

Child, Nation, Race and Empire. Child Rescue Discourse, England, Canada and Australia, 1850-1915

Review Number: 1033

Publish date: Tuesday, 1 February, 2011

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ISBN: 9780719078941

Date of Publication: 2010

Price: £60.00

Pages: 224pp.

Publisher: Manchester University Press

Place of Publication: Manchester

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During the second half of the 20th century, scandals arising from abuses suffered by some children in residential care in the UK encouraged the uncovering of the experiences of looked-after children in the past. Particular interest has been shown in the lives of those who were removed from their homes and sent as migrants to the colonies – a traffic that reached its height in the late 19th century but did not end until the last group of children was flown to Australia in 1967. Descendants of child migrants, as well as adults who had themselves been sent abroad as children, have pressed for recognition of the abuse they suffered, and in recent years the UK, Canadian and Australian governments, sometimes reluctantly, have responded to that pressure and acknowledged the distress experienced by many such children.

Child rescue and child migration has claimed the attention of a number of historians, including Gillian Wagner, June Rose, Geoffrey Sherington, Patrick Dunae, Michele Langfield and Lydia Murdoch, all of whom have explored the history of individual charitable organisations. In *Child, Nation, Race and Empire*, Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel have used their skills as historian and literature specialist respectively to examine a hitherto only partly explored aspect of child rescue – the printed material produced by the societies in order to publicise their work and the children's literature that accompanied it. They examine the intent behind the production of these books, house magazines, reports and pamphlets and then invite the reader to imagine how such material might have been received, not just by those whose moral and financial support was being sought, but also by those children whose lives were featured and who may have been exposed to these stories during their work in the printing houses that produced them, as well as in the homes and institutions in which they found themselves.

As Swain and Hillel show, changing ideas about the nature of childhood in the 19th century increasingly gave rise to the assumption that children were entitled to statutory protection and supplied the impulse for those concerned with their welfare to provide shelter and education, for example by means of ragged schools or residential care. That it was desirable for malleable children to be removed from unsuitable parents became a fundamental principle underlying the work of child rescuers in the second half of the century and created a climate that permitted those who believed particular children to be in physical or moral danger to engineer situations where they could be removed from their families and admitted to orphanages or refuges.

Transportation from the poorer parts of cities to the country, or at least to the suburb, was ultimately to be augmented by emigration to what were claimed to be new opportunities for rescued children in the colonies and assumed a specifically Christian twist. Although this was not a new solution to child poverty – pauper children had been sent to the Cape Colony, Western Australia and Canada from at least the late 18th century – the enthusiastic adoption of the practice by all the main child rescue agencies from the late 1860s meant that many thousands of children were uprooted and sent abroad. The underlying philosophy which stressed the importance of separating child and parent in some circumstances also pervaded those parts of the world to which the children were sent; the authors demonstrate its absorption in the colonial situation, in often brutal ways, when Aboriginal and First Nations children in Australia and Canada were forcibly removed from their homes. As recent research has shown, the reality of their placements often bore little resemblance to the loving, comfortable ‘homes’ described in promotional literature and the methods adopted by some child rescuers have been subjected to critical scrutiny.

The main pressure for child rescue and the religious impulses which powered it can be laid at the door of four men, Thomas Barnardo, Thomas Bowman Stephenson, Edward de Mountjoie Rudolf and Benjamin Waugh, the founders of Dr Barnardo’s Homes, National Children’s Homes, the Church of England Central Homes for Waifs and Strays and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). Their success in attracting financial and other support for their work owed much to the skill with which they tailored their publicity to contemporary ideas about childhood, the threats posed to the ideal by urban life and the irresponsibility, as they saw it, of many poor parents. They constructed a picture which permitted the conclusion that removal of children from poor and inadequate homes was a Christian duty and in the best interests of the child. Many children were wrongly characterised as orphans in order to deprive working-class parents of their rights and the everyday phenomenon of the street child was transformed into a cause that demanded individual and national action. Not only did their rescuers consider that the children’s expectations of a better life in this world would be enhanced if they were removed from parents deemed to be failing, they believed themselves to be called to a higher and more important mission – the salvation of those children’s souls.

The authors note the paradox underlying child rescue. Although the founders of the British movement helped to establish rights for children and to rescue them from their legal status as parental – effectively paternal – property, they also constructed a particular type of victim and prescribed a particular sort of treatment which was not always in the child’s interest. The neglected child had not only to be made real, the image of its suffering had to be described in such a way that it haunted the reader and prompted a generous response. To succeed it had to transform the frequently accepted picture of the urban street child as dirty, old beyond his or her years, destined for a life of crime and embodying a threat to decent people, into a waif with the potential for transformation once fed, warmed and taught about the Christian gospel. Descriptions of both clothing and physical characteristics were employed as code for dirt and social unacceptability and used to help to construct the child as victim. Magazines and pamphlets were liberally sprinkled with illustrations that sought to give pictorial representation of change in case mere words failed to convey the message. As has recently been shown by Seth Koven, Lydia Murdoch and others, the photographic image was often carefully manipulated; children at the point of reception by the rescuers were pictured wearing clothes that had been deliberately torn and smeared with skilfully-applied dirt. A second set of images showed the same children wearing clean garments, with their hair combed and bodies washed thanks to the care of their rescuers. Sometimes the children were pictured tucked up in bed between white sheets. In order to reinforce the message that lives could be dramatically changed, stories intended for supporters and their families sometimes featured street children who had made good and were taking on themselves the mantle of rescue and mission.

The wickedness of neglectful parents and substitute carers was used to emphasise the status of the child as victim and stress the urgent need for rescue, a process that was increased once the NSPCC, in its mission to challenge the law that tended to see the domestic space as sacrosanct, added its voice to the chorus of criticism of parents. Disability was a late entrant in the catalogue of characteristics worthy of compassion, but by the end of the 19th century ‘cripples’ were also employed in the task of eliciting pity and, therefore,

financial support. Although the causes of physical disability were many and various in Victorian England, child rescuers frequently chose to emphasise the role of parents and used statistics that suggested a necessary causal link between neglect and child disability or mortality, thereby linking their new concern with the NSPCC campaign against cruelty.

Successful though it was, the use of the individual – the waif, the neglected child with potential, the ‘cripple’ – was only a step on the way to portraying the problem as one of greater import. A powerful chapter explores ways in which national as well as individual analogies were used to link child rescue to Britain’s imperial task. The authors describe how the rescuer was transformed from an individual religious enthusiast into a national hero as a result of the process of rendering rescue a communal imperative by ascribing moral meanings to the body of the child. Urban environments were compared with biblical examples condemned for their wickedness, like Nineveh and Babylon, Sodom and Gomorrah – descriptions that constructed the city as threatening and were intended to shock as well as to shame. Oppositions such as darkness and light, urban and rural were employed to reinforce moral messages and were graphically illustrated both textually and pictorially. By using the vocabulary of evangelical mission, slum areas came to represent ‘Darkest England’ (although Scottish examples were often used), a direct reference to Stanley’s ‘Darkest Africa’ and freighted with the message that the needs of ‘heathen’ children in the poorest areas at home demanded missionary activity every bit as urgently as those in much-publicised mission fields abroad. By employing the characteristic evangelical message of civilising those without knowledge of the gospel, and using language with strong racial resonance, like ‘Arabs’ and ‘Indians’ to describe the inhabitants of slum areas, whose shocking style of life condemned their progeny to lives of destitution and crime, rescuers were able to portray themselves as saving both individual children and the nation from decay and the consequences of contagion and contamination. Images enlisted in the cause were designed to elicit fear as much as pity and to encourage donations designed to protect the donor from the danger that the children represented as much as to save children from their plight. Racialised imagery and the frequent use of descriptions which caricatured the physical features of indigenous peoples were also used to make comparisons between the behaviour of ‘natives’ and some British parents – to the latter’s disadvantage, and to urge on potential donors their responsibility to act to encourage a civilising mission at home as well as abroad. The imperial project had a home base with a difference: with their religious cultural and social advantages, British people should be expected to behave better than foreigners.

The imperial imperative also saw a change in the discourse; children were transformed from a liability to a resource. It began to be claimed that they would be valuable assets to any labour force and that their absorption into colonial situations would help to ensure that their work contributed to the development of their new homes and ‘add to the wealth of the Empire’. Unsurprisingly, this prompted a backlash. Canadian resistance to the continued immigration of children came to be characterised by a fear of the criminality they might be presumed to bring with them, together with a resentment-fuelled anxiety that such children were being used as cheap labour with the potential to undermine the wages of local workers. The argument that stressed the essential usefulness of the children sent from Britain backfired there, too, when questions began to be asked about the wisdom of exporting such valuable assets at a time when middle and upper class households were finding it difficult to recruit servants.

Child rescue as an imperial endeavour involved the transportation of ideas as well as children and established new norms for both the definition and the solution of the problems of child abuse and neglect across Britain and the colonies. It provided the language in which the problems were described and the structures for both legislative and institutional responses. By the end of the century, similar social sickness was discovered to be prevalent in colonial cities and home-grown rescue societies which claimed the imperative common to many of their British counterparts – the heart-rending stories of individual children brought to the attention of child rescuers – began to spring up, particularly in Canada and Australia. It required but a small shift to move to a more overt discourse invoking fears of degeneration. Gifts towards solving the problem were represented as a patriotic duty. And the solution to the problem was to be found, not in any attempt to improve the situations in which children found themselves, still less to reflect on society’s inequalities and failings, but in the removal of children from their home environment to ones in

which they would experience the virtues of cleanliness and evangelical Christianity.

This is a welcome and important addition to the growing literature on child migration. Its discussion of the extensive literature produced by the child-rescue movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries has demonstrated the extent to which it was influenced by a powerful amalgam of Christian evangelicalism and imperialism. It has shown clearly the extent to which the message of child rescue was used not just in overt publicity material but also in improving tales for children; within narratives by authors such as Captain Marryat, G. A. Henty and R. M. Ballantyne, for example, it was celebrated within the broader narrative of imperial adventure. An important feature is the way that it has drawn together the threads that connect child rescue in Britain with movements in colonial situations which portrayed indigenous peoples as barbaric, child-neglecters and provided justification for removal of children, especially those of mixed race, from parents whose culture the imperial power failed to understand and chose to impugn as degenerate and neglectful. Society had the right and the duty to remove ‘infected’ children for its own protection. The final section, which includes recollections of some of those children removed from their home situations ‘for their own good’, and for that of society makes almost unbearable reading. It rehearses views that Swain has expressed elsewhere [\(1\)](#) and demonstrates the cruelty inherent in a system that severed both family and community ties and which, at the very least, subjected deracinated children to life in distant and unfamiliar surroundings. A former residential school supervisor is reported as saying ‘Twenty years ago I would have said that it was a good system with some bad people. Now I realise it was a bad system with a lot of good people in it’. And as the authors opine, although ‘there is no evidence to suggest that all children were subjected to abuse, abuse in its various manifestations was, and is, endemic in all forms of out-of-home care’ (p.160).

Notes

1. S. Swain, ‘Child rescue: the migration of an idea’, in *Child Welfare and Social Action in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. International Perspectives*, ed. J. Lawrence and P. Starkey (Liverpool, 2001), pp. 115–7. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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