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'Sunshine and Fresh Air':

An oral history of childhood and family life in Interwar New Zealand, with some comparisons to Interwar Britain.

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A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in History

at the University of Otago, Dunedin,  
New Zealand

31 March 1998

### Abstract

This thesis studies how 'modern ideas' of family life affected the lives of New Zealanders in the 1920s and 1930s. New Zealand experiences will be compared with those of British families, since most European New Zealanders were of British origin. By comparing similarities as well as differences it is possible to explore characteristics of New Zealand life in this period.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the concept of childhood underwent a radical revision in all western societies. Previously children had been expected to work in a family economy. During the nineteenth century the need for an educated workforce led to the introduction of compulsory schooling. Legislation restricting child labour and enforcing schooling reinforced childhood dependence, and children became a greater economic burden on their parents. These changes in childhood helped to transform the nature of family life, as the family lost its function as an economic unit.

The interwar period saw the triumph of the modern family, but social class and geographical location mediated the adoption of new ideas. In the countryside family labour continued to be a necessity for many small farmers, and the family economy remained until well into the 1930s and 1940s. Change occurred to a greater extent in urban areas but many poorer working-class families needed children's labour and wages to supplement the breadwinner's earnings. It will be argued that these economic differences created contrasts in family structures between rural and urban life, and middle class and working class childhoods. This thesis will discuss how the forces of change affected relationships within the family, but also examine the forces that mediated change.

Three areas will be covered: official attitudes to children, family structure and parent/child relationships, and the wider context of kinship and community. Children became a matter of state importance in the early twentieth century. Changes to the education and child welfare systems reflect this shift. The government took an increasingly regulatory attitude to children. State initiatives in education, such as the school medical service, attempted to teach principles of healthy living and good parenting.

These outside forces affected children and their families. A detailed examination of family structure and parent/child relationships reveals both change and continuity. Scientific theories of child-rearing influenced parenting in the interwar period. The Plunket movement, established by Truby King in 1907, grew rapidly in New Zealand in the 1920s. The central section explores the impact of new ideas on child-rearing, and examines children's relationships with mothers and fathers.

Variations in family life occurred because gender and placement in family, as well as individual personality, determined experience of family life. A disparity emerges between country and town, middle class and poorer working class families. The latter had to struggle, particularly during the depression. They faced the greatest difficulty in achieving ideal standards of family life. Few state resources existed for widows and deserted wives and to a large extent they depended on kin for support and existence. Family life took place within a wider context of kinship and community. Relations and neighbours played a very important role for parents and children, although family and neighbourhood ties appeared stronger in Britain than in New Zealand.

The study is based on extensive primary research: national archive files, children's letters, and interviews. I interviewed forty-one New Zealanders, and collected thirty-four interviews in Britain. Oral history allows us to explore how gender, class, religious and geographical factors shaped the lives of real people. Although memories can be problematic, without oral history it would be difficult to access childhood experiences, since children are the most powerless and least articulate group in any society.

### **Preface and Acknowledgements**

I have to acknowledge a number of debts that I have incurred during researching and writing this thesis. These have been included in my preface since they made a vital contribution to the development and focus of my thesis. I must thank my three supervisors: Dr Tom Brooking and Dr Dorothy Page of the University of Otago in Dunedin, and Professor Paul Thompson from Essex University in England. The evolution of this topic owes much to Professor Paul Thompson, whom I studied under for six months in 1995-1996. I always intended to carry out further oral history and research into childhood, but had been uncertain as to the focus of my research. When I wrote to him originally I had thought of comparing children's experiences in the two world wars, in New Zealand and England. He suggested that a study of childhood between the wars would be useful, since this period has often been neglected by historians. Once I had established my area of research he was also useful in narrowing its focus. In consultation with him I decided to concentrate on parent/child relationships, another area much neglected by historians.

Originally I intended this thesis to be a truly comparative work, which would concentrate equally on childhood in both countries. Once I arrived in England, however, I became overcome by the enormity of the task ahead of me, and decided that this idea, although fascinating, was too ambitious for a PhD. I must thank Professor Leonore Davidoff of Essex University, who suggested that it would be very difficult to do a truly comparative study. As a result I decided to focus on New Zealand, but to retain the British material to contrast with the New Zealand interviewees. Through this method I hoped to highlight the unique as well as the common elements of New Zealand family life. I thoroughly enjoyed my experience at Essex University which brought me into contact with other academic practitioners of oral history, forcing me to re-examine ideas about interviewing. I wish to thank Dr Michael Roper for his advice on oral history, and for showing me some of the complexities inherent in interviewing. Because of his advice, I thought very hard about my relationship with the respondents, and how I would be able to place this relationship in the thesis. The results of this inquiry are included in the discussion of oral history and methodology in the introduction. I have tried to be 'reflexive', at least to some extent, and because of Dr Roper I have explicitly placed myself in the thesis. I interviewed my father, and my maternal grandmother, and so some of my own family history emerges in the study. Other influential oral historians at Essex, and good friends as well, were Dr Steve Hussey, who had recently completed his own PhD, and Ajay Khandewal, who was in the throes of writing a PhD. The sociology department at Essex was very friendly, and I am especially grateful to Brenda Corti who helps all the post-graduate students, and to Helen Hanff, who organises the post-graduate programme. I also want to thank the Sigma programme for employing me, especially John Stevens, who has become another good friend.

My time at Essex was intellectually fruitful, but also very stimulating as well, and I enjoyed the experience of meeting students from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds: Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East, although as far as I was aware I was the only New Zealander there. My grateful thanks go to my flatmates in Brightlingsea; Ute, Hitoshi, Stelios and Hansen; my friends Chika Osawa and Rumi Sakamoto; and especially Jackie and Mike Turton who invited me to stay at their village in Suffolk. They showed me some lovely English countryside, and showered me with food and wine, as well as supplying subjects for me to interview.

I am also very grateful to the custodians of other oral history collections, who gave me access to their archives. Paul Thompson gave me access to his interviews in Oxford, and Dr Elizabeth Roberts was also of invaluable assistance. She discussed oral history with me, let me photo-copy interviews and gave me somewhere to stay in Lancaster. Rob Perks showed me round the Oral History archive in London, and I used some of the archive's oral history material. My thanks also go to an interviewee, Gwen Bradley in Hove, and her daughter Janet who showed me around Sussex. I appreciate the kindness and hospitality I received in Britain, and wish to thank all my British interviewees, as well as the other people who assisted me there.

I would not have been able to write this thesis without the assistance of my interviewees, and I am immensely grateful for their memories, time and patience. This thesis could not exist in this form without their stories.

I found while writing and researching this thesis, that discussions and advice from other academics stimulated ideas, and helped to shape the focus of the work. I owe a great debt to Tom, for his endless enthusiasm and extensive historiographical knowledge. Every book or article he recommended, much to my annoyance, proved to be invaluable. I must also thank Claire Toynbee for some fascinating discussions on oral history and childhood, and for advice about articles and books. Jeanine Graham also gave useful advice about the subject.

I must thank the custodians of the various collections that I have used in New Zealand: David McDonald and the Hocken library, the Alexander Turnbull library, Auckland Public Library, the Macmillan Brown Library, National Archives in Wellington and Christchurch, and the Canterbury Museum.

Above all I wish to thank all the people who consented to be interviewed for this study, and people who lent photographs and material. I appreciate their hospitality, their candour and their trust.

To my fellow (Canterbury) students: Tracy, Tim (who kindly proofread my final version) and Adam, whose morning tea discussions, and mutual moans and triumphs helped to lighten the burden of researching a thesis. I appreciate their advice and support, as well as their own minor crises. Thanks also to Jean Sharfe of the Christchurch 2000 project at

Canterbury, who gave useful advice, and helped me find some useful archival material.

A special thanks must go to Greg Ryan who has proofread, and offered advice on many of the chapters in this thesis. At times I gave him some unwieldy and excessively long tomes, and I am grateful for his patience.

Thanks also go to Statistics New Zealand who have employed me for the last eight months of my thesis. Working there has given another perspective on 'hard' data, and made me appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative material. My fellow workers in Census Output helped motivate me to study after work.

And lastly, I wish to thank my husband Daniel, who put up with yet another thesis, and my absence during the trip to England. It was wonderful to see him again when he turned up in England after his African safari and our adventures travelling home together through India, and Nepal, helped to lighten up the tough last months of my thesis. Travelling in these countries also helped to give me another perspective on 'childhood' and the extent that it is culturally constructed.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AHJR</i>	<i>Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives</i>
<i>CWI</i>	Country Women's Institute
<i>NE</i>	<i>National Education</i>
<i>NZCER</i>	New Zealand Council for Educational Research
<i>NZJH</i>	<i>New Zealand Journal of History</i>
<i>NZMJ</i>	<i>New Zealand Medical Journal</i>
<i>NZPD</i>	<i>New Zealand Parliamentary Debates</i>
<i>NZOYB</i>	<i>New Zealand Official Yearbook</i>
<i>WDFU</i>	Women's Division of the Farmers' Union

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## General Introduction

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A dreary little place would this earth be  
 Were there no little people in it;  
 The song of life would lose its mirth  
 Were there no children to begin it. . .

No little hand on breast and brow  
 To keep the thrilling love-chords tender  
 The sterner souls would grow more stern  
 Unfeeling nature more inhuman  
 And man to stoic coldness turn  
 And woman would be less to woman

M.A. Rugby Pratt.<sup>1</sup>

‘The imprint of history is one of the most neglected facts in [human] development. Lives are shaped by the settings in which they are lived and by the timing of encounters with historical forces.’<sup>2</sup> If one accepts the Freudian belief<sup>3</sup> that childhood experiences form the crux of our personality then it follows that a study of childhood provides an insight into the development of society. The thesis explores the development of the modern family during the interwar years, by examining the experiences of forty-one New Zealanders and thirty-four British interviewees. Many older elements of family life remained during these years but profound changes occurred, outweighing continuities, thus irrevocably transforming the experience of family life. Oral accounts reveal change as well as the extent to which economic needs and individual circumstances mediated the impact of modern ideas. As well as illuminating the development of modern family life interviews can cast light on many of the forces that shaped

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<sup>1</sup>M.A. Rugby Pratt, *The Story of the South Island Methodist Orphanage and Children’s Home*, Christchurch, Bascands Ltd, Christchurch, 1934.

<sup>2</sup>Glen H. Elder, quoted in W.M. Tuttle, Jr., ‘America’s home front children in World War Two,’ in Glen H. Elder, Jr., J. Modell & R.D. Parke (eds.), *Children in time and place: Developmental and historical insights*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p.31.

<sup>3</sup>Freudian psychoanalysis firmly established the notion that ‘the core of an individual’s psychic identity was his or her own lost past or childhood’. Carolyn Steedman notes that Freud’s account of infantile sexuality ‘*theorised* childhood in this sense, gave it another name as ‘the unconscious’, or ‘the unconscious mind’.’ Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995, p.4.

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society in these years. By determining the forces that shaped the lives of our parents and grandparents and comparing these to the experiences of British children, we gain considerable insight into the shape of our society.

Historians agree that a transformation in family life occurred in all Western nations between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the time Rugby Pratt wrote the above poem in the 1920s the modern view of childhood had been firmly established. All children were considered to be entitled to certain rights and protection; above all they had the right to a proper 'childhood'. Children were expected to play and learn rather than work. Although a number of attributes defined the ideal child, childhood dependence became a central concept, superseding the older ideal of the industrious child. Western governments enforced these ideals through compulsory schooling, and child welfare legislation. Legislation enforced childhood dependence, making children a greater economic burden on their parents. Family size diminished sharply between the 1880s and 1920s as parents adjusted to these new conditions, and attempted to fulfil greater emotional and material expectations of family life. By 1919 the shape of childhood as we know it today had been established, and in a sense the children of the twenties and thirties were the first truly modern children. This transformation seems to be a simple story of a celebration of the discovery of childhood, but the truth is more complex. Historians face the problem of deconstructing these complexities. When did this change in family life occur? Did these changes happen uniformly throughout society or did variations emerge? Theories and evidence cited by such historians as Anna Davin, Ellen Ross, Elizabeth Roberts, and Paul Thompson in Britain and by Claire Toynbee in New Zealand, suggest that changes occurred unevenly. The complex interrelationship between ideology, social class, geographical location and the actual experience of family life needs to be explored. On closer examination the history of childhood in this period becomes fraught with contradictions and complexities.

The development of 'childhood' as a separate phase of existence occurred throughout Western society, so the history of childhood in an individual country benefits from an international perspective. A comparative approach offers greater insights; by determining differences and recognising similarities, we can draw out the shape of general childhood experience. While a number of historians have explored official ideologies and the transformation of childhood and family life, fewer have attempted to examine how these ideologies affected individual families and communities.

Few historians or sociologists have published academic studies on childhood in New Zealand.<sup>4</sup> Studies of childhood in New Zealand have focused on schooling, therefore most childhood history in this country falls under the category of educational history.

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<sup>4</sup> Dugald Macdonald wrote a useful survey of attitudes to childhood in Houston-Stewart (ed.), *Marriage and the Family in New Zealand*, Sweet & Maxwell, Wellington, 1970, and Claire Toynbee's *Her Work and His, Family, Kin and Community in New Zealand 1890-1930*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1995, is an informative work of sociology, but most other works deal with aspects of childhood that fell under state jurisdiction.

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Consequently, we know little about children's experiences as individuals. Two Italian sociologists have commented that 'Childhood is rarely seen as a distinct unit of observation or as a unit of analysis in its own right . . . the image of the child which emerges from social research is that of the passive individual who simply and automatically shares the conditions of the adults or nuclear family it belongs to'.<sup>5</sup> Jeanine Graham, Margaret Tennant and Claire Toynbee, among others, have carried out useful work, but gaps remain in our understanding of childhood. While Britain has a much wider historiography relating to childhood, again little academic study about parent/child relationships exists in this period.<sup>6</sup>

It is the aim of this thesis to redress this imbalance by examining the development of modern family life and the impact of modern ideologies on the lives of mothers, fathers and children. Despite the general belief in the inexorable nature of historical change, the relationship between ideology and change is a complex one. People accepted or rejected ideas, and often incorporated a number of different values in their lives. They might subscribe to ideas openly but secretly subvert them. A prominent oral historian, Valerie Yow, writes that through oral history 'reasons why ordinary people made decisions that in the aggregate influenced history but are nowhere written down can also be ascertained . . . The life interview reveals other kinds of information that do not get into the public record.'<sup>7</sup> Interviews can answer questions that are virtually impossible to answer elsewhere, and recollections of childhood give us the closest approximation to a child's perspective of their world. The thesis asks: how did children perceive power relationships within the family? Which parent was more influential and more respected? Many studies have also ignored historical forces, so the aim is also to mesh the lives of individuals with historical events. What effect did the experience of war have on family life? What did changing technologies mean in the lives of real people? In what ways did the depression affect family life? It is hoped that through this comparative study it will be possible to obtain a clearer picture of childhood in New Zealand, and assess the extent of social change in family life.

The thesis discusses the rise of the modern family in the interwar period but also argues that social class and geographical location mediated the adoption of new ideas. No single family pattern existed in New Zealand during this period because of the importance of New Zealand's distinctive small farm economy. Settlers to New Zealand had imported two characteristic family types: the pre-industrial and the industrial family. In rural areas the pre-industrial family lingered well into the 1930s and 1940s, whereas urban families followed the

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<sup>5</sup>Giovanni Sgritta and Angelo Saporiti, 'Myth and Reality in the Discovery and Representation of Childhood', in Paul Close (ed.), *Family Divisions and Inequalities in Modern Society*, Macmillan, Hampshire & London, 1989.

<sup>6</sup>Anna Davin's study of poor children in London reveals the complexity of family life, and the difficult relationship between ideology and reality. Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914*, Rivers Oram Press, London, 1996.

<sup>7</sup>Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History A Practical Guide for Social Scientists*, Sage Publications, California, 1994, p.11.

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model that industrialisation had imposed on Britain, with the man as breadwinner and women and children as economic dependants. It will be argued that 'middle-class' urban families adopted the new ideology of childhood first and followed it with the greatest fervour. They limited their fertility first and adopted modern child-rearing ideas earlier. Working class families, especially in rural areas, often resisted change because they could not afford the emotionally 'priceless', but economically 'worthless' child. This also raises the question as to why middle-class families eagerly adopted these ideas. Some kind of need must have been fulfilled by this ideology, and the answer probably lies in the role of the mother. The priceless child made the work of the mother priceless at a time when the household's economic function was fast disappearing. If this hypothesis is correct, the most enthusiastic followers of the new ideologies would be in those families where the mother did not work. But this re-definition of childhood, while benefiting some groups, placed an extra burden on families who could not, or would not, conform with these expectations. Certainly, as will be seen from this study, considerable differences in childhood and family relations existed. From one perspective the world of interwar childhood was more unified - certainly the great differences that had existed before the mid-nineteenth century had diminished - but divisions still existed.

Class, gender and location were vital differentials among families and this study will attempt to show how these shaped the context of children's lives and determined how the ideals and expectations of childhood would be absorbed. Although individual temperament may act as a modifier it seldom overrides the circumstances and background of a family.

Class is in itself a problematic term and there are some issues that must be addressed in using class in a comparative study. Despite the best intentions of the nineteenth century coloniser Edward Gibbon Wakefield, New Zealand never became a copy of the English social system. He envisaged a pyramidal society with the gentry at the top, a small middle class and a large labouring class, but a distinct bulge around the middle developed in New Zealand.<sup>8</sup> It is not possible to compare exactly all levels of society. But if one follows E.P. Thompson's definition of class it is not necessary to provide an exact mechanical comparison. He warns against the temptation to believe that 'class is a thing,' a structure or a category, and emphasises that, 'if we remember that class is a relationship and not a thing, we cannot think in this way'.<sup>9</sup> He sees class conversely as being only definable historically, as a phenomenon which happens:

when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and

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<sup>8</sup>See for example, Diagram illustrating the structure of N.Z. rural society post 1900, in Thomas W.H. Brooking, 'Agrarian Businessmen Organise A comparative study of the origins and early phase of development of the National Farmers' Union of England and Wales and the New Zealand Farmers' Union, ca. 1880-1929,' PhD Thesis, Department of History, University of Otago, Dunedin, 1977, facing p.46.

<sup>9</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, London, 1974, p.11.

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usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born - or enter voluntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms; embodied in traditions, value systems, ideas, and institutional forms.<sup>10</sup>

Class is a socially defined relationship which may vary over time. In this study interviewees will be defined by occupational group, maternal and paternal. Although working class and middle class are problematic and loosely defined terms, they will be used in conjunction with occupational definitions to help give context to the interviewees.

World War One focused attention on children as no previous event had done, and so the end of the war provides an appropriate starting point for this study. Mass recruitment exposed the physical inadequacies of supposedly healthy New Zealand men, with a massive 57.6 percent of men being rejected for overseas service on medical grounds. These revelations prompted the government to focus on improving the health of the nation, and of children in particular.<sup>11</sup> Schools provided a central point where these government ideas could be implemented and health and welfare problems could be identified and dealt with. So the school provided an entrance for the state into the life of children and their families.<sup>12</sup> Children were also for the first time present in large enough numbers that they could be studied, classified and processed, hopefully into the model citizens so necessary for the modern state.<sup>13</sup> Health formed a yardstick by which the state measured the gap between reality and the ideal, and formed the primary reason for any intervention in family life. Much of the concern about child health in the twenties and thirties focused around child labour, an activity that proved to be increasingly incompatible with ideals of childhood current world-wide.

New Zealand looked overseas for ideas about improving children's health and education and often used Britain as a model. New Zealand, however, often introduced ideas more comprehensively than Britain because of the more centralised nature of the New

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<sup>10</sup>ibid, pp.10-11.

<sup>11</sup>Margaret Tennant, *Children's Health, The Nation's Wealth A History of Children's Health Camps*, Bridget Williams Books & Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, New Zealand, 1994, p.23. Tennant notes that an American child health expert commented at the beginning of World War II that war represented 'a backhanded break for children - a break originating in the world's dismay at the appalling waste of human life, . . . When a nation is fighting a war or preparing for another . . . it must look to its future supplies of cannon fodder'.

<sup>12</sup>Lionel Rose suggests that the success of schools in indoctrinating children may have been overstated, because 'so much of what children had to learn at school was irrelevant to their lives and ephemeral in their memories'. Lionel Rose, *The Erosion of Childhood Child oppression in Britain 1860-1918*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, p.205. Schooling did, however, make a deep impression on children's lives, and impinged heavily on families. It is questionable whether the health lessons or citizen's duties influenced every child but they made an impact on many of my interviewees.

<sup>13</sup>See H.Hendrick, 'Child Labour, Medical Capital, and the School Medical Service, c. 1890-1918', in Roger Cooter (ed.), *In the Name of the Child, Health and Welfare, 1880-1940*, Routledge, London, 1992, also R.Cooter, 'Introduction', ibid.

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Zealand state, and the fact that as a smaller and newer nation, change could be more easily implemented. When New Zealand elected a Labour Government in 1935, their commitment to child welfare meant that many ideas originating in Britain could be introduced throughout the nation. The Labour government's efforts, although apparently radical, stemmed from a deeply traditional vein in New Zealand society. Both New Zealand and Britain shared a basic belief that all children, poor as well as rich, were entitled to a proper childhood. But New Zealand had a further motivating force: the potent myth of a nation of migrants who hoped to build a better nation in the South Pacific.<sup>14</sup> Myth is used in this context to mean a shared commonality of belief.<sup>15</sup> The myths of a society provide potent insights into what that society believes is important and how that society has shaped itself. 'Myth' can be used in conjunction with 'ideology', because myth prompted and infused ideas. Myth both affected the way in which people regarded society and the way in which they shaped recollections of their past.<sup>16</sup> The power of myth is apparent in official histories of New Zealand, which trumpet the country's enlightened attitude towards women, and the aged, but especially their treatment of the nation's children, 'the hope of the future'. Whenever the disparity between myth and reality became too great, both governmental organisations and private individuals were prompted to take action.<sup>17</sup> Plunket, health camps, the school medical service, among others, were all outcomes of this concern. Whether these organisations made a huge difference in the lives of children is irrelevant, what is important is that people perceived them as life-saving, progressive and positive. They in their turn enlarged public concern, increased an awareness of the disparity between myth and reality, but in doing so reinforced the myth more strongly into the New Zealand psyche. Competitiveness and an intermingled sense of

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<sup>14</sup>Erik Olssen, *Building The New World work, society and politics in Caversham 18802-1920s*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1995, p.230.

<sup>15</sup>The Oxford English Dictionary defines myth as: 'a purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions or events and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena . . . but often used vaguely to include any narrative having fictitious elements. . .'. Elizabeth Tonkin discusses these definitions and argues that the definition of myth as falsehood is simplistic. She also suggests that our worship of realism may in fact be false, 'there is a *myth* that realistic accounts of the past are unlike mythic ones, because realism is an inherently truthful mode of representation'. E.Tonkin, 'History and the Myth of Realism', in R.Samuel & P.Thompson, (eds.) *The Myths We Live By*, Routledge, London, 1990, pp.27-28. Luisa Passerini suggests that myth is 'by definition collective, shared by many, super-individual and inter-generational, beyond the limit of space and time . . . myth lays claim to be a discourse that does not require to be demonstrated, counting on self-evidence, a last remnant of sacredness after a long eclipse of the sacred'. L. Passerini in Samuel & P.Thompson, *The Myths We Live By*, p.50.

<sup>16</sup>Myth is also a relevant concept to use in relation to oral history. As Thompson and Samuels explain, any life story is at least to some extent a personal mythology, 'a self-justification'. Samuel, & Thompson, (eds.) *The Myths We Live By*, p.10.

<sup>17</sup>Physicality took precedence over spirituality in the creation of the myth of New Zealand as an ideal country for children. Despite the religious aims of early settlements, such as Otago, New Zealand became an increasingly secular society, though one firmly based on Christian ideas, a trend that intensified in the early twentieth century. The celebration of the body (in a non-sexual sense) became central to the vision that New Zealanders entertained of themselves. When the ideal of childhood was shaped to New Zealand circumstances it is not surprising that authorities concentrated on the child's physical well-being. Physical ideals inspired educationalists, politicians, and school doctors in their attempt to improve the lot of children in New Zealand.

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pride and shame were powerful forces, and concern with New Zealand's prestige on the international scene prompted the state to focus on children. Consequently, childhood acquired a resonance much greater than the sum of individual children. As Hugh Cunningham observed, the history of childhood becomes a 'romance of nationhood', and its 'outlines and details must rank amongst the best-known parts of the story of Britain'.<sup>18</sup> Although Cunningham referred to Britain his argument has equal validity when applied to New Zealand.

New Zealand believed firmly in its own superiority, constantly comparing itself with other countries, especially the mother country. Throughout the study British material will be included therefore, in order to illuminate New Zealand material. As one New Zealand paper wrote in 1926, 'There is probably no country in the world where the fundamentals of growth, fresh air, sunlight, food of the right type and amount, adequate sleep and rest, are more readily available than in New Zealand'.<sup>19</sup> When choosing any two countries for comparison, New Zealand and Britain offer some of the richest possibilities. Of all Britain's colonies, New Zealand prided itself on remaining closest to the mother country. In 1939, at the end of the period studied here, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Michael Joseph Savage, speaking of the war beginning in Europe, reluctantly affirmed, 'where Britain goes, we go'.<sup>20</sup> Colonial ties remained vital. Yet while Britain influenced New Zealand, the country also valued the notion of being more English than the English. New Zealand fed on the idea, as did other colonial nations, of the virility inherent in the pioneering spirit, the superiority of those who lived in a state closer to nature, far away from the decadence of the European urban environment. Colonial success in sport and war reinforced such beliefs and as a result masculinity became the measure of the true New Zealander. Typical of New Zealand's heroes were the 1905 All Black team who toured Britain, defeating all teams but the Welsh, events that seemingly proved the superiority of the colonial over the seed from which he had sprung.<sup>21</sup> New Zealanders were delighted when the British upper classes and the establishment press praised the All Blacks in 1905 as being a different breed, 'broad in

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<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*, p.6. Through oral history we have an opportunity to discover the interaction between myth and life since myths shape the view of the past. It is possible not to only discover life experiences but to examine the incorporation of myth into individual reality. Echoes of the rescue of childhood as part of a 'romance of nationhood' emerged in this study. For a discussion of the relationship of myth and individual memory see Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories, Living with the Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994. Alistair Thomson discovered that the old diggers that he interviewed had attempted to reconcile the official version of the ANZAC soldier with their own private memories, and his book attempts to grasp the complex interrelationship between myth and reality.

<sup>19</sup>'School Hygiene', *Northern Advocate Daily*, Whangarei, 22 October, 1926.

<sup>20</sup> Though later research has uncovered the fact that Savage, a working-class Irish Australian was unwilling to pronounce this speech and definitely did not share in these sentiments, this does not detract from the power of his statement. Indeed it confirms that New Zealand's association with Britain was so strong that politicians were forced to adhere to the policies of public servants and to popular sentiment.

<sup>21</sup>Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart NZ's Search for National Identity*, Allen & Unwin, New Zealand, 1986, pp.146-151.



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shoulder and clean in limb', altogether stronger and more wholesome than the degenerate English.<sup>22</sup> It suited colonials to encourage this vision of Arcadian virtue, which British authorities hoped would inspire improvement in working-class British youth. When New Zealand authorities discovered in World War One that much of the nation's manhood did not fit the colonial ideal, they reacted with dismay.<sup>23</sup> But this did not change the myth in the eyes of New Zealanders. Rather myth formed the motivation for much of New Zealand's actions to transform the health of the nation. If the mythical ideal did not correspond to reality, New Zealand attempted to transform reality in light of the mythical ideal. The motivating power of myth becomes apparent again and again in New Zealand history.

Other colonies believed strongly in pioneering virtues but perhaps this vision remained strongest in New Zealand. Patrick O'Farrell, in a study of the Irish in New Zealand, explains that immigrants develop complex and ambivalent relationships with their country of origin:

The new legatee colonial mind was focussed on aspiring to replicate, to improve on, home structures real or imagined, which were essentially restrictive, anti-new: colonial itself implied inferiority to metropolitan, as empty is inferior to full. Thus, the immigrant need to escape the old world is also a need to return, refer back, be reconciled, rebuild, be made whole with what it once was.<sup>24</sup>

The need to refer back, to relate to the country of origin, certainly marked the efforts of New Zealand legislators, particularly in relation to efforts to improve the nation's children. In a sense children became symbols of immigration, of the success of a colony and as the transition to a new society. They were potent symbols for the 'young' colonial nation.

Britain's fears also prompted similar efforts to improve the nation's health and welfare. Fears of degeneracy lay behind these concerns; their myth was one of the decay of a once proud nation, unlike the regenerative belief the colonial possessed in the vitality of a new country. Britain aimed to resurrect an ideal past, New Zealand to build ideals for the future. The result was that both nations brought a slightly different focus to bear on their

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<sup>22</sup>The Revd W. Carlisle of the Church Army gave a sermon entitled 'The New Zealanders' which argued that the All Black team avoided overindulgence, and were as hard as nails, 'England must wake up and do the same', he concluded. Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*, p.150.

<sup>23</sup>Medical examination discovered that only one in three men could be sent on active service overseas. 'The grounds of rejection provide a very good index of the chief sources of chronic disease and physical disability among men in what should be the prime of life, among the sons, the husbands, and the fathers of New Zealand today'. 15,396 were rejected for chronic heart disease, 7,173 for defects and deformities of the lower limbs, 3,211 - flat foot, 6,422- defective vision, 4,043 - general poor physique and impaired constitutions, 1,011 deformities of the chest and spine, 2,455 deafness, 2,555 disorders of the digestive system, 2,044 chronic rheumatism, 2,822 chronic disease of the lungs other than consumption, 1,718 tuberculosis, 1,681 goitre 1,431 diseases of joints, 1,076 defective intelligence = 53,038. J.Renfrew White, *The Growing Body: Its Nature, Needs, and Training. Being an Account of the Hygiene of Child Life with a System of Physical Education, for the Use of Teachers and Health Workers*, Coulls Somerville Wilkie Ltd., Dunedin, (3rd edition) 1933, p.4.

<sup>24</sup> P.O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms Irish in Australia & New Zealand A Personal Excursion*, New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1990, p.xxvii.

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efforts to shape childhood. Essentially New Zealand patterned itself on Britain, but attempted to improve on the original. The comparative element aids understanding of state attitudes towards children during this crucial period.

A study of childhood has a metaphoric value as a point of comparison between New Zealand and England. In a very real sense New Zealand was the child, the Imperial power, the parent. This patriarchal - or matriarchal - element had come through very clearly when dealing with the indigenous race, but in a sense it was present in all dealings between empire and colony. At the beginning of the interwar period New Zealanders called Britain 'Home' and many looked back with yearning to the land of their origin. Childhood featured strongly in the work of writers like Katherine Mansfield. It symbolised the Arcadian dream: of innocent and healthy nature and dreams unspoiled, in part this celebration of childhood reflected the sterility of adult life in a narrow society. Yet during this period New Zealand's child-like status began to be challenged, a development concurrent with but not totally originating from the gradual decay of the imperial power. In the 1930s Robin Hyde identified a kind of identity crisis as New Zealanders became no longer English, but had yet to develop their own vision of national identity. The interwar period in a sense could be termed the growing years, when New Zealand struggled with itself, finally to emerge in an undecided adolescence at the end of the thirties. Savage's reluctant war cry, 'Where Britain goes, we go,' was both prophecy and dirge, as the failure of the imperial power to defend New Zealand meant that for the first time they were required to look to other nations for support. Britain was no longer the powerful protecting parent, and New Zealand would never again be the child.

The Introduction and Chapter I examine theories of childhood and establish the context of childhood and family life in the interwar period. Chapter II looks at developments in schooling in this period, and examines the role of the education system in implementing change, enforcing conformity, and establishing a focus on children's health and well-being. The concept of the child as social capital emerges clearly in these chapters. In the second section the focus shifts from official ideologies to individual experiences. Chapters III, IV, V, and VI examine family structure and parent/child relationships in rural and urban New Zealand. These chapters disclose the central theme of the thesis: the development of the modern family in this period as well as the limitations on modernity. In almost every aspect of family life, family structure, parent-child relationships, discipline, family size, and attitudes to children's labour, a contrast emerges between rural and urban families. These differences support the argument that necessity and economic circumstances limited the extent of change in family life. The latter three chapters shift the focus outwards again. Chapter VII explores the interaction between ideology and practice by examining child labour in the interwar years. What contribution, paid or unpaid, did children make to the family economy and how did this

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fit in with the ideals of childhood and the demands of schooling? Here the ideology of the new childhood made most impact. Child labour and education were areas legislated on and most subject to outside change. Child welfare officials were aware of the numerous transgressions against child labour laws, which offended against the new ideology of childhood. A tension existed between the ideal, the concepts of childhood as seen by the middle classes and the government, and the practical realities of life for many families. Chapter VIII examines the increasing importance placed on family leisure, and looks at children's independent leisure and society's efforts to control their behaviour. Chapter IX focuses on family interaction with family and community, and suggests that although interwar New Zealand was not an atomised society, it did not have the same extensive kin ties as Britain. Nevertheless, kin and community were extremely important in children's lives, creating a wider world than a concentration on the nuclear family shows. An appendix includes brief biographies of all the interviewees.

A combination of written and oral sources has been used to examine these questions, with the emphasis being on oral history. Interviews with seventy-four individuals form the basis of this work. The study emphasises qualitative rather than quantitative information since interviews reveal the complex nature of family life, allowing the relationship between individuals and social change to emerge. Additionally, official sources provide information on a larger scale, so that it is possible to compare the families in this study with the general population. Another useful source is a number of education theses written under the influence of Professor James Shelley, an Englishman who became Professor of Education at Canterbury University College in the 1920s.<sup>25</sup> These provide comprehensive insight into certain aspects of children's lives, their leisure, aspirations and social backgrounds. Lastly, children's letters to various children's pages in newspapers around the country provide virtually the only contemporary written material by children. When placed together these sources provide a comprehensive resource about children's lives and extend the range of childhoods included in this study. In many studies on childhood, children and their families are denied a voice and appear as passive recipients, either of government bounty or government control. The aim of this study is to redress the balance, providing a view from the 'bottom up', rather than from the hierarchy down. By looking at history from below it is possible to discover the complexities and contradictions of life, the way in which myth and ideal interact and influence people's lives.

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<sup>25</sup>Professor James Shelley was born in Coventry in September 1884. After some years teaching he was appointed lecturer in education at Manchester University in 1910. He served in the R.F.A., as second lieutenant and then became chief instructor at the War Office. In 1914 he became Professor of Education at the University College of Southampton, then he moved to New Zealand in 1920 and took up the position of Professor of Education at Canterbury College. The Labour Government appointed him Director of Broadcasting in 1936 and he played an influential part in establishing high quality radio and a national orchestra. Source: *Who's Who*, Wellington, 1941.

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## Historiography and Methodology

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### *The History of Childhood*

'Members of any society carry within themselves a working definition of childhood, its nature, limitations and duration. They may not explicitly discuss this definition . . . but they act upon their assumptions in all their dealings with, fears for, and expectations of their children.'<sup>26</sup> In our society, children and childhood had implicit meanings that go beyond the simple biological definition of a child as 'a young human being below the age of puberty.'<sup>27</sup> A recent study on the sociology of childhood emphasises how psychological theories of child development and socialisation have become an integral part of our definition of childhood. The combination of these theories has resulted in children being regarded 'as "immature, irrational, incompetent, asocial [and] acultural" with adults being "mature, rational, competent, social and autonomous". . . . They are in effect, two different instances of the same species.'<sup>28</sup> Such a dichotomy negatively affects our perception of childhood, but undoubtedly shapes our attitudes to and provisions for children. It also inevitably determines our perceptions of childhood in other societies and in the past. A discussion of these ideas is essential to an understanding of New Zealand childhood in this period

Since its inception in the 1960s as a field of historical study in its own right, childhood history has become the centre of debate. From a position in the 1990s, looking back over the studies of the previous thirty years, the history of childhood has become a rich and enticing field of study. Yet much of the history of childhood remains relatively obscure. Many gaps in knowledge may remain forever, to be filled by guesswork and speculation. Hiner and Hawes, in their handbook of childhood history, concluded that it might be impossible to unravel the complexities of childhood in the past.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn, the first being that childhood is to a large extent culturally defined and expectations of childhood have varied over time, and between countries.<sup>30</sup> This cultural variation in attitudes to childhood has made debates between historians about the nature of childhood in the past complex.

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<sup>26</sup> K. Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900*, North Eastern University Press, Boston, 1992, p.3

<sup>27</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991.

<sup>28</sup> A.Prout & A.James, 'A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems,' in A.Prout & A. James (eds.), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, The Falmer Press, U.K. & U.S.A., 1990, p.13.

<sup>29</sup> J.M.Hawes & N.R. Hiner (eds.), *Children in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, Greenwood Press, U.S.A., 1991, p.6.

<sup>30</sup> Calvert, *Children in the House*, p.5

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Two factors have ensured the strength of this debate and its continuation. Since the mid-nineteenth century there has been an apparent transformation of attitudes towards children in Western society. 'As children were excluded from the adult workplace, the notion of childhood dependency became entrenched across all classes from infancy to at least the early teens.'<sup>31</sup> Since this has been universally hailed as a sign of advancement there has been a tendency to view the history of childhood as a steady progression from misery to enlightenment. Much historiography has therefore looked to the past to explain the favoured position of modern children. Childhood is also a universal phenomenon so all writers feel they have an insight into the subject; this subjectivity adds to the diversity of childhood history. The study of childhood has been described as 'a mass of tangled strands,' but it is this complexity that makes it such a fascinating area of study.<sup>32</sup>

There is such detail available on the history of childhood that to give a full description of the debate would require much more space than is available here. A brief summary of the historiography, nevertheless, discloses two issues central to the debate. Firstly, did Western culture traditionally recognise childhood as a separate state with distinctive characteristics? It has been argued that previous European societies regarded children as miniature adults rather than as a separate group of human beings with different needs from adults. Secondly, what was the precise nature of the emotional bond between parent and child and to what extent, if any, has this changed over time?<sup>33</sup> Philippe Aries prompted these questions when he suggested that the concept of childhood first appeared between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. This radical notion struck at the universality of childhood and set the agenda for the historical debate that followed. A major part of his evidence depended on children being depicted as miniature adults in medieval painting, whereas from the fifteenth century onwards they began to appear separately. This, he argued, meant that they were now separated from adult life, a sure sign that a concept of childhood had developed, and with it a recognition of the special needs of children. The growth of formal schooling marked a crucial development in the separation of childhood from adulthood.<sup>34</sup> Historians developed his arguments further, suggesting that parental care and affection for children only developed after a separate concept of childhood had been established. One historian, Lloyd de Mause, even argued that the further back in history one went 'the lower the level of child care and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorised and sexually abused'.<sup>35</sup>

Persuasive though such arguments are, the suggestion that the concept of 'childhood'

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<sup>31</sup> Tennant, *Children's Health, The Nation's Wealth*, p.14.

<sup>32</sup> Cooter, 'Introduction', in Cooter (ed.) *In the Name of the Child*, p.1.

<sup>33</sup> Calvert, *Children in the House*, p.10.

<sup>34</sup> A.Prout & A.James, 'A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood?', in Prout & James (eds.), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, p.17.

<sup>35</sup> L.De Mause quoted in J.M. Hawes & N.R. Hiner (eds.) *American Childhood*, Greenwood Press, U.S.A., 1985, p.58.

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as a separate state is a recent development seems unsatisfactory. Too many inconsistencies emerge. Underlying this argument is the belief that the way our society constructs childhood is superior and cannot be questioned. Such a Eurocentric notion ignores cultural variation. Comparison with other societies has revealed that while they may view childhood differently, they still have an understanding of the distinctiveness of childhood. Some idea of children as different from adults would be biologically determined due to the very obvious physical differences between adult and child. Scholars such as Shulamith Shahar, author of *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, have provided enough evidence to suggest that some concept of childhood existed before the fifteenth century. Shahar acknowledged the difference between medieval and modern ideas of childhood but suggested that it would be impossible for a society to exist without 'the acknowledgement (and conduct tuned to this acknowledgement) that, up to a certain stage in its life, the child has need of nurturing and protection in order to survive'.<sup>36</sup>

Historians have also debated about the nature of the parent/child relationship in the past. Linda Pollock, in a comprehensive study entitled *Forgotten children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500-1880*, firmly refutes the suggestion that 'childhood' is a modern construction and argues that love and affection had always existed between parents and child.<sup>37</sup> Bruce Bellingham, in a pithy discussion of these opposing viewpoints, has christened those following Pollock as belonging to a 'socio-biological' school, whereas Edward Shorter, Lloyd de Mause and their supporters follow a 'history of sentiments'. He believes that Pollock may have over-emphasised the invariant nature of childhood, arguing that since conditions in the past were very different it is likely that family relationships would have been different as well. Progressive views are too extreme while those who stress the importance of biology tend to stress invariant norms to the detriment of change.<sup>38</sup> Any consensus seems difficult to achieve but the detailed studies of the 1980s and 1990s reveal a high degree of attachment for children, which contradict de Mause's claims.<sup>39</sup> The error lies in thinking that because practices may be different from our own, they reveal a lack of concern and affection for children. As Karen Calvert has suggested, the central issue is 'not whether people love their children but how they treated the children they loved'.<sup>40</sup> Historians cannot agree about

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<sup>36</sup> S.Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, p.2.

<sup>37</sup> L.A.Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p.283.

<sup>38</sup> B.Bellingham, 'The History of Childhood Since the "Invention of Childhood" Some Issues in the Eighties', *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 13, no. 3, pp.348-349.

<sup>39</sup>For example Lawrence Stone in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* had argued that high infant mortality meant that parents became distanced from their infants, but in the seventeenth century, an era of high infant mortality, the popular psychologist Richard Napier treated women disturbed by the death of infants. His notebooks, concerning his patients - who were from every social class - include numerous cases of disturbing grieflike Ellen Craftes who, 'took a fright and grief that a door fell on her child and slew it. Presently head, heart and stomach ill; eyes dimmed with grief that she cannot see well'. A. Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel: Woman's lot in seventeenth-century England*, Weidenfield & Nicolson, London, 1984.

<sup>40</sup>Calvert, *Children in the House*, p.12.

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the nature of the parent-child relationship in the past, but most would agree that a profound shift in attitudes toward children has occurred over the past two centuries. It would seem that the shape of childhood is to a large extent socially constructed, rather than the concept of 'childhood' itself being a creation of Western society. The following section examines the nature of this transformation of childhood.<sup>41</sup>

## I

Hugh Cunningham, in *The Children of the Poor*, argues convincingly that the most significant development in the evolution of 'childhood' occurred when the notion of dependency was extended to all children. He states 'between the late seventeenth and mid twentieth centuries there occurred a major and irreversible change in the representation of childhood, to the point where all children throughout the world were thought to be entitled to certain common elements and rights of childhood'.<sup>42</sup> Today there are certain clear assumptions about the 'nature of childhood and about the proper role of children'.<sup>43</sup> It is believed that childhood is a state of innocence, protection, freedom from work, and granting freedom to play and to learn. Evidence suggests that this is a fairly recent development. What happened to turn the child from an 'earner' into a 'learner', to transform childhood from a stage of life that was best over quickly into a state that was valued in itself?

Although it is difficult to make a definitive answer some vital factors can be identified.<sup>44</sup> This transformation occurred throughout the Western world, though the examples used here are from Britain. Industrialisation, first evident in Britain in the mid-eighteenth century, rapidly transformed the British economy. Mechanisation made children's labour a necessity, then late nineteenth century developments in technology began to render it redundant. Industrialisation also required a trained workforce, prompting the impetus for the training of basic literacy. Secondly, and most importantly, social reform and the future of the nation became inextricably intertwined, bringing poor children to the attention of the state. Children became equated with the future, the means by which the country could insure its dominance as an imperial and industrial power. The ideals of middle class childhood were to

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<sup>41</sup>Tennant, *Children's Health, The Nations' Wealth*, p.14.

<sup>42</sup>Hugh Cunningham, *The Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood since the Seventeenth Century*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p.7.

<sup>43</sup>ibid, pp. 82-3.

<sup>44</sup>Cunningham suggests four main factors in the sentimentalisation of the 'children of the poor.' Firstly, the promotion of missions in cities, which were not just devoted to conversion but attempted to ameliorate the conditions of the poor. Propaganda from these missions popularised and emphasised the plight of the poor, and especially the terrible conditions of children. These agencies saw children as innocent victims, blaming their parents for their condition rather than wider social forces. Secondly, it personalised the plight of children and then prompted the missions to gain state support to legitimise their interference in family life. It was also increasingly believed that the urban environment was inimicable to children's health and that children brought up in the savage conditions of the city would be morally and physically stunted. This fear was one that peaked in the early twentieth century. These views were shaped by the middle class celebration of childhood as the happiest period of life. See Cunningham, *The Children of the Poor*, passim.

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be extended for the first time to all children.

Harry Hendrick has identified a series of shifts in attitudes rather than a simple progression of the idea of childhood. Childhood became constructed and reconstructed over this period. He argues that each new construction may be observed in approximate chronological order as: the romantic child, the evangelical child, the factory child, the delinquent child, the schooled child, the psycho-medical child, and the welfare child of the era before the First World War. Between 1914 and the late 1950s, he identifies two further 'reconstructions', namely, 'the child of psychological jurisdiction - meaning child guidance clinics, psycho-analysis, educational psychology, and Bowlbyism<sup>45</sup>; and secondly, the family child (which included the 'public' child, usually children in care)'.<sup>46</sup>

This construction of childhood between 1880 and 1918 occurred in a number of states which faced similar difficulties, such as economic and military competition from foreign nations, a fear of racial decline and domestic unrest. They attempted to redress these problems by focusing on children, the most malleable members of society. Authorities hoped to achieve a moral and physical transformation of society, as well as inculcating useful capitalist values: 'technical education, occupational adaptability, [and] demographic movement'. They believed that welfare initiatives would guarantee social stability and class interests.<sup>47</sup> Hendrick argues that by 1918 childhood had become 'conceptually "modern": it was defined in relation to medicine, psychology and welfare; there was little or no geographical fragmentation of the concept, and even social class barely disturbed its theoretical universal application'.<sup>48</sup> New Zealand apparently adapted these ideas without question, even though the fears of race decline in such a newly established (in terms of European settler society, not Maori) colony seem absurd.

'Modern' ideologies of childhood became so pervasive that a fund-raising booklet for a New Zealand orphanage could emphatically state, without fear of contradiction, that all

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<sup>45</sup>In 1951 the World Health Organization sponsored Dr John Bowlby's report entitled *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, and he later published the extremely influential book *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, before refining his ideas in the 1960s. He based his ideas on studies of children separated from their mothers and concluded that maternal deprivation had catastrophic effects on the developing child. 'What is believed to be essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother-substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment.' This had lasting implications for the mother-child relationship and was often used as an argument against child care. Bowlby wrote that from 'empirical observation we suggested that "the young child's hunger for his mother's love and presence is as great as his hunger for food", and that in consequence her absence inevitably generates "a powerful sense of loss and anger"'. John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss, Volume I Attachment*, Penguin Books, 1981 (first published 1969), pp.12-13.

<sup>46</sup> Hendrick, 'Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood: An Interpretative Survey, 1800 to the Present,' in A. James & A. Prout (eds) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, pp.36-7. Locke had suggested the value of children and the power of education as early as 1697 when he described the child as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, but the possibilities of this idea were only realised by the state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

<sup>47</sup> Hendrick, 'Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood', p. 50.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, p. 51.



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children were entitled to a 'proper' childhood. The author depicted one family's circumstances, using this ideology to make their suffering resonate:

Here are five boys and girls; children of one family. The father is dead. The mother is a problem to her friends and a perplexity to the policeman. The children are neglected, ill nourished, ill-clad and in sore need of medical attention. Kindly neighbours call in the physician who takes steps to defend these waifs into whose lives suffering has bitten so deeply. The children find shelter within our doors and amidst happier conditions recover the *birthright* of which they had been robbed.<sup>49</sup>

This revealing passage expresses a number of elements central to the new conception of childhood. The first is that the children are being taken into care because it is believed they have a fundamental right to a 'childhood'. Like earlier 'paupers' the children will eventually be taught to work, the girls being trained for domestic service and the boys for trades, but the crucial difference is that they will not have to work as children. Instead they will be given as close an approximation of childhood as the institution will allow. Secondly, ensuring that children achieve their 'birthright' has become the concern of a number of individuals: neighbours call in an official and the children are put under the control of yet more officials. In short they have become of public and state concern. The third point is that there are rigid notions of childhood and motherhood. The mother loses her children because she does not fit the requirements of a good mother. She has sinned against the prevailing ideology. Here the children are victims and treated sympathetically, but similar punishments also applied to children who transgressed the ideology of childhood.

The child as good citizen had arrived. Ideally girls were to be mothers, boys to be workers, but both were viewed as the nation's future. Society valued children for their potential and their emotional value, but believed that any economic functions they performed in the past were incompatible with a proper childhood. The child would not work but would be trained to become healthy, moral, sober and hardworking. This fundamental change transformed the construction of childhood.

The state did not welcome the most striking change in modern family life: in the same period that this conception of childhood was being developed, a dramatic fall in the birthrate occurred. In New Zealand, women who married in 1880 could expect to average 6.5 live births throughout their fertile life, while the 'marriage cohort' of 1923 had an average of only 2.4.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in England and Wales the birth rate halved between 1891 and 1935.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Rugby Pratt, *The Story of the South Island Methodist Orphanage*, p.8.

<sup>50</sup> This decline in family size occurred first in Continental Europe and Britain, and was slightly later but no less dramatic in New Zealand. E. Olssen, 'Towards a New Society,' in W.H.Oliver & B.R.Williams (eds.) *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Oxford University Press, Wellington, 1981, p.258.

<sup>51</sup> The average number of live births per thousand married women was 259.2 between 1891-95, and had fallen to 117.9 during 1931-35. E. Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940*.

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Demographic scholars have tried to determine the reasons for such a marked and rapid population change. It has been suggested that changes in the family economy were a major factor. As expectations of living standards rose, people recognised that extra children reduced the financial standing of the family, and limited family size accordingly.<sup>52</sup> Olssen attributes declining family size to other factors as well: the decline in child labour, the greater cost of feeding children in cities, as well as the 'cult of domesticity'. New expectations of child-rearing promoted by experts such as the founder of Plunket, Frederick Truby King, raised expectations about child care. Smaller families made adoption of intensive forms of child-rearing possible.<sup>53</sup> Cause and effect however, are difficult to disentangle. More recent research reveals that the family economy model does not supply all answers. Karl Ittman studied an area in Lancashire and concluded that this model: 'by assuming a single measure of utility for the family, ignore[s] generational and gender differences'.<sup>54</sup> He suggests that marriage partners might have different expectations and desires, arguing that family limitation involved a difficult negotiation of gender identities. 'For men, being a good husband could involve not pressing sexual demands, while for women, freedom from child-bearing could make them better able to meet the demands of their husbands for greater attention and resources without neglecting themselves or their children'.<sup>55</sup> The choice of family limitation must have involved compromises at first, though it seems likely that once begun it had its own dynamic.

New Zealand, while not directly affected by the forces of industrialisation, followed British patterns closely. Claire Toynbee argues that industrialisation and urbanisation affected New Zealand indirectly, because they shaped the attitudes of the men and women who settled there. Toynbee largely supports the family economy model as providing the basis for family limitation, but argues that a new belief in scientific rationalism may have promoted the belief that it was possible to direct and control one's own existence.<sup>56</sup>

The government and the medical profession expressed concern about the decline in family size and did little to promote contraceptive knowledge.<sup>57</sup> By the twentieth century a series of commentaries on women's selfishness in limiting family size emerged; all emphasising that it women had a duty to reproduce. Authorities in both Britain and New Zealand particularly feared that the better classes were failing in their duty to procreate. An

Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1984, p.85.

<sup>52</sup>Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', in Oliver & Williams (eds.), *Oxford History of New Zealand*, p.258.

<sup>53</sup>J. Phillips, *A Man's Country The Image of the Pakeha Male - A History*, Penguin, Auckland, 1987, p.224

<sup>54</sup>K. Ittman, *Work, Gender and Family in Victorian England*, New York University Press, New York, 1995, p.196.

<sup>55</sup>ibid, p.234.

<sup>56</sup>Toynbee, *Her Work and His*, p.27.

<sup>57</sup> See B. Brookes, 'Reproductive Rights The debate over abortion and birth control in the 1930s,' B. Brookes, C. Macdonald & M. Tennant (eds.), *Women in History: Essays on European Women in New Zealand*, Allen & Unwin/ Port Nicolson Press, 1986.



**On the safeguarding of Women's health depends the future of our race**

Woman, be she maid or mother, owes it not only to herself but also to the State to safeguard her health by taking every reasonable precaution against all ailments, big or little, that militate against efficiency and general well-being. One such precaution which thousands of women—and men, too, for that matter—have adopted to their own and their country's lasting benefit is the Kruschen Habit. A daily morning dose of Kruschen Salts, the home aperient and diuretic tonic, first establishes and then maintains that *regularity of habit* which is the basis of habitual good health. Get the Kruschen Habit—persevere with it! You will be benefiting both yourself and your posterity.

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'On the safeguarding of Women's health depends the future of our race'. This achievement for Kruschen Salts and the caption that accompanies it, reveal clearly the popularity of the fear of race suicide that prompted support for the eugenics movement. Advertisements, *The Press*, 26 February 1919.

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editorial in the *NZMJ* stated:

We have no words sufficient to express our contempt for people who are healthy and living in fairly good economic conditions who get married with the intention of having no children. The limitation of families among the poor has something to commend it, but it is hardly ever practised, and in other classes of society, where there is no justification on medical grounds, it results from selfishness in its most revolting form on the part usually of the mother.<sup>58</sup>

The fall in the birth rate had several consequences. Firstly it fuelled government concern and added weight to eugenic arguments, all of which promoted a concentration on children. Sir John E. Gorst in *The Children of the Nation* feared that race decline would result if 'those by whom our future citizens are now being bred are not the unfittest part of our people, they are at least those whose poverty makes them the least competent to provide the food, the home, and the other conditions of life which are necessary for children if they are to grow into strong and healthy men and women.'<sup>59</sup> Concerns such as these inspired welfare provisions for children. On a practical level smaller families also made possible the intense emotional commitment to children that the new ideals of childhood maintained. Thus it affected the state's attitude to children, as well as the child's life.

Social Darwinism and eugenic ideologies influenced attitudes to childhood in both countries in the interwar years. Medical and child welfare professions laboured in the context of social evolutionist concerns about heredity, the nature of humans and racial difference. The eugenics movement fuelled much of the concern about the falling birth rate, but its solutions took two separate paths. Some believed in race improvement while others took a more negative view and argued for compulsory sterilisation of the unfit. Francis Galton, the 'father' of eugenic theory, explained that eugenics rested on the principles of 'practical Darwinism'. Eugenics aimed to 'see what the theory of heredity, of variations and the principal of natural selection means when applied to man'.<sup>60</sup> In Great Britain and New Zealand, eugenic concerns had negative and positive consequences. In both countries, revelations about the poor health of the nation's soldiers, first after the Boer War and then the First World War, provided an impetus for change. Harry Hendrick argues that by the time of the Boer War social reform

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<sup>58</sup> Editorial, *NZMJ*, December 1922, no. 106, vol. XXI, p.341.

<sup>59</sup> Sir J.E.Gorst, *The Children of the Nation*, Methuen & Co, London, 1907, p.16.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Austin, *I Picture the Old Home So Clearly; The Commonwealth and 'Half Caste' Youth in the Northern Territory 1911-1939*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra 1993, pp.17-18. Such movements gathered strength in the twentieth century and often influenced public policy, particularly in the area of health. These concerns were expressed in different ways in various countries: in the fascist policies of the German republic under Hitler, as well as in child welfare initiatives in countries like France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia and the United States. Both Eugenics and Social Darwinism suggested that modern society might have subverted natural selection. Followers of these movements discounted most of the environmental factors that concerned reformers like Gorst, and dwelt on the relationship between racial strength and heredity.

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had acquired enough status to prompt action after these revelations. 'The rather casual public interest in the health of school children suddenly became a widespread fear over the apparent physical deterioration of the British working class.'<sup>61</sup> New Zealand in particular adopted the ideas of social eugenics with the hope that a change in social conditions and health could improve racial stock. This certainly lay behind New Zealand's efforts to improve child health.<sup>62</sup>

Cooter, a British social historian, argued that by the 1920s medical ideals dominated child health and welfare, and this became a powerful argument in favour of state intervention.<sup>63</sup> Science - in particular the medical profession and the new profession of psychology - became the major influence on children in the twentieth century.<sup>64</sup> The need for a healthy nation provided the impetus, psychology and medicine determined the language of this concern and shaped official attitudes to children.<sup>65</sup> Governments directed their efforts at 'normal' children, or aimed to separate normal from abnormal children, but both countries established a range of services for children who fell outside the norms. The public school provided an opportunity to quantify children's health as well as a useful base for health initiatives (see Chapter II). In many cases New Zealand followed Britain. Regulatory measures multiplied, and focused on morality as well as health. State concern affected children who did not fit into the category of proper children, especially the delinquent and 'feeble-minded'.<sup>66</sup> The medical profession believed that mental and physical defectives

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<sup>61</sup>Hendrick, 'Child Labour, Medical Capital, and the School Medical Service, c.1890-1918', in Cooter (ed.) *In the Name of the Child*, Routledge, London, 1992, p.55.

<sup>62</sup>The situation in New Zealand's fellow colony, Australia, seems to have been similar. Austin argues that though Australia was strongly influenced by eugenic ideas, they - unlike Britain and the United States - believed in the possibility to improve the race by environmental factors rather than following the more pessimistic hereditary view. This prompted many early twentieth century initiatives, like those directed at infant welfare, in preference to the schemes that found favour particularly in America, such as sterilisation and segregation in institutions. Austin, *I Picture the Old Home So Clearly*, p.19.

<sup>63</sup>Cooter, 'Introduction', in Cooter (ed.) *In the Name of the Child*, p.12.

<sup>64</sup>By the late nineteenth century childhood was viewed as an important stage of life, a microcosm in the development of man. In 1920 Oscar Chrisman could write that he had won his battle to get paediology or child science recognised as a legitimate area of study, 'the study of the child,' he stated, 'is a science in and of itself'. He wrote in the confidence that this was a notion generally accepted by the rest of society. Scientific studies focused the concerns of the state and gave them the means to achieve their aim, which was to improve the prospects of the nation by improving the nation's children. Oscar Chrisman, *Paedology: the science of the child: the historical child*, Budger, Boston, 1920, introduction.

<sup>65</sup>A 'medicalisation' of childhood occurred concurrently with a medicalisation of womanhood. By the twentieth century, medicine portrayed both women and children as 'incomplete' or 'undeveloped'; this reinforced the notion of dependency, implying that they were in need of care and protection. Whereas women were seen as inferior because of biology, children were de-sexed (until the ideas of Freud became popular of course), essentially this was a medical redefinition of the idea of innocence. Cooter, 'Introduction', in Cooter (ed.) *In the Name of the Child*, pp.8-9.

<sup>66</sup>I.Q. tests were used to prove the superiority of the white race. Aborigines did not score as highly in the tests so it was believed that they retained a mental age equivalent to that of a European child. This had grave consequences for social policy towards Aboriginal children in Australia. A noted social anthropologist, Porteous, reported that he had given I.Q. tests to a group of delinquent boys and Aboriginal children. They compared favourably with the delinquents but were still 'markedly inferior to "normal" white children'. Austin

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threatened healthy children, and were often precociously sexual, even promiscuous. Eugenics prompted a belief in permanent depravity of some types.<sup>67</sup> Definitions of delinquency stressed that the depraved child, with its unchildlike boldness and coarseness, represented a hideous antithesis between 'an infant in age, a man in shrewdness and vice . . . the face of a child with no face of childish goodness.'<sup>68</sup> Fears of racial degeneration, combined with the new ideology of childhood, ensured that children and childhood became a central part of the social agenda, especially in the interwar years.

This agenda resulted in initiatives to improve children's mental and physical health, to regulate their labour and to extend the discipline of schooling to their leisure hours. Concern over infant mortality in an era of declining birthrates prompted authorities to attempt to improve infant health. The superintendent of Seacliff lunatic asylum, Dr Truby King, launched the Royal Association for the Protection of Women and Children in 1907. His organisation became increasingly powerful, though initially confined to the middle classes, and Truby King tried to spread his campaign to Australia and Britain in the 1920s.<sup>69</sup> Though less successful, especially in Australia, his ideas touched similar concerns in all three countries. Discipline, regulation, fresh air and the right diet would solve the problems of infant mortality and build better citizens for the Empire. Child health improved by the 1920s, infant mortality dropped and children were far more likely to be able to survive to adulthood. Significantly, in both New Zealand and Britain, maternal mortality took rather longer to decline, perhaps reflecting the importance placed on the child. Many of these improvements in child health, however, had more to do with better drainage, increased prosperity and better food, than the legislative efforts of the government, the advice of baby care experts or the placement of children in schools.

The establishment of a school medical service was one of the most important developments relating to the child health in the early twentieth century. Britain appointed a Chief Medical Officer for the Board of Education at the beginning of the twentieth century, and by 1910 compulsory inspection of British school children had been established. By the interwar years 'a formidable apparatus, legally enforced with School Medical officers in every authority,' had developed, 'with every schoolchild compulsorily inspected, the whole enterprise supported by public funds, exploiting the existing conceptual and technical resources of clinical medicine, and linked into the statutory established system of public

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explains that resulted in a belief that aboriginal children were predisposed to delinquency, and an eventual campaign to remove half-caste children from their families, to assimilate them into white society. Austin, *I Picture the Old Home So Clearly*, p.28.

<sup>67</sup>Many doctors believed that there was a strong correlation between physical and mental development, and that feeble-mindedness was related to delinquency. Austin, *ibid*, p.27.

<sup>68</sup> Austin, *ibid*, pp.25-26. The I.Q. test, originally intended as a means to identify children with problems and help them overcome learning difficulties, soon became a tool to label children.

<sup>69</sup>See Philippa Mein Smith, *Mothers and King Baby Infant Survival and Welfare in an Imperial World: Australia 1880-1950*, Macmillan Press, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, 1997.

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health'.<sup>70</sup> The New Zealand government recognised the possibilities for improving the nation's health and followed the British example. They established medical inspection of schools in 1912, and started a system of dental inspection in 1920 (see chapter II). In Britain, fears of tuberculosis promoted the establishment of open air schools for poor children, who were thought to be pre-tubercular. The schools emphasised the benefits of fresh air and sunshine though it also paid attention to nutrition.<sup>71</sup> This idea shaped developments in New Zealand in two ways: through James Shelley's attempts to promote the open-air classroom, and through the health camp movement in the interwar years. One crucial difference existed between the Britain and New Zealand: the central government was usually more important in child welfare initiatives in New Zealand. No long-established philanthropic tradition existed, and even when initiatives were started by private concerns, eventually they looked to the government for funding.<sup>72</sup>

Gradually resources developed to deal with the child's mental health. This period saw the growth of a number of professional groups who attempted to tend to the newly defined problems of childhood. Hendrick identifies the child guidance clinics, psycho-analysis and the new department of child development at the University of London Institute of Education under Susan Isaacs, as being highly influential.<sup>73</sup> These clinics represent the full establishment of the 'psycho-medical child' by the 1920s. Developments occurred at a slower pace in New Zealand but James Shelley established a child guidance clinic in Christchurch in the 1920s.

In conclusion, by the early twentieth century society believed the state could and should intervene in the family to preserve the interests of the child. Childhood became the focus of concern and efforts were made to channel it for certain ends. Dugald McDonald identified this point as crucial since it marked the end of parents' inalienable right of control over their children.<sup>74</sup> People accepted that it might be necessary to remove children from their family, if, as Pratt identified, they were being deprived of their birthright, a proper childhood. By the interwar period the modern ideology of childhood had been constructed but

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<sup>70</sup> Hendrick, 'Child Labour, Medical Capital, and the School Medical Service', in Cooter (ed.) *In the Name of the Child*, p.62.

<sup>71</sup> L. Bryder, "'Wonderlands of Buttercup, Clover and Daisies': Tuberculosis and the Open-air school movement in Britain, 1907-39", in Cooter (ed.), *In the Name of the Child*, pp.76-77.

<sup>72</sup> Tennant, *Children's Health The Nation's Wealth*, p.264. The kindergarten movement, the Plunket organisation and health camps are examples of initiatives started by private individuals or groups that came to depend on the New Zealand government for their continued existence.

<sup>73</sup> Hendrick, 'Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood', in Prout & James (eds.), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, p. 51. Between 1920 and 1939, child guidance clinics were set up in Britain. These were influenced by three major schools of thought: the British child-study tradition that started in the nineteenth century; psycho-analysis from Vienna, and American Psychological medicine. D. Thom, 'Wishes, anxieties, play and gestures: Child guidance in inter-war Britain', in Cooter (ed.), *In the Name of the Child*, p.200.

<sup>74</sup> Tennant, *Children's Health The Nation's Wealth*, p.17.

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the ramifications of change were still working throughout society. Thus it provides a useful period to examine as it is possible to study how ordinary families incorporated change. The emphasis is on qualitative rather than quantitative information, since it is only through this process of interviewing that the complex nature of the family, and of the relationship between individuals and social change can emerge.

### *Oral history and methodology*

Research into the history of childhood is of relatively recent origin. It has become the centre of raging debate, partly due to a paucity of sources. Children are the most powerless, and least visible members of society, both historically and in the present. Evidence about childhood is fragmented and thus open to different interpretations. Historians of the recent past have an advantage not available to those studying earlier periods: the use of oral history.

The oral interview is the most direct source available for evidence on childhood. It is retrospective, rather than immediate, since the detail of children's lives is shaped and filtered by the recollections of an adult many years later, but oral testimony offers an insight into children's lives that written sources do not. These are either written by adults about children or expectations of childhood, or if by children in forms that were approved by adults.<sup>75</sup> Because of these factors the study of childhood and its relationship to society is peculiarly suited to the medium of oral history. As Trevor Lummis, a prominent oral historian, has commented 'life histories are exceptionally effective historical sources because through the totality of lived experience they reveal relations between individuals and social forces which are rarely apparent in other sources.' He defines oral history or oral evidence as: 'an account of first-hand experience recalled retrospectively, communicated to an interviewer for historical purposes and preserved on a system of reproducible sound'.<sup>76</sup> Here he emphasises the point that oral evidence should be oral, though some oral historians would include information that is 'committed to memory, [and] written down'. It is only through the spoken word that the full depth and nuance of experience is revealed. Oral history tends to be more focused than the life history as used by a sociologist and can be shaped to a particular subject.

The aim of this thesis is to use oral history in a largely 'reconstructive mode'. Oral sources, supported by documentary evidence from a number of different sources - including newspaper reports, government documents and children's letters - will be used to construct an understanding of the lives of children and their families in the inter-war period. The oral evidence will be examined as a source of information, for as Steve Hussey comments, it will

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<sup>75</sup> There are written sources that offer direct evidence about children's lives. One valuable source is letters to the various children's pages in different magazines and papers. These offer useful evidence about children's activities, the size of their families, and some detail about their role in the family. Extensive use is made of them in this thesis, but they are most useful as supplementary evidence to oral history.

<sup>76</sup> T. Lummis, *Listening to History; The authenticity of oral evidence*, Hutchinson, London, 1987, p.27.