



## **CHC EPISODE 8: NAILING JELLY TO THE WALL**

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Interview with James Marten is available [online](#)

*CHILDHOOD: History and Critique (CHC)* is a series of interviews, commentary, and happenings in historical studies of childhood by Dr. Patrick J. Ryan, Kings University College at Western University, Canada.

In 1998, I told [Kris Lindenmeyer](#) that I thought childhood was a secondary designation for historians. It had been ancillary to other fields for about a half-century. At that juncture, I was unconvinced that a network on [H-Net](#) dedicated only to the historical study of childhood would be viable. We should consider linking it with related areas of interest. Kris disagreed. She was recruiting me to help her start [H-Childhood](#), and she was sure it would be a mistake to explicitly pair a network in childhood history with closely associated areas like families, social policy, or education. I do not recall her arguments in detail, but she may have seen that adding another category would shrink the pool of potential subscribers by excluding those with interests outside of whatever area we chose.

I still think the study of childhood is a secondary designation for most of us, and the ways that the new technologies altered the implications of this fact are unsettled. Oh, some developments are obvious. The internet facilitated collaboration beyond traditional geographic limits in ways that encouraged specialization. You might be one of a few scholars interested in studying childhood historically in your locale, but that would mean there were thousands like you globally. Sixteen years later, H-Childhood continues to provide a means for about 1,700 scholars across the globe to communicate at the click of a button.

It is also clear today that “networking” scholars might facilitate interest in a topic, but it is not the same thing as creating a coherent field of study. Early in the life of H-Net, there was a hope that the new technology might provide an alternative to academic conferences, journals, and societies. Might it be possible to hold virtual meetings and generate scholarly discourse that was more open, free, frequent, and dynamic? This vision has yet to be

fulfilled. Scholarship continues to depend upon enclosed, costly, slow-paced, quiet, solitary labour. Email lists, websites, twitter feeds (and what have you) lack key features of personal presence and thoughtful debate. Travel, face-to-face relationships are especially important for a long-distance scholarly community.

This said, H-Childhood seems to have facilitated a wider set of activities. It helped a small group of historians (who met in Baltimore in 2000) to reach hundreds of colleagues across disciplines and outside of the United States to hold a childhood history conference at Marquette University in 2001. This became the founding meeting of the *Society for the History of Children and Youth*.

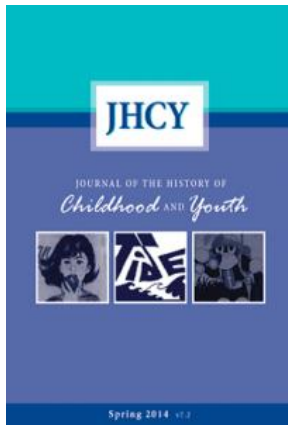
The Society’s biennial conferences never struggled to field panels. Today they include 220-250 papers and have been held on both coasts of the U.S., Sweden, and England; in 2015 *SHCY* will visit [Vancouver, British Columbia](#). The current 320 dues-paying members live in twenty-three countries (although 183 are concentrated in the U.S. with another 60 residing in Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand).

Like H-Childhood, *SHCY* has pursued an interdisciplinary, international, and topically diverse membership in an academic context that remains disciplinary, national, methodologically specialized. The tension between these poles is obvious in a simple recounting of the Society’s early leadership. *SHCY*’s first three Presidents and its first three program committee chairs were all Americanists with primary training in the 19th and early 20th-century social history (Kris Lindenmeyer, Ray Hiner, Joe Hawes, Jim Marten, Paula Fass, and Julia Grant). Nevertheless, the first conferences succeeded in reaching outside this area of concentration. They



were strongly attended by Canadians and Scandinavians – and to a lesser extent – by scholars outside of social history. If my memory serves, Bengt Sandin was one among a number of leaders (notably supported by Paula Fass) who encouraged *SHCY* to amend its mission statement, formally re-structure its executive board, and plan its conferences to promote the study of childhood historically across temporal, geographic, national, and disciplinary boundaries after 2005.

In my view, explicit internationalism has made *SHCY*'s conferences more interesting and compelling. Casting the net wide also must have helped the meetings reach a critical mass of attendees.



In just a few years, *SHCY* demonstrated that childhood history would attract numbers adequate to support an academic periodical. A group of scholars mostly based near Amherst, Massachusetts (Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Martha Saxton, Laura Lovett, Brian Bunk, and Jon

Pahl) formed the first editorial team for the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* in 2008. The editors' were themselves a diverse group with multi-disciplinary designations: a scholar of 19th-century literature, two historians of women, an expert on modern Spanish popular culture and sport, and professor of Christian theology and religious history. So too, the executive board of *JHCY* included members located across North America, Europe, and Australia with expertise in American, Canadian, European, Asian, and Australian history.

The founders of the *Journal* were willing to experiment. They formed an editorial "collective" with a rotating chief. In retrospect, this non-hierarchical editorial structure seems consistent with the diffusion of historical research on childhood. Each issue came with its own introductory statement authored by the standing Editor. None of the first editors claimed childhood as their primary scholarly designation (and they still don't); childhood was and is "an interest" for most studying it historically. The

articles offered a wide temporal, geographic, cultural, and topical range, and explored childhood from multiple disciplines with theoretically diverse assumptions. Each issue began with an "object lesson" – short presentations of cultural productions that were suited to classroom use. Every number included a piece on contemporary childhood policy. If there was a thematic volume, say on children's rights or schooling, more than one geographic area and/or vastly different periods of time would be represented. Even the cover art on every issue sported three images, rather than one. All and everything childhood was welcome.

*The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* has been the most important organizational accomplishment within childhood historical study. I remain impressed by the ongoing growth of academic programs, conferences, and networks dedicated to the area. Yet, I wonder about intellectual coherence in an era that combines globalization and specialization. Peter Novick once wrote that making history is like nailing jelly to a wall (a structure framed by disciplinary standards or a given school of thought); maybe the emergent field of childhood history was possible precisely because we were willing to forgo walls. Has the result been something like a hammer striking jelly in freefall?

I admit this is more of a provocation, than a question. But these thoughts encouraged me to ask [Jim Marten](#), the current President of *SHCY* and new Editor of *JHCY*, about how he understands the challenges of the temporal, geographic, and methodological diversity of childhood history.

Jim described his own path toward the study of childhood as something that was ancillary to his primary training as an history of the American Civil War. We discussed how this part of his background is aligned with general features of the emergence of childhood history. Our conversation moved into an extended discussion of how he approaches his duties as editor. He emphasized that he wants the journal to advance historically significant work upon childhood and youth. Pursuing this priority is complicated in an interdisciplinary area that attempts to cast wide methodological, geographic, and chronological nets. Yet, this vast scope is part of why the journal and the conferences are bolstered by strong participation from a diverse range of scholars.



Toward the conclusion of the conversation Jim extolled the intensity of the intellectual exchange at the conferences. However, he expressed two concerns: (1) will we maintain an adequate number of dues paying members and (2) can we develop a group of new leaders for the society over the next decade? He suggested that *SHCY* may be having difficulty maintaining membership consistent with the numbers we field at conferences and on *H-Childhood*, because research in the field exists in-between and as an extension of so many diverse and distinct interests and topics. Childhood study remains a secondary identification. This makes it more difficult for *SHCY* to compete for paying members.

Interesting, isn't it? The development of a specialization in childhood history became possible because we made a concerted effort to collaborate across important boundaries; but, these boundaries have remained paramount and may inhibit the growth of the organizations that serve childhood history. I am not particularly troubled by this state of affairs. But, it may be useful for those studying childhood historically to try to understand it. Listen to our recorded conversation above.



Since 1986 **James Marten** has been a member of the faculty at Marquette University, where he teaches courses on children's history and the Civil War and for the last decade has served as department chair. He is author or editor of nearly twenty books, including *The Children's Civil War* (1998), a Choice Magazine notable academic book. He is current president of the Society for the History of Children and Youth, past president of the Society of Civil War Historians, and editor of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*.



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