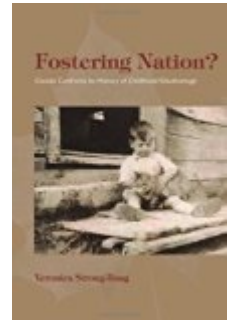


Veronica Strong-Boag. *Fostering Nation? Canada Confronts Its History of Childhood Disadvantage.* Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2011. x + 302 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55458-254-9.



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Published on H-Canada (October, 2012)

Commissioned by Stephanie Bangarth (King's University College, UWO)

With *Fostering Nation?* Veronica Strong-Boag, one of Canada's foremost historians, makes an important contribution to the growing historiography that attempts to decenter the "mainstream" Canadian family. Building on her earlier comprehensive study of the history of adoption (*Finding Families, Finding Ourselves: A History of Adoption in Canada* [2006]), Strong-Boag's *Fostering Nation?* is, as she concedes, less optimistic. From the outset, Strong-Boag states that this "is not a happy book": "comparable enthusiasm for fosterlings has been ... far less common" than for the "preferred" youngsters for whom adoption was a more likely outcome (pp. 1, 3). Although she deftly demonstrates how systemic structural inequalities have disadvantaged select groups of Canada's children, she also conveys a measure of faith in Canadians' "persisting determination to nurture" throughout her work (p. 9).

Strong-Boag organizes her book into seven thematic chapters. The first half, broadly speaking, traces the evolution of extrafamilial arrangements for caring for Canadian youngsters. An in-

troductory first chapter discusses Canadians' ongoing dependence on kith and kin and problematizes the "nostalgic narratives" that feature heavily in selective memories about first families (p. 16). Strong-Boag argues that kin's willingness and ability to care were shaped by various demographic and cultural factors that affected family formations and contributed to the diversification of caregiving. The fact that such relations were, at times, especially challenged by both familial and external pressures helps to explain why institutions prevailed. Chapter 2 discusses the institutional provisions for youngsters that have been "a significant feature of Canada's child protection landscape" from the nineteenth century to the present (p. 7). In their various forms, Strong-Boag contends, poorhouses, infant homes, orphanages, reformatories, asylums, and group homes all promised to "(re)socialize" children in a way that was superior to that offered by first families (p. 36). But, she argues, such institutions are not straightforward tools of social control. Families often resorted to them out of economic need, and

supporters and staff often “appeared to embody the collective concern for youngsters and families that was increasingly embraced as the mark of modern Canada” (p. 39). Although children were initially sheltered in jails, hospitals, and poor-houses intended for adults, the increasing recognition of childhood as a distinct life stage from the mid-nineteenth century gave rise to specialized institutions exclusively for children (including sectarian orphanages and state-run industrial and reform schools). This development was by no means uniform, however, and some children remained in adult institutions well into the twentieth century. Quebec’s “Duplessis orphans,” for example, were included in provincial mental hospitals from the 1940s through the 1960s. Selective admissions into specialized institutions, particularly orphanages, reflected ideas about which children and families were most worthy of public support. The same factors of race, class, gender, age, and ability that determined the “deserving” also affected first families’ abilities “to retain, to surrender, and to retrieve” institutionalized kin (p. 56).

While Strong-Boag cautions against drawing sharp distinctions between the operations of children’s institutions and the early foster care system, chapters 3 and 4 trace the evolution of Canadian child protection policies and programs and the specific place of fostering within this context. Strong-Boag identifies three main stages in the evolution of fostering. Until the 1920s, state child-welfare initiatives, namely, fostering, consistently sought to uphold and reaffirm the male breadwinner family. The “degeneracy” associated with mother-led families was framed as a public problem, and “redemption”—embodied by figures like J. J. Kelso, Ontario’s then-superintendent of neglected and dependent children—was associated with external, professional, male authority (p. 71). Solidly middle-class foster families consisting of male breadwinners and nurturing mothers were upheld as the ideal, but the realities of many domestic economies—fostering was unpaid—and the

fact that few middle-class households were willing to take on additional children made the ideal unattainable for most needy children. Respectable working-class homes were deemed adequate, but few such families could afford the added costs. As a result, “subsidies” (not “salaries”) that covered minimal expenses, while reflecting the expectations of women’s unpaid caring labor, became common in the interwar years.

After the First World War, state assistance to “worthy” families and legal adoption were heralded as the “gold” and “silver” standards of care while fostering was cast as an option for the children left behind. While social security programs aimed to shore up patriarchal family structures, Strong-Boag points out that these initiatives were only a stopgap, failing to adequately address “chronic shortages” in terms of housing and wages and ignoring “women’s persisting inequality in all aspects of life” (p. 80). Adoption—particularly of younger, white, able-bodied children—became increasingly popular during this period. As the demand for infants grew, would-be parents were expected to submit to external assessments of their domestic worthiness. As those “best” youngsters, those thought to be easiest to integrate into new households, were increasingly “skimmed off” by adoption, fostering became more demanding and foster homes gradually assumed the “unsavoury” reputation of earlier institutions (p. 82).

Strong-Boag demonstrates how foster families continued to struggle to manage ongoing connections with first families. By the 1960s, with the onset of what historians have termed the “sixties scoop,” First Nations girls and boys were increasingly central in child protection discussions, and often were singled out as candidates for fostering. In recent decades, growing recognition of the experiences of previously overlooked groups of children, cuts to social security, and growing concern over instability and “drift” among fosterlings have posed new challenges for child welfare ad-

vocates. Nevertheless, Strong-Boag asserts, reformers' increasing recognition of systemic failure and new feminist, disability rights, and First Nations activism warrant some optimism.

The final three chapters of *Fostering Nation?* offer a thought-provoking examination of the various actors engaged in the foster-care system: adults who surrendered children, those who received youngsters, and finally, the youngsters themselves. Strong-Boag argues that the experiences of first families, regularly depicted on opposite ends of the spectrum as either victims or monsters, can be better understood within the context of persistent and endemic structural inequalities. Classed, raced, and gendered inequalities have meant that certain first parents, particularly mothers, were suspect in the eyes of the state and medical, social work, and community authorities. For these vulnerable groups, gaps between resources and the domestic demands of child rearing often led to the surrender of children. Intact patriarchal households were perceived as the antithesis of, and consequently the solution to, pathological and "dangerous" first families. Foster mothers and fathers continually (re)negotiated their "border status" and faced what Strong-Boag has referred to as a "recurring dilemma of authenticity," caught between private and professional duties (p. 143). Although they often lacked formal credentials and were not paid professional wages, foster parents were expected to be model superior parents and citizens, to function capably alongside a growing body of child-care experts, and to acquiesce to state supervision. Foster mothers faced the paradox of reconciling their supposedly innate caring tendencies with the right to demand a fair wage, wrestling "with the perception that payment somehow made them less authentic" (p. 161). A shortage of "traditionally respectable" foster parents, coupled with increasing recognition of the varying needs of children in care--and in particular, the need to provide culturally appropriate child welfare services--have posed problems for the system in re-

cent years. Strong-Boag, however, makes note of ongoing efforts to improve fostering, including the celebration of outstanding foster parents and the growth of foster parent associations. In a final chapter that attempts to uncover the experiences of fosterlings--by no means an easy task--Strong-Boag similarly notes the optimism inherent in foster kids' resistance and courage in facing stigma associated with foster care and an ongoing "legacy of disadvantage" that consistently characterizes interactions with government agencies (p. 173).

Fostering Nation? does not claim to be a comprehensive history of responses to needy youngsters throughout Canadian history. Rather, Strong-Boag offers a broad, but groundbreaking, historical perspective on child protection policies and programs that illuminates the social forces shaping the management of Canada's foster children over time. In so doing, she carefully supports her argument that "policies and practices, for all their frequent good will, have rarely been equipped to address the root of much distress" (p. 201). Persisting structural inequalities and enduring patriarchy have disadvantaged many first families, and particularly, first mothers, who faced more scrutiny than their male partners. First fathers, in contrast, tended to avoid inspection, were often assumed to be incompetent by default, and only appeared to be cause for comment when their behavior was notably caring or abhorrent. Like their foster-parent counterparts, these men are seldom studied, and there is much work to be done in this regard. Strong-Boag's work is a pioneering effort that brings much to the embryonic history of extrafamilial care for children, offering a nuanced discussion of the experiences of those involved in fostering, in all its forms. Fundamentally, *Fostering Nation?* reveals the profound and lasting impact of social inequalities, while nonetheless pointing to the hope inborn in current indigenous, disability rights, and feminist "condem-

nations of traditional policies and practices” (p. 206).

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Citation: Whitney Wood. Review of Strong-Boag, Veronica. *Fostering Nation? Canada Confronts Its History of Childhood Disadvantage*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.

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