

# Introduction

It may be that mainstream literary historians assume that books written for children are independent of the forces that influence literary change.<sup>1</sup>

This book covers a period of over two hundred years of British history, a time which saw great changes in society, from the late-eighteenth century when the country was still largely an agricultural nation, through the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, the great parliamentary reform acts, the coming of the railways and powered flight, devastating wars from Waterloo to the present day, and the emergence of a global economy.

During this period children's literature changed from the crudely-printed pocket-sized books illustrated with copper-plate engravings of John Harris, to the lavishly produced and seriously reviewed works of today, a period in which children's author Philip Pullman has won the Booker Prize, a highly regarded award for adult fiction, as well as seen his works published in an expensive Collector's Edition and become the subject of major film and theatrical productions.

Literature is the result of various cultural, economic and social forces of the age in which it was produced, and these forces have a connection with the texts of their time which is more than 'background' or 'context'. It is not simply that children's books carry references and allusions to their society – such as railways, the Indian Mutiny or urban life in the 1930s – rather, the very form and structure of these books, and their authors' responses, are affected by these social forces, and, directly or indirectly, influence society in return.

The American scholar Mitzi Myers puts it this way:

extraliterary cultural formations shape literary discourse and ... literary practices are acts that make things happen – by shaping the psychic and moral consciousness of young readers but also by performing many more diverse

kinds of cultural work, from satisfying authorial fantasies and legitimating or subverting dominant class and gender ideologies, from mediating social inequalities to propagandizing new knowledge and discoveries to addressing live issues like slavery and the condition of the working class.<sup>2</sup>

This book does not attempt to be a comprehensive, year-by-year history of children's literature; rather it investigates the way children's books are affected by and respond to their society. It looks at how, particularly in times of social change – such as the Industrial Revolution in the early-nineteenth century, and the collapse of empire and rise of the Welfare State in the twentieth century – cultural, economic and social forces have influenced children's literature. It explores a number of individual cases in detail, each selected for their particularly interesting social significance.

The subjects chosen for study are not only interesting in themselves, but they illustrate some of the ways in which authors and their books relate and interact with different aspects of social change. Some of the early authors, such as Barbara Hofland and Charles Kingsley, seem to reflect the dominant values of their age. Barbara Hofland's simple tales of domestic life under times of stress reveal a good deal about popular attitudes towards industrial change, Christianity and utilitarianism in the early nineteenth century. Charles Kingsley's robust adventure stories reflect the rise of a more muscular Christianity, and its connections with imperialism and racism in the middle of the century. Other writers, however, reveal more complex responses to society. G.A. Henty's historical tales from the 1870s onwards appeared during the years of the British Empire's rapid expansion, and his works seem to endorse its values explicitly. But the narrative structure of his stories occasionally reveal fissures and gaps which illustrate some of the tensions and contradictions in the very values of the society he wished to support. The structure of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1886) reveals something similar about the state of the United Kingdom at this time, for his use of the narrative polarities of David Balfour and Alan Breck Stewart seem to comment on Anglo-Scotch relations towards the end of the century.

The works of Edith Nesbit and Amy Le Feuvre reveal changing reactions towards upheavals in society. The stories of Le Feuvre – produced over a long literary career stretching from the 1890s to the 1920s – went through a transformation, as she more or less accepted the social changes which led her from an unquestioning evangelicalism in

her early years to an incipient feminism in her later. Nesbit's stories, on the other hand, developed from the earlier amusing and optimistic family tales to much darker work as she became more critical of social inequality in the late Edwardian age.

But literary responses to society can be revealed not only by analysing the works of individual authors, but also by considering the literature produced over a period of time and examining the values of a particular genre. A study of children's books of the 1840s, for example, shows the most astonishing revolution in taste, and reveals its connection with contemporary social and political reforms. An examination of the popular form of flying stories in the first half of the twentieth century, written by over thirty different writers, such as P.F.C. Westerman and Captain W.E. Johns, suggests the genre tended to reflect the prevailing ideologies of the age in a fairly uncritical and passive way. A review of children's literature produced in the 1930s, however, suggests that whilst many writers showed a desire for quietism and escapism, Geoffrey Trease and a small minority wanted to challenge that mood.

The last two chapters examine the relationship between children's literature and society in more recent years. The cheerful anarchy of British children's stories of the 1970s reflects the long tradition of such books in England, but may also be related to the so-called 'permissive society' of that period, while the bleaker fiction produced in the 1990s may have been affected by the consequences of political change in those years. The final chapter on Philip Pullman reinforces this point from a wider perspective. His historical tales of the 1980s and 1990s are compared with the Victorian works of G.A. Henty to explore the effects of social and political changes, particularly those connected with war and imperialism, over the period of one hundred years.

One broader recurring feature of children's literature that seems to be related to social change is also important: the apparent interchange which occurs between periods when children's books are predominantly serious and didactic, and periods in which the literature is more light-hearted and entertaining. The publisher and critic Frank Eyre defined this process as the 'cyclical pattern in British children's books throughout the centuries, consisting of a continual alteration between the most determinedly moral stories calculated to improve and uplift young readers, and books designed for enjoyment'.<sup>3</sup>

Eyre calculated that these trends, whether towards moral stories or books written for enjoyment, tended to last about fifty years, before another swing of the pendulum brought in the alternating fashion, although changes in taste may fluctuate more rapidly than he

suggested in 1971. He also felt that with each swing of the pendulum, the movement towards didacticism became less pronounced, so that books produced in each successive didactic period became easier to read, and less obviously designed to have a purpose or moral.

These fluctuations in taste can be traced throughout the history of children's books in England, and seem related to political and social changes in general. For British society is democratic; it elects its own government, and a characteristic of this system in Britain is that it tends to choose alternating political parties as the mood of the country changes over periods of time. Thus it can be argued that Mrs Hofland's moral tales of the 1820s reflect the didactic climate of her age, but a massive swing of the pendulum brought in a new period of imaginative and exhilarating fantasy and fun in the 1840s. Kingsley and Henty showed a return to didactic values from the 1860s, until the more relaxed works of Stevenson and Nesbit began to appear. One has to be wary of becoming too schematic in interpreting Eyre's thesis, because the tales of Amy Le Feuvre and the genre of the flying story seem to suggest a return to more instructive forms, although in the 1930s one can see that freer, livelier books were also being written. The works produced in the 1990s, however, do seem to reveal aspects of a reversion to didacticism for reasons which are discussed in chapter eleven.

Another major factor in the relationship between what is happening in children's books and society relates to the conditions of readership and publishing. Few would question the importance of various educational initiatives, such as the beginning of the Sunday Schools Movement from the 1780s, which helped to introduce and spread the habit of reading. The Church of England and the Non-conformist Churches expanded elementary education still further from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and in 1834 the government made its first financial grant for the education of the poorer classes, so that the Newcastle Commission of 1861 could reveal that two and a half million children were attending school. Even so, that amounted to only one in seven of the population, and it needed Forster's Education Act of 1870 to provide free elementary education for all, and another Act in 1902 to regularise secondary education, by which time five million children were in schools. Only in 1944 was free secondary education ensured for all children. This was slow progress, to be sure, but it produced remarkable results regarding literacy and reading. It has been calculated that in 1714 only 45% of men and 25% of women were literate, but by 1841 the numbers had risen to 67% of men and 51% of women, and by 1900 97% of both

men and women. Education was providing a public able and eager to read books, and a steadily growing market for publishers to meet that demand.<sup>4</sup>

John Newbery (1713-1767) was probably the first bookseller and publisher to realise what was happening in the eighteenth century. Although selling patent medicines and other goods, he published between twenty and thirty juvenile books for a rising middle class prosperous and ambitious enough to want books for their children. He began with *A Pretty Little Pocket Book* selling for sixpence (or eight pence with a ball or pincushion) in 1744, and his success encouraged rivals and imitators such as John Marshall and William Darton also to publish children's books. The advertising and marketing of books specifically designed for boys and girls became increasingly important. Newbery had realised that a publisher must not stop at producing only one or two books of a particular kind, but needed to provide a steady stream of works, as John Harris (1756-1846), his most famous successor did, supplying not only story books and picture books, but works on factual subjects as well, establishing a breadth of product that led to the Harris imprint becoming well-known.

Technological changes in the early-nineteenth century, such as the introduction of steam-printing and papermaking machinery, brought great improvements, so that by 1837 an edition of 5,000 copies could be printed in the time it previously took to produce 500 copies. This all helped to reduce costs. Book illustrations, once coloured by hand, were also gradually replaced by lithography and other mechanical methods which proved to be cheaper. Thus between 1825 and 1850 the average price of a book was halved.

Publishers such as Blackie, Longman and Macmillan became more powerful in the children's market in the nineteenth century, and the 1840s marked a clear transition from an age of enterprise and opportunism to one where industrial mass-production of books enabled economies of scale so that more books could be printed at less cost. Publisher's profits varied, of course, depending upon prices and sales, but authors benefited when their methods of being paid changed from their receiving a lump sum or a share of any profit, to a system based on a royalty calculated on the price and sales of a book.

The Education Act of 1870 helped to create an even larger market for children's books – literature and school textbooks – of which firms such as Blackie took full advantage. As literacy increased and technology continued to improve production in the twentieth century, so publishers moved increasingly towards the standardisation of their works, and strived to find best-sellers. This has led to spectacular sales

and profits. In 2005, for example, it was announced that the 'Harry Potter' books written by J.K. Rowling had sold over 300 million copies world-wide, and that she herself had amassed more than £280 million from the sales of her books. The danger of such success is, of course, that both the format and the contents of children's books may be subject to pressures to conform to a formula that has proved successful elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

In light of these important developments, the relationship between the authors and their publishers is raised when particularly appropriate. For example, when examining Barbara Hofland's long career, one is bound to ask whether she would have written so much, and sometimes so clumsily, if her primary publishers, John Harris and Longman, had treated her more generously. Blackie's methods of mass-production and standardisation may be seen as directly related to and perhaps the cause of G.A. Henty's formulaic and repetitive narratives. Amy Le Feuvre's long connection with her evangelical publishers, the Religious Tract Society, receives attention, as well as the activities of the publishing house of John Hamilton, who produced the flying stories of Captain W.E. Johns among many others. The importance of the print industry must never be forgotten in trying to examine the relationship between children's books and social change.

To sum up, this book attempts to show the relationship between children's literature and society by considering a number of individual examples. An era's events, ideologies and *zeitgeist* deeply influence what is written, and are more important, more pervasively penetrating, than a simple framing device for a story. When society and its ideologies change, so does its literature. But literature is not a passive construction which simply reflects society. It can react against, protest, subvert or seek to change what appears to be dominant. And if society or its leading ideology is divided or contradictory, its literature reveals those divisions and contradictions too. As D.H. Lawrence once famously said, 'Never trust the artist; trust the tale'.<sup>6</sup>