Adventure Lit His Star

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If I pass during some nocturnal blackness, mothy and warm
When the hedgehog travels furtively over the lawn,
One may say, He strove that such innocent creatures,
should come to no harm.
But he could do little for them; and now he is gone.

These lines from Thomas Hardy's poem 'Afterwards' were delivered by Amanda Allsop at the funeral of her father, Kenneth Allsop twenty years ago on 29 May 1973. Henry Williamson was also there to see his old friend interred at the village church of Powerstock, Dorset.

Kenneth Allsop had died on Wednesday, 23 May from acute barbiturate poisoning. That day his wife Betty and daughter Amanda had gone to London with the Bridport and District Arts Society on a visit to the Chelsea Flower Show and the Mermaid Theatre and were not expected home till midnight.

Allsop had been due at television studios in London that evening but had failed to turn up. The police discovered his body later that evening in a sitting position in his bed with a clip-board and beside him a book, *The Collected Dorothy Parker*, open with two quotations underlined: 'I can find no other means of dealing with the pain of being,' and 'There is nothing good in life that will not be taken away'.

Despite this apparent indication of suicide, no last note was declared and the coroner recorded an open verdict. It was not until 1990 that the family revealed a final letter to Betty in which Ken told of the consistent pain of his amputated leg and tubercular kidney. Thirty years of this had worn him down to the point at which he could no longer go on, despite the love and support of Betty and the children.

But it was more than physical pain that wearied him. In that same final message he recalled the previous weekend he and Betty had spent in Wales watching his beloved peregrines, whose lives he regarded as ideal and honest compared with his own. In his notes for a piece that eventually appeared in *The Sunday Times* after his death he had scribbled, 'We poison them, we shoot them, we steal their eggs and young. It is so wrong. We are the predators and the killers, not those peregrines. For they and the few of their kind which survive live exalted lives, true to their nature, and we degrade and damage their world which is so beautiful and complex and balanced'.

Despite Allsop's success as an author, journalist and television commentator, many believe he had abused his real talent, had not been true to his nature like the peregrines, and envied Henry Williamson and others who had spurned bogus celebrity status to dedicate themselves to writing. Colin Wilson once commented that Ken had got used to the bottle of scotch in the cupboard, a symbol to him of financial security.

In this piece I have reviewed Kenneth Allsop's life from the many press cuttings that are filed about him and have examined his own writings in an attempt to show that he had become spiritually bankrupt when he took his own life. At various intervals during his fifty-three years Allsop's own doubts about his chosen path are revealed. Few writers have such an encouraging start and although he was to become a well-known 'personality', this dubious accolade was eventually resented and he increasingly found himself trapped between his urge to write and the

stimulation and security of television journalism.

Kenneth Allsop was born 29 January 1920 in Yorkshire, the son of a Civil Servant. He came from a family of fire-and-brimstone preachers and two brothers were to grow up to be Methodist ranters. He was educated at St Andrew's College, a minor public school in Hertfordshire. At fourteen he discovered a copy of *The Lone Swallows* in the library and found in Henry Williamson someone who felt as he did about birds and the countryside. Ken persuaded his parents to holiday in Devon and he wrote to HW who arranged for Windles to show him the area. But it was HW he had wanted to see.

After leaving school in 1938 he joined the *Slough Observer* as a cub reporter but his career was interrupted by the war and he entered the RAF in 1940 and two years later, at a party to celebrate the New Year, Allsop met Betty Creake. She recalled their first meeting in an interview with the *Daily Express* in 1973. 'He was with a group of airmen. I fancied his friend more than him. I thought he was a bit funny-looking and thin, but while we were talking he said something humorous. I picked it up and we spent the rest of the evening up on the balcony putting the world to rights.' According to Dan Farson, this included giving Betty a copy of *The Flax of Dream*. She must have liked it for they were married three months later, spending their honeymoon in North Devon and this time meeting HW, calling on him at the hut. For ever after he became part of their lives.

In the following year Allsop's plane crashed during an aircrew training flight. This accident severely damaged his right leg which eventually had to be amputated. During his subsequent two years sojourn in hospital he began writing short stories and later, when he returned to journalism, his first novel was published. *Adventure Lit Their Star* is outside the usual stream of fiction and is based on the true story of how the little ringed plover established itself as a breeding species in Buckinghamshire. Published in 1949 it won the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize.

As Britain recovered from six years of war, Allsop had a number of journalistic jobs including *John Bull, Evening Advertiser* (Swindon), *Sunday Express,* Press Association, *Picture Post, Evening Standard* (London) and the *Daily Mail.* During this time he continued with his short stories, one of which, 'The Terns', appears in the June 1950 issue of *Chambers's Journal.* But it was in 1955 that he came to the public's notice as a reporter at Independent Television News, moving on to present a fortnightly documentary series, 'Searchlight', for Granada. Then came his biggest break, joining the BBC in 1960 as a studio interviewer and film report for 'Tonight'.

In 1962, by which time he was fronting the 'Tonight' programme, Allsop's first book, *Adventure Lit Their Star,* was reissued by Macdonald (publishers of HW's *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight.*). HW praised it highly in a review published in the *Daily Mail* describing it as 'abounding in extraordinary observation'. Henry also related Kenneth's bike trip to see him at Georgeham in the Thirties.

In his foreword to this edition, Allsop tells that he held the book in great affection as he felt he had captured the quality of the intense excitement and joy that he had derived from that small bird's attempt to establish itself in a new country. It was a joy that was to elude him for many years.

By 1963 Allsop was enough of a 'personality' to be interviewed by the *Daily Mail* on how he felt about life after forty. In it he reflects on the gains and losses of reaching middle-age. The most telling of these, (and to my mind those which show how far he had drifted from his own nature) were two examples of his losses: 'Ecstatic delight that birds and the countryside once had for me – gone, now, but for nostalgic redolence,' and 'I wish I had a clear scale of priorities, a sound set of

values, greater conviction of what I'm about, what I've done and what I should do.'

Despite misgivings about his direction, Allsop took another step up the career ladder in 1965 when he was made presenter of the BBC current affairs programme 'Twenty-Four Hours', which was to dominate his life for the next seven years. From this platform he was to become a household celebrity whilst his two books of American social history, *The Bootleggers* and *Hard Travellin'*, also enhanced his growing reputation.

In 1968, following Malcolm Muggeridge's resignation, Allsop was elected Rector of Edinburgh University and was awarded a research fellowship at Oxford to develop his inquiry into nineteenth century agrarianism, which he believed led to twentieth century totalitarianism. Profiles of him appeared in several Sunday newspapers including a feature in *The Sunday Times* in May 1968 in which Allsop is quoted as denying his proven skills by saying, 'I don't rate myself as a creative writer. My abilities are journalistic, I can write documentary stuff. I don't see myself as an author'.

The same feature mentioned that he had been treated for a tubercular kidney which had kept him off air, but he was anxious to get back to the studio, 'The battle of daily TV leaves its mark. I leaves scar tissue. But outside TV I would miss the sting of events in my nostrils. It's obligatory to be in it'.

Such public prominence gave him 'personality' status, but he abhorred the label. So much so that he wrote to *The Times* in November 1968 to point out that he was a journalist and not 'the television personality Kenneth Allsop'. Later *The Guardian* was to describe him playfully as a TVIP – 'a televisually important person'. He was further off-course than ever.

His journalistic skills had brought him material success and he now had a substantial house at Braughing in Hertfordshire with a Methodist chapel at the bottom of the garden and the river Quinn beyond it. Flattered by public attention and academic recognition he drifted further into the world of media triviality. In March 1969 he is seen sporting a moustache and sideburns and is held in esteem as a trend-setter. His thoughts on what the well-dressed man should be wearing are aired in *The Observer* – he buys suits at Harrods and Jaeger, striped, button-down shirts in America, elastic-sided boots from chain stores. For casual wear he likes corduroys, denim shirts and fisherman sweaters, finished off with a splash of lime-scented after-shave. He drives a Jaguar E-type.

In an interview with the now defunct *Reveille*, Allsop is described as 'That rather dandyish yet sharp man'. The piece leads into an exposure of Allsop's dual life between weekday TV studio and weekends in his country farmhouse. 'I need the countryside as it has a replenishing effect on me... on the other hand I need London to be part of The Scene [sic]'.

That he was attractive to women goes without saying and two years after his death, Betty felt able to tell the *Daily Mail* about his numerous affairs, which she bore with great dignity. 'Sometimes I did feel bitter, ... some were bitches, some made him very unhappy, some were unfaithful to him and he took it out on us,' Betty is quoted as saying. A perceptive friend told her, 'You don't understand, in an affair the wife isn't being rejected'. Deeper matters were disturbing him.

It was at this time that Allsop was able to interview Henry Williamson in a BBC programme series 'Personal Choice'. Williamson, seventy two years old, had arrived at the studio expecting a tribute from his old friend and had not asked for a list of questions in advance. The interview started well with Allsop exploring the genesis of *The Chronicle* but then it developed with a number of personal questions. In my view, these more intimate explorations were an attempt by Allsop to

discover answers to some of his own dilemmas. These included questions about artists betraying their talents to become men of action and whether money and material things had ever been important to Williamson.

But the question that devastated Williamson was about his failed marriages. 'Henry, you're a contradictory and complicated man, and your dedication to the ideal of a new man in tune with himself and with nature and with his own family has in fact resulted in a fairly disrupted personal life. Your marriages haven't worked, and now you live alone, and you seldom see your children, I think. Do you ever feel that the cost of yoursense of mission has been too great?'

Williamson was quick to contradict the accusation, 'No, I think the mistake I made was taking on other people's troubles, instead of getting on with my work. But I must say we're a fairly harmonious family now. I see all my children – even my grandchildren call me Henry, which I think is a great privilege, because I want to feel equal with them, and my wife Gipsy, who's Mary of my book *The Pathway*, thinks I've done very well.'

In spite of Henry's feeling that Allsop had betrayed him, he was generous enough to dedicate the last of the *Chronicle* novels, *The Gale of the World*, to his old friend. But this attempt at rapprochement failed. Allsop found the book distasteful and disliked it intensely. Although he wrote to thank Henry for sending it to him, he was unable to bring himself to write further about it. It was a tragedy for Henry, who thought this final novel would bring him the recognition he had so earned and deserved.

Meanwhile Allsop had complied with a request in March 1970 from Victor Bonham-Carter, the secretary of the Royal Literary Fund, to provide a letter of appreciation in order that Williamson could be considered for a Civil List Pension. (Not, as Dan Farson suggests in his *Portrait of HW*, an Honour). In it, Allsop had no hesitation in labelling Williamson a genius and one of the great writers of this age. Henry turned down this offer. (AW/Ed. In a conversation with myself and Richard at the time HW implied that he found this insulting as he didn't need 'charitable' funds but had expected any offer made to be of an Honour of some sort. It *may* be that this refusal was taken as a refusal in principle of any kind of reward and thus that no further offers arose purely due to this instance.)

At Easter 1970 the Allsops moved to The Mill, West Milton in Dorset. A stone house surrounded by chalk downs and deep, secret coombs, well beyond the commuter belt. Life here was ostensibly idyllic and although Allsop had convinced himself that as a journalist he could live where he wanted – allowing for trips to London to newspaper office or television studio – he saw even less of the family.

So enthusiastic was he about his new surroundings that the editor of the *Daily Mail* suggested he write a Saturday column about life and wildlife at The Mill called 'In The Country'. Allsop found this immensely satisfying as he had been given a chance to write about his favourite subject and perhaps recapture that joy he experienced when writing his first book. However this time he was consciously writing for a mainly suburban audience, in much the same way Richard Jefferies had a century earlier when writing pieces for *The Standard*.

At this time he was also writing many letters to his daughter Amanda, who was studying at The University of East Anglia. Although Allsop himself had not had the benefit of a university education, he was keen that his children should have the chance. None of them managed Oxbridge and Amanda was struggling with her degree at Norwich, only to be nagged by her father in the many letters he sent her. Later, in 1974, this correspondence was published as *Letters To His Daughter*, having been serialised in the *Daily Mail* before publication.

Allsop also kept a private journal in which, Amanda later revealed, he recorded his unhappy estrangement from Betty and his own lack of sensitivity in regard to his father's death in November 1970. His mother died only four months later.

Despite his refuge at the mill, he couldn't escape from press attention and in November 1971 the *Radio Times* ran a fawning profile. Asked if he could ever give up television and the fame it had brought, Allsop said he hated being recognised and asked the reporter not to name the village where he lived. Tellingly, the piece ends with a quote from Allsop, 'I don't much like the time I live in. Ideally, I'd like to have been an eighteenth-century botanical parson'.

That same month, the *Sunday People* reported that a shake-up at the BBC was likely to mean the end of David Dimbleby, Ludovic Kennedy and Kenneth Allsop presenting '24 -Hours', and in April 1972, the *Daily Express* revealed that Allsop was to present a new environmental programme and would quit '24-Hours' in May, two months before the programme was to end. Despite this opportunity to shake off the burden of television and its demands, Allsop did not take the reshuffle lightly and attacked his bosses in *The Listener* –'24-Hours' had been run on a shoestring, it was moved about like a mobile snackbar if show jumping or ballroom dancing over-ran, he claimed.

However, he pressed on with his new weekly programme, 'Down To Earth', which was launched on Wednesday May 17, telling *The Times*, 'The environment seems to me to be the most important subject a journalist can concern himself with today'.

This was literally so, for he had a battle on his hands to protect the landscape right on his own doorstep. An American oil company had applied to Dorset County Council for permission to carry out exploratory boring for oil and gas in West Dorset. The Dorset citizens banded together under the banner of 'Defenders of West Dorset' voting Allsop as President. Well-crafted letters appeared in the national press over his name and other protest groups supported the 'Defenders'. But it was in vain and permission for exploratory drilling was granted in June.

Meanwhile, 'Down to Earth' was seen as the first genuine attempt by television to popularise the issue of the environment and make it the concern of all. Hordes of complaints about environmental abuse poured into the programme from anxious viewers. But when the first programme awarded a 'Plastic Banana' to Mr Peter Walker, Minister of the Environment, the joke raised few laughs in the upper reaches of BBC management. It was not lost on them that it was Walker who had refused to intervene over the Dorset drilling controversy. After only eight programmes the BBC killed it off blaming poor audience figures. It was the end of a twelve-year television career for Allsop who told the *Daily Express*, 'I am now like a dandelion clock floating in the breeze.'

This was a devastating blow for Allsop and the nadir of his life. His television career was over, his column for the *Daily Mail* had ended, his parents had died, his relationships with Betty and Amanda were strained and he had not been able to complete a book on Harriet Beecher Stowe that he had been commissioned to write. The Dorset landscape (beloved and made famous by Thomas Hardy) was being exploited for oil – a damning comment on the elected guardians of Britain's countryside. In addition, the pain of his amputated leg and the worry of the tubercular kidney were ever-present.

On Friday 11 May 1973, Allsop and his wife attended The West Country Writers' Association congress in Exeter. Henry Williamson, a past President, was also there and the two men were finally reconciled. The following weekend, the last before his death, the Allsops went to Wales, where he was able to watch his beloved

peregrines. Perhaps his reconciliation with Henry and the weekend in Wales were part of his putting matters in order. It will never be known for just how long he was planning to end his life but the urge to do so must have been a ruthless one for the day before he killed himself had been Amanda's birthday and Tristan's was the following week.

In July, two months after his death, *The Sunday Times* announced that it was launching The Kenneth Allsop Memorial Essay, for which an annual prize of £250 would be awarded for the following three years for the best article on conservation or any related topic. It also reported that a Kenneth Allsop Memorial Fund had been set up by Friends of the Earth, some of his friends and family. Andrew Lloyd Webber had agreed to donate his half of proceeds from the charity gala performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, for which he had composed the music. And a month later Amanda told *The Sunday Times*, 'With the money we'd like to buy Eggardon Hill in Dorset. We hope the National Trust will be prepared to look after the land'. But the plan did not come to fruition and early in 1974 it was decided to use the fund to buy a 50-acre island in the Bristol Channel. Steep Holm is a loaf-shaped mass of limestone rock five miles off Weston-super-Mare. Its cliffs are 250-feet high and hidden in them is a unique complex of Victorian gun batteries. The island is listed as a site of special scientific interest, particularly for its fauna. Amanda was quoted in *The Sunday Times* as saying 'Conservation was his life and this will be the perfect memorial. The island has views from Exmoor to the Black Mountains and can be saved as a place of great beauty and importance'. It is not recorded if peregrines have ever been sighted there.

Today, the Kenneth Allsop Memorial Trust administers the island and has in the past received support from the Countryside Commission and Woodspring District Council. It can be visited between April and October, weather and tides permitting. The Trust's handout says that the island was bought to perpetuate the memory of the naturalist and broadcaster Kenneth Allsop, but there is no guaranteed future income and recruiting members to the Trust is its only method of raising income. The sale of souvenirs to visitors raises further funds but the items available range from tea-towels to comb cases, all the unimaginative products associated with English seaside holidays. Now, plans for a Severn tidal power scheme will present the island with new problems.

Sadly none of Kenneth Allsop's books are on sale at Steep Holm for not one is in print. Had he stuck to his last after the success of *Adventure Lit Their star*, I believe we would now have been honouring a writer as remarkable as Henry Williamson or Richard Jefferies. I mourn the writer we have lost. I think of him still, aptly captured in another of Thomas Hardy's poems, 'Wessex Heights':

So I am found on Ingpen Beacon, or on Wylls-Neck to the West,
Or else on homely Bulbarrow, or little Pilsdon Crest,
Where men have never cared to haunt, nor women have walked with me,
And ghosts then keep their distance; and I know some liberty.