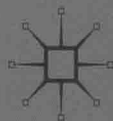


CLASSICS OF
CHILDREN'S
LITERATURE

the
Story
of
the Treasure
Seekers
and
the
Wouldbegoods
by e. nesbit

a new critical edition of the classic texts
edited by **claudia nelson**



The Story of the Treasure Seekers and The Wouldbegoods

E. Nesbit

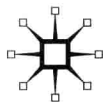
Edited with an Introduction by

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The Story of the Treasure Seekers and The Wouldbegoods

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This edition is dedicated to Mary Isabel,
Gabrielle, and Alex Nelson.
– C.N.

Acknowledgments

'Being editors,' as the Bastables discover, is a group endeavour. Lynne Vallone and Matthew Grenby persuaded me into the enjoyable task of focusing closely on Nesbit's texts, and at Palgrave, Macmillan Jenna Steventon and her assistant Felicity Noble patiently answered questions. My undergraduate research assistants Elizabeth Berry, Molly McGee, and Mary Ross performed heroic feats in connection with scrutinizing the serialized versions of the tales and formatting the manuscript; without their intelligent help, this edition would have been considerably delayed. At Texas A&M University, the Department of English and the Cornerstone Faculty Fellowship provided by the College of Liberal Arts funded the undergraduate research opportunities permitting me to work with these students. I am grateful for all this assistance.

My deepest appreciation, of course, must go to the memory of Edith Nesbit, whose stories and words these are. She's the author; I'm just the editor.

Introduction

When Edith Nesbit (1858–1924) began producing the Bastable stories, she was an experienced but undistinguished author. She had published many volumes of verse, novels, short-story collections, adaptations from Shakespeare, historical works for the young, and collaborative projects. Her output ranged from *The Prophet's Mantle* (1885), a novel written with her first husband, Hubert Bland (1855–1914), and expressing their support of socialism, marriage reform, and other aspects of the radical thought of the day, to pot-boilers such as *A Book of Dogs: Being a Discourse on Dogs, with Many Tales and Wonders Gathered by E. Nesbit* (1898). Bland, an erstwhile bank clerk turned brush manufacturer, had failed in the latter business in 1880 when, in an experience that Nesbit subsequently assigned to the Bastable children's father in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, he contracted smallpox and his partner decamped with whatever funds remained to their struggling enterprise. Since his intellectual interests were primarily political and policy-oriented, he moved on to journalism and pamphleteering; with Nesbit, he was one of the original members of the Fabian Society, a socialist group that also included in its numbers George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, and he later helped to found the London School of Economics. While he was still recovering from his illness, however, Nesbit, then still a new wife and mother, took up the challenge of supporting the family, making steady if not particularly lucrative sales to various periodicals and book publishers.

At first glance, Nesbit might seem an unlikely children's author to emerge in the late Victorian years. From the eighteenth century onward, women writers had been associated with books for the young largely because such writing was viewed as an extension of child rearing, a way for (presumably) virtuous preceptresses to transmit moral messages in a form that children would find digestible. Although by the late nineteenth century many children's authors had preceded Nesbit in abandoning the emphasis on overtly Christian training that had once driven the juvenile mar-

ketplace, a more general emphasis on good moral tone remained the norm in books for the middle class. But while Nesbit was not averse to pointing morals in her tales, which often urge such values as courage, honesty, and consideration for others, some critics read her children's fiction as engaging in 'protest against the reinforcement of intellectual and social subjection of women in patriarchal culture,'¹ while others argue that the Bastable stories' major contribution was not to socialize child readers but rather to impersonate a child sensibility for the delight of young and old alike. As Erika Rothwell observes, the tales, 'though told from a child's point of view, address both child and adult readers and focus attention upon the common, but conflicting, experiences of adult and child.'²

Nesbit's emphasis on the importance of the child's experience is understandable in one whose early life was punctuated with dramatic changes. The youngest of four surviving children of Sarah and John Collis Nesbit (from an earlier marriage, Sarah Nesbit also had a daughter, Saretta Green, who was fifteen years Edith's senior), Edith spent some years of her childhood in France, where her mother had gone in search of a healthier climate for Edith's tubercular sister Mary. Edith lost her father to a sudden illness when she was three; ten years later, Mary died. Edith herself was sent as a boarder to a lengthy series of schools and private homes in England, France, and Germany, often feeling the pangs of disruption and homesickness.

Perhaps her unsettled early life contributed not only to Nesbit's frequent depictions of family separation and bereavement in her children's fiction but also to her evident desire to form a new family of her own as soon as possible. Her approach to family in her personal life, however, would have struck many of her middle-class contemporaries as inappropriate in someone who aspired to influence the young. Back in England and engaged at eighteen to another teenager, bank clerk Stuart Smith, Nesbit met his colleague Hubert Bland in 1877, broke her engagement, and married Bland in 1880, when she was seven months pregnant with their first

¹ Amelia A. Rutledge, 'E. Nesbit and the Woman Question,' in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 223–40 (p. 227).

² Erika Rothwell, '"You Catch It If You Try to Do Otherwise": The Limitations of E. Nesbit's Cross-Written Vision of the Child,' *Children's Literature*, 25 (1997), 60–70 (p. 60).

child, Paul. Throughout their unorthodox marriage, which ended thirty-four years later with Bland's death, husband and wife practiced infidelity both sexual and intellectual as they cycled through assorted relationships and creeds, Nesbit at various times adopting socialism, Catholicism, dress reform, public cigarette smoking (at the time a shocking habit in a middle-class woman), and the belief that Shakespeare's plays were written by Francis Bacon. The names of three of the Bastable boys memorialize men who may have been Nesbit's lovers, a tribute that would have raised eyebrows had her public been aware of it. Nor would the Victorian bourgeoisie necessarily have endorsed Nesbit's decision to help her unmarried and pregnant friend Alice Hoatson by employing her as companion-housekeeper and passing off Hoatson's daughter, Rosamund, as Nesbit's. This pattern was repeated when Hoatson produced a second baby, John – even though by that time Nesbit had realized that the father of both children was her own husband. Hoatson continued to live with the family until Bland's death, the children's parentage kept secret from them and from all but close family friends until they were young adults.³

Even before her marriage, Nesbit had begun to sell her poems and stories, and despite her turbulent home life, her growing knowledge of the literary marketplace and ability to use her precarious finances and considerable good looks to play on the sympathies of editors enabled her to publish many early works that do not rise to the level of what she was to produce during her prime. The late nineteenth century was a booming time for literary periodicals, all hungry for material, and Nesbit could well have remained a hack writer while still earning enough to contribute a useful sum to the household budget. Instead, beginning tentatively in 1894 and escalating from 1897, Nesbit 'discovered her voice and style,' as Jan Susina puts it,⁴ when she published as magazine instalments, first

³ This complicated family dynamic has been well described by various Nesbit critics; see particularly Julia Briggs's biography *A Woman of Passion: The Life of E. Nesbit 1858–1924* (New York: New Amsterdam, 1987).

⁴ Jan Susina, 'Textual Building Blocks: Charles Dickens and E. Nesbit's Literary Borrowings in *Five Children and It*,' in *E. Nesbit's Psammead Trilogy: A Children's Classic at 100*, ed. by Raymond E. Jones (Lanham, MD: Children's Literature Association and Scarecrow Press, 2006), 151–68 (p. 153).

in *Nister's Holiday Annual* and the Christmas supplement to the *Illustrated London News* but subsequently and more extensively in *Pall Mall* and *Windsor*, the series of stories that, when collected and reordered, became her 1899 breakthrough book, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*.⁵ It was followed by two sequels, *The Wouldbegoods* (1901) and *The New Treasure Seekers* (1904), both of which also traced the adventures of the Bastable children.

After *The Wouldbegoods*, which was divided between *Pall Mall* and the *Illustrated London News*, Nesbit's children's works were usually serialized in a single magazine, the *Strand* (also the original home of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories), before being published as books in Britain. That the Bastable tales appeared in an assortment of venues reflects her comparative lack of stature as a writer in the late 1890s; she could not know how well the stories would take with the public and how many she should therefore expect to produce and sell, especially to a single editor. In addition, the periodicals that published the instalments varied, most but not all being general-interest titles primarily aimed not at children but at adults, a blurring of audience that aids in the analysis of the stories' narrative strategy. It is also worth noting that the order in which the tales appeared in periodicals differs from the order in which they appeared when they were subsequently published in volume form. Because they were first published as free-standing works, the tales, considered as a novel rather than as a series of short stories, do not follow a conventional dramatic arc by moving from exposition through climax to denouement. Yet that the order of the chapters may seem somewhat random, insofar as most of the episodes do not build upon one another to any significant extent, is for many readers part of the charm.

Nesbit's biographer Julia Briggs ascribes the genesis of *The Treasure Seekers* and *The Wouldbegoods* to several factors, among them the 1894 death of Nesbit's brother Alfred and Nesbit's partnership, literary and probably sexual, with a younger writer, Oswald Barron. Barron, dedicatee of the first Bastable book, encouraged Nesbit to think and talk about her childhood and to mine it for

⁵ See 'A Note on the Texts', pp. xviii-xx of the present volume, for a description of where each chapter originally appeared.

material. This exercise bore fruit when she published in the *Girl's Own Paper* (October 1896–September 1897) a set of reminiscences entitled 'My School-Days,' a memoir that Susina describes as 'pivotal for the transformation of Nesbit's children's writing,'⁶ but her recollections of her early days also informed her fiction. Episodes in both *The Treasure Seekers* and *The Wouldbegoods*, including the burial of Albert-next-door, the exploration of the haunted tower, and the children's expedition to find 'the source of the Nile,' rework events in Nesbit's childhood, while she also heavily rewrote a sequence originally published, as 'The Play Times,' in *Nister's Holiday Annual* in 1894, 1895, and 1896, to fit it into the Bastable framework.⁷ According to Nesbit's friend Edgar Jepson, some of the events of *The Treasure Seekers* are also based on the exploits of the Bland children, who 'were, to an extent, the children of the House of Bastable.' Thus, for instance, the instalment called 'The Nobleness of Oswald' incorporates Nesbit's rewriting of events that took place in 1895, when, Jepson recounts, eleven-year-old Rosamund and ten-year-old Fabian 'made posies of flowers from their garden, took off their shoes and stockings, and in their shabbiest clothes sold the posies to native residents on their way to catch the business trains to London. For a while the two children lived happily in an affluence beyond all dreams.'⁸

The Bastables' amusing doings establish a formula that Nesbit would repeatedly draw upon in her later writings, in which children's well-meant actions or high-spirited searches for entertainment go comically wrong but are eventually rewarded by a reunited family – a perennial Nesbit fantasy perhaps inspired by her father's death and her frequent separation from her mother. Yet the stories' success results most proximately from the vividness with which Nesbit establishes the voice of their narrator, Oswald Bastable. While Oswald is by no means either the first child narrator in Victorian children's fiction or the first of its protagonists to illustrate the realization that, as Angela Sorby puts it, 'children

⁶ Jan Susina, p. 153.

⁷ 'The Play Times,' which purports to be three numbers of a newspaper produced by a group of siblings, became the basis for the *Treasure Seekers* chapter 'Being Editors.' See 'A Note on the Texts,' p. xix in this volume.

⁸ Edgar Jepson, *Memories of an Edwardian and Neo-Georgian* (London: Richards, 1937), p. 25; see also Julia Briggs, p. 180.

were not just undeveloped adults,⁹ he is arguably the most successful in terms of his transformative effect upon his creator's subsequent career.

In breathing life into Oswald, Nesbit draws not only upon lived experience and upon predecessor texts such as Charles Dickens's 1868 serial *A Holiday Romance*¹⁰ but also upon her shrewd understanding of the furnishings of a bright child's mind. As a group, Oswald, his siblings, and their friends Daisy (Nesbit's own childhood nickname) and Denny have read extensively, much of this material imperfectly retained and all of it filtered through their individual sensibilities: Denny's vision of Charlotte Yonge's popular domestic novel *The Daisy Chain* (1856) is very different from Daisy's, for example. Among many other texts, the Bastables are familiar with tags from eighteenth-century poetry and Shakespeare plays, pieces of history perhaps encountered in the schools that they attended before the wreck of the family finances, news events such as battles and shipwrecks, advertising slogans, mass-market fiction about highwaymen or counterfeiters, hymns and music-hall songs, didactic tales, and the works of Nesbit's slightly younger contemporary and frequent inspiration Rudyard Kipling.

This reading in turn gives direction to the children's own creative energies, from Noël's versifying, to pieces of home entertainment such as the ill-starred attempt to re-enact *The Jungle Book*, to Oswald's self-consciously literary turns of phrase. Their schemes come from their reading, as do their assumptions about adult motivations or likely responses, their ways of transforming events into narratives, and the optimism that arises from their assurance that a happy ending is inevitable. For Marah Gubar, the effect of the insistence upon outside texts 'is to break down the divide between adult writer and child reader by suggesting that both parties can improvise on other people's stories to produce their own narratives.'¹¹ Moreover, just as in *The Wouldbegoods* Oswald

⁹ Angela Sorby, 'Golden Age,' in *Keywords for Children's Literature*, ed. by Philip Nel and Lissa Paul (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 96–9 (p. 97).

¹⁰ For a discussion of this connection, see Jan Susina, p. 157.

¹¹ Marah Gubar, *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 132.

praises Kenneth Grahame's *The Golden Age* (1895), a book about childhood aimed at an adult readership, as 'A1 except where it gets mixed up with grown-up nonsense' (p. 188), both adults and children can read the Bastable stories with pleasure, recognizing them as common ground.

Even so, Rothwell observes, Nesbit recognizes and exploits a division here: just as the children do not respond identically to texts that they all read or adventures that they all share, readers of different ages will understand and appreciate the children's voices and actions differently. Since much of the humour comes at the children's expense, Rothwell continues, child readers may be less ready than adults to recognize and be amused by childish misuses of language, mishandlings of social intercourse with adults, or naïve failures to perceive adult actions such as Albert's uncle's planting of a modest 'treasure' in the Bastables' back-garden excavations. For Rothwell, the tales often emphasize 'the disjunction between adult and child worlds: children do not understand adults to adults' satisfaction, and adults do not see children as they see themselves. Thus, adults and children seem to occupy separate spheres that are firmly segregated from each other.¹²

Yet 'seem' is the operative word here. Just as the tales' audience encompasses both child and adult readers, within the tales these spheres repeatedly intersect, particularly through the sharing of story. Albert's uncle, a novelist, recognizes and appreciates the children's tendency to approach problems within the framework of popular fiction; some of the Bastables' experiences, as Oswald notes, testify to the verisimilitude of plots by adult authors whose works they enjoy, such as Dickens and Kipling; and if adults do not always appreciate the Bastables' outlook, energy, and manoeuvrings, nevertheless they often prove willing, with whatever initial reluctance, to participate in bringing about the happy ending that the children have plotted. Moreover, Isabelle Guillaume points out, if the child's understanding is presented as limited, the adult's vision is simultaneously critiqued as prosaic: Nesbit 'offers a negative vision of the adult world whose corollary is the representation of childhood as an autonomous space' sacred to imagination and creativity, and the Bastable children's very fail-

¹² Erika Rothwell, pp. 61–2.

ures 'sanction the divide between the two worlds.' Thus, according to Guillaume, Oswald's errors in judgment empower both segments of Nesbit's audience, in that they 'leave the field open to the reflections of the reader' and allow a childish reading and an adult reading to compete.¹³

The crossover between child and adult readership noted by critics such as Rothwell, Gubar, Guillaume, Mavis Reimer, and others is something that Nesbit continued in further instalments of this family saga. Not only did she incorporate into her adult novel *The Red House* (1902) interaction between the adult narrator and the Bastables, she subsequently retold the same episode from Oswald's point of view in *The New Treasure Seekers*. For Reimer, the point of this interweaving is to enable Nesbit to explore the 'mechanism by which her culture produced the structural relation of child and adult,'¹⁴ a sophisticated question that also preoccupied such canonical authors as Dickens and Henry James. For the reader – and it is the adult reader, not the child, who is more likely to become familiar with both the Bastables and *The Red House* – Nesbit's playful move enables a journey both into childhood and back out of it as an appreciative observer, a vantage point that Nesbit adopted as her own throughout her career as successful children's writer. In taking this stance, Nesbit contributed to an important literary and cultural trend of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an era obsessed with gaining a better understanding of childhood. Simultaneously, in creating with energy, detail, and humour the Bastables' collective sensibility, Nesbit produced a children's classic that continues to speak to readers today.

¹³ Isabelle Guillaume, 'Les paradoxes de la représentation chez Edith Nesbit,' in *Devenir adulte et rester enfant? Relire les productions pour la jeunesse*, ed. by Isabelle Cani, Nelly Chabrol-Gagne, and Catherine d'Humières (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Université Blaise Pascal, 2008), pp. 163–76 (pp. 163, 170, 172; my translation).

¹⁴ Mavis Reimer, 'Treasure Seekers and Invaders: E. Nesbit's Cross-Writing of the Bastables,' *Children's Literature*, 25 (1997), 50–9 (p. 58).

Note on the Texts

As the above introduction observes, the Bastable stories first appeared between 1894 and 1899 for *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* and between 1900 and 1901 for *The Wouldbegoods*. They were published in an assortment of periodicals – *Nister's Holiday Annual*, the *Illustrated London News (ILN)* and its Christmas supplement, *Pall Mall, Windsor* – sometimes as singletons but more often in a series of instalments, detailed in the list at the end of this Note.

In preparing this edition, I have used as the source text for *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* the first British edition, published by T. Fisher Unwin Ltd in 1899, and as the source text for *The Wouldbegoods* the first American edition, published by Harper & Brothers in 1901, whose approach to punctuation more closely resembles that found in the periodical instalments. Readers may thus derive a sense of the range of flavours presented to Nesbit's original readers.

The occasional typographical errors to be found in the 1899 and 1901 editions have been silently corrected, and although I have provided a generous sampling in the notes in order to indicate the kinds of changes that the texts underwent as they moved away from their original venues, minor discrepancies between volume and periodical versions are not always chronicled. With regard to *The Wouldbegoods*, for instance, my notes do not observe that the *Pall Mall* version sometimes uses contractions instead of spelling out words. Speaking generally, the Oswald of *Pall Mall* is a less polished writer than that of the Harper & Brothers version, sometimes producing repetitive sentences such as 'And we all felt this so much that we felt in our chests just as if we had swallowed a hard-boiled egg whole. At least, this is what Oswald felt,' and preferring more juvenile diction; thus *Pall Mall* has 'we hadn't really meant to be naughty' where Harper & Brothers has 'we had not really meant to do anything wrong.' Similarly, *ILN* uses 'Dickie' for 'Dicky' and 'minute-book' for 'Golden Deed book'

throughout. As the notes make clear, *ILN* also omits references to instalments published elsewhere.

The most dramatic difference between the periodical instalments and the one-volume versions of the chapters has to do with the order in which they appeared. The lists below, organized chronologically from earliest appearance to latest, indicate the reorderings and, in some cases, the extensive rewritings that the tales underwent.

The Story of the Treasure Seekers

Chapter 8, 'Being Editors,' based, with revision too considerable to be reflected in the notes to the present edition, on a three-part serial that appeared as 'The Play Times' in *Nister's Holiday Annual* in 1894, 1895, and 1896.

Chapters 1, 2, and 7, 'The Council of Ways and Means,' 'Digging for Treasure,' and 'Being Bandits,' based, again too extensively for this edition to record, on 'The Treasure Seekers,' published under the pen name Ethel Mortimer in *Father Christmas*, a Christmas supplement to the *Illustrated London News (ILN)*, in December 1897. Nesbit considered that the *Father Christmas* version had been 'miserably mutilated.'¹

Chapters 4 and 5, 'Good Hunting' and 'The Editor,' published in a single instalment as 'Good Hunting' in *Pall Mall* for April 1898.

Chapter 10, 'Lord Tottenham,' published in *Pall Mall* for May 1898.

Chapter 6, 'Noël's Princess,' published in *Pall Mall* for June 1898.

Chapter 14, 'The Divining-Rod,' published in *Pall Mall* for July 1898.

Chapters 15 and 16, 'Lo, the Poor Indian!' and 'The End of the Treasure-Seeking,' published in a single instalment as 'Lo, the Poor Indian!' in *Pall Mall* for August 1898.

Chapter 9, 'The G.B.,' published in *Windsor Magazine* for September 1898.

¹ Quoted in Julia Briggs, p. 427.