

# Collecting kids' stuff: in search of the history of childhood in New Zealand museums

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper questions the extent to which museum collections capture the history of childhood. It advances the premise that collections are shaped by the historical context within which they were created, whether at the level of social discourse or the activities of individual people. This is evident in the types of childhood objects collected and in the changing way these objects are valued by the museum. In the museums examined here, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) and the Auckland War Memorial Museum (Auckland Museum), objects change from being valued as ethnographic specimens to colonial artefacts and high-end decorative art, to everyday objects that embody multiple perspectives and personal stories. Yet within these categories, the object-focused case studies in this paper show that the distinctive way in which museums make history enables children to become more visible. The paper argues that in collecting the material culture of childhood, museums capture a unique and extremely elusive element of history.

**KEYWORDS:** Te Papa, Auckland Museum, childhood, history, children, material culture, New Zealand, collections, museums.

## Introduction

The history of children and childhood is a relatively new field of enquiry that provides 'critical insights into the human past and contemporary social experience' (Fass 2003: xi). In New Zealand, child-focused research followed new social movements such as women's liberation and an increasing desire to understand what it was to be a New Zealander. This led to new intellectual developments in the field of social history and 'a fascination with social and cultural history, which had once been the profession's poor relations' (Phillips 2001: 331). Since the 1960s, social historians have unleashed a wave of child-related topics that focus on women, the family, health, education and social welfare. Scholarship in these areas has provided knowledge about the texture and complexity of the human experience in history, as well as bringing into view the perspective of children.

In comparison, the first museological publications that focused on the way museums include or represent the

history of childhood were produced in the 1990s. Earlier museum literature that focused on children in the museum mainly explored issues around display, delivery style and education. Museums have long been concerned with the child's experience. Thomas Cheeseman, Director of the Auckland Museum from 1845 to 1923, wanted to incorporate a children's museum into the new Auckland War Memorial Museum (Wolfe 2004). This did not occur, but the example illustrates an early desire to engage children in the museum environment and it highlights the way museums have traditionally focused their attention on children. Over time, child-focused education programmes, travelling education boxes and, later, discovery centres became a core component of museum business. New interactive and engaging displays are now expected. Children have a significant presence in the museum environment as visitors, but what I question is whether this is the case in the collections.

This article, based on research for a masters thesis, focuses on child-related objects in the history collections

at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) and the Auckland War Memorial Museum (Auckland Museum), and discusses the extent to which the collections include the perspectives and experiences of children in history. I question how and why collecting priorities have changed over time, and whether the collections reflect changing ideas about children and childhood. This new avenue of enquiry provides fresh insight into the way museums represent children as well as reflecting on curatorial collecting practice in general.

In the article I argue that the perspective and voice of the child has largely been excluded or marginalised by the museum, even though child-related objects have always been included in the collections alongside the inclusion of human history in general. Museum collections contain a diverse range of objects that in their own way reveal much about New Zealand childhood. This study shows how the history made in museums, through the perspectives represented by the material culture of childhood, provides a unique glimpse into the lives of some New Zealand children.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates how objects link the historical perspective of children to the material world, drawing on a physical reality that cannot be captured in any other way. As McKergow (2000: 163) explains, through their tangible presence, objects have the power to fascinate, not only through what we say about them, but 'by the way they look, feel, sound and smell'. Knell (2007: 9) also explores the premise that objects provide both intellectual and poetic possibilities by existing as a link to the external world and to the original context in which they were made. In this article I explore some of the stories behind a few of the child-related objects in history collections and make links to the history of childhood, advocating that objects and their associated stories provide an opportunity to represent, and include the experiences of, children in history. This is especially important considering the fact that children are limited in their ability to express their thoughts in written form and historically have left very little written evidence of their experiences.

Other studies on the history of childhood in museums have focused mainly on exhibitions. They are critical of the way museums often use the banner of childhood as an excuse to exhibit toy collections, revealing nothing about children themselves, and claim that museum displays about children are 'exhibits of childhood without children' (Roberts 2006: 155). Museums typically rely on nostalgia and reflect an image of childhood that is innocent, privileged and idyllic. Shepherd (1994, 1996) and Roberts (2006), who critique

childhood exhibitions in Australia and Britain, both find that the voice or experience of children is missing. Whilst this is also true of the New Zealand collections and the way they are organised and contextualised, they contain the potential for so much more. As Shepherd (1996: 269) points out, 'the challenge for the museum lies in judiciously harnessing its collection and its information to unlock the varieties of children's experience'.

The case study at the heart of this research focuses on the history collections of the two largest museums in New Zealand. In looking at these two nationally significant museum institutions rather than specialist children's museums, I have been able to consider childhood collecting within the broad context of collecting New Zealand history in general.

In order to gain information about the collections, the objects and museum practices, I carried out close scrutiny of museum collection databases, object files and accession registers, documenting what was in the collections, when objects were acquired and what associated information was recorded. I interviewed current and long-serving curators to record their unique perspectives and personal reflections on the realities and complexities of their practice. In addition, I accessed archival information and planning documents to gain crucial information on the strategic collecting direction of each museum.

The structure of this article is organised around three distinct periods of collecting, each of which was characterised by a different set of ideological discourses that frame the period and influenced collecting practice and the acquisition of certain types of childhood objects. I explore the influence of the people who worked with the collections in relation to each collecting period, as well as the influence of exhibition development, and focus on a few key objects from each period and the historical narratives they embody.

## 1851 to 1950: from cathedrals of science to the infancy of childhood collecting

The first period of collecting by museums in New Zealand, 1851 to 1950, was one in which the focus was on scientific collecting, mainly of natural history specimens, closely followed by the inclusion of ethnographic and Māori 'artefacts'. The early collections and origins of both the Auckland Museum and Te Papa occurred at a time when the British Empire and its colonising ideologies were enthusiastically



Fig.1 Child's moccasins, date unknown, moosehide. Made by Prairie Indians, North America. Gift of C.E. Crawford, 1934 (Te Papa FE003649).

followed in various colonial settlements throughout the world, including New Zealand. The foundations of both museums were built on collections that were clearly part of a colonial project involving the exploration and classification of New Zealand's natural resources (McCarthy 2007: 16). James Hector, Director of the Colonial Museum, the precursor of Te Papa, illustrated this when he said he aimed to 'organise for the use of the Colony a complete typical museum of reference that will illustrate all the branches of its natural history and mineral resources' (Dell 1965: 8). It wasn't until the 1940s, when New Zealand was celebrating the centenary of the British settlement of New Zealand under the Treaty of Waitangi, that New Zealand history was regarded as significant and worthy of attention, and the first objects relating to the history of New Zealand childhood were included in the collections. It is important to note that small provincial museums and historical societies were much quicker to respond to the growing interest in New Zealand history, and therefore many of these museums have a much richer collection of child-related objects from this early period. Furthermore, most of the pre-1950 child-related objects in the Auckland Museum's collection were acquired by the Old Colonists' Museum in Auckland and incorporated into the Auckland Museum's collection only in 1965.

The total number of child-related objects collected by Te Papa's pre-1950 predecessors, the Colonial Museum and the Dominion Museum, was 17. Eleven of these objects are now classified and stored as part of the Pacific collection or the International collection (previously known as the Foreign Ethnology collection). They include two sets of moccasins from the United States of America, one made in the 1700s and donated in 1912, and the other, a pair of child's moccasins, donated in 1934 (Fig. 1). A boy's dress from South Africa was purchased in 1915, along with four Indian drinking cups. Polynesian objects acquired from London dealer W.O. Oldman, now known as the Oldman collection, were also acquired by the museum at this time, including a Hawai'ian wand or puhenehene, sometimes used by children to play a guessing game. In addition to these ethnographic objects, an ancient Egyptian child's shoe, dating from the fifth to sixth century AD, was acquired through the Egypt Exploration Society in 1914. At this time, the museum subscribed to the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* and the Egypt Exploration Society, and as part of its contract with the society received a portion of any archaeological finds.

These objects, which have no connection to the history of New Zealand childhood, demonstrate past collecting priorities and the way museums construct history around

the dominant ideology of the time. The encyclopaedic collecting paradigm of the museum practitioners from this period is evident in the way that ethnographic objects were collected and preserved as 'scientific specimens' in the same way as natural history specimens – i.e. collected as illustrations of the laws of the natural world. As an extension of this, the objects or specimens of human history illustrated Darwinist ideas about the evolution of human society (McCarthy 2007: 20). Furthermore, non-Europeans or indigenous peoples were regarded as an 'exotic other' (Pearce 1995). Evolutionist ideas were progressed according to a belief that understanding the 'self' could be achieved only in relation to a perceived 'other' that is seen as different and as inferior, unpleasant and dangerous (Pearce 1995: 308). Childhood ethnographic objects collected prior to the 1950s were included as part of an ethnic 'other' that was of interest to European New Zealand but not considered to be part of it, and in so doing they set up a dichotomy between who was or was not part of New Zealand society.

Through the formation of collections, museums are engaged in a process of 'western identity formation' (Clifford 1994; Kavanagh 1999; Lawson 1999; Kreps 2003; Spalding 2002). Far from being neutral places, they reflect, create and reinforce the dominant ideologies of the culture within which they are positioned. As Hooper-Greenhill writes (2000: 49), 'Groups of objects brought together in the form of a collection generate social and cultural statements. These statements are produced through the objects combined together in such a way that each individual object confirms the statement as a whole.'

Pearce (1995) explains that collecting is tied up with notions of things being the same or different – i.e. the self and the other. Ethnographic objects, as part of the 'other', defined who we were as 'it is only by gazing on the abnormal that we can appreciate our normality' (Pearce 1995: 316). Furthermore, scientific and ethnographic collections reinforced a belief that colonisers were superior, progressive and intelligent peoples (Henare 2005). The 'scientific and practical know-how of settlers' was juxtaposed against indigenous peoples, who were perceived to be less progressive (Henare 2005: 13).

In contrast to the objects collected from Polynesia, North America, India and ancient Egypt, all of which became part of the Foreign Ethnology or Pacific collections, other objects of non-New Zealand origin were included in the History collection. These were a French child's bodice made in the 1700s (a bequest from Mrs Alec-Tweedie in 1946) and clothing thought to have been worn by England's King

George III. Although these objects were not of New Zealand origin, their European lineage was considered part of the New Zealand story. They were not considered 'other' because they were European, and therefore became part of the History collection.

From another point of view, the inclusion of objects relating to children suggests that the objects were perceived as an integral part of an ethnic or cultural group. Even though such objects weren't actively included, they weren't excluded either. The same could be said of New Zealand colonial or early settler material, which had started to trickle into the collections from the 1940s. Colonial objects in the Auckland Museum, originally acquired by the Old Colonists' Museum, typify this type of collecting. Some of the first items collected were slate boards, children's clothing, christening gowns, a christening mug, furniture and books.

### Growing up: collection development between 1950 and 1990

By the 1950s, the accession registers at Te Papa and the Auckland Museum confirm that a strategic change had begun. These museums had started to expand their collecting beyond science and ethnography. Colonial settler history had become topical thanks to the New Zealand centennial celebrations in 1940 (McLean 2000: 30). By the 1950s, Pākehā (European) New Zealanders were beginning to explore their own culture, identity and history (Belich 2001; McCarthy 2007). Objects that represented New Zealand's colonial past predominated in history collecting. These included childhood objects of the same genre, mainly colonial dress, and objects that represented an interest in decorative arts. Childhood objects were included because they were the best and finest examples of clothing, toys, dolls, arts and crafts, samplers and embroidery. Some of the toys reflect changing technologies and the introduction of new materials such as sheet metal; others, including a set of elaborately decorated alphabet blocks, demonstrate an educational focus; others still, such as a toy kettle, a child's tea set and toy kitchen scales, illustrate the use of toys to train girls for domestic duties.

The number of history objects acquired at this time, including many child-related examples, grew at an immense rate. At Te Papa, the volume of childhood objects collected in each decade steadily increased from about 60 in the 1950s

to more than 300 in the 1980s. At the Auckland Museum, the numbers were lower, with the most significant increase in the 1960s, when the museum focused on setting up a colonial-based exhibition entitled *Centennial Street*.

Typically, minimal information was recorded about the objects. It usually included a brief record of who the adult donor was but none, or very little, information about the child associated with the object. As in the previous period, the history collections continued to develop in a passive and ad hoc way. Most of the objects acquired during this period are typical of the type that make up the bulk of museum childhood collections. As Shepherd noted (1994, 1996), the objects and their classifications reinforce nostalgic and stereotypical ideas about children. He points out: 'Almost inevitably access to information pertaining to childhood in this type of museum is to be found through objects classified as dolls, games, juvenilia, children's clothing, and the like' (Shepherd 1994: 71). By using these narrow fields of classification and collecting along these lines, museums risk 'entrenching stereotypes, constructing social myths and masking rather than revealing the social issues that surround the development of young people and the environment in which they are raised' (Shepherd 1994: 71).

The early collections at the Auckland Museum and Te Papa conform to this type of collecting. They contain the material culture of childhood without any associated information, and they reveal very little about individual children. Furthermore, the information collected is superficial, and in most cases it and the objects themselves reflect the interests of adults rather than the lives and experiences of children. This trend is further reinforced by the tendency to orientate the information around the object rather than the experience of a child. It therefore becomes difficult to find information and objects that explore the social, economic or political experience of children, and their work life, home life or recreational life. Even so, there are exceptions and some objects do offer a connection to the experiences of children in history.

A christening gown donated to the Dominion Museum by Mrs Wheatman in 1968 is a good example of the type of child-related object that was collected during this period (Fig. 2). It is described in the museum record as: 'Christening gown, incorporates Ayrshire embroidery, white lawn, lace and hand broderie anglaise insertion. Hand-made'. Although the record contains very little information, and the specific history associated with this object is unknown, it embodies many important strands of information about



Fig. 2 Christening gown, 1800s, cotton, 1060mm (centre back). Maker unknown. Gift of Mrs Wheatman, 1968 (Te Papa PC001597)

the museology of the time and also the child's experience.

The Wheatman christening gown represents my initial impression of the way museum collections portrayed New Zealand childhood. Both the Auckland Museum and Te Papa have a vast array of infant, child and baby clothes from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this collecting period most of the articles of children's clothing were categorised as applied or decorative arts, and were collected because they were examples of the finest or best of

colonial dress, or because they contained examples of elaborate and intricate lace and embroidery. The associated classification system for the Wheetman christening gown, 'PC' (for 'period costume'), highlights the original collecting category and positioning within the museum. Shepherd argues that, by examining how museums represent childhood, insight can be gained into the way they create, represent and appropriate culture. He points out that 'it provides a uniquely suitable spring board for thinking about some common practices and assumptions used in representing social groups in museums' (Shepherd 1994: 66). The 'PC' category, no longer in use at Te Papa, is evidence of the way museums form collections around specific priorities and construct history through them. The fact that this cataloguing system was superseded by another is illustrative of the changing nature of museum collecting practices.

New Zealand museum studies scholar David Butts argues that 'once garments enter a museum collection their lives continue' (Butts 2007: 89). They reflect changes in museum practice and focus, and as such their significance varies over time. In contrast to today, the museum practice and curatorial emphasis associated with the early history collections focused on the aesthetic qualities of objects. A main priority was the physical care of objects, and effort was given to dealing with a backlog of objects that had never officially been accessioned. The initial focus of the museum staff who were involved in the history collections in the 1950s was to sort, store and record objects in the museum accession registers.

Although the physical care of objects and the accumulation of high-quality examples was a priority at the time of their acquisition, they are also valued for their ability to illustrate social and cultural practices associated with childhood. McKergow (2000: 164) observes that 'dress is a fundamental dimension of shared cultural experience', and that at any given point in time it reflects the social and cultural circumstances of people's lives. The Wheetman christening gown, for example, marks the participation of at least one child's involvement in a Christian religious ceremony. Furthermore, christening gowns were commonly passed on from one generation to the next and as such represent a family tradition involving generations of children. In addition to the christening ceremony, the Wheetman christening gown is symbolic of a period when a great deal of time and energy was put into creating children's clothing. Christening gowns were traditionally hand-made by the mother or grandmother, evidence of a physical and emotional investment in children. They embody the 'hopes



Fig.3 Child's harness, c. 1900, wool, metal. Maker unknown. Gift of Mrs C.J. Lindsay, 1953 (Te Papa PC000887).

and aspirations' of parents and grandparents for their children in the early stages of life (Butts 2007: 66).

Another collection item from Te Papa further illustrates the value of objects in encapsulating the historical experiences of children. In 1953, C. Lindsay donated an infant's harness (Fig. 3), made in about 1900. The harness was hand-knitted in shades of red and pink wool and has five bells attached to the front panel.

The original record for the Lindsay harness was made by Nancy Adams, one of the earliest professionals at Te Papa to engage with the History collection. She was responsible for sorting, storing and recording many of the museum's early

historical items. Curatorial input started in the 1960s and was followed by input from conservators and subject specialists, resulting in additional research and the creation of object files in the 1980s (Fitzgerald 2007). Thus, the Lindsay harness has an object file containing additional associated information, including a copy of a page from the *Weldon's Practical Knitter* (date unknown) that has a pattern for making the harness.

The changing nature of childhood and associated parenting ideas and methods is exemplified through this object. The harness provides a point of comparison between past and present parenting ideas and concerns. Walking harnesses or restraints became popular in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when parents were concerned about keeping their children safe in an expanding urban environment with increasing traffic (Anonymous 2003). The harness was considered to be an acceptable way of keeping children nearby and even entertained. In the *Weldon's Practical Knitter*, the introduction reveals, 'These reins are quickly and easily knitted and afford a great deal of amusement to children, besides being capital exercise'.

Opponents of the use of reins and harnesses advocate that they restrain not only the physical exploration of children but also their mental and psychological development. This attitude could be a reason for the decline in their use in the 1960s, when concern about the psychological and mental development of children was paramount (McDonald 1978). By the 1970s, the rights of the child had become an important issue in New Zealand (McDonald 1978; Dalley 1998). In an era of 'children's liberation' (McDonald 1978: 51), the use of harnesses and restraints would have been at odds with this movement: 'Growing legal advocacy for children, the mention of children's rights in the 1973 *New Zealand Handbook of Civil Liberties*, and the 1979 International Year of the Child all suggested a new awareness of the child as an individual' (Dalley 1998: 262). It is rare to see children's harnesses being used in New Zealand society today, although there has been a recent increase in their use in Europe as parents there have become increasingly concerned, fearful of child safety and of their children being abducted in cities (Anonymous 2003).

In the early twentieth century, when this harness was made, parents had a different set of priorities. The fact that it was hand-knitted is typical of a time when parents and other family members hand-made clothing and toys for children. Mothers traditionally knitted or sewed most of their children's clothes, toys and games were also mainly

hand-made, and less emphasis was placed on bought and manufactured items in general. Like the Wheetman christening gown, the knitted harness illustrates the fact that family members – usually mothers or grandmothers – spent a great deal of time and energy making children's clothes and accessories. Further, financial constraints meant that this was a necessity, especially as families were generally large and most lived on a limited budget. It wasn't until the more affluent decades of the 1950s and 1960s that there was a substantial increase in the availability of consumer goods for children. The harness, as an item that was hand-made in the early twentieth century, is therefore evidence of a broader New Zealand history. It is representative of the activities and everyday life of both adults and children, and of parenting ideas and methods.

A third example, a walking doll named Christie, donated by Frances de Lisle in 1986 (Fig. 4), further illustrates the type of history museum objects can encapsulate. This time, a note from the donor provides information and an opportunity to illustrate a specific child's experience in history.

The letter states that the doll was made by the 'Returned Services Rehabilitation Centre' following the First World War, although it seems more likely that it was only repaired or partly made by the rehabilitating soldier. The doll has since been identified as a Harry H. Coleman mechanical walking doll, patented as the 'Dolly Walker' in America and made by the Wood Toy Co. between 1917 and 1923 (Coleman *et al.* 1968: 170). The post-war rehabilitation story is an important one, as hundreds of New Zealand soldiers returning home from war were involved in projects at rehabilitation centres.

For this study though, the childhood recollection is more significant. Frances de Lisle was given this doll for Christmas in 1920, at the beginning of the commercialisation of childhood. Cheap mass-produced toys made their appearance in New Zealand from the 1890s, and sales were boosted through the growth of chain stores in the 1920s (Belich 2001: 367). The doll also represents other significant changes in New Zealand childhood. When de Lisle donated the doll to the museum, she explained that when she was a child, she and her cousin were 'crowd stoppers' as they walked the doll down the street in Whangarei. This charming childhood memory has multiple layers of meaning. On one level it is a story about two children playing together with a much-loved doll; on another, it is illustrative of the changing nature of children's play. By the 1920s, children were raised with more rules and controls than their colonial predecessors. Belich



Fig.4 Christie, a Harry H. Coleman Mechanical walking doll, c.1920, wood, iron, leather, cotton, rubber, paint, 760×280×120mm. Made by Wood Toy Co., United States; repaired by Department of Soldiers' Re-establishment, Auckland. Gift of Frances de Lisle, 1986 (Te Papa GH003513).

(2001) described this as a process of taming the colonial 'wild child'. From the 1890s, children's leisure time was increasingly 'provided for and organised' (Sutton-Smith 1981: xv). The supervision and control of children's play and recreational activities were increasingly implemented in schools through the introduction of sports, military drills and physical education (Belich 2001: 365). Supervised play during school breaks meant that there were fewer rough and tumble games. Boys were encouraged to be less physical in their play, but at the same time girls were encouraged to participate more in physical sports activities. Even so, children were a lot less supervised in their free time than they are today. Frances and her cousin were able to parade their walking doll up and down the street in Whangarei, entertaining crowds of strangers. This provides an interesting point of comparison to the experience of modern-day children today in New Zealand, who are closely supervised and whose parents tend to be acutely attuned to safety issues.

### Story time at the museum: collecting between 1990 and 2007

By the third period of collecting, 1990 to 2007, an emerging 'new museology' and the growing impact of social history were key influences. Collections continued to grow at an accelerated pace, especially at the Auckland Museum, where an exhibition about the history of New Zealand childhood, entitled *Wild Child*, was developed. At this point in time, childhood collecting at the Auckland Museum by far exceeded that at Te Papa, not only in terms of the number of objects collected but also in their variety, the breadth of themes covered and the inclusion of the child's perspective in history. At both museums, practices developed such that objects were now collected to both illustrate and invoke personal histories, and curators recorded more detail about the donor and associated stories. Alongside this, both institutions initiated a focus on everyday objects. The intrinsic value of objects was no longer the most important aspect of collecting. Much of this change has been exhibition-driven and evolved out of a need for museums to be more engaging and relevant to the community. Exhibition-driven collecting has proven to be one of the most important factors in developing comprehensive and detailed collections of childhood objects.

The following example demonstrates how increased curatorial input and a commitment to a new museological



Fig. 5A–C Paper doll ‘Ruth’ and clothes, c. 1958, paper, ink, pencil. Maker unknown, hand-drawings by Drusilla Megget. Gift of Joyce Megget, 2006 (A, Te Papa GH011542/1; B, GH011542/4; C, GH011542/8).

philosophy has had a direct impact on the type of objects collected and the type of information recorded. Curators in the 1990s and 2000s have either come through museum studies programmes, trained as historians and were influenced by the growth in social history as a topic at university, or been exposed to the ideas and thoughts expressed through these disciplines. All the curators I interviewed were committed to collecting objects that preserve New Zealand’s social, cultural and political history. Especially important to them were everyday objects that tell the stories of New Zealanders. The impact of individual curators, their interests and passions can also be seen in the collections and are therefore an important variable when considering the way collections grow and develop. Stephanie Gibson, a history curator at Te Papa, revealed this when she said, ‘I really think interest, experience and taste have a huge impact on what we collect’ (Gibson 2007). She explained that she had an interest in collecting what

she called ‘the low end. That’s more where anything’s up for grabs; any little remnant of everyday life has potential’ (Gibson 2007).

Te Papa’s largest collection of childhood objects was acquired by Gibson in 2005–06, and comprises mainly ephemeral items from everyday life. The collection came from the Megget family in Wellington and was acquired by the museum because it was an important representation of the experiences of two generations of children in the 1920s–30s and 1950s–60s, although there are some objects that date back to 1909. It consists of more than 100 objects and includes paper dolls and paper dolls’ clothes (Fig. 5), party hats and whistles, masks, decorations, scraps, bubble-gum swap cards, hairclips, Christmas cards that have been coloured in by children, musical toys, books and other ephemera.

The story of how these objects were sourced is also indicative of what happens to many childhood items. When

Gibson went to assess the objects, the party ephemera – hats, whistles and other items – had been saved and were shown to her by the family, but most of the paper dolls and their clothing had been thrown in a rubbish skip outside. Gibson (2007) recalls that the house had been packed to the ceiling with ephemera, a great deal of which had been thrown out, including some of the objects Te Papa eventually acquired. Gibson said, ‘They [the Megget family] confessed to me while I was there that they had thrown out the paper dolls. I got really excited and jumped into the skip and got them out.’ The fact that the family, in their sorting process, had thrown the dolls out is significant. It demonstrates the fate of many childhood objects and also the public’s perception of what would or would not be of interest to the museum. By investigating further, Gibson found a rich source of material culture that was extremely revealing about New Zealand childhood in the early to mid-twentieth century. As had become Te Papa’s usual practice by 2005, a detailed provenance and brief family history was recorded. But the most exciting and important aspect of the acquisition was the associated childhood memories. In recording these memories Gibson was able to capture some specific childhood experiences from the family, allowing the objects to be put into context. In relation to the paper dolls that belonged to Drusi Megget, Gibson recorded (on KE EMU, Te Papa’s online collections database):

Paper dolls – I do remember them and playing with them. I enjoyed dressing them, designing clothes for them and think they playacted domestic dramas. One of the things I remember – naming them was very important to me. One time (at least) I made sure I had a full alphabet of names, e.g. Anne, Barbara, Clare ... In this game teddy bears and ordinary dolls were roped in too. Q for Queeny was important, as Queeny was the only girl’s name starting with Q that I knew of. Other drawing and daydreaming/scheming games I played were a Girl’s Detective Agency called GDA for short. I drew lots of uniforms for them to wear. There was a red and brown uniform and a black and lime green for swimming, walking, office work, riding horses (however I was not much interested in horses), adventuring and so on. (Drusi Megget, pers. comm. April 2007)

These objects have provided the means for recording and preserving a historical childhood experience, but unlike the majority of objects collected in previous decades they are accompanied by a first-hand account of associated childhood memories. The vivid recollection of Drusi Megget makes the objects all the more vital, even if the recollection

has been filtered through the memories of an adult. Most child-centred source material produced by children themselves is relatively rare; this example reminds us that because of the nature of childhood, most of the evidence draws heavily on adult perceptions (Graham 1999: 203).

## Finding the child’s voice

The following example reveals the value in groups of objects, acquired as a collection from a child. In 1999, the Auckland Museum acquired a ‘pocket collection’ from a 10-year-old boy, who at the time attended a kura kaupapa (total-immersion Māori-language primary school) in the Auckland region. The collection consisted of two *Star Wars* cards, a Superman Candy Sticks packet, plastic Dracula teeth, a blue plastic pencil sharpener, a felt tip pen lid, part of a seashell, a blue glass marble, a yellow marble, a white plastic button, a golf tee, a metal screw and a piece of plastic Glad Wrap (plastic food wrap).

Like the Megget collection, and in stark contrast to child-related items acquired in the previous decades, these objects are not rare, financially valuable or representative of the best of the decorative arts. They are everyday items, some of which would normally have been thrown away, and that individually appear to have little value or collection appeal. Even so, the pocket collection is a simple but poignant artefact of New Zealand childhood at the end of the twentieth century. These objects, along with the child’s personal and social history, are very revealing about childhood in New Zealand in 1999: the popularity of swap and bubblegum cards, the interaction and influence of the film industry, and that film and television are now a common everyday aspect of children’s lives. While plastic is a commonly used material in children’s toys, glass marbles are still valued and played with. Glad Wrap is used to wrap food in school lunches. Finally, the fact that children pick up and keep in their pockets odd bits and pieces like shells, buttons and golf tees is an important aspect of childhood to document. Equally of interest is that this child attended a kura kaupapa. This is an important aspect of the child’s personal and social history that was documented as part of the acquisition. It reflects a changing aspect of New Zealand childhood and demonstrates the increasing bicultural nature of New Zealand society.

The objects also highlight the way in which groups of items can provide an insight into the hidden, unknown and elusive world of the child. Children are often unable

to articulate their ideas, thoughts or feelings (Shepherd 1994: 70). However, even though the exact reason these objects were chosen is not known, collections of objects are informative about the child and the material world with which they are interacting. The content of a pocket collection would obviously change over time, reflecting the changing material world, but this collection underlines the elements of childhood that stay the same. Play and the experience of childhood is typically difficult to capture through static material culture (Jordanova in Shepherd 1994: 72), but as Shepherd (1994) explains, it is possible when objects are juxtaposed together with the interpretive elements of display. Collections and groups of objects, like the pocket collection, represent one way of capturing the experience of childhood.

The circumstances surrounding the acquisition of the pocket collection emphasise another museological shift in this period: that new acquisitions were actively sought out to illustrate concepts, storylines and themes in new exhibitions. There was, however, one key point of difference between the two museums at the time that had a huge effect on the way their childhood collections evolved. The Auckland Museum developed a specific exhibition about the history of New Zealand childhood – *Wild Child* – and acquired a huge volume and variety of child-related objects specifically for the exhibition; at Te Papa, the acquisition of child-related objects continued as usual. The pocket collection was initially gathered as part of the development process of this exhibition, and like many of the objects collected by the museum at this time, it then became part of the permanent collection.

## Conclusions

The influence of broad discourses, ideologies and changing museum philosophies has proven to be a key factor in determining which childhood objects were collected during each period of time. This article has shown that museums have always included childhood objects in their collections and therefore a particular aspect of childhood history has been preserved.

Knell (2007: 8) argues that 'decades or even centuries of resource-starved keeping and "misuration" can leave just about any collection of objects decontextualised and historically unreliable'. In the 1990s, curators at the Auckland Museum and Te Papa were committed to ensuring objects had context. They recorded detailed information for new

acquisitions and updated records from past acquisitions when possible. Most of the childhood objects collected after 1990 have associated personal and intimate childhood stories recorded in their acquisition files. At Te Papa, Christie the walking doll is one early example, and the Megget childhood collection, acquired together with the recording of Drusi Megget's childhood memories of playing with the paper dolls, is another example of this practice.

Despite my findings about the way museums have included and collected the material culture of childhood, the broader context shows that these large institutions have traditionally marginalised children and the history of childhood. Although child-related objects have been collected, the thoughts, feelings and ideas of the children who used them have not. 'Childhood has a tendency to be revered and romanticized by adults in our society, and it is often viewed with a sense of nostalgia, as it comprises our own fond memories of when we were children' (James *et al.* in Roberts 2006: 154). The childhood collections at the Auckland Museum and Te Papa comprise mainly toys, games, dolls and beautiful clothes, all representing pleasant, happy or privileged childhoods. This is clearly at odds with the experience of many children. New Zealand society has always contained unhappy childhoods, and for many children the idyllic picture commonly presented by museums is far from their reality.

Museums have in their history collections material culture that can engage a broader range of childhood narratives. But an important link is missing: how can museums make their collections more relevant and representative of the child's experience? Shepherd (1994: 71) recommends that in order to make the experiences of childhood visible, museums should include classifications that specifically focus on childhood experiences, including play, school life, home life and work life. This became possible for New Zealand museums in the late 1990s and 2000s, when new electronic databases were introduced that contained fields for recording these types of subject headings and associations.

It is impossible for museums to be encyclopaedic and all-inclusive in their collecting (Gardner & Merritt 2002). Storage space is increasingly constrained and there is a need for museums to be more strategic about what they collect (Anderson 2004; Simmons 2004). However, I believe this must be done within the context of including multiple perspectives from all factions of society. Sandell (2003: 58) concludes that 'it is likely that the underlying demands for museums to become more responsive to changing

socio-political agendas and to adopt a greater degree of social responsibility will continue'. It is therefore significant and timely that the history of childhood and childhood perspectives in history are carefully and strategically considered. Children make up a significant proportion of society and traverse all cultural, ethnic and minority groups, including disabled and homosexual people. Children's history is everyone's history, and to leave the child's perspective out is to seriously diminish reality and sacrifice an exciting aspect of New Zealand history. Furthermore, I believe museums have a social responsibility to include childhood perspectives. Sandell (2003: 45) argues that museums have the potential to empower individuals and communities, and to contribute towards combating multiple forms of disadvantage. Museums, as advocates for children and the inclusion of multiple childhood perspectives, have the potential to give the child a voice in the museum environment and therefore a presence and status in the community.

Recent museum practice has allowed for the preservation of a few stories of childhood and the childhood memories of adults. However, one aspect of collecting the history of childhood is still underdeveloped – the contemporary child's voice in history. This paper has indicated that this is an opportunity for future development. The only way of collecting a childhood perspective or the child's voice in history is by actively pursuing it and recording the child's thoughts, while they are still a child. Museums now have the capacity and opportunity to collect objects that provide the material evidence of New Zealand childhood, including childhood perspectives, experiences and the child's voice in history. The challenge for museums is to collect a far more diverse range of childhood objects, and to record the sad and painful memories alongside the happy and joyful ones. In doing so, a considerably more poignant and diverse childhood collection will emerge. It is time to ensure that all childhood perspectives are represented in the museum.

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