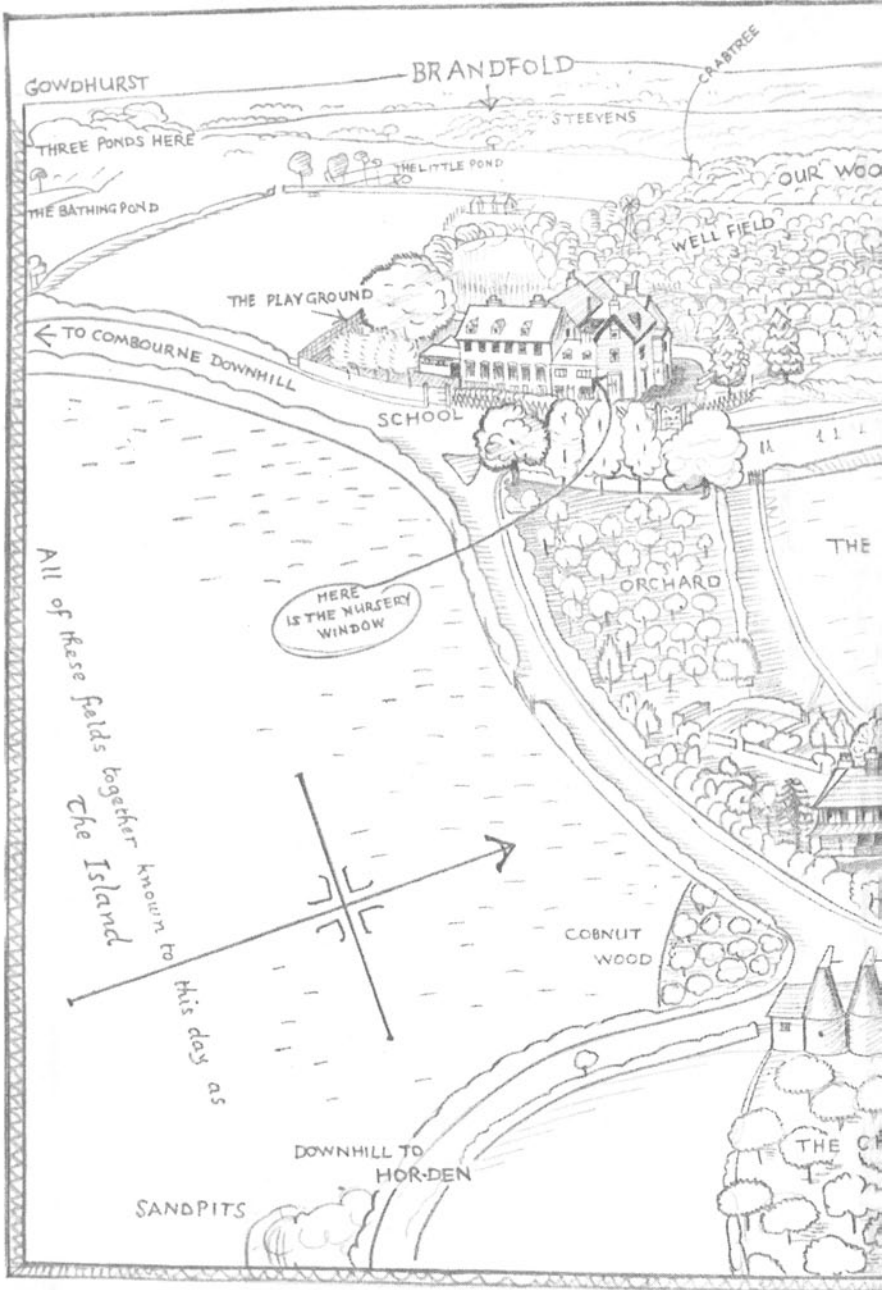
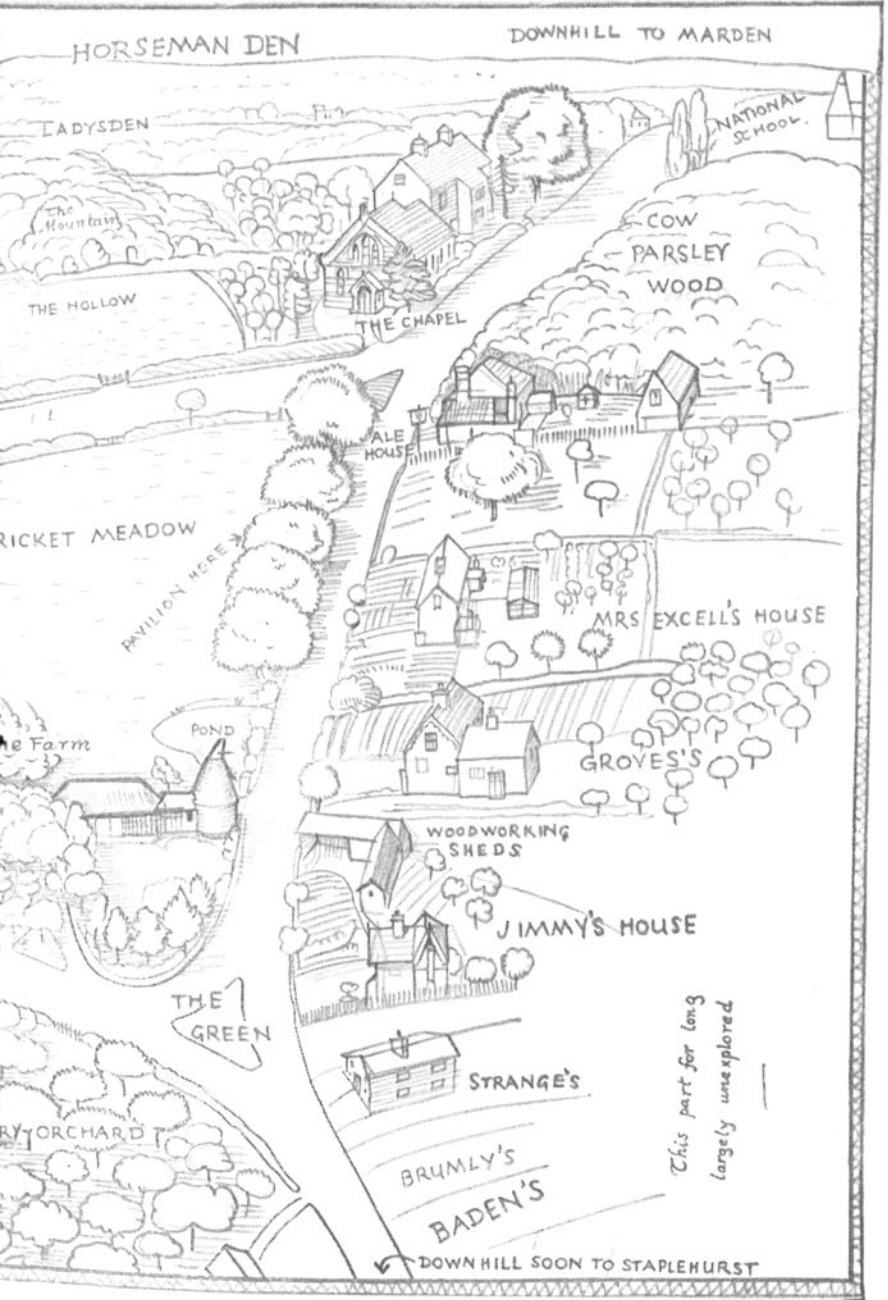


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# THE SMALL YEARS

BY

FRANK KENDON

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With an Introduction by

WALTER DE LA MARE

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I DEDICATE  
THESE PLEASANT MEMORIES  
TO MY FATHER

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*“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the word of life. For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness.”*

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## INTRODUCTION

“The memories contained in this book,” says Mr Frank Kendon himself, and far too modestly, “are not much, but they are something which the world could not have without me. If I was luckier in my earth than many thousands, I am but trying to leave them the shadowy form of my joys, to wrestle with the angel of childhood till he tells me his secret.” On the page that follows this there are references, lit with the light of the imagination, to the cuckoo, to snow, and then to the furtive childish rapture of stealing raspberries and gooseberries in a garden, creeping smally there among the bushes in that chequer of sun and shadow of the twigs and leaves—“and your hand going in among them.” And these last seven words alone would be proof that he has not wrestled in vain. They tell of a secret something which is of a child’s experience only and which is as clearly a divination of “the small years” as is his statement that “It is terrible to be in an ecstasy of joy, alone.” And so again, in the passage that tells of his first enraptured glimpse of the blue of the

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succory flower—"I am partly what I am, even to-day," he says, "because I found it then, *with my eyes for my spirit*... I am sure that the very fact that I remember it proves that it nourished life in me, and is part of me and indestructible."

Mr Kendon's book is an account, then, of the first few years of his childhood, a childhood seen in the retrospect of about thirty years. It is extraordinarily vivid and abundant, but even those of us whose glimpses of our "angel infancy" are far fewer and less vivid than his would agree that a light and intensity and a simple richness of being were ours then which is rare indeed in later life, and that we look back on those early days across a blue rift, as it were, of air and time—that an abyss divides us from them. The spirit within returns in glimpses thither as if to a world of dream. What causes that abyss?

It appears to be true, at any rate, that the childhood of a poet, as it is described by Mr Kendon, though it may differ in degree of delight and rapture, does not differ in kind from the childhood of other men. And reading such a book as this we realise that it is not the world of childhood which has changed, but that our

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attention and desire and interest have changed. It is *we* ourselves who are to blame, if blame there be. We realise also that in those far days we did not “measure distance by length but by remoteness, not by how far we had to go or had come, but by how far away we felt”; that we were surrounded when alone by a “wall of solitude,” that we could at any happy moment “step down out of the sun into the dream,” but that none the less “the smallness of our world could not shut us out of the world’s immensity.” What we remember too is not merely anything in itself, not merely as we lay in bed, thinking over the day that was gone, “a snowy scene, with children running, and sudden falls of fallen snow from pine-tree branches waving in the wind,” but “the soul of a lovely experience agitating with delight the soul of a little boy falling asleep.”

Such memories on the other hand, however precious to the possessor of them, may be neither striking nor significant. They are merely “little detached pieces of a jig-saw puzzle.” They rise to the surface of memory quiet as a bubble, and lo, “within the limits of a lost moment,” we are children again. Still, detached pieces though they may be,



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the complete puzzle was actually there if only we could find it, and it is not the same puzzle that lies before us now.

Mr Kendon was in love with life in the few years that closed the nineteenth century, and he falls in love with it again in looking back on them. Fears are told of, with an occasional glimpse of horror or of an unintelligible yet divinable evil. But these are few, and the passage on page 47 which describes the journey of a child from actuality into the state of sleep is untinged with fear at all. Indeed it is a condition of the mind worth a king's ransom.

Nor is it merely the plums of childhood that in memory taste so sweet. A curious delicious flavour may haunt even its duff. The commonest objects—a cupboard, a mug, a slice of cake, a door-bell, an old rocking-horse, a picture on a wall, the light reflected from snow, an old man's beard, his alpaca coat, the white of his eyes as he knelt praying—such things as these were somehow more themselves and therefore more enthralling. And it is not merely that growing older has bestowed on them a glamour evoked by time, envy and regret. Like runes scribbled on some grey old

mouldering pre-historic stone, they had a secret meaning, though what precisely that meaning was we may not be able to say.

So too with the inspiration of that singular game, Let's pretend. As Mr Kendon says, the child himself is not deceived by it, however deeply submerged in it he may be. His nursery horse is a *wooden* horse, and the rain that floods out of the skies on the adventurer as he gallops into the dark on and on and on is never in any sense *real* rain to him. He is not in the throes of an illusion. For "The child can see the two worlds side by side and seriously live at once by two standards," whereas "the grown-up... doesn't pretend at all without either deceiving himself (when he is insane) or shamefastly laughing."

So too of a child's experiments in drawing—with his paint-box and its entrancing gamboge and prussian blue and crimson lake. Surely page 59 affords us not only a most illuminating insight into this childish state of mind which should be of sovereign help to the teacher—"childish pictures are rubbish to children"—but also gives every artist something essential to think about.

And how about Mr Kendon's old grand-

father, who set up school in a barn, his charge twopence a week for every child that attended it, girl or boy? He had no theories; he was not a born teacher; but he knew what opportunities arise when a child is merely learning to read, to spell and to count. Without perhaps even realising it yourself you may—having the gift of so doing—at the same time and in the interstices, so to speak, teach him “to pray, to be kind, to be clean and neat, to be methodical and serious. . . and without extra charge you may teach him to grow up.” We cannot but agree with Mr Kendon that this solemn, upright and zealous old man would have dismissed much of the wild experimental education of to-day as “mischievous nonsense.” And it is as well at least to ask ourselves if he was right.

Quite apart, too, from the grown-up company to be shared in the following pages, and that company seen with the eyes of a child—a gallery as lifelike as it is various—we share the child’s rapture in the life of nature, and the appalling first revelation of the tenuity of that life. A catapult and a shrilling wren in a plum tree thirty yards away: “We gasped with amazed laughter, and ran to the wren.

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Its little entrails lay shining in the hot sun. Its eyes were shut, its beak was caught in the act of crying...and certainly it was dead—still—small—harmless—and brotherly, we suddenly saw. There was a pain at the back of my mind, as though something shameful had been done, and the day not shamed by it.” It is an experience that has probably happened to every one of us, and at any rate brings back to my mind a little privy solitude of nearly fifty years ago, and that of a dusty morning in June. A pebble round as one of David’s, and, for Goliath, a sparrow. Was it indeed a full twenty yards away—pecking there in the dust of the road? A marvellous shot! And then the hot, pallid, grinding shame of it.

But an introduction to a book—and immodest indeed must the introducer be who does not realise both the privilege and dangers of his little office—is intended to introduce, and not, however sharp the temptation afforded, to quote *ad infinitum*. He is bound to be an interloper between book and reader, but he need not be wearisome.

If, however, a last personal word be admissible, the reading of *The Small Years* has reminded me first—sobering thought—that

though Mr Kendon writes as a grown-up, I am myself of an earlier generation than he is; and next, that being so, many of what were pure charms and magics to him in his early life—the mechanical separator in his aunt's dairy, for example, or the touching of a button that suddenly flooded the surrounding gloom with an electric blaze of light—are for me the very reverse of what in looking back they now seem to him. And this simply because they came into my world when I was more or less an adult and no longer a child!

*I* look back with a fond romanticism to a one-horse 'bus with its little square skylight, its inner leather strap to its door, the immensely old ladies within it, nearly suffocating me in their skirts, and its straw to keep the feet warm. A grown-up of thirty years hence will be looking back with a like fond romanticism to *his* first ecstatic and bewildering flight in a *Moth*.

This deceitful world may change, then—though may be not much in its spots. But the immortal child in man lives on. He lives on in a chequered paradise which for want of a better word we might as well call Eden. Alas, how few of us can recapture it—and

how very few indeed with Mr Kendon's lovely truth and clarity. None the less we may remind ourselves that all the children of the world are to some degree sharers in that garden *now*, at this very moment. We can at least then attempt to refrain from being the self-appointed cherubims with flaming swords turning every way in an entirely unintentional effort to drive them out.

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