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# FRANK RICHARDS

## AND HIS 'BILLY BUNTER' BOOKS

ALEX KERNAGHAN EXPLAINS HOW THE ADVENTURES OF THE 'FAT OWL OF THE REMOVE' CAME TO BE ISSUED IN BOOK FORM

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**F**rank Richards, creator of the fat Owl of the Greyfriars Remove, was the most prolific writer the world has ever seen. Born in Ealing, London, on 8th August 1876, his writing career began in 1893 when, uncertain what to turn to, he wrote and sold his first short story at the age of 17. He continued virtually uninterrupted for the next 68 years. His total output, conservatively estimated by the Guinness Book of Records, is placed in excess of 75,000,000 words – the equivalent of 1000 full length novels.

Adventure yarns on the high seas, Westerns, thrillers and school-boy fiction, Frank

Richards – real name Charles Hamilton – churned them out under twenty-eight different pen-names. And it was the launching by Amalgamated Press of the 'Gem' in the spring of 1907, and the 'Magnet' in February 1908, that assured success for this writing phenomenon.

For the 'Gem' he created his first great leader, Tom Merry who, with the boys of St. Jim's (who had appeared earlier in 'Pluck') adventured every week right up to the last 'Gem' at the close of 1939.

### EVERGREEN

But it was in the evergreen 'Magnet' that Richards, the name under which he is best known, created the most famous school of all time . . . Greyfriars, inhabited by such stalwarts as Harry Wharton, Bob Cherry, Johnny Bull, Frank Nugent and Harree Janset Ram Singh, the successfulness was terrific. There was, too, the lean angular shape of Mr Henry Samuel Quelch, the gimlet-eyed Remove form master – "a beast, but a just beast"; pompous old Prout, rotund Master of the Fifth; Herbert Vernon Smith, 'boulder' of the Remove, landing himself in one scrape after another; his lazy lordship, Lord Maul-everer (Mauly to his pals); the pernicious penny-pinching American Fisher T. Fish; that ass Coker, and the inimitable William George Bunter, the podgy pillering pirate, the bloated burbling brigand, from whom no tuck was safe, no study cupboard inviolate. And it was Bunter, who had started as a minor character, that everyone wanted.

It must have seemed to Richards then that writing for the 'Magnet' and the 'Gem' would continue ad infinitum. It almost did. For 1683 issues he packed the pages of the 'Magnet' (subtitled "Billy Bunter's Own Paper") with the hilarious escapades of the Famous Five & Co. But all good things must come to an end. The paper shortage that had brought down the 'Gem' in 1939 killed the 'Magnet' in May 1940. For more than thirty years these two famous papers had secured Richards a steady income. Now, suddenly, at the age of 64, when most men would consider retirement, Richards found himself without a market. The war years were lean, and as Richards himself confessed: "I was never one for putting away for a rainy day". The future looked bleak. Yet he continued to write. He maintained his incredible output of a quarter of a million words a year ... and filed it away.

### STRANDED

"It was rather hard to be left stranded at that age," he said. "I took a house in Hampstead Garden Suburb, and all those six years I used to go to my desk each morning and write. I did a lot of hard work, but there was very little published. However I have a natural buoyancy, and didn't let the situation affect my spirits much."

There was, too, the additional complication that when the venerable 'Magnet' folded, the Amalgamated Press claimed copyright not only on Richards' published material, but also on the Greyfriars characters themselves. So it seemed to Richards that Billy Bunter & Co. were dead - and he accepted the loss, if not gladly, then at least philosophically.

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## BILLY BUNTER THE BOLD



**FRANK RICHARDS**

*The dust-wrapper for 'Billy Bunter The Bold', illustrated by R.J. Macdonald. The first edition of this book was published by Cassell in 1954.*

Then in 1946 the publisher Charles Skilton read an article about Richards in the 'Picture Post', and contacted the author with a view to producing the Bunter stories in book format. Richards readily agreed, and the Amalgamated Press rightly relented, allowing him to resurrect Bunter and the much-loved Greyfriars characters provided they appeared in book form only. So once again "all was calm and bright". Frank Richards set down happily and wrote his first post-war Bunter story, "Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School". He worked the length out to the equivalent of two of his 'Magnet' stories, and suggested a payment of 30/- (£1.50) per thousand words. But Skilton was a fair man. He advised Richards instead to accept royalties on the book, and these royalties netted Richards well over £1000, rather than the £90 he'd originally been asking. The success of the book was

immediate. Within weeks of its release it sold 25,000 copies – all that could be produced at the time, as paper shortage was still a reality.

The 'Evening Express' greeted the novel with: "Fathers and sons will be contending for its possession. . . Bunter is a national institution"; and the 'Empire News' wrote: "In his sphere Mr Richards is a genius. Ask any schoolboy."

For the first time in almost half a century of writing, Frank Richards' work appeared in book format, in what are now the world famous "yellow jackets".

The praise wasn't quite unanimous however. There were those of the 'old school' who felt, with some justification, that only the first novel was in reality an original story, all of the others being re-writes of work that had appeared earlier in the 'Magnet'. While this may be true to some extent, it was the superbly illust-

*"Backing Up Billy Bunter" was first published in 1935 by Cassell, with an amusing dust-wrapper illustrated by C.F. Chapman.*

## BACKING UP BILLY BUNTER



FRANK RICHARDS

rated yellow-jacketed books that brought Bunter to a whole new generation. And for the first time even those (including myself) who could never afford 7/6 (37p) for a book were able to get hold of them in any library. (I still remember joining three local libraries and cycling round them to dig out the magic yellow Bunter books, stuffing them into my saddle-bag and heading happily for home. Like millions of others I was to read them again and again.)

Skilton went on to publish the books at the rate of two new titles a year, the next being "Billy Bunter's Banknote" and "Billy Bunter's Barring Out" (both 1948). The following year Richards gave us the first Bessie Bunter story he had written in thirty years, "Bessie Bunter of Cliff House School", in the same uniform jacket and under the pen-name Hilda Richards. He also took the Greyfriars' men abroad in an exciting "Billy Bunter in Brazil", and gave us one of his rare Christmas treats with "Billy Bunter's Christmas Party". (Only two Christmas stories were ever written for the series; the other being "Bunter Comes For Christmas" in 1959.)

### SUCCESS

All the books enjoyed the same success as the first and Richards went on to complete a further five titles for Charles Skilton, finishing with "Billy Bunter and the Blue Mauritius". (A much sought-after volume, produced in one edition only and difficult to get hold of today in VG or Fine condition.) That the books sold extremely well cannot be doubted and it seems strange in retrospect that Skilton decided to sell the rights of the books to a new publisher, Cassell & Co., in 1932, after producing ten volumes (eleven if we include Bessie). Still, it made no difference to the reader, nor indeed to Richards himself – and Cassell had the good sense and taste to continue putting the books out in the same fine jackets. In addition, the cloth binding of the books was superior to that of Skilton, and each book was issued in an attractive and different colour; so that for collectors on a limited budget today, even a row of volumes minus

the dust-wrappers makes for a colourful display.

The first book to appear under the Cassell banner was "Billy Bunter's Breakfast" (1952), followed by "Billy Bunter's Brainwave" and "Billy Bunter's First Case", in 1953. The routine of two fresh titles a year was maintained, and in fact Cassell reprinted most of the original titles issued by Skilton.

### ILLUSTRATED

At this time the books were being illustrated by R.J. Macdonald, a Scotsman who had come down to live in Lymington and who had been one of the most prominent illustrators on the old 'Gem'. Macdonald illustrated the books until his death in 1954, his last drawings appearing in "Billy Bunter's Double" (1955). At this point C.H. Chapman took over. Chapman had been one of the great artists in the heyday of the 'Magnet', and it was he who had first put Billy Bunter into check trousers. He added creative touches to all the Greyfriars' characters, identifying Herbert Vernon Smith as lean and dapper with a



**FRANK RICHARDS**

"Billy Bunter The Hiker" was published in 1958, with another Chapman illustration on the dust-wrapper. It now sells for £6 in VG/Fine condition.

## PETER STOCKHAM at IMAGES

AN 'ALADDIN'S CAVE' OF BOOKS

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pugilistic nose. Johnny Bull was presented with a pug face and a thatch of dark hair, Bob Cherry with fair curly hair, Harry Wharton sober and serious, Coker of the Fifth with a pudding face – and so on.

Richards had in fact met Chapman in the 'Magnet' offices in 1911 and the two had become firm friends. So it was that Chapman began illustrating the Bunter books with "Backing Up Billy Bunter" in 1955, and continued to do so throughout the remainder of the thirty-eight volumes. He was a careful and fastidious worker, particularly adept at land and sea-scapes. Born in Thetford, Norfolk on April 1st 1879, Chapman was in many ways similar to Richards. Both were about the same age, both were slight, almost gnomish figures, both were staunch churchgoers, and they enjoyed in common long walks, cycling and a love of children and animals. Chapman lived most of his life in Reading.

Berkshire, where he trained as an architect. Despite the responsibility of marriage (and eventually six children), he shrugged off the conventional constraints of his profession to pursue his love of illustrating. A bubbling, twinkling little man, he often toured the country to present demonstrations of his art, giving away hundreds of his original drawings in the process. He died in 1972 aged 93.

When Chapman took over illustrating the Cassell books in 1955, Richards was 80 years of age. He cut an incongruous, eccentric figure then, as he sat at his typewriter each morning garbed in heavy dressing gown, carpet slippers, bicycle-clips around his trouser legs "to keep the draught out", and the skull cap he wore because he was embarrassed by his baldness.

### GENTLE

A simple gentle person, Richards was a man who drank rarely, enjoying only the occasional brandy or wine (and complaining that both were much too expensive), eschewing cigarette smoking but passionately attached to his pipe (only cads and scapegoats smoked in the Greyfriars environs). He admitted to having "blown" quite large sums of money in his younger days in the casinos at Monte Carlo, but considered the lesson invaluable - so that only idiots or bounders gambled at Greyfriars. Sex was something else almost entirely absent from his stories. Generally he was not at ease with women, and while there never was a 'Mrs Richards' he did confess to a near encounter with an American lady whom he simply referred to as "a certain Miss N.Y."

Yet even at 80 Frank (as he referred to himself) still churned it out tirelessly and with his inexhaustable verve and flair. With Richards there was no such thing as a rough draft; the words just tumbled onto the page, almost effortlessly, and only rarely did they require corrections. "If a fellow has a hard time writing the stuff," he declared, "then a fellow will have a hard time reading it!"

There was never anything hard about reading Frank Richards. In 1956 "Lord Billy Bunter" appeared, and "The Banishing of Billy Bunter". It was with the former (No.18) that Cassell began to number each

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volume — a practise they were to continue, not only with subsequent volumes, but with all reprints of the earlier books. It was also around this time that they developed the Billy Bunter motif, so that a bust of the fat owl appeared on the spine of every volume.

The following year gave us "Billy Bunter's Bolt" and "Billy Bunter Afloat", the latter heralding on the back cover "Yarrah! You Chaps This Is Bunter's Twenty-First", and celebrating with a laurel wreath on the spine. Eight further volumes appeared between 1958 and 1961 when "Billy Bunter at Butlins" (No.29) was published. This book is interesting to the collector, as it appeared in both the usual uniform jacket and a white dust-wrapper version for the Butlins Beaver Club. The Butlins version carried a Beaver Club inscription and was given away free to members. It should be noted that while the yellow jacket is valued at around £6 in Mint condition, the white wrapper goes for only £2.

That same year saw the last Cassell edition to appear during the author's lifetime: "Bunter the Ventriloquist" (No.30).

It had been rumoured for some time that the grand old master's eyesight had been failing, and in the last weeks he had increasingly taken to bed. Yet it had been only months before that Richards had completed the EMI LP "Florest Greyfriars", in which he discussed his life, his work and the eternal Greyfriars' characters. "Funny thing," he chuckled, "when I turned seventy I got a bit of a jolt, feeling I was getting old. But I don't feel like that now; I find the world too jolly. And an odd thought just came to me, that now I shall be able to say 'non omnis moriar'. Records last longer than the makers thereof, especially when the latter have counted eighty-five birthdays. 'Vox Ricardi' will still, like the voice of the turtle, be heard in the land. A bit like the Cheshire Cat in Wonderland, who vanished leaving only his grin behind."

On Christmas Eve 1961, aged 85, Frank Richards passed away peacefully at his home in Kent. Every major newspaper in the country, and many abroad, gave considerable space to reporting his death and reviewing his work and career.

But Richards had left more behind than

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just the fading smile of the Cheshire Cat. The success of the Bunter novels had prompted other publishers to press him for work; and ever industrious, Richards had more than readily complied. Oxonhoath Press regularly brought out "Billy Bunter's Own", while Mandeville did the same with the "Tom Merry Annual". Spring Books released an entire series of Tom Merry, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Jimmy Silver, Jack of all Trades and Talbot of the Shell. With an ease that belied his advancing years, Richards had then turned to radio and television, bringing the revered ivy-clad walls of Greyfriars to a new, younger and even wider audience than before. Bunter had even appeared on the West End Stage . . . and Casell still had a few titles up their sleeve.

### COPYRIGHT

In 1962 they issued "Bunter the Caravaner" and "Billy Bunter's Body-guard" (Nos. 31 & 32). And in 1963, "Big Chief Bunter" and "Just Like Bunter": the former copyright 'Trustees of the Estate of Frank Richards' and the latter copyright Una Harrison, Frank Richards' sister. It can just be discerned in this volume that the hand of the brilliant C.H. Chapman, who was by then 84 years old, was beginning to lose something of its sureness. Oddly enough, in the following book, "Bunter the Stowaway" (No 35, 1964) that sureness was back, but it was never to be recovered again in any of the following three volumes.

Also issued that year was "Thanks to Bunter" (this book and the remaining two were the copyright of Una Harrison Wright, Richards' niece) and for the first time one began to suspect that this was not, in fact, the work of the master himself. There is considerable conjecture over whether or not Richards wrote any of the final three books, and it's believed that they were based on unused television scripts, with a substitute writer (one of those hated hacks of Richards' erstwhile 'Magnet' days) fleshing and padding the scripts into novel form.

The final two volumes were released in 1965: "Bunter the Sportsman" and "Bunter's Last Fling". Certainly neither bore the stamp of the original genius. Curiously,

## BUNTER'S LAST FLING



### FRANK RICHARDS

*This book was originally to have been called "Bunter To The Rescue", but as the last book in the saga it was given a more suitable title.*

too, someone did a sloppy job in the colour matching of "Bunter the Sportsman", the book appearing in a queer golden shade rather than the renowned yellow. With "Bunter's Last Fling" the publishers confessed: "This story was originally titled "Bunter to the Rescue", but as the last of the 'Billy Bunter Series', and with the agreement of Mr Richards' family, it has been given its present title." It remained only for Casell, in honour of the great man, to publish "Greyfriars School - A Prospectus" by J.S. Butcher that same year. The Casell/Greyfriars saga had come to an end.

As many readers will know, that saga was taken up again by the Wimbledon publisher Howard Baker, who in 1969 began to produce (and still does), "Magnet" and 'Gem' facsimiles in bound form. He has to date produced more 'Magnets' than the original Amalgamated Press. But that's another story.



There is too, to this day, much of Richards' work, his furnishings and the ancient Remington on which he tapped out so many of his marvellous stories, on display at the Charles Hamilton Museum in Maidstone, Kent. In the timeless world that Richards created, cries of "Oh, lor", Oh crikey . . . YAROOH!" still echo hauntingly along the corridors of the Greyfriars Remove.

It should be noted that prices in the bibliography indicate rarity; thus "Billy

Bunter of Greyfriars School", "Billy Bunter and the Blue Mauritius" and "Bessie Bunter of Cliff House School" are the most difficult to get in Very Good condition. Editions other than firsts are generally a couple of pounds cheaper.

*The author would like to acknowledge his thanks to Mr Durrell Swift of 'Happy Hours' for his help with current values.*

## COMPLETE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FRANK RICHARDS' 'BILLY BUNTER BOOKS'

*All values refer to first editions in Very Good-Plus condition with dust wrappers*

BILLY BUNTER OF GREYFRIARS SCHOOL (1947, Charles Skilton) . . . . .	£20+
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