Alan Garner

by Thom K. Hinckley

I am opening the maroon folder. The paper is lined school paper, not even the metrified A4 size page. The pages are two-hole punched, English style, with the two holes about three inches apart in the center of the left-hand margin. Each hole has a woven paper reinforcement pasted on. And on the page, in a precise italic hand, is the opening of *The Owl Service* looking more like a careful copy of the book than the manuscript from which the book was made. Why? Why? Why? Why?

Why Garner? Why is the collection of manuscripts and correspondence here at BYU? Why is the collection considered sufficiently significant to be kept in the vault in Special Collections in the Harold B. Lee Library? Why should a geographer write about it?

Garner was born at the foot of Alderley Edge, which is in Cheshire, England, on the western flank of the Pennines. As the result of a long childhood illness, he became well-read in Victorian literature. This no doubt contributed to his winning a scholarship to Manchester Grammar School. He later read classics at Magdalen College, Oxford. As a result of training, and subsequent hard work, he has become one of the leading children’s authors of the twentieth century. Few write with more skill and precision. I admire his economy with words.

Since my days as an undergraduate, Brigham Young University’s library (The Harold B. Lee’s Library) has had an active, far-reaching acquisitions policy that has often been well ahead of scholarly requirements. Whoever writes the definitive biography of Garner will have to come here to do it. The Garner collection is only one of many such treasures. In this collection are two cartons of correspondence and three cartons of manuscripts, typescripts, galleys, proofs, and research materials. While many have searched for and recorded the ancient mythology and folklore of Wales, and many have mined and reworked this material, almost no one has written with the sensitivity and imagination of Garner. To work with this collection is almost as though we were personally observing a master word-smith at work.

Garner has lived in Cheshire most of his life. His books have their setting either in Cheshire or just to the west of Wales. We tend, rather casually, to regard fiction as temporal in nature; that is, the narrative puts forward the plot in a chronological fashion. Even stream-of-consciousness works in its own temporal style. What is seldom realised, is that no narrative/plot can work when it is place-less. Place gives a tale its mooring. Even the old Mercian tongue that flavours so much of Garner’s work is Cheshire-bound. Garner’s books are predominantly narrative. He does not tend to long descriptions; yet even his narrative describes place intimately. Mary’s description of Chorley as seen from the steeple of Saint Phillips, or Mary and her Father reading the rocks as they descend Engine Vein are transcen-
dental geography. In the Collins correspondence file are many letters between Garner and his publisher about getting the maps for *The Moon of Gomrath* just right. Yet Garner’s prose is so complete and accurate that the maps are almost relegated to decoration. It is this calibre of geographical description that has long convinced me that the best non-text geography books for schools are fiction. So, sitting here with the manuscripts becomes a magical, mystical moment.

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*The Owl Service*, mostly dialogue, requires indenting and paragraphing in the printed copy. In the manuscript, Garner already has all this precisely worked out, so as to require no editorial work in the transition to typescript (Mss [1]).

Every time Garner started to write, he must have picked up the first ball-point pen at hand, as the colour of ink is constantly shifting — blue, red, back to blue, black... (Mss [1-4]). The manuscript is carefully dated. It starts ‘7.35 p.m. Sunday March 1965’ and is completed ‘11.0 p.m. Friday 7 January 1966.’ I am in awe of the unbroken flow of the manuscript. And when there are corrections, they invariably shorten and tighten the flow. In the manuscript (I-1) when Alison first hears the noise in the attic, she shouts to Gwyn, ‘Come back!’ This is shortened to, ‘Quick!’

The typescript also has incisive changes (I-2): ‘Buzz off, will you!’ is changed to ‘You up there! Buzz off!’ (The Collins edition uses single quotations in compliance with the new typography). Impressive is the sureness and certitude of the changes: every one improves the story.

At the end of the typescript are 20-odd pages that have been extensively revised, retyped, and replaced in the manuscript. And between RT 200 and RT 201 is a rubbing that has subsequently been inked that becomes the endsheet decoration on the Collins edition and the cover block on the American Walck edition. I must confess that I could never see the owl in the plate design, but on the title page of the Collins edition is the design showing the owl’s tail and feet extending beyond what would be the rim of the plate. In deference to Garner, it must be admitted that Alison tells how to fit the owl parts together (p. 12), but I never saw it in my mind’s eye. Interestingly, this drawing heightens the owl/flower ambiguity.
Next in the library storage carton are the galley proofs carefully marked — mostly punctuation and capitalisation. There is a paucity of author corrections. The Uncorrected Advance Proofs are relatively clean. Most of the marks relate to items marked on the galleys, but somehow not corrected.

How is it possible to write so cleanly and powerfully? In the smallness of snobbery, I had at times supposed that had I gone to a good grammar school and to Oxford, I too would be able to write. What I have learned from the Garner collection is that if I would write, I must work as hard as Garner and be as careful.

There is a folder labeled, The Moon of Gomrath M. S. ‘Notes & Queries’ etc. Here is all the preliminary pushing and pulling, the research, the false starts. Sheet XII-3 is marked in red, ‘COPY: PHONY.’ Here Susan loses the bracelet down the scree-slope. In the book, this is one of the more exciting parts. The reworking is not extensive, but it eliminates every nuance not central to the presence of Angharad Goldhand, the Lady of the Lake. There are upwards of a hundred A4 pages of trials — many later discarded — and then ‘20/4/1961.0043 Final Rehash!’ to which has been added in red, ‘Ha! Ha!’

It is amazing how much good material ends up discarded. The book originally starts off with a chapter to get Colin and Susan from Oxford to Alderly Edge, a chapter with insights on the character of Oxford. Ultimately this whole first chapter is distilled to, ‘When Colin and Susan had first come to stay at Highmost Redmanhey everything had seemed very strange, but they had quickly settled in the Mossocks’ pattern.’ (p. 14). Then comes 103 manuscript pages in an italic hand written with an italic pen that heightens the magic of the story. A folder labeled ‘The Moon of Gomrath — 2 variant typescripts’ contains versions both different from the final book. The clincher is the laconic line in the Who’s Who 1980 Garner entry: ‘Recreation: work.’

What an education it has been to examine the Garner collection. And what a struggle to write this. It is as though Garner has been looking over my shoulder encouraging me to write well. It will not ever be possible again to read a Garner book without a heightened appreciation for the diligent working and reworking necessary to produce literature of this quality.

Townsend, in Written for Children (p. 235), finds ‘the children in Elidor and the Narnia books, ... unequal to the parts they have to play.’ The hero journey is always made by children: only they have the necessary faith. In the Tom Fobble’s Day, William is not equal to observing his grandfather’s death with the adults, but he is more than equal to celebrating his grandfather’s life by sledging the night through on Lizzie Leah’s on the sledge his grandfather made for him only hours before. What adult, for that matter, is ever equal to the parts they have to play? Is Gandalf equal to his part before the Gates of Mordor?
There is so much in children's literature that is good and beautiful that allows us to live more effectively in a sometimes hostile world. Garner has made the Welsh legends as though they were written for our day. Children today are not equal to the evil forces they must confront, yet Garner repeatedly assures us the powers of protection still operate in our world.

Books by Alan Garner

Holly from the Bongs, 1966.  
The Old Man of Mow, 1967.  
The Breadhorse, 1975.  
The Aimer Gate, 1978.  
The Lad of Gold, 1980.  
A Bag of Moonshine, 1986.