Autumn
15
1992

ReFresh

Recent Findings of Research in Economic & Social History

Children are rarely in a position to write their own history. Historical perceptions of children and childhood are generally based on adult perspectives. Here Harry Hendrick argues that children have received inadequate attention in history and reviews the recently emerging interest in historical concepts of childhood and the position of the child in society and the family

Children and Childhood

As women have been 'hidden from history', so children have been 'kept from history'. Prior to the 1970s very little had been written about either children as people or childhood as a condition, and even at the present time there are barely more than half a dozen English language general histories of either focus. There are child-centred studies of particular topics such as emigration, factory labour, literature, infanticide, health, and penal reform, but they add up to probably less than thirty books. It is true that children have made regular if perfunctory appearances in histories of the industrial revolution, of the education system, and of the evolution of the welfare state, although only family history has made any attempt to treat them as serious (though passive) historical figures. Moreover, these histories usually deal with adult attitudes to children, rather than the young people themselves. Nevertheless, during the last twenty years, scholars have developed three principal areas of interest and each will be considered in turn: the concept of childhood; child welfare and social policy; and parent-child relations.

The concept of childhood

There are two main groups of writings on the concept of childhood. Those of medieval and early modern historians concerned with whether or not such a concept existed at all; that is, whether there was a recognition that children were *different* prior to the seventeenth century. There are also those historians who have proposed a *developing* concept in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In most respects, as we shall see, these two emphases are unrelated in terms both of evidence and conclusions.

Philippe Aries initiated the debate with his famous statement that 'in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist'[1]. Not long after ‘a tardy weaning (... at about the age of seven)', he says, the child entered the adult world. In the sixteenth century, he continues, adults were beginning to see children as a 'source of amusement and relaxation', but not until the seventeenth century did the difference between the two ages begin to be appreciated. By the mid-eighteenth century a modern concept had emerged with the child occupying a central place in the family. Much of the evidence for this thesis was derived from the visual arts, literary texts and manuals, styles of dress, references to the child as 'it', and the use of the names of dead children for later births in the same family.

Over the years numerous scholars have made a comprehensive critique of Aries. They have levelled four charges against him. Firstly, that his data are either unrepresentative or unreliable. Secondly, that he takes evidence out of context, confuses prescription with practice, and uses atypical examples. Thirdly, that he implicitly denies the immutability of the special needs of children, especially small children, for food, clothing, shelter, affection and conversation. Fourthly, that he puts undue emphasis on the writings of moralists and educationalists while saying little about economic and political factors.

While his significance has been undermined, Aries remains an important figure in the historiography of childhood because he not only drew attention to the possibility of a developmental notion of childhood, but also that in so doing he focused on the social significance of children within the family, on the meaning of 'the family', and most controversially, on the nature of the parent-child relationship. As to whether the *idea* of childhood existed in the medieval period, the current consensus is that although prior to the seventeenth century children were viewed differently from today, there nevertheless existed a perception of their distinctiveness.

Modern historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have plotted not so much the sudden emergence of a dramatic and controversial concept, as the continuing transformation or *reconstruction of* competing and often class-based perceptions, at least until the First World War. Since the 1970s, drawing on parliamentary papers, official documents, medical records, contemporary writings, manuscript collections, and the annals of philanthropic societies, a steady accumulation of writings has focused attention on the evolutionary and, therefore, changing nature of childhood. The means by which this process occurred are attributed to the introduction of child-labour legislation in the 1830s; the reconceptuahsation of juvenile delinquency in the 1850s; the introduction of compulsory schooling in the 1870s; the raising of the age of consent for girls in the 1880s; the beginnings of the Child-Study movement in the 1890s; and the interest of medics and psycho-medics in various aspects of child life from the 1890s onwards. Although no general over-all thesis has been advanced, two aspects of the evolution have been emphasized: the remaking of working-class childhood (1880-1914), and the *sacralization* of children - a profound transformation in their economic and sentimental value - as they ceased to be wage-eamers and became school-pupils (1870-1930).[5,14,18]

Certain important and related conclusions have been deduced from these changes. Firstly, the constructions or reconstructions were usually associated with social policy legislation, ostensibly enacted for the pro-

Harry Hendrick is Senior Lecturer in British Social History at Oxford Polytechnic. He is the author of *Images of Youth, Age, Class and the Male Youth Problem, 1880-1920* (1990), and a forthcoming textbook, *Child Welfare in England, 1872 to the Present.*

protection of working-class children [6,9]. Secondly, while many of the welfare services often bestowed genuine benefits on children, they also tended to result in their having less freedom of behaviour and thought. Thirdly, children came increasingly under the gaze (nearly always critical) of medicine, education, welfare and the law. Fourthly, a maturing bourgeois *domestic ideal* more or less successfully patterned different kinds of childhood into a single, reassuring and comprehensive child 'nature'.

During its emergence, this socially constructed 'natural' childhood gradually was used to portray children as innocent, ignorant, dependent, vulnerable, generally incompetent and in need of protection and discipline. In effect, between c.1800 and 1914, not only was the duration of childhood as a stage of life extended, but also its status as a concept was universalized throughout social classes and geo- graphical regions.

The reasons for this process were diverse but can be easily recognized within an economic, social and political framework. Among the more important influences were industrialization and the changing labour market, urbanization and class relations, ideas of respectability and domestic order, a stable political and social culture, and demands for literacy and numeracy. Such a framework, whatever its particular historical form, either wholly or in part, is always ultimately responsible for structuring age relations.

Children and social policy

Until the 1980s British scholars had done very little research in this area. Earlier writings concentrated on administrative histories of education, penal reform, and the development of provision for children in local authority care.[6,9] The sources were normally national and local government records, involved, records of philanthropic societies and printed primary texts, such as sociological investigations and medical and scientific literature.

However varied the evidence, the story told in nearly all the accounts has been of children who were beneficiaries of enlightened social policies. This was an assumption more than a fact, since there were few attempts to investigate the reality behind policy. These works were usually uncritical of the initiating social theories and political developments, and of social work practice. The studies had nothing to say about the child's perspective or about the effect of the legislation on the concept of childhood, nor was the child seen as a participant in any way.

Over the last twenty or so years this rather static interpretation has begun to be challenged. Led by North American scholars, and using numerous but mainly conventional primary and secondary materials, recent publications have looked more skeptically at what was done to, and said about, children. These have broadened and deepened our understanding. One of the largest and most promising areas of research is broadly defined as child health, which includes medical ideologies, child guidance, diseases, and school medical inspection treatment.[3] But as yet only Stephen Humphries has shown anything of children's experience through the critical revelations from his respondents of life in schools, orphanages and reformatories, institutions erected under seemingly 'progressive' legislation.[81 Unlike orthodox accounts, this technique provides (albeit through memory) the recipient's *personal* appraisal of the effects of social policy.

Age-relations: attitudes and behaviour of one age group towards another.
Infanticide: the killing of infants by, or with the consent of, the parents.
Paternalism: the principle of acting in a way like that of a father towards his children.
Swaddling: swathing an infant in bandages to restrain its movements and quieten it.
Wet nursing: breast feeding, generally for money.

Although children's perceptions remain elusive, we can make the following observations. Firstly, a little work has been done on what were often different classroom experiences of girls and boys, and on their resistance to the authoritarianism of school. Secondly, the constructions and reconstructions of childhood since around 1800 were normally linked to health and welfare statutes: juvenile delinquency, compulsory education, the age of consent for sexual intercourse, care proceedings, and psycho-medical treatment. This legislation, it is now appreciated, extended adult supervision and control, and formalized a *modern* concept

The illustration on this page and the next indicate some possible class-based differences in the nineteenth century experiences of childhood. This picture of workhouse children is by the famous children's illustrator, Cadecott. It shows the standard, shapeless uniform worn, and hair cropped short to inhibit lice, thus hinting at the de-humanising process experienced by pauper children. Source: Mrs Edwing, *Daddy Darwin's*

of childhood. Thirdly, many of these acts were only indirectly, incidentally or partially concerned with bettering children's lives. Of more immediate interest, very often, were national political and economic objectives, and the largely middle-class desire to *protect* society from those children who were seen as either moral or social threats. Fourthly, as age relations responded to new formations, so simultaneously the state wrought a particularly influential relationship with children as it turned into their guarantor of safety, ultimately responsible for their health, education, discipline, and upbringing. To some degree this was recognized in earlier historical works, but recent research which is critical of the state's motives, has shown that its existence was more widespread than previously believed. What these writings confirm is what has long been recognized in the history of social policy, but only recently in the history of childhood and youth, namely that the evolution of social policy cannot be interpreted simply in terms of altruism and a linear progress. Thus we conclude that throughout the nineteenth and for much of the twentieth century, in many respects children have been the subjects of a repressive patemalism.[4]

The parent-child relationship

a. c.1400-1700. **'The Dark Legend'.** When Aries wrote that medieval society had no concept of childhood, he went on to add 'this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children

However, it is the theme of harsh, distant and formal parent-child relations, gradually becoming more affectionate and relaxed that has dominated this debate. Unfortunately, the positions - often littered with contradictory statements among historians of the same general outlook - have been stated in the extreme. From a wide variety of sources a so-called 'dark legend' of childhood has been propagated. It claims, in varying degrees of subtlety, that until approximately the end of the seventeenth century children were neglected, brutalized, starved of affection, and that their deaths were met with 'apparent absence of bereavement'.

'Good mothering', says Edward Shorter, in a burst of wild rhetoric, was 'an invention of modernization'.[13] These mothers, however, were not monsters. 'If they lack an articulate sense of maternal love, it

was because they were forced by material circumstances and community attitudes to subordinate infant welfare to other objectives'. Besides Aries and Shorter, the most influential work has been that of Lawrence Stone.[15] In the early modem period, he says, children were subject to strict parenting, which resorted to frequent and brutal corporal punishment, formal and affectionless relations, as indicated by swaddling and wet-nursing, a desire to break the will of the child, and a marked indifference to infant death. Between 1660-1800, however, there was a remarkable change in attitudes to children. Families of the professional and landed classes, became child-oriented, affectionate, recognizing the uniqueness of children and rearing them with a permissive mode of child care. These humane attitudes were temporarily lost in the early nineteenth century but reappeared during the mid-Victorian period. The emphasis in these accounts in on historical change, on discontinuity rather than continuity, and on the brutality and/or indifference of parents.

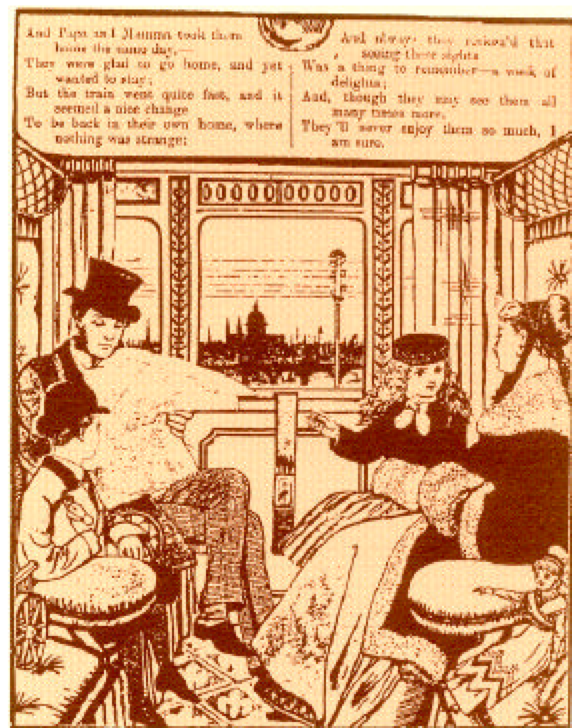
The reasons for the alleged indifference and harsh parental treatment of children has been variously attributed to abandonment, wet-nursing, swaddling, infanticide, and the absence of children from home while serving apprenticeships in other households. Other factors said to be likely to encourage a formal, distant and repressive relationship, at different times, include the concept of Original Sin, a high infant mortality rate, religious and moral theories of child development, an extended family structure, the rise of a formal education system, and authoritarian state policies. The causes of the change in attitude to, and treatment of, children have been grouped into five main themes: the emergence of an education system; changes in family structure; the rise of capitalism; increasing maturity of parents; and the emergence of a spirit of benevolence.

b. **The critics.** The critique, which started in the 1970s and gathered momentum in the 1980s, is not unanimous on every point. Nor has it altogether refuted the idea of *changing* child-rearing practices. But it has argued against the view that in previous centuries European parents were harsh, uncaring, 'loveless' and indifferent. For the most part the sources used are not particularly new, except for a greater use of diaries and autobiographies and a tendency to refer to comparative literature from anthropology, biomedicine, and psychology in order to argue for the immutability of parental love and affection.

These scholars contradicted almost everything their predecessors had claimed were characteristics of parent-child relations. The earlier received wisdom was turned on its head in virtually every sense. Swaddling was no longer evidence of a distant uncaring attitude, but was popular because mothers believed it would keep their children from harm; wet-nursing ceased to be a sign of indifference, instead it occurred very infrequently and owed more to particular economic circumstances of mothers; corporal punishment was relatively rare, hardly ever brutal, and usually accompanied by the parents' heavy heart; and in general children were reared in a loving atmosphere. In desperation, or exasperation, critics turned to anthropology to find examples of tribes- people succouring and indulging their young. This helped them to conclude that medieval peasants, though poor and illiterate, also loved their children. The course of this counter-attack has been marked by a self- righteous tone as, for example, by Linda Pollock, who impugned the motives of the 'pessimistic' writers, and accused them of 'errors, distortion and misinterpretation'.[10]

A noticeable feature of the critics' approach is their portrayal of apparently oppressive child-raising practices, such as swaddling and corporal punishment, as having been imposed on children for their own good. They are apt to sympathize with the problems of parenthood, rather than the trials of childhood, and to colour parental actions with the hue of concern and responsibility. Pollock writes: 'Our method of child care is by no means an easy system - one has only to witness the constant anxiety experienced by parents - and yet it appears to be an enduring one'. She seems unaware that children may also have been anxious. Perhaps too many historians too easily accept the presence of parental 'love' and 'concern' for children without ever investigating the meaning of these terms from the child's perspective.

c. **Parent-child relations in the 19th and 20th centuries.** There is no debate in this period similar to that surrounding the 'dark legend'. No special attention has been given to whether parents 'loved' or were 'indifferent' to their children. Instead our knowledge of the relationship has been gathered from general studies of working-class life, especially from oral accounts and autobiographies. The findings seem to confirm a view of the child's experience being to a large extent moulded by demands for obedience which were enforced through strict and frequently violent discipline. This, it should be stressed, is not to deny



*This picture of the **'Happy Family'** by **Crane, another** notable **illustrator** of Victorian **children's literature, offers a striking contrast** in **suggesting** the **emotional support, material advantages and intellectual stimulus that** might **be provided for** middle-class children in **an idealised depiction of family** life.*
Source**:** W. Crane**,** ***Walter Crane's Picture Book,*** 1874

that in other respects children were well nurtured or, indeed, the existence of loving relationships.

James Walvin has noted that the 'corporal punishment of children was often rooted in the assumption that obedience was the prime virtue to be encouraged among the young'.[17] Similarly, Elizabeth Roberts writes of working-class children who 'learned the habit of obedience from a very early age.[11] Their own wills and desires had to be subordinated to those of their parents; they were expected to do as they were told…'. If disobedience was a cardinal sin, so too was being 'cheeky' or answering back', and speaking freely in front of adults was seen as a sign 'of too much independence'. Babies were also expected to know 'at a very young age the difference between right and wrong'. Unsurprisingly, these children developed into a 'conforming and conformist generation'. This strategy insured that parents never lost their 'immense moral authority', even when their children were grown up.

Nor is it without significance that in common with a number of working-class autobiographies, as assembled by John Burnett [2], very few respondents either stressed or even mentioned physical affection and tenderness. This may indicate that they were absent or that 'self-control' prohibited their expression. On the other hand, the oral historian, Paul Thompson, [16] emphasizes a variety of contrasting memories. [See box]

Obviously the extent of inhibition is difficult to gauge. It may have been more prevalent in the North where the hardships of industrial labour and the influence of evangelical puritanism were stronger than elsewhere, especially prior to the Second World War. But it was not confined to within the working class, since boarding schools, nannies, governesses and strictly regulated nursery days in upper-class homes also created a sense of distance and formality between parents and children.

While discipline might be used to teach children right from wrong, it was also used to maintain order in households where time and space were at a premium. It might involve silence at meals, early bedtime, clearing a space for father, and doing chores. A very important aspect of discipline was that it signalled respectability and keeping up appearances within the community. Among the lower-working class in early twentieth-century Salford, as remembered by Robert Roberts [12], "'Manners" were imposed on children with the firmest hand'. The staunchest upholders of discipline were respectable and conformist par-

> None of us wears his heart on our sleeves. We was brought up to keep us moans and groans to ourselves ... when you came in from school she [mother] had her arms ready for you and used to say, "Well, what have you done at school?" ... She ... didn't like ... what you'd call affection - we never used to kiss much ... I don't mean that we didn't get love. But there wasn't time for, you know, we were never fussed because nobody had the opportunity or the time ... We was one: him and me was one. I'd always go to him with any troubles, and he used to listen ... he used to put his arm around my shoulders. We used to sit there sometimes of an evening, cuddled up to him.

ents, but those whose social standing was suspect 'would often brag about the severity of the chastisement meted out to their erring young, in an effort to restore tarnished prestige'. No one 'who spent his childhood in the slums ... will easily forget the regular and often brutal assaults on some children perpetrated in the name of discipline'.

There is little doubt that corporal punishment and authoritarian demands for obedience figured prominently, though by no means exclusively, in the child-rearing practices of the working class. (This is confirmed by sociological studies since the 1950s.) Children 'generally had to contend with a variety of physical punishments and assaults administered by adults, who offered a variety of justifications for their actions'. Three categories of enforcing discipline have been identified. In some families a word of rebuke was sufficient; in others the rebuke would be reinforced with 'a clip over the ear'; but some children 'were regularly hit for disobedience, by hand, cane or leather strap'. Without disregarding the authoritarianism of working-class parents, Paul Thompson concludes that violence was less regularly used than is often supposed because the authority of the parents was so rarely challenged: 'He never hit us. Well, he'd no need to hit us with the telling off he gave us ... He didn't tell us twice'.

The oral testimonies and autobiographies point to a regional pattern of authoritarianism and corporal punishment, being less common in rural areas than in the North and Midlands where 'there was almost certainly a more frequent use of slapping and also of severer forms of chastisement'. Thompson found that the least punishment and most respected children were those in Shetland crofter families, where they had more freedom in conversation, in choosing bedtimes, in eating habits, and where parental authority was imposed through reason. It was 'the only part of the country in which physical punishment was not socially approved'. He attributes this more humane pattern of childrearing to the absence of industrialization and urbanization, less contact with religious puritanism, and minimal class divisions. Autobiographical accounts suggest that whilst care and affection of children was not peculiar to any one class, restraint and prohibitions were more evident in the middle class, and that punishment was more severe in the working class.

Broadly speaking between, say, 1820 and 1920 discipline and punishment probably became more benevolent, and this trend was given an impetus at the beginning of the twentieth century by new theories of child psychology and progressive education. It is very difficult to generalize, but since the 1950s the liberal tendency has probably spread sufficiently widely for it to be justifiably claimed that 'most children today have more friendly and intimate relationships with their parents than they would have had in the early years of this century. Smaller families, less oppressive living conditions, and greater respect for children's rights and freedoms have all loosened the old authoritarian attitude towards sons and daughters'. [7] All the same, the extent of the loosening process remains open to question.

Thefuture

Unlike women, black people, and the working class, children are not in a position either to write their own history, or to ask awkward questions of those who exercise power and control over them. Nor do they have a political movement to raise public consciousness of their condition and their grievances. In the past this has been partly responsible for their neglect as historical subjects, and has also influenced the kinds of history written about them. Until recently conceptualising childhood has been deemed hardly necessary, unless as a means to understanding a particular area of mainstream social history, such as the family, education or welfare reform.

If this situation is to change and children are to be valued for themselves, future research on, for example, the parent-child relationship needs to be founded on a wide and imaginative range of sources. And even then expressing the child's outlook will be fraught with difficulties. However, sources are not the only problem. As with so much of historical study, it all depends on the questions we choose to ask of our material. These future historians, then, must not be concerned simply with the absence or presence of 'love', or whether parents 'did their best' for their children, but with the variety of ways in which children have been *treated* by their parents, and the ways in which they *experienced* that treatment.

Similarly, historians of social policy should ask questions which look beyond their usual interest with the interplay between policy, class and state, to those concerned to uncover the relations of age. Here, too, the views of children together with the behaviour of welfare personnel toward them will need to be described and analysed. For like the parent-child relationship, the study of social policy also requires an examination of those moral principles which help to condition relationships between relatively powerful adults and largely powerless children. Thus it is important that we develop a critical historical account to include their presence and their voices. Without these, we abuse the child's historical past, and our own historical understanding is incomplete.

References

[1] **Philippe Aries,** *Centuries of Childhood* (1962).

[2] **John Burnett,** *Destiny obscure. Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (1982).

[3] **Roger Cooter** (ed.), *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare,* 1880-1940 (forthcoming).

[4] **Robert Dingwall,** et al. 'Childhood as a Social Problem: A Survey of the History of Legal Regulation', *Journal of Law and Society, 11,* 2 (1984), pp. 207-232.

[5] **Harry Hendrick,** 'Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood: An Interpretative Survey, 1800 to the Present', in Alison James and Alan Prout (eds.), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood. Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (I 990).

[6] **Jean Heywood,** *Children in Care* (1959).

[7] **Steve Humphries,** et al., *A Century of Childhood (1988).*

[8] **Stephen Humphries,** *Hooligans or Rebels? An* ***Oral*** *History Of Working Class Childhood and Youth, 1899-1939 (1981).*

[9] **Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt,** *Children in English Society,* 2 vols., 1969 and 1973.

[10] **Linda Pollock,** *Forgotten Children: Parent Child Relations From 1500 to 1900* (1983).

[11] **Elizabeth Roberts,** *A Woman's Place. An Oral History of Working Class Women, 1890-1940* (1984).

[12] **Robert Roberts,** 7he *Classic Slum* (1971).

[13] **Edward Shorter,** 7he *Making of the Modern Family* (1976).

[14] **Carolyn Steedman,** *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain, Margaret McMillan, 1860-1932* (1990).

[15] **Lawrence Store,** *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-* 1800 (1977).

[16] **Paul Thompson,** *The Edwardians (1977).*

[17] **James Walvin,** *A Child's World, A Social History of Childhood* (1982).

[18] **Viviana A. Zelizer,** *Ncing the Priceless Child: Thee Changing Social* ***Value*** *of Children* (1985).