

***Earning a Life: Working Children in Zimbabwe*, edited by Michael Bourdillon, Weaver Press, 2000, pb, 220pp. 0 7974 2162 9**

OCCASIONALLY ONE READS a book that opens a window on to an entirely new world and, by so doing, shakes everything one knows about the old. Such a book, in its own modest way, is *Earning a Life*, edited by Michael Bourdillon. While it does not pretend to provide a definitive picture, it offers a large number of carefully-drawn case studies of street vendors in Harare suburbs and in downtown Harare and Masvingo, and at rural growth points. The work that children do in the home, both as servants to their own and other people's families and as carers for terminally ill relatives who are often their own mothers is also examined. Sketches are presented of the lives of children in official employment on commercial tea estates and unofficial employment in small-scale irrigation farms as well as children working in informal gold and chrome mines.

The studies contain no instances of "shock-horror" cases of children working as prostitutes or soldiers. This is partly because such stories are very difficult to find: serious abuse of children is always well-hidden. It is also partly a matter of authorial choice: the aim is to identify the average or normal situation rather than the extreme. The ages of the children studied ranges from 12 to 17 years though some readers may argue that 17-year-olds are scarcely "children", although vulnerable in many childlike ways.

The tale is a harrowing one, although the authors insist that it is not. They point out that many of the children work for their own families and the work they do is perceived as an extension of the kind of contribution that children routinely make to their households. This contribution to the family economy is traditional in many societies throughout the world, not an aberrant recent development. The lives of many children in Zimbabwe are harsh and some of the young workers here described may be better off than their non-working peers, as they are earning money which is nearly always used to sustain their families. They are, therefore, valued by their families because they are creating

value within the family economy. The authors remind us of the bonds of affect that tie these workers to their families, which makes them proud to be able to contribute to their welfare, even if their own contribution is unpaid. Most important, working children are able, to some extent, to secure some of their earnings towards their own educational costs.

In addition, the authors caution us on several occasions against making “adult, middle-class” judgements. These cautions are intended to stave off facile blanket moral judgements. Their point is that the particular situation of each working child needs to be examined before a judgement about exploitation or otherwise. But, as we *are* adults and middle-class, we cannot, without injury, fail to make corresponding judgements. Scylla and Charybdis lie in wait of the reader. To accept the pragmatic view that “children *do* work, they *must* work and they and their families benefit from their working” is unacceptable. To make the Charybdis judgement—that all child work must be banned—is even more unacceptable. Outlawing children’s work is not only impractical (it can only drive child work and child abuse underground and it is impossible to police); if it succeeds, this can only result in driving families to death by starvation. Trying to avoid the latter stance, the authors appear to fall too readily into the former.

As children comprise over half the world’s population they cannot be treated as a homogeneous group. Yet in a situation of extreme and unexpected hardship the rich exploit the poor and the poor exploit the poorer. The poorest and most powerless are children who have at least this in common; they are physically smaller than adults, and they are dependent, both economically and emotionally, on the adults who raise them. I see no problem in recognizing and acknowledging this chain of exploitation and relating it, not to individual wickedness but to the social and economic circumstances in which we find ourselves. What is on the line here is what we mean by exploitation and how far we are prepared to make a moral judgement that the ends justify the means. Of course families in desperate poverty should survive. Does this justify the harsh conditions under which working children often find themselves?

Readers will find in this interesting collection of essays much food for thought about their own attitudes to childhood, children's work and child labour, as well as about possible solutions to child labour. The book opens out yet another indication of the extent to which social and moral values that worked well for earlier generations can no longer help families in situations of intolerable poverty; and is yet another tragic reminder of the way in which the social fabric can be torn apart by societies undergoing massive economic and political change.

REVIEWED BY CAROLE PEARCE, EDITOR¹

¹ The editor hereby welcomes the new publishing company, Weaver Press, to the stable of academic publishers in Zimbabwe and wishes it well.