CHC EPISODE 3: IRELAND: READING CHILDHOOD COMPARATIVELY

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

With the Irish Research Council and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, the Society for the History of Children and Youth provided support for a conference on the history of childhood in Ireland in June, 2014. The conference drew over fifty papers covering an impressive diversity of issues, and offered four thought-provoking plenary lectures. Listen above to a conversation about it and the development of the field of childhood history in Ireland with one of the organizers, Mary Hatfield – Ph.D. Candidate at Trinity College, Dublin.

Organizers of "Twenty Years A-Growing" from left to right: Sarah-Anne Buckley, Mary Hatfield, Marnie Hay, Riona Nic Congail, and Gaye Ashford (another member – Jutta Kruse – not shown).

To prepare for the conference, I surveyed 40 peer-reviewed articles and chapters on Irish childhood history published over the previous decade and delivered a review of the literature. This reading and the conference experience left me with a few comparative observations. It also affirmed for me the value of reading childhood history comparatively across national boundaries.

About ten years ago there was a sustained increase in publications on Irish childhood history. The trend seems to be increasing every year. These efforts are interdisciplinary and predominantly focused on modern Ireland – that is familiar in other national contexts. Two narratives organize current Irish literature: (1) studies that tell a story of structural and institutional deprivation and mistreatment of Irish children since the mid-19th-century; (2) studies that explore the relationships between childhood, youth, and the politics of nationalism in late-19th- and 20th-century Ireland.[1] I suspect continuing efforts will extend beyond these dominant concerns with deprivation and nationalism, yet (given my limited examination) there is room for more work on youth consumer culture & sports, educational institutions (outside of residential schools), the history of scientific ideas about childhood (outside of paediatrics).

This said, the current emphases in Irish historiography prepare fertile ground for considering important comparative issues. My attention was drawn to a familiar tension between modern ideals of childhood and the existence of workhouses (or poorhouses) in the mid/late 19th-century. Influenced by ideas about childhood conditioning and innocence, like other elites, many Irish leaders feared workhouses would "pauperize" children through association with the worst kind of adults. At the same time, Irish authorities held the prejudice that ordinary Irish homes were unfit to raise children by middle-class standards. Neither the family as it was, nor institutions as they had been previously built, were adequate. This dilemma (common in other nations) created the framework for a vast overhaul of childhood policy in the late-19th- and 20th-century.[2]

While the Irish shared key elements of a larger childhood-saving concern, their discourse developed unique features. There was a much stronger fear that practices such as foster care or "friendly

visiting" (later professional casework) would be used to proselytize across confessional boundaries. Since, the Church exercised more influence over governmental policy and held a unique position within identity politics, the balance tipped decidedly toward building large Church-run institutions for children.[3] As it is still said in Ireland, the poor or troublesome child was "sent to the laundries" – residential schools typically run by nuns. The rise of juvenile courts, legal adoption, foster care, the rationalization of "outdoor" relief, the professionalization of social work, and a multitude of structures that advanced middle-class childhood discourse over the past 150 years in North America and Great Britain did not have the same presence or timing in Irish childhood history.

You might say that the relationship between the child and the modern state captured by the Anglo-American doctrine of "the best interests of the child," has been particularly contentious, and perhaps incongruous with primary features of Irish culture.[4] This seems consistent with Caroline Skehill's 2004 historical study of social work in Ireland, but the sources and consequences of this divergence are not obvious to me.[5] If Ireland was different, was it due to an ability to maintain elements of master-servant childhood? What is the Pauline exhortation? Husband-wife, parent-child, master-servant are "one-flesh."[6] It is more than tantalizing to contrast this ancient doctrine with Ellen Key's 1909 claim that "the century of the child" could only begin when humanity "abandoned the Christian point of view" and embraced the "holiness of generation."[7]

Before going too far down this road, we might recall one of Ian Miller's excellent points in his 2013 study of 19th-century Irish industrial schools and reformatories. Miller urged us to resist condemnation of the past or the propensity to see Irish childhood history only for what it lacked.[8] If the Irish industrial schools and reformatories (founded upon confessional division and a jaundice view of family life) inflicted harm, it would not follow that other national histories offer rational policy alternatives, harmless "best-practices." Taking this a step further, one might reconsider the narrative of trauma and survival fashioned to such popularity by the hyperbolic Frank McCourt. If taken as an axiom, the idea that nothing is so miserably heroic as Irish Catholic childhood forecloses other ways of reading the history of Irish childhood.[9]

When considering the lessons of childhood practices in Ireland, historians would do well to reflect on the prefiguring potential of the narrative of childhood trauma and survival. It has certainly framed the histories of childhood policy in other, purportedly more "modernized," countries: Bernardo's global farming out of "Home Children" from England to Australia and Canada; Charles Loring Brace's orphan trains from U.S. eastern cities to the western states.[10] Canada constructed a large residential school project to assimilate First Nation children in institutions run by the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, paid for by the Federal Government. The Canadian assault upon indigenous culture, its humiliation and violence has been called "cultural genocide" recently. These projects, apologized for today, were once proudly advanced as means to human progress.[11]

A comparative perspective might call into question the idea that if only Irish childhood practices had caught-up sooner, all would have been better (or at least less miserable). So many practices advanced earlier and more thoroughly outside of Ireland have come under critical review and debate. These include the professional investigation of the poor, compulsory standardized education, the removal of children and youth from paid work, not to mention the massive pharmacological network framing the treatment of North American children and youth today.[12]

It seems to me that the medicalization of childhood policy, what André Turmel called "developmental thinking as a cognitive form," was later and less comprehensively instituted in Ireland.[13] Taking a comparative view, it is difficult to read this as simply a blessing or a curse, but it is clearly a significant point for analysis. The difference might have been related to what Robbie Gilligan reasonably names Ireland's history as a "reluctant state."[14] Yet – here again – a comparative view complicates the matter. If we call Ireland a "reluctant state" (defining it by what it lacked), are we saying that modern childhood policy gains its unifying features by the triumph of a medical model? Do modern child-state relations have this sort of global essence? Or, might there be multiple reluctances among us? Might it be that states are apt to do many different things? If they have purposes at all, might these be temporary, contingent, protean, and divergent?

These questions are asked without denying that historians possess reasonably compelling ways to position the child-state relationship in particular places and times. It compresses too much, but we might say that in America, a reluctant state developed from late-18th-century Republican motherhood and the idea that insecurity and competition are necessary for developing manhood. These threads became aligned against church-state monopolies, but in the 20th-century they formed around certain bio-political techniques.[15] The "reluctant" state in Ireland seems to have emerged from the growing monopoly of Church institutions in the 19th-century with a complex connection with Irish nationalist identity and developed different (perhaps less subtle and less effective) disciplinary regimes. Juxtaposing two quite divergent "reluctant" states should disrupt the notion that the child-state relation moves toward the realization of an essential form; the idea of progress (or decline) may serve reformers better than historians.

Taken to its logical conclusion, this genealogical reading of the past may move categories, cast doubts upon assumptions, and put us in a position of perpetual critique.[16] Maybe it leaves us with nothing better than history and comparison, and calls us to read about childhood outside of our most familiar frameworks of time and place. To do so remains a laborious and risky thing. We are usually historians of a time, a place, a culture, before we are historians of childhood. Boundaries are not easily discarded, even if we sense that childhood is a discourse passing and shifting between eras – traversing state structures, and that it might be illuminated best upon a wide historical landscape.

Notes

[1] This essay will focus on the first of these two lines of inquiry. In the literature on nationalism and identity, many articles documented the institutional histories of youth voluntary associations. A fine example is Marnie Hay, "The Foundation and Development of *Na Fianna Éireann*, 1909-16," *Irish Historical Studies* v. 36, n. 141 (May 2008): 53-71. Others take a cultural studies approach, such as Ríona Nic Congáil, "Young Ireland and The Nation: Nationalist Children's Culture in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Éire-Ireland* v. 46 (Fall/Winter 2011): 37-62.

[2] For a concise overview of part of this period with a useful bibliography see, Lindsey Earner-Byrne, "Reinforcing the family: The role of gender, morality and sexuality in Irish welfare policy, 1922-1944," *The History of the Family* v. 13 (2008): 360-369.

[3] Virginia Crossman, "Cribbed, Contained, and Confined?: The Care of Children under the Irish Poor Law, 1850-1920," *Éire-Ireland v. 44 (Spring/Summer 2009): 37-61.*

[4] This is a complex issue. See Moira J. Maguire and Séamas Ó Cinnéide, "'A Good Beating Never Hurt Anyone': The Punishment and Abuse of Children in Twentieth Century Ireland," *Journal of Social History* v. 38, no. 3 (2005): 335-352; Sarah-Anne Buckley, "Child neglect, poverty and class: the NSPCC in Ireland, 1889-1939 – a case study," *Saothar: Journal of the Irish Labour History Society* (2008): 57-69; Maria Luddy, "The early years of the NSPCC in Ireland," *Eire-Ireland* v. 44 (Spring/Summer 2009): 62-90; Mary E. Daly, "The primary and natural educator? The role of parents in the education of their children in independent Ireland," *Éire-Ireland v. 44 (Spring/Summer 2009): 194-217.*

[5] Caroline Skehill, *History of the Present Child Protection and Welfare Social Work in Ireland* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

[6] See Patrick Joseph Ryan, *Master-Servant Childhood: a history of the idea of childhood in medieval English culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2013).

[7] Ellen Key, *The Century of the Child* (New York: Putnam, 1909): 3.

[8] Ian Miller, "Constructing Moral Hospitals: Childhood Health in Irish Reformatories and Industrial Schools, c. 1851-1890," in *Growing Pains: Childhood Illness in Irish History, 1750-1950* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2013): 108.

[9] The narrative of trauma and survival is highlighted on the first page and the jacket cover of *Angela's Ashes.* Given in the authorial voice of the adult just prior to taking the child's point of view, McCourt tells us that when he looks back on his "…childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood." Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes: a memoir* (New York: Scribner, 1996).

[10] Roy A. Parker, *Uprooted: the shipment of poor children to Canada, 1867-1917* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2008); Alan Gill, *Orphans of the Empire: the shocking story of child migration to Australia* (Alexandra: Vintage Australia,

1997); Philip Bean and Joy Melville, *Lost Children of the Empire: the untold story of Britain's child migrants* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

11 On the Canadian aboriginal residential schools see Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal: surviving the Indian residential school* (Vancouver: Tillacum, 1988). See also this 1955 CBC news release.

12 Ansgar Allen, *Benign Violence: Education in and beyond the Age of Reason* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Michael Bourdillon *et al* eds., *The Rights and Wrongs of Children's Work* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Louise Armstrong, *And They Call It Help: the Psychiatric Policing of America's Children* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1993).

13 This is a general observation of my own, rather than a point of a particular study. The "medicalization of childhood" refers to an approach toward the lives of young people including policies, diagnostic tools and language, treatments systems, and more. For example, see Tom Feeney, "Church, State and Family: The Advent of Child Guidance in Independent Ireland," *Social History of Medicine* v. 25, no. 4 (2012): 848-863.

14 Robbie Gilligan, "The 'Public Child' and the Reluctant State?" *Eire-Ireland* v. 44 (Spring/Summer 2009): 265-290.

15 The classic treatment of the establishment of bio-political techniques in the British and American situation is found in Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: the shaping of the private self* (London: Routledge, 1989).

16 See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* edited by D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977): 139-164; and Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader* edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984): 32-50.

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Patrick Ryan's Interview with her is available online at http://shcyhome.org/wp-content/uploads/CHC_Ep3_Audio_Hatfield_R.mp3

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