

In Search of the Child

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A review of

Maria Luddy and James M. Smith, eds., *Children, Childhood and Irish Society, 1500 to the Present*

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In their introduction to this collection of 21 essays, Maria Luddy and James M. Smith offer the suggestion that ‘the story of contemporary Irish society, a story that many claim signals unprecedented social and economic transformation, is a narrative with the child as its central trope’ (p.15). Given the extraordinary prominence of images of children on posters and references to children in recent debate around the 2015 Marriage Equality campaign in Ireland, it is hard to disagree with this statement, and the attendant observation that there is ‘a need for cultural critics and historians to understand the deployment of this trope against a broader historical and/or sociological perspective’ (p.15). This volume of essays is therefore very much to be welcomed and contributes to an important and growing field of research in Ireland. The volume is very broad in its historical scope and also in its range of topics and methodologies. This results in some differences in emphasis between contributions informed by or aware of the insights of the new interdisciplinary field of ‘childhood studies’ and those for whom the ‘children’ represented in the source material are either largely significant in so far as they reflect on another object of analysis or are to a degree a naturalised and assumed given.

The volume includes as its final essay a contribution by Harry Hendrick, a leading scholar in the history and sociology of childhood who argues strongly that ‘age, like

gender, requires sustained examination as to its origins, and who and what it is, rather than being taken as a natural given and immune to critical enquiry' (p.406).

Elsewhere, Hendricks has argued that the focus of researchers must shift from the understanding of children 'becoming' adults to the perspective of 'being children'. This, as Luddy and Smith point out, 'is difficult history to work with' (p.17), chiefly because for scholars working with historical and textual sources, virtually the entire archive that deals with childhood has been authored, managed and mediated by adults. What is required, therefore, is a shift in perspective and an appreciation of the fact that, as Hendricks notes in his essay, although there are 'natural elements' in the difference between adults and children, 'many of these elements are so structured, conveniently, as to be made compatible with adult-centric social requirements' (p.407).

The volume is divided into five sections, and this review will follow this structural division. One of the pleasures of reading the volume, however, is to note cross-currents and debates between the essays in the different sections, and between historical, sociological and cultural perspectives. The volume's opening section, 'The Child and History' contains essays that range from early modern Ireland to the twentieth century. Mary O'Dowd's essay on the history of the child in early modern Ireland is a good example of how a new look at the historical record can yield insights. Focusing on ideas around education of the young, O'Dowd notes continuity from early modern period to the eighteenth century, in that policy for reform of Irish society focused in part on children and the young, but also differences in that the concern was with the sons of elite Catholic families in early modern Ireland, whereas in the eighteenth century the focus shifted to poor children. O'Dowd also observes

that a persistent feature of colonial policy in Ireland was the idea that children could reform and instruct their parents. Gillian McIntosh's analysis of the report of the 1902 Street Trading Committee is an excellent example of how glimpses of the experience of 'being a child' can be gleaned from historical sources. Although much of the material provides an insight into middle-class views of working-class parents and children, it is also possible to see traces of the children themselves, whose work was often essential to the family's survival and whose appearances in the public record sometimes give glimpses of children's culture, including the frequent appearance of boys in the Juvenile courts in Cork who were fined for playing hurling on the city streets. Mary E. Daly's fascinating discussion of the role of parents in the education of children in independent Ireland addresses the campaigns to ban corporal punishment and to provide for the education of children with special needs. Her analysis reveals that the affirmation given to parents in the constitution, in which the family is described as the 'primary and natural educator of the child', was frequently overridden by the concerns of both the Catholic and Protestant churches, and also by the State's desire not to alienate the teaching profession.

In the section of essays dealing with 'Charity, Welfare and Child Care' Robbie Gillespie's discussion of the 'reluctant' attitude of the Irish state in the twentieth century towards the 'public child', or the child being cared for outside the family home, intersects interestingly with Daly's account of parent-led campaigns for education reform. Whereas Daly describes the eventual success of parents campaigning on behalf of their children, Gillespie draws attention to the very slow pace of reform and change in the case of the public child, the child who lacks committed adult advocates in the form of parents and other family members, and

whose main advocate is (or should be) the state. Gillespie's criticism of the 'indefensible delay' (p.161) in implementing the recommendations of the 1970 Kennedy Report on the reformatory and industrial school systems contrasts with the conclusions reached by Eoin O'Sullivan in his examination of 'Child Welfare Services, 1970-80'. A detailed reading of government and civil service sources following the publication of the Kennedy Report leads O'Sullivan to conclude that the entrenched nature of institutional care and the complex issues surrounding its dismantling were largely to blame for the slowness of the government response. Virginia Crossman and Maria Luddy's essays in this section deal with earlier periods, and also overlap productively whilst also offering a longer historical perspective on the concerns of Gillespie and O'Sullivan. Crossman, in her discussion of 'The Care of Children under the Irish Poor Law, 1850-1920' addresses the persistent reluctance to abandon an institutional model of care for children. Luddy's account of the 'Early Years of the NSPCC [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children] in Ireland' highlights the importance of the 1894 Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act and the success of the NSPCC, through fundraising activities and media coverage, of heightening awareness of the issues of child neglect and cruelty – a success measured partly in the numbers in which members of the public reported suspected cases.

The section entitled 'Shaping Childhood Cultures' includes five essays, three of which address memoir. Barry Sloan focuses on renegotiations of boyhood in works by John McGahern, Ciaran O'Driscoll, Dermot Healy and Ciaran Carson. Máirín Nic Eoin discusses the representation of adult-child relationships in Irish-language autobiographical writing, including iconic texts such as *Peig* and *Fiche Bliain ag Fás*, but also incorporating a wide range of lesser-known texts. Both Sloan and Nic Eoin

draw on contemporary theories of life-writing, and are alert to the complexity and nuance of reading memoir in search of childhood experience. Claire Lynch's essay on the representation of childhood reading in literary autobiography offers a rich contextualization of the writers' personal accounts. By incorporating insights from the history of reading, children's literature, social history and theories of life-writing, Lynch illuminates her material and expertly shows the ways in which reading is represented as constitutive both of the child subject of the memoir and the emergent writer who has authored it. The final two essays in this section deal with much less familiar material. Ríona Nic Congáil offers a very interesting account of the Irish Fireside Club, an organization centered around a column for young readers published firstly in the *Irish Fireside* and subsequently in the *Weekly Freeman*. In Nic Congáil's analysis, the club emerges as a pioneering 'child-driven' movement which facilitated children's agency and also promoted gender equality – features, she argues, that influenced the later Gaelic League. Ciaran O'Neill's essay on the 'Irish schoolboy novel' makes a valuable contribution to the history of children's literature in Ireland by recovering some long-forgotten schoolboy novels published in the period 1895-1936. The novels O'Neill discusses range from didactic and imitative rewritings of the imperialist schoolboy stories of 1890s Britain to reflect the Catholic and nationalist ideologies of the period, to later, more critical explorations of youthful identity formation in the context of such ideologies.

The six essays in the section on 'Literary Imaginings' rely by and large on established literary methodologies and most of the essays in this section focus on single authors, including Brandon Jernigan's account of Oscar Wilde's fairytales in the context of Irish revivalism, Eibhear Walsh's reading of Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* as a

commentary on female education and Kelly J. S. MacGovern's exploration of Irish girlhood and 'queer time' in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing*. Although uniformly well researched and insightful, these essays are arguably more valuable as contributions to scholarship on the authors concerned and to Irish literary history than to the revisioning of the child in Irish society and culture. Mary Shine Thompson's discussion of the brief appearances of children throughout Jonathan Swift's letters, journals and literary works, however, highlights the extent to which these 'fugitive' references to children across a wide variety of texts can show how, quoting de Certeau, childhood functions as a locus 'in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of relational determinants interact'. Shine Thompson suggests that 'among the determinants in Swift's work are class, gender, ethnicity and, implicitly, religion' (p.275). Although methodologically in contrast with Shine Thompson, Leeann Lane's indispensable account of the career of children's author Patricia Lynch bears out her opening claim that 'a study of an individual Irish life can illuminate social, economic, political and cultural patterns of change' (p.306). Jane Elizabeth Dougherty's discussion of 'Irish literary childhoods' including *Paddy Clarke ha ha ha*, *Angela's Ashes*, *The Butcher Boy* and *Reading in the Dark* concludes the section, pinpointing Mary Robinson's presidency as the moment which marked 'the emerging speakability' of previous abuse, exploitation and neglect of Irish children' (p.346). Dougherty, however, like MacGovern, highlights the continuing 'unspeakability' (p.356) of the Irish female child.

In the final section, 'Cultural Representations', Hendrick's essay (already mentioned), is accompanied by Anne Barton's discussion of how childhood innocence is used to negotiate unease about modernisation in contemporary Irish film, and Margot

Backus's analysis of the representation of children in mainstream nationalist journalism during the Land League agitation of 1882 and the Dublin Strike and Lock Out of 1913. Backus argues that in contrast to 1882, there is a marked change in coverage of children's involvement in social and political unrest in 1913. She claims that the growing sense of class division with the Catholic population, particularly in urban areas, prompted a 'newly metaphoric' construction of children in the context of the hardship causes by the strike and lock out, in an attempt by the *Freeman's Journal* 'to rhetorically unify and thus maintain its own broad readership within a movement increasingly threatened by class differences' (p.359). Interestingly, Backus regards the Fireside Club as an aspect of this rhetorical unification, a means whereby 'prosperous child readers were constituted as central to the newspaper's imagined community' (p.367); this is in marked contrast to Nic Congáil's account of the club's 'child-driven' quality. Barton's essay very deftly combines compelling analyses of films such as *Into the West*, *In America*, *Song for a Raggy Boy* and *The Butcher Boy* with sophisticated reflections on the extent to which these films can claim to represent the 'subaltern' experience of the child, and of the disadvantaged and abused child in particular (p.385).

As is clear from this outline, this volume offers a wealth of material for students and researchers. It is perhaps to be regretted that the editors did not provide a more extended introduction in order to frame the essays more fully in the context of current scholarship on childhood and on Irish history and culture. One might also question the decision to reprint without any revision the 11 essays which were previously published in a special edition of *Éire-Ireland*, also edited by Luddy and Smith, in 2009. This leads to a lack of currency which arises for instance in Robbie Gilligan's

excellent discussion of 'The Public Child and the Reluctant State'. Dealing as it does with legislation around adoption and child welfare, it would have benefitted by being revised in the light of the 2010 Adoption Act and the 2012 Children's Referendum. A more serious omission given the volume's aim to address the present moment is the complete absence of any address to the position of migrant children in Ireland, particularly those in the Direct Provision system for asylum seekers, a system that belies the comfortable notion that institutional 'care' of children is an aspect of the past. These omissions make it clear that the field outlined by the volume is one of urgent contemporary significance. These criticisms notwithstanding, the contributions to this volume indicate that excellent scholarship is being undertaken on children in Irish culture and society, and that research that draws on interdisciplinary perspectives and the potential of new methodologies generated by childhood studies is productive of new and enabling insights. The editors and contributors are to be congratulated on a volume that clearly lays down a marker for an important new field in Irish humanities research.