ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME AND JUSTICE

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THE MEDIEVAL NOTION of the ‘abominable superstition’ of the virgin cure for pox or syphilis enjoyed a resurgence in 18th, 19th and into 20th century Britain. The term ‘child prostitution’ may not have been recognised by Victorian society, however, children were used for deviant, unusual and curative services, certainly in the brothels and bawdy-houses of London and other large industrial cities and ports. The great brothels or ‘temples’ opened for gentlemen and military, merchants and trade, catered for all persuasions and charged accordingly. Most establishments had children set apart for curative purposes. Diseased children, if they survived, would be admitted to a Lock Hospital for treatment.

In Scotland young offenders and ‘wayward’ children were treated as criminals and sentenced by the courts in the same manner as adults. In Glasgow a Magdalene refuge was established for the rescue and reforming of girls at risk by 1812. Middle class women possessed of evangelical zeal were joined by women who held teaching and nursing posts and were together known as Lady Child Savers. Large numbers of ‘fallen’ and wayward girls were directed to reformatories and the Magdalene Institute: those who were found to be diseased were marched, heads shaven, to the Lock for treatment, to be returned if cured.

The Glasgow Lock Annual Reports (1840-1870) indicate that children younger than 13 years old were being admitted in numbers with contracted syphilis, many from reformatories, industrial schools and jails, others from the Magdalene Institute. Diseased girls were kept in medical isolation, kept apart from their family and friends, and rarely returned. The perception was that once ‘ruined’ they often turned to prostitution, and were therefore contaminated. Reformatories and industrial schools reported that such girls were shunned and avoided by others: “The object, once a girl had fallen, and this included the contraction of venereal disease through abuse or rape, was to contain the danger of contamination by isolating her from her friends” (Mahood, 1995). Victims were now perceived as a danger in themselves, viewed as a sexual risk.

The Youthful Offenders Act 1854 and the Industrial Schools Act 1854, established a system of special and reformatory schools offering residential and day schooling for children in trouble. The early industrial schools, where attendance was not compulsory, were reporting that young children, particularly girls, were manifesting signs and symptoms of molestation and violence. Children were largely left to roam and find what food and shelter they could in the streets. Boys formed gangs and lived in parks, middens and closes. Girls became ‘wanderers’ preferring the dangers of living on the streets to going home. Statistics for those who were known to the authorities, were alarming. By 1896 the Scottish School Board’s scrupulous record-keeping revealed that (in Glasgow) 283 children,
mainly girls, were being incarcerated in residential schools and reformatories. The term ‘wanderer’ occurred in many registers of industrial schools, Magdalene lists and Lock medical records. While Scottish magistrates and public health committees sought additional powers to detain prostitutes and habitual offenders, local government boards were reluctant to issue greater powers of detention, fearing the resurrection of the more discriminatory aspects of the notorious Contagious Diseases Acts (see article in SJM 5).

Evidence was emerging of a ‘white slave trade’ where respectable girls were being accosted and corrupted for immoral traffic or prostitution in local ice cream parlours. Glasgow magistrates deployed the existing Burgh Police (Scotland) Act 1892 in order to secure the deportation of foreign pimps, particularly Italians, allegedly grooming girls for the thriving sex trade. These measures promoted the later Immoral Traffic (Scotland) Act 1902 which significantly increased the penalties for men living on immoral earnings (Davidson, 2002).

Newspapers fuelled rumours about the violation of children, and word of the ‘abominable superstition’ was out and widely known ‘amongst the lower classes’. The exploitation of very young children sacrificed to a belief that connection with a clean female would cure a dose of venereal disease in a male was both abhorrent and fascinating to a late Victorian society. The Children Act of 1908 and the Immoral Traffic (Scotland) Amendment Bill 1910 were drafted in response, and municipal action uncovered evidence in chronically overcrowded housing of ‘child outrage’, with many incest cases being brought before the Scottish courts.

The concern surrounding sexual offences against children was evidenced after 1910 in the way in which Scottish law officers deployed Scots common law to penalise offenders who communicated venereal disease to young girls as a consequence of rape, attempt to ravish or lewd or libidinous practices. In response to the moral panic that was sweeping Scotland, Fiscals were instructed to ensure that such crimes should be heard before the High Court rather than in the sheriff courts.

The Children Acts of 1908 and 1912 had prompted the formation of the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SSPPC), who along with police, moral vigilance associations and the Medical Women’s Federation were using plain clothes officers to uncover sinister arrangements. The Lock Hospital annual reports showed numbers of children as young as 3 and 5 years old being admitted and treated for contracted venereal conditions. The medical professional reported the widespread effects of belief in the ‘abominable superstition’. John Glaister (1902), Professor of Forensic Medicine and Public Health, Glasgow University stated in 1912, “… coitus between an infected male and a clean female led to increased evidence of sexual abuse, the conclusion was often that these conditions were mostly caused through vaginitis, contaminated sanitary provision (rags), dirty towels, shared underclothing, baths or sponges.

For example, a School Board Medical Officer giving evidence in 1913 referred to a girl of 13 years allegedly assaulted by father in Glasgow tenement. Medical Report states “fingering of parts, dirt and/or worms”, no vaginal examination. Worm powder given to mother. Note: disease often passed from child to child, bed sharing (National Archives of Scotland NAS AD 15/13/100).

An earlier Lock Hospital Report described the admission of “seven schoolgirls aged from 7-14 years the youngest was seven years old and she contracted the disease herself” (Patterson, 1882).

Finally, evidence before a Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases 1914-16 accepted statements from Lock Hospital medical staff, and general practitioners, testifying to the extent of child infection contracted as a result of sexual assault.

Denial, however, is not delusion. What is interesting is that, as referred to earlier, child victims of sexual assault were viewed as a sexual danger not just in need of protection, but certainly in need of control. This was viewed was widely shared by the medical profession and police force, so that girls who were the victims of assault involving the communication of venereal infection, were transferred after medical treatment in the Lock to other confining institutions such as industrial schools, children’s homes or the Magdalene Institute. It was assumed that early sexual experience, whether abuse or seduction, would lead to prostitution: abused women and girls were deemed to be dirty and dangerous.

Abolitionists and suffrage activists concerned with the rights of women, if alerted to the reality of child prostitution or child ‘outrage’, did not usually choose to involve or include it in their campaigns. It was left to others such as philanthropists and rescue workers to get children, particularly in large cities, away from the streets. The abhorrent reality of the ‘abominable superstition’ located child abuse within notions of the degenerate city, a myth that would never really go away.

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