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**Andrew Birkin. *J. M. Barrie and the Lost Boys*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. ISBN: 0-300-09822-7.**

**Erica Hateley, Monash University**

J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (originally titled *Peter Pan and Wendy*) has a history as subtle and complex as any of the images and themes the work itself evokes. First staged as a pantomime on the stage of the Duke of York's Theatre in London on December 27, 1904, the prose version was first published in 1911. Before that, aspects of the narrative can be found in Barrie's earlier works, including *The Little White Bird* (1902). Now, to celebrate the centenary of *Peter Pan*, Yale UP has republished Andrew Birkin's landmark biography of Barrie, a tale which unfolds through an impressive array of documentary detritus from Barrie's relationship with the five boys of the Llewelyn Davies family, the boys generally agreed to be the inspiration for *Pan's* Lost Boys.

I call this work a biography advisedly, for while Birkin claims early that, "this is not a biography of Barrie ... it is, rather, a love story told through the words and images of the *dramatis personae* concerned ... and I have tried to limit my role to that of an editor, allowing the letters, diaries, notebooks, interviews, photographs, and Barrie's own works, to unfold the narrative with a minimum of editorial interference," the text is predicated most firmly on the notion that there are direct corollaries between Barrie's experience and art. This is a relationship incidentally, that Barrie himself consistently invoked, but which in Birkin's text becomes a kind of biographical 'check-list' against which to compare his works. The concomitant notion, that the author simply 'writes his life' thinly disguised by altered details, or perhaps in Barrie's case, a sprinkle of fairy-dust, seems to me to undermine a sense of artistic production. It is also bordering on deceptive, as the majority of the text is made up of excerpted (read edited) letters / correspondence interspersed with Birkin's narrative. It could be argued that every photograph chosen, every letter cut, each and every caption and placement represents editorial interference, but nonetheless, Barrie's life provides a fascinating story in and of itself.

Born in Kirriemuir, Scotland in 1860 to a family with six elder siblings, Barrie's youth appears to have been marked by the death of his elder brother David at age thirteen. Such was the sense of loss to their mother, that James used to dress up as David to comfort her. Barrie attended university in Edinburgh, ultimately bringing home an M.A., again, for the comfort of his mother. The intense relationship between Barrie and his mother would later be reconstructed in his work *Margaret Ogilvy*, published a year after her death in 1896.

Barrie moved to London, where his first years were taken up by journalism, novel-writing and an increasing involvement in the theatre. Although he romanced several actresses – and married one, Mary Ansell, in 1894 – Barrie's most important relationships appear to have been with children. He is known to have had stronger relationships with the children of friends such as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, W. Robertson Nicoll and W. E. Henley, indeed it was Henley's daughter Margaret (who died at age six, to become another spectre in Barrie's imagination) who coined the name "Wendy."

We tend to be wary of adults who appear to prefer the company of children, particularly when those adults actively court juvenile interest via the production of literature. From Lewis Carroll to William Mayne, overtones of paedophilia have haunted children's literature, and Barrie himself has not been immune to the label. Unfortunately, to those who may not have a pre-existing 'love-affair' with Barrie, Birkin's text may not do much to assuage such anxieties, particularly given the language used to describe some of Barrie's relationships: "Charlie [Barrie's young nephew] was exceptionally good-looking and intelligent, which appealed to Barrie; he was also extremely destructive and anarchistic, which appealed to him even more" (19). A generous soul could find his nude photography of young boys and eroticisation of children in everyday discourse a misplaced paternal drive, but I found it disturbing.

All of the major psychological elements of Barrie's identity find their culmination in his relationship with the Llewelyn-Davies boys: George, Jack, Peter, Michael and Nico. Barrie befriended the three elder boys in Kensington Gardens where they were walked by their nurse. He regularly met the boys there, and told them stories. Several months later, Barrie happened to meet their mother at a dinner and as a result befriended the entire family. These were life-long relationships, and Birkin spends by the far the majority of his text delineating the details.

Unfortunately, the more I read, the less enchanted and more disturbed I became with the figure of Barrie. It is possible to know *too* much about the author of a beloved work. The further I delved in to Birkin's copiously documented history of

Barrie's relationship with the Llewelyn-Davies family, the less I wish I had read.

The relationship that ultimately forms the crux of Birkin's work is that between Barrie and Michael Llewelyn-Davies, another young life cut short that Barrie appears to have never recovered from (David's death in France in 1915 also devastated Barrie). Birkin renders this relationship passionately and touchingly, but to be drawn into this world is, unlike Neverland, to experience emotional and psychological pain, mixed with disquieting modes of relationship that are possibly foreign to contemporary sensibilities.

Birkin's privileging of Barrie's relationship with the Llewelyn-Davies boys means that the end of these relationships – through death or marriage – also means the end of the text. The final years of Barrie's life are not examined here, although we are told that "his friendships with children continued unabated" (299), but of course, Birkin would have us believe that Barrie's own life symbolically ended when Michael died in 1921.

If Barrie's inner life has been accurately captured here, a melange of beautiful young children (especially boys) who die young, but should have lived 'forever,' and continual attempts to create such immortality for children through fanciful writing, I envy the man nothing, and can ultimately only remain grateful for his *Peter Pan*.

The central narrative of *Peter Pan* has garnered a place in the popular imaginary of Anglophone culture: the boy who couldn't grow up, the fairy-dust aided flight, Captain Hook, Tinkerbell and of course Neverland. The visual images associated with this tale may in the twenty-first century owe more to Disney than to Barrie, but the mythos of the tale is such that the prose version has passed in to legal publishing history. When, in 1987, fifty years after the death of Barrie, copyright on the work expired, a unique Act of British Parliament was passed restoring royalty income from all versions of *Peter Pan* to Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital in London. Birkin continues to support this hospital by donating all his own authorial royalties from sales of *J. M. Barrie and the Lost Boys*. This may perhaps be the most productive legacy of *Peter Pan*, ensuring that fewer children will experience the "awfully big adventure" of juvenile death that haunts the tale, and seem to have haunted Barrie himself.

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