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Karen Andrea Balcom. *The Traffic in Babies: Cross-Border Adoption and Baby-Selling between the United States and Canada, 1930-1972.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. xii + 356 pp. Illustrations. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-9918-1; $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-9613-5.

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Border-Crossing Babies

The idea of the borderland–the liminal space between nations or cultures where identities clash, mingle, and are reinvented–has become a central concept in recent historical scholarship.[1] Children are the consummate borderland residents: the paragons of adaptability and assimilability, youngsters slip easily across borders that remain impenetrable to their elders. Because of their roles as border-crossers, children have increasingly attracted the attention of historians seeking to illuminate the larger themes of borderlands history. Indeed, a burgeoning scholarly field links the history of childhood with the history of foreign relations, shedding light on the construction of racial and national identities and on the participation of ordinary people in international affairs.

Karen A. Balcom's *The Traffic in Babies: Cross-Border Adoption and Baby-Selling between the United States and Canada, 1930-1972* is a welcome addition to this field. Balcom explores the efforts of social workers, child welfare experts, and government officials to regulate the adoption of Canadian children by families in the United States during the middle decades of the twentieth century. In doing so, she not only chronicles a hitherto untold story in the history of international adoption but also offers an important account of the ways in which the constitutional division of power both in the United States and in Canada hindered efforts to manage the "traffic in babies" across the U.S.-Canadian border.

Between the 1930s and the early 1970s, several thousand Canadian children found adoptive homes in the United States. Guided by word of mouth and by newspaper advertisements promising healthy white babies, American families hoping to adopt infants looked to Canadian provinces such as Quebec and Nova Scotia that were perceived to have lax adoption regulations. In Canada, persons ranging from provincial welfare officials to Catholic orphanage directors to maternity home operators helped move babies, many of them born to unwed mothers, across the country's southern border. Many Americans attempted to adopt Canadian babies because they were unable to adopt a child in the United States. In particular, religious matching laws that forbade the adoption of a child born into one religious faith by a family of another faith made it nearly impossible for many Jewish and mixed-faith couples to become adoptive parents.

To Balcom, national borders are significant not as a location for intercultural penetration but rather as an empty space in which the laws governing the adoption of children lost their regulatory power. In both the United States and Canada, the federal government is responsible for regulating immigration. Child welfare matters, meanwhile, are regulated by the states or provinces. When children crossed the U.S.-Canadian border, they also moved beyond the jurisdiction of state and provincial officials, slipping outside of the regulatory framework designed to guarantee their welfare. For example, although most Canadian provinces had in place religious matching laws similar to those in the United States, the movement of babies across the national border made these provincial-level laws easier to circumvent. In this way, great numbers of infants born to unwed Catholic French Canadian women found homes with Jewish families in the northeastern United States.

Social workers and child welfare professionals in the United States and Canada alike viewed the cross-border flow of babies with apprehension. The adoption of Canadian children by Americans led to the placement of thousands of children without the careful screening and professional guidance child welfare experts on both sides of the border deemed to be essential. The unregulated "traffic in babies" also sometimes gave rise to unscrupulous baby brokers and maternity home operators. In the mid-

1940s, in one particularly notorious case, the Ideal Maternity Home in Nova Scotia provided birth mothers and babies with poor medical care, allowed residents to languish in unsanitary conditions, and charged high fees to birth mothers and adoptive parents. The home's operators specifically designed their operation to take advantage of the regulatory loopholes that opened up when babies moved across the U.S.-Canadian border. The Ideal Maternity Home case made clear to child welfare reformers in the United States and in Canada the dangers posed by cross-border adoptions.

The project of regulating cross-border adoption strengthened the ties between child welfare reformers in the United States and in Canada. American experts associated with the U.S. Children's Bureau such as Katharine Lenroot and Maud Morlock worked in concert with counterparts such as Charlotte Whitton and Nora Lea in Canada's semi-official Canadian Welfare Council to draft agreements designed to curtail the flow of babies across the border. They attempted to enlist federal agencies such as the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the U.S. consular system in Canada, and the passport office of the Canadian Department of External Affairs in regulating the adoption of Canadian children by American families.

But federal agencies in both the United States and Canada were consistently reluctant to assume a responsibility that they understood to be the jurisdiction of the states and provinces. "The story told here," Balcom notes, "may serve as a counter-example or caution against narratives focused on the centralization of state authority at the federal level in the post-Second World War period" (pp. 5-6). States and provinces, moreover, were not always eager partners in reformers' attempts to regulate cross-border adoption. In Alberta, for example, provincial welfare officials rebuffed reformers' attempts to provide regulatory oversight of the many cross-border adoption cases originating in the province. American and Canadian reformers were ultimately more successful in leveraging the transnational baby market to push for domestic regulatory changes than they were in achieving reforms that successfully managed the flow of babies across the U.S.-Canadian border.

By the early 1970s, changes in social work practice and in public attitudes transformed the landscape of cross-border adoption. After working for decades to curtail the movement of Canadian children into the United States, reformers in the United States and in Canada alike began to view cross-border adoptions in a radically new light. As the pool of children perceived by child welfare experts to be adoptable expanded to include older children, those who were non-white, and those who had special needs, experts increasingly looked to transnational adoptions as a way to find families for so-called hard-to-place children. Adoption professionals saw adoptions across state/provincial and national lines as a means of moving children away from areas in which they were perceived to be subject to prejudice and into locations where they might better appeal to prospective adoptive parents. "Looking across regions opened up more potential matches between adoptive parents and children, but it also seems that geographic border crossings smoothed the way for racial and cultural border crossings," Balcom writes (p. 205). But as adoption experts began to welcome cross-border adoption, launching programs such as the Adoption Resource Exchange of North America (ARENA), transnational adoption became once again the subject of controversy in the United States and in Canada. A growing chorus of protesters charged that transnational and transracial adoption unjustly stripped children of their national and racial identities. Child welfare reformers struggled to balance the benefits and the dangers of adoption across borders.

Balcom's book offers a nuanced account of the ways in which federalism has shaped the lived experiences of citizens. In the United States, scholars such as Suzanne Mettler have demonstrated that the constitutional division of power between the federal government and the states has historically intersected with categories of gender. New Deal-era distributive programs dealing primarily with men, such as Old Age and Survivors' Insurance, were the jurisdiction of the federal government, while programs such as Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), whose primary constituents were women, were administered by the states. State-based programs were often administered on a more variable and less egalitarian basis than their counterparts on the national level.[2] Balcom's story is another example in which state-level (and province-level) regulation contributed to an inconsistent and piecemeal system of social welfare for the most vulnerable.

Balcom places the female reformers associated with the U.S. Children's Bureau and those associated with the Canadian Welfare Council within an international frame of reference. Bound by the ties of mutual purpose and personal friendship, these reformers worked together to curtail the unregulated "traffic in babies" during the 1930s and 1940s. Informal, personal connections allowed reformers to work effectively across national borders. But they also proved impermanent. By the 1950s, the personalized networks connecting American and Canadian

reformers had diminished and were largely replaced by independent regulatory efforts on both sides of the border. Female reformers' efforts to regulate cross-border adoption, Balcom contends, were at once a project to improve the care of children and an attempt to further social workers' professionalizing ambitions. At some points in the book, social workers' desire to expand their own sphere of influence appears paramount. Balcom's concern is the history of social policy, and her focus on social workers and other reformers is justified. But further engagement with the stories of adoptive parents and children themselves would have helped to highlight the real child welfare issues that were at stake.

The Traffic in Babies opens numerous doors for future research. Balcom's account of the ties between the network of female reformers in the United States and its Canadian counterpart encourages further explorations of the work of child welfare reformers in the international arena. How might our impressions of the scope and impact of female-led social welfare reform change when viewed within a global framework? The book also urges a consideration of the ways in which other matters of family law–marriage, divorce, child custody–have been complicated by the system of federalism and by the movement of people across state, provincial, and national borders. How have state/provincial and national borders intersected with and reshaped the boundaries of race and family in other situations and in other time periods?

Balcom situates social workers, parents, and children as participants in international relations. The story she tells is a transnational one. But rather than demonstrating the insignificance of the nation-state as a frame of reference, *The Traffic in Babies* serves as a powerful reminder that national borders still matter. In providing a detailed and insightful account of North America's youngest border-crossers, Balcom's book will find a welcome audience among historians of child welfare, women's history, policy history, and legal history alike.

Notes

[1]. Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (June 1999): 814-841.

[2]. Suzanne Mettler, *Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

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