Leaving the Victorian Children's Institution: Aftercare, Friendship and Support

by *Claudia Soares*

After his parents died in 1897 when he was three John B. spent his childhood in the care of the Waifs and Strays Society (WSS), a charitable children's residential organization. He lived with a foster mother for several years before entering the Society's Standon Home. When he was fifteen the Society found him a job on a farm in Llanelli, but a few months later he was back at Standon Home having been 'unsuccessful' in his work. The Society placed John out twice more; each time he returned having proved an unsatisfactory worker.¹ In October 1914 the Standon Home Secretary, Mr Lewis Davies, who monitored John's progress, wrote for advice to the Society's founder, Edward Rudolf, lamenting, 'What is to be done with him?'.² John was 'very clean and tidy and decorates his bedroom tastefully', he wrote, but his employer found him 'disobedient', working only if he was 'constantly under supervision'. Davies was also concerned that John had started to show signs of 'mental instability', recently manifested in his 'great anxiety for pince-nez spectacles' that he thought would 'look more swellish'. Davies felt that John might do better in domestic service where he could spend his time 'pottering about a private house...' The Head Office, however, was less accommodating. Since he had been found work repeatedly and was now twenty, they suggested only two options: to return John to his sister, or send him to the workhouse – a preferable choice given his apparent 'mental instability'. But reluctant to take either option, Davies instead found John another situation nearby. No further correspondence was sent until February 1915, when Davies informed Rudolf that John had improved considerably and suggested leaving him where he was, as he was now well established, doing well, and able to fend for himself. John's difficulty in adjusting to independence after leaving the institution was not unique. Many young people found discharge challenging and required additional support in the months and years afterwards. As John's readmissions to the Society demonstrate, discharge could be a drawn-out process rather than a swift transition to independence. Correspondence also shows that some institutional staff might continue to be interested in the progress, welfare and wellbeing of care-leavers, and endeavoured to support those who needed it.

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Indeed, as in John's case, some staff could be allies for care-leavers who found the transition difficult, by offering them another chance or a helping hand when needed.

This article takes the point of inmates' discharge as its focus to explore the needs of care-leavers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the provision of 'aftercare' intended to enhance their welfare and well-being. 'Aftercare' included a range of different practices such as preparation prior to discharge, accessing the formal systems for obtaining work, inspections by staff to monitor youths' welfare, and informal systems, including correspondence, that allowed inmates time to disengage from the institution and make the shift to independence. Using the Waifs and Strays Society as a case study, this article asks different questions of surviving sources to advance understandings of care provision both in and beyond the institutional setting. What were the Society's expectations of discharged youths, and how did they see their responsibilities to provide aftercare? How did aftercare practices vary for inmates? Who was involved in providing this care and what support was offered? And how did care-leavers respond to these practices? By examining discharge and aftercare – an area for which there is a limited historiography – this essay provides new understandings of the provision of practical and emotional support to young people, and offers valuable glimpses of the continued interactions and relationships between former inmates and institutional staff. And by examining the practices of a non-state welfare institution, the essay shows how such agencies developed their methods in response to contemporary debates about effective care of the young, and how they helped to develop and drive forward child protection and childcare methods, particularly regarding aftercare support. Additionally, while WSS care practices, like those of other institutions, were shaped by ideas of reform and progress, the focus on this philanthropic institution also offers insight into how some care-leavers continued to engage with the organization and how expressions of care functioned in transitional spaces after discharge.

The discharge, aftercare and post-institutional experiences of young care-leavers have been marginal topics in studies of institutional care, whereas the reasons for institutional admission are well documented by historians. Scholarship has commonly presented discharge as an abrupt moment when young people were cast out of the institution to take up low-paid but demanding work that perpetuated intergenerational cycles of poverty.³ 'Aftercare' practices have been equated with the irregular and inadequate inspections that assessed performance in employment while offering few meaningful opportunities to report poor health, overwork or ill treatment.⁴ This narrow interpretation of aftercare underpins claims that welfare institutions cared very little about the longer-term wellbeing of inmates. Our understanding of the welfare institution therefore remains partial and incomplete. Only recently have scholars considered the practices (both formal and informal) that kept track of care-leavers' welfare, or the sustained

contact between staff members and the young.⁵ The ways in which care-leavers came back to their institutions for help and how staff responded rarely figure in scholarship on children's welfare, which is surprising, given the vulnerable and precarious positions of care-leavers in society and their limited access to further support. This essay suggests that by broadening our interpretation of aftercare to include informal contact between staff and former inmates we can glimpse a fuller and more diverse range of the types of practical and emotional support provided.

Drawing on approaches that foreground the critical reading of institutional literature and personal correspondence, the essay explores the ideals and practices associated with discharge and aftercare provision, and the meanings given to these experiences by institutional staff and youths. First, it expands traditional views of what constituted 'aftercare', by focusing on institutional ideals and the informal practices aimed at sustaining contact with young care-leavers. WSS inspections brought their practices in line with many other agencies of the time, and the development of a framework that encouraged care-leavers to maintain letter-writing and prolonged contact with the institution can be seen as one method to achieve this. Through this exploration, the essay takes forward issues raised in recent research on institutional material and social cultures to show how friendship and kindness featured in care practices, alongside and integral to the aim of morally reforming inmates.⁶ Second, the essay turns to more scattered evidence – care-leavers' surviving letters – to show the diverse paths they took, the issues they encountered, how they asked for support, and how staff assessed their petitions. The essay thus highlights the tensions and limitations involved in providing ongoing support to care-leavers, and in the attitudes of care-leavers towards their former carers. Letters are often a self-conscious source, their content specific and selected so as to elicit desired outcomes or actions. They suggest, nevertheless, that care-leavers and carers invested the most rudimentary aftercare processes with meaning, and at times they reveal a range of affective emotions: correspondence became a way of keeping in touch, expressing attachment, and receiving personal support and guidance. On that basis this essay complicates the assumption that welfare officials were uninterested in former inmates' well-being and argues the importance of these affective ties. The essay therefore reimagines aftercare provision as an act not only of obligation, but also of friendship and devotion, casting the carer-inmate relationship as more than just a duty to provide basic material care in the out-of-home setting.

Although this is not its main focus, the essay also extends Foucauldian understandings about the disciplinary nature of institutional practices, arguing that the purposes of aftercare were complex and multiple. Besides enhancing wellbeing through provision of support and strengthening emotional bonds through expression of friendship, kindness and sympathy, aftercare practices functioned as an extension of institutional control. The act of monitoring progress was disciplinary in nature and continued to apply

institutional systems of regulation and control even though care-leavers no longer resided in these spaces. Other individuals, such as employers, were complicit in youths' continued subjection. Additionally, the institution's celebration of former inmates' success meant that youths could regulate their own behaviour in order to meet institutional expectations. Nevertheless, while it is important to recognize the disciplinary processes in place, particularly when young people were passive agents in the scheduling, structure and scrutiny of inspection systems, aftercare could empower the young as active agents. They could for instance decide to sever contact with staff by refusing to correspond. Or in their letters they might embellish or fabricate their successes so as to be validated and recognized by staff.

It is also important to note how the source material which has survived shapes understandings about the nature of institutional aftercare provision, what this work appeared to achieve and how youths responded to it. The examination of correspondence between welfare officials and care-leavers permits valuable insight into the workings of the aftercare process, and can tell us much about the post-institutional expectations, experiences and responses both of welfare agents and of the youths leaving care. But of course the correspondence that survives in the archive largely concerns the children with whom contact was maintained, and dependence on it is likely to produce a somewhat rosy view of the institution's work. Alternative readings of both institutional and post-institutional experiences are required to consider the experiences of those who do not figure there. Many young people severed contact with the institution on leaving, despite the Society's attempts to keep in touch or to monitor them. Children who were reclaimed by relatives and friends were not usually inspected, nor did institutional staff routinely correspond with them. Similarly, aftercare and further contact were not extended to children discharged to other institutions (such as work-houses, asylums and specialist homes), when the Society believed them beyond their help. Other individuals, such as those who ran away from the institution, could often not be traced, despite repeated efforts of the Society and often the police. Young people in these groups would be likely to have a very different experience of discharge and of any further contact with the institution.

Meanwhile, those considered by the Society to be 'misfits' also had different (and varying) experiences, and some evidence consequently attests to less positive post-institutional experiences. As this article shows, some young people were considered to be 'unsatisfactory', 'unsuitable', or 'unsuccessful', by employers particularly. Apparent post-institutional 'failures' often resulted from employers' excessive expectations of their skills, as well as of their deference and commitment to employers. These young people were usually readmitted to the Society's homes until other employment was found for them, but the case files give only limited details of their experiences with employers or the events that resulted in their readmission. So while 'misfits' are not absent from the archive, letters from them are few and

far between. In some cases leavers corresponded with WSS agents to present their version of events, or to explain actions or behaviours not matching the institution's expectations.⁷ Others wrote to explain why they ran away from or left the employment found for them,⁸ or in an attempt to defend themselves from slanderous accusations made against them by employers.⁹ In some cases, the voice of the care-leaver is absent but other correspondence, sometimes written on their behalf or in their interests by members of the local community or by WSS agents, indicates the various further endeavours to support them. This was the case when girls found themselves pregnant in precarious situations, often out of wedlock,¹⁰ or when those who had been sent to employment abroad returned and simply turned up at the Society's door.¹¹ The Society might try to support these young people, even if they had not met expectations or stayed in touch, but often they referred them to other agencies as beyond the age for support by the Society.¹²

Some surviving evidence does then suggest less positive experiences of aftercare, particularly with individuals who did not meet the Society's ideals and expectations. Nevertheless the Society's aftercare system, with the documentation it produced and preserved, does offer a valuable if partial view of the ongoing contact and relationships between welfare officials and recipients beyond institutional walls. Despite their limitations, the correspondence and other sources that the institution's aftercare processes elicited are still of interest. The letters that young people sent show their sense of entitlement to help from institutional staff, their expectations and ideas about the institution, and their experiences and their perceptions of success in the wider world more broadly. Meanwhile, sources that reveal welfare agents' contact with care-leavers throw light on their continuing efforts to shape the individual lives of former inmates.

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Edward de Montjoie Rudolf (1852–1933), a Sunday School teacher working in Lambeth, founded the Waifs and Strays Society in 1881 to care for a growing population of outcast, destitute and friendless children. The Society became one of a growing number of statutory and voluntary welfare institutions established in the nineteenth century that aimed to care for children as a distinct group with specific needs. These institutions provided an alternative to the workhouse and might allow parents to deposit children in a Home temporarily during hardship, reclaiming them when circumstances improved. Underpinned by a Protestant ethos and close affiliation to the Church of England, the Society's first Home opened in Clapton in 1882 and aimed to provide a 'natural home life' to children, alongside training to instil in them the virtues of morality and industriousness. The Society expanded rapidly thanks to the goodwill of its supporters, and by 1920 it was caring for approximately 4,269 children each year in its 108 homes scattered across England and Wales.¹³ Separate homes for boys and girls were established in

each Anglican diocese, managed by an Honorary Secretary and a local committee. These individuals usually had a close affiliation to the church and were responsible for the home's management and decisions about children's admission and discharge. Committee members also determined the care children received: case records show their keen interest in children's individual wellbeing while in the homes and often, beyond. Children's care networks involved a range of WSS staff, in addition to relatives and friends.

That many institutional inmates were not orphans has been well documented and children entering WSS care were no exception.¹⁴ Inmates usually remained in care until they were fifteen or sixteen, when they entered employment in Britain, found for them by matrons and masters. Each year the Society also sent hundreds of children to Canada, to 'start a new life' overseas. Their training, as with other institutions such as Barnardo's, prepared children for a narrow range of occupations: girls were trained for domestic service, while boys entered trades such as bookbinding, printing, tailoring, or agricultural work.¹⁵ How staff found them employment was not routinely documented, but the sparse available evidence indicates the importance of local community ties, and records their responses to employment adverts in magazines such as *The Church Times*.¹⁶ Little evidence survives of enquiries into employers' reputation before placement. Any employment was considered preferable to returning children to their families, where the Society imagined that their efforts might be undermined. Many children, however, did return to family.

The denominational identity of the Society influenced institutional practices and the ethics of care displayed by staff. Daily life centred on ideals of homeliness and affective, nurturing family care.¹⁷ Like many other institutions, the Society favoured smaller homes over barrack-style workhouse environments, to allow for individuality and for personal and emotional connection with co-residents.¹⁸ Education, housework and religious instruction were intended to instil discipline, routine and industriousness in the inmates. Meanwhile, other activities, including play and leisure, allowed them some independence, freedom and sociability. Staff handbooks stressed the importance of creating the affective relationships that characterized natural family life, with staff urged to assume roles as 'mothers' and 'fathers' and to display 'kindness and individual sympathy' to children.¹⁹ These ideas of personal connection with children extended into WSS discharge and aftercare practices. A 1904 article entitled 'After-care', published in the Society's monthly magazine for supporters, outlined its vision of its longer-term role in children's lives. The article asked, 'What is, and what should be, our relationship towards these grown-up boys and girls of ours?' By way of answer, and emphasizing their superior practices to other institutions, the article stated that while the 'training, love, and a good send-off', might have been viewed as sufficient by other welfare agencies, the 'ideal home and friend of youth' that was central to WSS care must not be 'cast off like the skin of a snake'. Instead, the article proclaimed, the duty of WSS

staff was to create 'true friendship' with inmates, that was 'deep and lasting' in nature.²⁰ Their vision of aftercare centred on notions of 'friendship' and 'kindness' that might offer the support needed to enhance young people's wellbeing beyond the institution. This aim was in stark contrast to some other agencies, particularly Poor Law institutions such as workhouses, or district and industrial schools, that believed their only duty was to provide a character reference or a new outfit when inmates left.²¹ WSS aftercare ideology also derived from other factors. First, the Society was driven by a humanitarian concern to befriend the young and ultimately to improve their lives, and it invested considerable time, effort and expense to do so. It is likely that many staff members took a genuine interest in inmates, both current and former. Second, it was advantageous to demonstrate their care about leavers' longer-term welfare and through that to exhibit their success and the practical extension of the scope and reach in their child rescue work.²² This, in turn, helped to increase support and extend their work. Finally, not all young people had a network of support when they left care, especially those without relatives, or migrant children. The Society therefore committed to 'support children for as long as they needed', providing friendship to care-leavers when needed.²³

That friendship was at the heart of WSS aftercare, however, was not unique. The Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants (MABYS), founded in 1875 by Mrs Nassau Senior, sought to offer a 'friendly face' to young women who entered domestic service, providing support to find work and accommodation between positions until they reached the age of twenty.²⁴ During the nineteenth century middle-class reformers envisioned friendship as a way of bridging class difference through friendly visiting: many welfare agencies were motivated by ideologies of 'befriending' and assisting the poor, whether or not these policies were translated effectively into practice.²⁵ Meanwhile, the term 'friendship' across different centuries often referred to an individual's support network: communities of family, kin and other individuals who might offer benevolence, solidarity, or intimacy in a variety of forms. Friendship – particularly cross-class friendship – was especially important for the working classes and paupers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Imbalances of power, status and hierarchy marked these relationships and as Keith Snell notes, 'friends' were often those in a stronger position than the petitioner, and able to offer a path to assistance.²⁶ Other historians have pointed to the interconnection between friendship, kinship and patronage, which remains an area requiring further study.²⁷ The overlapping structures of friendship, kinship and family could be blurred too: friends could be equivalent to kin and family, while also denoting non-related relationships, even guardians and employers.²⁸ Friendship for the WSS was multidimensional. The amicable relationship between youth and staff was predicated on paternalism, patronage, obligation and duty, which might foster welfare recipients' sense of belonging and alliance to the organization. Friendship was also conceived

religiously as Christian love for one's neighbour. WSS membership and affiliation opened up new possibilities to foster friendship with a broader community of 'brothers' and 'sisters' in the Church of England community. This notion of friendship and belonging to a wider Christian family was reflected in the Society's monthly publication for children, entitled *Brothers and Sisters*. Here, Christian friendship was underpinned and defined by ideals and acts of self-sacrifice, selfless love, material provision, spiritual guidance and mentorship to those in need. Religious conviction therefore, shaped the construction of cross-class friendship, at a time when such friendships held growing social and cultural significance.²⁹

Welfare officials had long discussed the effective provision of aftercare: the term began to be used in relation to the care of inmates leaving institutions during the second half of the nineteenth century. An 1864 report on reformatory and industrial schools praised one school for the small number of children that it 'lost sight of', because of staff members' careful monitoring of children, and attempts to 'maintain their interest in the boys after they have gone out into the world'.³⁰ Although not at first termed 'after-care', subsequent government documents such as the Poor Law Amendment Acts of 1876 and 1879, classified such practices and the provision of support to children as 'after-care'. The Poor Law statute enacted that any child discharged into employment from the union or workhouse under the age of sixteen should be frequently visited to report on their condition, treatment and conduct in employment. However, this supervision ceased upon children turning sixteen, and only applied while leavers remained in their first situation. Meanwhile, other vulnerable groups were identified as benefiting from aftercare: the Mental After Care Association, established in 1879, provided help which included clothing, advice, money and employment support, and offered an alternative to the workhouse and the opportunity to reintegrate into the community.³¹ Recognizing the limitations of their work to support young care-leavers, the government identified the need for voluntary agency support in 'supplementing the provision afforded by the law' because 'many dangers and temptations assail young people' and 'especially girls'.³²

By 1882, a number of organizations had established aftercare systems to monitor youthful welfare. Visitation was one method employed, but for most organizations, correspondence featured as the primary system of monitoring welfare. Captain Brookes of the Feltham Industrial School reported that staff took 'great trouble' 'in keeping up a communication with the boys after they leave us'. Staff there also rewarded youths who kept in contact: 'we encourage them to report themselves to the school by giving them some little gratuity if they produce a good character for conduct or industry'.³³ A later report in 1896 acknowledged the successful aftercare work of MABYS among vulnerable young domestic servants. In 1895, MABYS provided care and supervision to 8,624 young women, and many more who despite having reached twenty still required assistance.³⁴ By the 1880s, children's 'after-

lives' – that is, their life trajectories after discharge – were a common concern in government reports on children's care, where ideas of success were negotiated and contested. Institutional officials stressed that although some young people were 'lost sight of' despite efforts to trace them, this did not necessarily indicate that they were not successful. While inevitably some would have fallen in with bad company or displayed undesirable behaviours, others might sever contact to distance themselves from the taint of pauperism and institutional life. Staff argued that once in service young people might cut themselves off in order to keep their institutional background secret from other staff and employers and potentially improve their status.³⁵ Doing so allowed some to gain higher-paid work. Moreover, length of time in the same position did not necessarily equate to a successful 'after-life': the young frequently moved positions in the labour market to negotiate higher salaries or to climb through domestic service ranks.

What then did the WSS see as success in the care-leavers' after-lives and how did it monitor longer-term wellbeing? WSS expectations reflected wider ideological contexts and beliefs about poor children's character and the role of child rescue agencies. The WSS magazine, *Our Waifs and Strays* and correspondence in the archive suggests that staff hoped that youths would 'prove a credit' to the Society.³⁶ The notion of reform was important to ideas of 'proving a credit' and the public representation of its work. Beliefs that pauper children were prone to deviance and degeneration were reflected in contemporary concerns about the management and reform of juvenile delinquents.³⁷ Fears about the degeneration of the population's mental and physical health, particularly focused on children as the future of the nation, resulted in new developments such as holiday camps and open-air schools, which might physically strengthen children. Meanwhile, 'mentally defective' children were subjected to other programmes of reform that might enable their reintegration into society. WSS literature made a contrast between children who entered the institution 'savage', undomesticated, unruly, malnourished and neglected, and their transformation into honest, hard-working, spiritual, grateful and humble youth.³⁸ The most important marker of young people's success was their ability to sustain employment, and become productive, independent citizens.³⁹ Moral reform was vital too and success was measured through behaviours and actions which included honesty, valuing home and family life, regular attendance at church, and helping the less fortunate in the smallest of ways. Exemplary care-leavers also demonstrated gratitude: a desire to keep in touch with the institution, willingness to share good news and progress with staff, and eagerness to give something back to the Society through donations or through gifts in kind.⁴⁰ Fundraising campaigns encouraged former inmates to keep in touch and offered them the opportunity to 'repay' the Society for the kindness it had shown to them.⁴¹ When young people were deemed by employers or by WSS staff to be 'unsatisfactory' as was the case with John B., these judgements were based on a variety of factors, many of them subjective. Reasons cited

for apparent lack of success included disobedience, laziness, lack of skills and experience, theft, lying, lack of respect or deference to employers, and unspecified 'troublesome' behaviour.⁴² In many cases, it is likely that the expectations (of both employers and the institution) about young workers' behaviour, skills and experience were excessive or unrealistic. Some letters reveal that youths were labelled as 'unsatisfactory' and returned to the institution when employers no longer had a use for them.⁴³

Since limited resources made regular inspections for every care-leaver impossible, the Society promoted letter writing as a way to keep in touch and offer support to care-leavers. This was in line with other institutions' practices, where annual visits might be made, but correspondence was regularly exchanged for years after discharge.⁴⁴ Mechanisms such as WSS Old Boys and Old Girls Leagues encouraged contact.⁴⁵ Members received a welcome letter from 'Uncle Edward', the Society's founder, which urged them to keep writing to him and to share news of progress. The use of the familial term 'Uncle' to refer to the founder Edward Rudolf was increasingly common in children's periodicals and newspaper columns in the late nineteenth century. Editors would assume a stylized identity as a family member, usually 'Uncle' or 'Daddy', to increase appeal and foster a sense of affection and intimacy among readers.⁴⁶ As in children's periodicals, the term 'Uncle' was used in the letters sent to former inmates upon enrolment in the Old Boys' and Girls' Leagues, casting the Society's director as a surrogate or substitute family member. This was deemed by staff to be important for care-leavers by helping to reinforce belonging, identity, and closeness with staff, many of whom had been the principal figures in children's lives for several years. In the Society's magazine for child readers, *Brothers and Sisters*, the founder was referred to as 'Uncle' to promote a sense of closeness and familial affection among its readers, some of whom would probably be inmates, both past and present, of the Society's Homes.⁴⁷ Research has also suggested the importance of the 'uncle' in the nineteenth century: often portrayed as an authority figure with economic value, a kind, paternal figure at the threshold of family life, or outside the nuclear family but still possessing important affective kinship value.⁴⁸

The WSS monthly magazine stressed care-leavers' positive responses to aftercare mechanisms that promoted letter writing. The desire for contact was apparently vast: postbags full of letters were delivered to the Society, and snippets of correspondence appeared in almost every issue of the magazine.⁴⁹ Of course, letters sent from former inmates might be highly edited before publication or indeed might be entirely fictional products, although it is difficult to ascertain whether this was practised and if so to what degree. If contact was indeed as popular as the Society claimed, letters were likely to contain only what youths wished to share with staff. News of poor progress, scrapes with the law, or difficulties encountered in the wider world rarely appeared in published form. Any that did, exceptionally, were used by the Society to promote a lesson or impart advice.⁵⁰ More typical were positive

reports, especially those from migrants. In a published letter to Uncle Rudolf, Sidney Barnes, who migrated to Canada in 1894, wrote 'I like my home very much, for my dear master and mistress are very kind to me.' Another letter, from Rose B. and 'M. C.', gave a fuller account of their progress:

Rose and I are liking farming quite well. Rosie feeds the turkeys and hens and always gathers the eggs, and I go to milk the cows in the morning and evening. I like it very much and I think it is great fun learning to milk. I do a little housework; it is not a hard place. . . I think we are lucky to get such a nice place. . .⁵¹

Although these letters supposedly told of progress in the wider world, their value lay in their publication, which promoted and celebrated the Society's success in churning out well-adjusted, grateful, and productive citizens. Migrants' letters also served to justify WSS emigration policies, while allaying public concerns and criticisms associated with the schemes. Showcasing these case studies moreover helped the Society to compete in a fierce fundraising market, enabling the growth of support.⁵² The publication of the letters may well have promoted a spirit of competition to demonstrate success and receive validation as exemplary Old Boys or Girls. Rewards were also on offer: letters of praise from 'Uncle Edward' and copies of his portrait were sent to young people who remained in employment for over a year. This incentive sought to show interest in and celebrate youth success, and to encourage feelings of pride and self-worth. Didactic and authoritative too, it inspired former inmates to strive for 'success'. Sending out the portrait may also have aimed to provoke other sentiments: prompting them to appreciate their present circumstances, to feel gratitude for the care they received, nostalgia or fondness about the institution, or the obligation to keep in touch. Nevertheless, records point to the many personal letters sent by youths to staff members. Although many of these letters do not survive in the archive, some are referenced in other material, and one-sided exchanges of these relationships can be uncovered and charted in records.

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While published letters spoke of youths' progress, gratitude and wellbeing, how did these accounts measure up to their actual experiences? Despite the Society's intentions to demonstrate paternal interest in care-leavers, enacting policies that sought to provide friendship and support to thousands of care-leavers was difficult to achieve. Where children ended up after leaving the institution depended on a number of factors, including their skills, attitudes and behaviour, their relationships with staff members, and personalities. Proving successful in employment could be difficult, especially for girls. Leaving care and entering service, as Lucy Delap asserts, could feel like

an 'abrupt ejection' and without the support of either relatives or staff, some women were vulnerably placed in the labour market.⁵³ However closely WSS training sought to mimic middle-class and elite households, it probably did little to prepare girls for the labour demanded of them, or indeed, the domestic politics they might encounter in these homes. Many girls returned to the Society having failed to please their mistresses. Employers' letters not only declared that their tasks were performed inadequately, slowly, or without care, they also alluded to 'unacceptable' behaviours, including disrespect, bad language, keeping bad company, staying out late, and stealing. Other letters complained about girls or dismissed them simply for the way they looked or behaved: stout, thickset girls and those who were slow-moving were deemed undesirable.⁵⁴ Sometimes an employer returned a girl for being unsatisfactory but requested another from the institution, which suggests that the quality of WSS training was not necessarily the issue.

Jane S. returned for two months in 1892 after her trial did not work out, although no record survives to state why.⁵⁵ While she lodged at her former institutional home, staff helped her to find and secure work, and probably provided her with another character reference. Young people seldom stayed in the homes for longer periods of time, although when skills or ability were deficient they might receive additional training, or staff would find them positions that required a lower skill level or allowed sufficient time for the development of skills and experience.⁵⁶ Lily A. was readmitted to the institution over twenty times because of her 'unsteadiness', 'lack of personal cleanliness', and once, her position of 'considerable danger' at the hands of a 'bad master',⁵⁷ but others were more commonly readmitted only a handful of times.⁵⁸ But for some who displayed 'undesirable' behaviours, the Society offered little additional support. After three years of service, Louisa L.'s employer Mary Baskerville of Harlesden wrote in June 1895 to inform the Society she could 'no longer bear' to have Louisa in her home because of her 'intolerable behaviour' over the last two days. Baskerville complained that she could not 'keep such a girl in our peaceful little home when she is so ungrateful', and that Louisa 'does not understand kindness, and indeed seems to get much worse afterwards'.⁵⁹ The Society accepted Baskerville's complaint at face value: seemingly they made no enquiries with Louisa about her experience, and she was discharged to her relatives. Such a response suggests perhaps that the Society placed little value on young people's accounts of their experiences. It is possible too that how individuals were treated by the institution rested on the personalities of the staff dealing with such complaints, or the nature and quality of the relationship between the young care-leaver and the WSS staff member. Louisa did not receive help to obtain other work, and she did not stay in contact with the Society. Much would have depended on the nature of the situation and the personalities of staff members and youths. It is possible that decisions to readmit young care-leavers depended on the Society's

assessment as to whether their skills or conduct were 'reformable', with some prospect of being able to earn an independent living. Additionally, the ability and willingness of staff and inmates alike to build affective bonds, and to express reciprocal behaviours that could be defined as articulations of friendship, kindness or sympathy, could determine the extent of support. But some certainly, like Louisa, were discharged when staff felt they had exhausted their options. Although studies of institutional experience have been slow to consider expressions of individuality, kindness and affective care, recent scholarship points to the importance of individuality in the implementation of institutional policies and practices beyond the control, discipline and management of inmates.⁶⁰

Boys' apprenticeships could be equally precarious and exploitative, resulting in their need for ongoing support. The quality of training varied considerably, and some employers took advantage of contracts that provided them with cheap labour and the generous premiums paid to supply training. For some, the benefits of completing an apprenticeship could be questionable. Frederick M. started an apprenticeship with local blacksmith William Holyoake in 1895, at the age of fifteen. He received one shilling per week, in addition to food, lodging, and clothing.⁶¹ In 1901, Rudolf wrote to Holyoake to ask about Frederick's progress and ability to earn an independent living as he approached the age of twenty-one. Holyoake's report was glowing: Frederick was 'steady and industrious' and 'quite capable of earning his livelihood as a blacksmith'. Moreover, he would 'recommend Frederick to any master', but he was 'keen to keep him for at least another twelve months'.⁶² A starkly different picture emerged however upon further routine investigation undertaken directly by one of the Society's staff members. Frederick had 'not yet been taught to make a horse-shoe' and Holyoake was 'not carrying out his part of the agreement'.⁶³ Other concerns were raised too: Holyoake was 'given to drinking bouts, leaving the lad in the shop to do the work the best way he can'. That this issue was raised so late in Frederick's apprenticeship is surprising and suggests that inspection had been infrequent or non-existent, or that the true quality of his apprenticeship had not been identified. The master of the WSS home in Leicester that Frederick was discharged from was probably responsible for overseeing his training and care while apprenticed in Lancaster. The duties of managing the day-to-day operations of the Leicester home, as well as the distance between Lancaster and Leicester, may well have prevented masters and matrons from regularly carrying out inspections. Having paid a premium for the training and keep of apprentices like Frederick, it is also possible that the Society's staff were too trusting of employers and relied uncritically on their reports as to the discharge of their duties and the progress of apprentices. Nothing further is recorded in Frederick's record, but he was probably removed and found another apprenticeship or job as happened with boys facing similar issues.⁶⁴

WSS matrons, masters and committee members usually carried out inspections. Staff knowledge of former inmates and their familiarity with the care-leavers might mean that youths were readier to disclose difficulties, or that poor treatment was recognized more easily. Inspections were informal: no standardized report forms were completed so the scattered letters that staff wrote to the Head Office communicating their findings provide the only clues about the struggles care-leavers encountered and any attempts to address them. However, staff were unlikely to travel great distances regularly to make visits. The ad-hoc nature of inspections suggests that resources for setting up an official inspection system were limited in the Society's early years. Although WSS practices in their Homes were similar to those of other institutions at the time, evidence from Parliamentary reports indicates that aftercare provision was entirely voluntary: a valuable but not essential element of children's care.⁶⁵ But the appointment of a 'lady visitor' by 1915 – Miss E. M. Taylor of Catford – whose primary role was to inspect and provide support to girls, indicates a shift in WSS attitudes towards aftercare. These changing perceptions were reflected across childcare and social welfare provision more broadly. Welfare reformers such as Louisa Twining and Jane Nassau Senior had been recommending the appointment of qualified lady visitors to protect care-leavers since the 1870s.⁶⁶ The 'lady visitor' was not an uncommon figure in the history of welfare provision and was often responsible for monitoring the behaviour and character of welfare recipients after discharge.⁶⁷ Her appointment may have marked the Society's allocation of greater resources towards a formal inspection system that reflected shifting ideas about children's rights and welfare during the early twentieth century.⁶⁸ While the appointment of a dedicated inspector signalled their developing aftercare practices, inspections only extended to a small proportion of young care-leavers – female domestic servants, assumed by the Society to be at greatest risk of moral danger, exploitation, and abuse. The practices of other organizations, such as MABYS, reflect similar concerns about the welfare of domestic servants.⁶⁹

Ivy L. received frequent inspections from Miss Taylor after leaving care in 1919. It is unlikely that they would have had much contact while Ivy lived in the institution, but this lack of familiarity did not appear to matter: letters written between 1919 and 1924 demonstrate that they had established a friendship, and endeavoured to keep in touch for some time. Upon leaving her job in 1923, Ivy wrote to Taylor to thank her for her 'goodness and trouble in coming to see me' and her hope that she would continue to visit her in her new job.⁷⁰ In a subsequent letter Ivy told Taylor that in her new job she was unable to receive visitors, but added 'although I will not be able to see you, I can write from time to time, and when I leave here. . . then, of course, I shall love you to come as often as possible'.⁷¹ While Ivy's letters were formal and respectful in tone and language, they also indicate familiarity between Ivy and the inspector, her gratitude for Taylor's attention, and her desire to remain in contact in spite of obstacles. That many other

care-leavers soon severed contact with staff with seemingly little concern makes Ivy's commitment to maintain contact and keep Taylor 'on side' all the more important, and suggests that she was aware of the benefits of having an advocate in what might have felt like a continually changing and unstable world. But conversely, Ivy's supposed inability to see Miss Taylor in her new job could have been an attempt to disentangle herself from the institution.

Other young people benefited from the direct interest and care that other staff took about their wellbeing and their futures. Miss Carver, Secretary at the Society's Emmeline Winstanley Home, wrote to Rudolf in 1917 to discuss the future of Cecil L., who was due to be discharged from the home. Her letters suggest a keen interest in Cecil: she knew of his fondness and his aptitude for drawing, and recognizing his skill she hoped he might become draftsman to an architect or engineer. With no family to support him while he trained, through Carver Cecil secured work as a clerk in the WSS Head Office while he attended evening classes.⁷² Eight months later, Carver wrote to Rudolf that she had found a 'most excellent opening' for Cecil in a 'well-known' engineer's office in Manchester and a place for him to live with 'a most superior man'. Arrived at his new position, Cecil's letter to his former master, Mr Fowl, suggested that he was enjoying his work:

Just a few lines to say that I have arrived safe and settled comfortably in my new home. I go on the train to work every morning and back every night on the tram. . . I feel absolutely sure that I shall get on well because it is work that I like and very interesting. . . I will let you know how I am getting on in a few weeks. . .⁷³

Despite Cecil's assurance to do well, a letter from Carver sent two years later suggested otherwise: Cecil had 'got in with an undesirable friend with whom he spent his evenings instead of attending classes'. Perhaps concerned that Cecil would continue to waste this opportunity, Carver arranged for his readmission to the Society's Standon Farm Home, where the master was experienced with 'dealing with troublesome boys'. A month later Cecil joined the army and three further reports describe his 'satisfactory' conduct in service.⁷⁴

While many youths distanced themselves from the Society, others stayed in touch with staff members, not necessarily because they needed support, but because they seemed to have a genuine desire to maintain friendship. Daisy W.'s letter echoes the sentiments expressed in published letters like those from 'Sidney' and 'Rose', and shows that the kindness that the Society endeavoured to display was appreciated by some. Daisy wrote as she left service to take up another job, and expressed excitement about visiting her former matron, Miss Fenton, in the coming weeks, as they had

not met for nearly two years. Daisy's letter also communicated her gratitude:

I shall never forget all her kindness to me and I am sure I feel very grateful towards everybody that has done anything for me in my young days, and if I ever do get on in life and can help the Society at all I will.⁷⁵

She confirmed her commitment by telling Rudolf that she was already a member of the Society's fundraising guild the Children's Union, and had knitted stockings for their current inmates. Although no further correspondence from Daisy herself survives in the file, other letters confirm that she kept in touch with various staff members for many years, sharing news and progress with them, such as her marriage.

* * *

Young migrants were at great risk of experiencing ill treatment and poor conditions in their new environments, because of their distance, physically and emotionally, from friends and family. While emigration schemes have become a focus of recent major inquiries, where narratives of abuse and exploitation dominate, from the late nineteenth century for many decades such schemes were common and important humanitarian 'rescue' projects for charities seeking to remove children from danger and poverty and provide them with a new chance at life overseas.⁷⁶ As historians have demonstrated, increasing regulation of emigration practices meant that institutions were required to obtain and document consent for emigration, to demonstrate the physical and mental fitness of young migrants, and to carry out at least one inspection in the first year after migration, thus fulfilling the legal requirement set for instance by the Canadian government.⁷⁷ Beyond this first year, however, there was a marked absence of stipulations about institutional accountability for these individuals, the need for inspection, or indeed longer-term support. As such, further inspections could be infrequent and contingent on both WSS resources and youths' co-operation.

Hilda W.'s experience as a young migrant in Canada demonstrates the potential for vulnerability and abuse and how the Society responded. In 1914, Hilda ran away from service to a friend in the local community, Mrs Clark, who gave her shelter and telephoned the Society's local home in Niagara.⁷⁸ The Society immediately sent a staff member based in Canada and known to Hilda, Mr Mackham, to investigate the matter and support her. Mackham reported to the Head Office:

... apparently Hilda's offence had been stealing some jam and for this she had been severely beaten. No complaint of any kind has ever been received about Hilda and I am most deeply indignant about the matter.⁷⁹

Mackham's rejection of the accusations against Hilda demonstrates his familiarity with her previous conduct, and his knowledge of her character. His statement further suggests that he trusted Hilda's account over her employers' and was offended by the accusations against her. Mackham arranged for her to be cared for at the Society's Canadian home where she could recover from her injuries and nervous shock. After some weeks of care, she entered another position found for her by staff.⁸⁰

Unlike inspections carried out in Britain, standardized reports were produced, to document the Society's fulfilment of Canada's inspection requirements. While inspections might have allowed young people to raise issues, the reports demonstrate that their main aim was to measure employment performance and they focused disproportionately on the employers' highly subjective accounts of 'progress' in work. Employers were quick to highlight the weaknesses of young workers. Accounts by the young of their experiences were secondary: little status or value seems to have been attached to their brief remarks, which ranged from positive to ambivalent in tone. The absence of negative comment suggests that children were unlikely to have had proper opportunities to complain.⁸¹ Mary S., aged seventeen, was inspected in 1909 and noted by her employers to appear 'quite contented and happy', though they complained that she was 'very forgetful'. Mary offered a brief statement on her three years with her employers: 'I am getting on alright and I like my place pretty well'.⁸² The brevity of her statement alongside her ambivalent language suggests a reluctance to convey her true feelings about her placement. Her forgetfulness may also point to her indifference about her work, or her preoccupation with settling into her new life in Canada.

Inspections usually took place at the site of employment, so with employers nearby the young workers were unlikely to complain about any perceived ill treatment. This was probably still more true for migrants, with few friends in their new country and dependent entirely on their employers. Whether employers were present during inspections remains unknown. Children may also have been reluctant to complain for fear of retaliation, such as the denial of privileges or even punishment. Not knowing the inspectors, and lack of confidence that they would be believed, may also have prevented them from presenting their true feelings. Research on domestic service experiences in England has highlighted the dislike and ambiguity that many young women felt towards their employers, as well as the boredom, loneliness, exploitation and abuse that were common features of a life in service.⁸³ It is probable that many of the children who entered service from WSS care felt the same, but would have articulated dissatisfaction only among close friends and family.

A small minority of young people did however express unhappiness and staff members endeavoured to resolve these feelings where they could. Mr Manning paid a surprise visit to Ethel A., aged fifteen, and reported that she

was 'doing very well' a year after arriving in Canada. Ethel's report stated 'I like this place very much and I am getting on well. We have such a lovely baby boy and I help to take care of him'.⁸⁴ Eighteen months later, Manning paid Ethel another surprise visit when her employer was away. Ethel's report was quite different, perhaps a result of her employer's absence. Manning observed that Ethel appeared 'fairly bright and very capable, but not contented'. Ethel's dissatisfaction stemmed from her perceived lack of freedom and control: 'I would like to have my wages to spend and choose my own clothes. Everybody tells me that I have quite good taste and that I should have higher pay'. Noting her wish, Manning called again to negotiate her release from her employer so that he could transfer her elsewhere. The employer agreed, but seemingly put out by her dissatisfaction, provided an uncomplimentary parting remark, stating she 'can be a very useful girl if she chooses, but does not always choose to'.

While migrants' aftercare often fell short over welfare, records demonstrate that the Society offered generous support to children with disabilities and ill health, following discharge. As scholars have noted, contemporary understandings about disability became increasingly nuanced in the twentieth century and growing efforts to address the needs of these groups resulted in more complex and sophisticated institutional responses.⁸⁵ The Society played a part in this. Many children in their care suffered from illness associated with poverty, while others had disabilities that limited their movement and ability to work. Considerable expense was allocated to corrective and remedial operations, provision of bespoke equipment and prosthetics, and convalescent treatments, which supports conclusions that disabled children fared remarkably well in a discretionary welfare system.⁸⁶ The help provided to disabled children, long after their discharge, shows that this group continued to be well cared for. Many sick and disabled children in WSS care followed the same paths as other care-leavers, notably domestic service or trades such as machine knitting. However, the strenuous labour that many jobs required meant that youthful health often deteriorated after discharge and some reapproached the Society for further assistance. The Society usually responded positively to these requests. Sarah C., who was discharged to work as a nurse in Lancashire in 1908, suffered from poor health related to her tuberculosis after sixteen months in work. She had no relatives to turn to, so the Society received her back into their care to recover. Sarah spent six months at the Society's St Nicholas' Orthopaedic Hospital and Special School near Woking, but never recovered, dying in June 1910.⁸⁷ Age was not considered a discriminatory factor for those with ill health, contrary to the aftercare provision for the fit and well, who might be turned away if they appealed for further support in their twenties or thirties. Although Charles H. was twenty-two and earning his own living, the Society agreed to pay for his new surgical boot, which he could not afford on his wage.⁸⁸ Louisa

P., at twenty-one, was still 'very delicate and often unable to work'. Louisa's matron implored Rudolf to continue to assist the girl, stating 'I think it is a case we truly should not withdraw help from'. The plea for support was assessed by the Society's Crippled Case Committee, who agreed that Louisa should be sent to a specialist care home, with the Society providing the eleven shillings per week necessary for her care for twelve months. A year later, her condition was unchanged, and The Society continued to pay for her care for a further seven years, until her death in 1918.⁸⁹ Several other young people whose health fluctuated were offered work in the Society's homes as teachers and nurses, and provided with often-lifelong accommodation.

* * *

This article has argued that, contrary to previous assumptions, children's welfare institutions like the Waifs and Strays Society did take an interest in where their inmates ended up. By focusing on discharge, the essay has shown how porous the institution could be. Because of attempts to provide after-care to young people who needed support, discharge could be a protracted and fluid process. That discharge was not as sudden or final as historians have previously asserted, however, is not to deny that for inmates it might have seemed rushed, or unexpected, or indeed have caused great anxiety. Case files point to the difficulties experienced in adjusting to life outside the institution: the challenge would have required much resilience. But leaving care did not always mean that the door was shut for care-leavers who required further support, nor were they sent out into the world 'alone'.

The essay also argues the importance of kindness and friendship in the provision of support both within and beyond the institution, and thus offers new understanding of a different kind of care provision with particular ideological meaning. In addition to the reformatory aims common to many children's institutions, friendship and genuine concern about youths' welfare and wellbeing was at the heart of WSS childcare policies. As this article has begun to show, in many of their homes and for some youths, these policies could be effectively translated into practice. Examination of how the Society endeavoured to provide practical and emotional support indicates that many staff members invested time and effort in, and continued to care about young care-leavers in the longer-term. Correspondence between young people and staff members also suggests that inspections and other ways of keeping in touch did not function solely as evaluations of progress – although useful in demonstrating the Society's impact, the letters reveal that emotional ties, attachment, and friendship existed between youths and staff. The letters, although professionally mediated, show that the relationships forged in the institution often continued to be strengthened beyond this setting. And where such familiarity and friendship did exist, as in Cecil's and Ivy's cases, so too did staff

members' attempts to arrange special considerations or privileges for the young. Meanwhile, analysis of aftercare practices and correspondence has also demonstrated the agency of some inmates. In particular, like the relatives who had negotiated children's original admission to the Society's homes so that they might survive, care-leavers show courage and tenacity in their letters, as well as a sense of entitlement in asking for additional support from the Society when faced with challenges. These letters often draw on notions of friendship, kindness and gratitude and use their identity as former inmates – Old Boys and Girls – to frame appeals for further help.

However, as this essay also argues, the provision and quality of aftercare was limited and not all those who needed further support received it. Although the Society endeavoured to provide specialist care for those with disabilities or health issues, assessment of such conditions was highly subjective, and some young people were prematurely discharged, with little support to navigate the wider world. Other appeals were rejected because of assumptions made by staff about character or conduct, or whether further assistance was deserved. Many inmates who left care maintained their distance with the institution, and sometimes staff members' attempts to get in touch met only with silence. Other young care-leavers may have turned to alternative individuals or agencies for support rather than reapproaching the Society. Even where former inmates received favourable responses to their requests, the assistance provided might be elementary in quality, scope and effectiveness, particularly by today's standards. Letter writing, in particular, relied on young people volunteering information to staff, which was an inadequate system of evaluating their welfare. Taken alone, these informal practices of keeping in touch seem basic when compared to present-day and still developing systems of tracking, monitoring, and aftercare support to care-leavers. Nevertheless, such methods formed an integral part of what the Society understood to be 'aftercare': practices that demonstrated their care for youths after they had left the institution, and attempts to provide friendship, advice and support through visits and correspondence, which for some, must have been important sources of personal identity and a sense of belonging.

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- 78 Case file 14987, letter from Our Western Home to Rudolf, 20 Dec. 1914. The correspondent is not named.
- 79 Case file 14987, letter from Mackham to Rudolf, December 1914.
- 80 Case file 14987, case note, 19 Feb. 1915.
- 81 Frost, *Victorian Childhoods*, p. 148.
- 82 Case file 11029, Lady Visitor's report, 18 June 1909.
- 83 Delap, *Knowing their Place*, pp. 44–6, 239–40; Françoise Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria*, London, 1989, pp. 58, 94–7.
- 84 Case file 7584, report from Manning to Rudolf, 29 Jan. 1906 and 30 Aug. 1907.
- 85 See David Wright, *Mental Disability in Victorian England: the Earlswood Asylum 1847–1901*, Oxford, 2001; Rebecca Wynter, 'Picture of Peter Pan: Institutions, Local Definitions of "Mental Deficiency", and the Filtering of Children in Early Twentieth-Century England', *Family and Community History* 18: 2, 2015, pp. 122–38.

- 86 Case files 11363 and 9133; Steven King, 'Constructing the Disabled Child in England, 1800–1860', *Family and Community History* 18: 2, 2015, p. 118.
- 87 Case file 11007, case notes 1903–10.
- 88 Case file 5818, letter from foster mother to Rudolf, 19 March 1908.
- 89 Case file 5597, see case notes, November 1896–October 1918.