



# Classics in Short No.51: The Wind in the Willows

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Classics in Short

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**Brian Alderson** on Kenneth Grahame's **The Wind in the Willows**.

So how did we get past fifty without ever dealing with what some regard as the classic classic?

**The Wind in the Willows** <!--break-->

*Aunty Toothache\* came visiting.*

Four milk teeth were extracted ?under gas? (fearful phrase to a seven-year-old) so by way of consolation my mother bought me a book for recuperative reading: **The Wind in the Willows** by Kenneth Grahame.

*It was an unimpressive affair*

(I have it before me as I write: its endpapers embellished with the blotchy results of an attempt to carve criss-cross lines on a school eraser to make a decorative rubber stamp.) The covers were of an unfetching brown sand-grain cloth, blocked with the drab series design of Methuen?s Modern Classics (fifty-second edition) and its 192 pages were innocent of any pictures.

*After two pages however*

such things were of no consequence. Mole had only to bowl over that elderly rabbit who tried to levy a sixpenny toll from him and then trot on his way crying ?Onion-sauce! Onion-sauce!? for one young reader to become his devoted companion for the 190 pages that remained.

*As English pastoral,*

which is what some readers have called it, **The Wind in the Willows** is more country polka than idyll. Mole?s escape to the River Bank is rapidly succeeded by his meeting with Water-Rat (really Water-Vole, as is frequently pointed out in conservation literature, but too assonant with ?mole? to be employable). The first of those feasts which gloriously punctuate the adventures is prepared; Mr Toad is momentarily spotted in his wager-boat ? first glimpse of the great central narrative; and Mole?s impulsive, but unschooled, oarsmanship sets the tenor for his perfect liaison with the ever-practical Ratty.

*Where such a train of events*

is not being expounded (Mole lost, say, amid the whistlings and patterings of the Wild Wood... Rat to the rescue... Badger and the eucatastrophe...) there may be equally appealing explorations of the character and relationship of these rural folk (Ratty?s low-key, almost sentimental, setting-up of the party for the carol-singing field-mice) and I still recall in that first encounter with the story how readily I came to trust my author. Confidence grew that, in another page or two, more jokes (Mr Toad before the Bench), or more word-play (the arming ceremony before battle: ?a-sword-for-the-

Mole, a-sword-for-the-Rat, a-sword-for-the-Toad...?) or more farce (especially the Toad's vainglorious follies) would sustain the pleasure of the reading.

### *The shared verve*

is not surprising since, as so often occurs with these classics, the story began with the author telling it aloud at bedtime to a child and then, over several years, supplementing the oral version with continuations in letters. The chronology is not clear and the sources of inspiration are variegated (the idea probably came through Grahame's liking for fables; 'The River Bank', usually assumed to be that of the Thames, may well involve the Fowey River in Cornwall too) but what is carried over from the family tale to the printed book is Grahame's mastery of the language and the pacing of his narrative.

### *Except of course*

Yes, of course 'of course', those two chapters that have so often roused critical grumblings: 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn' and 'Wayfarers All'. Both are ruminative interpolations with no direct bearing on the rapidly developing drama of Toad's adventures, and have been seen as self-indulgence on Grahame's part. (Alas that there is not space here to pursue their relationship to his earlier writings: the *fin de siècle* essays of **Pagan Papers** [1893] and those story collections that foreshadow **The Wind in the Willows : The Golden Age** [1895] and **Dream Days** [1898].\*\*)

### *From those earlier examples and precedents*

it seems reasonable to argue that Grahame was willing to risk the charge of self-indulgence for the sake of bodying out and reconfiguring a larger purpose behind his epic fable. Whatever readers might find of comedy or allegory in the doings of these animals it was important for them to recognise behind the larks an all-embracing unity in the natural world and an unquenchable zest (fulfilled or not) to venture beyond the next horizon. Few years remained beyond 1908 when such Romantic idealism could have any validity, and it looks pretty threadbare now with the River Bank clogged up with people-carriers and beakers full of the warm South served up on £5 flights to Venice.

### *Michael Foreman*

in a Note to his expansive, but overweight, illustrated edition of the story (Chrysalis 2001, just reissued in paperback) strongly commends these two 'difficult' chapters, but erroneously remarks that they are 'often omitted from modern editions'. So far as I can discover they are always included but are indeed noteworthy for offering illustrators little in the way of narrative purchase - thereby emphasizing the dearth of action at points when the reader is most expecting it. (Attempts at Pan, including that by Ernest Shepard, should really be forbidden - although Foreman does better than most - and apart from him the artist is thrown back on variably successful boating scenes and pictures of the Seafaring Rat gesturing 'Go South, young man'.)

### *Such illustrative problems*

are not confined to those two chapters however and there is much to be said for having the story published in plain-text as first occurred (apart from a soggily symbolic frontispiece by Grahame's friend Graham Robertson along with a gilt-blocked Pan on the front board and Toad in motoring gear on the spine). Efforts to add illustrations in 1913, 1922, and 1927 were uniformly disastrous and it's no wonder that when E H Shepard (the publisher's illustrator-of-choice after his success with A A Milne) called on Grahame in 1930 to discuss a new edition the author plaintively cried 'I love these little people. Be kind to them'.

### *Peter Green*

in his perceptive biography of Grahame, first published in 1959, sums up exactly the arguments against illustrating the book. There is a 'fluidity of viewpoint' about the storytelling (most obvious in the shifts between animal and human behaviour in the characters). The inner eye of the reader - such is the genius of Grahame's exposition - 'sees no

incongruity in these metamorphoses (and in fact hardly notices them) while visual representation at once pins down Grahame's imagination to a single static concept?. He accepts that Shepard 'came as near as possible' to finding a balance (now joined, in my view, by Patrick Benson who was given the book by HarperCollins after his work on William Horwood's first sequel **The Willows in Winter** ). But that child in the big armchair, consoling himself with the drab little 'Modern Classic?', assures me that he never felt need for someone to show him what was going on. Mr Grahame was sufficient.

\* See article on Hans Christian Andersen, p.7

\*\* **Footnote** : Will someone please reissue these, preferably in the combined volume illustrated by Charles Keeping done by The Bodley Head in 1962. I'd like to devote a back-page to that.

The illustrations by Michael Foreman are taken from the 2001 Chrysalis edition now available in paperback (1 84458 377 5, £9.99).

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