



# Classics in Short No 140: Topsy and Turvys on parade

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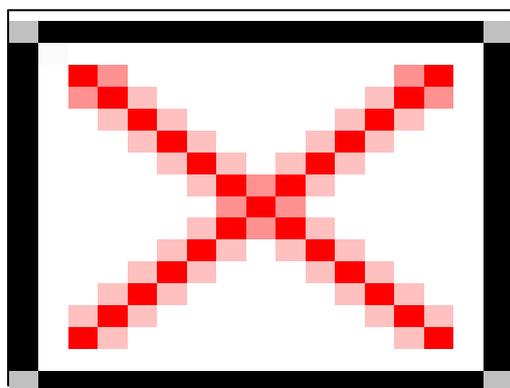
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Topsy and Turvys on Parade

**Brian Alderson** looks at a classic nds?p? po?u.?



## Connoisseurs

of these back pages (if any) may have noticed that the last few have been devoted to some nineteenth classics from the United States, provided, of course, that their work was known in Britain too. Illustrators did not get much of a look-in although drawings by Cranch and Nast and Denslow have been mentioned and Howard Pyle is yet to come. What though of Peter Newell who lived from 1862 to 1924?

## He arrived among the author/illustrators

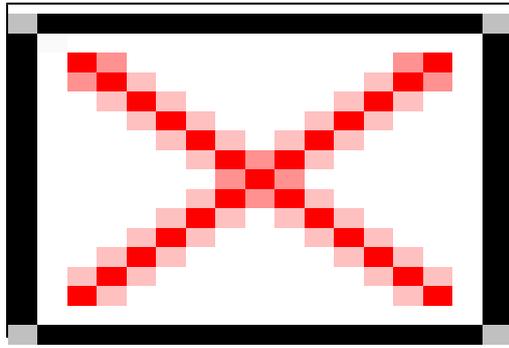
of children's books early in his career with a volume deserving of greater historical attention than it has received:

**Topsy and Turvys**, published by The Century Co. in New York. It is said to have been triggered when he observed one of his children looking at a picture book upside down, inspiring him to experiment with pictures that made visual sense twice on the page according to whether you looked at them one way or turned the leaf through 180° and found an alternative. Thus, an elephant is pictured with the words 'The Elephant leans on a fence and wonders why it is?' and then continues upside down 'The ostrich has a longer neck and smaller mouth than his?' with the picture appropriately converted.

## This trick

has a long history[1] [3] dating back to the sixteenth century with a collection of reversible heads **Orgueil et Folie** (1558) by the Dutch engraver Theodor de Bry but the demands of composition may well have deterred successors and few examples are traceable later, mostly of 'changing faces' and all for an adult clientele. Its earliest manifestation in a picture book for children did not occur until (predictably) it entered the Victorian fashion for toy-book novelties with the picture book devised by Tom Hood the Younger and William McConnell, **Upside Down, or Turnover Tales** (1868). This too had few successors so that Newell, with the 31 colour lithographs that make up the oblong leaves of **Topsy and Turvys**

(160 x 210mm.) may be accredited the first fully to exploit the potential of the comedy.



### ?The demands of composition?

do not need much explanation once you give some thought to the graphic needs of making one set of marks serve a double purpose which will also permit a one-page ?story? that will connect the two. The elephant looks over the fence in our example above while the ostrich stands before it in the companion picture, while the concluding leaf even tortures the lettering of ?puzzle? so that its inversion can be made to read ?the end? [possible pic]. Several other images also cannot help engage in some distortion but the ingenuity of the designs forgives all.

### The success

of **Topsy and Turvys** led to Newell repeating the performance a year later in Number 2 with a more ambitious display covering 64 pages. The one-sided leaves of the first book are now given facing pages with drawings in sepia half-tone so that the contents are effectually doubled. (It could be that, as Jon Agee found with his picture books based on palindromes ? **So Many Dynamos** ? Newell began simply seeing the reversible potential of a scene almost without thinking.) It would seem that the appeal of the volumes led to the London publisher Fisher Unwin (uncle to Stanley) issuing editions in Britain, presumably imported with a cancel title-page, It would seem that the appeal of the volumes led to the London publisher Fisher Unwin (uncle to Stanley) issuing editions in Britain, presumably imported with a cancel title-page, but there is no record of the first volume and the British Library have No.2 only in the American edition sent by Unwin, not the one with his own imprint.

### However,

the Museum did obtain Newell's next, and most famous, children's novelty, **The Hole Book** of 1908. Here young Tom Potts is fooling with a gun which unexpectedly goes off and the bullet's passage is traced by a hole in the next 23 leaves. It pierces Bridget Quinn's boiler, snaps a rope on Sister Sue's swing, and is only stopped when it encounters a cake cooked by Mrs Newlywed:

*And this was lucky for Tom Potts,*

*The boy who fired the shot ?*

*It might have gone clean round the world*

*And killed him on the spot.*

The full-page plates, faced by the rhyming text, are cleverly drawn to exploit the recently perfected half-tone process using just two colours which vary throughout the book and Newell makes great play with his characters' eyes ? animal as well as human - flat circles with expressive black dots.

### A similar technique

occurs in his inventive **Slant Book** of 1910 (reprinted in 2008 by Tara Books) which has a rhomboidal format so that when Bobby's Go-cart [pram] breaks loose it appears to trundle with increasing velocity down ?a hill so steep and high? that, like Tom Potts's bullet, it creates chaos in its wake. In 1912 there was a **Rocket Book** which repeats the dodge of **The Hole Book**

but vertically as a rocket goes up through the twenty-one storeys of an apartment house.

**Newell was a genial man,**

we are told, and illustrated several works of American fiction, mostly again with half-tone plates. This also led him to become one of the first in America to illustrate the **Alice** books once they came out of copyright. They were distinctively Newellized and one is only sorry that he only did three plates for **The Hunting of the Snark** which came out in 1913 in a compendium of verses by Lewis Carroll.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His latest book [The 100 Best Children's Books](#) [4], Galileo Publishing, 978-1903385982, £14.99 hbk, is out now.

Editions of **Topsy and Turvys: No 1** and **Topsy and Turvys: No 2** are available from Amazon. **The Hole Book** is published by Tuttle Publishing, 978-0804847414, £13.99 hbk.

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[1] [5] I must acknowledge much help in compiling this piece from Ian Alcock, Rosie Temperley, Laura Wasowicz, and Naomi Kennedy (née Alderson).

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