Sussex Research Online

# Children, class and the search for security: writing the future in 1930s Britain

Article (Accepted Version)

Barron, Hester and Langhamer, Claire (2017) Children, class and the search for security: writing the future in 1930s Britain. Twentieth Century British History, 28 (3). pp. 367-389. ISSN 0955-2359

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/67595/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

**Copyright and reuse:**
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk

**Children, Class and the Search for Security: Writing the Future in 1930s Britain**

*Keywords: Mass Observation; Children; Britain; Class; Security*

*This article is based on 269 essays written in 1937 by Middlesbrough schoolboys aged 12-16 on the topic 'When I leave school', which were collected by the social research organisation Mass Observation. The essays provide a counterpoint to social scientific surveys of ordinary people and allow us to work with the boys' own understandings of the world they inhabited. They offer an alternative lens on a period which, at least in relation to the industrial areas of Britain, is often characterised by poverty and unemployment. This representation is largely absent from the children's essays: instead, an overwhelming sense of possibility characterises their writing, from their wildest fantasies to their most concrete plans. Most dreamt of lives that would be long, fulfilling, domesticated and happy. This is not to say that they were oblivious to the world around them; indeed an emphasis on security and planning suggested an implicit awareness of material context. Nonetheless these boys expressed a marked determination that their lives would be better than those of their parents. As such, they embodied the educational and occupational aspirations that are more often seen as characteristic of postwar Britain. Their essays illustrate emergent and widely-held expectations of social mobility and dreams of cradle-to-grave security in the years before the Second World War, articulated – as they were being lived – by a generation which would go on to elect the 1945 Labour government.*

The cover of one of Ross McKibbin's seminal works, *The Ideologies of Class*, is illustrated by Bill Brandt's famous photograph, 'East End Girl Dancing the Lambeth Walk, 1939.'[1] It is an arresting image chosen partly, no doubt, due to aesthetics. But presumably it was also used because it makes a broader point about class-consciousness, with the dancing girl both aware and defiant of her gendered and classed place in the world. Other histories of class are also illustrated by children: on the cover of David Cannadine's *Class in Britain* an Eton schoolboy looks away from the working-class children who observe him; the central figure on the cover of Joanna Bourke's study of working-class cultures is a small boy; and John Welshman's work on the underclass in Britain is illustrated with the portrait of two poor children.[2]

[1] Ross McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class* (Oxford, 1990).
[2] David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London, 1998); Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain: 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London, 1994); John Welshman, *Underclass: A History of the Excluded* (London, 2007).

The symbolic importance of the child was evident to contemporaries. In preceding decades, children's bodies had become social scientific cyphers for the measurement of poverty, and surveys of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries asserted strong links between family size and family impoverishment.[3] Charities had long placed the photographed child – whether distressed or smiling – at the forefront of their campaigns.[4] As Stephen Brooke notes, 'The rise of documentary photography in the 1930s saw the continued use of images of working-class children on the streets as signifiers of social inequality and poverty.'[5] Images of children were increasingly used for propaganda purposes. The physical vulnerability of 'ordinary' children was used to bring home the horror of aerial bombardment within political responses to the Spanish Civil War for example.[6]

If children were used to represent misery and poverty, they were also employed to symbolise future promise. During the Second World War – as child evacuation was being credited (or blamed) for the destabilising of class relations – reconstruction narratives located future fantasies in the person of the child. When *Picture Post* published 'A Plan for Britain' in January 1941 six small children – naked apart from shoes and the occasional sock – graced its cover.[7] Four years later, Humphrey Jennings completed his film *A Diary for Timothy*, which used the first six months of a baby's life as a device around which to articulate the hopes and fears of British people on the cusp of peace.[8] If class continued to permeate the language of reconstruction, however, the political use of the younger generation was no longer focused on the working-class child. Rather, as Laura King has pointed out, it was 'the white, middle-class male child' – a child like Timothy – 'who was the default future citizen as envisaged in this rhetoric.'[9]

And yet whilst children are frequently *seen* in contemporaneous and historical sources, they are not so frequently heard. Despite their front covers, children as subjects barely feature in the texts of

---

[3] For example, B. S. Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, (London, 1901), 120; A.L. Bowley, *Livelihood and Poverty* (London, 1915), 47.
[4] See, for example, Lydia Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare and Contested Citizenship in London* (New Brunswick, N.J.; London, 2006), Ch. 1.
[5] Stephen Brooke, 'Revisiting Southam Street: Class, Generation, Gender, and Race in the Photography of Roger Mayne', *Journal of British Studies*, 53 (2014), 477.
[6] Rose Holmes, 'A Moral Business: British Quaker Work with Refugees from Fascism, 1933-39', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Sussex, 2014.
[7] *Picture Post*, 4 January 1941.
[8] Humphrey Jennings (dir.), *A Diary for Timothy* (1945).
[9] Laura King, 'Future Citizens: Cultural and Political Conceptions of Children in Britain, 1930s-1950s', *Twentieth Century British History* (Advance Access, 2016), 19.

either McKibbin's *Ideologies* or Cannadine's *Class*.[10] Nor do children constitute much of a presence in the written social commentary of the period. The cover of the most recent Penguin edition of George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, for example, features Kurt Hutton's 1939 photograph of 'An unemployed man leaning against a wall in Wigan, with two children looking on', but Orwell largely excluded children from his account.[11]

Jon Lawrence has recently argued that 'we need to pay more attention to the gulf between official and vernacular understandings of social class in twentieth-century Britain.'[12] We also need to think more critically about the perceptions of different age groups and interrogate the relationship between generationally-specific understandings of the meanings of class and patterns of historical change. In this article we ask what children's narratives of the future reveal about their contemporaneous sense of social status and how they understood the implications of this for their life chances. We use 269 essays written in 1937 by Middlesbrough schoolboys aged 12-16 on the topic 'When I leave school', which were collected by the social research organisation Mass Observation.[13] The essays provide a counterpoint to social scientific surveys *of* 'ordinary people' and allow us to work *with* the boys' own understandings of the world they inhabited.

Indeed, a consideration of children's writing offers an alternative lens on a period which, at least in relation to the industrial areas of Britain, is often characterised by poverty and unemployment. A sense of this is largely absent from the children's essays: instead, narratives of possibility and the refusal of material limitations characterise their writing, from their wildest fantasies to their most concrete plans. In their essays, the boys expressed the expectation that they would be happy and – supported by school and parents – that hard work would pay off. This is not to say that they were oblivious to the world around them; indeed an emphasis on security and planning suggested

---

[10] McKibbin devotes significant space to a discussion of education and schooling in his later work, but this is in relation to its effect (or, as he argues, lack of effect) on social mobility. See Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), 206-71.

[11] George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London, 1989/2001, first published 1937).

[12] Jon Lawrence, 'Class, "Affluence" and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain, c. 1930-64', *Cultural and Social History* 102 (2013), 275.

[13] Mass Observation Archive (hereafter MOA), Topic Collection (TC) 59, Children and Education, 1937-1952, TC59-5-A. Mass Observation researchers employed an eclectic mix of methods – from embedded ethnography, through 'overheards' and 'indirects' to the solicitation of diaries and questionnaires – in order to interrogate everyday life in all its richness. On the history of Mass Observation, see James Hinton, *The Mass Observers. A History, 1937–1949* (Oxford, 2013). Although the vast majority of its material was generated by adults, many hundreds of essays written by schoolchildren on a variety of topics were sent to the organisation by teacher-contacts from 1937 until the early 1950s. Most of these – over 1,000 – were written by schoolchildren living in the Bolton area. For a discussion of the Bolton essays see Hester Barron and Claire Langhamer, 'Feeling through practice: Subjectivity and emotion in children's writing', *Journal of Social History* 51:1 (2017). Mass Observation material is used by permission of the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

an implicit awareness of context. Nonetheless the essay writers voiced a marked determination that their lives would be better than those of their parents. These children – a generation who would vote for the first time in 1945 – were not succumbing to material context but, in their fantasies at least, were determined to transcend it and mapped out strategies to do so.

***

The boys all attended Middlesbrough High School in the late 1930s.[14] Middlesbrough's population was largely working-class and the census of 1931 recorded that those aged between five and nineteen constituted a higher than average proportion of the population.[15] The town had already been the subject of social investigation earlier in the century: in 1907 Florence Bell described it as 'a place in which every sense is violently assailed all day long by some manifestation of the making of iron.'[16] Certainly J. B. Priestley felt no desire to linger there as he travelled through the North East on his English journey of 1933: 'a dismal town, even with beer and football.'[17] Reliant on traditional heavy industry as it was, Middlesbrough suffered during the interwar economic crisis even if it fared relatively well in comparison to near neighbours such as Jarrow. By the late 1930s a recovery was evident, mirroring a national trend: the growth of the chemical industry on Teesside and particularly the creation of Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) in 1926, has been described as 'one of the success stories of the interwar years.'[18] Nevertheless, almost a quarter of adult males in Middlesbrough remained without a job at the end of the 1930s.[19] In the House of Commons in 1937, both Middlesbrough MPs regretted that their town had not been officially classed as a 'special area', which would have earmarked it for extra help. 'How can anyone deny that there is depression in Middlesbrough?' asked one.[20] The 1944 Social Survey of Middlesbrough found that 'The imprint of courage and success is everywhere. But there is also the imprint of failure.'[21]

---

[14] Middlesbrough High School had been established by local industrialists in 1877 but was transferred to local authority control in 1896. By 1938 the local education authority controlled a number of post-elementary schools including the High School, the Hugh Bell Selective Central School (1907), the Kirby Girls' Secondary School (1911) and Acklam Hall Secondary School (1935). Middlesbrough also boasted two Roman Catholic Direct Grant Secondary Schools and a Junior Technical School. Ruth Glass (ed.), *The Social Background of a Plan* (London, 1948; 2013 edn), 92-4.
[15] Glass, *The Social Background of a Plan*, 86, 248.
[16] Florence Bell, *At the Works. A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (London, 1907; 1911 edn), 40.
[17] J. B. Priestley, *English Journey* (London, 1934), 340.
[18] Katharine Nicholas, *The Social Effects of Unemployment in Teesside* (1986), 16.
[19] Nicholas, *Social Effects*, 25-6.
[20] *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 323, col. 76, 26 April 1937. See also vol. 322, col. 105, 6 April 1937.
[21] Glass, *The Social Background of a Plan*, 9.

Amidst deprived surroundings, attendance at the High School automatically marked these boys out as unusual: of over 570,000 boys and girls who left English and Welsh public elementary schools during the school year 1937-38, only 14.5 per cent of boys and 13.1 per cent of girls took up secondary school places, usually at the age of eleven.[22] Nevertheless, by 1938 over three-quarters of Middlesbrough's secondary school pupils held free or special places, a much more generous provision than the national average.[23] This allowed a high rate of working-class participation, and one survey suggested that the sons of skilled and unskilled workers accounted for 46 per cent of Middlesbrough's secondary school population in 1935-8.[24] This did not, of course, eliminate inequality. The costs of uniform, equipment, and particularly the loss of earnings for the extended period of schooling meant that a secondary education remained an expensive investment even with the remission of fees. National and local surveys also suggested that working-class children were more likely to leave secondary education early, before the age of 16.[25] A postwar survey of the town's secondary schools found that only five per cent of pupils attending the Boys' High School in 1944 came from the three poorest wards of the city, whereas 48 per cent came from the three most prosperous.[26] Although we are only able to ascertain the specific class background of individual boys in those cases where an essay provides contextualising information, broadly we can suggest that the majority came from the working and lower middle classes, but not from the very poorest families.

If analysis of the essays requires an awareness of socio-economic context, it also requires a sensitivity to the nature of the source material. Children's school essays are a distinctive form of writing and their interpretation is not straightforward. It is unclear whether or not the children knew their essays were being read beyond the classroom, and we have discussed the methodological complexities of using children's schoolwork elsewhere.[27] Moreover, these boys were writing at a particular stage in the life cycle, at an age when the lines between childhood and adulthood were being negotiated and traversed. Many were aware of their increasing maturity and

---

[22] *Education in 1938. Being the Report of the Board of Education and the Statistics of Public Education for England and Wales*, Cmd. 6013, May 1939, 98. Before the 1944 Education Act, most children attended public elementary schools to the age of 14. Secondary education – or higher education in another form such as that provided by technical or central schools – was limited to children whose parents could afford the fees or who were able to pass a competitive scholarship examination.

[23] J. E. Floud, A. H. Halsey and F. M. Martin (eds.), *Social Class and Educational Opportunity* (1957; 1976 edn), 14.

[24] Floud, Halsey and Martin, *Social Class*, p. 26. Board of Education figures in 1938 suggested that considerably more than one half (57.4%) of pupils across the country had been admitted free from the payment of any tuition fee that year. *Education in 1938*, 13.

[25] Floud, Halsey and Martin, *Social Class*, 119.

[26] Griselda Rowntree, 'Education' in Max Lock (ed.), *The County Borough of Middlesbrough. Survey and Plan* (1946), 290. For the edited reports upon which the Middlesbrough *Survey and Plan* was based see Glass, *The Social Background of a Plan.*

[27] Barron and Langhamer, 'Feeling through practice'.

several were conscious of moving on from their childhood. One boy, for example, remembered that

> As a small boy I said I would be an engine driver. This, however, was just a childish whim. I grew up and had other ideas as to what I would be…such as a fireman, captain on a liner, a horse guard and other such seemingly glamorous occupations. When I reached the age of 12 years my outlook became completely changed. I suddenly realised these occupations were no good as far as money was concerned, also that I had to have a steady, well-paying job in an office.[28]

Yet, these writers were, nevertheless, still schoolchildren and betrayed their age in various ways. For example, a boy who imagined his future self as a naval officer returning to visit his old school when his ship docked at Middlesbrough, promised that he would donate some money to the school – on the condition that it abolished homework.[29] Several of the younger writers felt that their future occupation was not a pressing concern: 'If you ask a lad, at about 12 noon, what he is going to be, he'll say something and talk for a bit, then out will come "Never mind that for now. I'm hungry."'[30] Indeed, one boy was actively hostile towards the idea of career planning: 'Really, this is an absurd subject to be forced to write two pages on – who knows what may happen when I leave school?'[31] Analytical difficulties also arise in negotiating the blurred boundary between realistic future planning and self-conscious fantasy. Amidst budding schoolteachers, wireless operators, railway workers, civil servants, chemists, mechanics, and journalists, some of the boys aspired to be famous sportsmen or band leaders. Few anticipated that within less than two years, a world war would make the very idea of future planning somewhat fantastical.

We are not the first to attempt to grapple with this kind of material. Schoolchildren's essays have been used by historians such as Christina Benninghaus (for Germany in the 1920s) and James Greenhalgh (for Britain during the Second World War).[32] Nor are we the first to analyse future thinking. Informed by the theoretical insights of Reinhart Koselleck, political and intellectual historians have investigated 'the place of the future in twentieth-century history', with a focus on

[28] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 300.
[29] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 266.
[30] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 296.
[31] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 25.
[32] Christina Benninghaus, ''Mothers' Toil and Daughters' Leisure: Working-Class Girls and Time in 1920s' Germany', *History Workshop Journal* 50 (2000), 45-72; James Greenhalgh, ''Till We Hear the Last All Clear': Gender and the Presentation of Self in Young Girls' Writing about the Bombing of Hull during the Second World War', *Gender and History* 26:1 (2014), 167-83.

how political and cultural elites have framed 'horizons of expectation'.[33] It has largely fallen to sociologists to call for a study of 'the equally powerful (and not unrelated) force exerted by the less grand, less total aspirations of everyday lives, the future images that inform social practices from the mundane to the heroic.'[34] Sometimes this has been through the use of historical material. Jane Elliott, for example, has mapped 'how children "did gender"' using essays written by eleven-year-olds in 1969 for the National Child Development Study.[35] Earlier sociological studies also focused on gender. Joyce Joseph's study of 1,300 teenagers in 1956 asked them to imagine that they were near the end of their lives and to write their autobiography. She offered limited conclusions, noting that the number of girls who wrote about paid employment after marriage 'may signify that a trend towards an increase in the number of women who work outside the home may be maintained in the next generation.'[36] However, her research also demonstrates the way in which future-writing could illuminate wider historical concerns. Ninety per cent of the girls in her study envisaged marriage in their imagined retrospectives but over a third of these authors then prematurely killed off their husbands via war, disease or accident, surely revealing something about the attitude of these girls towards conventional domesticity.[37]

The role that gender played in shaping young people's sense of their own future is, of course, relevant to our own analysis. But we are also interested in the ways in which the material circumstances of these children's lives affected the way in which they imagined (or fantasized about) their futures. James Hinton and Mike Savage have both utilised Mass Observation Directive material to explore adults' conceptualisations of class in the mid-century but children's own sense of social identity has been more tricky to access.[38] Childhood is often discussed within autobiographical accounts but it is difficult to judge the extent to which a retrospectively-composed assessment of class awareness in childhood was present in the contemporary attitudes

---

[33] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York, 2004 edn), 255-75; David C. Engerman, 'Introduction: Histories of the Future and the Futures of History', *American Historical Review* 117:5 (2012), 1402-10: 1402.
[34] Ann Mische, 'Projects and Possibilities: Researching Futures in Action', *Sociological Forum* 24:3 (2009), 694-704: 695. For examples see Gunilla Halldén, '"To be, or not to be": absurd and humoristic descriptions as a strategy to avoid idyllic life stories – boys write about family life', *Gender and Education* 11:4 (1999), 469-79; Joanne Bryant and Jeanne Ellard, 'Hope as a form of agency in the future thinking of disenfranchised young people', *Journal of Youth Studies* 18:4 (2015), 485-99; 'Guilia Carabelli and Dawn Lyon, 'Young people's orientations to the future: navigating the present and imagining the future', *Journal of Youth Studies* 19:8 (2016), 1110-27.
[35] Jane Elliott, 'Imagining a Gendered Future: Children's Essays from the National Child Development Study in 1969,' *Sociology* 44:6 (2010), 1073-90.
[36] J. Joseph, 'A Research Note on Attitudes to Work and Marriage of Six Hundred Adolescent Girls', *British Journal of Sociology* 12:2 (1961), 183.
[37] Joseph, 'Research Note', 180-3.
[38] James Hinton, 'The "class" complex': Mass-Observation and cultural distinction in pre-war Britain,' *Past and Present*, 199 (2008), 207-36; Mike Savage, 'Changing social class identities in post-war Britain: Perspectives from Mass-Observation', *Sociological Research Online* 12:3 (2007), unpaginated.

of the authors as children. The memoirs of scholarship boys – and to a lesser extent scholarship girls – have provided particularly rich access to shifting encounters with class across the life course but, again, childhood conflicts and negotiations are re-constructed with the benefit of hindsight.[39] We do not want to challenge the value of retrospective accounts, on which historians including ourselves have often relied. Rather, we would like to suggest that using contemporaneously-generated views of the future – rather than retrospectively-generated views of the past – offer a somewhat different perspective. They allow insight into classed subjectivities in the process of formation, and facilitate access to the way in which these subjectivities shaped generational understandings of the self in the material world.

I

One of the most striking features of the essays is the marked confidence of most boys in their ability to secure work of their choosing upon leaving school. While a secondary-level education already provided them with much greater opportunities for a higher-status occupation, there is little suggestion by any of the essayists that these jobs were not theirs for the taking. One suggested, for example, that he might be a carpenter, electrician or railwayman: 'if I like one of these jobs I might keep it…Later on I might change my mind and be something else.'[40] Another reported that 'There are numerous trades which attract me but I will consider their merits.'[41] Whilst a minority demonstrated real commitment, a vocation even, for a particular occupation, most expressed a more expansive – and somewhat eclectic – sense of possibility. A typical list included station porter, jockey, bank clerk or office boy as possible options, whilst a classmate preferred to be a customs official or member of the civil service; if these were unattainable he would 'try my ability either as a freelance journalist, or as a chemist, or Minister.'[42]

The local industries provided an obvious focus for the boys' ambitions, and many referred to specific Middlesbrough firms. The considerable number of aspiring chemists was surely partly due to the influence of ICI while many others spoke of possibilities with the steel firm Dorman Long, which, having struggled during the early 1930s, was faring better towards the end of the decade. However, if the boys were strongly rooted in place, this did not limit their horizons; indeed, the local context could itself facilitate dreams of geographical mobility. One boy who aspired to be a

[39] For a recent example see D. L. LeMahieu '"Scholarship Boys" in Twilight: The Memoirs of Six Humanists in Post-Industrial Britain', *Journal of British Studies* 53:4 (2014), 1011-31.
[40] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 434.
[41] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 302.
[42] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 462, 330.

draughtsman at a local works hoped that he might 'travel about the country for the firm and see all the great towns of England. Later on perhaps I might have to travel to other countries of the world.'[43] In fact, Dorman Long had been responsible for the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in the 1920s: this was referenced in a couple of the essays as an example of the way in which local employment could, indeed, lead to international opportunities.[44]

Many of these jobs would certainly have been available to secondary-educated children in the 1930s. Fifteen years previously, the educationalist Kenneth Lindsay had investigated the after-occupations of secondary school pupils. He found 32 per cent going on to further education; 27 per cent to professional, clerical and commercial work; ten per cent to industrial and manual work; and four per cent to agricultural and rural work. Twenty-five per cent he characterised as the 'residue' (of which half constituted girls who stayed at home).[45] But choices beyond lower middle-class work were limited for the majority. As Brian Simon has commented on the system of public education as it had evolved by the 1930s: 'Secondary schools were meant to provide clerical workers, on the new scale required by commerce and banking from the outset of the century, no less than to build up a corps of teachers or feed other lesser professions. Higher, truly educational, concerns belonged only to schools which had no such vulgar connection with occupation.'[46]

Yet the Middlesbrough boys' fantasies were often more ambitious than Simon's analysis might suggest was realistic. A sense of real agency underpinned both occupational choice and fantasies of occupational progress over the life course. One boy wanted to become a detective but his aspirations did not end there: 'Perhaps I will be promoted to Detective Inspector of Scotland Yard.'[47] Another wanted 'to go to sea…If I could rise higher by passing examinations I would probably rise to a rank such as commander or captain.'[48] The suggestion of a third, that he might become a pilot or engineer, entered the realm of the more unlikely when he added that, if not, 'I would perhaps try and become a professor or an astronomer and discover new planets or make new inventions.'[49]

[43] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 95.
[44] For example, MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 470.
[45] Kenneth Lindsay, *Social Progress and Educational Waste* (London, 1926), 16.
[46] Brian Simon, *The Politics of Educational Reform, 1920-1940* (1974), 252.
[47] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 400.
[48] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 365.
[49] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 433.

Even boys who identified themselves as being from poorer backgrounds were optimistic about their capacity to enter and then progress in their chosen field. An aspiring teacher understood that he would need to obtain a scholarship but this did not daunt him: 'as I was not born of wealthy parents I shall have to win my way through. This has been done by other lads and so, if I persevere, I see no reason why I should not do the same.'[50] Another also hoped for a scholarship, 'for we cannot afford the fees.' He wanted to become a chemistry teacher, but assumed that, even in the event of failure, he would still be able to secure a scientific career of some sort: 'If I cannot get the scholarships I shall be one of the many thousands who just let chance choose a career for them except that it will be something scientific.'[51]

A desire to excel in their chosen sphere was driven for some by a quest for fame. Historians have identified a distinctive brand of celebrity culture within the interwar context of mass media, mass leisure and ultimately mass democracy itself.[52] The appeal of well-known imperial adventurers and military men has also been interrogated to illuminate the complexity of desirable models of masculinity in an apparently domesticating context.[53] Several of the Middlesbrough schoolboys made generic references to thrills, fame and possible adventure in their essays. Perhaps unsurprisingly, sport was a key focus here: there were to be champion boxers, a successful jockey and star racing drivers amongst the cohort.

The celebrity status offered by films and broadcasting was also attractive, whilst new occupations such as piloting promised particular excitement. 'To fly as a Royal Air Force pilot is my great wish for when I leave school', wrote one:

> To defend my country in the latest inventions. To feel the thrill as you see Mother Earth rolling beneath you. To feel the breathless charm as you skim through the air at 400 miles per hour…If I was given my choice I would fly a single-seater racing monoplane, with a shining and streamlined body, and a roaring engine. And to have races with my fellow

[50] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 52.

[51] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 279-80.

[52] See for example, Laura Beers, 'A Model MP? Ellen Wilkinson, Gender, Politics and Celebrity Culture in Interwar Britain', in *Cultural and Social History*, 10:2, 2013; Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters. The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook*, (Chicago, Ill.; London, 2016); Frank Mort, 'Love in a Cold Climate: Letters, Public Opinion and Monarchy in the 1936 Abdication Crisis,' *Twentieth Century British History* 25:1 (2014), 30-62.

[53] Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, 1994); Max Jones, *The Last Great Quest: Captain Scott's Antarctic Sacrifice* (Oxford, 2003).

> pilots, roaring over peaceful country villages, a contrast of old and new, climbing higher and higher and diving steeply, making it perform gymnastics at a touch of the rudder bar.[54]

And yet the boys did not only look for adventure in the usual places. Interwar cultures of fame and fortune extended to ostensibly more mundane occupations, which were also perceived to offer the opportunity 'to do big things in the world'.[55] 'I would try and obtain a high position in life such as a manager, or a great business man and own numerous factories and shops' stated one.[56] Office work was a particularly popular option, in part because it was deemed to offer opportunities for a quick rise through the ranks. The language of celebrity permeated responses even where the anticipated career was fairly ordinary. A prospective engineer wrote that 'After serving my apprenticeship I would endeavour to work my way to the top of the ladder of fame. I would bank a sum of money every week and when I had enough I would start a small shop.'[57]

However, if fame was attractive to some, it was not the only way by which boys sought personal fulfilment. At a time when adult attitudes towards work were increasingly the subject of psychological investigation, these Middlesbrough schoolchildren were already anticipating a degree of job satisfaction in their fantasy futures.[58] The boys most often expressed this as a solitary act of self-fulfilment; very few referenced a commitment to the well-being of the wider community. 'If my hopes come true I will be able to enjoy life', wrote one, whilst another hoped only for a job in which he 'would not feel lonely and tired.'[59] Many of the essayists explained their occupational choice through the individual satisfaction it would bring: one boy wanted to become a chemist because he enjoyed visiting chemist's shops 'to watch the men mix medicines and prepare other things'; another hoped to be a clerk 'as I have always been interested in numbers and writing.'[60] A prospective electrical engineer anticipated future pleasure in all areas of the trade:

> This work is very interesting from all points of view. In a lot of jobs on electrical engineering the work is different every day. Fiddling on with electric motors and electric gadgets is very interesting. Then electricity, in no matter which form, is always fascinating although sometimes dangerous…Even a small job as an electrical engineer for a small firm

[54] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 285.
[55] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 468.
[56] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 433.
[57] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 399.
[58] See, for example, Robert Hoppock, *Job Satisfaction* (New York; London, 1935); A Kornhauser, 'The study of work feelings', *Personnel Journal* 8 (1930), 348-51.
[59] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 305, 137.
[60] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 380.

> such as hoover or goblin vacuum cleaners is interesting. Even a small wireless dealer if doing well can get a certain amount of enjoyment from his work.[61]

II

If the boys' sense of agency was one driver of their ambitions, then their place at a secondary school – which, for the majority of cases would have exceeded their parents' educational attainments – might be expected to be another. The Middlesbrough schoolboys certainly recognised the value of their secondary schooling as a key factor in facilitating future success: 'In any case, I will not waste my secondary education and most certainly will make great use of it,' wrote one.[62] Some were explicit in their understanding of an educational hierarchy: 'When a boy leaves a secondary school he most likely will get a better job than when he leaves an ordinary school. When he comes from an ordinary school he is not clever enough to pass a scholarship and a boy's work at a higher school is more serious.'[63] This rationale was used as a way of dismissing lower-status occupations. An office boy position was declared to be 'a rather poor job for a boy who has been educated at a secondary school'; while a job as a messenger boy was rejected because 'there is no need of a secondary school education to ride a bicycle.'[64] A hierarchy of jobs might also be indicated explicitly in the language used: 'If I fail [the School Certificate] I shall try to get a second-class job e.g. An errand boy or a butcher's boy. If I pass I shall try to get a job as a clerk or something that I can rise to a high position in e.g. a lawyer or a customs official.'[65]

Their educational achievements thus far may account for why so many of the boys expressed a commitment to hard work and a confidence in their ability to work their way up the occupational scale. One essayist, unsure what he wanted to be, nevertheless noted that 'whatever it is I shall work as hard as I possibly can to own a shop of my own'.[66] An aspiring clerical worker was typical in his declaration that 'I shall certainly work hard, and prove my worth.'[67] It was also the experience of school, perhaps, which further taught them that strategic deference was intrinsic to career progress; that, in order to get a job in the first place, 'I ought to be clean, tidy and respectful.'[68]

---

[61] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 111-12.
[62] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 433.
[63] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 431-2.
[64] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 362, 289.
[65] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 221.
[66] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 474.
[67] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 394.
[68] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 412.

Some were particularly keen to become the 'organization men' whose emotionality Mike Roper has studied for the years after the Second World War.[69] 'When I leave school I will if I am the same as other people have a feeling of contentment and success', wrote one boy, 'I will see that I am at the necessary stage of usefulness and I will avail myself of every opportunity to learn something about the adjacent parts of the mechanism. I hope that as rapidly as possible I will absorb the traditions of my firm and identify myself as closely as I can with its interests.'[70]

However, career aspirations were not just developed at school but were also fostered at home. Peter Mandler has recently argued that twentieth-century Britons increasingly conceptualised secondary education as a 'universal benefit' rather than a privilege to be accessed on 'merit'.[71] The driver of this was a popular growth in 'educational aspiration' during the 1930s, to which local authorities in towns like Middlesbrough responded through the provision of free places. In doing so, Mandler argues, 'they were recognising growing public appetite for free secondary education, as opportunities for better-paid and more secure employment in the clerical and retail sectors expanded, and mothers especially sought education for their children as an alternative to entry into the manual labour market facilitated by fathers' workplace connections.'[72]

Selina Todd has demonstrated 'the importance of kinship and friendship networks, and particularly mothers, in shaping employment opportunities and wider social aspirations' amongst working-class girls of this period, while Carol Dyhouse has shown the impact of parents on the educational and career aspirations of both working- and middle-class children, with mothers a particularly strong influence upon working-class boys' aspirations.[73] Such findings suggest that family was just as strong, if not a stronger, driver of aspiration than was school and this held true for many of the Middlesbrough pupils. Certainly there is little evidence in their writing of the tensions between these spheres described by the scholarship boy Richard Hoggart: 'such a boy is between two worlds: the worlds of school and home; and they meet at few points.'[74] In fact, at least some of the Middlesbrough parents conformed to the same sense of occupational hierarchy as their children

[69] Michael Roper, *Masculinity and the British Organization Man Since 1945* (Oxford, 1994).
[70] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 88.
[71] Peter Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I: Schools', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 24 (2014), 5-28.
[72] Mandler, 'Educating the Nation', 13. On secondary schools and educational aspiration earlier in the century see also Siân Pooley, 'Parenthood, Citizenship and the State in England, c. 1870-1914', in Hester Barron and Claudia Siebrecht (eds) *Parenting and the State in Britain and Europe, c. 1870-1950: Raising the Nation* (Basingstoke, 2017), 40-1.
[73] Selina Todd, 'Poverty and Aspiration: Young Women's Entry to Employment in Inter-war England', *Twentieth Century British History* 15:2 (2004): 119-42, 122; Carol Dyhouse, 'Patterns of Social Mobility through Higher Education in England in the 1930s', *Journal of Social History* 34:4 (2001), 817-42.
[74] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London, 1957), 228. For a discussion of Hoggart and five other 'academically-gifted working- and lower middle-class males in twentieth-century Britain' see LeMahieu, 'Scholarship Boys'.

and saw education as key to social mobility. One boy noted that his father's 'greatest desire is that…I will not work in the same place as him which is in the wire works. He says "A high school boy ought not work in the wire works as it is too dirty."'[75]

Reading the boys' essays draws attention to the relationship between school and home, and the importance of both in framing subjectivities and future opportunities. Certainly it seems that several boys sought (or were given) the advice of their parents, and the opinions and preferences of both mothers and fathers occasionally feature in the essays. Some boys actively sought their parents' approval: 'I must also interview my parents and find out what they say, then try to, if possible, please them'.[76] This particular child was keen on chemistry but noted that 'If my mother and father do not approve…I would turn my hand to the work of an engineer. This is also a very interesting job.' Another felt that his parents had some degree of veto. He thought he would like to start 'in a big firm…as an office boy or something similar and work right up to be in the head office…or would like to be a chemist in the ICI.' He knew, however, that his parents had different preferences:

> My mother wants me to start a shop of my own and if I can make it pay start another and employ people to work in it and if I can, have a string of shops such as Allick's the fruit shop. She does not say what sort of shop she wants it to be but I expect it will be a confectioners. My father however would like me to get a job on a ship and see if I can get a master's ticket or at least be a mate either first or second…If my parents refused me permission for the first two of the four and I had to choose between the ones they had picked I would pick the sailor's job.[77]

In only one of the 269 answers is there any suggestion that parental disapproval had been ignored, in the case of a boy who hoped to go to university to become a doctor: 'Mother says I will be twenty before I leave school for good but that will not matter. She first wanted me to be a teacher, but I do not fancy that as I think it is a job which takes too much preparing.'[78] Much more common are references of gratitude to parents. Despite the high number of free places available at the High School, a significant minority of boys still had to pay fees, and some, at least, were acutely aware of the sacrifice their parents had made. Two boys explicitly included their desire to pay their

[75] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 319.
[76] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 356.
[77] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 369.
[78] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 364.

parents back as part of their rationale in seeking a well-paid job.[79] Even for those who were excused fees, enrolment at the High School would have entailed expense, and the boys were clearly aware of this: 'My parents, just the same as any other parents, have had to sacrifice to give me the benefit of a secondary education.'[80] One boy suggested that it was the encouragement of learning instilled by his parents that had enabled him to win a scholarship. He hoped 'that in later days I might support my father and mother and comfort them as they have comforted me. I say this because I realise that without the general knowledge they provided me with when I was young I might never have been at the Middlesbrough High School.'[81] This cohort would go on, of course, to encourage and support the aspirations of their own children, facilitating the 'intergenerational cooperation' which Todd and Young suggest was a defining characteristic of postwar working-class family life.[82]

## III

Thus far our analysis of the Middlesbrough essays suggests that the boys had an expansive and well-developed sense of occupational possibility; that whilst some wanted a life of excitement many more emphasised the pursuit of happiness; and that their confidence stemmed from the secondary school experience but that family was also an important driver of the aspirations that these boys narrated. And yet the essays do not suggest that the boys were untouched by material circumstance. In fact, the way in which the boys framed their fantasy lives suggests that they were alert to the historical, social and economic context in which they were located. As noted above, statistics suggest that almost half of Middlesbrough's secondary school population came from working-class backgrounds. Alongside the confident assertion of career aspiration we also see anxieties about economic and international instability, a deep commitment to career planning and a valorisation of domesticity. In all these respects the boys might be seen as striving for, and fearing the absence of, security.

---

79 MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 313, 467.
80 MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 184.
81 MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 439. Of course historians point to a long tradition of working-class self-education. See for example, Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, 2001). In her chapter on working-class reading in early twentieth century Middlesbrough, Florence Bell found that most households contained readers and identified 'men of the very keenest intelligence, reading the best books that they can lay hands on, and eagerly availing themselves of the very good Free Library belonging to the town in question.' Bell *At the Works*, 230-1.
82 Selina Todd and Hilary Young, 'Baby-Boomers to 'Beanstalkers', *Cultural and Social History* 9:3 (2012), 451-67.

Security was an important theme within interwar public discourse. Lawrence has demonstrated that the Labour Party, for example, used the theme of social and economic security 'to try and bind wage and salary earners together' in the 1920s and 1930s: 'Appeals to salaried workers talked of their lives being "continually haunted by the fear of insecurity."'[83] When Mass Observation asked the people of Bolton 'What makes you happy?' in 1938, economic security was deemed to be an essential precondition for personal happiness.[84] Todd's study of young women's entry into employment suggests that security of employment was the most attractive job attribute; amongst the 1930s' graduates questioned by Dyhouse, 'It was not uncommon for respondents to heavily underscore the words *"secure job with a pension"* in their answers to my question about why they went to university.'[85]

Despite a mood of prevailing optimism amongst the majority of Middlesbrough boys, then, there was also an awareness of the economic – and to a lesser extent the international – insecurity of the period. 'We see these rough, idle and good for nothing men, hanging round the street corner with their hands in their pockets and we don't wish to be them when we leave school' wrote one child.[86] Another acknowledged that 'I may be forced to stand in a queue every week for an allowance at the Labour Exchange, but I hope that that will not be the case.'[87] A particularly dystopian future, in which 'the "situation vacant" columns have been studied', continued:

> letters have been written, but of no avail, the advertisement disappears and no reply is sent, so rather disappointed I wait for another vacancy to appear. So it goes on, each week, saying 'Oh, I'll be working soon, and I'll be able to become useful,' but it seems that the day of changing from a schoolboy to an earning youth will never come…[88]

A fear that the future may not be theirs to make also underpinned some of the more prescient accounts: 'But the unforeseen always happens. There might be a great slump, a strike, a war which might ruin all my hopes'; 'if I fell out of work, if we were on strike or if war were declared and I was conscripted I don't know what I would do after that because I might be killed in the war.'[89]

---

[83] Jon Lawrence, 'Labour and the Politics of Class, 1900-1940' in David Feldman and Jon Lawrence eds. *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge, 2011), 256, 257.
[84] Ian Gazeley and Claire Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Happiness in Mass-Observation's Bolton', *History Workshop Journal*, 75:1 (2013), 159-189, 171.
[85] Todd, 'Poverty and Aspiration', 137; Dyhouse, 'Patterns of Social Mobility', 826.
[86] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 431.
[87] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 291.
[88] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 378.
[89] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff 310, 317.

The particular problems of the 1930s' job market were perhaps one reason why such marked value was given to a secondary education within the essays. One boy suggested that he would have to 'hope for the best', but added, 'These days, though, the best isn't very good, so I will have to get my School Certificate and, if I stay long enough, Higher School Certificate, to stand a chance of a decent job.'[90] Contemporaneous concern about the blind-alley work being offered to young male workers flourished in 1930s Britain, and it was an awareness of the time-limited earning capacity of youth that frightened the teenage apprentice Harry Hardcastle in Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*: 'Every year new generations of schoolboys were appearing, each generation pushing him and his a little nearer to that incredible abyss of manhood and the dole…A horrible suspicion clutched him. Suppose that…once a fellow came out of his time he remained unemployed for ever!'[91] One of the Middlesbrough boys directly referenced such fears when he imagined that he would 'apply for a post which might be suitable for a boy of my age…Then when I am too old to keep the post I will have to leave it for a boy younger than me.'[92]

It is clear, therefore, that the boys' general optimism did not preclude realism about the future. A relatively rare answer, nevertheless, was one that explicitly acknowledged the limits of the possible. A boy who wanted to be a police constable in the flying squad or, better, join the RAF, wrote that he 'would like to fly above the clouds...but…I think I would not be able to fulfil these ambitions so I think I would be a clerk in an office.'[93] Others wrote about settling into the roles expected of them, a realism as much about growing up as it was about classed opportunity and constraint:

> 'Johnnie dear, what are you going to be when you leave school', asks many a person to the over-embarrassed Johnnie. But, it is not what Johnnie wants to be, when he leaves school which he tells the person. He has dreams of a ranch in Mexico, a log cabin in Canada, but he always answers 'Of course, I shall go in an office, and someday be manager.' This answer always pleases mother who does not allow Johnnie to go to those foreign parts. In this way many a boy's fond dream has been squashed, and the only adventure, he gets is Saturday night at the 'talkies'. When I leave school…I have many ideas how to lead and spend my life, but what is the use of relating them; none of them will ever come true. The job which

[90] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 273-4.
[91] Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole* (1954 edn; first published 1933), 67. Oral evidence from Middlesbrough backs up statistical evidence from elsewhere to confirm that youths were more likely to find employment than adults in interwar Britain. See Nicholas, *Social Effects*, 27.
[92] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 407.
[93] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 359.

> I obtain will most likely be in an office, a dingy old office; and I will try to be manager. All my life will be spent in the struggle to obtain money, to buy food, and if I fail I will starve.[94]

The influence of economic instability is perhaps reflected above all in the boys' search for life-long security. Ultimately, it was job security – around which progression through the life course could be planned – that seems to have been the most compelling factor for the boys' choice of career. Dozens of these young teenagers referenced pensions in particular as a key consideration in making their decisions. A basic state pension had been introduced alongside other New Liberal reforms before the First World War, but the interwar period had seen the spread and improvement of both public and private sector pension schemes, particularly for white-collar workers.[95] The generous pension provisions of the civil service was one reason for its popularity amongst the boys: 'The Civil Service has a pension at the end, and, although that is a long time to come, it is best to look to the future,' was one of several similar comments.[96] Another boy simply closed his essay: 'When I am an old man I hope to be able to retire and live in comfort for the rest of my life.'[97]

Some historians have suggested that the introduction of pensions in the early twentieth century began a process of marginalising older people.[98] Pat Thane has disputed this, arguing that a basic pension at least allowed old people to leave degrading, low-status work; she acknowledges, however, that many continued to live in poverty.[99] Within the boys' essays, old age was represented as a positive and distinct life cycle stage to be welcomed rather than feared. The Middlesbrough pupils generally demonstrated careful attention to the mapping out of a career (and life) over time, foregrounding the benefits of a job for life and fantasising about long and happy retirements (on a good pension) at the end of what Michael Anderson has identified as a historically specific 'modern life cycle'.[100] Indeed the rapidity with which individual responses moved through the life course towards retirement is striking. These fantasy retirements were defined by economic security; the reward for a life of hard work. Some had specific plans, and one elaborated: 'when retired life comes I would leave England and live in San Francisco, a place I've always wished to live until the end of my days.'[101] Another intended to run a general store once he retired from the civil service,

---

[94] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 3-4.
[95] Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History. Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford, 2000), 250.
[96] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 284.
[97] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 276.
[98] John Macnicol, *The Politics of Retirement in Britain, 1878-1948* (Cambridge, 1998), 400.
[99] Thane, *Old Age*, 259-86.
[100] Michael Anderson, 'The Emergence of the Modern Life Cycle in Britain', *Social History* 10:1 (1984), 69-87.
[101] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 310.

'When I am eighty I shall sell the shop and play bowls with the other old men'.[102] A third just wanted to relax: 'On reaching the age of 65 I should demand a small sum of 10 shillings a week without working for it, and then I will sit in front of the fire and recollect all my happy days at school and my rise from bank clerk to bank manager.'[103] The boys' valorisation of old age was more than a convenient way of ending their narratives.

A quest for security is further evident in an emphasis on domesticity. Marriage, home and children were an integral part of their future plans, as one explained:

> When the time comes for me to leave school I will have thought of what sort of job I would like. If I get this job I will start saving the money that I earn. After a certain time if I have the money I will buy a car and start to think of getting married. My work will then be in full swing and I might settle down. The house I would choose if possible would be down on the south coast. This part of the country fascinates me because it is bathed in sunshine. My wife would have to be dark and handsome.[104]

The boys expected to marry in their twenties and approached the issue with the same degree of thoughtful planning that most exhibited when writing about their future careers, weighing up the costs and benefits in terms of age at marriage and the type of wife they wished for. One essayist who wanted to be a mathematics master 'like Mr Speed' wrote that 'If I get married (as I very likely will) I would like to marry a brunette girl. Of course I would not take this load on my hands till I had reached the age of 25.' He added considerately that 'I will not grow a moustache they take too much time trimming and I don't expect my wife would like it when I was kissing her.'[105] A classmate also had clear requirements:

> When I leave school I will immediately look for a job of work. I will then look for a nice girl with blonde curly hair, her age about 16 (the same as my own age). Her and I will then start courting and we will continue with it for about five years. I will of course wait a few years before I make my choice at all the pretty girls in this wide world…I said I would pick a blonde but I will not pick a girl who will spend a lot of money because it is a waste of

[102] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 68.
[103] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 64.
[104] MOA, TC59-5-A, f. 132.
[105] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 245-6.

> money buying an engagement ring for her. Because I am a Methodist I will try and find a blonde girl who was also a Methodist. I will be married at West End or Park Wesley.[106]

The boys assumed the operation of clearly defined gender roles within marriage and expected their wives to facilitate their happiness. Some accounts were laced with fantasy elements that would not look out of place in girls' magazines of the period:

> I would start courting and maybe get married when I got older. If I got married I would live with my wife and take her with me wherever I went. If I got any children I would let them go to a school where there was no homework. If I could afford the money I would pay for a tutor to come to my children. I would bring them up to go on 'stage' if I had got on as well. I would also let them learn some instruments if they were musical if not I would allow them to be taught to dance. Then if I had no children I would enjoy myself with my wife. We would go to the pictures and dances and any other amusements which she wanted to go to. In the summer I would take her to places like Venice and Switzerland if I could afford the money. I would not allow my wife to work except housework. I should never mind her having company. I should have parties for my friends. I should never have a divorce as it costs too much money. Also because I hope we shall be happily married. If possible I shall never drink beer, but maybe I shall smoke. When we have been married 20 years, if we are, then it will be our silver wedding. I will hold a large party in the café to which I should invite all my friends and relatives. Then when I retired I should take my wife and children, if any, to settle down in a cottage at Bridlington. There I hope we would live in many more years of happiness and live to see our children all happily married.[107]

Unlike the girls in Joyce Joseph's postwar survey the Middlesbrough boys did not kill off their wives mid-way through the life course. In fact, as Melanie Tebbutt has also demonstrated, boys of the interwar years often demonstrated a commitment to love and romance that far exceeded that of their more pragmatic sisters.[108]

IV

---

[106] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 193-4.
[107] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 198-200.
[108] Melanie Tebbutt, *Being Boys: Youth, Leisure and Identity in the Inter-War Years* (Manchester, 2012), 181.

It has long been accepted that the British experience of the 1930s was far more complicated than earlier historiographical debate allowed, dominated as it was by a healthy versus hungry binary.[109] A view of the period as varied in complex and overlapping ways – politically, economically, culturally – now prevails with particular attention paid to heterogeneity of experience within social groups; several historians have complicated understandings of the era through a consideration of gender, for example.[110] Yet, as Lawrence has recently argued, although we *know* that many British workers did well in the 1930s, 'we have done too little to think through the implications for how we write the history of working-class life across the middle decades of the twentieth century'. He suggests that the concerns of interwar social inquiry, rightly dominated by the challenge of combatting the misery of poverty and chronic unemployment, have continued to contour studies of the period, encouraging a 'tendency to see social change from above rather than below – as a result of shifts in state policy, rather than as the product, at least in part, of democratic impulses from below, including rising expectations and subtle shifts in social norms.'[111] The use of autobiographical writing such as the Middlesbrough essays provides a way of exploring that social change from below, and of mapping those rising expectations and subtle shifts as they were being lived. In the boys' future fantasies, stable non-manual occupations sat alongside working-class cultural reference points, suggestive of a complexity of identity and experience more often ascribed to the postwar years.[112]

Children are largely omitted from characterisations of the interwar period, in which experience – even in nuanced and sensitive readings – is largely assumed to have been determined by occupation. Children become much more central to the historical narrative only after 1939, due to wartime evacuation and the child-centred post-war settlement.[113] And yet a study of schoolchildren's future-writing has wider implications for the way in which we conceptualise 1930s Britain. Matt Houlbrook has recently described the interwar period as 'a world in the remaking', but historians rarely look beyond the south east or the Midlands for evidence of that remaking.[114] The Middlesbrough working- and lower middle-class schoolchildren whose essays we have analysed here were active participants in this process. Having already secured the advantage of a

---

[109] For a recent review of the literature, see Stephanie Ward, *Unemployment and the State in Britain. The Means Test and Protest in 1930s South Wales and North-East England* (Manchester, 2013), 2-3.
[110] Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty. Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939* (Basingstoke, 1992); Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place. An oral history of working class women 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984); Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England, 1918-1950* (Oxford, 2005).
[111] Lawrence, 'Class, "Affluence" and the Study of Everyday Life', 274.
[112] Lawrence, 'Class, "Affluence" and the Study of Everyday Life', 282.
[113] On approaches to the child after 1945 see Mathew Thomson, *Lost Freedom. The Landscape of the Child and the British Post-war Settlement* (Oxford, 2013).
[114] Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters*, 10.

secondary education – itself a symbol of rising expectations – the boys remained defiant in the face of the decade and location in which they were growing up, and were determined to exercise control over their future lives. Indeed, the assertiveness of their writing reminds us of the defiance of Bill Brandt's dancing girl, used to illustrate McKibbin's book on class referenced at the start of this article.

For some, of course, the war would indeed change everything. In December 1937, twelve-year-old Jack Ellis, one of the Middlesbrough essayists, fancied joining the army when he was older:

> By chance the batch I happened to be in might be sent abroad (if anything important was happening) and there I might have some exciting adventures…When I join the army in about six years…it might be much better than now as the Government are spending a lot of money on the navy and the army. In the army I might have a chance of playing football and cricket for them against the navy…I might even rise to an officer or any other high place if I do anything worthy…I should like to travel in a boat round the world which the army sometimes do. There are plenty of medals which can be won in the army, one called the Victoria Cross.[115]

Just over seven years later, in March 1945, Jack was killed in Belgium. If his childhood fantasies give Jack's death a particular poignancy, many others of his classmates will also have served, and several must have died. Others may have had their lives wrecked in other ways by the war. Middlesbrough was the first British industrial town to be bombed, on 24 May 1940, with Dorman Long workers amongst the injured. Although the bombers returned only occasionally, 88 Middlesbrough civilians were killed over the course of the conflict.[116]

Yet in 1937, unaware of – or largely undeterred by – the looming threat of war, most of the boys dreamt of lives that would be long, fulfilling, domesticated, and happy. As one child put it:

> I will apply for a job in an office. If I'm lucky I will start work about 9 o'clock in the morning and will be busy writing and taking messages out for the employer till 12 o'clock. This is dinner hour and at 1 o'clock I will be busy again till 5 o'clock. Then I will go home

---

[115] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 348-9.
[116] Peter Stansky, *The First Day of the Blitz: 7 September 1940* (New Haven, Conn.; London, 2007), 21; http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/tees/hi/people_and_places/history/newsid_8701000/8701200.stm, accessed 4 Oct. 2016.

> and have my tea. At 6 o'clock I will go to the cinema for pleasure. When I get back I will read a book till about 10 o'clock then I will have my supper and go to bed. On the weekend the office will close and I will walk to Ayresome Park to see Middlesbrough play football after the match I will go home switch on the wireless and listen to a music hall if there is one. I will go out and have a look round the shops. On Sunday I will buy papers and go back to bed at dinnertime and have my dinner and go for a walk in the park to pass the time away. That night I will go to bed. When I am 25 I will marry somebody and I hope to have some children.[117]

Perhaps he did; if so he will have seen those children benefit from the 1944 Education Act, implemented after 1945 by the former Middlesbrough MP, Ellen Wilkinson, herself an ex-scholarship girl. For – several years later, and war casualties aside – these boys, whose childhood fantasies were imbued so deeply with a longing for security, would become the young voters who would elect the Labour government in 1945, on the promise of cradle-to-grave security for all.[118]

---

[117] MOA, TC59-5-A, ff. 233-4.

[118] As Geoffrey Field shows, 67% of young people voted for Labour in 1945. Geoffrey G. Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class, 1939-1945* (Oxford, 2011) 370. 1945 was the first election in which both Middlesbrough seats were won by Labour.