Play today in the primary school playground
Life, learning and creativity

edited by
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with a Foreword by Iona Opie

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Foreword

Iona Opie

When, in 1951, my husband Peter and I had finished The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, we began our quest for schoolchildren’s lore. We ourselves were poorly educated in the traditions of the schoolyard, having been to private schools, though this had the advantage that most traditional childlore was new to us, and vitally interesting. As it was generally assumed at the time that such lore was on the wane, the purpose of our first survey was to find out how much of it still existed, if any, and whether it varied from place to place, either in quantity or in local association. We began by writing to The Sunday Times, in November 1951, saying what we wanted to do, and asking for help in doing it. It seemed there was already a lot of interest, especially among schoolteachers. We had 151 offers of help from teachers who were willing to get information from their own schools, and to get in touch with friends who were teaching in other parts of the country. Our aim was to obtain material from places as evenly distributed as possible throughout Britain, and from the children who were most in possession of the lore – that is, the age range between 7 and 11, with the emphasis on the 8- and 9-year-olds. We knew it was important to enquire from as many children and in as many schools as possible. In one school very little lore may be found; in another, only a few miles away, the tradition is rich and vibrant. It depends on the school itself, the geography of the playground and the restrictions put upon play. Small country schools, with rural playgrounds that may include a hazel copse and a stream, foster ancient imaginative games of bandits and mothers-and-fathers. Large city schools, with barrack-like buildings and crowded asphalt playgrounds, are nevertheless seething with traditional lore. The children live in a social pressure-pot. The constant change of population brings a constant influx of new games, witticisms, stories and jokes. The only full version of the evocative
old singing game ‘Here Comes a Jew, a Jew from Spain’ that I found was in the depths of Salford in 1975.

These valiant teachers became personal friends, although we met few of them face to face. They set the children writing about the games, rhymes, legislation and language of their own out-of-school lives and, although this was done mostly during English lessons, we emphasized that spelling and punctuation did not matter. The approach was as informal as possible. If we could not understand exactly how a game was played, we wrote to the child who had described it and asked for more details. They were always most obliging. Indeed, it is flattering to be the one dispensing knowledge, rather than the other way about. Soon we were being asked for guidelines on the sort of material we needed, for children’s memories need to be jogged as much as adults’ do. We kept the questions as open-ended as possible. They might be ‘any game played with a ball’, or ‘any names for people you don’t like’, or ‘any game involving running to a certain place’. It is restricting to ask children if they play Hide and Seek when the local name may be Block, or to ask Scottish children about Hopscotch when in Scotland the game is called Peever. In our later surveys, the suggested topics were often as wide as ‘What do you think is the most stupid game you have ever played?’, which produced some marvellously splenetic replies.

The 1950s survey yielded more material than we could have dreamed of. Instead of one book, we saw that we would need to write several. After The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren came out to unexpected acclaim in 1959, we ran another survey, chiefly asking for games; and after Children’s Games in Street and Playground was published in 1969, a third survey was needed to acquire updated material for the next volume, The Singing Game (1985). The skipping games and other games using equipment, such as balls, fivestones, and Marbles, had to be left for a further volume because there were so many of them, and that volume appeared as Children’s Games with Things in 1997. (The original schoolchildren’s contributions are now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, along with the other Opie files and papers. The recordings I made in the school playgrounds and on housing estates during the 1970s are now in the British Library National Sound Archive, London.) We were, over the years, in direct touch with 20,000 of the children who were currently using this lore; yet, in spite of all the questioning and interviewing, I doubt we found out everything there was to know. Our main informants were 8- to 10-year-olds in British state schools, but in 1960, our midway date, there were 2,002,000 schoolchildren in that age group. We found out, perhaps, what was most common and most typical, but we also found some exciting rarities, such as Knife (Mumble-the-Peg) in the Isle of Lewis, and the old hide-and-seek game of Smuggle the Geg, known as Hunt the Keg in St Andrews and Smoogie Giggie in Golspie.

As we gathered this considerable mass of material we began to appreciate its wider implications. Children are but younger adults. Their
behaviour is fundamental human behaviour, not yet obscured by a veneer of civilization. Behind the verbal traditions of the playground can be heard age-old prejudices, beliefs, hates, resentments and ambitions. Amidst the bustle and noise of the playground can be seen remarkable skills of organization, quick agreements and decisions, and instant adaptability. The basic games demonstrate pleasures of strategy and movement that probably predate language itself. We can begin to understand what constitutes fun, what humour is thought cleverest, what noises are most satisfactory to make, what prowess is admired. Simply by examining which songs and rhymes are the most popular, we can see that the mental attitude found most useful when making one's way in an uncaring world is insouciant, defiant, offhand, pretending not to care. The important thing in a playground or other gathering is to protect one's ego.

The charm of the lore is that it is voluntary. Children are not made to recite 'I Went to a Chinese Restaurant', they choose to do so. It is easy to guess why the choice is made. There is still a lingering feeling, among British schoolchildren anyway, that anything Chinese, being unfamiliar, is funny. Wrapping a loaf of bread in a five-pound note is nicely comic. The nonsense rigmarole that the Chinese people say in the rhyme ('My name is Alli alli, Chickerlye, chickenlye, Om pom poodle, Walla walla whiskers, Chinese chopsticks, Indian chief says "How!"') is an achievement to learn, and a triumph to recite, especially when performing a complicated clapping routine at the same time. An enterprising child can become famous by introducing a new ending – instead of 'Indian chief says "How!"', for instance, they might say 'Indian chief – corn beef, "How!"'. One of the aims of collecting school lore is to assemble enough data to see into the minds of the children of a particular era, their preferences and the reasons for those preferences. The reasons may be as much to do with the sound of a verse as with its subject matter. The undefinable appeal of sounds, even if the sense is not evident, is also the reason that the old singing games, shaped by time, are so beloved of poets and readers of poetry. When The Singing Game came out, I was not surprised to hear that it was being bought by connoisseurs of surrealistic poetry.

The historical aspect of children's lore is, to my mind, vital. The history of a game like 'Thread the Needle' can be followed down through centuries. We know its twentieth-century manifestations, but what then? The structure of a game changes over the years to suit the social climate. Nubile maidens played ring or line singing games in the fifteenth century as part of the process of wooing a young man; in the twentieth century, younger girls played those games for their entertainment value, especially when, as in 'The Dukes a-Riding', they were given a chance to be rude about their friends. The words, too, change over time; it is a long evolutionary process, which incidentally obviates many of the so-called 'historical origins'. 'Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush' was, in its first wording, 'Nettles Grow on an Angry Bush' (and what that is a corruption of, I cannot imagine). It is for people with patience and the
spirit of enquiry and, yes, love, to notice and make a note of what children have chosen to preserve from the past. A local postman wrote to me not long ago to thank me for a copy of The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren, recently out of print. He said, ‘I already know its companion works, so rich in children’s exemplary inspirations, which are yet a truly still-living, shared tradition. And of course, so enjoyable. Only this morning, on my round, I saw some children singing “The Spanish Lady”, and how it has stayed with me since!’

Neither should we ignore the ephemeral amusements, and the crazes that come and go within weeks or months. Opportunists, children exploit their environment. In bright sunlight they masquerade with their own shadows, and burn holes in their clothes with the aid of magnifying glasses. In rain, they experiment with the possibilities of puddles. Sticks, stones, holes and pavements inspire fleeting games which may last only minutes. Crazes are easier to notice. I remember especially the fluff-gathering craze of the early 1960s, when children pulled wisps of wool off each others’ jerseys, trying to make the largest ball, and the ‘Spons’, triangular creatures of unknown origin or meaning, home-made from scraps of cloth, which invaded the schools later in the decade.

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. This certainly was in my mind when, from January 1970 to November 1983, I made a weekly visit to the playground of Liss Junior School, Hampshire, observing the social scene and the interactions between the children, listening to their opinions of each other, describing what they were doing and writing down their jokes and stories. I wished there had been a similar account of life in a British playground during the 1870s. Quite apart from the sensation of being there, I would so much have liked to compare the past with the present. William Hone was of a like mind. Chronicling Shrovetide games in The Every-Day Book for 15 February 1825, he says:

this information may seem trifling to some, but it will interest many. We all look back with complacency on the amusements of our childhood; and ‘some future [Joseph] Strutt’ a century or so hence, may find this page, and glean from it the important difference between the sports of boys now, and those of our grandchildren’s great grandchildren.

The authors of the chapters in this book, based on papers originally presented at the immensely successful and enjoyable conference entitled ‘The State of Play: Perspectives on Children’s Oral Culture’, at the University of Sheffield, Easter 1998, are all expert observers, recorders and interpreters of contemporary children’s play. They provide a worldwide view of the lore, in many different facets. Needless to say, they, and the other speakers at the conference, all discounted that long-lived and lusty meme, nowadays fuelled by newspaper articles in the tabloid press, ‘children
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don’t play their own games any more’ (or even, ‘children don’t know how to play any more’). It is truly a privilege to have been asked to write the foreword to this book.

Iona Opie
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Introduction

Julia C. Bishop and Mavis Curtis

The decline of play in today’s world?

In Britain, the popular perceptions that ‘children don’t know how to play any more’ and that ‘the traditional games are disappearing’ seem never to have been so widespread as in the early twenty-first century. Writing in 1980, Alasdair Roberts (1980: xi) declared that the main purpose of his book, Out to Play, was ‘to remove children’s games from the realm of nostalgia and demonstrate that they are as lively and varied now as they ever were’. Iona Opie discusses the spate of press coverage in the early 1990s given to British teachers’ fears that ‘“children appeared to have lost the art of playing games”, claiming that they simply sat around bored, or played solitary games on their computers’ (Opie and Opie 1997: 9). The research of Peter Blatchford in England supports the notion that these perceptions are widespread among school staff. His interviews with teachers and headteachers in primary schools in south-east England in 1987–8 reveal widespread concerns about children’s school playground behaviour, including aggression, desultory behaviour, the decline of traditional games, the marginalization of girls and the likelihood of problems arising during the long lunchtime break rather than morning or afternoon playtimes (Blatchford 1989: 9–30).

Parallels to these views are found in other parts of the western world. Ruth Brinton’s research into play traditions in southern France quotes the views of adults, including a primary school headteacher, that, in the words of one, ‘Aujourd’hui les enfants ne jouent plus; ils ne savent que se battre’ (‘Nowadays children do not play any more; they only know how to fight’) (Rodriguez 1980: 44, quoted in Brinton 1985: 1). As several contributors to this book note (see Chapters 1, 2 and 9), such views are also prevalent in North America and Australia.
As folklorists and others have been at pains to point out, these concerns are not new and in their tenacity have acquired the status of traditional beliefs in themselves (Opie and Opie 1969: 14). Iona and Peter Opie, for example, document examples stretching back at least 350 years (1997: 8; cf. Parry-Jones 1964: 240; Brinton 1985: 1–2). The reasons often cited today for the decline of play are also remarkably similar to those of the past. In the nineteenth century, commentators blamed national schools and the coming of the railway; in the twentieth century, first cinema, radio and gramophone, and now comics, television and video games, are the common scapegoats. 2

The background to the book

It was against the backdrop of these concerns that the editors of the present volume convened an international conference entitled ‘The State of Play: Perspectives on Children’s Oral Culture’ in 1998, hosted at the University of Sheffield by the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition, in association with the Folklore Society. Since, at this time, it was also the centenary of the publication of Alice Bertha Gomme’s ground-breaking children’s folklore collection, The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland ([1894, 1898] 1984), and 40 years since Iona and Peter Opies’ seminal publication, The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren (1959), it was an opportune moment to review the present state of children’s oral culture, especially as it related to current concerns about children’s play.

Play Today in the Primary School Playground contains a selection of the papers presented at the conference, now in revised form and with one subsequently written contribution. The research described dates almost entirely from the 1980s and 1990s and so corresponds to this period of particularly intense concern regarding the decline of children’s play traditions. Yet, the picture of children’s free play activities which emerges is predominantly one of vibrancy, creativity, continuity and variety, not one of decline. For this reason, it seemed important to make the authors’ findings available to a wider audience, including not only academic colleagues interested in children’s play, but adults such as teachers and playground supervisors directly concerned with it on a day-to-day basis. The focus is on ‘middle childhood’, the period between early childhood and adolescence (Stone and Church 1957; Roberts 1980), with much of the research centring on traditions in the primary school playground. In general, the approach is more descriptive than prescriptive, but the authors’ findings challenge us by implication to examine our adult assumptions about children’s contemporary play activities, and the effect of our personal experience on our perceptions of them. They urge us to take a longer, closer look at the reality and the complexities of what happens on today’s primary school playground and
other places where children play together. The overriding message is that we should be reserving judgement on much of what children choose to do while playing together, allowing children the space, in physical, temporal and psychological terms, to take responsibility for their play. This is, after all, an area of their lives in which they are truly the experts and it is only from them that we can gain an informed understanding of what constitutes ‘play for today’ and how adults might best support it.

The authors of the chapters in this book come from a variety of backgrounds, including folklore studies, playwork, ethnomusicology and education. Since each mentions to some degree the work of folklorists in the study of children’s play, this introduction will introduce some of the relevant folklore scholarship in this area and briefly elucidate the terminology, concepts and methods employed in contemporary children’s folklore research. It is necessary to do this since such research seems to be largely absent from the current debate about the supposed decline of children’s play. In Britain especially, folklore studies has struggled to establish itself as an academic discipline in higher education institutions, despite acceptance and expansion in many other countries (Widdowson 1987), and academically trained scholars struggle to disentangle themselves and their work from popular misconceptions concerning what folklore is and how it is studied (cf. Smith 1981; Buckland 1993).

Having surveyed folklore studies and its contribution to the study of children’s play, we will present a classification system of children’s play traditions. The classification system demonstrates the breadth of play traditions and at the same time offers a preliminary framework by which adults can organize their observations of what, at first glance, appears to be a noisy mêlée of activities on the playground. We conclude the introduction with a look ahead to the concerns of the chapters within each section of the book.

**The development of children’s play research within folklore studies**

The term ‘folklore’ (initially hyphenated as ‘folk-lore’) was coined by William Thoms, writing under the pseudonym Ambrose Merton, in 1846. He glossed the new term ‘the Lore of the People’ and proposed that it be used to replace such designations as ‘popular antiquities’ and ‘popular literature’ (the precursors of what is known today as folklore studies). He did not define who ‘the People’ were that he had in mind (although see Nicolaisen 1995: 72, who argues convincingly that Thoms was thinking of a rural audience), but it is clear that childhood traditions formed part of the definition from the start, since the principal example given by Thoms is that of a children’s custom in Yorkshire. In this custom the children
were formerly (and may be still) accustomed to sing round a cherry-tree the following invocation:–

Cuckoo, cherry-tree,
Come down and tell me
How many years I have to live.

Each child then shook the tree, – and the number of cherries which fell betokened the years of its future life.

(Quoted in Dundes 1965: 6)

Dictionary definitions of the term ‘lore’ give ‘a body of traditions and knowledge on a subject’, or ‘accumulated wisdom, learning’, but Thoms is content to exemplify his usage with a list, including ‘manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc., of the olden time’ (quoted in Dundes 1965: 5). The emphasis is clearly on cultural products – forms of behaviour, such as observances, and genres, such as ballads – especially in the areas of traditional custom and belief, and traditional language and song.

Just over 30 years after Thoms’ proposal, in 1878, the Folklore Society was formed. Among its founders was Lady Alice Bertha Gomme, wife of George Laurence Gomme, an influential folklorist of the time and president of the Society in the years 1890–4 (see Dorson 1968: 220–9). Alice Gomme’s monumental publication, The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland, published in two volumes in 1894 and 1898 respectively (Gomme [1894, 1898] 1984), was intended as the first part of a dictionary of British folklore, planned, but never completed, by her husband. It contains detailed descriptions of around 800 games and their variants, based on data from 76 correspondents and relating to 112 locations (Boyes 1990: 199). Although sometimes criticized for relying too much on the memories of adult middle class correspondents, the book does draw to some extent on the observation and testimony of children themselves, including working class children, as Boyes has pointed out (1990: 202). The Gommes were strong proponents of the latest theoretical approach of the time, based on the theory of unilinear cultural evolution and the idea that many contemporary manifestations of folklore could be interpreted as relics of adults’ customs and beliefs from former times. The games of Victorian children could therefore, they believed, shed light on the way of life of our ancestors. Thus, Alice Gomme traced a link between children’s games of chance and skill and ancient harvest and funeral rites, for example. Although now superseded as a theoretical approach, the value of Alice Gomme’s game descriptions remains, focusing attention, as they do, on the game traditions of girls, as distinct from those of boys, for the first time. Indeed, Gomme’s work did much to establish the study of children’s folklore as a valid field of investigation in its own right, especially the ‘singing game’, a term which Gomme herself established in the discipline (Opie and Opie 1985: 23; cf. Gomme 1894).
Elsewhere, folklorists and others were pioneering the study of children’s oral traditions in their own countries, notably William Wells Newell, who published *Games and Songs of American Children* ([1883] 1963), and Henry C. Bolton (1888) in America, and Franz Magnus Böhme in Germany (1897). Such pioneering publications were a major impetus to further collecting in the twentieth century. In Wales, for example, William George initiated a competition at the National Eisteddfod in 1911 ‘to do for Wales what the Alice Gomme collection has done for England’ (Jones 1986), while Maclagan considered his *Games & Diversions of Argyleshire* (1901: vi) an appendix to Gomme’s *Traditional Games*. These were followed, in the English-speaking world, by the work of researchers such as Halpert (1946), Brewster (1952, 1953), Mary and Herbert Knapp (1976), and Jones and Hawes (1987) in America; Howard in America and Australia (1938, 1965, 1971); Sutton-Smith in New Zealand (1981b); Fowke in Canada (1969, 1988); Norah and William Montgomerie (1985; see also Bennett 1998) and Ritchie (1964, 1965) in Scotland; James Carpenter (1972) and McCosh (1976) in Britain and America; and Douglas (1931) and the Opies in Britain (Opie and Opie 1959, 1969, 1985, 1997; Opie 1993).

The focus of these collections has been cultural products – ‘childlore’ such as ‘games, riddles, rhymes, jokes, pranks, superstitions, magical practices, wit, lyrics, guile, epithets, nicknames, torments, parody, oral legislation, seasonal customs, tortures, obscenities, codes, gang lore, etc.’ (Sutton-Smith 1970: 1; cf. Halpert 1971 – see Chapter 7, p. 139). Such items were regarded as folkloric because they were passed on by word of mouth (oral transmission) and informal watching, listening and copying of others (customary example). These most basic means of human communication are so commonplace as to be often overlooked or unremarked by adults, especially in literate societies where the supremacy of the written and especially the printed word is taken for granted (cf. Finnegan 1992). Yet, as discussed by Widdowson in Chapter 7, it is through oral transmission and customary example, principally in the family situation, that very young children first learn language and socially acceptable behaviour. As children grow older and begin formal schooling, their informal interaction becomes more peer-group dominated, resulting in the transmission of traditions from one child to another (horizontal transmission).

Of major importance in the twentieth century was the transition from collecting the memories of adults about their childhood traditions to collecting directly from the observation and interviewing of children themselves. Establishing the interest and worthiness of children’s own traditions – removed from the realm of adult recollection and possible nostalgia – and children’s commentary on those traditions, was achieved in Britain by the work of Iona and Peter Opie, whose books have been widely read by the general public as well as teachers and academics. They too were members of the Folklore Society, Peter Opie being president.
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during 1963–4 (see Simpson 1982), but they eschewed the ‘survivals in culture’ theory of the Gommes in favour of a survey of children’s traditions with comparative and historical observations. What the Opies collected were the games, lore and language known by contemporary children. As they stated in The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren (1959), their collection from the 1950s and 1960s ‘is made up of what will be the childhood recollections of the older generation after AD 2000’ (p. 9). As a result of their in-depth research, which relied (as Iona Opie’s Foreword to this book describes) principally on written correspondence with children, they were able, in The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren to propound a ‘revolutionary new view of children’s culture . . . that the rhymes children made for themselves were “more than playthings”, their verses were vivid, constantly renewed art forms, which also functioned as vital social supports amid the jostling life of the school yard’ (Boyce 1995: 131).

The recognition that these forms are specific to children as a group serves to underline an important development in the interpretation of the term ‘folklore’, a century or so after Thoms’ coinage. Alan Dundes’ formulation (1965: 2) that ‘the term “folk” can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor’ (original emphasis), such as ‘a common occupation, language, or religion’, sought to emphasize that ‘everyone has folklore’, not just the unlettered, uneducated, rural, elderly and marginalized, as some of our academic forebears believed. This idea has now become accepted as a central tenet of the discipline. Nowhere is this more obvious than in childlore, since everyone has been a child, although their experience of childhood may vary widely. An important corollary of this shift has been the consideration of folklore as an expression of group identity (see, for example, Jansen 1965; Mechling 1986).

At the same time, there has been a reconceptualization of the term ‘lore’, especially among folklorists in North America, who recognized that the emphasis on cultural products, items or texts tended to abstract them from their social and cultural context. Drawing on anthropological theory, items of folklore began to be documented in relation to their broader social and cultural milieux, and in the context of their actual performance and use. Analysis stressed the relationships between the forms of folklore and their function, and between the individual and their folkloric repertoire (Bascom 1965; Pentikäinen 1976; cf. Van Peer 1988).

The challenge to the dominant concern with the verbal, behavioural and cognitive categories of cultural tradition, emanating from the discipline’s strong leaning towards the humanities, was not complete, however. During the 1970s, and particularly under the influence of linguistic theory, a conception of folklore as a process of communication rather than a set of products or texts was introduced. This approach stressed that ‘lore’ was not just a form of knowledge but involved the active realization of that knowledge in a ‘performance’, be it of a traditional story, song, proverb or action. Thus, the performance of folklore emerged from the stream of everyday interaction and involved varying degrees of artistry.
and aesthetic judgement in order to be effective (Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975; Bauman 1984). This involved the formulation of perhaps the most influential new definition of the term ‘folklore’ as ‘artistic communication in small groups’ (Ben-Amos 1971: 13). Such a definition thus moved away from concepts of folklore as rooted in time and emphasized folklore as a communicative process within the context of face-to-face performance. Although tending to emphasize verbal folklore, this definition has been widely drawn on by folklorists in North America and beyond. Nevertheless, debate continues as to the usefulness of the term ‘folklore’ itself due to its popular but outmoded connotations (see, for example, the articles in the Summer 1998 issue of the Journal of American Folklore, 111).

In the field of childlore, the conceptualization of folklore as performance and communication has led to a focus not only on the social, developmental and educational, but also on the cultural, expressive and aesthetic (see, for example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1976; McDowell 1979; Goodwin 1985; Beresin 1995; Roemer 1995). It is perhaps this which distinguishes more recent folkloristic research from much contemporary sociological and psychological work in the field of children’s play. In particular, folklorists have tended to concern themselves less with child development and socialization (that is, stressing ‘time future’ in representations of childhood, as discussed by James and Prout 1997: 239–41), and more with what Sutton-Smith baldly stated as ‘the nonserious things of life’ (1970: 2). Since the 1970s these ‘nonserious things’ have been dignified with the term ‘expressive culture’. This may have no obvious survival value or adult-oriented benefit, but nevertheless forms a significant part of children’s experience of childhood. For adults to appreciate this, they have to surmount what Sutton-Smith refers to as ‘the triviality barrier’, in which the ‘nonserious’ is not necessarily deemed the unimportant:

The infant appears to babble for the joy of hearing himself. The child plays for the fun of it. The adults return addictively to their games for the enjoyments they find contained within them. We are saying, that is, that childlore deals not only with a definite series of expressive forms that can be traced throughout human development, but that these forms are normally, in some sense, self-motivating structures. Which is after all only what generations of humanists have been saying when they have claimed that poetry, drama, and other forms of human expression have their own intrinsic vocabulary and system of internal dynamics which must be understood in their own right before it is possible to study how they can be put to the service of this or that functional end.

It is true, then, that childlore deals with behaviour that has traditionally been regarded as nonserious, but as this behavior appears to be a systematic part of the human repertoire, to think, therefore, it is unimportant might be a mistake.

(Sutton-Smith 1970: 4, original emphasis)
As stressed by Factor in Chapter 1, and demonstrated by a number of contributors to this book, children’s play traditions often reveal dimensions of creativity, artistry and complexity in their own right, including carnivalesque, subversive and parodic elements as well as normative ones. It is the paradoxical nature of children’s lore which forms the focus of much discussion here, especially the central section of the book, and the way in which, as Factor highlights, ‘children’s play traditions unify conventional opposites’ (see p. 25). This results, in this book specifically and more widely in this field, in a concern with the children’s point of view concerning their own traditions, and a methodology which tends towards the accumulation of empirical data drawn from detailed micro-studies, based largely on ethnographic observation and interview, prior to broad generalization (see, for example, Dagan and Zeitlin 1990; Hughes 1993; Beresin 1995; articles contributed to Children’s Folklore Review 1977–, the Australian Children’s Folklore Newsletter, and the British Folklore Society’s Children’s Folklore Newsletter). While one cannot speak for all folklorists and those in affiliated disciplines who study childlore, Boyes (1995: 138–9), with reference to children’s verbal traditions, perhaps encapsulates the premise on which much of this research into children’s play traditions as a whole is based:

children’s traditional culture is an expression of their own beliefs and values, not isolated from contact with the adult world, but specific to themselves. Rhymes and other linguistic play are created and reproduced for children’s own purposes, not those of folklorists, the educational system or publishers . . . Children create and pass on their rhymes for their own enjoyment as they play. They are a living, active art, made by children for their own purposes, their content to be taken in at the children’s own level, and that is how they are best understood.

Such detailed studies as those mentioned above are timely. So often, children’s playlore is overlooked by adults because it is seen as unimportant. Indeed, as seems to be the case at the present time, adults only tend to notice play when it becomes a problem. In Britain, North America and Australia, for example, this has led to the reduction of the amount of time allowed for free play within the school day, with such substitutes as organized sports, extra lessons and an earlier end to the school day encroaching on children’s own ‘time out’ (see Chapters 1, 5 and 9).

**Defining ‘traditional games’**

This brings us full circle to the complex of ideas popularly associated with the ‘problem’ view of playtime (see Blatchford 1994) – namely, that children indulge in desultory behaviour in the playground, that traditional games are no longer played and, therefore, that children do not
know ‘how’ to play any more (which sometimes leads to the teaching of traditional games to children by lunchtime supervisors, teachers, parents and grandparents). One of the keywords here is ‘traditional’, and yet what is so often missing in this debate is a critical consideration of what we mean by ‘traditional games’ and ‘children’s traditions’.

There is, of course, a recurrent perception of traditions generally as dying out (and this was a powerful motivation to fieldwork and documentation of traditions for many of the early folklorists, including Thoms; see Dundes 1979). This perception relates to the way in which the meaning of the word ‘tradition’ is often constructed – as fixed, immutable and resistant to change, and therefore, by definition, as ancient and with origins lost in the mists of time. As Raymond Williams has so perceptively pointed out, ‘it is sometimes observed, by those who have looked into particular traditions, that it only takes two generations to make anything traditional: naturally enough, since that is the sense of tradition as active process. But the word tends to move towards age-old and towards ceremony, duty and respect’ (1983: 319). Here, then, is a notion of tradition as rooted in time and, in particular, as a passive process of handing down matter unchanged over a long historical period. Could it be, then, that the phrase ‘traditional games’ in popular parlance tends to connote a repertoire of play activities known to have a long history (and some of them certainly do)? Or is it more a matter of us adults being familiar with certain games from our own childhoods which come to form for us what ‘traditional games’ must be? But even so, why does it matter so much to adults that we do not always see these games to the same degree, or in the same form, or at all, in contemporary playgrounds?

This appears to relate to the additional element which Williams (1983: 319) highlights – of reverence for tradition:

tradition survives in English as a description of a general process of handing down, but there is a very strong and often predominant sense of this entailing respect and duty. When we look at the detailed processes of any of these traditions, indeed when we realize that there are traditions (real plural . . .) and that only some of them or parts of them have been selected for our respect and duty, we can see how difficult Tradition really is, in an abstract or exhortatory or, as so often, ratifying use.

Somehow what we perceive to be the older games, the play activities with a longer history, must be of value precisely because they have been passed on from one generation to the next. Hidden in this line of thought is the assumption that tradition is, by definition, ‘good’, ‘positive’, ‘valuable’ and ‘desirable’. Yet, as Williams points out, the process by which certain things are deemed traditional and accorded respect is a highly selective one. There seems to be something of a popular consensus that ‘traditional games’ denotes such activities as Hopscotch, Marbles, group skipping, and singing games. We need to keep in mind, however, that
play activities, such as practical jokes, initiation rites, games involving forceful physical contact, racist and sexist joking, nicknaming and taunting, are equally as traditional, in the sense that they have a long and documentable history. Yet, it is clearly not these traditions which are seen as declining and whose passing is so lamented in the playground today.

By contrast, contemporary folklorists have tried to construct a notion of tradition as a dialectical process within culture (cf. Toelken 1979) – in other words, a process of both continuity and change, stability and variation, dynamism and conservatism, both through time and across space. This leads to the perception that, rather than such-and-such a tradition dying out, traditions have often been modified and altered. By allowing change, creativity and resurgence as part of our understanding of traditions, and emphasizing that traditions are not passed on by some superorganic process but one which is actively shaped by human agency, we avoid the fallacy that traditions are necessarily continuous, and allow that they can be stopped and restarted at any point. The fascination is then with how traditions are altered and renewed, how older elements are combined with newer ones within culture, and how traditions can be added to with new words, new behaviours, new beliefs and new compositions. Tradition is seen as an ongoing process which does not die out but whose manifestations in forms, beliefs and activities (such as children’s rhymes and games) wax and wane and transform, making perceivable lineages and setting in motion new ones through time and across geographical space.

Thus, play traditions are not necessarily old or even passed on between two generations. They may be brand-new and enjoying lively and swift transmission among contemporary children of the same age group. This allows the children to recreate almost instantaneously the latest mass media influences in their own performances. The reader will therefore encounter a wide-ranging definition of what constitutes children’s play traditions in this book. The definition includes imaginative play, games made up on the model of music videos, and parodic rhymes and chants with a highly contemporary frame of reference. It also includes the skills and artistry needed to successfully learn, adapt and perform these items. Given the perhaps bewildering variety of these activities, we now present a classification of childlore. This is designed to introduce the reader to the basic categories referred to in the ensuing chapters of the book. It also suggests some of the general characteristics of the different categories, allowing adults to refine and structure their own observations of children at play.

Classifying children’s play traditions

Approaches to classification

Children have a play repertoire which they dip into according to the circumstances in which they find themselves, varying their games
according to the weather, the physical surroundings, the number of playmates and the length of time available. If adults want to study what children do in free play, then it is also useful for them to have a structure which will help them make observations which are meaningful to others. In other words, there is a need for a classification system which would be acceptable to everyone in order to aid communication. A classification system which includes all the different kinds of play will also help demonstrate the range and variety of children’s play traditions.

We have only to consider the use of the term ‘singing game’ in this volume alone to realize that a universally accepted classification would be helpful. Marsh (see Chapter 4), for example, following the usage of Iona and Peter Opie, includes clapping games under the label of singing games. Curtis (see Chapter 3), on the other hand, uses the term in the same way as Hinkson in the monograph Victorian Singing Games (1991) – a song which accompanies a dance and where the text, or part of it, often provides the instructions for the dance, as in ‘Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush’. Dundes suggests that a game set to music could be called a ‘folk dance’ (1979: 343). He has a point. The movement in singing games such as ‘Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush’ is indeed dance, a factor which is ignored in the present terminology. And what do we term the song and dance routines which children perform copied from S Club Seven and other pop groups? Where would they fit into a classification?

Adults come to children’s lore with their own agenda. As we have already seen, the theoretical basis of Alice Gomme’s work was the belief that children’s folklore was the repository of ancient customs which had almost disappeared (Gomme [1894, 1898] 1984). Her work, being intended as the first part of a dictionary, is in alphabetical order. The difficulty with Gomme’s system is that games have a variety of names, depending on the locality where they have been collected, and because Gomme failed to carefully cross-reference each game, it is often difficult to discover whether or not her book contains a particular game. Her American predecessor, Newell, arranged many of the games in his Games and Songs of American Children according to their category of use ([1883] 1963). His categories included love games, playing at work, humour and satire, and the pleasures of motion. Drawing on the observations of Halpert, Withers, in his introduction to Newell, characterizes this as ‘a remarkable and imaginative pioneer thrust toward what was later to be called “function- alienism”’ (Newell [1883] 1963: vi).

The Opies themselves divided their material into four parts. Their first book is concerned mainly with language: satirical and nonsense rhymes, wit and repartee, verbal tricks, riddles, truce terms, nicknames and so on (1959). Their second book deals with games in street and playground: ‘the games that children, aged 6–12, play of their own accord when out of doors, and usually out of sight’ (1969: v). It contains an enormous number of games and, recognizing the shortcomings of the Gomme alphabetical system of recording, the Opies went out of their way to
make sure games were identifiable by their form rather than their name, which varies from place to place. As they say in the Preface, ‘we have . . . given thought to the order in which the games appear, arrangement being by the basic motif of the game’ (1969: vi). This, along with the contents and analysis, provides a tool for locating a game description, even if the regional name is different from the alternatives recorded in the book. The Opies were able to do this because they had large amounts of material which could be broken down into very finely delineated categories. They therefore have ‘catching games’ (broken down into five subsections), ‘seeking games’, ‘hunting games’ and so on. The book also contains ‘pretend’ play. Their third book is concerned with singing games in which they include clapping rhymes (1985), and the fourth with play with things (1997), which is organized according to the play object used.

The difficulty with this approach for most people is that they are unlikely to have the quantity of games which the Opies had, and writers on children’s lore now have the Opie books to refer to, so the need to identify a game or a variation can often be fulfilled by referring to their work. For adults needing to organize a smaller amount of data, the Opies’ categories are very refined and what may be more useful is a system where the categories are broader, so allowing researchers to see a wider sweep of childlore.

In the 1960s and 1970s Roberts and Sutton-Smith posited the conflict/enculturation hypothesis that child training induces conflict which can be resolved in games and that the structure of a game will reflect the child’s upbringing and role in society (1971). The three groups of games they suggested were games of physical skill, which would be dominant in cultures where achievement was encouraged, games of strategy, where cultures stressed obedience training, and games of chance, correlated with training in routine responsibilities and a belief in benevolent gods. Eifermann investigated this theory and suggested that this was an oversimplification, that there was at least another category, which she labelled ‘memory-attention’, and that there was often a mixture of attributes (1971). It is also possible, of course, for children to change the category by the way they play the game. Goldstein, for instance, watched how children perform a counting-out routine, as distinct from how they say they perform it. He found that children could be seen to change what purports to be a game of chance to a game of strategy by manipulating the count (1971b: 167–78).

Halpert (1971) provides a comprehensive list of genres in children’s verbal folklore, using the content of the rhymes to distinguish one category from another (see Chapter 7) while Alan Dundes has made some very interesting observations concerning the structure of games which are, he says, paralleled in folktales (1964). The themes which occur in many folktales, he argues, also find physical expression in games. Certainly some games, such as the Grandma games of Punjabi-speaking girls, where
a dialogue between grandma and children precedes a chase (Curtis 1998), and which are almost identical to such British games as Old Mother Grey (Opie and Opie 1969: 307), appear to replicate folktales. But Dundes has also shown that games such as Tig (also called Tag or He) have the same component parts as folktales. Dundes points to one type of folktale – an example of which would be ‘The Enormous Turnip’. Here, first the farmer tries to pull up the turnip but fails, then successive people and animals are called upon to help until eventually there is a long line of creatures all pulling at the turnip, the weight of the mouse being the factor which tips the balance and results in the turnip being uprooted. Dundes likens stories of this kind to Chain Tig in which, when a person is touched, they must join hands with whoever is ‘on’ and help catch the others. A singing game example of this cumulative motif would be ‘In and Out the Winding Bluebells’ in which one person weaves in and out of the ring, collecting people as they go. One can certainly see that children are exploring the same emotions when, for instance, they hide in a game of Hide and Seek and when they listen to the story of Jack hiding from the giant in the giant’s oven in ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’, but, while a comparison of games and folktales aids insight into how the games are experienced, it is not helpful in constructing a classification.

Roberts and Enerstedt conducted an interesting study in Norway where they asked children themselves to categorize their own play activities, though the categories themselves were devised by adults. The only difference they could find in the 58 games sorted was that girls categorized Marbles and a coin game as ball games whereas boys thought of them as war games (1986: 5–28).

More recently Blatchford has tackled the problem of classification by simplifying the basic structure devised by the Opies, and categorizing the games described under 24 headings. As Blatchford comments, ‘there are enormous difficulties involved in documenting and categorising children’s games’ (Blatchford et al. 1990: 169). Nevertheless, undeterred by the difficulties, we have attempted our own classification, which includes verbal, physical and imaginative play. It is based on the function of the specific kind of play and is a development of the system devised by the Opies, with certain additions and, we hope, clarifications (see Table 1).

Some explanations

The material is divided into three sections: play with a high verbal content, play with a high imaginative content and play with a high physical content. The classification moves from the purely verbal to the purely physical, so verbal play such as epithets, jeers, narratives, riddles, jokes and entertainment rhymes heads the list followed by verbal play which accompanies movement. We then move on to imaginative play which
Table 1  Classification of play traditions

| High verbal content | General verbal play: jeers, epithets  
|                     | Narratives  
|                     | Jokes, riddles  
|                     | Entertainment rhymes  
|                     | Counting out  
| Singing games       | Song and dance  
|                     | Clapping rhymes  
|                     | Skipping rhymes  
|                     | Ball-bouncing rhymes  
| High imaginative content | Role enactment  
| Acting games        | Set plot and characters  
|                     | Set plot, characters and dialogue  
| High physical content | Games without playthings  
| Individual          | High-power It  
| Group               | Low-power It  
|                    | No It  
| Team                | Balls  
| Individual          | Ropes  
|                    | Stones  
|                    | Miscellaneous  
| Group               | Balls  
|                    | Ropes  
|                    | Stones  
|                    | Miscellaneous  
| Team                | Balls  
|                    | Ropes  
|                    | Stones  
|                    | Miscellaneous  
| Making things       | Collecting things  

may contain either or both high verbal and high physical content. The third section, games high in physical content, includes not only physical games but also collecting and making things such as bows and arrows or paper fortune-telling squares.

The three main sections of the classification are subdivided according to the way the material is used by the children. Therefore, a rhyme which accompanies skipping will be designated ‘a skipping rhyme’ and so on. There are some games which may be included in more than one category, skipping games regulated by a rhyme being a prime example. In such cases as these, the rhyme is treated separately from the physical activity.
The problem with assigning material according to its function is that children sometimes use material for different purposes. A rhyme such as:

Mary Jane went to Spain
In a chocolate aeroplane

which was used in Leeds, West Yorkshire, in the 1920s as a ball-bouncing rhyme (Kellett n.d.) has changed its form slightly and is now:

The Queen of Spain
Went up in a chocolate aeroplane

and is used for clapping (Curtis 1998). However, the fact that a rhyme may shift from one category to another only serves to highlight the flexibility of oral tradition and demonstrates how a classification system can illustrate both continuity and change.

Entertainment rhymes

The term ‘entertainment rhyme’ may need some explanation. There are a number of rhymes which do not accompany any activity. They are often scatological or sexual in nature, or subversive, and publishers in the past have often been reluctant to publish them because of the fear of shocking adults. Parodies of nursery rhymes come into this category, an example taken from Curtis (1998) being:

Mary had a little lamb.
She fed it on cream crackers,
And every time it dropped a crumb
She kicked it in the knackers.

Singing games

It seems sensible to extend the definition of singing games so that the term includes games which have movement where the movement is accompanied by singing or chanting. The term will then include clapping and skipping games, as well as the older kinds of singing game, such as ‘Oranges and Lemons’ or ‘Farmer’s in His Den’. There should also be some recognition of the dance element in these games. The term ‘singing games’ is therefore subdivided into song and dance, clapping rhymes and skipping rhymes. Song and dance includes both the older traditional games such as ‘Oranges and Lemons’ and the new traditions – for example, song and dance routines such as those copying the Spice Girls. Many of these are ephemeral, so it is a category which is likely to demonstrate change and reflect media influence. Dance is defined, after Royce, as patterned movement in time and space performed as an end in itself (see Royce 1980: 3-8).

The term ‘singing’, as anyone who has recorded songs in a playground can vouchsafe, is not to be thought of as pure-toned, accurately pitched
melody. Sometimes a tune will be pitched and sung accurately but this will be rare and often rhymes will be chanted, in a sort of heightened speech. Speech and song have much in common: rhythm, pitch, tempo, timbre and expression. Schafer (1970), asserting that verbal sense must become less important as sound changes from speech to song, plots the changes. He sees the stages (as listed in Hall 1984: 61) from maximum sense to maximum sound as:

1 Stage speech
2 Domestic speech
3 Parlando (recitative)
4 Sprechstimme or Sprechgesang (vocalization between speaking and singing as in the music of Schoenberg)
5 Syllabic song
6 Melismatic song (one syllable sung to several notes)
7 Vocables (pure sound)
8 Electronically manipulated vocal sounds.

In versions of songs and rhymes recorded in Victoria, Australia, Hall (1984) states that the majority of performances from children of junior school age lies somewhere between Stages 3 and 5 above. She defines parlando as speech with emphasized paralinguistic features, especially amplified intonation and intensity of expression. Its features are that it is often performed in dramatic context: jokes, tale-telling, role-playing in the playground. The voice is projected with an increase in volume and higher pitch. Sprechstimme is defined by Hall as maximum amplification of heightened speech intonation on a scanned poetic text with dramatic connotations. Most adult forms of Sprechstimme are contrived art forms such as Chinese opera, but some children perform in a mode similar to this. Speech intonation is exaggerated to the maximum manageable level but, in song terms, the notes are "out of tune" because the performer is still intoning partly in spoken mode. Hall adds a further category between heightened speech and Sprechstimme - recitation. This she defines as the repetition of scanned and unscanned poetic texts on a base note of limited intonation with regular but restricted ornamental pitches and strong, even metre. It is found in spoken playlore and the recitation of multiplication tables (Hall 1984: 116).

Imaginative play

These games call on a combination of verbal and organizational skills which fall between the categories of high verbal and high physical content. Some will be highly verbal while others will be full of physical action, but among their characteristics, according to Smilansky (1968), are role-playing and make-believe transformation. Sarbin (1954) distinguishes between role-enactment (being someone else) and role-taking (seeing something from someone else's point of view because one is
interested in another's motivation). This is a useful distinction pursued by Flavell who defines role-enactment as 'the general ability and disposition to "take the role" of another person in the cognitive sense, i.e. to assess his/her response capacities and tendencies in a given situation' (Flavell 1975: 5). The second aspect he identifies as the more specific ability to use this understanding of the other person's role as a tool in communicating effectively with them. He defines the essential element of role-taking as an ability to grasp the attributes of another person which are not immediately perceptible - for example, the other person's needs, intentions, opinions and beliefs. The role-taker's estimate of these attributes is the synthesis of information from two sources: the knowledge of people and their behaviour in certain situations, and the perceptual input from the overt behaviour of the other or from cues in the immediate situation. It is the first of these definitions, role-enactment, which concerns us here. In a hierarchy of skills, role-enactment is obviously at a simpler level than role-taking, since the second involves an ability not only to enact the role of the other, but to analyse the motivation of the person being imitated (Flavell 1975).

When role-enactment games are examined closely, they can be seen to fall into two groups: those where the characters are set by the overall idea of the game, with teacher and pupils in a game of School, for instance, where characters, plot and dialogue, if it exists, are improvised, and those where the characters and plot are fixed by the game, but the dialogue is improvised. In Curtis' 1998 study, for instance, one group of children was found to be playing the imaginative game of Neighbours, in which the children used the plot and characters of the Australian television soap opera to construct an ongoing acting game. These have been called 'acting games' in the classification.

There is a further group of games which really falls between the two categories. In Curtis' 1998 study there were several games played only by Punjabi-speaking girls and called by them Grandma games, mentioned earlier. These had set characters and a dialogue which usually culminated in a chase. They have a great deal in common with high-power It games, such as What Time Is It, Mr Wolf?, where there is an 'It' and players who exchange dialogue. In the Grandma games, however, the dialogue is much more protracted and does have scope for some improvisation, however minimal. They therefore form a sub-category of the acting games.

Games high in physical content

Moving on to the section of games high in physical content, these are divided into those with and without playthings, with a distinction being made between individual, group and team games, a group being defined as more than one person. The difference between group play and team play is as follows: in group play, each person is acting individually but needs other players to take part for the game to be complete. So a
skipping game will be a group game because the person skipping is performing as an individual but needs others to take part, turning the rope and joining in with the performer. Most group games can also be played individually when the player is intent on improving their performance. Performance in the group will often be competitive. In team play all the players, in theory at least, are playing for the team and not for themselves as individuals. One of the tensions in football as played in the playground is the difficulty some children have in playing for the team and not themselves.

A great deal of social learning occurs in children’s unsupervised play and therefore a distinction is made between games according to the role of the ‘It’. In a chasing game such as Tig/Tag/He, the role of the ‘It’ is to chase and try to catch one of the other players. When another player has been caught, that person becomes the chaser. The role of the ‘It’ is simple, and this, following Gump and Sutton-Smith’s definition (1971: 390–9), is called ‘low-power It’. There are games, however, where the role of the ‘It’ is much more complicated. If we consider a game such as Grandmother’s Footsteps (also known as Black Pudding, Hot Chocolate, Peep behind the Curtain and no doubt many other variants), the role of the ‘It’ is to stand alone with their back to the other players, to turn round from time to time, to try to detect movement in the players creeping up behind and to send those players who have been seen to move back to the beginning. The ‘It’ here is therefore controlling the game and has the power to control the movements of the other players. This entails a responsible use of the power invested in the role, which in its turn results in the practice of sophisticated social skills. The role of the ‘It’ is therefore described as being high power. For those adults interested in the social learning which occurs among children, the group of games where the ‘It’ has a great deal of power is an important one. The distinction between ‘low’ and ‘high’ power in games with playthings does not apply.

Setting out the full extent of children’s verbal, imaginative and physical play in this way shows the variety of experiences available to children during their free play activities, and demonstrates the potential for learning and enjoyment which a rich and fulfilling playtime can generate.

The scope and structure of the book

This book focuses specifically on children’s play traditions – verbal, physical and imaginative – as distinct from other aspects of children’s folklore, such as customs, beliefs and narrative traditions, although the reader will find reference to research in these other aspects in the bibliography. The book is not, however, an attempt to document systematically whether traditional games are in decline or not. Rather, it consists of two orientating chapters, in Part 1, which present the contrasting perceptions
of adults and children in today's world regarding play, with particular reference to the school playground. These are followed in Part 2 by a series of in-depth empirical studies of specific schools, playgrounds and current play traditions in Australia, Britain, Continental Europe and North America. These illustrate the kind of diachronic, synchronic and cross-cultural perspectives needed in order to undertake a holistic study of cultural tradition, and underline not only the continuity of many contemporary children's play traditions, but also their creativity, renewal and variety. Part 3 broadens out to demonstrate the possibilities and importance of play traditions in a number of different contexts, namely the relevance of children's traditional verbal creativity to formal language learning, the potential of the sharing of play traditions between generations and between members of different cultural groups in order to foster understanding and respect, and the role of children's free play in promoting their spiritual and psychological well-being. The book concludes by considering what constitutes 'play for today' and the role of adults in relation to it.

All the participants at the 'State of Play' conference, from which all but Chapter 5 derive, were privileged to have the presence of Iona Opie and hear her opening address. It is likewise a privilege that she has agreed to write the Foreword to the present volume. No one who researches into children's play traditions can do so without, at some point, drawing on the work of Iona and Peter Opie. With this in mind, we very much hope that Boyes' tribute to their achievements might be extended to contemporary research on children's play traditions, verbal, cognitive and behavioural, including the contributions to this book: 'The Opies' legacy allows us to see beyond unsubstantiated generalisations about the wholesale destruction of children's games to recognise the value of their ability to make creative change and give customary shape to innovation' (Boyes 1995: 145).

Notes

1 We are grateful to Andy Arleo for drawing our attention to these references.
3 Despite George's attempts to publish this collection, it remains unpublished and is now in the archive of the Museum of Welsh Life (MWLMSS 1970). We are grateful to Tecwyn Vaughan Jones for this information.
4 For further studies of children's folklore, see Grider (1980), Halpert (1982) and Sutton-Smith et al. (1995).
5 Nevertheless, Dundes' formulation has been subjected to criticism and refinement (for example, Oring 1986: 1).