Chapter 1

The child in history

Introduction

The history of childhood does not have a particularly auspicious past. It is itself an illustration of a process which is one of the themes of this book; namely the process whereby an idea takes flight, and having been let loose upon the world it reaches unexpected places, acquires unexpected meanings and becomes the subject of controversy, a pawn in battles that occasionally have little to do with its origins. Any account of this history, however brief, must start with Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood,* the original French edition of which was published in 1960 and was translated into English by 1962 (Ariès, 1973). Moving from his earlier studies of demographic history to the realm of culture, and drawing on evidence relating to paintings of children, to their clothes, their games and their schooling as well as to their representation in family iconography, Ariès explored the origins of the originality of the modern nuclear family. But the idea that caught the popular imagination, the great discovery that Ariès appeared to have launched upon the world, was that in pre-modern times there was no conception of childhood and that consequently childhood must be regarded as the product of modern western societies. In an often quoted passage Ariès said:

> In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children; it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle-rocker, he belonged

> to adult society. That adult society now strikes us as rather puerile: no doubt this is largely a matter of its mental age, but it is also due to its physical age, because it was partly made up of children and youths.
>
> (Ariès, 1973:125)

In spite of Ariès' careful distinction here between a mental concept and everyday behaviour, the book was widely interpreted as saying that nobody could have experienced being a child until the idea of childhood had been invented. As Vann notes, the history of this idea (for in the minds of most this *was* the book) reads like a picaresque novel (Vann, 1982). Outside the field of history, especially within the teaching of social sciences to undergraduates and within the training of professionals whose work related to childhood, the Ariès 'idea' rapidly gained hold. On the one hand it encouraged a belief in human progress; no matter that Ariès thought the high point for the child was in the seventeenth century, back home from medieval apprenticeship and service but not yet sent to modern school! On the other hand, its implicit cultural relativism opened up the possibility of more liberal interpretations of the possibilities of childhood. Children might gain rights of their own and perhaps share in women's escape from the oppression of patriarchal society. In a sense the Ariès idea seemed to offer the best of all worlds. We now, at least, had a concept of childhood, so we would not ill-treat children or fail to respect their special needs, as presumably happened before childhood was invented. But we could also throw off the shackles of contemporary practices, especially those which constrained the child within an overly protective and restrictive schedule, since these had no foundation except in history.

Historians for their part were, on the whole, always less than enraptured, not least because Ariès was seen as an interloper into a field he did not really understand (Wilson, 1980). This feeling was intensified, perhaps, by the concurrent enthusiasm for psychological interpretations of history which, whilst they produced some insightful studies of parenting and childhood in the past, also spawned grand theory in a manner antithetical to many professional historians (Hunt, 1972; Demos, 1970). For example, Lloyd de Mause's psychogenic interpretation of the history of childhood, in which adults through the course of history grow ever more in empathy with their offspring, had none of the sophistication of Ariès and employed all manner of evidence as proof of actual behaviour (de Mause, 1976). To this was joined the elegant social history of Lawrence Stone who, with infinitely more command of history, sketched a transformation amongst upper-class families in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries especially, which placed the changing nature of the parent-child relationship at its heart. To the idea of the history of childhood he contributed the notion of 'affective individualism' in the family, a growing ideal amongst parents committed not only to each other, but also to raising their children through love and respect (Stone, 1979). Whilst Stone recognised a growing variety in human conduct, he too seemed incautiously to interpret behaviour directly from sources of evidence that spoke much more of governing ideas than actual practices (Pollock, 1983). There were other objections, too, to Stone's interpretations. To some, his was a narrative too accepting of orthodox sociological modernisation theories in which 'individualism' rises with capitalism to dominate the *mentalité* of all western societies (Macfarlane, 1979); others were simply wary of the scope and all-inclusive nature of the interpretation (Houlbrooke, 1984).

But perhaps the most important challenge to the idea initiated by Ariès, and given impetus by de Mause and Stone, came from those historians who were unwilling to accept that so basic a human state as childhood could be subject to the whim of historical change. This reversal of approach threatened to deny the possibility of serious change in the state of childhood at all. At its best in the work of historians like Pollock, it produced a sober and realistic interpretation of the experience of childhood in the past (Pollock, 1983). But Pollock was wary of abandoning the possibility of historical change in relation to childhood and warned against too abrupt a Volte-face in the historiography of family life'. Urging the need 'to cultivate a sense of proportion in our contemporary interpretation of change', she argued that,

> Change and continuity should be investigated simultaneously, the one concept informing the other. Instead of searching for the existence or absence of emotions such as love, grief, or anger, we should concede that these emotions will be present in all cultures and in all communities, and seek instead for the varied ways in which they were perceived and expressed in particular societies.
>
> (Pollock, 1987:12)

The problem lay as much as anywhere in the evidence that was available. Access to historical material which tells us much about the experience of childhood is all too rare. Much has to be inferred from sources which are 'idealistic' rather than descriptive; domestic conduct books, literary sources, travellers' tales, writing designed to instruct or entertain the young themselves. The problem is that, not only does such material leave open the question whether real experience can be implied from it, but it often has another ideological agenda of its own. The consequence of this is that interpretation is drawn away from experience towards these other agendas within the terms of which experience is then explained. It is this process which leads historians like Stone to elaborate explanations of experience in terms of theories which encompass the development of western societies as a whole. An ambitious sociologist, armed with systematically collected evidence including the subject's own interpretation, might attempt such explanations of contemporary experience, but rarely is such material left us by history.

The shift Pollock implies, away from investigating experience towards an examination of 'perceptions' and 'expression', is therefore significant. Though Pollock's own study of childhood experience through an examination of diaries and autobiographies remains one of the most important of its kind, she herself found conclusions difficult to draw, precisely because lived experience is so various, so contingent and so unclear. In fact, Ariès himself was well aware of this, emphasising that his study was of the 'idea' of the family, not of the everyday experience of living within a family (Ariès, 1973:8, 393). More recently there has been a re-emphasis of important themes in his work; of his account of a growing perception of linear time with its enormous implications for conceptions of the life-cycle, and of the growth of the notion of discipline especially within the emerging institution of the school (Hutton, 1981; Casey, 1989). Hunt, like Hutton, believes that Ariès should be understood alongside scholars like Elias and Foucault, as one who studied 'long range trends in the alteration of the structure of the psyche' (Hunt, 1986:217). What Ariès identified, according to Hutton, was the 'gathering complexity' of the mental structures which accumulate through the civilising process, and in so doing he explored 'the paradox that such mental structures are at once the essential mode of human creativity and the primary obstacle to it' (Hutton, 1981:242).

In the wider field, too, beyond the narrower boundaries of history, there was a change in the nature of references to Ariès' work. As the clouds of pessimism gathered in the late 1980s and 1990s, it was increasingly accepted that there was an historical legacy that needed to be better understood, and that our own dealings with children were shaped by past conceptions that would not easily go away (Hendrick, 1990;

Stainton Rogers, 1992; Best, 1994). There was a growing appreciation too, that though the historical perspective offered a successive variety of childhoods, at any one time one version was seeking dominance. As Hendrick puts it, ‘each construction sought to speak of “childhood” as a singular noun; the plural posed too many conceptual and political problems’ (Hendrick, 1990:55).

There is a sense in which the legacy of Ariès, though by different routes through the realms of social science and history, has lead to similar conclusions. These briefly stated are simple enough. First that childhood is a socially constructed concept which varies by time, geography, culture, and economic and social status. Second that the relationship between the biological child and the social construction of childhood is complex and produces the varied lived experiences of children, difficult to assess in the present, frequently deeply inaccessible in the past. And third, that we can attempt to understand our current preoccupations, ambiguities and anxieties about childhood by seeing them as part of a legacy from the past, a past which seems to exert a hold upon us whether or not we would wish to be free of it.

Methodologically, too, it seems that the approach to the history of childhood adopted by Ariès still appears to offer fruitful opportunities. It took another marginal historian however, Michel Foucault, to provide the framework. His is a complex and controversial legacy which cannot be fully discussed here, but the coupling of his name by historians like Hunt and Hutton to that of Ariès suggests important possibilities. Foucault does not offer a systematic theory after the manner of Marx or Freud, nor a tightly organised methodology (Sheridan, 1980:225). Rather what he does offer is room for manoeuvre, the space to offer limited accounts in a field which has been bedeviled by the influence of grand narrative. In the first place, Foucault like Ariès was prepared to spend his time in the study of traditionally insignificant groups. He turned his attention to deviants of all kinds and claimed for them a significance in the cultural and institutional formations of modern societies. In the same way, Ariès had first suggested that the insignificant child stood at the centre of a major alteration in the way the life-cycle was perceived in western society. Foucault also attempted to redefine power and to move attention away from the centre (the state, social and economic elites) to the periphery. He wished it to be seen, not as originating in and flowing from politics or economics, nor as something ‘possessed’ by the powerful, but rather as ‘an infinitely complex network of “micro-powers”, of power relations that permeate every aspect of social life' (Sheridan, 1980:139; O'Brien, 1989). Perhaps most importantly, Foucault saw power not simply as an exercise in repressive control, but as something that could also be driven by the need to be productive and creative. There are problems with any theory of power that appears to deny the enduring structures power creates, but at least in relation to childhood, Foucault's conception serves to remind us that even the earliest and most intimate relations between child and adult are, in some sense, relations of power.

Perhaps most of all, Foucault developed the rather loose and baggy, but always useful concept of a discourse. At its simplest, a discourse is a social process in which, through language (used in its broadest sense to include all semiotic systems) we make sense of the world around us, but also the process by which the world makes sense of us (O'Sullivan et al., 1994). Discourses, thus, construct society by constructing 'objects of knowledge, social subjects and forms of "self", social relationships and conceptual frameworks' (Fairclough, 1992:39). A particular discursive formation will construct objects and relationships according to a particular set of rules which help to formulate 'technologies of power', and clearly some will be more successful than others. As children we are born into something which resembles a primordial soup of discourses; these represent the world to us and at the same time position us as individuals within that world (Hodge and Kress, 1988:240). Access to discourses can be sought through the examination of texts which can be thought of as containing elements of discourse. Here a text is no more than any convenient assemblage of signs, indicative of the meanings we attribute to some aspect of human life. In practical terms, they may be stories, poems, letters, diaries, conversations, domestic conduct books, sermons, pictures and photographs, ways of dressing, ways of eating, ways of making love—anything which packages the cultural meaning of everyday life into a form that can be examined. They are one important means by which the knowledge that discourses create is codified, circulated and reinforced. They can also be the means by which discourses are challenged and rejected. Texts should never be taken as straightforward accounts of discourse; reading them is an act of interpretation. A text, as Hodge and Kress note, is 'only a trace of discourses, frozen and preserved, more or less reliable or misleading' (1988:12).

It is possible to re-read Ariès as a study of the emergence of various discourses relating to childhood, in particular the developmental discourse with all its ramifications for the entry of the child into adult life, and the discourse of discipline within which the child was located as a creature over whom power was to be exercised productively. His texts are the paintings, the games, the clothes of the first part of his book and the educational tracts and orders for the running of schools which make up much of the second part. Such a reading is not unproblematic, but it does serve to re-establish the important agenda which Ariès set. It will not solve the problem of understanding the actual experience of children, but it defines more clearly how close and how far we are from that experience. From the traces in the text to the discourse and on to the experience is a long journey, but at least in attempting to understand the discourse we are attempting to understand a structure of meaning to which experience has, of necessity, to relate.

Discourses come and go. They can vary from the short-lived, localised and explicitly articulated (the early historiography of childhood discussed above would be an example) to much more deepseated ways of understanding the world (religious beliefs, for example). When dominant, these latter, because they are so embedded in culture, become naturalised and, though constantly elaborated upon, their basic propositions are assumed rather than expressly articulated. To take one example, the assumption of a gradual, linear development from infancy to adulthood is now so accepted that we rarely question it. Such discourses may only come under public scrutiny when some event suddenly challenges their presuppositions, as for example when, after a brief holiday romance, a 13-year-old English girl leaves home with her parents' blessing to marry an 18-year-old Turkish waiter and live in a remote Turkish town. The reason we find the age of 13 too young is because we accept, largely without question, the strictures of a range of influential discourses which define a 13-year-old girl as a child, socially and sexually immature. Discourses can achieve great significance but rarely complete dominance. Many are always in competition, always explicitly intertextual in the sense that their articulation depends upon opposition to or support for other pre-existing texts pertaining to other discourses. The concepts generated through these discourses live on to enter other discourses often with altered meanings, and especially with significantly different emotive and cognitive connotations. In some cases, there is a constant reference back to history, indeed a constant rewriting of history in order to reshape a particular concept in the light of the needs of current discourse. Foucault preferred to talk of 'beginnings' rather than 'origins' and of 'genealogies' rather than 'causes', because the history of any discourse has many possible beginnings and much wasted energy can be spent in deciding where the real origins are. The interest lies rather in exploring differences and in finding the disturbances that threaten any orthodoxy.

The historical part of this book is largely concerned with these intertextualities, with the way in which concepts generated by particular discourses both depend upon earlier concepts which they use or abuse to their own ends and at the same time contribute to later discourses. Roughly speaking, there are two types of discourses examined here. Two of them, those relating to Puritanism and to Romanticism, have fairly specific historic origins. These, although they have genealogies traceable to a remote past, also have identifiable beginnings represented by clear differences from their surrounding discourses. The other two, dealing with the Enlightenment and with Victorian discourses on gender and sexuality in childhood, are slightly different. Although they are specifically located historically (and in the case of the Enlightenment, very narrowly located textually in the work of Locke and Rousseau), they do deal with more existential questions—with the rationality and sexuality of the child. However, the distinction should not be drawn too sharply; the question of original sin, though it is posed in an historically specific way by the Puritans, raises existential questions about the moral nature of the child, and, however basic questions relating to the child's sexuality seem to be, their enunciation in the late nineteenth century is historically very specific.

In the rest of this study an attempt has been made to try and ensure that the somewhat abstract theoretical language employed in this discussion does not obtrude too much. Demonstrations of academic virility are all very well in their way, but they can make the analysis feel unnecessarily cumbersome and be alienating to the non-specialist reader. There are occasions when it is inevitable that some specialist language is employed, especially when a particular writer offers a strongly theoretical interpretation (Anthony Easthope on Wordsworth is a clear example). These occasional excursions into a more rarefied language have been introduced in the belief that something of particular significance is offered by the writers concerned. Readers are invited to give them due attention, but in the end must make their own judgement. In a short study of this kind, there is a very heavy reliance upon secondary sources and this, to some degree, determines also the kind of evidence that has been employed. Different discourses have their origins in different places, and this is reflected in the kind of secondary sources used. Puritanism was born of a religious and political movement, the Enlightenment was essentially an intellectual enterprise, and Romanticism was primarily a literary movement; as a consequence secondary sources range from social history to intellectual history and literary criticism. It is one of the pleasures of engaging in a study of this kind to note the increasing interdisciplinarity of much modern scholarship. One source of primary evidence has, however, been used in several different contexts; this is writing designed specifically for children, mostly in the form of poetry or stories. Whilst there is a well developed specialist field of study in children's literature, it has perhaps been under-used in more general discussions of the history of childhood. Yet it is a source that deserves more extensive and detailed examination than it can receive here, since through writing directly to children, authors (often conscious of their multiple roles as writers, educators and even parents) most clearly express their own hopes, fears and expectations for and of the children of the rising generation.

There are also notable absences from this study. The child at school has been marginalised as has the child who falls under the shadow of the state in other ways. There is little reference to the impact of science even though it could claim to have shaped much nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourse about the child. It would have been possible, too, and entirely appropriate to say much more about the mother-child dyad. There are various justifications that could be offered for their omission. They are all discourses with such strong intertextualities (in schooling and the curriculum; in politics; within the important scientific disciplines of medicine and psychology themselves; within feminist studies) that it would have been all too easy for the focus to slip away from the child into other areas. It is also true that each of these fields has its own extensive and important literature which makes demands upon discussion and analysis that a short text cannot easily deal with. But at the end of the day, the selection is personal and eclectic, reflecting an individual history of exploration. It is, in fact, easy to get trapped by others' orthodoxies; to ignore the Puritans because they largely pre-date the great intellectual endeavours of the Enlightenment; to get caught by the increasingly self-reverential musings of developmental psychology as the old certainties about socialisation slip away; to allow the ungendered child to fall into a void created by an over-insistence upon gendered analysis. The selection here may inadequately represent somebody else's meta-narrative, but religion, reason, sex and the intuitive human response to the sheer freshness of the child that is captured by Romanticism can surely claim to be the starting points—in Foucault's term the 'beginnings'—for some of the most important discourses that have shaped childhood in western societies since the end of the Middle Ages.

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