



Classics in Short No.58: Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel and Katy and the Big Snow

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Brian Alderson on Virginia Lee Burton's **Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel** and **Katy and the Big Snow**.

Stakhanovite Ladies in America: the chronicles of?

Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel and Katy and the Big Snow <!--break-->

A curling puff of smoke

in the shape of a question mark issues from the smokestack of The Little Engine That Could. His fame is assured, hauling those trucks up the gradient with his ?I-think-I-cans? and down the other side with his ?I-thought-I-coulds?. But when was the journey first made? When first printed?

The subject is still debated.

It may well date back to an American source in the late nineteenth century, but whenever it was it surely comes as the earliest example of a children?s story where a vehicle assumes the lead role, and many were to follow: **The Little Red Engine** , **The Little Train** , **The Three Railway Engines** (and their long train of associates), and the tradition continues down to the present in Benedict Blathwayt?s ?Little Red Train? picture books.

With Choo Choo in 1938

Virginia Lee Burton (1909-1968) added another American representative to the genre, or, if you prefer, to the Runaway Train sub-genre, inspired by a locomotive on her local line in Gloucester, Massachusetts and brought to the reader with some appropriately powerful drawing. Such was his success that a companion volume was clearly called for and Miss Burton?s observation of builders digging a basement for Gloucester High School prompted her to the creation of the tale of Mike Mulligan and his steam shovel, Mary Anne.

They arrived on the scene a year after Choo Choo,

escaping from the city to the little town of Popperville, with Mary Anne having been superannuated through the arrival of various modish gas-powered machines. But Mike is confident in his never-proven theory that the old girl could dig as much in a day as a hundred men in a week and he bets the leading townsman, sneaky Mr Henry B. Swap, that he can excavate a cellar for Popperville?s new town hall between sunrise and sunset or else do the job for nothing. For half a dozen pages the dirt flies everywhere as the sun crosses the heavens, and the two of them finish up just in time, neat and trim, only to realize that they have boxed themselves into their own hole. It is left to a small boy (acknowledged in a footnote as Dickie Birkenbush) to solve the problem for them.

The book was notable in its time

as an example of the flexibility of photolithography in the making of picture books. Virginia Lee Burton was a skilled designer, insistent on the need for balance in the layout of every page-opening, and she devoted much effort to planning the pattern of images throughout the book and then shaping her printed text so that it enhanced the pattern and also the dramatic movement of the story. She had a fondness for sweeping curves and globular effects, carried out with nicely modulated drawings in chalk and coloured pencil, and the book became one of several in the United States of that period to set new standards in picture-book design.

Unusual too

was the gendering of the steam shovel, who, according to the custom of the genre, should surely have been seen as a male associate of Mike Mulligan rather than a surrogate wife. In fact, Burton makes little attempt at giving her any human attributes, apart from a leery eye on the side of her shovel, and she has no internal voice through which to commune with herself or her driver. Nevertheless, as much through the drawing as anything, her frenzied labours are seen as a part of her personality rather than that of the man pulling the levers, and she should surely be due an honorary Order of the Dungaree for her contribution to women's Stakhanovism.

Even more so

can that be said of her successor the following year, Katy the snowplow. (I'm not sure how to spell that. In the new printing from Frances Lincoln that has prompted this article she is 'plow' in the text, but 'plough' on the covers.) Katy is 'a beautiful red crawler tractor' owned by the Highway Department of the City of Geopolis (surely again not far from Gloucester, MA). There is nothing superannuated about her and, what's more, when she is called out to clear the roads after 'the big snow' she has no truck with so amorphous an owner as a City department and apparently gets on with the job on her own initiative without any driver at all. 'Follow me!' she cries to all the feeble souls shut in by weather: the police, the postmen, the firemen, the utility companies, the medicos..., and in a trice the rough places are made plain. So much travel, north, south east and west of Geopolis, gives Miss Burton grand opportunities for yet more sweeping artwork: views of the snowed-up City, followed by extravagant maze-like patterns as Katy does her rounds, and these are enhanced early on by some enjoyable narrative pictorial borders to the pages which later give way to rather perfunctory decorative curlicues.

These ground-breaking, highway-making picture books

were first published in England by Faber & Faber, whose activity as a children's books publisher in the thirties and forties, under the direction of W.J. Crawley, deserves a full-dress study. Their reissue now in full format and with decent colour reproduction by Frances Lincoln is much to be welcomed - although I regret the abandonment of the decorated endpapers. (In **Mike Mulligan**, for instance, we have lost the very informative working-drawing of the majestic Mary Anne, boom, teeth, swing lever and all.) And why, oh why, have these two examples of Burton's books not been joined by her acknowledged masterpiece (which won the Caldecott Medal for 1946) **The Little House**? With the looming likelihood of Surrey and Kent soon to be completely covered in concrete it could be a salutary lesson-book for the Department of the Environment.

Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel (1 84507 459 9) and **Katy and the Big Snow** (1 84507 460 2), written and illustrated by Virginia Lee Burton, are published in hardback by Frances Lincoln at £10.99 each.

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