

Michigan Law Review

Volume 68 | Issue 4

1970

Platt: The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency

Joseph Whitehill

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Recommended Citation

Joseph Whitehill, *Platt: The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency*, 68 MICH. L. REV. 786 (1970).
Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol68/iss4/9>

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RECENT BOOKS

BOOK REVIEWS

THE CHILD SAVERS: THE INVENTION OF DELINQUENCY. By *Anthony M. Platt*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1969. Pp. ix, 230. \$8.50.

The Widow Douglas, she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough going living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out.

—Huckleberry Finn

The Widow Douglas was a child saver, along with her historical sisters, Louise de Koven Bowen, Jane Addams, and Julia Lathrop. Prototypically, a child saver is a Quaker woman in prosperous circumstances, anti-intellectual though pro-“culture,” energetic though burdened with leisure, and not very maternal over the long haul, who has gladly lighted on something to make her menopause meaningful. She is a clear warning to all of us engaged in social reform: all unknowing, she cannot see that the mortal difference between a do-gooder and a person who does good is that the do-gooder assumes without question that he knows what is good for others. Is it not significant that in all our prison vocational-training programs we assiduously teach inmates skills we think are “proper,” but that we ourselves would decline to learn? Dr. Platt quotes Frederick Wines, then Secretary of the Illinois Board of Charities, commenting on an English reformatory farm he inspected in 1878; he was pleased to find the inmates “occupied in cultivating the fields with the spade—the use of the plough being prohibited in order that the boys may experience the healthy influence of personal contact with the soil” (p. 106). One might believe that this remark sets some sort of track record for serene and elevated Pecksniffery—until he encounters the other abounding examples in Dr. Platt’s powerful little book. Nowhere, however, does the author express rage or amusement at the quaint, frequently baroque, social processes of the past; he exercises a scholarly dispassion that made me writhe.

The Child Savers is the first close look at that band of righteous activists who, at the end of the nineteenth century, worked the improbable and dubious achievement of creating an entirely new judicial subsystem out of their own perfervid notions of the way other people should raise their children. Concentrating on Illinois (where most of the action was), Dr. Platt presents an excellent short overview of the history of the changes in our attitudes toward crime

and the criminal, then shows the near-inevitability of the appearance of the child-saving movement:

Child saving may be understood as a crusade which served symbolic and ceremonial functions for native, middle-class Americans. The movement was not so much a break with the past as an affirmation of faith in traditional institutions. Parental authority, home education, rural life, and the independence of the family as a social unit were emphasized because they seemed threatened at this time by urbanism and industrialism. The child savers elevated the nuclear family, especially women as the stalwarts of the family, and defended the family's right to supervise the socialization of youth. [P. 98.]

Thus, exactly like Rousseau's romanticizing of the Noble Savage, the child savers' romanticizing of the "innocence" of children is really reaction in false face. Consider where innocence lies: The very best recidivist risk is the first degree murderer; the very worst is the fifteen-year-old punk kid with four hubcaps under his coat. The juvenile court and reformatory system that grew out of the child savers' efforts was, almost purely, an institutionalized way of replacing the failed family of the offender with a state-owned and operated, middle-class, surrogate family of greater coercive power—all to the purpose of forcing on him what he neither wants nor needs and maladapting him to the environment from which he sprang. The mind boggles before such a linear and coherent ignorance of the dynamics of human behavior as the following smug statement by Judge Stubbs of the Indianapolis juvenile court:

[I]t is the personal touch that does it. I have often observed that if I sat on a high platform behind a high desk . . . with the boy on the prisoner's bench some distance away, that my words had little effect on him; but if I could get close enough to him to put my hand on his head and shoulder, or my arm around him, in nearly every case I could get his confidence. [P. 143 n.]

Speaking as a former juvenile offender to my many readers who also were, I can say with confidence that the chief effect on the boy of the judge's putting his arm around him was diuretic.

It is cheap and easy to mock past sociological foolishness now that we are safe from it. Our mockery must subside when we consider our present, much more dangerous, foolishness like the tragicomic Mexican-border incident called Operation Intercept, our moralistic laws about crimes-without-victims, and our subhuman method of assigning priorities when scheduling the docket. In Baltimore, the prosperous numbers operator, out on bail, has his trial within two weeks, pays his fine, and that evening is back in business; the boy who stole fifteen pounds of copper wire from a junkyard waits in jail a year for trial.

It seems to me that *The Child Savers*, while excellent history and beautiful in its expanse of bibliography and clear footnoting, serves its best use as myth-breaker. It is fun to study the myths, then the reality behind them:

Myth: Everyone agrees what delinquent behavior is.

Reality: Delinquent behavior is that behavior, preferably by a member of a subculture, against which the power culture levels sanctions because that power culture defines and stabilizes its own shape more by nominating the behavior it hates and fears than by any candid description of the behavior it desires. It is most efficient to punish such behavior among the powerless, like the young and the blacks. Much behavior called delinquent by our middle-class institutions is not so regarded within the subculture where it happened.

Myth: The child savers were altruistic women who sought to rescue children from the grasp of a corrupting penal system.

Reality: The child savers were interested chiefly in norming or shaping all children into modes of conduct acceptable to themselves, and they found it easier to do this when they had first created the notion of deep difference between the adult offender and the child and could thus split the child off from the rest of the system and get at him from all sides. The child's civil rights vanished with his due process.

There are other such piquant myths you will enjoy watching broken.

While it is quite clear that Dr. Platt is correct in crediting the child savers with the invention of the idea of juvenile delinquency, it ought to be pointed out that the very idea of childhood itself is an earlier invention. The child-labor reformers invented childhood; prior to that movement, which took place in the early nineteenth century, children were miniature adults physically and apprentice adults culturally.

It is interesting to speculate on what might have happened if, when the child savers first took a look at the foul adult prisons with children in them, they had set to work to make the prisons fit for everyone, instead of hauling the children out and sequestering them. The rhetoric of "correction versus punishment" was as eloquent in 1900 as it is today, but physical conditions have hardly changed. Rhetoric may in fact be our damnation. First we called for tribal vengeance—pain given for pain caused—then for monitory punishment paired with the idea of deterrence of others (though those "others" demonstrably never get the news), and last for rehabilitation, all with negligible real change in our actions and our institu-

tions. It is as if, on looking into this Augean stable with no far end, we change our language with the times to spare us the real pain and expense of changing the thing the language is about. Hardly a prison system in the United States has the guts to call itself a prison system; the talk is all "corrections" and there is not a single correctional system among us. (Please, to spare me a flood of advocacy mail denying the last statement, won't you poll the inmates of your own institutions and ask them if they are part of a true hope-generating, goal-giving process? Damn it, I dare you!) We have agreed among ourselves in Maryland to quit euphemizing and to use "correctional" only when it is a matter of retrieving some federal money.

A good book like *The Child Savers*, which well fills a corner of our shelves empty until now, has one native, unavoidable, charming flaw: in its frequent references to other necessary books we have not read, it adds length to the ever-lengthening list of books we have promised ourselves we *must* read. In addition, a good book deserves copy editing just as good, in order to nip out things like "consensus of opinion," and a stumble of auctorial fatigue that reads: "Like almost all situations where people work together, informal ties affect the performance of the objective task at hand" (p. 171). A sentence like that, possibly written late at night when the author knew what he meant but only more or less said it, has insufficient buoyancy left to carry any cargo of meaning whatever; it sinks quietly from sight. Scott Fitzgerald, on being chided for his execrable spelling, remarked that you can hire people for fifty dollars a week who spell perfectly. We ought not to ask that a gifted social noticer like Dr. Platt be required to be correct in nice language; we do have the right to ask, however, that the University of Chicago Press, publisher of the best style book in the world, shall look to its own instructions.

Joseph Whitehill*

* Mr. Whitehill is a Maryland short-story writer, novelist, and teacher who heads Mensa Friends, a citizen organization working for reform of the Maryland prison system.—Ed.