**Children and Empire: How discourses of Empire permeated Victorian childhood before and after the 1870 Education Act**

While the British Empire is acknowledged to have functioned from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was during the nineteenth century that the British Empire expanded greatly in terms of size, population, and wealth.[[1]](#footnote-1) Dominating the nineteenth century, the Victorian Era, 1837-1901, in which Queen Victoria reigned over Great Britain, is considered by scholars such as Amy Llyod and Peter Marshall to be a period in British history in which monarchy increasingly identified with Empire.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed, Queen Victoria was granted the title of Empress of India in 1876; this, as well as occasions such as Queen Victoria’s Golden and Diamond Jubilees 1887 and 1897, continued to rouse imperialism towards the end of the nineteenth century.[[3]](#footnote-3) Within this article, discourses of Empire can be understood as text, discussion and ideals concerning imperialism. Pramod Nayar suggests in *Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire*, that discourses are not only a reflection of events, but define realities for viewers, giving insight into lived experiences.[[4]](#footnote-4) Accordingly, this article will examine the way in which discourses of Empire permeated Victorian experiences of childhood, specifically, before and after the 1870 education Act.

The 1870 Elementary Education Act, in principle, established the right of every child in England and Wales to some form of schooling.[[5]](#footnote-5) Though it did not provide universal, free, or compulsory education, it did address some problems in a deficient education system by establishing a set of school boards responsible for building and managing elementary schools where there was clear educational need.[[6]](#footnote-6) Historians such as Harris have argued that the 1870 Education Act was a major turning point in nineteenth-century Britain, leading to a significant expansion in the provision of education. [[7]](#footnote-7) Others have highlighted the way in which the Act awarded the state power over education, arguing it overtly functioned as a form of social control.[[8]](#footnote-8) Consequently, it is possible to analyse the extent to which discourses of Empire permeated Victorian childhood before and after the 1870 Education Act.

**Imperialism in informal Education before the 1870 Education Act**

Before the regulation of education in 1870, children from across classes would have accessed informal education in various ways.[[9]](#footnote-9) Lower and working-class children were likely to have attended beneficent Sunday schools as students. These taught not only religious curricula, but enforced social control and individual betterment through charitable events and organisations affiliated with the church.[[10]](#footnote-10) Recollections in the autobiographies of working-class children highlight the importance of Sunday schools in enhancing their quality of life. Bessy Wallies recalls in her memoirs the ‘Tea days’ bestowed upon her community by her Sunday school, and the importance of these occasions to the working-class and destitute children attending:

*‘Food left over was carefully divided amongst the helpers, few of which ever tasted ham or cake except on Tea Day’.[[11]](#footnote-11)*

Informal institutions in education such as Sunday schools undoubtedly influenced working-class children by encouraging their continued commitment to organisations through food and ‘treat’ offerings.[[12]](#footnote-12) While Tholfsen suggests the operation of philanthropic institutions such as Sunday schools in Victorian Britain ‘contributed to the achievement of national and imperial purposes’, their influence on Victorian childhood is considered minimal.[[13]](#footnote-13) Provision of valuable academic skill or the instillment of imperialistic ideals is widely debated, and historians such as Fraser have gone as far as to argue that some charity schools were considered ‘no more than childminding establishments’, ineffective in influencing children to any significant extent.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Middle-class engagement in Sunday school education was comparatively different. For girls especially, Sunday schools functioned as an outlet for teaching and individual betterment, rather than as an institution in which they might be taught. Sunday schools allowed middle-class girls to engage in apprentice roles, positively interacting with education in a way that was charitable, and ‘without compromising their class status or marriageability’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Arguably, the altruistic notion behind middle-class girls assisting the most destitute further elevated their position in society.[[16]](#footnote-16) Regardless of the whether imperialism did indeed permeate Victorian childhoods through Sunday school education, it is important to recognise that before the 1870 Education Act, education and class were largely interconnected. Working and middle-class children were accessing the same informal education systems, though in divergent ways, perpetuating class inequalities and allowing a power imbalance to persist. Had it been prominent as Tholfsen has argued, imperialism would have influenced the working and middle-class in an irregular manner.

**Imperialism in formal education before the 1870 Education Act**

Alternative, formal education before the introduction of the 1870 Education Act could be accessed through fee paying and boarding schools. [[17]](#footnote-17) This comprehensive form of education was primarily accessed by middle and upper-class children, on account of the requirement for fees, but also due to the economic necessity for working-class children to contribute to family income. [[18]](#footnote-18)  Working-class children would be able to access a degree of formal education through workhouses and industrial schools, while the most destitute, or ‘paupers’, were provided with informal teaching and free food by charitable ‘ragged schools’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Nonetheless, lower and working-class children were less likely to receive a comprehensive education than their middle and upper-class counterparts.[[20]](#footnote-20) Consequently, middle and upper-class Victorian children were more likely to consume imperial commentary through their education and the knowledge that teachers and textbooks imparted. This theory is supported by the increasing number of books produced and intended for ‘middling school children’ between 1837 and 1901.[[21]](#footnote-21) These textbooks were ‘a supply in some sort to teachers’ demands’, and provide evidence that discussion around Empire was indeed a part of the middle- and upper-class curriculum.[[22]](#footnote-22) Historian Bernard Porter has found that textbooks successfully analysed for imperial messages were found to have been seldom used in working-class schools, and enhances the argument that discourses of Empire were most likely to shape the childhoods of middle- and upper-class children. [[23]](#footnote-23)

An analysis of the extent to which imperialism permeated Victorian childhood on the basis of class reveals additional implications of gender. Notably, though middle-class girls were more likely to participate in education than working-class or destitute girls, either formally or charitably, the perception that education was unimportant for women continued to obstruct female access to education even in the upper-classes.[[24]](#footnote-24) This is illustrated by the access to education by middle-class girls through informal organisations such as Sunday schools that preserved their marriageability, and not through the formal, fee paying school’s their male counterparts had access to.[[25]](#footnote-25) Girls’ reduced access to education, especially amongst working-classes, likely reduced their exposure to discourses of Empire they might otherwise have gained through academia. This illustrates the way in which gender and class interconnect to influence children’s exposure to discourses of Empire before the 1870 Education Act.

**Imperialism in non-educational institutions**

While it has been illustrated that Victorian children’s, particularly girls’, absence from comprehensive education subsequently reduced their exposure to discourses of Empire, this is not consistently the case. Michael Childs explains that in Britain’s industrial age, ‘illness, death, accident, slackening of trade or a strike could plunge a family from relative comfort into a hand-to-mouth existence’.[[26]](#footnote-26) This precarity required the children of some working-class families to contribute to the household economy through waged labour. While the staple industries of textiles and iron continued to dominate the composition of British exports throughout the late-Victorian era, children contributed to economic augmentation, accessing wages in textile factories, mills, and mines.[[27]](#footnote-27) Arguably, children and families employed in exportation industries such as cotton textiles and coal would have been aware of the British Empire, namely their role in transforming raw imported cotton and the subsequent exportation of cloth.[[28]](#footnote-28) For this reason, it could be suggested that working-class children removed from education were exposed to discourses of Empire as cogs in the wheel of an expanding and industrialising British Empire.

Notably, Victorian boys were more likely to access manual and waged labour in order to stimulate their family economy than female children. In families unable to afford their education, girls would likely have been expected to correct a domestic imbalance caused by the return of adults in the household to the labour market.[[29]](#footnote-29) Consequently, one might argue that in Victorian Britain, boys could expect to be exposed to discourse of Empire to a greater extent than girls. When excluded from education, imperialism permeated Victorian boy’s childhood through industrial labour linked to the British Empire, while girls excluded from education could expect to remain within the domestic sphere performing caring roles, comparatively unexposed to imperialistic ideals. Importantly, historians such as Humphries have highlighted declining rates of child labour over the nineteenth century, attributing this to improved technology as well as the implementation of legislation such as the Factory Acts and the 1870 Education Act which gradually reduced child employment and increased their access to formal education.[[30]](#footnote-30) As the 1870 Act became fully implemented, and especially by 1880 when education had become universally compulsory, attendance at school had removed children from work environments that might have exposed them to discourses of Empire.[[31]](#footnote-31) Thus, a decline in child labour even before but especially after the 1870 Education Act might suggest that discourses of Empire permeated Victorian childhood to a limited extent.

**Imperialism in Education after the 1870 Education Act**

Though Bernard Porter has highlighted that textbooks containing imperial messages were utilised to some extent in middle and upper-class education systems before the introduction of the 1870 Education Act, he has gone on to explain that in comparison to other subjects, few textbooks published before the 1880’s awarded a significant amount of attention to Empire. [[32]](#footnote-32) Dunae supports this argument, writing that scattered references to Empire before and during 1870 publications suggest that ‘imperial sentiment was relatively limited’.[[33]](#footnote-33) This is indicative of an absence of imperial discourse throughout Britain until the late nineteenth century, and suggests that it was not until after 1870 that the significance of Empire began to increase throughout Britain. Certainly, Amy Llyod emphasizes that in the 1870s, Britain entered what has been termed the 'Age of Imperialism'.[[34]](#footnote-34) After Queen Victoria’s ascension to Empress of India in 1876, ‘Britons were captivated by the reporting of the Indian Mutiny and the Boer War’, illustrating the increased permeation of imperial discourse into Victorian society towards the end of the nineteenth century.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The premise that imperialism intensifies toward the late nineteenth century aligns with Queen Victoria’s return to the public eye after her private and extended period of mourning. Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887 was a ‘magnificent celebration’ while her Diamond Jubilee in 1897 focussed ‘almost exclusively on a celebration of the British Empire, and the Queen’s role as its head’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Families of all classes were encouraged to honour Victoria’s personal achievements as Queen, and these occasions ‘helped shape children’s view of the rightness of British rule’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Steinbach and Porter provide convincing evidence that information, knowledge and discourses of Empire percolated through classes, arguing that class mobility was a novel advancement in Victorian Britain.[[38]](#footnote-38) The participation of children across classes in Queen Victoria’s imperial celebrations suggests that discourses of Empire permeated Victorian childhood across classes after the 1870 Education Act, not entirely through education but through national and cultural engagement in Empire that grew towards the end of the nineteenth century.

By investigating the schooling experience of working-class Victorian children in English elementary schools from the late nineteenth century to 1939, Brad Beaven has concluded that school curricula, physical exercise and extra-curricular activities systematically delivered to children after the 1870 Education Act ‘were fertile ground for planting the seeds of imperial fervour’.[[39]](#footnote-39) While agreeing with Porter that until the late 1880’s ‘board Schools and schools in the voluntary sector appear to have followed curricula relatively free from imperial propaganda’, Beaven suggests that eventually ‘international competition and anxieties over the security of the Empire brought the teaching of patriotism to national attention’.[[40]](#footnote-40) He goes on to argue that from the late 1880s, the curriculum took on a distinctly imperial edge as military drill and imperial ceremony were introduced, citing songs such as ‘Hail Britannia’ and ‘England’s Queen’ listed among St Michaels Church of England School log book.[[41]](#footnote-41) Primary evidence such as that cited by Beaven suggests that discourses of Empire undoubtedly permeated Victorian childhood to a considerable extent after the 1870 Education Act. Notwithstanding, this can be attributed to a surge in imperialism towards the end of the nineteenth century as a result of external factors, ultimately translated through a regularising education system.

Furthermore, Lloyd has suggested that in the late nineteenth century ‘Empire was a prevalent theme in popular fiction and children's magazines… Imperial exhibitions during this period and an  
expansion of music-hall entertainment where patriotic songs celebrating the Empire were a staple element’ allowed discourses of Empire to permeate Victorian childhood to a startling extent.[[42]](#footnote-42) While historians may be inclined to assume that periodical literature would primarily have been accessed by the middle and upper-classes, Porter has suggested that contemporary ideals would have ‘trickled down’, stressing that class boundaries in Victorian Britain were in no way solidified.[[43]](#footnote-43) Thus, when discourses of Empire were not prevailing upon Victorian childhood through education, they seemed to permeate social and cultural experiences, particularly after the 1870 Education Act due to external cultivation of imperialism.

**Conclusion**

Though informal education opportunities provided by Sunday schools scarcely offered imperialism an opportunity to permeate Victorian childhood, they did work to emphasise inequalities compounded by class and gender. While working-class children might have expected to receive an informal, parochially compiled curriculum as well as charitable sustenance, middle-class girls were able to access informal education in pedagogical roles.[[44]](#footnote-44) Had discourses of Empire permeated Sunday school curricula as Tholfsen has suggested, imperialism surely would have directed working and middle-class children in divergent ways.[[45]](#footnote-45) Formal educational institutions such as fee paying, and boarding schools have been identified by Porter as institutions that adopted imperial teaching materials prior to the 1870 Education Act.[[46]](#footnote-46) Imperial ideals found to be presented through educational textbooks are however, limited to permeating the childhoods of middle and upper-class children on account of monetary requirements for fee paying and boarding schools. Moreover, formal education systems in Victorian Britain continue to demonstrate an interconnection between class and gender. While middle and upper-class boys may have been afforded a private education that taught imperial principles, the expectation of middle-class girls to preserve their marriageability and remain within the domestic sphere would have made them less likely to experience discourses of Empire through formal education systems.[[47]](#footnote-47) Although an absence from education before the 1870 Education Act might have suggested an exclusion from discourses of Empire, work such as Edgerton’s has suggested that working-class children performing waged labour in industries such as cotton textiles and coal would have been aware of Empire due to the distribution of goods.[[48]](#footnote-48) Uniformly, this exposure to imperial discourse is influenced by gender. Boys’ exclusion from education and Empire could be restored through exposure to Empire in industrial labour and trade, however, girls’ exclusion from education and therefore discourses of Empire was likely to result in their relegation to the domestic sphere where she was comparatively exposed to discourses of Empire to a lesser extent.[[49]](#footnote-49) Crucially however, Humphries has highlighted the way in which declining rates of child labour over the nineteenth century as a result of the Factory Acts and the 1870 Education Act comprehensively reduced the exposure of both boys and girls to discourses of Empire, reducing the value of this argument.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Superficially, discourses of Empire do appear to permeate Victorian childhood to a greater extent after the 1870 Education Act. Historians such as Beaven have illustrated the introduction of military drills and nationalist hymns into Elementary school curricula, suggesting an increase in imperial discourse in education towards the end of the nineteenth century.[[51]](#footnote-51) Though suitable evidence has been provided to support the argument that discourses of Empire permeated Victorian childhood to a greater extent after the 1870 Education Act, it is imperative to consider the extent to which imperialism in Britain was accelerating towards the end of the nineteenth century on account of trade expansion and the identification of monarchy with Empire. Queen Victoria’s role as Empress of India as well as her nationally celebrated Golden and Diamond Jubilees undoubtedly allowed discourses of Empire to permeate the lives of Victorian children.[[52]](#footnote-52) Importantly, national perpetuation of imperialistic discourse as well as the prominence of Empire in popular fiction and society seems to have been experienced by those across class and gender spectrums. On account of this, as well as sufficient evidence that imperial discourse permeated Victorian childhood most significantly towards the end of the nineteenth century, (though not entirely through elementary schooling), it is reasonable to argue that discourses of Empire permeated Victorian childhood to the greatest extent after the introduction of the 1870 Education Act.

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