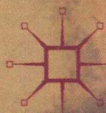


Christopher Parkes
**Children's Literature
and Capitalism**

Fictions of Social Mobility
in Britain, 1850–1914



Children's Literature and Capitalism

Fictions of Social Mobility in Britain,
1850–1914

Christopher Parkes



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Children's Literature and Capitalism

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*This book is dedicated to Judith and to my parents,
Katherine and David*

Series Preface

The *Critical Approaches to Children's Literature* series was initiated in 2008 by Kerry Mallan and Clare Bradford. Its aim is to identify and publish the best contemporary scholarship and criticism on children's and young adult literature, film and media texts. The series is open to theoretically informed scholarship covering a range of critical perspectives on historical and contemporary texts from diverse national and cultural settings. It aims to make a significant contribution to the expanding field of children's literature research by publishing quality books that promote informed discussion and debate about the production and reception of children's literature and its criticism.

Kerry Mallan and Clare Bradford

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Introduction

At the end of Britain's first industrial revolution, the child emerged as both a victim of and a threat to capitalist society. The sight of the suffering child, exploited as cheap labour in the nation's factories, appeared to prove that capitalist society could not properly accommodate its most vulnerable members, that it could only use them up and destroy them. Consequently, the image of the innocent child, damaged and destroyed by its participation in the commercial world, came to represent a distinct challenge to the future of capitalist society as it rendered all too obvious the lack of sentiment contained within the market economy. The purpose of this book is to examine the ways in which Victorian and Edwardian authors developed narratives that were fundamentally concerned with redefining the relationship of the child to the marketplace in order to accommodate the child within capitalist society. The solution to the problem of the child as a victim of commercialism and industrialization came, as I shall argue, in the form of a rhetorical strategy that equated the spirit of capitalism with the spirit of childhood. By locating capitalist ingenuity at the level of the child, the authors with whom I am concerned are responsible in part for transforming the child from the victim of capitalism into its ideal participant. During the nineteenth century, the spirit of childhood and the spirit of capitalism became virtually synonymous as authors argued that children are defined by an innate curiosity and invention, the kind that leads to capitalist innovation. Ultimately, once children were rendered the living embodiments of the capitalist spirit, they could no longer be seen to be victimized by that which was fundamentally a part of them.

British romanticism had argued at the end of the eighteenth century that children should be sheltered and protected from industrial and commercial activity. Following the lead of Rousseau, it essentialized

the child as an innocent child of nature, a kind of noble savage whose purist form is found not in human society but in the natural world. According to Penny Brown, the romantic view of childhood was born out of an adult "sense of uncertainty and vulnerability, and of simplicity, innocence and feeling in the face of the increasingly dehumanising industrial age" (6).¹ In the 1780s, artists and authors began to depict children as inhabiting an ideal state beyond the bounds of commercial society. Thomas Gainsborough's painting *Cottage Girl with Dog and Pitcher* (1785), for example, depicts a barefoot peasant girl holding a puppy that seems to share her wistful expression.² There are no adults or physical structures present in the scene to indicate that she is anything other than a child of nature. She is clearly very poor, but the sentimentalism of the picture renders her such an object of aesthetic pleasure that we would no more put shoes on her than we would the little dog. With his *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* (1804), William Wordsworth presents what is perhaps the period's most idealized version of the child as the poem argues, in effect, that the child is far superior to the adult, having been born into the world possessing within him or her all the knowledge of the universe. Growing up and becoming socialized represents for Wordsworth the unlearning and forgetting of this knowledge.

As scholars of child labour and child protection have demonstrated, the romantic view of childhood was responsible in part for initiating the gradual removal of the child from the workplace that took place in nineteenth-century Britain.³ The many Factory Acts of the period, beginning with that of 1802, set limits on the age of child labourers and the number of hours they could work until, by the time of the 1901 act, the minimum age for child labour was 12.⁴ The acts were motivated by the larger belief that a child should remain separate from the marketplace in order to be granted a proper childhood. According to Hugh Cunningham, the ideal childhood was to be spent "in a home divorced from economically productive activity" (*Children of the Poor*, 230). Similarly, Monica Flegel writes in her study of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) that childhood was to be "a protected, carefree time and space that should be enjoyed by all children, regardless of class" (13). The ideal family home was to be a space in which the child was neither produced by, nor implicated in, the production of the family income. Flegel notes how the period witnessed "the transformation of the child from an economically useful member of a household to an 'economically worthless but emotionally priceless' figure in society" (13).⁵ As children were increasingly removed from the economy, their value as labour decreased while their sentimental

value increased dramatically. As they were made non-participants in the marketplace, their economic agency was deferred to the future where it could not corrupt their innocence.

In many ways, British romanticism represented a break from the evangelical tradition of early eighteenth-century Britain, which had argued that children should not be sheltered from commercial society but raised as active participants. Brown notes how this tradition of child-rearing "stressed the need for strict discipline, constant watchfulness for sin, the early breaking of the child's will and absolute obedience to parents" (6-7).⁶ The child is a site of disorder that requires constant monitoring for signs of even the slightest deviation from correct behaviour. In texts such as Isaac Watts's poem, *Against Idleness and Mischief* from his *Divine Songs for Children* (1715), for example, children are to perform useful labour throughout the course of a day, just like the "busy bees" that "improve each shining hour", so that they never experience an idle moment.⁷ If romanticism insulated the child from labour, the evangelical tradition immersed the child within it but, in both cases, the child remained a passive subject lacking agency and autonomy in the labour market.

As Marah Gubar argues in her study of nineteenth-century children's literature, *Artful Dodgers*, the child in the nineteenth century became a contested site where the romantic and evangelical views competed for control. The fascination with the child as an innocent and the fascination with the child as a prodigy came together to produce the Victorian "cult of the child", which, she notes, is "a cultural phenomenon that reflected *competing* conceptions of childhood. More specifically, it was the site where the idea of the child as an innocent Other clashed most dramatically with an older vision of the child as a competent collaborator, capable of working and playing alongside adults" (9). She adds, "members of the self-proclaimed cult of the child expressed their allegiance to the ideal of unconscious innocence even as they demonstrated a profound fascination with knowledgeable, experienced, and remarkably competent children" (15). Capitalist society, as I have indicated, required the child to be a figure that could participate in commercial activity and yet remain innocent and uncorrupted. During the course of the nineteenth century, a particular kind of child evolved in children's literature, one characterized by a charming curiosity that is displayed only when the child participates in commercial society. This child of Victorian and Edwardian fiction possesses a well-developed imagination and an enormous capacity for imaginative play, which usually takes the form of acting out scenes taken from favourite books or from

adult activities witnessed in everyday life. Rather than corrupting the child's imagination, participation in commercial activity allows for the release of a natural capacity for ingenuity that is just as innocent as it is precocious. This charmingly innocent prodigy turned the "cult of the child" into what might be better described as the "cult of the imaginative child"⁸ as the child's curiosity became conflated with capitalist invention.

The emergence of the imaginative child can be traced back to Maria Edgeworth's many advice handbooks for parents, including *Essays on Practical Education* (1801), which discusses the importance of educational toys in a child's development. While children in the Edgeworthian home are not directly implicated in the production of the family income, they are in training for their future careers as the child's playroom is meant to dissolve the line between work and play. Whereas children were once encouraged to covet fashionable toys, such as finely painted coaches, Edgeworth argues that the imaginative child will naturally despise useless toys that exist only to display the family's wealth. Practical children will soon discover, she argues, that all they can do with fashionable toys is break them:

as long as a child has sense and courage to destroy his toys, there is no great harm done; but, in general, he is taught to set a value upon them totally independent of all ideas of utility, or of any regard to his own feelings. Either he is conjured to take particular care of them, because they cost a great deal of money; or else he is taught to admire them as miniatures of some of the fine things on which fine people pride themselves. Instead of attending to his own sensations, and learning from his own experience, he acquires the habit of estimating his pleasures by the taste and judgment of those who happen to be near him. (3)

In order to provide a proper childhood, Edgeworth's audience of parents is to construct the playroom as a classroom or a workshop that will allow their offspring to develop a kind of practical curiosity. In her model of parenting, toys are no longer bound up in the material circumstances of the home but are instead reconfigured as a means of stimulating innovation and ingenuity. Her manuals articulate a radical shift in thinking about the space of the home as they construct the child as a subject that is profoundly un-embedded in the material conditions of the home, as a subject that is granted an economic future that is not pre-determined by the family's socio-economic position.

The “self-help” movement, which came to prominence in Britain largely through the work of Samuel Smiles, whose writing career began with *Self-Help* (1858), a volume devoted to the habits of industry of successful businessmen, grew out of Edgeworth’s notion that the child’s playroom should be a training ground for participation in capitalist society. Smiles’s main contribution as a writer is to locate the spirit of capitalism in childhood rather than adulthood and to argue that it is only the child who is truly in possession of ingenuity and invention. In *Life and Labour* (1887), for example, he writes that the Victorian age of invention is the result of the talent and genius of young people rather than the studied wisdom of adults:

Most great men, even though they live to advanced years, have merely carried into execution the conceptions of their youth. The discovery of Columbus originated in the thoughts and studies of his early life. Newton’s discovery of the law of gravitation was made at twenty-five, and he carried out no new work after forty-four. Watt made his invention of the condensing steam-engine at thirty-two, and his maturer years were devoted to its perfection. Youth is really the springtime of inspiration, of invention, of discovery, of work, and of energy; and age brings all into order and harmony. All new ideas are young, and originate for the most part in youth-hood, when the mind is thoroughly alert and alive, ready to recognize new truths; and though great things may be done after forty—new inventions made, new books written, new thoughts elaborated—it is doubtful whether the mind really widens and enlarges with age. (145)

According to Smiles, because innovation and invention are child-like qualities, child development must by definition involve the awakening and emergence of a capitalist spirit. In *Men of Invention and Industry* (1884), he writes of James Watt the inventor of the steam engine:

Even when a child Watt found science in his toys. The quadrants lying about his father’s carpenter’s shop led him to the study of optics and astronomy; his ill health induced him to pry into the secrets of physiology; and his solitary walks through the country attracted him to the study of botany and history. (18)

Similarly, he tells the story of John Harrison, who won the famous contest in the eighteenth century to measure longitude at sea with his invention of a very accurate clock to be mounted on board ships.

Harrison's solution, we are told, was inspired by a moment in his childhood when, as he was lying in his sick bed, "a going watch was placed upon his pillow" (77). In the self-help movement, it is only the simplest objects—those that are available to any child regardless of the family's wealth—that are likely to stimulate the child's imagination. Every child, therefore, has the capacity to transform his or her material circumstances into a brighter future if he or she refuses to become embedded in the family home. The tools of social mobility, in other words, are everywhere available if only the child is child-like enough to recognize them.

The version of childhood constructed by the self-help movement was very much based upon the values of the nineteenth-century middle class, which not only believed in the virtues of hard work and industry but became obsessed with the ability of its children to compete in the labour market. Just as capitalist society needed to promote the concept of social mobility so that it could no longer be seen to victimize children, so it required that competing working-class and upper-class versions of childhood be over-written by a middle-class version of childhood. Working-class and upper-class views of childhood needed to be displaced by a middle-class view of childhood, one in which the child is defined by a potential for innovation and ingenuity in order to construct the child as that which cannot be victimized by capitalist society. Just as it was argued that working-class children born into poverty had the same potential for performing ingenuity and invention as middle-class children, so it was argued that upper-class children born into a life of privilege had been denied the circumstances that would demand that they perform ingenuity and invention. In Henry Mayhew's account of the working lives of the poor in the mid-Victorian period, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), a poor boy selling food in the street is asked what he wants to be when he grows up, a question that seems to hold very little meaning for him. He replies, "No I wouldn't like to go to school, nor to be in a shop, nor be anybody's servant but my own. O, I don't know what I shall be when I'm grown up. I shall take my chance like others" (123). Even as the boy is overwhelmed by his poverty he refuses to become part of a middle-class narrative of social mobility. Instead, he pledges allegiance to his fellow street vendors by refusing to imagine a future in which he is a shop clerk making his way up the social ladder. According to the self-help movement, however, it cannot be capitalism or the British class system that robs him of his childhood when it is childhood itself that will allow him to develop the tools necessary to escape poverty. Typically, children like the street

vendor were depicted as old before their time, as grotesque figures who had allowed the circumstances of their birth to define their economic destinies too early in life, rendering them little adults. Likewise, upper-class children were often constructed as inferior children because of their over-reliance on the family's fortune. For example, prior to reforms in the 1850s that required its candidates to pass an examination, the British civil service was often derided as the place where an aristocratic family could be rid of its untalented offspring. Upper-class children were not very good at being children because, it was argued, they did not have to develop their capacity for ingenuity given that the family could always use its aristocratic connections to arrange suitable employment. Relying on the family's money and connections suddenly meant that the individual had not fully grown up and had not properly left home. The popularity of self-help meant that even the wealthiest and most comfortable members of society could be made to feel guilty about relying on inherited wealth. Both working-class and upper-class children were inferior children because they were not seen as using their natural capacity for ingenuity to reconstruct or re-imagine the material conditions of the family home.

It is the purpose of this study to examine the role played by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children's literature in re-configuring the child as a subject that cannot by definition be victimized by capitalist society. While the majority of the texts covered here are typically considered children's literature, I also include texts that are not necessarily for children but that are very much concerned with the representation of the child and childhood. This study focuses in particular on some of the most well-known authors of the period—Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, E. Nesbit, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and L.M. Montgomery (a Canadian author often studied as part of the British tradition)—and argues that they were instrumental in transforming the child from a victim of capitalism into its ideal participant as they equate capitalist ingenuity and invention with childhood development. It is my goal to re-contextualize their work so that we may better appreciate the contributions they have made to the larger argument about the position of the child within the British labour market of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁹ It is my intent to remain within the British tradition in order to explore how British romanticism's conceptualization of childhood as separate and apart from capitalist society has been far too dominant in discussions of children's literature. It has caused us to focus almost exclusively on what capitalist society has done to the child rather than on what the child has done to capitalist society. The

stability of capitalist society, I argue, was entirely contingent upon its ability to accommodate what was, at the end of the eighteenth century, its greatest threat.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the problem of exploitation faced by nineteenth-century youths in the labour market and the ways in which Victorian authors of religious tracts, serial publications, biographies, and novels began to address the fears of a young readership that was increasingly anxious about its ability to compete. British youths were worried about being victimized by dead-end jobs like clerk and apprentice which, at the start of the century, were firmly rooted in the evangelical tradition's construction of youth employment as punishment. The tradition argued that as part of a national youth problem, young workers needed hard work and discipline to keep them on the right path and to keep them in their proper place in the social hierarchy. More sympathetic authors, however, began to focus on the career ambitions of British youths such that they re-imagined dead-end employment as a material context out of which young people could create better job opportunities.

Chapter 2 explores the ways in which Dickens's novels articulate the role of the child within nineteenth-century family capitalism. At the same time that both *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861) represent the Victorian family firm as the ideal business, they criticize the exploitation and lack of innovation contained within it. The strategy of Dickens's narrative is to dis-embed the child in the family home such that he or she, while remaining imaginatively attached to the family business, is not victimized by it by being forced from birth to act as a source of cheap labour. The child is the site of Dickens's transformation of the family firm into an innovative business as he or she draws inspiration from its sights, sounds, and objects in order to reconfigure it as a new and improved commercial enterprise.

Chapter 3 demonstrates that Stevenson's adventure novels are fundamentally about the making of the modern professional. Within the romantic landscapes of *Treasure Island* (1883) and *Kidnapped* (1886), Stevenson's boy heroes Jim Hawkins and David Balfour are in training to become a civil servant and a lawyer, respectively, even as they inhabit romantic landscapes populated by pirates and rebel highlanders. As they work to impose the bureaucratic machinery of state on lawless regions, they absorb the spirit of romance and adventure possessed by figures like Long John Silver and Alan Breck into their professional identities. Whereas the private, libidinal self was once suppressed or victimized by the Calvinist merchant class in order to present its business practice as