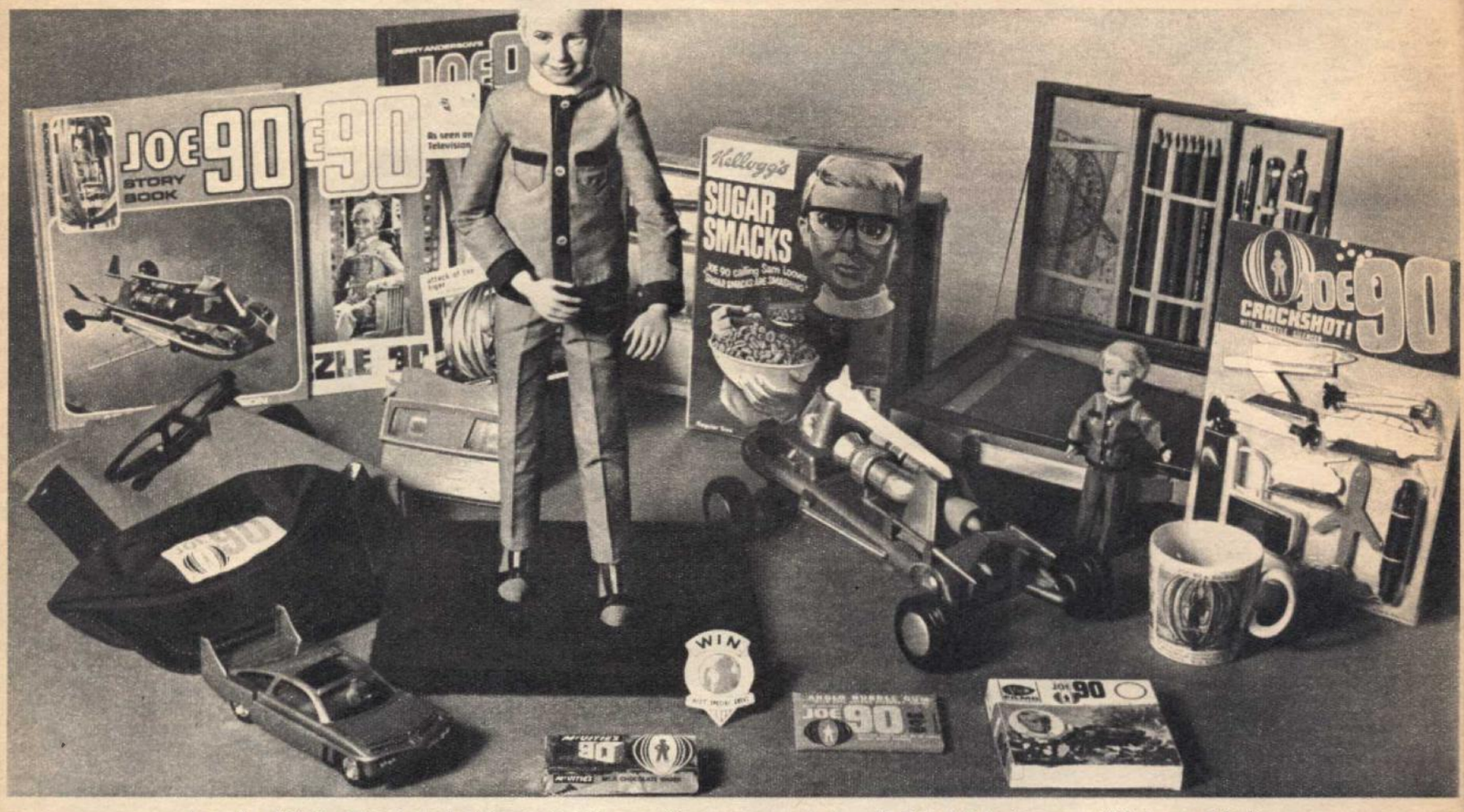
THE MANIPULATORS –puppet men with the Midas touch

Once upon a time, puppets were just toys. Now they are big business. MALCOLM STUART *goes behind the scenes and talks to the toycoons who pull the golden strings*



As well as TV, Joe 90 *is in books, biscuits, bubble gum, films, toys, cereals, etc. He'll be big business—until he's out of fashion*

LITTLE *Joe 90* is in business in a big way. Joe, the ITV puppet hero, is "every boy's daydream." But behind his adventures is another story—of the manipulators, the men who lead the assault on the toy shops.

Every scientific gimmick in Joe's life, like his 200-shot pistol, is specially chosen for toy shop appeal.

Introducing a television character to make money in the toy shops is known as "merchandising." And Harry Corbett had this in mind when he first showed Sooty on television 16 years ago. Because he risked giving up a well-paid job to earn 12 guineas a fortnight with the BBC.

Corbett works with a handful of assistants and one full-time prop man. But a 100-strong team produced *Joe 90* and the preceding series *Captain Scarlet, Thunderbirds, Fireball XL5* and *Supercar* for AP Films, the ATV subsidiary. At £20,000 a programme, an income beyond the sales of television films must be guaranteed.

So husband - and - wife producers Gerry and Sylvia Anderson produce a new story line for each series. Because whatever the popularity of the programme, the merchandising men say sales of sponsored goods fade after a year.

Thunderbirds, with International Rescue and Lady Penelope, ran for two years and was still enormously popular when it finished. Yet sales of toys like Lady P's Rolls-Royce FAB 1 had reached saturation level, and reluctantly the Andersons pensioned off that set of puppets.

Already, a pilot programme has been made for the series to succeed *Joe 90*. Richard Culley, the chubby, 28-year-old New Zealander who runs Century 21 Merchandising Ltd., was reading the script when I arrived at his office at the side of the Coliseum Theatre, London.

"I have to report on the merchandising potential and it looks good," he said. "I can't tell you the details, but it's a spy series involving a bishop."

Culley's opinion will obviously have an important bearing on the acceptance of the new series for 1969. Meanwhile, for him *Joe 90* is almost a past number. "We had most of the licences for Joe merchandise signed by the beginning of the year," he said.

The more expensive lines are geared to come in for the Christmas market and if Century 21's carefully organised plans work as their research tells them they will, we shall have a *Joe 90* Christmas.

This year's top toy, they anticipate, will be a model of Joe, waiting to be dressed in a variety of adventure kits, like Action Man. You may remember that 1965 was a Dalek Christmas and 1966 a Batman Christmas. Last year Action Man, not a television character, was top toy. Action Man certainly influenced the creation of *Joe 90* to join the £20-million-a-year merchandising industry.

Richard Culley said: "This show is a must for the toy firms. Each week Joe goes into a machine called 'The Rat' and is fed with thought patterns giving him the knowledge to be a jet pilot, or a potholer, or a scientist. Something different each week. Every boy will be able to identify his own fantasies with Joe's adventures. Think of all the equipment he can have and the suits kids can dress him up in."

Culley also handles the affairs of those pious koala bears Tingha and Tucker, although in book form they have jolly adventures without religious significance. He also markets *Man From Uncle* through a direct deal with the American agents even though the programme appears on BBC.

"That is a great money spinner because there are endless gimmicks," he added. "*Joe 90* is going to be like that. Do you know where he hides all his gear? In a school satchel. Every kid going to school will want to tuck a 200-round pistol with silencer, a two-way radio and secret agent's badge into a satchel with his exercise books. And they will all be in the shops."

Culley learnt the merchandising business with another New Zealander, Walter Tuckwell, who is said by his rivals to have slightly over half the television concessions in this country.

"Oh, I think it is a fraction under a half," said 56-year-old Tuckwell. "And I am not just television. There was World Cup Willie, who was created in this office. He is coming back in a sombrero for Mexico in 1970. Just now, we are bringing in a character to symbolise the Scout Movement."

"Tuck" came to Britain to join the R.A.F. After wartime service, as a staff squadron leader, he went to work for the Disney Organisation's merchandising office in London.

Merchandising made more money for Disney than the films in which his characters were created. This is a situation which men like Tuck are now applying to television programmes.

Last year, toys linked with TV programmes earned £10 million. This is 15 per cent of total toy sales. Books, food and confectionery doubled the cash turnover. As the average royalty paid by manufacturers is five per cent, this meant around £2 million was split by the creators, television companies and concession agents like Tuckwell.

What is a really valuable merchandising commodity worth? *Batman*, two years ago, is ranked as the hottest

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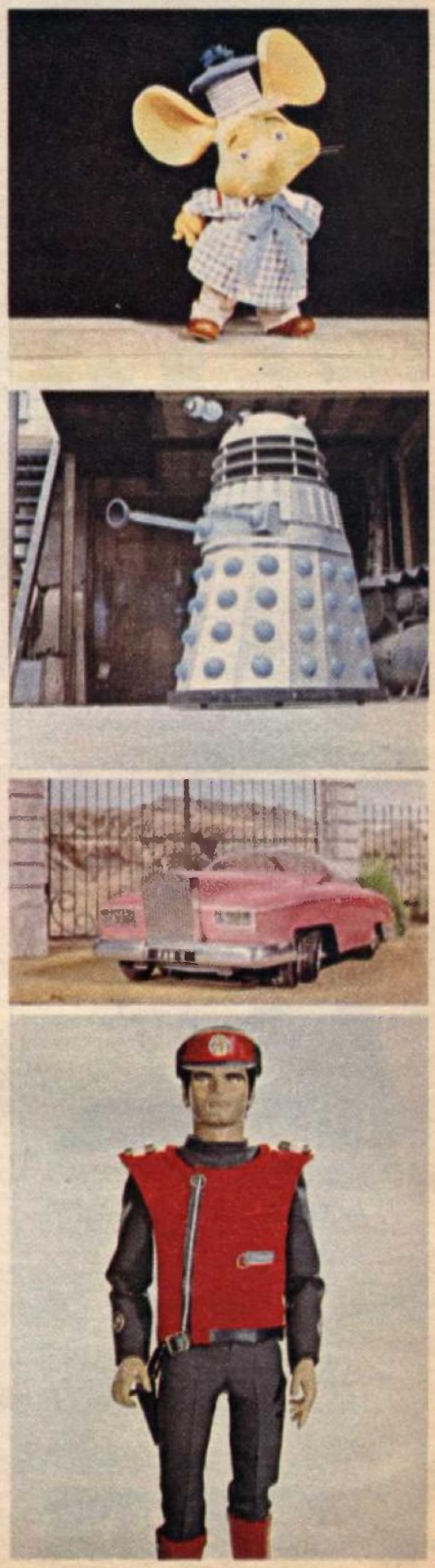
MICHAEL GILLIES

The international puppet set. Britain's Sooty and creator Harry Corbett were a £25,000-a-year industry within three years on television. Italy's 10-inch mouse Topo Gigio, below, makes a lion-size profit. Dr. Who's Daleks first rolled into popularity in 1963 and are still going strong. Lady Penelope's Rolls-Royce FAB1 was a big seller for Thunderbird *boss Gerry Anderson. The invincible* Captain Scarlet *was beaten by over-exposure from two years on television*



The manipulators

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Monsieur Rusty makes francs out of a five-minute spin on The Magic Roundabout. *Florence, Zebedee and Dougal appear in the series that the BBC show every weekday*

money-maker in the shortest space of time. Richard Culley, who handled the affairs of Batman and his young friend Robin for Walter Tuckwell, estimates sales reached nearly £3 million.

Batman, like *Joe 90*, was a planned sales exercise. The films were not shown until the manufacturers were ready. But occasionally there is a spontaneous and unexpected success like the Daleks, from the BBC's *Dr. Who*.

In his comfortable Piccadilly office, surrounded by the symbols of his success, Walter Tuckwell recalled: "When they made their first appearance in about the fifth episode of *Dr. Who*, late in 1963, I rang the BBC and asked if they were going to be a big thing. They said: 'Forget it. *Dr. Who* is going to finish them off after six episodes and then he is off to China with Marco Polo.'

"But like Dick Barton just after the war, this was a scarey programme that the kids loved. They enjoy being frightened when they knew the goodies are going to win in the end. Before the end of that first series, youngsters were running round their school playgrounds growling: 'Ex-term-in-ate.' It was bingo and nobody knew it."

Under Tuck's guidance, the Dalek boom grew steadily for two years. Then the BBC, by this time making a great deal of money out of the merchandising, brought them back for yet another battle with *Dr. Who* just in time for Christmas. In the shops, 1965 was Dalek Christmas.

Terry Nation, who was once a *Goon Show* script man on radio, thought of the idea for the Daleks. But the shape that chilled millions of delighted children was produced in the BBC workshops by effects designer Raymond Cusick.

"Daleks and *Dr. Who* games are still being sold after four years," said Tuckwell. "That is a really long life for a piece of merchandising."

But four years is a fraction of time in the success story of Britain's most durable TV merchandising commodity —that little glove puppet bear Sooty who is now with Thames Television after 15 years with the BBC.

For creator Harry Corbett, exploitation of Sooty was sheer economic necessity. In 1952, he was earning £15 a week as an electrical engineer in Guiseley, Yorkshire, and picking up an odd three guineas by giving after-dinner shows with a little glove puppet he bought to amuse his sons.

Then, after an amateur talent show on television, the BBC offered him a run of six fortnightly programmes at 12 guineas a show, including props.

"It meant giving up my job so it was a big risk to take," said Corbett.

"But I realised straight away that if I was a success on TV I could make a reasonable living out of royalties from toy firms and publishers. Before the series began, I had a bear made with black ears. I named him Sooty and registered him. Well, the television went very well and Chad Valley, the toy makers, wanted to make Sootys. In a couple of years, everything was rolling."

Chad Valley have made about two million Sootys. They even make half a dozen at a time as replacements for Corbett. He only gets a few pennies from each 15s. puppet. Those pennies have added up to about £30,000 for the tax man to dip into.

Within three years of the first show, Sooty was a £25,000-a-year industry and had ousted *Muffin the Mule* as the first love of young television audiences. The BBC, meanwhile, upped Harry's salary to £1,000 a series.

Corbett said: "The sale of Sooty goods has been wonderfully steady over the years. There are about 35 lines on the market. My new ITV show should give them a nice boost."

Very young audiences are faithful in their affections. A few years later they are fickle, and fads last only a few months.

It all depends on the merchandising men—the manipulators with the Midas touch.