

# The Curious Case of *The Seven Magic Houses*: J. M. Barrie and The Invalid Children's Aid Association

Peter Robinson

## Introduction

J. M. Barrie (1860–1937), playwright and author, is best known for his Peter Pan stories featuring the interaction between the well-to-do Darling family, and Peter Pan, the ‘boy who never grew up’, set against the contrasting backdrops of Edwardian London (Kensington Gardens) and the fantasy dreamland of Never-Never Land. An equally important aspect of Barrie’s life, however, was his quietly-conducted, but nevertheless important, philanthropic activity that culminated in the well-documented donation of the Peter Pan copyright to Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) in 1929, a gift extended in perpetuity by a special amendment to the Copyright Designs & Patents Act of 1988. This research note seeks to extend knowledge of Barrie’s charitable activities with reference to his support of The Invalid Children’s Aid Association (ICAA), in the form of a pamphlet, *The Seven Magic Houses*, featuring Peter Pan and Wendy coming to the aid of sick children. It makes a tentative case for not only Barrie’s moral support and sympathy, but his literary involvement too.

## *The Seven Magic Houses*

*The Seven Magic Houses* is a sixteen-page booklet featuring a previously undocumented Peter Pan short story, written in support of the ‘Homes of Recovery Fund’, a branch of the Invalid Children’s Aid Association (ICAA). This charity provided homes in the countryside and on the coast for children suffering from lung diseases such as tuberculosis, as well other chronic conditions including congenital heart problems, while also serving as places of convalescence after serious operations. Founded in 1888 by Allen Dowdeswell Graham, by the 1920s the ICAA was supported by high-profile fund-raising



**Fig. 1.** Front cover attributed to Mabel Lucie Attwell

activities such as mannequin parades, house sales, and special theatrical performances in London. Royal and aristocratic patronage including the support of HRH Princess Mary of Teck, and the Duchess of Norfolk, ensured regular publicity in national newspapers.

In *The Seven Magic Houses*, Peter Pan's philosophy of optimism and Wendy's sensitivity and compassion come to the aid of sick children 'too ill to dream', as they persuade 'The Wise Fairy' to create seven convalescence homes for sick children, mostly situated along the South Coast. The story ends with the successful completion of the homes and the formation of the 'Peter and Wendy Fund' to help pay for the cost of running the homes — for 'doctors and nurses and teachers . . . can't live on nothing any more than anyone else'. With a full-colour cover attributed to the well-known book illustrator Mabel Lucie Attwell depicting the seven magic houses as mushrooms (Fig. 1.), and orange monochromatic vignettes dotted throughout the text (a visual technique later used in Attwell's 'Wot-a-life' series in the early 1930s), the pamphlet also recycles and recaptions two Arthur Rackham illustrations from *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1906). Published by the Scheff Publicity Organization Ltd. in the early 1920s, the advertising group which was incorporated in 1921, went into voluntary liquidation in 1926 (*London*



**Fig. 2.** Peter Pan on Never-Never Land beach, p. 3.

*Gazette*, 19 Nov, 1926), information that helped in the initial dating of the pamphlet. Its print run was almost certainly limited to the low hundreds, perhaps even less. Copies were only available by ‘Application to the Secretary of the Fund’.

A note on the inside cover of the pamphlet reads:

The Homes of Recovery Fund Committee of the Invalid Children’s Aid Association acknowledge with deep gratitude the kindness of Sir James Barrie, who has allowed Peter Pan to come to their help; of Mr. Arthur Rackham, who has permitted the reproduction of his two delightful pictures; and of Messrs. Hodder & Stoughton, whose sympathy and courtesy have made possible the production of this book.

### **Authorship**

The pamphlet is anonymous, but the ambiguity of the thanks given to J.M. Barrie for ‘allowing Peter Pan to come to their help’, is perhaps deliberate. Although a report of the Homes of Recovery Fund Sub-Committee, produced for the ICAA’s 38th Annual Report, held at the London Metropolitan Archives, stipulated that, ‘A booklet entitled “The Seven Magic Houses” written by Miss Scott Bremner, was published in aid of the Homes in June, 1925’<sup>1</sup>, far

from settling the question of authorship, this merely serves to raise more questions. Is it really plausible that Barrie would have surrendered literary control of his greatest and most loved creation, now translated into more than 40 languages, and never out of print, to an unknown and hitherto untraced writer? Suspicion that in fact Barrie authored the pamphlet, or at the very least had creative input, is surely well founded. Indeed, his anonymous authorship would fit into a pattern of such activity during the period following the devastating loss of Michael Llewelyn Davies (one of the ‘Five’ boys who inspired *Peter Pan*) on the 19 May, 1921. As a result, Barrie threw himself into philanthropic activities involving children, and as Susan Bivin Aller suggests, over the next few years he ‘was asked to write prefaces to books and give eulogies to the famous’. His charitable work increased further until, ‘Only he [Barrie] would ever know how much money he gave to support the widows and children of his fellow authors or how many poor artists benefitted from his anonymous support’ (Aller, *J. M. Barrie: The Magic Behind Peter Pan*, 1994, p. 113). There are stylistic grounds to support such an attribution too. While the pamphlet is clearly thinly plotted, and transparently a device to explain the activities of the Homes of Recovery Fund and the formation of the Peter and Wendy Fund, in several places the turn of phrase and imagery bear all the literary hallmarks of Barrie’s prose. Two particularly good examples are:

So hand in hand they [Peter and Wendy] flew up into the mist and away over the sea, heading for the mainland and leaving the dear island behind them. And the moon watched them with such a broad, beaming silver smile that the sea caught the infection and laughed and twinkled like melted silver. [p. 6]

Suddenly the air was full of music — little silver sounds that tripped along after each other as one butterfly flits after another in the sunshine, or as one daisy follows another in the grass, and there were little ripples and thrills just as a blackbird sings from an apple tree and another blackbird answers from a hedge. [p. 10]

The money for printing the booklet was also provided by an anonymous donor, and did not appear in the charity’s accounts. It is quite possible that Barrie funded the publication. His involvement with the ICAA certainly con-

tinued into 1926, when a copy of his *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* was given to the ‘boys of Edgar Lee’<sup>2</sup> as a prize, for their activities collecting money for the Peter and Wendy Fund. Total donations to the Fund in 1926 amounted to £53 12s 4d.

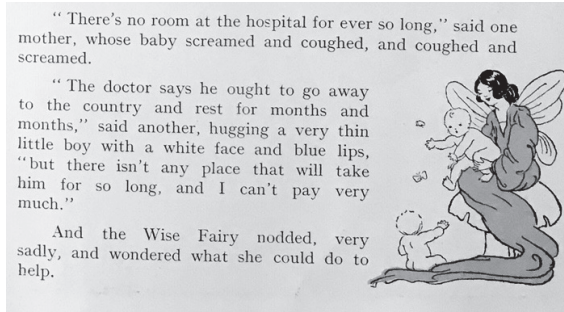
### Storyline

Divided into three chapters, the story begins with Peter lazing on a beach in Never-Never Land, playing ‘touch-last’ with the sea. He and Wendy, who is busy sewing nearby, suddenly hear an eerie moaning sound coming out of the mist, which Peter at once takes to be ‘someone or something that’s lost’. As the moaning intensifies, Wendy and Peter arrive at the dreadful conclusion that it is the sound of children who have lost their way and can’t reach the island of dreams:

“Oh, Peter,” cried Wendy, “s’posing there were some ill children, and they just got iller and iller, till they couldn’t even dream they were well, and couldn’t believe they would *ever* be well? Wouldn’t they lose the way, Peter?”

The chapter ends with Peter and Wendy resolving to help the children by building Little Houses to help them get well, using the example of Wendy’s recuperation in the Little House made by Peter after she was shot with an arrow by Tootles in the original novel. Because the children are too ill to dream and cross over to Never-Never Land, Peter and Wendy fly back to the adult world and set about the task of creating seven magic houses, where the sick children will be made well again.

In chapter two, ‘What the Wise Fairly Did’, Peter and Wendy encourage the Wise Fairy (the personification of the ICAA), to help create the houses, and seek her help. Based in London, the ‘Fairy Godmother of all the sick children’, shelters hundreds ‘in the folds of her skirt’. With mothers complaining about insufficient hospital places and the unaffordable costs of care, Peter starts playing a tune on his pipes to persuade the Wise Fairy to support their idea: ‘He played about the country and about flowers and birds and bees and butterflies, about woolly lambs and bunnies, and about little brooks that chat to the willows that bend over them...’. Finally convinced, the Wise Fairy



**Fig. 3.** The Wise Fairy (ICAA), hearing the complaints from mothers of sick children, p. 7.

consents and sets about creating the ‘Homes of Recovery’.

### **Description of the Seven Magic Houses**

The pamphlet cleverly combines the fantasy of Peter Pan and Never-Never Land with the fictional world of the affluent middle-class Darlings in London, the very donation demographic which the campaign targeted, and the real activities of the ICAA. From stage to page, and into children’s homes where real lives were being transformed. The ‘Seven Magic Houses’ were based along the South Coast: Worthing, Seaford, Berkhamsted, Dover, Broadstairs, Stonebridge Park, and Hartfield. Seaford had a particularly long-established reputation as a place of convalescence going back into the Victoria era, and has associations with another literary giant, Rudyard Kipling. Given the locations of the homes of recovery, Barrie’s choice of charitable project adheres to the old adage that charity begins at home. He was a visitor to Cudlow House in Rusington, and lived at Chiddingly in East Sussex from 1921–1934.

### **The Peter and Wendy Fund**

The final chapter of the pamphlet focuses on maintenance of the houses and the staffing and running costs required to look after the sick children. Although Peter knew nothing of money, he proposed that they ask children to donate to the Homes of Recovery. This idea evolved into the Peter and Wendy League or club, where children could win prizes for collecting money for the

fund. Collection cards were issued, and once 10 shillings had been collected, the card could be exchanged for a badge, and subsequently each completed card could be exchanged for a Peter Pan wooden figure, with fifteen to collect in total. The child who collected the most money for the fund each year would win free tickets to see the Peter Pan pantomime or another pantomime of their choice. The Fund appears to have been wrapped up in 1929 when Barrie passed the copyright of Peter Pan to the Great Ormond Street Hospital.

### **Conclusion**

Further research into the activities of the individual houses associated with the Homes of Recovery Fund is likely to yield more evidence of Barrie's hands-on involvement with their charitable work, and pursuit of Miss Scott Bremner might help resolve the lingering question of the pamphlet's authorship. Nonetheless, the nature of the cause, the type of publication, and the cooperation of his publishers and artistic collaborators, help to situate and explain Barrie's later involvement with and support of the Great Ormond Street Hospital, filling a significant lacuna in the scholarship.

### Notes

1 Extract from the 38th Annual Report of the Children's Invalid Aid Association, 1925, pp. 39–40, The London Metropolitan Archives. I am indebted to Christine Poortere, former 'Peter Pan Director' at Great Ormond Street Hospital Children's Charity for her research endeavours that brought this information to light.

2 Presumably a reference to Edgar Lee House School for Physically Defective Children (1922–1941), Willesden: Stonebridge Park, one of the 'Seven Magic Houses'.