

# History of Adoption

*I thought I felt odd,  
Then was told odd was normal,  
But normal hid behind perplexed,  
Because confusion had come to visit.*

*By Erin Altrama*

Many people are surprised to find adoption has deep roots, dating back to the Roman Empire. In the Empire, and later the Republic, for the ruling class adoption was a common way of both gaining a male heir and forging ties with other powerful families. Probably the most famous adopted man in Republican times was Augustus Caesar. Born Gaius Octavius, he was adopted by his great-uncle Julius Caesar and acquired the name of Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, better known to us as Octavian.

With the decline of the Roman Empire, the nobility of the Germanic, Celtic and Slavic cultures which dominated Europe rejected adoption, believing it went against Biblically derived rules of inheritance. However, increasing numbers of unwanted babies, known as foundlings, were being left on church doorsteps and the clergy felt the need to act. So it was that these abandoned children were initially raised within a monastery or convent. In return they were expected to dedicate their lives as lay, or secular, servants to the religious institution.

In this way a system of institutionalisation, complete with its own formal rules, came into being. A man seeking a wife (to work *for* him more than *with* him) could apply, and girls could be made available for marriage under the institution's authority. As more and more foundlings needed care it became a practice to place some into families as apprentices. At worst this could be a means of cheap labour and exploitation. It also was the beginning of adoption in the modern sense.

## **The 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

As social welfare activists took an interest apprenticeships developed into more permanent relationships. Orphanages began to promote adoption as something based on sentiment, family and love, rather than as a form of labour. The first recognisably modern adoption law, the Adoption of Children Act, which included the phrase, 'in the best interests of the child', was passed in the USA in 1851 by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In the aftermath of the American Civil War there was a great tide of immigration to the United States and already crowded orphanages were overwhelmed. Charles Loring Brace, a Connecticut-born Protestant minister, became so appalled at the number of homeless children living on the streets of New York that he considered them a threat to civil order. Out of his concern came what are known as the Orphan Trains, which for many years transported over 200,000 children from urban centres to relocate them in rural areas throughout the US. While many children were used to boost the labour force, this movement led to new adoption laws and the founding of support agencies. Brace himself was executive secretary of Children's Aid Society for 37 years and is still honoured and revered for his work with the street children of New York City.

Calls for reform were partly answered in 1909 when President Theodore Roosevelt called the First White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children. He declared that the 'nuclear family' represented "the highest and finest product of civilization" and could serve as primary caretaker for abandoned and orphaned children. Opposition came from the less

progressive Henry H. Goddard, who said, “how short-sighted it is for a family to take into its midst a child whose pedigree is unknown, with probabilities it would show poor and diseased stock in any offspring, who would doubtless be degenerates.”

### **Family Secrets**

Adoption has a long history of secrecy. It was generally believed that the less the child and the adoptive family knew about each other’s past the better. It was to be a fresh start for all, and Brace closed records in an effort to reduce any risk of children from the Orphan Trains being reclaimed by their biological parents. This was done more out of a sense of duty to protect the adoptive parents.

There was a certain stigma attached to adoption, and it took WWII and the disgrace of Nazi eugenics, – which ironically had their roots in much early 20<sup>th</sup> century American thinking- to significantly alter attitudes about admitting a stranger into the family. From 1945 to 1974 there was rapid growth and acceptance of adoption. The Roman influence resurfaced as the authorities in the USA opted to sever all rights of the biological parents, clearing the way for adopters to become the legal parents. The phrase ‘in the best interests of the child’ was reintroduced and for decades following 1945 what was considered to be the best interests was a policy of sealed birth certificates and adoption records.

To avoid the humiliation of an unwanted pregnancy outside of marriage young girls were often sent away for months, only returning home the baby had been delivered and subsequently adopted.

Mother and baby homes often run by nuns became inundated with enquiries in the 50’ and 60’s in particular. Parents, doctors and religious figures were very persuasive in ensuring that any illegitimate child was given up for adoption. Keeping the baby would mean ruin for the girl, and no hope of ever finding a husband. The ultimate cruelty was to further add they were ‘a whore’, ‘a slut’, or ‘evil.’

### **Secret Agencies**

Adoption agencies handled the placement of children. During these times the mother and the adoptive parents would speak with social workers, but there would be no direct contact or communication between biological and adoptive parents. The birth mother would be told little about where her child would be raised. Records were closed. Identities protected. Once a mother scribed her signature on the final adoption papers she became totally excluded from her child’s life. This was the system, devised by the Church and condoned by society, to deal with illegitimate children.

It all appeared so simple: an infertile couple could have a child, the child would have loving parents, not an impoverished single mother, and the girl could return to normality. Young single mothers were persuaded they were ‘doing the right thing’ and told that it was commendable, if they truly loved their child, to give him or her ‘a better life’. The words, ‘it’s God’s will’ and, ‘no one else ever needs to know’ were often heard.

During these decades, very little in the way of counselling was available or offered to mothers, adoptive parents or adopted children. There was no real understanding that counselling might be needed. When a mother felt she had made a terrible mistake and contacted the adoption agency she was not greeted with much sympathy, only told, ‘it will get better in time,’ or, ‘make a new life for yourself’, ‘it’s too late to change your mind’, and ‘you did the best thing’.

There was no outlet for these young mothers to talk about the range of emotions and pain they endured. Society cared little for these women. They found themselves desperately alone with a secret shame. Even today such secrets can be detrimental to women as well as their husbands and later children, who often remain uninformed about the past.

**In 1968** Nancy Verrier wrote, “There exists a great need for legislative action and concern for the rights of adoptees.” She argued that one of the greatest hindrances to an adopted person healing is denial. That to deprive an adopted person of the knowledge of their parentage is inhumane.

A survey conducted in America during the 1970s asked how many mothers wished to have some form of contact or news of their adopted child. 84% of the sample group craved knowledge of their child. A support group became inundated with women whose greatest relief was being able to share personal experiences with others who truly understood. A substantial number of mothers complained they were coerced by parents, the Church, medical professionals and social workers to give their child up for adoption, adding that, had they had the choice, they would have kept their baby.

Influenced by such voices, the United Kingdom reformed adoption in ways which has shown respect for adoptees. Now those adopted in the UK since 1975 are able to view their own files and histories. Though for older children, adopted pre-1975, the system still favours the rights of the biological parents. Unfortunately Ireland and the majority of states in the USA have yet to make any such reforms, the voices of the adoptees all too often being lost in a sea of legal arguments.

In the mid-1970's a small amount of money became available in the form of benefits for unmarried mothers. This, coupled with increasing numbers of single-parent families due to divorce, saw a parallel increase in young unmarried mothers deciding to keep and raise their own child. Adoption agencies began to find insufficient infants were available to fill the demand from potential adoptive parents.

**Today** parents wishing to adopt an infant find they look more to international adoption to fulfil their wishes.

Meanwhile a large number of older children remain for a long time in the foster care system awaiting new adoptive parents. Many of these children yearn to feel they belong to a family. It is a constant plea extended from social workers to people to contemplating adoption to consider them. These children have often been reluctantly relinquished by parents who are unable to care for them due to a variety of reasons. Some perhaps for their own safety having suffered abuse.

Certainly children need stability and adoption can give them the best chance in life.

A child adopted today receives more understanding, as does the mother who parts with her child. It is also true today in the UK that adoptive parents are rigorously vetted. Counselling is available for all. Support systems are in place for each member of the adoption triad .

Records are held on file and if the child wishes to read them, they can do so.

Adoption is not a negative force but neither is it all positive. The ideal is a loving biological home but when this is impossible for whatever reason adoption should be about giving a **child** the best possible option and chance in life. The material gains and emotional stability that can accompany adoption are, however we try to view it, based in loss. The lifelong effects of it vary in as many ways as there are adoptions. No one size fits all.

I acknowledge my gains, my loving adoptive parents, financial and material stability but freely admit that in the midst of it all have also come to accept my loss.