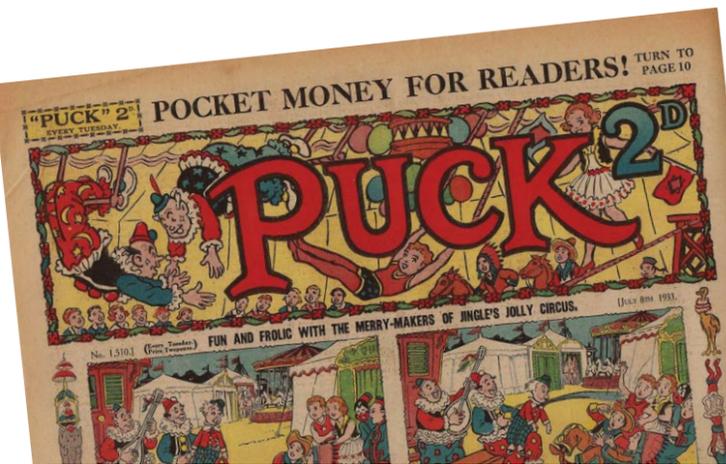


# Armed only with a pencil our hero gave chase...

Walter Henry Booth was a prolific comic book artist of immense imagination who knew exactly how to tell thrilling stories for children. His most famous creation is the boy detective and special agent Rob the Rover, whose adventures are acknowledged to be the world's first comicbook adventure hero. Jonathan J Elliot examines Booth's life and legacy.



8. Then as they drew near the great monoplane taxied along the ground, gaining speed at every moment, and then with a gently rolling motion the machine left the ground. "Too late," said Rob, resignedly. "The jewel thieves have proved themselves a little too clever for us this time."

Booth's stories are ripping yarns that fired the imaginations of a generation of children yearning for escape from the dreariness of depression era and war-ravaged Britain. His career spanned two world wars, lasted 46 years and he was still productive into the late 1960s.

Booth was born in 1889, in Walthamstow and he studied at the Walthamstow School of Art. At the age of 22 he quietly started his commercial comic book career at James Henderson and Son, a publisher in the heart of what would have been a buzzing Fleet Street.

Children's comics then had names like Our Young Folk's Weekly Budget. That title must have done alright, though, because shrewd Mr Henderson had bought the serial rights to Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island, and then Kidnapped which appeared in the paper. No pressure on the young Booth to impress, then.

In 1915 he devised Professor Potash who did moderately well. But Booth needed a character who would really take off. James Henderson & Son was being bought

by Amalgamated Press and the winds of change were blowing through the company. Booth needed to make his mark. In 1920, newly married and at the age of 31, he struck gold.

Rob the Rover was an instant, smash hit - and was immediately put into Amalgamated's top seller Puck where it stayed for 20 years. Rob was frequently accompanied by Joan, who insisted on coming on even the risky missions, despite Rob's gallant reservations. There was usually a foreign assignment, a chase and of course Rob (and Joan) always prevailed.

WH Booth's career may have been taking off, but in 1922 his personal life took a hammering, when Elsie, his 26-year-old wife of barely three years died. The heart-broken widower took comfort in the arms of a 22 year old confectioner's assistant called Ethel Hammerton and the following year they married.

The same year Rob the Rover went international. A Danish publishing house bought the rights to it and Booth's opposite numbers re-created Rob as 'Willy'

Danish school boys could now thrill to the same adventures and Booth was on a roll.

He must now have been sufficiently highly regarded at Amalgamated to work where he liked. He and Ethel moved away from Walthamstow to the picturesque coastal town of Barmouth in Wales, where they lived in some style and he worked remotely, penning his tales with views of the Irish Sea. In the next 8 years, he created countless epic stories with wonderfully evocative titles like Orphans of the Sea, Cruise of the Sea Hawk, Captain Moonlight, The Pirate's Secret and The Flying Boy. Booth's readers couldn't get enough - and nor could Amalgamated.

But in 1940, disaster! Rob the Rover is killed! Not by the Evil Emperor of Atlantis, not by Martian Death Rays but by the ultimate über-baddie, Hitler himself, who causes a shortage of paper in Fleet Street. Fiend! With many of Amalgamated's titles shut down, WH Booth had to cast around for whatever was going. He found work with Scion, a British imitator of the then hard-to-get American DC Comics. It wasn't

Rob the Rover, but early superheroes like 'ElectroMan' and 'Litening' that were in vogue now. Booth proved he could move with the times, and must have been doing US-style comic strips in his 60s for readers a tenth his age. If he missed his boy detective, we'll never know.

In retirement, WH Booth turned his pen to landscapes, Tolkienesque fantasy scenes and portraits of beautiful young women, not remotely in a comic book style, but expertly rendered, full size pencil and watercolour paintings.

The portraits show a sensual imagination that couldn't be more different from the boy's adventure material that defined Booth's comic book work. It begs the question, how many more late Booths are out there? Is there a second,



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only semi-discovered legacy of this great British comic book artist?

Booth died in 1971 aged 81, in Barmouth and is laid to rest alongside Ethel. His fans in Walthamstow and Chingford are still collecting his late paintings and curating his work. The tantalising possibility remains that much more of Booth's late-flourishing career as a portraitist is awaiting discovery, for in his final years, he paid his rent with paintings. The attics and walls of Barmouth may yet yield up more secrets. This is clearly a job for no ordinary detective...

biplane and is taking on the enemy with an amphibious flying saucer, but it's pretty much Rob the Rover in Danish. And even when Familie Journalen folds, Rob/aka Willy still fights on.

Since 1977, a tribute group of Danish graphic novelists has been keeping the flame alive and continues making comic strips recounting Willy's adventures to this day and much of Booth's original dash and energy is clearly present in its wonderfully faithful retro renditions.

Jonathan and the E list would like to thank Angela Wagstaff for her kind assistance, use of the images and her excellent website on Booth <http://walter-booth.webs.com> and the Chingford Historical Society [www.chingfordhistory.org.uk](http://www.chingfordhistory.org.uk)

Please also check out Angela's book remembering another artist from the area 'Douglas Frederic Mountford: Chingford Artist, Illustrator and Teacher' available from The Bookshop, 135 Station Road, Chingford as well as other local bookshops and from the Chingford Historical Society [www.chingfordhistory.org.uk](http://www.chingfordhistory.org.uk)

But wait! Is Rob the Rover really dead after all? Booth's greatest creation is not to be dismissed so easily! For, long after Hitler is vanquished, Danish Willy is still fighting the good fight! Ha! After the presses in Fleet Street grind to a halt, Rob's Danish alter-ego carries on (presumably from his island hideout, living on herring) smashing baddies everywhere in a wildly popular weekly called Familie Journalen that keeps churning out ripping yarns for another 37 years. By the end, Willy has upgraded his