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*“Germs of Endearment”:
The Machinations of Edwardian Children’s Fictions*

Troy Boone

Machine culture, the noisy and dirty sine qua non of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity in the West, would seem to have little to do with Edwardian children’s fictions. These fictions are apparently invested in a bucolic representation of the English countryside that harks back to the pastorals of Theocritus and Virgil—and certainly to the ideologically potent recycling of the pastoral mode by the romantic poets, particularly William Wordsworth. The importance of machinery in certain of the canonical instances of Edwardian writings for young people—and the role machinery plays in the construction of a new arcadia for a new industrial, militarist, and imperialist century—has thus received little scholarly attention.

This article places two prominent Edwardian children’s fictions—Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and Edith Nesbit’s *The Railway Children* (1906)—in historical context by considering their relation to turn-of-the-century “back-to-the-land” projects, such as the Salvation Army social-reform scheme and the Boy Scout organization. Back-to-the-land projects like those put forth by William Booth and Robert Baden-Powell—founders, respectively, of the Salvation Army and the Boy Scouts—are a response to the anxiety, on the part of many middle-class late-Victorians and Edwardians, that increasingly mechanized urban life was causing the physical, moral, and mental decline of the English working classes. However, in spite of their identification of mechanized urbanity as the force causing the decline of the working classes, these back-to-the-land projects do not constitute a phobic relation to machine culture itself. Rather, their goal is the transformation of English laborers, under the supervision of the middle classes, such that those laborers will be properly fitted for return to, and manual participation in, the mechanized life of a modern industrial nation.

These politically weighty depictions are not confined to the explicitly ideological works, for adults, that comment on the supposed decline of the industrial workforce and military fighting force of a modern imperial nation. Such depictions are evident also in Edwardian children’s fictions such as Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* and Nesbit’s *The Railway Children*. These seemingly most idyllic of works for

young people acknowledge the inescapable fact of urban industrialism and are concerned to invent a pastoral that is cut to the measure of machine culture. Grahame's and Nesbit's texts thus participate in the central political fantasy of the back-to-the-land projects: the supposed improvement of the urban working classes by taking them "back to the land" is a means of reinforcing the class divisions normative in industrial England.

This article seeks to perform a particular sort of literary-historical work on Edwardian children's fictions: namely, to look at how social concerns articulated broadly in Edwardian culture also impacted upon some canonical instances of children's fiction at a particular historical point. Those social concerns are also advanced outside the sphere of writings for youth, and thus the first section of this article examines the representation of class and mechanization in late-Victorian and Edwardian texts that are for the most part written for adults—although this section also considers how these political thematics influence what may be the most widely read Edwardian text for young people, Robert Baden-Powell's inaugural Boy Scout handbook. The second and third sections of this article consider how such representations of class and mechanization surface in two canonical Edwardian children's fictions—not to suggest that these representations are manifest in all works for young people from the period but rather that the presence of such representations in two of the best-loved and seemingly most innocent of children's fictions should cause us to ask weightier political questions of golden age works¹ that seem to so many readers only to exude the restful breezes of a summer in the English countryside.

I

Two of the exemplary advertisements of late-Victorian and Edwardian back-to-the-land projects—William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890) and Robert Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys: A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship* (1908)—seek, in part, to find urban solutions for the problems of modern city life on which those texts so obsessively focus: the Salvation Army scheme calls for a network of urban rescue missions, or a "City Colony" (92), and the Boy Scout handbook recommends training city boys to be urban observers.² Yet, for instance, the larger project of the Salvationist scheme—emigration—relies on a privileging of the rural over the urban. *In Darkest England* throughout implies that only in the (fairly unsuccessful, as it

turned out) “Farm Colony” (92) could poor city-dwellers achieve the regeneration necessary to make them fit for service in the “Over-Sea Colony” (92). Similarly, the characteristics that Scouting was designed to inculcate in the next generation of Englishmen—including “the work and attributes of backwoodsmen, explorers, and frontiersmen” (vii)—imply outdoor activities (even though Baden-Powell elsewhere notes that such skills “can be learnt just as well in a town as in the country” [119]); thus, Baden-Powell argues that Scouting should appeal to concerned adults and to boys themselves because “it engages them in an active, open-air life” (vii).

However, for all of their emphasis on the desirability of removing the working classes from the city to the countryside, a concern with machine culture pervades Booth’s and Baden-Powell’s texts; indeed, as we will see, these works (like the fictions of Grahame and Nesbit) represent the working classes *as* machines and in turn confirm the essential superiority of the middle classes who have a supervisory relation to mechanized workers. Such representations of middle-class visual power over a working-class population identified with the machines they tend are central not only to back-to-the-land projects but to Victorian and Edwardian culture more generally. For instance, Wolfgang Schivelbusch persuasively describes locomotive travel as reinforcing the middle-class passenger’s understanding of him- or herself as an empowered visual subject rather than as a body passively moved and jolted by machinery. Schivelbusch argues that, although people “used to the more leisurely technology of the previous era [i.e., horse-drawn coaches] were still unable to comprehend that it had become possible to travel safely in something that seemed like an enormous grenade,” most nineteenth-century “travelers gradually got accustomed to what at first seemed frightening”—in particular through the normalization of what Schivelbusch, following Dolf Sternberger, terms “panoramic vision” (160). In this way, the railway

machine and the motion it created became integrated into his [the middle-class traveler’s] visual perception: thus he could only see things in motion. That mobility of vision—for a traditionally oriented sensorium, such as Ruskin’s, an agent for the dissolution of reality—became a prerequisite for the “normality” of panoramic vision. (Schivelbusch 64)

In contrast to this representation of the middle classes in terms of visual power, the representation of the working classes in terms of machinery

operates according to what Mark Seltzer calls the "body-machine complex," a "double discourse by which the apparently opposed registers of the body and the machine are coordinated and 'managed' within a flexible control-technology of regulation and production" (95); this control itself involves an "insistence on a compulsory and compulsive visibility" (95) of the machine-bodies to be regulated according to schedules of production. This double discourse—"at once a fantasy of surveillance and a requirement of embodiment" (95)—involves, in social-reform texts such as Booth's and Baden-Powell's and in children's fictions such as Grahame's and Nesbit's, a crucial class differential: in such texts the working classes are represented in terms of mechanized embodiment (so many factory "hands" constitute a "mass" that enables industrial productivity), whereas middle-class writers represent themselves in terms of a vision that is capable of surveying those worker-machines because the middle-class surveyor remains distinct from and superior to these mechanized bodies.

That a representation of the mechanized working-class body should appear in tandem with a concern to get the urban poor out of the city and back to the countryside might seem surprising. Yet, however much they depend on a binary understanding of the city as unhealthy and the countryside as salubrious, back-to-the-land projects are finally driven by the demand for a more productive industrial workforce—and a more fit military force. The mechanized working-class body is an image that responds in part to the worry, following the Second Boer War (1899–1902), that England needed to focus on "national efficiency" in order to produce a healthy and fit working-class physique.³ Although attempts (like Scouting) to produce a physically fit working-class population were motivated largely by military concerns,⁴ the discourse on national efficiency presumes that a fit working-class population will have a dual benefit in that a soldiery capable of winning battles in the colonies or protecting the home front from invasion would be similarly able, as an industrial workforce, to protect Britain's dominance in the production of goods—which in the same period was declining, primarily due to competition from the United States. Indeed, the Edwardian household phrase "physical efficiency" should call forth the image of the working-class body as a mechanical object whose intake and output, wear and tear, and the like can be measured by an observer—whether army officer or shop-floor supervisor—who has an appreciation for the methods of Frederick Winslow Taylor and his ilk.

In this way, Baden-Powell argues that the “prosperity of the British Empire . . . depends on the character and on the industrial value of her citizens” and that Scouting can “make our next generation into men of energy and character” (289–90). Baden-Powell asserts that English boys are weakened as a result of “being brought up in a civilised country like England” (57), such that “very few fellows learn or practice” (14) the skills necessary to be a good Scout, backwoodsman, or soldier. Thus, “when those fellows . . . try to go scouting, they find themselves helpless duffers” (15). By contrast, Baden-Powell asserts that Scouting can halt this decline by offering training in woodcraft, camping, and “living in the open” (14). The exact opposite of the “helpless duffers,” the Boy Scout who has learned to brush his teeth with a stick, to track spoor, and so forth, also finds, when he comes “back to civilisation,” that “he is more easily able to obtain employment, because he is ready to turn his hand to whatever kind of work may turn up” (57). Baden-Powell therefore insists that, in order for the Boy Scout organization to address the needs of a nation defined by its imperial, military, and industrial ambitions, the Scout’s education in such woodsy matters as camping must be complemented by training in the use of machinery. Thus the handbook notes that Boy Scouts can earn proficiency badges not only for mastering the bucolic attainments of a basket worker (27), bee-farmer (27), and naturalist (31), but also for competency as an airman (27), electrician (29), and telegraphist (35). Moreover, Scouts “must have a general idea of the working of motor-cars and steam locomotives, marine, internal combustion, and electric engines” and must know “how to start, drive, feed, stop and lubricate” such machines (29). Crucially, the working-class boy supposedly reformed by Scouting appears to have, as the destiny in which he can apply the “energy and character” gained by these diverse Scout activities, a life of tending to machines—for which his class status has already destined him anyway. For all the seeming egalitarianism of Scouting, Baden-Powell clearly indicates that a goal of the organization is increasing the “industrial value” of the working classes. Indeed, a working-class boy’s future is itself mechanized, a predictable routine, as Baden-Powell suggests in a rather bleak metaphor using an image of mechanical urbanity as its vehicle: “Opportunity is a tramcar which has very few stopping places” (235).

Similarly, Booth’s *In Darkest England* seeks to regenerate the “huge standing army of” urban laborers “whose intemperance impairs their working power” (49) by transporting them back to the land, in the

form of removal to Salvation Army farm colonies: "As the race from the Country to the City has been the cause of much of the distress we have to battle with, we propose to find a substantial part of our remedy by transferring these same people back to the country, that is back again to 'the Garden!'" (92). Booth then notes, "we have next to seriously address . . . the problem of how to help" workers regenerated by transportation to the farm colonies "to get back into the regular ranks of industry" (111). The Salvation Army is, as its name implies, driven by military metaphors, and it is a response, like Scouting, to the need—perceived by the middle classes to be quite urgent at the turn of the century—for a more physically healthy military force: Booth's phrases "standing army" and "ranks" implicitly refer to the manpower needed for imperial combats, just as they explicitly refer to the need for a fit industrial workforce.

This emphasis on producing a population of laborers able to contend with mechanized industry is reinforced in H. Rider Haggard's 1910 commentary on Salvationist social work, which describes the rescue of a young laborer by the Salvation Army Anti-Suicide Bureau as follows:

Case Four.—Telephone operator, who was driven mad by that dreadful instrument and by domestic worries. The Army Officers saved the man and smoothed over the domestic worries; but how he gets on with the telephone instruments is not recorded. (161)

Such concerns about the ability of laborers to cope with the requirements of a modern nation characterize Haggard's writings—both those for young people, such as his novel *She: A History of Adventure* (1887),⁵ and his sociological writings, such as this book on the Salvation Army. Haggard here indicates how the representation of class in back-to-the-land projects such as Booth's and Baden-Powell's operates according to what Seltzer calls the "body-machine complex" (95). At the same time, Haggard demonstrates how this representation maintains a distinction between, on the one hand, the "requirement of embodiment" and the "compulsory and compulsive visibility" (Seltzer 95) that define the worker-machine and, on the other, the middle-class subject's difference from the worker-machine, a difference that enables the middle-class subject to maintain "a fantasy of surveillance" (Seltzer 95) over such embodied and mechanized laborers. Haggard slyly suggests that the telephone operator's relationship to his equipment is (or should be) not that of human to tool but a much more intimate integration of the

two, such as the relation one has with children or spouse: he is “driven mad” by both the telephone and “domestic worries,” and his reform by the Salvationists is only partly successful because these supervisors do not attend to how he “gets on” with the phone. Significantly, the writer’s power to produce and control the information recorded in this case study depends on his ultimate difference, as a middle-class subject, from mechanical and working-class objects, from the telephone and its operator: Sir Henry Rider Haggard is, needless to say, not likely to be found at a switchboard and thus can blandly declare the telephone to be a “dreadful instrument.”

The comparison of workers to machines is not unique to turn-of-the-century social-reform discourses, but is legion in writings on industrial England. For one example among many, Henry Mayhew observes in 1851: “Food is to the human machine what coals are to the steam engine” (463). What is striking about the back-to-the-land projects is that they so subtly manage two discourses that would seem to be mutually exclusive: a pastoralism that decries the mechanization of urban culture, and an endorsement of rehabilitative projects to integrate workers more fully into machine culture in accord with notions of physical and national “efficiency.” Booth and Baden-Powell are only two among many writers who manage these discourses such that they turn out to be complementary rather than contradictory. For instance, in *The People of the Abyss* (1903) Jack London condemns “the Abyss” of the London slums as “a huge man-killing machine” (47); he insists that only if “all the subtleties and complexities of this tremendous machine civilization vanished away” could one rediscover “the essence of this remarkable English breed” that has managed “to fight and colonize to the ends of the earth” (180–81). Although London here apparently trucks with a sentimental notion of the English yeoman of bygone days (the “English breed”), he also clearly indicates, in language that any physical and national “efficiency” expert such as General Booth or General Baden-Powell would understand, that modern imperial expansion and the fighting that inevitably follows from it both require an industrial workforce: thus, according to London, the primary problem with “the Abyss” is that it makes the poor “unable to render efficient service to England in the world struggle for industrial supremacy” (231).

Indeed, even working-class *intellectual* activities—such as socialist organization—are rendered merely mechanical in much middle-class writing of the period. Thus, in a 1914 essay included in a collection published by the Earl of Meath’s Duty and Discipline movement, Helen Hester Colvill describes socialist “Anarchy” as:

a great, huge, scarlet, spiritual motor bus, advancing inexorably towards me, coming very fast, swaying and rattling and crashing along, making horrid hootings and horrid smells; and I know, I *know*, I am no longer nimble enough to jump out of its way, still less to leap inside and become part and parcel of its triumphant progress! (10)

Colvill represents a horror relatively widespread among middle-class people regarding the "scarlet" machine of socialist "anarchy." William Booth's Darkest England scheme of interconnected city, farm, and overseas colonies is, of course, opposed to working-class radicalism, and thus it is an appropriate irony that he describes his scheme as a machine that offers an *alternative* to socialism: "The Scheme, in its entirety, may aptly be compared to A Great Machine" designed to lay "the foundations, perchance, of another Empire to swell to vast proportions in later times" (93). Here it might seem that, since the Salvation Army scheme is the machine, the working classes must be the raw material, which Haggard implies when he discusses Salvationist social work with convicts, one of the Army's "machines for the regeneration of fallen men and women" (165): "Will not this mass of comparatively useless material clog the wheels of the great machine by overlading it with a vast number of ex-prisoners . . .?" (60). However, laborers are again identified with machinery when Booth imagines that working-class Salvationists will in turn perform the work of regenerating members of their own class and thus become mechanical apparatuses that are part of the "Great Machine" of Salvationism (see Boone 98–99). Moreover, Booth's comparison of the Salvation Army scheme to a "Great Machine"—like Baden-Powell's description of the "opportunity" that Scouting offers as a "tramcar"—does not render the middle-class designers of such schemes mechanical. Rather, such comparisons reinforce the notion that these schemers are essentially different from the machines (whether those machines are understood to be the schemes themselves or the workers integrated into them) that they design and supervise. Relative to the "Great Machine" made up of mechanized working-class bodies, the middle-class subject is an inventor, creator, engineer. Thus, Booth compares his founding of the Salvation Army to the original visionary conception of the railway:

From the beginning of the world down to the beginning of this century, mankind had not found out, with all its striving after cheap and easy transport, the miraculous difference that would be brought about by laying down two parallel lines of metal. . . .

What we have to do in the philanthropic sphere is to find something analogous to the engineers' parallel bars. This discovery I think I have made, and hence have I written this book. (89)

Although written for ostensibly different purposes (the entertainment of the young), Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* and Nesbit's *The Railway Children* similarly work to reinforce the visionary power that the middle-class subject has over the mechanized working-class body.

II

"A railway-station is the thing I want most in the whole world at this moment . . ."

—Toad in Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (87)

"Oh, never mind about the garden now! . . . Let's get to the railway."

—Peter in Edith Nesbit, *The Railway Children* (25)

It is well-known that Edwardian children's fictions such as Grahame's and Nesbit's influentially contribute to an ideologically potent understanding of the English nation as unspoiled countryside.⁶ As J. S. Bratton argues, such works are deeply invested in "perceiving England as a green and pleasant land, essentially rural and traditional," which is both a means of "rejecting the urban and the industrial" and "a starting point for the justification of the Empire" (77–78). Such fictions, according to Bratton, "praise English or British national characteristics, and the land itself, in order to establish a sense of what is good and to be valued. For the imperialist writer, the extension of this Englishness overseas is a cogent reason for colonial expansion" (78). However, the nostalgic pastoralism of Grahame's and Nesbit's novels is not a wholehearted rejection of "the industrial." As in back-to-the-land projects, in *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Railway Children* arcadianism is inseparable from political anxieties about the industrial efficiency of the imperial nation. In these fictions, a reaction against the decline supposedly caused by machine culture is countered by the desire for a more efficient—thus more thoroughly mechanized and supervised—working-class body. In *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Railway Children*, machine culture does not disrupt the delicate ideological ecology of arcadia. Rather, the former is incorporated into the latter⁷ and used as a means of naturalizing the normative class relations under industrialism—in particular, the division between, on the one hand, workers depicted

both as thoroughly embodied and as at one with the machines they operate and, on the other, middle-class subjects depicted as possessing a visionary capacity that removes them from, and qualifies them for the regulation of, those mechanized workers.

The Wind in the Willows focuses on Mole's progress from his home at "Mole End" (52)—an obvious reference to the East London district of Mile End—to the pastoral realm of the River Bank. The depiction of his "dark and lowly little . . . cellarage" (1) at Mole End is laden with the clichés that social investigators from Mayhew onwards use to represent the cramped quarters of the urban working classes: showing his home to Rat, Mole himself is ashamed of "its narrow, meagre dimensions, its worn and shabby contents," and the "little wooden tables marked with rings that hinted at beer mugs" (52).⁸ The novel begins with Mole's "spirit of divine discontent and longing" (1) to leave Mole End, a desire that leads him to the River Bank, where everything seems "happy, and progressive" (2). However, the narrator subtly indicates that this escape from the realm of the urban poor merely confirms the supposedly "emancipated Mole" (11) in his essential working-class identity: the "Copses, dells, quarries and all hidden places" of the sunny River Bank world offered Mole unlimited "*mines* for exploration" (25; my emphasis).

Moreover, in the middle of his bucolic interlude at the River Bank, Mole experiences an equally strong desire to return to Mole End, and his instinctual awareness that his proper place is working-class urbanity is described not only as a physical sensation but as a mechanical one: when "the summons reached him, and took him like an electric shock," Mole "stopped dead in his tracks, his nose searching hither and thither in its efforts to recapture the fine filament, the telegraphic current, that had so strongly moved him" (48).⁹ In this way, the narrative treats as essential the working-class city-dweller's relations to the instruments involved in mechanical labor: even the desires that move Mole—here animal instinct and physical sensation (a smell)—are equated with electricity, filaments, telegraphs. Significantly, this mechanization of the body, which reaffirms Mole's place among the urban working classes, is equally a means of distinguishing him from his middle-class country friend Rat, characterized as the latter is by poetry, picnics, and his comfortable riverside home:

They moved on in silence for some little way, when suddenly the Rat was conscious, through his arm that was linked in Mole's, of a faint sort of electric thrill that was passing down that animal's

body. Instantly he disengaged himself, fell back a pace, and waited, all attention.

The signals were coming through! (51)

Finally, the working-class city space of Mole End is itself understood to be mechanized, as Grahame indicates in a passage that ironically renders even a countrified image mechanistic and—for Rat, who is out of place in the working-class city space—threatening: in Mole End, Rat “clambered into his bunk and rolled himself well up in the blankets, and slumber gathered him forthwith, as a swath of barley is folded into the arms of the reaping-machine” (58).

The best-known depiction of machinery in *The Wind in the Willows*—Toad’s destructive fascination with motorcars—employs strikingly different metaphors in order to represent this upper-class subject’s (inappropriate) bodily relation to machinery.¹⁰ In spite of Toad’s belief that the auto is a means of “fulfilling his instincts” (68) as a motorist, his attraction to machinery is typically described in terms of artificial invasions of the body, such as addiction (“the light jump of the car beneath him intoxicated his weak brain” [120]) or poisoning (Badger proposes to nurse Toad “till the poison has worked itself out of his system” [63]). In this way, the novel incorporates a common turn-of-the-century critique of the landed gentry for having given up its traditional authority—the governance of England, particularly rural England. Thus Charles F. G. Masterman complains, in *The Condition of England* (1909), about a wealthy class that “maintains large country houses” but that “sees rural England crumbling into ruin just outside their boundaries, and has either no power or no inclination to arrest so tragic a decay” (26). Such critiques of the landed gentry often focus on the faddish attraction to newfangled machinery displayed by the wealthy. For instance, in a 1914 essay on “The Decay of Authority,” Harold Owen observes that an “ominous development of our time” is

seen in our streets every day. The young man of wealth and leisure who sits at the wheel of his high-powered motor car with no ideal beyond the speed he can get out of her, smart but not cultured, taking advantage of science but learning nothing from knowledge, living on assured wealth but contributing nothing to any form of production, is a very disquieting portent of our age, because of the class he represents—a class decadent through its very advantages, useless through its leisure, superficial despite its education, selfish despite its good fortune, irresponsible despite its greater obligations. (63)

In Grahame's novel, the result of the landed gentry's abandonment of its traditional authority is, predictably, uprisings on the part of the working classes whom the gentry no longer control. For example, when Toad is led off to prison after being sentenced for reckless driving, he is "assailed . . . with jeers, carrots, and popular catchwords" by a working-class crowd euphemistically called "the playful populace," which includes "hooting school children, their innocent faces lit up with the pleasure they ever derive from the sight of a gentleman in difficulties" (69). The most obvious example of this undesirable rise of the working classes in Grahame's text is, of course, the occupation of Toad Hall by the denizens of the Wild Wood, and the stoats and weasels who invade Toad's manor house unambiguously represent, as Peter Hunt notes, "the London Underworld" (*Wind* 29).

In this way, Grahame's novel indicates what are proper and improper relations between the classes by using images of surveillance. Mole's progress as a new denizen of the River Bank results from his willingness to be observed and regulated by Rat, who not only surveys Mole's slum home and his telegraphic physicality but regulates his behavior. For instance, in response to Mole's query about what lies "beyond the Wild Wood," Rat pronounces: "Beyond the Wild Wood comes the Wide World . . . And that's something that doesn't matter, either to you or me. . . . Don't ever refer to it again, please" (6). By contrast, the discomfort caused by Toad's appearance before the hooting crowd has everything to do with the fact that, instead of the upper classes observing the working classes, the latter here derive "pleasure . . . from the sight of a gentleman" who momentarily possesses less power than they do (69). Finally, the taking and re-taking of Toad Hall testifies to an instability in the relation of the classes to physicality. The middle-class inhabitants of the River Bank must not only regulate Toad but must engage in a militarist "civil war" (149) against the Wild Wooders: "The mighty Badger" appears with "his great cudgel whistling through the air," and Rat is "desperate and determined, his belt bugling with weapons of every age and variety" (141). The final paragraph of the novel posits a return to normative class relations, in which the "underground" denizens of the Wild Wood apparently lose none of their physical prowess but are subdued by and accept their subordination to their middle-class River Bank neighbors, who go on observational excursions among the homes of weasels: "the friends would take a stroll together in the Wild Wood, now successfully tamed so far as they were concerned; and it was pleasing to see how respectfully they were greeted by the inhabitants" (149).

Such critiques of the gentry as Masterman's, Owen's, and Grahame's are in turn a means of reinforcing the authority of the middle classes: those critiques imply that the wealthiest (who have become decadent and unauthoritative) must, like the poorest (who are in physical decline or have become dangerously physical), be regulated by the middle classes. As Masterman remarks, the "aristocratic caste . . . is merging itself in a wealthy class, and undergoing a weakening in the process" (51), the result of which is "a rather harassed and limited Middle Class" (51) that one sees "everywhere taking the lead in public . . . activities" and providing "the mainstay of the political machine" (67). Indeed, Grahame's middle-class characters use exactly the same language, with reference to the owner of Toad Hall, that contemporary Salvationists employed in describing their relation to the urban poor: as Rat says, "We'll rescue the poor unhappy animal! We'll convert him! He'll be the most converted Toad that ever was before we've done with him!" (60). In this way, Grahame's text reaffirms class hierarchies suited to industrial culture, in which the traditional role of the landed gentry (supervision of laborers) has passed to the middle classes, who now possess the expanded social duty of regulating those both "below" and "above" them. As Peter Hunt claims, at the end of the novel

the ruling order has been restored: the lower middle classes represented by Mole have been absorbed, the nouveau-riche perhaps represented by Toad have been brought into line, the working classes of the Wild Wood have been put back in their place. Arcadia is safe again . . . (*Wind* 77)

Significantly, Toad—whose ancestral home surely identifies him as landed gentry, not nouveau-riche, just as Mole End suggests Mole's place among the working, not lower middle, classes—plots a final act of hubris that never comes off: a speech on a suggestive range of topics, including "Property, its rights and its duties—Back to the Land—A Typical English Squire" (145). Having abandoned the "rights and duties" of property to his middle-class neighbors, such as Rat and Badger, the "Typical English Squire" does not deliver his thoughts on the "Back to the Land" projects that occupied middle-class writers and their readers—even though, as we have seen, Grahame's text itself is hardly silent on this score. Even as the novel thus incorporates a subtle critique of traditional class relations—acknowledging the need for the middle classes to regulate not only a working-class population commonly viewed as undisciplined and deteriorating, but also the traditional bastions of cultural power, the landed gentry—*The Wind in the Willows* maintains a

crucial distinction between the two classes thus to be regulated. For the gentry, a bodily relation to machinery is the pathological absorption of an intoxicant or poison; for laborers, a bodily relation to machinery is as natural as animal instinct itself.

III

The proper relation between middle-class subjects and the mechanized working classes is also central to Nesbit's *The Railway Children*, which relates how the title characters move with their mother from a suburb of London to the countryside, where they befriend various workers associated with the railway and prevent several locomotive accidents. Initially, Nesbit's novel seems to transform the class discourses associated with back-to-the-land projects.¹¹ The youngsters who make this move to the country are not the slum-dwellers for whose supposed benefit Salvation Army and Boy Scout social-reform schemes were designed but, rather, middle-class children who "were not railway children to begin with" (7). Indeed, they had never

thought about railways except as a means of getting to Maskelyne and Cook's, the Pantomime, Zoological Gardens, and Madame Tussaud's. They were just ordinary suburban children, and they lived . . . in an ordinary red-brick-fronted villa, with . . . a bathroom with hot and cold water, electric bells . . . and "every modern convenience," as the house-agents say. (7)

Although this passage might seem to imply that it is *middle-class* children who are endangered by the overly mechanized urban environment, the narrator confirms that this realm is an appropriate place for the middle-class subject who benefits from, but does not have a close bodily association with, mechanized urbanity. Because these "three lucky children always had everything they needed" (7), they "ought to have been very happy. . . . but they did not know *how* happy till the pretty life in the Red Villa was over and done with, and they had to live a very different life" in the countryside (8). In fact, once in the country, the railway children do not rehabilitate themselves but, rather, gain experience in the activity that is, according to back-to-the-land projects, appropriate to their social class: supervision of industrial workers.

Their mother "had told them more than once that they were 'quite poor now,' but this did not seem to be anything but a way of speaking" (28); indeed, their mother informs the railway children, "we've got to

play at being Poor for a bit" (16). In spite of the apparent leveling of middle and working classes implied by the novel's opening, *The Railway Children* throughout endorses a sentimental benevolence—"everybody that has anything to do with railways is so kind and good" (61)—that in fact reinforces the power of the middle classes to supervise the working poor. The railway children's adventures largely consist of saving the train from various disasters. The title of chapter six, "Saviours of the Train," not only implies that the middle classes must rescue machinery from the hands of dangerously incompetent workers, but also suggests that even the supervision of working-class *adults* by middle-class *children* is better than no industrial supervision at all. This dual notion—that the working poor should identify with machine culture, but that this same class is often incompetent to manage machinery and so requires continual middle-class supervision—is exemplified by a report of the Chief Inspector of Factories quoted in the 1902 Fabian Tract *Life in the Laundry*:

It is simply amazing to see the lightheartedness with which an engine, gas or steam, is introduced into what one might call the domestic circle, for in noting unguarded machinery in the house-factory laundry I have always in my mind not only the workers, but the children of the occupier, whom I have so often found watching in a fascinated way the movements of the machines.

The prime mover for gas or steam engine is found in a badly lighted basement and in charge of a man who knows little or nothing of the dangers or management of machinery . . . (3)

Although the worker incompetent to run the laundry machine and the children fascinated by its workings are equally in the inspector's mind, the passage suggests that these are not equivalent evils, or even necessarily both evils: the real problem here is not that the working-class child finds machines fascinating (what better for a young person who will someday tend such engines?) but that the working-class adult cannot manage them. Similarly, at one point in Nesbit's novel, the children happen upon a railway signalman who has fallen asleep on the job—and whose essential incompetence to deal with the sophisticated machinery of modern civilization is perhaps indicated not only by his falling asleep but also by his animalistic "big hairy hands" (155), to which the narrator twice calls attention. The signalman is depicted sympathetically (we learn that his exhaustion results from nursing a son sick with "pewmonia" [156]) when he expresses gratitude for

middle-class surveillance ("Thank God, thank God you come in when you did—oh, thank God" [155]). However, when he appropriates the middle-class prerogative of offering a tip, or bribe—in order to guarantee the children's silence "about what's taken place to-day" (156)—Phyllis declares, "You *are* a nasty man" (157).

Describing the children's activities in the countryside, the narrator remarks that it "is always interesting to watch people working" with "spades and picks" (140). Visual scrutiny of rural workers in turn depends upon a segregation whereby middle-class subjects are kept at a physical remove from the various forms of manual and mechanical labor they observe. That such work is not for the title characters is indicated by their continual inability to handle the most rudimentary tools of mechanical or rural labor: in the midst of their departure for the countryside, Phyllis "fell down with a screwdriver and ran it into her hand" (16); Peter has a dangerous accident in which "the teeth of the rake had bitten him, and his foot was covered with red smears" (129); and, as Peter worries, "I might have caught my foot in the hoe, or taken off my fingers in the chaff-cutting machine" (130). Such passages do not imply the equivalence of the middle-class children and the incompetent signalman, however. Rather, the implication is that the railway children, by virtue of their social class, have no business handling tools and machines but rather should maintain an observational distance from the working-class subjects and the objects with which they labor—and with which they would labor more efficiently if under middle-class surveillance, even that of juveniles. Indeed, the changes in the railway children's social status typically occur only at a metaphorical level and in order to indicate that too close a contact with the working classes or with machinery is inappropriate for the middle classes. For instance, Phyllis at one point has her frock besmirched when the wind happens "to blow from the coal yard" (92); nervous about appearing thus before the "old gentleman" who aids the children in the exculpation of their imprisoned father, and as if she has internalized this dirty contact with the realm of her class others, Phyllis declares that her heart is "thumping like a steam-engine" (92). Although it occurs only at the level of metaphor, this bodily internalization of machinery is seamlessly linked with a transformation of the external signs of Phyllis's class status, and her brother notes that she looks "like any little gutter child" (92).

Moreover, when the middle-class children *do* "play at being Poor" they are represented in terms of the most negative stereotypes of the

working classes. Peter describes stealing some much-needed fuel from a coal heap owned by the railway company as “playing at mines” (30), after which pretend mining he “came back very black and mysterious” (31).¹² The slippage between mining and stealing would seem to offer, at least for a Fabian socialist such as Nesbit, an irresistible opportunity to mount a critique of the mining industry and its treatment of miners: at one point Peter says with unwitting irony, “I’m not at all sure, even now, that mining is a crime” (34). Yet this opportunity is buried, as Nesbit conflates Peter’s illicit coal-picking and the actual work of coal miners themselves: “I’m not a thief. . . . I’m a coal-miner” (32). Nesbit does not extend this comparison either, as suggesting that coal miners are the equal of criminals is not the goal of her sentimentalization of class relations; rather, she reinforces that Peter’s playing at coal-mining is an infraction due to his middle-class status.

That is, in spite of the fact that Peter’s theft is motivated by need, in the case of the middle-class child social status takes precedence over economic status, and Peter’s act does not resemble the way in which working-class Edwardian children commonly treated the petty theft of coal—or “coal-picking”—both as justified by economic need and as a form of class-based resistance. As Stephen Humphries argues, such

minor crimes against property committed by working-class children and youth . . . were condoned by large sections of both the youth and parent cultures as legitimate, despite their illegality. . . . It is significant that many people described their illegal activities as traditional customs, such as . . . “picking” or “scrounging” coal, all of which conveyed a belief in time-honoured rights in opposition to property law. (151)¹³

By contrast, Peter’s theft of coal finally reconfirms his place within normative class relations: the station master who catches Peter speaks “much more gently” to the boy after noting that he is “nicely dressed” (33). Nevertheless, even the momentary association of Peter with both mining and stealing threatens—although, again, only at the level of metaphor—to transform the middle-class children into a street gang and to transform their beloved railway into a carceral site proper to such a gang. When the station master says to Peter, “Stow your jaw, you young rip, and come along to the station,” Peter’s hidden sisters misunderstand what the man intends by the word “station”:

“Oh, no,” cried in the darkness an agonised voice that was not Peter’s.

"Not the *police* station!" said another voice from the darkness.

"Not yet," said the Station Master. "The Railway Station first. Why, it's a regular gang." (32)

Finally, the novel insists that coal and mining are matters from which the railway children, by virtue of their middle-class social status (however reduced their economic status might temporarily be), should keep their distance. This point is made perfectly clear by the narrator's brief denunciation of the site from which the problem derives as "the Sodom and Gomorrah heap of coal" (32). Similarly, the novel continually asserts that, however attractive the railway itself is to the children, they must maintain a proper distance from that which is mechanical and working-class or else risk an unpleasant confusion of their own class identity, a confusion that is itself associated with physical harm. Close up, the train "looked much larger and harder than" Roberta "had expected, and it made her feel very small indeed, and, somehow, very soft—as if she could very, very easily be hurt rather badly" (58).

In this way, the transference of the children to the countryside confirms them in their proper identity as middle-class subjects prepared to engage in a more or less sympathetic surveillance of the working classes, rather than as confused or radical middle-class subjects who might tend to identify with laborers. Early in the novel, in response to her father's coy question about whether or not she would "like to be an engine-driver," Phyllis responds in a manner that appears appropriate for a middle-class girl: "My face would be always dirty, wouldn't it?" said Phyllis, in unenthusiastic tones, "and I expect I should break something" (10). Indeed, Phyllis's later, unlucky contacts with coal-dust and screwdrivers confirm her earlier impression. Roberta's response is more ambiguous: "I should just love it . . . do you think I could when I'm grown up, Daddy? Or even a stoker?" (10). Roberta's incomprehension of class difference—even within the hierarchy of industrial labor, a railway stoker is lower than an engine-driver—is continually presented as a primary danger to this sentimental middle-class person. At one point she thinks that "it would be nice . . . to marry someone very poor, and then you'd do all the work and he'd love you most frightfully" (89). By the last chapter of the novel—after contact with nasty, hairy signalmen and large, hard trains—Roberta adopts a much more appropriate position as a young middle-class female, and we find her—as part of her home education and as if in training to become a lady philanthro-

pist—performing a “sum about the division of 48 pounds of meat and 36 pounds of bread among 144 hungry children” (179).

As such passages suggest, the narrative of *The Railway Children*, like that of *The Wind in the Willows*, is determinedly domestic—in the sense that the novels are concerned with the representation of English class relations and seem to have little to say about international relations at the apex of British colonial expansion, apart from occasional references in Nesbit’s novel to imperial competitors such as Russia and Japan.¹⁴ However, the representation of the working classes in terms of embodied mechanism and the middle classes in terms of the visual power required to supervise the operations of a mechanized mass of working-class bodies is the precondition for bellicose new imperial relations in the early twentieth century. The soothing pastoralism so thoroughly associated with Grahame’s and Nesbit’s novels speaks the sentimental but often deadly language of class in which Edwardian militarists and imperialists such as General Baden-Powell were fluent. As Nesbit’s character Peter says when trying to wriggle out of the accusation of name-calling, “I don’t mean what you mean. I mean it’s just a—what is it Father calls it?—a germ of endearment! Good night” (15). Edwardian children’s fictions such as Grahame’s and Nesbit’s lay out the terms, or germs, of endearment under which a nostalgic fantasy of pre-industrial co-operation between the classes could be reinstituted in late-industrial England: in Edwardian children’s fictions, the depiction of middle and working classes as, respectively, visionary surveyors and mechanized bodies leads directly to the fields of Flanders.

Notes

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¹Although this article focuses on *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Railway Children*, it is worth noting Jerry Phillips’s fine analysis (168–94) of how Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911), although apparently emptied of references to urbanity and class conflict, is nevertheless deeply implicated in the discourses on the city and the working classes that are central to back-to-the-land projects.

²For a fuller study of the Salvation Army social-reform scheme and the Boy Scout organization in terms of their relation to urbanity, see Boone 85–106 and 107–32.

³Searle 34–106 examines the physical deterioration scare following the Second Boer War and the desire for greater national efficiency.

⁴On the founding of the Boy Scouts as a response to perceptions that the working classes had “deteriorated” in physical efficiency, see Rosenthal 52–87, 211–29; MacKenzie 246–49; and MacDonald 145–75.

⁵Regarding the representation, in Haggard's *She*, of the working classes as inadequate to the needs of a modern imperial nation, see Boone 85–87.

⁶For a discussion of the relations between children's literature and the development of a "heritage industry," which in large part commodifies a nostalgic view of rural England, see Krips 71–91.

⁷In this way, Grahame's and Nesbit's novels operate according to the cultural logic that Marx (236–38) attributes to American discourses on technology—in which industrial machinery is understood not as destructive of nature, or natural ways of social life, but as cultivating them.

⁸Among the many biographical readings of *The Wind in the Willows*, Graham 181–86 treats the novel as a cautionary tale, directed at Grahame's son Alastair, about the harsh realities the delicate Alastair would face in the English public school. Although it has ingenious moments, Graham's argument that Mole represents Alastair and that the River Bank represents the public-school world is difficult to sustain if one attends to the multiple class discourses represented in Grahame's novel. The best discussion to date of those discourses is Hunt, "Dialogue" 159–68. Hunt also offers a brief but revealing reading of the difference between Grahame's novel and Nesbit's *The Railway Children* in terms of how each text uses dialect to represent class: whereas "Nesbit makes a clear linguistic distinction between her characters" of different classes ("Dialogue" 160), Grahame manages to "avoid or evade class dialogue" even though his "book is so centrally concerned with class" ("Dialogue" 167). However, as the final section of this article will reveal, I would disagree that *The Railway Children* "is not centrally about class" ("Dialogue" 161).

⁹The "electric shock" is noted also by Steig 310.

¹⁰Marshall 58–69 offers an intriguing reading of Grahame's "textual evocation of pleasures without bodies" (60) and the way in which the novel associates embodiment with femininity: for instance, by "including three women in the tale of Toad's escape"—the "jailer's daughter, the washerwoman, and the bargewoman"—Grahame evokes "the enormity of female figures" (64). In terms of my argument, it is equally crucial that (as Marshall briefly notes [64–65]) these characters are not only female but also working-class.

¹¹Both Grahame's and Nesbit's novels are very much of their time in that they seem to flirt with the confusion (in Grahame's case) or leveling (in Nesbit's) of class distinctions, only to maintain them in a revised form. In his famous analysis of the overstuffed upholstery associated with Victorian first-class railway compartments, Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues that such spurious leveling was a feature of the nineteenth-century railway itself. According to Schivelbusch, the physical jolts rendered the middle-class passenger's "experience of travel just as industrial" as that of the working-class passenger, "in its realization that the traveler was the object of an industrial process—all the upholstery in the world could not make him forget it" (73). However, as Schivelbusch notes, the

difference between the situation of the laborer, e.g. the locomotive driver, expending his energy on a machine by the sweat of his brow, and that of the passenger sitting in his comfortable upholstered compartment is quite obvious: it is the difference between an active-productive and a passive-consumptive participation in the same industrial process of production. (119–20)

Similarly, Schivelbusch remarks that, because "a train runs on a predetermined line," an "engine-driver could never aspire to the social role of a 'captain on dry land': the electric telegraph confirmed his true status, that of an industrial worker, an operator of a machine" (30). Crucially, in Nesbit's novel the railway children seldom actually come into physical contact with trains themselves: when in the country, only Roberta rides the railway, and that only once and in a manner (to get a toy fixed by an engineman) that affirms her difference from railway workers. Roberta's trip on the railway—in a chapter the title of which ("The Engine-Burglar") clearly indicates the inappropriateness of her contact with drivers and stokers—occurs on *The Railway Children* 58–63.

¹²For an interesting discussion of stealing in Nesbit's works that touches briefly (425) on *The Railway Children*, see Gubar 410–29.

¹³For more on coal-picking, see Humphries 66–68, 155–60.

¹⁴For a discussion of representations of imperialism in other of Nesbit's writings, see Bar-Yosef.

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