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Of School and the River:

The Wind in the Willows and its Immediate Audience

by Kathryn V. Graham

The Wind in the Willows is most innocently appreciated as nostalgic animal fantasy: a pastoral celebration of animal life along the riverbank, where the four primary "animal gentlemen" Mole, Rat, Badger, and Toad enjoy a series of picaresque adventures that often involve "messing about in boats" but always end with a return to their snug and comfortable homes. The novel's episodes promote friendship, courtesy, competence, courage, and generosity in an idyllic world where sex, work, violence, and death are beyond the horizon. Experienced readers contextualize the story in various ways. For Humphrey Carpenter the riverbank constitutes an Arcadia, one of the secret gardens characterizing the Golden Age of children's literature. Kenneth Grahame's biographer Peter Green sees the novel as a psychological escape for its author, Grahame's refuge from his disastrous marriage and his mundane, if well-compensated, job in the Bank of England. Lois Kuznets points out the mock-epic Odyssean theme and structure. Peter Hunt sees the novel as animal idyll, *Bildungsroman*, sociological document on class warfare, anarchist comedy, burlesque, nostalgia, sexist conservative tract—"by fits and starts, all of these" (97).

The novel richly repays all such readings, but here I would like to head back to the text's origins, curiously neglected by most interpreters of the book and warranting examination of the sort Marilyn Butler calls for when she observes, "The writings of the past ask for an educated reading, as far as possible from within their own discourse or code or cultural system" (43). It is particularly worth remembering that the narrative involves not only a specific author but also a specific addressee. *The Wind in the Willows* began as a series of bedtime stories that Grahame told his son Alastair in 1904, evolved into story letters when the two were apart in 1907, and finally took published form in 1908. In this essay, I contend that what Grahame wanted to pass down to Alastair, from father to son, from public-school old boy to future new boy, is material designed to inform the child about his future education, presented in a form meant to be palatable and accessible to the four-year-old audience of the oral stories and the seven-year-old on holiday with his governess. The story of the neophyte Mole, who makes friends, acquires knowledge and skills, and widens his world, is specifically applicable to the situation Alastair was shortly to face. Though *The Wind in the Willows* serves admirably as a general guidebook to the ways of that interesting young animal the English schoolboy, its fictive and rhetorical strategies specifically reflect the particular anxieties and circumstances of its author and its addressee.

In that sense, this obliquely cautionary and educational tale written by an initiate of the system is schoolboy lore customized to meet the needs of a one-boy audience.¹

* * * * *

Interestingly, the one piece of schoolboy fiction we are sure Grahame read, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), resulted from the identical impulse: Thomas Hughes wrote the novel as he pondered what to tell his eight-year-old son Maurice about entry into the world of school. But if Alastair—eccentric, overemotional, physically handicapped, precocious, maternally dependent—were to meet and recognize himself in late-Victorian realistic schoolboy fiction, he would see his prototype mocked, bullied, and tagged with a derisive effeminate nickname, such as "Molly" or "Fluff." Such misfits, in fiction, faced the torment of being tossed in a blanket or held over a fire—or in the real-life case of Lewis Carroll at Rugby, might have books defaced with such a taunt as "C. L. Dodgson is a muff." *The Wind in the Willows's* covert resemblances to classic school stories suggest that rather than frighten Alastair by modeling his work on the available realistic novels and periodicals (*The Captain*, *The Boy's Own Paper*), Grahame chose a more oblique and palatable form for dispensing schoolboy survival tips.

The choice to present material through animal fantasy rather than school story would have been heartily endorsed by C. S. Lewis, a near contemporary of Alastair Grahame's, had he read *The Wind in the Willows* in childhood rather than first encountering it in his twenties. In "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," Lewis articulates his dislike of the realistic schoolboy fiction he had read as a child. Lewis's hostility centers on the disappointing illusions of realism: "I never expected the real world to be like the fairy tales. I think that I did expect school to be like the school stories. The fantasies did not deceive me; the school stories did" (1078). Such stories gripped him with the longing to be a popular, athletic, and successful schoolboy; they returned him to his own world "undivinely discontented" (1078). This discontentment, perhaps the natural lot of the ordinary many, would be a still greater risk for a boy carrying Alastair Grahame's extraordinary burdens.

In his excellent biography of Kenneth Grahame, Green reports that "Alastair Grahame was born, prematurely, on 12th May 1900; and to his parents' intense distress, proved to have congenital cataract of the right eye, which was com-

pletely blind, together with a pronounced squint in the left—which was also ‘over-sighted’” (227). The delicate child of unhappily married parents, Alastair “became the recipient of both his parents’ thwarted emotions” (227). To say that he was spoiled would be an understatement. Carpenter comments on Alastair’s “precocious, cheeky manner which nauseated Grahame’s friends” (152). Green deplores Elspeth Grahame’s refusal to recognize her son’s physical handicaps and mental instability and argues that she created a fantasy of his physical prowess and mental brilliance: “The boy’s whole life became a struggle to live up to the impossible ideal she set him; and in the end the strain proved too great” (228). Kenneth Grahame did not share his wife’s illusions about Alastair. As a former public-school boy himself, Grahame knew from experience what his overindulged and overpraised son would face. As he was writing the story-letters to the seven-year-old Alastair in 1907, he must have been agonizing over the ordeal that according to upper-middle-class convention lay ahead: departure from the cocoon of mother’s adoration and nanny’s cossetting to the harsh male world of the English public school.

Grahame himself had enjoyed success in this overwhelmingly masculine world, where boys slept five or six to a room, the teachers were all men, and there was only the rarest contact with woman in the form of Matron, who helped the smaller boys and sometimes dispensed treats in the kitchen to the homesick and dispirited. After early experiences with the arbitrary and bizarre ways of the schoolmasters at St. Edward’s School, Oxford, he learned to conceal or indirectly present his own ideas while winning prizes for Divinity and Latin prose in 1874 and the Sixth Form Class Prize in 1875. He earned the respect of his fellow students through gaining First Fifteen colors for Rugby, making the second eleven in cricket, and serving as Senior Prefect (head of school). He wrote essays for the school paper and spoke in the Debating Society. But despite his successes, Grahame clearly remembered the pain of his own entry into the world of the public school. In an essay called “The Fairy Wicket,” published in *The National Observer* in 1892, he sketches the vivid image of “a small school-boy, new kicked out of his nest into the draughty, uncomfortable outer world, his unfledged skin still craving the feathers where into he was wont to nestle” (Prince 30-31). Green reports Grahame’s belief that “the ordeal of school is unavoidable; henceforth one must live in the enemy’s camp, wear his colors, and mouth his public shibboleths. What is more insidious is the possibility that one may come to believe in them” (32).

Most written records of school days, autobiographical and fictional alike, fall into one of several categories,

depending on the writer’s attitude. Royston Lambert identifies five distinct types of schoolboy, three of whose attitudes are likeliest to result in written accounts: the conformist, who believes in both the ends and the means of his particular school’s system; the innovator, who seeks reform and improvement; and the rebel, who rejects the institution outright (358).² The attitude Grahame expresses comes closest to fitting into the category Lambert calls “ritualist,” that of a boy who follows school rules without accepting them. As a ritualist and as a parent who seems to have understood his son’s particular circumstances, Grahame apparently found none of the usual direct methods of instruction appropriate for Alastair but instead encoded the lore necessary for schoolboy survival in the anthropomorphic animal story that became *The Wind in the Willows*. It may be, then, that one reason Grahame did not directly offer advice about schoolboy life was an ambivalent reluctance to either ally himself with the “enemy camp”—the world of arbitrary, dogmatic adults—or directly attack the system propounded in that camp, a system under which he himself had done well. Another reason might be his understanding that Alastair would never excel at sports requiring hand-eye coordination and stamina and his tactful reluctance to draw attention to his own successes in such schoolboy endeavors.³

Whatever his reasons, Grahame’s strategy involved doing what is implicit above in such previously quoted phrases as “kicked out of the nest” and “unfledged skin.” He transmuted school into the Riverbank, schoolboys in general into animals, Alastair in particular into Mole, who, involved in explicitly domestic doings as chapter one of *Wind in the Willows* begins, says “Hang spring-cleaning,” leaves his dark hole, and scratches his way upward into the sunlit meadow. The choice of a mole as the story’s new boy is particularly well calculated given its immediate audience, the partially blind Alastair. But any new boy at school might, to a lesser extent, be a mole of sorts—obliged to leave the dark, womblike confines of home and nursery for enlightenment. Like the mole (if we are to take his animal nature with any seriousness), the new boy ejected from his nest cannot at first see the spring charms of his new environment. He must learn the ways of the Riverbank (or school); get along with the other animals (or boys); find a particular ally to protect, instruct, and befriend him; and win the respect of his comrades through athletic endeavor.

In making the place of learning a river and its environs, Grahame appropriates an accessible and popular metaphor. As land-dwelling humans find, water is an alien element but one to which they can, with practice and instruction, grow accustomed. Horace Annesley Vachell’s *The Hill*, a 1905 novel about contemporary Harrow, begins with a didactic

passage based on this likeness: "You're about to take a header into a big river. In it are rocks and rapids, but you know how to swim, and after the first plunge, you'll enjoy it" (1-2). Besides being alien, "not-home," a river is dynamic. Like school, it is not simply a place but a means of taking those who embark away from home or back again, a motif Christopher Clausen delineates in "Home and Away," his comparison of *The Wind in the Willows* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Finally, the river is a distinctively congenial choice for Grahame's immediate audience. The Grahame family lived on the Thames, at Cookham Dene in Alastair's childhood, later at Pangbourne. Interestingly, the primary sport in *Wind in the Willows*, boating, was Kenneth Grahame's favorite recreation; and Alastair, despite his visual impairment, was a competent boater and swimmer.

Having found his way to the riverbank and met one of its habitués, the Water Rat, Mole candidly admits that he has never been in a boat or lived the jolly river life. Rat takes the neophyte under his wing, as an older boy might a younger, and shares the lore of the world that is, in his words, "brother and sister to me . . . and company, and food and drink. . . . It is my world, and I don't want any other. What it hasn't got is not worth having, and what it doesn't know is not worth knowing" (8). Rat smooths Mole's way with introductions to other members of his set. He warns Mole away from undesirables, notably the animals of the Wild Wood: "weasels—and stoats—and foxes and so on. They're all right in a way—I'm very good friends with them—pass the time of day when we meet and all that—but they break out sometimes, there's no denying it, and then—well, you can't really trust them, and that's a fact" (9-10). Some critics read the Wild Wooders as projections of Grahame's bourgeois social fears (proletarians, socialists, radicals); but in the context of life at school they are equally apt representations of the bounders, blighters, and cads a keen schoolboy loathes, those who are not "our sort" once the process of indoctrination has taken hold. Such indoctrination is a staple of realistic schoolboy fiction, where, for instance, it takes the form of feuds between classical and modern students ("our sort" and "cads" respectively) in Talbot Baines Reed's *The Cock House of Fells garth* (1891) and Compton Mackenzie's *Sinister Street* (1913).⁴

The Wind in the Willows begins this process by offering a series of object lessons for Alastair, or any other new-boy-to-be. In one such instance, Mole

began to feel more and more jealous of Rat, sculling so strongly and easily along, and his pride began to whisper that he could do it every bit as well. He jumped up and seized the sculls so suddenly that Rat . . . was taken by surprise and fell backwards off his seat. . . . "Stop it you *silly* ass!"

cried the Rat, from the bottom of the boat. "You can't do it! You'll have us over!" The Mole flung his sculls back with a flourish, and made a great dig at the water. He missed the surface altogether, his legs flew up above his head, and he found himself lying on top of the prostrate Rat. (15)

The immediate result may be humiliation for the rash and untutored new boy—Mole has to "brush away a tear or two with the back of his paw" while Rat "kindly looked in another direction" (17)—but the more enduring result is Rat's transmitting to Mole the lore of river life, and "very thrilling stories they were, too, to an earth-dwelling animal like Mole" (17).

Having met the friend who will be David to his Jonathan, Mole makes the acquaintance of authority as it exists for the Riverbank animals—Badger, who resembles nothing so much as a gruff but kindly headmaster of the Arnoldian type. As Grahame's text describes Badger, "He seemed, by all accounts, to be such an important personage and, though rarely visible, to make his unseen influence felt by everybody about the place" (38). Literally the *eminence grise* of the story, Badger embodies moral authority; his purpose is to encourage, exhort, and, if necessary, reform those under his protection. Mole's first sustained encounter with Badger begins as he and Rat, frightened and exhausted, knock at Badger's door. Badger's initially sharp and suspicious response turns quickly to fatherly concern: "He looked kindly down on them and patted both their heads. 'This is not the sort of night for small animals to be out,' he said paternally. 'I'm afraid you've been up to some of your pranks again, Ratty'" (58). After taking care of their physical comforts—a fire, dry clothes, supper—Badger assumes the place of adult authority "in his armchair at the head of the table" and evokes Rat and Mole's explanation of the suspected "pranks." He "nodded gravely at intervals as the animals told their story, and he did not seem surprised or shocked at anything, and he never said, 'I told you so,' or 'Just what I always said,' or remarked that they ought to have done so-and-so, or ought not to have done something else" (the last two things Badger left unvoiced are clear echoes of the Anglican prayerbook's General Confession). Avoiding heavy-handed didacticism, Badger allows the two animals to examine their own behavior and mistakes and to draw conclusions for themselves—rather like Mr. Rastle's gentle guidance of Stephen Greenfield in Reed's *The Fifth Form at St. Dominic's* (1871). This lighter approach that trusts to Rat's and Mole's essential good instincts, however, will not be Badger's way with the fascinating bad boy of the River, Toad of Toad Hall. Hearing of Toad's latest outrageous behavior, Badger announces, "Well, we'll take Toad seriously in hand. We'll stand no nonsense whatever. . . ."

We'll *make* him be a sensible Toad" (62). When Rat and Mole inquire about Badger the next morning, the two young hedgehogs (who from their deferential behavior might be seen as representatives of lower school or a lower class) inform them, "The master's gone into his study, Sir . . . and on no account wants to be disturbed" (64). Remote or nurturing, gruff or sympathetic as circumstances demand, patiently attentive, decisive but not judgmental, morally upright but not censorious, Badger is the ideal headmaster for the Riverbank "school."

The attempted reform of Toad is perhaps Badger's greatest pedagogical challenge, variously referred to as "taking in hand," "rescue," "conversion," and "mission of mercy." Because of his particular status, Toad must change for his own good and for the good of Riverbank society. Arguably the most memorable character in the novel, Toad is rich, self-centered, charming, and driven by the impulse of the moment. No discreet and dutiful member of the middle class, he never delays gratification, pursues fad after fad to comically catastrophic conclusions, and brags about his home, wealth, wit, and good looks. Along with Mole and Rat, Toad can be seen as a recognizable type of schoolboy: like Flashman of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* or "Demon" Scaife of *The Hill*, Toad is a flamboyant narcissist, a sort likely to run into trouble at school. Indeed, when Carpenter speculates humorously on the animals' educational backgrounds, he says, "One could imagine Toad enjoying a brief period at Eton or Harrow before being expelled."⁵

Toad's determination not only to break ranks but to go out-of-bounds into the Wide World of society—and women—sets him apart from the school community. Claudia Nelson points out that "of all the animals, Toad has the greatest affinity with the human (adult and—worse—female) world" (167). His passion for motor cars has an undoubted sexual quality and brings him into contact with nurses, jailer's daughters, washerwomen, and the dreaded bargewoman. As *The Wind in the Willows* demonstrates, to follow the errant path of a character like Toad invites disaster. His unfettered individualism is personally harmful; but worse, in the eyes of Rat and Badger, it lets the side down. Toad "has been corrupted by modern gadgets; he has made a public fool of himself; he is conceited and irresponsible and a spendthrift; he has disgraced his friends" (Green 245). It is worth noting how this catalogue of sins blends the personal and the collective. Toad's self-indulgence not only hurts him but also rends the fabric of riverbank society. His downfall enables the disreputable stoats and weasels to invade Toad Hall and, ensconced there, to mock the respectable animals of Toad's set. In the cautionary case of Toad, Grahame lays down for a son encouraged to think too much of himself the foundation of public school spirit: loy-

alty to the group. Observing the perils of Toad, Mole and Alastair learn the importance of team spirit: never, never let the side down. Or in the words of the Eton Boating Song (performed *in situ suo* just a few miles down the Thames from the Grahames' house or the riverside prototype of Toad Hall, Mapledurham House), "Yes we'll still swing together / And swear by the best of schools."

In Mackenzie's *Sinister Street*, an experienced older boy, Rodber, gives the young protagonist, Michael Fane, some good advice about school life: "'Look here,' said Rodber, 'I don't mind telling you, as you'll be a new kid, one or two tips about school. Look here, don't tell anybody your Christian name and don't be cocky'" (87). Shortly thereafter, *Sinister Street*'s narrator wryly characterizes the practical schoolboy virtue of anonymity: "Michael congratulated himself that generally his dress and appearance conformed with the fashion of the younger boys' dress at Randall's. It would be terrible to excite notice. In fact, Michael supposed that to excite notice was the worst sin anybody could possibly commit" (92).

Adults may come to learn that several sins are worse than notoriety, but the schoolboy lore that Grahame passes down through *The Wind in the Willows* concurs with that offered in *Sinister Street*. As we have seen, the cockiness of Toad never goes unpunished. We never learn what Rat, Mole, or Toad may have been christened, for the characters never address one another except by surname or the generic "old chap"—only the younger of the hedgehogs, Billy, and Portly, Otter's young son, have the juvenile feature of Christian names, which signal that they are still at home with mother. Conversation in the novel is stylized to the point of impoverishment, in Kuznets's phrase "full of colloquial expressions, some of them juvenile taunts and insults, rather hackneyed in its use of descriptive adjectives like 'jolly' and 'stupid'" (113). (For proof that such adolescent reductiveness transcends cultures, classes, and decades, one need only cite the contemporary equivalent to Mole and Rat's "jolly" and "stupid": Beavis and Butthead's division of all things into what is "cool" and what "sucks.")

As all these conventions would suggest, *The Wind in the Willows*, like other schoolboy fiction, stresses giving up eccentricity and individuality in order to become part of a community. Much of Mole's essential "moleness" is left behind as the novel proceeds. He gives up his underground hole, though, like a schoolboy on holiday, he is allowed a return for Christmas before leaving, presumably forever. Becoming a Riverbanker, he puts aside childish ways. After chapter five we hear no more of his tears; by chapter nine he feels confident enough to persuade Rat against becoming a Wayfarer; and at the conclusion he joins Badger, Rat, and Toad in the mock-epic battle to regain Toad Hall from the

stoats and weasels. With Mole's "insider" status solidified, the novel's last image is of the four animals linked together as heroes of their generation, much like Stalky, Beetle, and M'Turk at the end of Kipling's *Stalky & Co.* (1899).

As many nineteenth- and twentieth-century British novels and memoirs testify, schooldays were, or at least were considered, the crucially formative time of a ruling-class man's life. In the Duke of Wellington's memorable pronouncement, "The Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton." Cyril Connolly, an Eton contemporary of Alastair Grahame's, wrote more negatively of the school's potent influence in *Enemies of Promise*:

In fact were I to deduce any system from my feelings on leaving Eton, it might be called *The Theory of Permanent Adolescence*. It is the theory that the experiences undergone by boys at the great public schools, their glories and disappointments, are so intense as to dominate their lives and to arrest their development. From these it results that the great part of the ruling class remains adolescent, school-minded. . . . Early laurels weigh like lead and of many of the boys whom I knew at Eton, I can say that their lives are over. (251-52)

A feminist reader might see indoctrination of the sort Connolly describes and *Wind in the Willows* enacts as the cultural weaning of ruling-class males.⁶ Trained to detach themselves from and subsequently to idealize, corrupt, or mystify the influence of mothers, aunts, sisters, and (female) lovers-to-be, Connolly's Etonians and Grahame's Riverbankers remain, like Bertie Wooster and the other Drones of P. G. Wodehouse's fiction, perpetual schoolboys and bachelors at heart. Literary descriptions of their state generally have more charm than do its actual consequences.

* * * * *

Idyllic though its story may be for many readers, whether children, permanent adolescents, or adults, *The Wind in the Willows* held some dark ironies for its immediate audience of one and its author. When it proved enormously successful, Grahame resigned from the Bank of England to devote himself to writing, but he never produced another book. And if he wrote *The Wind in the Willows* with the primary goal of advising Alastair on the attitudes, behavior, and language that would lead to success in one of England's famous public schools, his narrative failed to achieve its desired effect. Rather than send Alastair away at the customary age of eight (Grahame's own age when he started at St. Edward's), the family kept the child

at home with a governess until he was ten. Then, with trepidation, they sent him to prep at the Old Malthouse School in Dorset. Luckily, it was a cheerful and permissive place. Alastair was not so fortunate when in 1914 he went from his prep school to Rugby, one of the "great schools" and his mother's unrealistic choice. "Rugby," writes Alison Prince, "was a tough school, ruthless in its dealings with any boy who put on airs or who seemed in any way odd or less than a 'good sport.' Alastair, full of airs and debarred by his poor sight from all sports except swimming, had been thrown into a life which was, by his standards, little short of hell" (285). He was desperately unhappy and resigned within months. In January 1915 the Grahames got him into Eton, where he managed to stay a little more than a year. Alastair completed his education under private tutors at home and eventually entered Christ Church College, Oxford. His contemporaries at university recalled that he always seemed miserable. Struck by a train, Alastair died, a probable suicide, at the age of twenty. He seems never to have adjusted to the schoolboy world whose lore is so memorably encoded in *The Wind in the Willows*.

NOTES

¹Indeed, even the anomalous "Pan" chapter corresponds to a trope of schoolboy fiction and memoir. In many school narratives, a Wordsworthian encounter with the spiritually nurturing power of nature, a mystical episode of religious awakening, or a conversion experience fosters the protagonist's individual self-development amid the communal values-building and socialization dominating public-school life.

²These attitudes, of course, lead to different kinds of literature, which Jeffrey Richards characterizes as "the conformist, which endorses the dominant ideology, the alternative, which proposes changes, and the oppositional, which proposes rejection and abolition" (8).

³J. A. Mangan points out that it is impossible to overestimate the importance of athletic skill in British public-school life. See his *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*.

⁴For an interesting discussion of cads, bounders, and blighters, see Mackenzie 212.

⁵Carpenter envisions Badger as "undoubtedly at Winchester and New College," Rat presumably from "a minor public school which had a headmaster who admired Arnold and Maurice," and Mole as perhaps "a pupil at a provincial grammar school" (229).

⁶This line of critical thought emerged in correspondence with Malcolm Kelsall.

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