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Author(s)	Buckley, Sarah-Anne; O'Riordan, Susannah
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CHAPTER 8
CHILDHOOD CA. 1740–2016.

Sarah-Anne Buckley and Susannah Riordan

1. Introduction.

The origins of historical research into childhood is usually traced to the publication of Philippe Ariès's 1960 study, translated into English as *Centuries of Childhood*. Here, Ariès argued that while there have always been children, the concept of 'childhood' – the recognition, celebration and, frequently, idealization of an intermediate stage of life between infancy and adulthood – only developed in the seventeenth century and then primarily among the wealthier middle classes. Later scholars have dismissed Ariès's portrayal of the middle ages as a period in which parents had a largely unemotional relationship with their children. However, there has been a general consensus that by the middle of the eighteenth century, certainly in elite families, the child was increasingly being recognised as an individual with needs which differed from those of adults. This chapter, therefore, charts a period of enormous change beginning with the 'discovery of childhood' and ending with the insertion of 'the rights of the child' into the Irish constitution in 2012.

Ariès inspired the development of a new field of scholarship, employing age – like gender, race or class – as a tool of historical enquiry. Methodologically, this poses challenges for historians as even within a limited region and timeframe, the definition and experience of 'childhood' is not universal. Furthermore, children are less likely than adults to have created records that have been preserved and, where they are extant, these sources may elude analysis by the modern adult. Historians are usually dependent on sources written or recorded by adults and, in consequence, Harry Hendrick has asked 'can the history of children/childhood ever be more than that of what adults have done to children and how they conceptualised childhood?'¹ This question is not merely rhetorical. Internationally, the historiography of childhood has evolved from concentration on the changing ways in which adults – whether parents, philosophers, philanthropists or politicians – represented and thought about children, to studies of the increasing intervention by states into the lives of poor, 'criminal',

¹ H. Hendrick, handout circulated at Conference on the History of Childhood, Boston College, Dublin Centre, April 2008.

illegitimate and other vulnerable children, to attempts through the use of such challenging sources as oral histories, memoirs, folklore collections and children's literature to discover the authentic voices, and the agency, of children in the past.

The history of children and childhood in Ireland has largely followed this trajectory, not least because it was late to develop and influenced in part by the intense social concerns about the historical abuse of children in institutions which emerged in the 1990s. Irish children's history is now flourishing. 2014 witnessed the publication of Maria Luddy and James M. Smith (eds.), *Children, Childhood and Irish Society: 1500 to the Present*, and the first major interdisciplinary conference on the history of childhood in Ireland. However, this history remains dominated by those aspects of childhood accessible through organised collections of records: education, institutions, the welfare system and the penal system. There are many questions remaining to be answered about the history of the Irish child and of Irish childhood – or rather *childhoods* since in Ireland as elsewhere childhood experience was marked by diversity of experience according to age, class, gender, geography, religion and ethnicity.

2. Family Life.

By 1750 in Ireland, the evidence of representational art, material culture, and the correspondence and reading habits of the upper and middle classes, suggest that childhood was viewed as a distinct period of life. Children were cherished as individuals with their own personalities, characterised by an innocence untainted by the temptations and vicissitudes of life, and not merely as imperfect adults, economic units or a means of ensuring the survival of families. Parents understood that their offspring had the potential to mature into good and useful citizens, or, if inadequately nurtured and guided, the opposite. Ariès associated this development with improving survival rates for infants and children in the early modern period. Though childhood mortality figures are difficult to estimate for Ireland before the advent of regular censuses, it has been suggested that between a quarter and a third died before their fifteenth birthday in the early eighteenth century.² This statistic improved incrementally over the course of the next two hundred years, with the exception of the Great Famine during which the death-rate of the under-nines, and particularly the under-fives, was

² S. Connolly, 'Family, Love and Marriage: Some Evidence from the Early Eighteenth Century', in M. MacCurtain and M. O'Dowd (eds), *Women in Early Modern Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1991), p.285.

disproportionate to their total numbers.³ Despite the general improvement in infant and child mortality, by the end of the nineteenth century Irish rates were noticeably higher than those in Britain and remained high by Western European standards until the 1940s. For the most part, this reflected the poverty, overcrowding, and poor diet of those in urban areas, particularly Dublin's tenements.

Sources, from the diaries and correspondence of eighteenth-century aristocrats to oral testimonies about tenement life in the first decades of the twentieth century,⁴ bear witness to the constant anxiety of parents about the health of their children, particularly in the first year of life. While the death of infants was often attributed to 'convulsions', epidemic diseases were the main cause of concern for the mothers and fathers of older children, ranging from smallpox – prior to the introduction of a relatively safe method of inoculation in 1768 – to gastroenteritis and tuberculosis. Parents often expressed their grief on the death of children in terms of resignation to the will of God and gratitude for the child's translation to a better world. Historians have warned against mistaking conventional expressions of piety for indifference. As Steven Ozment has observed, 'surely the hubris of an age reaches a certain peak when it accuses another age of being incapable of loving its children properly.'⁵ Nonetheless, Irish fatalism about the country's abnormally high levels of infant and child mortality into the twentieth century – among policy-makers as well as parents – appears to have been exceptional and debilitating.

Survival was, therefore, the main challenge posed to the Irish child. Thereafter, its upbringing was – certainly until after the Second World War – determined by its parents' understanding of its future role in society. Increasing survival rates meant larger families: more sons to be provided with land, a career or a trade; more daughters to be dowered or provided with a means of making a livelihood. This challenge existed in every class and was not peculiar to Ireland: where Ireland was remarkable was in the lack of alternative opportunities for non-inheriting children, the continued dominance of the pre-industrial family economy well into the twentieth century, and reliance on the emigration of excess

³ P. P. Boyle and C. Ó Gráda, 'Fertility Trends, Excess Mortality, and the Great Irish Famine', *Demography*, 23: 4 (1986), p.555.

⁴ For example, K. C. Kearns, *Dublin Tenement Life: An Oral History*, new edn (Dublin, 2006).

⁵ S. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), p.162, cited in C. Heywood, *Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times*, new edn (Oxford, 2004), p.42.

children as a family survival strategy. In these circumstances, the destiny of the Irish child, including decisions about inheritance, marriage, emigration and – towards these ends – education and employment were under the near-total control of parents, principally fathers.

Gabrielle Ashford has suggested that the eighteenth-century nobility and gentry experienced the ‘discovery’ of their own children in terms of the enjoyment of their company as well as the care of their health and education and were more comfortable with family intimacy than their English peers.⁶ However, although the international history of childhood has been dominated by middle-class childhoods in the nineteenth century, the domestic lives of middle-class children in general and of children of all classes in the nineteenth century are yet to be assessed by historians of Ireland. Whether the isolated and eccentric childhoods that were the staples of ‘big house’ literature at the beginning of the twentieth century were more than the tropes of an elegiac genre and whether Irish children of the middle classes experienced a ‘Victorian’ upbringing are questions that remain to be answered.

Family life in the pre-Famine tenant-farming and labouring classes are also largely unexplored and, given the absence of sources, may remain so. But the Irish farming family in the hundred years after the Famine has – because it differed significantly from western norms – attracted considerable scholarly attention. Most children in this period grew up on small family farms or over small-scale family businesses with close ties to the agricultural community. Irish demographic anomalies, such as late marriage, large families and endemic emigration, as well as the close relationship between land, shop and family, gave these childhoods some distinctive characteristics, frequently shared by the urban working classes. The age gap between parents, particularly fathers, and children was such that being orphaned in childhood was commonplace. Often there was also a sizable age gap between older and younger siblings with the latter scarcely knowing brothers or sisters who had left home or emigrated while they were still in infancy. Older and younger children within the same family could experience radically different childhoods as the fortunes of the family altered – for example, the earnings of older children might be used to facilitate the education of younger ones.

Within the family economy, particularly on the farm, life and work were strictly segregated by gender and age. Young children remained in close proximity to their mother as she worked, though in both rural and urban families older siblings, particularly sisters, were

⁶ G. M. Ashford, ‘Childhood: Studies in the History of Children in Eighteenth-Century Ireland’, unpublished PhD thesis, St Patrick’s College Drumcondra (2012), p.56.

often actively involved in the care of younger children to the extent that the term ‘little mummies’ was in widespread use to describe such girls. The stem three-generation household was in decline by the late-nineteenth century but was still more common in Ireland than other western countries. Where a grandmother was in residence, she frequently took charge of childcare and the care of a frail or sick grandparent in turn commonly became the special responsibility of an older child. At the age of six or seven boys began to associate to a greater extent with their father and older brothers, running errands and undertaking simple jobs. After the age of about ten or eleven boys could expect to be brought home from school when some crucial task such as hay-making required their labour. At about fourteen children left school, either to work alongside their mother or father or to find live-in work with another farmer.

Such patterns of working and living were usual in pre-industrial Western Europe but the rigid age-structuring of society in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century Ireland struck anthropologist Conrad Arensberg as anomalous.⁷ Irish children and adolescents had less autonomy than their counterparts and idiosyncratic relationships with parents and siblings. Arensberg considered relationships between fathers and children (sons in particular) to be distant and potentially antagonistic. This is also characteristic of Irish childhood memoirs and oral histories in which the cold, brutal, feckless or drunken father is a stock character, matched by the saintly – and frequently prematurely deceased – mother. These accounts must be regarded with caution but their ubiquity is noteworthy, as is Caitriona Clear’s observation that a generational shift occurred during the 1940s when it became more usual for fathers to involve themselves in childcare.⁸ The post-war period, and particularly the 1960s, brought gradual changes to family and generational relationships as both the age of marriage and the size of families gradually decreased and the comparative economic value of children’s labour declined. Combined with improved educational and, ultimately, employment opportunities for young people, these factors resulted in a longer, and more autonomous, childhood and adolescence and – conceivably – more companionate relationships between parents and children and between siblings.

3. Learning, working, playing.

⁷ C. Arensberg, *Family and Community in Ireland*, 3rd edn. (Ennis, 2001) [1940], pp.45–65.

⁸ C. Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1921–61: Experiences, Memories, Discourses* (Dublin, 2000), p.200.

Prior to the establishment of the national school system in 1831, education was an irregular experience for most children. A variety of voluntary schools had been established, mainly with a view to promoting the Protestant faith, but they accounted for a small minority. Private academies also offered merchants' sons and daughters an education suited to their expectations. For all classes in rural areas, education depended on the availability of a suitable and affordable teacher. Governesses were few in number and, until the 1860s, unlikely to have an academic education. Tutors were even scarcer and appear often to have been shared between several households. The reform of the public school system in England made this an increasingly attractive option for Anglo-Irish parents.⁹ The enthusiasm of the poorer classes for educating their children was regularly remarked upon by travellers to Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century. 'Hedge schools' were found in most parishes, usually conducted by a single teacher who charged a modest fee for each child to be taught reading and writing (in English) and arithmetic. In 1821 some 44 per cent of boys and 26 per cent of girls aged six to thirteen were attending a school.¹⁰ Under the national school system, education became more standardised, although the frequency and duration of attendance usually depended on family circumstances. It was not until 1892 that school attendance began to be compelled, and then only in urban areas. For this reason, work was a central factor in many children's lives up to this year and beyond.

The first day at national school features significantly in memoirs of rural childhood and was an occasion of wonder for children from isolated farms, particularly for Irish-speaking children introduced into this English-speaking environment. For some, exposure to books, kind teachers and the company of other children, were unalloyed pleasures but for others schooldays were marked by a brutality that was both traumatic and uncondusive to learning. School was also a stage for the enactment of class. In towns, where possible, commercial and professional families preferred to send their children to fee-paying religious primary schools and where national schools brought together children of different social backgrounds they tended not to associate.

⁹ J. Logan, 'Governesses, Tutors and Parents: Domestic Education in Ireland, 1700–1880', *Irish Educational Studies*, 7:2 (1988), pp.1–19.

¹⁰ G. FitzGerald, 'Irish Primary Education in 1824', unpublished typescript (2010) cited in C. Ó Gráda, 'School Attendance and Literacy before the Famine: A Simple Baronial Analysis', www.thehealthwell.info/node/662098.

Education in national schools depended on rote-learning with an emphasis on obedience and conformity and independence brought little change other than the extension of compulsory attendance in 1926 and the determination of successive governments to use the national schools as the main instrument for reviving the Irish language. From the 1960s campaigning by parents, previously excluded from involvement in educational discourse, together with educational reforms and developments in teacher training, began to revolutionise the primary school system and gradually, and not without opposition, to introduce more child-centred educational values. For the vast majority of Irish children until the 1960s, leaving primary school, usually at fourteen, meant the end of formal education. For those who could afford it, fee-paying Catholic secondary schools run by religious orders began to be established from the 1780s and received indirect funding on a payment-by-results basis from the state from 1878. Less research has been undertaken into the childhood experience in secondary schools – or the ‘vocational’ or continuation schools established in the Irish Free State from 1930 – than into the national schools. However, historians of education have drawn attention to the social consequences of an education which was heavily exam-oriented and in which young people were segregated by gender, religion and class, distinctions that were also reflected in the curriculum until a process of reform began in the 1960s. In 1967, the introduction of free secondary education in the Irish Republic contributed significantly to the extension, and consequently the transformation, of childhood and the development of adolescence as a central stage of development.

In Northern Ireland, where the control of education was highly contentious, the Education (Northern Ireland) Act 1947 made education for all children compulsory to fifteen with an exam at taken at age eleven, known as the ‘eleven plus’, determining whether the child would proceed to a technical, secondary modern or grammar school. Originally intended to match children by aptitude to the most appropriate continuation education, the ‘eleven plus’ quickly became regarded as an excessively arduous and class-biased competition for admission into the prestigious grammar schools. Nonetheless, it was retained in Northern Ireland after it was discontinued in most of England and Wales.

With comparatively low levels both of industrialisation and adult wages, child labour in mills and factories was not extensive in Ireland and legislation reducing the hours of labour and increasing the hours of education for factory and mill children in the 1830s and 1840s resulted in a significant decline. In 1878, the Factory and Workshops Act imposed restrictions on the employment of children in smaller workshops also and by 1920 the

employment of under-fifteens in factories and workshops was effectively eliminated.¹¹ By the beginning of the twentieth century, in Ireland as in Britain, concerns about child labour were largely focused on street trading, the extent of which had been revealed by a series of reports, including that of the Street Trading Children Committee (Ireland) in 1902. Most children engaged in street trading did so in addition to attending school and there were few objections to their working in principle. Rather, the Employment of Children Act, 1903 was prompted by moral anxieties about these very visible street children. It permitted, but did not compel, local authorities to regulate working hours and the age at which it became legal for children to be employed and to prohibit children from certain occupations.¹²

Gillian McIntosh's 2014 study of this Act and of public attitudes to street children was one of the first directly to address the question of child labour in Ireland.¹³ This is a subject that remains under-researched and there is no sustained treatment to compare with Marjatta Rahikainen's *Centuries of Child Labour* or Peter Kirby's *Child Labour in Britain*.¹⁴ Insights into child labour have most frequently emerged from contemporary literature¹⁵ or as a by-product of historians' discussions of the adult workforce.¹⁶ One reason for this has been the degree to which child labour was an aspect of the domestic or hidden economies.

John Cunningham has pointed out that while 'according to the 1891 census, 1,278 young people under the age of 15 were employed in Co. Galway,' it is probable that this is an underestimate of the number of children actually working. Firstly, it did not take into account

¹¹ D. Greer and J. W. Nicolson, *The Factory Acts in Ireland, 1802–1914* (Dublin, 2003).

¹² H. Hendrick, 'Child Labour, Medical Capital and the School Medical Service, c. 1890–1918' in R. Cooter, (ed.), *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare, 1880–1940* (Oxford, 1992).

¹³ Gillian McIntosh, 'Children, Street Trading and the Representation of Public Space in Edwardian Ireland' in Luddy and Smith (eds), *Children, Childhood and Irish Society*.

¹⁴ M. Rahikainen, *Centuries of Child Labour: European Experiences from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot, 2004); P. Kirby, *Child Labour in Britain, 1750–1870* (Houndmills, 2003).

¹⁵ Notably, P. McGill's autobiographical novel *Children of the Dead End: The Autobiography of a Navvy* (London, 1914).

¹⁶ For example, A. O'Dowd, *Spalpeens and Tattie Hokers: History and Folklore of the Irish Migratory Agricultural Worker in Ireland and Britain* (Dublin, 1991); J. Bourke, *Husbandry to Housewifery: Women, Economic Change, and Housework in Ireland, 1890–1914* (Oxford, 1993); Greer and Nicolson, *The Factory Acts in Ireland*.

the number of 'dependent' children who worked with their parents on the farm or family business; secondly, details of children in employment may have been withheld from census officials.¹⁷ If there was a tendency to conceal child labourers in 1891, this is likely to have increased by the census of 1901: while the majority of Galway children aged 11–14 years were returned as 'Scholar', 'Pupil' or 'Attending School', this may reflect a perceived necessity to appear compliant with the compulsory education measures introduced in 1892. If the figures are unreliable, however, census data does provide an indication of the kinds of work undertaken by children in Galway and other rural areas. Most were employed as servants, agricultural labourers or messengers while others worked with their parents at tailoring and dressmaking, brush-making or bag-making outwork. In Dublin, Belfast and other urban areas the increase in children working as street traders, as well as newsboys and messengers, outside of school hours reflected both the decline in less flexible forms of employment such as factory work and domestic service – which declined sharply for girls under fifteen from 1901 – as well as the introduction and enforcement of compulsory schooling. From 1926, this would see a further decline as all children were required to attend school until the age of fourteen. From the 1960s, while many more teenagers were attending school to the age of sixteen years, they were also working and holding onto some, if not all of their wages.¹⁸ This contributed to the growth in a material youth culture, especially in regard to music, fashion, recreation and travel. By the late twentieth century, with the advent of free third level education, childhood was again extended and many teenagers and young adults would remain dependent on parents and guardians to a much later age. In this regard, part-time work could be a necessity for expenses outside the preserve of parents/guardians, but most young people would enter precarious work as opposed to permanent employment.

Patterns of play among Irish children also require further study, though memoirs suggest that, here as elsewhere, whether urban or rural, middle or working class, children derived the most entertainment from playfully imitating the work of adults. Dolls – bought or home-made – were nursed, the machinery of agriculture, transport and construction lovingly recreated, and juvenile priests dispensed 'communion' to their siblings. In wealthier homes,

¹⁷ J. Cunningham, 'Dawn to Dusk Toil: the bleak life of Galway child labourers in 1900s', *City Tribune* (29 April 1988).

¹⁸ See C. Holohan, 'Challenges to social order and Irish identity? Youth culture in the sixties' in *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 38, no. 151 (2013) pp. 389-405.

such as that of novelist Elizabeth Bowen, such play was facilitated by a range of toys.¹⁹ Two factors appear to distinguish the poorer Irish child at play in second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries: an apparent obsession with the gathering and cooking of food and the centrality of the cinema to both family and, more particularly, autonomous child leisure, financed – for those without pocket-money – by running errands or doing chores for pennies or by collecting the refundable glass bottles which were accepted as the price of admission by some cinema owners.

With comparatively high rates of child literacy from the early nineteenth century, the publication of books and, later, comics, for children was a flourishing industry and an aspect of childhood that has been of great interest to historians, though more often concentrating on the literary, didactic and political aspects of this literature rather than on the child as consumer. Certainly, by the beginning of the twentieth century, children's leisure had become highly politicised. The comic a boy (in particular) read, like the sport he played and the youth movement he joined, defined him as a nationalist or an imperialist – a dichotomy which was replicated in Northern Ireland during 'the Troubles'. However, the extent to which this reflected the politics of his parents rather than his own agency is open to question. Similarly, children's play, however autonomous, was broadly subject to adult sanction. Howard P. Chudacoff has suggested that American children's play went 'underground' in the 1950s as adult supervision of children's play increased and children in turn sought to avoid this oversight.²⁰ While the Irish post-war boom dates from the 1960s rather than the 1950s, the emergence of the teenager, and adult concerns about the increasing precocity of younger children, marked the last decades of the twentieth century.

4. *The state and the child: ca. 1740–ca. 1920.*

Mary O'Dowd has demonstrated that the relationship between the state and the Irish child in the Tudor and Stuart periods was almost the direct opposite of that between the state and the English or Welsh child. While the sons of elite Gaelic families were seen as suitable means of transmitting English language and customs as well as pledges for the loyalty of their fathers, there was little state provision for the welfare of poor or abandoned children which – in the

¹⁹ P. W. Moran, 'Elizabeth Bowen's Toys and the Imperatives of Play', *Éire–Ireland*, 46: 1 & 2) (2011), pp.152–176.

²⁰ H. P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York, 2007), pp.182–213.

absence of an Irish Poor Law – was left in the reluctant hands of parish authorities.²¹ However, by the early eighteenth century the abandonment of children, particularly illegitimate children, had become a significant public concern. These children were regarded as both a potential public nuisance and a civic and religious opportunity.

Established in 1703, the Dublin Workhouse was empowered to receive children aged between five and sixteen years, educate them in the Protestant faith and apprentice them to Protestant masters. By 1725 the Workhouse was overwhelmed with children. It was reconstituted as the Dublin Foundling Hospital and Workhouse and in 1730 permitted to admit children of all ages, with infants usually being sent out to nurse. This was intended to help prevent infanticide and the death through abandonment and neglect of illegitimate children. The hospital's record of preserving life, however, was dismal. Parliamentary enquiries in 1737 and 1743 suggested that 75 per cent of the infants admitted had died.²² Conditions in the hospital improved over time but until it closed in the early nineteenth century the Dublin Foundling Hospital, like a smaller Cork institution, was associated with corrupt administration, poor diet, disease, infestation and cruelty.

Similarly, the workhouses established under the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act, 1838 were not initially intended for the reception of orphaned or abandoned children but became the main source of provision for them both before, and particularly during, the Great Famine. In the first quarter of 1844, the total number of children in workhouses was 22,585, representing about half the total workhouse population. By 1850 this had grown to an estimated number of 120,000. After the famine, the number of children in workhouses declined to under 14 per cent in 1900.²³ The Irish Poor Law system was designed to be workhouse-based under conditions which discouraged paupers from seeking relief, including the separation of families and the removal of children over two years of age from their parents. Officially, only orphaned or deserted children were permitted to enter the workhouse unaccompanied, though parents frequently 'abandoned' their children, hoping to reclaim them later.

²¹ M. O'Dowd, 'Early Modern Ireland and the History of the Child' in M. Luddy and J. M. Smith (eds), *Children, Childhood and Irish Society: 1500 to the Present* (Dublin, 2014), p.42.

²² J. Robins, *The Lost Children: A Study of Charity Children in Ireland, 1700–1900* (Dublin, 1980), p.17.

²³ V. Crossman, 'Cribbed, Contained and Confined? The Care of Children under the Irish Poor Law, 1850–1920' in Luddy and Smith (eds), *Children, Childhood and Irish Society*, p.82.

Childhood experiences of workhouse life were diverse but some general observations may be made. Children were usually allowed three meals a day – of milk and oatmeal, potatoes or bread – to the two permitted to adults. Poor diet and overcrowding contributed to the spread of infectious diseases with workhouses in the post-Famine period being particularly associated with childhood ophthalmia. Mortality rates were high, especially in the larger urban Unions. Children were supposed to attend school for a minimum of three hours per day but this generally amounted to little more than mass supervision in cold and dirty surroundings. Like adults, children were expected to engage in labour and in some workhouses they were trained in trades or in agricultural or domestic work or hired out as farm labourers. In many, children spent their days without any occupation. Unruly or violent behaviour and absconding were frequent. Improvements in dress, diet and educational and training standards occurred as numbers reduced after the Famine and with the amalgamation of Poor Law Unions for educational purposes, which was permitted from 1855. However, the prospect of their children being sent away to school became a deterrent to relief for some parents.

By mid-century concerns were being raised about the welfare of children in institutions. Internationally, this debate is associated with a mid-Victorian fascination with the innocence and moral malleability of children, with the idealisation of domesticity, and with fears about the corrupting influences of urbanisation and industrialization. Despite a comparative lack of industrialization in Ireland, the numbers orphaned or abandoned during and after the Famine meant that such children were highly visible in towns and cities. This resulted in an intense, cross-sectarian, public debate about instituting a boarding-out system for orphaned and abandoned children, which revolved around whether or not children's physical and moral welfare would be better preserved in foster-homes than in workhouses.²⁴ In 1862 boarding out orphaned or abandoned legitimate children under five was permitted, later increased incrementally to fifteen. However, Irish Poor Law Guardians did not adopt the boarding-out option enthusiastically and children in workhouses always outnumbered those boarded out. In part, this was due to a difficulty in identifying suitable foster-parents. While many must have offered caring homes, others were interested primarily in the payment they received and in the child's potential as unpaid labour.

The mid-century combination of humanitarianism and fear of childhood criminality also resulted in the growth of voluntary agencies intended to care for destitute children.

²⁴ Ibid., pp.85–88.

Concerns about proselytism also played a significant role in the establishment of orphanages, children's homes and 'ragged schools' for street children and Cardinal Paul Cullen actively promoted the involvement of Catholic orders of religious sisters in the institutional care of children. Debates about child criminality also influenced the establishment of reformatories and industrial schools, though it is noteworthy that, regardless of religion, Irish commentators, unlike their British counterparts, considered youth offending to be a by-product of poverty and the conditions in the workhouses in which many such youths had been raised rather than as evidence of the existence of a criminal sub-class.²⁵

Legislation to establish reformatories for young offenders aged between twelve and sixteen was passed in 1858 and to establish industrial schools a decade later. Drawing on British models – which in turn reflected continental European developments – both were built and managed through voluntary (which in Ireland usually meant religious) effort with the state certifying and inspecting the institutions and, together with local authorities, providing capitation grants for inmates. Both were denominational, segregated by gender, and provided moral and literary education and occupational training. Under the Industrial Schools (Ireland) Act, 1868, children under fourteen could be committed to an industrial school if found to have been begging, without a home or proper guardianship, destitute, or 'frequent[ing] the company of reputed thieves'.²⁶ Children under twelve convicted of a misdemeanour could also be sentenced to detention in an industrial school. The great majority of children were committed on the grounds of begging and from the outset industrial schools were more closely associated with poor, destitute or abandoned, rather than 'criminal' children, gradually replacing the workhouse in this capacity.

Schools varied in size from institutions with tens of inmates to the 900 boys accommodated in Artane industrial school in Co. Dublin. An average occupancy of 100-150 children who ate, slept, worked and learned in large groups, undermining the schools' insistence that they, unlike workhouses, provided an approximation of family life and were, indeed, superior to the 'unsatisfactory' home. Where parents were living, family ties were deliberately cut and committal was generally for the maximum period, to the age of sixteen. As with other institutions, infectious diseases were commonplace, though the death rate does not appear to have exceeded that in the general child population and compared favourably with that in workhouses. From their inception, industrial schools, like reformatories, paid

²⁵ J. Barnes, *Irish Industrial Schools, 1868–1908* (Dublin, 1989), p.15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.42.

considerable attention to diet, seen as an essential component in the moral as well as the physical development of children. The dietary was initially far superior to that in workhouses, though standards declined by the end of the century.

Industrial school regimes promoted obedience and conformity through silence, order and discipline. 'Industrial education' occupied most of the day with schooling typically taking place before 9 a.m. The quality of training varied widely in the nineteenth century. Some girls' schools specialised in crafts such as lace-making and embroidery while in Artane, for example, a range of trades were taught to boys. Often, however, 'industrial education' amounted to no more than the employment of children's labour for the maintenance of the institution. In theory, and by repute, corporal punishment was administered rarely in boys' schools and never in girls. In reality, nineteenth-century records indicate high levels of corporal punishment, including severe beatings. The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (2009) found that in the twentieth century '[p]hysical and emotional abuse and neglect were features of the [industrial schools]. Sexual abuse occurred in many of them, particularly boys' institutions. Schools were run in a severe, regimented manner that imposed unreasonable and oppressive discipline on children and even on staff.'²⁷

During the eighteenth, and for most of the nineteenth, centuries, the state's responsibility for children was largely restricted to those without parents, not least because of the emphasis placed on the obligation to maintain one's own offspring. By the late 1880s, however, the dangers posed to children *by* their parents had become matters of public and official concern, resulting in the passage, over the next twenty years, of fifty-two acts relating to child welfare and child protection. The most significant of these were the Prevention of Cruelty to, and Protection of, Children Act 1889 and the consolidating Children Act, 1908. The latter remained the main statutory instrument dealing with child protection in the Republic of Ireland until the passage of the Child Care Act, 1991.

Throughout Western Europe, the beginning of the twentieth century was marked by concerns about national deterioration and by state initiatives to improve the health of children through, for example, the provision of school meals, the medical inspection of school children and measures to improve the nutrition of nursing mothers and infants. Such legislation was delayed in the case of Ireland, often due to concerns expressed by Catholic clergy and others about state interference with the family. Official reluctance to confront this

²⁷ S. Ryan, *Final Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (Dublin, 2009), vol. IV, p.451.

attitude prompted voluntary efforts but some nationalists accused the Westminster parliament of deliberate neglect. Infant welfare became a political battleground in the first decades of the twentieth century – though with little impact on the survival rates of infants.

5. Child welfare and the state, ca 1920–2012

Despite the abolition of the Poor Law system in the Irish Free State, the establishment of the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor in 1925, and the recognition by the state, of ‘the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law,’ many scholars have argued that the first decades of Irish independence were typified by an erosion of the rights of parents as carers and educators. In legislation relating to compulsory education, institutional provision, welfare and illegitimacy, parents and children in poverty were the focus of measures that regularly led to the removal of children from the home. Working-class families suffered most from church and state action, as the sanctity of the family espoused in Catholic doctrine and political rhetoric was often far from the reality. Integral to this discussion is the State’s lack of planning and initiative in reducing poverty. These issues would all culminate in increasing attention to child welfare from the 1970s. Ireland was not unique in its treatment of families in poverty and children in care, but in many respects nineteenth-century systems and structures continued longer in Ireland than elsewhere in Western Europe.

In 1924 the Courts of Justice Act provided for the establishment of children’s courts in the four larger cities and responsibilities for reformatory and industrial schools was transferred from the prison service to the Department of Education. However, as the Commission of Inquiry into the Reformatory and Industrial School System (or Cussen Commission) reported in 1936, this had resulted in little change in the standards of care: the schools were over-crowded and under-funded, there was a lack of recreational facilities, teachers were underqualified and nourishment was questionable.²⁸ The Cussen report had little impact and the question of childcare in reformatory and industrial schools until the publication in 1966 of the report ‘Some of Our Children’ by the London branch of the Tuairim discussion group. This was a contributing factor in the setting up of the Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools under Eileen Kennedy. Although Kennedy’s 1970

²⁸ *Commission of Inquiry into the Reformatory and Industrial School System Report, 1936* (Dublin, 1936).

report did not address questions of sexual and emotional abuse, it is widely seen as turning the tide of the relationship between children and the state. The report recommended an end to the industrial and reformatory school system and the establishment of group homes.²⁹ However, the last industrial school did not close its doors until 1984.

The post-war period was also marked by increased attention to aspects of child welfare which had previously been regarded as outside the remit of the state. Provision for legal adoption was made in 1952, after vigorous campaigning, and despite political concerns that it would be opposed by the Catholic hierarchy. The increased visibility of adolescents and concerns about juvenile delinquency meanwhile gave rise to both the establishment of a Commission on Youth Unemployment in 1943 and the establishment of a Juvenile Liaison Officer Scheme in 1962.

In Northern Ireland, child welfare services were determined by the retention of the British legislative framework and the extension of the welfare state in the post-war period, together with the adoption of a policy of parity in welfare provision. However, they were limited by the ambivalence of the Unionist government, by the outbreak of the troubles, and by the imposition of direct rule. While the rest of the UK was moving towards a home-based child welfare system, the Northern Ireland government, influenced by the significance of the religious voluntary sector, was unenthusiastic. Greg Kelly and John Pinkerton argue that the Children's and Young Person's Act (NI), 1968 – based on English and Welsh legislation dating from 1963 – represented an attempt to forestall further changes rather than an eagerness for the statutory provision of child welfare services.³⁰ During the period of direct rule, it was recognised that Northern Irish children and young people, growing up in an atmosphere of violence, were in particular need of welfare services but that these should be removed from party politics and placed in the hands of the National Health Service. This allowed the development of a highly-professionalized child welfare service in the 1970s and 1980s, but one that was distanced from local communities.³¹

In Northern Ireland, as in the Republic, the 1990s were marked by concerns about child sexual abuse and debates about child protection were strongly influenced by the

²⁹ E. Kennedy, *Reformatory and Industrial Schools System Report 1970* (Dublin, 1970), p.6.

³⁰ G. Kelly and J. Pinkerton, 'The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995: Prospects for Progress?' in M. Hill and J. Aldgate (eds), *Child Welfare Services: Developments in Law, Policy, Practice and Research* (London, 1996), p.43.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.45.

difficulties of ensuring disclosure. The passage of the (UK) Children Act, 1989, which obliged courts, local authorities and parents to regard the welfare of children as paramount, made provision for the wishes of children to be taken into account during contested hearings, and emphasised the desirability of caring for children in their own homes, was followed by Children (NI) Orders, 1993 and 1995 to bring Northern Ireland practices into line. The Northern Ireland Act, 1998 both devolved powers relating to child protection to the Northern Ireland Assembly and directed that all measures passed by the Assembly be compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. Consequently, according to Alice Diver, the aims underlying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992) ‘have also gradually begun to inform thinking in this area, especially in relation to the child welfare “paramountcy” principle and in relation to the “participation rights” of the child.’³²

In the Republic of Ireland, the 1990s also witnessed a significant reform of child welfare with the passage of the Child Care Act, 1991, the major provisions of which were implemented in 1995. The first substantial piece of legislation in this area since 1908, this Act was primarily concerned with the treatment of children in the care of the state but it also established principles similar to those embodied in the British legislation. It obliged courts to take account of the wishes of both parents and children in decision-making, but established the welfare of the child as the most important guiding principle. However, debates about child welfare during this decade were deeply coloured by revelations about contemporary and historical child abuse, including child sexual abuse, associated in particular with religious-run institutions and calling into question the state’s traditional reliance on an ill-regulated voluntary sector. The broadcast, in 1999, of the documentary series ‘States of Fear’, produced by Mary Raftery, which detailed the abuse of children principally in reformatory and industrial schools, prompted both an apology on behalf of the state by Taoiseach Bertie Ahern ‘to the victims of childhood abuse for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue’³³ and the establishment of a Commission to Enquire into Child Abuse which reported in 2009. Meanwhile, 2004 witnessed the publication of ‘Children First’, a policy document intended to provide national guidelines for the protection and

³² A. Diver, ‘Report on The Enforcement of Family Law Judgments in Northern Ireland’ (The Hague, 2007) http://ec.europa.eu/civiljustice/publications/docs/family_rights/united_kingdom_northern_ireland_en.pdf

³³ *Irish Times*, 12 May 1999.

welfare of children, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and paying special attention to the reporting of abuse and the identification and protection of children at risk of abuse.

These developments drew national attention to the emergence of the rights-based approach to child welfare which had been driven by the United Nations since 1992. In 2012, following a referendum, the Irish constitution was amended to affirm ‘the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children’ and ‘in exceptional cases’ to provide for the care by the state or the adoption of children whose parents had failed in their duty of care to their children to the extent that the child’s safety and welfare had been jeopardised. Notable for removing a distinction in law between children whose parents were and were not married, this amendment was viewed by some as an act of reparation for the historical mistreatment of children but by others as a means of transferring rights from families to a state which had proved itself incapable of protecting its children.

Conclusion:

Beginning with the ‘discovery of childhood’ and concluding with the enshrinement of the ‘rights of the child’ into the Irish constitution, this chapter may appear, overall, to be a story of progress. Over the course of two-and-a-half-centuries childhood has emerged in Irish society, as elsewhere, as a stage of life with its own requirements and the vulnerability and potential of children have been recognised as having particular claims on parents, society and the state. Yet some of the consequences of this evolution have proved disastrous as benign intentions fell victim to political and religious ideology, indifference, corruption, parsimony and neglect. However, it is crucial to recognise that research into childhood in Ireland remains dominated by the experience of the ‘public child’. The centuries that witnessed the increasing institutionalisation and, frequently, the abuse of some children were also marked by advances in the lives of the majority of children through improving health, diet, education and standards of living. While this is a topic that requires further research, it is clear that Irish childhoods have both reflected international developments and been moulded by the country’s socio-economic, constitutional and religious heritages. The current enthusiasm among scholars for the history of children suggests that the coming years will see a revolution in the understanding of how childhood was experienced in Ireland’s past.

Further reading.

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- J. Countryman and K. Matthews (eds), *The Country of the Young: Interpretations of Youth and Childhood in Irish Culture* (Dublin, 2013).
- C. Cox and S. Riordan (eds), *Adolescence in Modern Irish History* (Houndsmills, 2015).
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