

Book Review

Brian Sutton-Smith.

A HISTORY OF CHILDREN'S PLAY:

The New Zealand Playground 1840-1950.

U.S.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.

331 pp. \$20.00.

"While children themselves can know little of the political and economic backdrop to the stage on which they will produce their playful account for us, they are nevertheless mightily affected by it."

This history delineates through a documentation of personal narrative the movement of children's play in New Zealand from the days of pioneer life to an era of modern and mechanized leisure consumption. To this end, an entertaining and enlightening account unfolds.

In Section One, "The Control of Children at School 1840-1890", Sutton-Smith allows the reader to meander through a memory of the earliest New Zealand playground. Reminiscent of rural life characterized by long hours of labour, the wildness of the bush, and the lack of formal sport and games, such seasonal pastimes as hoops, Shinty, Fly the Garter, bows and arrows, Rounders, Shanghais, and King of the Castle, to name only a few, are vividly recalled.

In the author's second section, "The Control of Children's Leisure", an overview is presented of immense philosophical and technological change as it impacted upon both the overall concept of childhood development and the specific 'play'-ground. Emphasized here is the notion that what was once chiefly the child's domain had become increasingly managed by adults. Sports, in particular rugby, were beginning to take hold, and both church and school were extending their recreation function beyond traditional areas.

In his concluding statement, "A Personal Epilogue", the author assesses the relative consequence and merit of this control. Interestingly, he speculates upon two hypotheses:

- 1) That the movement in the modern state toward a monopoly over violence, together with a shift in the locus of control from parochial to national organizations, has served to domesticate or 'zooify' children's play, and
- 2) That the change from a manual way of life to a symbolic one has fostered the growth and development of a highly sophisticated playground.

Sutton-Smith suggests that in reducing the violent and oftentimes barbaric components in play and games, control has been beneficial. Further, that in the evidence we see of the emphasis upon organization, technical competence, and mass leisure, control of children's play by adults has produced competent and capable members of the increasingly diverse and growing "global village".

However the author also points out that undoubtedly fewer play spaces belonging solely to children have resulted and less freedom to just **be**. Characteristic of this century's preoccupation with empiricism, the play and games of New Zealand children show little spontaneity and self-reliance.

For those who wish to review an historical and careful treatment of children's play as it was and how it has become, Sutton-Smith's book is an excellent choice. Much of the narrative and many of the ideas expressed are both entertaining and thought provoking.

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