

THE EARLY BIRDS

Or how to make money
out of James Bond and the Daleks
. . . by Llew Gardiner

Shortly after the Americans had hoisted their Early Bird satellite into space, Richard Culley, a quick-thinking young New Zealander working with Walter Tuckwell & Associates, had a minor brainwave. He launched himself out of his Piccadilly office chair and hurried off to register Early Bird as a trade name. Now anyone wishing to manufacture, say, an Early Bird worm catcher or wishing to exploit the name in any way, will have to pay a royalty to Mr Culley's firm.

In fact there has been no great rush to exploit Early Bird. Mr Culley describes the money it has brought in as "peanuts" and with commendable self-criticism says: "One should have got in right at the start and registered Sputnik." Nevertheless the £20-odd that it cost to register the name was a worthwhile gamble. It is brainwaves like this that put Mr Culley, and the organization which employs him, at the top of the character merchandising business.

Character merchandising, the business exploitation of TV series, film heroes, strip cartoons, pop groups and the like, is big, big business in America. It is still young here but is growing rapidly.

Walter Tuckwell, 52, New Zealand-born wartime flyer, started in the business at the London end of the world-wide Disney organization. The character merchants feel they owe a lot to Disney. "He pioneered this kind of work," says Richard Culley, "the agreements he drew up with manufacturers all the world over were models of their kind and made life a lot easier for the rest of us." Yet today there are those in the business who think that Disney has lost some of his snap. "The Mary Poppins exploitation was no great shakes," said Keith Shackleton of AP Films Merchandising. Shackleton, a tall, sandy-toned man who looks like a housemaster at Gordonstoun, is behind the exploitation of Supercar, Stingray, Thunderbirds and all their wooden-faced characters. He won't say how much they've

earned him, but it obviously wasn't shillings.

Everyone in the business agrees that the British toy manufacturers were slow to recognize the profits to be made from character merchandising. Says Shackleton: "When I started with Supercar five years ago I found myself knocking on a lot of closed doors, but a great deal has happened in those five years." One of the things that happened was that a part of the toy trade is now prepared to accept the idea that it is possible to introduce new lines in the middle of the year. In the past it was a golden rule that nothing new should be introduced after the Harrogate toy fair in January.

Another of the things that happened was the tremendous success of the Dalek merchandising handled by Walter Tuckwell and his Associates. This has spanned the last two Christmases and is probably the most successful operation of its type this country has ever seen. The Dalek royalties are split three ways between the BBC, Tuckwells and Terry Nation who writes *Dr Who* and thought up the name. The BBC will only say: "Our share is nominal, really. Most goes to Terry Nation." Terry Nation's agent says: "His share of the royalties this year has run into many thousands of pounds, that's all I can say. We are still waiting for the results of the Christmas rush to come in."

But these figures will be exceeded by the exploitation of World Cup Willie which the Tuckwell associates are handling for the Football Association. Something like £4 million worth of goods will flood on to the market during the summer.

Why didn't the FA organize their own merchandising? They could have done so, of course, but it is doubtful if they would have had the knowhow. Their original contribution to the operation was very square indeed – the World Cup on a Union Jack background. World Cup Willie was the lightning creation of a Tuckwell artist. He did just four draw-



Robert Fenn: in France the smart girl wears an 007 bra

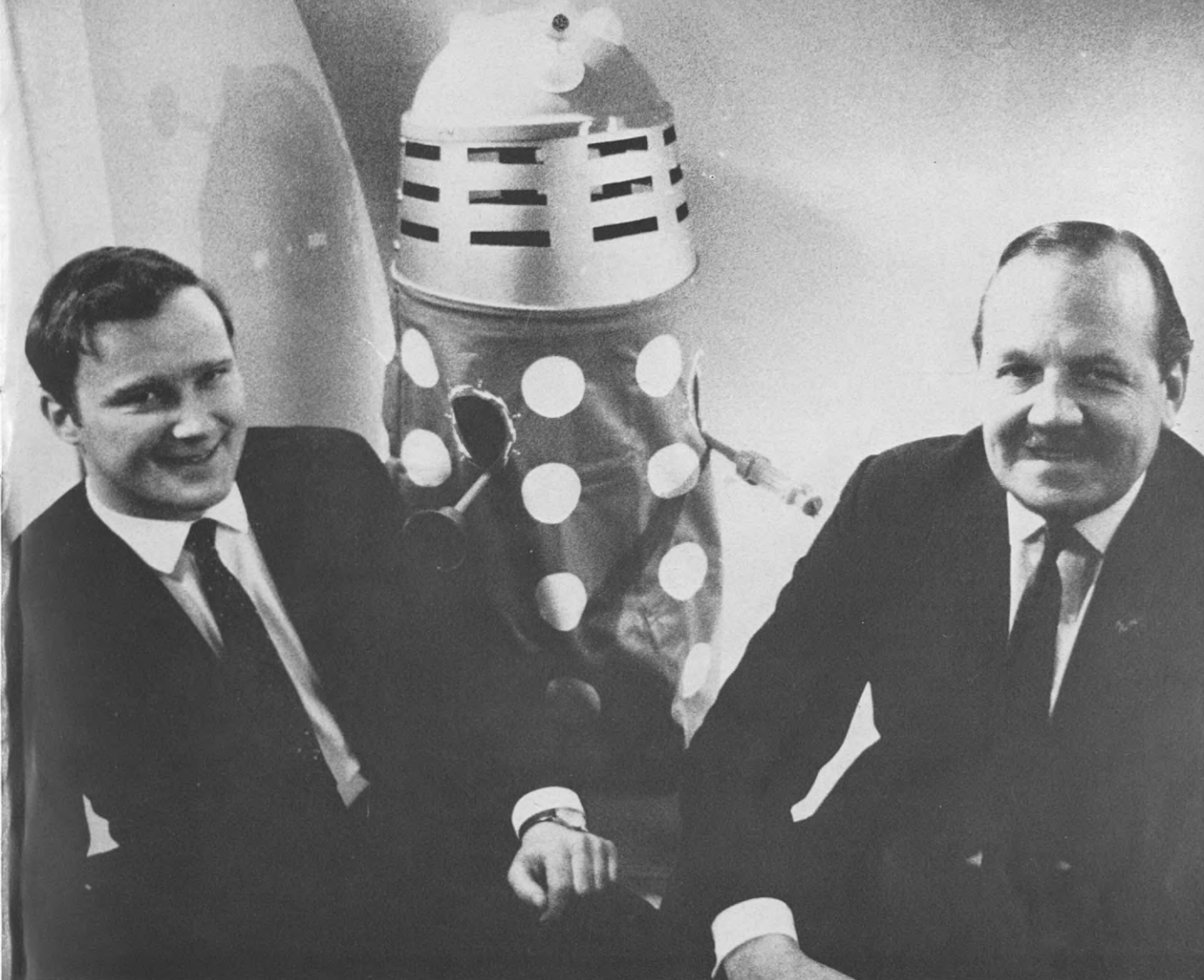
ings before he arrived at the pugnacious figure which is helping to make such a lot of money for everyone.

Licence fees are usually around the five per cent mark and the exploiters usually split this fifty-fifty with the original author or the holder of the copyright. "Of course you get authors who say 'Why can't I do my own exploitation?'" Culley told me. His reaction is to say: "Get on with it, sport." They usually find that it is a more difficult proposition than they imagined. Culley has at his side a file including the name of every leading toy manufacturer in the non-Communist world.

High in the major league of character merchandising is the James Bond cult. In the past year manufacturers in many countries have paid over £250,000 in licence fees on goods ranging from 007 cologne to 007 underpants

and including a spectacular variety of toys. A million-and-a-quarter James Bond cars were sold by Corgi in this country over Christmas and in the end they just couldn't meet the demand.

Fleming sold a 51 per cent share in his merchandising firm Glydrose to the City firm of Booker Bros, headed by his old friend Jock Campbell, for £100,000. It has already proved itself a good investment – probably as much as £18 million – and is likely to get better. Robert Fenn who acted as Fleming's film agent now acts as agent for the merchandising business and in turn employs an extensive network of Bondsmen. These are nine promoters, 15 paid agents and 17 lawyers hard at it throughout the world exploiting the Bond business and at the same time making quite sure that no-one does any pirating. So far 102 licences have been issued. Flem-



Richard Culley and Walter Tuckwell (right): three-way split on the Daleks after a "tremendous success"

ing's hero is licensed to kill – these are licences to make money: a lot.

The pirates don't worry Robert Fenn. "In the end they usually find out that it is better to co-operate," he told me. Bond couldn't have put it better himself. Bond has gone well everywhere (in France the smart girl wears a 007 bra) but nowhere better than in America: "Business there is fantastic. Quite fantastic," says Fenn.

Pop groups would seem obvious merchandising material, but with some exceptions, such as the Beatles and Dave Clark, it hasn't worked out that way. Richard Culley told me: "I used to go along and get pushed around with the kids at *Ready, Steady, Go!* but all they had to say was 'Right, give us the money'. It's too chancy. Most of the groups don't stay at the top long enough to give a manufacturer a chance." The merchandising exploita-

tion of the Beatles has not been an entirely happy story for them and manager Brian Epstein.

Beatles merchandising has been beset by legal actions (the biggest legal battle of all is going on in the United States now) and the Epstein organization spoke to me through their solicitors. How much is merchandising worth to the Beatles? "I can't tell you that for two reasons," said the lawyer. "Firstly I have been instructed not to and secondly I don't know." He was, however, quite sure that the Beatles have suffered quite considerably at the hands of pirates. "The trouble is that Epstein had too much to think about at the beginning," he said. "Everything was happening at once."

Pirating doesn't seem to worry the Tuckwell associates any more than it does Robert Fenn: "In a sense the manufacturers to whom we have granted licences act as

our agents," Culley told me. "The phone will ring and you'll have a manufacturer from Germany on the line saying that a rival is turning out a line without a licence. We get on to the pirate and he's usually amazed that we've caught up with him so quickly."

The merchandisers aren't really happy with their title. "I like to think of myself as an entrepreneur – a true middleman," said Shackleton. Nor do they consider "character merchandising" the happiest of phrases. "Tuck thought up the word 'fancifuls'," said Shackleton, who is on good terms with his rivals ("We like him to do well – it's good for business generally," said Culley). But even that word doesn't seem quite right. "It's a nice word but it doesn't really describe what we do," Shackleton complained.

Games are an important part

of the character merchandising business. Shackleton enthused to me about a variation of Monopoly based on ATV's *Power Game*. The good merchandiser exploiter doesn't wait for the games manufacturer to come to him – he goes to the manufacturer with a fully worked out idea of his own.

In the future we can look forward to much closer co-operation between authors and the character merchandise men. Culley had the title of the BBC's new series *Softly, Softly* registered before the series went on the air. The wise author will also take advice on how he may include around his hero a good variety of symbols that will easily lend themselves to merchandising.

Keith Shackleton summed up the philosophy of this rapidly growing business: "The art of merchandising is to be in at the beginning today and to have the foresight to exploit it tomorrow."