



The Henry Williamson Society
Schools' Writing Competition 2020

Source material

'Farm your land as though you are going to live forever . . . so that our children and their children's heritage shall not perish before our very eyes.'

(Henry Williamson, quoted from the film *The Vanishing Hedgerows*, produced by David Cobham and broadcast in 1972.)

'The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.'

(Greta Thunberg, quoted from her speech at the UN Climate Action Summit, when she argued passionately that the young demand action now, New York, 23 September 2019.)

Tea for Two in a Tree

I thought of the hollow ash, which with other timber trees had been left in the hedge. Arriving as hail bounced on the ground about me, I insinuated myself inside, wondering if I would disturb an owl up above in one of the dark cavities. At the same instant a voice said from the darkness above, "Ah, that's good!" and the words came as a shock; for I had been mentally prepared for an owl flapping down past me. There, wedged in a cranny, chin on knees like an elf, sat Rikky [Williamson's young son].

He had followed me to the meadow, and had been sitting there some time, "with his friend the old tree."

We Saw the Spirit of the Wood

Across a plank we walked, and so entered a narrow strip of woodland. Immediately the strange light and shade arrested us; we stood still, listening to the silence. The air was warm and buoyant, the sunlight glanced on the wet boles of ash and sycamore.

As we crept quietly forward a slight whispering sound came to our ears, and another: a family of small birds was flitting through the branches, hanging upside down as they peered for insects, and talking to each other. It was a family of long-tailed titmice; mother, father, and nine or ten young aerial gipsies who would remain together until the spring. They seemed to make a gossamer chain, faint chinking cries as they flitted, one after another, away into the wood.

Dead River in a Green Valley

I waited more than an hour, and saw not even a small brown trout throwing itself up from the white surge. The river, I was told later, was dead: sewage, chemicals, and coal dust had obliterated every diatom, nymph, minnow, shrimp, snail, water-buttercup and salmon-fry. The river was dead in the green valley; dead like so many of the rivers of England.

Who pollutes a river helps to pollute the body politic; to subdue, by yet another act of materialism, of the little selfish ego, the spirit of man.

(The three pieces above are extracts from newspaper articles written by Henry Williamson in 1944 and collected in *A Breath of Country Air*, published in 1990.)

Our Gulf Stream Spring

The Gulf Stream moves at a rate that has been known to bring a bottle from Mexico to the Devon coast in three months. This sure and steady current of water is pushed across the Atlantic by icebergs travelling south down the coast of Labrador and passing Newfoundland, gradually dissolving into cold water which sinks, and so helps to displace the warm water farther south. The temperature of the Gulf Stream is tepid, about sixty degrees Fahrenheit. It brings in its tepid flow trillions and trillions of elvers, to all rivers of Europe. The elvers hatch from eggs laid under rotting masses of weed in the Sargasso Sea. Every grown eel that survives gets back to the Sargasso Sea to spawn. It is an extraordinary sight to see the elvers moving up an estuary in early spring. . . .

If anything should happen to the Gulf Stream so that it is delayed, or rather diverted, from the south-west coasts of Great Britain, then the eel would become a very rare fish.

(This extract is taken from a broadcast that Henry Williamson gave on the BBC in 1936, and collected in *Spring Days in Devon and other Broadcasts*, published in 1992.)

The Sun in Taurus

In all the pure rivers of Great Britain, the young salmon are dropping down to the ocean. The symbol of baptism, of rebirth, was anciently a fish: and the noblest of fish is the salmon. Yet pollution has temporarily despoiled many of our rivers. In some, inanimate sludge has taken the life out of the water – the oxygen – without which plants cannot grow, mayflies arise, or fish breathe. Chemical discharges poison with false rainbow hues the surface of the gliding masses of dead water. Valuable phosphates and salts are squandered in the estuaries from the drains of great cities. Will that ever be changed? The sludge and the chemicals extracted on land and used for many purposes, among them the fertility of cornfields and pastures?

I hope, despite all, that one day salmon will be leaping again in the Thames: that *Salmo Salar*, the Sea Leaper as the Romans named him, will jump once more in the pool of London, and play around the piers of the bridges, showing his square tail in joy of meeting again the sparkling water of his nativity.

(Taken from the foreword to *Salar the Salmon*, as collected in *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga*, first published in 1960.)

Below are some lines of the poem **Binsey Poplars** by Gerard Manley Hopkins that suggest nostalgia for natural beauty lost, in particular the line: 'After-comers cannot guess the beauty been'.

O if we but knew what we do
When we delve or hew —
Hack and rack the growing green!
Since country is so tender
To touch, her being só slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all,
Where we, even where we mean
To mend her we end her,
When we hew or delve:
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.

There is also the following YouTube clip that we felt would be useful as source material:

Chris Packham's interview with his hero David Cobham, conservationist and film director, first shown on BBC's *Look East*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSiW4SIF6sw>

You might also like to watch BBC's Winter Watch (Series 8, Episode 1, broadcast in January 2020), in which 'the cameras are poised to capture pine martens, red squirrels, golden eagles and crested tits. This wild winter wilderness is home to rare cold-adapted species, but as the climate changes they are especially sensitive to warming temperatures. This makes them and the Cairngorm Mountains Britain's early warning system for changing environments, so what can the Cairngorms reveal about winter right now, and in the future?'

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000dtbr/winterwatch-series-8-episode-1>

(If the links don't work, copy and paste them into your browser.)
