



Classics in Short No.70: Just William

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[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

[171](#) [2]

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Brian Alderson on Richmal Crompton's **Just William**.

Brian Alderson

?I jus? won?t do it. I jus? won?t go to any ole weddin?... an? I jus? *won?t* be made look ridiclus...? So you can see why he?s *JUST ? WILLIAM*

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Reminiscence:

As an evacuee (of sorts) I have every reason to be grateful to William Brown ? or perhaps rather to John Overton (where is he now?). I had been exported to Bristol ? where there was as much likelihood of being bombed as in North London ? and there I encountered Master Overton who possessed what must have been a complete run of Richmal Crompton?s ?William Books? together with a generous disposition about lending them. (They still had their dust-jackets on and would be worth many sacks of Gooseberry Eyes on the market today.)

Day in, day out

I read my way through the collection, most volumes having ten or more stories in them and most stories working ingenious variations on the simple theme of the best laid plans ganging aft a-gley. I am pretty confident in saying that my gratitude for being allowed to participate in this feast had nothing to do with any distraction it might provide from hearing news of ?the horrors of war? and everything to do with what John Rowe Townsend has perfectly described as the young reader?s ?happy blend of identification and condescension?. You joined the Outlaws in their optimistic endeavours (wishing that you could join them just down the street) and you simultaneously gaped at the certainty of coming disasters which they themselves were too preoccupied to perceive.

And they never learned.

The first ever calamity occurred in the story ?Rice-Mould? (a name for a gruesome pudding foisted upon children in the 1920s ? cf. A A Milne?s Mary Jane). ?The girl next door? hates the stuff and William gallantly assures her that he can abstract for her some cream blancmange from the party-fare that his family are preparing. It is an idle boast of a kind that he will be prone to repeat interminably, for in his panicky raid on the kitchen larder he ends up by stealing for her just another gollop of lookalike rice-mould.

That was in February 1919

when the story was printed in the journal **Home Magazine** in response to a request for a story about children for its female readers. It must have been well-thought-of by the editors for the March issue carried a second one, ?The Outlaws?, and from then up to 1922 thirty-nine more stories appeared. In that year though the publisher, George Newnes

Ltd, started a new monthly for family reading, the **Happy Mag**, and William took up residence there until May 1940 having an adventure printed in 204 of the intervening 230 months. Back in 1922 however his popularity had become something of a by-word beyond the readership of a magazine for genteel ladies and Newnes had the good sense to gather up twelve of the published stories to make the first William book: **Just ? William**. Eventually the tally of William stories would reach beyond three hundred (more being published in other magazines after 1940) and these were gathered into a run of thirty-eight volumes, including a full-length story, the last being **William the Lawless** in 1970. Only one story was never transferred from periodical to book: 'William on the Trail', in which our hero encounters a young girl who fools him with the sort of scandalous tales that he was himself inclined to foist on other people.

Almost from the start

Thomas Henry accompanied William as his inseparable portraitist in books and magazines alike and for most readers his illustrations are an essential part of the saga (oddly though, he only met Crompton on a single occasion, at a Nottingham book festival in 1958, almost forty years after their first collaboration). It took him a book or two to perfect a rendering of the boy which would endure, with minor modifications, as far as **William and the Witch** in 1962 when he died after completing only two drawings. The preliminary stages of his visualisations can be seen in the pre-1950 editions of the first three books which he then reillustrated to bring them into conformity with all the rest.

Owen Dudley Edwards

in his **British Children's Fiction in the Second World War**, discussed here on page 12 (and to be reviewed in our next issue) makes a number of perceptive assessments of Crompton's work, for William is one of the heroes of his book. In the course of these he notes first that no William book ever got close to consideration for a Carnegie Medal and second that none was reviewed in the **TLS** (in the days when they *did* review children's books). From this we may derive a further implication that like another author on whose work he has much to say 'Enid Blyton' Crompton was regarded as a sort of story-machine, cranking out undemanding narratives to a single pattern to keep the customers happy.

The accusation has some justice.

After all, there is something unnatural about a leading character who remains stuck at eleven years old from 1919 to 1970 and has to have political, social, and linguistic affairs updated around him ('clots?', 'shambles?', 'drug-pushers?' turn up towards the end). And, however the dates are manipulated, the topography of William's village and the foibles of its local characters remain the same so that similarities and repetitions of plotlines can hardly be avoided. But what needs to be emphasised is the skill with which Crompton surmounts such limitations. The stories may be seen as the equivalent of eighteenth-century harlequinades. Everyone knows that the scope for action of Harlequin, Pantaloon, Columbine and so on (*cf.* William, Hubert Lane, Violet Elizabeth Bott, etc) is fixed; the genius lies in manipulating those actions with a continuing freshness so that even the predictable comes as a surprise.

Moreover

within the setpieces there is space for variation whether of unexpected walk-on characters or of Crompton's not-always-noticed satiric intent. It is also instructive to see how she manages what might be called her double-plots. While many stories (such as 'Rice-Mould?') progress simply from starting idea to denouement, others cunningly merge separate strands. Thus in the early 'The Show?', from **Just ? William**, we find the Browns plagued by a house-guest from hell: Aunt Emily. William however is preoccupied with trying to raise five shillings for a bow-and-arrow and arranges a (farcical) exhibition in his bedroom with local children as paying visitors. The plots merge when he hears Aunt Emily snoring during her siesta in the next room and includes her in the exhibition as 'Fat Wild Woman Torkin Natif Langwidge?'. She awakes affronted and instantly packs her bags and leaves, with the result that William's normally sardonic father gives his son a handsome tip.

And that of course

exemplifies Crompton's foremost characteristic: her stories are, and remain, *funny*. A couple of years ago I had occasion to read 'William Holds the Stage' (from **William the Pirate**) to a party of American librarians. (Crompton is not known in the States and a question had come up about William's equivalence to Booth Tarkington's very similar hero, Penrod - not known to Crompton.) The story concerns William's tussle with authorial and textual problems in **Hamlet** and the reading could hardly be completed since both audience and reader were exhausted with laughing. With the books of how many Carnegie winners could that occur?

I am greatly indebted to several books by Messrs Lofts & Adley, David Schutte, and Mary Cadogan for their loving exposition of the facts about William's career as literary hero.

The illustrations by Thomas Henry are taken from the 2006 edition of **Just ? William** published by Macmillan Children's Books (978 1 4050 5457 7, £5.99 hbk).

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and children's book consultant for **The Times**.

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[Just William.jpg](#) [3]

Page Number:

32

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