

IN HISTOIRE SOCIALE / SOCIAL HISTORY ^{vol. 14} FALL 1981, pp. 556-57.

JOY PARR. — *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980. Pp. 181.

The story of British child immigration to Canada naturally lends itself to sentimentality. The image of destitute waifs in British slums being "rescued" and sent to rural bliss in the New World is consistent with many beliefs that nourish the popular imagination. Not surprisingly, therefore, journalists, television producers and book publishers have successfully focused on the experience of the British immigrants by dramatizing heart-warming tales that resuscitate the rags-to-riches ideology. While these productions usually admit that the experience was not always a happy one, their general thrust depicts the rescue mission as worthy, noble and successful.

As it was, however, the experience of the child immigrant had a much darker side and was much more complex than the media image suggests. In *Labouring Children*, Joy Parr details a series of less known but crucially important aspects of the movement which undermine congratulatory enthusiasm. To begin with, Parr emphasizes that the young immigrants were not simply orphans or abandoned street arabs. Rather, most children were brought to rescue homes such as Dr Barnardo's by parents who, because of economic hardship, felt unable to fulfil their parental role. Thus, the men and women who took their children to the rescue missions were not abandoning them but instead were admitting their own distress. Parr presents a picture of "strong family affection and family cohesion" (p. 63) being challenged among the labouring poor by material factors and, in some cases, engendering the break-up of the family unit, an ironic result of true attachment.

Similarly, *Labouring Children* argues that children often maintained contact with their families even after migration to Canada. About two-thirds of the parents of Barnardo girls, for example, kept in touch with their children after the trans-Atlantic crossing. Parr emphasizes that child-savers talked a great deal about the importance of the family as the basic social unit but, in fact, did not properly appreciate working-class familial attachment; in some cases, they shipped children to Canada illegally without parental agreement.

A second major theme of *Labouring Children* concerns the experience of the British children after immigration to Canada. Again, Parr's conclusions radically alter the image of open-armed Canadians altruistically welcoming new family members from the mother country. The children were generally accepted for financial rather than sentimental reasons and Parr argues that they were not seen or treated as another child in the family but as boarders fulfilling an economic arrangement. In short, the British children became members of Canadian households, not Canadian families. The immigrants represented cheap contributors who fulfilled productive needs within a variety of household circumstances: on the agricultural frontier, in mixed farming areas, and in cattle regions perhaps as herd boys. The ability of the British children to fulfil these roles determined their residence and, as they grew older, they moved from one household to the next matching their strength and experience to the needs of different homes. Parr recognizes that emotional attachments were sometimes sought by these transient children who longed for the "trust, sharing and solidarity they knew to characterize family concerns" (p. 96). However, she suggests that this hope was unrealistic. "By birth, by background, by speech, by the physical and mental legacies of their early deprivations, the child immigrants were different from Canadian children, too different to plausibly claim kin" (p. 96).

Joy Parr's general analysis is consistent with much recent historical research and she places her topic within several important scholarly contexts including the history of education and the family, and late nineteenth-century social policy. To those familiar with and persuaded by the general direction of this recent research, *Labouring Children* will be greeted warmly. However, there is a stark quality about the book and while Parr's argument is often persuasive, some readers will remain unconvinced. A long wide-ranging concluding chapter would have been a great addition. Also, the book is clearly sensitive to the importance of systematic research strategy but at times a desire to promote the argument seems to take precedence over a balanced weighing of the evidence. Alternative perspectives could have been discussed in more detail. By itself, for example, the question of how the British immigrants related to their Canadian homes is exceedingly complicated and an array of issues are raised: were nineteenth-century Canadian families "sentimentally" bound together? Was the hope among child immigrants for "trust, sharing and solidarity" (p. 96) a goal that was characteristically achieved by the Canadian children with whom they lived? In other words, is "apprenticed or adopted" (p. 82) a valid dichotomy? Or were Canadian family relations determined as much by economic considerations as sentiment? More detailed consideration of these kinds of questions are certainly warranted by the intricacies of the topic.

A general impression is that the book is too short. The ideas are rich, the approach sophisticated, and I think the author is generally right. Throughout the book, however, discussions are just gaining momentum when the topic is changed, often before the complexity of the issue and the potential ambiguity of the data are fully developed and the argument clinched. Perhaps this is the result of an overly budget-conscious publisher or a tyrannical editor; in any event, I wanted to read more. This conclusion, of course, is a reflection of the book's quality. *Labouring Children* is required reading for both British and Canadian social historians.

Chad GAFFIELD,
University of Victoria.