

Poor Relief in England, 1350-1600

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Marjorie McIntosh is one of the foremost social and cultural historians of her generation, and has done much to advance the cause of later medieval and early modern English history. Her *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370-1600* (1) was a pathbreaking study, and she has also published extensively on women's work in late medieval and early modern England. Her most recent volume is a micro-history, and follows on from previous work on the Manor and Liberty of Havering which produced two full-length studies: *Autonomy and Community: The Royal Manor of Havering, 1200-1500* and *A Community Transformed: The Manor and Liberty of Havering, 1500-1620*, while *Poor Relief and Community in Hadleigh, Suffolk, 1547-1600* will shortly be published as volume 12 of *Studies in Regional and Local History*. (2) But Marjorie McIntosh is one of those rare historians who have the capacity to produce broad general studies as well as micro-histories, and the book to be reviewed here, *Poor Relief in England, 1350-1600*, represents the former rather than the latter genre.

There are a number of respects in which Marjorie McIntosh's book offers new perspectives. The first is with regard to the timing of the introduction of the Old Poor Law, the first fully articulated system of state-sponsored poor relief to be introduced in England. Here it is argued that the system was established earlier than others have claimed. It is not entirely correct to suggest that historians have focused mainly on the Elizabethan statutes of 1598 and 1601, for these are regularly described in the literature as 'codifying' statutes, which brought together the collective legislation of previous decades, as well as providing a more coherent bureaucratic structure. Others too, whether drawing upon McIntosh's own previous publications or those of other historians, have noted the early introduction in some parishes of collections of some kind for the relief of the poor. (3) But what is new here is the suggestion that what amounted to quasi-formal poor rates were required by statute much earlier than is usually suggested in the literature (1572), perhaps as early as 1552 when Collectors for the Poor were introduced, while the statute of 1563 authorised Justices of the Peace to punish those who were unwilling to contribute. What is more, much more weight is placed upon the injunctions to charitable giving via the poor man's boxes which Edward VI enjoined each parish to keep from 1547, the same year in which a statute was passed requiring collections for the poor at church services. The result, for McIntosh, was that during the Edwardian period, despite its brevity, 'parishes quite suddenly began to assume a far more active role in poor relief' (p. 8). So, while Paul Slack has suggested that perhaps less than half of all parishes were making regular collections as late as the mid 17th century, and the triumph

of rating was a late 17th-century phenomenon, and Steve Hindle has argued for the growth of rating from the late 16th century to produce widespread adoption only by the 1630s, McIntosh has moved that process back to the middle of the 16th century.⁽⁴⁾ The Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601, therefore, ‘made relatively minor modifications to existing practices’, and the crucial change came with the introduction of ‘an ongoing source of assistance within the parish’ in 1552 (pp. 295–6).

The second way in which this study offers a new approach – or, at least, further develops an approach that is already becoming more common in the historiography – is to emphasise that there was much more to poor relief than statutory, parish-based provision. A great deal of space here is devoted to begging and collection, to charitable giving in general and to the foundation of hospitals and almshouses in particular. Importantly, McIntosh is well aware of the intersections between the various facets of the ‘mixed economy of welfare’, whether administered by the church, the state or by local authorities. As implied by her emphasis upon the importance of church collections prior to the introduction of secular rating, she stresses the importance of cooperation between church and state after 1547. Furthermore, private (philanthropic) distribution is not treated as entirely distinct from public (statutory) provision, ‘for the two categories too often overlapped’ (p. 13). There is also a great deal of interesting material here on the growth of regulation, a clear appreciation of the problems posed by fraud, and an understanding of how the state was increasingly drawn into the regulation of philanthropy, culminating in the establishing of Commissions for Charitable Uses in 1598, and a legal basis for charitable trusts in 1598 and 1601 – features of the ‘Elizabethan poor law code’ that are too often overlooked.

Third, and a particularly refreshing aspect of this study, is the clear appreciation that – despite the harshness of much of the contemporary legislation – parish officials made up their own minds about who should, or should not, be relieved. ‘Sturdy beggars’, therefore, were not invariably whipped by local constables, but could also be assisted in cash or kind and sent on their way. Although official authorisation was formally required for individuals to supplicate alms, McIntosh finds that in practice this requirement was often waived. ‘If a needy person was able to persuade the wardens that his or her loss was genuine’ she writes, ‘sympathy proved more powerful than Parliamentary statutes’ (p. 154). So, despite some clear indications that some of the ‘hotter sort’ of Protestants became more discriminating with regard to who should receive charitable support and who should not, as recent work on Colchester has suggested, McIntosh makes space in her story for humanitarian compassion, bringing into relief that contrast between the milk of human kindness and the so-called ‘local xenophobia’ that some historians have suggested to be the prevalent human instinct.⁽⁵⁾ Choices about who should or should not be relieved were shaped ‘by personal sympathy for suffering people and concern about order and authority’, and not merely by ideological constructions of poverty and charity (p. 295).

Human compassion is thus one of the factors that helps explain the development of poor relief – statutory and non-statutory – in England in the second half of the 16th century. On a higher intellectual plain humanist or ‘commonwealth’ beliefs are also invoked as part of the explanation. Underpinning these developments, however, is the growth of need; whilst in later medieval England trends in population, prices and wages ensured that poverty was – exceptional years notwithstanding – ‘relatively mild’ (p. 13), between 1530 and the later 1550s poverty became a much more pressing problem, and more widely distributed through the country, as trends in population, prices and wages went into reverse. Did religion have a part to play? For McIntosh, its main role was negative, for the confiscation of monastic and chantry property in Henry VIII’s and Cromwell’s Reformation had severe implications for charitable funds, particular for almshouse foundations that had previously provided support to the elderly poor. Protestants were not, however, averse to making charitable provision of their own. If some may have been more discriminating than their Catholic forbears, and their theology eschewed an association between ‘works’ and salvation, the Protestant church too linked aid to the poor with spirituality, as Ian Archer and others have argued.⁽⁶⁾

The evidential basis for these conclusions is impressive. Over many years McIntosh, with the assistance of volunteer researchers, has constructed a database of almshouses and hospitals which includes a total of 1,005 that existed at some point between 1350 and 1599. Her analysis of the development of collections for the

poor is based essentially upon churchwardens' accounts. For 1404–1546, the accounts of 58 parishes were consulted, plus 'a few other' ecclesiastical sources (p. 96). For the period 1554–76, 94 churchwardens' accounts were consulted, and for 1577–98 the number was 110. Overall, accounts were studied for 125 parishes in 32 English counties, 35 per cent of which were in the Southeast or East Anglia, 27 per cent in the Southwest or West, 25 per cent in the Midlands or East Central England and 13 per cent in the North and Northwest. In all the study draws upon in excess of 70 archives, in addition to a wide range of printed manuscript and secondary sources. None of this material is tabulated in the text: instead, the key results are described in prose, while graphical and tabular information is relegated to six appendices. Additionally, ten methodological and quantitative appendices have been posted on a permanent, open-access website maintained by Cambridge University Press. Seven of these give further detail regarding the almshouse/hospital database, one analyses a sample of Sussex wills 1500–60 that left bequests to the poor, and two provide further quantitative and geographical information about Collectors for the Poor. This said, McIntosh makes it clear in her introductory chapter that the book is not intended to be all-embracing. No quantitative assessment of the degree of poverty is offered here, and most of the evidence comes from market towns and villages rather than the larger urban centres that have been the subject of so much previous work. Specialist forms of assistance are also ignored, such as grain stocks, apprenticeships, loan funds and funds to assist the marriage of poor maidens (p. 35). Her remit is thus a wide one, but not comprehensive.

Of particular interest to this reviewer is the almshouse material, which has been the focus of much new research, both here and on the continent.⁽⁷⁾ McIntosh's data, which comes with a range of appropriate health warnings regarding coverage and precision (p. 68), reveals a rise in the number of institutions (hospitals and almshouses combined) through to the 1520s, when the peak figure of 617 was achieved. Government religious policies in the 1530s dramatically reduced that number, fully 180 closing between the 1530s and 1550s, whereafter their number recovered with each decade from the 1560s to the 1590s, although still standing below 500 (494) by the final decade of the century. Very few were situated in the North or Northwest and, while McIntosh notes that fewer records survive from the North than for any other region of the country, this reviewer's recent work on the historical geography of philanthropy, as well as the classic studies of W. K. Jordan, suggest that this is a real phenomenon rather than an accident of source survival. McIntosh traces the evolution of almshouses and hospitals (terms which were often used interchangeably by the 16th century) into their 'modern' form, as institutions essentially designed to house the elderly poor. By the 1520s, it is estimated, they offered one place for every 370–480 people. By the end of the century there was one place for every 761–1,370 people. A more insightful calculation would compare the number of places with the 'at risk' population (that is, the elderly), but such calculations are not offered here, and nor are available comparative estimates for other dates outside of the period cited to provide context.⁽⁸⁾ The management of almshouses, the additional benefits they offered, the obligations placed upon residents and the evidence of fraud are all discussed at length. More detailed demographic features of almshouse residents are to be found in the online appendices, one of the more interesting ones being the gradual shift from a clear majority of men prior to 1540 to a slight majority of women in the last six decades of the century – a feature of almshouse residency that had become much more pronounced by the Victorian period. Without doubt this impressive data collection has made a major contribution to our understanding of the place of residential institutions in this period, and has laid a firm foundation for further work – particularly at the local and regional level.

The most controversial claim in this study is the suggestion that the collection of poor rates and their regular distribution to the poor was evident much earlier than the current orthodoxy suggests. McIntosh's precise position on this is not easy to pin down: in her conclusion she writes of 'the emergence after 1552 of ongoing sources of assistance within the parish' (p. 296), while in a previous chapter we are informed that the evidence 'suggests that in *southern and central England*, many parishes were indeed making use of the new system before 1598' (p. 253, my emphasis). Here we are told that Collectors' accounts were particularly fragile documents, and rarely stored with other parish records. But while this may be entirely true, it is not a sufficient basis upon which to argue for a far more widespread adoption of parish rating than the current evidence suggests. The examination of records from 125 parishes by a solitary researcher is indeed

impressive, but that number pales when we remember that England and Wales encompassed some 10,000 parishes, the vast majority of which appear not to have left any evidence that regular collections were made for the poor from so early a date. Nor is it clear that the evidence that does survive indicates *regular and ongoing* parish rating. Indeed, if the system had been so widely adopted from the 1550s, one might ask why it was that so much additional legislation was deemed necessary, through to and including the famous statutes of 1598 and 1601. Finally, as Professor McIntosh does not discuss the *amounts* that were collected and laid out, we cannot know whether these payments were sufficient for subsistence, or merely supplementary. The penny payments given weekly to many of the poor of St Giles parish in Colchester in the 1590s can have made only a small contribution to their livelihood, while indications from elsewhere also suggest that anything approaching full maintenance was rare before the later years of the 17th century.[\(9\)](#)

There is so much more in this book than can be discussed in even an extended review and, while this reviewer remains a little sceptical of one of its key conclusions, it remains a vital contribution to the historiography, and one that no historian of social welfare can ignore. The new perspectives adopted, the alacrity with which sacred cows are put to the sword, the depth of research and the humanity of the analysis, all render this a stimulating volume and a fascinating read. McIntosh's book represents an important step forward in how we approach and understand the genesis of the social welfare systems of early modern England, and offers clear guidelines that future scholars would do well to follow.

Notes

1. Marjorie McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370–1600* (Cambridge, 1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Marjorie McIntosh, *Autonomy and Community: The Royal Manor of Havering, 1200–1500* (Cambridge, 1986); *A Community Transformed: The Manor and Liberty of Havering, 1500–620* (Cambridge, 1991); *Poor Relief and Community in Hadleigh, Suffolk, 1547–1600* (Hatfield, forthcoming).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. S. Hindle, *On the parish? The micro-politics of poor relief in rural England c. 1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 230–1.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. P. Slack, *Poverty and policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988), p. 170; Hindle, *On the parish?*, pp. 229–51.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. N. Goose, 'The rise and decline of philanthropy in early modern Colchester: the unacceptable face of mercantilism?', *Social History*, 31 (2006), 485; K. D. M. Snell, 'The culture of local xenophobia', in *Parish and belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 28–80.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. I. Archer, 'The charity of early modern Londoners', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002), p. 237.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. For example, N. Goose and H. Looijesteijn, 'Almshouses in England and the Dutch Republic circa 1350–1800: a comparative perspective', *Journal of Social History*, 45 (2012), 1049–73; N. Goose and L. Moden, *A History of Doughty's Hospital, Norwich, 1687–2009* (Hatfield, 2010).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. N. Goose, 'The English almshouse and the mixed economy of welfare: medieval to modern', *The Local Historian*, 40, 1 (2010), 3–19.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Slack, *Poverty and policy*; Hindle, *On the parish?*[Back to \(9\)](#)

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