Reviews Under Review

Peter K. Robins.

THE BEAUTIFUL YEARS

One feels in regard to *The Beautiful Years* (Collins: 7s. 6d., net), described by the publishers as Mr. Henry Williamson's first "novel" (a truly comprehensive term nowadays), that it is a labour of love, inspired in the first instance—though possibly the author has not fully realized this—by a grateful desire to record certain impressions drawn from his evidently close and sympathetic association with the English countryside. The teeming life of its fields and woods and hedgerows; the furtive business of wild creatues, their satisfactions and their terrors; the grim tragedies of hunting and death; the pageantry of changing seasons; the drama of the skies between sunset and dawn—all this mystery and beauty has constrained him to homage in the form of word-pictures, usually rich and vivid.

But just as one may question the desirability of the single human figure in a landscape painting, so one doubts whether Mr. Williamson would not have achieved a better result if he had left the story out—or rather (for there is no story) the fictitious characters who supply such episodic element as the book contains. He has, in fact, fallen between two stools: his studies of nature are the main substance of his work; yet he treats them as background to a set of figures whose appearances are for the most part too shadowy and spasmodic to hold our attention; while any human interest which event or dialogue may occasionally seem to promise is stifled by the profuse descriptions—now and then degenerating into catalogues—of country sights and sounds. One character, indeed, that of the vagrant Jim, has a primitiveness, touched with mysticism, that does completely harmonize him with his setting. But the principal figure, a motherless boy. Willie Maddison, of whom, we gather from the author's foreword, more is to be told in future books, does not altogether justify the position he holds in this. He is, for the ordinary purposes of fiction, a quite successful creation—humorous, pathetic, mercurial: his reactions to rustic influences, his love of scenery and of wild life, are just what one would expect from sensitive boyhood in the country; yet somehow he never becomes an inevitable feature in the landscape; nor are we so closely in touch with him as to see nature through his eyes. Her interpreter is, the author, not Willie.

The present volume, though the first of a series of "tapestries" to be entitled "The Flax of Dream," is put forward as complete in itself: otherwise we should have regarded it as a mass of material from which the distinctive threads were yet to be singled out and worked into a coherent design. Mr. Williamson, by the way, should learn to distinguish between the weaving of dream-stuff and the weaving of words, a process which may result in nonsense—for example; "The first love of poetic youth is ... the attraction of like for the unlike"; or in the affectation which can find "plagiarized sapience" in the employment of a common saying.

We are grateful to *The Times Literary Supplement* for permission to reprint this anonymous review of *The Beautiful Years* from their issue of November 24, 1921

The reviewer makes a prescient comment in regard to Williamson's strengths as a descriptive writer of the English countryside – for *Tarka* was six years in the future and had not even been imagined. The characters and plot of *The Beautiful Years*, are thinly drawn and redundant in the reviewer's opinion, (although to us Jim Holloman is patently Richard Jefferies) but tell of Willie Maddison's childhood years between the ages of seven and nine.

Williamson drew on his personal memories of North West Kent and Apsley Guise in Bedfordshire, as well as Jefferies' descriptions of Coate and the surrounding Wiltshire downs, for his rich and vivid word-pictures.

The Beautiful Years was written between June and November 1920, when Williamson was working in Fleet Street for the *Weekly Dispatch*, a large circulation Sunday newspaper. This was not so much a choice of occupation as an obligation to his father and grandfather and his own self-realisation that he was drinking too much and wasting his time. Fleet Street proved to be a continuation of same!

After selling advertising space or, rather, failing to do so, he was commissioned to write light-car notes but, wrestling in his own mind with 'The Policy of Reconstruction' and bored by the trivialities of Sunday newspaper journalism, salvation came his way in the guise of the sack as a consequence of the financial difficulties of the newspaper.

The genesis of *The Beautiful Years* came from Williamson's ruminations after his experiences in The Great War,

> *'reconstructing mentally the lost sweetness of love and dreaming of how one day, after my early death, I should shine like a bright star like Keats in the poetic firmament. At this time I was writing my novel called 'The Policy of Reconstruction, or, True Resurrection'. 'The Confessions of a Fake Merchant' a contribution to* The Book of Fleet Street *by Michael Pope, Cassell, 1930*

'The Policy of Reconstruction' was reworked and Collins published *The Beautiful Years* as the first part of a tetralogy on October 13, 1921 at 7s.6d. with a print run of 750 copies. The *TLS* review confirms that the book was the first of a series of "tapestries" to be entitled *The Flax of Dream.*

The variable quality of *The Beautiful Years* can be forgiven as this was Williamson's first book and Williamson himself declares in the notebook containing the manuscript that the 'story was written anyhow. I never knew what to write next. My characters grew as I wrote.'

Certainly it was written spontaneously, his spirit guided by Richard Jefferies and Francis Thompson, and we have further insight into his creative process from an inscription he wrote to Gwendoline Rendle on the half-title of the copy he presented to her:

> *It was written, unplanned and in hesitant 'patches' during a time of unrest and often intense suffering ... it seems a little rough, a little wild, a little awkward.*

Late in 'Confessions of a Fake Merchant' he recalled,

> *The Spring deepened into early summer and I was writing* The Beautiful Years *in my room at night, with the stars shining above the elm trees beyond; or rather* The Beautiful Years *was writing itself, flowing like sap from the roots of my being, the scenes recreating themselves. Not in those days the tortured and blackened pages of*

the later books! I was recreating the spirit of my boyhood, which arose in the sad radiant air of memory.

After the success of *Tarka, The Beautiful Years* was revised and rewritten and according to a Kenneth Allsop review of the book in 1967 in *The Spectator* he claimed Williamson had said 'many untruths, exaggerations, incidents of false characterisation and false writing were either cut out altogether or replaced by new pages.'

Such was the frail foundation stone of Williamson's literary heritage we now enjoy.

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Ed. Note. For further information on the background of *The Beautiful Years* please see Dr. J.W. Blench 'The Apprenticeship of a Novelist', Part I, *HWSJ*, No. 17, March 1988, p. 5; Part II, *HWSJ*, No. 18, Sept. 1988, p.39; Part III, *HWSJ*, No. 19, March 1989, p.31. And further Dr. J.W. Blench, 'Henry Williamson's *'The Flax of Dream*: A Reappraisal', *HWSJ*, No. 20 Sept 1989, p.5; and in the same issue, *'The Flax of Dream*: Some bibliographical Notes' by John Homan (*HWSJ*, No. 20, p. 38) which gives the publishing history of *The Beautiful Years* and subsequent volumes. Further, on p. 44 of that special *Flax of Dream* issue (*HWSJ*, No. 20)there is also a rough guide to other references within the *Journal*.

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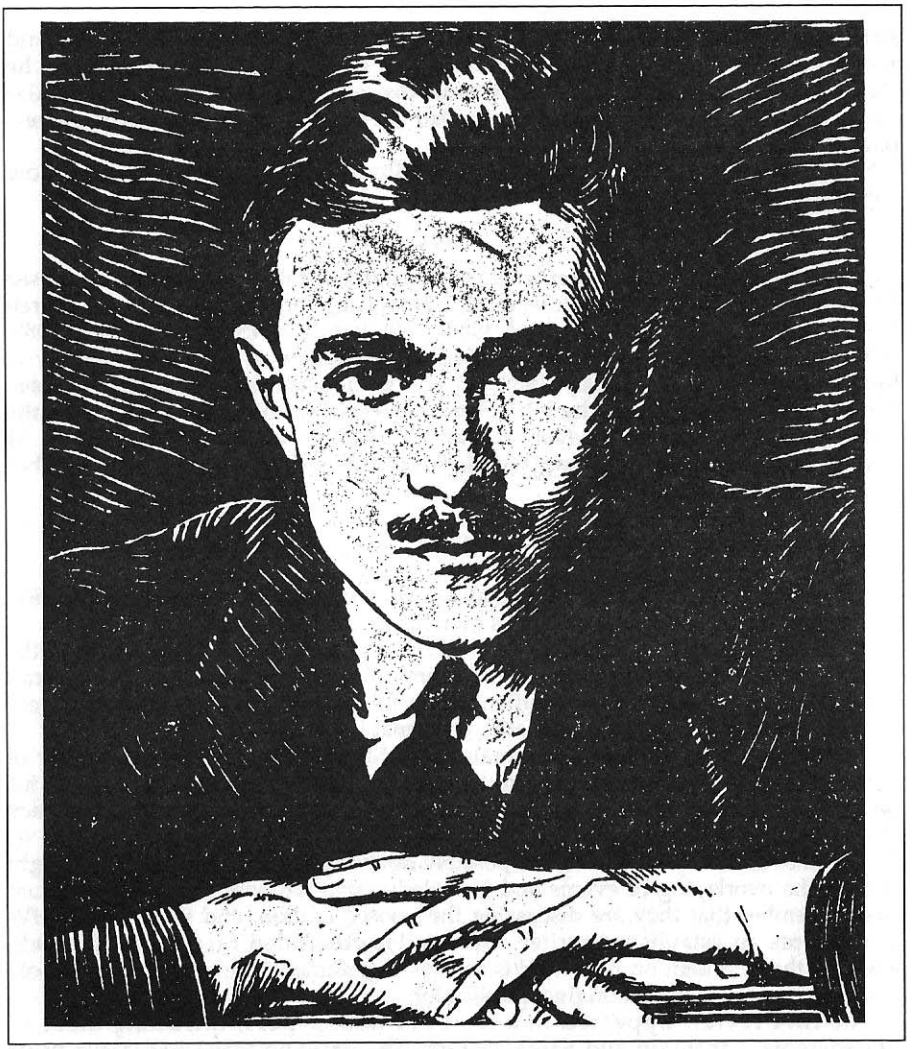
For further interest there follows a small selection of reviews of the revised edition of *The Beautiful Years* taken from HW's own file of USA clippings.

It is not generally appreciated how well HW was thought of as a writer in the USA in these early years. His short stories and articles were published in american magazines, and once his initial difficulties in finding an american publisher were solved, he was very well reviewed and, presumably, well read.

The following small selection reveals something of the content and flavour of these reviews. They are percipient in their grasp of his basic philosophy and of his particular gifts as a writer, but criticism is not withheld. They have an immediacy which perhaps makes us look at the book itself with fresh eyes, i.e. they take us back to that time, rather than (as we possibly do today) looking back with hindsight and all the overlaying of events and knowledge that we now have. But we must also remember that they are discussing the revised edition, and that by now HW has become an established writer with the Hawthornden Prize under his belt, whereas the first item on p. 51 of this section is genuinely a review of a first book, contemporaneous with its original publication.

The first review appeared in a series of newspapers, including those of Philadelphia, Cincinatti and Santa Monica. The drawing was used in the press throughout the USA and appears with nearly all the reviews, sometimes on its own with brief details of publication. Our typesetter, Sue Feather, has done sterling work in reproducing the style of the original cuttings.

HIS HERO A MENTAL REBEL



HENRY WILLIAMSON

Author of "The Pathway." His novel, "The Beautiful Years," third volume thus far published in the Story of William Maddison, will be issued September 3.

(From a drawing by Mabel Pugh)

Mental Rebel Re-appears

Author of "The Pathway" Goes Back to Early Life of Wm. Madison in "The Beautiful Years"

By SIDNEY WILLIAMS
Literary Editor of Philadelphia Inquirer
"THE BEAUTIFUL YEARS"
By HENRY WILLIAMSON
E.P. Dutton & Co.

After the ultimate answer of "The Pathway," it is doubly interesting to see how the artist in Henry Williamson, the author, and the character of Captain Madison, M.C., whose story chiefly it is, are figured in "The Beautiful Years." Known before "The Pathway" to English readers, in this country it follows the novel that has brought to Mr Williamson a true and unmistakable distinction.

His first published book, it was written, as he explains, before consciousness of technique existed. Its ore is pure, albeit little polished. Mr. Williamson had in mind a series of novels with a collective title, "The Flax of Dreams." They were to express respectively childhood, boyhood, youth, early manhood. Eventually he meant to have them published in a single volume, as Galsworthy has since done with "The Forsyte Saga." It would body forth in the life of one spiritually resolute the result of seeing plain.

The fate of Captain Maddison is fresh in mind to readers of "The Pathway." While no ordered philosophy controls his conduct, a mental rebel in him reaches out to Shelley. He will not reconcile himself to conventional society. And so he makes his exit in a ferment of fury and self-distrust. Even the understanding love of Mary Ogilvie, to whom he is still "Littleboy" of "The Beautiful Years," cannot quiet the torment of his too exacting soul. Surpassing his ambition, Mr. Williamson has portrayed in the various periods of Maddison the growth and tempering of one that will neither compromise with this world of men nor grant it quittance. Then his only answer is to go.

"The Beautiful Years" is a touching, and at times very amusing, revelation of unfettered childhood. While Willie Maddison fears his father, that quiet man so wistful of a son he cannot understand interferes but slightly with his education at the hands of Biddy, the softhearted and simple minded cook; Jim Holloman, an English rustic rapt as Thoreau in his feeling for nature, and Willie's chief teacher, nature herself.

In the fields and woods Willie is by turns ecstatic and content. The birds, blossoms and trees unfold to him the blessedness of existence. And he is wise in the ways of woodfolk. For persons about him he reserves his fair endowment of a boy's impishness. Willie is no little brown-eyed saint. With his catapult he is capable of considerable execution, and while not militantly disposed, under stress of passion he will give battle with fist and tongue. When hard pressed nervousness is likely to betray him to little lies or to tears. "Funny little devil," a solid neighbour observes.

To his less imaginative playmate, Jack Temperley, Willie is a hero. They cruise together, two braggy little boys with the grandiose delusions in which Willie considerably excells. He is a hero to himself in such moments and the artist in him adolescent. The joy of womanhood is as yet unrealized. Little Mary Ogilvie, instinctively fearful of the deeper bruises life will inflict upon him, he regards tolerantly.

"The Beautiful Years" companion Willie to his initiation in Colham school, one of those English repositories of youth that have come to old age with slight tradition. As he blows a crow's egg at night in his room, and carefully puts it away, he has no comprehension of the symbolism Mr. Williamson reads into his action. "He did not realize it," we read, "but he was hiding the past joy of his life in that secret place; part of his soul which had not yet built its own tower."

Here, as in later writing and more fluent prose, we see Mr. Williamson's acute perception of the spiritual and material fusion in nature; a communicated ardor in recent years only approached by the writing of Mary Webb. While it is not customary to work backward, "The Pathway" will win for "The Beautiful Years" a hearing justified by itself.

Childhood of a Poet

"THE BEAUTIFUL YEARS"
By Henry Williamson.
(New York: E.P. Dutton $2.50)
Reviewed by HERSCHEL BRICKELL

MR. WILLIAMSON'S widely praised novel "The Pathway" was in reality the concluding volume of a tetralogy called "The Flax of Dream," the first volume of which, "The Beautiful Years," appeared in England as early as 1921. "The Dream of Fair Women," third in the tetralogy, has already been published in the United States; it will probably be brought out again in a revised edition. The second volume chronologically, which carries the childhood of Willie Maddison into his boyhood, is called "Dandelion Days." In time it seems likely that we shall have the four novels between two covers, and then we shall be able to judge the work as a whole, a difficult matter at this moment.

What Mr. Williamson has written is the biography of a poet, a complete book about the adventures of a sensitive spirit in a hard and cruel world. There were those who thought "The Pathway" sentimental, and the charge has more than a little foundation. Mr Williamson's books about animals mark him as a person to the highest degree sensitive to suffering of any sort, moved and pained by the savage spectacle of nature, and by the needless hurt administered by man to the lower animals.

To quarrel with Mr. Williamson's attitude would be beside the point. He looks upon life as he must and writes about it as the pattern of his character makes him; we may agree or disagree. It is true that too much feeling about suffering, either human or animal, is likely to cut into the slim reserve of faith in the worth-whileness of living that is left for most moderns, and leave no choice except flight from the spectacle by the nearest way out. Mr. Williamson's Willie Maddison came to this end, it will be remembered, in "The Pathway." Suicide answers no problems, of course; it is merely a permanent exit from the great classroom where reality must be grappled with, and the use of suicide as a literary device is so plainly the mark of the amateur that even when it is used by a good novelist it is unavoidably suspect, no matter how logical it may be made to appear. The Philosophical value of "The Flax of Dream" is, however, a matter that must wait for weighing when the whole book is before us.

Appraisal of the literary merits of Mr. Williamson's magnum opus hardly need wait for the completion of the tetralogy; Mr. Williamson writes a rich, melodious, lyrical prose which it is an unfailing pleasure to read. He knows how to give his characters reality, and sets them against a background of lonely English countryside that is full of fascination. The living spirit of Richard Jeffries is in every page that Mr. Williamson writes; the spirits, indeed, of a long line of Englishmen who have watched dawn and dusk, moonrise and starset, the ebb and flow of tides, the round of the seasons, and the flight of birds, who have listened to the sounds of nature and caught its smells, weaving all these into tapestries the beauty of which cannot elude any one who has ever shared such experiences.

"The Beautiful Years" is the story of the childhood of Willie Maddison, the protagonist of "The Flax of Dream." It takes him only as far as his tenth year, and is not an easy feat to make an adult novel out of the first ten years of a hero's life. But this Mr. Williamson has done. On its own merits, the book is likely to take its palce in the enduring literature of boyhood; it is a delightful account of the early years of a child in the English country, with all the games that are played, all the farming operations watched and all the long rambles taken in the company of other lads. The relations of Willie Maddison and his father are the thread upon which the book is strung; the two live alone, except for servants, since the boy's mother had died as he was born. It is a moving account of a matter-of-fact parent's efforts to get on with a wildly imaginative, highly strung young poet, who, even as a child, invented stories and saw more worlds than the real one that was about him.

Willie's first sharp reaction against the cruelty of life which he feels even in his early years when there is a good deal of the savage in him—is the springing of a lot of jay traps on an estate near his home; to his surprise and delight, his father protects him from the anger of the newly-rich owner of the invaded territory. Willie and his father very nearly touch complete understanding during this episode, which ends the book, but they never succeed in quite breaking through the walls that surround their different personalities.

There is a love story in "The Beautiful

Years." It is of a romance between Jim Holloman, the crowscarer, and Dolly, a maid, and Mr. Williamson has made an appealing idyll of it. Jim, a hermit by nature and habit, succumbs to the insistant force of his love for Dolly and of hers for him; his cherished liberty is thrown to the winds at the strong call of nature, and the old comedy of the male's futile efforts to evade the yoke is played out with distinct charm.

Reading the beginning and end of a long novel which is primarily an imaginative biography, one feels that Mr. Williamson has succeeded in making his protagonist wholly consistent; one's belief in the Willie Maddison of the last tragic book is strengthened by the portrait of a boy in "The Beautiful Years." The book may be recommended without hesitation.

Printed in the *Tribune*, New York City, USA, Sept. 8, 1929

More About Willie Maddison

A Review by Paul F. Craig.

It is becoming increasingly evident that Henry Williamson is one of the foremost modern English novelists. He possesses to the very highest degree the ability to present a cross section of life in a way that edifies the while it entertains. He has just presented to the public "The Beautiful Years," the third of his planned group of novels depicting the scenes and people of Southern England, a group which already deserves to rank with that best known of such modern chronicles Galsworthy's "Forsyte Saga."

Those who have read "A Dream of Fair Women" and "The Pathway," have already enjoyed half of the group, and will recognize in this latest novel a section of the life of William Maddison which has hitherto been missing. "The Beautiful Years" tells of Willie from his birth to the age of nine, and its title is an exact label of what is to be found within. In this book Mr. Williamson's feeling for beauty, his fundamental love for Nature and her creatures, and his great sensitiveness to everything that affects the human mind, find fullest play. The book is a simple, direct story of the life in an English country village of a motherless small boy with a tremendous imagination, a great fastidiousness of mind and a shrinking attitude toward the rougher human contacts. The boy must be the author himself at that age; in no other way could his story have been told with such deep insight, such absolute comprehension of a small boy's reactions to life, such tender sympathy for him in situations which another would have observed with impatience.

Willie's story is not a startling one; there is nothing in those early years to chronicle with the blare of romantic trumpets, but nowhere in English literature will there be found a more sympathetic treatment of small-boyhood. Mr. Williamson is a writer in prose but he has a poet's soul for the treatment of his characters as well as his handling of language. Furthermore. Only an Englishman could write "The Beautiful Years"—it requires the background of an English life to compose such a book, a psychological combination of dispassionate observation of, and completest sympathy with, the characters and scenes of which it treats.

The author possesses a delightful humor, quite capable of dealing with the vicissitudes of his hero's existence, but his laugh never rings out free and lustily. It is always complicated by his mental delving into the psychology of his character, with the result that the fear is always pressing close upon the smile. This same tendency is also to be noted in his beautiful descriptions of the countryside, which are so vivid and charged with the author's affection as to be productive often of a poignant comparative emotion in the reader. "The Beautiful Years" has a haunting quality, it remains in recollection long after the final page is read, a trait, that few modern novels are able to lay claim to.

Printed in the Evening Union, Springfield, Mass. USA. Sept. 25, 1929

THE BEAUTIFUL YEARS. By Henry Williamson

(Faber and Faber: 7/6.)

Mr. Williamson achieved fame through his Hawthornden prize book, *Tarka the Otter,* but this his first novel, *The Beautiful Years,* proves that he deserved it before. *The Beautiful Years* is the first part of a tetralogy which he has called 'The Flax of Dream,' and it tells the life story of William Maddison up to the age of eight.

There are few tasks more difficult in literature than the depiction of a small boy's point of view. It is something which parents themselves fail more often than not to understand—just as Maddison's father fails—for, try as they may, they cannot rid their eyes of the scales of all the intervening years.

But Mr. Williamson has succeeded because he makes his approach through Nature. Country-bred children have their sensibilities developed earlier than others, because they see all the phases of life being enacted about them in woods and meadows. Their powers of understanding are quickened by watching the swallows come back year after year, by discovering how traps are set for jays that break their legs and hold them captive till they die of pain and exposure or have their necks wrung, or by watching rabbits at play and seeing how all the fields suddenly begin to sing with the return of summer. They learn the things that really matter without being told, and they do not learn them all distorted but in fair perspective.

Between the young and the old there can be no contact at all, but in the realm of Nature the young in spirit may meet and understand the young in years. This explains why Willie felt himself hated by his father, and his father knew that the boy was a stranger to him. If only he had known something about bird's eggs, or could have shown him how to flay moles, he would not have tortured himself quite so much or thrashed his son quite so often. Mr. Williamson defines the inevitable tragedy of age being baffled by youth with extraordinary sympathy: for these are the things that Nature has taught him to understand.

And he writes beautifully: his minor characters in all their doings are fresh and alive—so fresh that one cannot altogether banish the thought that their creator is perhaps too kindly disposed towards them. But one always comes back to Willie again, and the miracle of growing up, at the same time entrancing and poignant: Willie rambling about the countryside with his friend Jack; Willie trying to behave really nicely at tea-parties; Willie, tear-stained and smarting after a thrashing, being tucked up in bed by the comfortable Biddy, who is sometimes tragically aware of her own inadequacy as a substitute for a mother; Willie climbing a difficult tree, or going to school for the first time, or believing he is rather in love. There are no joys and bitternesses so purely elemental as those of childhood.

A.G.

Press Cutting from *Isis* Oxford, Oct 1929