

## IN PRAISE OF TARKA THE OTTER

First published 85 years ago, Henry Williamson's classic novel brought the rivers and woods of north Devon to life through the eyes of an otter. Jack Watkins celebrates this seminal work.



By [countryfile](#)

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***“Twilight over meadow and water, the eve-star shining above the hill, and Old Nog the heron crying kra-a-ark! as his slow dark wings carried him down to the estuary.”***

So reads the atmospheric opening line of the much-loved nature story, *Tarka the Otter*.

When Henry Williamson's tale was first published, 85 years ago this autumn, the novelist John Galsworthy hailed its author as “the finest and most intimate living interpreter of the drama of wild life”. TE Lawrence, who became a friend of Williamson, wrote that it had kept him “sizzling with joy for three weeks”. Even an ailing Thomas Hardy expressed his approval.

But it was the public that delivered the ultimate verdict, delighting in the saga of Tarka's “joyful water-life and death in the two rivers,” the Taw and the Torridge, of remotest Devon.

They made it an instant favourite, and it has been endlessly republished, never out of print, and even adapted as a feature film.

So much has Williamson become “the Tarka man”, you could be forgiven for believing he was a one-book writer. In fact, he was the prolific author of more than 50 books, not just about animals and birds, but also the novel tetralogy *The Flax of Dreams*, which evoked inter-war England, and the 15 volume, semi-autobiographical *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, which some rank as his finest achievements.

Yet it is the otter story for which he is destined to be remembered. Years before innovations in camera technology revolutionised scientific understanding of flora and fauna, and before TV documentaries brought nature so graphically into living rooms, Williamson’s taut prose conveyed an otter’s eye view of life in one of Britain’s wildest landscapes in all its raw, brutal and often terrifying reality – with minimal anthropomorphic intervention. Decades before concern about the natural world had taken root, the work touched a nerve. Ted Hughes, delivering the author’s funeral address in 1977, recalled reading *Tarka* for the first time aged 11, and recognising it as “a holy book, a soul-book, written with the life blood of an unusual poet”.

### **Exploring North Devon**

Williamson had first taken up long-term residence in the isolated Devon village of Georgeham in 1921, after several restless years following service in the trenches of the Great War, which left him psychologically scarred for life. Determined to make a living from country writing, he’d kept a nature diary from boyhood, and was soon familiar with the wild cliffs and moors of north Devon. Although his response to wildlife was not scholarly or academic, Williamson’s empathy with nature seems to have been total.

*Tarka* was several years in the making, and Williamson would later tell how, in 1921, a stranger had arrived at his cottage asking for help rescuing an orphaned otter cub.

Williamson brought it home, where his cat acted as foster mother. The otter learnt to respond to Williamson’s call and joined him on his evening strolls. One time, however, the otter got caught in a rabbit snare and when Williamson freed him, ran off. Williamson searched the countryside for months afterwards, but never saw the otter again.

Still, the seeds of a book were sown, as well as a belief that he could improve on the Cornish writer JC Tregarthen’s, *The Life Story of an Otter*, written in 1909. To gather information, he joined the local *Cheriton Otter Hunt*. Williamson had no love for hunting, but the descriptions

of the recurring menace of the killer hound Deadlock, and the climatic pursuit in which the exhausted Tarka is finally trapped, gains poignancy by the absence of sentimentality. It is still impossible to read these passages without mounting fury at the cruelty and futility of pursuing otters for 'pleasure'. But their creator was too much the realist to fail to counterbalance such scenes with the grim reality of the natural world, where one creature's frailty is another one's meal ticket.

Williamson was so keen to be exact that he claimed to have rewritten the manuscript 17 times. Critics, he conceded, might have been right when they said the result was too tightly packed: "Yet I enjoyed it all. I knew the prose was straight, clean and true – facts you know. It is all here in Devon if you just happen to see and hear or smell it".

### **Nostalgia**

Today, *Tarka* can be read with nostalgia for wildlife or country scenes we'd now consider rare or special – corncrakes, bittern and snipe, a woodlark singing "his wistful falling song over the bracken", foxgloves on the hillsides, or bundles of hazel faggots drying in a wood clearing for the Thatcher. It would be wrong to read it as a conservationist tract, however, for otters in the 1920s were still abundant in most counties and would only begin to decline seriously in number from the late 1950s, with the use of organochlorine insecticides and 'improvements' in river management. Gavin Maxwell's more personal, less literary, *Ring of Bright Water* (1960), written around the author's life with otters on a remote Scottish island, would be more timely.

Still, Williamson's meticulous detailing of otters' playful, curious and adventurous natures had elevated their profile. And along with his brilliant representations of animal sounds – the otters' playful 'hu-ee-ic!', the 'skirr-rr' of barn owls, and 'cur-lee-eeek!' of curlews – his ability to convey the elements and landscape ensured its timelessness as a literary masterpiece. From incidentals such as blackthorns "creaking" in the wind, to the roaring, foaming river that sweeps Tarka along in joyous reverie, or the bleak estuary in a winter freeze, he created images that linger long in the memory.

The final paragraph marking the end of Tarka's breezy, wandering life is heart-wrenching, despite its understatement. How well Williamson deserved Ted Hughes's assessment that "he was born with an intense vision of the world and a genius for expressing it".

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