Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal

University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

Children of Empire: How Discourses of Empire Permeated British Victorian Childhood Before and After the 1870 Education Act

Author(s): Molly Finlay

Source: Groundings Undergraduate, April 2022, Vol. 13, pp. 96-107

Published by: University of Glasgow, Glasgow University Union Publications

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

Licensing: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

The CC BY 4.0 license is a Creative Commons license. This is a non-copyleft free license that is good for art and entertainment works, and educational works. It is compatible with all versions of the GNU GPL; however, like all CC licenses, it should not be used on software. People are free to: Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format; Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. But they must conform to the following terms: Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

Children of Empire: How Discourses of Empire Permeated British Victorian Childhood Before and After the 1870 Education Act

Molly Finlay

While the British Empire is acknowledged to have functioned from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was during the nineteenth century that its greatest expansion in terms of size, population, and wealth occurred.[1] Dominating the nineteenth century, the Victorian Era (1837-1901) is considered by scholars such as Amy Lloyd and Peter Marshall to be the period in British history in which the monarchy became increasingly identified with empire.[2] Queen Victoria was granted the title of Empress of India in 1876; this, as well as occasions such as Queen Victoria's Golden and Diamond Jubilees 1887 and 1897, continued to rouse imperialism towards the end of the nineteenth century.[3] In the context of this essay, discourses of empire can be understood as texts, discussions, and ideals concerning imperialism; Pramod Nayar suggests in *Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire* that discourses are not only a reflection of events, but serve to define reality for viewers, giving insight into lived experiences.[4] Accordingly, this article will examine the way in which discourses of empire permeated Victorian experiences of childhood before and after the 1870 Education Act.

The 1870 Elementary Education Act, in principle, established the right of every child in England and Wales to some form of schooling.[5] Though it did not provide

Molly Finlay is a fourth-year Joint Honours student studying Economic and Social History with Social and Public Policy. These studies in both social history as well as public policy have interconnected to inspire this article on the 1870 Education Act. Her main academic interests lie in women's and medical history, areas which she hopes to draw contemporary attention to and develop further publications on during her post-graduate degree in Journalism.

1 Thomas Winter, 'Victorian Era', in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopaedia* (2004), 473, Peter J. Marshall, eds, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 26.
2 Amy J Lloyd, 'The British Empire', *British Library Newspapers*, (Detroit: Gale, 2007), Marshall, *Illustrated History*, 325.
3 Ginger S. Frost, *Victorian Childhoods* (Dawson Books, 2009), 118.
4 Pramod K. Nayar, *Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire* (John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 2
5 Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, 5th edition, (London: Palgrave,

universal, free, or compulsory education, it did address some problems in a deficient education system by establishing a set of school boards responsible for building and managing elementary schools where there was clear educational need.[6] Historians such as Harris have argued that the 1870 Education Act was a major turning point in nineteenth-century Britain, leading to a significant expansion in the provision of education.[7] Others have highlighted the way in which the Act awarded the state power over education, arguing it overtly functioned as a form of social control.[8]

This essay will build varying theoretical views such as these into its analysis of the extent to which discourses of empire permeated Victorian childhood before and after the implementation of the Education Act. In its comparison of the preponderance of imperialist ideology in childhood before and after 1870, it will explore the ways in which discourses of empire were imparted through channels of informal education, formal education, and some non-educational means, paying particular attention to the ways in which gender and class problematised the extent to which children received imperialist education. Overall, it will conclude that while Victorian children were exposed to a degree of imperialist discourse before the Education Act, this increased markedly after 1870, through both formal education and extraneous routes.

Imperialism in informal education before the 1870 Education Act

Before the regulation of education in 1870, children from across classes would have accessed informal education in various ways.[9] Working-class children were likely to have attended beneficent Sunday schools as students. These not only taught religious curricula but enforced social control and individual betterment through charitable events and organisations affiliated with the church.[10] Recollections in the autobiographies of working-class children highlight the importance of Sunday schools in enhancing their quality of life. Bessy Wallies recalls, in her memoirs, the 'tea days' bestowed upon her community by her Sunday school, and the importance

2017), 97.

6 *Ibid*, 98.

7 Bernard Harris, *The origins of the British welfare state: society, state and social welfare in England and Wales, 1800-1945* (Macmillan International Higher Education, 2018), 147.

8 William B. Stephens, *Education in Britain, 1750–1914*, (Macmillan International Higher Education, 1999), 15.

9 Walter Armytage, 'The 1870 Education Act', in *British Journal of Educational Studies* (1970), 18.2: 128.

10 Trygve Tholfsen, 'Moral Education in the Victorian Sunday School', in *History of Education Quarterly* (1980), 20: 78.

of these occasions to the working-class and destitute children attending:

'Food left over was carefully divided amongst the helpers, few of which ever tasted ham or cake except on Tea Day'.[11]

Informal institutions in education such as Sunday schools undoubtedly influenced working-class children, encouraging their continued commitment to organisations through food and 'treat' offerings.[12] While Tholfsen suggests the operation of philanthropic institutions such as Sunday schools in Victorian Britain 'contributed to the achievement of national and imperial purposes', imperialist influence on Victorian childhood through this particular channel is largely considered minimal.[13] Provision of valuable academic skill or the instillment of imperialistic ideals is widely debated, and historians such as Fraser have gone as far as to argue that some charity schools were considered 'no more than childminding establishments', ineffective in influencing children to any significant extent.[14]

Middle-class engagement in Sunday school education was comparatively different. For girls especially, Sunday schools functioned as an outlet for teaching and individual betterment, rather than as an institution in which they might receive teaching. Sunday schools allowed middle-class girls to engage in apprentice roles, positively interacting with education in a way that was charitable 'without compromising their class status or marriageability'.[15] Arguably, the altruistic notion behind middle-class girls assisting the most destitute further elevated their position in society.[16] It is important to note that before the 1870 Education Act, education and class were clearly interconnected; working and middle-class children were accessing the same informal education systems, but in these divergent means demonstrated, perpetuating class inequalities and allowing a power imbalance to persist. Had discourses of empire been as prominent in informal education as Tholfsen has argued, imperialism would, then, have influenced the working and middle-class in an irregular manner.

11 John Burnett, *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to The 1920s* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1982), 328.
12 Tholfsen, 'Moral Education', 78.
13 *Ibid*. 94.
14 Fraser, *Evolution,* 90.
15 Frost, *Victorian Childhoods,* 109.
16 Joan Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 1.

Imperialism in formal education before the 1870 Education Act

Alternative, formal education before the introduction of the 1870 Education Act could be accessed through fee-paying and boarding schools.[17] This form of education was primarily accessed by middle and upper-class children, on account of the requirement for fees, but also due to the economic necessity for working-class children to contribute to family income rendering schooling an impossibility.[18] Working-class children would be able to access a degree of formal education through workhouses and industrial schools, while the most destitute, or 'paupers', were provided with informal teaching and free food by charitable 'ragged schools'.[19] Nonetheless, working-class children were far less likely to receive a broad education than their middle and upper-class counterparts.[20]

Consequently, middle and upper-class Victorian children were more likely to consume imperial commentary through their education and the knowledge that teachers and textbooks imparted. This theory is supported by the increasing number of books produced and intended for 'middling school children' between 1837 and 1901.[21] These textbooks were 'a supply in some sort to teachers' demands', and provide some evidence in their content that discussion around empire was indeed a part of the middle- and upper-class curriculum[22]. Bernard Porter has found that textbooks successfully analysed for imperialist messages were found to have been seldom used in working-class schools, enhancing the argument that discourses of Empire were most likely to shape the childhoods of middle- and upper-class children.[23]

Such analysis of the extent to which imperialism permeated Victorian childhood on the basis of class reveals additional implications when observed in the context of gender. Though middle-class girls were more likely to participate in education

17 Jane McDermid, *The Schooling of Working-class Girls in Victorian Scotland: Gender, Education and Identity*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 11.
18 Michael Childs, *Labour's Apprentices: Working-class Lads in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, (Montreal: McGill Queen's Press, 1992), 6.
19 Sally Mitchell, *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopaedia,* (London: Routledge, 1988), 241, Frost, *Victorian Childhoods,* 34.
20 McDermid, *Schooling*, 11.
21 Bernard Porter, *The Absent-minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 65.
22 Ibid, 67.
23 Ibid, 67.

than working-class or destitute girls, either formally or charitably, the perception that education was unimportant for women continued to obstruct female access to education even in the upper-classes.[24] This is illustrated by the fact that middle-class girls had access to education through the aforementioned informal organisations such as Sunday schools, which preserved their marriageability, rather than through the formal, fee-paying schools their male counterparts were offered.[25] This reduced access to education, especially amongst working-classes, will inevitably, by this essay's previous analysis, have reduced their exposure to discourses of empire.

Importantly, though Porter highlights that imperial messages featured somewhat in the textbooks utilised in middle and upper-class education systems before the introduction of the 1870 Education Act, he has gone on to explain that in comparison to other topics, few textbooks published before the 1880s awarded a significant amount of attention to empire.[26] Dunae supports this argument, writing that the scattered references to the Empire in publications before and during 1870 suggest 'imperial sentiment [in education] was relatively limited'.[27] While the topic clearly permeated educational discourse somewhat, these assessments are indicative of an absence of imperial discourse in education throughout Britain before 1870.

Imperialism in non-educational institutions

While it has been illustrated that the absence of children, particularly girls, from comprehensive education subsequently reduced their exposure to discourses of Empire, it must be stressed that this was not consistently the case. Michael Childs explains that in Britain's industrial age, 'illness, death, accident, slackening of trade or a strike could plunge a family from relative comfort into a hand-to-mouth existence'.[28] As already alluded to, this precarity required the children of some working-class families to contribute to the household economy through waged labour. While the staple industries of textiles and iron continued to dominate the composition of British exports throughout the late-Victorian era, children contributed to economic

---

24 McDermid, *Schooling*, 1, Carol Dyhouse, 'Towards a "feminine" curriculum for English schoolgirls: The demands of ideology 1870-1963', *Women's Studies International* (1978), 1: 297.

25 Mitchell, *Victorian Britain*, 241.

26 Porter, *The absent-minded imperialists*, p.67.

27Patrick Dunae, 'Boys' Literature and the Idea of Empire, 1870-1914', *Victorian Studies,* 24, (1980), p.106.

28 Childs, *Labour's Apprentices*, 6.

augmentation, accessing wages in textile factories, mills, and mines.[29] It has been argued that children and families employed in exportation industries such as cotton textiles and coal would have been made directly aware of the British Empire; namely, through their roles in transforming raw imported cotton and the subsequent exportation of cloth.[30] For this reason, it could be suggested that working-class children removed from education were exposed through different, non-education channels, to discourses of empire, as cogs in the wheel of an expanding and industrialising British Empire.

Notably, Victorian boys were more likely to access manual and waged labour in order to stimulate their family economy than female children; in families unable to afford their education, girls would likely have been expected to correct a domestic imbalance caused by the return of adults in the household to the labour market.[31] Considering the lens of gender ones again, it is clear that, in Victorian Britain, male children could expect to be exposed to discourse of Empire to a greater extent than females. When excluded from education, imperialism permeated Victorian boy's childhood through industrial labour linked to the British Empire, while girls excluded from education could expect to remain within the domestic sphere performing caring roles, comparatively unexposed to imperialistic ideals.

Importantly, historians such as Humphries have highlighted declining rates of child labour over the nineteenth century, attributing this to improved technology as well as the implementation of legislation such as the Factory Acts and the 1870 Education Act which gradually reduced child employment and increased their access to formal education.[32] As the 1870 Act became fully implemented, and especially by 1880 when education had become universally compulsory, attendance at school had removed children from work environments that might have exposed them to discourses of empire in this manner.[33] Thus, the decline in child labour even before, but especially after, 1870 will have served to limit the discourses of empire that permeated Victorian

29 Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 7.
30 Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815-1914* (Springer, 2002), 22, David, Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-century History*, (Penguin UK, 2018).
31 Humphries, *Childhood*, 7.
32 *Ibid*, 5.
33 Nigel Middleton, 'The Education Act of 1870 as the Start of the Modern Concept of the Child', in *British Journal of Educational Studies* (1970), 18.2: 174.

childhood to some extent.

Imperialism in non-education after the 1870 Education Act

It was not until after 1870 that the significance of empire began to markedly increase throughout Britain. Certainly, Amy Lloyd emphasizes that in the 1870s, Britain entered what has been termed the 'Age of Imperialism'.[34] After Queen Victoria's ascension to Empress of India in 1876, 'Britons were captivated by the reporting of the Indian Mutiny and the Boer War', illustrating the increased permeation of imperial discourse into Victorian society towards the end of the nineteenth century.[35]

This premise that imperialism intensified toward the late nineteenth century aligns with Queen Victoria's return to the public eye after her private and extended period of mourning. Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 was a 'magnificent celebration', while her Diamond Jubilee in 1897 focused 'almost exclusively on a celebration of the British Empire, and the Queen's role as its head'.[36] Families of all backgrounds were encouraged to honour Victoria's personal achievements as Queen, and these occasions 'helped shape children's view of the rightness of British rule'.[37] Steinbach and Porter provide convincing evidence that information, knowledge, and discourses of Empire percolated through social classes, arguing that class mobility was a novel advancement in Victorian Britain.[38] The participation of children across classes in Queen Victoria's imperial celebrations suggests that discourses of empire permeated Victorian childhood across classes after the 1870 Education Act, not through educational channels, but through national and cultural engagement in discourses of empire that grew towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Furthermore, Lloyd has suggested that in the late nineteenth century 'empire was a prevalent theme in popular fiction and children's magazine' as 'Imperial exhibitions [...] and an expansion of music-hall entertainment where patriotic songs celebrating the Empire were a staple element' allowed discourses of Empire to permeate Victorian

34 Lloyd, 'The British Empire', (2007).
35 *Ibid*.
36 Greg King, *Twilight of Splendor: the court of Queen Victoria during her diamond jubilee year*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 19.
37 Frost, *Victorian Childhoods*, 118.
38 Susie Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, culture and society in nineteenth-century Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 138, Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*, 67.

childhood to a startling extent.[39] While historians may be inclined to assume that periodical literature would primarily have been accessed by the middle and upper-classes, Porter has suggested that contemporary ideals would have 'trickled down', stressing that class boundaries in Victorian Britain were in no way solidified.[40] Thus, discourses of empire permeated Victorian Childhood through a number of social and cultural channels after 1870.

Imperialism in education after the 1870 Education Act

By investigating the schooling experience of working-class Victorian children in English elementary schools from the late nineteenth century to 1939, Brad Beaven has concluded that school curricula, physical exercise, and extra-curricular activities systematically delivered to children after the 1870 Education Act 'were fertile ground for planting the seeds of imperial fervour'.[41] While agreeing with Porter that until the late 1880's 'board Schools and schools in the voluntary sector appear to have followed curricula relatively free from imperial propaganda', Beaven suggests that eventually 'international competition and anxieties over the security of the Empire brought the teaching of patriotism to national attention'.[42]

He goes on to argue that from the late 1880s, the curriculum took on a distinctly imperial edge as military drill and imperial ceremony were introduced, citing songs such as 'Hail Britannia' and 'England's Queen' listed among St Michaels Church of England School log book.[43] Primary evidence such as that cited by Beaven suggests that discourses of empire undoubtedly permeated Victorian childhood to a considerable extent after the 1870 Education Act. This can be attributed to the surge in imperialism towards the end of the nineteenth century, as described, translated through a regularising education system.

Conclusion

Though informal education opportunities provided by Sunday schools scarcely offered imperialism an opportunity to permeate Victorian childhood, they did

39 Lloyd, 'British Empire', 2007.
40 Porter, *Absent-minded*, 84
41 Brad Beaven, 'Educating the future citizens of Empire: Working-class schooling, 1870–1939', in *Visions of Empire*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 125.
42 *Ibid*, 130.
43 *Ibid*, CRO, CEE/log/15/1, 'St Michael's Church of England School log book', 9 March 1883, 3 March 1897.

work to emphasise inequalities compounded by class and gender. While working-class children might have expected to receive an informal, parochially compiled curriculum as well as charitable sustenance, middle-class girls were able to access informal education in pedagogical roles.[44] But had discourses of Empire permeated Sunday school curricula as Tholfsen has suggested, imperialism surely would have directed working and middle-class children in divergent ways, which it did not.[45]

Formal educational institutions such as fee-paying, boarding schools have been identified by Porter as institutions that adopted some imperial teaching materials prior to the 1870 Education Act.[46] The relatively limited imperialist ideals found to be presented through educational textbooks were, however, limited to permeating the childhoods of middle and upper-class children on account of monetary requirements for fee-paying and boarding schools. More links between class and gender may be observed: while middle and upper-class boys were afforded a private education that taught imperial principles, the expectation of middle-class girls to preserve their marriageability and remain within the domestic sphere made them less likely to experience discourses of empire through formal education systems.[47]

Although an absence from education before the 1870 Education Act might have suggested an exclusion from discourses of Empire, work such as Edgerton's has suggested that working-class children performing waged labour in industries such as cotton textiles and coal would have been aware of the Empire due to the distribution of goods.[48] In their absence from industrial labour and trade for favour of the domestic sphere, girls' exclusion from discourses of empire can therefore be seen as multiplied.[49] Crucially however, Humphries has highlighted the way in which declining rates of child labour over the nineteenth century as a result of the Factory Acts and the 1870 Education Act comprehensively reduced the exposure of both boys and girls to discourses of empire, reducing the value of this argument.[50]

44 Frost, *Victorian Childhoods*, 109
45 Tholfsen, 'Moral Education', 94.
46 Porter, *Absent-minded*, 67.
47 McDermid, *The Schooling of Working-class Girls*, 1, Dyhouse, 'Towards a "feminine" curriculum for English schoolgirls', 297.
48 Hyam, *Imperial Century*, 22, Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation.*
49 Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, 7.
50 *Ibid*, 5.

Discourses of empire do appear to permeate Victorian childhood to a greater extent after the 1870 Education Act. Historians such as Beaven have illustrated the introduction of military drills and nationalist hymns into Elementary school curricula, suggesting an increase in imperial discourse in education towards the end of the nineteenth century.[51] Though suitable evidence has been provided to support the argument that discourses of empire permeated Victorian childhood to a greater extent after the 1870 Education Act, it is important to consider the extent to which imperialism in Britain was accelerating towards the end of the nineteenth century on account of trade expansion and the identification of monarchy with Empire. Queen Victoria's role as Empress of India as well as her nationally celebrated Golden and Diamond Jubilees undoubtedly allowed discourses of Empire to permeate the lives of Victorian children.[52] Importantly, national perpetuation of imperialistic discourse as well as the prominence of Empire in popular fiction and society seems to have been experienced by those across class and gender spectrums. On account of this, as well as sufficient evidence that imperial discourse permeated Victorian childhood most significantly towards the end of the nineteenth century, (though not entirely through elementary schooling), it is reasonable to argue that discourses of Empire permeated Victorian childhood to the greatest extent after the introduction of the 1870 Education Act.

51 Beaven, 'Future Citizens', 130.
52 Frost, *Victorian Childhoods*, 118.

Bibliography

Armytage, Walter, 'The 1870 education act', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 18, no. 2, (1970): 121-133

Beaven, Brad, 'Educating the future citizens of empire: Working-class schooling, 1870–1939', *Visions of empire*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017): 125-149

Burnett, John, *Destiny Obscure : Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to The 1920s* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1982)

Burstyn, Joan, *Victorian education and the ideal of womanhood* (London: Routledge, 2016)

Childs, Michael, *Labour's apprentices: working-class lads in late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Montreal: McGill Queen's Press, 1992)

CRO, CEE/log/15/1, 'St Michael's Church of England School log book', 9 March 1883; 3 March 1897

Dunae, Patrick, 'Boys' Literature and the Idea of Empire, 1870-1914', *Victorian Studies* (1980), 24: 105-121

Dyhouse, Carol, 'Towards a "feminine" curriculum for English schoolgirls: The demands of ideology 1870-1963', *Women's Studies International* (1978), 1: 297-311

Edgerton, David, *The rise and fall of the British nation: A twentieth-century history*, (Penguin UK, 2018)

Fraser, Derek, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, fifth edition, (London: Palgrave, 2017)

Frost, Ginger, Suzanne, *Victorian Childhoods*, (Dawson Books, 2009)

Harris, Bernard, *The origins of the British welfare state: society, state and social welfare in England and Wales, 1800-1945*, (Macmillan International Higher Education, 2018)

Humphries, Jane, *Childhood and child labour in the British industrial revolution,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

Hyam, Ronald, *Britain's imperial century, 1815-1914: a study of empire and expansion*, (Springer, 2002)

King, Greg, *Twilight of Splendor: the court of Queen Victoria during her diamond jubilee year*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2007)

Lloyd, Amy, J, 'The British Empire', *British Library Newspapers*, (Detroit: Gale, 2007)

Marshall, Peter, James, eds. *The Cambridge illustrated history of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

McDermid, Jane, *The schooling of working-class girls in Victorian Scotland: gender, education*

and identity, (London: Routledge, 2013)

Middleton, Nigel, 'The Education Act of 1870 as the Start of the Modern Concept of the Child', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 18, no. 2, (1970): 166-179

Mitchell, Sally, *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopaedia*, (London: Routledge, 1988)

Nayar, Pramod, K, *Colonial voices: the discourses of Empire,* (John Wiley & Sons, 2012)

Porter, Bernard, *The absent-minded imperialists: Empire, society, and culture in Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

Steinbach, Susie, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, culture and society in nineteenth-century Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2016)

Stephens, William, Brewer, *Education in Britain, 1750–1914*, (Macmillan International Higher Education, 1999)

Tholfsen, Trygve, 'Moral Education in the Victorian Sunday School', *History of Education Quarterly* (1980), 20: 77-99

Winter, Thomas, 'Victorian Era', *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopaedia* (2004): 473-475