



Other people's children: narratives of paid-childcare in Britain 1860 – 1910

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Abstract

This poster seeks to explore how the provision of child-care in exchange for money was constructed, debated and contested by a wide range of social actors. It hopes to critically examine the assumptions made by Victorian Doctors, campaigners and welfare workers, that providing paid-childcare – often labelled with the pejorative term 'baby-farmer' - did so with nefarious or even murderous intent. This poster aims to explore the possibility that these practices were by no means always criminal or harmful to children, but were an accepted part of childcare practices in working class communities.

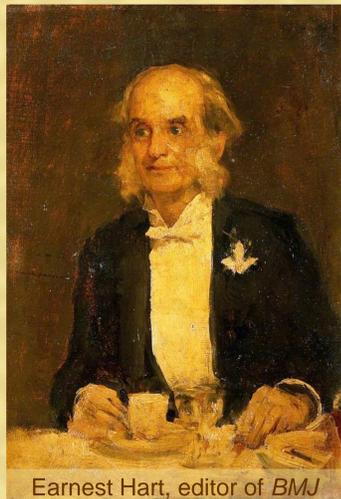


Introduction

In both popular and historical imaginations, it is often thought that the need to employ others to provide child care services is a fundamentally modern phenomenon. In the imagined past, children were looked after by a stay-at-home mother and supported by the wages of their 'bread winner' father. However this does not reflect the reality of working-class life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. Many women continued to work after giving birth to their children. This included unmarried mothers and widows as well as a surprisingly large portion of married women who continued to work out of the home. These circumstances created a need for short term services such as 'baby minders' or longer term informal adoption processes.

'Baby Farmers'...

The provision of informal childcare services in exchange for money was bitterly opposed by members of the medical and legal profession. One of the leaders of the opposition was the editor of the *British Medical Journal* Earnest Hart. Hart pioneered the use of the term 'baby-farmer' to describe paid childcare providers. In a series of articles published in the BMJ, he alleged that two thirds of paid-child carers took infants with murderous intent.



Earnest Hart, editor of *BMJ*

Or Baby Minders?

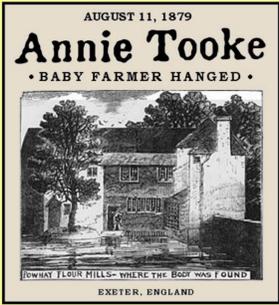
Attempts to demonise women who offered paid childcare and subject them to regulation were bitterly contested by Victorian feminists such as Josephine Butler. Butler argued that most paid infant care, consisted of arrangements in which women took in children not for profit but as a favour to friends, relatives, or neighbours. They berated medical men such as Hart who attempted to convert "a kind, neighbourly and womanly duty . . . into a legal crime." (Butler, 1872)



Josephine Butler

Paid-childcare 1860 – 1910

Fifty years of anxiety, scandal and reform

- 1865 Charlotte Winsor arrested in Devon for the murder of a child she is paid 3 Shillings a week for looking after. Interest in the case is largely confined to the local.
- 1868 First use of the term '**Baby-Farming**' in the *British Medical Journal*. Use of the term was pioneered by the Journal's editor to describe problematic providers of paid-childcare. A series of investigative reports into so called 'baby-farmers' brought the term to a wider public.
- 1870 The so called '**Brixton Baby-farmer**' **Margaret Waters** is convicted of murdering an infant in her care. The case attracted widespread attention and Waters was widely demonised in the press. She was executed in October 1870.
- 1870 The **Infant Life Protection Society**, consisting of Doctors, clergymen, coroners and campaigners formed in order to campaign for the regulation of paid-childcare.
- 1872 **Infant Life Protection Act** is passed in Parliament. It required women taking two or more infants under the age of twelve months 'for hire or reward' were to register with their local poor law union. The new law is widely thought to be ineffective as there was no provision for inspection and the requirement was widely evaded.
- 1872-1890  A series of 'baby-farmers' are tried for murdering infants in their charge (Jessie King, Catherine Barnes, Annie Took). Whilst their cases were widely reported, there was little appetite for changing the law.
- 1890 **NSPCC founder Benjamin Waugh** published his tract 'Baby-farming' calling for more regulation and a greater role for his society in policing paid-childcare. He also accused the public of 'falling to sleep' over the issue of a paid childcare.
- 1892 Private members bill introduced to try and extend registration and inspection to all infants under five.
- 1896 Public interest in 'baby-farmers' reawakened by the discovery of Amelia Dyer's baby-farm in Reading. She was widely believed to have **killed up to 400 infants** in exchange for a one off fee.
- 1897 In the aftermath of the Dyer case, Parliament rushes through an **amendment to the Infant Life Protection Act**, which required children looked after in exchange for money to be inspected **in some instances**.
- 1900 – 1907 A series of murders committed by women accused of murdering infants in their charge
- 1908 **Children's Act** meant **all** children looked after in exchange for money were subject to inspection and registration for the first time



Why such different views?

It is undeniable that children left with paid-child carers died in numbers that would be found horrific today. Hendrick (1994) estimated the death rate may have been as high as 70%. However this does not mean all paid-child carers murdered or neglected children.

Infant mortality amongst the urban poor was already very high, especially if a child could not be fed on breast milk.. This ambiguity created space for a debate:

- Did the paid child carer take in a child intending to do the best she could for the child, but was thwarted by poverty and the vulnerability of infants not fed on breast milk?
- Or did she callously pursue a policy of slow starvation in order to maximise her returns?

These questions and ambiguities that occupied commentators between 1860-1910 also form the bedrock of my research. My study attempts to navigate between these conflicting accounts and make sense of whether paid-child carers offered 'good enough' care for the infants in their charge.

References

Josephine Butler (1872) *Report of the provisional committee for amending the law in points wherein it is injurious to women*

Harry Hendrick (1994) *Child Welfare: England 1872 – 1989* (Routledge: London)