Changing Conceptions of the “Poor Child”: The Children’s Country Holiday Fund, 1918–1939

Hester Barron

The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth, Volume 9, Number 1, Winter 2016, pp. 29-47 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/hcy.2016.0018

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/611005
INTRODUCTION

One afternoon in the late summer of 1921, London’s Waterloo station was filled with the shouts of children. They carried bunches of flowers and handfuls of vegetables, dropped apples which bounced along the platforms, and wrestled with collections of small livestock (at least one rabbit escaped). Across London’s railway termini, such scenes were repeated as thousands of children returned from the countryside holidays organized annually by the Children’s Country Holiday Fund (CCHF). Between 1919 and 1939, nearly six hundred thousand such holidays were organized for London’s elementary schoolchildren, who left their homes to stay with a family in the country for two weeks or more, an average of twenty-seven thousand holidays each year.¹

Founded in 1884 by Samuel and Henrietta Barnett, the CCHF intended to provide children with “new experiences of the meaning of family life” and “to arrest the deteriorating influences of city squalor by the deportation of the children into country air.” In 1934, looking back at its first fifty years, the fund recognized its ideological continuity:

> There has been a certain amount of healthy elasticity, but the fundamental principles [now] are the same as they were in those early days: Consideration not only for the health of the children but for their outlook on life; A demand for the co-operation of the parents and a contribution (however small) from them whenever possible; An insistence on cleanliness, coupled with the most valiant efforts to obtain this.²

However, if the organization still clung to many of its nineteenth-century principles, interwar Britain provided a very different context. Following the trauma of the First World War, economic retrenchment in the 1920s was
followed by economic depression in the 1930s, blurring the distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor and changing the relationship between the poor and the state. The cultural practices of philanthropy were influenced by new concepts of citizenship and social rights, while the concept of a “holiday” itself was being reshaped, as the commercialization of entertainment transformed the experience of leisure. By the end of the period, the Holidays with Pay Act (1938) had established the principle of paid holidays for all. Within this changing context, attitudes toward childhood were also shifting due to increased interest in child development by scientific, medical, and educational communities. Harry Hendrick has suggested that the interwar period saw attention increasingly focused on the emotional welfare and “management of minds” of children, rather than primarily their physical well-being. An unprecedented emphasis on happiness as an ideal of childhood in the 1920s has been documented by Peter Stearns, and, although Stearns focuses on the United States, John Stewart’s work on child guidance clinics suggests that similar ideals influenced approaches to childhood in interwar Britain.³

The CCHF is particularly valuable as a means of tracing such shifts in attitudes due to the eclectic nature of its membership. Crucially, there is no easy classification of its volunteers by social class. The “sense of unshakeable class difference,” which Mark Peel finds amongst the (paid) social workers of interwar London, was largely absent. The CCHF employed hundreds of volunteers who coordinated the work of the fund in the capital. In 1922, 905 volunteers were divided between sixty-three district committees. Nearly three quarters were female, reflecting a common trend in interwar social and charity work. A considerable number were teachers, with 195 providing a school address (some teachers gave a private address and remain hidden). Eighty lived in university settlements, where young university graduates sought to help the poor by living amongst them, and eighty-six were clergymen. However, in 1922, the central council of the CCHF, consisting of representatives of all the local committees, also included forty-six-year-old Ernald Brentnall, the son of a butcher and grocer, who had started his working life as pupil-teacher; fifty-nine-year-old George Tavener, a stationmaster and son of a coppersmith; and fifty-five-year-old Kate Warcup, daughter of a tax collector, who had still been living with her parents and three adult siblings at the time of the 1911 census. It is likely that some of those who coordinated the day-to-day work of the CCHF might themselves have gone on its holidays as children. Certainly this was true of many of the donors.⁴

Much has been written about some of these distinguishable groups: young upper-class and upper-middle-class graduates whose settlement work appealed
to notions of “saving” young Londoners; clergymen whose involvement in social work attempted to further the appeal of the church; teachers, many from unprivileged backgrounds themselves, who often felt a duty of care that went beyond the classroom. The particular involvement and increasing visibility of women in both charitable activity and professional social work has also been explored. The CCHF was none of these alone. Rather, the charity occupied an unusual position that included aspects of settlement work, social work, education, and working-class self-help. It also reflected the interrelated nature of voluntary and state welfare, working in the “borderlands” (to use Seth Koven’s phrase) between state and civil society. This was particularly evident in its close association with the schools, demonstrated by the number of teachers directly involved and by the use of schools as sites through which to collect funds, visit children, and conduct medical inspections. The charity had an active association with the London County Council (LCC), with several overlapping personnel.5

The CCHF, therefore, saw discourses of childhood and poverty played out amongst an eclectic group of men and women, but its copious records have to date been untapped by historians.6 This article uses the CCHF to explore changing conceptions of the “poor child” in interwar Britain. In its membership, at least, the organization possessed a striking degree of continuity. Of 905 volunteers in 1922, over two hundred were working the same committees ten years later, and at least one hundred were still in post in 1939 (a conservative figure given the impossibility of tracking women who married and changed their names). Similarly long lines of continuity stretched back into the nineteenth century and forward into the postwar era. Yet, if the personnel were similar, the context had changed. During the interwar years the charity struggled to reconcile a sense of mission which had been born in the East End in the 1880s with the different challenges of postwar London. In doing so it would also look forward. Much of its interwar ideology, based around an increasing belief in the universality of childhood, would anticipate the developments of the post-1945 period and the creation of the Beveridge welfare state.

THE POOR CHILD AS URBAN CREATURE

In 1927, an article about the CCHF in The Times opened with the headline: “Slum children’s holidays.” The choice of the word “slum” was important, historically resonant, and culturally loaded, invoking a sensationalized and popular stereotype of urban lowlife. Above all, it reflected the fact that the poor child of the interwar years was a resolutely urban creature in the public imagination.7

A belief that country life was physically transformative pervaded CCHF literature. In 1918, its primary aim was stated as a subtitle to its annual report: “To
provide a fortnight in the country during the summer holiday for ailing children attending the elementary day schools of London.” Exposure to the countryside was itself believed to be enough to transform children’s well-being. As one committee put it, “In the second week the country air tells and their appetite is ravenous.” The transformation could be miraculous, according to one CCHF worker, who wrote that “one delicate little girl . . . was going blind. . . . We gave her a whole month’s holiday and she returned cured, her sight restored.”

The countryside was represented as a place where an emotional as well as a physical recovery might occur. Reports contrasted “the weary tiredness of London,” with “the real joy of life, the sea, the river, the scent of hay.” Open air might even trump actual illness. In 1922, a boy’s return was delayed following his contraction of chicken pox, but the society’s report cheerfully stated that he was better off with “chicken pox in [rural] Deal than well at home which is in a mews.” Agricultural work was idealized. CCHF holidays frequently coincided with harvest, and children might be required to help with this by host families who welcomed the extra hands (hosts were volunteers, receiving a small allowance but no payment). This was presented as an opportunity for the visitors rather than a chore, as in one committee’s comment: “This ‘helping’ and riding high on wagon-loads of hay was to them a new and thrilling experience.”

The interwar years saw the rural ideal raised by some to an almost spiritual level. This period saw the rise of groups such as the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, the Youth Hostel Association, and the Ramblers’ Association, while a scientific and medical emphasis on the restorative effect of fresh air became ubiquitous in interwar Britain and Europe. Of course, the CCHF had long been concerned with ameliorating the ill effects of urban life via an engagement with nature. Recapturing a sense of rural contentment was integral to another of Henrietta Barnett’s projects, the creation of Hampstead Garden Suburb, which she embarked upon in the early 1900s. A belief in the restorative power of the countryside was also shared by other reformers in prewar London. Margaret McMillan, whose pioneering open-air nursery school at Deptford opened in 1911, hoped that such initiatives would “take a dirty, malnourished, swollen-eyed child and make it healthy and beautiful.”

If an urban backdrop remained constant in interwar imaginings of the poor child, however, then the nature of its threat had changed. In 1932, the mission statement of the CCHF, “to provide a fortnight in the country . . . for ailing children attending the elementary day schools of London,” was altered and the word “ailing” permanently removed from the sentence. Made in the year in which unemployment peaked, this change may have been a tacit recognition that the charity was unable to help those most in need. In 1932, holidays were
organized for 23,600 children, five thousand fewer than the previous year, and the lowest number since 1922 (also a year of high unemployment). This was partly due to the squeezed resources of the charity itself, but was also due to a drop in the number of applications. One committee explained the reduction “largely through unemployment and parents not able to get clothes and boots for the children.”

This change in wording is also significant for the reduced emphasis it implies on physical well-being, reflecting the increasing awareness that child poverty could be emotional as well as simply material. It was also indicative of a growing concern with the association between urbanization and modernity. In 1930, the child psychiatrist Emanuel Miller suggested that modern life had brought to childhood “strains and tensions and disruptive tendencies which probably did not exist before.” His anxieties were shared by the CCHF. As its 1933 report explained, “If the holiday was needed so badly fifty years ago, surely it is wanted even more now, with the rush, bustle and noise of modern life.”

The rural was therefore presented as an antidote to modernity, especially to its perceived moral dangers. The formation in 1935 of a new committee at Acton, west London, was justified not by material poverty, but by the fact that the area possessed a high level of maternal employment, resulting in children spending considerable time unsupervised in the streets. There was, of course, considerable overlap between financial hardship and a squalid living environment. Yet a telling comment made by a camp superintendent compared boys living “within reach of the docks and the endless excitements of the river,” to those of other districts where “never-ending rows of low, straight, monotonous little houses strike their eyes, day after day, week after week, month after month and year after year.” Even if the latter apparently came from more comfortable homes, he argued, they needed a holiday at least as much, if not more, than the former.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF CHILDHOOD

The ideology of the CCHF often reflected the narrative of “outcast London” and a drive for national efficiency. In September 1918, after the army’s rejection of an estimated million men during the First World War, Prime Minister David Lloyd George employed the terminology used by the military to classify recruits to warn that “you cannot maintain an A1 Empire with a C3 Nation.” The CCHF echoed this language a year later, urging recognition of “the need to give proper holidays to the children in our great towns. Our armies have not saved Great Britain in order that a C3 population should inhabit an A1 country.” The holidays’ benefits were represented as being of both personal value to children and
of wider benefit to the nation. One committee reported that “the health-giving effect on their impressionable young minds, as well as on their bodies, must . . . have far more reaching consequences than we can easily foresee, extending possibly to another generation.”

Such arguments were particularly common in fundraising literature, evident in a request for donations published in 1927: “These children were the coming generation, to whom we would look for the stability of our country.” This echoed an appeal for donations by Dymchurch holiday camp (used by various youth groups, including the CCHF) in 1923: “It is well to remember, in these days of ‘Socialist Sunday Schools,’ of class hatred, and of social unrest, that the influence of a visit to Camp, the success of which depends upon the spirit of unselfishness, is of no small value to the individual, and ultimately to the State.”

This rhetoric grew less frequent as the interwar years progressed, reflecting the different social politics of the 1930s compared to the 1920s, as the restoration of a prewar ratio of salaries to wages and a reduction in working-class militancy restored middle-class confidence. By the late 1930s, Basil Henriques, who devoted much of his life to working with underprivileged young Londoners and was directly involved with the CCHF, wrote disparagingly of many who donated to children’s charities. “Mention the word ‘kiddies’ or something equally sloppy,” he wrote, “and the indiscriminate charity-minded people fork up.” A diminishing concern with the holidays as a means of diluting working-class radicalism was also reflected in a relaxation of rules governing the allocation of children to rural homes. In 1926, following the general strike, the CCHF executive noted that committees had “very wisely” decided against sending children to neighborhoods where men were unemployed. By 1933 the executive had softened its stance, agreeing that children should not be disqualified from homes where a man was on the dole, provided that workers were “satisfied that the children would be adequately fed.”

When children failed to respond to the countryside as the CCHF expected, its volunteers blamed the stubbornness or immaturity of youngsters so stunted by their environment that they lacked the emotional tools to appreciate the holiday’s benefits. In 1922, a committee regretted the early return of four girls who “despite all temptations refused to be happy.” Several years later, another committee reported with incredulity that two sisters had returned from “a particularly lovely district” following a complaint sent home by the elder that “wherever you looked from the cottage, north, south, east or west, you could see nothing but trees and green fields!” Indeed, at least one CCHF worker believed that urban life prevented the development of the most basic act of
childhood: the ability to play. Advocating greater provision of leisure facilities for children within London itself, Henriques noted that school playgrounds were “very little used, not because they are not needed, but because the children don’t know how to play in them.”

The implication was that better living—and a better childhood—therefore had to be learned, and the interwar years were marked by an ever-greater faith in the ability of children to be transformed by their surroundings. It was believed that country air itself could improve behavior and character, with several committee reports of the 1930s recounting stories of wild children who had returned from a countryside holiday as reformed characters. A change in attitudes can be demonstrated by the fund’s increasing flexibility towards misbehavior. Complaints were periodically made about rude or disagreeable children, along with reports of misdemeanours such as breaking windows or chasing sheep. Yet in only one instance, in 1924, was it recorded that some children caught stealing apples were given “a thrashing.” While other similar punishments may well have been meted out, no other instances were officially recorded. Increasingly, misbehavior was excused, attributed to unfamiliar conditions and a holiday spirit. Committees reported incidents of “foolishness” or “misdeeds,” undertaken by “a few unruly ones.” A few years after the thrashing, the same committee (containing several of the same members) commented on a year of good conduct, in which “any errors [were] those that belong to youth and sudden change of surroundings and authority. . . . They are understandable, forgivable, even admirable.” In fact, misbehavior was rewritten as being central to a child’s normal development. For one committee, reflecting on a year of exceptionally good behavior in 1937, “It was almost a relief to find that one small boy had a passion for window breaking.”

The change in rhetoric points to a belief in the universality of childhood that went increasingly unchallenged. Carolyn Steedman has noted that the working-class child in late-Victorian and Edwardian England was corrupt as well as innocent. Slum children “unless rescued . . . [will] swell the ranks of the despairing or boldly enter the ranks of vice,” warned the journalist James Cuming Walters in 1901. But, as Steedman also argues, during the 1920s and influenced particularly by Freudian psychoanalysis, “A certain understanding of selfhood had been formalized, most typically in the ‘discovery’ of the unconscious, and its connection as a formulation to the idea of the lost child within all of us.”

It is unlikely that many of those volunteering for the CCHF possessed a nuanced understanding of Freud (although recent research has suggested “a considerably broader interest and enthusiasm than hitherto recognised” amongst the British public), but they were increasingly concerned
nonetheless with the importance of giving children an “authentic” experience of childhood, recasting the holidays as key to the integral development of the child. Such a conception of childhood as universal also explains the surprising absence of class in CCHF records. One CCHF worker, writing in 1935, commented:

I learnt as a holiday visitor what I ought to have known before, that children are all alike. The poorest child has the same spirited likes and dislikes, easily hurt feelings and easily roused excitement, and is just as fond of clean, pretty things, of presents, surprises, and holidays as children in more fortunate circumstances. There is no difference whatever except in health and stamina, and there the difference is all too marked.20

THE PARENTS OF THE POOR CHILD

In its attitudes toward parents, the CCHF was often influenced by its nineteenth-century roots, and it maintained a close association with the Charity Organisation Society (COS), founded in 1869. In particular, an enduring belief in the contributory principle was apparent in the approach of the interwar CCHF. In 1938 it was noted “that self-help was one of the principles of the movement. Parents were encouraged to cooperate in providing for the holidays.”21

The fund also echoed COS ideology in its stigmatizing of working-class parents. In 1930, anticipating the complaint of incontinence that would be leveled at child evacuees during the Second World War, one committee reported “a few cases of bed damage . . . generally due to carelessness or lack of home training.” A reliance on a poor diet was a further criticism of the working-class parent. Country correspondents despaired of children who refused to touch fresh meat or vegetables and craved tinned milk, corned beef, or stewed eels. When reports did praise a child’s upbringing, London’s schools were credited rather than London’s parents: “Truly, we have much to thank the teachers for.”22

Unlike other youth organizations such as the scouts or guides, which were led by adults, made use of camps, and were more explicitly pedagogic, the CCHF usually boarded children in rural homes. The two-week holiday in the countryside for “the huge family consigned to our care for the month of August” was not just a break from a claustrophobic urban existence, but was also an opportunity to demonstrate an alternative and idealized model of family life. Country dwellers were subject to considerable scrutiny before being accepted as hosts. In 1930 it was decided not to send children to stay with an unmarried mother; on another occasion permission was refused to send four boys to a vicarage, as the vicar had no wife. One hostess was struck off because she had taken her young visitors with her to collect her husband from the pub.23
Comments upon the fecklessness of working-class parents were not new, but there is some evidence to suggest that the CCHF’s attitude towards parents hardened as the interwar years progressed. A greater faith in the ability of children to develop, marking a transition from assessment of their characters to a faith in their personality, influenced the fund’s attitude: casting the poor, urban child as emotionally stunted saw the transfer of blame to their parents. John Stewart notices such a shift in his work on the expansion of child guidance clinics in this period, arguing that this was indicative of an increasing tendency to pathologize childhood and demonstrated a change in focus from child to environment (and particularly parents) as culpable.24

In the 1920s, committees often described parents with the same pathos as they portrayed the children. By the 1930s, many took a more cynical attitude, implying that parents were motivated by pragmatic and material interests. In 1932, one committee commented on the thanks received from parents “who realize that without that holiday they would no doubt have to expend considerably more than they could afford to pay in medical fees.” In 1938, another committee had to disappoint several children for whom homes in the countryside could not be found: its secretary commented that “never have I felt so helpless. . . besieged by angry parents whose plans for a little peace or even a holiday, had been overthrown at the last moment.” Henriques believed that parents manipulated the assessment process and was scathing about the lack of verification required: “The wise parent will obviously lie.”25

Parents also demonstrated agency in their willingness to override the fund’s recommendations and bring their children home. Various examples of CCHF disapproval can be found in reports from the 1930s. One committee appealed to the parents to “remember that the children . . . are apt to exaggerate at times.” Another committee spoke of children being “snatched home”; another of children taken back by “unwise mothers.” Yet another despaired that three “misguided” children “returned home the first week, one hopelessly homesick, one ‘bored,’ and the third ‘very happy’ but missed by his mother!”26

The contradictory picture of parents both delighted and upset at their children’s absence is, of course, testament to wide variation in familial relations and personalities. But in both cases, the fund’s reaction was to belittle the working-class household and trivialize parental concerns. Indeed, for the charity, ultimate proof of parental fickleness came in the summer of 1939, when it noticed a reduction in the number of complaints: “This dearth of grumbling may have been owing to the parents being too occupied in getting their children ready to be evacuated. They had no time to dwell unduly on a child having been bitten by harvesters or not liking ‘fowl’ for dinner.”27
Yet if the stigmatization of working-class parenting styles was constantly present in the charity’s literature, it was not without an awareness of the difficult environment with which parents, like their children, had to contend. The idea that behavior could be shaped by environmental factors as well as personal character would gain increasing currency during and after the Second World War, but it was anticipated by at least some of the charity’s supporters. In 1938, Sir Wyndham Deedes hoped that the day would come when all London children would be provided with a holiday: “The fund might then turn its attention to holidays for the children’s mothers.”

**THE RESPONSES OF CHILDREN**

Recent scholarship has been critical of a tendency to represent the recipients of charity as passive victims and has attempted to restore the agency of the poor, exploring ways in which families negotiated and manipulated philanthropic and state welfare services. An integral part of the CCHF was the Countryside Committee, which invited every child returning from a holiday to write a letter back to the fund describing their experiences. Several thousand such letters were received each year (their composition was often sanctioned by schools, with classroom time set aside for the purpose) and selected quotations were published in the reports. Inevitably the historian has to sift these edited highlights with care; they nevertheless provide a rare means of accessing the voices of the children themselves.

It is difficult to measure how far children believed in the transformative qualities of the country holiday so celebrated by the charity’s organizers. Some appreciated the physical benefits. One child announced, “When I got home . . . I was so fat and rosy”; another declared that he had had “a very good growing holiday.” Many responded emotionally: local committees recounted with pleasure the numerous comments of children who returned to London declaring their wish to be farmers or milkmaids when they grew up, or who now beseeched their parents to move to the country.

There is no doubt that many developed a genuine affection for the places and people they visited. Children frequently requested to return to the same hosts as the previous year, and some returned year after year to the same homes. Every year, the charity recorded children’s comments which demonstrated their positive response to the change of surroundings. One girl declared that “I am very pleased with the country . . . for the birds with their singing and the trees rustling give you the joyful feeling everyone should have.” Another simply stated that “when in the country we felt it was good to be alive.”

Inevitably, not all children felt similarly. Occasional reports of ill-treatment surfaced, and in 1925 three children wrote that they were having a “very
unhappy time. We have been grumbled at every day for coming in a little to late or a little to soon [sic]. We have to sleep on damp beds. We have to stay out all day raining or not.” The charity was reluctant to condemn the hostess (“It is a matter of temperament I should imagine”), but the children were transferred elsewhere.32

Much more common than physical suffering was the fact that children might fail to respond emotionally to the country in ways that the charity expected. Cases of homesickness were blamed on the darkness or unfamiliar silence of country nights. For many, the prevailing experience was boredom. One boy remarked that “it was raining, so we went to church to pass the miserable time away!” In his memoirs, Alexander Hartog later remembered the “Country Holiday Fund for deprived children and its holidays at Leighton Buzzard on the cheap when nobody bothered and all we did was go for walks and maybe once in a while go to the pictures.”33

Children noticed the lack of amenities in the country. According to one visitor, “people light lamps and candles instead of gas, and water is not laid on—it has to be fetched from wells and pumps.” As late as 1939, 3,432 parishes in England and Wales had no piped water, and 5,186 had no sewage system. One child was appreciative of his host’s efforts to entertain them, but was given another stark reminder of the poverty which prevailed in many agricultural areas: “Our lady tried all she could to amuse us and took us to the workhouse.”34

The result was to remove any sense of inferiority. The Londoners rarely gave the impression that they were ashamed of their background or that they viewed themselves as “poor” in comparison to the rural population. One report noted the tensions caused in a village when children were “called ‘cockneys’ or taken for orphans from Dr Barnardo’s Homes.” Elsewhere, a fray broke out after a local boy ridiculed the visitors as “London tramps.” This echoes the experience of Henriques, who arrived in the East End as an Oxford undergraduate in 1914 and was astonished (and humbled) by the lack of deference: “Of all the impressions of that first night the most extraordinary was that these ‘slum boys of the lower classes’ should speak to me as though I were their equal.”35

In fact, London schoolchildren were often more physically robust than their rural counterparts. One boy noted proudly that “London and Horsham played cricket and London gave them a jolly good licking.” As a reminder that the city had no monopoly on infection, one boy caught chicken pox; another returned to London with scabies. At least some of the Londoners also proved themselves as capable of negotiating country hazards as the rural children. The LCC, one of the most progressive education authorities of interwar Britain, boasted in 1928 that over forty thousand of its pupils had been taught to swim that year. A few
years later, a child from Hackney, north-east London, saved the six-year-old son of her hostess from drowning.  

Children often viewed the rural population with the same detached anthropological interest to which they were subject. “The farmer was just what I had seen in books, a very homely, generous and jovial man,” commented one, while another described country people as “kind and dressed very plain. Most of them are red [skinned] in colour.” Another boy wrote (“somewhat patronisingly,” according to the committee which quoted him), that “they are very nice to you in the country but some of them are slow. I should not like to live there, but I shall go again next year.”

Whether their experiences were positive or negative, the CCHF holidays also reminded children of what they already had. Rather than turning them against their urban homes, the brief separation of two weeks often served to highlight a child’s attachment to London, and particularly the strength of family bonds. Children frequently returned with gifts for family and friends: “a china ornament for my mother, a packet of cigars for my father, and a toy for my baby.” One boy stopped off at Clapham Junction on his way home so he could finish buying presents, having run out of time during the holiday itself.

Ultimately, the children’s responses demonstrate their self-confidence, contrary to the fears of the fund. These children were active participants in their holiday and agents of their own leisure. Henriques may have despaired that urban children did not know how to play, but at least one child was content after he had been told “where Woolworths was and also a few historical places.” Another child hiked six miles to the nearest Woolworths. When he returned in the evening, his anxious hostess “wisely hid his boots after tea, lest he should march off a considerable distance to an evening at the cinema.”

THE WARTIME EVACUATION OF SCHOOLCHILDREN

Contemporary debates regarding the condition of the poor child in urban Britain were heightened by the wartime evacuation process. As tales of verminous, bed-wetting children elicited responses of both hostility and sympathy, it was argued that evacuation had opened “a window through which English town life was suddenly and vividly seen from a new angle.” The country was represented as a place of rehabilitation, away from the squalor of the big city. The 1941 government propaganda film Living with Strangers lingered on scenes of children picking daffodils, milking a cow, and observing a blacksmith.

The scope—both numerically and geographically—of the evacuation process meant that administrative challenges were inherently more difficult to overcome than those encountered by a London-based charity in peacetime.
But the basic principle remained the same. As a delegate to an LCC conference on evacuation stated during the crisis of September 1938, “It really is doing on a very big scale what the Children’s Country Holiday Fund are doing . . . an enormously bigger scale.”

Despite lobbying from individuals and organizations, the CCHF did not play a major policy role in wartime. Many CCHF workers volunteered to help at a local level, and throughout the war the charity was given the responsibility of assisting with the provision of billets for pre-school children. Yet the CCHF was not staffed or equipped to deal with the scale of wartime evacuation. The government was clear that the evacuation of “half a million children attending something like 2,300 school departments and requiring at least 700 special trains . . . is certainly not a job which could be left to the Children’s Country Holiday Fund . . . or any of the other voluntary agencies.”

Yet if the wartime evacuation process necessitated state oversight, the wider influence of the CCHF was apparent nonetheless. In the late 1930s, a committee of four members of Parliament was formed to advise the government with regards to evacuation policy. Two of those MPs, Lieutenant-Colonel G. F. Doland and Sir Percy Harris, had each donated money to the CCHF several times in the preceding years. A third, Dr. Haden Guest, had praised the fund’s work in the House of Commons fifteen years earlier: “It has always been one of my ideals to have the whole child population of London camping out in the beautiful country quiet near London during the summer holidays.”

For those directly involved—children, parents, and hosts—the interwar country holidays anticipated the experience of evacuation. Many of the children’s comments reproduced in CCHF reports anticipate those found in the letters or later memoirs of evacuees, whether expressing joy in the rural environment or complaining about the monotony of country life. For London parents, nervous about the prospect of evacuating their children, the CCHF also provided a familiar frame of reference. The official LCC guidance to head teachers appealed directly to CCHF experiences, asking them to reassure parents by telling them that “some of you may have children who have been away with the Children’s Country Holiday Fund, or in some other way, and if so, you will know how kind and helpful country people are.” Those who had previously hosted children for CCHF holidays also had a clear sense of both the challenges and rewards involved. While frantically searching for homes to accept evacuees during the crisis of September 1938, one LCC official received a positive response from villagers already won over to the prospect of hosting young Londoners by their positive encounters with CCHF children: “She was told that she could send as many Bethnal Green children as she liked to that particular village.”
In particular, the issues and concerns debated by social and political commentators resulting from wartime evacuation mirrored those raised by the CCHF in the preceding years. Arguably the most influential piece of contemporary writing emerging from wartime evacuation was published in 1943 by the Women’s Group on Public Welfare, a group of female activists and commentators, some of whom had been active in the interwar CCHF. Entitled *Our Towns: A Close Up*, the report combined a progressive attitude towards state involvement and an awareness of the detrimental effects of environment with a strong strain of condescension, which blamed the behavioral traits of a certain section of the working class for the conditions exposed in September 1939. The historian John Welshman argues that the report was perhaps the clearest example of the “complex amalgam that comprised ideas on social questions in the 1940s.”

The diverse group of philanthropic men and women who were active in the CCHF offered a similarly complex fusion of ideas in the two decades before the war, when a genuine concern and sympathy for the urban child was paired with a moralizing attitude towards their working-class parents. The work of the CCHF anticipated many of the findings of the evacuation process, including fears over the physical and mental deterioration engendered by an urban environment, concerns over the emotional development of children and their ability to indulge in play, and observations about the nature of working-class family life, especially the realization that parents frequently worried about and missed their children even during a two-week absence and that many children retained a strong loyalty and attachment to their home surroundings. Indeed, the writings of the CCHF demonstrate a complex attitude to the urban poor that would later find wide readership in publications such as the *Our Towns* report. The CCHF provides a vivid illustration that such a shift in attitudes was already becoming established well before the war.

**CONCLUSION**

The CCHF conducted its early work in a period in which concepts of childhood were already being reshaped. Steedman notes that, in the period from the late nineteenth century to the First World War, children became subjects of attention, “written about, photographed and painted, surveyed and measured, in an unprecedented way.” When the CCHF resumed its work after the Second World War, it was in a vastly changed Britain, in which the principle of “cradle to grave” welfare provided a wholly different context for family life. The 1920s and 1930s were years of transition, during which charity simultaneously carried the legacy of its Victorian roots, struggled to come to terms with the changing
nature of interwar urban life, and anticipated debates which would shape the
postwar welfare state.

If the charity was increasingly concerned with a more child-centered outlook
in the interwar years, then this idea was not a new one. The work of men and
women such as Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, and Maria Montessori had
won adherents in educational circles well before 1918, and Margaret McMillan
and others had long been advocating the idea of a “garden” for childhood.
However, a study of the CCHF demonstrates the diffusion of these ideas amongst
a much wider group of people by the 1920s and 1930s. Particularly in the later
years of the period, when economic depression forced an acknowledgement that
poverty was not always of the poor’s own making, for the thousands of men and
women—teachers and vicars, ladies or lords—who worked for the CCHF in the
interwar years, the charity represented a belief in the universality of childhood,
and, crucially, a universal entitlement to it. It was an ideology that would be fur-
ther bolstered by the wartime evacuation of schoolchildren and would become
enshrined in social thought in the second half of the century.

Concern over the poor child was increasingly not just about physical
neglect; rather a more holistic view of poverty was becoming popular. The poor
child remained an urban one, but was defined not just by a socioeconomic cat-
egory, but also by his or her appearance, behavior, and emotional development:
a “poor” child in both senses of the word. The countryside was represented as
the means of providing such children with a more “authentic” experience of
childhood. In 1933, one CCHF committee reflected on the return of over five
hundred children from the country, noting “the contrast between pale, tired,
silent, expectant little people, and the happy, healthy children, full of life and all
their doings.” The language was significant: the holiday had transformed these
“little people” into “children.”

Children and parents themselves did not always concur. John Macnicol
argues of the wartime evacuation process that it “revealed the essential solidar-
ity of working-class family life—quite the opposite of what many middle-class
observers maintained.” The same could be said of the activities of the CCHF,
demonstrated in the concern of parents over their children’s welfare and in the
responses of the children themselves. Rather than the urban environment stunt-
ing the children’s emotional development, as the CCHF feared, the children’s
letters reveal the degree of existing emotional maturity that they already pos-
sessed, grounded in the urban families and communities from which they came.

In the 1920s and particularly the 1930s, the CCHF worked with a generation
of London children who were perhaps more confident than ever before. They
generally came from smaller families and enjoyed greater parental attention as
a result, following the 1918 Education Act they were schooled until the age of fourteen by one of the most progressive education authorities of the time, and the growing opportunities of interwar London enabled them to assert their leisure choices in the new chain stores and picture palaces that proliferated across the capital. The snippets of children’s voices that survive, therefore, demonstrate a self-awareness and self-confidence that was ultimately grounded in an attachment to London and to their families. “One thing I like is that the trains run right past our [holiday] house,” wrote one child in 1922, “and by this I know what time the train left Paddington.”

NOTES


4. Mark Peel, Miss Cutler and the Case of the Resurrected Horse (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 117; Donor information noted by executive committee, June 21, 1935, LMA, LMA/4040/01/022.


6. Although Katharine Bradley briefly considers the CCHF’s activities in the postwar years. Katharine Bradley, Poverty, Philanthropy and the State (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 75–81.

7. The Times, November 24, 1927. For the mythologizing of the “slum” see Alan Mayne, The Imagined Slum (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993).


11. Report, 1932, 44.

12. Quoted in Stewart, Child Guidance, 1; Report, 1933, 11.


18. Report, 1924, 36; Report, 1938, 32, 47, 22; Report, 1929, 37; Report, 1937, 32.


22. Report, 1930, 16; Report, 1933, 34; see also Report, 1923, 43.


27. Council Committee, November 24, 1939: LMA, LMA/4040/02/008.


36. Report, 1921, 5; Executive Committee, September 18, 1931: LMA, LMA/4040/01/021; LCC Education Committee, October 31, 1928; Report, 1933, 28.

37. Report, 1923, 6; Report, 1920, 8; Report, 1922, 41.


41. Education Officer’s Conference, September 15, 1938: LMA, EO/WAR/1/4.


44. Education Officer’s memo: LMA, EO/WAR/1/4; Report, 1938, 18.


47. Report, 1933, 39.


49. Report, 1922, 44.