

PUBLIC SCHOOL FICTION

IN THE BAILLIEU LIBRARY

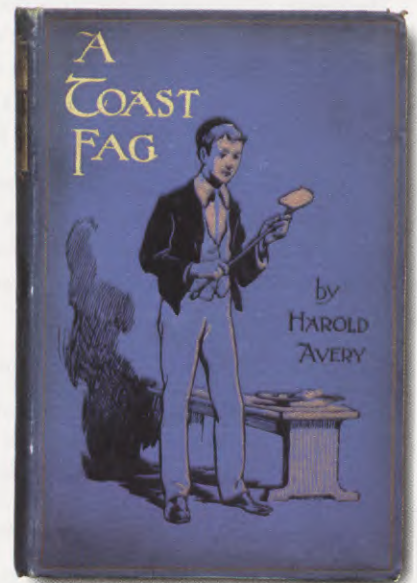
by Lesley Caelli



The public school fiction collection held in the Baillieu Library's Special Collections provides a fascinating insight into the rich history of what is, today, regarded as a very quaint (and very British) literary tradition. Purchased by the Library from London bookseller Bertram Rota in 1989, the collection was initially amassed over a period of approximately 25 years by the eccentric English collector Timothy d' Arch Smith.¹

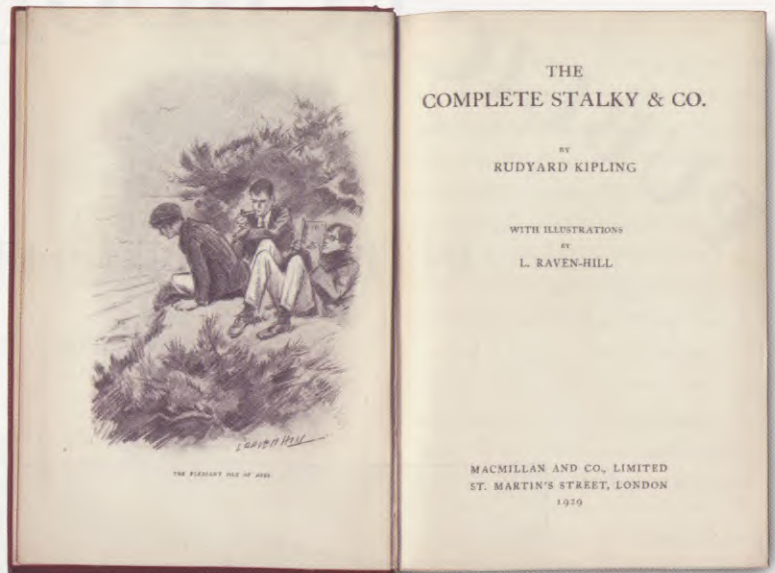
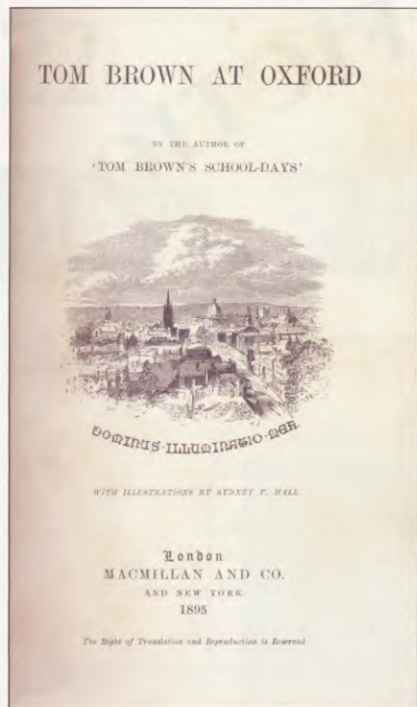
It is difficult to pinpoint when the school story was born. *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) is often assumed to be the first boy's school story. While it was certainly the first book of its type to have a major impact on the reading public, some 40 or so titles, most of them now fallen into obscurity, precede *Tom*, and the genre was already well established by the time Thomas Hughes put pen to paper.

Kirkpatrick notes that the first major, as opposed to incidental, mention of a school in prose was in Thomas Spateman's *The Schoolboy's Mask: a play in five acts*, published in 1742, predating by seven years Sarah Fielding's *The Governess, or The Little Female Academy* (1749), the work usually acknowledged as the first school story. The first genuine school



Top: Child's slate writing desk, cut-glass inkwell and steel dipping pen belonging to Percy Grainger. (Grainger Collection)

Right: *A Toast-Fag and Other Stories* by Harold Avery (London, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1901). A 'fag' was a younger boy of lesser status within English public schools — usually in first year — who was at the beck and call of the older boys, a kind of unpaid servant.



Above: *The Complete Stalky & Co.* (London, Macmillan and Co., 1929), was based on Rudyard Kipling's own school experiences.

Left: The lesser known sequel to *Tom Brown's School Days*, *Tom Brown at Oxford* (London, Macmillan and Co., 1895).

story, *The History of a Schoolboy*, was published anonymously in 1771, while William Beloe's *Incidents of Youthful Life, or The True History of William Langley* (1790), was the first work to use what was to become the traditional setting for books of this ilk, the English public school.²

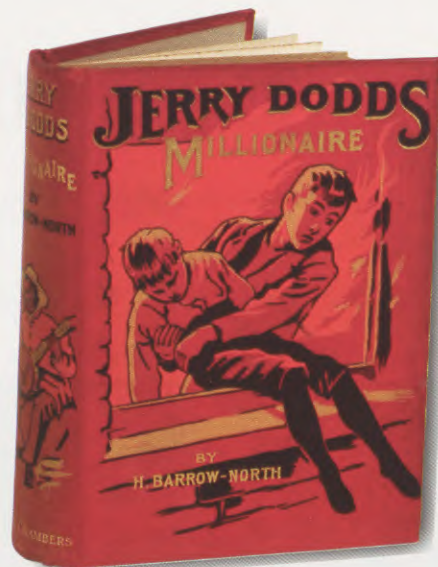
The heyday of the school fiction era ran between 1880 and 1940. Throughout this period school stories filled the popular boys periodicals, and the hardback novels were published at an average rate of one every fortnight. Although they often tended to gloss over many of the less savoury aspects of public school life — such as bullying and ritualistic beatings — they exemplified the public school ethos of manliness, honesty, sportsmanship, loyalty and chivalry; the very ideals upon which the British Empire had purported to have been built.

The world described in these stories was often an idealistic one, painting a picture of public school life that was both cosy and sympathetic. Boys would be boys, and the schoolmasters seldom earned praise for any depth of thought. There was always some flimsy excuse for the hero to sneak out of the dorms at night and get into all manner of scrapes before he saved the day in the last chapter. Games were often integral to the plot, with many hinged upon the outcome of a crucial cricket or football match.³

George Orwell perfectly summed up the appeal of these stories when he wrote in his essay *Boys' Weeklies* (1940):

*The year is 1910 — or 1940, but it is all the same. You are at Greyfriars, a rosy-cheeked boy of fourteen in posh tailor-made clothes, sitting down to tea in your study on the Remove passage after an exciting game of football which was won by an odd goal in the last half-minute. There is a cosy fire in the study, and outside the wind is whistling. The ivy clusters thickly round the old grey stones ... Everything is safe, solid and unquestionable. Everything will be the same for ever and ever.*⁴

One notable detractor in this cosy depiction of school life was Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky and Co.*, a collection of nine interlinked stories that first appeared in separate journals and were later collected together and published in book form in 1899. Based upon Kipling's own school experiences, *Stalky and Co.* has been widely criticised for the violence and iconoclasm in its depiction of schoolboy life.⁵ Unlike the majority of writers in this genre, rather than dwell upon moral issues and the development of character, Kipling focussed more on the school itself and the values it aimed to impart to its students.⁶



Left: *Out of the Running: A School Story*, by Harold Avery (London, Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1904).

Right: *Jerry Dodds, Millionaire: A School Yarn of Merriment and Mystery*, by H. Barrow-North (London, W. & R. Chambers, 1901). The Library's copy is inscribed, 'Master Aubrey with best wishes for a happy Xmas from "Byfrid" & Ellis, Xmas 1904'.

Today the school fiction genre has all but disappeared. For many years school stories suffered from critical dismissal and public derision, and it is only recently that their influence and merits have begun to be revalued. Even Orwell conceded that the genre had its merits, acknowledging that it endorsed many cherished values and was relatively free from mindless violence and sensationalism. In an age when children's entertainment is dominated by Xboxes and iPods and apprentice wizards, it is good to reflect on a time when the simple ideals of friendship and honour were not only encouraged, but also upheld.

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Notes

- 1 T.J. Strehlow, *Boyzone: British School Boy Fiction: a bibliography in progress (A-M) of items in the Baillieu Library*, Parkville, University of Melbourne Library, 1996.
- 2 Robert J. Kirkpatrick, *Bullies, Beaks and Flannelled Fools: an annotated bibliography of boys' school fiction 1742-1990*, London, R.J. Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 1.
- 3 Benjamin Watson, *English Schoolboy Stories: an annotated bibliography of hardcover fiction*, Metuchen, N.J., Scarecrow Press, 1992, p. xiv.
- 4 George Orwell, 'Boys' Weeklies', in *Horizon*, March, 1940. Accessed online, 17 October 2005: <http://www.netcharles.com/orwell/essays/boysweeklies1.htm>
- 5 Watson, op. cit, p. 95.
- 6 P.W. Musgrave, *From Brown to Bunter: the life of the school story*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 178.