There have been horror stories of child abuse and neglect since the beginning of
civilisation, but the twentieth century was surely remarkable in the history of
wholesale mistreatment of the powerless. These two books describe two appalling
cases of large-scale schemes in which children were the victims of the greed of some,
and the misguided charity of others.

The scandal of British child migration is now well known. Promised a happy,
prosperous future for their children out in the sunny colonies, many poor British
parents signed them over to the custody of the state, often not realising that this was
irrevocable: they would never be allowed to see them again. The children were sent to
isolated ‘farm schools’, given less than minimal education, fed disgusting food,
beaten, sexually abused, and overworked at menial tasks with none of the promised
training. David Hill, former head of the ABC, was one of the lucky ones, as he
acknowledges. He and his brothers came out to Fairbridge Farm School in NSW at
the tail end of the scheme when, in order to recruit more children, the Association had
started to accept children whose single parent would later join them in Australia.

The monstrous Tennessee scam which is the subject of The Baby Thief may
have started with charitable intentions, but it grew and flourished as a result of the
greed of one woman. Georgia Tann was a social worker who more or less single-
handedly made adoption fashionable in America: before the 1920s it was believed that poor children came of irremediably bad stock. She promulgated the idea that all children were blank slates to be moulded by their environment. Her adoption service became so popular that she began stealing children from poor families to meet the demand. Some children went to loving homes, but many were treated as servants or worse, and it’s not known how many babies died of neglect while they were waiting to be chosen for adoption: Georgia wasn’t keen on keeping inconvenient records.

Barbara Bisantz Raymond, like David Hill, writes from a personal angle: she has an adopted daughter, which makes her account more interesting as she grapples with the many problems surrounding adoption. Both these books catalogue a terrifying history of lies, emotional and physical deprivation and abuse, and in the face of more enlightened ideas, incomprehensible stubborn prejudice which allowed these schemes to continue wrecking lives for decades.