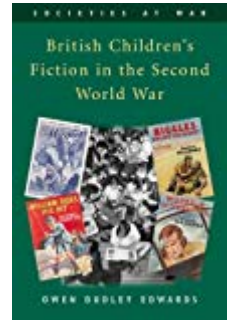


**Owen Dudley Edwards.** *British Children's Fiction in the Second World War.*  
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**Reviewed by** Stephen J. Heathorn

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If one word could possibly sum up a 744-page book, then in this case I would have to say it would have to be "indulgence." I must admit up front that it took me a long time to read Owen Dudley Edwards's *British Children's Fiction in the Second World War*, and despite the interesting topic, I am not sure it was worth the effort. It is not that Edwards writes poorly or has little of interest to say. On the contrary, every page is filled with learned allusions, wit, and genuine insight, and his primary research has been prodigious. The problem is that this research and the insights gleaned from it are not presented in an intellectually disciplined manner. Edwards has crammed into his book every last fact, every last supposition, and every last connection he has discovered in the course of reading his sources. This indulgence--and that of his editors and of the press--makes for a massive and unwieldy tome that, unfortunately, is sometimes rather tedious to wade through. The indulgence in description, extensive quotation and allusion--and, frankly nostalgia--where explicit argument and synthesizing analy-

sis were called for, diminishes the impact of what might otherwise have been an excellent book.

Although the works of over a hundred authors are mentioned or discussed in passing, the key protagonists of Edwards's tale are really Enid Blyton, W. E. Johns, Richmal Crompton, E. M. Brent-Dyer, and Frank Richards. The others--including such literary heavyweights as J. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis and George Orwell--are more or less the supporting cast, discussed to illuminate specific issues rather than the main theme of the book. That theme can be summarized as follows: the war was a time of relaxed or absent parental control, and British children inhabited a world, therefore, in which they were particularly susceptible to the messages of the popular literature and commercialized juvenile culture on which they, by necessity of parental relaxation/absence, relied to make sense of their world. So, Edwards's argument--implicit in a number of statements spread through the book rather than explicitly detailed--is that children's fiction, especially that of Blyton, Johns, and Crompton, provided "resources" for children to "manage" their experience of war. I

find this instrumental view of children's literature a more contentious proposition than does Edwards, and because he does not explicitly explore or defend his argument empirically or theoretically, I do not find that his view ultimately carries much conviction.

The position might be more convincing if the book was more engaged with relevant secondary-source literature. While the scholarly apparatus for each chapter is extensive, 95 percent of the footnotes refer to the children's books, many with further tangential comments on content or authorial context embedded in them. Privileged in the source material for this book are the novels and other children's literature and biographies, diaries, and correspondence of the literature's authors. Consequently, there is no bibliography; rather the book ends with a bibliographical essay entitled "Sources, guides and regrets." How indicative is this essay of the actual secondary sources read by Edwards is not apparent; what is noted is a very narrow and selective range of works, with yet more emphasis on the authors, rather than on the readers, of children's literature. For context about the war itself, dependable classics like Angus Calder's *The People's War* (1969) and *The Myth of the Blitz* (1994) are clearly apparent, but not more recent and equally heralded works like Sonya Rose's *Whose People's War?* (2003). Juliet Gardiner's companion to the Imperial War Museum's exhibition *The Children's War* (2005) is relied upon rather heavily, but other works in the history of childhood are eschewed as being too ready to generalize about children and for seeing children only in terms of what they might eventually become—that is, adults. There is also little evidence of reading in the scholarship on the general relationship between war and culture in Britain, and especially on the topics of war and youth culture, for instance, Michael Paris's *Warrior Nation* (2000), or on class and gender and children's reading, like Kelly Boyd's *Manliness and the Boys' Story Paper in Britain* (2003). Graham Dawson's voluminous scholarship on the

interrelationship of war, reading culture, class, and gender is also conspicuous by its absence. By focusing narrowly on his primary and so few secondary sources, Edwards has missed an opportunity to learn from and to contribute to larger current debates.

The book is actually organized into two parts: the first part, "The School of War," has five chapters, starting with an introductory one on children's literature up to 1940 parsed partly through George Orwell's essay "Boy's Weeklies" and Frank Richard's response to it, both of which were published in Cyril Connolly's magazine *Horizon* in 1940. The remaining four chapters are organized around stock figures and events in wartime children's narratives. Thus Edwards provides detailed discussions of the presence within the literature and children's culture of rationing, evacuation, "Quisling" characters, (the absence of) parents, and the place of authority figures, "officials," and other stereotyped individuals. The second part, "Lessons which May have been Learned," also contains five chapters which are loosely organized around ideas: religion, identity and authority, gender, class, and race. I say loosely, because the boundaries of these categories are nowhere defined or explained, and the discussion within each chapter rambles over many different topics without any clear analytical focus. The chapter on "gender" for instance, ranges across animals and women within children's narratives, to feminism and female authority, hetero- and homosexuality, and "tomboy" girls—but includes no analysis of masculinity.

The qualification "may" in the title of the second section is highly significant, as most of the book is a series of discussions about the content of children's books, drawing analogies, analyzing symbolism, making interpretative connections, usually in dialogue with what Edwards has been able to determine (or suppose, as much of what is suggested is, as he readily admits, is informed speculation) were the motives and intentions of

the authors. There is much of interest in these discussions, but for all the finger-wagging at historians in the bibliographic essay for generalizing about children and seeing them only through a teleological lens, there are really no children's voices in this book. The authors of children's literature are sensitively investigated. Debates about readership, and some figures about the number of children's titles that were published (but no sales or publishing figures--Edwards elsewhere in the book suggests that due to the exigencies of war such figures would be inherently unreliable) during the war are belatedly provided (p. 649), but there is no effort to get at the reception of the books by their child-readers. And, having had this charge levied at my own past work, I do not raise this issue lightly. Would children have recognized in the stories the analogies, symbols, and connections that Edwards has astutely uncovered? Indeed, does examining children's stories really provide us with a children's perspective on the home front? Exactly how do we know that the narratives and characters, for all their complexity and the sympathetic understanding of their authors, had a profound (and clearly from Edwards's tone, positive) influence on their youthful audience? For in the end, what this book presents is an erudite and detailed account of a reading of this literature by Edwards himself. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this. It is, of course, the staple of literary criticism. I doubt anyone living has read more children's literature from the period than Edwards. Yet as a self-conscious history (p. 5) of what children on the home front read and what that reading meant to them--which is how the book is being promoted on its dust jacket--this book demonstrates very little.

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