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

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Lydia Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London*
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Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London by Lydia Murdoch; Myra Bluebond-Langner
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tions that should interest scholars from a variety of different fields, including history of science and medicine, Victorian studies, legal history, and cultural studies.

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Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London. By *Lydia Murdoch*. The Rutgers Series in Childhood Studies. Edited by *Myra Bluebond-Langner*.
New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006. Pp. xii+252. $44.95.

Given its brevity, *Imagined Orphans* cannot be the very model of a major monograph. But in its concern with matters cultural and sociopolitical, it is certainly very modern. The theme of identity and civil society has assumed a central place in recent anthologies of British history, whose mere titles suggest an interest in the shifting boundaries between state power and social institutions (Peter Mandler, ed., *Liberty and Authority in Victorian Britain* [Oxford and New York, 2006]; Jose Harris, ed., *Civil Society in British History* [New York, 2003]). These issues are bound to arise in a study of London's welfare institutions, both public and private, as they coped with the problem of child poverty.

Set in this context, Lydia Murdoch's book is particularly rewarding. An investigation of the Victorian and Edwardian child welfare system, it builds effectively on a substantial body of work covering earlier periods. It also points ahead to a redefinition of citizenship during the First World War, when poor parents and their offspring were valued as never before. Murdoch makes creative use of a range of primary sources, including workhouse registers, sensationalist journalism, and the archives of Dr. T. J. Barnardo's child philanthropies. It offers thought-provoking insights, for the most part refreshingly free of jargon, and presents a convincing interpretation of the changing perspective on poor children and their families in society.

The whole book benefits from an admirably thorough introduction, which clearly lays out its multifarious and chronologically overlapping structure. Murdoch's argument emerges from an important observation, previously made but not systematically developed by others. She notes that although London reformers habitually portrayed the poor children they sought to help as orphans or abandoned "waifs and strays," a substantial majority of them in fact had a living parent, usually the mother, who often maintained contact with the child. In a succession of skillfully crafted chapters, the implications of this discrepancy are worked out against a backdrop formed by the contemporary debate over the proper aims of child welfare and the actual experience of children and their families with London workhouses, poor-law schools, and residential homes.

In the second half of the book, Murdoch turns to her broader contention: that the disjunction between the representation and the reality of the children's family ties "stemmed from conflicts over middle- and working-class notions of citizenship" (7). In order to be "depauperized," reformers believed, impoverished children had to be isolated from the corrupting influence of their families. In resisting this policy, Murdoch argues, "many working parents continued to assert their status as English citizens based upon the traditional rights and liberties of freeborn Englishmen, among which parental rights were central" (8). The evidence for the parents' political awareness is relatively weak, but this in no way affects the final chapter, which shows

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convincingly that in the midst of the war effort, "child welfare institutions promoted new notions of citizenship based on direct service to the nation" (161).

In describing the darker side of child philanthropy, Murdoch relies heavily on the promotional literature of Barnardo's charities, including posed before-and-after photographs of the children in his care. She demonstrates that Barnardo's tracts presented a standard melodramatic "narrative" in which a poor child was either rescued from the streets or perhaps "saved" from a drunken, neglectful, or sexually exploitative parent. Barnardo invoked such conditions to justify his "philanthropic abductions" and sought to keep parents who lacked "good character" from reclaiming or even visiting their children. Murdoch contends that poor "street-arabs" were portrayed as a race apart, even to the extent that they might require "overlapping civil, religious, and racial conversions" in order to join the community of British citizens (33). This chapter invites comparison with Seth Koven's discussion of Barnardo's "artistic fictions," but whereas Koven chose this episode to illustrate the "erotics of benevolence in Victorian London" (*Slumming* [Princeton, NJ, 2004], 138), Murdoch focuses on its consequences for the poor themselves.

Murdoch also employs old-fashioned social history to good effect in her examination of late Victorian welfare institutions, both state-run and charitable. According to the admissions registers, children who were truly on their own, either genuine orphans or completely deserted, amounted to only about one-third of the total (73–75). She also documents the high proportion of "in-and-out" children, often deposited repeatedly and only for brief periods. Indigent parents, often single women, used the resources of the poor-law system to obtain emergency assistance or to provide some sort of education for their older children, and it was precisely these "casual" inmates, Murdoch argues, that reformers saw as contaminating the "ideal" children, who were being prepared for respectable employment as maids and artisans (49–51, 97–98).

Thus poor families often intended separation from their children to be temporary and intermittent, whereas reformers, especially in the private charities, sought to enforce a permanent isolation from bad influences at home. Although even Barnardo implicitly acknowledged the parents' right to consent to their child's care, authorities seldom intervened to help parents seeking to visit or reclaim their children. Whether the aggrieved parents' "sense of injustice" translated into "a clear sense of their rights as citizens" is hard to know; it is possible that only sympathetic newspaper accounts of their legal actions against Barnardo spoke in such terms (100, 114–15). In the late Victorian era, the "contest" over citizenship might still have been carried on principally among middle-class agents like the press, the magistrates, and the reformers themselves.

Imagined Orphans makes many useful connections among the developing strands of Victorian social history. Among the interesting conclusions to be drawn is that, in contrast to private institutions, the public poor-law system became increasingly sensitive to the needs of the poor while resisting the more extreme proposals of reformers to transfer legal custody of children to the state (118). In this way, Murdoch's work could mark an important milestone in the history of official willingness to remove poor children from parents depicted as incapable of raising them properly, a policy that has been detected as early as the seventeenth century.

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