Early studies of children’s play and the legacy of Iona and Peter Opie

The most compelling reason for recording children’s lore, for me, was to leave a picture, for future generations, of how the children of today amuse themselves in their own free time. (Opie 2001: xiii)

In Britain, and also in other parts of the English-speaking world, the names of Iona and Peter Opie are synonymous with the study of children’s folklore, in the sense of folklore for children and the folklore of children. Yet, despite the stature of their work, there has been no detailed account or appraisal of their contribution. This chapter offers a preliminary account of the Opies’ work on children’s play, especially their methods, motivations, theoretical orientation and findings. It begins by sketching some of the Opies’ precursors in this field, especially those whose work is known to have had a significant influence on them and whose findings formed an important point of reference.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship

The earliest and most sustained research into children’s play in the modern period took place within the context of folklore studies and its twin antecedents of antiquarianism and nineteenth-century Romanticism. It therefore reflects various stages and theoretical orientations in the development of folklore as an academic discipline (Bishop and Curtis 2001). These include a concern with bounded and collectable forms – ‘games’, ‘rhymes’ and, later, ‘singing games’ – a predilection for amassing collections on a regional or national scale, and the influence of contemporary theory, such as the notion of unilinear cultural evolution and a Tylorian concept of survivals.

The work of Joseph Strutt (1747–1802), an engraver and antiquarian, is often cited as the first major historical study of play. Strutt combed documents in the British Library to bring together information on many aspects of English
culture and tradition. Among his resulting publications was *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, published in 1801. Strutt’s main concern is with adult sports and amusements but his final chapter is devoted to ‘popular manly pastimes imitated by children’. It describes the games of both boys and girls, including a number that would be familiar to children today, such as ‘Ducks and Drakes’, ‘Puss in the Corner’, skipping, ‘Hide and Seek’, and even ‘hopping and standing on one leg’ (several of these are discussed in Chapter 3). Strutt’s book was reprinted many times due to ‘the novelty of the subject, [which] attracted the notice and admiration of readers of almost every class’ (quoted in Cox 1903: v). The Opies later praised Strutt’s pioneering work as ‘a remarkable undertaking that embodies considerable research’ but criticized it for allotting too little space (14 pages out of 313) to the ‘sports of children’ (Opie and Opie 1969: vii).

The nineteenth century saw the publication of a steady stream of works concerning children’s play which drew on oral rather than written evidence. Among these are Robert Chambers’ *Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (1826) and James Orchard Halliwell’s *Nursery Rhymes of England* (1842), and its sequel *Popular Rhymes and Nursery Tales* (1849). Both contain game descriptions and rhymes of school-aged children as well as ‘nursery’ or Mother Goose rhymes intended for younger children. The books by Chambers and Halliwell proved popular and went through many reprintings. Meanwhile, games collections began to appear relating to other countries in Europe, North America and elsewhere (see Chapter 2 Appendix).

The testimony of children and young people themselves can be glimpsed here and there in some of these nineteenth-century sources. Chambers’ ‘puerile rhymes’ section contains an example said to have been ‘scrawled and bawled everywhere in Edinburgh, by the boys attending the High School’ (1826: 296), where Chambers himself went to school some ten years or so previously. Nevertheless, it is adults’ memories of their younger days which predominate in these works. As such, they may be coloured by nostalgia and filtering and, as the Opies point out, a tendency to focus on the dramatic rather than mundane games and ‘the amusing quips and jeers, the significant calls and superstitions, which mean so much in the life of a ten-year-old at the time, but have been too ordinary to be filed in memory’s archive’ (1959: vii).

William Wells Newell’s *Games and Songs of American Children* (1883, revised and enlarged in 1903) draws principally on adults’ recollections but some of the items presented are children’s street games which he had observed in New York City whilst a teacher there (McNeil 1988: 11). His collection includes game descriptions, grouped by thematic content, main activity and material object used, and associated verbal texts and melodies. A central figure in the founding of the American Folklore Society in 1888, Newell’s study is notable for its academic approach. Despite his belief that the games were dying out, he included essays on the ‘invention’ (particularly with reference to pretend play)
and the ‘conservatism’ of children. He also sought out and highlighted the existence of parallel versions of games and songs elsewhere and at different historical periods. This comparative approach was in keeping with contemporary folkloristic scholarship into the folktale, proverb, riddle and ballad but Newell’s study was the first time it had been applied to games and rhymes (Withers 1963: v–vi). The Opies commend Newell on this scholarship (Opie and Opie 1969: viii) and adopted the same technique themselves in much of their work.

In 1888, Henry Bolton, another founding member of the American Folklore Society and a chemist by profession, published an extensive collection of counting-out rhymes amassed from texts sent him by adult correspondents. Bolton adopted a survivalist approach to the 877 rhymes he amassed, seeking to relate them all to ancient forms of divination by lots (McNeil 1988: 14). The theory of survivals in culture was posited by the British anthropologist, E. B. Tylor, in his highly influential book Primitive Culture (1871).

This approach is also prominent in the landmark publication of Alice Bertha Gomme (1853–1938), The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland, which appeared in two volumes (1894, 1898) and was intended as the first part of a dictionary of English folklore proposed but never brought to fruition by her husband, George Laurence Gomme. Based on information from 76 correspondents, relating to 112 locations, it contains detailed descriptions of around eight hundred games and their variants (Boyes 1990), divided into ‘descriptive games’ and ‘singing or choral games’ (1894: ix). Gomme has been criticized for relying too much on the memories of adult middle-class correspondents but she also drew on the observation and testimony of some children, including working-class children (Boyes 1990).

Gomme’s adoption of a cultural evolutionist approach led her to search for parallels between Victorian children’s games and rhymes and the rituals and beliefs of peoples regarded as being at the earlier, ‘primitive’ stage of civilization. These parallels were taken as evidence of the origins of the games which, according to the theory of survivals, had long outlived their original context but which could be ‘read’ in such as way as to reconstruct that context:

Children do not invent, but they imitate or mimic very largely, and in many of these games we have, there is little doubt, unconscious folk-dramas of events and customs which were at one time being enacted as a part of the serious concerns of life before the eyes of children many generations ago.

(Gomme 1894: ix)

Thus, Gomme sees in the singing game ‘London Bridge is Falling Down’ the remnants of the custom of foundation sacrifice (Gomme 1898: 501).
When Tylor’s theory was discredited, Gomme’s work became discredited too. Boyes, however, argues that she nonetheless produced ‘the first major theoretical work by a woman folklorist’ (Boyes 2001) and, as the Opies note, Gomme’s descriptions are still valuable even if her theorizing is outmoded (1969: vii–viii). Her publication became the standard work for the next generation of researchers into play and it also gives extended attention to the distinctive game preferences of girls, particularly the ‘singing game’ (Gomme 1894/1898; Opie and Opie 1985).

Contemporary with Alice Gomme’s work was a very different piece of research, focusing on a single place, a fishing village and seaside resort in northern Scotland on the east coast of Sutherland. Collated and edited by Edward W. B. Nicholson, the then Librarian of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the contents of Golspie: Contributions to its Folklore were collected by seven children, aged between 12 and 15 (Nicholson 1897: 331), all named on the book’s title page. Nicholson had been holidaying in Golspie when he saw children at school playing. He decided to instigate an essay-writing competition for which he offered a prize of a book and cash (Nicholson 1897: 2–3). The children were given a set of topics to cover, including local stories, songs, sayings, customs and superstitions, but also games and rhymes.

Nicholson drew on Gomme’s work to annotate the children’s examples and urged the Folklore Society to initiate collecting in every location in the UK, particularly by means of young people (1897: 7). His engagement of young people as researchers not only seems to anticipate the approach adopted by the Opies some sixty years later, it also provided them with a rare opportunity to follow up on this research. Thus, in 1952–53, the Opies gave the same questionnaire to pupils at Golspie Senior Secondary School and asked them about the items that their predecessors had noted (1959: vii).³

**Twentieth-century scholarship**

Not surprisingly, Gomme’s work continued to be both a stimulus and reference point in much early twentieth-century play research (see Chapter 2 Appendix). Maclagan’s *Games and Diversions of Argyleshire* (1901) focuses on ‘pastimes found in use in Argyleshire at the present day’ (1901: vi, emphasis added), suggesting that Maclagan’s co-researchers noted items from their observation of, and perhaps interaction with, contemporary children. Memories of adults regarding their play are also included. Maclagan refers the reader to Gomme’s work for further analogues (Maclagan 1901: vi).

Meanwhile, English folksong collectors, alerted to the importance of singing games through Gomme’s work, also began to collect them, mainly from young people. Sharp and Gomme collaborated on a series of popular singing game publications together (1909–12) whilst Kidson, Gilchrist and
Gillington each published collections of this genre in the 1910s. In Wales, William George instigated a competition at the National Eisteddfod in 1911 ‘to do for Wales what the Alice Gomme collection has done for England’ (quoted in Bishop and Curtis 2001: 5). Later, in the early 1930s, the American folksong scholar James Madison Carpenter became the first to make sound recordings of children’s singing games in Britain. He recorded approximately fifty singing games in England and Scotland using the Dictaphone cylinder machine. These were mostly recorded from adults but there are six from ‘Lincolnshire children singers’.4

It was, however, a slender volume entitled *London Street Games* (Douglas 1916) and partly pitched as a critical response to Gomme’s work, that anticipated the direction of much play research since the Second World War and, in some cases, helped to inspire it. *London Street Games* is based entirely on the testimony of children, documented by means of ‘scores of letters’ (Bock 1993/2010) written for Norman Douglas, the book’s compiler, by lower-class children. Douglas encountered these children playing on the streets in various parts of London, including Finsbury, Hackney, Islington, Whitechapel, Stepney, Limehouse, Poplar, Shoreditch, Bethnal Green, Deptford, Camberwell, Kennington, Bermondsey, Rotherhithe, and Shadwell (Douglas 1931: ix).

Douglas was a writer, most famous for his novel *South Wind* published in 1917. His one and only foray into children’s games research was published first in 1913 as ‘In Our Alley’ in *The English Review*, a literary magazine of which he was also editor at the time (Mullin 2005). *London Street Games* was a longer version of this, published in book form in 1916 and reprinted in 1931 with a preface and index by Douglas. The preface gives an insight into Douglas’s collecting methods:

> The following pages [were] published in 1916 . . . and I might have continued to note down Street Games till Doomsday, and compiled a veritable Corpus of them, but for the fact that, owing to other occupations, it became increasingly difficult to find the necessary time. Time! It required time, days and weeks, to stalk these children and win their confidence. Whoever doubts this – let him try.

(1931: ix)

What Douglas does not mention is that, in the same year, he was charged with the sexual assault of a 16-year-old boy, followed some months later by two further offences involving boys aged 10 and 12. He jumped bail and left the country, subsequently living in various parts of Europe where he continued to write, as well as causing further controversy in his personal life as well as his written works (Mullin 2005). The specific circumstances under which Douglas obtained the game descriptions from the children have yet to be established but these contemporary events make *London Street Games* a problematic source.
Douglas claims that he intended to produce ‘a social document’ (1931: x) and the book consists largely of verbatim quotations from his child correspondents with connecting comments by him addressed to the reader in conversational style. The book has been criticized for being difficult to understand (e.g. Opie and Opie 1959: v).

The anti-academic stance adopted by Douglas is directed at Alice Gomme, of whom he is openly critical. Referring to her as ‘Aunt Eliza’, he remarks on her ability to ‘explain everything’, satirizing and dismissing her survivalist interpretations in startlingly misogynistic terms:

Then she says that *Here we come gathering nuts in May* is a relic of ‘Marriage by Capture’, and some more stuff of that kind. No doubt; no doubt. Aunt Eliza thinks a good deal about Marriage by Capture – to judge by her talk, at least. Nobody ever tried to capture her, you know. And nobody ever will, I don’t think.

(Douglas 1916: 88)

By contrast, Douglas’s stance was to avoid intellectualizing about the games and to demonstrate the inventiveness of the children (Douglas 1931: x). A recurrent theme in the book is the way in which children have to improvise when they do not have game equipment to hand:

There’s a difficulty about ball-games, which is this: that most of them generally need a ball; meaning you can’t play with a ball unless you have a ball to play with. And you generally haven’t got one – meaning the children. And then the trouble begins. Because then you have to start thinking about something that doesn’t need a ball.

Somebody or other may have a top . . .

. . . And if you have not tops, you can make up games with your caps or boots or jackets . . .

. . . And if you have no caps, which you sometimes haven’t, you must just find something else to play with. Buttons, for instance . . .

. . . But some of the best sports are those which they make up without anything at all, just out of their heads.

(Douglas 1916: 4, 5, 6, 10)

Douglas thus emphasizes the way in which children’s play is responsive to their immediate circumstances. In particular, he seems to adumbrate a practice which is characterized in play research today as ‘bricolage’ (Lichman 2001; Willett *et al.* 2013), in which children draw on whatever physical and cultural resources are available to them to orchestrate their play, especially resources not intended for such purposes. We will return to this point below.
Whilst the methods underlying Douglas’s research raise significant ethical and social issues, his book is prophetic of future directions in the study of children’s play. These include a focus on play in the urban environment and the dialectical relationship between play and environmental, material and cultural resources. Douglas also gives prominence to children’s voices and the description of play from the perspective of those who are involved in it. We now turn to collectors active during and after the Second World War to trace these and other new directions further.

Play research from the Second World War and beyond

Play research in Britain in the interwar years was sparse, but notable projects were taking place elsewhere. One of these was the Schools’ Folklore Scheme of 1937–38 in which around 100,000 children in some five thousand primary schools in Ireland collected folklore in their local communities over an eighteen-month period. These young researchers primarily noted information, including ‘old games’, from older members of the community. In the same year, Harrisson, Madge and Jennings initiated ‘Mass Observation’, in which volunteers from all over Britain recorded their everyday life in diaries and in response to questionnaires. The project continued into the early 1950s and was revived in the 1980s. Iona and Peter Opie later drew on ‘reports prepared by Mass-Observation’s panel of voluntary observers’ (Opie and Opie 1959: xv).

Meanwhile, in the US, Dorothy Howard (1902–96), a teacher and educationist, was undertaking fieldwork for her doctorate ‘Folk Jingles of American Children: A Collection and Study of Rhymes used by Children Today’, which she completed in 1938 for the School of Education at New York University (Factor 2005). According to Factor, ‘Howard may well have been the first person in the English-speaking world to gain a doctorate . . . for a study of contemporary children’s “folk jingles”’ (2005: 2). She went on to make the first in-depth survey of children’s playlore in Australia in 1954–55 (Factor 2005). The Opies later corresponded with Howard and paid tribute to her as ‘one of the originators of this field of study, who not only sent us her great thesis . . . the fruit of seven years’ collecting in the 1930s, but a quantity of her subsequent collecting both in Maryland and in Australia’ (1959: xvi).

In the period after the Second World War, a new generation of British researchers into children’s play took to the field. Among these was Britain’s first teacher–collector, Dr James T. R. Ritchie (1908–98). Ritchie was a science teacher at Norton Park School, a junior secondary school on the Edinburgh–Leith border. He was also a poet and an ardent advocate of Scottish language and
culture (Bishop 2011). Already familiar with the work of Chambers and Douglas, he became aware that his own students were living exponents of games and songs in their native Scots. Ritchie began to note these down and got the students to do likewise (Bishop 2011). This resulted in several radio broadcasts for the Scottish Home Service from the late 1940s, a pioneering film entitled *The Singing Street*, made with fellow school teachers Raymond Townsend and Nigel McIsaac in 1951, and Ritchie’s books *The Singing Street* (1964) and *Golden City* (1965), which focus on play and games in the street and the back-green respectively. The film attracted the attention of the Opies who were just embarking on their research into school-aged children’s folklore. Peter Opie wrote to Ritchie expressing their interest but Ritchie preferred to continue his work independently of contemporary researchers into children’s play.

This is in contrast with Father Damian Webb (1918–90), a Catholic priest of the Benedictine Order, whose interest in children’s games and songs grew out of his work, his talents as an amateur photographer and his love of travel (Brumfield 2011). He first documented children playing singing games whilst on a holiday in Portugal in the early 1950s, going on to photograph and tape-record children’s games and songs in various parts of northern England, Scotland and Ireland as well as other parts of Europe and Kenya during the 1960s to 1980s (Webb 1984). This resulted in an extensive collection of recordings, including thirty-six made in Britain, and high-quality photographs. Webb became acquainted with the Opies in the early 1960s, and provided photographs for all of their joint publications except *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Brumfield 2011). The Opies also drew on his notes and recordings for *The Singing Game* (1985).

Brian Sutton-Smith (1924–) was a teacher who became interested in children’s play and games in his native New Zealand, gaining a PhD thesis on the subject in 1954. He later emigrated to the United States, where he has spent a lifetime researching into the play of children and adults, emerging as the foremost theorist in this area of study. His work has been characterized by an interdisciplinary approach, particularly located within psychology but also folklore studies, anthropology and sociology. He lectured to the Folklore Society in Britain and met Peter and Iona Opie with whom he became friends, as he later recalled:

On the 1952 visit, I also met and befriended the great folklorist Peter Opie in a London pub, and we both declared we would write our next book on games. Eventually we both did so, but the difference was this: *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, which Peter and his wife Iona published in 1959, caused a great stir especially among those interested in worldwide communication theory; my book, *The Games of New Zealand Children*, published by the University
of California–Berkeley Press, also in 1959, landed with a resounding thud in the academic remainder bin.  
(Sutton-Smith 2008: 88–9)

It is to the Opies’ lives and work that we now turn.

**Iona (1923– ) and Peter (1918–82) Opie**

Iona describes Peter and herself as ‘children of Empire’ (1988: 203). Peter was born in Egypt, where his father was serving as an army doctor before being posted to India. Educated at Eton College, Peter joined the army at the start of the Second World War but was invalided out in 1941. After a number of jobs, including working for the BBC and for a publisher, he became a full-time writer.

Iona was born in Colchester, Essex, the daughter of an expert in tropical diseases who worked in Africa. She went to Sandecotes School, Parkstone, and later joined the meteorological section of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force. They met and became friends after Iona, on reading his youthful autobiography, *I Want to Be a Success*, had written to him and they struck up a correspondence with each other. They married in 1943 and had their first child, James, the following year. Soon after, the London publishing company for whom Peter was working moved to Bedfordshire to escape the bombs and the Opie family followed. It was here, during a walk, that the future direction of their lives was ‘decided by a ladybird’:

> Idly one of us picked it up, put it on his finger . . . and said to it: ‘Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home,/Your house is on fire and your children all gone.’ The ladybird obeyed, as they always do – and yet it always seems like magic; and we were left wondering about this rhyme we had known since childhood and had never questioned until now. What did it mean? Where did it come from? Who wrote it?  
> (Opie 1988: 208)

Their search for answers to these questions led them first to Halliwell’s *Nursery Rhymes of England* and thence to the British Library, resulting in ‘a treasure hunt which was to last forty years’ (Opie 1988: 208).

Peter had been writing since he was a child. A later autobiographical work, *The Case of Being a Young Man*, published in 1946, won a literary award and the prize money allowed Peter to devote himself to writing. With the help of her mother-in-law, Iona juggled childcare and acting as Peter’s research assistant. The first fruits of their labour was *I Saw Esau*, a ‘pocketbook’ of schoolchildren’s
chants and rhymes, published in 1947, the same year as their second child, Robert, was born.

Meanwhile, they were involved in the larger project of compiling a definitive dictionary of nursery rhymes which traced their histories and described the variant forms in which they had been found. At Peter’s suggestion, Iona joined the Folklore Society, with Peter attending meetings as her guest (1988: 209). They also began to buy children’s books at this time, gradually building up what became the largest privately held collection of children’s books. At work in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, they were noticed by Richard Hunt, the Keeper of Western Manuscripts. Through him, they were introduced to Oxford University Press who went on to publish all of the Opies’ major works, beginning with the *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* in 1951, which was an instant success. It was followed by *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book* (1955) and *The Puffin Book of Nursery Rhymes* (1963).

Of that time, Iona later wrote:

> We could see the road ahead almost too plainly. We knew, by now, that there were rhymes that belonged to older children – rhymes that were not passed from adult to child, but from child to child. We had been sent such rhymes by correspondents who remembered them from their childhood. However, we decided that instead of gathering these schoolchild rhymes from people who could remember them only imperfectly from many years before, we would go to the people who were using the rhymes in the present day – the schoolchildren themselves.

(1988: 213)

Thus, the Opies turned in earnest to children’s own lore and play and took on the role of empirical researchers as well as historical and comparative ones. A letter to the *Sunday Times*, published on 6 November 1951, asking for information, resulted in a plethora of responses including 151 from teachers offering to get information from children in their own schools and to contact colleagues elsewhere (Opie and Opie 1997: v; Opie 2001: x). The Opies’ aim was to obtain material from children aged 7–11 years, particularly those aged 8–9, and from a reasonably even distribution of places in Britain, in both rural and urban locations (2001: x), although a study of the demographics of the schools that were involved has yet to be undertaken. For their first book, they were in touch with approximately five thousand children at seventy different schools (1959: vii). Their next publication added a further 112 schools and another five thousand children (Opie and Opie 1969: v–vi). Iona Opie later estimated that, over a period of some thirty years (c.1950–80), they were in touch with about 20,000 children, although this was still only a tenth of the children in the 8–10 age group in 1960 (Opie 2001: xi). These contributions were supplemented by the
network that the Opies built up of friends, family (including, as time went on, their own children, James, Robert and Letitia), and other correspondents.

The Opies' methods

The Opies' intention was to build up a synchronic view of children's play throughout Britain (Opie and Opie 1959: viii; Opie 1989: 60). The survey approach was the obvious way to gain this breadth and there was precedent for the use of questionnaires in earlier studies by folklorists as well as in such contemporary related research as Mass Observation, mentioned above, and dialect studies.12

Our innovation was to collect children's folklore directly from children, in their own words and on a national scale, either by direct communication or through informal questionnaires that suggested topics and invited opinions rather than requiring answers of 'Yes' or 'No' or lists, or descriptions of named games (which might not be known under that name locally).

(Opie 1989: 60)

The Opies' initial questionnaires went through several different versions. The first is entitled 'The Oral Lore of School Children' and explains the aims of the survey and the kinds of material they wished to document. The Opies stress that they are 'not merely making a collection of oral lore, but studying its transmission, distribution, age, origins, and implications to the child himself'. They also give advice on how to administer the questionnaire, with either the teacher writing down the children's oral responses or the children writing them down themselves. It is aimed at children aged about 7 to 14. The questions cover skipping, ball games, counting out rhymes, singing games, other rhymes, jokes, tricks and conundrums, and crazes, as well as words and sayings.

A 'supplement' to the first questionnaire was also distributed during the 1950s.13 This requests information on further and more specific games and areas of language, custom and belief. In the preamble, the Opies comment;

there appears to be almost as much knowledge of traditional matter as there ever was, although the emphasis, particularly in children's play, seems to have shifted in the past half century. Some of the expressions and rhymes sent in have clearly been of post-war invention (mentioning pre-fabs, nylons, flying saucers, the Skylon, etc.), while other games, customs and terms, which children have written down, are known to be old, and had, sometimes, been thought to be obsolete.14
In what appears to be a telling shift from the first questionnaire, the Opies tactfully state that ‘the most satisfactory results have usually been obtained when each child in the class wrote down his replies himself’. They also suggest asking children to write essays on ‘my favourite game in the playground (or round about my home)’, customs, and magic and fortune-telling.

Following the publication of their first book on children’s play, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), based on the responses to their first surveys, the Opies devised a new questionnaire to collect further information towards their next publication which focused on street and playground games played without the use of play equipment. The questionnaires and the children’s responses to them, together with the correspondence with the relevant teachers, were deposited at the Bodleian Libraries in the 1990s by Iona Opie, where they form part of the Opie Working Papers, and the material on custom and belief was deposited in the Folklore Society Archives.

Iona also did fieldwork, sometimes in the company of fellow play researchers such as Damian Webb. From 1969–83, she made tape recordings of children from around the country performing songs and singing games, and talking about their play (Jopson *et al.* in press). These recordings were made in schools, council estates, and country villages around the country, including the Southwest, Welsh borders, Midlands, the Northwest, Yorkshire, Scotland and London. This work was an attempt to round out the geographical spread of their research and helped to reinforce the impression that cities were as rich in material as the countryside (Opie 1988: 213).

Iona also made regular visits to the primary school in Liss, Hampshire, where the Opie family had settled. Here she made notes on her observations over some years, a portion of which she published in 1993 as *The People in the Playground* (see Burn and Richards (in press) for a discussion of Iona Opie’s methodological approach). The Opies compiled, compared and annotated their data at their home by virtue of a spartan lifestyle imposed by Peter. They were meticulous in gaining clarification of the children’s responses where needed, writing back to the teacher or child in question to request these, or visiting the school themselves.

Aware of the immense task they had set themselves, they aimed not only to complete each book but to make it a classic in order to have sufficient income while they produced the next book. They received no grant funding and would not accept publishers’ advances (Opie 1989: 57). They conducted their work in adjoining offices in the manner of a small business, Iona as clerk and Peter as manager or, in the academic model, as research assistant and principal investigator respectively:

During the years in which we were engaged in our surveys of schoolchildren, the first job was to open any packages of material and to write to acknowledge their safe arrival. We each had our own correspondents, who became valued personal friends. I would then
take through to Peter the next section of whatever book we were writing – the next game, perhaps, consisting of 30 or more sheets of notes in chronological order, with outline explanations. While he wrote that section, which might take days or weeks, I continued to analyse and file the material, to back it up with further reading, to write in more detail to the head teachers taking part in the survey, or to individual children, to transcribe tapes, and to fend off visitors. When he had done his best with a piece, he brought it through to me for written comment, and then I handed it back to him. Only after he had considered all my suggestions and objections and had adjusted the piece accordingly, did we discuss it face to face, which meant, in fact, resolving those points on which we did not agree. If neither of us would give way, we had an arbiter – Doreen Gullen, then on the staff of the Scottish Educational Supplement, without whose help, I am convinced, none of our books would ever have seen the light of day.

(Opie 1989: 57)

By means of this process, they gradually produced their books, beginning with *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* in 1959, followed by *Children's Games in Street and Playground* in 1969. These contain a careful distillation of the data, illustrated with representative examples sifted out from the mass of material they had collected. During this same period, Peter’s role in the Folklore Society expanded and he served on the council during the years 1951–69 and as President in 1963–64. He was also President of the anthropology section of the British Association in 1962–63 and did occasional talks and radio broadcasts.

While they were working on their third play volume, concerning singing games, Peter’s health began to fail and, in 1982, he died of a heart attack. Despite having to cope with the loss of Peter, and the lack of his input in the final stages of the book, Iona brought *The Singing Game* to completion in 1985 and continued to work on the final volume they had planned, *Children's Games with Things* (1997), ‘really just as a joke . . . to astonish Peter’s obituarists’ (Opie and Opie 1997: vi). Iona also wrote a number of articles about the work of ‘the Opies’ following Peter’s death (1988, 1989) and continued to visit the school playground at Liss. After Peter’s death, Iona gave their collection of children’s literature to the Bodleian Library. This collection included ‘juvenile books on games,’ which the Opies were the first to explore systematically when writing the history of the games and texts in their works on play (1969: viii).

**The legacy of the Opies**

The results of the Opies’ research were published in their five books on children’s play – four joint volumes (Opie and Opie 1959, 1969, 1985, 1997),
the last two of these being brought to fruition by Iona, and one solo volume by
Iona (Opie 1993). Although a rigorous comparison of their archival collection
with their books has yet to be undertaken, it is clear that there were many areas
on which they amassed information but did not publish. Their books cover
games and forms of play with either historical antecedents or widespread
contemporary popularity. Overall, the books were well received, not only in
academic circles but with a general readership as well, and they have become
classics in the field, remaining in print for long periods. There is not space here
to undertake an evaluation of each of their books. Instead, we focus on their
contributions to the field in three areas:

- children and children’s culture;
- continuity and change in play, games and texts; and
- the influence of contemporary media on children’s play, games and
texts.

Children and children’s culture

In their books, the Opies combine their position as adults and as anthropo-
logical, historical and comparative folklorists with the perspectives of the
many children from whom they had received information and who were
participants in the very culture that the books set out to describe. In drawing
on this ‘insider knowledge’ as well as their own scholarly perspective, they
sought to document the everyday culture of children, with attention to the
ordinary and often overlooked (by adults) aspects, and without romanticizing
it or becoming nostalgic about it. Many view them as having achieved this
successfully. Warner observes that their first book is:

remarkably poised, brimful of genuine, vibrant affection for the
children, but empty of melancholic comparison with adult destinies,
of compensatory yearning for children’s ‘savage energies’ or ‘ecstatic
tribal innocence,’ their supposed liberty and anarchy.

(Warner 2001: xi)²⁸

In portraying the culture of children, and peer transmission among them,
they have been aligned with a notion of the ‘tribal child’ (James et al. 1998:
214), the study of childhood as a separate and distinct sphere from the adult
world. This, perhaps, is not surprising when one reads the rather startling state-
ment in The Language and Lore of Schoolchildren:

And the folklorist and anthropologist can, without travelling a
mile from his door, examine a thriving unselfconscious culture . . .
which is as unnoticed by the sophisticated world, and quite as
little affected by it, as is the culture of some dwindling aboriginal
tribe living out its helpless existence in the hinterland of a native
reserve.

(Opie and Opie 1959: 2)

However, placing this comment within the scope of the Opies’ work as
a whole, we would suggest that it is not wholly representative of their overall
assessment of play and childlore. Indeed, throughout their work, they are
at great pains to indicate how children are affected by the wider world,
accounting for the way in which media permeates children’s games and
rhymes, as is discussed in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a
notion that the child and adult worlds are somewhat divided in the Opies’
work and, as Warner argues, ‘the Opies probably overestimate this division,
since transmission of all kinds takes place between grownups and youngsters’
(2001: x). However, she makes the important point that this ‘does no harm to
the matter or the spirit of their enterprise; it rather brightens the focus on chil-
dren themselves’ (2001: x). We would argue that this aspect of the Opies’ work
needs to be placed within the context in which they were working. In the
mid-twentieth century, the voice of the child was largely absent from stories of
their everyday lives and the Opies’ work is notable for its recognition of the
significance of the direct accounts of children. As James et al. suggest (1998:
215), work such as this ‘is not part of a supportive social pyramid constructed
in the worship of the rational adult world’ and, in this regard, is an important
precursor to more recent developments in the recognition of the agency of
children.

Continuity and change

Underlying the Opies’ work was a fascination with continuity and change, the
endurance of certain forms and texts of play, and their adaptation. We suggest
that it is important to understand the views they expressed in relationship to
the scholarship of their predecessors. In their first book, for example, they
emphasize the high level of continuity that they have observed, characterizing
children as preservers (Opie and Opie 1959: 12), ‘respecters, even venerators,
of custom’ in whose ‘self-contained community their basic lore and language
seems scarcely to alter from generation to generation’ (Opie and Opie 1959: 2).
They nevertheless acknowledge that ‘oral lore is subject to a continual process
of wear and repair, for folklore, like everything else in nature, must adapt itself
to new conditions if it is to survive’ (Opie and Opie 1959: 9). They thus stress
the dynamism of folklore even though this leads them to write of it in super-
organic terms that do not acknowledge the agency of children, which the
Opies so emphatically champion in other ways. It suggests, however, that they
have in mind a macro view of folkloric change, what we might nowadays term
the sedimentation of certain texts and practices over time and space, and they give examples of ‘updating’ at the level of text (by the substitution of certain words), in object used (substitution of cigarette cards by milk bottle top ‘flying saucers’), in the timing of calendar customs (Halloween bonfires taking place on 5th November) and in function, illustrating this last through a playground rhyme taken from an eighteenth-century ballad, which has been used for counting out, skipping, and as a nursery rhyme, with concomitant textual changes (Opie and Opie 1959: 9–11). They likewise chart changes in game rules and preferences in their second book (Opie and Opie 1969: 8–10).

The point to note here is that their reference to folklore’s survival in the dictum quoted above can be read as a response to Gomme’s survivalist study. Indeed, the wording of the Opies’ statement in 1959 anticipates their second book on play, in which they characterize Gomme’s approach to her collectanea thus: ‘They were examined as if they were archaeological remains, rather than living organisms which are constantly evolving, adapting to new situations, and renewing themselves or being replaced’ (Opie and Opie 1969: vii–viii). The Opies’ emphasis on continuity and children as ‘preservers’ allows them to account for the persistence of certain texts and forms over long periods of time, as found by Gomme, whilst their emphasis on adaptation to new circumstances enables the Opies to counter Gomme’s survivalist approach and stress the function of these texts and forms for contemporary children.

Despite their acknowledgement of the changes introduced by children in their play and texts, the Opies are consistent in their view that these do not constitute children’s creativity or inventiveness (Opie and Opie 1959: 8, 12; 1993: 3). Variations, especially textual ones, are viewed as occurring ‘more often by accident than design’ (Opie and Opie 1959: 8), as ‘hopeful experiments, and minor games which last no more than a day, or at the most a few weeks’ (Opie 1993: 12) and as due to mishearing, misunderstanding, rationalization, and abridgement (Opie and Opie 1959: 8–9). These remarks need to be seen in the light of the Opies’ concern to understand the sources of children’s songs and rhymes. They are a reaction to the recurrent claim among children that they have ‘made up’ these songs and rhymes, and a result of the fact that the Opies never encountered evidence of children having been the ultimate creator of them (Opie and Opie 1959: 12). They continue, ‘the unromantic truth . . . is that children do not “go on inventing games out of their heads all the time”, as Norman Douglas believed; for the type of person who is a preserver is rarely also creative’ (Opie and Opie 1959: 12). Instead, they suspect that earlier fashions of adult popular culture are the ultimate source of many of the rhymes and they draw attention to the fact that ‘this process of children adopting or adapting popular songs for use in their games continues . . . in the present day’ (Opie and Opie 1959: 14).19 We would suggest that this process can be understood as bricolage (Lévi-Strauss 1966) and is
comparable, although with different cultural resources, to that described by Douglas, as argued above.

**Media influence**

The influence of media is discussed in two interlinked ways in the Opies’ published works, first in relation to the deleterious effect of media on children’s propensity to play in general (Opie and Opie 1959: v) and secondly as a source of content and frame of reference for some of their games and texts (understood multimodally as potentially including words, music, gesture and other modes of kinetic communication and performance; cf. Bishop and Curtis 2006; Bishop and Burn, 2013). Wherever the media are invoked, such as in rhymes (those used for skipping, clapping and counting out, or chanted just for entertainment), jokes, gestures, catch phrases, nicknames, pretend play, physical play, and musical play, the Opies highlight and explain this as far as they can, an achievement not to be underestimated in the days before the internet and its associated resources for research into the minutiae of popular culture. Their detective work shows that children draw on such sources as advertising jingles, news reports, popular song and dance, talent shows and competitions, and drama (as portrayed in television and film). Their account of the publicity surrounding the release of the film *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* in 1956 (Opie and Opie 1959: 118–20, described in more detail in Chapter 5) reveals that they were ready to document current events and use them as case studies to inform their views on the relationship between children’s play and the media.

Their cognizance of media influences may stem from their suspicion that the origin of many rhymes may originate in the popular culture of yesteryear. On the whole, however, they concluded that much media-referenced play was relatively ephemeral and they opted to include it only where it could be shown to have lasted or to have taken the form of a widespread but temporary ‘craze’ (Opie and Opie 1959: 138; 1969: 340; 1985: 414–15, 445; 1997: 212–13). Yet, as Jopson et al. (in press) point out in relation to Iona Opies’ tape-recorded fieldwork:

> the fundamental purpose of these interviews was to capture traditional singing games; not to document the children’s popular media cultures. Nevertheless, the recordings demonstrate clearly that Iona Opie did take the time to capture, often in some detail, many instances in which children refer to their engagement with contemporary media.

The Opies’ documentation of children’s engagements with media are discussed in more detail in the ensuing chapters of this book.
Conclusion

The Opies’ work on children’s folklore successfully mapped out this field of study in the UK and became a reference point for others to draw on as they needed in their research. It is the case that, as a number of scholars have pointed out, the Opies did not pursue in much depth a more socially and culturally contextualized approach (Grugeon 1988; Boyes 1995), but it is hard to imagine how they could have done so and retained the geographical breadth and historical depth of their research. It is now up to others to supply this lacuna retrospectively. Meanwhile, the Opies’ work continues to put the case for the importance of the historical view in studies of contemporary culture for, as Peter Opie observed, ‘it is practically impossible to understand and evaluate the present if we are not familiar with the past’ (1964: 75). In this sense, their work contributes fundamentally to the task we have set ourselves in this book and informs the chapters which follow.
Appendix

Chronology of the principal children’s game and song collections prior to the publications of Iona and Peter Opie

1801  J. Strutt, The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England (also new edition by William Hone, 1830)
1826  R. Chambers, Popular Rhymes of Scotland (and later editions)
1849  J. O. Halliwell, Popular Rhymes and Nursery Tales of England
1857  E. L. Rochholz, Allemannisches Kinderlied und Kinderspiel aus der Schweiz
1879  F. Zimmer, Volkstümliche Spiellieder und Liedespiele
1883  G. Pitré, Giuochi fanciulleschi siciliani, in Biblioteca delle tradizioni popolari siciliane 13
1883  E. Rolland, Rimes et jeux de l’enfance
1883  William Wells Newell, Games and Songs of American Children
1888  Henry C. Bolton, The Counting-Out Rhymes of Children
1891  A. Kiss, Magyar gyermekjátékgyűjtemény
1891  W. Gregor, Counting-out Rhymes of Children
1894  Alice Bertha Gomme, Children’s Singing Games
1894, 1898  Alice Bertha Gomme, The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland, 2 vols
1895  E. A. Pokovskrij, Deˇtskie igry
1895  R. S. Culin, Korean Games, with Notes on the Corresponding Games of China and Japan
1896  E. T. Kristiansen, Danske Börnerim, Remser og Lege
1897  E. W. B. Nicholson, Golspie: Contributions to Its Folklore
1897  F. M. Böhme, Deutsches Kinderlied und Kinderspiel
c.1898  A. G. Gilchrist, MS collection of singing games
1899  B. Støylen, Norske Barnerim og Leikar
1899  R. S. Culin, ‘Hawaiian Games’, American Anthropologist
1900  R. S. Culin, ‘Philippine Games’, American Anthropologist
1901  R. C. Mclagan, The Games and Diversions of Argyleshire
1902–08  A. de Cock and I. Teirlinck, Kinderspel en Kinderlust in Zuid-Nederland
1907  R. S. Culin, Games of the North American Indians
1909–12 A. B. Gomme and C. J. Sharp, *Children’s Singing Games*
1909 A. E. Gillington, *Old Isle of Wight Singing Games, Old Surrey Singing Games and Skipping Rope Rhymes, Old Hampshire Singing Games*
1913 A. E. Gillington, *Old Dorset Singing Games*
1915 ‘Notes on Children’s Game-Songs by Annie G. Gilchrist and Lucy E. Broadwood’, *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*
1916 F. Kidson, *One Hundred Singing Games, Old, New and Adapted*
1916 N. Douglas, *London Street Games*
1922 M. W. Beckwith, *Folk-Games of Jamaica*
1929–35 J. M. Carpenter Collection
1946 H. Halpert, ‘Folk rhymes of New York City children’ (MA thesis)
1952 P. G. Brewster, ‘Children’s games and rhymes’ in *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*
1953 P. G. Brewster, *American Non-Singing Games*
1959 B. Sutton-Smith, *The Games of New Zealand Children*
1959 I. and P. Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*
1964 J. T. R. Ritchie, *The Singing Street*
1965 J. T. R. Ritchie, *Golden City*
1969 I. and P. Opie, *Children’s Games in Street and Playground*
1985 I. and P. Opie, *The Singing Game*
1993 I. Opie, *The People in the Playground*
1997 I. and P. Opie, *Children’s Games with Things*