

Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World

Review Number: 1957

Publish date: Thursday, 14 July, 2016

Editor: Shirleene Robinson
Simon Sleight

ISBN: 9781137489401

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £63.00

Pages: 344pp.

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Publisher url: <http://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9781137489401>

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Rosie Kennedy

Within the burgeoning field of the history of childhood this collection attempts to offer something unique. It seeks to contribute to our understanding of the lived experience of children across the British world from the mid-18th to the mid-20th century and considers the construction of childhood within a global network of empire.

For the authors writing here, children were central to the imperial project and this book argues that their experience exemplifies the process through which 'Britishness' was expressed and contested across the globe. By considering a wide range of imperial children from those at the centre of the metropole, to temporary migrants, settlers and indigenous communities this book highlights the diversity of roles these children represent, from 'petty imperialists, migrant "pioneers", active resisters and dispossessed victims' (p. 2).

The 'British world' described here refers to an imperial system built on mass migration from Britain to Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and beyond. But in defining and describing the imperial experience of children this volume contributes to the conception of empire as a web of interconnected relationships and ideas that linked the colonies with Britain but also with each other. In this sense then mobility is a recurring theme throughout the collection, not just of individuals and groups, but also of ideas relating to the conception of childhood and youth. Prominent among them were the ideas of Social Darwinism which prioritised the creation of a healthy (white) population of settlers and imperial rulers and ensured that 'saving' white children across the British Empire had become a matter for the state. Indigenous children were also increasingly a focus of state attention as racialised rhetoric represented them as a threat to the purity of the young colonies.

In setting the parameters of this collection the editors have been influenced by the fluid nature of age as a category across the British world. They are not focused purely on the experiences of 'children' and 'youth' or on the ideology of 'childhood'. Instead they claim to be interested in the 'processes of representation and growing up' paying particular attention to the impact of colonial context, class, caste, ethnicity and gender, as well as relative age (p. 7). The essays here are interested in the social construction of childhood across the

British world and the extent to which they reflected broader imperial values.

What this means is that we have chapters here looking at wide range of ideas and young people, ranging in age from infants all the way through to young people in their 20s. These chapters therefore ask interesting questions about how age should be read as a category of difference across the British world in this period.

The collection itself is divided into six parts. The first 'Children and adults' explores important interrelationships between children and adults in a range of settings focusing on the hierarchies of knowledge and power. Shurlee Swain begins with an exploration of why child rescue societies of late 19th-century Britain chose to attach their cause to Queen Victoria and considers what understandings of childhood the Queen was being used to endorse. Swain finds that for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) Victoria's reign was significant as it marked the point at which children became subjects in their own right, no longer having their rights and responsibilities mediated through their parents. For the NSPCC and Barnardos, Swain explains, this new status was a gift from the Crown and was explicitly linked to children's service, or potential service to the British Empire.

Suzanne Conway's essay on the cultural significance of ayahs in colonial India highlights the inherent disjuncture between a belief in white racial superiority and the use of Indian servants in the intimate family circumstances of caring for, and raising, very young children. For Conway, ayahs and the children they cared for were 'at the most intense point of intersection between the colonial rulers and those whom they ruled' (p. 41). This intimacy, Conway argues however, was a source of concern for parents who feared the detrimental effects to their children of exposure to 'native ways' and saw as significant the breakdown of a desired separation between rulers and ruled.

The adoption of Truby King's Mothercraft teachings in early 20th-century South Africa is the subject of S. E. Duff's essay. Duff claims that Mothercraft was introduced to South Africa because it appealed to child welfare organisations with similar aims but disparate politics. English-speaking South Africans who saw themselves as part of the British world were attracted by King's stated aim of improving the white stock of empire. For societies with links to Afrikaner politics on the other hand its appeal lay in its status as a scientific intervention with proven result. For Duff, Mothercraft's failure to take off in South Africa, in the way that it did in New Zealand, is reflective of the more ambiguous position South Africa occupied within the British world, here imperial networks were not enough for it to succeed.

The second section of the book is entitled 'Rites of passage' and explores the movement of children and young people across the British world. Here Ellen Filor explores the political and racial tensions of the British Empire by examining the familial and domestic interactions of East India Company families. By considering the relationships between two interconnected families with both legitimate and illegitimate children, both white and mixed-race, Filor considers the intersection of race, birth and orphanhood within the imperial family. Filor positions these children not only as the subjects of adult epistolary correspondence but also as an embodied exchange between family members divided by vast geographical distances.

Claire L. Halstead's focus in this section is on the experience of British children evacuated to Canada during the Second World War. For Halstead, Canada's rescue efforts were rooted in the imperial paradigm, Canadians' recognising their hospitality as a practical way to aid Britain's war effort and ensure the survival of the empire. Halstead also hopes to add to the emerging revisionist interpretation of evacuation which attempts to contest the prevailing negative account of abuse and exploitation. Halstead seeks to 're-examine the extent to which all evacuees endured traumatic experiences, and to identify preventative efforts to care for the children adequately' (p. 93).

The theme of movement is continued by Timothy Nicholson's essay on the experience of East African students who travelled abroad to study during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Nicholson stresses the agency of these young people who established their own transnational networks to access educational opportunities across the British world and in the United States. By considering the experience of these students during the

late colonial and early postcolonial period this essay also sheds light on the transnational process of nation building as these students, now armed with an overseas education, secured positions within the new power structures of the postcolonial African nation-state.

In section three 'Indigenous experiences' are the focus of attention within the colonial contexts of Australia, Bengal and Africa. Shirleene Robinson's essay considers Aboriginal child workers in 19th-century Australia focusing on their strategies of resistance to highlight indigenous childhood agency in the British world. Robinson believes that the use of Aboriginal child workers not only met the economic needs of Australia but was also articulated as a method of reforming a population that was considered a 'problem' under colonialism. Although careful not to overstate the degree of agency these children enjoyed, Robinson suggests that tactics such as running away, stealing, 'playing-up' and destroying property demonstrate the creative and adaptive methods used by Aboriginal children to challenge the highly oppressive system they found themselves in.

Satadru Sen moves the focus of attention to colonial Bengal and draws on the writing of educator and polemicist Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay to consider modern conservatism and the family in late 19th-century Bengal. Sen argues that changing European notions of childhood were complicated in India by expectation of continuity, articulated as tradition and culture. For Sen children-rearing became a complex response to colonial rule, which became 'not so much an act of education, punishment and government, as an act of *mandating* the education, punishment and government by natives of their own offspring' (p. 144). Here, Sen suggests, conservative and liberal nationalists saw childhood as both a cause for anxiety as well as a solution to the degradation of colonisation.

The negotiation of race and indigeneity within the Girl Guide movement is the focus of Mary Clare Martin's essay in this section. Here Martin considers the interactions between settlers, visitors and indigenous Girl Guides in Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand and Asia between 1908 and 1920. Martin explores the agency of young women in establishing and governing Guiding in various colonial locations then attempts to highlight indigenous inclusion within these contexts. Martin finds that while Aboriginal girls were entirely absent from the movement in Australia, in Malaya there were mixed companies of Guides from the outset. In Kenya and South Africa a variety of restrictive practices were in operation defining the involvement of black African girls. Despite the fact that the lack of indigenous involvement in Guiding has often been noted, Martin argues that the presence of indigenous Guides in a variety of locations during this period 'in fact signifies the incipient development of an enduring multi-racial commonwealth' (p. 174).

The next section of the collection, 'Literary childhoods', focuses on the imperial imagination in children's fiction. Michelle J. Smith's essay considers how the relationship between the environment and colonial settlement was framed for young readers in 19th-century children's fiction about the white settler colonies of New Zealand and Australia. For Smith these stories register shifting anxieties about the dangers of colonial life for children, often emphasised by the threats posed by nature. By the early 20th century, however, Smith claims these fears dissipated with child protagonists now able to interpret and control nature in ways that earlier British protagonists were not. Despite this shift Smith concludes by arguing that colonial children's fantasies 'retain aspects of the environmental imperialism and racism on which the very processes of imperial expansion and colonial settlement were predicated' (p. 197).

Hilary Emmett's essay on the 'wilful' girl in the Anglo-world follows. Here Emmett draws upon well-known examples of children's sentimental fiction in order to explore how girls' novels from England, Australia and Canada in the first two decades of the 20th century responded to and reinterpreted the models of female behaviour that earlier American texts including Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* had suggested. Extending the 'British world' to encompass the 'Anglo-world', Emmett's conclusion is that successive texts from across the Anglo-world responded to each other to both support and challenge Alcott's mode of womanhood. For Emmett these novels are therefore examples of a complex transatlantic and transhemispheric network, just as they are tied to their particular national site of production.

'Youth and sexuality' is the focus of section five. Yorick Smaal begins with an essay that considers age-structured experiences of homosexual relations in colonial Queensland between 1890 and 1914. Smaal explores the complexities of age, poverty and race influencing these relationships and suggests a variety of ways we might think about boys' agency and abuse in the historical setting. Smaal continues the trend for historians of homosex being prepared to explore the sexual potential between men and boys, but argues that the criminal justice evidence on which this essay is based suggests danger accompanied possibility in equal measure.

Melissa Bellanta follows this with an essay exploring girls' participation in Australian larrikin street gangs in the late 19th century. Bellanta's analysis seeks to walk the difficult line between what an earlier generation of historians saw as the subservient sexuality of these girls, and later feminist attempts to celebrate their flagrant sexuality as an expression of freedom. Bellanta offers another reading of their displays of sexualised behaviour by connecting it to the popular performance styles these girls would have been familiar with from the music hall stage. For Bellanta these larrikin girls are troubling subjects, displaying both vulnerability and toughness. But by considering their familiarity with the brazen characters of the popular stage Bellanta argues, 'offers us a way to afford them a measure of agency and self-assertion' (p. 249).

The final section of the book 'Children's empires and material cultures' focuses on the objects and ambitions of childhood. Using a combination of archaeological as well as archival evidence, in her chapter Ruth Cotton argues that the reality of the British world was illustrated to late Victorian and Edwardian children in the landscapes they occupied as well as the books, games and toys they enjoyed. Cotton's focus is on the public park and her essay seeks to demonstrate how notions of empire were embedded within its architecture and the actions and activities that took place there. Cotton concludes that public parks were spaces in which the British Empire was made visible, tangible and meaningful to the children who visited.

Finally, Kate Darian-Smith's essay explores how the historical experiences of settler children within the British world have been memorialised over time. In the 19th century Darian-Smith finds that memorials to 'lost' children formed one of the very few public representations of children's lives, while more recently children's experiences were often subsumed within wider family or community histories. Interestingly, Darian-Smith concludes that the recent children's rights movement has driven an increased recognition of the unique nature of children's experience and history in the public sphere.

Ultimately then, it is to that recognition of children's unique experience and history that this volume contributes. Its ambition to investigate both the lives of children themselves and the meanings attached to childhood and youth across the British world makes it an important contribution to the way we seek to research and write children's history. While the geographic and temporal range of this volume is considerable it succeeds in demonstrating links between the experience and conception of childhood and youth across the 'web' of empire. By considering the ways in which age might operate as a category of analysis this volume pushes at the boundaries of previous conceptions of children's history and makes us focus again on the importance of race, gender, class and context in approaching the study of 'childhood'.

The complex issue of children's agency is one of the key themes of this volume with several authors keenly exploring the tension inherent in any attempt to empower these historical figures. Both Melissa Bellanta and Shirleene Robinson particularly encourage us to find new ways of recognising the agency of young people despite the apparent lack of autonomy and power they might enjoy. What is perhaps surprising in a study of children, childhood and youth in this setting is the unbalanced focus on white migrant and settler children. Although there are important chapters here on indigenous experiences, as well as Anglo-Indian and East African young people's migration, the transnational nature of this project was an important opportunity to highlight the experience of colonised children in their own right.

Any quest to give voice to the often 'silent' children of the past is also problematic. Here an impressive

variety of archival, material and visual evidence is offered to try to access the lives of children from an extraordinarily diverse range of backgrounds. As always though, we are left frustrated by the limitations of what it is possible to draw from the evidence available. Sadly we hear relatively little from the children themselves here. Their words are sometimes recorded in official documents, as Yorick Smaal and Melissa Bellanta discover. Or we might learn something of their feelings from surviving letters or adult memoirs, as Claire L. Halstead, Ellen Filor and Timothy Nicholson explore. But this partial testimony is limited and we are again compelled to try to understand children's history through the adults that surrounded them. This is not a specific criticism of this volume, which is rich in the diversity of its methodological attempts to access children's lives, but is a reflection of the inherent limitations in our attempts to explore children's history.

Despite these limitations however, this volume is a fascinating contribution to our understanding of the experience and conception of children, childhood and youth across the British world in this period. The impressive range of contributions illuminates the diversity of children's lives, prompts us to reconsider ideas about power and agency and highlights the exchange and flow of ideas across the global web of empire. These essays, both individually and collectively, enhance our knowledge and understanding of the histories of childhood and youth, of colonial and imperial history, and should be read by all with an interest in the British world.

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1957>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/155919>