A Winter's Tale

by Peter Lewis

I recently read again H.V. Morton's *In Search of England*,[1] in which the writer tours England in relaxed and humorous exploration, seeking out 'local' people and recording the stories they had to tell. I was particularly interested in his trip to Dartmoor and the remote Warren Inn as described in Chapter Five. Two incidents concerning the inn are related, and they left me with the distinct impression that these passages were known to me. I reached for Williamson's *The Peregrine's Saga*, 1923, and turned up the story of 'A Winter's Tale' – yes, there they were! I hurried to my writing desk ...

The Warren House Inn, wrote Morton in 1927, stood in the shadow of Warren Tor beside the road that cut straight over the moor like a stretched tape. (There is no Warren Tor shown on modern Ordnance Survey maps, but behind the inn is Water Hill, 1600 feet above sea level.) *'The inn was small, white, and built low, as if crouching in defiance from the wild winds which in winter must make its chimneys scream'*. The innkeeper boasted that the fire in the bar had not been quenched for a hundred years. But it was the saddest fire Morton had ever seen – a thin spiral of blue smoke curled lazily from a huge pile of peat, and there was not a hint of warmth. The innkeeper had a further tale to relate. A long time ago, he said, a traveller called on a snowed-up night, was given the front room and retired early to bed. In his bedroom was a big old chest, and being an inquisitive interferin' fellow he opened it and saw a lot of ice and, underneath, a corpse. *'It was only Father'*, it was explained, who was being kept until he could be taken to Widecombe church. Morton claimed to have verified the story, but believed that it had happened, not at that inn, but at another of similar name which, in old times, had stood on the opposite side of the road.

In March 1921 Henry Williamson, aged twenty-five, rode down to Devon on his Norton motor-cycle to take up residence in Georgeham. The story of his emigration is well documented, and is supported by the autobiographical 'H.W.' of *The Sun in The Sands*, 1945 (chs 1-3), who motor-cycles to Devon in March 1921 after being thrown out of his London home by his father, and also by 'Phillip Maddison', who suffers the same fate, and who also motor-cycles down to Devon in 1921, as related to *The Innocent Moon*, 1961, ch 7.

But twice (at least), inexplicably, Williamson would have his readers and listeners believe that he had actually walked all the way to Devon following his expulsion from his father's house in London. One instance was a radio broadcast in December 1935 entitled 'Recipe for Country Life'.[2] Here, aged twenty-two and after being sacked from his journalist's job in Fleet Street, he tells of the two hundred miles walk to Devon, army pack on back, where he rents a cottage in a little village by the sea.

An earlier version of part of this 'walk' is recorded in far greater detail in the story 'A winter's Tale' in *The Peregrine's Saga*. The apocryphal back-packing marathon takes place in December, a few months after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty was signed June 28th 1919, so the walk can be dated to December 1919, when Williamson would have been just twenty-four. The writer's destination is 'a house in a coombe beyond Princetown', where he has been invited to spend Christmas with a war-time friend, 'C'. We are told that the first 175 miles, to the eastern edge of Dartmoor, was completed in seven days (an average of 25

miles per day). Before dawn on Christmas Eve he leaves Exeter, passing under Cotley Wood to the River Teign, through Bridford Wood and so to Moreton hampstead, travelling some twelve miles, his route easily traced along the B3212 road, every name, he recalls, learned from his 1-inch Ordnance map. He continues past Shapley Common and Birch Tor and arrives at the Warren House Inn, where he drinks two pints of beer, *'spreading his hands to the peat fire which had been burning continuously in the grate for more than a century'*. He has now covered an arduous and lonely seventeen miles, but soon marches on into the wind, over the East Dart and Cherry Brook to the Two Bridges and Princetown, with its grim prison, before limping into another inn, *'damnably weary'*, after twenty-six miles. He thinks to save several miles by turning up a lesser road to Tor Royal and, by following a track beside the Devonport Leat, arrive at where the Abbot's Way joined a track by disused tin-mines. There he would be, according to his map, about a mile and a half from his destination. On *'monstrous heavy'* boots he hobbles mechanically on, in darkness now, and in extreme fatigue. It begins to snow. At this point we lose him as he moves into what is probably the most remote and inhospitable area of the moor, several desolate square miles of uninhabited, uninhabitable trackless bog. Fortunately, the writer, just in time, finds an isolated farmhouse and is given supper and a bed for the night. The nightmare story of how, in the cold, sleepless night, he finds, in a corner cupboard of his room, a corpse in a barrel of cider, must be left for the reader to discover, or re-discover, for himself. The corpse turns out to be the mortal remains of the father, recently deceased, of the farmer's wife, pickled until the frozen ground would thaw to enable a grave to be dug. The next morning, Christmas Day, before breakfast, our indefatigable hero goes for a walk in the snow, naturally! Soon he continues his journey, his destination not revealed.

In a bookshop in Tavistock I found a booklet entitled *A Walker's Guide to the Pubs of Dartmoor*, 1993, by Chris Wilson and Michael Bernie. The hundred-year-old fire at the Warren House Inn is recorded, as is the 'amusing' story of the corpse at the Inn packed in salt in a chest, awaiting burial. As H.V. Morton pointed out in his book, anyone making the same journey through England will meet much the same kind of people and hear exactly the same stories. Henry Williamson chose to transfer the legend of the corpse pickled in cider/ice/salt in the barrel/chest/cupboard from the Inn to a remote farmhouse somewhere beyond Princetown.

In October 1993, after attending the Society's A.G.M. in Devon, I followed in Williamson's footsteps across Dartmoor, seventy years on, unencumbered by army pack and monstrous heavy boots. Would the bar fire in the Warren House Inn be still alight? Yes, it would! Peat is no longer cut on Dartmoor, (and to obtain it elsewhere is too expensive and ecologically unsound) so the old stone grate with iron basket, before which Williamson spread his hands, now burns only logs, but is no doubt a good deal warmer than the miserable peat fire which Morton saw seven or eight years after Williamson's visit. The present innkeeper boasts that the fire has now burned continuously for 150 years, and happily he is determined to maintain the tradition. The inn was built in the eighteenth century as a hostel for workers at the nearby tin-mines, now disused. At 1400 feet it is thought to be the second or third highest inn in England. In 1845, it was found impossible to enlarge it, and it was re-built on the other side of the road (the foundations of the original establishment can still be seen). In 1919, then, when Williamson saw it, the fire in the grate of the new inn could not have been more than 74 years old, but possibly the burning peat could have been carried across the road on a shovel and placed, still burning, in its new grate. That fire would have been badly needed in 1963 when the road was blocked by snow – the inn was cut off for six weeks, its only link

with the outside world a friendly R.A.F. helicopter. Sadly, the Inn, outwardly little changed since 1845, is nowadays disappointingly spartan, the log fire its only attraction in the long Dartmoor winter. But I was moved to think, as I sat before that ancient fire that I was perhaps sitting on the same rough bench on which HW had sat in his 'monstrous heavy' boots all those years before.

NOTES

1. H.V. Morton, FRSL, 1892-1979, a near contemporary of Henry Williamson was well-known to him, as was his delightful *In Search of England* (1927, re-print Methuen, 1987), the first and perhaps the best of his *In Search of* and *In the Steps of* books, mentioned by Williamson in ch 1 of his *Devon Holiday*, 1935. Morton was the elder brother of John B. Morton, CBE, 1893-1979, author and journalist, best remembered as 'Beachcomber' of the *Daily Express* for over fifty years. The first 'Beachcomber' had been D. Bevan Wyndham Lewis, FRSL, who died in 1969. In 1925, Henry Williamson, J.B. Morton, his cousin Guy, and Wyndham Lewis spent a walking holiday in the Pyrenees. This adventure can be read in Williamson's fiction, both in *The Sun in The Sands*, 1945 (Part 3), where Morton and Wyndham Lewis are portrayed as 'Johnny' and 'Bevan' respectively, and also in *The Innocent Moon*, 1961, chs 19/20, where 'Philip Maddison's' companions become 'Rowley Meek' and 'Bevan Swan'. (See John Homan's article 'Beachcomber Rediscovered' in Society *Journal* No 11.)
2. Printed in *The Listener*, Dec. 1935, recorded on Vol. 2 of the tape 'The Broadcasts of Henry Williamson', (Henry Williamson Society, 1984) and reproduced in *Spring Days in Devon*, HW Soc. 1992.