



## **In Search of History's Child**

—Mona Gleason

Young people have long been an absent presence in the history of Canada. As my colleagues in this forum section suggest, this is a state of affairs not confined to the discipline of history. Social history, developed in the 1960s to highlight the perspectives of those traditionally excluded from scholarship, including women, workers, immigrants, and racialized “others,” had much to say *about* children and youth, but rarely placed their perspectives at the centre of the historical record. While young people travelled across various waves of historical change, they were rarely, if ever, thought to have instigated those waves or to have responded meaningfully to them. Young people, in other words, were not yet considered to be important historical actors.

Philippe Ariès is credited as the first historian to explore in a serious and sustained way the historical terrain of childhood. In 1960, Ariès authored the groundbreaking history of French childhood, translated

into English two years later as *Centuries of Childhood*. His central argument was then a novel one: childhood was not simply a physical and developmental stage. It had a history of its own. In fact, Ariès contended, childhood as a distinct phase of life simply did not exist in the Middle Ages. Children were not shielded from adulthood, but rather were fully integrated into the social life of their elders. There were certainly children in the Middle Ages, but “childhood” was nowhere to be found. This argument was subsequently challenged by two generations of historians on a number of fronts. Most particularly, they pointed to the problematic nature of one of Ariès’s main sources: formal family portraiture in which children were depicted as “little adults.” For all of its considerable flaws, however, Ariès’s thesis was formative for its early insistence on the social construction of childhood.

The papers in this forum section testify to the enduring nature of this theme, with childhood and

children's "constructedness" figuring in each paper. Julie Emberley explores the problematic construction of children as the embodiment of truth and authenticity, while Shauna Pomerantz focuses attention on the role of gender in the particular construction of girls as the quintessential "other." Patrizia Albanese argues that the construction of the child as "always becoming" does not act in the best interests of actual children, who should be seen as active agents in their own right. Each of these contemporary concerns has a long, deeply rooted history.

Since the 1960s, historians have investigated how history has made both children and childhood. Children in Western societies, argued Viviana Zelizer in her seminal 1985 book, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, became emotionally "priceless" in the industrial age as their sentimental value grew and their economic value waned. In the context of English Canada, Patricia Rooke and R. L. Schnell demonstrate, in their foundational history of child rescue, how reform efforts shaped, and were shaped by, a new ideology of childhood that characterized the West at the end of the eighteenth century. Childhood was increasingly conceptualized as a time of dependence, protection, segregation, and delayed responsibility for youngsters. Rooke and Schnell show that support for this view of childhood drove much public-health and social-welfare reform in early-twentieth-century English Canada and helped

further entrench the priorities, values, and biases of dominant groups.<sup>1</sup> North American social reformers heartily endorsed Swedish reformer Ellen Key's call for the twentieth century to be, as the title of her influential book proclaimed in 1900, "the century of the child."

Indeed, the twentieth century ushered in new beginnings for many children. It was an era of reform and child saving, as well as growing acknowledgment of children's rights.<sup>2</sup> As Patrizia Albanese points out in her contribution to this forum, the rights of children would eventually represent an international phenomenon that promised to reinvigorate the sociological study of children. At the state level, early initiatives included Canada's Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital (1889), which devoted much attention to child labour, and the first White House Conference on Dependent Children (1909), which supplied the impetus for the establishment of the US Children's Bureau (1912). Reformers also focused on institutional "care," including orphanages and industrial schools, the kindergarten movement, compulsory schooling, and new hygienic measures to preserve children's health (Gleason, Myers, Paris, and Strong-Boag). Concern for children was a central tenet of the developing social-welfare apparatus in North America and the West more generally.

The century of the child, and the new beginnings it presaged, would have only been possible with



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the end of other, less desirable, childhoods. Historians have paid close attention to the manner in which those children who ran afoul of the law; whose parents were addicted, absent, criminalized, or impoverished; or who were fatherless, racialized as non-White, or gendered as female became particular targets of intervention and remediation (Jones and Rutman; Sutherland, *Children*; Myers; Myers and Sangster). Indeed, as Shauna Pomerantz's contribution in this forum makes clear, the gendered process of making girls into social "problems" continues in the contemporary moment. Children with disabilities also presented uniquely difficult challenges to efforts dependent on the reformation of behaviours, circumstances, attitudes, and values. Disabilities, presented in professional discourse as physical or intellectual differences in need of serious attention, did not readily or easily yield to change or "improvement" (Gleason, "Navigating").

In English Canada, the context with which I am most familiar, interest in children and youth grew primarily out of foundational work in the history of the family and the history of education in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>3</sup> This first wave of historical work focused primarily on the history of childhood. Unlike the history of children and youth, the history of childhood investigates adult-generated ideas about youngsters. Historical sources that talk about children, such as medical texts, parenting-advice literature, governmental publications, popular magazines, juvenile-court records, and public-education documents, are easily accessible and provide a window onto social attitudes toward the "healthy," "normal," or "proper" child. Historians took advantage of these sources to study topics such as twentieth-century child-saving efforts, the growth of social-welfare networks, the role of advice manuals in shaping ideas of "proper" mothering, popular psychology's influence on understandings of "normal" children and

families, and the interaction between the priorities of public schooling and those of families, cultures, and economies.<sup>4</sup> While youngsters were certainly important in these works, their perspectives were not placed in the centre of analysis. The child as the object of study, as Emberley, Pomerantz, and Albanese point out in their papers, also characterized foundational scholarship in English literature and sociology.

The second wave of historical work is much more concerned with teasing out how children and youth contributed to, and responded to, change over time. Concerned, like my forum colleagues, to identify the perspectives of children and youth, I have turned to oral-history interviews to achieve this challenging goal. Adult memories of childhood are, of course, not the same as historical evidence generated by children. Given that very little of what children produced in the past—most particularly, the productions of children whose class, racialized, or gendered identity set them apart from the dominant culture—was valued or kept, memories of childhood do shed some critical light on a past to which we have little access (Gleason, “Embodied”; “Race”).

The history of children’s health and welfare serves as an exemplar of the opportunities and tensions that currently characterize the field. The health-and-welfare work of adult experts at the turn, and over many decades, of the twentieth century in English Canada situated children as the embodiment of risk

and liability. And, since historians have constructed this twentieth century of health-and-welfare intervention almost entirely from the perspective of adult professionals, scholarship tends to reconstruct children via a discourse of need and deficiency. Because they are positioned primarily as the recipients of adult interventions intended literally to save them from death, we know much more about children as objects of health-and-welfare intervention than we do about their subjective response to this work. From the perspective of those inclined to intervene, the modernizing twentieth century rendered children vulnerable to death, disease, and malnutrition, and thus they needed saving and healing. From the perspective of many social reformers, most from white, middle-class backgrounds, the modernizing twentieth century rendered children vulnerable to death, disease, and malnutrition: children needed saving. Incapable of fighting off the worst effects of poverty, industrial exploitation, urban squalor, and ignorance, children needed to be taught, trained, disciplined, and, less benevolently, punished and constrained.<sup>5</sup>

Testimony from adults who experienced a range of health-and-welfare interventions in childhood—from hospital stays to school health lessons, to vaccinations, to home remedies concocted by mothers, fathers, and grandparents—“talks back” to objectifying processes on the part of twentieth-century health-and-welfare experts, and, by extension, enriches our historical

  
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understanding of young people (Gleason, “Disciplining”). Analyzed through age and size as categories of historical analysis, their memories suggest that assumptions regarding children’s embodied vulnerability and incompetence translated into both benevolent and malevolent treatment, often had unintended consequences, varied fundamentally depending on one’s social location, and took on new meanings within what Neil Sutherland calls “the culture of childhood” (Sutherland, *Growing* 16). For example, a ninety-three-year-old male interviewee who was quarantined in 1927 at the age of fourteen characterized his time in hospital as an opportunity to take full advantage of adult notions of children’s vulnerability. For a child from an extremely poor family with twelve children, scarlet fever made possible a rest from an endless cycle of work. When prompted to tell us what he remembered feeling about the experiences, he said, somewhat sheepishly, “You know it was the best time of your life! You could have good meals . . . the nuns were looking after that, you know . . . . I was there for about forty days . . . . Yeah when I was fourteen years old it was easy to make friends, you know” (Child Health Project Participant 012). So, while oral histories are as tainted as any other historical source, I argue that they are still incredibly valuable to efforts to learn more about the history of children and youth. As Neil Sutherland has argued, for historians to “get inside” childhood (*Growing* 13), oral history interviews used judiciously, and in concert with a range of other resources, can give representation to overlooked, ignored, and silenced experiences.<sup>6</sup> Listening to the voices of young people, as we all suggest in this forum, is a powerful goal that links our various disciplinary approaches to the study of children, youth, and childhood.

Historicizing assumptions surrounding size and age might enrich two important priorities for the field: efforts to consider the perspectives

of young people themselves on their own history, and efforts to develop perspectives that synthesize and weave together the varying, and varied, historical experiences of “growing up.” My own work argues that, rather than simply functioning as biological or physical descriptors of children’s appearance or growth, age and size convey social meanings by measuring and contextualizing assumptions about children’s needs and capacities in relation to adults. These assumptions have shaped and made sensible the treatment children have received and, in turn, have had an impact on children’s responses to their treatment, both within and outside of their families.

Privileging the perspectives of the young, however, involves wrestling with a number of challenges. First, and most obviously, how do we best shed light on their perspectives? The central issue for historians typically boils down to the problem of sources. Sociologists are implored not to filter their understanding of children through adult perspectives and interests: they are to ask children themselves and to make them partners in research, not objects of research (Thorne). History’s children cannot be asked (at least not directly) because they are gone: they have either passed away or grown up. Where should we look to find the voices, however heavily mediated, of those least likely to have left behind remnants of their past? Oral histories are an important source for historians in this regard. But using adults’ memories of growing up as historical sources

is not without significant problems—not the least of which is the tendency for memory to fade and for interviewees to recreate their pasts rather than simply report on them.<sup>7</sup> Faced with the challenge of voice, historians constantly search for new sources and effective methodologies to “get inside” childhood.

A second significant challenge for the history of children and youth emerges from the need to expand the categories of historical analysis in the discipline. In conjunction with traditional categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and other markers of identity, age and size profoundly shape historical experience. While notions of “embodied difference” have guided the work of scholars interested in critical histories of the body, historians of children and youth rarely make explicit the meanings attached to the social construction of children as “young” and “small”—particularly because these constructions are used to justify power imbalances between children and adults. In my work, I have attempted to fill this gap by exploring the social construction of associations of children’s small size and youthfulness with vulnerability and incompetence, particularly as operationalized by health-and-welfare experts over the course of the twentieth century. Neil Sutherland, Cynthia Comacchio, and others have demonstrated that over this period, significant social shifts brought on by industrial and urban growth, war and immigration, public-health initiatives, and changes in attitudes



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toward the centrality of education intensified and made increasingly public the formal management of children's health and welfare. Increasing numbers of health-and-welfare professionals surveilled and counselled families about the proper care of youngsters. Children were viewed as raw material out of which, given the right kind of attention from home, school, and church, moral, hard-working, and productive adults would emerge. Over the course of these shifts in focus, however, the pathology associated with small size and young age remained relatively constant: simultaneously vulnerable and incompetent, children were deemed "naturally" in need of a variety of interventions. Vital statistics regarding children's birth dates and causes of death were gathered, well-baby clinics and breast-feeding aggressively promoted, public-health-nurse visits to individual family homes and regularized visits to the doctor insisted upon, immunizations recommended, school medical inspection implemented, and advice from medical experts increasingly made available for parents, mostly mothers (see Comacchio; Grant). The implementation of these complex and intertwined webs of surveillance simultaneously created and reinforced conceptualizations of children as a population in need of protection, training, discipline, surveillance, and punishment.

The socially constructed nature of size and age is starkly revealed when the relationship between expert discourse and the perspectives of youngsters on this discourse is considered. While the latter is nebulous and shadowy, oral-history testimony does offer some cracks in the darkness. Just as the health and welfare of the young has been, and continues to be, a priority for middle-class reformers, the ways in which such priorities were revealed, taken up, remade, and even rejected by individual children and their families adds a complicated, if also intriguing, layer to adult-driven understandings of children's pasts.

Traditionally, children and youth, like women, have been under-represented in the historical record. Unlike women, however, children continue to be understood, in Western societies at least, as lacking the power and competency to drive social change or to produce important knowledge. Feminist and critical scholars have long rejected the invocation of gender difference to justify women's exclusion from history; they blame unequal power relations, not natural inferiority, for this exclusion. As Shauna Pomerantz shows in her paper in this forum, contemporary girls must navigate the continuing legacy of this imbalance even as they invent new ways to subvert it. Western societies continue, nevertheless, to trade on assumptions of children's incompetence. Just as attention to the social construction of gender differences has remade our understanding of women's contributions to historical change, critical inquiry into the social construction of size and age might help us rethink the historical contributions of young people.

In her 2003 introduction to *Histories of Canadian Children and Youth*, Joy Parr offered three broad cautions or caveats for historians interested in children and youth. For the most part, these still hold true and

provide an instructive place to conclude this very brief contribution to an interdisciplinary discussion. First, Parr reminds us that childhood is not a natural state, but is shaped by historical processes, economic forces, and cultural contexts. Research that untangles these processes, forces, and contexts enriches our understanding of the present (2). Second, *the* history of childhood does not exist. Although historians like to impose order, straight-line chronologies, or homogeneous categories onto their interpretations of the past, childhood and children tend to resist these impulses. Those who work in the field need to be prepared to abandon traditional scripts of what constitutes meaningful change over time and how these meanings are interpreted (2-3). Third, Parr points out that we continue to know much more about histories of childhood than we do about histories of children and youth. To get to young peoples' subjectivities, to their personal pasts, Parr suggests, "we will need other sources and other methods" beyond those we have come to rely on (4). Through interdisciplinary co-operation and fresh attention to new or overlooked sources, historians have much to contribute to our ongoing search.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The history of social reform is explored in Sutherland, *Children*; Strong-Boag; McLaren; Valverde; Chunn; Ursel; and Comacchio.

<sup>2</sup> Canadian scholarship includes Rooke and Schnell, and Comacchio. In the American literature, see, for example, Lindemeyer and Sealander.

<sup>3</sup> While a full exploration of this development is beyond the scope of this paper, social historians such as Susan Houston, Neil Sutherland, and Joy Parr offer studies that focus on the interaction between agents of the ever-expanding welfare state and families, immigrants, and youngsters. See Houston; Sutherland, *Children*; and Parr, *Children and Family*.

<sup>4</sup> See Comacchio; Gaffield; Arnup; and Gleason, *Normalizing*.

<sup>5</sup> Foundational works that analyze and critique the ideological

construction of children and parenting include Sutherland, *Children*; Chunn; Arnup; and Gleason, *Normalizing*.

<sup>6</sup> See, in particular, Sutherland, "Listening." On the problems and potentials associated with autobiography as an historical source, see Sutherland, *Children*; Sturrock 1–19; and Coe.

<sup>7</sup> On the benefits and challenges of using oral history for the history of children and youth, see Gleason, "Disciplining."

<sup>8</sup> The first issue of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* (2008) signalled the priorities for the field going forward: more research on global childhoods and children, the development of age and size as categories of historical analysis, and connections between contemporary and past challenges for young people. To view the table of contents, go to <[http://www.umass.edu/jhcy/Issue\\_1.html](http://www.umass.edu/jhcy/Issue_1.html)>.

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