

Colin Heywood. *Children in Nineteenth-Century France: Work, Health and Education Among the Classes Populaires.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. Pp. xii, 350.

In 1837 the French physician Dr. Louis R. Villermé published his *Discours sur la durée trop longue du travail des enfants dans beaucoup de manufactures.* This influential work laid out for the French most of the classic truisms of child labour in the early stages of industrialism. Of children in the textile industries, for example, Villermé wrote:

Everywhere pale, enervated, slow in their movements, tranquil in their games, they offer an exterior of misery, suffering and despondency, which contrasts with the ruddy complexions, the well-fleshed look, the liveliness and the numerous signs of vigorous health which one notices amongst children of all ages, as one moves from a manufacturing area to an agricultural canton. (p. 147)

In his carefully and meticulously crafted study, *Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France*, Colin Heywood puts to the test most of the conclusions that Villermé and a host of subsequent writers had reached regarding childhood amongst the *classes populaires* over that century. In his opening chapters, Heywood describes the "technically primitive and labour-intensive" forms of

agriculture that characterized France at the time of the Revolution and which persisted until well into the nineteenth century. "The atmosphere of ceaseless activity it required in the peasant household bred an obsession with keeping all hands busy" (p. 27). In a common pattern, rural children began work at age five or six as shepherds. After a few years they turned to the much more strenuous effort of helping on the land, at first with their own family and then, often, as a *petit domestique* or *servante* on a series of other farms. If much of their work "had a casual, unhurried air to it," nonetheless, "for all its charms, a rural childhood could still be 'nasty, brutish and short'" (p. 60). In all the settings in which they worked, "watching, listening, helping...were the ways the young acquired the skills and knowledge necessary for everyday living" (p. 74). Only very gradually and over the whole of the century did "new cultural forms, based on Orthodox Catholicism, a national consciousness and the written word" spread outward from towns to villages and, eventually, to the countryside (p. 93).

Heywood next shows that early commentators did not generally overdraw their accounts of the children of the industrial revolution. In a chapter that lays out the context for child labour, he explains why, in the early stages of industrialism, children provided "a convenient solution to pressing labour problems" (p. 124). Later on in the century, he goes on to argue, a more mature economy had less need for the youngest and least-skilled members of the

work-force and their numbers gradually declined. As to the actual working lives of the children, he observes that over the first half of the century the "age of starting work may not have changed much, nor the hours of labour put in each day, but a more relentless application to the tasks at hand was required" (p. 144). Heywood concludes that "if, in the long run, industrialization brought some improvements in the working conditions of children, things had to get worse before they got better" (p. 145).

From these descriptions of child labour in its rural and urban settings, Heywood turns to examine two questions that dominated nineteenth-century discourse about the effects of child labour: he asks, was there "a physical decline in the race?"; was there "a moral and intellectual decline?" Heywood responds to the former through a careful examination of two sorts of evidence. First, he examines the data on military conscripts that Villermé and others had employed to show that industrial and urban development were harming the health of working-class children. He concludes that "Villermé and...other writers...were entirely justified in linking low-paid jobs with ill-health" but that "they could be accused of exaggerating the differences between industrial and agricultural populations" (pp. 155-56). Heywood then considers the content of death registers, another source widely employed by nineteenth-century reformers to attack the employment of children in factories. Again he finds the critics guilty of exaggeration,

noting that it was the filthy, crowded, disease-ridden urban environment itself rather than their work that killed most of those who died young. Nonetheless, if he finds it difficult to prove "a wholesale deterioration in the physical condition of the working class during the first half of the nineteenth century," he does conclude that there was little improvement until the second half of the century (p. 181).

In answering his second question, regarding moral and intellectual decline, Heywood shows how the changing role of the working-class family and the crisis in apprenticeship threatened social stability. Offsetting these changes, however, "were various new institutions: the elementary schools; the broadsheets and chap-books...; the popular theatres; and the labour movement, with its message that working-class people should study and think for themselves" (p. 213). To see working people merely as passive recipients of change "insults the memory of a whole class of people....In reality men, women and children from the *classes populaires* were engaged in a long process of struggle to adapt to changing circumstances" (p. 213). Thus, "to suggest that two or three generations of working children...[grew up] with no worthwhile stimulus to their moral and intellectual development, is to go beyond the bounds of credibility" (p. 213).

After his careful descriptions of the often very grim lives of rural and urban children in nineteenth-century France, Heywood moves on to examine the efforts of those who tried to improve their lot. He discusses the

motives of the reformers, the legislation they brought into being, and how it actually affected the lives of girls and boys. He notes that, although each piece of child labour and other related social legislation brought some change, the overall impact of legislative intervention fell far below expectations. When, for example, one inspector overheard someone shouting, "Save yourselves, children, save yourselves, the Inspector is here!" he could clearly sense how employers, parents, and the children themselves combined to subvert the legislation (p. 277). Heywood concludes that, in fact, underlying economic forces brought about the rise of child labour in the first half of the nineteenth century and its decline in the second. Increased mechanization, "a clearer margin over subsistence in working-class budgets, improved diet and living conditions, [and] some reduction in the power of...notables" provided, by the end of the century, "a greater tolerance of legislation on child labour and compulsory schooling" (p. 323). In nineteenth-century France, in short, capitalism had to proceed through its almost predetermined developmental course. At this point, however, one wonders parenthetically how a successful *Commune* would have treated its working children.

In *Childhood in Nineteenth Century France*, Colin Heywood has written a fine piece of historical reinterpretation. His clear, straightforward style makes the book a pleasure to read. Although he considers and presents relevant ideas from whatever source in an

even-handed, noncontentious way, he is not afraid to make clear his own position. He has delved deeply into regional and national, unpublished and published, primary sources. It seems certain that he has read all of the relevant French secondary literature on the topic. He is comfortably familiar with the classical and recent work of social and economic historians who have written about child labour and schooling in England. If he fails to mention related North American literature it is difficult to see that as a flaw; one is hard-pressed to find examples from it which might sharpen Heywood's analysis. Perhaps familiarity with Bruce Curtis' reconceptualizing of the nineteenth-century state would add to the strength of Heywood's discussion of the role of various French governments in their gradual interventions in the lives of children. What Canadians such as John Bullen and Lorna Hurl *could* teach Heywood is how to give boys and girls themselves a more central place in his description. While we see a few children, we usually see them at a distance, and hardly hear their voices at all. However, whatever Canadians have to give to Heywood, we certainly have something to take. We now have a substantial monographic literature on childhood in nineteenth-century Canada. We, too, need a synthesis on the topic. Heywood has not only shown that it can be done but has also provided us with a fine model as to how to tackle the task.

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