

SOCIAL HISTORY IN PERSPECTIVE

Melanie Tebbutt

MAKING YOUTH

A History of Youth in
Modern Britain



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Making Youth

A History of Youth in Modern Britain

MELANIE TEBBUTT



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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
Introduction	1
1 Working Youth and Educating the Young	20
2 Troublemaking and Imposing Order	50
3 Organised and Unorganised Youth	75
4 Policing Sexual Behaviour	104
5 Leisure and Consumption	131
6 New Youth Identities	156
7 Youth Transforming	182
<i>Notes</i>	201
<i>Bibliography</i>	245
<i>Index</i>	269

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Making Youth: A History of Youth in Modern Britain

Introduction

Defining youth

The emergence of modern youth

Key themes and moments of transition

Chapter outlines

Introduction

There are striking continuities in the history of youth over the two centuries this book covers, the most significant of which is the frequency with which modern society has feared its young people. At the beginning of the nineteenth century and at the end of the twentieth, young people were seen as a problem, vulnerable because not yet fully formed, threatening because not yet disciplined by the expectations of adult status. Industrialisation and urbanisation eroded the traditional mechanisms by which youth had been regulated and controlled, reinforcing well-established anxieties about their independence and introducing new fears about their susceptibility to the risks and temptations of urban life. Perceptions that working-class young people were finding their own way through work and leisure, detached from traditional forms of moral regulation, accentuated concerns about their disruptive behaviour and criminality. As adults themselves found it difficult to comprehend the rapidity with which society was changing, focus on the young intensified, making them a powerful and persisting symbol of uncertainty about the future.

The ageing of Western societies, high levels of youth unemployment and the accompanying potential for social and political unrest make re-consideration of youth histories both timely and appropriate. It was, after all, unsettling trends in the post-war condition of young people which led the first generation of scholars to turn their attention to the history of youth in the 1960s and 1970s and produce the first attempts to define youth historically, with ambitious overviews such as John Gillis's, based on case studies from England and Germany, and Joseph Kett's study of American adolescence.¹ Research has developed considerably since then, although the attention paid to developments in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods frequently overshadow how young people's lives changed in the early nineteenth century. The interwar years, usually skimmed over in earlier studies, have, however, received more attention since the 1990s, while the second half of the twentieth century, for long the domain of social scientists and cultural studies, has also been attracting attention from a new generation of historians.² *Making Youth* draws on much of this more recent research in tracing the origins and development of a number of key themes and debates in the history of youth in modern Britain. Urbanisation and industrialisation brought challenges which gradually altered how young people were perceived and understood, and this book explores how young people came to be seen as a problematic social group which had to be contained by institutions and professionals specifically devoted to managing their lives, through education, the juvenile justice system and welfare agencies. Experiences of being young were influenced by many similar trends across modern western societies, and *Making Youth* suggests some of these broader patterns. It also makes reference to national and regional differences within the United Kingdom, although these receive less attention than they deserve because of lack of space, a reminder that detailed studies of the histories of youth in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are much needed.³

Defining youth

Defining youth is by no means straightforward, shaped as it is by the fluid boundaries of childhood and adulthood, which vary culturally and through history. Most of those to whom this book refers were between the ages of 10 and 11 and their late teens, although some young people in their twenties flit through its story, as do younger children, reflecting how changing ideas of childhood influenced the contradictory ideals and images which have shaped modern concepts of adolescent identity and sexuality.

Boundaries at both ends of the age scale of childhood and adulthood changed over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and by the end of the period the age range of 'adolescent' behaviour commonly extended from the twenties into the mid-thirties. Youth is, of course, more than chronological age, and can also describe a state of mind or set of attitudes associated with people much older than the age range to which the term is conventionally applied.⁴ Ideas of age and ageing changed considerably over these two centuries, particularly in the second half of the twentieth, when the growth of consumption and youth-oriented consumer culture made being young a desirable identity to retain and re-invent, as the balance of cultural power shifted away from emphases on age and maturity.⁵

Some scholars have used the term youth as a blanket description to encompass very young children; others have applied it to those at the older end of the pre-pubescent spectrum. Dictionary classifications of youth as a period 'when one is young' typically beg the question as to when youth begins and finishes.⁶ Definitions by late-twentieth-century policy-makers tended to end in the mid-twenties. In the 1990s, for example, the World Health Organization broadened its definition to include all young adults up to the age of 24. Sociologists have come to describe youth less as a chronological age and more as a transitional stage of life which may be associated with the teen years, but can also apply to the thirties, or when individuals are even older.⁷

Similar uncertainties surround other words used to describe this liminal age 'suspended' between childhood and adulthood, yet also filled with potential.⁸ Adolescent and adolescence originate in the Latin verb *adolescere*, 'to grow up', a vague term which reflected the general fluidity of 'Latin terminology for age groups'.⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines adolescence as 'the process or condition of growing up', usually 'considered as extending from 14 to 25 in males, and from 12 to 21 in females'.¹⁰ There is, however, 'no internationally accepted definition of adolescence'. That used by the United Nations is young people aged 10–19.¹¹

The new terms which emerged in the twentieth century to describe young people reflected both their growing association with consumption and consumer culture and the lengthening time spent in education, especially in the United States, where the adjective 'teenage' was first used in the 1920s, although its connotations were then rather childish.¹² The noun 'teenager', popularised in North America in the 1940s, was a marketing term coined to describe young people whose consumer preferences were shaped by the peer-group culture of high schools, which by 1930 were teaching 47% of those aged 14 to 17. (This had risen to 65%

by 1936.)¹³ Most young people in Britain left school much earlier, at the age of 14, and consumer culture was much less advanced than in the United States, which meant that the term remained uncommon before the Second World War and did not pass into common usage until the post-war period, when it marked a significant new stage in the history of youth, albeit one that has been much debated.¹⁴ Teenager was used originally to describe young people's engagement with a distinctive type of modern consumption, but gradually became such a familiar term that medievalists and early modernists have used it to refer to this age range in their own periods.¹⁵

The biological process of sexual maturing known as puberty has a much more precise definition because of the universality of the physiological changes to which it refers, although considerable variations between individuals can make it, too, an indeterminate marker of change.¹⁶ The physical changes of puberty, usually taken as a clear indication that the child is maturing, are more obvious in girls, for whom the advent of menstruation, or menarche, has often been a significant 'rite of passage'. In medieval society, menstruation was identified with the adult world of reproduction and child-bearing, which meant that girls' adolescent years were more 'compressed' than those of boys, because the need to maintain sexual reputation meant that its onset was often followed quite quickly by marriage.¹⁷

The age of puberty has varied historically and higher standards of health and nutrition have significantly influenced its occurrence in both boys and girls.¹⁸ Young people were physically maturing much earlier by the end of the twentieth century than at the beginning of the nineteenth. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the age at which puberty occurred dropped by three years for both boys and girls.¹⁹ Between 1860 and 1980 the age at which a girl experienced her first period fell by 0.3 years per decade in the industrialised countries of Western Europe.²⁰ In 1999, the Bristol Institute of Child Health published the results of a large-scale study of 14,000 children, which revealed that one in six girls and one in fourteen boys were showing signs of puberty by the time they were 8 years old. The average age for the onset of menstruation at the end of the twentieth century was 13, compared with about 17 at the beginning.²¹ The main cause was probably improved nutrition, although these changes were also attributed to rising levels of obesity, increased exposure to chemicals in the environment and hormones in the food chain.

Youth was also constructed through legislation, which set varying age boundaries across the nineteenth century, through Factory Acts, the criminal justice system and the introduction of compulsory elementary

schooling from the 1870s, which started to define school-leavers more clearly as 'representatives of a new life-stage', separate from both childhood and the 'adult' age of employment, at 18.²² In 1889, the Prevention of Cruelty Act established the end of 'childhood' as 14 for boys and 16 for girls. The 1908 Children Act distinguished between 'children', who were under 14, and those aged between 14 and 16, who were described as 'young people'.²³

Class, social status, gender and 'race' all contributed to how youth was understood across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although the male remained a default setting in most definitions, reflecting adult preoccupations with how to control the disaffection and destabilising tendencies to which young men were assumed to be prey. Michael Mitterauer observed how 'understanding of youth is, in its historical roots, generally conceived in strongly masculine terms', and girls and young women were largely marginalised in the history of youth and youth studies until the 1970s and 1980s.²⁴ Youth culture was also for many years largely seen as a male phenomenon because of associations with the 'public' life of the street. The cultural dominance of masculinity and assumptions which privileged the 'public' lives of boys and young men was very clear in the work of pioneering historians of youth, such as Joseph Kett, John Gillis and John Springhall, all of whom largely neglected girls and young women. Carol Dyhouse was unusual in the literature of the 1970s and early 1980s in addressing female experiences of being young, by examining girls' socialisation at home and in school.²⁵ More alternatives to the 'male orientation' of earlier historical accounts began to emerge from the mid-1980s and 1990s, as feminism encouraged new directions which challenged earlier emphases.²⁶ Nancy Lesko has pointed out that although girls may have been largely missing from earlier accounts, their absence was a defining one. If the discourse of adolescence which developed in the nineteenth century was largely focused on boys, 'the girl problem was fundamental' to it: 'Seemingly absent, girls were always present, in fact, hauntingly present.'²⁷

Race, ethnicity and religion have also frequently been lacking in histories of British youth. Perceptions of adolescence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were shaped by a narrow ideological imperialist idea of white, Protestant Englishness which not only reinforced the otherness of working-class children but placed below them the children of immigrants or children from different ethnic or religious backgrounds. These adolescents often balanced several different kinds of world, whose divergence from mainstream British culture carried expectations of Anglicisation. Large Irish and Jewish communities faced anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism, discrimination, language barriers

and societal pressures to adopt British customs and values. Their paths into adulthood were diverse, refracted by gender and class. Their negotiation of street, school and home lives, work and leisure relationships involved conformity, family pressure to maintain traditional practices and attempts to rebel against traditional expectations. Some hid leisure pursuits from parents, or the fact that they were going out with a boy or girl of a different religion or culture. Everyday neighbourhood relationships could be divided but also amicable. The context of local communities was very important.

There were also smaller black and Asian populations, particularly in dockland areas of seaports such as Liverpool, Bristol, Glasgow, Cardiff, London, Newcastle, Southampton and South Shields.²⁸ Ethnic settlement patterns in ports were not racially homogeneous and they varied, as did relationships with local populations. These communities grew during and after the First World War, although they have tended to remain in the shadow of the larger scale migrations from the Caribbean and South Asia, which took place in the second half of the twentieth century. These settlers were largely male, which reflected their seafaring background, and many entered into permanent relationships with local, white, working-class women. Children from these communities and from mixed-race partnerships lived largely under the radar, and their lives have to be pieced together from fragmented accounts, oral history and autobiographical testimony, although racism seeped into all levels of their education and working lives. Black school-leavers often found it difficult to find work, a persistent problem which continued across the twentieth century. What was expressed publicly often masked painful experiences of casual and overt racism.²⁹ Constructions of black people as inferior long predated the First World War, but the children of interracial relationships became a particular source of anxiety in the interwar years, when scientific theories of race were strongly influenced by eugenic concerns about race-mixing and intermarriage. Although the number of black males in Britain was relatively small before the second half of the twentieth century, they were a focus for considerable sexual anxieties. (There is evidence of similar hostility towards sexual relationships between British women and black men in the eighteenth century.)³⁰ Young working-class women, sexually stigmatised in any case by the middle class, lost status even further through liaisons with black men. Miscegenation fears strengthened in the war years, with the arrival of large numbers of black American servicemen, and continued through the 1950s and 1960s, with the growth of much larger migrant communities from the Caribbean and South Asia. Media sensationalism and racist popular mythologies contributed and reinforced a stereotype, especially

from the 1970s, of black young men, specifically African Caribbean, as a violent and dangerous 'enemy within', a demonised image supplanted in the popular imagination towards the end of the twentieth century by that of the Islamist terrorist.³¹

It was from the 1970s that the term 'black' became a descriptive term of resistance against racism, rather than an ethnic identification, implying a homogeneity which, while understandable as far as resisting racism was concerned, veiled the diverse ethnicities and contexts which characterised youth in the last decades of the twentieth century. Prejudice, discrimination and being a minority in white, Protestant British culture nuanced youth in complex ways across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not only in terms of external representation but within communities and among individuals who developed their own structures of defence and resistance, whether through establishing different types of youth organisation and supplementary education, or through personal assertions of cultural and religious identity. Racism shaped youth, but young people from minorities also shaped themselves, socially and politically, as this book suggests.

The emergence of modern youth

The ambiguities which surround the end of childhood and beginning of adulthood have been much challenged by historians in debates famously initiated by the French historian Philippe Ariès whose book, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), argued that neither childhood nor adolescence existed as distinct life stages in medieval society.³² Ariès suggested that medieval children did not experience an extended period of transition from childhood to adulthood but mixed with adults, socially and in work, with dependence on their mothers reducing, usually from about the age of 7 or 8.³³ Scholars have since contested this claim, demonstrating that medieval society did have a concept of childhood and that Ariès's lesser-known view that adolescence did not exist was also too simplistic. Although the medieval world in Europe would not have recognised adolescence in its twentieth-century sense of social and psychological confusion, struggle and conflict with parents, it was certainly identified in relation to age-defined male experiences such as apprenticeship and 'squirehood'.³⁴ Apprenticeships, typically entered at the age of 14, lasted until 21 or 24; the mid-twenties were often seen as the age of adult independence, with the full acquisition of a trade and economic independence. Not all became apprentices, of course, and transitions to adulthood seem to have been not so much a short, simple process as a

continuous one of 'maturation', which varied according to gender, social status and family circumstances.³⁵ The fluidity of the borders between childhood, youth and adulthood in pre-industrial society meant degrees of independence and dependence; the ability to work and contribute to the household and community were more significant than chronological age. The expectation that children should contribute to the household economy meant that many experienced a sharp break with childhood, and left childish things behind them.³⁶

Those most likely to experience the years after puberty as distinctive were members of the nobility, upper-class young men and those from the gentry and mercantile classes, apprentices in craft and professional fraternities and also students. Their freedoms were limited by the need to preserve family reputation and deference to paternal authority, particularly when choosing a wife, yet could extend into the mid- and late twenties, when pleasure-seeking was expected to be replaced by the responsibilities of marriage and children.³⁷ The long years between puberty and marriage caused some concern about young men's sexual activities, but were also accompanied by acceptance that they should 'get wild behaviour out of their systems before they settled down', expectations which also continued into the modern period.³⁸

The shift from 'traditional' to modern thought which occurred with the Enlightenment was significant in helping to change perceptions of what came to be seen as 'between' years.³⁹ From the mid-seventeenth century, a mix of philosophical, cultural, social and economic changes brought greater awareness of the child's moral value and the role of education in developing the internal, individual 'self'.⁴⁰ Jean Jacques Rousseau argued that it was wrong to force children to grow up and acquire adult attitudes and behaviour too quickly, because training the senses needed to follow a natural maturing process controlled by the laws of nature.⁴¹ Rousseau's book, *Emile* (1762), countered religious beliefs in children's essential sinfulness and argued that enlightened education ought not to treat children as miniature adults but should nurture innate goodness through appropriate education to help them develop into moral beings. It was necessary to postpone adulthood, because civilisation could only be ensured by separating boys from the potential corruption of adult society and educating them in virtue. Girls were to be trained at home to prepare them for their 'natural' roles, in domestic life and motherhood.⁴² Boyhood was, by contrast, a time of play, when boys could wear loose clothing, enjoy long walks in the countryside and hone their observational skills. As the capacity for rational thought developed from the age of 12, they were expected to study more, learn a trade and exercise powers of judgement, a period which lasted

until they were 15, when the sexual passions associated with the onset of puberty marked the start of young adulthood, which finished at about 25. The years between puberty and 20 were regarded as 'naturally troublesome', a time when boys needed careful adult guidance to help them develop the tools of rationality which Enlightenment thinkers considered essential to civilised manhood.

The eighteenth century was an important point in the emergence of modern ideas which associated childhood with innocence and parental nurturing. *Emile* was translated into English in 1763, and these new ideas of childhood grew in influence among the educated classes between the 1760s and 1830s, although romantic perceptions of children's 'natural' innocence remained in tension with evangelical views of the child as a bearer of original sin, inherently corrupt and sinful, whose disciplining to the parent's will was essential to ensure redemption through God's grace. Notions of childhood innocence vied with darker views of the child's capacity for wickedness and sin and had a significant class dimension, which came to centre upon the 'untamed' children and 'immoral' youth of the Victorian slums.

Rousseau's views of adolescence assumed greater significance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as reforms in the public school system encouraged educational approaches in middle-class schooling which prolonged adolescent transitions to adulthood. Part of the purpose of elementary schooling, from the 1870s, was to impose middle-class expectations of behaviour on working-class children, as young people were brought under adult authority by a wide range of new professionals – teachers, government officials, welfare workers, school attendance officers and voluntary workers.⁴³ Working-class young people were perceived as both dangerous and vulnerable. On the one hand, they threatened 'respectable' society and the established social order; on the other, they needed protection from the temptations of modern urban life. The late-Victorian and Edwardian years are significant in the history of modern youth because young people of all classes were delineated more clearly by age as adolescence was 'universalised' and 'institutionalised' in Europe and the United States. This era and the emergence of teenage consumer culture in the 1950s and 1960s were key moments of transition in the history of modern youth.⁴⁴

Key themes and moments of transition

The earliest study in Britain to address when youth emerged as a social category was Frank Musgrove's *Youth and the Social Order*, written in the 1960s and inspired, in part, by contemporary concern about a growing

'generation gap', which Musgrove argued was not a post-war phenomenon.⁴⁵ Rather, it was rooted in the nineteenth century, when well-off families sent their sons away to boarding school, lengthening their dependence on adults during adolescence and reinforcing 'a concept of youth as distinct and different'.⁴⁶ John Gillis similarly argued that adolescence was 'invented' as 'the unintended product of the reform of the public schools', where from the 1830s the middle and upper-middle classes commonly sent their sons to spend their teen years in 'cloistered', induced immaturity.⁴⁷

Gillis distinguished between the cultural 'invention' in the public schools and its 'discovery' in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, when educationalists, social reformers, scientists and writers developed a discourse of working-class youth as a social problem which became a metaphor for the many contemporary changes which disturbed them.⁴⁸ Stephen Humphries and John Springhall argued that the most significant factor between the 1870s and 1900s was middle-class anxiety about street violence and delinquency, as concerns about hooligans and working-class gangs intensified. These social and political worries about the independence of working-class boys in their teens were exacerbated by changes in the juvenile labour market. The growth of short-term jobs with no prospects was thought to make boys susceptible to political agitators and the temptations of street life, due to a lack of work discipline.⁴⁹ Harry Hendrick illustrated how this contributed to a public discourse which educational reformers and social scientists used to justify efforts to institutionalise boys and girls through schools, the judicial system and the youth movement.⁵⁰

Youth came under protracted academic scrutiny in the late-Victorian and Edwardian years, ushering in what Joseph Kett described as 'the era of the adolescent', between 1890 and 1920.⁵¹ Adolescence 'came of age' across a range of disciplines in the decades around 1900, as medical and scientific discourses identified the years between puberty and the late teens as a time of physical and emotional upheaval which all young people experienced, regardless of class or gender. In literature, adolescent turmoil became a medium through which to examine generational struggles, as in Franz Wedekind's German play *Spring Awakening* (1891), which explored the tragic effects of sexual hypocrisy and ignorance on young people, as they struggled to reconcile nascent sexual feeling with bourgeois moral expectations and adults' refusal to discuss sex and sexual feelings.⁵² Autobiography and satire highlighted generational friction, especially between middle-class fathers and their sons, who were often resentful of dependence and paternal expectations, including their fathers' financial and moral authority, which often continued after

the age of formal majority, at 21.⁵³ Father–son relationships were marked by detachment but involved significant emotional investment, because a son's behaviour and success was so closely tied to his father's reputation.⁵⁴ Edmund Gosse's memoir, *Father and Son*, published in 1907, based on childhood and family life during the 1850s and 1860s, portrayed a painful and growing sense of distance from the religious beliefs of his father, Philip Gosse, an eminent naturalist who was also a member of the Plymouth Brethren, a fundamentalist evangelical sect.⁵⁵ The factual accuracy of the book, written when Gosse was nearing 60, has been questioned, but its description of the repressive effects of an upbringing, mediated by the self-awareness of the older author, is an important and unusual personal account of adolescence in the Victorian period.⁵⁶ By contrast, George and Weedon Grossmith's novel, *Diary of a Nobody* (1892), satirised the late-Victorian lower-middle class through the character of Lupin Pooter, a rebellious 20-year-old, on the edge of achieving his majority, whose wayward behaviour – keeping inappropriate company, using slang and dressing flashily – caused his father considerable exasperation.⁵⁷

The most influential academic exponent of adolescence as a problematic life stage was the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall, a pioneer of the child study movement in the United States in the 1890s, who is often described as the 'father of adolescence'. Hall's book, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, played an important part in defining adolescence as a universal stage of psychological development, which affected all young people, regardless of class or culture.⁵⁸ It has been described as a key moment of 'discovery', when adolescence was defined ideologically through a discourse of freedom and control.⁵⁹ In Britain, *Adolescence* was first published in 1904, roughly the time that the term adolescence was taken up by practitioners such as social investigators and youth workers.⁶⁰

Hall defined adolescence as starting with puberty, at 12 or 13 years, and ending between the ages of 22 and 25. He illustrated how physiological and emotional changes made adolescents impressionable due to extreme and fluctuating moods, which veered from elation and depression to apathy and enthusiasm, arrogance and lack of confidence.⁶¹ Adolescents were malleable and needed not only freedom to nurture their potential but also the stabilising guidance of adults to help them become 'reliable workers and responsible citizens'.⁶² Hall's psychological assumptions were rooted in the American family values of the 1830s and influenced by fin-de-siècle worries about the nature of contemporary society.⁶³ *Adolescence* was published in an era of anxiety on both sides of the Atlantic about the upbringing of boys and young men.⁶⁴

Heterosexual masculinity was dominant and elite males went to great lengths to avoid feminising influences, which significantly affected how Hall defined this 'new' developmental period. He disliked co-education and the growth of female participation in the education system and was of a view that women never really grew up but remained in a state of adolescent dependence and immaturity.⁶⁵ Feminist contemporaries criticised the way in which Hall's work promoted medical and biological theories about women's inferiority.⁶⁶ Girls were civilisers, whose wills had to be curbed to nurture their families. By contrast, he considered 'a period of semi-criminality' to be 'normal' for all 'healthy' adolescent boys, a rebellious phase which they would eventually outgrow.⁶⁷ Their rowdy behaviour and 'naturally' adventurous 'instincts' received scientific justification.⁶⁸ Girls who were rebellious were 'abnormal' because they transgressed what was expected of female behaviour and they were discouraged from overexerting themselves, physically and mentally.⁶⁹

Hall synthesised ideas which had been circulating for many decades in intellectual and academic circles, including social Darwinism, which viewed human development as a series of distinct evolutionary stages.⁷⁰ His model of 'recapitulation', which mapped evolutionary theory onto child and adolescent development, proposed infancy, childhood and adolescence as stages which followed, or recapitulated, the stages of human evolution, from the emergence of primitive societies to a state of advanced civilisation. The infant was like an animal, the child a 'savage', the adolescent a primitive who, with the right support, would eventually become a 'civilised' adult. Adult guidance and regulation were essential to develop self-control because adolescents were 'imprisoned' by unstable emotions. Hall echoed Rousseau, in believing that laws of nature made adolescence a period which had to be nurtured rather than rushed. He had spent time in Germany and his romantic views of adolescent volatility and 'storm and stress' echoed the 'sturm und drang' of German literary romanticism in the 1770s, an idealistic reaction of 'angry young men' who exalted in youth's senses and passion, against the rationalism of the French Enlightenment and the expectations of polite society.⁷¹ Goethe's novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, published in 1774, the most popular and influential of the 'sturm und drang' texts, was the tragic story of a young man rejected by the young woman he adored, whose unrequited love led him to commit suicide. Banned in parts of Germany, it was alleged to have encouraged 'copycat' suicides by young men who had been similarly rejected.⁷²

Adolescence attracted attention from researchers and professionals on both sides of the Atlantic. Its text was, however, dense and turgid, and in Britain, J. W. Slaughter, a prominent British eugenicist, published

a more readable interpretation, *The Adolescent*, in 1910, which brought Hall's theories of adolescent development to the attention of a range of professionals, from psychologists and educationalists to youth workers and magistrates.⁷³ In 1928 Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* challenged psychobiological approaches by proposing wide cultural variations in perceptions and experiences of puberty. Mead argued against the universality of 'storm and stress' and emphasised the culturally specific character of adolescence, as in the United States, where modern family and urban life exacerbated social and personal anxieties and gave it a distinctive cultural identity.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, despite their differences, both Mead's and Hall's theories provided a rationale for the professional approaches and institutions to manage and control young people, which dominated what Springhall called the 'era of adolescence', between 1900 and 1950.⁷⁵ Hall's 'storm and stress' model influenced educational, social and welfare services into the 1970s, although it gradually fell from favour as academics moved away from bio-psychological explanations of adolescent behaviour. Echoes remained, however, absorbed into the discipline of criminology and in 'common-sense' assumptions about the problematic nature of adolescence, which continued to demonise the young.⁷⁶

By the end of the nineteenth century, the key themes that encapsulated adult anxieties about the young – street crime and delinquency, their relationship with commercial leisure and sexual behaviour – were absorbed by the emerging mass circulation press, whose powerful popular discourses about the 'problem' of working-class youth would continue across the twentieth century.⁷⁷ As Britain came under pressure, domestically and internationally, in the late-Victorian period, more attention was paid to the health and moral welfare of youth, which were linked to the nation's economic, military and political future. The 'natural' instability of adolescence, layered over concerns about the 'moral deficiencies' of the working-class 'youth problem', contributed to the expansion of education and welfare policies aimed at the young between the late-Victorian period and the Second World War. Youth's metaphorical significance remained important and concerns about the 'condition of youth' persisted in wartime plans for post-war reconstruction, whose vision of major welfare reforms had much to do with young people. Major policy changes in the late 1940s and early 1950s, particularly in relation to education and youth justice, were paralleled by persisting concerns about youth delinquency, reinforced during the war, which supported arguments for the establishment of a state-funded youth service.

The growth of youth consumption after the Second World War, a defining feature of post-war youth culture, is the second key moment

on which historians of youth have focused. Youth acquired international resonance after the war, when the emergence of a distinctive teenage culture was exemplified by a new type of adolescent moulded by affluence. A higher standard of living, full employment and the safety net of the welfare state meant many parents no longer depended on children's earnings and supported their aspirations for greater freedom. However, the emergence of subcultural youth groups, from the beatniks and Teddy Boys in the 1950s to the Mods and Rockers, skinheads and hippies in the 1960s, presented new challenges to adult perceptions of youth, as did counter-cultural and political identities which were visibly representative of a generation gap. As commentators in the 1960s and 1970s increasingly focused on the behaviour of young people and their consumption and leisure habits, tensions between teenage sexuality and morality contributed a sense that this generation was markedly different, with less respect for adult society and 'traditional' standards than previous ones.

New consumption habits also masked the persisting significance of social class. Secondary education extended after the Second World War, with the raising of the school-leaving age, but working-class young people continued to leave school earlier, with fewer qualifications than their middle-class counterparts. Most continued to pass into adulthood fairly quickly for the first three decades after the Second World War, although this trend was undermined from the mid-1970s as the economic climate deteriorated. The inclusive welfare policies of the post-war years were eroded and the state's involvement in young people's lives became more intrusive, intensifying in the 1980s. More punitive policies were delivered against a background of rising youth unemployment and major urban disturbances. Immigration made British life more cosmopolitan, but reinforced other youth inequalities around race and ethnicity, as sensationalised press reporting demonised black youth as an alien 'other' incompatible with Britishness. Across the period, the needs and experiences of young disabled people went largely unnoticed.

Youth was gradually 'invented' and 'discovered' over the course of the nineteenth century as a distinctive life stage, defined through legislation and institutionally. Powerful cultural ideas and images of youth bore little resemblance to the social realities of young people's lives, their social and cultural meanings more resonant among adults than to young people.⁷⁸ The history of youth has largely been interpreted through the prism of such adult expectations and judgements. Young people's voices are distant before the twentieth century, those of girls more muffled than boys, whose lives have been better documented. For much of the period, girls were considered in terms of motherhood,

lower educational attainment and poor job prospects with persisting emphases on sexual behaviour and reputation. Their working lives were largely ignored or misrepresented, their jobs expendable because they were expected to get married. Middle-class girls were more privileged and depended on their parents for longer, but girls, regardless of social background, were more restricted than boys, their teen years less distinctive, confined by expectations of domesticity until after the Second World War.

There were remarkable continuities in how young people were 'labelled' across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Youth became a metaphor of both hope and disaster, which increasingly necessitated containment by government and state policy. Perceptions by policy-makers of youth as a 'problem' persisted across the twentieth century, as state intervention in the lives of the young became evermore pronounced, in education, health, welfare and the judicial system. The dualism of troublesome or vulnerable was reflected in the ebb and flow of policy according to broader national worries. The emergence of the modern state had been accompanied by the creation of a range of institutions, ideas and discourses designed to 'manage' young people, and despite continuities and familiar themes, the meanings of youth at the end of the twentieth century were very different. Youth, always an evasive term, now raised questions which were not so much to do with when it started as when it finished, its complex meanings more contested, more uncertain, by the end of the twentieth century than they had been at the beginning.⁷⁹

Chapter outlines

Chapter One, 'Working Youth and Educating the Young', starts with an overview of the ways in which patterns of employment and education changed over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Work dominated the lives of adolescents during the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth, and the chapter examines the significance of young people's contributions to the family economy in working-class households, their frequent vulnerability in the workplace and the implications of changes which took place in the youth labour market. It examines differences in the educational experiences of working-class and middle-class young people and the ways in which these were affected by class and gender. It discusses debates over the extension of secondary schooling from the late-Victorian period, how social background influenced participation in secondary education after the Second World War, and educational trends in the second half of the twentieth century, as young people became more dependent on their parents than they had been a

century earlier due to spending more time in education and training than in the labour market.

Recurrent panics about crime rates among working-class young people, frequently related to broader social insecurities, contributed important continuities across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and [Chapter Two](#), 'Troublemaking and Imposing Order', introduces debates about the 'invention' of juvenile crime in the early nineteenth century, when youth crime rates rose with urbanisation and prompted considerable debate and alarm among the middle classes. The chapter examines how juvenile crime was gradually re-conceptualised across subsequent decades, leading to the emergence of a distinctive juvenile criminal justice system which culminated in the Edwardian years with the establishment of separate juvenile courts, borstals and modern probation methods. [Chapter Two](#) considers reformist and punitive trends in the treatment of crime and delinquency across the twentieth century and finishes in the 1990s, when youthful criminality dominated criticisms of the young in political and media rhetoric, repeating patterns which had first emerged more than a century earlier.

[Chapter Three](#), 'Organised and Unorganised Youth', turns to urban streets as spaces of conflict for working-class youth, where the vacuum left by the lack of state interest in developing recreational opportunities for young people once they left school was filled by voluntary youth organisations. The chapter discusses the emergence of a new generation of voluntary initiatives from the late-Victorian period, prompted by concerns about the demoralising effects of urban life, national efficiency and the menace of street gangs. It examines the ways in which the motivations and attitudes of the organisers and members of youth organisations differed over time and also suggests how youth voices and dissent were articulated through the growth of youth political movements in the interwar years and after the Second World War. Political concerns about training youth for citizenship, which grew in the 1930s, were heightened in the 1940s by policy concerns about the war's effects on family life, reinforcing beliefs that a state-supported Youth Service should develop, which was established after the Second World War. This Local Authority youth sector grew in the 1960s, but because local authorities had discretion in the quantity and quality of youth work they provided, this remained a second-class service compared with schools. The chapter concludes by suggesting the increasing pressures that the maintained youth work sector came under from the 1980s, as cutbacks reduced provision in many areas, and the person-centred, empowering methods developed in the 1960s and 1970s were displaced by managerial and target-driven approaches.

Chapter Four, 'Policing Sexual Behaviour', introduces the tensions which surrounded adolescent sexual identity in the nineteenth century, when concerns grew over how to control the sexual behaviour of young people in their teens. It suggests how ideas of femininity helped shape ideas of adolescent masculinity and the powerful class stereotypes which informed moral fears about the sexual 'nature' of working-class girls. The chapter examines changes and continuities in how age, gender and sexual behaviour were perceived across the twentieth century, highlighting the central role that sexuality continued to play in representations of young women, especially from the 1960s, as media use of sexualised imagery became increasingly pervasive and the sexualisation of consumer culture reinforced adult anxieties about how to protect both children and adolescents. The regulation of young people's sexual behaviour was fiercely debated in the 1960s and 1970s, especially as effective contraception became widely available and opened up possibilities of sexual choice. The chapter traces how secularisation liberalised social attitudes and encouraged greater acceptance of sexual diversity, although homosexuality still lacked equality with heterosexuality at the end of the century. Young women's lives changed immensely from the 1970s, released from fears of pregnancy and no longer dominated by powerful cultural expectations of marriage and having children. Society became more open about sex, and family and community influence over young people's personal lives became less invasive. Moral judgements about their sexual behaviour were much reduced by the end of the twentieth century, although, as the suggests, familiar negative assumptions remained, especially in relation to the sexual behaviour of young women.

Chapter Five, 'Leisure and Consumption', reflects on the significance of young people's relationship with consumption. It starts with the nineteenth century, examining the growth in urban areas of a commercial leisure market catering to workers and the gradual expansion of a popular literary market which, although dominated by the interests of boys and young men, also saw in the Victorian period the emergence of a separate girls' culture of magazines and literature defined by a new conceptual category known as girlhood. The chapter suggests how consumer culture involving young people gradually expanded, particularly in the interwar years, supporting arguments that post-war youth culture was more evolutionary than once acknowledged, although higher living standards, greater disposable income and technological advances after the Second World War gave rise to a national youth culture. The chapter explores how music, fashion and cultural styles gradually became ideological and political expression of youth identity, as the marketing and

leisure industries began to speak more directly to young people themselves, although relationships based on the commercial power of youth values were, as is suggested, complex and ambivalent.

Chapter Six, 'New Youth Identities', turns to the different forms that young people's cultural identities assumed from the 1960s and the myths and mythologies of youth in popular memory. It examines debates over the nature of youth rebellion in the sixties, and the implications of consumer culture and rising living standards in giving young people opportunities and the confidence to move away from traditional expectations, generating new opportunities for youthful experimentation through working-class sub-cultures and the counter-cultural values and politics of middle-class youth. The chapter places the tensions and contradictions of political radicalism and alternative cultural forms in the context of a longer process of post-war readjustment as social and cultural trends became more informal and liberalised. Discussing the central role that music played in these cultures, it also examines how cultural identities were informed by gender and race, exploring the distinctive cultural spaces and relationships which developed between black and white youth cultures between the 1950s and 1980s. Finally, it considers feminist critiques of post-war youth culture and the politicised and commercial alternatives presented to earlier masculinised narratives of youth culture in the form of radical feminist punks and the commodified feminism of the Spice Girls.

Chapter Seven, 'Youth Transforming', develops themes introduced in [the previous chapter](#), by charting the movement towards more fragmented youth identities in the last two decades of the twentieth century as consumer practices became a naturalised part of everyday life. The chapter places these changes against longer-term economic and social trends in young people's lives and the implications of youth unemployment, alienation and income inequality from the late 1970s, which changed how young people were perceived and represented. It suggests how the expansion of consumer leisure cultures targeted at the young enhanced the cultural significance of youthful values, as established age boundaries became more fluid and many traditional transitions of youth were eroded or changed. The chapter concludes by examining the ways in which the cultures of youth had become more varied and diverse by the end of the twentieth century, as globalisation contributed to changes in the meanings of age and youth not just in Britain but across the Western world.

Finally, there is no scope in this book to consider in-depth the many changes that have taken place in young people's lives since the start of the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, it seems appropriate to consider

some of the developments which are bringing about significant change. Information and digital technologies are spreading throughout everyday life, their rapid evolution transforming young people's social, cultural and work lives in ways which are difficult to predict.⁸⁰ Hedonistic values and beliefs in personal success, social prestige and personal autonomy have become stronger among the young, who tend to be less supportive of the welfare state than older generations, cynical about abuses and more concerned with 'personal autonomy', although research suggests that they are as concerned about others' welfare as older people, with whom they share many values, such as friendship, good relationships, health and education.⁸¹ Young people have a stronger sense of age identity than older groups, yet despite much discussion of a widening wealth gap between older and younger generations, research also suggests that they harbour no great resentment towards their elders, many of whom sympathise with their employment and housing problems, which are worse than their own generation experienced.⁸² High-risk behaviours are still sizeable by international standards, yet drug use, smoking, drinking, crime and teenage pregnancies have been declining since 2000, possibly due to better relationships with parents, health and education initiatives and a wide range of leisure opportunities, both in the public sphere and at home.⁸³ Young people are more ethnically and culturally diverse than their elders, and social attitudes, helped by greater participation in higher education, are liberalising towards sexuality, ethnicity and gender roles, although there are 'significant differences' within youth cohorts and it is difficult to say how uniform these attitudes will be in the future.⁸⁴ Structural changes in the youth labour market and the long-term effects of insecure employment and part-time working are similarly difficult to assess. Young people in Britain today are growing up in a population which is ageing, yet they are part of a global generation which is the largest in history, one particularly affected by unemployment and conflict. How to empower them, in the UK and globally, so that they meet their potential is the greatest challenge, for despite continuing to serve as a symbol of the future and the nation's potential, polarised views persist in depictions of them as victims or perpetrators, the complex realities of their lives ignored, still all too often stigmatised in the media and by older people, just as they were across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Chapter 1: Working Youth and Educating the Young

Young people at work

Youth employment from the end of First World War

Class and schooling

Educating working-class youth

Work defined the lives of most adolescents during the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth, and this chapter turns to examine the significance of the youth labour market, the role that young people played in the working-class family economy and how patterns of child and youth employment changed across the period. Education played a lesser part in their lives, despite state investment in elementary schooling from the end of the Victorian period. Secondary education did not become free and universal until after the Second World War, and the chapter explores the persisting significance of class in defining how young people were educated, the type of schools they went to and the assumptions made about their educational potential.

Young people at work

In the nineteenth century, only middle-class, upper-middle-class and aristocratic children received schooling during their teen years. Working was more important than education to most working-class families, for whom getting children into work as quickly as possible was essential for economic survival. Most of the population was working class, labouring largely in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, with a minority of about

15 per cent who were skilled workers. The middle classes, which grew from about 15 per cent in 1815 to around 25 per cent in 1900, included professionals, such as lawyers, doctors and industrialists, besides more precarious lower-middle-class white-collar workers and small businessmen. The aristocracy and landed gentry comprised a mere 2 per cent of the whole.¹

By the 1830s, children had moved to a central place in middle-class households, reflecting the home's new cultural status as a sanctuary from the pressures of the public, masculine world of work. It was an idealised model far removed from the everyday experiences of most working-class children, for whom childhood had little meaning, given how they were expected to contribute to the family economy from a very young age and were often exposed to adult experiences, in the early factory system, on the streets in poor urban districts or working on the land.

Children had always been an integral part of the rural economy, and such traditional work expectations prevailed in the early nineteenth century, when their involvement in various types of domestic tasks, crafts and agricultural work was taken for granted. Many were only 4 or 5 when they started basic farm tasks such as scaring crows, collecting wood for fuel, weeding or tending sheep and pigs. By the time they were 10 or 11, boys were often working full-time, as plough boys or shepherds.² Some stayed to help on the land, usually on small family farms, but most moved away from home when they were 13 or 14, to become indentured as apprentices or domestic servants. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, about 60 per cent of young people aged between 15 and 24 were in such service.³ Agricultural labourers were among the poorest paid of all workers, and although agricultural jobs for children (including as farm servants) declined during the nineteenth century, low wages and poverty meant child labour remained essential to many families and 'endemic' in much of the agricultural sector.⁴ Agricultural labour was the most common first job for 10- to 14-year-olds in the 1851 census, when 20 per cent of workers were still working on the land.⁵

The exploitation of child labour made an essential contribution to Britain's economic success in the early nineteenth century, when the expansion of urban life and industry between 1790 and 1850 brought many children into the new waged labour force. Besides agriculture and domestic service, their most common forms of employment now included labour in small workshops, although contemporary reformers tended to be more preoccupied with the conditions of children who worked in factories.⁶ There were wide regional variations in the age at which children started work, which was usually at 10 or 11 but could be as young as 8 in manufacturing districts. Most boys in their teens

were employed in various types of manufacturing, such as textiles, coal mining, iron making and pottery manufacture. Many girls also worked in such industries.⁷ Young people worked under the authority of adult workers in many ancillary industries, from nail-making, brickmaking, cutlery work and hosiery, to glassmaking and glove-making, 'service' activities of a type which remained a persisting characteristic of young people's employment across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸ Most of these workers lived at home until they married in their twenties, although boys were more likely to find a job locally because families depended on the higher wages they could earn.⁹

In the early nineteenth century, parents who could afford to, such as skilled workers, paid for their children to learn a trade with a master craftsman, which could take between two and seven years before entry into full-time paid work.¹⁰ Apprenticeships originated in the medieval guild system as a highly regulated form of training which involved legal indentures. Traditionally, the apprentice (usually a boy) lived in his master's home for seven years. Over time, however, apprenticeships were often degraded into low-level, unskilled work to support the master's own activities. Indeed, the pretence of learning a skill often became an excuse for paying young workers low wages and getting rid of them once they entered their mid- to late teens and could claim higher pay on the grounds that they were trained.

By the 1830s, the custom of apprentices living-in with their master's household had become less common and the decline of the traditional apprenticeship system over the course of the nineteenth century helped push many males in their teens towards the unskilled labour market. The expansion of the industrial economy helped distance many work relationships, although craft unions recognised the importance of apprenticeships in protecting their own craft skills and continued to regulate entry to their trades by maintaining rules of seniority through the traditional five- or seven-year training period. The protective nature of these regulations was exposed in some industries during the First World War, when many young women and men who were not time-served adapted very quickly to what had been described as highly skilled jobs.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a newer type of apprenticeship, starting usually in the mid-teens, had spread beyond a well-established base in the printing and building trades to industries such as engineering, ship-building, plumbing and the electrical trades. In 1906, 21 per cent of employed males aged between 15 and 19 were apprentices of some sort, the largest numbers being in building and engineering.¹¹ Apprenticeship was a flexible term, which included boys indentured as apprentices under agreement and those classified as 'learners'. Girls