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E. Wayne Carp, ed. *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002. 257 pp. \$57.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-10999-9.

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Adoption is simultaneously an ordinary and highly extraordinary institution; ordinary in the sense that, directly or indirectly, it touches most families in modern westernized societies, but extraordinary in what it sets out to do, replacing ties of blood with ties of association. Yet the aura of secrecy surrounding the practice in the last fifty years has meant that it has been the subject of little historical research. E. Wayne Carp's *Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption* was significant in breaking the silence that surrounded adoption practice in America. As editor of *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives* he extends the debate by drawing on the work of nine other scholars working in the field.

The scope of the book is impressive. After an historical overview by Carp, there are essays by Susan Porter, Carol Singley, and Paula Pfeffer exploring various aspects of nineteenth-century adoption in America, while George Behlmer contributes a chapter on the place of adoption in Victorian and Edwardian England. The second half of the book turns to the twentieth century with Julie Berebitsky, Patricia Hart, and Brian Gill focusing primarily on the transitional inter-war period, while Carp and Anna Leon-Guerrero make an argument for World War II as a major watershed in adoption practice and Barbara Melosh examines the relationship between personal narratives of adoption and the politics of identity.

With authors ranging from established academics to recent post-graduates, it is not surprising that the chapters vary in both quality and scope. The volume is given focus, however, by a series of shared assumptions and concerns. It makes no claims to be a comprehensive history of adoption, but rather sets out to highlight the potential for research in this area by showcasing the innovative work being done with the aim of making a case for the recognition of adoption studies as a distinctive sub-field of history. Adoption, Carp argues, impacts upon "the main currents of American social history and public policy such as definitions of family, children's rights, and

the growth and effect of state intervention in individual and family life" (p. 3) and as such is deserving of more attention than it has been given by historians to date.

The emphasis on the United States is deliberate. In the introduction, Carp argues for the uniqueness of the American experience, a point further emphasized by Behlmer's discussion of the starkly different British practice in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Despite having inherited from Britain a legal system which focused on preserving the rights of blood (and particularly the rights of inheritance), the American colonists were prepared to tolerate a more fluid definition of family. England, Behlmer argues, had to endure the multiple impacts of World War I on family relations before objections to legal adoption could be overcome, with the first adoption legislation not passed until 1926, yet in the United States the first legislation had been passed in Mississippi eighty years earlier. While, as Carp observes, legal adoption was first introduced in states where the legal code had originated in the Napoleonic Code, which was far less concerned with preserving blood ties, this did not apply to the Massachusetts legislature which passed the first "modern" adoption law in 1851 (pp. 5-6).

However, as all the early authors in this collection recognize, the practice of adoption long predates its legalization. The task of the historian is to recognize the variable, and sometimes competing, meanings of this malleable term in order to understand its extraordinary discursive power. In the nineteenth-century, adoption was one of a range of alternative ways in which a relative, or an institutional or statutory official, could dispose of an impoverished or, in some cases, an unwanted child. Though the notion of "the best interest of the child" was often invoked, "interest" could be defined in many ways. In many of these early cases, as both Porter and Behlmer point out, the exchange was primarily economic—the child was provided with a means of earning his or her keep while the new family obtained a cheap, and to all intents bound, worker. It was the "heartless" nature of

such utilitarian exchanges that brought adoption into disrepute once the notion of the child as an emotional rather than an economic asset emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

There were also deeper fears, encoded in notions of “bad blood,” that delayed the acceptance of adoption as a way of building family. Even though, as several of the writers in this collection make clear, not all the children surrendered to adoption were illegitimate, fears built around notions of inherited moral contagion persisted long after the crude versions of eugenics in which they were based had been abandoned. Hence the need for adoption advocates to capture the discourse, emphasizing the triumph of environment over heredity, and positing such family-building practices as central to national survival. The strains and complexities of this process are well examined both in Singley’s examination of narratives of adoption in nineteenth-century children’s literature and in Berebitsky’s work on the child rescue campaign conducted through the columns of the *Delineator* in the years 1907 to 1911. Although, as Hart points out, the “national dialogue of opportunity and progress” (p. 145) of the Progressive Era did much to reposition adoption in the national imagination, the doubts were never completely buried. Nor were all institutional managers convinced that adoption offered the best upbringing for all the children in their care. Catholic religious institutions, already threatened by the professionalization of social work, were, Pfeffer argues, particularly slow to be convinced of the virtues of home placements.

Despite its admirable scope, there are gaps and silences in this volume, largely created by the nature of the sources on which it was based. In his earlier work, Carp pioneered research into case records previously zealously guarded by their creators. Many of the contributors to this volume draw on similar material. However, only a small number of record sets have been opened for research and these relate primarily to professionally supervised adoptions arranged through private charitable agencies. As such they address forms of adoption which are passing into history. The nineteenth-century practice already seems alien. The pattern of newborn, closely matched placements as a “solution” to infertility are already moving in the same direction. However, there are other forms of adoption which are not in decline. While several contributors note that inter-country and special needs placement now dominate agency practice, these changes are understandably too recent to be open to the historian’s gaze. This, however, is not the case for the controversial inter-racial adoptions of the past which, although mentioned in passing, are not examined in detail in any of these contributions. Given the prominence of

debates around such practices in relation to the removal and placement of Indigenous children in like countries such as Canada and Australia it would have been interesting to see a reflection on American practice in this area.

More significant is the absence of any detailed discussion of what constitutes perhaps the greatest claim for the uniqueness of U.S. adoption practice, the continued toleration of private as against professionally arranged adoptions. In Britain, Canada, and Australia, where social workers were successful in gaining complete authority over the defense of “the best interests of the child,” such private practice has been completely outlawed as akin to trading in children. Its continuance in America is thus an anomaly which could have been more fully explored. While Gill’s chapter ruthlessly exposes the value-ridden basis of the supposedly professional matching practices of social-work adoption practice, with the chilling assumption that “there are first-class, second-class and third-class children, and there are first-class, second-class and third-class homes” (p. 163), there is no similar expose of the assumptions of private practitioners.

Nonetheless, the volume is not silent on the other key focus of contemporary debate, the fate of those whose lives were shaped by adoption. Silenced by the secrecy which encompassed adoption, particularly in the post-war era, their voices have invaded public discourse over the last twenty-five years, challenging what Melosh describes as the “adoption consensus” (p. 227) and, in many cases, changing contemporary practice. In the book’s concluding chapter, Melosh explores the narratives, or stories, which became the motor of this protest, bringing private pain into the public arena and, in the process, upsetting comfortable assumptions about the unimportance of blood (or genetic) ties in the construction of identity. Where adoption won public approval for its ability to construct “normal” families by bringing together “unwanted” children and infertile adults, the dissemination of the stories of those for whom the fit was less than perfect has served to undermine its legitimacy. Such narratives attract a popular audience, Melosh explains, “because they tap pervasive concerns and uncertainties about identity and family ties ... [creating] a space for discussion of moral questions and family ideologies that are often excluded from public debate” (p. 240). Her essay performs a similar function for this collection on the history of adoption, giving a human face to discussions in the earlier chapters reminding readers that social policy always has a personal impact and that the act of doing good always has within it the capacity to inflict great harm.

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