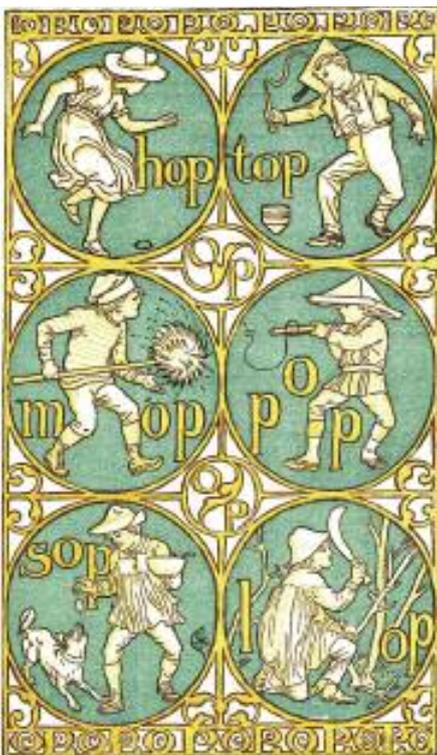


Rhyming Pictures: Walter Crane and the Art of Reading

Dr Grace Brockington describes the educational, aesthetic and political ideals underpinning Walter Crane's art, and illustrates his views on the importance of the visual in our first encounter with written language.

Walter Crane (1845–1915) was one of the most ambitious British artists of the later nineteenth century. As a leading exponent of the Arts and Crafts Movement, he designed textiles, stained glass, wallpaper and ceramics. He also threw himself into politics – the politics of the art world and of social reform. He was founder President of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, which aimed to increase the prestige of the decorative arts; and he dedicated his skills to promoting socialism by designing cartoons, banners and posters. Crane travelled widely, spreading the message of the Arts and Crafts across Europe and North America. His work was celebrated abroad and his books translated into several European languages. Yet despite his industry



and success, his reputation in his own country has suffered. This is partly because William Morris, the pioneering artist-craftsman, still tends to eclipse his younger colleague, and also because of an element of bathos in Crane's career. The large, allegorical paintings which he hoped to exhibit at the Royal Academy were badly received. Instead, he became famous for his children's books, known as 'toy books' ('toy' here meaning trivial). Scores of illustrations, produced over a period of 50 years, earned Crane the teasing title of 'academician of the nursery'. He loved fancy dress, animals and fairy tales, and it is tempting to dismiss him as an overgrown child, whose domestic talents never lived up to his public ambitions.

Crane himself chaffed at such monikers. They left him feeling, he complained, 'like a travelling portmanteau', covered in old labels.¹ The metaphor conveys his desire to move beyond children's books (as he wishfully observed, labels eventually rub off), but it also suggests a way of rethinking his illustrations. In *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1871), Crane's contemporary Lewis Carroll extended the idea of the portmanteau to denote the blending of words and meanings ('mimsy', combining flimsy and miserable, is his famous example of a portmanteau word). Crane was a cosmopolitan and polymath whose tendency to blend conventional distinctions between art and craft, master and labourer, adult and child, still challenges assumed categories. His books explore the connections between words and images, as well as between countries and generations. They project a

Figure 1. J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *The Golden Primer*, illustrated by Walter Crane (London, Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1884), p. 24



Figure 2. Walter Crane, *Pothooks and Perseverance: or the ABC-Serpent* (London: Marcus Ward & Co Ltd, 1886), [np]

sense of educational and political purpose, linking the imaginary world of Crane's illustrations with the visionary world of his politics, and it is those associations – between art and language, childhood, and social reform – that I shall explore here.

Crane regarded his illustrations as key to the educational value of his books. He believed that children learn primarily through their eyes and that a well-designed book can shape an individual, intellectually and morally. His books combine words and images in ways which emphasise the pictorial quality of linguistic signs, intensifying the visual experience of reading. In Crane's primers, children dance inside alphabets (Figure 1). Hand-written calligraphy complements the expressive line of his designs (Figure 2). The text is inscribed on fluttering banners, or it fans across the picture, losing its blocky, abstract quality.

This sense of the priority of the visual is evident in Crane's work with various educational theorists of his day, notably Professor John Meiklejohn, a writer of school text books, and Miss Nellie Dale, a

Wimbledon school teacher who published a series of children's readers around 1900. Both Meiklejohn and Dale rebelled against the so-called alphabet method of teaching reading, where children begin by learning to name letters. Instead they advocated systems which



Figure 3. J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *The Golden Primer*, illustrated by Walter Crane (London, Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1884), preface [np]

emphasise visual association: 'look-and-say', where children learn to recognise whole words as pictures was Meiklejohn's method; and phonics, pioneered in part by Dale, which teaches the sounds of individual letters, but not their names.

In 1876, Meiklejohn was appointed first Professor of Education at the University of St Andrews, and he used the position to advocate a nurturing, holistic, child-centred system, based on the new sciences of philology and child psychology. He made it his mission to reform the teaching of reading, which suffered from the inadequacies of the written alphabet. The historical process of development from realistic pictures, through hieroglyphic symbols, to arbitrary signs was, he argued, one of deterioration, thwarting children in their efforts to read, and retarding

Figure 4. Walter Crane, *Mrs Mundi at Home, The Terrestrial Ball, Lines and Outlines* by Walter Crane (London: Marcus Ward & Co., 1875), plate 23

their powers of logical analysis.² In *The Golden Primer* (1884), Meiklejohn and Crane worked together to reconnect the written word with the child's visual experience. Meiklejohn's instructions to the teacher give equal weight to Crane's illustrations (Figure 3). 'In this little book', he explains, 'ART comes, to fix the child's attention; SCIENCE, to guide his steps. Pictures – words in the pictures – words out of the pictures – words in sentences: this is the first **Ladder to Learning!**' Crane has drawn himself and Meiklejohn, the artist and the writer, taking their bow together. Crane dresses himself literally as a crane: the bird becomes his signature. The fact that the writer wields a feather quill pen, presumably plucked from the bird's wing, underlines the close connection between Crane as artist and the visual art of writing.

That connection is made even more explicit in Crane's work with Nellie Dale. Dale's books are visually less impressive than Meiklejohn's *Golden Primer*, but her commentary makes it clear that visual art was even more important to the phonic method than it was to 'look-and-say'. She also suggests that Crane was involved in the development of her method, at times actually present in the classroom and drawing pictures to demand. For instance, she fondly remembers her pupils' delight when he improvised a crab peeking out from under a cap.³ Dale's idea was that children should spend a whole year drawing and modelling objects and telling stories about them before they learnt to associate them

with written words. She called it 'hand-training', and she argued that the visual awareness it taught was vital for a child's conceptual and linguistic development. She also encouraged her children to use gestural symbols, like waving for goodbye, before introducing them to the more arbitrary symbols of the alphabet, and in the early stages she used colour to differentiate different phonic categories: vowels were 'clothed' in red (clothed is Dale's word), voiceless consonants in blue, voiced consonants in black, and silent letters in brown to suggest something 'faded', like autumn leaves.⁵

The idea of art as our first encounter with written language was important to Crane as an educator, aesthetic theorist and political campaigner. He used it to promote the Arts and Crafts revival, arguing that not all art has the symbolic quality necessary to encode conceptual thought. The fine or pictorial arts, the sort of painting promoted by the art schools and academies of his day, fail to achieve linguistic sophistication. Decorative art, on the other hand, is a form of picture-writing and therefore able to communicate ideas with all the subtlety of words. And if decoration is a language, then society must reject the expressive void of industrial mass-production and sponsor the return to hand-crafted artifacts, restoring the relationship between the artist as speaker and the artwork as utterance.

Crane was optimistic that such a return would come about. A fervent Darwinist, he





Figure 5. Walter Crane, *The Sirens Three, A Poem* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1886), [np., stanzas cxxvii–cxxix]

believed that society could evolve toward a better, fairer balance of wealth and labour, and toward a renaissance of the applied arts. He also believed that it would evolve away from its dependence on an arid combination of naturalistic painting and visually illiterate text toward a situation where people communicated primarily through pictorial symbols. This prediction built on a model of human development as a spiralling cycle, using an analogy between the growth of the individual and racial development which circulated among Crane's contemporaries. What is interesting in Crane's case is that he applied the model to visual communication. According to his world-view, evolution was spiralling round again to the pre-industrial, pre-textual days of the symbolic word-picture – the sort of pristine, visual eloquence demonstrated by his children's books.⁶

Crane's prophetic sense of return helps to make sense of his fascination with fairy tales. He was not retreating from public life, as some critics have assumed. Rather, he believed that fairy tales preserve the traces of early civilizations, and that children, who are miniatures of the human race, have direct access to that mode of thinking. As curator

Helen Stalker points out, fairy-tale imagery imbues Crane's political cartoons, while his children's illustrations conceal political metaphors. The symbol of a fruit tree recurs in his socialist posters as well as his toy books, a benign Tree of Knowledge feeding children and workers alike. Jack climbs the bean-stalk wearing a Phrygian cap of liberty, a red sun rising behind him, to ransack the wealthy giant's castle. Elves and fairies celebrate May Day under the gloomy eye of goblin Marjoy (organised religion).⁷ Crane's picture-book *Mrs Mundi at Home* (1875) playfully projects his concern for international relations in its parable of war and diplomacy as a society ball, with France and Germany pulling pistols out of party crackers, Bosnia blowing its cork, and Britannia handing out an aloof pax (Figure 4). The interlinking of children's make-believe, adult politics and decorative book design comes across particularly vividly in his poem *The Sirens Three* (1886), a long, dream allegory of human suffering and socialist redemption (Figure 5). The poem's imagery of knights and dragons parallels the fantasy world of *Pothooks and Perseverance* (Figure 2), published the same year, but it extends Crane's educational method to an adult readership. In both books, the text is decentred, incorporated into the overall design of the page in such a way as to emphasise the visuality of the reading process.

Crane the traveller turned instinctively to metaphors of journeying when he predicted the renaissance of book illustration. 'The point is reached', he explained:

when the jaded intellect would fain return again to picture-writing and welcomes the decorator and the illustrator to relieve the desert wastes of words marshalled in interminable columns on the printed page. In a journey through a book it is pleasant to reach the oasis of a picture or an ornament, to sit awhile under the palms [...] thus we end as we begin, with images.⁸

Crane carried with him a portmanteau philosophy which linked social equality, evolution and the decorative arts. His children's books embodied these ideals through their actual appeal to the learning eye of the very young reader, and their symbolic appeal to a rejuvenated society. They put into practice his call for a return to design, and they renewed the genre of

children's illustration just when he anticipated that society as a whole would rediscover its infant way of seeing things.

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From 2004 to 2007, Dr Brockington held a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship at Clare Hall, Cambridge, researching the interface between internationalism and the arts at the fin de siècle. In July 2006, she convened an international conference on the subject of her research, and is preparing an edited collection of essays arising from this event, to be published by Peter Lang in 2008.

Dr Brockington is currently Lecturer in the Department of History of Art at the University of Bristol.

Notes

- ¹ Walter Crane, 'Notes on My Own Books for Children', *The Imprint* 1 (Jan–June 1913): 81–36, p. 81.
- ² JMD Meiklejohn, *The Problem of Teaching to Read Restated and Attempted to be Solved with Suggestions for Methods and Plans* (London; Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1879), p. 12.
- ³ Nellie Dale, *On the Teaching of English Reading, with a Running Commentary on the Walter Crane Readers* (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1898), p. 34.
- ⁴ Nellie Dale, *Further Notes on the Teaching of English Reading, with a Running Commentary on the Dale Readers, Book I* (London: George Philip & Son, 1902), p. 14.
- ⁵ Dale, *On the Teaching of English Reading*, pp. 19, 58.
- ⁶ Walter Crane, *The Claims of Decorative Art* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1892), p. 107.
- ⁷ *Sleeping Beauties: Walter Crane and the Illustrated Book*, an exhibition currently showing at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, May 2007–March 2008.
- ⁸ Walter Crane, *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1972), p. 16.