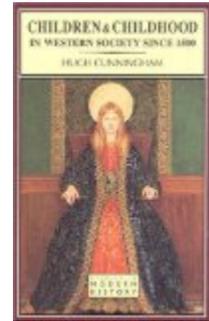


Hugh Cunningham. *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500 (Studies in Modern History)*. London: Longman, 1995. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-23853-4; \$37.80 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-23854-1.

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Surveying Children and Childhood

Hugh Cunningham has taken on a formidable challenge in this book: describing the history not only of the Western idea of childhood, but the actual experience of children over a span of nearly five hundred years. That he has done such a fine job in less than two hundred pages testifies to his skills of historical synthesis. The task was complicated by the flourishing historiography of his subject: for the past twenty-five or thirty years, family life and childhood have received increasing attention from scholars and have generated more than a few hard-fought battles.

The starting point for modern studies of childhood is Phillipe Aries, whose *Centuries of Childhood* appeared in 1960. Aries sparked a great outpouring of criticism with his declaration that “in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist” (Aries 1960: 30), but nevertheless focused the attention of scholars on a subject which had only been fitfully illuminated by previous generations. The torch was soon taken up by others, many of whom either elaborated upon or disagreed strongly with Aries’ conclusions. Lloyd de Mause’s *History of Childhood* (1974) and Lawrence Stone’s *Family, Sex, and Marriage* (1977) epitomize the approach of the “New Social History”: extraordinarily influential works, they systematized the study of childhood. De Mause identified six “modes” of parent-child relations, ranging from the “infanticidal” to the “helping”; while Stone described the evolution of the family, from the “open lineage” to the “closed domesticated nuclear.” These works focused upon change over time; Stone, for example, argues that

an important part of the story lay in the transformation of parent-child relations from one of distance to closely-bound affection.

The implication in these works—that parents in the past did not love their children, or they hardened their hearts as a psychological defense against high rates of infant mortality—sparked the next round of work on childhood. Most important has been the contribution of Linda Pollock, whose *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (1983) argued that loving relations were the rule. Pollock and others working in the field such as Alan Macfarlane, stressed continuity in the history of childhood, rather than change.

Cunningham falls into the Pollock camp on the question of parent-child relations; he assumes that parents did indeed love their children. Because he takes parental affection as a given, he is not particularly interested in the question. Where Cunningham makes his real contribution to the debate is in his determination to set childhood and the family into a broader context, primarily to explain the impact of forces beyond the home, declaring that “a major theme of this book will be that public action shaped the lives of innumerable children” (p. 3). Philanthropy and government are of crucial importance for Cunningham, and he argues that their impact was broader, and began earlier, than some historians have recognized.

The book first explores the evolution of ideas about childhood in the western world. Beginning with a

brief but lucid examination of the classical and medieval world, where the most important change in the notion of childhood came with the spread of Christianity, Cunningham turns to the period beginning about 1500. His aim here is to describe the rise of what he calls a “middle class ideology of childhood.” This ideology has its origins in the thinking of a succession of figures, the first of whom was Erasmus. Erasmus’s stress upon the importance of the father and of education—for boys, at any rate—was the first step in the creation of a distinctly modern vision of childhood. Interestingly, Cunningham argues that the Reformation’s importance was in advancing the notion of the importance of education for Catholics and Protestants alike. Though he concedes that there were differences—the Puritan obsession with original sin and the Catholic elevation of the priest above the familial patriarch, for example—Cunningham prefers to stress continuities across the religious divide. John Locke, the next important contributor in Cunningham’s view, was important for undermining the idea of original sin, and for encouraging the secularization of the western ideal of childhood. It was left for Rousseau to follow Locke’s secular ideal to its logical conclusion: nature, rather than the Church, should be the director of a child’s growth. These romantic ideals were immensely influential among educated Europeans, and were popularized still more after the publication of Wordsworth’s “Ode on Intimations of Mortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.” This work, says Cunningham, “came to encapsulate what was thought of as a romantic attitude to childhood: that is, that childhood was the best part of life” (p. 74). And unlike Locke’s own gendered notion of childhood, Wordsworth and Rousseau made no distinctions between boys and girls: children of both genders were “godlike, fit to be worshipped, and the embodiment of hope” (p. 78).

Of course these ideas were the product of elites, and until the nineteenth century rarely applied to any other children, as Cunningham recognizes. The rest of his book traces the ways in which this “middle class ideology” came to be applied to all children. In the early part of the period, Erasmian prescriptions had no place in the experience of the vast majority of children, who were trained from about the age of seven to take their place in the adult world of work. But beginning in the seventeenth century, education, sponsored by churches and lay charity, began to have a broader impact. Many of the free schools founded in English towns in the period, for example, followed, if only loosely, Lockean ideals. While their goal was usually to teach a useful trade, they also provided lit-

eracy skills and made the experience of schooling more common for the non-elite majority.

Industrialization, Cunningham argues, did little to alter the structure of the family, but it radically changed the experience of its members, as people moved from agriculture to industry. Children, accustomed to work in the fields, quite naturally took their places in the factory work force. Here the Romantic ideal began to have its effect upon the majority of children, as middle class reformers pressured Western states to limit the impact of industry upon children. A hallmark of the century after 1750, Cunningham tells us, was the dramatic increase in state intervention in child-related matters. Regulation imposed upon child labor was one feature of these policies. Eighteenth-century governments had deliberately encouraged the rapid introduction of children into the work force, teaching them trades, but by the mid-nineteenth century the goal was to exclude them from the shop floor. Most important of all was the introduction of compulsory schooling. Although feeble state efforts at requiring education had been underway since the early eighteenth century, it was not until the latter half of the nineteenth that school became a common experience for all.

While compulsory education reinforced the Romantic ideal of childhood, Cunningham points out that Western states had far more in mind than assuring fun and games for youth. Increasingly sophisticated economies required sophisticated skills. Schools served the interests of governments and their rulers: children pledged allegiance, saluted portraits of kaisers and kings, and learned about the benefits of the status quo. Moreover, the state’s increased role in the lives of children—not simply through schooling, but also through public health programs and social work, both of which emerge simultaneously with the public school, “entailed an unprecedented degree of surveillance of the working-class population” (p. 168). Despite the utility of such policies for governments, there is no doubt but that the Romantic ideal of childhood dominated public action. Even science did more to serve the ideal than challenge it: pediatrics, a branch of medicine unknown much before the turn of the century, helped ensure a dramatic fall in infant mortality rates, a shift Cunningham emphasizes is of great importance.

Though Cunningham argues that the Romantic ideal persists, he describes modern challenges to that ideal in his last chapter. It is a thought-provoking essay. He stresses that the transformation of children into consumers, a process that began in this century, has un-

dermined older ideas, as children, with money in their pockets—or the desire to put money there—have challenged the adult authority which has kept them in dependence. The boundaries between childhood and adulthood established a century ago are increasingly permeable. An example of this is the increasing tendency of states to try young offenders as adults. Juvenile justice systems were founded in the last century upon the Romantic premise that children—even criminal children—are endowed with a special innocence that makes their redemption more likely. Now teenagers—and at times children even younger—are often turned over to the adult courts. What has happened to the Romantic ideal?

Hugh Cunningham offers no definitive answer to that last question, but he has done a superb job of describing how we have come to where we are. His book is a survey, based upon secondary sources—and mostly sources describing Western European nations—but it succeeds brilliantly in its goals. Any reader in search of a clear, well-written, and comprehensive account of the history of children and childhood could ask for nothing better.

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