Reading Enid Blyton

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by

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For Roz, with love

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PREFACE

Rubbalong Tales provided my introduction to Enid Blyton. Then I discovered the Famous Five mysteries, after which adult literature took over. Not that Blyton was forgotten. Her books were exciting and so seductively readable. How could I discard a writer who helped to stimulate my interest in literature?

No children's author can have aroused as much controversy as Blyton. By the time of her death in 1968 her critical standing was low, though this failed to dent her popularity. Since then a trickle of academics and commentators including David Rudd, David Buckingham, Peter Cash and Peter Hunt have defended her against detractors, while she has become a subject of theses around the world, which indicates her wide appeal.[1] Building on the work that has already been done in rehabilitating her, my aim is to look at the cultural climate in which she worked. Focusing on a sample of her books, my objective is to consider whether Blyton was a provocateur or a reactionary. What I have avoided is examining her personal circumstances, which can prove a distraction. Whether or not Blyton was a good mother is incidental to the quality and popularity of her writing. Inevitably her language appears dated, but I have retained terms such as "gipsies" in *Five Fall into Adventure* and idiosyncratic spellings including "granpa" in *The Treasure Seekers*. The date beside a title is the date of first publication.

I am grateful to librarians at Exeter, Leeds, Leeds Beckett, Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores universities for their co-operation. My thanks go to colleagues who have commented on drafts of this work including Jennifer Davies, Rosalind Ellis and Kevin Hayes. Eric Fenwick and Veronica Montgomery loaned me books I might otherwise have overlooked. A massive thanks to the staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their support.

CHAPTER ONE

ENID BLYTON AND BRITISH LITERATURE

For many children growing up in Britain during the 1940s and 1950s, Enid Blyton provided their introduction to literature and judging by her popularity they liked what they read. With her output of over 700 books there was no lack of choice.[1] She became the world's fourth most translated author over the period 1979 to 2019 according to UNESCO, outranked only by Agatha Christie, Jules Verne and Shakespeare.[2] Nielsen Bookscan lists her as the tenth best-selling author by value of copies sold in the UK over the period 2000 to 2009, while the Famous Five series topped a 2004 British survey of a thousand adults with an age range of 25 to 54, who were asked to name their favourite children's book; the Secret Seven series came fourth.[3] The Costa Book Award poll of 2008 named Blyton as Britain's best-loved author.[4] On the basis of Public Lending Right data she was among the top twenty authors whose work was borrowed from British public libraries during the year 2015/16.[5] To add to these statistics, Blyton's books regularly find their way into charity shops, so an unknown number circulate by this route, swelling her readership, while adults retain copies from childhood, passing them on to their children. This catalogue of popularity is not uniform. In the BBC's Big Read of 2003, a poll for the country's hundred best-loved novels, Blyton was represented by one book, *The Magic Faraway Tree,* ranked in sixty-sixth place, while another title from the same series, *The Enchanted Wood,* entered the Book Trust's 2015 list of the hundred best books for children.[6] These results suggest a continuing interest confined to the fantasy genre.

What the crude figures cannot reveal is who displays such affection for Blyton. An attempt to modernise the Famous Five stories in 2010 was abandoned, which suggests an element of nostalgia with adults buying the books for their children as a reminder of their own childhood.[7] Whatever the reason, since Blyton's death in 1968 the plethora of new editions shows that children have continued to derive pleasure from what now appear as dated stories. A roster of later writers including Judy Blume, Philip Pullman, J.K. Rowling, Francesca Simon and Jacqueline Wilson have produced works for children, which makes Blyton's continued

popularity remarkable. Sometimes a writer's reputation declines after death only for a reappraisal to take place at a later date. This has not yet happened in Blyton's case. Her low literary status means that her place in the canon of children's literature continues to remain uncertain despite a flurry of academic interest. She has the misfortune to be remembered for the quantity of her work rather than its quality. Somebody who encouraged so many children to read for pleasure deserves better.

The Famous Five books are among the most popular of Blyton's works. *Five on a Treasure Island* was published in 1942, to be followed by another twenty full-length novels and eight short stories, the final full-length adventure *Five Are Together Again* being published in 1963. The books were written alongside other works for older children including fifteen Find-Outers mysteries (1943–61), eight Adventure titles (1944–55), six Family titles (1945–51), six Barney mysteries (1949–59), fifteen Secret Seven books (1949–63) and six each of the St Clare's stories (1941–45) and Malory Towers stories (1946–51). Not surprisingly there is some overlap with Bets in the Find-Outers having similarities to Anne in the Famous Five and Lucy-Ann in the Adventurers. There were additional ways of attracting readers. The first two books of the Secret series initially appeared in Blyton's magazine *Sunny Stories* (1937–53), itself a successor to *Sunny Stories for Little Folks* (1926–36). The Family series was serialised in *Playways* (*c*.1943–56), while four of the Famous Five books were serialised in *Enid Blyton's Magazine*, which was published from 1953 to 1959 and circulated in schools at a time when primary schools did not have libraries as a matter of course. Famous Five and Secret Seven stories appeared regularly in *Princess* (1960–67), implying a female readership. The Famous Five Club operated from the 1950s to the 1970s and was another means of generating and maintaining enthusiasm for the series.[8]

Blyton might be a publishing phenomenon, but her work does not exist in isolation. Children's literature burgeoned during the nineteenth century as a response to a growing middle class, cheap printing and increased literacy.[9] Captain Marryat's *Children of the New Forest* (1847) followed the exploits of four siblings, two girls and two boys, which was to become a favourite combination for Blyton. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) highlighted and then subverted the etiquette of eating.[10] It is not always clear whether the Famous Five emulate their Victorian upper-middle-class forebears in eating separately from adults (as Blyton's daughter Gillian did until the age of 10), but they challenge orthodoxy with their eclectic choice of food.[11] Beatrix Potter began her career as an illustrator, using her own drawings for *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902).

She was involved in merchandising her work, registering a Peter Rabbit doll and inventing a Peter Rabbit board game.[12] It was an approach that Blyton emulated and like Potter she used animals as characters in her work, dropping in and out of their viewpoint, Edith Nesbit provided another role model, writing about siblings who largely spent their time apart from adults. Arthur Ransome did the same, but from a realist tradition, the first of the *Swallows and Amazons* adventures being published in 1931. Echoes of his work can be found in the Secret series and in the Famous Five's adventures, where there is the same emphasis on location, action and children being encouraged to fend for themselves.

The boarding school made sporadic appearances in books from the late eighteenth century, often as part of a broader scenario as in Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838/39) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). A focus on the school was apparent in Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), an approach adopted by Talbot Baines Read, whose most popular title was *The Fifth Form at St Dominic's* (1887). Charles Hamilton hid behind at least twenty-five pen names including Frank Richards, which he used for the Billy Bunter stories.[13] Anthony Buckeridge's Jennings series of twenty-four books set in a boys' preparatory school ran from 1950 to 1994. As an illustration of their popularity, the third book, *Jennings Little Hut* (1951), appeared in a new edition in 1954, which was reprinted in 1955 and 1956.

Girls' education was being promoted from the late nineteenth century, with girls' boarding schools being established to meet the needs of parents who were working across the empire. One consequence was a sub-genre of girls' boarding school books spearheaded by L.T. Meade, who with co-authors wrote some 300 works in different genres in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. By the time of Angela Brazil, who wrote forty-nine school stories between 1906 and 1946, the moralistic element had been replaced by an emphasis on individuals, who were of interest to readers rather than being good role models. A contemporary of Blyton was Eleanor Brent-Dyer, who wrote the Chalet School series between 1925 and 1970, comprising some sixty books set in a girls' boarding school. Blyton was progressive in setting the Naughtiest Girl series in a radical co-educational school, though only three books were produced.

The popularity of the boarding school story is a paradox of children's literature given that most children prefer holidays to being at school and few go to boarding schools. The Famous Five books may be seen as an offshoot of the boarding school story, given that the four children attend boarding schools. The girls' school is unusual in allowing pupils to have pets, which means that George keeps her dog Timmy with her. As in

Ransome's books it is made clear that the adventures take place during the holidays. Schooling provides the framework for *Five Go Adventuring Again* (1943), in which a tutor comes to Kirrin Cottage to give the children extra coaching during the Christmas holidays. *Five on a Hike Together* (1951) takes place during the half-term holiday, the children wearing their school blazers in illustrations for the first edition.[14] The demands of education are inescapable and as a former teacher, Blyton would have eschewed anything else.

Another strand of children's fiction was the adult adventure story promoted in the nineteenth century by authors such as G.A. Henty, whose 100 plus titles between 1867 and 1906 were set across a range of locations and periods. In the same vein was the work of Percy F. Westerman, who specialised in naval and military adventures and produced 178 titles between 1908 and 1959. Captain W.E. Johns wrote 198 books about the pilot Biggles between 1932 and 1999. Adventure stories were gendered, with females rarely participating in tales of daring do until Blyton came along.

In a break with established forms of children's literature, Richmal Crompton's first collection of William stories, *Just William*, appeared in 1922, going through five impressions in its first year. The forty-first and final book was published in 1970. Though living in an upper-middle-class world of maids and tennis clubs, William Brown goes to the local school and does his best to overturn conventions and disrupt the smooth running of the household. Like Blyton, Crompton was a teacher and the two women were contemporaries. The difference is that while Blyton appears to support the status quo, Crompton gives every impression of trying to subvert it.

The impressive outputs of these writers demonstrate a sustained enthusiasm among youthful audiences for following the exploits of interesting characters through a series of books. For avid readers who could not afford books, or who came from households where books were seldom read, a range of text-based weeklies were published including *The Magnet* (1904–47), *Boys' Friend Library* (1906–40), *The Wizard* (1922–63), *The Rover* (1922–73) and *The Hotspur* (1933–59). Though not aimed specifically at children, the *Sexton Blake Library* ran from 1915 to 1968. The longevity of these titles suggests a faithful readership continuing over at least two generations.

Blyton satisfied several audiences, which gave her a wide readership. Younger children had Noddy and Mary Mouse stories. They could graduate to the Family series and the Magic Faraway Tree titles, with books of suspense and excitement such as the Famous Five novels to

follow. There was also the option of boarding school stories. The limitation in Blyton's range was that unlike Philippa Pearce or Philip Pullman, she failed to appeal to adults, who might have been deterred by her reputation.

Richmal Crompton's William never aged, but evolved with changing times, doing his bit during the war and going on to become involved with television and pop singers. The Famous Five showed signs of growing up, albeit more slowly than mere mortals and almost as an afterthought. They inhabited a time warp in another sense: the final story *Five Are Together Again* dating from 1963 could have been written in the 1940s with its tropes of the camping holiday, the absent-minded scientist, the circus and the denouement on Kirrin Island. The familiar formula is comforting and a case can be made for claiming that Blyton's style relies on conjuring a recognisable and stable sense of period. Her work is of its time in its concerns and content, even if her sense of the present is uncertain. A second recurring element is Blyton's response to the countryside. This is at the heart of the Famous Five series, where the urban world scarcely merits a mention. Elsewhere the distinction between towns and villages is often vague, the communities being small enough for people to know each other. The third element is Blyton's sense of childhood, her work being notable for having children as protagonists with adults being relegated to the background. Fourth is the vexed matter of class. Many of Blyton's characters inhabit an upper-middle-class world, where a cook is obligatory and a gong sounds for dinner. Fifth is her sense of fantasy, which is apparent in her anthropomorphic treatment of animals and the improbability of the children's adventures. These five themes are explored in the next chapter. Subsequent chapters examine a sample of Blyton's work in more detail. The concluding chapter considers the vicissitudes of her reputation and returns to the question of whether she was as conservative a writer as she is commonly perceived.

CHAPTER TWO

SENSES OF ENID

A Sense of Period

That failed attempt to update the Famous Five series noted in the first chapter emphasises the importance of period in Blyton's stories. In repackaging the Malory Towers books for a new generation, Hachette showed commercial acumen in retaining a steam train on the cover.[1] The fact that texts have been revised repeatedly attests to Blyton's low status. Nobody would consider tinkering with a work by Henry James or E.M. Forster, but Blyton was a children's writer and fair game for anybody prizing relevance over fidelity to the writer's intentions.

The period the stories embody is worth trying to define further. Although most books were written over two decades, the world they depict scarcely changes. It is a childhood recognisable to readers in the 1950s, the ubiquity of cars and telephones placing it later than E. Nesbit's stories and Blyton's childhood. Foreign tourists are absent in the Famous Five books, except on the eponymous Finniston Farm in the penultimate story (1960). By comparison the Adventure series appearing in the late 1940s feels modern with its foreign travel and the routine use of aircraft.

Illustrations capture the period in a way that text cannot do and as an astute businesswoman, Blyton must have approved the work of her illustrators. Eileen Soper provided images of the Famous Five for a generation of readers. Her illustration for the original dust jacket of *Five Get into Trouble* (1949) shows a 1930s car with a running board. The government's emphasis on building cars for the export market during the austerity years meant that prewar cars remained a common sight on British roads. The image would not have seemed dated in 1949.

Caravans feature regularly in the series and present greater challenges in establishing the period. In *Five Go Off in a Caravan* (1946) the circus folk travel in horse-drawn caravans, though this was already an anomaly. Soper shows an elephant pulling the leading caravan, which was fanciful given the animal's speed. The Famous Five's parents let their offspring go travelling in two horse-drawn caravans, though the illustrations show

modern caravans that would not have shafts for horses and which arrive at the children's home towed by cars. Soper is accommodating Blyton's fanciful notion of how a caravan should look. Illustrations for the first edition of *The Caravan Family* (1945) by William Fyffe show traditional Romany caravans and later editions adhered to this: the story involves buying two horses to draw the caravans, which limits updating. Blyton was not alone in her nostalgia: in a travelling circus seen at the end of the film *Charley Moon* (1955), a young Jane Asher holds the reins of a horse pulling a traditional Romany caravan. She heads a procession of motor vehicles hauling the impedimenta of the circus. Blyton predates Federico Fellini in her fascination with the circus and like Fellini she may have seen it as an escape from the limitations of everyday life or as a means of introducing her readers to an exotic lifestyle.[2] The traditional image of the Romany caravan was lodged in the popular imagination as firmly as the myth of the Victorian music hall, though the music hall strike of 1907 exposed the poor working conditions behind the tawdry glamour of that world. Blyton elides travellers, circus performers and fairground workers. Each group has a lifestyle based on travel, but each has its own traditions.

Soper's choice of clothing for the children remains conventional with little distinction between formal and informal dress, which was characteristic of the period. In *Five Go Adventuring Again* (1946) the four children wear belted school raincoats, which were likely to be their only coats. The boys sport school caps, which were common at the time. George the rebel is distinguished by her roll-neck jumper. An exception to this dress code is *Five Go to Mystery Moor* (1954), in which jodhpurs are de rigueur. In *Five Go Down to the Sea* (1953) clothing is less formal, the boys wearing shorts, though Anne still wears a dress. The children show signs of maturing, though the process is inconsistent. Julian never graduates to long trousers except possibly in the final book, *Five Are Together Again* (1963), where he appears behind his companions. He might be feeling self-conscious. Blyton makes passing references to the children growing up, but there is limited scope for this in a series written over twenty years. Victor Watson distinguishes between progressive series, in which children are allowed to mature and successive series, in which the characters show few signs of change.[3] A successive series such as the Famous Five can continue indefinitely; progressive series such as those set in schools are inherently self-limited, if one character is followed. Betty Maxey produced new illustrations for the Famous Five books when the Brockhampton Press published paperback editions in the 1960s. She changed the physical appearance of the children as well as modernising the hairstyles and clothing (Anne wears jeans). This creates anomalies with other aspects of

the stories such as the dated language and the choice of food. The Secret Seven books had three illustrators for the first editions, George Brook, Bruno Kay and Burgess Sharrocks, but this was not the cause of inconsistencies in whether or not the children wear school uniforms.[4] Individual children are not differentiated so clearly as in the Famous Five books either in the text or the illustrations. From the beginning of the Find-Outers series the older boys wear long trousers and their school uniforms of blazer, cap and belted raincoat. This is consistent across the work of the series' four illustrators. Stuart Tresilian had the Adventure series to himself, his drawings being more detailed than those found elsewhere. The boys wear shorts, though the girls look older than they appear in the narrative. The result can be disconcerting: the childlike Lucy-Ann resembles Anne from the Famous Five in not wanting adventures, but she appears as an adolescent in some drawings.[5] In Tresilian's defence the children's age is left vague. Blyton employed different illustrators for each series. The reason is not clear, though different genres, the sheer number of books she produced over a long period and changes of publisher probably contributed.

A period can be defined by its artefacts, but also by its values and ethos. David Rudd sees Blyton as mirroring the values of the time. In the Famous Five series he detects the wartime need for secrecy in the repeated criticisms of Anne's loose tongue, particularly in *Five Go Adventuring Again* (1943). This was succeeded by a concern with traitors during the cold war, which is apparent in *Five Have a Wonderful Time* (1952). Increasing American influence is critiqued in *Five on Finniston Farm* (1960), where the American seeks to buy anything old and take it back to the States. The impoverished farming family is in no position to object.[6] This contrasts with *Five Have Plenty of Fun* (1955), in which to prevent the daughter of an American scientist being kidnapped, she is disguised as a boy and hidden among the other children in Kirrin Cottage. The Anglo-American alliance is cemented. Because Berta is younger than the others and plays with dolls, Anne feels closest to her, though the others rally to her defence when the American's enemies attempt to kidnap her, but take George by mistake. This differs from the attitude found in *Five on Finniston Farm* five years later. Public opinion did not shift significantly in the interim, but residual anti-American sentiments survived from the war, so not too much should be made of the contradictory attitudes.[7] An attempt to remain relevant is noticeable in later Famous Five stories such as *Five Go to Billycock Hill* (1957) with its airfield for testing RAF jet fighters. This hints at the British response to the cold war, notwithstanding the familiar Blyton plot device of a prisoner being held in a cave complex.

There is often a sense that life has changed since the early books with their search for hidden treasure, though this trope recurs in *Five on Finniston Farm*, confounding easy generalisations.

Continuing the theme of relevance, Rudd makes a case for seeing the Noddy series as celebrating the values of consumerism, property and hard work, though it might be argued that the intended readers were unlikely to appreciate this.[8] By way of supporting Rudd's viewpoint, the drawings of Noddy's car by Harmsen van der Beek show a bulbous, brightly-painted vehicle that was of its time. For older children the pony and trap that collects the children from Kirrin railway station in the Famous Five series would not be seen as anomalous in a rural setting at a time when petrol rationing limited car use. Consciously or not, Blyton may have revealed the preoccupations of the period, but her primary concern was to create stories that were relevant and attractive to readers.

Several series originated in the early 1940s, but are set in more peaceful times. With the exception of *The Adventurous Four* (1941) the Second World War never intrudes into Blyton's world, which helps to create a sense of timelessness. Nor did postwar austerity spoil those feasts, which must have been an added attraction for children who could envy their fictional friends in the days of food rationing.[9] Though Blyton knew her market and attempted to keep up with the expectations of readers, she was born at the end of the Victorian era and it is not surprising that her work contains echoes of the past. Nostalgia involves looking to an idealised past, from which Blyton sometimes had trouble escaping. For David Lowenthal, romantics shelter from devastating change in a remembered or invented past, or as Morris Holbrook and Robert Schindler put it more portentously, "Many agree…that this impulse to regain Paradise—to achieve a reconciliation with Lost Innocence and a reunification with the Prelapsarian Beauty of the World—is the essence of romanticism."[10] Blyton is not usually regarded as a romantic—romance and passion are absent from her work—but she was inheritor of the romantic tradition. Children rely on instincts more than reason and those depicted in Blyton's books are no different. In this invented past, holidays are not spoilt by rain, violence can be contained, there are no murders, firearms are rarely encountered and there is always a happy ending. Constantine Sedikides et al. see nostalgia as an agent for mediating between our past and present selves: "Nostalgia may facilitate use of positive perceptions about the past to bolster a sense of continuity and meaning in one's life."[11] Irrespective of Blyton's personal situation, in the 1940s there was a need to offer children continuity and meaning, which she did with aplomb. The romantic discourse required that they should be

protected from death and this is absent from her books.[12] There may be nostalgia not only on Blyton's part, but on the part of adults who remember her work from their childhood and attempt to pass on their enthusiasm to their children. Age increases the tendency to look back, but nostalgia alone does not account for the books' popularity half a century after Blyton's death.[13] They must retain their interest as stories.

For Ronald Paul, "In the period following the Second World War, when Britain's imperial status was more and more being questioned by liberation movements abroad and the Labour movement at home, there was a growing lack of consensus about what sort of moral message books for children should contain."[14] As in earlier children's literature there is moral certainty in Blyton's work compared with that of her compatriot Richmal Crompton. This may not be apparent immediately given that no historical events are mentioned and there is no imperial agenda as in the case of W.E. Johns, but Blyton's writing was of its time in giving clarity to what was right and wrong. This was an attitude many adults accepted and which formed a cornerstone of the golden age of crime fiction in the work of Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, et al., where the aim was to discover who did it, the social structure being taken for granted. The ambiguous villain is hard to find in Blyton's writing. When moral certainty came to be perceived as dated, so did her books. Morality is not a pressing issue in her fantasy works, which may be why *The Enchanted Wood* found a place in the Book Trust's 2015 recommended reading list for children as noted in the previous chapter. It does not date.

Lowenthal goes further in suggesting that a comfortable past is the big lie of British right-wing nostalgia.[15] The 1950s seems comfortable enough and distant enough to be the subject of nostalgia today, providing the period is not examined too closely. Though it was free of the economic and social unrest of the 1930s, the cold war was at its height and political unrest took place overseas as the empire imploded.[16] Blyton was at the height of her popularity in the 1940s and 1950s, so her golden age was located earlier in the century. Her work may not be political, but the social structure remains unquestioned even in the Barney mysteries, which offer the opportunity to explore social inequality. The Secret Seven, the Find-Outers and the children in the Adventure series build cosy relationships with the police. In this respect Blyton might be described as conservative, though other interpretations are possible. One is the child-centred approach advocated by Rudd, which has its own logic. In William Brown's anarchic world in the Richmal Crompton stories, author and reader are free to think as a child.[17] William is a far cry from Blyton's conformist children, though Crompton has attracted similar criticisms to

Blyton for her dated attitudes. Even for Crompton the status quo is reinstated at the end of each story, leading to her being considered conservative.[18]

World wars were defining events of the twentieth century, engendering a sense that Blyton's notion of a prelapsarian world was beyond reach, whether this be the Edwardian world of her childhood, or her comfortable, upper-middle-class, Home Counties existence of the 1930s. Such thoughts might not have been in the forefront of her mind, but it is hard to deny that she preferred looking back to halcyon days in preference to confronting contemporary problems from unemployment to war. This gives piquancy to her work and has to be accepted if her writing is to be appreciated. Though *The Ship of Adventure* (1950) is of its time in the use of aircraft, even here she drew on memories of a cruise she made with her then husband two decades earlier.

A Sense of Place

That warm blanket of the past where many of Blyton's stories are located carries with it a sense of a place. As if seen on an old postcard, the reader can imbibe the scene and embellish it in the imagination, so that the location becomes integral to the reading experience. The Famous Five's adventures occur away from towns and cities. The exception is *Five Go to Smuggler's Top* (1945) and even here the town is small enough to be built on a hill and surrounded by a wall as well as being cut off from the mainland by a marsh. The liminal world where land meets sea provides a location for many Famous Five stories, the children never venturing further from the coast than a rowing boat takes them. The rural coastline is replete with villages, smugglers and lighthouses. Away from the coast the five roam freely over moorland and commons. It is a countryside redolent of earlier days with small farms worked by horses. This settled world was threatened during the Second World War, when the U-boat blockade meant that food imports were restricted and farmland was used more intensively. This is nowhere apparent in Blyton's work. Farming provides a backdrop with little sense of seasonal activities, exceptions being the Farm series, the Family series and *Five on Finniston Farm*. Barns are important in the Famous Five's adventures, being places where secret tunnels lead, villains meet to hatch plans and boys sleep in the hay from choice rather than necessity. They make sure the girls have proper beds, which never goes down well with George.

The vision of an idyllic countryside was neither new nor unique to Blyton.[19] Raymond Williams detects it in the writings of Virgil, who

looked back to the *Works and Days* of Hesiod some six centuries earlier.[20] This golden age was a time of supposed harmony with nature, the myth of the pastoral recurring in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and kept alive over the centuries in translations of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. It found wider currency in England with Shakespeare's poem *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and John Blow's opera (*c*.1683).[21] Williams detects in Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph Replies to the Shepherd" (1600) hints of a changing perspective: "Not the nymphs and shepherds of neo-pastoral May, in their courtly love in the parks and gardens; but the quiet, the innocence, the simple plenty of the countryside: the metaphorical but also the actual retreat."[22] The focus was shifting from a world distant in time and place to the English countryside. Its idealisation was apparent in Ben Jonson's "The Forest III: to Sir Robert Wroth" (*c*.1612) and "To Penshurst" (1616), expressing "In the form of a compliment to a house or its owner, [and] certain social and moral values."[23] The romantic movement of the eighteenth century gloried in the seemingly endless vistas achieved by the wholesale clearance of fields and even the moving of villages as at Milton Abbas in Dorset. One figure who survived change was the shepherd, who inhabited the pastoral tradition from Virgil's time and can be found in Blyton's work, where he is a repository for the legends and stories of past generations. He serves to confirm a sense of remoteness, living and working in uplands where no other form of farming is viable.

With increasing industrialisation, Raleigh's rural landscape acquired new significance as a symbol of what was being lost. Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village" (1770) captured the changing mood with John Clare echoing his sentiments in "The Mores" and "The Fallen Elm." Both men took an unsentimental view of what was happening; other poets including Wordsworth and Coleridge eulogised the appeal of nature and the English countryside in particular. Thomas Gainsborough, John Crome and John Constable popularised landscape painting. A caution is that their stylised images give no hint of the social unrest sweeping the countryside.

The move to towns and cities accelerated during the nineteenth century, as new technologies such as canning, refrigeration and steam ships facilitated food imports from North America and Australasia. This decreased the reliance on British farmland, releasing more land for other uses. Allied to these changes were poor European harvests and agricultural depressions in the 1820s and 1830s. In the prolonged depression of the 1880s, English farms reverted to scrubland and prices declined, making farmland attractive to developers.[24] One consequence was to reinforce nostalgia for the rural life that was being abandoned, This is apparent in the work of painters including Samuel Palmer, T. Sidney Cooper and

Henry John Boddington as well as critics of industrialisation such as John Ruskin and William Morris, who looked back to a golden age. The English countryside was becoming mythologised as much as the classical world of nymphs and shepherds.

The final years of the nineteenth century, when Blyton was born, crystallised several elements of this yearning for a rural past. Thomas Hardy began writing his Wessex novels. A.E. Housman was a classical scholar, his collection of poems *A Shropshire Lad* with illustrations by William Hyde being published in 1896, though there was a time lag before it became popularised with settings by Arthur Somervell (1904), Ralph Vaughan Williams (1909) and George Butterworth (1911/12).[25] In 1898 the Folk Song Society was founded, which sought to preserve the music of the countryside. Kenneth Grahame's rural idyll *Wind in the Willows* was published in 1908, Mr Toad's love of cars suggesting how people who looked towards the future were seen. The English Folk Dance Society was founded in 1911. Frank Trentmann emphasises its importance as a facet of the anti-modernity movement, particularly in the 1920s, when there was a revival of pastoralism. There were divergences within the movement with the place of women being a point of contention. Leading light Rolf Gardiner felt that to introduce women into Morris dancing was to "Pervert the spirit of 'a genuine dance of men, sworn to manhood, fiery ecstasy, ale, magic and fertility'"[26] A sense of distinct gender roles suffuses Blyton's fiction. The spirit of pastoralism was felt in Weimar Germany, where in 1929 Carl Heinrich Becker the Prussian Kulturminister appointed Georg Groetsch as director of the Musikheim in Frankfurt to research historical performance practice in music. The mission of these two educators went beyond this narrow brief to "Usher in a cultural revival by popularising ideas of wholeness and spiritual unity through a new curriculum for elementary school teachers." Gardiner was friends with Becker and Groetsch and devoted his energies to an English crusade promoting the Musikheim ideals.[27] Given Blyton's Froebel-inspired training and interests in music and pedagogy, it would be intriguing to know if she had contacts with the movement, which was soon to be hijacked by a darker form of nationalism.

The First World War made evoking the countryside seem a way of clinging to something unchanging, when normality appeared lost for ever. With the coming of peace, there is evidence across the arts for the revival of pastoralism that Trentmann notes. One sign was a plethora of Housman settings.[28] Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending* was premiered in 1920, the score being prefaced by lines from George Meredith's poem of 1881. The composer's Pastoral Symphony followed in 1925. Despite its mood,

this work was shaped by his experiences in the Royal Army Medical Corps on the Somme and in Salonika. A.A. Milne fought on the Somme and a decade later published his two Pooh books, while war artist Paul Nash sought refuge in painting rural scenes.

Like William Morris, George Sturt (1863–1927) turned his back on industrialisation, combining writing with practical work, which in his case meant being a wheelwright. In Malcolm Chase's view, Sturt influenced a generation of commentators on the English countryside including H.J. Massingham (1888–1952) and H.V. Morton (1892–1979).[29] Politics separated the two men: Morton had Nazi sympathies, while Massingham displayed a belated interest in socialism.[30] What they had in common was seeing the rural world they cherished being threatened by mechanisation and suburbia. Towns and cities sprawled into the surrounding countryside, which stimulated the phenomenon of commuting, notably around London.

Massingham divided English history into good and bad periods, the pagan Palaeolithic and the Christian medieval periods being good. In common with Morris, Pugin and Sturt, he regarded craftsmanship as the foundation of civilisation in the past. The Christian medieval period degenerated in the modern age, the use of tractors being symptomatic of the decline. This did not constitute a plea for rewilding, Massingham's ideal being a farmed countryside. As a devout Christian, his world was grounded in tradition—a place where divine order held sway and progress was a false philosophy. This conservative approach distinguished him from a writer of the previous generation, Richard Jefferies, who viewed nature as without shape or purpose and whose writings took a mystical turn.[31] Massingham's philosophy precluded social change and put women in a purely nurturing role, which set him in opposition to professional women such as Blyton. This perspective was based on the countryside in the south of England. His views might have been different had he paid more attention to the north, but the same could be said for Blyton.

Nostalgia can be a blanket term for looking back to a golden age, but like the end of the rainbow, that age is always just out of sight. Nor is there agreement on what constitutes a golden age, except that it is something modern society has lost. This is apparent across the centuries and across urbanised societies. It is notable in the arts, but was complicated in the twentieth century by the opposing ideologies of totalitarianism and communism along with the gathering pace of technology. These changed how the rural world was perceived (as an economic unit rather than the romantic's tabula rasa), how it looked (much land was drained and went under the plough in Britain during the Second World War) and its ownership (paying for wars meant increased death duties on landowners,

while the War Office commandeered tracts of land for camps, training areas and airfields). One paradox is that figures extolling the simple life came from the affluent middle class and were reliant on the benefits of modern technology. In the nineteenth century, Morris produced goods by traditional methods for clients whose wealth was derived from the new society. In the twentieth century Vaughan Williams conducted recordings of his own music, Morton's *In Search of England* (1927) was the record of a car journey, while Massingham as much as Blyton relied on journalism and the publishing industry to reach a mass audience.

In 1940 the planner Thomas Sharp argued that suburbia was an escape from reality, being individualistic and selfish.[32] The same could be said of the rural idyll a century earlier. Morris would have appreciated the suburbanite's striving for individualism, the irony being that the spread of suburbia led to conformity. Over four million houses were built between the wars, comprising a third of Britain's housing stock.[33] Though most were speculative, the total included local authority estates. These were often modelled on the village, with an open space akin to the village green being surrounded by houses, while curving roads and culs-de-sac mimicked country lanes. Terraced housing in cottage style might have a roughcast finish and emphasise horizontal elements with long windows lacking in height and situated close to the eaves.[34] Many of Blyton's readers would have lived in interwar upper-working-class and middle-class suburbs. This is not evident from the books' subject matter, in which farms and rural cottages predominate. The suburbs represented an escape to the concept of the Tudor cottage expressed in gables and faux half-timbering (stockbroker Tudor), which were notable in planned communities from the turn of the century, Letchworth and Port Sunlight having a rustic appearance when compared to the classical lines of Saltaire. As Paul Oliver puts it, "What the new Dunroaminer sought was an imagery that spoke of home, of family, of stability and of individualism."[35] The increasing affordability of the motor car meant that the middle classes could reach the countryside more easily, prompting the publication of Batsford's *The Face of England* series and the *Shell County Guides*, the first examples of the latter coming from such upholders of Englishness as John Betjeman, John Piper and Paul Nash, while Massingham contributed to the Batsford series.[36] There was another irony as arterial roads and increasing traffic threatened the very countryside that people savoured. Urban dwellers without cars could enjoy the same weekend pleasures by hiking and cycling, though not without battling owners on land enclosed in previous eras, the most notable act of mass trespass being on Kinder Scout in 1932.[37] The Second World War gave the

countryside a new significance in propaganda terms as the world we are fighting for—a belief promoted in a range of films and in songs such as "There'll Always Be an England."[38] The notion was sanctified in postwar days with green belt and National Parks legislation.

Blyton's view of rural life was idealised. Like Massingham she failed to acknowledge change. While Betjeman came to enthuse about the suburbs, Blyton ignored them, yet hers is a suburban dweller's view of the countryside. Her homes in Bourne End and Beaconsfield offered quasi-rural retreats conveniently situated for access to London. It is a world far removed from the endless moors the Famous Five encounter, where every village has a shop to provide them with provisions and snacks. Farms offer accommodation and gargantuan meals as a matter of course. *Five on a Hike Together* is a rare case where hospitality is not offered automatically, the problem being that Dick and Anne have gone to the wrong address. Despite this, they are allowed to stay the night with Dick being content to sleep in a barn.

Whether Julian, Dick and Anne are suburbanites is never made clear. It hardly matters as they spend most of their time at school or having adventures. The same could be said for the Adventurers. The Secret Seven live in a location akin to Blyton's Beaconsfield, their adventures taking place within the town and in the adjoining countryside. The Find-Outers live in a village, though it is large enough to have a theatre in *The Mystery of the Pantomime Cat*.

The countryside can be a hostile place, the common near to Kirrin Cottage being no exception as *Five Go Adventuring Again* demonstrates. The weather is better when George camps there in *Five on a Secret Trail*, in what proves to be the starting point of another adventure. The common is large enough to encompass a farm (Kirrin Farm) in the former story as well as an archaeological site, a pool for the obligatory swim and a derelict cottage in the latter, though when compared with the open country encountered in other stories, the common feels circumscribed. Famous Five adventures could take place in towns, though as the books achieved commercial success, there was no incentive to change the formula.

A Sense of Childhood

Like all writers, Blyton built on the work of her predecessors, *The Secret Island* (1938) bearing more than a passing resemblance to R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857), which was one of her favourite childhood books; Blyton's work in turn influenced William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954).[39] The Victorian era was the age of the child. For

the growing middle classes, rising incomes allowed more money to be lavished on children, while technological progress resulted in a greater range of toys and games becoming available. Compulsory education and cheap printing meant that by the early twentieth century, books aimed at young readers found a ready market, often as school and Sunday school prizes. At the same time there was a decrease in family size, despite improved medical services allowing more babies to survive into childhood. In the twentieth century, baby bulges after the two world wars and a boom in the 1960s did not significantly alter the downward trend in the standardised fertility rate.[40] Along with an increasing number of small families in new housing, slum clearance gathered pace during the 1930s. Crowded homes and large families were inimical to a culture of reading, whereas a housewife with one child could devote time to encouraging the reading habit. New industries were concentrated around London, where much of the population growth took place and incomes were higher, which resulted in increased disposable income to spend on children. In parallel with these changes came children's departments in public libraries. Another development was the paperback, the first Penguin books being published in 1935 and the Puffin imprint for children following in 1938. The lower price of paperbacks helped to boost the market for children's books after the war. Because paperback editions of Blyton's work only appeared in the 1960s, she retained her position as the pre-eminent children's writer in the 1940s and 1950s on the strength of hardback sales, despite some books being serialised in magazines. David Cook notes that cheap editions of the first two books in the Secret series were issued at around half the normal price, but this was unusual.[41]

Several series including the Famous Five and the Secret Seven originated in wartime, when paper was in short supply, meaning that the number of books published was limited by the War Economy Standard, which operated until 1949.[42] Each publisher had a paper quota, so using several publishers enabled Blyton to maximise the number of books printed. This may not have been foremost in her mind, for factors such as royalties probably loomed large in her calculations. Judging by the popularity of her work as evidenced by frequent reprints, there was a demand from children who had little to do on winter evenings during the blackout and austerity years except reading or listening to the radio.

Many of Blyton's stories are notable for the limited contact between children and their parents. In *Five Go Off in a Caravan*, Julian suggests that, "You can always go and see Mother for a week or so, George, when you want to."[43] This reads like a dispensation. The parents of Julian, Dick and Anne remain anonymous figures, though in the same book the trio ask

their mother for permission to go off by themselves for a few days.[44] The Find-Outers and the Secret Seven have fathers who are present, but remain in the background. More contact is with mothers, who are so under-characterised as to be interchangeable. The Adventure series is unusual in that the children's widowed mother Mrs Mannering accepts a marriage proposal from the policeman Bill Smugs in *The Ship of Adventure*, which comes as a surprise to the children, to readers and by all appearances to the happy couple.[45] By definition the girls in the boarding school stories have limited contact with parents. This mirrors what was happening in real life during the war, when fathers served in the armed forces and children were often separated from their mothers by evacuation and the demands of war work. George's parents are unusual in making regular appearances in the Famous Five series. Her father Quentin is more interested in his scientific work than his family and regards the presence of children as a distraction. The situation was the reverse of Blyton's own childhood, when she was closer to her father, mentioning him over a hundred times in her autobiography compared with a single mention of her mother.[46] This should prompt caution in reading Blyton's life through her characters. A more convincing explanation for the sidelining of adults in her work is that she understood what her readers wanted. Rudd suggests that as a Froebel-trained teacher she would approve of children being left to their own devices as much as possible, though the fictional parents' disinterest in their offspring sometimes verges on neglect.[47]

Family bonds across the generations may not be strong in many of Blyton's series, but they are close within the youngest generation. The Famous Five meet at every opportunity. The Adventurers and the Find-Outers each include two pairs of siblings. The Secret Seven are a more disparate group, though Peter and Janet are siblings. Meetings, passwords and badges reinforce group cohesion. While the exploits of the Famous Five other than in *Five Go Adventuring Again* largely take place away from home, the Secret Seven and the Find-Outers confine themselves to domestic puzzles. This allows more interaction with parents, though the children take care to keep their activities to themselves. What all the groups have in common is that they function in a world apart from that of adults. This gives Blyton's work its appeal, but presents a paradox. Blyton's stories rely on groups of children, but they appeared in postwar days as the nuclear family was becoming the norm. Traditional working-class communities were being fragmented by redevelopment and displacement to new towns, while an increasing number of couples of all classes were opting for one child. Families in Blyton's books largely consist of two or three siblings, with single children such as George in the

Famous Five often being mavericks. Blyton could be said to offer solitary children the family they never had.

While Blyton's children enjoy their freedom, they are of their time in their conventionality. This is apparent in their clothing (those school caps, blazers and berets), but more significantly in their attitudes. Though they may disagree with authority, usually in the shape of slow-witted policemen, they try to avoid open confrontation. Frederick Algernon Trotteville in the Find-Outers (known at Fatty from his initials) breaches this principle in his running battle with the village policeman Mr Goon. Usually there is never any doubt about who are the wrongdoers, though as Rudd notes, the Famous Five scarcely reprimand the wild girl Jo when she runs away from her foster-parents.[48] Trespassing is accepted as a matter of course, the children in all the series straying on to other people's property on a regular basis.

An aspect of the period that cannot be overlooked is corporal punishment, which was widely practised particularly in boys' schools. Because these are absent from Blyton's books and there is limited contact with parents, corporal punishment is more threatened than practised. George's father Quentin provides an example. When he is asleep in his study in *Five on a Treasure Island* (1942), Julian wonders whether to retrieve the box his uncle confiscated: "I'll risk it. I bet I'll get an awful spanking if I'm caught, but I can't help that!"[49] The threat is that other people's children can be punished. Even if the deed is never carried out, it becomes a recurring refrain in Blyton's fiction.

A Sense of Class

Something that cannot be missed, particularly in the Famous Five stories, is the children's effortless sense of superiority over the lower orders, who know their place and keep to it. David Rudd takes a nuanced view, accepting that the stories adopt a middle-class perspective, but pointing out that 1990's children know the stories are of their time.[50] Whether previous generations of readers who did not have the benefit of hindsight appreciated Blyton's social distinctions is less clear, but a middle-class bias was normal in children's literature and judging by Blyton's popularity, it was not perceived as a problem. The world of boarding schools, servants and horse-riding was accepted by her devotees. Working-class readers new to the stories after making the transition from comics might have detected class differences without being aware of how they shaped the narrative, though Lord Snooty in the *Beano* should have given them an idea and made class distinctions fun. To heighten the social

difference, Blyton's lower orders are often denoted by their smell or by being dirty. Smell is a sense that appears to evoke nostalgia.[51] It lodged in Blyton's mind. In *Five Run Away Together* (1944) the Famous Five battle the working-class Stick family. George calls the Sticks' dog Stinker, which startles her father, who thinks she is talking about their son Edgar. George grins at his mistake: "Oh, no. Though it wouldn't be a bad name for him, because he hardly ever has a bath, and he's jolly smelly."[52] Class is less apparent in other series, though there are fewer working-class characters. Occasionally the working class are incorporated effortlessly into the middle-class world, notably in the case of Jack in the Secret series.

Blyton wrote from the viewpoint of her own class and by the time she became a successful writer that meant the upper middle class. She can hardly be castigated, for few authors escape their environment. Most came from this class, for they were the ones with time for writing and the contacts to get published. This applied to most of those British authors from the 1920s to the early 1950s who are remembered today including Elizabeth Bowen, Ford Maddox Ford, E.M. Forster, Henry Green, Nancy Mitford, Anthony Powell, Evelyn Waugh and Virginia Woolf. A few ventured into working-class territory including William Somerset Maugham, who drew on his medical training at St Thomas's Hospital for his first novel *Liza of Lambeth* (1897). George Orwell's politics prompted him to explore the working-class world in his non-fiction and in his novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936). Two years later Graham Greene published *Brighton Rock*. These were outsiders looking in. Working-class writers were scarce, but included Walter Allen, Sid Chaplin, D.H. Lawrence and Walter Greenwood. Arguably these authors were absorbed into the upper middle class when they became published, but they could look back to their childhood. Fiction about working-class children was a rarity, exceptions being Erich Kastner's *Emil and the Detectives*, published in English in 1931 and Eve Garnett's *The Family from One End Street* (1937).

Rather than concentrating on obvious manifestations of class, Rudd adopts an oblique approach: "One of the main pleasures of children's books...is that the traditional framework of society is temporarily questioned: patriarchy can be challenged and the Five can upset middle-class tenets, both literally with their tunnelling, and socially, in joining the circus and fair-folk."[53] This radical interpretation finds something subversive in Blyton's literature, which critics may overlook if they are intent on seeking out middle-class bias. David Waywell concurs:

> Blyton's fiction is more anarchic than that. Couched in quite a parochial form of Englishness, the books nevertheless teach us to maintain a