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Book Review of The English Poor Laws, 1700-1930

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The English Poor Laws, 1700–1930. By ANTHONY BRUNDAGE. [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2001. vii and 185 pp. Hardback. £49.50. ISBN 0-333-68271-8.]

THIS latest addition to the Palgrave series on Social History in Perspective is a concise and systematic overview of the Poor Law system from the beginning of the 18th century through to its demise in 1930. Well written, *The English Poor Law* is intended as an introduction to the subject for students of law, history, and/or society, and therefore offers a very short account. Fortunately, the knowledgeable Professor Brundage (whose earlier books include an analysis of the New Poor Law and a biography of one of its facilitators, Edwin Chadwick) provides first-rate end notes and an

extensive bibliography. In consequence, those wishing to learn more of this interesting topic have been afforded the means for additional research.

Organised chronologically, the eight chapters of *The English Poor Laws* include an introduction and conclusion. The inductory chapter ("Approaching English Poor Law History") sets forth the author's methodology. Brundage briefly describes the competing Poor Law historiographies that have risen to prominence over the last half century, including the economic, political, and social history schools, and states his purpose as a synthetic "narrative survey" of that literature.

Chapter two ("The Poor Laws in the Eighteenth Century: Changing Patterns of Relief in a Maturing Capitalist System") provides an overview of the Old Poor Law system and its 18th century developments in poorhouses, workhouses, indoor and outdoor relief, and the instauration of Gilbert Act unions and the Speenhamland System of relief. It then describes the intellectual milieu established by Smith, Malthus, and Bentham amid the declining economic fortunes at the end of the century. Continuing on the theme of change, chapter three ("Debates, Experiments, and Reforms, 1800–1832") explicates the growing discontent with the system, a resentment exacerbated by the cost of caring for the indigent in the hard circumstances that followed Waterloo, and by the social unrest invoked by Luddites and Swing riots. A flurry of debate and experiment ensued, with pamphleteers advocating abolition of the Poor Laws, Parliament promising investigation, and various localities, most prominently among them Nottinghamshire, experimenting with reforms to reduce their burdens.

Chapter Four ("The New Poor Law Takes Shape, 1832–1847") describes passage of the New Poor Law and establishment of its administrative devices, including the Poor Law Commissioners, Boards of Governors, and the consolidation of parishes into Unions. Perhaps most notable was the strategy of making workhouses so atrocious that they existed only as places of last resort, a system resented by workers who resisted these reforms, at times in the company of Chartists. Chapter five ("Mid-Victorian Poor Relief, 1847–1870") details the period of centralisation of Poor Law administration under the Poor Law Board, one which expanded the provision of services to include education, medical care, and treatment of the mentally ill. At the same time, concern mounted over the increasingly urban nature of the indigent, as well as the meanness of outdoor relief.

Chapter six ("The Revival of Deterrence and the Expansion of Services, 1870–1900") depicts two seemingly counter-currents: the constricting battle against outdoor relief and vagrancy, and the more beneficent treatment of families in the workhouse. This period also witnessed the democratisation of the Boards of Guardians, with some Unions electing women Guardians. Chapter seven ("The Eclipsing and Transforming of the Poor Laws, 1900–1930") details the political history which led to the demise of the system in favour of alternative social assistance plans. Uncertainty about the national schemes which substituted for the established Poor Laws abounded, as well as "a clear sense that an era had passed." The concluding chapter, eight, returns to the subject of competing Poor Law historiographies. Having described the course of the Poor Laws from 1700–1930, Brundage urges readers to avoid the "thrall of the evolutionary model" of Poor Law history in favour of the more apposite metaphor of ebb and flow.

The English Poor Laws is a useful exegesis of an important area of English socio-legal history. The book succeeds as an introductory text primarily due to Brundage's mastery of the subject, even-handed presentation of competing intellectual histories, and clear writing style. Those sufficiently attracted to the growing field of Poor Law history to read this book should be inspired to further investigation.

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