Introduction

James Marten

There were many childhoods in colonial America. Race and ethnicity, region and religion, and economic and social distinctions shaped a wide variety of material conditions and styles of childrearing. As in so many other fields of colonial history, New England has dominated the literature on the history of childhood, at least partly because her early residents documented their lives so well. Yet historians have recently begun to expand beyond the rocky soil of New England to other regions in the New World.

Indeed, in *Huck’s Raft*, his recent synthesis of American children’s history, Steven Mintz argues that regional variations in the principles and experiences of childrearing were “a defining feature of colonial childhood.” His graceful survey offers telling glimpses of childhood in the major regions and among the many ethnicities of colonial America, including the ways in which those experiences and ideas changed between the early seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth century. Puritans were the first Westerners to think seriously about the place of children in society because their sons and daughters—and their sons and daughters—would bear the burden of preserving their “city on a hill.” Their close family relationships and, at least during the first generation or two of the typical New England town, tight community bonds, ensured that parents and children were rarely out of one another’s sight and never out of one another’s thoughts. The entire Puritan enterprise depended on their successful childrearing. That intensity emerges in this passage from a famous Puritan book for children, which describes a boy seemingly without hope for salvation:

There seemed to be little hopes of doing good upon him, for he was a very monster of wickedness, and a thousand times more miserable and vile by
his sin, than by his poverty. He was running to hell as fast as he could go, and was old in vice when he was but young in years: one scarcely hears of one so like the devil in his infancy, as was this poor child. What sin was there, that his age was capable of, which he did not commit? What by the corruption of his nature, and the abominable example of little beggar-boys, he was, indeed, arrived at a great pitch of impiety. He would call names, take God’s name in vain, curse, swear, and do all kinds of mischief; and as to any thing of God, he was worse than a heathen.2

This unblinking chronicle of a young child’s capacity for evil is the sort of thing that gives the Puritans a rather harsh reputation. It appeared in one of the first children’s books written in English, James Janeway’s *A Token for Children*, published in England in the 1670s and in America in 1700. Modern readers might gasp at the subject matter in a book purportedly for children, but it was popular in both England and the American colonies. The stories followed a simple formula: each told the tale of a dying child. Inspired to righteousness by the deaths of siblings, by natural piety, or by the enormity of their own sins, they sickened and died at peace with their maker, showing no fear and encouraging their mourners to live Godly lives.

Not surprisingly, then, the children of colonial New England are commonly believed to have been so emotionally and psychologically repressed, so weighed down by the Protestant notion of original sin and battered by high expectations and narrow assumptions that they were unable to live a “real” childhood. Indeed, the handful of surviving portraits of colonial children—including the painting on the cover of this book—represent children as straight-backed and dour, dressed in modest suits and gowns. In them, Puritan boys and girls appear as nothing but “miniature adults.” Moreover, given the sometimes high mortality rates for children and others, especially in the southern colonies, and the largely agricultural economy, which required hard work from every family member, there seemed to be very little in the way of a true childhood anywhere in colonial America.

Although there are kernels of truth in these and other stereotypes, they are exaggerations of the beliefs and experiences of a very small percentage of the population of colonial America. Historians have relieved the Puritans of some of the worst stereotypes (they were hardly the cold, emotionless parents of legend), but Mintz does point out that New Englanders created childhoods that were much different from those of children living in the South. Early in the colonial period, the extraordinary threats to the health of children and adults in Virginia and Maryland created a fluid,
confusing situation of orphaned children, combined families, and underage property owners. As the southern economy developed and the mortality rate declined, children and youth in the planter class came to enjoy relative leisure and far less pressure to sustain their parents’ religious values. Nevertheless, the priority placed on passing estates down through families placed a different kind of pressure, almost entirely economic, on southern planter children.

At the other end of the plantation spectrum, of course, were the slaves, whose children began working at the age of five or six—and entered the fields as full hands by the age of twelve—and suffered alarming mortality rates throughout the colonial period and into the nineteenth century. Those who survived grew older, but, in many ways, never “grew up,” since they enjoyed few of the rights of grown whites. Slave children, it probably goes without saying, endured more hardship and enjoyed less of an actual “childhood” than any other group of youngsters in colonial America. Yet Mintz and other historians firmly argue that they and their parents fought to form stable families characterized by love and grief; some slave children even found time to play.

Yet another group of children with unique experiences were the sons and daughters of American Indians, who, like Europeans, applied their unique values to childrearing. One of the most remarked upon aspects of Indian childhood—which Anglo-Americans commented upon whenever they encountered natives during two hundred years of “first contacts”—was its remarkable freedom from physical discipline, from physical labor, from any serious institutional restraints. Most Europeans blamed ignorance or laziness for the relatively light touch of Indian parents, but Native American childrearing practices purposefully sought to instill pride, independence, and courage, rather than timidity.

Many other cultures rose in colonial America—the Dutch in New Amsterdam, the Quakers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the Caribbean-born planters and slaves of the Carolinas, the indentured servants toiling on tobacco plantations in the Chesapeake, to name just a few—and each developed its own approaches to children and to childhood.

**Purpose and Scope of the Anthology**

The essays that follow, while bowing somewhat to historians’ traditional interest in New England, seek to delineate the diversity of colonial child-
hoods. But an even more important premise of this volume is that the histories of the American colonies and of American children can be better understood if they are considered together rather than separately. As a result, although each section confronts a set of concerns typically emphasized by historians in one field or the other, the authors combine the sensibilities of both groups.

Since the 1960s and 1970s race has been central to scholarship on colonial America, and part 1, “Race and Colonization,” owes a debt to such classics as Edmund Morgan’s *American Slavery, American Freedom* and to the dean of historians of Native Americans during the colonial period, James Axtell. The pieces on Mexico, New England, and Jamaica show how Western Europeans employed schools, churches, and slavery to overwhelm indigenous peoples and to control the “immigrants” stolen into slavery by reshaping the lives of Native American and African children. The essays in part 2, “Family and Society,” are guided by a few prominent themes in the historiography of childhood—sibling relationships, child abuse, and family networks—but their authors place those issues solidly in their colonial contexts (in the elite families of South Carolina, for instance, training children into adulthood took on forms that would have been familiar to the English gentry but were also quite distinctly “colonial”). Part 3, “Cares and Tribulations,” also reflects the concerns of children’s historians. The familiar stories of Pilgrims, Puritans, and Quakers—among the most studied colonial populations—are deepened with essays on children imperiled by the process of immigration in the 1620s, the continuing threats to children’s health in the mid-1700s, and the familial-religious, legal-religious, and familial ramifications of mental disability. Finally, part 4, “Becoming Americans,” unites two of the most distinctive issues raised by historians in the two fields: colonial historians’ investigation of the conditions and ideologies that encouraged British subjects to metamorphose into Americans; and children’s historians’ interest in the socialization of children into the communities in which they live. Placing the latter in the context of the former offers a fresh perspective on both.

**Historiographical Contexts**

Whatever their emphasis, all of the essays are firmly rooted in the historiographies of colonial America and of childhood. Up to the 1950s, the colonial historian Jack P. Greene recently declared, scholars “had no doubt”
about what they should write about: elections, wars, and revolutions; economic and social transformations; great personalities in politics, art, and culture. Indeed, John Demos, writing in 1970, just as the traditional historical topics were beginning to lose their dominance, claimed that his own study of families and communities “has not as yet won a wide following among working historians.” That would change over the next thirty years. The emergence of the “new history” in the 1960s, according to Greene, “reorder[ed] our priorities about the past,” convincing many historians that

the experiences of women, children, servants, slaves, and other neglected groups are quite as integral to a comprehensive understanding of the past as those of lawyers, lords, and ministers of state; that . . . popular culture is far more revealing than high culture; and that great events are important objects of study only when they open a window upon otherwise obscure aspects of more basic processes of social change.³

A 1993 essay by Joyce Appleby showed the extent of that historiographical change. Until after the Second World War, historians of early America were trapped by the necessities of explaining the uniqueness of America and of Americans, and of showing how the largely British colonists clinging precariously to the Atlantic sea coast challenged the most powerful empire on earth to build their own nation. Inspired by social scientists and European social historians, a new generation of American scholars overcame their fixation on nation building and began to explain how colonial America fit into international transformations; investigate the ways in which communities and families dealt with new religious, sexual, and economic ideas; and, inspired by the dramatic transformations of the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, take a fresh look at the colonial period through the roles of women and ethnic minorities. “Investing the typical conditions of everyday existence with an importance they had never known before,” wrote Appleby, “historians made society—its geographic setting, its enduring traditions, its productive and reproductive activities—the central focus of historical research.” In his sweeping and often humorous essay on the historiography of early America, Gordon S. Wood wrote that “there is scarcely an aspect of human behavior in early America that historians today do not write about—from divorce to dying, from the consumption of goods to child rearing.” Nevertheless, except for a few notable exceptions, the colonial period is relatively unexplored by
historians of American children, who have focused more on the last 150 years, especially the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{4}

Part of the problem may be that there was not just one definition of childhood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As John Demos has suggested, contemporary pictorial and written representations of the “ages of man” borrowed seasonal metaphors or assigned characteristics based on arbitrary ages unrelated to actual child development. Furthermore, the coming-of-age rituals of virtually all modern American children and youth—graduations, first jobs, etc.—were virtually meaningless in an overwhelmingly rural culture without a large number of social and cultural institutions.\textsuperscript{5}

The most difficult populations of children and youth to study during the colonial period—or any period in history, for that matter—are ethnic minorities. Some of these groups were, of course, “premodern” in the sense that they did not have the same traditions of education and literacy as Europeans. More important, however, was the fact that colonialization, and, in the case of Africans, enslavement, either destroyed the traditions and kinds of sources required by historians or rendered the conquered populations uninteresting to the conquering Europeans. In the case of colonial America, few documents and other historical evidence have survived to offer clues about the lives of Native American and African American youngsters, especially from their own points of view. European colonizers frequently commented on the Indians they encountered and the slaves they imported, but painfully few accounts by Native and African Americans have survived the colonial period. This is reflected in the paucity of articles and, especially, books on “minority” children in colonial America. A recent anthology suggests that the history of children in Latin America—where, of course, indigenous peoples were never a “minority”—has been even less investigated than in the rest of the Western hemisphere: “If the history of childhood in Europe and in North America is a late developer, the history and sociology of childhood in Latin America are truly in their infancy.” And, as in British North America, most of the work on Latin American children has focused on more recent times.\textsuperscript{6}

Attacking the problem from a different direction are historians of children and youth, who have also begun to apply the themes and methods of children’s history to early America. The historiography of children dates from the mid-twentieth century, when Phillipe Ariès’s \textit{Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life} caught the attention of social scientists and historians alike with its argument that Western society had barely
recognized children as a separate group until the early modern period. Although Ariès—an amateur historian whose work was first published in France—is more often cited than read, *Centuries of Childhood* was a catalyst for the modern study of childhood. Over the last several decades, historians have challenged Ariès’s methodology and conclusions but have also marked the publication of his book as the beginning of the modern study of childhood. And Ariès’s contention that childhood was not recognized as such until the early modern period resonates for historians of colonial children, who have often inquired about the extent to which their subjects enjoyed recognizable “childhoods.”

Children’s historians employ a wide range of approaches and interests, which are highlighted in three recent surveys. Mintz, for instance, sought to clear away several popular myths, including the notions that American children have enjoyed peculiarly carefree childhoods in stable, nurturing families, that American childhoods are not affected by class, and the conflicting ideas that American children have, over the generations, enjoyed irrefutable progress or inevitable decline. Like Mintz, Joseph E. Illick acknowledged that there were many “varieties of childhood”—he stressed ethnicity, class, and geography as the chief agents of that diversity—but the overriding purpose of his *American Childhoods* was to show how these factors shaped the ways in which children sought autonomy and their parents prepared them for it. Harvey J. Graff also suggested that American children have followed a number of “conflicting paths” shaped by ethnicity, economics, and gender, among other factors, but, in focusing on the process of growing up, he attempted to provide an analysis of “an integrated human developmental process.” More so than most historians, Graff emphasized the words of children themselves—or, more accurately, adult memories of childhood—and virtually ignored major historical events. Finally, in his quick survey of issues facing Western childhood from the Middle Ages through the first quarter of the twentieth century, Colin Heywood argued that children “must be seen as active in determining their own lives and the lives of those around them,” or, to use a term favored by social historians of late, that children have “agency” in shaping their own experiences and destinies. He also provided a handy list of topics concerning historians of children and youth—a “repertoire of themes,” he called it—that he set up as a series of dichotomies: depravity versus innocence, nature versus nurture, independence versus dependence, age versus gender. The historians whose essays appear in this anthology follow a number of the threads laid out by these historians.
It goes without saying that there have always been children, and that those children fill virtually identical biological roles in the societies in which they live. But a notion that has become almost universally accepted by historians of children and youth over the last generation, and one that is stressed in many of the essays that follow, is that, although the presence of children is, of course, a constant in all societies and cultures, “childhood” itself is a “construction,” a concept created by humans rather than a state of being governed by inevitable natural laws. In other words, people living in different times and places have accepted a bewildering variety of behaviors from and have projected myriad expectations onto the youngest members of their societies. Those assumptions have and are shaped by countless factors, but most historians have focused on race and ethnicity, class, religion, and gender. Heywood refers to childhood as “a variable of social analysis,” and this anthology seeks to explore how the colonial experience in the Americas led to particular constructions of childhood.

Rather than simply describing the lives of children and youth who happen to have lived in American colonies between the late sixteenth and late eighteenth centuries, *Children in Colonial America* addresses two questions. First, how did the colonial experience shape or even alter perceptions and assumptions about children and childhood? Second, how can research on the history of children reorient our knowledge and interpretations of colonial history? Some essays confront these questions only indirectly. Parnel Wickham’s piece on “Idiocy and the Construction of Competence,” for instance, deals with an issue that was confusing to Puritans in England and America alike. But a number of the essays provide bridges between these two fields of inquiry that strengthen both. By focusing on the children of Plymouth Plantation rather than the adults, for example, John Navin lends texture to our understanding of the tough choices and tougher conditions faced by the Pilgrims. Similarly, Audra Diptee’s examination of the young slaves trapped in Jamaica’s “colonial project” stretches our knowledge about eighteenth-century attitudes toward children and the ways those attitudes were adapted to match the blunt economy of the plantation system that was central to European mercantilism.

As Tobias Hecht wrote about Indian youngsters in Latin America, “children were a sort of ground zero for the colonial encounter, a point of
entry through which Europeans not only interpreted the nature of the indigenous societies but gained access to and sought to change them." As the essays in this volume show, it is not too great a leap to suggest that children were similarly central to the colonial experience throughout North America.10

The historiographies of children and of colonial America have, over the last generation or more, developed in often intersecting ways. Historians still write about traditional topics like the coming of the American Revolution, the Enlightenment, and Puritan theology, of course, but they also investigate the day-to-day lives of the peoples of early America. Although the shortage of documentation has often hindered research on colonial children, scholars have nevertheless begun to uncover the ways in which colonial childhoods reflected both European assumptions and "American" values.

The illustrations and primary documents intermingled with the essays complement and expand on the themes and arguments introduced in the essays. They are followed by a brief section of study questions that is inspired by the somewhat outdated but still provocative notion that colonial Americans thought of their children as "miniature adults." Finally, a brief historiographical essay and full bibliographic references for crucial secondary sources cited in the essays can be found in the "Suggested Readings."

NOTES

1. Mintz, Huck’s Raft, 41. In this essay and throughout the volume, only short citations will be provided for crucial secondary sources. Full citations can be found in the “Suggested Readings” section at the end of the book.


3. Greene, Interpreting Early America, 3, 4; Demos, A Little Commonwealth, xv.

7. Colin Heywood’s brief but wide-ranging survey offers a useful summary of historians’ reactions to Ariès. Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 12–15. For two brief summaries of the historiography of children, one written just as the field was emerging and another, after a generation of historians had explored countless aspects of children’s lives, see, Sommerville, “Bibliographic Note: Toward a History of Childhood and Youth,” and Cunningham, “Histories of Childhood.”