

Letters

May I, in this one letter, deal with two or three subjects touched upon in Journal No. 7.

First of all, it was with great regret that I learned of the death of Arthur Witham. Arthur was the resident of Shallowford House when I first visited there in 1969, and he and his wife Mary were hospitality itself, particularly when they learned of my deep interest in and admiration for Henry Williamson. They showed my wife and children and me over the house - and how wonderful it was to be where "The Children of Shallowford" had lived - Arthur presented me with a copy of the 1933 edition of *The Old Stag*, and supplied me with a few names and addresses of other HW admirers, among whom were dear old George Harris, John Gregory and a very young Stephen Clarke. And so I joined an early and unofficial Henry Williamson Society. My family and I have walked with Arthur and Mary in the Deer Park beneath the Railway Viaduct - now, alas, demolished - where the Williamson children would climb most dangerously. And we have enjoyed tea on the front lawn of Shallowford House beneath the yew trees; and I have photographed my children where the Williamson children once stood. Arthur Witham was a truly kind gentleman, and I shall miss him greatly.

Next, Henry's birthplace. I once obtained from Somerset House a copy of the birth certificate. This gives the following details:

Born: 1 December 1895. 66 Braxfield Road, Brockley, Lewisham, London.

Name: Henry William.

Father: William Leopold Williamson.
Mother: Gertrude Eliza Williamson formerly Leaver.
Occupation of Father: Bank clerk.

So there is no doubt at all that Henry was indeed born within a stone's throw of the Hilly Fields where so much of his childhood was spent.

And so to Henry's war service. Among the Colfe's Grammar School books held in the Local History Department of Lewisham Public Library, I once found recorded a post-war Roll of Honour which listed HW as follows:

WILLIAMSON, Henry William (1907-13)
Mobilised 5.8.14.
Private London Rifle Brigade; 2nd Lt
10th Batt. Bedford Regt.; Lieut.
Machine Gun Corps, 208 Co. 62nd Division. With 3rd Battn. Bedfords
Nov. 1917 and with 1st Battn. Sept. 1919 until demobilisation. Served in France.

These details were probably supplied to his old school by Henry himself. What leaps out at anyone familiar with the war books of the *Chronicle* is the way in which Henry has remained truthful to his actual wartime service. This further supports the theory I have always maintained, that Henry invented very little, and used truth as the basis of all his writings - with the one exception that he did not serve in the London Scottish in 1914, but was in The London Rifle Brigade (as was Cousin Willie during First Ypres!).

Finally, my congratulations to Tom and Joan Skipper for their excellent work in Bedfordshire, an area which always resisted my research; to John Glanfield for his fine letter on behalf of our Society to the BBC; and to the editorial staff for the excellence of the *Journal*.

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Thank you; your remarks are appreciated. Ed.

I hope other readers of the last number of the *Journal* have enjoyed as much as I have the extract from Beachcomber in *The Daily Express* of 15 November 1934. At that time the Beachcomber column was written by the late J.B. Morton, later C.B.E. The original Beachcomber, whom Morton had succeeded, was D. B. (Dominic Bevan) Wyndham Lewis. Both are now dead. Morton I used to see quite often, Wyndham Lewis more rarely; both were occasional callers at the office of *G.K.'s Weekly*, in Little Essex Street, Strand. My impression is that Wyndham Lewis rose to greater heights of fantasy and satirical farce, but that Morton kept to a steadier level of comedy. Both men were writers of serious biography and history; possessed of original talents of a high order, they were both front-rank followers of Belloc and Chesterton.

They were also personal friends of Henry Williamson, Wyndham Lewis being one of Henry's closest friends. I remember how warmly he and his wife greeted Henry on the occasion of his first delivering of his lecture, at the Royal Society of Literature, on "Some Nature Writers" (Jefferies and Hudson). Wyndham Lewis's death came as a great shock and sorrow to HW. (He attended the Requiem Mass to D.B.W.L. in Westminster Cathedral.)

In Part III of Henry William-

son's fictionalised work of autobiography *The Sun in the Sands* the author records how Beverley Baxter, of *The Daily Express*, made him acquainted with two friends who were on its staff: "One of them, called Bevan by his friends, was a wit whose daily column of humour, fun, and satire was much admired. His friend, Johnny, was a pastoral poet and writer of country essays. Johnny was a fanatical admirer of an older writer of large and varied talent, Hilaire Belloc".

The next two pages give a very amusing account of the personalities and behaviour of the two worthies, which is absolutely characteristic of each of them. Together with Williamson they set out on a visit to the Pyrenees. After various shared adventures and vicissitudes the two Fleet Street men part from Williamson and return home, leaving him to carry on alone.

Looking again at the chronology of all this I must revise what I said at the beginning of this note. I am pretty sure that in 1934 Wyndham Lewis - no relation to the novelist and painter - was still writing the *Express's* Beachcomber feature. The passage cited by Mr Fred Shepherd in the *Journal* seems to me much more in his style than in 'Johnnie' Morton's.

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I feel that the comments about the *Omnibus* programme on Henry that it was "solely and shrilly" about his

politics and that it was "inaccurate and unbalanced" are an avoidance of reality. The programme was self-evidently not inaccurate and certainly contained none of the "grosser" errors to which the circular refers. Neither was it unbalanced because it dealt with Henry's fascist writings. A writer's work is public and intended to be so. It is perfectly fair and correct to make programmes on "Writers of the Right" or on any other theme, and to concentrate on that perspective.

Of course, I entirely agree that the purpose of the Society is solely to promote the literature, but we are never going to be able to do this as long as we continue to show no comprehension of *why* fascist ideas generate such repugnance. Neither

will we convince anyone that we do not sympathise with those ideas as long as we are abusive toward those who express just indignation at them.

A need for the appreciation of Henry's literary achievement there may be. That is the Society's job to promote. Adding its name to a supposed media hit-list is not.

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THE HWS LENDING LIBRARY

John Gregory reminds members of the Society that a bound photocopy of HW's collected articles written for *The Eastern Daily Press*, entitled *Green Fields and Pavements*, is available via the Official Lending Library through Stephen Clarke.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE *JOURNAL*

Henry Williamson's *The Confessions of a Fake Merchant*, Part II.

E.J. Rogers on *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*.

The Editor reminds readers of the *Journal* that contributions for its pages are always welcome.