"History from Below": Time-Slip Narratives and National Identity

In this article, I want to look at a group of English children's novels that feature the "time-slip" device: that is, either the protagonist slips back in time, or characters from the past reappear in the present, or both. Books using this device seem to cluster in the 1960s and 70s – as can be seen from this (by no means exhaustive) chronological list:

1906, Rudyard Kipling, Puck of Pook's Hill
1906, Edith Nesbit, The Story of the Amulet
1908, Edith Nesbit, The House of Arden
1939, Alison Uttley, A Traveller In Time
1954, Lucy Boston, The Children of Green Knowe
1957, Gillian Avery, The Warden's Niece
1958, Philippa Pearce, Tom's Midnight Garden
1963, Clive King, Stig of the Dump
1966, William Mayne, Earthfasts
1972, K. M. Peyton, A Pattern of Roses
1973, Nina Bawden, Carrie's War
1973, Penelope Lively, The Ghost of Thomas Kempe
1974, Penelope Lively, The House in Norham Gardens
1976, Penelope Lively, A Stitch in Time
1977, William Mayne, It
1978, Jill Paton Walsh, A Chance Child
1999, David Almond, Kit's Wilderness
1999, Susan Cooper, King of Shadows

The list also reveals that there are much earlier antecedents for this genre at the beginning of the century, and the device is still very much with us. Two of the runners-up for the 1999 Guardian Children's Book Prize, Kit's Wilderness and King of Shadows, are recent examples. The special importance of the genre in the postwar decades of the last century has been recognized by Humphrey Carpenter, who writes that a typical plot is "likely to concern one or two children who stumble across some

feature of history or mythology which concerns their own family or the place where they are living or staying" (218, quoted in Krips, 52).

Valerie Krips explains this preoccupation with "achieving an appropriate orientation to the present in terms of the past" (52) with reference to the British loss of Empire, and the nascent heritage industry, in an argument that ranges widely over many different types of children's literature. I am concerned here to pinpoint the special features of the time-slip genre, and to relate them very explicitly to ideas of heritage. At the same time, I want to argue that this genre provides ways out of some of the dilemmas and negative features of "heritage" as a concept and a practice. In many of its variants, the time-slip narrative offers an openness to "other" histories, rather than the potentially nationalistic search for roots; it problematizes the simple access to the past promised by the heritage site; it critiques empty reconstructions of the past; and because of the way it constructs childhood, it evades the dangers of nostalgia.

The novels I am interested in deploy a series of overlapping motifs, which are repeated with variations - rather like folktale or fairytale motifs. Not all the novels feature all of them. They are: a deracinated child comes to stay in a new locality; a special place, often in conjunction with a special object, provides access to the past;[1] an empathetic bond is formed with a child in the past; a connection is made between the past experience and the memory of someone still living; names, inscriptions and their decoding are important; the history that is accessed is the everyday life of an ordinary child; the subjectivity of the present-day child is an important element in the story; this child does some form of archival research to establish the truth of their experience of the past; the experience of the past becomes part of a theme of moving on, growing, accepting change, death and loss.

The "genre" I am talking about overlaps with high fantasy and secondary world fiction, where the "past" the child accesses is wholly or partly fantastic. But here I am only interested in novels which introduce children to a past that is presented

as "real" and everyday.[2] While a supernatural element is sometimes present in order to effect the movement between past and present, some of the stories - Carrie's War, The Warden's Niece - are entirely naturalistic. On the other side of my definition, is actual historical fiction, wholly set in the past, which represents a different type of historical consciousness from that encouraged by the time-slip genre.

The emergence of this genre is clearly connected to the ideas of Raphael Samuel, in Theatres of Memory, regarding what he calls "a new version of the national past", the "living history" or "history from below" movement. Samuel sees a shift in "our historical consciousness as a nation, which departs quite radically from the textbook version of 'our island story'. . . . It is the little platoons, rather than the great society, which command attention . . . . the spirit of place rather than that of the common law or the institutions of representative government" (I, 158). He locates this new movement in the practices of oral, local and family history, and it is particularly evident in the way that history is taught in the schools, and in the institution of "heritage" sites and activities.

Samuel, then, is presenting the idea of "heritage" as a good thing, evidence of a democratic tendency in our conception of the nation's history. He points, for instance, to the interest in "life below stairs" fostered at stately homes owned by the National Trust (I, 160). His views are opposed by Patrick Wright, in his book On Living in an Old Country (1985), where "heritage" is attacked as an overly nostalgic, classist and racist representation of "Englishness". He, however, also points to a movement towards the everyday and ordinary – "the thematic repertoire of the modern past comes to be defined in close relation to everyday life" - involving a value "for the auratic [possessed of aura] object and the place or site which seems to bear meaning in itself" (22). Whether this new version of the national past is politically regressive or potentially radical is a question I will be addressing in relation to the books I am discussing.

That there has been a shift in historical consciousness is suggested by the change in focus from the earliest examples of the children's time-slip genre to its later manifestations. In Kipling's Puck of Pook's Hill, the children Dan and Una are located in their own Sussex meadow, while Puck presents to them a series of characters from crucial moments in England's past. It all adds up to a grand narrative of Englishness, presented as a fusion of different races and cultures, a story which the children unproblematically inherit. In Nesbit's The Story of the Amulet, as in the later novels, it is the children who travel, by means of a special object, but the local dimension is missing. They travel all over the world, and once again a grand narrative of progress links their various adventures. Nesbit's The House of Arden introduces the often-to-be-repeated device of the "auratic" old house where the past comes alive, but, as in Kipling, it is the ancestral home of the child protagonists, and moments from various points in a long time-scale are visited.[3]

It is important to my interpretation of the later novels whether the past that is discovered is a purely family past, or whether it is "other" to the child protagonist. Samuel makes the point that it is rootlessness that has produced the compensatory search for "roots", and the fascination with local history, which "gave the territorially mobile the dignity of ancient settlement" (I, 150). David Loewenthal also comments that "to compensate for their own lack of real roots, newcomers to old English villages may take a keen interest in the local past" (38). According to Samuel, the National Trust is now called upon "to do the memory work which in earlier times might have been performed by territorial belonging" (I, 39). Child protagonists who rediscover a sense of territorial belonging, by simply returning to ancestral homes and connecting to their "real roots", are Tolly, in The Children of Green Knowe,[4] Penelope in A Traveller in Time, and Kit in the very recent Kit's Wilderness. In this book it is not a grand old house but a coal-mine where Kit discovers his earlier namesake. He is aided by his grandfather's stories, as is Tolly by his grandmother's. The exact replication of names and appearances in successive generations naturally

favours a patrilinear scheme, and a rather static, even racist, view of reproduction, inheritance and the nation. King of Shadows also uses the “namesake” idea, as Nat Field, an American boy actor at the reconstructed Globe theatre, changes places with Nathan Field, a boy actor in Shakespeare's time, but this book plays with the more mobile idea of the American researching his “roots” in England. The present-day Nat also notes that his namesake looks nothing like him.

By contrast, Tim Ingram in A Pattern of Roses is mysteriously drawn to the history of Tom Inskip. The initials are the same, but the boys are quite different and not related. Tim in the present is an urban, upper-middle class youth, brought to the countryside by his parents, who, after some insensitive modernisation of their ancient house, soon decide village life is not for them. Tom in the past is a poverty-stricken agricultural labourer. The boys, however, share their artistic talent: Tim has found some sketches by Tom concealed in his unmodernised room. The connection enables Tim to defy his parents, follow his talent and remain in the village. His formation of roots is contrasted explicitly with his parents’ rootlessness, making Samuel's point.

The contrast between unsympathetic, rootless parents and a child who is fascinated by the past is also foregrounded in A Stitch in Time. Here it is a holiday that removes Maria and her parents from the city and deposits them in a time-warped house full of undisturbed Victoriana, in Lyme Regis, where Maria notices and appreciates the rootedness of the houses in their locality:

> In the heart of London, in Oxford Street, Maria had been startled once to see workmen lift a slab of paving to reveal, beneath, brown earth. It was as though the new, shrill, street of concrete and plate-glass windows had shown its secret roots. But here, she noticed, in this small seaside town, the roots came boldly out on to the surface, for walls and the occasional house were made of the same grey-blue stone as the cliffs. It seemed, somehow, satisfactory, as though

> the houses had grown out of the soil just like the trees and grass and bushes . . . (44)

She also puzzles her parents by buying old postcards of the town. The Victorian holiday house could almost be one of the "heritage sites" described by Samuel and Wright; and Samuel comments on the reproduction of old postcards as evidence for his theory (I, 160). It is her rootless life in London that produces Maria's fascination with the past and with locality, and we are invited to sympathise with her.

In others of my texts, Tom in Tom's Midnight Garden is removed to relatives in a strange part of the country, who have no family connections to their living place; Carrie, in Carrie's War, is removed by evacuation from London to Wales; James in The Ghost of Thomas Kempe is an "offcomer" in the village, like Tim Ingram; and Avery's "Warden's Niece" is a runaway, taken in by her Oxford uncle, and moved to investigate the history of a local stately home that she visits as a tourist. Willam Mayne's characters, however, do have more of a sense of rootedness in their locality, but it is not their own family's history that they discover, and the radical differentness of the past is stressed.[5] There is, then, in many of these books, the excitement of discovering and entering some-one else's history, across time and sometimes across culture, class and even race, as with the evacuee Carrie's empathy with the story of the homesick black slave in Carrie's War. It is interesting that Samuel sees heritage as an attempt to escape from class: "Instead of heredity it offers a sense of place" (I, 246).

In his discussion of the "new" history, Samuel connects it in several ways to ideas of childhood and children, though he never mentions the novels I am interested in. For instance, he says that oral history adopted "a child's eye view of the past and a home-centred view of sociability" (I, 161); of historical re-enactments he remarks, "children seem to be the principal consumers of these exercises in historical make-believe" (I, 177); and "living history" "invites us to play games with the past and to

pretend that we are at home in it, ignoring the limitations of time and space" (I, 196). The time-slip novels, then, seem right in the centre of the movement Samuel is delineating. One of his prime examples of the new history is the way the past has been taught to children in the schools, from the mid 1960s: "the quality required of the child . . . was first of all 'empathy', seeing things in terms that would have been familiar to the real-life historical actors. History was no longer the biography of great men but rather the record of everyday things" (I, 198). There was a new emphasis on "discovery" and "child-centred learning" (II, 217. Samuel cites Sylvester and Wake to support his comments on history teaching in schools).

"Empathy" is obviously central to the experiences of the past in these books: the child is transported into a past world in order to visit the familiar world of the past child, and the empathy between them often goes so far that they can be seen as each other's alter-egos. Here some of the texts play with the childhood phenomenon of the imaginary companion. This is especially true of Tom's Midnight Garden, Stig of the Dump, and A Stitch in Time. It is interesting that some educators recommend the reading and writing of fiction as a way to help children understand history (Hicks and Martin). The element of "discovery" is also often present: Tom in Tom's Midnight Garden looks up Victorian costume in an Encyclopedia in a effort to identify what he has seen; Christopher in A Chance Child reads Victorian Parliamentary reports in the local library, to track down his half-brother Creep who has disappeared into the past; Maria in The Warden's Niece sneaks into the Bodleian to discover more about a boy whose portrait she has seen; Tim's friend Rebecca consults local archives to find someone who remembers Tom Inskip; Kit's adventures connect to actual school projects in Geography and English. Living memory is another resource, in Tom's Midnight Garden, A Stitch in Time, The House in Norham Gardens, Carrie's War, and Kit's Wilderness. As Samuel says, favourite school projects were "Grandmother's washing day", and "A Day in the Life of a Victorian School-Child", accessible through living memory in the 60s and 70s (I, 198).

As I live in Lancaster, the latter project immediately brings to mind the reconstructed Victorian school-room at Wigan Pier, and memories of sending my daughter, dressed in an approximation of Victorian costume, on a school outing to visit it. The heritage site is a focus of debate for both Samuel and Wright. They both pick on Jorvick, for example, the reconstructed Viking village in York, which is extremely popular with children, and comment on “the search for a past which is palpably and visibly present: ‘stepping back in time’” (Samuel. I, 175); and “the supposition - at the heart of contemporary tourism: that the past is really there to be visited” (Wright, 75). This is of course the supposition on which all these books are based, except that in most of them various devices complicate and question this naive belief. In the first place, I've already commented on the importance of research as a theme.[6] The ways in which the past is shown to be reconstructed from books, memory, objects, inscriptions, are central to many of the stories. The unreliability of dreams and imagination in our recreations of the past also comes into the picture. In Tom's Midnight Garden, the “past” Tom enters is partly created by Mrs Bartholomew's nostalgic dreams of her childhood; and in A Stitch in Time, the heroine, Maria, has a lively imagination, she is always talking to inanimate objects and making things up. In an opposite turn, which also destabilises the notion of unproblematic access to history, William Mayne in Earthfasts insists on the differentness of the boy from the past, and that he isn't just to be experimented on (38). In several other stories, protagonists have to let go of mistaken stories or theories about the past - Carrie's War, A Stitch in Time, The House in Norham Gardens. In all these ways the simple access to the past promised by the heritage site, is problematized. These questionings also differentiate the genre I am looking at from historical fiction as such.

In several of the texts, too, actual heritage sites or events are featured, and the action of the book is carefully and cleverly distinguished from these artificial reconstructions.[7] Nat in King of Shadows is acting at the reconstructed Globe, but he

is transported back in time to the real Globe, which is subtly different. Coming back, he can see how some of our guesses about the past are wrong. At the end of Kit's Wilderness, the pit, site of Kit's terrifying encounter with child miners of the past, is turned into an innocuous mining museum:

> Up there, they have cleared out our drift mine. New pit-props keep it safe. The tunnel floors are cleared of rubble. There are electric lights. There is a metal gate at the entrance. There are maps pinned there, and explanations of our history. (223)

In A Stitch in Time, Maria visits a Medieval Fayre at a stately home, complete with Jousting Tournament. The Fayre is sent up as a shabby though cheerful event, with participants incongruously dressed in costumes from different periods. It is like a parody of Maria's experiences of shifting between past and present. In The Warden's Niece, it is a visit to a stately home that sets Maria on her quest, but her discovery of the inscription is marginal to the official tour, and a later visit has to be made surreptitiously. Finally, in A Chance Child, Christopher comes across a student group visiting the "auratic" "Place", an industrial wasteland by the canal, learning as facts the experiences Creep has undergone by disappearing from this very place into the industrial past. "'Thank God nothing like that happens now!'", one of the party exclaims.

There seem to be two contradictory effects going on here: on the one hand, the protagonists' experiences of the past are the "real" thing, as opposed to the superficial heritage activities; on the other, the past that is visited is, as I have discussed, shown to be a reconstruction, provided by memory, imagination, dream, archives. The two effects can be well illustrated from Kit's Wilderness, where on the one hand the mining museum is a pale reflection of Kit's real experience of the past, while on the other hand Kit's school projects and stories about the Ice Age are intimately

connected to his experiences of the past in the pit. While participating in the "heritage" project, then, these books work to both question and deepen it.

Another way in which they seem to go beyond "heritage" is closely connected to their status as children's books, directed at children, and giving a representation of what we expect children to be like. Wright's main complaint about heritage is that it is backward-looking. History is constructed as entropy, everything is always in decline, about to be lost, in need of preservation (70). Even Samuel quotes Jameson on our "nostalgia for the present" and "the desperate desire to hold on to disappearing worlds" (I, 140). But nostalgia is an adult emotion.[8] Joan Aitken claims that children's attitudes to the past are different from adults': children are more resilient and forward-looking (71). This may not be true, but it is what many contemporary adults want to believe. The children in these books are finally identified with growth, change and forward movement. Their experiences teach them that they cannot remain trapped in the past, they must move on. This theme is especially strong in Tom's Midnight Garden, where Tom's scheme to remain in the past forever doesn't work, and he realises that the child Hatty from the past is the present old woman Mrs Bartholomew. In A Stitch in Time, Maria's contact with the Victorian Harriet is a phase in her growth, as she becomes more outgoing, more like Harriet (as she imagines her), and she finally leaves off the childish fantasizing that materialized Harriet in the first place. She also discovers that Harriet, contrary to Maria's fantasies, grew up into normal adulthood. The Maria in The Warden's Niece uses her historical researches as a way to establish herself as a serious grown-up person in her uncle's eyes. Alice in It lays to rest her poltergeist from the past, and moves on to the Grammar School. Carrie, in Carrie's War is freed from her unnecessary guilt about the past, and her false, childish constructions about what happened. Kit, In Kit's Wilderness, comes to accept his grandfather's death and his own relocation. Tim, in A Pattern of Roses, finds his adult vocation and independence from his parents through his connection with Tom, after a crisis in which he nearly loses his life on the same

day of the year that Tom did. His growth is connected to an escape from the repetition of the past. Christopher, in A Chance Child, finds out that the adult Creep escaped the rigours of child labour and testified to the reformist government commission.

In these last three books, the horrors of child labour in the past are stressed, in contrast to which the present is undeniably better,[9] and in all these books it is growth and change that is the final message, revisiting and benefitting from the past, but then moving on. In these ways, coupled with a scepticism about "heritage", and the partial questioning of family roots, this children's version of the national past enacts a more hopeful and positive vision than either Samuel or Wright present. It is, however, less encouraging that my two most recent examples revert to the "namesake" device, with its emphasis on patrimony. And where are the stories with immigrant protagonists, rather than just displaced English children, discovering the "roots" of their new homes?[10]

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[1] The importance of place and object in this kind of fiction has been noted by Eleanor Cameron (157). See also Le Mesurier (36) and Smith (114) for the connection of past and place in Penelope Lively's works.

[2] Here, my definition differs from that of Eleanor Cameron, who includes e.g. Susan Cooper's Dark is Rising sequence.

[3] M.A.L. Locherbie-Cameron has commented on some of the differences between Nesbit's and later time-travel stories, concentrating on a movement from realism to modernism, and objectivity to subjectivity. See also Linda Hall, for an analysis of Nesbit's role as 'progenitor of the time-slip story' (51). A longer time-scale and wider

geographic range appears again in a recent, German, example of the genre, Hans Magnus Enzensberger's Where were You, Robert? Here, the larger narrative is one of European development and understanding.

[4] Eleanor Cameron points out not only that Lucy Boston used her own house as the model for Green Knowe, but she also willed it to the National Trust, neatly making Samuel's point above (Cameron, 160)

[5] This is a point emphasized by Fred Inglis, who prefers the time-slip genre to unproblematic historical romance (226, 253-257)

[6] As Inglis points out, "all the children in these exemplary novels do their history out of school" (225).

[7] So the auratic places from which the time-slips take off are different from Nora's 'Lieux de Memoire', which depend on a deliberate memorialization of that which has been forgotten. On the other hand, the books themselves in which these sites are created, could be seen themselves as the writers' delberate attempts to recapture lost memory. On the children's book itself as "heritage site", see Krips, 45.

[8] This is not to say that nostalgia cannot be useful, if it works as a critique of the present. This effect is present in Nesbit's time-travel books, when people decide to remain in the past, or visitors from the past criticize the present (see Hall). But in the group of texts I am interested in, this device is not used.

[9] Though Paton-Walsh makes it clear that the horrors of child abuse continue. It is to escape his treatment in the present that Creep enters the Victorian past.

[10] Interestingly, Kipling, in Puck of Pook's Hill, presents Englishness as created by (adult) people from different ethnic groups: they are assimilated, but they also contribute their distinctive values.