

Developing and Appreciation for the Cultural Significance of Childlore¹

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Part of the responsibility of contemporary scholars of childlore rests in their actively promoting a genuine appreciation for children's own traditions so as to counteract the continuing perception of such material as merely the charming, nostalgia laden ephemera of innocents. Childlore would seem by its very persistence in the modern age to merit serious investigation, for in a world of considerable cultural change that which endures ought to acquire particular significance and its uses, meanings and function in contemporary society should command attention. Rather than dismissing childlore as culturally irrelevant, then, it is quite arguably more responsible to highlight this material and consider the impact of these durable traditions on the development and expression of individual, group and national identity.

There are several reasons for assuming this responsibility, namely:

1. this approach potentially affords considerable illumination of the dynamics of cultural acquisition, generally and during childhood in particular;
2. there is a necessity given the complexity and demands of contemporary multicultural circumstances to gain as full an understanding as possible of the cultural milieu of children in order to shape and plan judiciously for their future; and
3. it is desirable to combat the persisting popular tendency to disregard the holistic humanity of children as equal, fully human beings—even to the extent of their having meaningful culture.

By taking on this responsibility, folklorists can more adequately meet their ethical obligations to their young informants while contributing to a richer understanding of perhaps the single most important yet culturally neglected minority group in North America—our children.

Widespread popular belief as well as solid clinical evidence support the idea that childhood experiences are central to the development of our personalities. It might benefit our understanding of the acquisition and dynamic operation of culture (whether individual, group or national) if we were to consider seriously the

possibility of childhood cultural experiences having a similar formative influence on each person as a cultural being. To date, even the best discussions of childlore have paid limited attention to such enduring effects of experiences with the cultural artifacts of childhood. Factor's *Captain Cook Chased a Chook* (1988) certainly points to, but does not elaborate upon, the possible influence of experiences during childhood in enabling empowerment and in effecting a given stance vis-a-vis culture and its manipulation. In *One Potato, Two Potato* (1976), the Knapps argue for recognizing the manipulation of childhood traditions as a primary means to acquiring valuable life skills. And some studies (e.g., Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's work on language and Sutton-Smith's on folk stories)² do comment upon the significance of folklore experiences in cognitive and linguistic development. Yet, even such fine discussions of the function of childlore stop short of documenting in detail the long-term impact of particular experiences with specific cultural artifacts of children's own culture. The persisting effects on perceived and operative identity associated with and expressed through such artifacts are scarcely ever recognized let alone analyzed in depth.

Alexander Chamberlain called for an anthropological interpretation of children's culture as early as 1896 in *The Child and Childhood in Folk-Thought*. Yet, his was a developmental focus on the lore of childhood as a means to understanding culture generally, allowing as this material did examination of the past and the future, "for children as a semiliterate society inherit the oral tradition of the past and use it to shape the future" (Bronner 47). The legacy of the Gilded Age has not ultimately directed academe or the general public to consider children's own traditions fully as culture-the dynamically interrelated process and product shaping orientation on existence (worldview) both affecting and effecting identity and, hence, overall way of life. The finest study of which I am aware relating early childhood cultural experiences to subsequent identity is a historical work, Elliot West's *Growing Up With the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* (1989) which, because of the author's orientation, does not highlight children's own traditions quite as a folklore study might.

This paper seeks to address this evident lack in cultural scholarship and childlore studies. It explores the enduring influence of children's own expressive culture and of childhood cultural experience amongst five groups of modern Canadians marginalized by various circumstances so that identity has been a particular issue for them, specifically:

1. residents of Saskatchewan when it moved from territorial to provincial status in 1905;

2. Newfoundlanders during the transitional period from WW II through to the province's entering Canadian Confederation (1949);
3. Montrealers living in a bilingual environment prior to official bilingualism in Canada (before the late sixties);
4. the offspring of mixed ethnic group marriages before the adoption of the federal multicultural policy (1971); and
5. aboriginal Canadians who attended residential schools before 1960.

The data employed in this discussion are drawn from field as well as archival and library research conducted over the past four years. Of special concern in this effort to reconstruct childhoods of times gone by and determine their impact on identity has been hearing the child's own voice, which is singularly absent from relevant "storying of childhood," to paraphrase Rex and Wendy Stainton Rogers (1992). Therefore, appropriate adult informants were asked to re-member their childhood culture and to reflect upon its contribution to their identity. However tinged by nostalgia or warped by selective recall these memories might be, themes and recurrent patterns in them were considered as justifiably indicative of the actual historical situation. Pilot fieldwork was conducted in Saskatchewan (concerning Group 1), B .C. (concerning Groups 1 and 4), and Ontario (concerning 3, 4 and 5). There is extensive documentation of the Newfoundland situation in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA) which was selectively consulted. As well, some data were incorporated from the collection of questionnaires in the Saskatchewan Archives (Regina) conducted in 1955 and pertaining to pioneer experiences,³ one set of which was specifically entitled "Folklore." Last (and actually least given the extant publications), information was obtained from ethnographic accounts, journals and memoirs of childhood.

In **Group 1**, the children concerned were of a broad range of ethno-cultural heritage and mostly recent first- or second-generation immigrants to Canada. A substantial number did not speak English in their homes, but were required to do so in school and, through peer pressure, on the playground. Since pioneer Saskatchewan was a rural agrarian society, most of the children were isolated on farms except when at school or during the harvest. At school, they strongly perceived a dominant Anglo norm reflecting in part the contemporaneous British/Empire orientation strong in their classrooms, but

also the desired orientation of their parents, the *lingua franca* of the children and the overall childhood cultural dynamic which elevated conformity. The following recollections explicate this cultural milieu:

According to Hilbert Kreuzweiser (age 92), one morning in his fourth year he left the home of his birth in Englefeld, Saskatchewan "a wee fella who spoke German" and came back up the farm lane that afternoon "a real Canadian lad"-much to his parents' delight. (Collected in Saskatoon, 1992)⁴

Frances Kanuit, looking back as an 84-year old, chuckled about the playground of his youth in Macoun, Saskatchewan, saying: "To keep all the others from laughing at my name, I palled up with another guy—a kid with an accent, too—and together we beat everyone up. Then I could play all the games and be just like them." (Collected in Kelowna, B.C., 1992)

Informants typically saw the long-term effects of their childhood cultural experiences to be a general homogenization of tradition outside the home which, in some instances, distanced them from their families. Their identification was stronger beyond the region than within because of the immediate cultural disparities and the Anglo norm which came (however much willingly adopted) from outside. In later years, shared agricultural/economic concerns promoted local identification which fed off the perceived dominance from outside and produced a certain antagonism to Canadian (especially Central Canadian/Ontario) authority and cultural dominance. The subordinate situation—real and perceived—of the prairie region had profound and enduring socio-cultural impact.⁵ According to my informants, their own cultural experiences resonated with this subordinate situation resulting in their viewing the rise of socialist parties in Saskatchewan as a logical response to what they considered to be central Canadian (and overall governmental) authoritarianism. Further, in later life, many of them—staunch and patriotic Canadians almost without exception—have regretted the fact that their parents and they, themselves, did not preserve more of their heritage traditions for subsequent generations. To a certain extent, then, they have welcomed the recent ethnification of Canadian culture as a means of recapturing that lost heritage which, as children, embarrassed and marked them as outsiders.

By considering the impact of childhood cultural experiences in pioneer Saskatchewan then, one can better appreciate the reasons for the cultural prominence of socialism in the prairie region. Also, the development of the seemingly conflicting intense ethnic sentiments alongside federalist identity are understandable as the logical consequences of the early childhood situation for many Saskatchewan residents.

Let us turn now to **Group 2**, consisting of Newfoundlanders who were children during World War II and up to 1949 when the former Crown Colony entered Confederation with Canada. There was a considerable commonality amongst children throughout Newfoundland where the population was predominantly of English or Irish background. They mostly shared a common language—indeed, a common dialect of that language which had developed amongst them⁶—and economic conditions in that the greatest number were from fishing families living in small, isolated villages. There was strong identification with Britain across well-defined classes and throughout the Island, accompanied by little knowledge of or involvement with Canada. The experience of the outside increased greatly as a result of World War II, during which Newfoundland played a particularly strategic role especially as a result of the North Atlantic convoys. The war tended to heighten "Britishness" for children—an identity which was directly reflected in their songs, parodies, rhymes (many of which in MUNFLA closely parallel the topical rhymes and other material in the Opies' *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, Chapter 7 in particular).

Personal awareness of a cultural other came to many of the children through American servicemen stationed in Newfoundland. One informant (interviewed in Toronto in 1992) recounted how airmen at the Argentia base sought contact with local children as surrogates for their own families, and they used childhood traditions to do so. But, she said, their traditions were different, which made the local children recognize their own distinctiveness. Besides, some of the servicemen were black—the personification of "the Man in black," the "Stranger," or "Foreigner" who occupied a boogey-man/frightening figure role in Newfoundland childhood cultural tradition, as documented by John Widdowson in *If You Don't Be Good* (see especially page 275).

Childhood lore then served as a boundary maintenance device between the locals and the "Come-from-aways" (as Newfoundlanders call people from off their island). The schools meanwhile reinforced the inherent British-orientation as well as separation of distinct sub-groups, given that all schools then were church-operated. Official childhood lore—as presented for instance in school texts or other books for children—promoted a British-oriented Newfoundlandiana, both more regional and more connected to the

"Old Country"? than contemporaneous childhood lore elsewhere in Canada (for instance, in Vancouver between the 1920s and the 1960s as indicated by Sutherland and confirmed in my recent fieldwork).

Over the long-term, these Newfoundland children grew up with a sense of separateness, of being other but of being together in their identity. Today the British connection remains for many of them, now amongst the older residents of the province, rather stronger emotionally than their attachment to Canada. It is present in contemporary lore such as the popular saying in St. John's that one can go out on Cape Spear (the most easterly point in Newfoundland) and come back with an Irish accent.⁸ Most people who were youngsters during World War II have maintained a certain sense of being foreign within Canada in good measure because of their childhood cultural experiences.

The children of **Group 3** existed in three distinct groupings: the Francophones, the Jews, and the English Canadians, the latter two together with other non-Francophones comprising "les Anglais," so-termed by the French-speaking majority in the province. Children were separated on the streets by language and into schools by religion (the Jews mostly attending Protestant owing to discriminatory circumstances prohibiting their own religious schools).⁹ In keeping with the common cultural response in francophone/anglophone encounters throughout most parts of Quebec, very little macaronic lore apparently developed here. The extant documentation of such traditions in Canada is remarkably limited and pertains primarily to adults (see Posen).¹⁰

According to my informants, there was a macaronic tradition of jests or jeers in the Montreal of their childhood, and this lore functioned for them primarily as a social boundary maintenance device, though its overt use was to bridge the linguistic barriers. There was very little non-institutionalized shared communication, though many of the children grew up able to speak both languages as a result of formal schooling and broad experience in the bilingual/bicultural city that was Montreal in those days. With limited communication came almost no shared childhood traditions, so that while the linguistic communities were not geographically divided, child groupings were virtually mutually exclusive. The children's own lore was antagonistic to the perceived other, or focussed inward because of linguistic boundaries. Here then was a miniature version of the situation described by Lord Durham in his 1840 report to the British Government on the state of the Canadian colony: "two nations warring within the bosom of a single state" (one might read street in the case of these children).

The long-term manifestations of this childhood cultural situation are evident in the strong cultural protectionist sentiments in Quebec today—both

separatist and English-Canadian. Most of the leaders of Quebec are fluently bilingual, but they developed throughout their youth, and today retain allegiance to and primary identity with, the particular culture of their childhood homes. Their experiences in the popular culture have prompted many—especially though not exclusively the francophones—to react against bilingualism as a negative, a move towards losing one's own culture. There is, as a result, a demand (supported by legislation in the instance of the dominant francophones) for unilingualism to protect "threatened" culture. This perception of threat is directly traceable to the eyes of the child beholders from decades past.

According to the 1991 census data, the majority of contemporary Canadians are, like the members of **Group 4**, of mixed ethnic extraction. Prior to official multiculturalism (1971), those of such background mostly existed in some form of cultural amalgam within their homes and as nothing evidently distinctive culturally outside of them. Largely they blended into the mainstream of childhood culture, becoming invisible often by conscious design (witness many offspring of Japanese-Canadian/Caucasian marriages after the incarcerations of World War II). They accepted the strong Anglo norm in effect amongst children's groups (as demonstrated in Neil Sutherland's research in Vancouver as well as in my later research on multicultural playgrounds in Toronto in 1975-76 and 1986-87).¹¹

Over the years, such children developed no clear tie to any particular ethnic traditions unless one aspect of their heritage was dominant in their homes. They were, by virtue of their families' active nonparticipation in ethnic-oriented culture and consequent activities, usually excluded from the child-directed, child-focussed process whereby youngsters passed ethnic-based traditions amongst themselves and over the generations. As they matured, Canada adopted multiculturalism and ethnicity flourished while mainstream traditions were down-played. Consequently, many reported feeling that in having no overt ethnicity they had no culture.¹² Some embarked on a "rediscovery" of ethnicity, but most developed a profound sense of cultural alienation—the mosaic of cultural rhetoric did not embrace their identity; in fact, it denied status to their cultural reality. This situation is a major contributing factor to the on-going quest for identity that plagues modern Canada.¹³

The Final Group is that on which I have done least fieldwork, but for which there is abundant documentation of the significance of childhood cultural experiences for native people who as children attended residential schools up into the 1960s when they were finally closed. Essentially, the oral traditions these native children shared helped them preserve their Indianness, becoming (along with their memories of home and family/community) their

focus of identity. This childlore was consciously rejected by some children who purposefully tried to fit in, to some extent out of fear of punishment by their non-Native custodians. But most of the youngsters themselves recognized the oral traditions they shared as a means of defiance and rebellion and actively used them as such.

This circumstance is vividly represented in Shirley Sterling's *My Name is Seepeetza* (1992), a recent award-winning fictionalized journal of life in a residential school located in the interior of B.C. The young narrator, called Martha Stone at the school, recounts an instance in which she is given one of several dolls donated by the local community. Recalling dolls made for her by her mother, she promptly buries it and looks up to discover an older girl looking on:

She said she was a grandmother, and she had stsa-wen. I was surprised to hear her say that word. It means dried fish. I thought only we knew that word from home. She handed me an old dried piece of pine wood and told me to sit on the ground to eat my stsa-wen. We sat cross-legged on the ground facing each other near an old log so we could keep warm. The tumbleweeds were rolling past and the wind was kind of moaning. (37-38)

The many testimonials from contemporary adult native people bear witness to the long-term effect of their schooldays which was cultural suppression at the very least. Those I interviewed (in the Muskoka region of Ontario) evidenced a profound militance to preserve their heritage *for* themselves and *by* themselves as, it must be emphasized, they have come to perceive it. In large measure gone is the nostalgia for times past along with any substantial concern for traditional veracity to be replaced with a dedication to reject the appropriation of their voice and to be heard where once they were silenced. One such informant characterized the current status of her people's traditions through recalling a circumstance from her own childhood:

Towards the end of the month, just before my grandparents could buy new batteries—they could only afford them once a month when their cheques came in—the sound from the radio would get weaker and weaker. There would be something you really wanted to hear, but it was fading away from your grasp. (1993)

Some (like Basil Johnston, long an ethnographer with the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto) have tried to educate the non-native society and in so doing have supported cultural self-determination (see *Indian Schooldays*). In all, most of my informants showed many cultural commonalities with other suppressed/oppressed peoples. There is a rejuvenation of Indianness amongst youth (in a contemporary guise, often with little direct reference to the historical traditions and sometimes of a pan-Indian nature).¹⁴ This cultural revitalization involves the employment-deployment might actually be the better term-of native traditions as they were used during the natives' childhoods, that is, as weapons-both to protect and to do battle against the threatening cultural milieu. Excellent examples of this cultural stance or orientation with respect to traditions include the armed confrontations at Oka in 1991 between Mohawks and first, Quebec provincial police and then, Canadian military forces as well as powerful non-violent activity through the numerous native council houses established in recent years as veritable cultural rehabilitation centres.

This cultural articulation derives from a form of romantic nationalism, similar in nature and goals to the many 19th-century movements centred around folk traditions. Already the socio-political products of a native movement bred in substantial measure through the cultural (mis)treatment of children are obvious in the greater evidence of the native voice in Canadian politics, widespread support for the natives' demand for self-government, the recent commencement of the dismantling of the Department of Indians Affairs and the realization of a native to such an understanding of childhood culture through themselves giving children's lore thoroughly scholarly attention, discouraging romantic and sentimental treatments of it and promoting full appreciation of its significance especially amongst those who work with as well as for children.

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NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Folklore Society meeting in Eugene, Oregon, October 1993. I am grateful to Linda Morley, Priscilla Ord and Ruth Stotter for their helpful comments and criticisms.

2. Sutton-Smith, *The Folkstories of Children* (Philadelphia, 1981) and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Speech Play* (Philadelphia, 1976).

3. This series of questionnaires was undertaken as part of the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the province's entry into Confederation in 1905. At that time, a substantial proportion of those who experienced the transitional period as children were alive and able to contribute significantly to the documentation of their past.

4. All the interviews cited are included within my collection on deposit in the Ontario Folklore-Folklife Archive of the Ontario Folklife Centre located at York University, North York, Ontario.

5. As noted by the prominent Canadian historian W. L. Morton, amongst others. Morton directly associates this socio-historical circumstance with a marked distinctiveness about the political climate, "The Bias of Prairie Politics," which supported, he argues, the growth of grass-roots socialism amongst other things. I discovered Morton's article (in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Vol. XLIX, Series III, Section Two [June 1955], 289-300 and variously reprinted) after my original presentation of this paper in Eugene. Queries raised at that time challenging the linkage I reported led me to seek corroboration of my informants' contentions, which Morton more than adequately provides.

6. As extensively documented in G. M. Story, W. J. Kirwin and J.D.A. Widdowson, eds. *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990 (1982).

7. The reference to Great Britain most commonly used in English-speaking Canada at the time and well into the sixties.

8. Personally collected several times over three decades, most recently in October 1991.

9. As documented in Mary Ashworth, *Children of the Canadian Mosaic*, Chapter 6 "Jewish Children," 57-68.

10. The few scholarly references to macaronic children's lore in Canada include an unpublished paper by Gerald Thomas concerning the French in Newfoundland's Port-au-Port peninsula presented at the American Folklore Society meeting in 1987; my own work on "Ethnic Joke-Telling Among Canadian Children," *Culture and Tradition* 7(1985): 31-41; and some brief remarks by Margaret Bennett Knight in "Scottish, Gaelic, English and French: Some Aspects of the Macaronic Tradition of the Codroy Valley, Newfoundland," *Regional Language Studies*. . . Newfoundland 4(1972): 25-30.

11. As reported in several papers to the American Folklore Society (1976 and 1987), the American Anthropological Association (1976), and the American Culture Association (1984) and published in my article cited in note 10.

12. As reported in several articles in Stella Hryniuk, ed. *Twenty Years of Multiculturalism: Successes and Failures*. (Winnipeg: St. John's College Press, 1992), the proceedings of a conference in which this circumstance surfaced as an emotionally-charged issue. See in particular Richard Ogmondson, "On the Right to be a Canadian," 45-55.

13. As argued in my paper "Folklore as a Tool of Multiculturalism" in Hryniuk (1992): 149-160.

14. An excellent example is the homogenized nature of drumming, the lighting of supposed *council* fires as symbolic protest, and the omnipresence of bald eagle feathers as speaker's tokens.

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