

Suffer the little children in the name of reform

At first, Mathew suggested getting a Barnardo boy. But I said 'no' flat to that. They may be all right — I'm not saying they're not — but no London streetarabs for me.

— Anne Of Green Gables

By JANE O'HARA

HERE IS A new musical in London's West End, a high-calorie, low-protein production, which falls somewhere between *Oliver* and *Annie* by virtue of its kick-line of little British orphans. It is called *Barnardo*, and it is based on the life and legend of Dr. Thomas Barnardo.

The story of these 80,000 orphans is often sad, more often tragic. But it does not appear on the stage of *Barnardo*, where the Twistian little hams are too busy singing about the joys of clean sheets to wonder about the 80,000 who got away and hated it. All of them were packed off before the age of consent; some went without their parents' permission, others without their parents' knowledge and in letters home they complained of severe loneliness, harsh Canadian masters and the frightening isolation of the vast Canadian wilderness.

This story surfaces in a new book called *Labouring Children*, by Joy Parr, a historian at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont.

The scheme to export to Canada children who washed up on the banks of various philanthropic and religious institutions reflected the Victorian ideals of the day. It had the backing of Britain's social reformers, who thought the mother country "could benefit from the absence of young paupers, the future inmates of our workhouses and jails"; of the policy makers and the powerful, who feared that the "children of the streets were the raw materials from which the dangerous classes were formed"; and lastly, of the evangelicals, who believed they could save young souls by shovelling them out of slums and sending them, on a wing and a prayer into the agricultural arcadia called Canada.

More to the point, shipping kids overseas before they reached the age of consent saved Britain money that would be spent keeping the disadvantaged in workhouses or rehabilitating them in industrial schools already crowded to overflowing. It seemed like a good idea at the time and Canada the perfect place. As Parr rightly points out in her book, the idealization of agriculture and wide open spaces was a 19th-century belief rigidly held by the Victorians. And what was Canada at the time if not wheat and ploughs and the back forty of the world.

If Christian evangelists viewed the city as corrupt, then they also saw the country as "the best asylum for the outcast child." As a consequence, Canada with its frontier farms in Ontario, Quebec and the West was little short of "God's reformatory." Still, no matter how nicely phrased, the Victorian scheme of pest control smacked of sending convicts to colonize Australia. And, although there was no shortage of Canadian applicants for child immigrants — they were, after all another pair of hands at a time when the rural population was declining — Canadians looked upon the British slum kids as morally depraved and hereditarily "tainted." For this, and many other reasons, the child immigrants

Eighty thousand British youth were sacrificed in a cruel plot to rid Britain of its surplus orphans by shipping them off to Canada, "God's reformatory."

LABOURING CHILDREN. By Joy Parr. McGill-Queen's, \$25.95.

were never really accepted as part of the families they worked for. They would not be adopted, not come to be loved as sons and daughters, but suffered as members of some worker species.

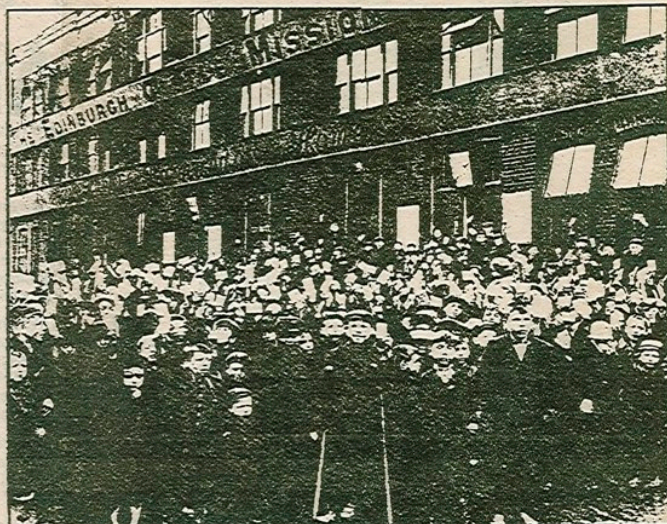
In all but the most genial situations, these children forfeited their childhood. They were legally bound or indentured to masters and mistresses who measured to the farthing the cost of keeping, clothing, feeding and paying them (after they had reached 14) a small wage, with the work they extracted from them. This misery attitude was best displayed by one Ontario farmer who complained to the emigration agency about the 11-year-old boy he kept, saying: "He seems no more than a child of six, with no idea of anything but play."

But these children had even harsher Canadian critics. Many suspected the backgrounds of these migrating urchins

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and pondered their unhealthy effect on the lily-white Canadian landscape. One of the more notably outraged was Peter Macdonald, a Liberal MP from Huron, who in 1888 claimed publicly that these kids came from districts "where syphilitic disease" prevailed and that they would be sodden with the same "poisons when they came to Canada." County sheriffs soon got into the act, claiming, as Parr relates, that the children came from a bad, lunatic, criminal class imbued with crime "from infancy."

Add to these pious, upraised voices the cries of organized labor, who lobbied against the prospect of these little mites stealing urban jobs when they got loose from their barnyard engagements, and the



ORPHANS wield meal tickets at Dr. Barnardo home.

picture of Canadian hospitality is not all that palatable.

That many of the British slum children were physically smaller than well-fed Canadian farmboys, or that they suffered more from various eye and skin diseases than a normal sampling of their Canadian siblings, only increased the Canadian fear that these immigrants were morally and physically degenerate. Canadians looked upon them as dimwitted and inferior; they were laughed at when they went to school and so a majority discontinued their education, a handicap they bore later in life.

An inordinate number of these children were also bedwetters. One Manitoba farmer, named James Wheelton Brown, got so fed up with the smell night after night that he eventually forced his incontinent charge

to protect the children, but given the distances inspectors had to travel and the limited number of men given over to the task, these were insufficient and in Parr's opinion "offered little" safeguards at all. Besides, in many instances the cruelty to these children was subtler; more mental than physical and it is little wonder that, as one boy put it, he spent much of his time "hatching schemes to run away." But where to, when one lonely farmhouse was as bad as the next.

It would appear that many Canadian masters and mistresses considered the children as British castoffs and as such, not worthy of any better treatment in their new country than in their old.

Still, it does not excuse the Canadian farmer who gave his young boarder slippers to wear to school in winter while supplying his own children with shoes and rubbers; nor does it pardon the Stratford, Ont., master who kept returning his charges to the agency when their clothes wore out. That way he wouldn't have to pay for replacements. Boys of 14, who were considered fit enough to do the work of grown men, often spent biting winters clad in light clothing because anything heavier would also be costlier.

In her balancing act, Parr doesn't forsake historical accuracy for the sake of a good story. She points out that the British immigrants were, at times, trying. Masters of boys who did everything from ploughing and setting traplines to working on road gangs in the West, and mistresses of girls, who were mostly apprenticed as domestics, complained they sulked, were lazy, ill-tempered, too weak and even that they masturbated. Yet another sign of moral depravity. On at least two occasions, child immigrants murdered a family member.

Parr pointed out that many of the child immigrants profited materially from their emigration to Canada; a number moved to the cities, others moved back to Britain and some moved to the United States. Because they were laughed out of schools in Canada, few ever made it to the professional classes. And because they lacked a British industrial training, few as well found work as skilled workers.

Perhaps they were better off coming to Canada, but at what price this relative prosperity? Britain's social reformers and religious philanthropists could perhaps claim they had rescued the mother land from a generation of troublemakers and had saved a few souls. But was it worth it to the 80,000 who would grow up knowing they had been robbed of childhood?

to sleep in the barn. With temperatures reaching 45 degrees below zero, the 14-year-old boy's feet froze solid and he died of gangrene after suffering severe frostbite.

Although this is the most extreme case of cruelty and mistreatment in Parr's book, there are others and the comment of a Montreal social worker, when asked for details on the death of another British child, perhaps reveals the extent of them. Said A.F. Proctor: "Really, there have been so many cases of ill usage in the past that it would occupy the judges fully for some time if they could all be raked up."

There was an inspection system set up