opening extract from

Salar the Salmon

written by

Henry Williamson

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SALAR THE SALMON

Henry Williamson

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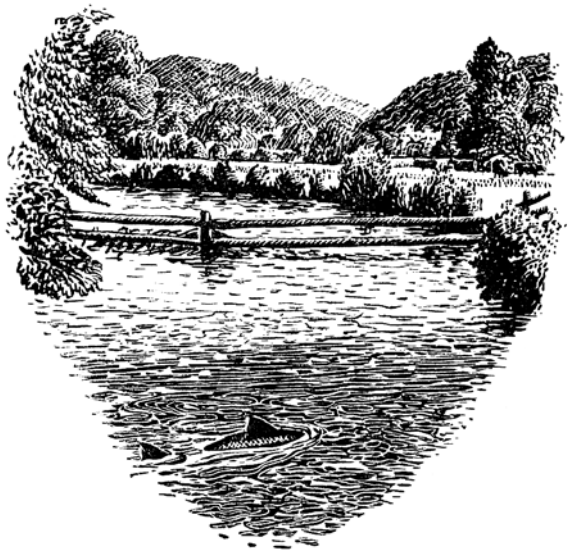
To
T.E. LAWRENCE
of
Seven Pillars of Wisdom
and
V.M. YEATES
of
Winged Victory



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INTRODUCTION

Michael Morpurgo

I LIVE IN NORTH DEVON under the same sky, near the same water where Salar the Salmon lived, in the land where Tarka the Otter roamed, and where Henry Williamson sat in his hut and wrote his stories. I frequently walk the riverbanks he walked, see the descendants of the kingfishers and herons and the otters and the salmon he saw. I have stood on a windy hill overlooking the river as he did and watched the leaves flying and the crows buffeted about the skies. These valleys and rivers have become synonymous with the most loved and best known of all his characters. For I live in Tarka Country. The local railway from Exeter to Barnstaple is called the Tarka Line, and there is a walker's footpath through the countryside called the Tarka Trail. How pleased Williamson would have been about all this is dubious. In a way he came to resent all the fuss about *Tarka*, the hugeness of its popularity which had come to overshadow all his other work. But for me, if there is a companion volume to *Tarka the Otter*, it is *Salar the Salmon*. I have to come clean and say that the narrative drive in *Tarka the Otter* may be stronger – superficially in part because the creature himself is more appealing. And the story is certainly more of a page turner. *Salar* does not quite have the same emotional punch. But the greater achievement nonetheless is *Salar*. That Williamson attempted to write it at all is extraordinary.

In 'A Personal Note' written on his 'salmon book', Williamson reflects on the difficulties he had in even starting the book. It's a wonderfully frank and touching confession of a great writer, faced with the same blank page all writers face, 'Where and how, should one begin?' The rivers he knew already, the Bray, the Mole, the Taw. He'd walked the banks, spent thousands of hours up trees, watching – the fish, the birds,

the insect life. He knew the people of the river, the anglers, the poachers, the bailiffs. He ploughed through 20 years of quarterly numbers of *Salmon and Trout Magazine*. He was anyway a countryman through and through, and still he couldn't begin. Hardly surprising. He was attempting to write the biography, the life and death saga, of a fish. Even as well informed, as deeply connected as he was to the life of the river, he put it off again and again. Then he says, 'At last, returning one late afternoon, having seen the wreckage of many spawned-out fish lying at the margins of the river, I sat before a wood fire in the sitting room at Shallowford and tremulously began to write.'

And then came the doubts, even as he was writing it, that is was 'dull, commonplace and unreadable.' There was a looming deadline and no time to check what he'd written. The publisher received the chapters one by one, and unedited, simply sent them on at once to the printers. It was a huge commercial success, at one point selling over 3,000 copies in one day. A book about a fish, selling 3,000 copies in one day!

I am always intrigued by the difficulties and doubts, and even the despair, experienced by the great writers. It's a comforting thought for me when I look down at my blank page every morning. I can think to myself, 'It's alright. Henry Williamson went through the same despair, the same doubts.' I do know a little of what he was going through, especially in relation to *Salar*, which must have seemed to him an almost impossible book to write. The most impossible book I ever persuaded myself I could write was about the life saga of a swallow – the whole idea itself may well have been inspired by *Salar* and *Tarka* in the first place. Henry Williamson was amongst those authors who showed me the way to my own writing. Indeed I think they showed me the way to my own living, how to live, where to live even.

I was brought up on poets like Kipling and Wordsworth, was read Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, and many of the books by BB. Later I came across John Clare, Edward Thomas, and most importantly of all, Ted Hughes and Henry Williamson. All these writers, each in his own way, brought me closer to the world of nature, to a desire to feel part of it.

They opened my eyes, helped me to breathe in the world about me. They still do. So it was in part because of them, that I found myself living and working on a farm in Devon, where I had the opportunity to watch the swallows arriving in Spring.

Every day I'd be there watching them dipping down into the puddles for mud, building their nests. I'd see the head and tail of the sitting bird, I'd listen for the first cheeping of the brood, witness the gaping beaks, the parent birds coming and going tirelessly feeding their chicks. I was there sometimes for the first triumphant flight of the young birds, to see all the siblings lined up on the telegraph wire, and I was with them for all the summer as they skimmed over the mown hayfields, as each became a supreme aerial acrobat, a genius of a flying gymnast. All too soon, with the first gales of autumn they were waiting to go, ready to go, and then they were gone. I knew, as we all do, that they go to the warmth of Africa for the winter, and then return like salmon to their place of birth. But how they get there and back, and what happens to them on the way, I had no idea. Those journeys I had to imagine. I had to fly with my swallow in my mind's eye, to endure the dangers and difficulties he encountered. I had to live his life, be him.

So whilst the trigger for my story might have been my fascination as I witnessed the comings and goings of swallows on the farm, I am quite sure that it was the work of other writers that inspired that fascination in the first place, and gave me the confidence to take on the challenge. Somehow they seemed to have been so immersed in the natural world about them, that they were no longer mere observers, but part of that natural world, as much as part of it as a nettle, a bee, or a buzzard or a pied woodpecker – one just came to my window and watched me writing this! – or a swallow or a salmon. All of them had a way of painting a picture with words, of singing the song of the wild, of drawing me close with word-songs and images, that opened my eyes and my mind, and touched my heart. These writers made me look again and wonder again.

Great poets do this, storytellers rarely. It is a rare gift indeed for a

storyteller to be poet as much as a storymaker, to tell a tale so deeply engaging that the reader wants to know what will happen and never wants it to end, and yet at the same time tells it in such a way as to leave a reader wide-eyed with amazement at the sheer intensity of feeling that can be induced by the word-magic of a poet. Henry Williamson is just such a story-maker poet.

I never met Williamson, but I knew someone who did, a poet who knew him well. I met this poet down by the River Torridge, the sister river of the Taw – a place of herons and kingfishers, otters and salmon. He was fishing for seatrout late on a summer's evening, and loomed up from under the river-bank. I remember a giant of a man who greeted me warmly enough, and introduced himself as Ted Hughes. I could tell from his demeanour that he wished to be left alone with his river. I learnt later, as I got to know him better, how single-minded he was about his fishing, about his river. I also learnt that he'd known Williamson well, that he was a great writing hero of his, a kind of mentor in a way, and a huge admirer of both Tarka and Salar.

The two men had a great deal in common – how I should have loved to have been a fly on the wall at the pubs where they drank, or a damsel fly on the riverbanks where they walked. They both had a strong sense of the importance of belonging, that we are not separate or distant from the world of nature about us, but part of it. Both of them knew also what we know, but may prefer to ignore: that as we leave the agrarian way of life behind us, abandoning it ever more for the comfort and convenience of this urban world, we will inevitably be in grave danger of destroying so much that we hold dear, and in so doing may well destroy ourselves.

On reading 'Pike', one of Ted Hughes' most powerful poems, and on reading *Salar*, we can see how both men are drawn to the underwater world, how through observation and wonder they are both able to live under the water, to see the world from a mysterious perspective unknown to the rest of us, until we read their words. Both men, it seems to me, perceive the world as a barn owl does, minutely, distinctly, yet from afar,

knowing what they see, how every creature and plant lives and dies, and its place in the scheme of things. They can imagine it so well, because they are connected, they belong, because they are there, because they feel it. In *Salar*, Williamson might have witnessed the catching of a fish, but he could only have imagined how it was for Salar to be hooked, to struggle against the line, to be reeled in, to break free and to live with the pain and the scar of it for ever afterwards. And he could only have imagined it because he felt it, as Salar felt it.

It is that struggle for life that both are writing about, the salmon's, the otter's, the heron's, the kingfisher's. Hughes and Williamson worshipped this world, knew it intimately, this endless struggle. They knew that we are all part of it, together. As the great writers they are, they help us to understand it, wonder at it, and for that we should always be profoundly grateful.

As Ted Hughes said in his tribute to Henry Williamson given in St Martin-in-the-Fields on December 1st 1977: 'On every page of Tarka was some phrase, some event, some glimpse, that made the hair move on my head with that feeling. In the confrontations of creature and creature, of creature and object, of creature and fate – he made me feel the pathos of actuality in the natural world. It was the first time I was ever aware of it. But I now know that only the finest writers are ever able to evoke it.' Ted Hughes might have been speaking of *Tarka*, but that is precisely how I feel about *Salar the Salmon*.

Michael Morpurgo
North Devon, 2010

TIDEWAYS

ONE

Sea Assembly

AT FULL MOON the tides swirling over the Island Race carry the feelings of many rivers to the schools of fish which have come in from their feeding ledges of the deep Atlantic. The returning salmon are excited and confused. Under broken waters the moon's glimmer is opalescent; the fish swim up from ocean's bed and leap to meet the sparkling silver which lures and ever eludes them, and which startles them by its strange shape as they curve in air and see, during the moment of rest before falling, a thrilling liquescence of light on the waves beneath.

The Island Race is a meeting place of currents over a sunken reef, or chain of reefs. The sea is never still there. Twice every day and twice every night the tide rips over the ledges and pinnacles of the reef, streaming the seaweed under its white surges and mingling the layers of river waters in its green massive drifts.

Salmon feed in the Atlantic and return to the freshwater rivers to spawn, and, by this arduous and pleasurable act, give of themselves to the immortality of salmon.

For two years after hatching the samlet lives and feeds in the river, and, having survived many dangers, in the month of May drops down to the estuary in a new silver sea-coat, a slender little fish no longer than a man's hand, bewildered and brave, venturing with others of its school

the thickening salt waters beyond the known river-water of its birth. It feels its way by the link of nerves, sensitive to the least pressure or density, along its sides from gill-covers to tail. The samlet, or smolt as it is called in its first armour of sea-scales, feeds eagerly on the new food moving in and stirring the sandy shore of ocean, shrimps and other small crustaceans and fish. In freshwater life it was always head to stream, poised in eddy or by stone: thus it breathed through mouth and gill, thus it waited and watched for food moving or floating before and above its eyes, thus was it stream-tapered and made strong: a passing act in the everlasting action of its racial immortality. Always it was driving itself forward, to keep its poise, and its place in the stream.

In the sea it drove itself forward, a sideway sinuating movement, boring into the unknown and deepening densities of ocean. It found its new food more easily and frequently, it grew quickly, its shoulders deepened, its white flesh became pink, its forked tail-fin broadened. Always it was travelling farther from the shallow coast, yet following the weakening stream of fresh water beyond the last ribs of sand.

It came to a dark wall of rock from which ribbon weed was unrolling and swaying. The green water moved as in the river, but with greater press, and there the smolt waited in the race of tides, feeding on small fish which drifted past. Many smolts were taken by fish called bass, which, large mouthed and spined of back-fin, roved together down the corridors of the reef, and through the weedy timbers of wooden ships wedged in clefts of rock. The Island was a breeding place of sea birds, guillemots, auks, razorbills, puffins, red-throated divers, and others which oared themselves with their wings swiftly under water, while thrusting with webbed feet. Conger eels lived in dark water-caves, moving darkly and slowly behind broad-nosed heads, and suddenly accelerating along their own lengths to seize a fish before it could turn away. Loath to leave their remembered river-water, which was parent and friend to them, the smolts remained in a straggling school near the reef, among hundreds of thousands of other smolts, brought thither by their weakening parent streams.

The sun in Taurus rose over the land whose watercourses they had left,

and set in the Atlantic; the tides poured over the reef, flowing north and lapsing south in light and darkness; the moon moved over the sea, and as its light grew so the tides pressed faster, mingling the river-streams until memory or feeling in the smolts for their rivers was lost in the greater movements of ocean. And in the night of the moon's fullness many shadows moved into the racing tide, and the smolts fled and gathered in confusion before the apparitions, which one after another swam slowly up to the broken, gleaming top of the sea and, near the surface, gathered all their power within themselves to sinuate first one side then the other, faster and faster gripping the water with one flank then the other to push their tapered lengths violently away from the water: thus a salmon accelerates for the leap. New schools of fish followed, slowly and leisurely, and ranged themselves behind and under and beside the salmon formations already waiting in the tide-race. Fish after fish left its place, swam up, gathered strength, leapt, smacked down on its side, and swam down slowly to its place again.

The tide took the displaced smolts south of the Island, to where beyond rocks the water deepened and was quiet below the lift and roll of waves. So they began a far sea journey, their rivers disremembered. They wandered above rocky glooms of the deeper Atlantic; they wandered in ancestral memory. Here for many scores of thousands of years salmon had travelled, coming to where the last of the continent's foundations fell away into the blue twilight of immeasurable ocean.

In the sea was rich feeding; and when they were grown big, in surfeiture of physical life the unconscious lust for a fuller or spiritual life led them back along the undersea paths they had travelled as smolts, to where ancestral memory became personal memory – to where the river currents frayed away in the tidal rhythms of the sea. The returning salmon thinks with its whole body.

As the different schools found their food easily or hardly, so they grew quickly or slowly; thus salmon were returning to their rivers flowing into the North Atlantic at all months of the year, in varying tapers or sea-mouldings. Nevertheless, the salmon's cycle of renewal is fixed in the

orbits of the sun, served by the moon; its spawning time is the end of the year, when days are short and rivers run high with wild rains. What of those fish which enter the rivers at the beginning of the year?

Should the early-running salmon survive the perils of the estuary, of river life in spring and summer, and endure the ardours of spawning and of prolonged starvation (for salmon feed only occasionally, and with no profit, in freshwater), it returns, sick and dislustred, to the sea, where, as fishermen say, it cleans itself; and again it journeys forth against the warm drag of the Gulf Stream with the eagerness of one reborn, yet who must follow the fixed orbit of its kind, unto that darkness which awaits even the sun in heaven. The scattered eggs of salmon in the gravel redds are the constellations of night; nothing is lost of air or water. In this faith is the story of Atlantic salmon told.

The Romans, sailing in their galleys between the Island and the mainland, knew the meeting place by the reef, and named the fish Salar – the Leaper. So shall be called the big keeper, or cock-fish, who sprang towards the moon from the waves of one of the biggest tides of the year on that coast, the Easter tide.

Salar was one of many thousands returning from the ocean feeding banks. As the moon at night rose fuller, he had travelled on, pausing neither to feed nor sleep. He had come at medium ocean cruising speed, travelling about a hundred miles from one sunrise to another, faster with the currents, slower aslant them. The current guided him; his body remembered. His mouth opened forty times every minute, and each time as his mouth closed his gill-covers opened, and red gill-rakers absorbed oxygen from the water for his bloodstream. In that bloodstream were units of life, even as the fish was a unit in the living sea.

Salar was five years old. During the two years of river life he had grown to a weight of two ounces: three years of ocean feeding had added another twenty pounds to his weight. Growth had not been regular or uniform. In two periods of sea wandering he, with other salmon, had increased rapidly, while following herring shoals on their westward migration after

spawning in the shallow waters of the north. The herring had followed drifting clouds of marine plankton, and salmon had pursued the herring shoals. Every day during those two periods Salar had gorged his own weight of herrings, catching a fish across the back as it turned from his upward rush, holding and crushing it in his jaws until it was dead, and then swallowing it head first. Soon his shoulders were hog-curved with stored power.

Pursuing the salmon were porpoises, led by Meerschwein, the old sea-hog. The porpoises hunted by swimming in formation under the salmon, which were under the herrings. They were invisible below. The only warning of Meerschwein's approach was a swirl and sudden varying water-pressure of the upward dash. He swam up under a salmon, gathered and launched himself at the fish, turned on his back and snapped at the salmon's belly. Meerschwein and the other porpoises fed by tearing away their bites; they seldom pursued a fish further. Being mammals, they had a sense of sport equal with the sense of feeding.

Following the porpoises were ferocious gladiators, or killers, led by Orca, the strongest, who could crush a porpoise with a single bite in the recurved teeth of his immense mouth. This tribe of killers, like the porpoises, were warm-blooded, breathing only in air. They mated and brought forth their young under water. Their young were born with the instinct, or inherited custom, to inspire only when their mothers, to whom they clung, rolled on to the surface to breathe; but they could suck their dam's milk while submerged.

Salar had avoided death by bite of porpoise, shark, ray, and other predatory fish – nearly all fish prey on other fish – and now, five years and one month from hatching out of a round egg about three-sixteenths of an inch in diameter in the headwaters of a stream under Snowdon, he was more than a yard long, and his girth was half his length.

He was lying on the edge of a current where it dragged against an eddy or back-trend of water; using one moving weight of water to buoy him against an opposing weight. He lolled there, at rest. He was nearly asleep. His mouth opened to take in water twenty times a minute.

Two lines of pierced scales along each flank covered cells filled with liquid which was sensitive to every varying pressure of moving water; the cells were joined with nerve-roots which connected with the brain. His body moved in idle flexion. Fins kept the body poised in its hover. On his back was the dorsal fin, behind each gill-cover was a pectoral fin. A little behind the point of the body's balance were the paired or ventral fins, by which he held himself when resting on a rock, or the bed of the sea in shallow water. By the caudal or tail fin he steered himself: a rudder. There was a small fixed fin, like a pennon, on his back, aft of the dorsal fin which served to prevent turbulence or eddy when he was swimming forward. Blue and silver of flanks, porcelain white of belly, with fins of a delicate opaque greyish-pink, with a few yellow-red and grey-green and light brown spots on his gill-covers, and groups of sea-lice under the dark edge of his tail and on his back, Salar was resting in one of the many streaming currents at the eastern edge of the Island Race when Jarrk swam down, driving himself by powerful flippers, peering round and below with grey-filmy eyes. The seal scattered a school of grilse which flickered and flashed away in the tide. The sudden contorted beat of Salar as he accelerated thrummed in the seal's ears.