GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

When General Charles Gordon lived at Gravesend in the 1860s, he turned himself into a child rescuer. Since his duties in the Royal Engineers only took up his mornings, he used to gather up boy 'waifs and strays' (whom he called 'scuttlers') from the streets around his home. They were scrubbed by either his housekeeper or himself and he then ran classes for them. He also taught at a local ragged school. This represents an intriguing fusion of the iconic imperial hero, already celebrated for his suppression of the Taiping revolt and later elevated to the status of classic Victorian martyr at Khartoum, and the heroic child rescuer depicted in so much of the material surveyed here by Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel. Not the least of Gordon's heroic reputation was based on what Victorians (and their successors) saw as his Christian philanthropic urges. For them, his 'scuttlers' represented the desires of an almost saintly character to elevate those less fortunate than himself. Moreover, this represented his espousal of a typical bourgeois ambition to cure perceived social ills and, by doing so, save the very nation itself.

In this book Swain and Hillel survey the manner in which these typically Victorian obsessions fitted with images of childhood, with the metaphors that were used to represent the ideals associated with middle-class children, and with the ways in which the young were represented as the building blocks of a nation. These needed to be constructed on the sure bourgeois foundations of an essentially Christian ideology rather than on the shaky structures of poverty, vice and crime which appeared to threaten the survival of the edifice. Hence, child welfare and rescue movements were created not only to pursue the objectives of Charles Gordon, but also to provide, as their activists believed, a better life through emigration. These ambitions were cloaked in a strongly slanted propaganda which served to demonstrate that the often damaging effects of removing children from their own supposedly unworthy (or in some cases non-existent) families and morally repugnant environments ultimately led to worthier ends. But if the children were 'saved', they were invariably trained only for the most menial of tasks, and sent into colonial situations where physical and sexual abuse was rife. The actual lives they experienced were often very different indeed from the success stories laid out in the magazines, articles and lectures which the child rescuers used to propagate their Christian endeavours.

In addition to dealing with the intriguingly manifold dimensions of this movement in Britain, the authors also reveal the manner in which child rescue ideas were translated to the British colonies, notably to Canada and Australia. As well as rescuing white children, however, these techniques, often in even more brutal forms, were converted to the 'saving' of Aboriginal and First Nations children. In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we have come to recognise the extent to which this 'cure' for alleged social and racial

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ills was often more damaging than the supposed social (and environmental) illnesses which alarmed the child rescuers. The middle classes and the Christian churches were assuaging their consciences rather than seeking to transform systems. Charity was more important than the structural changes (not least in economic opportunity) which were needed to alleviate child poverty or the plight of indigenous peoples left to moulder in reserves. Here was a classic case of inadequate forms of charity attempting to substitute for fundamentally necessary state action.

This book is timely because its analysis of the manner in which such ideas are transmitted to the public and potential donors has real resonance for today. The 'waifs and strays' of Victorian times have been translated into the poor of Africa (most notably) and elsewhere. Similar techniques are used today to open the pockets of concerned individuals. Often aid, and the charitable impulses on which it is based, is indeed highly necessary, but it should never be allowed to obscure the international energies that need to be deployed in the alleviation of poverty, the improvement of environments and the avoidance of wars, inter-ethnic tensions and their results. When we hear of transnational adoption, an activity which seems to satisfy the impulses of the rich west in 'saving' one or two children rather than addressing the vast problem which they represent, we can see that it lies within this longer tradition of rescue. This book lays out the issues in a clear, concise and eminently readable form.

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