

THE RICHARD JEFFERIES SOCIETY

A TRIBUTE

TO

HENRY WILLIAMSON (1895-1977)

President ~ 1965 - 1975



MARCH 1978

A TRIBUTE TO HENRY WILLIAMSON

PREFACE:

At the Society's Annual General Meeting in the Joliffe Studio Theatre, Wyvern Arts Centre, Swindon on Monday October 3rd, 1977, a number of tributes were read, to the memory of the late Henry Williamson. Following the readings, Mr. Cyril Wright, Hon. Secretary and Vice President of the Richard Jefferies Society made the suggestion that the tributes read on that occasion should be gathered together and presented as a further addition to the Society's Talks and Articles Service.

Henry Williamson has of course a special place in the annals of the Jefferies Society. On the death of Mr. Samuel J. Looker our first President, Mr. Henry Williamson was invited to accept the post which he held for many years until ill health and advanced age forced him to retire. Senior members of the Society will recall with pleasure the Birthday lecture given by him entitled "Some Nature Writers and Civilisation".

Shortly after his return from the battlefields of Flanders at the end of the Great War, Henry Williamson discovered a copy of "Story of my Heart" in a secondhand bookshop in Folkestone; This book was to have a profound and lasting effect on his life style and writing, strongly influencing major works like 'The Flax of Dream', that tragic four-part saga of the star-crossed Willie Maddison and his doomed quest for self expression and fulfilment in a world grown weary of war.

Finally culminating in the splendid 'Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight'; a panoramic 13--- novel sequence spanning English family life from the reign of Queen Victoria through decade after decade finally reaching its conclusion after the outbreak of the Second World War. Into these semi-autobiographical novels Williamson poured all his life's hoard of memories, hopes, dreams and fears. (I well recall the powerful impact these books had for me on their first reading. This feeling is graphically described by Mr. Peter Robins in his own personal tribute later in these pages).

Richard Jefferies image of soul - life and oneness with nature burned like a beacon for Henry Williamson "...Personally I care for all he wrote for as a boy and youth and man devoted to Jefferies, he always had and always will have my deepest respect and sympathy".

Henry Williamson first visited Coate in 1925 as a young writer yet to make his mark on the literary world with the celebrated 'Tarka the Otter'. Some years later in 1937, he returned again. A visit described in his 'Richard Jefferies'; Selections of his Work, with details of his life and circumstances.

At the 1948 Centenary Celebration of the birth of Richard Jefferies, Henry Williamson was one of the distinguished writers invited to be present by Swindon Corporation. In 1950 Mr. Harold E. Adams, our Chairman and Founder, saw the realisation of a life's dream with the formation of the Richard Jefferies Society. Henry Williamson expressed his enthusiastic support. I quote from a letter he wrote to the late Mrs Frances J. Gay, herself a tireless worker for the Society and a lifelong admirer of Jefferies, (the occasion was the Twenty First Anniversary of the Society 1950 -

1971).... For you and I have for the better part of our lives been accompanied by Richard Jefferies, a spirit as real to us as the man in the tumulus who, after two thousand years of interment was real to Jefferies. And since you first read 'The Story of my Heart' when Edward VII was on the throne (when I first read 'Bevis'), your personality and duty has been, as it were, entwined about the band of brothers which you have shepherded within the Jefferies Society".

A fine bronze memorial plaque surmounting the huge artificial tumulus overlooking Coate Water, is our lasting tribute to Mrs Frances Gay.

Henry Williamson's permanent memorial is to be found in his books which will continue to enchant countless readers new and old.

Brian Fullagar

TRIBUTE TO HENRY WILLIAMSON. 1895 - 1977

RICHARD JEFFERIES SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING Oct. 3rd. 1977

Chosen from an Obituary in *The Times*, for August 15th 1977, and read by Mr. Harold Adams.

"Williamson was born on December 1st. 1895, of middle-class parents resident in South London, and educated as a day-boy at Colfe's Grammar School, Lewisham. Soon after the outbreak of war in 1914, he joined the forces, received a commission in the Bedfordshire Regiment, and saw some service in France. Though he remained a serving soldier throughout the war, he suffered something of the same awakening to the futility of war as Siegfried Sassoon described in "Memoirs of an Infantry Officer. From seeing the graves on both sides marked with crosses, labelled either 'For King and Country,' or 'Für Vaterland und Freiheit,' came a 'shaking, staggering thought that both sides thought they were fighting for the same cause.' So the Idea came to the young and callow soldier that if only he could tell them all at home what was really happening, and if the German soldiers told the truth about us, the war would be over.

The idea became the obsession of his life and work - that all conflict arose from what he called "un-understanding" or "misprision." It received confirmation soon after his demobilisation in 1919 from his reading Richard Jeff cries' "Story of my Heart," the effect of which on himself is ascribed to the hero of "The Pathway."

"All the stored impressions of my boyhood seemed to return, with a mysterious spirit that brought tears to my eyes many times, I stood there more than an hour, so rapt was I in the pages, which were a revelation to me of my own self, which had been smothered and overlaid all through the hectic days of the war. Indeed for some time afterwardsI thought that Jefferies was with me, and of me, and I realised that all the world was built

up of thought; that the ideals which animated the world were but thought, mostly mediocre and selfish thought.

HENRY WILLIAMSON died on 13th August 1977 at the age of 81.

Ontario
Canada.

6 September 1977

Dear Mr. Wright.,

I have just heard, in a letter from an aunt of mine in England, of the death some weeks ago of Henry Williamson. Tributes will doubtless be paid at subsequent meetings of the R. J. Society, and it seems appropriate that some statement should come from me.

I never met Williamson, as many of the Society members did, but my knowledge of him goes back to quite early childhood, and it is difficult for me to remember a time when Tarka the Otter and Salar the salmon were not household words. My now extremely well-thumbed copy of The Beautiful Years (it is, in fact, virtually falling to pieces now) is a Penguin edition of 1949, and I must have got hold of it—I forget how—close to that date. It was some years, in fact, before I came to realise how much of it is dependent upon Jefferies, but its simple story has for long been dear to me.

A second-hand bookseller told me the other day that the three authors that he found most sought after in his shop were Williamson, Edward Thomas, and John Cowper Powys. All three very good writers, and it is pleasant to note that two out of the three of them were deeply indebted to Jefferies.

Henry Williamson was, of course, a controversial figure. Some have been put off by the poor quality of a few of his books—and have therefore been tempted to under-rate his excellence when he was writing at his best. Many, too, were alienated by his political opinions in the 1930s, but a really fine writer can outlive that, and so will Williamson. I am reminded of W.H. Auden's lines, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," Yeats's attitudes being almost as distasteful to Auden's generation as those of Williamson. Auden wrote:

Time that is intolerant
Of the brave and innocent,
And indifferent in a week .
To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet.

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons him for writing well.

Henry Williamson also wrote well, and will be remembered.
With best wishes,
Bill Keith

HENRY WILLIAMSON - A PERSONAL REMEMBRANCE

“TARKA THE OTTER MAN IS DEAD” - so read the headlines in August.

I had half expected it as I had learned that Henry was in a nursing home in a poor condition. Nevertheless, the cold print of the obituary columns could never convey what this man meant, and still means, to me.

In the same way that Henry discovered Richard Jefferies on his return from the Great War, a discovery that changed his life, I came across Henry Williamson some twelve years ago and it was through Henry that I went on to Jefferies.

It was not Henry's nature books, not even TARKA, that excited me. It was the Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight, that saga which must be the literary masterpiece of the twentieth century.

In Willie Maddison I found that same alienation that Willie carried all his life. The rigid father, few friends and, above all, a long struggle for an ideal and a soul life. Sadly, Henry carried these crosses through his life and his personal relationships were never happy or longlasting. Fortunately, I passed from this immature state but my sympathy for Henry never lessened.

I met Henry only once, after a Richard Jefferies Birthday Lecture, and, together with two others talked for a short while., Sadly he was difficult to talk with and he seemed locked in a mental struggle with the past, an affliction he could never cure, spending his days in his cabin at Ox's Cross.

It is unfortunate that the public will never forgive him for his pro-Hitler sympathies and his GOODBYE WEST COUNTRY is a damning document to his enthusiasm for the Third Reich. It was his naivety that failed him and the enthusiasm for an ideal, albeit in Germany, attracted him greatly. But forever after he was marked as a Nazi sympathiser.

During his last years I tried to interest various people in writing his biography, including Dan Parson, a close neighbour. However, I understand that Henry's son, Richard, together with his wife Anne, will be undertaking the task. I wait for the volume in anticipation, but meanwhile his memory will remain with me and his books will be thumbed again. Somewhere in the pages of his works lies the answer to the struggles of our souls.

Peter Robins

91, Keith Rd,
Talbot Woods,
Bournemouth. BH3 7DT.

HENRY WILLIAMSON. A TRIBUTE BY EDNA MANNING

Henry Williamson was not only an eminent writer, but he was devoted to the writings and personality of Richard Jefferies and understood the nineteenth -century writer, naturalist and mystic more than most people. How well he understood Richard Jefferies is summed-up in the last sentence of the first paragraph THE ENGLISH GENIUS published by FABER and FABER 1937.

“All during his life he was working: and the theme of his work was the creation of, the burning hope for, a better, truer, more sunlit world of men.”

And the last paragraph of the book penned by Williamson reads:

“Dear Jefferies, you fought the three giants of disease, despair, and poverty; and in this fight you destroyed yourself, that others might live. The fight is not yet over; it is a fight continuing down the light years of the human imagination. I could not write a book about you, a prophet whose testimony and fate is everywhere in your own works. May these fragments bring you to the many minds who today most sorely need to know your way of life.”

Williamson’s grandfather, Henry William Williamson, visited Jefferies when the author lived at Brighton; and gave his grandson the three-volume story of BEVIS and his adventures played out on Coate Water. A book that Henry like many other boys, treasured.

Henry Williamson paid a visit to Coate and the farm that “lay under the chalk downs” in May 1925 where he went as if to the shrine of Richard Jefferies to gaze upon the place where the farmer’s son was born and inspired to write some of his best work. Williamson then made for the reservoir, Bevis’s country, the “broad sheet of water, with reeds and rushes and wild fowl, and two islets near the west shore. Pike lived in there, with roach and rudd and perch, and other fish.”

He was destined to find the stretch of water much smaller than he imagined , and did not much like the bathing-huts, and other amenities that Swindon Corporation gave to Coate Water at that time; and feared that it would not be long before nothing was left of the place as Jefferies knew it.

There is, of course, no going back. Jefferies returned to the ‘hatch’ over the brook, where he had sat with his friends dreaming of great things, and he, too, was disappointed to find it ‘shrunk’ and the water almost gone; but if there is no going back, the past is forever captured by a writer like Jefferies, and lives forever - as Williamson knew so well: “those pages of his which glowed and shone with ancient sunlight.”

Henry Williamson was President of two Societies of which I am a member: the Richard Jefferies Society (1950), and the West Country Writers’ Association (1951).

In a tribute to Henry Williamson, the Acting Editor of the *Newsletter*, the Association's paper, wrote of the Thanksgiving Service in St. Martin -in-the-Fields in memory of "one of the outstanding personalities of contemporary literature."

The Association feel, writes the Acting Editor, "that some stretch of river, or other appropriate place should be specifically associated with Henry Williamson's name."

I feel sure that many other people who knew him and read his books, would approve of this idea. I feel that a part of the Jefferies countryside, could well be shared with such a kindred spirit as Henry Williamson, if not at Coate Water, then a place near a tumulus of "ancient sunlight," where Jefferies at seventeen years of age, discovered some of the truths that Williamson's spirit also knew.

Henry Williamson gave everyone an impression of ease and enjoyment. He loved congeniality and friendship. Ted Hughes, at the Thanksgiving Service, spoke of his friendship with Henry Williamson; and John Trewin, F.R.S.L., Vice-President and former Chairman of the West Country Writers' Association wrote of his loyalty to his friends. Kenneth Allsop was another friend of his, also Waveney Girvan, the Association's Founder.

I saw Henry Williamson many times when I attended the Association's gatherings at Congress. I was walking along the front at Lyme Regis, when I met him, and he was clearly depressed at the end of all the friendly reunions. He recognised me, and asked where everyone had got to. He felt quite despondent that such happiness had vanished, and that his friends had scuttled back into their ruts again for another twelvemonth. I was a complete stranger; our only link was Richard Jefferies; but in that brief encounter, he treated me as a friend.

At my suggestion, Henry Williamson, did, at that Lyme Regis meeting, suggest Old Swindon, and Coate as a future meeting-place for the West Country Writers' Congress, but the proposition was not then accepted. It might be that this could happen yet,

HENRY WILLIAMSON..... A TRIBUTE BY BRIAN FULLAGAR.

Many tributes will be paid tonight by those who had the good fortune to know Henry Williamson personally during the years of his Presidency of our Society.

May I, as a member who never met this great author, make my contribution from the standpoint of a grateful reader.

During the passage of time from boyhood to middle-age, ones bookshelves become the crowded resting place for many literary treasures. Everlasting flowers gathered along the way.

Into some of these 'glittering prizes' one dips again and again for a renewal of the delight found when first the book was read.

Apart from the volumes of Jefferies, the author to whom my hungry eyes most return is Henry Williamson.

Toward the end of the last war a friend loaned me an early 'Penguin' edition of 'Tarka', - my first introduction to the prodigious output of this distinguished nature-writer and author.

A fine study of the life and death of an otter amid the rivers and countryside of North Devon, 'Tarka' remains today an unrivalled classic of perceptive, raw unsentimentalised prose poetry.

Some years were to pass before I stumbled across yet another of his books, 'The Beautiful Years', first novel in the sequent 'Flax of Dream' Saga. A hauntingly tragic tale concerning the life and loves of the star-crossed Willie Maddison. Reading this book set my feet on the life-long pilgrimage that has brought countless hours of enjoyment.

Richard Jefferies and the 1914-18 war were the two greatest influences, both on his writing and his life style.