

PART I

Changing Conceptions of Childhood

Childhood, according to the seventeenth-century French cleric Pierre de Bérulle, 'is the most vile and abject state of human nature, after that of death'.¹ It is tempting to agree – not least as an antidote to all the sentimental nonsense surrounding the supposedly pure and innocent child of the Victorian era. Such extremes serve to remind us that childhood is a social construct, which changes over time and, no less importantly, varies between social and ethnic groups within any society. As noted above, it is always tempting to think in terms of a 'natural' and indeed universal child, whose path to development is largely determined by its biological make-up. Biology does of course play a part in the psychological as well as the physical development of a child. The psychologist Jerome Kagan informs us that the most important biological influences spring from the maturation of the central nervous system structures during the first dozen or so years of life. These permit the emergence of motor and cognitive abilities such as walking, speech and self-awareness. At the same time, Kagan takes the now-familiar line that experience counts as well as biology.² Any idea of a purely 'natural' child becomes difficult to sustain once it is realized that children readily adapt to their own particular environment, the product of assorted historical, geographical, economic and cultural forces. To the extent that human beings can construct their own nature, as Nicholas Tucker recently noted, one might anticipate varying outcomes in what passes for childhood in different societies. Childhood is thus to a considerable degree a function of adult expectations.³

It follows that if historians wish to recreate the way day-to-day experiences of children in the past (what might be called the social

history of children) they must in the first instance understand how adults thought and felt about the young (the cultural history of childhood).⁴ Childhood is of course an abstraction, referring to a particular stage of life, as opposed to the group of persons implied by the word children.⁵ What we will be looking for in various societies is some understanding at a theoretical level of what it is to be a child, rather than mere descriptions of individual children. It may be useful at this point to follow philosophers in making the distinction between a *concept* and a *conception*. David Archard suggests that all societies at all times have had the *concept* of childhood, that is to say, the notion that children can be distinguished from adults in various ways. Where they differ is in their *conceptions* of childhood, which specify these ways of distinguishing the two. Thus they will have contrasting ideas on the key issues of how long childhood lasts, the qualities marking out adults from children, and the importance attached to their differences.⁶

Conceptions of Childhood in the Middle Ages

And in the beginning was Ariès. His wide-ranging and dramatic account of the 'discovery' of childhood was a truly seminal work. Briefly stated, Ariès made the startling assertion that the medieval world was ignorant of childhood. What was missing was any *sentiment de l'enfance*, any 'awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult'. The moment children could survive without the care and attention of their mothers or nannies, somewhere between the ages of 5 and 7, they were launched into the 'great community of men'. They joined adults in their games and pastimes and, whether they were courtiers or workers, acquired a trade by throwing themselves into its daily routines, living and working with those who were already fully trained. According to Ariès, medieval civilization failed to perceive a transitional period between infancy and adulthood. His starting point, then, was a society which perceived young people to be small-scale adults. There was no idea of education, medieval people having forgotten the *paideia* of classical civilization, and no sign of our contemporary obsessions with the physical, moral and sexual problems of childhood. The 'discovery' of childhood would have to await the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Only then would it be recognized that children needed special treatment, 'a sort of quarantine', before they could join the world of adults.¹

Critiques of Ariès's work

Centuries of Childhood (1962) has enjoyed mixed fortunes among professional historians. (For what it is worth, Ariès was an amateur 'weekend historian'.) Some, including a few medievalists, accepted its interpretation of childhood with enthusiasm, using its insights as an inspiration for their own researches.² Others were more measured in their appreciation, or downright hostile. Jean-Louis Flandrin 'marvelled' at its impressive documentation but was 'concerned' about weaknesses in its methods of analysis. Adrian Wilson, one of Ariès's most systematic critics, concluded that it was riddled with logical flaws and 'methodological catastrophes'.³ The book was far more favourably received among psychologists and sociologists. Indeed, they had an alarming tendency to treat it as a 'historical report' rather than a highly contentious thesis. Judith Ennew observed that all sociologists return to it 'as if to Scripture'.⁴ Why, then, has it enjoyed such renown, in some quarters at least? The answer must surely be the challenge presented to the reader by the counter-intuitive character of its argument. Most people assume that their own ideas and practices concerning childhood are 'natural', and are shocked to discover that other societies diverge from them. But once childhood is perceived as being culturally constructed, whole new fields for study are opened to scholars. It also becomes easier to mount a radical critique of thinking about children in their own society. For example, in 1979, Martin Hoyles attacked the present 'myth of childhood', and its desire to exclude children from the worlds of politics, sex, work and culture, by exposing its shallow historical roots.⁵

Sniping at Ariès is all too easy. His sweeping assertions on childhood may dazzle the intellect, but they also give numerous hostages to fortune. In the first place, critics accuse him of naivety in his handling of historical sources. They are particularly scathing of his approach to iconographic evidence. Ariès famously asserted that, until the twelfth century, medieval art did not attempt to portray childhood, indicating that there was 'no place' for it in this civilization. All that artists came up with was the occasional tiny figure resembling a man on a reduced scale: a 'horrid little dwarf' in the case of the infant Jesus.⁶ No one disputes that children are generally missing from early medieval art. However, as Anthony Burton remarks, the concentration on religious themes means that many other things are missing too, notably 'virtually all of secular life'. This makes it impossible to single out childhood as a significant absence. As for the miniature adults, they are not necessarily a 'deformation' inflicted on children's bodies. If, for example, the child in a twelfth-



Virgin and Child in Majesty, French twelfth century, wood, h. 31".

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916 (16.32.194). Photograph © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

century wood sculpture *Virgin and Child in Majesty* looks decidedly mature, is this not because he is supposed to represent Divine Wisdom? Even when depicting adults during the early medieval era, artists were more concerned to convey the status and rank of their subjects than individual appearance. Furthermore, not everyone accepts that the transition to more lifelike depictions of children in painting and sculpture from the twelfth century onwards reveals an artistic 'discovery of childhood'. Some historians argue persuasively that this was more a matter of Renaissance artists rediscovering and imitating Greek and Roman models than taking a new interest in the children around them. In short, Ariès appears to think that 'the artist paints what everyone sees', ignoring all the complex questions about the way reality is mediated in art.⁷

Secondly, critics of Ariès note his extreme 'present centredness'. By this they mean that he looked for evidence of the twentieth-century conception of childhood in medieval Europe, failed to find it, and then jumped to the conclusion that the period had no awareness of this stage of life at all. In the words of the historian Doris

Desclais Berkvam, this leaves open the question of whether there might not have existed in the Middle Ages 'a consciousness of childhood so unlike our own that we do not recognize it'.⁸ In the interim, to take the third line of criticism, historians have had no hesitation in judging the Ariès thesis on the complete absence of any consciousness of childhood in medieval civilization to be overdrawn. They have been quick to show various ways in which there was at least some recognition of the 'particular nature' of childhood.⁹ Medieval law codes contained a few concessions to the minority status of children. For example, they usually protected the inheritance rights of orphans, and sometimes required the consent of children to a marriage. The ordinances of Aethelstan, a West Saxon king during the early tenth century, laid down that any thief over 12 years of age who stole goods worth more than 12 pence should be executed. However, Aethelstan later added that he thought it 'cruel to put to death such young people and for such slight offences as he has learnt is the practice everywhere'. He therefore declared that thieves under the age of 15 should not be slain, unless they tried to defend themselves or escape.¹⁰ The regime in the monasteries for oblates, children bound to the religious life by the vows of their parents, was slightly less rigorous than for adult monks. A ninth-century commentary on the Rule of St Benedict allowed the *infantes* more frequent meals than the *maiores*, extra sleep and some time to play in a meadow (even if it was only a meagre one hour per week or per month).¹¹ Similarly, general works on medicine from the Middle Ages include a section on paediatrics, almost invariably a matter of copying the twenty-three chapters on infant care from the *Gynecology* of Soranus of Ephesus (98–177).¹²

An even more powerful riposte to Ariès's conclusion that an awareness of childhood was lacking during the medieval period comes from the inheritance of Graeco-Roman discourse on the subject. Medieval Latin adopted the Hippocratic tradition of dividing childhood into three stages: *infantia* from birth to age 7; *pueritia* from age 7 to 12 for girls and 7 to 14 for boys; and *adolescencia* from 12 or 14 to 21.¹³ The discourse also acted as a medium for Classical thinking on the Ages of Man. Some of the schemes available to scholars gave detailed attention to childhood. A twelfth-century translation of Avicenna's *Canon* subdivided the first stage of life, from birth to age 30, into five parts. There were successively ages when the legs were not fit for walking; for dentition (when the legs were still weak and the gums not yet filled with teeth); for achieving strength and dentition; for producing sperm and facial hair (letting slip a focus on boys); and for the final achievement of bodily strength and full growth.¹⁴ From the thirteenth century, such ideas and the images associated with them including the swaddled baby or the frolicsome child, were widely diffused in the vernacular. They appeared in,

among other places, sermons, moral treatises, encyclopaedias, medical handbooks, stained glass windows and house decorations.¹⁵

There is a risk of exaggerating the impact of such schemes on an awareness of childhood.¹⁶ They were largely academic exercises, owing more to the ingenuity of philosophers in relating the human life cycle to the natural world than to direct observation. Besides the seven ages familiar to us from Jaques's speech in *As You Like It*, three, four and six were also particularly popular. It all depended on whether the author was seeking to draw parallels between the stages of life and, say, the four humours or the seven planets. There was in addition what J. A. Burrow calls a 'confusing instability' in the naming and classification of ages. The classic three stages of childhood were usually too fine for schemes with three or four ages of man: the latter might have a first age running from birth to 14, or from birth to 25 or 30. It is likely that the mass of the peasantry would have had little contact with this type of knowledge. What it did stimulate was a learned tradition of reflecting on the nature of childhood among a literate minority of monks and cultivated laymen.¹⁷

Now that the dust has settled a little in the debate, it seems unduly simplistic to polarize civilizations in terms of the absence or presence of an awareness of childhood. Following the thinking of David Archard, one might say that the medieval world probably had a concept of childhood, but conceptions of it that were very different from our own.¹⁸ As a historian one must surely acknowledge the role of Ariès in opening up the subject of childhood, profit from his many insights into the past, and move on. A more fruitful approach is to search for these different conceptions of childhood in various periods and places, and to seek to explain them in the light of prevailing material and cultural conditions.

Medieval conceptions of childhood

How, then, did medieval Europe characterize the nature of childhood? There was some recognition of positive qualities, particularly in the very young (adolescents were looked on with some distaste by clerical figures, on account of their licentiousness and 'carnal lust'). A recent French survey proclaims that never has the child been as celebrated as in the Middle Ages. One can quote no lesser personage than Pope Leo the Great preaching in the fifth century that 'Christ loved childhood, mistress of humility, rule of innocence, model of sweetness'. The innocence of children meant that they could have celestial visions, denounce criminals and serve as intermediaries between Heaven and Earth, as in the proverb 'out of the mouth of

babes come words of wisdom'. The cult of the infant Jesus, evident in Cistercian circles during the twelfth century, provided further occasions to exalt childhood. The Massacre of the Innocents also provided a powerful image of childhood, in the form of the children slaughtered on the orders of Herod three days after the birth of Christ. However, it must be said that these were isolated views: in keeping with the often gloomy view of the human predicament in the Middle Ages, most commentators among the educated elite preferred to depict the child as a sinful creature, 'a poor sighing animal'.¹⁹

Recent authorities on childhood have also suggested that the Middle Ages understood childhood as a process of development, rather than a fixed state. In other words, they had some understanding of the dynamics of growth.²⁰ Such studies have been bedevilled by accusations of an anachronistic reading of medieval material through the lens of modern theories on the stages of growth.²¹ However, it is possible to use the medical, didactic and moralizing literature of the period to demonstrate an awareness of stages in childhood. Shulamith Shahar, for example, draws attention to an awareness of turning points around the ages of 2, 7 and adolescence, and of the characteristics particular to each stage. In similar vein, focusing on budding saints, Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell document the phases in their growth to perfection during childhood and adolescence. From the thirteenth century, they argue, female saints such as Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila followed a particular pattern of spirituality. Between the ages of 4 and 7 the girls grasped what society had in store for them: courtship, marriage and motherhood. At the same time, they gradually became aware of an alternative life revolving around perpetual chastity, humility and charity. There followed a struggle between the world of the flesh, which might triumph temporarily during adolescence and early adulthood, and that of the spirit.²²

On the negative side, medieval authors almost invariably preferred to write about adulthood, and particularly male adulthood, rather than childhood and adolescence. (Whether the oral culture of the masses ran along the same lines is of course impossible to determine.) A survey of histories and chronicles from the early Middle Ages found them to be 'quite barren' in this area. Another investigation, this time of English literature, mentioned a thousand-year silence surrounding children between St Augustine and the Reformation.²³ There were of course exceptions: one might cite the Middle English poem *Pearl*, which focuses on the death of a child, and the autobiographical references to childhood in works by Bede and Guibert de Nogent.²⁴ None the less, there is no denying that those writing history in the Middle Ages thought it should be largely a matter of kings, battles and high politics (a view not unfamiliar even in our own times, let it be said). Similarly the conventions of hagiography dictated that

a future saint be marked out early in childhood by his or her exceptional maturity. Authors in this genre revelled in detailing the prodigious feats of a *puer senex*, a child who already thought like an old man. They had St Nicholas displaying his asceticism while still in the cradle, as he agreed that on Wednesdays and Fridays he would take the breast only once a day. St Guthlac (evidently anything but a victim of political correctness) 'did not imitate the impertinence of children, the extravagant gossip of women, the silly popular stories, the stupid sayings of peasants, the frivolous and lying chatter of parties, and the various cries of all sorts of birds, as was the custom to do at that age'. Bede himself had the young St Cuthbert turned from a carefree childhood by a mere 3-year-old, 'who began to upbraid him, with all the solemnity of an old man, for his idleness and indulgence in games'. Adults reflecting on their own religious experiences in their turn followed these conventions by emphasizing maturity. Margareta Ebner, from the later German Middle Ages, wrote: 'I cannot describe how I lived for the previous twenty years', that is to say before her mystical experiences began, 'because I did not take note of myself then'.²⁵

Medieval sources were often vague when it came to estimating ages, and caught by the ambiguities surrounding language in this area. In the same way as 'boy' used to be applied to an adult slave in the United States, or *garçon* to a mature server in a French café, so words for 'child', such as *puer*, *kneht*, *fante*, *vaslet* or *enfes*, often drifted to indicate dependence or servility. Hence they too might apply to adults as well as to young people. Early writers also played fast and loose with any precise form of classification by age. Typically, the ninth-century monk Magister Hildemar was happy to apply the term *infans* to a 15-year-old as well as to a 3-year-old.²⁶ We conclude that childhood (and adolescence) during the Middle Ages were not so much ignored as loosely defined and sometimes disdained. The medievalist Doris Desclais Berkvam sums up the peculiarity of medieval childhood as its 'unstructured and unspecified' character, encompassing 'the time and space of youth regardless of where, or how long, this youth takes place'. The historian James A. Schultz, perhaps generalizing rather too easily from his source material, asserts that medieval society in Germany viewed childhood as an 'age of deficiency' and children merely as 'imperfect adults'.²⁷

This limited interest in childhood for its own sake can best be understood in the context of social conditions in a pre-industrial society. Ariès was surely correct to depict medieval children being inserted gradually into the world of adults from an early age, helping their parents, working as a servant or taking on an apprenticeship. He was by no means the first scholar to note that the distance in behaviour between children and adults was less evident in the past than in the present.²⁸ With hindsight, what we would perceive as

childhood and adolescence meshed progressively and almost imperceptibly into adulthood. This does not mean that people in this type of 'primitive' society were unaware of different stages of development among the young. There was an obvious grading of the responsibilities with which young people could be entrusted: from odd jobs around the household to shepherding and eventually a formal apprenticeship or work out in the fields. They also played their own games, rather than joining in adult contests.²⁹ None the less, childhood and adolescence did appear less distinct and special at this early period. The element of choice and experimentation which makes these stages of life so critical for the individual today was also far less in evidence. There were different paths for the young to follow, even in the sixth century. Pierre Riché highlights the contrasts between 'the pupil leaving the charge of the Roman grammarian, the lector attached to a cathedral church, the Barbarian raised in the entourage of his chief, and the monk offered to his monastery as an infant'.³⁰ However, young people themselves had little say in these matters. Most of them were more or less obliged to follow in the footsteps of their parents, with their occupation and station in life clearly mapped out before them. Childhood in Germany during the early Middle Ages was, for the historian Jean-Pierre Cuvillier, an 'apprenticeship in the conduct of a caste'.³¹ One generation therefore shaded unobtrusively into the next. Finally, with most people in a village or neighbourhood undergoing similar experiences as farmers or craftsmen, they were hardly encouraged to engage in debates on the nature of childhood. In this way, social conditions in the villages and small towns encouraged a particular idea of childhood, and it in turn reinforced them. To pursue the issue further, however, one needs to proceed beyond the rather static view of medieval Europe presented so far.