

Sketches from the history of psychiatry

Kilvert's abused children

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Professor Roy Meadow, in his recent introduction to the 'ABC of child abuse', states:

"Looking back further, there is evidence that the abuse of children was considered to be culturally acceptable in Britain one hundred years ago." (Meadow, 1989)

The mid-Victorian clergyman diarist, the Reverend Francis Kilvert, appears to provide an example of this attitude in an entry dated 29 June 1871:

"Annie Corfield is better but we fear that she and her sisters, the twins Phoebe and Lizzie, are very miserable and badly treated by their father since their dear mother's death. What would she say if she could see them now, ragged, dirty, thin and half-clad and hungry? How unkindly their father uses them. The neighbours hear the sound of the whip on their naked flesh and the poor girls crying and screaming sadly sometimes when their father comes home late at night. It seems that when he comes home late he makes the girls get out of bed and strip themselves naked and then he flogs them severely or else he pulls the bedclothes off them and whips them all three as they lie in bed together writhing and screaming under the castigation. It is said that sometimes Corfield strips the poor girls naked holds them face downwards across his knees on a bed or chair and whips their bare bottoms so cruelly that the blood runs down their legs."

Kilvert's Diary has already been the subject of medical interest in which references to pastoral visits to both mentally ill parishioners and members of his own family are documented (Walk & Hare, 1979).

Comment

Kilvert had visited the dying mother three weeks previously on Tuesday, 7 June. She is described as lying in bed, very weak, sweating profusely under two blankets and a coverlet. He advised that one blanket be removed, but makes no reference to the children. In the second entry quoted above, he does not give the age of the three girls, but as they were still at home, presumably they must have been dependent and therefore relatively young.

Kilvert's Diary (Plomer, 1973) is considered by its editor to be a classic of the life and times of a mid-Victorian clergyman. The diarist is described as a man with a watchful eye. He is said to have been unassuming, innocent, truthful and unworldly; a

sociable young man with a strong love of life and of landscape, and with a sense of drama and humour. His life was affected by his susceptibility to the beauty of women and girls, and a shortage of money. In his Diary, Kilvert modestly refers to providing clothing, blankets and food for the poor of his Parish. He fights for and obtains pensions for ex-servicemen of the Napoleonic Wars.



Rev. Francis Kilvert
(Kilvert Society)

Yet, despite all his recorded virtues, he did not appear to take any action on behalf of the unfortunate Corfield girls, or if he did he did not appear to confide such action in his Diary. Could, therefore, this kindly conscientious Victorian clergyman accept the abuse of children as Professor Meadow suggests, as "culturally acceptable", and therefore the right of a father

in this case to brutalise his three daughters required no response other than to express sympathy for the children's sufferings. The concept that children are the property of the parents, particularly the father, is still prevalent today.

References

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WALK, A. & HARE, E. (1979) Psychiatry in the 1870s - Kilvert's mad folk. *Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists*, October 1979, 150-153.