Just William: 'The most popular boy in fiction'

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The first Big Books I can recall reading as a child were Richmal Crompton's *William* books. Every Saturday, after our weekly swim at the local pool, I would be found in the public library gradually working my way through the series. I remember briefly sampling Anthony Buckeridge's *Jennings* books, and Frank Richards' *Billy Bunter*, but these boarding school adventures about posh children held little appeal. Likewise, I found nothing to interest me in the war stories of W.E. Johns's *Biggles*; and my parents evidently failed to push me in the direction of 'children's classics' like *Swallows and Amazons* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

William was not intended to be improving literature. Even his creator, Richmal Crompton, described the books as 'pot-boilers'. She would have preferred to be known for the adult family sagas she produced in great quantities over her fifty-year writing career, but it was not to be. William, first published in magazines in 1919 and in book form in 1922, lasted through 38 collections of stories until her death in 1969. More than 12 million copies have been sold in the UK alone, and the books have been translated into around a dozen languages – although interestingly they have never succeeded in the United States. While the books have rarely been out of print, William has also enjoyed an extensive after-life through television, radio and audio books, continuing well into the twenty first century: the most recent TV version was a short BBC series aired in 2010, ninety years after the first stories were published. As the covers of the paperback reprints of the 1990s proclaimed, William was 'the most popular boy in fiction' – at least until the advent of Harry Potter, with whom he makes an interesting comparison.

I don't think I realized at the time that the author of these books was female. Unlike J.K. Rowling, Crompton didn't intend to disguise her gender, although I'm not sure it would have discouraged six-year-old boy readers like me in any case. Richmal Crompton Lamburn (to give her full name) had a very conventional upper-middle-class upbringing. The daughter of a clergyman and Classics teacher, she attended an Anglican boarding school in Lancashire and later in Derbyshire. In 1914, she took a degree in Classics at Royal Holloway College, and went on to become a Classics teacher herself, first at her old school, and then at a high school in Bromley, just outside London. Her life changed when she contracted polio in 1923, leaving her partly paralyzed; and in the early 1930s, she had a mastectomy following breast cancer. The immediate success of the early William stories enabled her to give up teaching, and buy property, where she lived first with her mother, and subsequently with her older sister. It seems that Crompton had no romantic relationships in her life: she became what she described (somewhat ironically) as a 'professional Victorian aunt', especially for her sister's children.

Crompton remained a devout Christian, although she developed a passing interest in spiritualism later in life; and she was also a true-blue Conservative, who campaigned for the party in local elections. Despite the popular success of the William books, she remained interested in scholarly pursuits, especially in Ancient Greek literature. In most respects, her life could be described as respectable and traditional, even old-fashioned.

The appeal of William

The continuing appeal of William might be seen as a symptom of adult nostalgia – and to some extent, it is. Yet William still seems to appeal directly to contemporary children. As part of the eightieth anniversary celebration of his creation, the publisher Macmillan produced twenty William books with facsimiles of the original jackets, while also launching a set of abridged versions for younger readers with much more contemporary cover designs. So how might we account for the longevity of William's success?

As an adult re-reading some of the stories today, I was not surprised to find them highly formulaic; although I also found some of them genuinely very funny. The earlier stories in particular are full of gentle social comedy, as characters are satirized and parodied. There is a kind of relish in how Crompton works through the twists and coincidences of the narrative, and the little jokes that she distributes throughout.

The location and many of the characters seem to have been established in the very earliest stories, before they were published in book form. William is the youngest son of an upper-middle-class family living in an English village, apparently not far from London, where his father commutes daily. This is a pastoral setting, a narrow and safe world of genteel tea parties and church fetes, amateur dramatics and tennis clubs, respectable ladies and their domestic servants – although, as we shall see, there are occasional intrusions of modernity.

However, William and his gang of friends, the Outlaws, live in a world that is partly of their imagination – a world of cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, Arthurian legends and international espionage. Many of the stories are concerned with the boys' apparent confusion between these fictions and reality, or at least their overly ambitious attempts to make these fantasies come true – and these are delusions that the reader is expected to see through.

William is to some extent a force of anarchy, a lord of misrule. He persistently disrupts the calm and comforting stability of the village and of family life, generating chaos and confusion. Yet William is not at all malicious or destructive, or even disobedient. While he is certainly often naive, he is always well-meaning. He is loyal to his friends, fair-minded and honourable. While he can be opinionated and obstructive, he is rarely openly resistant to adult authority – although he does frequently express a resentment of adults' unreasonable demands, their occasional inconsistencies and hypocrisies, and their misunderstandings of children's point of view. William is typically scruffy and dirty, but even in the school holidays he

consistently appears in school uniform, with drooping socks and untied shoelaces and his cap and tie askew.

As Crompton herself wrote, William is not the 'bad boy of fiction', as he has sometimes been called:

> *His insatiable curiosity may put the refrigerator out of action, immoblize the Hoover and fuse the electric lights, but it is the spirit of the inventor and pioneer that inspires his work of destruction. He explores unknown stretches of country, plunging into ditches, climbing trees, doing battle with his enemies, and comes home a sight to break his mother's heart, but his courage and initiative are the stuff of which heroes are made. He has sudden impulses to 'help' his family. He 'helps' to wash up and leaves a trial of broken crockery in his wake; he 'helps' to bring in the coal, covering face, hands and the kitchen floor; he 'helps' bring in the deck chairs, becoming inextricably entangled with each; he puts in a spot of gardening and no one can ever use the secateurs again. It is not always easy to remember how laudable his intentions were… (1962, quoted in Cadogan, p. 72)*

Typical stories will involve two, or sometimes three, storylines. These often result from William's fantasies and ambitions, which are clearly marked as unrealistic and impossible from the start – often through dialogue with his sceptical friends. William frequently misreads the ideas and intentions of adults, filtering them through his own fantasies. Alternatively, he sees adult foibles as a means to realize his own and his friends' desires – for money, for a new bike, for avoiding adults' demands, or for some form of revenge on somebody who has wronged him. For example, William's older sister Ethel and his brother Robert are frequently involved in superficial romantic entanglements: while Ethel is often seen as flirtatious, Robert is merely a sap. William despises this, but it also provides him with knowledge and situations that he can manipulate to his own advantage.

Through layers of misunderstanding, coincidence and lucky accident, events rise to a pitch of chaos, followed by a denouement in which order is quickly restored. The absolute rule is that, however embarrassing and disorderly the situations might become, William invariably wins out. His grandiose schemes always fail, but nevertheless he gets what he wants; and in the process, he also frequently finds a way of pleasing the adults around him, by fulfilling their stated or unstated wishes. At the story's end, William is often congratulated, and hardly ever blamed, let alone punished. While adults may be vain and sometimes hypocritical, and while there are occasional villains (usually of the criminal variety), adult authority is generally seen as benevolent too.

The sheer predictability of this formula, across many dozens of stories, is undoubtedly part of its appeal. We know the way these stories go, even if we do not know exactly how this particular one is going to pan out. For the reader, a key pleasure comes from seeing William vindicated and victorious once again, apparently against the odds. This repetitiveness is of course a recurring feature of children's stories, and particularly of series fiction: it is a quality William shares with the British series mentioned above, as well as American ones such as *Nancy Drew*, *The Hardy Boys* and *Goosebumps*. Any parent who has been exasperated by their children's

compulsive re-playing of favourite videos can confirm that this also applies to more contemporary media.

Boys will be boys...

It is hard to know whether the William stories have appealed primarily to boys. Richmal Crompton's repeated attempts to create an equivalent female heroine in other stories for children appear to have had little success – although there are plenty of powerful women in her adult novels. In her youth, Crompton herself was a suffragist (rather than a more radical suffragette), and she remained financially independent throughout her life. It would be too much to accuse the William stories of a kind of proto-feminism, but there is a sense in which William's essential 'boyishness' is seen from the outside, from a female perspective.

William conforms to all the stereotypical expectations of boyishness, albeit without displaying many of the more negative attributes (such as aggression) that are conventionally associated with it. We are frequently told (by the author and her characters) that 'boys will be boys', and that William is merely displaying 'natural high spirits', or some variant of this. For Crompton, William almost seems to belong to an earlier stage of evolution, before the advent of true civilization:

> *There is a theory that, on our way from the cradle to the grave, we pass through all the stages of evolution, and the boy of eleven is at the stage of the savage – loyal to his tribe, ruthless to his foes, governed by mysterious taboos, an enemy of civilization and all its meaningless conventions. (Cadogan, p. 73)*

William's untidy and dirty appearance, his love of scrapping with his friends and enemies alike, his disdain for good manners and propriety, all fulfill this stereotype of boyishness. Yet it is particularly reinforced by his disdain for girlishness – or at least an equally stereotypical idea of girlishness, especially as represented in the character of Violet Elizabeth Bott, the spoilt daughter of a local *nouveau-riche* businessman. As Crompton goes on:

> *He dislikes little girls, not only because he considers them to belong to an inferior order of being but also because he suspects them of being allies of the civilization that threatens his liberty.*

With her frilly dresses, her rosy clean face and bubbly curls, and her lisp, Violet Elizabeth represents William's nemesis. She is a nightmare vision of femininity – one that is several degrees more appalling than its adult equivalent in the form of his sister Ethel or the boy-hating elderly spinsters of the village. Violet's ability to get her own way derives especially from her often-quoted threat to 'thcream and thcream till I'm thick'.

Yet if Violet Elizabeth is a kind of parody of girlish femininity, William might equally be seen as an affectionate parody of boyish masculinity – although he is obviously a more complex and likeable character. We are invited to identify with William, and to take his side; but we are also invited to laugh at his boyish immaturity.

...and children will be children?

This ambivalence is perhaps more apparent in terms of age, rather than gender. In fact, the *William* stories were initially written for adult women, rather than for children. The first stories were published in the women's magazine *Home*, and subsequently moved to *The Happy Mag*, a family publication. Unexpectedly for their author, the stories proved popular with children too, and once they began to appear in book form, they were more explicitly aimed towards child readers.

Nevertheless, the stories continued to be targeted to adult women too, as late as the 1940s and 1950s. During wartime, they appeared in *Modern Woman* (1940-44) and *Homes and Gardens* (1943-45) and then in *Home Notes* (1947-48), while William ran as a comic strip in *Woman's Own* between 1947 and 1969. Crompton maintained that the stories were written for adults, and that she knew very little about writing for children – although clearly she (and her publishers) could not deny their popularity with child readers. As we shall see, the after-life of William – especially in the form of audio books – also seems to depend upon a large adult market.

So are these stories *for* children, or merely stories *about* children? Some critics (such as William Whyte) have argued as much, while others (most notably Aiden Chambers) argue that Crompton's approach changed when she realized her popularity with children and came to see them as her 'true audience'. Yet in my view, both possibilities can be the case: like a good deal of children's fiction (not least Harry Potter), these books have a *dual address*, and hence an appeal, to both adults and children.

Thus, on the one hand, the *William* books take the familiar 'child-centred' perspective that is common in popular children's literature. Like Blyton's Famous Five and Secret Seven, the Outlaws live in an idyllic rural world, in which they are free to roam with very little adult constraint. The gang is a kind of secret society (a common motif in children's literature), of which adults know nothing. Indeed, for the most part adults are either absent or ineffectual in their attempts to control the boys. While they are occasionally displeased, they are more frequently confused or ignorant about what the gang is doing.

Indeed, it is striking to note how much freedom William and his cohorts have, when seen from the perspective of the much more tightly regulated childhoods of the twenty-first century. The Outlaws wander around the countryside, frequently trespassing across fields or in empty houses. On the face of it, they also engage in a good deal of 'anti-social' behaviour – fighting, theft, vandalism, bullying and the like – although they are generally well-intentioned in doing so. If William's modern-day equivalent were to live on an urban public housing estate, he would probably have been subject to an ASBO (an Anti-Social Behaviour Order), or long since been placed in juvenile detention.

William is consistently successful in outsmarting adults; and yet when he wins out, they are often obliged to thank and congratulate him. In carrying out his plans, he often undermines or debunks adults' pretensions and hypocrisies. However, this is rarely overt, or even intended: William sometimes voices a kind of 'savage' critique

of the 'civilized' adult world, but he is more likely to be puzzled or confused by the strange things adults get up to. His victories over adults are most frequently achieved inadvertently, by accident rather than design. Aside from the few criminals and nefarious characters who occasionally appear in the village, adults are rarely dishonest or malicious in intent. To be sure, much of William's success is achieved at the expense of the adult world; yet if this is subversive, it is only very mildly so.

On the other hand, the style of writing might suggest that the books are addressed to adults. The vocabulary is often quite elevated, and there are elements of social satire and irony that most child readers would probably find obscure. Many of the descriptions of adult eccentricities – the pretentious failed artists, the inept politicians, the loopy spiritualists, the vain social climbers – refer to aspects of adult life that would be beyond the grasp of many children. William's poor spelling and grammar are also played for laughs, as are his stumbling and inarticulate attempts to justify himself to adults. The Outlaws employ forms of language and logic that are clearly marked as child-like, betraying a lack of basic understanding of the adult world.

Perhaps more significantly, the narrative often requires the reader to be more knowledgeable than William himself. Many of William's schemes seem self-evidently idiotic or fanciful, and the passing doubts of the other Outlaws confirm this, until they are swept along with his optimism and energy. Caught up in his world of smugglers, spies and cowboys, William sometimes seems to have a precarious grasp of reality – and again, this is frequently pointed out to us, not least as his grandiose schemes invariably go wrong. The humour depends upon us recognizing William as a loveable fantasist, whose plans cannot conceivably work.

Likewise, William frequently misunderstands adults' ideas and intentions, even as he exposes their hypocrisy: he often imagines sinister and melodramatic explanations for their behaviour (such as international espionage) that invariably prove wide of the mark. Here again, the reader is invited to judge William's view of the adult world from a position of greater knowledge or maturity: we either understand what is really happening, or look for more rational explanations, in contrast to William's wildly fanciful accounts.

While it easy to see how these ironies might appeal to adult readers, there is no reason to assume they are not accessible to children as well. Children might 'identify' with William, but much of the appeal of the stories – and especially the humour – depends upon the reader seeing William from a distance. The reader, we might say, has to read as an adult, and not only as a child.

To some extent, then, William represents a rejection of idealized images of childhood, of the kind represented by A.A. Milne's Christopher Robin (which Crompton reportedly hated). However, he is also loveable, and even somewhat cute. He is another, equally sentimentalized, figure common in representations of childhood: the loveable scamp. As such, he stands in a long tradition, running from Mickey Rooney in the 1930s to Macaulay Culkin in the *Home Alone* films. This is a quality very well captured in Thomas Henry's original line-drawn illustrations (and later those of Henry Ford): William is pictured as rosy-cheeked, snub-nosed, with his school cap askew, and looks significantly younger than the eleven-year-old he is

supposed to be. He is mischievous, but not malevolent; he causes trouble, but it is rarely serious or lasting. He is occasionally cheeky, but never truly rebellious. On the contrary, he is essentially playful. As such, he represents very little threat to adult authority.

William the Conservative?

Some critics have argued that the continuing success of the William books reflects a long-standing conservatism in English culture. This is partly a matter of how they deal with the theme of politics itself; but it is also to do with how they represent the social world, and how they respond to modernity.

As I have noted, Richmal Crompton was a High Anglican and a loyal Conservative, who campaigned for the party in local elections. Yet while politics do make occasional appearances in the William books, they are typically the focus for mild satire. Extremes on either side of the spectrum are gently mocked. In 'The Weak Spot' (1921), William's older brother Robert briefly joins the Bolsheviks, although he quickly becomes disillusioned, not least when William attempts to redistribute his wealth, in the form of his bicycle and prize watch. 'What's in a Name?' (1928) finds William witnessing a Moseleyite fascist demonstration, and going on to organize a group of 'Greenshirts' in a bid to become a Dictator – although here again, he ends up in failure. As we shall see, Crompton provides a similarly satirical treatment of the counter-cultural student protest movements of the 1960s.

'William and the Nasties' (1934) has attracted some criticism for its apparent anti-semitism, although this might be to mis-read Crompton's intentions. As is so often the case in William stories, an initially unsympathetic adult, a tight-fisted Jewish sweetshop owner, is eventually transformed into the Outlaws' benefactor, and they give up their campaign against him. Even so, the story has been deemed sufficiently sensitive that it has been omitted from subsequent editions.

As this implies, politics are often seen satirically, albeit from an implicitly conservative position. The efforts of reformers and campaigners of all persuasions are seen as foolish and futile: it's best that things should remain as they are. In 'William Enters Politics' (1924) our hero ultimately withdraws from the political arena, unable to fathom the 'confusions' of both Conservatives and Liberals. However, in 'William, Prime Minister' (1929), William stands as a Conservative in a mock school election, and inevitably wins. Yet even here, the ultimate message appears to be somewhat sceptical. William's friend Ginger offers the following summary of the political landscape:

> *There's four sorts of people tryin' to get to be rulers. They all want to make things better, but they want to make 'em better in different ways. There's Conservatives an' they want to make things better by keepin' 'em jus' like what they are now. An' there's Lib'rals an' they want to make things better by alterin' them jus' a bit, but not so's anyone'd notice, an' there's Socialists, an' they want to make things better by takin' everyone's money off 'em, an' there's Communists an' they want to make things better by killin' everyone but themselves.*

Yet if Crompton largely steers clear of overt political messages, it could be argued that her representation of the social world is nevertheless highly conservative. Bill Schwarz, for example, asserts that the books portray 'an idealised domestic world untroubled by the public events which all too readily gripped the minds of the English middle classes in the 1920s and 1930s'. Other critics, such as Ralph Stewart and Betty Greenway, argue that William's pastoral world is 'narrow, durable, and unchanging' – one 'where nature is essentially benign and authority is essentially benevolent'. In the 1960s, such criticisms apparently led to the books being banned by some librarians on the grounds of being 'too middle-class'. According to a writer in the *Times Higher*, it was argued that 'The majority of children… would not be able to identify with William's world and, besides, the hierarchical nature of his society and the attitudes that went with it were out of step with modern democratic Britain.'

There is certainly some truth in this. Read today, the social world of the William books seems lost in time. This is a quintessentially English world of country cottages, rhododendron bushes, church fetes, sweet shops and genteel drawing rooms. Men like William's father commute to vaguely defined jobs in the City, while mothers stay at home endlessly darning socks. There are some eccentricities here: as Mary Cadogan puts it, the village appears to be populated by 'a bizarre assortment of earnest aesthetes, peppery ex-military gentlemen, nervous clerics, intense spinsters, batty artists and bright young things'. We see very little of the lower social orders, beyond the family's domestic servants and gardeners.

To be sure, this world is gently satirized, but it is rarely threatened or seriously disrupted. The historian Ross McKibbin argues that Crompton was 'an acute observer of the mood of the Southern middle class', and some critics have even compared her satire of middle-class values to Jane Austen. Yet while William occasionally exposes adults' hypocrisies and pretensions, the social order – and especially the class order – remains fundamentally stable. This is quiet satire, occasionally rising to the level of farce, in the manner of P.G. Wodehouse, rather than anything more challenging.

So are the William books simply conservative? Even at the time they were written, were they merely a kind of pastoral elegy for an imagined world? And when read and heard today, or seen on screen, are they any more than nostalgic escapism?

The answer, I would suggest, is a little more complex. In exploring these questions further, I particularly want to consider the claim made by the critic William Whyte that Crompton was a 'conservative modernist'. According to Whyte, she was a conservative in the sense that she wished to defend the private, domestic world against the public world – and to defend the individual against society and the state. She had an abiding faith in the resilience and continuity of English middle-class values, combined with a certain conservative pessimism about human nature. Yet she was also a modernist in striving to be contemporary, and to keep pace with the times.

In fact, elements of the modern world do intrude on William's pastoral scene throughout the series. Aside from the references to contemporary politics discussed above, the Second World War appears in collections such as *William and the Air Raid Precautions* (1939), *William and the Evacuees* (1940) and *William Does his Bit* (1941). As

we shall see below, there are numerous examples of such contemporary references in the books published in the 1950s and 1960s. The world Crompton represents is by no means entirely unchanging, and she herself was explicitly concerned that her stories should be 'topical'. Yet the question is whether such changes are any more than superficial, and whether she genuinely manages (or even tries) to come to terms with 'modern democratic Britain'.

William meets modernity

To explore this further, I want to look more closely at how the William stories evolved in the 1950s and 1960s. I begin with two collections that seem to reflect something of the changing context of early post-war Britain: *William and the Moon Rocket* (published in 1954) and *William's Television Show* (1958). In many respects, the social world of these books remains unchanged from the pre-war William. Yet there are several stories in both collections that focus on more contemporary social developments.

In some instances, these elements are fairly incidental. In the title story of *William and the Moon Rocket*, William and his friend Ginger stow away in what they mistakenly imagine to be a moon rocket being transported to its launch base. Eventually they arrive at a fairground where it turns out that the 'rocket' is being used for one of the rides. However, in the process they manage to uncover a criminal scheme for hiding and selling off stolen goods. True to formula, William wins out in the end, and even manages to please his disapproving father, who is excited by the unexpected opportunity to attend the fair.

Likewise, in 'William's Television Show', chaos ensues when William attempts to mount a television show for the local children in order to make a little money. The show, of course, is a live performance, although William assures his audience that this is much better than mere 'pictures'. Events ascend to farce when the children, apparently copying a television programme in which buildings are demolished, take it upon themselves to lay waste to a local hen-house – although (as ever) everything turns out well, as they manage to rescue a hapless artist who has implausibly become trapped inside. At a stretch, this story might be read as a parody of contemporary arguments about the harmful effects of television – arguments that were a key point of reference for the Himmelweit Report, *Television and the Child*, published in the same year. However, in other cases, the stories can be read as rather more directly satirical.

'William the New Elizabethan' (1954) picks up on an idea that became briefly fashionable in the wake of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Popularised in several books and magazines, the New Elizabethans looked back patriotically to the era of Elizabeth I and Shakespeare, when plucky little England was resisting foreign invaders; but they also looked forward to a modern world of industrial and commercial innovation. Rather like Tony Blair's 'Cool Britannia', the idea combined elements of conservatism and nostalgia with a modernizing edge.

In the story, William is inspired by this patriotic mood, and decides that, like the sailors of Drake's Armada, it is the Outlaws' duty to steal from foreigners. In the

event, none of the 'foreigners' the Outlaws locate in the village turn out to be foreigners after all, and none of them seems unduly worried by the Outlaws' attempts to requisition their property. Eventually, while digging a hole through the earth in search of new countries to colonize, the boys come across some family silver that has been buried in a bombed-out and abandoned house. This turns out to belong to the town mayor, who congratulates them all. Here again, the formula remains intact: the boys' 'bad behaviour' is far from dangerous or threatening, and adult authority proves to be benevolent in the end. Yet 'William and the Elizabethans' could easily be read – at least by adults – as a kind of grotesque parody of these fashionable ideas.

Such satire of modernity is apparent elsewhere in these books. In 'William and the New Game' (1954), chaos arises when a mother applies a new approach to child-rearing that she has learned from a child psychologist. At her daughter's invitation, William and the Outlaws take possession of her house while she is out, and proceed to trash it while acting out an anarchic, violent parody of the British parliament – an idea encouraged by William's mother. In 'William and the National Health Service' (1958), William stumbles into a local hospital and is inspired to set up a parallel version of the NHS for animals, to which the local children bring their assorted pets with mostly imaginary complaints. The plots of these stories are sometimes as chaotic as the events they depict – this is not 'classic' William – but the basic formula remains familiar. In each case, order is restored, William avoids punishment, and the adults concerned end up being delighted by the outcome.

Both books – along with others of this period, like *William and the Space Animal* (1956) – contain several attempts on Crompton's part to remain 'topical', as she had repeatedly urged herself to be. Yet despite the elements of satire and parody, her response to contemporary developments remains essentially conservative: her satire is primarily directed at silly, new-fangled ideas, rather than anything more fundamental.

William and the counter culture

William and the Pop Singers, published in 1965, includes several stories that reflect Crompton's response to the emerging counter-culture of the period. Once again, she was seeking to be 'topical', yet her stance is now even more irritably conservative. This is not Crompton at her best, and in many respects the formula seems stale and tired.

In the title story, the leader of a pop group called the Argonauts comes across William and the Outlaws performing a farcical science fiction drama on the village green (as ever, they are attempting to raise some money, after Douglas has broken his brother's electric razor by using it to plane some wood). The young man, Chris, is clearly presented as rather pretentious: he talks about 'art for art's sake' and bemoans the fact that 'mechanisation has destroyed art'. Chris is seemingly inspired by the Outlaws' play, and wanders off. When the other three Argonauts appear, looking for him, they explain the source of the dispute that has broken out between Chris and the rest of the group:

'We must give him time to work it out of his system' [said Johnny].
'Work what out of his system?' said Henry.
'His education,' said Johnny with a reverent hush in his voice. 'He's educated. It was him that made us call ourselves the Argonauts.'
'It's a foreign language,' said Ted.
'Out of his education,' said Pete.
'He's our leader,' said Pete.
'The brains of us,' said Johnny. […]
'He's classy,' said Johnny. 'He's had a classy education and taken classy exams and sometimes it comes over him that he's wastin' his life singin' pop songs and – he's got to work it out of his system.'

Chris eventually reappears, and sings a new song that he has just written. The group is reunited, and Douglas's problem is quickly and implausibly solved when the members of the group find a spare electric razor.

The satire here is not exactly subtle – although again, it is interesting to consider how much of it might be aimed at adult readers, rather than accessible to children. Despite his grand pretentions, Chris is ultimately shown to be motivated not by artistic imperatives, but rather by fan mail; and the song that he eventually performs is clearly intended to be quite banal. And yet the other members of the group (which may or may not be modeled on the Beatles) defer to his 'classy' education, as though they would be incapable of achieving anything themselves. Youth culture is seen to be shallow, trivial and pretentious – in some ways reinforcing Chris's own criticisms.

Crompton's response to the cultural developments of the 1960s is readily apparent in other stories in the collection. In 'William and the Holiday Task', our hero is set homework for the summer holidays by a trendy teacher, Mr. Mostyn, 'a flamboyant youth with a startling taste in socks and ties, whose "modern" methods of teaching left the minds of his pupils completely but not unpleasantly befogged.' Mr. Mostyn is described as 'so engrossed in acting the part of the unconventional schoolmaster to his own satisfaction that he required little or no support from the rest of the cast'. When William returns to school at the end of the story, we learn that his teacher has left the school to become an actor in 'a small and exclusive repertory company that specialized in performing "experimental" drama to a limited audience of left-wing intellectuals.' Here again, the satire seems to be directed more towards an adult reader; and this is reinforced by events in the same story, when the hapless artist Archie (sometime boyfriend of William's sister) attends a class on 'Neo-primitive art' and achieves a surprising success in selling a painting.

In 'William and the Protest Marchers', a group of student protesters implausibly appears in the village having lost their way on a protest march to London. The students 'straggle' through the village, 'a collection of youths and maidens, long-haired, tight-jeaned, wearing brightly coloured scarves and sweaters'; and they have names like Cedric, Constantia, Dolores and Ferdinand. Their leader, Cedric, is represented as self-important, fastidious and vain. Even worse, he has a luxuriant beard. The group are students of Newlick University, which Cedric pompously proclaims to be a 'University of the Future', unlike 'those moth-eaten decayed relics of antiquity', Oxford and Cambridge. However, the students are not protesting about political issues or world events, but about the university's attempt to ban their

mascot, Hannah the pig: according to Cedric, the students have 'traditions to build up, principles of freedom to inaugurate and maintain'.

As I have said, this is not Crompton at her best, and yet it illustrates some of the wider limitations of her 'conservative modernism'. Modern phenomena are introduced quite artificially into William's world, in ways that strain plausibility: they are represented by outsiders to the village, who quickly disappear. William is aware of pop music and television, but these remain largely extraneous to his life. The satire reads like that of a fusty elderly person – an 'old fogey' – responding irritably to modern life, but with very little understanding or sympathy for young people. The modern world is undoubtedly recognized – this is not mere nostalgia for some imaginary golden age – but it is also very quickly dismissed. This is certainly conservative, but it is quite far from modernist.

William the Brand

The commercialization of children's culture is often seen to be a recent development, although in fact it has a long history. When we compare William with Harry Potter – currently 'the most popular boy in fiction' – the latter might initially appear to be much more commercialized. While the first Harry Potter book was published in a small print run, the series quickly took off, not least when Warner Brothers bought the film rights. In addition to the films and books, there have been Harry Potter computer games, trading cards and Lego models, as well as toys, clothing, and a whole range of other merchandise. There is also an extensive – and for some, quite lucrative – fan culture. At the height of Harry Potter's success, the author J.K. Rowling was reportedly the highest-earning woman in Britain, bringing in more than the Queen.

William may not have been quite such a money-spinner, but he was a lucrative commercial brand in his time, and he has gone on to enjoy a long after-life in media of various kinds. As I have noted, the stories were first published in women's magazines, and continued there in comic-strip form until the late 1960s. Like other children's series fiction, the books themselves were intended to be collectible: the back covers frequently included a list of all the titles published to date, with the legend 'How many William Books have **You** got?'

There were three William films, released in 1939, 1947 and 1948, and a stage play in 1947. The first William radio series ran from 1945 to 1956, and there have subsequently been numerous radio and audio-book versions. The audio versions of the 1970s and 1980s were narrated, with a considerable dose of camp, by Kenneth Williams; while those of the 1990s and 2000s (no fewer than 180 stories overall) were read by the rather more deadpan, but still drily ironic, Martin Jarvis. Both were broadcast on BBC Radio 4, suggesting that they would have enjoyed a substantial adult audience. The first television adaptation arrived in 1951, and William has regularly featured on television since that time, with series in 1956, 1962-3 (starring Dennis Waterman), 1977-8 (featuring Bonnie Langford and Diana Dors, no less), 1994-5, and most recently in 2010-11. In several cases, the television adaptations have prompted the release of tie-in book publications.

Meanwhile, there have been William jigsaws, toy theatres, card games, board games, figurines, dress-up books, magic painting books, maps, diaries, calendars, and many other products. In the 1940s and 1950s, William was used to advertise Hercules bicycles, chocolate and (somewhat less plausibly) Lifebuoy soap and National Savings Bonds. He has even featured on a set of Post Office stamps. While by no means as extensive in this respect, or as lucrative, as the work of Crompton's contemporary Enid Blyton (whom I intend to consider in a later essay), the William franchise represented a considerable commercial enterprise in its time.

Over the years, there have been several William fan clubs, some catering to adult nostalgia, but others clearly directed at children: as recently as the 1990s, the Children's Marketing Department of Macmillan publishing was advertising a 'new Outlaws Club' in its inexpensive paperback versions of the books. For a small subscription, members would receive a special Outlaws wallet containing a badge, a pencil and writing pad, the club rules and membership card, and most importantly 'a letter from William giving you the secret password'. Meanwhile, adult fans remain active online, and the 'Just William Society' holds annual meetings. There is a small but busy trade in original merchandise, and first editions of the books can sell for as much as £750.

The books remain in print to this day, and (as I have noted) have also been successful in international markets. William is 'Guillermo' in Spain (where the books were apparently censored during the Franco regime) and 'Bill' in German and Swedish. Interestingly, the books have never been successful in the United States – a phenomenon that Crompton and her publishers struggled to understand. The US critic Betty Greenway suggests that this may be a result of the 'Englishness' of the books' social world, and the complexity of the vocabulary and the satirical writing style – although similar points might be made in relation to Harry Potter. Apparently, the UK office of the US company Marvel once planned a William comic book, but it never appeared.

Interestingly, few of these versions of William have shown much sign of adaptation to changing times. One attempt to reissue the series in the 1970s (perhaps as a TV tie-in) seems to have failed, and it was suggested that this was because of the lack of Thomas Henry's original illustrations. Subsequent reissues by Macmillan, which began in the late 1980s, returned to the original illustrations, with more success; although their most recent editions (currently being published in 2016-17) have new, more modern covers as well. Likewise, the television versions have shown marginal signs of updating across the years: the BBC series broadcast in the 1990s appears to be set in the 1920s or 1930s, while the most recent BBC series (a short run of four, which was not re-commissioned) was set in the 1950s.

Reading reviews of the books on Amazon, and accounts of Crompton's fan mail (now held at Roehampton University in London), it seems clear that William has always appealed to both adult and child readers, at least partly for the reasons outlined earlier. The latest editions combine sharply contemporary cover designs with the original stories and illustrations, and reviews suggest that this appeals to adults and children who may be reading the books together. For this grown-up reader, the humour remains entertaining, even if the formula becomes rather tiresome. Yet despite the books' occasional references to the cultural developments

of the 1950s and 1960s, the social world they depict seems light years away from that of most children today. Perhaps they are now understood as sheer escapism; but it would be interesting to know how far Crompton's rather irritable conservatism even registers with contemporary children and their parents.

Sources and references

Complete versions of several William stories can be found online at Project Gutenberg, ebooks and probably other copyright-free online libraries:
https://archive.org/stream/justwilliam34414gut/34414-8.txt
http://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/richmal-crompton/william-ala.shtml

Audio and TV versions can be found on YouTube, for example:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oy7MNkKO--4
and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kI1YWu2OVeE.

The story of Marvel's failed William comic can be found at http://downthetubes.net/?p=27842.

The Just William Society is at: http://www.justwilliamsociety.co.uk/index.htm.

Other fan materials can be found via this fan site: http://www.justwilliam.co.uk/

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