

# Chapter Ten

## The Retreatism of the 1930s: A Few Dissenters

To me, England is the country, and the country is England. And when I ask myself what I mean by England... England comes to me through my different senses... the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil... the cornrake on a dewy morning... the last load at night of hay being drawn down a lane as the twilight comes on... the smell of wood smoke coming up in an autumn evening....

(Stanley Baldwin, 'On England')

The first sound in the mornings was the clumping of the mill-girls' clogs down the cobbled street. Earlier than that, I suppose, there were factory whistles which I never wake to hear.

(George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*)<sup>1</sup>

After the horrors of World War I (1914-1918) and the violent class-conflict of the Great Strike of 1926, Britain seemed to withdraw from militant confrontation and to search for some kind of national unity. The National Government elected in 1931 and its successor in 1935 were pledged to preserve stability. Stanley Baldwin, Prime Minister in 1923-1924, 1924-1929 and 1935-1937, was the appropriate leader and symbol for a Britain 'desperate for a return to tranquillity and social peace', as Kenneth Morgan reminds us.<sup>2</sup> Much of the country prospered, particularly in Southern England and the Midlands, and the majority of workers had no significant spell of unemployment between 1929 and 1940. The population continued to rise. Home ownership grew and there were over a million cars in private hands

which made visits to the seaside or the countryside a popular pastime for the more prosperous.<sup>3</sup>

This is the main reason why much of the children's literature of the thirties reflects a kind of quietism, what Peter Hunt has called 'a retreat from the realities of the world surrounding the child and the book'. And so, he says, the world of children's literature was largely 'the world of the comfortable middle class'.<sup>4</sup> The juvenile literary scene seems to have become dominated with works of fantasy, sometimes brilliant, but often gently escapist, even when professing to be realistic.

Thus, a representative list of children's books published in the 1930s includes:

- 1930 *Wireless in Toytown* by S.G. Hulme Beaman (1886-1932)
- 1931 *The Chalet School and Jo* by Elinor Brent-Dyer (1894-1969)
- 1932 *Darkie & Co.* by Howard Spring (1889-1965)
- 1932 *William the Pirate* by Richmal Crompton (1890-1969)
- 1933 *The Incredible Adventures of Professor Branestawm* by Norman Hunter (1899-1995)
- 1934 *Winter Holiday* by Arthur Ransome (1884-1967)
- 1934 *Mary Poppins* by P.L. Travers (1899-1996)
- 1935 *The Box of Delights* by John Masefield (1878-1967)
- 1935 *National Velvet* by Enid Bagnold (1889-1981)
- 1936 *Hedgerow Tales* by Enid Blyton (1897-1968)
- 1936 *Little Grey Rabbit's Party* by Alison Uttley (1884-1976)
- 1936 *Ballet Shoes* by Noel Streatfeild (1895-1986)
- 1936 *Wurzel Gummidge* by Barbara Euphan Todd (1897-1976)
- 1937 *Martin Pippin in the Daisy Field* by Eleanor Farjeon (1881-1965)
- The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973)
- 1938 *The Sword in the Stone* by T.H. White (1906-1964)
- Orlando: the Marmalade Cat* by Kathleen Hale (1898-2000)
- 1939 *The Ship that Flew* by Hilda Lewis (1896-1974)

Any decade which contains such books as *The Box of Delights* and *The Hobbit* must be considered successful, and incidentally raises questions about the suggestion frequently heard that that the Second Golden Age of Children's Literature began in the 1960s. One must also note, however, that the main strength of the period lies in its high quality fantasy from Hulme Beaman to T.H. White.<sup>5</sup>

Howard Spring (1889-1965) is a particularly interesting example because, although he was brought up in poverty and worked for a number of years as a journalist in South Wales, his children's books,

*Darkie & Co.* (1932), *Sampson's Circus* (1936) and *Tumbledown Dick* (1939) virtually ignore the society around him. Although they are realistic in the broadest sense, these tales are really jolly *picaresques*, which combine melodramatic plots and comic caricatures with considerable zest, but essentially accept the *status quo* without either systemic analysis or, it must be said, expressing any great discomfort. The impression one gets is that, apart from occasional mishaps, everyone is perfectly safe.

The children's literature of this period tends to reflect the values of the prosperous and untroubled part of the population, not really noticing the often violent struggles of the General Strike and the rise of communism and fascism. Adult literature of the time, such as the works of Auden, Graham Greene and Orwell, did notice these events, but it is as if children's writers deliberately chose to ignore them and retreat into comedy or pastoral fantasy. It goes without saying that children's writers must write as they will, and that there is no obligation on them necessarily to write realistically or produce propaganda about the age in which they live. One might, however, have expected to find more variety among the fiction published in what was a troubled period, as happened in the second half of the nineteenth century when, to give a few examples, realistic tales by 'Hesba Stretton' (the pseudonym of Sarah Smith [1832-1917]) and Charlotte M. Yonge appeared alongside the works of 'Lewis Carroll' (i.e. Charles Dodgson [1832-1898]) and Rider Haggard.

For although much of Britain did enjoy relative prosperity and stability in the 1930s, particularly in the south and industrial Midlands, there were also massive regional variations. Unemployment, often said to have blighted the whole of Britain in this period, was in fact most devastating in those areas dependent on the older stable industries of textiles, iron and steel, and mining, such as Lancashire, Scotland, the North-East and South Wales. In 1936, for example, one in four workers in the Rhondda and almost one in five in Crook (County Durham) had been unemployed for a year or longer. While workers in the newer industries flourished, the older and less-skilled workers suffered, especially where there was also poor housing and health provision. Andrew Thorpe calculates that unemployment never fell below a million during this period, and quotes the wife of a sixty-two-year-old miner saying that they 'would be better dead than go on like this'.<sup>6</sup>

The picture in agriculture was more complicated because, while there was some government help in the form of protection imposed from 1931-1932, and direct subsidies to producers of wheat and sugar

beet, which made conditions better for some, there was also much poverty and debt. In June 1933, for example, the number of workers employed in agriculture fell below 600,000 compared with over one million in 1931, and the number of farmers declared bankrupt reached 600 in 1932 compared with 44 in 1920.<sup>7</sup>

Because of these regional and industrial variations, and the contrasts between poverty in some parts of Britain and prosperity in others, one could say that in the 1930s Britain was almost as divided into two nations as it had been in the 1840s. It is, therefore, not surprising that some children's writers of this period, though not very many, did reveal unease at the social and economic difficulties and inequalities.

The most popular reading of the 1930s, as represented by magazines such as the *Gem* and the *Magnet*, published by the Amalgamated Press, and the *Hotspur* and the *Rover*, published by D.C. Thomson, mainly concentrated upon adventure stories and school yarns, and were essentially escapist. Yet they did raise social issues from time to time, particularly in stories about working-class 'scholarship boys', who struggled (usually successfully) to cope with their middle-class and sometimes snobbish schools. Although 'Frank Richards' (i.e. Charles Hamilton [1876-1961]) notoriously avoided any mention of religion, sex, strikes or unemployment in his stories in the *Gem* and *Magnet*, there were a succession of working-class 'scholarship boys' alongside Harry Wharton and Billy Bunter at Greyfriars School.<sup>8</sup>

Eleanor Grahame's *The Children who Lived in a Barn* (1938) is one of the few books which reflects some of society's tensions in this period in a muted but more sustained way. Grahame (1896-1984), whose family came from rural Scotland but moved to Essex when she was four, worked as a medical student for a time before moving first into a bookshop and then to the post of children's book editor for Heinemann and then Methuen. When Penguin Books started their series of Puffin Story Books for children in 1941, Eleanor Grahame was appointed their first editor and for more than twenty years played a critical role in their development, as Stuart Hannabuss has observed, building up a discriminating list of fine children's books. She was extremely sensitive and well-informed authority on children's literature.<sup>9</sup>

*The Children who Lived in a Barn* is in fact a modern version of a *Robinsonnade*, given a realistic setting in British in the 1930s. The story is essentially about the adventures of the Dunnett family who live in the village of Wyden. When the grandfather is taken ill abroad,

the children's parents have to fly out to help him, leaving their five children, aged between 13 and 7, to look after themselves. But their unpleasant landlord threatens to evict the children from their cottage and they find refuge in a barn offered by a kindly farmer. When the children don't hear from their parents, and there are rumours of a plane crash, they know they will have to cope on their own. They clean up the barn and learn to prepare their own meals. When the holidays end, the children return to school. Thirteen-year-old Susan has to do the cooking and the laundry, while the others do odd jobs in their spare time to earn money. The Rector's wife arranges for the children to be regularly inspected by the District Visitor, and other members of the village offer interference or help in various ways. Finally, a friendly journalist, learning of the children's plight, writes a newspaper article about them, which the parents read by chance while recovering from their flying accident overseas. The parents are safely reunited with their children and the threatening adults are defeated.

Although the story looks at first as if it is going to offer a rural idyll, once the reader accepts the implausible disappearance and then reappearance of the parents, the book becomes a convincing picture of real life. When the children lose their cottage and have to manage on limited resources, they have to learn to look after themselves, find food, fuel and clothes, learn to cook their meals, and to cope with the problems of everyday life without much money or parental help. Life is particularly harsh for Susan, the eldest girl, for she has to shoulder most responsibility. Threatened by the District Visitor, she has to make sure that the barn is clean and tidy, and that the children attend school regularly and neatly. There is a vivid account of her doing the family washing in a copper boiler between 4 and 8 a.m., before she gets herself off to school. She has difficulty dealing with her energetic and sometimes uncooperative younger brothers and sisters. And, though they do receive a small allowance from their absent father's bank account, there is always a shortage of money. Even eleven-year-old Bob feels the pressure – 'money, money, money! Cried a voice inside him. *We must have money!*'<sup>10</sup>

But, as well as this picture of the children struggling against practical and economic problems, the story also shows an interesting awareness of the different social classes, with the middle class, represented by the Rector and his wife, the District Visitor and their landlord, revealed as interfering and cruel, while the villagers, especially the farmer and his wife, seem more friendly and supportive. The old tramp Solomon, clearly at the bottom of the social

ladder, is the most sympathetic adult in the book. Eleanor Grahame's publisher, Routledge and Kegan Paul, worried about this aspect of the manuscript, but, as well as pointing to the presence of other sympathetic adults, Eleanor Grahame defended herself, saying 'I too was a little taken aback (sic) to find how poorly the grownups developed – and yet I think they are pretty true to life.'<sup>11</sup> The book well deserves its republication by Persephone Books (London: 2001, 2003), and Jacqueline Wilson's warm praise in the preface.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from the framing device of the parents' disappearance at the beginning and reappearance at the end of the story, *The Children who Lived in a Barn* is very simply organised in a series of episodes, and the work of Eve Garnett (1900-1991) is similarly very episodic. Although Eve Garnett trained as an artist at the Royal Academy Schools and her illustrations to Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* (Puffin, 1948) are still well regarded, she is best known for her three children's books about the working class Ruggles family. *The Family from One End Street* was first published in 1937 and won the Carnegie Medal that year. *Further Adventures of the Family from One End Street* was not published until 1956; though the story was begun in 1940, it was believed to have been destroyed by fire and not recovered until later. A third story, *Holiday at the Dew Drop Inn: a One End Street Story* was not written and published until 1962.

Eve Garnett came from a middle-class family and enjoyed an idyllic upbringing, but moving to London to study art in the 1920s seemed to have had a profound effect upon her. According to her nephew and biographer, Terence Molloy, 'Eve, besides being particularly touched by the plight of unemployed ex-servicemen, found her social conscience roused during frequent visits to the East End on seeing the deplorable condition of children in the slums'.<sup>13</sup> Some of her drawings of children won the admiration of the publisher John Lane, and she was commissioned to illustrate Evelyn Sharp's *The London Children* of 1927. This touching book, which simply describes the lives of poor working-class children in London in the late 1920s, contains many short accounts of children playing in the streets, including one of a docker's daughter sent from Wapping to convalesce in Devon, which clearly influenced Garnett's own writing.

Eve Garnett also devised and illustrated another important book on children entitled *Is It Well with the Child?*, published by Muller in 1938. There is little prose in this book, just a series of poignant and angry monochrome sketches illustrating the poverty of urban working-class life. The book's savagery often arises from

the juxtaposition of an ambitious, public statement with a picture illustrating the reality of the working-class situation. Illustration No. XV, for example, quotes an Air Raid Precaution suggestion, as World War II approached, that 'One room in the house should be set apart and made gas-proof'. Eve Garnett's accompanying illustration shows a family of seven eating, sleeping and living in a single room. A quotation from *The Times* adds that 'There are over 110,000 families living in one-room dwellings in London alone.'<sup>14</sup>

Eve Garnett, therefore, brought a considerable awareness of the lives and conditions of working-class families to her children's books, and, as she made clear in her talk about accepting the Carnegie Medal for *The Family from One End Street*, she knew what she was trying to do:

I have always thought, not perhaps very originally, that the reason one half of the world does not know how the other half lives, is chiefly because the half which might be expected to know is not interested. Once people are interested they are usually concerned to know, and it seems to me, like so many other useful things, this interest is best begun in the nursery – particularly nurseries like the one from which came the almost incredible but true story of the little girl who asked her nurse if it were really true that there were people who hadn't even one motor-car! This may be exceptional but it is true that the average child of well-to-do parents today – particularly the country child – is extraordinarily ignorant of the conditions under which less fortunate children live. One wonders why.<sup>15</sup>

*The Family from One End Street* is basically a happy family story about Mr Ruggles, a dustman, Rosie, his wife, who is a washer-woman, and their seven children. The book is very episodic in form with, more or less, each of the ten chapters concentrating on a simple domestic adventure involving one of the children. Lily Rose tries to help her mother, but accidentally uses a hot iron on an artificial silk petticoat which causes it to shrink. Kate, who has passed the exam to go to secondary school, loses but then recovers her new school hat. Jo sneaks into a cinema for a free visit, but is discovered by the musicians, who ultimately pay for him. Nine-year-old John is driven away in a car he has been asked to mind, but the kindly owners look after him and invite him to their son's party. The book ends with the whole family enjoying a Whitsun Bank Holiday in London at the Cart Horse Parade in Regent's Park.

*Further Adventures of the Family from One End Street* has slightly more structure. The first three chapters depict the family still living in London, but Lily catches measles, and Peg and Jo are ordered to convalesce in the countryside. Kate (now twelve) goes to look after them, and the book's middle chapters concern these children's adventures at the Dew Drop Inn with kindly Mrs Wildgoose. Meanwhile, back in London, Mr Ruggles achieves his life-long ambition to obtain and raise a pig; and the story ends when the convalescents return home only to discover that Kate has now developed measles herself. *Holiday at the Dew Drop Inn*, published in 1962, deals with Kate's holiday in the countryside, and is similar to the story in *Further Adventures*.

A lot of this is easy reading. The characterisation is thin, almost stereotyped at times, and the structure of simple, domestic episodes with little real development is fairly basic. The domestic crises, serious enough in themselves, are nearly always resolved quite easily, either by a stroke of good luck, as when Mr Ruggles finds some money in a rubbish-heap, or by the help of some kindly stranger, as when some friendly dockers send the runaway Jim safely home in a lorry.

Some critics, like John Rowe Townsend, have found Eve Garnett's attitude altogether too condescending. Here is what he says in his revised edition of *Written for Children* in 1976:

[*The Family from One End Street*] seems to me too condescending to be altogether commendable. Mr and Mrs Ruggles are seen from above and outside. Even their names, and the choice of their occupations as dustman and washerwoman, make them seem slightly comic. People from higher up the social scale are terribly nice to the Ruggleses; and the Ruggleses know their place.<sup>16</sup>

There is some truth in this, and yet it does not do full justice to Eve Garnett's realistic portrayal of the difficulties of the Ruggles's poor working-class life – their struggles for shoe-repairs and their reliance on second-hand clothes, the costs of school uniforms and of doctors' bills, the problems over bus fares, the absence of bathrooms and electricity – all the daily grinding for sufficient money to bring up seven children. Yet these are happy stories, full of warmth and gentle humour, as the characters fall into and recover from various mishaps, and they are told with genuine affection and admiration for the family. Christopher Hopkins relates this to what, following W.E. Empson, he calls 'Proletarian Pastoral'.<sup>17</sup> He reminds us that there is a strong pastoral interest in Eve Garnett's stories. Mr Ruggles has always wanted to buy a pig, tries to save money for it, and at the

end of *Further Adventures* finally realises his ambition. In *Further Adventures* not only Kate, but Jo and Peg as well spend time in the countryside, to which Kate returns in *Holiday at the Dew Drop Inn*. As part of this pastoral theme, Mr Ruggles and his family are presented as simpler and yet somehow more contented than we might expect from their situation. The reader follows their adventures with sympathy and humour. They seem poor but happy.

And yet Eve Garnett shows us that their world is more complicated than it appears in a number of disturbing episodes. When the friendly Lawrences invite John to their son's birthday party, he meets children from a different social class:

'Do you go to school?' she asked next. John nodded.

'I'm in the third form,' she continued. 'Where are you?'

John looked puzzled. Forms were things one sat on.

'I'm in a Standard,' he said.

'I thought that was a sort of flag,' said the girl. 'What does it mean?'

John found it hard to explain. 'There's seven,' he said.

'I'm in four. My sister's in seven – she's got a scholarship,' he added proudly.

'I've a cousin who's got one,' said the girl not to be outdone. 'She's going to Oxford, is your sister going to Oxford?'

'No,' said John, 'she's going to Otwell Central.'

'It sounds like a railway station,' said the girl...<sup>18</sup>

Later on in the story Mr Ruggles finds an envelope containing some money amongst the rubbish, and when he returns it to the owner, an impoverished author, Mr Ruggles thanks him profusely for giving him two pounds reward:

'Don't,' said the author; 'I only wish it were more but times are difficult,' and he slammed the door after his guests. His cheerful mood had evaporated. Mr Ruggles's thanks bothered him. Eight human beings (for he supposed the baby was indifferent) achieving complete happiness and their life's ambition for five shillings a head; five shillings! *Thanks.... Did one pity or envy Mr Ruggles....*<sup>19</sup>

Even the placid Ruggles is sometimes aware of a less contented working class, however. When he finds the lost money, he cannot help reflecting on the unfairness of life. 'I'm fair upset', continued Mr Ruggles. 'It's no wonder to me some chaps turn Communists; no

wonder at all.’<sup>20</sup> Eve Garnett’s book is more challenging than it might first appear. One cannot help noticing that *The Family from One End Street* was published in the same year as George Orwell’s picture of appalling poverty in parts of Britain in *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

The political views of Geoffrey Trease (1909-1998) were even more direct. Although from a middle-class family in Nottingham, Trease abandoned his classics course at Oxford, took up social work in London, and began free-lance writing. Gradually adopting progressive views, after his marriage in 1933 Trease began to think of writing children’s books. Then, as he explains in his engaging autobiography *A Whiff of Burnt Boats* (1971), Trease had a revolutionary idea:

While in London I had come across a book translated from the Russian *Moscow Has a Plan*, in which a Soviet author brilliantly dramatised for young readers that first Five-year plan which had already captured the imagination of the adult world. I did not want to write books like that, I could not, but Ilin’s had planted a time-bomb in my mind which now suddenly exploded into questions and ideas. Why were all our own children’s books still rooted in the pre-1914 assumptions which serious adult literature had abandoned? In the boys’ adventure story especially there had been no development since my own childhood. Such stories still implied that war was glorious, that the British were superior to foreigners, that colonial ‘natives’ were ‘loyal’ if they sided with the invading white man and ‘treacherous’ if they used their wits to counterbalance his overwhelming armaments. In historical tales the Cavaliers and the French aristocrats were always in the right, no matter what the teachers explained at school, and the lower orders, like the lesser breeds, figured only in one of two possible roles, as howling mobs or faithful retainers.<sup>21</sup>

Inspired by this idea, Trease developed his notion of a story about the legendary Robin Hood as a ‘proletarian hero’. His revolutionary concept was welcomed by the left-wing publisher Martin Lawrence, and Trease’s tale *Bows Against the Barons*, written to expose romantic and reactionary views of Merry England, was published in 1934.

In a long career Trease went on to write over a hundred books, including many adventure stories, but this has one of his best plots. Although he writes clumsily in places, Trease creates a credible hero in young Dickon, who escapes to Sherwood Forest after killing one of the king’s deer which is ravaging his crops. There he meets Robin

Hood and the others who are critical of the King and his barons for ruling unfairly. Various adventures follow, as Dickon runs messages, escapes capture, and helps a Peasant's Revolt against Sir Ralph D'Eyncourt and his army. But in the end, when the outlaws become too successful, the Duke of Wessex intervenes and destroys them with a massive display of brute force. Robin himself dies, and Little John and Dickon make for the Derbyshire Hills, resolved to go on working to make Robin's dream come true of 'An England without masters'.<sup>22</sup>

Although vigorously written, *Bows Against the Barons*, perhaps because it was Trease's first book, is too simplistic, too reductive of the virtues and especially the vices of the antagonists. The melodramatic portrait of one of the book's villains, Sir Ralph D'Eyncourt, is typical:

The Eagle of D'Eyncourt was home [from the Crusade] all right!

Perched on the body of the land, red claws sunk deep in the flesh of the peasants, it drank the very life-blood of the surrounding country.

Sir Ralph had brought many things back with him besides the faked relics he had purchased to put in his chapel. He had brought a secret and loathsome disease which was destroying him body and soul; he had brought new notions of luxury and cruelty, learnt in the rotting courts of Eastern Europe. And for these he must have more money and power, ever more money and power....

For his feasting and drunkenness, the men must sweat and groan with plough and spade.

For his music must the tiny children spend all day scaring crows or minding pigs.

For his clothes of rich cramoisy and samite must the village women crawl ragged and shivering through the winter.

For his pride must the best horses, the tallest men, the cleverest boys, waste their time dashing hither and thither to attend him.

'Well,' he would have bellowed at anyone who questioned him. 'It's all *mine*, isn't it?'<sup>23</sup>

Looking back on his first book, Geoffrey Trease later said:

*Bows Against the Barons* was, as Margaret Meek has fairly written, 'genuine black-and-white' and I would not quarrel now with the verdict in her Bodley Head Monograph: 'At this time Trease believed that it was his duty to be

a propagandist of social and political realism in opposition to those writers who trafficked in improbability. We find his villains capitalist in utterance, and the heroes are downtrodden proletariat of the thirties rather than twelfth-century peasants, but as an example of shaking up the mixture and telling a clear yarn it has still much to offer.’<sup>24</sup>

*Comrades for the Charter*, published later the same year, shows a considerable advance, at least in avoiding so much stereotyping. It is the passionate story of two boys – one from the countryside, the other from Birmingham – who both become involved in the early Chartist struggles in Wales; but this picture of social unrest in the late 1830s, carried, as Trease himself admitted, ‘more than a flavour of twentieth-century politics’.<sup>25</sup> Led and educated by an itinerant salesman and agitator John Tapper, the boys attend political meetings and so learn the injustices of nineteenth-century Wales. But they also get caught up in a series of adventures as they deliver messages, learn to avoid the police and help to identify a spy in their midst. They are present at the tragedy of the Newport Massacre of November 1839 when British redcoats butchered the protesting Chartists. But after the massacre the two boys and Tapper escape to the North, in order, as Tapper says, to ‘Live to fight another day. Go on spreading the Gospel of Man.’<sup>26</sup>

Trease’s novel about injustice and the needs to reform or risk the dangers of violent revolution speaks directly to the Britain of the 1930s, but the book is too didactic. John Tapper’s political speeches are fine, but the meaning of Trease’s novel is not sufficiently dramatised until the reader reaches the final pages. The story indeed reminds us that books need more than good intentions to make them live, as Frederick Engels’s famous letter of 1888 to Margaret Harkness made clear.

Margaret Harkness sent Engels a copy of her socialist novel *City Girl*, and although Engels praised it, he reminded her that good (socialist) intentions were not enough to guarantee the creation of literature, and referred to the contrary intentions but artistic greatness of the reactionary novelist Balzac:

I have learned more [from Balzac] than from all the professed historians, economists and statisticians of the period together. Well, Balzac was politically a Legitimist; his great work is a constant elegy on the irretrievable decay of good society; his sympathies are all with the class doomed to extinction. But for all that his satire is never keener, his irony never bitterer, than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathises most deeply –

the nobles.... That Balzac thus was compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices ... that I consider one of the greatest triumphs of Realism, and one of the grandest features in old Balzac.<sup>27</sup>

The work of L.A.G. Strong (1896-1958) offers the same kind of passionate observation of life in the 1930s as Geoffrey Trease. Like Trease an all-round man of letters, Strong, after leaving Oxford had various spells of teaching before becoming a prolific author of novels, biographies and criticism.

*The Fifth of November* (1937) is based upon the familiar idea of time-travel. When the twentieth-century Spence family celebrate Bonfire Night, their eccentric Uncle Edward, is so appalled at the children's ignorance that he resolves to teach them about the history of Guy Fawkes and takes them to visit the Tower of London. But Uncle Edward and his nephew Dick begin to have dreams about the Gunpowder Plot and in their dreams watch the history of the conspiracy unfold before their eyes in a series of dramatic scenes. Contemporary life is suggested by various deft touches. The Spence children attend a London day-school because 'the slump of 1932 had hit the Spences hard', we are told.<sup>28</sup> But the main way by which Strong relates his fictional recreation of history to modern life is through an extended parallel; for the gist of *The Fifth of November* is to show how an oppressed people, in this case seventeenth-century Roman Catholics, may rise up in violence if they are harshly treated. This is Strong's parable about the neglect of the working classes in the 1930s.

Strong wrote another adventure story for children in the 1930s which is even more closely connected with the social distress of the day. *King Richard's Land* (1933, reprinted in 1938) is the tale of two cousins Nigel and Bruce who become involved in the Peasants Revolt of 1381. The orphans of aristocrats, they find themselves threatened by some angry villagers, but are rescued by the village leader Yeo. He explains the causes of the villagers's grievances to them – 'As long as our masters were our lawful masters – as long, that is, as they behaved lawfully – we had no quarrel with them. It's when they became our unlawful masters that the quarrel began'.<sup>29</sup> Yeo tells the boys how the Black Death made labour scarce, and, although Parliament then introduced fixed wages, it failed to fix the price of bread. So the two boys join Yeo's march to Canterbury, and then the great March of 60,000 demonstrators from there to London. Here young King Richard hears the people's complaints and promises to help them.

Reading of these events of the Middle Ages, it is impossible not to see the modern parallels. In 1922 the first National March of the Unemployed to London had taken place, but the South Wales miners marched on London again in 1927, and there was another great March from Scotland, Devon and Wales in 1929, followed by the third National March in 1930. The fourth National March in October 1932 was a protest not only against the Means Test but the cuts in unemployment benefits, and there were violent clashes as the crowd of 100,000 covered the area around Marble Arch and Hyde Park. The Welsh miners marched again in 1934, and there was what was called a National Protest March in 1936, the same year as the Jarrow Crusade presented its petition to Parliament.<sup>30</sup>

Strong's fine story of the Peasants' Revolt, with its resonance of contemporary marches, rather disintegrates into a more conventional historical romance at the end. The boys help to prevent an attack on the King, and eventually return home to look after their own estates. Strong's narrative collapses in a way which mirrors the collapse of the Revolt. Despite his fine words – 'I am your king. I will be your leader' – the king is unable to overrule Parliament and help the people; and they return to the countryside defeated.<sup>31</sup> One cannot help being reminded of King Edward VIII's ineffectual words – 'something must be done', when he visited the distressed Welsh mining villages in 1936.

For in that year great demonstrations in Wales saw 100,000 meet in the Rhondda and 50,000 in Aberdare, and amongst the protest about the economic conditions, references were also made to the Spanish Civil War which had broken out on July 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup>.<sup>32</sup> Contemporary civil wars seem an unlikely subject for British children's books, especially in the 1930s, but there was an unlikely and honourable exception in the work of W.E. Johns.

Johns, as we have seen in the previous chapter, began to write adventure stories about his flying hero 'Biggles' in 1932, initially drawing upon his experiences in World War I. Increasingly, however, Johns began to look for new material and began to write more conventional plots, although still with a flying background, such as *The Cruise of the Condor*, about a treasure hunt in Brazil. But Johns, although an adventure-story writer, was also deeply patriotic and took a keen interest in Britain's defences. In *The Black Peril*, which was serialised in *The Modern Boy* magazine from February 1935, Biggles and Co. thwarted an air-raid from Russia, for the threat of the Soviet Union worried many observers in the 1930s. (An unpublished story by Percy F. Westerman deals with the same topic.<sup>33</sup>)

But Johns became more concerned with the rise of fascism, most particularly in its National Socialist incarnation in Germany from 1932, in light of Hitler's efforts towards rearmament at a time when the British government was trying to scale down defence expenditure. Johns used his position as editor of the magazine *Popular Flying* to attack the British government's policy of disarmament and he regularly argued for not only its halt, but a complete reversal. Johns was also fond of Spain, a country he had frequently visited, and when civil war began there in 1936, he bitterly denounced the British government's policy of non-intervention. In March 1939 he wrote

The Spanish Government – by which I mean republican Spain – is as democratic as a government can be. It was elected by the vote of the people. That it was a Left Wing government makes not the slightest difference. It was the will of the people, and the soul of democracy lies in the simple fact that 'the people are always right.' But our government, being Right Wing, does not hold that view. So it prefers to see Spain slaughtered by its own sworn enemies rather than lift a finger to save it. There you have the truth of the affair.<sup>34</sup>

*Biggles in Spain* (1939) portrays Biggles and his pals becoming accidentally involved in the Spanish Civil War when their holiday cruise ship is bombed by a fascist plane, and a British secret agent asks them to deliver an important letter to the Foreign Office. They encounter various dangers, mainly from Franco's fascists, before they successfully complete their mission. There is the usual mixture of fast-paced episodes involving spies, kidnapping, air-battles and prison-escapes before the heroes triumph.

But what makes the book particularly interesting, of course, is its political context. Johns's acute awareness of the horrors of war is powerfully realised by his description of the bombing of Barcelona in chapter two. Although Johns tries to be impartial about the conflicting sides in the civil war, he cannot help leaning more sympathetically towards the Republican cause, and especially the International Brigade; and he is totally unsympathetic to the fascists, particularly the vicious agent Goudini – 'I know nothing about your war', says Ginger. 'I don't want to know anything about it, but I hope the side wins that represents the majority of true Spaniards'.<sup>35</sup>

Not surprisingly Johns's outspoken political views got him into trouble. He continued to argue for rearmament, and attacked Prime

Minister Chamberlain for the Munich Agreement in 1938. In March 1939, as we have seen, he criticised the British government again for its non-intervention in Spain. He had, however, been removed from editing the weekly magazine *Flying* in January 1939, and was now told that the May issue of *Popular Flying* would also be his last as editor.

Johns continued writing his Biggles books, of course. *Biggles in the Baltic*, his first story to have a Second World War setting, was serialised in March 1940. This tale opens with Chamberlain's poignant broadcast words – 'England is now, therefore, in a state of war with Germany', and Biggles murmurs, 'Well that's that. It looks as if we are in for another spot of war flying'.<sup>36</sup>

The retreatism of the 1930s was coming to an end.

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