Introduction

> I have a holy horror of babies, to whatever nationality they may belong; but for general objectionableness I believe there are none to compare with the Australian baby . . . the little brute is omnipresent, and I might almost add omnipotent . . . Wherever his mother goes, baby is also taken. He fills railway-carriages and omnibuses, obstructs the pavement in perambulators, and is suckled *coram populo* in the Exhibition.[1]

Thus wrote Richard Twopeny, an upper-class British journalist who arrived in Adelaide in 1876. To such observers, not only infants but older children had apparently escaped the discipline of nursery and school and were running riot in the world of adults, in no way unseen and far from unheard. According to Jessie Ackermann, an American feminist visiting Australia in 1902:

> They are very excitable by temperament, and scamper to the doors, windows, fence or gate, at every possible opportunity to cheer or yell. They love to watch processions, funerals or a circus; crowd to football games, prize-fights, races, or any manner of sport at which those of tender years are allowed. They bet, barrack and manifest for their 'side' regardless of fair play or other considerations. Crowding the picture-shows, they scream, shout and fairly roar . . . A love for healthy sport is wholesome . . . but an overdeveloped love for pleasure and excitement is bad, very bad.[2]

Such comments were not unusual. The European settlement of Australia had occurred at a time when the rights and wrongs of childhood were being intensely debated. Childhood was the 'seedtime' of 'the soul', declared William Wordsworth, one of many theorists who believed that proper upbringing of the young was vital not only to the individual but to the future health and happiness of society as a whole. By the late nineteenth century, although everyone from poets to pedagogues and politicians agreed that children had a right to physical care,

formal training and moral protection, there was a wide range of opinion as to the particular forms this pediatric programme should take.

These debates were of relatively recent origin. Up until the fifteenth century in Europe, the components of an ideal childhood had been neither defined in sociological theory nor enshrined in criminal and civil law. Though various stages of life had been recognised, childhood was not seen as an intrinsically separate condition but rather a period of defective adulthood out of which children had to be wrenched as soon as possible. There had been no universal schooling to delineate childhood, formally postponing entry into the world of work while inculcating social and moral values. Nor had the family been overly concerned with formal, moral training of the individual child. Following a somewhat tardy weaning, child-rearing had been shared in poorer communities by kin, friends and neighbours and in the case of the rich, by servants, until at around seven years, apprenticeship into other households had further loosened parental bonds. Such large and fluid domestic environments did not necessarily mean children were unloved or neglected. However, the fact that perhaps only a quarter of those born actually grew up inclined some parents to regard their offspring as little more than a necessary encumbrance to ensure security in old age and/or the transmission of property. For children who survived the health hazards of the first five years, childhood had passed quickly and was soon forgotten. Nor was puberty seen as a particularly complicated stage of growth requiring protection, training and care. Shorter life expectancy, the early assumption of adult roles and dressing children in scaled-down versions of adult clothes all played down young people's sexual changes at this time.

The growth of capitalistic production and the rise of Protestantism changed all this. The replacement of loyalties to lineage, kin, patron and local community by new fealties to state and religion strengthened the power-base of sovereigns in the political realm and of fathers in the home. Both the Catholic and the Protestant churches became ever more concerned with the morals and inclinations of the individual than with the sacred and eschatological aspects of faith. At the same time, children were assumed to have attributes that distinguished them markedly from adults. These differences were based on the notions of malleability and weakness. Because children were more pliant and vulnerable than adults, the quality of the individual, society and, in due course, even the nation was seen to depend on expert and early training during this tender stage of growth. Thus the notion developed that no

child was quite ready for life but first must undergo a prolonged socialisation in the quarantine of the school. For the sons of the well-to-do, consignment to a boarding-school replaced domestic service in a superior household or court. Religious orders founded from the sixteenth century became teaching orders, while the family too assumed a moral and spiritual function. Far from merely transmitting life, names and property, its purpose was to mould bodies and souls.

In tandem with these changes came the idea that children required a carefully structured, daily discipline to guard both them and society against perils and corruption. 'Give me a child . . . ', teachers at St Ignatius Loyola's Jesuit Order (founded 1534) are thought to have intoned. Corporal punishment, formerly reserved for criminals and vagabonds, gained favour in all schools and many homes. Sexuality too became an issue. With the growing gains won by fluid, newly enriched groups of merchants and land-holders over traditional, fixed, hereditary power, ever more emphasis was placed on the role of the environment in fashioning individual health, happiness and material progress in this world and salvation in the next. Strictly defined sex roles and forms of sexual expression came to be seen as crucial factors in this task. Hence children were no longer considered unaware of or indifferent to sexual matters. They were special little creatures who, if not quite innocent (owing to the burden of original sin), were certainly more so than adults and must at all costs be kept pure. Some advised corporal chastisement for this purpose; humanists believed that morals and skills were best taught through pleasure and games. In 1690 England's John Locke outlined a detailed training programme based on the notion that children were like empty vessels, easily filled with desirable aspirations and values. Locke, also a critic of absolute monarchies, believed that cruel treatment and physical abuse would produce irrational, unwanted behaviour, difficult or impossible to correct later as the child hardened into adulthood. More attention to controlling the environment, including a spartan regime of bland food, cold beds and baths and much fresh air and exercise, would strengthen both body and mind, inscribing 'modesty, submission and the power to forbear' on the *tabula rasa* (blank sheet) of the child's mind.

By the late eighteenth century, when the first colonists were arriving in New South Wales, these debates had escalated. Latter-day Puritan theorists such as Susannah and John Wesley argued that in addition to strict diet and avoidance of luxury, corporal punishment was needed to beat out sin and break the child's will, but influential French secularist

writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau strongly disagreed. Writing in 1762, he maintained the Puritan proscription on rich food, alcohol and comfortable beds, but argued that corporal punishment might arouse premature sexuality. Like the humanists, Rousseau believed that during this extended period of protection and vigilance, learning was to be structured so as to be achieved as far as possible through unfettered play. Released from swaddling bands and from conventional, bookish schooling, and allowed a degree of monitored liberty but no power, the child would eventually reach adolescence unspoilt. This, Rousseau declared, was a specially momentous stage of growth, a second birth, a time of sacred innocence when vitality overflowed, the imagination soared and the task of education could really begin. Vigilance therefore was to be prolonged. Youths at this fiery and ardent stage should be given much healthy exercise and kept away from cities and women. Only at twenty were they ready to be told about sex, after which they should be consigned to an early marriage.

'Hold childhood in reverence,' Rousseau had commanded, an ordinance further developed by the Romantics who made the innocence of childhood and youth central to their theories of knowledge and art. According to these philosophers, poets, artists and novelists, children had special qualities of sensibility and imagination which put them in touch with a realm of *a priori* knowledge that extended far beyond mere sensory perception or the Newtonian calculations of science and technology. These special qualities were, however, rapidly corrupted and blunted by 'experience', that is, cruel, tyrannical parenting, puritanical religion and exposure to the harsh realities of urbanisation and industrialisation. Other than children, certain gifted people, chiefly young men, also reached these ecstatic realms, thus realising their individual potential and identity, always provided they remained attuned to imagination, passions, intuition and dreams. Other theorists linked Rousseau's idea of the adolescent male's potent sensibility and energy to collective, nationalistic goals, a notion actively encouraged by the 1820s in fraternal movements like 'Jeune France' and 'Young Germany'.

Some physicians, too, contributed to this Romantic ideal. Though many were heavily influenced by the Puritan formula others, like William Buchan, were drawn to the currently fashionable concept of indigenous people, especially in the Pacific, as 'Noble Savages', living a life of innocence and enchantment remote, it was thought, from the trials of industrialising Europe. Applying such notions to the physical

care of European children, these medical theorists followed Rousseau in attacking many punitive nursery practices, from swaddling the newborn to coddling the older child. By the 1790s these debates were prominent in the plethora of new magazines, periodicals and newspapers catering for the proliferating literate middle class. In particular, the issues of corporal punishment and sexual innocence were probed in a dialogue that sometimes verged on the pornographic.

Though the Romantic's visionary child was often a peasant or even 'a little black boy', initially these debates were not seen as applicable to every child. Until the late eighteenth century, interest in child socialisation was race, class and gender specific, expressing the needs of wealthy new upper and middle classes to school their sons as holders and inheritors of property. It was no coincidence that most of the principal writers on childhood up to this time were also theorists of law, property and the social contract, the right of entrepreneurial men to overturn tyrannical, irrational and feudal regimes and establish new political, judicial and economic systems based on the pursuit of personal fortune in a free market. Such extraordinary freedom could only be allowed after prolonged training in the rules of the game. Whether by corporal punishment or supervised play, boys had to be taught that they owned only what they could pay for. Otherwise anarchy would prevail, and no man's property would be safe. The monitoring of male sexuality, too, was more than merely a moral issue. Care had to be taken that sexual gratification did not culminate in poor health or unproductive homosexual inclinations, or interfere with the passing on of property to rightful heirs.

The ideal of a prolonged, protected childhood and adolescence for females had initially little relevance for theorists, who assumed that women could not hold property but were themselves the property of men. Rousseau was the first to make specific mention of girls, and he made it clear that they were to have a very different training from that which he envisaged for Emile, his model child. A girl was to be trained to become a decorative ornament and plaything of her husband yet also a responsible and prolific mother. A miniature model of femininity, somehow she had to be always an adult yet forever a child.

Despite the strictures of visitors like Ackermann and Twopeny, these debates proved especially influential in Australia. The colonies themselves were often regarded as children—Britain's offspring still in their formative years. Unencumbered by any entrenched social hierarchy, it was said, such as that based on aristocracy or slaves, even in the convict

period the colonies' Aboriginal and 'currency' children attracted attention as specimens of what a new 'free' environment might or might not achieve. The conservative, racial and sexual assumptions underlying child-raising formulae were not closely examined; nor were the punitive implications of the concept of 'innocence' when it was applied across class and gender to 'save' children whose parents could not match the prescribed, child-rearing ideal.

Equally obscured was the power-play which underlay the increasing debates between competing groups claiming expertise on how best to control the malleable child. As 'childhood' gradually encompassed all children, transforming the young from invisibility and abuse to objects first of altruistic rescue and, later, of intense scientific concern, so the prestige to be won from authority on child-nature became ever more hotly contested. In the beginning, it was principally charitable church people and especially middle-class women who set up the infrastructure of child rescue, including welfare and health services, but their very success soon attracted male secular experts, principally doctors, to the field. By the end of the nineteenth century these men were using semi-scientific knowledge of child-nature, much of it spurious, to question the competence of 'lady bountifuls' and indeed of all women in child-rearing. Determined to develop a superior white Australian national type, they also turned to Darwinist notions of inherited defects, thus challenging liberal environmental theory. When doctors in turn were forced to concede to psychologists, whose claim to scientific objectivity was equally questionable, the children were again affected.

This book attempts to portray a broad range of Australian childhood, exploring happy experiences as well as harrowing ones. None of these childhoods, however, is easily retrieved. Whether rich or poor, black or white, children leave few records of their immediate joys and fears. Certainly the historian can examine children's games, rhymes, toys and other artifacts, but many of these reflect what adults considered appropriate for children rather than the voices of children themselves. To write childhood history, the historian greatly depends on what adults remember of their past, or what adults have said about children in letters, diaries, school records, government reports and the like.

These documents are far from impartial. Memory is vital to the way we construct a metaphorical 'self', while even in personal letters and oral testimony, people order and categorise experience, seeking to confer meaning and direction to their present-day lives. In autobio-

graphy and in interviews, some adults look back to childhood as an almost mythical golden age before they were forced to undergo the anxieties and eventually the ill-health of maturity and old age; others recall mainly the miseries, humiliations and punishments to which the young are always susceptible. Moreover, both personal memories and contemporary accounts of childhood are coloured by the informant's concept of an ideal childhood and, as we have seen, over the past 200 years, no issue has been more extensively theorised, debated and explored. Even if informants are unfamiliar with the views of Locke or Rousseau, few will have escaped the pervasive influence of the nineteenth-century novelists, especially Dickens. Drawing on the concept of innocence laid down by Rousseau and the Romantic poets, Dickens interpreted the innocence of children to mean their victimisation by ignorant, cruel and greedy adults. By the late nineteenth century this was a central, literary convention, influencing numerous written accounts. In the Australian sources, it is mainly authors like Albert Facey or Margaret Tucker who, not in touch with approved English literature, avoid the sentimental Dickensian view. Such writers are also best able to evade the equally pervasive influence of the doctors and of Freudian psychoanalysis. Premised on the notion of the supreme importance and uniqueness of childhood, these models seem to have been remarkably powerful in prompting literate, formally educated informants to attribute childhood sorrows to the follies of parents, principally mothers, rather than to the political and economic framework with which mothers had to contend.

Because of these problems, childhood history must always be as much about adults as children. The historian can never lose sight of the various influences which shape the sources and how these influences have changed across time. For this reason, this book takes a chronological approach and tells as much about the ways childhood is remembered as the experience of children themselves.