed all the tasks expected of a secretary, and more, with dedication. And remember, John was originally responsible also for organising events and writing minutes, until new posts were created to cope with these duties. But all this does not amount to the only reason we have to be grateful to John. What the Society needed from its inception was somebody who knew his Williamson. John does know his Williamson, and he knows a great deal more besides. He is a very well-read man, and he has demonstrated the valuable ability of placing Henry in context with other writers. Many of us will remember the Notes he has written regularly in the Journal, which often include a reference to or a review of a book with interest to Williamsonsians. John likes to question, to probe, to challenge, and his pro-activity has been of great benefit to the Society.

As a token of our gratitude and esteem the Society would like to mark John's retirement with a gift, and I ask our President, Richard Williamson, to make the presentation on our behalf.

*[At this point, our President made a brief presentation speech and handed to John a gift from the Society, a very recently executed painting by Mick Loates of a brown trout.]*

As we look forward to another year in the life of the Society, may I with everyone here, and, by proxy, as it were, the entire membership, every success in capitalising on the opportunities that will doubtless present themselves for pursuing our one great Aim. This isn't always easy, I know. We may not always feel inclined to join in a discussion, or disabuse yet another person that Henry did write more than just Tarka, or stand our ground when politics are mentioned, or keep our patience when we discover someone has given up the Chronicle after reading volume 4 only — and so on. It is often simpler to keep one's own counsel. But we should persist, each one of us, in finding the opportunity to play some part — pro-actively, co-operatively, individually, imaginatively, sympathetically, sensitively, energetically in promoting the Aim of the Henry Williamson Society. Thank you.

*\* This address was given before the unexpected and untimely death of our membership secretary Pat Murphy. It was Pat who posed the question quoted above.*

*I am pleased to report that Bob Tierney, one of our Vice-Chairmen, who suffered a stroke a short time after the AGM weekend, is improving slowly but surely*

General Secretary. At their November 1992 meeting, the Committee proposed that Will Harris remain co-opted as General Secretary until after the Centenary Year. Will agreed to this, subject to ratification at the next Annual General Meeting.