Matthew Eve has been an ardent fan of the Captain Pugwash stories since he was 6 years old. At the age of 13 he wrote John Ryan a fan letter asking numerous questions, which the long-suffering author duly answered in his impeccable calligraphy, adding an original movable Pugwash television figure from the 1950s and other ephemera. In due course they started a long correspondence that flourishes to this day, despite Ryan suffering a near-fatal aortic aneurism in 2000. Matthew Eve read English Literature/Art History at St. Andrews University, Scotland; has recently completed a doctoral thesis at Oxford University about children’s book illustration and book publishing in Britain during World War II.

“Ahoy Me Hearties!”

Captain Pugwash, Bits of Movable Paper, and the Bible: A Tribute to John Ryan

A short celebratory article about the life and career of the English children’s book author/illustrator, John Ryan, most famous for creating the eponymous pirate Captain Pugwash. This article documents Ryan’s early career at school and in the army, and his rise as a freelance cartoonist, working first for Eagle and Girl comics (and in the process creating Captain Pugwash, Harris Tweed, Sir Boldas-brass, and Lettie Leefe) and then developing his characters for books and television. There is also a brief discussion of Ryan’s biblical retellings for children and the recent controversy surrounding the names of Pugwash’s crew.

KEY WORDS: Pugwash; Harris Tweed; illustration; John Ryan; Eagle.

Nostalgia for childhood has become an increasingly evident aspect of latter-day popular culture. In Britain over the last 10 years, vintage children’s picture books have found a new and ready market of tots, parents, and grandparents. Old favourites such as Diana Ross’s Little Red Engine, Edward Ardizzzone’s Little Tim, and Kathleen Hale’s Orlando, the Marmalade Cat stories have all been reissued in new editions, using the latest computer technology to enhance the original lithographic illustrations. Such stories are as timeless now as when they were first published 50 or 60 years ago. British television characters from the old, grainy black-and-white days have also become cult classics, gaining legendary status among 30-, 40- and 50-somethings. Thunderbirds, Paddington Bear, Joe 90, Bagpuss, Muffin the Mule, The Clangers, Pinky and Perky, Noggin the Nog, Rhubarb and Custard, Camberwick Green, Parsley the Lion, Prudence the Kitten, Sooty and Sweep . . . the list is extensive. For some characters the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century has been a simple case of updating and reworking outdated media techniques.
Favourite marionette programmes from BBC’s *Watch with Mother*, featuring Bill and Ben, the Flower Pot Men, or Enid Blyton’s eponymous character Noddy and his assorted politically incorrect friends, have been given the necessary contemporary facelift-gloss and are now stop-frame computer-enhanced animated dolls in their own mini features. Other favourites such as *The Wombles*, and that surreal phantasmagoria of the 1960s, *The Magic Roundabout*, remain relatively unchanged from the original concept.

However, one of the oldest, quirkiest, and best-loved of all British children’s television programmes was neither animation nor puppetry per se, but a combination of the two. John Ryan’s adventures about his pompous, incompetent, lily-livered, and greedy pirate Captain Pugwash first appeared on BBC’s *Watch With Mother* in 1958. His exploits were chronicled in an ingenious series of 5-minute shorts filmed in real time using flat paper puppets laid on painted backgrounds and moved by hidden cardboard levers. Forever after, Captain Pugwash and his crew held a significant place in the nation’s affections. Indeed, even after 40 years, Pugwash was still popular enough to attract media attention. In the early 1990s an urban legend, of dubious authorship, claimed that the names of Pugwash’s crew had their origins in smutty sexual innuendo. While this was of course untrue (Captain Pugwash’s named pirates only ever consisted of Master Mate, Pirate Willy, Barnabas, and Tom the Cabin Boy; Illustration 1) the myth did little to change Pugwash’s cult popularity with the general public, although John Ryan’s reputation suffered and apparently (according to Richard Lewis in *The Encyclopaedia of Cult Children’s TV*) “schools . . . where he gave talks and workshops . . . no longer asked him to call when the story broke”! In the mid-1990s, John Ryan sold the film rights of *Captain Pugwash* to John Cary Films/Britt-Allcroft (the latter of whom had been responsible for the popular animated series *Thomas the Tank Engine* based on the Reverend W. Awdry’s stories), who subsequently produced a new stop-frame animation cartoon series based around Ryan’s characters, re-titled *The New Adventures of Captain Pugwash*. The series proved very popular and was sold worldwide together with the obligatory books, videos, DVDs, and soft toys that seem to accompany all contemporary televisual enterprises. In media form at least, *Pugwash* had been revitalised and revamped for a third generation to enjoy.

Be that as it may, *Captain Pugwash* is only one of a number of highly successful characters created by Ryan over the past 50 years. This article examines the range, quality, and diversity of John Ryan’s life and work from his earliest cartoons to his later reworked Bible stories for children.