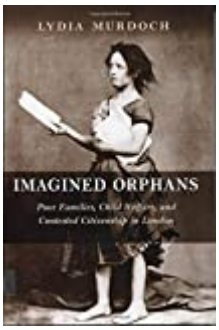
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Lydia Murdoch. *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006. xii + 252 pp. $44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-3722-1.

Reviewed by Nadja Durbach (Department of History, University of Utah)

Published on H-Albion (August, 2007)

Somebody's Children

Imagined Orphans challenges Victorian melodramatic narratives that depicted children's charities as rescuing abandoned children and victims of abuse and neglect. In fact, contrary to popular belief, the children who became residents of state or charitable institutions were rarely orphaned, abandoned, or abused. Instead, Lydia Murdoch demonstrates that their parent or parents were actively and conscientiously involved in securing them places in these institutions and attempted to maintain contact throughout their stay. *Imagined Orphans* thus rewrites the history of child welfare, placing loving, active, and concerned parents at the center of the narrative.

Murdoch's research into the state and charitable provision of child welfare services in London reveals that parents living in poverty were shrewd consumers of these resources and made rational economic decisions when they confined their children to the care of either the state or one of Thomas Barnardo's homes for what he misleadingly called "waifs and strays." *Imagined Orphans* argues that placing a child, generally an older child, in care was one of many survival strategies that the poor used to deal with economic hardship. These institutions often served as the best means to secure vocational training for older children; alternatively they provided temporary housing during times of family crisis. These latter children, who moved in and out of care frequently and were thus dubbed "ins and outs," proved frustrating to charities who could not, try as they might, exert their moral influence over such temporary inmates. Instead of seeing these institutions as rescuing children from immoral parents or providing a sense of community to the orphan, Murdoch posits that charities such as Barnardo's were in fact responsible for transforming children who had been imbedded within domestic and community networks into veritable orphans. They did so by attempting to cut children off from their families who these charities saw as exerting a bad moral influence over future British citizens.

By discussing child welfare within the context of larger issues of poverty and the survival strategies of the poor in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Murdoch tells a much more complex story about the "mixed economy" of welfare provision, and parents' active roles in negotiating with both the state and charities.

In addition, by focusing on parents' attempts to maintain contact with their children, Murdoch foregrounds the ways in which contests over child welfare provision were bound up in larger debates over the rights of parents. This is particularly significant as it complicates our understandings of how the working poor conceptualized their role and rights as citizens, and moves the historical work on citizenship beyond the narrow confines of debates over the expansion of the franchise.

While this is obviously a book about class, Murdoch also does a nice job of exploring questions of gender and race. Often in discussions of children and citizenship in the years around the turn of the century, the focus is heavily on male children, assuming that only boys could become full citizens able to vote and to defend the nation through military sacrifice. Murdoch does take up these issues in an excellent analysis of vocational training for boys, which, while poorly equipping them for the economic marketplace by focusing on artisanal rather than industrial production, nevertheless underscored their important role as respectable skilled laborers and thus members of the national community. Similarly, she demonstrates how charities and the Poor Law encouraged military training for boys in order to breed imperial citizens ready to defend the nation and the empire. But Murdoch also demonstrates that the debate over barrack versus cottage schools focused almost entirely on the female child as the model inmate, and thus future citizen, for whom all institutions should cater. Although the intent of all child welfare schemes was to equip girls to become domestic servants, this attention to the domestic arrangements for poor girls in particular also suggests concern with the cultivation of Britain's future female citizens.

Murdoch's discussion of the rhetoric of "street arabs" and their visual representation reveals the ways in which the discourses of race were central to ideologies of class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and by extension questions of citizenship. She argues that the racial construction of poor children as "domestic savages" distanced them from the national community, but crucially, like missionary efforts overseas, left open the possibility that with the correct moral guidance and appropriate intervention by reformers, these children could, unlike their irredeemable parents, evolve into upright citizens. By using a racial discourse that cast poor children as "street arabs," who could and should be civilized, welfare reformers, Murdoch argues, could gain support for their cause without having to address the fundamental economic causes of child poverty and thus without calling for systemic change.

This book is an insightful, well-researched, and important contribution to the history of child welfare. But it left me wanting more. While there is a clear trend towards shorter monographs these days, I felt many of the arguments of the book would have benefited from being fleshed out in more detail. This was particularly true in relation to the issue of parental rights and claims to citizenship. Since the book's subtitle foregrounds the theme of contested citizenship, I wanted a more thorough exploration of exactly how parents understood the concept of citizenship and what metaphors and rhetoric they deployed. It is not that Murdoch does not explore this, but rather that I felt she moved too quickly from this material, which is central to the major argument of the book, to a focus on how welfare reformers themselves constructed child citizens. Similarly, I felt that the child welfare services that emerged around the turn of the century needed to be placed within a wider and longer history of the cultural shifts taking place in attitudes towards childhood in general.

What is least satisfying about the book is the way in which Barnardo's institutions stand in for charitable approaches to child welfare in general. *Imagined Orphans* compares the state provision of child services through the Poor Law to those provided by Barnardo. Murdoch rightly argues that Thomas Barnardo was the most vocal, visible, and influential child advocate in late Victorian Britain. But as she also notes, he was a controversial and unconventional celebrity who consciously manipulated public opinion by inventing melodramatic narratives and by using sensational before and after photographs. Although Murdoch does refer occasionally to the Charity Organization Society, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants, her almost exclusive focus on Barnardo's institutions closes down any exploration of the multiple philosophies that surely existed amongst different groups of child welfare reformers. Since the book is already narrowly focused on London, a comparison of the services provided by a variety of children's organizations would have revealed the ramifications of different models of care and their relationship to debates over citizenship. This would not only have broadened our understanding of child welfare in general, but might also have helped to explain why Barnardo's model was in the end so successful, becoming arguably the leading children's charity in the United Kingdom.

Imagined Orphans is a thoughtful, interesting, and

well-written book that contributes much to understandings of child welfare, poverty, and parenting in Victorian and Edwardian London. By tracing exactly how and why children entered and left state and charitable institutions, Murdoch is able to uncover the economic and emotional factors that led poor parents to make use of these services. These narratives of family hardship and economic distress provide an important corrective to widespread popular understandings of the recipients of institutional care as "nobody's children." Instead, Murdoch reveals that these were neither orphaned nor abused children, but rather the much-loved offspring of conscientious mothers and fathers who were either compelled to use these services or sought them out precisely in order to ensure their children a brighter future.