

Henry Williamson Biography



Portrait by Charles Tunnicliffe, c. 1935

Early Years

Henry Williamson was born on 1 December 1895 in south-east London to bank clerk William Leopold Williamson (1865-1946) and Gertrude Eliza (1867-1936; née Leaver). In early childhood his family moved to Ladywell. This then semi-rural location provided easy access to the Kent countryside, and Williamson developed a deep love of nature during his childhood.

First World War

On 22 January 1914, Williamson volunteered as a rifleman with the 5th Battalion of the London Regiment, part of the British Army's Territorial Force, and was mobilised when war with Imperial Germany was declared on 5 August 1914.

In November 1914, Williamson was sent to France where he served on the Western Front in the Ypres Salient trenches. He participated in the *Christmas Truce* between British and German troops. In January 1915, he was withdrawn from the winter trenches with trench foot and dysentery and evacuated back to Britain. After convalescence, he was commissioned on 10 April 1915 as a second lieutenant with the Bedfordshire Regiment. In May 1915, he was attached for training to the Cambridgeshire Regiment at Newmarket. In October 1915, he was transferred to the Middlesex Regiment at Hornchurch. He volunteered to specialize in machine-gun warfare, and in January 1916, joined the Machine

Gun Corps at Belton Park, Grantham. In May 1916, he entered hospital in London with anaemia, and was granted two months' medical leave. He rejoined the MGC, and in February 1917, departed Britain with it for the Western Front. Williamson acted as his Company's transport officer and, in June 1917, he was gassed while transporting ammunition up to the front line. He was returned to the UK, spending the next few months in military convalescent hospitals. In September 1917, Williamson was attached for garrison duty as the adjutant of the 3rd Bedfordshire Regiment at Felixstowe. Classed B1 by an Army Medical Board, from the effects of the gas, he was judged to be unfit for active service. After a year at Felixstowe, and frustrated at the nature of garrison life, Williamson attempted to get back to front-line action in September 1918 with an application to be transferred to the Royal Air Force, but this was rejected due to his medical classification. He then applied for a transfer to the Indian Army, which was granted, but the war was ending and the order was cancelled. He spent a year afterwards on administrative duties demobilizing soldiers from military camps on the southeast coast of England and was discharged from the army on 19 September 1919.

Williamson became disgusted with what he considered to be the pointlessness of the war, blaming its causation on greed and bigotry. He became determined that Germany and Britain should never go to war again. Williamson was also powerfully influenced by the camaraderie that he had experienced in the trenches, and what he saw as the bonds of kinship that existed between the ordinary British and German soldiers.

Williams wrote about his war experiences in *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1929), *The Patriot's Progress* (1930) and in many of his books in the semi-autobiographical 15-book series *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (1951–1969).

Early Writing

After the war, Williamson read Richard Jefferies' book *The Story of My Heart* and this inspired him to begin writing seriously. In 1921, he moved to Georgeham, Devon, initially living in Skirr Cottage. He married Ida Loetitia Hibbert in 1925. They had six children.

In 1927, Williamson published his most acclaimed book, *Tarka the Otter*. He won the Hawthornden Prize for this book in 1928, and the book made him enough money to pay for the wooden hut near Georgeham where he wrote many of his later books, often sitting alone there for 15 hours a day.

In 1936, Williamson bought a farm in Stiffkey, Norfolk. *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1941) is his account of his first years of farming there.

Politics

In 1935, Williamson visited the *National Socialist German Workers Party Congress* at Nuremberg and was greatly impressed, particularly with the Hitler Youth Movement, which he contrasted with the life of youths in the London slums. He expressed the view that Hitler was essentially a good man who wanted only to build a new and better Germany. Opposed to war and agreeing with the anti-Semitic belief that wars were caused by Jewish "usurious moneyed interests", Williamson was attracted to Oswald Mosley's *British Union of Fascists* and joined it in 1937.

On the day of the British declaration of war with Germany and its allies, Williamson suggested to friends that he might fly to Germany to speak with Hitler to persuade him away from war. Following a meeting with Mosley later that day, however, he was dissuaded from this naive plan. At the start of WWII, Williamson was briefly held under *Defence Regulation 18B* for his political views. Visiting London in January 1944, he observed with satisfaction that what he perceived as the ugliness and immorality represented by its financial and banking sector had been "relieved a little by a catharsis of high explosive" and somewhat "purified by fire". In *The Gale of the World*, the last book of his *Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, published in 1969, Williamson has his main character, Phillip Maddison, question the moral and legal validity of the *Nuremberg Trials*.

Williamson initially retained a close relationship with Mosley in the immediate aftermath of the war, but Williamson refused Mosley's request to join the newly established Union Movement and suggested to Mosley that he should instead join him in abandoning politics altogether. This led to the two men falling out. Nonetheless, Williamson wrote for Mosley's journal *The European*. He also continued to express admiration for aspects of Nazi Germany after the war.

Post-war Life and Writing

After the war the Williamson family left the farm. In 1946, Williamson went to live alone at Ox's Cross, Georgeham in North Devon, where he built a small house in which to write. In 1947, Williamson and his wife, Loetitia, divorced. Williamson fell in love with a young teacher, Christine Duffield, and they were married in 1949. He then began to write the series of fifteen novels collectively known as *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. In 1950, the

year his only child by his second marriage, Harry Williamson, was born, he edited a collection of poems and short stories by James Farrar, a promising young poet who had died, at the age of 20, in WWII. From 1951 to 1969, Williamson produced almost one novel a year, while contributing regularly to the *Sunday Express* and *The European Magazine*, edited by Diana Mosley. He also contributed a number of reviews and articles to *The Sunday Times*.

In 1964, Williamson had a short affair with the novelist, Ann Quin, who was nearly forty years his junior (he had previously had an affair with his secretary, Myfanwy Thomas, daughter of the poet Edward Thomas). This put great strain on his marriage and, in 1968, Christine and Williamson were divorced after years of separation.

In 1974, Williamson began working on a script for a film treatment of *Tarka the Otter*, but the script was not regarded as suitable to film, being 400 000 words long. Filming went on, unknown to Williamson, and the film of *Tarka the Otter*, narrated by Peter Ustinov, was released in 1979.

Death

After a general anesthetic for a minor operation, Williamson's health failed catastrophically. One day he was walking and chopping wood, the next day he was unrecognizable and had forgotten who his family were. Suffering from senile dementia, he was moved into a hospice at Twyford Abbey in Ealing. He died there on 13 August 1977, by coincidence on the day that the death scene of *Tarka* was being filmed.

Bibliography

The Flax of Dream- a tetralogy following the life of Willie Maddison

- *The Beautiful Years* (1921)
- *Dandelion Days* (1922)
- *The Dream of Fair Women* (1924)
- *The Pathway* (1928)

A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight - a series of 15 novels following the life of Phillip Maddison from his birth in the late 1890s till the early 1950s, based loosely on Williamson's own life and experiences.

- *The Dark Lantern* (1951)
- *Donkey Boy* (1952)

- *Young Phillip Maddison* (1953)
- *How Dear Is Life* (1954)
- *A Fox Under My Cloak* (1955)
- *The Golden Virgin* (1957)
- *Love and the Loveless* (1958)
- *A Test to Destruction* (1960)
- *The Innocent Moon* (1961)
- *It Was the Nightingale* (1962)
- *The Power of the Dead* (1963)
- *The Phoenix Generation* (1965)
- *A Solitary War* (1967)
- *Lucifer Before Sunrise* (1967)
- *The Gale of the World* (1969)

The Lone Swallows (1922)

The Peregrine's Saga, and Other Stories of the Country Green (1923)

The Old Stag (1926)

Tarka the Otter (1927)

The Linhay on the Downs (1929)

The Ackymals (1929)

The Wet Flanders Plain (1929)

The Patriot's Progress (1930)

The Village Book (1930)

The Labouring Life (1932)

The Wild Red Deer of Exmoor (1931)

The Star-born (1933)

The Gold Falcon or the Haggard of Love (1933)

On Foot in Devon (1933)

The Linhay on the Downs and Other Adventures in the Old and New Worlds (1934)

Devon Holiday(1935)

Salar the Salmon (1935)

Goodbye West Country (1937)

The Children of Shallowford (1939)

The Story of a Norfolk Farm (1941)

Genius of Friendship: TE Lawrence (1941)

As the Sun Shines (1941)

The Incoming of Summer (undated)

Life in A Devon Village (1945)
Tales of a Devon Village (1945)
The Sun in the Sands (1945)
The Phasian Bird (1948)
The Scribbling Lark (1949)
Tales of Moorland and Estuary (1953)
A Clearwater Stream (1958)
In The Woods, a biographical fragment (1960)
The Scandaroon (1972)

Writings published posthumously by the Henry Williamson Society

- *Days of Wonder* (1987)
- *From a Country Hilltop* (1988)
- *A Breath of Country Air* (2 vols, 1990–91)
- *Spring Days in Devon, and other Broadcasts* (1992)
- *Pen and Plough: Further Broadcasts* (1993)
- *Threnos for T.E. Lawrence and Other Writings* (1994)
- *Green Fields and Pavements* (1995)
- *The Notebook of a Nature-lover* (1996)
- *Words on the West Wind: Selected Essays from The Adelphi* (2000)
- *Indian Summer Notebook: A Writer's Miscellany* (2001)
- *Heart of England: Contributions to the Evening Standard, 1939-41* (2003)
- *Chronicles of a Norfolk Farmer: Contributions to the Daily Express, 1937-39* (2004)
- *Stumberleap, and other Devon Writings: Contributions to the Daily Express and Sunday Express, 1915-1935* (2005)
- *Atlantic Tales: Contributions to the Atlantic Monthly, 1927-1947* (2007)