



The History of Children's Books, No.4: Between Two Wars

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John Rowe Townsend looks at the period after the first World War.

Between Two Wars

John Rowe Townsend

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World War I ended in 1918, and the history of the next 21 years can be seen with hindsight as being largely that of the brewing-up of World War II. Socially, in the West, there was a good deal of marking time; the Edwardian age, never as golden as it was painted, had gone, and no new one had dawned. The most striking developments were in travel and communication. The world was shrinking as movement around it grew easier; cinema and radio were becoming universal, and television emerged as a new phenomenon at the end of the period.

Children's books were slow to react to these or any other changes. The 1920s were on the whole a dreary time, though with flashes of brilliance. The number of children's books increased, but the rise was largely in 'rewards' and budget books, in insipid stories for younger children, and in old-fashioned school and adventure novels for older readers. Comics multiplied but were equally uninspiring.

Fantasy titles

Oddly, the most interesting of early post-war books was inspired by reflection on the part played in the war by horses. Hugh Lofting, who had served in the trenches, observed that 'if we made animals take the same chances we did ourselves, why did we not give them similar attention when wounded?' Obviously, to develop horse surgery 'would necessitate a knowledge of horse language.' From this notion arose in 1922 **The Story of Doctor Dolittle**, about the benevolent G.P. who learns to speak animal languages and collects around him a group of animal friends, including Chee-Chee the monkey, Polynesia the parrot, and the Pushmi-Pullyu with a head at each end.

In what became a series of a dozen books, the Doctor's adventures ranged far and wide. Lofting has been in trouble for offensive portrayals of such characters as Prince Bumpo, who is black but longs to be white, and King Koko, usually either sucking a lollipop or using one as a quizzing-glass. Lofting was in fact a sincere internationalist whose idea of humour unluckily failed to keep pace with his principles. It is not easy to escape the insensitivities of one's day. (We do not know what our own insensitivities may turn out to be in the eyes of the future.)

Humanised Toys

The great and lasting successes of the 1920s were A A Milne's **Winnie-the-Pooh** in 1926 and **The House at Pooh Corner**

(1928), together with the Christopher Robin verses, **When We Were Very Young** in 1924 and **Now We Are Six** in 1927. Milne's characters, like those in **Alice** and **The Wind in the Willows**, have planted themselves firmly in the national consciousness. Pooh, the Bear of Very Little Brain, Eeyore, the gloomy old donkey, and the rest are of course humanised toys rather than humanised animals, and Christopher Robin, who always knows what to do, stands in the adult-to-child relationship that children find agreeable in their own relationship with toys or dolls. Milne in his turn has come in for criticism, with Christopher Robin seen as a middle-class wimp. But his world was what it was, and, internally at least, the Hundred Acre Wood is a classless society.

Magic and Adventure

In striking contrast to this innocuous world was that of John Masefield, whose **The Midnight Folk** in 1927 was a wide-ranging quest for treasure – a fierce and fast-paced combination of fantasy with high adventure. A sequel, **The Box of Delights**, followed in 1935. Among other fantasies of the inter-war period still remembered are Margery Williams Bianco's **The Velveteen Rabbit** (1922), Alison Uttley's **A Traveller in Time** (1939) and P L Travers's books about **Mary-Poppins**, the nursemaid with the magical powers who was created in 1934 and was powerfully rejuvenated years later in a hugely successful film version.

The Peace-Loving Hobbit

The story of Bilbo Baggins, the reluctant hero of **The Hobbit** (1937), who defeats the dragon Smaug and returns triumphantly home, is an archetypal quest story with complex origins in what its author, J R R Tolkien, called the 'perilous realm of faerie.' Hobbits, those small sturdy people with brown curly hair on the soles of their feet, were a brilliant original creation of Tolkien's own. **The Hobbit** is undeniably a children's book, but in conjunction with its later companions on the adult list which made up **The Lord of the Rings** acclaimed by a vote of bookshop users as the great work of the century it must rank among the major fantasies of its age.

Historical Fiction

British historical fiction in the nineteenth century had tended to be a sub-branch of the adventure story, decked out with swash-and-buckle and gadzookery, and offering a romantic rather than realistic view of the past. The innovator in stripping out these ornamentations was Geoffrey Trease, then a very young writer, with his vigorous if naive radical novel, **Bows Against the Barons** (1934) Debunking 'Merrie England?', this presented Robin Hood as a popular hero, leading the people against their oppressors. It was followed by the equally fervent **Comrades for the Charter**, but by 1938 Trease had, as he put it himself, 'got the propagandist urge out of his system.'

'Real' Children

Realistic fiction of the let's-face-it kind had been plentiful in late Victorian years, but with the passage of time had sunk under the weight of its own moralising. Between the wars, children's books did not engage much with uncomfortable realities. Where contemporary life was portrayed, it was the contemporary life of the better-off, and as a rule detached from serious issues; it was fiction written for middle-class children by middle-class adults. Within these limits, the most sustained achievement was that of Arthur Ransome, with his twelve **Swallows and Amazons** books, the first of which was published in 1930. They are mainly set in the Lake District or East Anglia, and are about practical children engaged in healthy outdoor activities. The author's knowledgeable descriptions of such pursuits are among the strengths of the books for the many who have loved them over the years. Emotional stress and the deeper waters of family life are not explored. Parents stay discreetly in the background.

Richmal Crompton's **William** books, beginning with **Just William** in 1922, were equally middle-class but not nearly so realistic. The exploits of the unruly protagonist, a perennial eleven-year-old, tended to become ever more unlikely, but William's fine line in defiant eloquence and habit of escaping from all kinds of scrapes and scoring over the adults in the process encouraged identification and made him vastly popular among young readers, if not among the literati. And it was between the wars that Enid Blyton began to spin her endless line of undemanding stories, written with an unerring

gift for achieving instant appeal. Blyton's books have often been dismissed or condemned by critics, and kept from library shelves; but in the current centenary year there has been a backlash in her favour. At the risk of being charged with elitism, I have to say that in my view her books are worthless; they have a place in the history of children's reading but not in that of literature. I would not ban them, however. Their best defence is that they have often been credited with making readers of children who responded to little else.

Eve Garnett's **The Family from One-End Street** in 1937 featured Jo Ruggles, the Dustman (capital D), his wife Rosie, the Washerwoman (capital W) and their seven children. They live in a little urban terrace house, and the book tells of various homely episodes in their lives. The point of view is from outside and above, and Eve Garnett has been charged with condescension and sentimentality, but **The Family from One-End Street** has a warmth that has made it loved by more than one generation.

Children's Poetry

Poetry for children was dominated by Walter de la Mare, who published several collections in the inter-war years and whose **Collected Rhymes and Verses** appeared in 1944. De la Mare was a brilliant technician with an outstandingly fine ear; he could recapture the childlike vision, and he could at need be robust or humorous. His friend and contemporary Eleanor Farjeon wrote many books of verse ? accomplished, playful, sensitive and perceptive ? but in the end her talent seems rather frail. Whether T S Eliot's **Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats** (1939) is to be regarded as a children's book I am not sure and do not much care. My own children loved it ? with special affection for Skimbleshanks the Railway Cat and the villainous Macavity ? long before it gave rise to a famous musical.

Eminent Illustrators

The inter-war years were a thin time for art in British children's books. William Nicholson produced two brilliant but now almost-forgotten picture books in **Clever Bill** (1926) and **The Pirate Twins** (1929). E H Shepard memorably illustrated a new edition in 1931 of **The Wind in the Willows** as well as the Christopher Robin books; Arthur Rackham was active as an illustrator all through the period; in 1937 Kathleen Hale began her long series of books about Orlando the Marmalade Cat. And in 1936 Edward Ardizzone, a distinguished illustrator soon to be renowned as a war artist, produced the first of a famous series of picture-story books with **Little Tim and the Brave Sea Captain**.

John Rowe Townsend has been writing, and writing about, books for children and young people for many years. Three of his books ? **Gumble's Yard**, **The Intruder** and **Noah's Castle** ? have been serialised on television. His history of English-language children's literature, **Written for Children**, published by The Bodley Head at £9.99, is in its sixth and, he says, final edition.

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