Nordic Journal of Educational History
Vol. 12, no. 1 (2025)
ISSN (online): 2001-9076
ISSN (print): 2001-7766

Book Review

Susannah Wright
Youth and Peace in England, 1919–1969
Cham: Palgrave Macmillan
2024, 226 pp.

In *Youth and Peace in England, 1919–1969*, Susannah Wright sets out to address both the marginalisation of children and youth in broader histories of the British peace movement, and a relative neglect of peace activism in the history of childhood and youth. Drawing on a diverse range of sources, she explores how young people in England have engaged with ideas of peace across five decades and multiple generations. The result is an empirically rich study that helps bring everyday experiences of peace activism to life, from interwar hopes of a new and peaceful international system to nuclear fears among 1960s youth.

While formal peace organisations are at the centre of the narrative, this is not an organisational history. Instead, Wright uses peace organisations as gateways into the lived experiences of children and youth. The organisations studied under the umbrella of the "peace movement" encompass both liberal internationalist bodies such as the League of Nations Union (1918–1939), the United Nations Association (1945–present), and the Council for Education in World Citizenship (1939–2008), as well as more radical and countercultural movements like the Peace Pledge Union (1934–present) and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (1957–present). In discussing these organisations, Wright takes a resolutely bottom-up approach, drawing on a rich variety of sources: oral history interviews (both archival and newly conducted), autobiographies, school magazines, Mass Observation material, and the records of peace organisations.

While the book intersects fruitfully with a range of fields, historians of education will perhaps find greatest value in Wright's treatment of schools as arenas for extracurricular activism and engagement. She contrasts more institutionalised, "safe" expressions of peace education—endorsed by teachers and headteachers—with more oppositional forms of activism, such as anti-nuclear protest, which could bring young people into conflict with school authorities. The League of Nations Union and the Council for Education in World Citizenship, for instance, offered structured spaces within which children could experiment with civic ideas of peace, sometimes under adult supervision. In contrast, youth sections of the CND could meet resistance within school settings, and youth living out strict forms pacifism in times of war could experience social sanctions. Yet, Wright avoids simplistic binaries and shows how across these different formats, youth engagement could be fleeting or profound, compliant or resistant. Her approach is consistently nuanced and attentive to the complexities of children's and adolescents' motivations.

The book's analytical structure reflects the methodological challenges of working in the history of childhood and youth, where child-produced source material is often fragmentary and uneven. As Emily Gallagher has recently noted in her study of Australian archives, researchers must cast wide nets to locate child-authored or

child-related material (Gallagher, 2023). Wright embraces this eclecticism. The result is not a tightly structured, systematic analysis but rather a mosaic of source-driven examples that shed light on individual experiences. This patchwork quality is both a strength and a limitation: while it may lack a clear analytical through-line, the book succeeds in capturing what Wright herself describes as the "variety, messiness, and complexities, alongside commonalities of young people's engagement with peace" (p. 5). For historians of education – particularly those interested in perspectives from below and informal or extracurricular dimensions of education – the book therefore offers both methodological insights and rich empirical content.

Wright's transparency about the limitations of her source base, her personal investment in the topic, and her engagement with thorny questions of agency and children's genuine voices is commendable. Rather than imposing an artificial structural coherence, she allows the available sources speak for themselves, assembling them into a vivid social history of how peace was lived, contested, and imagined by young people. At the same time, the book's multifaceted source base reflects certain social and institutional filters. Wright herself points out some of these biases in her introductory chapter: preserved school magazines, for instance, often come from better-resourced schools (p. 17) and the organisations had a predominantly white, middle-class membership (p. 12). These factors inevitably shape the portrait the book offers. For a fuller picture, explorations of how peace was conceptualised and enacted among youth in other ideological milieus might be a fruitful avenue of further research – especially considering how central the rhetorical concept of "peace" was among communist youth groups in the West, and in Soviet cultural youth diplomacy (e.g., Neumann, 2022).

In sum, *Youth and Peace in England, 1919–1969* offers an empathetic and source-driven account of youth's engagement with peace and internationalism. Wright has done the hard (and often underappreciated) work of assembling a dispersed source base, a necessary effort to be able to make claims about the significance of children in youth in larger historical questions. She can therefore weigh in on larger debates about whether children only exist on the edges of adult-driven processes of historical change, or in themselves could be significant contributors to such change by shaping adult decisions through the very nature of their age (Gleason, 2023). In Wright's account, young people gain such significance by contributing to shaping hopes and emotional investments of adults around them. Therefore, while an enjoyable reading experience as a cultural and social history of modern Britain in itself, the book also provides valuable inspiration to historians of education who want to access and accentuate the importance of youths' experiences.

References

Gallagher, Emily. "Hidden in Plain Sight: Child-Authored Material in Australian Museums and Archives." *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 16, no. 3 (2023), 384–419.

Gleason, Mona. "'Children Obviously Don't Make History': Historical Significance and Children's Modalities of Power." *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 16, no. 3 (2023), 343–60.

Neumann, Matthias. "'Peace and Friendship': Overcoming the Cold War in the Children's World of the Pioneer Camp Artek." *Diplomatic History* 46, no. 3 (2022), 505–26.

Tuva Skjelbred Nodeland
University of South-Eastern Norway
tuva.s.nodeland@usn.no