

Boys don't like the books dad liked

By NORMAN BARTLETT

HENRY BLANCHETT, an English schoolteacher, left £1000 in his will to buy four books a year for 14-years-old boys living in Ewell, Surrey, a cable reported this week.

The books Blanchett listed in his will are *The Cloister and The Hearth*, *Old Mortality*, *David Copperfield*, and *Westward Ho!*

Ewell boys don't like these books, the cable tells us. They prefer stories about aeroplanes and modern adventure.

Sydney booksellers and librarians say most Australian boys wouldn't like Blanchett's four books either, and I found evidence of this at the Sydney Municipal Children's Library.

An assistant there, Miss Shirley Parsons, took down from the shelves Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth*, a stirring, wordy, historical novel about 15th century Europe, written in 1861.

We looked at the card inside, which records borrowings. The book had been out 19 times in two years.

Sir Walter Scott's *Old Mortality* isn't in the library. *Waverley*, Scott's first and most popular novel, had been out seven times in two years.

Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* was out, but children had borrowed *Westward Ho!* Charles Kingsley's tale of the Spanish main, 27 times in two years.

Captain W. E. Johns and Enid Blyton are the modern children's best-sellers. Captain Johns writes boys' air adventure stories, and Enid Blyton specialises in girls' school and mystery stories.

The Municipal Children's Library has 100 of Johns' books in its catalogue. We couldn't find one on the shelves. The catalogue lists 60 Enid Blyton books. Two were on the shelves; one had been out 12 times in four months and the other seven times in three months.

"Left to their own choice, children usually pick modern adventure, school, or mystery stories," Miss Parsons said. "A few read the classics out of school because their teachers recommend these. Parents picking books for their children usually choose titles which have sentimental associations with their own childhood."

This sentimental conspiracy to make children read the books their parents liked has been going on for at least two hundred years.

ADULTS have always frowned on the latest fictional "nonsense," "romances," "penny dreadfuls," and "Deadwood Dicks" produced for their children.

They forget that people regarded Scott, in his day, as a frivolous romancer, Dickens appeared in shilling yellowbacks, and Robert Louis Stevenson's perennial children's classic, *Treasure Island*, began as a serial in a "penny dreadful."

John Newbery, a philanthropic bookseller of St. Paul's Churchyard, London, published the first regular series of books for children during the 18th century.



His greatest success was *Goody Two Shoes*. It told how two villains, Sir Timothy Gripe and Farmer Graspall, put it over an innocent girl and her family.

The book had a moral, but Newbery confessed the moral was there for "children of six feet." His young readers loved the jain in which he buried his sermon.

When they grew up children remembered John Newbery affectionately. In 1802 English essayist Charles Lamb wrote to his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the poet:

"*Goody Two Shoes* is almost out of print. Mrs. Barbauld and Mrs. Trimmer's nonsense lies in piles about.

Hang them, I mean the cursed Barbauld crew, those

plights and blasts of all that is human in Man and Child."

The "cursed Barbauld crew" were turning out the young generation's books when Lamb wrote to Coleridge.

By the middle of the 19th century morality and instruction went out of children's books and "blood and thunder" came in.

Historical and adventure stories for boys became a major industry. Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, Kingston's *Three Midshipmen*, Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* and Mayne Reid's *The Boy Hunters of the Mississippi* belong to this period.

The bookshops still stock them because Granddad and Pop sentimentally remember them and buy them as presents for their own new-

fangled stuff as Captain Johns' books about Biggles, the favorite hero of today's boy reader.

That romantic throw-back, the 67-years-old novelist, Compton Mackenzie, speaks for the oldsters when he says: "It is worth noting that with the development of machinery the quality of juvenile literature deteriorated. Jules Verne got the best out of it in anticipation."

But Jules Verne is not popular with children today—and stories about machinery (cars, planes, space-ships) are popular. I mentioned Jules Verne to a teenage girl. She looked puzzled, but her face lighted up when I asked about Biggles. "Oh! yes," she said, "we've got one of those at home—*Biggles Goes to War*—my young brother is mad on Biggles."

During World War II Mr. A. J. Jenkinson, lecturer in Education at the University of Manchester, investigated the reading habits of English boys and girls.

He discovered that the average senior school boy of fourteen reads four books and 5.5 periodicals a month, averages 2.1 newspapers weekly, and goes to the cinema considerably more than once a week.

Adventure books were easily the most popular (5.6 per cent.). School and home-life stories came a bad second with 14-year-olds, and detective stories and "Christmas annuals" were third. Love stories and books about games weren't in the race.

Among the periodicals, *Wizard*, *Hotspur*, and *Rover* topped the poll among all boys fourteen and under in both senior and secondary schools. Girls like them, too.

The *Magnet*, *Gem*, and

Boys' Own Paper, favorites of a generation ago, were way down on the list.

Sydney newsgangents say that boys prefer adventure strips to any other form of periodical reading matter. The *English Wizard*, *Hotspur*, and *Champion* come next.

Superman and Dick Tracy have taken the place of Billy Bunter and the Honorable Arthur D'Arcy, "the swell" of St. Jim's.

Some of us over 30 will regret the change. But let's be honest and remember how pallid, padded, and snobbish the *Magnet* and *Gem* were.

"Weally, I shall be obliged to give you a feahful thwashing!" says Gussy, the monocled idiot. "You wottah! You wuffian! You feahful outsidah!"

Today's books for boys reflect the world we live in—a world of atomic bombs, death-rays, sub-machine guns, aeroplanes and scientific marvels. We—not the boys—made this world.

In 1855 the Rev. Charles Kingsley described his *Westward Ho!* as a "most ruthless, bloodthirsty book—just what the times want, I think

" But this realistic extract from a modern American book for boys would probably have horrified even Kingsley:

"He walked in stolidly and smashed a clublike right to my face. Blood spattered, and I went back on my heels, but surged in and ripped my right under the heart. Another right smashed full on Sven's already battered mouth, and, spitting out the fragments of a tooth, he crashed a flailing left to my body."

ENGLISH and Australian books for boys betray

ENGLISH and Australian books for boys betray less blood-lust than the American books. Nor do we yet run boys' serials with titles like this:

"Lives of the Hotcha Chorus Girls. Reveals all the intimate secrets and fascinating pastimes of the famous Broadway Hotcha girls. Nothing is omitted."

However, we're catching up. Maybe, soon, English and Australian juvenile magazines will also advertise *Naughty Nudies Transfers*. Or maybe, we'll have a reaction. Several Sydney booksellers and Mr. Jenkinson report that boys are again showing interest in Thomas Hughes' old-fashioned mid-Victorian novel, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*.

Way back in the 'nineties *Tom Brown's Schooldays* was "must" reading for Compton Mackenzie. He and his pals voted it "dry and pi," meaning pious.

I took it down from the Children's Library shelves this week and found it had been out 16 times in two years.

It belongs, with the *Magnet* and *Gem*, to the days of my youth. I think it's better for boys than *Biggles*. But, then, I'm over forty.