



Seeing with the Heart

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Alan Wakeman on his new translation of **The Little Prince** - with further commentary by **Michael Foreman** and **Erik Blegvad**.

Alan Wakeman on his new translation of **The Little Prince**

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Since it first appeared 50 years ago, Antoine de Saint-Exupery's **The Little Prince** has become a classic attracting a cult following in each successive generation. This month sees the publication, by Pavilion Books, of a radical new version which combines new illustrations by Michael Foreman with a new translation by Alan Wakeman, who here describes how and why he embarked on its 17-year journey to publication.

37 years ago I picked up a second-hand copy of Antoine de Saint-Exupery's **Le Petit Prince** at one of those pavement booksellers that still cling precariously to the stone parapets of the River Seine in Paris. The year before I'd dropped out of the fourth year of a part-time architecture course, sold all my worldly goods - it didn't amount to much - and taken a one-way ticket to Paris. At the time I couldn't explain why to bewildered friends or family but, looking back, I'm surprised it took me so long. I was young, idealistic, full of passion and desperate to find something meaningful to do with my life. Instead I'd found myself doing a succession of mind-numbing drafting jobs on factory farms, housing estates and office blocks for a succession of materialistic clients who boasted their only interest was 'maximum floorspace for minimum money'. Small wonder I fled.

So, at the age of 23, I was alone in a country where I hardly spoke the language, painting walls by day and reading in cafes by night. But now at least my circumstances matched my feelings: I'd always felt an outsider, now I genuinely was one. Inevitably, as my language skills improved, I discovered the French could be just as materialistic as the English. But during the three years I lived in France I happened upon a series of books that were to change my life. **Le Petit Prince** was the first. 'We only really see with our hearts,' the fox says to the little prince. 'What matters is invisible to the eyes. . .' Exactly.

Imagine my disappointment then, on my return to London a few years later, to find this profound magical book available in English only in a ponderous translation that failed utterly to capture the spirit of the original. I abandoned my plan to buy copies as presents and got on with my new job - a job which *wassatisfying* because it helped people communicate with one another: I became an English language teacher.

In 1979, 20 years after I first read it, I resolved to attempt a new translation myself. I rented my favourite hillside cabin on my favourite Mediterranean island and set about my labour of love - I took it for granted that my new version,

however successful, couldn't be published till the copyright expired in 1994. But I was on holiday, and the view was inspiring. A chain of islands known as Les Iles d'Or stretches away to the west and every evening I was treated to spectacular sunsets of the Golfe de Giens where the last island becomes a peninsular linked to the mainland at Hyeres. As I sat on my terrace, my favourite view in the world spread before me, serenaded by nightingales, struggling with my self-appointed task, I would scarcely have credited what would happen at the focal point of this scene 14 years later. For, in December 1993, even as we began preparing my new translation for publication, the wreckage of Saint-Exupery's plane was found in this selfsame Golfe de Giens, where it had lain undiscovered since he crashed and died there on 31st July 1944.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery was born in Lyon on 29th June 1900 into a family with an aristocratic lineage extending back seven centuries. When his father died before his fourth birthday he inherited the title *Le Comte de Saint-Exupery* (though he rarely used it). Despite this loss, he and his three sisters and younger brother, Francois, had an idyllic childhood thanks to their mother, Marie. She created a secure loving atmosphere at the family estate at Saint-Maurice de Remens to shield her children from the loss of their father and the financial blow it had dealt them. (It eventually forced her to sell the entire estate.) Antoine was influenced all his life by her simple goodness which for him set an example no other woman could match, while she for her part loved her son's gentle nature and cherished the curious tender boy she observed picking his way cautiously along the footpaths to avoid treading on insects. 30 years later when he was a famous aviator, bestselling author and *enfant terrible* of the French establishment, he could still write to his mother: 'I'm not sure I've lived since childhood...'

Yet his life was crammed with adventure. Saint-Exupery pioneered remote airmail routes across deserts and mountain ranges, flew long-distance record attempts (some ending in near-fatal crashes), patented more than a dozen inventions (including an aircraft landing system) and wrote numerous prize-winning books and successful screenplays. The 1934 film of his bestselling novel, **Night Flight**, starring Clark Gable and Myrna Loy, ran for months on both sides of the Atlantic while another bestseller, **Terre des Hommes (Wind, Sand and Stars)** won the *Prix du Roman* in France in 1939. This brave passionate man also won three *Croix de Guerre* as a reconnaissance pilot in the Second World War, went into voluntary exile in the United States when France was occupied by the Nazis, and returned to fly perilous reconnaissance missions over southern France from Algeria and Corsica. Indeed, it seemed to his friends he sometimes forgot to take the most elementary precautions when flying in order to flirt with death. In France he is a national hero whose life is celebrated in more than 40 biographies though we can easily imagine the retort his cheeky star child would make seeing the current 50-franc banknote with its rudimentary depiction of Saint-Exupery and the little prince himself on his planet.

As a writer he was a perfectionist. The simple beauty and purity of his prose was the result of hours of painstaking distillation of his thoughts to their irreducible essence. His friends were accustomed to being wakened at three in the morning to listen to rewrites of chapters they'd heard a dozen times before in wordier versions. He even invaded printers' workshops to make changes to final copy. Such an author deserves careful translation.

Shortly after I completed mine and returned to London, I met by chance a young man who turned out to be a member of the author's family. He passed a copy of my new translation on to his mother, Mme Huguette Imbert de Saint-Exupery, who commented: 'I hope you'll move heaven and earth to get it published!' and sent it on to Saint-Exupery's last surviving sister in Provence. As a result of their delight at my new version, I was invited to spend a holiday at their country home on an island off the Brittany coast. So I found myself honing the text I'd begun on an island off the south coast of France within sight of the place where the author had died, on another island off the north coast, staying with his family.

These serendipitous events have enhanced my feelings of personal involvement with Saint-Exupery's marvellous fable of life, love and death. Re-reading it now, I'm astonished how relevant it still is. 50 years ago it presaged our current despair as the certain result if self-serving materialistic politicians were allowed to continue treating their citizens as mere consumers. **The Little Prince** is a manifesto for a saner way to conduct our lives. No one listened then. Will anyone listen now? Are we ready to see with the heart yet?

The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, translated by Alan Wakeman and illustrated by Michael Foreman, is published this month by Pavilion (1 85793 288 9) at £10.99

First, the 1945 Katherine Woods translation of Saint-Exupery's dedication. On its right, the new Alan Wakeman translation.

TO LEON WERTH

I ask the indulgence of the children who may read this book for dedicating it to a grown-up. I have a serious reason; he is the best friend I have in the world. I have another reason: this grown-up understands everything, even books about children. I have a third reason: he lives in France where he is hungry and cold. He needs cheering up. If all these reasons are not enough, I will dedicate the book to the child from whom this grown-up grew. All grown-ups were once children although few of them remember it. And so I correct my dedication:

TO LEON WERTH

WHEN HE WAS A LITTLE BOY

FOR LEON WERTH

I hope all you children will forgive me for dedicating

this book to a grown-up. I've got a good

excuse: this grown-up is my best friend in the whole

world. I've got another excuse: this grown-up

understands everything, even children's books. I've

got a third excuse: this grown-up lives in

France and he's hungry and cold. He really needs

cheering up. If all these excuses aren't good

enough, I don't mind dedicating this book to the

child this grown-up used to be. All grown-

ups used to be children once. (Though few of them

remember it.) So I'll alter my dedication:

FOR LEON WERTH

when he was a little boy

Saint-Exupery wrote *The Little Prince* in exile in the USA while his beloved France was occupied by Nazi Germany.

A word from the new translation's illustrator, **Michael Foreman**

I was working in my studio last year when the phone rang.

'My name is Alan Wakeman. You don't know me. Do you like **The Little Prince**?

'I love it,' I said.

'I've made a new translation. Do you want to illustrate it?'

'It shouldn't be re-illustrated,' I said. 'The original drawings are part of the magic.'

'It's coming out of copyright,' he said. 'Think about it.'

I thought about it. I re-read the story. I loved it even more than when I first read it in my teens. I was even more certain that the original pictures should not be changed.

I read around the subject and about the extraordinary life of Saint-Ex. I found I loved the author even more than his little Prince.

I wanted to do pictures of the author. I felt he should be visible in this, his most famous book. This seemed to be a valid reason to make new pictures - not instead of the old ones, but as *extra* pictures.

I phoned Colin Webb at Pavilion. 'Do you like **The Little Prince**?' I asked. 'I love it,' he said.

'Would you be interested in a new translation and a few new pictures?' 'Let's do it,' he said.

The challenge was to do as little damage to the delicate beauty of the original as possible. I regarded the undertaking as a damage limitation exercise.

I hoped it would appear as if untouched by hand or brush. Perhaps the brush of a butterfly's wing at most. To this end I reverted to using an airbrush (a habit I have given up in recent years).

Later I found I had to faithfully re-draw all Saint-Ex's original pictures onto my watercolour paper using my paints as the mix of old and new was too disturbing. Also Saint-Ex had not cleaned his brush very carefully and the Little Prince's costume varied in colour from one picture to the next.

I hope not too much charm has been lost in the process.

I read it to my eight-year-old who thought it brilliant, funny and sad. It *has*

a beautiful poignant sadness. The final paragraph hits the spot every time.

A memoir by **Erik Blegvad**, Danish author/illustrator and would-be aviator; plus a further memoir by the very first child to read **The Little Prince**.

As a boy in Copenhagen before the war, and before any understanding of philosophy or appreciation of literary style had ever interfered with my choice of reading matter, I read three Saint-Exupery titles available in Danish translation - **Courier Sud**, **Vol de Nuit** and **Terre des Hommes**. These three books, it's true, lived on the periphery of my shelves of aviation literature. You could never count on him to mention the type of aeroplane he was flying and sometimes the book became a love story. But I had never before read an author who so convincingly described what flying an aeroplane is like.

Living in Paris after the war I found more books by Saint-Exupery, **Pilote de Guerre**, **Lettre a un Otage** and, to my surprise, a children's book **Le Petit Prince**. It's a tender, wise text and, like the best children's books, of equal value to adults. Saint-Exupery's own humanism, his search for what it is that makes a life worth living, makes it a classic worthy of a place among his best novels and it's illustrated by the author! I had myself become an illustrator of sorts, not an aviator as in my boyhood dreams. Saint-Exupery's illustrations completely enchanted me. I was moved to think of him as a philosopher and a famous author exiled in New York after the fall of France, now also an illustrator. Still a pilot,

volunteering to fight with the free French, crashing and dying, he lies in his own French Mediterranean, among others - Philosophers, Pilots, Authors, an Illustrator! This pleased me enormously. My prosaic occupation seemed now imbued with a deeper glow and I realised that it no longer mattered that I might never become a pilot. It was fine being an illustrator.

During my second year in Paris I heard a personal memoir of Antoine de Saint-Exupery. The first reader of **Le Petit Prince**, the first child to see the manuscript and those enchanting illustrations - was a friend of mine, Michele Lazareff Rosier. Here is how she remembers it:

^The story goes like this: Saint-Exupery was a very close friend of my parents and as I was the only little French child he knew, he gave me his manuscript to read to learn how a child would react. I was then, I think, 11 years old - in 1940 (I suppose everyone knows the year and month it was written in - I'm not sure at all). He lived near Columbus Circle in Manhattan; the manuscript was absolutely beautiful with very few words on each page, handwritten in Saint-Ex tiny, but very easy to read writing - and on each page an ink drawing filled in with most delicate watercolour.

I don't know how long it took me to read **Le Petit Prince** but, yes, I cried a lot. That's all I remember and that's very little.'

Erik Blegvard has illustrated and translated **Hans Christian Andersen**, a selection of stories and fairy tales, published by Heinemann (0 434 92904 2) at £12.99.

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