

## Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924

*Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924* by Joy Parr (London: Croom Helm Ltd./Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980, 181 pp., \$25.95.)

In this journal, August 1975 the reviewer drew attention to a promising area of research in Childhood history. The movement of approximately 80,000 British emigrant children and juveniles under the auspices of a score or so of agencies, rescue societies, and philanthropic individuals from 1869 until the 1930's highlights the assumptions, ideologies, Imperial and Dominion policies, and child saving practices, which reflect the changing concepts of childhood. It is therefore gratifying to review what is the first, but hopefully not the last, monograph dealing with the topic of juvenile immigration. Moreover, Joy Parr's *Labouring Children* (1980) with Neil Sutherland's *Children in English Canadian Society* (1976) is only the second contribution to what remains an embryonic area in Canadian social history. Together both studies constitute the building blocks of a future body of literature examining changing concepts of childhood in English Canada.

Professor Parr's interesting analysis of 997 Barnardo case studies examines the life cycles of these British emigrants, their experiences before emigration, their apprenticeships, fostering and adoption in Canada, their patterns of mobility, and finally their adult lives. The study places juvenile emigration in the context of working class apprenticeship in Britain and includes a discussion of the evangelical rescue-motive and interventionist theology (p. 12) which culminated in child emigration as a form of Imperial Philanthropy (as more fully described in Gillian Wagner's 1979 biography, *Barnardo*, whereas the evangelical rescue motive has been superbly dissected by Ford K. Brown in *The Fathers of the Victorians*, 1961). To avoid the constraints of an oversimplified "dumping ground" thesis Parr chooses to utilise the increasingly popular and flexible theory of "family strategies" which demonstrates how working class groups used Emigration homes as a last resort to alleviate domestic pressures caused by poverty or misfortune.

By far her most effective sections are chapters 5, 6, and 7 which are based on a computer assisted analysis of almost one thousand case histories. More traditional methods are used to examine societies other than Barnardo's, such as the Scottish Orphan Homes which also emigrated orphan, destitute and abandoned children and youth. Parr's documentation for the more topical chapters demonstrates her talent for prodigious research in archives across Canada and in Great Britain. The author draws attention to the sensitivity required to interpret the "intricate and intimate view of the past rarely glimpsed through other sources" in her handling of case histories. (P. 161)

The title itself is somewhat curious for as the author admits, it does not distinguish the uniqueness of the emigrant child's experiences, work patterns, or socio-economic expectations, from those of the majority of working class children in the nineteenth century. Neither can the title at this stage be generalised to the experiences of other "Home Children" because the case studies exclude some 60,000 who came under auspices other than the Barnardo homes and who were also initiated into Canadian society through agricultural apprenticeship, domestic service, fostering or adoption. Neither does the study compare the "darker side" of the emigrants (p. 12) with that of Canadian children who similarly laboured in cities and on the land and frequently within and for their natural families. The treatment meted out to the Home children may not have been so dissimilar. Economics prevailed all too often over the refined sentiments of "childhood" and the rigors of rural and frontier life compelled a harshness for young members in this environment. Parr does, however, pertinently draw attention to a major difference between immigrant and Canadian child life in the psychological distance between the apprentice and his surrogate family or employers, and the traumas of separation from kin and homeland (pp. 78, 82). Whether school attendance was any less sporadic for Canadian rural children might be further examined and especially for females (pp. 108-109, 128). (It is confusing too that the author cheerfully proceeds to discuss the teacher attitudes to emigrant children having overstated that they were probably not at school to be subject to these belittling attitudes! (p. 110).)

The book contains a number of minor defects which are merely bothersome and in no way mar the overall importance of the study. For example I am not sure I would have described *John Bull's Surplus Children* as either a "travelogue" or a sacharine "novel" (p. 143) but rather as the author himself specifies — "a plea for a fair chance" for these children who had begun life in urban England "under the minus category." Also one must puzzle as to why Parr refers to School Board Inspectors in the year 1909 when the School Act of 1902 had abandoned such school boards (p. 20).

There is a strange ambivalence in Parr's study which implies at the beginning an exposé of the juvenile immigration movement. Throughout she argues for a growing sensitivity on the part of certain British elements, particularly labour and socialist groups, which came to reject emigration as a moral or socially acceptable panacea to economic problems. On the Canadian side the movement is much more faltering because the opponents of it invoke theories of taint and degeneracy which do not improve the conditions of the children but in fact make their reception in Canada more difficult and demeaning (pp. 51-52, 58). It is only in the twentieth century that Canadian child savers such as Charlotte Whitton and the Canadian Council on Child Welfare (CCCW) are progressive enough to coincide with the English opponents of the movement. All of this theoretically sounds logical except Parr wishes to establish more factual bases which will demonstrate that the children were callously treated and exploited. In fact the few interviews that she reports do not sustain this point of view. Consequently, to salvage a theoretical position she then claims that those interviewees represent a select group, that is they emigrated later and were older at emigration. At this juncture one must wonder aloud why Parr does not choose, given her quantitative methodology, to analyse the pertinent subject of the children's age distributions at emigration nor to provide the reader with such ages.

The author's ambivalence becomes compounded with the realization that her treatment of the Canadian response to the child immigrants is singularly restrained in spite of the desire to expose the "darker side" of the movement. Parr states that there was "no forceful or sustained opposition" in Canada (pp. 43-47) and it is with this point that issue must be taken.

Although Parr uses as one of the bibliographical sources the 1925-27 papers of the CCCW one assumes that these were used with selectivity (p. 153). She overlooks that the 1928 CCCW report *Several Years After* (which as compiled by Hazel Breckenridge McGregor under the watchful eye of Charlotte Whitton who in turn "dished it up in her masterly style") was an astonishing concoction — its cupidity only matching its distortion of data and unrepresentativeness of sampling. Neither does she attempt any analysis of the preceding years of effort the Council put into discrediting the juvenile immigration movement in a manner, which in effect, ingeniously succeeded in vilifying the child immigrants themselves.

The eugenic theories which were noised abroad and in Canada and which were used against the children have not been radically dissected by the author to demonstrate what amounted to a deplorably acrimonious Canadian response to them. In short, she minimises the significance of a prejudice which was rationalised by such theories and which in turn reveals numerous Canadian social and service groups to have been ungenerous, class conscious, and less than humanitarian. This oversight is all the more surprising given that the Barnardo children, who are her particular concern, had been frequently singled out in concerted efforts to sensationalize any minor misdemeanour they committed as evidence of their genetic deficiencies and irredeemable depravities. These attacks ranged from the presentation of the 1894 Brandon Assizes to a campaign against juvenile immigration in the 1920s which was publicised by the Social Service Council and the CCCW. Both organizations conducted surveys examining the "backwash," or moral residue, that came out of the movement of British children.

Even in a time when the statistical survey was not perfected, the instruments used, the questionnaires circulated, and the scurrilous innuendo contained in them, elicited a predictable bigotry with just as predictable conclusions. For example Toronto General Hospital records were used against the Home children in 1925 to illustrate their moral depravity, sexual moronism, feeble-mindedness, criminality and illegitimacy rates. These records concentrated so inordinately upon Barnardo cases that a Professor MacPhee of the University of Toronto was forced to make a public apology for citing figures from them to indicate that Barnardo children were undesirables before a conference on child welfare in 1925. Charlotte Whitton pursued her campaign against the Barnardo people in Winnipeg when she served as the advisor into child welfare for the Manitoba Royal Commission in 1928. Parr barely touches any of these aspects or quite ignores them with the oversight truncating her work.

However the oversight might be partially explained in that the writer scarcely considers the 1920's at all despite the time period she sets herself, virtually ceasing by 1910. Therefore much work still remains in examining the post-war period, the significance of the 1922 Empire Settlement Act, and the results and response to the 1924 Bondfield Report. This report was not necessarily applauded as Parr suggests (p. 153), certainly not by the CCCW and Whitton who found it to be an unsatisfactory document whose recommendations were not far reaching enough.

Childhood historians will appreciate that the author has opened up avenues of fruitful research and that as all searching histories must do, will lead others to ask different questions. The author has examined the socio-cultural context and economic motivation behind a sample of Barnardo emigration parties with success but the complexity of the Canadian reactions remains largely untouched with this response culminating in the twenties after Parr's study leaves off. Therefore the Canadian response must be more rigorously examined. What are we to make for example of the Social Workers club of Toronto including in its 1928 review a version of "Britons Never Never Shall be Slaves" with "John Bull" taking the spotlight to render several robust verses and the audience of social workers joining in the chorus with gusto? Each verse became increasingly more distorted and crude.

O there was a London urchin of feeble-minded strain  
 His parents both were in the clink and he was raising Cain.  
 The Poor Law Guardians got him but he drove them near insane,  
 Till an Emigration Home got a subsidy for shipping him across the main.

Singing:  
 Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves  
 For Britons never, never shall be —

Made to care for their dependent poor  
 If Canada will do it free.

Surely this represents something more sobering than child welfare interests merely wishing to protect immigrant children from exploitation and abuse?

A more careful reading of the Canadian response must also consider the Children's Aid Societies as well as the various provincial Child Welfare agencies (p. 57) which wanted to supervise the immigrant children in Canada and by implication control their guardianship. This sense of proprietorship over all aspects of child life can be understood in ways other than solicitude towards the children and was most conspicuous in the years of child welfare interests' consolidation of what increasingly came to be seen as their territory. Issues of guardianship, *in loco parentis*, adoption procedures, conditions of indenture and boarding out practices were scarcely resolved in Canada itself before the 1930's and were no more noticeably "advanced" than in Britain (p. 56).

For example the Orphan Asylums during Parr's period of study used methods of binding out and neither were they "fastidious in their selection of situations" (p. 4). Their clients were used in the service of their "betters" through apprenticeship and domestic service and at equally tender ages. Arbitrary adoption and placement procedures without parental approval were the order of the day with the supervision of part-orphan and orphans frequently less adequate than the supervision by the federal government of British immigrant children, if only for the reason that Canadian institutions were never subject to the same scrutiny as Emigrant Receiving and Distributing Homes. What is requisite now is to place Parr's evidence in the context of Canadian child-rescue for in some ways the anti-juvenile immigration campaign proved to be a catalyst to Canada's changing concepts. Furthermore if we are to critically examine as the author does the British child savers who exported children we must as critically examine Canadian counterparts who just as enthusiastically imported them. Nowhere for instance has this reviewer found a more incompetent group than the British Immigration and Colonization Association who operated out of Montreal, yet these bunglers scarcely received any criticism from child welfare interests.

*Labouring Children* is a welcome and refreshing start to an important area in Immigration History. In a very useful study Professor Parr has opened up questions for a lively debate and conflicting interpretations. Although it is hardly surprising to childhood historians that "childhood was quite different between classes and between rural and urban areas" (p. 12) the story of immigrant apprenticeships does add another dimension to this history. Her material will assist in developing the relationships between child immigration, the professionalization of child welfare, and the shift toward "scientific method" in child care and its subsequent de-institutionalization through boarding-out principles.

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