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Empire

Jo-Ann Wallace and Stephen Slemon

> E is our Empire
> Where sun never sets;
> The larger we make it
> The bigger it gets.
> —Mrs. Ernest Ames, *An ABC, for Baby Patriots* (1899)

A barrage of associated terminology attends the advance of empire, and none of it fires with exactitude. "Imperialism" usually refers to "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory" (Said 1993)—that is to say, the politics, the economics, and the enabling ideology behind the promulgation of empires. "Colonialism" is generally understood as the assemblage of ways by which one nation or people imposes direct rule over another nation or people. "Colonization" refers specifically to the establishment of settler colonies in foreign lands. "Neo-colonialism," a term coined by Kwame Nkrumah (the first president of Ghana, itself the first of Britain's African colonies to politically decolonize), refers to that postcolonial condition by which a newly constituted (or now reconstituted and liberated) nation-state is only "in theory independent. . . . In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from the outside" (Hadjor 1992) by its former ruler, or by a new surrogate.

But it is "empire" that shimmered to the schoolboy and, perhaps to a slightly lesser extent, the schoolgirl reader of British children's literature from the 1850s onward. It was empire that flushed pink British pride into a world map shown to be one-quarter "British" in 1897, at the time of the Diamond Jubilee celebration of Victoria, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and Empress of India. It was empire that breathed fire into an endless stream of memorabilia, collectibles, advertisements, play activities, costumes, and club formations, in Britain and abroad, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. And it is empire that continues, despite its declared end, to play a foundational role in the subject-formation of the children on both sides of the imperial divide.

From its beginnings, the word "empire" has held a close "etymological connexion" to the ideas of power through, and subjectivity under, militarism (*Oxford English Dictionary* [*OED*]). The word "emperor"—with its attendant sedimentation of Roman centralization, citizenship, and hegemony—entered the English language around 1225, almost a century before the word "empire" (*OED*). "Empire" is rooted in the concept of "supreme and extensive political dominion . . . exercised by an 'emperor,'" and then later, "by a sovereign state over its dependencies" (*OED*). The personal element of the British emperor—"Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Empress of India [as of 1876], Defender of the Faith"—was sometimes obscured in British children's literature of "the

period of high imperialism," and even in children's games and puzzles, where Britannia replaces the body of the emperor/empress (Norcia 2009). That said, an inherent celebration of military supremacy remained a prominent component of imperial pageantry abroad, as evidenced in representations of Victoria's Golden and Diamond jubilees.

"English" schoolchildren found it relatively easy to identify with the shimmering, overdetermined category of "Britishness" promulgated within the idea of empire, but non-English readers and consumers of empire's ubiquitous address found themselves distanced, and internally split, by the category: "subjects" of empire on the one hand, objects of empire on the other. The idea of a globally inclusive, British subjectivity, promulgated throughout the "British Isles," the "Dominions," and the "Colonies" through publications like *The Boy's Own Paper* (1879–1967) and Nelson's *Royal Readers* (1875–95), rested on an embedded narrative of imperial cultural "progress" wherein non-English traditional practices and languages, celebrated as they were for their exoticism and difference, would necessarily in time give way to a "larger" and emancipatory "Britishness" that empire eventually would bestow. "British," Raymond Williams would write in *Border Country* (1960), his novel of rural south Wales, "was hardly ever used without 'Empire' following, and for that nobody had any use at all" (Gikandi 1996). Nirad Chaudhuri's dedication to his 1951 *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* captures this split subjectivity of empire's ideological force with painful clarity: "To the memory of the British Empire in India," he writes, "which conferred subjecthood on us but withheld citizenship; to which yet every one of us threw out the challenge: *'civis britannicus sum.'*"

In *Keywords* (1976), Williams circumvents empire's splitting impetus, focusing instead on the more stable social concept of "imperialism" as a modern political system developed "especially after 1870," and inevitably associated with a self-proclaimed "civilizing mission." Williams notes a later, early-twentieth-century shift in connotation, where imperialism becomes "understood primarily as an economic system of external investment and the penetration and control of markets and sources of raw materials." Postcolonial literary writers, including writers of children's literature (see Ngũgĩ 1986), have been at pains to retain the ideological force of empire as a divisive and diminishing social message well into the present day. Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris (2005) dropped "Imperialism" from their *New Keywords,* substituting "Colonialism" as "a general term signifying domination and hegemony." In their introduction to that volume, the editors indicate that they have deleted "those of Williams's keywords that we feel have not sustained their importance," emphasizing instead a "shift to a collective and more international mode of production." *Keywords for American Studies*, on the other hand, revives "empire" in a specifically American, post–2003 Iraq War context, tracing "arguments about the possible virtues of U.S.

empire" from the 1803 Louisiana Purchase to the present (Streeby 2007). The sliding fortunes of "empire" in keywords dictionaries suggest a stabilization and diminishment in the term—movements that may be related—and thus it remains useful to interrogate the concept as an organizing principle in American and British children's literature, and as a category of critical analysis. As Williams (1976) notes, keywords not only reflect but also produce "continuity and discontinuity, and also deep conflicts of value and belief."

While "empire" has functioned as a category of critical analysis for literature read *by* children since the late 1970s, with particular focus on adventure novels (see Green 1979), some critics have suggested that it has been insufficiently explored in texts written *for* children. Peter Hunt and Karen Sands (2000) argue that "empire" and "post-empire," that is, colonialism and postcolonialism, are undertheorized in British children's literature: first, because the notion that children's books "were the witting or unwitting agents of the empire-builders" is "so apparently obvious" (a hiding-in-plain-sight argument), and second, because recent postcolonial studies have focused on "the other" and not on "the centre, the imperialist coloniser." Hunt and Sands note the degree to which "empire" lingers as an unvoiced theme in post-1945 children's genres, such as in the animal fantasy (e.g., Michael Bond's Paddington stories, Richard Adams's *Watership Down*) whose characters "learn that the Brits are still on top" (Hunt and Sands 2000).

Like Hunt and Sands, Daphne M. Kutzer (2000) suggests that "little attention has been paid to imperialism and its intersections with literature intended for those 'future rulers of the world.'" As Kutzer's phrasing might suggest, much of what early criticism there was on the topic focused on high imperialist writing for boys (see Richards 1989; Bristow 1991), a trend identified by J. S. Bratton in 1989 but continuing, with some exceptions (see McGillis 1996), until recently. The emphasis on writing for boys—leaving to one side the question of whether the texts were also read by girls, as they almost certainly were—resulted in a critical stress on the genres of the adventure novel and the schoolboy novel, where the interpellation of the boy subject as imperial ruler and/or colonial administrator is often overt. Fueled by scholarship on imperial feminism (Chaudhuri and Strobel 1992; Midgley 1998), on the "New Girl" (as a parallel to the "New Woman"; Mitchell 1995), and, to a lesser degree, by the rise of "girls' studies," especially in the American academy (Kearney 2009), recent years have witnessed new interest in the imbrication of writing for girls and questions of empire. While such writing drew on traditions of masculine adventure (Norcia 2004a; Horne 2004), it also led to the development of new subgenres, like the nursing novel (Smith 2009). Kutzer's claim that "children's literature is highly [she suggests inherently] conservative" (Kutzer 2000) is challenged by the complicated relations between late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century feminism and writing for girls.

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Further complicating the relationship between writing for children and questions of empire, Jacqueline Rose, Perry Nodelman, and Satadru Sen align the children's writer with the imperialist. *The Case of Peter Pan* (1984), Rose's controversial Lacanian and deconstructive exploration of adult desire for an idea of the child, and of adult "colonization" of childhood, did not of itself launch a rethinking of the relationship between children and their books; it did, however, model rigorous investigation of the uses of children's texts and of relations of power between children and adults. Nodelman (1992) pushed the colonial analogy farther, asserting that "child psychology and children's literature are imperialist activities." More recently, critics like Sen (2004) have begun exploring the nature and affect of writing for colonial child subjects, or "colonized children." An issue that has not yet received significant attention is the question of the relation of class to the project of empire. While this issue has received attention with regard to children's history and childhood studies, with some exceptions (see Boone 2005) it remains largely absent from questions of children's literature.

Regardless of readership and address—child or adult, colonizer or colonized, imperialist or imperial subject—the question underlying writing for children and the matter of empire remains at heart one of interpellation, the calling into being of the child as sovereign or as split subject, hailed into complex social identifications by the seemingly simple but structurally complex, and continuing, literature of empire. As Mrs. Ernest Ames writes in her *An ABC, for Baby Patriots* (1899),

> F is the Flag
> Which wherever you see
> You know that beneath it
> You're happy and free.