

HELPING CHILDREN DURING WARTIME – THE TWO WORLD WARS

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF HELPING CHILDREN

A journey of generosity and giving through the generations



The two World Wars proved a catastrophe in terms of destruction and devastation and in the deaths of combatants and civilians alike. Both conflagrations also produced casualties of a different sort, namely mothers at home – the bereaved, separated and single who had to deal with loss, grief and hardship as they attempted to bring up children alone. During both wars, but especially the first, there was an influx of applications to the Society, many from families who had lost the “breadwinner” in the conflict. The wars were therefore times when there was significant need for the Society’s help, but they were also times when there was a paucity of resources available to meet that need. The combination of exceptional need and scarce resources was to concern the Society, providing a robust challenge to its Presbyterian supporters.

“Orphans are being made by the thousand” (1914-1918)

The 1917 Annual Report noted that orphans were being made by the thousand “by the bloody hand of war” and that “the claims of a society like this should come home to everyone.” During the First World War the Society’s Annual Reports drew attention to the increased cost of living and the Society’s response. In 1915 it was noted that “The increased cost of living falls most heavily on the poor, and to meet this, the scale of grants has been raised and may have to be further augmented.” In 1917 the Report noted that “the Governors feel the need, in most cases, of larger sums being voted than before the war, as prices of all commodities have risen so rapidly.” In 1918 the Report notes that “the war has put a double strain on the resources of the Society. It has not only increased the cost of living so much that the Governors have seen it necessary to give larger grants to orphans already on the roll, but it has caused the death of so many of our brave men that more than half of the families elected at our last election are ‘war orphans’”

By 1916, as the war dragged on the Society celebrated as best it could, 50 years of its existence. Its achievements were noted; many children were saved from poverty and the poorhouse though a large number according to the 1917 Report were “serving with the colours” and therefore almost certainly were amongst countless numbers slaughtered on the battlefield. There was a sense of duty to the country in time of war, but the Society also sensed its duty to those who were bereaved as a result. In 1919 the Report notes, with some satisfaction, that the “Society has been able to help many of the orphans of those who fell in the defence of our country, as well as to assist many children who have been orphaned by the epidemic of influenza. Owing mainly to these two causes the number of families applying for aid at the last two elections was by far the largest in the history of our Society.” Sadly there was no shortage of applications from those in need due to the war, but the flu epidemic which claimed the lives of millions worldwide also had a major impact on the numbers applying at the end of the First World War.

“Mother is able to earn nothing as she must attend to her children”

Any perusal of the Society’s cases relating to the First World War makes sobering reading. For instance, Agnes, a Belfast woman, was left with her one year old child when her husband’s ship was torpedoed by a German submarine. She was unable to work as she was in poor health. Agnes passed away shortly after applying to the Society. Her daughter Jane was supported until she was 12 years of age when she went out to work.

James, a labourer and soldier, was killed in action on 1 July 1916 and left three children aged 3, 2 and 2 months. Help was given by the Society to his widow.

Time and again the words “Killed in Action” are beside the entry on the Society’s list. Other typical narratives include “Father....died 13th September 1916 of wounds received in battle.” “Father died on 9th August 1916, killed in action in France.” “Father died 23rd May 1915; he was killed in the Dardanelles.” “Died of wounds” “sniped in a trench while looking at a photo of his youngest child.” “Died of insanity developed from shell shock.” “Died of wounds in a German prison.”

Sometimes one family’s situation can throw the devastation of war into sharper focus. As we take a look for a moment at the Baillie family, the effects of war on the Home Front become clearer.

A Family at War

Mary McCandless lived with her widowed mother, two brothers, one sister, a nephew and a boarder. Mary married John Baillie when she was 22 in 1905. Mary gave birth to her first son in 1907, her second in 1908 and a daughter in 1911. It is recorded that another child was born but had passed away. John was a packer in Belfast and left to join the Royal Navy. Sadly he died at the age of 36 when his ship was torpedoed by a German U Boat in 1914. His wife passed away the same year as did their daughter. Both remaining children were cared for by Mary’s maternal aunt who left her employment to do so. Both children were supported by the Society after the application was made by their minister. Both were helped until 14 years of age in 1921 and 1922 respectively. This family’s circumstances presents us with the ravaging effects of war and graphically illustrates the fragility and transience of family life in wartime.

“In times of cruel war, when the Angel of Death is busier than ever” (1939-1945)

Annual Reports of these years were shaped by wartime concerns, some sharing a common thread with those of the First World War. There is concern with the cost of living, anxiety about the lack of funds to meet need and effort to ensure a commensurate increase in grants to address the increase in need. It would also appear that wartime conditions may have freed the Society to extend help to groups hitherto unable to avail of grant aid, namely the ‘unmarried mother’ and the ‘disabled father’. There is also apprehension voiced about the nature of the relationship between what was termed by one commentator “private charity and public assistance.” This unease was to re- emerge later in the post-war years.

Two Cases – The Home Front

In wartime, help was not just given to families where a parent was in the armed forces. In Jane’s case her husband, who was a labourer, died of tuberculosis. He had been nursed at home for five years by his wife. The family had to be evacuated to the country after an air raid on 15th and 16th April 1941. The mother was having difficulty finding the means to feed her daughters Mary aged 6 and Agnes aged 7. The family were supported by the Society until 1942 when the mother remarried.

In 1943 the Society extended grants to the children of ‘unmarried mothers’. In 1944 Sarah’s application was put forward on behalf of her one year old child, Maureen. Sarah was a farm labourer in County Down and she was said to have formed a relationship with a soldier who promised to marry her but then deserted her. She lived with her mother who was also a farm labourer. The minister wrote on the application that the miserable house where all three generations lived was “not worthy of the name of a labourer’s cottage.....(it had) a bed and a few sticks of furniture.” A woman poor, exploited and abandoned in dire circumstances was put forward for help by the Society in perilous times. It was not to be the last such application. The Society helped readily. The period of the two world wars were exceptional times and the Society helped make a difference when demand was plentiful and resources few.