2 The Child Welfare Movement in Montreal to 1920

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I

In 1974 I published a study of the condition of the working class in Montreal, The Anatomy of Poverty,¹ which has become something of a standard work on social conditions in Montreal. The book had a curious history in that the work began as an inquiry into the development and ideology of urban progressivism in Canada’s largest city. Influenced by the growing list of books on American urban progressivism, I originally set out to examine such groups as the Civic Improvement League, the Charity Organisation Society, the Metropolitan Parks Commission, the Children’s Aid Society, and a number of other like organisations. The records of these groups were readily available and it was not a difficult matter to relate their activities to a larger North American, and indeed North Atlantic, context.

It was, however, equally clear that the impact of these associations on the evolution of society in Montreal was marginal, and it was difficult to sustain interest in the activities of such groups. Instead I was drawn into an examination of wages, working conditions, mortality and morbidity and other quite traditional measures of societal well-being.

The general conclusion of the study – that conditions of life for the working-class population improved only very slightly between 1897 and 1929 (a period of great economic expansion and prosperity for the Canadian economy) – has been generally accepted.² Many Canadian historians³ were less willing to accept my explanation of this pattern, which emphasised such factors as rapid growth, characteristics of the Montreal economy and questions of public finance. The book had quite
deliberately set out to demonstrate that ideological differences between French Canada and the rest of North America were of minor importance in explaining the trends, and it had even expressed the view that French Canadian reformers, directly influenced by developments in continental Europe, were at least as advanced in their thinking about urban problems as their English-language counterparts. This argument was particularly difficult to accept in view of the predominant influence of historians such as Fernand Ouellett and polemicists like Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who had restated the traditional Anglo-Canadian view of the backwardness and conservatism of French-Canadian society with considerable skill.

Since 1974 a great deal of research on Canadian social history has been published, including a wealth of material dealing with issues raised in The Anatomy of Poverty. What I propose to do in this chapter is to examine the subject of child welfare reform in Montreal – an issue central to the argument of The Anatomy of Poverty – in the light of recent research and additional documentation. I do not intend to review the data on the condition of the working class; the focus here is on the character of the reform movement.

II

The title ‘child welfare movement’ is used in this chapter as a term encompassing a wide variety of organisations which sought in various ways to change the manner in which society dealt with children, especially children of the poorer classes. There should be no need to enter into the debate about just when the new view of society’s responsibility towards children took hold. We could perhaps agree with Neil Sutherland4 that by 1920 a ‘new consensus’ on most issues related to childhood had solidified, but even this is misleading. Let us instead examine a number of themes which, for present purposes, can be treated quite separately.

The most important single issue raised by child welfare reformers was the very high rate of infant mortality which the mid-Victorian fascination with statistics brought to light. Initially the discussion over mortality rates did not focus on infant mortality. In the 1860s, however, physicians began to recognise that from half to two-thirds of all deaths were among children. The problem was especially acute in Montreal, where estimates placed the infant mortality rate at ‘three times the Canadian level, higher than Boston’s and comparable to that of