

The Working Papers of Iona and Peter Opie

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The names of Iona (1923-) and Peter Opie (1918-1982) will be familiar to many students of oral tradition. This husband-and-wife team of English folklorists are best known for their work on children's folklore (Figure 1), although their scholarship also covered adult traditions of custom, belief, and folktales.¹ Their joint endeavours, continued by Iona after Peter's premature death, resulted in numerous publications, including a series of landmark books on children's oral culture covering nursery rhymes and songs (1951), as well as school-aged children's language, custom, and belief (1959); outdoor games (1969); musical play (1985); and outdoor games with playthings (1997). Iona Opie also published a selection of the notes she made during weekly observations of playtimes on her local school playground in Hampshire (1993). Accessibly written and thoroughly researched, these books have become classics in the field and are widely read by scholars, teachers, students, and the general public.

The Opies undertook extensive fieldwork—including surveys, tape-recorded interviews, and observation—as well as literary and historical research to inform their books concerning the folklore of school-aged children. They also corresponded with a host of individuals, including teachers, children, members of the public, fellow researchers, journalists, broadcasters, and publishers. The materials they amassed form an archival collection that is now distributed among the Bodleian Libraries (University of Oxford), the



Fig. 1. Iona and Peter Opie skipping (photo from <http://www.opieproject.group.shef.ac.uk>).

¹ See, for example, Opie and Opie 1974; Opie and Tatem 1989.

Folklore Society Archives (London), and the British Library (London). The British Library holds the sound recordings made by Iona Opie (now known as “The Opie Collection of Children’s Games and Songs”), mainly documenting children’s singing games (Jopson et al. 2014). The “Opie Working Papers” are held by Special Collections at the Bodleian Libraries. These are housed in 247 boxes and cover most of the children’s language, games, and play material as well as other aspects of their research and personal lives:

- children’s papers and correspondence between the Opies and teachers (boxes 1-38)
- publications materials (boxes 39-69)
- correspondence with colleagues/contributors (boxes 70-85)
- personal letters/diaries/private albums (boxes 86-150)²
- loose-leaf files (boxes 151-247)

The Folklore Society Archives holds a further 24 boxes of the Opies’ papers, consisting of:

- research materials on weatherlore, and superstitions (boxes T150-154/1)
- research materials on calendar customs (boxes T154/2-154/3)
- research materials on calendar customs, beliefs, children’s games; index of counting out rhymes; personal papers; and Folklore Society correspondence (boxes T210-211, T217-T231)

The present article considers the papers at the Bodleian Libraries, specifically the Opies’ primary and secondary data relating to children’s verbal art and play. A finding aid for the Opie Working Papers was compiled in 2011,³ and the material itself is available for consultation on-site in Oxford. A project entitled “Childhoods and Play: An Archive” has recently been set up to seek funding for the full cataloging and digitization of the Opie papers and, subject to the necessary permission, to make them freely available online for academic, educational, and community purposes. The project has been granted British Academy Research Project status (2012-17) and is a collaboration between the University of Sheffield, the University of London Institute of Education, the Bodleian Libraries, the British Library, and the Folklore Society.⁴

Creation and Content of the Collection

Full-length biographies of Iona and Peter Opie have yet to be written, but there are several briefer accounts that indicate their lives and their research were closely, and perhaps inevitably, intertwined (Opie 1988, 1989; Avery 2004; Marsh and Bishop 2014). They met

² Peter Opie’s diaries are embargoed until the death of the individuals that feature in them.

³ This aid was compiled by Laura Jopson and is available at <http://www.opieproject.group.shef.ac.uk/PDFs/Bodleian%20Opie%20Working%20Papers%20Finding%20Aid.pdf>.

⁴ Further information is available on the project website (see <http://www.opieproject.group.shef.ac.uk/>).

through their mutual interest in books, and later married. Their interest in folklore was piqued around 1944 when they were expecting their first child, James. Encountering a ladybird during a country walk and recalling the “Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home” rhyme, they were “left wondering about this rhyme we had known from 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 introduced them to earlier sources of folklore and dialect, and began what Iona Opie later characterized as “a treasure hunt which was to last forty years” (1988:208).

The Opies’ work on nursery rhymes drew primarily on print sources.⁵ When it came to children’s peer traditions, however, rather than adult-to-child ones, they turned to ethnographic research methods in order to gain as comprehensive a picture as possible of contemporary play, language, customs, and beliefs of school-aged children in Britain. This research was done first and foremost through surveys and correspondence, and began in 1951 when they wrote to the *Sunday Times* asking for assistance in documenting children’s folklore. They received 151 responses, and from this beginning they came to establish a nationwide network of correspondents, many of whom were teachers (Opie 2001:x). Through them, the Opies distributed a series of surveys designed to elicit written descriptions from children about their everyday practices (Opie 1989:60):

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).

In the guidance notes to these questionnaires, the Opies stress their interest not only in the oral lore itself but also in its transmission, distribution, age, origins, and “implications” for individual children themselves. They urge adults to get the children to write down the information themselves and to avoid “correcting” the children’s responses. For instance, Series 1 of the Opie Working Papers comprises the questionnaires (Figure 2) and responses (Figure 3), together with the accompanying correspondence between the teacher and the Opies, bundled according to location and school. Iona Opie later estimated that they were in touch with 20,000 children overall (2001:xi) and there are roughly 200 schools represented in the collection.⁶ The Opies aimed to get information 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” (Opie 2001:x), but it would appear from the papers that slightly older children were sometimes involved as well.

⁵ See, for example, their *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1951). The Opies built up an extensive collection of printed books and ephemera of literature written for, or by, children. This collection is now known as the “Opie Collection of Children’s Literature” following its acquisition by the Bodleian Libraries in 1988 (see http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/finding-resources/special/catalogues/opie_collection_of_childrens_literature).

⁶ See Marsh and Bishop 2014 for a more detailed description of the Opies’ surveys.

- GAMES
- 2.
- Names and description of:
1. Any game involving running across the street.
 2. Any game or prank played after dark.
 3. Any game (other than 'Leap Frog') involving jumping onto other people's backs.
 4. Any game in which one uses penknives, buttons, conkers, cob nuts, cigarette cards, milk bottle tops, or such like.
 5. Any game or feat in which one has to use strength or cunning.
 6. The different kinds of games of 'Hopscotch' (girls), 'Fivestones' (girls or boys), and 'Marbles', including the names of the different kinds of marbles.
 7. Calls to start or end a game, or to begin a race.
 8. Any way of choosing who is to be 'He' or 'On it' in a game, or which of two teams is to go first, other than by saying a counting-out or dipping rhyme.

Fig. 2. Extract from "The Oral Lore of Schoolchildren II" questionnaire (box 11). Reproduced with permission from the author.

Meticulous in their approach, the Opies sometimes sent follow-up questions back to the teacher to clarify and supplement the first set of responses, and there are also cases in which the Opies wrote to specific children requesting further information. The results run into the thousands of pages, containing descriptions of myriad linguistic items, customary practices, and beliefs, as well as verbal, musical, imaginative, and physical games from the 1950s to the 1980s. The material is by no means confined to "traditional games" in a narrow sense, as it includes crazes and impromptu games, "favorite" games, descriptions of commercial toys and play equipment, and popular culture and contemporary media, such as comics and television. In addition, there are often comments by the children, which provide a fascinating insight into their views of the games and role of play in their lives, and sometimes drawings as well (Figure 4).

In preparation for writing their books, the Opies would excerpt information relating to a particular game, practice, or linguistic item from the children's responses and add it to sheets devoted to that topic within a loose-leaf file. The files also contain further information on the same topic, including related texts and forms from others' collections, clippings from

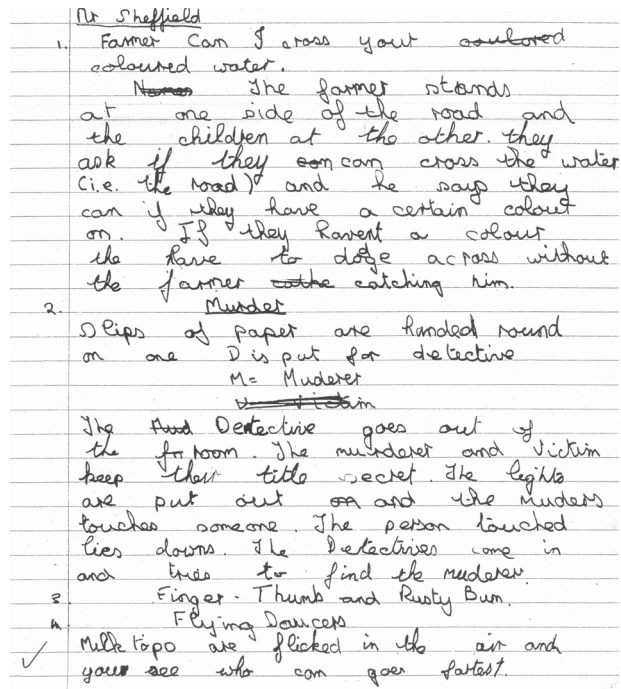


Fig. 3. Extract from a response to the Opies' second questionnaire, boy aged 12-13, Ecclesfield Grammar School, 1954 (box 7). Reproduced with permission from the author.

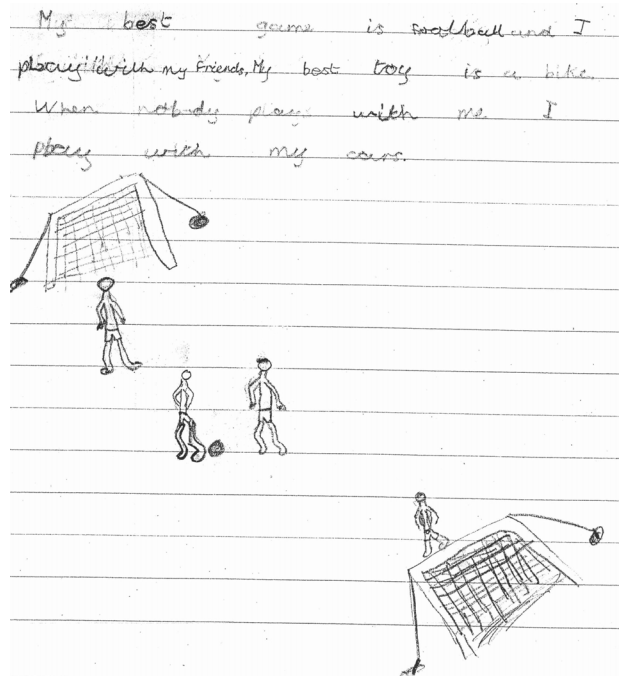


Fig. 4. Extract from an essay on "My Favourite Game," boy aged 8, St. Winefride's School, Manor Park, London (1962), Opie Working Papers, Special Collections, Bodleian Libraries (box 30). Reproduced with permission from the author.

newspapers or magazines, advertisements for playthings, notes written by the Opies, music transcriptions and quotations from the children recorded on tape by Iona Opie, and bibliography. There are approximately 220 files relating to the Opies' research on the lore, language, play, and games of schoolchildren, and these make up a large portion of Series 4 of the collection. They are organized by the type of play represented, such as skipping games, singing games, gambling, and pitching, but some are thematic, such as "adult interference" (box 216).

Interest of the Collection

The collection forms an essential complement, and supplement, to the Opies' published oeuvre. The books represent a distillation of the Opies' primary and secondary data. They provide a synchronic snapshot (relating to the period *circa* 1950-80) of genres, texts, and game types; an indication of their history and distribution; and observations on continuity and change in their internal characteristics and popularity. Although replete with examples, they contain only a sample of the numerous descriptions, variant texts, and individual testimonies produced for the surveys and fieldwork. There was not sufficient space for a detailed picture of the regional distribution and variation of every text and game form, and sometimes—as in the case of hula hoops and football, for example—games were not included despite there being copious notes on both in the Opie loose-leaf files. We also know that attitudes of the time meant that some bawdy items could not be published (Boyes 1995).

Sometimes, too, items were received, or became more significant, after the publication of the book to which they related. An example of this phenomenon is the clapping game "Eeny Meeny Dessameeny," which has been documented with increasing frequency in the UK in the last two decades (Bishop 2010; Roud 2010:315-17). The following is a transcription of the game as filmed in a Sheffield primary school playground in 2009:⁷

Eeny meeny dessameeny (*3-way clap*⁸)
 You are the one for me
 Education collaboration
 I like you. (*Pointing to partner on "you"*)
 Down town baby (*3-way clap*)
 Down to the roller coaster
 Sweet sweet cherry
 No place to go. (*Shaking index finger from side to side*)

⁷ This film was made at Montenev Primary School, Sheffield, by Julia C. Bishop on July 16, 2009, of a performance by two girls, aged 8-9, in the playground. It was recorded as part of the "Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age" project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK), 2009-11 (see <http://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/playgroundgames/>). The reference number of this specific film is MPJB2009-07-16v00056. The data from the project is being deposited with the British Library (shelfmark C1614) where it will be accessible for research and other uses, subject to the necessary permissions.

⁸ The 3-way clap comprises the Down-Up clap (D/U), Clap Partner's hands (C/P), and Clap Own hands (C/O), repeated as necessary. These abbreviations are adopted from Marsh 2008:342.

Caught you with my boyfriend (3-way clap)
 Naughty naughty (Shaking index finger forward and back as if scolding)
 Didn't do the dishes (3-way clap)
 Lazy lazy (Tilting head to alternate sides with palm-together hands held to tilting side)
 Jumped out the window (3-way clap)
 Flippin' crazy. (Circling index fingers pointing towards ears in "cuckoo" gesture)
 Eeny meeny dessameeny (3-way clap)
 You are the one for me
 Education collaboration
 I like you. (Pointing to partner on "you")
 And you (Pointing to self on "you")
 And you (Pointing to partner on "you")
 But not you. (Pointing to partner and shaking head for "not you")

There are no British variants of this game in *The Singing Game* (1985), but the Opies note that clapping games generally are becoming increasingly widespread, and they include the following, taken from the *New York Herald Tribune*, August 2, 1964, as an American example (1985:446):

Eeny, meeny, gypsaleeny,
 Oh, oh, animal-eeny,
 Achapacha, libavacha,
 I love you.

As one would expect, the Opie Working Papers at the Bodleian Library contain the relevant press cutting (box 238), an article by Ann Geracimos entitled "Just Look and Listen." The text accompanies a photograph of handclapping by two black performers, a man and a woman, and is prefaced "Handclapping rhymes—'pattycakes versions'—often mixed with dance steps or descriptive motions. Verses, like related rope-skipping rhymes, seldom make sense."

The Opies' audio collection contains further information on the game, namely, a recording made in March 1975 by Iona Opie from girls aged 8-9 at the American School in

(Transposed)

Ee-ny mee-ny dess-a-mee-ny You are the one for me

E - du-ca - tion c'lla - bo-ra - tion I like you.

Down town ba-by Down to the roll-er coast-er Sweet sweet cher-ry

No place to go. Caught you with my boy-friend Naugh-ty naugh-ty

Did-n't do the dish-es La - zy la - zy Jumped out the win-dow

Flip - ping cra - zy. Ee - ny mee - ny dess - a-mee - ny

You are the one for me E - du-ca - tion c'lla - bo-ra - tion

I like you and you and you. But not you.

Fig. 5. Transcription of the clapping game "Eeny Meeny Dessameeny" as filmed at Monteny Primary School, Sheffield in 2009. Recording and transcription by the author.

London. It is the earliest known documentation of “Eeny Meeny Dessameeny” in Britain. The loose-leaf files in the Opie Papers contain Iona’s transcription of the words:

Eeny meeny desta meeny
 Ooh ba, babaleenie,
 Atchy katchy liver atchy,
 I love you.
 Hey, boy,
 Watcha name?
 Jim-mie.
 Watcha got?
 Hot dogs.
 Gimme some.
 Jump out the window.
 Ladies and gentlemen,
 Children too,
 This little girl
 Got something to do.
 Turn around
 Touch the ground
 The sun goes up
 And then goes down.
 Eeny meeny desta meeny
 Ooh ba, babaleenie
 Atchy katchy liver atchy
 I love you.

Iona has also noted: “Horizontal-style clapping [that is, the 3-way clap], except when doing actions at ‘Turn around,’ ‘Touch the ground,’ ‘The sun goes up,’ when the arm is raised, and ‘The sun goes down,’ when it is lowered . . . Learnt at the school” (box 238). As has been demonstrated (Bishop 2010), this text bears a distinct resemblance to part of the song “Glad to Be Here,” released in 1957 by Lee Andrews and the Hearts, a doo-wop group from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The group’s indebtedness to the game, and influence on it, have previously been discussed by Gaunt who was probably unaware of the Opies’ recording (2006:90-91).

The Opie Papers also contain a cutting from the *Times Educational Supplement* of January 13, 1984, reporting the popularity of “Eeny Meeny Dessameeny” among girls aged 9-10 in North London primary schools, with an annotation in Iona Opie’s hand, “now naturalised in North London.” Presumably too late for inclusion in *The Singing Game* (1985), this example shows that the Opies continued to collect information even after they had published on particular games, and that their collection contains pertinent information relating to genres and texts that were emergent, as well as established, among children at the time.

The Opies’ archival collection further contains information relating to games that lay beyond the scope of their books, such as play within the home, including with toys, cards, and

commercial games. Indeed, there are many insights into contemporary childhoods more generally in the children's accounts of their play and language. Adults' attitudes towards children and childhood are well-documented in the collection as well, partly through the many press cuttings that the Opies assiduously clipped out and filed. Beginning their work in the same period as that in which television entered the home, they were told repeatedly that "the young had lost the power of entertaining themselves; that the cinema, the wireless, and television had become the focus of their attention; and that we had started our investigation fifty years too late" (1959:v). Much of the evidence they amassed suggested otherwise, however, as they themselves pointed out.

The passage of time has lent the collection additional value as a source of longitudinal data with the potential for reuse within a number of academic disciplines such as folklore studies, anthropology, history, childhood studies, sociology, cultural studies, child psychology, play theory, language, literature, and ethnomusicology. In their first book, the Opies observe (1959:ix) that "this book contains information which would not ordinarily have been written down for another fifty years, for it is made up of what will be the childhood recollections of the older generation after A.D. 2000." This observation applies equally to their archival collection, which provides a richly detailed resource for a more informed discussion of continuity and change in children's cultural practices. A recent study (2012) by Marsh and Bishop, for example, involved tracing some of the young contributors to the Opie collection, now adults aged roughly 40-70, and gathering their recollections (and those of some of their peers in the same geographical location) of play.⁹ When the Opies' archival data and the interview data were compared with data from a recent ethnographic study of play in the same locations, the results indicated a complex array of continuities and changes in the forms, performance, transmission, and creation/re-creation, as well as the social, cultural, and environmental contexts, of children's play. These findings are developed further in a book by the same authors (2014) in which they argue that key continuities are found in the functions, framings, and forms of play, and that some of the more substantial changes, some of which were emergent at the time of the Opies' research, are discernible in relation to the contexts, texts, practices, and processes of play. The latter include the use of intertextual referencing to signal cultural allegiances and to demonstrate knowledge of popular culture and technical prowess, as found in the influence of reality television on children's pretend play, the complex multi-layering of texts, and the rapidity with which they are "remixed."

Another aspect of the collection's interest is the light it sheds on the Opies' methods. Working outside the university context and without research funding of any kind, they developed and sustained a network of hundreds of correspondents. Iona Opie later wrote (2001:xi) that "these valiant teachers [and others] became personal friends, although we met few of them face to face," and indeed many of the letters span a number of years and contain personal details relating to the correspondents and their families. The Opies also managed large quantities of data at a time when photocopiers were just becoming widespread and home computing had yet to develop. The way in which parts of the children's accounts have been copied or clipped out for inclusion in the loose-leaf files, and the many marginalia and annotations, provide clues to the

⁹ This study was funded by a British Academy research grant.

way these pioneering folklorists of childhood worked, and how they came to think of, select, and write up their data.

Conclusion

The whole of the Opies' archival collection can be seen as an essential complement to their publications, adding new and more detailed information for the study of transmission and variation of particular items of children's folklore. From the standpoint of the present, it represents an extensive and highly detailed time capsule of information relating to children's oral culture and play in Britain in the mid-to-late twentieth century, offering many opportunities for the study of continuity and change in childhood experience more generally. As Iona Opie later reflected (2001:xiii):

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.

As of yet, however, the collection has only been in the public domain since the 1990s, and it has remained relatively inconspicuous compared to the stature of the Opies' published work. It is to be hoped that funding to catalog and digitize the Opies' papers will be gained in order to open up access to them and eventually allow the distributed parts of the Opie archive to be reunited virtually for research and general interest, including uses from theoretical and disciplinary perspectives other than those for which it was originally created.

At the present time, many of those who as children contributed to the collection are still living, and many of the schools involved are still in existence. There is thus the possibility of follow-up research into the identities of contributors and their communities—in terms of social class and ethnicity, for example—which are not generally documented in the collection. Such information would in turn add value to the collection. Equally, the availability of the full range of the Opies' material would stimulate further research into childhoods past and present, and underline the agency of children in the production of knowledge concerning childhood culture and experiences, of which the Opies' research is a significant early example.

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