

***The Singing Game.* Iona and Peter OPIE (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 521.)**

Robert C. Cosbey

Volume 7, Number 1-2, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081332ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081332ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Cosbey, R. C. (1985). Review of [*The Singing Game.* Iona and Peter OPIE (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 521.)]. *Ethnologies*, 7(1-2), 207–210. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081332ar>

Reviews/Comptes rendus

The Singing Game

Iona and Peter OPIE

(Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 521.)

Iona and Peter Opie have for years given us models of how the folklore of children should be collected, analyzed, and presented. Beginning in the 1950s, they have collected the language, customs and games of children from hundreds of schoolyards and lanes in Great Britain, combining direct observation, questionnaires, and the reports of a network of children, teachers, and other observers. The result has been a mass of material the publication of which required four large volumes. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* appeared in 1959. *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (restricted to games which did not involve either singing or equipment) appeared in 1969. Now we have *The Singing Game*. There remains to be published a book about games involving equipment, such as skipping with a rope.

The collecting which is the base of all these books was not confined to the massive projects of the 1950s, but has been going on constantly since then. In the acknowledgements section of *The Singing Game*, the Opies thank the headmaster of one school "who has accepted us as part of the ecology of his playground during the past fourteen years," and also thank collectors at twenty-eight schools, and twelve independent collectors, all of whom have kept information coming in since the previous book was published.

The Opies are much more than collectors, however. They have read, obviously, all the other important collectors, and the historians and theorists, and every reference to the games now played by children which they could find in any source, of any period and of many countries. *The Singing Game* includes a fascinating history of these games, taking the ring-game, for example, back some 3,500 years, and a history of theories about such games, including those of the 19th

century mythologists who saw everywhere references to sungods and watergods, and those of the well-meaning blunders of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who decided that the children of the poor had no culture at all and must be taught uplifting games. The Opies themselves are saved from blunders and from pedantry by their great common sense, by their humour, and above all by their respectful but unsentimental acceptance of children as they are.

The Singing Game consists of an historical first chapter, then nineteen sections each containing one kind of singing game and each preceded by an introduction. One hundred forty-nine singing games are presented in detail, each one with the music, the words, the actions, and comments and cross-references. The index lists well over a thousand titles of songs, games, and dances referred to in the text.

In short, here is God's plenty. It is presented in a handsome volume, with attractive print and layout, and embellished with the amazing photographs of Father Damien Webb and a wealth of illustrations from old woodcuts, drawings, paintings, and figurines.

The Opies keep a commonsense balance in dealing with the many theories of children's games. For example, they expose the oversimplification of Lady Alice Gomme's derivations: "Game-songs mentioning water are linked with well-worship, choosing-and-pulling songs with tribal marriage-by-capture, and the game of 'In and Out the Windows' . . . with the ceremonial perambulation of a village"; but they also honour Lady Alice for her tireless collection of singing games and her insistence that attention must be paid to them. Another example of the balance of the Opies' approach is that while they are moved by the wild beauty of some of the songs, they collect whatever children sing, beautiful or not, and whether adults would approve or not. Thus, they include modern clapping-songs based on Barbie dolls and television, and a nine-year-old's explanation of why boys like to watch the girls play "Salome": "It's because when we lift our skirts up the boys can see our knickers."

One of the values of the book is that it shows us how the ocean of children's lore persists through the years and spreads across the world. A great many people throughout the English-speaking world will remember playing some of these games, and perhaps can still watch their own children playing them or at least singing the songs: "London Bridge"; "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush"; "Go This Way and That Way"; "Go In and Out the Window"; "Do You Know the Muffin Man?"; "Little Sally Waters"; "Oats Peas Beans and Barley Grow"; "The Farmer Takes a Wife"; "A-Hunting We Will Go"; "Ring Around the Rosy"; "Lazy Mary Will You Get Up?" Many will recog-

nize songs which have become independent of the games, and may be surprised to learn that well-known songs have come from these games: "Three Times Round Went Our Gallant Ship"; "Pop Goes the Weasel"; "Skip to My Lou"; "Someone's in the Kitchen with Dinah"; "There Stands a Lady on the Mountain."

Many of the games have also been collected in the Southern Appalachian area of the United States, where they were played by young adults: "I'll Give to You a Paper of Pins"; "Marching Across the Green Grass"; "Three Dukes a-Riding"; "Hog Drovers." In my own home town, Regina, Saskatchewan, I hear echoes in games or phrases in the local schoolyards: "Thread and Needle"; "I love the boys and the boys love me"; "The wind blows high"; "Down in the Valley Where the Green Grass Grows"; "I'm a Little Dutch Girl"—all these from skipping—and one clapping-game played and sung just as in the book: "Mary Mack Dressed in Black."

The book will be of nostalgic interest to many adults, some of whom will inevitably see it as a source of games to be taught to children, though the Opies seem to share my own conviction that children should be left alone, to develop and enjoy their own folk games. (I like the Rev. Stewart Headlam, who in 1894 scolded some "benevolent . . . ladies who have not yet recognized that their main duty towards the poor is to see that all unauthorized people get off their backs," and who collected children's games to prove that children, even those of the poor, have their own folk culture.)

The book will be useful to anyone interested in the history of play, children's lore, or the dance. It should also be useful to anyone interested in contemporary children's lore, or in child psychology. The Opies themselves do not attempt the treacherous field of psychological interpretation; theirs, I believe, is a sound approach, avoiding the temptation of letting a theory of interpretation influence their collecting of presentation. But they have provided the materials on which others can base analytical theories.

If there is a weakness in the Opies' presentation (since reviewers are expected to guarantee their objectivity by noting weaknesses), it is that they are sometimes too much concerned with the past. "What we have tried to show," they say, "is that these games, now enjoyed by children, are the final flowering of a tradition known since antiquity." *Final* flowering? The Opies should know better than to speak of the present stage of any folk process as *final*. We expect that sort of thing only from the antiquarians who see all children's lore as degenerate remnants of ancient custom. Similarly, the Opies say that of the games recorded in the book "only 82 could be considered

true singing games, in the sense that they fulfilled a social function in days gone by." But these are momentary lapses: the Opies have too much respect for children and too much admiration for the games, the songs, and the folk culture of children to denigrate what children now do, except very rarely.

In this review, I have referred to "the Opies" in the present tense. To the sorrow of all who work in this field, Peter Opie died in 1982. *The Singing Game* properly lists him as co-author, but it is also a memorial to him which Iona Opie presents in her completion of their joint work on children's singing games. We must all hope that she will persevere, and publish the fourth book in the series, which would complete the tremendous project the two Opies began in the 1950s. We wish Iona Opie a long career, of course, and hope to see, as the next step in her career, the final book in this most impressive series.

Robert C. Cosby
University of Regina
Regina, Saskatchewan