INTRODUCTION

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When Jean Drever looked back on her childhood in the Red River settlement in the 1850s and 60s, she remembered a time of playing and working with her mother and sisters, of daily prayers, of Aboriginal neighbours and servants, and of shopping at what was for a time the community’s only store. Drever’s childhood seemed without care or troubles; it was certainly quite different than children’s experiences today. And yet, then as now, Drever’s experiences were indelibly shaped by her gender and her father’s position in the community. They were also shaped by where she lived—in a small, isolated community and not one of the burgeoning colonial centres.

Children and childhood are often forgotten topics in our histories of British North America. This is rather odd, given that children were considered to be crucial elements in the development of the colonies. Married women were frequently urged to “be fruitful and multiply,” and newspapers regularly offered parents advice on how best to prepare their offspring to become productive and God-fearing adults. It was assumed that children were the ties that bound a husband and wife together irrevocably; they were an essential part of the colonial workforce, whether it was helping on the family farm, or at the family workshop or business; and of course, children represented society’s future.

What children thought of this attention is often difficult to discern. We know that children’s experiences in nineteenth-century British North America varied considerably depending on whether one was a boy or a girl; lived on a farm, in a labouring household, or in one of the “big” houses in the city; or whether one was white, Black, or Aboriginal. Childhood was also indelibly shaped by society’s changing expectations of its young residents; and children’s relationships with their parents were always a major factor in their lives. Although the ideal was a relationship was based on equal measure of respect and affection, few doubted that corporal punishment might be required, and accounts in local newspapers of children being beaten and abandoned illustrate that for some, this happened quite frequently.

In his classic study of childhood in Europe, Philippe Ariès noted that during this time, childhood was not a fixed category, and that there was often no clear distinction between being a child without responsibilities and being a working part of the household. (The category “teenager” did not yet exist.) The two primary determinants of the texture of childhood were gender and class. In many British North American households, particularly in the early years, “childhood” ended at about age seven or eight. After that, children moved from watching to working with their parents, older siblings, and neighbours. Boys followed their fathers into the fields, to their workbenches, or into the streets. Girls stayed with their mothers and helped to prepare meals, tend the garden, and clean and sew. By the time they were 14 or 15, children were for all intents and purposes adults in terms of the work that they could do and the responsibilities they assumed.

As communities matured and settlements moved beyond the frontier stage of development, colonial leaders began to emphasize the need for more formal education. Parents had always been expected to ensure that their children were self-disciplined, hard-working Christians. They had also been encouraged to teach their children to read, write, and cipher. Many families did not have the ability or the time to teach their children such fundamental skills and values, however. A few wealthy and influential colonists did send their sons away to school in the United States or Great Britain. Others, who could afford it, sent their children to private boys’ or girls’ academies or “seminaries” that began to appear...
in local centres. Early in colonial development, governments also began to support a few local grammar and common schools. By mid-century, Upper and Lower Canada—quickly followed by Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island—had legislated that all children would go to school and as historian Chad Gaffield has pointed out in his seminal article, by the time of Confederation, attending school had become one of the dominant themes of growing up in British North America. Certainly, attendance was erratic, as many households—both in rural and urban areas—continued to need child labour to sustain the family. Public schools nonetheless became the site where most children learned to read and write and were trained in those skills that were considered appropriate for their station in life. Girls took lessons in needlework, household management, and perhaps spinning and weaving; boys were taught a trade. Only children of the middle classes required a classical education and, even then, girls were never expected to learn Latin and Greek. Public schools also became an important vehicle for transmitting those social, cultural, and moral values that authorities and many parents assumed were essential to the colonies’ future well-being.

Faith in the power of education was clearly apparent among prominent families of the Western fur trade, among Black settlers in Upper Canada who arrived after 1820, and among a growing number of Aboriginal people who were determined to maintain their cultural integrity in the face of increasing white settlement. As Sylvia Van Kirk illustrates, Alexander Ross, an influential and relatively wealthy fur trader in the Red River settlement, assumed that, through education and appropriate parental guidance, his mixed-blood children—or at least his sons—would be accepted as British subjects, equal to their neighbours and associates. But in the West, as in the more settled colonies of British America, even the best education did not trump race or gender. Indeed, a child’s race or class frequently had a direct impact on his or her opportunities for a formal education. In Upper Canada, Black families often faced fierce resistance from white neighbours when they tried to enroll their children in a local school. In some cases, a second schoolhouse was built to accommodate those who were deemed “unsuitable” for a “regular” British American classroom. In a few communities, Black children were unable to attend school at all. Schools established by missionaries in Aboriginal communities offered their pupils instruction only in those subjects that would promote their assimilation into white society. Boys learned a trade or how to farm; girls learned to sew and keep house. And despite the premium middle-class colonists placed on formal education, Martin Butler, the youngest of 11 children of working-class parents in New Brunswick, did not stay in school long.

One of the difficulties in exploring childhood from the “inside” is that then, as now, young children did not and usually could not keep a diary or journal, and few diaries of older children have survived. For the most part, a child’s world is understood as it is filtered through the lens of parental and social concerns and advice, school reports, and adult reminiscences. The public record—inspectors’ reports of schools, for example—does tell us a great deal about social expectations of childhood and the values that authorities wanted to instill in children but little about what children thought or actually experienced. The letters and diaries of parents—which proudly chronicle their children’s triumphs or bemoan their children’s shortcomings—are very much an “outside” view of childhood. One source that comes closer to an “inside” view are adult reminiscences. But it is important to remember that reminiscences are memories of past events. They are shaped by the intended audience and what the author assumes would be of interest or importance to them. The very process of organizing and constructing the story adds another filter between the experiences of childhood and what is now considered important. However, with careful attention to detail
and an awareness of the limitations of the various sources, it is possible to reconstruct at least a partial view of a child’s world.

QUESTIONS

1. One of the purposes of formal education was to ensure the child’s “success” in the future. What, for Alexander Ross and James Padfield (the school superintendent) were the elements of a good education and how did these differ, depending on a child’s class, gender, and the expectations of parents or government authorities?

2. Sylvia Van Kirk concludes that James Ross had a “crisis of identity.” What was at the heart of this crisis?

3. We learn of both Jean Drever’s and Martin Butler’s childhood through accounts written when they were adults. How do you think their respective audiences influenced what they wrote about, and how might this influence historians’ use of reminiscences as a “reliable” source of the author’s childhood experiences?

4. What did Martin Butler mean by “work-play”? How was his experience of childhood different from that of his sisters, or Jean Drever?

5. What impact did birth order have on the rhythms of childhood for James Ross, Jean Drever, and Martin Butler?

6. How and why are the accounts of Joshua Fraser and James Padfield about the state of schools in nineteenth-century Upper Canada so different? Using all the readings and documents in this module, how would you describe “schools days” in British North America during this time?

WORKS CITED/FURTHER READING


