The Flax of Dream, by Henry Williamson

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English Association First World War Bookmarks
No. 3

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1
Half the seed of Europe

Lois Lamplugh's account of the life and works of Henry Williamson, titled *A Shadowed Man*, opens with a statement that could refer to many young men who joined up in 1914 and 'like huge numbers of others, he was only a youth when he plunged himself into the mass atrocity that was trench warfare.' What perhaps marks Williamson off from many others was the visionary effect of the war upon a South Londoner who had a deep love of the countryside:

> He emerged from the experience with strong, almost obsessional ideas concerning the origins of the conflict, and the need to refashion society—especially the education system—to avoid a recurrence.

The fourth novel in Williamson's tetralogy, *The Pathway*, presents us with Willie Maddison, decorated war veteran, who lives like Williamson himself in a rural confusion which consists of long walks through the countryside of North Devon and reading the mystical prose of Richard Jefferies. Willie is treated with both disdain and fear by the parental figures of the village and his outbursts against a world of bullying unfairness and Blakean vengefulness inspire him to tell Mrs Ogilvie, the mother of Mary, a girl with whom he has had a spiritually close relationship since they were both children:

> The lies that were told in the war, and are still being told, about the Germans! The humiliation of their Rhineland being occupied by the conquerors who knock off the hats of civilians who forget to raise their hats to French and Belgian officers! The agents provocateurs who arrange clashes between the rival political parties of resurgence in order to proclaim martial law! I have just been walking through Germany,' he went on, in a rapid nervous voice, amidst complete silence, 'and I know a little about it. It is terrible to see how that proud and truthful nation is brought low. The poor little starving children—why, the starvation blockade was maintained until that revengeful treaty was signed at Versailles, eight months after the fighting ceased. Their bread was half sawdust. Scores of thousands of babies have died because of starvation.

The reply given by Mrs Ogilvie emphasises a theme running through all four of the novels which make up *The Flax of Dream* and echoes an Old Testament voice of vengeance:

> 'It is retribution,' exclaimed Mrs. Ogilvie. 'Their defeat was the judgement of God! How can anyone think otherwise?'

This sense of judgement and righteousness imposed by the parents upon the young is, of course, the voice that haunts Wilfred Owen's 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' the last lines of which place the responsibility for war firmly in the camp of the elders who are prepared to sacrifice their children. When God tells Abram to sacrifice 'the Ram of Pride' instead of his son Isaac 'the old man would not so, but slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one.' In Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* the Owen poem is sung as part of the Offertorium and the soloists repeat that last line whilst the choir of boys provide an ethereal backdrop and the Latin Hostias text merges seamlessly with the emphatic repetition of 'one by one.'

2
The long Edwardian afternoon

In January 1914 Henry Williamson enlisted in the London Rifle Brigade and, after war had been declared in August was commissioned into the Machine Gun Corps and promoted to Lieutenant. From 1917 he was attached to the Bedfordshire Regiment. When he emerged at the end of the war he was

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determined to become a writer and *The Beautiful Years* was published by Collins in October 1921 with Williamson receiving the standard advance of twenty-five pounds for a first novel. The novel revolves around the figure of William (Willie) Maddison who is seven at the beginning and ten by the novel's conclusion. It is based in an imaginary rural world made up of Williamson's own childhood in the land between Brockley, in Lewisham, and the suburbs of Bromley near Keston and Farnborough. This turn of the century landscape is merged with the world of Dorset. Some forty years later Williamson suggested that for him the novel 'had all the freshness of an early morning of the summers of my boyhood' and the sense of a pre-war time that seemed unending is symbolised by the grandfather clock in Skirr Farm, the home of Willie's friend Jack Temperley:

> Every dawn for centuries it had seen the darkness paling before the flowing light, the room filled with spectral atoms not thrown in one direction, but moving in invisible silence everywhere…The seasons had passed with invisible feet across the savannahs of infinity: the wistfulness of spring, the gold and glory of summer, the fires and abandon of autumn, the snows and frosts of winter.

The pre-war idyll, referred to as 'the ancient sunlight of his past happiness' in *Dandelion Days* (the second of the tetralogy's four novels), is one of homoerotic innocence in a village world 'bounded by the fields and forests around the village of Rookhurst.' The friendship between young Willie Maddison and Jack Temperley is explored in much greater detail in *Dandelion Days* and 'Nine years of intimacy had formed a friendship of such grandeur to themselves that perfect understanding existed in everything they did together.' The illusion of things lasting, an eternity of youthfulness, prompts Willie to tell Jack 'isn't it lovely to think of being friends for ever?' but the novel concludes with a letter written to Willie by the self-righteous and bullying headmaster of Colham Grammar School, which the two boys attended:

> Very many Old Colhameans have taken the post of honour. I am proud to think of your determination to serve your King and Country at the front by concealing your age. Such is the mettle of our pasture. We hope to make a roll of all such for undying memory.
> Never was there a more righteous war—civilisation against military despotism.

The letter, written on October 29th 1914, was delayed in the posting and contains a postscript announcing the death of Jack Temperley:

> It will be hard to bear; but you will bear it. We must go on—the fallen will be more and more numerous, alas!—but our cause is the cause of liberty, humanity, and true Christianity.

The Beautiful Years is not a self-indulgent novel and images of the precariousness of the present haunt this long lead-up to the First World War. Jim Holloman, crowstarver and part-time labourer, holds in his hand a mouse that has been killed by a weasel before asking an age-old question 'What's the good of life, eh, mousie? You've been made a perfect little body, yet no one cares if you'm killed or not'. A few pages further on Willie shows Jack a wounded rabbit that has been bitten by a stoat and had its blood drained. Williamson's language is almost that of the war as the rabbit dies and 'Terror and exhaustion had paralysed all movement.' When Jim Holloman sits next to his sweetheart, Dolly, who works at Skirr Farm, in the damp and 'forlorn' boathouse it is as though he realises the precarious nature of their love which will never reach fruition and this is called to mind by the bench which 'might slither into ruin at any moment'. As a presage of the cutting down of the troops as they went over the top the harvest season is presented in terms that find echoes in the poetry of Owen and Sassoon:

> The seeds formed and fallen, borne with the wind, and the year's work is ended; among the wild, silent things colour and form, radiance and imagery, are but for the future of the species, as though the giving of all in death will assure some immortality henceforward…a lark sang soaring into the evening sky, having no knowledge of the mowers that would come shortly, leaving the swathes of wilting grasses behind, raked when sun-dried by the girls into wakes, the tumuli of the little larks.

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The Beautiful Years is haunted by death and the 'bones and fragments' which are reminders of a past world. Prompted by his reading of *The Story of My Heart* by Richard Jefferies, a book he came across in a second-hand bookshop soon after the end of the war, Williamson sees the historical perspective of war and presents the reader with an awareness of the relics of the past, like trenches uncovered and metal dug out of Flanders fields where 'after a winter flood broken pieces of pottery and tiles were sometimes left sticking from the bank, where the swirl and rush of muddy waters had exposed Roman remains hidden since Caesar's legions had come to Britain.'
Although both *The Beautiful Years* and *Dandelion Days* record a world of childhood and school before the outbreak of war the massing of clouds on the horizon is hinted at and referred to with unmistakable emphasis. Willie and his cousin Phillip from London watch night manoeuvres off Spithead and the flashes of guns beyond the Isle of Wight before deciding that they want to join the Royal Navy 'for the war that one day would start between Germany and England. Glorious to fire the big guns and blow the tin-pot German Navy out of the sea!' L.P. Hartley's 1953 novel *The Go-Between* explores this long Edwardian summer and contains more than one echo of Williamson's tetralogy of novels:

> I remember walking to the cricket ground with the team, sometimes trying to feel, and sometimes trying not to feel, that I was one of them; and the conviction I had, which comes so quickly to a boy, that nothing in the world mattered except that we should win.

3
'Never again to have such friendships'

The third volume of *The Flax of Dream*, titled *The Dream of Fair Women*, was first published by Collins in 1924 before being re-written for publication by Faber in 1931. The novel opens in1919 and Willie Maddison, having been demobilised, is living in a run-down cottage in Devon. As he tries to pull his war-torn experiences together by writing a semi-mystical tract called 'The Policy of Reconstruction' he is haunted by the memories of camaraderie in the trenches:

> Never again to have such friendships? Or to see the white flares beyond the parapet at night and hear the mournful wailing of gas-horns over the wastes of the Somme battlefields? Gone, gone forever.

The dominant tone in this writing is not the horror of war but the romantic feelings of lost union where even the terror of a gas attack has been softened into 'mournful wailing', with its echoes of Keats's 'To Autumn', and the 'wastes' of the battlefield belong more in the world of fin-de-siècle Arthurian legend than the devastated landscape of Northern France. In Paul Fussell's outstanding account of the First World War in literature, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, he devotes a chapter, titled 'Soldier Boys', to the curious connections between war and love concluding that

> Given this association between war and sex, and given the deprivation and loneliness and alienation characteristic of the soldier's experience—given, that is, his need for affection in a largely womanless world—we will not be surprised to find both the actuality and the recall of front-line experience replete with what we can call the homoerotic.

This sense of camaraderie, proximity, and vulnerability is central of course to the relationships in *Journey's End* and one of Willie Maddison's feelings about demobilisation echo that emotional world of brotherly proximity within the trenches:

> The shore was empty, except for the gulls like many seed-pearls scattered on the sands. Watching them, he felt a loneliness, and a return of sadness akin to that felt after the Armistice, when the spirit of comradeship was changed in the squadron mess; when friends who had carelessly and happily been such, had returned to civilian life, and there had been nothing to take their place. The happy circle round the stove in the ante-room after mess dinner was broken up; nobody seemed to want to drink any more hot whiskey and water, with lemon in it: the wassailous spirit of comradeship had gone for ever.

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Willie remembered his last term at school in which he and his close friends had been prepared for 'the conflict of a mature life' and the 'shadowed classrooms' saw out the last schooldays of 'Jack, Bony and Rupert, Fitzaucher and Burrell, all the friends who had swatted and played together—the summer of 1914'. As he writes his 'Policy of Reconstruction' he recalls now that Jack is 'part of the sour Flemish earth at the edge of Ploegsteert wood' and that Bony was 'shot down in flames over Havrincourt Wood in the Hindenburg Line'.

Much of this third novel takes place in Folkestone where Willie has decamped so that he can be close to Evelyn Fairfax, his lover whose adulterous affairs reflect another sense of emptiness. As she puts it, 'My heart is filled with dead men'. Willie's reflections on arriving by train at this south-coast town, an embarkation point, remind us of the transport of those soldiers 'Going overseas…shouting with excitement for the unknown' some of whom return wounded 'self-held in secret fortitude, casual in manner on the verge of unutterable darkness.' Like the survivors in Owen's 'The Send-Off' they

> May creep back, silent, to still village wells
> Up half-known roads.

The book of poems that was in every pocket just before the outbreak of war was A.E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) and Fussell suggests that although it might seem that the increase of an interest in poetry brought about by 1914, prominently including that of Rupert Brooke, had a nostalgic sense, the interest was 'less in poetry than in the theme of beautiful suffering lads, for which the war sanctioned an expression more overt than ever before. Homoeroticism was now, as it were, licensed.'

4
The Pathway

Williamson began writing the fourth novel in the sequence in 1924 and it was published by Cape in 1928. It immediately shocked some readers and one critical response was that it was blasphemous as the angry young man of the post-war years suggested a merging of the teaching of Christ with that of Lenin. In some notes written about the creation of the tetralogy Williamson outlined this last novel's theme as dealing with Willie Maddison's 'devastating self-distrust' as he became aware of 'the difference between what he preached' and what he did:

> He could not reconcile the surviving soldier-feelings with those of the civilian mind at home.

One of the central themes of the novel deals with the blossoming of the love between the self-conscious and over-wrought Willie and Mary Ogilvie whose awareness of their rightness for each other was evident from the beginning of the whole saga. It is a blossom which is killed off by the frost of manners and fear which dominate the North Devon village in which the action takes place, a spying social coldness which revolves around Miss Gough whose telescope is trained on all those who break convention. One of the central memories in *The Pathway* deals with the exchanging of gifts between British and German troops at Christmas 1914. Giving an account of the absurdity of the position in which both sides are fed with the patriotic bluster of the newspapers at home, Willie suggests that 'if we could persuade every man of our respective armies to turn round and walk home, the war would be over':

> 'It seemed so simple, and such plain truth, that surely everyone would perceive it at once. But even before I had finished suggesting my simple idea, I knew it was hopeless. Quite hopeless: the unpatriotic suggestion of a simpleton who was not fit to fight in such a Christian War. Unfortunately my suggestion did not get me kicked out of the Christian band, for which, indeed, I should have been very glad: instead, the German and British staffs both issued orders, about the same time, that any man found

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> fraternizing with the enemy, would be court-martialled, and if found guilty, suffer the death-penalty.

The Pathway was completed in early 1928 after Williamson had seen the film 'The Somme' at the Theatre Royal in Barnstaple and emerged feeling that it was an ignorant portrayal of the real war.

The character of Willie Maddison becomes increasingly identified with a Christ-like figure who offers redemptive hope to all who will listen to him and in his diary for that year Williamson wrote that 'A new Europe shall arise out of the ruins of the old; and Maddison's triumph shall be the formula for the new way of thought…Maddison…refuses to die, to be drowned, to be crucified…By power of his personality, his genius, he is going to pull through, he is going to give a new idea to others!' However, Williamson re-thought the ending which in fact sees Willie drowning alone in the night, a sacrificial victim to ignorance and prudery. Despite the deep love felt for him by Mary Ogilvie and his awareness of how spiritually right for each other they are the novel concludes with Mary turning to Willie's cousin, Phillip, and saying 'He did not need to change…It is we who must change'

> …and she ran down to Phillip by the edge of the sea, weeping, thinking of the darkness of men's minds, pierced in vain by the shining light of Kristos, and of the agony of Christ, at the end of the Pathway.

In conclusion it is worth mentioning the strangely moving manuscript that was handed to the Bodley Head publisher, John Lane, after the war. It consisted of a bundle of papers which had been discovered in one of the dug-outs of an abandoned gun position and Lane published it in 1918 under the title *The Love of an Unknown Soldier*. The papers are a series of un-posted letters which an officer has written to an American war-nurse whom he has met and who becomes for him the focus of both love and hope. The unknown author writes of the connections he sees between the world of war and his own bullied schooldays:

> By day I was a wretched little white-faced creature, the youngest boy in the school, who crept through the corridors in perpetual fear of chastisement. But at night I was brave—quite a King Arthur kind of person, who rode to the rescue of great ladies and challenged all the world. In my little white bed, one of a row of twenty, I would strive to keep myself awake, lest the hours which were my own should slip from me, and I should open my eyes to find that I was again in the bondage of daylight. Here in the trenches I have fallen back on that old trick of childhood. I have to meet you somehow.

Bibliography

The four novels which make up *The Flax of Dream*, *The Beautiful Years*, *Dandelion Days*, *A Dream of Fair Women*, *The Pathway* were reissued by Zenith Books in the 1980s.
The Great War and Modern Memory by Paul Fussell, O.U.P. 1975.

Tha Flax of Dream by Henry Williamson by Ian Brinton is Number 3 in the First World War Bookmark series, published by

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