

Reviews

Intellectuals & British Fascism: A Study of Henry Williamson, by Melvyn D. Higginbottom. 88pp., illus., 1992: paperback, £9.95 (Janus Publishing Co., isbn 1-85756-085-X)

It is difficult to review this book objectively, not because of its challenging title and controversial subject, but because it seems to me to be seriously flawed. It purports to be an academic study, and the 74 pages of text are supported by 292 notes, which refer to the sources on which the author has drawn. For biographical details he has relied heavily on Daniel Farson's *Henry Williamson: A Portrait* (Robson, 1986), claiming this to be the only work covering Henry Williamson's life. He seems to have been unaware of Lois Lamplugh's biography *A Shadowed Man*, published in 1990. (Neither does he refer to Dr J.W. Blench's scholarly article *Henry Williamson and the Romantic Appeal of Fascism*, which appeared in the Durham University Journal in December 1988.), nor various articles etc. which have appeared in the *HW Soc. Journal*. The book is therefore coloured, inevitably, by Farson's rather jaundiced 'portrait', and reproduces several of its inaccuracies.

Mr Higginbottom has read all the standard books on British fascism, and pulled together all the references to Williamson: and to that extent he has performed a useful service. However, he has done so without question or judgement, accepting the opinions of others and passing them on as his own. This is unfortunate. The usefulness and 'authority' of some of his other sources must also be questioned, for example, the 'blurbs' from the dustjackets of books, and the anonymous *Times* obituary.

His lack of original research and his failure to go back to primary sources is disturbing. As would be expected from a book of this nature, the text contains very many quotations from Williamson's own works (incidentally, without acknowledgement to, or the permission of, Henry Williamson's Literary Estate). On turning to the notes, one finds again and again that the source of such a quotation is not the actual book and page number, but instead, the book wherein he read the passage. For example, there are three vivid passages quoted from *The Patriot's Progress*, each numbered at the end. The references, when checked, read 'Farson, op.cit., pp. 18, 19' — and, on turning to Farson's book, there they are. Again, only a page or so later, a quotation is given from *The Pathway*; but the reference is to *The Times* obituary of 15 August 1977; and, indeed, there the passage is, in full. The inescapable suspicion gradually dawns that Mr Higginbottom has, perhaps never read the primary sources. Surely the reading of his books must be an essential part of trying to understand Williamson the man? The suspicion hardens on reading on p. 30 that '*The Lone Swallows* (1922) and *The Peregrine's Saga* (1923) were the first fruits of his observation of bird life.' This is a rather curious description, the former book being a collection of nature sketches and the latter short stories, neither devoted solely to bird life. However, *The Times* obituary describes them exactly so, although on this occasion the author does not acknowledge his source.

In Chapter 4, dramatically entitled 'Plunge into Fascism', it is stated that 'Williamson expressed his hero-worship for Mosley in *The Phasian Bird*, an allegory about an exceptional pheasant'. The source for this statement is correctly given as Desmond Stewart in his *T.E. Lawrence*. But the matter is left there. One is left to presume that Mr Higginbottom agrees with the proposition — in which case, in view of the subject of his book, it might have been thought worthy of further

examination. Not so, however. And again, the doubt is there: has he actually read *The Phasian Bird* himself? If so, what is *his* opinion?

On several occasions he quotes from John Middleton Murry's essay *The Novels of Henry Williamson*, which was first published in 1959, in *Katherine Mansfield and other Essays*, and which the Henry Williamson Society reprinted in 1986. At one point Mr Higginbottom states 'J.M. Murry wrote in 1986...' A minor mistake perhaps, but misleading nonetheless.

More seriously, on p.55 he states that 'all the indications are that he [Williamson] became a member of the UM [Mosley's post-war Union Movement], just as he had earlier been (belatedly) a member of the BUF.' No evidence is provided for this allegation, and while the dead cannot be libelled, to print such a statement without substantiation is disgraceful.

The end result is an unsatisfactory book, symbolised, perhaps, by the misspelling of the word 'fascism' in the running title at the head of the verso of every page. To be fair to the author, he is not ultimately, unsympathetic towards Williamson; but it is apparent that he has no real knowledge of either Williamson or his books.

As it is known that this 'paper' formed part of Mr Higginbottom's MA Thesis, the full work presumably considered other people and their writings and opinions. (The title mentions 'Intellectuals'). One does wonder why only HW is chosen as the subject for publication.

John Gregory

The Country Child. Edited and with original photography by Piers Dudgeon. Headline Books. 1992. £16.99.

Piers Dudgeon has taken a selection of well-known authors and used 'sweetie' excerpts from their work wrapped up in a biographical 'paper', producing a veritable chocolate box of favourite hard and soft centres, which can be dipped into (unlike a chocolate box) again and again. Goodies come from authors such as W.H. Hudson, Richard Jefferies, Kenneth Grahame, BB, George Baldry, Arthur Ransome etc. The theme is childhood and in particular the relationship between child and nature. But Mr. Dudgeon also explores the background and biographical details of each of his authors showing how each was driven inevitably to their chosen course in frequently a mystical, spiritual harness.

HW comes under a section labelled 'Lost Content' which includes Edmund Blunden, John Clare and Beatrix Potter. Though the style is a little slick and the occasional detail a little suspect, the chapter is a sympathetic appraisal of HW's life and work. It is good to see HW in such good company, and this will hopefully bring the attention of his life and work to a readership who might not normally know him.

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Horse called Apollo. Douglas Jordan. Excalibur Press. 1992. £3.50.

We must draw your attention to this charming tale written by Douglas Jordan, member of this Society, workmate and friend of HW, and the first recipient of our Margaret Clarke Memorial Award. Douglas is hoping to publish further books in due course.

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