



# The Invention of Childhood

Books Reviewed:

[The Invention of Childhood](#) [1]

Issue:

[163](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Peter Hollindale](#) [3]

Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

This set of CDs comprises the series of 30 broadcasts produced by the BBC on Radio 4 in the autumn of 2006, forming a history of British childhood over more than a thousand years. It begins with a seventh-century child's grave in a Lincolnshire Anglo-Saxon graveyard, and ends with the conditions of childhood here and now. The cover shows two pictures, one of medieval children, the other of boys from (judging by their dress and haircuts) about 1950. Both lots are snowballing. These pictures neatly sum up the central theme of the series ? that children stay the same across the ages, but childhood is a social, political, religious and cultural construct which is always being re-invented.

The BBC could hardly have found two better people to collaborate on the series. Hugh Cunningham is a distinguished academic historian of childhood, who has written a book to accompany the series. (Since **The Invention of Childhood** deals exclusively with Britain, readers wanting a wider comparative history should go to his earlier book, **Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500** .) Michael Morpurgo is not only a major children's writer but a hands-on innovative worker for children's welfare through the charity Farms for City Children. They have done a splendid job. Morpurgo's presentation is clear, quite formal, utterly unpatronising and ungingimmicky, and the many illustrative quotations, not least the children's, are delightfully performed and free of hamming-up. There is a minimum of music. It is quite an old-fashioned production, in fact ? a hugely enjoyable piece of good teaching.

What is taught is impossible to summarise, but certain things stand out. Yes, in important ways the lives of children have steadily improved. The decline of infant mortality and gains in health, education and welfare are undeniable, and not just recent. (The eighteenth century comes out very well from this history.) But children have always been loved, always been mourned when they died. Our modern child-centred world does not represent a great leap forward in affection. As Morpurgo several times points out, some of the major doctrinal clashes of the past (for instance, Evangelicals versus Romantics, original sin versus clouds of glory) remain unresolved even now. Our certainties are premature, and our present-day confusions manifold. Morpurgo and Cunningham do not supply an entirely upbeat conclusion. One sobering fact is that the play space of present-day children is one *ninth* what it was a generation ago. Morpurgo regrets that, and so do I. My own 'free range' as a post-war ten-year-old covered, I calculate, something like eighteen square miles of rural and urban habitat. Those were the days. As Morpurgo said in his **Radio Times** introduction to this admirable series, 'if I were to choose a golden age for children, it wouldn't be now?.'

**Source URL (retrieved on *Mar '21*):** <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/163/childrens-books/reviews/the-invention-of-childhood>

**Links:**

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-invention-of-childhood>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/163>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/peter-hollindale>