

### **Abandoned Children**

(Cambridge University Press, 2000, 230 pages)

Edited by Catherine Panter-Brick and Malcolm T. Smith

Reviewed by Susan L. Bissell<sup>1</sup>

*Abandoned Children* is an edited collection of papers that examines the abandonment of children, and the social and cultural constructions of both abandonment and childhood. Historically, the book covers an ambitious four centuries, introducing the reader to a range of 'contexts' – from 18th-century Portugal, through the streets of Brazil, and to a refugee camp in contemporary Nepal. Geographically, *Abandoned Children* takes us from Italy, to Thailand, Nepal, the UK...and beyond. Culturally, the reader is exposed to everything from the




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Catholic orientations of Italian society to Buddhism, and to societies steeped in familial reverence and responsibility.

In its historic breadth, *Abandoned Children* is perhaps overly ambitious. The early chapters are dense and difficult to reconcile with the contemporary readings that Panter-Brick foreshadows in the initial chapter. However, in its attempt to 'review' abandonment, the book does meaningfully immerse the reader in the terms' past and present. *Abandoned Children* provides, for lack of a better term, some 'foundation' language for a 'conversation' about children and their state and status in society. On the basis of this language, and the understandings that emerge as the book unfolds, the reader finds herself conversant not only in what abandonment is and was, but also in a range of childhood experiences.

*Abandoned Children* is a pioneer insofar as it marries the historic abandonment of children with what we presently understand abandonment to be. While the historic essays might have been fewer in number, their intent is evident and well-articulated: that the very term 'abandoned' has deep roots in welfare approaches to the well-being of children, and to their 'care' and 'management'. These historic writings are more than adequately balanced by some important and insightful case studies. Each of these challenge traditional notions of the abandonment of children, and of the experience of childhood more generally.

There are two likely audiences for the book. The first, and most obvious, is a largely academic audience. For students of sociology, anthropology, children, childhood, ethnography, demography, and public health, *Abandoned Children* presents new and challenging ideas. In particular, for students of research methods in anthropology and ethnography, the latter chapters of the book raise important questions. The chapters on street children in Nepal and on child prostitution in Thailand are necessary reading for researchers undertaking investigations with young people, and especially in cross-cultural settings.

Likewise, for practitioners in 'the field' – people grappling with programmes, policies and interventions for and with children – the methodological issues raised in *Abandoned Children* are invaluable. In the essay on young people in the streets of Nepal, the reader learns about research conducted among children involved in non-governmental (NGO) projects. Similarly, the essays on prostitution in Nepal and on Bhutanese refugee children examine the lives and lived experiences of young people exposed to interventions. That practitioners can read about investigations conducted in these settings in helpful, for, often, engaging in study, analysis and reflection is deemed too hard, costly, or time-consuming. Though clearly not the purpose

of the book, *Abandoned Children* offers some 'hope' for more child-centered and participatory research and learning.

The lure of the book for practitioners does lie in its latter half. While the historic context is appreciated, in practical terms the contemporary essays in *Abandoned Children* are those with the strongest appeal. For those working with abandoned children today, and with children in a range of settings where notions of childhood and abandonment are an issue, time constraints necessitate practical reading - essays 9 through 12 are indeed that.

*Abandoned Children* is a provocative book and 'must read' for childhood historians, a range of academicians, and for child advocates and child development practitioners. In its evolutionary style, this book mirrors the intellectual and emotional debate about children in which the world is currently immersed. That *Abandoned Children* approaches a particular aspect of childhood – namely abandonment – is laudable. The study of childhood begs deconstruction like this, demands division into digestible bits...for the examination of childhood is as complex and confounding as the experience of childhood itself!