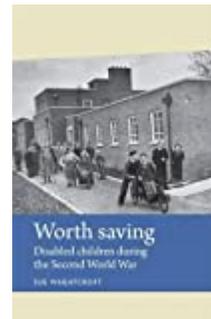




**Sue Wheatcroft.** *Worth Saving: Disabled Children during the Second World War.* Disability History Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013. 224 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-8800-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-78499-119-7.



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During the Second World War, British authorities, acting under the Government Evacuation Scheme, relocated some 1.5 million children. Another 2 million were evacuated privately. Evacuees were relocated to protect them from bombing raids and, in the period that Britain, its dominions, and its colonies stood alone after the fall of France in 1940, from the threat of invasion as well. How did children with disabilities fare in the evacuation, surely one of the largest coordinated wartime movements of civilians in human history? Sue Wheatcroft argues in *Worth Saving* that authorities generally considered disabled children “worth saving” and for that reason the evacuation included them, with a few exceptions. The book looks at the wartime care and education of children with disabilities, meticulously documenting the experiences of youngsters falling into “five official categories” evacuation authorities used: “blind,” “deaf,” “physically defective,” “epileptic,” and “mentally defective” (p. 11). While evacuation involved cities in every part of the United Kingdom, Wheatcroft has chosen to narrow that wide scope by looking at evacuees within England alone.

As the field of disability history matures, specialized studies such as this one will become more common. There is much that we still do not know about people with disabilities in history—children in particular—even

amid events, such as the Second World War, that receive a great deal of coverage. Wheatcroft’s book is a valuable contribution, filling a gap in the historiography. It makes a fine addition to Manchester University Press’s new and promising Disability History series.

Chapter 1 of *Worth Saving* begins with an overview of special education for children with disabilities as it developed from voluntary and charitable efforts in the nineteenth century to state involvement in the first half of the twentieth. Special education was the domain of both the Local Education Authorities (LEAs) running special schools and other local government and charitable authorities operating so-called colony institutions. The first chapter of Wheatcroft’s book also examines the evacuation. A familiar image of this event is of individual children billeted with families all over the countryside, as far as possible from the children’s homes in England’s industrial centers where German bombers were expected to strike, and later from the coastline where it was feared an invasion might occur. Children with disabilities were not evacuated in this individualistic fashion, Wheatcroft informs us. Instead, they were more liable to be evacuated en masse. For instance, an entire school or institution was evacuated together, staff and children, to a new and safer location. A few people recommended leaving

disabled children out of evacuation plans altogether, but these dissenting voices were hushed. This is a central theme of Wheatcroft's work, the decision that disabled children were worth saving, one that I will return to momentarily.

Chapters 2 to 5 are thematic, dealing with different elements of the wartime experiences of various groups of boys and girls with disabilities. Chapter 2 discusses living and learning conditions. When entire institutions pulled up stakes and relocated, the new surroundings they found were often makeshift. Hotels, summer camps (what North Americans would call "lodges"), or private estates and castles let or donated to the organization for a time were used. Wheatcroft relies heavily on His Majesty's Inspector (HMI) James Lumsden's reports to assess conditions. Not surprisingly, given the variety of venues used, conditions varied greatly. Some children were well accommodated and cared for, under the circumstances. Educationally, they fared not substantially differently from able-bodied children, experiencing typical wartime disruptions such as air raids. Nearer to the end of chapter 2, Wheatcroft moves briefly away from HMI Lumsden's reports to bring in testimony from four former evacuees who she was able to contact and who wrote letters to her about their experiences. They reported hardships, but in general were satisfied with conditions and treatment that were as good as they could expect during the war. One informant interviewed by Wheatcroft was not at all satisfied with her education under evacuation. Testimonies such as these occasionally appear in the book. Official records, in particular Lumsden's reports, however, are by far the major source for Wheatcroft's evidence.

Chapter 3 looks at accommodations for children who were not, or could not be, evacuated. Except for a very brief period in late 1939 when no schools of any sort were in operation, special day schools for children with disabilities continued to operate throughout the war, although some were seriously disrupted by air raids or closed partially or totally due to bomb damage. Existing home tuition schemes for housebound children were maintained. Children receiving these two forms of education were not officially evacuated. Hospital schools (educational facilities within treatment centers) for children actively receiving medical treatment or long-term care, or convalescing, could not be relocated. Some of the children in these facilities could not even be moved to air raid shelters and bravely endured the harrowing experience of waiting out the bombing raids in their beds, unshielded, with equally brave nurses who remained at

their sides to comfort them. Children with severe disabilities, such as "spastic cripples" (cerebral palsy) are also a subject of chapter 3. These children were not evacuated, and charities, Wheatcroft demonstrates, often took up the slack of caring for and educating them.

The fourth chapter considers the experiences of three final groups: the "ineducable," children with epilepsy, and maladjusted children. The ineducable mentally defective were excluded from all schooling provisions before and during the war by virtue of their low IQs. (Any child with an IQ of less than 50 was labelled this way.) They were also, for that reason, excluded from all evacuation parties formed at special schools for the educable mentally defective and other disabled children. The ineducable continued to reside in the mental defectives colonies that had housed them prior to the war. A very short section of chapter 4, just over a page, touches on children with epilepsy who continued, as before the war, to be accommodated in four special colonies established for them. The category of maladjusted, or emotionally disturbed, children expanded markedly during the war. The evacuation itself revealed many new cases of maladjustment. The vast expansion in the number of British child guidance clinics probably had something to do with the discovery of these cases. There were nearly twice as many clinics at war's end than there had been in 1939, Wheatcroft tells us.

The book's final chapter (excepting a brief conclusion) provides a general overview of the many changes to the education of disabled children in the immediate post-Second World War years. Most of these changes were due to new legislation and regulations that are Wheatcroft's main focus in the chapter. The most obvious piece of legislation is the 1944 Education Act. This represented the first major change in laws governing special education since 1921. Other legislative changes included the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act, also passed in 1944. It was supposed to expand employment opportunities for veteran and civilian people with disabilities. The act had some effect. But "real change was, and is, extremely slow," Wheatcroft writes (p. 176).

Case studies of different schools for disabled children during the war adorn the chapters. But Wheatcroft's main focus is "development of policy towards disabled children during the war" (p. 1). With the book's title she poses an interesting and important question: why were disabled children considered "worth saving" during the Second World War? Certainly, there were many people who, even in the late lead-up to the war, subscribed to

the eugenics view that England would be better off without its disabled citizens. Wheatcroft even introduces us to a few who openly espoused this sort of view, such as Cecil Maudslay, who held a very prominent position as a principal assistant secretary of the Board of Education. Maudslay more than once questioned whether disabled children were “worth saving” (pp. 42-43). We learn from this book that the view that disabled children were worth evacuating, caring for, and educating prevailed in a time of national crisis. What we do not learn are the contours or context of the debate. Just how many other senior figures in the Board of Education agreed with Maudslay? How seriously was not evacuating disabled children considered? What ultimately resulted in the de-

nial of this option, despite it having support? Wheatcroft has no definitive answers to these questions. She offers, only tentatively, that Maudslay’s “sentiments did not reflect those of the main decision-makers who, it would seem, attached as much importance to ‘the weak’ as ‘the strong’” (p. 43). Given that the book’s title appears derived from this very question, I expected Wheatcroft to address it in much greater depth. However, *Worth Saving* is worth reading. It makes a valuable contribution to an expanding knowledge base about disabled people’s lives in history. It raises important questions about changing views of the worth of people with disabilities at a pivotal moment in modern history.

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