

Dear Filly . . . Love, Harry

John Gregory

While a frustrated Henry was kicking his heels on Home Service during the summer of 1918, stationed with the 3rd Battalion of the Bedfordshire Regiment out on the east coast at Landguard Fort, Felixstowe, he spent at least some of his free time in writing to a girl whom he had known since before the war. There is nothing so unusual in this – what is more unexpected is that there is no mention of her in his surviving diaries and private papers, while her existence was previously unknown to his biographer. This might seem surprising, for Henry put so much of himself and his life into his books – and Anne Williamson's two biographies are so comprehensive – that the reader feels there must be little new to learn about him. That this is not necessarily so was well illustrated when Tony Evans uncovered the story of Henry's previously unknown friendship with the Radford family at Ingo Brake, in Lydford, South Devon.¹

The girl was Miss Phyllis Maude Taylor – 'Fill', or 'Filly', as Henry called her. The very little that we know about her is gleaned from the few surviving letters from Henry that she kept all her life – just four of them. Phyllis lived in St German's Street, Forest Hill, just south of Brockley, and she went to school at St Ursula's Convent in Park Avenue. It seems certain that this was the same school that Biddy, Henry's younger sister, attended; the two must have been contemporaries and also good friends, for Phyllis joined the Williamson family for their holiday at East Runton in Norfolk in 1912 (although William Leopold was no doubt on his own cycling holiday elsewhere). She and Henry therefore knew each other at least from 1912, but most probably from two years or so earlier than this. In the summer of 1918, when Henry was 22, Phyllis would have been 18 or 19 years old. It is clear that there was an easy familiarity between them – and that Phyllis also knew Doris Nicholson (Helena Rolls, of course, in the *Chronicle*). Smoke- and water-damaged from a house fire – perhaps in the Blitz? – the letters were auctioned in 1999, together with two short stories and three poems written by Henry and two other personal items.² If the auction took place after she had died, then Phyllis lived to a grand old age. It is more likely, though, that the sale was prompted by the death of her son John, Henry's godson, for also included in the lot was Henry's christening present to him: an inscribed copy of the 1927 first edition of *Tarka the Otter*, limited to 1100 copies.

While some of the writing is now illegible, the letters make for interesting and poignant reading today, portraying a time long lost in ancient sunlight. These are the first two, written on the headed paper of the 3rd Battalion, The Bedfordshire Regiment:

*Felixstowe
18 July [1918]*

My dear Filly,

Sorry, I mean Phyllis. I am writing you just a short note to let you know that I have not forgotten you – yet!

I am back again in this beastly hole and unutterably tired. I say, dear one, you might learn Coleridge-Taylor's "Demande et Response": if you dont already know, then you can play it when I come up next time to take you out. You wont object, will you, to be taken out by me?

That piece by Coleridge-Taylor is exquisite. The 'Demande' is full of pleading and beautifully expressed – the answer is light & abandoned, and (so it seems to me) shallow.

On the other hand, my dear friend, it may be that the answer is joyous beyond everything. The whole meaning of music is that it appeals to each one differently, & we each put our own interpretation on it.

How is David, or whatever his name is? Is he still as nice as ever, and have his eyes that deep soulful look that Milton wrote of "The eyes are the windows of the soul". They are – sometimes, but not always, sweet one.

Write to me if you so desire – I shall like hearing from you.

*Love,
Harry*

That piece of literature may be
appreciated. The elements in full of
pleading and somewhat expressed -
the answer is right or a bad deed and
(no it seems to me) shallow.

On the other hand, my dear friend, it may be that the answer is joyous beyond everything. The whole meaning of music is that it appeals to each one differently, & we each put our own interpretation on it.

How is David, or whatever his name is? Is he still as nice as ever, and have his eyes that deep somber look that melts into woe of "the very windows of the soul"? They are - sometimes, but not always, sweet ones.

Write to me if you so desire - I
shall like hearing from you.

Love Harry



3d BATTALION

Yale, Conn
18 July

My dear Lily,

Sorry, Inez Phyllis. I am
writing you just a short note to
let you know that I have not
forgotten you — yet!

I am back again in this
beastly hole and unutterably
tired. I say, dear me, you might
learn Wadsworth-Taylor's "Demande
et Response": if you don't already
know, then you can play it
when I come up next time to
take you out. You won't forget, will

To Jack & the Taylor

Code to the Machine Gun

How hard by my side - Ladies my gun team learn
my ways.
Now you learn my ways and I forget the
thunderbolt
I have a gun and a rifle and pistol my children
but
The children of the gun have
nothing but

[illegible]

Franklin
Ch. W. H. Redf. Regt

(On the same day he wrote the above letter, he was writing in his diary, *Foch's counter offensive begins which will end the war.*)³

Landguard Camp,
Felixstowe.
2 Aug [1918]

Dear Fill,

Thanks for the thanks for my letter and the appreciation of my notepaper.
How observant you are!

- (1). No, I am not still tired of life. I enjoy life very much.
- (2). Your "subtle" hints are appalling and silly.
- (3). I expect to go to the Front any day.
- (4). Your supposition that I "may have forgotten you" is not a sound one.

Thanks for the information about David and his peepers. How boring!

Yes [... illegible ...] explain.

Yes, I will excuse the notepaper you wrote on, only I am expecting better from you shortly written on a piece of magazine paper or the border of the Daily Mail.

However, don't worry, nothing really matters.

If I come up on leave shortly, it might be from 9 – 13 Aug, & I might possibly want to take you to a theatre or something, but I expect you won't turn up, but if you do, I shall cut you dead if you appear like this [there follows a drawing of a short-skirted girl, with the comment a little bit longer please, no longer the ... illegible]

Biddy and Kathie are, I believe, in Cornwall, & Mother in Essex near 'Sarfend'.

Father still works on his plantation. Rubber or tea, I believe.

"P. M. T." – Phyllis Maude Taylor, eh? Purely mental telepathy told me that, possibly my thoughts – – oh shut up, I'm so tired.

Give my love to all, & come to Felixstowe for your 'education' [?]

Love to all,

Sillybilly.

On the last page of the letter above are drawings of David and his eyes, and the caption *I'm David – I play the piano & write silly letters to young Fil Taylor – she likes me, you know.* Henry then adds *POUFF!!*

Perhaps it was with one of these letters that Henry enclosed an original handwritten poem, now badly stained and faded. Undated, though likely to have been written while he was undergoing initial training with the Machine Gun Corps at Belton Park near Grantham, Lincolnshire, it is addressed to Miss Phyllis Taylor (probably at a later date than the poem's composition), and is signed *H. Williamson, Lt. 1st Bn Bedf. Regt.* It reads:

Ode to the Machine Gun

*Here hard by my English glades my gun teams learn their ways,
Men new-trained and men who have fought through the thundering battle haze.
English forests awake from sleep and repeat my chattering tale.
The hills look down on the plain below and echo my rattling hail!*

*Here hard by on the ragged lip of a trench just won through hell,
Patient, I wait for the counter charge that shall melt! – if they lay me well!
Down, bow down, ye of race accursed!
Down, bow down, ye Huns!
Mine is the fan that purge the earth – mine and my sister guns!*

Sent possibly at the same time as this, another poem is untitled, on a separate sheet of paper, with other notes and what appear to be a sketch of trench lines and doodles of biplanes – Lille,

presumably the town in northern France, is also marked. Of particular interest are mentions of both Phyllis and Doris Nicholson, an indication surely that the two girls knew each other. The draft poem, and a further 'sketch', reads:

*Through the land of death and sorrow, I went wandering in the moon
Seeing all the old loved faces through the pale & trembling gloom,
All the pals I've lived and fought with,
Through the valley of the Shadows.
Some were boys and some were men,
Heroes all. I passed them wandering with the Army,
With the Dead and Silent Army.*

Miss Phyllis Taylor – a sketch

As I entered the room at twilight, I saw her sitting at a piano. A small girl – yet the strains of pure liquid melody that came from the piano denoted the artist of no small ability.

The next letter to Phyllis is post-war, written in pencil during the spring of 1920; Henry had started work as a canvasser in the Classified Advertisements Department of *The Times* in early January, though it needed little – this spring day, for example – to distract him from its tedium.

Richmond

Tuesday afternoon

[Henry added a note to the top of this page after finishing the letter: *P.S. Keep this; it will be worth £100 in 30 years time.*]

Dear Phyllis,

Thanks for your letter; I wondered if I should ever receive a reply to mine.

At the present moment I am sitting by the Thames side at Richmond: the day is too beautiful to work so I came down here.

Across the river, swirling and lapping gently against the stone sides of the bank, the willow greens are covered with a mantle of delicate, faerie green; flecked as it were with gentle leaf-foam. The sun shines down on the steel-blue surface of the flowing river – taking unto itself the blueness of the sky – shining in a broad expanse of silvery spangle, rippling with light, aetherial sheen, spilling in flickering pools of whiteness.

Among the willows a great titmouse is singing, calling with his spring song for his mate. His notes are borne across the blue-shining river, clear and distinct; coming to the ear as though he were only a few yards away.

The wind is gentle, the sun is warm. Unfortunately a nasty little boy is trying to whistle in front; he cannot, and it is exceedingly monotonous. Then he treads in a puddle. "Come here, Geoffrey" she calls. Geoffrey, Geoffrey, Geoffrey, whistle, whistle, whistle – not a musical sound, but dull, flat, irritating and monotonous.

He's gone now, thank goodness!

You mention the stars, upon a certain evening when the beacon-rays of Sirius shone high in the dome of the sky; when Venus, like a white ball of fire hung serene and alone; when the other planets winked and glowed – driven pin heads of silver-light.

And yet what was the use of that conversation? No use – better if it had never been mentioned.

The wind ceases for a moment, the heat of the sun is slightly increased. Here comes a smoke-belching tug, drawing behind it a cordon of dark, low-sunken, heavy-laden barges, going down river towards London. Nasty, ugly thing, grating on the mental ear, polluting the rising essence of spring in the air with minute particles of dead, evil-smelling matter.

Which copy of R. Jefferies have you got? 'The Story of my Heart' is his finest work – it is the autobiography of his genius, of his soul aspirations. The other works of his, (some of them) are full of fine, poetical feeling; deep thought and the 'gold of genius' – the hand of the master.

Now I am going to tell you a great secret! I've changed the name of my book to "The Flax of Dream". The title is explained in this passage: "He to whom the Master had given the Flax of Dream wove hurriedly, and the web was broken. All the beauty in the world that he loved resolved itself in the years of his youth to a hazy outline; then into a well-defined object. The stirring of the sap after the cold bleakness of winter; the rising of the earth-spirit through the million blades of grass; the bursting [?] of the buds to the warm wind; the cloud shadow racing over the meadows, while the sweet burst of sunshine came through the gaps in their high-piled mass, all these filled him with vag[u]e, undefined longings.

When the swallows come again; and the bees drone by in the sunshine, &c &c &c &c etc etc" (I'm suddenly tired of writing).

With regard to the dedication of "The Flax of Dream", I think that I shall ask someone else to accept the very doubtful honour; someone, possibly, for whom the "Flax of Dream" shall be woven afresh – not the disastrous weavings in the First and Second Phases.

It would be rather silly if, for instance, I dedicated it to Marjorie, wouldn't it – let allan dedicate his book to her – not Mr Williamson; if I dedicated it to Gladys she would laugh in a few years time, possibly: if I inscribed it to Miss Hare, she might feel rather glad to see her name in print, but that's all. No, I shall dedicate it to "The Memory of Richard Jefferies".

Because you see, there is David as well as Goliath, and if I did it to R. Jefferies I would fall foul of no-one.

I never intend to risk having my penates – my designs of the Flax – broken again.

The gulls are wheeling over the fast-flowing water. Several old men have come quietly down and are sitting on the bank.

By the way, you remember that boy at East Runton who carried the little girl on his back? I saw him the other day; he told me something about Miss Hare – rather pathetic, I thought. However, I mustn't repeat it, he must pretend to some little dignity. I shall see Marjorie and your Father shortly.

Best wishes,

HW

The last few paragraphs present a puzzle: Marjorie might well be Henry's cousin, Marjorie Boon, sister of Charlie. But Gladys? Is she also Miss Hare? Stephen Francis Clarke, who made notes about these papers, was sure that Marjorie was Marjorie Boon. He also conjectured that Miss Hare was most likely a nickname – underneath the type-written poem 'Vision' is written in very faint pencil '[illegible] Hare', and it is just possible that the illegible word is 'Doris'. Stephen concluded that he was drawn to believe that Miss Hare was Doris Nicholson.

Vision

*Sometimes, 'o nights, I lie and dream before my eyes
A vision comes. I see the clouds drift in the skies,
And feel the wind that wanders lightly – cool and free
Borne from the shimm'ring mists that haze the shining sea.
I watch it rushing o'er the corn adown the hill
Where seawards climb the wild, free larks that sing, and fill
My heart with pain*

*I hear the sea that frets and weeps against the rocks
That grimly stand, and echo all the wild gulls' mocks.
I see the vision of your head, all tawny-crowned,
And watch the shine of Love within your eyes, deep-drowned.
The spirit of the sea the white gleam of the sands
Upon my sleeve the soft touch of your sun-kissed hands,
These ghosts appear.*

*'O nights The wind moans past the door, the street lamp gleams
Upon the wet slate roof, the fog drifts up and seems*

"VISION"

Sometimes, 'o nights, I lie and dream..... before my eyes
A vision comes. I see the clouds drift in the skies,
And feel the wind that wanders lightly - cool and free
Borne from the shimm'ring mists that haze the shining sea.
I watch it rushing o'er the corn adown the hill
Where seawards climb the wild, free larks that sing, and fill
My heart with pain

I hear the sea, the wind, and waves against the rocks
That cry all day, and echo all the wild gulls' mocks.
I see the vision of your head, all tawny-crowned,
And watch the engine of love within your eyes, deep-drowned.
The spirit of the sea... the white gleam of the sands
Upon my sleeve the soft touch of your sun-kissed hands,
These ghosts appear.

'O nights The wind moans past the door, the street lamp
gleams
Upon the wet slate roof, the fog drifts up and seems
To chill my very soul O God! Why am I torn
By these sad wraiths? The wind that rushes o'er the corn,
The singing lark.... the glory of thy faithful head....
Where wand'rest thou my dear beloved, wistful Dead?
Where wand'rest thou?

*To chill my soul O God! Why am I torn
By these sad wraiths? The wind that rushes o'er the corn,
The singing lark the glory of thy faithful Head
Where wand'rest thou my dear beloved, wistful Dead?
Where wand'rest thou?*

This poem and 'Through the land of death and sorrow' are reminiscent in their theme of Charles Sorley's 'When you see millions of the mouthless dead / across your dreams in pale battalions go'. Sorley was killed by a sniper at Loos in October 1915, but the spooks, the 'dead and silent army', would stay with Henry for the rest of his life.

It is not known when 'Vision' was written, but it was most probably soon after the war's end. It is on a separate sheet of paper, and the question arises: was it sent by Henry to Phyllis, or it was

given to her by – could it be, perhaps – Doris Nicholson? It seems to me that the girl in the poem (she with the ‘head, all tawny-crowned’) is more likely to be Doris than Phyllis. The supposition might be supported by the inclusion in these papers of two very early nature sketches, and on the back of one of them, ‘The Wind Whispers’, are two pencilled notes: “*When you lose the owl feather which came from Devon, then [drawn owl symbol] will fly away to Death.*” and *Why do you look so wistful; so sad; so “distracted”; why?* It is unlikely, given the nature of Henry’s letters to Phyllis, that these notes were intended for her; much more likely that they were addressed to Doris, for Henry’s calf-love for her had by this time become almost obsessive. We know from Anne Williamson’s *A Patriot’s Progress* that Henry saw Doris several times during 1918, taking her out to lunch, even having one too many drinks with her (Tuesday, 5 February: ‘Drunken episode with DN and Hippo’ – though surely it must have been Henry who had had one too many, rather than Doris!),⁴ and playing tennis together in the summer.⁵ We know too that Henry occasionally posted short compositions to Doris, for Anne Williamson states that on ‘Monday [11 February 1918] he “sent off 2 tales to DN [Doris Nicholson] (anon)” showing that he had spent a productive weekend practising his writing skills,’ and again that ‘on 21 June [1918] . . . he sent a story called “Money Moon” to Doris Nicholson’.⁶ The one-sided relationship with Doris broke down after they quarrelled in July,⁷ and it may thus be significant that Henry’s first letter to Phyllis was written very soon afterwards, on 18 July; perhaps he hoped that Phyllis might become a substitute for Doris. But could these essays, and perhaps ‘The Vision’ also, have been sent originally to Doris, and could *she* have given them later to Phyllis, after her quarrel with Henry? The hypothesis certainly seems possible.

That Henry and Phyllis were fond of each other is obvious, though it never amounted to more than that. It seems, though, that they lost touch when Henry moved down to Devon. Nevertheless, Phyllis felt comfortable enough to write to Henry many years later with a special request, for the last letter in this small collection is written from Shallowford in 1936:

Shallowford, Filleigh, N.Devon, 14 March

Dear Phil,

Im terribly overworked and worried and harassed and do forgive me not having replied before to your letter. Thank you for asking me to be godfather to your son John, and this I will be, if you will forgive me or excuse me all ecclesiastical duties in that connexion. In this connexion (shows how weary I am to repeat and write such phrases) my last two infants have not yet been baptised although one fell in a river in spate in January and was lugged out by a 7 year-old after 6 minutes struggle. I only heard of this yesterday, through the 7 year-old telling me; his mother didnt bother to tell me when I was away in London. So my state as described in line one of this letter is permanent for all domestic life seems to be on that sort of level.

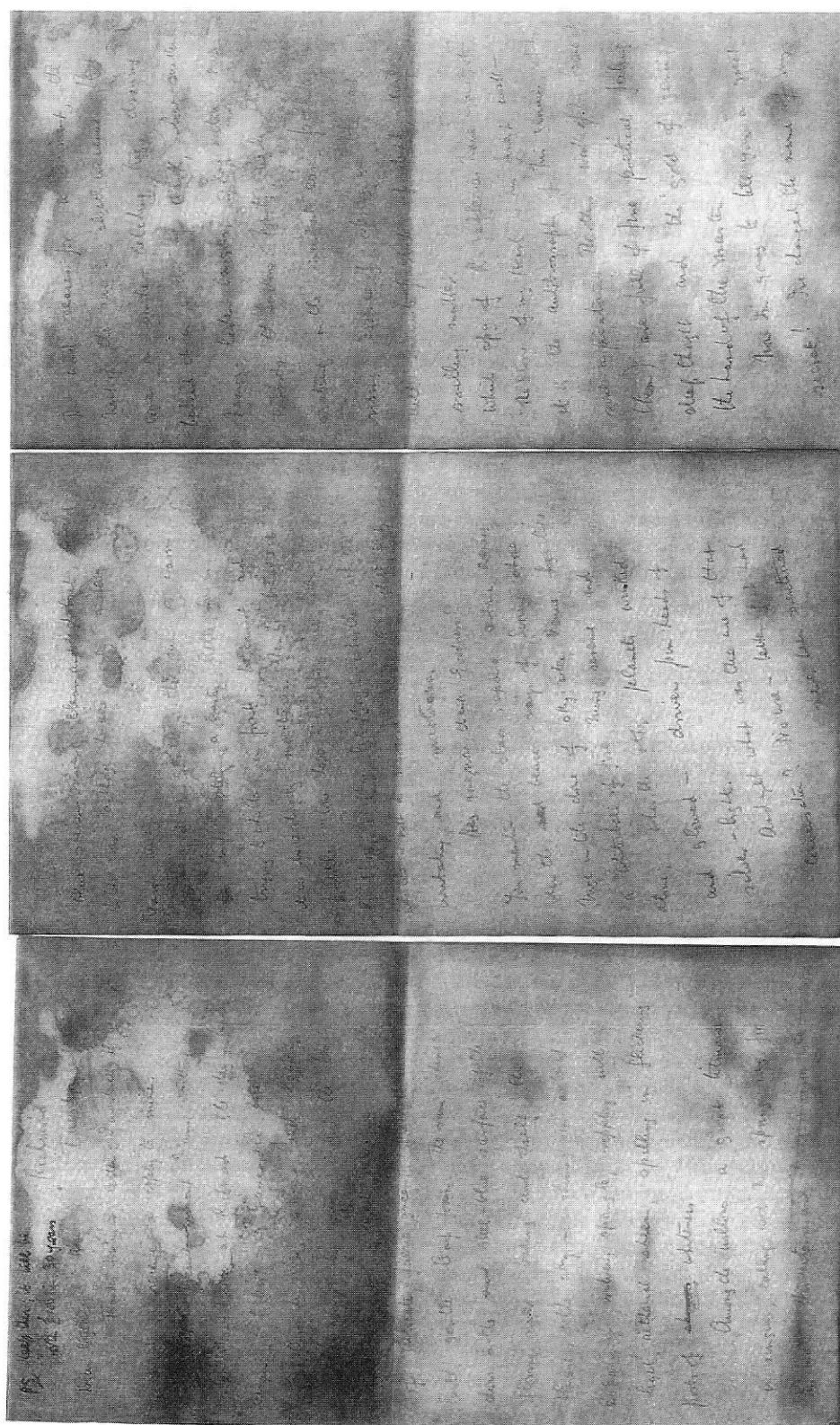
Ill come and see you sometime, sending a card first. But you wont recognise an irritable, white-haired, ruin. Do you remember 1919? I escaped from the awful atmosphere, and it followed me to Devon, and still criticised; and now the inevitable:- Biddy with 2 small children, her husband gone for ever somewhere; Mother’s small income gone thro foolishness and silly lendings to my elder sister; and mother herself dying of cancer and who should support her and pay for Biddy but . . . this is a rotten letter, isnt it? I have also my dear wife’s inept and ruinous relations to support; one of them is here in the house for ever, and telling me how selfish I am etc etc. As for money, I can just keep out of debt; but cant save anything, and having worked 16 hours a day for 15 years am quite exhausted.

I want to do things with my hands; to be a labourer; a farmer; sweep roads, anything but this awful mental grind which is writing -- chipping words out of my breastbone. But Ill be better soon; and come and see you; and forgive me this rubbish now. As for fame, am I famous? I dont know what it means, except to have nothing to do except work at a horrid desk. One day Ill play a game of tennis; or sail a boat; or go for a walk with a friend. One day Ill have a friend. I had one, but he died, smashed himself up on a racing motorbike. As for the rest of the world, it might be Brockley or East Runtun in 1912. Yes, I had a friend there. Ive never forgotten you.

With love to you,

Harry

Keep this letter to yourself, wont you? It’s just a private grouch from one friend to another.



And Phyllis never forgot Henry. With these few letters, poems and nature essays, she also kept this photograph of him, taken by a professional photographer in Felixstowe, which Henry had sent to her in the summer of 1918:

He had signed it, very formally – *Sincerely yours, Harry Williamson, 16.6.18*. And she kept too this silver cigarette or card case, dented perhaps when he was on active service in France, on which is inscribed *HWW 1915*. Inside it, Henry has drawn his beloved owl totem, and written *Redeemable only by sorrow!!*



And that, tantalisingly, is all we know of Phyllis Maude Taylor.

Notes and Acknowledgements

1. Tony Evans, 'The Radfords of Ingo Brake, Lydford', Henry Williamson Society *Journal* No. 36, September 2000.
2. Letters and effects auctioned at Bonhams, 28–29 September 1999, lot 212. The successful bidder was Stephen Francis Clarke.
3. Anne Williamson, *A Patriot's Progress: Henry Williamson and the First World War*, Sutton Publishing, 1998, p. 146.
4. *A Patriot's Progress*, p. 142.
5. *A Patriot's Progress*, p. 142.
6. *A Patriot's Progress*, p. 146.
7. *A Patriot's Progress*, p. 146.

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