

Overworked Children?

CHILD LABOUR IN NEW ZEALAND, 1919–1939



WITHIN THE WESTERN WORLD a radical shift in the conceptualization of childhood occurred over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the past 50 years, childhood has emerged as an area of interest to social and cultural historians, who have helped to uncover a wealth of information about the worlds of children in the past. Historians such as Karen Calvert, Linda Pollock, Hugh Cunningham and Harry Hendrick are among those who have emphasized the diversity of childhood experiences and contributed to the increasingly rich historiography of childhood.¹ Much of childhood has been shown to be culturally constructed, to have varied over time and across societies. In this article I argue that variations in attitudes to children also exist within societies, being shaped predominantly by social class, geographical location, gender and culture.

Child labour is one of the key areas that reveals the shift between the old and new conceptions of childhood. In the nineteenth century authors such as William Blake, Charles Dickens and Charles Kingsley aroused concern about British child workers while others, such as Kenneth Grahame, helped create the notion of a golden age of childhood.² Hugh Cunningham, a specialist in British childhood, claims that the transformation ‘of working-class children from labourers to pupils was central to the reconstruction of childhood at the end of the nineteenth century’, while Diana Gittins notes that the idea of the child as innocent, carefree and involved in play and education rather than work resulted in demonizing childhoods that did not accommodate the bourgeois standard.³ The childhood experiences of children of the poor and of rural areas faced criticism as a result.⁴ Childhood became, at least in middle-class eyes, a time to be valued and treasured. Both women and children became marginalized economically.⁵ Families became emotionally focused, rather than being seen as primarily economic units.⁶

Parenting advice and the treatment of children outside the family reflected this change in attitude towards children. In the interwar years, child-rearing advice began to stress the importance of parental involvement. The problem with modern family life, stated one commentator, was ‘the failure of parents to take sufficient interest in the lives of their children’.⁷ When elementary education became compulsory, schooling assumed more importance in children’s lives. New educational theories began to stress the importance of catering to a child’s individual needs, and became enshrined in legislation by New Zealand’s first Labour government.⁸

Other forces, such as the First World War, also shaped the nation’s attitude to children. Medical inspection of troops had revealed New Zealanders’ health to be less than ideal. The president of the New Zealand Dental Association was

one of many calling for improved health among children: 'It is to the children of the present day and of the future generation that we look to repair the wastage of this terrible war, and it behoves us to see that they are given a fair chance to develop clean and wholesome bodies.'⁹ An obsession with children's health characterized the interwar period and found expression in open-air schools, health camps, school medical inspections and child-rearing literature, such as that propounded by Truby King, who correlated physical health and well-being with morality.¹⁰ Psychological literature also became popular at this time and stressed the importance of freedom of expression among children rather than rigid discipline.¹¹

By the 1920s and 1930s, therefore, new family ideologies dominated in Western societies such as New Zealand. Leisure and education characterized childhood, although work, paid or unpaid, continued to play a part in many children's lives.¹² Leisure, of course, needed to be productive. For example, W.B. Harris, an education student in the 1920s, wrote that there was 'a great need for many boys to be encouraged to join suitable social organisations, and there is a need for a part of their education at school to be devoted to the development of interests in which they may later spend their leisure time profitably and happily'.¹³

Divisions between rich and poor, male and female, and town and country, emerged clearly in relation to children's work. Many rural and urban working-class Pakeha households in New Zealand relied to some extent on 'child labour', reflecting the continuing importance of the family economy. An examination of household roles and children's labour reveals the extent of social change in attitudes to children in the interwar years as well as constraints that limited change. This article draws upon a selection of oral history interviews, newspaper articles and children's letters to explore the nature of Pakeha children's working lives in the interwar years. It is based on interviews with 41 men and women, born between 1914 and 1930, whose geographical backgrounds ranged from the rural North Island to urban Dunedin.¹⁴ Considerable diversity existed in childhood experience in these years, with rural children and children from poor homes following much older patterns of childhood. Often children from the age of about 9 or 10 made a considerable contribution to the household economy, either through paid or unpaid labour.

In the later decades of the nineteenth century the New Zealand parliament passed legislation that reflected the changing Western views of childhood. The 1877 Education Act enshrined the principle of elementary education as free, secular and compulsory between the ages of 7 and 13 years, although as Dugald McDonald has noted, children remained in the workforce in significant numbers until the end of the century.¹⁵ Factory legislation in New Zealand, starting with the 1884 Factories Act, gradually regulated and removed children to the periphery of the regular workforce.¹⁶ Education board officials and child welfare authorities seldom focused on labour within the household unless it conflicted with school work.¹⁷ However, they were much more censorious about children taking part in the cash economy.¹⁸ Such activities seemed to threaten the very nature of the distinction between adult and child. Britain's more comprehensive legislation was not replicated in New Zealand,¹⁹ perhaps

reflecting the greater importance of the family economy in the Dominion.²⁰ New Zealand's legislation prohibited the employment of children during school hours, but considerable concern emerged about the employment of children outside school hours.

As Bronwyn Dalley pointed out in her study of child welfare, authorities often focused on the evils of street trading, which they believed would lead to delinquency.²¹ Clause one of Section 29 of the Infants Act 1908 regulated children's employment in street trading and in areas of public entertainment: 'on the complaint of any constable or of any child welfare officer that any child is neglected, indigent, delinquent, not under proper control, or living in an environment detrimental to its physical or moral well-being, any Justice may issue a summons addressed to any person having custody of the child requiring him to appear before a Children's Court'.²²

Successive New Zealand governments passed a series of rather uncoordinated regulatory laws to curb children's paid labour. Some awards approved by the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act included provisions against the employment of children of school age. For example, the Dairy Employees' Award for Wellington in 1920 stated: 'Youths: Drivers shall not allow any boy or youth on their carts, or allow them to assist in the delivery of milk'.²³ The Shops and Offices Amendment Act of 1927, Section 4, prohibited the employment of any boy or girl under the age of 16 years before seven o'clock in the morning. Officials also used child welfare legislation to regulate employment where there was 'no definite contract of employment, however, as between a parent and child'.²⁴ Patriarchal protection can be detected in some proposals. Suggested legislation in the 1930s provided extra protection for girls. The law proposed boys under 12 years and girls under 16 years of age should be prevented from street trading.²⁵ Given the raft of regulations it is not surprising that in 1930 the Minister of Health, A.J. Stallworthy, responded to a number of condemnatory newspaper articles on child employment by noting that child welfare officers could use a 'hotch-potch' of legislation, which he believed gave 'ample provision for action'.²⁶

Undoubtedly child labour continued despite this legislation and occasional prosecutions. In 1930 the *Dominion* reported that two men were charged and fined £1 'for employing a boy under 16 years of age to deliver milk before 7 am'. Such prosecutions were meant to act as a deterrent. A Labour Department official admitted: 'We have to bring these cases before the court to give publicity to them'.²⁷ There was little evidence of consistency in the enforcement of restrictive legislation.

In England and in New Zealand, School Medical Officers expressed concern about the physical and moral consequences of child labour. Harry Hendrick has identified a link between campaigns against child labour and the rise of the school medical service in England. There, the first Chief Medical Officer with the Board of Education, George Newman, claimed in 1907 that employment outside school hours 'plays havoc with the health and physique of children'. Hendrick argues that Newman intended to 'consolidate the medical authority implicit in the relationship between the children's physical life and their life in the school, but also he claimed the authority in respect of defining the "normal"

developmental process'.²⁸ New Zealand school doctors also firmly asserted their power to define 'normal' childhood, and increasingly regarded paid labour as inappropriate for children.

The number of children in regular paid employment during the interwar years is difficult to estimate from official statistics.²⁹ Official reports focused on what were seen as 'problem situations' where children were overworked; the perspectives provided by oral interviewees provide a refreshing counterpoint. In 1925, the School Hygiene Division of the Department of Health investigated child labour among children at Mt Cook school in Wellington and discovered that between one-quarter and one-third of boys in Standards IV and V had paid employment. Most boys (18 out of 25) sold newspapers, but other occupations included 'peeling potatoes by machine', being a call boy at the opera house and delivering goods.³⁰ The youngest boy was 10 and the eldest 13. Hours worked varied from two a week to four hours on four days of the week.³¹ Wages ranged from 11s. a week for a boy who sold newspapers three hours each day and four days on Saturday, to 1s.6d. for a morning helping on the baker's cart. One boy earned £2.10s. a week selling three different newspapers.³²

Table 1 : Urban boys : regular paid work

Name and place	Job	Age	Hours	Pay	Second job	Hours	Pay
Dennis Kemp (Rotorua and Wellington)	caddying	(8) (Rotorua)	weekend	5s-7/6 w	papers (Wellington)	3 1/2 daily	c.7/6
Elliott Atkinson (Wellington)	papers	9-15	Sat, evening	4s			
Steve Harris (Wellington)	milk run	Est?			papers		
George Goodyear (Port Chalmers/Dunedin)	milk run	12/13	holidays	half crown	papers	holidays	half crown
Reg Williams (Invercargill)	milk run	12	various	occasional 1s			
David Moore (Timaru)	messages	11+	occasional	?	messages	holidays	?
Eric Robinson (Temuka)	milk run	11+	?daily? / occasional?	half crown			
Edward Twort (Wellington)	messages	12?	2/3 hours weekly	2/3s	collected golf balls		1/6

Reports into child labour in cities focused on boys, since few opportunities existed for girls. Boys did milk runs, newspaper runs and street selling. Girls were more likely to carry out unpaid child-minding.³³ Neil Sutherland's study of children in English Canada revealed that urban working-class children there carried out similar activities in the interwar years, with paid work almost entirely confined to boys.³⁴ The activities carried out by children in the Mt Cook study and among Canadian children are to some extent replicated in the

sample group of my oral interviewees. Although none of the men interviewed for this study had worked hours as long as some of the boys in the Mt Cook study most had carried out some kind of paid work as children (Table 1). Most did more than one type of job. Five had worked on a milk run, although David Moore did this on an irregular basis. Four delivered newspapers as children. Two had been message boys.

Table 1 shows that most urban boys in this study tried to earn extra money while still at school. Only two of the urban men interviewed did not describe some paid work. No urban girls had any. Only working-class boys undertook regular paid employment during the school term, with middle-class boys more likely to have holiday employment. George Goodyear and David Moore had holiday employment during their high school years. None regarded this boyhood work as unpleasant or exhausting. Did paid work interfere with their prowess at school? Elliott Atkinson and Dennis Kemp worked the hardest and did so as primary school children, but both managed to pass their schooling. Reg Williams, however, thought that poorer children at his school suffered and came into conflict with authority because of their extra employment. The teacher ‘biffed them’ for inattention.³⁵

In this sample group both girls and boys also earned money irregularly and made contributions, directly or indirectly, to the household budget. Their activities included collecting coal, firewood or food, similar to the scrounging undertaken by some children in Sutherland’s study of English Canada.³⁶ Eric Robinson picked peas in season (in the small town of Temuka) at ninepence a kerosene tin and half a crown for a sugar bag. He profited from recycling beer and lemonade bottles left lying in the streets and collecting copper, brass and lead from the tip, which he then sold at the foundry.³⁷ Children also gathered food to eat themselves, to take home or to barter. Elliott and his brother caught herrings, which they took ‘to a Chinaman in Haitaitai’ and traded for vegetables. Some children’s activities showed more ingenuity than honesty. Elliott tried to avoid paying tram fares: ‘you’d be on and off tram cars as quick as you could and if you weren’t too quick with your change — you’d have to haul off the tram cars before you gave your change sometimes’.³⁸ Steve Harris stole fruit, sometimes from gardens and sometimes from a fruiterer’s cart: ‘We were round at the back wheel climbing up the spokes. Half the time you would get blooming potatoes and you would have to throw them back. We were bad kids in that street.’³⁹

What did children do with the money they earned legitimately? Some of their cash went to their family, but children also spent money on sweets, comics and clothes. Dennis Kemp remembered the sense of pride he felt when he bought a pair of good school shoes with the money he earned from caddying: ‘Our parents stopped giving us pocket money as soon as we started earning.’⁴⁰ Many parents ensured their children banked money, encouraging values of thrift as well as hard work.

Only a minority of the New Zealand oral interviewees contributed all of their childhood earnings to the family budget. Elliott Atkinson gave his income to his parents: ‘At the Saturday nights we sold the — what was it then? — the local *Sports Post* in Wellington and managed to get a few bob that way, and

that went into the family pool. You never kept that yourself, it was all taken home and given to your parents.⁴¹ British working-class children did that as a matter of course. For example, one Lancashire man earned a few shillings from picking potatoes and had a milk round, but he did not keep any of his money: 'Oh paid it in [to the household], you had to cough it up.'⁴²

Contemporary comment reflected a widely held belief that some paid work could be beneficial, especially for older boys, although the importance of children receiving adequate rest was acknowledged. The *Otago Daily Times* commented: 'After all, there is a great deal to be learned in the school of life by those who are capable of absorbing information.'⁴³ A member of the Otago School Board pointed out that 'most of the successful men in the country were those who had been through a period of hardship in their early life'.⁴⁴ But school medical officers noted that the boy who sold three newspapers had 'retarded growth', was anaemic, suffered from 'nervous twitching of the face' and had a tendency to stutter.⁴⁵ Money and independence were important values in New Zealand society. Attitudes to money reflected notions of thrift and respectability which many middle and respectable working-class parents tried to inculcate in their children. As one man recalled: 'we were all encouraged to have savings definitely, wasn't a school thing, but it was a family thing so to start you on the road to recovery, independence'.⁴⁶ Paid work also gave youngsters a sense of autonomy that defied adult regulation.

A class element emerged strongly from the New Zealand interviews, with children's paid or unpaid labour being more significant in poorer families. This situation parallels the insights provided from oral histories undertaken in the United Kingdom, Canada and Finland.⁴⁷ Middle-class children had no formal economic role in the household and in some families did little work around the home. Working-class children tended to leave school at an earlier age (the leaving age was 14) and when they started working handed over their wages to their parents. Usually they gave their pay directly to their mother, who allocated them a small amount back for pocket money and tram fares. Their earnings tended to be subsumed into the family budget through the payment of board. According to modern definitions of childhood, these children ceased to be children when they left school, if not earlier. Middle-class children, in contrast, experienced a longer period of dependence and a lack of responsibility.

In both town and country, interwar reports focused on outside employers: the newspaper man, the butcher, the milkman or theatre-owners. Children employed by family businesses in both town and country were initially exempt from criticism. But in the 1920s child labour within families became the focus of a minor 'moral panic' centred on the countryside. The continuing use of children's labour on farms, especially after the advent of milking machines and electrification, aroused much concern.⁴⁸

Despite popular nineteenth-century perceptions of children's labour as predominantly industrial, in New Zealand and, as Mats Sjöberg discusses, in much of the Western world, 'rural child labour was probably much more widespread than industrial, in the sense that it concerned a greater number of children'.⁴⁹ Perceptions of a romantic arcadia, however, blinkered authorities when confronting the more arduous experience of childhood in rural areas. The

influential educationalist James Shelley argued that children educated in the city should not grow up with ‘so little direct touch with the land’.⁵⁰ In the 1920s and the 1930s, however, school medical officers were increasingly concerned about overworked country children. A Report on Rural School children in the North Island in 1926, carried out by school medical officers, noted that some children of share-milkers and poor farmers were suffering: ‘The children from these homes are old, young children. Many have lined anxious faces, their clothing is of the poorest, and as the all powerful cow is the first consideration, the children are a poor second. They work very hard and are often too tired to take any great interest in their school work.’⁵¹ The survival of the yeoman ideal, however, continued to depend on the use of family labour, especially among smallholders struggling with the impact of economic recession. This situation was mirrored in Sweden, where government recognition of the importance of children’s labour in rural areas delayed the adoption of full-time schooling until the 1930s.⁵²

Medical reports into child labour in the New Zealand countryside identified dairying areas as the worst offenders. Dairying had increased rapidly before the interwar years and relied heavily on smallholdings. School medical officers had observed in 1921 that the farmer ‘got a good price for his butter-fat, and could afford to pay for labour’.⁵³ But butter prices dropped sharply later that year and reliance on family labour increased. By the time of the 1926 census about 60% of farmers did not employ any paid labour.⁵⁴ That year a father in a share-milking district of Opunake assured the school medical officer that ‘a share-milker must have a big family to work in order to make enough money to buy even a very insufficient supply of food’. The family jointly milked 50 cows by hand, and the school medical officer commented that one had to believe this statement ‘as no human being could live from choice in such a bare hovel’.⁵⁵

The 1926 report on the health of rural school children concluded that:

In the coal-mining groups 12 per cent. of the children were retarded;⁵⁶ in the timber mill workers, 14 per cent.; among farmers in thriving areas 21 per cent.; in remote farming areas 11.5 per cent.; and *among share milkers 26 per cent.* The factors helping to account for retarded school progress included *work done before and after school hours, racial heredity, maternal overwork*, migration from school to school, and shortened attendance from various causes, including sickness. Amongst the share milkers’ children 24 per cent. had less than ten hours of sleep and 18 per cent. more than three hours of work. Though the children who did work before and after school did not appear unfavourably in development with others, their nervous system did not appear to be in a good state, for retardation in school work was more pronounced, and a common remark of teachers was that children showed signs of fatigue in school — indeed, in some cases actually fell asleep.⁵⁷

Eugenic influences are apparent in this criticism of the conditions of some rural children; a subtext implies that the poverty of share-milkers stemmed from internal as well as external factors.

The officials showed scant understanding of or sympathy with these families. The report commented unfavourably on share-milkers’ homes, describing 30% of the houses as dirty and 15% as damp. The report found that 80% of farming

and share-milking mothers worked out of doors, 'mainly in milking sheds — [this] may also be a factor in retardation, as it certainly is in regard to personal and house cleanliness and efficiency'. Farming children 'have decidedly the hardest life. I found in almost every instance the mother and all children over seven years help with the milking.' In contrast, children of coalminers or saw-mill workers had more cheerful homes and enjoyed an easier existence.⁵⁸

A survey of children attending Meremere School, north-east of Hawera, revealed that children averaged just over four hours' work a day. For example, one girl, aged 10 years and 4 months, worked from 5am to 8.45am, then from 4pm to 7pm at night.⁵⁹ The earlier urban study in the Mt Cook School in Wellington revealed that boys at the most did three or four hours each day. School medical inspectors campaigned strongly against such labour.⁶⁰

Prosecutions against rural parents for child exploitation were relatively uncommon, but one case is worth examining in some detail. In 1921 the courts tried a farmer for 'Alleged Child Slavery'.⁶¹ This case illustrates neatly the confrontation between official ideology and parental attitudes. John William Clark, a Halswell farmer, was charged with 'wilfully mistreating' his two daughters, Juanita and Maud (aged 12 and 11) 'in a manner likely to cause them unnecessary suffering'. The *Press* report listed Juanita's work:

She rose every morning at about 5 o'clock. She had to get a cup of tea and then milk seven or eight cows. After her mother left the house she had ten or eleven cows to milk. She would be kept milking till about 8.30 a.m., or 9 a.m. When she finished, she had to feed pigs sometimes, and also wash cans occasionally. After this she would go home for breakfast. She would then wash dishes and clean the kitchen, after which she would prepare the dinner . . . Her father sometimes carted hay; sometimes witness did. This was also the case regarding driving the horse. She also helped her father cut a gorse hedge, witness stacking the gorse as it was cut. The gorse would also cut her legs.⁶²

Regardless of the morality of the situation, a contest of values between town and country and necessity and ideology is apparent in the report.

Schools also provided an arena for the clash between official attitudes and family needs. The teacher at Halswell School (called for the defence in the Clark case) stated that both girls had only attended 221 times out of a possible 310 and were frequently late.⁶³ Gender attitudes were also expressed. The prosecution emphasized the hard physical nature of the work Juanita did, how the gorse scratched her legs and the unsuitability of her driving cows alone through the countryside. If Juanita had been forced to do large amounts of housework it seems unlikely that prosecution would have resulted.

How widespread was excessive child labour in the countryside and how justified were officials in their condemnation of this situation? The evidence from this study suggests that during the interwar period, farming children in particular worked extremely hard. Evidence from children's letters in the *New Zealand Farmer* also supports this conclusion. Age made a major difference to the amount of work carried out by children; most children did not work hard until they were in their teens.⁶⁴ A quarter worked regularly in the milking sheds, while well over half recalled working hard for their parents, either on the farm or cooking, cleaning and helping with younger children. Most children helped

at harvesting time.⁶⁵ And most commentators seemed to agree that children developed useful skills from helping out on the farm. The issue that caused concern was the excessive workload of some children.

Clearly some children enjoyed helping with chores, although others found the work burdensome. For example, Mavis Benson believed she had been made to work far too hard as a child: 'I was too busy helping [to play]. I was Mum's help, and I just didn't know how to be a child I think at the time.'⁶⁶ Most children, however, accepted such work because it was simply a part of their existence. They saw other children working hard in the house or on the farm. Their resigned attitude is obvious in letters to the *New Zealand Farmer*.

Children's letters described their participation in a large number of farm activities. One child explained: 'We are milking eight cows at present, and when the men are busy my sister and I milk them. It is lucky we are quite fond of it. On the calendar I put down how many I milk each morning and night. During February I milked 222, but during March I only milked 137.'⁶⁷ 'Parrot' from Runa Runa greeted the arrival of the milking machines with delight, writing: 'I am only milking one cow now and I am not sorry either. Father is to get a milking machine.'⁶⁸ Only one child (a boy) wrote about being paid for milking: 'I help to milk every night and morning, besides doing other work, and father gives me pay for it, which I put in the bank.'⁶⁹

There were fewer opportunities to earn money in the countryside than in the towns, but occasionally children got paid work during the holidays. 'Huapai Laddie' wrote: 'In the last Xmas holidays I was working on a farm from the day we broke up till the day we began school again, and now I thoroughly understand grading the cream and altering the separator for skimming thick or thin.'⁷⁰ Edna Partridge, like many other children, collected birds' eggs for the local council and picked mushrooms to sell. She explained that she hoarded the money to buy herself shoes. She also worked one year, when a teenager, apple picking.⁷¹ Other children kept livestock and presumably were able to sell eggs to make a small profit from their labour. One boy wrote: 'I am going in for poultry and have 50 little chicks.'⁷²

Children also helped parents with horticultural work. Although such work could be labour intensive it was seasonal. It also escaped the notice of authorities because it could often be carried out in holidays or on weekends and did not interfere with schoolwork as much as some other forms of labour. A child in the tobacco-growing area of Wakefield wrote: 'We have been very busy among the tobacco lately, and it is not a very nice job. We will be picking again tomorrow. I am in Standard IV at school this year.'⁷³ A nine-year-old described going on a hop-picking holiday in Motueka.⁷⁴ Children from the fruit-growing regions of Central Otago and Hawke's Bay recounted picking and grading fruit: 'We are kept busy in the fruit season, especially when the peaches are ready to pick. We pull the fruit and grade it into three grades, and then we pack them.'⁷⁵ Letters in the *New Zealand Farmer* reveal children's extensive knowledge of farming practice, which is completely different from town children's isolation from production.

Government response to public concern and medical evidence about the plight of rural children was muted. The dairying miracle had become an

essential part of the New Zealand economy and any legislation to restrict women's and children's labour might inhibit production. Officials attempted to remedy the situation by arousing public concern, threatening that if conditions did not improve the law should 'secure an amendment for the protection of the children concerned'.⁷⁶ But their recommendations focused on self-improvement within families.⁷⁷ Medical and educational concern about child labour continued.⁷⁸ Government efforts to electrify the countryside in the 1930s and 1940s, however, indirectly helped to solve this problem, since electricity reduced the need for family labour.⁷⁹

What effects did child labour have upon rural children? Some of the interviewees recalled the sense of pride and independence they acquired through work. Others regarded such work with resentment and regretted lost opportunity. The Ryans encouraged their son Thomas, a bright boy, to gain a secondary education. He had no desire to go farming after seeing the drudgery his parents endured on their marginal farm in the central North Island.⁸⁰

Medical authorities bewailed the backwardness of rural children, especially in share-milking districts where over a quarter were recorded as retarded in their schooling (the standard being three years in excess of average age for class). Elizabeth Gunn, medical inspector of schools, commented in a memo to the director of the Division of School Hygiene that contrary to popular belief: 'No one could describe these country children as better physical specimens than the town child Poorly clad, poorly fed, dirty, tired expressionless faces they look and smell of the cowyard.'⁸¹ Gwen Somerset, herself originally a country child,⁸² noted on her arrival in Oxford in 1921 that country children compared unfavourably with town children. Eventually she realized that the children's main problem was weariness: 'Many had begun the day at about 4.00 a.m. helping with the milking or preparing food for the workers. By 1.00 p.m. they were in need of sleep, to lie and sprawl on the forms and desks or on the few mats I was soon able to gather. And how they did sleep! And what a busy hour we enjoyed after they wakened.'⁸³

Country children often found education alienating because of their fatigue, but a good education became increasingly necessary in the interwar years. Society demanded flexible and educated workers and fewer opportunities existed for manual labour, particularly in the agricultural sector. In 1929 the Christchurch Chamber of Commerce criticized rural schools for not promoting rural education: 'the schools are not designed to produce farmers, but seem rather to train boys for clerical positions'. They noted that out of 1400 or 1500 boys in Canterbury who had finished school, only 80 had gone on to the land.⁸⁴

While this article has concentrated on children playing an economically significant role through paid or unpaid work it is important to note that household chores were a significant part of childhood. Pakeha society believed that children should take some responsibility around the home. Children typically washed and dried dishes, ran errands, filled the wood box, dusted, cleaned the silver (in better-off households), tidied their rooms and helped with any poultry or other domestic livestock. They also minded younger brothers and sisters. Girls and boys often shared the dishes and errands but, thereafter, work

paralleled gender divisions: girls did inside work and boys worked outside the house. Chores were also age-specific, although the definition of a suitable age for a particular task varied according to need. Children took part in all areas of household labour. The distinction between helping out in the home and exploitation could be blurred. Claire Toynbee, who also used oral interviews to study children's work in the early twentieth century, concluded that children's work was 'heavily influenced by the particular needs of a household, rather than slavish adherence to norms associated with gender'.⁸⁵

Although children laboured in both town and countryside, country children undoubtedly worked much harder than their urban counterparts. Gender differentiation in tasks also emerged as being more rigid in urban areas. The work of urban girls and boys mirrored the masculinist/breadwinner model of society, whereas both girls and boys in the countryside made an economic contribution to the family. Urban children made a more indirect contribution to the household economy, and many boys used their small earnings as a means to obtain extras. Country parents followed older notions about childhood, revealed in ideas about what age children should be when they began substantial chores. Many country children helped to milk cows from the age of 7 or 8, an age when they would have still been considered helpless dependants in town. Working-class children in towns and children in the countryside negotiated burdens that were, at least ideologically, considered inappropriate for their age. During the interwar years, concerns about children's health and the work of the Division of School Hygiene of the Department of Health as well as the Child Welfare Department, resulted in a shift in society's views towards children's work. The extension of compulsory schooling to the age of 15 was a signal that children's focus should be schooling rather than work, either at home or for an employer. A series of reports, some of which are mentioned above, attacked excessive child labour as inhibiting educational prowess, weakening children's constitutions and threatening New Zealand's superiority as an ideal country for children. The Health Department's claim that 'there is probably no country in the world today where the fundamentals of healthy growth, fresh air, sunlight, food of the right type and amount, adequate sleep and rest and wholesome exercise are more readily available [than] in New Zealand' reflected official rhetoric rather than the reality. As the *Westport Times* noted in 1926, the evidence of medical inspections suggested that 'too many of the children are not doing the country real credit'.⁸⁶ As the global situation became increasingly ominous in the 1930s, the importance of a healthy populace became even more pressing and children's health and welfare a growing national concern.

ROSEMARY GOODYEAR

Christchurch

NOTES

1 See Paula S. Fass, ed., *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, 3 vols, New York, 2003.

2 The range of influential children's literature is too extensive to note here, but Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863) helped popularize the evils of child sweeps, while Kenneth Grahame, most noted for *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), wrote *The Golden Age* (1895) and *Dream Days* (1898), books that depicted children existing in a world of creativity and imagination.

3 Hugh Cunningham, *The Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood Since the Seventeenth Century*, Oxford, 1991, p.7. For further discussion of this issue, see p.167; Diana Gittins, *The Child in Question*, New York, 1998, pp.138–42.

4 In his study of child labour and the School Medical Service in Britain, Harry Hendrick asserts that the 'problem' of child labour 'was relatively slow to emerge as a distinct social question', but gradually came to symbolize the failure of the working-class to adapt to middle-class conventions of family life. H. Hendrick, 'Child Labour and the School Medical Service', in R. Cooter, ed., *In the Name of the Child. Health and Welfare, 1880–1940*, London and New York, 1992, p.49.

5 For example, see Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class*, Cambridge, 1995.

6 A number of writers have discussed this shift in attitudes to childhood. Most acknowledge the work of Philippe Aries, whose *L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Regime*, Paris, 1960, available in English as *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, New York, 1960, began the debate over the nature and degree of cultural variation within the experience of childhood. The most influential work on the increasing emotional value of children is Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, New York, 1985.

7 The issue was raised at a Rotary meeting which proposed that New Zealand should have a boys' week. The emphasis here was on the role of fathers. 'Child Welfare Parents' Responsibility', *Press* (Christchurch), 6 July 1922, p.2.

8 Rosemary Goodyear, 'The Individual Child: A Study of the Development of Social Services in Education in Relation to the First Labour Government's Educational Policy', BA (Hons) dissertation, University of Otago, 1986, pp.1–2.

9 N. Mitchell, quoted in Tom Brooking, *A History of Dentistry in New Zealand*, Dunedin, 1980, p.97. See also Rosemary Goodyear, "'Sunshine and Fresh Air": An Oral History of Childhood and Family Life in Interwar New Zealand, With Some Comparisons to Interwar Britain', PhD thesis, University of Otago, 1998, pp.76–79; and Goodyear, 'The Individual Child', pp.18–34.

10 See Margaret Tennant, *Children's Health, The Nation's Wealth: A History of Children's Health Camps*, Wellington, 1994; and Helen May, *The Discovery of Early Childhood: The Development of Services for the Care and Education of Very Young Children: Mid Eighteenth Century Europe to Mid Twentieth Century New Zealand*, Auckland, 1997. In 1926, for example, a memo from the Director-General of Health noted that 2344 children had benefited from the various camps. Memorandum for the Director-General, Post and Telegraph Department, Wellington, 'Health Stamp Campaign — Broadcast by Governor General', H1b 9 35/14/pt2, Archives New Zealand (ANZ), Wellington. The New Zealand Sunlight League attempted to have children sleep and eat outside whenever possible. 'Sunlight League Health Camp Programme', H1b 9 35/14/pt2, ANZ.

11 See Goodyear, 'Sunshine and Fresh Air', especially pp.128–32. Articles in *National Education* in this period had titles such as 'Reprimands and Punishments Psychological Reactions' (1932), 'Nervous Children Effects of Anxiety and Fear' (1933) and 'School and the Home Value of Mutual Appreciation' (1931).

12 Studies on childhood in regions as diverse as Canada and Scandinavia reiterate the role children played in paid and especially unpaid labour over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Neil Sutherland, *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the Age of Television*, Toronto, 1997; Ning de Coninck-Smith, Bengt Sandin and Ellen Schrupf, eds, *Industrious Children: Work and Childhood in the Nordic Countries 1850–1990*, Odense, 1997.

13 W.B. Harris, 'The Boy Just Left School: An Enquiry into the Social Conditions Which Influence the Boy of Christchurch in the First Years after he Leaves School', Honours and MA thesis, Canterbury University College, 1928, p.248.

14 Twenty were from rural backgrounds, ranging from farmers' children to the children of rural labourers. Sometimes real names have been used, at other times, pseudonyms, to protect an individual's identity. I selected these interviewees through a range of methods in order to obtain

as representative a geographic sample as possible, as well as a balance of sex and class. I used personal networks (including my father and grandmother), publicized my search through radio and the press and also interviewed some people at a day centre for the elderly in a working-class suburb of Christchurch. The interviews were based on a nine-page questionnaire developed with the assistance of Professor Paul Thompson of Essex University in Colchester, who supervised part of this thesis. While in England I interviewed another 33 people for comparative purposes. For more information and a discussion on memory and oral history, see Goodyear, 'Sunshine and Fresh Air', pp.22–34.

15 Dugald McDonald, 'Children and Young Persons in New Zealand Society', in Peggy Koopman-Boyden, ed., *Families in New Zealand Society*, Wellington, 1978, p.47. See also Colin McGeorge, 'Schools and Socialisation in New Zealand 1890–1914', PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 1985.

16 McDonald, pp.46–56. See also Jeanine Graham, 'Child Employment in New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 21, 2 (1986), pp.62–78.

17 The government set up a separate child welfare department in 1920 with responsibility for the 'maintenance, education and training of any destitute, dependent, or homeless children committed to the care of the department'; also children orphaned by the 1918–1919 influenza epidemic, the care of infants (children under 6) separated from their parents, delinquent children and the maintenance and education of 'deaf, the blind, and the feeble-minded [children]'. *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (AJHR), 1920, E-4, p.1.

18 Less concern emerged regarding girls' education. For example, Ivy Anderson had to stay at home when her mother was ill. She explained that her father would write a note 'when I was needed at home, I was the girl' and the school accepted that. Ivy Anderson, interviewed 7 June 1995. Abstract, p.12. Oral history collection held by Rosemary Goodyear (hereafter referred to as Goodyear Collection). Born in 1922 in England, Ivy was the eldest of five children. The family lived in Christchurch, where her father was a carpenter.

19 In Britain, the Employment of Children Act, 1903, gave local authorities the right to make by-laws 'prescribing for children a limited number of daily and weekly working hours, and the age below which employment was illegal. It also permitted the prohibition of their employment in any specified occupation, and the curtailment of street trading'. Hendrick, 'Child Labour', p.51.

20 'Child Labour in New Zealand', *National Education*, 1 November 1926, p.361. Anna Davin's work shows the conflicts that could arise between British parents and authorities on this matter. Child employment was often a matter of necessity among the poor in London. See Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870–1914*, London, 1996, pp.85–183.

21 Bronwyn Dalley, *Family Matters: Child Welfare in Twentieth-Century New Zealand*, Auckland, 1998, p.87.

22 'Child Labour', memorandum from A. G. Paterson, Director, Division of School Hygiene to the Secretary, Wellington Education Board, 6 October 1930, H 1, 35/75, Closed Number 20617, ANZ.

23 The definition of 'youth' seems to refer to boys under 18. An unattributed copy of the Wellington Dairy Employees (Drivers or Distributors) Award, Clause 6, was included with the 1930 'Child Labour' memo, as was the reference to the 1927 Shops and Offices Amendment Act. See H 1, 35/75, Closed Number 20617, ANZ.

24 'Child Labour' memo, 1930.

25 *ibid.*

26 'Child Labour. What the Law provides. Review by Minister', *Evening Post*, 26 August 1930, press cutting in H 1, 35/75, Closed Number 20617, ANZ.

27 'Asleep at desks. Boys on Milk Runs. Employers fined', *Dominion*, 8 November 1930, press cutting in H 1, 35/75, Closed Number 20617, ANZ.

28 Hendrick, 'Child Labour and the School Medical Service', p.52.

29 In 1926 the Otago Education Board estimated that 355 pupils in Dunedin schools were working before and after school: 'Child Labour in New Zealand', *National Education*, 1 November 1926, p.359.

30 'Report on Mt Cook School, 1925', in H 1, 35/75, Closed Number 20617, ANZ.

31 These studies suggest that some children received reasonable wages. Indeed one Otago board member commented, after working out that children received on average sixpence an hour, 'Almost as good as the Education board!' 'Child Labour in New Zealand', *National Education*, 1 November 1926, p.361.

32 He worked every school night with a break between six and seven for tea and worked until

10pm on Saturday nights and 11pm on Friday night. 'Report on Mt Cook School, 1925', in H 1, 35/75, Closed Number 20617, ANZ.

33 This seems to be in contrast to the situation of the poor in London, where a girl's childminding might be worth a penny or two to a mother. See Davin, p.167.

34 Sutherland, pp.116–41.

35 Reg Williams, interviewed 14 October 1994. Abstract p.11 (Goodyear Collection). Born in 1914 in Invercargill, Reg was the eldest of nine children. His father worked on the railways and the family moved frequently.

36 Sutherland, pp.122–4.

37 Eric Robinson, interviewed 10 June 1996. Abstract p.3 (Goodyear Collection). Born in 1919 in Timaru, Eric was the second of seven children. His father worked first as a labourer, then as a paperhanger, before being employed as a wharfie.

38 Elliott Atkinson, interviewed 11 June 1994. Abstract p.2 (Goodyear Collection). Elliott was born in Lower Hutt in 1921. There were three children in the family and his father was unemployed during the Depression.

39 Steve Harris, interviewed 1 August 1996. Abstract p.7 (Goodyear Collection). Born in 1921, Steve was the eldest of five children. The family lived in Lower Hutt and moved to Wellington after his father's death in 1926.

40 Dennis Kemp, interviewed 29 March 1995, Abstract p.24; interviewed 9 July 1994, Abstract p.9 (Goodyear Collection). Dennis was born in 1930 in Napier, the second of four children. His father worked as a motor mechanic and later a foreman at a bus depot. His mother was an untrained nurse who was brought up on a marae.

41 Elliott Atkinson, Abstract pp.1–2.

42 Mr B4B, interviewed by Lucinda Beier [1988], transcript p.8, Elizabeth Robert's collection, Barrow, Preston and Lancaster project, North West Centre for Regional Studies, University of Lancaster. Working-class children in London gave earnings to their mothers. Children worked for neighbours, in shops and helped their mothers with domestic chores. Edith Hogg noted 'it is one of the melancholy features of the neighbourhood to see sickly children hardly more than infants staggering along in the wind and rain . . . with every muscle of their rickety bodies strained beneath the load, upon which the chance of next day's dinner depends'. Quoted in Davin, p.192.

43 Quoted in 'Child Labour in New Zealand', *National Education*, 1 November 1926, pp.361–2.

44 *ibid.*

45 'Report on Mt Cook School, 1925', in H 1, 35/75, Closed Number 20617, ANZ. Retarded in this context simply meant he was small for his age.

46 Jack Ford, interviewed 13 April 1995. Abstract p.30 (Goodyear Collection). Born in 1921 at Pleasant Point near Timaru, Jack was the middle child of seven. His father was a farm manager and farmer.

47 For example, a study of children's labour in Finland between 1890 and 1920 argues that in poorer families children's wages were still essential for survival. Pirjo Markkola, "'God wouldn't send a child into the world without a crust of bread": Child Labour as Part of Working-class Family Economy in Finland 1890–1920', in de Coninck-Smith, Sandin and Schruppf, eds, *Industrial Children*, pp.79–105.

48 See footnote 56.

49 Mats Sjöberg, 'Working Rural Children: Herding, Child Labour and Childhood in the Swedish Rural Environment 1850–1950', in de Coninck-Smith, Sandin and Schruppf, eds, *Industrial Children*, p.107.

50 'Compulsory Education for Parents. Professor Shelley on "Environment"', *National Education*, 1 August 1923, p.265. In my PhD thesis I argue that rural mythology infused the New Zealand psyche and still remains potent today even though 85% of New Zealanders are urban, hence the appeal of lifestyle blocks to the affluent urbanite. See Goodyear, 'Sunshine and Fresh Air', pp.50–53.

51 'Children of Farmers in Remote Districts. Poor' in 'Report on the health conditions and environment of rural school children in the South Auckland district of New Zealand' (hereafter 'Report on Rural School Children'), 1926, H 1, 35/78, Closed Number 8911, ANZ. This report was covered by newspapers and is a very interesting collection of information about the diet, housing and working habits of rural children in parts of the North Island. It was carried out by a Dr Henderson, with the help of other school medical officers and school nurses. The prominent woman doctor, Elizabeth Gunn, was also involved. In total, doctors and nurses examined 478

children from 25 schools in selected representative areas. The coal-mining districts were in Waikato; share-milkers' children from Opunake; Pukekohe, Wairoa South, parts of the North, Paparoa, Matakoho, Ruawai, were identified as more prosperous areas; while remote districts were located in parts of Northern Wairoa. Emphasis added.

52 Sjoberg writes that in 1940, boys of about 13 worked on average for more than 800 hours per year and girls of the same age about 500 hours. The prevailing ideology in Sweden supported children working and no regulations applied to rural children's labour till the 1940s. Sjoberg, p.124.

53 'Child Slavery: An Auckland Discussion', *Press*, 7 July 1921, p.2.

54 Brooking notes that the number of dairy farmers had tripled by 1911, when a third of all farmers declared themselves to be dairy farmers. He contends that rural fertility rates remained high until the 1930s because of the reliance on family labour. Brooking, in Oliver with Williams, ed., *Oxford History of New Zealand*, p.229.

55 Share-milking is a system where people milk for the owners of farms who provide houses, pay expenses and pay the share-milker one-third of the factory cheque. This is the description of the system as given in 'Children of Share Milkers', in 'Report on Rural School Children', 1926, H 1, 35/78, Closed Number 8911, ANZ. The families referred to were Paheka, with the majority New Zealand-born, except for the children of coal-miners. The report explained that the land in this district (Opunake) belonged to Maori 'who have nothing but the land which they are unable to sell, and consequently have no money for repairs and so the houses are the poorest of four-roomed shacks with no conveniences or comforts, and no attempt whatever at paths or gardens'. Another family worked for a European owner and had much better accommodation.

56 Retarded in this context refers to the children being behind in relation to their peers, rather than any having any intellectual handicaps.

57 'Rural children', *Evening Post*, 23 May 1930, press cutting in H 1, 35/78, Closed Number 8911, ANZ.

58 Quoted in 'Rural children', *Evening Post*, 23 May 1930, press cutting in H 1, 35/78, Closed Number 8911, ANZ.

59 The teacher at the school carried out the survey for Dr Dawson. Memo for the Director of Education, from Dr Dawson, Medical Officer of Health, New Plymouth, 16 December 1936, in 'School Medical Inspection, Child Labour', H 1, 35/78, Closed Number 8911, ANZ. An earlier departmental memo included evidence of one parent's attitudes to child labour, provided by a doctor who commented that the girl concerned was in a bad nervous state because of overwork. A mother had asked the teacher not to punish her daughter for not doing her homework: 'It is impossible for her to do homework at night. She is up at 4 o'clock in the morning and does not go to bed until after 9 at night. She puts 7 hours in the cow shed besides going to school. Please do not keep her in after school hours. She goes straight into the cowshed when she comes home.' See Memo for Director of Education, from Dr A.G. Paterson, 2 December 1925, H35 206/7 35/75, ANZ.

60 'Report on Mt Cook School, 1925', in Memo for Director of Education, from Dr A.G. Paterson, 2 December 1925, H 1, 35/78, Closed Number 8911, ANZ.

61 Cunningham argues that the campaign against child labour gained momentum in Britain because of the influence of the anti-slavery movement, with abolitionist imagery frequently used. See William Blake's famous poem, 'The Chimney Sweep'. However, the term slavery was so bandied about that it ceased to have any resonance. Cunningham, *Children of the Poor*, passim.

62 'Court News', *Press*, 5 February 1921, p.5.

63 'Court News', *Press*, 11 February 1921, p.2.

64 For example, one family only had 30 cows and so their children started milking at 13 or 14 years of age rather than seven. Others worked from the age of seven or eight.

65 'Timothy', Amberley, *New Zealand Farmer* (NZF), 1 March 1919, p.375.

66 Mavis Benson, interviewed 12 May 1995. Abstract p.10 (Goodyear Collection). Mavis was born in 1924, the eldest of four children. The family moved from Taranaki, to Nelson, then to the West Coast. Her father worked as a labourer for much of her childhood, and the family had little money until the mid-1930s.

67 'Silver Eye', Taihape, NZF, 1 May 1933, p.37.

68 'Parrot', Runa Runa, NZF, 1 September 1919, p.1254.

69 'Boy Blue', Otakeho, NZF, 1 November 1927, p.1430.

70 'Huapai Laddie', Helensville, NZF, 1 October 1926, p.1452.

71 Edna Partridge, interviewed 7 February 1995, 1 March 1995, 8 March 1995. Abstract pp.24,

31, 45 (Goodyear Collection). Born in 1917 at Rangiora, the eldest of nine children, Edna caused consternation in the family when she married rather than performing her expected role as perpetual unpaid labourer for her parents.

72 'Joey the Patriot', Blenheim, NZF, 1 January 1919, p.112.

73 'Lily of the Valley', Wakefield, NZF, 1 May 1933, p.366.

74 'Harry', Motueka, NZF, 1 May 1919, p.662.

75 'Cary', Te Rimu (9 years old), NZF, 1 June 1920, p.864.

76 The Education Board, Wellington, 3 October 1930, for the information of the Director-General of Health, H 1, 35/78, Closed Number 8911, ANZ.

77 Doctors and education board officials recommended systematic supervision of school lunches, hot drinks in cold weather and teaching children about nutrition and vegetable gardens. They had been horrified to find that except for the group of remote farmers between 17% and 37% of families had no vegetable gardens. Only one official recommendation related to the major problem, that of women's and children's labour. The report stated 'Child labour after school hours might be regulated, and condemnation of unsuitable houses could be enforced'. 'Report on Rural School Children', 1926, H 1, 35/78, Closed Number 8911, ANZ.

78 Labour attempted to appeal to this section of the rural community in the 1930s. The popular and indefatigable John A. Lee proselytized in dairying areas and small towns trying to raise support by promising cheap credit and an improvement in rural conditions. Erik Olssen, *John A. Lee*, Dunedin, 1977, pp.61, 75. 'Selma', Cabbage Bay, NZF, 1 October 1919, pp.1424-5.

79 Plate 88, 'Power to People', in Malcolm McKinnon, ed., *Bateman New Zealand Historical Atlas*, Auckland, 1997. See also Delyn Day, 'The Politics of Knitting: A Study of the New Zealand Women's Institutes and the Women's Division of the New Zealand Farmers' Union 1920-1940', Research essay for Postgraduate Diploma in History, University of Otago, 1991, pp.19-25.

80 Thomas Ryan, interviewed 22 March 1995, 28 March 1995, 29 March 1995, 11 April 1995 and 24 April 1995 (Goodyear Collection). Born in Hexton in 1919, the third of five children, Thomas grew up in a soldiers' rehabilitation farming settlement in the Central North Island.

81 Memo from Elizabeth Gunn to Director, Division of School Hygiene, Wellington, 26 November 1926, H 1, 35/78, Closed Number 8911, ANZ.

82 Gwen Alley grew up in Rangiora, but her family moved to Christchurch when she was in her early teens. Her father maintained a farm in Southland which her brothers often worked on in their school holidays. Gwen Somerset, *Sunshine and Shadow*, Auckland, 1988.

83 *ibid.*, pp.141-2.

84 'Work for Boys', *Press*, 8 March 1929, p.10.

85 Claire Toynbee, *Her Work and His: Family, Kin and Community in New Zealand 1900-1930*, Wellington, 1995, p.71. See also Caroline Daley, *Girls & Women, Men & Boys: Gender in Taradale, 1886-1930*, Auckland, 1999, who argues for more gender differentiation and notes (p.10) that men 'were more forthcoming about crime and disorder, alcohol and fighting, than about chores around the house or familial relationships'.

86 'The Country Child', *Westport Times*, 23 September 1926, press clipping in 'Report on Rural School Children', 1926, H 1, 35/78, Closed Number 8911, ANZ.