Henry Williamson

Alister Kershaw

At twenty-five one had better things to do than worry about survival. Nonetheless, every now and again in the weeks before I left Australia, it did cross my mind that staying alive once I got to Europe might prove to be a trifle ticklish. Among the barmier solutions which occurred to me was that I might become a farmhand. Since I knew nothing whatever about agriculture and had a healthy young man's sincere loathing for hard work, an outside observer might have considered the idea unrealistic. Not to my way of thinking. I wasn't proposing to become an ordinary, run-of-the-mill labourer. As far as I can recall, I saw myself as a sort of rustic sage, performing a few undemanding tasks not too early in the morning, and the rest of the time dazzling my employer with displays of wit and erudition and delicate insights. Of course, this arrangement presupposed an employer who was likewise somewhat out of the ordinary, but that was no problem: the employer I had selected was Henry Williamson.

His *Tarka the Otter* I had read and reread as a child, weeping abundantly over his description of the otter's death. Orders were issued by my parents (so violent was my grief) that I was to stop reading as soon as I reached the last harrowing chapter. To this day, I think that *Tarka* is a moving and beautifully written book, even if I now read it dry-eyed. Williamson's other books, I discovered when I came to read them, were not about otters. Most of them were about Henry Williamson. One was an account of his efforts to run a farm in Norfolk. He mentioned, in passing, how hard it was to get anyone to work on the land in England. Fine – his troubles were over. He needed a farm labourer, I needed a job. I wrote offering my services.

From Oxford, when I eventually got there, I wrote again to let him know that I was available whenever he wanted. A scrawled postcard came back, signed with a perfunctory "H.W." It informed me that he would be in Oxford on the following Saturday and that he would call on me in midafternoon. Rather to my surprise he did.

At the hour he'd stipulated, a peevish-sounding sports car pulled up outside Dutton's flat. The driver remained at the wheel for a minute or two, listening with a knowledgeable air to the machine gnashing its teeth. When I became better acquainted with Henry, I realised that he had undoubtedly been well aware that we'd be peering furtively at him from behind the curtains (as indeed we were) and had struck an attitude for our benefit. In the event, it was largely wasted since we decided that the driver couldn't possibly be Henry Williamson anyway. To begin with, he seemed far too young: I imagine he was only in his forties at that time and, with his slim figure and his hair almost free of gray, he looked even less than his age. Again, surely eminent authors didn't go gallivanting around in corduroy

trousers and a lumberman's jacket? And did they drive such very sporty sports cars and listen to the engines with such impressive expertise?

Apparently, they did all these things – at least, this eminent author did. He sprang from his car (is it possible that he actually vaulted over the side or is that just a picturesque touch added by memory?) and ran athletically up the steps. The next moment he came striding in. His movements were restless, jerky. He wouldn't sit down, he wouldn't have a drink, he wouldn't accept a cup of tea. Incorrigible play-actor that he was, he may have been imitating his friend Lawrence of Arabia, who, one understands, was given to the same vexing behaviour. I don't know if Lawrence's conversation was a disconcerting as his manner. Henry's certainly was. He spoke with a quick, nervous intensity in twitchy staccato phrases.

"Work on my farm? There is no farm. That's gone along with everything else. Gone with he wind, scattered like chaff. A fool's enterprise: Trying to bring together the burgeoning word and the burgeoning seed. Somebody else might have succeeded. I couldn't. Failure's the only thing I'm good at. Now there's merely a hut in Devon and a field in which silly Henry Williamson can play at being a farmer...."

How was one to reply to this perplexing stuff? We mumbled something that was meant to sound understanding, commiserating and respectful at one and the same time.

"I don't matter, The old tree. Dead wood. You're from Australia. A younger and tougher root."

He aimed his piercing, intense gaze at each of us in turn. Seeing us so thoroughly thrown off balance by these histrionics may, for all I could assert to the contrary, have procured him a faintly malicious amusement. I don't think so, though. Perhaps, even, he was as timid and as ill at ease as we were.

I can't any longer remember how the rest of the conversation went. Cars undoubtedly came into it. Henry's passion for probing into his own psyche was accompanied by an equal enthusiasm for probing into the innards of his sports car. The Aston-Martin, one gathered, was an erratic as Henry himself. All his friends received periodical bulletins on the various complications besetting Henry Williamson and his car. Sometimes it was not easy to know which of the two he was talking about:

> *Dear Alister, I was glad to hear form you. Reasons various. Amity. Etc. Also, I wanted to see you in London, regarding France. Want to go there in April, with my wife, the new one. (Keep this to yourself, for reasons I'll tell you when I see you, this is important). Was thinking of taking the redone Aston, tents, making way to Italy, along Mediterranean shore, as new engine won't properly take mountains, it must be run in softly. Twas ruined last time by previous owner who did 300 rpm or 60 mph after 200 miles and ALL the bearings were ruined and I saw it as the oil pressure dropt bit by bit to near zero and any minute it would clank to ruin. So I stripped it and saw bearings like concrete surface instead of mirror-like, and loose and useless, oil poured from the moving parts, not being spirited* [sic, *as they say] all over as it should when they are "tight" ...*
>
> *Period 1 Jan-19 Jan most painful and purgative in this life; but it stood test, and came better. Pathway was mild compared to reality, religious objections, you see, to a divorced man. It tore someone else in two bits; but stood test. Result, steel where before was malleable iron. ...*

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

But the friendship between Henry and myself and the correspondence to which it gave rise lay in the future. For the moment, communication was seriously hindered by his preoccupation with cars. By a happy chance, Dutton was familiar with these mysteries, so he and Henry were able to chatter away about poppet valves and overhead cams.

Naturally, I didn't attempt to participate. My expression, I hoped, was one of bright intelligent interest, but I was conscious that every so often it slipped into an idiot gape. Not only was there no job for me but, even if there had been, I saw that I could never have succeeded in dazzling my intended employer as I had planned.

I was, then, somewhat taken aback when Henry, suddenly announcing his departure, directed an especially penetrating gaze at me and I was still more surprised when, with that peculiar spasmodic intonation of his, he said, "We must meet again, Kershaw. Today was nothing but a clearing of the soil, tearing away the weeds. Write to me when you're coming to London. I count on you. We'll tear some more weeds out. I sense in you – " I've forgotten what.

He took abrupt leave of us. From the window we watched him jump into the Aston-Martin and screech off down Banbury Road.

"Bit of a ratbag, isn't he?" said Dutton without animosity as he poured us a drink.

There was no getting around that; he was a bit of a ratbag. But in his books he had depicted himself as just that – tormented, feverish, slightly cracked. Meeting him, then, one didn't feel one had been tricked. One had had fair warning, so to speak. The man and his books were identical twins. And he was, in any case, an interesting ratbag, vulnerable, unsure of himself, yet with a queer strength of his own. On top of which his anxiety to see me again was evidence of a discriminating taste....

I wouldn't have disappointed this desire for the world. Some days before I was due to go to London again, I did as he had asked me and let him know that I'd be arriving. On a first reading his reply was unaccountable, on the second enough to make me explode into a Krakatoa fury. Couldn't I realise, Henry inquired irascibly, that he had more important things to do than receive callow young men? How could an artist do any work if he was to be badgered every five minutes by importunate strangers? Was he never to have a moment's peace?

Well, well, well! But, if it came to that, I had a few questions I wanted to put, too. Who had urged me to let him know when I was going to London? Who had claimed to sense in me whatever it was? Who had insisted that we must meet again? And who the hell did Henry Williamson think he was? He had ended his letter with a regal suggestion that he could perhaps grant me an audience for no longer than five minutes if I were to present myself at the Savage Club at such-and-such an hour. Did the patronising son-of-a-bitch really think I'd turn up for the appointment?

Why Henry should have chosen to send me this petulant rubbish was something I could never comprehend. If he didn't want to be bothered with me (and what could have been more natural?) the obvious solution was simply not to answer my letter or to make some polite excuse for not seeing me. Or if he merely happened to be in a bad mood that day, he could surely have devised a more effective method of working off his spleen than addressing a page of snappish remonstrances to little old me. Was I perhaps being subjected to some obscure test, designed to determine whether or not I was worthy to associate with him, or was he indulging that freakish humour which (as sooner or later, his friends had to accept) was such a feature of his make-up?

At the *George*, where I hurried as soon as I got to London, Roy [Campbell] flew into an epic rage when I showed him Henry's letter.

"By God, man, nobody's going to write to a friend of mine like that. I'll tell you what we'll do: we'll go to that club of Williamson's together and I'll see that he apologises to you. If he doesn't, I'll knock his block off. I know you could make mincement of him yourself but I think I can hit a little harder than you."

Poor old Henry, I reflected. Roy would break every bone in his body. I remembered those walnuts and, in spite of my righteous indignation, tried to calm Roy down.

"No, man," Roy said sternly, "bastards like that have got to be taught a lesson. We'll just put down another drink and then go round and have a word with this Mr Williamson of yours."

We had another drink, we had several. With these under my belt, my original feeling of outrage revived. Yes, I decided, Roy was quite right. Henry had asked for trouble and he was going to get it. We set off. Ugh, those squalid London streets! Mr Williamson, the hall porter informed us at the Savage Club, had not yet arrived. So what? We installed ourselves in the bar and continued drinking. How, I wonder did we manage that since neither of us was a member? Roy must have met an acquaintance there (The Savage Club was mostly frequented by writers, journalists, painters and what not) or perhaps the barman was hypnotized by Roy's juggernaut personality. Anyway, we drank.

Henry chose to enter the bar at the point when I (and, I naively believed, Roy) had built up a stupendous head of steam. I marched belligerently towards him. "Good evening, Mr Williamson," I said in a tone of bleak politeness, "May I take this opportunity of informing you that you are the world's leading supercilious shit?" That, I felt, was telling him. I stepped aside and waited for Roy to move in and finish off the execution.

The executioner's axe landed right on bewidered me. "Hey, man, take it easy," Roy barked with bluff severity and, while I goggled at him incredulously, "You've got to make allowances, Mr Williamson. Alister's just a rough colonial like me, only I've been around long enough in England to pick up some idea of how to behave..."

"Jesus, Roy, you said you were going to knock his block off!"

"Never mind about that. I'll take him away, Mr Williamson. If you want to sue him for unruly behaviour or something, you can get hold of him through me – Roy Campbell's the name."

"Roy Campbell!"

"That's right, man."

"But this is extraordinary, incredible. Your work has been part of my inmost cosmos ever since the *Flaming Terrapin*, It was Lawrence of Arabia, wasn't it, who was responsible for the Terrapin being published and it was he who first told me about it."

"Yes, he did me a good turn, old Lawrence, although I never knew why he used to go around in that gyppo nightie of his ..."

They were irresistible together, Henry and Roy, a top-line music-hall act: Henry distraught, tormented, vibrant with an emotionalism that was wholly sincere but that dominated him all too easily, and Roy never for a moment relinquishing his protective imitation of the blunt, straight-from-the-shoulder colonial who jotted down a few lines of doggerel now and then as a hobby.

"Yours is the poetry of the elements, Campbell, and itself is elemental. You are the falcon that strives with ardent pinions towards the breast of the sun ..."

"My word, would you go that far, man?"

Why, Campbell, you are one of the men apart – the elect – the blood's aristocracy. ..."

"Well, I don't know about that. ..."

For God's sake, I said to myself, if this is how Roy knocks someone's block off ...

Surlily, I interrupted. "I suppose no-one has any objection if I go and have a drink somewhere where there aren't so many goddam compliments flying around?"

From Roy, "Don't let's have any more bullshit out of you, man"; and from Henry, "No, Kershaw, this, too, has been a wrenching away of the undergrowth that masks the light. If you go now you reject the task – the light-seeking task..."

Nobody was going to accuse me of rejecting a light-seeking task so I stuck around. The love feast finally came to an end and Roy went off with a final admonition ("Now, listen to me, Alister, you get rid of that chip on your shoulder"), leaving me alone with Henry. There was a long and (to me) discomfiting silence. Henry's intense glittering stare didn't help.

"You're a gifted young man," he announced at last, although I could only conjecture as to his reasons for thinking so, "but that's not enough. Understanding must come to you, too. That letter which annoyed you so much was written in great agitation of mind. You see – I had just been told that my son was dead."

I was appalled. What could I say? I muttered an apology, feeling distressed and very much ashamed of myself. Subsequently, I found out that there wasn't a word of truth in this tragic yarn. Henry's son was as fit as a fiddle.

We spent the rest of the evening together. Gradually, I forgot about Henry's offensive letter. I was somewhat surprised to observe that he himself seemed to have completely forgotten about his son's death...

I think Henry really liked me after that initial bloodletting at the Savage Club. I certainly took to him. His unrelenting vehemence could be exhasuting, *was* exhausting, but what a relief it was, too, when one was drowning in the bland placidity of the English! He could and did talk by the hour about what he was writing, what he was trying to achieve in his writing. Plenty of people considered him an intolerable egomaniac. Personally, I admired his unabashed belief in himself as an artist and his fervent attachment to his art. He was the reverse of the literary timeservers one usually came up against. His play-acting, typified by the absurd tale of a dead son, was exasperating or pathetic or plain silly, but it was a damned sight better than the flabby solemnities one was mostly forced to listen to. At the end of the evening, we agreed that it would be pleasant to see each other again, and this time Henry made the suggestion without any dramatic emphasis and I accepted it without any stammering uneasiness.

London, according to Henry, was not a propitious place to meet; so although we got together whenever we both happened to be there at the same time, he was continually insisting that I must – absolutely must – pay him a visit in Devon. As soon as I showed any sign of taking him up on the suggestion, however, Henry characteristically did his best to prevent me.

> *Come here if you will but not before 1 August as I cannot look after anyone directly any more after the years of caring, in vain it seems, for so many bullocks, cows, sheep, men, ducks, turkeys, children, machines implements, books, ledgers, tiles, walls, woodwork, roads, barns and trees, etc., etc. I just cannot any more. But from 1 August to 10th someone will be here and one mouth won't mean too much extra provided it comes with its ration book for food is nowadays a necessity AND a chronic worry which makes writing not possible. But there is a tent you can sleep under if you will ...*

Not exactly encouraging; and even though I wasn't as touchy as I had been, I didn't

much care for being lumped in with the bullocks and the turkeys. On that occasion I decided against going to see Henry, but the threat of a visit must have cropped up again:

> *I find I have to be away from Devon for a longer time than I anticipated, & tomorrow must go to my wife's home in Suffolk; so I shall not be returning to Devon for another week, in all probability. I am sorry for this, for I would like to have walked with you round Baggy headland, and on the high downs above Taunton, where so many times I walked alone when I was your age and even younger...*

In the end, I nonetheless succeeded in spending a week in Devon. Presumably, at some point I must have been invited anew by Henry and have caught the train before he had time to change his mind. His offer of a tent was friendly but Roy had arranged for me to do another broadcast so I had a little money and asked Henry to find me some less austere accommodation in the neighbourhood. He did – in the home of a blood-curdling sexagenarian nymphomaniac who was forever sidling into my room in a state of unalluring seminudity. I was never able to decide whether this was Henry's idea of a rip-roaring joke (in as far as he had any sense of humour, it was inclined to be primitive) or whether he was punishing me for having ventured to break in on his Devon fastness.

If he was annoyed with me, he soon got over it. He would turn up every morning in the Aston-Martin and rescue me from the lascivious crone. Driving through the narrow twisty Devon lanes, I sometimes wondered whether I had been saved from a fate worse than death only in order to confront death itself. There was barely enough room for two cars to pass and no way of knowing what was bearing down on us from around the next corner, but Henry drove with a demented abandon which should have left us mangled on the roadside a dozen times a day.

It is conceivable, I suppose, that he wasn't deliberately trying to kill either me or himself; but he certainly didn't go out of his way to keep us alive. Apart from those horrendous excursions in the Aston-Martin, there was his habit of swimming at uncanonical hours and in subarctic temperatures. After an evening spent by me (and, to a lesser extent, Henry) ingesting a cider which was in itself as lethal as curare, we would lurch, befuddled, to the car and rocket away through the darkness until, around about two a.m., we reached some especially precipitous and forbidding stretch of coast. Here, with the wind lashing icily at us, we would strip, clamber blindly down the cliff and dive into a sea not noticeably colder than liquid air. This ritual over, we would climb painfully back to the car and, drenched and shivering, take off to dice yet again with death in those serpentine lanes. Shortly before dawn, Henry would deliver me back to the boarding house where the aged nymphomaniac lay, pantingly, in wait.

During that week, I was given a glimpse of the bizarre enjoyment which Henry extracted from situations in which he stood a fair chance of being snubbed or insulted or ridiculed. In *The Sun in the Sands*, which tells of his early struggles as an author, he constantly presents himself as a figure of fun. When he goes to a fancy-dress ball in a costume patched together by himself, no-one knows who or what he is supposed to represent and he overhears some county matron asking why "that drunken outsider" had been invited. At a literary tea party, he boasts of the compliments he has received from Arnold Bennett, and is exposed as a liar by Bennett's sister who happens to be present. He is asked, in the most humiliating manner possible to resign from a provincial club because of his Bohemian carryings-on, he embarrassingly urges complete strangers not to miss his

forthcoming first novel, brisk young women swinging their tennis rackets mock his love of poetry and introduce him to their friends as "our tame author". Such incidents are described with a weird delectation, one might almost say with a touch of conceit as though Henry was positively proud of being treated with contempt. In 1940, I knew, he had been interned as a follower of Sir Oswald Mosley (four years' service as an under-age volunteer on the Western Front in 1914-18 was not considered sufficient proof of loyalty to his country). Already, this stupid injustice had given him a sort of anguished satisfaction, and when he presented me with a copy of his *Phasian Bird*, he gratuitously noted on the title page that "The book was originally intended for dedication for some friends in Norfolk but the dedication was omitted lest it embarrass them; for, as the Chief Constable of Norfolk told the author in June 1940, in a police-cell, 'Your name in Norfolk is mud'. But really, you know, mud is true richness of the world, of the soil; later, later."

An odd fish, Henry. Why in heaven's name, should he attach any importance whatever to a piece of impertinence from an insignificant functionary? How could he allow the incident to go on rankling for nearly a decade? And, if the recollection was really so disagreeable to him, why make a point of recording it?

But, of course, the fact is that he somehow relished such affronts and would even go looking for them. While in Devon, I would be dragged unwillingly into some preposterous local club or the saloon bar of some tarted-up inn. The company would consist of beefy lackwits wearing huge ginger moustaches and garish tweed jackets. On the face of it, there was no reason for us to visit these gruesome establishments. Henry was not a great drinker while, for my part, I would have much preferred the public bar and the uncouth customers to be found there. We went to the other places solely in order to enable Henry to be jeered at.

No sooner did he appear than the lackwits would give tongue. "Hullo, Williamson. What are you doing out of jug? On parole? Haw, haw, haw!" "Got that book of yours from the library, Williamson. Pretty heavy going, what? You want to put a spot of sex in! Haw, haw, haw!" "How's your old pal, Mosley? Still planning to become dictator of England? Haw, haw, haw!"

Roy (not that he would have been found dead in such surroundings) would either have come back with some annihilating rejoinder that scorched like a flame-thrower or have taken the nearest blockhead by the ear and tossed him outside. Henry preferred to contort his face into a bitter smile and say whatever was most likely to elicit further witticisms formt he beefy rabble.

"Oh, the sex is there, you know – the golden sexuality that both creates and destroys, the systole and diastole of the selves, the equipoise of interdiscovery ..."

"Too subtle for me, old boy. Think I'll stick to James Hadley Chase. Haw, haw, haw!"

Apart from the pleasure of setting himself up as a butt, Henry may, perhaps have actually believed that some communication was possible with these imbeciles. Given his friendliness towards myself, I hardly like to mention it, but the fact is that he was strangely naive in his appraisal of people. I was always baffled, for example, by the importance he attached to the London literary scene – that suburban back garden – and its twopenny-halfpenny denizens. Or consider those atrocious young women depicted in *The Sun in the Sands*, with their middle-class attitudes and their hockeyfield vocabulary. Whether these insufferable hoydens really existed or whether Henry invented them doesn't matter. Either way, he clearly looks on them as the most fetching creatures imaginable.

When he wasn't engaged in laying himself open to these half-witted gibes, there was nothing Henry liked more than to place his friends in some uncomfortable set-

up of his own devising and to watch them wriggle on the hook. I was the victim of this bothersome idiosyncracy during my stay in Devon. In I can't remember what book he had recounted a quarrel with one of his sons which ended with the boy knocking his father down. Or was it simply a tale he related to his friends and acquaintances? In any case, the story was widely known. To put it mildly, then, I was considerably discomposed when, in one of his clubs or pubs, Henry greeted the usual tweedy nincompoop and, gesturing towards me, said casually, "You remember my son, don't you?"

"Good God! I haven't seen you since you were knee-high to a grasshopper, haw, haw. Shouldn't have recognized you in a month of Sundays."

I couldn't on the spur of the moment see any way of repudiating the relationship. I muttered something civil.

"Glad to see you've patched things up, the pair of you. Knocking your father down – damned bad show, what?"

If I couldn't extricate myself from the role Henry had assigned to me, I could at least get across to him what I though of his foolery.

"Oh, well" I told the nincompoop, "Dad's such an infuriating bastard sometimes, you know."

"Hey, I say, old lad, draw it mild. No way to talk about your father ..."

"Maybe not, but that's what he is – an infuriating bastard. In fact, Dad." I said turning to Henry, "I feel like belting you one at this very moment."

On the whole, I wasn't sorry to leave Devon. There had been some very good times: walking over the downs while Henry delivered enchanting lectures on the natural history of the district, or sitting in his cluttered hilltop hut while he talked, now with buoyant confidence, now with Byronic melancholy, of his own writing. But his dotty jests, the lecherous landlady, those nightmare drives, the glacial plunges into the Atlantic, the haw-hawing of his gin-swilling acquaintances were more than I could take.

For someone who professed to dislike London, Henry spent an inordinate amount of time there. His incomprehensible preoccupation with the "literary scene" was, I fancy, the main reason. There was no keeping him away from the Savage Club. Once surrounded by journalist and fellow authors, Henry was content. From my point of view that was all to the good, since he rarely failed to get in touch with me during these London excursions. Before long we had ceased to be congenial acquaintances and became close friends. We remained so until his death, even though in later years I was living abroad and our contact was solely through letters.

There was only one cooling-off in our friendship, as I recall. A young woman in whom at the time I took somewhat more that a passing interest was devoted to Henry's books and eager to meet him. I was eager to please the young woman. The problem was that she mentioned this desire of hers just as I was about to leave England for a few weeks. What could be done? I left a note for Henry at the Savage Club explaining the circumstances and suggesting that it might be a kindly act on his part to give the girl a drink during my absence and allow her to see him plain.

I had forgotten Henry's ineradicable conviction that the ideal woman, the perfect mate, existed somewhere or other if only he could find her. Unfortunately, he found her, briefly, in every personable young woman he came across. True to form, he found her in *my* young woman. He had telephoned her, she told me on my return to London, and invited her to dinner. Five minutes after they sat down he began a spirited attempt to seduce her. She was not, in principle, averse to be seduced from time to time, but Henry's ardour was more pulsating and precipitate than she was accustomed to. Her initial gratification made way for uneasy

bewilderment and that, in turn, for outright consternation. Those fevered eyes! Now that they had met, Henry was telling her, they would never separate again, he would never release her. They would leave that minute, drive through the night to Devon, strip off their clothes and plunge into the life-enhancing sea! That passion of Henry's for forcing everyone to go swimming in chilly oceans!

The young woman excused herself for a moment. There was a window in the lady's lavatory. It was open. It gave onto the outside world. It was irresistible ... Speculating some days afterwards as to how long Henry might have waited for her to come back, I felt my annoyance fading. When next we met, I made no allusion to the incident. Neither did he. We were soon back on the friendliest terms.

Time went by. I left England and settled in the south of France. Twice, in, I think, 1948 and 1949, Henry came and stayed in the neighbourhood. Whether we met again thereafter, I'm not sure. Looking over his letters, I remember, gratefully, his extraordinary kindness. I was a bumptious and opinionated youth. Henry showed an admirable forbearance. He actually encouraged me. "Your explanation of yourself interests me," one of his letters begins. However self-absorbed I may have been, I'm fairly sure that I didn't subject people to analyses of my ego out of the blue. That Henry, tolerably preoccupied with is own ego, should have invited me to discuss mine is proof, it seems to me, of an amiable disposition. Another letter, I see, mentions his attempt to interest Walter De La Mare in my verses. Their merits must have escaped De La Mare, but when, for some inscrutable reason, Henry took over the editorship of the *Adelphi*, he at once solicited and published a few of them without, I dare say, any great enthusiasm but purely out of friendship.

In his latter years, I understand, he became something of a cult in England, and has become still more so since his death. His devotees approach him on tiptoe or bent double in a posture of religious veneration. They are shocked that he was never given the O.M. or even a knighthood (Sir Henry Williamson – what next!) and demand that memorials be erected to him. According to one of his devotees, "As a prophet, he is comparable to Blake; as an artist to Tolstoy, Dostoievsky, or Melville."

Henry had a pretty high opinion of himself, but when I knew him he wouldn't, I think, have gone quite that far. If he did come around to seeing himself as a Devonshire guru, then I'm glad that I was never invited into the ashram. I prefer to remember him roaring through country lanes in the Aston-Martin, diving into the daunting night sea, or even introducing me as his scapegrace son...

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There is further mention of HW in the chapter on Richard Aldington:

With Maugham or Church or Lane or whoever else, Richard, saddled since his death with the reputation of a curmudgeonly hermit, was in fact a delightful, genial and considerate host. Henry, whom Richard had not previously met, burst in late at night, hours after he had been expected ("One of the Aston's pushrods was bent") together with his new wife, Christine. Richard had just swallowed his last glass of wine and announced that he was tired and ready for bed; but when Henry and Christine arrived, he greeted them with cordiality; because the housekeeper had long since retired and because Netta was no cook, Richard prepared a meal for them, opened up one of his best bottles, insisted on helping them to bring in their bags, refused charmingly to listen to any apologies for the lateness of their appearance, behaving throughout with never a trace of fussiness. Even Henry's habitual angst was assuaged by his welcome.

After some preliminary skirmishes, inevitable between these two touchy characters, Henry and Richard got along very well together. Both of them had fought on the Western Front in the first war, both of them were hag-ridden by the experience. It was painful to see how unable they were to escape from it. Together they sang the grisly ditties of 1914-18, they reminisced with a sort of horrible nostalgia about this or that battle, they swapped ghastly tales of dead comrades trodden underfoot, of the survivor's ignoble relief.

Luckily for the rest of us, not all their conversations were as grim. They shared a passion for natural history and talked about birds and flowers and reptiles and butterflies with impressive erudition. When they disagreed about some recondite aspect of ornithology or herpetology, the discussion would become vehement. On such occasions, Richard was always able to locate in his considerable scientific library whatever authoritative work was needed to prove him right.

"I am nothing," Henry would cry with masochistic rapture, "a fraud, a pretence. I *am* nothing and I *know* nothing."

A glass of wine would cheer him up, and the conversation would turn to other matters. He and Richard enjoyed exchanging recollections of their early struggles although their lives had been very different – Richard always drawn towards France and Italy, Henry bogged down in England. Richard was a wholehearted European, Henry a bit parochial. Listening to their talk, I couldn't help remarking that Henry's allusions were to rather dim individuals like Squire and Galsworthy and Shanks, whereas Richards' world was inhabited by ruffians like Lawrence and Pound and Wyndham Lewis – a bad lot.

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We are grateful to Alister Kershaw for permission to use this chapter from his book. *The Pleasure of Their Company* (Univ. of Queensland Press, 1986).

HW and Alister Kershaw at Le Lavandou in 1949