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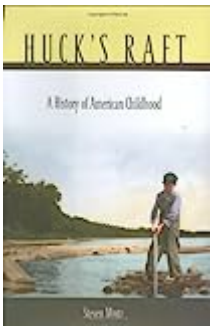

Steven Mintz. *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. xii + 445 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01508-1; $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-01998-0.

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Childhood in One Country

Huck's Raft comes to me, in the modern fashion, garlanded with pre-publication praise. Seven eminent scholars tell me that it is, without any question, the best single-volume history of American childhood and youth. Scholarly, and engagingly written, it places the history of childhood in the mainstream of the history of the United States; as David Brion Davis puts it, it is "a major reinterpretation of the entire sweep of American history as seen through the eyes and experiences of children and adolescents." The endorsements, let me say straight away, are fully justified. The book is a major achievement, and will become the benchmark against which any future histories will be judged.

The book also provides us with a benchmark for considering broad questions about the history of children and childhood. That history, Mintz acknowledges, "is especially difficult to write" (p. vii). The difficulties lie partly in the question of agency. No one, now, would want to write a history of childhood in which children appear simply as victims or as passive participants in events. But sources do not often show up children as active agents in any historical process. Mintz is alert to any evidence that they may have played some role of that kind. He opens arrestingly with the story of seven-year-old Eunice Williams, captured in a raid in 1704, and later refusing to leave her Mohawk captors for a life with her clergyman father. Children in his narrative are actively engaged in the revolutionary and civil wars, they initiate strikes, they lead peace protests. But if we can name any of these children–and Mintz is very good at drawing upon personal testimony–they are likely to be older children. Eleven-year-old Harriet Hanson, who in 1836 led a walkout from a textile factory in Falls River, Massachusetts, and twelve-year-old William Black, the youngest wounded soldier in the Civil War, his left hand and arm shattered by an exploding shell, are exceptional in their youth. Children below ten, when agency is more difficult to unearth, are perhaps poorly served by the new fashionable emphasis.

Here we encounter the second difficulty in writing about childhood. When does it begin and end? Mintz, without debating the issue, settles on the period from infancy to eighteen. Does starting at "infancy" rather than birth, or, as some would prefer, conception, mean

that babies are outside the scope of a history of childhood? Certainly the very young get little attention in this book unless they die. In the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, as for Mintz, eighteen is the cut-off age for childhood. But, in the past at least, and I suspect in the present, many in their mid- or later teens would have seen themselves as beyond childhood. Slave children, for example, began to work full-time in the fields around the age of twelve, and at the same age received a full ration of food and adult clothing. Can they be said to belong beyond that age to a history of childhood? As it is, many parts of *Huck's Raft* may seem to readers less a history of childhood than a history of youth or, in the twentieth century, of adolescence. Even if we take childhood to encompass all the years before adulthood, we are in difficulties, for the typical markers of adulthood (partnered, living outside the parental home, economically self-supporting) have come at very different ages at different times in the past. In short, it is not at all clear what the bounds of our subject are, and Mintz is disappointingly unreflective about this.

A third difficulty lies in trying to write a history of childhood in one country. Like socialism, childhood cannot easily be constrained within national boundaries. Children themselves certainly were not. They were as much participants as were adults in the great movements of people that play such a key role in U.S. history: from Europe, from Africa, from Asia, from east to west, from south to north. Mintz is very good on this. A recurring theme is how children who might have at first thought of themselves as Irish, or Italian, or Jewish, came (or did not come) to think of themselves as American. Mintz is rather less alert to the flow of ideas. They traveled just as easily as people, and it was a two-way traffic. And patterns of behavior that seem to be explicable in exclusively American terms may turn out to be more widespread and therefore call for further attention. Mintz, for example, explains the diminution of the role of fathers in the late nineteenth century by reference to the Civil War; but exactly the same diminution and at the same time has been observed in Britain, where the Civil War explanation obviously has no hold.[1]

The desire to see children as agents, the extension of childhood up to eighteen, the confinement of the narrative within the bounds at any one time of the United States, and the linkage made between childhood and major events in the history of the nation, at times have the effect of making Mintz's book read like a stirring patriotic tale. The children in the early chapters are each and every one heroes. We only encounter children who murder in the late twentieth century. But patriotism is a diminishing motif after the Civil War. There are moments when children again contribute to the national cause, by their earnings for family budgets in the Depression, or by their support for the war effort in World War II. But it is possible to read *Huck's Raft* as a story of the rise and decline both of childhood and of the nation. In the rise children are purposeful, and engaged in useful social activity, contributing their full part to the making of the nation. Moreover, adults are alert to the needs of children. Sometimes their well-meaning efforts go badly wrong, all too often their good intentions sit alongside racism or gender bias, but they are seen as at least making an effort, more praiseworthy or less blameworthy than their successors today. The child-savers "pioneered innovative and creative approaches to the problems of childhood that should stand as an inspiration and a rebuke to Americans today" (pp. 155-156). Progressive ideals on juvenile crime are seen to "stand as a rebuke to the simplistic solutions … favored today" (p. 178). The decline started in the late nineteenth century, and was in full flow after the near-realization by the mid-twentieth century of the ideal of a protected childhood for all children. The recent past is a history of a commercialized children's culture and of successive parental panics, all of them out of proportion to the actual danger to children. Mintz himself firmly nails the myths that underlie such panics about the good of the old days, and has no truck with notions of either progress or decline (p. 3), but a story that ends in Columbine High School will implant in many readers a sense that things were better in the past. Mintz strives to be optimistic about the present, and is disinclined to romanticize the past, but the message that comes through the texture of the book may point to a different conclusion.

Although the book can be read as a story of rise and decline, Mintz prefers to see three overlapping phases. In pre-modern childhood, roughly coinciding with the colonial era, parents saw the young as adults in the making. Modern childhood, in which adults aim to mark off childhood as a protected state, has its seeds in the middle of the eighteenth century, and two centuries later had come to define childhood across the spectrum of class and ethnicity. But already in the 1950s it was under threat from post-modern childhood, when norms about family structure and authority and gender roles began to break down. The problem is that many observers, as Mintz is fully aware, see post-modern childhood as a fundamental decline from the good of modern childhood. But there is, Mintz rightly insists, no way back.

Diversity, not progress or decline, is Mintz's overarching theme. The diversity covers gender, religion, ethnicity, geography, demography, and chronology. But the diversity to which Mintz gives greatest weight is class. It is, and presumably always was, "the most significant determinant of children's well-being" (p. ix). I began to wonder, reading this, and reading the largely economic explanations for the spread of the ideas of modern childhood, whether there is a Marxisant Mintz struggling to come out. What would the history of childhood look like if we wrote it as part of the history of class rather than as part of the history of the nation? It would be deeply unfashionable to do so, but might yield insights to which at present we are blinded. The focus would be on slave children, two million of them on the eve of the Civil War; on the 100,000 children in the 1900s whose childhood was spent in one of 1,200 orphanages; on the 30,000 Native American children who in any one year in the early twentieth century lived in boarding schools designed to separate them from their culture; on the children living in poverty, 16 percent of all children in 2002, higher than it had been thirty years previously. It would be possible to ascribe the state of many of these children to ethnicity, but what they all had in common was poverty–and with poverty went powerlessness, a powerlessness that was transmitted from parents to children. Put another way, they were the victims of a class structure. As Mintz so appositely points out, the very economic circumstances that allowed for the invention of a protected middle-class childhood were also the ones that condemned so many children to labor in factories and mines.

A focus on class and power might lead us to examine more closely what became a defining experience of childhood in the modern phase: school. School can, of course, be represented as the means of escape from poverty and powerlessness, and in the United States there are strong ideological reasons why it should be so seen. But it was also a site of power, in part simply between adult teacher and child student, but also between middle and working class. Mintz rather dutifully chronicles the rise in the number and proportion of children in school, and reflects at some length on the role of the high school in molding children. But he does not spend much time inside the classroom, exploring the dynamics of power and class on display there. It is a difficult area to access, and to do so one has to cut through the largely institutional accounts that clutter up the shelves that constitute the history of education, but it might reveal more about childhood than what Mintz tends to concentrate on, the media and childhood, a topic likely to provoke either alarm, or, as one comes within living memory, nostalgia–and there is quite a lot of nostalgia for baby boomers to suck up in the latter chapters of this book.[2]

Huck's Raft has provoked these thoughts. It is, to repeat, an excellent book: wise, moving, and stimulating. It forces us to reflect on the peculiarities of childhood in the early twenty-first century–and it offers us no easy solutions. At the same time it invites us to reflect on how we now write the history of childhood. For about twenty years between the 1970s and the 1990s the history of childhood was in large part a history of parenting. It was also, and has always been, a history of ideas about childhood. Only in the late twentieth century did the focus change to trying to give the child a voice, to make children agents. Mintz's book shows the strength of the new approach, but also some of the difficulties inherent in it, and some of the aspects of childhood to which it may blind us.

Notes

[1]. John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

[2]. For examples from Britain as to how this history might be written, see Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996); Stephen Heathorn, *For Home, Country, and Race: Constructing Gender, Class, and Englishness in the Elementary Schools of Victorian England, 1880-1914* (Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Stephen Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth 1889-1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).