

# Umbrella Feet



## CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE AND THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

Gwenda Beed Davey investigates the importance of children's traditional games

The intriguing phrase 'umbrella feet' seems to me an image worthy of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Such feet might well be possessed by the Houyhnhnms or the Brobdingnagians, or at the very least by one of Dr Seuss' characters. In fact it comes from one of the many children's traditional counting-out rhymes held in the Australian Children's Folklore Collection at Museum Victoria. This collection is one of the world's largest repositories of its type and, in August 2004, it was honoured by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) with placement on the Australian Register of the Memory of the World (see *National Library News*, November 2005).

The Australian Children's Folklore Collection includes more than 10 000 card files and other documents listing children's games, rhymes, riddles, jokes, superstitions and other kinds of children's lore, together with photographs, audio cassettes, video tapes, toys and some specialist collections of children's folklore. Outstanding among the specialist collections is the Dorothy Howard Collection.

Dr Dorothy Howard was an American folklorist who spent 10 months travelling

round Australia as a Fulbright Scholar in 1954–55, documenting more than 1000 children's games and other lore dating back to the 1870s. All her original field research is now held in Museum Victoria, and her 10 scholarly articles on Australian children's traditional playlore were reprinted by the museum in 2005 as *Child's Play: Dorothy Howard and the Folklore of Australian Children*.

The National Library also has an extensive collection of sound recordings of Australian children's rhymes and games, and I prepared a guide to this collection called *Fish Trout, You're Out*, a phrase from a wonderfully economical counting-out rhyme collected by Helen O'Shea. The Library is currently preparing the guide for use on the Internet, and aims to display all the recordings of children's folklore held in the Oral History and Folklore Collection. It lists recordings from a large number of separate collections, such as those of John Meredith, Wendy Lowenstein, Norman O'Connor, Alan Scott, Helen O'Shea and Chris Sullivan. Although most of the recordings are in English, there are substantial numbers of recordings in other languages from the collections of Peter Parkhill, Gwenda Davey and others.

One of the biggest challenges for both the National Library and Museum Victoria concerns the need for continually updating and refreshing their collections of children's folklore, and there are many questions to be asked. Do children still play the same

Geordie Dowell  
Handclapping at Harcourt Valley  
Primary School April 2006



Geordie Dowell  
Cubbyhouse Building in 'Pinies'  
at Harcourt Valley Primary  
School April 2006

games as they did a generation ago? Or the same games as the children depicted in Pieter Brueghel's famous painting of 1560, *Children's Games*, where more than 80 games are shown? Has the popularity of television and computer games affected the amount of time today's children spend in active play? Have hand-held electronic toys affected the activities of the school playground? Only research will enable these questions to be addressed. Yet no nationwide survey of children's games has taken place since Howard's work in the mid-1950s, more than half a century ago.

This survey is now to take place. On 6 July, the Australian Research Council announced a major grant to enable national research into primary school children's playground activities. This research was proposed by a consortium of three universities—Melbourne, Deakin and Curtin Universities—together with the National Library of Australia and Museum Victoria. The project is entitled *Childhood, Tradition and Change: A National Study of the Historical and Contemporary Practices and Significance of Australian Children's Playlore*. It will last more than four years, and aims to revisit the same Australian schools that Howard did, plus many more.

For several months the National Library carried out what was, in effect, a pilot for the Australian Research Council's project. A team of experienced interviewers visited primary school playgrounds in Victoria, and sound recordings have been obtained in two Melbourne locations, Warrandyte

(rural fringe) and Preston West (inner north suburban), as well as at Harcourt Valley Primary School which is in a rural area near Bendigo in the heart of Victoria's apple-growing region. After it is processed, this material will be added to the Library's Internet guide.

The Library's project has already exposed some additional problems beside the need for simply recording current games. Today researchers working in schools with children are required to undergo police checks, and ethical issues such as parent consent and approval for the project need to be considered carefully. Ethical issues are not always simple, and the Library withdrew one school from the project after a school committee chairperson demanded unworkably strict conditions for observation and documentation.

Another project at Deakin University in Burwood, Melbourne, aims to provide contemporary information for the Australian Children's Folklore Collection at Museum Victoria by asking all final-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students to collect playground games during their teaching practice periods. The project has received enthusiastic support from the Education Faculty which recognises the importance of play for children's social, intellectual, physical and language development. One good example is the well-known children's rhyme, *A Sailor Went to Sea*, which usually accompanies a handclapping rhyme, and involves feats of memory, verbal fluency, motor coordination, and breathing skills:

A sailor went to sea, sea, sea,  
To see what he could see, see, see;  
But all that he could see, see, see,  
Was the bottom of the deep blue sea, sea, sea.

It has been proved that traditional games are of major importance for children's physical development and wellbeing. Two physical education lecturers, Peter L. Lindsay and Denise Palmer, carried out a study in Brisbane, published in 1981 as *Playground Game Characteristics of Brisbane Primary School Children*. It showed that in many respects traditional games were more beneficial to children's health (for example, their cardio-vascular endurance) than formal syllabus games. Traditional play provides a wealth of information about childhood

and children's abilities. The games and pastimes involve not only memory and linguistic facility, but also a sense of rhythm, knowledge of rules, and organisational and mediation skills. It is not surprising that the American folklorists Mary and Herbert Knapp described children's games as 'legislatures and courts of law', where decisions must be made, arbitration carried out, rules observed or bent in the interests of a good game, and 'fair play' observed all round. In a recording made at Warrandyte Primary School, two boys give a long and elaborate explanation of how to play the running and chasing game called Stationary. This game requires the nomination of a King, a Messenger, the selection of a category unknown to the King (such as a favourite dog) which the King has to guess, and the avoidance of prohibited behaviour which constitutes cheating. The counting-out rhyme (or 'dip dip') used to begin this game shows how playground



Geordie Dowell  
Football Card Trading at  
Harcourt Valley Primary School  
April 2006

rhymes can satirise and challenge adult sensibilities with the use of vulgar language that delights in puncturing adult taboos about bodily functions:

*Uga Buga Hairy Legs Umbrella Feet,  
Went to the movies and couldn't find a seat.  
When the movie started, Uga Buga farted,  
Uga Buga Hairy Legs Umbrella Feet.  
When the movie stopped, Uga Buga popped,  
Uga Buga Hairy Legs Umbrella Feet.*

In this current era of anxiety when many adult voices are lamenting obesity in children and expressing concerns about issues such as violence and bullying, it may be salutary to consider that we adults do not have all the answers. A careful study of children's own traditional folkloric culture might suggest that many of the answers are, indeed, child's play. The fresh data provided by the sound recordings collected for the National Library's pilot project and by the more elaborate research for the major, four-year Australian Research Council project will greatly assist such careful study.

left:  
Geordie Dowell  
Hopscotch at Harcourt Valley  
Primary School April 2006

below:  
Geordie Dowell  
'Scoobies' on Show at Harcourt  
Valley Primary School  
April 2006



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