

Iona Opie, A Lifetime in the Playground (inaugural address to ‘The State of Play Conference’, University of Sheffield, 14 April 1998)¹

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Introduction by Professor John Widdowson, National Centre for English Cultural Tradition, University of Sheffield

We’re delighted to welcome Dr Iona Opie to Sheffield and to this conference on ‘The State of Play’. I’m sure that Dr Opie’s work is well known to everyone here. And in addition to their early collecting and work on children’s rhymes, culminating in the publication of *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1951), Iona and Peter Opie had the vision to launch a major survey of children’s folklore which constitutes a unique record of the traditions in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. This all began of course with their ground-breaking work, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, which I have cause to think about a great deal because it ‘seduced me’ into folklore. So there’s a great deal to be answered for there! And it was followed by *Children’s Games in Street and Playground* in 1969, and then in fairly quick succession, *The Singing Game* (1985), *The People in the Playground* – a fascinating insight that Dr Opie perhaps couldn’t have given before 1993 – and *Children’s Games with Things*, the latest book and sort of completing the series, 1997. And in so doing, in publishing all this material, they’ve made all their collections available to everyone, and in a form that’s both scholarly and accessible. And by any standards, that’s a remarkable achievement. Acclaimed nationally and internationally, it ensures that their names will always be associated with the study of children’s folklore.

It’s a particular pleasure to me to invite Iona Opie to present her inaugural address to the conference, aptly entitled, ‘A Lifetime in the Playground’.

A Lifetime in the Playground

The question that I’m most often asked is ‘how did you begin’? So I’m going to tell you how we began.

Well, like most other people, we began by accident. And yet, while it was not planned, it was not entirely by accident. We had, as it were, the right sort of qualifications. We liked reference books. In fact when we got married, each of us had a copy of *Brewer’s Phrase and Fable*. And it was a question of whose copy we got rid of. Need I tell you, it was mine!

We liked looking things up in reference books. We wanted to find answers. And also we were the sort of people who were, I suppose, fairly reclusive, who were not sociable, didn’t mind working long hours.

We were also rather at a loose end at the time. Peter was in a publishing firm, publishing reference books, as it happened. And I was expecting our first child. The publishers had been evacuated to Bedfordshire because it was impossibly noisy in London at the time. The buzz bombs were interrupting any sort of normal life. It was 1944. But Peter was bored stiff. He didn’t like working for somebody else. He liked working for himself. And I suspect he was already on the outlook [sic] for some work we could do together, some life that we could share. Just the two of us.

¹ This transcription has been made by Julia C Bishop, University of Sheffield (July 2014). The recording is held at the University of Sheffield in the Archives of Cultural Tradition, audiotape A19-98, held in Special Collections (<http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/special>).

Anyway, because we were in the depths of the country, we were forced to do things like going for long country walks – something we never did again in the rest of our lives. And we went for one of these country walks and we met a ladybird. And we met the ladybird and we said its rhyme to it, which I'm sure you remember but I'm going to recite:

Ladybird, ladybird,
Fly away home,
Your house is on fire
And your children all gone.
All except one
And her name is Anne,
And she crept under
The frying pan.

Well, it was quite a shock to say that rhyme as an adult. It was so mysterious. We'd known it as children but we'd never thought about it since. And the next time we went up to London, the first thing we did was go to the public library and ask for a book about the histories of nursery rhymes. And the book we were given was Halliwell's *Nursery Rhymes of England*, 1842. Well, we learnt something about the ladybird and we learnt something about other nursery rhymes, and we decided to find out more for ourselves. It began as a kind of hobby and gradually took hold of all our spare time. We followed up all Halliwell's clues in the British Museum Library, and we began to buy nursery rhyme books because we were having to decide first of all what *is* a nursery rhyme? Well, obviously a rhyme that appeared frequently in nursery rhyme books. That was actually the way the Opie Collection of Children's Literature started because once you start collecting children's books, you don't stop.

Well, it was *I* who was officially writing this book. And Peter helped me in the evenings while James – about that size – who had meanwhile put in an appearance played with our toes under the table. We submitted a manuscript to the publisher Herbert Van Thal who said – first of all he gave us a grand lunch at the Café Royal – and there he said, God bless him, he said, 'Yes, this is very interesting, but I want to know much more about each rhyme. I want to know its whole history.' So we were shattered really. I mean, we thought it was okay as it was, but. I remember we staggered along from the Café Royal afterwards and stood blindly in front of a corset shop in Leicester Square, not even seeing the corsets, just discussing what we should do next. I certainly didn't have the freedom or the time to study at the library. So Peter decided to leave his job and work on the dictionary full-time.

And it took us seven years all told. Well, thank goodness it wasn't until after it was finished – after it was published – in 1951 that quite a number of other people told us that they had been working on the histories of nursery rhymes and their books were mostly half-finished. Because, you see, we were giving all our time to it and they had other things to do.

Now, of course, we're still a long way from the playground which, I say, my lifetime has been spent in the playground. But what happened was this. While we were working on the nursery rhymes our correspondents occasionally sent us in a rhyme that was quite unsuitable for an adult to say to a small child. These rhymes were far too rude and rumbustious. They had a harsh thumping rhythm. They belonged to a later period, we decided, when the child was out in a playground. So we set these rhymes aside and found that we had seed-corn for a further study, and one that was going to take us far longer. Because Peter never did anything by halves. None of my family do actually, they're all 'excessive'.

When we started to find out about school lore we decided to do something that had never been done before. We decided to ask the school children themselves. There had been other enquirers before, of course. Lady Gomme's volunteers had collected the words of singing games. And the Bodley's librarian, E. W. B. Nicholson, when he was staying with the Duchess of Sutherland in 1892, had organised a prize competition for written descriptions of games from the schoolchildren of Golspie. But our aim was no less than to cover the whole of the British Isles. We started with a letter to the *Sunday Times* saying what we wanted to do and asking for help in doing it. It seemed there was a lot of interest already especially among schoolteachers. We had 151 offers of help from teachers who were willing to get information from their own schools. And to get in touch with friends who were teaching in other parts of the country. We had a network!

I've often been asked about our methodology. Well, in the days when we were running these rather large surveys, we didn't even know the word 'methodology'. We never had any higher education. We'd been caught in the war. So when we wanted to know how the children of Bishop Auckland or Ipswich amused themselves in the playground, or spent their free time after school, we just asked their teachers to ask them to write about it. We sent out what I suppose could be called questionnaires but they were of a very general nature. Just general guidance. Simply, what games do you play? And, please give the rules and any rhymes. What is the most stupid game you've ever been asked to play, and why don't you like it? And which is your favourite? Any ball games? Games played with stones or nuts or coins? And, what word do you say when you want to stop for a breather in a chasing game? Any action to go with it? And, what do you call people who cheat? People who wear spectacles? And so on.

We were not specific. We'd never ask, for instance, do you play hopscotch? Which would have been fatal in Scotland where they'd never heard of hopscotch but always played peevers. No use asking about hide and seek when the local name is block.

And one of the pleasures of that informal method we used was that our correspondents became our friends. We wrote chatty letters back and forth, and when we needed to know more about the rules of the game, or to understand the trickier points of marbles, then the teacher could ask the child to write to us direct, just to explain.

Well, all this was very labour-intensive. We received wads of written papers which are now in the Bodleian Library. And these had to be sifted, and passages marked and copied into the files in appropriate sections which gradually became more and more detailed. In fact, I learned about the subject while I was analysing the material. A child might describe another way of continuous skipping, for instance, in which a player might tap the outgoing skipper on the back as she jumps into the rope. Or might produce yet another regional name for hopscotch. And I would have to create a new section in the files so that like could be put with like. Then, when all the material was in place, and arranged so that the whole history of a game and all the recordings could be read through chronologically, and all the rules in a rational order, then the file could be taken through to The Writer, in his room next door. Because that was how we worked. Peter was The Writer. He had been a writer since he was six years old. And he had already written two books, both of them autobiographies, by the time that we got married when he was 24 and I was 19. (The whole of our life has been slightly ridiculous!)

In 1959 we moved to a larger house, because we had too many books really. They were on the wardrobes and under the beds. And we worked in this new house in rooms side by side on the ground floor. Mine contained the files, the folklore and reference books, the typewriter

and the telephone, and looked out towards the front so that I could keep an eye open for intruders. Peter's room was lined with children's books and more reference books, including the largest size *Oxford English Dictionary* which he'd bought with the money they gave him because he was invalided out of the army. He got 25 pounds and he knew that good writers had to have the very largest dictionary so that's what he got. And his room looked out on the garden so that he could watch the woodpeckers on the lawn while he was thinking.

Now in my present position as an elder, I feel I can say this to you. If you want to do something badly enough, you can do it in spite of all natural disadvantages. We were neither of us particularly bright. I doubt we would have had distinguished academic careers if we had gone to university, which we didn't, of course, because we'd been caught in the war. Our concentration was poor so that we never interrupted each other in case we broke some valuable train of thought. So we had a working agreement. If I needed to go and look at a reference book in his room, I walked in, didn't look at him, walked straight to the book I needed, consulted it, and walked out again. If he needed to consult a file in my room, he did the same. When he had finished the rough draft of a piece of writing, he brought it through, put it on my desk and walked out again. I read it, wrote comments in the margins, went into his room, and put it on his desk. We never discussed the writing verbally because if we did we always got into a muddle.

Sometimes an interviewer or a reviewer will say that they hope that someone will run a similar survey in the present generation of schoolchildren and compare the results. But I really wonder whether it could be done. To begin with the present generation of primary school teachers is terribly hard pressed and probably cannot spare the time. For another thing the financing might be difficult. Peter and I lived off the proceeds of the nursery rhyme dictionary and his own small private income, and handouts from his mother and his uncle. We were not academics. We were never part of an institution. We never had a grant. And even in our palmier days, we never earned more between us than a London police constable.

We led this curiously reclusive life. We worked unsocial hours. We normally worked from 9 until lunchtime, then we listened to the 1 o'clock news. Then we worked again from 2 till 6 when we had high tea and listened to the 6 o'clock news. Then we went back and worked till about 9. We didn't have television. We never went out to pubs or restaurants. Or to concerts and plays. We never had friends round for the evening and we never had holidays.

We had most of the classic works of literature and most standard reference works in the house so that we didn't have to waste time by going to libraries. But for rarer books, of course, we both had to work in the big libraries. Peter had bad eyesight amongst other things so he worked in the London Library and I worked in the British Museum Library, later the British Library. And then Peter spent whole days book hunting in London. But that was his other life, you know.

And I certainly was not one of those miracle women you read about. We had three children and we did have help with them when they were small. And later on we had somebody who came in to clean the house and cook the midday meal. And the great advantage of that was not that we were fed and the house was clean but that we had to keep to our desks, you see. I couldn't leave my desk in case I was seen by this lady!

Actually it wasn't as gloomy as I'm making out really. We did have time off. We had to mow the grass. We went shopping on Saturday mornings and we bought books off the market stall at sixpence a piece. That's where we got most of our classic works. They were sixpence a

piece or there was a bargain thing, you could do six books for half a crown. So usually we bought them in bulk. And of course we played Kick the Can with the children. And we climbed the chalk hills looking for orchids. Lived in lovely countryside.

Ah, this is the serious bit. I'm just beginning the serious bit.

One of the themes that ran through all the years we were doing this work, was the cry 'children don't play games any more'. When we told a fellow folklorist what we were proposing to do, she said, 'Well, but children don't play games any more.' She said, 'And anyway, it's been done already. Lady Gomme's great work. That's the standard work.' And when I went down to the local playground and asked permission to talk to children, the deputy head said, 'Ooh, children don't play the old games any more.' 'Well, I just wondered,' I said, 'I just wondered what they're playing over there.' 'I shouldn't think that's anything,' he said. And, later on, it turned out to be Sly Fox.

But other researchers have told me that this is always the first remark when they go into a playground to enquire about games. 'They don't play them any more.' It's a kind of block. It's a kind of conviction in the adult mind. And it has existed for a very long time. One of the things I tried to do in this latest work, this book I've published last October, called *Games with Things*, where I tried to trace this belief back as far as possible. Samuel Pepys was sure that boys didn't amuse themselves in the way he used to as a boy. In the nineteenth century, one thing after another was blamed for the disappearance of children's games. It was the national schools, the railways, the cinema, the gramophone, motoring. And then in this century, the standardisation of life, television, pop music. More recently, since early in this decade, teachers have simply stated, I quote, 'Children appear to have lost the art of playing games.'

Well, being well-meaning folk, they have organised the dinner ladies into teaching children games from their own childhood and also in special training programmes. But children have always learned games from the dinner ladies, and from their parents and from grandparents on an ordinary human level. And organisation is the last thing that should happen in playtime. For playtime is free time. And if children don't want to play anything in particular but simply walk round aggravating each other, well, that's up to them. It's their social life.

I'm sure now that this fear, this deep-rooted and almost primitive [fear], this fear that children are not behaving like children any more – it's a fear akin to the ancient fear that the crops won't grow, that the normal cycle of life will cease to be. But it's unnecessary. The instinct for play is built into the psyche of mankind. Children and adults need to play. Indeed, what would we do without it?

But another part of our survival kit is to idealise and to live by stereotypes. Perhaps none of us would get married and reproduce if we didn't have in the back of our minds that fairytale happy-ever-afterwards, idealised stereotype of marriage.

The stereotype of children playing is that there should be a little group here skipping, and another group joining hands in a singing game there, and a line of boys over there playing leapfrog, all nicely spaced, all recognisable games. Something a little bit like Bruegel's famous painting. But it never does seem to have been like that.

Just to give one example:

In 1913, the chief medical inspector in charge of physical education in Cleveland, Ohio, organised a census of children's activities. The twelve Cleveland surveyors counted a total of 14,683 children out of school hours on streets, in yards, in vacant lots, in playgrounds and in alleys. Only half the children were categorised as playing, 10 percent were working and 40 percent were 'doing nothing'. Of those who were playing, 43 percent were 'mostly just fooling' rather than playing known games. Although the surveyors included, amongst examples of play, such things as fighting, teasing, pitching pennies, shooting craps, stealing apples, chasing chickens and tying a can to a dog, they excluded such activities as playing with fire, breaking electric light bulbs, chalking suggestive words on buildings, shooting air guns, bumming around aimlessly, junk-picking, and telling bad stories. The nature of childhood doesn't seem to have changed all that much. Nor should their right to 'bum around aimlessly' be eroded as it is a most productive activity and one not unknown to adults.

One of our aims was to study children's language in activities in much greater depth and width than they'd been studied before. It was impossible to do this properly but we did try to achieve some sort of worldwide perspective. No one should study singing games, for instance, without comparing the equivalent games from the rest of Europe. And now, at this late stage, I realise that nobody should study play at all without including adult play.

Centuries ago, adults' games and children's games were of course not differentiated, and the standard of games was consequently much higher because children could copy the adult players. I think that's why little boys like football so much because they can watch the very best player on the television.

Young women playing jacks in ancient Greece must have been copied by little girls. Young people dancing and singing their courtship games in medieval times were watched and later copied by children. And, up till the 1930s, men were still playing marbles in this country. And a very skilful game it is when played properly.

Nowadays, when children are being so much criticised, indeed castigated, for not playing the traditional games any more, who thinks of deploring the fact that men don't play marbles any more, men don't whip parish tops any more, or play a whole number of other good old-fashioned games? And when adults wring their hands and think the world's coming to an end because children are fascinated by those new toys, the computer games, who thinks of the men who are fascinated by computers and spend their evenings surfing on the net to the detriment of family life?

The instinct to play is still strong in adults. They love and need their games of golf, and bridge, and Scrabble. The fashions in adult games change and so do the fashions in children's games. We really should leave children to their own devices. And respect their privacy. And generally stop trying to organise them in their own free time.

Thank you!

[Additional text arising from the questions]

[Regarding audio-visual recordings] When at last I was free – because I mean I did put the children first when they were small – but when they all went away, I was free to go around the country mopping up the places where we hadn't had any contributors. And all the little corners, like Land's End and Cape Wrath and the Isle of Wight, and so forth. And I went round with my little tape recorder and in those days, you see, it was quite different because if

you went into anywhere, town or country village or anywhere, you could hear when the children were out to play because [of] that thin screaming noise they make, you know, you can hear it for miles. And then I could stop and I could just throw myself out of the car, and just say ‘Could I come into your playground, please?’ And the headteachers were just so unalarmed in those days, and usually they would say, ‘Well, come in, of course!’ and then ‘Do you want to keep any of the children? Just help yourself!’

[Using their own children as a source of information] I tried not to involve my own children. I mean my daughter’s fed up with nursery rhymes! She just won’t teach her children – she leaves it to the teachers to teach the nursery rhymes. And she said, ‘I haven’t taught them any nursery rhymes. You know why!’ But then the children used to bring back – my second son used to bring back rhymes from school. He’s a great enthusiast and even at that age when he was about 7 he got terribly fired by everything. And he came back from the little school her was at, and recited:

Mrs White had a fright,
In the middle of the night,
Saw a ghost, eating toast,
Halfway up a lamp post.

And he said, ‘I think that’s so clever.’ And, of course, it is, the way it all rhymes. And, you know, I mean, it’s a sort of introduction to the whole of poetry when they start learning these things.

Nobody’s asked me how it was that we got published by OUP! It was so exciting, you see, because we never would have dared submit our manuscripts of nursery rhymes but we went to work in the Bodleian Library because they have a unique collection of chapbooks with nursery rhyme books amongst them. And we went up there during the vacation and dear old Dr Hunt, who was the keeper of Western Manuscripts, came pottering along, sort of like this, you know, sort of peering at it. ‘What are you two people working on?’ I felt very silly because I was great with child and I had a floral smock, and Peter was still looking quite young, you see. And we looked a bit embarrassed and we said, ‘Nursery rhymes.’ And he took it quite seriously. He didn’t turn a hair. And he said, ‘Oh yes, what are you modelling your work on?’ And we said, ‘Well, the nearest thing we have as a guide is Miss Withycombe’s *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Names*.’ ‘Oh Betty Withycombe, yes, great friend of mine. You must come and have coffee.’ Well, you see, Betty Withycombe was working at OUP and when we had our coffee she said, ‘Well, when you’ve finished this you must submit it to the Oxford Press.’ Of course, yes, we said. So we wrote to the Oxford Press and said what it was and they wrote back and said ‘We would be interested in a small corpus of nursery rhymes and their histories.’ So we made our book somewhat smaller and sent it off. And we didn’t hear anything for six months. And what they’d done was to send the manuscript to the surviving editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* to see if they could find any faults. And they didn’t. So Oxford Press wrote to us and said, ‘Yes, we’d like to publish this but we would like it somewhat enlarged.’ So we put back all the rhymes that we’d taken out and that was it. And we were with them, so to speak, ever since. Wonderful.

[Regarding rude rhymes] I went to a little discussion group when *The People in the Playground* first came in. Because, you see, what happened – now this is frightfully important – when we published *The Lore and Language* in 1959, there was a conference before it was published, with the Press, about rude worlds. We were not allowed to print any – because it was a general book, it was not a specialist book – we were not to print any word

ruder than 'knickers'. And then, later on, there was criticism, because people on the whole don't think. There was criticism, especially from the Germans, because they're very, I mean they're wonderful scholars, and so forth, [but] they said we hadn't given a true picture of childhood because we had left out the bulk of rhymes – the sexy, scatological rhymes, you see. So when I came to do *The Children [People] in the Playground*, the whole climate was different, you see. So, by Jove, all the words and all the stories, there was no holds barred. They're just all in there. And, of course, those were going for years but we hadn't been able to print them.