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Book Review

Social work with unmarried mothers and their children: Learning from the past

By Vivienne E. Cree & Robert MacKenzie with Douglas Edgar & Rose Foy

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This book is the product of expert and sensitive collaborative work by a retired professor of social work and former social worker, together with three former residents of a children's home in Edinburgh. The authors describe their approach as a 'voyage of discovery' (p. 3), in which they agreed to a range of opportunities which came their way, including an invitation to write an account of their work for this journal (Cree & MacKenzie, 2023).

The basis of the book is a case study of an agency, the Guild of Service for Women, from the 1940s to the 1960s. The Guild had its origins in a nineteenth century organisation, the National Vigilance Association of Scotland, that existed to provide help to young women 'in trouble', which typically meant being pregnant and having a child 'out of wedlock'. During the time-period studied, the agency was opposed to adoption, though this later changed, preferring a 'family home' for the children of unmarried mothers who were expected to maintain contact and pay towards their child's upkeep. The Guild operated two group homes in Edinburgh, Edzell Lodge, and later, Margaret Cottage.

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The book details the life stories of its principal characters, including the authors. These life stories are categorised by the mothers, the children, the housemother, the social workers, and the Guild's committee members. Pieced together from agency records, genealogy, newspaper reports and interviews, the life stories provide a fascinating social history and history of care experience. In the words of Bob: 'I became very much aware of straddling two worlds, three worlds in a way' (p. 48), the world of Edzell Lodge in its leafy Edinburgh setting and school, the 'run-down' farm cottage where his birth mother lived with her husband who Bob 'never got on with' (p. 48), and the husband's father with whom Bob developed a good relationship, the man's Boer War medal being among Bob's 'prize possessions' today.

A full chapter is devoted to describing the experiences of care in three settings: Edzell Lodge, from 1946 to 1962, and Margaret Cottage which operated successively in two locations, one from 1951 to 1960 and another from 1960 to 1963. There are detailed descriptions of the physical environment and daily life. The authors' observation is that there were good times and bad times, as in most childhoods, but one thing that stood out was the lack of consultation with the children when some were moved, at short notice, to the new Margaret Cottage home, on the other side of the city, leaving behind significant friendships with children and staff. 'It was only in working on this book, more than 70 years later, that the former residents (now older people) understood for the first time what the thinking behind this decision had been all these years ago' (p. 85).

The book ends with two contextualising chapters. The first of these, 'teasing out threads', explores themes which the authors consider to be important messages arising from their work. One of these, 'problematising memory', I found particularly interesting. This refers to the challenge of looking back on childhoods of 80 years ago and making judgements based on memories which are inevitably partial and uniquely different, and with the benefit of hindsight influenced by today's research and public inquiries into social welfare inadequacies and abuses of past generations. These reflections made me think about my own biases as a researcher of social welfare and family history. A clear strength of the book is the collaboration between the authors to present a story of childhood in residential care in the mid 20th Century. This work is assisted by present-day access to archival material but is inevitably modified by using recollections of many years in the past and, as the authors

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concede: 'Whose stories are *not* being told in the telling of our own?' (p. 102).

The final chapter considers implications for contemporary social work and child care practice. This is done by reference to The Promise, recommendations arising from the Independent Care Review in Scotland. It is clear that the voices of children in this case study were not heard in ways that are now considered unacceptable, but in other ways the authors point to 'daily acts of care and kindness' (p. 114) which we might recognise as demonstrating 'love'.

The book is a tribute to the value of collaborative storytelling as a way of better understanding care experience and is a very welcome addition to the growing canon of work on the history of care experience.

Reference

Cree, V. E. & MacKenzie, B. (2023). Collaborative story telling in residential social work: Revisiting our shared past. Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care, *22*(2). https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.00087194

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Dr Graham Connelly has an honorary post in the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde and CELCIS, and is Editor-in-Chief of the *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care* and a member of the editorial board of *Youth*.

The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book.

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