

IN DEFENCE OF CREATIVE GENIUS

Michael Loates

Portrait of a Country Artist by Ian Niall, published in 1980 is a concise biography of the life and work of Charles Tunnicliffe. Within its interesting and colourful pages is a chapter titled 'The World of Henry Williamson'. I recall reading this on the book's publication and feeling particularly incensed by what I considered to be bordering on the slanderous and unnecessarily demeaning to the late Henry and those immediate people in his life. Today, (April (1985)), I read again the chapter and, with mellowed feelings, find it worth some comment.

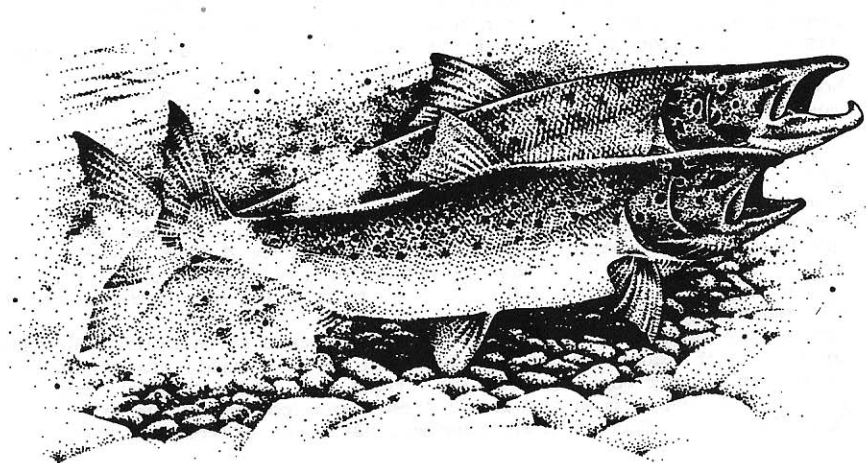
Henry is for me what Jefferies was for him. I do, however, as a painter myself, have a high regard for Tunnicliffe's work and I must also add that I have read both books and articles by Ian Niall finding him a vibrant and sensitive writer. Why then, with the combined talents of both artist and writer, was it necessary to devote an entire chapter publicising Henry in such a way?

Those who knew Henry and readers of the *Chronicle* will appreciate his life was certainly not without trauma and emotional distress. He was perhaps sometimes difficult and insensitive in his dealings with people as is strongly suggested in the topical chapter. There are, I believe, very few who fall into the category of 'Creative Genius' who are not high on success, low with depression, stimulant abusers or misled in romantic affairs. Tunnicliffe was a creative genius and a very rare one in as much as he struck me as a total realist. His very comment of Jefferies *Bevis* is a small but firm indication of this. 'He was particularly fond of the work of Jefferies but would have kicked *Bevis*'s backside!' He was indeed fortunate to have lived a multi-productive life and yet kept himself loyal and stable to a remarkable degree.

I do believe that almost all true artists, writers and musicians are not realists. I am continually reminded of this by people around me. We live on hope and dreams; we strive for that never attainable state of perfection. We are self-condemning and sometime manic depressives. Henry was certainly all these things. I am not implying that instability is an essential qualification in the production of true art. What I am saying is that to create a work which holds any element of truth and beauty, the emotions are sapped to a degree where one is temporarily, physically and mentally drained. During these periods one becomes socially distant and not infrequently intolerable.

Ian Niall says that Williamson never made his mark as a novelist and had no more success than Jefferies. I think most of us within the H.W. Society and indeed many readers outside would question this. Whether or not certain books by Henry failed to sell well, the impact they had on the few was great enough to establish them as works of genius. Also, had Jefferies had the good fortune to have lived longer than his 40 years he would doubtless have produced a greater volume of work and arguably may have become a celebrated novelist.

Perhaps we look at the 'creative genius' too critically. We hear of the oddities, and unacceptable face of their social and domestic affairs which, naturally, fascinate the masses. Yet without their own peculiar lifestyles, would they have produced such work? For it is the work which we should remember as the part of that person which was their ultimate achievement. We are all at the hands of critics whose words are merely one voice and not infrequently those of a would-be professional who would have liked to have aspired to the heights of their subjects. This is perhaps why Ian Nialls' words disturb me, for surely, isn't he a professional man?



Drawing by Mick Loates