

## AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE NEWSLETTER

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### EDITORIAL

*Christmas is coming, the geese are  
getting fat;*

*Please to put a penny in the poor man's  
hat.*

*If you haven't got a penny, a ha'penny  
will do,*

*If you haven't got a ha'penny, God bless  
you.*

The old rhyme is, unfortunately, as appropriate today as it was centuries ago. Australia is in political and economic turmoil, with irresistible forces and immovable objects massed ready for battle, if you'll pardon the mixed metaphors. Have any of our folklorists documented any of the slogans carried in some of our current street rallies? Like political jokes, they are an interesting source of wit and frequently draw on folkloric images; only our wish to be even-handed prevents us giving an example.

The good news is that November saw a highly successful national folklife conference held in Melbourne, with sponsorship from several public and private organisations and a fine range of speakers. The theme of the conference was TRADITIONS, TRANSITIONS, VISIONS: Folklife in Multicultural Australia, and a major focus for discussion was the 1989 UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore. An

undoubted highlight of the conference was the presence of Dr. Richard Kurin, the Director of the Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. Richard's address dealt with the politics and economics of culture, and left us in no doubt that culture is central to contemporary realities.

There are still many who, regrettably, continue to regard culture as peripheral, or at least some aspects of it, and folklorists are not guiltless. Why were the participants (except one) in the splendid children's folklore panel at the recent conference all women? Judging by the number of paediatricians who are male, the medical profession does not regard children as the province of females; why then do Australian folklorists? Perhaps the conference was not typical. We do have contributions in this Newsletter from John Evans and Mrs S. Mc Kerchar, for which relief much thanks. 1992 has also been a good year for publications, and 1993 is also promising. Details elsewhere in this newsletter!

Gwenda Beed Davey  
June Factor

# THE PLAY EDUCATION OF TEACHERS

by John Evans

Much has been written about the importance of playtime in children's schooling. In the last edition of the newsletter (September 1991), Heather Russell noted how the years of middle childhood are distinguished by children's love of play and that these play experiences are a vital part of children's informal education. The primary school playground culture has been the subject of considerable interest to me for some 10 years now. It first became the focus of my attention when I undertook a study of the way in which children select teams prior to their playground games at lunch and recess times. Several months spent lurking about primary school playgrounds gave me a fascinating insight into the playground culture.

One of the many interesting things to emerge from the study was the attitude of the teachers. Initially they were intrigued as to why anyone would want to conduct research in the playground. After all, didn't all the serious and important work of schools take place in the classroom? As the study progressed their attitude changed. They became increasingly interested in what I was finding out. They saw that I had managed to submerge myself in a world that they knew very little about. I, in turn, began to look at the role and attitude of the teachers when they were on yard duty (or guard duty as some would call it). It soon became apparent that, for many teachers, the playground was a pretty alienating environment. Some were quite unsure as to how to relate to the children when they were playing. Others never set foot in the playground unless it was on the compulsory yard duty, and even then they hovered around the school building and only ventured on to the playground

when they were required to intervene in some dispute.

All of this set me thinking about the need for teachers to engage in some study of children's play. As I reflected on my own teacher training, and the pre-service course which I myself had been part of teaching at Deakin for some 10 years, I realised that it was always taken for granted that teachers knew how to relate to children outside the classroom. Preparing teachers for their role in playground supervision, for example, was never even considered despite the fact that, in time alone, it is a significant area of responsibility. The study of children's play barely rated a mention in the compulsory education studies and when it did the focus was on the developmental and instrumental aspects of play. That is, ways in which play might be "used" to enhance the learning of certain concepts and competencies. Important as this aspect is, it should be seen as only one dimension of children's play and I was more interested in getting teachers out into the playground where, in my view, the "real" play takes place.



Regrettably I can't claim to have yet made any inroads into the education of teachers at the pre-service level but at the in-service level there is some noteworthy progress. In a small but, I believe, quite significant breakthrough there is now a unit of study which is titled Children at Play and it is offered to teachers through Deakin University's off-campus Bachelor of Education program. As well we are starting to get a trickle of students who, having done the B.Ed unit, are continuing to do their Masters research papers in the area of children's play. There are moves afoot to develop a Masters unit which will build on the unit in the B.Ed. To date there have been (and to my knowledge still are) very few opportunities for students to undertake post graduate studies in children's play in Australia so I am quietly hopeful that, from a modest beginning, something even more significant might develop. Let me describe a little more about the unit that is now in its 4th year.

It is offered in the off-campus or external studies mode as it is often called. Deakin University is a major provider of distance education in Australia. One of the advantages is that the courses are available to a very wide market. Children at Play has, each year, had students enrolled from all over Australia and usually there are one or two from overseas. The research these students have done has resulted in a unique pool of data being gathered about play in a wide variety of school settings.

The majority of students who do the unit are practising primary school teachers. Once enrolled they get a text (titled Children at Play: Life in the School Playground) an accompanying Reader which contains 16 articles on children's play, and what is called a Course Guide which sets out the requirements students have to complete in order to pass the unit. The unit has been running for 4 years and over that time teachers have

conducted field research on many varied and interesting topics associated with how, what, when, why, where and with whom children play during recess and lunchtimes.

Much to my pleasant surprise the unit has been very well received by teachers with enrolments in excess of 100 each year. The feedback has been encouraging with many teachers remarking on the fact that it is something they wished they had done in their pre-service training. Many commented on the fact that the assignments, for the first time, had made them look at what was going on beyond the four walls of their classroom. For many it was the first time they had set foot in the playground other than when they were on yard duty and they felt they had begun to develop a much more informed view of the value of play in children's lives. Here are a couple of examples of extracts from assignments completed by teachers which reflect these sentiments.

*I have been teaching for over twenty years and have spent many hours on that most "odious" of tasks, yard duty. In my imposed role of policeman, doctor, surrogate mother (rarely father), and "the one to whom all tales are told", I have never taken the time to stand back and have a good look at what is going on before me in the playground. When on "guard duty" I have always been on the lookout for trouble, always more aware of the anti-social aspects of the playground than ways in which children are interacting positively. It sounds a terrible admission but for the first time in my career I have stepped back and taken a look at what children do during recess and lunchtimes. Doing this unit has opened my eyes to a world of play which was right before me, but which I never saw.*

And from another teacher;

*Up until starting this course I must confess I hadn't given play much thought. My teacher training course included a brief introduction to play, mainly though educational psychology. However, I can't recall being encouraged to explore life in the actual playground. I associate playtime with a break from the children and a chance to chat with colleagues in the staffroom. My yard duty once a week is taken up with solving disputes and attending to injuries. Other than occasionally being asked by other staff members to observe certain children's behaviour or to watch a child because of ill health, what the rest of the children were doing at playtime went mostly unnoticed.*

The study of play in school settings has not, to my knowledge, been high on the agenda of teacher training institutions in Australia. This is despite the fact that schools;

- often without proper consultation, spend quite a deal of money on playground equipment, landscaping, etc.
- are increasingly concerned about safety and the consequences of accidents in terms of teacher liability.
- are constantly reviewing the rules that govern the use of the playground yet rarely do they take into account children's perspectives.
- have staff who have no training for the role of playground supervision yet have to spend up to two hours per day engaged in this duty.
- are becoming increasingly concerned about the amount of

anti-social behaviour occurring in their playgrounds and how to deal with it.

The course at Deakin is providing teachers with the opportunity to examine these and other issues in their school setting. The findings from these studies are making a very significant contribution to our body of knowledge about children's play.

*Dr. John Evans is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Deakin University (Geelong Campus). Further information about the course can be obtained by writing to him. The text Children at Play: Life in the School Playground is available from Deakin University Press. John is interested in sharing ideas and information with anyone doing research in and about children's play in primary school settings.*





# BUNDLE BABY AND OTHER PLAY CONFERENCE DELIGHTS

by June Factor

Most conferences resemble the curate's egg: good in parts. That is a fair description of a recent gathering in Paris where specialists, would-be specialists and a few encouraging eccentrics spent four days discussing the topic Play Prepares the Future.

Two organisations arranged this talk-fest - the American-based Association for the Study of Play (TASP), and the European International Council for Children's Play (ICCP).

For an Australian, coming from a country where children's play has little status beyond the preschool years, such serious, even learned interest in the free-time activities of the young came as a pleasant surprise.

From May 12-16, the suburb at the end of a Paris Metro line - Sevres - accommodated close to 140 academics, researchers, educators, folklorists and toy designers, together with people from zoos, museums and hospitals.

When the speakers were boring - not unusual, alas - it was possible to slip away and sit in the sunny old garden of the International Centre for Educational Studies (CIEP). There one would find a fellow escapee or two (or many), and it was in the garden, or walking through Sevres' winding streets, or over coffee or couscous, that the liveliest discussion and debate took place. But that's nothing new to anyone who has ever attended a conference.

Perhaps the most significant, and certainly one of the most provocative

papers given at the conference originated from an ex-New Zealander: the jovial, joking, sharp-as-a-tack Professor Brian Sutton-Smith.

Brian Sutton-Smith has been a full professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania for many years. Regarded as the guru of children's folklore studies, he refuses to retire from intellectual debate, although he has finally given up undergraduate teaching at the age of 67. (The University of Pennsylvania is one of a number of U.S. campuses which has outlawed compulsory retirement as a form of ageism).

Sutton-Smith began collecting and analysing New Zealand children's games, rhymes and other informal play activities back in the late 1940s. Working in almost total isolation - the great English children's folklorists, Iona and Peter Opie didn't publish their first book until 1959 - he produced a remarkable Ph.D. thesis, later published under the title A History of Children's Play: The New Zealand Playground 1840-1950. Then he departed for livelier pastures in the U.S.A.

Since those pioneering days, Sutton-Smith has produced what some consider an excessive quantity of papers and books. No thought goes unrecorded. But if all his work is not first-class, the paper he gave at Sevres vindicates the respect and affection with which he is regarded in folklore and education circles.

Taking as his subject the overall theme of the conference - **Play Prepares the Future** - Sutton-Smith analysed the ideologies that lie beneath the surface of such an innocuous subject. He questioned the easily-held view that children use play to 'try-out' adult roles. He also challenged the notion that play is always forward-looking and helpful for children as they grow and change.

To illustrate his argument Sutton-Smith examined the controversy surrounding a new toy in the U.S.A. - the Bundle Baby.

This soft baby doll comes wrapped in a binder which a child can wind around her (or his) stomach to simulate pregnancy. The child can also wear the doll piggy-back with the binder, but that's not the use that has aroused angry cries from writers to the New York Times, and representatives of both the pro-Life and pro-Choice lobbies in the U.S.A.

This strange alliance of opposing groups has resulted, Sutton-Smith pointed out, from a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of children's play. Anxious adults have declared the Bundle Baby an invasion of parental rights, an incitement to pregnancy, and downright misleading about the nature of reproduction.

Forgotten amidst these cries of outrage is what children actually do when they play. Children, especially little girls, have been pretending to have a baby in their tummies by tucking a doll or some clothes down their pants since Eve was a kitten. As far as one can tell, 5 and 6 year olds have not become promiscuous as a result.

But it is not just the naive notion of what Sutton-Smith calls 'the specific causality' fallacy that makes some adults so foolishly assume that a toy or a story or a rhyme lead the child to immediate imitation in 'real' life. (Remember the fuss about Where the Wild Things Are? That wonderful, love-affirming picture-story book was said to be dangerous for the young: it would encourage them to anger and rebellion).

Sutton-Smith recognises that adults often take a very literal view of children's play. They assume that an object that suggests to them 'embryo in uterus' holds exactly the same meaning for a child. But playthings can be made from anything

and turned into anything - that is the great power and pleasure of play. A gum-nut is a tea-cup, a Bundle Baby a little puppy (for a child who wants a dog).

If Bundle Baby has a weakness, it is the same limitation found in many contemporary toys: she is too exact, too life-like to allow for endless flexible imaginative play. Yet that is still her true function, the function of most 'object' playthings. Children will use her as they wish, not necessarily as the manufacturer or any other adult intends or expects.

Sutton-Smith's paper ranged widely across his chosen subject. He traced the historical stages of the domestication of children's play, leading to our current emphasis on elimination of physical danger and emotional licence. Play has moved indoors in the U.S.A., and is increasingly supervised and organised. In America this is the era of play leaders, playground supervisors, summer camps and adult-initiated fantasy play.

The late 20th century is also a high point in the commodification of childhood. As well as children's food, clothes, furniture and books, we have a flourishing industry devoted to making toys and games which will appeal to children - for a short time - until the next widely-publicised product appears on the market.

It is remarkable, given the devotion of so many adults to the organisation and direction of children's lives, that youngsters continue their own playways unabated. They skip and clap and swap marbles and collect football cards and chant rude rhymes in the cracks between basketball practice and piano practice and all the rest.

Sutton-Smith didn't mention these activities in his paper, but he did emphasise the role of play as a means of empowerment for both children and adults. (Yes, adults play too, but we call

it theatre, or literature, or sport, etc.). "Play is a place to pretend that life is worth living," he said. In play we triumph, however, temporarily, over difficulty and danger, and thereby gain confidence that everything is possible. As a wise Russian poet wrote: *"The present belongs to the sober, the cautious, the routine-prone, but the future belongs to those who do not rein in their imagination."* (Kornei Chukovsky).

There were a number of other good papers at the conference, and some so dull they were hilarious. My favourite line came from one sober American who declared that *"Children play best at what they know."* Wife-beating? Arguments over how to pay the mortgage? I think he must have had other things in mind.

Then there was the worthy Israeli director of an educational centre for games, who tried to convert me to the view that Musical Chairs and other games in which there are winners and losers should be changed in the interests of a kinder, more just society. Her motives are admirable, her chances of success slim. Children's traditional play will not be 'reformed' to suit adult wishes; it is too important for children at a level unimagined by such clumsy attempts at control. As always, worthy motives are not sufficient to ensure worthwhile practice.

In a moment of utmost tedium, when one of the French dignitaries - the only people given the opportunity to comment on any of the papers - demonstrated his capacity for lengthy generalisations, I undertook a primitive statistical analysis of the gender divisions at the conference. While women constituted almost 60% of conference attenders, they were barely 45% of paper givers. Even more significantly, the important plenary sessions offered a platform for 22 men and 5 women.

The Americans to whom I passed on my

statistical findings insisted that it was all to do with being in France. They could be prejudiced, of course; and there is the old Biblical line about casting out the beam from one's own eye ...

Certainly the French went to considerable effort to ensure our comfort and enjoyment. Excellent food was served every day to large numbers without a trace of 'mass' (mess) cooking. Translators were provided in three languages: English, French, German. This worked well for those speakers who happened to present their papers in the hall set up for this purpose. The rest made do with an audience who could understand them untranslated.

I didn't speak in the translation hall, and I was grateful. My subject was Australian children's slang. I couldn't quite see how the translators would cope with 'dob in', 'wuss', 'nerd', 'snot block', and 'packing polenta'. Perhaps I underestimated them.

In less than a year, Australia is to host an important international conference on play - February 1993. After the experience of the Paris conference I would recommend: few dignitaries, plenty of discussion, large print name tags, pleasant indoor and outdoor areas for informal talk, noticeboards, tables for publications, and the French chef who cooked for us in Sevres.



One there was an Australian, an English and a Russian.  
One day they went to a hotel and the manager  
said: "There only one room left but the person who can  
be on the stairs down their watch run down the stairs  
and catch their watch can have it." The Russian  
so the English man tried it but failed. The Russian  
had and failed. Then the Australian went up the  
stairs, dropped his watch, walked down the stairs  
had something to eat, had a shower and then  
had a nap, when up and caught the  
watch. Then they asked "How did you do  
that?" "Easy," he said, "My watch always  
three hours slow!"



## BONFIRE NIGHT

by S. McKercher

Along with the Royal Show and Christmas, Bonfire Night was one of the most important events in a school child's year.

In the 1930s in Fremantle there was still a substantial amount of bushland in the suburbs and each year, in early September or thereabouts, kids of both sexes would organise themselves into working groups to build their local bonfire.

After school, axes would be appropriated from the wood heap and saplings of eucalypt and peppermint trees were lopped and dragged incredible distances by girls and boys who would normally find it a chore to cut a bit of kindling wood for the kitchen fire.

A site would be chosen on a vacant block near to where the group lived and a firebreak cleared, then a nucleus of small branches and dry grass laid down and then the larger branches laid on. Many parents used this as an opportunity to get their yards cleaned up, and dry grass, old boxes and sticks of dilapidated furniture were willingly carried away by enthusiastic 'bonny' collectors. Every night more bushes would be dragged in and thrown on to the ever-growing bonfire, plus anything flammable that could be scavenged anywhere, old car tyres, bits of carpet, cardboard boxes, etc.

As the bonfires grew, there would be inspections of the other fires in the neighbourhood to check their progress, as every group wanted to have the biggest and highest pile in the area.

While all this was going on, another part of the big night was being put together ...**The Guy**. Worn-out clothes would be acquired from parents - pants, shirt, coat and hat would be sufficient, pant legs and

shirt sleeves were tied, and the body stuffed with dry grass, an old stocking stuffed up for the head (sometimes a Penny Bomb was inserted) then a tuppenny mask tied on, and the effigy completed with a hat.

Some of the more brash and cheeky kids would put him in a cart and take him to the local shop, park outside, and pester the customers for "A Penny for the Guy". Any money collected was spent on crackers which were split up among the group.

As the Fifth of November got closer, cutting new branches would not give them time to dry, so a new phase started. Kids would start sneaking around after dark to pinch bushes off a rival 'bonny'. Street lighting was very sparse, and on a moonless night it was possible to get fairly close, then a couple of the biggest of the group would dash in and grab a branch each and run, while the rest tried to delay the inevitable pursuit, as lookouts were posted by nearly all the fires. This method of getting more fuel was all part of the fun, and rarely led to more than a bit of rock throwing, and verbal abuse, and, if you knew who the perpetrators were, the next night you raided their 'bonny', and tried to coerce an adult to come and help you, although in those days, the whole operation was run by the kids. The parents helped a lot, but they kept a fairly loose rein and did not interfere unless they thought it was getting out of hand. This applied to most things then, and the idea of a parent throwing a tantrum at a kid's football match if his kid was penalised was not a part of the way we lived.

The crackers we bought were mainly imported from Hong Kong. Tom Thumbs, No.1 Crackers, Six-a-penny bombs, penny bombs (quite dangerous), sparklers, jumping jacks, Catherine Wheels, sky rockets and so on. Some of the pretty ones like the Roman Candles



and Prince of Wales Feather came from England.

The Tom Thumbs and the No.1 crackers came in strings, to be let off in a machine-gun-like cacophony of sound, but we thrifty children painstakingly unravelled the ties and let them off one at a time. Penny bombs were about three inches long and one inch in diameter, and if one was being lit, all in the vicinity were warned as they were very noisy and were potentially dangerous.

Sparklers were popular with everybody as they could be held in the hand and burnt for a long time, and were good for lighting off crackers, and even toddlers could hold one and wave it about (under parental guidance).

A post would be set in the ground on which the Catherine Wheels and Red Devils could be nailed, and when a suitable number of watchers gathered, the proud owner would light the wick, step back and wait for the result. I still carry a scar on my wrist where a Catherine Wheel spun so forcefully that the nail worked out of the post, and the still sparking wheel landed on my forearm. I did not notice the burn much until next morning.

Eventually the big night came, and after a hastily gobbled tea, my sister and I would sit on the lounge floor and sort out our crackers, keeping the pretty ones

separate from the bangers and putting them in two papers bags, one to be left home for later. Dividing the crackers was a good idea, as sometimes a stray spark got into a bag, setting the whole lot off together, and many a tearful child watched helplessly as his or her whole night's fun disappeared in a rattle of exploding crackers, while all those around cheered the diversion.

As darkness set in, the Guy would be placed on the top of the bonfire, sometimes sitting in an old chair. Then the waiting started, as we all wanted our fire to be the last one lit. Smoke would fill the air and soon you would hear comments like "There goes Carter's fire", "The one on Walter Road's gone up", "That one over there is Billy Sexton's", and so on.

Tired of waiting any longer, the fire would be lit in several places at once, and the dry leaves would quickly carry the flames up to the Guy, and we would wait expectantly to see if the bomb in his head would blow his hat out of the fire to be souvenired by some lucky person. Crackers were let off continuously while the fire burned, and as the flames died down, the Roman candles, Mount Vesuvius's and the other 'pretty crackers' started to come out of the bags to be let off in front of the admiring adults. Last of all came the sky rockets, in various sizes, from little cracker-sized Fizzers to quite large ones, classed as Three Star, Five Star, and Seven Star, which indicated the number of stars it was supposed to throw out when it reached its peak.



One family in our district used to set off several marine distress flares and everybody looked skywards at 10 o'clock at night as this was the traditional time they went up, and the Oohs and Aahs that greeted their appearance were echoed all over. The big problem was that after that any rockets we had left seemed totally inadequate.

When the hot embers became approachable, potatoes appeared like magic in the kids' hands, and forked sticks were used to bury them in the hot ashes to cook. When the spuds were considered ready, the forked stick again came out to drag the burnt offerings from the ashes, and despite the outer skin being burnt to charcoal, they had a never-to-be-forgotten taste of their own - burnt skin, ashes and partly-cooked spud combining in a unique way.

Next morning at daybreak, the scavengers, including me, were out looking for crackers that had been dropped, or had not gone off, and a little fire was stoked up from the embers of the big fire still smouldering, and the crackers were let off. The ones without wicks were carefully broken in half, and the exposed gunpowder lit to make a 'Fizzgog'. Everybody had a story to tell of the previous night's happenings, and sizes and shapes of burns compared, and if anybody appeared with bandages soaked in Carron Oil on an arm or leg, they were temporary heroes.

For the next few days at school, reports from the various groups regarding unusual happenings, funny incidents at the 'bonny', or any one who got hurt or burnt seriously, were seriously assessed, discussed, and then we got on to the more immediate problems of preparing for Christmas.

In general, bonfire nights were not hazardous in the time and place I write about. Larrikinism was frowned upon by

elders and peers, and all people of all ages were usually considerate of others, and if somebody did something totally wrong or irresponsible at a bonfire, the group as a whole would react very strongly.

Anyway! Such were some of the goings on in the unsophisticated, television and computer-free Thirties.

Pinjarra, Western Australia



## QUEEN OF THE JACKS

by Elaine Killen

Isa Stewart didn't need to practise to win the 1985 Australian Jack-be-Nimble Championships - she'd been practising for the last 71 years!

Eighty-four year old Isa learnt to play Jacks when she was seven years old. She and brother Dave whiled away the hours sitting in their polished lino passage throwing up the jackbones, scraping them in from the skirting boards.

*"My brother and I were always playing jacks, there wasn't much else to do in them days," reminisces Mrs. Stewart. "We were good cobbers ... and of course, when we got near the end we'd throw*

*'em at one another ..."*

Jacks, or knuckle bones, is an ancient game that has been played world-wide. Relics of the game have been found as widely as Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the Americas. The Australian version uses five jacks or knuckle bones, which come from the hind leg of sheep. School children in the early 1900s would clean off the muscle and gristle after the family roast, dry out the bone and sometimes dye them.

*"We used to dye them red by putting red crepe paper in a preserved fruit tin of water on the stove and boil them and boil them until the paper went white,"* recalls Mrs. Stewart. *"Mine are a bit faded now but they do a good job still. Some of them used to paint theirs enamel, you know paint them with enamel paint."*

Coloured plastic jackbones later became available, but are outlawed in the Australian Jack-be-Nimble titles played in Maryborough (Victoria) each year as part of the Golden Wattle Festival.

And how is the game of 'Jacks' played?

A licenced second-hand dealer, antique enthusiast and unabashed hoarder, the diminutive Mrs. Stewart totters off to find her hackbones. She sways as the weight settles on each painful hip - a legacy of years of hard physical housework and caring for her own seven children, as well as four of her husband's orphaned siblings. Her house displays relics of times gone by and gives the impression that she may just have the jackbone from her first roast lamb dinner! A set of largish jackbones are produced along with a series of newspaper articles which laud her 1985 win, and subsequent placing every year since.

The jacks are first jockeyed, Mrs. Stewart explains. *"The game starts by throwing up five jacks and trying to catch them on*

*the back of your hand. You would then try to throw them up and catch them again while trying to pick up the ones you missed the first time."*

She picks up the jacks individually at first, while tossing the fifth in the air. She then snatches up two at a time, then three at once, and finally, she scrapes up all four jacks, then catches the one that was thrown. She hasn't missed a jack and has continued her commentary of the game throughout.

*"There are different variations called Scatters, Feed the Crows, Jump the Hurdles and Stable the Horses."* Mrs. Stewart demonstrates how to scatter the jacks, and from her open palm she then throws the jacks shuffle-style with her fingers pointing down - a subtle difference perhaps, but when it comes to the Australian Championships - rules are rules!

*"There's another one - Feed the Crows - we done,"* she quips, while tossing a jack into her mouth between catches. *"They're clean!"* she smirks as her audience grimace. *"Then you're supposed to Jump the Hurdle - this is a hard one for me now."*

Mrs. Stewart makes a hurdle with her hand and throws the jacks over one at a time while throwing and catching the one remaining.

*"There's this one, Horse in the Stable they call that."* She makes an arch with her hand, fingers spread and places a jack at each gap, then tries to push them through while the spare jack is flying through the air. The oversized bones won't fit through the arches made by her small fingers.

She continues to display her repertoire which has developed over 77 years! Colourful titles like My Little Pussy Cat Likes Skim Milk, My Little Puppy Dog



Won't Bite You, Clicks, No Catching Flies, and Overhand, are all part of this skilful and very entertaining game.

*"This is Ups and Downs" she says, while intently picking up a jack with one throw, then putting it down the next. "It's the easiest of the lot."*

Recently Mrs. Stewart paid a visit to her old primary school, Maryborough 2828, to teach interested children (including some of her own great-grandchildren) to play jacks. She modestly explains, *"I don't think anybody knows about jacks much, you know, because it's never played in the later years ... I showed the kids how to play, and I got a nice letter thanking me for it, for going up there and showing them."*

Born in May, 1907, and the second of six children, Isa (whose name is actually Ethel), was closest to her brother Dave, only 14 months older. Dave, as a youngster, had trouble introducing the tiny Ethel as his little sister, so he just called her 'Isa', and the name stuck. Even today she is known as 'Isa' to her friends, bowls mates, and great-grandchildren alike, although sometimes little tongues get tied up so they just call her 'Isa' or 'Little Nana' in reference to her stature.

Like others her age, Mrs. Stewart has seen history in the making. Her mind is astute and she not only relates stories of the olden days with flair and humour, but being an avid collector and recycler has the old wash-boards, toy Kupie dolls and lace-up shoes to prove it! There is also a faded sepia photograph of her father, David Sinclair, taken around 1885. He was the carrier contracted to cart the first electric light poles into Maryborough by horse and dray in 1992, the same year that Isa was sacked from the Bull and Mouth Hotel for whistling on the job!

"You can be old but you don't have to

think old," says Isa as the jackbones are again brought to life.

Keen as her mustard and with an enthusiasm for all things antique especially her jack-bones, Isa grins and says of the 1991 Jack-be-Nimble Championships, "I've never been out of a place since 1985 and I'll be in it again this year."



## HORSES WITHOUT WHEELS?

By Julie Perrin

*The following article is drawn from a paper written by Julie Perrin for an M.Ed in storytelling and education. The paper reviews an essay by Canadian educationalist, Kieran Egan who looks at recent research on oral cultures for some insights into the oral culture of early childhood.*

It is virtually impossible to fathom the impact that literacy has had on our thinking. The 'technology' of writing has unalterably changed our outlook on the world and the strategies with which we think. In an oral culture "what one knows is what one remembers" whereas a different economy of the mind is required where mental operations can have constant visual access to organized bodies of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> The impact of writing is in Walter Ong's words an "interior transformation of consciousness".<sup>2</sup> Kieran Egan maintains:

*"... most children in Western cultures live in an environment that presupposes literacy and its associated forms of thought; adult interactions with young children constantly assume conventions that depend on literacy, and preliterate children are constantly encouraged to adopt forms of thinking and expression that are more easily achieved as a product of literacy."*<sup>3</sup>

The influence of literacy is only problematic when a hierarchy is presumed that presents its linear discursive conventions as intrinsically superior to the metaphoric and story-based structures for thought and memory in oral cultures.

One way in which this can be perceived is in the view of orality as a condition of deficit - i.e. nothing more than a lack of literacy. Egan quotes Walter Ong's neat simile that thinking of orality only in terms of literacy is like thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels.<sup>4</sup>

This, of course, has implications for our view of and respect for children's oral culture. Egan's concern is that primary school curriculums are frequently designed as though unaware of children's rich and agile oral capacities.

Since it is the path from orality to literacy which education directs children to travel, it is significant to recognize the steps it asks them to take. Thus Egan makes the case for examining aspects of oral cultures and the strategies of thought within them. It is his contention that some of the effective strategies for thinking in oral cultures have been unnecessarily lost or suppressed in our educational systems.<sup>5</sup>

One of the things that has attracted me most to Egan's writing is his acknowledgment of the lack of linear order and progression that characterizes our learning. He says in the opening chapter of Teaching as Storytelling.

*"Consider how you learned whatever you consider most valuable. We pick up bits and pieces, and suddenly see connections; these break and defract, and are recomposed in new ways and disparate pieces."*<sup>6</sup>

The predominant metaphor of education as an assembly line can be seen in the idea of children's education as "progressive mastery of practical tasks and logical sequences of discipline areas."<sup>7</sup> The picture Egan paints of the learning process is certainly more organic and less mechanistic than the principles we have inherited from educational research this century. He questions the "logical plodding from known to unknown." June Factor adds to this picture her awareness of children learning by "shifts and distortions of the given models", rather than through repetition of what adults regard as appropriate behaviour.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst much of children's oral culture remains invisible to adults, Egan elaborates some of the ways in which we have adopted appropriate structures for it:

*"... we also use endless formulae to impress an array of behaviour patterns on children, for road safety, cutlery and utensil use, care of toys and furniture ... We recite proverbs, tell stories, teach rhymes, play verbal games, and tell jokes - all of which help to build the*

*mental structures that systematize memory and poeticize the prosaic world, creating imaginative space and the power to be enchanted by magic and ecstasy."*<sup>9</sup>

#### Endnotes

1. K. Egan, "The origins of imagination and the curriculum," in Imagination and Education, (eds.) D. Nadaner and K. Egan, Open University Press, 1988 p.93.
2. W. Ong, Orality and Literacy, Methuen, London, 1982, p.82.
3. K. Egan, op. cit. p.94.
4. W. Ong, *ibid*, p.12.
5. K. Egan, op. cit. p.94.
6. K. Egan, Teaching as Storytelling, Routledge, London, 1988, p.13.
7. *ibid*, p.13-16.
8. J. Factor, Captain Cook Chased a Chook, Penguin, Australia, 1988, p.180.
9. K. Egan, "The origins of imagination and the curriculum," 1988, p.93.



## "YOU'LL NEVER GUESS WHAT I SAW ....."

[continued from previous issue].

The intensity of emotions aroused by shared family fun was evident in many of the interviewees' memories. Family walks, shopping expeditions or outings to the beach were frequently interwoven into the narrative. The same incident was often recalled within the space of one interview. The attention paid to the events often turned the re-telling into an epic saga.

**Jean Sudlow:** "We would walk down to the beach. Grange." (from Hindmarsh).

**Margaret:** "That was a long walk."

**Jean:** "Yes, it was. It must have been four or five miles. And Mum pushed the pram with the baby in it. Dad would ride his pushbike and we used to take turns riding on that. That was only to take the dog. On a Saturday we used to often go down the beach and Mum would take a packed lunch. Sometimes we'd go down to Semaphore and then Dad would come down straight from work. This was a Saturday and we'd come home on the train and then we'd have to walk from Bowden Station.

This must have been after the War (WW1) because there was old Sammy Lunn and he used to have an icecream cart and he made up lollies and made a lot of money for returned soldiers.

He'd come around and we'd get an icecream for a penny, and if you didn't have a penny you took a bottle out and got an icecream for that. He used to go down the beach and he's come home on the train ... He was a real comedian.<sup>1</sup>

The currency of laughter was well used and developed by children. The ability to laugh with adults was also turned on adults. Playing tricks on adults, parodying their actions and telling jokes



about them placed adults **outside** the world of childhood. 'Pretended innocence' was frequently assumed mantle of disguise. 'We'd do anything for a laugh', was a common refrain. Not only was there a special 'language' - for example, being dared to show one's 'marrow' had nothing to do with vegetable growing and everything to do with one's penis, but the forms of language used was meant to exclude adults' ears. 'Rude' jokes were particularly popular, as in the genre of **Little Audrey** jokes.

For example: Little Audrey's mother sent her down to the shop to buy some fly paper. Little Audrey laughed and laughed and laughed. 'Cause she knew flies don't use paper.

OR

Little Audrey's mother sent her down to the shop to buy some moth balls. Little Audrey laughed and laughed and laughed. 'Cause she knew moths don't have balls.<sup>2</sup>

Other cherished 'rude' jokes ranged from the 'Julius Ceasar did a breezer' ilk to 'The boy stood on the burning deck ... burnt his little jimmy' (penis) genre. The presumed ability to 'shock' adults was much prized. If one could combine

swearing with bodily functions in a joke, or story, it was usually an instant success and brought the teller 'status'. Typical of this genre were the 'Pat, Mick and Mustard' jokes:

Pat and Mick were travelling to the city by train. In those days they only had dog boxes, little compartments where people were closed in. Pat wanted to go to the toilet and didn't know where to go. So Mick said, 'Drop your tweeds and do it out of the window'. Just as Pat finished, they were pulling into a station and the porter was calling out the name of the station to let passengers know where they were. The name of the station was 'Isawya'. And he was calling out 'Isawya, Isawya'. Pat answered, 'You bloody liar, you couldn't have. I did it coming round the bend.'<sup>3</sup>

There was a great deal of prestige to be gained from telling 'rude' stories or jokes as it showed other children that the teller had 'grown-ups' knowledge. Boys frequently positioned themselves in active joke telling roles, while girls usually positioned themselves in a passive listening mode.

Within the world of 'fun', 'friendships', 'fantasies and tears' children could not help but be aware that the status of their parents, and hence their own, was



measured against such community yardsticks of 'wealth', 'ownership of goods and property', or a privileged position in church or community affairs. Children also learnt that they were 'judged' by their hand-me-down clothes, the income and employment of their parent(s) and their type of housing and neighbourhood. Children learnt very quickly how they 'measured up' and to 'whom'. Some, like Coralie Green, learnt they could offset a perceived lack of 'social status' by 'doing well' at school. Others, like Anne Tonkin, seized opportunities as they arose:

**Margaret:** Did you mix with families like the Elders and the Bonythons (in Stirling)?

**Anne:** No. Some of them were friendly enough. Lady Bonython would have been the nicest one. She was a very friendly sort of person. But they were people who just socialised amongst themselves - had their own parties and entertained a lot.

**Margaret:** It must have been 'interesting' living close to these people and yet not being invited to be a part of it?

**Anne:** No. You wouldn't be part of them at all. We often played up in Barr-Smith's garden because Nell, my friend, her father was the head gardener - we went to school together. And when the Barr-Smith's weren't in residence, we'd go up. Their garden was beautiful. Up there now, it's a shambles - it's a shame. We'd have cubby houses under the trees.<sup>4</sup>

All of the interviewees actively positioned themselves as belonging to a particular 'class' and placed themselves in their communities according to their self-designation. Some, like Molly Dutton, Margaret Kenny and Kathleen McLean 'supposed' they were 'middle to upper class'; other, like Bert Smalley, said his family was 'definitely working class'. Yet,

as their narratives revealed, all of these men and women ascribed to themselves subject positions well beyond the narrow inscriptive 'norms' of a 'class' position. As children they moved in, and through, various adult designations of religious beliefs, political affiliations and 'class' battles and internalised the attendant contradictions in various forms.

While all interviewees were aware of the political allegiances of their fathers, which usually meant also that of their mothers, very few children were involved in political discussions unless their families were seen to be outside of the 'norm' - for example, Irish Catholics, German Lutherans, Salvation Army adherents or lay missionaries.<sup>5</sup> For children of these families, politics and religious issues were frequently to take on a similar ideological hue. For most children, however, overt political induction was not perceived to be one of their rites of passage. Even in the midst of the Depression, children's gaze was on their own interactions within their immediate communities.

As the 1930s drew to a close, disruption to the family walks, shopping expeditions, visits to the Botanical Gardens to listen to the speakers in Speaker's Corner, to the beach, or picnics at Long Gully, or any one of numerous shared activities, came from an unexpected source - children's organised sport and the influence of manufactured toys marketed specifically for children's sole use, or with their peers. As the great open spaces were built on, and suburbs and big country centres developed, children were more closely superintended. As the rituals of schooling came to dominate the lives of children, the school playground began to assume an importance never before experienced. School team sports were utilised to instill 'discipline' and 'pride' in children, and normalisation practices of educators were rigorously pursued, via a battery of standardised tests. The new construct, 'school child', ushered in

different measuring sticks from those used in the community.

That it did not stop the young from finding 'safe' places to experiment with smoking cane cigarettes, or in Tilly Simpson's case, a 'roll-your-own packed with manure', and making themselves violently ill in the process, or from stealing the fruit from neighbours' trees and pelting unsuspecting passers-by, or, like Adelene Venables, 'sliding under the tent to see the circus - the only time I ever got to go', is a tribute to the resilience and resistances of children.

by Margaret Peters

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(from doctoral thesis, Children's Culture and the State: South Australia, 1890s to 1930s).

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> OHI. Jean Sudlow.

<sup>2</sup> From un-taped discussions with the husband of Patricia Fitzpatrick, Mr. Lloyd Fitzpatrick.

<sup>3</sup> ibid.

<sup>4</sup> OHI. Anne Tonkin.

<sup>5</sup> Eileen O'Loughlin was particularly 'brought up' by her parents' Liberal party 'beliefs' to the point of reading the newspapers' accounts of Parliamentary debates'; Veronica Sladdin's father involved her family in Labor Party meetings; German-Lutherans, such as the Linke and Schubert family, were concerned to keep state and religious affiliation totally separate; and Coralie Green's parents were politically active to the point of her mother, Ruth Ravenscroft, standing for a seat in the Senate, as an Independent. Disrupting religio-political hegemony was a factor for many families who were situated as other to the dominant Anglo-elite.

## PUBLICATIONS

Roll Over, Pavlova! (1992) More children's games and rhymes, compiled by June Factor, illustrated by Annie Marshall. Hodder & Stoughton: Sydney.

Jack and Jill: A Book of Nursery Rhymes. (1992) Compiled by Gwenda Beed Davey, illustrated by Betina Ogden. Oxford Univ. Press: Melbourne.

The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore. Edited by Gwenda Beed Davey and Graham Seal. Oxford Univ. Press: Melbourne. Due for publication February 1993.

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Q. If twenty rings run after a dog and then it is 20  
A. Twenty after one!  
Q. What letter do you always see in a mirror?  
A. U (you)

Rhyming Zou! *Pennington P.S.*  
P.S.





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