

Malcolm Williamson and Rooks Nest House

Contributed by John Alabaster
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One Sunday evening in the summer of 1989 when Dr. Williamson was living at Rooks Nest House, I had the pleasure of meeting him in the company of Ellen Deffner (who had known Elizabeth Poston) and her husband David who were visiting from the States, both keen to meet the Master of the Queen's Music.

Malcolm Williamson had first met Elizabeth Poston in 1985 at a concert at the Royston Arts Festival when he was living in the nearby Village of Sandon, Hertfordshire, with his partner Simon Campion, having returned in 1983 from a two-year stay in their native Australia. They soon became friends with Elizabeth, and in October 1986 organised a concert at the Berkhamsted Civic Centre primarily to celebrate her 80th birthday. The programme included a first performance of Malcolm's *The Feast of Eurydice* as well as her *Re-creation and Autobiography* and, as a surprise for Simon to celebrate his 50th birthday, a set of three pieces, *Campion Carillon*, that she wrote for piano duet. Elizabeth had had her battles in the past in negotiating fair contracts and so had asked Simon to be her publisher and, moreover, when she died in the following March, had made him her literary and musical executor and copyright holder. At that time she had been working on a book of carols which was still only half finished and Malcolm then readily and generously completed, writing a comprehensive introductory essay and setting some thirty items, about half the total - *A Book of Christmas Carols* by Elizabeth Poston & Malcolm Williamson, published by Simon & Schuster, London, 1988. Elizabeth had bequeathed Rooks Nest to her nephew Jim Poston who, when posted abroad had rented it to Malcolm and Simon, the terms of the lease being that nothing should be removed or re-arranged. So, when we arrived at Rooks Nest, not only were we warmly welcomed by Malcolm, but felt very much at home in familiar surroundings; even the two large beeswax candles I had fashioned from old honeycomb from the roof of the bay window at Rooks Nest were still in place on the living-room mantelpiece; and David, who was working on his doctorate on hymn writing, was soon trading tunes with Malcolm on Elizabeth's grand piano in the music room and was much encouraged by Malcolm's interest. Malcolm showed us his current work in progress - a beautifully neat manuscript score of *The Dawn Is At Hand*, a choral symphony commissioned for the Australian Bicentenary. It concerned aboriginal culture - tribal law, customs and dance, and the mystery of birth, life and death - utilising the poems of aboriginal writer Kath Walker. Such a theme at that time was so controversial that some of the Queensland Choir refused to be involved! Malcolm and Simon remained at Rooks Nest until Jim Poston returned to England in August 1992 when they had to move. During their five-year stay at Rooks Nest Malcolm had completed a number of other works, despite suffering the after effects of a stroke. Altogether during his life he had been remarkably productive, composing a huge range of more than two hundred and fifty works. As we retraced our steps homeward through Forster Country, we reflected on what an important role Rooks Nest House had played in the lives of three remarkable, creative artists.

Photograph by John Wittich for the City of London Recorder Malcolm Williamson with Lord and Lady Wilson at the Church of St Sepulchre without Newgate on the occasion of the première performance of *Galilee* at the annual Musicians' Benevolent Fund Service for the Festival of Saint Cecilia, November 1987. Williamson composed *Galilee* to the poem by Mary Wilson and dedicated it for Elizabeth Poston who died on 18th March that year. Dr Williamson wears the robes of Doctor of the University of the Open University of Great Britain, founded when Harold Wilson was Prime Minister.