



"Never mind the quality, feel the width". Victorian Children's "soaps" and the Socialisation Process

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***“Never mind the quality, feel the width.”
Victorian Children’s “soaps”
and the Socialisation Process***

The field of *Domestic* children’s stories produced during the Victorian and Edwardian age has generally been shunned by serious scientific research as tasteless literature totally lacking in artistic merit⁷⁵. Certainly, when compared to the great classics of this golden age, it is easy to see why they have not been the focus of critical examination. Poorly made, poorly written, lacking in narrative intrigue and exotic settings, they seem to wallow in the trivial and the banal. They were, quite literally, the Victorian and Edwardian equivalent for children of our “soap operas,” our sitcoms, our docu-dramas and our “trash” novels (Poirier 36).

Yet for the social historian these stories are a mine of information and deserve to be better known. For all they lacked in narrative quality, they faithfully mirrored children’s day-to-day life and generations of young readers identified themselves with the normative behaviour patterns and role models with which they were replete. Indeed, it is tempting to suggest as axiomatic that the value of such stories for the social historian must surely be inversely proportional to their intrinsic *literary* worth; in the image of their modern-day television counterparts: the greater the banality, the greater the historical value!

They were, above all, one of the Victorian period’s most valuable assets in the complex mechanism of transmission of social values from one generation to the next, all the more precious as they functioned both discretely and without arousing the slightest contention or debate. As such, they constitute, therefore, a major source of first-hand information opening up to us what R. H. Tawney has called:

the unseen foundations (of our society), which, till they shift or crumble, most men in most generations are wont to take for granted. (Tawney 192)

⁷⁵ Cf. for instance Watkins (606).

In their uncluttered and uncomplicated simplicity, they reveal the conventions of manners, of political correctness, of sexist and racist attitudes, of social class, in a word, the elitist philosophy which Victorian and Edwardian society so desperately desired to be identified with. For this reason alone, these works of fiction deserve to be rescued from what Tawney called "the limbo reserved for triviality" (ibid.) and treated like windows on social realities which would otherwise elude the historian.

They deserve to be better known also because of their authenticity. Along with its lowly status as the poor relation of the great classics of the Victorian period, this genre forces itself on our attention by its incredible vitality. In terms of reading power these novels were collectively vastly more popular than the classics and, indeed, constituted the backbone and the driving force behind an industry which exploded onto the publishing scene in the latter part of the nineteenth century (and has continued ever since). Despite their fall into oblivion today many of these authors were household names at the time, such as Hodgson Burnett, Mrs Molesworth, L. T. Meade, Edith Nesbit.⁷⁶ These and countless others swelled the ranks of a literary genre which, it has been suggested, collectively sold as many copies as the Bible.⁷⁷

If, then, we take as a starting point the suggestion made by Lucie S. Mitchell that "it is only the blind eye of the adult that finds the familiar uninteresting" (76-90), what new perceptions do these works allow us to glimpse of the hidden forces of social control at work through their medium? I propose to explore this contention by looking briefly at three of the Victorian age's greatest social conventions — conventions so fundamental to the character of the age, so self-evident in fact, that they were rarely subjects of public discussion or debate at all: the racial superiority of the nation, the structure and composition of social classification and the sexual division of soci-

⁷⁶ Lucy Clifford, for instance, produced at least 42 stories all based on the same theme of busy, glad, naughty and sad children, A. Clare wrote 55 stories, Mrs Ewing about 114, L. T. Meade 308 and Charlotte Yonge 333! Some authors wrote serials with the same characters and titles such as *Princess Penniless*, *Marian and her Cousins*, *Lotty's Visit to Grandmama* and so on (Darton 318).

⁷⁷ Hesba Stretton, whose name has long been forgotten, published 101 books in all. Her "masterpiece," *Jessica's First Prayer*, is believed to have sold more than 1,500,000 copies in the years after its publication in 1867 (ibid.).

ety. This is not to suggest that such discussions or debates took place inside the field of domestic stories, but simply that where these questions were treated in these works, they were invariably presented in an innocent straight-forward fashion as behaviour patterns and models which the young heroes naturally adopted, and which the young reader should therefore identify with (Semiontek 8ff).

It might seem strange to look for attitudes towards racism in Victorian children's domestic tales, for, while the British Empire had by the end of the nineteenth century blossomed into the world power — “the land on which the sun never sets” — foreigners were still a relatively unusual sight inside the country itself.⁷⁸ Yet, so deeply ingrained were the theories of Darwinism and Social Darwinism by then — “all is race: there is no other truth” (Faber 59), as Benjamin Disraeli once remarked — that this world picture and the stereotyped images of foreigners frequently formed part of the back-drop to even the most domestic of domestic tales: God's Englishman in his rightful place at the top of the pile, looking down with unquestioning contempt or undisguised pity on the rest of humanity.

Thus we find, for instance, a casual familiarity with distant parts of the Empire in work after work of this kind. In F. Hodgson Burnett's story of *The Secret Garden* set in rural England around the late 1890s, for instance, there are numerous and sometimes quite detailed references to the “jewel in the crown”, India. In other novels, even when the actual story has the most traditional of English settings, the children still find it necessary to introduce references to the distant outposts of English civilisation, to China, to “darkest Africa,” India or Timbuctoo, as well as the exotic fauna to be found there, such as the *Ayaks* and the *Lascars*.⁷⁹

Much rarer are the “walk-on” parts given to real representatives of such races. When a coloured character does appear in these books, he or she is generally anonymous, a vague presence devoid of per-

⁷⁸ The Census Reports for 1881-1921 show that for a total population of 32,527,843 in England and Wales in 1901, there were 247,758 foreign subjects, the majority from Russia and Russian Poland, then Germany (Halsey 504). 1.3% of the population at this time was Irish-born (501).

⁷⁹ All the little readers of Kipling at this time will have known that these terms designated various types of servants. In *A Little Princess*, the servants in India “whose foreheads almost touched the ground when she spoke to them” spend their time making salaams to Sara, and let her do all she pleases (Burnett: 1905 8). In *The Secret Garden* the ayah Saidie keeps the heroine hidden as much as possible, at her mistress's desire, and her task was to pick up and carry things and to be obsequious to her masters (Burnett: 1911 7). See also Ewing (1899 458).

sonality or individuality. Even in exceptional cases where such characters are given a part to play in the story, such as Ram Dass, the Lascar, in *A Little Princess*, they remain the quintessential Indian. The reader is constantly reminded of the contrast between the dark colour of Ram Dass's skin and his white clothes, his teeth which were "gleaming white" and his "dusky face." His dress code is that of a "picturesque white-swathed form and dark-faced, gleaming-eyed, white-turbaned head of a native Indian" (124). And above all, his impeccable manners which, with repeated "salaam"s, underline his recognition of his position of inferiority (127).

Other races, particularly those who were "unfortunate" enough not to have been in greater contact with English civilisation, are depicted with greater mistrust and distance. The Chinese, for instance, never seem to be employed by Englishmen, not even as servants. Implicitly they are not to be trusted. Their racial and cultural inferiority is rather a source of amusement, from school book —

So there are the Chinese!
O what comical creatures!
At least they appear so to me:
How dreadful his nails
and how funny her features!
I suppose they are going to tea⁸⁰

— to novelette, for as one of the little characters in *A Little Princess* coyly remarks, "the geography says that the Chinese men are yellow" (121). At a time when racial purity and evolutionary status were defined in terms of a strict colour coding from pure white down, such references were powerful signals to the young readers. And it is these signals which were reinforced by other (un)savoury titbits of information about the mysterious Orient. Oswald Bastable, for instance, told his brothers and sisters that if these people are not, strictly speaking, cannibals, their culinary tastes are far from being civilised, "we knew that Chinese do really eat dogs, as well as rats and birds' nests and other disgraceful forms of eating" (Nesbit: 1904 62).

⁸⁰ *The Costumes, Manners and Peculiarities of Different Inhabitants of the Globe* (London: 1831) in Walvin (176).

Our little hero warns his listeners that they might want to pass themselves off as “venerable strangers from distant shores” but they will have little difficulty piercing their disguise. Their language betrayed them for it “all sounded like ‘hung’ and ‘li’ and ‘chi’” and can easily be imitated by any Englishman:

Nicee lilly girlee, same piecee flowelee, you takee my head to walkee on. This is alle samee my father first chop ancestor. Dirty white devils makee him hurt. You come alongee fightee ploper. Me likee you welly muchee. (68)

England’s European neighbours fare marginally better (but not much) if only because they tend to be even more invisible than the peoples from the various parts of the world. Not all Europeans however are treated equally, for the children’s eye-view of the Continent seems to be largely influenced by sentiment and romanticism.

Latin stereotypes, for instance, are portrayed as having an exciting, passionate side to them. In several of these novels there are encounters with the mysterious Romanies who always seem to exert a strange fascination over the young heroes. Alongside the traditional stereotype of the “thieving, lying Gypsy”⁸¹ the stories also hint at their marvellous cultural heritage,⁸² their strong sense of community and tradition, their exotic customs and their remarkable craftsmanship (see below).⁸³



Collecting wood

⁸¹ For figures on Gypsies in Europe at the end of the 1870s and their rate of illiteracy, see the article by Carla Stevens (76).

⁸² “Gypsies have a licence to tell fortunes, I believe, and judges can’t do anything to them” (Nesbit 175).

⁸³ Cf. the description of the “*permanent*” camp site in Crockett’s *Sir Toady Lion*.

Italians, too, are seen in quite a positive way. Unlike British people, they don't have boring jobs and live much healthier, less monotonous, lives as "bandits, or 'vineyardiners,' or play the guitar, or something, and they crush the red grapes and dance and laugh in the sun" (Nesbit: 1904 11). The climate, it is suggested, has much to do with this state of affairs for it influences their manner of speaking and gesticulating,

I have been told that they put the "a" instead of the "e" because they like to open their mouths as much as possible in that sunny and agreeable climate. (123)

Russia, on the other hand, is given a mixed reception, for while the snow-clad images of droshkys and mujiks capture the imagination (Burnett: 1905 150), the negative image of Tsarist autocracy and the penal colonies in Siberia also receive their fair share of comments (Nesbit 1906: 86).

But of course, pride of place is reserved for England's nearest Continental neighbour, the French. French culture and etiquette are commented upon with admiration, so much so that the height of refinement for English families is to have a French maid (De La Pasture 13; Dawes 62).⁸⁴ The French language is likewise held in great esteem, and not infrequently, as in the *Railway Children* and *My New Home*, for instance, some of the young heroes claim to be able to speak the language if they are pushed or at least attempt to do so as a last resort.⁸⁵ But such admiration for the French has its limits and the young reader is also left in little doubt about their natural propensity for cunning and their equally excessive (and totally unjustified) vanity (Chancellor 121).

But, perhaps, strangest of all are the stereotyped images of the Celtic races of Britain itself to be found in these children's novels. The Welsh are surprisingly invisible. The Scots, on the other hand are frequently portrayed and, generally in a favourable light. In the image of Janet, the Scottish housekeeper, in *Sir Toady Lion*, they are

⁸⁴ In *A Little Princess*, Sara has a French maid to look after her in the Select Seminary for Young Ladies.

⁸⁵ Bobbie with more courage than linguistic competence and who has never been that bright at school surprised the community at large by saying: "Vous attendre. Ma mère parlez français. Nous être bong pour vous" (Nesbit: 1906 88).

hard-working, live very strict lives and are obsessed with discipline. Janet's Scottish accent is the subject of fun (but only behind her back). Her words are often accentuated to the point of incomprehension when speaking to the children although she is seen to revert to the Queen's English when addressing her master, or at church on Sundays (Crockett 40).

The Irish have a much darker image. They seem only to have been bestowed with all of God's character defects. In one of Mrs Ewing's books, *A Happy Family*, the young hero refers to Irish uncle Patrick with the telling comment, "My father makes allowances for him — first because he is an Irishman and secondly because he's a cripple," before continuing, "Our Irish uncle is not always nice. He teases and mocks and has an uncertain temper" (Ewing: 1862 112). In *We and the World*, by the same author, Jack the farmer's boy is warned that,

[t]his craving to disturb the calm current of events, and the good conduct and composure of one's neighbours as a matter of diversion, must be incomprehensible by phlegmatic people, who never feel it, whilst some Irishmen, I fancy, never quite conquer it, perhaps because they never quite cease to be boys. (264)

Quite obviously, behind these and other racial stereotypes can be seen the outline of a dividing line between "them" and "us," between God's Englishman and the rest of humanity. But to dismiss this as merely harmless banter and part of the patriotic binding process, captured in the popular expression of the time — "One Englishman: a good fellow. Two Englishmen: sport. Three Englishmen: the British Empire" (Earle 14)⁸⁶ — would be to ignore its impact on the very many non-English readers which these novels reached throughout the world, for they were also avidly read abroad. One young Dutch reader of such stories, for instance, felt so infuriated by what he saw as the suffocating arrogance displayed towards all foreigners in them that he wrote to an English children's periodical in protest in 1908. His criticism was that without even being aware of it, "the young Englishman came to believe he was equal to two or more Frenchmen, about four Germans, an indefinite number of Russians,

⁸⁶ Translated into French, this apparently gave, "Un Anglais, un imbécile; deux Anglais, un match de football; trois Anglais, l'Empire britannique" according to Madariaga (37).

and any quantity you care to mention of the remaining scum of the Earth."⁸⁷ In essence this remark seems justified for, while the authors certainly cannot be accused of having invented such stereotypes, they were unquestionably guilty of their propagation in a form which by its very innocence guaranteed at worst their adoption, at best their unquestioned acceptance.

Domestic tales also have much to tell us about how the dominant ideology of middle-England saw the structure of social classification and what was deemed the "proper" relational attitudes towards members of other classes. Here, as with racial attitudes, it is interesting to note that the conventions are unquestionably much stronger than the actual presence of representatives of other classes in the stories would lead us to assume.

The "upper class" for instance, rarely seems to figure in these domestic tales. Where they do appear, they tend to be the objects of gentle derision. The Bastable children, for example, seem nonplussed by their encounter with a Royal Princess in Greenwich Park and conclude that,

[s]he was the funniest little girl you ever saw. She was like a china doll — the sixpenny kind; she had a white face, and long yellow hair, done up very tight in two pigtails; her forehead was very big and lumpy and her cheeks came high up, like little shelves under her eyes. Her eyes were small and blue. She had on a funny black frock, with curly braid on it, and button boots that went almost up to her knees. (Nesbit: 1901 66)

Her whole appearance and mannerisms were so comical in fact that our heroes could only conclude that she was playing a part in a play and they were neither intimidated by her title "princess" nor by her "eighteen Christian names," nor even by the fact that she was Queen Victoria's fifth cousin! Nor is the lifestyle of adult royals any more envious. On the contrary, in *The Unlucky Family*, Charlemagne and Sophia, Duke and Duchess of Pontypool, seem condemned to live out their lives like some kind of travelling circus going from village fêtes to weekends at friends' and receptions at home. When the Duchess goes to visit someone, she has with her a maid, a secretary, a travelling companion, a nurse, a valet, four little dogs and a canary!

⁸⁷ *The Captain*, a children's periodical in 1908 (Leeson 99).

(De La Pasture 86) Clearly it is a life-style (see below) which attracts little sympathy or envy from the young heroes and is ultimately judged boring and obsessively formal when compared to that of the solid down-to-earth middle class!



A picnic in the park.

As for the working classes in these domestic tales, one is tempted to say that there is neither “the hole” that George Orwell once predicted we would find when we look for them in English fiction (Orwell 11-12), nor the complexity of types identified by P. J. Keating in his study of adult Victorian fiction (Keating 26-27).⁸⁸ Indeed, we find quite a significant working-class presence inside these works, but the image is simplified into a stark black-and-white contrast between good and bad, between the respectable worker, who despite being poor, knows his place in the great scheme of life, and the scoundrel. A contrast, in fact, between two working classes, that of the industrial cities and that of rural England.

The stereotype of the respectable rural working class character is frequently portrayed in depth in our books. The porter Albert Perks in *The Railway Children* (146-62), for instance, is the portrait of a happily married man with a loving wife and three children. He is a hard worker and an accomplished gardener, a proud man who

⁸⁸ In this remarkable study Keating finds six kinds of working-class character, the respectable, the intellectual, the poor, the debased, the eccentric and the criminal.

knows how to live within his means, a man who would never dream of asking for charity. He, like so many others, is always respectful of the children in the story, never forgetting to punctuate his sentences with "missie" when addressing the young girls, never counting the time spent telling them about the railway and the trains. Like his gardener counterpart, Ben Weatherstaff in *The Secret Garden* or the young agricultural worker in the *Wouldbegoods* (144), such honest, hard-working and straight-forward people⁸⁹ live genuine lives where all the traits of good living are noted in passing. In particular, attention is drawn to the cleanliness of the family life, no doubt in an attempt to underline the well-known Victorian saying that "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." The importance of such details can be measured by the fact that, not infrequently, the flow of the "adventure" is momentarily interrupted to give the reader a glimpse of the importance placed by these working-class characters on a neat and tidy home, with wild flowers, clean clothes and country freshness everywhere (Nesbit: 1906 151);⁹⁰ faces shining with soap and water, hair brushed very smooth and tight (152), for all their lowly status, these working-class specimens with their "sturdy little bodies and round, red-cheeked faces ... a healthy likeable lot" (Burnett: 1911 246)...⁹¹

One is tempted to think, because these children are also polite and already well-versed in social etiquette and know how to curtsy or bow to those they recognize as their natural superiors (246). In contrast, the poor of the urban slums are seen in a much more pessimistic light. The miserable conditions of their environment are depicted in graphic detail and the reader is left in no doubt that theirs is a "wild savage place" with its, "gas factories and chimneys polluting the atmosphere, its obscure alleys and dark passages heavy with menace and foreboding" (Nesbitt: 1904 66).⁹²

⁸⁹ On only one occasion is he seen to relax, when he appears in the kitchen with his vegetables, and is invited to the "*servant's hall*" for a beer (252).

⁹⁰ For a comparison with French traditions, see Bethlenfalvay (54).

⁹¹ In Mrs Ewing's *A Happy Family*, the class difference is stressed by the hero of the story, Bayard, who tells the village boys that he shall grow up to be a gentleman like his father: "One feels mean in boasting that one is better born than they are, but if I did not tell them, I am not sure that they would always know" (26).

⁹² For a description of this district of London at this time, see Gareth Stedman Jones (144). Jack London recalls that when he was preparing *The People of the Abyss*, he approached the travel agents *Thomas Cook and Sons* to arrange a tour of the East End. To his surprise he discovered that while they could send him instantly to "Darkest Africa or Innermost Tibet, but to the East End of London, barely a stone's throw from Ludgate Circus, you know not your way."

The people of darkest England could indeed come from another world, for they live in underground cellars like rats (Meade 290)⁹³ and can be terrifying to look at. One little girl found begging in front of a baker's, for instance, was,

huddled up in the corner of the step. She looked frightful in her wet and dirty rags. She was staring straight through her with a stupid look of suffering, and Sara saw her suddenly draw the back of her roughened black hand across her eyes to rub away the tears which seemed to have surprised her by forcing their way from under the lids. She was muttering to herself. (244)

Obviously, such people could never be confused with the upright healthy workers of rural England. Their sense of "raggedness," of "scruffiness," their "shabby" and "forlorn" clothes which look more like rags, their dirty faces and, above all, their "hollow hungry eyes" (Burnett: 1905 144), these traits as well as their physical features set them apart, setting them out as small, ugly, stunted, worn-out (Burnett: 1905 48),⁹⁴ lame and maimed (Meade 290).

Not surprisingly, the young heroes exercised extreme caution when dealing with these people. Where they showed signs of contrition or an acceptance of their fate and their humble position in the great scheme of life (*A Little Princess*, Ch. 5 and 13), divine intervention could usually be counted on to lend a hand and produce a happy ending. The young heroes were also expected to nudge fate into action by giving charity, but with caution. Charitable actions towards the poor could easily end in disaster for, as young Matilda in *The Unlucky Family* puts it, "working-class people do not always have an impeccable behaviour." In return for her kindness towards two tramps, she discovered to her cost that they helped themselves to all the valuable objects they found in her house (De La Pasture 71).

Clearly the vicious criminal side to working-class behaviour was never far below the surface and a constant source of danger for unsuspecting middle-class children. Time after time readers are warned not to fall into the trap of excessive trust and to be on their

⁹³ It was the period when philanthropists and various associations organized trips to the country for the poor children of the towns.

⁹⁴ As an exception we find Tom, in *The Scamp Family*, who was already well-built for his tender years (Meade 70).

guard at all times. When little Nora and Snowball, the two heroines of *The Scamp Family*, lose their way in the London fog,⁹⁵ they are firstly robbed of all their possessions by Mr Loafer (Mead 196) and then a "nice" old lady, who volunteers to help them find their way home, ends up kidnapping them and locking them up in her lodgings (215).⁹⁶

Of course, not all working-class people are this bad and the young readers are invited to detect the signs which mark off the good from the bad. Clothes can sometimes give a clue to the characters, such as the "red comforter," the fur cap or the "ragged jacket" (De La Pasture 69), which burglars seemed to sport as a badge of office (Nesbit: 1904 168). But above all, the young reader's attention was constantly drawn to the linguistic signs which marked out the criminal from the rest. Scottish⁹⁷ and Yorkshire (Burnett: 1911 39) accents are, for instance, frequently associated with honest hard-working types you can trust (Mitchison 132). At the other end of the spectrum is the Cockney accent which almost invariably symbolises the criminal character.⁹⁸ As if to reinforce this point, the language of the criminal underworld is also decoded for good measure:

"All right, governor!" the young Bastables are told by one Cockney burglar, "Stow that scent sprinkler. I'll give in. Blowed if I ain't pretty well sick of the job, anyway" (and in a moment of remorse), "What'll come of them if I'm lagged?" (Nesbitt: 1904 166)

Quite obviously, even if the subtleties of such vocabulary were beyond the grasp of most young readers the message itself could not be mistaken (Nesbit: 1901 81). Time after time, the strange fascination⁹⁹ which these working-class characters exerted on the middle-

⁹⁵ See also *Not a Bit Like Mother*, by S. Austin, the author of "Stumps," for more images of London's pea-soup fogs.

⁹⁶ For more on child-kidnapping during this period see Pinchbeck and Hewitt (360).

⁹⁷ Crockett's *Sir Toady Lion* and *Sir Toady Crusoe*, among others.

⁹⁸ "Scent sprinkler" means a revolver, "lagged" signifies either to be sent to prison, or transported to the colonies (Nesbit: 1904 166). For a list of vocabulary used by this type of character, see Chesney (443-51).

⁹⁹ This attraction is pushed even further in *The Secret Garden* where Colin and Mary, when out of earshot of other members of the family, have great fun speaking the Yorkshire dialect. Mary, who on her arrival admitted not understanding a single word spoken by Martha the maid, ends up very proud of her capacities in the "broad Yorkshire" just like her cousin Colin. (Burnett: 1911 196).

class heroes had to be treated with caution and the “spontaneous” absence of the usual marks of deference and respect in working-class characters, was the first sign of danger.¹⁰⁰ So ubiquitous in fact is this convention that, while the “good” working-class characters naturally touch their cap, pull their forelocks, curtsy or punctuate their discussions with their “betters” with a “miss” or “missie,” a “er ladyship” (Nesbit: 1906 98) or a “governor,” “sir” or “master,” the criminal elements only revert to such conventions when caught or to gain some reward.¹⁰¹

The last social convention I want briefly to explore is sexism. Gendered attitudes were omnipresent in this literary genre, much more so, certainly, than images of foreigners or even of other social classes. This and the fact that the patriarchal foundations of Victorian society were central to its existence no doubt explain why, at every level, it permeates these stories propounding and reinforcing the dominant ideological message (Marshall 135); “Girls are, boys do” (Dixon 2),¹⁰² and this, even though the vast majority of authors of children’s domestic tales at this time were women.

Surprisingly too, perhaps, in spite of the demographic statistics of the period,¹⁰³ female characters are quantitatively more present than males in such novels. Yet numbers are not in themselves enough to bestow superior status, and in the majority of our books, girls occupy a subordinate role to boys. So natural did this appear to most characters that one little heroine is brought to remark on first meeting a distant cousin, that, “he was only a boy ... but still he seemed at once to take the upper hand with me; I felt that I must respect him.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Note also that middle-class heroes not infrequently played at imitating such speech patterns. The children in *The Railway Children* for example amuse themselves describing a family, in the manner of Perks the porter, in terms of “the kids and the missus.” They are however quickly brought to task by their mother who explains that they must use a more dignified manner and say “his wife and children” (Nesbit: 1906 146). J. B. Priestley (97-98) has further information about these codes.

¹⁰¹ Nesbit with the Bastables, or Elizabeth De La Pasture with *The Unlucky Family*.

¹⁰² It is curious, to say the least, that Mrs. Thatcher, who believed she was the epitome of Victorian values, famously claimed that “If you want something said, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman”!

¹⁰³ For the period 1891 to 1911, according to census returns, there were slightly more boys than girls in the age group 0-10 years. cf. B. R. Mitchell (45).

¹⁰⁴ Helena in Mrs Molesworth’s *My New Home* (139).

Such respect for the male role, and acceptance of the duties of womanhood¹⁰⁵ are seldom openly questioned and are seen as part of the natural order of the world. Thus the old doctor in *The Railway Children* confides to one of the male heroes of the story,

you know men have to do the work of the world and not be afraid of anything — so they have to be hardy and brave. But women have to take care of their babies and cuddle them and nurse them and be very patient and gentle. (Nesbitt: 1906 216)¹⁰⁶

Marking and guarding the frontier between the sexes, certainly, constitutes one of the most dominant traits of these domestic novels. Long-lost uncles, returning from distant outposts of Empire, spontaneously kiss their little nieces but tap their little nephews on the back, as they would a man. (Nesbit: 1899 207; 1904 40). Girls are invariably (flatteringly) compared to their mothers while even younger brothers' faces light up at the hallowed phrase, "he's a man. If he's not a man, I'm a nigger" (1899 198). Fathers too play their part in the propagation of these stereotyped attitudes, not infrequently addressing their daughters as "my little girl" while their sons are addressed as "sir" (1899 185)!

The common notion that in the boy was hidden the man seemed therefore to justify and at times even encourage a spirit of adventure which was deemed a necessary attribute for the future leaders of Victoria's Empire. With only rare exceptions,¹⁰⁷ when boys and girls play together, it is the boys who naturally assume the leading roles. It is their dynamism and spirit of adventure which trigger off the drama of the stories; it is their scientific minds and fantastic imaginations that lead them to a successful conclusion.¹⁰⁸ Not surprisingly therefore, boys who fail to live up to these high ideals are mercilessly ridiculed as cissies, wimps, softies or cowards,¹⁰⁹ conditions which only a spell at boarding school are able to cure.

¹⁰⁵ Little Dorrie spends most of her time looking after her older brothers Frank and Dickie, and in being dutiful towards them. She finds it normal to agree to do anything for them, despite being only nine. (Everett-Green 170)

¹⁰⁶ This same attitude could also be expressed more bluntly as in the words of the great-uncle in *The Scamp Family*, "there's hope for a boy, but none for a girl." (Meade 243)

¹⁰⁷ Particularly those stories by E. Nesbit.

¹⁰⁸ *Sir Toady Lion* and *Sir Toady Crusoe* are good example of this. Team sports played a major part in these activities, but so too did feats of bravery and trials of strength and endurance.

Images of adulthood have little place in such stories and the future of our young heroes was very seldom evoked. Where it is present, it tended to be vaguely treated in terms of careers, usually vaguely designated as positions of authority.¹¹⁰ Marriage, on the other hand, tended to be seen with a degree of resignation, as a duty to be fulfilled. For one little hero, it was “our fell destiny ... this awful law” (281) by which men lose their freedom and became “bridal sufferers” (Nesbit: 1904 13).¹¹¹ After all, England expects... But if, in every boy there was a man trying to get out, in every girl, it would seem, there was a mother.¹¹²

“Girls are so much softer and weaker than we are,” one little boy is told, “they have to be, you know, because if they weren’t, it wouldn’t be nice for the babies ... and their hearts are soft too ... So a man has to be very careful, not only of his fists, but of his words.” (Nesbit: 1906 217)

Where the future Empire-maker needed a spirit of adventure, the future Home-maker did not.¹¹³ Little Priscilla, in the story of *Sir Toady Lion*, is a typical example of this. She is so good, brave and pious that she forces the admiration of her elder brother, who exclaims that “[s]he’s good no end, our Prissy is. And never shirks prayers, nor forgets altogether, nor even says them in bed...” (Crockett 210 ; 286).

Prissy can on occasion be a good sport and join in with the boys but she never represents a serious threat to their dominant position.¹¹⁴ Her preferred pastime lies elsewhere, looking after and occasionally

¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, the forlorn figure of Albert-next-door in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (Nesbit: 1899 27).

¹¹⁰ Some example are found like Peter, in *The Railway Children*, who wants to be an engineer, Oswald Bastable wants to go to Balliol College, Noël dreams of being a poet and Dicky of working in his father’s business — the girls say nothing about the future apart from a vague idea of marrying a missionary in Nesbit’s *The Wouldbegoods* (128).

¹¹¹ Nesbit herself had a rather agitated marriage to Hubert Bland (Carpenter and Prichard 372).

¹¹² In a recent study of two rival periodicals for children at this time, *The Girl’s Own Paper*, and *The Boy’s Own Paper*, both published by the *Religious Tract Society*, Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig underlined this ambivalence as far as girls were concerned: “girls were expected to become women early in their lives: not for them the fantasies and freedom of childhood, but rather conditioning as embryonic little mothers and home makers” (Cadogan and Craig 73).

¹¹³ *Children’s Book Bulletin*, n° 4, Summer 1980 (60).

¹¹⁴ It should not be forgotten that with their long skirts, streaming hair and flapping pinafores, girls did suffer from “the natural handicaps in the race of life” (Crockett 182).

scolding her collection of dolls — not too much of course, and only when they have been naughty (Crockett 1825). Not surprisingly therefore team sports figure less frequently in their world where the socialisation process centres much more on domestic functions such as tea-parties.¹¹⁵

Rare are the exceptions to this pattern but they do exist. The father of *The Railway Children*, for instance, is the modern man who refuses to differentiate between his son and daughters. When his eldest daughter Bobbie declares she wishes to become a railway engineer, he does not object because he states: "Girls are just as clever as boys, and don't you forget it!" (Nesbit *The Railway Children*). In keeping with the character traits, Bobbie is exceptional on most counts. She is braver than her brother, less of a wimp than her sister, and even declares she would prefer to be a boy (199). Nesbit, however was quite an exceptional character in her own right. But in general, where girls adopt a tomboy or adventurous approach to life, the consequences are disastrous. In *The Scamp Family*, for instance, "a girl's natural desire for adventure and for seeing the world" (Mead 132) almost costs her her life after wandering unaccompanied into the alleys of Petticoat Lane (178).

Yet for all their "domestication," girl characters seem even less fascinated by talk of the future than their boy companions. Perhaps this is not surprising since thoughts of professional careers could never be entertained. More surprising, perhaps, even thoughts of marriage seem to raise little enthusiasm. As one little heroine stoically put it, "you have to be married, or you don't have any grandchildren" (Nesbit: 1906 118), while, for another, there was the even greater dread of remaining an old maid. To avoid this, girls should be prepared for any sacrifice, even that of marrying a man with a crooked nose (234).

It is not excessive then to conclude by suggesting that this neglected field of children's literature has much to commend itself to the social historian. In spite of their initial existence as works of fiction, the incredible detail of day-to-day life of ordinary children which these adventures feed off makes them part of our collective heritage. As Marion Lockhead rightly claims, "they are worthy of

¹¹⁵ Girls are given "Japanese china tea-sets, red and white and gold."

our cherishing for their preservation of the forgotten facts of everyday life” (Lockhead 530).

But more than this, they also allow us a glimpse at how *social inertia*, the unquestioned and unproblematic transmission of cultural and social conformity from one generation to the next, exerted its influence inside the society of our ancestors. For these reasons, irrespective of their literary merits, they deserve our attention.

Rosemary Findlay¹¹⁶

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