Artistic Friendships

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Transcript of a talk given to the Henry Williamson Society Spring Meeting, Norfolk, May 1994.

I have written biographies of two East Anglian artists: one, *Edward Seago – The Other Side of the canvas* (Collins, 1979; Jarrolds, 1990) and the other *What A Go! – The Life of Alfred Munnings* (Collins, 1988). I found researching these books a really exciting and stimulating experience which led me to a wealth of literature I'd have hated to have missed. It also led me to discover someone with as intriguing and enigmatic a character as either of those I have written about – Henry Williamson, whose work was previously unknown to me. I discovered that none of my friends had heard of him either. 'Henry Williamson?' was the reaction when I said I was giving a talk about him. 'Who was he?' When I said he wrote *Tarka the Otter* of course they knew. But few of them could name many of his other writings. I found this odd. How could such a prolific and great writer who, my researches revealed, has been authoratively compared to Tolstoy, Proust and Dickens, remain comparatively unknown and unrecognised. That is a question which I am sure every member of this Society has considered. I am equally sure that you all know a great deal more about Henry Williamson than I do.

But I would like to share with you what is perhaps a more unusual view-point. There's an old saying that 'you can judge a man by his friends' and that is just what I intend to try and do – judge Williamson by two of his friends that I now also feel I know very well, since I spent a total of five years writing their biographies – The East Anglian painters Edward Seago and Alfred Munnings, both of whom were attracted to this unique, bleak, but artistically stimulating part of the country as was Henry Williamson, who spent a significant part of his life, and wrote one of his best books there.

Another connection is that Williamson's love of Exmoor was reflected by Munnings. A passage from my book describes how the painter lay on a cliff edge there, contemplating the meadows sweeping down to the sea and imagined the country as it was when Coleridge and Wordsworth walked there; 'If only we could keep this feeling,' he said drowsily to his companion, the Norfolk writer, Adrian Bell, 'If only we could keep it.'

I also relate in my biography of Munnings the anecdote about Henry Williamson's trouser press. It concerns that day in September 1939 when the last war broke out. Munnings was staying at The Ship Hotel, Brancaster, to paint. He had used up all his canvases and looked around Henry Williamson's barn and granary for something to paint on. He found an old trouser press, cut out a square of hard board from it and used it to paint on. HW's 13-year-old son, Windles, came up behind him and watched him paint. 'Clear Off.' said Munnings. The boy retaliated. My congratulations to the then young Williamson for standing his ground. For Munnings in a blustering mood was a foul-mouthed and formidable character.

But my first real awareness of Henry Williamson came when I was researching for my biography of Edward Seago. It was a most satisfying book to write because Seago was also a most evocative writer – about his own thoughts and beliefs. He'd had some eight books published and in one of them *Peace in War* I found his portrait – in both words and paint – of Henry Williamson, his friendly neighbour.

The portrait was painted in 1942 when Seago was on leave from the army, and the book *Peace in War*, an anthology in words and pictures expressing the cause for which Britain was fighting was published the following year.

I learnt that Seago had often discussed the book with Henry Williamson. For example, as on one bleak day when Williamson saw Seago painting on the uplands of his farm. Seago was huddled on a stool, wrapped up in a rug against the east wind and had been painting for hour after hour. Later Williamson met him going home in the twilight and Seago lamented, in his quiet voice that he could hardly bring himself to leave because the sky tints changed so rapidly and so marvellously. Williamson invited him back to his barn for tea and they smoked their pipes before the fire and discussed the better England they both believed would emerge after the war.

There are two illustrations of Williamson in the book: One is the three-quarter portrait (now in the National Portrait Gallery) and the other a fine study of the writer's hands holding his fishing rod. The text explains that the sittings involved Williamson' passion for truth: If it was to be an outdoor portrait, he said, it should be painted besides a stream – preferably a Devon Stream on a hot summer's day, to get the real atmosphere. Seago humoured him to the extend of setting up his easel in the garden where he completed the head in one sitting. But Henry was very concerned about his hands and the rod and his short little fishing pipe he'd had made especially so it didn't get in the way when he swatted the horse flies on his face. He fascinated Seago by telling him the difference between blood-sucking horse-flies and the waterflies that danced their whole life away in a single day.

A few days later, at the Stiffkey farm, he showed Seago his favourite trout rod. Seago made a study of his hands as he held it and copied it into the portrait. He also used the study as a separate illustration in the book.

It was typical of Seago to humour Williamson's passion for truth – in having an *authentic* outdoor background for the picture. Seago had no need to – he could have painted it just as well in the comfort of his studio., as I know from my own experience when he painted my own portrait which he did in just one hour and twenty mins. Afterwards he told me I needn't even have been present as he could have done it just as well from memory. Like Williamson he had the mental ability for total recall for, as he modestly estimated, up to ten years.

I suspect Seago found writing the essay to accompany Williamson's portrait more difficult than painting the portrait. He was acutely perceptive and recognised that his subject would not be captured easily in words.

He wrote; 'I think his biographer will find that he is writing the life of more than one man, It will not be easy to keep them from getting muddled. But if he fails to do so the portrait will lose by it.'

And in the following passage it could as easily have been Williamson as Seago writing: 'I love the beauty of the countryside. For me there is joy in every season of the year ... When I see the plough team breasting the hill to the jingle of the shackle chains and see the great sky behind, the beauty of it fills my heart. To me it is a noble sight.'

In paint, Seago tried to put down what he saw and felt; to achieve in paint what Williamson did in words in books like *The Norfolk Farm*.

Seago suspected that Williamson chose to write about nature and animals not because he was an enthusiastic naturalist but because he found in those subjects the essence of truth and reality as Seago himself found in his great skies and landscapes – a subject he much preferred to portraiture.

Again writing of Williamson Seago said 'I have never met a man more

completely sincere, nor so steadfast in his search for truth'. This was at the time when Williamson's unpopularity was at its height because of his friendship with Mosley and his admiration for Hitler. But Seago did not condemn him. He saw him as 'one of those men who follow unflinchingly their own vision of truth whether it is against popular taste or not. Theirs is a hard road and scarcely a happy one. I believe he is not a happy man. I think he left his heart behind in his beloved Devon to farm in Norfolk where the farm of his ideal has not materialised. I wish that he could find peace of mind but I'm afraid that if he did the spark which burns fiercely within him might die.'

Those words were rather ironic, coming from Seago. His distinguished friend, Sir Laurens van de Post, when discussing Seago said that his theory was that if a great artist found peace of mind to the extent of no longer striving to tackle new challenges in his work then he could well lose the driving incentive to live. Sir Laurens suggested this as a possible explanation of Seago's early death, at the age of 64, in his holiday home in Sardinia. Seago himself was fundamentally an unhappy man which probably helped him to recognise a similar trait in Williamson.

Both Seago and Williamson, I learned from Daniel Farson's book *Henry: An Appreciation of Henry Williamson* had another failing in common: Farson confessed that one of the difficulties he had when writing about Williamson was that he supplied so many very different versions of the truth – in conversation, letters and writings. They were not necessarily wilful lies but simply different recollections of the truth as he saw it at the time. A confusing trait for a biographer to say the least as I found to my cost.

I started writing the Seago biography a few months after his death and, at the time, rather naively, wished I could have started it a year or two earlier while he was still alive. However, I soon realised that had I done so it would have proved an impossible task to differentiate between the truth and the truth as Seago saw it. I'd like to give two examples of this to show the extent to which Seago indulged in a characteristic it seems he definitely shared with Williamson.

Seago liked to impress on his new and important friends that he had never had a day's schooling in his life and had not learned to read or write until he was well into his teens. I think he used this to cover-up any shortcomings in his literary or other knowledge. I had to reconcile this with the letters I found that he had written to his mother when he was only six years old, and later letters that he wrote to his parents when he went away to boarding school at Lowestoft.

More difficult to refute was a blatant lie which even fooled Sir Laurens van der Post and caused him to perpetuate it in a magazine article. This was that Seago's parents and his mother in particular did everything in their power to stamp out his desire to paint. Van der Post, primed by Seago, describes them as 'malicious and cruel' and tells how they tied Seago to a post outside in their yard so that he could only trace the outline and draw in the dust with his toe! A ridiculous story and an example of Seago playing for sympathy. On the contrary I found his parents were inordinately proud of their son, if a little bemused by his success.

In another article Sir Laurens wrote that Seago had nobody to advise or guide him in the pursuit of his calling except one or two of the more academic and less-known painters he met, by chance, in his youth. But the fine Academician Bertram Priestman had made himself completely responsible for Seago's drawing and painting from the age of thirteen. There is a huge file of letters to prove it.

'There is no deceiver like an old deceiver' Daniel Farson wrote of Henry Williamson's tendency to re-write the truth. It seems like Seago, HW often

preferred fantasy to reality.

There was nothing like that about the subject of my later biography, Alfred Munnings, the brash extroverted miller's son who, like Williamson, could be the life and soul of the party and, again like Williamson, could offend and upset people and, at times, disgust them. He certainly had a vocabulary for swearing that allowed him to curse in foul language for ten minutes without repeating himself. I would have loved to have seen them together at the party Williamson gave in his granary which he describes so vividly in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*.

> *The Granary was lit by 50 candles, and the refectory table was polished and laden with all sorts of good things. There, at one end, sits a famous painter of horses waving a chicken bone and shouting about the iniquities of the art dealers and their brothers, sons and cousins – 'Our Rulers' he calls them. When the last bottle had been drained, the last guttering candle snuffed, when 'The Ballad of the Cafe Royal' and its encores had been declaimed by the artist ... we went home.*

I wish I could read you his 'Ballad of the Cafe Royal' but it seems it was so crude that even he admitted it was unsuitable for mixed company and it was never published. He wrote it, by the way, in the Cafe Royal itself which he frequented after he had been suspended from his beloved Chelsea Arts Club for using bad language in front of the staff. I understand that only two mild verses of it still exist.

> *But worse than these are the cunning and wise*
> *Artists who go to advertise*
> *Who dress themselves in a foreign guise*
> *Whose futurist pictures are bloody lies*
> *They pose and talk and cut their capers*
> *To critics who write for the Sunday papers.*
> *These jealous pimps, they would destroy all*
> *Art outside the Cafe Royal.*
>
> *Would-be poets and playrights too*
> *Hob-nob with a cringing crawling crew*
> *And criticise everything other men do.*
> *And write their rubbish they fancy new*
> *And when with drink their minds are fired*
> *They sponge on each other till all grow tired.*
> *Such souls as these they do alloy all*
> *Poetic joys at the Cafe Royal.*

How Munnings must have loved proclaiming this and the innocuous sixty verse Ballad of Anthony Bell to the actors, writers, musicians and painters and their models who frequented the Cafe Royal.

It is surprising that Munnings never mentioned the granary party in his huge autobiography as it was an occasion he would have absolutely adored. In fact there are only two casual references to Williamson in all of that three volume work. On the other hand the granary party was certainly mentioned in the biography of another famous guest there, the actor Robert Donat who made a round trip of 250 miles to be there just before he started filming *Goodbye Mr Chips*.

However Williamson did Munnings full justice when he appeared as the earthy-spoken horse-painter Frederick Riversmill in the final novel of *The Chronicle, The*

Gale of the World, set in Exmoor, and published ten years after the artist's death.

> *He had a painter's eye for a beautiful young girl, bickered with his wife and belittled spiritualism, Picasso, flying saucers and an East Anglia that was 'all derelict airfields and rusty wire barriers'. He also had a great store of country lore like most people with the seeing eye and a sense of fun'.*

'What a Go', would have been Munnings comment on his portrayal – his favourite phrase (and thus the title that I gave to my biography of him).

The Gale of the World, is dedicated to Williamson's friend, the writer and journalist Kenneth Allsop who didn't actually like the book at all. However Allsop had liked an earlier volume in the series, *The Golden Virgin* which he had reviewed in *The Daily Mail*. This review led Munnings to buy the book and, although he did not know Allsop, to write to him about it, in a hand-written letter dated 18th September, 1957.

> *Dear Kenneth Allsop,*
>
> *Altho' I have not met you I am writing to say that your review of my old friend Henry Williamson's book in The Daily Mail a short time ago was so well done that I wrote to Henry and congratulated him.*
>
> *I have not seen him since ... but I did go to Georgeham from Exmoor and found him and his hut and all the rest of it. Long ago I used to see him at Stiffkey and before that at Filey, Lord Fortesque's place, where he wrote Tarka etc. At last I have had a reply from him – PERHAPS THE GREATEST EPISTLE EVER TYPED BY MAN!*
>
> *Poor old Williamson, I do hope your review will give the book a start. I now have it, thanks to you and the D.M.*
>
> *If you <u>know</u> Georgeham and Clovelly and all those places then of course you know him.*
>
> *A strange fellow. What nights we had in the past – at Stiffkey,*
>
> *Yours sincerely*
>
> *A.M.*

But, to return to my main theme – the similar characteristics of Henry Williamson and these artistic friends of East Anglia – I would like to refer to the 'zest for living' which Henry Williamson shared with Munnings. Judge for yourselves how Munnings compares with Williamson in this from the following anecdotes.

Munnings always maintained a boyish excitement at the sight of horses and jockeys in bright silks going down a racecourse – a sublime slice of pageantry enacted against a backcloth of smooth green turf and wide skies. It thrilled him so much in itself that he never actually bothered to place a bet. This passion for horses and his knowledge and understanding of them was the sublime emotion of his life.

In later years he lectured to students at the Royal Veterinary College, one of whom, now a Director at the College, remembers how he spoke to them with his eyes closed, swaying backwards and forwards as if the audience wasn't there.

'You could have heard a pin drop,' he said. 'He spoke of the smell of the dew at early morning gallops and the clatter of horses' hoofs and the start of a race with horses milling around, waiting to get under starter's orders; a moment of tension with their nostrils flaring and their adrenaline flowing. 'Always the start – never the finish', he said'.

He revelled in days out hunting followed by lively tea-parties given by a Norwich vet and afterwards, those with no reason to go home, dined at the Maid's

Head Hotel, the oldest inn in Norwich where they talked and drank and sang the night away.

I'm sure such first hand experience of his subjects was partly responsible for his success as an equestrian painter – just as Henry Williamson's first-hand experience of nature illuminated his writings.

During his period in Cornwall with the Newlyn painters, he boasted he organised more parties, picnics, outings and festivities than anyone in the country. The artist Laura Knight met him at one of his parties and was completely captivated by him. 'I could not take my eyes off him,' she told her biographers years later. 'He was the stable, the artist, the poet, the very land itself. I adored everything about him.'

Apparently she knew nothing about his periodic bouts of depression which, it seems, often go hand in hand with a zest for living.

At the start of this talk I said that I was very surprised to find that Henry Williamson has remained such a comparatively unrecognised literary figure. I think that this may be due to a striking similarity between him and Edward Seago. Seago was a prolific painter and this, to some of his critics, was very much to his detriment. Similarly Williamson was a prolific writer. Seago, like Williamson, was saddened towards the end of his life because he felt he did not get the critical acclaim or official recognition his work deserved.

Lord Butler (Rab Butler) the former Home Secretary, and at one time Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, had a great knowledge and feeling for art and artists. He was a close friend of Seago and often painted with him. He told me he once suggested to Seago that the fact that he painted similar subjects so swiftly and easily might be considered a defect in his work. Seago agreed but, he says he found it absolutely congenial to paint in Norfolk and there always seemed to be a ready market for his work so he felt he should go on painting the things he loved.

Butler described Seago's talent as 'a quick art'. He explained that that meant that 'despite his ability he was not taken seriously as a great artist'. But, had the process been slowed down, Butler believed he might have been recognised ostentatiously as one of our great modern painters.

Twenty years after Seago's death, his popularity is growing. This confirms a prophecy made by the Duke of Edinburgh in a television film about Edward Seago made by the producer, Clive Dunn, and myself four years ago.

> *I think Seago WILL find his place very much in that long tradition of English landscape painters. But it may take several years before he's recognised.*

The cost of his paintings is definitely rising.

Henry Williamson died about three years after Seago so I hope that next year's centenary of his birth will herald the start of a similar resurgence of interest in his work.