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CHILDHOOD THROUGH THE AGES

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Introduction

This chapter examines the ways that childhood has been studied by historians. It looks at the origins of the historical study of childhood, picks out some of the issues which have been seen as important and then goes on to give one account of the changing nature of childhood in the period since the Middle Ages.

Origins

Two books can be identified as starting points for the study of childhood in history. First and most significantly, Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood* was initially published in French in 1960 and was translated into English in 1962. Its appearance marked the beginning of the systematic study of the history of childhood.

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It is perhaps hardly surprising that this sub-discipline should originate in France. After the Second World War the *Annales* school of history, which was extremely popular in France, stressed the need for new approaches to the study of society by historians. Ariès was a leading protagonist of this school and sought to open up a whole new field of enquiry by turning his attention to the history of childhood.

In the book, which remains influential today, he came up with several hypotheses. First, he stressed the extent to which there was little precision during the mediaeval period in respect of counting things such as years of age. One result of this was that the idea of childhood remained ill-defined, if recognised at all, and was not in any sense quantified with reference to any particular age or stages of development. He found numerous examples of the brutal treatment of children and of their being introduced to an adult world at a very early age through both sexual play and exploitation and as a commodity within the labour market. Ariès went on to argue that during the early modern period, most probably the seventeenth century, although most social groups continued to be very imprecise in the use of their term 'child', it became possible to discern a new usage, first among the middle classes, by which 'childhood' began to assume some of its modern meanings. Ariès argued that somewhere between the thirteenth century and modern times 'childhood' was discovered. Whereas during the Middle Ages children were depicted and seen as being small adults by the eighteenth century there was a general understanding that 'childhood' meant a stage of life which was widely recognised in a number of ways. This involved the coming of children's clothing, distinctive from that of adults, an end to their being depicted as small adults in books and illustrations, as well as the appearance and wider recognition of children's games and pastimes and a growing sense of the innocence of childhood.

There were several reasons why Ariès arguments proved very persuasive and are still taken seriously. First, as he pointed out, it was the common lot of humankind that a significant proportion of infants did not survive to adulthood. In many societies more than a half of the child population was lost through one cause or another. He suggested that the likelihood of losing children made it very difficult for parents at earlier times to draw too close to their children or to sentimentalise them lest they suffer emotional torment at their likely loss. Although this argument is conjectural, it carries some weight for earlier historical periods.

It should be remembered too that in most societies children were needed as part of the workforce to sustain the economy. In this context it would have been an inappropriate luxury to spend too much dwelling on the particular needs of childhood. Only with the coming of affluence and the appearance of a more comfortable middle class did it become possible to postpone the entry of some children to the labour market thus allowing a growing number of parents to consider their offspring as 'children' in the modern sense. In brief Ariès located the appearance of childhood within the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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Ariès work sparked off an interest in the history of childhood among historians and a growing number of authors began to focus on this phenomenon. In 1974 an American scholar, Lloyd DeMause, brought together a collection of essays under the title *The History of Childhood*. Here, in a lengthy introductory chapter on the evolution of childhood, DeMause developed his 'psychogenic theory of childhood' and set about turning Ariès' ideas on their head by suggesting that childhood, in particular the way in which children were treated by adults, was central to any understanding of the human past. He argued that the habits and practices which were imposed on children throughout history offered the only meaningful explanation of how they subsequently performed as adults. Therefore, DeMause argued, it is not possible to understand human history without first understanding how the main protagonists had been reared: the kind of childhood they had experienced. He extended this argument to suggest that the maltreatment of children was a constant factor in human history and explained much of the social involvement of adults at a later stage in their lives.

DeMause remains active to the present day and continues to disseminate his ideas. He is currently actively involved in debates in a website exchange on the history of childhood and is still seeking, almost 30 years after his initial pronouncements, to publicise the importance of understanding child psychology in history. His ideas have been enormously influential and certainly have had the effect of 'psychologising' the study of childhood.

Underlying issues

As the study of childhood developed during the years that followed a number of underlying issues quickly became evident. It is important for anyone approaching the history of childhood to have some awareness of these issues and to have thought through their own beliefs in respect of each of them.

First, running through European history there is a tension between two opposed views of childhood which appear to contradict each other. On the one hand, there is a vast literature which suggests that the child is at birth intrinsically evil, or at least in need of improvement, and that it is the duty of parents and adults to school the child, to get rid of unfortunate characteristics and behaviours and, in brief, to redeem it so that it can become an effective adult. This view is, of course, underpinned by much Christian literature which stresses the need for redemption and the extent to which humankind is innately evil. The idea that humankind is innately wicked is an enduring and pervasive one and it has underpinned much of the thinking about childhood during the last two millennia.

Set against this, quite contradictorily, is the view which also is frequently found in European literature that children are born innocent but are corrupted by their growing

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experience of and acquaintance with the adult world. Ironically, this thread can also be discerned within the Christian church. For example, during the Middle Ages, it was usual at religious ceremonies to dress children in white as a symbol of their innocence.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in particular, a school of literature appeared which stressed the innocence of the child. Jean Jacques Rousseau's book *Emile* (1762) took this view, as did Wordsworth who subscribed to the neo-Platonist view that it was possible to look back to an age of innocence during which various insights into the nature of being were possible which were denied the corrupted adult:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
 The earth, and every common sight,
 To me did seem
 Apparell'd in celestial light,
 The glory and the freshness of a dream.
 It is not now as it hath been of yore; –
 Turn wheresoe'er I may,
 By night or day,
 The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

In his 'Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', from which these words are taken, Wordsworth reflected on the loss of childish innocence and the loss of insight and understanding that went with it. These two views of childhood appear to be mutually contradictory, and yet they have stood against each other for the best part of two millennia.

A second underlying issue is the question of the extent to which childhood has been socially constructed in history or whether it is a stage of life which all human beings necessarily pass through. On the one hand, much recent child psychology, such as the work of Piaget, would suggest that there are stages of development through which all children must pass on their journey to adulthood. Against this is the consideration that in many contexts childhood has necessarily been abbreviated and curtailed allowing no possibility of a childhood in the form that we currently understand it. In these historical contexts, does it make sense to talk of childhood as though it were comparable, for the vast majority of children, with the experiences undergone by a modern day child? Equally, there is in recent times, an idealisation of childhood in books, films and on television which suggest to any thinking observer that childhood may be being redefined as well as described by these treatments. The possibility of the social construction of childhood is one which has to be to the fore in the thinking of any historian of childhood.

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A third issue is the question of what adult characteristics are socially constructed during childhood. Central to this is the question of gender. Are the differences and distinctions in male and female adult behaviour and the differing roles ascribed to them within society the result of differing hormones and a differing genetic endowment or are they the result of the social conditioning which takes place during the early years? What other adult characteristics and attitudes can be shown to be, to some extent at least, moulded during childhood? Is personality ultimately genetic or socially conditioned? These are all questions which can be illuminated by the study of the emergence of childhood as a historical phenomenon.

Fourthly, it is important to bear in mind the extent to which childhood may differ and may have differed in history in differing locations. There are today very clear contrasts between the Developed World, the Developing World and the Third World in respect of experiences which children undergo. It is likely that this has always been the case. These variations in experience exist both across continents and countries and within individual nations. In Britain, for example, during the period of industrialisation, childhood meant different things in differing locations depending upon particular local patterns of industrialisation. These contrasts persist to the present time and some would say have always been there. It is important for anyone approaching the history of childhood to bear this consideration in mind and to have a sense of the limits which have to be placed on any generalisation. This also gives rise to the possibility of fascinating local studies which unearth local experiences of childhood which have been lost or are as yet unknown to historians.

A framework for understanding the history of childhood

As the study of the history of childhood has become more extensive during the past thirty years, it has become possible to distinguish a number of key elements in the historical development of childhood which, together, constitute a framework which helps us to conceptualise childhood over the past four or five centuries. First, a number of detailed studies have thrown far greater light than ever before on the relative ill treatment of children across Europe during the Mediaeval period (Shahar, 1990; Schultz, 1995). This work has led us to a greater realisation of the significance for childhood of key social changes that took place in Britain during the sixteenth century. The growth of the wool trade and the swift growth of a number of towns in response to this meant that a growing number of merchants and yeoman farmers could afford, for the first time, to build larger homes than had been usual throughout the Middle Ages. These buildings often incorporated a first floor to enable separate sleeping arrangements for parents and children. This kind of domestic

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arrangement was unknown before and was critical for the development of the family and of childhood since it instituted in a growing number of homes for the first time a concept of privacy. It also made it easier for the children to be separately identified and treated differently in a number of respects within the home. This subtle but very significant shift tied in with other changes that were going on in society. A restructuring of apprenticeship and a complete restructuring of the education system meant that the preparation for work became far more codified and far better organised during the sixteenth century than had ever been the case before. Society was beginning to put in place the mechanisms for the codification and organisation of childhood. It is no coincidence that in 1545 Thomas Phayre wrote the first English book on paediatrics, *The Regiment of Life*. In addition, at this time, the Reformation meant not only the redirection of the religious life of Northern Europe but also that education itself became far more secular than had previously been the case. This too had a massive impact upon the lot of many children. Another key development at the end of the century was the 1598 Poor Relief Act which, for the first time, made poor children the responsibility of the Parish. The parochial overseers of the poor became for the next three centuries those who took responsibility for the welfare of children whenever parenting failed or was absent. This was to determine for ever the way in which children were perceived and treated in Britain.

Nonetheless, although there was a prospect of some kind of schooling for a minority of the luckier ones, for the vast majority of children life remained hard. In many rural areas over the next two centuries gang systems of agricultural labour developed with women and children being used for weeding, stone picking, root gathering and other menial tasks. In other parts of Britain local trades such as lace making, hosiery, straw plaiting, glove making and shoe making, each generated a demand for unskilled child labour. Some industries, such as the making of straw hats in Bedfordshire and other parts of the Home Counties, were almost entirely dependent upon child labour. The textile industries placed particular demands on children, whether it was woollen manufacture in West Yorkshire, East Anglia or the West Country or lace manufacture in some Midlands towns. The well-established tradition of out-working by which much of the manufacturing took place small-scale in the homes of weavers and spinners led to a situation in which children were notoriously exploited for their nimble fingers and their availability. By the end of the eighteenth century there was hardly any corner of Britain in which children were not being exploited on a vast scale for one form or other of cheap labour (Horn, 1994).

Set against this, the responsibility of the Parish to take care of orphaned and penurious children resulted in a significant network of charity schools. From 1699 these were co-ordinated and founded by the Society for Promotion of Christian Knowledge with a welter of new foundations in England down to 1740. By the mid-eighteenth century there was hardly any middle-sized town in England which did not have its 'blue coat' or charity school, the blue uniforms being a token of the poverty of the

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children who were being cared for. Without exception the supporters of these schools stressed the need for a basic education to be provided. Isaac Watts wrote in 1724:

there are none of these poor who are, or ought to be, bred up to such an accomplished skill in writing and accounts as to be qualified for superior posts: except here and there a single lad whose bright genius and constant application and industry have outrun all his fellows.

The tradition that the education of the poor should not extend beyond the 'three Rs' and the catechism was well established in these charity schools during the eighteenth century.

If the lot of the poor child was hard during the early modern period, the coming of industrialisation served only to make it worse. Industrialisation, involving the appearance of factories and a rapid increase in population and in the size of the towns and cities generated a situation which was too tempting for unscrupulous employers to resist. In large towns, such as London, clergymen and parish officers realised they had a new opportunity to solve the problem of child pauperism. Equally, the factory owners saw the possibility of gaining a new and remarkably cheap labour force from the towns. The consequence was that literally thousands of young orphaned children were taken long distances from their homes and confined in near prison conditions for long hours of industrial labour. At the start of the nineteenth century this traffic in children had passed its peak, but still during the first decade of the century over 2,000 pauper apprentices were sent from London to work in a variety of textile mills, three-quarters of them going into the cotton industry. Most of these were below the age of 11 (Horn 1994: 18–34). Parish children were a key source of labour enabling the swift expansion of industrialisation between 1750 and 1850. Many of the tasks they did were dangerous and the conditions in which they lived, usually in apprentice houses, were overcrowded and unhealthy. Survival rates were dreadful and those that did make it to adulthood were often stunted, puny and unhealthy. Conditions in other industries such as mining were hardly any better and in some cases worse.

All of this led to a relatively new construction during the nineteenth century: the child as the object of pity or of philanthropy. A growing number of reformers such as Peel and Wilberforce, alarmed at the conditions in which children were working in the factories, set about the establishment of legislation which would control these practices. The outcome was, by the end of the century, a plethora of Acts of Parliament which made it increasingly difficult for unscrupulous employers to exploit children as had been the case a hundred years before. This was the first serious engagement of the state in its modern form with children. By controlling the conditions of their employment and seeking to set minimum standards, the state, perhaps unwittingly, set itself up as the ultimate arbiter of the well-being of children. The other leg of this nineteenth-century reform movement was the

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drive to establish systems of popular education which would be increasingly accessible to all and ultimately universal. By 1870 provisions were in place for every child in England and Wales to be served by elementary schools and by 1891 schooling was de facto compulsory for all except the children of itinerant workers such as bargees and travelling showmen (Stephens, 1998).

But for much of the century the emphasis was on a schooling that was basic and confined in reality to reading, writing, arithmetic and the catechism. As Andrew Bell, one of the founders of the monitorial system of elementary education, observed in his book *The Madras School* in 1808:

it is not proposed that the children of the poor be educated in an expensive manner or be taught to write or cypher. Utopian schemes for the universal diffusion of general knowledge would soon realise the fable of the belly and the other members of the body and confound that distinction of ranks and classes of society on which the general welfare hinges ... There is a risk of elevating by an indiscriminate education, the minds of those doomed to the drudgery of daily labour above their conditions and thereby rendering them discontented and unhappy in their lot.

Thus, in practice, the coming of popular education seems to have been driven as much by a determination to impose some kind of social control as by any spirit of charity. It is surely no coincidence that regular hours, submission to the demands of the bell, and the ready acceptance of a system of rewards and punishment (all characteristics of the industrial system) were central elements in what was offered to children through elementary schools throughout the nineteenth century. Only towards the end of the century, with a series of extensions to the revised code which had been introduced in 1862, was there a prospect of a fuller education for the ordinary child.

It is impossible to understate the significance of universal schooling for understandings of childhood. First, schooling enabled childhood to be perceived as a set of stages through which young people progressed naturally: nursery, infant, junior and secondary. The processes of transition defined and identified what was thought to be taking place. Further, schooling in this way involved a standardisation of childhood which otherwise would not have happened. It became increasingly easy for commentators, policy-makers and critics to identify templates of childhood to which 'template' solutions could be applied. One spin-off from this was the identification of the 'normal'. In 1956, C. W. Valentine wrote a book entitled *The Normal Child* reflecting these perceptions.

Moreover, schooling enabled a heightening and codification of the gendering of childhood. Boys and girls were separated from an early age in classrooms, into different schools and into differing curricula routes. All of this made it far easier to fashion 'little women' and 'little men' through the education system. An extreme version of this was the code of masculinity which was perpetrated in the boys' preparatory schools and public schools (Heward, 1988). These schools developed during the

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Victorian period and have persisted. They provide an elite education for a privileged few (roughly 7% of the population) who, among other things, acquire distinct perceptions of their gender roles through their schooling. Conversely, the schools for girls, which grew greatly in number at the start of the twentieth century, marketed their own versions of 'domesticity' and 'femininity' in order to prove attractive to potential fee-paying parents (Dyhouse 1989). Thus, schooling meant gendering. The processes that were set in train with the coming of industrialisation appear, in retrospect, to be almost irreversible.

A third concomitant of universal schooling was the discovery of child poverty towards the end of the nineteenth century. The success of school attendance officers appointed by the School Boards after 1870 in getting the vast majority of the child population into schools meant that teachers were brought abruptly face-to-face with the spectre of urban poverty. It was an issue that was seized on by the nascent socialist movement. Two investigators, Charles Booth, a Liverpool shipowner and Seebohm Rowntree independently investigated the extent of poverty in London and York. Their findings, which were published at the turn of the twentieth century were shattering in their impact. In both cities they found that about one-third of the population was living below the poverty line but, equally significantly in our context, that it was possible to identify cycles of poverty during one individual's lifetime. Those families most likely to fall into poverty were those with large numbers of children. Hence, the number of children living in poverty at the beginning of the twentieth century was disproportionately higher than the overall percentage in poverty. These findings coincided with the realisation of the ill-health of the urban proletariat during the recruiting campaign for the Boer War. Even worse, it became evident that child poverty correlated with ill-health. Children in poverty were far more likely to be suffering from tuberculosis, to die of scarlet fever or to suffer dental caries. All of this became evident as a direct result of universal schooling and of politically inspired, privately funded research projects (Englander and O' Day, 1995).

The outcome was a permanently changed view of the ways in which the state should deal with the child. At the beginning of the twentieth century the medical inspection of school children was introduced. At the same time, a school meals programme was allowed by Parliament. In addition, it became clear that in future the process of educating children was to involve far more than instruction. A number of welfare initiatives were intended to alleviate the lot of poor and unhealthy urban children. The first of these was the Open Air School movement which took off during the Edwardian period and resulted, by the time of the First World War, in most large cities having Open Air Recovery Schools (usually for tubercular children) in rural locations away from the urban centres.

One other significant result of the discovery of child poverty was the appearance of a Child Study movement in the late nineteenth century. In 1895 James Sully produced a book entitled *Studies in Childhood*. This appeared at exactly the moment that

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organisations were being set up in both England and America to study children and the child's mind. Between 1889 and 1906 the medical profession organised five large-scale enquiries into the condition of children in London alone. In 1894 the Child Study Association was set up. Two years later, the more medically oriented Childhood Society was established. This immediately launched a journal, *The Paidologist*. During the Edwardian period, these two organisations merged and in 1907 they formed the Child Study Society (Hendrick, 1994). In these initiatives we can see the origins of child psychology in modern Britain. Many of the early leaders in the child psychology movement were members of one or other of these organisations.

However, in Britain the child study movement took a particular slant as a result of the foundation of the Eugenics Society, a London-based organisation committed to racial improvement. Founded by Charles Galton at the turn of the century, this quickly became the basis of an international movement. The Galton Laboratory was established in 1905 at the University College London where Galton's collaborator, Karl Pearson, set about experimental work on the human mind. Several of the pioneers of child psychology were attracted to the Eugenics movement, perhaps most notably Cyril Burt. Within a few years Burt and his associates, working from within the Eugenics Society, had shifted child psychology in Britain to a position where it was very firmly focused on intelligence testing and on the separation and streaming of children rather than on the identification of a whole range of psychological needs (Hearnshaw, 1979). Britain became one of the 'stamping-grounds' for early intelligence tests and over a forty-year period before the Second World War most Local Education Authorities were beginning to use intelligence tests to diagnose children for entry to schools of one type or another (Wooldridge, 1994). It is possible, to greater or lesser degree, to show that each of these initiatives stemmed in large part from the coming of universal schooling.

Meanwhile, other agencies were appearing which would work to stereotype and to idealise childhood. The popular press emerged in its modern form in the years following the foundation of the *Daily Mail* in 1896 and universal schooling, leading to universal literacy resulted in a mass reading public which enabled a vast growth in book publishing at the turn of the twentieth century. Books were written about children, and for them (Turner, 1976). A number of authors from the mid-Victorian period onwards established their reputation on writing at least some of their major works for children: G. A. Henty, Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, C. M. Ballantyne, Robert Louis Stevenson, Anna Sewell, to name but a few. They conjured a world in which children were brave, adventurous, loyal and patriotic. They provided the stereotypes which enabled children to have an image of what they were meant to be and which at the same time offered the adult world a stereotype of childhood which they found acceptable and worthwhile. This stylisation of childhood has continued apace during the intervening 100 years. New

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agencies such as radio, television, popular film and, more recently, the record, tape and CD have all offered images of childhood which are widely admired and extremely influential. In brief, during the period since the 1880s agencies have appeared which are deeply influential in determining society's view of childhood. If schooling began the process of standardisation and stereotyping, the media have extended and confirmed it.

More recently, the range of areas in which the state has felt it appropriate to intervene towards children has expanded dramatically. Perhaps the first signals of this were apparent when schemes to send orphaned Dr Barnado's children to Australia and Canada became popular during the inter-war years (Bean and Melville, 1990). This preparedness to arbitrarily move large numbers of children in what was perceived to be their own interests was followed by the evacuation scheme introduced in 1939 to save urban children from the perils of a German bombing campaign. This scheme proved largely ineffective, since thousands of children and their parents simply returned to their own homes rather than sit the war out in strange rural locations, but it was evidence of the preparedness of the state to take far wider responsibility for the well-being of children. Since then the expansion of the work of Juvenile Courts, the 'statementing' of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties in schools, the accretions to the powers of the Youth Service and the introduction of Young Offender schemes are all clear tokens of the preparedness of the state to take responsibility for more or less every aspect of the life of the child (Pilcher and Wagg, 1996).

Conclusion

Thus, in brief, what emerges from this sketch of key developments in the history of childhood over the last 200 years is that childhood does appear to have changed irreversibly, that the powers of society to govern and control childhood have been greatly enhanced, and in the process childhood itself seems to have become irreversibly stereotyped. All of this has generated a vast research literature, some of which is hinted at in the references.

This phenomenon of the emergence of childhood as a historical phenomenon also raises questions for anyone embarking on a study of the early years. Whatever aspect of childhood is being examined, it is always important to bear in mind the historical context within which we work today and the historical influences which have come to bear on childhood. These are still working themselves out in adult perceptions of children and in the self-images that children acquire as they grow up. The study of the history of childhood is necessarily central to any proper understanding of what it means to be a child at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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Questions and exercises

- 1 Explore the books in the reading list which deal with the history of childhood to find out how far you agree with the ideas in this chapter. Be ready to incorporate your growing knowledge of the history of childhood into your other work on this course.
- 2 Consider how far and in what ways childhood as you know it today has been conditioned by this historical legacy.

Further reading

Ariès (1962) is in some ways the best introduction to the subject – after all, this was the book that established the discipline. DeMause (1974) is a stimulating exploration of the psychological aspects of the subject, with links to other elements of early childhood studies. Heywood (2001) is the best recent summary of the field. Cunningham (2006) is a wonderfully accessible and expert guide to the history of British childhood, and comes with an accompanying CD which is highly recommended.
