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## Hatless Harry: An Interview with Maynard Williamson

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## HATLESS HARRY

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAYNARD WILLIAMSON

**I**HAVE often yearned for a chance to be a non-conformist. One of my greatest ambitions has been to be able to say "no" to any nuisance who asks me to do anything for him or for his organization, and then, after I have made myself perfectly clear, to push him in the face. I have always earnestly desired to defy convention. An hour ago I stood talking to a man who personifies all the non-conformity many of us have dreamed of possessing.

Maynard Williamson, the non-conformist, is known to those who meet him on the streets of Carlisle as "Hatless Harry". I had been told by some that he was an artist or an interior decorator, by others that he was a singer and a little "off" mentally. His appearance, as I meet him on the street from time to time, only deepened the interest such reports had aroused. Dressed in gray knickers, hatless, massy gry hair framing his ruddy countenance, white six and shoes setting off his robust figure, and carrying the inevitable cane, he passed me often. My belief that his appearance and the reports I had heard of him were only half as interesting as he himself would be, were confirmed an hour ago.

I approached Elm Rok, the house Williamson built himself, with the admiration of one who detests the hackneyed bungalow styles of rural America. Here was a house that conformed to no style but borrowed the best features of all. With a dash of originality and non-conformity Williamson had inserted unique iron grills, colored cements in designs, niches filled with columns asymmetrically arranged, and bricks and stone jutting out from the smooth stucco surface.

The interior however was a disappointment. When I stepped into the long living-room my eyes met dull gray

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walls, yet unfinished, scattered woodworking tools, old blocks of wood,—a general makeshift appearance which made me feel that the interview I had come to seek would be dull and uninteresting. Williamson soon banished all fears of the failure of my visit.

"You'll have to excuse the informality", Williamson said as he shook my hand and appraised me carefully with his clear searching blue eyes. "This is the way we are living until we get fixed around. We make progress slowly, especially since we do most of the work ourselves." His ruddy countenance lighted up with a glow of satisfaction. "We built the house ourselves, my wife and I. It has taken us a long time but we get a kick out of doing things we've never done before." His stocky body turned slightly as he glanced around the gray-walled room. That arch was a lot of fun, but the fireplace was a little more difficult. I had to be sure that it would work. So many of our neighbors' don't. I read two or three books on fireplaces and finally succeeded in building one that works."

The spot Williamson has chosen for his home is beautifully situated. I had no sooner mentioned the extreme beauty of it than he told me what his relatives had said of his coming to Carlisle. "They say we came to the sticks to vegetate, but we like it. My wife got a lot of fun out of shoveling the snow off the walk while I went to market. We had been penned up in the city so long. We came here to live as it suited us. We get up when we like; go to bed when there's nothing else to do. A friend of mine once said that 'early to bed, early to rise, and you miss meeting a good many interesting people'. Another friend commented on my irregular hours by stating that my only regularity was my irregularity."

My interview was of double intent. I wished to learn something about Williamson and to secure him for a speaker. As soon as I broached the latter subject I saw Williamson become evasive. "I hate to be tied down to any en-

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gagements" he told me candidly. "I came here to avoid all appointments, social functions,—all that binds me to regular deep-rutted routine. Life becomes too narrow under the pressure of it. I've been moderately successful, and now that I am able to live as I choose, I don't like to be tied to any obligations. We work if we feel like it and eat when we have time. Today we haven't eaten yet. (It was two o'clock) I'd speak but I don't want to be tied to an engagement."

From time to time in our conversation he emphasized his words with his gesticulations, either by pounding lightly with his fist or by nodding his head forcefully. The sincerity of each word he spoke rang true. Everything he said was his actual belief and a part of his philosophy.

The gate upon which he leaned as he talked he had built himself. It was hand-carved with vines, flowers, and animals in low relief. "I've spent most of my time lately building these gates. It was quite a lot of work because I had never done any carving like it before. Then, too, I had to scrape all the wood with this heavy wire brush to get the rustic effect I wanted. It's great fun to do things I've never done before. That's probably where my greatest interest lies, next to that in life and people.

With that rambling suggestion of his interest in life and people he began to explain his philosophy, not the philosophy of a textbook but one which he had formulated from his contact with people and life. "I enjoy nothing more than meeting and talking with people. Life has taught me that the man who can work an hour longer than his competitor is usually more successful. Physical vigor is responsible for any small degree of success I have acquired. I was able physically to work harder than my competitors. Health is absolutely essential to any clear mental activity. My mother used to chide me for not getting up earlier, saying that I could have done a lot of thinking if I had been up. I told her that ideas couldn't be rushed."

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"If people could only learn to be satisfied with their lot," he said, brushing his heavy hand across his brow. "That gesture, by the way," he said, calling my attention to that involuntary motion, "was the cause for my never wearing a hat. Many people have wondered why. When I wore a hat I found myself pressing my forehead with my hand and frowning. I was unable to think clearly sometimes. When I discovered that my hat was causing the trouble I discarded it. Now I'd never wear one again. I like to feel free to think clearly." That is why Williamson is known as "Hatless Harry."

Throughout Williamson's conversation runs a philosophy. It is his own, a philosophy of activity, of contact with life and people, of artistic interests, of a life broadened by refusal to conform to the petty, hampering conventions.

"Educational methods today have often seemed to me to be too narrowing and too theoretical. We need more actual practice in our education—less theory. The readjustment college people have to make after leaving college is that of learning from the beginning to practice what they have gained only in vague theory. It's difficult and often disastrous."

Every minute our conversation seemed to shift; a new subject, another phase of philosophy, a new interest. Every sentence brought into prominence some fact of Williamson's personality. Now he was berating the desire of all Americans of materialistic bent to secure more wealth; again he scored those who were duped into buying what they didn't need merely for the sake of keeping up with the neighbors next door. He has an indomitable faith in men, however, despite his vituperations against them.

Williamson's voice is pleasing and well-modulated. When he had explained his life and career I realized the cause. "I used to sing" he said as he was drawn to the subject by a Metropolitan opera coming over the radio. "I had aspirations to make Carnegie Hall stage. I worked and

finally succeeded, but what was the result? Every time I went off the stage there was the customary applause." He had a mocking note in his voice as he said it. As he spoke he cupped his hands and mimiced the applause of the operatic patron. "It was always the same. The singer who came on the stage after me received the same trite applause I had been given. I decided there was nothing for me on the concert stage so I gave it up."

Advertising, his next field, held more success he told me as he rummaged in a pack of material for examples of his work. "I thought up the content, arranged it, and made any illustrations. Because I was able to carry out the whole scheme without any assistance I got farther than some of my competitors. I was successful enough."

What did a non-conformist do for pleasure, I wondered? Would he be a movie-fiend? "All life is pleasurable," said Williamson, putting an end to my wondering, "if we are imaginative. Not the sort of imagination which shuts out reality, but that kind which is visionary. We need both the practical and the impractical in our make-up. I'm interested in people, music, art, activity—in short about all of life. That's our biggest game and we should be more concerned with that than with anything else. I suppose my greatest happiness is to be free to enjoy life. No ties, no ruts to follow, and a life of comfortable security not free from work and not bound to it is the life I cherish and the life I live."

He waived aside the few hasty remarks in the way of an excuse that I made for having troubled him. When I was walking down the path that led to the street from Elm Rok I realized that the man I had come to see was more of a philosopher than a non-conformist.

—Ralph Thompson.