

# HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn examines the life of a pioneer of children's welfare

## HEROES 16: Dr Barnardo: the children's champion 1845-1905

It's a cold winter's night in 1866. You're a 21 year old medical student, volunteering in one of Shaftesbury's ragged schools and it's home time. You're locking up the converted donkey shed in London's East End. But there's an eight year old boy curled up by the burning coals who refuses to leave: 'Ain't got no home to go to sir!' What do you do? There were no children's services in 1866! Not until Thomas Barnardo's pioneering work, an Irish medical student at the London Hospital. Motivated by Christ's example and commands, his work gave rise to principles of child welfare which are now recognised all around the world. This is his story.



so Barnardo spoke instead, and raised the issue of child homelessness. Missionary topics went viral on the Victorian press. Lord Shaftesbury read of this medical student's speech and was concerned: were whole tribes of homeless waifs slipping through the net of his ragged schools? Curiously even the great reformer Shaftesbury was unaware of the scale of child homelessness on the streets of London. Barnardo had witnessed poverty and medical calamity first hand in the East End. Cholera hit London in 1866 and 65% cases were in the East, with up to 16 deaths per day.

Shaftesbury invited Barnardo to his home, and planned some empirical research near Billingsgate market. Searching under crates and behind barrels with burning matches at one in the morning, this focus group found a pile of boys under tarpaulins. Scared they were in trouble with the law, Shaftesbury induced them with free sausages, bread and a penny each. They counted 73 lining up for the offer. Shaftesbury apologised to the student for doubting him: 'Public opinion can cure this ghastly ill...I will see that all London knows of what we experienced tonight. You hope

### a missionary to London's slums

The young lad, Jim Jarvis, told Barnardo that he had slept in a hay cart the night before and had to move each night to keep ahead of the police. He took him on a night tour, scaling a ten foot wall onto an open roof where eleven other 'urchins' slept rough. Shortly after, Barnardo was invited to a missions rally, because he was intending to be a medical missionary to China. The speaker was sick,



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to go as a missionary to China, that is a noble ambition. But pray over the events of this night. It may be that God is calling you to labour among the homeless children of this metropolis!<sup>1</sup>

## storming Edinburgh Castle

One request Shaftesbury made of his young apprentice was another piece of research: to establish the cause of each child's lot. Both were astonished to find that 85% stated that directly or indirectly, alcohol had been the cause of their family's demise. Gin was particularly popular as it was cheap; many pubs had signs stating 'drunk for a penny, dead drunk for two'. Many women became heavy consumers of gin, causing it to become known as 'mother's ruin'. The average consumption was half a pint per day.<sup>2</sup> It was another symptom of the malaise that England suffered in the mid-nineteenth century: desperate poverty alongside spectacular wealth, horrific health stats, social breakdown and soaring crime.

Barnardo responded by becoming teetotal, and set about addressing the root cause. In August 1872 he invited a mission to set a tent opposite a notorious 'gin palace', the Edinburgh Castle in Limehouse. Hundreds professed faith, signed a



sobriety pledge and many became volunteers. This mission was so successful that the Edinburgh Castle lost custom and was forced onto the market. Barnardo seized the opportunity to rededicate it as a 'coffee palace', serving cheap meals and recreation for working men. It became a hub for the temperance movement. His cause was so popular that he was able to fund this venture without borrowing a penny.

However, it was not all smooth running. His success in mission threatened bar trade and

prevented him from hiring public rooms. Other times he was pelted with rotten fruit, or dead cats and rats were dropped on him from the skylights of halls where he has preaching. He did not want to retreat to a religious building but to 'go into the highways and byways'. He was dismayed by what he heard in the 'penny gaffs' and on occasion paid to have an audience to preach the gospel to! Once he was selling Bibles in a pub when he was assaulted, with cries of 'bonnet him' and 'chuck 'im down!' A table was thrust on him whilst drunk teenagers danced on it. He was dragged away unconscious with broken ribs. When asked if he would press charges, he replied 'I began with the gospel, I am determined not to end with the law!'

His assailants visited him daily, and he believed that the incident gave him more influence than years of preaching would have.

One case that seared his conscience was 'Carrots', the ginger-haired eleven year old John Somers, who turned up half-naked and half-starved at one of his first homes in Stepney Causeway. There was no bed for him, but he was given a meal and promised lodgings a week later. His mother, a gin drinker, left him to fend for himself. He tried selling matches but the weather was stormy. He was found dead six days later. Barnardo resolved a new policy 'no destitute child ever refused admission'. That's quite an ambition for a medical student! But the founding principles of Barnardo's organisation rested on Christ's teaching that 'it is not the will of our Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish'.<sup>3</sup> He vowed to rear the most unfortunate, so as to honour both his country and his God.

### a missionary to the stingy

Barnardo was deeply impressed by George Müller (1805-1898). Müller ran orphan houses in Bristol, a 'faith mission', and had remarkable answers to prayer whilst refusing to ask for money directly, raising the equivalent of £90 million in today's currency. He stated that his work was not merely charity but that the 'orphan houses exist to display that God can be trusted and to encourage believers to take him at his word'.<sup>4</sup>

But Barnardo's aim never to refuse admission to a destitute child gave him a dilemma. He was soon

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overwhelmed by needy waifs, and needed to expand urgently by taking on new buildings and mortgages. As he searched the scriptures, he discerned another principle for provision. St Paul had recommended: 'see that you also excel in this grace of giving'.<sup>5</sup> And had not Christ sent his disciples ahead to Jerusalem to fetch an ass and a colt with the words 'the Lord has need of them'? Had not even Müller published his accounts widely? Too many Christians were 'almost cucumbers in the ground' when it came to shouldering their financial responsibilities to 'evangelise the masses, rescue the perishing, to deliver homeless

and suffering children from the power of the destroyer'. He felt a special calling to provoke and educate the consciences of the hardhearted, a 'special mission to the stingy!' And he led by example. He worked for the homes for 17 years without pay, and when forced to take a salary, it was less than half what he would have earned in medicine.

Before he qualified, his charity was pulling in a staggering £30,000: equivalent to £4 million today! And these finances were entrusted solely to a student zealot! Unusually, he refused to print any of the donors' names, quoting the scripture 'when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret'.<sup>6</sup>

But God answered his prayers in ways that demonstrated that his appeals went to a greater sponsor. Once he was warned that he had to pay £550, or his mortgage would be foreclosed. On the

day of the deadline he went to throw himself at the mercy of the lawyer (a futile plan!). As he crossed Pall Mall a total stranger stopped him and introduced himself as just returned from India, where a colonel had given him the proceeds of a bazaar. The packet contained £650.

### 'God setteth the solitary in families'

In contrast with the austere Victorian households of the day, Barnardo recognised the emotional needs of children. He said he had never seen an ugly child. He sacked one of his workers because 'she [had] no heart for the poor dears that need love more than medicine'. Therefore he preferred to have children boarded out with families rather than raised in an institution. Frustratingly, it was harder to fundraise for boarders than for orphans in a home. Boarding was Barnardo's early pioneering of fostering, encouraged by the Bible: 'God setteth the solitary in families'.<sup>7</sup>

His support for unmarried mothers was also unusual for its time. He devised a scheme to give them employment and keep the family intact. So great was his passion for the children's work that when he got engaged, his supporters could think of no better wedding present than a national whip-round to buy buildings for his first home for girls. He was delighted!

### controversy

Like most heroes, Barnardo was not above reproach. He was taken to court for arranging the



adoption of a child to Canada, after his mother had given permission but later regretted it. The transaction protected the adopting family from contact, and there were accusations of anti-Catholic bias. He could be autocratic, representing himself in court and claiming that 'philanthropic abduction' was sometimes necessary in the interests of the child. Today the pendulum has swung in the other direction, as services aim to keep children with their natural parents wherever safe to do so. He also admitted that some of the photographs used in appeals had been doctored to maximise their impact. Today you might say that he was good at marketing!

More recent campaigns by the charity that bears his name have been hard hitting even by modern standards. Would Barnardo have approved, in order to provoke the viewer's conscience?

Despite these troubles, Barnardo weathered the storms and emerged as a popular public figure. Once he was robbed of his coat, watch, pen and all his money before being recognised. His robbers then apologised: "ad we know'd you was Dr Barnardo, we would never ha' touched you!"

### legacy

Barnardo's legal disputes revealed the horrors many children had to endure without protection, and led to the Enquiry into the Destitute Child Problem, for which he was a chief witness. This led to the Act for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children 1889, transferring all rights from 'vicious parents'



to suitable guardians. Another 'Barnardo Act' empowered courts to take custody of neglected children. But it was a full hundred years after his birth that the Curtiss report of 1946 finally resolved that the state would be the default guardian of vulnerable children, even the homeless ones, and paved the way for the Children's Act of 1948.

However, is the state a good parent? Today, children in care are at high risk of falling into the criminal justice system: 27% of the adult prison population have once been in care.<sup>8</sup> But figures show that convictions amongst Barnardo's protégés relocated to Canada was 1.36/1000, one fifth that of Canadian citizens, and even comparing favourably with contemporary MPs! By this measure, Barnardo's children were well adjusted: 'If they had not been caught early, how many of these poor children might have fallen into a life of crime because there was nobody to help them? As Home Secretary, I thank God for Dr Barnardo's homes.'<sup>9</sup>

One example of reformed character was James Page, a 'street urchin' who was caught robbing a drunk Frenchman, when he was taken in by Barnardo. He went on to become Chief Whip to the Australian Parliament. A cabinet minister who chaired a Royal Commission on the Poor Law Schools declared that 'much as the government owed Barnardo for what he has done, it owed more for *what he has taught the state to do*'.<sup>10</sup> Rev Benjamin Waugh, founder of the NSPCC remarked: 'In protecting the young from the evils to which they are exposed, Lord Shaftesbury and Dr Barnardo were our pioneers'.

By the time of his death in 1905, Barnardo's homes cared for over 8,500 children in 96 locations, and had rescued 60,000 children from the direst circumstances. It became the UK biggest children's charity.

## reflection on the life of Barnardo

- What issues have you noticed that older doctors, Christians and the state are neglecting?
- What stops you speaking about Jesus as boldly as Barnardo?
- What is the place of appeals and prayer in causes you support?
- Barnardo was heading for China, but followed the missionary principle: 'plan to go, be prepared to stay'. Where can God use you best?
- Barnardo regularly spent the hours between midnight and 3am not on Facebook, but with his face in a book! Leaders are readers - how can you make the most of your time?

Sadly, since his death, the Barnardo charity reflected that its institutions became more focused on the moral and physical wellbeing over the emotional, and staff could be cold and aloof.<sup>11</sup> Concerns were also raised about sending so many children abroad to the colonies, where conditions could be harsh and guardianship less closely monitored. The charity's work has since evolved into diverse areas of advocacy for 200,000 vulnerable children in a range of settings today. It begs the question of what the church should leave the state to do, and what we can and should do better. ■

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