

Minor concerns: representations of children and childhood in British museums

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Abstract

This paper investigates the different ways that British museums have represented children and childhood. It examines the argument that children are under-represented in Britain's museum displays, and reviews different images and constructions of children and childhood observed in recent exhibitions. Evidence is also offered to contest the principle that all such exhibitions will generate a completely positive and nostalgic image of childhood. As children are a social group with relevance to all visitors, and childhood is often perceived as a common experience, it is important to understand such representations, so as to impart a voice to children in museums that speaks with as much consideration and balance as those extended to other minority social groups.

Key Words: Children, childhood, representation, museum, nostalgia

Introduction

Museums are inherently social institutions, created with the intent of collecting society's past to display to society's present and preserve for society's future. Claims for museums being social agents (i.e. having the ability to have an impact on society) are not new (e.g. Low 1942). Social agency is an area of museum work that has recently developed markedly in the context of portraying the 'hidden histories' of marginalized sections of society within museums concerned with social history (Shepherd 1994: 66). Hidden history refers to the pasts of certain groups, which have had an 'emergence into mainstream history: it also has an explicit message that these groups have lacked a history because society has been unwilling to see them as a separate group with particular rights' (Laurence 1996: 3). Notable in this movement has been the inclusion of women's history (including a museum dedicated entirely to women in Dallas), and of black and Asian histories in museums, as well as the establishment of a special interest group in the UK calling itself Women, Heritage and Museums (WHAM).

These developments are associated with a growing recognition that museums should deploy their authority to help the local community increase its understanding of other groups in society, and 'help to give substance, correction and reality to the often incomplete and distorted stories we hear about...history' (Gaither 1992: 58). It is often assumed that the best way for museums to do this is by representing all social minorities within its collections, although it is fair to say that expecting each and every institution to do so is politically and sociologically naïve (Ames 1994: 33). However, despite this increase in interest in minority groups and hidden histories, one distinct and important part of society with relevance to all visitors is frequently overlooked in such considerations: children.

The study which is presented in this paper is based on doctoral research which examined the representation of children and childhood in British museums. The research was informed by the two central questions: [1] How are children and childhood represented in British museums? [2] Why are they represented in this way? This paper will provide an overview of museum representations of children and childhood in Britain; it draws on both the extant literature and on fieldwork conducted in 2003-2004. The UK was selected as a promising location for this work because it is comparatively well endowed with childhood museums.¹ The research was, therefore, conducted on a sample of British museums – on museums with

childhood collections, social history, industrial/work history, archaeology, anthropology/ethnography, and general collections (collections comprising a mixture of two or more of the other categories). The selection of these topics enabled a focus on those collections where the material culture of children and childhood could be anticipated (i.e. such items may be found in social history collections for example, but not in natural history collections).

The research consisted of two elements: a questionnaire-based survey of museum curators and a programme of visits to museums and exhibitions (both permanent and temporary) exhibiting relevant material culture. Given that only small-scale and localized surveys had been carried out – and then only from the perspective of visitors² - there was a strong case for conducting a survey which would elicit the general ideas and opinions of the professionals who collect, interpret and exhibit material culture. The questionnaire was sent to 325 museum curators with the aim of making a broad assessment of collections, displays and attitudes in relation to representations of children and childhood in museums across Britain. The survey also assisted with identifying those museums that would be worth visiting at a later stage in the study. In total, 240 surveys were returned (all respondents who had not returned a questionnaire within two months were sent a second copy), giving a response rate of 74%.³

The museum visits were undertaken with the object of observing first hand how the theme of children/childhood was exhibited in museums. The museum sample was identified from previous research in this field, from the responses to the survey, and by searching appropriate websites for information about relevant forthcoming exhibitions.⁴ Notes and photographs were taken of the displays as a record, and interviews were conducted with a curator at each museum visited to gather further information. Relatively few museums display childhood material culture in sufficient amounts to warrant visiting and analyzing them, and just ten museums were identified within the year that data collection was undertaken.⁵ (Displays of childhood material culture seem to be more popular in toy/doll/teddy bear museums rather than in exhibitions about the children themselves.) Data were collected using a structured observational method with standardized record sheets, which served to ensure that the same material was gathered from all museums in the same way.

Thinking about children and childhood

Defining exactly what is meant by 'a child' is not easy. In the strict etymological sense, it is the age when a person cannot yet speak, from the Latin *in-fans*, 'not speaking' (Durkheim 1982: 146). It is a word used to describe a group in relation to the norm (adults), and which covers a large number of individuals whose abilities and level of dependence span a great range (Lucy 1994: 22). Biologically, we were all young once, and with the passage of time we will become old – but such a simple statement hides a much more complex set of ideas. There is no precise definition of 'child' or 'childhood'; the social significance of such terms changes depending on the context in which they are created and applied (Goldson 1997: 2). In contemporary capitalist society, we categorize human development into a number of stages (babyhood, childhood, youth, adulthood, old age), but this is an arbitrary process with no distinct boundaries between the groups, and indeed some people use simply the 'child' and 'adult' categories. In physical terms, it is easy to see there is a difference between a baby, a twelve year old, and a twenty year old, but the demarcation between such stages is not always clear, and each stage has its own social significance.

In legal terms, modern British society would consider a child to be a person aged under eighteen years, although this boundary stands at twenty-one in many other countries, including most parts of the USA. Other institutions may mark the end of childhood as being at ten, twelve, or fourteen years, while in the educational system, a person ceases to be a child when they leave compulsory education at sixteen. Historically, there has long been a link between the period of learning and childhood, and schooling has had an important influence on the concept of childhood (Cunningham 1995: 36). At the start of the twentieth century, the school leaving age in Britain was ten – this was raised to fourteen in 1918, fifteen in 1944 and sixteen in 1972 (Cannon 2001: 229). Today increasing numbers of individuals are going on to post-compulsory education in colleges and universities. Childhood, then, is arguably getting longer in this sense despite the increasing 'adultification' of children.

Another way of considering a child is in the biological sense, where children are considered to be those individuals between infancy and puberty; the exact chronological age in this definition becomes irrelevant, and rather it is the physical development of the person that counts. A child may also be someone who is not permitted a full involvement in society, who is not able to be independent yet, or who has not acquired psychological maturity; someone then in the liminal state between birth and full societal participation. More simply, the word 'child' may be used to refer to a person of any age in terms of being someone's offspring.

Therefore, the current Western usage of the word 'child' is problematic, as it does not discriminate between individuals at different stages of development (Sofaer Derevenski 1994: 8); it is instead a fluid term used at times interchangeably with others such as 'infant' or 'juvenile'. It has been suggested that the term was one used to marginalize children both socially and economically (Sofaer Derevenski 1994: 9), and the term may even have been deliberately invented and applied in order to press home to children that adulthood has to be attained. However, in any one society there should be a broad agreement about what a child is and when childhood ends – this is because people will have grown up in the same society and will have experienced similar levels of cultural socialization.⁶ For example, it should be widely agreed that adulthood starts at eighteen (or twenty-one), even though there is no a priori reason that adulthood should or should not start at this age. All this suggests that societies have ideological frameworks within which ages or life stages are understood, interpreted and given 'age appropriate' behaviours. Therefore, the creation and labelling of age categories such as 'child' is both arbitrary and culturally relative.

The associated concept of 'childhood' is equally problematic; childhood is far more than simply the state of being a child. Although it is something of which all adults have had direct experience, there is a strong tendency to see children and childhood as different from ourselves: the child is familiar to us and yet strange, he or she inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another (Jenks 1996: 3). As such a state is so obviously different from our own – and is largely associated with positive connotations – it is easy to see the appeal of children (and by extension of objects representing children) to adults. Indeed, it has been noted that, 'the drive to make the past come alive is unusually vigorous in museums of childhood, which have been presented as... offering each visitor a chance to relive their own particular childhood' (Jordanova 1989a: 26). 'Childhood', in the first place, refers to the temporary state of being 'a child'. However, given the difficulty of defining what a child is, then inevitably, problems arise in describing the state of being a child. Childhood has a tendency to be revered and romanticized by adults in our society, and it is often viewed with a sense of nostalgia, as it comprises our own fond memories of when we were children (James *et al.* 1998: 59). The word 'childhood' invokes certain images – those of innocence, playtime, fun, and freedom from responsibility – that adults tend to associate with their own past. However, not all children (both now and in the past) will have had such an existence, which begs the questions of whether all children can automatically be said to have had a childhood – and can a child only be a child if s/he has a 'childhood'? (Cunningham 1995: 1). It can therefore be seen that 'childhood' is a social construction and not a biologically determined period of life; its existence will vary depending on country, social class, time and gender. However, Western society still persists in seeing childhood as being biologically defined and thus universal (Kamp 2001: 3). Children's culture is appropriated by adults and turned into the commodity of 'childhood', in which the child's world becomes framed in an adult perspective. As such, childhood may be viewed as an institutionalised state imposed by older members of society on the young to help elders make sense of and cope with the next generation (Shepherd 1994: 66).

This issue is important, as being a child is something we all experience and, moreover, it is something that around 30 per cent of the world's population is currently experiencing according to the United Nations estimates for 1998 (Schwartzman 2001: 1). Such estimates are, of course, dependent on the definition of 'child' that is taken, though (in this case, under fifteen years of age). This becomes significant when it is considered that for museums to be popular with and relevant to their audience, they need to be something that their visitors can relate to and find meaningful. To the extent that people are conscious of their common experience of having been a child, the inclusion of children and childhood in museum displays could well provide such a link. Thematically, children seem almost always to be packaged up into specific

museums of childhood, despite the fact that 'children' and 'childhood' are not necessarily synonymous. Such displays reflect social constructions of 'childhood' as perceived by adults, as children are largely unable – or lack the opportunity – to represent themselves and their interests in museums. Therefore, it is important to understand children's own constructions, so as to impart a voice to children and so that museums themselves may speak with as much consideration and balance about children as other minority social groups. The representation of children and childhood in museums seems, however, to be in the hands of adults: as collectors, as academics, as interpreters and as curators.

Are children under represented in museum displays?

The body of literature on the representation of children and childhood in museums is relatively small, but one key theme that occurs repeatedly is the idea that there is an under-representation of children in museum displays. That is to say, despite the considerable proportion of people who may be classified as children, they are discussed relatively little in museums, and objects reflecting their lives are exhibited either not at all, or only as part of toy exhibitions – that is as displays of childhood objects rather than as displays about childhood or children. It has been argued (Shepherd 2001) that museums, by and large, still think of society as being composed only of adults and that this failure to grasp the importance of age stratification is associated with a lack of proper representation of children (and the elderly for that matter) within museum displays and collections. Indeed, Shepherd, in arguing that children and childhood are largely insignificant or invisible in museum exhibitions, has gone so far as to claim this omission as 'the last frontier' (Shepherd 2001: 1) in the social role of museums. Given the very positive connotations that can be associated with the images and material culture of children and childhood, it is perhaps surprising that children have been noted to be underrepresented or excluded in the general museum population both in Australia (Shepherd 2001) and the USA (Crosson 1988: 8). The absence of children from mainstream historical (Jenkinson 1988: 12) and archaeological (Sofaer Derevenski 1999: 7) narratives in the UK suggests such a pattern may also exist in Britain's museums. While 'children are hot property in today's museums',⁷ their importance is (for many museums) as a passive participants in school visits. As such, they tend to become mere fodder in the battle for visitor figures, or they are viewed pedagogically and didactically, as museums increasingly position themselves as mainstream educational institutions. However, despite their importance to museums, it can be argued that recent concern regarding the representation of social groups in terms of equity, empowerment and authenticity in museums has not been properly extended to children (Law 1994: 5).

This situation appears to have arisen for four reasons. First, there is the idea that children are materially invisible in the past, except for very recent periods. However, as works on the archaeology of children (e.g. Egan 2000, Kamp et al. 1999, Lillehammer 1989) are increasingly demonstrating, accessing the physical evidence of children in the past is in some cases possible. This is despite the fact that children usually have a lower impact on their environment than adults, and the apparent difficulty in recognizing archaeological deposits that may result from the activities of children in the past (Sofaer Derevenski 1994: 8). Secondly, unlike minority adult groups, children are largely unable (or at least, are considered to be largely unable) to represent themselves and their interests in museums. This is because children, although far more numerous than many other minority groups in society, are in an especially weak position because they are relegated to a status which does not allow them to represent their own interests. In being so confined to the state of 'childhood', children are seen in terms of play and trivial activities rather than as active people with their own thoughts, ideas, and opinions. Thirdly, there is the simple point that children may be regarded as being insignificant, perhaps not worthy of inclusion, or at least less important to include than other groups within the community. Finally, it is possible that children are thought of a mere sub-set of a cultural group, and hence are assumed to be included whenever an ethnic group, social class or any other section of society is represented (Shepherd 2001: 2).

However, on closer examination, it appears that British museums may be more inclusive of children and childhood than the literature suggests. When the curators surveyed for this research were asked about the contents of their collections, the results suggested that the

material culture of children and childhood was far better represented than might be expected based on these earlier observations. The questionnaire contained a basic definition of what was intended by 'children'⁸ to promote consistency in responses. The responses indicated that 95 per cent of respondents worked in museums with at least some objects in the collections that they considered to be related to children. While most museums surveyed did not appear to have a specific collection of childhood objects – this was more a diaspora of objects than concentrations in individual museums – this does suggest that objects that could potentially be used to illustrate the lives of children are found in some form in most museums, something that would not be expected if children were under-represented.

In addition to this, whilst 'museums of childhood are few in Australia today and have become steadily fewer over the past decade or so' (Shepherd 2001: 4), children and childhood as a theme in British museums has only increased in popularity over recent years. The three major museums of childhood in Britain are in Edinburgh (opened in 1955), Bethnal Green in London (designated a childhood museum in 1974) and The National Trust Museum of Childhood at Sudbury Hall, Derbyshire (opened in 1974). These institutions have continued to perform strongly, with the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood attracting a considerable 200,000 visitors in 2003 (a marked increase from the 175,000 it managed in 1997). Bethnal Green expects to further build its audience in future (Heywood 2003: 23-24). A fourth museum of childhood – the Highland Museum of Childhood in Strathpeffer, Ross-shire – was opened in 1992 and a new permanent childhood gallery opened in Abbey House Museum, Leeds, in 2001. In addition to this, childhood has become a popular and widespread choice of theme for temporary exhibitions, a move linked as much to the nostalgia associated with childhood as to the appearance of the themes of children and toys as part of the National Curriculum's history Key Stages 1 and 2, which makes childhood history exhibitions targets for school visits. Between summer 2003 and summer 2004, three major temporary exhibitions were produced by accredited museums alone on the theme of childhood (at the Silk Mill, Derby; Pontypool Museum, and the Royal Pump Rooms, Harrogate). Still more were being advertised as future attractions, or offered on allied themes such as schooldays or toys. While some of these displays may be about childhood objects rather than the children behind them, the trend of a declining popularity of childhood displays observed in Australia – which doubtless contributed to Shepherd's perception of an under-represented of childhood generally – is certainly not seen in Britain. Future work in this field may need to address international patterns of difference.

Children, childhood and nostalgia

There are two common ways of regarding museum displays about childhood: that they reflect modern images of childhood, or that they can be read as a history of childhood. In contemporary Western society, childhood is the most revered time of life, with the prevailing representation conceptualizing a world of innocence, joy, imagination and fantastic freedom (Goldson 1997: 1). This modern image often places children in a metaphorical walled garden, a state where the child can experience freedom and pleasure, but is at the same time protected from the harsh reality of the outside world, and is preserved as happily innocent of adult worries. Such an image appears most often as an older person's nostalgia for their own perfect childhood of the past, where negative experiences are conveniently airbrushed out of the picture. This is the image of a 'golden age' of childhood, before the popular perception of decline ushered in by modern society. Paradoxically, however, there exists a simultaneous tradition in literature and autobiography where childhood appears as a dark age, which is 'portrayed as a time of captivity, with cold or distant parents, bullying teachers and...brutal employers' (Samuel and Thompson 1990: 9). Such writers as Charles Dickens and Frank McCourt exemplify this tradition; here the walled garden appears to be more of a prison confining the child, limiting their experiences to a world of isolation, sadness and often poverty, which the reader can contrast with their own happier childhood. These two modern images, therefore, reflect the two popular discourses concerning the history of childhood – that past childhood becomes idealized when contrasted with present-day decline, or conversely, that the past was barbaric and exploitative and the present enlightened (Jordanova 1989b: 3).

In 1994, Brian Shepherd administered a survey to adult visitors at the Bethnal Green

Museum of Childhood, with the aim of gauging opinions about the displays in the museum. This questionnaire failed to elicit a single response that the museum concentrated on toys at the expense of other important aspects of children's lives. An almost leading question asking whether the respondent had expected the displays to reveal more about the domestic, educational or working aspects of children's lives produced a strong response that such themes would be better dealt with in another museum, and that the concentration on toys at Bethnal Green was entirely appropriate (Shepherd 1996: 261). The results of this survey suggest that in the minds of the visitors, a museum of childhood is synonymous with a toy museum. It also seems to imply that this museum's audience had a fixed and idealized image of childhood, an image in which the idea of childhood is removed from the world of daily living so that the child becomes isolated from adult reality in a land of comfort and toys. It therefore appears that adult visitors have clear ideas about what should be displayed in museums of childhood. This is perhaps to be expected given that it is adults who manufacture and distribute toys, who construct and perpetuate images of childhood, and who create the social, intellectual and emotional spaces that children are obliged to inhabit.

Toys, particularly icons of childhood such as rocking horses, teddy bears and dolls are widely used in museums of childhood; they are familiar, easily identified and have strong connotations of the early years of life. Such objects are often carried into adulthood as items of nostalgia for a period of life now passed. Objects are important constituents of nostalgia, as they are tangible and 'like a fly preserved in amber, they are a unilateral reminder of how things were and of how ourselves, our lives, and our personalities, have changed' (Chase and Shaw 1989: 9). A second requirement for nostalgia is that the present is in some sense deficient. Most dramatically, this may arise from a sense of national historical decline, but it can also work on a personal scale, as each adult carries with them the memory of an age when their experiences were different (Chase and Shaw 1989: 4). Childhood is poignantly absent from the sensibilities and mentality of the adult. The attendant concerns and responsibilities that accompany maturity, could encourage the present to be seen as deficient in comparison to childhood – especially as childhood can only be seen through the filter of adult memory. It is this nostalgic tendency that is a major contributor to the fixed and idealised images of childhood that adult visitors appear to construct. These images enter the museum as the cultural baggage and expectations that visitors use to bring meaning to the objects and texts in museum displays. Expectations of a museum of childhood are, then, very important in the minds of visitors. They influence both the meanings made (Shepherd 1996: 261) and the representations a museum produces – given the need to 'concord broadly' with the audience's view of society (Lidchi 1997: 202). Nostalgia can therefore be considered a regulatory influence on museums of childhood, even more so than in other types of museum.

The first publication on the theme of representation of children and childhood in museums was issued by the Social History Curators Group (SHCG) in their annual journal *Social History in Museums*, with a group of papers entitled *Social History in Wonderland* (1988). These papers were written by members of the special interest group who attended the SHCG annual study weekend of 1988 to discuss the issue; "the idea for the 1988 annual study weekend of the Social History Curators Group was prompted really by a meeting of WHAM [Women, Heritage and Museums] delegates in Dewsbury held to discuss 'perspectives on childhood'" (Frostick 1988: 3). Most of the contributing authors appeared dis-satisfied with the way that childhood was represented in museums at that point, dismissing them as being 'content with portraying the childhood of the Edwardian nursery, the innocence of the gingham dress and the sailor suit, the Meccano set, the teddy bear, the doll's pram' (Fleming 1988: 31). Museums were accused of displaying an unreal, one-sided history that was largely reliant on nostalgia, and the conclusion was reached that the prevailing representation of children/childhood in British museums was, at that moment, 'an inevitable middle class Edwardian nursery, amply filled with toys and dolls' (Frostick 1988: 3).

Research conducted in 1994 suggested that this was still the case, with displays reinforcing rather than questioning cosy and nostalgic images of childhood on most occasions (Law 1994: 45). By 2001, it was noted that although such imagery was still being widely used in museums, curators in some institutions 'will try to include some difficult or controversial issues' (Maultby 2001: 55-56), suggesting that a broader range of representations was being

introduced into British museums at this time. However, images of a nostalgic middle class childhood filled with expensive toys are still in use to represent children in the past. In 2004, for example, this construction of childhood was observed during the research visits to the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, the National Trust Museum of Childhood in Sudbury Hall, in Edinburgh Museum of Childhood and in the childhood museum within Judges' Lodgings in Lancaster, among the most prominent permanent childhood museum displays in Britain. While we hear a lot about children without childhoods, such displays are often the very opposite: they exhibit childhoods without children. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with this type of display, as long as it is made clear to visitors that not all Victorian and Edwardian children lived in cosy nurseries, and that not all children who had the privilege of such surroundings would have found it an entirely pleasant experience. Neither of these important points was mentioned in any of the museums displays or text panels, leaving only one reading to be taken from each situation: the nostalgic one. The representation of children and childhood that the Social History Curators Group was so critical of in 1988 therefore still exists despite indications that representations have been broadening over recent years; the idealised middle class childhood is still prominent in British museums.

But why is this imagery still so prevalent in British museums? The pervasive 'Edwardian nursery' image of childhood is perhaps quite straightforward to explain: it has been described as a 'soft option...there is nothing like a bit of childhood nostalgia to get the visitors cooing appreciatively' (White 1996: 22). In other words, this is perceived as the easiest image of childhood for museums to construct and for visitors to enjoy, flattering the preconceived notion of a rosy childhood past and playing on the visitor's own memories of happy experiences as children. This study's survey of curators indicated that manufactured toys were common within museum collections relating to children/childhood: 88% of respondents reported their museum as having them. Clothing (reported by 86% of respondents), baby and nursery items (74%), and books (69%) are also popular categories of object for museums to collect or for the public to donate. These objects almost unequivocally reflect positive, playful and happy memories of childhood; in the past, many toys and books would have been the preserve of wealthier households, giving them an inevitable sheen of middle class status and values. In regard to date, this research has also shown that the majority of material relating to children or childhood in museum collections dates to the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries (Roberts 2006: 164-168), which helps to explain the dominance of Victorian and Edwardian material in displays. Equally, curators can exert power/knowledge in controlling the discourses that museums produce as part of politics of display (Lidchi 1997: 185). For example, at Judges' Lodgings childhood museum and the National Trust Museum of Childhood at Sudbury Hall, nursery room sets reconstructions were displayed, each brimming with toys and the joyful ephemera of childhood. The interpretation of these rooms presented only the 'nice' version of history – luxurious play, cosseted by loving nannies – distanced from the lives of those children who found the experience lonely, harsh or unpleasant. However, what some museums seem to forget is that the nursery could easily stand for something else: the loneliness and isolation of a child shut away from the rest of the household. Equally, such a room could be used to highlight Victorian moral discipline, using triggers such as educational games and deportment chairs, for example. Such points were not raised in any museum text panel or display encountered during the research visits, despite being an equally valid interpretation of a nursery room set. The curators actively controlled the discourse, perhaps to present a more appealing image to visitors. Therefore, this representation is a direct result of the material culture collected, and indirectly influenced by curators opting for the most popular messages about childhood in displays.

Other representations of children and childhood

One notable exception to the trend for nostalgia in museum displays about childhood was a travelling exhibition curated by Tyne & Wear Museums in 1995 and entitled *A North East Childhood*. This exhibition avoided the 'Edwardian Nursery Syndrome' in trying to present more difficult issues such as working children and crime; it was to be a history of childhood in the region 'with the bad bits left in' (White 1996: 21). The display was intended to encompass both

adult constructions of childhood and views from children themselves, to make it both enjoyable yet thought provoking, but above all to emphasise the agency of children, depicting them as people in their own right and not just as victims of circumstance. It seems likely that several factors favoured the development of this project: [1] the commitment of David Fleming, who became head of Tyne & Wear Museums in 1996; [2] the idealism of 'social history curators [who] want to change the world with their exhibitions (White, 14 March 2003, *pers. comm.*)⁹; [3] the legacy of the Social History Curators Group articles, and [4] the political environment. The exhibition was well received, drawing widespread positive feedback and boosting visitor figures at the museums to which it toured, ultimately winning the British Telecom North of England Museums Award for Attracting New Audiences (White 1996: 23). The success of the exhibition suggests that visitors do indeed appreciate a more balanced and challenging view of childhood history easily as much as the nostalgic toy-box approach.

Two recurring images of childhood have been observed in British museums beside the nostalgic one. In direct opposition to the nostalgic portrayal of childhood is the image of the child as a victim, which stems from the idea of the past as being brutal and exploitative. From this perspective the child is a passive casualty of a corrupt and corrupting adult world that sees it as an incomplete person; a 'human becoming' rather than a 'human being'. In literature, we see this imagery clearly in the works of Dickens, for example, who returned obsessively to the humiliation of being sent to work in a blacking factory at age ten in his fictional accounts of the child-martyr (Samuel and Thompson 1990: 10). This representation is also a key component in the history of childhood. In the 1970s, a body of writings appeared that suggested the history of childhood was above all a history of progress, with children being mistreated in the past – establishing what became known as the 'black legend' theory of childhood. The three major works of this school of thought were *The History of Childhood* (De Mause 1974), *The Making of the Modern Family* (Shorter 1975) and *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (Stone 1977). De Mause was the strongest proponent of the 'black legend' view, going so far as to state,

the history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of childcare, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorised and sexually abused (De Mause 1974: 1).

Similarly, Shorter suggested that 'good mothering is an invention of modernization' (1975: 168) and that there was a 'traditional indifference' (1975: 169) displayed by mothers in regard to their children. Stone was less strident in his claims, but still believed that prior to the seventeenth century, 'they [children] were treated with the utmost severity' (1977: 115), citing the swaddling of infants, the dressing of young children in restrictive bodices and corsets, and the use of physical punishment both in the home and in school as evidence. Historical children were portrayed by these writers as victims of exploitative child labour, and as largely neglected by their parents, until a change in attitudes occurs and childhood was 'discovered' by modern society.

The popular image of the child-as-victim, of children without childhoods – although not so negatively portrayed as in the 'black legend' literature – was, for example, evident in the working child galleries of the National Trust Museum of Childhood which was visited in the course of this research. Here, the dark and cramped structure of the building (once used as the servants' wing of Sudbury Hall) was used to project popular images of nineteenth-century urban industrialization, with gloomy industrial landscapes painted on the walls and a focus on the roles of the child worker, such as chimney sweep, lace-maker and factory hand. This was not as prominent a representation as the 'Edwardian nursery' image, but was present across a range of museums as a reflection on this construction of childhood. These two main representations were usually exclusive, although they did overlap at Sudbury Hall, where the two representations followed one another in different sections of the museum, to present competing versions of childhood. It is perhaps more difficult for museums to represent the 'child as a victim' than it is for them to provide nostalgic images of childhood. This is partly because of difficulties that are associated with the survival or identification of objects related to children. As far as most work-

related material culture is concerned, children and adults would, in the past, have used the same objects – making it impossible to distinguish the age of the user – although there do remain a few exceptional objects that would have been predominantly used by children (such as newspaper delivery bags). Therefore, the ‘child as victim’ cannot be readily demonstrated by the objects a museum has in its collections. However, this construction of childhood is also embedded within today’s popular imagery of the nineteenth century, making it appealing to curators who wish to challenge or complement nursery scenes with a different perspective on the Victorian period. Sudbury Hall, for example, presents an image of childhood that most visitors will recognise and to which they will respond. Therefore, the representation of the ‘child as victim’ can sometimes owe less to the weight of evidence of material artefacts than to the aims of the museum staff and their goals for the exhibition.

However, it is possible to transcend the opposition between idealism and realism. Children could be represented as having more ordinary, working class childhoods, in a measured display that neither idealized nor victimised the child, but instead produced a more balanced construction of childhood. The possibilities of such an approach can be illustrated via the displays observed at the Highland Museum of Childhood. Here it was evident that the more positive aspects of childhood (toys, games, festivals) were balanced by the less attractive ones (poverty, poor nutrition, hard work) and although both wealthy and working class families were depicted, ultimately presenting a rounded view of childhood experience in this region, it was representations of working class families that dominated the displays. Although represented as mostly poor and often in bad health, these children were not portrayed as social victims. Any hardships they experienced were shown as being part of the life of a Highlander and, in a way, alluded to the positive attributes of these lives, such as the resilience, adaptability and hard working nature of the people represented. While the museum does acknowledge the importance of nostalgia in motivating the public to visit (Maxwell, 14 June 2004, *pers. comm.*),¹⁰ the displays did not play to it excessively and instead were more clearly focused on presenting a social history display. The ‘ordinary’ child was therefore represented in museum displays where an emphasis on local history was integral to the exhibition design; indeed, the Highland Museum of Childhood might be more accurately described as the Museum of Highland Childhood. The displays were aiming to present a specific, geographically bound childhood rather than a generic middle class childhood.. Given that an ‘ordinary’ working class childhood would have been the majority experience, then this is what is portrayed, despite limitations of material culture and a need to rely on other interpretive methods such as oral histories and reproductions of photographs.

A further interesting example of the ‘ordinary child’ is powerfully created at the Apprentice House in Quarry Bank Mill, Cheshire. Quarry Bank Mill is a historic site that is owned and interpreted by the National Trust, and together with its associated village of Styal, forms the best-preserved Georgian factory colony in the UK (Guy 1995: 1). The Apprentice House presents the lives of the working children at the Mill. This forms a crucial part of the interpretation of the site, as ‘until the 1840s, more than half the workforce was children’ (Robinson 1996: 26). As such, the Apprentice House ‘may justifiably be described as a museum of childhood’ (Shepherd 1994: 72). However, to say that it represents childhood experience may not be entirely accurate. This has been claimed to be so because the concept of childhood had not emerged historically at this point in time (Shepherd 2001: 4). But a more persuasive explanation may be that it is questionable whether the industrial circumstances and experiences of these nineteenth-century children can be suitably described by such a culturally loaded term as childhood.

The Apprentice House interpreted children’s lives by using a mixture of period furniture, reproductions and a handling collection of objects to reflect the living environment of the indentured children. This was supported by an interpretive programme of costumed guides to give visitors both cognitive and affective understandings of the experiences of the mill children in the early nineteenth century at Styal. The Apprentice House has broken new ground in the representation of children, because it has developed from a different conceptual base and has not been hindered by the lingering traditions of mainstream museums of childhood. The presentation of children’s lives in this building was comprehensive, and feedback would suggest that this is a very popular attraction with both child and adult visitors alike (Mayle, 27th December

2003, pers. comm.).¹¹This is an evocative experience and one that most visitors to Quarry Bank Mill will likely remember. The memory will be linked perhaps to surprise (even shock) rather than the nostalgia that many other museums aim for in their appeal to visitors.

It is interesting that all the room sets in the museums visited were, with the exception of babies, devoid of models of human figures. Where a family room or nursery was included, there was a tendency to place a baby in the accompanying crib. Perhaps this is linked to the expectations of visitors. Whilst we would not automatically expect to see an adult sitting at a table or a model schoolchild working at a desk, the empty cot is surely another matter entirely, being fraught with difficult symbolism. This may be due to the transitional nature of babyhood. Any person may use the table and there is always a new class of schoolchildren to occupy desks in a classroom, but a cot signifies that there is a baby in the home to fill it; the absence of a baby hints at the uncomfortable subject of infant mortality. This is indicative of the way that babies seem to be represented in museums. While some exhibitions will touch on the theme of infant mortality if they are aiming to challenge the nostalgic image of childhood, it appears to be too uncomfortable a subject for many to approach. The material culture of babyhood does not present so many of the problems associated with exhibiting childhood objects, as babies have a distinct and recognisable material world, very obviously different to that of adults and older children. This perhaps gives it more potential in terms of collecting and exhibiting a balanced image of babyhood in museums, but a reluctance to explore the darker side of experiences needs first to be overcome if we are to exploit this potential.

The survey and fieldwork for this study suggests that overall there is now a greater range of representations of children and childhood exhibited in British museums than was the case in the 1980s (although it should be remembered that this study examined a wider range of museums). More museums do seem to feel comfortable with including unpalatable and controversial elements of children's experience as Maultby (2001) suggested. Although the nostalgic imagery that first triggered these criticisms remains in some museums, there are now other permanent and temporary displays that challenge and contest such representations of childhood, although the effectiveness with which this is done does vary from museum to museum.

Conclusion

The representation of children and childhood in museums is a significant issue, just as much as the portrayal of other minority groups and arguably more so, since it concerns the one social group of which everyone has direct experience. Both children and adults can relate to children in displays, even as they stand as a cultural Other. Children can provide a familiar and approachable framework for the museum visitor to appropriate new experience and understanding. However, 'childhood' is a large and heterogeneous field and too many museums try to capture this concept as a single entity, resulting in vague representations of a generic childhood, or, worse still, they use the banner of childhood as an excuse to exhibit toy collections that reveal nothing about children themselves. No museum would attempt to display 'adulthood'; our adult perspective emphasizes the obvious variety of experience over time, space and culture, and makes nonsense of such an idea. This rationale needs to be applied to children, as they too have a great variety of experiences.

Curators of childhood exhibitions should not be afraid to be more intellectually ambitious. The fact that most visitors can relate well to childhood as a concept means that it can be used as an educational hook for many themes rather than as a mere means of triggering nostalgic reminiscences. Museums also need to consider representing the negative aspect of children's experience, alongside the pleasant imagery of toys and schoolrooms. It must be acknowledged that not all children had what we would conceptualize as a 'childhood' and museums need to be prepared to be more controversial and provocative in this regard. Although this research did not extend to examining how children can represent their own culture in museums, there may well be scope for museums to develop a fairer and more even-handed representation of modern childhood. Such an approach may be an interesting way to balance the adult perceptions of childhood that are evident in the rest of displays. Museums can and should act as places of discourse, communication and controversial ideas (Boyd 1999: 187) and this applies as much

to childhood as to any other issue.

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Notes

¹ The majority of the World's childhood museums located in the UK. Australia also has such museums, but they are in decline. Childhood does not appear to be a theme that appears greatly in other museums internationally.

² E.g. the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood survey (Gardiner and Burton 1987).

³ According to Mangione (1995: 60-61) this equates to a "very good" response rate (where over 85% is "excellent", 60% to 70% is "acceptable", 50% to 60% is "barely acceptable" and below 50% is "not scientifically acceptable").

⁴ Such as <http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/>. The ten museums visited were: the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, London; the National Trust Museum of Childhood, Sudbury Hall, Derbyshire; the Edinburgh Museum of Childhood; the Highland Museum of Childhood, Strathpeffer, Ross-shire; the childhood gallery at Abbey House Museum, Leeds; Quarry Bank Mill, Wilmslow, Cheshire; the childhood section within Judges' Lodging Museum, Lancaster; 'Grow Up! The Derby Childhood Experience' at the Silk Mill, Derby; 'Childhood in Wales and Portugal' at Pontypool Museum, Torfaen, and 'Childhood: From Perambulators to Playstation' at the Royal Pump Rooms, Harrogate.

⁶ See <http://www.sociology.org.uk/fchild.doc> (June 30th 2004).

⁷ See <http://vicnet.net.au/~museaust/insite/ychildhood.html> (September 30th 2002).

⁸ A child was defined as "a person aged 16 and under, including babies and infants".

⁹ Helen White, Tyne & Wear Museums, Curator of A North East Childhood.

¹⁰ Jennifer Maxwell, Curator, Highland Museum of Childhood.

¹¹ Claire Mayle, Apprentice House Coordinator, Quarry Bank Mill.

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