

A new musical about Dr Barnardo has opened in the West End, but a more serious account of the lives of the children in his care comes from the Canadian academic Joy Parr in her book about child immigration. John Cunningham reports.

## Labouring under a dangerous illusion

Emigration party, 1909: Mrs Sylvia Barnardo (centre) seeing off a group of youngsters on the first London to Liverpool leg of their journey. Picture: Barnardo Photo Library

THERE WAS a cast of hundreds. Their costumes identical in their drabness, the girls carrying identical hessian bags. They were starting an epic journey and yet the young faces, their astonishingly young faces, show nothing of excitement or fear: only the learned expression of meekness which identical misfortune brings.

They are standing in front of a train, and along the side of the carriage their future, and their immediate past, is emblazoned: Dr Barnardo's Emigration Party. There is in the West End a new musical about the life of the famous founder of children's homes, but this is not a scene from it. It is a photograph, one of many in the Barnardo

There was a lot of seeing-off to be done if you worked for Dr Barnardo, or indeed for any of the children's charities which arranged new lives in new lands for the off-spring of the urban poor. Between them, in the half century to 1925 such organisations sent 80,000 children, most of them under 14 years old, from city jungles to the rural wildernesses of Canadian farms, where they were apprentices, most of them, as child labourers.

The movement of children whose families had been over-strained by economic and social pressures in Britain, had more in common with transporting undesirables to the colonies than with the mass voluntary migrations of adult workers from



serve long periods indentured to farming families.

But while children exchanged life in an institution in big British cities for the wild, wide open spaces of Canada — and many went to parts of Quebec and Ontario which were still frontier farming areas late last century — they did not escape the system which had clobbered their parents and which, for all its so-called benignity, could maim them emotionally.

A Canadian academic, Joy Parr, has uncovered the whole hypocritical business and recounts it well and briefly in *Labouring Children* (Croom Helm, £11.95). Its roots were Victorian; its organisers were the philan-

thropists, and saw juvenile emigration as a method of social control.

At least, so they thought, if poverty runs in families, they would be getting the next generation of trouble-makers out of the way. Others, and the churches all were involved, concentrated on the alleged moral danger to children of feckless families. Often as Joy Parr points out, both cases were argued at once, because public policy and Christian mission were seldom separated by the Victorians.

Evangelicals lived by faith, but more by results. Saving souls was always dodgy (how could you be sure?) but here was something foolproof: by putting boys and girls on boats for the Promised Land, they felt sure of the efficacy

of Western Christianity idealised in the belief that agricultural work is purifying, innocent, and morally intact.

At least, that was the theory. The children came from poor, crowded urban backgrounds, and were quite unused to the raw tyranny of the seasons; the long loneliness of evenings in strange houses, beyond the reach of affection, so it must have seemed to them, with intermittent letters home. They were inserted into a labour market as productive units; the notion for them of childhood, was a very compressed period. And by their early teens, it was over. If not at an earlier age.

The children were not there for adoption; they were not full family members

in Canadian households. For instance, paid Canadian masters and mistresses, as Joy Parr puts it, five dollars a month towards the keep of children from six to 10 who were boarded out. This freed them from larger labour obligations and bought them time to go to school.

At 11, children were reckoned mostly to be strong and experienced enough to earn their keep by some domestic and farm work, with time off in winter for schooling. By 14, many were doing full-time jobs, were no burden on the household. The agencies, which arranged supervision with varying degrees of thoroughness, demanded wages for the child apprentices at this stage. Wages accumulated and

young men enough to move somewhere else in Canada. To come home to Britain, if they hadn't lost the longing. Or more likely, quitting the land altogether, and moving to Canadian cities.

In this, the immigrant children were following, as Joyce Parr documents, the pattern of the Canadian youngsters alongside whom they grew up. In 50 years of child immigration, the rural population of Canada declined from 80 to 50 per cent of the total by 1921. British children were sent across the Atlantic partly to fill a gap in this labour market, to try and stem an irrevocable trend.

Very poor Canadian farming families took young boarders because the cash payments were useful; other families took them in in

And the slightly more prosperous farmers finally employed them as fully-fledged wage-earners, but at the low-paid end of the scale.

So the children grew up in a succession of households as the demands of Canada's rural economy dictated. Barnardo girls moved four times in their first five years; boys an average of three times. Rather rarely, they ran away (where to?) Rather rarely, there was cruelty. But in adulthood, they didn't look back on it all with much affection. Even so, the social reformers rubbed their hands in satisfaction.

After all, "Every boy rescued from the gutter is one dangerous man the less," a quotation Prof. Parr wrongly attributes to the Psalms. It was said, of course