

The Magnet 2nd



*So Near and
Yet So Far!*

As far as fictional schoolboy characters go, Billy Bunter, “the fat owl of the Remove” at Greyfriars School, is up there in popularity with Tom Brown, William Brown, Jennings and Harry Potter. But unlike the latter four, Bunter’s character was not very likeable – indeed his creator, Charles Hamilton, deliberately portrayed him as a venal, cheating, snobbish prig who stole his schoolmates’ tuck at every opportunity to stuff himself full. Today he would not be simply fat but clinically obese.

But readers didn’t hate Bunter; in fact, quite the opposite. So how did Hamilton, writing under the pseudonym of Frank Richards (one of 28 he used), pull that one off?

According to *The Guinness Book of Records*, Hamilton is considered to be the world’s most prolific writer, publishing an estimated 75 million words in his lifetime – 30 million concerning Bunter alone.

Born in 1876, he was sixth in a family of five brothers and three sisters. It was not a happy childhood, with a father (who died when he was eight) prone to drunken rages and a mother who struggled to raise so many children. He began to escape into his own world and make up stories for his young sister, Una. He sold his first one at the age of 17.

Bunter first appeared in a Greyfriars story published in the weekly magazine, *Magnet*, on February 15, 1908. Another 1,682 episodes followed, and Bunter appeared in all except four. In fact, the magazine acquired a subtitle, *Billy Bunter’s Own*. But the Nazis killed Bunter off in 1940 when a U-boat sunk a ship from Newfoundland loaded with timber for the Amalgamated Press paper works. The government had ordered publishers to cut back anyway because of the paper shortage, and *Magnet* became a casualty. But Bunter resurfaced after the war and Hamilton went on to write 39 Greyfriars books

as well as several TV series, which continued until he died in 1961.

Physically Bunter was a composite, as his creator explained, of a Mr Higgins, the editor of a magazine called *Chuckles*, “who overflowed his chair”, his sister Una, “who peered over her glasses like an inquisitive owl”, and a brother Alex who, Micawber-like, was “always expecting a cheque”. Hamilton had Bunter as “stout” originally but over the years his girth expanded. According to Dr Peter McCall, the president of the Friars’ Club and an authority on the school: “We enjoy Bunter as we enjoy Shakespeare’s Falstaff, for whom

BILLY BUNTER

The famous fatty turned 100 this year. Christopher McCooey considers his sizeable legacy

also, being fat is a source of mirth. Hamilton is happy to repeat the references to Bunter’s bulk as amusing in itself and deserving of laughter.”

The author was fairly small and, in terms of lifestyle, a moderate drinker (of whisky), and an inveterate pipe smoker. The only physical problem he seemed to have was premature baldness. His niece was horrified to discover that he had a wig, but his pate was usually covered by a skullcap. He never married but lived with his housekeeper and companion, Edith Hood. According to



Charles Hamilton, the creator of the Greyfriars tales. He is said to have written more than 5,000 full-length stories

Dr McCall, “Hamilton was almost certainly asexual”.

The Greyfriars stories centred on a group of five 15-year-old boys which did not include Bunter. They had a code in which decency, loyalty and good behaviour were paramount. Cheating, lying, stealing and, above all, sneaking (all of which Bunter indulged in) were strongly frowned upon.

Dr McCall says, “Bunter’s most important role was to act as a foil for the good. Hamilton exaggerates Bunter’s faults to the point of parody, in which his wrongdoings are the means of his finding the treasure, routing the villains or righting a wrong. His very oppositeness to the rest pointed to the moral of the story.”

Hamilton wrote about what he knew and loved – Edwardian England. He wrote: “The world has not been improved by the Great War, the General Strike, sex-chatter or lipstick.”

Asked if Bunter has any good points, Dr McCall says, “Yes, he loved his mother. In one story, he helped solve a robbery and he got an award of £50. Instead of blowing it all on tuck, he sent it to his mother, who was unwell, so that she could convalesce at the seaside. Also, he would steal tuck but he would never steal money.”

In 1940 George Orwell criticised Hamilton’s stories as escapist, nurturing snobbery, and said the characters were stereotypes, with foreigners depicted as funny. Hamilton replied that aristocratic virtues were worth preserving and that foreigners, by whom he meant continentals, were funny.

Hamilton was no racist. One of the famous five was Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, His Royal Highness the Nabob of Bhanipur. The writer explained: “I thought that it would be a good idea to have an Indian boy at Greyfriars equal to the other boys.”

As for the stories being escapist, this surely was the whole point of the exercise, retorted Hamilton.

To this, I concur. Yaroo!

