



Jolly Good Company

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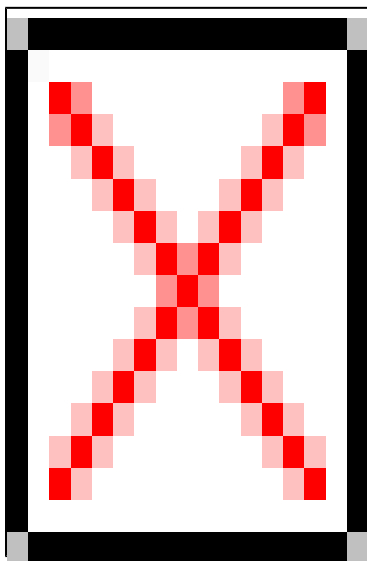
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Byline:

Nicholas Tucker on the new edition of the **Oxford Companion to Children's Literature**

Nicholas Tucker gets to know the new edition of **The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature**, revised and updated by Daniel Hahn.



Daniel Hahn has undertaken the heroic task of updating the 1984 **Oxford Companion** compiled by Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Pritchard. His version is longer than the original, running to over 3,500 entries compared with the former total of 900. It is also more severe, shorn of the occasional illustrations that once helped break up so many meaty slabs of prose. The first edition was often cavalier with detail and contained more than a sprinkling of typos. This one is more careful. Hahn is also well up with contemporary developments, referring to books published last year and with at least one entry going into 2015. And while he has cut numbers of former references to European literature, he has increased coverage of children's literature coming from America, the Commonwealth and Ireland.

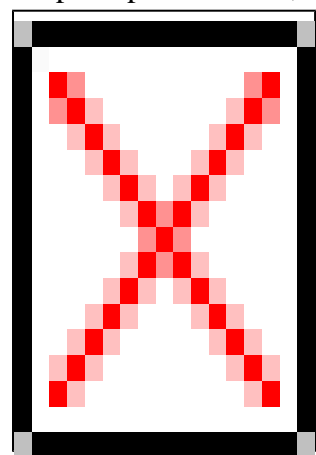
The two editors of the first edition always seemed most interested in books past rather than present. For them, it was quite natural for a long piece on Sir Bevis of Hampton to be followed by an equally lengthy entry on Thomas Bewick, illustrated with a charming engraving from his **The History of British Birds**. Hahn has retained both entries, shortening the eventful life of Sir Bevis but leaving Bewick almost entire. Still retaining these and other by now relatively obscure entries ? for example **Aldiborontiphoskyphornioistikos**, a game issued in book form in 1822 ? could appear somewhat odd when there is no space for fine, more recent writers like Pauline Fisk or Ann Schlee.

Yet coming across such antiquarian literary treasures does lend both Companions a sense of literary adventure and discovery, however unlikely it would be that anyone would actually look up these entries for themselves (with the exception perhaps of first-time readers of **Jane Eyre** for the book by Bewick that gave poor Jane such pleasure during her bleak childhood). But then there is no entry on Charlotte Brontë or indeed Dickens in either of the **Companions**. Carpenter and Pritchard were working at a time when Young Adult literature and crossover books in general did not exist as genres in publishing. But Brontë and Dickens surely still have much to offer a particular type of young reader on the verge of adulthood. It is a shame to see that these authors remain ignored.

Entries themselves vary between names of authors, significant topics such as historical novels or sexuality (missing from the first edition) and names of characters deriving from children's books. This last category does not always work. A baffling entry on Polly runs 'Character in the **Mr Gum** books. (This is not her real name.)' Reference back to Mr Gum himself does not mention this person. Would anyone think of looking up a mere Christian name in a book of this scope? And if they did, in this case a reference to Catherine Storr's charming **Clever Polly** books would surely seem more appropriate. Elsewhere, a bare mention of M?Turk refers back to a lengthy entry on Kipling's **Stalky & Co**, an important and brilliant book though hardly read these days. But who now would ever look up M?Turk in the first place? Entries simply on Jane or Harry, carried forward from the original companion, also seem redundant, given there are so many other literary characters with these names.

No scholarly lapses leap out, although the entry on **The Little Engine That Could**, taken verbatim from the first edition, needs urgent revising. This I discovered by checking the tangled and occasionally litigious history of this story from other sources on the internet. The question arises, therefore, about what exactly this current volume offers that is not easily accessible from any computer. Well, it is written in an agreeable style not afraid to make value judgments. Cross-referencing is built in on every page, and there are useful charts of various awards and their winners at the end. It also has a good, straight-talking introduction by Michael Morpurgo.

But perhaps best of all, Hahn has preserved the agreeably donnish atmosphere of the original version, with its long



entries on obscure authors or titles all written with love as well as erudition. These entries offer a glimpse of the arcane knowledge and random enthusiasms once expected of scholars when they could be persuaded to leave their studies for a moment and talk less formally for a moment about what they knew and liked best. I would not therefore ever want to be without the **Oxford Companion**, not so much despite but because of its endearing eccentricities, with its second edition admirably following up the charm and achievements of the first.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

[The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature](http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/211/childrens-books/articles/jolly-good-company) [3], Daniel Hahn, OUP, 978 0 19 969514 0, £30

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