

## A Postscript to *The Beautiful Years*

Peter Lewis

In connection with the review of *The Beautiful Years* in the last issue, I had a letter from John Homan dated 21/6/90, containing interesting comment on that novel. I had written to him about my research at the HW archive in Exeter University where I had discovered that Henry had once intended the titles of the four books which eventually became the Flax of Dream tetralogy to be: *The Beautiful Years*, *Pauper Spirit*, *The Flax of Dream* and *The Bludgeon*. On the cover of the revised MS of *The Beautiful Years* was a note to the effect that the novel was 'quite unplanned, and written without definite climax'.

Part of John's reply reads as follows:

*Regarding Henry's note about The Beautiful Years being 'quite unplanned', I do not think this was quite true. As Henry wrote in his 'Epistle' to Mr Dakers, first edition of Dandelion Days,*

*'You may remember myself coming to see you, a year after the end of the war, with a manuscript of a book hidden in an old army blanket... the script I had written during three weeks of 'fierce midnights and famishing morrows', following an almost intolerable pain. Nevertheless you managed to read approximately 100,000 words of my tale.'*

*And later,*

*'It was borne on me that one volume could not possibly contain all I had to say, unless that volume were as big as the post-war Who's Who...'*

*And later, having considered the tragedy of the Great War, and how best he might show how the human heart yearned for goodness and beauty,*

*'Then one night in London everything seemed clear to me, and I wondered how I could best make it clear to others. I had been reading that glorious record of an individual man's thought, 'The Story of My Heart', and suddenly it seemed to me that my own thought was fused with that of Richard Jefferies. I conceived the character of Willie Maddison, and wrote, as you may remember, a book that I called The Flax of Dream. But I was not satisfied, and after a few months it appeared to be imperfect in every way, so I cast it, deciding to wait until I had more mature knowledge of my materials.'*

*Obviously the above is the same MS that he refers to at the beginning of the 'Epistle', and which was elsewhere described as the 180,000 – 200,000 plus word 'Policy of Reconstruction'.*

*I am sure that the first 'draft', the vast MS, was that written during Henry's first visit to Georgeham after the War, when he rented Skirr Cottage, and got involved with 'Evelyn Fairfax', which seems in truth to have been a brief but passionate and then anguished affair. After this of course he returned to London, and did not go back to the Devon cottage until March, 1921. In fact, the episode is described fictionally in the first edition of *The Dream of Fair Women* and again in the later revised version of 1930.*

*I doubt that the very first MS, the vast effort, survives – it must of course however have contained at least in outline, and with many of the characters drawn, (illegible) the basis of what became a four novel sequence. Apart from anything else, if he had finished the first draft, essentially the four books in one, I doubt any publisher would have considered it. Unknown writers would never have been risked with a single book about the length of FOUR average novels, circa 60,000 words being usual, All fascinating stuff.'*

signed: John Homan

I have recently come across notes and photocopies I made on the above subject on my second visit (with Fred Shepherd) to the HW archive at Exeter. On the first page/cover of a MA of *The Beautiful Years* (on which is also written by HW 'Commenced June 1920, ended 8 Nov 1920) is written 'Written spasmodically, during intervals of Essay writing, newspaper work, articles and short story writing. Quite unplanned, & written without definite climax.' THE BEAUTIFUL YEARS, being *The Boyhood of William Maddison*, by Henry Williamson. On the reverse is written: 'This story was written anyhow. I never knew what to write next. My characters grew as I wrote. The description of Jim Holloman is an exact copy of Besant's description of Jefferies in his Eulogy. It is done on purpose. This Book is meant to be one of 4 (sic), thus: *The Beautiful Years* (8-11), *Pauper Spirits* (14-18), *The Flax of Dream* (18-22), *The Bludgeon* (*The Life of Mary Ogilvie*, & W. Maddison coming in half way, and then le fin).' signed H.W., 12/1/21.

On the first page of a MS of second book ('begun 7/12/1920') is written 'Pauper Spirits, A story of Boyhood, by Henry Williamson.' Also on the first page is: 'Pauper Spirits' is to be dedicated to Terence Tetley [what looks like ('with his permission') has been crossed out], but *The Bludgeon* to Doline (Gwendoline) Rendle if she's a good girl, and not flinty-hearted.' signed H.W., 15 January 1921. Doline, an old flame of Henry, portrayed as Tabitha Trevelian ('Spica Virginis') in the novels (says John Homan in a letter to me d/d 21/6/90) must have been flinty-hearted, for *The Pathway* was not dedicated to her, or (uniquely, I think) to anyone else. J.H. in the same letter thought that Doline was the *original* model for Mary Ogilvie, before Henry met Loetitia who became the model for the Mary of *The Pathway*. In the event, 'Pauper Spirits' (*Dandelion Days*) was dedicated to Andrew Dakers. (J.H. though that Henry once thought of 'Smokey Flax' as the title for *The Bludgeon/The Pathway*.)

*The Beautiful Years* and *Dandelion Days* were published in 1921 and 1922 respectively. From the dated hand-written notes on the MSS at Exeter, and given the intentional autobiographical nature of *The Flax of Dream* novels (where Willie Maddison, the main protagonist, is obviously drawn on the author himself), clearly the tetralogy was not quite as unplanned as Williamson claimed.