Book Reviews

HENRY - AN APPRECIATION OF HENRY WILLIAMSON by Daniel Farson. Michael Joseph, £8.95.

This is an attractive and an endearing book, which deserves to be read widely. Daniel Farson, who has already published two stimulating short pieces on Henry Williamson (1), is well qualified to write this 'appreciation' of him. His parents, Negley and Eve Farson, knew Williamson well for many years, and he himself was Williamson's friend from his boyhood just after the Second World War. Furthermore, as an author himself, and the son of an author, Daniel Farson understands the inner life of a creative writer. He correctly chooses to call his book an 'appreciation', because as he points out (p.4), it is neither a full-scale biography (which is being written by Williamson's son Richard) nor is it a detailed critical study of Williamson's works. It is more in the nature of an affectionate memoir, illustrated by some excellent photographs, which succeeds well in throwing some fresh light on Williamson both as man and writer.

Mr Farson adopts the good strategy of beginning, in his Introduction, with the last summer (1975) which Williamson spent in North Devon before the tragic breakdown in his health which he suffered in December of that year shortly after his eightieth birthday. Williamson was alone by then, two wives having left him in divorce in previous years, while his son Harry by his second wife was of an age when he wanted to follow his own pursuits. In search of company and conversation, Williamson would call frequently on Daniel Farson in the 'Grey House' by Vention Sands. Mr Farson's description of him at this time is memorable, and I can vouch for its accuracy from my own meeting with Williamson in 1975:

> *Henry looked magnificent during his final year in North Devon. Ellen Terry compared Henry Irving in his old age to 'some beautiful grey tree that I have seen in Savannah'. Henry too, had a lean tree-like strength, wind-swept and knotted, but unlike the bent trees at Ox's Cross he remained upright with the bearing of an old soldier. His hair was white but abundant, and though his eyes were watery they were rivetting - he expected you to look at him when he was talking.* (p.2)

A long life and much varied experience had gone into the making of this distinguished figure. Mr Farson traces for us much of this process, highlighting the key factors in his development. He indicates accurately the two most formative experiences which go far to explain the later Williamson; first a difficult, but not totally unhappy childhood and youth in the south-east London suburb of Lewisham, and secondly the sufferings together with the glories and nobility of the Western Front during the First World War.

Williamson was born at 66 Braxfield Road, Brockley (not Bradfield

Road as Mr Farson states), the son of a bank clerk, who, Mr Farson informs us, had to suppress a warmer spirit to cope with his work. Relations between father and son were strained, with the result that, as Williamson himself tells us in several places in his writings, he would escape from the restricted ambience of his home, now at Eastern Road, Lewisham, to the fields and woods of north-west Kent, where his love of birds and natural scenery developed rapidly. (2) I should have valued a fuller portrayal of Williamson's mother than Mr Farson gives us, and I think that some treatment of his sisters, who also played a part in the formation of his character, would have been helpful. However, Mr Farson rightly points out the importance of his schooldays at Colfe's School, Lewisham, which were by no means without fun and friendship, although indeed he reacted against the teaching methods then employed there. From the experience of his childhood and youth, we can see with Mr Farson's help how Williamson developed his characteristic point of view about the need for a happy untrammelled childhood lived within a harmonious home atmosphere to foster the straight and sure growth of the human personality. (3) Of course Williamson used his childhood experiences as the basis of some excellent fiction in the sequences *The Flax of Dream* (1921-28) and *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (1951-69), which as all good novels do tell a more universal and satisfying kind of truth than mere autobiography can. In this connection it is interesting to note, as Mr Farson recounts, that both Williamson himself and his son Harry were at pains to stress that the *Chronicle*, which is more realistic than the romantic *Flax*, and is certainly closer to Williamson's actual life, is nevertheless by no means just heightened autobiography (pp.173, 187). A creative writer begins with his own experience, imagined experience and insights into the lives of others, and out of these makes a work of art which is above and beyond the materials which have gone into it. There is an important distinction to be made not only between 'the man who suffers and the mind which creates' (to use T.S. Eliot's phrase) (4) but also between these and the work of art itself which has its own existence and individuality.

With these considerations in mind, we can see how important to Williamson both as man and writer was his experience of the Western Front, to which he first went out in 1914, as a Private in the London Rifle Brigade. The most important aspect of the war for Williamson was not the fighting itself nor the comradeship of the trenches with troops on his own side, but the Christmas Truce of 1914, when British troops fraternised with the German 'enemy'. This convinced Williamson, who in fact had a Bavarian grandmother (p.24), (5) that at the level of the combatants themselves the war between the 'cousin nations' of Britain and Germany was not just an appalling tragedy, but in some ways a confidence trick played upon them, as each side believed that it was fighting for freedom and justice. As Mr Farson points out, this episode coloured Williamson's views about Germans throughout his life (p.15) and I think that we might add that he was influenced also by his indignation about the propaganda, which he knew from his own experience to be mendacious, against the character and behaviour of the German troops.(6) I am sure that Mr Farson is right in believing that the Christmas Truce played an important part in Williamson's later admiration for Hitler whom he saw, in the words of Maurice Richardson quoted by Farson, as 'the great

pacifist *manqué* destroyed by an Achilles heel of fear' (p.211). It is a commonplace that Fascism was in many respects a product of the First World War; Hitler, Mussolini and Mosley were all front-line soldiers, and the comradeship, self-sacrifice and discipline, even the uniforms of the War, all influenced the more positive side of the various fascist movements. Williamson expressed the feeling of belonging to a generation misunderstood not only by the older but also by the younger generation who had both missed the terrible but in a sense mystical experience of the War, and thus had no instinctive access to the wisdon which he believed resulted from it. (7) This I think helps further to explain his enthusiasm for Hitler and Mosley. Even if we deplore this enthusiasm I believe that, regarding Williamson's motivation for it, we can apply, with at least a fair degree of assent, the proverb *tout savoir, c'est tout pardonner.*

Be this as it may be, Mr Farson gives us some piquant details of Williamson's relationship with Mosley, which he shows had reservations on both sides. Williamson joined British Union quite late, in 1937, at the urging of Dorothy Lady Downe, a Norfolk neighbour, and he wrote to Mr Farson in later years: "I was never really a fascist. I cared for England, I fought for England in 1914-18. I saw another war coming. And so joined BU (the British Union)..." (p.156). Mosley himself recognised something of this limited support (pp.157-8) - although on another occasion he felt that Williamson's adherence to his movement was too simplistic: "We like Henry so much," he told Mr Farson "but he will take it all so seriously" (p.154). Nevertheless, from the evidence of Williamson's writings I think that we can see that he was deeply and thoughtfully attracted by two positive aspects of Mosley's thought - his enthusiasm for farming and country life and his desire for a peaceful and harmonious Europe. These are not ignoble attitudes, and I believe that they had a beneficent influence on Williamson's work. (8)

Williamson's friendship with T.E. Lawrence, which Mr Farson deals with briefly, arose from Lawrence's interest in *Tarka the Otter*, but it was undoubtedly cemented by their shared experience of the War. When I met him in 1975 Williamson spoke to me of his admiration for Lawrence in the warmest possible terms, and I am sure that he saw more of Lawrence's real greatness than those who have written about him in a depreciating way. While we may agree with Mr Farson that Williamson's attempt to arrange a meeting between Hitler and Lawrence had a certain *naiveté* about it, nevertheless I think that we should recognise that Williamson's intentions in the matter were honourable and were directed towards the avoidance of another destructive European War. The outcome of such a meeting remains of course one of the imponderables of history, because Lawrence was killed on his journey back home to Clouds Hill after sending Williamson a telegram inviting him to come to discuss the project. Much more remains to be written about Williamson and Lawrence, and I have no doubt that the topic will be fully explored in Richard Williamson's book about his father.

Another of Williamson's friendships, which Mr Farson is the first to discuss in print, was that with the Stokes family, whom he got to know in his early days in Devon when he was living at Skirr Cottage in

Georgeham. They provide the originals of some characters in *The Sun in the Sands* and *The Innocent Moon*, and it is fascinating to have their recent recollections of those days to compare with the passages in which they appear in Williamson's books. It is pleasant to read that Commander Edward Stokes RN remembers from his boyhood Williamson's kindness and humour and that his sister 'Annabelle' (her fictional name) was able to see beyond the surface gaucherie and eccentricity of Williamson's manner at that time, and to remember him as being "very beautiful, wild, lonely and lovely" (p.37). Mr Farson shows clearly that those who loved Williamson were able to recognise his essential goodness and greatness, and it is moving to read the tributes paid to him by Loetitia, his f rst wife, Margaret his daughter, and his sons Richard and Harry. Nevertheless Mr Farson does not gloss over Williamson's faults, and it is sad to learn that the success of the Norfolk farming venture immediately before and during the Second World War was achieved at the cost of losing his family, who ceased to live with him. However, the portrait of Williamson which emerges from Mr Farson's pages is more sympathetic than that of Phillip Maddison, hero of the *Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, drawn by Williamson from himself. Mr Farson is surely correct in suggesting that if Williamson had liked himself better, he would have made Phillip a more attractive character (p.178).

It is agreeable to read Mr Farson's honest and balanced account of his own and his parents' relationships with Williamson. The quarrel between his father and Williamson is treated with understanding and humour, and we see that, as so often, there were faults on both sides. We follow the growth of the friendship between Williamson and Mr Farson himself with great pleasure, and I am sure that readers will feel that he earned well the tribute which Williamson finally gave him when he signed his copy of *Tarka*, after having refused many years before. Williamson was, I think, fortunate in his last years to have such a kindly and patient friend as Mr Farson. He writes with compassion about Williamson's decline and death, but I feel that he is right to borrow a phrase from Williamson's inscription in his copy of *Tarka* for his last chapter: "Summer is come again!!". Although he could be difficult with those closest to him, not just his family, but literary friends like Malcolm Elwin and Kenneth Allsopp, nevertheless Williamson has undoubtedly carried into the hearts of his readers something akin to the sunshine and beauty of the English summer. He is, I believe, a writer of great spiritual wholesomeness who brings us by the experience of his art into a sounder and healthier frame of mind. Although we must regret that we are not told more about certain aspects of Williamson's life, I am nevertheless sure that after reading Mr Farson's work, we, like him after writing it, will understand Williamson better and "like him more" (p.238).

J.W. BLENCH

REFERENCES

(1) 'Recognising Henry Williamson', *The Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, 30 November 1975; 'West Country Writer', *A Window on the Sea* (1977) chapter vi, pp. 74-86.

(2) *Goodbye West Country* (1937), pp.107-15; 'A Boy's Nature Diary' and "Days of Autumn', *The Lone Swallows* (1945 edn.), pp.78-108, 165-75.
(3) For this viewpoint see Henry Williamson, 'Foreword' to *The Flax of Dream* (1 vol. edn., 1936) pp.7-8; *The Pathway*, chapter vi, ibid., p.1138; *The Sun in the Sands* (1945) pp.82-3; 'Out of the Prisoning Tower', in Brian Inglis (ed.) *John Bull's Schooldays* (1961) pp.144-9.
(4) 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Essays* (2nd edn., 1934) p.18.
(5) Mentioned by Williamson himself in *Goodbye West Country* p.231.
(6) *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1929) pp.17-20; *The Sun in the Sands*, p.10; 'The Sun that Shines on the Dead' (II), *The Adelphi*, June 1946, p. 130; *How Dear is Life* (1954) chapter xxix, p.370; *A Fox under my Cloak* (1955) chapter xxv, pp.359-60; *The Golden Virgin* (1957) chapter i, pp.15-16, 22-24; chapter xix, pp.310-2; *Love and the Loveless* (1958) chapter vii, pp.120-1; *A Test to Destruction* (1960) chapter xxi, pp.399-403; *The Power of the Dead* (1963) chapter iv, pp.105-6.
(7) *Goodbye West Country*, pp.22,42,242; *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1941) p.253; 'The Tragic Spirit', *The Adelphi* October-December 1943, pp.17-19; *The Pathway*, chapter xxiii, 1936 edn. of *The Flax*, p.1294; *The Power of the Dead*, chapter vi, p.156; *The Phoenix Generation* (1965) chapter viii, p.186.
(8) See my review-article, 'Henry Williamson: Greatness Recognised', *Durham University Journal*, June 1982, pp.260-2, 265-7.*

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** The Henry Williamson Society hopes to print this review-article in due course. Ed.*

Following the many irrelevant and often fatuous reviews in the press of Daniel Farson's book *Henry: an Appreciation*, a numberof members felt that there should have been an official response from the Society. The committee has therefore decided on a formula whereby such a response can be made. So in future would members finding material in the media criticising HW, his work or the Society itself which they consider to be unfair, unfounded or detrimental, please contact me. I will then report to John Glanfield and John Homan, and from there a decision will be made as to the appropriate action to take.

Tim Osborne
National Publicity Officer

HENRY WILLIAMSON by A. Cade (privately printed)

There is a great deal of treasure to be discovered in unpublished academic theses. Students of the life and work of the poet John Gray (1866-1934) can profit on theses on Gray by Jerusha McCormack and Margaret McAlpine, which may be consulted in the libraries of, respectively, Brandeis University, USA, and Manchester University. More recently a young student at the Oxford Polytechnic, Stephen Setford, has achieved a fine study of Hilary Pepler and the Saint Dominic's Press, of which the Polytechnic's copy is available to bona fide students. There must be many theses on Henry Williamson lurking uncharted here and there, and awaiting discovery. Scarecely more 'published', so to speak, than such theses is this attractive small book by Amanda Cade, which bears no printer's imprint (thereby breaking the law!), nor any publisher's, and no indication of any source from which it might be obtained. The young author's modesty no doubt accounts for this; but she surely goes too far when she omits even the *date* of printing, which could set a problem for Williamson's biographers. I surmise the year of printing to be 1982; but it could quite well be 1981.

I understand this small item to be some kind of thesis, or perhaps an exercise in typography, or perhaps a combination of both, created by Miss Cade at the College of Art where she is a student. However that may be, it is certainly an attractive production. Format 8¼" X 8¼", the cover reproduces Tunnicliffe's drawing of Tarka confronting the hounds, who face him from the other side of the mill-wheel. The texts on cover and title-page are set in Berthold Wolpe's Albertus typeface. The drawing on the title-page, an effective study of Henry in winter outdoor gear, standing on the river-bank, is by the author; though there is nothing to tell you so, since the legend on the cover says only 'written' by A. cade. Hers also is the drawing of Skirr Cottage on the first page of her Introduction. One of the well known photographs from *The Children of Shallowford* is reproduced, and a photograph of Henry's new house at Ox's Cross.

Within the limits that the author was allowed it would have been impossible for her to have discussed the whole of Henry's published work, so in the main her sixteen pages are devoted to *The Flax of Dream* novels, *In the Woods*, and some of Henry's broadcasts; with some allusions to *The Gold Falcon*, *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, amd other books. The author makes some sound judgements. "Williamson always wanted to be remembered as the old soldier who hated war, but the public would never listen to this part of his message, and even in his broadcasts he will be remembered as a brilliant nature writer, not as a pacifist."

I hope it does not seem too much like looking a gift-horse in the mouth to criticise a work that has been privately printed, and not offered for review, but of which I have been privileged to receive from the author a signed copy. However, I do not think it was Henry's 'intention' that his house should become a Henry Williamson museum. It was rather his *hope* that it might become some kind of memorial to him, to which future students of his work might come for purposes of study and research. This has not been found possible; but the preservation of his nearby Writing Hut will fulfil this wish in part.

The author is uncertain as to whether *In the Woods* was published or privately printed. It was not, as she suggests, "distributed privately". It was published in the normal way by St Albert's Press in a limited edition of one thousand copies, offered for sale to the public at the ludicrously low price of ten shillings. And, incidentally, the Henry Williamson Society was not "set up by the Williamson family and admirers (of HW)". It was set up by some of the admirers, with the approval of the family.

This little book is attractively printed, the type being set in two columns to the page since single lines of type across a page of this size would have been two wide for comfortable reading. The type (or photo-setting equivalent?) has been set unjustified at the right-hand edge, but with due care so that the edge is not too uneven.

More careful proof-reading would have eliminated some spelling errors: 'Jeffries' for Jefferies; 'Thomson' for Thompson; and would have secured consistency as between '*The Gold Falcons*' and '*The Golden Falcon*' (neither of which is correct. *The Gold Falcon* is. Ed.).

These small cavils in no way lessen the merits of this short. lively study of Henry Williamson. The number of copies printed is presumably quite small. It will undoubtedly become a rare item of Williamsoniana, and will give lasting pleasure to those fortunate enough to possess it.

BROCARD SEWELL