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ARTICLE

Age, Gender, and Agency in Juvenile Migration from England to Canada, 1850–1900

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Abstract

This article makes two important contributions. Firstly, it provides valuable insights into the motivations of working-class migrants in the second half of the nineteenth century, adding a new dimension to a scholarship focused on studies of forced migration or middle-class empire building. Its analysis of a rich body of published and unpublished letters from former institutionalized children reveals the primacy of financial gain in the migration decision and shows that working-class Britons saw the world beyond the British Isles as a space of opportunity, where they could leverage their mobility in pursuit of profit. Secondly, by arguing that juvenile emigrants need to be viewed as a heterogeneous body where age and gender made a difference in terms of experience, the article provides an important new perspective on institutional migration that has implications for wider literatures on childhood and youth. The average age of the boys studied for this article was sixteen and the research shows that they were active participants in the emigration process, shaping their own futures through their diverse decisions. Recognizing this significantly undermines the modern discourses of blame and victimhood that dominate the historiography and encourages us to re-evaluate our approach to nineteenth-century juvenile migration.

In 1857, twelve-year-old Robert Herod stole a gun and a chicken from a neighbour. At the time of the theft, Robert was working as a bobbin winder in Nottingham. It was his third criminal conviction. On pleading guilty, he was sentenced to four years in a residential reformatory school in Surrey. When his sentence was up in 1861, Robert, now aged sixteen, left England for a new life in Canada. Fifty years later, he was a 'millionaire bridge contractor' in Portland, Oregon, reportedly 'well known throughout the Pacific Coast'.[1] Robert was an early example of what would, ten years later, become a key plank of British social policy – the emigration of pauper, neglected, and criminal children throughout the world. He also exemplified a central narrative of the nineteenth century – the successful transformation of a poor working-class individual through migration into a prosperous member of society.

This article explores the history of Robert and other boys like him who emigrated from England's leading reformatory school in the second half of the nineteenth

[1]Surrey History Centre (SHC), 2271/10/11, fo. 263; 'Son of Portland millionaire crook. Charged with highway robbery and father believes charge', *East Oregonian*, 26 Mar. 1912, p. 1, col. d.

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century. Juvenile emigrants were an important part of the approximately thirteen million Britons who left the British Isles between 1853 and 1913 and made a significant contribution to some of Britain's colonies.[2] According to campaigners, Canada was 'built on the back of child migrants' while officials estimate that as many as 10 per cent of the Canadian population is descended from a former 'Home Child'.[3] The public discourse, however, has emphasized the 'shame and isolation' many juvenile migrants reportedly felt. Campaigners have demanded an apology from the Canadian government and an annual commemorative day dedicated to British Home Children has been established.[4] These narratives of victimhood have profoundly influenced the historiography and as a result, despite their importance, juvenile migrants have been elided from discussions of settler-colonialism.[5] They have also, within British histories, largely been positioned as objects of welfare policy not as active participants in the emigration process.[6] The article focuses on a particular cohort of institutional male migrants with an average age of sixteen who emigrated between 1850 and 1900 to challenge this perspective. It begins by arguing that juvenile migrants were not a homogeneous body. Male experiences differed considerably from female experiences and age was crucially important. It then argues that these older juvenile migrants, whose stories have hitherto been absorbed into overall narratives of child migration, should instead be considered in conjunction with other adult migrants, the majority of whom were also male, and examined as part of the burgeoning scholarship that seeks to understand the migrant decision-making process.[7] Drawing on rich and detailed letters from emigrants back to their former institution, it reveals that these young men actively sought out emigration because of the financial gain they believed they could make. They competed for the opportunity to emigrate and importantly, relayed detailed information about wages and working conditions to those boys still in the institution to persuade them to follow them overseas. These findings not only reveal the transnationality of the Victorian employment market but also challenge traditional presentations of juvenile migrants as passive victims of state policy.

Migration wrought a profound change on Britain and on its empire in a process of mutual reconfiguration. The 'settler revolution' was instrumental in the emergence of a globally dominant British identity maintained by reciprocal networks of ideas, money, kinship, and culture.[8] Within Britain's former colonies, much of the

[2]Timothy J. Hatton, 'Emigration from the UK, 1870–1913 and 1950–1998', *European Review of Economic History*, 8 (2004), pp. 149–69.

[3]'Who are the British Home Children?', https://britishhomechild.com/history (8 May 2021); Marjory Harper, 'Rhetoric and reality: British migration to Canada, 1867–1967', in Philip Buckner, ed., *Canada and the British empire* (Oxford, 2010), p. 168.

[4]'Forgotten legacy of British children sent to Canada', Sky News, 5 Oct. 2023.

[5]Morgan Brie Johnson, 'Settler colonial structures of domestication: British Home Children in Canada', *Genealogy*, 5 (2021), p. 77.

[6]The exception being Siân Pooley and Jonathan Taylor, eds., *Children's experiences of welfare in modern Britain* (London, 2021).

[7]Marjory Harper and Stephen Constantine, 'A civilizing influence? The female migrant', in Marjory Harper and Stephen Constantine, eds., *Migration and empire* (Oxford, 2010).

[8]Kent Federowich and Andrew S. Thompson, eds., *Empire, migration, and identity in the British world* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 6–7; Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, eds., *At home with the empire: metropolitan culture and the imperial world* (Cambridge, 2006).

recent scholarship has understandably focused on Indigenous–settler relations and on the policies and practices that facilitated the dispossession, and partial elimination, of Indigenous peoples.[9] Yet, as Laura Ishiguro reminds us, there are two parts to this story. The settler-colonial project was only possible because of the personal commitments of white British settlers to their new countries. It is they who enacted the colonization process. Therefore, understanding 'why Britons moved in this period' is crucially important to understanding how the imperial world was shaped.[10] In recent years, historians have examined the migrant decision in more depth. Studies such as Ishiguro's have revealed the opportunities that underpinned middle-class white emigration, while other historians have demonstrated the desperation or events that drove working-class diasporic groups from Wales, Scotland, and Ireland to leave Britain for a new life.[11] But there is still, as John Tosh points out, a 'dearth of information' about English working-class migration, which remains 'curiously detached from the social history of nineteenth-century England', despite its importance to the settlement and development of Canada.[12]

To some extent, this gap reflects an absence of sources. The classed nature of the archive has led, until recently, to a historiographical focus on middle-class settler experiences and motivations.[13] Few bodies of English working-class migrant letters exist within British archives and almost none in manuscript form.[14] Yet, institutional archives, which do contain such letters, provide a route in. The over 1,000 letters from predominantly working-class juvenile emigrants that form the basis of this study provide rich evidence for the ambitions of an important group of the working class – those at the beginning of their working life. These published letters have traditionally been dismissed as 'fictional accounts' 'carefully constructed' to give a positive view of institutional efforts.[15] Yet, by carefully linking together published and unpublished correspondence and supporting this with other evidence, it has been possible to authenticate correspondence from England's first and largest reformatory school – the Royal Philanthropic Farm School for boys, a key player in early juvenile migration schemes. These richly detailed letters provide an important window into the thoughts and motivations of these young migrants.

[9]Adele Perry, *On the edge of empire: gender, race, and the making of British Columbia, 1849–1871* (Toronto, 2001); Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler colonialism: a theoretical overview* (Basingstoke, 2010).

[10]Laura Ishiguro, *Nothing to write home about: British family correspondence and the settler colonial everyday in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 2019), p. 7.

[11]Marjory Harper, 'Exiles or entrepreneurs? Snapshots of the Scots in Canada', in Peter E. Rider and Heather McNabb, eds., *Kingdom of the mind: how the Scots helped make Canada* (Montreal, 2006); Bruce Elliott, David Gerber, and Suzanne Sinke, *Letters across borders: the epistolary practices of international migrants* (New York, NY, 2006); John Tosh, 'Jeremiah Goldswain's farewell: family and fortune in early nineteenth-century English emigration', *History Workshop Journal*, 77 (2014), pp. 26–44, at pp. 26–7.

[12]Tosh, 'Jeremiah Goldswain's farewell', p. 27; notable exceptions include: Charlotte Erickson, *Leaving England: essays on British emigration in the nineteenth century* (Ithaca, NY, 1994); Harper, 'Rhetoric and reality', p. 163.

[13]New research by Claudia Soares, *A home from home* (Oxford, 2023), has begun to address this gap.

[14]Wendy Cameron et al., *English immigrant voices: labourers' letters from Upper Canada in the 1830s* (Toronto, 2000), pp. xx, xxii.

[15]Claudia Soares, 'Neither waif nor stray: home, family and belonging in the Victorian children's institution, 1881–1914' (Ph.D. thesis, Manchester, 2015), p. 177; Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel, *Child, nation, race and empire* (Manchester, 2010), p. 161.

Reformatory and industrial schools were charitable and state-funded, yet privately owned and operated, residential institutions that formed an increasingly important part of child welfare policy and thus of working-class life in the second half of the nineteenth century.[16] By 1896, one in 230 children aged between five and fifteen was being brought up in an industrial or reformatory school – 80 per cent of whom were male.[17] The purpose of these institutions was to provide poor and delinquent children firstly, with a character-based education that would turn them into 'virtuous, honest, and industrious citizens' and secondly, with vocational training that would give them the 'best means' of independently supporting themselves.[18] 'Juvenile offenders' aged between ten and sixteen, were admitted for terms of between two and five years. While many boys entered an institution involuntarily, at the end of their term they were free to go where they wished. They could return to their families, join the army, move elsewhere within Britain, or they could emigrate.

Although most boys returned to their families within Britain, at the Royal Philanthropic 42 per cent chose to emigrate. This study reveals that they did so principally because of the comparative opportunity they believed emigration offered. The ambitions of these young male migrants matched those of the multitudes of middle-class settlers who saw imperial spaces as an opportunity to improve their standards of living.[19] Yet, as juvenile migrants, they have traditionally been viewed as passive 'survivors' of harmful public policy, equivalent to the transported criminal or indentured servant.[20] Public scandals relating to twentieth-century state-sponsored emigration schemes have overshadowed the scholarship and while more recent research has begun to acknowledge that many young people did actively consent to emigration, it is still often within a framework that foregrounds criticisms of the economic and social underpinnings of philanthropic action.[21]

These criticisms are well founded. The emigration of disadvantaged young people was an important part of first philanthropic and, later, state welfare policy that began with 1830s' schemes that aimed to provide the young poor with a 'fresh start' overseas.[22] Early descriptions of poor children as a 'social evil' who would become

[16]Harry Hendrick, *Child welfare* (London, 1984), p. 74.

[17]*Parliamentary Papers* (1896), Cm 8204 XLV.1, Dept Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools, vol. 1, pp. 8–9; John Watson, 'Reformatory and industrial schools', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 59 (1896), pp. 255–312, at p. 278.

[18]*Parliamentary Papers* (1852), 674-I, Report from the Select Committee on Criminal and Destitute Children, pp. iii, iv.

[19]Ishiguro, *Nothing to write home about*; Federowich and Thompson, eds., *Empire, migration, and identity*; Harper and Constantine, eds., *Migration and empire*, are just a few examples.

[20]Harper and Constantine, eds., *Migration and empire*, p. 251; Kent Federowich, 'The British empire on the move, 1760–1914', in Sarah Stockwell, ed., *The British empire: themes and perspectives* (Oxford, 2008), p. 87; Joy Parr, *Labouring children: British immigrant apprentices to Canada, 1869–1924* (London, 1980), p. 27; Swain and Hillel, *Child, nation, race, and empire*, p. 159.

[21]Rebecca Swartz, 'Children in between: child migrants from England to the Cape in the 1830s', *History Workshop Journal*, 91 (2021), pp. 71–90; Eloise Moss, Charlotte Wildman, and Ruth Lamont, 'Reintegrating agency, regulation and economy into histories of child emigration from north west England to Canada 1860–1930', *History Compass*, 19 (2021); Rebecca Bates, 'From suppression to sponsorship: juvenile emigration and the preservation of pre-industrial labor', *International Migrations in the Victorian Era*, 33 (2018), pp. 507–31.

[22]Swartz, 'Children in between'.

a 'boon to society' once abroad altered, as the century progressed, into discourses that refashioned the child's body as central to the nation's health. From the 1870s, evangelical reformers began to speak of disadvantaged children as 'diseased tissue' being given a chance to grow into 'healthy flesh'. Destitute children became increasingly racialized in a society that associated whiteness with civilization and saw their behaviour as threatening to imperial dominance. Historians argue that, by the end of the century, these racialized narratives had coalesced with eugenicist theories and fears over the future of Britain's place in the world to frame the 'rescue' and 'reform' of such children as increasingly central to the future of Britain, its economy, and its empire.[23]

Yet, to focus purely on these top-down narratives decentres the individual child and as recent histories of child welfare have shown, our history of modern Britain looks different if we write the child back in.[24] By concentrating on the individual, rather than on discourses, policy, or structures, this article provides a different perspective on juvenile migration policies. It demonstrates the heterogeneity of the juvenile migrant experience, questions narratives of coercion, and argues for the inclusion of young male migrants in bigger stories of settler-colonialism. It reveals that, like other migrants within society, these young working-class men saw emigration in terms that were primarily economic and highly individual. These emigrants, doubly marginalized by their age and their class, perceived the empire as a site of opportunity where their status was determined by their earning power. Young working-class boys shared advice and information that contributed to a circuit of news that reflected and fostered emigration enthusiasm across society and that shaped metropolitan imaginings of the world. They actively embraced the idea of a transnational future and acted as 'agents of emigration' by recruiting schoolmates, and they contextualized the emigration decision within a framework that compared the employment opportunities within Britain to those available overseas, illustrating the transnational nature of the job market for working-class Britons. In showing how ideas of overseas territories as paradisiacal lands of plenty, as both a 'rural Arcadia' and an 'urbanised Utopia', penetrated even to the most disadvantaged sections of the working classes, this research questions suggestions of absent-mindedness, instead revealing how empire was woven throughout working-class lives.[25]

I

When Robert Herod decided to emigrate, it was because he had weighed up his alternatives. The youngest child and the only boy in a family of four, his elder sisters were all married with children by the time his reformatory sentence was coming to an end. His single mother's promise of work for him in Hull had evaporated when

[23]Michelle Langfield, 'Righting the record', in Federowich and Thompson, eds., *Empire, migration, and identity*, p. 154; Swain and Hillel, *Child, nation, race, and empire*, pp. 83, 109; E. Boucher, *Empire's children: child emigration, welfare, and the decline of the British world, 1869–1967* (Cambridge, 2014; Marjory Harper, '"Abroad was where it all happened". Inter-war and post-war sponsored migration to the commonwealth', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 50 (2022), pp. 317–47, at p. 319.

[24]Pooley and Taylor, eds., *Children's experiences*, p. 21.

[25]James Belich, *Replenishing the earth* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 153–4, 163–4.

she had returned suddenly to Nottingham and then moved in with her daughter's family in their already overcrowded terraced house.[26] Yet, given his connections in Nottingham's lace-making districts, Robert could doubtless still have found work at home. Of the 119 boys who left the Royal Philanthropic that year, 73 chose this route. But emigration was an attractive option and was highly sought after by many pupils. School staff positioned emigration as an opportunity only available to the 'most promising lads' and as a 'privilege' given to those deserving in conduct and character.[27] Robert, described in his file as possessing 'pretty good' general intelligence, appears to have met this criteria.[28]

Like most industrial and reformatory schools, the Royal Philanthropic promoted emigration as an attractive solution for boys who through their delinquency had already limited their options. It provided the possibility of a clean slate and contributed to the reform of character that was central to the school's evangelical foundations.[29] Yet, emigration was also promoted because of its economic benefits. A key institutional aim was to provide children with a better life than that of their parents.[30] Supporters claimed that emigration would provide 'an abundance of remunerating employment' and allow young emigrants 'independence and prosperity' as well as a 'far brighter career' than the alternative of remaining in England.[31] Emigrants would be able to develop 'personal independence and the ability to live comfortably on the fruit of their own exertions'.[32] Even those who argued that philanthropic efforts should focus on the provision of employment in Britain conceded that emigration offered 'better and brighter prospects to children of the working class'.[33]

At the Royal Philanthropic, staff repeatedly spoke of boys' futures in terms that emphasized the financial gains to be made overseas. In 1870, Superintendent Charles Walters presented an internal report to the institution's management committee that emphasized the progress made by former pupils. They now possessed 'considerable savings', he reported. Some had married or had 'purchased land' or were 'farming or brick making on their own account'. He marvelled:

[26]Ancestry.com, 1861 England Census, RG09/3585/44/18.

[27]Gary Howells, '"On account of their disreputable characters": parish-assisted emigration from rural England, 1834–1860', *History*, 88 (2003), pp. 587–605; SHC, 2271/1/4, Annual Report (1852), p. 5; SHC, 2271/1/21, Annual Report (1889), p. 62; SHC, 2271/1/4, Annual Report (1852), p. 5; SHC, 2271/1/21, Annual Report (1889), p. 62.

[28]SHC, 2271/10/1.

[29]SHC, 2271/1/3, Annual Report (1851), p. 16; SHC, 2271/1/4, Annual Report (1852), pp. 7–8; SHC, 2271/1/5, Annual Report (1853), p. 7; Swain and Hillel, *Child, nation, race and empire*, p. 135; Lydia Murdoch, *Imagined orphans: poor families, child welfare and contested citizenship in London* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2006), p. 121.

[30]*Parliamentary Papers* (1852), 674-I, Report from the Select Committee on Criminal and Destitute Children, pp. iii, iv; Murdoch, *Imagined orphans*, p. 121.

[31]John Lang and Matthew Baines, *Juvenile-pauper emigration* (1849), https://files02.sl.nsw.gov.au/fotoweb/pdf/1413/141346410.pdf; Boucher, *Empire's children*, p. 41; 'Emigration of pauper children', *Central Somerset Gazette*, 27 Jan. 1877, p. 6, col. a.

[32]'The Nugent expedition to Canada', *Daily Post*, 5 Aug. 1870, p. 9, col. b.

[33]'Poor law conference at Malvern', *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 9 May 1891, p. 3, col. h.

> just think for a moment, boys being proprietors of farms after being in the province some 6 or 7 years – boys from the streets of London and the provincial towns in England – well may they bless the day they were put on the Red Hill farm, to be taught to work and earn an honest living.[34]

With such examples to follow, the arguments that a boy's 'best hopes' for happiness and prosperity lay in settling overseas must have been persuasive.[35] As must the promotional visits paid to the school by emigration advocates such as the bishop of New Westminster in British Columbia, Canada. However, even more influential may have been the many letters from former pupils now living abroad. These were read out and circulated within the school and later published in the annual reports.[36]

These emigrant letters are an invaluable source for understanding why boys emigrated. The schoolmasters from the Royal Philanthropic wrote frequently to emigrants and, as part of their policy of monitoring boys for four years after their departure from the school, encouraged them to write back with news of each other's lives.[37] Many of these letters were published, leading historians to dismiss them as fictional. However, through a painstaking process of linking the published correspondence to other institutional and non-institutional records including the unpublished letter book, it has been possible to show that they were authentic.[38] The letter book transcribed the contents and key phrases of around 1,500 letters received from emigrant boys between 1857 and 1874 and overall there are records of letters from just over half of emigrants in this period. But there are also indications in other records that communication was more frequent, indicating that an even higher proportion of emigrants wanted to stay in touch in some way.

Emigrant letters fulfilled multiple purposes and reveal how the empire was created and sustained through epistolary contact. Historians have described adult emigrant correspondence as 'the fulcrum of transnational family and kinship networks'.[39] Letters could make the difficulties of independent life seem easier by reinforcing connections and providing a space to articulate difficult emotions. They acted as a medium to pass on news or gossip or to ask for information or goods. They allowed the writer to boast about his progress and to relate cautionary tales about mistakes.[40] Studies have shown that when it came to correspondence, the boundaries between the public and the private were fluid and porous. Emigrants expected their letters to be read and shared with others, or even published in newspapers.[41]

Institutional boys' correspondence was little different. Many letters asked for sections to be read out to current pupils during weekly services and excerpts were made

[34]Charles Walters, *Emigration as a mode of disposal* (Redhill, 1871).

[35]Muriel Whitten, *Nipping crime in the bud: how the philanthropic quest was put into law* (Sherfield on Loddon, 2011), pp. 200, 222.

[36]SHC, 2271/1/10, Annual Report (1858), p. 15; SHC, 2271/1/21, Annual Report (1888), p. 35.

[37]Mary Thompkins, 'The Philanthropic Society in Britain with particular reference to the Reformatory Farm School, Redhill 1849–1900' (MA thesis, University of Western Australia, 2007), p. 6.

[38]Soares, 'Neither waif nor stray', p. 177; Swain and Hillel, *Child, nation, race and empire*, p. 161.

[39]Thompson and Federowich, eds., *Empire, migration and identity*, p. 11.

[40]Claudia Soares, 'Dear Sir, remember me often if possible', in Pooley and Taylor, eds., *Children's experiences*; Ishiguro, *Nothing to write home about*, p. 91.

[41]Elliott, Gerber, and Sinke, *Letters across borders*, p. 10.

public at the annual Harvest Home celebration.[42] Some were published in the annual reports that were sent to potential donors and printed in the school newsletter circulated to all emigrants and their families. The content of published letters seems to have been representative of that of the unpublished letter book. There is no indication in the records of how letters were chosen for publication but most annual reports contained a letter from each month of that year and covered diverse geographies. Many contained difficult or challenging stories that by no means painted their authors in a positive light but they also provided skilled appraisals of the benefits and costs of emigrant life, acting, whether deliberately or not, as a means of persuading those still in the school of the opportunities of emigration. Through these letters, the empire penetrated the daily lives of those back home.

Between 1850 and 1900, 42 per cent of Royal Philanthropic pupils emigrated. A further 2 per cent joined the army. It is tempting, given the structural inequalities of Victorian Britain, to minimize the agency boys exercised in making these decisions and, instead, foreground the constraints on their choices. Yet, this is to marginalize an already marginalized group even further. All Victorian Britons faced structures that directed and inhibited the options open to them. It is true, of course, that there were boys for whom emigration was their main opportunity to escape from the cycle of poverty and criminality that afflicted their families. However, it is important to recognize that over two-thirds of the boys admitted to the Royal Philanthropic came from families where the father earned a reasonable wage and there were other siblings in employment. Such boys could return home, and many did. That so many did not shows that there was also a sizeable proportion for whom the attractions of home were insufficient, and emigration was preferable.[43]

The choice inherent in these decisions demonstrates the significance of age and gender. Part of the reason for the historiographical marginalization of all juvenile migrants within settler-colonial and imperial histories has been the focus by historians of child migration on the image of the young emigrant child and their bewilderment and grief at being removed from their families. Yet, this is not representative of the whole.[44] There is no question that very young children were sent overseas, nor that while some were adopted into Canadian families, others, particularly girls, found themselves abandoned or abused by employers.[45] It is also true that emigration did not offer the same opportunities to younger institutionalized girls as it did for older institutionalized boys.[46] Younger girls tended to be employed as

[42]SHC, 2271/1/15, Annual Report (1867), p. 37; SHC 2271/1/16, Annual Report (1871), p. 46; SHC 2271/1/19, Annual Report (1881), p. 53; SHC, 2271/1/19, Annual Report (1883), pp. 32–3; SHC 2271/1/18, Annual Report (1878), pp. 46, 49, 54, 70 are just a few examples; 'Harvest Home at the Philanthropic Farm School', *West Surrey Times*, 4 Sept. 1880, p. 3, cols. a–e.

[43]Gillian Lamb, 'Child welfare and the impact of late-nineteenth-century English reformatory and industrial schools: a life-course analysis of social mobility, emigration, and character' (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 2022).

[44]The cover of Boucher's *Empire's children* and Parr's *Labouring children* show images of young children; Swain and Hillel, *Child, nation, race and empire*, p. 43; Boucher, *Empire's children*, discusses children's isolation, p. 25.

[45]Andrew Doyle, *Copy of a report as to the emigration of pauper children to Canada* (London, 1875), pp. 11, 18–20.

[46]Lamb, 'Child welfare'.

maidservants, while boys were favoured for their physicality and had a wider range of choices.[47] However, it is important to note that overall most juvenile emigrants were older boys. Joy Parr's evaluation of Barnardo's emigrants between 1882 and 1908 found the average male emigrant was fifteen, while the average girl was eleven. Yet, even this sample was 'younger than most'. Both Parr's statistics and those compiled by Roy Parker imply that most boys were fifteen or above.[48] While this may still seem young to modern eyes, it needs to be viewed within a framework that recognizes the historical contingency of age. As Jane Humphries has shown, between 1851 and 1878, the average British child started 'proper' work aged twelve and boys from the poorest families or children of single mothers, like Robert, typically began work even earlier at ten years of age.[49]

The average emigrant from the Royal Philanthropic was sixteen. This is important because sixteen marked the age at which children could consent to their own emigration.[50] Consent is a controversial topic. A historiographical focus on Barnardo's where, although they may have consented to their daughter's emigration at some point, two-thirds of parents were not informed of their child's emigration date in advance, has influenced a perception that children were routinely sent overseas against their will. Yet, as recent research has shown, consent to emigration was much more common than previously suggested.[51] This was particularly the case at the Royal Philanthropic where parents normally came to visit their children before their departure and the school sought parental consent where necessary and, in many cases, where it was not.[52] The law stated that children aged below sixteen needed parental consent or, if their parents could not be found, that of two magistrates or the home secretary.[53] Of course, the home secretary's consent was normally forthcoming and between 1894 and 1907, an average of sixty-eight children per year emigrated under this process, representing around 2 per cent of annual child emigrants.[54]

One such child was thirteen-year-old Alfred Cavell, who was one of the youngest boys to emigrate from the Royal Philanthropic. Alfred was one of nine children and his father and three of his brothers were convicted criminals. The family were

[47]Ibid., p. 31.

[48]Parr, *Labouring children*, pp. 91, 125; G. Joy Parr, 'The Home Children: British juvenile immigrants to Canada, 1868–1924' (Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1977), p. 178; Roy Parker, *Uprooted: the shipment of poor children to Canada, 1867–1917* (Bristol, 2008), p. 71. Both Parr and Parker reported one quarter of boys were below twelve, which, given an average age of fifteen and the maximum age of eighteen, implies that almost all the remainder were fifteen or older.

[49]Jane Humphries, *Childhood and child labour* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 174, 176, 195.

[50]Ruth Lamont, Eloise Moss, and Charlotte Wildman, 'Who cares?' Welfare and consent to child emigration from England to Canada, 1870 to 1918', *Liverpool Law Review*, 41 (2020), p. 49; Parker, *Uprooted*, pp. 5, 40–1, 241; *Parliamentary Papers* (1882), Cm 3876-I, 147.

[51]Langfield, 'Righting the record?', p. 155; Hendrick, *Child welfare*, p. 81; Parr, *Labouring children*, pp. 67–8, 71; Lamont, Moss, and Wildman, 'Who cares?'; Boucher, *Empire's children*, p. 42; Swain and Hillel, *Child, nation, race and empire*, pp. 116–21; Parker, *Uprooted*, p. 7; Moira Martin, '"A future not of riches but of comfort". The emigration of pauper children from Bristol to Canada, 1870–1915', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 19 (2000), p. 32.

[52]'The Philanthropic Society's Farm School. The Harvest Home', *Surrey Mirror*, 19 Sept. 1885, p. 5, col. f.

[53]Parker, *Uprooted*, pp. 40–1, 196, 239, 241; Lamont, Moss, and Wildman, 'Who cares?', pp. 53–5.

[54]Parker, *Uprooted*, pp. 40–1, 241.

extremely poor and according to local newspapers, the children were often seen 'running about the harbour in a dirty ragged state', their house 'totally unfit for human habitation'.[55] Alfred had been admitted to the Royal Philanthropic at the unusually young age of nine but appears to have been happy there judging by the long-term relationship he maintained with staff. When it came time for him to leave in 1886, Alfred chose not to return home but asked to emigrate instead. His father refused his consent. However, after reading the police report on Alfred's home environment, the home secretary over-rode this decision and allowed Alfred to go. It turned out to be a happy choice. Alfred wrote back to the school many times in subsequent years and stated in 1888, two years after his arrival in Canada: 'I am glad I made up my mind to come out here, for if I had stopped at home in England, I should never have got on so well.'[56]

The archives contain many similar instances of children who defied parental wishes for their future. Nineteen-year-old Stephen Smith's file contains a signed letter from his father who was 'anxious for his emigration'. But the record also shows that Stephen was 'unwilling' to wait for his opportunity to emigrate and instead enlisted in the army.[57] In contrast, Charles Young's father had not wanted him to emigrate at all. Yet, seventeen-year-old Charles went anyway. Following his emigration, his father wrote 'very civilly' to the school to enquire whether Charles had emigrated 'of his own free will', stating he had thought that his son had had no wish to emigrate. The school superintendent replied that Charles had gone 'in consequence of his own repeated urgent request'.[58] This official response was, of course, only to be expected, but Charles's 1883 letter to the school seemed to bear out this version of events. He wrote: 'many thanks for the kindness you have done for me in getting me over here'.[59]

Parent–child tensions and conflicts such as these reveal the importance of age.[60] Sixteen may have been the boundary at which the state thought of these young people as independent of their parents' wishes or desires, but it was not that straightforward.[61] Charles was a young man but he was also his father's child with the emotional bonds that entailed. His failure to inform his father of his emigration could have stemmed from a desire to escape the familial hierarchy or just to avoid conflict. The school's response reveals that, even in this period before the Children Act had enshrined children's civil rights in law, staff were placing Charles's wishes ahead of those of his parents. This could have been because his desires were congruent with those of the school. But Stephen's example seems to indicate that the school took boys' decisions about their futures seriously and that this was true even when these contradicted parental demands.

[55]'School attendance cases', *Thanet Advertiser* [Thanet], 29 Nov. 1879, p. 3, col. c; SHC, 2271/1/20, Annual Report (1886), p. 40; 'Overcrowding in house', *Thanet Advertiser* [Thanet], 23 Nov. 1878, p. 3, col. a.

[56]SHC, 2271/1/21, Annual Report (1888), p. 86.

[57]SHC, 2271/10/20, fo. 470.

[58]SHC, 2271/10/18, fo. 675.

[59]SHC, 2271/1/20, Annual Report (1884), p. 60.

[60]Anna Davin, 'What is a child?', in Andrew Fletcher and Stephen Hussey, eds., *Childhood in question: children, parents and the state* (Manchester, 1999), p. 15.

[61]Supported by the Custody of Infants Act of 1873 which set the upper boundary at sixteen.

One case that provides an important insight into parental and institutional power dynamics and that demonstrates very clearly the agency of juvenile migrants is that of Albert Durack. Eighteen-year-old Albert emigrated to Canada in 1895, telling his father, Samuel, that he was going to join his uncle on his Canadian farm. But, shortly after his departure, Samuel, a house painter, wrote to the school to complain that Albert had not arrived at his uncle's farm. Blaming the Royal Philanthropic for Arthur's non-arrival, Samuel threatened to report it to the press.[62] Superintendent Marshall Vine responded indignantly. He wrote that Albert had been 'offered the opportunity of going to his uncle, which we should have preferred being a shorter distance to pay for' but that Albert had 'begged that he might go with two schoolfellows who were going to Wapella' and so the school had agreed.[63]

These conflicts demonstrate the growing sense that working-class parents had of their rights as citizens. Siân Pooley has shown how concepts of citizenship were founded in 'adults' authority as self-regulatory and responsible parents'.[64] Samuel strongly articulated his parental authority, proclaiming: 'do not forget that I did not give my consent for him to go away'.[65] At nineteen, Albert was legally able to seek out his own future and make his own decisions – as indeed it appears he had – but his father still saw him as a child under his control. Perhaps his presence in reformatory school, long beyond the age of other formal schooling, had created this impression.[66] Despite Albert's age, the Royal Philanthropic clearly felt under pressure to provide his father with an explanation.[67] Yet, crucially, as it had for Charles Young, thirteen years earlier, it asserted the primacy of Albert's choice. Vine wrote: 'but for giving him a freedom which you appear to object to he would have been sent to your brother which however he declined', adding that Albert was 'quite a free citizen in his new settlement' who could go where he liked 'if he thinks he can do better for himself'.[68]

And boys did go where they liked. Unlike later institutions, the Royal Philanthropic did not operate overseas receiving homes but instead used a network of agents in areas where there was already a 'nucleus of successful and respectable colonists'.[69] These agents were typically local ministers or farmers who provided the school with regular updates on boys' lives. Boys emigrated in pairs and were not indentured on arrival, although many chose to sign up to either one-year employment contracts or longer-term apprenticeships. The evidence shows that once overseas, young working-class emigrants, like their middle-class older counterparts, deliberately used geographic mobility as a strategy to improve their prospects.[70] Analysis of the life courses of 100 emigrant boys shows that 70 per cent of them moved location within five to ten years in search of better wages or alternative

[62] SHC, 2271/10/20, fo. 694.

[63] Ibid.

[64] S. Pooley, 'Parenthood, citizenship and the state in England c. 1870–1914', in H. Barron and C. Siebrecht, eds., *Parenting and the state in Britain and Europe, c. 1870–1950* (Cham, 2017), p. 31.

[65] SHC, 2271/10/20, fo. 694.

[66] Davin, 'What is a child?', p. 22; John Springhall, *Coming of age: adolescence in Britain* (Dublin, 1986), p. 36.

[67] Pooley, 'Parenthood', p. 29; Murdoch, *Imagined orphans*, pp. 104–10.

[68] SHC, 2271/10/20, fo. 694.

[69] SHC, 2271/1/21, Annual Report (1891), p. 64; Parr, *Labouring children*, pp. 46–9.

[70] Maria Ruiz, ed., *Bridging boundaries in British migration history* (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 160–4.

work. Robert Herod, whose example began this article, worked as a farm labourer for several employers after his arrival in Canada in 1861 before, firstly, taking up a three-year apprenticeship to a cabinet maker and then working in railroad and bridge construction.[71] This occupational journey took him from small-town Canada to Montreal and back, then on to Chicago in the United States and eventually to Portland in Oregon.

A similar trajectory was experienced by fourteen-year-old William Lockyer who arrived in 1867. William had been abandoned by his mother as a child and was a frequent correspondent with the school, writing of how much he liked Canadian life. On his arrival, he spent his first two years working for the school's local agent. His letters reported that he was 'growing like a currant bush' and was as 'fat as a pig'. He was happy with his job but wanted to earn more money to buy clothes and to enable him to 'save like a man'. He viewed the United States as a promising location and, at the age of sixteen, moved to New Jersey to work as a carpenter. Ten years later, the records show him in Maine, where he married and bought his own farm, taking up employment as a forester. He remained there until he died in 1927.[72]

Like one third of his fellow emigrants from the school, William's choice demonstrates that his identity as an imperial citizen was less important to him than the opportunity to make money. Research has shown that in the twentieth century juvenile migrants identified strongly with Greater Britain, seeking out other dominions or colonies for onward migration.[73] Yet, in this earlier period, there was no sign of similar imperial affiliations. Instead, boys viewed their options as existing beyond as well as within the empire.

Juvenile emigrants also demonstrated their independence through the decision of many to return to England. Around 37 per cent of emigrant boys took advantage of improvements in the speed and cost of ocean travel to buy or work their way home, bringing with them their experiences of Britain's empire.[74] Boys returned for a variety of reasons. Some, like John Webb, had always viewed emigration as temporary. John wrote in 1853 that he would give emigrant life another year to see 'what good I can do' and if his endeavour was fruitless, he would return.[75] Others wanted to stay, but only if their families would join them. Sidney Langston, who had emigrated to Canada aged fifteen in 1893 had, by age twenty-one, purchased 160 acres of land funded by his mining work. He returned to Britain to persuade his mother and stepfather to join him overseas. They refused, so Sidney remained in England.[76] More often, boys returned because they did not like emigrant life and they were

[71] Ancestry.com, 1861 Census of Canada, Roll: C-1313; 'Robert Wakefield, pioneer contractor dies at age of 75', *Oregon Daily Journal*, 13 Feb. 1920, p. 3, col. e.

[72] SHC, 2271/1/16, Annual Report (1869), p. 40; SHC, 2271/33, Emigration Book, p. 241; Ancestry.com, Maine State Archives 1908–22, Roll: 341900; 1900 Federal Census, Eustis, Maine, p. 1, enum.0089; 1910 Federal Census, Eustis, Maine, Roll: T624_540, p. 1B, enum.0123; Maine, Nathan Hale Cemetery Collection, 1780–1980.

[73] Boucher, *Empire's children*, pp. 256–7.

[74] Harper and Constantine, eds., *Migration and empire*, p. 336.

[75] SHC, 2271/1/5, Annual Report (1853), p. 35.

[76] SHC, 2271/11, Register of Discharges, fo. 655.

homesick.[77] As Marjory Harper has demonstrated, homesickness was a common phenomenon among migrants of all stripes.[78] Yet, often the nostalgic ideal of home did not match the reality. Many felt they no longer belonged. Of boys who returned from emigration, 21 per cent re-emigrated, while 39 per cent joined the army.

II

There were, of course, politics underpinning nineteenth-century mass migration, both in terms of the social conditions that provided impetus to the individual decision to leave, and in terms of the enabling practices that facilitated their movement and settlement overseas. This is true whether we are speaking of spinster missionaries or young delinquent boys.[79] Yet, within this framework pushing migration, individuals were still making their own choices. As the first part of this article has shown, boys chose whether to emigrate or remain in Britain; they chose their employment when overseas; and they chose whether to remain in their new country or whether to return to England. Of course, these decisions were constrained by their circumstances, but they had advantages in education, training, and sponsorship over non-institutionalized peers. Their diverse decisions reveal a great deal that has been overlooked by a scholarship that has focused on top-down discourses. Their evident agency directly undermines the child welfare historiography that foregrounds juvenile migrants' passivity. It argues for their inclusion in the wider histories of migration and raises questions about why they made the decisions they did. We have already seen the discourses of opportunity promoted by the school. To what extent did boys absorb these and how influential were they in the decision-making process? What do these tell us about how empire was made and reinforced within the metropolitan imagination? The boys' correspondence provides some answers. Emigrant letters were a popular feature of the nineteenth-century press, forming a 'transnational social space'.[80] Correspondents often viewed publication as a quicker and less expensive way of disseminating information to family and friends. David Gerber has shown that the information within emigrant letters was eagerly sought after by the audience at home and viewed as a 'help to those who have yet to leave'.[81] Often, items published in British newspapers would be republished in the same form in overseas newspapers or weeklies.[82] We know that the boys of the Royal Philanthropic were avid consumers of newspapers and periodicals, which they circulated across the globe. Their letters contained requests for copies of illustrated periodicals such as *The Graphic, The Illustrated London News, Answers, Pearson's Weekly, The Leisure Hour, Reynolds's Miscellany, London Journal*, and *News of the World* as well as local newspapers such as the *Surrey Mirror*. In exchange, boys would send copies of Canadian, Australian, or American newspapers and it seems probable that these too

[77] SHC, 2271/33, Admissions Register; Ancestry.com, England and Wales Census 1891, RG13/614/105/7; England and Wales 1901, RG12/578/61/29.

[78] Harper and Constantine, eds., *Migration and empire*, p. 337.

[79] Ibid., pp. 333–4.

[80] Elliott, Gerber, and Sinke, *Letters across borders*, p. 189.

[81] Ibid., pp. 187–9.

[82] Jude Piesse, *British settler emigration in print, 1832–1877* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 21, 25–7, 158, 159, 185.

were circulated within the school.[83] This created a transnational circuit of information that, as Jude Piesse has argued, meant that Victorian periodicals not only 'reflected mobility but were actively involved in *producing* it'.[84]

Juvenile correspondence formed part of this process of mobility production. Letters from former pupils were widely distributed. They were published in annual reports, reprinted in newsletters circulated to emigrants around the globe, and read out in the weekly church service and at special events. Through their description of the opportunities emigration offered, correspondents both provided those already keen to emigrate with advice about how best to navigate life overseas and tried to persuade others to follow them in making the journey.

Missing are of course the thoughts of those who did not stay in touch – perhaps because their experience of institutional care had been negative, or because they no longer wanted to remember their past. Yet, through the large body of letters we do have, representing around two-thirds of those emigrants who remained overseas, we can examine the extent to which these young emigrants embraced the self-help 'rags to riches' stories that dominated Victorian culture and through these engaged with the mass emigration movement of the nineteenth century.[85] The analysis shows that these young working-class boys embraced ideas that associated hard work with prosperity. While the majority of Victorians may not, as Bernard Porter argued, have seen one of 'those famous empire maps', it is evident that institutional boys and their families were very aware of the potential material rewards of Britain's current or former colonies.[86] They were exposed to discourses that provided them with detailed information about life overseas and that acted as persuasive devices to encourage their emigration. Some of this came from the institution and its guest speakers but the vast majority came from correspondence from former pupils who acted as emigration agents by encouraging those still in the school to follow them overseas.

The role that institutional boys played in persuading others to emigrate has been under-recognized. Its significance lies in the way it foregrounds these young working-class men not as victims of structures but as active participants in the settlement project and in a process of shaping the Anglo-world in the metropolitan mind. Around 30 per cent of emigrant letters explicitly encouraged others to follow in the writer's footsteps and emigrate. They show that it was not just the institution but also the emigrants themselves who framed emigration as a source of opportunity. Often, authors targeted family members. In 1870, eighteen-year-old Charles Greener wrote to the school praising America as the place to give 'a poor man a start in life'. America was the 'the best in the world, compaired [sic] with the City of London'. Charles had saved up money to pay for his brother William's passage to join him in America and, although William was not a pupil at the Royal Philanthropic,

[83]SHC, 2271/1/10, Annual Report (1860), p. 40; SHC, 2271/1/17 Annual Report (1872), p. 41; SHC, 2271/1/29, Annual Report (1900), pp. 70–1, 78; SHC, 2271/1/6, Annual Report (1855), p. 32; SHC, 2271/1/8, Annual Report (1857), p. 24; SHC, 2271/1/11, Annual Report (1862), pp. 55, 65.

[84]Piesse, *British settler emigration*, pp. 21, 25–7, 158, 159, 185, emphasis in the original.

[85]Jerome Meckier, 'Great expectations and self-help: Dickens frowns on smiles', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 100 (2001), pp. 537–54.

[86]Bernard Porter, *The absent-minded imperialists: empire, society, and culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004), p. 20.

asked the school to help arrange it.[87] This was a relatively common request. Around 15 per cent of boys from the school sought to bring family members out to join them and institutional staff often acted as intermediaries in this process, passing on correspondence and arranging travel.[88] Boys also encouraged former schoolmates to join them. Sixteen-year-old Albert Edmonds emigrated to New Brunswick in 1854. He was a frequent correspondent and after three years stated: 'I should advise every boy to come abroad that gets the chance.' He made his consent in the whole process clear, adding 'It was some time before I could make up my mind to come.'[89]

Studies have shown that adult migrants tended to have more confidence in migration schemes when they were supported by a letter from a friend or relative who had already emigrated.[90] It was the same for institutional boys. Even those letters that employed well-known tropes about the possibility of vast wealth were perceived as more authentic because they originated from someone to whom the boys in the school were connected. In the early years of emigration to Australia, many letters discussed gold mining in enthusiastic terms. James Shea, who had emigrated in 1851 aged eighteen, wrote that, while he had originally taken work with a schooner captain, he had soon 'caught the gold fever' and left for the diggings where, after several months, he had earned 150 pounds of gold and had been able to send 20 pounds home to his mother. James promoted Australia as 'a fine country' where, although you needed to work hard, every man could 'be his own master if he likes'.[91] While not all letters employed such extravagant persuasion, it was common for encouragement to be linked with details of financial opportunity.

These discussions reveal the transnationality of the employment market for working-class boys. A key attraction of emigration was the opportunity to improve one's standard of living. Over 70 per cent of letters mentioned the wages that boys were earning or hoped to earn. These were often linked to place or type of job and mirrored the kind of information being circulated by adult migrants.[92] It seems probable that this information was persuasive in the migration decision.[93] Nineteen-year-old William Vowles wrote to his 'mate' Vincent Print still in the school shortly after his arrival in 1890, encouraging Vincent to come out and join him in Victoria, British Columbia. He promoted Victoria's virtues, highlighting its 'many handsome stone and brick buildings', and the availability of over 'two million acres on the Island not taken up yet'. He reported that Victoria and Vancouver were the 'best paying places' in Canada and although it was 'pretty hard work', he was earning '34 dollars and board' a month and saving five to seven dollars a week. He encouraged Vincent to 'come out soon' so they could work together.[94]

These discourses of opportunity failed to acknowledge the dispossession of Indigenous peoples that were implicit in the discussions of 'land not yet taken up'.

[87] SHC, 2271/1/17, Annual Report (1872), p. 51.

[88] Based on analysis of c. 300 cases by author.

[89] SHC, 2271/1/7, Annual Report (1856), p. 40.

[90] A. Thompson, 'Overseas migration', in G. B. Magee and A. S. Thompson, eds., *Empire and globalisation: networks of people, goods and capital in the British world, c. 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 74.

[91] SHC, 2271/1/5, Annual Report (1853), p. 29.

[92] Thompson, 'Overseas migration', p. 74.

[93] SHC, 2271/1/14, Annual Report (1866), 35; SHC, 2271/33, Emigration Book, p. 178.

[94] SHC, 2271/1/21, Annual Report (1890), pp. 87–8; SHC, 2271/11, Register of Discharges, fo. 497.

Many of these young settlers were instrumental in the systematic settlement of the territories in which they arrived. Yet, it is notable that there was no mention of Indigenous peoples in any of the boys' letters from Canada. This was not, as Laura Ishiguro has pointed out, unusual. Letters from middle-class emigrants in the same period also fail to discuss Indigenous peoples even in the west of Canada, where white settlers were in the minority.[95] Whether the silences reflect a lack of contact or awareness, which could have been the case in eastern Canada where white settlers dominated, or was a deliberate discursive erasure, these silences are disturbing and raise many questions that have been widely discussed in existing histories of settler-colonialism.[96] It is clear that these young settlers were beneficiaries of a structure of systematic dispossession and oppression in which, as Donald Akenson has described it, their 'better life' was 'paid for in part by a worse life for the dispossessed'.[97]

As recent research has highlighted, young emigrants were deeply aware of their value as economic units.[98] Their correspondence compared the wages available in different occupations and locations and made it clear that status was associated with financial success. Twenty-three-year-old Harry Dare emigrated to Australia aged eighteen. He rejected the agricultural ideal privileged by philanthropists, writing in 1898 that farming 'is not paying enough for me'. Harry, who was loading timber in a port, was eager to compare wages in Canada to those in Australia. His letter to Superintendent Vine complained that while Vine had provided him with a 'good account' of how emigrants were getting on in Canada, he had not told him 'what the average wage was among them'. Harry reported that he was getting 7s 6d a day 'the next highest wage to the foreman, who gets 8s, so I think myself that I am doing pretty well'.[99] Thomas Dawson also wrote from Australia regarding another former pupil, Jack, for whom he had procured a job driving a baker's cart. Thomas wrote that 'he [Jack] is getting about the best wages a young man could get in the country – £1 10s. per week, the same as myself – the usual wages for it being from 12s. to 20s. per week'.[100] Letters were also quick to note changing economic circumstances and opportunities. An 1875 letter from Canada highlighted that wages for farm labourers needed to increase because of the competition from new railroads for construction workers. It noted that carpenters and builders were particularly scarce, and these occupations could command as much as seven dollars per day in wages. This was more than farm labourers had earned in a month less than a decade previously.[101]

Although historians of child migration have argued that institutions promoted agriculture as the ideal occupation for emigrants, boys' letters demonstrate that emigrant life offered diverse opportunities – from engineering to cabinet making

[95]Ishiguro, *Nothing to write home about*, pp. 6–7.

[96]Perry, *On the edge of empire*, pp. 11, 13, 196; R. Cole Harris, *Making native space: colonialism resistance, and reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 2002); Rebecca Schwartz, *Education and empire: children, race and humanitarianism in the British settler colonies 1833–1880* (Cambridge, 2019).

[97]D. Akenson, 'The great European migration and Indigenous populations', in G. Morton and D. Wilson, eds., *Irish and Scottish encounters with Indigenous peoples* (Montreal, 2013), p. 36.

[98]Moss, Wildman, and Lamont, 'Reintegrating agency', p. 8.

[99]SHC, 2271/1/27, Annual Report (1897), pp. 90–1.

[100]SHC, 2271/1/11, Annual Report (1860), p. 30; SHC, 2271/33, Emigration Book, p. 314.

[101]SHC, 2271/1/17, Annual Report (1875), p. 44.

to construction work to shopkeeping.[102] This freedom must have been appealing to boys faced with the constraints of following their fathers' occupation in England or working in one job all their life. As areas became more settled, the type and location of opportunities changed. Harry Boyce wrote from Ontario in 1899 to tell his old school mates of the potential of Fort William, the 'Golden Gateway' to the Northwest, revealing that it would soon be the site of a pig iron smelter as well as a large mill that would take 300 men to build. To persuade his friends to emigrate, he added,

> There is not only those sorts of work, but there is plenty of fine land to buy and it wants a lot of vegetables to be grown for so many people next summer. I have ten acres of land, all ploughed, ready to plant anything and I can earn lots of money here. Canada for me – nowhere else.[103]

These epistolary discourses of opportunity contradict existing histories that have highlighted the poor wages and prospects available to juvenile migrants.[104]

Yet, it is true that economic conditions varied over time and that emigration did not always provide the straightforward path to fortune that emigrants thought it might. By the late 1850s, for instance, Australian emigrants were making it clear that gold mining, once so compelling, was more difficult than it had initially appeared, while across the globe in North America, the economy was experiencing a downturn.[105] George Martin, who had emigrated to Canada in 1854 and had initially been very positive about his future, reported in 1857 that 'times are getting very hard here at present and shew [sic] us no prospect of getting any better'.[106] While he was wrong and things did improve in the 1860s, by the mid-1870s emigrant letters were once again complaining of difficult conditions. By 1875, thirty-year-old Walter Uppington, who had emigrated to Australia twelve years earlier, was comfortably situated, but nonetheless wrote to warn potential emigrants that 'farming in Australia is very different to farming in the old country; and if wages here are higher than at home the work is heavier and the comforts less'. He added that the employment market was saturated near the coast, the food was expensive and the climate unfavourable to health.[107] Nor were conditions in Canada more attractive. William Gane, who was working as a servant to a widow in eastern Canada, also wrote back in 1875. He complained that money was scarce across Canada, adding that 'several factories have suspended operations altogether and nearly all are running on short time'.[108]

It also took time to make money. It was common for correspondents in their twenties to warn prospective emigrants that they could not expect to earn good wages at first, suggesting that it must have been fairly usual for the new emigrant

[102] Swain and Hillel, *Child, nation, race and empire*, pp. 116–17.

[103] SHC, 2271/1/29, Annual Report (1900), pp. 85–7.

[104] Laura Peters, *Orphan texts* (Manchester, 2000), p. 95; Swain and Hillel, *Child, nation, race and empire*, pp. 161–2.

[105] SHC, 2271/1/10, Annual Report (1859), pp. 23, 37–9, 40–3.

[106] SHC, 2271/1/9, Annual Report (1858), p. 23; SHC, 2271/10/9, fo. 90.

[107] SHC, 2271/1/17, Annual Report (1875), p. 53.

[108] SHC, 2271/1/17, Annual Report (1875), p. 64.

to complain.[109] Wage progression was linked to age. Charles Whatler who emigrated to the United States in 1866 aged fourteen, wrote back aged twenty. Having begun employed life earning two dollars per month labouring, he was now earning two dollars a day, was married, and a property owner.[110] Twenty-year-old William Terry had emigrated in 1866 aged seventeen. He wrote:

> My Dear Fellows...all you that have the privilege of Emigrating can do as well as I have, for I am only a little fellow, and weigh only 120 lbs., and stand 5ft. 2 in. high. The most of you will be large stout fellows when you get to be my age. You must not expect to get big wages when you first come to Canada because you cant [sic] earn them; I only got 36 dollars the first year I was in Canada and that was about all I earned.[111]

These accounts outlined a clear trajectory towards wealth that was instrumental in persuading younger schoolmates to emigrate. However, letters also counselled patience. William Gane, aged twenty, wrote to warn prospective emigrants that they would have to work for 'rather small wages at first' and that other 'boys that had been in country longer' and who received better wages would make fun of them. But, he cautioned, boys should not become dissatisfied and look for other work, because this could mean a 'harder place for less pay'.[112]

Emigrants also outlined risks. Multiple letters contain tales of mistakes made, injuries suffered, and money lost. William Rosin, who had been keen for boys to join him in 1863 when he was nineteen, wrote four years later, aged twenty-three, of how after eighteen months of hard work for a 'carrage [sic] maker' earning 120 dollars, he had asked for his money but the carriage maker said 'they could not pay'. William employed a lawyer who told William that he could not recover his earnings because he 'had no written agreement and no witness'. He was forced to take on gardening work for low wages and was laid up all winter with frozen feet.[113] These kinds of cautionary tales were common. Their challenging content also helps to explain why histories of juvenile emigration are so negative about emigrants' experiences. Yet, we are able to gain a different perspective by linking letters together across time and integrating them with other sources. This reveals that emigrants' views on overseas life fluctuated with circumstance. Henry Hoare, a few months after arriving in Australia in 1865, wrote that he wished 'many a time' that he was 'back again at the school' but a year later in 1866 felt more positive, asserting that he felt he could 'do better here [Australia] than in England'. Only three months later, however, he left that job because the work was 'too much' and advised school staff not to send out another emigrant as 'things are so dreadfully bad out here just now; he might be out of work for weeks and weeks'. By 1868, things had improved and Henry was now getting on very well. He had arranged for his brother to join him overseas and offered to employ a boy from the school. His final recorded letter from 1869 confirmed that he

[109]See SHC, 2271/1/17, Annual Report (1872), p. 51; SHC, 2271/1/20, Annual Report (1884), p. 58.
[110]SHC, 2271/1/17, Annual Report (1872), pp. 49–50.
[111]SHC, 2271/1/16, Annual Report (1870), p. 43.
[112]SHC, 2271/1/17, Annual Report (1876), pp. 55–6.
[113]SHC, 2271/1/15, Annual Report (1867), pp. 33–5; SHC, 2271/33, Emigration Book, p. 269.

was now settled in Australia. Henry stated 'if I ever return to England, it will be to see my mother and return here again'.[114] In 1863, two years after Robert Herod, whose story began this article, had arrived in Canada, he thought about leaving. Although he was just beginning an apprenticeship in cabinet making and found Canada 'pleasant', he contemplated going to Australia instead. A year later, he pondered going to the United States or perhaps back to England. In 1865, he wrote of going to New Zealand but in 1866 he finally decided to go the United States after all.[115]

Although Robert's ideas were constantly changing, it is evident that he nonetheless perceived the world through a prism of possibility. The existing historiography has foregrounded the 'trapped' nature of juvenile emigrants, yet for those who had already undergone a journey across the Atlantic, the need to move hundreds of miles in search of more favourable employment terms was not the constraint it might seem to us. If things did not work out, then there was scope to return to Britain or to choose another country. Employment overseas was varied and, if circumstances changed and wages declined, other jobs were available in countries that were building out their infrastructure.

III

By centring the child, this article makes two key contributions. Firstly, through its study of the letters of young male institutional migrants, it provides valuable insights into the motivations of broader working-class English emigrants, who, as Eric Richards notes, have often been consigned to the background of the imperial narrative and viewed as 'the victims, the manipulated, the weary, the dross' and 'the hapless'.[116] The boys in this study were beginning their working life and in deciding to emigrate were making rational choices within the context of the options open to them. The settler colonies offered a freedom of employment and movement to the British working classes that contrasted with employment constraints and social limitations at home. The willingness of boys and young men to leverage their mobility in pursuit of the profit made possible by the exploitation of imperial spaces makes it evident just how transnational Victorian society was and shows the extent to which the world beyond the British Isles was embedded in the daily life of nineteenth-century Britons.

Secondly, by arguing that juvenile emigrants need to be viewed as a heterogeneous body where age and gender made a difference in terms of experience, the article provides an important new perspective on institutional migration and on wider literatures on childhood and youth. The dominant historiography portrays child emigrants as largely passive objects of policy, yet analysing boys' letters has revealed the multiple ways in which they were able to exercise autonomy in their lives in a way that younger or female emigrants perhaps could not. However, importantly the research also shows that not just content with directing their own lives, they also sought to influence those of others. Through the discursive social space of

[114]SHC, 2271/33, Emigration Book, pp. 80–3; SHC, 2271/1/13, Annual Report (1865), p. 39; SHC, 2271/1/16, Annual Report (1866), p. 43.

[115]SHC, 2271/33, Emigration Book, pp. 157, 165, 170, 177, 185.

[116]Eric Richards, 'British emigrants and the making of the Anglosphere', *History*, 103 (2018), p. 286.

their letters, these boys created and recirculated ideas of emigration and of the settler colonies that persuaded others to follow in their footsteps. In all these actions, they showed that they were not victims but were instead shaping their own futures. Recognizing this significantly undermines the modern discourses of blame and victimhood that dominate the historiography and encourages us to re-evaluate our approach to nineteenth-century juvenile migration.

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