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### J.M. Barrie and the Du Mauriers

#### Abstract

Notes the influence of several members of the Du Maurier family on the writings of J.M. Barrie—particularly on *Peter Pan*.

#### Additional Keywords

Barrie, J.M.—Characters—Captain Hook; Barrie, J.M.—Relation to Du Maurier family; Du Maurier, George—Influence on J.M. Barrie

# J.M. Barrie and the Du Mauriers

Rebecca A. Carey

According to Andrew Birkin, author of *J.M. Barrie & the Lost Boys, the Love Story that Gave Birth to Peter Pan*, when J.M. Barrie was seated next to Mrs. Arthur Llewelyn Davies at a fashionable New Year's Eve dinner party in 1897, he did not know that she was the mother of Barrie's special young friend George, the boy in the red tam-o'-shanter. Neither did Sylvia Llewelyn Davies suspect that she had finally met "the man with the cough who could wiggle his ears." The thread of commonality between them were the books of her father George du Maurier: Barrie had named his St. Bernard Porthos after a dog of the same name in du Maurier's novel *Peter Ibbetson*, and Sylvia had named her youngest son Peter after the hero of the book. (Birkin, 45)

In *Peter Pan* Barrie wrote, "The Neverlands vary a great deal...; but on the whole the Neverlands have a family resemblance, and if they stood in a row you could say of them that they had each other's noses and so forth." (19) Three generations of du Mauriers would leave the imprints of their noses on the Neverland.

George du Maurier, a generation older than Barrie, was an artist for the satirical magazine *Punch*. He poked gentle fun at English high society: those who were born to it and those who were trying to buy entry – the new class of wealthy businessmen who wanted so desperately to be accepted by the aristocracy. He also drew children – mainly his own – and used their peculiar, child-wise remarks for the captions.

Barrie wrote plays for the stage. Du Maurier created "a sort of stage, occupied by people in afternoon or evening costume (55)," and wrote skits to accompany his sketches. Often, said T. Martin Wood (*George Du Maurier, Satirist of the Victorians*) the sense of the satire rested almost entirely in the caption. "By obscuring their legends," he said, "we find that drawing after drawing has nothing to tell us but the beauty of those involved in 'the joke,' and this...gives a peculiar salt, or rather sweetness to satire from his pencil." (10)

Du Maurier had a one weakness as a satirist: he drew types rather than individuals, ugly people turned out "figures of fun." When he attempted to draw people outside of society, the characters came out stiff and wooden. (44)

He had no trouble drawing individual children. The occupants of his nursery scenes were always warm and natural. Wood said:

When it comes to his drawings of children, du

Maurier is very far away from the sentimentalist of the Barrie school. He does not attempt to go through the artifice of pretended possession of the realm of the child's mind. He was one of those who find the curious attractiveness of childhood in the unreality and not, as claimed in the later school the superior reality of the child's world. (14)

Du Maurier's women were always ladies – even the servants. "And we cannot help feeling such delightful child-life as he represents could only have retained its characteristic under the wing of the beautiful women who nurse it in his pictures." (Wood, 18)

It seems an injustice to call du Maurier's work a cartoon. This is a typical caption to one du Maurier domestic scene:

Mamma. "Why is Baby crying for, Maggie?"

Maggie. "I don't know."

Mamma. "And what are you looking so indignant about?"

Maggie. "That nasty, greedy dog's been and took and eaten my punge-take!"

Mamma. "Why, I saw you eating a sponge-cake a minute ago!"

Maggie. "O – that was Baby's!" (Wood, 29)

Du Maurier created an image of the English nursery which Barrie used in *Peter Pan*. In the original stage version of *Peter Pan*, Wendy, returning home with her brothers and the Lost Boys, interviewed a dozen lovely women to find just the right homes for her adopted sons. Compare the photograph of the scene (Green, facing p. 67), with any sketch by du Maurier. You will recognize the Victorian lady that du Maurier popularized: tall and elegant with evening gowns and upswept hair. The Beautiful Mothers did not remain in the final version. "The ensuing scene with the Beautiful Mothers, though it has its moments of humour, is distinctly embarrassing, and no one need regret its speedy excision early in 1905." (Green, 55)

George du Maurier had, however, a more lasting influence upon Barrie's work.

According to Andrew Birkin, the du Maurier family "epitomized the gaiety and Bohemian frivolity of the 'nineties.'" (47) George had been an artist in Paris before he became an illustrator for *Punch*. His son Gerald was an actor, and in the early years of her marriage Sylvia worked for the famous theatrical costume maker, Mrs. Nettleship, making clothes for Ellen Terry (51).

It was Sylvia's skill with needle and thread that first drew Barrie's attention to her sons George and Jack. She created bright red tam-o'-shanters for the boys out of an

ancient, velvet judicial robe which had once belonged to her husband's grandfather. "Thus arrayed," said Birkin, "George and Jack soon became a distinctive feature of Kensington Gardens, and could hardly fail to catch the attention of the little Scotsman out strolling with his dog." (55)

Sylvia's sons, George, Jack, Peter, Michael, and Nico, were a source of delight and inspiration for Barrie: "I made Peter [Pan]," Barrie claimed, "by rubbing the five of you violently together, as savages with two sticks produce a flame. That is all he is, the spark I got from you" (Birkin, 1-2). It is clear, however, that the boys got their charm from their mother.

"There never was a cockboy," Barrie wrote in *The Little White Bird*, a fictional account of his relationship with George. Describing the boy "David" he wrote:

It is difficult to believe that he walks to Kensington gardens; he seems always to have alighted there: and were I to scatter crumbs I opine he would come and peck... He strikes a hundred gallant poses in a day; when he tumbles, which is often he comes to the ground like a Greek god...

I returned to David and asked him in a low voice whether he would give me a kiss. He shook his head about six times, and I was in despair. Then the smile came, and I knew that he was teasing me only. He now nodded his head about six times.

That was the prettiest of all his exploits. (Birkin, 42)

Compare this with a description of Sylvia Llewelyn Davies, which Barrie put down in his notes for Grizel in the novel *Tommy and Grizel*:

"Her eyes at least were beautiful, they were unusually far apart, and let you look straight into them and never quivered, they seemed always to be asking for the truth. And she had an adorable mouth... the essence of all that was characteristic and delicious about her seemed to have run to her mouth, so that to kiss Grizel on her crooked smile would have been to kiss the whole of her at once... There were times when she looked like a boy. Her almost gallant bearing, the poise of her head, her noble frankness, they all had something in them of the princely boy who had never known fear. (Birkin, 60)

Charles Frohman, the first producer of *Peter Pan*, made the decision that Peter should be played by an actress. He realized that if Peter was actually played by a boy, the other children in the cast would have to be younger in proportion to him. In England, children under the age of fourteen could not appear on stage after nine p.m., so it made sense to use an adult woman in the title role. (Birkin, 105) Still, it is not surprising that on stage Peter Pan continues to be played by a woman role, for it is obvious that Sylvia and her sons were mixed up in Peter's creation. Compare the above with Barrie's description, in *Peter Pan* of Mrs. Darling:

She was a lovely lady, with a romantic mind and such a sweet mocking mouth. Her romantic mind was like the tiny boxes, one within the other, that come from the puzzling East, however many you discover there is always one more; and her sweet mocking mouth had one kiss on it that Wendy could never get, thought it was, perfectly conspicuous in the right-hand corner (13)... If you or I or Wendy had been there we should have seen that [Peter] was very like Mrs. Darling's kiss. (24, emphasis added)

The story of Peter Pan underwent many incarnations before it was set down in novel form in 1911. It began with the stories Barrie told the Llewelyn Davies boys in Kensington Gardens (Birkin, 69) and in the castaway games he played with them at Black Lake Cottage in Surrey during the summer of 1901. (83-88) Barrie included some of the Peter Pan stories in *The Little White Bird*, completed in 1902 (93). Barrie began the first draft of the play "Peter & Wendy" on March 1, 1904 (103), and the curtain went up on the first performance December 27th of the same year.

In *Fifty Years of Peter Pan*, Roger Lancelyn Green said, "Much of the characterization [in the novel] is based upon characters which had already emerged in action or been suggested by the actors who created the parts..." George Shelton, the first Smee, elected to make his pirate an Irishman. "Noddler," whose hands were fixed on backwards, owed this peculiarity to loose-jointed John Kelt, and Bill Jukes might not have been tattooed all over had not James English set the fashion." (116-117). Among the actors, however, it was Sylvia's brother Gerald du Maurier who truly left his stamp upon Barrie's work.

In Gerald's hands, the somewhat one-dimensional character of the scripted Hook began to expand in all directions, inspiring Barrie to make constant rewrites until the pirate captain came to fit the description given of him in the final version of the play: "Cruelest jewel in that dark setting is HOOK himself, cadaverous and black-avised... He is never more sinister than when he most polite, and the elegance of his diction, the distinction of his demeanour, show him one of a different class from his crew, a solitary among uncultured companions." (Birkin, 109-110).

In addition to writing many books of romance and suspense, Gerald's daughter, Daphne du Maurier, wrote three books about her illustrious family. In *Gerald: a Portrait*, she remembered her father in the role he made famous:

When Hook first paced his quarter deck in the year 1904, children were carried screaming from the stalls, and even big boys of twelve were known to reach for their mother's hand in the friendly shelter of the boxes. How he was hated, with his flourishes, his poses, his dreaded diabolical smile! That ashen face, those blood-red lips, the long, dank greasy curls; the sardonic laugh, the maniacal scream, the appalling courtesy of his gestures... There was no peace in those days until the monster was destroyed, and the fight on the pirate ship was a fight to the death.

Gerald was Hook... a tragic and rather ghastly creation who knew no peace, and whose soul was in torment... a lonely spirit that was terror and inspiration in one. And, because he had imagination and a spark of genius, Gerald made him alive. (p. 91-92, quoted from Birkin, p. 109-110)

Gerald was not the only du Maurier to play in *Peter Pan*. Gerald's daughter Angela almost gave her nose to the Neverland – came within a hair of actually donating it to the Neverland – when she played Wendy on stage in the 1924-1925 season. Angela had been born early in 1904, and during the writing of the play *Peter Pan*, Barrie had given her name to Wendy (Wendy Moira Angela Darling). (Birkin, 112) Twenty years later she played the part of Wendy on stage.

Gladys Cooper played Peter Pan in the 1923-24 and in the 1924-25 season. She was as independent as she was lovely, and had strong ideas about her character. In her autobiography *Gladys Cooper*, she wrote about her appearance in that plum role: When producer Litchfield Owen held out for the traditional *Peter Pan* wardrobe (which, after twenty years, was getting tired and ratty), Cooper took Barrie to lunch. Where did Peter Pan get his boots? she asked Barrie. Barrie allowed that she might wear old shoes that belonged to her son John. Where did Peter Pan get shorts? She was allowed to wear an old pair of flannel shorts which belonged to Gerald du Maurier. Cooper also persuaded Barrie to let her replace the wooden swords used in the play with real sabers. (quoted in Green, 125.)

Of the du Mauriers, Angela was the one who suffered for the Neverland. In her autobiography *It's Only the Sister*, she recounted the disasters that plagued her during the 1924-25 run. Flying back into the nursery one night, Wendy ended up in the orchestra pit, and it was fortunate for Angela that her next scene required her to lie silently in bed, waiting for Mrs. Darling to find her children tucked into bed, for she needed to collect her scrambled wits. The audience, sure that she had broken her neck, gave her an ovation when she emerged seemingly unscathed from Wendy's bed.

Nor was that the last close call she had while flying. On the very last night of the run, as she was flying out of the nursery, the wire stuck and she swung back in again and crashed into the safety curtain.

The flying accidents, however, were not the worst. Near the end of the season, during Peter's duel with Hook on the pirate ship, Angela steeped between the pair and caught Gladys Cooper's very real saber right on her nose. "As for the scar," she wrote, "I carried it for ten or fifteen years." (quoted in Green, 137-139)

Barrie, haunted by the death of his brother David when Barrie was six, thought deeply about "the boy who could not grow up," and wrote poignantly on the subject in *Sentimental Tommy*, *The Little White Bird*, and *Tommy and*

*Grizel*. These books, however, are not widely read today. Barrie's triumph, his enduring creation, *Peter Pan* owes a large debt to the dashing, colorful family who took him in. Without George du Maurier, master of the drawing room and the nursery, father of two strong individuals... without Sylvia who gave life to five handsome boys... without Gerald, who gave breath to Captain Hook... without George, Jack, Peter, Michael, Nico, and Angela... there would have been no *Peter Pan*, as we know it. The Neverland is one of childhood's first realms of fantasy. Without the du Mauriers, our fantasy lives would all be diminished.

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