

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF ENGLISH CHILDHOOD

1800 ~ 1914.

By James Walvin.

Pelican Books, 1982.
217 pp.

\$7.95

Anyone undertaking a social history of English childhood in the nineteenth century and recording that history in 200 pages is at best overly ambitious. James Walvin does attempt this and, whilst the result is necessarily simplistic and descriptive, it is well written, and does convey a picture of English childhood in the nineteenth century.

Indeed for those who want to validate perceptions regarding stereotypical English attitudes to sport, sex roles, public schools and street urchins they will be able to use this book to do just that.

Walvin explores the period under thirteen headings including Death and the Child, Pain and Punishment, Working, Playing, The Facts of Life, The Law. In his introduction he acknowledges that much of the substance of the book was initially delivered in lectures, and this factor is noticeable throughout the book. The chapters are not woven together. The advantage of this is that they can be read on their own for reference. The disadvantages are repetition of material and a major lack of integration.

The material in each of the chapters gives the reader an understanding of behaviour and/or attitudes to the issues being explored. The chapter on death and the child illustrates the omnipresence of death for the child at the time, and suggests the antecedents for today's attitude of the 'replacement' child for a sibling who died and the guilt placed on surviving children. However, it is left to the reader to develop these themes, as the author does not.

In the chapter on discipline the author quotes Givvon's experience (and one might wish he had applied a little of Givvon's own disciplined scholarship to his work!) This chapter is informative in showing the lack of rights of children. The author quotes Hannah More's ridicule of the possibility that such rights will eventually be extolled. This chapter can

only confirm the nineteenth century belief that to abuse children in the name of discipline is for their own good, and the child is owned by his/her parents. Anyone wishing to espouse the 'cultural lag' theory of child abuse could draw examples from here.

Those promoting organised sport could take quotations from the pundits quoted by Walvin. "Brave boys make brave men. Good soldiers, dauntless hunters, adventurous explorers, and good volunteers, all owe a great deal of the pastimes they enjoyed between school hours and in vacations. Indeed much of the greatness of our nation is to be attributed to the training which takes place in the playground." p. 80.

However, girls' games were not seen to possess the same ingredients for character building.

"And think not, ye Boys, who of mischief are full,

That we Girls are stupid, inactive and dull;

Though we're not in our pastimes and pleasure so rough,

We enjoy well the game which is called Blind-man's buff." p.87

Walvin covers the changes in educational philosophy of the day and the consequent effects on schools; the effect of the individual philanthropist and reformers, and the changes in legislation which gave children greater protection and more opportunities to participate in the society.

Walvin also addresses sexual behaviour and attitudes for the nineteenth century child and, whilst it is possible to gain some understanding of the behaviour of the poorer children, there are many omissions.

The training for sex typing (boys for work and/or leadership and girls for domesticity) can be identified across social classes. Unfortunately, Walvin leaves this task of interpretation and analysis to the reader.

The book relies on the more obvious sources for evidence and the author does not appear to have sought out additional sources.

A comprehensive bibliography, however, is supplied, and the reader can underkate his own pallous though of the issues.

Finally, one wonders if Walvin has his tongue in cheek somewhat (or an over dose of patriotism) — after describing the antecedents for British attitudes of superiority, he suggests in his conclusion that those people "who take comfort in seeing British children enjoying unparalleled levels of material well being and humane treatment" would find "a glance at the wider world salutary."

Margarita Frederico



OUR ELDERS.

By Muir Gray
and Gordon Wilcock

Oxford University Press 1981 p. 256 \$4.50

Although this is a book about the circumstances of old people in Britain it has much to commend itself to the Australian reader seeking insight into ageing as a set of processes. It is refreshingly free from jargon and is full of common sense information about the social context of ageing and those ills that are at present its inevitable accompaniment. Because of its specific British focus some of the material on the organisation and function of social services, pension levels etc. will be of marginal use to Australian readers. However they will be of interest to the student of comparative social policy.

Our Elders — the authors' preferred name for old people — is a nice exercise in whole person treatment not often encountered in the literature of gerontology. Old age and ageing are set in a biopsychosocial context. This enables the authors to present the ageing individual in the round unlike so many other writers who concentrate on either pathological processes or some other categorization reducing the individual to a one dimensional construct.

This is a wise book giving historical perspective to a generation of men and women who experienced the multiple convulsions of two world wars, the hardship of economic depression and the mysteries of the technological revolution.