

## Review

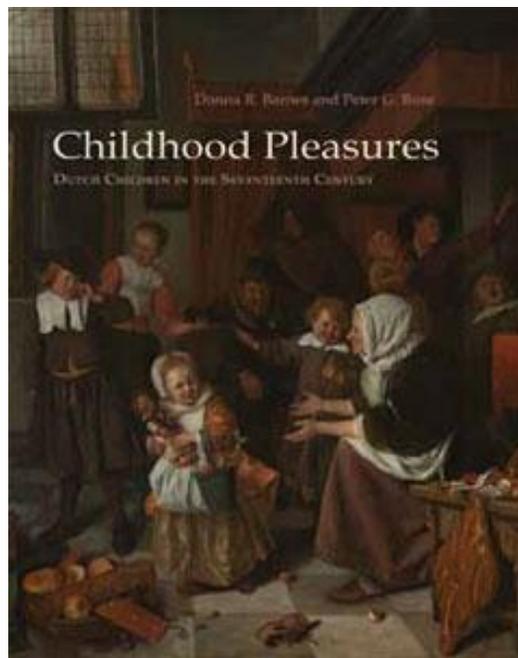
**Donna R. Barnes and Peter G. Rose:  
Childhood Pleasures:  
Dutch Children in the Seventeenth Century**

With a Foreword by Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2012. 184p.

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*Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Galway*



*Childhood Pleasures: Dutch Children in the Seventeenth Century* is a beautifully illustrated work that will appeal to those with an interest in both Dutch history and the history of childhood more broadly. With a focus on the province of Holland from the seventeenth century to the early years of the eighteenth century, the work considers various elements of childhood culture including toys, games, music, and food. Through their exploration of the different pleasures and

modes of entertainment available to Dutch children of the period, the authors shed light on Dutch attitudes towards children and childhood during this important era.

The book focuses on two key areas of childhood experience: activities and food. In the book's *Foreword* Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. outlines how studying childhood culture both informs us of attitudes towards children and simultaneously reveals many of the values that helped shape the Dutch Republic. He notes the significant connections between international trade, children's toys and food, and the teaching of "deeply felt ethical and moral values that were broadly shared in Dutch society" (x). While the book would have been enriched by making this important point a more sustained topic of investigation, Barnes and Rose nevertheless provide an engaging account of some of the key elements of children's daily lives in seventeenth-century Holland. They draw from cookbooks, diaries, and archaeological evidence, but the primary source of their information on the pastimes and cuisine experienced by Dutch children is art, including paintings, drawings, and prints.

The book contains beautiful, high-quality reproductions of these artistic works, and each one is accompanied by commentary from one of the authors. As they note in their *Preface*, Barnes and Rose have organized these images around eight key themes: "infancy; Saint Nicholas, bringer of sweets and toys; celebrations and music; toys and games; animals as pets and companions; inventing fun, games, and mischief; shopping for food treats; and winter activities outdoors" (xiii). Regrettably, it is not clearly articulated why these particular themes are the subject of focus, or why other ones are absent, and there remains a great opportunity for further study of themes like family relations and schooling. Nevertheless, the authors do direct the reader's attention to a number of interesting topics within their study.

Barnes' chapter on child pastimes is written in a relaxed, accessible prose style, designed to evoke in the reader's mind a clear image of the daily pleasures and experiences of Dutch children at this time. She draws connections between elements of childhood experienced by seventeenth-century Dutch children, and those fundamental to childhood in other periods and places, while at the same time noting those features that were unique to this period in history. Barnes is careful to point out that childhood experience was shaped very much by the particular social class to which one belonged, and that there were significant differences between rural and urban childhoods in this period.

One factor that receives less critical attention is the role that expectations of gender played on shaping childhood toys and activities. For instance, Barnes remarks that "boys climbed ... trees and swung on branches (as they have done around the world since time immemorial)" (2), and that boys, "more so

than their sisters enjoyed snowball fights or mud-ball fights” (5). It would be a welcome contribution to the discussion of Dutch childhood if such distinctions between the activities of boys and girls were explored in greater depth in relation to the social conventions and expectations that may have resulted in such differences. Additionally, the discussion would be enriched by a further consideration of what the objects, toys, and art of the time tell us about the way Dutch boys and girls were socialized into particular gender roles during this period.



*Job Berckheyde. The Bakery Shop. Oil on canvas. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio; R.T. Miller, Jr. Fund, 1956. Illustration from book under review, p. 108*

Rose's chapter on *Edible Pleasures* provides an excellent overview of the food available in Holland, including both local foodstuffs and more exotic ingredients such as cinnamon and nutmeg that were available as a consequence of Dutch seafaring. Rose draws on some fascinating sources to outline the eating habits of children from all classes, including a menu from an Amsterdam orphanage from 1640. Outlining some of the food connected to specific religious holidays and events such as weddings, Rose demonstrates how food went far beyond simply providing sustenance and played an important role in the social life of the community. A delightful addition to this text is the inclusion of a dozen Dutch recipes that are intended as child-adult cooking activities.

Following these introductory chapters, the book focuses on examples of Dutch art, organized around the eight key themes identified by the authors. The accompanying text offers possible interpretations of the artwork, including both symbolic readings where appropriate, and assessments of what the art reveals about the clothing, pastimes, and toys available to children at the time. Also included are brief biographical statements about each of the twenty-four artists whose work appears in the book.

*Childhood Pleasures*, though not an exhaustive study of the subject of seventeenth-century Dutch childhood, provides a good introduction to the topic. It is an enjoyable, accessible text that will appeal primarily to a popular audience, but which also has much to interest scholars in the fields of food history, Dutch history, and childhood culture.

### **About the reviewer**

Elizabeth A. Galway is Associate Professor of English at the University of Lethbridge and member of the Institute for Child and Youth Studies (I-CYS). She is the author of *From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood: Children's Literature and the Construction of Canadian Identity* (Routledge, 2008) and is currently researching WWI children's literature.