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10 Dec. 2010

Colonial America

Final Historiographical Essay

The Silent Contributions of Colonial Childhood History

When studying colonial American history, there is one group that remains generally hidden in the historical record. While scholars have increasingly looked to understanding groups based on national origins, racial or ethnic backgrounds, gender or class, little has been done in terms of age. This essay examines how scholars address children in their studies of colonial America. When children are found in historical works, they are often, if not always, consigned to either gender or family studies. However, even in these works, the focus remains adult-centered as scholars focus on childrearing as a reflection of adult life, rather than childhood as an influential process of growing up in the colonies. This silencing of children and child life is astonishing given the time Benjamin Franklin devoted to explaining his own childhood. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin remembered entering grammar school at age eight, being taken out and placed into a writing and arithmetic school a year later, and then beginning work at the age of ten. He recalled walks he had taken with his father and mentioned how he was influenced in his own interests of invention and experimentation by seeing various laborers at their work. Even his fondness of reading, he recalled, began as a child.¹ These memories of childhood's influence come from one of America's most notable philosophers and inventors! Can there be any doubt

¹ Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, John Bigelow, ed. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1869), 85-92.

that a person's childhood holds significant power over his or her choices in life? Nevertheless, colonial childhood has largely remained unwritten in modern history texts. If adults are to remain the primary subjects of history and scholars are intent on uncovering the influence that guided individual or group actions and the events of the colonial era, the history of childhood must be included in the written record. By examining the contributions of childhood history, this essay will show its importance and applicability in studies of material culture, gender, race, religion, class and politics.

Scholarly interest in childhood during the colonial period began as early as the late-nineteenth century. In 1899, popular historian Alice Morse Earle followed the success of her earlier book *Home Life in Colonial Days* with a meticulous and direct study of *Child Life in Colonial Days*. Her opening line in the foreword of this book illustrates her disappointment in the silencing of children in history: "When we regard the large share which child study has in the interest of the reader and thinker of to-day," she writes, "it is indeed curious to see how little is told of child life in history."² Not only does Earle attempt to repair this absence by writing about child life, she includes over a hundred illustrations that allow the reader to imagine for themselves what life was like for a child in the early American colonies. Included are pictures of schoolbooks and schoolhouses, portraits of children and their clothing from infancy to teenage years, depictions of games from marbles to hopscotch, pictures of toys and dolls, and even illustrations of discipline and punishment from seventeenth and eighteenth century books. With such rich detail and consummate study of primary sources, Jack Larkin calls Earle "one of the

² Alice Morse Earle, *Child Life in Colonial Days*, Introduction by Jack Larkin (Stockbridge, MA: Berkshire House Publishers, 1993 [originally published 1899]), xxiii.

pioneers in writing integrated social and material history.”³ In one instance, Earle prints numerous lines from a child’s diary listing “a black list of her childish wrong-doings” along with a “white list [that] showed the duties she performed.” This is printed, Earle explains, “to prove the simplicity of the daily round of a child’s life at that time. The pages prove with equal force,” she argues, “the domination of the Puritan temperament, a nervous desire and intent to be good, and industrious, and attentive, and helpful.”⁴

Not only is there much to gain from children’s diaries, but even portraits of children yield significant clues in constructs both of age and gender. In one particular portrait of the Pilgrim Governor Edward Winslow at age six, Earle shows the reader “the extraordinary resemblance of the child’s picture to the ‘grown-up’ portrait, the same brow, contour of face, and other similarity.” Despite this, she does not claim that childhood and adulthood were hardly separated in colonial life. By examining children’s clothing within portraits, she is able to explain how “hanging sleeves were so distinctively the dress of a little child that the term had at that time a symbolic significance, implying childishness both of youth and second childhood.”⁵ In addition, many of the children’s portraits contain toys that would not be shown in adult portraits. Earle’s assessments likewise answer some of the questions scholars pose regarding colonial gender distinctions at earlier ages, given that boys wore dresses until they were six or seven years old. She points to these dresses as being called “coats” and explains how a boy’s posture in a picture, specific features, toys being held, and even certain additional articles of clothing can be seen clearly as masculine.⁶ While Earle’s conclusions are often based on the subjectivity of analyzing

³ Ibid., xx. Another example of Morse’s work as a social historian can be found in her *Colonial Dames and Good Wives* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1895).

⁴ Ibid., 167-169.

⁵ Ibid., 38-44. See also p. 4 for the actual portrait of Edward Winslow.

⁶ Ibid., 40 & 43.

a picture, they nonetheless illustrate how examining childhood may aid historical scholarship in a variety of fields, from studies of material culture to gender construction.

While Earle's writings were quite popular in her time, they were not given much credit in scholarly circles and children were subsequently disregarded in the historical record of colonial America. This does not mean that children or family life were completely overlooked, for some scholars did focus their attention on these aspects in history. For instance, in 1917 Arthur Calhoun published *A Social History of the American Family from Colonial Times to the Present*, wherein he includes a full chapter on "Children in the New England Family." Intriguingly, long before late-twentieth century feminist scholars placed women and gender into mainstream historical research, Calhoun writes of women in colonial America as "the instruments of male gratification [who] did not realize their degradation. They were the vicarious sacrifice to the peopling of a continent," he argues. Thus, in attempting to examine childhood, Calhoun begins by pointing to childrearing's negative effects upon women under a system that prized children over women.⁷ He goes on to discuss experiences of children and how colonial parents most likely often followed the suggestions of John Locke in his *Thoughts on Education* (1690), a book commonly found in New England libraries at the time. One such example he draws upon is that of Josiah Quincy who, "at three years was taken from his warm bed, winter and summer, carried to the cellar kitchen, and dipped three times in water just from the pump." This suggestion of Locke's was meant to "toughen them," particularly boys, and Calhoun uses this example to argue that "many Revolutionary heroes grew up under Locke's strenuous rules of dietary and

⁷ Arthur Wallace Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family: From Colonial Times to the Present*, Vol. 1 (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1917), 105.

sleeping.”⁸ If this is true, it certainly holds significance in studies of Revolutionary America and the influences upon those who led the colonies into their most strenuous years.

At the time of Calhoun’s social history, scholars who focused predominantly on intellectual or economic history may have benefitted greatly from his insights on the colonial family. Calhoun did not look upon the early colonists favorably, particularly Puritans, seeing their treatment of children and women as brutal. His discouraging view of Puritans even preceded *The Founding of New England* by James Truslow Adams, believed to be one of the first Progressive scholars of the 1920’s to depict Puritans negatively. Adams, along with other Progressives of his time, looked at social conflicts primarily through the lenses of “money and social value.”⁹ Had their arguments been coupled with Calhoun’s observations on the family, early Progressive scholarship may have taken on entirely different forms. Calhoun’s focus also allowed him to examine the influence of Puritan zeal in providing for their children both religious and secular education. Their efforts, he argues, overburdened their children psychologically and thus changed over time. Perhaps his greatest overlooked contribution is this documentation of changes in Puritan childrearing over time where discipline gradually became less draconian. Were scholars attentive to works such as this and continued their search of changing childrearing practices and childhood experiences, the historiography of colonial America may have been profoundly different. Long before Perry Miller explained the changes in the “social structure and the mentality” of Puritans in *The New England Mind: From Colony to*

⁸ Ibid., 106-107.

⁹ James Truslow Adams, *The Founding of New England* (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1921), 68.

Province in 1953, Calhoun had already illustrated those changes in Puritan zeal through the history of childhood.¹⁰

Childhood and family history in colonial American studies remained on the periphery, however, until approximately 1970. It was then that the “new social history” led such scholars as John Demos and Philip Greven, inspired by social scientists and European social historians, to begin examining family life in colonial America again. It was in their work that colonial children were rediscovered and placed back into the historiography. This is not to suggest that childhood and family life had been entirely absent from colonial American histories. As Demos points out in the opening of *A Little Commonwealth*, Edmund S. Morgan’s *The Puritan Family* and Bernard Bailyn’s *Education in the Forming of American Society* were two “outstanding books on the history of early American family life.”¹¹ We may question why Calhoun’s *A Social History of the American Family* is not mentioned, particularly because Demos argues against Calhoun in suggesting that childhood and adulthood were barely separated. He makes this argument first by pointing to similarities in their clothing found in portraits of children. Later, this argument is made beyond mere symbolism in explaining how children became apprentices between ages six and eight. The facts that children lived six years prior to their becoming “little adults” and that high mortality rates made for earlier adulthoods throughout history seems to have escaped from Demos’ narrative.¹² It is telling that prior to 1970 colonial family life was studied, though not in any recognizable way until the “new social history” took shape. Studies like Morgan’s, however, revealed the applicability of family studies into broader scholarship. Morgan’s *The Puritan Family* is largely a study of how the family acted as the first order not only of society but of the

¹⁰ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981 [Originally published 1953]), 178.

¹¹ John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), vii.

¹² *Ibid.*, 67-68 & 140-141.

church. In this way, religious studies were aided by a closer examination of the family, and to a lesser extent childhood.¹³

Childhood became a central concern in Greven's work and his conclusions are applicable in a wide array of studies. In his groundbreaking study of four successive generations of families in colonial Andover, Massachusetts, Greven reconstructs the changing structure and character of colonial families, households and relationships. Unfortunately, because the sources to which Greven had access were limited to "local records, probate records, land records, and vital records," he could not uncover certain features of family life, including "their methods of child nurture, discipline, and acculturation."¹⁴ As such, children remain a negligible group in this book, though not by any disregard on the part of the author. In a footnote toward the end of his book, Greven laments the absence of children but enthusiastically announces that "John Demos, in his forthcoming study, *A Little Commonwealth*, provides a rare, and quite remarkable, insight into many of the innermost areas of childhood and of family life."¹⁵ However, Greven did not abandon his search for childhood experiences. Drawing upon psychoanalytic and sociological studies, Greven writes in *The Protestant Temperament* that scholars must uncover childhood experiences if they are "to bridge the gap between the public and private realms of consciousness and thought." In this book, Greven devotes extraordinary attention to childhood and its influence upon self-identity and community. Had there been a sharper investigation of childhood in Morgan's *The Puritan Family*, or any analysis of children and the role of the family in one of

¹³ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 18.

¹⁴ Philip J. Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 287, footnote 25. It is here that Greven also points to the remarkable work done in the both European social history and the social sciences, namely Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York, 1962) and Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society* (New York, 1950). Having read these works, Greven argues, "no one ... can doubt the importance of childhood and the family for social history."

William McLoughlin's studies on revivalism and pietism that connected religion with the American political tradition, scholars may have been able to see how, as Greven argues, "the accumulation of personal experiences in the earliest years of life had an enduring influence upon the development of the temperaments and religious experiences of people in adulthood."¹⁶ McLoughlin, it should be said, later realized the importance of studying childrearing and began by writing an essay analyzing an anonymous letter that detailed these practices among evangelicals. By the end of his article he argues for further research, saying, "historians need to consider more carefully the relationship between child-rearing patterns and American social and political behavior."¹⁷ Of course, these considerations had already begun in the work of Greven and his colleagues in the "new social history."

Greven ultimately pioneered the importance of studying the particular and varying features of childrearing practices and showed how childhood historical research could aid in our understanding of self-identity, community and politics. In *The Protestant Temperament*, Greven effectively shows differences in childrearing and discipline throughout the colonies, particularly when comparing evangelicals, moderates and Southern genteel families, resulting in varying childhood experiences that would have influenced not only their feelings of religion in politics but their very conceptions of self and identity. "The nature of power and the nature of authority," argues Greven, "evoked associations that drew upon memories from childhood and from experiences in adulthood." However, it is important to remember that "childhood had differed

¹⁶ Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 16. See also William G. McLoughlin, "Pietism and the American Character," in Henning Cohen, ed., *The American Experience: Approaches to the Study of the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968); and William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹⁷ William G. McLoughlin, "Evangelical Child Rearing in the Age of Jackson: Francis Wayland's Views on When and How to Subdue the Willfulness of Children," in N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes, eds., *Growing Up in America: Children in Historical Perspective* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 107.

significantly for different people,” which provided alternate views of both power and authority. Every individual defined these, in addition to their own identity, according to those particular experiences they had as children.¹⁸ One can only imagine how Jill Lepore’s *The Name of War* may have differed had she examined more closely possible variations in the story-telling of King Philip’s War amongst these families. While she argues that “alternate interpretations” of the war were silenced by “the colonists’ public and private commemorations of King Philip’s War in the early years—the almanacs, the skulls on poles, the books, the stories told out loud, the bullet holes shown to children,” it is highly likely that these stories were not uniformly delivered across the colonies where childhood experiences, teachings and identities were profoundly diverse.¹⁹

The Protestant Temperament also places childhood in the context of slavery and adds to our understanding of the master-slave relationship. For years, scholars of slavery have debated the paternal relationship within the institution of slavery without really studying childhood itself. Contrary to their differences in explaining its effects, theories of paternalism are found in Stanley Elkins’ *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* and Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. Both of these works were profoundly influential in setting the course of slave studies, though neither author examines to any significant degree childhood in colonial American society. Greven, on the other hand, examined how slavery changed the dynamics of childrearing which thereby allowed the experiences of childhood to influence the institution of slavery. With slaves in the home, Greven argues, children were not disciplined as consistently as they would have been elsewhere because “such discipline was reserved principally for their slaves.” In addition, children were often left to

¹⁸ Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, 339.

¹⁹ Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 190.

be raised by slaves and, seeing the relationship between master and slave, they were more likely to exercise their own power in tyrannical ways against those that cared for them. Thus, the institution of slavery was perpetuated and strengthened within childrearing practices.²⁰ All of Greven's conclusions regarding slavery have not been entirely substantiated, and some have been refuted by later works, but his focus on children and their experiences with slaves remains applicable in any studies of slavery or the construction of race.

Following the 1970's, scholars throughout academia began exploring the lives of children with greater interest to answer some of the questions posed by Greven and Demos. A number of essays, including the one by McLoughlin previously discussed, were compiled and published in 1985 by editors N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes as *Growing Up in America: Children in Historical Perspective*. In their introduction to this work, the editors applaud the growing interest in childhood studies and the "growing awareness that all human relationships are to some degree reciprocal and dynamic, and that no one, even the most powerless person, is without influence on others."²¹ This statement reflected the growing acceptance of all groups in the "new social history," though the influence of children on historical scholarship remained largely subdued. Nonetheless, interpretations of childhood consistently reconceptualized what life was like for colonial children. In one of the essays in the Hiner and Hawes anthology, Ross W. Beales, Jr. confronts the "miniature adulthood" thesis posed by Demos and others. By narrowing his focus on New England, Beales argues not only that childhood existed but that life as an apprentice was also significantly different from adulthood so that even a similar age to modern adolescence existed. This theory was also substantiated by the existence of Puritan ministers' concerns

²⁰ Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, 277-278.

²¹ N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes, eds., *Growing Up in America: Children in Historical Perspective* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), xiii.

specifically in the behavioral patterns of youth.²² Notably, Beales did not insinuate that his conclusions were universal, either, thus opening the way for community-specific studies in searching for particularities in childhood experiences.

While most studies of childhood and family life up to this point, with the exception of a notable few, focused on New England and the Puritans, the 1980's saw scholars opening family and childhood studies to other regions of colonial America. In *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society*, Daniel Blake Smith looks to the South to show how family life extended to larger kinship attachments that often included friends and neighbors. Most notably, improvements in life expectancies allowed parents to send their children to other relatives, including grandparents. Like Beales, Smith sees a distinct age of childhood in the Chesapeake where children not only experienced greater autonomy on the plantation, but were tied more closely to family because of the larger kinship networks. "The nature of child-rearing in planter families," Smith argues, "encouraged children very early in life to sense the meaning of the world beyond the immediate family." These responsibilities and the greater autonomy children enjoyed did not lessen the time of their childhood but allowed for an "easier transition" toward adulthood.²³ By looking at childrearing practices, Smith further illustrates how "the establishment of a strong, secure sense of gender identity in girls was a major preoccupation of parents throughout the eighteenth century."²⁴ Thus, through the lens of childhood, Smith was able to outline some of the earliest parental endeavors in the social construction of gender. These particularities of the Chesapeake South would later be discussed in

²² Ross W. Beales, Jr., "In Search of the Historical Child: Miniature Adulthood and Youth in Colonial New England," in N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes, eds., *Growing Up in America: Children in Historical Perspective* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 19-22.

²³ Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 44-54.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

greater detail in Kathleen Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches & Anxious Patriarchs*, a monumental work on the social constructions of race and gender. As an analysis of power, this book also relied heavily on childhood experiences to compare and contrast parent-child relationships to master-slave relationships. Though the geographical area and many of the topics discussed were similar, Brown's conclusions differ from Smith's vision of childhood autonomy, the former arguing that Virginia's planter fathers exercised significant control over their children's behavior.²⁵ While the works of Smith and Brown show significant disagreement in the actual experiences of children, both have shown the importance of studying childhood further with the larger goal of attempting to understand the gendered and racial constructions of society.

Examining childhood or family life with the intent to generalize findings is difficult, however, especially given the varying features of family life in the different colonies. Despite this difficulty, scholars continue to make broader arguments concerning their findings. Barry Levy centered his research on *Quakers and the American Family*. Instead of writing to add particularities to a broader narrative of differences based on different regions, however, Levy provocatively placed Quaker family life as central to the origins of the modern American family. Unfortunately, Levy's focus on children was confined to brief considerations of childrearing practices among the Quakers rather than examining deeply the experiences of Quaker children themselves. While his focus on Quaker settlements as "holy speech communities" helps to illustrate anxieties and experiences within the household, his lack of children's experiences weakens the overall argument.²⁶ As such, without addressing directly the role childhood (or even childrearing) played on a Quaker's identity or sense of family life, the reader is left wanting.

²⁵ Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches & Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 350.

²⁶ Barry Levy, *Quakers and the American Family: British Settlement in the Delaware Valley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 131.

Fortunately, with the publication of *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker* by Elaine Forman Crane scholars were given a closer look into one Quaker's experiences in childrearing. In her analysis of the diary, Helena M. Wall places Elizabeth's focus on her children in the home as reflecting "broader changes in the household economy of the late eighteenth century, and the movement of families like the Drinkers toward a class-specific domesticity."²⁷ While the successful economy of the Delaware Valley plays a significant part in Levy's work, it is through the lens of childrearing that Wall is able to approach class consciousness and illustrate the making of the middle-class family in early American history in vivid detail.

The scholarly works discussed in this essay have all added significantly not only to the historiography of colonial childhood but to all aspects of colonial history. Studies centered on childhood and childrearing have yielded insights applicable to lessons in race, gender, class, religion, politics, and possibly every aspect of life. These scholars, beginning with Alice Morse Earle, demonstrate not only the importance of childhood as a separate category of analysis but an important factor to be included in any history of colonial America. While considerations of gender and race have become standard elements of critique, it is time that scholars start emphasizing areas where children are or can be included in the research. In one of the most recent works on childhood in colonial history, Anna Mae Duane concludes with advice on the sources scholars may use in the future in painting a more accurate picture of the past: "The often formulaic exercises children perform as part of education can be an important resource," she argues, "for examining national investments in particular ideas about childhood, and how actual

²⁷ Helena M. Wall, "My Constant Attention on My Sick Child": The Fragility of Family Life in the World of Elizabeth Drinker," in James Marten, ed., *Children in Colonial America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 166.

children absorbed, resisted, and reworked the symbolism they were asked to inhabit.”²⁸ This statement illustrates that children were important actors in colonial history. They were given significant attention by parents as well as religious and civic leaders, and in addition to being acted upon, they themselves responded, thus influencing the course of history in ways yet to be discovered.

²⁸ Anna Mae Duane, *Suffering Childhood in Early America: Violence, Race, and the Making of the Child Victim* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2010), 165.

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