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# Frank Richards and Greyfriars School

In the years soon after the war, our Editor was the publisher of the first full-length stories of Greyfriars School in bound volume form. Here he describes something of the author Charles Hamilton, whose voluminous writings appeared under various pseudonyms, of which the best-known was Frank Richards.



Frank Richards, 1960 (Photograph by Allan Chappelow)

TWENTY YEARS AGO this Christmas Eve died Frank Richards, a writer who made happy in his time very many people's Christmas holidays. In his school stories, at the appropriate season, there would often be quite an emphasis on an old-fashioned Christmas background, with plenty of snow more appropriate to Decembers much colder, one seems to recollect, and imagine, than is the case in our milder winters now. So Christmas came to be associated with Frank Richards' writings ("his *Magnet* yarns of the festive season are still read and re-read by those lucky enough to possess them," says one authority), just as it did with Charles Dickens and Washington Irving.

However, he would have been totally horrified and enraged to find an article about himself sandwiched in between the pulchritude on display in the pages of a Christmas Special issue of a girlie magazine this year. It is true that the "readers" of such magazines have to have, presumably, something to relieve all those fleshly pictures, but it is a very enterprising journalist who made poor old Frank Richards' writings such a subject; hardly anything, indeed could be more inappropriate.

Although Frank Richards' stories had been loved for thirty years and more before the outbreak of the Second World War, it was not until the last twenty years of his life that he himself became well-known, and eventually had an entry in *Who's Who*. When he died, there was a half-column obituary in *The Times* and reports in all the other national newspapers. He had become a legend.

His adventure stories can be traced back as far as 1895; school stories came later, and Greyfriars School became the most famous of his establishments.

In sheer output he has probably never been equalled by any other author. He claimed to have written over sixty million\* words, the equivalent of a thousand ordinary-length novels.

\*In fact, *The Guinness Book of Records* has 100,000,000!

For years on end he wrote the two schoolboy weeklies, *The Magnet* (1908-40) and *The Gem*, (1907-39) with their full-length stories set in barbarically small type. But even this did not exhaust his capacity, and he used other pseudonyms.

When paper shortage killed his two weeklies early in the war he found his large income reduced virtually to zero. It is rather a puzzle how he survived the war years financially. In 1940, however, there had come his first emergence from personal obscurity. In March of that year, George Orwell's article entitled "Boys' Weeklies" appeared in the literary magazine *Horizon*. In it he stated that "it is difficult to believe that a series running for thirty years could actually be written



The first "Magnet", 1908



The last "Magnet", 1940

by the same person every week." In a ten-page response in the May issue, Frank Richards replied to set Orwell right "on a few points," and in so doing, revealed for the first time his multiple authorship, which up to then had been carefully concealed.

George Orwell reckoned that boys' papers were snobbish, and ignored the realities of life, including sex, and he summed up the world of *Magnet* and *Gem* as follows:

The year is 1910—or 1940, but it is all the same. You are at Greyfriars, a rosy-cheeked boy of fourteen in posh tailor-made clothes, sitting down to tea in your study on the Remove passage after an exciting game of football which was won by an odd goal in the last half minute. There is a cosy fire in the study and outside the wind is whistling. The ivy clusters thickly round the old grey stones. The King is on his throne and the pound is worth a pound. Over in Europe the comic foreigners are jabbering and gesticulating, but the grim grey battleships of the British Fleet are steaming up the Channel and at the outposts of Empire the monocled Englishmen are holding the niggers at bay. Lord Mauleverer has just got another fiver and we are settling down to a tremendous tea of sausages, sardines, crumpets, potted meat, jam and doughnuts. After tea we shall sit round the study fire having a good laugh at Billy Bunter and discussing the team for next week's match against Rookwood. Everything is safe, solid and unquestionable. Everything will be the same for ever and ever. That approximately is the atmosphere.

Charles Hamilton in *Horizon* responded spiritedly about old times, circa 1910.

I can tell him that the world went very well then. It had not been improved by the Great War, the General Strike, the outburst of sex-chatter, by make-up or lipstick, by the present discontents or by Mr Orwell's thoughts upon the present discontents...

He followed up with the comment that "If Mr Orwell supposes that the average Sixth Form boy cuddles a parlour maid as often as he handles a cricket bat, Mr Orwell is in

error." (It is true that the readers of the boys' magazines were supposed to be up to any sixteen, and in those days sex was hardly the staple interest of such youngsters — "more interested in bees than boobs," as the girlie magazine journalist elegantly put it — still, one is obliged to observe that twenty, thirty or even forty years ago parlour maids were not so numerous as cricket-bats, except perhaps in the domestic arrangements of such as the prosecuting counsel in the case of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*!)

In 1946 I picked up a copy of *Picture Post* in the hotel lounge while on honeymoon at Oban. It contained an article about Frank Richards, and there and then I had the idea of publishing Greyfriars stories in bound form, to add to the list of books I was issuing under the extraordinary production difficulties which beset publishers in those days. Of course, it was unlikely that a famous author would consent to write for an unheard of publisher, but one could try. I little realised at that time how pleased he must have been to receive my letter! He was willing to write for thirty shillings per thousand words, which had been his remuneration before, as he had no desire to join in the scramble for higher prices. I advocated a royalty instead, and on the first book alone he thus earned over a thousand pounds instead of a mere ninety.

*Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School*, which appeared at 7/6d. in 1947, was an immense success, immediately selling 25,000



"Bend over that chair, Bunter." An illustration by R.J. Macdonald to "*Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School*" (1947)

copies, all that could be produced at the time. My firm then issued a further nine Billy Bunter stories, and one about Bessie Bunter, before the venture got top-heavy for our inadequate resources, and we were obliged to dispose of the series to a larger publisher. In the next ten or more years Cassell & Company continued the tradition of Bunter very successfully, and a total of around half a million of the yellow-jacketed books were sold before paper-back versions appeared. Altogether there were over thirty novels.

If all authors were like Frank Richards how pleasant a publisher's life would be! Always cheerful and uncomplicated, ever reliable in delivery, his "copy" was perfectly prepared, typed by himself in purple ink\* — admittedly single-spaced — on foolscap sheets, needing no alterations before sending to the printer, and with no author's corrections in proof.

It was all very much child's play to him, of course, used as he was to churning out each week a 35,000-word story of Greyfriars and a 20,000-word one of St Jim's!

My Bunter books were illustrated at Frank Richards' suggestion, by R. J. Macdonald, who had illustrated *The Gem* from No.91 onwards (the magazine expired with issue No. 1711) and I remember the annoyance which was caused to devotees by Billy Bunter being portrayed with striped trousers instead of check ones to which he had perforce again to resort. After that likable artist's death, later Cassell's books were illustrated by C. H. Chapman, who originally commenced



R. J. Macdonald and C.H. Chapman, illustrators respectively of "*The Gem*" and "*The Magnet*", and of the Billy Bunter books

working on the Greyfriars stories in 1911, and was I believe still carrying out illustration work when in his 90s.

It gave me great pleasure to issue in 1952 *The Autobiography of Frank Richards*, and a persistent undercurrent of demand after it was out of print led me to suggest a reissue, revised up to date. Frank Richards readily agreed, but only three weeks later he died, and the revisions were never effected. The book, was, therefore, reprinted as before, though it was possible to add a valuable supplement from Eric Fayne, not only a great expert on Frank Richards' writings, being editor of *The Collector's Digest*, a monthly journal about old magazines for boys, but who was also the fortunate possessor of a complete set of *The Magnet* and *The Gem* in wonderful condition.

F.R.'s *Autobiography* disappointed fans with too much about his travels and too little about his magazines; I can tell them, however, that an earlier version existed which was most uncomplimentary to his periodical publishers, The Amalgamated Press.

Frank Richards lived to see his creations praised in many quarters. They became a very popular TV series in the early 1950s. The producer was in despair at finding a suitable boy to play Bunter (who had been elevated to star rôle in the post-war books) when she noticed someone very suitable eating in the BBC staff canteen. He was, however, in his thirties; all the same, Gerald Champion took on the part most convincingly.



Billy Bunter in a tight corner on television

\* Cassell's cheques were purple too so I was again glad to see the royal colour!

Even Orwell had written: "Billy Bunter must be one of the best-known characters in English fiction; for the mere number of people who know him he ranks with Sexton Blake, Tarzan, Sherlock Holmes and a handful of characters in Dickens." *The Listener* wrote: "Billy Bunter has become a proverb, and what other living writer can claim as much for one of his characters?"

These sentiments were widely echoed in the obituaries of the author; perhaps he might have liked best a sentence from *The New Daily*: "Mr Richards has left a memorial of which very many more pretentious and less industrious writers might be very proud indeed." Certainly I cannot imagine any writer having a more devoted following. He once wrote to me: "The most familiar phrase in fan letters is 'Thank you for many hours of happiness.' I like reading that phrase, and have done so at least 10,000 times." Is it too much to say that he has, in fact, given more pleasure to people than all the statesmen of his era put together?

*Adieu*, therefore, to a writer who was one of the curiosities of literature, with his prodigious output of schoolboy saga, his hobbies of translating Horace and compiling Latin crosswords (and even, at the very end of his life, having a Bunter story in Latin published in *The Times Educational Supplement*!); a character, in later years, with his black skull cap, shawl, pipe and corduroy trousers with bicycle clips to keep out the draught; and withal a charming gentleman whose standards of moral decency and professional workmanship were regrettably conspicuous by being so unusual in the world in which he lived at the end, though one is forced to add that the decline appears to have continued ever since.

C. S.



#### APPENDIX

To make a note for posterity, most of my Greyfriars titles were printed in runs of 12,500; I do not know how many Cassells ran of theirs. They probably paid about 1/6d each for my mountains of stock: I am told that good copies of these old yellow-jacketed books can fetch £6 each now. Obviously after a period "juveniles" simply get thrown away or are reduced to poor condition.

Although I am not able to trace exactly how much it cost to post a copy at inland "printed paper rate," which the Post Office graciously discontinued years ago, it was probably less than a shilling. What I have been able to find are some old invoices of thirty years ago (relating to various Bunter books) which can illustrate all too clearly how inflation has taken its toll:

*Central Paper Warehouse Co.* 56 reams extra bulky antique wove 40 x 60, 130 lb. £239.8.11 (this was for 14,000 copies 256 pp. and was around 3¼ tons)



Illustration by C. H. Chapman from "The Magnet"

*Munro Press Ltd.* Setting (Linotype) for 236 pp cr.8vo. £105.0.0. Moulds of same £26.15.0. Less 10% for cash in 30 days.

*University Tutorial Press.* 3 binders electros. £1.4.0. Casting stereoplates from moulds supplied, 219 pp. £46.10.9. Sending by passenger train from Cambridge to Edinburgh £2.18.7. (well over a hundred-weight!!!)

*Rumph & Waite.* 5 b/w line blocks, 5 x 3½, £4.2.1. Process 3-colour blocks for 2 books, both jacket and frontispiece (i.e. four 3-colour-sets in all) £71.1.10.

*Morrison & Gibb.* Machining 14,000 copies "Billy Bunter Among the Cannibals" from stereoplates £175.10.0. Binding 4,000 copies, blocked in ink, with frontispiece tipped in, £45.10.0. per 1,000. Delivered to London from Edinburgh.

*C. J. Cousland & Sons.* Printing 13,400 book jackets from 3-colour blocks, together with frontispiece, and including supplying art paper, delivered to Lancashire. £79.0.0.

*W. H. Houldershaw Ltd.* 20,000 9 x 7 Bunter circulars printed on salmon tinted paper £17.2.6.

The books were evidently therefore costing me a little under two shillings a copy, rather too much perhaps for volumes retailing at 7/6d. Nowadays a five-times publication price mark-up over production cost is considered minimal to cover such things as booksellers' and wholesalers' discounts, representatives, commissions, warehousing costs, the thumping charges of nationalised undertakings (remember when nationalisation was going to solve all our problems?), and astronomical wages costs. In 1950 I was paying 4/- (20p) an hour for an experienced secretary who could do 200 words a minute shorthand and 100 typing. (Nowadays children from school expect the earth yet know little of actual value). All in all, what is left to a publisher, even out of a five-times mark-up, is very very thin indeed.

#### *The Plantin-Moretus Museum - Continued from page 9*

1696. During the eighteenth century it lost its pre-eminence as the first printing-house in the world, and was simply a manufactory of religious books. In 1808 the special privileges they had for making these books for Spain and its possessions were withdrawn, and this great business of the house was at an end.

From 1840 to 1865 but a single workman was employed. In April 1865, Edouard Moretus, by the death of his brother Albert, became proprietor of the house, and in July of that year began to work again, with the help of three or four printers. This continued until 1867, and then the Plantin press, after an existence of 312 years, ceased its labours forever.

The house was too vast for a private individual, and too historically valuable for a mere business firm, and so Édouard Moretus determined upon the patriotic idea of placing it at the disposal of his native city. The Council decided to purchase the Plantin-Moretus building with all its artistic collections and old furniture, for the sum of 1,200,000 francs. In April 1876 the deed of sale was signed and the house, after the necessary repairs and alterations, which took a year, became a public museum.

[To be continued