The Ladies of Protestant Orphan Homes (POH) were seen as thinkers, experts, and developers, became part of a major movement in the efforts to make women a part of a social reform in the Pre-Confederation era. This social improvement focused on changing the model of institutional care. “A major factor in this advancement was the women Managers of Protestant Orphan Homes...”[[1]](#footnote-1) From the first Protestant home[[2]](#footnote-2) , POH women were the driving force behind a change. Before confederation, institutional care was not advanced in the way they cared for children and POH were seen as diverse in the way that they approached child care. These middle class women took part in charitable work, and their philanthropic interest made Protestant Orphans’ Homes part of an evolution “between old forms of institutional charity and new forms of scientific child care.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The women’s influence is strongly shown in how the children were treated within the home as well as in apprenticeship and adoption. Through these aspects of the POH operation, the women became an important role in institutional care advancement. .[[4]](#footnote-4) They combined basic support of Protestant religion and middle-class moral ethics with moral uplift of the deserving poor; values which justified their expanded feminine role.[[5]](#footnote-5) Religion was displayed within their annual meetings and in their annuals reports but rarely in daily activities. “Religious training was an important part of the upbringing of the children, but the evidence supports Rooke and Schnell’s conclusion that ...The institutions themselves did not seem to represent oppressive evangelical fervour in religious training and indoctrination.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This was a major change from early institutions where religion was the pinnacle of the homes operation.

Protestant Homes were some of many institutional homes as large numbers of children’s homes were established in the latter half of the 18th century as settlers came to Canada and populations grew. Some of these other institutions included the widows and orphans ’asylum in Newfoundland, and The Kingston’s widows and Orphans’ Friends society. Many 18th century institutions were often run by men - women did not have a major role within the home. The early societies were often built due to epidemics, accidents, and male interest. Protestant Orphans’ Homes however were created mainly by religious Christian duty and a chance for women to take part in charitable work. Protestant Orphans’ Homes were one way for women to offer their assistance and to become part of a major change in institutional care. “The orphan asylums and related institutions offered socially prominent middle class women one of their few opportunities to establish make policy for and manage a significant social agency. Unlike general relief institutions, POH excluded men as objects of charity and progressively limited their attention to children and appropriate women.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The women of the POH had a major influence on how the children were treated which impacted the change of institutional care to a more scientific pragmatic view. “. . . Colonial ladies, being I closer contact with the real poverty,”[[8]](#footnote-8) had a stronger understanding of the children’s needs. These women knew what the children’s lives would, “. . . the orphan would be left to roam about the streets of Toronto as before, unbefriended, unprotected. . .”[[9]](#footnote-9) Although these women were not their parents they, under God, treated the children in a “family-like view”. It was a form of charity, which provided a new insight on how institutions should be operated. These women became part of a movement forward by realizing the need for a parental role in the lives of these children. The women of Protestant Orphans’ Homes (POH) influenced the advancement of institutional care by the way they approached apprenticeship, care within the home, and religion.

A necessary advancement in institutional care was apprenticeship. Protestant women approached it with an understanding that many of the children they hoped to help were deprived of parental guidance in the past. Apprenticeship within POH was their main approach to offering children life outside of the institution. Homes that apprenticed were mainly to be of Protestant religion and occasionally the home could be of the child’s parent’s religion. The children would be sent to the home to learn a specific trade when of age. As written in the “Rules and Regulations” of the Toronto Orphan Home developed in 1851, children should remain in the institution for at least a year and to the age of twelve. . .[[10]](#footnote-10) This allowed them opportunities to be under the guidance of women who understood the importance of maternal care for children who are deprived of a parental role model. “Other homes provided short-term institutional care, apprenticed the children as soon as possible.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The choice for other institutions to apprentice sooner could have been influenced by many factors, but a common one was to gain more space within the homes. Regulations of POH may state the children are to be kept until twelve, but the managers would often look at the individual cases of the children. By doing so they were able to assess if the child would be better off being adopted or apprenticed earlier. “Managers preferred to place children sooner through apprenticeship and adoption due to the understanding that long-term institutional care was undesirable, and the interest in doing what was best for each individual child.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Even though they may have apprenticed early it was often in best interest of the child, not in the interest of the home.

Apprenticeship and adoption were important to the operation of Protestant Orphans’ Homes and was under the control of the lady managers. “The influence of lady Managers is evident in the way the Home used apprenticeship and adoption, which suggest both pragmatic and empathetic responses.” [[13]](#footnote-13) The placing out and apprenticeship practices, were common to all POH almost to the point of uniformity. [[14]](#footnote-14) Within these practices “. . . women through their ladies' committees exercised maximum control.”[[15]](#footnote-15) They were able to provide children with homes that were “. . . to feed and clothe the child in a fit and proper manner. . .”[[16]](#footnote-16) Children were not given to unfit families. The Managers strongly believed in apprenticing children but still maximized control so if needed he child could be withdrawn from the home. POH women did not want children to be placed in a home where important childhood experiences were deprived. This attitude is presently common in childcare. The women who ran the home “. . .stressed the importance of childhood experiences in determining the future well-being of society and the necessity of reconstructing schools and other agencies on the model of the new family with its emphasis on love and maternal care.”[[17]](#footnote-17) They played a significant role in the reconstruction of how these agencies apprenticed by being part of a model that emphasized a “family like” outline. This outline focused on children individually when placing them, showing that the lady managers were flexible. In the Toronto Protestant Orphans’ home , “the use of adoption for younger children suggests that the Managers thought it desirable to remove children from the institution at as young an age as possible, and to try to provide real homes for such children, not just houses in which their material needs were met.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The idea of offering children “home-like” experiences was not adopted by all homes, and many other institutions’ main focus for placing children was to provide more space to take in other children. Since POH placed children so early in life, the rules may have been broken but it was done for the benefit of the child. The idea of re-focusing the institutional model on empathy led to the needs of the children being recognized and increased the possibility of being placed in better homes.

By focusing institutional care on empathy, children were given an opportunity to be placed in better homes and were also given better care within the institution which spread beyond the home and within the community. Care within the protestant Orphans’ Homes was widely recognized as part of the advancement in social care. This female agency was part of “. . . the transformation of the POH, institutions which represented one of the most remarkable nineteenth-century Canadian demonstrations of female philanthropic genius”[[19]](#footnote-19) By working with the children admitted in to their care on an individual basis instead of a sum POH started many changes in social care. The way they approached care within the home, how they treated children was much different than other institutions. “..the necessity of a separate institution [for children] ... wherein undivided care can be bestowed on the physical, moral, and religious training of its helpless inmates, in most cases admitted in tender years, when just deprived of a parents watchful care and instruction...”[[20]](#footnote-20) Many of the women realized that these children were very vulnerable and easily influenced at such a young age. This caused them to realize that each child had individual needs.

The Women in POH were more interested in the individual and long term care of the children. This was shown with their efforts to care for the children. “In general, the*“Visitors’ Book* suggests that the women had a keen interest in the functioning of the Home and well-being of the children, despite the ignorance, and perhaps indifference, of the founders.”[[21]](#footnote-21) These visitor books were used to keep track of the homes operation. Each month a Manager would be elected to check on the home three times a week and act as a “visitor”. The Manager would record her findings in the visitor’s book giving an “outside” perspective.[[22]](#footnote-22) The men on the other hand were less relevant in the daily work and monthly meetings, and “. . . it was made clear that the Home was to be run by ‘the ladies of the City’.”[[23]](#footnote-23) These ladies prioritized the urgency for maternal care which had a major impact on the people admitted. “Although it has frequently been observed of children's institutions that any resemblance to an actual "family like" situation was purely coincidental, Canadian POH in some ways offers a curious anomaly to this perception.”[[24]](#footnote-24) They were commonly seen as “a happy religious home. . .”[[25]](#footnote-25) Children were looked after by a female matron who acted like a parental figure. As well as there was a teacher within the homes who was to provide them with an education daily. These women were to follow the rules but unlike other homes “Discipline was to be ‘strictly parental in its character, and the order and decorum of a well-regulated family shall be carefully observed’.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The lady managers worked hard at making the home more empathetic towards the children. With their religious background and their understanding for the need of a parental role in the children’s lives they had a major impact on the running of the POH.

Much like other homes there was a religious impact on the operation of the institution. “Protestant men and women were often aware of the substantial effort made by Roman Catholic religious orders to provide for the destitute and dependent.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Protestant homes on the other had been heading towards institutional care that did not put religion as a top priority. This movement forward is how social work is often viewed today without bias. Even though Protestant homes still had some religious aspects it was not as strong as many other homes and older institutions. Most POHs recruited their members from several protestant churches but did not serve as a “religious section” but more as a group of Christian women. Unlike other institutions (i.e. Halifax and Montreal Ladies Aid Societies, Women’s Christian Association, and Local Council of Women in Vancouver[[28]](#footnote-28)) Protestant Homes did not force Christian religion on the children but did show its importance. When accepting children the secretary takes note of “the religious profession of their parents. . .”[[29]](#footnote-29) and when placing children that religion was taken into account. Most institutions made religion a priority and since POH focused their perspective to a more scientific form they are approaching religion impartially. Even through, “there was much focus on religion in the management of the home,”[[30]](#footnote-30) it was not noticed in the daily activities of the children. The women only “promoted religious instruction in excess of that available in most churches and Sunday schools.”[[31]](#footnote-31) It can be said that the POH reflected the values of a middle class women and individual behaviour rather than religious enthusiasm, [[32]](#footnote-32)like other institutions did in this time period.

With sympathy, kindness, and gods assistance a movement towards scientific child care began with the women of Protestant Orphans’ Homes. These women were one of the first organizations to truly look at the need for child care rather than relief. These institutions were built across Canada with the same attitude. These women were seen as sisters who focused on maternal care within the home. Since many females were not seen in such a powerful role the women of POH set a new standard on how these organizations should be approaching apprenticeship, care in the home, and the importance of religion. Children of POH were exposed to childhood experiences and opportunities in order to become responsible members of society. By not forcing religion on children, Protestant Orphans’ Homes moved beyond early Canada’s societal norm of Catholicism. They approached child care with an understanding that the individual needs of children would differ. These differences were taken into account when deciding how the home should apprentice and operate. With their philanthropic impulse these women played a role in refining institutions. Rebuilding, recreating, and reforming institutional care the women of Protestant Orphans’ Homes were an anomaly of their time.

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Women of Protestant Orphans’ Homes: An Anomaly of Their Time

Research Paper

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November 22, 16

History 1120

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1. Charlotte Neff, “The Use of Apprenticeship and Adoption by the Toronto Protestant Orphans’ Home, 1853-1869,” *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society*, (Vol. 9, 2006) p. 339 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The first Protestant Home was built in 1822 (Montreal, Quebec) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rooke. T. Patricia, and R.L Schnell, “The Rise and Decline of British North American Protestant Orphans’ Homes as Woman’s Domain, 1850-1930,” *Atlantis*, (Vol. 9 No. 2, 1982) p. 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Neff, “The Use of Apprenticeship and Adoption by the Toronto Protestant Orphans’ Home, 1853-1869,” p. 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rooke. T. Patricia, and R.L Schnell, “The Rise and Decline of British North American Protestant Orphans’ Homes as Woman’s Domain, 1850-1930,” *Atlantis*, (Vol. 9 No. 2, 1982) p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Orphans’ Home and Female Aid Society, “Third Annual Report”, (Toronto, Ontario: Henry Rowsell, Printer, King street, 1854), p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This rule to keep children to the age of 12 was common to all POH in Canada. The Orphans’ Home and Female Aid Society, “Third Annual Report”, (Toronto, Ontario: Henry Rowsell, Printer, King street, 1854), p. 8.

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11. Ibid., p. 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Charlotte Neff, “The Use of Apprenticeship and Adoption by the Toronto Protestant Orphans’ Home, 1853-1869,” *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society*, (Vol. 9, 2006) p. 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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15. Ibid., p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Orphans’ Home and Female Aid Society, “Third Annual Report”, (Toronto, Ontario: Henry Rowsell, Printer, King street, 1854), p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rooke, and Schnell, “The Rise and Decline of British North American Protestant Orphans’ Homes as Woman’s Domain, 1850-1930,” p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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22. Ibid., p. 348. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., p. 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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25. Donald Chard, “The Halifax Protestant Orphans’ Home: Triumphs and Tragedies in the Life of A Victorian Institution,” *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Scoiety*, (Vol 9 2006), p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
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32. Ibid., p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)