



## The Limits of Experience? A Case Study on Children's Dreams

29.11.2022

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*I dreamt I was elected M.P. for Fulham. Lloyd George decided to send me out to Germany to try and persuade the Kaiser to give up fighting. I do not know how I got to Germany. I was suddenly there. The Kaiser took a fancy to me and I lived at his palace, and was educated with his children. There were four girls and three boys, and they all dressed in brown holland. There were two other children living with us, a small French boy and an English girl. One day the Kaiser took us for a drive in his motor, and as we were going up a very steep hill, I asked the Kaiser to give up fighting. He was so amazed that he let go of the steering-wheel, and the car slid backwards down the hill and shot us through the palace windows into the dancing hall where the dancing mistress was waiting to give a lesson. Presently the Kaiser called us and told us that he must fly into Holland and that the German fleet was going to surrender. I then escaped in a submarine, and woke up when it bumped against the shores of England.*[\[1\]](#)

This twelve-year-old girl's dream was written as a school essay at the behest of Dr C.W. Kimmins, Chief Inspector of Schools for the London County Council, during the First World War. He collected some 5,900 dreams from boys and girls aged 5 to 18, in all types of London schools, including elementary, secondary, industrial and those for blind and deaf children. On the surface, dreams, maybe especially children's dreams, push the boundaries of what historians can reliably know: children's accounts of unconscious experiences might well be met with skepticism when trying to access 'the ways in which living was real'.[\[2\]](#)

What are the limits of the history of experience? Are there parameters beyond which historians cannot go? Can children's dreams be plausibly included among our sources? As Josephine Hoegaerts and I have argued, histories of experience, focused on the 'lived reality' of historical actors, thickly layer accounts, meanings and contexts of the past as opposed to 'disentangling' particular constituent parts of historical structures or events. But do dreams fit under the heading of 'lived reality'? And if so, how are the sources to be used? Historians of experience must be creative both in the kinds of sources they use, and the way they use them:

*a push toward experience also pushes us to imagine source criticism in new ways, and particularly invites us toward a rethinking of the authorial voice in many of our historical documents. The classical string of contextualizing questions—who, what, when, how—gains new meaning when we not only ask them of the practices of writing, or the events and ideas examined, but also involve the experiential world of both the writers and those about whom they write.* [3]

Historians are forced to read between and across the lines in archival sources. Both historians of emotions and historians of childhood have increasingly been self-reflexive in their writing, as part of a process of applying their methodology to their historical actors as well as to themselves. Furthermore, historians of childhood and education have increasingly sought to retrieve the traces left behind by children, whether written, oral, artistic or material, and attempt to take them seriously. [4] Essays and stories written in school are already a (rare) part of that corpus. Are essays about children's dreams a further step in this direction? Could the exposition and analysis of children's dreams be read as mediated primary sources for the history of experience?

Kimmins was explicit about his research and pedagogical aims. He wanted 'first-hand information from the child himself by his own record of impressions on being confronted with new situations'. This meant securing 'such a record as early as possible after the development of the new experience' to eliminate the influence of parents and teachers. Kimmins lamented that the 'belief of the child in the infallibility of the information given to him by his mother and other members of the family group, and later by the teacher, up to the age of 9 or 10 years is fatal to that faithful picture of the first impression which is of such priceless value when it finds expression'. [5] Informed by his training and experience in pedagogy and his observations on child behaviour, and influenced by contemporary work on dreams and psychoanalysis, his vast, child-centred studies, and the privileged access he had to children in London schools, were unique. They conferred on him professional authority on the topic, although he appears to have largely been self-taught. [6]

The dream with which I began is characteristic of war dreams, wish fulfilment, bravery and adventure dreams, according to Kimmins' categorisations. It is similar to personal accounts of the war in children's essays that he recorded elsewhere. [7] Many dreams seem to be inspired by boys' papers and war stories where the dreamer, male or female, is a hero and saves the day. [8] This one, like many others, takes up experiences (including perhaps age- and gender-based frustrations) from the recent waking past and transforms them, imaginatively, according to contextual and narrative conventions. It is also common in these dream accounts for children to imagine themselves in adult-like scenarios with adult-like responsibilities.

Kimmins was particularly concerned with the impact of the senses – primarily sound and smell – on dreaming, and with the effect of hard mental work and heavy meals, immediately before bedtime. [9] He also maintained that reading stories at bedtime influenced the content of dreams. Kimmins argued that the dreams of children in industrial schools were different from those of 'normal elementary school children', their dreams being more frequent and vivid. [10] 'The comparative monotony of institutional life', he argued, 'finds undoubted solace in the dreams of fulfilled wishes and those of bravery and adventure'. [11] As with other children who had impoverished or sad lives, or blind or deaf children who could respectively 'see' or 'hear' in their dreams, he argued that children in industrial schools dreamt of things they could not have in daytime. Their fulfilled wishes were often about

home life, family and fortune and success in life.<sup>[12]</sup> This focus on environment, context, senses/ emotions, and social and bodily commonalities and particularities, is sympathetic to the historian's work of creating a 'deep' understanding of the dreamer. But what about the fanciful and outlandish components of the dream? These were essential to an aspiring early twentieth-century child psychologist like Kimmins, but what should historians of experience do with them?

Assaf Mond, one of the few scholars to have used Kimmins' work, wrote that the essays represented 'an authentic and unbiased [voice] – because they were part of Kimmins' psychological study, and were written under his strict orders'.<sup>[13]</sup> But this misses the point. Our research should not be limited to experiences which are verifiably 'authentic'. It is impossible to tell to what extent children followed scripts to describe or even invent their dreams for the essays they wrote, or indeed if these scripts informed the dreams themselves. The very question of authenticity suggests an unmediated interiority. There isn't one, even in sleep.

Although accounts of children's dreams are obviously valuable sources for the history of experience, it is not clear what the nature of the experiences they document is. Kimmins' work is evidence of the institutional mediation of interiority, of the interior life of the child as represented by the educator and the analyst. It also provides a unique opportunity to study children's collective and individual experiences in a particular time and place. Whatever we do, we are always at stages of remove from the dream itself. But the task of writing in school about experiences of life and war, via dreams, was *formative*: a process of collective and individual experience *making*. These sources confront us with the limits of the history of experience in the figure of the sleeping, dreaming child. Yet as accounts of socially and subjectively meaningful responses to everyday life and terrifying crises, they augment the scope of the history of experience and stretch those limits.

#### Notes

[1] C. W. Kimmins, *Children's Dreams: An Unexplored Land* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920), 62-3.

[2] Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 23. There has been little work on dreams from a history of experience perspective. Ville Kivimäki's insightful study of Second World War soldiers' accounts of their dreams demonstrates not only that dreams are valid subjects in themselves, but also that they can also help us 'understand many aspects of the wide-awake experiences and behavior of people who have experienced massive violence'. 'Nocturnal Nation: Violence and the Nation in Dreams during and after World War II', *Lived Nation as the History of Experiences and Emotions in Finland, 1800–2000*, eds Ville Kivimäki, Sami Suodenjoki and Tanja Vahtikari (London: Palgrave, 2021), 298.

[3] Josephine Hoegaerts and Stephanie Olsen, 'The History of Experience: Afterword', *Lived Nation*, eds Kivimäki, Suodenjoki, and Vahtikari, 382.

[4] See, for example, Kristine Alexander, 'Can the Girl Guide Speak? The Perils and Pleasures of Looking for Children's Voices in Archival Research', *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* (2012): 132-44.

[5] C. W. Kimmins, *The Child's Attitude to Life. A Study of Children's Stories* (London: Methuen and Co, 1926), 2.

[6] C. W. Kimmins, 'Children's Dreams', *A Handbook of Child Psychology*, ed. C. Murchison (Worcester, Mass.: Clark University Press, 1931), 527-54. Kimmins' work appeared alongside that of luminaries in the field, including Anna Freud, Jean Piaget and Margaret Mead.

[7] Kimmins, *The Child's Attitude to Life*.

[8] For more on the impact of boys' papers on their readers, see Stephanie Olsen, *Juvenile Nation: Youth, Emotions and the Making of the Modern British Citizen, 1880-1914* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) and Elizabeth A. Galway, *The Figure of the Child in WWI American, British, and Canadian Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

[9] Kimmins, *Children's Dreams*, 24.

[10] Kimmins, *Children's Dreams*, 93.

[11] Kimmins, *Children's Dreams*, 93.

[12] Kimmins, *Children's Dreams*, 94.

[13] Assaf Mond, "It is at night-time that we notice most of the changes in our life caused by the war" War-time, Zeppelins, and children's experience of the Great War in London', *War Time: First World War Perspectives on Temporality*, eds Louis Halewood, Adam Luptak, Hanna Smyth (London: Routledge, 2018), 94.

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**ISSN**

**2953-920X**

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