

Pleasure or Propaganda? The Role of Children's Publishing from 1914-1918

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Abstract

This paper explores children's literature of The First World War and examines whether publishers engaged in a literature of propaganda, sought to provide an escape from the war, or were merely producing literature based on a perception of what the public wanted to read. It is well documented that publishers collaborated with Wellington House during the war years to produce propaganda for the war effort, but it is less known whether this propaganda filtered through the full spectrum of published literature.

Although children's literature during the period undoubtedly abounded with themes of pride and patriotism, it is perhaps more interesting to consider the paratexts that made even the least overtly war-themed book inseparable from the culture of the time. The article asks why publishers chose to commission pro-war narratives, why authors produced them, and why readers were so influenced by them. It will question whether the Great War spurred on a whole new genre of literature, or simply inspired a new generation of books that built upon the foundations of the past. This article will utilise archives from *The Bookman* between 1914 and 1918, and reader accounts from the UK Reading Experience Database, and consider whether children's books were able to be read purely for pleasure, or whether they were merely another form of propaganda for an increasingly indoctrinated youth.

Keywords

First World War; Children's literature; Propaganda, Paratexts

Introduction

Children's fiction played a vital role in the promotion of patriotism at the start of the war, and it has been suggested that it played an instrumental part in the voluntary recruitment of so many young soldiers between 1914 and 1916. Yet, its reach seems to extend far beyond the early recruitment. Books have always been a way for authors to express their opinions on current events, and to use allegorical reference to present the most controversial of opinions, however what is remarkable is the sheer force of pro-war literature for children - subtle or overt.

Patriotic literature did not just come from the authors who prominently supported the war, but also from known pacifists, and it is this community of support that seems so remarkable to today's society. Far from using children's books to promote their own agendas, publishers and authors alike seemed united in presenting a patriotic view of a war that their literature deemed was necessary and noble.

This article seeks to uncover the literature that shaped the opinions of a young nation, and explore the bodies that made this happen. Perhaps more cynically, it further seeks to question whether publishers were truly using literature to fight for their country, or whether the war provided an easy way to capitalise on a new theme. Whilst the current climate of First World War literature represents a multitude of views and perspectives on one event, this article will explore the contemporary publishing society that strove to support the war through the solidity of unified opinion.

The Normalisation of war

Throughout history, fiction has always provided a way for individuals to escape their daily

struggles and live in a world that is far away from their own. Yet rather than providing this sense of escape, First World War literature for children appeared completely inseparable from the war itself. War had become completely normalised, and fiction played a large part in that. From the games children played, to the bed-time stories they read, it seems that war was always the chosen theme. But how much of their imaginations were fuelled by their surroundings, and how much was cultivated by the publishers and toy makers that helped to shape their imaginary worlds?

The Christmas edition of *The Bookman* in 1916 promotes the *Collin's Children's Annual* and claims that "Every child will find his favourite form of story here, whether it be of fairies and witches or a modern war story." (Bookman, 1916). In a modern context, the different themes seem entirely antithetical, yet clearly war had become as commonplace in children's fiction as fairies.

Even previously innocent characters couldn't help but become embroiled in the war. May Byron's *Peek-a-Boos* made war seem laugh-a-minute in *The Peek-a-Boos in War Time*, where "their various attempts at war work are most amusing, and we follow them with interest from munitions to the land, although both enterprises are doomed to failure. We leave them eventually, 'busy resting hard,' after their excitements." (The Bookman, 1916). It appears a common theme across *The Bookman* archives that war was just another adventure, and certainly not considered an insensitive topic for a comical stance of writing. Indeed, describing war as an "excitement" in 1916 seems particularly fanciful, and certainly more reflective of a 1914 stance. Perhaps this was a way of coping with the tragedies of the war, perhaps it was to protect children from the horrors of its reality, or perhaps publishers wanted to control public perceptions and feed children with the belief that everything was fine, even if this was very far from the truth.

Even the youngest of children could not escape the war as a background to their reading.

Kennedy's research in *The Children's War: Britain, 1914-1918* highlights a multitude of titles for toddlers, with everything from *The Child's ABC of the War*, to *What the Elephant Thinks of the Hun* to Nina MacDonald's *War-Time Nursery Rhymes* which contained "a total of 58 popular nursery rhymes adapted to the theme of war, dealing with every aspect of war, from food shortages to military training" (Kennedy, 2014, 79). Whilst some could consider this a complete eradication of childhood innocence from the earliest of ages, it perhaps serves more to highlight the relevance of the war to everyday life, and the necessity of its presence in books for children to be reflective of their lifestyles.

The belief at the time, seemed that it was important for all children to be able to understand the reasons Britain entered the war, and Kennedy suggests that "the formulaic stories described the conflict in simplistic language of right or wrong: positive British characteristics were juxtaposed against negative German ones in order for all children to understand whom to support and who the enemy was." (Kennedy, 2014, 81) What has to be questioned, however, is the early indoctrinating effect that this must have had on children whose earliest literary education was not teaching them to imagine the best, but to understand the worst.

Paratexts of wartime literature seem to further build upon this loss of innocence. Even the most seemingly innocent children's book could not remain entirely free from its wartime publication. The December 1914 edition of *The Bookman* advertised *Pan o' the Pipes*, a book of fairy stories that was "bound in khaki covers" (The Bookman, 1914). It would be difficult to argue that this was anything but a deliberate branding choice to align it in the setting of the war. What is perhaps more difficult to know is whether this was a choice of publishers to support the war effort, or a reflection of what they felt society at the time aesthetically wanted to buy.

It was not just the cover choices that were militaristic, *60 Storybooks for Younger Children*,

played host to a riot of slogans like “Long live England” and “Long live the Triple-Entente” in its inside covers (Kennedy, 2014, 80). It is hard to suggest that copy such as this played any role in supporting the literature that was between its covers, or selling its literary merits to the parents that would buy it. The question again is whether this was propaganda enforced by Wellington House, or a clever commercial choice by the publishers to sell more copies.

It is difficult to know what came first: the desires of the public, or the trends established by the publishers. Was war so normalised for society that they expected their children to read about it? Or were the public spoon-fed a pro-war campaign right down to the books they bought for their children? Publishing is often regarded as a trusted industry, with people buying books because they believe in the name that has produced them. Did publishers utilise this good name to normalise war for the population? Did they support the war effort by suggesting it was a natural part of life in the books they produced, and was this under their own steam, or under the guidance of Wellington House?

The Commercialisation of war

Whilst publishing arguably sees itself as a cultural industry, individual houses would not survive without commercial success. It is no secret that publishers supported the war effort, and saw books as a way of promoting a sense of Britishness and patriotism to their readers, but perhaps what they would be less keen to broadcast is the manner in which they used the war for commercial gain. Kennedy suggests that “Editorials in the trade press made it clear that manufacturers knew that children’s play and imaginations were being fired by the war and so sought to produce products that would appeal to their market.” (2014, 52). Yet was it children’s imaginations that dictated the types of books that were published during this period, or was this merely a front for a commercial campaign?

The nature of fighting during the First World War did not lend itself to engaging and

dramatic stories, and as Zurino (2014) suggests in the *International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*, publishers “produced old-fashioned images of a war of movement, a stark contrast to the dreary war of attrition on the Western Front.” Whilst soldiers were spending day after day in monotonous trench warfare, children were reading of the thrills and adventures that they were having.

Whilst it could be suggested that this provided them with a form of pleasure and escapism, it could also be regarded as publishers using and twisting the war as another way to sell books. According to Kennedy (2014, 73), “For the books to sell, and for their message to be successful, it was no good having your hero sitting in a hole in the ground, up to his knees in mud, for weeks at a time.” Perhaps the reality of war was unable to provide its juvenile readers with the sense of glory and bravery that they desired from their heroes, but it could be questioned whether this was the right backdrop to entertain children with. Publishers may have seen the war as a new and exciting genre to exploit, but were they publishing what children wanted to read, or what the government wanted them to believe?

Authors, too, capitalised on the war as a new genre of writing. Badsey suggests that “wartime juvenile fiction came mainly from successful pre-war authors who adapted their existing plots and conventions” (2005, 852). Boys and girls found themselves engrossed in novels where the adventure revolved around the war, and painted the reassuring image that their relatives on the front would be embracing the thrill of the fight (in a chivalric manner, of course).

According to Donson (2014), authors “felt it was their patriotic duty to get young people to support their nation’s cause” yet the more cynical amongst us might suggest that they saw the war as a platform to rebrand their existing fiction, and capitalise on the new genre it brought them. Even if you could appreciate the desire for older children to read about the war, publishers seemed to take this to a level that could only be considered a commercial

opportunity. “There were also toy books with cut-out soldiers, and Messrs Gale and Ploden Ltd published a series of toy books including *The British Army Painting Book*, *Our Foot Soldiers*, *Our Guns and Men*, and *Regimental Pets of the British Army*” (Kennedy, 2014, 69).

As the war progressed, literature had to adapt to its changing climate. Whilst early war literature aimed to glamourise trench warfare to reflect the pace of past wars, later literature turned to the skies for its inspiration. Fighting in the air seemed to reflect the chivalry of past conflicts, and enabled publishers to produce the honourable image of war that was important to the government to portray. Paris suggests in *Warrior Nation* that the popular appeal of these stories during the latter years of the war was due to the romantic myth created around the airman: “according to this myth, heroic young airmen fought their battles according to the knights’ code in the clean, clear skies over the Western Front.” (2000, 134). These new novels revitalised a support of the war in young people, and helped to continue the myth of the excitement of war, and glamour of fighting.

The war provided opportunities for publishers to embrace their backlists; it wasn’t just newly produced literature that was widely circulated. According to Paris “For those too young or too frail to enlist, reading about the war was probably the next best thing.” He quotes Huntly Gordon remembering, “our curiosity to know what it would be like to be under fire had to be satisfied from the novels of G. A. Henty and Captain F. S. Brereton” (2000, 112).

Whilst F.S. Brereton was alive and actively serving in the war, G.A. Henty had died in 1902, and his war novels had been based on a scenario that bore no resemblance to WWI. It is hardly accurate therefore to suggest they showed boys “what it would be like to be under fire”. Although Brereton would have been able to provide a more accurate account of the war through his own first-hand experience, his focus was much more on the commercial and the “formulaic stories of derring-do, set, often against the background of famous

conflicts where the hero overcame all the odds to triumph” (Cranleigh, 2017). It is interesting that authors who had seen first-hand the horror of war, were still able to write books about its glory and adventure. Perhaps they were writing about the war they wished had been fought, or perhaps publishers could only commission novels with triumphant endings.

Interestingly, the novels of Henty appeared in two reading experience surveys of soldiers in 1918, one an eighteen-year-old private in an infantry regiment, who, amongst Henty, also read Robinson Crusoe, Kidnapped and Treasure Island – perhaps suggesting a comparable fantasy that encouraged him to sign up for the war effort and believe in the myths even at such a late stage. Whilst between 18 February and 7 December 1918, Lance Corporal Edward Henry Jones reports reading *In the Reign of Terror* by Henty whilst in Germany. Perhaps very ironically, as the main character in the novel spends a large part of it trying to escape from France and return to England.

Maybe the novels showed a foresight and relevance that even Henty could not have predicted. Furthermore, in 1919 Lawrence Durrell stated “Kipling had now been supplemented with Henty, Ballantyne, Rider Haggard and John Buchan, all with their own tales of imperial derring-do to tell the impressionable young colonial” (UK Reading Experience, 1919), suggesting that the lasting impact of the patriotic war tales were not only needed (“supplemented”), but also unquenched by the aftermath of the war.

December 1914 presented a clear example of publishers utilising the war to their commercial advantage. The issue of *The Bookman* from this month plays heavily on the need for children to seek comfort in books, although it is hard to tell whether the war books they provided for children could actually do this. Tynan writes in 1914 that, “no one wants the children’s hearts to be heavy, so they must find their ease in a book.” She follows this by specifying the type of book that is so needed by children “the ancient tales of heroes”, a

statement that would not seem out of place on a Kitchener poster.

Not only was the publishing industry using the war as a new thematic backdrop for literature, but they were using it as a reason why parents should be buying books for their children. And these tactics did not lessen as the war went on, with the December 1917 edition of *The Bookman* saying of “Thrilling Deeds of British Airmen” that “Mr Wood has written a volume which ought to be read by every boy who can buy, beg or borrow the book.” Whilst men had died in their thousands by this stage, the use of the war to sell books had still not stopped.

Clearly publishers capitalised on the war as a new genre to sell not just fiction, but a whole range of “activity” books for children. It could be suggested that they were just producing what the public wanted to buy, but their adaptation of a war story that could not be remotely considered exciting suggests it was merely a backdrop for them to use to sell more books.

The Glorification of War – Playing on Patriotism

Children’s fiction played a vital role in creating enthusiasm for the war between 1914-16 and it has been suggested that the early rush of voluntary service was underpinned by boyhood reading. The vast majority of books published during this time were steeped in a form of patriotic nationalism. Books such as the *Heroes of All Time series*, *Stories of Brave Deeds from Britain’s Roll of Honour* and *A Patriotic School Girl* highlighted the need to support the war. The early war novels of 1914 depicted noble reasons for Britain entering the conflict – justifying it as a defence of liberal institution, whilst the later novels focused on the chivalry of the fight in the air. Literature showed an emphasis on how powerful Germany had violated powerless Belgium and how honourable Britain must save them. It aimed to leave no questions about who was right and who was wrong.

Whilst French propaganda focused heavily on anti-German sentiments, British literature focused more on the honour of fighting for what was “right”. According to Badsey in *The Journal of Military History*, “in 1914, authors depicted Britain as entering the Great War for noble reasons against a Germany that threatened the existence of civilisation, and whose fictionalised representatives were utterly villainous” (2005, 852). While this highlights the sense of morals that were believed to front the British campaign, it also highlights the base degradation of the German race – a concerning notion in children’s literature. As Kennedy argues, “Toy production and juvenile literature show us both what images adults wanted children to have about the war and also what they felt children would enjoy.” (2014, 52). Perhaps then it is simplistic to think that the publishing industry were concerned with propaganda over pleasure, but that instead they were just responding to the demands of the consumer, and the parent that wanted their child to know that their father was fighting for the right reasons.

Interestingly, the rationing of the First World War caused inadvertent propaganda throughout the war, even when positive views on it were waning. Shortages of paper and rising prices led to the reprinting of books from the first phase of the war, as a result, “euphoric propaganda from the beginning of the war remained in the public sphere until 1918” (Zurino, 2014). This could present that publishers weren’t necessarily interested by either pleasure or propaganda, but rather their own profit margins in difficult financial times.

The choice of authors for children is very revealing. Most of the wartime fiction was produced by already successful authors, *Mrs Strang’s Annual for Children* of December 1914 states that “Mrs May Byron, Miss Jessie Pope and many other well-known writers are among the long list of contributors.” (The Bookman, 1914). It is well known that Pope was among the most jingoistic of wartime writers and her placement in a 1914 children’s annual

makes quite the statement about the desire for children to be subjected to literary propaganda.

Propaganda in children's literature was not just the reserve of boys. With the war came a wave of new opportunities for women, and female authors were quick to capitalise on the empowerment that girls could have by joining the war effort. Far from the adventures suggested for boys, fiction aimed at girls showed them a whole new world of freedom on the home front. Donson (2014) describes how, in their stories, "the girls matured by volunteering for the war effort and embracing thrift and personal sacrifice to help their country and families. The stories often ended with the protagonist marrying a soldier." While novels aimed at boys focused heavily on a sense of masculinity and pride, girls' novels still focused on the romance of a happy ending, in spite of the gains made by women during the First World War. The idea of marrying a soldier also serves to reinforce the idea that the ideal man would volunteer for active service, and those were the men that girls should marry.

Even after the war had finished, children's literature still seemed full of propaganda, however subtle. In a *Bookman* review of the *Collins' Children's Annual* of December 1918, the writer suggests of the stories that "one of the best is about the little boy who went to a party and hated his velvet suit. Yet the sash which he wore and was so ashamed of, did its part in trapping a burglar!" (The *Bookman*, 1918). This seems to represent a conscientious objector, who in spite of "hating" their uniform and being ashamed of it, still took part in the war effort, and should be proud of the uniform that they wore. Clearly the end of the war did not signal an end to the need to convince the population that it had been the right thing to do.

The school stories, so popular with girls before the war, also faced a makeover, with a *Bookman* review of *A Patriotic Schoolgirl* promoting the message that "the girls were all

hotly patriotic and anxious to help in the war” (The Bookman, 1918). A *Reading Experience* account by Kathleen Betterton shows how she was inspired by Brazil’s novels to want more for herself and wrote that they “conjured up muddled visions of midnight picnics, sweet girl prefects, hockey, house matches and exploits that saved the honour of the school” (The Reading Experience Database, 2001). Whilst it could be suggested that propaganda painted a false and damaging image of the war, it cannot be said that all propaganda lacked positive consequences.

Whilst after the war propaganda remained strong, it arguably started long before the First World War did. Critics suggest that the tales of imperial adventure fed to boys before 1914, were hugely linked to the initially enthusiastic response to sign up for a war that they believed was making the fiction of adventure a reality. Kennedy suggests that “late nineteenth and early twentieth-century boys’ juvenile literature reflected the public-school ethos of manliness, courage and patriotism.” (2014, 71). Perhaps this belief that to be a man was to exemplify those exacting traits, further fueled this desire to fight for their country and protect what they believed deserved protecting.

Conclusion

To suggest that publishers were purely interested in producing propaganda for the war effort is an overly simplistic view. Yet it is hard to ignore the patriotic messages that resonated through children’s literature, or the seemingly unnecessary transformation of nursery rhymes and ABC books into another form of pro-war rhetoric. Clearly publishers chose to publish these books, but it is also clear that they were subject to a range of powerful influences. Firstly, the government had a huge control over the publishing industry during the First World War, and it would be naïve to suggest that this influence did not extend to children’s literature. Then there are the authors to consider – many of whom seemed to take inspiration from Henty to produce adventure books with war as their central

theme.

Finally, it is apparent that the public were fixated on the war, and craved any information on it, however fantastical. It is a classic case of the chicken or the egg: were publishers forced to produce texts that either linked to the war in terms of content or paratext, or did they seize upon an opportunity to rebrand their backlists and capitalise on a captive market? Whichever way you choose to view it, what is clear is that literature produced during the First World War created a generation of patriots, prepared to support their country like the heroes of their much-loved books.

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