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**Jeffrey Richards, *Happiest Days: The Public Schools in English Fiction*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989. Index, notes, pp. 319.**

If like many of my erstwhile schoolfriends and I you have, at some stage of your life, exhibited a voracious appetite for English public school fiction, you may form the opinion that *Happiest Days* is a somewhat heretical analysis of this much-loved genre. The public school novel with its standard devices - the stolen exam paper with the villain ultimately brought to rights and the unjustly accused hero exonerated, the moral lesson of success or failure in the House cricket match, breaking bounds after lights out, the eagerly awaited tuck-shop stipend and other all too familiar 'rags' and japes - has always demanded from its acolytes an absolute compliance to a world-view in which youth reigns supreme. Adolescents of all ages have always been more than willing to embrace what J. de S. Honey has aptly called 'Tom Brown's Universe'.

Jeffrey Richards does not deny this widespread appeal but he also finds many dissenting voices, the most critical of which belong to those

who had actually experienced the realities of a public school education and found it to be not to their liking.

*So Happiest Days* is by no means a celebration of the public school ethos but more an examination of this literary genre and its potency as a self-affirming, evangelising and, at times, critical form of rhetoric. Those who have read any of J.A. Mangan's books on athleticism will recognise the importance of public school fiction in developing both the favourable public perceptions and the reflective pedagogical practices which allowed the ideology of athleticism to flourish in the late Victorian and Edwardian public schools. Gerald Redmond (1981), Isobel Quigley (1982) and P.W. Musgrave (1985) have also produced scholarly work in this area with Redmond arguing that *Tom Brown* was but one version, and a quite late one at that, of the 'Muscular Christian' novel; and Quigley and Musgrave using the same novel as a departure point for analysing the development of the public school genre.

What sets *Happiest Days* apart from these earlier works is the author's attempt to formulate a periodisation based on the major ideological shifts in the public school novel. To achieve this somewhat artificial but nonetheless instructive chronology Richards draws on both Newsome and Mangan to provide the necessary 'signposts' of change. The book begins with Hughes, Farrar, Kingsley and Newbolt and eventually arrives at the creator of Billy Bunter, Frank Richards, having spent time with the likes of Kipling, Wodehouse, Forster and Orwell along the way. As literary criticism it is a little one dimensional but this fault can also be a virtue for the reader who is primarily keen to learn something of the history of the genre.

In providing this valuable overview Richards reveals the polemical nature of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, and its effect on the evolution of the public school novel along with the disparate visions of Farrar and Kingsley. He correctly observes that Hughes was writing about the past, the present and the future of the public schools in *Tom Brown*. Similarly Richards balances the descent into athleticism with an appreciation of

the antithetical views of Kipling, Forster and Orwell, and he also looks at the highly satirised and determinedly outlandish public school world of P.G. Wodehouse.

The chapter on Alec Waugh's novel, *The Loom of Youth*, is perhaps the most revealing of all. Richards identifies this novel as one which provides a degree of realism that is seldom matched in the general run of public school fiction. This is hardly surprising given that it was written when Waugh was seventeen. Perhaps in closing Richards could have spent more time on the decline and fall of this idealised world. By the late 1960s the emulation of, and adherence to, public school ideals had become decidedly passe. Richards has pointed out that this rejection had taken place much earlier amongst those who actually attended such schools. The high culture/low culture dichotomy had relegated school fiction to the bottom rung in the opinion of elite society by as early as the 1920s. It remained for works such as Lindsay Anderson's film *If* to give popular expression to a de-mythologising critique of the public school world. In charting the rise and fall of the genre Richards has taken us along three-quarters of the journey - it will require another *Loom of Youth* to take us all the way.

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