

James Farrar: An Important Postscript

Daphne Odin-Pearse

Re the MSS, Diaries, etc. of James Farrar, whose book *The Unreturning Spring*, edited by Henry Williamson, was published in 1950; rev. ed. 1968; new ed. *Spring Returning* with fresh material selected by Christopher Palmer, June 1986.

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It appears that the information I have re the above is quite unknown to the Henry Williamson Society and so I will give the details, which I think will be of interest to our members, apart from the fact that it is important to have the facts recorded.

My story starts with my connection with the Farrars, Mother and Son. Eleven years ago in 1976, after reading *The Unreturning Spring*, I experienced an extraordinary reaction. Deeply impressed by the quality of the writing, poetry and prose, I also perceived the spirit behind the pages in a curious flash of comprehension. It was a personal thing. I had to do something about it. The book was out of print but the publishers, Chatto and Windus, informed me that his mother, Mrs Margaret Farrar, was still alive. I wrote — and she replied by return, 'Come and see me'. We met. Again that flash. It was mutual. We exchanged almost identical letters that same evening. Thus started a unique and abiding friendship, lasting until her death two years ago.

And so I gained the information I now pass on to you: that to ensure safety for all time, she donated all his MSS, papers, etc., to the Library of Exeter University, where I understand they were placed next to those of Henry Williamson; very fitting, as HW was the idol of the young Farrar and there was a strong bond between them.

I visited the University Library to see the collection for myself and there the story of James Farrar was laid before me — all very simple and strangely vulnerable in its little cardboard box. The most important and interesting, of course, being the Red Manual, mentioned so often in the Farrar books and broadcasts, wherein he wrote all of his poems and stories and beautiful prose sketches.

I found it deeply moving to sit with it in my hands; and becoming quite absorbed, it came as a shock when suddenly there was a full stop, and page after blank page stared whitely back at me. Stark reminder of that early dawn in July 1944 when his aircraft was shot down into the sea.

Then I noticed additions, placed quietly there by his mother — no comments — they spoke for themselves: the RAF ribbons from his uniform; the telegram; the official letters from the War Office. And there were other things to see, for those interested in the Farrar story: letters, pages torn from diaries — all writing, writing, writing by an eager spirit using every second of time and every scrap of paper available.

I was left with a lasting impression. A letter from a very 'high-up' in the RAF. Normally it should have been purely official. Instead, there was a detailed description of the most dazzling dawn on that particular morning; he was flying into it seconds before he died. Such sensitivity and imagination from the dry bones of officialdom. Thus proving flowers can spring from the sharpest of stones.

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Daphne Odin-Pearse has most generously made available to the Society a copy of a tape of a programme entitled 'The Unreturning Spring' by David Heycock broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in July 1967, which includes a contribution by HW. No doubt the opportunity to listen to this will be made at future meetings. Details from our Secretary, John Homan.