

Poke Your Finger into the Soft Round Dough:

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The Absent Father and Political Reform in
Edith Nesbit's The Railway Children.

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

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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

The Railway Children

Chamutal Noimann (bio)

Edit h Nesbit 's *The Railway Children* (1906) stands firmly in t he 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 t he genre's simplistic and straight forward surface as a shield against censorship and criticism, Nesbit is engaging in political criticism and promoting social change. At t he heart of Nesbit 's novel is her own brand of political ideology. Alt hough influenced by her activities in t he Fabian Society, Nesbit 's ideology offers a dist inct and original position, especially concerning women's issues—a position t hat has baffled her critics for years. In *The Railway Children* Nesbit, whose "soul was against t he government all t he time" (Wells 515), explores t he common social phenomenon of t he absence of t he father from t he home as a metaphor for t he absence of patriarchic hierarchy in England. In doing so, she highlights all t hat stands in t he way of much-needed social and political change.¹ In other words, she presents t he absent father as an opportunity t hat opens new possibilities for an alternate social arrangement. Nesbit questions t he three patriarchal institutions of empire, nation, and t he family by removing t he 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 t hink and behave according to conventional social and gender codes, t hey 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 t heir weaknesses and inadequacies in t he progress of reform. Nesbit requires radical reform to produce not only a just, social democracy but also a society t hat is gender-blind, with equal opportunities for men and women of all classes. **[End Page 368]**

To many of its readers, *The Railway Children* presents a perplexing

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. Knoepfelmacher 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, capitalist 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...

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Chamutal Naimann

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Chamutal Naimann 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.

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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

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