

CHILDREN OF THE FESTIVAL AND THEIR TOYS

DAVID'S STORY

My parents got married in the year between the Festival of Britain and the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, so they could hardly have anchored themselves more firmly in the period. I was born in Hull, early in 1955, when the country had only just cast off the last traces of wartime rationing. Until 1967 we lived in a little house in Auckland Avenue, off the Cottingham Road, which would have been terraced except that a passage down one side rendered it semi-detached. In later years, when we looked over photographs of the house, I used to tease Mum by pointing out how Festival of Britain the décor was, and she used to say, "Well, it's my period!" The spirit of Barry Bucknell was abroad, and many of the original features had been carefully covered over with hardboard. The décor was bright and optimistic, the same qualities which also appeared in the public architecture of the period, notably in the town centre, where the shops had had to be rebuilt after horrific wartime bombing. Thanks to the Hornsea Pottery, our crockery was bright and optimistic, and there was a bright and optimistic poker standing by the fireplace, mainly black but with a shiny red knob for a handle. When my aunt and uncle bought me a blow-up globe, it too had a black frame with shiny red knobs for its feet.

Most of the houses I knew were not like this, however, having been created in earlier generations, when antimacassars were still the order of the day. Grandma and Grandpa lived in Faversham Avenue, a Morris Minor's drive away, while Nanny and Granddaddy lived in Ashdene, which was much nearer at hand. As a crawler, I used to play on the floor of Nanny's house with her pots and pans. I came to have a good eye for lids, and which lid would fit which pot or pan. When a lid was missing, Nanny used to wheel me along Newland Avenue in my pushchair, and I would choose a suitable lid from the selection displayed outside one of the shops. Apparently, my judgement was always reliable. I wish I could still do this trick. But my visual memory would never be so good again. Lids led on naturally (?) to old gramophone records, in search of which Nanny used to take me along Newland Avenue to a junk shop, where there was always a good selection of 78s. I was not yet able to read, so I could only choose them by general appearance, mainly relying on the colour of the label. As a result, my record selections were not as infallible as my instinct for pots and pans. I particularly remember the boredom of Edna Thornton (Contralto) singing "Oh, peaceful England!" from *Merrie England*. I have since learnt to enjoy pieces of this sort, but at that stage in my development I didn't have much time for their lugubrious melancholy. My inability to read also meant that I was unable to weed out songs that were unsuitable for my tender (y)ears, such as an old music-hall ditty entitled "I'm a daddy at sixty-three", which became my greatest favourite among these junk-shop finds. Fortunately, my parents, though not card-carrying liberals, were very broad-minded, and when the record broke in my childish hands, my mother cheerfully wrote to a wireless request programme and asked if they would play it for me, as I believe they did. Like the wind-up gramophones on which they were played, these 78s were not quite obsolete, and when I was very little, pop singles were still routinely bought in this form rather than as 45s. This was not without its drawbacks. As a piece of seasonal foolishness my parents bought the Goons' "I'm walking backwards for Christmas", but it never got played, because while coming home in the car I managed to sit on it. Some of the older 78s were phoenix-like in their ability to be brought back to life after being smashed, and my father became very skilful at gluing the broken pieces together again. The old gramophone needles cheerfully ploughed their way through the excess glue. A fate worse than breakage was for a record to be thought so surplus to requirements as to be soaked

in hot water and sculpted into a plant-pot. I remember being shown by Mum how to do this bohemian trick, though I don't think I ever took to it. I have always been uneasy about destroying things, even under the banner of Art.

From old second-hand records it was an even more obvious jump to new-bought children's records, of which many different sorts were marketed in the 50s and early 60s. Some were American, re-packaged for the British market, and even when they featured nursery rhymes set to their traditional tunes, they were often "swung" in a very contemporary manner. Some were British but sounded American, and others were British and still managed to retain a native feel. My favourites were the Selcol ones, featuring Alan Kane (a somewhat forgotten band leader of the period) and his family. They were sometimes accompanied by the clavioline, a primitive precursor of the synthesizer, with a professed ability to imitate all the instruments of the orchestra. These were the homeliest of the records, but also the most fun. Unfortunately, few of them survive to tell the tale. My least favourite, because the performances were the most anonymous and perfunctory, were the Kidditune series, produced in Swansea by a firm called Lumar. The ones I collected most successfully were the Gala Goldentone series, made of red plastic, and American in origin. The most amazing were the Red Raven records, which were also of coloured (and sometimes translucent) plastic when originally sold in America, though plain black when produced under licence in this country. But the colour was a minor matter, the real point of interest being that they were designed to be part of a Praxinoscope. The sound was round the outer rim of the record, and between that and the label was a series of images, which when used with the Magic Mirror provided a visual commentary on the song.

Apart from the records, there were children's gramophones, either clockwork or battery-operated. And apart from my own toys of this sort, I inherited some similar things from the previous generation, which I didn't like much at the time (their old-fashioned appearance made them seem slightly "wrong" to a child's eyes), but which now make an interesting comparison.

There were two Arcades in town, Paragon Arcade, of which I rarely darkened the doors, and Hepworth Arcade, where lots of interesting things seemed to happen. It boasted a joke shop; a second-hand bookshop, where my father would one day buy so many of the local history books that became his great hobby; and, dearest to me when I was little, a shop which sold the Selcol records described above. There was a display cabinet hung on the outside of the shop rather in the manner of a barber's pole. It was constructed from an old clock case, and in it were displayed records, packets of gramophone needles, and so on. On one occasion the case had to be unlocked, since a very small record displayed inside was the only one the shopkeeper had left. It was intended to be played on a tiny gramophone without a motor, and had an off-centre hole in which to put a pencil so the turntable could be made to turn by hand. I don't think I was ever able to play the record on a conventional machine. (It was probably one of the Selcol Kid-e-phone series.) Apart from the record, I coveted the display case itself, and my father, whose hobbies at that early period were woodworking and photography, endeavoured to construct one for me as a birthday present. My desire to have things exactly like some real-life model was to become characteristic of all my youthful enthusiasms, and it was a standing joke with my parents that it was a good job the shopkeeper didn't have a wooden leg, or I should have wanted one of those as well.

I think pop music hit me in about 1962, when the Twist was all the rage. But this was only a preparation for the coming of The Beatles a year or so later. Mesmerising when seen

performing on television, the way they were filmed in *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* made them seem get-at-able as well as godlike. For the next few years the pop world was very vivid to me, but I think I think it grew up more quickly than I did (in retrospect this is one of the things that makes the period so exciting) and by the time psychedelia set in I had largely detached myself from it, though still enjoying novelty acts such as The New Vaudeville Band. One obvious rival for my affections was the film musical, a genre which gave rise to several massive hits at this period (*Mary Poppins*, *The Sound of Music*, *My Fair Lady* and *Doctor Doolittle*). I had the soundtrack LPs of all four of these, and played them constantly. They also prepared me for what would become the great obsession of my teenage years, the Savoy operas.

The Gilbert and Sullivan thing happened very suddenly, on Christmas Day 1967. Music for Pleasure Records were having a special offer, in which you could buy two of their already very cheap LPs for the price of one. Mum and Dad bought *H.M.S. Pinafore* (excerpts from the 1930 D'Oyly Carte recording) as a stocking-filler for me and *The Greatest Music Hall Bill Ever Assembled* as a present for Grandpa. Grandpa, who was not a man to suffer in silence, hated his gift and made no secret of the fact. I was mesmerised by mine, and wouldn't leave it alone. After Grandpa's death, which occurred shortly afterwards, I often played the music hall record as well, and music hall became one of my other great enthusiasms.

As long as I still depended on being having books read to me, the heights of tragedy and comedy were occupied by Enid Blyton and A. A. Milne. The scene that made me sob aloud was the one where Noddy has his car stolen, and is then stripped naked and left alone to sing (with telling understatement) "It isn't very good in the dark, dark wood." The one that made me laugh uncontrollably was the one where Piglet pretends to be Roo, only to have his bluff called by Kanga, who gets him ready for bed and brushes aside his protests with "Yes, Roo dear, of course you're Piglet." Another early favourite was a book whose name I have forgotten, but whose characteristic phrase was "'Nonsense!' said Big Doll, crossly."

Perhaps predicably, when only just able to write, my enthusiasm for publishing books, or rather numbered series of small booklets, burned more brightly than my desire to read other people's offerings. On the other hand, I had no great confidence in my creative powers, so I proceeded by demanding that my two grandmothers (Nanny and Grandma) wrote the stories for me. I would create a front cover, with a title and a serial number (A5 or B7 or whatever), then instruct one or other of them to write an appropriate story. By a further turn of the screw, this was a task for which I allowed only a brief space of time. With the authors working under these oppressive conditions, many of the stories never reached a conclusion, but another title was added to my ever-expanding list.

In the world of children's cartoons, I believe Teddy Tail (who appeared in the *Daily Mail*) was a favourite, though Rupert the Bear, a more fashionable character to have liked when young, had no appeal for me. Indeed, he is associated with one of the horror stories of my childhood. A well-meaning uncle turned up one Christmas with a present that turned out to be not only a *Rupert Annual*, but the self-same *Rupert Annual* he had given me the year before. Having unwrapped the gift, I exclaimed (in a voice calculated to be fully audible at the back of the gallery), "Oh, no! Not another one of those!", leaving my mother with the job of laughing the matter off and soothing the poor man's injured feelings. Both my parents became well practised in the art of laughing things off. To be fair to my childish self, I had no

desire to be hurtful, but I did have a weakness for theatrical delivery. Part of me was always on stage.

Perhaps *on screen* would be nearer the mark, since I had very little experience of the theatre but spent a great deal of time watching the television. When I was about two, Granddaddy died, and Nanny came to live with us. She had the television, and I often spent my evenings with her. I was thus on familiar terms with *Take Your Pick*, *Double Your Money*, and *Criss Cross Quiz*, with *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* and the early days of *Coronation Street*, as well as the regular children's fare which in those days tended to occupy the screen between five and six o'clock: *Blue Peter*, *Crackerjack!* and so on. But on Tuesday evenings I was taken to visit Grandma and Grandpa. So it was courtesy of their television that I saw the long-running Richard Greene version of *Robin Hood* and (even more important in my mental universe) *Tuesday Rendezvous*. This was an hour-long children's magazine programme which later split into two half hours on Tuesday and Fridays as *Five o'Clock Club*. Apart from its human presenters, of whom Muriel Young was the chief, its brightest stars were two glove puppets, Ollie Beak (owl) and Fred Barker (dog), and a pantomime cow, Daisy. In the summer of 1964, I got tickets for the show, and Mum took me and two schoolfriends on the train to King's Cross, and from there to Wembley Park, where the Associated Rediffusion television studios were. Two shows were recorded, one live and one for broadcast a few days later. *Camelot* was just starting its run at Drury Lane, so we had Barry Kent in full armour as the guest in one show, and The Tremeloes (who had recently parted company with Brian Poole) in the other. I came away with my party hat (a fez), my song sheet (signed by Muriel Young!), and the knowledge that I had been able to pat Daisy the Cow. Mum had the privilege of being herded with the other parents and guardians into a dark corner of the studio, where they were encouraged to swell the applause by a floor manager who kept shouting things like "What do you want, blood?"

Puppets had been there in earliest days of television, of course, and they continued to be an important ingredient of the schedules throughout my childhood. *Muffin the Mule* was before my time, but as a toddler I had become so accustomed to a regular sequence of *Picture Book* on Monday, *Andy Pandy* on Tuesday, *The Flowerpot Men* on Wednesday, *Rag, Tag and Bobtail* on Thursday and *The Woodentops* on Friday, that when the mixture started to be varied by the introduction of *Camberwick Green* and other novelties, it seemed as if the very order of nature was under attack. But there were puppets for every stage of development. And as one got older one could progress through *Rubovia* to the great sequence of Gerry Anderson titles, all filmed in Supermarionation: *Supercar*, *Fireball XL5*, *Stingray* and *Thunderbirds*.

My choice of comics reflected these television tastes. I took *Huckleberry Hound* and *Yogi Bear* (the latter intended for younger readers) and *TV Comic*, also *TV Century 21*, the first issue of which was given to me for my birthday in 1965. I was barely conscious of the *Beano* and *Dandy* at all, though I did experience something of that world by taking *Wham!* which was created by Leo Baxendale in 1964 when he broke away from the *Beano* fold.

One Christmas (maybe 1962) a lot of American comics appeared outside W. H. Smith's in the city centre (their shop had a counter at the front for newspapers and magazines). They were presumably unsold copies of recent issues shipped over in bulk. They were not the superhero comics that have become so fashionable, but actual *comic* comics, featuring the same cartoon characters that I watched on television (not only the endless Hanna-Barbera characters, but also the wonderful Bullwinkle and Rocky), together with a number of others which didn't normally impinge on the British consciousness, such as Little Lulu. For two or

three years I used to haunt station bookstalls in the hope of adding to my stock of these treasures.

Two more products of Dad's woodworking skills need to be mentioned, the earlier being the farmyard which he constructed with the help of Mum's cousin Hubert. The two men attended the same woodwork and photography classes at the Technical College, and were subsequently rivals in book collecting. The later creation was a tool-box, of which I made very little use (it was never going to be my sort of thing), but whose immaculate craftsmanship I still find astonishing.

I had the usual toys of small children, teddy bears, rocking horse, toy car a la Noddy, pull-along cart with bricks in it, followed by the usual toys of little boys in the 1950s, cap guns, cowboy outfit and Davy Crockett hat. By the time of junior school I also had an Action Man, a favourite toy because of all the impedimenta you could buy to go with it. Many other boys at school had them as well, to the disgust of some masters, who found them intolerably girly (we were dressing dolls). As ever, I did try to argue the case, pleading the similarity to the toy soldiers of yesteryear. I didn't get very far, though (as often) my persistence was found amusingly eccentric.

I don't think I ever had a chemistry set or a conjuring set, though I did have a few individual tricks. I possessed at different times the fashionable toys of the day, such as Etch-a-Sketch and Spirograph. I also had small amounts of Lego and Meccano, but never enough to make anything exciting, certainly not the things I should have liked to construct, specifically vending machines, which were one of my obsessions. I was always trying to make one of these, but (to be brutally honest with my younger self) they are something of a specialised area of expertise. For some reason I did have little boiler thing, which could be attached to some bits of Meccano (including wheels) and thus turned into a self-propelling vehicle. I also had a toy cooker, which ran on little tablets of fuel, and which was capable of cooking small quantities of food quite edibly.

At the bottom of our garden was a garage, which my father had constructed himself. By way of proof, there were still pots of paint and bits of asbestos lying about next to it. In front of it was a raised patch of rough ground on which bonfires could be made (especially for Guy Fawkes night, which was still celebrated domestically in those days). To one side was a border with things like nasturtiums growing in it, and on the other was a bush with brambles growing on it. My cockney readers may need to be informed that "brambles" is what blackberries are called in the north of England, but whatever the name, they were delicious eating in the summer. In the middle, there was a small area of grass, which offered just enough space to pitch a small tent, or else to erect a swing. I spent many happy hours on the swing, until one day the back supports gave way, and I was propelled into the bramble bush. I was not seriously hurt, though I did have my arm in a sling for a while, and was thus enabled to have my one and only happy sports day at school. I always had a very odd relationship with sports days. I had nothing against them in principle, as long as I wasn't expected to do the running or jumping. With my arm in a sling, I was allowed to hold tapes, brush sandpits, and make myself generally useful (if slightly officious).

Beyond the garage was a "tenfoot" where I did sometimes take part in games of cricket. The drain covers had holes placed conveniently for holding the three stumps. But my favourite sort of cricket was French cricket, which didn't have to be taken seriously and so (as Miles

Kington used to point out to anyone would listen) was the only sort of game worthy of the name, all the others being too much like warfare.

Even when the nuisance of physical exertion was removed (as in card games or board games), I didn't like games to be taken seriously, and what I enjoyed best was Rummy played with Nanny or Grandma. With Monopoly, I liked to achieve a particular result where I ended up owning certain specific properties (the cheapest and the most expensive). Grandma let me do this time after time. And Mum was scandalized by the idea that she was "letting me win". But in truth I wasn't so much interested in winning, as in achieving a particular sort of pattern. I made it a ritual rather than a game. A number of children's card games were displayed in certain shops, and I collected several sets of these, all produced by Tower Press. There were a standard five varieties: Snap, Beat your Neighbours (= the old Beggar my Neighbour), Old Maid, Donkey and Happy Families. I also collected small jig saws, some of which came with a free tattoo. But I wasn't really interested in doing jig-saws, and my first attempt at applying one of the tattoos was also my last. It looked a mess.

I was occasionally taken to the theatre when young, and the programme of my first pantomime survives. It was *Mother Goose* at the old Palace Theatre, which was then operating mainly as a cabaret theatre, before closing altogether. In later years pantomimes were always associated with the New Theatre, housed in what had once been the Assembly Rooms. A frequent star was Ronnie Hilton, who was a great local favourite. The show used to run from Boxing Day to the end of January, and we used to go at the end of the run because my birthday and Nanny's both occurred in the last days of the month. But there was also a rival touring pantomime, which had more famous stars and was to be seen for one week only at the A.B.C. Cinema (formerly the Regal). Lower down the theatrical scale, we often had a parish pantomime in the tiny hut next to St John's, Newland, which served as a parish hall. These had names like *The Pirates of Wyke* and *The Robbers of Wyke* (Wyke being the name of the town before Edward I made it Kingston-upon-Hull). I think these were just as magical to me as their professional equivalents. I particularly remember the conclusion of one of them where the leading lady gamely thanked the audience for their kind reception "even if the scenery *did* fall down". Methods of amplifying sound were very crude in those days, and both professional and amateur pantomimes were dominated by the microphone which stood in the centre of the stage and made itself the focus of the entire show. Perhaps my earliest attempts to create a stage involved the fire guard and a small thin wooden box, representing the stage and the microphone respectively. The result was perhaps more like the Hollywood Bowl than any known theatre, and I don't think I attempted to do anything with it in the way of performing, not even to myself, but it was good to know that it was there, and could be re-created at any moment.

Apart from the pantomime, there was a least one visit to *Peter Pan*, which in those days always had a Christmas season at the Scala Theatre, London, followed by a provincial tour. I saw Julia Lockwood, daughter of the even more famous Margaret, as Peter. Like many children, I was intrigued by the idea of being able to fly, in pursuit of which I skill I once jumped off the kitchen table. But I only jumped once, and very gingerly at that, since my confidence in my supernatural powers never amounted to very much. I also went to the bottom of the garden and called out "A little less noise there!" to visitors, though not so loudly that they could actually hear me.

October brought Hull Fair, one of the great surviving fairs. The range of rides that I was able to enjoy was somewhat limited, since I found anything with an up and down motion (such as

the Big Dipper) distressing rather than exhilarating. I only tried the Big Wheel once, and didn't like it, and I knew better than even to try the Steam Yachts (or "Shamrocks" as they were known locally). But I enjoyed the Waltzers and the Cyclone, and the daredevilry of the men who hopped about all over the place collecting money, even as the ride was getting into motion, and their cheerful sadism as they told the girls to scream if they wanted to go faster. And of course there was the music, since everything was done to a belting throb of the latest pop records. (For recreating the experience, I would recommend *Telstar*, played by the Tornadoes.)

Then there were the side shows. I have certainly visited a flea circus. Also a Wall of Death, with a man riding round on a motor bike accompanied by a lion. And a conjuror dressed as a Red Indian, at whose bidding my friend Wynne (always bolder than I was) got up on stage to have his head chopped off by a guillotine. Needless to say, he survived the ordeal, though his family did move to York shortly afterwards.

The gentle romance of the gallopers and steam organ did not have any effect on me when young. As with other sorts of mechanical music, I think I heard only a desperate attempt at jollity, with the sadness of poverty and deprivation lurking behind. But my greatest enthusiasm was reserved for the Ghost Train. Many years later my father, still puzzled, asked me why I had been so keen on this. I am not sure whether I was able to give him an answer even then, but I suppose it must have been because the feeble horrors of the ride are at least an attempt, however unsuccessful, to create a theatrical experience. At all events, when I was eventually given a small train set, my first thought was to convert it into a Ghost Train, with a large flat cardboard box into which the train could disappear and then re-appear.

I think I was five when the witchcraft of Punch and Judy took hold of me. I first saw this terrible, elemental, mesmerising drama on the beach at Scarborough. Inevitably, I wanted to perform as well as watch. My first puppets were acquired at Hull Fair, where a selection of Punch and Judy puppets was displayed among the candy floss and toffee apple stalls. They had excellent heads of moulded pot, attached to bodies of randomly coloured remnant, and could be fished out of the box in which they were heaped up for 1/6 (one shilling and sixpence) each. At Christmas my parents excelled themselves, and produced their most astonishing present, a Punch booth in which my father's woodworking combined with my mother's painting and sewing skills to produce a very passable miniature substitute for the one I had seen on the sands. Unfortunately, although my affection for the show has never left me, in childhood or since, I have sometimes shifted the precise focus of that affection. Most notably, it shifted from the beach at Scarborough to the Gymnasium at the Newland Orphans' Home, where J. Bursell's Punch and Judy appeared every year at the Whit Monday Carnival. This was (as I now understand) a most unusual presentation of the show, performed indoors in what was more of a fit-up theatre than a booth, with changes of scene (the curtain coming down between them) and a cast of characters much nearer to the 1828 text of Collier and Cruikshank than any normal modern version. Be that as it may, I fell in love with it, and insisted that my own booth be re-jigged in imitation. So the seaside stripes were covered over with red paper, and I became very dissatisfied with my Hull Fair puppets. My mother embarked on a set of puppets in imitation of J. Bursell's, but these were never finished. She was keen that I should take up the head-modelling (in *papier mâché*) for myself. I made a few half-hearted attempts, but they were so awful that that was really the end of the thing. In the meantime, I did do some performances in the garden for my friends, but these were almost too successful. When Punch started to beat people, they took up sticks and fought against

him. A touching tribute, I suppose, to my ability to engage an audience, but too painful to be continued indefinitely.

I think my introduction to the toy theatre may have come through *Blue Peter*, which in 1961 ran a feature on making a wooden toy theatre and lighting set. As ever, you could send off for the instructions, which were very expertly written by Peter Adams Turner, of Pollock's. When the instructions came, you were also invited to write to Peter for the stage front and orchestra. We must eventually have done this, because the theatre was first constructed with my mother's imitation of his stage front and scenery (as with the Punch booth, she was well able to produce a good imitation), but this was afterwards replaced with the genuine original. This was my ingratitude all over again, but much of her work for the theatre survives, to prove how good it was.

At some point I discovered the Treasure Hour series of cardboard theatres and models. These were sold in Woolworth's, and so were the nearest thing that boys of the post-War period had to buying their toy theatres in the way that their Regency and Victorian predecessors had bought them, not as an artificial bit of revivalism, but as a cheap, contemporary, commercial product. And as with Clarke of Garrick Street in the late Victorian period, the toy theatre took its place alongside Punch and Judy and various construction toys. But I gave no performances with these theatres. I am not quite sure why, but all I did was to construct the stages, cut out the scenery and characters, read the scripts, and dream of what the performances would be like.

In the 1960s we made several visits to Stratford-on-Avon. We were certainly there in 1964 for the Shakespeare Quatercentenary, when I saw *Henry IV Part II*, accompanied alternately by my mother and father (the other remaining outside the theatre with my sister, who was then a babe in arms). Tipped off by my mother's friend Patricia Raine, we also made a beeline for The Puppet Centre, a shop situated in Henley Street, directly opposite Shakespeare's birthplace, and owned by Waldo Lanchester, of the Lanchester Marionettes. In the wake of the Punch Tercentenary of 1962, he had an excellent Punch exhibition in a room off the shop. But he also stocked all sorts of puppets, including toy theatres and his own series of theatrical portraits based on the productions of the Royal Shakespeare Company. These included Hugh Griffith as Falstaff, a performance which I had just witnessed, and which remains to date the only performance commemorated in a portrait of this sort of which I have seen the stage original. Lanchester's toy theatres included the Treasure Hour series, but I had all of them by then, except *The Rustlers of Rocky Ranch*, and he had never heard of it. (It remains a rarity.) But they also included the Pollock's Toy Theatres that were now being produced by Marguerite Fawdry in Monmouth Street, Seven Dials. So I acquired a cardboard Victoria Theatre and three plays, with a quantity of wire slides.

So far as I remember, my dreams in the car on the way home were not of toy theatre performances but of toy theatre publishing. I immediately drafted a list of possible titles for publication, and practised drawing and lettering in the approved style. I eventually achieved a passable style of pseudo-engraved lettering, but my pseudo-engraved drawing, despite the ample opportunities offered for disguising infelicities of anatomy and perspective under a blizzard of cross-hatching, never took wing.

Actual performances were few and far between. During my last week at junior school, four friends and I were allowed to give a performance of *The Miller and his Men* before the entire school. It was an affair of no brilliance at all, the highlight being the point where I announced

that, because Scene 2 wasn't very interesting, we would we go straight on to Scene 3. This made the masters laugh uproariously.

In the south of England, Hallowe'en is often thought of as a novelty imported from America, but when I was young it was enthusiastically kept up in the north, as also in Scotland. We had "turnip" lanterns (actually made from swedes), carved with grinning faces (another of my mother's specialities), though here there was a difference from the American way of celebrating, since the Americans used pumpkins, large orange things which can now be seen in the shops every year, but which in those days I only knew from my American comics, along with jaywalking, summer camp and the paper bags used for carrying groceries home from the supermarket. But there were differences from family to family, and when I went to visit my friend Wynne after his departure to York, I was horrified to discover that in his household you were expected to fling your lantern on to the bonfire at the end of Guy Fawkes night. Mine had always been kept till it was so withered that I couldn't bear to look at it any longer, after which Mum discreetly disposed of it.

Like most provincial cities in those days, Hull had excellent Christmas lights, which the city centre shops were prosperous enough and co-operative enough to fund lavishly. The lights were appropriately vulgar, with none of the pretensions to good taste which spoil so many civic displays nowadays. For some years running, the Guinness clock was a leading feature of the festivities, and became one of my obsessions. I think I was taken to see it every evening after school.

As a toddler I had been taken to visit Father Christmas at a local department store, and was even pictured queueing up to do so on the front page of the *Hull Daily Mail*, but this well-intentioned outing was not a success. On being presented to the imposter, though not of course *bare-faced* imposter, I blurted out "Cotton wool! Cotton wool!" and had to be led away in tears. (As a first attempt at theatrical criticism, I still think this hit the nail on the head.)

By the time I was conscious of such things, the pre-War pastime of cigarette card collecting seemed to have suffered a sea-change and become tea card collecting. Although it is reported that I drank tea from a spoon when a baby, by the time I had become a toddler, I refused to have anything to do with it. In a Yorkshire household, where everything seemed to revolve round brewing pots of tea, this was to raise a flag of extreme deviance, and my parents actually sought the advice of the family doctor. As luck would have it, she was an eccentric old lady (I suppose she must have been something of a pioneer in her day), and when they complained that I would drink nothing but water, exclaimed "Lions thrive on it!", and that was the end of the interview. In any case, there seemed to have been something of a falling-off in the subject matter of the cards. Before the War they had *Kings and Queens of England* and *Stars of Stage and Screen*. Now we had *Freshwater Fish*, *Wild Flowers* and (heaven help us) *Wild Flowers, Second Series*. What came to the rescue was chewing gum cards. Despite my obsession with chewing gum machines, I only once attempted to chew gum, but found that as soon as the taste went (which was very quickly) I couldn't tolerate the disgusting residue and had to spit it out. Fortunately (and I have quite never understood this) you handed over your coin and got one small piece of gum and several cards. It was almost as if the gum was being given free with the cards, rather than *vice versa*. I only collected two series (*The Beatles* and *Flags of the World*), because the subjects moved on to football and boxing, but, all things considered, this was a return to the excitement of earlier years.

The cult of the stereoscopic viewer, whose high point seems to have been as early as the 1850s, never quite went away. A hundred years or so later, stereoscope cards were given away with Weetabix, and you could send off for a plastic viewer. More pervasively, many tourist attractions (mainly stately homes, but also things like the Stump Cross Caverns) offered a set of ten views. And once (in a shop at the seaside) I bought a set of fairy tale cards.

To mitigate the shock of my being sent to school, my mother found a little nursery school to send me to. Here I was fascinated by some little wooden figures on the mantelpiece. They were of children, with a peg where their legs would normally have been, so that they could be slotted into see-saws, swings, or roundabouts, which had holes to fit the pegs. I believe they were of Swedish manufacture. I was also fascinated by a cylinder phonograph which was sometimes brought out for my amusement. Indeed, I was so taken with it that the lady who ran the establishment was tempted to give it to me. Later, my parents saw a similar article in an antique shop at Stamford Bridge, but reluctantly (and I think guiltily, because they often talked about it afterwards) decided that it was too expensive. So one recurrent pattern in my young life was that of NOT being presented with cylinder phonographs. Some years later, I was given a Tri-ang Lionel model of Edison's original machine, and on another occasion a model of Gutenberg's press from the same series. Both were fun to make, and the press managed to print a small fragment of a Gutenberg Bible. But although I bellowed "Mary had a little lamb" into the phonograph horn, in humble imitation of Edison, I never managed to get the machine to play back anything recognizable.

My parents were of a generation which still felt attached to the church, but didn't go very often. When first taken to church as a toddler, I became excited when the organ struck up and danced in the aisle, having to be yanked out of the way of an approaching procession of choir and clergy. This, of course, was before self-consciousness set in, and a few years later I would have died sooner than do anything of the sort. More conventionally, I attended Sunday School, where I was very keen on the stamps which we were given each week, to be stuck in (suitably Gothic) albums. The stamps were mostly in an old-fashioned style of biblical illustration, but one series was done in a bright modern style which I liked very much at the time and which I still find pleasure in looking over. I was keen enough to want to create my own albums, and Mum duly took me to Friar's Crag, a religious supplies shop, to buy a sheet of stamps. Inevitably, I published my own album (limited edition of one) to stick them in. I also coveted a book called *Church Teaching for the Kindergarten*, which contained the lessons which the stamps illustrated. It chanced that I had to go into hospital to have my tonsils removed, To cheer me up, I was given a copy of the book to take with me. It did as much as anything could have done to keep my spirits up, but the hospital staff must have thought I had very cruel and unusual parents, to leave me with such impossibly dull reading matter for company.

School proper, when it arrived, came in the form of Froebel House, a small and eccentric school founded by Miss Musgrave (a terrifying apparition, all in black) and her sister Miss Winifred. In accordance with a principle that pursued me throughout my education, I was good at abstract subjects and dimly bad where any knowledge of the real world was required. At the infant stage, I dreaded nature study but shone in mathematics. In particular, I was fascinated by the various series of sum cards (and later tables cards) that we had to work through. Each series was of a different colour, the earlier series hand-written on thick card and varnished, the later ones type-set on thinner card (each with two supplementary "Black Cards" printed on the back) and also varnished. The tables cards were typed on paper, and got

you through Avoirdupois Weight and Troy Weight and so on, till you scaled the final, giddy height of the Kings and Queens of England, divided into Houses, with their dates of reigning. I should love to have known who devised of all these cards, but I didn't ask. I had early found that people didn't take enquiries of this sort seriously, and tended to fob you off with silly or evasive answers. Some relief came when I acquired a toy typewriter, and I could attempt to create my own versions of the tables cards. But the toy typewriter typed in sans serif italics, and had a blue ribbon, and although at my then age I couldn't have named the fount, I had a good enough eye to be less than satisfied with what I was able to produce.

For indoor recreation, singing games were taught to us from Linda Chesterman's *Music for the Nursery School*, and this became another object of desire for me. The copy used at school had a tear at the bottom of the "Incy Wincy Spider" page, and when I was given a copy of my own, I did something dreadfully revealing. I went and hid, so that I could tear the same page. I then went and remarked innocently to my mother how strange it was that it should be torn in the same place as the school copy. I don't think she believed the coincidence was accidental.

For one blessed year, the school took on a P.E. teacher whose main enthusiasm was Scottish country dancing. This I enjoyed so much that I asked if could go to the classes which she held in the evening at the Co-operative Institute opposite the New Theatre. Whereas the theatre had once been the Assembly Rooms, the Institute had had been the School of Medicine, and had an Egyptian doorway. My mother was worried that the classes might only be for the Scots *émigré* community, so she wrote a letter, which I remember bringing back with the words "Not only for Scots" written across the bottom. She made me a kilt, which she would have preferred to make in Black Watch tartan (more dignified, I suppose), but I plumped for Royal Stewart (brighter and more cheerful), and every week I went off with 1/6d. in my little sporran (1/- for the lesson and 6d. for refreshments). Most of the other dancers were older girls, and I don't think I was ever very expert, so they must have been very tolerant. As ever, I wanted to do more than just learn, and Tuesday evenings were now enlivened by my attempts to teach the dances to Grandma and her next-door neighbour. At this time, I had none of the correct music (and very little knowledge of what I was doing), though later on a couple of EPs of the proper music became two of the most treasured and most oft-played records in my collection.

My parents endeavoured to take me to displays of Scottish dancing whenever possible, and two of these occasions (one on a school playing field at home, and one during a holiday in Oban) also gave me my first glimpses of morris dancing. Although Hull had a thriving folk scene, my parents were not remotely connected to it, and I don't think it occurred to me that this was something you could go and learn. At all events, what I did do, as so often, was to make plans on paper (never shown to anyone, of course), in which I divided up my friends (and some who hardly qualified as anything more than acquaintance) into two morris teams, with the ones I didn't like much assigned to the role of hobby horse. There had to be two teams because I had only seen two lots of morris dancing, one with the "tourney" type of hobby horse and one with the "mast" type, and I had no way of knowing that either was better than the other.

There were also out-of-school activities which I acquiesced in, without going so far as to ask to do them. I had piano lessons for a year or two, but these were only moderately successful. The teacher found for me was not especially sympathetic, and one day I came out of my lesson crying. My father let her know that if it happened again the lessons would be stopped. It did happen again, and that was that. I have since wondered whether, when I started having

swimming lessons, he didn't issue the swimming teacher with a similar warning *in advance*, because she never attempted to teach me anything, and I went for what seemed like years without making any progress at all. At 8 I became a Wolf Cub (as they were in those days), and was quite a successful one, getting lots of badges and becoming a Sixer. But after the transition to the Scouts, I couldn't find the same enjoyment in it, and eventually left.

Round about the age of 8, I read enormous amounts of Enid Blyton, especially the Five Find-Outers (who were more suburban and therefore more approachable than the Famous Five), *The Naughtiest Girl in the School* (with its surprisingly radical ideas on how a school might be run), as well as the more conventional Mallory Towers and St Clair's series. In none of them do the heady emotions aroused by Noddy recur. Not long ago I re-read *The Mystery of the Pantomime Cat* (mainly for its subject-matter), but it seemed poor stuff. Truth to tell, it is the very limitations of Enid Blyton, literary and socio-political, that make her books so easy to gallop through when this is what you need. The great favourites of my junior school years were Tove Jansson's Moomin books (which I think I discovered through hearing one read on *Jackanory*) and, above all, the *Swallows and Amazons* books of Arthur Ransome. My sister has always found it amusing that these books about excessively practical children should have appealed to me. But, while I realise that I would have been useless in a boat, I did have one practical skill that features prominently in the books, the (now lost?) art of semaphore, thanks to my Signaller's badge. So I was able to read the mysterious messages of dancing figures, and even to exchange messages written in this form with one or two friends.

I enjoyed the Narnia books of C. S. Lewis, and also Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, but I couldn't get on with the rest of Tolkien. I was given a beautiful set of *The Lord of the Rings* one Christmas, but although I went at it doggedly, and was looking forward to the section on Elvish at the end, not even that inducement could get me to the end. I got half-way through the middle volume, before giving up for good. There were many things I barely tried, such as the *Just William* books, which I now enjoy hearing read on the wireless. I once tried to read a Biggles novel, but got no further than the first page.

At junior school age, I began a slow move away from fictional reading matter to factual. In particular, armed with the dates of the Kings and Queens of England, I devoured the works of R. J. Unstead greedily, as well as other books of history for children. I also subscribed to *Knowledge*, one of those "magazines that build week by week into an encyclopaedia". It was of Italian origin, as hinted at by the stylish cover illustrations, signed A. Fedini.

At Christmas 1966 I was given a tape recorder. It was apparently one of a bad batch, because the man from whose shop it had come (a crony of my father's) kept asking after it. All the others had developed faults, and only ours continued working. (It can still be coaxed into action from time to time.) During the Christmas week *Jackanory* devoted its programmes to toy theatre performances, presented by Bernard Cribbins. These I was able to record, the sound part at least, which in those pre-video days was as much as you could aspire to. In fact, the tape recorder became a focus of my performing ambitions (or lack of them), and I created soundtracks for performances that were never to be made real. At about the same time I was able to exchange my toy typewriter for a real one, one that typed in black, in a serified roman fount. So I was able to add to my activities the typing of scripts for plays that were never going to be performed. And at senior school I was able to produce form magazines and scripts for plays. These were for real (not cardboard) actors, and were really performed, as part of the inter-form drama competition. These efforts brought me into contact with one of my great loves, the duplicating machine. Having mastered the art of drawing on a Roneo

stencil, I was finally able to do some of my own toy theatre printing and publishing, not very much and not very good, but enough to satisfy the pent-up cravings.