

Young People and the Shaping of Public Space in Melbourne, 1870–1914

Review Number: 1661

Publish date: Thursday, 25 September, 2014

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ISBN: 9781409432449

Date of Publication: 2013

Price: £70.00

Pages: 284pp.

Publisher: Ashgate

Publisher url: <http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781409432449>

Place of Publication: Farnham

Reviewer: Andrew May

Posted up on my fridge door is one of those certificates with which any parent of primary school aged children over the past decade or so would be familiar – accessorised with stars and stickers and smiley faces, the award acknowledges one of the kids for their ‘Awesome Effort for Remaining Open to Continuous Learning’. Simon Sleight might take this as an example *par excellence* of the ways in which the marshalling of children reveals more about the preoccupations of adults than the interests of children themselves.

There was a certain appropriateness in the choice of venue for the launch of Sleight’s *Young People and the Shaping of Public Space in Melbourne* – not only does the Royal Historical Society of Victoria hold a treasured collection of historical materials dating from the infant origins of the city (a collection which Sleight himself has usefully mined in his research for the book), but also because a line might be drawn back from this recent contribution on the youthscape of colonial Melbourne to the biennial conference of the RHSV in 1979, the International Year of the Child. Collected papers from that event were published in 1981 as *The Colonial Child*, with contributions from historians including Ken Inglis, Chris McConville and June Factor.⁽¹⁾ This little volume signalled the growing interest of Australian historians in the subject of Young Australia – as metaphor for the upstart offspring of the mother country, and in terms of the lived experience of the child in the classroom, the reformatory, the playground, or indeed at home. Stephen Murray-Smith’s contribution titled ‘Messages from far away: recollections of Australian childhood’ pointed importantly to the role of memory and nostalgia in shaping our historical understanding of childhood.

In the intervening three and a half decades or so a number of historians have taken up the challenge to construct more complex and intimate histories of childhood in Australia. Inglis traced the historian’s interest in the subject back two decades to the work of Philippe Ariès in *Centuries of Childhood*.⁽²⁾ In the years following the RHSV conference, historians of the new social history put children as an often unvoiced majority back onto centre stage, from Sue Fabian and Morag Loh’s *Children in Australia: An Outline History*; Jan Kociumbas, *Australian Childhood: A History*; to more recent contributions including Carla Pascoe’s *Spaces Imagined, Places remembered: Childhood in 1950s Australia* and Melissa Bellanta’s *Larrikins: A History*.⁽³⁾

Inglis could demand in 1981 that 'We need to discover more about what colonial children did and had done to them; we need to get bearings on their experience in families, at school, in streets and playgrounds and paddocks and in the bush, on their transitions from school to work, on their biological and social journeys from infancy to childhood to adolescence to adulthood'. But if he was concerned that children had not left enough evidence for the historian to go on in any attempt at describing and analysing their lives, he need not have worried. Sleight has made a significant contribution to discharging Inglis's brief, and his first and major contribution has been to carefully and deliberately follow the child into the street, not simply the child of representation and metaphor, but the child of flesh and blood.

Where many social historians have confined children to institutions, schools or home, Sleight puts children *outside*. So while he draws on the significant legacy of these historians preceding him, and the work of others like Graeme Davison and Shurlee Swain, he energises what we might call the unfinished and ongoing business of Australian urban history. I recall the intense and surprising illumination brought to the field in the 1980s by works such as the edited collection *The Outcasts of Melbourne: Essays in Social History*.⁽⁴⁾ Here an approach animated by the new social history shone an exciting light on the social condition of the working class, Melbourne's so-called 'low life', the prostitutes and criminals, the spaces of Chinatown and Little Lon, the environmental dysfunction of a city beset with noxious trades and open sewers, the moralising pages of the boosters and the slummer journalists. But this corrective arc light on the underclass perhaps also unwittingly caught urban social history in something of a freeze frame. Sleight reminds his reader, for example, that an over-emphasis on forms of social control through the social institution of the charitable or penal institution belies the fact that a negligible proportion of Victoria's youthful population in the second half of the 19th century – that is, Melburnians under 20 years of age – were so confined.

Sleight's canvas is, therefore, the outdoor city, on which he tracks and shades the territories of youth in the period prior to the growth of the formalised playground movement in the years just prior to the First World War. And here I think is the book's second key strength: Sleight is particularly interested in the child's eye view, where public space equates with fun, possibility, adventure and independence, rather than with danger or fatalism. The parameters and definitions of being a child may shift over time – whether a state of storm-and-stress, childhood or adolescence – but childhood in this study is taken flexibly and inclusively as a transitional phase of growing up. The arc of the study delivers us by the immediate post-First World War decades a child, as he observes, 'increasingly regarded as economically worthless but emotionally priceless', and the task of the book is to explain how Young Australia gets there in that condition.

One of the many attractions of the book is the way in which it deploys the child as both subject and guide. Like the 'link boys' noted by Yi-Fu Tuan, the children who led lost travellers through the maze of 18th-century London, Sleight's child is both metaphor and maven; both a subject of observation as a rounded historical actor, and also a trusted expert who understands the place like no other. As Edith Onians of Melbourne City Newsboys' Society fame noted of one of her charges, 'there was not much Crutchey did not know about town', while Bill and Tom 'knew every lane and right-of-way for miles ... as much at home in the city as old men'. If, as Sleight writes, 'young Melburnians instead made the entire inner city into a giant playground', how and where does he find them? Melbourne, he reminds us, is a most appropriate hunting ground for this study, with its distinctive demographic structure, its rapid development as a boomtown, and its self-perceived sense of novelty. And he is a deft and expert tracker. On every other page of the book, children leap out from unexpected corners of the city. He finds them in the 1860s, playing truant in the suburb of Hawthorn, collecting tadpoles and nicking quinces; 'whipping on' behind trams in the early 1900s; in Carlton Gardens in 1896, turning piles of timber into an *ad hoc* adventure playground; catching rats in 1901 for the municipal reward. He finds them walking to school – anywhere up to two miles, the radius prescribed under the 1872 Education Act as the maximum distance within which children would be expected to attend; they are running messages, selling matches, flowers or newspapers; he spies shop assistant May Stewart in 1906 locked out of her boarding house, having to crawl in through a window at midnight; the same girl who is elsewhere observed mashing and smooving with various boys.

Sleight is acutely attuned to the rhythms of the city, its sounds and senses, the ways in which children's activities bend to nature's seasons, seeking bird nests in spring, or larking around water fountains in the heat of summer. Here the book reveals for me a third and abiding strength, in its deep and considered use of the archive, from diaries and autobiographies to municipal correspondence and police reports. This has taken enormous time, skill, attention to detail, and a critical eye. Like slow food, this is slow history – educative, ethical, tasty, artisanal – you can feel it doing you good. I'm sure when you read the book you will also be surprised and intrigued by the author's insight and acuity when it comes to reading photographs as historical evidence. Scouting literature is an odd omission, given the movement was established in Melbourne from 1908 and Baden-Powell visited the city during his Australian tour of 1912, though this comes right at the end of the period under examination.

There is an enormous amount of material packed into the five chapters of the book. The first chapter – growing up with the city – asserts a key argument of the study – that the child and the nascent place are mutual analogs. Melbourne in the process of its physical formation and development, half built, half vacant, half real, half imagined, is a kind of map of the future. As the streets of this upstart place are made, the book argues, so are its citizens. 'Age', Sleight writes, 'is a lens through which both cities and the people who live within them are viewed'. Here we get a marvellous evocation of the pure adolescent energy of 19th-century Melbourne, a city 'boiling with boys' as Marcus Clarke put it in 1870, an impression confirmed by the 1871 census at which children under 14 made up 42 per cent of the white population of Australia, with Melbourne at its demographic epicentre. The trope of Young Australia – the country as a youth – is here analysed as a key device structuring a whole set of debates about imperialism, demography, crime and character. Indeed Young Australia 'remained a powerful ideological tool available to whosoever wished to use it: a convenient device in the hands of some for implying rapid "national" progress, whilst an equally handy instrument for others intent on keeping an incipient Australia in its place'.

The book's second chapter moves beyond representation to the metropolitan youthscape, the diverse ways in which children found and made the city their own, their spaces of play, their street games and pranks, the folk geographies of child's eye imaginings and nomenclature. Sleight's methodology reveals fascinating patterns. His mapping of young people's urban range – that is, an analysis of the sorts of distances working-class kids travelled between their places of residence and where they were intercepted in the act of committing various misdemeanours by city authorities – provides a revealing overlay to the itineraries of public urban life. Diaries provide a view of middle-class trajectories, and here in particular it is young women who are observed as claiming nascent social freedoms and privileges at the turn of the century. As the child claims the city as playground, so too he or she succumbed to its pitfalls, literal and moral. Through legislative regimes, the spaces of the city become subject to curfew and control, and children are reconfigured 'as objects in need of reformation'.

Chapter three turns the book's attention to 'Getting and spending – the world of outdoor work and the beginnings of the youth market'. In its depiction of juvenile street economies, of children as hunters and collectors *par excellence*, the study relocates the antecedents of the youth market from the 1950s teenager to the newsboy and the shop girl of an earlier period. Here were two critical transitions at the end of the 19th century – the decline of juvenile street trading (and hence the earning capacity of youth), yet at the same time, the expansion of the youth market (as expressed in new leisure spaces and amusement practices). The regulations tightened around street trading just as minimum educational expectations hardened, and the image of the dependent child slowly supplanted that of the street merchant. This chapter also delves deeper into the figure of the city newsboy as 'metonym and metronome' of city life, figured variously as either confirming or countering fears and fantasies about the future of the nation and the race.

The populist figure of the larrikin gets a makeover in chapter four, the no-man's-land and in-between-spaces of the not-yet-mature city seen as nurturing larrikin behaviour, which often of course was a matter of perspective. From 'doing nothing' (which as Sleight notes, after Paul Corrigan, is 'an intense experience, full of incident, anticipation') and various acts of mischief, to sex crimes and an ultimate literary absolution,

the figure of the larrikin is here situated in a moment of generational change, defined by space and youth as by class. The final chapter takes as its focus youth on display – in particular, the ways in which children *en masse* were increasingly marshalled in various civic processions and other events – in particular in the lead up to Federation – to signify a set of symbolic ideologies: ‘city children’, Sleight writes, ‘had *themselves* come to embody a national ideal, thereby lessening the requirement for them to bear emblems of nationhood’.

There is no doubt at all in my mind that this book will become a classic in the genre. While ostensibly focussed on Melbourne and with fewer direct national or international comparisons in its detail than might be expected (youth curfews were considered in some North American cities around 1900; Edith Onians was directly inspired by the activism of Jane Addams), Melbourne represents a convincing case study of the ways in which conversations about children and public space occurred within the particularities of local conditions as well as against a broader and more international framework in which concepts and protocols about youth circulated.

Sleight has a craftsman’s eye and a very fair turn of phrase. The intimately observed correlation at the heart of the book – between a youthful place, the youth of this place, and the changing ideas about youth that prevailed in this place – adds much to our understanding of Australian society more generally over these critical years. It challenges us to avoid the technological determinism that might see the automobile or indeed the computer as the sole *bête noir* of what Sleight calls the ‘diminishing autonomy and narrowing parameters’ of childhood. It telescopes the language of generation from the past to the future, according it a fundamental role in the determination of social and communal affairs.

Sleight in his assiduous and understated way is I think is very careful in the book to avoid bombastic prognostications about the present and potential future of childhood in the city. In places we *can* glimpse his vision – he sees the city of the 21st century as ‘a less welcoming place’ for children and one ‘poorer for the change’. Here there is perhaps a tone of that ‘literature of loss’ that Michael Brill has identified as marking a nostalgic view of public space which sees the disappearance of some aspects of public life as irrevocable decline rather than constructive transformation (some public life has not been lost at all because it never existed, some has been lost because it was squalid, and some now takes place in other locations, including virtual ones). But I think the book gives us other tools that might belie any subtle editorialising. It perhaps comforts us in the era of helicopter parenting, the ‘retreat from outdoors’, toxic childhood, and the islanding of children – that perhaps the sky is not falling in, that our anxieties about the generation gap, though keenly felt, are usefully self-revealing.

This is very much a book about the meanings and uses of *mischievous*, a word coined it seems specifically for the activities of the child – ‘pestering playfulness’, according to Chambers. Where we put the emphasis – on pestering or play – is historically contingent. Finally, and just as critically, this book is important because it reminds us to constantly ask who and what the city is for, and demands of our community leaders and urban planners consideration of the child as a permanent citizen of the urban realm.

Notes

1. *The Colonial Child: Papers presented at the 8th Biennial Conference of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, Melbourne, 12–13 October 1979*, ed. Guy Featherstone (Melbourne, 1981). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (1960, Paris; 1962 translation, London). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Sue Fabian and Morag Loh, *Children in Australia: An Outline History* (Melbourne, 1980); Jan Kociumbas, *Australian Childhood: A History* (Sydney, 1997); Carla Pascoe, *Spaces Imagined, Places Remembered: Childhood in 1950s Australia* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2011) and Melissa Bellanta, *Larrikins: A History* (Brisbane, 2012). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Graeme Davison, David Dunstan and Chris McConville, *The Outcasts of Melbourne: Essays in Social History*

(Sydney, 1985).[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review, and thanks the reviewer both for his close and careful reading of the text and for the intellectual generosity which characterises his comments.

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