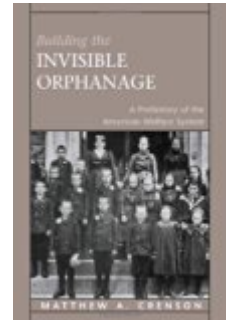


Matthew A. Crenson. *Building the Invisible Orphanage: A Prehistory of the American Welfare System.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998. xii + 383 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-46591-6.



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This book raises a number of interesting questions about the connections between nineteenth and twentieth century child welfare practices. Matthew Crenson, Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University, makes the case that ADC, which he sees as the "invisible orphanage," replaced the bricks and mortar orphanages as the prevalent form of caring for needy children. Crenson posits that the common "institutional logic" of orphanages created two "paths -- internal and external," that would ultimately lead to their decline. The internal problem, "that uniform regulations impeded the development of children's characters, and that the indiscriminate mixing of children in institutions might magnify the influence of bad characters while corrupting the good," (4) caused orphanage administrators to separate and classify children and, eventually, to experiment with cottage style institutions. The "external" issue, heavy demand, resulted in overcrowding and forced administrators to consider alternatives to building larger institutions, including the placement of children in "free" and, later "paid" homes.

Crenson argues that the expense of institutional solutions encouraged experimentation with other options like placing out. Eventually perspicacious policy makers and social workers recognized that it was cheaper, and, perhaps, even better for younger children to be placed in "paid homes" because "free homes" were often unsatisfactory for children too young to contribute to the household economy. From here, Crenson claims, it was but a short leap to paying mothers so that children could remain in their own homes. While this argument is in some ways appealing because it puts children's needs at the center of the history of child welfare policy, it is, unfortunately, also extremely problematic.

Crenson's compares the child welfare systems established in four states New York, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Minnesota to deal with increasing numbers of needy children. The states are chosen to reflect a range of approaches, with Massachusetts, the first state to endorse "placing out" over institutions, at one extreme, and New York, the state with the largest number of children in orphanages, at the other. Although there were many

private orphanages in Massachusetts, they did not receive public funding and by mid-century the state had established its own "state schools." The New York legislature, in contrast, subsidized private institutions rather than building its own. In each state Crenson selects individual institutions and tells their stories. In many ways these case histories are the highlight of the book; whether Crenson is describing the trajectory of the state school in Monson, Massachusetts or the biography of Charles Birtwell he succeeds in communicating the complex moral economy of child welfare work.

However, the strengths of Crenson's case histories, with their variations that cannot entirely be explained by geography, state policy, or even powerful leaders, also illuminate the weaknesses of the book as a whole. His attempts to classify institutions and states by type lead him to lump together asylums with dissimilar populations, goals, and systems. For example, he does not differentiate between orphanages and reformatories. The early chapters of the book focus on the New York Juvenile Asylum as a prototypical orphanage even though this institution was, from the moment of its incorporation in 1850, intended for potential delinquents rather than poor orphans. Other more typical long-lived institutions, like the Orphan Asylum of the City of New York, a nonsectarian Protestant orphanage founded by women in 1807, are not considered. This is unfortunate because these asylums would offer more interesting parallels with institutions he discusses in Ohio and elsewhere.

Another misleading implication is that Catholic orphanage managers alone were interested in preserving the child's connection with his or her family of origin. Most Protestant and Jewish children placed in institutions after 1850 also eventually returned to their surviving parents, siblings, or other relatives. In fact, by the end of the century, many children who entered orphanages were not orphans at all; they were the chil-

dren of families in crisis. Judith Dulberger, for example, in *Mother Don't for the Best*, argues that parents used the Albany Orphan Asylum for temporary emergency child care (sometimes repeatedly).[1]

Long-term asylum inmates often had no families to return to or were "diagnosed" with physical, mental, or behavioral problems. The reformers Crenson discusses tended to focus on this population because these were the children (rejected by more selective private institutions) who ended up in public institutions (where they existed) and the ones that legislators and policymakers were most concerned about. The annual reports, other published materials, and reports to budget committees which constitute most of Crenson's sources were carefully constructed documents designed to raise money and elicit certain responses; as such they need to be read with care.

The book also seems to ignore chronology. When the Children's Aid Society sent its first orphan train to the west in the 1850s, Charles Loring Brace's innovation was the train, not the practice of placing out. Early apprenticeship in families, with or without formal indenture contracts, was the traditional means of dealing with poor orphaned children. Orphanages had been established in the early years of the century in response to the abuses of this system; their founders were concerned that families used such children as "hewers of wood and drawers of water" and neglected their education and emotional needs. Orphanage managers saw their institutions as protective rather than reformatory; throughout the century they continued to fear early placing out because their experience with indenture was, at best, mixed. Crenson describes one such institution the Union County (Ohio) Home. E. Byron Turner and his wife, Mary, ran the home for sixteen years. Mrs. Turner's reports express her motherly attitude toward her wards and her continual (and reasonable, given the high percentage of unsuccessful placements) misgivings about

placing out. Finally, in 1900, the Turners left to manage a new orphanage which did not indenture children (150-157). Crenson ascribes Mrs. Turner's concern and her maternal approach to the smaller size and rural location of county homes. However, my research and that of others, including Tim Hasci, in *Second Home*, indicates that Turner's management style was typical.[2] Most orphanages (but not reformatories) saw themselves as "second homes" which provided children with food, clothing, shelter, and education until they were placed in families as adolescents ready to learn trades and contribute to the household economy. But the traditional practice of individuals, philanthropists, organizations, and public welfare workers placing young orphaned children in families as "boarders" or indentured servants also continued throughout the century. These two approaches coexisted as alternatives.

Chronology matters because Crenson attempts to demonstrate causal relationships between the various ideas, events, and trends discussed. Most of the latter are well described: the growing critique of institutional practices by the members of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections after 1874 and the reforms they recommended (some of which were eventually implemented); the White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children in 1909 and its resolutions that children should not be removed from their mothers for economic reasons alone and that children who could not be cared for in their own homes be placed in foster homes; the mother's pensions bills that became law in several states at about the same time.

But none of these events caused orphanages to disappear; in fact census data shows that the orphanage population continued to increase until 1933, decades after the White House Conference and the passage of mother's pensions bills in most states.[3] The decline of orphanages was much slower than Crenson implies and can probably be ascribed largely to demographic changes that kept

children in their own homes, especially lower adult mortality rates and decreasing family size. And if families were kept together by a "check in the mail," (316) that check was as likely to result from other forms of social insurance such as unemployment or worker's compensation benefits as from ADC. What is more, as Dorothy Brown and Elizabeth McKeown have convincingly demonstrated in *The Poor Belong to Us*, there was no consensus about child placement practices even in the 1930s. During the debates over the Social Security Acts, Catholic child welfare workers insisted on narrowing the proposed ADC eligibility requirements in order to safeguard state subsidies to institutions and protect Catholic children from assignment to Protestant foster homes.[3]

Crenson argues that, by the turn of the century, "welfare was just around the corner [but] it took more than thirty years and the Great Depression to carry the country over the last few steps." (314) It is surprising, therefore, that the book does not discuss the key period between 1920 and 1936. Instead Crenson reverts to a theoretical model; social policy formation in the United States, he posits, was the work of corporations, women's organizations, and private charities rather than, as in Europe, the result of national struggles over class, state, and party. Private charity led to smaller institutions with limited authority which sought simpler means of providing services; over time they would increasingly look to the state to solve their problems. The American environment led to a different kind of "state building in which the role of demolition was vital Dismantling the regime of the orphanage not only took children out of the asylum; it helped to put checks in the mail." (319) This process took a long time because different groups had competing agendas, but eventually all realized that they would benefit from state involvement. Whereas religion, for example, was a divisive factor in institutions, welfare would be inclusive; in principle at least it allowed the establishment of a child-centered policy that went beyond moral, cultural,

and racial considerations. This is a nice thought, but it is not supported by the evidence. Ultimately, as Crenson himself points out, now, as in the past, "charity is not just about need, but also about virtue," (328) and the meanings of both have always been contested.

Crenson's comments on contemporary child welfare policy are cogent and his focus on "the child-centered origins of welfare" (329) is thought-provoking. But, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, does not demonstrate that his model of state formation works. Nor does it make the case for the "invisible orphanage."

Notes

[1]. Judith A. Dulberger, "Mother Donit for the Best," *Correspondence of a Nineteenth-Century Orphan Asylum* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 10.

[2]. Timothy A. Hasci, *Second Home, Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[3]. E. Wayne Carp, "Orphanages vs. Adoption: The Triumph of Biological Kinship, 1800-1933," in *With Us Always: A History of Private Charity and Public Welfare*, Donald T. Critchlow and Charles H. Parker, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), p. 126.

[4]. Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth KcKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us, Catholic Charities and American Welfare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 172-177.

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