

Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, *Children in English Society, Volume II: From the Eighteenth Century to the Children Act 1948, Studies in Social History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1973. Price \$10.00, Pp. vii., 325.

It is surely an astonishing phenomenon in English history that legislation for the prevention of cruelty to animals preceded legislation for the prevention of cruelty to children. That it seemed not inconsistent to extend humane treatment to a dumb animal and to neglect the plight of the much abused creature, the child, is undoubtedly significant, but such significance is lost in what amounts to an overwhelming deluge of facts, Bills, Acts, speeches, tracts, people and events related to the gradual recognition of children's rights in English society.

One cannot but admire the painstaking research put into the second volume of *Children in English Society*. One cannot but praise the scholarship and care with which each chapter traces the evolution of the various topics under discussion, whether it be that of child transportation and emigration, illegitimacy, baby-farming, juvenile delinquency, the rights and duties of parents or the fostering and adoption of young human waifs and strays. Each is a chronicle in itself and each has been treated as such. One cannot but acknowledge the thorough documentation of hitherto relatively unusual materials which are organized in what amounts to an encyclopaedic approach and left somewhat disappointingly unrelated. Consequently here is a book which successfully informs but rarely interprets; a book which admirably chronicles but rarely postulates. The comment made by Etienne Van de Walle about Volume One of *Children in English Society — From Tudor Times to the Eighteenth Century* can be also extended to this particular volume, that is, that the book deals mostly not with children or childhood "but with welfare schemes involving children" (*The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. II, No. 2, 1971). One feels some sense of grief at the treatment described in this volume, but the children involved, who lived and often died in abuse and wretchedness, remain in a faceless mass to be moved at will like a pawn according to the malevolence or benevolence of the adults concerned. Would that it were so, but history is not so simple!

The combined shortcomings and strengths of the book result in a history with few interpretive antecedents, and the historian, with his necessary ardour for whys and wherefores is left in a limbo, asking not only who resisted the various reforms but *why* were they resisted? *Why* the new and extraordinary interest in the welfare of children during the nineteenth century? To what extent were attitudes to children related to the broader cultural context? How influential were prevailing concepts of childhood? What were these concepts? What influence (if any) did the romanticizing of childhood or the upsurge of sentimentality in literature and philosophy have? These are but a few of the questions that are left dangling.

The book in question assumes as given that the State must be predisposed in favour of children's rights. That may well be so (one would be seen as

little less than a monster today to believe otherwise), but the fact remains that this is a fairly contemporary predisposition and that the historical process involved to reach such a conclusion was a long and rather arduous one, paved with social obstacles that were part and parcel of what was, after all, a dissimilar social fabric to ours today and punctuated with equally dissimilar social perceptions. To pass moral judgements on historical events, or express impatience at the gradualism of the historical process in even so worthy a cause as the protection of children, can hardly be viewed as a historian's function. In an age where State intervention was neither generally a fact nor even viewed as generally desirable, it seems a gross error to begin by assuming that children are the property of the State or that children are everybody's responsibility. To ask the question today — "Whose Children?" — is not to receive an answer unequivocally in favour of the State. Conflicts of interest between parental "rights" as against children being "mere creatures of the State" still commonly arise in cases of child abuse, the legal context or even in matters of schooling.

It can be argued, as the authors seem to do, that the diffusion of private philanthropy (which became a positive epidemic during the nineteenth century) delayed acts of social service organized by the State. This may well be so, but then perhaps public social services would have been delayed even longer if the clamourings of philanthropists, the zeal of humanitarians and the enthusiasm of evangelicals had not drawn attention to urgent social problems. Here remains a historical question mark that is speculative at best and cannot be resolved even with the advantages of hindsight although the problem itself must consistently be raised for the insights it provides.

The prevalent *laissez-faire* philosophy of the day cannot be dismissed as significant only in the economic sphere. It pervaded all aspects of the social life of those who could afford to sympathize with its premises. Even those who expressed grave reservations about "unbridled" *laissez-faire* such as Matthew Arnold, J.S. Mill, Carlyle and Ruskin, also expressed a profound abhorrence for State intervention in most matters. For instance, they viewed State education as interfering with not only the rights of parents to educate but also as an interference in the rights of children (admittedly they left the latter rights ill-defined). Not only that, but State education would be financed by public funds and that too in the final analysis was an interference in rights—by taking from one's property to educate other's children! Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham were advocates, respectively, of *laissez-faire* economics and Utilitarian philosophy, but both agreed that it was well known that State intervention endangered freedoms, reduced competition, minimized personal initiative, led to inefficiency, encouraged wastage and finally was repressive because it required close supervision and controls. It was also well known that private and voluntary charitable activities required financial support and some sacrifice which made people *value* the services received! State intervention was generally seen as a departure from sound economic theory and certainly a violation of private conscience. It was no small wonder then that Samuel Smiles was able to popularize his gospel

of Mutual Improvement and Self-Help. Competition was a natural law and Providence absolutely beamed upon the new "elect" - the rising middle classes.

In addition to this clearly articulated common-sense approach against State intervention, there was the just as clearly articulated belief that it was the duty of the well-to-do to give charity just as it was the duty of the poor to not only be content with their station in life, but also to be grateful. Thus it was a logical consequence of a sincere (even if mistaken) belief in *laissez-faire* that there should have been the "triumph of the voluntary principle" in all areas of social concern, including child welfare. The result of this triumph of voluntarism was made manifest in a rash of "societies" supported by endowments and subscriptions and organized on joint-stock company principles. The well-to-do were intent on rescuing the poor from their depravity although not their poverty. The years of childhood were now recognized as formative years in which character was moulded for good or for ill. Locke and Rousseau had both made this point despite their differences. The Romantic poets, in reaction to a vulgar materialism, a sensible utilitarianism and a debasement of new industrialism, sentimentalized the age of childhood and regressed into a pristine innocence supposedly the domain of children. However, nineteenth century child-rearing was seldom the same as the Romantics and Rousseauians would have it. The middle class child was becoming increasingly more confined in the hearth of the Victorian *paterfamilias* and by jove, like the poor, he had to be grateful! Those unfortunate children without the moral support of a traditional family structure were viewed as potential paupers, wastrels and criminals. Because sound child rearing was associated with sound religious principles, the Evangelicals in particular indiscriminately gambolled through the lives of children. Sarah Trimmer's Sunday Schools, Lord Shaftesbury's child labour reforms, Peter Bedford's "Society for Investigating the Causes of the Alarming Increase of Juvenile Delinquency in the Metropolis", Mary Carpenter's book "reformatory Schools for the Children of the Perishing and Dangerous Classes and for Juvenile Offenders", Dr. Barnardo's "Scattered Home System" and the Emigration Societies of Annie McPherson and Maria Rye - all of these were born out of the voluntary spirit.* Societies were founded and funded by the well-to-do. They bull-dozed their way into child-labour reform, industrial schools, monitorial instruction, the diffusion of useful knowledge and the rounding up of street-arabs!

Ivy Pinchbeck and Mary Hewitt do not ignore any of these aspects. Indeed they devote much detail to them but do not successfully relate them to the spirit of the age which was one of enthusiasm, piety, philanthropy, humanitarianism, a peculiar admixture of romanticism and utilitarianism but, above all, one of *laissez-faire*. This spirit was not in favour of state interference in any area of public life and certainly not in the area of childhood, where parents traditionally had sole rights over the lives and guardianship of their

*Some enterprising Canadian Social Historian might find the latter three, with their schemes for sending children to Canada, a fruitful and fascinating subject for research.

children. The desirability of State intervention only became recognized as the societal dislocations of the industrial age increased the distinctions between deserving and undeserving poor. Children were seen as befitting the category of the "deserving" inasmuch as their numbers increased alarmingly with higher birth rates (despite Malthusian advice for self-restraint) and lower death rates.

Throughout the book one catches allusions and glimpses of broader significance concerning matters of changing parental and familial attitudes, controversies about the changing understanding of human nature or of philosophical conflicts about social contract and social responsibility. One all too vaguely realizes that children were of little account previously in England because "All too many died before they reached maturity" and "those who survived were hurried into the ranks of adult society" (p. 368). It was their eventual populousness that caused problems rather than their essential childhood, and such problems could only be effectively remedied by the State. But it seems that a book such as Philippe Aries' *Centuries of Childhood* helps the reader make the connections rather than the present one. The differences in attitudes to children were not only quantitative but qualitative as well, and we must insist on asking the authors how and why. They certainly have an advantage to work upon in the quantity of data they have examined.

Nevertheless, the authors have detailed the events that culminated in the Children Act, 1948, which guaranteed a unified system of child care staffed by competent social workers. Children had finally been recognized as a financial liability and not an asset during their years of childhood, a position greatly accentuated by the Compulsory Education Act of 1870 which perpetrated intolerable burdens on the already overburdened poor. The question asked in 1870 by those who were against State intervention in the lives of children was a cynical one. If the State was bound to educate children why should it not also be bound to clothe and to feed them? The State replied some seventy years later that it was indeed bound to not only clothe and feed those children whose parents could or would not, but also it was bound to provide national assistance and health services. The authors shrewdly observe that this act represented a peculiar form of the much-feared State intervention. By taking over what were originally family responsibilities it actually strengthened the family.

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