



# A Carey Variorum

Article Author:

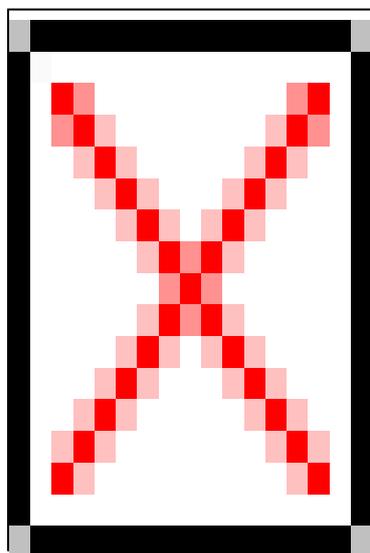
[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

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Byline:

**Brian Alderson** on **Ronald Welch's** action-packed series

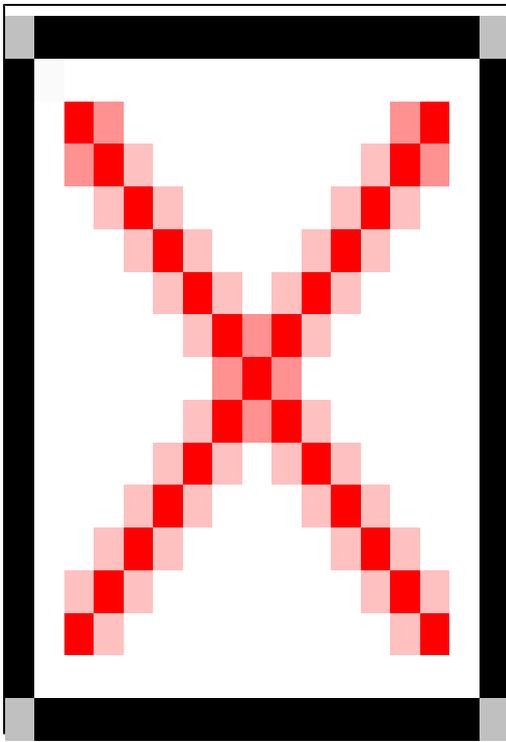
2017 sees the 80th anniversary of the **CILIP Carnegie Medal**, this country's most distinguished children's book award. Amongst its illustrious winners is Ronald Welch. Here Brian Alderson introduces his sequence of **Carey** novels, now reissued with the original illustrations by **Slightly Foxed**.



There's a lot of shooting going on here: mounted Turkish archers and Welsh crossbowmen to begin with and then a pretty fully explicated sequence of chaps with slip-hance and wheel-lock pistols, muskets, rifles, machine-guns, or setting a match to sakers, drakes, cannon, howitzers, and much field artillery. If no bows and arrows or gunpowder are to hand then short swords, rapiers, fencing kit, or bayonets will do along with some rudimentary fisticuffs and wrestling.

Ronald Welch's intimate knowledge of the tools of murder and slaughter forms a crucial accompaniment to his twelve volumes exhibiting select examples of Britons out to rule the world. That theme doesn't count for much in the first instalment, **Knight Crusader**, whose composition probably preceded any later scheme for sequels and follows a Frankish noble, Philip d'Assailly, born and bred in the Christian community of Outremer, through the calamities of the Second Crusade and on to a surprising conclusion. By a set of curious chances he inherits the fiefdom of Llanstephan in Wales and through service to Richard I of England is granted another in the West Country. Thus, by the end of the story, he is on course to become the founder of a dynasty of Anglo-Welsh warriors.

**Knight Crusader** brought Ronald Welch the Carnegie Medal for 1954[1] [3], and this and the arrival of his hero in Glamorgan may have

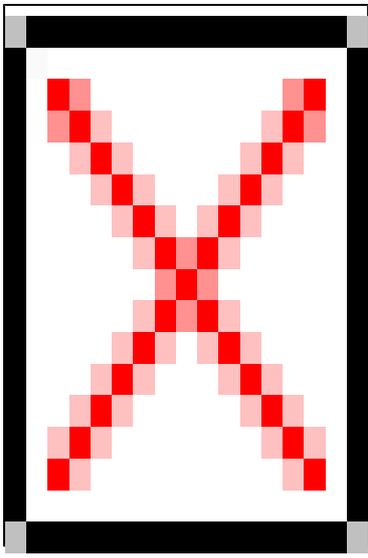


confirmed for the author that he had found home-ground for further

exploration. (An earlier book, *The Gauntlet*, was partly set in medieval Wales and Welch ? who had been born Felton in Aberavon - took his *nom de plume* from his own military service in the Royal Welch Fusiliers.) But the exploration may not have been immediately apparent to any readers who sought out Welch's next book: **Captain of Dragons** (1956). When we meet Captain Charles Carey of Cadogan's Regiment on page 1, he is leaning against a rock somewhere near Limburg as part of the Duke of Marlborough's command in the War of Spanish Succession, a long way from twelfth century Palestine. There is passing mention of Carey of Llanstephan on page 42 and it is not till we get to a military interview on page 69 that we learn that he is the grandson and heir of the Fifth Earl of Aubigny, and hence a descendant of the crusading Assailly family. (I can't find where the Carey moniker comes from.)

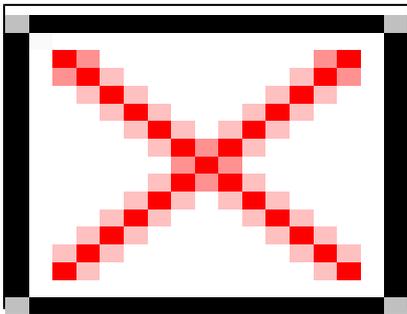
That temporal and territorial gap between the knight and the captain was not filled in any overly systematic way in the ten successor volumes that make up **Slightly Foxed's** reissue of the Carey Saga. Certainly, the three next tales take historic events as a dramatic centre: Wolfe and the Heights of Abraham, the French Revolution, and campaigns in Portugal and Spain, but Welch is primarily concerned with the response of his varying Careys to specific events within that framework. Alan, wrongly accused of cheating at Cambridge, builds up the Earl, his father's, property in Mohawk Valley, New York; his nephew Richard masterminds a rescue adventure in revolutionary France, and his cousin Christopher, the only military man of the three, occupies the four parts of **Captain of Foot**. (His heroic death, along with the rather ignominious one of Ensign Nicholas in the Crimea in the late final book are the only Carey deaths-in-action of the Saga.)

Only after these five books does Welch turn his attention to a more variegated bill of fare. In four volumes he moves us back in time, but only the Civil War story, **For the King**, corresponds in pattern to the switchbacks of military campaigning of earlier narratives. **Bowman of Crécy** the chronological successor to **Knight Crusader**, is notable in its first half as being a Romantic forest-outlaw tale in the vein of **Robin Hood** and has, throughout its course, a hero unrelated to the Careys (Sir John doesn't get a mention till page 72 and is not much more than a supporting character). Similarly, a Welsh neighbour of the Careys is the hero of an Elizabethan yarn **The Galleon** and that book, with a near contemporary companion, **The Hawk**, is primarily about maritime, rather than military, affairs.



From the opening scene of **Knight Crusader** to the almost documentary study of the arrival of tanks on the Western front in 1917, the Saga is powered as much by the frequency of violent incidents as by unitary narratives. Personal antagonisms abound so that duels and murders are interleaved with the often repetitious descriptions of bloody battles (Welch ? a schoolmaster ? was an expert on the mechanics and social layering of military life). They serve, as in all stories of derring-do, to keep the reader reading but ultimately have the effect of making the Saga, when read *en bloc* instead of piecemeal as its original readers would have found it, a massive theme and variations without much change of key. Generals, other ranks, boozers, bullies and outright assassins recur as do duels, fights and hairbreadth escapes. I wonder though what today's sensitive readers, in their safe spaces a long way from Henty, will make of these vanished colonial endeavours with never a transexual in sight nor yet, I am sorry to say, a leading lady.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children?s Books History Society** and a former Children?s Books Editor for **The Times**.



Here is a chronological list of the Carey volumes by date of publication The initial bracketed numbers indicate the chronological sequence of the historical events that are the subject of the stories.

[1] **Knight Crusader** illus. William Stobbs (1954)

[6] **Captain of Dragoons** do, (1956)

[7] **Mohawk Valley** do. (1958)

[9] **Captain of Foot** do. (1959)

[8] **Escape from France** do. (1960)

[5] **For the King** do. (1961)

[10] **Nicholas Carey** do. (1963)

[2] **Bowman of Crécy**do. (1966)

[4] **The Hawk** illus. Gareth Floyd (1967)

[3] **The Galleon** illus. Victor  
Ambrus (1971)

[12] **Tank Commander** do. (1972)

[11] **Ensign Carey** do. (1976)

All volumes first published by Oxford University Press, now reissued in by Slightly Foxed with uniform covers in heavy cloth boards with designs on front by Daniel Macklin.

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[1] [4] William Stobbs, indispensable illustrator of the first seven books, was to win the third Kate Greenaway Medal in 1959.

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