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Book review

Children in Care 1834-1929: The lives of destitute, orphaned, and deserted children

By Rosemary Steer

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As a non-historian who has become immersed in family history research and the history of care services, I found this book fascinating. I appreciated the clear writing, depth of archival research, meticulous referencing, and advice on further reading.

Central to the book is Steer's study of the lives of more than 300 children who were in the care of a local charity in the village of Dickleburgh in Norfolk, England. That charity was taken over by The Waifs and Strays Society, which ultimately became The Children's Society. Steer's research is compiled from a variety of sources, including charity and poor law records, census returns, newspapers, and published personal accounts.

I wish that as a student I had read more about the social history of welfare and children's services, and so I commend this book to today's students. The emerging themes – and the political and personal motivations, explicit and implicit, affecting care provision – are surprisingly familiar. The UK's rapid industrialisation in the nineteenth century laid the conditions for inadequate housing, poor sanitation, overcrowding, disease, and precarious employment. The efforts of social reformers were kept in check through pervasive attitudes about the natural order, with the labouring classes firmly placed at the bottom.

The pernicious nature of these attitudes, leading to blaming the poor for their situation, is demonstrated in the 'reform' of the poor law system in the UK which produced the infamous Poor Law Amendment Act 1834. This did introduce education to the workhouse, but not enough to lead to the poor questioning prevailing attitudes which equated poverty with idleness, and '...workhouse conditions were made harsher to act as a deterrent" (p.20).

Steer's book includes significant chapters on the world of the deprived child and the reasons children came into care, quoting extensively from case files, as well as on the work of household-name charities like Barnardo's and Quarrier's. In her chapter on 'boarding out' (what we now know as foster care), Steer makes the point that this '...was a key feature of the Scottish poor law system, especially after the new poor law of 1845, but there was much slower take-up of fostering schemes by poor law authorities in England' (p. 111). She quotes from a Board of Supervision for Scotland report of 1852, which raised concerns about

boarding out following a case of neglect and inadequate supervision but concluded: 'in the vast majority of cases, the children appeared to be treated with kindness and often tenderness' (p. 113).

The chapter I found most difficult to read deals with the notorious practice of child migration: '[in] the view that emigration to the wide open spaces of the young country of Canada [and other parts of the former British Empire] would give the children a fresh start away from poverty and crime, which would be good for the nation as much as for the children themselves' (p. 137). I learned from this chapter that the Canadian government agreed to inspect migrant children annually and created the post of Inspector of British Immigrant Children and Receiving Homes, the sole holder being George Bogue Smart from 1899 to 1933. This official inspection role did not involve asking children directly about their experiences, in contrast to an earlier inspection on behalf of the Local Government Board of England carried out in 1874-5 by Andrew Doyle, a Poor Law inspector in his mid-sixties, who travelled throughout Canada and interviewed 400 children as well as their employers and adoptive parents. Doyle appeared to have identified all or most of the appalling inadequacies in the migrant schemes, but, sadly, his criticisms were vigorously rebutted.

By coincidence, I am writing this a few days after the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (2023) published its case study report on Child Migrants' Experiences, which includes among its conclusions: 'All children were migrated through a scheme that did not regard them as individuals and took no account of their individual needs and vulnerabilities' (p. 341), a view reached by Andrew Doyle which if it had been heeded could have prevented the isolation, abuse, and misery of so many children.

References

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (2023). *Case study no. 8, volume 1: Child migrants' experiences: Children sent overseas as part of child migration programmes*

between the late 1800s and the early 1970s [evidential hearings: 3 December 2019 to 21 October 2020]. www.childabuseinquiry.scot

About the author

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The review copy was purchased by the reviewer.