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**Aspects of Evacuation
in Michelle Magorian's
*Good Night, Mr. Tom***

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Introduction

When World War II broke out in September 1939, the evacuation of children in Great Britain had already started. Children and mothers with infants were evacuated from London and other major cities to escape German bombing raids. They were transported to different locations in the countryside, accompanied by schoolteachers and volunteers. When they arrived at their destinations, they were met by the local Billeting Officer who organized the temporary housings called billets. No one was forced to move but people in urban areas, where the bombing raids were most likely to hit, were strongly advised to do so. Private arrangements with friends and relatives were also made and millions of people left the big cities for the assumed safety in the countryside.

Since it was primarily wealthy people who were able to arrange private evacuation, many of the children who became part of the national evacuation program came from poor families. This was the first time for them to be away from their parents and home towns. They left their familiar surroundings to live with strangers in new and sometimes frightening surroundings. Many of them had never been to the countryside, nor seen any farm animals. Descriptions of children's horrors when they were separated from their families can be found in several books and articles dealing with the evacuation of children during World War II. There are also stories of how they were abused and neglected in their countryside homes. A great many of the evacuees were punished by their foster parents for reactions which were caused by stress and anxiety. It was not unusual either to be forced, for different reasons, to change billeting once or several times.

In the children's novel *Good Night, Mr. Tom* (1981) by Michelle Magorian, the reader gets to know the evacuee William Beech. He comes from a poor family and has never left London before, but the rest of his story is very different from the ones mentioned above. He gets a better life in every aspect when he leaves his home in London and comes to a small village in Dorset. There he is billeted with the lonely widower Tom Oakley who takes extraordinarily good care of him. The eight-year-old Will has been severely abused by his controlling mother and starts out being scared and insecure, but Tom understands what Will has been through and what he needs. Even though Tom has lived as a recluse for many years, he opens up and lets the villagers help him with the care of Will. Their relationship grows and gradually Will gets stronger both physically and emotionally.

The novel is used in schools as a part of the teaching of children's history. It gives a portrait of village life in England during the war, although the focus is on Tom and Will. However, it seems that the novel gives a more positive image of the evacuation than historical sources do. Books about the evacuation and articles on the effects of it give another, more dark and pessimistic picture. Even though the evacuees experienced the evacuation in different ways, very few improved their living conditions as thoroughly as Will. The purpose of this essay is to compare Will's experiences with selected historical sources in order to answer the question whether *Good Night, Mr. Tom* gives a romanticized image of the evacuation of children in Britain during World War II.

This essay will start with an overview of the evacuation of children to the countryside during World War II. Then it will move on to talk about what life was like for an evacuee in terms of family life and social issues. In the fourth section, it will take a look at how the country schools were affected by the dramatic increase in number of pupils. Finally there will be a section focusing on the cultural clashes between urban and rural life as well as those between social classes. Except from the overview, all parts will be discussed with focus on the children's experiences and compared with Will's life as an evacuee in the novel *Good Night, Mr. Tom*.

Historical Background

Until the First World War, Britain had been protected from invasion because of its island advantages. When the Germans started using Zeppelins and heavy bombers in air-raids, it was inevitable that the civilians had lost their natural protection in times of war. Britain had also grown more vulnerable since forty per cent of the population lived in the country's six largest urban centres. Mike Brown reports in *The Impact of Civilian Evacuation in the Second World War* that suggestions were made on how to best protect the civilians. It was then concluded that it would be best to disperse the population in order to reduce injuries and panic (13). The government set up the Air Raid Precautions – ARP – which had to deal with a possible evacuation of civilians. To begin with, central London was the only part that was thought to be in need of evacuation. According to some committee members of the ARP, the poorer parts of the city were especially likely to panic if the bombings started (Brown 1-2). There seemed to be a fear that masses of poor people would invade the richer parts. To maintain control and keep up the morale, it was better to spread them over large areas.

Brown further reports that the 'Committee on Evacuation' was set up in 1938 and became known as the Anderson Committee since it was led by Sir John Anderson (3). Martin Parsons and Penny Starns report that the Anderson Committee soon decided that billeting would be compulsory, but it would be voluntary to be evacuated (198). In Carlton Jackson's book, the reader learns that the nation was divided into three areas: Evacuation, Reception and Neutral. The highest priority as an evacuation area was London and a typical reception area would be somewhere in the countryside where it was unlikely that the German bombs would fall. A categorization was also made for those who were to be evacuated. School-children between five and fifteen were put in category "A" and would be evacuated together with their school. They were prepared through practice drills carried out by their teachers. Category "B" was the difficult group containing children under the age of five and, in most cases, their mothers. The last two categories contained the blind, and expectant mothers (2-4). People were advised, if possible, to make their own evacuation arrangements with friends or relatives. They were also suggested to rent vacancies in neutral or reception areas and about 2 million people did so (Brown 24-25).

Brown writes that the main problems were how they should encourage people to leave the major cities and how to take care of them in the countryside (4). Parsons and Starns talk about a survey which was carried out in January 1939, where interviewers asked households in the reception areas if they were willing to take in evacuees. The purposes of the survey were also to get information about how many extra rooms were available and how many of these were suitable for the reception of evacuees. This procedure was made in haste and they never checked if the persons in the households were suitable to look after children (24-28). Parsons and Starns point out how inhuman this procedure was to those involved:

The bureaucratic procedures ignored the feelings of the individuals concerned, both in the evacuated and reception areas, and it relied on the unquestioning co-operation of teachers, without whom the scheme would have collapsed. It also relied on a billeting system which, in the Government's opinion, required no expert monitoring and supervision from outside agencies both before or during the evacuation process. (31)

People became numbers and individuals were only considered part of a big group. The efficiency of the upcoming evacuation was clearly more important than the needs of both children and adults.

On the days of evacuation, children walked with their teachers from their schools to the nearest railway station. Ben Wicks depicts how first in line were 'markers' who carried boards with the name of the school and a reference number (43). All children carried a gas mask, a label around their necks and some luggage with a similar label. Their names and the name of their school were written on the labels. Information had been given about what the children were supposed to bring (Brown 15). It was a long list and many evacuees reported that their parents had difficulties or no possibility at all to afford everything. Jackson illustrates how crying mothers walked after the groups of children and the waving goodbye at the stations were sometimes dramatic (16). Some evacuees claimed that they saw their fathers cry for the first time when they parted. It was clearly very hard and emotional for all family members to be separated.

The first of three waves of evacuation took place the first three days in September 1939. According to Parsons and Starns, about 1,500,000 children were then moved from city to rural areas (64). When Britain declared war against Germany on 3 September 1939, the general fear was that massive air-raids would start immediately, but nothing happened. There were no air-raids at all and life could partly go on as normal. This period came to be called the Phoney War. Since the expected short and violent war did not materialize, parents wanted their children back (Brown 35, 38). It was also stated that fewer evacuees had left the cities than had been expected and a significant number were drifting back (Wicks 97). Travis L. Crosby confirms that only half of the evacuees from London were still living in the reception areas by the summer of 1940 (9). Many of those who returned to their homes left again a year later when the bombing of London started (Wicks 162). Still more than half of the school-aged children in London stayed home despite all warnings (Jackson 30). There were threats of compulsory evacuation, but the fear of the reactions from mothers who were forced to be separated from their children held the authorities back. They could not even stop the hundreds of children who came back for Christmas right after the heaviest bombings in December 1940 (Parsons and Starns 78). The poor working-class families were tightly knit and wanted to stay together regardless of circumstances.

The background given in this chapter summarizes the procedures of the evacuation that took place both before and during World War II. It shows the successful organisation, but also how people were almost regarded as cattle when they were sent to their billets in the countryside. Unlike the organisers' predictions, many children never left the cities and a great number went back within the first six months. The reasons for the so called 'drift back' were various including homesickness and bad billeting. In the chapters to come, different aspects of

the evacuation will be analysed, using the children's novel *Good Night, Mr. Tom* as counterbalance to the harsh facts and real-life stories from historical sources on the evacuation.

Family Life

Michelle Magorian's book *Good Night, Mr. Tom* starts out when a Billeting Officer knocks on sixty-year-old Tom's door in a small country village. He reluctantly takes the evacuee William Beech in since he knows it is compulsory. The book thus begins without giving us any information about the often very painful process of separating from one's family.

Historical documents tell us that the scenes at the railway stations were often heartbreaking for both those who were leaving and those who waved them off. Although some children may have seen the evacuation as an adventure, many children were in fact terrified and deeply anxious (Wicks 46). In Magorian's novel, the scene at the station is absent, but the reader finds out, bit by bit, that the reason may be Will's former life with his mother. She is a single parent living in a poor area of London and she does not have a tight or loving relationship with her son. His upbringing has been difficult with daily beatings and degrading words. Still, the effect of the abrupt introductory scene is that the reader gets the impression of a smooth transfer from the evacuated children's urban homes to the safety in the countryside. The historically documented panic and sadness experienced by both children and parents is left out and excludes a piece of the evacuation which is frequently documented in historical sources.

The destinations of the evacuated children were unknown to both them and their parents. On their way to the reception areas, it was almost impossible for them to know what stations they were passing as well. The reason was that the signs of the stations had been removed due to the war. The train journeys were therefore experienced as long and uncomfortable even though the distance was not always far (Jackson 17). Those who accompanied the children had a difficult task to keep everybody calm under these circumstances. In the novel *Good Night, Mr. Tom*, the reader finds out that Will has arrived in the countryside by train, but the train journey is never mentioned, however. It seems to fade away with his other memories of his former life and he never talks about those who accompanied him either. The Billeting Officer is the only one mentioned as she is the one who hands Will over to Tom. She tells Tom that Will's mother, who is a God-fearing woman, refuses to evacuate her son unless he stays with religious people or near a church. Since Tom lives next to the church in the village, his home is chosen for Will (1-2). According to

historical sources the Billeting Officers actually had no possibility or right to take special consideration to parent's wishes (Jackson 23). This is the first event in the novel, among others to come, where special consideration is taken to Will which in fact would be unlikely to happen in reality.

The picture of the arrival is one of few depictions in the novel where Will has a difficult time in the countryside. He is frightened and despite the fact that he is starving, he cannot eat anything. Will's arrival with a group of other evacuees matches with what Jackson reports in his book based on letters, notebooks, diaries and interviews with former evacuees. Jackson talks about how groups, like the one Will arrives with, walked from house to house with an official. In this procedure the hosts were asked to pick whomever they wanted. Someone was always the last one to be chosen and these experiences "could, and did, leave psychological marks upon many of an entire generation" (19). Crosby also points out that a great number of evacuees were rejected by the hosts (7). However, unlike many children in the interviews, Will is taken in and treated well by Tom and the other villagers. Other evacuees in the novel are taken to the village hall (18), something which Jackson reports about as well. The hosts came to these places and picked children, something which came to be called 'slave markets' by the evacuees. Parsons and Starns call it a 'cattle market' since they see clear similarities with the way animals are chosen according to how useful they look. Farmers generally chose strong-looking boys who could work on their farms, while others picked girls whom they thought would be good as housekeepers. Parsons and Starns conclude that "a more efficient billeting strategy would have undoubtedly alleviated a great deal of distress and anxiety" (67). In the novel, Tom does remark on the fact that the farmer who owns the biggest farm in the area has picked two strong-looking children (64). This remark may provide the reader with a hint as to the sometimes horrible treatment of the evacuees, but the focus is on Will and his positive experiences. It is also important to consider that although Tom used to be the village recluse, he does his duty without hesitation. At first, people judge him to be inappropriate to take care of a child, but he proves them wrong and he turns out to be the best host possible for a destroyed child. Will never talks about his first trembling hours in the countryside again, and they seem to be a part of his 'old city life' rather than a bad memory of his 'new country life'.

Historical sources state that it did not take long until children started to run away from their billets or were taken back by their parents (Brown 36-38). It was obviously not favorable for them to be parted from their families and the security of home. The so called 'drift back' to the cities was mainly caused by deficient billeting according to Crosby (9). Brown gives

several reasons for why evacuees did not leave their city homes or returned: life in the country differed too much from what they were used to, they got very homesick, they could not stand the billet and sometimes the parents were not able to be parted from their children (39). In *Good Night, Mr. Tom*, Will has no such intentions at all. His life becomes so much better in the countryside and this gives him no reason to return home. For the first time in his life, he has got a father figure and a group of people who genuinely cares about him. He makes his first friends and strikes up a close friendship with the evacuee Zach who helps him to open up and become less insecure (73). Zach does not have any wishes to run away either, despite the fact that he misses his parents and comes from a loving home. Therefore the reader is never involved with evacuees who suffer from homesickness or negative experiences.

Although most people believed that it would be a short war and therefore a short period of evacuation, someone still had to pay for the lodged evacuees. Jackson presents how the question was solved by encouraging the parents to pay most of it, unless they proved to be insolvent, while the government paid for the rest (11-12). Will's single mother in *Good Night, Mr. Tom* is not able to pay for neither a visit to the countryside nor his accommodation. Tom knows that he is not supposed to pay for all Will's expenses, but he still does without complaining. It is clearly suggested throughout the novel that Will has been brought up under poor and miserable circumstances, something which Tom can see by just unpacking Will's bag (23). In historical sources like Jackson's book, it is stated that many evacuees got a better standard of living (47), but it is unlikely that they got the same extreme improvement in the emotional care as that of Will. For example, his birthday has never been celebrated before, and on the second day with Tom he gets his first compliment ever (35). Material things like a comic are new to Will and he is overwhelmed by all the good food he gets. To begin with his stomach cannot handle it, but he can gradually eat more and grows accordingly. Tom sacrifices his former way of living and does not mind the extra expenses in order to give Will a decent life. Stories like these are hard to find in historical sources.

To convince parents that it was better for their children to leave the cities, there were campaigns saying that children grew healthier in the country. Parsons and Starns point out that these campaigns were not grounded on facts. Instead some children displayed retarded growth rates due to emotional deprivation (83). These campaigns are echoed in *Good Night, Mr. Tom* as Tom gets instructions that country air is the best for Will when he comes back from his horrific time in London (234). There he has been badly beaten by his mother and finally been locked up in a closet with his baby sister. Not until several days later when Tom has arrived in London to look for him, is he found along with his dead sister. Since he is in

very bad shape both physically and mentally, the doctors want to send him to an institution (226). Tom objects to that because he knows what Will needs and decides to secretly take him back to the countryside. Once in the countryside again, Will gradually grows stronger and never experiences any emotional deprivation as long as he is with Tom. The circumstances for the average evacuee and Will are profoundly different and so is the state of their health from spending time in the countryside.

The novel depicts one good experience after the other as the days pass for Will in the countryside. In *The Impact of Civilian Evacuation in the Second World War*, on the other hand, the aim for Crosby has been to write about those who had bad experiences as evacuees. He admits that there are happy stories as well, but his point is that “if all evacuees had encountered only pleasantness in the countryside, our story of the evacuation would be very short indeed” (2). Crosby concludes that the welcoming of and the attitudes towards evacuees could be both cold and rude; the hosts clearly showed that the evacuees were not wanted (8). Will’s story is long but for the opposite reason since he has left a miserable home with no love and has got a home with respect and care. There is even consideration taken to religious demands from his mother. These special considerations to make Will grow stronger and more confident are visible throughout the novel. The people who become close to him in the village seem to turn themselves inside out to give him a pleasant time. There are no hard words whatsoever and Will is welcomed by everyone. It gives a heart-warming touch to the novel, which is a part of its popularity, but it also makes it less realistic.

There were some cases when the hosts wanted to adopt their new family member. Jackson reports about how they wrote to the authorities, but the adoptions seldom became reality (46-47). In the novel it becomes reality as Tom adopts Will when his mother has died. It is possible since Will does not have any relatives alive and a psychiatrist gives a statement that it is best for him to stay with Tom (283). By then, Will has realized that he has not been loved and taken care of in a proper way by his mother. When he makes friends in the countryside, he starts to compare his former situation with theirs. Zach, who is also an evacuee, gets long letters from his parents while Will only gets one. It is addressed to Tom who only reads part of it to Will, presumably because the rest is about how he should behave and be punished (128-129). Since *Good Night, Mr. Tom* is a children’s novel, the adoption and Will’s recovery gives the young reader the happy ending most people wish for. J.J. Watson also argues that this is what most people wish for although “the rather cushioned ending might be a point for criticism” (202). The reality during the war did, however, not give you a happy ending just because you had started out in a miserable way. Although historical

facts are accurate in the novel, a romantic picture is framed around the story about Tom's and Will's family life.

Care and Treatment of Children

A common question among many people during and after the evacuation is whether it was best for the children to stay with their parents or to be evacuated. Louise J. Despert has come to the conclusion "that the effects of evacuation were worse than those of bombing, owing to the separation of the children from their parents" (219-220). In Magorian's novel, the opposite is true. Will is better off being separated from his mother. Tom's instincts and empathy help Will in difficult situations and all his efforts contribute to exclusively positive results. Tom is very gentle and takes care of Will in a way which makes him grow both physically and mentally. He acts kindly and considerately with the best intentions for Will at all times. Although he has lived like a recluse for many years, he seems to know by instinct what is best for Will. The reader can see that Will is lucky to come into the hands of someone who is as pedagogical and psychologically correct in everything he does.

The circumstances of how Will ends up in the home of a recluse and how no authorities ever checked how he was doing are, on the other hand, more realistic. The first report on the organisation of evacuation had, according to Leena Mehreen Akhtar, been criticised for being inhuman and for not paying any attention to social and psychological issues. Despite this fact, there were no experts on psychology or child development present at the series of meetings held by the Anderson Committee (227). Akhtar continues to report that in the second wave of evacuation, local authorities were better prepared and could put children in billets which matched their needs (244). The children in the novel are evacuated during the first wave and the authorities' lack of engagement is only mentioned when Tom brings back Will from London. He more or less kidnaps Will from the hospital and the villagers consider it to be a good thing that nobody will check on Will (234). The days Will and Tom spend together are, indeed, full of joy and positive development, only interrupted by the extremely difficult events in London. Will is only cured again when he gets back into the care of Tom and escapes his mother and the authorities.

Will is a victim of both physical and emotional abuse while he is in his mother's care. During his school time in London before the evacuation, he was bullied and teased as well (208). All this abuse completely stops when he comes to the village where everybody treats him well. The opposite picture is often depicted in historical sources as it was common among

evacuees to be abused by their hosts. Feigenbaum's study, for instance, shows that 46.9 per cent of the participants who had been evacuated as children had been abused. The percentage was 24 for those participants who had not been evacuated. Physical abuse seems to have been the same in both groups while emotional and sexual abuse along with neglect had been vastly more common among evacuees. There was also a connection between abuse during and after evacuation, indicating that once you became a victim you stayed that way. The same pattern could be seen among those who were abused before evacuation. They had a higher tendency to also be abused as evacuees (171). The novel gives another, more romantic picture, where nobody takes advantage of Will's vulnerability. Instead, his new friends and their parents do everything they possibly can to make him feel comfortable.

The help and good care from those who understood the needs of children were vital for many evacuees. The psychoanalyst, John Bowlby, who was active in the treatment of children during the war, showed that young children thought they were rejected by their parents when they were evacuated. Therefore they became insecure and at the same time they were worried about their families and homes (Sturgeon-Clegg 27). Neither Zach nor Will in *Good Night, Mr. Tom* seems to be insecure because of their billeting, although Zach worries about his parents. He has had a good upbringing and is close to his parents while Will very seldom thinks about his mother. The fear he has gained from his upbringing shows in his bed-wetting, but it stops after a while since Tom turns it into a small matter. When Tom is informed that bed-wetting is common, he has already started to act in a proper way (37). In reality, information about bed-wetting did not reach all hosts according to Sturgeon-Clegg. Attempts were made by Bowlby to inform parents and foster families that the bed wetting and anger were caused by the child's fear and homesickness and should not be punished. Bowlby concluded that emotional disturbances from being uprooted and put in the hands of strangers, who were not always welcoming and nice, were the main reasons for bed-wetting. Most of the children did not have any problems with this at home and it caused difficulties for both them and their foster parents (27-28, Bowlby 1940). It does not say in the novel whether Will was a bed-wetter in London or not. The reasons for him to wet his bed in Tom's house seem to be connected with his deeply rooted insecurity. In the countryside he loses one fear after the other, until he has gained a security he has never had before. He goes from having the worst upbringing imaginable to a life with an incredible host who truly understands what he needs. This gives the impression that most children were, or became, confident in their country homes.

Bad billeting sometimes led to repression of the evacuation according to Akhtar. She presumes that more children were abused in different ways than we know of. Her primary explanation is that children tend to repress difficult memories instead of talking about them, especially when it comes to sexual abuse. The other explanation is that former evacuees felt that adults did not listen to their stories (245). Akhtar concludes that neglect was the most common form of abuse and included punishments for bed wetting and poor treatment compared with the host's own children (246). Readers of *Good Night, Mr. Tom* get a horrific look into how children could be neglected, but it is always associated with Will's mother. Neither Will nor his friend Zach experiences any abusive treatment, but it is suggested that the children who are billeted at the farm may have been abused in some way (145). Will tends, however, to repress his past in the city and he has difficulties remembering what his mother is like (181). His time in the countryside is, on the other hand, depicted as positive and memorable.

Will's development leads to a positive change in his personality and he laughs and runs for presumably the first time in his life. Sturgeon-Clegg reports in her study that a great many evacuees experienced changes in their personality while they lived in their new families. The reason was mainly that they were dependent on their host for food, shelter and acceptance. In order to better integrate into their host families, evacuees would hide parts of their personality and develop other tastes and even religious behavior. These changes would later turn into problems when they were to resume their lives in their old environments (123). This is depicted in the novel as Will's exceptional change creates tensions when he returns to his mother in London. She can see that he has grown into a healthy boy who even smiles, but she does not approve. She seems to be threatened by his new security and accuses him of stealing the gifts he has brought from Tom and other villagers (195). His change from being serious and quiet to being happy and social is too much for her to handle. He has never had any friends in London while the stay in Little Weirwold has given him several good friends and links to adults who care about him. The acceptance from the country people makes it easy for Will to fit into their society. Although he changes while he builds up his relationship with them, they accept this and see that it is a good change. As a reader it is also obvious that the mother's wish for Will to be frightened into goodness (188) is the opposite of what Will needs. The evacuation helps Will to change his personality in a positive way and even though it makes his mother angry, it also makes him realize what she is really like.

The inhumane conditions many children lived under in the poor parts of the cities were discovered during the evacuation. Jackson tells his readers about hosts who reported that

some children were only used to eat on the floor and many had lice and vermin (22). This awareness is also depicted in the novel as Tom reacts against how small Will is and how he behaves when he, for example, sleeps under his bed because that is where he is used to sleep (30). Instead of just stating this as a fact, Tom makes deliberate efforts to improve Will's health and living conditions. The gap between the novel and reality continues to be present in different events concerning Will and Tom. One example is that even though the evacuation gave insights into how other classes lived, very few, if any, hosts risked their lives for their new family members. When Tom takes the dangerous trip to London in the middle of the Blitz he has only Will's well-being in mind (205). He is deeply worried about him, although he knows that most of the evacuees in the village have returned to their parents and lost contact with their former hosts. He also knows that the delivery of letters does not work as usual either, especially if your home address no longer exists because of the bombings. His intuition and strong feelings for Will ultimately leads him to the decision to kidnap Will from the hospital where he is treated after he has been found locked up in a closet (229). Scenes like these make Karen Harris conclude that the novel "is part irresistible traditional English juvenile adventure and part unrestrained and unabashed melodrama" (73). The successful rescue is more like a fairytale where Will is rescued from his evil and poor mother to live with someone who treats him well and gives him what he needs. This is one of the reasons why Carolyn Polese recommends the novel as a good resource for abused children. It gives them hope to read about Will's healing process and how well things turn out for him (156). The popularity of the novel is certainly due to the optimistic story and the growing relationship between Will and Mr. Tom. It can also be argued that reading a novel is to escape reality for a while.

Education

The way the question of education was handled in the reception villages varied. Sometimes the evacuees joined the regular children in their classes, while larger groups of children who came from the same school took over buildings and continued to be taught by their teachers from home. In Little Weirwold, where Tom and Will live, it is decided that a retired teacher will help out at the school since there are seventy extra pupils starting school that term (76). No accompanying teachers from London are mentioned in the novel, neither as a part of the school nor in the village life. The evacuees are mingled with the villagers and it is decided that the younger ones go to school in the mornings and the older ones in the afternoon in order

to make room in the school. Will works hard to be able to join his newly made friends in their classes, but since he cannot read or write, he needs extra help. This is arranged through Tom's efforts when he, along with Will's teacher, patiently helps him to learn all basic skills. Once he is moved to his friends' class, he impresses them when they realize how much he has learnt in such a short period of time (172). In reality it could be hard for the evacuees to continue their studies in a proper way. Crosby reports that being away from their familiar schools and surroundings affected them in a negative way. The intention to keep evacuated schools intact was difficult to achieve since schools were broken up for different reasons and there was a shortage of classrooms. The motto for the billeting authorities was 'beds before desks' which meant that the aim of the evacuation was mainly to save lives (67-69). Crosby concludes that the best thing for the pupils was to be part of their usual group with the same familiar teachers, schoolmates, books, and teaching methods (72). When it comes to Will, the situation is pretty much the opposite. What was generally considered negative for evacuees is positive and helpful to Will.

After only a couple of months in Little Weirwold, Will sees that half of the other evacuees have returned home. The reason is that the government has asked all parents of evacuated children for money. Some of them do not want to both pay and be separated from their children so they have decided to bring them back (116-117). In the beginning of the novel some women mention that there were evacuees running home from the village as well (18). By Christmas only eight of the original seventy evacuated school children are left in Tom's village. Parsons and Starns write that schools had started to reopen in London in November 1939 as about 35% of the evacuees had returned home (199). According to these figures, the 'drift back' in the novel seems larger than the one in reality, although very few problems about the evacuation process are mentioned. A problem mentioned in historical sources was that most of the teachers had not returned and had difficulties doing so (Brown 37). The closing of schools in the evacuation areas was a mistake according to Despert, and broke down the morale among the young. She emphasizes that schools became more important than ever during war (219). The authorities had assumed that all children would be evacuated and then happily staying in their billets. This was a gross miscalculation since very few of them got a new start in the countryside like fictional Will does. His change from being gloomy and illiterate to being healthy and hungry for knowledge is as unrealistic as the authorities' expectations about the evacuation during the war. It actually would have been more likely for Will to run away from London to the village instead of the other way around.

When the evacuees came to their new schools and surroundings, it sometimes took a long time to create new relationships. Everything was new to them and Brown gives examples of how evacuees were teased and bullied by the village children, especially during their first months. Some were laughed at for their accents and it created communication problems if they talked very differently from the local population (104-105). The novel depicts how Tom has problems in being understood in London when he tries to locate Will (204), whereas Will never experiences any communication problems although he is considered to be too quiet in the beginning. He is not treated in a condescending way either by the village children in his school. It does not take long before he is a part of a group of local children who invite him to join them in their day-to-day life. They encourage him to paint and draw – activities he has never been given the opportunity to do before since his teacher in London did not let him draw as long as he could not read and write. It turns out that Will is an excellent artist who is admired by everyone. When he returns to his mother, she refuses to believe that he has made all the drawings he has brought to show her (194). All his pride is washed away by her harsh words, emphasizing the great difference between her treatment and the treatment he gets in his new environment.

Cultural Clashes

Cultural clashes between social classes and between urban and rural populations emerged long before the evacuees arrived in the reception areas. Both Brown and Crosby stress the fact that most of the organisers' privileged backgrounds gave them very little understanding for many of those who were to be evacuated. They were very little acquainted with the lives and attitudes of the working-class women and children (Brown 40, Crosby 6). Brown continues to report that the authorities tried hard to convince the working-class families to join the evacuation programme. They, for example, offered reduced rates on public transport in order for the parents to be able to visit their children (41). This rendered the possibility for many happy reunions and helped children to endure the difficult time away from their families. Brown and Crosby also assume that it was very likely that the organisers had been sent away to boarding schools at an early age, and that they had done the same with their own children. For them it was natural to send away children from their parents whilst the family ties in the working-classes were very strongly knit (Brown 40, Crosby 6). In Magorian's novel, this non-psychological mass evacuation of children is never depicted since focus is on Will and what he goes through. The picture of how painful it was for many children and their parents to be

part of a program which did not understand or consider their needs is therefore never shown. The reader follows Will's path and sees how many good things the evacuation gives him. It can even be regarded as positive that little understanding was taken to the individual's needs, since a destroyed boy like Will is put in the home of the village recluse. It turns out to be the best thing that could have happened, though. Tom also suggests a couple of months after Will's arrival, that it is good for Will to spend some time away from his mother. He says this to a woman in the village who quietly concludes that it has been a very good thing for Tom as well (135). Despite everything, the old man and the destroyed boy are perfectly matched.

In the 1940s, life in the big cities and in the countryside looked very different. Both villagers and people from the big cities had biases against each other according to Jackson. However, if the village was situated far from London there was a greater chance for tolerance of the evacuees. Jackson also points out that the increased number of people in the villages contributed to shortages of products like toilet paper and envelopes (9). This fact would be unlikely to help the acceptance of the newcomers. Crosby talks about how tension between evacuees and hosts started to grow during the Phoney War, when the bombing of civilians never occurred. It could start with small arguments which developed into hostility (29). Indeed, the only things that Tom has heard about the evacuees before he meets Will are negative. He is quite surprised to find Will so vulnerable. Even though some of the villagers start out by having prejudices against evacuees, it does not increase or last very long. No hostility whatsoever is shown after Will's first couple of days in the village. With the historical sources in one hand and the novel in the other, it looks as though Little Weirwold and its inhabitants are romanticized. Most of them are very nice and have the same natural intuition of what is best for Will as Tom does.

Another issue which does not seem to occur in *Little Weirwold*, but which was quite common in reality was anti-Semitism. Crosby argues that the widespread anti-Semitism among all classes of people continued to haunt the Jews in their new countryside homes. He also argues that the evacuees were the victims, who in unfamiliar surroundings had to face xenophobia, religious hatred and personality clashes (3-5). This is not at all depicted as a part of the village life in the novel. Will's friend, Zach, is Jewish but he is treated with respect and experiences no religious biases. It is only Will's mother who gets extremely upset when she finds out that her son has "been poisoned by the devil" (196). As a contemporary reader it may look as though only deeply religious or sick people could have these biases since this is the case with Will's mother. The depicted idyllic village does not seem to have any inhabitants who express such hatred though. In the book review by J.J. Watson, there is an

agreement that the countryside in the novel is described as “utopian and idealistic” (202). It is as though the village is mainly inhabited by people who are unusually open minded and good hearted. This leaves out some of the issues which actually took place during the evacuation and makes the story somewhat unrealistic.

Many of the complaints about the evacuees had to do with their hygiene. Crosby reports that the hosts complained about bed-wetters, mischievous children and how unclean and verminous many of them were. Sometimes the hosts were convinced that the lousiness and dirt were due to the character or habits of the lower class (7, 33-34). The evacuation started at the end of the school holidays which meant that teachers and pupils had to return earlier and there was no time for the planned medical inspection (Brown 15-16). Instead innocent children had to take the blame for a whole society. In reality they were just victims of poverty. When Will first comes to Tom, he is dirty and in a poor condition. He gets a bath and new clothes without being looked down upon. The reason is that Tom is able to see the whole picture where Will is not to be blamed for his poor hygiene. Tom’s empathy and insight create very few incidents where the different cultures clash in a negative way.

Conclusion

The experiences of the evacuation were as many as the evacuees themselves since people came from different societies with different habits and backgrounds. Their personalities partly shaped the way they experienced their time with their hosts in new environments. Some of them later repressed or simply forgot what their lives looked like in the countryside. They were perhaps very young when they arrived and some even forgot their real parents. Still it is important to understand that most real-life stories contain a great deal of sorrow and loss. The evacuated children were seldom given profoundly better lives or the sense of being wanted and loved. What were seen as typical problems for evacuees or hosts in historical sources, are only briefly mentioned in the novel *Good Night, Mr. Tom* and do not exist in Will and Tom’s relationship.

It can be concluded that there is plenty of evidence to support the thesis that the novel gives a romantic picture of the evacuation of children during World War II. When read in the light of historical research it becomes clear that the book’s depiction of Will’s experiences is far more positive than that of many evacuees. He is, for example, never punished or looked down upon for his bed-wetting or habits from his city life. His host and the other villagers want the best for him and treat him with respect instead of deprecation. There were of course

cases where evacuees were placed in caring homes, but the emotional and physical improvement that Will undergoes seems to present an unrealistic, almost unlikely, image of the consequences of the evacuation process. In addition, Tom's heroic efforts and the way he risks his life for Will, concludes the romantic picture of a perfect host during the evacuation.

Good Night, Mr. Tom gives the reader an emotionally moving story which has won several awards. It has been read by children world-wide and it has also been adapted as a film, a musical, and a play. What should be taken into consideration, however, is that it cannot serve as sole source for education on the evacuation since it gives a romantic picture of it. Even though it includes accurate historical facts, the entirely positive experience of being an evacuee needs to be discussed. The fact that children had to spend an unknown period of time away from their families and sometimes ending up in the hands of abusive hosts are examples which can be used to give a broader picture of the evacuation. The purpose of this essay has not been to criticize the novel, but it needs to be emphasized that not all evacuees had a happy time in the countryside during the war.

The novel is not only bright and sunny as it brings up some difficult subjects. These parts do not concern the evacuation process, however, but rather Will's troublesome family background. These parts are not romanticized and therefore create a sharp contrast to the rest of the story, but this still does not alter the somewhat idealized picture we receive of Will's evacuation experience. Instead it puts extra fuel to the way the reader can perceive the evacuation as something which saved lives, not only physically, but mainly emotionally. In Will's case, it is described in his gradual change from a scared and insecure boy who becomes strong and confident. Historical facts presented in this essay show, however, that many evacuees experienced neglect and emotional abuse instead. For them the evacuation saved their lives, but at the cost of their happiness and emotional security.

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