

Foreword

The jacket of AA Milne's autobiography solemnly describes him as 'a writer of unusual diversity of achievement.' The children's books, which made him a celebrity and Winnie-the-Pooh the most famous bear in the world, occupy fewer than ten pages of his own three hundred pages about his life.

Some people remember – perhaps from reading my biography – that Milne started life as a humourist as a contributor to *Punch* and, later, an extremely successful playwright – the Alan Ayckbourn of his day. There was a point when five of his plays were running, 'three in America, one in London, one in Liverpool.' The names of some may linger in people's memories: *The Dover Road*, *Mr Pim Passes By* and, above all, *Toad of Toad Hall*, his adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. They were for many years staples of amateur dramatic societies across England.

Other people will perhaps recall that Milne was a pacifist and that after serving in the First World War and being invalided home from the Somme, he wrote a pacifist bestseller, *Peace with Honour* and then, years later, when he realised fascism must be fought, *War with Honour*.

What hardly anyone realises is that AA Milne was also a novelist. His first novel for adults was an adaptation in 1921 of one of his plays. He called it simply *Mr Pim* and insisted it was a 'real book' and 'not just the dialogue with "he said" and "she said" tacked on.' At that point he had already written what was to be his most lucrative novel, a detective story called *The Red House Mystery*, not published until 1922. This book was such a success that his publishers, on both sides of the Atlantic, wanted another in the same genre. But he refused to be typecast. It was always more interesting to write something new and different. *When We Were Very Young* followed the detective story.

If a writer, why not write
 On whatever comes in sight?
 So – children’s books: a short
 Intermezzo of a sort;
 When I wrote them, little thinking
 All my years of pen-and-inking
 Would be almost lost among
 Those four trifles for the young.

It gives me great pleasure, as the biographer of this complex, attractive, difficult man, that his novel *Two People* should not be lost, but reissued, three-quarters of a century after its first appearance, by an enterprising publisher.

Two People was dedicated to Milne’s wife Daphne, and it is tempting to identify her closely with Sylvia, the wife in the novel. Christopher Milne, their son, certainly did. Sylvia has neither imagination nor intelligence but is altogether desirable and has entwined herself in her husband’s heart. Daphne’s own taste in books, Milne said, was for the ‘delightfully twaddly’. His own taste was very different, but there are times when *Two People* appears to qualify for that description, or at least as an easy, light read. But the book has a serious undercurrent. As the *Boston Transcript* put it in October 1931: ‘While his style is as mercurial as ever, and his touch as delicate as the down on the butterfly’s wing, Mr Milne here achieves something no less impressive than a symposium on married life.’

The novel considers how two people can make a relationship work when the people concerned have little in common but that shared past when they fell in love with each other. Biographically it is of tremendous interest, written, as it was, at a time when Milne’s own marriage was under strain, when Milne was recognising, as his character, the novelist Reginald Wellard does, that he wanted to be free, but ‘I want her not to be.’ ‘I am less free than she is,’ Wellard thinks, ‘for I have this

uneasy feeling of disloyalty to her when I am with another woman. Does she have that feeling? Of course not.' There is an extremely good scene when Reginald, having braced himself to tell Sylvia something he should have told her ages before (that he has had tea with an actress), finds she not only knows already, but doesn't attach any importance to it whatsoever.

Christopher Milne once wrote 'My father's heart remained buttoned up throughout his life.' But in *Two People* AA Milne reveals a great deal about himself. The reader should not be put off by the beginning. Read on, even if you have an aversion to novels about writers. If you have already bought the book, you will be able to feel smug, whether you live in the country or not, at the fun Milne has with the non-book-buying neighbours, including the one who once knew a fellow in India who wrote a book.

Two People is perhaps best characterised as a funny, cautionary tale for writers, with much period detail. (Have nothing to do with the theatre. Stay out of London. Live in the country and write what you want to write.) If it was easier for Milne, with the income from his children's books, then it is for most to follow this advice. It still makes a good story.

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