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Rose, Ella Pohl

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Johannesburg College of Education
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BOOKS REVIEWED

A work that provides new insight into the Alice-in-Wonderland world of the school child's mind.



The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren, by Iona and Peter Opie (OUP).

Many readers will remember that delightful book, "The Oxford Book of Nursery Rhymes", which was edited by the authors of this work.

This is the first book of its kind to appear, for although there were previous books published, (Douglas' "London Street Games 1906", and Lady Comme's "Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland") they were not as representative as this one. The former was concerned merely with games played in the back streets of London whereas the latter describes games played by well-to-do country dwellers. In addition most early studies on children's pastimes were descriptions of these amusements given and recollected by adults. The Opies gleaned their knowledge from the children themselves, five thousand of them from seventy different schools in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Rural and city children were questioned in new slum-clearance schools or old established schools of academic distinction. They were essentially "ordinary" as opposed to delinquent or handicapped children.

The conclusions that the authors draw from their survey is that the modern child "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." This is contrary to the belief that the modern child spends so much time being entertained by radio, film and television that he has lost the art of amusing himself. The school-child's verses are passed down from one child to the next, unlike the nursery rhyme which is transmitted from parent to child. Customs, jokes, jeers, beliefs, songs and games have remained almost unchanged for generations. For instance they ask each other the same riddles that were popular in the time of Henry VIII. The authors found that schoolchild lore is apparently uniform in different parts of England among different social classes. Furthermore it spread with an amazing rapidity by childhood's secret grapevine. They cite a notorious example. Although King Edward VIII only abdicated on December 10th children as far apart as London, Chichester and Oldham sang "Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Mrs. Simpson's pinched our king," before the end of the Christmas term.

Sometimes rhymes are brought up to date as in the rhyme of 1900, "Lottie Collins has no drawers", which has become "Diana Dors has no drawers." There is variation in language too from district to district as anyone knows, and the Opies set out the reason for this as well as the uniformity in oral lore. There are two main kinds of chant and chatter: the transitory, slangy superficial lore of comic songs, jokes, catch phrases, slick adjectives, nicknames and crazes which spread everywhere from continent to continent. There is also the dialectical lore which describes the child's darker doings; playing truant, giving warning, sneaking, swearing, snivelling, tormenting or fighting. This is confined to one locality but survives for hundreds of years.

Rhymes which flourish wherever children play, unknown or unheeded, are recorded here in their fascinating diversity: There are satirical rhymes, tangle talk, puns, tongue-twisters, ghoulism or nonsense rhymes such as

"The elephant is a pretty bird.
It flits from bough to bough,
It builds its nest in a rhubarb tree
And whistles like a cow."

In the section on wit and repartee, they distinguish such refinements as juvenile correctives, having the last word, street jeers or snubbing companions for using well? what? or why? such as in "What?"

"Watt died long ago. Pardon took his place." Children make use of all kinds of tricks, some inflicting pain, some involving spitting, self-incriminatory traps such as "Tell me, which would you rather do:

Run a mile,
Jump a stile.
Or eat a pancake in a field?"

Much merriment results if the last is chosen.

Riddles have always been popular and many examples are given of true riddles, rhyming riddles, conundrums, Wellerisms or catch riddles, such as: "Why do black sheep eat less than white sheep?" "Because there are fewer of them." Parodies of hymns, carols, nursery rhymes are very popular, and many other rhymes are mildly indelicate, such as

"As I sat under the apple tree,
A birdie sent his love to me,
And as I wiped it from my eye,
I said, Thank goodness, cows can't fly."

There is a chapter on the child's code of oral legislation: he reinforces the truth by swearing on his heart, honour etc. There is a special code as regards bets, bargaining, giving, claiming precedence or obtaining respite. For instance "if one gets a stitch while playing chase, one crosses one's fingers and says "Kings" and the person who is "he" does not chase one until one is ready."

Some nicknames are traditional, most epithets are, whether they apply to a "Greedy guts" "carrot top", "fatties" or subjects like Latin,

"Latin is a subject
That no one enjoys;
It killed the ancient Romans
And now it is killing boys."

Unpopular children are jeered at and tormented, whether they be spoil-sports, clever-dicks or fools, swank pots, nosey-parkers, stare-cats, sneaks, cry-babies, bullies or crawlers. They have to endure all kinds of ordeals, hair pulling, sending away or intimidation, "Hand it over — or else —", — "I'll bash you up."

Children's half-beliefs are fascinating, and relate to such things as ambulances, examinations, walking on the lines of a pavement, finding things, luck

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in examinations or in games such as this charm recited by marble players,

"Roll, roll, tootsie roll,
Roll marble, in the hole."

Different schools have customs relating to initiation rites, special holidays, end of term, etc. But there are some curiosities which are almost universal, such as saying the same thing at once accidentally. Both children must instantly stop what they are doing, and follow a set ritual, such as holding little fingers and wishing, with or without a chant. The curing of warts by magic chants is widely practised with but little variation in method from 1627 to 1954 (Francis Bacon) or even back 2,000 years (Pliny). Among other curiosities is that of secret languages, popular with teen-age children. So that outsiders are unable to understand them they use slang, word-twistings, sign language, "back-slang" such as "uoy nac ees reh sreckin ginwosh", or rhyming-slang such as "almond rocks" for "socks", "going for a ball of chalk" for a walk etc.

There are many rhymes and superstitions as regards friendships, love tokens, tests of affection, fortune telling etc.

The book closes with the chapter on pranks played on pedestrians, such as setting booby traps across the pavement, and on householders such as window tapping, and especially door-knocking which is described in great detail and variety. This book should help to deepen any teacher's insight into the working of his pupils' minds, and it should be interesting to note how South African childrens' mores differ from or coincide with those of English children.

E.P.R.

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An American University adapts itself to the modern world —



Innovation and Experiment at an American University. New Horizons of Higher Education, by John Rowe Workman (Public Affairs Press, Washington, D.C.).

Lip-service is commonly paid at all levels to innovation and experiment in education, but too often in practice education goes on in the same old way, monotonous, boring, rutted. **New Horizons of Higher Education** is a description by the Associate Professor of Classics at Brown University (U.S.A. Founded in 1764) of an experimental scheme of instruction for first and second year undergraduates at that university college. The university authorities were concerned, as most university authorities are, about the attitude and performance of first year students fresh from high school — the job, as the writer puts it, of converting "the unco-ordinated collector of facts and impulses into a scholar." Orthodox instruction was leading to boredom and failure; text-books and survey lecturers were short-circuiting the educational process; large groups were hindering the proper development of personality; final examinations were holding the danger of being little more than an exaggerated demonstration, not of knowledge, but of what the student thought the professor wanted to know, and of fostering in the student the dogmatic belief that there is a final answer to everything.

These doubts about and criticism of higher education courses, with the implied criticism of high school instruction, are not confined to the United States, and for this reason this book has an interest for us in South Africa. Had Brown University then answers to these very real problems?

The first 'reforms' were made in a physical sense. Class groups were reduced in size. Groups of 7 to 10 were considered to be the most desirable size, but it was necessary to accept groups of 20 for economic reasons, and it was found in practice that a group of this size gave a larger field of impact. (In parenthesis, it may be noted that the Johannesburg College of Education for some years has followed a consistent policy of keeping groups small, with happy results. This policy, we may add, has not had the entire approval of the Educational Department, largely for economic reasons — or so we hope). The increase in staffing at Brown was underwritten by the Carnegie Corporation for five years.

In these smaller groups, instruction became participatory rather than expository — the traditional method of school and university. The latter method tends to make the student "become addicted to a black-white, hot-cold, way of examining evidence"; the former accepts no authoritarian agent — no lecturer or text-book is held up as a final authority. Classes, then, were conducted in an atmosphere of free discussion about ideas — their evolution, validity, and pertinence to other ideas. This was the first premise of the scheme.

The second was the intensive study of a central text. To name but a few: Aristotle's **Ethics** in Classics, Machiavelli's **Prince** in History, Darwin's **Origin of Species** in Biology, a book of the Bible in Religious Studies. As Prof. Workman says, 'We say that the impression made by a reading of the book of Job will have a greater impact upon the student than a book about the problem of evil." These intensive studies were designed to stimulate among the students 'intellectual curiosity', an overworked phrase, but one which describes the desired end. First-hand knowledge is always superior to second-hand predigested information. Brown University feels too that it was not only the students who benefited. Lecturers were shaken out of their ruts, however ancient and petrified these were.

All in all, the experiment was a success and is being continued, for, to quote Prof. Workman again, "The ability to examine critically what is set before the citizen must be at the heart of any educational system", and this aim the new methods were undoubtedly achieving.

H.H.