# HENRY WILLIAMSON

## Malcolm Elwin

ON CHRISTMAS EVE OF 1914 wiring parties were sent out from the British front-line trenches at Ploegsteert Wood. For an hour they worked in silence, fearful of making sounds which might draw upon them the enemy's fire. But far up and down the line there was no sound of firing; 'the battlefield was silent as the moon'. Encouraged by the absence of danger, men began laughing and talking as they worked; soon they heard 'singing from the German lines - carols the tunes of which we knew'. And then came cries of "Come over, Tommy! We won't fire at you!" 'With bumping heart,' shaken by suspicion of a trap, a young soldier named Henry Williamson, only just nineteen, watched a dark figure hesitantly approaching. "Merry Christmas, English friend!" And the two shook hands.

'All Christmas Day grey and khaki figures mingled and talked in no-man's-land.' Both sides buried their dead, marking shallow graves with crosses made from ration boxes and labelled in indelible pencil, "For King and Country" or "Fur Vaterland und Freiheit".

'Fatherland and Freedom! *Freedom?* How was this? *We* were fighting for freedom, our cause was just, we were defending Belgium, civilisation...these fellows in grey were good fellows, they were - strangely - just men like ourselves. "How can we lose the war, English comrades? Our cause is just, we are ringed with enemies who would crush us economically, we asked only for a place in the sun, and now we are defending our parents, our homes, our German soil. No, we cannot lose the war - for Right is on our side." A most shaking, staggering thought; that both sides thought they were fighting for the same cause! The war was a terrible mistake! People at home did not know this! Then the Idea came to the young and callow soldier, that if he could only tell them all at home *what was really happening*, and if the German soldiers told their people the truth about us, the war would be over.'

Of course, neither Henry Williamson nor the German soldiers were allowed to tell the truth, and if they had, their appealing whispers would have been drowned in the shrill clamour of war propaganda. In his *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* Mr Siegfried Sassoon has told how, when he protested against the prolongation of the war to suit selfish political interests, he was committed to a shell-shock hospital as an 'interesting' mental case. And a few days after the Christmas truce, an Army Order issued warning that 'men found fraternising with the enemy would be be court-martialled, and if found guilty, would suffer the death penalty'.

Though he remained a serving soldier throughout the war, the incident survived in Williamson's memory as the most pregnant experience of his life. Repeatedly he refers to it in his writings - in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, in *The Children of Shallowford*, in *Goodbye West Country*. And in the foreword to *The Flax*

*Shallowford*, in *Goodbye West Country*. And in the foreword to *The Flax of Dream* he confesses that it germinated 'the seed-idea' of his great tetralogy of novels, and that 'the fulfilment or materialisation of that idea' had been for him 'the mainspring of life ever since'.

As a demobilised officer, after a short experience of newspaper work,* he decided to settle in North Devon with 'the writing of books' as his 'only aim and thought'. A second fateful experience inspired this decision - the reading of Richard Jefferies' *The Story of My Heart* early in 1919, which revived the emotions excited by the revelation of political deception during the fraternising in no-man's-land. Maddison in *The Pathway* thus describes the effect on himself:

'All the stored impressions of my boyhood seemed to return, with a mysterious spirit that brought the tears to my eyes many times as I read on. I stood there more than an hour, so rapt was I in the pages, which were a revelation to me of my own self, which had been smothered and overlaid all through the hectic days of the War. Indeed, for some time afterwards, when walking about alone, under the stars or in the sunshine of solitary places, I thought that Jefferies was with me, and of me. I grew and grew in spiritual strength; and I realised that all the world was built up of thought; that the idea-s which animated the world were but thought: mostly mediocre and selfish thought. Change thought and you change the world.'

Williamson like Maddison, recognised Jefferies as 'a voice crying in the industrial wilderness of the nineteenth century', as hopelessly as his own would have cried had he raised it four years before to denounce the folly and futility of the war. He saw that such voices must be raised to make men change their way of thinking - the more especially at that time, when hope was high, buoyed by politicians' lavish promises, of a better world to follow the savage sacrifice of war.

In a damp, decrepit labourer's cottage at Georgeham, within sound of the Atlantic breakers crashing on the eastern beaches of Bideford Bay, he settled to live according to Jefferies' ideal, away from the pettiness of observances, the petty necessity of useless labour, useless because productive of nothing', always in company 'with earth, and sun, and sea, and stars by night'. Reviving his boyhood's adoration of nature, submerged by the swollen tide of war, he wrote stories and sketches of bird and animal life, of simple rustic customs and characters encountered in the village. At first manuscripts returned from unappreciative editors with depressing regularity; even after he was earning a steady income by stories and sketches in newspapers and magazines, when they were collected in book form, he found himself among those described by D.H. Lawrence as 'us small-selling authors'. Sensitive and introspective as a child, he grew to maturity in desolate want of the understanding which breeds self-confidence, and living 'on a few

**Described by Williamson himself in 'Confessions of a Fake Merchant', HWS Journal Nos 8 and 9 (Oct. 1983 & March 1984).*

shillings a week, in a labourer's cottage, bearded, and writing books which no one read, emphasised solitariness to oneself.' In a remote village he alternated between two sorts of social contact - the semi-literate yokels of the public-houses, and the gentry, literate, but as lacking in real culture, types of whom he portrayed in Mrs Ogilvie, Uncle Sufford Chychester, Mr Shelley and Major Shakerley of *The Pathway*.

His way of life was alone enough for the Mrs Ogilvies to label him 'am unsatisfactory young man', but his opinions, spliced with bitterness at the betrayal of his generation by post-war politics, excited suspicion and distaste in the unimaginative country gentry, unquestioning in acceptance of authority, narrowly nationalistic or 'patriotic', indignant against reforms or resentment of industrial iniquities as 'bolshevism' and ready material to be led tamed tamely by pusillanimous politicians into another war. Many amiable old gentlemen must have been embarrassed by his outbursts, shifting uneasily in their chairs like Mr Chychester druing Maddison's argument with the vicar in *The Pathway*. Seeing a war film in which all the Germans were 'portrayed as fat and cowardly creatures', he was afflicted, when children in the audience enthusiastically booed everything German, by "a feeling of hopeless anguish, equal to that felt during the battle of the Somme', at the corruption of children's minds by such falsity of feeling'. But when he spoke of this afterwards, conventional people 'looked puzzled, then blank, and turned away'. Resentful of any suggestion shaking their complacency, devout worshippers of respectability thought of him in Major Shakerley's words to Maddison: "Apparently you're agin Huntin', agin the Church and the State, agin all the things that most of us consider the decent things, in fact, you remind me of the fellow who said that he wasn't out of step, but the rest of the battalion were." And they 'left him to it', as Major Shakerley left Maddison.

Mr Williamson is to be no more inveterately identified with Maddison than Dickens with David Copperfield or Thackeray with Pendennis; naturally he used an artist's licence in developing the theme of his tetralogy into dramatic narrative. Willie Maddison was brought up by a father soured by his mother's death in giving him birth; in childhood and boyhood Mr Williamson's mother meant so much to remind him of the relationship between D.H. Lawrence and his mother. Maddison's motherlessness, his upbringing by an aloof and unapproachable father, was necessary to emphasise the child's loneliness, which caused him to grow up introspective, self-conscious, and wanting self-confidence. The flax of dream is the material for weaving the web of life; the whole being 'a novel of cause and effect', the first three books reveal the making of the man which Maddison became in *The Pathway*. In *The Beautiful Years* the lonely little boy progresses from seven to nine years old, waking to the beauties of nature in exploits with a faithful playmate, to tenderness and romance in relations with a pretty maidservant and her ineligible lover, to adoration of feminine beauty in his feelings for a pretty spoilt child: *Dandelion Days*, reviving for its generation a more realistic retrospect of schooldays than Kipling's out-moded *Stalky and Co.* and its countless conventional imitations of the *Boy's Own Paper* type, shows his progress from fifteen to seventeen, escaping from

school's oppressive routine into idyllic adventures in fields and woods: in *The Dream of Fair Women*, which gathers conviction in depicting post-war neurosis from its apparent defects of theatricality and youthful emotionalism, the baptism of fire endured during the war is completed by a soul-searing amour with a beautiful nymphomaniac.

Describing the novel as 'neither wholly fiction, nor...autobiography', Mr Williamson suggests that 'it may be autopsychical', and allowing for the dramatic stratagems of art and a tendency to theatricality and emotional extravagance natural to youth, the story of Maddison's intellectual development may be supposed much the same as his creator's; certainly Maddison of *The Pathway* must have been recognisable in Williamson at the same age. But while Maddison, before dying Shelley-like by drowning in Bideford Bay, a sacrifice to the stupidity of the conventional mind, had written only a volume of poems and the two unpublished works intended to revoltionise men's thought, 'The Policy of Reconstruction' and'The Starborn', Williamson had laboured hard to make a living by writing. *The Dream of Fair Women* was about to appear, and despite assurances from magazine editors that 'people are not interested in the countryside' and that he was 'hiding his light under a bushel' by writing for the 'restricted animal-story market', he had found a steady sale for his nature stories and sketches. On the income from his writings he married - at that stage of development at which Maddison died.

The simple cottage life becoming complicated by the arrival of babies, the need to support a family urged him through four years' labour in writing *Tarka the Otter*. The material was not gathered merely by minute observation as a follower of otter hounds; letters of criticism on nature articles decided him 'to put nothing into *Tarka* which was not based on actual country'. In several later books - *The Linhay on the Downs*, *Devon Holiday*, *Goodbye West Country* - he refers to the copious correspondence with otter-hunters about this proposed story, which was rewritten seventeen times before the final version satisfied his sense of truth to nature.

At the same time he was writing the fourth book of Maddison's epic. While the need to provide food for their mouths spurred his work on *Tarka*, thought of provision for his children's future inspired the writing of *The Pathway*. Watching his eldest boy playing in the garden, he saw that something must be done so that 'his generation would live more truly for the battle of the Somme'. The town-minded had lost touch with the truths of sky, grass, and sunshine. Only from nature could the truth arise.' He saw his favourite Jefferies, 'the poor farmer's son, slain before his time by hateful nineteenth-century industrialism', as 'the prophet of the new world waiting to be born' - himself as the disciple. 'How pleasant it would be each day to think, today I have done something that will tend to render future generations more happy' - having read these words in Jefferies' *Story Of My Heart*, he settled to finish *The Pathway* 'in a month of hard, continuous writing'.

*Tarka the Otter* was awarded the Hawthornden Prize for 1928, and

*The Pathway*, published in the same year, consequently attracted more attention than it might otherwise have received. Sir John Squire thought it 'a really big novel', but conventional opinion was interpreted by the popular novelist-critic who disparaged Maddison as 'half-baked, with all the trappings of a prophet without a prophecy'. A prominent church newspaper described it as 'blasphemous', and the rector of Mr Williamson's parish preached on the theme that 'Truth had been discovered among men already, and there was no need for further search in the world, among individual seekers'. Mr Williamson's father-in-law (the prototype of Uncle Sufford Chychester?), who despised Dostoievsky as 'unreadable' and Wagner as 'a horrible noise', remarked after reading the book, 'H'm, my son-in-law's an ass'.

Williamson was 'not really surprised', but confessed to a 'feeling of mortification'. As at that time, D.H. Lawrence was suffering shameful persecution for pursuing his belief in the fullest and frankest natural relations, and Llewelyn Powys, apostle of happiness, was finding only a few hundred readers for his books, he might have reckoned himself relatively lucky. T.E Lawrence's brother once told him that he 'hadn't the scholar's eye'; he acknowledged the lack with humility, remarking that his way of life had left him neither leisure nor opportunity to be a scholar. So, while he fervently appreciated his favourite writers - Jefferies, Shelley, Wilfred Owen - he was unable to derive from intimacy with the lives of inspired visionaries the balm of philosophic fortitude to counter irritant frustration. And lacking the consoling reflections of the profound thinker, he was also incapable of the artistic detachment of D.H. Lawrence and Llewelyn Powys. Despite his arduous perseverance as a writer, he unconsciously found his art insufficient to appease his nervous activity; his feeling, as yet unrecognised, was the same as Stevenson's when he said that he 'ought to have been able to build lighthouses and write *David Balfours* too'. So, instead of finding pleasure in the reflection that by publishing *The Pathway* he had achieved something that would 'tend to render future generations more happy', he forgot Jefferies' estimate that progress towards fixing 'the ambition of the multitude' on 'the ideal of form and beauty' might occupy three generations, and felt a sense of frustration on failing to receive immediate recognition as a prophet.

Seeking refuge from restlessness, he visited America, and on his return wrote *The Gold Falcon*, which was published anonymously in 1933. In *Goodbye West Country* Mr Williamson explains that 'it was anonymous because it was completely objective to me, a thing on its own, an affirmation of what in other ages used to be called God'. The arrogant pomposity of the 'blurb', though not written by the author himself, was bound to offend reviewers: 'The identity of the anonymous author has not been revealed to the publishers. They have it on the authority of the distinguished man who submitted the manuscript to them that he is "already a very well known novelist". But the book itself contains all the evidence of his quality that the publishers require.' If anonymity was desired and the quality so evident, what need was there for 'the distinguished man' and the 'very well known novelist'? Critics could

not be blamed for accusing the author of 'skulking behind anonymity in order to sneer at his contemporaries', especially as many real people appear under obvious pseudonyms - Enoch Potter, author of 'The Old Woman's Story', G.B. Everest, David Torrence, Wallington Christie, P.B. Bradford, Horace Whipple, Adolf Stucley.

Such diaphonous pseudonyms and the book's anonymity naturally suggested that the story was garbled autobiography; hence the hero's Byronism savoured of theatrical conceit. Mr Williamson confesses that he used 'many, but not all, of my feelings; and part of myself in the character of the hero-villain', but insists that the character was to him objective, not subjective. He fell thus between two stools. 'The theme of salvation through suffering moved me deeply,' he declared, and it might have moved readers likewise if treated with the sincerity of *The Pathway*. But a tone of bitter cynicism sounds through the theme, and the style is not Williamson, but pseudo-Hemingway - crude, staccato, hard-boiled.

The Hemingway cult then being in fashion, Williamson may have been lured into a concession to the second-rate by hope of cashing in on the current vogue. The bitterness of tone in *The Gold Falcon* reflects his feelings; he was chilled by the 'cold draught' against which Mrs Belloc Lowndes warned him during the flush of success in 1928. In 1930 he published *The Patriot's Progress*, a stark story of a simple Cockney clerk's immolation in the mud and blood of sordid war, which compares in savage irony with Richard Aldington's masterpiece, *Death Of A Hero*. But it came just too late to feed the appetite for war books whetted by Remarque's *All Quiet On The Western Front*. The same year *The Village Book*, containing the distilled essence of his ten years in the village of Ham, failed to receive fair recognition as a rare achievement in Jefferies' tradition; it was too prodigal in richness and fullnes for the Bloomsbury critics, who might have called him another Coppard if he had produced a precious-looking volume of half-a-dozen short stories like 'The Zeale Brothers'.

The reception of *The Gold Falcon* deepened his feeling of frustration. Though, unlike the much rewritten *Tarka*, *Salar the Salmon* was sent in sections to the printer without revision, it was 'so costly, so continuous an anguish to write, a daily act resented so bitterly that I spent quite forty minutes every hour during the summer of 1935 declaiming against the necessity of having to write for money'. Its success and attendant congratulations left him numb; gushing assurances that 'you should always write that sort of book, you know', intensified the sense of futility inspired by neglect of what he began to think of as 'my juvenilia, but inspired stuff of youth'. The message of *The Pathway* - that 'unless there were mental change - true life or awareness coming to the white-sepulchral minds of "public opinion", the same was would rise again' - was ignored, and the public preferring books about otter and salmon helped to elect an unprecendented parliamentary majority dedicated to the fleshpots of selfish commercial interest. The danger imaginatively remote in the 'twenties loomed imminent in the middle 'thirties, but self-styled democracy was lulled into sottish

complacency by an oligarchy of mediocrity. Williamson visited Germany, and like millions of frustrated Germans was deceived into conceiving National Socialism as the means to salvation from impending ruin. When, in the spring of 1936, his tetralogy appeared in one volume as *The Flax of Dream*, the foreword proclaimed, 'I salute the great man across the Rhine, whose life symbol is the happy child'.

Though exceptional quantitative value with over fourteen hundred pages for 10*s*. 6*d*., *The Flax of Dream* sold slowly, completing Williamson's sense of failure as a prophet. His name was continually before the public with new books, but these were often only collected articles, broadcast talks, or reminiscences, linked by the story of a ramble, as in *Devon Holiday*, or in the form of a diary, like *Goodbye West Country*. His long-promised 'London trilogy', with Willie Maddison's cousin Phillip as the hero, remained unbegun. "I think that the force or emotion which wrote *The Flax of Dream*, and which was burning out spasmodically when I wrote *The Gold Falcon*,' he wrote in October 1936, 'has now gone out of me.' In his fortieth year he felt 'it was time to leave the West Country', where he had written 'about twenty books' in seventeen years and reared a family of healthy children; he 'needed new impressions, new stimulations'. How he found them - how he defied expert advice in buying a derelict afrm without a house, defied inexperience and difficulties to make practical farming profitable in three years of energetic endeavour - is told in *The Story Of A Norfolk Farm*, which, combining with practical knowledge the narrative faculty of a talented novelist, claims a classic place in the literature of agriculture.

Thus finding an anodyne for frustration and restlessness in tilling the soil, he felt that his mission was 'to work and to live so that I may serve the English people by making coherent their inner *geist* or aspirations, and so accelerate the making of the nation into one large family'. The paths of such different writers as Mr Middleton Murry and Mr H.J. Massingham converged by different courses into the same track; Mr Murry's *Adelphi*, founded to formulate a new faith in life, art and criticism soon after the last war, has become identified with those who may be disparaged as 'little Englanders', but who offer a solution to the evils of commercial civilisation in a return to the healthful life of husbandry.

The second world war intervened before Mr Williamson could reveal whether change of scene and activity had revived his artistic impulse. In a recent article, he repeats the axiom that 'art does not flourish in a war', remarking that 'only a half-wit, or a very selfish man, could behave or think without care of what was happening almost everywhere on the earth and in the air and the water'. Still incapable of detachment, he continues to suffer over man's witless self-immolation, seeing behind every tale of lauded heroism the wastage of life and effort, behind every victory the agonies of the maimed, the dying, and the bereaved, behind every air raid, not only the wanton destruction of the bombs, but the soul-destroying emotions of the bombers, and always, remembering the fraternising of Christmas, 1914, recognising the

helplessness of the common man, deluded by the parrot-cries of politicians into believing that all the right is on his side. But *The Flax Of Dream* was born of such suffering; still short of fifty, Mr Williamson should be reaching the maturity of his writing powers; it may be for him, with a great work of genius, to complete after this war the mission begun after the last. Meanwhile the prophet's voice in *The Flax Of Dream* rings still as clear after sixteen years; the cry of soul-scarred youth must surely find sympathetic hearers among a second generation of war survivors.*

*This was written in 1944, some months before publication in *New Saxon Pamphlets*. In the spring of 1945 Mr Williamson published *The Sun In The Sands*, an autobiographical novel based on his life during the years immediately following the first world war, and later in the year *Tales Of A Devon Village* and *Life In A Devon Village*, both the result of rewriting material originally used in *The Village Book* and *The Labouring Life*. A comparative reading of these last books with their earlier counterparts affords an astonishing study of a literary artist's development through fifteen years of maturing reflection.

*This piece is taken from* Little Reviews Anthology, 1946, *edited by Denys Baker, Eyre and Spottiswoode. I have been unable to trace the copyright holder and apologise in advance for any offence this may cause. Ed.*

*Maurice Wiggin writes about HW in the next issue of the Journal*