

Lionel Rose — *The Erosion of Childhood: Child Oppression in Britain, 1860-1918*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. Pp. 294.

Carolyn Steedman — *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan, 1860-1931*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1990. Pp. 343.

In her introduction, Carolyn Steedman refers to “popular histories of childhood in which, throughout the nineteenth century, kind people are seen to rescue children from factory, mine and physical deterioration, and events march toward the enlightened present of the schooled child” (3). Their distance from this naive model is what these two books share; in other ways, they are quite different, and valuable in their different ways.

Lionel Rose’s posthumous book is better described by its subtitle than by its title. “Erosion” of childhood suggests some Romantic golden age of innocence and freedom increasingly overshadowed and corrupted by experience and exploitation, whereas the full weight of Rose’s evidence makes the subtitle’s claim of “oppression” seem no hyperbole. Nor is that oppression, as he amply documents from a wide range of sources, merely a matter of “a harsh, callous capitalist profiteering from his child slaves” (8). Instead, he provides pages and pages of both statistical and anecdotal evidence for the physical, intellectual, and spiritual oppression of children in farm and factory labour, on canal boats and in carnivals, on the streets, in schoolrooms and at home — and he does not limit his focus to the working classes. As befits a school-teacher, Rose focuses often on education and what passed for it, whether in public school or evening classes. The reader finishes the book, oppressed in her turn, by the ubiquitous neglect and abuse suffered by those generations of children. Probably, few readers will so immerse themselves in the book, however; it is primarily a resource for dipping, a compilation of facts rather than an argument.

Steedman’s book, on the other hand, demands and deserves sustained engagement. Rose asserts that as the century progressed, “the idea that education should enlarge children’s aspirations and enable them to become ‘upwardly mobile’ was beginning to supersede the classic Victorian view that it should condition them to their set station in life” (207). Steedman’s book takes a major figure in that change, and explores how and why she contributed to that change in attitude, while broadening the issue from concern with the upward mobility of the individual schoolchild to the cultural welfare of the schoolchild’s family, community, and class. Steedman does far more, however, than focus on the life and work of Margaret McMillan as a way of understanding socialist policy and practice in the early twentieth century, and she does more than focus on class and culture as shaping forces in the life and work of the woman Rose variously described as “the educationalist” (76) or “the socialist child welfare campaigner” (114). Steedman summarizes “the *historical* argument that lies at the centre of [her] book: that what might be seen as McMillan’s ‘insideness,’ her meaning, which was her remaking and reassertion of childhood, actually spells out the public space of cultural change” (251). Autobiography, biography, and history are then all parts of the process by which selves and societies are constructed, and those constructions narrated. Since “literary forms are both permissive and preventive” (Steedman, 243), it only makes sense that Steedman’s book should echo McMillan’s own “elision of forms,” her “manipulation and use of genres ... and rhetorical forms” (243). No doubt, some readers will find this open acknowledgement of “the fictionality of the historical enterprise” (245) disconcerting or even disturbing, but part three of the book (“Biographical Questions, Fictions of the Self”), in which these

issues are explored, ought to be required reading for every historical biographer or biographical historian. That chapter opens and closes with the “shade of an autobiography” (243) — McMillan’s first, and Steedman’s own to conclude. Following that precedent, let an autobiographical shade end this review.

McMillan worked closely with schools and schoolchildren in Deptford, “the poorest area of south-east London”. In 1927, she described it as “the place of deep ford. Very deep and steep it is, the soft black yielding mass under the black waters of Poverty. At every step, one goes down and down...” She describes its “hideous trades,” and claims: “This kind of work leaves its mark on a generation. It is not wiped out in days, or months, perhaps not in years” (115). She was Manager of, among others, Trudley’s Road School in Deptford; perhaps it would have cheered her to know that a boy born in the twenties on Trudley’s Road eventually took advantage of one of the grammar school scholarship places Rose catalogues (207), and climbed out of the place of the deep ford. She might even have smiled to see his daughter writing a review of a book of her life’s project.

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Joyce E. Salisbury, éd. — *Sex in the Middle Ages. A Book of Essays*. London : Garland, 1991, xv, 258 p. (Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, vol. 1360; Garland Medieval Casebooks, vol. 3).

Dans l’étude des comportements humains, l’histoire de la sexualité a encore un certain mal à trouver sa juste place et il semble toujours y avoir une résistance à en traiter comme de n’importe quel autre aspect de la vie des sociétés. À ce titre, l’analyse des sociétés médiévales ne fait pas exception. Reconnaisant la multiplicité et le caractère éclaté des publications sur la sexualité au Moyen Âge, l’éditrice de ce volume a voulu pallier cette difficulté et faire progresser nos connaissances en rassemblant quatorze textes — dont deux ne sont pas originaux ayant déjà été publiés —, répondant chacun à sa manière aux trois questions autour desquelles, selon elle, devraient tourner toutes les études sur ce sujet : « What were people doing? What did they think about what they were doing? What did they think about what other people were doing? » (xi). Ainsi posée, la question de la sexualité dans le monde médiéval semblera cependant à plusieurs trop étroitement définie et, pour tout dire, un peu simpliste. La description la plus complète des pratiques sexuelles des gens du Moyen Âge ou l’éventail exhaustif de ce que l’on pensait à leur sujet, s’ils étaient possibles, ne pourront jamais servir de substitut à une véritable réflexion sur la place de la sexualité dans l’économie générale du monde médiéval. Le lecteur ne doit pas espérer trouver ici une ébauche de cette synthèse cependant souhaitable.

Dans un essai de thématization et pour corriger le caractère forcément discontinu de ces études de provenances diverses, l’éditrice a réparti les quatorze contributions en quatre sections : « courtship », « disclosure », « diversity » et « public implications ». Ces regroupements n’empêchent pas l’ensemble de demeurer un peu disparate malgré la concentration des recherches sur le Moyen Âge central et