

Economic Choices and Popular Toys in the Nineteenth Century

Janet Holmes

Résumé/Abstract

Les fabriques de jouets d'Angleterre, d'Allemagne et des États-Unis approvisionnaient une bonne part du marché canadien à la fin du XIX^e siècle. En 1871, la valeur des importations de jouets s'élevait à 27 000\$, soit un volume d'environ 300 000 objets pour trois millions et demi de Canadiens. On trouvait de tout, à tous les prix, la gamme allant des animaux en bois ou en matériel synthétique et des jouets américains en fonte pour un sou, au cheval à bascule le plus coûteux à 15\$. La plupart des jouets étaient vendus aux membres de la classe moyenne grandissante du Canada, mais de petits jouets simples étaient vraisemblablement assez bon marché pour être achetés, en milieu urbain, par les salariés des usines et, en milieu rural, par les petits propriétaires terriens qui pratiquaient une économie d'échanges et qui possédaient un peu d'argent liquide. Les jouets les plus populaires étaient fabriqués à la maison ou achetés en magasin; ils reflétaient le monde des adultes vu par un enfant. Ils constituaient probablement les premiers jouets offerts à l'enfant. Il s'agissait de chevaux à bascule en bois, chevaux sur roulettes, poupées, traîneaux, meubles d'enfant et poupées en chiffons.

The commercial toy industries of England, Germany and the United States supplied much of the Canadian market in the late nineteenth century. By 1871 the value of imported toys had grown to \$27,000, representing a volume of about 300,000 items for 3.5 million Canadians. In variety and price toys ranged from simple wooden and composition animals and American cast iron toys for a penny to the most expensive rocking horse for fifteen dollars. Most toys were marketed to a growing Canadian middle class, but the small, simple toys were likely cheap enough to be bought by city factory wage earners and small farm owners who worked in a self-sufficient barter economy with little surplus cash. Popular toys, available in homemade and commercial versions, reflected a child's view of the adult world and were likely the first toys owned by a child; these are identified as wooden rocking horses, horses on wheels, dolls, sledges, children's furniture, and rag dolls made from scraps of material.

First-generation research in the material history of a country usually involves an attempt to focus on what was being made in that country. The preliminary survey that I made on toys some ten years ago was this type of analysis, based on a reading of the *Montréal Gazette* from September to December at ten-year-intervals to see what was being advertised in Montréal, Canada's major importing centre; on a check of Canadian directories from 1851 to 1900, and of some Montréal and Toronto directories to see what Canadian-made toys were being advertised; and on a look at several public and private collections of toys. Such a general survey allows one to extract a skeleton framework for understanding what toys might have been available, and what kinds of toys were being made by Canadian toy makers.¹

With the broader conference topic of "Children and Changing Perspectives of Childhood in the Nineteenth Century" in mind, it seemed more useful to look at several other aspects of toys in Canada, such as the value and volume of imported toys being sold commercially in Canada; the relation of toy prices to wage figures for salaried workers to determine what types of toys a family could afford for its children; and the identification of "universal" toys, that is, those made by individual toy makers, by factory workshops and by adults and children in the home, and those first owned by a child from a much wider possible selection.

In England and continental Europe the early years of the Industrial Revolution created a new and affluent middle class whose view of children and education was changing. No longer were children seen simply as small adults. They were treated as a special group who needed recreation and play, along with affection and a firm religious and moral training. A growing market, the new attitude toward children, and the acceleration of industrial inventiveness in mass production methods spurred the growth of a commercial toy industry. Toy manufacturers in England, Germany, France and the United States, particularly after 1850, supplied not only their own market but also exported toys to Canada, as is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

	Value of Toys Imported to Canada			
	1866	1871	1881	1901
Germany	\$ 3,128	\$ 4,428	\$10,116	\$135,788
Great Britain	5,983	17,235	10,227	10,470
United States	4,271	5,410	15,010	69,161
Other	193	948	1,092	14,950
Total	\$14,575	\$27,128	\$36,445	\$230,369

Source: Canada. *Sessional Papers*, "Tables of Trade and Navigation for 1866, 1871, 1881, 1901."

Those figures, although they convey the value of toy imports, do not indicate either the variety or extent of toys being brought into Canada. In 1874, the *Merchantman*, a Toronto wholesale trade review, published a review and price list of toys.² The following rearrangement (Table 2) of that extensive list shows more clearly the wholesale price ranges. The most expensive toys were:

Speaking dolls, "papa and mama"	\$1.60-\$ 2.40 each
Large show window dolls	\$2.00-\$ 4.50 each
Rocking horses, wooden	\$2.25-\$15.00 each

Other toys were sold by the dozen or by the gross (twelve dozen, or 144 items).

TABLE 2
Price List of Toys (from *Merchantman* 1874)

Animals	Cost per doz. (\$)		Cost per gross (\$)
Horses & wagons, wood	0.70- 4.20	Monkeys on stick	1.00- 8.40
Horses on wheels, wood	1.00- 8.40	Horses on wheels, composition	1.00- 8.40
Serpents	1.00- 2.75	Animals on bellows, sheep, lions, birds	3.60-21.00
Alligators	1.50- 2.40		
Turtles, moving legs and heads	2.50- 6.00		
Dolls			
China-headed dolls, Nankeen bodies	0.75- 6.00	Small china doll heads	4.00-10.80
Large china doll heads	1.00- 5.40	Kidd dolls	4.00-12.00
Parian doll heads	1.25- 6.00	Crying dolls	6.00-11.40
Dressed dolls, comic with cymbals, &c.	1.40- 8.40		
China bathing doll	1.50-15.00		
Crying dolls, wax heads, arms, legs, movable eyes, with shoes and stockings	9.50-27.00		
Wooden toys			
Acrobats, windmills	0.60- 2.75	Soldiers on shears	1.20- 3.60
Tea sets	0.70- 1.80	Pails	1.25- 3.65
Whistles	1.25- 6.00	Humming tops	3.85-18.00
Noah's arks	1.25-21.00	Trumpets	12.00-15.00
Villages & farmyards	2.50-15.00		
Tin toys			
Gigs	1.50- 2.50	Buggy, with horse & driver	3.75- 4.50
Horses in hoops	1.60- 1.75	Cups, painted	5.00-60.00
Dump carts	1.60- 3.25	Banks	6.00-18.00
Horses on wheels, with rider	2.00- 2.50	Covered pails	8.40-10.00
Fancy carriages	2.50- 3.00	Buckets	9.60-10.80
Meat carts	2.50- 3.00	Animals, assorted	10.50-15.00
Horses on wheels, with boy & dog	2.75- 3.00	Rocking horses	10.50-16.80
Open wagons	2.75- 3.00	Horses on wheels	15.00-33.00
Express wagons	2.75-12.60	Dogs in hoops	15.00-21.00
Locomotives	3.50-15.00	Wagons	15.00-24.00
Express wagons with horse	3.50-15.00		
City cars	8.00-12.00		
Fire engines & men, fancy coloured	8.40		
Locomotives with trains	8.40-12.00		
Farms, fancy coloured	9.00		
Hose carriages	12.00-24.00		

American iron toys

Wheelbarrows	2.00- 2.25	Knives, forks, spoons; penny toys, assorted	1.20- 1.50
Banks	2.00- 4.00	Hammers	3.69- 4.00
Fire-cracker pistols	4.00- 4.50	Sad irons	8.00-24.00

Furniture

Parlour sets	3.50-18.00
Kitchen sets	5.00-19.20

In the wholesale prices quoted:

\$ 1.44- 7.20 per gross	=	\$0.01-0.05 each
0.60- 1.20 per doz. or		
7.20-14.40 per gross	=	0.05-0.10 each
1.20- 2.40 per doz. or		
14.40-28.80 per gross	=	0.10-0.20 each
2.40- 4.80 per doz.	=	0.20-0.40 each
4.80- 9.60 per doz.	=	0.40-0.80 each
9.60-19.20 per doz.	=	0.80-1.60 each

In all cases retail prices would be about 40 per cent higher.

In the same 1874 article, retailers were advised to order cases of assorted toys: \$12.83 for a case of a 250-item assortment, which would give an average wholesale price per item of 5 cents; \$18.25 for a 200-piece assortment, an average of 9 cents per item; \$29.00 for the 120-piece assortment, an average of 26 cents per item; and, \$40.50 per case of 100 pieces of higher quality, or 41 cents per item. For the 1871 value of \$27,000 worth of toys being imported into Canada if we assume the \$18.25, 200-piece assortment price as an average one, that import figure represents about 300,000 toys for a population of a little over 3.5 million people.³

All the different types of toys were made in a variety of sizes, with care and in a wide range of prices to suit different pocketbooks. For one cent one could buy a monkey on a stick, a composition horse on wheels, wooden soldiers on shears, wooden pails, and the American cast iron knife, fork, spoon and penny toys such as cast iron trivets and miniature guns. For five cents one could buy wooden animals on bellows, such as sheep, lions and birds, small china doll heads to make into dolls at home, kid dolls and crying dolls, wooden humming tops, tin buggy with horse and driver, tin banks, and painted tin cups. The most expensive toys were the speaking dolls that said "mama" and "papa" selling for \$1.60 to \$2.40 each and the wooden rocking horses for \$2.25 to \$15.00 each.

Although a great variety of toys was available, the number and source of toys that any particular child might have would depend on the economic circumstances of the

family. For adult workers in manufacturing industries in Nova Scotia in 1878, wages varied from about \$5.00 to \$11.00 a week. Although there may be some regional variations, wages were similar for workers in other provinces. An unskilled labourer might earn \$1.00 a day. Skilled workers, such as furniture makers, foundrymen, forge workers, upholsterers, clothiers, carriage makers, boot and shoe makers, contractors, builders and woodworkers might earn \$7.50 to \$8.00 a week. Stove makers and machinists could earn \$10.80 a week.⁴ For these wage-earning parents it is doubtful that they could spend a day's or even a half day's wages for a toy. Money for toys, if any were available after buying necessities, would probably be for the simple penny or 5 cents variety. In many of these families the children themselves might also be wage-earners. Up to 1880 in some city factories children as young as ten worked ten-hour days to supplement their family's income. There would be little time or energy left for play. Toys for these children might also be homemade or improvised by the children themselves.

On some small farms or in areas of Ontario where land was still being opened for settlement in the 1870s and 1880s, the family might be self-sufficient in supplying its own food, but might not be producing enough of a surplus to generate a cash income. Children on most farms would be expected to help with chores. In this situation again there would be little carefree time for play and toys would likely be homemade.

The middle and higher priced toys in the 1874 list would have found their way to the homes of a growing Canadian middle class of wholesale and retail merchants, importers and shippers, factory owners and prosperous farmers, and into the homes of the professional engineers, doctors, lawyers and government officials.

The kinds of toys found in both homemade and manufactured versions would be in use by children across the economic spectrum. Such toys, including special furniture for children, made in simple versions by hand, were also the staple products of early Canadian toy manufacturers. In their efforts to compete with an already established toy trade from Germany, Great Britain, and

the United States, Canadian companies made those items that were most saleable; these same toys remained best-sellers well into the twentieth century. The most widely produced and most enduring in popularity were toys mimicking the visible physical activities of the adult world: taking produce to market with a horse and cart; riding a horse to visit neighbours; clothing, feeding, and bathing young children; and preparing and serving meals. They reflected what children saw of adult work and it was natural for children to learn by imitating that work, with or without the assistance of toys. The most common toys seem to have been wooden ones, such as hobby horses, rocking horses, horses on wheels, horse or ox and cart, wooden dolls and furniture, sledges and sleighs, and children's chairs. Of a much wider selection, these would be the first toys a child might be expected to have, whether roughly executed and homemade or the most finished and expensive that money could buy.

NOTES

1. See Janet Holmes, "Toys and Games" in D.B. Webster, ed., *The Book of Canadian Antiques* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974).
2. *The Merchantman*, Toronto, vol. 2, no. 4, 1 October 1874, 9-10. This was the only issue the author was able to locate at the time of research.
3. The *Encyclopaedia Canadiana's* article on "Population" gives the 1871 Canadian census figure as 3,689,000.
4. Canada, *Sessional Paper* no. 37, "Reports Relative to Manufacturing Industries in Existence in Canada, 1885," 62-63.

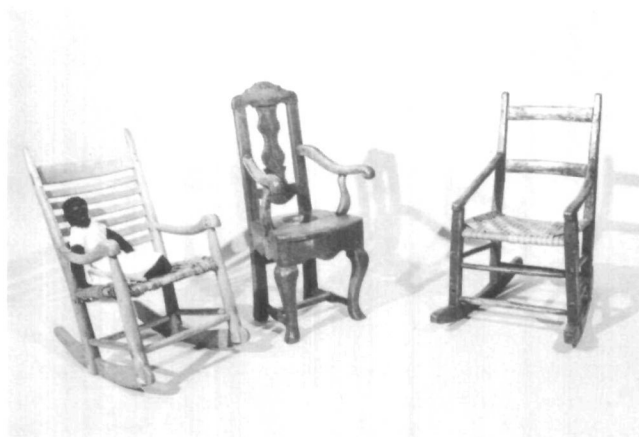


Fig. 1. Three children's chairs from Quebec. The comode chair of butternut and pine was made about 1790-1810, and the two ladder-back rocking chairs about the mid-nineteenth century. Ht: (left) 62 cm, (middle) 75 cm, (right) 66 cm. (Cat. no. 971.25.2; cat. no. 970.374.15, gift of the Laidlaw Foundation; cat. no. 971.25.3; neg. no. 78CAN275.) All artifacts in illustrations, except for those in Figure 7, are from the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario.



Fig. 2. In this watercolour *Boys on Coasters*, painted about 1835-1840 by James Duncan, a Montréal artist, the boys' sleds look like roughly made, scaled-down versions of the sledges that were commonly used to carry produce, such as hay or pigs, to winter market. These sleds are likely homemade, and the scene is similar to one described by Catharine Parr Trail in her description of Christmas in 1838: "A merry day it was for them [our little ones], for our boy Martin had made them a little sledge, and there was a famous snow drift against the garden fence, which was hard packed and frozen smooth and glare - up and down this frozen heap did James and Katie with their playmates glide and roll. It was a Christmas treat to watch those joyous faces, buoyant with mirth, and brightened by the air, through the frosty panes." Taken from "Pioneer Celebrations" in Mary Barber and Flora McPherson, *Christmas in Canada* (Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1971), 17-18. Ht: 23.2 cm. (Sigmund Samuel Collection, cat. no. 951.158.33; neg. no. 64CAN75.)



Fig. 3. Pine sled with elm runners reinforced with iron bands, c. 1860. Signed on the bottom in black crayon: "C.M. Faulkenham/Lunenburg, N.S." It is likely the work of a craft workshop, making sleds for sale to customers. Later factory-made versions were advertised by the T. Eaton Co., Toronto, in their 1901 catalogue, at prices from 20¢ to 65¢ each. Ht. 21 cm. (Cat. no. 984.88.1; neg. no. 85CAN65.)



Fig. 4. Child's sleigh with original black paint and thin red decorative lines. The seat is upholstered in black wool plush edged with black braid. This sleigh was made in Quebec province about 1860, by a craftsman specializing in carriages and sleighs. This sleigh would likely belong to a child whose parents owned a full-size sleigh for their own transportation. Ht: 90 cm. (Cat. no. 972.429.1; neg. no. 78CAN276.)

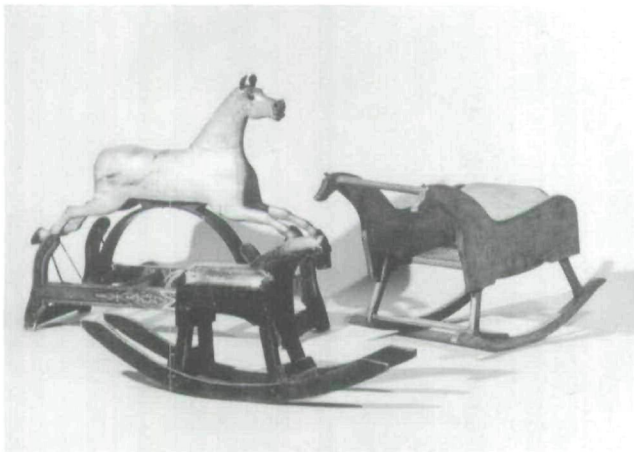


Fig. 5. *Centre:* The black butternut rocking horse with maple rockers made in the mid-nineteenth century in Quebec is likely homemade. Its body has been carved from a single block of wood and it has simple stick legs. Ht: 48 cm. (Cat. no. 971.97.7; neg. no. 78CAN274.)
Right: The "shoo-fly" rocker was first made by an American toy-maker, Jesse Crandall, in 1859. It quickly became popular in both factory and home copies for children too young to balance on a rocking

horse. This one, in pine, was made in Quebec in the late nineteenth century. Ht: 52.5 cm. (Cat. no. 970.374.9; neg. no. 78CAN274; gift of the Laidlaw Foundation.)

Left: The swinging hobby horse gave a forward and back motion but since it remained stationary, it saved the wear and tear on carpets that regular rocking horses were likely to inflict. The body has been pieced together from odd bits of wood and originally would have been painted or covered with leather. These beautifully carved swinging hobby horses were factory products and in the Sears, Roebuck catalogue for 1912 cost from \$2.25 to \$10.50 each. Ht: 72 cm (approx.). (Cat. no. 963.28; neg. no. 78CAN274.)



Fig. 6. *Left to right:* The platform pull-toy horses vary greatly in style, detail and price.

The plush-covered horse pull-toy is described in an 1895 Butler Bros. catalogue as "well made, natural appearance, mane and tail, complete with saddle and harness with stirrups, saddle, blanket and bridle, all on 4-iron-wheel axle platform" at \$4.10 per dozen. It might retail for about 45¢. It is likely German. Ht: 25 cm. (Cat. no. 973.220.5; neg. no. 78CAN259.)

The realistically carved tall wooden horse might have sold at the same price as a similar size plush horse, which was advertised in the same catalogue at \$1.12 each. It was probably made in Germany or the United States. Ht: 42 cm. (Cat. no. 976.339.2; neg. no. 78CAN259; gift of Dr. Michael Pflug.)

A pasteboard horse with wood legs, and a mane and tail, was intended to retail for 5¢. Probably German. Ht: 14 cm. (Cat. no. 973.220.3; neg. no. 78CAN259.)

The painted blue and white dapple horse with horse-hair mane and tail, and platform with wooden wheels came from Quebec, and may have been made there about the 1870s or 1880s. Its eccentric rear axle made the horse dip up and down as he was pulled along. Ht: 29 cm. (Cat. no. 973.64.1; neg. no. 78CAN259.)

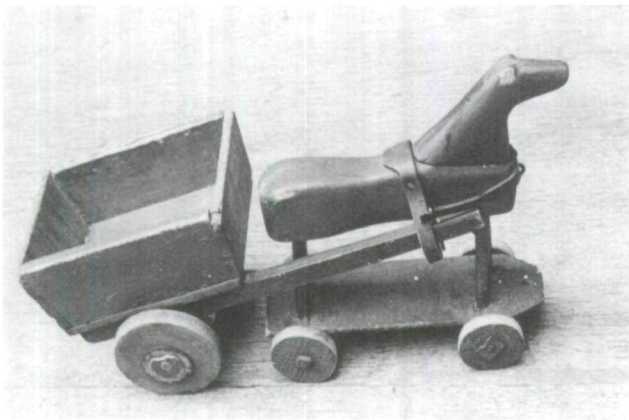


Fig. 7. Several examples of this rather simpler horse and cart, c. 1880, with a plywood platform, painted red/brown, have turned up in Quebec, and may be the work of a toymaker there. Ht: 18 cm (approx.). (Private collection.)



Fig. 10. *Left:* Some American factories imported doll parts; the china heads, arms and legs made in Germany were assembled in their own factories. This doll is an early mechanical doll, called the "Autoperipatetikos" (automatic walking doll) by her inventor, Enoch Rice Morrison. The doll was patented in July 1862 in the United States. It works with a simple gear and wind-up spring and uses an imported German china head. Ht: 23 cm. (Cat. no. 961.71a&b; neg. no. 78CAN86; gift of Mr. F.R. Jeffrey.)
Right: This blonde mechanical doll with small baby also works with a wind-up gear mechanism and was made by Armand Marseilles, Germany, about 1920. (Cat. no. 977.204; neg. no. 78CAN86; gift of Miss Margaret Bruce.)

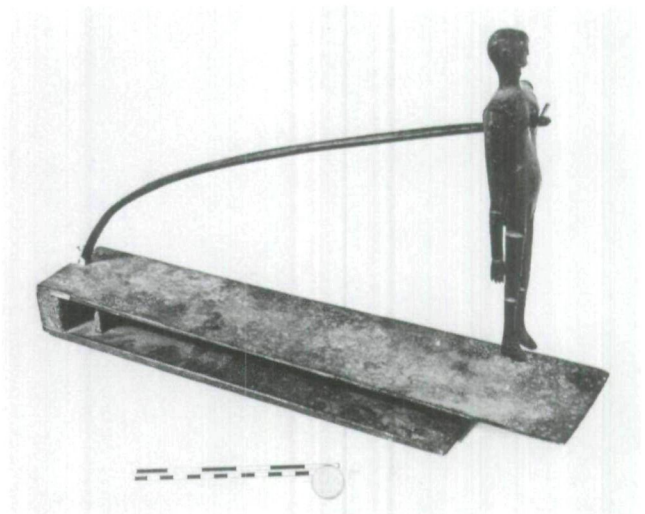


Fig. 8. Simple Dutch dolls that sold for a penny were made in a single piece with unmovable arms and legs. Others were jointed, and might also be attached to sticks or platforms, as this one is, to make a dancing doll. Most of these simple wooden jointed dolls likely came from Sonneberg, Germany, the centre for the manufacture of many varieties of wooden toys. It is a type of doll that was also often whittled out in homemade versions. This doll may have been made in Quebec in the late nineteenth century. Ht of doll: 24 cm. (Cat. no. 972.411.2; neg. no. 06.26.72/3.)



Fig. 9. Rag dolls, like this black rag doll, c. 1870, from the Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia, were made at home from available scraps of material. Machine-stitched black twill weave body with persian lamb hair, white wool dress with crocheted edging. Ht: 44.5 cm. (Cat. no. 977.292.2a&b; neg. no. 80CAN34.)