

Book Reviews

George R. Boyer (2019), *The Winding Road to the Welfare State: Economic Insecurity and Social Welfare Policy in Britain*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, £35.00, pp. 384, hbk.

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In certain respects, this is an important, and useful, addition to the literature on the history of social welfare in modern Britain. The overwhelming focus is on economic insecurity, and action (or inaction) by the state when addressing this particular social issue. In a useful section on 'Defining Terms' (pp. 4-8) the author constructively engages with various definitions of 'economic insecurity' put forward by social scientists, settling on the sensible notion that it involves 'a household's exposure to declines in income of a magnitude large enough to create acute financial hardship' (pp. 4-5). While the bulk of the volume is concerned with the period from the reform of the English Poor Law in 1834 down to the creation of the 'welfare state' in the 1940s, Boyer comes to the gloomy, if unsurprising, conclusion that economic insecurity has persisted over time, notwithstanding efforts to address it, and that the first half century of the 'welfare state' has not seen the 'end of the road to economic security. The road continues' (p. 310).

As might be expected from a scholar who has a distinguished career as an economic historian, the strength of the book lies in the assembly, synthesis, and interpretation of a wide range of data on, especially, the level of income available to the working class. There seem to be few appropriate sources of which the author is unaware, and he deftly picks his way through often complex, and arcane, material. One result, he notes, is that his volume 'presents newly constructed estimates of the number of persons aged 65 and older receiving poor relief from 1860 to 1908', so challenging some existing historical accounts (p. 26). To take one example (Chapter 7) of Boyer's approach, the inter-war period saw persistent economic depression, albeit with notable regional differences in terms of impact. The author, with admirable clarity, explains how this impacted on household income. He also explains the shifting complexities of the welfare benefits available to those at the rough end of long-term economic downturn. One outcome of this was a sharp rise in those seeking outdoor relief under the Poor Law, a return, after a notable decline, to the situation of the later nineteenth century (p. 233). A notable response was, as the author shows, a number of social surveys which took place in the 1920s and 1930s. So, for instance, an investigation of Sheffield in the early 1930s revealed that 90% of those below the poverty line received some form of social assistance, with around half of the families involved in receipt of unemployment benefit, and around 40% on poor relief (p. 254). As Boyer notes in concluding this Chapter, the problems associated with state benefits were, by the outbreak of war, well known, with bodies such as Political and Economic Planning providing compelling evidence of the shortcomings of the social services (p. 259). The stage, so it might be argued, was set for the intervention of William Beveridge and, ultimately, his 1942 Report.

The volume's merits notwithstanding, some health warnings should be issued. First, it cannot be read straightforwardly as a pre-history of the raft of reforms which took place in

Britain during, and after, the Second World War. There is, for instance, no significant discussion of areas such as health policy, family policy, education policy, and housing policy in the period under discussion. The volume's main focus is income maintenance in a society characterized by, as the sub-title suggests, economic insecurity. There might have been a winding road to the welfare state, but it was also a broader one. Second, while the historical literature on its chosen themes is admirably dealt with, nonetheless some curious claims are made. So while it is true that more historical emphasis should be placed in British welfare history on the Crusade Against Outrelief of the 1870s, the supposed neglect of the Edwardian welfare reforms, and their impact, is surely overstated (p. 25). In his inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics in 1951, Richard Titmuss spoke of the 'great collectivist advances at the beginning of the (twentieth) century' – that is, the Liberal welfare reforms (Titmuss, 1951). The latter have hardly been under-researched since. Third, the notion of the 'welfare state' is not critically scrutinised. We are told, for example, that 'Britain after 1948 deserves to be referred to as a welfare state', the contrast being with the prevailing situation in the Edwardian and inter-war eras (p. 284). Again to refer to Titmuss, if only because he was one of the earliest social scientists to critique the notion, he invariably put the phrase 'welfare state' in inverted commas. This was to signify that for him, unlike for some other commentators from both the political right and the political left, this was an unfinished project, and one whose demands, and needs, were constantly changing. Titmuss would, incidentally, certainly have agreed with Boyer's argument that 'economic growth does not necessarily lead to economic security' (p. 309). Fourth, the volume is not in any real sense about Britain. It is concerned, almost exclusively, with England. It is certainly true that measures such as the 1911 National Insurance Act applied not only to England and Wales, but also to Scotland (and Ireland, for that matter). But there is no acknowledgement, for example, that a separate Poor Law regime existed in Scotland. In the nineteenth century at least, this was notably harsher than its English counterpart. Finally, Boyer is not unaware that social welfare is highly politicized, and that politics, and ideas, are important. But these dimensions of social policy are somewhat underplayed. To take an area already alluded to, Michael Freeden has analysed the importance of ideology in the creation of the pre-1914 Liberal welfare reforms (Freeden, 1986). Likewise, Stephen Brooke has shown that it was not only Beveridge who was rethinking social insurance in the 1940s (Brooke, 1992).

So, on the issue of income insecurity, there is much to be learned from this volume. But for a fuller understanding of how the 'welfare state' came into being, it needs to be complemented by other works.

References

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JOHN STEWART
Glasgow Caledonian University
John.Stewart@gcu.ac.uk