



ROY WATKINS

## Simple Annals

A memoir of early childhood



**B** editions

Author's note: The names of my family members and two of my schoolteachers are taken from the life. The names of all other characters are fictitious.

To all families  
where love lives in memory

First published in 2021  
by CB editions  
146 Percy Road London W12 9QL  
[www.cbEditions.com](http://www.cbEditions.com)

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Frontispiece: drawing of the Fog Bell by J. L. Watkins

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Printed in England by Blissetts, London W3 8DH

ISBN 978-1-909585-39-3

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213 Lytham Road, Marshside

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## THE FIRST PART

*213 Lytham Road, Marshside*



### 1

The intimacy of toys when it's raining... A cardboard sweetshop with labels on shiny tin bottles; a little lead Red Indian, kneeling with a raised tomahawk; a white, four-engined bomber in a cardboard hangar; the Child's Bible with stand-up figures; words, the magic shapes of letters on pages not understood – they are the doors: they open one by one on different worlds that are themselves and the same world.

The *hush*... going from room to room at Aunt Mary's when nobody's home. Cousin Eric looks for fingerprints, I look for treasure – into cupboards and corners, over eiderdowns, under musty beds: we always find the same things – coats and boots and old gloves, silence and darkness, Grandad's fiddle, and the family Bible under a big, quiet bed.

The moment after each peal of thunder leaves me giddy with stillness, curled up on Aunt Mary's dusty sofa under the window – maroon velvet, smell of sleep.

'Nah we can do owt we want!' Eric says, and pees seriously into the fire.



Aunty Mary and Aunty Kitty sing a duet. We're in the back kitchen. Aunty Mary looks shy – she always does – she's wearing that long, blue coat with rabbit collars. Aunty Kitty wears two cardigans, one over the other, she's always cold, she was born cold Grandma says...and she should know, she says, since she sleeps every night in the same bed with her. 'Come on, Mary, shake a leg!' she says, and so they link arms, and I wonder ever after why they link arms when they're supposed to shake a leg:

*Show me the way to go 'ome  
I'm tired and I want to go to bed  
I 'ad a little drink about an ower a...go  
And it went right to my 'ead...  
SO...  
Show me the way to go 'ome...*

'What's next, Kitty?'

'Eh?'

'I said what's next...'

'How should I know!'

They don't finish. They never finish. I'm glad. They always laugh, but back behind them in the song, they're sad... Those songs are sad, I know, I know... there's sommat behind them, shadows creeping up, enough to make you weep.



It's different when Grandma sings. Hymns every night. Songs sometimes, not often. Not like Aunty Kitty, something from the Hit Parade, never *Would You Rather Be a Fish*.

Sometimes she sings *When Grandpa Papered the Parlour*, but that's not real singing, or else *The Grand Old Duke of York*, and she marches up and down the kitchen with her rolling pin over her shoulder. I don't know who he was, the Duke of York, but I just lie there and listen. One day, half way through kneading dough, she suddenly tilts her face up and sings –

*All the birds of the air come a-sighing and a-sobbing  
When they heard of the death of poor cock robin  
When they heard...  
Of the death...  
Of poor...  
Cock...  
Robin...*

She sang that, I think, to make the bread rise: flour-dust on her pinnie whitening her hair. She looks sad, stomps round the kitchen, chucks coal on the fire, goes back to her dough.

'What's matter, Grandma?' I ask.

'Nowt!' she snaps... 'Poor cock robin...'



... *Rockall, Shannon, Lundy, Irish Sea...*

These are the words that tuck them up, Mam, Grandma, Aunty K, tuck them up in silence, into their eyes.

I think the words are the waves. It's the shipping forecast.  
Then the Irish Mail goes over . . .

. . . tap tap . . . scrat scrat . . .

What's that? Grandma grabs the poker.

It's nowt but a tramp. Poor soul. She finds a bit of bread,  
bit of mousetrap, a tomato. Not easy on rations. He whis-  
pers *Thank you kindly*, misses into his beard. Gone! Gone to  
a hedge!

. . . scrat scrat . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .

What's that? Grandma grabs the poker.

Nobody. Just wind. Nobbut wind.

'I wish it were our John!' says Grandma.

'Wish it were Bob!' says Mam.

I wish, I wish. I don't know what I wish.

Wish it were wind.

Wish I never had to cry.



Aunty Mary's got a job making butter. She swings the  
handle round all morning, round and round, hour after  
hour. It's hard work, a wooden churn. At last she gives  
a little grin and winks, runs her finger round the brim:  
'Nearly there!' she says.

Then she gets a job making lead soldiers. That's better!  
We can have as many as we want. She chucks the lumps  
of lead into a little pot and holds it with long pincers over  
the fire. It's almost no-time, the twinkling of an eye. The

lumps of lead fall over and there's a shimmering sea.

She makes rugs out of potato sacks and old coats – rag  
rugs she calls them. They're everywhere, everywhere you  
look, funny little rugs, all shapes and sizes, dark dingy  
colours full of dust . . .

'We know what we'll get for Christmas!' Grandma says.



'My, Mary, this pie's 'ard!' Uncle Hugh says. He's been  
sawing at it with the breadknife, but it doesn't budge.

'Gie it a swipe, Dad!' Eric says, so Uncle Hugh lifts  
the breadknife up above his head then stabs the pie right  
through the middle. Half hits the cat and half flies through  
the window. Then the parrot claps. We watch the empty  
air where the pie has flown.

'Good job you didn't ate it!' Eric says.

Uncle Hugh's birthday, that was.

He was in trouble, Uncle Hugh. His billy goat got loose on  
the sea bank, and he had to go to court.

'Why, Mam?' Eric said. 'What happened?'

'Shurrap about that!' Aunty Mary said, 'It's nowt but  
manderous blabbermuck. D'you hear me?' *Manderous blab-  
bermuck!*

Eric's mouth dropped open. 'But Mam, what's that?'

Aunty Mary slowly wagged her finger in the air and  
screwed her eyes up: 'It's lay-ers to catch meddlers, that's  
what it is, lay-ers . . . to catch . . . MEDDLERS! Nah leave me  
alone wi' it!'

'Oh! Bloomin' eck!' Eric said.