

# Hannay and Tarka and all

John Buchan

By William Buchan

A Memoir

(Buchan & Enright, £9.95)

Henry

An Appreciation of Henry Williamson

By Daniel Farson

(Michael Joseph, £8.95)

These two memoirs of writers most popular and celebrated in the years between the wars reveal some interesting correspondences. John Buchan and Henry Williamson are, on the whole and as regards their most successful work, thought of as writers for the young. Those over eighteen who occupy themselves with Richard Hannay and Tarka the otter must be reliving their youth. Neither is at all esteemed by conventionally enlightened critical opinion, although, perhaps, for different reasons: Buchan because, in what he called his "shockers", he did not aim high enough; Williamson because, in his two raptly autobiographical romances, he aimed far too high.

Both men emerged in bad shape from the Great War: Buchan with an agonizing



Buchan Gubernatorial

ulcer caused by overwork, Williamson more or less out of his mind as a result of what seems to have been terrible experiences at the front (however much he may have lyingly inflated them). The two books are personal memoirs and not biographies: Buchan's by a son from whom circumstances often separated him, Williamson's by a devotedly long suffering young admirer who found that they were together rather more often than the admirer would have liked.

John Buchan is in every way the better book, a fine supplement to Janet Adam Smith's biography, properly applauded by William Buchan as unsurpassable. Where Buchan's biographer is largely concerned with the public aspects of a multifariously public man, his son is able to reveal his private conduct in its immediate family and domestic setting to most illuminating effect, even if he has to admit in his final chapter that a final core of mystery remains at the heart of John Buchan's personality. John Buchan

owes part of its superiority over *Henry* to the fact that where Buchan was a remarkable man, with much more to him than appears in his writing, Henry Williamson was, outside his writing, largely squalid and pitiable: unbalanced, cruel, immensely dishonest and, what is more, enormously silly and embarrassing.

But John Buchan is also much better written than *Henry*. In the first place it has a genuinely literary, reflective quality where *Henry* has the tumbled-together structure of a colour magazine contribution. On top of that William Buchan has a feeling for and understanding of the very numerous worlds in which his father was active -- the devout Scottish borders, Oxford, politics, upper-class country life, and, in particular, he is himself a well-read imaginative writer. By contrast Daniel Farson appears unrootedly journalistic, a literary equivalent of the seed that fell on stony ground. He writes from time to time of the comparison between Henry Williamson and Tolstoy, Proust and Dickens. There is no comparison except in terms of avoirdupois weight of output. In writing such things he sounds like Lord Gnome (through E. Stobes) comparing Rita Chevrolet with Joan of Arc, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Edith Cavell. It is only fair to add that his book is both shrewd about Williamson as a man and attractively modest.

The best parts of William Buchan's book are those which report what he has observed directly and so has special authority about. Anyone like myself who is often ready to relive the Buchan part of his youth will be both pleased and illuminated by the way in which John Buchan's life at Elsfield mirrors that of Hannay at Fosse after the war, by the correspondence of Kirkcaldy shore in *Prester John* with the Fife beaches of Buchan's early years in Kirkcaldy, by the letter to his wife in which Buchan eulogizes the house that was to be the eponymous hero of that excellent story "Fullcircle", and a host of similar linkages. If the more public matter is a little less interesting, even that is seen from a private angle, so that becoming Governor-General is not a mass of newspaper cuttings, but a giant project of packing and planning and closing things down.

Both John Buchan and Henry Williamson have been much criticized in a wholly non-literary way: Buchan for beady-eyed opportunism, snobbery and anti-semitism, Williamson for his enthusiastic involvement with Mosley. William Buchan deals convincingly with the standard criticisms of Buchan and without indignant protestation. He rightly observes that Buchan's ideals are simply unintelligible to the sort of people who disparage

him; what in their mouths would be disgusting hypocrisy was in his the simple truth. Ambition is bad where it leads to the trampling-down of rivals. There is not the smallest evidence in Buchan's life of his ever trying to score symbolic victories at the expense of others, let alone of his doing them any actual harm. And if he did rather adore the high and mighty he had a large enough fund of friendship for it to be spread all over the social scene.

Williamson's infatuation with Mosley and his dedication of *The Flax of Dream* to Hitler ("the great man across the Rhine, whose life symbol is the happy child") was a pathetic folly, no doubt, but it was neither calculating nor malevolent and his loyalty to Mosley, when there was nothing in it for him but disgrace, is by no means dishonourable. What was awful about him was the constant maltreatment of family and friends. His two wives had to put up with beatings, the presence of youthful "secretaries", often in rapid succession, screaming, grotesque public conduct, persistent emotional blackmail. Friends, like Daniel Farson's father, Negley, found themselves brutally caricatured in Williamson's self-obsessed "novels", that is to say autobiography turned into fiction by the amount of lying included.

Daniel Farson knew Henry Williamson only in the latter's later years and largely confines himself to them. By then, it may be, his skill in exploiting others for the benefit of his fantasies was at its most developed. Daniel Farson sensibly remarks on *foxiness* as his most distinctive characteristic. Ronald Duncan's equally sensible judgement "Women did fall for Henry very easily. He gave women the sense that he needed them" does not imply that the impression was given unconsciously. There is no reason to doubt that *Henry* was written in affection. But a sentence of Farson's contains its essential message: "He was lucky to be so armour-plated in his selfishness, for his guilt would have been appalling otherwise".

Anthony Quinton



Edward Seago's portrait of Williamson c. 1940