

Babes in Bondage: Indentured Irish Children in Philadelphia in the Nineteenth Century

THE experiences of childhood, emotional, enhanced by the innocence of youth, and profoundly affecting, are a challenge to the imagination of the social historian. Children, even more than adults submerged in the mass of illiterate and inarticulate people in the past, are largely without historical chroniclers.¹ Study of the influence of social customs, of home life, education and work life requires insight into the conditions of childhood. Not only were attitudes toward childhood different in the past from those of our own time, but there were types of juvenile experience quite different from contemporary forms of childhood participation. This is readily illustrated by the institution of child indentures in the nineteenth century.

In Philadelphia the practice of legally binding children extended back to colonial times, from whence it was derived from England. Part of William Penn's original scheme for populating his vast holdings was a plan by which emigrants would be first indentured to captains of ships in England, and upon landing in Pennsylvania the indenture would then be sold to an American buyer.² The institution of indenture was ancient, rooted in law and custom, and accepted as part of the economic and social life in the colonies.

¹ The beginnings of a broader-based study of family and childhood have emerged in such studies as Shirley Glubock (ed.), *Home Life and Child Care in Colonial Days* (New York, 1969); Harvey L. Graff, "Patterns of Dependency and Child Development in the Mid-Nineteenth Century City: A Sample from Boston," *History of Education Quarterly*, XVII (1973), 129-143; Joseph F. Kett, "Adolescence and Youth in Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, II (1971), 283-298.

² Karl Frederick Geiser, *Redemptioners and Indentured Servants in the Colony and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (New Haven, Conn., 1901), 6; Merrill Jensen (ed.), *English Historical Documents* (London, 1955), 488-490.

Indentured labor was an inheritance from the medieval guild practices of work training and social control.³ It was carried into the age of mercantile economics and artisan independence by the contract system of English common law. In America it served its time-honored functions of training the young in skills and giving some stability to diffuse and petty work relationships.⁴ In addition, it was an instrument for imparting social discipline to the young and the alien, as well as providing for rudimentary education. As problems of destitution and child abandonment increased in America, they were frequently dealt with by indenturing the unfortunates involved. The indenture system of labor was used as a consciously humanitarian device to assign responsibility and to facilitate charity for the victims of poverty and for orphans. Indenture was also an alternative to slavery in a society in which there were various forms of servitude and influence curtailing mobility. In some cases indentured service was barely distinguishable from the involuntary servitude of slavery; in others it was a refuge for the young from fates much worse. In the British Isles and America, too, there was added the widespread practice of creating "redemptioners," that is, emigrants who paid for their passage to the New World by signing contracts for terms of servitude in their new country, usually terms of seven to fourteen years.

Although indentured servants and apprentices had the right in law to appeal to the courts for relief from unjust contracts, or mistreatment, or to correct abuses, the indentured person was rarely in a position to obtain real redress.⁵ The courts tended to side with those possessed of those two paramount legal resources, property and education. Hence, the system was both open to abuse

³ Ian M. G. Quimby, "Apprenticeship in Colonial Philadelphia" (Master's Dissertation, University of Delaware, 1963). See also the materials in John R. Commons, *et al.*, *Documentary History of American Industrial Society* (Cleveland, 1910), and Robert F. S. Seybolt, *Apprenticeship and Apprenticeship Education in Colonial New York* (New York, 1917); James D. Motley, *Apprenticeship in American Trade Unions* (Baltimore, 1907), 9-40.

⁴ Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York, 1965), 340, 376, 382.

⁵ Oscar and Mary Handlin, *Facing Life: Youth and the Family in American History* (Boston, 1971), 30-31, note the problems involved in indentures. Morris, 336, provides an example of a case in which an Irish servant girl did obtain redress from Philadelphia courts. For a legal opinion on the strong enforcement of indentures in the early nineteenth century see Grace Abbott, *The Child and the State* (Chicago, 1938), 216-218.

by harsh and heedless masters, and difficult to supervise and correct because of its ubiquity and the irregularities that creep into any widespread social institution.

The economic advantage of having indentured workers instead of workers who received regular wages was not disregarded by artisans, merchants, and householders. Wages in America tended to be high because of a chronic labor shortage. In addition, indentured workers were not free to move away in search of better pay or living conditions. They were bound by law to their master. The Irish exile, Archibald Hamilton Rowan, who was living near Philadelphia in 1791, observed tartly that his Quaker neighbors were not above a "brisk trade for 'Irish slaves.'" He wrote that "The members of the society for the abolition of slavery have not the least objection to buying an Irishman or Dutchman, and will chaffer with himself or the captain to get him indentured at about the eighth part of the wages they would have to pay a 'country born.'"⁶

Eighteenth-century lists of indentured persons in Philadelphia show that beggars, those unable to pay jail fees, convicted criminals, orphans and runaways were signed into contracts for years of service by public authorities. Debtors were still another class of persons available to authorities for indenture. The Guardians of the Poor in Philadelphia had the power to indenture those in their charge.⁷ Thus, in addition to redemptioners paying for their passage through their labor and the contracts of private individuals and families, there was a brisk trade in indentures by public officials. Considering the fact that indentures probably were signed most frequently for juveniles rather than adults, the perils of the system for the poor and undefended were manifold.

The traffic in bound servants from British ports was mostly Irish in the eighteenth century, and agents, called appropriately "soul drivers," toured Ireland itself seeking indenture subjects.⁸ The Irish had poor reputations as servants. They were likely to run away. The reasons for running away were most commonly because

⁶ William H. Drummond (ed.), *The Autobiography of Archibald Hamilton Rowan* (Shannon, Ireland, 1972), 318.

⁷ Lewis R. Harley, *The Redemptioners: An Address to the Montgomery County Historical Society* (Norrstown, 1893), 1-2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

the work to which they were bound was too hard, the hours too long, the punishments meted out by masters too disagreeable, and the living conditions too unsatisfactory.⁹ That servants or apprentices lived with the families of their masters was capable of producing considerable friction in itself. The Irish usually could speak English, and this also made it easier for them to abscond.

In one study of runaways in Pennsylvania in the years 1771-1776 more than half the runaways were Irish.¹⁰ This disposition to break free of the indenture may have been derived from the fact that the Irish had little reason to respect English legal documents, or simply that the disciplines of such agreements did not accord with the psychology of those who came from a more pastoral and fluid society. And it was not only youths who made the break for freedom. Advertisements such as the following offering forty shillings reward for a runaway were common all through the eighteenth century:

Last Wednesday noon at break of day,
From Philadelphia ran away
An Irishman named John McKeown,
To fraud and imposition prone;
About five feet, five inches high
Can curse and swear as well as lie;
How old he is I can't engage
But forty-five is near his age.
He came (as all reports agree)
From Belfast town in sixty-three.¹¹

During the nineteenth century Irish immigrants were certainly very likely to be included in great numbers among the ranks of the

⁹ Handlin, 30.

¹⁰ Geiser, 6; Gibson Bell Smith, "Footloose and Fancy Free: The Demography and Sociology of the Runaway Class in Colonial Pennsylvania, 1771-1776" (Master of Arts paper, Bryn Mawr College, Apr. 29, 1971), 6-17. This research based on census materials and colonial advertisements for runaways shows over half of the runaways to be Irish. In Philadelphia in 1773-1774 some 10 percent of the indentured ran away, and of these almost half were Irish. Another authority states that most indentured servants were Irish in the eighteenth century, and the Irish were most likely to break their indentures and run away. Cheesman A. Herrick, *White Servitude in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1926), 159, 167. Lewis Harley, 3, agrees with this.

¹¹ Geiser, 80.

debtors, orphans, criminals and the servant class. Coming from a rural background, they frequently lacked the skills needed in the emerging industrial order. They were to be found in disproportionate numbers among the inmates of almshouses and prisons, and their group was stigmatized in the public mind as feckless, untrustworthy, and prone to violence.¹²

The actual agreements by which the children of this group were bound to artisans and tradesmen were documents rarely varying in traditional form. One signed April 26, 1802, reads: "Biddy Dougherty, with the advise and consent of her mother Catherine of the City of Philadelphia, was bound apprentice to Arthur Howell of the City of Philadelphia, Tanner and Currier, to him, his heirs and assigns for and during the term of seven years, to be taught domestic work, to be provided with meat and drink, clothing, lodging, working, fitting for an apprentice during the said term of seven years, to have four quarters half days schooling and when free to have two suits apparel, one whereof to be new."¹³

In an agreement signed February 9, 1801, for John Lahy, aged twelve, whose father had died, his mother bound him for "eight years, two months, and twenty-one days," to John Wright, an oak cooper, with provision for four quarters evening schooling.¹⁴ On August 11, 1801, an agreement was signed for John McCoy, "whose parents reside in Ireland," by John McConaughy of the District of Southwark, "his next friend," to bind the boy to Robert Christy for two years and four months "to learn the art, trade, and mistery [*sic*] of a cordwainer."¹⁵

For children like Biddy Dougherty, bound in 1802 to learn domestic service, working conditions as a kitchen slavey could be very repugnant with interminable hours. The dangers to maidenly virtue were proverbial. The drinking habits and rowdy temptations of hardy workmen sent many an indentured lad into early dissipa-

¹² Dennis J. Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia: Ten Generations of Urban Experience* (Philadelphia, 1973), 44-49.

¹³ Records of Indentures and Marriages (Oct. 27, 1800-Oct. 18, 1806), RG 60.14, Apr. 26, 1802, Archives of the City of Philadelphia.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1801.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Aug. 11, 1801.

tion.¹⁶ The gambling, sports, and drinking of craftsmen, who could, after all, often make their own work schedules, led to some of our earliest temperance efforts.

It was, at this time, that one of the earliest craft unions in the nation, the Philadelphia Typographical Society, drew up its charter and rules that made apprenticeship, which was a form of indenture, a formal requirement of the craft. The system was hard to control, however, and in 1828 the *Mechanics Free Press* in the city complained that lower paid apprentices were being used instead of journeymen in the shops of some artisans. It is notable that the precocious workingmen's movement in Philadelphia in the late 1820s barely mentioned the plight of the indentured. Master mechanics and journeymen were too worried about their own problems to fret over the indentured subclass. The *Mechanics Free Press*, the organ of the movement, carried accounts in 1830 of charges against the House of Refuge managers that they were using inmate boys improperly to compete with local labor, and that boys were plucked off the streets for forced labor. The charges were denied, and the managers of the House of Refuge assured the workingmen's committee that they indentured boys to rural masters to "obviate the evil of competition."¹⁷ One plea, signed simply by "Paul," protested apprenticeship conditions, complaining that the country's liberty was a mockery "as long as our youth are robbed of the just reward of their extreme toil and labour, or rather so long as they are required to labour incessantly from the morning's dawn to the going down of the sun, for almost nothing."¹⁸ Another kind of complaint derived from disgruntled parents who paid to have their children taught a trade, and then found that the indenture had been in vain. One such parent wrote to the *Mechanics Free Press* in 1828:

¹⁶ David R. Johnson, "Crime Patterns in Philadelphia, 1840-70" in Allen Davis and Mark Haller (eds.), *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life 1790-1940* (Philadelphia, 1973), 97-98; Bruce Laurie, "Nothing on Impulse: Lifestyles of Philadelphia Artisans 1820-1850," *Labor History*, XV (1974), 345; Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844* (Westport, Conn., 1975).

¹⁷ *The Mechanics Free Press* (Philadelphia), Jan. 30, 1830.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, July 3, 1830.

When we bind our sons for five, six or seven years, to learn a trade, it is with an idea that when he has faithfully served out the term of his apprenticeship, he will be enabled at least to find employment as a journeyman. This reasonable expectation very often ends in disappointment; for the very moment he assumes his independence his troubles begin: he is thrown out of employment by his parsimonious and ungenerous master, with whom no consideration of past services has any weight, and whose heart can melt at the sight of nothing but money.¹⁹

But the concern of the worker committees for political representation, for abolition of debtors prison, and for free public education stopped short of an address to the problems of bound children. The *Mechanics Free Press* continued to carry advertisements like the one placed by Edward Short:

Five Dollars Reward—Ran away from the Subscriber on or about the 1st inst. an indented apprentice to the shoemaking business, named James Maher. He is lame in one of his feet. Whoever returns the said apprentice to me at 148 South Front Street shall receive the above reward, but no charges.²⁰

Though conditions of indentured youths were hard, the alternative of remaining, for instance, in custody of an almshouse was even less attractive. The physician for the Philadelphia Almshouse, writing in the 1830s, stated:

A hundred or more children were sheltered on their way to an early grave to which most of them were destined. Illegitimate and other outcasts formed the majority, and ophthalmia, that curse of children's asylums, made them a sore-eyed, puny group most pitiable to see. . . . I pointed out to the committee of the board how the disease was disseminated by the children washing in the same basins and using the same towels . . . and also by the insufficient food permitted them. . . . But, of course, the committee . . . knew better than I, and . . . nothing was done to correct the wrong.²¹

From 1830 onward the District of Moyamensing in South Philadelphia was an area of heavy Irish concentration. The *Indenture Book of the Moyamensing Board of Commissioners for 1836-1845*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Nov. 29, 1828.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Mar. 27, 1830.

²¹ Homer Folks, *Neglected and Delinquent Children* (New York, 1902), 9-10.

has survived and the contract receipts for children with names like Mary Ann Callaghan, James Kearney, and Patrick Duffy fill its pages. Most were indentured before their eleventh birthday, but Josephine Develin was bound out at the tender age of one year and Mary Roach at age five for a term of thirteen years. Mary Ann Callaghan was bound to "housewifery" for ten years at age seven, and Timothy Donovan was bound for eleven years to a bootmaker at age nine. John Donnelly, age eight, had the good fortune to be indentured to a skilled cabinetmaker for thirteen years, but most of the indentures are for menial servant work. One third of the indentures in the book are for children with distinctively Irish names.²²

Oscar and Mary Handlin, in their book on youth in America, point out that apprenticeship and indenture meant, for children, life in a "family of contract" rather than the family of birth. The master took the place of the blood father. Where the master took his responsibility seriously, this meant that the child was subject both to family discipline and the obedience required of a shop worker.²³ Subduing the willfulness of children was the first and foremost duty of religious parents. Bernard Wishy has emphasized how seriously this duty was regarded in an age of evangelical zeal such as the 1840s. It was in the 1840s, too, that the Irish Catholic immigrants arrived in vast numbers. The Children's Aid Society of New York warned of the immigrant slum children: "This dangerous class has not yet begun to show itself as it will in eight or ten years, when these boys and girls are matured. . . . They will poison society." Protestant masters were expected to work for the religious discipline of their charges.²⁴

It would be misleading to interpret the situation of indentured children according to our contemporary notions of child status and welfare. Doubtless, many were fortunate to be bound to responsible masters. But, to be removed from the family of one's nativity at an early age, to be bound to a family of different ethnic and religious

²² Indenture Book (1836-1845), Moyamensing Board of Commissioners, RG 214.2 Archives of the City of Philadelphia.

²³ Handlin, 30.

²⁴ Bernard Wishy, *The Child and the Republic* (Philadelphia, 1968), 16; William G. McLoughlin, "Evangelical Child-Rearing in the Age of Jackson," *Journal of Social History*, IX (1975), 20.

background, and in a condition of all but total subordination, could not but produce troubled psychological reactions in many cases. If there was not an "identity crisis" for the child, there was at least a condition in which the child was highly vulnerable psychologically.²⁵ The riotous behavior of apprentices, which became a fixture of urban life in the first half of the nineteenth century, might be, in part, attributable to this circumstance.

It should be recalled that conditions in the new factories of the 1840s were no escape from the rigors of indenture for children. A report on factory problems in Philadelphia in 1838 records that the work day extended from five in the morning till seven in the evening for children who carried boxes up four stories on their heads. An Irishman testified that children labored longer in the United States than in Irish and Scottish mills where he had worked. A seventy-hour week was the norm, and one John Mulligan testified that a sixty-nine hour week would not be economically damaging and urged it. The views of employers were sought, and "The reason alleged by them for the employment of children is that they are forced on them by poor, and in many instances, worthless parents."²⁶

The use of indenture for philanthropic reasons is illustrated by the surviving indenture records of Girard College. Stephen Girard endowed in his will this school for "poor, white, male orphans," and this was construed to mean boys whose father had died, but whose mother might be living. Girard College was a nonsectarian institution, but this did not prevent Irish Catholics from enrolling in it. In 1847, of the 102 indentures for entering boys twenty-three had recognizably Irish names. Robert Emmet O'Brien was entered by "his next friend, Adelia Rodgers," whose signature was by mark. Indeed, eleven of those relatives or friends entering children of Irish names signed the indenture by mark for names like Kelly, McClay, Collins, Devine, Dougherty, Donahue, Miles, McIlhenny, McFadden and Kane. Such signers probably saw Girard College as

²⁵ John Trisediotis, *In Search of Origins: The Experience of Adopted People* (Boston, 1973), ix-x.

²⁶ *Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Visit the Manufacturing Districts of the Commonwealth for the Purpose of Investigating the Employment of Children in Manufactories—Mr. Petty Chairman, Senate of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, 1838), 6-42. Much information on this period is provided by William A. Sullivan, *The Industrial Worker in Pennsylvania: 1800-1840* (Harrisburg, 1955).

a boon compared to regular indentures or factory employment, whatever their personal or religious misgivings might have been.²⁷

Herrick, in his book on white servitude in Pennsylvania, writes "The indentured system continued much later than is generally supposed. Indeed, it did not disappear until near the close of the first third of the nineteenth century."²⁸ I have already cited indentures extending beyond the end of the first third of the nineteenth century. There was, obviously, a continued use of indentures by both public and philanthropic officials. The Committee on the Children's Asylum of the Guardians of the Poor of Philadelphia was indenturing children as late as 1866. The minutes of the Committee reveal an indenture on July 2, 1857, for Anna Donnally, bound out at three years of age. Mary Rowan, bound out to William Kelly, had her indenture cancelled because she pilfered and was a bad example to Kelly's own children. Margaret Boyle returned to the Committee's charge in 1860 when her indenture expired. Bridget Larkin's indenture was cancelled by consent of both parties that year. Though a city agency, the Committee did provide indentures to farmers in the suburbs and elsewhere. In 1866 John Dailey was bound to D. Cadwalader, farmer, of Montgomery County.²⁹

It is difficult to believe that the Guardians of the Poor would be free of political and economic pressures for the assignment of children practically as chattel. In 1855 Edward Everett Hale found in a survey that in most cases in Massachusetts and New York the education of bound children was not provided for, and there is no reason to assume that Pennsylvania would have been different.³⁰ The contracting into bondage of children of a lower-class and stigmatized group probably was fraught with much greater abuses than the omission of education, and perhaps these abuses were the

²⁷ Indentures Made to Girard College, 1847-1853, RG 35.134, Archives of the City of Philadelphia.

²⁸ Herrick, 265.

²⁹ Guardians of the Poor, Minutes of the Committee on the Children's Asylum (July 1857-November 1856), RG 35.23, Archives of the City of Philadelphia.

³⁰ Robert H. Bremner (ed.), *Children and Youth in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), I, 575. A study of a sample of sons of Boston families by Harvey L. Graff has shown that in 1860 only sixteen of 353 boys were apprenticed, and of boys in the sample who were fifteen-year-olds about half were enrolled in schools. Graff, 142.

very reason the indenture system continued under public auspices in Philadelphia, a city seldom esteemed for the purity of its politics.

The growth of population itself helped cause the decline of the indenture system. Mass populations required mass production, and the old individual entrepreneur and artisan declined as the factory order flourished. In 1848 a Pennsylvania act made it illegal for minors to work more than twelve hours a day in textile mills, but the struggle over child labor had hardly begun.³¹ The spread of the wage system and the abandonment of traditional methods of craft training did, however, hasten the demise of indentures.³²

While some of those who experienced life as indentured youths became successful as adults, the fate of most is obscure. Boys like Hugh Craig, born in Coleraine, Ireland, and Horatio Fitzgerald, the son of poor parents, could rise to prominence as flour and grocery merchants. There are very few references in biographies of successful men of their having been indentured in the city in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The hazards of childhood in the growing city changed but did not diminish for thousands of poor Irish children. The Philadelphia Society to Protect Children was investigating cases in the 1870s, including vicious instances of child abuse and exploitation. Thirty years later, when young Scott Nearing was an investigator for the Child Labor Association, the grim record of child brutalization was still continuing.³³

As late as 1899 an act of the General Assembly of Pennsylvania empowered "benevolent and charitable" institutions, asylums, and corporations to bind children by indentures under certain conditions.³⁴ While most child placement societies abandoned the use of indentures by the end of the nineteenth century in favor of agreements with foster parents, a study by the United States Children's Bureau showed that the indenture form was actually used by juvenile courts in selected cases up until the 1920s.³⁵

³¹ Miriam E. Loughran, *The Historical Development of Child Labor Legislation in the United States* (Washington, D. C., June 1921), 69-70.

³² Abbott, 230.

³³ Records of the Philadelphia Society to Protect Children, and Records of the Child Labor Association of Philadelphia (1904) in the Urban Archives, Temple University.

³⁴ Abbott, 230.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

As the immigrants made social and economic progress, they became less subject to victimization through indenture. In Philadelphia, the United States Census records of occupations of Irish males in 1850, 1860, and 1870 show a steady expansion of skilled occupations.³⁶ In the last third of the nineteenth century the problem of child labor would draw increasing interest of reformers, and campaigns to assert the dignity of working people would increasingly be waged in relation to the massive industrialism that would dominate the economic life of the nation.

Philadelphia

DENNIS CLARK

³⁶ Clark, 73-85.