



LOLLIES OR LOLITA?

The perils of modern childhood research

Gwenda Beed Davey argues the case for preserving the culture of primary school playgrounds

Together with four other partners, the National Library of Australia is participating in an exciting four-year project called *Childhood, Tradition and Change: A National Study of the Historical and Contemporary Practices and Significances of Australian Children's Playlore*. I described the project, announced in July 2006, in an earlier article, 'Umbrella Feet: Children's Folklore and the National Library' (*National Library of Australia News*, September 2006).

Childhood, Tradition and Change is an Australian Research Council linkage project.

The Library's partners are Melbourne, Deakin and Curtin universities and Museum Victoria. Principal Chief Investigator is Professor Kate Darian-Smith (Melbourne University), with Chief Investigators Professor Bill Logan (Deakin University) and Professor Graham Seal (Curtin University). The latter is Australia's first professor of folklore. Principal Researchers are Dr June Factor and myself, and the Project Officer is Dr Nikki Henningham, based at the Australian Centre at Melbourne University.

The project is particularly interested in the notions of continuity and change in children's playlore, and is funded to do fieldwork in 30 schools around Australia until 2010. In particular, we want to compare and contrast today's playground activities with some very significant research carried out in the 1950s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Raymond de Berquelle (b.1933)
Children at Play, Glebe, Sydney, 1964
gelatin silver photograph
27.6 x 34.1 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3065061



Jim Fitzpatrick
Drouin Schoolboys Playing,
Drouin, Victoria c.1944
gelatin silver photograph
15.9 x 21.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24280499

The 1950s research was carried out by an American Fulbright scholar, Dr Dorothy Howard, who travelled to all Australian states and to the Australian Capital Territory, meticulously documenting playground games. In 2005, Museum Victoria reprinted the 10 scholarly articles Dorothy Howard had published on this research, in a book titled *Child's Play: Dorothy Howard and the Folklore of Australian Children*, edited by Kate Darian-Smith and June Factor.

The 1970s research was carried out by two Queensland physical education lecturers, Peter Lindsay and Denise Palmer, who observed almost 5000 children in 21 Brisbane schools. They published their work in 1981, as *The Playground Game Characteristics of Brisbane Primary School Children*. This work provides a particularly important opportunity for comparisons with current research. Unfortunately, it has taken the Childhood, Tradition and Change project two years to obtain permission from all states and territories to carry out research in primary school playgrounds—two years of tortuous negotiation and compromise.

Conducting research into children's behaviour in today's Australia is not an easy task. At best, it is hindered by contradictory images of childhood and attitudes towards children. These perceptions can range from cossetting children from the dangers (real or imagined) of the outside world to exploiting children commercially or sexually—the so-called 'lollies or Lolita' paradox. At its worst, there seems to be a tendency to regard as a paedophile any researcher who wants to observe children in their natural surroundings.

Controversial views about childhood have been around for some time. Sigmund Freud began publishing his major works around 1900 and developed his notions of children's psychosexual development (oral, anal, phallic and genital stages) from anthropological, clinical and social observations of nineteenth-century Vienna. Somewhat later, and less controversially, the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget focused on children's cognitive development. His *Origins of Intelligence in the Child* was first published in English in 1936, having

profound effects on educational thinking and practice in the West.

In the last few decades, Phillippe Aries and Neil Postman have provoked considerable debate with their writings about the 'invention of childhood' and the 'disappearance of childhood' respectively. Aries' *Centuries of Childhood* (1960) drew heavily on depictions of children in artworks (particularly clothing) and on some diaries to contend that childhood as we know it today was not 'discovered' before the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982) held that children are being 'degraded and then transmogrified into the lesser features of pseudo-adulthood' by commerce, fashion and media of all kinds.

Postman's concerns about exploitation and degradation of childhood are still shared today—with good cause. In 2005, Fiona Stanley, Sue Richardson and Margot Prior collaborated on a book called *Children of the Lucky Country?* Its subtitle is 'How Australian Society Has Turned Its Back on Children and Why Children Matter', and it expresses the view that economic prosperity has failed children on numerous indicators, especially among disadvantaged groups. Some of the developments are well known, though nevertheless alarming: rises in asthma and obesity, dramatic increases in Down syndrome children, and a four-fold increase in suicide rates for males aged 15–24 years since the 1960s. And, according to the Australian Council of Social Services report issued in October last year, 2.2 million Australians are living below the poverty line.

In 2006, Emma Rush achieved a lot of notoriety—and controversy—as the lead author of an Australia Institute research report, *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia*. The report dealt particularly with children and sex in advertising, and its effects on children. The inappropriate sexualisation of children involves defining children as objects to be exploited, whether it be in marketing or in direct sexual abuse.

This report caused a furore at the time, with the David Jones store threatening legal action against the institute. The report criticised some advertising that used child models and some aimed at children. It was also critical of a number of clothing manufacturers and magazines for

young girls. Part of its argument was that significant content in some advertisements and publications promoted the sexualisation of young children through preoccupation with, for example, adult celebrities, cute boys and promotion of hair straighteners, perfume and lip gloss. (These items are reflective of the content of one magazine I examined recently, aimed at 8–11 year-olds.)

I do not believe that childhood was discovered, or invented, only in the sixteenth century. Certainly, interest in children and childhood grew from that period, together with much other humanistic thought. The famous 1560 painting we know as *Children's Games*, painted by the Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel, reflects that interest in its depiction of more than 80 children's games,

below from top:
Jeff Carter (b.1928)
Cat's Cradle, Foxground, New South Wales, 1968
b&w photograph; 25.8 x 36.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3109265
Courtesy Jeff Carter

A.G. Forster
Students in Playground at Front of Tempe Public School, Sydney [between 1920 and 1945]
b&w glass negative; 12.0 x 16.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3098407





above:
J.A. Mulligan (1927–1996)
Group of Children Playing at the Handicapped Children's Centre, Sutherland, New South Wales [between 1960 and 1976]

b&w acetate negative
9.4 x 12.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an3093312

right:
Philip Gostelow
Ruby Gostelow and Friend Play Hopscotch on Backyard Patio, Woodford, New South Wales, 2000
gelatin silver photograph
33.5 x 23.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3047373

almost all of which are still played today. But there is much older evidence available. Children have a culture of their own, one which transcends nationality, ethnicity and time. It is a culture which is principally characterised by play, and much of it is of great antiquity. June Factor's 1988 book, *Captain Cook Chased a Chook: Children's Folklore in Australia*, confirms:

the remarkable persistence of old, sometimes ancient traditions of verbal and kinetic play. The game of Jacks, or Knucklebones, is still a popular children's pastime ... the British Museum's treasures from antiquity include a terracotta piece, dated about 800 BC, which shows two girls playing this game. On a wall of the tomb of Akhor, two Egyptian girls are painted handclapping ... The word 'barley', one of the terms used in English and Australian playgrounds to gain a moment's respite from the rules of a game, has been used for this purpose for at least 600 years.

Children's play is their secret weapon against those adults who would undermine their right to be children. It is the way in which they satirise the adult world, mock its taboos and its hypocrisy, and make use of the adult world's own cultural items for parody, as when they sing or chant:

My bonny lies over the ocean,
My bonny lies over the sea;
My father lies over my mother,
And that's how they got little me.

And even children who love their teacher are likely to chant:

One two three four, kick the teacher out
the door.

Today, children's traditional play, their skipping and handclapping games, marbles, counting-out rituals, running and chasing, take place mainly in the primary school playground. The great English researchers Iona and Peter Opie called their seminal work of 1969 *Children's Games in Street and Playground*. Not any more—in the age of the motor car and of exaggerated fears, children are kept inside the home, glued to television or computer.

I think a case could be made for declaring primary school playgrounds as cultural heritage sites. What a furore that would cause!

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