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Ford Madox Ford's Fairy Tales

Alison Lurie

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Ford Madox Ford's Fairy Tales

Alison Lurie (bio)

Once upon a time there was a large, pink-faced, yellow-haired man who liked to tell stories. All kinds of stories: adventure and spy thrillers, historical dramas, romances and fantasies, war stories and personal

reminiscence, social comedy and social criticism. Unfortunately he overdid it. Between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five he published eighty-one books, including four juveniles and thirty-two novels. Of the latter, one, *The Good Soldier*, is a masterpiece; four or five others come near it, and the rest vary from interesting to awful. Overproduction, especially of inferior work, is hard on an author's imagination and also on his public reputation. If Ford Madox Ford had told fewer stories, he might be better known today.

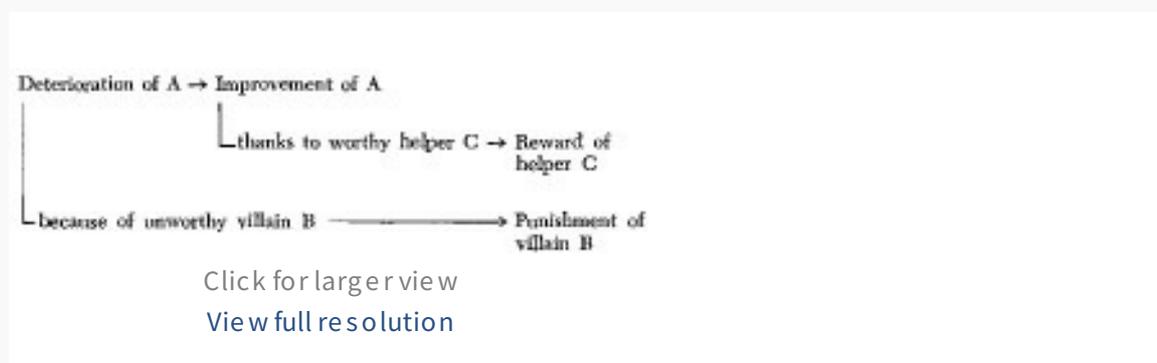
Ford wrote not only because he enjoyed it but because, in an increasingly desperate way, he had to. As Arthur Mizener says in his fine biography, *The Saddest Story* (without which this article could not have been written), Ford's life was a series of "financial crises that forced him to write too much journalism and popular fiction."¹ From about 1900 on he began to live on advances from publishers for books he had often not yet finished or even begun, writing against time to earn money already spent.

Ford's books for children were written at the start of his career, before the economic pressure on him had become heavy, when his energy was high and his creative impulse strong. His first two fairy tales appeared when he was only eighteen, and the third before his twenty-first birthday. Though *Christina's Fairy Book* was not published until 1906, most of the stories and verses it contains were probably composed some time earlier.

The Brown Owl, Ford's first published work, which appeared in September 1891,² is a remarkable achievement for someone of his age. It began as a story told to his sister Juliet, who was ten years **[End Page 7]** old that year. Later he wrote it down and showed it to his grandfather, the Pre-Raphaelite painter Ford Madox Brown. Brown "was so delighted that he immediately made two illustrations for it, bullied Edward Garnett into seeing that Fisher Unwin published it, and rushed copies to all his friends."³ The book was favorably noticed in several London newspapers, and had a considerable success.⁴

Late-Victorian England, of course, was the golden age of the literary fairy-tale. Lewis Carroll's Alice books and George Mac-Donald's *The Princess and the Goblin* had appeared shortly before Ford was born, and they were followed by dozens of imitations. The line between adult and juvenile fiction was less strict than it is now, and adult writers like Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Oscar Wilde, and Christina Rossetti, who was Ford's aunt by marriage, all wrote fairy stories; Ford's project was therefore not unusual.

The plot of *The Brown Owl* follows the standard structural model of the fairy tale as outlined by Claude Bremond:⁵



Its heroine, the Princess Ismara, suffers "deterioration" at the start of the story when her father the king dies, leaving in charge a Chancellor who turns out to be an evil magician. The Princess is protected from his various schemes by a large owl, the classical Animal Guardian who also helps to unite her with a prince. The pattern is repeated in several episodes, as the magician is routed and returns again in different disguises and with different helpers.

The style of *The Brown Owl*, like that of many contemporary fairy tales, varies between flowery-elaborate and comic-realistic. Ford's descriptions tend to be conventionally pretty: "A beautiful **[End Page 8]** day was dawning after the last night's rain, and the sun was rising brightly over the edge of the blue sea. . . . everything was quiet except the shrill chirp of a solitary sparrow."⁶

There is a good deal of rather heavy-handed farce involving the court doctor and his umbrella, a little dwarf and a large giant, and so on. *The Brown Owl* also contains the customary...

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¹This article, © 1980 by Alison Lurie, will appear in a volume of essays on Ford Madox Ford to be published by the University of Pennsylvania Press.



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