

Folklore and Schools: The View from the Desks

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Over the last fifty years Children's Folklore has established itself as a serious subject for study. From the beginning, schools have been seen as rich sites for the transmission of—and thus the recording of—Children's Folklore. The Opies' magisterial collection and categorizing, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), brought a scope and a level of detail that provided a stimulus and basis for later collectors and analysts. In Australia, the work of June Factor has been prominent here. Obviously much of the collecting has been where children themselves assemble in large numbers and where they are readily accessible to recorders—in schools. More specifically, much of this observation, discussion and collecting has been undertaken by school teachers—people whose care for their charges, for their interests and skills, led to a fascination with and respect for Children's Folklore, for its range of aspects, for its continuity/longevity as well as for its adaptability.

Where teachers had most opportunity to observe and collect was in the playground, and this focus has continued,¹ including an extension of study into the more general study of *play* and of *games*, but still largely with the locus of the playground. In Australia, using the image of the one-teacher school, we might characterize this model as 'the view from the verandah'. While crucial in establishing the field of Children's Folklore, this trend is a narrowing of the concept inherent in the Opies' compound word *schoolchildren*.² It is too readily forgotten that most of a child's school-time is spent in the classroom, and so their school experience is much wider than that of the playground.

¹ This approach began with the work of school-teacher and principal, Dorothy Howard (1902–1996). For more modern work see, for example, *Play Today in the Primary School Playground: Life, Learning and Creativity*, ed. by Julia C. Bishop and Mavis Curtis (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2001).

² The compound word *schoolchildren* is reasonably new. It does not appear in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1973), nor in the *Australian National Dictionary*. In its earlier hyphenated form it is cited in the *OED* (2nd ed., 1989) as *school-child* 1879 (Sb Sense 16b). The term appears to have evolved as a more inclusive usage than the compounds *schoolboy* and *schoolgirl*, both of which appear much earlier. A search of titles in the British Library shows several earlier twentieth-century examples, but a large increase after the Opies' 1959 work. It is now common, e.g. in the *Macquarie Dictionary* (3rd ed., 1997), the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* (4th ed., 2004), etc.

This is not to suggest that folklore has not had a place within classrooms. There have been long-standing moves to include folklore within the formal curriculum, so that the culture of a local community could be acknowledged and incorporated into schoolwork, and so that the culture of other groups could be acknowledged and examined.³ But beyond the formally-transmitted knowledge, is what actually happens in the classroom, or in the broader school, *folklore*? To what extent here does the medium become its own message? There is a hint in the beginnings of the discipline. The major source and inspiration for Children's Folklore, the Opies' work, clearly signaled a place for Teachers' Jokes (pp. 365-366), and it cited several examples such as *Stop scratching your head, boy, aren't you afraid of splinters?* In ruling that for their purposes (establishing the importance of Folklore controlled by children) such teacher-talk could not be explored, they gave the intriguing introductory note:

Despite the eagerness of some of our junior contributors to make this section a lengthy one, we must agree with their mentors that anything like an extensive catalogue of the facetiae, however traditional it may be, which is sometimes allowed to emanate from the desk in front, is neither fair game nor within the scope of this enquiry. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that pedagogic wit may itself be one of the sources of juvenile vernacular. (pp. 365-366)

So while not within their then scope, the Opies gave serious consideration to this aspect of the classroom. Despite being filtered by both the recorders and the 'mentors' (teachers), their text is a strong reminder that the classroom is itself a powerful source of language and attitudes, formed through interactions, and both grounded in tradition as well as generating new tradition.

Their early approach can be tested by more recent categorisations. In its overview of the topic, the *Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore* looks to four categories of Children's Folklore:

³ For example, consider the early model of the Danish Folk High Schools, and then the various Education Faculties in American Universities. Also in the USA, since 1988 the American Folklore Society has had a special interest group entitled the 'Folklore in Education Section'. This has acted as a focus for numerous publications in the field. These have ranged from the use of folklore as an acknowledgement of the community's knowledge, or as a stimulus for classwork—see Simons, Elizabeth Radin, *Student Worlds, Student Words: Teaching Writing through Folklore* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1990)—to the incorporation of folklore as lesson content for its own sake. As Sylvia Grider puts it 'My hope is that for folklorists, our classroom is as vast as *all* nations.' See her 'Passed down from Generation to Generation: Folklore and Teaching', *Journal of American Folklore*, 108 (Spring, 1995), 178-185 (p. 184).

- Folklore of children
- Folklore for children
- Folklore about children
- Children as apprentices in learning adult folkways.⁴

Teachers' Jokes

The situation of Teachers' Jokes can be seen, to some degree, to fit within each of these categories. That children repeatedly retell the stories indicates that they have made the stories their own. While the mix of motives can be uncertain, it is produced by their teacher for the children, and as the children are its subjects it is clearly about children. Lastly, and perhaps least—because the site is one limited to interactions between one adult and a large group of children—there is the longer-term issue of induction and transmission by the children. In all this, the over-riding factor must be the enthusiasm of the children—in that they wish to contribute at length on this topic, and to do so despite adult resistance. For their own purposes, children have control of transmission of this oral lore. It is the adults who merely control its publication.

Rather than lingering on the topic of Teachers' Jokes, collecting and categorizing them, analyzing the circumstances of their production, reception and replication, at this time we might more profitably ask what has been lost by the overall practice of a narrowing of the interest in schoolchildren's folklore to that exhibited in the playground. First, by excluding the (often lone) teacher, there is danger of the 'observer-paradox' implicit in much collecting and analysis—an understatement of the recorder's influence. Even in studies of playground games, there is a tendency to understate the role of a significant adult in directly teaching/encouraging children's games, chants etc. One could usefully consider the impact of statements such as *Do you know this one? This is something we used to do when I was at school. We did it a little differently when I was at school.* By extension, the publication of popular works is a more formal reinforcement of examples and of possibilities.

Secondly, within a school, a range of formal school-wide practices can be observed as the teacher/s attempt to mediate official requirements into knowable, manageable and valued activities and attitudes—adapting the formal curriculum into meaningful knowledge. If one considered the case of the 'School Reader', then here there could be some overlap with curriculum studies or educational history.⁵ Thirdly there are those values

⁴ *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, ed. by Gwenda Beed Davey and Graham Seal (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 62-68.

⁵ Consider also Opala, Rosemary, 'The Old School Reader', *Australian Folklore*, 15 (2000), 115-122.

and practices that might not be official but are nonetheless shared—the informal curriculum. And, finally, there is the whole range of classroom interactions of many students with each other as well as with one adult—their teacher.

While this might appear to stray from the well-acknowledged focus of the Opies' work—and their field is now well-established—there are moves underway to broaden the field of Children's Folklore, and from these some encouragement can be gained for a focus on school-lore. For example, consider the recent revaluation of the place of electronic games in Children's Folklore. Prepared by a corporation, a solitary activity where the player is guided through pre-determined steps, this strays widely from a playground view, however

by re-thinking and expanding our concept of what qualifies as Children's Folklore, we can contribute new perspectives on play, peer interaction, and identity issues while staying abreast of these developments.⁶

So while the imperative of 'the new' is prompting such a broader scope, a similarly more inclusive view of that which happens more broadly in schools should also be considered a part of children's folklore. Otherwise our enjoyment and respect for the roots of the field might be used to restrict recognition of its further growth.

Other Sources of School Folklore

If the topic of school belief/values/activities is so important, then it is likely to have had some sort of place in written texts previously. While not quite sufficiently numerous to constitute a genre of its own, memoirs of school days are a popular topic for inclusion in larger works. Indeed, it is claimed that 'Schooling figures prominently in most Australian autobiographies, and in accounts of childhood it is often the most vividly rendered phase.'⁷ If one added the thinly veiled personal accounts that can be identified in creative writing, then, in sum, it would appear that adult writers draw much stimulus from the events/activities of their school-day selves. For folklorists, the collection of topics is particularly useful. A categorising of school memoirs into themes is given by Niall and Britain⁸ (although for their own work they adopted an historical approach):

⁶ Hercbergs, Dana, 'A Reassessment of Children's Folklore Classification', *Children's Folklore Review*, 20, (2007-2008), 25-34, (p. 27).

⁷ 'Introduction' to *The Oxford Book of Australian Schooldays*, ed. by Brenda Niall and Ian Britain (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xv.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Travelling to school
 Landscapes and buildings
 Rules and rituals
 Misdemeanours and discipline
 Uniforms
 Food
 The curriculum
 Friendships and sex
 Sports and recreation
 Conformists, eccentrics and rebels, among both teachers and students
 Questions of personal, social and cultural identity faced by individuals at school.

This list indicates what could be a broad range of folklore topics, important in the wider world but, when in the school context, crucial to the formation and development of the individual or group. The inclusion of teachers under the theme of ‘Conformists, eccentrics and rebels’ is another reminder of the strength of the impact of the unofficial influence of teachers.

Occasionally such memoirs are written by teachers, and here, while the detail and approach are often similar to those of non-teachers, there is a tendency towards professional knowledge and practices.⁹ That is not to suggest that this professional-lore is beyond the scope of anything that might be called *school-lore*, but, rather, to acknowledge that it is a little off-focus from children’s folklore.¹⁰ Still, occasionally such professional knowledge, expressed in pithy sayings, can be passed on to students.

An example personally observed is the seeming career advice that *The naughtiest students make the best teachers*. School memoirs are a

⁹ See for example, *Tales From the Blackboard: True Stories by Australian Teachers*, ed. by Amanda Tattam (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1998), where ‘several stories are written from a student’s perspective’, and that ‘how teachers cope (or otherwise) with discipline problems or uncontrollable students is the most popular topic.’ Introduction, p. xiv. For archival material rather than contemporary memoir, see McPherson, Mary, *It Happened at School* (Roseville, NSW: Kangaroo Press, 1997).

¹⁰ For a recent consideration of teacher-lore, and its role in marking the boundaries of the profession, see Pierides, Dean, ‘How the lore laid down by teachers maintains who belongs as folk: That’s just the way it’s done around here!’ [Paper presented at the 2006 Annual Conference for the Australian Association for Research in Education, 26-30 November, Adelaide.] <<http://www/aare/edu.au/06pap06610.pdf>> [accessed 10 November 2008]. The major teacher-memoir with a professional focus would appear to be James, Brian, *The Advancement of Spencer Button* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1950).

particularly useful source here, in that their selectivity indicates an emphasis/memorability, and that their popularity/persistence indicates its genuine importance. That the teacher's role spans both the broad culture, as well as the immediate world of the child, is indicated by the children's author and former teacher John Marsden's claim that: 'teachers are so often the conscience of our society'.¹¹ How this conscience is expressed and negotiated within the classroom, and in ways so memorable to the children, is an appropriate study for schoolchildren's folklore.

Another useful source would be the summative writing that arises officially from the school—the school histories, with their record of achievements. School-organised functions such as fêtes, concerts, festivals and commemorations can be seen as a focus for the community's interest in folk practices. In small communities the school can be the major (or only) focus for the community's cultural activities. More recently these have been seen to initiate and then to draw upon those most-often expressed memoirs in the form of oral histories—a wide range from ex-pupils to ex-teachers. This inclusiveness of voices that might not otherwise have appeared in print memoirs adds much in the way of likely topics. Often the style of such oral memoir is summative and evaluative, but with the inclusion of one remarkable example to illustrate the larger theme. For readers who are also teachers, such examples can be the most intriguing aspects of school histories—opening questions of the practices in the school/classroom and of the relationship of the teacher(s) with the students. Less often, school histories include the voices of current school children, and while partly authorized by adults, these accounts often contain more open-ended detail.¹²

As aspects of school-experience are acknowledged to be so powerful and worthy of record and thought, so a reasonable methodology for Schoolchildren's Folklore would be the collection and coordination of several memoir examples upon a specific topic. However, the limitation of sample size would always be a problem, as would the uncertainty as to how representative was the situation and so the relevance. Still, by including the teachers as participants, there is a broader scope, and while this approach can trespass towards a folklore of the profession, it would help to ground a topic in the broader cultural context as well as official requirements. Such an approach opens potential for more shared understanding of contextual specificity (of a particular school, or area),

¹¹ Foreword to *Tales From the Blackboard: True Stories by Australian Teachers*, (1988), p. x.

¹² For a consideration of the broader cultural life of a school, see Ryan, M. *The School on Pound Hill: Lismore Public School 1942-1992* ([Lismore, NSW: Lismore Public School], 1992), especially its Chapter 14, 'The Hidden Curriculum'. For the use of oral history, see Fletcher, Sherry, *Blakebrook Public School Centenary: 1907-2007: 100 Years of Public Education* (Blakebrook, NSW: Blakebrook Public School, 2008).

as well as for an appreciation of the continuity and creativity of folk practices within that context.

The major limitation of such an approach is that any topic so treated does not exist solely within a school setting. While having its focus of attention within a school, and transmitted thereby, it is obvious that the practice/language/topic also exists within a broader social and cultural context, and its school presence can be seen as a reflection upon its place in that broader context. In this way, the coherence of the traditional 'view from the verandah' becomes fragmented with the imperative of also looking outwards to the larger community.

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Over the years, attention has been given to the place of folklore as a topic for formal inclusion in the school curriculum.¹³ However, the broadening of children's folklore, as suggested here, can also encompass the role of the teacher in folklore transmission. As Sylvia Grider noted, a common element amongst folklorists is that they are so often teachers.¹⁴ In essence, what is proposed here is a claim for the place of *school-lore* under the umbrella of children's folklore.

This would acknowledge that children not only look back to 'the verandah' (and its observing teacher), but that they listen-to and engage with that teacher, and that nowhere do they do this more so than in their classrooms. The benefit of this approach looks to be a renewed attention to coordinated study of the school experience—to that most culturally-formative period of one's life. Such attention and acknowledgement has to be useful for the overall place of folkloristics.

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¹³ For example, Hamer, Lynne, 'Folklore in Schools and Multicultural Education: Toward Institutionalizing Noninstitutional Knowledge', *Journal of American Folklore*, 113 (Winter, 2000), 44-69.

¹⁴ Grider, Sylvia, 'Passed down from Generation to Generation: Folklore and Teaching', *Journal of American Folklore*, 108 (Spring, 1995), 178-185.

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