

## Helena Rolls' Brooch

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Whilst preparing one of the chapters in the forthcoming First World War book I wrote up the following notes. As it does not directly concern HW's war service I felt it was a more appropriate item for the *Journal* and will merely make a reference in the book to the information here.

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The 'badge in nine-carat gold, costing three guineas' which we read of in *A Fox Under My Cloak* which Phillip was going to give to Helena Rolls is based on a true incident to a certain extent. There is no diary extant in HW's literary archive for 1915 (and I am fairly sure there never was one) but there are various little additions within the pages of his 1914 diary, which was very confusing until I realised what had happened. I imagine that because he was away at the Front as the year turned, and then ill and subsequently convalescent for several weeks he never obtained a 1915 diary and thus added some notes to blank pages within the small 1914 diary. Teasing out which were the added notes became reasonably easy once I realised they existed. The writing is slightly different and their content, meaningless with a 1914 context, became clear when seen from the 1915 era.

It is well-known that Henry Williamson was at this period of his life deeply in love in the idealistic manner of youth with the beautiful but unattainable girl who lived in the end house with turret on whom Helena Rolls is based and who was in real life Doris Nicholson. A few of those scattered added-in diary notes bear out the existence of the brooch story found in the novel. They also poignantly reveal how Henry was trying to puzzle out the situation in his mind.

On a November 1914 page these notes constitute entries thus:

'April 4 (Sunday) Saw Mrs. N. [Nicholson] & others in road : April 15, Said goodbye : April 18, Saw Allan Dodd : April 25, Saw Allan. Went to town with Doris. Gave her brooch : May 2, Saw Allan. Gave shrapnel piece. Allan told me re dog's burial "morbid", took photo : Monday May 3, Wrote to Doris, mother wrote re books : May 5, Answer "I am unable" etc rotten wording : May 6, Saw Allan - told me about photo - it's ripping.

On a March page, Henry has added an enumerated list:

1. "Hanker-on". 2. Didn't accept brooch because didn't like me & it wasn't fair. 3. HW "runs" after me, & Allan comes up. 4. Kathie said at end that I'm coming & then bunked before Doris could say if she minded. 5. What would she do if I joined the club & ran after her "like a two year old". 6. Ralph Fraser ran after her, & asked her to St. Dunstan's dance but he took the hint, but I wouldn't. 7. I was all right as a "chum" but she felt young & skittish. 8. Father dictated the letter.

Added onto 18 June is written: 'Saw Allan on Tuesday. He told me. I understand. Finish. My own fault.' And onto 24 September (these dates may be totally arbitrary of course) : '1) Blackheath business. Mrs. N. [Nicholson]. 2) Said to A.D. [Allan Dodd] "Seen H. [Harry i.e. Henry] lately. Why can't people enjoy themselves sans mkg stultus ipsi.'" And finally added on 22 October: 'Allan can consider ipse privilege person: can go out with D. sans fac. b.f. ipse (without making a bloody fool of himself).

It is now possible to work out how Henry Williamson translated this into his fictional story. Allan Dodd becomes 'Alwyn Todd' and it looks as if Ralph Fraser (unknown to me) was actually the rival suitor and not 'Cousin Bertie' as in the novel. So there is the evidence that Henry did give Doris a brooch BUT I can find no evidence to suggest it was a 'regimental badge in nine-carat gold, costing three guineas'. On another page in the diary is a list of uniform etc items together with their cost which HW bought at the time he was commissioned (these details will appear in the war book) - and which he also detailed in the novel. In the novel he ordered the regimental brooch badge at the same time. However this item does not appear on the list in his diary, and the total cost of the items that are there is exactly the amount he wrote a cheque for, which is entered in his bankbook. So he did not buy the brooch at that point and there are no other references to it anywhere. Thus we cannot say whether the real life brooch was actually a regimental badge, but there was certainly a brooch of some sort.

