

Lydia Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London*.

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Lydia Murdoch's historical reinvestigation of the child welfare system and its official representations and popular fictionalisations in *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London* forms part of the Rutgers Series in Childhood Studies. Combining critical reappraisal of the popular image of the orphaned child as it informed state welfare and private charities from the nineteenth century onwards with a detailed account of the institutional information of the time, Murdoch builds on a general reconsideration within the history of the working classes as well as of the child. As the study's focus on the charitable institutions run by Thomas Barnardo clearly shows, the cultural mythologisation of such philanthropic work has generated as well as capitalised on distorting factors that have only recently been questioned. Thus, Barnardo's own promotional material was at times partially built on fraud when the children of the poor, sent to his institutions to be trained as servants, were posing as orphaned or deserted in order to appeal to a benevolent public. An indicator of the representational value of such popular images of the orphaned street child, biographical sketches of Barnardo, such as William T. Stead's, published in 1896, praised the well-known philanthropist as 'the father of "Nobody's Children,"' the head of "the largest family in the world" (67). These images of poor children as waifs and strays have had a tremendous impact on child welfare literature. Murdoch's account of British child welfare institutions, however, is firmly concentrated on the disjunction between the representation and the historical data available – and in part, newly available – of children's and parents' experience of welfare and charity institutions. This discrepancy operated as a defining category of conflicting middle- and working-class concepts of domesticity and citizenship.

Imagined Orphans takes *Oliver Twist*'s iconic significance for the popular representation of orphanhood, the destitute child, and most importantly, the workhouse waif as a point of entry into the history of child welfare. With *Oliver Twist* 'Dickens created a portrait of the workhouse child that remained the standard image for the Victorian age,' the 'archetypal workhouse child' as orphan (1). Reformers, who were primarily of middle-class background or had become deeply ingrained in bourgeois ideologies of domesticity through their own 'reformation,' depicted poor children in both state and private institutions 'as being either orphaned, like Oliver, or abandoned by their parents' (1). They were homeless and, as 'waifs,' practically parentless. Although Murdoch acknowledges that the parents of institutionalised children often 'were abusive or absent, traumatising their children in ways worse than even the most sensational philanthropic tracts recounted' (69), the accounts kept by the institutions in general contradict popular cultural fictions of the 'street arab' or the 'waif.' Examining children's case histories as well as admission and discharge log books in great detail, Murdoch reveals an impressive collection of data to reconstruct quite different narratives.

It was not only that the majority of institutionalised children had one or even both parents living, but that the narrativisation of their desertion deliberately erased or vilified the parents. Especially the urban poor instead sometimes sent their children to charity or state institutions to secure (temporary) shelter or an education for their off-

spring. In some instances of course, children were sent because they were deemed 'beyond parental control' by their own parents (71). What is more, Murdoch emphasises, given that most of these 'imagined orphans' were not orphaned in fact, the welfare system often contrived to make them orphans in practice 'by permanently separating them from their indigent parents' (2). Both barrack schools and the newer family cottages made 'them de facto orphans' (52). The centrality of domesticity in debates over family cottages, she further suggests, only additionally 'delegitimised the children's biological family structures' (61), undermining the concept of natural domesticity and promoting at once social reform and political stability that undercut any subversive elements (61, 66). In one of the perhaps most vexed – and hence particularly revealing – deployments of imperialist rhetoric, the rendition of the London 'street arab' demonstrates in what ways discourses of ethnicity and nationality, as aligned with class, were used to distance children from their families and local communities. Murdoch mentions the popular waif novel as an increasingly popular genre between the mid-1860s and 1890s as well as the popularisation of the 'street arab' (25).

In scripting child poverty according to the narrative demands of domestic melodrama, evoking the paradigms of rescue and salvation, welfare reformers produced cultural fictions that almost invariably rendered parents as either absent (dead, unknown, irresponsible) or actively abusive. Intriguingly, Barnardo's own sensationalist accounts such as *Worse Than Orphans: How I Stole Two Girls and Fought for a Boy* (ca. 1885) or *A City Waif: How I Fished For Her* (ca. 1886) already played with the indeterminacy of 'orphanhood' as well as touched upon a problematic closeness to criminality in his 'rescue' work: his admitted theft and often violent snatching of children. The very flexibility of a term that was often consciously used as a euphemism for illegitimate or deserted children of course lent itself to extensions, loose usage, or as Murdoch points out, representational distortions. Putting the parents of some of these 'orphans' back into the picture, she furthermore investigates the structures of visits between parents and children, parental supervision of institutionalised children, as well as the custody conflicts that were at the heart of such imaginary orphanhood. If orphanhood, as studies of Victorian fiction have amply shown, can be a state of mind and an experience unconnected to the absence of a biological parent, the startling discrepancies between popular and institutional narratives of child welfare may moreover induce us revisit and rethink the well-known and now so iconographical representations of the abandoned child in the Victorian novel: not only the temporary institutionalisations of *Oliver Twist*, *Jane Eyre*, or poor Jo, but also Lizzie Hexam's decision to part with her brother, or the problematic positioning of the Charitable Grinder and Tattycoram in novels centrally concerned with family structures.

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