

## 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.

In all of this we are reminded that having lived through such major social and economic changes older people have much to tell us of their reactions to and knowledge of social change. Our own capacity to cope with the next round of changes could well be positively influenced by our learning from 'our elders' about the nature of their coping mechanisms.

It is this identification with older people that perhaps represents the core of this useful book. By using the term 'our elders' the authors imply that when we confront older people we are essentially talking about a continuum that links all stages of the life cycle. If we seek to relegate the older members of our society to some discrete sub category with special needs and special services then we create a separation process that ultimately leads to stigmatisation, isolation and despair. By identifying older people as ourselves grown old we place ourselves as well as them on a continuum.

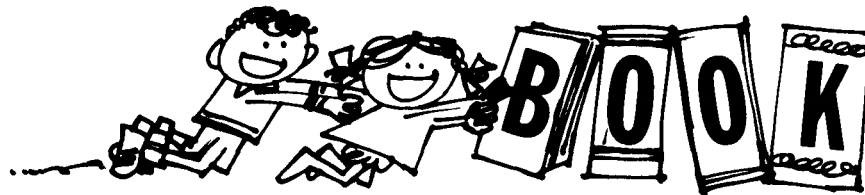
As the authors say:

"although older people have a right to set their own standards there is little to suggest that they are different from young people, that they would not enjoy better living conditions and a higher income if it were possible to attain them, or that they should not be encouraged to strive for a better deal from society" p. 55.

For the reader in search of information there are good detailed chapters on the physical aspects of ageing, confusion, incontinence and the problems of communication and medication. Service providers will find many valuable examples of caring systems to ponder upon in measuring the effectiveness of their own programmes. A good example of this is the comment regarding whether or not people should be kept in bed.

"It is clear that bed is a bad place to be! This is particularly so, when one remembers that most people die in bed. It is for this reason that we attempt to limit the amount of time our elders have to spend in bed because of illness."

Overall, the authors approach their task in a realistic way. Since neither more money nor helpers will be available in the future they examine the question of older people in all its facets with regard to their special physical, emotional and social needs. They seek to awaken a deeper understanding and awareness among society in general and to find possible new ways of helping this growing population segment in all communities. They clearly have an awareness of the wide reader potential for this book in



that they translate each technical term into laymans language. This places Our Elders within the reach and comprehension of most readers who would benefit much from its perusal.

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## YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE SPEAK OUT.

Compiled by: S. Low,  
P. McPaul, M. O'Brien.

Published by New South Wales Association of Child Caring Agencies.  
(Copies obtainable — P.O. Box 2244, North Parramatta, New South Wales. 2151). 62 pages

Project Speakout was a camp held for children in New South Wales in 1979. One hundred secondary school children who were living in institutional care at that time met for a weekend and discussed the way they viewed the care provided to them. This publication is a record of the comments of what the children felt and believed.

The organisers of the Project hoped that the shared experience of life in care would help the children consider positive alternatives to any common difficulties discussed.

This publication is a refreshing change from the plethora of material written by professionals and for professionals working in the child care field.

It goes some small way to redress the balance. A description of the historical and legislative background of institutional care is presented but generally the authors have let the children speak for themselves

The children's comments are divided into subject areas to provide some harmony to the document. These subject areas appear to be most relevant to children who are experiencing institutional care. The topics range from broad areas such as "Coming into Care" and

"Families" to personal topics such as "Privacy" and "Who to talk to". Once again a concise introductory remark by the compilers of the report gives a background to the particular topic.

One section is devoted to Bill's story — a poignant story of the child's experience of separation from his mother, the memory he tried to retain of her and the lack of preparation he had for his numerous foster placements.

Another section is a play written and produced by a group of participant teenagers. It is a tongue in cheek presentation of foster parents applying for a child. The message of the play is to try to educate the general public about the feelings of children in care.

The material presented is a reflection of the way in which institutional care in New South Wales is experienced by the children. There may be some subtle variations to the experiences of institutional care in other states.

It may be helpful to point out that the use of foster care in New South Wales varies from other States. Commenting on the topic of "Foster Care" the compilers noted that many of the children who contributed to the document had experienced foster care, some several times, and some had spent most of their lives in foster care.

There was considerable evidence presented in the report which ran counter to the modern philosophy of foster care. Contact with families — certainly knowledge of them — would seem to be an integral part of a foster care programme. Yet most of the children at the camp had minimal or no contact with their families.

It is useful to keep this perspective in mind when reading the comments of the children.

The main body of this report deals with the individual, his feelings and emotions, and attitudes to various aspects of institutional care. It is a report about self respect and a person's sense of dignity.

The report illustrates clearly the phenomena that when a person's basic needs are processed according to a system, there develops a distinct lack of sense of individuality and even self respect in the individual.

There are many quotes from the