

**Review of Cheek, Richard. 2018. Playing Soldier: The Books and Toys That Prepared Children for War. New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press.**

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# Book Reviews

## Comptes rendu de livres

### ANDREW BURTCH

Review of

Cheek, Richard. 2018. *Playing Soldier: The Books and Toys That Prepared Children for War*. New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press.

Pp. 471, 1,291 colour illustrations. ISBN 9781605830766 (hardcover).

Readers interested in military history, popular culture, and the history of childhood will all find something of interest in the beautifully and thoughtfully compiled *Playing Soldier*. The thoroughly illustrated publication is a companion piece to its namesake exhibition at New York's Grolier Club in the fall of 2018. Featuring hundreds of examples from the author's extensive collection of children's novels, drawings, primers, board games, model soldiers, and storybooks, *Playing Soldier* explores how war and military life was depicted in works aimed at children from the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 to the armistice of the First World War in November 1918.

The book, like the exhibition, is a vehicle to feature the collection, and this handsome volume boasts nearly 1,300 full colour images of works from classic poster artworks to disposable ephemera, with an absolute minimum accompanying text. It is quite simply one of the most attractive exhibition catalogues I have ever seen, and the text is accessible and informative without being overwhelming. The author's argument is that while the works themselves are charming, depicting red-cheeked white children in mock parades in dress-up, or leading a mock charge across a bridge in their rural idyll paradise, "playing soldier" was an activity encouraged by the state and publishers alike to furnish volunteers for future wars, or to prepare children for compulsory military service while instilling key civic values and nationalist messages (9). The collection convincingly demonstrates the

nationalist bent of children's war literature and games by dividing the collection in four sections each dedicated to children's books, games, and toys in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

While the media made available to children was more or less uniform in quality across all four countries during the time in question, a by-product of more extensive and affordable colour printing at the end of the 19th century, Cheek highlights key themes that publishers of this material sought to highlight in the works they marketed to children. In Germany, much ink was spilled before the Great War highlighting the martial qualities of the nation following the union of Prussian states and the remarkable victory of Germany against France in the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War. Alphabet books showcased the uniforms of the modern German army and navy, contrasted the German form with those of other, lesser countries in Europe, and hearkened back to the chivalric traditions of German knights.

In France, not surprisingly, considerable attention was given to the concept of *la revanche* against the Germans for their perfidious victory in the 1870-1871 war, and the conviction to regain Alsace-Lorraine which had been lost in the war. Cheek's collection features a number of gruesome propaganda pieces showing extraordinary violence against children. The most striking of these is Paul Déroulède's 1884 illustrated book *Monsieur le Hulan*, in which a German lancer, spotting French cockades given to children by

the baby Jesus on Christmas Eve, flies into a rage, beheading the children. Their graves sprout tricoloured flowers, and so the lancer orders the fields burned. The flames, too, burn in the colours of the French flag, so the lancer commits suicide. The children rise from their grave, and are shown picking up their lost heads (124-25). Grim stuff, and telling. Other works in France searched military history for France's glorious history and rise as a world power during the Napoleonic Wars.

In the case of the United Kingdom (Great Britain in this collection), the martial edge to children's works was a consequence of the manpower requirements to sustain the military at the height of the British Empire. Naval fiction, in particular, sidestepped the brutal recruiting method of the press-gang in favour of describing the social mobility that could be acquired through service and pluck. A few examples of these books are provided, such as MacAulay's *From Middy to Admiral of the Fleet* and Gordon Stables' *From Slum to Quarter-Deck* (241). Stories from skirmishes across a wide empire fed a wide array of children's publishing, including songbooks, ballads, and of course paper soldiers showing uniform variations from around the empire and colonial forces. Even thoroughly controversial imperial engagements, such as the Crimean War and the Boer War, show how defeats and disasters were transformed into glorious encounters in children's books, abridged histories, and prize books awarded to young men.

In the United States, the children's books and games play out against the tradition of the volunteer militias that fought the Revolutionary War, the real-life stories of children fighting in the Civil War, and the enthusiasm of the American toy and publications industry to produce new materials promoting the United States as it expanded beyond its continental borders at the end of the 19th century following the Spanish-American war. The failure of the voluntary system (and, presumably, of the books promoting that system) led to the introduction of selective service during the First World War.

The national priorities of the four countries under study all shifted during the test of the First World War, and with those the products marketed to children also changed. The shift was subtler in Germany and France, as both countries had

been exposing children to a call to arms for nearly 40 years, to perpetuate past victories or right past wrongs, and so in children's publications, enthusiasm for the adventure of war overtook the grim reality of the front. The German Red Cross 1915 publication *Das Kindes Kriegsbilderbuch* captured the departure of German men from homes and villages, battle scenes and early victories (70-71). "Dream books" such as *Hurra!* allowed children to imagine themselves settling the war on their own, with comic book scenes of a toddler and its teddy casting bombs down upon the wicked Allies, devastating towns (85-86). In the United States, isolationist sentiment mixed with sympathy for the civilians affected by the war. Some publications offered illustrations contrasting the boy's desire to play with a wooden sword with a spectre behind of a murderous, bloodstained killer, questioning the wisdom of the pull to war and playing at war. Another illustration showed a baby Uncle Sam, imploring his European playmates to snap out of it and get along. Others still showed the plight of Belgian women and girls despoiled by shadows wearing spiked helmets (402-405). These sorts of images transitioned well into the propaganda developed following the German sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915. Eventually boys' publications began to imitate military manuals, anticipating the need to join the war. In the latter pages of the German, French, and British chapters, we see the sombre tone developed by the end of the war, the toys, games, and publications reflecting the butcher's bill at the front, impossible to ignore after three years of the most devastating war in world history. Prints, souvenir cenotaphs, and short stories tried to draw comfort from personal loss, and, in Germany's case, defeat.

*Playing Soldier: The Books and Toys That Prepared Children for War* is, in short, a remarkable collection. For readers interested in the history of the First World War and the events leading to it, the book offers a view into how publishers, game designers, and toy makers interpreted contemporary events and national historical narratives to appeal to youth. *Playing Soldier* suffers somewhat by the division into national categories, as several genres of children's publication repeat frequently in the book, such as alphabet primers and adventure books, and I would have liked to see a greater front-end discus-

sion of the technologies and market forces that allowed this rich vein of literature to be produced. Who was making them? Who was buying them? In what quantities? How were these used in formal and informal education? This material and economic history of the artifacts presented in the catalogue would have offered additional context to the accessibly written political and military narratives that dominate the introductory sections of each chapter. The most interesting piece in the collection is excerpts from the British publication, *An Alphabet from the Trenches*, which is the only piece in the author's collection that appears to have been well-used by a child (350). Its previous owner drew a crude Union Jack over the dedication to the British Expeditionary Force. Below, drawn with a purple pencil, is a battle scene from his or her imagination: field guns shooting down a German Zeppelin as a British biplane flies to intercept. This, along with faithful colouring of the British Tommy's uniform and a garish, clashing colouring job on the "Hun, with

his HYMN and his HATE," does as much as any of the written captions in the volume to show how profoundly the war shaped childhood. More discussion along these lines would be welcomed, but its inclusion in the collection was a remarkable and important addition alongside the various publications in mint condition.

The author argues that the production of these children's publications resulted in an increased chance of war developing (11). Neither the evidence presented or the historical record supports this assertion. However, this collection does show how tightly aligned children's publications, games, and toys were with contemporary and historical anxieties that helped shape the foreign and military policies of the great powers that collided in the apocalypse of the Great War. Readers may wonder how many of the boys who were targeted by these publications were lured into service, and how many survived. Notwithstanding the many beautiful illustrations in this work, *Playing Soldier* is a sobering, perhaps cautionary volume.

## DIANE CHISHOLM

Review of

Burrison, John A. 2017. *Global Clay: Themes in World Ceramic Traditions*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Pp. 338, 228 colour illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 9780253031884 (hardcover), \$30.00 US.

John Burrison's latest offering, *Global Clay: Themes in World Ceramic Traditions* is a highly personal, idiosyncratic, and engaging journey through the history of pottery. It is not a chronological survey of pottery through the ages but rather the author's own exploration of the story of clay and how people—common folk—have shaped it for use in ordinary life (Burrison's specialty is folklore and indeed he provides an introductory primer on international folk pottery). This is not a discussion of fine china, though the breadth of the author's knowledge is such that there are allusions to the production of these more refined wares. For example, a

photograph of a Spode plate in the Blue Willow pattern is included because it fits one of the book's themes, but this volume is not about Meissen, Lalique, or Wedgwood. This work is about the world's ceramic traditions and their significance in people's lives, for most of our homes contain pieces made of clay. They meld beauty with practicality and their inherent fragility is an intrinsic part of their nature and value. The actual means of their production and cost are important and recurring ideas running through *Global Clay* because manufacturing and economics have a demonstrable impact on the lives of all people.