

# Introduction

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In 1849 the Society circulated upwards of four million children's books, which has been the average number for several years. . . . Its catalogue contains nearly three hundred scriptural and entertaining books, which are adapted to convey important truths to youthful minds. . . .

William Jones, 1850<sup>1</sup>

The story of the Religious Tract Society is that of a publishing phenomenon. Founded in 1799 with the aim of publishing cheap religious tracts for dissemination to adults in Britain and overseas, it produced 200,000 tracts in its first year, a figure rising to a million by 1805. These intensely evangelical publications, most probably influenced by the success of earlier pamphlets such as Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* of 1795-98, were often based on the true biographies of devout believers. They were not originally intended for children, but the Society did recommend similar works for children in 1809 and began publishing tracts for them such as *John Wise, particularly designed for Young Children*. Gradually more tracts aimed at children, such as the *The Dairyman's Daughter*, which had originally been written for adults, began to appear, and by 1821 the total had grown to thirty-six.

In 1824 George Stokes made the Society's first serious attempt to produce books for children, notably with his *Short Stories for Children under ten years of Age*. This was a series of fifty-one publications costing a farthing each about such characters as Sally Meanwell, Fanny Thoughtless, and Tom Steady, and the series actually sold more than five million copies by Stokes's death in 1847.<sup>2</sup> In the same year the Society began publication of a monthly magazine for children *The Child's Companion; or, Sunday Scholar's Reward*. With its mixture of Christian homilies, improving stories and natural history, it was soon selling over 28,000 copies monthly.

The year 1824 can thus be seen as crucial in the history of children's literature, and the RTS continued to publish more books for children and young people from then on, as well as its religious works for adults. By May 1831 the RTS Catalogue listed 292 publications for the young.

Not all these works were well received. Mrs Trimmer's *The Guardian of Education* (1802-6), while praising the reprint of *Divine Songs* by Isaac Watts, was worried by some aspects of the RTS's theology, such as its emphasis on salvation obtained through the medium of preaching rather than through the sacraments.<sup>3</sup> In 1822 *Blackwood's Magazine* criticised *The Dairyman's Daughter* for what it saw as an excessive sense of sin over relatively minor matters such as wearing pretty clothes.<sup>4</sup> Later Dickens memorably satirised the sometimes patronising ineffectiveness of distributing such literature among the genuinely deprived but often illiterate working classes, when Mrs Pardiggle in *Bleak House* takes her pamphlets to the wretched hovels of the brickmakers:

'An't my place dirty?' says the brickmaker. 'Yes, it is dirty – it's nat'rally dirty, and it's nat'rally onwholesome; and we've had five dirty and onwholesome children, as is all dead infants, and so much the better for them, and for us besides. Have I read the little book wot you left? No, I an't read the little book wot you left. There an't nobody here as knows how to read it: and if there wos, it wouldn't be suitable to me. It's a book fit for a baby, and I'm not a baby.'<sup>5</sup>

Despite these kinds of doubt, however, the RTS continued to expand its efforts and to prosper. The important duty of providing more suitable books for children gradually persuaded the Society to publish works with a more secular tone. The Society continued to produce books that were written from a Christian point of view, but its lists began to include works about geography, history and science as well as evangelical and moral tales. In 1849 the Society annually circulated upwards of four million children's books, and its catalogue showed how the Society was changing its strategy, for it contained, according to William Jones, 'nearly three hundred scriptural and entertaining books, which are adapted to convey important truths to youthful minds, and to lead them, through Divine grace, to walk in the lovely paths of pleasantness and peace.'<sup>6</sup> It was, of course, this attempt to balance entertainment with religious instruction which characterised future RTS publications, particularly seen, for example, in the recurring committee debates about the contents of its popular magazine the *Boy's Own Paper*.

Early publications had often been in the form of pamphlets or broadsheets, sometimes ornamented with pictures like those found in hawkers' tracts, which sold very cheaply, but from the 1820s the RTS began publishing bound books for children with engravings printed on superior paper. By the 1870s it was publishing a whole array of attractively produced stories for children, such as the 'Shilling Books for the Young,' a 'Ninepenny Series,' and a series of 'Two Shilling tales,' featuring Hesba Stretton. In addition to the works of Talbot Baines Reed, the Society published boys' school stories by such writers as A.N. Malan and S.S. Pugh, and girls' school stories by such authors as Mrs Henry Clarke and Mrs George de

Horne Vaizey. Women novelists such as Rosa Carey and Sarah Doudney also produced what were in effect love stories for young women, though always within a religious context, such as *Lady Dye's Reparation* by Sarah Doudney (1901). The Society also made great efforts to produce more attractive-looking books with pictorial boards and gilt lettering, and sometimes using first Baxter colour prints and later Kronheim plates. It would not be difficult to trace some of the major developments in printing and publishing over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by considering the history of the RTS, as the Appendix here, 'A Sampling of Children's Works Related to or published by the RTS', indicates.

Although it is impossible to estimate precisely how many copies of works the RTS actually published, it is clear that the second half of the nineteenth century, and particularly the years from 1860 to 1890, saw a massive increase in the circulation of children's books led by such popular authors as W.H.G. Kingston, Talbot Baines Reed, Hesba Stretton and Mrs Walton. Hesba Stretton's *Jessica's First Prayer*, first published as a serial in *Sunday at Home* in 1866, sold one and a half million copies alone, together with 750,000 copies of her *Little Meg's Children* (1868) and *Alone in London* (1869), compared, for example, with sales of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* totalling 180,000 from 1865 to 1898. Richard Altick calculates that in 1897 the RTS distributed over 38 million items, of which 18 million were tracts, and the rest were books, especially but not exclusively children's.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the earliest literature is heavily influenced by the evangelical origins of the RTS. The Society had indeed suggested the kinds of qualities its early tracts should contain – an emphasis on scriptural truth and some account of a sinner's way to salvation, to be narrated in a plain and direct prose style. The works of Legh Richmond and Mrs Sherwood embodied those kinds of characteristics in the first half of the nineteenth century.

One of the recurring *motifs*, perhaps the major one, found in RTS literature is that of the redeeming child. From as early as James Janeway's *A Token for Children* (1671) stories had been told about the wonderfully transforming effects pious young children, especially when dying, had upon the lives of their more sinful adult relatives and friends. This notion of the redeeming child often seemed to co-exist with an equally strong belief in the sinfulness of the young, the latter appearing particularly strongly in the first volume of Mrs Sherwood's *History of the Fairchild Family* (Hatchard, 1818), for example. But from the middle of the nineteenth century the image of the redeeming child appeared with all the trappings of Romanticism – youthfulness, innocence, physical attractiveness and precocious wisdom. Hesba Stretton's *Jessica* and Mrs Walton's *Christie*, in *Christie's Old Organ* (1874), demonstrate how the young can bring their elders to salvation, and the theme persists in the works of Amy le Feuvre, where in *Probable Sons*, (1894?) the angelic child Milly is able to save her misanthropic uncle.

Magazines and periodicals were one of the most important features of

RTS publishing. *The Child's Companion* ran from 1824 to 1922, while a similar kind of publication for younger children *Our Little Dots or Pretty Pictures and stories for little girls and boys* ran from 1887 to 1950, taking its title from *Little Dots* (1873), Mrs Walton's second published story. Most strikingly the *Boy's Own Paper* (*BOP*), which began monthly circulation with a mixture of stories, natural history and competitions in 1879, soon reached a readership of over half a million, while its companion magazine the *Girl's Own Paper* (*GOP*), which began a year later, with a similar mixture of contents aimed at a female readership, did even better. What was important about the success of these magazines was that they not only sold well, but that they enabled the RTS to convert successful serials by such authors as Talbot Baines Reed and Mrs de Horne Vaizey into volume form after being serialised.

The contents of these magazines reflected, however, the increasingly secular nature of society in the later years of the nineteenth century. Whereas religious works had the prominent place in publishing in the early years of the nineteenth century, between the years 1870 and 1919 the emphasis shifted markedly towards secular works, and, although the RTS did its best to adapt its content to the changing times, while remaining true to its principles, it was struggling against the tide.<sup>8</sup>

There is no great mystery about its decline. The RTS was founded in an age when evangelism was strong, and, as society's values changed, the RTS found its readership disappearing. There is evidence, in fact, that its decline had started in the 1890s. The *BOP*, for example, which in 1889 had a print run of 665,000 per week, had dropped its sales by 57,000 by December 1891.<sup>9</sup> RTS income from sales which had peaked at over £180,000 in the 1880s was below £100,000 by 1900. Apart from the increasing secularisation of the age, a number of other factors contributed to the decline. Other publishers challenged the RTS's supremacy, both with magazines and books. The Society's reluctance to use advertising, while morally admirable, perhaps, was hardly a wise economic decision – and no doubt some policy-errors were made. As tastes changed, however, and readers began to turn away from didactic religious fiction, the sad truth is that the RTS failed to find any new writers or forms to meet the new situation. Perhaps Talbot Baines Reed had come nearest in the 1880s when he wrote a number of serials – sharp, humorous, inventive, embodying the (Christian) values of virtue, decency, kind-heartedness – in readable and absorbing school stories which did not preach ostentatiously. The tragedy for the RTS was that it could not find any worthy successors to Reed. Was John Masefield a missed opportunity? Was Hesba Stretton more than perceptive when she complained about the payments to authors? The cold facts are that the RTS changed its name as a British publisher to Lutterworth Press in 1932, and that in 1935 the RTS itself merged with the Christian Literature Society for India and Africa, eventually becoming the United Society for Christian Literature, and concentrating most of its work overseas. In the 1980s the Lutterworth Press became a private company.

One interesting way of tracing the changing values and culture of the RTS's publications is to examine a number of representative texts as they appeared during the Society's long history. Legh Richmond's sin-obsessed rural tracts, such as *The Dairyman's Daughter* of 1809, were gradually replaced by more city-based redemptive works, such as *Jessica's First Prayer* (1867) and *Christie's Old Organ* (1874). Ethical but more secular values appear in Talbot Baines Reed's school stories such as *The Fifth Form at St. Dominic's* (serialised 1881-82), although the lingering values of a declining evangelism are still found in the books of Amy le Feuvre, such as *Teddy's Button* of 1896. By the twentieth century secularism is almost completely triumphant in the flying tales of George E. Rochester such as *The Flying Beetle* – serialised in *BOP* 1926-27 – while feminism is added to the new technology by W.E. Johns in *Worrals Flies Again* – serialised in the *GOP* 1942-43. (See No.120 in the Catalogue.) The evangelising heroine of the nineteenth century has given way to a fearless female aviator. The dairyman's daughter has been replaced by a WAAF.

In 1999 the Children's Books History Society, generously supported by the Lutterworth Press, organised a Study Conference at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, to celebrate the 200th Anniversary of the founding of the Religious Tract Society. Speakers focused on some of the major events and personalities in the Society's publishing history, beginning with Aileen Fyfe's authoritative account of the RTS and Ann Thwaite's vivid picture of the nature of tracts and their distribution. Vivian Fowler traced the history of religious tracts in North America, and Dee Carter and Alexandra Leach considered the ways early writers, such as Legh Richmond and Mrs Sherwood, were beginning to transform tracts into literature. Two of the Society's most popular authors were given detailed discussion – Hesba Stretton by Sue Rickards and Mrs Walton by Morna Daniels. The Society's long success with periodicals was examined by papers on *The Child's Companion* and *Our Little Dots* by Michael Taylor, the *Boy's Own Paper* by Dennis Butts, and the *Girl's Own Paper* by Mary Cadogan. Robert Kirkpatrick's paper showed how the RTS took up the publishing of boys' school stories, while a comprehensive account of the Society's production of girls' school stories was given by Hilary Clare and Sue Sims. The Conference ended with some conclusions by Brian Alderson, the then Chairman of the Children's Books History Society, and by Adrian Brink, Managing Director of the Lutterworth Press.

These papers were prepared for oral delivery at the Conference, and though they have been modified to make them more appropriate for written publication, the Editor wishes to apologise for any signs of inconsistency or inaccuracy which may remain. Thanks are due to all the contributors for their strenuous efforts to present their talks in publishable form and especially to Brian Alderson for his helpful comments and suggestions. Pat Garrett, currently Chairman of the Children's Books Historical Society, has made an incomparable contribution. Not only was she the organising

force for the original Study Conference, but as co-editor she played a crucial part in guiding the book through its final stages. It is not going too far to say that without her skill and patience, there would have been no book.

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