



The Henry Williamson Society

Schools' Writing Competition 2025

Source material

The source material consists of extracts from some of Henry Williamson's essays and short stories and from his book *Tales of a Devon Village*, together with extracts from *The Birdwatcher's Year* by his son Richard Williamson.

The Countryside in January

The Great Field is a marvellous place. Seen from the hills as you descend to the estuary it lies spread under your feet like a Joseph's coat. It is made up of strips and curves and rectangles of the wide and ancient river-bed; the soil is rich and deep. In Anglo-Saxon times it was the communal field of the village: it is still hedgeless, but now it has many owners, and alas! one modern house standing on its edge. The hues and colours of the strips – called 'splats' – vary with the seasons, the maturity of the barley, wheat, oats, grass and root-crops . . . [*Setting the scene and place using metaphors and similes for impact when starting a descriptive piece on a country walk.*]

Walking along Sandy Lane, leaving the Great Field behind, you see the berries of thorn and wild rose red in the hedges. Raindrops glimmer on the thorn-spikes. Each drop holds a miniature landscape, inverted. More berries – red and yellow of bryony twisted, as strings of beads, on their withered chords. Below, the white bones of a rabbit lie just off the track among the ruins of nettle-stalks; the skeleton is complete even to the finger bones of the paws. Here it dragged itself to die, after being mortally wounded by shot, or the talons of a buzzard, or the teeth of a stoat or weasel. Through the skull a daisy plant has pushed its young leaves, sturdier than most.

Soon the white flowers will hide the brittle skull and gentle teeth, and the nettles will arise and hide the whitethroat's nest; and they too, will fall in autumn and vanish, beaten by rain into earth again forgotten. [*Description of observations made of natural objects, animal and plant life as well as imaginative musings on their origins.*]

Returning along Sandy Lane, as a wild sunset broke with fire the western ocean sky, I saw a flock of green plover flying for the shore of the estuary. Above the smoky-red ball of the swollen sun they wheeled and formed into a long skein of black specks, trailing along the horizon until they formed an eyebrow over Lundy. The flock, of many thousands of birds, has haunted the Great Field all the winter; soon their plaintive cries will be heard in the hollows of the sandhills, and then we shall know that the time of darkness is passing, for the voice of the plover wheeling and diving over his mate is the first voice of spring in the West Country. [*Detailed but 'poetic' reporting of what is seen and felt.*]

(Published in *The New London Magazine*, January 1931)

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It is a wonderful feeling a man has when he is exploring a country for the first time, especially when he is young, with a war behind him, put away, he thinks, for ever. He is in a new country; he is a writer with the highest ambition; he lives in a thatched cottage said to have been built in the reign of King John, for a rent of eighteen pence a week.

Everything he sees and hears (when it is not about himself) is tremendously interesting, and forming into stories. The wild, beautiful, unexplored Atlantic seaboard! The falcons, the badgers, the otters, the character of the people! When he sits down to the table, the stories write themselves, out of his excitements.

That is the feeling I had when, one morning in the time of the primroses and celandines in the hedge banks, and gloss on the coats of grass-feeding red Devon cattle, I left my cottage, spurning to lock the door, and with stick in hand set out to explore the fishing village across the estuary. *[A description of how Henry Williamson himself felt about the way exploring a new place could inspire his nature writing.]*

(From 'The Crake', *Collected Nature Stories*, 1970)

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A Falcon's Eyrie

A path along Baggly (a headland in North Devon) north side, trodden by bullocks in the furze and bracken, takes us to the Point, with its 300-foot cliffs. Bluebells and primroses have seeded, the purple orchids and the dog violets are nearly over, the white bladder-campion and the pink sea-thrift are now in full flower. The bumble-bees know these flowery slopes below which grey gulls wheel and wail, and jackdaws float black as burnt straw-flakes above the blue-green waves. The bees bend the flowers, and fill their thigh-bags with pollen. But the boy with me is not interested in flowers . . .

Those white things trembling on the hummock of sea-thrift are not flowers, but the feathers plucked by the peregrine falcon from a razorbill. Scramble down if you care to; I will sit here and breath the wild-thyme wind, and watch the schooner so distant in the Severn Sea that she seems to be sailing in the sky. Probably you will find what remains of the razorbill's skeleton. Picked clean by the hooked beak of the falcon. You will find neither head, nor feet, nor legs; the head was knocked off by the impact of the falcon's stoop; the legs are in her crop; she has left only the sinew-linked wing-bones and the notched breastbone. How do I know? I have seen it often before. That hummock is a favourite plucking-place. For years the falcon has stood on that hummock; for years the flowers have been marred where her feet press. *[This piece could inspire and guide pupils choosing to write about what might be found in a gull's nest rather than a falcon's.]*

The Pitiless Gull

When you have toiled up the slope again, the bones pocketed for your museum, we follow one of the sheep paths – for the cattle do not roam out here – down to the colony of the herring gulls. The birds see us and utter their cries, half gabble and half wail. Yes; I have noticed that a gull floating in the sunshine is a lovely thing. How does it do it? It balances by leaning on the wind, its point of balance being in the centre of the breast. Hold out your arms and you will feel what I mean. Yes, it would be nice to have white feathers, and move downwards and against the air-flow, keeping at the same level and so slowly . . . *[This passage has been chosen to help inspiration to flow when writing about*

observations made on a walk in the country, a park or in a town. It is also relevant when choosing to describe gulls at the seaside.]

(Both the above passages are from 'With a Boy on the Headland', published in the *Daily Telegraph*, 13 June 1928)

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Black-Headed Gulls across Britain could be brooding [in June] their second clutches. About 150,000 pairs nest in coastal marches, sand dunes, reservoirs, lakes and tarns in Scotland. In the breeding season their velvet chocolate heads contrast wonderfully well with their cherry red beaks and legs. They build chunky nests on salt marches, or on sketchy grass and rubbish nests in sand dunes – occasionally they will build up to 20 feet up in a tree.'

In town and village gardens near the sea, Black-headed Gulls often come down to bird tables in winter. They will grab large items and take them off, when all the others will give noisy chase. Town and city gardens are more likely to have Herring Gulls, which often nest on the roofs in spring, again with much noisy calling. These bigger gulls are bold enough to attempt to take the chicks of Peregrine Falcons nesting on tall buildings. *[Providing some factual information about gulls in town and country habitats.]*

(From *The Birdwatcher's Year* by Richard Williamson, 2013)

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The Linhay on the Downs

On the high down above the sea, in the corner of the last rough grazing field, stands a linhay, half fallen into ruin. It is built of boles of spruce fir, unhewn but barked, and boarded with rough wooden boards. It has a roof of corrugated iron. The roof is intact, but many of the wooden boards have fallen with rusted nails. Those boards remaining are green and damp, and shaggy with grey lichens. The linhay had been built with its eastern end open to shelter bullocks in stormy weather, but the gentlemen farmer had sold the down with his other land after the Great War, and the new owner, a native farmer, had let it fall ruinous. . . .

On windy days buzzard hawks lie over the downs on crooked wings, watching for rabbits in the heather slope below; or turn and glide over the hill. It is a beautiful and desolate place where the spirit can spread itself wide and airy as the sea and sky. One morning between winter and spring I set out to picnic in the linhay with a companion. As we climbed the road to Windwhistle Cross the wind blew harder, and found cold places in our clothes. . . . After a while we reached a wall of stone and earth, tunnelled by rabbits, and fallen in gaps. The wind, seeking to level all things, was whipping up bits of stone and earth over the wall, and we had to shield our eyes. Plants growing on the crumbling riband of earth remaining on the top of the stones were pressed tightly down, guarding their leaves among the mosses from the stripping storms.

(from *Tales of a Devon Village* by Henry Williamson, 1945)

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Links to examples of related short nature films:

- Look for past episodes of BBC's Springwatch series:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/b007qgm3/springwatch>

- YouTube: 'Seagull', a short film by Myles McEwen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIUdk9JKXJg>

- YouTube: 'A walk up Bosley Cloud'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ns8C9N6zt0&list=PL8oAdvi5juyGS0xULHgG-NWbZyXJFrhVp&index=10>

- YouTube: Baggy Point and Saunton Down Walk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VK4XMbv-clc>