

*Hello Girls & Boys! A New Zealand Toy Story*

By David Veart

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Toys are powerfully evocative objects that can immediately connect us to a moment in the past. They have nostalgic appeal both in terms of our own childhood and that of others to which we are connected. Toys provide a tangible link to the past that most people can relate to, a link that is skilfully educed in David Veart's *Hello Girls & Boys! A New Zealand Toy Story*. This book explores the ways in which toys are part of our everyday life and as such document moments in history, changes in society and culture, and evolving technologies.

A multidisciplinary approach draws on a variety of sources to 'tell the story of New Zealanders and their toys'. Included is the seminal work of play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, and other historians, archaeologists and anthropologists. A large number of primary sources such as digitised newspapers, advertising material, and the collections of museums and private toy enthusiasts, make this a rich multi-layered account.

The just over 300-page publication is an in-depth exploration of the toys, games and the past-times enjoyed in New Zealand, including both locally and overseas made toys. There are seven chapters, a short introduction and conclusion, and a useful section on 'Sources and Further Reading' that includes publications for those who wish to explore the history of toys and New Zealand childhood further. An 'Image Credits' section, with further information about featured objects, could have been more clearly laid out to improve access to this information.

The book includes examples of toys and games manufactured, homemade and virtual; big name brands, boutique toys and one-off examples. Where an example does not exist, the author employs a range of devices to evoke the toy or game. Woven throughout are charming photographs, images used in advertising and on packaging, personal anecdotes, poems, and quotes that provide unique personal insights.

From the outset, the perspective of Māori and Pākehā are central. Chapter one 'Toys from the waka', focuses on the toys and games of Māori tamariki prior to European settlement, but it also touches on those that had influence and were adapted by both Māori and Pākehā in cross-cultural exchange. Veart explores the blurred parameters between toys and play, adult and child activities, and the use of toys as a mechanism for adults to transmit to children practical skills needed in everyday life. Also included were examples of makeshift toys, such as the little harakeke boats or koruru, a game played by using pebbles, berries or whatever was to hand.

Chapter two 'New arrivals 1840 – 1900', focuses on Pākehā settlement and the introduction of European toys. Veart notes that migrating children often brought toys with them but also that from the outset of settlement, the shipment of supplies to New Zealand included toys for children. Some shipping lists were extremely detailed and enable an understanding of the range of toys available to early settler children (p. 29). Alongside the new high-tech toys of the day, such as the magic lantern, were classic favourites such as dolls. Veart explores the activities of the colonial 'wild child' (p.36 – 47), but not in a romanticised way. The dangers of playing with toys like pocket knives, homemade shanghai or bow and arrow is clearly brought to the fore. Stories such as the one about George Deverell, who died in 1891 after an accident involving a toy cannon, disband any myths about an era of freedom without harm.

Toys used to prepare girls for domestic duties are touched on in chapter two, a theme that continues in chapter three 'Toys in depression & war, 1900-1945'. Likewise, toys that illustrate changing technologies and modes of transport are a strong feature.

*Hello Girls and Boys* explores the effects of the depression and war on the availability of toys. For example, German-made toys ceased to be imported, and British or American made toys were purchased instead. New Zealand's alliance with Britain was strong between 1900 and 1945, something that was expressed through war and trade. New Zealand acquired British manufactured goods and exported food – 'meat for Meccano and butter for books' is the fun analogy Veart uses (p. 65). Meccano and Hornby trains are a key focus in this chapter and, to a lesser extent, homemade toys. The war, depression and import restrictions are shown to have had a major impact on the local toy industry. The book showcases people who adapted their skills to create toys where there was a gap in the market. Mortie Foreman, who made dolls out of kahikatea sawdust and went on to set up 'Plastic Products', is one example. Unique New Zealand stories like this are a strength of this publication.

In chapter four, 'A Golden Age? 1946-1960s', Veart argues that the post war years were 'a great time for toys, imported and local' (p. 120). Not only did the baby boom have an impact on the demand for toys, so too did economic prosperity. The benefits of increased toy production within New Zealand were coveted at a government level. Veart explores the influence of politician Walter Nash who went into direct negotiation with British toy maker Lines Brothers, as well as the impact of trade restrictions and tariffs on both New Zealand manufacturers and overseas importers. Massive expansion in manufacturing saw an exponential increase in the availability of toys. However, while many New Zealand toy manufacturers flourished, smaller, less-competitive companies were forced out when they couldn't compete with the influx of toys from international toy manufacturers.

Some of New Zealand's most sort after collectable toys were made between 1946 and the 1960s. The history of well-known brands such as Fun Ho! Jumbo Toys, Akrad, Tonka and Luvme are explained. Toys made by smaller niche market toymakers are also highlighted, including David Auld's 'very well made' stationary and mobile steam engines (p.137). One of the yellow-paged breakout sections that feature throughout the book focuses on the Buzzy Bee. It is particularly satisfying to see the origins of 'That Bee' clearly explained (p. 126 – 130).

The influence of a new educational philosophy and a demand for educational toys is explored, using plasticine and colourful wooden rods as examples. As in other chapters, the author includes his own personal example, a native timber cube puzzle by Gunner Berger. However, wooden unit blocks- a staple in every New Zealand kindergarten - are notably absent.

By the 1960s New Zealand was in a position to manufacture and export toys internationally, and Veart sets the scene in chapter five 'Toys to the world, 1960s – 1970s' by explaining the aim was to increase exports by 700 percent. Diversification of exports was an important focus for the government. Lincoln Industries, Tri-ang Pedigree, Tonka, and Consolidated Plastics were the main large-scale companies to take up the challenge. Those with an international connection proved to have a distinct advantage. The influence of television and film meant that adventurous toys inspired by popular culture made an appearance – Batman and Captain Scarlet are two examples explored. Interestingly, two small New Zealand-based toy companies outdid the toy giants, Kiddibricks by Luke Adams Pottery Ltd became the longest running toy ever

made in New Zealand and North Shore Toy Company Ltd, who made soft toys, was in operation until 1988.

Sociological studies are shown to have had a role to play in toy production in the 1960s and 70s – a study in the 1960s highlighted the benefits of children playing with dolls that reflected their ethnicity. Māori dolls became popular, although as Veart points out, examples of Māori dolls in traditional dress were created in the early twentieth century, long before Pedigree produced their example. Another toy that demonstrates sociological and historic shifts were cereal collectables. These giveaways found in packets of cereals included themes around New Zealand culture and new technologies such as space travel. The introduction of small plastic toys as giveaways continued into the 1980s and beyond through fast food outlets.

Chapter six ‘The elves & the Rogernomics, 1980s’ tracks the final days of most New Zealand toy manufacturers. Rogernomics and the removal of import controls meant that by 1986, nine out of ten toys sold in New Zealand were imports. Toys from Asia flooded into New Zealand. Longstanding companies like Lincoln Toys folded in 1985, followed by FunHo! in 1987. The book explores the impact of endemic toy advertising, alongside toys that were created and sold directly through television shows. Veart explores the unsuccessful efforts of parents and concerned agencies to control advertising, and to try and stop the influx of aggressive war toys like Power Rangers. Barbie and other examples of fashion dolls also make an appearance in this chapter. Also featured is an exploration of the place of fireworks in play and changes in retail outlets for toys.

‘End Games, 1990s – 2000s’ is a short chapter that focuses in part on the last remaining New Zealand toy manufacturers, those that adapted to make toys for adults. Toy figures, particularly soldiers, continue to be made. One example is Regal Enterprises, a Greytown company whose small figures are still in demand throughout the world, and another is Holdson, which specialises in board games and jigsaws, products they began with over 75 years ago. Both have survived by adapting to an adult market. But the big toy story for children, explored in this chapter and in the conclusion is that of virtual play. This, Veart points out, has significantly changed the nature of play for children in the twenty-first century.

By Veart’s own admission, his interest in toys is influenced by his own childhood in the 1950s and 60s (p. 274), a perspective that is continually reinforced throughout this book. Veart’s personal reflections and those of others engaged in the toy industry significantly enrich this publication, however the inclusion of a more culturally diverse range of people, and some recollections from New Zealanders born post 1980, would make it a more socially and culturally inclusive history. Further, an exploration of a greater variety of toys available in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries would have been beneficial. They too have the potential for insightful analysis that reflects New Zealand society and the lives of children today.

Very few publications exist that focus on New Zealand childhood, and this book with its focus on toys, is a much-needed resource for toy enthusiasts and those with a passion for childhood things. It’s a thoroughly enjoyable read and a book that many people, including myself, will dip into again and again.