

Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World

Shirleene Robinson and Simon Sleight, editors (2016)
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Children have been central to the British Empire's mission to maintain and reproduce its present and assure its future. When the average global age was much younger than it is today, there were many more children in proportion to adults. There was also greater urgency in older adults' sense of having to hand over responsibilities to younger generations who must be trained and prepared.

Although the British Empire gradually turned into the Commonwealth during the mid-twentieth century, it still exerts a powerful legacy as *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World* reveals. The book concentrates on the period 1750-1950 and illuminates vital aspects of childhood and youth within the imperial context. Interactions between structure and agency are highlighted by the overall class structure of the empire, with sharp divisions between British children of the elite who were educated to be future leaders, and middle-class children who were trained to join the civil service or the military, to become missionaries, or develop business and trade. Many travelled the world with their parents. A third tier, British working-class children, included those sent as "orphans" or criminals to the colonies. And there were also the indigenous children around the world, who were respected if their families were considered to be sufficiently grand and supportive of the Empire, but otherwise generally exploited and under-educated. Although they rarely chose their social conditions, all these children actively responded; some became Empire builders and others were protestors and resisters. Most coped with being disadvantaged and even dispossessed victims, and all were drawn into reinterpreting and reconstructing the British Empire in each diverse local context.

The book is uniquely valuable in its global breadth, and its emphasis on how childhood and youth have been so variously understood, interpreted and experienced throughout the British Empire. The introduction reviews the major relevant texts for their contributions and shows how this collection covers new ground. The authors include specialists in history, archaeology, sociology, geography, cultural studies, art, literature, policy, education, play, religion, economics, race relations, sexuality and war.

The introduction begins with the statue of Queen Victoria outside Buckingham Palace. Figures surround her, personifying Truth, Victory, Courage, Constancy and Motherhood, with military guards. Past some gates and water, child figures escorting animals represent Australia, Canada, South and West Africa. The editors note the rich symbolism of a benign maternal empress, distantly aware of her needy sub-civilized childish subjects. The symbolism appears to excuse, even glory in, inversions of reality, when the violent colonial plunderers are presented as the altruistic providers of civilization. Children as pre-social beings in need of wise parents are central to the allegory.

The 15 following chapters are arranged into six themes. The maternal section starts with Queen Victoria's supposedly motherly concern for all children in her Empire, followed by the neglected viewpoint of the Ayahs, the Indian nannies to Anglo-Indian children, and the "scientific" care of white babies, to be discussed later. Theme 2 traces children's migrations across the Empire and between radically different places and cultures. Theme 3, "indigenous experiences," reports on Australian aborigine child workers, families in Bengal, and the international Girl Guide movement from 1908 to 1920. Literature is perhaps the richest resource on childhoods around the Empire, and Theme 4 examines narratives of colonial danger in Australia and New Zealand, and of the "willful" and wild colonial girls. Theme 5 on sexuality considers "boys and homosex: danger and possibility in Queensland, 1890-1914," and sexuality and the "disorderly girl" in the music hall. Finally, Theme 6 analyzes British childhoods in relation to public parks and museums.

Older readers, who remember their childhoods during the 1940s or earlier, will find that this book recasts our memories in a new political light. Much that we may have taken for granted can be re-understood as designed to assume and train us to be children of the Empire: our geography and history schoolbooks, children's novels, Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, household objects (in my family's case, gifts from India and Africa), messages from relatives and friends working in those continents, and newsreels in the cinema before we had televisions.

The education of the Empire's children began at birth, and to illustrate the generally scholarly and well-researched yet original analysis through the book, here is an example of one chapter, by S. E. Duff, on the "scientific" care of white babies. The hygiene regime, developed by Truby King in the 1920s in New Zealand, was promoted by leading women around the Empire. Yet notably in South Africa, although infant mortality was highest among the black native groups, the scientific workers ignored them. The cruel main rule, that mothers should feed and change their babies only once in every four hours, still governed British midwifery into the 1970s (personal experience). The claim that this promoted babies' physical health is well known, but Duff also quotes reports from the 1930s onwards about intentions to train the baby's body and will and increase mental stamina, with patriotic eugenic concerns to preserve and increase the white populations and thereby promote the Empire.

The book offers a rich and often surprising read. Inevitably, there are many missing topics and areas, and I hope this book will be the first of a series that expands this initial collection. My one reservation is that more attention could be paid, beyond culture, to economics as the primary driving force that created and maintained the Empire, and still avidly enforces its neo-colonial legacy. *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World* will be a useful resource on all courses and research programs concerned with its central themes, to enlarge students' and researchers' understanding and theorizing of the great historical and international diversity of experiences and interpretations of British childhoods. This volume will also help with tracing sources that explain present limitations and achievements in the slow

process towards greater equality between and within all the member states of the former Empire and present Commonwealth.

Reviewed by Priscilla Alderson

Priscilla Alderson, Ph.D. is Professor Emerita of Childhood Studies. Her books include: *The Politics of Childhoods Real and Imagined: Practical Application of Critical Realism and Childhood Studies, Volume 2 (Routledge, 2016)*, *Childhoods Real and Imagined: An Introduction to Critical Realism and Childhood Studies, Volume 1 (Routledge, 2013)*, *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook, with Virginia Morrow (Sage, 2011)*, and *Young Children's Rights: Exploring Beliefs, Principles and Practice (Jessica Kingsley/Save the Children, 2008)*. Further details are available at <http://iris.ucl.ac.uk/iris/browse/profile?upi=DPALD60>.