

Obituary - Roy Parker 1931 – 2017

Sonia Jackson

The article, *Early Economic Threads in the History of Children's Homes*, included in this issue of *SJRCC* is Roy Parker's last publication, written when he knew he probably had only a few weeks to live. He told me that he found it helpful to have a project and something to think about other than his illness.

Roy was born into a working-class family in Barnehurst, South-East London, in 1931. His father was an engine driver and his mother a housewife. Unusually, when war broke out in 1939 and most London children were sent into the country as evacuees, Roy's parents refused to allow him to go, and he stayed with his family throughout the war. It cannot have been easy for them to stand up against officialdom at this time. It may be that his mother was influenced by her own experience of being admitted to the workhouse as a young girl and separated from her elder sister, whom she did not see again for many years.

Roy attended Dartford Grammar School and then studied sociology at the London School of Economics in the great days of Richard Titmuss and Brian Abel Smith. After graduation and National Service in Libya and Egypt, he worked as a child care officer, 'house father' in a children's home, and secondary school teacher before returning to LSE to study for a PhD. His supervisor was David Donnison, who recalled that, despite their own cramped housing, Roy and his wife, Jo, took in a homeless postgraduate and his family from Vietnam.

Up till then there had been very little empirical research on foster care, and Roy was breaking new ground in choosing it as a subject for his doctoral dissertation, which was published as *Decision in Child Care* (Parker, 1965). One of its conclusions was that foster placements were more likely to break down if there were birth children of the same age in the foster family. At that time it was common for parents of only children to apply to foster a child with the idea that he or she would be a playmate for their birth child, and child care officers often tried to place children in families with children of a similar age. The evidence from Roy Parker's study was not only counter-intuitive but challenged most existing practice; his key findings have been confirmed many times by later research.

Roy's ability was soon recognised and he was appointed as a lecturer at the London School of Economics, from where he moved to Bristol in 1969 to set up the newly created Department of Social Administration and Social Work. Under Roy's leadership, this became one of the foremost departments in the country. It was also a most enjoyable place to work, with annual staff and student

pantomimes and residential weekends where we could take our children, and serious discussion and lectures went on alongside a lively programme of entertainment.

Roy was not only a brilliant lecturer himself but had a unique capacity to inspire and support others. Many illustrious research careers owe their origin to his selfless encouragement. He was always insistent on giving full credit to his colleagues, however junior, contrary to the custom in universities at the time. In addition to his academic work, Roy had a distinguished record of public service. He was a member of the Milton Keynes New Town Development Corporation and the Seebohm Committee on Local Government whose 1968 report led to the setting up of social services departments. He served on numerous government committees, the Economic and Social Research Council, the University Grants Committee, and the Social Policy Association, and he chaired the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) from 1980-86. For many years he was principal scientific adviser to the Department of Health on child welfare, social security and local government, and ran many summer schools for top civil servants.

It is not often remembered that it was Roy Parker who introduced the concept of the corporate parent in his capacity as Chair of a National Children's Bureau working party (Parker, 1980). Corporate parenting, the principle that all departments of the local authority are responsible for promoting the wellbeing of the children they look after, is now well embedded in UK child welfare practice, with most authorities having corporate parenting committees. Before that, children in care were considered to be the exclusive concern of social workers.

He also initiated another important shift in research focus, namely that from a preoccupation with service provision to the outcome for the child. He chaired the Department of Health working party that produced the Looking After Children system of assessing outcomes in child care. The fundamental question, which the working party under Roy's guidance explored with scholarly thoroughness, was: how can we evaluate the success of an intervention unless we know what we are aiming for? The conclusion of the working party was that care away from home should try as far as possible to replicate the practice of well-informed and adequately resourced parents (Parker, Ward, Jackson, Aldgate & Wedge, 1991). The set of age-related materials that were produced by the group, edited by Harriet Ward, aroused great international interest and were adopted into child welfare practice in many different countries (Ward, 1995).

In 1997 Bristol University was going through one of its periodic financial crises and Roy decided to take early retirement, not because he had any idea of giving up work but, with characteristic altruism, to help the Department's financial position. This enabled him to move to Devon and establish a new research base at the Dartington Social Research Unit. It also gave him space to devote himself

to perhaps his most important project, his research on child migration. The book which eventually resulted, *Uprooted: The Shipment of Poor Children to Canada, 1867 – 1917* (Parker, 2008), was based on twenty years of meticulous research. It showed how a combination of religious zealotry, personal greed and, for some, a genuine desire to give the poorest children a better chance in life, resulted in 80,000 children being sent to Canada, often without their parents' knowledge or consent. Most of the children ended up working in harsh conditions on remote farms. The tone of the book is balanced and non-judgemental, although the children's testimonies it quotes are intensely moving. The author concludes that many of these uprooted children must have suffered greatly. But his final thought is 'One cannot help wondering how the convictions that are entertained today about the needs of vulnerable children and how these are or should be met might, in their turn, be judged 100 years from now' (p.293).

At Dartington, Roy with Spencer Millham and Roger Bullock, set up the Centre for Social Policy, a Fellowship of recently retired academics, senior civil servants, lawyers, consultants, local government officers and administrators. The Centre holds interdisciplinary seminars three or four times a year, with papers presented by Fellows or visiting speakers. The idea was to capture and make use of the wealth of knowledge and experience accumulated by these people. It has produced many important journal papers and research initiatives. Most recently, Roger Bullock published an article in the *Journal of Children's Services* which includes an appraisal of Roy Parker's legacy as one of six 'pioneer' child care researchers (Bullock, 2017). He suggests that Roy Parker's major contribution was to analyse child welfare policies in their political and economic context, drawing attention to the fact that historical continuities often do more to explain local variations in resource allocation and practice than any process of rational decision-making.

Roy Parker inspired affection and admiration in all who knew him. He threw himself into everything he did with enormous energy and enthusiasm. After suffering a heart attack in 1974 at the age of 48, he took up running, and it wasn't just an early morning jog; before long he was running marathons, always determined to beat his previous best time. For his retirement present he asked for skis, which he later exchanged for a faster pair. Most people who take up skiing in their 50s don't get much beyond cautious snow-ploughing down easy slopes, but within two years Roy was hurtling down black runs.

Roy was devoted to his family, his wife Jo (José) to whom he was married for 63 years, his four children, Joanna, Stephen, Kate and Sally, and eight grandchildren. All of us who were privileged to know and work with him will greatly miss an inspiring colleague and a wonderful friend.

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