# THE WORKS OF EDWARD STRATEMEYER: A NEGLECTED SOURCE OF CULTURAL HISTORY

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Historians have traditionally viewed literature as an excellent source of cultural history. However, the emphasis has usually been directed toward "classics" or best-selling adult books. Discussions of juvenile literature have generally been confined to analyses of Horatio Alger, Jr., as a social Darwinist, an approach which has since been thoroughly discredited.[1] It may be argued that low-grade juvenile literature has no historical value at all, but I believe that a close examination of the genre will not permit such a conclusion. To begin with, these stories have been read by an incredible number of people. Furthermore, although a statistical analysis remains to be done, they seem to have been read by all literate classes. In 1926, for example, the American Library Association sponsored a survey in which thirty-six thousand children in thirty-four cities participated. They were asked to list their favorite books, and ninety-six percent responded with a title written by Edward Stratemeyer's literary syndicate.[2] It is estimated that each of the two hundred million Stratemeyer Syndicate books sold to date has been read by five individuals.[3] After allowing for the fact that there is a certain amount of overlap (i.e., most youngsters read about ten different titles), it can be reasonably estimated that more than one hundred million Americans have been exposed to these books. The influence the books have had is immeasurable (a comparative statistical analysis would be indicative but not definitive), but it is fair to theorize that it has been considerable. Children read such literature throughout their formative years. Picture books are designed for ages three to six, simple stories such as "The Bobbsey Twins" are aimed at the six to nine age group, and the more complex "Nancy Drew" stories are for youngsters aged nine through thirteen.[4] Most children do not challenge what they read when they are so young. Opinions and values are unquestioningly accepted as facts. It is not presumptuous to theorize that many of today's widely held values are formed, at least in part, by low-grade juvenile literature.

There is a second level at which these books can be viewed historically. Edward Stratemeyer did not propose radical changes or champion unpopular causes. A juvenile author must always be concious of the parental factor. As a rule, American children do not choose their reading materials independently. Parents frequently exercise considerable control over the books which enter their homes. Library and school boards screen books carefully before making them available to children. Consequently, a writer who has to face such de facto censorship is exceedingly careful to express only those values which he believes will be agreeable to those who will pass judgment on his works. Viewed in this perspective, juvenile literature can tell the historian a great deal about prevailing opinions and beliefs in any given period.

If we accept the idea that popular juvenile literature significantly influences the thinking of its readers, and at the same time reflects generally accepted adult values, then it will be profitable to examine some of the values expressed in the Stratemeyer books. Many of the values are predictable, and some are surprising. All are interesting and revealing.

Social Darwinism was never embraced by Stratemeyer. Misinterpretation arises because there are enough elements of social Darwinsim to lead astray those who make superficial examinations of the books. The following excerpt from the "Old Glory" series illustrates this point.

> "There ain't no telling how our modern battleships are going to pull through in a fight," said Striker. "Although England and America and France and Germany and Spain and some of the other countries have 'em, they ain't been put into active use. I've been told the Chinese and Japanese used some of 'em during their late war, but them heathens don't count---not alongside o' Anglo-Saxon blood; eh, Hobson?"
>
> "I grant you that, every time, Striker, --- Anglo-Saxon blood every trip, --- against the world," cried the Englishman, heartily. "Now you take it among ourselves," he went on, after a pause. "The Americans and English and Germans, and even the French, can get along together; but put a Spaniard or a Portuguese or an Italian, or one of that kind of fellows aboard and there's trouble right away --- I've seen it a hundred times."5

Anglo-Saxonism was certainly a doctrine of many social Darwinists. However, as Richard Hofstadter has noted, "this Anglo-Saxon dogma

became the chief element in American racism in the Imperial era; but the mystique of Anglo-Saxonism, which for a time had a particularly powerful grip on American historians, did not depend upon Darwinism either for its inception or for its development."[6] Furthermore, historians have frequently made the mistake of equating success stories with social Darwinism. To say that the triumph of good over evil constitutes social Darwinism is an oversimplification. A key element of the social Darwinist argument --- that unbridled, ruthless competition, without regard to rules or ethics, is a natural condition of life --- was never present in the Stratemeyer books. For every celebration of rugged individualism, there were many more reminders that means are more important than results.

> But it was not mere envy that made Eben foam at the mouth when the Hotel Excelsior was mentioned. He could perhaps have borne the blow philosophically if it had been a case of honest opposition. But it was far from that.
>
> For Eben, in his prosperous days, had owned all the land on which the Hotel Excelsior and the golf grounds were now located. The town was small then and property was not worth so much as it rapidly became when the Aero Corporation had established its mammoth plant.
>
> Still it had been worth a tidy sum when Brewster Gale had begun dickering for it. Eben had never liked Gale, but his money had seemed as good as that of anyone else, and he had listened to the proposition. They had settled on a sum, of which only a small part was to be paid in cash. This cash payment Eben had received, but had never obtained a cent more. Through a bewildering series of sleight-of-hand tricks, engineered by Gale and the unscrupulous lawyers he hired --- holding companies, reorganizations, forced sales, technicalities, all the devices by which scoundrels defraud honest men, while still managing to steer clear of jail --- some way and somehow, that poor, bewildered Eben even now could not understand, he found himself divested of equity in the property, with Gale "sitting pretty" with what seemed to be a clear title.[7]

The Stratemeyer philosophy was not Calvinistic. His attitude toward wealth depended upon the circumstances. Where wealth was gained illegally, or unethically, he stated unequivocally that it could not be justified. Wealthy characters who obtained their riches through devious methods were clearly cast as villains. Stratemeyer harshly criticized unethical business practices, but at the same time he praised those who made their fortunes honestly.

Indeed, the fact that Stratemeyer and Alger never embraced social Darwinism, but instead subtly attacked it, may be one reason why that philosophy ultimately fell out of favor.

What then was the Stratemeyer philosophy? Children were taught to respect their elders, but also that certain elders did not deserve obedience or respect. The heroes of the "Old Glory" series, for example, ran away from home because their uncle had treated them harshly. Readers were also urged to exercise a certain amount of independence in planning their futures. A recurring theme involved a hero who sought a life of adventure, while his parents wanted him to enter some profession such as law or medicine. In every case, the hero got his way.

> His mother had hoped that Joe would enter the ministry, but Joe, although he had the greatest respect for that profession, did not feel that his life work lay in that direction. He had been so successful in athletic sports and took such pleasure in them that he yielded to his natural bent and decided to adopt professional baseball as his vocation.
>
> His mother was sorely grieved at first, and the more so as she felt that Joe was "stepping down" in entering the professional ranks. But Joe was able to show her that scores of college men were doing the same thing that he planned to do, and she had too good sense to press her opposition too far.[6]

Female readers saw that a girl could do more than stay home and bake cakes. Nancy Drew was feminine, but certainly not a fragile little thing. Stratemeyer characters never accepted charity, if it was at all possible to fend for themselves. When they did accept offers of help, it was with the insistence that the money would be repaid as a loan. Thrift was a definite virtue, but it was also permissable to acquire such luxuries as radios and automobiles. Blacks were friendly and harmless, but they always spoke in dialect and were not very ambitious or intelligent. The porter in the following passage exhibits most of the characteristics of the classic "Sambo" stereotype.[9] He is slow-witted, irresponsible, subservient, and (at least by implication) lazy.

> They hammered on the door for a while, but no one heard them. At last Frank caught sight of the bell button.
>
> "That's stupid of me," he said, with a smile. "I should have known there'd be a bell to call the porter."

> He pressed the button and waited. No one came. There was no sound but the roar of the train as it rushed on its way. He pressed the button again and again.
>
> "That porter must be either dead or asleep," he muttered, settling down to a prolonged ringing of the bell.
>
> After what seemed an interminable length of time they heard a shuffling of feet in the corridor. The sound of the steps ceased, and some one rapped at the door.
>
> "Something foh you, gemmen?"
>
> "Yes -- let us out of here!"
>
> The porter tried the handle of the door.
>
> "By golly," he observed, "You done locked yo' selves in."
>
> "We didn't lock ourselves in. Somebody locked us in. Haven't you got a key?"
>
> "Jes' a minute."
>
> They heard the porter shuffling away. After a while he returned with the sleeping car conductor, a key clicked in the lock, and then the door swung open.
>
> "How on earth did that happen?" asked the conductor, mystified. He looked at the porter accusingly. "Did you lock these boys in there?"
>
> "No, sah! No, sah!" protested the porter. "Ah didn't have nuffin to do with it, sah! Dey come on at Chicago wif an older man and I done showed 'em to de compa'tment and dat's all Ah knows about it."10

Foreigners and others who acted "different" were sinister and always subject to suspicion. Honesty and hard work were guaranteed to keep people out of trouble, but there was alway a place for practical jokes and good, clean fun. A good education was important, and crime did not pay.

It is not difficult to see where these values have found a place in America. Nativism in the Twenties may well have had some of its roots in the Anglo-Saxonist sentiments expressed in the "Old Glory" series of 1898. Nativism was certainly reinforced by the depiction of foreigners in the books of the Twenties and Thirties. How much of our desire to own automobiles, boats, radios, and television sets was caused by the fact that the Hardy boys owned such things? How many of today's feminists were inspired to cast off the submissive role of women because of the independence of Nancy Drew? How much of our resistance to welfare can be traced to the Stratemeyer edict that nobody should accept charity when it is still possible to work? Perhaps we can better understand the opposition to such programs as Huey Long's "Share Our Wealth" when we consider that millions of

Americans were taught, through the books they read while youngsters, values which are inconsistent with income redistribution plans.

There is no intention here to imply that the Stratemeyer books were either the exclusive or most significant sources of such attitudes. These values would have existed (although undoubtedly to a lesser degree) even if Edward Stratemeyer had remained a clerk all his life. It is sufficient to note the very real likelihood that the books people read during their formative years do as much, or more, to shape their attitudes as all the learning they receive in later years. The Stratemeyer Syndicate books are true Americana. They may not possess a great deal of literary quality, and it is true that many were assembly line creations. Nevertheless, millions of people have read them and were influenced by them. The historian who ignores them is neglecting a significant source of cultural history.

FOOTNOTES

1. R. Richard Wohl, "The Country Boy' Myth and Its Place in American Urban Culture: The Nineteenth-Century Contribution." Perspectives in American History, III, 1969, 121-139.

2. Arthur Prager, "Edward Stratemeyer and His Book Machine." Saturday Review, July 10, 1971, 15. Stratemeyer relied heavily upon the use of pseudonyms, and under such noms de plume as "Arthur M. Winfield," "Victor Appleton," "Franklin W. Dixon," and "Carolyn Keene" he created "The Rover Boys," "Tom Swift," "The Hardy Boys," "Nancy Drew," and other perennial favorites. For a more detailed examination of Stratemeyer and his works see Richard Gallagher, "Edward Stratemeyer: A Study in Cultural History" (unpublished Research Paper, Western Connecticut State College, 1974).

3. Interview with Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, East Orange, New Jersey, January 23, 1973.

4. Harriet Stratemeyer Adams.

5. Edward Stratemeyer, Under Dewey at Manila (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1898), pp. 105-106.

6. Ricard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought, Revised Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 172.

7. "Franklin W. Dixon" (pseud.), Over The Ocean To Paris, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1927), pp. 17-18.

8. "Lester Chadwick" (pseud.), Baseball Joe Around the World, (New York: Cupples and Leon Company, 1918), p. 15.

9. See Stanley M. Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life, Second Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 82.

10. "Dixon," Hunting For Hidden Gold, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1928), pp. 67-68.