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Deposited in DRO:

27 March 2015

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

James, Simon J. (2014) 'Q is for Queen : the reading nation.', in Books for Boys : literacy, nation and the First World War. Durham: Institute of Advanced Study, Durham University, pp. 6-9.

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Introduction

Q is for Queen: The Reading Nation
Simon J. James

In an age now so deluged with information of all kinds, and in which text is so freely available, it is difficult indeed to imagine a Britain that is not universally literate. While the illiteracy of the early and mid-Victorian working class has been exaggerated, it is still nonetheless broadly the case that Britain did not see a truly mass reading public until the coming to adulthood of the children sent to school by the 1870 Elementary Education Act.

Such a step was a consequence of the extension of the vote to a larger (male) share of the public; and this public's rulers felt that with this increased political power should also come greater power to acquire knowledge. Chancellor of the Exchequer and MP for London University Robert Lowe drily remarked to the House of Commons that, 'I believe it will be absolutely necessary that you should prevail on our future masters to learn their letters.' Literacy was also closely associated with Britain's sense of itself as the major world power: W. E. Forster, the Liberal MP who introduced the Education Bill, added that: 'if we are to hold our own position among men of our own race or among the nations of the world we must make up the smallness of our numbers by increasing the intellectual force of the individual.' Just as imperial rhetoric asserted Britain's superiority more and more strenuously in the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, in reality that position was beginning to be threatened by the economic and military achievements of other countries, especially Prussia/Germany, whose surprising military victories against Austria and France were attributed in part to the superiority of her educational system.

The political decision to enable a whole future population to read enormously increased the number and kinds of books that were being produced: at a conservative estimate, the Victorian publishing industry trebled in size between the Education Act and the close of the century. There is abundant evidence, as attested by Jonathan Rose's ground-breaking *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, of gifted working-class readers devoting their spare time to strenuous self-improvement by reading in fields such as politics, theology, history and the sciences. However, what this newly massively enlarged class of readers read, when give the choice, was predominantly imaginative literature, mostly fiction. Indeed, it is largely the romances, novels and short stories of the period between the Education Acts and the First World War for which this era of literary history is largely remembered today: from the decadent gothic of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to H. G. Wells's experiments in science fiction, to *Trilby* (the original 'Svengali' story) to the works of the so-called 'Golden Age' of children's writing, among them *Just So Stories*, *The Railway Children* and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

In contrast to, say, essays or poetry, fiction's claim to be a 'literary' form of writing was by no means assured in this period. Pious Victorian households even forbade the reading of secular stories on a Sunday, many adults' only day of leisure, in favour of books of sermons or devotional writing (religious publishing is a large and under-remembered part of the history of the Victorian book). In order to legitimise itself, therefore, as worthy of being read, much Victorian fiction actively sought to achieve a morally purifying effect on its reader; and writing for children was especially committed to didactically instilling traditional, puritan virtues. For the author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* Thomas Arnold, this sense of purpose was exactly what justified such a book's very existence:

Several persons, for whose judgment I have the highest respect, while saying very kind things about this book, have added, that the great fault of it is, 'too much preaching;' but they hope I shall amend in this matter should I ever write again. Now this I most distinctly decline to

do. Why, my whole object in writing at all was to get the chance of preaching! (Preface)

From the origins of English writing for children in the eighteenth century onwards, it was not enough just to be made literate: the reader should also be made *better* by their reading. While so much of children's reading matter from this period might now seem bloodthirsty, sexist, racist, or disrespectful towards the natural world, these books were nonetheless intended to shape their young readers into the adults whose qualities would help ensure Britain's world pre-eminence for years to come. Then, as now, a taste for reading fiction over other kinds of books was often rather suspiciously gendered as female; in such a male-dominated culture as that of Victorian Britain, the shaping of young boys into men was given especially careful attention in the fictions of the first mass reading public.

Given the often straitened circumstances of the real lives of young Victorian readers, writers needed a larger and stranger canvas to paint such glorious pictures as they did. The boys' adventure-romance tended to take place at either a historical or a geographical remove from the everyday, as is shown by the titles of books produced by bestselling children's writer G. A. Henty in a little over one year of his eighty-book career: *Friends Though Divided: A Tale of the Civil War*, *Under Drake's Flag: A Tale of the Spanish Main*, *By Sheer Pluck: A Tale of the Ashanti War*, *Jack Archer: A Tale of the Crimea* and *With Clive in India* (1883-4). The moral character such tales sought to teach also looked back, borrowing for a boy's regulation of himself a classical masculinity of imperiousness towards the enemy and impervious to physical suffering and, for behaviour towards others, a code of graceful chivalry from an imagined Middle Ages. Weaker beings such as women, servants and colonised races were often portrayed as themselves being child-like: it was therefore the responsibility of the boy-hero (and the reader imaginatively alongside him) to become mature enough, over the course of the narrative, to rule over them. Clearly, education was materially allied to the imperial project in answering to the Empire's real need for young men capable of going on to serve in the actual Empire, literally recruiting these new readers to the imperial mission. The narrator of Rudyard Kipling's school stories *Stalky & Co* briefly sees the future of one of the schoolboys as being dying a glorious death in an African colonial war. A reader of the most jingoistic productions from the Boer War era such as Mrs Ernest Ames's *An ABC for Baby Patriots* might even wonder whether Britain had acquired its empire for the express purpose of educating its young:

E is our Empire
Where sun never sets;
The larger we make it
The bigger it gets.

But there is more to it than this: Empire in fiction also served as a site of wish-fulfilment, where the boy-hero could be, at least in his imagination, adventurous, boisterous and brave.

Not only were children held to be 'naturally' unruly, but post-Darwinian understandings of 'human nature' had inscribed the 'natural' way for males of the species to behave towards each other as being to compete: for food, resources and, having reached maturity, female attention. Society's requiring of men to engage in collective enterprises (such as the school, the sports team, or the regiment) rather than to fight each other, is therefore something *unnatural*. Since bonds between men are artificial, they need to be constructed. The adventure narrative thus serves as a means, even a pretext, for the making of bonds between men – taking 'natural' impulses towards violence and directing them outwards. Here Peter Pan welcomes the Lost Boys to Neverland:

His courage was almost appalling. 'Do you want an adventure now,' he said casually to John, 'or would you like to have your tea first?'

Wendy said 'tea first' quickly, and Michael pressed her hand in gratitude, but the braver John hesitated.

What kind of adventure?’ he asked cautiously.

‘There’s a pirate asleep in the pampas just beneath us,’ Peter told him. ‘If you like, we’ll go down and kill him.’ (J. M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*)

A paradox, therefore, of the turn-of-the-century boys’ story is the desire to foster at once both individualism and team spirit. Kipling’s Stalky, M’Turk and the Beetle might break the letter of the school rules in pursuing their own adventures, but at the same time they never violate the spirit of their own well-developed inner code of gentlemanly values such as fair play and loyalty to each other. Think also of Allan Quatermain’s admiration, even hero-worship, of Sir Henry Curtis in H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines*, or Dr Watson’s of Sherlock Holmes; of *Treasure Island*’s Jim Hawkins rejecting the charismatic but rascally pirate Long John Silver for the more socially acceptable father-figures of the doctor, the squire and the sea captain; of the bonds forged between the ‘Crew of Light’ in *Dracula* and the animal-bachelors of *The Wind in the Willows*. Even a work which has entered everyday language as an allegory for the divided modern self, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, begins as a story initially of a stranger’s unwelcome disruption of long-established male friendships. In Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World*, the newspaperman-hero Edward Malone idolises and accompanies to the Amazonian jungle the aristocratic big game hunter Lord John Roxton and the hyper-masculine scientist Professor Challenger. At first, Challenge bickers constantly bickers with his scientific rival Professor Summerlee, but their adventures in the Lost World bring the men closer together. On first seeing a family of dinosaurs:

The two professors were in silent ecstasy. In their excitement they had unconsciously seized each other by the hand, and stood like two little children in the presence of a marvel, Challenger’s cheeks bunched up into a seraphic smile, and Summerlee’s sardonic face softening for the moment into wonder and reverence.

Such fantasies of masculine fulfilment were, at the same time, reminders of how far such adventures were from reality. *The Lost World*, like so many Edwardian fictions, seems to know itself to be taking place in an era in which the best is already past. The editor of Malone’s newspaper laments that, ‘the big blank spaces in the map are all being filled in, and there’s no room for romance anywhere.’ Even as these stories achieved huge success, many of their writers feared that the sun was already beginning to set on the British Empire, and that perhaps the most glorious possibilities for heroic action could only be imaginary. Politically, Rudyard Kipling was sincere in his imperialism, portraying the benefits conveyed by Empire both to the colonies themselves (in the form of government, manufactured goods, railways), and also to the young men whose scope for heroic action could be greater in foreign spaces. At the same time, he could poke fun at the high seriousness with which the imperial mission was sometimes taken, and warned that even the greatest achievements could only ever be historically transient. Even Boer War hero Robert Baden Powell’s handbook for imperial masculinity *Scouting for Boys* (perhaps the most widely read English text of the twentieth century) is in its first edition a deeply nostalgic text, promising its readers that they, too, are capable of matching his own past feats, even if they find themselves not in hot colonial spaces but in the grimy streets of modern, urban Britain. The advice the book also contains on how to recognise a criminal seems to recognise that, these days, foes may be found nearer at hand as well.

The years between the Education Acts and the outbreak of World War One also saw the teaching of military drill in schools, the coronation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India, and public displays of patriotic fervour around the Boer War and 1900s Naval rearmament. While, clearly, national reading cultures of Britain and Germany in the early twentieth century did not, of course, make war between these nations inevitable, it is worth remembering that while the world makes books, books also help make the world, and the imagining of imperial fantasy was a crucial part of the making of the Edwardian boys who would grow up to be the adult soldiers of World War One.