

1 Poverty and possibility in the era of Greater Britain

In June of 1909, William Baker, the executive director of Barnardo's Homes, the charity founded nearly forty years earlier by the evangelical reformer Thomas Barnardo, received a disturbing letter. The manager of the organization's flagship Stepney mission in London's East End, Adam Fowler, had written to pass along an inquiry from a "respectable widow" about her son. The boy in question was a former Barnardo's ward who had emigrated to Canada a few months previously, and his mother was hoping for any news that Fowler might have about his progress. Such requests were routine. At the time, the charity was sheltering nearly 7,000 boys and girls in its branch homes across the United Kingdom, as well as sending an additional 1,100 to Canada each year.¹ The parents of these children often sought to remain in contact with them, and Stepney provided a stable address for the exchange of letters and information. This case was unique, though, because, unbeknownst to the mother, her child had returned from Canada the week before and was a patient in the local hospital. His story was tragic. Fowler wrote:

[The boy] alleges he was given work to do in the fields which made his back ache, and that when he rested he was beaten with an India rubber strap. One night last November he went out and hid himself under a barn. A report from Canada states that he "ran away"; the barn, however, under which he was found formed, I understand, a part of the farm on which he lived. When found, he was made to walk back to the house (so the boy says) although his limbs had, by that time, become black, as the result of frost-bite. Not until two days later, the boy asserts, was any doctor brought to see him. When seen by the doctor he was ordered to a hospital, where, soon afterwards, both his legs were amputated. One of his arms is now in such a condition that it may also have to be removed.²

Fowler went on to acknowledge the obvious fact that the child had not been well placed. Since 1882, when Barnardo's first joined the then-

¹ In 1908, Barnardo's reported having 6,736 children in care in Britain; the previous year, it sent 1,082 boys and girls to Canada. Barnardo's, Council Minutes, January 22, 1908, D.239/B1/2/4, ULSCA.

² Fowler to Baker, June 23, 1909, D.239/C1/1/1, ULSCA.

burgeoning child emigration movement, the organization's policy had been to send boys and girls to live with farming families along the Canadian frontier. Its directors accepted that many of these children would work for their keep by performing light duties around the house, but the family that had taken in this boy had given him an excessive amount of work for his age. Although "only twelve last September," he had been required to do tasks that usually were the preserve of hired servants, such as milking cows, plowing, and making breakfast. "If his story is true," Fowler noted, this work was not in keeping with the definition of "merely 'nominal' employment" that the organization allowed. Equally troubling was the devastating lack of communication from the Barnardo's representatives in Canada. Not only had the Toronto office failed to keep track of the child's wellbeing but they had also neglected to inform Stepney of the situation until the boy had arrived back in Britain, a full seven months after the amputations had occurred. In the intervening period, the child had recovered alone in his hospital bed, and no Barnardo's official had visited him until the eve of his return journey. This long silence from Canada now placed Fowler in a difficult situation with the mother, who "cannot have heard anything of the terrible misfortune that has befallen [her son] ... She has certainly had no notice from Stepney, for we knew nothing, and could, therefore, tell her nothing."³

From there, the record falls silent. The case of "the boy" – his name was never mentioned – was not considered at the next meetings of Barnardo's Council or Executive Committees. If Baker wrote back to Fowler about the situation, his letter did not make it into the archive. No legal action appears to have been taken, and the episode did not provoke any change in or interruption to the organization's emigration program. In fact, only two years later the Council expressed its delight at the receipt of a £10,000 contribution toward its Canadian initiatives.⁴ The money went to fund a publicity campaign that pasted thousands of Barnardo's advertisements in railway carriages throughout Britain, offering a "new start in life to ... young emigrants."⁵ As for the boy himself, the lack of basic information about his identity makes it impossible to do more than speculate. Perhaps he returned to the care of his mother, although, given the difficulties of providing for disabled children at the turn of the century, it seems more likely that he remained in one of Barnardo's

³ Ibid.

⁴ Barnardo's, Council Minutes, April 24, 1912, D.239/B1/2/4, ULSCA.

⁵ This quote comes from a typical Barnardo's advertisement of the period, published in *The Quiver* 34, no. 6 (May 1909), 22.

specialized homes for “crippled” boys and girls. There, he would have received training in a manual skill in the hope that despite his missing limbs he might still make an independent life for himself.⁶

Instances of extreme abuse like this one are rare in the archive, and, given the inadequate nature of inspections and record keeping in the period, it is impossible to know how common they were in reality. Nevertheless, the case sheds light on the kinds of hardships that child migrants faced during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. The rapid expansion of the child emigration movement in the four decades before the First World War, during which period over a dozen agencies sent more than 80,000 boys and girls to Canada, created widespread problems of supervision and placement.⁷ In the words of one early critic, the system amounted to “nothing more than just scattering the children broadcast here and there, and losing sight of them.”⁸ Child migrants’ isolation could also be amplified through a loss of contact with their families in Britain. As Fowler’s reference to the respectability of the mother makes clear, judgments about the validity of a family’s connection were enmeshed with subjective assessments of character and morality. Middle-class and elite reformers rarely took seriously the opinions of those they deemed the “undeserving poor,” and they often explicitly attempted to sever family ties. In a careful study of Barnardo’s case files from the years 1882 through 1908, Joy Parr found that, while parents signed their consent to the possibility of emigration when they admitted their child into the Homes, only one in every three migrant girls’ guardians were notified when their daughter was actually scheduled to leave the country; of these, two-thirds of the parents described as “respectable” received advanced notification. Forty-two percent were informed only after their daughter had sailed, and one

⁶ On the limited assistance provided to disabled children and their parents in this period, see Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 180–181; Seth Koven, “Remembering and Dismemberment: Crippled Children, Wounded Soldiers, and the Great War in Britain,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (October 1994): 1167–1202.

⁷ Overviews of the early development of the movement can be found in Gillian Wagner, *Children of the Empire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982); Joy Parr, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869–1924* (University of Toronto Press, 1994, originally 1980); Kenneth Bagnell, *The Little Immigrants: The Orphans Who Came to Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2001, originally 1980); Marjorie Kohli, *The Golden Bridge: Young Immigrants to Canada, 1833–1939* (Toronto: Natural Heritage, 2003); Roger Kershaw and Janet Sacks, *New Lives for Old* (Kew: The National Archives, 2008); Roy Parker, *Uprooted: The Shipment of Poor Children to Canada, 1867–1917* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008).

⁸ “The Emigration of Pauper Children,” *The Times*, June 11, 1875, 4. This was the finding of a Local Government Board inquiry. For a summary of the full investigation, see Andrew Doyle, “Report to the President of the Local Government Board ... as to the Emigration of Pauper Children to Canada,” *Parliamentary Papers LXVII* (1875).

in four received no notice at all.⁹ Moreover, caregivers almost always disregarded the views of children outright, as shown by the numerous qualifications and asides – “so the boy says,” “if his story is true” – that littered Fowler’s letter. As such, episodes like this one underscore the relative powerlessness of needy parents and children at the turn of the century, a time in which one in ten child migrants was sent to Canada without the expressed permission of their guardians.¹⁰

That is a significant, and disturbing, proportion. Yet the fact that the majority of parents who grappled with the agonizing decision to allow their child’s resettlement gave their assent suggests that child emigration was an acceptable, if desperate, option for poor families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the vantage point of the present day, it can be difficult to fathom the former vibrancy of a practice that now so jars with twenty-first-century ideals of child welfare and the family, and easier to dismiss it as another example of the victimization of poor families by an overly zealous charitable sector.¹¹ Recent historians of nineteenth-century philanthropy, however, have done much to refute the stereotype of the omnipotent and interventionist “Lady Bountiful.” Although voluntary campaigns were frequently condescending and hierarchical, they could also offer a space for working-class men and women to participate in civil society, to engage in the culture of respectability, and to advocate for the needs of their communities at a time when most Britons remained excluded from active citizenship.¹² The challenge is to understand how child emigration made sense to a generation of Britons – rich and poor alike – who were swept up by the possibilities of a new life overseas. In an era of growing concern that chronic, industrial

⁹ Parr, *Labouring Children*, 71.

¹⁰ The power to emigrate children against the wishes of their parents was officially granted to the Home Secretary under the 1894 Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act, but many charities had been exercising the practice for some time. Parr identified 100 out of a total of 997 Barnardo boys and girls who had been sent to Canada without their parents’ consent or under court order by the Home Secretary. *Ibid.*, 67.

¹¹ An emphasis on the victimization of poor parents dominates the popular literature on child emigration, which has contended that most guardians throughout the history of the movement did not consent to their children’s emigration. Philip Bean and Joy Melville, for instance, claimed that “parents, when they gave their child(ren) into the care of an institution or society, generally had no idea that the children would end up being sent to the other side of the world.” Philip Bean and Joy Melville, *Lost Children of the Empire: The Untold Story of Britain’s Child Migrants* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 4. For a critique, see Barry Coldrey, *Child Migration: Consent of Parents to their Children’s Emigration, the Legal and Moral Dimension* (Altrincham: Tamanaraik Press, 1996).

¹² Frank Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 2006). On the agency of poor parents within the Victorian child welfare sector, see Lydia Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

poverty was stifling the potential of thousands of British children, the vision of a more wholesome life to be found in the farmlands of Greater Britain appealed widely, from the elevated tier of elite reformers to the most struggling of poor parents. Exploring how this came to be is the focus of this chapter.

Britons overseas

During the long nineteenth century, Britons were a people on the move. From the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars through the Great War a hundred years later, the country witnessed a series of emigration booms that propelled millions of English, Irish, Welsh, and Scottish across the seas. In 1815, when the trend was just beginning, some 2,000 people left the British Isles. By mid century this number had risen to 250,000 people per year.¹³ During the early 1900s, over 1,670,000 men, women, and children left the country. And in one remarkable year – 1913 – nearly 400,000 poured forth.¹⁴ To put this figure into perspective, it roughly equaled the size of one of Britain’s larger cities, as if all of the residents of Leeds or Bristol had suddenly departed for foreign shores.¹⁵

Not all of these people went to the empire. During the mid-Victorian period the majority traveled to locales outside Greater Britain, particularly the United States. Yet the settler colonies of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa grew steadily in popularity, and by the early 1900s they were attracting nearly two-thirds of all British migrants.¹⁶ As James Belich has argued, this sustained period of emigration was nothing less than a “settler revolution.” By the end of Victoria’s reign in 1901, it had ushered forth a new world entity, the “British West,” which contained some 24 million people and rivaled the power and energy of the more famed American frontier.¹⁷

The effects of this expanded emigration were far reaching. Most noticeably, it led to a tremendous increase in the public awareness of the colonies

¹³ Eric Richards, *Britannia’s Children: Emigration from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland since 1600* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 118.

¹⁴ Stephen Constantine, “British Emigration to the Empire-Commonwealth since 1880: From Overseas Settlement to Diaspora?” in *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity*, ed. Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 16–35, 19.

¹⁵ In 1911, the population of Leeds was 445,500 while that of Bristol was 357,048. Frank Moore Colby, *The New International Year Book for the Year 1914* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1915), 314.

¹⁶ Marjorie Harper and Stephen Constantine, *Migration and Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁷ James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglorworld, 1783–1939* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 85.

within metropolitan culture. The revolution in communications technology that occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century did much to facilitate this process, allowing idealized images of settler life to saturate all levels of society. The creation of an undersea network of telegraph and cable lines secured a prominent spot for news from the British world in the pages of the national and penny press, while the rapid development of the postal service helped sustain contacts between migrants and their loved ones.¹⁸ Also important was the rise of “booster literature” that aimed to encourage emigration, particularly following the “hungry forties,” when large numbers of philanthropists became convinced that resettlement offered the best means to restore independence to starving paupers.¹⁹ In the wake of that decade, a growing number of charities and civic groups and (from 1886) the government’s own Emigrants’ Information Office issued cheap pamphlets and posters extolling the benefits of the settler territories.²⁰ Perhaps the most powerful source of knowledge about life in the empire, however, came from return migrants. Between 1860 and 1914, an estimated one-third of English settlers traveled back home, especially from Canada, which was relatively close by and well serviced by steam-powered ocean liners.²¹ Back in Britain, the period of time spent overseas gave return migrants added cache in their old neighborhoods, where many were eager to share their experiences.²² In sum, during the late nineteenth century the paths conveying information about the settler colonies to Britain were diverse and well trodden. This influx of news, personal stories, and adventure tales made the rural empire a living concept in the minds of most Victorians. It also helped remove the stigma that had once been attached to emigration. By the end of the century, resettlement no longer appeared as an unhappy fate reserved for convicts and castoffs but as a respectable life decision available to all walks of life.²³

The heightened cultural conversation about the settler world extended the mental frameworks in which ordinary Britons contemplated their

¹⁸ Simon Potter, “Communication and Integration: The British and Dominions Press and the British World, 1876–1914,” in *The British World*, ed. Bridge and Fedorowich, 190–206, 196. See also Simon Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System, 1876–1922* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). In 1839, Britons sent an average of four letters per capita, but by the 1870s they were sending thirty-two. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, 122.

¹⁹ Hilary Carey, *God’s Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, 1801–1908* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 332.

²⁰ Constantine, “British Emigration,” 20.

²¹ Richards, *Britannia’s Children*, 169.

²² On this phenomenon, see Marjory Harper, ed., *Emigrant Homecomings: The Return Movement of Emigrants, 1600–2000* (Manchester University Press, 2005).

²³ Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, 153–165.

lives. Its impact was soon felt within the broader national discussion of issues such as urban poverty, joblessness, and overcrowding. Public concern about these problems, which commentators tended to lump together under the heading of “the social question,” was especially intense during the later years of the nineteenth century, when the prolonged economic downturn of 1873–1896 made destitution appear more entrenched and visible than ever before. Ironically, this perception of a worsening social crisis came at a time of rising real wages and declining family sizes, which together helped usher in an overall improvement in the standard of living.²⁴ Yet these trends did little to alleviate the plight of the unemployed or of those who labored in areas such as agriculture and dock work, where jobs remained scarce, poorly paid, and often temporary. The debate about the social question thus focused less on the matter of generalized poverty than on what the reformer Charles Booth called the “residuum” of society: the subsection of chronically destitute people who appeared to be mired in a state of perpetual need.²⁵

Opinion remained divided about how, or even if, the problem could be solved. Many “public moralists” saw pauperism as a product of a sinful character in need of salvation.²⁶ This belief had deep roots within the eighteenth-century evangelical tradition, which continued to dominate philanthropic circles in the Victorian period.²⁷ In the post-Darwinian era, however, its persuasiveness was fading. From the 1870s onward, it became increasingly common to understand poverty less in personal terms, as the product of moral flaws, than in systemic terms, as having resulted from “chains of causation outside the individual.”²⁸ The rise of data-driven forms of social investigation, like Booth’s mammoth seventeen-volume study *Life and Labour of the People in London*,

²⁴ The rates of those receiving poor relief as a percentage of the total population continued to fall throughout these years from a high of between 80 and 100 people per 1,000 in the 1840s to 25 per 1,000 in 1900. Lynn Lees, *The Solidarity of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700–1948* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239 and 295.

²⁵ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); Jose Harris, “Between Civic Virtue and Social Darwinism: The Concept of the Residuum,” in *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain, 1840–1914*, ed. David Englander and Rosemary O’Day (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 67–87.

²⁶ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

²⁷ Boyd Hilton, *Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1796–1865* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1988); Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service*.

²⁸ Lees, *The Solidarity of Strangers*, 243.

and Seebohm Rowntree's analysis of York, added "scientific" authority to this view.²⁹ Rowntree's work was especially influential in this regard. By defining the concept of the "poverty cycle," he focused awareness on the structures that trapped whole communities in destitution, defined economic need as a problem rather than a state of being, and helped spur the "New Liberal" social legislation of the early twentieth century.³⁰

The importance of the idea of Greater Britain to these discussions was that it held out the hope that change was possible. By the late nineteenth century, the iconography of the settler empire had matured into a set repertoire that emphasized natural abundance and productivity. An 1886 *Times* editorial on Canada was typical. It drew readers' attention to the "long reaches of river, great expanses of lake and plain, lofty mountain ranges, illimitable wheatland, populous cities, and railways running on and on for thousands of miles" with which the region had become synonymous.³¹ In part, these notions of boundless imperial fertility took hold because they fit neatly within the broader "pastoral impulse" of late Victorian culture.³² Juxtaposed against the "metaphors [of] the swamp, the forest, and the labyrinth" that dominated descriptions of the urban landscape at home, they invoked nostalgic conceptions of a simpler, rural, preindustrial Britain.³³ This idealized vision of the dominions as naturally rich but "empty" lands also appealed within the settler societies, which were at the time engaged in their own imperial wars against Indigenous peoples for control of the frontier.³⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century, Canadian settlers steadily encroached on Aboriginal "reserved lands," ignoring a 1763 Proclamation that protected Indigenous rights to territory that had not been purchased by the Crown. Following Confederation in 1867, the new federal government moved aggressively to extinguish Aboriginal title. Administrators were greatly aided in this effort by the simultaneous disappearance of the buffalo from the western plains, which forced Indigenous leaders to enter into one-sided treaties

²⁹ Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 17 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1889–1903); Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (London: Macmillan, 1901).

³⁰ Jose Harris, *Private Lives and Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain, 1870–1914* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 230–241.

³¹ "Canadian Tour," *The Times*, September 16, 1886, 7.

³² Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in England from 1880 to 1914* (New York: Quartet Books, 1982).

³³ Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 180.

³⁴ Philip Buckner, "The Creation of the Dominion of Canada, 1860–1901," in *Canada and the British Empire*, ed. Phillip Buckner (Oxford University Press, 2008), 66–86, 74–75.

that ceded control of their land in exchange for food and supplies.³⁵ As westward expansion picked up pace in the latter half of the century, and as the total number of Aboriginal peoples fell to under 1 percent of the population, the politically expedient vision of Indigenous peoples as a “dying race” whose decline would leave the prairies open for the taking came to dominate Canadian society, much as it had in other settler sites, such as Australia.³⁶

What made the rhetoric of open spaces and natural wealth so compelling was its forward momentum. The settler territories were not simply idyllic representations of the past transported to the present; they were also portrayed as inherently modern, located on the cusp of the future.³⁷ This temporal complexity was evident in commentators’ frequent tendency to describe the settler colonies using a mix of tenses that jostled together past, present, and future.³⁸ A 1903 *Monthly Review* editorial, again on Canada, noted that the territory was premodern and untouched, absent “those signs of age-long conflict with the forces of Nature so visible in every acre of trim and well-kempt England.” Yet at the same time, it was progressing swiftly forward, aided by its “widespread potentialities” and “preternaturally extended vision.”³⁹ To metropolitan Britons, the rural empire was much more than a throwback to a bygone era. It represented an alternative modernity, one in which social advancement did not depend on the immiseration of the poor and in which economic prosperity did not necessarily produce an urban wasteland.

Complementing this vision were the well-established ties of religious faith and Christian community that united the British world. Hilary Carey has demonstrated how eagerly nineteenth-century metropolitan Anglican,

³⁵ Sarah Carter, “Aboriginal People of Canada and the British Empire,” in *Canada and the British Empire*, ed. Phillip Buckner, 200–219.

³⁶ Canada’s Indigenous peoples constituted at least one-fifth of the population in 1815. But the influx of new settlers in the later decades of the century, accompanied by the ravages of disease and starvation within Aboriginal communities, cut their total population in half. By 1911, Indigenous peoples numbered around 100,000, which was under 1 percent of the country’s total. Ged Martin, “Canada from 1815,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. III, ed. Andrew Porter (Oxford University Press, 1999), 522–545, 533.

³⁷ David Hamer, *New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth Century Urban Frontier* (Columbia University Press, 1990), especially 163–183. This rhetoric found parallels in the “nostalgic modernism” espoused by a range of conservationists and reformers in the United States. On this concept, see Laura Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890–1938* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 10–12.

³⁸ A complexity that Peter Mandler has also identified in Victorian discussions of the British countryside, “Against ‘Englishness’: English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850–1940,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7 (1996): 155–175.

³⁹ Arnold Haultain, “Who Should Emigrate to Canada?” *Monthly Review* 11, no. 33 (June 1903): 91–108, 92.

Nonconformist, and Catholic authorities looked to the settler empire to extend their influence. Bolstered by the concerted spread of clergy, missionary societies, and cheaply produced tracts throughout the colonies, the overseas branches of certain denominations, such as Methodism and Presbyterianism, grew dramatically. By the beginning of the twentieth century, both had outstripped Anglicanism, becoming the leading Protestant churches in British North America.⁴⁰ At the same time, religious leaders in Britain became active promoters of emigration, whether through organizations such as the Emigrants' Spiritual Aid Fund (1849) and the Church Emigration Society (1886) or simply by lauding the spiritual merits of the settler territories in their sermons. The outcome of this activism was to make the "Christian empire" a vibrant, multid denominational terrain, much less homogenous than Anglican-dominated, Protestant Britain.⁴¹ The strength of religious fellowship throughout the settler world helped cement its reputation as a locus of Britannic liberty and moral virtue in the minds of many Britons, both "at home" and overseas.

In a period of widespread anxiety that chronic destitution was sapping the strength of the nation, therefore, Greater Britain held out a promise of renewal. As the Prince of Wales put it in 1901, the colonies offered ordinary men and women an escape from the "almost hopeless struggle for existence ... in the old country" and an opportunity to create better lives for themselves through hard work.⁴² The essential assumption underlying such statements was that paupers *were* redeemable, that destitution was not a fixed caste or a life sentence. In this respect, the portrayals of the rural empire as a locus of progressive British individualism helped undercut Social Darwinist arguments that explained societal disorders in terms of inherited mental or physical defects. Instead, they supported the mainstream interpretation that "the stock" was sound and that any seeming "degeneration" of the national character was the fault of unhealthy slum environments and unnatural city lifestyles, not heredity.⁴³ The success of the common man in the settler territories offered living proof of the continued power of the British race. Greater Britain

⁴⁰ Carey, *God's Empire*, 60.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴² Quoted in Urquhart A. Forbes, "Overcrowding and Emigration," *London Quarterly Review* 8, no. 2 (October 1902): 236–252, 252.

⁴³ This view was officially sanctioned by the 1904 Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. See "Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration," *Parliamentary Papers XXXII*, Cmd. 2,175, 1904. On the limited influence of Social Darwinism and the eugenics movement in late nineteenth-century Britain, see Harris, "Between Civic Virtue and Social Darwinism"; Lucy Bland and Lesley Hall, "Eugenics in Britain: The View from the Metropole," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (Oxford University Press, 2010), 213–227.

helped sustain the nation's faith that lasting and definitive reform was achievable.

By the end of the century, many reformers were suggesting that the solution to the social question was to be found through an expanded reliance on the resources of the British world. Assisted emigration initiatives, which local authorities had quietly and sporadically used since the 1830s, were given new life by prominent figures such as Edward Gibbon Wakefield, who spent most of the 1830s and 1840s urging the state to fund the resettlement of poor men and women in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.⁴⁴ Later, religious leaders such as William Booth, one of the founders of the Salvation Army, took up the call. Booth's plan, which was encapsulated in his 1890 treatise, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, combined an emphasis on personal discipline with a strong faith in the curative power of the countryside.⁴⁵ He advocated removing the nation's unemployed first to temporary training colonies across Britain and then on to permanent settlements in the rural empire. Although Booth's vision proved too elaborate and expensive to implement, the book did create a minor sensation after its publication.⁴⁶ It provided fuel for the gospel of redemptive emigration by broadcasting the notion that paupers could rise above their origins if they were provided with proper guidance and were placed in the right setting.

The confident tone of *In Darkest England* aside, the question of whether all poor people were available for reform remained a matter of debate. Despite the underlying optimism that individuals were molded by their environments and could be recast in different circumstances, slum poverty nevertheless appeared to be a deforming influence. To Victorians, destitution was like a cancer. If left unchecked, it would seep into people's bones, warping their bodies and distorting their spirits. It followed that those who had grown up in desperate settings could not simply slough off their effects. Most would have permanent physical and spiritual scars, and even the lucky ones who did succeed would have an arduous road ahead of them. In time, these concerns about the lasting impact of urban poverty led many reformers to shift their focus from pauper adults to the seemingly

⁴⁴ Carey, *God's Empire*, 313–331.

⁴⁵ William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London: Salvation Army, 1890).

⁴⁶ While Booth's plan was never realized, the Salvation Army did later serve as an emigration agent, resettling between 200,000 and 250,000 poorer Britons in Canada between 1903 and 1930. Myra Rutherford, "Scrutinizing the 'Submerged Tenth': Salvation Army Immigrants and Their Reception in Canada," in *Canada and the British World: Culture, Migration, and Identity*, ed. Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), 174–198; Desmond Glynn, "'Exporting Outcast London': Assisted Emigration to Canada, 1886–1914," *Histoire Sociale: Social History* 15, no. 29 (May 1982): 209–238.

less tarnished young. By the 1870s, a vibrant “child rescue” movement had taken shape, which united activists across Britain in the effort, as Florence Davenport Hill put it, to provide children with “delivery ... from their terrible environments” before it was too late.⁴⁷ And it was here, within this rapidly expanding social crusade, that the idea of Greater Britain had its most profound impact. While the vision of the settler empire made the redemption of the poor first seem possible, it was the targeted reclamation of children that promised to turn that ideal into a reality.

Imperial potential

Public fervor for child rescue burned brightest during the second half of the nineteenth century, when the rise of celebrated organizations such as Lord Shaftesbury’s Ragged School Union (1844), Barnardo’s Homes (1870), and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (1889) placed the needs of poor children in the national spotlight.⁴⁸ Yet the foundations of this commitment had first been laid a hundred years earlier, when the combined influences of Romanticism and the Enlightenment ushered in a new model of childhood as a distinct stage of life, separate from adulthood, and characterized by the “childlike” traits of innocence, vulnerability, and dependence.⁴⁹ Taken up by an increasingly powerful middle class, this novel conception spread throughout British society during the early decades of the nineteenth century. In the 1830s and 1840s, Parliament pushed through a stricter regulation of child labor, and in 1880 it instituted compulsory schooling. These legislative milestones elevated child protection to a national ideal and helped solidify a single cultural standard of childhood across Britain.⁵⁰ By the later Victorian era, the notion that the young required nurturing, education, and specialized care to achieve a full and healthy development was widely accepted, and a new field of charitable action, which sought to provide every British boy or girl with a “proper childhood,” had been born.

⁴⁷ Florence Davenport Hill, “Emigration of Children,” *The Times*, December 27, 1886, 6.

⁴⁸ There is a large literature on the history of child rescue; for a comprehensive overview, see Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire: Child Rescue Discourse, England, Canada, and Australia, 1850–1915* (Manchester University Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (New York: Longman, 1995); Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁵⁰ Hugh Cunningham, *Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood Since the Seventeenth Century* (London: Blackwell, 1992); Eric Hopkins, *Childhood Transformed: Working-Class Children in Nineteenth Century England* (Manchester University Press, 1994).

Heavily influenced by evangelical tenets, the principal aim of most self-styled “child savers” was to deliver poor children from sinful influences and place them on the path of righteousness. To these reformers, helping a needy child ensured the spread of Christianity not only by counteracting the hold of vice and immorality on the rising generation but also by training the young to become disciples of the Lord. Echoing a sentiment that permeated the movement, Barnardo’s maintained that its “watchword” was that “‘children must be saved!’ ... saved, that Christ may claim them for his kingdom; saved, that they may *save others*.”⁵¹ The best way to bring about this redemption, it followed, was to maintain the seemingly natural divide between the innocent, carefree world of youth and the starker realities of adulthood. The first step was to get boys and girls off the streets and out of the workhouses, since only then could reformers preserve children’s inherent purity and protect them from sin. Starting in the 1870s a host of child-centered charities established free shelters for homeless or destitute children across the country. Most of these institutions took the form of “cottage homes,” small-scale residences that accommodated between twelve and twenty children under the care of a matron. The idea was to create a more healthy, domestic, and familial setting than could be found in the massive, barrack-style orphanages left over from the 1834 Poor Law, which ranged in size from 174 children to over 1,500.⁵² Charities also began to increase their use of foster care, or “boarding out” in the parlance of the time. Barnardo’s led the way in both regards. In Essex in 1876, it founded the “Girls’ Village Home,” a large compound containing dozens of smaller cottages. The organization began boarding out in 1886 and opened a parallel “Boys’ Garden City” in 1909.⁵³ Barnardo’s stressed that, in these controlled and homelike environments, destitute children would exchange their former lives of “poor and insufficient food, impure air and unhygienic conditions” for a more structured existence of “good food, early hours, better air and household discipline.”⁵⁴ Such simple fare was the best way to domesticate the youth of the slums, cutting boys and girls “clean adrift from the evils of the past” and redirecting them toward “a useful, clean and worthy life.”⁵⁵

Reformers often used vague phrases such as “the evils of the past” to invoke a host of corruptive forces from which they sought to redeem

⁵¹ *My Cottage: A Story of Dr. Barnardo’s Village Home for Orphan and Destitute Girls* (London: Shaw and Co., 1885), 38. Emphasis in the original.

⁵² Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans*, 53.

⁵³ On the development of Barnardo’s, see Gillian Wagner, *Barnardo* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979).

⁵⁴ Barnardo’s, Annual Report, 1907, D.239/A3/1/42, ULSCA.

⁵⁵ Barnardo’s, Annual Report, 1911, D.239/A3/1/46, ULSCA.

children. In practice, their objective was more explicit: to isolate boys and girls from destitute or “immoral” adults, and from families that seemed beyond repair.⁵⁶ Child-saving literature usually depicted poor parents as yet another element of the harmful slum environment from which children needed protection, and they used sensationalized imagery to advocate total separation. As one supporter of emigration wrote in *The Times*, placing boys and girls “beyond the ocean” was the only reliable way to make sure they would not be “dragged back into misery and permanent degradation by so-called ‘friends,’ who, whether relatives or not, are often their worst enemies.”⁵⁷ Lawmakers sustained reformers’ incursions into the private sphere by standardizing a code of parental conduct that, if broken, abnegated guardians’ claims to their children. Between 1885 and 1913, Parliament passed more than fifty pieces of legislation pertaining to child welfare, including the landmark 1889 Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act, which empowered local authorities to remove boys and girls from parents convicted of neglect, as well as the 1908 Children and Young Persons Act, which obligated official intervention in such cases.⁵⁸ This flurry of lawmaking emboldened many child savers. In a highly publicized 1886 article, Barnardo proudly acknowledged having stolen, bought, or smuggled forty-seven children away from their families.⁵⁹ A few years later he boasted having employed a squad of night agents, which the journalist W. T. Stead applauded as “child hunters” and “human wolfhounds,” to patrol the streets looking for ragged children to save.⁶⁰

To justify these forms of vigilante behavior, reformers drew on the racialized language of light and dark, salvation and peril that was common across British culture during the era of the new imperialism. They spoke of their efforts to civilize the “street Arabs” and “urban savages”

⁵⁶ Swain and Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire*. The one major exception was the NSPCC, which focused less on the removal of children than on targeted family intervention. George Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870–1908* (Stanford University Press, 1982). Nevertheless, the Society did advocate separating parents and children in cases of extreme abuse, and frequently lent its support to emigration initiatives. In 1910, for instance, its director Robert Parr noted that, while he felt “very strongly against the emigration of able-bodied and intelligent children if there is the slightest prospect of their being able to do well at home,” the policy was justifiable to “remove a child from the bad influences of undesirable parents.” Parr to Undersecretary of State for the Home Office, June 22, 1910, HO 45/10598/188663, TNA: PRO.

⁵⁷ William Tallack, “The Emigration of Children,” *The Times*, November 26, 1886, 4.

⁵⁸ Harry Hendrick, *Child Welfare: Historical Dimensions, Contemporary Debate* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2003), 28–33.

⁵⁹ Thomas Barnardo, “Is Philanthropic Abduction Ever Justifiable?” *Night and Day* (November 1885): 149–150.

⁶⁰ W. T. Stead, “For All Those Who Love Their Fellow-Men,” *Review of Reviews* (December 1901): 670–678, 675.

of the slums, and to illuminate the “rookeries” that concealed “hordes” of unwashed children. This tendency to view metropolitan destitution through the prism of colonial racial categories was widespread at the time, and has been well documented by historians.⁶¹ The comparisons were effective because they aligned the work of rescue organizations with the nation’s larger imperial mission, and defined child poverty as an urgent threat to Britain’s continued world supremacy. Less noted, yet equally important, is the fact that, alongside these tropes of “otherness,” another imperial language – that of Greater Britain – was also at play. Arguably, this alternate rhetoric was more influential, for it directed attention not to the uncomfortable distance that separated rabble from respectable at home but to the power, unity, and shared potential of the global Britannic people.⁶² Child savers might have projected stark scenes reminiscent of the colonized world to draw on readers’ sympathy, yet they never went so far as to position poor children as a “race apart,” as some historians have claimed.⁶³ Rather, by tapping into a wider conversation about the redemptive effects of the rural empire, they countered the frightening images of urban decay with hopeful portrayals of the heights British boys and girls could reach if placed in more wholesome environments overseas.

This emphasis on the transformative power of the settler colonies permeated child rescue pamphlets and magazines as well as children’s books more generally. The popular Scottish author Robert Ballantyne, for instance, set the bulk of his boys’ adventure stories in Canada, a territory he had traveled across as a teenager. Many of his novels take the form of emigration tales, which follow the journeys of slum children pursuing success and independence in the empire.⁶⁴ A classic example is his 1884 melodrama, *Dusty Diamonds: Cut and Polished*, which centers on the renewal of a Whitechapel scamp, Bobby Frog, in the farmlands of the far

⁶¹ Cunningham, *Children of the Poor*, 95–132; Laura Peters, *Orphan Texts: Victorian Orphans, Culture, and Empire* (Manchester University Press, 2000); Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans*, 24–32; Swain and Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire*, 79–109. On the racialization of the urban poor more generally, see Deborah Epstein Nord, “The Social Explorer as Anthropologist: Victorian Travelers among the Urban Poor,” in *Visions of the Modern City: Essays in History, Art, and Literature*, ed. William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 122–134.

⁶² Shurlee Swain, “‘Brighter Britain’: Images of Empire in the International Child Rescue Movement, 1850–1914,” in *Empires of Religion*, ed. Hilary Carey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 161–176.

⁶³ Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans*, 14.

⁶⁴ On Ballantyne’s work, and the portrayal of Canada in British children’s literature more generally, see R. G. Moyles and Doug Owsam, *Imperial Dreams and Colonial Realities: British Views of Canada, 1880–1914* (University of Toronto Press, 1988), 37–60.

northwest.⁶⁵ Escaping a drunken father and depressed mother, Bobby joins a party of child migrants and soon finds himself in the home of a cheerful Canadian farming family. The majority of the story details how he and two other child migrants are “polished” into “splendid gems” through a combination of loving discipline, honest work, spiritual tutelage, and Nature’s bounty.⁶⁶ Ballantyne makes clear that the settler environment does the bulk of the work. Under the influence of the hearty rural lifestyle, the lingering traces of the slums quickly fade. Once overseas, Bobby loses his Cockney accent “as if by magic,” while merely breathing “the air of Canada” invests him with a strong constitution and “wonderful delicacy of feeling.”⁶⁷ By the end of the novel, Bobby has become an ideal specimen of British imperial manhood, a “broad-chested, well-made, gentlemanly young man.”⁶⁸ He has also changed class. Reinvented as Robert Frog, Esquire, his move into the ranks of the propertied is cemented through the purchase of his own farm. In an ultimate sign of Victorian respectability, when the adult Bobby returns to London to visit his (chastened) father’s deathbed, a passing policeman unconsciously calls him “Sir.”

The central claim of *Dusty Diamonds* is that the solution to Britain’s problem of child poverty lay in the connections of the wider British world. Indeed, by styling the charity responsible for Bobby’s emigration after the work of a leading child emigration agent, Annie Macpherson, Ballantyne intentionally blurs the lines between fact and fiction in the novel, and suggests that the success the characters find overseas was available to all British children. The mining metaphor reiterates this theme. The book was published in the midst of South Africa’s mineral revolution and just after the North American and Australian gold rushes of the 1850s. The references thus immediately pulled readers’ imaginations to the settler colonies while invoking the notion that slum children contained hidden value. Such evocative symbolism caught on quickly. By the turn of the century, editorials were describing orphanages as having the “character of an undeveloped mine, full of possibilities of wealth”⁶⁹ and needy children as “residual gold” processed from the “tailings of the street.”⁷⁰

The spread of these ideals throughout British culture both provoked and sustained an upsurge in child emigration initiatives from the 1870s

⁶⁵ Robert Ballantyne, *Dusty Diamonds: Cut and Polished* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1884).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 352. ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 217 and 388. ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 416.

⁶⁹ D. L. Woolmer, “Up the Ladder,” *Quiver* 985 (January 1903): 881–887, 882.

⁷⁰ Lord Bishop of Glasgow and Galloway, “The Cyanide Process,” *Night and Day* 33, no. 252 (1910): 11, quoted in Swain and Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire*, 66.

onward. Although the notion of sending needy boys and girls to the colonies had a long history – one of the first instances occurred in 1618 when the City of London apprenticed a hundred pauper children in the newly founded settlement of Virginia – these earlier programs tended to be sporadic and short lived, usually running out of funding after a few years.⁷¹ In contrast, the establishment of two separate ventures by reformist women, Maria Rye's 1869 project to send workhouse girls to Canada followed by Annie Macpherson's 1870 initiative that focused on boys, triggered a wave of activism that soon coalesced into a coherent movement.⁷² Religious rivalry played an important part in encouraging this rapid development. Because Nonconformists were the dominant force behind the initial schemes, Catholic and Anglican organizations such as the Liverpool Catholic Children's Protection Society (LCCPS) and the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society soon created their own initiatives in order to prevent child migrants of their faiths from being placed in evangelical homes.⁷³ An equally influential stimulus, however, was the widely held view that the environment of the settler colonies was vital to unlocking poor children's potential. One advocate of emigration, Arnold Haultain, believed there was an "antiseptic property in the air of prairie and veldt and bush" that guaranteed children's transformation. Arguing that the schemes offered a "catch-all cure for hooliganism ... and an antidote to many another canker in the State," he called on charities to increase the annual number of child migrants sent to Canada from roughly 2,500 to over 100,000, and pressed the government to consider funding the movement.⁷⁴ In a similar vein, Barnardo's reported that, while "all the bacteria of moral disease" were present in the settler territories, the setting was "unfavourable" to their "germination and growth." The regions lacked the "dark and noisome places in which the rank weeds of vice and evil bear their most deadly fruits," as well as the "conditions of squalor and overcrowding" that "enervated

⁷¹ On this early history, see Wagner, *Children of the Empire*, 1–35; Barry Coldrey, "A Thriving and Ugly Trade: The First Phase of Child Migration, 1617–1757," *History of Education Society Bulletin* 58 (Autumn 1996): 4–14; Parker, *Uprooted*, 3–35.

⁷² Both women had been influenced by, and to a large extent modeled their schemes after, the American precedent of the "orphan trains," which had begun relocating street children from cities such as New York to western farms in the aftermath of the Civil War. Parker, *Uprooted*, 20. On the orphan trains, see Marilyn Holt, *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); Stephen O'Connor, *Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

⁷³ Between 1881 and 1902, the LCCPS sent 2,400 children to Canada, while the Waifs and Strays Society sent 2,240 to the colony between 1885 and 1914. Parker, *Uprooted*, 94 and 86.

⁷⁴ Haultain, "Who Should Emigrate to Canada?," 106.

and emasculated” Britons “in the old country.”⁷⁵ Underlining the point, the charity’s *Night and Day* magazine summarized that the removal of slum children overseas promised to break the poverty cycle once and for all; it served to “prevent the pauper and the criminal, and ... create the honest workman – often out of very unpromising materials!”⁷⁶

These arguments that the atmosphere of Greater Britain was curative, that it could clean and restore the essence of needy children, allowed reformers to envision futures for child migrants that moved beyond the hierarchies of class that constrained charitable activism at home. The child emigration movement arose at a time when increasing numbers of boys and girls were entering the care of local authorities and charities. By the turn of the century, between 70,000 and 80,000 British children were receiving some kind of residential assistance. Most of this aid remained under the auspices of the Poor Law, yet a sizable proportion of children, some 10,000 to 15,000, were being helped by voluntary organizations.⁷⁷ While the specifics of care varied from place to place, on average the education provided in most institutions consisted of vocational skills training coupled with a heavy dose of moral and spiritual instruction.⁷⁸ The intent was to prepare children to fill niches in “class-appropriate” jobs such as blacksmithing, carpentry, or domestic service. On the whole, reformers’ expectations for their wards were modest. Few believed that they would find a future doctor, lawyer, or prime minister in the back-alleys and tenements of the nation’s slums. Instead, they gauged success in humbler terms and according to existing societal models. The Ragged School Union, for instance, defined “productive work” as any occupation that would engender discipline and a steady wage, and famously sent its wards scavenging through garbage as members of rag-collecting brigades.⁷⁹ The ultimate goal among metropolitan child rescue societies, in short, was to turn Britain’s poorest children, those plucked from the lowest rungs on the social ladder, into independent laborers and members of the respectable working class.

In comparison, the settler empire appeared to offer poor children the chance of real upward mobility as well as a more egalitarian attitude toward labor. The colonies were not classless spaces, and they were never broadly perceived as such. But they did contain a more fluid social hierarchy, which meant that, while recognizable differences between

⁷⁵ Barnardo’s, Annual Report, 1908, D.239/A3/1/43, ULSCA.

⁷⁶ Barnardo’s, “A Gilt-Edged Investment,” *Night and Day* 29 (December 1906): 7. Emphasis in the original.

⁷⁷ Hendrick, *Child Welfare*, 42.

⁷⁸ Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans*, 120–141.

⁷⁹ Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service*, 45.

professionals and laborers remained, these tended to lack the negative connotations of privilege and paternalism that they carried in Britain.⁸⁰ Commentators argued that, without the conventional rigid divides of status, children born into poverty could attain a level of achievement that was unthinkable at home. As Maria Rye exclaimed, sending boys and girls to Canada allowed them to become “honourable members of society” and offered the possibility of “a far brighter career than the one which would, most probably, have awaited them had they remained in England.”⁸¹ Rapid social advancement seemed especially available to girls, given the empire’s long-standing gender imbalances. The Irish philanthropist and prison reform activist Susanna Meredith’s observation that settler women “marry soon and have wealth early” led her to champion emigration as a technique for providing desperate girls with “ways of escape ... by means of socialities.”⁸² Transfer overseas appeared an effective method of unleashing poor children’s potential, regardless of gender. As one enthusiast summarized, it allowed the “wastrels of our crowded English cities” to find new lives of “independence and prosperity” in the wider terrain of the empire.⁸³

It is difficult to tell whether these stories of “hyper-environmental change”⁸⁴ were based in fact. Certainly, emigration improved the prospects of many children, and it was indeed true that the stigma of early pauperism was less of a handicap in the settler territories than in Britain.⁸⁵ Yet, as the case that opened this chapter illustrates, it was customary for host families to treat child migrants as inexpensive farm workers. The demand for rural labor remained intense throughout the Canadian provinces during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, and this trend goes a long way toward explaining why applications for child migrants always exceeded the available supply, usually by a factor of eight to one.⁸⁶ The tendency to view child migrants as a form of unpaid help undercut the children’s access to education and limited their opportunities

⁸⁰ Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, 157–158.

⁸¹ William Gilbert, “Maria S. Rye,” *Good Words* 12 (January 1871): 573–577, 577.

⁸² Mrs. Meredith, “Juvenile Emigration,” *Sunday at Home* 1369 (July 24, 1880): 477–478, 478. In this vein, proponents of child emigration echoed the claims of reformers active in promoting the resettlement of young, single women as domestic servants and governesses throughout the empire. Some women, such as Rye, were key figures in both movements. Lisa Chilton, *Agents of Empire: British Female Migration to Canada and Australia, 1860s–1930* (University of Toronto Press, 2007).

⁸³ W. H. W. Pelham, “Emigration of Pauper Children,” *The Times*, January 22, 1877, 4.

⁸⁴ Swain and Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire*, 115.

⁸⁵ Although the stigma was not erased entirely. For a full discussion, see Stephen Constantine, “Children as Ancestors: Child Migrants and Identity in Canada,” *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 16, no. 1 (2003): 150–159.

⁸⁶ Parker, *Uprooted*, 135.

for social advancement, although it is important to remember that rates of school attendance among rural, Canadian-born youth also remained low throughout the period.⁸⁷ For most migrant boys and girls, the ideal of upward mobility was belied by a reality of long working hours, limited schooling, and social isolation.

Nevertheless, the actualities that structured child migrants' daily lives were always less apparent in Britain, where emigration charities touted success stories and centered publicity drives around tales of boys' and girls' extraordinary upward climbs. Typical editorials featured formerly destitute children whose "good conduct and smartness" had led them to become successful barristers in Canada, or whose moral fortitude had prepared them to take on missionary work battling "cannibalism and barbarism" in the "far Pacific."⁸⁸ In a particularly vivid brochure published in 1908, the Barnardo's director of emigration, Alfred Owen, encouraged readers to envision a parade of the 20,000 child migrants the organization had settled in Canada since the 1880s. Once penniless, these boys and girls now held an array of occupations in the country. The procession was led by the professionals: those doctors, lawyers, and ministers "who have pushed themselves through College ... by sheer hard work and unremitting self-denial." Next were the fit and the brave, the "rugged, hard-muscled" railroad workers and firemen, who were accompanied by scores of daintier "married ladies" and "young schoolmistresses." Last but not least came the "great bulk of our family – the farmers and farm boys and girls," who had recently arrived and were just beginning on the road to self-reliance. "Taken as a whole," Owen declared, the migrants were "undeniably and unquestionably a fine body of young lads [and lasses] and a noble asset to any country."⁸⁹

Owen's "march past" highlights how the late Victorian vision of the settler empire opened up new ways of thinking about the potential of poor children. Although an implicit class hierarchy remained – the procession, after all, was organized with the brains at the front and the brawn toward the back – the focus was on the diversity of paths that awaited children in the colonies. In this respect, the brochure underlined the central claim of the resettlement movement: every British child contained the seeds of future greatness. Like young plants, they only needed the proper soil

⁸⁷ Across Canada in the 1880s, the average daily attendance rate of children in the rural areas was 46 percent, a figure that does not account for the large numbers of boys and girls who never registered for school. In Ontario, where most child migrants were placed, full-year compulsory schooling was only established in 1891; in Quebec, the province that received the second highest number of child migrants, it was not instituted until 1942. *Ibid.*, 143.

⁸⁸ Woolmer, "Up the Ladder," 883.

⁸⁹ Alfred Owen, "Our March Past," Barnardo's Homes, 1908, D.239/A3/18/34, ULSCA.

and cultivation to grow strong and upright.⁹⁰ In part, this faith in the universal social value of the young was a legacy of the rise and extension of the Victorian cult of childhood. Equally, however, it was a product of the vision of the united British world that infused metropolitan culture in the decades surrounding the turn of the century. In common with other social activists of his day, Owen viewed the settler empire as a site of spiritual and physical redemption, a place where young Britons were not just reformed but remade. These ideas affirmed a wider confidence in the power of the global Britannic race, and they also forecast an end to the problems of domestic poverty once and for all.

Although potent, the image of Greater Britain that underlay this optimism remained abstract. While Britons recognized the general differences between, say, the terrain and lifestyles of Canada and Australia, their overall impression of these places revolved around a series of set tropes. The settler territories were prosperous, productive, and, most importantly, British. This coherent vision of the rural empire was easier to maintain, however, if one had little firsthand experience of the colonies. As Thomas Barnardo found when he attempted to expand his programs into southern Africa at the dawn of the twentieth century, these ideals about the capacity of the imperial landscape to renovate boys and girls beyond the boundaries of class depended on a particular conception of empire that focused myopically on Canada. In a territory such as South Africa, the potential of British children, and even the meaning of “Britishness” itself, was less certain.

Pauper children for a White South Africa

By the dawn of the twentieth century, Thomas Barnardo’s more than three decades of experience “saving” slum children had made him one of Britain’s most well-known philanthropists. Yet, despite his fame, he was beleaguered by persistent money troubles that stemmed from his doctrine of never refusing care to a child in need. His charity operated one of the least restrictive admissions policies of its time, and each year thousands of boys and girls poured into the organization’s network of orphanages and foster homes. Even with an annual income of over £100,000, Barnardo still struggled to make ends meet. Child emigration offered a straightforward solution, for, while it cost the society £16 per year to

⁹⁰ Garden metaphors were widespread in child rescue literature at the time, particularly in places such as Canada, where agrarian ideals were central to the burgeoning national ethic. See Xiaobei Chen, *Tending the Gardens of Citizenship: Child Saving in Toronto, 1880s–1920s* (University of Toronto Press, 2005).

feed, clothe, and educate a child in the United Kingdom, sending that same boy or girl to Canada required just a one-time outlay of £10.⁹¹ Barnardo genuinely believed that resettlement benefited poor children, and these economics gave him even more reason to champion the policy. Always on the lookout for opportunities to expand, he was thrilled in the summer of 1902 when the Duke of Argyll, the former Governor General of Canada and then president of the Homes, offered a plot of land in South Africa to use in founding a training institution for child migrants.

It was not the first time that reformers had considered resettling pauper children in the region. Almost sixty years prior, just after the passage of the 1833 act abolishing slavery in the empire, the Children's Friend Society sent 1,300 juvenile apprentices to the Cape. Applauded by the British elite as a way to ease the colony's transition from forced labor, the venture soon became the focus of fierce popular opposition. As Elaine Hadley has argued, the crux of the problem was the initiative's conceptual incoherence, marked by its blurring of the categories of "emigration" and "transportation."⁹² In theory the distinction was clear: emigration signified a voluntary relocation in pursuit of better prospects, whereas transportation was a form of expulsion and punishment. In the early days of emancipation, however, many Britons viewed the prospect of sending White boys and girls to work alongside former slaves as degrading. The scheme never escaped public censure. Opponents stoned the governing committee as they walked to a meeting in 1833, and, when the Society's founder died a few years later, reputedly of grief, the remaining members disbanded in disgrace.

More than half a century later, these tensions had long subsided. The government abandoned convict transportation in the late 1860s, just before the child emigration movement to Canada took off. Around the same time, the public had begun to recalibrate its image of the settler empire, recasting these once remote wildernesses as highly-sought-after pioneer destinations. In particular, recent developments in the south of Africa – including the opening up of the diamond fields in the 1870s, the discovery of gold in the 1880s, and the establishment of Southern Rhodesia in 1895 – positioned it as one of the richest sites in the empire. As the Duke of Argyll observed in an editorial in *Nineteenth Century*, the time was ripe for "planting out state children in South Africa." The abundant land was perfect for bringing up "healthy little colonists," and

⁹¹ For funding specifics see Wagner, *Barnardo*, 214. A monthly breakdown of costs is also available in the Barnardo's Council Minutes, D.239/B1/2/3–4, ULSCA.

⁹² Elaine Hadley, "Natives in a Strange Land: The Philanthropic Discourse of Juvenile Emigration in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England," *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 3 (Spring 1990): 411–439.

he was sure that child migrants “would never wish to leave the country they would regard as their own.”⁹³

Beyond these philanthropic intentions, there was another, more strictly imperial motive fueling the renewed interest in an African venture. Argyll wrote his editorial in 1900, one year into Britain’s South African War against the region’s two Boer republics, and at a point when the conflict was escalating into the nation’s largest and costliest since the Napoleonic era. When the fighting finally dragged to a halt in May of 1902, the imperial government had spent more than £200 million and mobilized between 250,000 and 450,000 troops to suppress a total Afrikaner force of no more than 88,000. The army had resorted to devastating scorched earth tactics, destroying over 30,000 farmhouses and laying waste to large tracts of land in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. More than 28,000 Afrikaner civilians, some 22,000 of whom were children, died of disease and starvation in British concentration camps, while another 14,000 African refugees perished in even worse conditions.⁹⁴ The three long years of fighting left deep rifts between the British and Afrikaner settler populations. It also provoked strong political unease in Whitehall, having shown the world the weakness of Britain’s military control in one of the most vital sectors of the empire.

Even as shots were still being fired, imperial officials were at work strategizing ways to reestablish British supremacy in the territory. Heading up the effort on the ground was South Africa’s High Commissioner, Lord Alfred Milner, a self-proclaimed “race patriot” and ardent proponent of the policy of “Anglicization.” His plan combined an infusion of state capital into the mining industry with initiatives designed to universalize the English language and culture.⁹⁵ This vision hinged on an expansion of British settlement, and throughout his tenure Milner proposed a series of ambitious immigration schemes. Although most of these initiatives failed, Milner’s platform nevertheless cast child emigration in a new light. No longer just a humanitarian policy, it equally began to appear as an effective imperial tool, well tuned to the needs of the colonial administration. As one advocate, Francis Stevenson, proposed in another supportive *Nineteenth Century* editorial, the movement had an essential contribution to make to Britain’s long-term colonial mission. Using poor children to fill the ranks of a new generation of South African settlers would ease the

⁹³ Duke of Argyll, “Planting Out State Children in South Africa,” *Nineteenth Century* 47, no. 278 (April 1900): 609–611, 611.

⁹⁴ Donal Lowry, “Not Just a Teatime War,” in *The South African War Reappraised*, ed. Donal Lowry (Manchester University Press, 2000), 1–22.

⁹⁵ Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, “Lord Milner and the South African State,” *History Workshop* 8 (October 1979): 50–80.

“wearying task of governing a race that will not readily be reconciled and will be still more difficult to assimilate or amalgamate.”⁹⁶

The unruly “race” that Stevenson was referring to was not the colony’s African, “Colored,” or Asian populations but rather its other “European” element, the Afrikaners. British administrators viewed the racial issue in the region less as a battle between White and Black than as a struggle for ethnic ascendancy *within* the settler community. They took as writ that the “Britannic race” was a coherent entity and that “Britishness” encapsulated certain traits (such as respectability, morality, civilization, and progress) that uniquely prepared Britons to rule subject peoples.⁹⁷ Indeed, the South African War had reaffirmed this ideal of Britannic solidarity, as more than 30,000 soldiers and nurses from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand poured into the region to support the imperial cause.⁹⁸ Applied in the context of early twentieth-century South Africa, this brand of racial thinking presented two complementary options. Either the British heritage should be institutionalized and extended to those who lingered outside its glow, as Milner wanted, or it should be combined with the best qualities of the Afrikaners to create a novel variety of White colonial patriotism, as was the hope of Milner’s “Kindergarten,” the loyal group of administrators who came to power following his 1905 departure.⁹⁹ The connecting thread between these conceptions was a jingoistic faith in the superiority of the British spirit. Britons may have been tested in southern Africa, but they had emerged undefeated.

Back in London, Barnardo was aware that these imperial considerations might complicate his new undertaking. Ever the prudent Victorian, he decided that a full investigation was needed before he could commit himself to the proposal. He commissioned his eldest son Stuart to travel to the four loosely connected colonies that made up preunion South Africa, and to send back his impressions. Armed with letters of introduction from influential officials such as Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial

⁹⁶ Francis Stevenson, “Child-Settlers for South Africa,” *Nineteenth Century* 50, no. 298 (December 1901): 1020–1029, 1021.

⁹⁷ Douglas Lorimer, “From Victorian Values to White Virtues: Assimilation and Exclusion in British Racial Discourse, 1870–1914,” in *Rediscovering the British World*, ed. Phillip Alfred Buckner and R. Douglas Francis (University of Calgary Press, 2005), 109–134.

⁹⁸ For overviews of the settler participation in the war, see Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899–1902* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992); Craig Wilcox, *Australia’s Boer War: The War in South Africa, 1899–1902* (Oxford University Press, 2002); John Crawford and Ian McGibbon, eds., *One Flag, One Queen, One Tongue: New Zealand and the South African War* (Auckland University Press, 2003).

⁹⁹ Saul Dubow, “Colonial Nationalism, the Milner Kindergarten, and the Rise of ‘South Africanism,’ 1902–1910,” *History Workshop Journal* 43 (Spring 1997): 53–85.

Secretary, the twenty-eight-year-old Stuart boarded a ship for Cape Town in August of 1902.

He got off to a good start. As luck would have it, on the boat out Stuart chanced upon two members of the South African political elite: Leander Starr Jameson, the leader of the botched 1895 coup against the Transvaal, and his friend and coconspirator Alfred Beit, the mine magnate and philanthropist. Both were intrigued by Barnardo's plan, and gave Stuart their blessing, although they suggested the need for proper safeguards to make sure the children would not compete with "Native labor." Jameson and Beit were the first of many colonial dignitaries that Stuart encountered in his travels, and a constellation of powerful names is scattered through his journal. On arrival, he met with the Governor of the Cape Colony, Sir Hely Hutchinson, who seemed "very keen on getting boy and girl emigrants" but who warned that securing state funding for the scheme would be difficult.¹⁰⁰ In late September, Stuart moved north into the Transvaal for meetings with Milner as well as with the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Arthur Lawley. He also toured some of the twenty sites Argyll had offered. Stuart wrapped up his trip in Natal, the most "British" of the colonies, where he discussed the proposal with the Premier, Sir Albert Hime. As elsewhere, his reception was cordial but guarded. Hime liked the notion of importing girls to train as servants in the towns, but he was less optimistic about the prospects for boys, arguing that the climate along the coast was altogether "too tropical ... for whites to do any hard manual work in the open."¹⁰¹

Hime's advice about the weather confirmed some of the larger concerns that Stuart had started to develop. Summarizing the position for his father, he noted that South Africa was "not an agricultural country like Canada." Farming seemed risky in each of the districts he visited, and Argyll's properties were all located in "very sparsely settled" areas.¹⁰² Moreover, the region labored "under the curse of having almost every known disease and pest which kill the stock and ruin the crops, such as rinderpest, lung sickness, red water and locusts, to say nothing of the universal lack of water at the right seasons."¹⁰³ Apparently, Stuart had not become enthralled by the "romance of the veldt" that attracted so many other British men of his age and that appeared memorably in the writings of novelists such as John Buchan.¹⁰⁴ Instead, the majestic landscape

¹⁰⁰ Stuart Barnardo, *Journal of a Visit to South Africa*, 1902, 7, D.239/A3/17/42, ULSCA. A detailed summary of Stuart's journey is included in Wagner, *Children of the Empire*, 162–187.

¹⁰¹ Barnardo, *Journal*, 84. ¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 71 and 83. ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁰⁴ Dubow, "Colonial Nationalism," 64; for a full discussion of Buchan's views on empire, see Daniel Gorman, *Imperial Citizenship: Empire and the Question of Belonging* (Manchester University Press, 2006), 77–114.

that most appealed to Stuart was located across the Atlantic in Canada, the country of rich harvests and a vigorous outdoor lifestyle, not in the “most trying ... sub-tropical heat” and humidity of South Africa, whose climate was so oppressive that even those people “who have lived here many years feel it much.”¹⁰⁵

These comments represent some of the cracks and fissures that were beginning to fragment the unified concept of the settler empire in Stuart’s mind. He had come to southern Africa anticipating a temperate and restorative land in keeping with the iconography of Greater Britain. But he encountered a territory that looked and felt quite different, where the sun harassed rather than soothed and where the wind came on so fiercely and suddenly that it sometimes sent him scuttling inside for shelter. Beyond the altered landscape, Stuart was also finding that the unique demographics of South Africa, with its ethnically divided White community and African majority, had given rise to a distinct local culture that appeared at odds with Barnardo’s aims. To proponents of child emigration, one of the greatest strengths of the settler world was its abundant supply of honest jobs. They believed that steady work endowed poor children with character and discipline, qualities that were widely accepted as essential for social mobility. In southern Africa, however, Stuart found few opportunities for this brand of uplift. He noted that the “racial feeling” between Afrikaner and British was still so “frightfully bitter” that no Boer farmer would employ a child migrant.¹⁰⁶ More to the point, he reminded his father that the “great bulk of the population is black, and the majority of the native races, instead of dying out like the North American Indian, are increasing in numbers very rapidly.”¹⁰⁷ There was already more than enough cheap labor to fill the demand for farm hands or rural servants, and the ubiquitous presence of Africans in unskilled or semi-skilled positions had led many Whites to forgo the principles of independence and self-reliance. As Stuart reported, the local motto seemed to be that “honest manual work [was] *infra dig.* and only fit for Kaffirs.”¹⁰⁸

Stuart would hear this last point time and again. The problem with settling young Britons in the territory was that they would climb the social ladder too quickly. Because of the color of their skin, coupled with their British ancestry, poor children would find themselves on arrival in the colony “one step higher in the scale.” This sudden advance would naturally cause them to “look down on and refuse to do hard work of the kind they have previously been quite willing to do.” Having risen in standing

¹⁰⁵ Barnardo, *Journal*, 146. ¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 138–139. ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

without having had to strive for their position, the majority would then be “very apt to deteriorate morally after being out here a short time,” lowering the standard of the British community as a whole.¹⁰⁹ No less a figure than Lord Milner had stressed this danger, warning that if Barnardo brought out “children of the lower class” to do “menial work, which whites do not do, they might fall to the level of natives, a most undesirable state of affairs.”¹¹⁰ Stuart emphasized to his father that the greatest risk of the scheme was of child migrants “getting down to the native level and forgetting they are whites, and consequently the superior race.”¹¹¹

This last comment – that destitute boys and girls could “forget” their Whiteness – serves as a striking illustration of the complexities of race in settler societies, which went well beyond the matter of skin color. In colonial South Africa, being “White” connoted prestige, character, and power, traits that also occupied a central place within the global Britannic identity. These attributes were cultural rather than biological. As Vivian Bickford-Smith has described it, “[a]nglicisation was not something that had happened to anyone in the womb.”¹¹² Instead, it was a slow and rigorous, if often unconscious, process whereby individuals learned “a set of affinities” that designated them as colonizers.¹¹³ This definition of Whiteness as a culture that needed to be protected, rather than as a state of being that was innate, underlay the emergence of official concern with “poor Whiteism” in the same period. Yet, at the turn of the century, the problem appeared distinct to the Afrikaner community, especially its subsection of rural *bywoners*, or tenant farmers.¹¹⁴ Stuart’s investigation was revealing the possibility that Britons were not immune to the threat. In South Africa, child migrants would have to earn their membership in the colonial elite, and Stuart remained unsure whether the atmosphere of the colony, with its vigorous “Native” and Afrikaner populations, could provide destitute children with the values and ethics they needed to begin this upward journey.

The issue was severe enough to derail the scheme. Upon receipt of Stuart’s report, Barnardo decided to decline Argyll’s offer and quietly shelved the idea of extending child emigration outside Canada. It would be over three decades before proponents would again raise the idea of sending children to the south of Africa, and, even then, many of the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 140. ¹¹⁰ Ibid, 49–50. ¹¹¹ Ibid, 148.

¹¹² Vivian Bickford-Smith, “Revisiting Anglicisation in the Nineteenth Century Cape Colony,” in *The British World*, ed. Bridge and Fedorowich, 82–95.

¹¹³ Saul Dubow, “How British Was the British World? The Case of South Africa,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37, no. 1 (March 2009): 1–27, 19.

¹¹⁴ Robert Morrell, ed., *White but Poor: Essays on the History of Poor Whites in Southern Africa, 1880–1940* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1992).

questions that had plagued Stuart remained unresolved. Barnardo's venture in South Africa was a minor moment in the history of child emigration, but it does illuminate the profound impact of the idea of Greater Britain on turn-of-the-century understandings of child welfare. The revelation that the African empire held little prospect for the redemption of destitute children exposed how closely the idea of children's universal potential relied on a narrow vision of the settler empire that centered on Canada. The lack of a similarly transformative environment in South Africa threw doubt on the ability of working-class children to cast off their social origins and to move beyond the moral and spiritual corruptions of poverty. It thus called into question the common view that Britishness, like Whiteness, was a coherent identity, one that was available to all Britons regardless of class. In South Africa, it seemed, pauper children would likely never count as fully British, or as fully White.

Conclusion

While the failure of Barnardo's South African initiative exposed the tensions within the British world ideal at the turn of the century, these doubts about the unity of the British race were always more apparent overseas than they were at home. Back in Britain, the romanticized imagery of the settler frontier as a space in which ordinary people could start afresh remained powerful. The vision retained its hold over the metropolitan imagination not only because it sustained public optimism that the poor were in fact redeemable but also because it inspired Britons to think in new ways about the potential of poor children. When placed in the right setting, such as those rural spaces on offer across Greater Britain, pauper children appeared able to cast aside destitution and achieve a prosperous independence. The "kith and kin" connections spanning the settler empire held out the promise of individual rebirth alongside a broader national renewal.

Judging by the rapid growth of the child emigration movement in the decades before the First World War, these ideas clearly struck a chord with reformers. Harder to know is whether they also appealed to needy parents, whose voice remains obscured or is missing altogether from the archives. When correspondence from the relatives of child migrants does appear in the records, it is usually in cases of disputes, when guardians wrote to find the whereabouts of their children or to object to a proposed emigration. Those who agreed with the policy left less of a trace. A further complication is that it remains unclear whether individual parents understood, when they signed the papers admitting their children to organizations such as Barnardo's, that they were also consenting to the

possibility of their son's or daughter's emigration. Many parents were illiterate and could not rely on admitting officers to explain the intricacies of the forms.¹¹⁵ Even when guardians did grasp the implications of the emigration requirement, they were frequently bullied into signing away their rights. Comments that mothers were subjected to "a little gentle pressure" or "with difficulty [were] induced to yield" their permission appear frequently enough in Barnardo's promotional literature to imply that the practice was widespread.¹¹⁶ Still, those emigration charities that were more diligent about receiving parental consent, such as the Waifs and Strays Society, did attain relatively high rates of agreement. While the organization did not make parental permission for emigration a prerequisite for admission, it did include a section that asked guardians to consider the option. Only one-third of parents refused to endorse the clause.¹¹⁷

What we can know with certainty is that, in an era that lacked many of our modern social safety nets, being a poor mother or father was a precarious and often emotionally exhausting experience. Statistics paint a bleak picture. At the cusp of the twentieth century, 15 percent of all babies born in London died in their first year. Those born to single mothers perished at twice that rate, and on the whole infant mortality levels rose as incomes fell.¹¹⁸ One 1905 survey showed that, while the death ratio for babies born to households of four rooms or more was 99 per 1,000, it was 219 per 1,000 for families living in one-room tenements.¹¹⁹ Another study done in North Lambeth between the years 1877 and 1882 indicated that 62 percent of the working-class mothers surveyed had lost two or more children to stillbirth or disease.¹²⁰ In a period when the reality of a child's illness or death touched the majority of laboring families, it is likely that the prospect of sending a boy or girl to the empire was a more palatable option than it might appear today. Indeed, the idea that destitution could be temporary, and that the next generation would be less bound by the degradations of poverty, had even more to offer those on the economic margins of society than it did the elite. Undoubtedly, child emigration was a heartrending strategy. But it was not unfathomable, particularly given the fact that it did not always lead to a breakdown of

¹¹⁵ See, for instance, the case of Mary Collard, who in 1886 "signed a paper, not knowing what it contained," which later enabled Barnardo to send her four children to Canada against her wishes, in Parker, *Uprooted*, 246–248.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Barnardo, *Never Had a Home: A Very Commonplace History* (London: Shaw and Co., 1890), 11; *My Cottage*, 46.

¹¹⁷ Parker, *Uprooted*, 86. ¹¹⁸ Ross, *Love and Toil*, 182 and 186.

¹¹⁹ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870–1914* (London: River Orams Press, 1996), 17.

¹²⁰ Ross, *Love and Toil*, 182.

family ties. Parr's study of Barnardo's records found that roughly 70 per cent of parents remained in touch with their sons or daughters after their arrival in Canada. Even more remarkably, nearly one-quarter of those relatives who had been given no notice of their children's resettlement managed to reestablish contact later on.¹²¹ Statistics like these bring into focus the loving attachments and sacrifices that bound poor families of the era. They also highlight the surprising smallness of the late Victorian British world, a compactness that allowed Britons of all backgrounds to imagine that the future of their nation, their families, and their children lay overseas.

¹²¹ Parr, *Labouring Children*, 72.