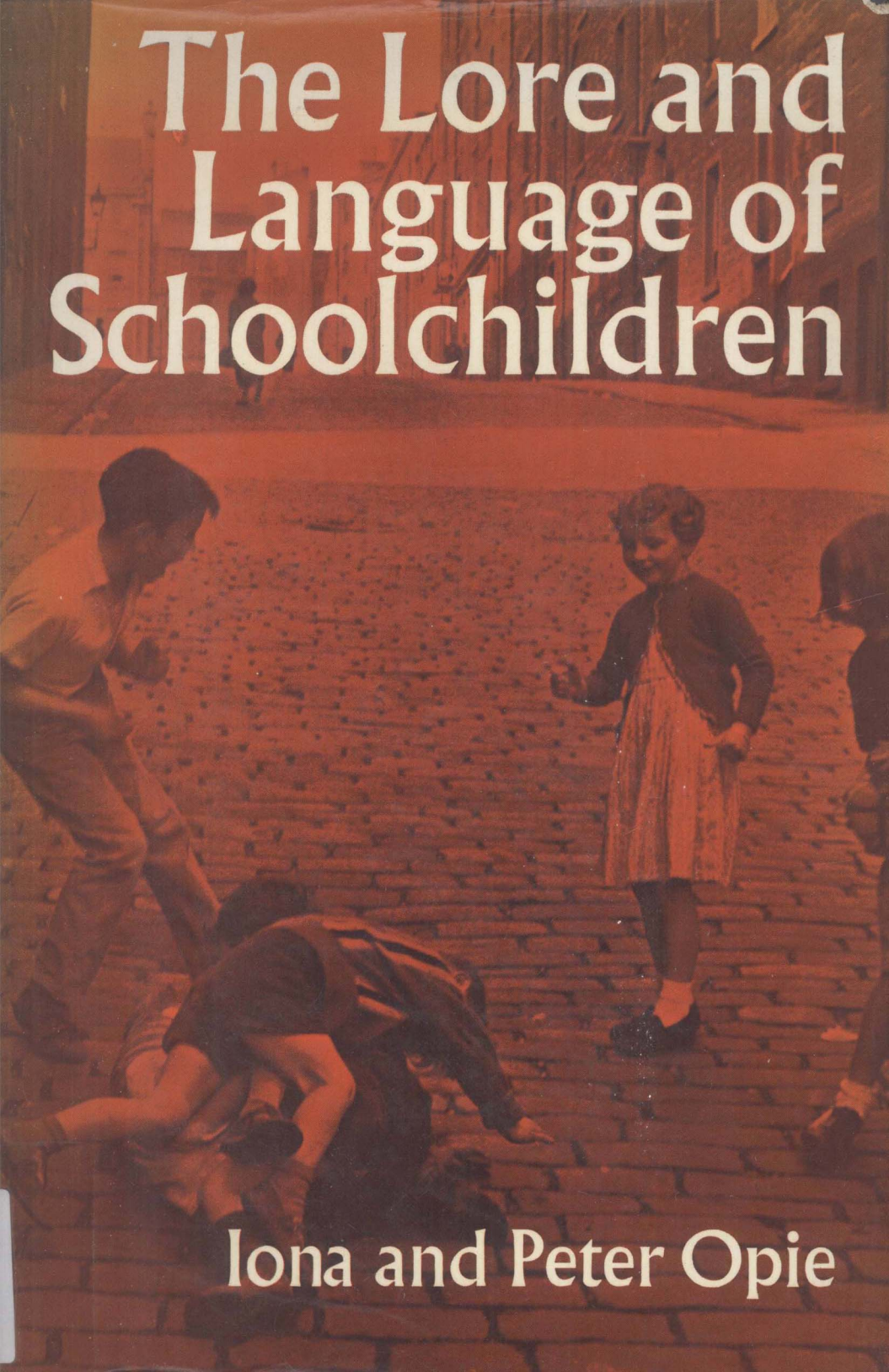


The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren



Iona and Peter Opie

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BY

IONA AND PETER OPIE



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The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren





WHEREABOUTS OF CHIEF CONTRIBUTING SCHOOLS

Preface

MORE than 200 years ago Queen Anne's physician John Arbuthnot, friend of Swift and Pope, observed that nowhere was tradition preserved pure and uncorrupt 'but amongst School-boys, whose Games and Plays are delivered down invariably from one generation to another'. If Dr. Arbuthnot made any notes on his discovery they have not been found (he let his children make kites of his papers); and none of his eminent contemporaries, nor, indeed, many people since have given much further thought to the subject. The curious lore passing between children aged about 6-14, which today holds in its spell some 7 million inhabitants of this island, continues to be almost unnoticed by the other six-sevenths of the population. In fact one of the difficulties in making the present study has been that, since this work has no true predecessor, we had first to find out what there was to find out, before we knew whether there existed a subject to study. The generally held opinion, both inside and outside academic circles, was that children no longer cherished their traditional lore. We were told that the young had lost the power of entertaining themselves; that the cinema, the wireless, and television had become the focus of their attention; and that we had started our investigation fifty years too late.

The study which comes nearest to being a predecessor to the present work is Norman Douglas's 'breathless catalogue' of *London Street Games* published in 1916. This pioneer work and social document of first importance is, however, something of a curiosity. Written by a fastidious literary craftsman, and based on genuine research amongst young cockneys, it records the secret joys of the gutter in a finely printed limited edition for the bibliophile. Even so, the book might have been a success if it had not been almost incomprehensible to anyone but a street arab. It is a skilful prose-poem fashioned out of the sayings and terminology of Douglas's urchin friends; and we must admit that it was only after several years, when we ourselves had become familiar with the argot which the kids still speak in London's alleyways and tenement courts, that we appreciated the book's finer points. Douglas was not interested in glossing the terms, and giving details of the games and pranks he listed, because he was under the impression that the street lore was largely impromptu, and therefore transient and merely local. Although he afterwards admitted (*Late Harvest*, 1946) that the words of one of the games he had witnessed, 'Buck, buck, how many fingers have I got up?' had survived from the time of Nero, he

continued to believe, as he had done when he collected the games (mostly in 1913), that they were rapidly disappearing. The reason he made his catalogue, he said, was to see whether the next lot of children knew even the names of the street sports he recorded. So it may be as well to report straight away that, of the 137 child-chants and fragments of chants which Norman Douglas heard in the streets the other side of two world wars, more than 78 per cent. (108 verses to be precise) are still being chanted by youngsters today.

Douglas had, indeed, a healthy mistrust of pedants who claim to discern a relic of marriage by capture in a simple singing game, and find a meaning 'not quite nice' in every underived child word like 'obobé' and 'a-lairy'. In *London Street Games* he characterizes this kind of person as 'Aunt Eliza'. Very possibly he had in mind Lady (Alice Bertha) Gomme whose 964-page, two-volume *Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland* had appeared in 1894-8. This monumental compilation has remained the standard work on children's games (it does not, unfortunately, include children's customs and language) for the past sixty years. Yet in one sense, as Norman Douglas's book sharply revealed, it was out of date before ever it was published. It presented, anyway, only a partial picture. Lady Gomme, it is true, conscientiously secured correspondents all over Britain, but two features about her records have to be borne in mind: firstly, that the games with which she was supplied were largely recollections of what her correspondents had played when they were young, probably forty or fifty years earlier (i.e. around 1850), or were re-collectings;¹ and secondly, that almost all her correspondents were country dwellers, and tended to be well-to-do. The great warren of city backstreets where the mass of the nation's children are bred and brought up remained *terra incognita*; and there is a slightly unreal feeling about most of the games Lady Gomme describes, as if the children had had to wash their hands and faces before playing them.

It is noticeable that in almost all books and articles on children's play (and there has been a continuous flow of them ever since Strutt's *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* in 1801), the regular source of information has been the author's or other adult's childhood reminiscences; and the *cri de cœur* has been nostalgia for the 'good old days'. The inevitable result has been that while the highlights of children's play, the dramatic and haunting 'Wally, wally, wallflower growing up so high', and the spectacular scrimmage of 'Hi Jimmy Knacker', have been documented

¹ That is to say, when they did collect from children, they asked for games which they remembered playing themselves.

over and over again, the everyday games have usually been overlooked. And the verbal lore, the amusing quips and jeers, the significant calls and superstitions, which mean so much in the life of a ten-year-old at the time, have been too ordinary to be filed in memory's archive.

The present study is based on the contributions of some 5,000 children attending seventy schools, primary, secondary modern, and grammar, in different parts of England, Scotland, and Wales, and one school in Dublin. The schools include small village schools in remote rural districts, such as one where squirrels steal from the pockets of children's coats hanging in the porch; and they include the grim barrack-like buildings to be seen in nearly every city. They include central secondary schools like the one in mountainous Radnorshire, where, since the population averages 39 to the square mile, the children have to travel to school each day from widely separated homesteads; and they include schools where children rush in across the road from a single great tenement block. They include schools with long histories, and records of academic distinction, such as Kirkcaldy High School, where Carlyle was once a master; and a modern slum-clearance school where it was believed no traditional lore existed, and the girls were found to possess more than almost anywhere in Britain. They include a bilingual school, in which the first language of many of the contributing children is Welsh (the Welsh speakers pick up English rhymes almost before they know the meaning of the words, when they begin to mix with the E stream children).¹ And they include schools as far apart as Pendeen in the toe of Cornwall, and Golspie on the east coast of Sutherland, where the children were asked exactly the same questions about their lore that their predecessors had been asked sixty years earlier.²

Broadly speaking we believe that our contributing schools, and the children in them, are representative of the child population as a whole. The study does not, however, except incidentally, include the lore current among children in the private, fee-charging establishments. And it does not, despite the sections on tortures and pranks after nightfall, set out to include the lore and language of the delinquent. We are concerned here

¹ For a parallel situation: Russian, Polish, and Galician Jew immigrant children learning old English games in a Missouri playground, see L. R. C. Yoffie, 'Three Generations of Children's Singing Games in St. Louis', *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. lx, 1947, pp. 1-51.

² In 1892 Bodley's librarian, E. W. B. Nicholson, gave the headmaster of Golspie School a questionnaire on children's games, rhymes, sayings, local customs, tales, and beliefs, and offered a prize to the pupil submitting the best essay. From the entries he received he wrote his book *Golspie: Contributions to its Folklore* published in 1897. (The actual children's papers are preserved in the Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. misc. c. 58.) In 1952, through the courtesy of the Sutherland Director of Education, 38 pupils at Golspie Senior Secondary School tackled the same questionnaire; and in 1953 a further group of 51 children answered a series of special questions covering item by item the traditions written down by their Victorian counterparts.

merely with the fun-loving but father-fearing specimen who is typical of the vast majority. It seems necessary to say this because there has, of late, been such a spate of books about children who are juvenile offenders, or illiterates, or physically handicapped, that a book about the ordinary child is rather extraordinary. Indeed the picture which emerges is a happy one. It contains some tears but much laughter, some hard knocks but no whining; and the warm feeling the children have for their homes, and the pleasant relationships they evidently enjoy with their parents (revealed, for instance, in their descriptions of special days in the year), should gladden the heart of the most confirmed pessimist.

The present work is solely concerned with the contemporary school-child, and wherever possible his story is told in his own words. All rhymes, riddles, jokes, records of strange beliefs, descriptions of rites and customs, and other curiosities of juvenile lore and language for which no source is given may be taken as coming *direct from oral tradition*, collected by us or on our behalf during the past ten years. The only exception to this is the use we have occasionally made of some manuscript collections, acknowledged hereafter, which had already been compiled by various interested persons when we began work, and which were generously placed at our disposal. Historical annotation and comparative material has largely been relegated to the footnotes, or to paragraphs following the sign **. When we do not give a locality to a particular item it may be taken to be fairly generally known; and even when we do name the place or places where a piece of lore is current, it does not, of course, necessarily mean that it is known only in those places, but that those are the places, or some of them, where we have collected it. When we say that a rhyme or other item is known 'all over Britain' we mean, literally, that we have recordings of it from north, south, east, and west, perhaps from children in twenty or more different schools.

This is the first time, we believe, that oral lore has been studied in a number of widely separated places at the same time. And if our modest, unsponsored, and wholly voluntary survey has turned out to be the most comprehensive folklore collecting scheme which has yet been undertaken in Britain, it is, firstly, a tribute to our devoted band of collectors; and it is, secondly, a sad illustration of the way Britain's rich oral heritage, so often beautiful as well as scientifically interesting, continues to be neglected by those who otherwise care for the good things of this country.¹

¹ Unfortunately most academic and governmental people are not even aware that English traditional lore exists to be collected. See, if interested, our two papers: 'The Collection of Folklore in England', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. ci, 21 August 1953, pp. 697-714; and 'England, the Great Undiscovered', *Folk-Lore*, vol. lxx, December 1954, pp. 149-64.

It may be, of course, that the information recorded here will seem trifling to some. But to us the unexpected quantity and variety of the traditions which have been collected, and of the street and playground games which are to follow in a companion volume, do seem to show that children today are storing up for themselves just as lively memories as any of those with which we are now regaled by the old folk. In a way, this book contains information which would not ordinarily have been written down for another fifty years, for it is made up of what will be the childhood recollections of the older generation after A.D. 2000. Having now spent some length of time watching the rising generation, the first in the new Elizabethan age, we cannot but feel that it is a virile generation. The modern schoolchild, when out of sight and on his own, appears to be rich in language, well-versed in custom, a respecter of the details of his own code, and a practising authority on traditional self-amusements. And a generation which cares for the traditions and entertainments which have been passed down to it is not one which is less good than its predecessors.

I. O. & P. O.

WEST LISS,
HAMPSHIRE

(The book was written at Alton in Hampshire, 1951-9)

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The chief contributing schools, and the teachers responsible, have been as follows:

ABERDEEN	Powis Junior Secondary School (Mr. James Thomson, lately Head Teacher)
ABERYSTWYTH	Dinas Secondary Modern School (Ysgol Eilradd Dinas) (Mr. Hywel Watkins, Head Master, and Mr. D. P. Hughes)
ALTON	Alton County Primary School (Mr. Nicholas J. Wickham)
ANNESLEY	Annesley County Primary School (Mr. L. Spolton)
BIRMINGHAM II	Golden Hillock Road Primary School (Miss Freda Tomlinson)
BIRMINGHAM 27	Acocks Green Junior Mixed School (Miss Gladys Watson, Head Mistress)
BISHOP AUCKLAND	Cockton Hill School (Mr. Harold Guthrie)
BLACKBURN	Intack School (Mrs. E. H. Higham, Head Teacher)
CAERLEON	Caerleon Junior Mixed School (Miss P. Hockey, J.P., Head Mistress)
CAISTOR	The Grammar School (Mr. R. Capper, Head Master)
CLEETHORPES	The Grammar School for Girls (Miss Iris Sawbridge)
CROYDON	Selhurst Grammar School for Boys (Mr. Hugh Hughes)
DOVENBY	The Controlled School (Miss Isabelle Benson, Head Mistress)
DUBLIN	St. Catherine's School, Meath Street (through the Rev. John Maher)
DUNDEE	Dens Road School (Miss Jane Tosh)
ECCLESFIELD	The Grammar School (Mr. Linden Huddleston)
EDINBURGH	Moray House School (Miss Maureen R. C. Laing)

ENFIELD	Suffolks Secondary Modern School (Mr. A. H. Sellick)
ETTON	Etton Church of England Primary School (Mrs. J. M. Johnson, Head Mistress)
FORFAR	Forfar Academy (Mr. Douglas J. McMillan)
GLASGOW E.	Newlands School (Miss F. L. S. Begg)
GLASGOW E. 2	Shettleston School (Miss F. L. S. Begg)
GOLSPIE	Golspie Senior Secondary School (through Mr. T. E. M. Landsborough, Sutherland Director of Education)
HELENSBURGH	Hermitage Senior Secondary School (Dr. Ian J. Simpson)
IPSWICH	The School of Commerce and Social Studies (Miss Yvonne K. Rodwell)
KIRKCALDY	Kirkcaldy High School (Miss J. B. T. Christie, lately Woman Adviser)
KNIGHTON	Knighton Secondary Modern School (Mr. Frank Noble)
LANGHOLM	Langholm Academy (Miss Eva Smart)
LAVERSTOCK	St. Andrew's Junior School (Miss D. Belfield, Head Mistress)
LINCOLN	Spring Hill Secondary Modern School (Miss M. M. Fenton, Head Mistress)
LIVERPOOL (BOOTLE)	Balliol Modern Secondary School (Mr. W. Stewart Elliott).
LONDON E. 8	Wilton Way County Secondary School (Miss Betty Gould)
LONDON S.E. 5	Wilson's Grammar School (Mr. Linden Huddleston)
LONDON S.E. 7	Maryon Park Secondary Modern School (Miss Dorothy King)
LUNCARTY	Redgorton School, near Luncarty (Mr. A. K. Lunan, Head Master)
LYDNEY	Lydney Grammar School (Miss Alice Higgs)
MANCHESTER (SALE)	Sale County Grammar School for Boys (Mr. G. G. Urwin)
MARKET RASEN	The Modern School (Mr. S. B. Vickers, Head Master, together with Mr. Fox and Mr. Houlton)
NEWBRIDGE	Greenfield Secondary School (Mr. Gordon Groves, J.P., Head Master)
NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE	Wingrove Road Junior School (Miss E. T. Kerr, Head Mistress)

OUNDLE	Oundle Church of England Primary School (through Mr. H. Caudwell)
OXFORD	Headington Church of England School (Mrs. E. Skwierczynska) Headington Secondary School (Miss Margaret Hornsey)
PENDEEN	Pendeen Primary School (Miss Ida Bennetts, Head Mistress)
PENRITH	The Boys' National School (through Mr. John Jackson) The Girls' County School (through Mr. John Jackson) Queen Elizabeth Grammar School (through Mr. John Jackson) Tynefield Secondary Modern School (through Mr. John Jackson)
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PETERBOROUGH	Eastholm Secondary Modern School (through Mr. R. W. Cowe)
PONTEFRAC T	The King's School (Mr. J. S. Golland)
PONTYPOOL	The County School for Girls (Miss A. Francis, Head Mistress)
PORTSMOUTH	Southern Grammar School for Girls (Miss Peggy Samways)
RUTHIN	Brynhyfryd Grammar School (Miss Una Williams)
SCARBOROUGH	Hinderwell Primary School (Miss R. Horsman)
SHREWSBURY	Monkmoor Secondary Modern School for Girls (Mrs. Waddington)
SOUTH ELMSALL	Broad Lane Girls' School (Miss Blanche Eyre)
SOUTH MOLTON	The Secondary School (Mr. Derek Stewart)
SPENNYMOOR	The Spennymoor Grammar Technical School (Mr. William Sumner, Head Master; Mr. Matthew Walton)
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	Summerbank County Modern Girls' School, Tunstall
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