



Panel report: „ Childhood and the Countryside in the Twentieth Century “, 20. August 2013, Rural History 2013

Panel organizer: Griffiths, Clare

Participants: Burchardt, Jeremy / Moser, Peter / Sayer, Karen / Cassidy, Anne

Report by: Caitriona Clear

Brought together by **CLAIRE GRIFFITHS** (University of Sheffield), who also chaired the session, the speakers in this lively and challenging panel were Peter Moser (Archives of Rural History, Bern), Anne Cassidy (NUI, Galway), Karen Sayer (Leeds Trinity) and Jeremy Burchardt (University of Reading).

PETER MOSER's research on children and teenagers on Swiss farms in the 1950s was mainly based on empirical material. The information collected among children, parents and teachers by a young scholar in the late 1950's suggests that youngsters had a generally positive attitude to the work they did to sustain the family farm. Two-thirds were up before 6 a.m. on school mornings but, in general, school absence was not a problem and homework was fitted in. Non-heirs as well as heirs worked on the farm, boys looking after the milking and feeding animals, girls doing all these jobs and/or housework as well. These children had leisure activities – playing music, listening to the radio, going on bike rides and playing cards – but sometimes the lines between work and leisure were blurred, especially in summer farm work. Boys especially, but girls too, were proud of their work and quite definite about their status as contributors to the family enterprise. As families grew smaller and the demands of off-farm education and training increased, children's family labour ceased to be necessary.

The young people who formed the focus of **ANNE CASSIDY**'s research had also worked on their family farms growing up; she looked at contemporary Irish university students from rural backgrounds. Most viewed their movement from the farm as permanent, and they had very contradictory feelings about it. Although glad to get away from tightly-knit communities where they were not only known to everybody, but to a certain extent bracketed and 'placed' depending on their family name, they did not want to be 'townies' either, scorning urban life. Indeed, they hoped that migration and education would offer them a means of returning to live in or near the home place, a phenomenon described by Anne as 'postponed embeddedment'.

Anne's contributors were inclined to look upon their farm childhoods as 'pure' and 'innocent' and idealism about the 'innocence' of farm life is one of the reasons why farm visiting is and has for a long time been believed to be good for children. **KAREN SAYER**'s paper on the decades-old practice of attracting British urban people to visit farms, argued, however, that there were other reasons for this practice. Such 'agri-tourism' not only provided farmers with supplementary income, but promoted understanding between town and country, and established farmers as 'curators' of the landscape and the animal world instead of the hard-headed business people they sometimes were. The supposed moral benefits of farm visiting extended even to the most undisciplined children, it was claimed in 1973. In 2001 over 10,000 people, most of them children, visited farms in the English countryside and the practice is still going strong.



However children do not always need the experience of rurality to be mediated through an adult, and **JEREMY BURCHARDT**'s paper on children's apprehension of the countryside as a place of enchantment argued (what many of us have always suspected) that children giving their own special names to places they play are not confined to books by Arthur Ransome (or, in this writer's childhood reading, L.M. Montgomery and Edith Nesbit). Using the diaries/memoirs of three late nineteenth-century/early-twentieth century British girls/women, Burchardt showed that children's 'transfigurative place-naming' was not only a way of keeping adults out of children's worlds, but served to familiarize the exotic and exoticize the familiar. Sometimes the names given were from scriptural, classical, Arthurian or literary sources, sometimes they were purely descriptive, but always they were gateways to imaginative and physical freedom.

The papers sparked a number of very good questions and comments. In response to a question about the extent of teenage farm workers' power, Peter Moser argued that farm work not only burdened but also improved children's management capacity for later life. Anne Cassidy conceded that contradictory emotions felt by young people in university about their backgrounds, are not confined to those of farming origin, though she maintained that the peculiar work demands of the agricultural way of life are an important constituent of these adults' identities. Karen Sayer was asked if young farm children were sent to the city in the same way that city children were sent to the country. (Not in the same way, apparently; the Young Farmers often participated in debates and other quasi-political activities in towns and cities). But the reactions to Jeremy's paper, squashed in as the lunch-hour beckoned at the end of his necessarily-truncated paper (four in two hours are really too many), seemed to tie together all the contributions. There were questions about the fallibility both of memory and of memoir, about children as 'namers' of the landscape, and work versus play in children's lives. Although Peter Moser's paper was about work, Jeremy Burchardt's about play, Anne Cassidy's about native farm children and Karen Sayer's about children visiting farms, all were about the way rural life was apprehended and understood by the young. One commentator summed it up when he pointed out that while a superficial understanding of the research would seem to split the children we had been hearing about along class lines – Peter Moser's and Anne Cassidy's worker children, Jeremy Burchardt's leisured dreamers, Karen Sayer's 'deprived' city children – he had learned from all the papers that children, regardless of class, blended work and play, urban and rural to maximise their understanding both of the practical and the intangible, imaginative world.

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Panelübersicht:

Jeremy Burchardt: Country childhood in twentieth-century rural England: perceptions and experiences

Peter Moser: Overwork and empowerment in the daily life of children on Swiss farms in the middle of the 20th century

Karen Sayer: Visiting 'farm' animals: 1940-2000

Cassidy, Anne: It's not a big part of me but I know it's where I come from!: Farm youth and their changing relationship with the countryside