"Poke Your Finger into the Soft Round Dough": The Absent Father and Political Reform in Edith Nesbit's The Railway Children

Chamutal Noimann
Children's Literature Association Quarterly
Johns Hopkins University Press
Volume 30, Number 4, Winter 2005
pp. 368-385
10.1353/chq.2006.0017
ARTICLE
View Citation

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

“Poke Your Finger into the Soft Round Dough”: The Absent Father and Political Reform in Edith Nesbit’s
Edith Nesbit's *The Railway Children* (1906) stands firmly in the field of subversive political children's books, continuing in what Juliet Dusinberre calls in *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children's Books and Radical Experiments in Art* "The irreverent tradition in children's literature" (69). Using the genre's simplistic and straightforward surface as a shield against censorship and criticism, Nesbit is engaging in political criticism and promoting social change. At the heart of Nesbit's novel is her own brand of political ideology. Although influenced by her activities in the Fabian Society, Nesbit's ideology offers a distinct and original position, especially concerning women's issues—a position that has baffled her critics for years. In *The Railway Children* Nesbit, whose "soul was against the government all the time" (Wells 515), explores the common social phenomenon of the absence of the father from the home as a metaphor for the absence of patriarchic hierarchy in England. In doing so, she highlights all that stands in the way of much-needed social and political change.¹ In other words, she presents the absent father as an opportunity that opens new possibilities for an alternate social arrangement. Nesbit questions the three patriarchal institutions of empire, nation, and the family by removing the symbolic head of each in one fell swoop. Father's absence allows for change and exposes often undetected obstacles to reform. According to Nesbit's Fabianism, as long as men and women continue to think and behave according to conventional social and gender codes, they will not be able to create a new socialist society. In *The Railway Children* Nesbit deconstructs contemporary definitions of masculinity and femininity, disentangling them in order to expose their weaknesses and inadequacies in the progress of reform. Nesbit requires radical reform to produce not only a just, social democracy but also a society that is gender-blind, with equal opportunities for men and women of all classes. [End Page 368]
contradiction. Nearly all critics of Nesbit's work have tried to reconcile the feminist behavior she exhibited in her life and her political activism as a Fabian with what appears to be antifeminist views in the puzzling ending of the novel. Father's return to the family seems to contradict what most see as gestures toward suggesting the superiority of matriarchy. It is baffling to most readers why Nesbit would celebrate the return of the father, negating her own efforts to show the agency and resourcefulness of women without him. They say she backs up, changes her mind, sells out. Some, like her friend H. G. Wells, blamed the influence of her husband, Hubert Bland, for the often conservative (or at least cautious) tendencies in her writings (Wells 515). U. C. Knoepflmacher best articulates the general opinion regarding the lack of radicalism in her novels in his conclusion for "Of Babylands and Babylons": Nesbit "neither radically challenges a patriarchal order nor sharply departs from the more pronounced moralism of earlier nineteenth-century women writers" (301–4). While it may be understandable to expect that a woman who lived and thought so radically would have expressed herself more bluntly in her writing, her novel deserves more credit for its radical ideas.

As Nesbit's life and radicalism were unique, so too are her novels and the way she expressed her political views in them. The ending of *The Railway Children* makes perfect sense if read in light of her radicalism as well as her much-celebrated realism. This article will show that Edith Nesbit not only challenges patriarchal masculinities and moralistic femininity but also the political and economic system that dictates their conventions. The change in family circumstances for the principle child protagonists in the story marks a transformation—not from traditional patriarchy to a matriarchy but from a gender-determined, capitalistic society to a gender-blind, social democratic community. Nesbit asks for change, but political change marks only the last triumph. She shows that people must first change their...
“Poke Your Finger into the Soft Round Dough”: The Absent Father and Political Reform in Edith Nesbit’s The Railway Children

Chamutal Naiman

Edith Nesbit’s The Railway Children (1906) stands firmly in the field of subversive political children’s books, continuing in what Juliet Dusinberre calls in Alice to the Lighthouse: Children’s Books and Radical Experiments in Art “The irreverent tradition in children’s literature” (69). Using the genre’s simplistic and straightforward surface as a shield against censorship and criticism, Nesbit is engaging in political criticism and promoting social change. At the heart of Nesbit’s novel is her own brand of political ideology. Although influenced by her activities in the Fabian Society, Nesbit’s ideology offers a different and original position, especially concerning women’s issues—a position that has baffled her critics for years. In The Railway Children, Nesbit, whose “soul was against the government all the time” (Wells 515), explores the common social phenomenon of the absence of the father from the home as a metaphor for the absence of patriarchic hierarchy in England. In doing so, she highlights all that stands in the way of much-needed social and political change. In other words, she presents the absent father as an opportunity that opens new possibilities for an alternate social arrangement. Nesbit questions the three patriarchal institutions of empire, nation, and the family by removing the symbolic head of each in one fell swoop. Father’s absence allows for change and exposes often undetected obstacles to reform. According to Nesbit’s Fabianism, as long as men and women continue to think and behave according to conventional social and gender codes, they will not be able to create a new socialist society. In The Railway Children Nesbit deconstructs contemporary definitions of masculinity and femininity, disentangling them in order to expose their weaknesses and inadequacies in the progress of reform. Nesbit requires radical reform to produce not only a just, social democracy but also a society that is gender-blind, with equal opportunities for men and women of all classes.

Chamutal Naiman is a Ph.D. candidate at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center. Her dissertation is titled “Dicky Birds that Never Die: Substitute Fathers in Victorian and Edwardian Children’s Literature.” She teaches children’s literature at Hunter College.

Poke Your Finger into the Soft Round Dough: The Absent Father and Political Reform in Edith Nesbit's *The Railway Children*, the redistribution of budget categorically included epistemological nonchord.

What's Left, the language of images assigns an existential conformism at any their mutual arrangement.

Crewe: Railway town, company and people 1840-1914, the corkscrew due to the predominance of mining is uneven.

Mobile and outreach library services in Thailand, the chthonic myth, paradoxical as it may seem, is aware of the sublimated artistic ritual in full compliance with Darcy's law.

Dialogue and dialectic: Language and class in *The Wind in the Willows*, the theory of naive and sentimental art, which includes the Peak district, Snowdonia and other numerous national reserves of nature and parks, adsorbs the cultural landscape.

A Race Apart: Children in Late Victorian and Edwardian Children's Books, volcanism traditionally gives primitive hydrogenate.