

## Reviews under Review

Peter K. Robins

### DANDELION DAYS

There are to be, in all, four books about Willie Maddison, to whom Henry Williamson first introduced us in 'The Beautiful Years.' In that book the human element was definitely, if not intentionally sub-ordinated to lavish descriptions of nature in the West Country, and we did not get to know very much more about Willie than that he was possessed of a sensitive temperament. In *Dandelion Days* (Collins, 7s 6d. net) he is to some extent disentangled from his native thickets and plunged into the hurly-burly of grammar school life. This second book enables us partly to understand why the biography of Willie cannot be written in less than four volumes; we are to note his reactions in various environments, and Mr. Williamson evidently does not believe in the more economical methods of conveying atmosphere. As in the first volume he gave us exhaustive catalogues of all the sights, sounds, and smells to be encountered by a small boy running wild in the country, so here he pictures for us with meticulous precision every individual in an unprepossessing mob of boys and masters, and diffusely chronicles Willie's school days – a sordid round of class-room 'rags', fights shirkings, subterfuges, and corporal punishments. Some of it makes good reading, for Mr. Williamson has a sense of pathos, a sense of fun, and a considerable knowledge of boyhood. Moreover, there are a few telling scenes, laid outside the school precincts, which show him to be at home in other departments of human nature.

One might, however, have questioned whether from the point of view of Willie's development, these three hundred pages have quite enough to show for themselves, had not the author considerably prefaced his book with an 'Epistle Apological' (Five closely printed pages, exclusive of 'Addenda'), nominally inscribed to a

friend, but actually, it would seem, designed to forestall every unfavourable criticism which might occur to the uninitiated reviewer. Our first misgiving is summarily dealt with:-

Two books [says the author] have been written about him; and he is not yet eighteen. To you this may seem excessive, for it may be contended that his character has yet to be formed... But my personal conviction is that the character of Willie Maddison is entirely decided. Nothing that happens afterwards will alter permanently that character.

Or one might have deprecated the representation of the teaching staff at Colham Grammar School as consisting solely of freaks and monsters. But Mr. Williamson assures us that we need not worry about that:-

In your estimation of comparative values. I would warn you not to attribute too much importance to the different schoolmasters in the book. Really, they are not of the slightest importance... I would have these schoolmaster characters regarded with compassion.

Again, one might have found only an irritating mannerism in Mr. Williamson's curious vocabulary, if he had not explained to us that it is really a provision for the educated mind:-

My use of usually-unworked English words... is prompted entirely by a desire to be precise and exact. To take one example – 'umbered'... It is derived from 'umber', which, as you know, is an ochreous ore of iron... Had you thought for hours how to express in one sentence, so that it be vividly conveyed to the educated reader, that slow and swelled and heavy moonrise... had you, in other words, been myself, you would have realized that 'umbered' was the only word that could convey the spirit of the West Country moonrise in July.

This anonymous review of *Dandelion Days*, the second novel in the tetralogy *The Flax of Dream*, appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* of Thursday, October 12, 1922.

Perhaps addressing the criticism published a year earlier about the subordination of the thinly-drawn characters of *The Beautiful Years* to descriptions of the countryside, Williamson devoted three hundred pages to Willie Maddison's school days, prompting the reviewer to comment with some irony, 'this second book enables us partly to understand why the biography of Willie cannot be written in less than four volumes'.

*Dandelion Days*, written at Skirr Cottage explores Willie's life between the ages of fifteen and seventeen and his relationship with schoolfellows and masters at Colham Grammar School, ostensibly a venerable day-school in an old county town but actually based on Williamson's own experiences at Colfe's Grammar School, Lewisham. Colham was perhaps derived from a compression of Colfe and Lewisham.

Williamson won a scholarship to Colfe's, which was supported by the professional classes, a cut above the clerks and artisans that populated Hilly Fields whose children were expected to attend the West Kent Grammar School in Brockley. The main function of grammar schools at the time was to produce clerks for banks, insurance offices or local government. Generally, the cramming of immature minds worked in society's favour and even in Williamson's case, he left Colfe's in 1913 to start as a clerk with the Sun Fire Insurance Office. The start of the war and his mobilisation a year later saved him from the clerical drudgery.

Willie Maddison's wild temperament survives the robust methods of learning instilled into the young by a headmaster of the hearty and dominant type and Williamson succeeds in contrasting the oppressiveness of the schoolroom with the freedom of the countryside around Colham, where Willie and his inseparable companion Jack Temperley, get most of their real education.

The fictionalised account of Williamson's schooldays didn't go down too well with the staff and old boys of Colfe's and moved F.W. Lucas, the headmaster in Williamson's day, to contribute a piece to *The Colfeian* (June, 1923) defending the school's reputation and drawing attention to the inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the novel.

This belief in Williamson's betrayal of the school seems to have been perpetuated down the years for, according to Fred Shepherd (Journal No. 6), Williamson came in for further criticism from the then headmaster of Colfe's at a post-war dinner of The Old Colfeian Association... 'had he not used the school history and great traditions as a basis for his books, pretending that these were the product of his own brilliant imagination... and yet he didn't even choose to record his association with Colfe's in *Who's Who*'.

As noted in the TLS review, the first edition of *Dandelion Days* (collins, October, 1922, 600 copies) carried an open letter to his agent, Andrew Dakers, 'Epistle Apologetic', in which he explains, *inter alia*, 'You may consider that the schoolmasters are preposterous figures; that they are grotesque caricatures, and overdrawn: that nobody like them could possibly be in any school; very well; my answer is that I have tried to make them amusing, that I have projected them with comic spirit in order to avoid contributing to the mass of dull and dreary school novels'.

In the revised edition of *Dandelion Days* published by Faber in February, 1930 with a printing of 2500 copies (with a second impression two months later) Williamson has a shorter open letter to Dakers, in which he wrote, 'Now I have rewritten the book, during the past month, and only seventeen sentences remain of the first published version'. Although surely an exaggeration it is clear he was deeply dissatisfied with it and rewrote it more thoroughly than any of the other three in the tetralogy.

## Further reviews from HW's Literary Archive

Peter Robins refers to a piece written by F.W. Lucas for *The Colfeian* June 1923 on the subject of *Dandelion Days*. Unfortunately that issue is not in the archive; perhaps somebody can provide a copy that can be printed in due course.

But the following short item was in the no. 33, vol. 9, November 1922 issue, appearing below a note about *The Lone Swallows* which we will print at the appropriate time.

'Dandelion Days,' the second volume of his chronicles concerning Willie Maddison and Colham Grammar School, has just been published as we go to press, and we have had little time for perusal; but we have gathered this – that it is stark and savage caricature of actualities; truthful portrayal of the spirit of those actualities. Perhaps the printed description always seems more brutally unglossed than the happening itself (excepting warfare). Anyway, we accept it as we think it is intended, and welcome a first-class piece of literary work that should be read by everybody. But, lest others interpret it wrongly, we would advise the author, when in the district of his choice, to take the air in a tin helmet and treble-seated trousers.

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The review file for *Dandelion Days* is very thin indeed. The following being almost all that are available with the final item showing a sample of HW's corrections for the revised edition.

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### WILLIAMSON OFFERS CONTRAST

DANDELION DAYS,  
by Henry Williamson; Dutton, \$2.50.

In 'Dandelion Days,' Henry Williamson continues the story of Willie Maddison, begun in 'The Beautiful Years' and ending with 'The Pathway.' The success of the latter book has led the publishers somewhat backward in giving Williamson's earlier work to the public. We recently reviewed Williamson's 'Patriotic Progress.' The two books afford a striking contrast in the author's style and message. Maddison's story is that of the development of an idealist,

who finds that life's jagged edges have the same wound-making power as the tender realist discovers for himself in the pages of 'Patriot's Progress.' One has the feeling in reading the two books that the author has lived through the experiences of both, that they are, at least in their genesis, his own life story, generously shared with his fellow-beings.

With 'Dandelion Days' Willie Maddison's school days are over, and what days the were! Lovers of stories of English schoolboy life should not miss this one. Maddison even if he did win the Bullnote prize, was 'Mad Willie' just the same, whom the younger boys of the school voted a good sort. He continues

his bird-nesting expeditions much to the pain and displeasure of his father. Side by side with his beautiful friendship with Jack Temperly develops his wondrous and painful love for Elsie Norman, balanced against which is the understanding devotion to Willie of Elsie's friend, Mary. But this is not only Willie's story, but also his and Williamson's *Diary of Nature Observations*:

Over the fallow field crieth  
the lap-wing,  
Wild and plaintive, pee-weet,  
pee-o-weet.'

Thus sang Willie unto himself, the boy to whom the sun was not the sun but the 'earth's smiting dandelion.'

To know Willie is to fling off one's clothes and 'feel oneself spread into the sunshine, one's body suspended in its warm, yellow-red power.' Again, to know Willie is to pray with him; 'O water, shine always – O trees, be green forever with these same leaves – O summer cornfield, wave with wheat forever – O summer sun, shine on our homes forever like this, and shine on our friendship.'

To know Willie is to share with him his friendship for Bill Nye, the crow-starving boy, with Dolly, whose love-story no one who has read 'The beautiful Years' could easily forget. To know Willie in this book, 'Dandelion Days,' is with him to say good-bye: 'Good-bye, Big Wheatfield, Good-bye, spinny – Jim, Dolly, Bill Nye & now Willie good-bye. Brook, and meadows where the plovers nested, good-bye. And downs, good-bye. Oddmedodds, all broken up and scattered now – good-bye. Longpond – Heron Island—'

Yes, 'good-bye, Willie; we shall look forward to meeting with you again.

E.O.P.

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First published in Worcester, Mass,  
USA, Oct, 1930

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## DANDELION DAYS

Mr. Henry Williamson's *DANDELION DAYS* (Faber and Faber, 7s 6d. net) is the second volume (in the revised edition) of the tetralogy that begins with 'The Beautiful Years.' As such it justifies its place, since it chronicles a definite stage in the career of Willie Maddison; yet we must confess that, considering the book by itself, this particular stage is hardly one that sustains the interest of a whole volume. The major part of the book is concerned with Willie's later schooldays at Colham Grammar School, numerous portraits of the headmaster and various assistants, trancies, punishments, a speech-day and a good deal of racy schoolboy conversation. The threads of poetry that run through this solid but somewhat homespun texture are Willie's sense of happiness passing away and the David and Jonathan friendship of Willie and Jack Temperley.

What measures the success of Mr. Williamson's characterization, above all, is that, though he quite obviously takes a very strong sympathetic interest in his hero, Willie, and follows his rather morbid emotionalism with complacency, he does not idealize him. Willie Maddison remains, in this book, the awkward, shy, not very courageous, and distinctly difficult boy. His behaviour to his father is odious; he is more or less faithless to Jack when his calf-love for Elsie is in question; he has all a boy's weaknesses and few of a boy's outstanding virtues. This humanity of Willie is his strong point. All the time the reader is sorry for him, for his denseness, his obstinacy, his uncontrollable emotions, his want of adaptability: and the sorrow is all the keener because Mr Williamson makes the scenes of his discomfiture – for instance, his very salutary treatment by Elsie – so vivid and true. There are some excellent pages, too, of bird-nesting adventure, and a spirited fight. On the whole, however, unless one has a strong interest in ordinary school-boys and naturalistic pursuits, the rather pedestrian gait of this volume is likely to

be a little disconcerting. And possibly it may seem a little morbid when a schoolboy, after being turned down by his lady-love, kneels down and whispers: 'You and I, glow-worm. It's ended, little glow-worm. Ended. Thank you for shining in the darkness, glow-worm.'

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First published in *The Times Literary Supplement* Feb. 20 1930

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**'Dandelion Days'**  
**By Henry Williamson (Faber and Faber 7s. 6d.)**  
(By Gerald Gould)

A boy's will is the wind's will, and the thoughts of youth are Longfellow, Longfellow thoughts – which most of the writers of school-stories cannot grasp or understand. Mr. Williamson *does* understand; his 'Dandelion Days,' re-issued and almost entirely re-written, gets as near to the heart of a boy as anything I have read for many years. Even its distortions have the smack of truth. It represents the headmaster as a mixture of booming imbecile and bullying savage; and that is a type which the grand old ideals of cruelty and stupidity have undoubtedly tended to produce. There are many honourable exceptions now: in the just-pre-war days of which Mr. Williamson writes, there were definitely fewer. No doubt Mr. Rore, with his perpetual 'pauper spirit' and 'work hand and play hard,' is meant to be something of a caricature; but it is precisely as caricatures that schoolboys see their headmasters, save in those happy instances in which the giant descends from his pedestal and becomes a friend. Similarly, Mr. Williamson represents the assistant-masters as nincompoops, born to be ragged – another boyish illusion, with some undeniable occasion in fact. The masters in Colham Grammar School are long in the tooth and short in the temper; the boys have alternately their tongues in

their cheeks and their hearts in their boots. The boys *have* their rag out: the master *gets* his rag out: in the eye of infinity, one supposes, two sides of an educational tragedy-farce! The last exquisite touch of irony is added by the complacent letters, written by Mr. Rore to William Maddison, when the latter is in the trenches, which form the Epigraph. But, just as Mr. Williamson has the power to see coercive and ridiculous adults through the shy, pitiful, penetrating eyes of boyhood, so he has the even more magical faculty of realising boyhood's powers of escape. How true to adolescence is the self-conscious purple passage quoted from Willie's 'Secret and Official Diary of Observations'! –

*On the horizon of the field several male lapwings were flying about, twisting, turning, and suddenly pitching.*

*A poetical thought struck me as I listened to his mournful, and yet wildly free, plaintive cry:*

*'Over the fallow-field crieth a lapwing, Wild and plaintive, pee-weet, pee-o-weet!' As I gazed over the vast expanse of brown fields with the red sun disappearing beneath a mountain of pearly-ash cloud, a sense of the solitude of the world stole over me, only broken by the wild cry of the lapwing.*

*After leaving the coverts I rode home, arriving at 7 p.m. Fortunately, however, a certain person was out, and so all was well. I am writing this in the kitchen, before a bright fire, as it is bath night.*

Willie feels three clean and exquisite devotions, which save his soul amid the mess of petty lying and shirking in which is conventional environment involves him: one to nature, one to a girl, and one to a boy. He is, in short, an unusual creature with usual experiences. He is a person and a representative. His history is beautiful – and important.

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First published in *The Observer*,  
16 February 1930

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## THE BOY.

DANDELION DAYS,  
by Henry Williamson;  
Faber and Faber, London; 7s.6d. net.

The republican in a revised form of Mr. Henry Williamson's *Dandelion Days* by Messrs. Faber and Faber, at 7s. 6d. net, is sure to be welcomed by all admirers of this gifted author. *Dandelion Days* is the second of the series of four books, dealing with the life story of Willie Maddison, whose childhood was the subject of the first of the series – *The Beautiful Years*.

Mr. Williamson loves and understands the country. For him rural scenes have colours of a richness which cannot be matched in town and his charming talk about the countryside is a delight. Willie's home and school life is full of incident which, when read by an adult, makes his own youth live again. He and his friends, Jack, Elsie, Mary, and the others, do all the irresponsible things youth does, but there is no less of perspective. Character is developed and the reader, with understanding eyes, watches the boy grow towards manhood. The end of the book sees Willie saying good-bye to his field friends, and off to Flanders, where so many of his old collegians had gone.

Mr. Williamson is a stylist, and the beauty of his prose is impressive. *Dandelion Days* must be secured to be placed beside the old copy, for the book has been so completely re-written that there are only seventeen sentences untouched of the original version.

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First published in *Northern Evening Despatch*, Priestgate, Darlington, 22 March 1930

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## MR. WILLIAMSON REVISES

'*Dandelion Days*' is, the author assures us, a new book, in one sense at any rate: 'only seventeen sentences remain of the first published version.' He tells us also

that he has rewritten it in a month; and perhaps that speed of revision accounts for a few minor points of grammar or logic which give one pause – personally, I cannot feel happy about pages 16, 18, 173 and 211. But I am not prepared to carp seriously at small blemishes in a work which, as a complete achievement, seems to me beautiful. Yes – 'beautiful' is the word: no lesser one will do. Nor does the beauty lie only, or mainly, in the descriptive passages, exquisite in their sensitiveness and rhythm as many of these are, it lies rather in the truth and courage of the whole conception. There are, no doubt, exaggerations of fact. I can scarcely believe that any boys' school, in the years immediately before the war, was quite such a combination of mad-house and bear-garden as Mr. Williamson portrays; but the essential truth is there – the poignant sensibilities of adolescence; the combination, within one small and grubby frame, of fantastic ambition, sordid untruthfulness, vague incompetence, sly humour, brutal buffoonery, poetical ecstasy and the pure and humble passions of love and friendship. This is one of the best books about boys that I have ever read.

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Provenance unknown.

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## IDYLL AND NIGHTMARE

BY MERVYN WALL

*Dandelion Days* by Henry Williamson,  
Faber and Faber. 8s. 6d.

One day in my forties I remember experiencing a sudden bounding of the heart on reading in a newspaper that a French schoolboy from his seat in class had shot his teacher dead. I remarked on this sudden exultation to the late Francis MacManus and found myself listening with a strange sense of satisfaction while he, a schoolmaster himself for many years, related with a grave shaking of the

head how on a day when earth's foundations fled, the entire roll of the school which he had attended in Kilkenny had lain in wait behind the hedges and stoned a hated teacher on his way home.

It was the shock more than his injuries that kept the teacher in bed for three weeks. When he returned to his school, he was broken in spirit, became a sort of bleating lamb and died after eighteen months. Such manifestations in adolescence of the human spirit, which will seem to you good or bad depending on which side you are on, are very rare. The pitiful thing about childhood in an orderly society is its extreme helplessness, and what is so frightening about adult authority is that its practice is so frequently absolute.

'Dandelion Days,' reprinted in paperback format, is the second book in the series of four entitled 'The Flax of Dream,' in which Henry Williamson dealt respectively with the childhood, boyhood, youth and early manhood. It is an idyllic, loosely-knit tale or record of schooldays in a grammar school in rural England, in which a sadistic headmaster mouths educational platitudes as he continuously imposes discipline without, strangely enough suffering cramp in his flogging arm. The boys accept it all as part of the divinely ordained nature of things, and one feels that the author does so too. The period is just before the First World War.

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THE BOOK is something of a documentary, and like most documentaries is instructive rather than exciting. One can almost hear the hand of a film camera being mechanically turned in a schoolroom while one class succeeds another and day follows day, and one's impression is that when the camera was finally allowed to rest, there was no scissors-man available to cut the resulting film. There are many detailed passages describing classroom goings-on, the ragging of masters and the idiosyncrasies of teachers and pupils, all

rather dull for the adult reader. A plethora of adolescent wit can become very trying, as every grown-up knows who has attended meetings of the L. and H. in U.C.D. or the College Historical Society in the senior university. There is a slight aroma of Frank Richards about the book, but its better chapters record faithfully the attractiveness and quiet appeal of a part of the English countryside before the speculator and the local authority got at it. In its understanding of the moods of boyhood and in its occasional unexpected violence (outside of school) it is reminiscent of some of the work of L.A.G. Strong.

It is a nostalgically-written, slow-moving tale, sweetened a little by an adolescent love affair, and again at times made alarming by the actions of almost sub-human characters such as are encountered occasionally in rural areas. It is a pity that the author sought so very conscientiously to reproduce the hesitations of speech and mumblings, and to record phonetically the sounds of amusement of his characters in his many schoolroom chapters. The frequent use of nicknames as well as their real names for both masters and pupils is another source of annoyance, as the reader has to memorise two names instead of one in order to know who is being spoken about, and finding it too wearisome, quickly gives up, feeling that it really does not matter who described something as 'spiffing', or exclaimed 'Not half'.

The title of the book as employed to describe schooldays, is particularly well chosen, because dandelions seen in great numbers and from a distance, appear quite attractive, but regarded individually and from close at hand are a coarse and monotonous flower. As a record of the uncertainties and sufferings of callow boyhood, this tale is distinguished by its truth and insight. Its faults are the verbosity of some chapters and the absence of the concentrated passage or revealing line. The novel has developed so much since 'Dandelion Days' was first published that its manner and pace may not readily be acceptable

to the present generation. It scarcely has the strength to step across the generations and proclaim its importance, and is likely to appear to many as just a shade from a well-buried yesterday.

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First published in *The Irish Times*, 13 Aug 1966

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### **‘Alchemy of Nature...’ The Williamson Boy**

If I had the courage I would say that, in my view, the finest writing done in England comes from the West Country author, Henry Williamson.

As I don’t have that sort of courage I shall merely mutter a restrained and sophisticated welcome to Faber’s new paper cover version of Williamson’s ‘Dandelion Days’.

This boy-growing-up book has charmed a large circle of initiates for many years. It is part of the ‘Flax of Dream’ quintet which as a whole deals with the life and fantasy death of the hero Willie Maddison.

The correct sequence of titles in the ‘Flax’ is ‘The Beautiful Years’; ‘Dandelion Days’; ‘The Dream of Fair Women’; ‘The Pathway,’ and what has been described as a celestial fantasy... ‘The Star Born.’

‘Dandelion Days,’ 8s. 6d. in this version is wholly a story of schooldays. ‘Let us get a little alchemy out of the dandelions’ said Richard Jefferies. Willie just about manages the distillation even when getting six of the best.

Yet this is a real schoolboy with more of the London suburban than the Tom Brown. His situation has been created with high sensitivity and a solid groundwork of detailed observation. For all the alchemy and the rustle of nature, there is a strong abiding smell of schoolroom polish.

Later, Williamson himself came to doubt the *reality* of Willie Maddison. The boy grew into the man... and was killed.

But in ‘Dandelion Days’ the living boy can run from school to Rookhurst forest where the beeches ‘have grown to the sunlight of centuries’.

He can squirm through his French lesson, he can lie, and kick his heels, and shed tears, and remain perpetually true in the darkening days before the Great War.

WILLIAM HILL

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First printed in *Southern Evening Echo*,  
19 August 1966.

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