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## Review of *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America* By Marilyn Irvin Holt

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*The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America.* By Marilyn Irvin Holt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. Introduction, epilogue, notes, bibliographic essay, index, illustrations, photographs. 248 pp. \$27.50 cloth.

One of the most haunting stories of the American West is the legend of the "orphan trains." Relating the practice of taking homeless children from the teeming cities and resettling them in the nation's heartland where they could grow and prosper as youngsters should, the story tacitly invokes some of the most potent of American myths—the Turner safety-valve theory, the Horatio Alger tale of the self-made person, and, more darkly, the lingering traces of Social Darwinism. *The Orphan Trains* strives to set the record straight—not to debunk the legend, but to give it its proper niche in western history. Emphasizing the New York Children's Aid Society but giving attention to other agencies, it explores the placing-out movement from its origins in the 1850s to its disappearance in the late 1920s, providing an account satisfying for non-specialists yet bolstered with primary bibliography enough to aid specialists in deeper inquiries.

Holt makes her case in five meaty chapters. The first examines the origins of the placing-out movement and its development through the nineteenth century. The second outlines the career of Charles Loring Brace, who established the New York Children's Aid Society, which between 1853 and 1929 relocated more than 150,000 youngsters. The third looks to other, comparable agencies, including the Boston Children's Mission (1850), the New England Home for Little Wanderers (1865), and the Catholic-sponsored New York Foundling Hospital (1869). Chapter four examines criticisms of the movement, including religious bias, physical or sexual abuse, and economic exploitation. They led to an 1884 investigation by Hastings Hornell Hart who documented occasional abuses, but generally gave the movement a clean bill of health. Chapter five records the end of the

movement, accelerated by changing social attitudes, the professionalizing of social work, and the national expansion of kindergarten education. A brief epilogue treats television and juvenile fiction's popularizing of the placing-out story.

*The Orphan Trains* is a useful corrective to the legend. The children placed were not necessarily orphans; they were as often indentured to families as adopted into them; their placements dotted the nation, and not just the Middle or Far West. But even as it dispels the distortions, it attests to the nation's optimistic faith in the goodness of the land. Brace and his compatriots recognized the problems of the city and looked to the American heartland for salvation. Sometimes they succeeded in their quest, and occasionally they failed, but their actions speak volumes about the enduring power of the myth of the West.

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