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BEN AMES WILLIAMS: PASTORAL MORALIST

By JOSEPH B. YOKELSON

I

IN statements about his books Ben Ames Williams consistently stressed his desire to give pleasure or simply to tell a good story. Authorial practice varies: to D. H. Lawrence fiction was a vehicle for a prophetic vision, to some writers it may be no more than a mechanical variation of the boy-meets-girl formula. But that a writer aims to entertain does not preclude his maturest judgments and deepest feelings from finding their way into his work. Thus a reading of even a sampling of Ben Ames Williams' fiction reveals a concatenation of ideas, assumptions, and biases which should perhaps not be labelled a philosophy but which nevertheless cohere into a sort of pastoral myth. It is this myth which raises the rustics in his local color stories above mere eccentric types, makes a historical novel like *Come Spring* far more than a chronicle, and gives point to a psychological shocker like *Leave Her to Heaven*. In fact, given the explicitness with which Williams sometimes uses the pastoral point of view, one might call him a pastoral moralist.

The pastoral myth appears in its nearly pure form in an early story, "Thrifty Stock." More a sermon than a story, perhaps, "Thrifty Stock" dramatizes not a conflict between full-fledged characters but a conversion to the pastoral way of life. Shackled to a small store in the city and hungering for the soil which his father worked, Mr. Moore buys a farm with a run-down orchard in "Fraternity," Maine. His daughter Lucia, who is almost emaciatedly thin and who makes up heavily, swears, smokes, and calls herself a "fellow," at first resents the move to the country. Soon after her arrival she discovers her neighbor, Johnny Dree, who runs a prosperous apple orchard, and with his acquaintance a change begins for the Moore family. Not without sense, Lucia suggests to her father, who is going increasingly into debt, that he might raise apples like Johnny. When the father complains that he has poor trees, Lucia recites what she has learned from Johnny—that

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one must take care of a tree and also that the Moore trees are "good, thrifty stock." When Mr. Moore points out weakly that it takes years to make an orchard, Lucia scolds him into talking with Johnny.

Responding in a neighborly fashion, Johnny introduces Moore to the mysteries of pomiculture and advises him to hire help only when he has to. During the long winter Lucia is convinced that she cannot bear the drudgery of farm life, but at times she forgets to be unhappy and even finds pleasure in the "ordered simplicity" of the life. By the end of the winter she is stronger, her figure is rounding out, and her color is natural. In the spring she and her father diligently attend the apple trees, but after a tremendous burst of bloom, the crop is destroyed by a frost. Lucia, nearly hysterical with disappointment, is tamed into silence by Johnny, to the astonishment of Mr. Moore. The "stoic patience" of the farmer carries Johnny and the Moores through the coming months. Lucia and Johnny achieve a deeper understanding: she teaches him how to relax; he cures her of smoking and swearing. When Johnny's mother dies and Lucia goes to comfort him, Johnny in his quiet way proposes.

The following year the orchards yield enormously and prices are up because of a poor crop elsewhere. When Moore gratefully comments on the improvement in his life, Johnny moralizes:

"I've said to Lucy some times, you can learn a lot from an apple tree. If it's got grass and weeds around its roots, they starve it for water; and the scale and the aphids and the borer hurt it; and the suckers waste its strength. You were kind of like that when you came up here. You'd been crowded in with a lot of other folks—grass and weeds around you, cutting off the air and the good things you needed. And the way you lived, there were all sorts of things hurting you; no exercise, and no time to yourself, and Lucy's dancing all night, and smoking, and your inside work and all, the way the bugs hurt a tree."

Mr. Moore agrees that he feels new and strong like the trees, with all the "suckers and bugs and all the wasteful things trimmed out of our lives," and he adds that he is no longer worried about Lucia, or Lucy, who has come to like her more humble name. Gazing at his wife, "full with the promise of

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the greatest fruition of all," Johnny affirms: "Aye, Lucy's like the trees. She's come to bearing now."

II

The image of Lucy "come to bearing" like the apple trees is a significant one for Williams; it epitomizes his feeling about the right or "natural" relationship between men and women, about the love that should rule between them. To this relationship Williams was to return repeatedly. It is the chief subject of *Honeyflow* (1932), *The Strange Woman* (1941), and *Leave Her to Heaven* (1944), and an important strand in *Come Spring* (1940).

In the first three books, the central female character in some way violates the right relationship, is alienated from the natural. Mima Robbins, in *Come Spring*, can be seen as the full exemplar of the attitude adumbrated in the pregnancy of Lucy Moore. Mima's healthiness is revealed early in the book as she muses on the problem of immortality:

To bestow that life [in oneself] was the only certain way to preserve it. The preachers spoke of immortality as though it were as far away as the stars; but was it not immortality to pass on a part of your life to make another one? Yet before your life was fit to be passed on, it must be kept fine and clean.

Later, watching her sister nurse her baby, Mima feels herself "tingling with a fierce desire" for motherhood. Just as apple trees bear fruit and seeds to perpetuate the stock, so Mima, attuned to the drives in nature, will find fulfillment in perpetuating the race. Her love for Joel Adams, though tenacious, is that of one bearer of the life force for another, not the selfish desire for a passion which excludes the rest of the world. "I want to have Joel's babies," Mima declares, "even if I hated him, or if he hated me, I'd want that just the same." At times Mima's blind vitalism merges with her faith in the American dream of material and spiritual bounty. She and Joel will breed fine children who will not simply preserve the stock but "harness the continent, 'put their mark' on it.

Strangely, perhaps, in a time not many generations removed from the Puritans, Mima and her family allow the demands of the life force to override conventional morality. With her mother's applause, Mima installs herself as housekeeper in

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Joel Adams' cabin, and in the spring, stirred by the mating calls of the pigeons in the forest, she gives herself to Joel. When it becomes apparent a few months later that Mima is pregnant, Mr. and Mrs. Robbins calmly accept the situation. Joel momentarily feels trapped, but the life force impels him as strongly as it does Mima, and he gives up his dreams of freedom for the responsibilities of fatherhood.

Honeyflow is Williams' first and perhaps most explicit study of a woman's unhealthy relationship to the male and hence of her deviation from nature. Sophie Randle, the central character of the book, spends most of her childhood repressed and unloved in an orphanage, her only consolation being the long hours she spends alone singing to herself. Adopted by her uncle, a Maine farmer, she learns to delight in the hills and woodlands around Fraternity. In the course of her wanderings she meets and is befriended by Margaret Dale, who has bought an old mansion where she may nurse her sister, the burnt-out opera star, Tullia D'Aragon. When Tullia discovers that Sophie has a beautiful voice, she determines to make her an instrument through which she can relive her past triumphs, and she persuades her former manager, Hammel, to finance a year of lessons for Sophie. Sophie responds with an equal determination to become famous but to avoid burning herself out by feeling too much. She rejects the love of Hammel's son and dedicates herself to learning the fundamentals of her art. When Tullia is killed by an old lover, Hammel, judging Sophie's singing to lack emotion, tries to send her back to Maine; but in the crisis Sophie brings a mysterious seductiveness to the aid of her ambition and departs for Italy with Hammel.

In the next ten years, Sophie develops a great voice and, bestowing herself "with calculation," uses a succession of lovers to further her career. She makes her debut at the Metropolitan in the opera *Lilith*, which has been created for her by one of her lovers, Johann Rossbach, the greatest composer of the day.

The story of *Lilith* is symbolic of Sophie's fate as a woman of genius. Written at the height of the suffrage movement, the opera expresses Rossbach's belief that "woman belongs at home" and that "only grief and tragic regret can come from her insistence on equality and independence." Tired of his

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nomad existence in the forest and wishing to settle down and raise a family, Adam breaks with Lilith, who leaves him to wander from Eden by herself. She is wooed by Eblis, the Prince of Darkness, and promises to yield if Adam has forgotten her. Returning to Eden, Lilith and Eblis find Adam a husbandman with wife and child. Lilith musters her seductive powers and is about to win Adam away from dreary domesticity when Eve reminds Adam of their child and curses Lilith. Adam turns back to Eve, and Lilith, crushed, bids farewell to Eden and disappears with Eblis, hopelessly longing for the things forever denied her: "a hut of boughs with a dull mortal for a husband, and a human child."

Margaret Dale, now married and the mother of several children, attends Sophie's debut at the Met. Margaret warns Sophie that there are payments still to be made, and the second half of the novel shows these payments coming due. With no further conquests to make, Sophie becomes restless and sings more than she should. Frightened by the realization that her voice is not inexhaustible and that she is growing old, Sophie for the first time falls violently in love—with Alex Austin, a callow young man—and hastily marries. Williams draws the parallel between man and nature:

An apple tree, its roots attacked, the end of life and therefore of productiveness at hand, will bear most richly, as though it were a sentient thing striving to perpetuate the life within it while there still is time. Thus the life force in woman, too long denied, may like a damned stream burst its bonds and sweep her blindly forward along the road till now refused.

Unfortunately, all of Sophie's mature splendor cannot hold Alec, who is drawn to a young rival of Sophie's. And it is Alec himself who suggests to Sophie the lesson of nature. Describing to her the "honeyflow," the period when the nectar of a plant flows strongly and attracts the bees, he remarks that the honeyflow of fall flowers is like Indian summer—"sweet, but soon gone." Sophie is quick to grasp the instruction:

Suppose there grew a single blossom which could distill nectar as she chose, so that she was besought by many bees, and glorying in her power rebuffed them all, until suddenly her sweets were gone. Her sister blooms would have ripened long before to fruitfulness; there must come to her a time when her beauty without fragrance would

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become a mockery. Sophie thought that such a blossom would be very lonely, at the approach of fall.

If Mima is Williams' saint and Sophie, a sinner, Jenny Hager in *The Strange Woman* and Ellen Berent in *Leave Her to Heaven* are like the lurid, inhuman figures in a demonology. For them love is the opposite of what it is for Mima—exclusive, inward-turning, and ultimately destructive.

Jenny Hager, who lives in Bangor between the war of 1812 and the Civil War, devotes herself to such causes as total abstinence and abolitionism and maintains the reputation of a saint; but in her private life she is a sadist who destroys three men. First, though but a teen-ager, she deliberately arouses her father, Tim Hager, who blames himself and goes to pieces under the constant poundings of self-accusation. Married to old Isaiah Poster, to whom she has fled to escape one of her father's beatings, she methodically sets about ruining Poster's son Ephraim by luring him into adultery and at the same time inciting him to murder his father. She threatens to expose the adulterous relationship if Ephraim does not do away with the old man. By the time Ephraim accidentally kills Isaiah, Jenny has no further use for him and turns him away to sink his shame in dissipation.

Before he dies of the delirium tremens, Ephraim disgorges the story of his ordeal to his college friend, John Evered; but when Evered saves Jenny's life after a shipwreck, Ephraim's incredible story is wiped from his mind and he marries Jenny. Their life is at first "richly happy," and Jenny produces four sons. But unlike Mima, Jenny is not content to pass life on, to create new independent existences: she seeks complete dominance over her children. One day John discovers her brutally whipping one of them. With a "malicious mirth" she reminds him of Ephraim's story—whereupon John forsakes Jenny's bed. Barely daunted, Jenny takes as a lover Elder Pittridge, a temperance crusader and a good friend of the family. After a few months, however, Jenny discards him and sends him, as she did Ephraim, to disintegrate in the riverfront taverns. On the night of the great flood of '46, after discovering that Jenny has given birth to his child in a house of prostitution, Pittridge disappears.

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For the rest of her life, Jenny exercises her viciousness within the family. Two of her sons, unable to bear her cruelty, go off and settle in the South; and when the Civil War starts, she enjoins the remaining sons to kill their brothers mercilessly. During these years, the corruption in Jenny's soul attacks her exterior and she gradually wastes away with an unspecified illness. Her son Dan, back from the war after losing a foot at Gettysburg, shrinks from her as a man might from a serpent. When Jenny dies, John marries the wholesome Margaret Pawl, who loved him even before he met Jenny.

Williams chivalrously suggests that Jenny, recurrently visited by uncontrollable impulses, is two women. If Jenny reminds one of a victim of demonic possession, there is no mitigation for Ellen Berent: in her opposition to the life force she is pure, unmotivated diabolism. After the death of her father, whom she has totally dominated, Ellen fastens herself to Richard Harland, attracted by his resemblance to her father. She employs no mere lover's hyperbole when, shortly after the marriage, she announces that Richard must think of no one but her, not even of his crippled younger brother Danny, to whom he is devoted. She even resolves to herself never to have children. Perceiving soon that she will never have all of Richard while Danny lives, Ellen lets the boy drown while he is swimming in a Maine lake; then when she understands that her husband has seen all from their cabin, she tries to bind him to her by announcing that she is pregnant. The lie succeeds, and in a few weeks Ellen makes it good. But ignorant—symbolically perhaps—of the mysteries of gestation and fearful that Richard will discover her deception, she gets rid of the hated child by throwing herself down a flight of stairs while pretending to be sleep walking.

With the death of the child dies Richard's remaining tenderness for Ellen. Unable to win Richard back by threat or seduction, Ellen poisons herself with arsenic. Richard marries Ellen's truly womanly sister Ruth shortly afterwards. But Ellen once told Richard that she would never let him go, and now her malice reaches from beyond the grave. She has arranged her suicide to look like a murder, and by a provision of her will Ruth is to be charged with the deed if she ever marries Richard. Ruth is exonerated only when Richard reveals that Ellen is capable of murder and thereby confesses his own complicity in

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Danny's death. After two years in prison Richard is reunited with Ruth at a retreat in the Maine woods.

III

When Johnny Dree in "Thrifty Stock" advises Mr. Moore not to hire outside help to cultivate his orchard, he is not simply conforming to the stereotype of the niggardly Yankee: he is expressing rather one of the axioms of Williams' pastoral morality.

For Williams nature is not only a model or a source of instruction; it is an instrument by means of which one is enabled to surpass nature and become truly human. Erich Fromm has written: "*In the process of work, that is, the molding and changing of nature outside himself, man molds and changes himself.*" He emerges from nature by mastering her; he develops his powers of co-operation, of reason, his sense of beauty. . . . The more his work develops the more his individuality develops." Fromm is here describing work as it was carried on, ideally at least, in pre-industrial societies, when one could love the necessity of struggling with nature because of the satisfactions that necessity created. There is something more than mere nostalgia for the picturesque horsedrawn plough or than a belated expression of the Puritan ethic in Williams' idealization of the individual farmer working his own land: the pastoral myth adds an implicit criticism of modern technological society which neo-Freudian psychoanalysis criticizes explicitly.

The Robbins family in *Come Spring* voices most eloquently the pastoral gospel of work. Mima sets the theme early in the book, before the family has reached its uncleared tract north of Thomaston: "Here's a new country everywhere, and it's not the King's anymore. We've said it's ours; but it's not ours just for the saying. We have to use it before it's ours; clear the land and make it bear." Two satisfactions obtained from work meet in the word "ours"; rootedness,—or being able to call something one's own—, and the differentiation of the self. After a few years of making his farm, Mr. Robbins, confessing that he once disliked work, declares that he "wouldn't give a damn for a world with no chance in it to work up a good lather of sweat every day"; and in an exalted, if unortho-

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dox, moment he even sees his labor as uniting him with the universe, "Maybe God and the world He made are the same thing. Maybe when you clear a field and bring it to bearing you're taking care of Him." The characters' words are supported throughout *Come Spring* by accounts of felling trees, ploughing, and raising shelters—accounts which, because they convey the arduousness of mastering the land, convince one of the joy and pride derived from doing the job.

One of Williams' most poignant stories, "Road Discontinued," deals with a family, the Pattens, which, taking the opposite way from the Moores, loses sight of the satisfactions of work and abandons the land for the deracinated life of the city. Contrasted with the Pattens is an immigrant family, which makes the land its own by causing it to bear.

As a child Beth Patten spends her summers in the old farmhouse on Patten Road in Fraternity. She loves to hear gran'ther (her great-grandfather) tell how the original Pattens built the house with native timber, cut the road, and laid out their farms along it. But, as gran'ther ruefully relates, people left or died off and only cellar holes and lilac bushes remain of the old farms. "It takes work to make a farm, Beth," he declares, "and work to keep one going. Most things a man wants, it takes work to get them and work to keep them." Gran'ther alone seems to retain the true spirit of the original Pattens: he lives at the farm all winter, doing the chores himself. When Grandpa Patten renovates the farmhouse and hires men to run the farm which he writes off on his income tax, Gran'ther grumbles: "You can't hire a man to keep up a farm. . . . You've got to put your own sweat into it."

When both her great-grandfather and grandfather are dead and she is ten, Beth, out riding one day, comes across a somewhat older boy tending a fresh grave—that of his mother, who has died in childbirth, the boy explains. The boy's name is Nikky Karonen. When Beth asks whether he lives on the Freeman place, a farm which the first Patten had given to his daughter as a wedding present, Nikky in his inarticulate way echoes Mima's pronouncement that one owns the land by working it: "It ain't anybody's place. It's our own land." He defends the fittingness of not burying his mother in a cemetery with the same words: "It's our land." Remembering that her an-

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cestors were buried in their own land, Beth feels a bond with Nikky and when her parents express outrage at the crude burial, she reminds them of the practice of the original Pattens, of pieties which they no longer understand.

Williams' depiction of Beth's father is bitter. When the stock market collapses, Mr. Patten tries to make the farm pay but fails. He rejects brusquely his wife's suggestion that she and Beth might help out to cut down expenses; and he dismisses her remark that the Karonens, working the way the old Pattens did, have made their fields bear miraculously: "They don't know any better It takes two or three generations for foreigners to understand our American ways." Finally, in true American fashion, Mr. Patten sells the farm to the government, which is buying up "submarginal" land, and over the protests of Beth, who has come to love Nikky, the family removes to Boston. For a while Beth and Nikky correspond, but gradually the letters stop.

Two years later, now a sophomore in college and going with a law student who reminds her of Nikky, Beth drives over from Camden to see the old farmhouse. She finds Patten Road much deteriorated and the house so decayed that she cannot bear to look at it. When she fetches Nikky to pull her car out of a mudhole and sees him tall and brown behind his plough, Beth realizes that she can have happiness only with him. But Nikky has married a local girl and is awaiting his first child. As Beth emerges from the Patten Road onto the main highway she finds her alienation from the happy, productive pastoral life symbolized by a newly posted sign: "Road Discontinued. By Order of the Town."

IV

The late frost which ruins Mr. Moore's first apple crop is not an exception to Williams' picture of nature. His pastoral myth imagines no Golden Age or luxurious Garden of Eden. Nature can be tough and hard. On the abandoned farms around Fraternity the land goes swiftly back to alder and birch. In *Come Spring* black flies and mosquitoes attack the pioneers clearing their tracts; frosts blast the crops they need to get through the winter; deep snows isolate them. Mima hears about a woman, marooned forty days along the Kennebec,

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whose baby starved to death, and for a moment she contemplates a wilderness "impersonal and pitiless, . . . willing to dawdle forty days over the business of killing a little child."

If the toughness and hardness of nature create tragedy, they also stimulate in response pride and courage, which the pioneers in *Come Spring* amply exhibit. Further, in direct confrontation of a demanding nature men learn how they must order their lives if they are to survive. They perceive the necessities, the essentials of existence, and they throw overboard the superficial baggage of urban man. How far this simplification may be carried is shown in *Come Spring*: I'm Davis, the hermit, constructs a comfortable hovel between two ledges, using elm and birch bark and rushes. Even in the coldest weather, Davis reports, he is "as warm as mice. . . . I do good." Life in Fraternity, though far from so primitive, is still comparatively frugal. Lucia Moore at first resents it as barren, but gradually comes to love it for its order and simplicity and to see in it a sort of wisdom.

Although Williams acknowledges the hardness of nature and its value, as it were, for "soul-making," his emphasis is ultimately on faith and hope.

I know that winter death has never tried
The earth but it has failed—

he might be said to hold with Robert Frost. Johnny Dree, with the farmer's "stoic patience," knows that nature does not betray, that the good years outnumber the bad. Though the frost destroys the apple crop one spring, he can assure Mr. Moore that apple trees are "like money in the bank." In "The Sunrise Side," old Jeff Arthur, reputed to have the largest orchard in the state, castigates those who try to take short-cuts with nature:

"Man that sets out to start an orchard, he can't take no short cuts. He's got to be willing to wait nine-ten years . . . before his first pay day comes around. . . . You've heard folks say that you hadn't ought to put a thing off till tomorrow; but I tell you it's a sight better to wait till tomorrow than it is to take some fool short cut so's you'll get there today. My experience is, there allus does come another day. I never see a day yet that another one didn't come along the very next morning!"

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Applying his philosophy to economic and social problems, Arthur scornfully refers to those people who complain about hard times as "sunset-siders," who concentrate on the end of things rather than on the new day. "Me, I raise apples," he declares. "If folks want to eat them, they can buy 'em. And there allus has been, yes and allus will be, enough folks want to eat apples so it'll pay in the long run." The title *Come Spring* derives from the refrain which laces the novel together, a refrain which asserts the cyclical triumph over "winter death" both in nature and in human affairs: The pond will sparkle once again, the leaves will shoot, the alewives will run. Joel may realize that he loves Mima, his broken leg will mend, come spring.

To those who front it properly, nature can be benevolent and bountiful. One must work, but one must limit one's demands to the essentials. Williams says of the towns around Fraternity that "life in them flows easily," but if it does so, it is because "there is no great striving after more things than one can use":

The men are content to get their gardening quickly done so that they may trail the brooks for trout; they hurry with their winter's wood to find free time for woodcock and pa'tridge; and when the snow lies, they go into the woods with trap for mink or hound for fox.

In some stories, where Williams seems to be condoning laziness, he is indirectly pointing out the bounty of nature by exposing the foolishness of unnecessary toil. Even Johnny Dree, it will be recalled, has to learn to relax. Dave Burley, in "Lazy-bones," is the laziest man in Fraternity. He likes only to hunt and fish and talk. His wife is an energetic type who prides herself on her family's industry. When Mr. Covert, who represents the owners, puts the local store up for sale, Mrs. Burley longs to buy it. Angered by her husband's indifference, she sends him to clean up the attic, which has been untouched—rightly, Dave thinks—for thirty years. Among the old trash Dave finds a letter from his wife's uncle which shows that the uncle was too lazy to learn to spell correctly. Equipped with this silencer, Dave knocks off for the afternoon and when his wife berates him a few days later, he produces the letter. Mr. Covert recognizes the stamp on it as a rare one and pays Burley enough for it so that he can buy the store. Burley asks: "If

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I'd cleaned out the attic first time ma told me, I'd have burned them old letters, stamps and all; and then when we needed a few thousand dollars, where'd we ha' been?" And he concludes: "I always did say work'll git you in trouble if you do too much of it. It's the man that's got sense enough to know when not to work that gits along."

In one of his best stories, "The Eftest Way," Williams presents the most outspoken and persuasive version of Dave Burley's credo. Although there is no mention of urban society, the implicit comparison between country and city life that one finds in all of Williams' pastoral tales emerges very strongly. Whereas the city dweller is cramped and budgeted, engages in a thousand "visions and revisions," dares not eat a peach, Uncle Joe Deal takes no thought for tomorrow, enjoys his hunting and fishing, drinks and eats as he pleases. He has no visible occupation. "On the whole, no doubt," Williams comments on Uncle Joe's story, "a highly immoral tale, daring to suggest that sober and ascetic virtue may be, after all, but the weakness of a coward." Even as he grows older, as his eyes go bad and his legs give way, Uncle Joe refuses to become sober and ascetic. "Set ten years in a chair! I'd ruther gun one day and let the chair rock in the wind the next," he tells Chet McAusland. And one fine Indian summer day, when the woodcocks are so tame that one can almost touch them, Uncle Joe, while making a beautiful double shot, dies of a heart attack.

Uncle Joe and Chet McAusland of the Fraternity stories and Leick Thorne and Sime Verity in *Leave Her to Heaven* are the characters who bear Williams' ideals. Joel Adams in *Come Spring* is on the way to becoming such a person. These are all "good men"—faithful, modest, competent. Hunters or farmers, they love the land they gun or work. Some, like Chet McAusland, love their dogs, who come of good stock and, like Reck in "Mine Enemy's Dog," are incorruptible. These men live in poor or declining areas; they appear to have been left behind by the progress of civilization. But Williams shows that to be left behind is almost a badge of superiority. The city people, busy making money and achieving status, are actually inferior. They may exert the power in the world, but they have not the moral excellence of the farmer or hunter who by remaining on the land has kept in touch with the per-

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during values. And though power may be exercised by the outsider, the pastoral characters form a fraternity of men with standards which will not be violated. Scratch an eccentricity and there you will find a standard. Brad Miller in "The Piano" sends to his death a burglar who in his search for money foolishly wrecks the piano that Brad has bought to honor his wife's memory. Even one of the meanest of the Fraternity characters, Andy Wattles in "Another Man's Poison," becomes a terror when two escaped convicts rob him of supplies belonging to the store which he works in and loves.

Although Williams makes excursions into the glamorous territory of public figures, as in *Honeyflow*, his characteristic and best work concerns itself with the lives of ordinary and insignificant persons like Brad Miller. In *Come Spring*, a historical novel, he concentrates on the clearing of the wilderness by the Robbins family and relegates the major historical events and personages of the Revolutionary War to the background. In a postscript to the novel he writes:

The historical novel usually concerns itself with persons who have made a major imprint on their times . . . with generals and statesmen and kings and queens. But for every general there were ten thousand soldiers, and for every king there were subjects. An historical novel may as justly deal with the lives of people who were important not individually but in the mass.

Williams' feeling for the common man (preferably rural) appears in his accurate rendering of colloquial diction and in what may be called the folk-tale quality of many of his Fraternity stories. These have the air of history slipping into legend. They are about extraordinary dogs like Tantrybogus who lived to an advanced age and, though blind and lame, followed his master to the field to make a final point. Or they are about transformations like that of Andy Wattles from a lusterless youth to the single-handed conqueror of two hardened criminals. Or there is the heroic death of the hunter, Uncle Joe, who in the manner of a Hemingway hero gets off two perfect shots as he is stricken fatally. Although the inhabitants of Fraternity, both human and animal, are obscure, they have in them the stuff of legend: they are the best of shots, the wisest of dogs, even, as in "Jeshurun Waxed Fat," the stingiest and slothfulest of men. These are the tales that, retold at the post

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office and general store, create a sustaining sense of continuity with the past and with the land, the site of the extraordinary deeds.

V

Although he was a contemporary of Faulkner, Hemingway, and Dos Passos, Williams virtually eschewed their formal experiments and adhered to traditional story-telling techniques. His first novel, *All the Brothers Were Valiant*, shows the influence of Conrad in certain incidents, and *Victory* is mentioned in *Leave Her to Heaven*; but Williams appears not to have been influenced by Conrad's manipulations of time except in *Leave Her to Heaven*, where events are given from two perspectives. He does not use the stream of consciousness, counterpoint structure, or the Camera Eye. His stories do not begin *in medias res* like some of Hemingway's but generally introduce the main character, discuss him in a leisurely fashion, then present him in a significant incident. The emphasis, as he himself points out, is on local color and character. Williams' style, too, remains well within the canons of tradition. In his diction, indeed, one finds a strain of the archaic: "Be it recorded . . ." or "yet is there always some new thing in Fraternity." Only in his point of view perhaps does Williams join the mainstream of twentieth-century experimentation. In later works, like "Road Discontinued" and *Come Spring*, the action is seen almost entirely through the eyes of the central character.

The pastoral outlook is a conservative one. "Where I am, and the people I love, is all the world I want," Mima tells Joel. And since the truths of life are few and simple, new ideas, new ways of doing things are not embraced simply because of the newness. It is not surprising that this conservatism is reflected in the formal aspects of Williams' works.

Nevertheless, Williams' fiction is relevant to our times. Dealing with origins in a historical novel like *Come Spring*, Williams seeks to give us who live among disintegrative forces a feeling of connectedness, the sense of being not simply an isolated phenomenon without past or future but part of a historical process. At the same time the novel makes us aware of our loss of the satisfactions—and perhaps virtues—of the Robbins family. The Fraternity stories may at first reinforce the

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impression of loss: the society of farmers and hunters in Fraternity is a shrinking one, and we seem to gaze at it from an increasing distance. The recurring descriptions of the landscape, however, tend to reassure us that our loss is not final: the blue hills, the woods, the meadows, and the streams remain; nature waits only to give instruction and to be cultivated like the "thrifty stock" of Mr. Moore. Williams the pastoral moralist is not convinced that we must follow the lead of the Pattens; the way of Nikky Karonen is also open.



BEN AMES WILLIAMS IN BOOKS

By RICHARD CARY

FOR sheer industry and productivity Ben Ames Williams ranks among the most proficient writers of our time in America. During his four decades of active authorship he turned out forty books, which ran into at least seventy-seven subsidiary and English editions, as well as twenty-six foreign translations; he edited three volumes; he contributed introductions, forewords, or chapters to fourteen books by other authors (including a play based upon one of his short stories); and his stories and articles have been incorporated into more than fifty anthologies. His appearances in periodicals number in excess of four hundred.

The immediate reaction to such quantity is to suspect its quality, but one finds no substantiation in Williams' record. A dedicated and meticulous man, Williams served a rugged apprenticeship in his vocation. Satisfied at the outset merely to entertain, he steadily and earnestly raised his sights to loftier concepts of the function of literature. His earlier novels of action and mystification gave way to purposeful studies of character and mores—*Splendor*, *The Strange Woman*, *House Divided*, *Owen Glen*; his multiple adventurous fictions in the "pulp" magazines are later balanced by the almost plotless