

“Fair Trade for Children: Ethical Cooperation and Exchange in the children’s literature of Maria Edgeworth, Isaac Taylor, Jane Marcet, and the 19thC Cooperative Movement”

This paper analyzes British children’s fiction and nonfiction from 1800 to 1860 about global trade and political economy, exploring early representations of economic justice in children’s literature. I identify popular authors who engage children in ethical debates over what kind of economic activities are mutually beneficial for producers and consumers. Children’s books by Maria Edgeworth and Jane Marcet (the “mother of political economy” who inspired Harriet Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1834)), and children’s manufacturing tour books by Isaac Taylor (the brother of poets Jane and Ann Taylor) represent cooperation as the happy result of competition and the division of labor, using personal gifts and face-to-face conversation to humanize capitalist exchange. Concurrently, Robert Owen and the Cooperative Society developed radical education curricula for children that rejects capitalist competition, developing the principles behind the Fair Trade movement.

My research investigates these competing visions of cooperation using Marcet’s *Willy’s Holidays* (1836), *Willy’s Rambles* (1840), and *Willy’s Travels on the Railroad* (1847), and Taylor’s *Scenes of Commerce* (1828) and *Scenes of British Wealth* (1823), and Maria Edgeworth’s *Early Lessons* (1801, 1814, etc.) and *Moral Tales* (1801), with archival research from the Nation Co-operative Archive in Manchester (to be conducted this spring). I call particular attention to representations of global and local trade, and gender, class, and race in labor contexts. Scholars have previously assessed literature by Charles Dickens, Charlotte Tonna, Harriet Martineau, and Elizabeth Gaskell about industrialization and political economy. My approach, however, places children at the center of these ethical debates—as readers and consumers, but also as children who worked alongside adults to produce goods for trade.