

*"Children don't play in the playground anymore," is the received wisdom. "Tosh," says Steve Roud and his new book,*

# The Lore of the Playground



*proves he's right!*

It's great being a grandfather. Steve Roud's younger granddaughter is under the impression that he is Lord of the Playground and, in a way, she is right. Over thirty years of research have culminated in this packed book which shows children are still playing, much as they did 'in our day' and combining tradition and modern invention. This book is a window on a world many adults no longer really see.

Steve's background is in local studies and he has published dictionaries of folk lore and superstitions as well as being the author of the *Roud Index to Folk Song*. The new book is subtitled *One hundred years of children's games, rhymes and traditions* so many of his interests have come together in this particular study. He makes a grateful acknowledgement to the work of Peter and Iona Opie, whose *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* still commands respect for its scope and meticulous detail. This was published in 1959 so Steve's work brings us up to date, providing us with the same kind of fascinating and often entertaining material that they did, all of it rooted in our changing social situation.

Adults often feel they have to make sense of the games and their rhymes. We are usually wrong. The singing game, *Ring-a-Roses*, has been literally plagued by a fanciful interpretation for years. *In and Out the Dusky Bluebells* has been related to the slave trade. Apparently the tapping on the shoulder represents the auctioneer's gavel. "Tosh," says Steve, again. As in the case of nursery rhymes, there is evidence from dates which makes the adult interpretation impossible. Often, there is simply no evidence.

He explains that he gathers his research material from three main sources, firstly, from his years of collecting from adults for his previous work. He also conducts literature searches, not only of the obvious sources like the Opies but also from specialist books, dialect dictionaries and even novels. The most rewarding research, however, is when he goes to the playground and collects directly from the children. It is not enough, he says, just to watch. It is important to talk to the children, "more efficient," he says. They are keen to talk to him and he finds them very articulate, well able to expound on their theory of the games. They can talk about what is good and bad and explain the rules. These rules are often sophisticated and, if necessary, flexible. The games are dynamic and are talked about analytically and theoretically. Steve

is adamant that the jaundiced belief, often sighed over in the tabloids, that children's cooperative play has been superseded by computer games and iPods is simply wrong. What seems to the outsider like children running around screaming at random could well be a complex game with precise conditions. Yes, there have been changes but children still play.

Is there a difference between the games which are largely a matter of words and movement and those which require objects? Steve talks about the way in which games based on toys have been seasonal in the past. They used to come and go. He points out that shopkeepers would always know when tops or skipping ropes would be coming round and they would get in their stocks. This is less true now as equipment may be supplied by the school. What is still true is that there is a kind of hierarchy for toys. Some skipping ropes were adorned with bells, had coloured handles; others may have simply been a piece of old rope. Now, as in the past, shop-bought things had higher status.

What about the games which rely on words? Are children purist about a 'script' as they often are in storytelling? Children enjoy word play and will introduce new things for fun. He describes a game of *Duck, Duck, Goose* where one player goes round the circle touching the heads of the other players saying, "Duck, duck, duck," until they say "Goose!" At that point, the 'goose' must get up and chase the other child. One child used a variation and, instead of the expected chant, substituted 'sausages' for duck. This was greeted with the kind of response Oscar Wilde would have envied and they continued to use this form for the rest of the game. The next day, however, they were back to the original. It had been a comic interlude. They are, however, much stricter with counting-out rhymes as variations in these might result in unfairness. The rules are real and they know when it is important to follow them.

When asked which changes have taken place over the one hundred years the book covers, Steve paints a picture where social change is often the driver, just as in children's books. In around 1900, lots of children would have had tops and whips. By the end of the Second World War, these had gone from the playground. They are simply not made in the same quantity anymore. In the 1950s, marbles, cigarette cards and five stones were strong. Marbles are now on the

wane, five stones intermittent and cigarette cards have gone. There are other cards but these are swapped, rather than used for the elaborate flicking games.



The singing game has also disappeared in its old form. Now, the games are deliberately taught in nursery classes. Consequently, slightly older children would rather be seen dead than singing *The Farmer's in his Den*, though older girls will permit themselves moments of nostalgia when playing with the little ones. When Flora Thompson described singing games in her book *Lark Rise to Candleford*, the girls in the circle were twelve, even fourteen. The age range for children's games has shrunk and so has the play space. The greatest loss must be the neighbourhood street. Traffic and street parking now present a problem to would-be players. Smaller children are simply "not allowed out".

Steve is cautious when asked if gender-related changes are reflected, the problem being that this was not tested in the past. Gender divisions were more marked in the 1950s but divisions still remain. One contributor reported in 2008 that her son walked round the playground with his gang chanting, "Who wants to play Goose? No girls" and the girls do the same, "No boys." Nevertheless, children are pragmatic. If a game requires many players, anyone can play.

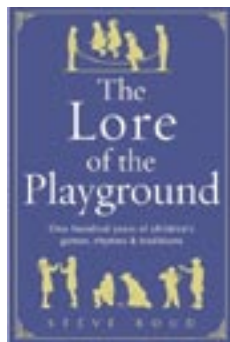
So what does survive? In the sections on the actual games, the reader cannot help becoming personally involved. The regional variations fascinate and one becomes quite proprietorial about 'the way we used to play it'. All kinds of chase games persist in the primary playground. Some of them have an ancient lineage but they acquire modern slants. Basic Tig is described in a book compiled in the 1660s. Now, there is Toilet Tig. When you are tiggged, you must stand with one arm outstretched. You can however be released by a friend pushing your arm down in a flushing action, then you are free to run again. (It could have been so much worse!) The release factor changes and is often regional. Now the details can be affected by the media children watch. Similarly, truce terms used to be entirely regional – *fainites* in London, *exes* in Norfolk, *skinches* in Gateshead – but now it is being gradually replaced all over the country by time out but Steve points out that the new term may not be permanent.

Another great survivor is the singing game. The ancient circle games may not survive in their original form, but a lot of singing and movement games have been updated. Children have a much wider set of sources for their songs. Steve mentions in particular an outbreak of clapping games in the 1960s which seems to be tied in with clapping repertoires that came from the United States. There are connections with rap and the changing rhythms and body movements. This seems to be a persistent growth area for girls and suit more confined spaces. Popular games like *When Suzy was a Baby* and *A Sailor Went to Sea* can start as simple routines and acquire, Steve observes, a definite progression in skill and complexity.

Many games seem common to different areas of the country. How does this transmission take place? Steve explains that it can be horizontal (from peers) or vertical (from older siblings or even adults.) He cites the role of cousins who may meet regularly but be from distant parts of the country. Children do exchange games. The Opies recorded how the rhyme which appeared at the time of the abdication, *Hark the herald angels sing/Mrs Simpson's pinched our King* crossed England at a surprising speed without the aid of social networking sites. Steve gives the example of coming across something on Orkney that he previously only knew from Sussex. It was explained that "this was taught to us by a child who had come from England." "It only takes one child," he says, otherwise there are no rules. It is chance.

So a great deal is still going on in playgrounds where children may be playing something which is based on a three hundred year old song or a recent pop song. He finally makes a very significant point. "It's not just physical," he says. Yes, children learn coordination but they are also becoming efficient with language, negotiating and cooperating. What is most striking and humbling is their often thoroughly civilised behaviour while playing. Of course, one must avoid romanticizing. There are little beasts in the primary playground and schools have worked hard at opposing bullying. On the whole, in Steve's opinion, these policies seem to be succeeding. But children inherit a basic game with its rules which they then apply and their variations make complete sense. A game of Tig where the weakest player is always 'it' is no fun at all so they compensate. They play a cumulative version where the strongest join hands with the weaker players. They are aware of each others abilities so younger girls in ball games, for example, will be given three goes. Even competitive games need cooperation. If those turning the rope in big skipping games do not keep to the rules, it just doesn't work. Steve observes that, watching the considerable skills needed for ball bouncing games, it is clear that they are working for personal bests although the girls are playing together.

At this point, I begin to wonder if all those business gurus who plan 'away days' could learn something from our playgrounds. Given properly designed playgrounds – not asphalt deserts, not glass walls where balls are not allowed, – children are using playgrounds to become the best kind of human beings.



The book is endlessly fascinating but to get the full flavour and all the fun, you must read about the games themselves and there they are, in detail, in Steve Roud's excellent book. If you like to think and laugh at the same time, go and get it.

Pat Thomson

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