



JOHN BOWLBY

## Edward John Mostyn Bowlby 1907–1990

John Bowlby was a giant. He was one of the most fertile, incisive thinkers about children of our century (Albert Solnit, Yale University Medical School).

I think he really saved psychoanalysis from being totally discredited (Anthony Storr, 1993).

It is only a few decades since cultural forces in the UK decreed that babies should be fed on a fixed schedule, and parents restricted from visiting their babies in hospital; now, thanks to John Bowlby, all that has changed (Robert Hinde, 1991).

John Bowlby? Give me Barrabas. (Anonymous psycho-analyst quoted by Holmes, 1993).

FOR A MAN WHO DEVOTED HIS LIFE to the study of the influence of childhood experience on the development of personality John Bowlby wrote very little about his own childhood. When I asked him about it he shrugged it off as typical of the childhood of people from his type of background, by which he meant that he was largely brought up by servants and was sent to boarding school at the age of eight. His widow, Ursula Bowlby, says that his family of origin were unable to express affection; if so, it may be that John's laconic dismissal of my question was a reflection of his reticence to discuss personal matters outside the private realm of his psychoanalysis.

His biographer, Jeremy Holmes, suggests that Bowlby himself suffered from the parental deprivation which he later came to deplore. If that is the case it is hard to explain why he showed so few

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of the cognitive and other impairments which he attributed to such deprivation, for John Bowlby stands as one of the most brilliant and intrepid thinkers of his time and those who knew him well found loyalty and warmth behind his reserved exterior. Perhaps the question that we need to ask is how the many influences on his life converged to influence the formation of his truly exceptional character.

Bowlby was not much concerned with heredity as one of the roots of personality but that does not mean to say he dismissed it. He chose, rather, to focus on the influence of traumatic life events and circumstances because he saw these as amenable to modification. Hereditary influences could not be changed although people could be helped to live more happily with them and to develop their individual potential to the full.

Bowlby himself can be said to have come from 'good stock'; he was the third of six children of Sir Anthony Bowlby, King's Surgeon and President of the Royal College of Surgeons, and of his wife May, who was the eldest daughter of a country rector and grand-daughter of Lord Mostyn of Mostyn in Wales. John's older brother, Sir Anthony Bowlby ('Tony'), inherited his father's title and went on to become a successful industrialist. Two of his sisters became talented musicians.

Although there is little doubt that John loved and was loved by his mother, she seems to have been an undemonstrative woman who was thought by some to be 'cold'. His main contact with her occurred when he was brought down from the nursery to the drawing room for an hour between tea and bedtime. He was once beaten for insisting on wearing pink velvet shorts on this occasion.

During the crucial first four years of his life his closest 'maternal care' came from his 'much-loved' nurse maid, Minnie. But she left when he was four and he was largely cared for thereafter by diminutive 'Nanna Friend' whom he described as an intelligent, well-read disciplinarian and a good story-teller. His relationship with her seems to have been ambivalent as suggested by his daughter, Mary, who recalls his glee when, in later years, she found it necessary to reprimand Nanna. Clearly this took courage.

His younger sister Evelyn, sees the family as 'rather joyless'. Even so, long holidays in Scotland during the summer months provided the children with close contact with their parents and with their maternal grandparents. It was in this setting that, following his mother's example, John developed a love of wild life.

In later years he 'would not have sent a dog' to the kind of boarding

school to which he was sent in 1914 at the age of seven. No doubt the younger teachers had gone to war and the rigid attitudes of older teachers may have added to the trauma of separation from his family and friends. His intellectual development, however, was not impaired and when, at nine years of age, he was sent to be a Naval Cadet at the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth he did very well, loved the school and was soon 'top of his term'.

His father, who had lost his own father at an early age, had 'made his way up' and achieved the rank of General in the Royal Army Medical Corps. He is described as 'formidable', a remote and intimidating man who impressed his children rather than earning their affection. They preferred their maternal grandfather (The Reverend Hugh Mostyn), a gentle and easy-going man, who was much loved by all the family. He it was who taught John to fish and shoot.

Like the royal family, whom he admired and emulated, General Bowlby saw it as best for his sons to enter the armed services rather than to follow in his own footsteps; Tony was to be a soldier and John a sailor. The boys did not lack courage and both eventually rebelled against his decrees. Tony hated Wellington College from the start and wanted to enter industry. He eventually succeeded (manufacturing screws), having turned down his father's offer to buy him a place on the stock exchange.

John, despite his good start at Dartmouth and a prestigious posting to HMS *Royal Oak*, found life in the navy stultifying and, with the moral support of a friend from the College who was 'in the same boat', persuaded his father to buy him out. Medicine, although second best, was an acceptable alternative career although, for John, this too was a reluctant choice.

He worked extremely hard, won several prizes and obtained a first class degree at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he read Natural Sciences and Psychology. He is described by his brother-in-law as already a mature, independent-minded young man with an 'inner calm'. At all events he seems to have found his father's death, when John was twenty-one years of age, remarkably untraumatic and subsequently referred to this event as 'fortunate', since it set him free to pursue his own rather than his father's interests.

The two years which followed this turning-point in his life appear, at first sight, to be 'off track'. Freed of the need to enter Medicine he worked as a Science Master at Bedales School for a year and then took a job at a special school for maladjusted children. This enabled him to

renew an interest in Psychology which, although a subject despised by his father, had fascinated him while he was at Trinity. The school was run 'like a home' and John learned a great deal about the emotional problems of the young people whom he was helping and about the dysfunctional families from which they had come.

While working at the school he met John Alford, a volunteer helper, who later obtained a chair in the History of Art at an American university. He seems to have taken a 'fatherly' interest in John and to have had a powerful influence upon him. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that Alford became, for the young Bowlby, the warm father whom he had never had. At all events it was Alford who persuaded John to resume his medical career and, at the same time, to enter psychoanalysis.

It is hard to imagine how Bowlby managed to find the time to undertake a Training Analysis *and* the medical course at University College Hospital but medical training was much more relaxed in 1929 than it is today and he even found the leisure to run a sandwich bar. According to a friend 'Bogey's Bar', was patronised by 'everyone who was anyone in Bloomsbury'. He took an interest in the labour movement and one of his closest friends was Evan Durbin, the economist and Labour MP.

It took John Bowlby the usual four more years to qualify as a doctor, but seven to qualify as a psychoanalyst. From the outset he seems to have found it hard to accept the dogmatic beliefs of his supervisors, which failed to satisfy the scientific standards which he had learned at Cambridge or the logical arguments of his new friends. Thus in 1935, while responding to a paper by Melanie Klein, he reported that he had seen several depressed patients who had suffered recent bereavements. This interest in psychological trauma ran counter to the received knowledge of the time that it is unconscious fantasies that are the origin of psychopathology rather than real life events. Consequently he was soon at odds with Klein, the dominant figure in his school of psychoanalysis.

In 1938, he proposed marriage to Ursula Longstaff. He told her that he had used up all his capital on his training analysis and she, jokingly, retorted that he could not afford a wife and an analyst. Shortly thereafter he succeeded in persuading his analyst (Joan Riviere) that his accreditation should be approved. Ursula's devotion and care of both John and their four children freed him to pursue his clinical, administrative, research and teaching activities.

The second world war was impending and John's first publication was a joint book which he wrote with Evan Durbin as first author, on 'Personal Aggressiveness and War'. In it the authors argue that 'War is due to the expression in and through group life of the transformed aggressiveness of individuals. We therefore contend that to deal with the symptoms of transformed aggression — such as extreme nationalism and class hatred — will not solve the problem of war.' Transformed aggression they attributed to 'the repression both by the self and by parental authority of simple aggression'. They drew the conclusion that 'If children could be frustrated less frequently, . . . punished less severely when they resented frustration . . . [and] allowed to express desire and anger more freely it should follow . . . that they would make more happy, more peaceful and more sociable adults.' 'To permit children to express their *feelings* of aggression whilst preventing *acts* of irremediable destruction is, we suggest, one of the greatest gifts that parents can give their children.'

This starry-eyed solution to the problem of war sits uncomfortably with the good sense and balance of the later Bowlby and it is, to be fair, qualified later in the book. The book is of particular interest in the light which it sheds on Bowlby's later works. Already we find him tackling a topic of great importance in an original and thoughtful way. Despite its naivety the argument is presented in a characteristically painstaking manner and supported with copious references to a variety of sources including studies of subhuman primates. It reads much like Bowlby's later writings and we must suspect that Bowlby used Durbin as a model in these. Sadly Durbin was to die by drowning a few years later. Ursula Bowlby describes this as 'the most overwhelming loss of John's life'. He set up a Trust for Durbin's children.

On leaving medical school in 1933 he undertook his training in psychiatry at the Maudsley Hospital where he came under the influence of another critic of psychoanalysis, Professor Aubrey Lewis. He then worked at the London Child Guidance Clinic where he developed the view that children raised in institutions may lose the capacity to love because they have not themselves had an experience of being loved.

In 1940 he joined the Emergency Medical Service and, after Dunkirk was sent to deal with psychiatric casualties in an ex-infirmary in Lancashire. He was appalled by the conditions and, with a fellow psychiatrist, Kenneth Soddy, protested to the authorities. When his protests were ignored he resigned from the service and joined the Royal Army Medical Corps. Here he helped to set up War Officer

Selection Boards (WOSBs) and made friendships which were to stand him in good stead after the war. After he was promoted to the rank of major, his energy and drive is reflected in a rhyme which was written by one of his contemporaries:

Major Bowlby  
Goes flat out  
Whatever his goal be.

While in the army he continued to work at his research and, in 1944, he published the results of a comparison of the families of young delinquents who had been referred for child guidance with the families of non-delinquents referred to the same clinic (in 'Forty-four Juvenile Thieves'). This revealed the part which separations from the mother played in the lives of these delinquents and described a subgroup of these youngsters who were unable to make permanent, satisfying relationships with other people. His findings again brought him into conflict with Klein.

In the same year he was posted to the War Office Research and Training Unit in Hampstead; his three years there were invaluable in giving him a postgraduate education in psychology and research methodology. While in Hampstead he was able to contribute to the management of the Psycho-Analytic Society where he was appointed as Training Secretary and was in a position to prevent the excessively long training analyses from which he had suffered.

After the war he joined several of his friends from the WOSBs at the Tavistock Clinic and accepted the responsibility for setting up a Child Psychiatry Department (or, as Bowlby preferred it, a 'Department of Children and Parents'). He was made Deputy Director of the Clinic in support of the Director, his friend, John Sutherland.

In 1948 his interest in the effects of separating children from their mothers caused him to appoint James Robertson to undertake regular filming of the behaviour of such a child. From the large quantity of material obtained the famous film, 'A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital' was made. This brought to public attention, as nothing else could, the sufferings which small children were undergoing in the circumstances which then prevailed in children's wards and other institutions. It had a great influence on improving child care in institutions. Subsequently Bowlby was appointed by the World Health Organisation to prepare a report on the psychological needs of homeless children and this gave him the opportunity to review the scientific literature and to travel

widely in Europe and the USA, where he met many of those who were carrying out research in this field. His report formed the basis for his popular book *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, which was published in 1953. He concluded,

The proper care of children deprived of a normal home life can now be seen to be not merely an act of common humanity, but essential to the mental health and social welfare of a community. For, when care is neglected, as happens in every country in the Western world today, they grow up to reproduce themselves. Deprived children . . . are the source of social infection as real and serious as are carriers of diphtheria or typhoid. And, just as preventive measures have reduced these diseases to negligible proportions, so can determined action greatly reduce the number of deprived children in our midst and the growth of adults liable to produce more of them.

By this time Bowlby's name was becoming widely known and was already giving rise to controversy. On the one hand he had offended many members of the psychoanalytic establishment by criticising Freud's dismissal of the importance of psychological trauma in childhood, his Libido Theory and his theory of Infantile Sexuality. Since much else rested on these theories Bowlby was seen as highly subversive. He had also offended members of the growing Women's Movement who saw his assertion that mothering was essential to small children as a threat to the independence of women. His use of the term 'Maternal Deprivation' led to accusations of sexism, since neither Bowlby nor anyone else, at that time, had seriously examined the possibility that fathers (and other 'mother figures') could provide 'mothering'. It is easy to see why Bowlby's own experience may have blinded him to the fact that some fathers can share in the provision of care or even replace an absent or inadequate mother.

Bowlby has been criticised for repeating his father's pattern of working long hours and neglecting his family. This claim is contradicted by his eldest daughter, Mary, who says that he always made himself available to his children, inviting them to join him on his regular walks after lunch. 'He liked to stroke us,' she says. In Ursula he had found a wife who had no wish to give up her children to the care of servants and John always assumed that it would be she who would be the primary object of the children's attachment. He avoided any situation in which he might seem to compete or disagree with her regarding the children. This policy seems to have worked well for the three younger children but less well with Mary.

Following his parents' example, John regularly took his family to



Scotland during the summer months. He bought a croft cottage on the Isle of Skye where he became well known to the local community and was a regular church attender. In this setting he could relax and enjoy his children and grand-children. He even engaged in 'impish tomfoolery' which would have surprised professional colleagues who saw only his dignified working face. Towards the end of the summer he had usually had enough of the wilds and was impatient to return to the fray in London.

During 1951, having established beyond reasonable doubt the damage which could be done to small children by the absence of or rejection by a mother or mother-substitute in early childhood, Bowlby was looking for a theoretical explanation for his empirical findings. The answer came to him 'in a flash' after he read a draft of Konrad Lorenz's *King Solomon's Ring*. Ethology, the study of animal behaviour, enabled him to explain in evolutionary terms the mechanisms by which mothers become attached to their children and the consequences which arise when they are separated. These ideas were worked out in more detail and further ideas arising from the field of Systems Theory added during a fruitful year (1958) at the 'Think Tank' (or Center for Advanced Studies) in Stanford, California. They formed the basis of his major work, the three volumes on *Attachment and Loss*, which took him another twenty-two years to complete (volume I, *Attachment*, appearing in 1969, volume II, *Separation*, in 1973 and volume III, *Loss*, in 1980). Between them they provide a body of well-argued scientific evidence in support of a new paradigm for understanding mother-child relationships and much else beside.

In *Attachment* (1969) and in an earlier paper which appeared in 1958, he addressed the problem of the nature of the child's tie to its mother. He had, by this time, recognised that the primary attachment was not always to the child's biological mother and used the term 'mother-figure' for this person. He saw this tie as rooted in instinct and much of the book consists of a detailed scrutiny of the complex interaction between instinct and learning which underlies all human behaviour and emotion. He described the 'Internal Working Models' of the world which each child builds up and which is then used as a means of orientation and planning. After reviewing the attachments of infants and mothers of other animal species including the fascinating and important concept of 'imprinting', he turned to human infants describing the sequence of behaviours by which the attachment to the mother-figure is developed and expressed during the first two years of life.

These include sucking, crying, smiling, clinging and following. Each of these is modified from the time of its inception by the behaviour of the mother-figure so that, by the end of the second year, large differences are already evident between the patterns of attachment exhibited by different infants. These, in turn, influence the internal models of the world as seen by each child.

An explanation for many of the important differences were covered in his second volume, *Separation: Anxiety and Anger* (1973). In this he showed how temporary separations from mother-figures can evoke a distinctive type of anxiety ('Separation Anxiety') and anger, both of which can give rise to a second level of problems such that lasting difficulties in relationships and personality development may persist even after the return of the mother-figure. He referred to the intense but anxious attachments shown by children whose mothers have stayed away too long and showed how clinging may itself evoke the very behaviour which it is intended to prevent, rejection.

During this very productive period he attracted to himself at the Tavistock a team of researchers whose work enabled him to flesh out the bones of the theory that he was developing. James Robertson made films of children in institutional care with and without their mothers and then, with his wife Joyce, was able to demonstrate that most of the damaging effects of separation from mother could be prevented by the provision of sensitive foster care. Tony Ambrose carried out systematic studies of the smiling responses of young babies and showed how easily they could be augmented or extinguished by interaction with adults.

Mary Ainsworth, after a brief spell at the Tavistock, applied John's theories to studying mother/child interaction in native Ugandans. She then returned to the USA, where she achieved considerable distinction by developing a systematic method of studying the patterns of attachment between infants and mothers, her 'Strange Situation Test'. She went on to classify the secure and insecure patterns which she discovered and, with others such as Mary Main, was able to demonstrate that her observations were highly predictive of the personalities and patterns of attachment made by these children many years later. She formulated the idea that the mother and the home constitute a 'secure base' from which, if circumstances were right, the developing child would begin to explore the world.

Another member of the team whose work was facilitated by Bowlby was Ronald Laing. Laing was a brilliant young Glaswegian psychiatrist whose ambivalent relationship with his own parents had made him

painfully aware of the damage that families can do to their children. It had also made him suspicious of all authority, a revolutionary who was not afraid to take on the psychiatric establishment. In *The Divided Self* (1960), *The Self and Others* (1961) and *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (1964) he formulated a novel view of mental illness, which attributed most forms of it, including schizophrenia, to family pathology. Mental hospitals he saw as extensions of the family system which, far from curing the problem, would often aggravate it. His theories were not popular with the medical establishment. John, himself something of a revolutionary, recognised and helped to channel Laing's maverick genius while subjecting his wilder ideas to critical scrutiny. During his years at the Tavistock Laing carried out his best work and achieved considerable fame. Had he remained, it may be that the decline which took place after he became a 'Guru' and surrounded himself with less critical colleagues would have been checked.

I worked in John's team from 1962 to 1975, having become aware of the importance of his ideas about attachment and loss in childhood for my own area of research, bereavement in adult life. He proved a stimulating and thought-provoking colleague who generously spent many hours reading drafts of my papers and writing critical comments. I awaited these with apprehension for I knew that he could spot a half-baked idea or a sloppy argument a mile off. But his criticisms were not all destructive, his love of well-conducted research and his personal affection for his juniors made him an inspiring team leader.

Bowlby and Robertson had observed that the behaviour of young children separated from their mothers followed a sequence of stages. At first, protest and attempts to recover the mother; secondly, despair of doing so, with depression; and finally, emotional detachment from her. My own research revealed a similar sequence in bereaved adults (with the addition of one earlier stage of 'numbness' which was often present in the immediate aftermath of a loss) and this was reported in a joint paper (Bowlby and Parkes, 1970). I had lectured on this subject in Chicago in 1966, where I met a young psychiatrist, Elizabeth Kubler Ross, who was studying the reactions of cancer patients to their illness. She subsequently adapted Bowlby and Robertson's stages of grief as her *Stages of Dying* (1970). Later authors have been inclined to attribute the stages of grief to Kubler Ross and both concepts have been misunderstood, some applying them in a rigid way to people whose reactions do not fit the pattern and others rejecting them out of hand

because they do not. In fact none of the original authors saw them as a rigid succession of stages through which all people had to pass. Rather people move back and forth across the stages some manifesting one and some another as predominant. These ideas were developed and extended in the third volume of Bowlby's trilogy, *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (1980).

The research carried out by Parkes under Bowlby's guidance proved of great value in the development of services for the bereaved and also, through Parkes's work with Cicely Saunders at St Christopher's Hospice, in the development of Hospice care for dying patients and their families. Bowlby played little direct part in this work but provided invaluable advice and criticism. His concept of the Internal Working Model proved particularly important in understanding reactions to major life changes when, in a relatively short space of time, individuals are forced to abandon one set of assumptions about the world and develop another. Parkes termed these 'Psycho-social Transitions' (1971).

Bowlby set out to be a scientist but he also knew that clinicians have to make the best use they can of the theories available to them and that these cannot always rely on scientific evidence. He did not extend the same licence to researchers. His integrity shone out despite his own comment to me that he would 'lie, cheat and steal' to get money for research but could not tolerate people who fudged their results. Despite his hyperbole I never knew him to lie, cheat or steal; and his wife says that he would not even send a private letter through the mail at his place of work without putting one of his own stamps upon it.

His influence extended far beyond the Tavistock and was augmented by the regular research seminars which he chaired for over twenty years and which were attended by researchers from the United Kingdom and by visiting scientists from abroad. These provided a venue at which people from many disciplines, who shared an interest in Attachment, could meet and discuss work in progress. John provided encouragement, stimulation and unbiased critical comment on the work which was much valued by the participants. Among other things, the group who grew up around him helped to initiate the series of publications edited by Brian Foss entitled *Determinants of Infant Behaviour* (1961, 1963, 1965 and 1969) and the later books *The Place of Attachment in Human Behaviour* (1982) and *Attachment across the Life Cycle* (1991) (edited by Parkes and Stevenson-Hinde with the addition, in the second case, of Robert Weiss). These helped to develop the field of study and drew in contributions from researchers from across the world. Of

particular importance for the contribution which he made to John's theorising was Robert Hinde.

In 1963 John was appointed as a part-time member of the academic staff of the Medical Research Council, a post which freed him from clinical and administrative responsibilities at the Tavistock and enabled him to devote more time to the development of the field of Attachment.

Once he had established a 'secure base' outside the main stream of psychoanalysis his contribution to that discipline diminished and, although he continued to call himself a psychoanalyst, he seldom attended meetings of the Society. He realised that the older generation of psychoanalysts would not come round to his views and he had wearied of the endless arguments to which his work continued to give rise.

In 1972, at the age of sixty-five, he retired from his Health Service and MRC posts, but remained an Honorary Member of the staff of the Tavistock Clinic and continued his academic work. The last two volumes of *Attachment and Loss* were both published during this final period of his life and they confirmed his stature as a scientist. Like Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Marx's *Das Kapital* these volumes provide a foundation for a new way of viewing the world. Like Darwin's and Marx's books they are lengthy tomes which are not light reading, yet they are to be found in every serious collection.

During the latter part of his long career Bowlby received many honours: a CBE, honorary doctorates from the universities of Leicester and Cambridge, a senior fellowship from the British Academy in 1989, fellowships of the Royal Society of Medicine and the Royal College of Psychiatry and several distinguished scientist awards in the USA including that of the American Psychiatric Association. In a somewhat belated tribute he was appointed, in 1982, Freud Memorial Professor of Psychoanalysis at University College London. Two books which contain lengthy biographies but also summarise his work have been published. *John Bowlby and Attachment Theory*, in a series *Makers of Modern Psychotherapy*, is by a psychoanalyst, Jeremy Holmes (1993). It attempts a *rapprochement* between Bowlby and psychoanalysis that was never achieved during his lifetime. Wider in its appeal is Robert Karen's book *Becoming Attached* (1994). In describing the body of Attachment Theory he quotes Dwight Macdonald's review of Agee's *A Death in the Family*: 'It is not sexual, not even romantic; it is domestic — between husband, wife, children, aunts, uncles, grand-

parents.' . . . 'This,' he says, 'was the love that stirred Bowlby and Ainsworth.'

Bowlby, unlike most of his psychoanalytic colleagues, saw attachment as quite separate from sex. He wrote little about sex; and Holmes, who clearly finds this unsettling, points out that, by comparison with Freud and Klein's passionate world of infantile sexuality, Bowlby's scientific world, 'at times seems bland, banal even.' He clearly intends this as a criticism much as Sellar and Yeatman, in *1066 and All That*, refer to the Roundheads as 'Right but Repulsive', while the Cavaliers are 'Wrong but Romantic'. Elsewhere, however, he is not afraid to acknowledge that 'Attachment is a unifying principle that reaches from the biological depths of our being to its furthest spiritual depths'.

John Bowlby had always been an admirer of Charles Darwin, who shared his own breadth of vision and intellectual rigour. His last major work was a biography of Darwin which was published in 1990 when John was eighty-three years of age. Like Bowlby, Darwin was the second son of a successful, though intimidating, doctor and was largely brought up by servants until being sent to boarding school at nine years of age. A lover of nature and a reluctant doctor, he shows in his subsequent career other parallels with John Bowlby who drew inspiration from his work. It is, therefore, fitting that his final contribution should have been a biography of Darwin.

Bowlby died peacefully on 2 September 1990, following two strokes in short succession. He was spending the summer in Skye and his body now rests in a beautiful spot overlooking the cliffs of Waternish and the Ardmore Peninsula. He is survived by his widow, Ursula, his four children and seven grandchildren. His eldest son, Sir Richard Bowlby, who inherited the family baronetcy on the death of John's older brother, is now chairman to the Board of Trustees of the Institute of Attachment-based Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy.

John Bowlby can, perhaps, best be remembered in the words with which he described Charles Darwin, 'An outstanding scientist who excelled first as an observer and later as a theorist and experimenter, he was also a singularly attractive character beloved by family and colleagues alike.'

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