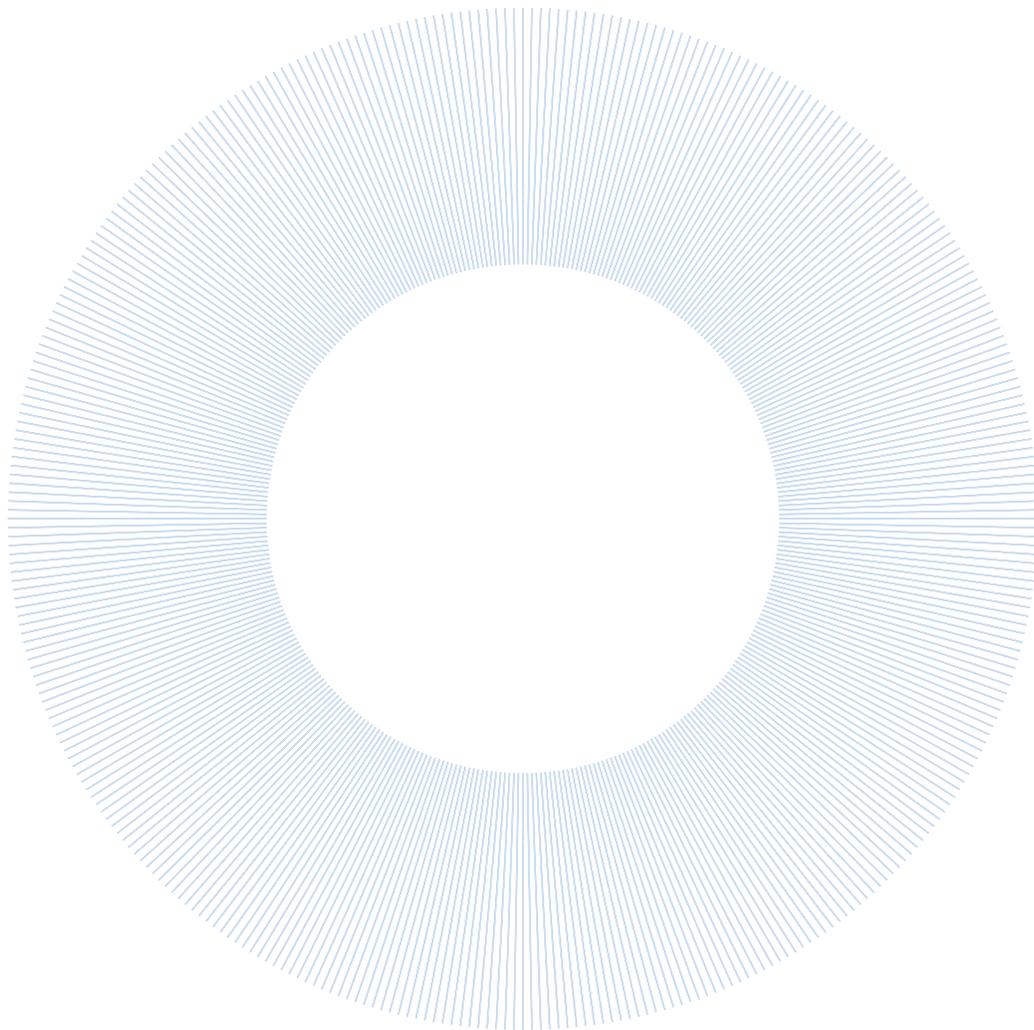# Childmade Evidence: A Reflection on the Sources Used to Historicise Childhood

Matthew Daniel Eddy

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CHILDMADE EVIDENCE: A REFLECTION ON THE SOURCES USED TO HISTORICISE CHILDHOOD

What kinds of evidence can we use to historicise childhood? In this essay I answer this question by summarising and then problematising the kinds of books, art and objects used by scholars since the eighteenth century to understand the lives of children. One of the points that I wish to underscore is that a profound evidentiary shift has occurred in recent decades. The shift, I suggest, is motivated by a rising scholarly interest in childmade evidence, that is, objects definitively used and made by children on an everyday basis. When viewed in light of a child's historical context, such evidence can be used to gain insight into the developmental foundations of the modern world.

Henriette Browne, *A Greek Captive*, 1863, Tate Modern. Photo © Tate, Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND.

Evidence and Childhood

Children see the world differently from adults. As any parent or teacher can attest, they draw valid connections between topics that adults have learned to separate. They learn things from lessons that educators never intended and they frequently make logical inferences that defy the conventional boundaries of what is supposed to be rational. The wisdom of children has long been recognised within modern culture as being a litmus test that can be used to

examine the boundaries of how adults think and communicate. Indeed, children's observations are humorously enjoyed in everyday conversation and in social media, a point underscored in a recent Facebook meme that I read:

TEACHER: Donald, what is the chemical formula for water?
DONALD: H I J K L M N O
TEACHER: What are you talking about?
DONALD: Yesterday you said it's H to O.

The humour of this meme caught my attention because it addresses the representation of scientific information, one of my longstanding research interests. Over the past decade I have written much about the history of this topic. But how, you might ask, is this interest in the history of modern science relevant to the ways in which children learned in the past? The short answer is that one of the conclusions I have drawn from my research on seventeenth- to twentieth-century science is that scientists have to learn how to *do* science. The form of learning is often contingent. It is based on a scientist's developmental context. Crucially, it affects how scientists see themselves and how they see the world.

My contingent realisation was of course not new. In the twentieth century the philosopher Thomas Kuhn and anthropologist Bruno Latour emphasised that if one wanted to understand the aims and objectives of science, then one needed to understand scientists. They also stressed that if one wanted to understand scientists, then one had to understand how they had been trained to do science (Kuhn, 1970; Latour, 1987). In recent decades historians of science have advanced these insights by studying the place of science in schools and universities with a view to understanding the kinds of training that occurred when scientists were young (te Heesen, 2002; Kohlstedt, 2010). Herein was the spark of my interest in evidence made by children. But, for reasons that I will soon explain, that interest grew into a more focused research programme on the kinds of manuscript tools that children used to make sense of the world in general and of science in particular.

The history of childhood is a popular topic at the moment. However, different disciplines use different kinds of evidence to pursue it. Over the past two centuries disciplines as diverse as English literature and economics have formed an understanding of the kinds of evidence that can be used to historicise the lives of children. This being the case, in the first half of this essay I wish to offer a typology of the kinds of evidence that have been used to construct the history of childhood for the past two centuries. Since computers have revolutionised the everyday world, I confine my focus to studies that have addressed the predigital world, as the evidentiary status of electronic media exceeds the historical focus of this paper. One of the points that I will underscore is that adults, not children, made the bulk of the evidence used in early studies of modern childhood.

Near the end of the twentieth century, historians began to ask different questions of childhood, particularly those who sought to understand children as historical actors who were capable of playing a proactive role in the ways in which they interacted with the world around them. These historians increasingly turned to the material evidence created by children. I treat this movement in the last half of my paper, where I explore the importance of material evidence to the history of childhood. Drawing from my recent research, I also discuss the centrality of the kinds of manuscript evidence created by children prior to the invention of steam printing during the nineteenth century.

Traditional Evidence

The traditional sources used by historians writing about pre-nineteenth-century childhood were primarily published texts. They were employed in many ways, but four reoccurring disciplinary strands have remained influential. I will treat these in turn with a view to explaining how the selection of traditional evidence reflects the interests of different disciplines.

Let us first turn to the evidence used to reconstruct childhood as a branch of the history of education. Historians writing in this vein tend to be interested in what might be called literate children, that is, boys and girls who were learning to read and write in institutional settings. The overarching questions that guide this approach are 'What was being taught?' and 'Who was doing the teaching?' To answer these questions educational historians usually turn to textbooks and pedagogical handbooks. Histories based on this kind of evidence explain what children were supposed to know and they reflect on why some pedagogues were perhaps more progressive than others. Emphasis is often given to the acquisition of literacy and numeracy. Notable authors on this topic include Ian Michael (1987), Tamara Plakins Thornton (1996) and E. Jennifer Monaghan (2005). Other studies of this nature seek to determine what subjects were taught in schools or to excavate the careers of notable teachers and pedagogues (Cohen, 1977; McCarthy, 2008).

A second strand of childhood evidence centres on what might be called the literary child, that is, children as represented by authors who frequently interacted with print culture. Historians working on this kind of child traditionally investigate the characterisation of children in literary texts like novels, poems and plays, or they work with sources commonly associated with print genres designed for children from the seventeenth century forward. Studies on these topics exhibit an underlying, but persistent, focus on evidence that speaks to the nature of authorship and, more recently, readership. Many have written on the topic, but the works of Peter Hunt (1994, 1995) and, more recently, Seth Lerer (2009) are perhaps the most well known. Drawing from interpretative tools provided by the history and theory of literature, such studies seek evidence that speaks to how authors composed children through the use of literary devices such as narrative, figures and metaphors. Questions commonly asked are 'Who wrote books for or about children?' and, relatedly, 'How were children's books written or distributed?' The bookish evidence gathered to answer these questions about the literary child, therefore, speaks to important themes such as the rise of the literary middle class and the commercialisation of childhood.

A third kind of evidence for childhood can be found in studies that address the artistic depiction of children. The origins of the framework used to identify and gather the evidence of the artistic child lie in art history, particularly the work of the French historian Philip Ariès who looked for paintings that spoke to the social and religious frameworks of early modern childhood (Ariès, 1973; originally published in 1960). Scholars working in this tradition are keen to investigate whether an artist's conception of children was similar to or different from that of other artists or with the place of children in society. This focus leads to questions like 'Who made images of children?' and 'How were children's images made?' The evidence for the artistic child is collected largely in relation to the analytic categories developed by art historians and theoreticians, particularly those who address the aesthetic, emblematic or iconographic aspects of children depicted in portraits or other similar genres of representation. Consequently, the media used to investigate the artistic child are usually paintings and, occasionally, prints, that is to say, two forms that were beholden, either financially or conceptually, to the patronage and power exercised by the upper class.

A fourth kind of childhood evidence is collected by historians interested in the many socio-economic factors that influenced a child's everyday life. This tradition of evidence reaches back to the Enlightenment with publications that addressed the effect of the poor laws on children (Burn, 1764). Even to this day, the questions that drive this kind of research are framed by long-standing units of analysis such as the household, poverty, mortality and income, which explains why studies on the socio-economic child are written by historians working in different fields such as the history of politics, economics, law and, more recently, gender. Examples of this kind of scholarship include the work of Eric Hopkins (1994) and Pamela Horn (1995). Frequent questions within this tradition are 'How were the lives of children tracked statistically?' and 'Why were children valued or ignored in institutions?' The evidence used to answer these questions is understandably broad and layered. The foundations of childhood are usually established with information provided by local or national reports issued by institutions such as the established church or the government. Evidence is then collected to test the generalised picture against the specific contexts inhabited by children. This kind of evidence is often drawn from parental diaries, household accounts, newspapers and household or parenting manuals.

Material Evidence

The foregoing categories of childhood evidence all share a striking feature that presents a noteworthy epistemological problem. That feature is the fact that just about every form of evidence used to reconstruct pre-nineteenth-century childhood was not actually created by children. As shown above, the bulk of evidence is taken from texts or images made by adults. As pointed out by a number of childhood historians, this presents a rather significant evidentiary quandary (Gubar, 2009; Grenby, 2011; Hilton and Shefrin, 2016). On the one hand, questions arise concerning the representative status of evidence generated by adults about children. On the other hand, the seemingly low survival rate of childmade evidence suggests that, for better or worse, the evidence provided by adults is the only realistic kind we have to use. But, upon reflection, does this dichotomy really exist? In other words, do we really lack evidence made by children? Are they completely silent?

While it is true that the questions asked by historians influence the kinds of evidence that they gather, it is also true that the presence or absence of any kind of historical evidence is inextricably linked to whether or not it was preserved in the first place. This point is particularly important for members of society like children. Like the historical traces generated by other people who possessed little institutional or financial power, childmade objects and texts were not deemed worthy of intentional preservation until Victorian times. Even today historical children's collections struggle to compete for private and state funding. This means that the widely persistent belief in the paucity of pre-nineteenth-century childmade evidence is in a certain sense warranted.

But, as any historian knows, evidence is a very tricky beast. It often appears in the most unexpected places. This is certainly true of childmade evidence, that is, evidence that was definitely made or used by children. Put more plainly, one of the reasons that historians have struggled to find artefacts made or used by children is the fact that they have not actually been looking for them outside the usual sources cited by traditional histories of childhood. In recent decades, a rising number of innovative studies have shown that there is indeed an impressive variety of uncatalogued evidence waiting to be found in family archives, excavations, research libraries and state museums. Much of this evidence would be seen today as material culture, as objects with affordances with stories to tell about their makers and users. Taking inspiration from recent studies written by archaeologists and anthropologists on the relationship between

cognition and material culture (Malafouris, 2013), a growing corpus of self-made evidence has emerged in the form of childmade samplers, wedding linen (a *trousseau*), marginalia, homemade toys, doll clothes, writing tools, notebooks and drawings (Stabile, 2004; Baxter, 2005; Flower, 2016; Martin, 2017). In short, material evidence definitively made by children can be found if one decides it is worth finding.

Scholars looking for childmade evidence tend to be interested in the day-to-day life of children. They find inspiration in asking 'What were children really doing?' On the face of it, this question seems rather bald and perhaps even naive. Of course we know what children were doing. They were playing. They were running. They were going to school. Yet, though these answers seem obvious, the traditional evidence that scholars use to investigate these activities runs into the same problem: adults made the bulk of it. Upon examination, much of the evidence used to construct the literate, literary, artistic and socio-economic history of children is based on sources that speak to what children were *supposed* to be doing and not necessarily what there were actually doing.

Did a child really grasp the entire content of every textbook used in the classroom? Did they actually like the characters in the stories they read? Did they readily identify with the children depicted in portraits of aristocrats? And did they even know what the poor laws were? The answer is maybe, but probably not. Historians working with childmade evidence are constantly amazed at how the skills and knowledge of children challenge the broad-brush assumptions that have long guided the conceptualisation of childhood. It is for this reason that questions about what children were really doing become important, because they transform every child into a dynamic actor, that is, into a person capable of doing a variety of things – things that elevate children into significant historical agents who made meaningful decisions and choices.

Manuscript Evidence

Perhaps the largest cache of extant material evidence exists in the form of the inscriptions written, drawn or scribbled by children. This manuscript evidence is fundamentally graphic in the sense communicated by the Greek verb 'grapho', which refers to all acts of inscribing, and not solely to the act of writing. Childmade manuscripts came in many forms prior to the nineteenth century, including diaries, commonplace books, letters, exercise books, manuscript textbooks, poetry books, sketch books, lecture notes, as well as paper slips, paper-cuttings and the marginalia of printed books. Such inscriptions are, in the words of the childhood historian Anthony Fletcher, personal testimony, artefacts that speak to the experiences of children 'in their own words' (Fletcher, 2008, p. 283).

Put another way, the graphic child was an interactive performer who created manuscripts through copying and composing lines on the page. Thus, in addition to shedding light on the personal experiences of children, the manuscript evidence of childhood speaks to a much larger world in which children were learning the very skills and techniques that underpinned the creation, organisation and dissemination of knowledge during the period traditionally associated with the modern world. Since writing and drawing were acquired early in life, the graphic child was also the learning child whose psychological development was inextricably linked to inscription.

The manuscript evidence provided by children's notebooks and ephemera provides great insight into what children were actually learning and what they would have liked to learn. The 1810 diary of the eight-year-old Marjory Fleming, for example, reveals that she spent much of her time thinking about children's stories and on several occasions she even voiced an interest in learning

geometry (Fleming, 1934). Notably, many of the stories that impressed her have received hardly any attention by historians. Likewise, though Fleming's work is arguably the most well-known diary written by an early nineteenth-century British child, no significant research has been done to connect her geometrical interests to the long-standing tradition of teaching Scottish girls mathematics through accounting and cyphering techniques (Eddy, 2016).

A plethora of these kinds of examples could be cited from the many childhood inscriptions that I have located over the years. The basic point, however, would be the same: the inscribing child generated evidence that complicates our current understanding of what it meant to be, indeed, a child writer. More generally, the evidence yields new connections that greatly expand our understanding of what children were doing and what they wanted to do. For example, our knowledge of what they were writing is effectively rewriting how we understand how they used their notebooks as paper tools that could be customised by filling them with different kinds of information. This elevates hitherto ignored acts of copying such as cyphering, commonplacing and note keeping into core modes of knowledge-formation that deserve serious attention (Howell, 2015).

In addition to re-orientating the way that we see the inscribing child, the evidence provided by children's notebooks and scribal ephemera point to a cornucopia of graphic skills. As the manuscripts of children repeatedly demonstrate, writing was not a monolithic skill. Indeed, it involved a host of techniques that allowed children to copy, compose, design and draw the page into a useful artefact that speaks to the material, visual and cognitive cultures that transformed every child into an active historical agent. At the most basic level children had to design graphically the pages of their letters and notebooks by drawing a graphite grid on every blank page. As they became older they used this grid to transform the written page into an easily accessible picture in which specific places denoted specific kinds of information. In other words, children were learning how to make and use the common headings and paragraphs of the handwritten page as visual affordances (Eddy, forthcoming).

Making graphic patterns was not something that came easily to some children. Indeed, the use of graphic design to manage information on paper required a host of manual, material and visual skills that could only be learned through trial and error. Perhaps one of the most revealing examples of self-commentary written by a designing child was penned by the teenager James Dunbar in his early eighteenth-century commonplace book. After his initial attempt to draw a table ended in failure, he wrote the following in one of the unusable columns that trailed off the page: 'I am angry that I left a blank here and wrote filthy Scribble Scribble on the side and that I did not contrive it better' (Eddy, 2013). Hence the designing child was also an emotional child, one who learned to negotiate anger through contriving the space of the page.

The graphic intelligence exhibited by the writing child was sometimes complemented by figural drawings. The extant evidence for such figures made outside elite settings occurs primarily in notebooks, where they serve as mnemonic devices cued to a narrative, handwritten text. Their main purpose was to serve as visual forms to which information could be attached and remembered. The child poet John Black, for example, drew simple sketches of the characters appearing in the scenes described in his poems (Black, 1797–8).

On the whole, particularly within sites of learning, the extant evidence suggests that children drew figures primarily in relation to practical topics relevant to science, medicine or mathematics, or they sewed figures of domestic or natural objects onto cloth samplers. In most cases, the figures were constructed with visual affordances such as simple contour lines and flat dimensions that made them easy to remember. Drawing, like writing and graphic design, was dependent upon

skills that had to be learned and upon the visual decisions being made by individual learners. The drawing child, therefore, was a visually pragmatic inscriber who operated in a graphic world that was notably different from the aesthetic or emblematic world of the artistic child.

Concluding Thoughts

Highlighting the role that children played in making and using material culture offers useful insights into how they learned to conceptualise knowledge. My interest in childmade evidence in particular stems from the fact that children need to be given a stronger voice by historians, mainly because their view of being a child is often different from what adults think children should be, a point that can be illustrated by another Facebook meme of a brief conversation between a teacher and a student:

TEACHER: Harold, what do you call a person who keeps talking when people are no longer interested?
HAROLD: A teacher.

It is my hope that further research with childmade artefacts can help excavate the experiences of children like Harold. Rather than being passive receivers of knowledge, children learned through making and using objects that lie waiting to be discovered. In following this path, they created valuable forms of evidence that shed insight into the developmental context that shaped the modern world.

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