Centuries of Irish Childhoods

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This special issue of *Irish Economic and Social History* illuminates the diversity of childhoods experienced by children growing up in Ireland and in the Irish diaspora between the mid sixteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Diversity has always characterised experiences of childhood whether in Ireland or anywhere else. Such factors as 'age, class, gender, geography, religion and ethnicity' are as likely to influence experiences of childhood in past centuries as they are today.[1] The one commonality [p. 3] evident in all childhoods, however, is the power that adults wield over children. The articles in this special issue demonstrate how age, class, gender, geography, religion and ethnicity combined with adult control to influence the lives of children ranging in age from infancy to early adolescence. As these articles show, adult control was reflected in decisions made regarding the feeding, fostering, educating, employing, entertaining and punishing of children. Such decisions could have life-long consequences for the children concerned.

This special issue arose from Centuries of Childhood, a conference on the history of children and childhood in Ireland and beyond, which was hosted by Dublin City University's School of History and Geography on 15-16 June 2018. The conference's name referenced *Centuries of Childhood*, the title of the 1962 English translation of Philippe Ariès's *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*, the book that helped to launch the history of children and childhood as an academic field of enquiry. I organised this DCU conference, which

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[1] S.-A. Buckley and S. Riordan, 'Childhood since 1740' in E. Biagini and M. E. Daly (eds), *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 328.

ultimately featured thirty speakers representing universities in Ireland, Britain, Germany and India. Emerging scholars as well as established academics presented papers examining aspects of the history of Irish, German, Romanian, Indian and Chinese children and childhood from the late sixteenth century to the present.[2] The conference built on previous initiatives in Ireland to foster this area of historical enquiry, such as Twenty Years A-Growing: An International Conference on the History of Irish Childhood from the Medieval to the Modern Age, which was held at St Patrick's College (now the DCU St Patrick's Campus) in June 2014, and the subsequent foundation of the History of Irish Childhood Research Network.[3] Looking to the future, NUI Galway will host the biennial international conference of the Society for the History of Children and Youth in 2021.

As Sarah-Anne Buckley and Susannah Riordan have noted, 'the history of children and childhood in Ireland […] 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'.[4] In 1992 Maria Luddy footnoted what she then viewed as 'the only full-length study of children in Irish society', Joseph Robins' *The Lost Children: A Study of Charity Children in*

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[2] For more information about this conference, see https://www.dcu.ie/history_geography/news/2018/May/Centuries-of-Childhood-Conference-15-16-June-2018.shtml and https://www.academia.edu/36639822/Centuries_of_Childhood_Conference_Programme (accessed 8 June 2020).

[3] This June 2014 conference resulted in the publication of an edited collection of essays and a special issue of a journal: M. Hatfield, J. Kruse and R. Nic Congáil (eds), *Historical Perspectives on Parenthood and Childhood in Ireland* (Dublin, 2018) and the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 9:2 (2016). Sarah-Anne Buckley, Marnie Hay and Ríona Nic Congáil served as guest editors of this special issue on children and childhood in Ireland. For more on the 2014 conference and activities associated with the History of Irish Childhood Research Network, see https://irishchildhood.wordpress.com (accessed 8 June 2020).

[4] Buckley and Riordan, 'Childhood since 1740', p. 328.

Ireland, 1700-1900, which was published in 1980.[5] Since then, the study of [p. 4] Irish children and childhoods has become a growing area of historical enquiry, particularly in the twenty-first century. Robins' book is joined by a lengthening list of monographs, essay collections, special issues of journals and doctoral theses examining aspects of the history of Irish children, childhood and adolescence.[6]

One of the key problems in researching the history of children and childhood is that children leave few records in their own words. Thus, historians have had to rely on primary

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[5] M. Luddy, 'An Agenda for Women's History in Ireland, Part II: 1800-1900', *Irish Historical Studies*, 28:109 (1992), 29, fn 25. See J. Robins, *The Lost Children: A Study of Charity Children in Ireland, 1700-1900* (Dublin, 1980).

[6] Examples of monographs include: M. J. Maguire, *Precarious Childhood in Post-Independence Ireland* (Manchester, 2009); C. O'Neill, *Catholics of Consequence: Transnational Education, Social Mobility and the Irish Catholic Elite* (Oxford, 2014); C. Holohan, *Reframing Irish Youth in the Sixties* (Liverpool, 2018); M. Hatfield, *Growing Up in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: A Cultural History of Middle-Class Childhood and Gender* (Oxford, 2019). Examples of essay collections include: J. Dunne and J. Kelly (eds.), *Childhood and its Discontents* (Dublin, 2003); A. Mac Lellan and A. Mauger (eds), *Growing Pains: Childhood Illness in Ireland, 1750-1950* (Dublin, 2013); J. Countryman and K. Matthews (eds), *The Country of the Young: Interpretations of Youth and Childhood in Irish Culture* (Dublin, 2013): M. Luddy and J. M. Smith (eds), *Children, Childhood and Irish Society: 1500 to the Present* (Dublin, 2014); C. Cox and S. Riordan (eds), *Adolescence in Modern Irish History* (Basingstoke, 2015); C. Boylan and C. Gallagher (eds), *Constructions of the Irish Child in the Independence Period* (Basingstoke, 2018); C. Kinealy, J. King and G. Moran (eds), *Children and the Great Hunger in Ireland* (Hamden, CT, 2018). Also see *Éire-Ireland*, 44:1-2 (2009), which focused on children, childhood and Irish society; G.M. Ashford, 'Childhood: Studies in the History of Children in Eighteenth-Century Ireland' (PhD thesis, St Patrick's College/DCU, 2012); J. Kruse, 'Social Constructions of Infancy in Ireland, 1900-1930: The Role of Medicine' (PhD thesis, University of Limerick, 2014). Mary Hatfield and Jutta Kruse have compiled a useful bibliography of secondary sources and websites related to the history of Irish childhood, which was last updated in 2020; it is available from https://irishchildhood.wordpress.com/bibliography/ (accessed 7 August 2020).

sources that reflect the perspectives of adults. Such sources convey what adults thought about children and childhood and what adults recorded about the actual lives of children either gleaned from their personal or professional associations with the young or remembered from their own childhoods. More often than not, we can only view the behaviour of children in the past indirectly through a written record created by adults, which produces an extra layer of interpretation that we must excavate. Historians, however, are trained to identify, interrogate and interpret sources, however challenging and problematic they may be. This makes historians uniquely qualified to study childhood.

Furthermore, certain types of children and childhoods tend to generate a greater amount of documentary evidence and in turn are more likely to attract the interest of historians. For instance, records are more likely to be extant for the 'public child', whom Robbie Gilligan describes as 'a child whose private world has in some sense become public business, attracting attention because concern has been aroused about his or her care or safety'.[7] The paper trail of the 'public child' can be found in the records of charitable institutions, non-governmental organisations and state systems that have intervened in the lives of children and their families. Thus, it is not [p. 5] surprising that the 'public child' has been the frequent focus of Irish studies.[8] Most recently, public concern about the treatment of such children resulted in the Irish government's establishment of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation in 2015. The commission was tasked with investigating and reporting on such issues as the 'living conditions and care arrangements', 'mortality' and

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[7] R. Gilligan, 'The "Public Child" and the Reluctant State?' in Luddy and Smith (eds), *Children, Childhood and Irish Society: 1500 to the Present*, p. 145.

[8] For instance, see C. Reidy, *Ireland's 'Moral Hospital': The Irish Borstal System, 1906-1956* (Dublin, 2009) and S.-A. Buckley, *The Cruelty Man: Child Welfare, the NSPCC and the State in Ireland, 1889-1956* (Manchester, 2013).

'post-mortem practices and procedures' pertaining to children and mothers resident in these institutions during the period 1922-1998.[9]

It is evident that adults have not only had control over children's lives, but also over how children's lives in the past have been researched and represented. The biases and limitations inherent in primary sources created by adults have influenced the topics covered within the historiography of children and childhood. The authors of the articles in this special issue have successfully grappled with the challenges presented by the extant sources. Their research illustrates ways in which parents, fosterers, employers, legislators, judges, nuns, teachers and cultural activists influenced and controlled the lives of children. These articles also highlight some recurrent themes in the history of children and childhood. For instance, Clodagh Tait's contribution provides insight into family strategies in relation to childrearing by examining the practices of wet-nursing and fosterage in early modern Ireland. She reveals that the arrangements made by parents regarding the nourishment and care of their infants and young children often resulted in long-term emotional and economic relationships that were evident throughout their future lives. Years later, for example, an individual's nurse or foster sibling might be remembered in their will.[10]

Two of the articles chart adult endeavours to ameliorate harsher aspects of children's lives in the past through reforming legislation. In examining the plight of the climbing boy in Ireland, James Kelly considers the themes of child labour and child abuse. He has mined contemporary newspaper reports to reveal the identities of and cruelties inflicted on children

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[9] Terms of Reference for the Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters) Order 2015, available from http://www.mbhcoi.ie/MBH.nsf/page/Terms%20of%20Reference-en (accessed 26 June 2020).

[10] See C. Tait, '"Kindred without End": Wet-Nursing, Fosterage and Emotion in Ireland, c.1550-1720', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 47:1 (2020), 10-35.

who worked as apprentice chimney sweeps. His research traces the efforts of reformers to persuade the public and politicians that new technology had overcome the necessity for children, some as young as five years of age, to engage in the dangerous work of cleaning chimneys. That these efforts were spread over a century (1775-1875) shows the slow pace of attitudinal change despite the known risks to the health of the children employed in this trade.[11] Also slow to change were legislation and judicial practice regarding juvenile justice. Geraldine Curtin demonstrates that despite increasing concern that it was inappropriate to incarcerate children with adult criminals and the [p. 6] opening of reformatory schools as an alternative, the majority of Irish children who were given custodial sentences in 1870 were still being sent to prison. Covering the period 1850-1908, she examines actions taken first to improve conditions for children in prison and later to remove them from prisons.[12]

The remaining two articles engage with a theme common to most children's lives – education. Mary Hatfield explores how religion, class and gender influenced education in a transnational context. Her article sheds light on the construction of Catholic girlhood within convent schools in England, Ireland and the United States during the period 1780-1920.[13] In contrast, Mary Mac Diarmada's contribution considers the theme of education within the context of associational culture rather than the institutional culture of schools. She examines the efforts of adult activists in the Gaelic League to teach Irish language and culture to

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[11] See J. Kelly, 'Chimney Sweeps, Climbing Boys and Child Employment in Ireland, 1775-1875', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 47:1 (2020), 36-58.

[12] See G. Curtin, '"The Child Condemned": The Imprisonment of Children in Ireland, 1850-1908', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 47:1 (2020), 78-96.

[13] See M. Hatfield, 'Catholic Convent Schools and the History of Irish Girlhood: Curriculum and Continuity 1780-1920', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 47:1 (2020), 59-77.

children in London in the early 1900s.[14] Her research adds to the growing literature on the endeavours of adults to mould a future generation of Irish nationalists.[15]

These articles highlight examples of children exercising agency, though it is not always clear whether the children concerned understood the potential consequences of their actions, which could include imprisonment, corporal punishment or even death. For instance, Curtin cites more than one example of a child being sentenced to prison or reformatory school for such 'crimes' as 'malicious injury to a turnip field' or 'wilful damage to a geranium plant' after she or he was caught eating a raw turnip or picking a flower from the wrong garden.[16] Another example is Patrick Usher, a nine-year-old apprentice chimney sweep who refused to climb any higher in a chimney because the flue was too narrow for him to squeeze through. His refusal resulted in his employer punishing him with a beating so severe that it caused his death.[17] In contrast, young William McKinny chose to hang himself with a rope rather than continue to pick oakum in his cell in Belfast Gaol.[18] In this latter case,

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[14] See M. Mac Diarmada, '"Those Little Ones Immersed in a Sea of Foreign Influences": Teaching Irish Language and Culture to Children in London in the Early 1900s', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 47:1 (2020), 97-111.

[15] Examples of this literature include: J. Condon, 'The Patriotic Children's Treat: Irish Nationalism and Children's Culture at the Twilight of the Empire', *Irish Studies Review*, 8:2 (2000), 167-178; M. Hay, 'This treasured island: Irish nationalist propaganda aimed at children and youth, 1910-16' in M. Shine Thompson and C. Keenan (eds), *Treasure Islands: Studies in Children's Literature* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 33-42; R. Nic Congáil, '"Fiction, Amusement, Instruction": The Irish Fireside Club and the Educational Ideology of the Gaelic League', *Éire-Ireland*, 44:1-2 (2009), 91-117; R. Nic Congáil, 'Young Ireland and *The Nation*: Nationalist children's culture in the late nineteenth century', *Éire-Ireland*, 46:3-4 (2011), 37-62; M. Hay, *Na Fianna Éireann and the Irish Revolution, 1909-23: Scouting for Rebels* (Manchester, 2019).

[16] Curtin, 'The Child Condemned'.

[17] Kelly, 'Chimney Sweeps'.

[18] Curtin, 'The Child Condemned'.

it is likely that William understood and [p. 7] welcomed the tragic consequences of his decision to commit suicide, a sign of his distress and the miserable circumstances of his life.

Although these articles display the dominance of adults within the lives of children, they also offer occasional glimpses into the observations or choices of the children themselves. This can be seen in what London Irish girls Violet O'Mahoney, Margaret Judge and Gladys O'Connell had to say about their holidays in Spiddal, Co. Galway,[19] or the spending habits of Dubliner Mary O'Connor while a student at St Mary's Bar Convent in York.[20] The example of Mary O'Connor highlights the possible insights into the economic life of Irish children that could be gained through a historical study of the provision and expenditure of pocket money.[21] Just as adults today might be concerned about children and teenagers spending money on frivolous or potentially harmful items, adults in the past appear to have had similar concerns. In the early twentieth century, for instance, Irish nationalist activists encouraged children and adolescents to buy Irish publications and products, for instance as Christmas presents, and despaired when they chose to spend their money on British story papers instead of Irish alternatives.[22]

Lauren Clark has analysed the role of children in an emerging Irish advertising and consumer culture, while other researchers have begun to consider how and why adults spent

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[19] Mac Diarmada, 'Those Little Ones Immersed in a Sea of Foreign Influences'.

[20] Hatfield, 'Catholic Convent Schools and the History of Irish Girlhood'.

[21] A search for the term 'pocket money' in academic journal databases on 17 July 2020 suggested that research related to pocket money or allowances given to children or adolescents has tended to be conducted by social scientists and published in journals concerned with psychology, public health, consumer affairs or adolescence, rather than history.

[22] M. Hay, 'What Did Advanced Nationalists Tell Irish Children in the Early Twentieth Century' in C. Ní Bhroin and P. Kennon (eds), *What Do We Tell the Children? Critical Essays on Children's Literature* (Newcastle, 2012), pp 156-8.

money on children, for instance on clothing, nursery items, foodstuffs, toys, books and schooling.[23] Further exploration of the economic aspects of childhood is just one potential avenue for future research relating to the history of Irish children and childhood. Ultimately, the ongoing vitality of this area of historical enquiry will depend not only on researchers deliberately combing through primary sources in search of children, but also on those who decide to make use of evidence relating to children that they have found while seeking something else.[24] [p. 8]

In conclusion, these articles not only demonstrate the central role of adults in influencing, controlling and representing children's lives, but also provide insight into the diverse experiences of Irish childhoods during five centuries. While some Irish children experienced the dark confinement of prisons or the insides of chimneys, others enjoyed opportunities to revel in the fresh air of the countryside either as foster children or holiday visitors. Childhoods were ever thus. [p. 9]

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[23] For example, see L. Clark, 'Gendering the Victorian Irish Child Reader as Buyer', *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 6:1 (2014), 8-28; L.R. Clark, *Consuming Irish Children: Advertising and the Art of Independence, 1860-1921* (Oxford, 2017); E. O'Toole, 'A Social and Material History of Maternity and Infancy in Ireland, c. 1730-c.1830' (PhD thesis, National College of Art and Design, 2018); Hatfield, *Growing Up in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, chapters 3-5.

[24] Mary Mac Diarmada's article, for instance, developed as a sidebar to her doctoral research entitled '"The God of Our Small World": Art O'Brien and Irish Nationalism in London, 1900-1925' (PhD thesis, DCU, 2018).