

Andrew Jones and Leonard Rutman, *In the Children's Aid: J.J. Kelso and Child Welfare in Ontario* (University of Toronto Press, 1981, 210 pp., \$15.00).

Since the publication of Neil Sutherland's path-breaking *Children in English Canadian Society* (University of Toronto Press, 1976), the field has been ripe for further examination of the development of child welfare services in Canada. A biography of John Joseph Kelso, founder of the Toronto Children's Aid Society in 1891 and first Superintendent of Neglected and Dependent Children in Ontario from 1893 until his retirement in 1938, should be a welcome addition to scholarship. It offers an opportunity for a detailed examination of developments in the first Canadian province to legislate in the field of child welfare. It also offers occasion for a critical analysis of the philosophy and actions of the man who instigated many of these processes. Andrew Jones' and Leonard Rutman's *In the Children's Aid: J.J. Kelso and Child Welfare in Ontario* has attempted the task but the results are disappointing.

First, despite its prefatory claims, the book is not a biography. The opening chapter does deal with Kelso's early life in Ireland and the economic collapse which led to his family's migration to North America. Straitened economic circumstances and lowered social status appear to have had a profound effect on the young Kelso. His father's subsequent alcoholism seems to have led to a closer relationship between Kelso and his mother and to have increased his feelings of responsibility to provide for the family and to make a public and financial success of his own career.

Unfortunately, this promising start leads nowhere. After a brief account of Kelso's early experiences as a reporter, Jones and Rutman merely describe his career in child welfare reform. They make no further attempt to connect his growing interest in this area with any of his personal needs or characteristics. Kelso remains thereafter a two dimensional figure. It is as though once he reached maturity and chose his career, he was impervious to both outer experience and inner growth. We learn in passing that he eventually married and fathered two children but his relationships with his family, and indeed with most people in his professional sphere, are totally ignored. A biography will legitimately focus on specific aspects of its subject's life, giving greater emphasis in some areas in order to illuminate a telling point. But to restrict the study almost completely to Kelso's professional activities is to do him a dis-service; to offer no analysis, interpretation or criticism of the man in relation to his professional accomplishments is to portray him as less than human. Such a narrow approach removes the study from the realm of biography.

Despite the authors' unwillingness to deal with Kelso as a real person, glimpses of some interesting personal attributes do show through, though sometimes in contradictory fashion. For instance, Jones and Rutman describe Kelso as self-confident, energetic and enthusiastic, able to gain the support of subordinates, and yet they list a number of instances in which he was unable to establish satisfactory working relationships with colleagues. Resulting clashes must surely have had implications for both Kelso's personal career and the development of child welfare reform. A deeper examination of such problems may have helped to answer Jones' and Rutman's half-framed questions about Kelso's personal dissatisfaction at the speed and direction of his career advancement.

The narrowness of approach may be due to lack of source material. The authors' desire to keep footnoting to a minimum makes it difficult to assess just how much, and what type, of new data they uncovered. Their note on sources, however, suggests that there is a wealth of personal documents amongst Kelso's papers and one can only regret that greater use was not made of them in order to reconstruct a fuller portrait of Kelso and his motivations, his ideas, his reactions and interactions.

If *In the Children's Aid* is not a biography, then what is it? As its subtitle so aptly states, it is in fact a narrative of Kelso's relationship to and role in the development of early governmental child welfare services in Ontario. Listing in chronological order every one of Kelso's professional actions seems to be the authors' chief goal. In this they succeed admirably. Surely there cannot have been any professional incident of note in Kelso's long career that is not at least touched upon. In a field that has not previously been the focus of any research at all such chronological ordering is necessary and valuable. However, the work of Richard Splane and the theses listed in the bibliography, suggest that much of this preliminary work has been done. The task of a further study, therefore, should be to place Ontario developments in their wider context and to construct a theoretical framework in which to fit this area of social reform.

However, the authors doggedly refuse to look beyond Kelso himself or to connect reforms in Ontario with those taking place elsewhere. Admittedly chapter two begins with a very brief summary of the reform climate in the last quarter of the nineteenth century; it mentions the role of private charitable associations and institutions which developed alongside the slowly expanding government social welfare services; it touches on the part played by church and women's groups; it even hints that a vast gulf, cultural and ideological, as well as economic, separated middle class reformers from the working class masses. But, as in chapter one, immediately they begin to discuss Kelso, Jones and Rutman forget all these other factors, or at least push them so far into the background that they almost disappear. Kelso is placed at centre stage, under a full spotlight; it is his actions and his actions alone that we are permitted to see.

As a result the book smacks strongly of the sort of hagiographical studies which were in vogue several decades ago. Such studies, recent researchers have discovered, can be downright misleading about the significance of their hero's role. The placement of Kelso in such a central position might be partially defensible if he had been an original thinker or a creator of new practice in child welfare reform. But although he was an enthusiastic catalyst who could organize those already interested in child rescue, he was not an innovator. Rather, he was yet another participant in an international movement already underway in the United States and Britain as well as in Ontario.

In the remainder of the book, the authors emphasize Kelso's support for foster-home rather than institutional care for

neglected and dependent children. They present this concept as one of Kelso's main contributions but the idea was not his own -- he merely popularized it in the Ontarian context. I suspect the authors' interest stems more from a current interest, by social workers, in the idea of foster-home care, than from a real understanding of its historical significance. This is a good example of their whiggish approach to the study of history. Because Jones and Rutman treat the Ontario scene as a unique phenomenon, Kelso, as one of its prominent figures, assumes for them more importance than is justified.

Social reform was one of the chief concerns of many of the middle class in the second half of the nineteenth century, not only in Canada but throughout the western world. In Toronto in the 1890's, for example, the public school system was still only a couple of decades old; it was still being extended upward to the high school and downward to the kindergarten. Prison reform, the conditions of child and adult labour, suffrage and temperance were all issues of vital importance and interest to reformers. These issues were attracting increased government attention or had recently become a government responsibility but they were still considered legitimate areas of activity for individuals or organizations. The fact is glossed over by the authors in a single sentence, but this was the golden age of women's reform groups; increasingly, middle class women were leaving their traditional private sphere of home and family to work publically for the spiritual, moral, and physical improvement of society. Kelso's contribution can only be assessed in light of all this reform activity taking place around him.

To construct a conceptual framework in an area of study as new as the history of child welfare in Canada is a very difficult task. One cannot criticize Jones and Rutman for their inability to produce a sophisticated and complete organizational structure. However, a few explanatory pegs, on which Kelso's contribution within the wider sphere of reform could be hung, would have been welcome. The lack becomes obvious in the final summation. Because there is no explanatory framework to assist in the formation of conclusions, the final chapter becomes no more than a summary in brief of what has already been presented in detail. And yet several questions cry out for at least an attempt at explanation. Not the least of these is the rather bald statement that Kelso's disillusionment and frustration in his later years as Superintendent stemmed from the fact that "social welfare services during the twentieth century came increasingly under governmental auspices" while Kelso's thinking continued to reflect "the approach of an earlier era" (p. 189). This may well be true but what a lot it leaves unsaid, unexamined. There is no attempt to deal with the changing public and private attitudes to welfare. What factors were operating during the forty year period 1890-1930 to cause such change? Was it a radical change or a developmental one? The authors offer no explanation of their own and make no mention of Sutherland's thesis of consensus-formation although they have drawn on his work as much as any other in their footnoting. Perhaps they feel no need for explanation, leaving Kelso to stand or fall on his own merits; perhaps, on the other hand, they feel that if they ignore the problem of historical explanation it will go away of its own accord. If this is so, they are at odds with many social historians who increasingly stress the need for offering explanation of past events rather than simply describing them.

Because *In the Children's Aid* is limited so narrowly to Kelso's activities in isolation from the society in which he was operating, many questions as to the nature of reform and private and public attitudes to it do not arise. Those that do are left hanging for someone else to explore and, hopefully, to answer.

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