Children in history: From the mouth of babes

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Julia Gossard, assistant professor of history and specialist in the area of children in history.

Those skeptical about children's influence in the past need only read today's headlines, says historian William Wordsworth wrote those words in 1802 as a wish that he, the man, would always experience his younger self's sense of wonder and thrill at, for instance, a luminous rainbow. The phrase, however, is truer in more ways than the poet imagined — or, well, perhaps he did.

For Julia M. Gossard, modern civilization's younger self — the world that historians like Gossard write about — is our own era's parent.

Other scholars would agree. But here's a funny quirk: Gossard's historical specialty is children.

Gossard, an assistant professor of history, is an expert on the lives of youngsters who lived more than two centuries ago. We hear very little about the lives of these children in history. (Although her research does indeed point to the fact that they did exist.)

"They're in the shadows," she says of children. "We usually think about the adults because they're the ones creating the documents."

Children, however, she says, were more influential than we citizens of the modern world — or even history in general — give them credit for.

Think of your own household, she nudges, "and how about sometimes children rule the roost."

Isn't it often their ideas, she adds, that "dictate what you're going to do?"

We in America have seen just in recent months children take a larger and more vocal role in society. Think of the teenaged Parkland, Fla., shooting survivors sharing their message on national media and in marches at Washington, D.C.'s National Mall. Gossard sees in these headlines the growing pains and the fight against the adult world in which children have always engaged.

"I want to use this moment in the present day as an example to talk about their history," she said.

And indeed, Gossard has reached international and national forums to talk about the little-known impact of history's children.

She shared her research recently on the popular podcast, "15 Minute History." Self-described as a source for educators, students and history buffs, the podcast airs weekly from the University of Texas at Austin. During the Feb. 21 episode, Gossard discusses a little-known episode in French history: In the 17th and 18th centuries, the country sent children to serve as ambassadors in the Ottoman Empire.

Gossard was also an invited guest on the BBC 4 radio show, "When Greeks Flew Kites," hosted by Sarah Dunant, author of such renowned historical novels as The Birth of Venus (2003) and In the Name of the Family, a 2018 novel about the Borgia family of 15th-century Rome.

From a microphone in the studio of Utah Public Radio, Gossard joined an international conversation between scholars about the historical underpinnings of our current resurgence of youth activism.

Not only was she thrilled at this taste of NPR notoriety, she says, "I thought it was beautiful piece that demonstrated youth activism in these moments in history that people might not know about." (see the link at the end of the story.)

Gossard has focused her research on a favorite historical period, 18th-century France. Her upcoming book, under contract with McGill-Queen's University Press, is Coercing Children: State-Building and Social Reform in the Eighteenth-Century. She's also collecting research for a book project to be called Little Republicans, which describes how the architects of the French Revolution "inculcated" youth into the movement. "They looked at
Athens and Greece and said, ‘We can’t go down that same route. (Without young people) their revolutions died after a generation’,” she said. As an undergraduate at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Gossard’s original interest in the history of education opened her eyes to the long invisible role of children. “I started thinking, children have probably held roles in their own families that we haven’t recognized before,” she said.

Within that field of study, she found surprising intersections with other avenues of historical research — gender roles, for instance, or social and family culture. “Plus, children are rather quiet in the historical literature,” she added.

Gossard hopes her research will also temper the historical myth that parents in earlier times somehow loved their children less. We still hear the rational that mothers didn’t want to bond with babies that were likely to die. Or another habit that seems to discomfit us modern types: giving babies the names of their dead older siblings.

“That’s a big strain of historical thought,” she says, recalling that she heard it from her own mother. “Historians now are pushing back and saying ‘You are really just looking at mortality rates and naming practices,’” she said. “These things aren’t necessarily indicative of people’s emotions.”

She adds, “I think they experienced death and loss in a way we can’t imagine – it was very public, omnipresent. They bound their emotions together in a different way. To feel is a human characteristic, and that attachment they have, there’s something there.”

Some other novelties in the teaching toy box of Julia M Gossard, assistant professor of history

The UnEssay

Some history students simply ace the research paper. Others, Gossard has found, “are kinesthetic learners who have to take things apart and play with them.” The UnEssay allows young historians to approach topics in any format that fits them. When she introduced it, students created magazine spreads, produced documentaries and recorded podcasts. “It’s just giving them a different presentation space using all the same components,” she said.

Twitter history conference

This social media platform requires users to boil concepts down to their essence. And so it was with a 2017 conference hosted by the Canadian History Association — all via Twitter. “It’s incredibly difficult to get a 15-page paper down to 15 tweets,” she says now. “It was a great exercise to think about what’s important about my research and the key points I need to communicate.”

Gossard shared via Twitter research she conducted with former student Arie French as part of the Summer Mentorship Grant program. They documented the journey of young French women forcibly transported to Canada in the 1700s (see Liberalis winter 2017 issue online for more).

“I connected with more people virtually than I ever would have taking this to a physical conference,” she says. “I feel like more people read it, more people asked me questions. There was a really engaging virtual presence happening.” Follow Julia’s newest endeavor at #twitterstorians and @jmgossard.

Food timelines

Gossard authored an American History Association blog article detailing the use of a digital timeline create with TimelineJS as an approach to history through its stomach. Students in a Foundations of Western Civilizations class researched their chosen era through food trends. What does canned Spam tell us about World War II? What role did corn play in Khrushchev’s Cold War policies?

The approach helps students think historically and critically about how food — and access to it — has been a mobilizing factor in history, Gossard said. One student’s research on the role of wine in the French Revolution touched on sanitation, culture and business practices.