


THE HEYDAY OF 'THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER'

MARY CADOGAN LOOKS AT
THE HISTORY OF THIS POPULAR
PERIODICAL DURING ITS PRIME
IN THE THIRTIES & FORTIES



The 'Girl's Own Paper' is certainly one of the best-known periodicals of its kind, and had a large following from the late nineteenth century through to its eventual demise in 1948. The early years of the paper have already been examined from the collector's point of view in issue 6 of 'Book and Magazine Collector'. Flora Klickmann, the editor who dominated the paper during its Edwardian heyday, continued to edit it until her retirement in 1931, when it was known as 'Woman's Magazine and Girls' Own Paper'. With volume 52 in 1931, the monthly magazine entitled 'Girl's Own Paper' finally became a periodical for young girls rather than women, and adult female readers were diverted to 'Women's Magazine'. So the paper of the 1920s was successfully split into two independent publications.

The new 'Girl's Own Paper' was a very attractive and vital affair, featuring many excellent illustrators and some of the most popular writers for girls of its period. Among the famous names who contributed stories and articles were Angela Brazil, Elsie Jeanette Oxenham, L.M. Montgomery,

Baroness Orczy and Elinor Brent-Dyer. As well as items from these 'giants' of the girls' story genre, there were splendid short stories and serials from lesser known but addictive authors like Frances Cowen (who covered a wide range of fiction), Wallace Carr (a writer of historical tales), Sybil Haddock (who produced humorous episodes) and Dorothy Carter (whose forte was girls' flying stories).

The publishers, who no longer produced the paper as the Religious Tract Society but as the Lutterworth Press, gave girls good value for the sixpence (in old money) per month that the paper cost. As well as the fifty or so large pages that made up the basic paper, each issue contained twenty pages of G.O.P. Club news, fashion and career chat, and colourful advertisements. The most striking and appealing feature every month was the full colour cover, which specialised in glowingly healthy, outdoor girls, engaged in brisk country walks, strolls with a wide variety of dogs (from dalmatians to dachshunds), or in skating, sledging, hockey, lacrosse, boating, tennis, cricket and almost any other sport one could think of. There were occasional double numbers, priced at one shilling, to celebrate Christmas.

ANNUAL

To avoid confusion, it is important to point out that during the Thirties and Forties, the "Girl's Own Annual" consisted of a year's bound issues of the monthly paper. Because they are preserved in a cloth binding, these annuals have often lasted longer than collections of unbound monthly copies; however, though the annuals are attractive collector's items, they are not so satisfying to possess as runs of the unbound magazines. This is because the annuals do not contain the lovely coloured covers (although three or four of the pictures are usually bound into the annual as colour plates), and neither do they include the interesting twenty pages of club notes, etc., mentioned above, that are always present in the monthlies.

Apart from its fictional content, the G.O.P. ran many factual articles and photographs, which provide a wonderfully comprehensive commentary on what it was like to be an adolescent girl in the run-up to the Second World War, and actually

The GIRL'S OWN Paper



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The covers of "The Girl's Own" were particularly appealing, featuring healthy outdoor pursuits.

during the period of hostilities. This is social history of the most immediate and effective kind, rarely to be found in the less ephemeral publications that are generally available to students in schools and universities today.

During the Thirties, the physical culture movements that were then in vogue cropped up constantly in the pages of the G.O.P. Youth Hostelling and hiking are favourite subjects, and there are hints in abundance on how to improve one's breast- or butterfly-stroke when in the water, and one's bullying-off when out of it! Prunella Stack, the leader of the then amazingly popular Women's League of Health and Beauty, tells girl readers 'How to Keep Fit' in an article that is niftily illustrated by smiling exponents leaping about in smart white tops and black satin knickers.

The G.O.P., however, saved its wildest enthusiasm for the exploits of aviators, including feminine ones like Amy Johnson, Amelia Earhart and Jean Batten. The paper was not alone in this, of course: girl flyers, by their achievements and through their strength of character, were symbolic of

the widening spheres of activity sought by women and girls. The media in general responded to them in prose, poetry and song, and especially to Britain's own Darling of the Skies — 'Amy, Wonderful Amy'.

After Amy Johnson's Gipsy Moth solo flight from England to Australia in 1930, flying stories for girls began to catch on. 'The Girl's Own Paper' echoed the popular mood and became airborne. In 1936, for example, it enthusiastically described the work of the first British air stewardess in an article entitled 'A New Career Open to Girls'. Then Dorothy Carter began to contribute stories of girl aviators like "Lizzie of the Bush" and "Mistress of the Air". She was followed by Pauline Gower, who was one of the most successful women in aviation during the Thirties and Forties. She ran an air-taxi service before becoming commandant of women ferry pilots in the Air Transport Auxiliary, and a board member of the British Overseas Airways Corporation. She wrote a string of stories for the G.O.P. about girls piloting their own biplanes, and later became its regular air correspondent.

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The paper's ace contributor on flying matters, however, was not one of these enterprising women authors, but a male writer who had already created one cult figure in the world of flight ('Biggles'), and who was ready to produce another in the interests of Air Force recruitment during the Second World War. Captain W.E. Johns was a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps during the First World War, and a recruiting officer for the R.A.F. during the second. When he wrote the serial, "Worrals of the W.A.A.F.S." for the G.O.P. in 1940, the women's branch of the Service was in urgent need of recruits. His eighteen-year-old heroine, Flight Officer Joan Worrals (‘Worrals’), immediately caught the imagination of readers, and the W.A.A.F. soon received its full quota of recruits. (It is, of course, possible that the Olympian achievements of the Battle of Britain pilots also stirred girls into joining the W.A.A.F., but Johns and Worrals must not be denied a large measure of credit.)

Worrals stories remained in great demand throughout the war, and serial after serial featuring her and ‘Frecks’, her engaging

sidekick, was produced by Johns. The wartime issues of the G.O.P. are collectable for these items alone, even without the many other riches which they offer. Johns was, in a sense, pioneering with Worrals, whereas by 1940 the ‘Biggles’ saga had become something that he could produce fairly easily. The girls’ fiction market was new to him, and he put some of his most charismatic writing into his G.O.P. stories, even spicing them up with lively feminist touches. Worrals starts off by ferrying battered Tiger Moths back to their makers for reconditioning; later she is parachuted into Nazi-occupied Europe to rescue British Army and Air Force personnel stranded there after the fall of France. She also grapples gamely with the Japanese enemy in the Far Eastern theatre of war.

She achieves the distinction of confronting the Gestapo, Middle Eastern gun-runners, slave dealers and wild African tribes whilst always retaining her ‘cool’ – and her virginal state. Engagingly – because Johns remembered that he was writing for girl teenagers – Worrals never lapses into obscenities or the consumption of strong

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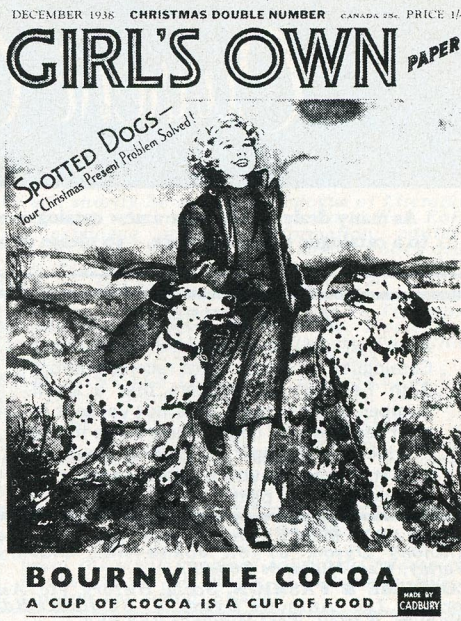
liquor. After particularly nerve-shattering escapes from the Gestapo, for instance, she steadies herself, not with gaspers or gulps of whisky, but with a few raisins or some 'pre-war nut-milk chocolate'.

Captain W.E. Johns became the hero of the 'Girl's Own Paper' during the 1940s; his avuncular face smiled frequently from its pages, and for many issues he conducted its flying gossip column, "The World on Wings — Between You and Me and the Joystick".

BOMBING

Stories by Phyllis Cooper, Joan Verney and Frances Cowen dealt atmospherically with bombing and the blackout, with evacuees, and with girls doing their bit on the Home Front on assembly lines, in servicemen's canteens or in Civil Defence. Fashions of the period are well represented. Schoolgirls wear knitted pixie-hoods and carry their gas masks in home-made leatherette shoulder bags; they are given tips on transforming their tired old gym tunics by making them look 'brand new' with boleros cut from discarded dresses. These were the days of 'Make Do and Mend', and the G.O.P. took up the theme with a vengeance, its pages spattered with instructions on how to pep-up fading garments with crochet, daisy-stitch embroidery or ric-rac braid trimmings.

There is no doubt that the Thirties and Forties represented a heyday for the 'Girl's Own Paper'. Or perhaps it might be more accurate to think of it as an Indian summer, because — despite its appeal and vitality throughout the war years — decline and



The Christmas Double number for 1938 presented this charming cover picture in full colour.

demise quickly followed. In 1948 it changed its name to 'Heiress', and no longer attempted to cater for schoolgirls and adolescents, but solely for young women. It became a tired and watered-down women's magazine, without sufficient romance of the addictive kind to attract readers. 'Heiress' finally ceased publication in 1956. Few collectors now take any interest in it; but 'The Girl's Own Paper' remains very much in demand.

PRICE GUIDE TO 'THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER'

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