

The Reverend W V Awdry 1911 - 1987

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The Reverend Awdry who has died aged 85, was the creator of Thomas the Tank Engine, Gordon the Grumpy Express, the Fat Controller and the whole group of human-faced rolling stock whose adventures celebrated the golden sunset of steam railways.

Their stories - recounted in some 30 books which led to television series and numerous commercial spin-offs - began in 1944, when Awdry's three-year-old son Christopher was ill with measles. Nursery rhymes had palled with repetition. So Awdry, although no artist, drew some engines with faces to illustrate the lines, "Early in the morning, down at the station, / All the little engines standing in a row." To go with them he wove a few tales which the child, long after he had recovered, insisted be repeated word for word.

The first engine Awdry named Edward ("it was the first name that came into my head"), and he jotted the stories down on the backs of old circulars. He saw little value in the stories, but at his wife's suggestion they were sent to Edmund Ward, a fine art printer in Birmingham, who paid £40 for the copyright and commissioned an indifferent illustrator. The Three Railway Engines was published in 1945; it sold remarkably well, and over the next year was reprinted four times. Thomas the Tank Engine appeared in 1946, and a steady flow of additions appeared every autumn for the next 24 years. By then Awdry found the task of coming up with new stories too onerous, and handed over to Christopher.

One part of the Awdry books's success was that they came out in small, easy to handle volumes; another was the fine work of the later illustrators whose bright, brochure-style pictures showed a world of well-kept stations, neatly dressed passengers and overalled workmen. They also appealed for the way the narrative was crafted to trip off parental lips with the rhythm of rolling stock. James the Red Engine puffs, "Come along, come along," as he struggles up a steep hill, while his coaches say encouragingly, "You're pulling us well, you're pulling us well." As Gordon is made to haul some trucks, he complains, "A goods train, a goods train" in disgust.

For all their simplicity, each of the stories was based on a real incident, such as the loss of some trucks, a derailment, or a fish found in an engine's boiler. Sometimes Awdry's readers questioned the likelihood of such events. In one story, Percy is forced down a gradient by his loaded trucks and collides with the rear of a stationary train at the bottom, ending up perched precariously on top of a wagon. Railway enthusiasts by the score wrote to Awdry claiming that such an event or anything like it was quite impossible. "My reply", said Awdry, "is that it actually did happen on April 13 1876, on the London, Chatham & Dover Railway, and that a photograph of the accident is to be found on page 31 of Volume XXXIV of Model Railway News."

Wilbert Vere Awdry was born on June 15th, 1911 at Ampfield, Hampshire, where his father, a railway enthusiast, was vicar. Every Wednesday afternoon, young Wilbert went for a walk with his father which ended with them climbing an embankment to see the engines of the London and South East Railway pass on the way from Romsey to Eastleigh. If it was raining they were admitted to the platelayers's cabin where there was always talk of steam-engines, and their ways.

Awdry went to Dauntsey's School, Devizes, and St Peter's Hall, Oxford, before completing his training at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. He spent three years teaching at St George's School, Jerusalem, before being ordained at Winchester Cathedral in 1936. He first took a curacy at Odiham, Hampshire, and then moved to West Lavington in the Wiltshire. During the Second World War his pacifism led him to take charge of the large parish of King's Norton, Birmingham. He next became vicar of Elsworth with Knapwell in Cambridgeshire, where he proved a diligent pastor in the moderate evangelical tradition, and was a great favourite with the children of the parish.

In 1951 Awdry became Rural Dean of Bourn. Two years later he moved to the larger parish of Emneth, near Wisbech, where he ministered faithfully for another 12 years before retiring to Stroud, Gloucestershire, to give part-time assistance in local parishes.

Inevitably - problems ensued as the stories became international best sellers. Pressing inquiries from eager children were fielded placing his railway on the mythical island, of Sodor, located somewhere between the Isle of Man and Barrow-in-Furness. For Sodor, Awdry designed, with the help of his children, an entire fictional landscape criss-crossed by a network of railway lines. Awdry halted the first television series in 1959 because the BBC wrote in a scene that he believed inauthentic. Thirty years later he was pleased by a new animated production put out by Central Television, using the voice of Ringo Starr. But he was exasperated when Central started to write their own storylines.

In 1951, Awdry published 'Our Child Begins to Pray'. Besides his children's books, he edited Industrial Archaeology in Gloucestershire (1973), which ran to three editions, and was joint editor of A Guide to Steam Railways in Great Britain (1979). In 1987 he was joint author of a history of the Birmingham and Gloucester Railway.

In his last years, Awdry looked back philosophically on his two callings. "Railways and the Church have their critics," he would say. "But both are the best way of getting man to his ultimate destination." He married, in 1938, Margaret Wale, who died in 1989; they had a son and two daughters.

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