



## The History of Childhood

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seems to rule out the understanding between the two disciplines which he wishes to promote. This is a logical dilemma which he does not solve, but in posing it even implicitly, he begins to throw light on what has been an untidy and muddled scholarly debate.

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RODERICK FLOUD

*The History of Childhood.* Edited by LLOYD DE MAUSE (London: Souvenir Press, 1976. £5, paper £3).

THIS work spans the last two thousand years with essays on childhood in the following periods and places: late Roman and early medieval (Lyman), ninth to thirteenth centuries (McLaughlin), urban Italy from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries (Ross), England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Tucker), seventeenth century French child-rearing (Marvick), seventeenth-century England and America (Illick), eighteenth-century America (Walzer), imperial Russia (Dunn), nineteenth-century Europe (Robertson), and a general survey by the editor. In each period the essays cover the following major themes: pregnancy and birth, swaddling and infant clothing, breast-feeding and wet-nursing, the disciplining of children, sending children away from home, infant and childhood sexuality. A very wide range of mainly literary sources is used, from saints' Lives and domestic manuals to letters and diaries. There is an impressive array of footnotes, indeed, in one essay, the notes extend to forty pages, the text for one page less. The work thus provides a good bibliographic introduction to the subjects listed above. For the historian of England, the essays by Tucker and Illick will be most relevant. Illick's essay is a particularly useful contribution to this difficult subject, sensitive and knowledgeable, frequently stressing that there was, in practice, a relaxed and affectionate attitude to children.

Apart from the extensive bibliographical information and long quotations which make the work a sourcebook, its main virtue is that the authors have attempted to describe a much neglected yet enormously important area of the past. As Walzer puts it, 'we can learn far more about the cultivation of flax in the colonies than how mothers raised children' (p. 365). Yet, in this post-Freudian era, we all tend to subscribe to the view that the child is father of the man and that an understanding of the way children were raised is of great value in the understanding of political, economic, religious and social life. Thus, to have been shown that wet-nursing and swaddling were widespread in many parts of traditional Europe is a considerable gain in understanding and alters our conception of the past. Numerous sidelights are thrown on diverse areas, from conceptions of time to toilet training, masturbation, the structure of the family, infanticide and fostering. Many of the essays represent courageous attempts to explore, on the basis of deficient sources, the inexorable. The problems of documentation account, however, for the thin and unconvincing nature of the earlier contributions, and it is only from the seventeenth century onwards that the

essays begin to be founded on an acceptable mixture of evidence and generalization.

It is not, however, merely the lack of evidence and the difficulty of evaluating it which makes this collection so frustrating to professional historians. The framework for interpreting the evidence, especially as revealed in the editor's introduction, is totally unacceptable. Apart from fairly frequent unsupported generalizations (*e.g.* about age at marriage, instability of marriage etc., pp. 121, 126), and occasional lapses into home-spun psychologizing, the major contributors in the book do not make overt what is made clear by the preface – that this work, rather than being a 'new' and 'progressive' history, is a curious revival of late nineteenth-century Whig history and evolutionary anthropology. The view is encapsulated in the editor's second sentence, 'The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized, and sexually abused' (p. 1). There are repeated assertions that there has been a long-term secular progress to our enlightened times. The editor attempts to show this not only by quoting frequent instances of bestial cruelty but by ascribing the worst of motives to every parent in the past. For example, while people might have justified swaddling on the grounds that it was good for the child, he argues that they encouraged it through laziness, or sent children away to be nursed or as servants in other households because they did not care for their children. The contention that the high mortality meant that people could not afford to become emotionally involved with their children lurks behind much of the text and counter-evidence from other non-western cultures is forestalled by arguing that their apparent kindness and affection is merely the result of 'projection and not true empathy' (p. 15). It is clear that the editor has spoilt a good case by exaggerating it, making his assertion that 'we are all historians first, and have considered it our central task to examine the sources objectively' (preface) appear ludicrous. Fortunately, a number of the contributors *are* good historians and have risen above the hysterical and culture-bound level of the introduction. It is advisable to read the introduction last, and to realize that even the best contributors tend to paper over huge gaps in the evidence with totally unacceptable evolutionary generalizations. Such a general framework is especially tempting since most of them wish to make statements about changes in child-rearing patterns though the evidence is almost always too thin to do so. Furthermore, since it is impossible to establish the major dimensions of change, speculations as to the causes and consequences of changes are doomed. It is perhaps curious that the major premise that 'the central force for change in history is neither technology, nor economics, but the "psycho-genic" changes in personality occurring because of successive generations of parent-child interactions' (p. 3) should have led to so little interest in how modes of childrearing influenced society and culture. The work is worth reading and may, indeed alter the way we think of the past, but its sweeping central assumptions need to be examined before any of them can be accepted.