

A History of  
**Childhood**

*Children and Childhood in  
the West from Medieval to  
Modern Times*

Colin Heywood

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## Introduction

My name is Etienne Bertin, but I've always been called 'Tiennon'. I was born in October 1823, at a farm in the Commune of Agonges, near Bourbon-l'Archambault. My father was a *métayer* on the farm in partnership with his elder brother, my uncle Antoine, called 'Toinot'.<sup>1</sup>

So began *The Life of a Simple Man* (1904), in the world of a sharecropping family in the Bourbonnais region of France during the early nineteenth century. Its first few chapters gave a vivid account of the ups and downs of childhood in this milieu. The author, a sharecropper himself, acknowledged that there was 'nothing remarkable' in this poor, monotonous life of a peasant. Yet he was determined that his novel would 'show the gentlemen of Moulins and Paris and elsewhere what the life of a *métayer* really is'. Drawing on the reminiscences of his grandfathers, he recounted his experiences as a child of family feuds, his work as a shepherd boy, the Spartan meals, the nightmares, and a visit to a fair, catechism with the local priest and the double wedding of his brothers.<sup>2</sup> Numerous autobiographies written in modern times by people from very ordinary backgrounds, no less than memoirs and biographies of leading figures in public life, also took it for granted that readers would wish to know something of their early experiences. A few devoted the whole work to recollections of a peasant or working-class childhood.<sup>3</sup> Like Tiennon, they routinely apologized to their readers for the humdrum circumstances of their existence, but persisted in telling their life story none the less. Such authors often asserted their identity with a particular region or neighbourhood. Lucy Larcom opened her memoirs by observing that 'It is strange that the spot of earth where we were born should make

such a difference to us. People can live and grow anywhere, but people as well as plants have their *habitat* – in her case, the Cape Ann Side in north-eastern Massachusetts.<sup>4</sup> Some writers emphasized their family identity, however humble or even dissolute their ancestry. Fritz Pauk, from Lippe in Germany, dismissed his grandfather as a heavy drinker, never knew his father (a cabinetmaker who disappeared before he was born), and so shuttled back and forth between an aunt and his ‘good mother’.<sup>5</sup> Others dwelt on their games and fantasy life as children, or, at the other extreme, bitter experiences of poverty and oppression. Autobiographies written by German workers for some unknown reason stand out by their *misérabiliste* outlook. Today one might go as far as to assert that childhood reminiscences are generally the most successful part of an autobiography. They certainly satisfy our curiosity about a stage of life commonly assumed to shape the character and destiny of an individual.<sup>6</sup>

Yet this fascination with the childhood years is a relatively recent phenomenon, as far as one can tell from the sources available. During the Middle Ages there was no question of peasants or craftsmen recording their life stories, and even accounts of the highborn or the saintly did not usually show much interest in the early years. A St Augustine (354–430) or an Abbot Guibert of Nogent (c.1053–1125) might give some details of their childhood experiences, but these were the exceptions that proved the rule.<sup>7</sup> Ottokar von Steiermark, writing in Middle High German, made his position perfectly clear, ‘greeting the birth of a future king of Hungary with “I don’t want to write any more about him now; he’ll have to wait until he gets older”’. Similarly, during the early modern period in England, children were largely absent from the literature, be it Elizabethan drama or the major novels of the eighteenth century. The child was, at most, a marginal figure in an adult world.<sup>8</sup>

For the medievalist James A. Schultz, this change in perspective is easily explained. His contention is that for approximately 2,000 years, from antiquity down to the eighteenth century, children in the West were merely thought of as imperfect adults. As they were considered ‘deficient’, and entirely subordinate to adults, he reasoned that their stage of life was likely to be of little interest for its own sake to medieval writers. Only in comparatively recent times has there been a feeling that children are special as well as different, and hence worth studying in their own right.<sup>9</sup> Such a massive generalization over periods and places is unlikely to withstand close scrutiny. Nevertheless, it is instructive to compare the ‘imperfect’ child inherited from antiquity with the mystical child of the nineteenth-century Romantics. On the one hand, Dante (1265–1321) echoed the classical tradition when he divided a man’s regular life span into a period of growth (*adolescenzia*, up to the age of 25), a period of maturity (*gioventute*, from 25 to 45, peaking at 35) and a final period of decline

(*senettute*, from 45 to 70). In this scheme it was the moral superiority of middle age that was most in evidence. Youth and old age were conspicuous merely for their departure from the ideal moral mean in their own contrasting ways. Aristotle felt that only men in the prime of life could judge others correctly, youth exhibiting too much trust, old men too little. The Aristotelian concept of the child, then, saw him (and it was a male they generally had in mind) as ‘important not for himself but for his potential’.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, for the German philosopher Richter, writing in 1814, the world of the child encapsulated the future, which ‘like Moses at the entrance to the Promised Land, we can only look upon, without ever penetrating’. The Romantics idealized the child as a creature blessed by God, and childhood as a source of inspiration that would last a lifetime. The way was open in the nineteenth century for scientists and educators to study childhood on the grand scale.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, even in the twentieth century, old ways of thinking about childhood died hard.<sup>12</sup> Social science research on child-rearing was slow to escape the narrow boundaries of psychological behaviourism. Until the 1960s, according to Hans Peter Dreitzel, researchers saw the child as an ‘incomplete organism’ which developed in different directions in response to different stimuli.<sup>13</sup> Again, adulthood was the critical stage of life for which childhood was merely a preparation. All the emphasis in anthropology, psychology, psychoanalysis and sociology was on *development* and *socialization*. What mattered was finding ways of turning the immature, irrational, incompetent, asocial and acultural child into a mature, rational, competent, social and autonomous adult. This conception of children as essentially deficient vis-à-vis adults, according to Robert MacKay, had the effect of deterring research into children as children.<sup>14</sup> In addition there remained the lingering feeling that childhood was a ‘natural’ phenomenon, which could hold little of interest for researchers. The temptation was for members of any society to consider their own particular arrangements for childhood as ‘natural’, having been steeped in them all their lives. At the same time, it was easy to assume that the biological immaturity of children would be the overriding influence on this stage of life.

Such ways of thinking about childhood and children have barely survived the last few years. In 1990 the sociologists Alan Prout and Allison James argued that a new paradigm for the sociology of childhood was emerging, based on six key features. In 1998 they (together with Chris Jenks) returned to the fray with another paradigm, this one revolving around four sociological approaches. Given the slippery nature of the customer, they wisely presented it as necessarily a matter of interpretation, ‘inviting engagement and simultaneously forbidding closure’.<sup>15</sup> Three of their propositions stand out as potentially fruitful for historians. The first is that childhood is to be

understood as a social construction. In other words, 'child' and 'childhood' will be understood in different ways in different societies. To quote Prout and James, 'the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture'.<sup>16</sup> An influential study by William Kessen in 1979 noted the futility of efforts by American child psychologists to discover the fundamental nature of the child in their laboratories. He countered that the American child, like any other, was a cultural invention. Common themes in child psychology, such as a belief in the purity and innocence of children, were therefore to be explained by historical developments in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America rather than by 'eternal science'. Today in the West we do indeed generally associate childhood with such characteristics as innocence, vulnerability and asexuality, whilst people in, say, the slums of Latin America or a war-torn region of Africa, will probably not do so.<sup>17</sup> The second strand to the new paradigm is that childhood is a variable of social analysis, to be considered in conjunction with others such as the famous triad of class, gender and ethnicity. In other words, an age category such as childhood can hardly be explored without reference to other forms of social differentiation which cut across it. A middle-class childhood will differ from a working-class one, boys are unlikely to be raised in the same way as girls, the experiences of the young in an Irish Catholic family will diverge from those in a German Protestant one, and so on. The novelist Frank McCourt understood this all too well:

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.<sup>18</sup>

The third contention is that children must be seen as active in determining their own lives and the lives of those around them. A key weakness of the earlier neo-behaviourist emphasis on socialization was, arguably, its reduction of children to passive receptacles of adult teaching. Recent research in the social sciences indicates that it is misleading to allocate parents the role of model and children the role of followers. As Dreitzel notes, 'beginning with the first smile or the first cry, parents react to their child's behaviour and respond with warmth or hostility, encouragement and satisfaction – depending on their child's character no less than on their own attitudes.' Relations between adults and children can instead be depicted as a form of interaction, with the young having their own culture or succession of cultures.<sup>19</sup>

This new line of thinking on children and childhood raises problems of its own, as its exponents readily acknowledge. If childhood is to be seen as a social construction, what role is there left for biological influences? How can one discover general insights into childhood when the emphasis is on the plurality of social constructs: at the extreme, on what is unique to each society rather than what is common to all? Accepting that other societies will have conceptions of childhood different from our own, how do we react to practices such as infanticide and child prostitution, which we would judge abusive? Is there not a danger, as Diana Gittins observes, of dismissing 'real problems, real pain, real suffering of real embodied people'? And in focusing on the language and lore of children, or the 'tribal child', is there not a risk of casting the young into a ghetto on the margins of society?<sup>20</sup> Even so, the 'new paradigm' in the social sciences has both influenced and been influenced by historical writing about childhood to good effect.

Historians of childhood have in fact been rather thin on the ground for a long time. As late as the 1950s their territory could be described as 'an almost virgin field'.<sup>21</sup> Much of the early work was in any case heavily institutional in character, outlining the rise of school systems, child labour legislation, specialized agencies for juvenile delinquents, infant welfare services and so forth. Ideas about childhood and children themselves were hardly in the frame.<sup>22</sup> Yet gradually historians have contributed to a recognition of the social construction of childhood, cross-time comparisons being as instructive as cross-cultural ones. The work of Philippe Ariès in the 1960s was particularly congenial to social scientists. They readily latched on to his famous assertion in *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) that 'in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist' to demonstrate the shifting nature of childhood.<sup>23</sup> This work sparked off a whole series of strictly historical debates: on whether the medieval period did in fact have an awareness of childhood, on the key periods in the 'discovery of childhood', on the nature of parent-child relations at various periods, and on the role of the schools, to name a few.<sup>24</sup> The growing volume of monographs in the historical literature over the last thirty years or so also makes it possible now to grasp the diversity of experience among young people in the past. The American experience lends itself particularly well to this approach, but European historians have also engaged with the impact on childhood of class, gender and so forth.<sup>25</sup> No less importantly, certain historians have eagerly taken up the challenge of moving children centre stage for their part in shaping the past. David Nasaw, for example, demonstrated how poor children in the cities of early twentieth-century America used their purchasing power to encourage the lurid offerings of penny arcades, cheap vaudeville halls and moving-picture theatres, in

defiance of adult reformers. Similarly Miriam Formanek-Brunell noted how some American girls used dolls for their own purposes rather than those of their parents, cutting them to pieces or running them through a clothes wringer.<sup>26</sup>

A particular problem for historians is to unearth source material on past childhoods. Children themselves leave few records, and even artefacts designed for them, such as books and toys, have a poor survival rate. Historians have displayed considerable ingenuity in their use of sources, turning to official reports such as those produced by factory and schools inspectors, polemical works generated by debates concerning childhood, literary accounts in novels and poetry, 'ego documents' in the form of diaries, autobiographies and oral testimony, folklore collections, advice manuals for parents, visual evidence from portraits and photographs, not to mention toys, games, furniture and the like. Some aspects of childhood have proved easier to document than others. Accounts of philanthropic and state initiatives to improve child welfare can rely on the extensive archives normally maintained by institutions. This doubtless helps to explain the massive scale of the literature available in this area.<sup>27</sup> Studies of the representation of childhood also have a solid base in the literary and visual texts available to them. 'Classics' from such authors as Goethe, George Sand, Wordsworth and Dickens have emerged as an abiding source of inspiration to specialists in a number of disciplines. However, as Roger Cox warns, a discourse, as defined by Michel Foucault, can never be read off in straightforward fashion from a text: an act of interpretation must intervene.<sup>28</sup> Medievalists face these problems in a particularly acute form. They risk gaining a seriously distorted impression of ideas on childhood at this early period because they are forced to rely on a small number of texts, many of them fictional in character. They have made extensive use of sources such as hagiography, law codes, encyclopaedias, penitentials, romances and illustrations on manuscripts. All the same, these works were produced by a tiny minority of the population, who were above all male, clerical and close to the narrow circles of the aristocracy and the urban patriciate. Moreover, authors of literary works at all periods, in following the conventions of a particular genre, were not necessarily providing a direct reflection of contemporary ideas on childhood.

The 'sentiments approach' to the family and parent-child relationships also faces acute problems in finding evidence to answer the questions posed. What historians like Philippe Ariès, Edward Shorter and Linda Pollock want to know is how parents felt about their children in the past. This is by no means a hopeless task, given the survival of sources such as diaries and autobiographies, but it is difficult to achieve any precision over the timing of changes in attitudes and regional or socio-economic variations. The most daunting obstacles

arise when historians look beyond the literate minority to the masses, a point where, according to one authority, source problems become almost insuperable. Information is available from the writings of clergymen, doctors, folklorists and other educated observers, but these of course are all outsiders to the groups being discussed. Hence critics routinely condemn Ariès for the vagueness of his account, Shorter for pontificating on half a continent with 'a few scraps of evidence', and Pollock for losing sight of the seamier side of parent-child relations, as she relied on the inevitably self-censored testimony of diaries and memoirs.<sup>29</sup> Attempts to recreate the experience of childhood also have to be wary with their sources and methods. Children have left traces in various places, ranging from Anglo-Saxon burial sites and medieval coroners' reports to modern records of their heights, deaths, school attendance and employment in a factory. Adults too have attempted to recall their childhood years, in autobiographies and during interviews with specialists in oral history. Yet Ludmilla Jordanova is persuasive in warning against any search for an 'autonomous, authentic voice of children', on the grounds that the very languages, mental habits and patterns of behaviour of the young are learned from adults.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, there is once again the risk of treating various texts as windows into reality. Autobiographies, for example, might appear a secure point of entry to the world of the child. Closer inspection reveals that one is dealing with a literary form, complete with its own conventions. Above all, it is 'a review of a life from a particular moment', and hence it inevitably involves some shaping of the past. One can hope for some interesting insights, but they are likely to reveal as much about the author at the time of writing as about his or her past.<sup>31</sup> There are also various models for working-class autobiography, differentiating it from the classic 'spiritual autobiography' of the middle classes. Regenia Gagnier discerns six 'rhetorical genres' in nineteenth-century Britain which workers could follow: conversion and gallow tales, storytellers and politicians, and self-examinations and confessions.<sup>32</sup>

This book is divided into three parts. The first focuses on childhood as a social construct, and the deceptively simple question of 'what is a child'? In particular, it considers the question of how medieval societies might have perceived childhood, the key turning points in the history of ideas in this sphere between the early medieval and modern periods, and the long-running themes discernible in the debates. Not everyone would agree with Carolyn Steedman that claims for a history of adult attitudes towards children are 'much more compelling' than those for a history of children.<sup>33</sup> Even so, there is no disputing that these abstract ideas are worth studying because sooner or later they have an impact on real children. The second part of the book traces the process of growing up in the past, concentrating on the relationships between children, their families, and their

peers. This takes us into a long list of topics ranging from infanticide and child abandonment to games and folktales. The final section considers aspects of children in the wider world, above all their work, health and education. The periods covered run from the early Middle Ages to the First World War, stopping before one becomes embroiled in the mass of institutional developments characteristic of the twentieth century, and the countries are those of Europe and (from the early modern period) North America. The general aim has been to focus on the child's perspective as well as the adult ideas and institutions that affected their lives. What matters is the *interaction* of children with parents, neighbours, teachers, doctors, employers, policemen and the like. It is also the intention to give at least a hint of the varied experiences of growing up in the past, and to concentrate on ways of interpreting the material rather than the details of what happened. For this reason the work takes a thematic rather than the more conventional chronological approach. This means zooming to and fro across the centuries, as well as across two continents, in what may appear at first sight a disconcerting approach. However, the aim is to highlight key issues in the history of childhood and children.

## PART I

# Changing Conceptions of Childhood

Childhood, according to the seventeenth-century French cleric Pierre de Bérulle, 'is the most vile and abject state of human nature, after that of death'.<sup>1</sup> It is tempting to agree – not least as an antidote to all the sentimental nonsense surrounding the supposedly pure and innocent child of the Victorian era. Such extremes serve to remind us that childhood is a social construct, which changes over time and, no less importantly, varies between social and ethnic groups within any society. As noted above, it is always tempting to think in terms of a 'natural' and indeed universal child, whose path to development is largely determined by its biological make-up. Biology does of course play a part in the psychological as well as the physical development of a child. The psychologist Jerome Kagan informs us that the most important biological influences spring from the maturation of the central nervous system structures during the first dozen or so years of life. These permit the emergence of motor and cognitive abilities such as walking, speech and self-awareness. At the same time, Kagan takes the now-familiar line that experience counts as well as biology.<sup>2</sup> Any idea of a purely 'natural' child becomes difficult to sustain once it is realized that children readily adapt to their own particular environment, the product of assorted historical, geographical, economic and cultural forces. To the extent that human beings can construct their own nature, as Nicholas Tucker recently noted, one might anticipate varying outcomes in what passes for childhood in different societies. Childhood is thus to a considerable degree a function of adult expectations.<sup>3</sup>

It follows that if historians wish to recreate the way day-to-day experiences of children in the past (what might be called the social

history of children) they must in the first instance understand how adults thought and felt about the young (the cultural history of childhood).<sup>4</sup> Childhood is of course an abstraction, referring to a particular stage of life, as opposed to the group of persons implied by the word children.<sup>5</sup> What we will be looking for in various societies is some understanding at a theoretical level of what it is to be a child, rather than mere descriptions of individual children. It may be useful at this point to follow philosophers in making the distinction between a *concept* and a *conception*. David Archard suggests that all societies at all times have had the *concept* of childhood, that is to say, the notion that children can be distinguished from adults in various ways. Where they differ is in their *conceptions* of childhood, which specify these ways of distinguishing the two. Thus they will have contrasting ideas on the key issues of how long childhood lasts, the qualities marking out adults from children, and the importance attached to their differences.<sup>6</sup>

## 1

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## *Conceptions of Childhood in the Middle Ages*

And in the beginning was Ariès. His wide-ranging and dramatic account of the 'discovery' of childhood was a truly seminal work. Briefly stated, Ariès made the startling assertion that the medieval world was ignorant of childhood. What was missing was any *sentiment de l'enfance*, any 'awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult'. The moment children could survive without the care and attention of their mothers or nannies, somewhere between the ages of 5 and 7, they were launched into the 'great community of men'. They joined adults in their games and pastimes and, whether they were courtiers or workers, acquired a trade by throwing themselves into its daily routines, living and working with those who were already fully trained. According to Ariès, medieval civilization failed to perceive a transitional period between infancy and adulthood. His starting point, then, was a society which perceived young people to be small-scale adults. There was no idea of education, medieval people having forgotten the *paideia* of classical civilization, and no sign of our contemporary obsessions with the physical, moral and sexual problems of childhood. The 'discovery' of childhood would have to await the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Only then would it be recognized that children needed special treatment, 'a sort of quarantine', before they could join the world of adults.<sup>1</sup>



*Critiques of Ariès's work*

*Centuries of Childhood* (1962) has enjoyed mixed fortunes among professional historians. (For what it is worth, Ariès was an amateur 'weekend historian'.) Some, including a few medievalists, accepted its interpretation of childhood with enthusiasm, using its insights as an inspiration for their own researches.<sup>2</sup> Others were more measured in their appreciation, or downright hostile. Jean-Louis Flandrin 'marvelled' at its impressive documentation but was 'concerned' about weaknesses in its methods of analysis. Adrian Wilson, one of Ariès's most systematic critics, concluded that it was riddled with logical flaws and 'methodological catastrophes'.<sup>3</sup> The book was far more favourably received among psychologists and sociologists. Indeed, they had an alarming tendency to treat it as a 'historical report' rather than a highly contentious thesis. Judith Ennew observed that all sociologists return to it 'as if to Scripture'.<sup>4</sup> Why, then, has it enjoyed such renown, in some quarters at least? The answer must surely be the challenge presented to the reader by the counter-intuitive character of its argument. Most people assume that their own ideas and practices concerning childhood are 'natural', and are shocked to discover that other societies diverge from them. But once childhood is perceived as being culturally constructed, whole new fields for study are opened to scholars. It also becomes easier to mount a radical critique of thinking about children in their own society. For example, in 1979, Martin Hoyles attacked the present 'myth of childhood', and its desire to exclude children from the worlds of politics, sex, work and culture, by exposing its shallow historical roots.<sup>5</sup>

Sniping at Ariès is all too easy. His sweeping assertions on childhood may dazzle the intellect, but they also give numerous hostages to fortune. In the first place, critics accuse him of naivety in his handling of historical sources. They are particularly scathing of his approach to iconographic evidence. Ariès famously asserted that, until the twelfth century, medieval art did not attempt to portray childhood, indicating that there was 'no place' for it in this civilization. All that artists came up with was the occasional tiny figure resembling a man on a reduced scale: a 'horrid little dwarf' in the case of the infant Jesus.<sup>6</sup> No one disputes that children are generally missing from early medieval art. However, as Anthony Burton remarks, the concentration on religious themes means that many other things are missing too, notably 'virtually all of secular life'. This makes it impossible to single out childhood as a significant absence. As for the miniature adults, they are not necessarily a 'deformation' inflicted on children's bodies. If, for example, the child in a twelfth-



*Virgin and Child in Majesty*, French twelfth century, wood, h. 31".  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916 (16.32.194). Photograph © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

century wood sculpture *Virgin and Child in Majesty* looks decidedly mature, is this not because he is supposed to represent Divine Wisdom? Even when depicting adults during the early medieval era, artists were more concerned to convey the status and rank of their subjects than individual appearance. Furthermore, not everyone accepts that the transition to more lifelike depictions of children in painting and sculpture from the twelfth century onwards reveals an artistic 'discovery of childhood'. Some historians argue persuasively that this was more a matter of Renaissance artists rediscovering and imitating Greek and Roman models than taking a new interest in the children around them. In short, Ariès appears to think that 'the artist paints what everyone sees', ignoring all the complex questions about the way reality is mediated in art.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, critics of Ariès note his extreme 'present centredness'. By this they mean that he looked for evidence of the twentieth-century conception of childhood in medieval Europe, failed to find it, and then jumped to the conclusion that the period had no awareness of this stage of life at all. In the words of the historian Doris

Desclais Berkvam, this leaves open the question of whether there might not have existed in the Middle Ages 'a consciousness of childhood so unlike our own that we do not recognize it'.<sup>8</sup> In the interim, to take the third line of criticism, historians have had no hesitation in judging the Ariès thesis on the complete absence of any consciousness of childhood in medieval civilization to be overdrawn. They have been quick to show various ways in which there was at least some recognition of the 'particular nature' of childhood.<sup>9</sup> Medieval law codes contained a few concessions to the minority status of children. For example, they usually protected the inheritance rights of orphans, and sometimes required the consent of children to a marriage. The ordinances of Aethelstan, a West Saxon king during the early tenth century, laid down that any thief over 12 years of age who stole goods worth more than 12 pence should be executed. However, Aethelstan later added that he thought it 'cruel to put to death such young people and for such slight offences as he has learnt is the practice everywhere'. He therefore declared that thieves under the age of 15 should not be slain, unless they tried to defend themselves or escape.<sup>10</sup> The regime in the monasteries for oblates, children bound to the religious life by the vows of their parents, was slightly less rigorous than for adult monks. A ninth-century commentary on the Rule of St Benedict allowed the *infantes* more frequent meals than the *maiores*, extra sleep and some time to play in a meadow (even if it was only a meagre one hour per week or per month).<sup>11</sup> Similarly, general works on medicine from the Middle Ages include a section on paediatrics, almost invariably a matter of copying the twenty-three chapters on infant care from the *Gynecology* of Soranus of Ephesus (98-177).<sup>12</sup>

An even more powerful riposte to Ariès's conclusion that an awareness of childhood was lacking during the medieval period comes from the inheritance of Graeco-Roman discourse on the subject. Medieval Latin adopted the Hippocratic tradition of dividing childhood into three stages: *infantia* from birth to age 7; *pueritia* from age 7 to 12 for girls and 7 to 14 for boys; and *adolescentia* from 12 or 14 to 21.<sup>13</sup> The discourse also acted as a medium for Classical thinking on the Ages of Man. Some of the schemes available to scholars gave detailed attention to childhood. A twelfth-century translation of Avicenna's *Canon* subdivided the first stage of life, from birth to age 30, into five parts. There were successively ages when the legs were not fit for walking; for dentition (when the legs were still weak and the gums not yet filled with teeth); for achieving strength and dentition; for producing sperm and facial hair (letting slip a focus on boys); and for the final achievement of bodily strength and full growth.<sup>14</sup> From the thirteenth century, such ideas and the images associated with them including the swaddled baby or the frolicsome child, were widely diffused in the vernacular. They appeared in,

among other places, sermons, moral treatises, encyclopaedias, medical handbooks, stained glass windows and house decorations.<sup>15</sup>

There is a risk of exaggerating the impact of such schemes on an awareness of childhood.<sup>16</sup> They were largely academic exercises, owing more to the ingenuity of philosophers in relating the human life cycle to the natural world than to direct observation. Besides the seven ages familiar to us from Jaques's speech in *As You Like It*, three, four and six were also particularly popular. It all depended on whether the author was seeking to draw parallels between the stages of life and, say, the four humours or the seven planets. There was in addition what J. A. Burrow calls a 'confusing instability' in the naming and classification of ages. The classic three stages of childhood were usually too fine for schemes with three or four ages of man: the latter might have a first age running from birth to 14, or from birth to 25 or 30. It is likely that the mass of the peasantry would have had little contact with this type of knowledge. What it did stimulate was a learned tradition of reflecting on the nature of childhood among a literate minority of monks and cultivated laymen.<sup>17</sup>

Now that the dust has settled a little in the debate, it seems unduly simplistic to polarize civilizations in terms of the absence or presence of an awareness of childhood. Following the thinking of David Archard, one might say that the medieval world probably had a concept of childhood, but conceptions of it that were very different from our own.<sup>18</sup> As a historian one must surely acknowledge the role of Ariès in opening up the subject of childhood, profit from his many insights into the past, and move on. A more fruitful approach is to search for these different conceptions of childhood in various periods and places, and to seek to explain them in the light of prevailing material and cultural conditions.

### *Medieval conceptions of childhood*

How, then, did medieval Europe characterize the nature of childhood? There was some recognition of positive qualities, particularly in the very young (adolescents were looked on with some distaste by clerical figures, on account of their licentiousness and 'carnal lust'). A recent French survey proclaims that never has the child been as celebrated as in the Middle Ages. One can quote no lesser personage than Pope Leo the Great preaching in the fifth century that 'Christ loved childhood, mistress of humility, rule of innocence, model of sweetness'. The innocence of children meant that they could have celestial visions, denounce criminals and serve as intermediaries between Heaven and Earth, as in the proverb 'out of the mouth of

babes come words of wisdom'. The cult of the infant Jesus, evident in Cistercian circles during the twelfth century, provided further occasions to exalt childhood. The Massacre of the Innocents also provided a powerful image of childhood, in the form of the children slaughtered on the orders of Herod three days after the birth of Christ. However, it must be said that these were isolated views: in keeping with the often gloomy view of the human predicament in the Middle Ages, most commentators among the educated elite preferred to depict the child as a sinful creature, 'a poor sighing animal'.<sup>19</sup>

Recent authorities on childhood have also suggested that the Middle Ages understood childhood as a process of development, rather than a fixed state. In other words, they had some understanding of the dynamics of growth.<sup>20</sup> Such studies have been bedevilled by accusations of an anachronistic reading of medieval material through the lens of modern theories on the stages of growth.<sup>21</sup> However, it is possible to use the medical, didactic and moralizing literature of the period to demonstrate an awareness of stages in childhood. Shulamith Shahar, for example, draws attention to an awareness of turning points around the ages of 2, 7 and adolescence, and of the characteristics particular to each stage. In similar vein, focusing on budding saints, Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell document the phases in their growth to perfection during childhood and adolescence. From the thirteenth century, they argue, female saints such as Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila followed a particular pattern of spirituality. Between the ages of 4 and 7 the girls grasped what society had in store for them: courtship, marriage and motherhood. At the same time, they gradually became aware of an alternative life revolving around perpetual chastity, humility and charity. There followed a struggle between the world of the flesh, which might triumph temporarily during adolescence and early adulthood, and that of the spirit.<sup>22</sup>

On the negative side, medieval authors almost invariably preferred to write about adulthood, and particularly male adulthood, rather than childhood and adolescence. (Whether the oral culture of the masses ran along the same lines is of course impossible to determine.) A survey of histories and chronicles from the early Middle Ages found them to be 'quite barren' in this area. Another investigation, this time of English literature, mentioned a thousand-year silence surrounding children between St Augustine and the Reformation.<sup>23</sup> There were of course exceptions: one might cite the Middle English poem *Pearl*, which focuses on the death of a child, and the autobiographical references to childhood in works by Bede and Guibert de Nogent.<sup>24</sup> None the less, there is no denying that those writing history in the Middle Ages thought it should be largely a matter of kings, battles and high politics (a view not unfamiliar even in our own times, let it be said). Similarly the conventions of hagiography dictated that

a future saint be marked out early in childhood by his or her exceptional maturity. Authors in this genre revelled in detailing the prodigious feats of a *puer senex*, a child who already thought like an old man. They had St Nicholas displaying his asceticism while still in the cradle, as he agreed that on Wednesdays and Fridays he would take the breast only once a day. St Guthlac (evidently anything but a victim of political correctness) 'did not imitate the impertinence of children, the extravagant gossip of women, the silly popular stories, the stupid sayings of peasants, the frivolous and lying chatter of parties, and the various cries of all sorts of birds, as was the custom to do at that age'. Bede himself had the young St Cuthbert turned from a carefree childhood by a mere 3-year-old, 'who began to upbraid him, with all the solemnity of an old man, for his idleness and indulgence in games'. Adults reflecting on their own religious experiences in their turn followed these conventions by emphasizing maturity. Margareta Ebner, from the later German Middle Ages, wrote: 'I cannot describe how I lived for the previous twenty years', that is to say before her mystical experiences began, 'because I did not take note of myself then'.<sup>25</sup>

Medieval sources were often vague when it came to estimating ages, and caught by the ambiguities surrounding language in this area. In the same way as 'boy' used to be applied to an adult slave in the United States, or *garçon* to a mature server in a French café, so words for 'child', such as *puer*, *knecht*, *fante*, *vaslet* or *enfes*, often drifted to indicate dependence or servility. Hence they too might apply to adults as well as to young people. Early writers also played fast and loose with any precise form of classification by age. Typically, the ninth-century monk Magister Hildemar was happy to apply the term *infans* to a 15-year-old as well as to a 3-year-old.<sup>26</sup> We conclude that childhood (and adolescence) during the Middle Ages were not so much ignored as loosely defined and sometimes disdained. The medievalist Doris Desclais Berkvam sums up the peculiarity of medieval childhood as its 'unstructured and unspecified' character, encompassing 'the time and space of youth regardless of where, or how long, this youth takes place'. The historian James A. Schultz, perhaps generalizing rather too easily from his source material, asserts that medieval society in Germany viewed childhood as an 'age of deficiency' and children merely as 'imperfect adults'.<sup>27</sup>

This limited interest in childhood for its own sake can best be understood in the context of social conditions in a pre-industrial society. Ariès was surely correct to depict medieval children being inserted gradually into the world of adults from an early age, helping their parents, working as a servant or taking on an apprenticeship. He was by no means the first scholar to note that the distance in behaviour between children and adults was less evident in the past than in the present.<sup>28</sup> With hindsight, what we would perceive as

childhood and adolescence meshed progressively and almost imperceptibly into adulthood. This does not mean that people in this type of 'primitive' society were unaware of different stages of development among the young. There was an obvious grading of the responsibilities with which young people could be entrusted: from odd jobs around the household to shepherding and eventually a formal apprenticeship or work out in the fields. They also played their own games, rather than joining in adult contests.<sup>29</sup> None the less, childhood and adolescence did appear less distinct and special at this early period. The element of choice and experimentation which makes these stages of life so critical for the individual today was also far less in evidence. There were different paths for the young to follow, even in the sixth century. Pierre Riché highlights the contrasts between 'the pupil leaving the charge of the Roman grammarian, the lector attached to a cathedral church, the Barbarian raised in the entourage of his chief, and the monk offered to his monastery as an infant'.<sup>30</sup> However, young people themselves had little say in these matters. Most of them were more or less obliged to follow in the footsteps of their parents, with their occupation and station in life clearly mapped out before them. Childhood in Germany during the early Middle Ages was, for the historian Jean-Pierre Cuvillier, an 'apprenticeship in the conduct of a caste'.<sup>31</sup> One generation therefore shaded unobtrusively into the next. Finally, with most people in a village or neighbourhood undergoing similar experiences as farmers or craftsmen, they were hardly encouraged to engage in debates on the nature of childhood. In this way, social conditions in the villages and small towns encouraged a particular idea of childhood, and it in turn reinforced them. To pursue the issue further, however, one needs to proceed beyond the rather static view of medieval Europe presented so far.

## 2

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## *The Quest for a Turning Point*

When looking for long-term changes in conceptions of childhood, it was once again Philippe Ariès and his *Centuries of Childhood* that first set the agenda for historians. His main concern, of course, was to document the emergence during the early modern period of a *sentiment de l'enfance*: an ambiguous phrase which conveyed both an awareness of childhood and a feeling for it. Ironically, few researchers in the field were at all impressed by his account. He outlined a twofold set of changes between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries. At the outset, mothers and nannies launched the new idea by treating children as a source of amusement and relaxation, delighting in their 'sweetness, simplicity and drollery'. He argued, not very convincingly, that 'children's little antics must always have seemed touching to mothers, nannies and cradle-rockers, but their reactions formed part of the huge domain of unexpressed feelings'. Adrian Wilson observes that since Ariès confined his researches to printed sources, the feelings were bound to remain 'unexpressed' until the invention of the printing press.<sup>1</sup> More significantly for Ariès, from the seventeenth century onwards, reformers replaced this coddling of children with 'psychological interest and moral solicitude'. A small band of lawyers, priests and moralists came to recognize the innocence and weakness of childhood, and managed to impose a long childhood among the middle classes. There was, in other words, a shift in the cultural sphere, attributable to the growing influence of Christianity and a new interest in education. Ariès rounded off his account by arguing that the heightened concern for education gradually transformed the whole of society during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, notably in encouraging a new and spiritual function for the family.<sup>2</sup>

The response from other historians was to balk at accepting change on such a broad scale. They have generally preferred the safer (if less exhilarating) ground of the monograph, aiming to produce a more nuanced picture across the nations, the various social groups and the conventional periods of history. However, this has not prevented many of them proposing an alternative 'discovery of childhood', either before, during or after the seventeenth century. They follow Ariès in the reassuring scenario of an increasingly 'serious and realistic' concept of childhood emerging, whether from the early medieval period or the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This is all very well, in so far as they have drawn attention to key periods, organizations and thinkers in the history of childhood. Yet the whole notion of a definitive discovery of the particular nature of childhood is open to question. It assumes childhood to be a timeless category 'waiting in the wings of history to be discovered'.<sup>4</sup> This of course rules out the more recent strategy of considering childhood as a social construct that will vary in different periods and places. Moreover, the notion that 'innocence' and 'weakness' are fundamental truths about childhood rather than one such construct is deeply suspect. It would surely now be more illuminating to think in terms of an ebbing and flowing of interest in the young over the long term, and of competing conceptions of childhood in any given society. So, we should ask, when were the important turning points, and how did they relate to changing material and cultural conditions?

### *'Discoveries' during the Middle Ages*

A few notable attempts to upstage Ariès located significant changes in the medieval or even early medieval periods. Pierre Riché, writing during the 1960s, argued that between the sixth and the eighth centuries the monastic system 'rediscovered the nature of the child and all of its richness'.<sup>5</sup> At first sight this appears a highly implausible line of argument. Circumstances during this particular period were hardly encouraging for any such development. Most of the population lived a miserable, hand-to-mouth existence, threatened by plague, famine or invasion by outsiders. The historian Jacques Le Goff has asserted that the 'utilitarian Middle Ages' had no time to display pity or wonder towards children, and so barely even noticed them.<sup>6</sup> The monasteries, however, to which Riché draws our attention, managed to stand out as a taper of light in the general gloom. They also had direct experience of raising and educating children. The custom of parents handing over a child to the Church meant that the majority of recruits to the monasteries were young oblates.<sup>7</sup> It became pos-

sible for the odd monastic teacher in various parts of Europe to challenge the generally low opinion of childhood inherited from the Romans and the early Church Fathers. St Columban, in the late sixth century, noted that in some respects a boy could be a superior monk to an adult, because 'he does not persist in anger; he does not bear a grudge; he takes no delight in the beauty of women; and he expresses what he truly believes'. Another illustrious monk, Bede, repeated the same formula in the eighth century, to support his exceptionally favourable view of the child. He claimed to know 'many children endowed with wisdom', and suggested that they were good to teach, faithfully absorbing what was taught to them.<sup>8</sup>

In the period around the twelfth century and its 'renaissance', the trickle of historians opposing Ariès becomes a flood. They talk in terms of 'a truly critical phase in the history of childhood', 'changes in the Christian concept of children', or, more cautiously in the case of Roland Carron, a discovery of the child during the thirteenth century, 'perhaps only for a while'.<sup>9</sup> In the background was a series of upheavals in the social and economic spheres. An 'agrarian revolution' running from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries brought some improvements in techniques of cultivation, forest clearances and the settlement of waste land. Population in Europe more than doubled between the mid-tenth and mid-fourteenth centuries, from an estimated 22.6 million to 54.4 million. The securing of the Mediterranean from foreign raiders encouraged trade to flourish on an unprecedented scale. And, most importantly for our purposes, from as early as the tenth century towns began to recover from their torpor, above all in northern Italy, Flanders, the Low Countries and France. Western Europe remained a predominantly agrarian economy, with a relatively fixed social order. Even so, a society which was once composed largely of priests, warriors and peasants came to include 'such numerous and varied types' as merchants, lawyers, accountants, clerks and artisans.<sup>10</sup> In the urban environment, young people had some scope for choosing a career, and parents sometimes had to confront a childhood different from their own.<sup>11</sup> An Abelard or a St Bernard, for example, had some choice over whether to become a knight, a monk or a secular clerk. Thus Abelard, the son of a knight, wrote that 'I was so carried away by my love of learning that I renounced the glory of a soldier's life, made over my inheritance and rights of the eldest son to my brothers, and withdrew from the court of Mars in order to kneel at the feet of Minerva [goddess of learning]'.<sup>12</sup>

The historian David Herlihy has argued that the result was an increased social and psychological investment in children. More resources were devoted to their education and health, and more thought given to child-rearing and teaching methods. Herlihy also notes a new sympathy towards childhood, evident in the devotion

to the Child Jesus. The idealization of a 'sweet and sacred childhood', he suggests, might be interpreted as a reaction to the strains and stresses of urban life.<sup>13</sup> The 'renaissance' of the twelfth century also brought new learning. French cities in particular harboured a growth of humanism and an interest in the individual. The injunction 'know yourself' encouraged reflection on human motivation and various forays into autobiography, such as those by Peter Abelard and Guibert of Nogent. No less importantly, broader career choices and debates on the true nature of knighthood or the ideal monastic life provoked a questioning of established authority.<sup>14</sup> Within the rarefied atmosphere of 'urbane and intelligent society', the cultural ambience was surely favourable to a re-evaluation of childhood.

### *The contribution of the early modern period*

Childhood was once again 'discovered' during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, if certain historians are to be believed. C. John Somerville contends that 'sustained interest in children in England began with the Puritans, who were the first to puzzle over their nature and their place in society'. Puritans did not necessarily have a high opinion of infants, the more zealous brethren asserting that they were born as 'filthy bundles of original sin', or 'young vipers'. However, according to Somerville, Puritanism as a reform movement eager to win over the younger generation was propelled into taking an interest in their position.<sup>15</sup> Catholic reformers across the Channel in France had a similarly low opinion of children, being no less vehement in denouncing them as feeble and guilty of original sin.<sup>16</sup> Yet the seventeenth-century Jansenists at Port-Royal and other educators argued that children were worthy of attention; that one should dedicate one's life to their instruction; and that each individual needed to be understood and helped.<sup>17</sup> Max Okenfuss asserts unequivocally that 'childhood was discovered in Russia in the 1690's', taking as evidence the series of Slavic primers produced by Karion Istomin (c.1640-1717) in Moscow. With their vivid use of illustrations to teach grammar and religion, these primers revealed an awareness that the perceptions of a child differed from those of adults. Okenfuss follows Ariès in attributing this 'discovery' to a new-found interest in education, the school serving to set apart childhood from later stages in life.<sup>18</sup> If some historians look to the cultural sphere to explain the renewed interest in children at this period, others have highlighted the impact of economic change. They argue that the period between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries saw the emergence of capitalism in western Europe. Parents in the middling strata of society

then had an incentive to ensure that children did not fritter their inheritances, and that their male offspring at least had the skills required for success in commerce or the professions.<sup>19</sup>

### *The eighteenth century: Locke, Rousseau and the early Romantics*

Ariès barely strayed beyond the early modern era in his book, which is curious, given that eighteenth-century thinkers came closer than any of their predecessors to our contemporary notions of childhood. They confidently asserted that children are important in their own right, rather than being merely imperfect adults. The historian Margaret Ezell made a case for John Locke and his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) as one of the most important influences in changing attitudes towards childhood in the eighteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Locke's book was certainly popular, running through more than a dozen editions before mid-century, and being translated into French, German, Italian, Dutch and Swedish. It also did much to boost the image of the child as a *tabula rasa*, admitting in its final paragraph that it had considered the Gentleman's son for whom it was written 'only as white Paper, or Wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases'.<sup>21</sup> Whether this image can be taken as the opening salvo in the long campaign by the Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century to eradicate what was left of the doctrine of original sin is a moot point. Given the Lockean view that education can make a 'great Difference in Mankind', there is some logic in suggesting that he saw the child as being born neither good or bad. However, W. M. Spellman counters that Locke had by no means shaken off the gloomy perspective offered by the old notion of 'Christian depravity'. The message of *Some Thoughts* was that learning involved a long struggle to teach the child 'to get a Mastery over his Inclinations', and 'submit his Appetite to Reason'. Unfortunately, according to Spellman, Locke always took it for granted that the great unwashed would refuse to live up to their God-given nature as rational beings, and so were doomed to infinite misery.<sup>22</sup>

The book did at least encourage a sympathetic attitude to children (among the favoured few) that was rare in earlier periods. It called for the tutor to observe closely the 'change of Temper' in his pupils, to help them enjoy their studies. It also accepted that he could not expect the same 'Carriage, Seriousness, or Application' from young children as from older ones: 'They must be permitted . . . the foolish and childish Actions suitable to their Years.' In the final analysis Locke by no means escaped a negative conception of childhood. This

followed from his desire to develop the capacity to reason in children from an early age, 'even from their very Cradles'. With their characteristic inadvertency, carelessness and gaiety, children needed help: they were 'as weak People under a natural Infirmity'.<sup>23</sup>

The outstanding figure in the reconstruction of childhood during the eighteenth century must therefore be Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He it was, in the words of Peter Coveney, who most forcefully opposed the Christian tradition of original sin with the cult of original innocence in the child.<sup>24</sup> Although his ideas were not always new, he mesmerized readers of his *Emile* with a whole series of paradoxes and provocations. The work oozes radicalism – for the male Emile if not for his mate Sophie – starting with the famous line that 'everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things, everything degenerates in the hands of man'. The child is therefore born innocent, but risks being stifled by 'prejudices, authority, necessity, example, all the social institutions in which we find ourselves submerged'.<sup>25</sup> Rousseau organized the book around a series of stages during childhood. These included an Age of Instinct, during the first three years of life; an Age of Sensations, between 4 and 12; and an Age of Ideas, around puberty. He scorned Locke's advice to reason with children, on the grounds that this faculty would not be fully developed until the early teens. He countered that nature wants children to be children before being adults. Childhood 'has its own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling', and in particular its own form of reason: a 'sensitive' or 'puerile' reason, as opposed to the 'intellectual' or 'human' reason of the adult. The very young were not to be burdened with distinguishing good from evil.<sup>26</sup> As innocents, they could be left to respond to nature, and then they would do nothing but good. They might cause damage, but not with the intention of doing harm. They could then learn lessons from things rather than from men, having to do without the furniture or windows that they had broken, for example. 'Respect childhood', he admonished, and 'leave nature to act for a long time before you get involved with acting in its place.'<sup>27</sup>

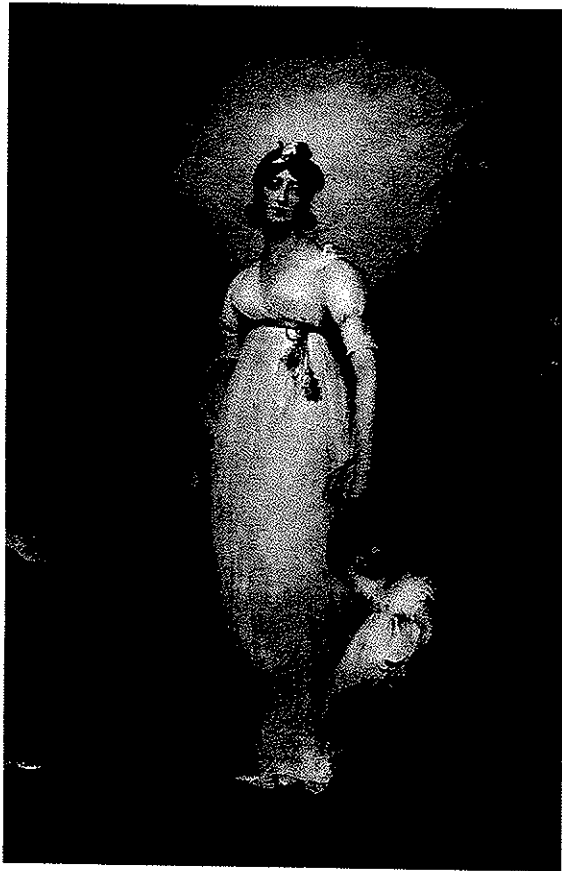
The Romantic conception of childhood, which first appeared during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, added a subtle twist to the Rousseauist notion of innocence at this stage of life. Rousseau had not anticipated that children would become virtuous during the first twelve years of their lives, merely that a 'negative education' would shelter them from vice. The Romantics, by contrast, depicted children as 'creatures of deeper wisdom, finer aesthetic sensitivity, and a more profound awareness of enduring moral truths', to quote the literary historian David Grylls.<sup>28</sup> The Enlightenment view of childhood as a time for education, and particularly education for boys, yielded to the notion of childhood as a



Joshua Reynolds, *The Age of Innocence*, c.1788.  
Plymouth City Museums and Art Gallery (Plympton St. Maurice  
Collection)

lost realm that was none the less fundamental to the creation of the adult self. The upshot was a redefinition of the relationship between adults and children: it was now the child who could educate the educator.<sup>29</sup> Bronson Alcott (1799–1888), the educational innovator and father of the author Louisa May, proclaimed after spending time with his daughters that 'Childhood hath *Saved* me!'<sup>30</sup>

Artists and writers have left us with numerous vivid images of Rousseauist and Romantic conceptions of the child. Late in the eighteenth century, English portrait painters such as Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough broke away from the tradition of depicting royal and aristocratic children in ways that indicated future wealth and status rather than immaturity. These artists reflected the increasing separation of the worlds of adulthood and childhood in the bodies of their subjects, contrasting the innocence of the child with the experience of the adult. In *The Age of Innocence* (c.1788), Reynolds made his intentions explicit, portraying his great-niece Offy as a beautiful but demure infant. As Anne Higonnet points



Thomas Lawrence, *Portrait of Mrs John Angerstein and her son John Julius William*, 1799.

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, photo Maurice Aeschmann.

out, he evidently revelled in her large eyes, creamy flesh and little, dimpled hands, but had her fully covered in a shapeless white dress. Sir Thomas Lawrence followed a similar path with his *Portrait of Mrs John Angerstein and her Son John Julius William* (1799), in which a magnificently sensual mother stands beside her rather dreamy son. Similarly, in the United States, after about 1750 family portraits became less concerned to display children as adults-in-the-making, accepting instead their playfulness and immaturity.<sup>31</sup>

On the literary side, Romantic poets played their part in the 'invention' of childhood innocence. Victor Hugo proclaimed that 'Christopher Columbus only discovered America. I discovered the child!'<sup>32</sup>

William Wordsworth's *Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Childhood* (1807) was arguably as powerful an influence on nineteenth-century ideas of childhood as Freud has been on present-day ones. The lines that we are born 'trailing clouds of glory', and that 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy!' were repeatedly quoted, plagiarized and adapted by later writers.<sup>33</sup> What stands out in the poem is the sense of loss of the visionary qualities of the child, 'Nature's Priest', as the years go by:

Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,  
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,  
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

The German Romantics produced an equally exalted view of the child. Jean Paul Richter suggested in his *Levana* (1807), a tract on education, that children were 'messengers from paradise', and that 'a single child on earth would appear to us as a strange, angelic, supernatural creature'.<sup>34</sup>

The Romantic view of childhood was far from sweeping all before it. For a start, the older tradition of tainting children with original sin died hard. It was even given a boost in England from the late eighteenth century onwards by the rise of the Evangelical movement. The intensely moralistic Mrs Sherwood wrote in a familiar vein that 'All children are by nature evil, and while they have none but the natural evil principle to guide them, pious and prudent parents must check their naughty passions in any way they have in their power.'<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the emphasis on childhood innocence had little relevance to the lives of the majority of young people, still being immersed in the world of adults at an early age. The new ideas resonated most powerfully in middle-class circles, where the interest in domesticity and education was particularly developed. They also served as a powerful antidote to the strains and stresses of the French and the industrial revolutions. As Coveney suggested, in the Machine Age the child could readily symbolize Imagination and Sensibility.<sup>36</sup>

### *Towards a long childhood and adolescence, c.1900*

Finally, a number of authorities have plumped for the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century period as significant in the construction of modern childhood. Viviana Zelizer famously asserted that between the 1870s and the 1930s there emerged in America the economically 'worthless' but emotionally 'priceless' child. By the middle of the nineteenth century, she suggested, the notion of an economically



worthless child had already been adopted by the urban middle classes. However, working-class families continued to rely on wages from their children until child labour legislation and compulsory education 'destroyed the class lag'. To encourage the withdrawal of children from the workplace, American reformers promoted a 'sacralization' of childhood. As one of them put it in 1905, to profit from the work of children was to 'touch profanely a sacred thing'. The outcome was a massive increase in the sentimental value of children in both working-class and middle-class circles.<sup>37</sup> Carolyn Steedman has detected a similar 'reconceptualization of childhood' in Britain at the same period. She focuses on the efforts of the socialist intellectual Margaret McMillan to deploy a new and politicized version of the Romantic child. McMillan modified the original image of innocence and death to one that allowed her to explore the mysteries of growth and decay. In this way she could highlight the thwarted development of children from the unskilled labouring poor. Her *Marigold* (of 1911–12) was an evocation of Goethe's *Mignon*, a strange, deformed child with the same potential to reclaim the sensibility of the adults around her.<sup>38</sup>

The years around 1900 were also notable for the 'discovery' of adolescence.<sup>39</sup> The American psychologist G. Stanley Hall was by no means the first thinker to centre a distinct stage of life on puberty. However his massive, two-volume work, *Adolescence* (1904) did much to popularize the concept – surprisingly, in a way, since its gruesomely pedantic style is almost a caricature of 'academic' writing. Hall based his approach to adolescence on the law of recapitulation.<sup>40</sup> In his version, the individual retraces the development of the human race, from animal origins to civilization. Between the ages of 8 and 12, the child represents 'some remote, perhaps pigmoid stage of human evolution'. Adolescence brings a 'new birth', and a transitional stage between childlike savagery and maturity. 'Development is . . . suggestive of some ancient period of storm and stress when old moorings were broken and a higher level attained.'<sup>41</sup> Needless to say, as in the case of childhood, historians have debated how far an awareness of 'adolescence' can be traced back to early modern or even to medieval Europe.<sup>42</sup> Revisionists have cited a number of institutions, nearly all of them male, that fulfilled in the past at least some of the functions – mainly violence and mayhem – that we now attribute to adolescence. These include packs of twelfth-century aristocratic youths in France, apprentice boys in early modern English towns, and the *abbayes*, *capitanages*, *Königreichen*, and similar organizations that were found among youth in much of sixteenth-century Europe.<sup>43</sup> No less importantly, social scientists have noted that adolescence is as much a cultural construct as childhood.<sup>44</sup> Hall thought of 'storm and stress' as a universal characteristic of

this stage of life, physiologically determined by the onset of puberty. He thereby ignored the possibility that it might reflect more his own social and cultural environment, and the peculiar pressures facing young people in the modern West. Nevertheless, Hall's thinking did encourage the notion of an extended period of transition between infancy and adulthood. Following his recapitulatory principle, he hoped that children would be indulged in their savagery, their 'tribal, predatory, hunting, fishing, fighting, roving, idle, playing proclivities', adding plaintively, 'if only a proper environment could be provided'. Likewise, he envisaged a long spell of adolescence, from 14 years of age until the mid-twenties, which should give full rein to the contradictory impulses towards enthusiasm and lethargy, euphoria and gloom, selfishness and altruism, and so on, which he perceived at this age.<sup>45</sup>

The heightened interest in defining a prolonged period of childhood and adolescence from the late nineteenth century can partly be explained by the fact that young people were being increasingly segregated from adults at this point, notably in age-graded schools. There was, however, a more sinister backdrop to these discussions: a widespread anxiety over the future. The nineteenth century was self-consciously an age of progress, and yet many people were disturbed by the forces unleashed by the new industrial civilization around them. In the atmosphere of heightened competition towards the end of the century, the older powers in Europe feared being overtaken by new rivals, notably the Germans, Russians, Americans and Japanese. French elites were particularly exercised by the problem of a declining birth rate, or 'depopulation', in the face of a rampant population across the Rhine. Ironically, the Germans soon faced a similar crisis among conservative and religious groups once their birth rate began to decline during the 1890s.<sup>46</sup> The British meanwhile began to feel insecure about their industrial and military prowess, as 'national efficiency' became the order of the day. The Boer War was a deeply humiliating experience for them, as a supposedly invincible imperial power struggled to overcome what was perceived as a rag-tag bunch of farmers. Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts, worried that the British would go the way of the young Romans and lose their Empire by being 'wishy washy slackers without any go or patriotism in them'.<sup>47</sup>

There was also a more generalized unease in the West over the physical and moral condition of populations living in an advanced, but 'fatigued and sensual', civilization. Historians have explored in some depth the adoption of medical terminology to describe the 'degeneration' of national stock. The press played upon such fears with sensational accounts of crimes by youthful street gangs, symbolized during the 1900s by the menacing figure of the London

hooligan or the Parisian *apache*.<sup>48</sup> G. Stanley Hall worried that America, as an 'unhistoric land', was particularly at risk: 'never has youth been exposed to such dangers of both perversion and arrest as in our own land and day'. He pointed in particular to the 'increasing urban life with its temptations, prematurities, sedentary occupations, and passive stimuli'.<sup>49</sup> One obvious way to turn the tide was to look to the health, education and moral welfare of the rising generation: 'the child of today holds the key to the kingdom of the morrow', as a British journal put it in 1910.<sup>50</sup> This was the era of institutions such as the Child Study movement and organized youth movements like the Scouts and the German *Wandervogel*.

It would be satisfying to end by arguing that the wheel has turned full circle since medieval times with the 'disappearance' of childhood during the late twentieth century. Neil Postman followed Ariès in assuming that the idea of childhood is a relatively modern invention, and then attempted to update him (in 1982) by observing that 'Everywhere one looks, it may be seen that the behaviour, language, attitudes, and desires – even the physical appearance – of adults and children are becoming increasingly indistinguishable.' He even cited the rush of publications in the field of childhood history as evidence, on the grounds that historians move in when a social artefact becomes obsolete.<sup>51</sup> With even a little hindsight, Postman emerges as a shrewd enough observer of contemporary developments in age relations, notably challenges to the assumption of innocence and vulnerability among children, but his 'disappearance' looks as exaggerated as the 'discovery' posited by Ariès.<sup>52</sup> A more plausible approach is surely to retain in the forefront the protean forms of childhood as a social construct.

### *Conclusion*

Various historians doubtless risk a somewhat overblown claim to the 'discovery' of childhood, in a bid to dramatize the significance of their findings. Any long-run survey of this area is likely to make a mockery of attempts to limit the emergence of key insights to one period. The cultural history of childhood has its turning points, but it also meanders over the centuries: a child might be thought of as depraved in the early twentieth century as well as in the early Middle Ages. On the one hand, then, the long-term shift to a pluralistic urban society favoured the gradual emergence of a prolonged version of childhood and adolescence. The middle classes, whether in twelfth-century Italy or Britain during the Industrial Revolution, accepted the need for an

extensive education and a certain segregation of young people from the world of adults. On the other hand, cultural influences such as Christianity and the Enlightenment promoted series of debates that took a cyclical rather than a linear form. It remains as our final task to pull together the themes hinted so far.

## 3

## Some Themes in the Cultural History of Childhood

Running like a red thread through the historical literature is the contradictory nature of ideas and emotions concerning childhood. It is striking how often the words *ambivalence* and *ambiguity* appear in relation to widely different periods in history. This is perhaps hardly surprising if one assumes that societies are likely to harbour competing conceptions of childhood. A number of dichotomous images emerge from the debates on childhood hinted at in the previous chapters, as people thought about the 'extent, nature and significance of childhood'.<sup>1</sup> Did children come into the world innocent, or with the stain of original sin upon them? Were children like a blank sheet at birth, or did they arrive with a number of innate characteristics already in place? Should they experience a 'short' or a 'long' childhood: in other words, should they be cosseted in their families or launched into the world of adults? And, on a rather different tack, was the main focus on age or gender relations: on children or on boys and girls? One can readily identify extremist stances on these issues, and shifts back and forth along the spectrum at different periods of history. Yet many commentators fall somewhere in between the extremes. It is easy to waver between thinking of infants as little angels and little devils, or to feel obliged to protect a child and to fear being exhausted by it.

### *Depravity/innocence*

The trouble started with Adam and Eve: to quote the psalm, 'Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me'.

The Christian doctrine of original sin did not in fact emerge until St Augustine (354–430) became embroiled in the Pelagian heresy during the early fourth century. He concluded that the taint of sin was passed down from generation to generation by the act of creation. In his *Confessions* he reflected that in the sight of God 'no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth'. The only way by which original sin could be remitted was through the sacrament of baptism. As the literary historian Robert Pattison observes, the Augustinian position 'brought down upon the child the great weight of Christian dogma'.<sup>2</sup> The child was now seen as a wilful creature and, in this respect, no different from an adult. Infants who were unfortunate enough to die unbaptized would therefore be consigned to the flames of hell. Augustine was not entirely unsympathetic to children: he objected to the custom of 'hitting an innocent child with the fist if he runs between two people walking together'.<sup>3</sup> Even so, his firm line on infants being born in sin generally prevailed until the twelfth century over the opposing one of infant innocence.

It also reappeared in a new form when Luther and other Protestants of the Reformation reasserted the importance of original sin. A German sermon dating from the 1520s contended that infant hearts craved after 'adultery, fornication, impure desires, lewdness, idol worship, belief in magic, hostility, quarrelling, passion, anger, strife, dissension, factiousness, hatred, murder, drunkenness, gluttony' and more. Luther himself proved an 'elusive witness' on the nature of the young. On the one hand, he asserted that original sin was as deep-seated in the child as in the adult. On the other, he accepted the innocence of children during the first five or six years of their lives: 'God's little fools' as he affectionately called them.<sup>4</sup> English and American Puritans resolved the issue by asserting that children were assuredly born with evil in their hearts, yet might be likened to the familiar image of 'narrow mouth'd vessels', which were 'ready to receive good or evil drop by drop', or to young twigs which could be bent the right or wrong way. The eighteenth-century Presbyterian Samuel Davies, writing in Virginia, wondered whether his son was an 'embryo-angel' or an 'infant fiend'.<sup>5</sup> The Jansenists, sometimes described as the Catholic Puritans, were no less vehement in condemning the corruption of children than their Protestant counterparts. From their stronghold at Port-Royal one of them thundered that 'the effects of lusting after flesh, which are not extinguished in us until death, are all the more violent in them [children] because their reason is more feeble and they have as yet no experience of the world'. Paradoxically, though, their very weakness made children model Christians, since they were incapable of putting into practice their evil plans, or of resisting the efforts of those responsible for them. The faith that the infant placed

in his parents provided an excellent example for adults in their relationship with God.<sup>6</sup>

The belief in the original innocence of children was equally rooted in the Christian tradition. Jesus Christ himself was quoted by St Matthew as saying 'Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.' Odd voices were to be heard from the monasteries in praise of childhood during the early Middle Ages. At this point opinions were particularly polarized on whether children were channels of diabolical or divine influence. The historian Janet Nelson draws attention to the way stories of the conversion of future saints during their early years highlighted the ambiguity in the Church's attitude to childhood. The underlying conception of childhood, she observes, oscillated between two extremes as children's behaviour was taken to reveal either good or bad supernatural power.<sup>7</sup> The first major assault on the Augustinian position had to await the twelfth century, when Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard denied that unbaptized infants went to hell. St Thomas Aquinas (in the thirteenth century) settled on a special *limbus puerorum* for the souls of infants, where they were spared the flames but deprived of the Beatific Vision. What childhood had in its favour for the medieval churchman was its supposed ignorance of sexual lust. With his weak 'sexual movements', Bartholomew the Englishman wrote about 1230, the child (*puer*) is named after the purity (*puritas*) of his natural innocence.<sup>8</sup>

Protestants no less than Catholics could take this line: Philip Greven found that in America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries fiercely 'evangelical' parents were complemented by 'moderates', who believed wholeheartedly in the innocence of their offspring.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the association of childhood with innocence became deeply embedded within Western culture, particularly after the Romantics had made their mark in the nineteenth century. Yet it was one thing to proclaim the angelic nature of childhood in a poem, quite another to create well-rounded characters in a novel, or deal with street urchins who were far from innocent. Charles Dickens may occasionally have lapsed into sentimentality when describing children, as in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Oscar Wilde is supposed to have quipped that one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing) and *David Copperfield*. But, as Peter Coveney has observed, in the strongest Dickensian depictions of childhood there is a powerful mingling of pathos and idealization with the squalid. The sentimental atmosphere surrounding the Victorian child would in any case be dissipated by the appearance of Freud's theories concerning the human personality.<sup>10</sup>

### *Nature/nurture*

If medieval writers paid scant attention to children, this was partly because they did not always share our modern view that the early years of life are critical for character formation. Doris Desclais Berkvam uses texts from twelfth- and thirteenth-century France to show that moralists from this period felt that the nurturing of a child would only be effective if it was in harmony with its nature, this latter determined by class and gender rather than individual circumstances. Should a noble boy happen to be adopted by peasants or merchants, his true *nature* would out, as he inevitably reacted against an unsuitable environment or *norreture*. Thus in *Tristan de Nanteuil* Doon reveals his noble lineage by spending far beyond the means of the poor foresters who are raising him, and by killing his foster-brother. Surprisingly to us, the author treats all this as entirely acceptable, heroic even, for a budding knight. Conversely, Middle High German texts assume that a base character like Judas, brought up to be a noble, is bound to turn out badly. Who can argue with the comment from the narrator that 'anyone who takes a leopard skin and sews it over a donkey, expecting it to jump like a leopard, is no smarter than a very young child'? To the medieval mind, according to Berkvam, the nature one is born with is the most important influence on life, the raw material without which the finest nurturing will be wasted. It suited the hereditary aristocracy all too well to promote this line on lineage. They were even willing to believe that a youth would respond almost instantly to instruction in his true calling, as Parzival became an accomplished knight relatively late in life after a few words of instruction from Gurnemanz.<sup>11</sup> Yet this heavy stress on nature did not go entirely unchallenged. The later Middle Ages at least were familiar with the notion of the child as soft wax, which could be moulded in various ways, or as a tender branch which needed to be trained in the right direction. Educators identified childhood as the period in life when people were most receptive to teaching, and hence stressed the importance of providing good examples for the young to follow.<sup>12</sup>

The balance of nature versus nurture gradually shifted towards the latter from the Renaissance onwards. The middling and upper classes in particular began to pay more attention to the nurturing of the young, and the detailed advice on child-rearing and education provided by moralists. The idea that 'the hand that rocks the cradle shapes the destiny of society' became received wisdom. John Locke made the stirring assertion that 'of all the Men we meet with, Nine Parts of Ten are what they are, Good or Evil, useful or not, by their

Education'.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, he made some concession to hereditary influences by noting the need to prescribe remedies for the 'various Tempers, different Inclinations and particular Defaults, that are to be found in Children'.<sup>14</sup> During the Enlightenment period, there were high hopes that various 'wild' children found alone in the forests would throw some light on this issue. In the event, notably with the so-called Wild Boy of the Aveyron, the failure of such children even to acquire a spoken language was disappointing for those with a Lockean faith in the powers of education.<sup>15</sup>

Various scientific developments during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought a formidable reaction against the environmentalist strain in social thought. To put it crudely, scientists denied that the child entered the world as a blank sheet, and began to ask what was in its genes. Their assertion of the hereditary nature of intelligence had important implications for the question of who should have access to education at various levels. In 1906 Karl Pearson spelt out the fundamental premise, standing Locke on his head by observing that 'the influence of environment is nowhere more than one-fifth that of heredity, and quite possibly not one-tenth of it'.<sup>16</sup> American psychologists made the early running in this area. They latched on to the tests of mental ability among children devised in Paris by Alfred Binet (1857–1911), but used them for purposes he had never envisaged. In 1905 Binet published his tests to identify pupils performing so poorly at school that they needed some form of special education. The American versions had far more ambitious aims. They assumed that the test scores measured an 'innate intelligence'. It followed in their thinking that all children could be sorted on a single scale by an IQ test, educated according to their inheritance, and later directed into jobs appropriate to their biology. These American pioneers further assumed that there existed significant differences in general intelligence between various races. Lewis Terman wrote that 'border-line' deficiency (an IQ in the 70–80 range) was 'very common among Spanish-Indian and Mexican families of the Southwest and also among negroes'. He therefore envisaged that children from these racial groups be segregated into special classes, where they would not have to 'master abstractions', and be turned into 'efficient workers'.<sup>17</sup>

In England Cyril Burt was thinking along similar lines, though it was the supposed differences in average intelligence between social classes rather than races that concerned him. Finding (from a very small sample of forty-three cases) that boys from upper-class families in Oxford performed better in his tests than those with a lower-middle-class background, he concluded in 1909 that parental intelligence may be inherited. Later in his career he argued that an elaborate education would be wasted on most of the population, since it could never develop much in the way of intelligence. His main pri-

ority was to identify and nurture through the education system that 'small handful of individuals who are endowed by nature with outstanding gifts of ability and character'.<sup>18</sup> The most recent tendency in this debate, let it be noted, is to stress the interaction between nature and nurture, rather than to prioritize one over the other.

### *Independence/dependence*

Humans are born helpless, and when they become independent, with a household of their own, they are deemed to have left childhood and youth behind them. Some never achieve full independence, as in the case of slaves and servants, and so suffer the indignity of being thought of partly as a 'child' for the whole of their lives. Conversely, older children become less and less dependent on their families, leading to a certain ambiguity in their position.

As late as the nineteenth century, the majority of children in the West were encouraged to begin supporting themselves at an early stage. The age of 7 was an informal turning point when the offspring of peasants and craftsmen were generally expected to start helping their parents with little tasks around the home, the farm or the workshop. By their early teens they were likely to be working beside adults or established in an apprenticeship. They might well have left home by this stage, to become a servant or an apprentice of some sort.<sup>19</sup> This is not to say they were treated as miniature adults, but they were expected to grow up fast. How fast was a matter of uncertainty, as divergences in the age of majority indicate. Jerome Kroll found that the legal definition of minor in the Middle Ages varied considerably 'across time, nations, classes within nations, and for various purposes'.<sup>20</sup> From the twelfth century onwards, as medieval pedagogy began to pay attention to the training of laymen, various authorities stressed the importance of learning a trade early in life. Thomas Aquinas noted that 'to the extent that something is difficult, so much the more must a man grow accustomed to it from childhood'.<sup>21</sup> Medieval thinkers reflected this view of the child as an adult-in-the-making by favouring child prodigies above all others. The Puritans of colonial America also expected a great deal from children. Fearing that they might die at any moment, they taught them to read as early as possible so that they could study the Bible.<sup>22</sup> There is too the question of how early young people began to have a sex life in the past. It may be that low rates of illegitimacy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provide evidence of 'sexual austerity' outside marriage. Alternatively, and in our view more persuasively, Jean-Louis Flandrin argues in the French case that youthful libido found

various outlets short of full intercourse. Young people could indulge in homosexuality, masturbation and intimate courting customs such as peasant 'bundling'.<sup>23</sup>

Since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the 'middle-class' desire has been to isolate children, and later adolescents, from the world of adults. Young people have been increasingly 'infantilized' by efforts to keep them out of the workplace, to repress their sexuality and to prolong their education in schools and colleges. The child, as a weak and vulnerable being, was to be constantly supervised, detached from the temptations of the world and subject to rigorous discipline. Young males, for example, were thought to need a series of demanding exercises and detailed rules to regulate their conduct: hence the learning of languages was considered particularly suitable for them.<sup>24</sup> However, this eventually led to tensions between a Romantic-inspired vision of children as charming and helpless, and the realities of life for young people.

It was one thing for a Rousseau or a G. Stanley Hall to recommend that the young remain continent until their twenties, quite another to prevent them masturbating or experimenting with the opposite sex. From the late sixteenth century onwards, particularly in Protestant areas such as Britain, Holland and north Germany, a number of voices threatened those indulging in 'onanism' with all sorts of debilitating diseases and insanity. The very title of the famous *Onania, or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, and All Its Frightful Consequences, in Both Sexes, Considered. With Spiritual and Physical Advice for Those Who Have Already Injur'd Themselves by This Abominable Practice* (1716) gives an indication of the opprobrium involved. There were even sad letters to eighteenth-century medical experts like Tissot in Lausanne in which the writers reported symptoms and diseases which they attributed to years of masturbating. None the less, the desperate nature of some of the proposed remedies suggests that moralists were aware they were fighting a losing battle. In France, during the 1840s, the scientist F. V. Raspail wanted all school children to wear drawers impregnated with camphor; a Dr Demeaux hoped to shame masturbators with regular nude inspections in the schools.<sup>25</sup> Middle-class reformers in Victorian England struggled in similar fashion with the contradiction between their notion of the sexual innocence of children and the hard-nosed choices forced on young prostitutes.<sup>26</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, Freud and several others had come to admit the reality of child sexuality.<sup>27</sup> Efforts to prevent children earning a wage also clashed with peasant and working-class notions of early independence. These tensions came to a head in many countries during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as governments attempted to impose the new model by means of factory legislation and compulsory schooling. With hindsight, as Arlene Skolnick observes, it

may be that developmental psychologists have consistently underestimated the capacities of children, and the resemblance between the minds of children and those of adults.<sup>28</sup>

### *Age/sex*

How did people in the past combine their perception of age (a child or adolescent as opposed to an adult) with that of sex (a male as opposed to a female)? In other words, did they have a sexless (or androgynous) child figure in mind, as opposed to a boy or a girl? During the Middle Ages, when they used the word 'child' in written sources, they often appear to have had a boy in mind. In the Occitan literature of southern France during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Linda Paterson found girls to be 'virtually invisible'. Middle High German texts paid some attention to them, but in general male lives were more varied and interesting. Ariès noted that the first attempts to distinguish children from adults by means of costume during the seventeenth century concerned boys: the dress of girls remained close to that of a woman. Boys, he suggested, 'were the first specialized children'.<sup>29</sup>

The coming of the Romantic movement during the late eighteenth century overturned the prevailing mode in literary sources of concentrating on the rearing of young males from the elite. There was even a tendency for the stock character in Victorian fiction of the child redeemer, who reconciles estranged members of families or helps adults to see the errors of their ways, to be thought of as a girl. One thinks of Sissy Jupe, Little Nell or Florence Dombey in the work of Dickens.<sup>30</sup> Advice on the dress, diet and exercise appropriate for children and infants in Victorian England minimized sex differences. As Deborah Gorham makes clear, however, parents were relaxed about this because they were more certain than we are today about innate differences between males and females. By playing together, it was hoped that 'the girl's weakness [would be] strengthened, and the boy's roughness softened'.<sup>31</sup> The ideal of 'manliness' for the middle classes during the early nineteenth century has also been characterized as 'androgynous', in contradistinction to the 'masculine' version that held sway in the late nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> The programme of 'godliness and good learning' developed in the English public schools during the 1820s and 1830s by influential figures such as Thomas Arnold at Rugby was heavily laced with conventionally 'feminine' virtues. Tom Brown, eponymous hero of the novel by Thomas Hughes, was, for all his prowess on the games field, not afraid to kneel down and say his prayers in front of the other boys.<sup>33</sup> For a

while, then, the child was conceived in some circles as an androgynous figure. Goethe's Mignon was a precursor, the strange young acrobat who bemused the observer Wilhelm Meister following a brief encounter on the stairs at an inn:

A little short silk waistcoat with slit Spanish-style sleeves and long close-fitting trousers with puffs looked very well on the child . . . He looked at the figure in astonishment and could not make up his mind whether he should declare it to be a boy or a girl.<sup>34</sup>

James Kincaid goes as far as to argue that the 'perfect erotic child' of twentieth-century American culture is an androgynous figure, short-haired, active and even aggressive when nominally female, and long-haired, soft-featured and passive when nominally male.<sup>35</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Most societies in the West divide the human life span into a series of 'ages', each with its particular characteristics, rather than seeing it as a single trajectory. Such schema take some fairly obvious biological feature of the age in question and graft on to it a series of more general qualities. Thus the infant in Shakespeare's seven ages of man, 'mewling and puking in the nurse's arms', might be an Augustinian sinner, out to dominate those around it, or a Romantic innocent, as yet uncorrupted by civilization. This chapter has argued that a repertoire of themes has been used to construct and reconstruct images of the child and the adolescent in the West. This of course is to deny that any one period, be it the sixth or the sixteenth centuries, has managed to discover some supposed timeless qualities associated with childhood – least of all 'innocence' and dependence. The cultural influences on the construction of childhood have been many and varied, with inputs from Classical antiquity, the barbarian invaders, humanism, and above all Christianity. Over the long term, one can certainly discern a growing interest in discussing childhood and adolescence, which has been linked here to various pressures emerging in the process of economic development. One can also see a more positive image of the child coming to the fore, as the emphasis on original sin declined gradually from the eighteenth century onwards. These developments would influence, and in turn be influenced by, child-rearing methods, child labour, maternal welfare measures and education.

## Conclusion

What emerges when one attempts the Olympian stance of a twenty-first century perspective on childhood and children down the ages? First, there is the persistence of various themes in the cultural history of childhood in the West. Far from 'discovering' the innocence and weakness of childhood at some particular period, people debated these and related issues from the early medieval period to the twentieth century. Certainly educated opinion tended to favour the contrary view of infant depravity during the medieval and early modern periods, and parents had an interest in toughening up young people for work as early as possible. But at various stages educators, moralists and others challenged these orthodoxies, with varying degrees of success. The assumption here is that there is no essential child for historians to discover, rather that commentators have shuffled around a limited repertoire of themes stemming from the biological immaturity of children. Some of the issues faded from view during the late twentieth century, while others continue to provoke discussion. Sociologists might consign the debate over whether children are born innocent or depraved to a 'presociological' phase, and most people now accept the 'middle-class' conception of a 'long' childhood. That is to say, we take for granted the separateness of childhood from the world of adults, with the young cooped up in schools, playgrounds, their own rooms, and so on. Conversely, the nature/nurture debate continues to interest researchers, though in muted form, and the nature of gender relations during the early years remains controversial. Most parents and educators like to play down differences between boys and girls but old gender stereotypes are difficult to overthrow.

A second, and related, point that stands out from a long-run perspective is the survival until the late nineteenth century of a gradual transition from early childhood to adulthood for most people. This does not mean following Philippe Ariès in his assertion that there was no awareness of childhood until a relatively late stage. Pushed to its limits the thesis leads to absurdities such as the line from Linda Hannas that 'Until the middle of the eighteenth century there was no child in England over the age of seven.'<sup>1</sup> It merely suggests the absence of an established sequence for starting work, leaving home and setting up an independent household. Today the age-graded classes of the school system and child labour laws impose precisely this type of order. But this was far from being the case even in 'modern' American cities such as Philadelphia or the mill town of Manchester (New Hampshire) during the nineteenth century. The key stage occurred between the ages of 7 and 12, when children 'slowly and erratically' joined the world of adults.<sup>2</sup> The upshot was that childhood was less distinct from adulthood than in the early twenty-first century.

Finally, one can discern a growing momentum to social and cultural changes affecting children from the eighteenth century onwards. Philosophers, poets, novelists, educators, doctors and others produced an increasing volume of works devoted to childhood. Reformers in private charities and state bureaucracies founded a range of institutions dedicated to child welfare. Families became smaller and more child-orientated. And school took over from the farms and workshops as the principal site for the work of children. How far young people benefited from these developments is a moot point. Various indicators suggest significant improvements in their health, education, and perhaps moral welfare. The end of the belief in infant depravity may also have removed a hard edge to parent-child relations, as the desire to break the will of the young receded. Increasing affluence trickled down to children in the form of wider opportunities for leisure activities. At the same time, some children gained more from these changes than others, depending on the usual divisions of class, gender and race, and there was perhaps some trade-off between less time spent on wage labour and more on a 'curricularized' life organized by the school and ambitious families. Of course, children were by no means passive victims here: they had some capacity to select, manipulate, resist and above all escape with their friends. Whether the very recent emphasis among researchers on challenging the established asymmetrical pattern of age relations will bear fruit remains to be seen. Perhaps one should never underestimate the power of a child.