

Worth Saving: Disabled Children During the Second World War

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This review was written in early June, and coincided with the anniversary of D-Day. The annual commemoration of this event, accompanied this year by new television documentaries as well as the replaying of iconic films, is yet another reminder of the important place the Second World War still occupies in British culture as well as history. Much of what we value today is understood in relation to both wartime experiences and the promise of a better post-war world. While disabled children have been marginalized, if not totally overlooked, in most accounts of 1939–45, this detailed and thoughtful study by Sue Wheatcroft shows that their treatment actually serves to exemplify many of the key themes and issues of the period. There is something deeply comforting about the knowledge that in an era of total war there were officials making sure that disabled children were not only evacuated to safer rural areas but were also issued with suitable footwear so that they could enjoy the countryside (p. 34). Yet Wheatcroft is not afraid to explore the limitations of the care available. There were problems evacuating all the disabled children; leading to delays, unsuitable placements and evidence of neglect and abuse. Also, while some officials were determined to treat the most vulnerable as priority groups, others expressed hostility towards disabled people. In both cases there was a tendency to view disabled children as part of a potentially problematic group rather than individuals with different needs. As Wheatcroft demonstrates, this had profound implications for post-war policy making as well as wartime arrangements.

Wheatcroft highlights the importance of categorization and the fact that some groups of disabled children received better treatment than others before, during and after the war. She also reveals how gaps in statutory provision were filled by charities whose practices both helped and hindered the individuals referred to them.

Throughout the book, Wheatcroft persuasively argues that while evacuation could be a positive experience for disabled children much depended on the attitude of other people. There was certainly no sense of equality of entitlement or right to quality care. Officials could be helpful, or not; the public in some areas seemed more prepared to welcome disabled children than others; family members might or might not be supportive; paid carers could be cruel but could also go to exceptional lengths to meet the needs of their charges; children might be carefully prepared for life as independent, autonomous adults or they might be consigned to the permanent care of the vestiges of the Poor Law. Wartime help for disabled children was contingent on a number of different factors, and service-users were typically expected to be grateful and passive recipients of support delivered under a paternalistic model of care that empowered professionals and other elite figures.

When evaluating the experiences of disabled children Wheatcroft looks to personal testimony as well as official archives and this allows a focus on both intentions and outcomes. Her main interest is the development of education and health services for children now understood to have special needs. This approach usefully encompasses an assessment of policy developments before, during and after the war, with the war years seeing the acceleration of some initiatives but also resource constraints that worked to retard others. An obvious comparison is with the evacuation of children not thought to have special needs, and Wheatcroft makes persuasive arguments about the benefits of moving entire residential schools. These planned relocations provided a sense of continuity and security that was often missing from the lives of other evacuees who had their schooling disrupted, went through humiliating selection processes and often experienced frequent moves. The day special schools and hospital schools encountered more difficulties but those in reception and neutral areas made efforts to carry on as normal. It was the arrangements for disabled children remaining in supposedly evacuated areas that proved most problematic, although Wheatcroft suggests that some integration occurred as mildly disabled children joined the elementary schools when they first reopened. Some specialist provision then returned to the London area, with education and staff training successfully continuing throughout the rest of the war. Wheatcroft also positively assesses home tuition schemes (pp. 82–3). Her final wartime chapter looks at hostels and other institutions for mentally disordered and emotionally disturbed children.

The chapters include a wealth of detailed information, carefully referenced to original records, and some very interesting images. The chapters are organized chronologically, but the wartime ones take a thematic approach that does introduce a little repetition as Wheatcroft considers how different groups of disabled children were treated in different settings. The wartime concern with maladjusted children is reflected in the attention given to services for this group. All this material provides an important resource for future researchers, and despite the scholarly approach adopted the book is sufficiently accessible to be of interest to a wide range of readers. It is certainly informative to read *Worth Saving* alongside other accounts of the evacuation that do not address the issues faced by disabled children. Indeed Wheatcroft's work needs to be considered as part of an ongoing effort to study the evacuation experience from different perspectives. She is for example interested in the recollections of teachers and other staff who were evacuated with the children. This could be expanded to look at those organizing the evacuation and acting as escorts. Simon Garfield draws attention to the Mass-Observation diaries of Eileen Potter as an insight into this neglected topic [\(1\)](#), although he misses the opportunity to suggest that as someone concerned with special schools and clinics some of her charges probably were disabled children.

While Wheatcroft usefully makes the point that the experiences of the disabled children were in significant ways both the same and different to those of other children she pays far less attention to developing comparisons with the fate of disabled adults. This is important because the care given to at least some aspects of the evacuation of disabled children contrasts sharply with historical accounts of the wartime neglect of other vulnerable people. Many frail elderly people did not long survive their relocation from London institutions needed for military and civilian casualties. Other older people (evacuated or not) suffered from disruptions to their community support networks but did not immediately benefit from an expansion of dedicated statutory or voluntary services. There remains a question mark over the care of other vulnerable groups, for example the residents of large-scale, long-stay hospitals for the mentally ill and

mentally defective. Evidence from the Devon institutions I have studied points to neglect tempered by an official concern to avoid the excessive asylum mortality rates seen during the First World War. Inmates were left in buildings exposed to enemy action on a vulnerable coastline, and their care was compromised by wartime overcrowding (the institution accepted patients from asylums needed for military purposes) and understaffing. Local hospitals claimed they were unable to treat mentally defective patients as they were busy with 'convoy and civilian casualties', and even basic record keeping deteriorated. Yet at the same time considerable effort was made to improve nutrition, monitor patients' weights and limit the spread of TB. There also seemed genuine sorrow when a patient (on licence) was killed by a bomb in Exeter.

Wheatcroft suggests the mentally defective were a particularly disadvantaged group, but also shows that disabled children benefited from the emphasis given to their status as children rather than potential identification with other groups of disabled people. It is worth remembering Deborah Dwork's important thesis that 'War is good for babies and other young children'.⁽²⁾ Some policies from the 1939–45 era clearly originated in interwar thinking that was itself shaped by both the formative 1914–18 period and earlier preparations for economic competition as well as military conflict between states. Wheatcroft traces the evolution of the Liberal welfare state but although she shows how a concern with disabled veterans (from both world wars) tended to reinforce divisions between disabled people, with some seen as more deserving than others, the full implications of these ideas, then and now, are not fully explored. It is perfectly possible to argue that the needs of disabled children are very different from those of disabled adults (many of whom will not have experienced childhood disability). Yet adult activists today seek to set the policy agenda with an emphasis on individualism, autonomy and choice that may not be appropriate for children. This has served to intensify debates about the merits or otherwise of special schools. Wheatcroft usefully highlights the resource these represented, and sensibly balances evidence of acute homesickness (and opportunities for hidden abuse) against the value of the specialist skills taught and the opportunity to mix with other disabled children with similar needs. While evacuation was a formative experience for people of a certain age (not just evacuees), the life-chances of disabled children continued to be shaped by access to specialist resources with schooling often a critical determinant of experiences in adulthood as well as childhood.

The war years served to encourage the development of residential special schools, a policy that continued 1945–55 (pp. 160–5) and was to some extent pursued at the expense of day special schooling. This removal of children from their homes and families contrasts with other policy areas where the wartime evacuation experience has been linked to post-war efforts to protect such ties, as the importance of bonding and attachment were increasingly recognized. Such ideas are associated with the work of John Bowlby, but as Wheatcroft explains, professional interest in the emotional needs of children did nothing to discourage the view that some children were better off away from their families (p. 129). Although much of the discussion concentrated on delinquent and disturbed children, disabled children were also vulnerable to official concerns that their homes might cause/exacerbate their problems. The disempowerment of families, often viewed negatively but still the main carers of disabled children, has been a problematic feature of decision making about the care of disabled children since the war. It has also made the transition from child to adult services particularly complicated. These services were traditionally separate and suffered from a lack of co-ordination, problems that were exacerbated by wartime developments and often remain unresolved today.

In a very balanced account Wheatcroft is not afraid to explore what was good and bad about the evacuation experience and its influence over later policy developments. One of the arguments that I took from her book is that disabled children were viewed as worth saving, but that their protection owed less to a sense of equal rights than their identification as a vulnerable group requiring the protection of a paternalistic state. Such thinking imposed limitations on what was offered at the time, with some groups seen as more deserving than others and collective needs addressed at the expense of individual preferences. It also restricted the post-war offer in terms of the range of services available to disabled children (as children and as adults) but it did ensure a vital safety-net. While Wheatcroft is careful to avoid sensationalism, an implicit theme in her UK study is the contrast with international developments. Wartime efforts to save disabled children were an integral part of a wider British evacuation plan, but they were contemporaneous with Nazi policies to deliberately exterminate similarly disabled people on the continent. This horrific backdrop receives limited

attention from Wheatcroft, and having shown the pervasiveness of eugenic language (pp. 22–5), even amongst opponents of overtly eugenic policies, in Britain the impact of these ideas abroad perhaps also needed further comment.

Wheatcroft makes it painfully clear, in relation to reactions to saving children (p.43) and even killing children (p. 144), that not everyone in the UK valued all lives equally, despite the collectivism that was meant to be engendered by wartime conditions. Instead of what we would now understand to be ‘valuing people’ a premium was placed on economic output and disabled children’s care was shaped by their perceived future relationship to the labour force. Wheatcroft demonstrates that work was at the heart of many special education programmes, although she has less to say about the financial support available to disabled people and their families than other recent historical studies of disability policy.⁽³⁾ This approach misses one of the important contradictions in disability policy today that could usefully have been explored in the rather abbreviated concluding section. Activists are articulating an entirely legitimate agenda that prioritises individual autonomy and service-user rights but this is proving thin cover for efforts to protect welfare spending in an era of austerity when people’s economic contribution rather than social needs are being scrutinised. There is currently an unpleasant backlash against recipients of state welfare, and disabled people are very vulnerable to loss of both income and services. Interestingly this seems to be encouraging a more collective and less individualistic approach to disability rights campaigns, and this approach echoes sentiments that will always be associated with Britain’s wartime experiences. Sue Wheatcroft has made a useful contribution to our understanding of the evacuation of disabled children and it is hoped that this will stimulate further research on this important topic.

Notes

1. Simon Garfield, *We Are at War: The Diaries of Five Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (London, 2005), pp. 4–5.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Deborah Dwork, *War is Good for Babies and Other Young Children: a History of the Infant and Child Welfare Movement in England, 1898-1918* (London, 1987).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Anne Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy in Britain since 1750: a History of Exclusion* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 140–68.[Back to \(3\)](#)

I am happy with the review and do not wish to add any comments.

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/63458>