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Exhibiting Childhood: E. Nesbit and the Children’s Welfare Exhibitions

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Edith Nesbit’s reputation as a quintessential Edwardian children’s author is due as much to her involvement in the social context of her times as to the nature of her work, which is often hailed as marking the beginning of modern children’s fiction. This essay seeks to place Nesbit in a very particular context – her involvement with the Children’s Welfare Exhibition held at London’s Olympia from 31 December 1912 to 11 January 1913 – but also seeks to show how that context cannot be seen as an inert backdrop to the development of Nesbit’s writing, or to the kind of fiction it produced. Rather, a reading of the Exhibition’s own rhetoric suggests that literature was co-opted by those concerned with the lives of Edwardian children, and helped to define categories of childhood around welfare issues.

The Children’s Welfare Exhibition, supported by the Daily News and Leader, had two incarnations. The first ran for three weeks in 1912–13 and the event was then repeated on a larger scale in April of 1914. The two Exhibitions encouraged debate around the nature of childhood and child welfare, ranging from educational systems to eugenics. Although the Exhibitions were very much celebrations and discussions of British childhood, the directors may have been influenced by similar events previously held in the United States. Several screens illustrating children’s welfare in America were on loan from the 1911 Children’s Welfare Exhibition which had been held in Chicago, inspired by the belief that ‘the city which cares most for its children will be the greatest city’ (Children’s Welfare Exhibition Catalogue 1912–13, 34). Nesbit attended the first Exhibition to publicize her novel The Magic City (1910). She read fairy tales in a session chaired by G. K. Chesterton and erected a
demonstration ‘magic city’ model following the method of The Magic City’s hero, using books, household objects, scraps, and waste paper as building materials.

The Exhibitions cannot be claimed to have been landmark events. The theme was not revived at Olympia after 1914 and is not mentioned by the historical surveys of welfare and reform in the period. However, they can be said to have been distinctively Edwardian events that focused on childhood in a uniquely co-ordinated and unprecedented way. They drew together commercial enterprise with the new movements in health, women’s rights and family life in a manner which reflected the newly national debate about the nature, potential, and dangers of childhood. In particular, the Exhibitions’ rhetoric and agenda can be aligned with the discursive developments in child welfare which Carolyn Steedman has so extensively described. Steedman documents the way childhood came to be understood and described within various disciplines and bodies of thought (developmental linguistics, pediatrics, medicine, education, social welfare work and so on), but also the way in which childhood in a much more general sense, was reformulated to mean something new – something abstract yet explanatory, something ‘true’ – for a large number of people seeking explanation of human subjectivity and the meaning of life. (Steedman, ‘Bodies, Figures and Physiology’ 20)

The Exhibitions featured discussions of children’s literature (primarily fairy tales), alongside debates and lectures on the aspects of child development, psychology and health, Steedman discusses. Although it would be tempting to treat the Exhibitions as a ‘snapshot’ of Edwardian attitudes to childhood, the commercial and somewhat eclectic nature of much of the Exhibitions’ content precludes such a project. A more interesting approach is to read the Exhibitions’ construction of its ostensible object and to ask what the place of children’s literature was in that debate and how Nesbit’s work, including her treatise on child psychology Wings and the Child (1913) and the subtextual models of child-rearing represented in Nesbit’s novels, appear in the light of her involvement in this public venture.

Following Jenny Bourne Taylor’s argument around the influence of Margaret McMillan on the work of both Nesbit and Frances Hodgson Burnett, it is at this moment that we see the development of the children’s author as an alternative ‘authority’ on childhood, and the semi-acknowledgement of the children’s book as an examination of