



Play and Folklore

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Play and Folklore – On the Web

This issue of Play & Folklore is the second to enter the ‘virtual reality’ of the Web. Museum Victoria, the home of the Australian Children’s Folklore Collection since 1999, is now publishing Play & Folklore on its web page. As before, it will appear twice a year; as before, it is edited by June Factor and Gwenda Beed Davey and will continue to publish childlore and play research, memoirs, debate and reflection – lively and thought-provoking material from across the globe.

Freed from the costs of printing and postage (although Play & Folklore will still be available in hard copy if required), we can now welcome a much wider readership, and, we hope, new contributors. The old, true notion of knowledge as a public good, freely available to all who wish to partake, is not a reality – at least for Play & Folklore readers. In the future, we hope to publish an Index covering all issues of Play & Folklore, and to reprint key articles, building up an archive of valuable material. Send us your email address, and we will send you each issue. We look forward to your comments complimentary and critical – and your contributions.

■ PRINS JORIS WAS A GENTLEMAN

Multicultural folklore for children in sound recordings at the National Library of Australia

Gwenda Beed Davey

*Prins Joris was a gentleman
A gentleman was he;
He had a coat with currants on
And pants of rice pudding.* (TRC 2632)

In 2002 I completed a project for the National Library of Australia which I had begun some years before (Davey, 2002). This was a survey of children's folklore recordings held in the Oral History and Folklore Section, and I was delighted to find that many of the Library's leading field collectors had included some children's folklore among their recordings.

Children's folklore is one of the most ancient of continuous traditions. Stories for children such as *The Emperor's New Clothes* were written down in the fourteenth century, and the famous painting *Children's Games*, produced by Pieter Brueghel in 1560, shows more than eighty games still played by children today. Children's lore is, however, not significant only for its antiquity, but because of the important role which it plays in children's social and intellectual development.

It is of particular interest that the National Library of Australia's collection of sound recordings of children's folklore contains a strong multicultural component. The Dutch rhyme about Prins Joris printed above is one of many in more than twenty languages, held in the Library's Oral History and Folklore section. It's also one of the many nonsense rhymes of a similar type, in different languages, where reality is turned upside down. The cow who jumped over the moon in the English rhyme, *Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle* has many companions such as a mouse in a monastery (Greek), sardines in the mountains (Spanish) and a house with no roof (Italian). This Serbian rhyme is called *The Fisherman*:

*The fisherman put a net in the sea
And next day found seven pheasants in it.
The next time he put out a line
He hooked a rabbit!
When he fished out in the deep sea
He found sausages and a bottle of wine!*



Children playing games under supervision at the Child-Minding Centre at Graylands Migrant Hostel, Perth, Western Australia (detail). National Library of Australia Pictures Collection.



And nobody in the town could work it all out! (TRC 2632)

There is no doubt that the main reason why adults use nonsense rhymes with young children is for entertainment, but both parents and early childhood specialists are well aware that nursery rhymes serve other functions as well. Nonsense rhymes help children's ability to classify concepts (what's real and what's not), and children's first lessons in counting may be through rhymes such as

*One two three four five,
Once I caught a fish alive.
Why did I let him go?
Because he bit my finger so.*

Physical and emotional bonding are enhanced by body games such as 'This little pig went to market', 'This is the way the ladies ride', and by charming rhymes such as the Italian *Signorina Patatina*:

<i>Signorina Patatina,</i>	<i>Little Miss Potato,</i>
<i>Con le gambe di gallina,</i>	<i>With your chicken legs</i>
<i>Con la vesta di veluto,</i>	<i>And your velvet dress;</i>
<i>Signorina, ti saluto!</i>	<i>Little Miss, hello!</i> (TRC 2632)

In an era when cultural differences between people of different ethnic background may be a source of bitter dissension, it is a cause for joy to discover that there are many cultural similarities too, including similarities in the songs, rhymes and games which adults use with very young children. One aspect of multicultural similarities in folklore for children which has interested me for some time involves the enigmatic sayings which adults use, usually humorously, to put curious children in their place. A child's query 'How old are you, grandma?' may be answered in English with 'As old as my tongue and as young as my teeth' and in Italian as 'Thirty years per leg'. The perennial question 'What's for dinner?' may be answered by a Greek mother with 'My liver and kidneys', or by an English-speaker with 'Bread and scrape', or 'Bread and pullet. Most families have their favorites, such as the mysterious response to the question 'What are you making, Dad?' – 'a wigwam for a goose's bridle'.

Although the earliest sound recordings held by the National Library were made in the 1950s by pioneers such as Hazel de Berg and John Meredith, there are only a few recordings of any kind in languages other than English made before the 1970s. This was the decade in which the word 'multicultural' was first used extensively in public discourse, and the decade when real interest began in the cultural treasures brought to Australia by immigrants of many different ethnic origins. Peter Parkhill was one of the first to make field recordings of immigrant musicians, beginning in the 1970s, and his collection held in the National Library includes items for children and performances by children. Parkhill's recordings include musicians from Anatolia (Turkey), Cambodia, Crete, Czechoslovakia, East Timor and Macedonia, all playing for child singers and dancers.



Some of the traditional Turkish songs recorded by Peter Parkhill such as 'The Red Handkerchief' are also included in the Australian Children's Folklore Collection. It is interesting that love songs in many languages, such as the English 'Lavender Blue', are frequently sung by adults to children, and I have found that the old song 'Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do' has passed through oral tradition into the nursery rhyme repertoire. The following translation of the Turkish folk song 'Mendil' ('The Red Handkerchief'), one of Peter Parkhill's recordings, is from the Australian Children's Folklore Collection (TRC 2632):

*Go to the mountains and get some snow;
The wood smells wet, bring it in a golden bowl.
Break a golden nut in the golden bowl
And bring me the red handkerchief.
I should have not broken the nut,
I should not have broken my lover's heart.*

There are two exceptions to my contention that most multicultural recordings in the National Library date from the 1970s. One is from the important O'Connor Collection, recorded in the 1950s and 1960s, mainly in Victoria. This collection includes a number of items of children's folklore, including songs and lullabies from Africa, Israel, the United States and Yemen. The other exception is Catherine Ellis's 1962 recording of Aboriginal women at Ooldea (South Australia) singing songs including a lullaby. There are of course many recordings made with Aboriginal people in the National Library's collections, but recordings of traditional lore for children are rarities.

A more recent project, the Greek-Australian Oral History and Folklore Project, was carried out in Melbourne between 1997 and 1999. Interviews were conducted in both Greek and English by Demetra Enzilis, and several different groups of Greek-Australians were interviewed, including Melbourne *Rebetika* musicians and both State and Federal members of Parliament. Groups of women interviewed included women over seventy years of age, professional women, and women under thirty years. The interviews included discussions on folk beliefs and practices, and many interviewees, both men and women, contributed examples of the traditional songs, rhymes and stories which they told to young children, including 'Moon so Bright', which is one of the best-known of all Greek nursery rhymes. It is often said to refer to the illegal Greek schools which were held at night during the Ottoman domination of Greece. However, like English-language nursery rhymes such as 'Little Jack Horner' (sometimes said to refer to Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and his allocation of 'plum' real estate to his favorites), the 'political' origins of nursery rhymes are difficult to establish.

*Moon so bright
Shine at night.
Light my way
To go to school*



To work and play

And learn the rule

And God's good things.

All of the examples given above are folklore used by adults with children. This is folklore FOR children, one of the two main types of children's folklore. The more widely-recognised type is children's own playground lore, folklore OF children, which has become well-known in Australia in recent years through Ian Turner's 1969 publication *Cinderella Dressed in Yella* and through June Factor's compilations such as *Far Out, Brussel Sprout!* and her scholarly book *Captain Cook Chased a Chook: Children's Folklore in Australia*. Australian children's playground lore is mostly known as English-language lore, and some classic examples are hand-clapping rhymes such as 'Mary Mack dressed in black', 'Teddy bear, teddy bear' or

A sailor went to sea, sea, sea,

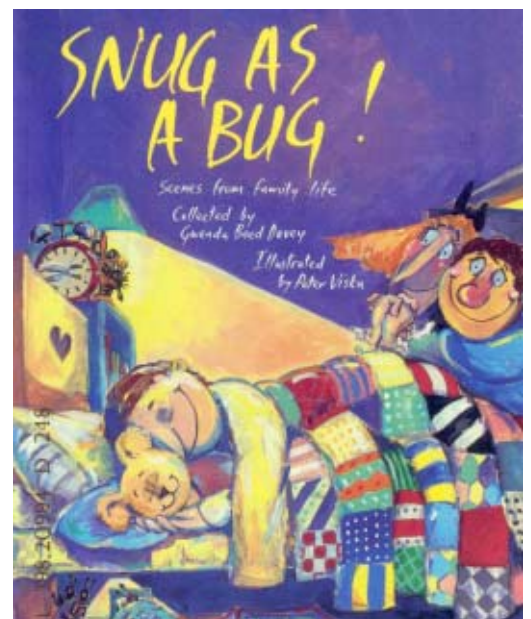
To see what he could see, see, see;

But all that he could see, see, see,

Was the bottom of the deep blue sea, sea, sea.

Some Australian researchers such as Heather Russell and Kathy Marsh have looked at non-English lore in school playgrounds, and particularly at the influences that this introduced children's culture has had on the mainstream play repertoire. Some individual school playgrounds have adopted new games or practices, such as the 'Chinese flick' in marbles, but most Australian children's playground lore remains in the Anglo tradition, as are most of the sound recordings of this lore in the National Library's collections. Even exotic locations like Christmas Island show the dominance of the Anglo pattern! Mr Choo Wai Chee was born on Christmas Island and lived there for a number of years. In 1987 he recorded his experiences for what has become known as the Christmas Island Collection. He spoke about his childhood at South Point:

We were called the 'barbarians' by the other kids and the teachers because we came in from the jungle. South Point and Camp 4/5 kids were always picked on...At 5 o'clock every kid was in the park which was directly opposite our house. There we played all sorts of games like a kind of 'rounders' using rocks for bases, or a game we called 'boompa' which is the sound made by the two sticks we hit together instead of a bat and ball... We played lots of different marble games with real marble marbles. Sometimes if we ran out, we would steal them from the chooks' nests. Mum and Dad used to put dummy marble eggs under the chooks to make them lay more.



Snug as a Bug! Scenes from Family Life, collected by Gwenda Beed Davey, illustrated by Peter Viska (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990).

