



Classics in Short No.38: Eric: or Little by Little

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Classics in Short

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Brian Alderson on F W Farrar's **Eric: or Little by Little**.

‘Didn’t I ?Eric? ?em splendidly?? asked Beetle at the end of *Stalky & Co.*, having gleefully spoofed his seniors with a homily in the manner of Frederic Farrar’s<!--break-->

Well now ? tell me:

when were the first ?secular? stories published for children? By which I mean tales of ordinary life ? not *contes de fées* and not fables with a theological burden.

Dispute the matter if you will,

but my guess is that the first collection of such tales occurred in **A Christmass-Box for Masters and Misses** by a certain ?Mary Homebred? which came out in London in 1746. The stories were crude enough, featuring characters like ?The Good Boy? and ?The Undutiful Child?, and their purpose was to confirm the profitability of Virtue and the mortal dangers of Vice. Play ill-advisedly with fire and you’ll burn the house down.

That is unsurprising.

Awful warnings have been good copy since God embargoed the apple-tree, and persons *in loco parentis* are much given to cautionary admonitions (which may be depressingly negative but have much more scope for dramatic denouements than tales of cheery success).

Prominent among nineteenth-century examples

of such literature is the dismal tale of **Eric** whose decline from chippy youngster, setting off for boarding-school, to remorseful teenage corpse is chronicled with much fervour by Frederic Farrar in 1858. He was a schoolmaster at Harrow at the time and his book, which drew upon that experience and on his recollections of his own schooldays at King William’s College on the Isle of Man, was a long-selling success, going through over thirty printings before his death in 1903.

The stages of Eric’s decline

are presaged in Chapter One, where his gifted nature is said to be flawed by pride and by ?an imperious passion?, and once he gets to school these defects prevent him from confronting his moral failings. He connives at cribbing; he cheerfully swears; he fails to condemn foul language and other dubious practices in the dorm (although it’s hard to know what Farrar’s innocent youthful readers made of his darkly menacing references to Kibroth-Hattaavah and ?the most fatal curse which could ever become rife in a public school?). Later on Eric succumbs to the lure of smoking, drinking, and running up debts at The Jolly Herring and there is no escape. His bid for freedom by running-off as cabin-boy in a trading-schooner is calamitous and he returns home where he gains forgiveness before entering ?the land where

there is no more curse?.

Farrar's method in telling his tale

combines the determinist moralising as first seen in **A Christmass-Box** with his own brand of Anglican evangelising. Poor old Eric must thus battle not only against his own shortcomings but also against the doom prepared for him by his author from the very first page of his story. (Farrar is not above killing off the two angelic youths who are most likely to reform his hero's character.) Nevertheless, for all its likeness to a 'highly-coloured novelette?', as the magazine **Vanity Fair** remarked in 1891, it is still worthy of attention. 'It is powerful and readable?' said John Rowe Townsend in **Written for Children** in 1965 (the best edition of that 'outline?') and, more importantly, it projected 'a view of life in which everything matters?.'

It has been suggested

that Eric was directly inspired by **Tom Brown's Schooldays** which had been published a year earlier. That could be true but is irrelevant in that the two books are very different: the one a loose, near-autobiographical promulgation of Thomas Arnold's attempts to reform public-school education, the other schematic in conveying its moral purposes. For tales with no such ulterior motives one must wait for Billy Bunter ? or the thrills and spills of **The Chocolate War**.

Mr Townsend expressed a wish

that **Eric** might be reissued and in 1971 found himself engaged in introducing just such a reprint in a short-lived series published by Hamish Hamilton. And now **Eric** returns again as a photographic facsimile of a 1902 edition, printed in double-column, with a substantial account of its author by Ian Anstruther*. He includes several unusual appendices, including Pusey on Masturbation, and the wickedly satiric profile from **Vanity Fair**, but, alas, does not enlighten us about Kibroth-Hattaavah. (Can any gentle reader explain?) His enterprise should also leave us with the sobering thought that every generation from Mary Homebred's onward has had its moral tales which seem preposterous to those who come later. If books and literary critics are around in a hundred and forty years' time what sport they may make with such contemporary effusions as **Junk**?

*The illustrations by Gordon Browne are taken from **Dean Farrar and 'Eric'** by Ian Anstruther, Haggerston Press (2002, 1 869812 19 0, £19.95).

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