

## **Saving the Children**

Craig Heron

Volume 13, numéro 1, autumn 1983

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad13\\_1rv06](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad13_1rv06)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce document

Heron, C. (1983). Saving the Children. *Acadiensis*, 13(1), 168–175.

come a long way since the 1965 article which claimed class had been little used by Canadian historians since there was no "research to suggest that such an analysis is possible".<sup>11</sup> The word class has become acceptable in academic circles, but, as in the case of *Jack in Port*, the conceptual and methodological implications have not been taken up. We must leave the poop if we wish to learn the history of the foc's'l, descend from "upper town" to begin seeing "lower town" society. At the very least, the poverty of poop theory and method is to be recognized in order to progress towards ordinary people's history.

RICHARD RICE

11 S.R. Mealing, "The Concept of Class and the Interpretation of Canadian History", *Canadian Historical Review*, XLVI (1965), p. 212.

### Saving the Children

THE PATTERN OF LITTLE FEET is getting louder in Canadian social history. No longer Clio's orphans, children are attracting the watchful gaze of latter-day child-savers who have set out to rescue them from further historical neglect. And in much recent historical writing these youngsters have been taking us by the hand and leading us back into the private, poorly-documented world of their families.

Canadian scholars and writers who are contributing to the growing international literature on childhood and family life have been particularly interested in the first "child-savers", those earnest social engineers who began their rescue work among the poor urchins of the urban slum in the second half of the 19th century. Earlier work in this field, probably best exemplified by Neil Sutherland's *Children in English-Canadian Society*,<sup>1</sup> tended to begin the discussion with generalized attitudes to children and childhood in the ranks of the child-savers themselves. As a result, much of the story of this kind of social activism was written through the eyes of the activists alone, and far less attention was directed to the specific social situation of the children in question. Fortunately, the wealth of new literature which has been appearing in recent years allows us to start to piece together a more complete picture of the children, their families, and the busybodies who intervened in their lives.

What is becoming clear is that an abstracted notion of a "childhood" shared by all Canadian children is none too helpful. Instead, we need to recognize that the centre of all this fluster in Victorian Canada was really the working-class family. No one has been making this case more effectively than Joy Parr —

1 (Toronto, 1976).

first, in a fascinating study of juvenile immigrants from Britain, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924* (London, Croom Helm, 1980); and then in a stimulating collection of essays which she has edited, *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1982). Parr begins by reminding us that the working-class family functioned as a tiny collectivity of economic co-operation. The chief breadwinner's wage was scarcely ever sufficient to maintain a family, and all members of the family unit contributed to the upkeep of the whole. Children joined in as soon as they were needed, either in the home or in the paid labour market.

Parr's discussion of the labouring poor in Britain from whom the young immigrants were drawn finds its Canadian counterpart in Bettina Bradbury's insightful essay in *Childhood and Family*. In Montreal, just as in East London, the industrial-capitalist labour market could be highly unstable. Among the less-skilled workers and those threatened by technological change, unemployment and underemployment were endemic. Their families rarely accumulated enough savings to meet the crises created by sickness, accident, or the death of one parent. In such times older children might be sent out to find any work, often as newsboys and bootblacks, and, as Susan Houston tells us in her thoughtful contribution to *Childhood and Society*, a "street culture" emerged among hundreds of youngsters. The constraints of parental authority were perhaps looser in such crisis-ridden families, and it was in such situations that the high-spirited world of the "street arab" took shape.

In both Britain and North America, a new interest in the children of families attempting to cope with such crises began to appear around mid-century. Like Bradbury, Patricia T. Rooke and R.L. Schnell have described in a recent essay<sup>2</sup> and in their collection of essays, *Studies in Childhood History: A Canadian Perspective* (Calgary, Detselig Enterprises, 1982), how the interest in urban urchins as a specific problem, separate from the poor in general, quickened after 1860 — well before the moment in the late 1880s which Sutherland has suggested was the starting point for child-welfare work. Many specialized institutions for dependent and neglected children appeared across the country, most particularly the Protestant Orphans' Homes. Similarly, Bradbury documents the activity of parallel Roman Catholic institutions in Montreal, and Houston points to the Victoria Industrial School which opened on the outskirts of Toronto in 1887 as a late development in the same vein. This new writing has revealed the way in which the institutions fit into working-class strategies for survival in difficult moments in the families' fortunes. Only a minority of inmates of the misnamed "orphanages" were actually parentless. More often they were children whose parents lodged them in the homes for extended periods and took them back when the family crisis had eased.

2 "Childhood and Charity in Nineteenth Century British North America", *Histoire sociale/Social History*, XV (May 1982), pp. 157-80.

*Labouring Children* deals with a similar range of institutions in Britain for the young “waifs and strays” of poverty-stricken working-class neighbourhoods. By the 1870s child-savers like Maria Rye, Annie Macpherson, and the flamboyant Dr. Thomas Barnardo found their homes could not handle the large numbers of children in their care and began shipping them off to the colonies. As Gillian Wagner explains in her lively summary of child immigration, *Children of the Empire* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1982), this was not a completely new strategy for dealing with pauper or delinquent children — hundreds had departed for the white-settler colonies in the preceding century. But the scale of the work and the focus on children increased dramatically after 1870, and Canada became the preferred destination. More than 80,000 “Home Children” were sent over during the next 60 years, the largest group coming under the auspices of Barnardo, whose life is thoroughly chronicled in Wagner’s workmanlike biography, *Barnardo* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1979).

In contrast to the Canadian orphanages, which apprenticed only some of their children to employers, all the child immigrants were dispersed onto individual family farms, on the diaspora model pioneered in 1852 by Charles Loring Brace in the New York Children’s Aid Society. By the late 1880s, the accelerated pace of industrial capitalist development and concomitant urban blight had prompted new Canadian initiatives along the same lines. The first Humane Societies and Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty emerged, followed quickly by the more specialized Children’s Aid Societies. This new phase in Canadian child-saving was marked by a suspicion of the institutionalized care of the orphanages and a preference for the dispersal of the children to foster homes. None of the writers reviewed here raise the question, but we might well ask if some of the labouring poor would not have resented these attacks on the established neighbourhood institutions upon which they frequently relied for child-minding services.

A central figure in this late-19th century expansion of the domestic child-saving movement was a prudish, ambitious Toronto journalist by the name of John Joseph Kelso, the subject of a short biography by Andrew Jones and Leonard Rutman, *In the Children’s Aid: J.J. Kelso and Child Welfare in Ontario* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981). Kelso served as secretary for several of the new interventionist organizations and in 1893 began a 40-year term as Ontario’s first superintendent of neglected and dependent children, with responsibilities for overseeing all voluntary child-welfare programmes in the province (eventually including child immigration). He used his post to spread a network of Children’s Aid Societies throughout the province and helped to spawn similar efforts across the country. Ontario’s Children’s Protection Act, which soon became the model for other provinces, allowed Children’s Aid Societies to obtain legal guardianship over “street children” and to settle them in foster homes. Like his concerned contemporaries in Britain, Kelso was determined to rescue the waifs from neglectful parents and to re-establish them in the salutary atmosphere of a family farm — “God’s reformatory”. His work in

enlisting the Canadian state as regulator of working-class parents paralleled legislative action on schooling, prisons, factory work, and health in the late 19th and early 20th century.

What prompted these self-styled "child-savers" to take such a keen interest in the proletarian family in Canadian cities? Certainly they were almost never members of the working class itself. Instead we find two layers of child-savers, both outsiders to the world of the working poor: on both sides of the Atlantic some of society's wealthiest and most powerful figures sponsored, funded, and oversaw the work, while men and women of more middling backgrounds predominated in day-to-day activities. Not surprisingly, women comprised a large percentage of this latter group, in line with traditional notions about their "nurturing" functions. Also, as Parr stresses, immersion in non-denominational, revivalist evangelicalism was an equally important distinguishing characteristic of the British child-savers.

The concerns motivating these men and women have long been viewed as primarily humanitarian and the chief actors referred to as "reformers", a term which must be one of the loosest labels in Canadian social history. Three new popularized accounts of child emigration to Canada restate this theme uncritically: Gail H. Corbett's scrapbook of documents and interviews, *Barnardo Children in Canada* (Peterborough, Woodlawn Publishing, 1981); Phyllis Harrison's rich and moving collection of letters from former child immigrants, *The Home Children* (Winnipeg, Watson and Dwyer, 1979); and Kenneth Bagnell's melodramatic rendition, *The Little Immigrants: The Orphans Who Came to Canada* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1980), a book which relies heavily on Wagner and Parr and, regrettably, bumped Parr out of her contract with a Canadian publisher. For these writers the children were pathetic, homeless orphans who were "saved" by men and women determined to provide them with a better material existence in a stable family. Unfortunately, these writers note, many children suffered at the hands of unexpectedly severe foster parents, but the sad outcome of the reformers' work should not detract from their basically laudable intentions. Harrison admonishes us to remember, "when reflecting on bitter experiences, what worse lives these boys and girls could have expected had they remained in the industrial slums of Great Britain" (p. 13). Similar sentiments run through Bagnell's account, and Jones and Rutman likewise see "feelings of benevolence and compassion for the poor" as the major theme in J.J. Kelso's career.

The new research presented in Joy Parr's *Labouring Children*, and to a lesser extent in Wagner's work, has laid bare the distortions and inaccuracies of these hoary old myths. In the first place, these children were rarely the homeless orphans that Bagnell *et al.* suggest they were. Rather, they were most often members of working-class families in severe crisis. Typically the children were brought to the homes only as a last resort, when the support of kin was no longer possible. By delving into the homes' confidential case records, Parr found that the children's backgrounds seldom matched the child-savers' rhetoric of neglect

and maltreatment. Rather, “the admission documents show strong family affection and family cohesion among the labouring poor, reveal parents more respectable than suspect, and record more admissions on economic than on moral grounds” (p.63). Only one in six of the child immigrants she studies had lost both parents. Parr describes, moreover, how the English homes regularly shipped children off to Canada without their parents’ permission (nine per cent of the boys and 14 per cent of the girls) and tried to keep parents ignorant of their offspring’s whereabouts— a long-standing practice in Canadian orphanages as well, according to Rooke and Schnell. Families nonetheless struggled to keep in touch across the Atlantic. One in three Barnardo children later returned to Britain and one in six settled in the Old Country. The same pattern of what Barnardo frankly called “philanthropic abduction” might well show up in a closer look at the “street arabs” scooped up in Toronto. Certainly Kelso and his staff showed the same disrespect for the rights of the biological parents, and his growing belief that even the foster parents needed professional supervision and inspection became the cornerstone of child-welfare work in the emerging social work profession.

A second misconception is the suggestion that it was primarily the poverty of the waifs that tugged at the child-savers’ heartstrings. We can certainly assume that they were touched by the genuine suffering of the many young tots they encountered. Yet the evidence indicates that it was not poverty itself, but the threat of the “lapsed masses” and “dangerous classes” which provoked their child-snatching activities. Evangelicals like Rye, Macpherson, and Barnardo were initially concerned with the threat to individual Christian souls and acted on a need to extract children from an allegedly immoral lifestyle. Increasingly, however, in both Britain and Canada, it was the unruly behaviour of the growing hordes of working-class children which disturbed men like Kelso. Where were the piety, sobriety, and discipline necessary for workers in an industrial-capitalist society? More ominously, what threats to public order and to respect for private property lurked in this new urban sub-culture? Children had to be plucked from such an environment and taught appropriate behaviour and morality. In the words of the motto of the Toronto Children’s Aid Society: “It is wiser and less expensive to save children than to punish criminals”. Small wonder that the first regional organization of social welfare workers was known as the Canadian Conference on Charities and Correction and included prison officials — child-saving and penal reform were on the same continuum. Child-saving, then, was a tactical escalation in the same moral battle launched by the first “school promoters” a few decades earlier.

Wagner’s biography of Barnardo, and Jones and Rutman’s life of Kelso, also provide some interesting clues on the origins of these men’s interest in child-saving. The careers of the two men followed similar paths out of middle-class families in Ireland who had suffered some severe decline in economic fortunes. Both men appeared early in life to be intensely egocentric and ambitious, though the avenues open in the 1860s were quite different from those of the 1880s.

Barnardo was swept up into the evangelical movement and quickly built up a large mission in London. He took delight in his association with the likes of Lord Shaftesbury. Kelso took up the more secular pursuit of newspaper reporting, which brought him into contact with Toronto's poor, initially without prompting any sympathy or charitable activity. Jones and Rutman's discussions of his diary entries in the mid-1880s reveal a man with limited resources singlemindedly searching for an illustrious career. Only when assigned to write a story on the need for a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals, it seems, did Kelso recognize the advantages of rubbing shoulders with members of the Toronto elite in such organizations. Between 1887 and 1893 he parlayed these connections into his provincial government post, only to face the degrading abstemiousness of his new employer. "The superintendency was seen by him as an opportunity for increased social standing as well as public duty", his biographers indicate, "but this relatively low salary [\$1,000 per year] was a damper to his social aspirations" (p. 64). Ultimately this kind of independent interest among social welfare administrators would form part of the basis for a new profession of social work.

A third myth destroyed by this new research is that the children were saved by being incorporated into their new homes as members of the family. The child-savers certainly made proper parenting in a natural family setting the central precept of their endeavours; yet, in practice, their programmes seldom allowed such a relationship. In the final analysis, they expected the regeneration of children to take place through work: for the evangelicals hard, manual labour shaped appropriate personal discipline and morality, and for all the child-savers, it turned aimless street arabs into productive workers. The orphans' homes in Canada and Britain thus became, in essence, employment agencies. In Ottawa, for example, young boys from the Protestant Orphans' Home, presided over by Mrs. Bronson, spent the summer of 1869 working in Mr. Bronson's lumber mill. Later this process was partially disguised. Following Barnardo's controversial example, Kelso liked to photograph his foundlings in "before-and-after" outfits, providing the sentimentalized trappings for the "after" shot, which would symbolize the transition to neat, clean middle-class childhood. Then the children were bundled off to farms, where plain hard work left little time for frolicking in pretty frocks and shiny shoes.

Indenture remained the most common mechanism for employing children. Like the young residents of Canadian orphanages whose parents could no longer pay fees for their children's upkeep, child immigrants were indentured to farmers as servants and labourers and only rarely welcomed into the family circle. They often ate apart, slept in tiny back rooms or barns, and suffered other forms of ostracism and deprivation. Their background and the habits learned in crowded English cities certainly set them apart — many had never laid eyes on a cow, let alone milked one. More important, as they grew older and more experienced as farm labourers and domestics, they were shifted about according to the needs of particular farmers. Economic criteria came to determine their

placement, Parr concludes: "They were not placed to meet the emotional needs of Canadian homes nor monitored by guardians who allowed emotional considerations to be paramount" (p. 88). Indeed they were scarcely monitored at all. The resulting cruelty and abuse which so many of Phyllis Harrison's correspondents describe and which Parr and Wagner document in the societies' official records contrast sharply with so much of the Victorian rhetoric about a warm, nurturing family environment.

Kelso's young charges were handled somewhat differently, for they seem generally to have been "adopted" rather than indentured. But Kelso placed the same emphasis on work and responded promptly to farmers' requests for juvenile labour. Jones and Rutman might have probed further into what that experience would have meant, since what happened to the children should surely bulk large in any assessment of Kelso's work. One child told an investigator in the 1870s, "'doption Sir, is when folks get a girl without wages".

Among the thousands of children relocated in this way were many who found a happy home with affectionate surrogate parents. Some of these wrote to Harrison with words of gratitude for the new chance they got. Even at the price of emotional impoverishment, a considerable proportion must have ended up somewhat better fed and clothed on a Canadian farm than in a British (or Canadian) slum. However, Parr's evidence suggests no rags-to-riches stories. She traced a sample of the most stable child immigrants, for whom records survived into their adulthood, and discovered that in contrast to the child-savers' goals, most of them grew up into urban-dwelling, blue-collar workers. "In its own terms", she concludes, "the movement to rescue the sons of the city wage workers from the city and from wage work failed" (p. 130).

The focus on the children of the poor as the vehicle for social and moral regeneration was undoubtedly a new departure in the last half of the 19th century, but there is little in all this activity to suggest any new notion of "childhood" at either an intellectual or a practical level. At the core of these social engineering projects was the age-old assumption that children should work like everyone else — or, more precisely, that working-class children should work. Whatever the rhetoric of the promotional literature, Barnardo, Kelso, and the others were not attempting to create a new, dependent status of childhood, based on some kind of middle-class model, which would isolate and protect these waifs and strays from adult life. The only adult environment from which they were trying to shelter them was the allegedly degenerate working-class neighbourhood. Child-saving was, quite simply, an assault on certain disturbing forms of working-class behaviour, and the fruit of the child-savers' efforts was not to be new middle-class children, but rather good little workers. In this light, it is not surprising to find leading merchants and industrialists deeply involved in the sponsorship of this movement. They had the most at stake.

On both sides of the Atlantic, then, child-saving grew out of a sense of crisis. The perceived crisis was not the real material crisis of economic insecurity facing so many working-class families, but the threat of the "dangerous classes"



to bourgeois order. Slum children were consigned to Canadian farms first and foremost to save them from immorality, insobriety, and indolence. Of course, the ideological emphasis on hard work, self-reliance, and independence among the labouring poor has a modern echo in Thatcherism and Reaganism, and the weight of this recent literature on child-saving must give us pause. It suggests that such a response to the dislocations of capitalist industrialization in Britain and Canada was too often brutal, insensitive, and, paradoxically, disruptive of the one social institution revered by the child-savers — the family.

CRAIG HERON

### Class Formation in Canada: Some Recent Studies

FOR SOME YEARS NOW the winds of change have been sweeping through the staidly conservative corridors of Canadian working class history. A revisionism that draws upon the contemporary resuscitation of Marxist historiography is bringing Canadian history into the creative mainstream of social history elsewhere and several recent books show distinct signs of a fertile familiarity with intellectual currents from across the sea and south of the border. It would seem that these tendencies have created alarm within certain elements of the Canadian historical profession — which has not possessed much of a Marxist tradition — and the practitioners of revisionism have had to contend with a fiercely political response masquerading as scholarly discussion.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, of course, such distractions are of relatively little significance and can in no way diminish the contribution this revisionism will make to the re-construction of Canadian working class history. In common with other parts of the English-speaking world, a major concern of that re-construction has been the question of class formation. All of the books under consideration here reflect the necessity to grapple theoretically and conceptually with the relationships between culture, class, work and politics. And if the answers arrived at are in some respects problematic, this merely reflects the uncertainties that characterize the questions wherever they are asked.

Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer address the process of class formation most centrally, although in slightly different ways. Palmer's *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979) reflects the "culturalist" influence of E.P. Thompson in its identification of the struggle within the culture of the working class as the place where class is made. And this leads him into fascinating discussions of the associational life of the workshop

1 Kenneth McNaught, "E.P. Thompson vs. Harold Logan: Writing about Labour and the Left in the 1970s", *Canadian Historical Review*, LXII, 2 (June 1981), pp. 141-168.