J. M. Barrie

Markgraf, Carl

Published by ELT Press

Markgraf, Carl.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/25281.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/25281

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=965172
THE THOUSANDS OF REFERENCES in this bibliography to books and articles on Barrie are sufficient evidence of continuing interest in the man and his works. Having surveyed all of them, I suppose that I am the last person who would wish to add more words to those already written about "JMB." However, I would like to offer some thoughts to which my work has led.

First is the surprising fact that in our time Barrie is so little known, despite all his honors: his Baronetcy, his Order of Merit, his four honorary doctorates—St. Andrews, Edinburgh, Oxford, and Cambridge—despite the fact that he was the first British playwright since Shakespeare to be presented by the Comédie Française and the first living British author to be printed in the London Times; and despite the enormous financial success and worldwide popularity that Barrie and his works enjoyed during his lifetime. I found to my amazement during work on this project that few of my literary colleagues recognized his name. Of those who did, only a couple could connect him with anything beyond Peter Pan.

Naturally enough, Peter Pan was my own introduction to Barrie, as is the case with most English-speaking children of this century. But my serious acquaintance with his work came through the theatre. In college after World War II, I performed in Barrie's one-act, A Well-Remembered Voice. It was, I felt then, a rather touching story about a young Englishman's ghost who returns, after being killed in the First World War, for a brief chat with his father. Knowing now that it first played in London while the blood-bath in France was still decimating British manhood, I realize that, like most of JMB's work, it was more than it seemed. In those grim days it must have been taken as anything but "touching"; rather, it must have given its first audiences a terrible emotional wrench. My next work with a Barrie play occurred ten or so years later, when I directed his comedy, Alice Sit-by-the-Fire, in which he created a charming, but ironic, love-triangle satire on the love-triangle pot-boilers then in vogue. As with A Well-Remembered Voice, this play also worked its audience on more than one level. Since then, I have not had any personal theatrical experience with Barrie's work, although over the years, besides reading and teaching some of his work, I have enjoyed seeing a number of JMB's plays performed. My latest contact with the Barrie theatre magic occurred recently, when I watched the television re-broadcast, after
twenty-nine years, of the 1960 Mary Martin television musical production of *Peter Pan*. To my surprise, I found it as charming and as affecting as at first view, when I had watched it with my young children. Knowing from my work that the television audience for its first broadcast was the largest in history, I continue to puzzle over JMB’s relative obscurity.

Though I have not seen all his plays performed, from what I know of them, a Barrie play—as they say in the theatre—is far from being "actor-proof," or, by extension, "reader-proof." After all, Barrie generally had in mind specific actors for the parts he wrote, and those actors were the best people performing on the stages of London’s West End. His reputation for producing "winners" assured him his choice of players. Furthermore, for the same reason, during most of his playwriting career he could count on the kind of financial backing that would support the finest in what we today call "production values": very large casts, specially written musical scores performed by good orchestras, numerous and elaborate—hence expensive—settings, extraordinary lighting, and special scenic effects. The production requirements of his best-known work, *Peter Pan*, give sufficient evidence of the above: the "stars" Nina Boucicault and Gerald Du Maurier in the lead roles of Peter Pan and Captain Hook/Mr. Darling, multiple sets that included The House in the Treetops and The Mermaids’ Lagoon, the Tinkerbell lighting effects, and the specially developed "flying" apparatus. Beyond the acting, settings, and technical elements, there was the production factor of Barrie himself. Unlike other playwrights, some of whom went so far as to iron-clad their texts, printing them before the play even went into rehearsal, Barrie was noted for being ever-present during rehearsals—revising, cutting, and supplying new material where needed—and open-mindedly collaborating with his players: he was not above changing his text when experienced actors demonstrated the need for revision. This creative Barrie touch continued to shape his plays all the way up to—and even after—opening night. In the latter regard, he is known to have called together the actors of long-running productions so as to delete the added "gags" and bits of "business" which had, weedlike, sprouted up in his original play.

But setting aside the expensive paraphernalia of star actors, grand sets, and the like which were available to him, in my experience, a Barrie play, given half a chance, "works" on stage, though it does not always appear to work quite so well on the page. Why? Because in his best work JMB did not settle for theatrical clichés, and because he knew his audience and how his stagecraft would affect them right down to the ground.
The Elusive Barrie

Many theatrical reviewers cited in these pages have found this somehow very annoying; much of their criticism of his plays as staged sounds rather shrill. Other critics who write about his printed plays—which JMB painstakingly revised into a new form something between a play and a novel—frequently demonstrate that they lack the "theatre of the mind" which Barrie’s plays—as plays—demand of the reader. Sometimes drama critics have written that the audiences, and even they, were moved to tears, or laughter, and occasionally even to thought. Even so, these same critics often turned on Barrie to blame him for their own failures to explain HOW Barrie had managed it. Other critics, in order to praise what was obviously inexplicable success, ascribed it to those undefinable Barrie qualities that became almost mandatory language in their reviews: the plays succeeded because of the Barrie "charm," or the Barrie "whimsy," or "that Barrie magic." The affectionate term "Barrieism" grew up to cover this. Even the French began to use it, and one British playwright was downright chided for his employing "Barrieisms," since he had rudely stepped foot in JMB’s private preserve.

Most discussion of Barrie’s work struggles with what I have suggested above: his elusiveness. He formed no school, nor did he adhere to one. He was at home in many camps. Some of his plays, such as The Will, are grimly realistic—for the writing of which he was chided by those who loved his "whimsy." On the other hand, we find William Archer, the eminent drama critic, speaking for the Realists who were riding the rising Ibsen tide; he would not concede that Barrie was a playwright at all, until Barrie produced The Admirable Crichton, a play which finally met an Ibsenite criterion, being demonstrably critical of the existing social structure.

Similarly, Barrie’s work in fiction ranged widely, from the carefully drawn, realistic, local color work of his "Thrums" creations to the fantastic, such as his ghost story, Farewell, Miss Julie Logan. But being an adherent of no particular school draws the fire of all schools, and Barrie could count on only the reading and playgoing public. Their judgment, as the following pages of comment and partial lists of performances show, has sustained his reputation.

In the course of his enormously successful career as novelist and his later even more successful career as playwright, Barrie amassed a fortune which was described at the time of his death in 1937 as the largest sum, up to that date, that a writer had ever acquired through his work. The enormous, and unexpected, success of Peter Pan gave Western civilization a wholly new and powerful myth—an original fairy tale that places Barrie among that group of truly creative geniuses such as Hans Christian Andersen and Lewis Carroll. But it
The Elusive Barrie

is indicative of Barrie the man that little of his great personal wealth came from *Peter Pan'*s success.

In fact, *Peter Pan*, for most of Barrie's lifetime, did not contribute a penny to his income. Early on he assigned its proceeds, later bequeathing them to continue after his death, to the support of London's Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street. That expiring copyright has recently been extended into perpetuity, at least within the United Kingdom, by a Special Act of Parliament. Thus Barrie's aid, which helped to provide the Peter Pan Ward and the Peter Pan Canteen, will continue to live on like their namesake.

Barrie's philanthropy is evident not only from such monetary support of worthy causes, but also from the lavish outlay of his talent as a writer. He allowed numerous productions of his "commercial" plays to be performed gratis for charity, it is true. However he also devoted considerable time and effort to writing plays and sketches specifically intended for charitable fund-raising. Skimming through a list of his plays, one is struck by the fact that a large number of them have never been heard of since their initial productions—and rightly so. They were written for specific charitable occasions, many of them benefit productions for servicemen's hospitals during the Great War and for similar war-connected charities. Surprising to me in this respect was the fact that some critics cited herein, instead of praising him for his altruism, chided him for squandering his talent in pieces of so little merit. But few, if any, writers of his stature can make claim to the generosity Barrie displayed.

Some of Barrie's many other charitable gifts, most of which he provided anonymously, are described by Cynthia Asquith, his secretary during his last twenty years. One benefice is strikingly similar to his gift to the Sick Children's Hospital—in France he outfitted and maintained a hospital and shelter for French children during the Great War. It is perhaps a signal of this century's cynicism that the childless Barrie's kindnesses have resulted in an ambivalent modern attitude toward his affection for children.

Paedophilia, say some. Once Freud's ideas had become commonplace, the chorus of that notion, if not use of the word itself, began to swell. Numerous articles cited in these pages sing that tune. Predictably, in nearly all writings by psychiatrists or psychologists about Barrie or his works, we find it the burden of their arguments, circularly finding evidence of aberration in his works and thereby explicating his works in terms of abnormality. However, this din seems to be subsiding. A fairly recent psychological essay on Barrie and *Peter Pan* goes so far as to point out that before Freud's ideas were common knowledge, people weren't finding sexual significance in anything and
The Elusive Barrie

everything. This essay's historical approach notes the realities of Victorian and Edwardian home life, in which Father—often called "the Governor," rather as if he were a prison official—was a distant and awesome figure. In this milieu, an uncle or family friend, for instance, was a welcome father-substitute in children's games.

Such a one was Barrie in the lives of the five Llewelyn Davies children. After the death of their father, Barrie provided financial assistance. On the death of their mother, and at her request, Barrie legally adopted them and offered them all the luxuries of an upper class upbringing, including Eton and Oxford. As the companion of their childhood—and with them, Barrie said—he composed his classic about The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up, which Andrew Birkin describes so marvelously well in his J.M. Barrie and the Lost Boys. The blood-soaked fifty years that followed Barrie's death seem to have disillusioned us into a cynicism that makes it nearly impossible for us to accept genuine kindness such as his at face value.

Given Barrie's personal oddities, the biographical approach, of which the psychoanalytical is one manifestation, is to be expected. As a Scot, he was by nature an oddity to the English public. And in his earliest work he exploited his Scottishness, many would say. Though he did not initiate the "Kailyard School" of Scottish local-color writing, his early work was its most successful example, thereby drawing upon himself the fire of those critics who disliked the "mawkishness" of its sentimentality. But not only was he not English, he also was extremely short and exceedingly reserved—a curious little man who never seemed to smile. Socially retiring, with an impenetrable reticence, his idea of a sociable time was to sit quietly with someone, puffing away at his pipe, while the silence between them lengthened interminably.

Another strand of Barrie's oddity, as comment on him reveals, connects with what is often called an excessive affection for his mother, as shown in the book he devoted to her: Margaret Ogilvy.

Had Barrie not written Margaret Ogilvy, one wonders how much less ink might have been spilled over his presumed mother-fixation. Surely, mother-figures appear in most of his work, and critics would certainly have discussed all this "mothering" as a recurring subject. But in Margaret Ogilvy Barrie unabashedly poured out his devotion to her. Some, mainly Americans, spoke of it as a marvelous filial tribute. But Barrie offended British sensibilities by this book—it was not the sort of thing done in public; it was an act some critics described as coining money from his mother's coffin. The impact of Margaret Ogilvy seems not only to have increased the critics' barely-suppressed tone of virtual outrage about mother-figures in his works, but also to
have encouraged his biographers to see his mother's influence as another of his oddities. As a playwright, he was certainly odd—once established, he maintained his singularity.

After his earliest playwriting ventures, he followed neither the dramatic mainstream, rapidly turning its course toward the intellectual vogue of realism—as represented by his friends and theatrical coworkers, Shaw and Barker—nor did he stay with the standard potboiler techniques of writers who had learned only too well the crafts of the well-made play.

A few of the writers cited in these pages recognized that Barrie was not to be pigeonholed. Some even recognized the novelty he afforded: at long last, here was a playwright who could provide the hoped-for relief from Realism, and in his own, truly unique, way. No slave to Ibsen, nor bound to the grinding out of formula "triangle" plays, Barrie produced burlesques of such playwriting vogues, not only in his popularly successful one-act, *Ibsen’s Ghost; or, Toole Up-to-Date*, but also in *A Slice of Life, Alice Sit-by-the-Fire*, and elsewhere. The "elsewhere" included taking on his friend and producing colleague, the great GBS, whom he put on stage in *Punch* as the character, "Superpunch," replete with red beard and Jaeger suit.

Shaw, Barrie, and Harley Granville Barker were collaborators in the theatrical revolution sometimes called the "theatre of the playwright," a movement most clearly exemplified in Granville Barker's famous Court Theatre productions, 1904-1907. These banished the time-honored but pernicious "star" system, substituting for its emphasis on the star performer—which often led to cutting the script to focus on the star—their emphasis on the play as a whole, often relegating erstwhile stars to minor parts. To accomplish this, they maintained directorial control over all production elements. In Britain, therefore, they were primarily responsible for bringing about the present-day means of managing theatrical creativity. Although Barker’s energetic activities rightly deserve the major credit for this breakthrough in the British theatre, some have said that Barrie made it all possible.

Barrie continues to live on in his plays. As in his lifetime, however, he cannot be categorized as one sort of playwright or another. His best work—the work that continues to be performed—is neither one thing nor the other. He is not merely a fantasist, as *Peter Pan* would suggest. Nor is he a local-color realist, as *What Every Woman Knows* might indicate. He is not only a "women's libber"; though *The Twelve-Pound Look* would support that notion, *The Adored One* contradicts it. Nor is he just a "problem-play" writer,
The Elusive Barrie

however much *The Admirable Crichton* is a demonstration of the "Two Englands" idea. He is all of these, hence none of these alone.

Barrie resists all attempts to classify him. His plays make his audiences not only think, but feel. One is tempted, when reading some of the critics who are made uncomfortable by their own emotions at one of his plays—therefore calling the plays sentimental—to remind them of Aristotle's maxim: rational evidence is insufficient to move humankind to action—their emotions must be stirred as well. Barrie's best plays, as do those of all great playwrights, take us out of our world into a world of his creation. We return having been moved, as well as moved to thought, by this experience. I can think of no greater praise for any playwright.