

**‘You understand what domestic architecture  
ought to be, you do’:  
Finding Home in *The Wind in the Willows***

Gerry Smyth

**ABSTRACT**

*This essay offers an analysis of the classic children’s novel The Wind in the Willows (1908) by English writer Kenneth Grahame in two aspects of its engagement with domestic space. The first concerns the representation of house and home within the text itself, and discusses how this representation is linked both to Grahame’s biography and to the wider politico-cultural condition in which he was living and writing. The second concerns the ability of fiction to assume a quasi-architectural presence in the perception of the reading subject, and examines the manner in which The Wind in the Willows became a sort of reading ‘home’ (with all the ambivalent values and associations that such a concept implies) for the author of the essay. The contribution concludes by suggesting a link between the image of home as represented in the text and that assumed by the text itself in the perception of the reading subject.*

**Introduction**

The vast amount of critical literature produced on the subjects of house and home is evidence of the fact that they are concepts possessed of the ability to function on a number of different cognitive levels. In this essay I want to consider a number of such levels as they relate to an analysis of Kenneth Grahame’s celebrated children’s novel *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). These levels of engagement are categorically distinct but, as I shall go on to argue, are also and at the same time indissolubly interdependent. In many ways, in fact, the principal interest of such an analysis lies in catching the resonances that lie (as here) between literary critical, socio-historical, biographical, autobiographical and philosophical discourses.

The first level of engagement is concerned with the text itself and the ways in which the various characters experience and negotiate

concepts of home, especially as these concepts are manifested in the built environment known as ‘the house’. Indeed, at the level of plot alone, *The Wind in the Willows* is clearly all about houses – the Rat’s “cosy quarters [...] Toad’s beautiful hall [...] Badger’s great house”<sup>1</sup> and Mole’s humble underground dwelling – owning them, leaving them, caring for them, and ultimately fighting for them. At a deeper level, however, we may discern an anxious engagement with the concept of ‘home’ as a place of nurture and safety on the one hand, but one of restriction and limitation, on the other. This contradictory response to the idea of house and home may be linked on one level to Grahame’s own biography which, in common with many of the writers from what one critic called “The Golden Age of Children’s Literature” (Carpenter 1985), was not the straightforward ideal prescribed in contemporary ideology. More tellingly, however, I believe it’s a reflection of the fragile politico-cultural formation in which, as a subject of the world’s most successful modern empire, he lived and worked.

Meaning is never created in a cultural void, of course. My own experience as a reader of *The Wind in the Willows* has been coloured by particular circumstances, both in the moment of initial encounter and subsequently. As a second level of analysis, therefore, I want to track my own changing response to Grahame’s novel, describing first of all what occurred when this middle-class English classic (encoding, as remarked above, very particular models of house and home) was consumed sixty years later in a working-class Irish “reading formation” (Bennett 1983) possessed of very different experiences of domestic architecture and a very different understanding of what it meant to belong and what it felt like to be excluded.

In the second part of the essay I want to consider the ways in which fictional narratives assume both geographical and architectural dimensions in the consciousness of the reading subject. Specifically, I shall suggest that *The Wind in the Willows* began to function as a sort of narrative home for me, a notional place that in time accumulated its own contradictory resonances in my spatial apprehension of the world. As an exile from class, country and childhood, ‘home’ has become a deeply ambivalent concept for me to engage – familiar and ever-present in some respects, uncanny and always already lost in others. In the final analysis, the essay may achieve nothing more than a proof of the suspicion that a personal response to my fictional ‘home’ as embodied in Grahame’s text, therefore, is symbiotically enmeshed with a

professional apprehension of house and home as abstract theoretical concepts.

### **Finding Home**

Kenneth Grahame's best-known work has been a phenomenon of world publishing since its first appearance in 1908. With countless imprints and republications, the tale of the four friends and their various adventures has (in the marketing parlance) captured the imagination of generations of people: not only in England, in which country the book is set – *The Wind in the Willows* is one of a select number of stories to enjoy transnational appeal; and not only for children – the text possesses the rare ability to continue to resonate for mature readers who might be expected to have outgrown its childish charms.

In the second part of this essay I consider how a text changes in relation to the altered circumstances (including most crucially the age and the background) of the reading subject. Before that, however, I want to revisit the story in relation to certain aspects of the author's own experience, and the experience of the society in which he lived and worked. *The Wind in the Willows* appeared in that period between the end of the Boer War and the beginning of the First World War – a period which in retrospect has been seen as somewhat of a golden age of English life, the last late stirring of an older world before the destruction wrought by the first great modern military conflict. In reality, Edwardian England was (as ever) anxious, uncertain, frantically attempting to modernise in economic and military terms while at the same time desperate to hold on to what centuries of ideological accretion had determined to be the core constituents of English identity.

On one level, *The Wind in the Willows* may be read as an allegory of the conflict between tradition and modernity at a key stage in modern British history.<sup>2</sup> The class basis of the conflict with which the text closes has, for example, been noted more or less since its first publication: various conservative elements (landed gentry, old aristocracy and bourgeoisie) combine to quell the discontented lower orders as represented by the weasels, stoats and ferrets. Behind such class conflict, however, lie deeper anxieties concerning Britain's imperial status and the status of those subjects (specifically, English men) charged with the task of winning and holding the empire. Deeper still, underpinning and informing all these issues, lies a concern with space and place – specifically, with calibrating the meaning of the contemporary world

as a function of that most fundamental of human concerns: domestic dwelling.

In a letter to a friend, the young Kenneth Grahame described a recurrent dream in which he experienced

a gradual awakening to consciousness on a certain little room, very dear and familiar [...] always the same feeling of a home-coming, of the world shut out, of the ideal encasement. On the shelves were a few books – a very few – but just the editions I had sighed for, the editions which refuse to turn up, or which poverty glowers at on alien shelves. On the walls were a print or two, a woodcut, an etching – not many [...] All was modest – Oh, so very modest! But all was my very own, and, what was more, everything in the room was exactly right (quoted in Carpenter 1985: 117).

For the critic Humphrey Carpenter, this intriguing report encapsulates one pole of Grahame's personality: 'the Home-lover'. Carpenter is referring here to a familiar cultural trope in which the notion of 'home' (often associated with a sentimentalised representation of the childhood house) functions as an implicit balance to a discourse of travel (frequently troped as 'wanderlust' or 'adventure') which, always present to some extent, begins to make itself felt with the coming to maturity of the subject. In some intellectual traditions, the dialectic thus formed (home-lover / adventurer) is understood to be fundamental to the modern human condition. In this respect, it's interesting to note the extent to which Grahame's dream accords with the description of a similar apprehension encountered early in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*:

If we give their function of shelter for dreams to all of these places of retreat, we may say [...] that there exists for each one of us an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past. I called this oneiric house the crypt of the house that we were born in. Here we find ourselves at a pivotal point around which reciprocal interpretation of dreams through thought and thought through dreams, keep turning [...] In order to sense, across the years, our attachment for the house we were born in, dream is more powerful than thought [...] And so, beyond all the positive values of protection, the house we were born in becomes imbued with dream values which remain after the house has gone (1994: 15-17).

The parallels are striking and suggestive; but more interesting, perhaps, are the discrepancies between theory and experience. Grahame's dream-room represents not the surfacing of 'values' associated with

the house of childhood, but rather the eruption of unfulfilled desires – the books he never owned, the peace he never knew, the home he never had. This reading is clearly supported by a knowledge of Grahame's early life which (as described in Peter Green's definitive biography), although far from the ideal of a settled childhood in the bosom of a nuclear family, was not the disaster which his circumstances might have warranted. His alcoholic father decamped for France soon after the death of Grahame's mother, leaving four children in the care of their maternal grandmother. Thereafter the future author of *The Wind in the Willows* experienced many geographical and architectural resettlements before coming to maturity and taking responsibility for his own domestic arrangements. There can be no doubt that Grahame did possess a 'home-loving' dimension to his personality, for it clearly emerged in his work; this dimension, however, was animated (in Bachelard's terms) as much by 'thought' as by 'dream' – by a conscious desire to realise a cultural ideal rather than an unconscious retrieval of a lost childhood space.

If Grahame was on one level merely compensating for the childhood he never experienced, however, he did so in a way that revealed the contradictions underlying the ideal to which he aspired. Looking again at the description of his dream room, it's interesting to note that it is *already* riven to some degree by competing desires and fears. The womb-like properties of the room are clearly in evidence – the feeling of absolute safety, of a secure anchorage against the cares of the world – and this constitutes the invocation of 'nature' as a discourse within both the dream and the description. The world is excluded, "shut out", precisely *because* it is a place where "everything" can never be "exactly right". That (as so much Victorian literature attests) is a condition reserved only for childhood and dreams. At the same time, the space described is in some senses already a cultural one – a built environment (encompassing shelves and walls, and presumably a roof and door) in which are housed a range of materially preferred objects. Culture is also present in the allusions to the social context of poverty, and to the taste that prescribes the superiority of certain "editions". What, after all, do these prints and woodcuts and books represent – what do they *stand for* and what do they *depict*? The answer is: the world – the real world *outside* the room upon whose exclusion depends the natural feelings of homecoming and of things being "exactly right".

Culture and nature inhere within the same narrative, in other words, a narrative in which neither home nor travel has priority over the other – in which, in fact, these concepts depend upon each other for their coherence *as* concepts. This, in turn, makes the spatial narratives within which such concepts are invoked profoundly ambivalent – something which may be observed in the representation of house and home in *The Wind in the Willows*. Each of the four main characters in the text is identified with a particular kind of dwelling, and has a particular kind of relationship with that dwelling.<sup>3</sup> The text begins with the Mole hard at work in his modest little underground house, beaver-ing (!) away on home maintenance in a manner that has become almost hysterically fashionable a century or so later. But in an act familiar to generations of DIY victims, he suddenly takes a different perspective and abandons his work to go, literally, in search of pastures new.

Thus the beginning may be regarded as the key moment in the text, the event which *enables* everything that comes after. This is the point at which the responsibilities of home-ownership and building maintenance – essentially adult responsibilities – are neglected in favour of more trivial pursuits. Mole's desertion of his home represents a turning away from adulthood, and this in turn may be read as an embodiment of one entire strand of so-called 'children's literature' – which on closer inspection turns out to be not *for* or *about* children at all, but for adults who, under pressure from their responsibilities, hypostasise a particular model of childhood wherein such responsibilities may be, at least temporarily, abrogated.<sup>4</sup> And thus it is with Mole who, soon after leaving home, encounters Rat with whom he becomes involved in a life defined principally by the irresponsible activity of "messaging about in boats" (4). The life lived by the two friends represents the lost Eden, the "secret garden" of childhood, worshipped by so many of the late Victorian and Edwardian children's authors.

Rat's bijou riverside residence appears to provide the perfect base for "messaging about in boats". We soon learn, however, that this is to some extent *already* a fallen world, a world under pressure from the forces of change, and this reminds us of Raymond Williams' comment that the defining characteristic of the organic community is that it is always already lost (1979: 252). In response to Mole's naïve question regarding the solitude of his life by the river, the Rat replies:

You're new to it, and of course you don't know. The bank is so crowded nowadays that many people are moving away altogether. O no, it isn't what it used to be, at all. Otters, kingfishers, dabchicks, moorhens, all of them about all day and always wanting you to *do* something – as if a fellow had no business of his own to attend to! (5).

In such passages we begin to catch a glimpse of the forces of change that are threatening both the riverbank and the nation that it symbolises. For if on one level Grahame was clearly dramatising a range of personal anxieties and desires, on another we observe that he came to maturity during one of the most active and successful periods in British imperial history, at a time, that is, when issues of home and belonging, safety and danger, travel and dwelling, were being redefined in relation to a very specific politico-economic mission. In Britain itself, industrialisation had precipitated new patterns in homebuilding, dwelling and ownership, all of which impacted significantly upon the bourgeois imagination. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the modern world which the late Victorian commentators (Arnold, Ruskin, Kingsley and Forster, to name but a few) could hear creeping out of the great industrial centres was its encouragement to working-class people to cluster together in new kinds of buildings and in new kinds of communities. In this way the proletarian house became one of the great repositories of bourgeois angst regarding both the moral and the physical health of the nation.

The nervousness engendered by the re-organisation of Britain's social fabric contrasted with the ostensible confidence resulting from the nation's status as motherland to the world's most successful modern empire. Yet this latter consciousness also brought its anxieties and doubts. For if on the one hand the empire offered male characters an arena wherein they could realise their identities *qua* British (or more often than not simply 'English') men in relation to a variety of exotic others, on the other it seemed that the turn to empire represented an abrogation of the responsibilities of home and a concomitant embrace of perpetual childhood. Thus, whereas Hardy's Jude Fawley (1896) *stayed* and lost himself amongst the contradictions besetting late-Victorian England, Stevenson's Jim Hawkins (1883) *departed* and found himself amongst the swamps and woods of the treasure island. Jude is obliged to become a man before he has finished being a child. Even as Jim *becomes* a man, however, he *remains* a child, both in terms of the text wherein he is represented (he will always be the

teenage cabin boy in *Treasure Island*) and in terms of his representation as a model of English masculinity.<sup>5</sup>

Mole's initial rejection of home is compounded by his enthusiasm for the open road (Chapter Two) and his reckless adventure in the Wild Wood (Chapter Three). Wild oats thus well and truly sown, he thereafter displays a marked domestic inclination as well as a keen sense of responsibility, something reflected in his close association with Badger. Both Toad and Rat, on the other hand, are overcome at various points throughout the story by strong impulses to leave, to realise themselves in relation to exotic landscapes and unfamiliar peoples. Whereas Toad's rejection of home serves to confirm his immaturity in relation to the other characters (a lack of responsibility towards his name and his property) the temptation of Rat figures much more ambivalently. Throughout the chapter entitled 'Wayfarers All', Rat perceives the narrowness of his life on the riverbank with an increasing sense of dissatisfaction. Through the narratives of the Sea Rat and the migratory swallows, Grahame depicts the departure from home as an exotic adventure, full of colour and excitement. The appeal, it appears, lies in a denial of routine, a rejection of the humdrum repetitions that constitute life at home, and a *realisation* of the self through encounter, danger, achievement – all those staples, in fact, of the high imperial adventure story. That the Mole is obliged to physically prevent his friend from leaving at the end of 'Wayfarers All' is a clear indication of the seriousness of the situation; but Grahame reveals that the more significant assault in this instance has been upon Rat's 'true' identity, for as they grapple Mole finds himself staring not into "his friend's eyes, but the eyes of some other animal!" (105).

Moving up the social scale, we find the dwellings of Badger and Toad are likewise implicated in both Grahame's personal psychodrama and in England's domestic response to its imperial status. Although different in many obvious ways, Badger and Toad nonetheless share a relatively privileged social standing in the community, such a position being dialectically linked to the dwellings they inhabit. The description of Badger's underground home as a "safe anchorage" (36) carries echoes of Grahame's dream room; in this regard we should note that subterranean dwellings represent an especially intimate way of inhabiting the landscape – a way of being present even when appearing to be absent. Adapted as it is from an ancient human settlement, Badger's home represents the stability and durability of English

rural life; as such, it functions as a conservative rejoinder to the onset of rapid, remorseless change precipitated by the great social, cultural and political revolutions of the nineteenth century. Above all, home for Badger represents “security [...] peace and tranquillity” (42); and when Mole heartily acquiesces, Badger grants a telling compliment: “You understand what domestic architecture ought to be, you do”.

In some key respects, Badger is clearly a representation of the responsible father figure which his creator never knew, and this is reflected in his ambivalent status within the text; for if we are invited to acknowledge his sense of duty and the high respect in which he is held by all parties, at the same time his humourless, bullying presence appears faintly ridiculous when set against the Toad’s subversive laughter. Badger plays the bluff, rough squire to Toad’s feckless son-of-the-big-house; and it is here, beneath Grahame’s comic depiction of the latter, that we may observe the anxiety with which issues of property and class were regarded in the wake of the industrial revolution, and the nervousness attendant upon Britain’s precarious role as first among imperial equals in the years leading up to the First World War.

Toad is without doubt the most memorable of the four main characters, and this is principally because he possesses material resources the others do not, and is willing to jeopardise those resources in spectacularly comic ways. Put simply, his personal wealth allows the Toad to work in large colourful gestures, and to make large colourful blunders, and this makes good reading in a way that the gestures and blunders of those with less to lose do not. At the same time, as a member of the landed gentry Toad represents one important cornerstone of English society, which in turn supports and informs the British imperial project abroad; while he may be mocked for comic purposes, the narrative works to restore the order which Toad, in spite of himself, symbolises.

That order is embodied in the house Toad inherits from his illustrious father. Like Badger’s home, Toad Hall plays an important regulatory role within the local community, representing power, privilege, wealth and influence. In Toad’s case, however, these factors derive not from the personal prestige of the owner (for Toad is clearly a figure of fun amongst all and sundry) but from the ostentatious power embodied in the edifice itself; as Toad himself remarks, his ancestral pile is the “[finest] house on the whole river [or] anywhere else, for that matter” (14). It’s entirely fitting, then, that the social revolution

attempted by the Wild Wooders should take the form of an expropriation of Toad Hall. It's likewise appropriate that the house itself should constitute both the prize for which, and the arena wherein, the battle between order and anarchy takes place.

The heroes are aided in their endeavour by a secret passage enabling them to emerge right in the heart of Toad Hall. This secret knowledge symbolises an organic connection between dwelling and identity – Badger simply *knows* who belongs where. His thorough command of the architecture contrasts with the disdain for decorum demonstrated by the weasels who, we are informed, “[lie] in bed half the day, and breakfast at all hours, and the place in such a mess [...] it's not fit to be seen” (127). Even so, given the size of the threat and the numbers of the enemy, it's surprising just how quickly victory is achieved. The characters' faith in their own abilities is matched by the author's conviction that nature will assert itself and order will prevail, regardless of the odds or the situation. Such faith and such conviction were to disappear forever from the world by the Christmas of 1914. In the meantime, Grahame achieves classic ideological closure, resolving in narrative what could not be resolved in reality, and temporarily relieving anxieties that continue to plague English national consciousness to the present day.

Grahame took aspects of the prevailing political climate, of his own personal experience, and of a deeply embedded species response to the phenomenon of dwelling, and orchestrated them into an enduringly successful narrative. The ‘home-lover’ is encapsulated in ‘The Piper at the Gates of Dawn’, the chapter in which Grahame gives clearest expression to a conviction (one he shared with many Victorian and Edwardian writers) regarding the mystical that inheres within the domestic. The ‘adventurer’ is encapsulated in ‘Wayfarers All’, the chapter in which the author gives vent to a suspicion that Pan may indeed be dead, and that such magic as remains in the world may be encountered only by forsaking the domestic.

Grahame can only ever provide the raw materials from which meaning is produced, however; he cannot guarantee that a single intended meaning will subsist over the potentially endless range of reading contexts within which the text will be invoked. Reading, in fact, is always a discursive event in itself – always, that is to say, the result of negotiation between *a* meaning intended by the author and *a* meaning produced by the reader in response to their specific location in time

and space. Sometimes, the discrepancy between the ideal reader encoded in the text and the actual reader who productively activates the text can produce anomalous, yet deeply compelling, responses. It's just one such response that I wish to describe in the second part of this essay.

### **Leaving Home**

I first encountered *The Wind in the Willows* in or around July 1970 when approaching the age of nine. One of Dublin County Council's mobile libraries was a regular visitor to our small estate throughout that summer, and I would take time off from the usual holiday activities – playing football, or messing about in boats on the River Dodder which ran close by – to climb the van steps and enter its cool, book-lined interior. On the first occasion, the young librarian directed me to the children's section at the back of the truck, while the driver looked on suspiciously. On a later visit I found a large hardback edition of Grahame's novel, although why that volume and not some other should have been chosen on this particular occasion escapes me. Of such unfathomable chances are life-long obsessions made.

Although typical in every other way of the contemporary Irish working-class milieu to which we belonged, our household was unusual in the depth of the family's passion for books. Both grandfathers enjoyed reputations as 'readers'; the paternal one was especially well regarded in the local community, being an educated Protestant who had voluntarily come down in the world so as to marry his Catholic sweetheart (who turned out to be far from 'sweet') at the end of the nineteenth century. A respect for the printed word descended to my generation, although at the time my siblings and I were ignorant of both its provenance and its implications; reading was just something we did and did a lot, something that our peers – otherwise similar in more or less every other respect – did not do so much or did not do at all.

By the time I first encountered *The Wind in the Willows* I had been engaged in self-directed reading for a number of years. Graduating from the ubiquitous *Peter and Jane* school series, the first book I read for pleasure was *Shadow the Sheepdog* by Enid Blyton. From that I moved on to other Blyton texts – the Secret Seven, the Famous Five, as well as selected titles from an elder sister's library of Mallory Towers and St Clare's volumes. All these books were consumed with that

intensity of identification and that obliviousness to ‘the real world’ which are recurring characteristics of reading children. None made the impression, however, that Grahame’s novel did. I re-read it continuously for the remainder of that year, and returned to it at frequent periods throughout the next decade or so. Sometimes I had time only for favourite chapters; occasionally I would indulge myself by settling down in some secluded place to consume the entire text at one four- or five-hour sitting. But why? Why should this “heady evocation of the English pastoral dream” (Wullschläger 2001: 161) resonate so strongly with a late twentieth-century Irish boy?

One answer must be the text’s ability to create a world alternative to the ‘real’ one outside the text. As Francis Spufford writes:

The books you read as a child brought you sights you hadn’t seen yourself, scents you hadn’t smelled, sounds you hadn’t heard. They introduced you to people you hadn’t met, and helped you to sample ways of being that would never have occurred to you. And the result was, if not an “intellectual rational being”, then somebody who was enriched by the knowledge that their own particular life only occupied one little space in a much bigger world of possibilities (2002: 10).

Growing up in Dublin in the 1960s and 1970s, I experienced *The Wind in the Willows* in a cultural and political milieu which was deeply inimical to the one in which the text had been produced, the one which its ideal reader would inhabit. The political revolution of 1916-1922 (in which the state that would become the Republic of Ireland was established) was accompanied (and to a significant degree precipitated) by a cultural revolution that had been underway since the late eighteenth century. This revolution in thought, word and deed was dedicated to the rediscovery (its critics would say ‘invention’) and subsequent celebration of a unique Irish identity defined in large part over and against the Englishness which had been the dominant cultural force throughout the Atlantic archipelago for nigh on a millennium (Smyth 1998). Life in the Republic had been liberalising throughout the 1960s, but by modern European standards the place was still a provincial backwater, dominated by an ultra-conservative Catholic clergy and by a political culture still in thrall to values and practices with roots in the nineteenth century. The commencement of ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland towards the end of the 1960s, and their escalation into something akin to a full-scale revolution during

the early years of the 1970s, appeared to confirm the entire island's benighted status.

As a working-class Irish child I was fully implicated in this milieu, trapped like the rest of my generation by discourses of nationality and class into which, through no choice of my own, I had been born. It was not that it was such a bad environment; it was the fact that its limits had been determined by unaccountable forces, removed in time and space from the child's purview. Its everyday culture, powerful and attractive though it could be, seemed insular and dull when set against the colourful outside world which filtered in from time to time through a variety of unofficial channels. One important connection to the outside world was provided by British television that, through a broadcasting anomaly, was available all along the eastern Irish seaboard. Thus it was that *Top of the Pops* and *Dr Who*, *Coronation Street* and *Play for Today*, became the cultural staples of a generation growing increasingly frustrated with the long shadow of the past that appeared to lie over modern Ireland.

I participated in this cultural rebellion, finding solace from the dissatisfactions of the present first of all in Blyton and *The Beano*, later in British and American pop music. In the early months of 1977 my world, like that of the rest of my generation, was turned upside by The Sex Pistols and The Clash. Besides being propelled forward into a new and exciting future, however, I was also drawn (via the family penchant for reading) backwards into a world very different from the one into which I had been socialised, a world, in fact, more or less diametrically opposed – in terms of its values, its language and its general cultural atmosphere – to post-revolutionary Ireland.

Fiction, I have suggested, can remove the child from one social and cultural environment to another – therein, indeed, lies perhaps its chief appeal; the environment described by Grahame in *The Wind in the Willows* was powerfully attractive for a young mind in search of colour, romance, and a model of identity radically *other* to the one with which he was so familiar. In terms of language, for example, commentators justly celebrate the richness of the Hiberno-English dialect that I grew up speaking. For me, however, it was the language of the kitchen and the schoolyard, and it faded before the linguistic richness of the riverbankers, who spoke in such perfectly formed sentences and who employed those comic locutions so unselfconsciously.

In *The Child that Books Built*, Francis Spufford employs a number of spatial images to describe the development of his early reading practices: the forest, the island, the town and the hole. These spaces function at times as metaphors – as when, for example, he likens the infant’s developing brain to a primeval wood; at other times, the spaces are deployed much more literally – as when he tracks the influence of post-glacial forest upon the development of folk narrative (2002: 23-63). There is one space, however, so absolutely fundamental in its relevance to human evolution that it comes as a real surprise when Spufford does not engage with it at length: the house. For it seems to me that fiction functions at a number of levels to recreate the relationships that humans have with houses; and this certainly helps to account, in a number of important respects, for my changing relationship with *The Wind in the Willows* over the years since first encountering it.

Let me try to describe what I mean by this: Science and philosophy (and latterly, although much more modestly, literary criticism) have suggested that we all inhabit a number of different realities. While some of these realities are susceptible to material analysis (in terms of their physical properties, economics and politics, for example), others are less amenable to empirical description – worlds in which memory, atmosphere and dreams reign. One of the worlds we all inhabit, however, is the world of fiction. By this I do not mean solely the written word (although that is a significant source); I mean the world of memories and impressions and prejudices and beliefs that is constructed by our encounter with all the narratives we encounter in all the representational media to which we are exposed throughout our lives. In some senses, the reading subject is reborn into the house of fiction every time he she engages with narrative. This is a world that is akin to our own, but nevertheless different, a world populated by subjects similar to us, but again recognisably ‘other’ at the same time. This is a world that possesses its own morality, its own logic, its own reality; most significantly for present purposes, it’s a world in which architecture and geography function according to the internal logic of the reading subject’s fictional reality.

What I would like to suggest is that certain texts can come to represent ‘home’ within the world of fiction that we all, to a greater or lesser extent, inhabit; and this ‘home’ – like those in the ‘real’ world – is capable of creating contradictory feelings in the home-dwelling sub-

ject: feelings of security and belonging, certainly, but also feelings of restriction and resentment.<sup>6</sup> What I would further like to suggest is that for a variety of reasons – some of which are describable (in the terms I have attempted above), some of which are ultimately inscrutable – *The Wind in the Willows* came to function at an early stage in my reading career as a sort of home, the still, secure point of my imaginary world of fiction. While this is clearly a metaphor on one level, on another it is equally clear that my feelings in relation to the text were cognitively the same as those towards the actual edifice in which I slept and ate and read – feelings of familiarity, belonging, proprietorship and security. The fact is that I *lived* in *The Wind in the Willows* in the same way that I *lived* in that small south Dublin house; coming home to one (house) provided an opportunity to come home to the other (text).

As Rat discovers in ‘Wayfarers All’, however, the thing about home is that at some point the feelings of familiarity and safety can give way to feelings of restriction and resentment. As part of their bid to achieve full and independent subjectivity, children are obliged to negotiate a traumatic re-orientation of space as they approach puberty – especially the key space of the home which dominates their early imagination. This was especially the case in a deeply patriarchal country such as twentieth-century Ireland, in which the mother’s domestic role was instituted by law, and where the male child’s formative experiences were dominated by a model of feminine domesticity. As a consequence, Irish adult masculinity characteristically involved a simultaneous rejection of, and nostalgia for, the childhood home. This pattern, in fact, forms the basis of a recurring theme within modern Irish cultural discourse: the hero puts away childish things with initial alacrity, only for some narrative crisis to prompt a wistful realisation of the power of feminine domesticity that has been left behind, followed by either an attempt to re-institute the childhood home in a new form with a new ‘mother’, or a stoical admission on the part of the lone hero that home is lost and gone forever.<sup>7</sup>

Approaching adolescence, my own home-within-fiction began to come under pressure. School friends began to talk about *The Odessa File* and *The Day of the Jackal* (both by British thriller writer Frederick Forsyth who was co-incidentally at the time resident in Ireland for tax purposes) and similar ‘grown-up’ books. These boys took obvious pride in the size and the difficulty (or hardness) of their reading mate-

rial, as if there was a direct correlation between these factors and the adult male identity of which they were so assiduously in pursuit. I recall reading and hating both books, bored by the unfamiliar allusions, the tortuous plotting and the lack of dialogue, and threatened by the thought that I *ought* to be enjoying them. I spent the summer of 1973 reading Agatha Christie whodunnits. Although seldom guessing the identity of the murderer, these novels fed a lasting anglophilia that I have had to learn to accommodate in later life with some decidedly anti-English sympathies. From these flirtations I returned to *The Wind in the Willows* as to the maternal bosom, happy to be back again amongst the pages, paragraphs, sentences and even the individual words which I knew so intimately – happy, in a word, to be home.

Such a relationship could not be sustained indefinitely, however; just as the adolescent subject has to prepare to leave home by exploring spaces outwith the domestic realm, so I submitted to ‘wanderlust’ by beginning to explore the fictional world beyond *The Wind in the Willows*. While still in this transitional stage, I had the fortune to encounter two competitors of immense power and attraction: *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In Longbourn and Middle Earth, these texts depicted ‘realities’ every bit as compelling as the Riverbank, while also broaching issues – politics, sexuality, morality – too subtly embedded in *The Wind in the Willows* to be of much use at that stage in my critical career. The encounters between Darcy and Lizzie, or between any of the huge cast of characters in Tolkein’s epic, pointed towards new experiences, new languages – in short, new and more complex ways of being in the world. Later I perceived the ideological limitations of both texts, and the way both worked to naturalise certain privileged notions of reality. All this notwithstanding, *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Lord of the Rings* materially altered the map of my fictional world more than anything I have read since. In the meantime, the re-visitations to Grahame’s world grew fewer and fewer, the colours faded and the pleasure waned. It was time to leave home.

### Conclusion

In one of the most effective passages in *The Wind in the Willows*, Mole and Rat are returning from a day’s outing when the former smells his old underground home, the one he abandoned in the opening pages of the story as he rushed off in search of adventure above ground. The power of Mole’s feeling for the abandoned dwelling is

only just overcome by the power of his friendship for Rat, although when the latter learns the situation he insists that they return to find Mole's pre-Riverbank abode. Mole is initially mortified by the condition of his old home, but Rat brings him around by degrees to an appreciative estimation of its worth. The stoical conclusion to the chapter is typical of the tenor of the book as a whole:

[Mole] saw clearly how plain and simple – how narrow, even – it all was; but clearly, too, how much it all meant to him, and the special value of some anchorage in one's existence. He did not at all want to abandon the new life and its splendid spaces, to turn his back on sun and air and all they offered him, and creep home and stay there; the upper world was all too strong, it called to him still, even down there, and he knew he must return to the larger stage. But it was good to think he had this to come back to, this place which was all his own, these things which were so glad to see him again and could always be counted upon for the same simple welcome (58).

Here, the irresistible force of adventure meets the immovable object of the home. I would suggest that insofar as Mole, sensible fellow that he is, manages to reach an accommodation between these two forces in his life, this passage becomes central to Grahame's vision, as well as to an entire tradition of English culture. When occasionally I come across *The Wind in the Willows* – in critical works, in reading lists, in the houses of friends with children, on video or on television – I feel like Mole encountering a place which used to offer a secure and familiar "anchorage" on the world but which has been abandoned for a "new life". Given the trajectory of this essay, the issue I then – now – have to face is the extent to which the resolution of competing desires achieved by Mole is available to me.

In this essay I have suggested that I experienced the same predicament in relation to *The Wind in the Willows* as may be discerned throughout the text itself. The characters have to negotiate a range of moral and emotional dilemmas in relation to the geography and the architecture of the Riverbank – all variations on the central dilemma of whether to leave in search of adventure or to stay and fully inhabit a 'natural' environment. These dilemmas can themselves be linked to Grahame's own experience as an 'abandoned' child, as a semi-reluctant banker and a somewhat more reluctant husband and father. The narrative may also be regarded as a reflection of the general political climate of the age in which it was conceived, especially the decade of the 1890s which, as well as being the high point of British im-

perial activity, was also the happiest period of Grahame's life. There may initially appear to be a great distance between the concerns of the Riverbank and those of the empire, but it's clear that they are in fact animated by the same matrix of desires and anxieties.

I first read *The Wind in the Willows* in a very different social, cultural and political context to the one in which it was written. Yet my relationship *with* the text came to mirror the spatial relationships described *in* the text – the desire for home cast against the desire to realise the self by leaving home. The anxious closure achieved *in* the narrative is likewise similar to the uneasy accommodation I have reached *with* the text. Grahame's novel will always constitute 'home' within my fictional world. It waits, a secure anchorage, while I sport up here in the sunshine, still messing about in boats – happy to have left it behind, but glad that it's still there.

## Notes

1. Grahame 1999: 50. All future references will be incorporated within the main body of the essay.
2. Although they are related in many key aspects, this is the quality in which Grahame's later story most resembles Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), in which text, amid all the facetiousness, there remains a deep anxiety regarding "that fretful haste, that vehement striving, that is every day becoming more and more the bane of nineteenth-century life" (1984: 151).
3. As Jackie Wullschläger notes: "[We] remember Alice or Peter Pan for what they say or do, but Mole and Toad and Rat are unimaginable without the context of the river bank; and river, wild wood and Toad Hall are characters as vivid as the animals" (2001: 163).
4. This is the central thesis of one of the most influential modern studies of children's literature, Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984).
5. As Wullschläger points out, however, Grahame and Hardy are similar insofar as "[both] were engaged by the rural myth [...] and both pit the majesty and timelessness of rural traditions against a 'modernist' enemy who would destroy them" (2001: 167).
6. Compare this central point with the one made by Milan Kundera in relation to the emigrant Russian composer Igor Stravinsky: "[The] start of his journey through the history of music coincides roughly with the moment when his native country ceases to exist for him; having understood that no country could replace it, he finds his only

homeland in music; this is not just a nice lyrical conceit of mine, I think it in an absolutely concrete way: his only homeland, his only home, was music, all of music by all musicians, the very history of music; there he decided to establish himself, to take root, to live; there he ultimately found his only compatriots, his only intimates, his only neighbors” (1995: 96-7).

7. A classic case in point is provided in Seamus Deane’s semi-autobiographical novel *Reading in the Dark* (1996), a text which, given its obsession with memory, reading and domestic space (as explored in Smyth 2001: 130-58) in an Irish cultural context, is of clear relevance to the concerns of this essay.



