

Percy Westerman Seminar. Portsmouth February 11th 2012.

Slide 1

“Remember we’re British”: Did Percy Westerman Change the Henty Hero?

The quote in the title, taken from the unpublished typescript ‘Delivered by Air’ (1937) gives an initial indication of how the Westerman hero differs from the Henty hero which I hope by the end of this presentation will be clearer. Firstly –

Slide 2

Who is the Henty hero?

In order to answer this question it is necessary to put in some brief background outlining the context out of which the Henty hero emerged.

1850 – 1900

The second half of the nineteenth century is a period I will refer to as ‘Victorian’, since Queen Victoria was on the throne of England at that time. The British Empire was rapidly expanding abroad.

It was a time of great upheaval in every area of life, not least in the area of faith. Beliefs which had hitherto been accepted by the majority of people were shaken by scientific discoveries and theories, leaving a sense of instability and lostness. At the same time, society had changed due to the industrial revolution and the growth of urban living with its consequent poverty and misery. All of this is common knowledge.

With the loss of Christian faith came the rise of human ideal heroes. Thomas Carlyle wrote his On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (1840) and, following Auguste Comte, Frederic Harrison edited and partially authored the Positivist New Calendar of Great Men (1892) giving hagiographical short biographies of ‘great men’ (selected by FH) to encourage readers in their aspirational efforts. This period also saw the rise of Smilesian self-help, the aspirational assumption that everyman could be a success with, as Henty put it ‘hard work and determination’ (Sturdy and Strong preface?). The definition of ‘success’ in this context referred largely to social mobility and material wealth, although moral character development was implicit in the journey towards ‘success’.

Henty, writing ostensibly for aspiring youthful heroes (male and female) between 1861 and 1902 was not a positivist in the Comtean sense but the idea of the aspirational ideal is deeply embedded in his construct of the hero.

Slide 3

Construct of youthful hero

The construct of the youthful hero in the second half of the nineteenth century includes influences from the classical period with its emphases on honour and the public good, through the warrior hero of the medieval period (chivalric code) into the eighteenth and early nineteenth century when

childhood and youth were recognised as something other than a precursor to adulthood. But what was all this upheaval doing to the perception of the hero?

The quick answer is that it was making him into an unattainable but aspirational ideal. You notice I say 'him'. The youthful male was the hero. His female counterpart is another study in herself and equally complex. G. A. Henty had more to say about her than is generally supposed. (Westerman not so much).

Slide 4

Who is the Henty Hero? - Characteristics

GAH and ideal hero - his outlook and continuing influence.

One, typical example of the Henty hero can be found in Frank Hargate, (By Sheer Pluck, 1884) who demonstrates 'manly virtues' not only in terms of physical prowess but also by his truthfulness and unselfishness. He is noted as a cricketer who 'played a steady rather than a brilliant game,' (Henty 10) and his integrity is unquestioned.¹ Frank also demonstrates courage, intelligence, initiative, self-possession, inner-strength, courage to do right against peer pressure, and, a key characteristic of the Henty hero, language ability. You are probably already thinking of instances of his continuing influence. They are not hard to find. Some of the changes are subtle, one major example being the use of his intelligence. The Henty hero is of course, intelligent but later protagonists, found in Westerman and, notably in Anthony Horowitz (Alex Rider) also demonstrate 'high intelligence, adroitness, , sophistication, social adeptness' (Darnell 18), in addition to the problem solving, bravery, courage etc. One recent protagonist, who does not demonstrate these rather more streetwise characteristics, often arising from social class, is Harry Potter. His non-academic, orphaned representation aligns him more closely with the less sophisticated Henty hero.

It is worth mentioning here another, possibly important trait that is entirely absent from the Westerman protagonist and that is the motif of the 'bad boy'. Henty clearly welcomes a sense of mischief and high spirits in his characters, the Scudamore boys in The Young Buglers (1880), for example, take mischief to an extreme bordering on delinquency, whereas Westerman's upright young men do not enter into 'pranks' (Nigel correct me if I am wrong).

Slide 5

Unexpected aspects of the Henty hero?

Why unexpected? Because a stereotypical perception has grown up around the figure of the Henty hero, almost turning him into an adjective in the same way as a stereotypical perception of the Victorians has turned the word Victorian into an adjective. Close reading of Henty unearths evidence against the grain of this stereotypical imperialist construct.

(Quote if needed – 'for most of the 20th century, the word 'Victorian' was associated with negative connotations of hypercritical morality, brutal industrial exploitation and colonial

¹ See for example the episode described in G.A. Henty, By Sheer Pluck (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, n.d.) 54-64. Frank saves the lives of schoolmates when they become cut off by the tide.

oppression'. Paul, Ronald. Imperial Nostalgia: Victorian Values, History and Teenage Fiction in Britain. (Paul 3)

Attitudes of religious tolerance can be found throughout Henty's work, for example Gregory Hilliard in With Kitchener in the Soudan (1903), finds this passage in his father's diary,

'tis strange, the Allah that you worship and the God of the Christians is one and the same.
With Kitchener p 302

The Henty hero acknowledges and admires courage (in any form) in people of races other than English. (e.g. passage in 'A Soldier's Daughter' p 24- Germans, French, Russians, Turks, Sikhs, Punjaubis, Ghoorkhas, Hausas).

Henty demonstrates that it is possible to have a hero who is afraid of gunfire. (Ralph) Bathurst in Rujub the Juggler (1893) finds he is paralysed by fear in this situation although he has courage enough to fight off a tiger with a horse crop.

Intermarriage – e.g. in The Tyger of Mysore (1895), Dick Holland's mother is Indian (this is not an unusual example of Anglo-Indian progeniture. Henty takes the opportunity to put a comment into the conversation between Dick and his mother about the unacceptability of racial prejudice thus

Say nothing about my having been born in India, or that my father was native rajah. Some of these officials – and still more, their wives – are very prejudiced, and consider themselves to be quite different beings to the natives of the country. TM P 21

Slide 6

Who is the Westerman hero?

Brief background as to what is happening 1900 – 1950

1900 – 1950

In the ten short years after Queen Victoria's death, the collective English attitude, towards 'foreigners', that is, those perceived as non-English, had hardened. In part, this change was led by media coverage of the rise of the young Kaiser, Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia, whose unpredictable view of the English, was often pilloried and caricatured in the popular press (Wilson 10-13). Following the publication in 1910 of William Le Queux's futuristic novel The Invasion of 1910, an 'anti-German invasion fantasy' (Wilson 14), the 'foreigner', of any colour and race, became increasingly enmified. 'He', was described in derogatory, stereotypical terms, and the concept of a multi-faceted character became narrowed to specific adjectives attached to different races. [I will give some examples of such descriptions in a brief investigation of the Westerman hero's language, later in this paper.] The historically multi-cultural mix that became the English was conveniently forgotten.

On top of this change in attitude, political instability in mainland Europe and Ireland, domestic urban unrest due to the worsening (if this was possible) of living and working conditions for factory

workers in industrial areas, and the push for changes in the position of women began to realign the strata of society creating fresh fault lines and more destabilization of the previous order (Wilson 58). A. N. Wilson discusses the destructiveness of the first 50 years of the twentieth century (Wilson 80) alongside the growth of nationalism (as opposed to patriotism) and, as Cedric Cullingford notes,

Slide 7

National identity is one of the most public and powerful expressions of group identity in terms of both fear and assertion (Cullingford 4).

Wilson also notes the cultural emptiness of those 50 years (Wilson 88), an observation echoed in overviews of children's literature. Marcus Crouch comments on 'a vast output of characterless conventional writing' (Crouch 39) and includes Westerman in his assessment of children's literature of the interwar years as marked by 'naïve characterisation and a rudimentary style' (Crouch 33). The above brief overview sets the scene and emphasises the difference between the perception of Britain as secure in a powerful position in the Victorian age and the perceived destabilization both at home and abroad before WWI. After WW1 the changes became more rapid and dug deeper into the fabric of society as any follower of Downton Abbey will be aware.

Slide 8

Construct of youthful hero – 1900 to WW2

So how does all this affect a change in the representation of youthful hero - post 1900 and pre WWII?

One of the after effects of WW1 upon the construct of childhood and youth was the loss of innocence associated with youth. (Higonnet 104-226). The spectacle of inhumanity experienced during the war and the rise of Freudian psychology had brought the romantic construct of the child and youth as spiritually aware, full of bright goodness and innocence into question. Although protestant evangelicalism had never subscribed to this concept, the romantic view of the child as innately good persisted and most representations of childhood and youth in literature had not included overtones of loss of innocence.

Slide 9

The Westerman Hero and his outlook

Percy Westerman's first published story appeared in 1911, three years before the outbreak of WW1. In the early publication, the construct of the hero figure in his books written for boys did not appear to change much at all. The Westerman hero showed no indication of this increasingly complex construct of youth. Wilfred Owen's Dulce et decorum est, Anthem for Doomed Youth was not in evidence in his psychological makeup or his awareness of the world around him.

But there were changes; Crouch's comment on the literature of the interwar years sounds harsh but the Westerman hero is a narrow character compared to the Henty hero of the previous century. Westerman's hero shows all the basic characteristics present in the upright Henty hero but the undeviating traits of the stereotypical figure of the young, British, good-looking, courageous, self-

confident, sixteen year old is frozen, in, for example the character of Peter Preston, the main protagonist of Captain Starlight (1st published 1929):

‘he was a fair-complexioned, auburn-haired youth of sixteen years and seven months, of medium build and five feet ten inches in height’ (Westerman *Captain Starlight* 15).

A Scout Patrol Leader, he was leaving the 99th South Croydon Troop to enter the National College of Aeronautics, having already had one adventure as part of the crew on a voyage

‘in an airship whose existence was not only a mystery but whose disappearance still ranked as one of the unsolved problems of the history of flying (Westerman *Captain Starlight* 15).

This much we are told as soon as Peter Preston is introduced very early in the story. His subsequent exploits and coolness in the face of danger never deviate from his early promise. His sixteen year old counterparts in other stories are Peter Preston under a different name. They are ‘typically healthy and athletic schoolboy(s)’ (Westerman *The Riddle of the Air* 9).

Julie Darnell, in her paper on spy fiction for young people, notes ‘the accelerated maturing of the ... character’ (Darnell 19) due to their experiences. Although this is apparent in the Henty hero it is however, important to note that the Westerman hero, often close in age to the Henty hero, is equally often a young adult, not a sixteen year old who behaves like a young adult. He operates within a recognised career structure (often naval, air force, or army).

The character of Colin Standish is a clear example of his type. His initial position as a pilot with Far Eastern Airways provides the experience he needs to fulfil his subsequent role as an officer in the Royal Air Constabulary, a position he earned due to his outstanding qualities of courage, initiative etc. Maturity does not alter the construct of his character when compared to that of the youthful hero but his position as young adult allows him the independence needed to carry out his adventure. It also dispenses with any narratorial need to explain, dispense with or even mention parents at all.

The Westerman hero reflects the increasing narrowness of representation found in the prevailing English world view. I have already referred to the growth of nationalism in the interwar years and Helen Fairlie, in her study of Boys Story Papers of the period includes a note that the ‘archetypal pattern of hero is modified by a sense of national identity’(Fairlie 154). Alongside Cullingford’s discussion of nationalism as the ‘assertive definition of self against others’ (Cullingford 5) Westerman’s narrowing of character and hardening of his hero’s attitude toward the ‘other’ demonstrate his cultural embedding.

Having said all that, there are exceptions, as ever, to every rule. One notable exception comes in the character of Bulverton in Delivered by Air. (Westerman "Delivered by Air" 110) Bulverton’s attacks of ‘nerves’ nearly cost the air crew their lives and it is notable that he is not thereby rejected by his ‘chums’ since the situation is so extreme that only the most courageous, that is, the main protagonist (Colin Standish) remains cool.

In ‘A Mystery of the Java Sea’(date?) the main protagonist, Leslie Wyndham, is noted as a hero who is not doing everything right, is conscious of own shortcomings and has drawn attention to both of these traits (Westerman "A Mystery of the Java Sea" 168).

Slide 10

Language

Another aspect of this cultural embedding is shown in the language used by characters both when the hero interacts with his peers and in the description of 'foreigners'. Apart from the obvious example given in the title of this paper ("Remember we're British" (Westerman "Delivered by Air" 167), examples of the former pervade Westerman's work. This English public school slang used between peers generates camaraderie in the face of dangerous adventure and excludes those outside of the active circle of young English middle or upper class men. Any given story contains numerous examples as you can see on this slide:

'Sorry, Pater' (Westerman *Unfettered Might* 9).

'Topping, if it comes off!' (Westerman *The Riddle of the Air* 13).

'You look like being in the consommé, my festive leg-puller!' (Westerman *The Riddle of the Air* 19).

'Might have bagged the lot,' (Westerman *The Riddle of the Air* 277).

'...I'll just stick it and carry on' (Westerman *Captain Starlight* 175)

'Your pigeon, my festive' (Westerman "Captain Blundell's Treasure ")page 10

'Dash it, old lad! (Westerman *Unfettered Might* 12)

The question of how the other is referred to gives some evidence of Cullingford's note that national stereotypes can 'become genetic rather than simply cultural'. Westerman character's comments such as that Levantine characters 'use a knife at the slightest provocation, real or imagined' (Westerman "Dual Control" 54); force is 'the only argument a Chinaman understands and respects' (Westerman "The Gate of Kwei -Nan" 3) or references to 'foreign devils' sweeping on like 'a bestial tide' (Westerman "Delivered by Air" 178) jar as the worst kind of prejudice. Such comments are not confined to non-white races, A Mystery of the Java Sea includes negative anti-Americanism (Westerman "A Mystery of the Java Sea" 231) in a paragraph referring to American tourists visiting the far east in liners and Eastern Europeans are invariably villains (e.g War of the Wireless Waves - Georgeos Kosmosoli; Captain Starlight - Desnos Devilinos)

Cullingford notes that it is an sense of insecurity that leads to prejudice (Cullingford 222). The insecurity felt both at home and abroad due to the growing instability of the pre WWI social order, the rise in urban discontent at home and the questioning of the British imperial position even by the end of the 19th century shook England to the core. By the inter-war period, the shortest route to India was under threat due to German control of the main railway line in the Middle East at a time when British rule in India was under pressure from within the country. (Wilson 133-4, 208-9). Under such circumstances, a simplified stereotypical depiction of 'the other' makes 'him' easier to enmify. Research undertaken by Kate Agnew and Geoff Fox on comics for boys in the pre WWI and interwar years also investigates this hardening of attitude toward 'foreigners' (Agnew and Fox 25,26).

Conclusion

So what can we conclude from this brief comparison of the Henty and the Westerman hero?

Firstly, that there are many similarities, moral characteristics such as:

Slide 11

Similarities

- Resourcefulness
- Bravery
- Honest
- Honourable behaviour at all times – only the English or those influenced by the English can act consistently in this way. e.g. Chinese Airman in Delivered by Air educated in England.
- coolness in 'tight spot' e.g. Peter Preston in Captain Starlight – saves airship from exploding into flames after collision engineered by enemy (Slavs 'out for dirty work as usual' (Westerman *Captain Starlight* 233).

Slide 12

Differences

There are significant differences in the way the youthful hero is portrayed.

- Tolerances – foreigners and enmification
- Friends - Language use - slang
- Languages – occasionally Westerman's heroes are able to 'pick up the lingo' but there is no systematic attempt to learn the language as there is with the Henty hero.
- Depth – PW assumes the Henty hero's physical and intellectual prowess without examining how the intervening years have changed his perceptions or the popular perception of the image of the hero. Therefore Westerman constructs a hero as a shallower character and much narrower in outlook.

Slide 13

All these differences reflect the historical contextual change in political and racial perceptions pre WWI and between the wars.

And a question to end :

After WWII, do Westerman's heroes change? Not substantially.

Not until Anthony Horowitz's Alex Rider (2000 – 2011 10 books so far) is there a perceptible difference again – the reluctant hero who nevertheless displays the same curiosity and courage that gets him out of a 'tight spot' – greater psychological awareness – feeling of manipulation -

So although to say ([Click for final slide](#))

“Remember we’re British” might sound as though it represents the same attitude as it did in a 19th century text by G.A. Henty, what it meant to be British had changed significantly, as indeed it has changed in the years between Westerman and Horowitz.

References

- Agnew, Kate, and Geoff Fox. *Children at War: From the First World War to the Gulf*. Contemporary Classics of Children's Literature. London: Continuum, 2001. Print.
- Crouch, Marcus. *Treasure Seekers and Borrowers: Children's Books in Britain 1900 - 1960*. London: The Library Association, 1962. Print.
- Cullingford, Cedric. *Prejudice: From Individual Identity to Nationalism in Young People*. London: Kogan Page, 2000. Print.
- Darnell, Julie B. "The Appropriateness of Spy Fiction for the Pre-Adolescent and Adolescent Aged Nine to Fifteen." Chapel Hill, California: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006 of *School of Information and Library Science*. Print.
- Fairlie, Helen. "'An Ocean of Terrible Trash'? Revaluating British Boys' Story Papers of the Inter-War Period: 1918-39." University of Warwick, 2006. Print.
- Henty, G.A. *By Sheer Pluck*. 1884. Glasgow: Blackie and Son, n.d. Print.
- Higonnet, Anne. *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1998. Print.
- Paul, R. "Imperial Nostalgia: Victorian Values, History and Teenage Fiction in Britain." *Moderna språk* 102.1 (2009): 3-13. Print.
- Westerman, Percy F. "Captain Blundell's Treasure ", n.d. Print.
- Westerman, Percy F. *Captain Starlight*. London & Glasgow: Blackie & Son (1929). Print.
- Westerman, Percy F. "The Gate of Kwei -Nan." 1933. Print.
- Westerman, Percy F. "A Mystery of the Java Sea."? Print.
- Westerman, Percy F. *The Riddle of the Air*. London & Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1926. Print.
- Westerman, Percy F. *Unfettered Might*. London& Glasgow: Blackie & Son, (1947). Print.
- Westerman, Percy F. . "Delivered by Air." *Westerman Collection*. Unpublished typescript. ed. Worcester, UK: University of Worcester Research Collections., 1937. Print.
- Westerman, Percy F. . "Dual Control." *Westerman Collection*. Unpublished typescript ed. Worcester, UK: University of Worcester Research Collections., nd. Print.
- Wilson, A.N. *After the Victorians: The Decline of Britain in the World*. Hutchinson, 2005. 2005 ed. London: Arrow Books, 2006. Print.