



Colin Welch

“Dear Little Noddy”

A Parent's Lament

IF YOU have small children and they don't like Noddy, you are very lucky. I have; they do; I am not. This insipid wooden doll, with its nodding head crowned with cap and bell, with its taxi and its friend Big Ears, has opened a rift between parents and children which time alone may heal. They love it; we don't. And we can't agree to differ, live and let live, because we parents have to sit and read the stuff to them.

The Noddy business has by now taken its place among Britain's major non-warlike industries, along with sauce-bottling, the pools, cheesecake photography and the manufacture of ice-lollies, righteous indignation, and plastic pixies. The business is founded on the mass-production of Noddy books, of which 12 million had been sold two years ago: 12 titles, that is to say, and about a million sold of each. The export branch produces Noddy books in countless foreign languages, including Tamil, Hebrew, and Swahili. By-products, controlled by five separate companies, include Noddy soap and Noddy chocolates, Noddy pyjamas and nighties, Noddy painting books, jig-saws, Christmas annuals, cut-outs on cereal packets and models (“smashing fun modelling Noddy and his friends: all easily made from Sculptorcraft Rubber Moulds”). Noddy has also appeared on television and the West End stage, though not yet at the Royal Court.

Noddy's onlie begetter is a former school-mistress called Enid Blyton. She has been

described by William Hickey as “a sweet-looking woman in her middle years. The outstanding thing about her is her eyes. They are deep and kind.” The really outstanding thing about her is her industry. In the five years 1948–52 inclusive, she managed to fill nearly four close-printed columns of Whitaker's Cumulative Book List—261 titles by my count. In 1955, she clocked up 59 titles, more than a book a week (not all of them about Noddy, of course). Last year, flagging slightly, she only managed 28. She also produces a fortnightly magazine (“the only magazine I write”), runs four children's clubs (the Famous Five Club, the Busy Bees, the Sunbeam Society, and the Magazine Club), and personally answers a thousand or more fan-letters a week.

The scale of her activities has naturally aroused suspicion that she must be a corporate entity like Dumas et Cie, or even some sort of electronic brain. These allegations she indignantly denies: it is all her own work, all done by hand. “Once I get started,” she has said, “I've just got to go on and on. Oh, I love it. . . . Stories flow from my imagination like cotton from a reel.” According to her husband, “It has been a constant battle to restrain her from working. The sheer effort of turning out 10,000 words daily—sometimes 14,000—has resulted in heart-strain. She never lets up. . . . She is a remarkable woman, but now she must rest.” 14,000 words daily—if we assume a seven-hour writing day—

means 2,000 words an hour, about 33 words a minute, a word every two seconds. Miss Blyton’s style may be flat, her material banal, her method unreflective; written at such a lick it is astonishing that her works make as much sense as they do. Measured beside this literary Stakhanovite, such prodigies of productivity as Trollope, Zola, and Balzac shrink to mere idle dilettantes.

MISS BLYTON is, by Johnson’s definition, no blockhead. Even two years ago, the royalties on Noddy alone totalled £400,000. With an income estimated at £50,000 a year, she must be about the highest paid woman in the British Isles. It would be quite wrong, however, to assume that she writes only for money. She writes not merely to amuse, but to edify. Her art is not for art’s sake. She is committed: she has A Message.

“Into my books,” she says, “I pack ethical and moral teaching. . . . I do not write merely to entertain. My public, bless them, find in my books a sense of security, an anchor, a sure sense that right is always right and that such things as courage and kindness deserve to be emulated.” Thus does she range herself firmly with Dr. F. R. Leavis against Lord David Cecil’s hedonistic aestheticism.

If not “merely” entertaining, however, the Noddy books undoubtedly do entertain the people they are meant to entertain. The sales are unanswerable—the more so, since the books could not possibly entertain anyone else. Noddy books are not enjoyed by grown-ups and forced upon children: they are enjoyed by children and forced upon grown-ups. The story behind practically every copy sold is of a delighted child and an adult’s dead body.

The essence of a children’s classic—perhaps of any classic—is that it can be enjoyed at a number of different levels. The adventures of Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-glass; the tales of Grimm and Andersen; the wistful nonsense of Edward Lear; Beatrix Potter’s strange stories, in which the matter-of-fact surface half conceals a sort of mysterious poetry; The Wind in the Willows, Doctor Doolittle and Winnie the

Pooh—all these books have delighted generations of children. They have also delighted generations of grown-ups. And when parents read them to their children, it is to experience a complex harmony of pleasures: they find delight in the book itself; they recapture the delight it once brought them as children; and they see awakened that same delight in a new generation. These books thus form a most precious link between the generations, binding them together, part of the family, forever part of the life of each member of it.

To compare, say, Winnie the Pooh with Noddy is not really unfair. Both appeal primarily to the same age group, both with complete success. In other respects, the difference is startling. The Pooh stories are written with wit, taste and economy of means, and with an almost magical felicity of form. For sheer craftsmanship take the story “in which Pooh and Piglet go hunting and nearly catch a woozle.” The mounting suspense as these two enchanting fools plod round and round the tree in the snow, tracking first one woozle, then two, three, and four, and the effortless way in which the illusion is finally pricked, make this in miniature a perfect short story. Compared with such happy mastery, Noddy is mere drooling, shapeless meandering—“cotton from a reel.”

If children enjoy Noddy, is that all that matters? Miss Blyton, of course, wouldn’t think so; neither would I. By writing ruthlessly *down* to children, she does not merely bore and antagonise grown-ups. Her Noddy books also fail to stretch the imagination of children, to enlarge their experience, to kindle wonder in them or awaken their delight in words. They contain nothing incomprehensible even to the dimmest child, nothing mysterious or stimulating. They have no “contact with nescience”; they never suggest new and exciting fields to conquer. By putting everything within reach of the child mind, they enervate and cripple it. “Those children,” says Miss Blyton, “who find exams easier to pass and scholarships easier to win, are nearly always those who have been much read to in their earlier years.” It is hard to see how a diet of Miss Blyton could help with

the 11-plus or even with the Cambridge English Tripos. It certainly did not help poor Christopher Craig, of whom, at his trial for murder, it was stated that "the only books he knows anything about are the books of Enid Blyton, which he gets other people to read for him."

THE idea that children should have special books is a fairly modern one. Until Victorian days, children by and large read grown-up books or none. In Noddy, "the book for children" is carried logically *ad absurdum*. Victorian children's books often involve long words and quite complex intellectual and moral problems. Since then children's books (not excluding "Winnie the Pooh" of course, in which "writing down" is used half-ironically) have been more and more closely geared to the supposed intellectual powers of their public. Enid Blyton is perhaps the first successful writer of children's books to write actually *below* her audience. "Only not-so-bright children like Enid Blyton," was the acid comment of a town librarian. "My books," replied Miss Blyton, somewhat irrelevantly, "are read in palaces as well as in working-class homes. They are suitable for every child's mentality." In fact, her appeal is not only to the not-so-bright. Her books seem to possess a mysterious fascination for all children, bright and not-so-bright alike.

To what ends, then, does Miss Blyton use her influence over children? It is not easy to say. For all her protestations of lofty purpose, there is little explicit moralising in the Noddy books. One can only go by the characters Miss Blyton appears to find sympathetic. Of these the chief is Noddy himself.

Noddy is not perhaps intended to be admirable. According to his creator, he "is like the children themselves, but more naïve and stupid. Children like that—it makes them feel superior. He is the helpless little man who gets into trouble and invites sympathy—a children's version of the early Charlie Chaplin." But he is undoubtedly intended to be attractive and influential. He is always "dear little Noddy"; he is "always so friendly and polite that everyone likes him"; "he is

quite the nicest person in Toy Village"; he cleans his teeth, brushes his hair, polishes his shoes, drinks his milk, eats his bread; he can make children respect policemen, tidy their rooms, eat up their porridge; echoing his creator, he thinks it "good to work hard and earn lots of money"; he is also an artist who composes (or rather "feels coming," like Elgar) songs which, sung by the composer, are invariably received with rapturous enthusiasm. Mr. and Mrs. Tubby Bear like to hear one every morning; "Isn't he clever?" says Miss Rabbit; "How *does* Noddy think of his songs?" asks Miss Blyton: "no wonder everyone is clapping him and calling for more." Several critics have thought Wagner rash actually to incorporate in *Die Meistersinger* a melody, the Prize Song, which he himself declared to be of transcendent beauty, a masterpiece: wiser perhaps, to have funk'd the challenge and left it to the imagination. Miss Blyton is equally intrepid. Her pages are lavishly enriched with the fruits of Noddy's genius, of which the following—greeted as usual with universal applause and cheers—is a fair sample:

*"I'm only little Noddy
Who's got a song to sing,
And a little car to ride in,
And a bell to jingle-jingle.
I've a little house to live in
And a little garage too.
But I've something BIG inside me,
And that's my love for YOU—
My love for ALL of you!"*

The "little-man" sentimentality and crooner's clichés of this declaration are in fact redolent less of "the early Charlie Chaplin" than of the mature Norman Wisdom—to whom in other respects Noddy bears a certain resemblance.

HIS poetic gifts apart, to call Noddy "more naïve and stupid" than any normal child is a gross understatement. His imbecility is almost indecent. It is somehow symbolised by the ceaseless nodding of his head, a movement—presumably involuntary—upon which great emphasis is placed. The

clinical explanation of this palsy or St. Vitus's dance is that the victim's head is supported by a spring. Yet, in the light of Noddy's manifest feeble-mindedness, it is bound to acquire a deeper and more sinister significance. One recalls Zinsser's description of St. John's Evil, a mediæval scourge in which whole villages, driven mad by want and misery, went about shaking and nodding. As characters in Dickens and Wagner have their own catch-phrases or themes, so Noddy nods—or “nid-nods.” “There goes the little nodding man,” cries everyone in Toyland. “Look at his head nid-nodding as he drives.” Noddy himself seems to regard his affliction with pride; it also appears to give pleasure to others. Noddy's milkman is paid in nods: “He tapped Noddy's head again as soon as it began to stop nodding and made it nod again, up and down, up and down. ‘Payment for *two* bottles,’ he said.”

More striking even than Noddy's imbecility is his timidity, which again borders on the pathological. Courage may be “a thing to be emulated”; it is not emulated by Noddy. He is terrified of everything. His friend, Big Ears, a 100-year-old Brownie who acts as a sort of father- or male-nurse symbol, knocks at the door: “‘Rat-a-tat-a-tat.’ Little Noddy woke up in a hurry and almost fell out of bed in fright. His little wooden head began to nod madly.” Bouncing balls scare him so much that he wants to get down a rabbit-hole. He is terrified by the sea (“It's too big. Let's go and find a dear little sea. This one's too big and it keeps moving”) and by holidays: “‘They sound sort of prickly,’ said Noddy. Big Ears laughed and laughed. ‘Not *holly*-days made of prickly *holly*!’ he said” (Big Ears' laughter is timely: this is about as near a joke as Miss Blyton gets). When four golliwogs steal his taxi and all his clothes (including “his dear little trousers and shoes”), “Noddy couldn't move an inch. He was so full of alarm that he couldn't say a word. . . . He wriggled and shouted and wailed ‘You bad, wicked golliwogs’ . . . Noddy was all alone in the dark wood. ‘Help!’ he called. ‘Oh, help, help, HELP! I'm little Noddy and I'm all alone and LOST.’” He is overwhelmed

by self-pity. “He stumbled along through the trees, tears running down his cheeks.

*I've lost my hat,
I've lost my car;
I simply don't know
Where they are!
I'm all alone;
Won't ANYBODY
Come to help
Poor little Noddy?’* **

Help, of course, is soon forthcoming, in the shape of Big Ears and Mr. Plod the policeman, who arrest the golliwogs and restore Noddy's possessions to him. Though utterly resourceless himself, Noddy is never in trouble for long. There is always somebody to run to, someone to whine and wail at. The machinery of benevolent authority (Big Ears) or of the state (Mr. Plod) can always be invoked to redress the balance between cowardice, weakness, and inanity on the one hand, and vigour, strength, and resource on the other. In some respects, the Noddy books give the impression of being an unintentional yet not wholly inaccurate satire on—or parody of—the welfare state and its attendant attitudes of mind.

IF NODDY is “like the children themselves,” it is the most unpleasant child that he most resembles. He is querulous, irritable, and humourless.† “‘Whoo-ooo-ooo!’ said the

* One of the books is entitled *Be Brave, Little Noddy!* Fortified by the moral support of Big Ears and by copious draughts of “raspberry syrup,” Noddy manages to sing “A Brave Song”:

*“Oh, what does it matter (sniff, sniff, sniff)
When things go wrong (oh, dear, oh, dear!)
I'll sing and I'll whistle
The whole day long! (sniff-sniff-sniff)”*

† Humour is not perhaps Miss Blyton's own strongest point. In *Take It From Here*, Joy Nichols once declared that “her little boy was never happier than when he was curled up in front of the fire with Enid Blyton.” This harmless pleasantry produced explosions of indignation from “Green Hedges”—Miss Blyton's house at Beaconsfield. “Shocking, disgusting,” commented her husband: “We were furious.” Sir William Haley and the B.B.C.'s chief of variety were bombarded with demands for a deletion and apologies. My own request, couched in terms of conventional civility, for an interview in connection with this article also produced unexpectedly dramatic repercussions. I have accordingly relied where quoting Miss Blyton on statements already published.

wind at the top of its voice, and blew some flowers out of a jug on Noddy's table. 'Don't,' said Noddy. 'Now look at the mess you've made! It's my busy morning, too!' A clockwork clown turns somersaults in Noddy's garden. "Do stop, Clown," Noddy frets, "you always make me feel so dizzy. . . . Oh, don't start going head-over-heels again. Look, you've squashed one of my plants." He is unnaturally priggish. "I would rather like to see you knock a lamp-post down," says the clown: "BANG! What a noise it would make." "Now you're being silly," is Noddy's sanctimonious reply. He is also a sneak. An elephant from Mr. Noah's Ark wants Noddy to drive it to the wood, so that it can knock down trees: "that's what real elephants do," it explains. Noddy, of course, is "alarmed." "That's silly and dangerous . . . you're a very bad elephant. I shall tell Mr. Noah of you." The elephant struggles into the taxi. "'Please get out,' begged little Noddy"—all to no avail. Off they go, Noddy's head nodding sadly ("Whatever was he to do?") and the elephant thoroughly enjoying itself, blowing the horn and making everyone jump "dreadfully." Soon the elephant goes to sleep. Noddy's head nods "madly"; he smiles to himself: "he

knows what to do." "What to do" is, of course, to drive the elephant to Mr. Noah's Ark, report it, and request that it be smacked: "Certainly, certainly, certainly," says Mr. Noah.

In this witless, spiritless, snivelling, sneaking doll the children of England are expected to find themselves reflected. From it they are to derive "ethical and moral" edification. But Noddy is not merely an example: he is a symbol. Noddy, according to Miss Blyton, "is completely English, and stands for the English way of life. He's very popular in Germany. It's interesting to think that a generation of young Germans is absorbing English standards and English morals." The Russians, it seems, have pirated some of Miss Blyton's books, but not yet Noddy. "I wish they would," says Miss Blyton. "I don't care about the royalties—I should like the Russian children to read English stories. It might help them to understand our way of life." It is disquieting to reflect that they might indeed.

It remains only to add that Miss Blyton was a strong supporter of Suez. So, I bet, was Noddy: indeed, circumstantial evidence might suggest that he was the moving spirit behind the whole enterprise.

Robert Guillain

Not by Rice Alone . . .

A Report from Hongkong

THE presence of discontent in China may have been denied by propagandists in the West, but it was very well known to the party leaders. Moreover, Mao Tse-tung and the collective leadership in Peking had retained enough insight to realise that the time had come to do something about it. For seven long years the party had brought the people to white heat, shaped them and hammered them. As a good Marxist with a feeling for the expediency of anti-thesis, Mao saw it was time to reverse the rôles. It was the moment to put the party on the anvil and re-forge it under the blows of popular feeling.

The new policy began in the spring of 1956 when the famous slogan "let a hundred flowers bloom" was first put out in Peking. It was followed a year later by Mao's speeches of February 27 and March 12 on "contradictions." Until June, Mao's theses on the right way of treating contradictions were studied in the party, but were not published. However, on April 13 the *People's Daily* dealt with the essential points in a long leading article that was significant enough to be immediately reproduced in *Pravda*. With engaging candour it admitted that there were tensions between the people and the People's Government. The chief cause of this "contradiction" was "bureaucratism." Communists no longer knew what was happening among the masses; they were deaf to the complaints of the people; they had "grossly violated the rights and interests of the masses" and had even "exerted brutal pressure." In so doing they had aroused the natural resentment of the people.

The newspaper then announced a "rectification" campaign, which was to be conducted on three levels: (1) discussion of the people's grievances; (2) confession by the Communist cadres of their errors; (3) education of the masses to make them more Marxist so that they would understand that a great deal of time and effort was still required before they could achieve socialism.

A central committee directive issued on April 27 and published on the 30th set the rectification movement going. It was to last six months, that is, to November 1.

Within a few days the masses of Chinese were swept into one of those whirlwind campaigns which the régime is so expert at organising. From Peking to the most remote village, 600 million Chinese met for discussion and criticism. At countless gatherings throughout the country they spoke out more openly than they had ever done before. There was no institution, no administrative centre, no small market town where the citizens were not summoned to a forum at which, in contrast to former occasions when counter-revolutionaries and enemies of the people were sought out, a new type of hunt was set on foot, a hunt for "contradictions" and failings. And the watchword was no longer: "be silent." It was: "speak up."

"Like a Summer Breeze"

THERE was another fundamental difference between the rectification campaign of spring 1957 and earlier purges. The directive explicitly prohibited the use of coercion. All the classic procedures of earlier cam-