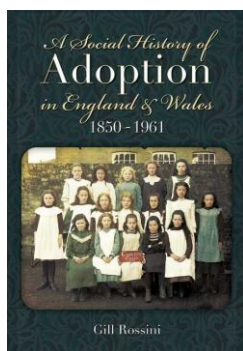


Full title of book: A History of Adoption in England and Wales: 1850-1961



Author(s) of book: Gill Rossini

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This book on adoption attracted me because of personal experience of adopting a baby in England in 1974: slightly outwith the dates cited here but nevertheless worth comparing. I hoped for a 'good read'. It did not disappoint, and emphasised to me the huge changes that had occurred in the period covered. The book is set out in six clearly-headed chapters, the first five of which, in chronological order, take the reader through aspects of the history of adoption in England and Wales. Fourteen appropriate illustrations are provided.

Chapter 1 is the introduction to the book. It gives a background to adoption and discusses possible reasons for choosing this path. We see the contrast to today in the views, starkly portrayed, of mid-nineteenth century citizens of England and Wales on children and what should be 'done' to and for them, on illegitimacy, women, and, the value or otherwise of education.

In Chapter 2, Rossini describes ideas of 'family' and being a child in England and Wales around 1851. The sentence: 'A child was a small human whom you could own, exploit, love and abuse as you wished, and then discard at will', heralds examples of fostering and adoption, procuring an abortion, infanticide, and of private baby adoption by advertising. Baby farming became a norm, with frequent disastrous consequences. At last, the 1872 Infant Life Protection Act came as a first step towards child protection. The societal changes of World War I led to further child legislation.

It was in 1918 that a serious push for legal adoption began and this is described in Chapter 3. Work continued with babies born outside marriage, 'fallen women', adoption societies, and the 'new' family where the parents were divorced. The idea of the perfect home was born and thrust at couples through women's magazines, cinemas, child-rearing experts, the 'perfect' Royal family, must-have children and, a last resort, adoption. This was not legalised until the 1926 Adoption of Children Act was passed: a step in the right direction.

The 'perfect family' did not last long. Chapter 4 takes us from 1926 to 1945, through the turbulence of World War II. The 1926 Act, although only partially successful in its efforts towards a better world for children in need of care, at least publicised the need. Into the mix

came Marie Stopes and her work on birth-control, the trend towards smaller families, and, much later, the decline in numbers of babies available for adoption. A Parliamentary Committee chaired by Florence Horsburgh, MP for Dundee eventually published its Report (1936). This uncovered many systemic failings and made recommendations held up by the War. The evacuation of 10,000 children both on the *Kindertransport* from mainland Europe to the UK in the 1930s and internally during the War further complicated the system. The 1926 Act was strengthened by the 1943 Adoption of Children Regulation Act to regularise the position of adoption societies.

Rossini deals with the post-war years in Chapter 5 by describing how the welfare system changed. Most well-known of the contemporary legislation was the implementation of all the UK National Health Service Acts on 5 July 1948. Lesser-known was the pertinent 1948 Children's Act, underlining the need for the State to make better provision for children. These Acts are examples of post-war optimism – but actually changing attitudes took a long time. 'Eleanor's Story' (1954) highlights social mind-sets as entrenched as they were in Victorian times.

Chapter 6 is a practical section on researching adoption for oneself. Rossini gives helpful advice on, for example, acquiring family sources, planning research and finding resources, and gives examples of what to look for. The final section contains an Appendix regarding Adoption Procedure in England and Wales, Further Reading suggestions, a Glossary, and a short but clearly defined Index. Throughout the book, I missed being able to consult foot- or end-notes as I read. The final section helped to make up for this.

Within the first five chapters of this history of adoption Rossini covers much ground on this sensitive subject. This is achieved in a readable style and includes much historical detail, such as legislative dates and numerical trends, plus oral testimonies and the stories surrounding them. If available, both are necessary to help create a rounded picture of the social past of an issue like adoption. Many of the accounts are very sad, but Rossini presents a fascinating insight into the movement for change in the adoption process from the turbulent times of babies left to die, baby-farms and cruelty, to early legislation followed by the 1943 Act. Another Adoption Act was passed in 1950 to amend and bring up to date the previous legislation.

This thoughtful book is well worth reading for anyone interested in social history. In addition, I would like to recommend that it be on appropriate reading lists and libraries.

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