

## **Edith Nesbit (15.8.1858 – 4.5.1924)**

### **A BRIEF INTRODUCTION**

Edith Nesbit, who her family called Daisy, is known to her reading public as E. Nesbit. She wrote initially for adults and then for children, her most famous books being „The Railway Children,“ „Five Children and It,“ and „The Treasure Seekers.“

### **EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION**

Edith was born in Kennington, South London, and moved extensively with her widowed mother and family, looking for the right places to live for her sister's ill-health. They attended many schools, including schools in Brighton, London, France and Spain, some of which she hated. When attending a weekly boarding school in Brighton she writes of her unhappiness, „I remember the hot, white streets and the flies and Brill's Baths and the Western Road and the bitter pang of passing, at the end of a long procession, our own house, where someone might be at the window, and never anyone was.“

This was published in a series of 12 essays called „My Schooldays“ in The Girls' Own Paper from 1896-97. Edith was an anxious and lonely child, she faced nightmares and fears after teasing and bullying at more than one school. In France she was traumatised by some Egyptian Mummies she saw in Bordeaux, she wrote of „the darkness and the silence“ and „nights and nights of anguish and horror.“ She wrote of herself, „When I was a little child I used to pray fervently, tearfully that when I should be grown-up I might never forget what I thought and felt and suffered then.“

In total contrast the families and the settings in her books reflected her happy, very early years, an escape from the suffering she experienced in schools. She was, „a temperamental, deeply sensitive child“ wrote **Noel Streatfeild** in her biography. There are some parallels between the 2 writers, Noel also

experienced problems in schools with her rebellious streak. Noel writes of Edith in her biography, "Magic and the Magician" (Benn, 1958) "her children's books, with one exception, are divorced from the life she lived as an adult for they have their roots in her childhood, and a very early childhood at that." As a teenager she loved the freedom of rural life in France and, living in Halstead Hall in Kent, she would explore the railway cuttings, perhaps these early memories inspired her later and most successful book, "The Railway Children."

## **PERSONAL LIFE**

Like Noel, Edith wrote for adults initially, in order to support her family, they experienced very hard times when her first husband, Hubert Bland, had lost his business. Edith had to provide for 5 children, two were the children of Hubert and her best friend, who lived with them for many years as a housekeeper, Edith adopted these children. They lived in houses in London, Eltham, Dymchurch and from 1911 she had a "retreat" in a farmhouse at Crowlink, a hamlet in the Downland above Eastbourne.

Edith loved to retreat to her house in Crowlink, which she wrote about in "The Incredible Honeymoon" as "the Crow's Nest." She moved there in 1911 with her staff and husband, until Hubert's death in 1914. She describes it as "part-Tudor, it used to be a smugglers' retreat." In a letter she writes, "It is a lovely little house on the Downs, not a sound all day but the wind and the sea and, on sunny days, the skylarks. The quiet is like a cool hand on one's forehead." In 1915 the owner reclaimed the property and she had to return to the house at Well Hall, Eltham.

Edith loved the peace of the countryside although the settings for her children's books reflected the town houses of her childhood.

Edith wrote at first for adults; poems, novels, stories and she painted greetings cards. Her dream was to be a poet and she wrote some short verses for children's annuals which prompted a commission for some stories of her schooldays, which she completed in her 12 stories, recalling not just the pain of her schooldays but the relief from them, escaping into "an enchanted world." This was a world that she realised that she wanted to capture, in "The

Wouldbegoods” the narrator, Oswald Bastable criticizes the Kenneth Grahame book, “The Golden Age” as he sees it as “mixed with grown-up nonsense,” Edith had decided that she wanted to write using her children as the narrators with the true viewpoint of a child. Instead of writing for adults to read in magazines she wanted her stories to be intended for children, stories of “ordinary children who have extraordinary adventures.” In reply to a child’s letter about “Five Children and It,” she writes, “the reason why those children are like real children is that I was a child once myself, and by some fortunate magic I remember exactly how I used to feel and think about things.”

In 1889 Edith amalgamated her first stories of the Bastable children, originally published in an adult magazine, and called it “The Treasure Seekers,” her first children’s book. This was followed by “The Dragon Stories,” in The Strand Magazine, Edith continuing her exploration of children and families with ordinary lives who encounter an enchanted world. She built on ideas from some other stories and built her own viewpoint of creating a different sort of genre, with a different sort of magic or magical character. In “Five Children and It,” the Psammead, the ages-old sand-fairy who will die if it gets wet, is her own version of what might in the past have been a fairy or dragon, and she introduces humour, they can be quirky and bad-tempered, with interesting foibles. Sometimes the magic goes wrong.

In 1964 in “The New York Review of Books” Gore Vidal praised her “magical books” that were written *about* children, not *for* children,” he called Edith a “fabulist,” the best in England after Lewis Carroll. Although less popular in America, Edith’s writing impressed him with her ability to create magical worlds with children and characters who still have very recognizable, sometimes very adult, behaviours and traits. Noel Streatfeild believed that Edith did not like children very much and that this explained the lack of sentimentality in their creation and the characteristics which were very realistic, but which did not always make them endearing. Her families often had hardships, a parent dead or missing, she had lost her own father when she was 4 years old, although they were often quite middle-class with servants. In “The Enchanted Castle,” supposedly a favourite of J.B.Priestley, there is a move towards a dark, frightening scenario which perhaps is the only book that explores Edith’s childhood nightmares and fears.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

- Wrote over 40 children's books and collaborated on as many more
- Wrote poetry and books for adults
- Founded the Fabian Society
- Researched extensively the idea that Shakespeare's plays were written by Francis Bacon
- Guest Speaker at the LSE
- Wrote a serial in the Strand magazine "The Magic City" then exhibited her own building of a miniature city at Olympia in 1912, a version of Utopia.

Edith did not write her children's books until her 40s, then, perhaps, writing some of the earliest fantasy novels for children, combining reality in their family settings but moving her characters into magical worlds. She influenced J. K. Rowling, C.S Lewis, Michael Moorcock, and Jacqueline Wilson, who has written her own sequel to "5 Children and It." Noel Coward wrote to Noel Streatfeild, one of her biographers, of Edith's "unparalleled talent for evoking the hot summer days in the English countryside."

("Magic and the Magician" Noel Streatfeild 1958 Ernest Benn)

Edith's son Fabian, who had attended a boarding school in Telscombe, Brighton, died in 1900 after surgery, "Five Children and It" was published in 1902, the main role of Robert was based on her beloved Fabian, Edith expressing her grief and also maybe guilt as it was revealed that they forgot that Fabian was not to eat before surgery and he choked to death. She then wrote "The Phoenix and the Carpet" in serial form, in 1906 she published "The Railway Children" her most famous book, that has been filmed, televised and is still in publication.

Edith was a Socialist, politically active, naming her son after the Fabian Society, of which she and Hubert Bland in 1884 were founder members and

speaking extensively over those years, including a speech at The London School of Economics, which had been founded by other Fabian Society members. She also believed that she had discovered a secret code that proved that Francis Bacon was the true author of Shakespeare's plays.

Edith moved in a circle that was rich with famous names from the world of literature and the arts. She was renowned for being a bohemian, she held gatherings akin to "salons." Noel Streatfeild writes, "she was a bohemian hostess whose charm, wit and gaiety and almost frightening temperament surrounded her." H G Wells thought Edith (who he called Ernest) and her husband "fundamentally intricate." Yet in 1903 he praised "The Phoenix and the Carpet: "he is the best character you ever invented, or anybody else has ever invented in this line." He predicted that she would become "a British Institution in 6 years from now." Wells also famously tried to elope with Edith's adopted daughter Rosamund, and was stopped at Paddington station by Hubert Bland. Edith was a friend to E M Forster, a close friend, some say lover, to George Bernard Shaw, admired by Noel Coward, he lived near her in Romney in their later years and died with a copy of her book "the Enchanted Castle" beside his bed. Other friends and visitors were Sybil Thorndike, G K Chesterton, Laurence Houseman. In London she had moved with her sister's Victorian litterati set of friends, The Rossettis, Swinburne, William Morris. She read Sir Walter Scott, Ibsen, Dickens, Henry James, Kipling. She spoke at working men's clubs and functions, she cut her hair short and smoked cigarettes, she was unconventional, she loved the theatre and admired the Brownings and the Shelleys. She was socially active with the poor in Deptford, much as Noel Streatfeild was to be some years later, she was much-travelled.

She married Thomas Tucker in 1917, the captain of the Woolwich Ferry (at this time Noel Streatfeild had moved to Woolwich to work in a munitions factory, where Edith's sister worked, another interesting link.) They moved to St Mary's Bay, near to where she used to holiday in Dymchurch, the road is now called "Nesbit Road," where she died in 1924 of lung cancer. Her former house there, (a pair of bungalows, The Long Boat and The Jolly Boat, converted from former Jesson airfield RAF huts,) now overlooks the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Miniature Railway, how fitting for the author of "The Railway Children"

## RESEARCHER'S VIEW

It is interesting to note that when Noel Streatfeild arrived to live in Eastbourne in 1911, aged 15, Edith Nesbit was renting a home 3 or 4 miles away, her retreat near the cliffs, having already written some of the children's novels which are now classics, "The Story of the Treasure Seekers," "Five Children and It," "The Phoenix and the Carpet," and her most successful book, now filmed and televised, "The Railway Children." Many years later Noel was to greatly admire these books and to write Edith's biography, but in Angela Bull's biography of Noel she states that Noel previously knew nothing of her- perhaps the books were not suitable for her vicarage upbringing? One wonders if she knew of the Crowlink connection, it is not mentioned in her book? Edith drew on her past in a similar way to Noel Streatfeild, but moved the genre on to become an early writer of fantasy, still much copied and admired.

Edith lived a full, varied and colourful life, charismatic and bohemian, quite different from the early childhood life that she reflects in her books. It has been fascinating to see how she forged so many strands in her life, travel, writing, politics, public speaking at a time when life was so much more male dominant and making a success of a career was demanding and fraught. Edith was the wage-earner, she wrote to support her family, she took the extraordinary step of adopting her husband's illegitimate children and welcoming his partner into her home. she was a strong, individual and unique woman, Her books live on as classics more than a century after they were written, her name lives on for the magical worlds that she created for children.

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