



Heathcote Williams  
**Sacred Elephant**

Read by **Heathcote Williams**  
with **Caroline Webster** and **Harry Burton**

THE  
COMPLETE  
TEXT

UNABRIDGED

POETRY

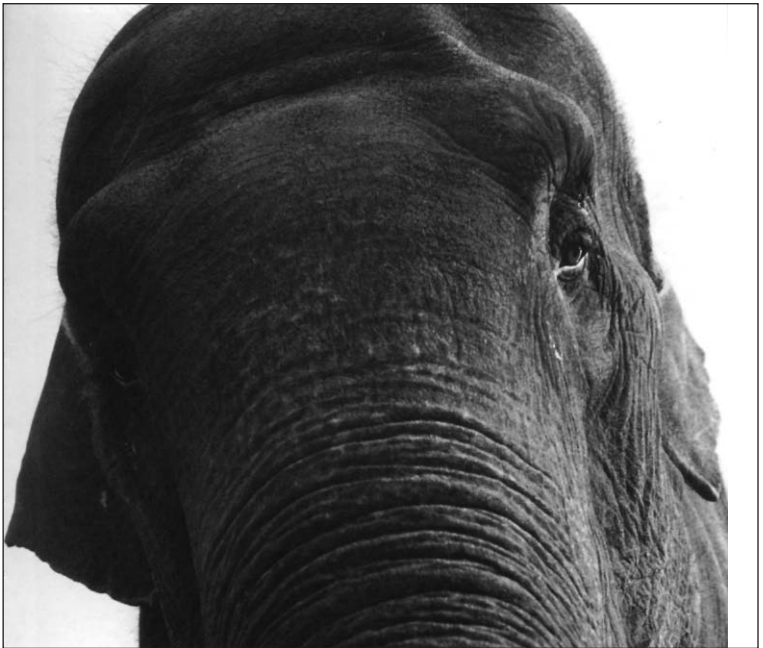


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1	Wisdom	1:41
2	'Good Public Relations'	3:48
3	Characteristics	3:55
4	Birth and life within the community	3:32
5	Rogues?	1:47
6	Death and burial	5:47
7	Elephants and man	2:31
8	The lord of creation	3:24
9	'A newer, shabbier religion'	2:20
10	'Knick-knacks'	3:00
11	In captivity	4:37
12	Retaliation	4:21
13	Sacrifice	1:25
14	Memories	1:19
15	Fate	4:55
16	Evolution	12:42
17	Behaviour	9:00
18	Instinct	4:26
19	Intellect	8:56
20	Communication	3:18
21	Procreation and protection	7:30
22	Death	2:19
23	Captive	5:50
24	The hunted	5:47
25	The spoils	5:09
26	Comment	4:46

**Total time: 1:58:21**



Picture: Courtesy Shirt Off Your Back Picture Agency.

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## Heathcote Williams

# Sacred Elephant

‘Nature’s great masterpiece, an Elephant...’

JOHN DONNE, PROGRESS OF THE SOUL XXIX

In 1967 actor/writer Heathcote Williams spent three months touring in India. While he was in Rajasthan, he was able to observe, at close quarters, the local elephants and their trainers. At this time, he also had a close association with a circus elephant called Rani, and was able to watch her daily routine and behaviour in captivity. Many years later, these observations were to prove useful in the writing of his first environmental poem, *Sacred Elephant*.

It was in 1987 that the work first appeared. It had been published by Williams himself, but in a rather unusual form. Three thousand copies of a newspaper were printed on elephant-sized paper and with print ‘large enough for elephants to read’. These newspapers were not sold in public, but given away by the author to friends and associates. In the same year, the poem was

performed by Heathcote Williams in a radio production. This programme drew the first of many favourable reviews including one from playwright Harold Pinter who described it as ‘a marvellous poem.’

Before the book could be published, however, Williams had already started work on *Whale Nation*, the publication that eventually appeared before *Sacred Elephant* and set the pattern for the books to follow. *Sacred Elephant* was eventually released in 1989, published by Jonathan Cape but in a considerably revised form. Williams had earlier been working on a script for a film version of the book *Elephant Bill* by J.H. Williams. This book, set in Burma, describes the life of J.H. Williams and his relationship with the elephants that worked on teak plantations. The observations and scenes in this book enabled Heathcote Williams to



Picture: Courtesy Masahiro Iijima, Ardea London Ltd.

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extend and improve his earlier version to become the work we know today. Indeed, the second part of *Sacred Elephant*, 'On the Nature of Elephants', contains many extracts from J.H. Williams' book, as well as various insightful and moving tributes to the elephant such as this one, from *Elephant Memories* by Cynthia Moss:

'Elephants are very special animals: intelligent, complicated, intense, tender, powerful and funny. I consider myself immensely fortunate to have spent so much time with them. I have always said that watching elephants is like reading an engrossing, convoluted novel that I cannot put down but I also do not want to end'.

After it was published, the book received many more favourable notices including one from author and journalist Bernard Levin – 'a strange and beautiful book.'

Despite its enormous success, however, *Sacred Elephant* has not received the same environmental publicity that greeted *Whale Nation*. I asked Heathcote Williams why he thought this was.

'The sea is the last great unexplored wilderness. Whales seem much more mysterious to us as a species, less readily observable. Somehow, the desire to preserve

the more "familiar" elephant is less pure. As long as the elephant encroaches on human land and impedes the development of housing and farming it will almost always seem more acceptable to destroy it.'

The text of *Sacred Elephant*, often stark and uncompromising, is also hauntingly beautiful and highly emotive. To all those who are concerned with the destruction of a species, *Sacred Elephant* is a fitting tribute to all the animals that have been, and will be, sacrificed to satisfy man's greed.

### **Notes by Sarah Butcher**

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**The music on this recording is taken from  
the NAXOS and MARCO POLO catalogues**

<b>CIURLIONIS</b> THE SEA, IN THE FOREST, FIRE PRELUDES Slovak Philharmonic/Juozas Domarkas	8.223323
<b>BRAHMS</b> A GERMAN REQUIEM Czecho-Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra/ Slovak Philharmonic Choir/Rahbari	8.550213
<b>BRUNEAU</b> MESSIDOR Rhenish Philharmonic/Lockhart	8.223498
<b>BRAHMS</b> SYMPHONY NO. 2, SERENADE NO. 2 BRT Philharmonic/Rahbari	8.550279
<b>RUBINSTEIN</b> SYMPHONY NO. 2, THE OCEAN Slovak Philharmonic/Gunzenhauser	8.555392
<b>RUBINSTEIN</b> IVAN THE TERRIBLE CSSR State Philharmonic/Stankovsky	8.555476
<b>RUBINSTEIN</b> DIMITRI DONSKY George Enescu State Philharmonic Orchestra/Andreescu	8.223320
<b>SAINT-SAENS</b> CARNIVAL OF THE ANIMALS Czecho-Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra/Lénard	8.550499
<b>MUSSORGSKY</b> PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION Jenö Jandó, piano	8.550044

Cover picture: Courtesy Art Directors' Photo Library.



**Harry Burton** is a highly versatile actor. A familiar figure in British theatre, in London's West End and the Fringe, he has become equally known for taking leading operatic roles including Mozart (Figaro and Leporello) and Rossini (Dandini) at the South Bank, the Vienna Festival and on TV. He is also regularly seen on TV in programmes as varied as *Soldier Soldier* and *Pinter's Party Time*.

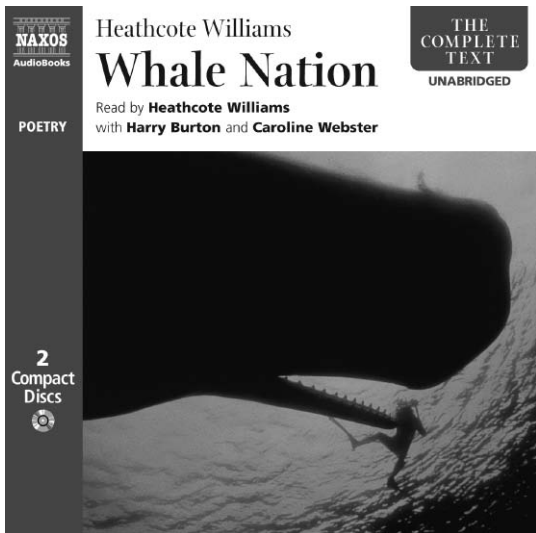


**Caroline Webster** works extensively in UK TV, radio and theatre. She has appeared in no fewer than four Alan Ayckbourn plays – three of them directed by the playwright – both in Scarborough and the Royal National Theatre, London.



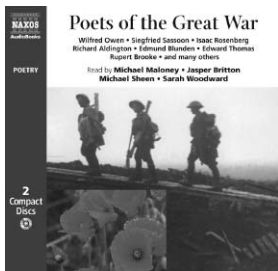
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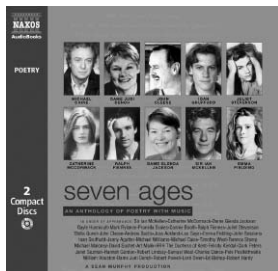


**Whale Nation** (Williams)  
Read by Heathcote Williams  
with Harry Burton and Caroline Webster  
ISBN: 9789626344545

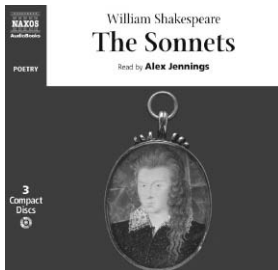
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Heathcote Williams

# Sacred Elephant

Read by **Heathcote Williams**  
with **Caroline Webster** and **Harry Burton**

*'Behold now behemoth, which I made with thee...  
chief of the ways of God.'* Job 40

*Sacred Elephant* is a moving portrayal of the world's largest land-living mammal. The poem explores the life of elephants in their natural habitat and in captivity, and details their relentless destruction at the hands of man. Evocatively read by the author, the poem is accompanied by a second disc containing a fascinating compilation of facts and figures from elephant history.



**Heathcote Williams** As poet, playwright and actor, Heathcote Williams has made a significant contribution to many fields. He is best known for his extended poems on environmental subjects, *Whale Nation* (1988); *Falling for a Dolphin* (1988); *Sacred Elephant* (1989) and *Autogeddon* (1991). But his plays have also won acclaim notably *AC/DC* produced at London's Royal Court, and *Hancock's Last Half Hour*. As an actor he has been equally versatile – among his most memorable roles was Prospero in Derek Jarman's film of *The Tempest*.

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Company: Simon Weir, The Classical Recording  
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Total time  
1:58:21