

The First Century of Welfare: Poverty and Poor relief in Lancashire, 1620-1730

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Some monographs feel as if they have slotted themselves – like a puzzle-piece – snugly into the picture presented by our extant historiography. And just like single parts of a complex jig-saw, these works often add brilliantly to the overall image. So it is with Jonathan Healey's *First Century of Welfare*, part of an excellent Boydell series on 'Peoples, Markets and Goods', which covers the history of poor relief in Lancashire across the 17th and early 18th centuries. Healey's book emerged to general and well-deserved praise in 2014, and while it is early yet to assess its broader historiographical impact, previous reviews consistently took note of how effectively the work contributed to a regional rebalancing of poor law history by offering a thorough examination of both underused source material (petitions) and of a northern county less frequently studied. In this review, I suggest a pair of quietly articulated but important contributions which Healey's book made to our broader historiography of early modern poverty, and ask also whether we can take his work on petitioning further still.

Healey tells us he is uninterested in theorized grand narratives (p. xii) and instead favours foregrounding the voices, exigencies, and strategies of the poor found in Lancashire's excellent archive of poor law petitions. His main body of sources is an enormous sample of 3,169 first-time petitions, often penned on behalf of poor petitioners and/or countersigned by supportive community members; documents that in effect physically demonstrated the maintenance of 'belonging' and notions of 'deservingness' in parish or township. These petitions are supplemented by the accounts of parish officers where they survive, by other legal records of Quarter Sessions related to the poor laws, and by quantification of agricultural price series and urban censuses in his final chapter on 'crisis poverty'. This is 'history from below' almost cover to cover, a book visibly conscious of the contours of early modern 'New Social History' and determined to give space to as many pauper voices – however mediated through the form of the petition itself they might be – as possible.

Healey describes the main aspects of early modern poor law operation as 'threefold': relieve the deserving, punish the undeserving, and get the able-bodied back to work (p. 5), and in practice comments solely on the first part of this trifecta. The book itself also divides into three parts. The first section is contextual, and we learn much of use about the nominally 'backward' (p. 14) county Lancashire in the 17th century and about

the relatively swift uptake of institutional welfare there after 1601. The exceptionally large and dispersed parish geographies of the county also swiftly engendered innovation on the statute, most tellingly in the development of township units increasingly taking on the role of administering to poor relief. Healey also provides a composite average of the growth in poor law expenditure from the accounts available from the 1690s onwards (p. 79, figure 7) which corresponds generally with what we know about the rise in national expenditure on the poor laws across England for the same period. He rightly views this growth as indicative of the system's 'success', in the sense that it clearly indicates more poor people found relief through it, and revenue was successfully collected to meet rising pressures as the period progressed, and he later convincingly demonstrates how the relief system could mitigate crises in his case study on a suspected local epidemic, combined with very high food prices, in 1727–30 (pp. 240–52). In part one Healey also introduces and crucially differentiates between different records of poor relief, commenting particularly on issues with the (elsewhere) ubiquitous accounts of Overseers of the Poor, and points out that they are records of '*relief*', not of poverty in and of itself; an archival lacuna which petitions compellingly address.

The second section is devoted to the petitions themselves, and to the many and varied the stories of marginality that they present. 'Present' is here the operative word: petitions, Healey tells us, were 'documents of advocacy', supplicatory in form and not claims to any right of relief, and many of them contained 'exaggeration, inattention to uncomfortable detail, and even downright distortion' (p. 107). However, he makes a compelling case for seeing most petitions as credible presentations of deserving poverty: they were often endorsed by neighbours and likely ratepayers, petitioning in writing often necessitated clerical assistance for the illiterate pauper in question, Justices could interview paupers when they made their cases, and indeed challenge a petitioner legally if they lied. The picture that these petitions paint of the reasons behind poverty is one of contingency and circumstance, of 'crosses and losses' (p. 114), which principally devolved into four main afflictions: old age, sickness, family breakdown (or failure to form a household at all), and macro-hardships such as industrial or trade depression or regional spikes in unemployment or food prices (p. 172). While Healey is entirely willing to see the *explanations* or circumstances of poverty in petitions as credible, he seems less inclined to believe that they show us any 'language' of poverty produced by poor people themselves, because their voices and experiences were inevitably mediated through scribal dictation, the expectations of Justices of the Peace, and of course the written 'form' of these 'humble' documents in and of themselves. Petitioning was deeply political and sometimes 'strikingly devious' (p. 97), one of James C. Scott's famous 'weapons of the weak', but when it comes to their language in particular Healey is understandably cautious about what we can learn: 'the language employed does tell us *something*' about understandings of poverty, he writes, but petitions cannot be an 'easy guide' to any cultural mindset of the poor themselves. The guide might not be easy, but I would argue in petitioning (and indeed other forms of judicial interview such as settlement or vagrancy examinations) we might be as close as we will ever get.

I would like to pause here for a moment and suggest that Healey's own robust case for the broad credibility of petitions actually suggests that we can and should interpret their 'language' and the cultural constructs of poverty which these petitions routinely invoked. I would also suggest that new 'distant reading' technologies might allow historians to return to a sample as large as Healey's (were it machine readable) in order to conduct quantitative analyses of language which he suggested were too unwieldly and which would tell us more about the form of petitioning, rather than about poverty itself (p. 96). Healey rightly points out just how demanding the act of petitioning was; the story needed not only to be believable, it often needed to be almost verifiable via the reputational bolstering of co-signees or parish officials. Paupers might need to orally match their testimony to a petition *they almost certainly did not write*. What this all suggests is a much closer connection between the *precise* language and narrative of poverty deployed in these petitions and the cultural assumptions of the poor themselves. This observation is obviously counterfactual in nature, we are not lucky enough to have clerical diary entries where they narrate how they edited the petitions of paupers, at least that I know of, but I am essentially arguing that Healey could take these petitions even more seriously than he already clearly does as 'voices' of the poor, voices which relied on symbols, shared assumptions, and yes, shared language, in order to communicate their desperation.

As an example of such cultural assumptions, let us consider those about vagrancy. I would suggest Healey's petitions show fascinating examples of a *spectre* of vagrancy or utter destitution being invoked by supplicants, whether it was as genuine misery, as implicit threat of further destitution, or indeed as scribal gloss. Alice Roberts was certainly channelling imagery of vagrancy in her petition, which stated that she had 'noe habitation noe bed to lie upon, but the cold frosty ground' (p. 100), so too did Elizabeth Bovell, a most 'miserable wido who wanders like a pilgrim in the wilderness', and John Rylough's 1669 petition about how he was made destitute by the profligate spending of his son mirrors the story of Martin Parker's rogue ballad *A Warning to all Lewd Livers* almost exactly (p. 131).⁽¹⁾ These sorts of terrible circumstances are specific enough that sceptical Justices might well ask about them in detail, but the language also seems to me authentically evocative, Rylough's son left his 'ould father your petitioner both sorrowfull and poore', Bovell felt like a 'pilgrim in the wilderness'. I am inclined to see these powerful statements about poverty and indigence as emanating from experience in the first instance, as showing us the attitudes toward poverty of the poor themselves, and if there is scribal gloss on the linguistic core of these narratives it seems to take the form of a supplicatory tone and clear penmanship.

Healey is clearly well aware of these connections and uses them on occasion, such as when another Parker ballad called *The Cunning Northerne Begger* is visually juxtaposed with his short discussions of mobility and mendicity (p. 162). Itinerancy rightly figures in Healey's discussion as a survival strategy and here too cultural assumptions make an appearance, with William Blundell recounting a cony-catching jesting story clearly influenced by Harman and Dekker and adjusted to northern geography. But this brief discussion of begging and mobility necessarily stops at the borders of township or parish, and seems crafted primarily from the perspective of the 'shame-faced' poor who petitioned in the hopes of staving off extreme necessity. I also found myself eager to learn more about the prevalence of 'positive' (p. 165) references to begging which were seemingly more common earlier in the period. Healey wonders whether this might be because begging became less common as a makeshift strategy as the century progressed, but I would suggest it rather shows a shift in the nature of these archival documents rather than a shift in practices or prevalence: strategies of parochial eviction and the resettlement of problem paupers (like those who begged) became increasingly robust as the period went on and both parish and judicial documents tend to reflect this.

The latter half of the book, on the many forms that marginality could take, seems like its heart. There is a nuanced discussion of downward social mobility, 'decayed households' (p. 116), and of the surprising number of former ratepaying families who eventually needed to petition for poor relief. The next chapter details the varied survival strategies of Lancashire paupers and ranges confidently across Olwen Hufton's 'economy of makeshifts'. Poor relief emerges here, in Healey's turn of phrase, as a 'comprehensive system of social insurance against risk' (p. 172). In what I consider an important moment of conceptual clarification in poverty historiography, Healey argues convincingly that we should group a range of signifiers of deservingness into the category of 'infirmity'; it was not simply old age or sickness in and of itself that the poor relief system targeted, it was the debilitating effects of those conditions on the abilities of paupers to work (p. 179). Healey's work with his sample also throws up the increasingly gendered nature of multiple hardship poverty, with female heads of household much more likely to be on the rates, and a significant number of their cases resulting in the first instance from absent or runaway husbands. He is entirely correct to point out 'the disproportionate vulnerability of single women to poverty' (p. 191), and for an unknown 'dark figure' number of women, who could not petition or found themselves unsuccessful in doing so, such multiple hardship poverty caused complete destitution and a slide into begging and vagrancy.

Healey's final section examines the understudied relationship between 'economic crises and the day-to-day operation of the Poor Law', positing that petitioning during these crises might best be seen as a form of bargaining and popular pressure designed to push 'recalcitrant overseers and vestrymen into performing their duties to the poor' (p. 215). He examines several understudied years of high corn prices in Lancashire, particularly 1674–5 and 1727–30, and connects such surges to trade depressions and mortality crises. We learn about these terrible periods from two powerful perspectives; firstly, through the detailed quantitative work Healey undertook on local agricultural price series where he highlighted some astonishing price spikes,

such as in 1674 when grain prices approximately doubled in Lancashire, an increase well above what is listed in the *Agricultural History of England and Wales*'s price series index (p. 226). Secondly, Healey connects his petitioners to the crises directly and demonstrates how sharp increases in the volume of petitioning were closely tied to these years of dearth and depression. His key finding is just how adaptive the poor relief regime was to such circumstances: expenditure skyrocketed during years of crisis, as can be seen from Healey's striking figures for relief expenses in parishes such as Bury: the parish averaged £86 p.a. from 1710 to 1726, and expenditure soared to £219 in 1727, and averaged £222 from 1728 to 1730 (p. 245). Ultimately it seems clear that while the poor law could not combat endemic disease or several other forms of crisis mortality, it was increasingly able to prevent the poor from starving.

In his conclusion Healey succinctly ties together his project and suggests that even against 'a background of rising market dependency and social polarisation' the poor law still managed to convincingly alleviate economic tensions, prevent famines, and '[ease] fears about vagrancy' (p. 257). I am entirely convinced by the first two contentions, less so by the third, though it should be said Healey was at pains throughout his study to clearly indicate that his focus was on 'deserving poverty', and indeed on successful pauper petitioners in many respects, themselves a subset of parish poor. Because it generally eschews grand claims about poverty, the contentions that *The First Century of Welfare* does make stand out, grounded as they are on an excellent source base and thorough efforts of contextualisation and quantification. Firstly, the book articulates and then demonstrates a solid methodological framework for the use of poor law petitions, one that can be further developed by dialogue with the tools and practitioners of the digital humanities. Secondly, despite much about this text which suggests that Healey tends toward 'splitting' in history rather than 'lumping', he suggests a powerful redefinition of deserving poverty not as old age, but as *infirmity* of body (or indeed mind). These are important contributions to the larger historiography of poverty over and above the excellently detailed study of Lancashire which underwrites them. We have long been able to see the historical shape of early modern poverty in England, but Healey's study of poverty in Lancashire adds much needed light and detail to our image.

Notes

1. See for reference the English Broadside Ballad Archive, ballad ID: 30976 or 20838.[Back to \(1\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/121684>