Is Richmal Crompton a 'Conservative Modernist'? Re-reading *Just William*

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Abstract

With several ground-breaking books of literature, 1922 witnessed the appearance of Richmal Crompton's *Just William* in the realm of children's literature with a new benchmark of market saleability and general appeal for the 'popular'. The sustaining appeal of *Just William* made Crompton go for an adventure series that continued till 1969, and that provided us with a saga of enthralling adventures of a pre-pubescent child-protagonist William with his friends, the outlaws, the cops, the cowboys and the robbers. What prevents the text from being a prototypical children's adventure fiction is the portrayal of the child-protagonist, the youngest son of an upper-middle-class family living in an English village, amidst the dualism of dream and reality, confusion and conviction. But in *Forever England* (1991) Alison Light criticises Crompton for making the text stuck somewhere between conservative rootedness and modernist principles in England (238-39). Highlighting Crompton' sinclination towards the conservationist Tory ideals of the early twentieth century and her faith in the potency of the English class system, critic William Whyte goes further to call her a 'conservative modernist' ("Just William? Richmal Crompton and Conservative Fiction" 140). Calling Crompton a 'conservative modernist' in the context of her portrayal of William is undermining her pessimistic reflection on the general nature of man to stick to the past, on people's reluctance in adapting liberal and socialist ideals of the time that could overturn the stagnated bourgeois values. Looking resolutely backwards, while the 'conservative modernists' were 'full of nostalgia for a mythical past', Crompton's William represents a democratically functioning and dynamically formed futuristic vision. My paper, at this juncture, seeks to critique the stereotypical branding of Richmal Crompton as a 'conservative modernist' in the light of her portrayal of William and explore how *Just William*, thriving in dualism at different levels, tends to assert a dynamic sense of modernism to arrive at newer socio-political equations and aesthetic paradigm.

Keywords: conservationist, liberal, socialist, futuristic, dualism, modernism

Joining several ground-breaking books of literature published in 1922, Richmal Crompton's *Just William* set a new benchmark of market saleability and general appeal to the 'popular' in the realm of children's literature. The sustaining appeal of *Just William* encouraged Crompton to create an adventure series that continued until 1969 and that enthralled readers with the saga of the pre-pubescent child-protagonist William Brown and his friends, the 'Outlaws', the cowboys and the robbers. In terms of the text's overall scheme, one may find that *Just William* resembles other celebrated works of children's fiction like *Nancy Drew*, *The Hardy Boys* and *Goosebumps*. However, what prevents the text from being prototypical children's adventure fiction is the portrayal of the child-protagonist, the youngest son of an upper-middle-class family living in an English village, amidst the dualism of dream and reality, confusion and conviction.

Though Crompton's *Just William* holds a significant place in the corpus of popular literature and culture, serious academic ventures into the *William* texts are limited. In *Richmal Crompton: The Woman behind Just William* (1986), Mary Cadogan explores Crompton's biographic details and follows her development as an artist through the growing popularity of *Just William*. In "William Forever: Richmal Crompton's Unusual Achievement", Betty Greenway compares *Just William* with other children's adventure series like the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew and Tom Swift but suggests that William's stories stand apart from the American children's adventure fictions. She writes, "But unlike other series books, the William books are not artefacts. Though William has been eleven years old for over eighty years now, he continues to be a living and breathing part of British life" (99). Alison Light's *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991) critiques *Just William* as Crompton's failure to merge modernist radicalism with the deep-rooted faith of age-old conservative cultural and racial values throughout the entire series. William Whyte's "Just William? Richmal Crompton and Conservative Fiction" sheds light on the political underpinnings behind the design of *Just William* as 'just' a children's adventure fiction series. Whyte's essay examines the modernist elements in the text and explores how the text speaks modernist values while simultaneously maintaining conservative Tory ideals. Whyte points out that *Just William* includes an inherent tension due to Crompton's failure to balance between "optimism about society and pessimism about humanity" (154). In *British Children's Fiction in the Second World War* (2007), Owen Dudley Edwards writes that the *Just William* stories reveal Crompton to be a representative "Tory radical" (477). He argues that Crompton failed to liberate the William stories from the ghetto of Tory conservative values.

The portrayal of William in *Just William* hints at Crompton's leanings towards the political propaganda of the early twentieth-century Tories. Highlighting Crompton's inclination towards the conservative Tory ideals of the early twentieth century and her faith in the potency of the English class system, critics like Alison Light, Owen Dudley Edwards and William Whyte tend to call her a 'conservative modernist' (Whyte 140). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the lack of vision and leadership among the Tories became quite evident. The October 1910 edition of *Quarterly Review* points this out and laments the failure of the Tory conservatives 'to obtain the confidence of the country' ('Conservatism', *Quarterly Review*, October 1910, pp. 516-519)[1]. Frequent criticism revives the Tory conservatives, and they create the Tory newspaper *The Commentator* with the goal of supporting 'the advocacy and propagation of Conservative principles' (27 May 1910: 1)[2]. The rise of conservative Edwardian Toryism was supported and promoted by philosophers, sociologists and critics like T.E. Hulme, Edward Storer and J.M.

Kennedy. While Storer claims that the English society will acclimatise to unified conservative Tory ideals[3], Hulme hopes that the conservative ideal of the Edwardian Tories will save the young intellectuals from the grips of the bewildered socialists and liberalists and the clutches of the Fabian Society[4]. Following in the footsteps of Hulme and Storer, J. M. Kennedy argues in favour of the mass acceptance of Tory conservatism in a series of articles published in *The New Age* between May and August 1911[5]. Kennedy thinks that moving back to strict conservatism is necessary for the Tories, as they must 'dissociate themselves from the Liberal leaders' (*New Age*, May 1911: 103). This new brand of conservative Toryism as an answer to the confusing principles of liberalism and socialism becomes increasingly popular in Georgian England. Envisioning the potent prospect of this conservatism, writers like Ford Madox Ford and T.S. Eliot offer a clarion call to the intellectuals, the literati and the Tories to come together for a 'greater interest' (655)[6]. Encouraged by the Edwardian and the Georgian Tories, a significant number of modernist writers and poets (following in the footsteps of Ford and Eliot) become suspicious of egalitarianism and begin to reflect on conservative Tory principles in their literary works. These 'Tory modernists' or 'conservative modernists' begin to produce a body of backward-looking literature. Commenting on it in *Conservative Modernists: Literature and Tory Politics in Britain, 1900–1920* (2018), Christos Hadjiyiannis writes, "Writing at the beginning of a new century, Tory modernists all looked resolutely backwards. In this sense, these were modernists writing *against* modernity (xi). Hadjiyiannis goes on to say that the 'high modernists' like W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, under the influence of the new conservative Tory modernism, tend to expand the scope of literature beyond economics and culture and into the sphere of politics, and the 'classical or high modernists' come to engage politics in the same way as they engage culture (xiii). A large number of critics, sociologists, writers and artists begin supporting conservative Tory principles in their works of literature and art. Other than making literature free, it makes literature confined to the political propagandas of the time.

Amidst the inclination of critics and creative writers towards Tory conservatism, Crompton's first *Just William* stories are published in 1922. *Just William* begins its journey as an adventure periodical in *Home Magazine* and then becomes a regular feature in *Happy Mag*. The William stories always intend to amuse, rather than to instruct, readers. Satirising the cosy conventionalism of Victorian thought, Crompton began her literary career writing adult fictions focused on family sagas. An admirer of Hulme, Pound and Eliot, Crompton remains hopeful about the credibility of the conservative English class-system and the ability of hierarchical organization to bring order and stability. To provide readers with an understanding of Georgian English society from the perspective of youth, she ventures into writing children's fiction. In *The Woman Behind William: Life of Richmal Crompton* (1993), Mary Cadogan points out that Crompton portrays William as a little boy of eleven who is loyal to the 'Outlaws' (his mates), ruthless to his foes and critical of the practices of meaningless socio-cultural conventions (73). In opposition to the so-called 'progressive' bent of 'high culture', Cadogan finds primitivism in William and comments that his untidy appearance, his love for scrapping with his friends and foes alike and his disdain for the stereotypically codified norms of virtue, justice, good manners and propriety make him special (73).

In the William stories, she tries to represent the spirit of the time and attempts to create a boy-next-door character who remains a bit naughty, playful and funny yet does not fail to reflect on the socio-political and cultural scenario of his time. This is why

stories like "The Weak Spot", "What's in a Name?", "William and the Nasties", "William Enters Politics", "William, Prime Minister", "William and the Air Raid Precautions", "William and the Evacuees" and "William Does His Bit" contain direct or oblique references to Tory conservatism and contemporary politics. Highlighting Crompton's inclination towards select conservationist Tory ideals and her faith in the potency of English traditionalism, critics like Light and Whyte call her a 'conservative modernist' (Whyte 140). Light employs 'conservative modernist' pejoratively in *Forever England* (1991), as she thinks that Crompton's *Just William* is stuck somewhere between conservative rootedness and early modernist principles in England (238-39). Whyte's criticism focuses more on Crompton's belief in a kind of feudalistic hierarchisation in society and the English class system that echoes the conservative Tory ideology of the early twentieth century (Whyte 140). However, a comprehensive and insightful study of the *Just William* stories shows that Crompton's representation of politics is more dynamic.

In "The Weak Spot", William's elder brother, Robert, joins the Bolsheviks, and little William supports it. Since Bolshevism promotes a current of political thought associated with a rigidly centralized, cohesive and disciplined socio-political system, it finds proximities with the conservatism that flourished in England during the early modern period. A favourable attitude towards Bolshevism suggests favour of their support for the conservative ideals of the Edwardian and Georgian Tories. However, one could form a biased understanding by missing the fact that Robert remains among the Bolsheviks for a very brief period. The text reveals how the brothers soon become disillusioned by the negative radicalism, and Robert withdraws himself from the Bolsheviks. The text even reveals how the brothers, guided by socialist and altruistic principles, seek to offer their dearest possessions—like the bicycle and the watch—for the betterment of common people.

"What's in a Name?" shows William being moved by the Moseleyite fascist enterprises in Europe. Particularly, he loves the Moseleyite fascists' tradition-bound mindset and faith in a hierarchically stratified society. The text shows how William goes on to form 'Greenshirts', a group of young enthusiasts with a militant outlook who pro-actively fetch him whatever food and toys he wants and let him undergo adventures whenever and wherever he likes. He aims to become a dictator and to have absolute control over his wishes. This sort of representation tends to lead critics like Whyte and Light to conclude that Crompton's ardent belief in Tory Conservatism is reflected in William's fondness for radical Moseleyite fascist enterprises, yet we must remember that William is ultimately disillusioned by the movement. His attempt to form 'Greenshirts' as a group inspired by the Moseleyite fascists is merely a means of wish fulfilment for a mischievous youth without any serious political affiliation. His disillusionment brings his faith in democracy and cooperative socialism.

"William and the Nasties" has received some negative criticism for its apparent conservative and anti-Semitist stance[5], but the overall scheme of the text signals Crompton's support of equal dissemination of wealth, power, authority and importance among different classes in the society. In the text, outwardly unsympathetic adults and a tight-fisted Jewish sweetshop owner are eventually transformed into 'the Outlaws' benefactors', and subsequently the 'Outlaws' give up their drive against them. Crompton does not want to represent the children as naïve, law-abiding, obedient or 'other'. More than anything else, the text highlights Crompton's attempt to represent William and the

'Outlaws' as funny, unpredictable youth capable of doing daring things. The text presents William and the 'Outlaws' as little Robin Hoods triggered by the ethos of equalitarianism. Throughout the text, they campaign for removing the divide between the elites and the underprivileged folks.

"William Enters Politics" directly raises some pertinent questions regarding contemporary politics. Here, William argues with the dominant political beliefs of the time. Intrigued by his uncle's wholehearted submission to liberalist values, William starts spying on the Liberal Party meetings and campaigns. With utter disillusionment, he discovers that the Liberal Party's attempt to liberalise national policies and use resources to improve the conditions of the working class in the new liberal economy actually creates new socio-economic challenges for the working class to overcome. William is equally dejected by the ideologies of the Conservatives. To his deep shock and annoyance, he realizes that while they want to make the price of bread cheaper, their policies are going to make it more expensive. Unable to understand the 'confusions' in both the Conservatives and the Liberals, he ultimately withdraws from the field of politics. Crompton concludes the text with William taking on the Liberals and the Tories 'with equal contempt' (188). Though the title of the story hints at William's affiliation with politics, the text reveals his disillusionment and subsequent exit from the same. Acting as a trope, William represents Crompton's disenchantment with both neo-liberal ideologies and pro-conservative policies.

In "William, Prime Minister", William participates in a mock school election, stands as a Conservative representative for the post of Prime Minister and finally wins. Critics may point to this plot point as evidence of Crompton's inclination towards Tory Conservatism, but in the course of the text, William becomes disappointed with the political ideology of the Conservatives. Here, the ultimate message appears to be somewhat sceptical. William's disappointment with the ideologies and propaganda of all political parties is echoed in the words of one of his close friends, Ginger, who remarks:

> There's four sorts of people tryin' to get to be rulers. They all want to make things better, but they want to make 'em better in different ways. There's Conservatives an' they want to make things better by keepin' 'em jus' like what they are now. An' there's Lib'rals an' they want to make things better by alterin' them jus' a bit, but not so's anyone'd notice, an' there's Socialists, an' they want to make things better by takin' everyone's money off 'em, an' there's Communists an' they want to make things better by killin' everyone but themselves. (272)

Ginger is a Communist candidate who tries to dissuade all from warfare. Henry, another of William's friends, is a Socialist candidate who argues with a 'pious' boy who thinks that snatching away everyone's wealth and distributing it among common folk is sinful. Another boy, Douglas, is a Liberal candidate who keeps on bribing people with promises of what he will do if he wins. Owing to his admiration for a renowned hunter who turns out to be a Tory, William becomes inclined towards Tory conservatism and becomes the Conservative candidate in the election. The text, therefore, does not offer any serious rationale behind William's affiliation with conservative Toryism. "William, Prime Minister" presents a critique of the contemporary socio-political scenario and remains open-ended. William might appear in the text as the Prime Minister elected as a

Conservative representative, but the message is quite sceptical. The text keeps on locating the anxiety and disillusionment rooted in the protagonist's psyche.

We do not see the haven of the typical cosy, comfortable children's world in the William stories. These stories are, rather, closely associated with the contemporary socio-political realities of their time. They seek to encapsulate the social unrest and political turmoil of their contemporary period. In contrast to the common trend in children's literature of steering clear of serious adult issues like war, mass uprising, political unrest, rivalry and ideological and philosophical contestation, these texts critique and comment on such issues. "William and the Air Raid Precautions", "William and the Evacuees" and "William Does His Bit" deal with politics against the backdrop of world war. Alongside the adventures and mischief of William and his peers, these texts comment on different political ideologies. More than individual happiness, William's concern for order and stability in society and the world (as he knows it) can only be achieved through the right kind of political affiliation. In *British Children's Fiction* (2007), Edwards remarks that the world that Crompton presents in the William stories is entirely unchanging (538). But stories like "William and the Air Raid Precautions", "William and the Evacuees" and "William Does his Bit" do not support Edwards's view. In these texts, William hopes and desires for an apocalyptic change in the society to give rise to 'modern democratic Britain'.

Born and brought up in a high Anglican family, Crompton remained loyal to the Conservatives in her early life. She even campaigned for Tory Conservatives in local elections, but she never tried to make her texts vehicles of her political beliefs. Calling Crompton a 'conservative modernist' due to her portrayal of William, undermines her creative potency and dynamism. Adherence to the principles of conservative modernism implies an ardent belief in strict institutional codes and practices, but Crompton's William stories exhibit the weaknesses, conflicts and tensions in the institutions that the conservative modernists sought to prioritise. Whyte remarks:

> More importantly, Crompton acknowledged the weaknesses and the tensions within the institutions she described. Just as she showed the family as a problematic place for human flourishing—potentially a site of tyranny as well as human love—so the schools, universities, and voluntary societies she explored could also be arenas for cruelty as well as happiness. (151)

Whyte illustrates that the institutions that seem to be perfect in her novels unvaryingly fail to live up to the hopes, desires and expectations of the individuals who believe in them; under the institutional façade, there always remains an 'undercurrent of strain and uneasiness, of something wrong… envy, hatred, and malice…jealousy, hypocrisy, lies…' (151-2). Crompton is conservative in the sense that she has faith in the English class system, but she rejects the civilisational codes of the English class system as promoted by Tory conservatives and conservative modernists. The William stories reveal Crompton's concern for social harmony and her belief that an obsession with social structures and hierarchies could break down the social fabric. Crompton does not believe in institutions. According to her, no institution can lead society to its greatest development, as the function through the formulation of exclusive political ideologies, failing to be inclusive, do not give room to the goals and cravings of individuals. This is reflected in the *Just William* series, where children who seem to be 'perfect' for practising institutional rules end up being frauds and swindles.

Christos Hadjiyiannis writes that the conservative modernists cherished their convictions about the status and function of art as means of cultural nostalgia; their creative and critical faculty, to a great extent, revolves around 'nostalgia for a mythical past' (xi). But this is not the case in Crompton's William stories. Crompton critiques the existing political ideologies in her texts and tries to come up with a fresh idea. In "William Enters Politics" and "William, Prime Minister", Crompton challenges the ideologies of the Liberalists, the Communists and the Socialists; she does not spare even the Conservatives. Critiquing the ideologies of the existing political parties, she tries to assert a forward-looking and futuristic political vision. Hadjiyiannis goes on to say that the conservative modernists, by and large, are engaged in picking out flaws in others and getting entangled in a cobweb of repetitive arguments and notions (xi-xii). In stories like "The Weak Spot", "What's in a Name?", "William and the Nasties", "William Enters Politics" and "William, Prime Minister", Crompton satirises the idea of modernism that the Liberalists, the Communists and the Conservatives propagate. As we know, satire is always correctional in nature; hence, these texts advocate Crompton's correctional motive, her progressive and futuristic intent.

In the chapter entitled "Conservative Party Crisis: Tory Propaganda, Imagist Poetics" included in his aforementioned book, Hadjiyiannis argues that the early twentieth century Tories and the conservative modernists had faith in hierarchical politics and did not believe in the values and potencies of an individual. They focused on making a hierarchical system and a stratified order that could handle unrest in individuals and restore socio-cultural and economic stability (2-8). But Crompton's William stories—like "William and the Air Raid Precautions", "William and the Evacuees" and "William Does His Bit"—point out her belief in the credibility of individuals. In these stories, William pessimistically reflects on the general nature of man (especially the Victorians) to stick to the past and critiques people's reluctance to adopt true liberal principles and socialist ideals of the time that could overturn the stagnated bourgeois values. Yet, the little boy believes in the potency of individuals to turn the wheel of progress and guide society to achieve a true democratic socio-political space. Whyte makes an interesting observation that the "uneasy balance between optimism about society and pessimism about humanity (human nature) created its own problems…" (154). There is no denying the fact that what seems problematic to Whyte has added to the dynamism of the William series.

If the Tories and the conservative modernists believed in reserving the exclusivity of different classes as means of development, William dreams of an inclusive and integrally connected 'modern democratic Britain'. Where the conservative modernists, the supporters of elitism, used to consciously practise and celebrate snobbery, Crompton's thematic representation and character portrayal of William showcase her as an anti-snob. Though Crompton believes in the class system, she does not support the dominance of the elites. She knows that the progression of the workingclass will decide the development of society. She has faith in their good sense and a conviction that they will never be convinced and duped by shallow promises of development and superficial glosses as markers of progress.

To maintain political correctness, conservative modernists challenged and subverted socialist ethics, values and principles, but Crompton's William stories imply a staunch support for socialism. Guided by the principle of economic egalitarianism[8], William and the 'Outlaws' disseminate the hoarded wealth of the privileged class among

the working class and the wage earners in "William and the Nasties". In "William, Prime Minister" we see that though himself a Conservative party representative, William offers words in favour of the enormous value and importance of the views of the Socialist party representative, Henry. He agrees that equal distribution of wealth is the prerequisite to ensure the development of society in the truest sense of the term. This shows how Crompton subscribes to socialist principles like mass prosperity in a sustainable manner, resistance to bourgeois monopoly and equal distribution of wealth, power and privilege.

Edwards, Light and Whyte criticise Crompton for her understanding of the English class system and general human nature. Whyte writes, "In tandem with this confidence in class, however, Crompton's work also engages with a more profound and more troubling issue—human nature itself" (151). They are of the view that the tradition-bound nature of Crompton's William stories, like other wartime adult and children's fictions, could hardly take us through any kind of crusade for the destabilisation of socio-political and economic privileges and offer us the true essence of liberal modernism. This observation is not true, as Crompton believes that the sudden disruption of the class system and disbelief in human nature could collapse the entire social fabric and bring only anarchy. She does not believe in the radical shift of belief systems and social-political conditions; rather, she envisions a transition towards development in the real sense of the term. William's dream of a 'modern democratic Britain', where tradition and modernity fuse into an organic whole and complement each other, encapsulates the true essence of liberal modernism. Crompton seems to echo the views of Lord Hugh Cecilin *Conservatism*, who writes:

> …unless there is prospect of such an improvement in human nature as the general substitution of love for self-interest, we may be sure at the outset that no change of social or political machinery will redeem society. (91)[9]

Whyte writes that Crompton's William stories are a 'sustained meditation' on 'the tyranny of the pitiless over the pitiful'; these texts seem to go on 'everywhere every minute of every day, like a festering sore at the heart of the world.' (152). He observes that in the William stories, Crompton is confident in the progressive renewal and continuity of the class system and in the pivotal role of the workingclass in providing society with the right kind of leadership in every possible means (153). These are the points that speak blatantly in favour of her standing apart from conservative modernists.

In the William series, Crompton does not attempt to create a separate world for children; rather, she appropriates the social and political reality of her contemporary period within the framework of children's literature. Whether or not that prevents her from falling to the constraints of censorship is another matter of critical inquiry. In *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration* (1981), Nicholas Tucker observes:

> *Just William* was written rather in the manner of Saki, another contemporary who occasionally took advantage of the public's reaction against over sentimental views of children in fiction. (117)

Calling Richmal Crompton a 'conservative modernist' in the context of her portrayal of William and her handling of the political issues in the William stories is undermining the futuristic outlook and the ever-expanding prospects of politics that she wants to highlight.

Little William, in particular and the William stories, in general vividly showcase Richmal Crompton's inclusive and dynamic political vision.

Notes

[1]This is quoted from *Conservatism and the Quarterly Review: A Critical Analysis* (2008) by Jonathan Cutmore.

[2]This is quoted from Christos Hadjiyiannis's *Conservative Modernists: Literature and Tory Politics in Britain, 1900–1920*(2018).

[3]Robin Harris, *The Conservatives: A History*, London: Corgi, 2013, pp. 104-5.

[4]Ibid., p. 168.

[5]Later on he elaborated the articles into full-length essays and collected and re-published them in a book form under the title, *Tory Democracy*.

[6]See Ford's "Stocktaking: Towards a Revaluation of English Literature", *Transatlantic Review*, May 1924 and T. S. Eliot's "A Commentary", *Criterion*, 1929 (later on published in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition* (2014).

[7]Having the charge of anti-Semitism, the story has even been dropped from later collections and editions.

[8]Guided by the equalitarian principle, economic egalitarianism takes into serious account the issue of political economy and ethics embedded in consumerism. See Ronald Dworkin's *Sovereign Virtue: Equality in Theory and Practice* (2000) for further understanding.

[9]This is quoted from C.D. Broad's essay, "Lord Hugh Cecil's *Conservatism*".

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