

Would Bobbie's Train Have Stopped in Time?

E. Nesbit, *The Railway Children* (1906)

One of the most memorable, not to say iconic, images in Lionel Jeffries's 1970 film of E. Nesbit's *The Railway Children* is of Jenny Agutter standing on the tracks as the train approaches, desperately waving a flag made of her red flannel petticoat. It is pretty dramatic in the book, too:

The train came rattling along, very fast.

'They don't see us! They won't see us! It's all no good!' cried Bobbie . . .

'Keep off the line, you silly cuckoo!' said Peter fiercely.

It seemed that the train came on as fast as ever. It was very near now . . . The front of the engine looked black and enormous. Its voice was loud and harsh.

'Oh, stop, stop, stop!' cried Bobbie. No one heard her. At least Peter and Phyllis didn't, for the oncoming rush of the train covered the sound of her voice with a mountain of sound. But afterwards she used to wonder whether the engine itself had not heard her. It seemed almost as though it had – for it slackened swiftly, slackened and stopped, not twenty yards from the place where Bobbie's two flags waved over the line. She saw the great black engine stop dead, but somehow she could not stop waving the flags.

The scene is a classic example of bestselling novelist's technique: the dramatic confrontation. *The Railway Children* has these in spades, usually demonstrating that children can best adults. For example, the episode of Peter and the sleeping Signaller, Bobbie and the drunken Bargeman, the children and Perks the Porter and, most dramatic of all, Bobbie confronting the train.

Bobbie's confrontation is one of two remarkably effective examples of the quasi-realistic novelist taking an invisible step away from probability to manufacture a dramatic moment. The other, perhaps even more iconic in the film, I shall come to in a moment.

Jeffries filmed *The Railway Children* on the Keighley and Worth Valley Railway, a 'preserved' or 'heritage' railway in West Yorkshire, which has also appeared in films and TV shows such as *Sherlock Holmes*, *Last of the Summer*

Wine, Sons and Lovers, Poirot, and A Touch Of Frost. The engine that stops just in time is the now retired ex-GWR 0-6-0 pannier tank number 5775. The fact that the film is set in 1905, and the engine was built in 1929 is a forgivable anachronism (just as the engine that bursts into the first scene of Claude Whatam's film of *Swallows and Amazons* – set in 1930 – is an Ivatt 2-6-2 tank built some time after 1946). Jeffries makes great play of the engine stopping only a yard away from Bobbie, in a dramatic manner of which Nesbit would undoubtedly have approved.

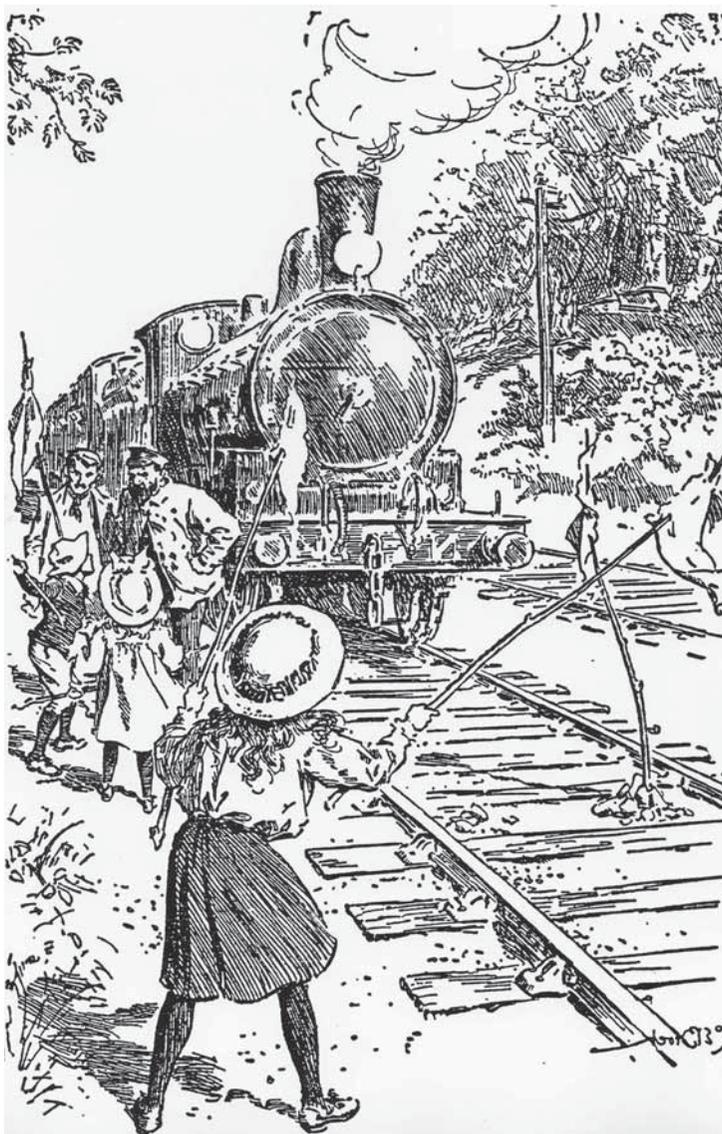
But is this rural scene what Nesbit had imagined?

The Railway Children may well, as Julia Briggs suggests, have had its roots in Nesbit's childhood memories of playing beside the railway at Halstead in the 1860s: indeed the character of the émigré, who Bobbie finds at the station and takes home to her mother, may have been inspired by Nesbit's friend Stepniak, who was run down by a train. The story of *The Railway Children*, Julia Briggs notes 'seems to be set around Halstead, with "Maidbridge" combining elements of Tonbridge and Maidstone'; and if so, the railway she was thinking of was not the single-line, rural railway as at Keighley (or the Bluebell Railway, scene of the 2000 remake). Halstead for Knockholt station (so named so as not to confuse it with Halstead in Essex) was built in 1876, a wayside station on the South Eastern Railway 'cut off' through Orpington, Sevenoaks and Tonbridge which opened in 1868. This was, and is, a main line with, as *The Railway Children* shows, regular expresses – the midnight town express, for example. It is also double-tracked ('"Trains keep to the left, like carriages" said Peter, "so if we keep to the right, we're bound to see them coming."') Even in 1905, the ability of an express train weighing over 200 tons and running at sixty miles per hour to come to an emergency stop, even if it had been fitted with the new (for that era) Westinghouse brake, would have been even less than now. And so the stopping distance required would have been more than 500 yards – over a quarter of a mile. With the best responses possible by the driver, Bobbie wouldn't have had a chance.

But this is bestseller-land, and in order to manufacture an iconic scene, authors frequently have to manipulate characters and fact: in the case of the train, most readers would probably accept the scene at face value. However, manufacturing the big climax to the book also required a manipulation of the character of Bobbie that rather undermines her.

Critics (especially male critics) of the film were reduced to tears by Bobbie's dramatic reunion with her father, recently released from prison; on the station platform the steam from the train drifts away to show him standing there, and she runs down the platform and flings herself into his arms, crying 'Daddy, Oh my Daddy.' The book is no less affecting:

Only three people got out of the 11.54. The first was a countryman with two baskety boxes full of live chickens who stuck their russet heads out anxiously through the wicker bars;



Bobbie stops the train

the second was Miss Peckitt, the grocer's wife's cousin, with a tin box and three brown-paper parcels; and the third –

'Oh! My Daddy, my Daddy! That scream went like a knife into the heart of everyone in the train, and people put their heads out of the windows to see a tall pale man with lips set in a thin close line, and a little girl clinging to him with arms and legs, while his arms went tightly around her.

How did Bobbie find herself in that scene?

The book, it has often been noted, is about imprisonment (the Dreyfus case, a notorious miscarriage of justice, was in the news when it was being written) – and the core of the plot is that Bobbie's father has been unjustly imprisoned. When they find a Russian émigré who 'was three years in a horrible dungeon', the children's mother asks them in their prayers to 'ask God to show His pity upon all prisoners and captives'. When Bobbie finds out about her father she appeals to the *deus ex machina* of the book, the Old Gentleman, who is director of the railway. (The children not only saved one of his trains from being wrecked, but saved his grandson from being run over in a tunnel.) In due course he brings justice – but to orchestrate the final, climactic scene, somehow Nesbit has to get Bobbie down to the station without knowing what is going to happen. First the children, as they always do, wave to the 9.15; and instead of just their old gentleman waving, 'from every window handkerchiefs fluttered, newspapers signalled, hands waved wildly . . . ' Now, Bobbie, who has been the most intelligent character in the book, is required to be stupid. What does the waving mean? 'Perhaps the old gentleman told the people at his station to look out for us and wave. He knew we should like it!' And then: 'I thought he was trying to explain something to us with his newspaper . . . I do feel most awfully funny. I feel just exactly as if something was going to happen.' She walks down to the station and everyone is nice to her – even the Blacksmith, with his newspaper in his hand:

He grinned broadly, though, as a rule, he was a man not given to smiles, and waved his newspaper long before he came up to her. And as he passed her, he said, in answer to her 'Good morning: –
 'Good morning to you, Missie, and many of them! I wish you joy, that I do'
 'Oh!' said Bobbie to herself, and her heart quickened its beats, 'something *is* going to happen! I know it is – everyone is so odd, like people are in dreams.'

Mr Perks is overwhelmed: 'Well, God bless you, my dear! I see it in the paper, and I don't think I was ever so glad of anything in all my born days!' and he begs the liberty of kissing her on her cheeks, 'On a day like this, you know . . . ' to which Bobbie replies 'On a day like what?' – at which point the train steams into the station, and the narrator comments: 'Of course you know already exactly what was going to happen. Bobbie was not so clever. . . .'

Perhaps the sacrifice of Bobbie's character to the dramatic moment is justified – or perhaps the emotional dynamics of the bestseller means that we willingly suspend our disbelief, colluding in the illusion of a neat and satisfying world.