Introduction

How French people tried to make sense of their childhood and adolescence in past centuries remains something of a mystery. That this should be the case for the medieval and early modern periods is hardly surprising, given that so few contemporaries chose to write about their formative years. For centuries, the majority of clerics maintained a low opinion of the young. St Augustine (354–430) led the way with a dismal image of his own past, his influential *Confessions* lingering on his sins rather than his virtues during the first stages of his life. He at least gave some account of the suffering and humiliation of his boyhood, and the ‘surfeit of hell’s pleasures’ during his teens.1 Other authorities preferred to ignore entirely those they saw as small creatures wallowing in sinfulness and deficient in both intellectual and moral qualities: the child was ‘a poor sighing animal, starting his life in torment’, as the twelfth-century monk William of Saint-Thierry put it.2 They assumed that it was reason that separated mankind from the animal kingdom, and so only took seriously those who had progressed from the early chaotic years to adulthood. A seventeenth-century Jansenist from Port Royal wrote that ‘I only wish to count [life] from when one starts to be moved by reason, which normally does not happen before the age of twenty.’ The view of the young as deficient was by no means confined to the more austere wings of Christianity. The great Catholic orator and prelate Bossuet (1627–1704) lamented that much of his allotted three-score-and-ten years would count for nothing. Sleep he considered similar to death, childhood merely the life of a beast, and his own adolescence best erased.3 Similarly, fictional autobiographies written by members of the laity during the seventeenth and

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eighteenth centuries generally had little to say about the early years of life. The authors of these memoir novels found childhood uninteresting, and indeed ‘simply unimportant’. They assumed that one childhood was much like another: a long period when the individual personality was only gradually forming. There was, however, a counter-current in ecclesiastical thinking on childhood that emphasized its purity and innocence. This was a common theme in monastic literature, notably during the period of revival in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The author of the Life of Stephen of Obazine wrote that the simplicity and pure ignorance of children brought them close to divine knowledge and angelic purity, because they lacked the ‘impure wiles’ of the worldly. The suggestion from Philippe Ariès that there was a thousand-year silence on childhood after the fall of the Roman Empire now finds few takers. Nonetheless, the claim by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) in the mid-eighteenth century that ‘childhood is unknown’ had some justification.

Come the modern period, childhood and adolescence slowly emerge from the shadows. Leading figures in the Enlightenment, such as John Locke (1632–1704) and Rousseau, found a ready audience for their positive image of the child. By the nineteenth century, some people thought of childhood as the most blessed period of life, and the child as a source of intuitive wisdom lacking in the adult. Poets as diverse as Victor Hugo and Jean Cocteau linked the poetic imagination to childhood. The child hero made a belated but striking entry into French literature in novels such as Jack (1876) by Alphonse Daudet and L’Enfant (1879) by Jules Vallès. Adolescence in its turn came to fascinate writers like André Gide,
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Jean Cocteau and Colette during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rousseau also launched the notion that what happened to the individual during childhood shaped the rest of his or her life. Following the success of his *Confessions* (1781), authors of autobiographies began almost as a matter of routine to include an account of their childhood. Readers now wanted to know about key influences on a personality, about choices made or refused during the early years. In the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) famously reinforced this line, writing that ‘analytic experience has convinced us of the complete truth of the common assertion that the child is psychologically father of the man and that the events of his first years are of paramount importance for his whole subsequent life’. The welfare of the young also became a matter of state, as governments in France became concerned over the threat of ‘depopulation’ and the ‘degeneration of the race’. A whole raft of experts, drawn from the worlds of medicine, education, the Catholic Church and psychology, gave advice supposedly for the benefit of children and adolescents. Finally, reading and writing came to occupy a large amount of people’s time. From the late eighteenth century there survives a growing volume of personal diaries, family correspondence, memoirs, autobiographies and reminiscences of childhood. To begin with, the written word was largely the preserve of the nobility and the middle classes: on the eve of the French Revolution, according to the Maggiolo Enquiry, over a half of all bridegrooms and nearly three quarters of all brides were unable to sign their names. However near-universal literacy from the end of the nineteenth century enabled artisans, workers and peasants to begin penetrating the literary circuit.

This outpouring of material has provided the sources for a range of innovative works on issues affecting the young in France. One might cite histories of childbirth, infant welfare, child abandonment, the

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11 The most comprehensive study of the spread of literacy in France remains François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
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wet-nursing business, child labour reform, education, reformatories for juvenile delinquents, colonies de vacances, organized youth movements and concepts of adolescence. However, it is a common complaint that histories of childhood tend to leave out the children. At best the mass of juveniles hover anonymously on the edge of the frame as victims, or suitable cases for treatment. In other words, the existing historiography generally adopts an adult-centred approach, revealing in some depth how adults in the past conceptualized childhood and adolescence, and what they did for (or to) children. Much of it ends up as a history of modern welfare institutions for young people. Where it has hesitated to venture until very recently is towards a more child-centred approach, engaging, for example, with what Richard N. Coe called ‘the authentic small world of the young child’, or the restlessness of youth. Yet every single French man and woman who survived to maturity spent years passing through the successive stages of life ordained by their particular background, experiencing the often searing impact of, among others, relatives, friends, teachers, doctors, priests and employers. Why should there be something of a blind spot in history for first-hand accounts of such an extended period of everyone’s life? It surely stems from two sources: a reluctance by most historians to take seriously the concerns of young people, and a general wariness of notoriously ‘suspect’ sources such as diaries and autobiographies.


For much of the twentieth century, historians and social scientists simply did not consider young people worth studying on their own terms. They preferred to remain on familiar territory, dominated by the adult male, such as political systems, wars and class structures, rather than the more humdrum domain of women and children. They evidently found it difficult to cope with the inevitably ‘trivial’ concerns of children in particular, for it is indeed no mean challenge for a writer to convey to the reader ‘the supreme significance of the unspeakably, the absurdly trivial’. As far as treatment of the young was concerned, all that mattered was their socialization and development, in preparation for the all-important stage of full adulthood. In other words, children were treated as adults-in-the-making, rather than as children in their own right. Only in the past few years have scholars in history and the social sciences begun to consider this latter approach. Moreover, there were doubts for a long time among historians over whether there was much in the way of source material for any such study. The ‘sentiments approach’ to the history of the family, and its focus on parent–child relations, has proved vulnerable to the charge that its evidence is too subjective and fragmentary to allow rigorous documentation of change over time in various contexts. Above all, what was happening beyond the literate minority that produced most of the personal records on which such an approach relies has remained obscure. Even a champion of this ‘school’, during the 1970s, could loftily dismiss history based on literary sources as merely anecdotal, a haphazard collection of ‘charming little stories’. For as long as quantitative methods held sway in social history, it was tempting to opt instead for a demographic or a ‘household economics’ approach, using ‘hard’ data from sources such as census lists. However, in the late twentieth century, for many historians the sheen began to wear off the statistics, meaning appeared more interesting than function, and cultural history came to the fore. A number of historians have incorporated personal case studies into their work, providing a ‘grass-roots’ perspective on certain aspects of growing up.

15 Coe, When the Grass was Taller, p. xii.
19 Excellent examples include Mark Motley, Becoming a French Aristocrat: The Education of the Court Nobility, 1580–1715 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Eric
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In the background, inspired in part by the pioneering work of the historian Philippe Ariès in his *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), was the emergence of the movement known as the ‘new social studies of childhood’. Drawing on the work of anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists as well as historians, it has provided both inspiration and theoretical support for this study. Three of its propositions stand out for our purposes. In the first place, there is the call to give young people a more active role in their own history than has usually been the case. Instead of depicting them simply as passive receptacles of adult teaching, they gain a role as agents in determining their own existence. Research indicates that even infants are capable of manipulating and interacting with adults, despite the fact that the overall power relationship is heavily weighted towards the latter. The sociologist William A. Corsaro set out to show how children ‘negotiate, share, and create culture with adults and each other’. The upshot is that in this study the young move close to centre stage than is usual.


This is the theme of recent works in American historiography, such as of Elliott West, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far West Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989) and Elliott West and Paula Petrick (eds.), *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850–1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992).

Secondly, there is the insistence on analysing the age category of childhood (and of adolescence) according to such variables as gender, social background and religious affiliation. This means that one should be wary of broad generalizations about the experiences of children and adolescents in modern France, given the huge disparities in areas such as wealth and education. Indeed, it is the diversity of childhoods in different periods and places that stands out in recent scholarship, rather than any universal experience. Hence one needs to bear in mind the particular configuration of French influences on the process of growing up during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At various points, this work will draw attention to a number of these, including the persistence of a large agricultural sector in the economy, the high proportion of married women in the active population (56 per cent of married women worked in France in 1906, compared to 9.6 per cent in England in 1911), the widespread resort to paid wet-nurses by workers and the lower-middle classes in the big cities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the early resort to birth control within marriage, the concern among ruling elites with ‘depopulation’, the long battle between Catholics and Republicans for the control of education, and the polarization of politics between the Left and the Right in the wake of the 1789 Revolution.

Finally, and relatedly, there is the assertion that childhood and adolescence are to be understood as a social construction. That is to say, the search for the ‘real’ or the ‘essential’ child and adolescent is considered futile, given the huge variety of definitions we are now aware of in past societies and in other countries today. As William Kessen put it in 1979, anyone adopting a positivist approach now faces the nightmare ‘that the child is essentially and eternally a cultural invention and that the variety of the child’s definition is not the removable error of an incomplete science’. Treating the concept of the child or the adolescent as a ‘moveable feast’, however, raises the problem of avoiding the extremes of

23 Prout and James, ‘New Paradigm’, p. 8.
24 The starting point here was Margaret Mead and Martha Wolfenstein (eds.), Childhood in Contemporary Cultures (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1955).
'cultural' and 'biological' determinism. It is quite possible to study these stages of life in evolutionary and biological terms. Thus Barry Bogin defines childhood as ‘the period following weaning, when the youngster still depends on older people for feeding and protection’, and adolescence as the stage between puberty and the attainment of adult stature. He sees childhood as an evolutionary innovation, unique to *Homo sapiens*, that enabled human parents to raise a higher proportion of their offspring to maturity than any other species. This sociobiological perspective left him open to the criticism that he ignored the social and cultural influences on childhood.27 Towards the other end of the spectrum, Allison James asserts that childhood is a social and cultural phenomenon: ‘biological development must be seen as contextualising, rather than unequivocally determining, children’s experience’. This provokes questions on the relationship between the biological base and the child’s life. ‘What’, asked Martin Richards, ‘marks out those parts of the child that are biological from those which are social?’28

It is not easy to provide an answer, but one can hardly avoid some reference to the biological realities that underpin the adaptability of young people to their cultural environment.29 One should be aware that child psychology has always suffered from a tendency to make universal claims for its findings when the basis for its empirical observations have come from a narrow, largely American, range of environments. All the same, in the present state of knowledge, there are grounds for thinking that during the first twelve months or so of its life an infant has a ‘biological predisposition’ to develop a special relationship with a caregiver: usually, but not invariably, the biological mother. According to the psychologist L. Alan Sroufe, the first sign of an attachment relationship, distress at separation, ‘shows a strikingly similar course across cultures with a peak onset commonly seen at about 9 months’.30 Between eighteen and thirty-six months, there is a period when the acquisition of language is at its most rapid. More generally, as the structure of the central nervous system matures during the first twelve years of life, it permits the release of abilities such as walking, talking and self-awareness. Hence every culture

29 See below, especially ch. 3.
has some notion of the stages of life, linked more-or-less precisely to age
gradations. However, their number and meanings are subject to consid-
erable variation.31 In the final analysis, one evidently needs to strike a
balance between biological and environmental influences on growing up.
For a historical study such as this the emphasis is bound to be on the
latter. The inclination here is to follow the sociological line that children
and adolescents everywhere are immature biologically, but where each
society differs in the ways that it interprets and attaches meaning to this
immaturity.32 All this of course takes one back to adult discourses rather
than to the young themselves. It remains important as a starting point for
this work, given that prevailing conceptions of the child and the adoles-
cent sooner or later had an impact on the way people treated their young
in any given society. Robert E. Levine, for example, notes that ‘parental
practices and the parents’ organization of the child’s environment are
goal-driven, and the goals are largely derived from conceptions of care,
ininfancy and childhood embedded in local cultural ideologies’.33

By focusing systematically on what French people had to say about their
early years, either at the time in letters and diaries, or retrospectively in
autobiographies, childhood reminiscences and oral history projects, this
study aims to harness this ‘new paradigm’ to move on from the existing
orientation of the historiography. It gives voice to a sample of young
people from all levels of French society, rather than the usual cast of
famous reformers, politicians and other adults in positions of authority.
It analyses the way the individual child or adolescent reacted to the world
around them, rather than the socio-political forces underlying legal and
institutional developments. And it takes an interest in the later stages
of childhood and adolescence, rather than the intensively studied areas
of childbirth and infancy.34 This is not to deny the importance for the
young of the institutional framework in which they grew up. Hence what
follows balances the somewhat random testimony of individuals with the

31 This section relies on Levine, ‘Child Psychology’; Jerome Kagan, The Nature of the
Child (New York: Basic Books, 1984); and Josephine Klein, Our Need for Others and its
Roots in Infancy (London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1987), ch. 6. It is also
influenced by Nicholas Tucker, What is a Child? (London: Fontana, 1977); Emily Cahan,
Jay Mechling, Brian Sutton-Smith and Sheldon H. White, ‘The Elusive Historical Child:
Ways of Knowing the Child of History and Psychology’, in Glen H. Elder Jr, John
Modell and Ross D. Parke (eds.), Children in Time and Place: Developmental and Historical
Insights (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 192–223; and Chris Jenks,

32 Prout and James, ‘New Paradigm’, p. 7.


34 On the emphasis in current studies on such topics as the heavy mortality suffered by
infants under the ancien régime, and the little rituals designed to protect mothers and
babies in these difficult circumstances, see Bardet et al., ‘Introduction’ to Lorsque l’enfant
grandit, pp. 6–28 (p. 6).
context of changes affecting, say, the family, the school system, child labour legislation and marriage customs in modern France. The general impression that lingers in the existing historical literature is a positive one of progress from philanthropic and state intervention. Given the numerous dimensions to young people's existence, any comprehensive answer is in fact likely to be complex. A common-sense view would suggest that things have improved considerably for the young from the middle of the eighteenth century. Children and adolescents have taken their share of increased affluence with, on average, better food, clothing and housing, more varied leisure activities, improved medical treatment and more extensive education and training. Their interests have featured prominently in charitable initiatives and the development of the welfare state, from child protection agencies through to universities. The evidence of progress is hard to dispute when one considers such measurable gains as lower infant and child mortality, and rising literacy rates.35 An opposing tendency in the literature, however, highlights various drawbacks for the young in all this progress. Philippe Ariès betrayed a certain sympathy for medieval practice in suggesting that young people enjoyed a relatively carefree existence before the discipline of the school system began to clamp down on an increasing proportion of them during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.36 The Marxist interpretation of history implies an increasingly 'rational exploitation' of the young in the schools and workshops of capitalist society during the nineteenth century.37 The persistence of child labour in the twenty-first century and critiques of mass schooling militate against easy optimism on contemporary society.38 This study veers towards a 'swings and roundabouts' approach, arguing that there was a certain trade-off between the material benefits brought by economic development and the pressures on young people in an increasingly mobile society.