

Meetings

Devon — October 1992

As a comparatively new member of the Society the prospect of a visit to Williamson county was an exciting one as I arrived at Woolacombe and the delight of the Devon Beach Hotel in its wonderful location and views from Baggy Point to Lundy to Morte Point. Members began to arrive and the gathering was enhanced by the presence of our President, Richard Williamson, and other family members.

We had a short introductory address after dinner from Richard by way of welcome, followed by an address by Dr Blench, as the Society Archivist, into the nature and extent of the Williamson documents held at the University in Exeter. He referred in particular to those presented recently by Mrs Watkins and treated us to some readings from them. He emphasised the care with which some of the archives had to be treated, for Henry had often made references to people still alive, when prudence and delicacy dictated that some things were best left unrevealed.

The next morning we boarded a coach bound for the fringes of North Dartmoor and Fingals Bridge. The weather was not kind. Nevertheless it did not appear to dampen the interest and enthusiasm of the party and the journey through varied countryside was enjoyable, with points of interest being brought to our attention.

In the evening there was an elegant gathering of one hundred members. The hotel set out for us a superb buffet and was complimented by all for the service and arrangements which had been made. Later, Richard spoke to us about The Hut at Ox Cross and told some amusing stories about events relating to its refurbishment, and he called on all present to raise their glasses for the traditional toast, 'Henry'. He was followed by our Chairman, Will Harris, who in a masterly speech alternatively instructed, admonished, cajoled and informed us. Tribute was paid to John Homan retiring from his post of General Secretary. John had held the position since the inception of the Society and it was his knowledge, energy and industry which had been the powerhouse of the Society and the strength of the organisation was due in no small measure to him. John was then presented by Richard Williamson on behalf of the Society with an original watercolour by Michael Loates, to which he responded gently and modestly.

The AGM had been put back to the Sunday morning and the principal matter for discussion was the centenary. Mr Ronald Slater presented the report of the sub-committee. There seemed to be an awakening of interest particularly in the county and the prospect of various activities. The atmosphere throughout the meeting was such that one had the feeling that Henry was there and had just slipped briefly away.

Mention was made of the arrangements for the Spring '93 meeting to be held in South Devon, perhaps at Kingsbridge on the 7-9 May. Michael Loates pointed out that there were many associations with Henry in the south of the county in his writings. The AGM itself would be again at Woolacombe on 1-3 October.

Finally the Margaret Clarke Memorial Award was made, firstly to Mr Peter Lewis for his contribution to the *Journal* in 1991 on Crowpoint and also to John Homan, as a special recognition of his service to the Society. The meeting was formally closed by the chairman.

For a number, however, the rest of the day beckoned with a visit to Georgeham and lunch, either 'Upper' or 'Lower', and to finish with a visit to The Hut, with its old gramophone and original records.

For this member, at least, the weekend will remain an unforgettable experience.

Alan Buckley

South Eastern Area Local Meeting — Redhill, November 14th 1992

Margaret White had come up with the thought-provoking idea on which to base a programme, 'Henry Williamson — Letter Writer in Fact and Fiction'. Throughout his long life Henry wrote thousands of letters, perhaps the most famous of these was his long-lasting correspondence with T.E.Lawrence. He was considerate and courteous to the small army of fans who wrote with trepidation to the great man to tell him how much they enjoyed his books. Most of them received a polite reply and many of our members cherish such a letter. Today in the auction rooms Henry's fugitive letters command very high prices. Most of them are often highly personal in content but, all are fascinating to read because of the light they throw on the life of the author and his work.

The sad death of Pat Murphy came as a great shock to the small band of enthusiasts who organise the annual Redhill meeting but it was decided to go ahead with the meeting which was what Pat would have wished. Our evening began with a short tribute and a minute's silence for Pat, who was for so long a faithful supporter of these local gatherings. Paul Reed then gave a reading of two letters which first appeared in the *Colfeian*, these were written by the young Henry to his old headmaster and describe the life of a private soldier in the front line trenches of Flanders. They are especially interesting letters because they represent the earliest known published writing of Henry Williamson. Paul followed this with a letter Henry wrote to John Giles in response to his request to provide an introduction to John's fine book, *Flanders — Then and Now*.

Brian Fullagar next gave a reading of an extract from *How Dear is Life*, one of Phillip Maddison's extraordinary letters home to Richard and Hetty from Crowborough Camp, in August 1914. This was followed with an extract from Alistair Kershaw's hilarious chapter on Henry from his book, *The Pleasure of Their Company*. Kershaw gives an amusing picture of letters written to him by Henry,

'A letter from Henry, as Richard Aldington once wrote to me, was "like a mixture of Dostoevsky and Our Motoring Correspondent".'

After the break during which Derek White ran his popular book stall, Margaret White presented the main event of the evening. Margaret has in her collection, several fine examples of Henry's correspondence. These comprise a series of letters written to Henry's nephew Brian (son of Henry's younger sister, Biddy). What is particularly fascinating about these letters is that they contain references to particular historical and family events that are exactly mirrored in the novels of the *Chronicle* Margaret White skillfully illustrated this with extracts from the letters themselves and corresponding readings from the appropriate novels. This gave a most revealing insight into the means by which the author wove actual real-life events into the fabric of his fiction. Afterwards there was a general discussion of Henry's writing and the many facets and idiosyncrasies of his letter-writing were explored.

It would not be right to end this report without first mentioning the courage of Margaret Murphy who made all the booking arrangements, handled the finance and, took care of the refreshments. Without the sincere unstinted support of such fine people these enjoyable evenings would not be possible. **Brian Fullagar**

May I remind you all that unpublished letters remain the copyright of the Henry Williamson Literary Estate and particular permission is necessary for their use.