



Classics in Short No.21: Clever Bill

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Brian Alderson on William Nicholson's **Clever Bill**.

A Salute to ? Clever Bill Nicholson <!--break-->

?Sir William?, if you please.

William Nicholson was born in Newark, Nottinghamshire on 5 February 1872, the son of an engineer. Passionate about painting he preferred experience to academics and received only intermittent tuition. His early successes were mostly in print-making, especially through collaboration with his brother-in-law, James Pryde ? the two of them working together as the Beggarstaff Brothers, re-inventing the art of the poster. Nicholson never lost his interest in graphic art, but his knighthood in 1936 was gained for his eminence as a painter (particularly portraits and still-lives) and for his public status, not least as a Trustee of the Tate Gallery. He had five children, his eldest son being Ben Nicholson and his eldest daughter Nancy, who became Robert Graves?s first wife. He died on 16 May 1949.

A is for Alphabet.

Work on the posters provoked an interest in wood-cutting and in 1897 William Heinemann (whose ?windmill? device would later be cut by Nicholson) oversaw the final publication of **An Alphabet** (dated 1898) after well over a year?s work. It was, at one level, a *livre d?artiste*, appearing in various fancy and expensive get-ups; but at another level it was a ground-breaking picture book, its big, dramatic wood-cut illustrations, with bold, heavy contours unlike anything seen before. These cuts were converted into lithographic plates for the ?popular edition?, and since children were seen as an essential part of the audience the Executioner and the Topers were changed to the more acceptable Earl and Trumpeter. X for Xylographer may have been a self-portrait.

And Animals.

The **Alphabet** prompted some other fancy plate-series (for adults rather than children) but in 1899 Heinemann brought out **The Square Book of Animals** , dated 1900. Although lithographed, the pictures originated as woodcuts, most of which were done around the time of the **Alphabet** and they share with it images of a similar power ? not much enhanced by some reach-me-down verses by Evelyn Waugh?s papa.

And Abject Absurdity.

During the next couple of decades Nicholson was busy with other projects, but during the 1920s he returned to book illustration, first of all with a cover and seven full-page colour illustrations for **The Velveteen Rabbit** by Margery Williams. Later on, as Margery Williams Bianco, this lady was to produce one of the great toy-stories of the century, **Poor Cecco** (why is this not available, with its stunning drawings by Anthony Maitland ? vastly superior to the original ones by boring old Rackham?) ? but how she came to compose the fatuous twaddle of the rabbit book is difficult to comprehend. It would be nice to think that Nicholson?s bracing graphics were the chief reason for its current fame,

especially in the United States, but I fear it's more likely due to a taste for marshmallow. (And expensive marshmallow at that. A recent catalogue from an English dealer in second-hand books offers 'a near fine copy' at 'wait for it - £15,000!')

And Absolutely Admirable Artistry.

In 1926 and 1929, however, Nicholson published two unquestionably classic picture books: **Clever Bill** (Heinemann) and **The Pirate Twins** (Faber). He wrote and illustrated these for his youngest daughter and her niece 'Nancy's daughter (the Penny and Jenny on the last page of **Clever Bill**) and the books could be seen as *durchkomponiert* as the musicians have it 'through-composed', with his hand-written text nudging along his graphic ideas and his graphic ideas filling the generous narrative space opened up by his economical prose. (For instance: Mary's exchange of letters with her formidable aunt in **Clever Bill** with Nicholson's famous portrait of Queen Victoria, plus cairn, on the wall in the background; or the 'this / that / and the other' as he runs through Mary's menu for the pirate twins.)

Now, a grand Nicholson Trumpeter is called for to lead rejoicings that at last Egmont (né Heinemann) have brought **Clever Bill** back into print 'albeit a little shorn in its page-sequencing, so that there is a reduction in its dramatic climax, but the colour printing is admirable. To follow, we must begin to assemble a deputation of the Great and the Good (led, surely, by our Laureate) to appeal for the restoration of **The Pirate Twins**. It was hardly their fault, poor things, that they were constructed out of black socks, garnished with button-eyes and earrings 'suffering ostracism in consequence (and probably someone will also object to their laddish treatment of Mary). But no less an authority than Maurice Sendak has held these two books up as models of picture-book art: 'seemingly so simple they run through your fingers', and we are all deprived if they don't do the running together.

Note: For a recent account of Nicholson *en famille* and the making of these books, see Elaine Moss's interview with 'Penny' in **Signal** 80 (May 1996), pp. 98-104.

The illustrations are taken from the recently re-issued **Clever Bill** published by Heinemann Young Books (0 434 80439 8, £10.99).

Brian Alderson is Chair of the Children's Books History Society and the chief children's book consultant for **The Times**.

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