

Walter Crane's toy books

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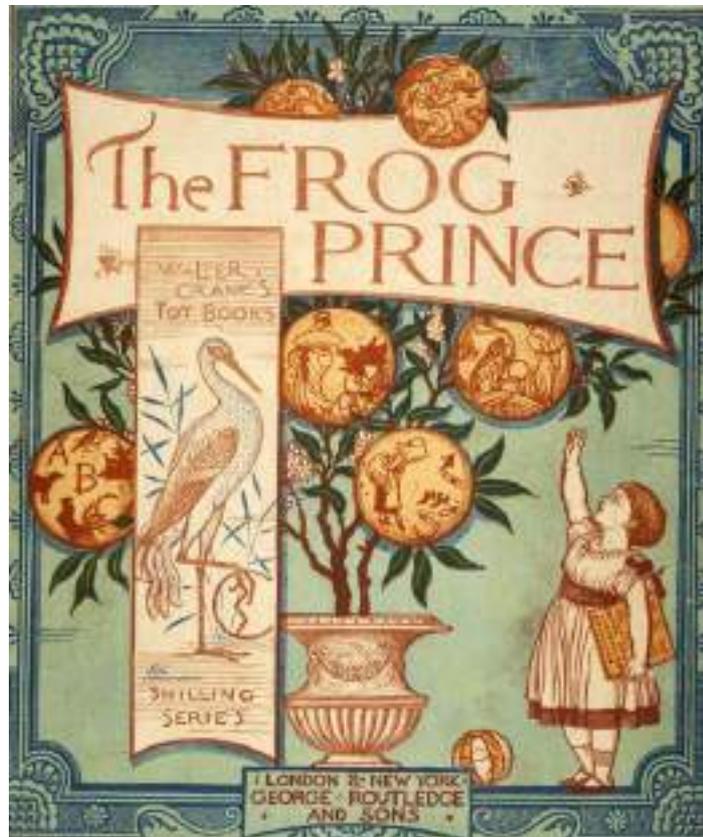
Walter Crane [shown left] has been described as “an artistic polymath, capable of turning his hand to almost any task within the fields of the fine and decorative arts as practised in late Victorian and Edwardian England” and as “one of the most ambitious British artists of the later nineteenth century”. Crane was born in Liverpool in 1845, and was the third child of Thomas Crane, a portrait painter, lithographer and active member of the Liverpool Academy. The family moved

to Torquay when he was three months old, and then again to London in 1857.

Walter hated school and became so acutely nervous he had to stay away. However, his artistic talent became evident very early, and he helped and learnt in his father's studio. He painted his first study in oils, the head of a greyhound, as early as 1857.

Crane was apprenticed to W.J. Linton, a noted master engraver, writer, and political campaigner. The writer Isobel Spencer comments that “Crane found himself at thirteen years of age entering one of the best engraving workshops in England.” Linton recognized Crane's talent, and gave him work specifically to develop this. At

the same time Crane was continuing to paint on his own; his *Lady of Shalott* was hung at the Royal Academy in 1862. The same year he left Linton to work as an independent illustrator.



Front cover of The Frog Prince toy book

In 1863, the engraver and printer Edmund Evans commissioned Crane to produce a set of designs for a potential book series. The writer Rodney K. Engen points out that this was the period of greater mechanization in publishing, and that this was often used as an excuse to neglect design. Crane wrote: “The books for babies, current at that time –about 1865 to 1870 – of the cheaper sort called toy books were not very inspiring. These were generally careless and unimaginative woodcuts, very casually coloured by hand, dabs of pink and emerald green being laid on across faces with a somewhat reckless aim.” Evans believed paper picture books could be greatly improved and still sold for sixpence, ‘if printed in sufficient quantity’. The writer John Hutton comments that working with Evans, Crane “gradually transformed the toy book into a sophisticated art form using a variety of technical, intellectual and aesthetic means. Advances in the use of wood engravings for colour

printing made it possible for Evans to accurately print Crane's designs in a wide range of sophisticated colours." Crane's designs were printed by Evans for the publisher Frederick Warne in a Sixpenny Toybook series, bound in pale yellow rather than white. In 1867 Crane began designing toy books for George Routledge. Over the next ten years, he illustrated thirty-seven of these toy books, which would become the most popular children's books of the day. The University of Reading rare book collections contain four examples: *Beauty and the Beast* [see illustration below], *Princess Belle-Etoile*, *The Yellow Dwarf* and *The Frog Prince* [see front cover shown above].



Double-page illustration from Beauty and the Beast toy book

Crane's work was influenced by Japanese prints, with decorative compositions in flat or very deep perspective. He was later to write: 'Their treatment, in definite black outline and flat brilliant as well as delicate colours, vivid dramatic and decorative feeling struck me at once, and I endeavoured to apply these methods to the modern fanciful and humorous subjects of children's toy-books and to the methods of wood-engraving and machine printing.'

The illustrations were full of the fashions and domestic bric-à-brac of the Aesthetic Movement such as fans, peacock's feathers, and blue and white china. They also

included a wide range of historical details and patterns. Crane had a taste for fantasy, and his work features pigs going to market and dishes eloping with spoons.

Spencer observes that Crane produced some of his finest designs for the beast fairy-tales: “*Beauty and the Beast* and *The Frog Prince* are rich in decorative detail and convey also, in contrast to their obvious glamour, a real sense of horrific fantasy. Beauty’s discomfiture, so well expressed by her despairing countenance and lash-frilled eyes [see illustration above], and the control of design in the perspective interior of the page where Froggy visits his beloved [see illustration below], are just two examples of this masterly handling.”



Illustration from The Frog Prince toy book

Crane drew a distinction between “pictorial” artists, aiming to produce beautiful individual pictures, and “decorative” artists. Decorative artists worked with the entire book, the entire printed page and with text and illustrations together. Crane felt traditional illustration types, including title pages, headers, tailpieces and full-

page illustrations, should be coordinated with the written story to involve the reader more closely with the work. This entailed the cooperation of author and illustrator. Spencer comments that, “As a financial proposition these picture books seem to have been something of a liability to the publishers who always maintained they had to print large editions, at least ten thousand, in order merely to cover cost and show minimum profit.”



Illustration from The Yellow Dwarf toy book

The illustrator received one payment, usually fairly small. Crane continued to collaborate with Edmund Evans, who consulted Crane about the choice of subjects, advised on page layouts and then negotiated with the publishers.

Crane ceased illustrating for the Routledge Toybook series with *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* in 1876. He had started illustrating the stories of Mrs Molesworth in 1874, and he worked with Evans to produce *The Baby's Opera* and *The Baby's Bouquet*, incorporating music and illustrations.

By this time, Crane and his wife Mary Frances were living in Shepherd's Bush and moving in the fashionable and artistic circles of Holland Park. The artist Lord Leighton was a friend and patron, and Crane's acquaintances also included William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. He continued to produce allegorical paintings, and it was his ambition to show at the Royal Academy, but he did this only twice and his works never became popular. Crawford writes: "The public acclaimed him as 'the academician of the nursery', but he wanted to be known as a distinguished allegorical painter. Much of his life was spent in pursuing this difficult ambition and, at the same time, in creating tolerable substitutes for it."



Illustration from the Princess Belle-Etoile toy book

However, Crane made his living as a decorative artist, designing wallpapers, tiles, printed textiles, stained glass, embroideries, and decorative plasterwork. By this time, he wanted to escape from the nursery, and worked on illustrating books for adults. Under the influence of William Morris, Crane became a socialist, joining the

Socialist League in 1884 and the Hammersmith Socialist Society in 1890. He was the artist of the socialist movement, drawing many cartoons and posters for it. Crane was a founder and president of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society and, after the death of William Morris, was probably the best-known British decorative artist.



Illustration from the Beauty and the Beast toy book

Crane was appointed director of design at Manchester School of Art in 1893, but resigned after three years. In 1897 he was asked by Halford John Mackinder to become Director of the Art Department of a new university college at Reading. He accepted on condition that his duties would be light. These included some promotion of arts and crafts, and attendance at many functions, including the Prince of Wales's visit to open the new college. Prince Albert Edward was given an address illuminated by Crane, and a silver enamel casket designed by Nelson Dawson. In July 1898 Crane became Principal of the Royal College of Art.

Crane died at Horsham on 14 March 1915. His obituary in *The Times* comments:

‘ ... he was one of the chief of those artists who redeemed English design from hopeless and incompetent ugliness. ... If we were less familiar with his work we should see its originality more clearly. But we have known it since our childhood, when we enjoyed his children’s books so much that, rather ungratefully, we have never enjoyed any of his works so keenly since.’



Illustration from The Frog Prince toy book

The University of Reading Special Collections holds a large number of other books written or illustrated by Walter Crane. These include children’s books such as *The Baby’s Opera* and children’s books by Mrs Molesworth, and some of his writings on art and design, including *The Bases of Design* (1898), *Ideals in Art* (1905) and *Reading College : plans and views* by W.M. Childs (1898), which features a cover design by Crane. There are also a number of letters from Walter Crane in the archive of George Bell & Sons Ltd (MS 1640) which is held in the archive collections at Reading.

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Double-page illustration from The Frog Prince toy book