

July 30, 2019

Ye Olde English Humourists

An Old-Fashioned Tribute

By: S. Unian Sambar

An affectionate tribute to the low-brow humorists of the British Empire who wrote in the early-mid 20th century. Or is this a symptom of "a post-colonial condition brought on by the native collaborator's false nostalgia for colonial master narratives"?

Is there any good reason for reading dreadfully anachronistic low-brow stuff from the days of the Empire, still less for enjoying it, and least of all for writing about it? Of course not, but there could be some lame excuses. Being a superannuated scholar in the humourless—indeed outrightly dismal—discipline of Economics which obliges one to relate human beings to such things as closed, compact, convex subsets of n -dimensional Euclidean space could be a major excuse for reading this species of literature. Also for taking pleasure in it, simply as an act of revenge for all those grim-death axioms and theorems which are inflicted on the economist by the compulsions of a life-time of wage-slavery and survival through scholarly publishing. And an excuse for writing about it is the canny suspicion that the author is not alone in his sneaking, shameful, guilty appreciation of the chuckle-headed and politically incorrect scribbles of a lost generation of English humourists, and that there are other closet aficionados of this brand of mentally arrested wit who might actually have some interest in (covertly) reading articles of the present type. One can't be sure though, so I have taken refuge in a pen-name. (I might add that I'm quite proud of my anagrammatic disguise.)

So here are some of my favourite authors from an age gone by.

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I am happy to begin with Max Beerbohm (1872-1956), of whom, though, it is manifestly unjust to suggest that he was 'low-brow'. He is the one exception in this essay to that category of intellectual status. Surely, there has not been a greater parodist in English letters than this writer, playwright and caricaturist of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. His *A Christmas Garland*, published in 1912, carries 17 parodies of the writings of his seniors or contemporaries, many of them all-but-forgotten now. Among his more famous victims are Henry James, Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton, Thomas Hardy, and George Bernard Shaw.

His ability to nail a writer's idiosyncratic mannerisms is wonderfully captured in the opening line of "The Mote in the Middle Distance", a story about two precocious little siblings awakening on Christmas morning to the prospect of opening their Christmas presents. This is pure, wicked Henry Jamesian stuff, when we are told about the boy that, "It was with the sense of a, for him, very memorable something that he peered now into the immediate future, and tried, not without compunction, to take that period up where he had, prospectively, left it." This was matched, if not surpassed, by the opening sentence of "The Guerdon", inspired by the conferment of the Order of Merit on James, in which neither His Majesty the King nor his Lord Chamberlain has the slightest clue as to who Henry James is: "That it hardly was, that it all bleakly and unbeguilingly *wasn't* for 'the likes' of him—poor decent Stamfordham—to rap out queries about the owner of the to him unknown and unsuggestive name that had, in these days, been thrust on him with such a wealth of commendatory gesture, was precisely what now, as he took, with his prepared list of New Year *colifichets* and whatever, his way to the great gaudy palace, fairly flicked his cheek with the sense of his having never before so let himself in, as he ruefully phrased it, without letting anything, by the same token, out."

Was the typical Jamesian investment of the commonplace with intimations of the magisterial and the portentous ever better captured than in this sharp but affectionate imitation of Beerbohm's (except, perhaps, much later, by David Lodge in his 1965 novel *The British Museum is Falling Down*)? It recalls to mind H. G. Wells' unkind assessment of James, whom he likened to a hippopotamus in words credited to a fictional character, Boone: 'He splits his infinitives and fills them up with adverbial stuffing. He presses the passing colloquialism into his service. His vast paragraphs sweat and struggle; they could not sweat and elbow and struggle more if God himself was the processional meaning to which they sought to come. And all for tales of nothingness. It is leviathan retrieving pebbles. It is a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at any cost, even at the cost of its dignity, upon picking up a pea which has got into a corner of its den. Most things, it insists, are beyond it, but it can, at any rate, modestly, and with an artistic singleness of mind, pick up that pea.' James was offended, and greatly hurt, by Wells' remarks, but charmed and amused by Beerbohm's imitation of him.

The good news for those that would like to lay their hands on *A Christmas Garland* is that it is available, on the web, as a product from the immensely helpful Project Gutenberg enterprise.

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A. A. Milne was born a decade after Beerbohm, and a year after P. G. Wodehouse, in 1882. He is, of course, well-remembered and widely read, even now, because of the Winnie-the-Pooh books, which I am far from being the only one to regard as the perpetration of a wanton excess of whimsy. In 1928, Dorothy Parker, doyenne of the *New Yorker* in its hey-day, wrote a brief but savage review of *The House at Pooh Corner* under the name of Constant Reader. Reacting to the glutinous charm of its prose, she says: “And it is that word ‘hummy,’ my darlings, that marks the first place in “The House at Pooh Corner” at which Tonstant Weader Fwowed up.”

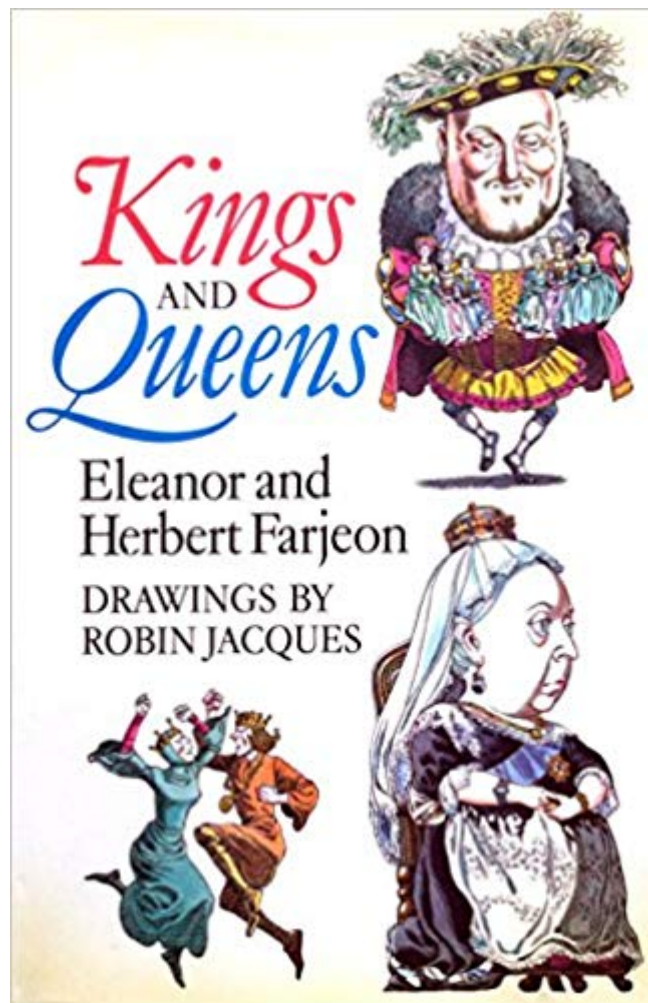
Milne and Wodehouse were good friends until the time of Wodehouse’s unfortunate involvement in the so-called Berlin Broadcasts. These broadcasts were talks aired on German radio after Wodehouse had been taken prisoner by the Germans from his house in Le Toquet, France, during the occupation of that country by the Nazis in World War II. It is widely believed now that at worst, Wodehouse was naive and gullible, but otherwise blameless of any sinister intent in agreeing to the broadcasts. At the time, however, and for years subsequently, there were dark allegations of collaboration with the enemy and treason against Wodehouse, to which A. A. Milne was a party. The normally gentle and peaceable Wodehouse was so far moved as to express the wish that “Milne would trip over a shoe-lace and break his bloody neck.” His final revenge was in the form of a story, “Rodney has a Relapse”, which pokes fun at Milne’s saccharine exploitation of his son Christopher Robin in the cause of the Pooh books.

Milne’s earlier books were far more fun to read, dealing with the humorous experiences of a bunch of young friends and cousins spending their vacations together. I have nostalgic memories of spending time, as a schoolboy, in the dark and protective interior of the library of the Royal Asiatic Society in Bombay (as the city was then called), where one could find collections of Milne’s *Punch* articles such as *The Day’s Play* and *The Holiday Round* (not to mention deplorable thrillers such as those by Dornford Yates). In these essays of Milne’s, the non-achieving adolescent reader could achieve easy identification with their inept protagonists who unintentionally snicked the outswinger over the slip fielders for six, or who went in to bat at number eleven, enabling the players immediately thereafter to return to the pavilion for an early lunch.

Incidentally, Milne was also the author of a crime novel called *The Red House Mystery*.

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Speaking of cricket stories, I’d put it to the reader that the funniest one ever written in the literature of the sport was by Herbert Farjeon (1887-1945). This is the story of a particular cricket match between two ancient rivals, the villages of Herecombe and Therecombe, which calls into question the cherished British notion that cricket is a game of fair and sporting play engaged in by gentlemen. Indeed, the author himself advises us (in *Herbert Farjeon’s Cricket Bag*, published in 1946) that “Sharp practice in our national game is probably a good deal more common than most Englishmen would care to admit...Yet I question whether any match has ever been conducted in a more thoroughly unsportsmanlike manner than a certain ‘friendly’ match between the old-world villages of Herecombe and Therecombe.” We are then provided with the description of a match which lasts the scheduled length of the entire day, in which both teams get to bat, in which only two balls are bowled, in which the rules of cricket are held up to merciless scrutiny, and which ends in a tie. I hope very much that the reader has been provided with an incentive to discover for themselves how all this came to pass. Having done so, I hope they will feel impelled to read another great cricketing story from bucolic Britain—the chapter titled “The Village Cricket Match” in the Welshman A. G. Macdonnel’s 1933 book *England, Their England*.



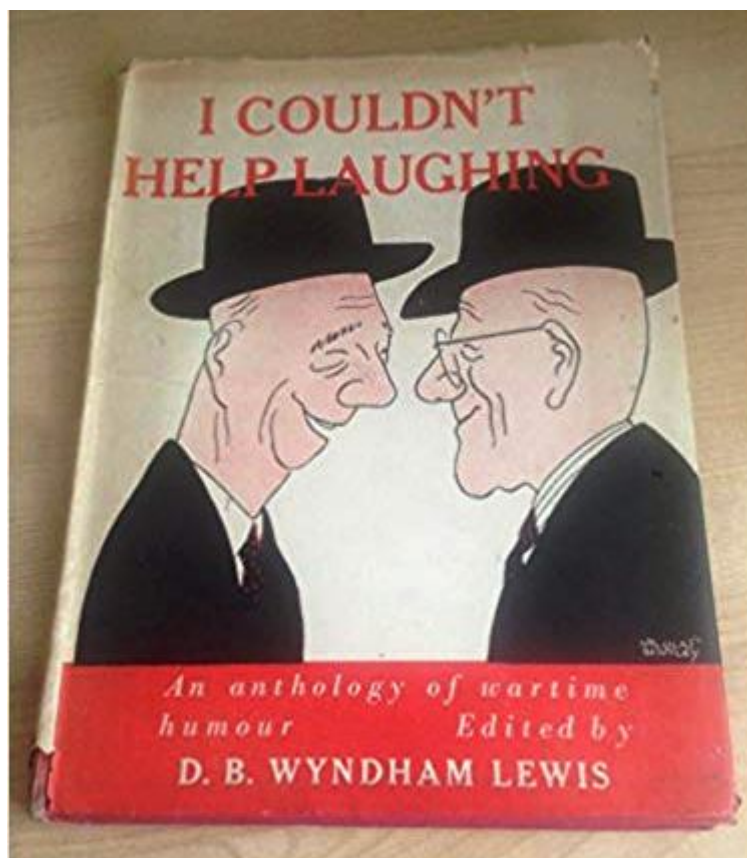
Farjeon also wrote entertaining verse, a sample of which is available in the poem “When Bolonsky danced *Belushka*” that immortalises the ballet-loving cultural snob. Here is an excerpt:

It's true that many lesser clans For ballet also thirst, But they are merely *nouveau* fans,
It's we who liked it first, And we who know it best, becos, Ask any connoisseur, The ballet
isn't what it was When we were what we were. Oh, the urge To see Serge! What a thrill! What
a pill! What a purge! So adept When he leapt, We were dumb, Overcome, Overswept!

Farjeon was one of four very talented siblings. A sister, Eleanor Farjeon, was a well-known writer of children's books, and author of the one-time popular *Martin Pippin in the Apple Orchard* (1921). A brother, Harry Farjeon, was a composer; and a second brother, Joseph Farjeon, was a writer of whodunits, some of which have recently been reissued by the British Library as classics representative of the Golden Age of detective fiction.

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Possibly the funniest columnist to write for an English newspaper is “Beachcomber”. Among other distinctive features about Beachcomber is that he is not some one individual, but at least—at last count—four persons, all columnists for the English paper *The Daily Express*. The first Beachcomber was a John Arbuthnot, and the present ‘Beachcomber’ is William Hartston. But it is the two in-between Beachcombers that will receive attention here: D. B. Wyndham Lewis (1891-1969) and J. B. Morton (1893-1979).

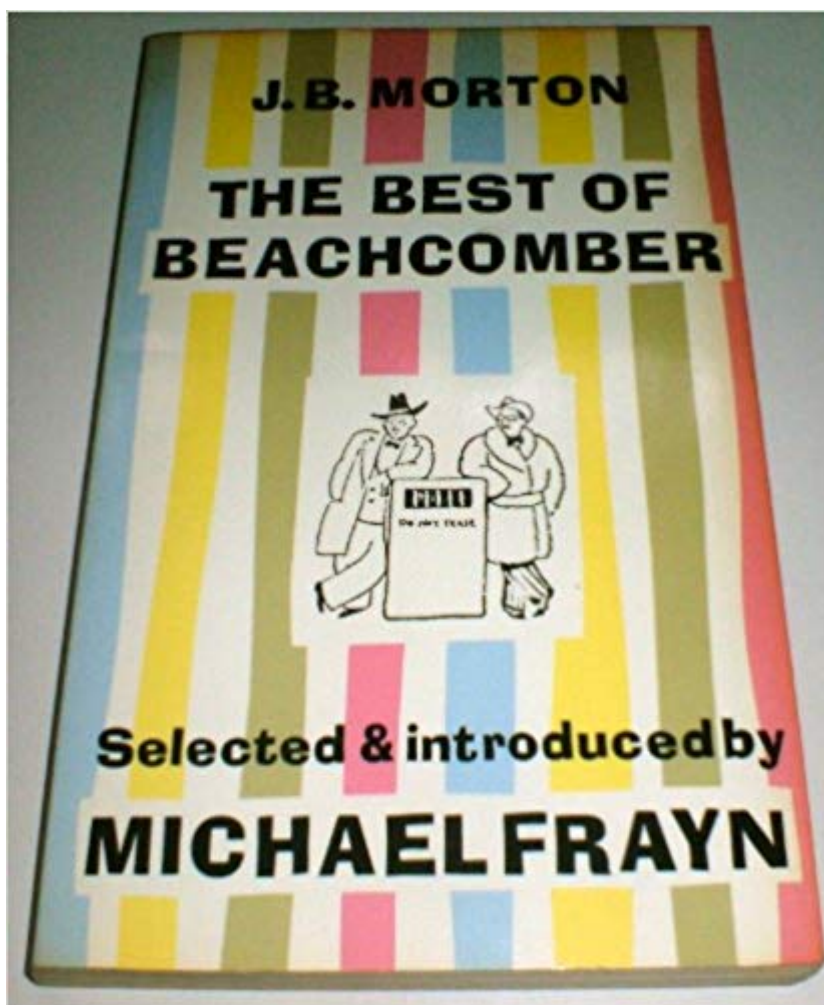


Wyndham Lewis was a scholarly Francophile who wrote learned biographies of French literary figures when he wasn't making his readers laugh out aloud with his "By the Way" column in *The Daily Express*. The pieces in the column are absolute marvels of classy inanity. Wyndham Lewis had a number of signature themes that he dealt with, including: characters from Chinese plays and novels with names like Distinguished Frosted Willow and Moonlit Crystal Rivulet; cricket and cricketers, both ridiculed alike; the Island Race (his compatriots) whom he seemed to regard as an awkward, bumbling people to be held in affectionate pity: "Frigid, distant blue eyes, a holy terror of being spoken to, panicky sheering-off movement, as of a startled crab—the old, old embarrassing Island story...compulsory school cricket is at the root of it all"; writers and reviewers (whom he habitually referred to as "booksy boys" and "booksy girls"); unsustainable nonsense, usually described as "fla-fla" and "poodle-pie"; Dorothy Parker, whom he seemed to love and of whom he said: 'A fierce old Roedean type, we thought. On meeting Mrs Parker later we discovered a petite, dewy-eyed, charming, gentle, rather shy girl, with nothing fierce about her except a wistful longing to rid the earth of a few literary and other notables...[T]iny Mrs Parker, bless her'; the philosopher and broadcaster C. E. M. Joad, whom he seemed to dislike and systematically referred to as "slogger Joad"; and Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Dorothy Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey, two fictional detectives he gave every impression of heartily loathing. Here's a sample of his ill-tempered handling of Wimsey:

One of the best and shortest [crime stories] we know is an old Spanish one. Two poor scholars tramping one day from Xaen to Salamanca stopped in the fiery noonday heat to drink at a wayside fountain, under which they discovered a stone slab faintly inscribed: *Aqui esta encerrada el alma del licenciado Gil Perez*— "Here lies buried the soul of the licentiate Gil Perez." With a cynical shrug one of the scholars drank and continued his journey. As the other, scenting some mystery, was staring at the slab, a cheery voice behind him said: "I'd take a jolly good stab at it if I were you, old fruit. Buried gold jolly well indicated, what?" "Wimsey?" asked the scholar, shuddering. "Bull's eye, old boy." The poor scholar at once sprang at Wimsey and after a short, sharp struggle strangled him, after which all the bells of Spain, Italy, England, Ireland, Europe, France and Navarre rang merrily for 15 days on end and the poor scholar was given £10,000 and made Master of Balliol.

I have at home a 1944 selection of D. B. Wyndham Lewis' columns in *The Tatler* and *The Bystander*. It is called *Take It To Bed*. I have been doing that for a week every year over the last several years.

The Beachcomber who took over from Wyndham Lewis in 1924 and kept it going for more than half-a-century till 1975 *on a daily basis*, was J. B. Morton or—to give him his proper due—John Cameron Andrieu Bingham Michael Morton. If the notion of “inspired lunacy” deserved a patent, it would have to be in Morton’s name. Apart from honing the typical ingredients of the repertoire of British humour of the time, Morton also added his own elements of the fantastic and the surreal to the genre.



His daily column had everything: verse, one-liners, jokes, fake advertisements, reviews of imaginary books, stories, pseudo-economics, commentary, politics, Hollywood films, and parodies of mushy romances, Mata Hari-type tales of ravishing spies, and plots involving the lives and deeds of the aristocracy and High Society. He invented scores of unforgettable characters, many of whom made repeated appearances over the long course of his column’s innings in *The Daily Express*: the social snob Lady Castanbleigh; the inventor Dr Strabismus (Whom God Preserve) of Utrecht; the disreputable principal, Dr Smart-Allick, of the infamous Narkover School of criminal students and masters; the Filthistan trio of Ashura, Kazbulah and Rizamughan; the cad and bounder, Captain Foulenough; the young poet and disciple of Rabindranath Tagore—I disclose this at the risk of outraging our Bengali friends—Rai Mahatma Kama Kuma Bholpindi Ras Kamari Damchanga Damchunga Damchonga Baroo Mahadur Bomba Gul, of whose poetry we are told that “it has no meaning. It is cosmic.”

And presiding over all these unforgettable characters is arguably the most unforgettable of them all, that star on the legal firmament, the incomparable Mr. Justice Cocklecarrot. Here a brief digression is in order. When it comes to sending up the law, Morton did not stand alone: we have to reckon with his great comic rival and contemporary A. P. Herbert (1890-1971), librettist, Member of Parliament, and lampooner of the law. Herbert’s critical sweep, collected in the 1935 book *Uncommon Law*, covers everything from traffic rules to freedom of speech to divorce to the status of whimsy under the law. The hero of these legal cases is a litigious Common Man called Albert Haddock who argues, among other things, that it is perfectly in order for him to pay the Collector of Taxes with an order inked on a white cow which, he contends, is a lawful negotiable instrument. While exposing the idiocies and convolutions of the law and its practitioners, Herbert also achieved some real gains on the legal front in the real world: he was

responsible, in considerable measure, for the reform of divorce law in Britain.

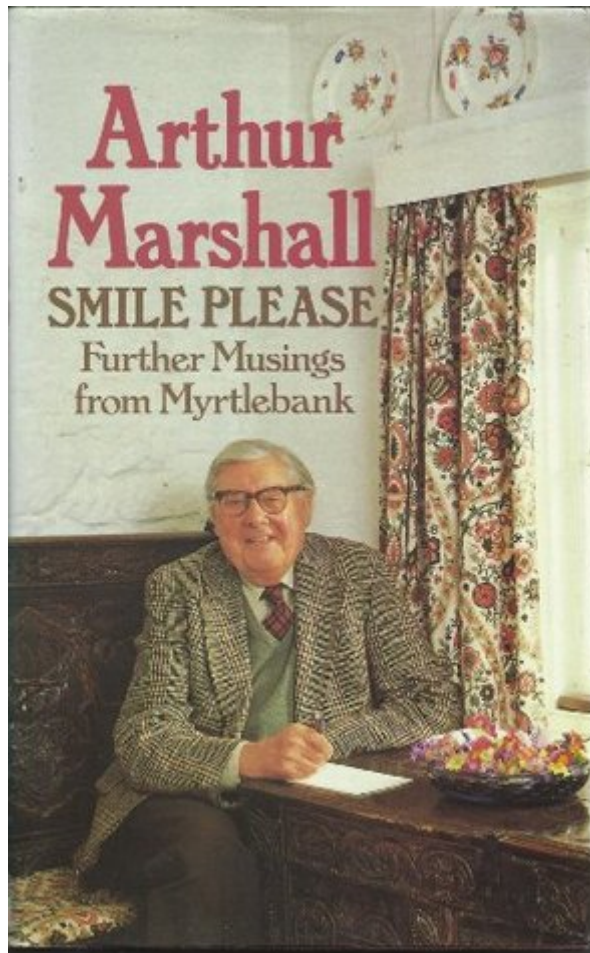
Returning to J. B. Morton's Justice Cocklecarrot, here—by way of a sampler of his over-the-top concoctions—is an account of one of several appearances of the Twelve Red-Bearded Dwarfs in the Judge's Court:

Mr Justice Cocklecarrot began the hearing of a very curious case yesterday. A Mrs Tasker is accused of continually ringing the doorbell of a Mrs Renton, and then, when the door is opened, pushing a dozen red-bearded dwarfs into the hall and leaving them there. An expert witness is called... Mr Bastin Hermitage (for the defence): Now, Dr Spunton, is there, to your knowledge, any disease which would account for Mrs Tasker's strange habits? Dr Spunton: There is. It is called rufo-nanitis. The spymptoms— Mr Hermitage: Symptoms. Dr Spunton: Yes, spymptoms, but I always put a 'p' before a 'y'. Cocklecarrot: With what object, might we ask? Dr Spunton: I can't help it, m'lud. Cocklecarrot: Do you say pyesterday? Dr Spunton: Pyes, unfortunatelpy. It's hereditarpy. Mpy familpy all do it. Cocklecarrot: But why 'p'? Dr Spunton: No, py, m'lud. Later The court had to be cleared owing to the roars of ribald laughter which greeted the appearance in the witness-box of the twelve red-bearded dwarfs all in a heap. Their names were read out amid growing uproar. The names appeared to be: Sophus Barkayo-Tong, Amaninter Axling, Farjole Merrybody, Guttergorm Guttergormpton, Badly Oronparser, Churm Rincewind, Cleveland Zackhouse, Molonay Tubilderborst, Edeledel Edel, Scorpion de Rooftrouser, Listenis Youghaupt, Frums Gillygottle. Cocklecarrot: Are these genuine names? A Dwarf: No, m'worship. Cocklecarrot: Then what's your name? Dwarf: Bogus, m'ludship. Cocklecarrot: No, your real name. Dwarf: My real name is Bogus, your excellency. (At this point the court had to be cleared)

No account of British humourists born in the 1890s would be complete without mention of the duo W. C. Sellar (1898-1952) and R. J. Yeatman (1897-1968), the authors of the 1930 book *1066 And All That: A Memorable History of England, comprising all the parts you can remember, including 103 Good Things, 5 Bad Kings and 2 Genuine Dates*. The book is not only a parody of how history was taught in British schools in those days, but also of the favoured nationalistic view of how Britain's history was to be recorded and understood. What largely survives of the book in the popular memory is the series of "Test Papers" created by the authors—spoofs of examination papers of the times—with questions of the following type: "Which do you consider were the more alike, Caesar or Pompey, or *vice versa*? (Be brief.); "What is a Plantaganet? Do you agree?"; "Stigmatize cursorily (a) Queen Mary, (b) Judge Jeffreys' asides. (Speak out.); " 'To the exercise of Despotic Monarchy the Crown is more essential than the Throne.' (Refute with special reference to anything you know.)" The present author (which is how we refer to ourself, as Wyndham Lewis would remind us) is properly ashamed (i.e. pleased) to admit that in 2010 he succeeded in sneaking a piece titled "1936 And All That" into Issue 148 of the *Newsletter of the Royal Economic Society*.

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In those days of old, the great staple of popular British fiction among younger readers were the Schoolgirl Story and the Schoolboy Story. Angela Brazil was a firm favourite of schoolgirls, and also, apparently, of certain adults, one of whom was Arthur Marshall (1910-1989). Marshall was a schoolmaster who taught modern languages at the British Public School Oundle both before and after the Second World War. He had a very interesting War career, as a member of the Intelligence Corps, and was, in fact, the Commandos' Chief Security Officer on D Day. Earlier, he was involved in the evacuation of Dunkirk, about which we are told: "...Marshall was soon to introduce girls' school stories to an...unlikely venue, the battlefield of Dunkirk in June 1940. Here Marshall was hit in the ankle by a bullet, but he continued to encourage his men to face the enemy fire and so to reach the awaiting ships with 'Come on, girls, who's on for the Botany Walk?'" (The quote is from the absorbing and instructive essay "Finding Schoolgirls Funny: Arthur Marshall", by Ju Gosling, and it is available on the web at www.ju90.co.uk/fin.htm)



Marshall's peculiar fascination for schoolgirls' stories found expression in a series of reviews of schoolgirls' books which he wrote for the paper *The New Statesman*. Later in his career, he also wrote for *The Sunday Telegraph*. The reviews are no doubt sexist and politically unacceptable in a number of ways by modern standards, but it is also hard not to find them excruciatingly funny, not least—as pointed out by Gosling—as critiques of sloppy writing. His favoured technique for composing these reviews was unique, and consisted mainly of letting the books speak for themselves through carefully selected quotes of the sillier excesses in them, punctuated with occasional poker-faced comments from himself. Here is an excerpt from his review (in *The New Statesman and Nation*) of a 1938 Angela Brazil novel:

Miss Angela Brazil's offering for this year is called *The School on the Cliff* and concerns the adventures of 'the three R's', Rosamunde Barton, Ruth Davis and Rhoda Fielding. There is much talk of 'folk lore, nature myths, folk-memories, and elfin maidens'; and even the vanishing of Miss Ward's 'illuminated ode' is traced to the pixies. There is a 'disgruntled senior' called Myfanwy who behaves 'in a most unsporting fashion' over tennis. Rosamunde, 'just a light-hearted schoolgirl' is a 'recorder in the Botany section' and frequently 'rambles up the mountains' collecting 'butterwort and bog pimpernel...'...The school amateur theatricals include girls representing 'the spirit of summer, the four winds, the sea fairies, and a band of gnomes.' Ruth is chosen for 'the south wind...all gauze...with trailing pieces to blow about'. Rosamunde is in pale-blue satin: "'You look no end!" admired Ruth.'...Rosamunde... and her mother... set out on a cruise to Palestine...The streets of Palestine are found to be 'dirty and malodorous', and there is a know-all called Miss Hirst who translates the word 'baksheesh' and advises them not to drink the water. Rosamunde comes across some 'borage and speedwell', but 'the Arabs aren't romantic at close quarters', and 'after all the noisy natives it was delightful to be back on board, with British seamen and stewards and the Union Jack, and the Captain, and their own cabins and Western ways.'

Despite the occasional hint of lesbianism and the like in Arthur Marshall's reviews, they still belong essentially to an Age of Innocence. The arrival upon the scene of the Truly Wicked Schoolgirl had to await the genius of Arthur Searle (1920-2011), who in

the 1950s drew a number of sketches to pithily convey the doings of the frightening inmates of the girls' school called St Trinian's. These drawings were collected in a number of books: *Hurrah for St Trinian's*, *The Female Approach*, *Back to the Slaughterhouse*, and *Souls in Torment*. The text for one book, *The Terror of St Trinian's*, was supplied by D B Wyndham Lewis, writing under the name of Timothy Shy.

St Trinian's is an unfettered girls' version of J. B. Morton's dreadful boys' school Narkover. Searle had a very ugly Second World War in which he had been captured and tortured by the Japanese, and there is an underlying darkness of that experience which finds a certain chilling expression in his cartoons of the largely criminal students and mistresses of St Trinian's. The girls of the school are smokers, drinkers, gamblers and arsonists, with—it goes without saying—extremely dodgy scruples and given to violent sociopathic behaviour. Some of this is reflected in a typical picture of St Trinian scholars, with concealed boxing gloves, cosh, and hockey stick, waiting to receive a new and unsuspecting girl into the school.

Searle was to participate in the creation of yet another work of genius which, for many readers of a certain generation (all right: mine), represented the finest and funniest fruit of schoolboys' stories: the chronicles of Nigel Molesworth, self-confessed "curse of St Custard's", written by Geoffrey Willans (1911-1958) and illustrated by Ronald Searle. Earlier versions of the stories and sketches first appeared in the *Punch*, and these were later collected in four volumes: *Down with Skool!*, *How to be Topp*, *Whizz for Atomms*, and *Back in the Jug Agane*.

The books are the ostensible reflections of a thirteen-year old schoolboy on various aspects of life that make for a cynical if shrewdly perceptive view of a world that includes his school, St Custard's; his headmaster, Mr Grimes; a younger brother "molesworth 2"; a best friend "peason" (presumably Pearson); an aggravatingly whimsical class-mate, the "wet and weedy" Fotherington-Tomas who skips about saying "Hello, sun, hello clouds"; Prudence Entwistle, the Matron's Junior, for whom Molesworth harbours deep but unhappily inexpressible sentiments of romance; sententious bores who will insist on stressing the obvious (on a wide range of matters which 'any fule kno'); schoolmasters ('beaks') and other villains with 'the face of a baboon/squished tomato'; and the inescapable sorrows of 'lat.fr.algy.geom.hist.geog.bot.div.arith.'

These reflections of a lazy, under-achieving, unambitious boy are inscribed in atrocious spelling and execrable grammar, which nevertheless cannot hide the precocity of their possessor, whose view of history, for instance, is along the following lines: "Noone hav ever found a way of avoiding history it is upon us and around us all. The only thing when you look at the cuning vilaninous faces in our class you wonder if history may not soon be worse than ever.'

Molesworth's frequent cure for the sadnesses of this world is day-dreaming, but even here, he is sometimes let down by the grim realities of life. As in this passage of a dream in which a flood engulfs his school:

Up Up Up the swirling waters rise steadily. The vegetable garden and playing fields are a sea of water old foopball boots float in the skool yard. Inside corridors and classrooms are deep in water...The gallant boys, meanwhile, hav climbed upon floating blackboards benches and tubs. They punt peacefully across the skool yard. The chivalrous molesworth hav prudence entwistle the beautiful under-matron upon his craft hem-hem PRUDENCE: How peaceful it is upon the waters nigel. ME: (blushing benethe my boater) i have a rather nasty hack on my shin and can i have a clean handkerchief. PRUDENCE: Don't let us talk of everyday things nigel. Am i beautiful ME: Gosh ur coo i mean to say gosh. (*We glide benethe the green shade of a willow. There is silence.*) ME: Prudence- PRUDENCE: Yes, nigel? ME: i think on the whole mumps are beter than measles. (*With a strangled cry she thro the cucumber sandwiches at me.*)

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Casting an eye over what I have written, I cannot help feeling that the whole thing is some aspect of a post-colonial condition brought on by the native collaborator's false nostalgia for colonial master narratives. Or something. Besides, the essay is far too light-weight for a journal/magazine of this stature. The ending at least, it seems to me, should be on a deep note. Deep and critical and modern, or better still, post-. I think I'll sign off with a quote from Professor Homi Bhabha. Yes, that is what I will do – borrow something from his book *The Location of Culture*. I don't have the slightest idea what it signifies, but it sounds terrifically impressive and may even, for all I know, be apposite. Here goes.

When historical visibility has faded, when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest, then the displacements of memory and the indirections of art offer us the image of our psychic survival.

Ye gads!