

Book Review

Higginbotham, P. (2017). *Children’s Homes: A History of Institutional Care for Britain’s Young*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword. 256pp. ISBN: 978-1526701350.

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The history of children in care in the United Kingdom is long and fractured. Peter Higginbotham’s work *Children’s Homes: A History of Institutional Care for Britain’s Young* is an attempt to look at the history of children’s establishments and the providers of children’s services in the United Kingdom. He reflects on how these institutions functioned and progressed amidst the changing attitudes of the populace and the considerations put forward over how best to accommodate the wants and needs of children in care over the course of several centuries.

Higginbotham himself has worked on several accounts of life in Victorian workhouses throughout England; *The Workhouse Encyclopedia* and *Voices From the Workhouse*, both published in 2012 by The History Press are among them. The author’s expertise on the history of the workhouse in England stands without question, and this aids him in this attempt to branch out into the field of children’s care.

Children’s Homes begins with a discussion of the early foundations of children’s care in Britain, from the opening of Christ’s Hospital in London in 1552 through to the reformatories, ragged and industrial schools of the Victorian era. Several chapters are devoted to different aspects of children’s care in the 1800s – from Shaftesbury Homes and Training Ships to Barnardo’s Homes, Occupational Homes and Religious Homes, such as the Sisters of Mercy organisation.

A thorough description of life and discipline in each type of care is given, along with a history from their respective foundation to the present day. Higginbotham goes on to devote chapters to more universal aspects of the burgeoning child care system, such as funding, fostering and emigration homes run by the likes of Thomas Barnardo, which prepared children to be shipped to, for example

Canada and Australia, something Higginbotham notes was seen as a 'patriotic endeavour' by the end of the nineteenth century. The author also tackles difficult subjects such as abuse of children in care over the course of a century and a half. The book is concluded with a discussion of what lies in the future for Britain's children's homes, along with advice on how to locate individual records should the reader be interested.

Higginbotham's work is a detailed, interesting history of the evolution of children's care in Britain. Its main strength lies in the level of detail that the author manages to include, as he shows how changing attitudes and behaviours contributed to the creation of a framework, initially through charitable enterprise, that enabled children's care in the United Kingdom to be brought under the auspices of local authorities in the postwar era and ultimately to be modernised in the shape of the care system that we know today. Higginbotham is not limited to one area of Britain, as examples of care from across the British Isles are brought into each chapter where appropriate. The final chapter, detailing numerous sources through which one might find further information, shows the attention to detail that is present throughout this work.

Where *Children's Homes* (2017) runs into difficulty is in the same area; with such a broad spectrum of events to cover, both in terms of geographical area and the time period being covered, Higginbotham sometimes gives only cursory mention to events that merit further discussion or elaboration, such as the conflicts between Joseph Barnardo and the Catholic Church in the early years of Barnardo's work with children's care. Likewise, the narrative often jumps from place to place without much warning, which at times can make for a slightly disorienting read.

Ultimately however, such moments are brief, as Higginbotham has written an interesting, informative work. *Children's Homes: A History of Institutional Care for Britain's Young* is recommended for anyone looking for a wide-ranging introduction to the history of children's care in the United Kingdom. Likewise, it would also be a recommended read for those who wish to conduct their own research into individuals or groups who received or provided care.

About the author

Ben Quail (benjamin.quail@strath.ac.uk) has submitted a PhD thesis in modern history at University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland. His primary research interests lie in the area of modern history and social and economic policy, and he has worked at the National Archives in Washington D.C. and the British Library in London. He is an enthusiastic historian and has taught tutorial groups at both University of Glasgow and University of Strathclyde.

References

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