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CALEDONIAN
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**HEATHERBANK MUSEUM
OF SOCIAL WORK**

**The Policy of
Boarding out
children in
Scotland**

Ruth Currie and Alastair Ramage

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Heatherbank Museum of Social Work was established in Milngavie, a small town a few miles north of Glasgow in 1975. The Museum is now part of Glasgow Caledonian University. It collects and exhibits books, pictures, archives, resources, ephemera, journals and periodicals, gathered and created artefacts and oral reminiscences on the theme of social work and social welfare. From its founding the Museum has created exhibitions using very largely its own resources both for the research and for the materials. One focus has been on child welfare and social action and the materials for this paper are drawn entirely from the Museum's own holdings, which include primary and secondary sources.

In 1579 in Scotland an Act of Parliament was passed: *for the punishment of strong and idle beggars and the relief of the poor and impotent*. This Act was to direct the provision for the poor for nearly three centuries. As its title suggests it was not generous minded in its attitude to the poor. Indeed until well into the Seventeenth Century in order to ensure that strong and idle beggars were deterred from such activity it was decreed that they should be ***apprehended and tried and if convicted, burnt through the ear with a hot iron unless some honest and responsible man would of his charity take and keep the offender in service for the whole of the year succeeding***. The Act contained a long list of those deemed to be strong men and vagabonds including those ***using subtle crafts and unlawful plays as jugglers, fortune tellers, all minstrels, songsters and tale tellers*** as well as ***vagabond scholars of the universities of St. Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen not licensed by the Dean of Faculty to ask alms*** [plus ca change!]. The Act gave little particular help to children except to allow for *beggars' bairns* between 5 and 14 to be passed over by direction of a magistrate to any person of substance who chose them. A very early form of boarding out apparently.

These very rigid rules relaxed to some degree through the 17th and 18th centuries but this depended very much on where a person lived. The management of poor relief was devolved to magistrates in the burghs and the Kirk in rural areas. By law the Kirk Session or the Burgh magistrates could tax or stent heritors for the benefit of the poor. Alternatively church collections would be used. A person could only request relief in the parish of his residence. In general this would be distributed through outdoor relief. However parishes could determine their own system-this could well be a licence to beg.

A unique system existed for many centuries in Shetland. Each parish was divided into fourteen parts called "quarters". Each quarter was allocated a proportional number of people in need. Within the families in quarters who were allocated needy people, boarding out was

supported for as many days as the family occupied merks of land. Those in need would then move on to another family in the quarter, eventually returning to the first. Church collections were used to supplement the boarding out allocations given by families.

By the end of the 18th Century the majority of parishes across Scotland would use for poor relief-ordinary collections, extra collections at the Communion season, dues for the uses of hearses or the parish mort cloth, mortifications for the benefit of the poor, seat rents and fines for breaches of chastity. In the larger towns there would be extra sources. Glasgow had its Town Hospital, maintained through taxing the heritors. This provided especially for the infirm, old and children until other arrangements were made. By 1819 there were only 58 children in the Hospital with 212 boarded out. There was good reason to board out children from the Hospital. Between 1802 and 1818 113 out of 197 unwanted and abandoned children in the Hospital died. Parishes might also board out children as apprentices or cheap labour. David Dale followed by Robert Owen used large numbers of boarded out pauper children at their New Lanark mills, even if by the standards of the time the children were well treated.

Given each parish's right to determine both its own collection and distribution of poor relief, there was a huge disparity across the country as to which families were deemed entitled to relief; this would be partly geographical and partly the whim of Minister and Kirk Session. One famous champion of the voluntary principle was the Rev. Thomas Chalmers when Minister of St. John's Church in Glasgow. In the 1820's Chalmers persuaded the Town Council to allow St. John's to use church collections as the sole means of raising money for poor families, accompanied by a very complex system of visiting families and assessing relative needs.

In rural areas, while it was possible to tax heritors for the relief of poor families, the majority of parishes relied heavily on voluntary contributions until well into the 19th Century. This was really due to the prevailing principle within the church that the soul of the giver would benefit from giving freely while the receiver's could benefit from his gratitude.

The system might have been all right in principle but it let the richer off the hook, especially where they were absentee landlords or members of other denominations. Indeed the Church of Scotland struggled with the burden of taking full responsibility for an ever increasingly urbanised society as well as a large immigration of very poor Catholic families from Ireland. In 1843 the situation was further complicated by the Church of Scotland splitting down the middle in the Disruption. The Auld Kirk, rather than the newly formed Free Kirk still carried all responsibility for poor relief. The system, if it had ever been adequate, was simply breaking down. Huge numbers of poor families, especially their children, were just not being cared for. Even with informal

charitable organisations trying to plug the gaps a whole restructuring of the poor law was vital by the 1840's.

Following a Royal commission the Poor Law Scotland Amendment Act was finally passed in 1845, legislation which remained broadly in force until after the Second World War. The basis of the Act was to bring about a change in the funding of poor relief and the organisation to administer it. The principle of local control continued but in future this was to be within a system of overall national control. The Board of Supervision was set up to act as a watch dog and ensure that parishes carried out their legal obligations. This was now done by unitary poor relief agencies-the Parochial Boards, known colloquially as the Parish. Its members were both elected by rate payers and nominated by the Kirk and principal landowners. So the Kirk was still involved both in fact and in colloquial usage.

How and to whom poor relief was distributed was the decision of the Parochial Board. Any tendency to generosity would be quickly curbed by rate payers who took a close interest in keeping the poor rate down. The practice of boarding out continued as the main provision for children, however parochial boards did take on some new ideas in childcare. For example several of the parochial boards in the cities set up industrial schools to give children from very poor families a training. These were modelled on the charitable schools set up by Sheriff Watson in Aberdeen and the Rev Dr.Guthrie in Edinburgh. This spirit of Christian charity in childcare was to be reflected later in the century by men such as William Quarrier who not only established the Orphan Homes of Scotland but ensured that 7000 children were migrated to Canada.

Much of the 1845 Poor Law Amendment Scotland Act was adapted, from its English equivalent. In particular the concept of the Poorhouse was modelled on the English workhouse. These institutions were now built all over Scotland, not only to house and care for the elderly and infirm but also the able bodied as well. Life in the poorhouse was harsh as a deterrent to anyone looking for relief. Families or individuals forced in to destitution would sell everything and drastically reduce their diet before giving up to go into a poorhouse, still remembered today by the colloquialism the *grubber* . Inside there was no privacy, strict discipline was enforced and there was segregation of those deemed as respectable from the rest. Even families were broken up as males were separated from females.

One of the best recorded of these Poorhouses is Barnhill, situated on the north side of Glasgow. When it opened in 1850 the population of Barony Parish for which it catered was 136,283.

From the beginning there was a debate over whether to board out children or to accommodate them within the bounds of the Poorhouse. In the opening years of Barnhill, children accounted for nearly one third of the residents. In February 1853, for example, the Governor's report showed 355 children in the Poorhouse, of whom 124 had no parents.

The original staffing of the House, which Governor MacKay demanded, shows a male and a female teacher among the staff of 18, as well as a children's nurse. MacKay argued that this number was essential to provide adequate staffing. At the laying of the foundation stone on August 9th 1849, the Chairman of the Board, Hugh Tennent, remarked that the new building would cater for 1500 people with a school for 350 children. In practice the role of pupils never exceeded 63 and the school itself closed in 1888.

One of the most important influences from the beginning of Barnhill Poorhouse was the Rev. Norman Macleod, the Minister of the Barony Parish and thereby Chaplain to Barnhill. His duties as Minister included the administration of the Poor Law in his parish but his involvement in the development of Barnhill went far beyond the official requirements of his Ministry. Mr Macleod was inducted to the Barony in July 1851, and in his 1853 diary entry for January 1st records that he had visited 222 families in Barnhill in the previous year. Writing in his biography in 1876 his brother Donald Macleod records ***"Shortly after his induction, being shocked at the number of pauper children in Barnhill, he proposed the complete adoption of the boarding out system whereby the young would be brought up in the houses of decent people in the country."***

Mr Macleod did not neglect the school at Barnhill and produced a pamphlet on initiating a complete system of industrial training, which was unfortunately never fully realised. Nevertheless the arguments of its chaplain were to prove significant and in February 1853 Barnhill fully embraced the principle and the practice of boarding out of children.

Many other voices spoke in favour of the system. Writing in the Poor Law for Scotland magazine in February 1864, Mr Walker, the secretary of the board of supervision for the relief of the poor in Scotland declared: ***"The advocates of this, the country boarding system, deprecate the immuring of children within the precincts of a poor house, and they are of opinion that there, the example and influence of dissolute inmates, the atmosphere of pauperism pervading the establishment, the absence of healthy excitement and the want of experiences in the realities of a labourer's life, must tend to corrupt the minds of the children, to break down their spirit and cramp their energy, and to educate them for hereditary pauperism rather than for useful employment."***

Other voices were raised against the system of boarding out. In October 1863 and again in April 1864 the Poor Law magazine published correspondence from a person whose only identification is "G". Despite the wish to remain anonymous the writer certainly held strong opinions against boarding out. The 1863 letter seems to cast great doubt on the probity of those who offered boarding out facilities. The letter states at one point: ***"We are much afraid that the class who are willing to undertake such charges have seldom the qualifications proper for due performance of the duties"***. And in a

later sentence we can read ***“It is indeed a well known fact that the majority of such as are fond of boarding out pauper children are actuated more by a desire to make profit than to study the welfare of their charge.”*** In the later letter the writer echoes the pecuniary theme with the words ***“the primary object of those with whom they live is to turn the connection to the best account in a money point of view.”*** It should be pointed out in response to “G’s” charge of financial motives that Barnhill records show that each guardian of boarded out children received nine or ten shillings monthly per child, dependent on the child’s age. It is also interesting to notice that the upper age limit of boarding out from Barnhill in the 1850’s was 12. After that the child was expected to be in employment and earning. Anecdotes of bad treatment did creep back to the poor house. In an anonymous letter to the journal *The Reformers Gazette* of 28th January 1854 there was an allegation that ***“pauper children sent to the Isle of Arran are being ill treated, under fed and not sent to church or school.”*** . A group of Barony councillors made an unannounced visit to several boarding out homes on the island in and found nothing seriously amiss, except in the case of one house where no less than eleven children were boarded out. The deputation were however highly embarrassed to discover that Dr Ford, the medical superintendent at Barnhill, had allowed these eleven children to leave the poorhouse while still suffering from scrofulous disease. They were removed from Arran and placed on the mainland nearer to Barony. The concepts not only of separating children from their natural parents but also from their natural environment were strong motivations in the early days of systematic boarding out. A striking indication of this is seen in the evidence given to Sir John Macneil, the Chairman of the board of supervision for the relief of the poor in Scotland by Mr Henley, an experienced inspector. Sir John Macneill was collecting evidence to submit to the Poor Law Board of England who were conducting an enquiry into the possible extension of the Scottish system of boarding out to England. In a long and very thorough report Mr Henley included the statement ***“The North of Scotland, and more or less the West, are districts peculiarly well suited for the boarding out system, as they possess a class of small holders, either crofters or cottiers”.*** A fascinating picture of the effect of boarding out on a small island community in the West of Scotland is found in the Glasgow City Parish Minutes for 1st September 1869. The island in question is the Isle of Iona. The island belonged for several centuries to the Duke of Argyll and in 1869 his factor, a Mr Campbell, at his employer’s insistence, forced the removal of all boarded out children from the island. To counter the negative descriptions of the children boarded out in Iona offered by Mr Campbell a report was sent to Glasgow City Parish detailing the benefits the children had brought to the island. The report notes that there were 18 children and their presence on the island produced a sum of £148 to the island in 1868, when the whole rental

from crofts amounted to about £450. The report describes the fact that Iona was deliberately chosen to ensure that the children would be beyond the reach both of **"their dissipated parents who completely neglected them"** and of **"relatives who were no better than their parents"**. It also describes the children when they came on the Parish as **"completely emaciated and diseased for want of proper nourishment"**. Eight years later, the report notes there had been no deaths and **"all these children are now, without exception, stout and healthy. They were an ornament to the island"**. The parting must have been very hard. The report ends with the words: **"The scenes that took place on the day of separation may be imagined. It was the violent rending of all the finer feelings of the human heart."**

There were specific difficulties in the boarding out of Roman Catholic children. Prior to the large emigration to Scotland of Irish Catholic families in the second half of the 19th Century, Roman Catholic families were sited in numbers in only a few areas of the Highlands and Islands. Outside those areas, families were very scattered. Mr Henley reported in the 1871 Report already referred to that **"Great difficulties have been experienced in obtaining Roman Catholic nurses[foster parents] to meet the requirements of the Inspectors, and the Priests naturally object to Protestant homes for Roman Catholic children."** He then goes on to quote the City Parish in Edinburgh. Here there were 72 children boarded out, of whom only 45 were with Roman Catholic families, the remaining 27 being in 12 Protestant families. However he did note that half of these latter families were recommended by the Sisters of Mercy in Lanark or the priest in Dalkeith.

The separation of children from their natural parents by boarding out continued to be a very live issue throughout the scheme's history. The enforced separation was an even more hotly debated issue. A court ruling of 1853 [Barbour v Adamson] had ruled that the Poor Law **"could not violently sever domestic relationships"**. Apart from the normal poorhouse regulations children could not be physically separated from their parents. In 1871 when Linlithgow Parochial Board asked for advice on whether it could separate a mother from her illegitimate children it was told that only the authority of a Sheriff could separate a mother and her children and this would be given **"only in extreme cases"**. Over the next few years a further question occurred about whether children could be taken into care when their mothers refused relief or admission to the poorhouse. The case of Mary Kelly in 1873 illustrates the difficulties.

She had spent much time in Wigtownshire Poorhouse, in the south west of Scotland. One night she was found in a field and offered outdoor relief by the local Inspector of Poor. Her local parish, Mochrum, however insisted that she be sent back to the poorhouse. She refused and refused also for her children to be sent to the

poorhouse. The original Inspector became worried over his legal responsibility towards Mary Kelly and her children and approached the Poor Law Board for advice. They replied that in their opinion that he had incurred no criminal responsibility if Mary Kelly persisted in refusing the poorhouse. Their opinion concluded ***“As regards the children, the advice which the Board gives the Inspector is, to endeavour to get them away from their mother, and carry them away from their mother, and carry them to the poorhouse, if he can do so quietly and peaceably.”***

Six years later in Kirkpatrick Durham parish in the same part of Scotland the Poor Law Board took a clearer line. That parish was clearly told that it did have the right to board out children where the parent had accepted poorhouse relief. The mother could of course demand the children back but only if she left the poorhouse.

The problems in the cities and in the larger poorhouses were exacerbated by the number of mothers with illegitimate children, who would seek poorhouse accommodation for short periods. In November 1884 Barony parish in Glasgow resolved to rectify matters. Thirty two children were boarded out in the Highlands, thirteen of whom had mothers in Barnhill poorhouse. The mothers were told that if they wished their children back they would have to demonstrate their ability to maintain a “home”. Several mothers understandably objected to this draconian policy by the Parish. One, Mary Hannay, demanded the addresses of her two children from the Poor Law board. The board advised Barony that they should ***“exercise a wise and humane discretion”***. However the Parish persisted in its refusal.

An interesting report revealing the scale of boarding out in the last decade of the 19th century was produced by Mr Peterkin and issued as a parliamentary paper. He reported that in 1892 there were 496 children in poorhouses and 4,318 boarded out. For comparison the annual report of the board of supervision reported 90,792 people dependent on poor law relief, which constituted 22 in each thousand of population. Mr.Peterkin’s report on boarded out children indicates further that 907 of the boarded out children were from the three Glasgow parishes and 439 from the two Edinburgh ones. The remaining children were drawn from 520 parishes, some of them offering less than five children for boarding out. Interestingly enough he also suggests that boarded out children are likely to be less subject to abuse than those with their natural parents as any such abuse would be promptly reported and the boarded out children removed!

The twentieth Century was to see the system of boarding out continued in its known form for very nearly half its span. In 1904 a conference was held in Edinburgh at which papers relating to the scheme were delivered. One such paper declared ***“The boarding out system is, in my experience, the very best or the very worst of systems, according to the manner in which it is administered.”*** This was the opinion of Miss Mason, the Senior Inspector of the English local

government board; clear evidence that the Scottish scheme had found strong advocates on its export South of the border.

The Clyde Report of 1946 put a very different view which was strongly reflected in the Children's Act of 1948. The Clyde report was the Scottish response to the influential English Curtis Committee which had been set up following the death of Dennis O'Neill on a remote Shropshire farm at New Year 1945. This dreadful occurrence led to a sensational trial of his foster parents, which took much headline coverage from the events of the end of the Second World War in English papers.

Paragraph 73 of the Clyde Report which was entitled "Report of the committee on homeless children" reads "***We strongly deprecate the boarding out of city children on crofts in very remote areas where they have no real contact with other children, where they have no facilities for learning a trade which is congenial to them, or where living conditions are bad.***"

This would appear to be at variance with Paragraph 58 which reads "***There are cases where owing to the conduct of the parents, it is in the child's own interest that it should reside where contacts with its parents will not be easy, and therefore infrequent.***"

Despite this apparent variety of views of boarding out the influential Children's Act of 1948 quite clearly endorsed the policy which had been spelt out in the Statutory rules and orders on Boarding Out which had appeared in the previous year. Paragraph 4 of that document includes the following "***Where a local authority becomes responsible for the care of a child apart from his parents they shall make arrangements for boarding him out as soon as possible .***" The 1948 Children's Act, which was applicable to Scotland as well as the rest of Great Britain offered three options for the "***accommodation and maintenance for a child in their care***". These were boarding out, placing the child in a local authority home or a placement in a voluntary home.

Section 13b indicates that boarding out was seen as the most desirable of these three options in the view of the Act. After offering boarding out in Section 13a, the following subsection begins "***Where it is not practicable or desirable for the time being to make arrangements for boarding-out***" and then goes on to offer placement in a children's home.

And indeed this policy was reflected in the practice throughout the next two decades. Between 1948 and 1968 60% of children in care were boarded out, 15% were placed in voluntary homes like Quarriers Village or Aberlour, while the remainder were placed in local authority homes. Various views have been advanced for the policy in this period of which the most significant are firstly the fact that until 1969 conditions of nourishment, clothing and housing were not high in comparative terms. The second is that with boarding out homes mostly being in small communities a vigilance of the children's welfare could

be exercised through the school, the doctor, the Minister and the neighbours. It is only fair to add that other voices see this picture as more suitable for TV soap operas like Dr. Finlay's Casebook or Take the High Road than a genuine image of rural Scotland.

The ending of boarding out in its understood form came with the passing of the Social Work Scotland Act in 1968. Section 21 places the onus on deciding how a child shall be cared for on the local authority and makes no reference to boarding out. Despite this statement in the year of the Act 58% of children in care were still boarded out, though it is significant that only 18% were boarded out in an area distant from their own. Perhaps it should be added that current fostering practices ensure that contact with natural parents is maintained wherever possible.

A much more significant section of the Act for the care of children was that establishing the children's panel system as recommended in the Kilbrandon Report on Children and Young Persons of 1968. If boarding out can be viewed as a distinctive Scottish contribution to child care then the Children's Hearing system can perhaps be viewed as its worthy successor. In 1991 Sanford Fox declared in a lecture at Glasgow University **"The Children's Hearing system has for two decades embodied and made operational child-centred concerns that are only now being recognised as goals round the world."** If there is a link here to boarding out then it is a distinguished and worthy one.