

4.1. Childhood and the Countryside in the Twentieth Century

Panel organiser: Griffiths, Clare, University of Sheffield, UK

Connections between childhood and the countryside were explored in many different ways during the twentieth century. The countryside was the setting for ideals about physical and mental wellbeing, promoted by youth movements and developments in education, imagined as a counterblast to the damaging influence of urban industry. It was often a landscape for leisure and holidays – whether in children's personal experience or in the books they read. Yet, for some children it was also a place of work, of various forms of casual labour, support for family enterprises and an education and training for possible future careers. This session explores understandings about the place of the countryside in children's experience and imagination. As generations of families grew up within towns and cities with little personal engagement with farming or the rural landscape, this prompted attempts to bring them back in contact with more natural, healthful ways of living and to educate them in an aspect of national life from which they seemed increasingly estranged. At the same time, representations of rural life and rural places were a prominent feature in children's culture: the toys they played with, the stories they read, the illustrations produced to entertain and delight them. As children played at farming or empathised with storybook characters living a rural idyll, what did this mean for generations growing up in very different settings? How did children respond to attempts to educate them in the realities of farming or in the strenuous pleasures of outdoor recreation? What do the supposed affinities between children and the countryside reveal about contemporaries' ideas regarding the experience of childhood and the special character of rural settings and rural communities? And what of the children growing up in villages and on the farms? How did that experience shape them and the communities and economies of which they were a part? The papers in the session explore some of these questions through studies of childhood and the countryside in Britain and Switzerland.

Chair: Griffiths, Clare, University of Sheffield, UK

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4.1.1. Overwork and empowerment in the daily life of children on Swiss farms in the middle of the 20th century

Moser, Peter, Archives of Rural History, Bern, Switzerland

Up to the 1950/60's most children on family farms were an integrated part of the family economy; they were engaged in a multitude of tasks in their daily life and often made a substantial contribution to the work rendered on family farms. While today this fact is often bemoaned and criticized as inhuman and cruel, historians have so far made remarkably little effort to contextualize the phenomenon historically and find out what impact the work experience had on the children themselves and on the family economy as a whole. Was it one of the causes which contributed to the relative competitiveness of family farms in highly contested markets? And was the work itself rather more than simply an excessive burden for the children? Did the self-reliant handling of animals and plants not also empower and strengthen them? Based on detailed empirical surveys and interviews carried out with children living on family farms, parents and teachers in the 1950s in the Canton of Luzern, student essays from primary and secondary schools in the Canton of Bern, published recollections and photographic sources from all over Switzerland this contribution analyses a) the extent and the variety of children's work on family farms in the middle of the 20th century and b) looks at various impacts this performance had on the different categories of children (kin, foster, boys, girls, heirs and non-heirs) living and working on family farms.

4.1.2. Country childhood in twentieth-century rural England: perceptions and experiences

Burchardt, Jeremy, University of Reading, UK

This paper lies at the intersection of two historiographical growth areas: the history of childhood and the critical analysis of the 'rural idyll'. For much of the twentieth century, the belief that nature and the countryside were good for children was widespread and influential. Youth movements such as the Scouts and Guides took young people out into the countryside, schools taught nature study and folk dancing, while open-air adventure was central to children's literature. By the late twentieth century, survey data suggested about three-quarters of adults believed the countryside was a better place to bring up children, while studies of counterurbanization frequently cited this as a principal motivation for rural relocation. Yet how justified were such beliefs? As yet, historians have hardly begun to explore the relationship between perceptions and experiences of country childhood. The paper will make a small start in addressing this gap in the literature by drawing on the Museum of English Rural Life's unique collection of rural life writing, consisting of over 300 mainly twentieth-century diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, typescripts and oral history recordings. The rural life collection provides a potentially very rich source of information about childhood but it has not yet been systematically analyzed by historians. This will be an exploratory paper, opening up lines of enquiry, and attempting to offer a preliminary map of the wide diversity of childhood experiences of the English countryside in the twentieth century.

4.1.3. Visiting „farm“ animals: 1940-2000

Sayer, Karen, Leeds Trinity University, UK

As farming processes specialised and intensified in the twentieth century, so the public came to see less and less of the animals that they consumed, yet at the same time increasingly sought out a supposedly 'authentic' rural experience: farmer's markets, 'slow' food, and visitor attractions such as farm parks, rare breed centers and heritage 'home farms'. There was a perceptual 'lag' between the technology employed within agriculture and the ways in which the public believed farming worked. In particular, the representation of farms and farm animals in texts either aimed at children, or seeking to attract parents with young children, drew on the long-standing iconography of British rural life, messages of tradition – the essence of trust – and intersected with Romantic conceptualisations of childhood. Within this perceptual gap new spaces of experience opened up, which allowed farmers to offer, profitably, their farms as sites of special interest to children and families. Concentrating on texts that present farms as centres for 'education' – from WWII efforts to educate children in the ways of country life and animal care in particular, through to the development of play farms/barns – this paper will look at the ways in which the managed spaces of the 'modern' farm came to be perceived in the post-War period as somehow overlapping or intersecting peculiarly with the social spaces of childhood.

4.1.4. „It's not a big part of me but I know it's where I come from“: Farm youth and their changing relationship with the countryside

Cassidy, Anne, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

This research looks at the relationship between a cohort of young Irish university students from farming families and the countryside. In particular it focuses on the social and emotional impact of their attachment to the farm they grew up on and their membership of wider local and agricultural communities. This is a significant but often overlooked group who even as they build their life away from farming continue to retain deep connections to the countryside and the world of their childhoods. The findings show that there are two distinctly different dimensions to how they present their relationship with the countryside. In seeking to locate themselves against an externalised other i.e. the urban they look to convey an image of a bucolic childhood of purity, innocence and hard work that is underpinned by the rural idyll discourse. On the other hand in dealing with their internal relationship with this background a more nuanced, complicated story can emerge. For some in shifting from the external to the internal there is little change in how they present their childhoods. For others, however the security of belonging clashes with a feeling of being under surveillance and the love of the farm jars against resentment at long hours of work on it. Regardless of their individual reactions to it the results show that while attitudes to the countryside and especially the farm are liquid, both continue to be of profound and enduring importance to their ontology whether willingly embraced or not.

Participants

Burchardt, Jeremy

Jeremy Burchardt is Lecturer in History at the University of Reading and chair of the Interwar Rural History Research Group. His research focuses on the social and cultural history of the English countryside in the 19th and 20th centuries. He is the author of *The Allotment Movement in England, 1793-1873* (2002) and *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change* (2002), and co-editor, with Paul Brassley and Lynne Thompson, of *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline* (2006). His articles in various scholarly journals focus on urban-rural relations, perceptions of the countryside and rural social change.

Cassidy, Anne

Anne Cassidy is a final year PhD student in the National University of Ireland, Galway. Her research focuses on the experience of growing up on Irish family farms and its impact on the transition to adulthood for a cohort of university students who will not become farmers. She has a BA in Sociological and Political Studies and History and an MA in Community Development. Her research interests include rural youth sociology, belonging, research methodologies and rural development.

Griffiths, Clare

Clare Griffiths is Senior Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Sheffield, and the author of *Labour and the Countryside: the politics of rural Britain, 1918-1939* (2007).

Moser, Peter

Peter Moser is Director of the Archives of Rural History in Bern and President of the Swiss Rural History Society. Latest Publication: *Integration through Subordination. The Politics of Agricultural Modernisation in Industrial Europe, Brepols, 2013* (together with Tony Varley).

Sayer, Karen

Karen Sayer is a member of the executive of the British Agricultural History Society and is Professor of Social and Cultural History at Leeds Trinity University, Leeds, UK. She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 2002. She has published widely on rural history, including to date two monographs: *Women of the Fields*, (MUP 1995); *Country Cottages: A Cultural History* (MUP 2000). She is currently working on a book-length project for Ashgate: *Farm Animals in Britain: 1850-2001*. She has articles forthcoming in the *Agricultural History Review* and in *Agricultural History*.