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research article

Stories from Edzell Lodge children's home in the 1940s and 1950s: lessons for practice and research

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'*Gnatola ma no kpon sia, eyenabe adelan to kpo mi sena*' ('Until the lion has his or her own storyteller, the hunter will always have the best part of the story') (Ghanian proverb, available at: <http://thelionandthehunter.org/>). Historically, both the discipline and profession of social work have been imagined and constructed by those who oversee social work services – 'the hunters', according to the aforementioned Ghanaian proverb. Thus, it has been predominantly white, middle-class, non-disabled, mainly female, Global North voices that have determined what social work looks like and how it is carried out across the world. However, this is changing. Today, many more 'lions' are telling their stories, as this article demonstrates. Through the curated narratives of Bob, Doug and Rose, as well as that of their storyteller/collaborator, Viv, we learn that growing up in care in Scotland in the 1940s and 1950s was 'confused and confusing' for the children at the heart of it. Contradictory discourses competed for dominance, and the children experienced unintended consequences from the 'care' they received. While not attempting to universalise on the basis of three people's stories, we believe that they have much to teach social work.

Keywords residential childcare • 1940s and 1950s • Scotland • experts by experience • unmarried mothers

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Introduction

Gnatola ma no kpon sia, eyenabe adelan to kpo mi sena ['Until the lion has his or her own storyteller, the hunter will always have the best part of the story']. (Ghanian proverb, available at: <http://thelionandthehunter.org/>)

The profession of social work emerged in the Global North in the second half of the 19th century as a compassionate response to the overwhelming social, economic and personal challenges that accompanied rapid industrialisation and urbanisation (Hugman, 2009; Cree, 2013). In the UK, this saw the development of both statutory and voluntary initiatives, most of which were led by white, middle-class, non-disabled people, many of whom were women (Walton, 1975; Cree et al, 2020). As a consequence, we have been left with a partial understanding of the impact of social work services, with some notable exceptions (for example, Holman, 1987; Mayer and Timms, 1970). Meanwhile, activists have sought to challenge mainstream accounts, drawing attention both to the silences and to the real harms that have taken place in the name of ‘doing good’ (see, for example, Beresford and Croft, 1980; Oliver, 1983; Sköld and Swaine, 2015).

The Guild of Service for Women (henceforth, the Guild of Service)¹ was one such UK voluntary initiative. It had its roots in the global social purity movement, ‘rescuing young women who were deemed to be at risk of sexual exploitation at home and abroad’ (Cree, 1995: 3). By the early 1940s, the agency offered casework support and, where necessary, ‘boarding out’ (fostering) for the children of the ever-growing number of women who were then described as ‘unmarried mothers’. It also had a kiosk at Waverley Station in Edinburgh, where a station worker met young women travelling from rural areas into the city in search of work. In 1946, the agency moved into what, for it, was new territory, opening Edzell Lodge children’s home in Scotland’s capital city of Edinburgh. Importantly for the Guild of Service and for this article, Edzell Lodge was never envisaged as a children’s home for abandoned or unwanted children. Instead, it set out to provide a resource for mothers, what it called a ‘family’ home for 12 children whose mothers were expected to pay towards their care. That there was perceived to be an ‘urgent need’ for such accommodation for ‘illegitimate’ children had been acknowledged at a conference held in Edinburgh a few years earlier in 1940 (Ashley, 1955).

This article will present stories from Edzell Lodge, as told through the testimonies of three of its first residents (the ‘lions’, according to the aforementioned Ghanaian proverb), all of whom spent their childhoods in Edzell Lodge and its successor home, Margaret Cottage. The stories have been located by their storyteller/collaborator in the wider context of agency records (case files, minute books, annual reports and miscellaneous papers), wider reading and the findings of a PhD completed in 1993 (Cree, 1993). The four authors have been working together over the last two years to co-investigate and co-construct this history, after a connection made during the first COVID-19 pandemic ‘lockdown’ (see Cree and MacKenzie, 2023a). We now briefly outline the methodological approach we have taken to this co-enquiry (see also Cree and MacKenzie, 2023b). The main focus of the article will then be to present and analyse the lions’ stories. We end by offering some conclusions for future practice and research.

We have chosen to refer to our three main correspondents as ‘lions’ in homage to the Ghanaian proverb quoted earlier and in preference to any of the other terms that are more commonly used: ‘former child in care’, ‘care leaver’, ‘care-experienced adult’ and ‘expert by experience’. Each of these terms can be experienced as objectifying and stigmatising, and can elide the differences between people in terms of their gender, class, sexualities, ages, personal biographies and so on (see Beresford et al, 2005; McLaughlin, 2009; Skoura-Kirk, 2022).

Methodology

The methodology we use here is different to that of conventional social work research. Not only have we named those who are most frequently referred to anonymously or with pseudonyms as 'respondents', 'informants' or 'participants', but we have each played a part in co-constructing the themes and discussion in the article. Moreover, two of us took the lead in drafting the article, which was then shared and commented on by all four co-researchers.

Two traditions inform our methodology: oral history and interpretive biography. Oral history is a way of conducting historical research through the memories and narratives of those who experienced the events they describe (Leavy, 2011; Abrams, 2016; Thompson, 2017). It emerged in the late 1940s as a direct challenge to standard academic history, which was almost always related from the perspectives of those in power. Since then, feminist and other constructionist historians and sociologists have sought to rebalance the historical agenda, uncovering new stories and bringing fresh insight into understandings of our past (and present). Interpretive biography takes this further, encouraging us to interrogate 'documents of life' (Plummer, 1983: 13), not only through conversation and interviews, but also by exploring autobiographies, diaries, letters and life stories. Throughout all this endeavour, there is a recognition that there is not one, single 'truth' to be uncovered. Instead, multiple versions of truths exist, and these change and are changed through the process of our lives and as we bring new meaning to the encounters and experiences that frame us (see Ellis et al, 2011). From this point of view, in writing this article, our knowledge and understandings have changed and are changing still; what is offered here is simply our current and best attempt to explain a world that we have each experienced in different ways, from different standpoints and different perspectives, and at different times.

Our practice has also been informed by our understandings of reflexivity, power and intersectionality (Finlay, 2002; Etherington, 2007; Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2017). This means that we have been aware that who we are (our identities – personal, professional, gender, age, ethnicity and so on) has inevitably impacted on how we are in the world, with each other and in this research. We all come from a different place, with different expertise, and yet we have a shared history too, and it is that which brought us together in the first place. Thereafter, we have worked together in an atmosphere of mutual inquiry, trust and care, looking after each other and sharing ideas, reading and sometimes new technologies with each other. This practice of 'ongoing dialoguing' (Hosking and Pluute, 2010) is premised on what Chia (1996) has referred to as an 'ontology of becoming' rather than an 'ontology of being'. In other words, our work is never finished!

Viv has played a specific role in bringing the stories together as storyteller/collaborator in a process we have conceptualised as a kind of curation. Drawn from a museum context, curation 'places multiple artifacts in dialogue with each other, instantiates them around a complex set of themes, elicits multiple meanings from related artifacts and narratives, and promotes questions as often as answers' (Persohn, 2021: 21). As 'curator', Viv met and interviewed the three co-researchers on multiple occasions (sometimes online) and carried out primary and secondary analysis of agency archives. This might suggest that she held additional power in the research, which she clearly did. However, with the focus firmly on the stories of the three lions, this power imbalance was counterbalanced

by the lions' greater knowledge and experience, and it was this that shaped and guided the project as a whole. This is, first and foremost, their story or stories.

Introducing the lions and their storyteller/collaborator

Bob's story

Bob was born in Edinburgh in 1944. In common with all the Edzell Lodge residents at the time, his mother, 'A', was unmarried and poor. Her own mother had died young, and her fisherman father had had no choice but to take his six daughters to a children's home in Aberdeen. 'A' spent her childhood there, not unhappily, as Bob recounts, and on leaving the children's home, she travelled to Edinburgh, where she made contact with a station worker from the Guild of Service. This person found her a hostel place. Some years later, she became pregnant to a Canadian serviceman, and after he returned to Canada, she did not hear from him again. When Bob was born, 'A' struggled to raise him while working 'in service' in private homes and also living and working for a time at Inveresk poorhouse in East Lothian. When he was two years and ten months old, she admitted defeat and sought help again.

Bob became the first resident of Edzell Lodge, the Guild of Service's new children's home in the New Town suburb of Inverleith, arriving one evening in late November 1946, before the home was officially opened. He describes Edzell Lodge as follows:

'It just seemed enormous to me and I actually loved it. I loved the building. It was warm red brick – no, not red brick, but red stone – and it sort of seemed to smile the way that you approached it through a very large gate that could be opened to allow cars and lorries to come in, and then there was a pedestrians' gate and a large garden. It had a play area. It had a ... sort of embankment with daffodils in the spring and beautiful flowering trees... Just opposite were the Royal Botanical Garden, straight ahead was Inverleith Park on the left, as you exited the building and behind the building, the Water of Leith flowed through. It was a lovely area – a very select area, actually... There was a vegetable garden. There was a greenhouse for growing seedlings, and there was a big garage which also had a vehicle pit. So, all the whole area for a young child, certainly for me, was a wonderful place to explore, with lots of hiding places as well, especially outside but also inside, and there were various nooks and crannies.'

Bob was hugely aware of what he calls the 'privilege' of growing up in such a space and in such an area. He remembers a busy life of playing with other children and the matron, Aunt Margaret's dog, walking to school in Comely Bank (Flora Stevenson's school), attending a local cub troop, church on Sundays, mealtimes in the home (heralded by a gong), prayers and a hymn at bedtime ("Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh"). There was a formality to daily life. The two live-in carers were always addressed as 'Aunt' or 'Auntie', and table manners and good behaviour were expected at all times, most especially when visitors were present, which was frequently, as a steady stream of committee members and external visitors came to call. Children were also taken to committee members' homes, on occasion, for afternoon tea. There were also, however, opportunities for free time, for exploring and for fun. Bob recounts

being allowed to lick the spoon when the cook was making fudge in the kitchen. He also remembers Saturday mornings spent with Wullie, who worked in the plant nursery at Inverleith Park. Wullie would share his 'brew' of tea with Bob and talk to him about flowers. Sunday afternoon was the time when mothers were allowed to visit or children could go out to see their mothers. Bob continued to see his mother intermittently, and then later more frequently. On two occasions, the agency asked 'A' to consider placing Bob for adoption, but she refused both times. When she married later in life and moved to West Lothian, it seemed for a time that she might then be able to take Bob to live with her. This was never, however, a realistic option. Grinding poverty and an alcoholic stepfather militated against this, and although Bob did visit his mother for short stays, he was hugely aware of the uncomfortable contrast between his two lives.

Bob's childhood was massively impacted by the decision taken by the Guild of Service in 1951 to open another, smaller children's home in Juniper Green on the other side of Edinburgh. This was to be a home for the children who were not expected to go back to their mothers, as Bob explains:

'It was clear that some children were not going to be placed, and Margaret Cottage became what you imagine, not exactly, not cradle to grave but cradle to adults, and it didn't work perfectly like that. But I think all the children that went to Margaret Cottage ended up being there until adult.... Margaret Cottage, I think, was conceived with that idea of being a home for them.'

When Aunt Margaret and eight children relocated to Juniper Green, Bob was left behind with a few others, including Rose. He was aged just seven years and was desperately unhappy; he had to wait another five years before a place was found for him at Margaret Cottage. What helped him over this unsettled period was school and homework. He went on to the University of Edinburgh, where he graduated in 'honours' history. He became part of the latter-day Scottish diaspora, taking up an overseas development post in East Africa. His career since then has spanned UK and international settings within the public, private, voluntary and higher education sectors; he also undertook a DPhil on learning (MacKenzie, 2005). He is currently Visiting Professor of Management Learning at the University of Chichester.

Doug's story

Doug was born in Glasgow in 1947. His mother, 'M', was living at the Glasgow Home for Deserted Mothers. Growing up in a village in the Scottish Borders, she had concealed her pregnancy from her family until the last possible moment, intending that her baby would be adopted immediately; she had caring responsibilities for her elderly parents and was unable to care for a child. Doug's father was a divinity student at Edinburgh University, who had met 'M' while on an army training exercise in the Borders. Through his church connections, he knew one of the Guild of Service committee members, so had asked for help. As a result, the 'organising secretary', Miss Kay Stewart, had travelled to the Borders to meet the family, and she made arrangements from then on. (Significantly, this visit was recorded at the time as an opportunity to find out if the extended family would be able to keep the baby; Miss

Stewart had strong views that adoption should only ever be as a last resort.) As things turned out, adoption at birth was not possible because the baby was ‘in a very poor physical condition’ (case file), and when he was three weeks old, it was decided that he should go to Edzell Lodge for nursing care. Thereafter, he thrived. Doug remembers Edzell Lodge fondly:

‘What I did like, it was a big rambling house, plenty space to run around in, I very rarely remember the children arguing amongst themselves, squabbling, I suppose there would be petty squabbles, but most of the time it would be fun. There was quite a lot of coming and going, I remember committee members coming in and you thought, “I’ve seen that person before, but I’ve no idea who they are”, and you might see them again a year later. They’d pop in and out. I suppose you’d answer any questions they asked, but I cannot remember anything in particular. They were just there. Someone used to send me comics – I never met them, but I’d get a roll of comics – I think this was more at Margaret Cottage [the second children’s home] – so I’d get *The Dandy*, *The Beano* and *The Eagle* all rolled in a tube, and I’d look forward to that coming in the post. But I still don’t know who the people were that sent me them regularly, and then I suppose just after a while they suddenly stopped – either they’d served their purpose in helping someone on a voluntary basis or whatever, I just have no idea. It would have been nice to say thank you to them. But the rest of the time in the home, I enjoyed playing outside – the garden was great fun. I liked the fire escapes because you weren’t supposed to go on them. And this is where – we had a fire escape drill that we had to do on occasion. For me, it was great fun, running down the stairs.... I’ve no idea how many children were in the home. I always thought there were between eight and an itinerant maybe 12, come and go? Some people you’d see for a few months and suddenly they weren’t there anymore, and you don’t know what happened to them.’

Doug’s mother continued to press for him to be adopted, not least because she found it difficult to meet the monthly payments for his upkeep in the children’s home (case file). The matron at Edzell Lodge (‘Aunt Margaret’ to all the children) then applied to adopt Doug when he was four years old. The adoption was finalised in 1951. It was unusual for two reasons. First, the matron was a single woman in her early 30s, and at that time, single-person adoptions were virtually unheard of. However, more importantly for Doug, Aunt Margaret did not tell him that she had adopted him until some years later, though some of the older children in the home had guessed by then. He explains:

‘Aunt Margaret told me I was adopted when I was 11 or 12 and not to talk about it, so there was no rivalry with the other children, hence my calling her “Aunt Margaret”. After 16 years, you couldn’t stop calling her Aunt Margaret. It would be a joke. I’d give her a cuddle and call her “mum” on occasion, but she wasn’t used to that either. She was perfectly happy being “Aunt Margaret” to everybody.... There couldn’t have been a better mother. Really, I think she was a saviour for an awful lot of those that had more troubles than I had. She was a genuine article.’

Doug's adoption did, however, change aspects of his life. As well as attending Sunday school at the local Church of Scotland with the other children, he sang in the choir at Aunt Margaret's church, an Episcopal Church in the West End of Edinburgh. He also attended Scouts there and was sent to private school after primary school at Juniper Green. On leaving school, Doug joined the army at a junior leaders' regiment in Wales and then the 7th Parachute Regiment Royal Horse Artillery regiment. After a few years of military service, Doug bought himself out of the army to pursue a career in instructing/teaching outdoor sports/activities. He worked first with a commercial company in the Scottish Highlands, then for Edinburgh Council's Education Department, gaining more National Qualifications on the way, until taking early retirement. He had two daughters.

Reflecting on his childhood and upbringing, Doug describes his time as happy overall. However, he acknowledges that the children he grew up with were not his siblings (though in adult life, a few have built strong relationships with each other); they were the children Doug lived with, as he says, "the kids in the kids' home". There was also, he admits, "the randomness of childhood – things happen and you don't understand why".

Rose's story

Rose was born in Dundee in 1943. Her mother, 'M', had been working as a domestic cook in Edinburgh and had travelled to the mother-and-baby home in Dundee to have her baby. 'M's family were poor, Irish Catholics from Paisley; she and two of her siblings had spent some years in a home in Paisley, and she had then been 'boarded out' on a farm. 'M' had subsequently joined the navy and was a Wren during the Second World War, working in the kitchen on HMS Condor, where she met Rose's father, who later drowned at sea during hostilities. After Rose was born, 'M' took her back to Edinburgh, where they lived for the next three or four years in the servants' quarter of James and Charlotte Learmonth's house in Morningside. James Learmonth (later Sir James) was Professor of Surgery at the University of Edinburgh and the King's surgeon in Scotland; Charlotte (later Lady Learmonth) was a member and then chair of the Committee of the Guild of Service. Rose thinks that it was Charlotte Learmonth who suggested to 'M' that Rose should move into Edzell Lodge:

'She ["M"] was the head cook there, and I was about three or something, and she just wasn't able to do her job and look after me too. Lady Learmonth suggested to my mother to put me in here because I'd be better off with other kids and I'd be taken care of.... So, I remember the day my mother took me to Edzell Lodge. I remember being lined up with a few other kids.... And then I was taken up to my dormitory, and there was probably ten kids up one side and ten up the other, and I stood at the window and watched my mother walk away. It was awful. Awful. So, then, I lived there, just a life – I mean, we were well looked after. We went on vacation, etc, but nobody really loved you or hugged you. It was up to you and other children, and that's why I became close with Bob, and Doug, and....'

Rose also remembers well her puzzlement with the coming and going of children in the home: "Yeah, because you didn't know, it was just confusing ... cos some would

come and go, and we would stay. And you made friends with somebody, and then they weren't there the next day. No, they were gone.... I just remember particularly the young ones coming and going." The relocation to Margaret Cottage affected Rose badly because, as a child who had contact with her mother, she was one of the children left behind. She tells of her anguish at this time:

'So, I was there till, I'm guessing, ten, and Bob and ... and the whole bunch of us were walking to school with the head of the home, Aunt Margaret, and on the way to school, she announced that they were opening up Margaret Cottage and they were taking this one and this one and this one, but not Bob and I, she said, because we had mothers that visited; the others didn't have mothers that visited. So, that part of my life, I fell apart, and I actually ran away. Yeah, I ran and ran. On the way home from Flora Stevenson School, I just lay by the pond for hours, and I think it was ... that came and got me, and I thought I better go back because I'm in trouble already. I got so depressed. I stopped eating. I stopped paying attention at school. They decided to take me at the last minute because ... was the only girl going and she and I were like sisters. That was traumatic, very traumatic. It was terrible, and to this day, I have nightmares, to this day. I never got over that because they were separating us, you know?'

However, Rose was more fortunate than Bob, as she appreciates. Space was found for her a few days later, and she moved into Margaret Cottage with the other eight children. Throughout this time and beyond, the Learmonths maintained a close relationship with Rose, and she visited them when they relocated to Midlothian. Rose also continued to see her mother a few times a year, and on one occasion, when a couple expressed interest, her mother refused to allow Rose to be adopted. When she left school, Rose went to live in the Western General Hospital while training to be a nurse. She met and married her husband, and they emigrated to Canada, where they had one child and adopted another.

Viv

Viv was born in 1954 in Dundee, the middle one of three girls and 'first in family' to go to university. She later became a youth and community worker, and then a social worker, where she worked with single parents at what had been the Guild of Service but was known as Family Care by the 1980s. The agency's history became the topic of her PhD, in which she conducted documentary analysis and interviewed some 80 former and current social workers and committee members (Cree, 1993). No lions were interviewed because her focus of attention was on how social workers (paid and unpaid) described their work. In 1992, she started work as a lecturer in social work at the University of Edinburgh, and in 1995, she wrote up and published her PhD as a standalone book (Cree, 1995). She remained at the university for the next 26 years, occupying various posts and positions, until retiring from full-time work at the end of 2018. She is now an emerita professor of social work, still writing and researching, mainly on history topics. Viv is immensely grateful to have the opportunity to revisit her PhD research and to meet and learn from the lions who have contributed to this article, writing the following about this new project:

Not only has it been possible to revisit and recontextualise everything I already thought I knew about social work history and about the Guild of Service's history, it has also allowed me to delve into what is a whole new field of interest for me, that is, residential childcare history. I have also enjoyed thoroughly getting to know the lions and engaging in what is truly co-enquiry and shared learning for all of us.

Themes

From these brief autobiographies, three strong themes emerge: the personal, social and economic context; attitudes to unmarried mothers and adoption; and approaches to residential childcare.

The personal, social and economic context

The autobiographies demonstrate the personal, social and economic hardships faced by the lions at the heart of this article. Their birth families had all experienced poverty over generations, and two of the three mothers had themselves spent time 'in care' as children. The Second World War had a massive impact on these families, as it did on others (Waller, 2012). All three lions were born to fathers who were unable to provide for them, one because of death and another because of his return to Canada following demobilisation. Two of the three mothers did manage to care for their babies for the first few years, principally through 'live-in' domestic situations and the use of nurseries, but as the children became more active and more demanding of attention, this proved unworkable. Moreover, the tide was changing, with increasing pressure on women to stay at home to raise the next generation of children (Richardson, 2015). Domestic service (particularly for those 'living in') was diminishing, nurseries closed down and working-class women sought better-paid work than was available through previous informal fostering arrangements (Greenlees, 2015). With limited financial input from the state and no help from extended family members, the lions' mothers had little chance of raising their children on their own.

Attitudes to unmarried mothers and adoption

The autobiographies also offer us a window into attitudes towards unmarried mothers and adoption. As already suggested, Edzell Lodge was intended to be a support for unmarried mothers, as well as for their children. Only one of the three mothers of our lions actively wished her child to be adopted, and Doug only found himself in the children's home because he was considered unadoptable due to his poor physical condition at birth.

Although adoption was legalised in Scotland in 1930, the Guild of Service, and its organising secretary, Miss Stewart, in particular, believed that a child's best chance in life was to grow up within their birth family, if at all possible. She was not alone in this view. The 1937–38 annual report of the London-based [National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child](#) (1937–38: 16, emphasis in original) states that

although ‘many unmarried mothers *want* to hand over their children for adoption from birth, total separation of mother and child is to be deplored, in the Council’s opinion, as the usual solution for illegitimacy’. Its 1939–41 report reiterates that the council ‘sees no reason, despite war difficulties, to depart from its fundamental principle of keeping mother and child together wherever possible’, maintaining that ‘to keep a child with, or near, its mother is probably the strongest incentive in helping her to lead a moral life in the future’ and concluding that ‘it is therefore always anxious that she should not be deprived of the responsibility, interest and affection which the child should bring to her life’ ([National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child, 1939–41](#): 9). The Scottish Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child and other agencies in Scotland took what might best be described as a pragmatic approach. They realised that for many, being ‘unmarried’ was a temporary situation. Many unmarried mothers went on to marry the father of their illegitimate child, while others married someone else. In either case, the mothers needed time to get their lives in a position that would allow them to take their child ‘home’ ([Ashley, 1955](#)).

This is a very different picture to the one that is currently in the forefront of the public imagination, where the notion of ‘forced adoption’ is most prevalent (see, for example, then Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon’s ‘sincere, heartfelt and unreserved’ apology on 23 March 2023 to people affected by the practice of ‘forced adoption’). It suggests that for a complex mix of reasons, removing an ‘illegitimate’ child from their birth mother was not always the favoured response to an unplanned pregnancy in the 1940s, as is also demonstrated in [Thane and Evans’ \(2012\)](#) study of unmarried motherhood in England. The Guild of Service did not become a registered adoption society until 1954, after Miss Stewart had resigned as organising secretary. Her departure marked a decided shift in direction for the agency ([Cree, 1993; 1995](#)). Keen to be seen as a trend-setter and model of good practice, it began to lead the field in baby adoption, most specifically, in the selection and training of adopters, and in ‘matching’ babies with their new parents, including carrying out psychological and intelligence tests on the unmarried mothers and, less often, their partners. The impact of psychodynamic and psychoanalytic principles was fundamental to this activity, replacing what were presented at the time as outdated, punitive and moralistic discourses ([Cree, 1993; 1995](#)). Unmarried mothers were increasingly pathologised as neurotic, sick or extroverted (see [Young, 1954](#); [Wimperis, 1960](#); [Gough, 1964](#)), and ‘good practice’ for children came to be couched in terms of the need for ‘attachment’ and the search for ‘permanent’ solutions ([Bowlby, 1951](#); [Goldstein et al, 1973](#)). For the lions growing up in the children’s home, the agency’s shift in direction was experienced in real time, without this ever being explained or understood, as all three stories demonstrate.

Approaches to residential childcare

This account has shed light on changing attitudes to unmarried mothers and adoption. It also gives us evidence about approaches to residential childcare and how these changed over time. When Edzell Lodge opened at the end of 1946, it was a pioneering institution, anticipating and also reflecting new ideas about children, childhood and care. Edzell Lodge began in 1946 as a ‘demonstration centre for the new idea’ of a ‘family home’ ([Guild of Service for Women, 1948](#): 12). It was intended

that it would be a small, stable group of children of all ages from infancy through to teenage years, much on the lines of a large Victorian family, in which the older children were expected to help to care for the younger children. This approach was in stark contrast to the large orphanages and 'cottage'-style children's homes that had been in vogue up till then; the agency expressed pride that 'the new venture in 1946' (Guild of Service for Women, 1955: 6) pre-dated the Clyde and Curtis Reports of 1946 (Care of Children Committee, 1946; Committee on Homeless Children, 1946). The degree to which the idea of a stable 'family' home was a reality for the children living in Edzell Lodge remains questionable, however. The 1950 Annual Report states: 'Edzell Lodge is now four years old. 15 happy children are in residence and 30 others have gone through its doors for longer or shorter periods as the "visiting cousins" the Committee visualised' (Guild of Service for Women, 1950: 10).

Many of the children who left Edzell Lodge returned to their birth families and so were seen as a success by the agency. Others went on to foster homes or for adoption. With demand for places high, vacancies were always filled quickly (Guild of Service for Women, 1960: 12). The outcome was that in the formal photographs taken for publicity purposes, there were children present whom none of our three lions could identify.

Edzell Lodge also struggled to hold on to a stable staff group. Annual reports from the 1940s to the 1960s describe staffing difficulties. Although the matron was a steady presence from 1946 through to 1963, her primary commitment was to the small group of children who had travelled with her to Margaret Cottage (and even here, there were many changes of staff at assistant matron level). Meanwhile, the much bigger home at Edzell Lodge had a succession of matrons and deputy matrons, as well as students from the social study course at the University of Edinburgh and then, in 1958, students from a new Home Office course for house-parents. Committee members also dropped into the home on a regular basis. Agency minutes record that committee members visited the home and stayed for the evening meal on a rotational basis, reporting back to a children's subcommittee, thus adding to the general feeling of instability experienced by the children.

Conclusions for practice and research

The stories of the three lions illustrate that life in the children's homes in the 1940s and 1950s was neither all good nor all bad. There were clear advantages to be had in the routine and order that the home offered, in the encouragement to play and to take part in creative activities, in the support for learning, and in the friendships with other children. However, there were disadvantages in the imposition of rules of behaviour and conduct that felt outdated, and in the seemingly arbitrary decisions that were taken by the adults that impacted on all areas of their lives. Taking some, but not all, of the children to a second children's home was one decision that impacted greatly on all the children, not just those left behind. Another was to allow the matron to adopt Doug while not telling him or the other children. Introducing some children for a short time only, especially after the agency became an adoption society, also had a detrimental effect on the stability of the 'family group'.

In all this, we see an agency in transition, moving from a discourse that relied on a mainly Christian, moralistic world view to one that relied more on psychological and 'professional' values and practices. One did not replace the other; rather, the two

coexisted for a time, and this, to use Rose's word, was inevitably 'confusing'. Of course, childhood is always 'confusing'. Whatever parents (substitute and/or otherwise) do to mitigate this, there will always be decisions that are taken on the basis of best intentions and events that are beyond the control of those at the heart of them. This means that in interpreting the past, we need to show some care and humility. As the sociologist Zygmund Bauman (2023 [2000]: 83) writes: 'it is better to care than to wash one's hands, better to be in solidarity with the unhappiness of the other than indifferent, and altogether better to be moral, even if this does not make people wealthier and the companies more profitable'.

We hope that this article has demonstrated an alternative approach to carrying out research in social work, one that is less 'top-down' and more collaborative, and one that is more concerned with knowledge exchange than knowledge transfer. By foregrounding experience and treading with care, we believe that more complex, nuanced and ultimately helpful ways of doing social work and childcare practice and research may be co-created in the future.

Note

¹ For the evolution of The Guild of Service of Service for Women, see <https://birthlink.org.uk/about-us/>. Today it offers support to adopted adults, birth parents, social workers and adults who have spent time in care. We would like to thank Birthlink staff and committee members for their support and encouragement in conducting this research, and also staff at the Women's Library based at Glasgow Caledonian University and the National Library of Scotland.

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Conflict of interest

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