

A Shaft of Ancient Sunlight

Jim Sloan

My interest in HW began in 1965/6 when, browsing through the paperbacks in my local W.H. Smith, I discovered a book whose striking cover illustration immediately seized my attention. Contrived though it was, the power of the depiction of a trench raid on the cover of *A Fox Under My Cloak* compelled me to purchase it. It is difficult for me to describe the effect that novel had on me. Until then I would not have believed that I could have been so affected by the written word; to identify with a character and his period so closely; to be so affected by scenes and events that occasionally. I would have to stop reading in order to compose myself! The skill, the guile, the elemental power of the writings of Henry Williamson seized me with that novel that I read all those long years ago. It has not released me to this day. I immediately purchased the preceding volumes to *A Fox* and thereafter made the weekly pilgrimage to Smith's, desperate for the subsequent publications in the series; I also bought *Salar* and *Tarka*.

It was at this time that I met a girl whose father, I discovered, possessed a number of books written by Henry Williamson before the War. I begged, and was allowed, to read them all. Those pre-war writings of fields and woods and wild creatures possessed the same descriptive power, and had the same effect upon me as the contemporary work that I was then reading. I was awed by his use of words, how he somehow metamorphosized them into light, colour, mood and emotion ... Even to my untutored self, I dimly realised that there was work of genius. I felt that I had to write to this great man, this genius, to try to tell him how I felt.

Amazingly I received a reply! But my anticipation at seeing the post mark on the envelope and daring to hope ... was instantly tempered by the content and tone of the enclosed letter. It was indeed from Henry Williamson. But it was not from the man I imagined – one of the country's foremost writers, lauded and respected by all. Its tone was that of a tired, disillusioned and disappointed old man. He thanked me for writing to him, saying that: 'Here and there are a few like yourself who hold the fort and allow me to keep going' ... 'One more novel, possibly two, and it is over ...' '... a project started in 1945, and continued day and night for years ...' To say that I was shocked to receive that letter would be understatement. I had to go and see him.

On a Friday night in May, 1966, collecting my girl friend, I set off, unannounced, for the address on the HW's letter. We arrived in Georgeham quite early the following morning, and pulled up outside 'The King's Arms', hopelessly lost and confused. It was a beautiful May morning; with not a soul to be seen apart from two men standing a little further down the street. The two were uncannily similar in features, although one was much shorter than the other and, possibly, I later thought, a little simple minded. I got out of the car and asked them, inanely, something to the effect of 'whether they had ever heard of a writer called Henry Williamson?'. Their mutual gaze had not left us since we had come into view, and now, at my question, they both smiled simultaneously and nodded their heads. Not only did they know of him, the taller of the two informed me, but for a time he had lived in that very 'house opposite. 'An' 'e were proper mazed, 'e were. Why, 'e would come for to wash in that stream of a 'mornin", He cast a surreptitious look up and down the deserted street, 'an' would be nekked, 'e would! Nekked as a bebbly!'. After a little more desultory chat (why, oh why, didn't I stay longer with them? Find out who they were?) the man explained the whereabouts of Ox's Cross.

Back then up the hill out of the village, past the 'New' cemetery (that I was later

to read about in one of the 'Village' books) and soon we were at the Cross and outside the gate of the field.

The field itself, as it transpired, was well screened from the road by a thick hedge of trees and bushes. Leaving Sue in the car, I crept cautiously through the gate and followed the mini-ride that led into the field proper. I noticed a small hut away to my right and set off nervously towards it. When I reached the door of the hut, before knocking, I peered through the little diamond shape pane of glass which was set into it to see a large, comfortably jumbled single room. A tall, white haired man lay, apparently asleep, on a sofa; but at my diffident knock he got immediately to his feet, and came to the door.

I don't quite recall my initial introduction – something inane, no doubt. But I do recall that he wasn't particularly pleased at being disturbed! Indeed, after I had stumbingly told him who I was and that I had come to see him etc. he replied that, though he normally like to see his readers, he hoped that I would understand that, on this occasion ... He explained that he had got a lot of things on his mind at present. There was some difficulty with one of his children at school, apparently; the recent visit of a documentary film crew had taken an awful lot out of him, and he still had a great deal of writing left to do ... We walked slowly back across the field, exchanging the odd word. I then mentioned a chap called Richard Jefferies, whose name cropped up in HW's books occasionally; and another chap called Francis Thompson ... The mention of these names had an electric effect on HW. He seemed to go from a mood of morose depression, to one of cheerful optimism in a moment. He asked me if I would like him to read me some of their 'stuff'. Some of his stuff, perhaps ...

We collected Sue from the car (who, I have to say, was an instant hit!) and returned to the hut, where HW made tea and gave us a slice of delicious cake each. He sat at a little three-legged table (that I was later to know so well from many of his books) and proceeded to read aloud to us. Time seemed suspended ... I remember him once stopping, turning in his chair, and tossing a log on to an apparently dead fire. A few seconds only, it seemed, and the log smouldered, and then caught fire. Another time he stopped reading to ask why I looked so sad. I said something about all beauty somehow making me feel sad ... I can see his smile to this day. But then, as now, I still don't know what it meant. Eventually he stopped reading (I remember that to me it was like waking from a deep, deep sleep, and I think that I just sat there for a time, dumb, while he and Sue chatted together), and then suggested that: 'We go to a place that makes the best pasties I know'. We walked back to the gate where we stood chatting for a few moments. Suddenly he bent down and picked up something which he held out to show me. It was a piece of tree bark. I looked at it in puzzlement for a few moments: then at HW: then at the piece of bark again. 'Can't you see it?' I remember him saying. 'Can't you see it? I shook my head, miserably. Then watched as he carefully held the piece of bark between finger and thumb, and slowly raised it up and away from me. Then I saw it! There, against the blue May sky, was the perfect silhouette of a large bird of prey; perfect even down to the pinion feathers on the tips of it's outstretched wings!

The place we went for our beer and pasties was the 'Agricultural Inn', at Braunton; there was a carnival or market in progress, as far as I can recall. There, still in high good humour, HW was in Puckish mood, for he now assumed an amazingly thick Devonian accent, and tried to start conversations with the locals, many of whom seemed to have difficulty understanding what he was saying. HW thought this great fun! The good mood continued, and he remarked how glad he was that we had come to see him, and invited us a back to stay the night at 'a house

that he was now forced by his doctors to live in', in Ilfracombe.

We eventually set off for Capstone Road, Ilfracombe, HW leading in his green Triumph estate car. We stopped twice en route, once for HW to walk back and ask us, indignantly, who we were and whether we were following him – and then laughing at the puzzlement on our faces. The second time he stopped us to point out the effects that the fresh breeze and sunshine was creating on a large field of growing cereal. The field was like a green sea. Waves of constant rhythmic movement were created by the erratic breeze and the cloud shadows cast by the lowering sun's light. It was a wonderful sight. At length I murmured something inane about 'the corn'. HW turned to look at me, sadly. 'Barley', he said, 'It's Barley.' It had to be of course.

That evening as we sat in his sparsely lit basement room, listening to his beloved Wagner, HW talked. His mood of depression seemed to have revisited him, and as he talked, mostly of things past, it was as much aloud or to himself as to us. He talked of Arnold Bennet, of T.E. Lawrence, Hitler; of how the Second War was a direct and inevitable consequence of the First War, and how he and others who had realised this tried, in vain, to stop it. He explained how 'they' had thought to avert the coming war by sending a special emissary to Adolf Hitler to persuade him against a war. A man would be sent of impeccable character and honour; a man whose own credentials had been forged and tested in war and whose politics were World renowned, might be heeded and would be able to convince Hitler of the 'true' mood of British public opinion, which was against another war. T.E. Lawrence was approached 'as the only man in England who could accomplish such a task' and 'agreed to go'. According to HW it was returning from sending a telegram to him, confirming details of a visit at which they would have discussed details of such a trip, that Lawrence was killed. HW then looked in vain for the telegram to show us, couldn't find it, and concluded that somebody had stolen it.

By now the depressed mood seemed to have affected us all, and Sue and I just sat listening to HW talking. I remember asking one question only – about the identity of 'Cranmer', 'Phillip's' boyhood friend in *A Fox ...* HW smiled, wistfully, and said that 'Cranmer', like most of his characters, was a composite of the street urchins who haunted London at that time. 'But he was real, for all that'.

At last it was time for bed, and our host showed us up a flight of steep stairs to a bedroom. Before sleep overcame me, I remember seeing in one corner of the room an ancient air-rifle. Could that have been the one that the boy Phillip had shot at his neighbour's greenhouse? Alas! That question, together with so many others, was never asked or resolved. The following morning I awoke to see HW standing over us, offering a tray on which were two perfectly boiled eggs. In no time, it seemed, we were walking to the harbour car park, where I had left my car. As we walked HW asked if we would consider staying a couple of days to help him mend a caravan which he had at the field. I replied that, unfortunately, I couldn't as I had to get back ...! When we reached the car park Sue said she wanted to take a photograph, at which HW seemed excruciatingly embarrassed, putting a piece of paper in his mouth and generally clowning around. After this he directed me as to the best route home, and the last glimpse I had of the great man was of him walking away across the car park, head down, his thoughts, no doubt, already on the work remaining to be done to complete the *Chronicle*, now his *raison d'être*. I felt that Sue and I were already forgotten, that his thoughts were faraway, recalling the people, events and times which, we now know, will be forever available to posterity, vivid and clear, brilliantly illuminated in Ancient Sunlight, thanks to the writings of this imaginative genius, Henry Williamson.