# The Folkestone Connection

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Our curiosity about how much in Henry Williamson's novels is autobiographical can never be wholly satisfied. Until an official 'Life' is available, we have to rely on such fugitive memoirs as Daniel Farson's *Henry* (1982) or Lois Lamplugh's *A Shadowed Man* (1990), and of course the reminiscences and photographs that members of Henry's family share with us from time to time. But when we read the 'domestic' novels, episode after episode seems to have the ring of authenticity. This, we feel, must surely have happened to Henry himself. Then, upon reflection, we wonder how much of the truth lies slightly to the east or slightly to the west of what is actually written.

And the author himself complicates matters by his love of mystification. Take, for example, such a simple issue as proper names. If Bromley becomes Brumley, why does the neighbouring village of Westerham remain as Westerham? (If T.S. Eliot is described as 'a bank clerk called Eliot', why does Walter de la Mare become Walter Ramal or Middleton Murry become Wallington Christie? There is more than a hint of mischief in some of the disguises: as, for instance, when Edward Garnett becomes Edward Cornelian, or the publishers, Hutchinsons, become, by a verbal association, Rabbitsons.

It's a similar situation with place-names. Recent attention has been paid to the actual venue of Malandine in *The Dream of Fair Women,* notably by Mick Loates in his article *South Devon Days,* with follow-up letters in the *Journal* from Charles Taylor and Pat Murphy. Williamson located *Colfe's Grammar School* in a mythical Rookhurst in Dorset, and the famous Paragon of Blackheath has been reconstructed here in Folkestone.

Thus, when I came to examine the Folkestone episodes in both *The Flax of Dream* and *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight,* I was haunted by the teasing question, 'How much of what is experienced in this town by both Willie and Phillip Maddison is autobiographical and how much romantic elaboration?'

But by the time I had followed the theme through to the end of the preparation for this talk, I was asking myself, 'Does it really matter?' In his book *Henry,* Daniel Farson offers us the paradox that Henry was 'a liar in search of truth, a pacifist in love with war.' 'A liar in search of truth, is too abrasive a judgment; I would prefer to paraphrase it as 'a romantic in search of the higher truth', by which I mean the truth to nature of both Henry's characterisation and his vision of human experience.

Keats, in defining his notion of 'negative capability', said that a man could be 'capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable teaching after fact and reason.' We must curb any 'irritable reaching' after factual truth in the novels of HW, since what matters is imaginative truth. 'With a great poet,' wrote Keats, 'the sense of *beauty* overcomes every other consideration.' And with a great novelist, I believe, what overcomes every other consideration is 'the sense of *truth.*'

The three novels which deal with the Folkestone episodes are *The Dream of Fair Women, A Test to Destruction* and *The Innocent Moon.* The first is wholly concerned with Willie Maddison, the latter two with Phillip, with an occasional intrusion of his cousin. There can be no doubt that these two young men are, in essence, Henry himself. What is remarkable is that, although over thirty years separate the writing

of *The Dream of Fair Woman* and *A Test to Destruction*, the link-up between the novels is achieved with consistency and great command of detail. We have here an astonishing level of comprehension and memory. It is, however, not only astonishing, but annoyingly complex. We have the sensation of layers of recollection settling into a dense mass, of one character somehow merging into another, and then both, perhaps, becoming the author himself.

Thus we find Phillip in *The Innocent Moon* planning to write a novel with one 'Pauline' as the heroine. Wheatley Blench, in his articles *The Apprenticeship of a Novelist* (*HW Soc. Journals* nos 17 & 18) tells us that Pauline was the name given – in the first version of *The Flax of Dream*, a single volume – to the 'Eveline Fairfax' who becomes Willie's lover in the second, four-volume, version. Thus Phillip can be recognised as the author himself writing about his own apprenticeship as a novelist and planning a book about his fictional cousin. But more follows. In *The Innocent Moon*, Phillip's novel is constantly being criticised by the beer-sodden Julian Warbeck, who sneers at his choice of the name 'Donkin' for its hero. He reminds Phillip that, as a child, he had been fed on ass's milk and was in consequence 'Donkey Boy'. Phillip tells him that Donkin is 'based partly on my cousin Willie' and that he feels for him as though he were his 'younger brother ... sharing the same thoughts and ideas.'

It is complications such as these which lead us back to the initial question: how many of the Folkestone episodes are wholly and truly autobiographical? What in fact can we know?

There is one primary certainty. In the Preface to the four-volume edition of *The Flax of Dream*, Henry tells us that it was during the Christmas Day truce of 1914 that the 'seed idea' of the novel was 'loosed upon the frozen ground of the battlefield.' It lay dormant until three months after the Armistice of 1918, 'to quicken suddenly... on reading an old copy of Richard Jefferies' *The Story of my Heart* in a second-hand bookshop in Folkestone.' This is a recorded fact, but Henry immediately retreats into hint and suggestion: 'The tale is neither wholly fiction nor is it autobiography. It may be autopsychical.' (That is a word I cannot find in any of my dictionaries.) 'Willie appears to me as a younger brother whose life has been recreated from scenes we both knew, and sometimes shared.'

Another *fact* is that Henry Williamson was here in Folkestone in the spring of 1919. He had been at No. 1 Dispersal Unit at Shorncliffe, and then at No. 3 Rest Camp here – before going on to Brocton Camp in Staffordshire, in September of that year, whence he was demobbed. And it was here that he met the woman who appears in the novels as Eveline Fairfax, whom now I am going to let Daniel Farson introduce, rather brusquely perhaps, but certainly in a way that seizes our attention.

> *Henry was also deep in the grip of another strong emotion: he was in love. The girl was Evelyn (sometimes Eveline) Fairfax, romanticized in* The Dream of Fair Women *and in his memory. He mentioned her to me after I had the impertinence to ask him: 'Who were the women you have loved in your life?' This merited a snort of indignation: 'Does a gentleman tell? It's a question of form; you don't go and shout out, "I've just screwed Alice!"' Then he laughed. 'A famous lover is a lot of old rubbish – but who was that woman in Folkestone after the war?' As he remembered her he smiled with pleasure: 'Oh, she was a lovely girl, only eighteen, a great friend of Lord Somebody-or-other – was it Longford? – whom she met coming over on the boat from South Africa. It was wonderful...'*
>
> *'Were you in love with her?'*

*'Oh yes, I was very happy. Walking hand-in-hand along the parade...'*
*The zest of the youthful affair was fun while it lasted, but Evelyn was unable to choose between her admirers, and Henry was not heart-broken by her ultimate rejection. 'I had been cast off from a disastrous love affair which had begun as a pleasant philander and ended in a conviction of my own utter sincerity and non-appreciation.'* [1]

And, to complement these disclosures, here is a passage from Lois Lamplugh's *A Shadowed Man:*

*One of his early loves, the young married woman he called Evelyn – or Eveline – Fairfax in* The Dream of Fair Women, *shared the cottage for a while ... To avoid scandalising the villagers, he invented for himself a wife who had recently died, and pretended that 'Evelyn' was his sister-in-law – though why it should have been regarded as acceptable that he was living with his sister-in-law is not clear. To one sympathetic listener, the wife of Georgeham's rector, he described his fictitious wife's death so vividly that his voice weakened and his eyes brimmed with tears, as they did so easily; an interest example of the way his imagination, having projected a fantasy, could instantly transform it, for him, into a substantial reality: it was the mainspring of his talent as a writer.* [2]

A footnote might be added to these quotations. In Fred Shepherd's article *Considering Folkestone* in Journal No. 24, he tells us that he had been reminded of *The Dream of Fair Women ...*

*On a recent visit to the Rodin Museum in Paris, where I was astonished to come across the beautiful bust of a late Edwardian beauty, Eve Fairfax. At first I dismissed the connection as being impossible, but upon reflection my imagination soon worked wonders. Was not the Fairfax home at Folkestone decorated with photographs of Rodin's sculptures?* [3]

So the ground is somewhat prepared (I can hardly say cleared) for an examination of the Folkestone episodes in the novels specified, in which the beautiful Eveline Fairfax will be the key-figure. But if we are to make Eve Fairfax the main line of enquiry, it means that we shall have to start with the later novel, *A Test to Destruction,* for it is to Phillip Maddison that she first makes herself known.

It is interesting that the word associated with Eve Fairfax when she detonates herself into the action of *A Test to Destruction* is 'terrible.' On p. 355 of that volume, Hetty and Thomas Turney are discussing Phillip, and she tells her father that in all probability her son will not be going back to the Moon Fire Office now he is demobbed. Thomas Turney asks, 'D'you suppose he squandered the money on that woman in Folkestone, Hetty?, to which she replies, 'Oh, I have never asked, Papa. I have never broached the subject after that *terrible* time last summer.' Elizabeth had spent her holiday in Folkestone, and had written to her mother to say that 'everybody' there was talking about Phillip's 'gadding about with the young wife of a General, who is abroad with the Occupation Army in Germany.' The woman concerned was 'notorious for picking up young officers.' Elizabeth's moralistic nature had been deeply shocked by the fear that people might find out that Phillip was her brother, and the tone of the letter is characteristic of her testy unhappiness.

The next ominous scene takes place, characteristically (might we say?), in Hetty's kitchen (p. 358). Hetty is provocative enough to say, through her tears, 'I beg you,

my son, to give me your promise not to see this lady again. Will you, for my sake?' And, behind her, from the gas-stove, there rises 'pale blue smoke from the burning omelette' she is cooking for him, as it adds 'one more layer to the congealed essences of thousands of frying pan and oven experiments which had darkened the varnish of the papered kitchen walls.' The whole incident is touched with a kind of angry pathos. She even wonders if she should go down to Folkestone, with Mrs Neville, to confront Mrs Eve Fairfax. 'Mother!' shouts Phillip. 'If you do that I will never see you again!' Here Elizabeth comes in and cries, 'Now you know the truth, Mother! ... Now you can see for yourself what Phillip is really like!' But Phillip has already left the room, and, as Hetty stands looking at her daughter, 'something in her went blank.' And, at this point, the author takes us back to what Phillip had been doing at Shorncliffe Disposal Unit.

It was at Shorncliffe that Willie had called on him, 'filled with the grandeur of a book he had found in a second-hand bookshop in Folkestone', and he 'reads rapturously' from *The Story of My Heart*. Here is a valuable link with real life. Then Phillip (as Henry did) moves to the rest Camp at Folkestone, and it is at a dance that he meets this incendiary woman who is the main theme of our study.

> *The girl, who said she was Mrs d'Arcy Fairfax, took a fancy to Phillip ... He thought she was the most natural person he had ever met, and wrote in his diary, early the next morning, that it was wonderful to be friends with such a rare, happy spirit, so understanding and generous, and 'entirely devoid of any ulterior thoughts, since she is obviously very happily married, and has a little girl of her own.'*[4]

There is an excruciating irony in these words, for even the kindest view of Eve Fairfax could hardly see her as a 'natural' person, and her marriage is far from happy. Indeed, the little girl's peculiarities might be traced back to the incompatibility of her mother's life with Lionel Fairfax. Phillip, in his naivety is quite unsuspecting of all this. Then, one evening,

> *Eve, as he called her, had asked him if he had ever had experience with a woman. The question appalled him, for it had been made when she had impulsively taken his hand while they were sitting by the sea and kissed it; and he had felt that poignancy which meant he might be going to fall in love with her ...*
>
> *That night she taught him to kiss, gently plucking with the lips before the full conjoined softness which worried him in case his breath smelt of rank cigars and possibly decayed teeth – for he had not been to a dentist during the entire war. The next day he went up to London, to collect the longed-for bike.* [5]

We have here our first taste of the sensualism of Eve Fairfax and, also in this particular chapter of *A Test to Destruction* (ch. 19), of her (to me) enormously irritating mode of speech. There are further examples of it in ensuing pages, from which I select the following passage, since it also contains the first hint that Eve will go down to Devon to visit cousin Willie – the story of which meeting, of course, is the entire length of *The Dream of Fair Women*, which we shall come to a little later. The writing is, for Henry Williamson, surprisingly frank, almost what is referred to nowadays as 'sexually explicit.'

> *'What's that, Pillie, a photograph of your cousin? Oh, isn't he good-looking! Such enormous eyes, and humorous mouth. Where was this taken?'*
>
> *'Under one of the trees at the bottom of our garden.'*

*'Where is that?'*

*'Near Blackheath.'*

*'I like your straw boaters. What kids you both look! Willie and Pillie, under the tree at the bottom of the garden. Yes, I certainly like the look of Willie! The name seems to suit that clever little face, full of intelligence.'*

*'Shall I read you his letter?'*

*'Do, please.'*

*He read only a part of it, telling of Willie's life in the solitary cottage above Shelley Cove, with an otter, seagull, and birds he had tamed. It was a beautiful life, said the writer, but lonely at times ...*

*...'Pillie, do you feel lust for me? How lovely, darling: Tell me when you first felt lust for me!'*

*'When you rubbed your bare foot against my shin, when we were lying on the pebbles side by side after bathing that day, soon after I met you.'*

*She kicked off a shoe, and held up a foot. 'This was the one. Bad foot! It couldn't help it, honest it couldn't, cross my heart. Naughty foot!'*

*'I liked the spread of your toes, on the shingle. They looked so natural.'*

*She felt under her skirt, and unfastened her stockings, pulled them off, and threw them across the room. 'That's better,' she said, spreading her toes. 'I used to climb trees like a monkey when I was a kid. I could hold on to branches with these toes.'*

*She lay back, waving one leg, admiring its shape. 'I know how a fish feels with its fins. Let's go and have a swim!'*

*'No.'*

*'Oh, darling, not now. Someone may come.'*

*'I'll lock the door.'*

*'Do you truly love me?' she said, feeble now. He did not answer, held in tension by a thought to pay her out, since she wore nothing under her skirt. Afterwards, alarmed and weakened by shame, he asked what she was going to do about 'preventive measures.' She said in a hurt voice, 'Why do you have to talk like that, and spoil it? You're like Lionel.'*

*'I don't want anything to happen to you.'*

*'I wouldn't mind a baby with your dark blue eyes, Pillie.'*

*'I think you ought to take precautions, all the same. Haven't you any –'*

*'Really!' She looked at him with scorn. 'Very well, I'll ease your mind. On such occasions I usually douche with Lysol and swish away any little strangers. God, you men are all alike. Go away from me, you and your poetry! Don't you dare to touch me!'* [6]

The association continues on this sentimental and sensual level until the time comes for Phillip to say good-bye to her, at which time he notices outside her flat 'a grey Mercedes-Benz', which is obviously the powerful car in which Pat Colyer, the ex-airman, takes her to see Willie, as narrated in the first chapter of *The Dream of Fair Women*. This means that we are taking a long stride backwards, over thirty years in fact, to the composition of the earlier novel.

And, we ask ourselves, 'In heaven's name, what have we got here? What has Willie got coming to him in his retreat in Devonshire?' Perhaps, more to the point, we may ask, 'What is Henry asking us to feel about this woman? Is he portraying a particularly despicable one with brilliant honesty and success, or seeking to portray an enchanting one with conspicuous failure?' To that question I have no ready answer.

Time does not allow us to pursue the Phillip-Eve relationship in all its details.

When we reach *The Innocent Moon*, it is considerably easier. Phillip writes in his journal on 21 March 1920: 'Now the country is all I have left to console me. Helena Rolls – where are the thoughts I had of her? Fled into nothingness. Lily Cornford – dissolved like her body in the grave. Eve Fairfax – gradually the mists of time hide thoughts of her. As I write I feel my heart being squeezed again – but no, she is gone.'

But she isn't – quite. A few weeks later, Phillip is enamoured of Eve's cousin Tabitha, who he calls Spica. She, too, lives in Folkestone, but her family, with its educational and cultural superiority to his own, worries him, and it seems as if a visit to Eve might help him to work off his self-distrust and lead him into more familiar country. He feels at home on Eve's level, for it has been disclosed to him that, as a serving-girl in a country castle belonging to Lord Spreycombe, she had been seduced. 'We are now good friends,' he writes in his journal in July, 1920. In September, he is in Folkestone again, 'ostensibly to say good-bye to Lionel who was about to leave for his job in Accra.'

> *'Pillie! Can you keep a secret? Cross your heart? Lionel has agreed to be divorced, and then I shall marry Naps Spreycombe ... Remember him?'*
> *'I don't think I ever met him, Eve.'*
> *'Surely you have?' Oh, I'm mixing you up with Willie again!'*[7]
> (A not surprising aberration on her part, we may reflect.)

These, then, are the main features of that 'terrible time' in Folkestone of which Hetty was so ashamed, believing that her 'best boy' had been breaking all the rules of conventional morality. And even when she visits Phillip with his sister Doris, in the 'solitary summer' of 1922, and he tells her of Mrs Selwyn-Lloyd, the mother of his new goddess, Annabelle, Hetty (we read) 'had not seen Phillip looking so nervous since what she thought of as 'that terrible time', three summers before, when he was entangled with a married woman at Folkestone. Was it happening again with this lady he had mentioned?' No – but it was happening again with her sixteen-year old daughter! Phillip has yet to find his destined mate; as Spica had told him, 'You are not yet ready to possess a woman all your own.'

This seems the appropriate point at which to leave Phillip in order to turn our attention to the narrative of *The Dream of Fair Women*, written as noted thirty years earlier. It is here that Willie Maddison's love-affair with Eve Fairfax is treated at expansive novel-length. The account in this novel is obviously more immediate to Henry's own experiences of the post-war period, on the credit of Farson's recollection of his conversation with Henry: 'Who was that woman in Folkestone after the war?' Henry had asked himself, and had smiled with pleasure at the recollection. 'O, she was a lovely girl, and only eighteen ...'

Yes, Henry's memory of the affair was then (in 1924) only five years old. The novel, with all its diffuseness, sentimentality and repetitiveness, is still full of enormous value to all lovers of Williamson's work. And yet it is interesting to learn from Stephen Clarke what Henry himself had said of it: 'I'm afraid this isn't much good. It was re-cut and rewritten so many times that at the end I didn't know where I was and I'm certain that the thing I had in mind isn't the thing in the book. I'm almost ashamed of it now.'

Critical opinion of *The Dream of Fair Women* varies greatly among members of the Henry Williamson Society. To some it is deeply moving and beautiful, to others irritating and melodramatic. I have a foot in each camp. To me its beauty lies in its descriptive power, and it is moving in its depiction of what Wheatley Blench has

called 'a feverish doomed love growing out of post-war neurosis'; but I find irritating the interminable love-dialogues between Willie and Eve, and its repetitions of what is virtually the same scene. Eve, of course, is the sharpest irritant of all, and can stand comparison at any time with Hardy's Lucy Templeman or Sue Bridehead, perhaps two of the most infuriating women-characters ever created by a male novelist.

The plot may be streamlined as follows. Willie is living in a derelict cottage called 'Rat's Castle' in Devon, writing his philosophical treatise, 'The Policy of Reconstruction'. It is April, 1919. Eve is driven down to meet him by Pat Colyer, ex-Royal Flying Corps, in a huge Mercedes-Benz (the one we noted outside Eve's flat in *A Test to Destruction*). Willie and Eve have a love-affair. She returns to Folkestone, where he follows her and, in Part II, the affair grows ever more frenetic. Williamson congregates in Folkestone, somewhat implausibly, a good number of other characters in the novel-sequence: Mary Ogilvie, Elsie Norman, Julian Warbeck, and of course cousin Phillip. Willie meets others of Eve's *entourage* – her husband, and Sandy White who, at the end of the novel, kills himself in despair over his love for Eveline. She goes off with 'Naps' Spreycombe. 'Eve does not want me, even as a friend,' laments Willie, in his immense sadness.' He returns to Cryde Bay.

I do not propose to spend time on the protracted love-passages, nor give endless examples of Eve's empty prattle ('Willie, wherefore this thusness?' 'Do you think I give myself to any man?' 'I can give men friendship but they never remain content with that!' are among some of the more excruciating examples; not to mention her use of the nicknames Willie and Pillie throughout, complicated by her having a daughter called Quillie.)

This is not to say that the characters lack realism. Far from it. It is because Williamson makes them so real in their sentimental and sensual contacts that the reader feels uncomfortably like an intruder, eavesdropping on their erotic drills, their silly jokes and routines, their petty jealousies. We often dislike them even as we pity them. We constantly have to remember what has made them what they are. Willie Maddison is presented as the talented man of sensibility and idealism whose personality has been splintered by four years of horrific warfare. Here are some typical remarks of his: 'I am nothing, dishonourable, parasitic, worthless.' 'I feel I'm not wanted.' 'I'm sorry I'm so dull.' 'I'm a waster.' 'I think I ought to go.' 'Eve, this can't go on.' This insecurity is underlined by the author's telling use of verbal expressions: Willie is 'alarmed', he 'breathes slowly to ease his heart', he 'feels the persistent pain of doubt.' 'In silence he despaired.' It is a test of the reader's tolerance to remain in sympathy with such a hangdog character.

As for Eve, we are reminded again and again of her peasant childhood, her seduction as a serving-girl by Lord Spreycombe, in the castle where she was employed. She has become something of a nymphomaniac. Her early marriage has proved a failure. And, ultimately, these two are so completely preoccupied with their own feelings, are so self-absorbed, that it is all uncomfortably like a kind of literary indecent exposure.

Let us focus upon the Folkestone scene on a particular day, the day when Willie arrives there, the 9th July, 1919. This is 'Victory Day', and the atmosphere is 4th August, 1914, all over again, but this time the crusade against the Germans has been transformed into a miracle of healing, for Asquith in parliament has spoken of the world being 'cleansed and purged.' Patriotic parades are going on everywhere. The National Anthem is sung in the House of Commons. Peace-fever is scarcely distinguishable from war-fever. And the Victory Day celebrations in Folkestone,

into which Willie Maddison is projected, are one with hundreds of others round the country, with their fire-crackers, bonfires, trumpets, decorations, and unlimited supplies of alcohol.

Williamson does not spare us this obnoxious side of the proceedings, and the wanton vandalism of the drunken Lord Spreycombe is a telling example. The shop owned by the Mayor, George Bogside, is without decorations of any kind, and Spreycombe and his friends fling cans of paint up to the roof, where the Mayor is at tea with two ladies. 'My dear chap,' exclaims the 'noble lord', 'we're helping to decorate the ancient and horrible town of Folkestone. We are responding to your appeal to make the best display on this auspicious occasion ...', and as he speaks 'the paints were slowly making their shapeless slides down the drab shop-front, while attenuated driblets in advance of the main sploshes gave the appearance of string-blinds hanging awry.' the sentence is quite Hardyesque, and brings home to us the senseless barbarism of the act.

But underneath the external atmosphere of wild excitement and drunkenness lurks the internal one, that of post-war *ennui* and disillusion. The protracted description of the Grand Hotel Victory Ball makes us fully aware of this dark and bitter side. Willie, dancing with Mary Ogilvie, remarks how, seeing the flares on the seafront, he had been reminded of the trenches in Flanders. 'I was homesick for the guns,' he says, and Mary remarks, 'I think I understand. I don't see how anyone who went through the war could ever forget.'

> *In his mind was lighted by memory a sombre picture of flame and smoke and shards upbursting from broken earth like the blown coal-dust fire round an iron wheel-hoop in a blacksmith's forge;; and moving slowly in corpse-rotten mud were men with faces toadstool-pale under their helmets, men with dislustred eyes, hollow-minded and beyond fear. They were men who had bidden farewell to wife, mother, child – who had loved the green fields, the evening talk in some town tavern. They were entirely human, of no class or creed, of no race or nation; and they were dead.* [8]

And against this lurid background of memory we are presented with the immediate properties of the Grand Hotel which surround Maddison, the 'hectic throng', the 'mass shuffling', the 'bombilation of negroid music.' Thus the vapidity and falsity of the occasion are brought to our minds, for here is a Victory Celebration without regard to the cost it has entailed.

> *Pale cheeks and sunbrowned cheeks, painted cheeks and pencilled eyebrows, lamp-black lashes and blue-rubbed eyelids. Eyes that were sweet and young and gentle, eyes that were old and hard and false-bright with liquor. Pupils shining with love and happiness; liquified by belladonna and diminished by morphine sulphate. Natural lips and carmined lips, lustrous hair and dyed hair, hair in waist-long tresses and in plaits, hair false in coil and pad and gummed whisker-curl. Young and old, they sought personal happiness, he thought, one among pom-poms aswing and scarves floating above the sussuration of skirts and the sibilation of shoes. They clasped aloofly, firmly, tenderly, amiably, delightedly, abandonedly, round waists and shoulders and necks. The brilliant lights shone on the Peace Night revellers.* [9]

One cannot but admire the brilliance of such a passage, using the prose-writer's accumulation of detail and contrast together with the poetic devices of alliteration and onomatopoeia. In this mindless, unreflecting dancing Maddison is caught up momentarily, and his thoughts at one point reach forward to that vision of human

brotherhood which, we know, was Williamson's personal response to the Great War and its aftermath:

> *He felt that if only his voice could equal it his shouts would roll round the earth ... The spirit of the moment's fraternity must never be lost, never allowed to subside, but must gather impetus and be grasped, so that human enmity and strife should perish for ever ... And with shining eyes he looked around him, his head above most men.* [10]

The last sentence is interesting, for Willie and Phillip and Henry himself all unite *physically* in their gangling length of body, and also spiritually in their roles of idealist, overpeering the insensitiveness masses, heirs of a private utopia, a kingdom of peace and brotherhood – never to be realised, at least in Williamson's, or in our own, day.

It is what *haunts* these scenes that catches our imagination. Even, at one point, Eve herself realises that the desolating evil of war has made her what she is. The young officer Sandy White is deep in the toils of a desperate love for her. Maddison realises this and feels 'the heaviness coming again in his breast', for he knows what Sandy White is going through. He questions Eve, and we hear her, to our surprise, saying, 'Everything I do seems to bring pain to someone else ... It makes me sad – all the boys I knew – who are dead. My heart is filled with dead men.' It's a sudden burst of luminosity on her part. She too has become an aspect of war's inhumanity and waste: she has lived on whilst ten million have died.

How strikingly those sections of the novel which demonstrate this sustained artistry of narrative stand out form the sentimentalism of the love-dialogues! They are often a source of surprise. Another example might be adduced from a slightly earlier section than the one just quoted from – the walk which Maddison takes from the Queen's Hotel to an area which is still littered with empty and deserted Canadian hutments. Here he climbs a fence and reaches the summit of a small hill overlooking the town. The promenade is ablaze with lights, 'like a snake glittering every scale.' 'Suspended in blackness, a battle-cruiser suddenly became studded with yellow as all her lights were switched on at every porthole. A white searchlight beam stretched out from among them, illumining the pier, trailing over the houses, and swelling to a dazzling whiteness as it moved up Caesar's Camp, causing a drove of feeding cattle to stampede in terror.' The theme of light is dominating the text here. 'Great serpent-tongues of flame darted at the sky.' And Willie sees these lights as 'tokens of England's ended darkness', and to the brilliance he adds his own small contribution, a bonfire of stakes, hurdles, and furze-twigs. But, as he lies there ...

> *... sudden emotion choked his throat and sight he felt that the spirits of dead soldiers were with him. Sheep and cattle shuffled in the darkness beyond the fire, and from the grass came a million sighs that stirred the flames, and passed into darkness again.* [11]

After the wild revelry of the Grand Hotel Ball, Willie again goes out on to the Leas, which are now deserted, and the lamps extinguished. He lies down on his side near a heap of embers which are all that remain of the huge bonfire of the previous evening; and 'almost at once he must have slept, for he awoke in the steely pallor of dawn, to crawl nearer the fire, followed by a mongrel dog that had been curled against his back.'

I find the phrase 'steely pallor of dawn' something of a signal to the reader, for

what follows is a picture of a very different Folkestone from the one depicted in the previous chapters. The great Victory Day jamboree has come to an end. The morning after is the first day of the nothingness that follows hectic excitement. Willie is cold, his companion is a mongrel dog seeking the warmth of human contact (a detail which creates the scene for us, rather than embellishes it).

> *Thrushes were singing when he awoke again, with the mongrel licking his face. The fire was a rough flat circle of white ash around which a few dishevelled figures were lying. Dozens of bottles, black, green, and transparent, whole and broken, labelled and plain, were scattered with paper, orange peel, stoppers, Mr Archibald Dodder's brown bowler, boots and shoes, a set of false teeth, a woman's torn skirt, walking sticks, flattened hats, fragments of food, and a dead swallow winged by the heat ... Across the embers the Grand Hotel quivered and faded in the hot air arising, seeming insubstantial and remote as the happenings of the night before.* [12]

'Insubstantial and remote'. With sensitivity and artistry, the author is returning us to the real world, the world which, for all the promises of the politicians, is the world which will wake to find itself in economic ruin, in the trauma of bereavement in thousands of homes, a world desolated by prolonged slaughter on a scale never known before, a world that is chill, sorrowful, and maimed.

The newspaper that Maddison buys has 'uninteresting headlines about the Versailles Treaty'. He breakfasts off fried fish, margarine, and a pot of strong tea, where the girl who serves him has 'darned stockings and dragging slippers.' There is a dull, unwelcoming atmosphere. The movements described are undeliberate, their purposes half-defined. Stagnation and distaste infiltrate the tone of the writing. He notices 'some miserable flies stuck to wet paint.' The mongrel dog is sick. It deserts him. And over yesterday's happy Folkstone a ghastly normality descends.

Another significant incident follows. Willie sees a cat crouching under a shrub, 'its yellow eyes fixed on a wren stittering above it.' He throws a clod of earth at it, and then learns from 'a female servant' sweeping steps nearby that the cat belongs to Mr Fairfax Senior., the British Israelite. She describes the cat as a 'great fat ugly birdketching fleabitten eunuch', and is hardly less complimentary about Mr Fairfax. 'The old gent would die if his cat was in peril. 'Tisn't right to keep cats in luxury while working people starves. And him that was a parson too!' In middleclass Folkestone, in the light of this returning day, we recognise the cry of workingclass bitterness. It is all part of the world Willie Maddison has inherited as a survivor of the War.

These central chapters of *The Dream of Fair Women* reveal the camera-eye, the microphonic ear, the ability to reproduce ambience and dialogue, which are Henry Williamson's especial gifts. It is astonishing that they were all there, even in 1924, to achieve their maturity thirty years later in *The Chronicle*. I cannot recall a more authentic picture of post-war disorientation and spiritual torpor than we have before us in these pages. Williamson is forcing us to realise that the Great War destroyed more than physical human life; it destroyed pattern and progress, it destroyed faith in man's upward destiny.

The novel is still immensely readable. And to the Society meeting in Folkestone in Spring 1992 its mingling of shadowy autobiography and compelling fiction was all-absorbing. What Henry exactly did at Folkestone we may never know; he was free to select and arrange and adorn his experiences. What impresses are the tautness and concentration, the narrative control, and the evocation of a torn and

unhappy world, a world whose distress is brought to a focus in the narrow boundaries of a seaside town in Kent.

Though not a war-novel as such, *The Dream of Fair Women* is a highly-sensitised testimony to war's futility. Four years of poisonous combat has led to a sickness of mind and spirit that is totally disillusioning. Elderly reactionaries, the 'old men' still in power, the detached organisers of the Victory Day unrealities, are still concealing the truth known by the common soldier to the bone; the mentality which mismanaged the war now seeks to enact the policy of punishment and reparation upon the defeated, which will be the theme of much in Williamson's later writing. We probably think in this connection of the patriotic bombast Phillip had to endure from his father, Richard Maddison, a conflict which led to their separation. But, interestingly, we have, in the conclusion of *The Dream of Fair Women*, an equally barbed conversation between Willie and *his* father, John, a conflict whose tensions remain with us after the book is closed.

> *'I don't know why you are talking like this.'*
>
> *'I've told you why, Father!' he shouted, springing up again and walking up and down the book-lined room. 'You say I was indolent as a boy, you wise grownups, with your canes and your religions and your blockades of food for children – and your wars and all the lousy hellishness arising out of the negations of the little boy's dreams! Christ, I won't stay here another moment! O, you good people! You grind away the natural, the godlike part of the mind, and have your wars, your burnings at the stake, your crucifixions, you – O Christ, I can't bear it! ...'*
>
> *Mr Maddison was seriously alarmed, for the agitation in his son's features as he flung himself about the room.*
>
> *'Honour!* Dulce et decorum est! *Ten million didn't go home again, but I did – Willie Maddison the unwanted, the waster! God, it's quite true! I've never done anything worth a damn in my life – d'you hear? except to be a target for our naval shells ... and later to help to destroy some poor miserable little German boys of eighteen – now I live in my friend's house after I've made love to his wife! And I'm not a bit ashamed really! That's an awful thing to say, Father, but it's absolutely true! I'm a degenerate – creepy crawly – as you once called me as a boy. Why don't you order me out of your house? I'm no more use to England – why don't you kick me out?'*
>
> *'I don't know why you're bullying me like this,' said Mr Maddison, in a thin voice.*
>
> *The tone of his father's voice, the worn look on his face, made the son remorseful for his words. He realised that he was stronger than Father. Father looked grey and tired, and his hands were trembling. He flung himself on the sofa, sobbing.*
>
> *'There now, Willie, there now!' said Mr Maddison, hovering near. 'There now, old chap.'* [13]

My last few words are a kind of foot-note to what we have seen of the Folkestone episodes, with their strong undertone of disillusion, bitterness and post-war disorientation. It is for the *truth* of that picture that we can re-value and re-assess the quality of Williamson's fictional presentation of what, we cannot help believe, was part of his own consciousness, even perhaps of his own actions.

Forty-five years separate the young man who wrote *The Dream of Fair Women* and the ageing veteran who penned these moving words in the envoi to *The Gale of the World:*

*A thousand scenes from Time regained. Innumerable joys and sorrows, the best and worst of oneself.*

*The fairest things have fleetest end,*
*Their scent survives their close,*
*But the rose's scent is bitterness*
*To him that loved the rose!*

*Bitterness, dear Francis Thompson? Ah no! Behind the tears were love and gratitude that one had been born in England, that one had been privileged to experience hardship that had burned away the selfish dross of oneself and thereby perhaps made one worthy of an attempt to speak for those who had not come back from the Western Front.* [14]

**Notes:**

1. Daniel Farson: *Henry* (Michael Joseph, 1982) p.20
2. Lois Lamplugh: *A Shadowed Man* (Exmoor Press, 1991) p.3
3. Fred Shepherd: *Considering Folkestone* (HW Journal 24) p. 34
4. Henry Williamson: *A Test to Destruction* (MacDonald, 1961) p. 360
5. Ibid. pp. 360-1
6. Ibid. pp. 366-9
7. Henry Williamson: *The Innocent Moon* (MacDonald, 1961) p. 83
8. Henry Williamson: *The Flax of Dream* (Faber, 1936) pp. 761-2
9. Ibid. p. 762
10. Ibid. p. 770
11. Ibid. p. 750
12. Ibid. p. 780
13. Ibid. pp. 940-1
14. Henry Williamson: *The Gale of the World* (MacDonald, 1969) p.364


*Sketch by Doris Walker of the Venue for the 1993 Spring Meeting – see p. 55*