

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Judith A. Dulberger, ed. *"Mother Donit fore the Best": Correspondence of a Nineteenth-Century Orphan Asylum*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996. xiii + 206 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-2696-1.

Reviewed by Kriste Lindenmeyer (Tennessee Technological University)

Published on H-SHGAPE (March, 1998)

Judith Dulberger's meticulously edited and annotated volume, *"Mother Donit fore the Best"*, makes a significant contribution to Gilded Age and Progressive Era social welfare history. By relying on the words of those involved, Dulberger reveals a complex story of "friendship, intimacy, mutual attachments, and refuge" (p. xi) in correspondence exchanged by caregivers, parents, children and the Albany Orphan Asylum's superintendents (Albert and Helen Fuller) during the 1880s and 1890s. She found this story in the over five hundred case files preserved in the "Parsons Child and Family Center Collection" housed in the Manuscripts and Special Collections Division of the New York State Library. This book was conceived over ten years ago while Dulberger engaged in research on her D.A. dissertation completed at Carnegie Mellon University. The letters included in this volume offer a rare glimpse into the lives of children, their families, and caretakers in a late-nineteenth century American orphanage.

Dulberger explains that she chose letters from parents that "illustrate a variety of life circumstances confronting poor families of the late nineteenth century—single parenting, desertion, chronic illness, illegitimacy, irregularity of work, and marital discord" (p. xii). Letters from foster parents describe the perceived behavior problems of indentured children. The children's correspondence discusses sibling relationships and emotional attachments (or lack thereof) to parents and other caregivers. All of these voices are ones rarely heard by researchers interested in the history of child welfare.

Besides the carefully selected letters, *"Mother Donit fore the Best"* includes a concise and well-written introduction placing the correspondence in historiographical context, describing the Albany Orphan Asylum's contemporary role in child welfare, and outlining background information on the institution's superintendents: Albert and Helen Fuller. The book also features seventeen wonderful black and white illustrations, a convincing conclusion, an epilogue, and a useful bibliographic

essay.

By the 1890s, the Albany Asylum ranked fifteenth in size among New York's over two hundred state-subsidized private orphanages. It served as the daily "home" for more than six hundred children and supervised an additional six hundred placed out on indenture. Although a single institution among many, as Dulberger intends, "if the correspondence [included in this book] accomplishes nothing else, it will begin to recast the story of the asylum in more realistic and human terms" (p. xiii).

Dulberger's findings agree with other historians who argue that most nineteenth century "orphans" were not true "orphans," but instead children with a single parent that could not earn enough money to care for their children at home.[4] Many families used the Orphan Asylum as a temporary "boarding" school during times of greatest need. The institution was not merely a way to separate poor children from their parents. Instead, the asylum provided a way for "keeping families together during times of economic crisis, sickness, and death" (p. 167).

In her thoughtful introduction, Dulberger correctly notes that "late nineteenth-century America was a time of unprecedented material progress. In many respects it was quite literally a 'gilded' age." But, this accelerated economic shift from an agricultural world to an industrial one also resulted in "chronic unemployment, overcrowding, hazardous workplaces, rampant disease, and untimely death [for] a vast underbelly of American society comprised of those dependent on the still-emerging system of wage labor for their sustenance" (p. 1). Poverty was nothing new. But, as Robert Bremner maintains, there was a popular "rediscovery" of poverty in the mid-nineteenth century largely because Americans had never before dealt with such large numbers of poor children whose parents were unable to provide for them in the changing economic structure.[1]

Consequently, vast stores of intellectual and emotional energy were funneled into the debate over how

to “save the children.” As many scholars have shown, nineteenth-century reformers advocated a wide array of social welfare measures designed to mold the dependent to independence.[2] But such efforts do not neatly fit the social control thesis. Dulberger’s work, like that of Linda Gordon and others, shows that poor parents and their children also played a role in shaping the new welfare bureaucracy.[3] Or, as Dulberger puts it, the poor “were forced to work out their own personal strategies for survival And so they used the system in quite different ways than perhaps had been intended. For if nineteenth-century social welfare was a question of manipulation, it is difficult to ascertain exactly who was manipulating whom” (p. 7).

The letters’ poor grammar and awkward spelling often make them difficult to read. Nevertheless, I agree with Dulberger’s decision to leave them as close as possible to the original text. The letters are also often heart wrenching. Caroline O’Rourke’s May 4, 1884 letter to Albert Fuller is typical of many.

Will you please Write how my Children Cora and Carrie are getting along and Please Send me a Lock of their hair. O how i Wish i Could See them. please to Write me if they are going to School and if [they] go to Sunday School. O may the Lord Forgive me for What i have done and if i Could have them Back i Would do Better and i Would Never give them Up again. me and my Husband are keeping house again and Can you not Let us have them and i Will do all i Can to Bring them Up good and take . . . good Care of them. O Mr. Fuller Can you not let me have them again. do help me if you can. give them my love and tell them this letter is from their Mother . . . (p.107).

Although such letters might sway readers to see the parents and their children as victims of middle-class reformers bent on separating poor children from their well-meaning parents, Dulberger’s annotation following this series of letters notes that Caroline O’Rourke’s “determination to achieve the societal expectations of good parenting may well have waned over the years.” Even though the girls were discharged to their parents in 1887, the “final piece of correspondence in 1892 makes reference to continued intervention in their lives by Humane Society agents”(p. 108). In other words, examining the individual stories makes for a complicated picture. Often times parental negligence may have been no more than the result of tragic circumstances. But, other times it was a combination of many factors, including an intermixing of personal irresponsibility, alcoholism, and social conditions that were never “fixed.”

Perhaps the most significant letters are the few written by the children themselves. As Dulberger maintains, here again, the story is complex. Many asylum children were strongly attached to their siblings and “keepers.” Other express “sadness, disappointment, and rage” at their circumstance (p. 114). The letters from foster parents sometimes discuss the way such children acted out on their feelings in socially unacceptable behavior or by running away. But many letters also support recent surveys showing that many who grew up in orphanages were happy with their experiences.[5] Perhaps as Dulberger concludes, “the pervasiveness of poverty in late-nineteenth-century America made attainment of middle-class material life an impossibility for many, but certainly not so the attainment of fruitful and satisfying emotional life” (p. 170).

This work is not a monograph, so it should not be reviewed as such. Instead it provides primary materials with thoughtful analysis for anyone interested in the plight of dependent children, families and social welfare. Indeed, after reading the documents, my only frustration came in wanting to know more. Sparking further interest and research is an admirable goal of any work of history.

This book is an important tool. The current debate over orphanages and foster care is certainly nothing new. Clearly, group institutionalization should not be condemned in every situation nor should it be celebrated as THE answer to current child welfare problems. Unfortunately, as Dulberger notes, the debate over whether “children should be removed from environments of physical and mental anguish or [kept as] part of a process that preserves the sanctity of the home at all costs” has again entered the public arena. “This,” Dulberger maintains, “will be the child welfare issue for the twenty-first century, one that, as in the past, will likely not be debated by the children and families most in need” (p. 174). Perhaps this book will help to change that pattern.

Notes

[1]. Robert Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1956); for the most recent interpretation of this tug of war see Judith Sealander, *Private Wealth and Public Life: Foundation Philanthropy and the Shaping of American Social Policy from the Progressive Era to the New Deal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

[2]. For example see Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Clarke A. Chambers, *Seedtime of Reform: Ameri-*

can Social Service and Social Action, 1918-1933 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963); Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Kriste Lindenmeyer, "A Right to Childhood": *The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Anthony Platt, *The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency* 2nd. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

[3]. Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, 1880-1960*, Boston (New York: Penguin Books, 1988); for similar insight see David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and at Play* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[4]. For example see, Hyman Bogen, *The Luckiest Orphans: A History of the Hebrew Orphan Asylum of New York* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Marilyn Irvin Holt, *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); Peter Holloran, *Boston's Wayward Children: Social Services for Homeless Children, 1830-1930* (Fairleigh Dickin-

son University Press, 1989); Daniel I. Hurley, *A History of the Children's Home of Cincinnati, 1864-1869* (Cincinnati: Children's Home of Cincinnati, 1989); Gary Polster, *Inside Looking Out: The Cleveland Jewish Orphan Asylum 1868-1924* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1990); Timothy A. Hacsí, *Second Home: Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming, 1998); and Nurith Zmora, *Orphanages Reconsidered: Child Care Institutions in Progressive Era Baltimore* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

[5]. For example see Richard B. McKenzie, "Orphanage Alumni: How They Have Done and How They Evaluate Their Experience." Copies available from the author, professor in the Graduate School of Management at the University of California, Irvine.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Kriste Lindenmeyer. Review of Dulberger, Judith A., ed., "Mother Don't Fore the Best": *Correspondence of a Nineteenth-Century Orphan Asylum*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1787>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.