11. Prizing the Nation: Postwar Children's Fiction

Lucy Pearson

At the start of Arthur Ransome's *Pigeon Post* (1936), Nancy Blackett complains that her absent adventurer uncle 'might just as well have stayed at home', asking, 'Why shouldn't he look for things here?'.¹ It is fitting that this question is posed by the winner of the inaugural Carnegie Medal, for it expresses an attitude which was to characterise the first two decades of Carnegie prize-winners. These books 'look for things at home', both in seeking to promote British children's fiction and – more fundamentally – in mapping a sense of nationhood which is predicated on rediscovering history, heritage, and the rural landscape. Jacqueline Rose has argued that children's fiction holds out the possibility of 'a primitive or lost state to which the child has special access', and the long association between the figure of the child and the natural world makes children's literature a potent venue for a construction of nationhood which is built around a pre-industrial past.² However, these books are not simply regressive or nostalgic: in employing the figure of the child they look towards the future as well as the past, presenting change as both possible and desirable.

The years 1940-1960 straddle what have traditionally been seen as two distinct periods in the history of British children's literature: the 1950s, widely hailed as the beginning of a 'second golden age' of writing for children which continued throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s; and the preceding forty years, traditionally viewed as a somewhat

¹ Arthur Ransome, *Pigeon Post* (London: Random House, 2001), p. 22.

² Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* rev. edn. (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 9.

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disappointing era for British children's books.³ A succession of commentators have characterised the children's literature of the inter-war period and the years immediately following as 'dreary', 'derivative and stale', and lacking in vitality.⁴ More recent scholarship, however, has challenged this characterisation of 1914-1949. Dennis Butts, for example, notes that the number of 'modern classics' written during the 1930s belies the notion that this was a period of quiescence, while Kimberley Reynolds traces a tradition of radical writing for children from the late Edwardian period to the beginning of the 'second golden age', arguing that the tendency to obscure this tradition has produced a 'hole in the cultural memory'.⁵ Curiously little attention has been paid, however, to perhaps the most visible sign of continuity between the purportedly 'quiescent' interwar years and the activity of the 1950s: the Carnegie Medal. Established by the Library Association in 1936 as an award for 'the best book published for children', the Medal heralds a move towards the prizing of both children's literature and childhood itself. It is thus a key cultural site for postwar Britain: and significantly, the first two decades of Carnegie winners return again and again to themes of home, history and heritage as a means of renegotiating ideas about national identity in the postwar era.

³ The nineteenth century saw the 'first golden age', which is associated with the emergence of children's literature which focused on the amusement as well as the education of the child reader (although inevitably, this too is now a contested notion). Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) is perhaps the most prominent text of the 'first golden age'.

⁴ John Rowe Townsend, *Written For Children: An Outline of English-language Children's Literature*, 2nd rev. edn. (Harmondsworth: Kestrel, 1983), p. 163; Marcus Crouch, *Treasure Seekers and Borrowers: Children's Books in Britain, 1900-1960* (London: The Library Association, 1962), p. 17; Geoffrey Trease, 'The Revolution in Children's Literature' in *The Thorny Paradise: Writers on Writing for Children*, ed. Edward Blishen (Harmondsworth: Kestrel, 1975), pp. 13-24, p. 16. See Lucy Pearson, *The Making of Modern Children's Literature in Britain: Publishing and Criticism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) for an examination of the discourse around the 'second golden age' of children's literature.

⁵ Dennis Butts, 'The Retreatism of the 1930s: A Few Dissenters' in *Children's Literature and Social Change: Some Case Studies from Barbara Hofland to Philip Pullman* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2010), pp. 118-133; Kimberley Reynolds, *Left Out: The forgotten tradition of radical publishing for children in Britain 1910-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 4.

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In his discussion of the Newbery Medal (the US counterpart of the Carnegie), Kenneth Kidd notes the role of literary prize-giving in both creating and bestowing cultural capital, arguing that it 'encourages both the making and unmaking of canons, underwrites but also undercuts faith in popularity'.⁶ The establishment of the Carnegie Medal was explicitly motivated by a desire to accrue cultural capital for children's books: like the Newbery, its stated aim was to raise both the standard and the profile of writing for children.⁷ This concern with the standard of children's books reflects the growing concern for and about childhood itself during the first half of the twentieth century: an increasing discourse around children as 'the future' both intensified the impulse to 'preserve' childhood and 'presented children as actually or potentially dangerous'.⁸ Children's literature is a primary site for both constructing and controlling childhood: it is telling that the criteria for the Carnegie Medal included the stipulation that the tone of the winning book should be 'in keeping with the generally accepted standards of good behaviour and right thinking'.⁹ Despite the inherently problematic nature of literary prizes as a barometer of either popularity or literary quality, the bestowing of the Medal in itself gave (and still gives) the winning books a particular cultural weight, and helped to ensure that they were available to (if not read by) child readers.¹⁰ James English, in his influential study of cultural prizes *The Economy of Prestige*, suggests that the children's market is particularly responsive to prizes; this is borne out by Kidd, who notes

⁶ Kenneth Kidd, 'Prizing Children's Literature: The Case of Newbery Gold', *Children's Literature* 35 (2007), 166-190, p. 166.

⁷ Keith Barker, 'Prize-fighting' in Kimberley Reynolds and Nicholas Tucker (eds), *Children's Book Publishing in Britain since 1945*, (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1998), pp. 42-59.

⁸ Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005), p. 179.

⁹ See Perry Nodelman, 'The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 17:1 (Spring 1992), 29-35 on the 'colonising' qualities of children's books; W.C. Berwick, one of the founders of the Carnegie Medal, quoted in Keith Barker, 'Prize-fighting', p. 43.

¹⁰ Keith Barker shows in *In the Realms of Gold: The Story of the Carnegie Medal* (London: Julia MacRae Books, 1986) that the rather haphazard administration of the Medal in its first decades almost totally excluded not only children themselves, but also specialist children's librarians.

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that winning the Newbery 'can keep authors and titles in print for decades'.¹¹ The same is true of the Carnegie: of the first twenty-four winners of the Medal, thirteen remain in print today, over fifty years after their first publication.¹² The fact that the Carnegie Medal (like the Newbery) is awarded by librarians ensures that the books are also typically well-represented in library collections, further enhancing their contribution to canon construction, while histories of children's literature typically use the Medal winners as one means of tracing trends in the development of children's books. Although in one sense a relatively arbitrary selection of books published for children, the Medal therefore has a key role in curating children's books in the national imaginary. The history of the Medal intersects with those of children's publishing, librarianship, and education; this chapter, however, takes a primarily textual approach.¹³ Reading the winning texts in relation to each other, it shows the continuity of themes and concerns across the period 1936-1960, suggesting that these helped to shape the canon of children's literature in Britain.

Much scholarship on cultural prizes has pointed to their function in relation to claiming and defining a distinctive national culture, especially – but not exclusively - in a postcolonial context.¹⁴ The early history of the Carnegie Medal signals its connection to the shifting sense of British identity during this period. Keith Barker suggests that the establishment of the Medal was in itself 'a matter of some national pride', since the USA had launched the Newbery more than a decade previously.¹⁵ Launching confidently as an award

¹¹ James English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), p. 97; Kenneth Kidd, 'Prizing Children's Literature', p. 166.

¹² The question of whether these texts also enjoy a continued readership is a more vexed one: certainly William Mayne's *A Grass Rope* (1957), which is available only as part of Faber's print-on-demand series Faber Finds, is presented as a forgotten classic rather than as a book for contemporary children.

¹³ Keith Barker's two short histories *In the Realms of Gold* and 'Prize Fighting' are the most significant scholarship on the Medal to date. Both deal primarily with the administrative history of the Medal and its position within the Library Association (Later Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals). This chapter represents the beginnings of a wider project on the literary and cultural significance of the Medal.

¹⁴ The postcolonial implications of prize culture is a key focus for James English in *The Economy of Prestige*.

¹⁵ Keith Barker, *In the Realms of Gold*, p. 3.

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for 'the best book published for children in the British Empire', by 1941 it had significantly retrenched, limiting its scope to books published in England (a move which Owen Dudley Edwards characterises as 'either bigoted or parochial or both').¹⁶ In 1944 the criteria were revised again: the Medal was to be awarded to 'an outstanding book for children by a British subject domiciled in the United Kingdom (Great Britain and Northern Ireland), published in Great Britain during the year'.¹⁷ In the light of this uncertainty, it is striking that the first two decades of the Medal winners show a preoccupation with national identity. Whereas Kidd notes that the early Newbery medal winners typically featured 'other countries and/or indigenous North American cultures', all but seven of the Carnegie winners 1936-1960 were set wholly in Britain and focus on British characters.¹⁸ Prizing children's literature, it seems, also entails prizing the nation.

This turn towards home is evident from the inaugural winner of the Carnegie Medal, Arthur Ransome's *Pigeon Post* (1936), which establishes a deep preoccupation not simply with Britain as a nation, but with the land itself that runs through the next two decades of Carnegie winners.¹⁹ The genre of 'camping and tramping' fiction, of which Ransome was a progenitor, reflected the 'explosion of interest in the British countryside' in the years

¹⁶ Owen Dudley Evans, *British Children's Fiction in the Second World War*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 249. Evans notes that these criteria may have reflected the tendency during this period to use 'England' as a synecdoche for Britain rather than an intent to exclude writers from other parts of the United Kingdom. Conversely, this chapter will chiefly speak of the creation of a British identity, since although the majority of these titles are English they encompass, I argue, a range of regional identities which are not necessarily aligned with 'Englishness'.

¹⁷ Evans, *British Children's Fiction*, p. 249. Evans suggests that the change was motivated by the desire to award the Medal to the Welsh-born Eric Linklater, one of only four non-English winners in the years up until 1960. The other three are Ronald Welch (Welsh), C.S. Lewis (Irish), and Eleanor Doorly (born in Jamaica, although she moved to England at age seven).

¹⁸ As Kidd points out, Newbery books also function to construct national images through their creation of an implicitly normative American identity against which other cultures are measured. It is striking, however, that early Carnegie winners largely eschew the strong adventure story tradition (which functions in the same way) in favour of narratives about home.

¹⁹ In the first decades of the Carnegie Medal, the date of the Medal reflects the date of publication for the book. These have therefore not been separated.

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following the First World War.²⁰ Alun Howkins has argued that this interest was the culmination of a cultural movement which produced 'a ruralist version of a specifically English culture'.²¹ Camping and tramping fiction was important both for promoting this vision of nationhood, and for interrogating it; although it was dominated by stories set in the English countryside, these books did not universally reproduce the images of the rural south which according to Howkins underpins the ruralist ideal.²² Ransome in particular is known for his loving representations of the Lake District, a wilder, less cultivated space than the village greens and hedgerows of the south.²³ Hazel Sheeky Bird argues that camping and tramping novels 'failed to recognise the validity of competing national identities', but they did represent specific regional identities.²⁴ This regional specificity allows for a construction of national identity which to some degree bypasses the problematic associations of both Englishness and Britishness by emphasising a more direct connection with the land itself.²⁵ *Pigeon Post*, the sixth book in the series, represents a particularly decisive turn towards the land. In earlier books in the series, Ransome's child protagonists reimagine the Lake District as a foreign space, remapping the British landscape through games which draw on their reading of adventure narratives. These games simultaneously reproduce and invert imperial conquest: instead of conferring European names on colonised territory, the children replace local names with foreign ones (they refer to the nearest town as Rio), investing the landscape

²⁰ Hazel Sheeky Bird, *Class, Leisure and National Identity in British Children's Literature, 1918-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 1.

²¹ Alun Howkins, 'The discovery of rural England' in Robert Colls and Philip Dodds (eds), *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1987), pp. 85-112, p. 86.

²² Alun Howkins, 'The discovery of rural England', p. 86.

²³ Although only five of the twelve published books in the *Swallows and Amazons* series are set in the Lake District, it is this region with which the series is most closely associated. Peter Hunt credits Ransome with helping to create the national image of the Lake District, see *Approaching Arthur Ransome* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p. 12.

²⁴ Hazel Sheeky Bird, *Class, Leisure and National Identity in British Children's Literature, 1918-1950*, p. 7.

²⁵ The complex interaction of Britishness, Englishness and regional identity deserves a more nuanced discussion than is possible here. Nevertheless, the northern setting of Ransome's Lake District novels is particularly important given that the rural ideal of Englishness often excludes the North (see Peter J. Taylor, 'Which Britain? Which England? Which North?' in *British Cultural Studies: Geography, Nationality and Identity*, ed. by David Morley and Kevin Robbins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 125-144).

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with the allure of the unknown. By contrast, much of the action of *Pigeon Post* turns upon the desire to prove the value of the British landscape itself. Nancy Blackett's complaint at the start of the book is provoked by the absence of her uncle, who is prospecting for gold overseas. The children's desire to prove that his absence is unnecessary (and thus enable his usual role as co-conspirator in their holiday adventures) motivates them to begin prospecting for gold on the rocky, drought-stricken local fells. Whilst their uncle's efforts overseas are a failure, 'looking for things here' proves to be much more successful and by the end of the book the children have identified a valuable seam of metal (albeit copper rather than gold). In the most vividly realised episode of the book, the children also uncover an equally precious commodity beneath the fells: a hidden spring which proves crucial to the defence of the land itself when a fell fire threatens to devastate the local landscape. This episode breaks down the boundaries between child and adult (tellingly referred to in the children's games as 'explorers' and 'natives') and between locals and visitors, as they work together to extinguish the fire before it reaches farmland. The British landscape is thus shown to hold both economic and spiritual value, and it is the recognition of this value which constitutes belonging. The children's vital role positions them as custodians of this national treasure; they will be the 'new natives' who will inherit and preserve the land.

The Carnegie winners of the years 1937-1939 moved away from this focus on the countryside: 1937 saw J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, which draws on an idealised rural England in its depiction of the Shire, passed over in favour of Eve Garnett's *The Family From One End Street*, about an urban working-class family. In 1938 the Medal went to Noel Streatfeild's, *The Circus is Coming*, another text concerned with working-class life and culture. If things had continued on this track the first two decades of the Medal might have told a different story; however, the outbreak of war in 1939 heightened the importance both

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of children's books and of depictions of the land. Just three days after war was declared, Routledge and Keegan's editor T.M. Ragg wrote to Eleanor Graham: 'I do think that children's books are, if the war is continued for any time, going to become more and more important', observing that Graham's own camping and tramping novel, *The Children Who Lived in a Barn* (1938), was a good example of the kind of book which would benefit evacuated children.²⁶ At Penguin, the launch of Puffin Picture Books (Allen Lane's first venture for children) was similarly given impetus by the sense that 'evacuated children are going to need books more than ever, especially [...] on farming and natural history'.²⁷ In catering for this need, children's books turned back to the land: one of the first Puffin Picture Books tackled life *On the Farm*, while the 1940 Carnegie Medal went to Kitty Barne's evacuee story *Visitors From London*. Barne's novel does not wholly embrace this enforced move towards the countryside: much of the humour of the novel rests on its depiction of the administrative challenges of evacuation and the resistance of urban evacuees to the rural environment. Nevertheless, the book is underpinned by a sense of the rural community as the source of enduring stability in a world in which you 'woke up in the morning with one set of things in front of you, you went to bed with quite another'.²⁸

The turn towards the land is even more acutely present in the 1942 Carnegie winner, *The Little Grey Men* by 'B.B' (D. J. Watkins-Pitchford), which is first and foremost a powerful celebration of the natural world – as in this description of seasonal change:

²⁶ T.M. Ragg to Eleanor Graham, 6 September 1936, RKP 121/2, Routledge and Keegan Archive, Reading University.

²⁷ Allen Lane, quoted in Ian Rogerson, *Noel Carrington and his Puffin Picture Books: An Exhibition Catalogue* (Manchester: Manchester Polytechnic Library, 1992), p. xii. Eleanor Graham was shortly to join Penguin as editor of Puffin's second list for children, Puffin Story Books.

²⁸ Kitty Barne, *Visitors from London* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1940), p. 261.

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The great tide was on the turn, to creep so slowly at first and then to rise ever higher to culminate in the glorious flood, the top of the tide, at midsummer.

Think of it! All that power, all those millions of leaves, those extra inches to be added to bushes, trees and flowers. It was all there under the earth, though you would never have guessed it.²⁹

The quasi-magical qualities which Watkins-Pitchford attributes to nature are given physical form in the little grey men of the title, gnomes who live in harmony with the natural world. The insertion of these magical creatures into a realistically described British landscape serves as an inducement to the reader to engage more closely with the world around them: as the introduction to the novel makes explicit, if you 'watch and wait by the streams and in the woods [...] suddenly you will understand that the birds and wild animals *are* the little people'.³⁰ The sense of the natural world as magical recurs across other Carnegie-winning titles. In Elizabeth Gouge's fantasy novel *The Little White Horse* (1946) the protagonist Maria feels apprehensive about leaving her London home to live with her uncle, but as the novel develops both her appreciation for the land and her understanding of her own magical significance within it unfold. Whereas Watkins-Pitchford focuses on wild spaces, Gouge's imaginary village of Silverydew is a perfected version of the cultivated rural south, complete with cottages 'thatched with golden straw and set in neat gardens bright with spring flowers'.³¹ Howkins suggests that in the cultural construction of rural England which emerged from the 1880s onwards: 'Purity, decency, goodness, honesty, even reality itself are closely identified with the rural south'.³² These qualities are all integral to Gouge's pre-

²⁹ 'B.B.', *The Little Grey Men* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 1.

³⁰ 'B.B.', Introduction to *The Little Grey Men*, n.p.

³¹ Elizabeth Gouge, *The Little White Horse* (Oxford: Lion Children's, 2009), p. 50.

³² Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', p. 86.

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industrial community in which 'the people looked as happy and prosperous as their homes'.³³

A defence of this space is a defence of the nation united around, and imagined through its rural heritage; an association underscored by the fact that Maria's quest to 'keep Silverydew always like this' is aided by a lion and a unicorn.³⁴

Ten years later, William Mayne's *A Grass Rope* (1957) reiterates this idealised vision, and produces another unicorn. This novel, a realistic portrayal of a small community in the Yorkshire Dales, is less straightforwardly magical than Gouge's, but Mayne's prose invests the entire landscape with the numinous:

They walked along in the dusk. The sky hung overhead in colours of new roses; and to the west lavender and marigold; to the east the green of sage, and under the cloud that rolled behind the edge of darkness came on: silver lined like a well edged with daisies.³⁵

For both Mayne and Gouge, the child functions as a connection to the magical qualities of the natural world. It is Mayne's child protagonist Mary through whom the description of the dusk is focalised, and the plot turns around her belief in fairies. In *The Little White Horse* only Maria can resolve the ancient conflicts which threaten the protected space of Silverydew. The sense of the child as what Jacqueline Rose has described as a 'pure point of origin' makes children's literature a particularly potent venue for the celebration of Britain as characterised by its natural spaces: the child is able to retrieve a connection to the land and an

³³ Elizabeth Gouge, *The Little White Horse*, p. 50.

³⁴ Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', p. 74.

³⁵ William Mayne, *A Grass Rope* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 103.

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understanding of local traditions which work to build a coherent identity and heal historical rifts.³⁶

These texts reflect a tradition of English nationalism which, Ian Baucom argues, 'identifies English place rather than English blood as the one thing that could preserve the nation's memory and, in preserving its memory, secure England's national identity'.³⁷ The link between place and history is equally important in non-fiction Carnegie winners: Agnes Allen's *The Story of Your Home* (1949) traces the development of architecture from prehistoric times, while Edward Osmond's *A Valley Grows Up* (1953) depicts the growth of a (fictional) valley. The two historical novels which won the Carnegie also link place and memory, and extend the 'localist' discourse to the British Isles as a whole.³⁸ Ronald Welch's *Knight Crusader* (1954) is one of the few Carnegie winners of this period to be set largely outside Britain, but it retains an emphasis on a deep connection with the land. Welch's twelfth century Norman hero Sir Philip d'Aubigny is born and bred in Syria, but when a pilgrim describes the 'grey mists [and] soft rain' of Britain, Philip is 'filled with the vision of green forests' establishing an instinctive connection with Britain.³⁹ The narrative deals with the fall of the Outremer states to Saladin's forces – a theme which has obvious resonance in the context of the retrenchment of Britain's imperial territories during the 1940s and 1950s – but surprisingly little emotional weight is given to the destruction of Philip d'Aubigny's own Syrian home. Instead, Philip establishes a new life by turning towards the British 'home' he has never experienced, swearing allegiance to King Richard and ultimately returning with

³⁶ Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 9.

³⁷ Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 16.

³⁸ *Tom's Midnight Garden*, discussed later, is also a historical novel of a sort, but its timeslip device sets it apart from these two books.

³⁹ Ronald Welch, *Knight Crusader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 26-27.

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him to Britain, where Philip travels to the Welsh marches to take up his ancestral fiefdom.⁴⁰

Paradoxically, foreign-born Philip is presented as more 'British' than the British-born noble whom he ousts from his fief, Llanstephan Castle, and he is welcomed by the Welsh men-at-arms serving in the castle. A similar connection between Britishness and an affinity for place is present in Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Lantern Bearers* (1959). The book concerns a British-born Roman soldier, Aquila, at the time of the Roman withdrawal from Britain. At the opening of the book, Aquila – returning home to his father's farm – surveys 'the farmstead under the great, bare swell of the downs: the russet-roofed huddle of buildings, the orchard behind', and feels 'a sharp-edged pleasure'.⁴¹ This deeply-felt connection to the land explains and justifies his decision to go 'wilful missing' when his legion departs Britain, and his subsequent allegiance to the forces battling the invading Saxons.⁴² This connection with the land is also associated with other cultural values which Sutcliff represents as part of an enduring British tradition: the forces resisting the Saxons are represented as lantern bearers against the dark of invading barbarism: 'for us to keep something burning, to carry what light we can forward into the darkness and the wind'.⁴³

The connection Sutcliff makes between Aquila's affinity with the land and his role as a 'lantern bearer' of British culture reflects a more wide-ranging connection between the countryside and Britain's 'traditional' heritage. The wider cultural turn towards the rural was associated with attempts to construct a national culture by reviving traditions such as Morris dancing and folk songs.⁴⁴ This impulse is evident across many of the early Carnegie winners. B.B.'s *Little Grey Men* literalises the notion of an enduring heritage embodied in 'traditional'

⁴⁰ Welch, *Knight Crusader*, pp. 18-19.

⁴¹ Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Lantern Bearers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 1.

⁴² Sutcliff, *The Lantern Bearers*, p. 22.

⁴³ Sutcliff, *The Lantern Bearers*, p. 305.

⁴⁴ Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', p. 74.

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rural communities: they have lived on the land since 'long before Julius Caesar landed in Britain'.⁴⁵ As 'the last gnomes in Britain' they represent what Patrick Wright has termed the 'precious but imperilled traces' of an enduring British identity.⁴⁶ In *Pigeon Post*, as Peter Hunt points out, 'those who truly belong to the Lake District (by birth or in spirit) save it by traditional methods (pigeons, firebrooms, water from a well found by dowsing)'.⁴⁷ *A Grass Rope* also presents the importance of traditional knowledge and connection to the land. Its child characters work together to uncover the truth behind a local legend, and by the end of the book they have discovered part of a lost treasure; but the real value of the legend is its role in bringing the children together and creating a sense of community. In a sense, the Carnegie list shares this function: it curates and transmits a shared narrative tradition. Walter de la Mare's *Collected Stories* (1947) and Eleanor Farjeon's *The Little Bookroom* (1955) reveal the degree to which this apparently recuperative tradition was actively engaged in constructing a national heritage: both collections offer 'literary fairy tales' which draw on British traditions and settings.

Valerie Krips identifies the turn towards 'heritage' as central to British identity construction in the post-war era, noting that 'After the countryside itself [...] the country house was to be one of the chief objects of postwar conservation and heritage'.⁴⁸ Changes in land ownership between the wars, and the decline of the social order which had underpinned large country estates, along with postwar taxation regimes, resulted in the decline of 'the country houses that had been historic symbols of power and influence'.⁴⁹ The ambivalent

⁴⁵ *Little Grey Men*, p. 217.

⁴⁶ Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 2.

⁴⁷ Hunt, *Approaching Arthur Ransome*, p. 114

⁴⁸ Valerie Krips, *The Presence of the Past: Memory, Heritage and Culture in Postwar Britain* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000), p. 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

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status of the country house as both an important repository of cultural heritage and a symbol of a now-defunct social order is evident in several Carnegie winners, notably Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1952) and Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958). Both books take place in formerly grand country houses: the vibrant household from which Norton's race of tiny people once 'borrowed' small odds and ends has been reduced to an elderly invalid and two servants, while the large family home in Pearce's book has been divided into 'poky flats' and 'crowded round with newer, smaller houses that beat up to its very confines in a broken sea of bay-windows and gable-ends and pinnacles'.⁵⁰ A symbolic grandfather clock is at the heart of both texts, which are deeply concerned with issues of history, change and the passage of time. In *Tom's Midnight Garden*, the clock striking thirteen signals the beginning of 'time no longer' (the quotation emblazoned on the clock's face): slipping downstairs to investigate, Tom opens the garden door to find himself back in time, before the house was divided up and the garden destroyed. In his own time, Tom (in quarantine for measles) lacks both a garden and a playmate. Stepping back in time, by contrast, he finds both. As he spends long hours in the garden with the lonely Victorian child Hatty, the urban environment of the modern era is contrasted unfavourably with the rural space of Hatty's time: looking out of her window Tom sees 'a lawn, at one end of which a giant beech-tree leaned in thought [...] a lane, another hedge, a meadow, with a great elm in the middle' and decides 'I like your room better [...] and I like your view much better'.⁵¹ Pearce thus conveys a strong sense of nostalgia for a lost era. At the same time the book suggests that it is not, in fact, entirely lost, since Tom is able to access the garden. This text is not simply concerned with passing on history to the child; the child itself becomes a point of origin to history. Ultimately, Tom comes to realise that he has been able to access the garden because the grown-up Hatty – now

⁵⁰ Philippa Pearce, *Tom's Midnight Garden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4.

⁵¹ Pearce, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, p. 146.

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an elderly woman who has returned to live in what remains of her childhood home – has been dreaming of her own childhood:

Yet perhaps Mrs Bartholomew was not solely responsible for the garden's being there, night after night, these last weeks. For she remarked to Tom now that never before this summer had she dreamed of the garden so often, and never before this summer had she been able to remember so vividly what it *felt* like to be the little Hatty – to be longing for someone to play with and for somewhere to play.⁵²

It is Tom's own longing for 'someone to play with and somewhere to play' which has 'activated' Hatty's memories and made them into a shared space.⁵³ This process of sharing memories can, of course, be likened to children's literature itself. Here it is not the land which constitutes an enduring heritage but the experience of childhood, which enables a shared recreation of a lost era.

The Borrowers shares the motif of the grandfather clock as an enduring symbol of an earlier era, but here the time travel is symbolic rather than literal. Norton's family of Borrowers, Pod, Homily and little Arrietty, derive their surname from the grandfather clock under which they live, which has not stopped in living memory. Their home is a historical space, furnished with 'several portraits of Queen Victoria as a girl' (repurposed postage stamps) and a library of 'those miniature volumes which the Victorians loved to print'.⁵⁴ The Clock family are the last vestiges of Victorian country house society: once there was a whole race of little people living off the excess of the house, but 'the Overmantels and the

⁵² Pearce, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, p. 223.

⁵³ Pearce, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, p. 223.

⁵⁴ Mary Norton, *The Borrowers* (London: Puffin, 2003), p. 19; p. 20.

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Harpsichords and the Rain-Barrels and the Linen Presses' have disappeared as the human inhabitants of the house have departed and old traditions such as Afternoon Tea have been abandoned.⁵⁵ It is possible to read this shift in terms of the decline in domestic service in the post-war era: the Borrowers inhabit the 'primarily functional places and spaces in the great country houses, kitchens and servants quarters [...] hidden away behind green baize doors' which Valerie Krips notes became the most-visited parts of the country house as heritage object.⁵⁶ The dependent status of the Borrowers and their practice of borrowing not only surplus items, but also names, culture and even social status from the human society on which they depend, parallels the existence of domestic servants in these spaces. Norton makes this explicit through her depiction of Mrs Driver, the cook, who supplements her position with some borrowing of her own, feeling that a 'drop of Madeira here, a pair of old stockings there' are 'within her rights'.⁵⁷ This link implies that the decline of the country house is potentially catastrophic for the entire household: the Boy's observation that Arrietty Clock will one day be 'the only Borrower left in the world' suggests not simply change, but the possibility of extinction.⁵⁸ Andrew O'Malley consequently sees the book as inherently conservative, arguing that Norton exhibits a 'nostalgic yearning for a world unspoiled by modernity, in which all know and keep their places'.⁵⁹ This reading encapsulates the central conflict of 'prizing the nation' in terms of history and heritage: the 'lovely things' of the past are juxtaposed against a narrative of loss and decline.

As O'Malley points out, 'Laments over [a] lost or vanishing way of life bear a great deal of resemblance to nostalgic recollections of lost childhood, and often the two impulses

⁵⁵ Norton, *The Borrowers*, p. 108.

⁵⁶ Valerie Krips, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Norton, *The Borrowers*, p. 180.

⁵⁸ Norton, *The Borrowers*, p. 111.

⁵⁹ Andrew O'Malley, 'Mary Norton's "Borrowers" Series and the Myth of the Paternalist Past', *Children's Literature* 31 (2003) 71-89, p. 72.

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occupy the same ideological and textual space'.⁶⁰ This makes children's literature an effective venue for a nostalgic and conservative construction of nationhood. To read the Carnegie Medal simply in these terms, however, is to overlook the radical potential of children's literature, and indeed, the nostalgic qualities of *The Borrowers* are disrupted by the presence of the child within the text itself. Whereas Pod and Homily are fearful of change, Arrietty longs for it, complaining of being 'cooped up... day after day... week after week... year after year'.⁶¹ Like many young people in the post-war era, who benefited from the reforms enacted through the 1944 Education Act, Arrietty is more educated than her parents (Homily does not know how to read) and less respectful of traditional boundaries relating to gender and class.⁶² She demands to be taught how to borrow (traditionally a male role) and when she meets the Boy, challenges the assumption that good Borrowers, like good servants, must avoid being seen. The Borrowers' expulsion from the house at the end of the book is traumatic, but from Arrietty's (focalising) perspective it is also a longed-for opportunity.

This sense of change as both inevitable and valuable is crucial to the way children's literature functions as a site of national self-fashioning in this era, for while adults may look back to childhood, children are inevitably propelled out and away from it. This is the underlying theme of *Tom's Midnight Garden*, which despite its nostalgia for the prelapsarian space of the garden, ultimately suggests that it is a space which must be left behind. Tom seeks to remain in the garden forever, but when he understands that his expulsion came about because the adult Hatty was dreaming 'of growing up, and of [her husband] Barty' he accepts it 'without bitterness'.⁶³ Pearce also subtly suggests that both childhood and the past are less

⁶⁰ O'Malley, 'Mary Norton's "Borrowers" Series', p. 75.

⁶¹ Norton, *The Borrowers*, p. 64.

⁶² The 1944 Education Act extended compulsory education and established the tripartite education system, which (albeit controversially) offered more working-class children the opportunity to attend grammar schools.

⁶³ Pearce, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, p. 223; p. 224.

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idyllic than they appear through the filter of Tom's adventures in the garden: Hatty is an orphan dependent on the charity of an aunt who despises her and cousins who bully her. When Tom realises that he has been accessing Hatty's dreams he understands 'why the weather in the garden had always been perfect': only in memory is the past ideal.⁶⁴

Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Lantern Bearers* also problematises the construction of nationhood through an idealised sense of place. Although Aquila's connection with the land is presented as fundamental to his national identity, in choosing to foreground the Roman withdrawal from Britain Sutcliff brings to the surface some of the complexity and contradictions of British national identity. While the novel is focalised through Aquila, who is represented as 'belonging' to Britain in a way the invading Saxons do not, Sutcliff does not allow us to forget that despite his British birth he also represents a colonising force. The civilisation which Aquila and his fellow 'lantern bearers' are preserving against the dark is Aquila's Roman culture, not an indigenous British one, and many of the Celts Aquila encounters in the course of the novel view him as an invader rather than a fellow Briton. His marriage to a Celtic woman – contracted in order to cement allegiances between the various forces allied against the Saxons – is paralleled with his sister's marriage to one of the Saxon invaders who killed their father. Both women initially resist their husbands, but ultimately recognise that through marriage and child-bearing they have relinquished their previous cultural allegiances. The lack of agency these women have over their national identity is problematic, but their narratives also present the possibility that nationhood can be shaped by family ties as well as ties to the land.⁶⁵ Sutcliff reminds the reader that Britain has been

⁶⁴ Philippa Pearce, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, p. 222.

⁶⁵ The gendering of national identity reflects contemporary debates: it was only in 1948, just a decade before the publication of *The Lantern Bearers*, that British women marrying foreign nationals were allowed to retain their British nationality.

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shaped by successive waves of colonisation and immigration, and rejects the notion that Britishness is determined through race, suggesting that the assimilation of difference is not only possible but inevitable. In the context of the mass immigration of the 1950s, this is an inclusive message, but it is also one which destabilises the notion of national identity as fixed and immutable. Aquila's defection has implications for those living in Britain's former colonies: whereas for Ronald Welch, the collapse of Empire activates an instinctive turn towards 'home', Sutcliffe suggests that it might equally prompt a re-evaluation of national loyalties.

The Little Grey Men offers a more straightforward picture of the land as part of an enduring British heritage, but even this text suggests a contested space. The chief threat to the gnomes is not simply the encroachment of human beings into wild spaces, but the gamekeeper who brutally punishes incursions onto the 'private property' of Crow Wood.⁶⁶ The gnomes' contempt for the sign warning that 'trespassers will be prosecuted' would have been met with approval by those involved in the 1931 mass trespass of Kinder Scout in the Peak District: as Hazel Sheeky Bird shows, the discourse surrounding rural spaces in interwar and wartime children's literature was radical rather than conservative, and reflected a shift towards a more egalitarian approach to land ownership and access.⁶⁷ Owen Dudley Edwards suggests that the ruthlessness of the gamekeeper's murder by the gnomes (they cause his shotgun to explode) reflects wartime sensibilities, but it equally hints at the possibility of a violent class struggle.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *The Little Grey Men*, p. 107.

⁶⁷ *The Little Grey Men*, p. 88.

⁶⁸ Edwards, *British Children's Fiction*, p. 252.

Pearson, Lucy, 'Prizing the Nation: Postwar Children's Fiction', in *Postwar: British Literature in Transition*, ed. Gill Plain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Implicit in these narratives, then, lie concepts of progress that parallel and complicate the concern with tradition, and children here represent a force for change rather than a point of access into the past. Significantly, change is often symbolised through the transformative potential of work, and the Carnegie list shows a recurrent concern with this: Ransome's characters, for example, assert that prospecting for gold is 'serious business, with no pretence about it' (a departure from the emphasis on play in earlier Ransome titles).⁶⁹ In the prizes of the postwar period and the 1950s, this transition is increasingly evident, as is the figure of the child as worker. In *The Circus is Coming*, Peter and Santa begin the book in the care of their Aunt Rebecca, who enforces a model of childhood belonging to both a different era and a different class by attempting to reproduce the education enjoyed by the children in the wealthy household where she was lady's maid. When their aunt dies, the children find a new home with their uncle in the circus, where they are forced out of their assumption that children will be 'just fed and looked after and then jobs found for [them] when they're older'.⁷⁰ The expectation in their new community is that everyone will work, and that children can assume agency by working to gain skills in a chosen profession. This is a socially progressive book: the children begin the novel with rather snobbish class assumptions which are gradually abandoned as they are absorbed into the egalitarian, hard-working community of the circus. *The Circus is Coming* is essentially a career novel, as are both Richard Armstrong's *Sea Change* (1948) and Elfrida Vipont Foulds' *The Lark on the Wing* (1951), which in different ways are concerned with the long, slow process of developing skills. The prizing of this sub-genre, which enjoyed a particular prominence in the 1950s, reflects the sense that heritage and tradition alone are insufficient. On the contrary, children become a focus for rebuilding the nation in the wake of change.

⁶⁹ Ransome, *Pigeon Post*, p. 80.

⁷⁰ Noel Streatfeild, *The Circus is Coming* (Harmondsworth: Puffin, 1986), p. 232.

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The establishment of the Carnegie Medal in 1936 can be viewed as an attempt to recapture some of Britain's former glories: the first golden age of children's literature had also been a golden age for Britain's imperial and industrial interests. In claiming cultural capital for children's books, and prizing those narratives which promoted heritage and history, the Medal worked to construct a sense of an enduring national identity. This turn to the past, however, is not simply regressive: it helps to demonstrate that change itself is integral to Britain's national character. The figure of the child – a symbol of both our nostalgia for the past and our potential future – enables the Carnegie medal to celebrate Britain's heritage while promoting its future.