

## **'Saving' the Child in Victorian Dundee**

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### **Introduction**

Similar to current disquiet, public anxiety and political debate fuelled concerns amongst the Victorians about juvenile 'delinquency' and child neglect. Contemporary observers argued that it was the drunkenness, ignorance, promiscuity, and irresponsibility of parents which were responsible for the 'gangs' of disorderly and offending children 'swarming' the streets of Victorian towns (Pearson, 1983; Platt, 1969; Shore, 1999). The children of the 'culpable' poor were believed to be at particular risk of drifting into criminality, as not only were they influenced by their unreliable and unworthy parents but they had also inherited all the susceptibilities and propensities of their forebears. What to do with these children became a prominent preoccupation of the era. A group of reformers, many of whom were evangelicals, argued that the salvation of these children could only be achieved through religious-based moral training. (These reformers are characterised by the term 'child savers'). They had a resolute belief in the righteousness of their cause: not only to protect the child from the risk of criminality but also to protect society from the perceived growth in lawlessness. The rhetoric of the 'child savers' was the protection from depravity and corruption of a large group of vulnerable children, but the methods established within the institutions they founded, and the subsequent legislation, sought to correct the behaviour of the culpable poor through the retraining and reforming of their children.

Mary Carpenter, described by one historian as 'the supreme ideologist of [the] reformatory principle' (Pearson, 1983, p. 179), repeatedly argued that special training schools would only be successful if they were 'enforced by magisterial authority' (Carpenter, 1851, p. 259). She held the view that children who were 'homeless and friendless' would become thieves and beggars if they were not '*compelled*' to attend; voluntary attendance was discounted due to the children's addiction 'to vagrant habits' (Carpenter, 1851, p. 71). Victorian perceptions of the causes of crime allowed for little distinction between the persistent juvenile offender and the child in need of care and protection, which led to innocent children not found guilty of any crime but detained under an order of detention being viewed in the same manner as those who were found guilty of offending. These children, many of whom were neither 'delinquent' nor 'destitute', were subjected to many years of incarceration in order to undergo 'special' training, treatment which reflected the wider political and social fears amongst elite groups regarding the lower classes.

Many Victorians adopted an approach to the poor which assumed their guilt for the distressed circumstances they were in and the accusation that parents sought to abdicate responsibility for their children abounded. The children were viewed as 'tainted' because they had inherited the tendencies and weaknesses of their parents. The directors of the special training institutions in Dundee reflected common beliefs that the children of the culpable poor were more likely to become respectable adults if they were removed from the influence of their parents. Accusations of lack of parental responsibility allowed the 'child-savers' to deny parental rights to those whom they regarded as unworthy. Fathers had recognised rights, and were regarded as masters of their household who should be free from any interference from outside agencies (Davidoff, Doolittle, Rink & Holden, 1999, p. 140). Only when it was judged that the moral welfare of their children was jeopardised were these rights discarded. Pauper families could also be denied the right to family life with children being removed from parents, and some Scottish parishes were sending children to work in English mills (Mitchison, 2000, p. 127). A Court ruling in 1853 had decreed that the Poor Law could not sever family relationships, but over the following years it would become increasingly acceptable to remove children from their pauper parents (Levitt, 1988, p. 30). Lynn Abrams suggests that during the nineteenth century and extending into the twentieth century there was a general belief among the directors of children's homes that some children were better away from the influence of parents (Abrams, 1998, p. 90).

The family unit had little value without the personal means to support and sustain it, and for the Dundee children detained on an order of detention the term 'family' was not used once they had been taken either to Dundee industrial schools or the *Mars* training ship. The family would be subsumed into the euphemism 'friends', which allowed the management of the institution to disregard the concerns and 'rights' of parents. In removing the concept of family from those deemed to be culpable or destitute, proponents of special training for the children of the lower classes destabilised the family unit hoping to create a workforce trained to industrial habits who would no longer be influenced by familial behaviour.

### **Dundee industrial schools**

Dundee Industrial Schools Society was founded in 1846, and by 1869 (the year in which the *Mars* Training Ship Institution was inaugurated) was accommodating approximately 130 girls and boys, most of whom were detained on an order and had not been convicted of an offence (some may have been charged with an offence but would not have been previously convicted). Its purpose was the 'rescuing' of boys and girls who were poor and neglected from 'idleness and temptation'. At the first annual meeting of the Dundee Industrial Schools Society

in 1847, Lord Kinnaird, founder and first president of the Society, claimed that the number of children in Dundee who needed to be reclaimed from 'a course of vice and crime' was 'very numerous' (*First annual report*, 1847). Throughout the nineteenth century there were claims of boisterous behaviour from gangs of juveniles roaming the streets of towns and cities, and it has been claimed that the 'respectable' community believed the safety of society as a whole was at risk, and that the lower classes could no longer be controlled due to the weakened authority of the law (Pearson, 1983, p. 172). Poverty was an integral part of God's providence, whereas vice and immorality were man's inventions and the quest was to address the sinfulness of the culpable poor. It has been suggested that philanthropists could be 'staggeringly optimistic' about the ease by which the lower classes could be 'reclaimed' (Pearson, 1983, pp. 175-176).

### **The *Mars* Training Ship Institution**

The children of the lower classes, whose behaviour was perceived as a potential threat to the stability of society, could be saved because it was believed that children were especially receptive to God's grace. It was also believed that nurture could overcome most of nature's defects. This dual perception was the premise not only for founding industrial schools in the town, but also for establishing a training ship to accommodate and train boys for a seafaring life, where they were perceived as on the periphery of criminal activity. Comparable with present-day rhetoric, claims regarding the level of crime being committed by juveniles were used to justify the extension of facilities in Dundee to train the children of the culpable poor. The editor of the *Dundee Courier* was among a number of Dundee residents arguing in the late 1860s for a training ship to be anchored in the River Tay (*Dundee Courier and Argus*, 25 March 1869).

The training ship was established as an institution following the Crimean War (1854-56), when it became apparent that there was a lack of naval recruits; however, it quickly took on a wider role than that of training cadets for the Royal and merchant navies. The *Mars* Training Ship Institution was founded in 1869 and could accommodate 400 boys, but in its first year as an institution there were 210 boys aboard, most of whom were detained on an order. The legislation contained within The Industrial Schools Act, 1866 made no reference to training ships, but it was under this legislation that magistrates, many of whom were directors of the *Mars* Training Ship Institution, detained boys. The great majority of children accommodated on board the *Mars* training ship and in Dundee industrial schools were not, as has been suggested by one historian, 'free of legal compulsion' (Owen, 1965, p. 156).

## The use and impact of legislation

A change to national legislation in 1854 had led to a significant rise in the numbers of children being sent to industrial schools. Prior to 1854, first offenders were sent directly to Dundee industrial schools, most commonly for a single offence of simple theft. Applying only to Scotland, Dunlop's Act (17 & 18 Vict., c. LXXIV) August 1854 allowed a magistrate to detain a child under the age of 14 years in an industrial school (or indeed a reformatory) if they had been found begging or were deemed to be vagrant with the maintenance of the child charged to the parents, or possibly the parish. The Lord Advocate at the time described the Act as a means 'to remove the outcast children from the streets [but] if any relative or guardian gave security they would be discharged.' (Home Department, 1897, p. 953). Further amendments to national legislation affecting industrial schools occurred in 1861 with the Industrial Schools Consolidating and Amending Act (Scotland) (24&25 Vict., c. CXXXII).

Another act which consolidated and amended the previous acts relating to industrial schools in Great Britain was introduced in 1866 (The Industrial Schools Act 29 & 30 Vict., c. CXVIII (10 August 1866)). While children convicted of criminal behaviour could be sentenced under the Reformatory Schools (Scotland) Act (19 & 20 Vict. c. XXVII) of June 1856, the children ordered to be detained under the Industrial Schools Act of 1866 invariably had no criminal conviction, and in many cases were neither neglected nor beyond parental control. It would be under Sections XIV, XVI, and XVII of this Act that many children would be brought to Dundee Police Court and detained in industrial schools or on board the *Mars* training ship. The Act defined an industrial school as, 'A School in which Industrial Training is provided, and in which Children are lodged, clothed and fed, as well as taught, shall exclusively be deemed an Industrial School'. Industrial schools and training ships were required to be certified and in order to obtain certification the Inspector of Industrial Schools visited and reported to the Secretary of State on the appropriateness of the accommodation and programme for training. The institution was required to be inspected at least once in a twelve-month period, and no substantial additions or alterations could be made without the permission of the Secretary of State.

The Dundee Industrial School Society and the *Mars* Training Ship Institution were keen to accommodate as many children as they were allowed under the certification. The directors of both institutions believed that prevention through education and training cost the country much less than the child growing into an adult criminal (*Sixteenth annual report*, 1863). The 1866 Act outlined the 'classes of children' who could be committed to a certified industrial school. For children 'apparently' under the age of 14 the following criteria, contained in Sections XIV, XVI, and XVII, applied: found begging

or being in a public place with intent to beg; found 'wandering' with no fixed abode, and no guardian providing subsistence; found destitute, being either an orphan or with a surviving parent in prison; keeping company with 'reputed' thieves; where a guardian requests a child to be detained on the grounds that he is beyond control; refractory children maintained by the Parish; and a child where either parent had been convicted of a crime punishable with penal servitude or imprisonment. (This Act also retained Section XV of the Industrial Schools Act of 1861 allowing children charged with a minor offence who had not at any time been convicted of theft and were 'apparently' under the age of 12 years to be sent to an industrial school). Orders of detention were signed by a 'magistrate', a term which, under the Act, applied to Scotland only, and included a sheriff, sheriff-substitute, justice of the peace of a county, judge in a police court, and provost or bailie of a city or burgh (The Industrial Schools Act, 1866).

Children were being detained in Dundee industrial schools during the 1860s charged with vagrancy despite the fact that no act in Scotland at that time defined the term 'vagrant'. Vagrants were sometimes called 'tinkers' or 'unlicensed hawkers', and Chief Constables throughout Scotland were not in agreement about who was a vagrant and how they should be treated (House of Lords Select Committee, 1867-1868, pp. 69-70). Emphasis was placed upon the importance of dealing with child vagrants who would, it was argued, be the next generation of adult vagrants, and this needed to be recognised, as crime resulting from vagrancy could not be 'overstated' (House of Lords Select Committee, 1867-1868, p. 103). Others concurred, arguing that Scotland was in 'very great danger' from vagrancy (House of Lords Select Committee, 1867-1868, p. 103). Such concerns about the effects of vagrancy on Scottish society may have led Charles Parker, a Dundee police magistrate, to commit Peter Robertson, aged 14 years, to three years detention in Dundee industrial school after he was charged with vagrancy and theft. The boy's previous character was described as 'idle and vagrant', but his mother made application to have him returned to her care and the directors accordingly dismissed him from the school. They found the mother to be 'a respectable woman', and were of the opinion that neither she nor her son were vagrants. Boys were also being accommodated on board the *Mars* following allegations of vagrancy - one was George Tait, aged 12 years when committed in 1869. He was ordered to be detained until he was 16, and described as a 'vagrant wanderer' despite having attended school in Cupar for seven years (*Mars training ship admissions and discharges*, 1869-1871). George's mother was dead, and his father earned his living as a hawker. Hawkers were commonly deemed to be vagrants, and it would appear that the only reason for George's committal was the occupation of his father. It was recorded that George was 'not strong', a comment which must question his suitability for a seafaring life.

By the 1870s the term 'vagrancy' was no longer being used as a reason to detain children in Dundee industrial schools; however, 'tinker' children were being sent there. Two sisters, aged 13 and 11 years respectively, were living with their family in woods and caves in Caithness when a magistrate in Wick committed them to Dundee industrial schools. The reason for the girls' detention is unclear, but the admission book states they were 'from a tinker family' (*Girls' admission book, 1872-1889*). There is considerable evidence to suggest that some magistrates were detaining children due to the cultural lifestyle of their families, unsupported by any specific evidence of a lack of parental care.

Children were removed from their communities, often based on scant evidence of wilful neglect or of risk taking behaviour. Many of these children would become adults with little sense of identity or knowledge of their 'history'; many would even be unaware of their true age. One example of this is the case of William Swan, who when aged seven years was living at Brechin Parochial Lodging House, and was brought before a magistrate by the Inspector of Poor of Menmuir. William had no guardian as his mother was dead, but it is unclear why the parish sought to have him removed to the industrial school (it is possible that William was deemed to be a refractory child). An order was signed in November 1875 to detain him in Dundee industrial schools until he was 16 years old. He left the school on 2 January 1884. In January 1934, William, by then living in Belfast, wrote to the industrial school seeking information about his family. He had been unable to find any certificates relating to himself despite approaching the Registrar for Menmuir and visiting the General Registry in Edinburgh. The only information he had been able to obtain was from the 1871 Census. Others were left without pension entitlement as they could not prove their age, or inform authorities of their parents' names. George Adams was seven years old when, in November 1877, he was sent to Dundee industrial school for truancy. He was ordered to be detained until he was 16 years old. He wrote to the school in October 1933 stating he had no birth certificate and needed details of his birth and his father's full name to allow him to claim a state pension (see letters held with Admission Books of Dundee Industrial Schools). Magistrates frequently determined how old children were prior to committal without making proper enquiry (*Boys' admission book, 1873-1885*). It is clear from omissions on the schedule of admission that many children were accommodated in Dundee industrial schools with only limited information being recorded about them. In some cases little was known about the children, but as details of the detention order have also frequently not been completed, a lack of efficiency by the superintendent would seem the most likely explanation for the lack of detailed records.

Whilst it was argued by proponents that the committal was 'done in the interest of the child' no verification of the child's circumstances was undertaken by the Court, and the magistrate mostly signed the detention order immediately

(Home Department, 1897, p. 723); however, children who were guilty only of playing street games on Sunday were being detained for many years under Section XIV of the 1866 Act (*Dundee Courier and Argus*, 25 January 1876). Those whose overall aim was to clear the towns of 'street Arabs' could misuse this section of the Act which allowed for a detention order to be signed if the child had no 'proper Guardianship' – a term open to wide interpretation. Once detained it was imperative that the child adhered to the conditions laid down in the legislation if they were not to be criminalised. Any violation of the institution's rules could result in a term of imprisonment and the child being sent to a reformatory on conviction. In effect, the child was on 'probation' for the duration of the order, which could be for a period of up to 10 years depending upon the child's age when detained.

### **The function and conditions of special training institutions**

Training the children of the culpable poor for future employment and 'respectability' was the primary function of special training institutions. It was hoped that habits of self-care and self-reliance would be inculcated in the children. It was also essential to ensure that the institutions were maintained as cheaply as possible, and supporters assured that they were being run cost-effectively. The boys on board the *Mars* were required to provide their own day-to-day care, which included making and repairing their own clothes and bedding, cooking their own food, and undertaking all the cleaning of the vessel. The maintenance of themselves and the ship provided the boys with many of the skills required for independent living, but the principal aim of the institution was to teach the boys seamanship. They were taught sail making and repairing, knotting, splicing, and other techniques that were thought to render them suitable candidates for the Royal or merchant navies. The boys were occasionally taken out to sea in a tender, which allowed them to put into practice the skills they had learnt. They were also trained in gun, rifle and cutlass drill, and taught to row. All the boys were taught to swim (Scott, 1917).

The secular instruction the boys received in the years immediately following the establishment of the training ship consisted of reading, writing, ciphering, and elementary geography. By the 1880s this had changed and they were receiving instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic. The boys attended the classroom on separate 'watches', alternating mornings and afternoons with training and other duties. The teaching of Christian doctrine was strictly enforced and viewed as intrinsic to the discipline of the ship. Morning and evening worship, together with reading the Bible were part of the daily timetable. Sundays were rigidly observed, and only essential tasks were undertaken on that day. The boys were encouraged to achieve and behave well through a system of prizes which were awarded for various activities and achievements. Consistent with the Victorian

ideal of respectability there were also prizes for the care and maintenance of the ship and personal belongings (*Unidentified newspaper cutting*, September 1890).

Considerable importance was placed upon the boys on board the *Mars* being constantly occupied, as the management believed that this ensured the 'happiness of the boys and the discipline of the ship' (*Unidentified newspaper cutting*, 1872). This not only prevented the boys from having the opportunity for possible mischief, but reflected the Victorian view that constant labour was a virtue. The boys were observed and monitored throughout all daytime work and evening activities which included 'voluntary reading, games, geographical puzzles'. A savings bank was provided in order to teach the boys 'thrift', and interest of 1d. was paid on every shilling held in a boy's account (*The Mars Training Ship Institution*, 1889). The boys were taught music and the *Mars* brass band was highly regarded by supporters of the ship, having approximately 60 members drawn from all the boys on board. There was also a flute band. Occasionally entertainment was provided for the boys – one such event was in March 1885 when a choir of 20 'ladies and gentlemen' gave a concert for the boys on board the ship.

While the management of the two institutions established similar rules and regulations the industrial training provided within Dundee industrial schools differed from the *Mars* training ship, and reflected the gender of the child. Within the girls' school the matron had sole charge of the sewing machines and all preparation of the girls' work, while the female teacher was responsible for the instruction of the girls in sewing and knitting. The matron was also liable for instructing the girls in domestic work, and what was termed 'household affairs generally'. With the exception of tailoring, the janitor took charge of the boys' industrial work, which included hair teasing and wood-splitting for firewood. In 1874 the boys prepared 156,537 bundles of firewood for sale, and teased 27,752 pounds of hair and fibre for upholstery work. It was estimated that nearly a million paper bags had been made for retailers, and 163,283 sacks sewn for manufacturers (*Unidentified newspaper cutting*, 21 January 1874). The tailor instructed the boys in all aspects of tailoring, and was also responsible for making, altering, and repairing all the boys' outer clothing (*Constitution of the Dundee Industrial Schools Society*).

The living conditions of the children detained in Dundee industrial schools hardly differed from boys who had been convicted of two or more previous offences and incarcerated in the local reformatory near Montrose. The day was strictly regulated from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. when all the children went to bed. Every aspect of the day was structured and supervised, and was a relentless cycle of religious instruction, secular instruction, domestic chores, and industrial work. Religious instruction was a primary element in ameliorating the inherited



or learnt faults of the detained children; they attended church on Sundays and morning worship every day, said prayers at bedtime (supervised by the superintendent), and offered a grace and thanksgiving before and after each meal (Home Department, 1897, pp. 673-674). Recreation was equally ordered, consisting of accompanied walks, supervised reading (with the girls and boys using the library on alternate evenings), and band practice for the older boys. The children were allowed no recreation on Friday evenings as this time was dedicated to washing the classrooms (*Twenty-ninth annual report*, 1876). As with reformatories, the proponents of special training institutions implemented a system of control that allowed no 'idleness', but in advocating this approach they denied children the opportunity to develop social and emotional skills. Regardless of the fact that the children detained within these institutions had been deemed by statutory order to be in need of care and protection, they were viewed as inmates and upon admission given a number which replaced their name while detained in the institution. A roll-call was taken at various times throughout the day, and every impression given to the children must have been that of a parapenal institution. The aim of the institutions was to produce hard-working, responsible and compliant adults, and it was argued that this could only be achieved through a tightly structured system of incarceration, industrial training, religious instruction, education and discipline.

Providing the children with a basic education was seen as essential if the children were to be self-providing in adulthood. Very few of the children were literate upon admission to Dundee industrial schools. Only two boys could read 'tolerably' when admitted in 1863, and only one boy in 1874. All of the children admitted in 1863 were unable to write, and only three boys were able to 'write a little' in 1874. No child admitted in the years 1863 and 1874 was able to do any arithmetic (*Sixteenth annual report*, 1863; *Twenty-ninth annual report*, 1876). The schools published, in their annual reports, statistics of the progress the children were making in literacy and numeracy skills, and from these it is clear that the industrial schools were educating the children they accommodated. Most children could read and write well when they left the schools, and many of them attained a high standard in arithmetic. The children were examined annually by HM Inspector, but members of the committee and directors also scrutinised the children's learning when they visited. In 1872 a number of 'ladies and gentlemen' visiting the institution witnessed the children being examined in 'reading, spelling, Bible knowledge and arithmetic', and watched as the boys were 'put through their drill' (*Dundee Courier and Argus*, 2 May 1872). Similarly, at the end of the annual meeting of the Society the children were 'put through a variety of exercises by the superintendent' (*Dundee Courier and Argus*, 23 January 1872). Demonstrating that the institution was providing the children, who were detained mostly at public expense, with appropriate life skills was an important factor in recruiting and retaining subscribers.

## Conclusion

Destitute and inadequate parents did neglect and abandon their children during the nineteenth century and certainly these children required protection, and compulsory care may have been necessary in some cases; however, George Behlmer maintains that hardly any children were protected from maltreatment through the Industrial School Acts, and those who were resulted from them being perceived as 'ripe for a life of crime' (Behlmer, 1982, p. 11). Protecting society took precedence over protecting the child, and magistrates in Dundee, many of whom were involved with the management of the special training institutions, aimed to correct the behaviour of the lower classes through familial separation and coercion. There would have been benefits of an education and industrial training for the wilfully neglected or abandoned child, but a significant number of children were removed from their families and communities without apparent cause or consent. Upon discharge most of the children returned to their families, and it is questionable whether their social status had been enhanced by their detention. Indeed, the children may have found that they were viewed with suspicion outside their own communities, and this may have decreased the opportunities open to them.

Similar to all such studies, the missing element is the 'voices' of the children who experienced the treatment designed to retrain and reclaim them. Evidence compiled on behalf of the various parliamentary select committees reviewing the system was invariably submitted by those who wished to retain and promote it. The children concerned were viewed as a 'problem' even if they were not categorised as offenders, and the emphasis was on correcting their behaviour. If some children were protected it was as a consequence of the desire to instil Christian ideals and notions of respectability into the culpable poor. The child's views were not taken into account or recorded, and the vast majority of children brought before the police courts in Victorian Dundee and detained for many years in 'special' training institutions have now passed into obscurity, and their 'histories' are irretrievable.

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