

Letters

Fellow members might be interested in a postscript to the well researched article – “Shedding light on Crow Point”, by Peter Lewis.

When we lived in Beach Cottage, Croyde, immediately after the war one of our favourite walks was over Down End and across Saunton Sands to Crow Point. During the war mines had been planted in the sand dunes on the edge of the Burrows. After the war these mines were removed and exploded by high pressure hoses mounted on armoured vehicles. All day the noise of exploding mines could be heard in Croyde. One day as we walked along the beach we found that a sand dune had been completely washed away, revealing the bleached bones of a large whale. I carried home two of the large vertebra, and for the next two years they served as seats each side of the driftwood fire in Beach Cottage. This skeleton must have been the remains of the whale washed ashore in 1911. When we left Croyde I gave the vertebra to a friend and with them about fifty glass fishing net floats – I wish I had them now!

In those far-off days after the war before visitors had arrived in large numbers, the North Devon Coast was an idyllic place, and Henry Williamson’s buzzards, ravens and peregrine falcons were flying over Baggly Point and the almost empty sands.

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“Veronica”

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As a former native of the locality, I was fascinated to read Mick Loates’s article ‘South Devon Days from the Innocent Moon’ in Journal No. 24.

Mick Loates seems fairly sure that Malandine beach is South Milton Sands, to the east of Thurlstone Sands. I would suggest that it may be a combination of several beaches – Henry Williamson

employing an element of artistic licence My first thought on reading The Innocent Moon was that it was Bantham further to the west of Thurlstone; certainly it too used to have a stream 25 years ago, though now lost under the sand.

On the east side of Bolt Head, just outside Salcombe, there is a rock shaped like a head. When I was first shown it by a local farmer, he told me it was Queen Victoria and indeed it does look very like her head on coins of the period. I am sure this is Phillip Maddison’s ‘Britannia’, transposed, again with artistic licence, round into Bigbury Bay.

Finally, I would once again suggest artistic licence in the case of ‘The ruins of Valhalla’. I feel sure Mick Loates is correct in his location of Valhalla. There are however ‘ruins’ on the west side of Bolt Tail – not much, admittedly, but the outline of a hill fort. Alternatively, the ‘ruins’ may be an artist’s view of the damage caused by storms and landslips on the rock formation.

I would agree with Mick Loates that the area would make a good location for a meeting.

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I well know how difficult it is to write a sentence in the English language that is absolutely free from any possible ambiguities of meaning. All the same, the sentence in Mr Hamish Carlisle’s letter about a possible attempt to link Henry Williamson with ‘yet another unsavoury politician’ made me wonder. The reference here can only be to the late Sir Oswald Mosley, I think.

There may be many among your readers, especially, perhaps, younger members of our Society, who have no firsthand knowledge of Mosley and have not read his writings. But if they know anything of Henry Williamson they will realize the impossibility of the notion that he would have admired, and felt honoured by the friendship of an ‘unsavoury politician’.

They will find a very true portrait of Oswald Mosley and his policies in Henry's novel The Phoenix Generation, where he appears as Sir Hereward Birkin; and they may be urged also to read Robert Skidelsky's biography Oswald Mosley.

Certainly it is possible to disagree with Mosley's policies; it is hardly possible, if one is correctly informed, not to respect him as a patriotic Englishman and a politician of unquestionable probity.

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I read with great interest Mick Loates's article in Journal No. 24 – 'South Devon Days from The Innocent Moon'. I believe that Mr Loates has fallen into the trap that Henry Williamson set for his reader when writing The Innocent Moon.

When I first read this volume of the Chronicle, I was puzzled by the locations in south Devon as the little I knew then of the author was that he had lived in North Devon and his books on the countryside were all set in that area. I pored over maps of the Kingsbridge district but couldn't quite reconcile the places mentioned to the information given on the maps. In the end, I accepted the position though not without some small reservations.

However, when some years later I read Henry's The Sun in the Sands all my doubts returned. For members who have not read this book, it is an isolated work of autobiography, written in Florida in 1924 but not published until 1945. It covers the same period as The Innocent Moon 1921-1923, but of course the main protagonist is Henry Williamson, not Phillip Maddison.

All the same characters from The Innocent Moon are there: Irene and Barley, Sophy and Annabelle, Julian Warbeck, Piggy etc, and the plot is in most essentials that of the Chronicle volume. The literary figures are not disguised but appear as Walter de la Mare., Middleton Murry, J.D. Beresford and so on. Those sections of the narrative set in Devon are clearly about the

countryside of North Devon and Georgeham in particular. Admittedly, the village is not actually named but reference to Skirr Cottage, The Kings Arms, The Higher House, The Burrows and to trips along the coast to Morte and Lynton put it beyond doubt.

When Henry came to write in 1960 that part of the Chronicle which deals with his hero Phillip Maddison first coming to live in Devon he must have been in a quandary: He had already written it, albeit in an autobiographical form, in The Sun in the Sands published fifteen years before. His solution was to keep all the characters but to transfer the Devon scenes to South Devon. Another departure was to have Barley married to Phillip and to die in childbirth rather than to perish in a climbing accident in the Pyrenees as related in the earlier book

Henry Williamson obviously was not unacquainted with the south of Devon. Indeed, his somewhat lightweight travel book On Foot in Devon published in 1933 does, however superficially, deal with some parts of South Devon. I would guess that he thoroughly researched the topography of the South Hams before transposing the Georgeham district into South Devon in The Innocent Moon.

If one substitutes Baggy Point for Valhalla, Skirr Cottage for Valerian Cottage, Croyde for Turnstone, Vention Sands for Maladine Sands, South Molton for Malborough, Braunton for Queensbridge etc. the true area that Henry is describing becomes clear.

As far as Mr Loates's suggestion to base a future Society meeting in the south of the county is concerned, I would certainly endorse this if only to see the various locations and to admire the skill which Henry employed to bamboozle his faithful readers in this topographical matter!

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