

Review

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Samantha A. Shave, *Pauper Policies: Poor Law Practice in England, 1780–1850*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017. xiv + 300 pp. £75. 9780719089633.

Samantha Shave has written one of the most original books on the English Poor Law in years: she has taken topics we thought we knew well, such as Gilbert's Act, and given them new and insightful treatment.

Shave positions her work in the context of a recent historiography that side-lined study of parish administration in favour of a concentration on pauper agency, but argues that now 'there is a need for a dynamic approach to understanding the administration of the poor laws, an approach that also lets the experiences of the poor in' (p. 24). To this end she co-opts a policy-process approach to the development of law and practice after 1780. In addition to the bare fact of statute law, and to the paupers' receipt of relief, the interpretation, implementation and evolution of policy within the legal framework relied on decisions that were conscious or unconscious, documented or unwritten. A cycle of implementation is continuously informed by *de facto* evaluation and adjustment in response to specific perceived problems. Seen through this lens, our understanding of changes to the Poor Law, particularly during the legal and social upheavals of 1830–45, has been flawed. Parochial manifestations of generosity or meanness should instead be seen as emerging from policy developed by the parish officers, attenders at vestry meetings, and others; minor 'stakeholders' rather than 'key actors' (to use twenty-first-century terminology) could make significant interventions in policy formation and delivery.

Consequently, Shave is able to reconsider statutory changes to the poor laws in 1782, 1818, 1819 and 1834 in relation to the exchange of ideas of how best to operate the law, policy transfer between authorities, adoption and discarding of specific legal provisions, and pressure applied by public opinion in the form of scandal. The influence of Gilbert's Act, for example, has been substantially underestimated on the evidence of Wessex parishes when studied over fifty years rather than seen at a single moment in Parliamentary inquiries. This Act was adopted by more rural parishes than expected, and taken up in the 1790s with rationales of economy rather than humanitarian feeling. Furthermore, Gilbert workhouses might introduce work schemes and apply them contrary to the provisions of the Act for sheltering the vulnerable. Enabling Acts offered new ways to think about local problems, and evolved in ways unanticipated by legislators.

Shave concludes that long-distance policy transfer was effected by both personal connection and by publications, so disrupting the potential for a coherent regional view of relief. The reformed law after 1834 did not stop these transfers but rendered them more formal as Boards of Guardians communicated with one another. The Poor Law Commission endorsed 'horizontal' flows of knowledge, subtly subverting the law's

'top-down' intent, and meaning 'The Commission was not a dictatorship, nor was it powerless' (pp. 252–3). In navigating this balance of power, Commissioners were not so much schooled by scandal as eventually observant of it.

In this way Shave's monograph provides us all with a corrective to the trend of pauper experiences dominating the literature: experience was contained within an evolving policy context, which was not governed wholly by localism but by information exchange, discernible process and independent application.

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