Review Article

HISTORY AND HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY: DIVERGENT PATHS IN THE STUDY OF AGEING

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> Pat Thane. *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues.*
> Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000. 536 pp. £25.00 ISBN 0-19-820382-9.
> John Macnicol. *The Politics of Retirement in Britain, 1878–1948.*
> Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998. 425 pp, £47.50, ISBN 0-52162273- 5.

Research on the history of old age has been an important area of scholarship in gerontology over the past two decades. From the impetus provided by Laslett's work in the 1960s and 1970s, historical research had opened out by the 1980s into what Stearns and Van Tassel viewed as a 'promising and provocative subfield of social history' (1986: ix).

This was especially the case in the United States, where the impetus to study the historical dimension to growing old has been especially strong. Indeed, it was research by historians that often set the agenda for debates within social gerontology; for example, in discussions about the origins of popular stereotypes about ageing, and in debates about changes in the status of older people in the family and wider community. Fischer's Bland-Lee Lectures (1977) provided an influential contribution to both the above themes, emphasising the role of cultural factors in determining the position of older people in society. This approach was subsequently explored by Achenbaum (1978), Cole (1991) and Haber (1983), who offered different periodisations and causal explanations for changes in the position of elderly people. Subsequently, the debate moved on to embrace economic and sociological factors in the history of ageing: for example, in Graebner's *History of Retirement* (1980), Quadagno's *Transformation of Old Age Security* (1988) and Haber and Gratton's *Old Age and the Search for Security* (1993).

In their different ways, these studies tried to resolve the tension between what Kertzer (1995: 364) views as 'two extremes' in historical and policy perspectives on ageing. On the one hand, a romanticisation of the past that views older people as occupying a central position of power and influence

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inside the family. On the other hand, a revisionist view emphasising the punitive character of relief in past societies, and the marginalisation of those (especially women) without gainful employment. Kertzer concludes that neither of these broad scenarios is helpful for understanding ageing in past societies. He observes that:

Part of the problem, of course, is that the terms of the debate have been unrealistically broad. While the demographic changes in Western societies have followed a fairly uniform pattern, from low proportions of elderly to much higher proportions and from low life expectancy to high life expectancy, the social and political arrangements for dealing with the older population have varied considerably from society to society and, indeed, in many cases within societies, by such factors as class and gender. (Kertzer 1995: 364)

The British context

Both the books under review provide a welcome assessment of the British (or English, in Thane's case) context, and represent major summations of extensive periods of research and scholarship by the two authors. Laslett's influence notwithstanding, British historical research on ageing has been distinctly patchy, especially in comparison with the productivity of American historians (Harper 2000). The reasons for this are not immediately obvious but may have something to do with the much stronger British tradition of social policy analysis, which for a period at least 'balkanised' the study of ageing to the relative exclusion of other disciplines. Genuine inter-disciplinary research (at least up until the 1980s) was limited, with researchers in disciplines such as history, sociology, and social policy often working in isolation from one another.

   Despite these observations, British historians have provided major contributions to the study of ageing. Thomas's essay 'Age and authority in early modern England' (1976) has been one of the most outstanding. He also covered the topic of old age in his magisterial *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1973), where he speculated on some of the factors that lead to a disproportionate number of elderly women being singled out in witchcraft accusations. The tradition of investigations using local parish records has stimulated research on different aspects of family and household life in old age (Pelling and Smith 1991; Robin 1984). Older people have also figured prominently in studies of poor relief, and retirement, too, has been the subject of study (Johnson 1994; Hannah 1986). Many of these themes were brought together in a special edition of *Ageing and Society*, edited by Laslett and published in 1984, a volume which must itself be credited with stimulating greater interest in the historical analysis of ageing.

   The publication of the volumes by Thane and Macnicol provides us with an opportunity to assess how far the historical debate in Britain has progressed. In some respects, this is not a straightforward issue, and depends for an answer on how we view the purposes and scope of historical enquiry. Here, the books diverge and one of the objectives of this review is to provide an account of the difference in approach taken by the two authors. Broadly, Thane offers the

strengths (but also the weaknesses) of traditional historical analysis, rarely straying outside the boundaries of the discipline, taking the reader through a chronology of events: from old age in Greece and Rome, life in pre-Modern England, experiences of the Poor Law, the development of pensions, through to a summary of future trends. Macnicol in contrast has a much tighter period (1878–1948) and set of objectives, and he is concerned to pursue a particular argument combining political economy perspectives with a focus on the role of 'human agency' in the framing and development of retirement policy. He is concerned as well with exploring the social divisions running through debates about pensions, and the relative strength of different interest groups in pressing the case for particular proposals.

Retirement contracts and the Poor Law

Pat Thane certainly operates on a much broader canvas, and in that sense her enterprise is perhaps more ambitious, but in certain respects less successful than that of Macnicol. A major concern of her book is to challenge historical stereotypes about gerontocracies on the one side, and what might be termed the 'immiseration' of the elderly on the other. Thane sees the position of the old as more nuanced than either of these positions would suggest. Certainly, the status of older people in history has rarely been unambiguous, and life – especially for those without benefit of land or property – has often been a struggle in the fullest sense of the word. But Thane does have a relatively optimistic view of older people in history, keen as she is to convey the range of experiences which were possible even from relatively early times. Here, for example, is her summary of life in pre-modern England:

Older people who were a visible presence in society influenced perceptions of old age … as did drama, sermons, medical texts, and the range of media representation. All expressed the variety of the experience of old age, the difference between 'green' old age and later decrepitude and the positive potential of the earlier phase of old age … as for long before, and after, honour and dishonour were simultaneously experienced by, and attributed to older people, contingent upon their personal and social situations. As in all times, 'old people' were not a homogeneous category. (Thane 2000: 70)

Few would disagree with this last point although, apart from gender-based distinctions, Thane has relatively little to say about divisions of social class, or those between urban and rural society. Stearns (1977), in his very interesting study of old age in France, is certainly much stronger in this regard (as indeed is Macnicol). But part of Thane's argument is that views about old age (and especially those coming from sociologists) have over-emphasised older people as victims of a domineering kinship system or, more latterly, welfare state. In contrast, Thane is keen to present people as actively constructing support for themselves in different ways, and under different social and economic constraints. Retirement contracts, where individuals ensured support for themselves and their spouses, are one such example. Typically, these were

agreements where property was transferred on condition that a certain amount of care and support was received in return. Thane provides some fascinating examples, as in the following case of William Notte of Wymondum in Norfolk, who in 1419:

Transferred to his son one messuage [a dwelling plus outbuildings and adjacent land], plus a fairly substantial amount of land, the conditions being the reservation for his use of one room at the northern end of the hall. Also he was to receive food and clothing, to be allowed to warm himself at the fire, and to have a horse and saddle ready to ride whenever he wished; also annually the son was to plough and seed three acres of this land and maintain twenty-four ewes. (Thane 2000: 77)

But the interpretation of retirement contracts is itself less than straight-forward. Thane views their existence as an example of people: ' … directing their own lives and striving to preserve their independence … carefully planning the maximum use of resources available to them' (2000: 76). Acknowledging that they could equally be viewed as illustrating tensions between generations, she opts instead for seeing them as a healthy sign of older people taking control of their lives. Yet there is something unconvincing about the argument put forward. It is easy to be seduced by the richness of the examples provided, but hard questions need to be asked such as: what were the limits to this kind of exchange? What sanctions existed for maintaining contracts? Above all, were such contracts a sign of 'weakness' in the position of older people, leaving them open to abuse and maltreatment in their dotage? Stearns provides an alternative view that perhaps deserved closer scrutiny:

The fearful wording [in retirement contracts] suggests not a causal statement of intent but an anxious awareness of the potential for later neglect. Specificity down to monthly pecks of potatoes followed from prior conflict within the family, or awareness that such conflict was likely as soon as the elderly surrendered their basic weapon in a familiar power struggle – the weapon of ownership. (Stearns: 1986: 7)

Thane is on stronger ground in her assessment of the Poor Laws, where the range of examples and depth of analysis are very fine indeed. She argues convincingly that poor relief was largely residual and complementary to income from other sources, including work, the informal network of family and friends, and charity. Poor relief was, she argues, essentially a 'safety net' when all else failed. Thane demonstrates with numerous examples how capacity for work was a crucial test for receiving help, with the expectation that people would continue to seek some form of labour for as long as possible. The following example is taken from the 1790s:

J.L. aged 80 and his wife 82, had received parish aid for more than twenty years. They were formerly engaged in agriculture but a fall had incapacitated him, throwing him on the parish. The wife 'occasionally spins and earns about three-farthings besides doing her other necessary household work. They receive at present two shillings regularly each week and £1.6s annually for house-rent for digging and carting peat and turves for fuel etc'. (Thane 2000: 149)

Particularly striking from Thane's account is the way in which older people juggled a variety of sources of assistance (an 'economy of makeshifts'), creating their own social networks in the process. Again, she is keen here (and

with some justification) to challenge a picture of older people as passive victims of poor relief, demonstrating how in certain circumstances they could manipulate the system to retain independence. Yet important though this argument is, the book perhaps understates the sheer misery of old age for large numbers of men and women without work or much in the way of property. There is surprisingly little on the important topic of begging, although the old must be regarded as a prominent group in this category (especially in urban areas). And whilst the book has numerous case studies showing the old managing in some form or another, these are inevitably the stories of the survivors and not those who simply fell by the wayside or dropped out of the records entirely.

The administration of poor relief was tightened after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, and elderly people were caught up in the more disciplinary climate that came in its wake. Thane points to conflicting attitudes regarding the role of the workhouse, some viewing it as a means of instilling the virtues of thrift into the young whilst others saw it as a haven where the old 'could enjoy their indulgencies' (2000: 166). This conflict was never resolved although 'a far greater stigma attached to entering the workhouse in the minds of older people after 1834 than before, as they became embedded in the consciousness of poor people of all ages as pitiless ''bastilles''' (2000: 166). Indeed, as Blaikie (1999: 47) argues, the 'dark vision of poverty [and] humiliation' aroused by the workhouse reached forward into the 20th century, tainting residential provision in the welfare state (exacerbated by the fact that geriatric care was often provided in former poor law institutions).

This last point raises the issue of images of ageing, about which historians in the USA have devoted particular attention (notably Achenbaum 1978, and Cole 1991). In Britain, contributions from historical sociologists (notably Blaikie 1999) have begun the task of tracing the evolution of stereotypes of ageing. This area has also been the subject of considerable sociological investigation, in particular through the work of Featherstone and Hepworth (1993). Thane certainly covers aspects of this discussion, noting for example the emergence of ideas about the human life cycle, and the way this was associated with the need to impose shape and purpose on 'the journey of life'. But we could have done with rather more on the iconography of the life course: what range of images did the English medieval world produce? What was the contribution from European culture and religious institutions? Thane usefully picks out some of the ambiguities in Shakespeare's plays, but the wider artistic culture is left largely unexplored.

This is even more the case with the chapter dealing with images of older people in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of the attention here is devoted to what are referred to as 'articulate old women' (such as Beatrice Webb and Florence Nightingale) and 'powerful old men' (Gladstone and, oddly, since his death was as late as 1963, Beveridge), with around two pages left for 'powerless old people' (2000: 270). There are really two problems here. First, given the time period, much more could have been said about the powerless, notably through autobiographies of working-class women and men, artistic representations and the medium of photography. Again, Blaikie has demonstrated what can be achieved, but there is huge scope for further

historical investigation and some indications of the possibilities might have been in order. Thane relies on Henry Mayhew and Francis Kilvert, but neither comes across to best effect as purveyors of images of old age. Second, taking the powerful was a good idea, but the danger is that this can sanitise some of the grimmer aspects of growing old (from which Thane tends to distance herself, given her interest in 'active ageing'). Yet the point might still be made that even for those blessed with substantial resources, status and dignity can unravel at the end. Indeed, one of the messages that might be drawn from biographies of the great and the good is precisely the sense in which old age can spin out of control. Here is Anne Oakley, describing the final days of her father, Richard Titmuss:

You were semi-conscious. You couldn't speak properly: the respirator made you sore and you didn't have your dentures in. This was you without your smart clothes, your titles, your important appointments, your department and your international influence. This was you naked and defenceless in a tiny mean hospital room. This was you enjoying the benefits of what you had worked so hard to defend – the British National Health Service. (Oakley 1984: 108)

Similarly, Pimlott gives an intensely moving description of the final illness of Hugh Dalton, a former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer:

Hugh had started to decline fast, losing control physically and mentally. His last week in the flat, irrational and almost mad, flinging objects around the room, was terrible … On Sunday 14th January he was admitted to a private ward at University College hospital. But he made so much noise that he was moved to St. Pancras hospital into a public geriatric ward with 28 other men. (Pimlott 1985: 638)

A wider point perhaps is that, whilst the book deals admirably with the institutions of ageing – notably the impact of the poor laws and the development of the welfare state – crucial areas in the experience of ageing are missed. Thus we have a valuable chapter covering the invention of geriatric medicine, but very little on the issue of illness and death in old age. Yet an old age without medical help, or with a primitive NHS, was one more to be endured than enjoyed. Thomas (1976: 249), in his account of old age in 17th century England, suggested that old age was 'itself a disease', a 'perpetual sickness', 'the dregs of a man's life'. Similarly Fischer comments that: 'to be old in early America was to be wracked by illness. It was to live in physical misery, with pain as a constant companion' (1977: 67). The idea of illness as a constant companion to ageing (and hence part of its social and natural history) might have been an important theme for the book, along with discussion about the active responses developed by lay women and men on the one side, and scientists on the other.

Rather more nuanced is the coverage, in various parts of the book, of the family life of older people. Here, the study is a valuable corrective, challenging interpretations that allege a decline in family support for the old. Thane takes us through from pre-modern times up to the 1950s and 1960s (with a useful review of the work of the Institute of Community Studies), teasing out some of the complexities in the nature of family support. On the issue of co-residence, she takes the view that older people had no customary right to share a home, even with very close relatives. On the other hand, the historical record

suggests that this did occur with some frequency, though with many permutations, reflecting the different pressures upon households and communities. Reporting research on the town of Preston, Anderson (1971) showed that three generation households became more prevalent in the 19th century, the reasons for which Thane summarises as follows:

Complex intergenerational relationships underlay the statistics. People in their sixties might still have teenage children living at home. Young couples often lived with parents early in marriage, before setting up their own household. In a district such as Preston where women could work more regularly and for better pay than in most parts of the country, the oldest generation could keep house and care for children. Over time the demands of space might require the younger family to move, but grandmaternal care could continue either from a separate household or by means of the older women moving with the younger generation. At the end might come a period when the older person was wholly dependent, but this was by no means inevitable. In Preston, even among the poorest, family support was far more important to the survival of older people than the exiguous poor relief system. (Thane 2000: 294)

The book also provides valuable insights into the question of the 'liable relatives clause'. This forced children or other close kin to care for an elderly relative. Whilst Poor Law practice was open to variation, the evidence suggests that lack of resources in the wider family often made the clause unworkable. Close relatives were often just too poor themselves to help older people in need. As one Commissioner for the West Riding of Yorkshire observed: 'There are instances in most of the large townships in which the relatives of paupers have been compelled to maintain them; but these cases do not frequently occur, owing to the difficulty of proving the ability of the relation' (Thane 2000: 156).

Thane also demonstrates older people negotiating a difficult path between support from the state and that from the family. Writing of the period in the 1920s, she notes that there was no sign that resistance to the Poor Law had diminished: ' ... it remained a desperate last resort and old people opted for struggle and destitution on the pension rather than turn to the board of guardians' (2000: 315).

With the advent of the Assistance Board in 1940, there was a rush of applications for supplementary pensions. The Government expected 400,000 to apply but by the time of the first payments, 1,275,000 applications had been filed: evidence, as *The Times* famously expressed it, of 'a remarkable discovery of secret need'. This reflected the severity of poverty affecting elderly people in the inter-war years, and continuing through the 1940s.

Yet, despite a period of militancy in the 1930s, individual pensioners were often reluctant to press their case. Help from the Assistance Board was still tainted with charity and dependency, and many older people were reluctant to apply. One study carried out in the 1940s found that elderly people – 'anxious not to be a nuisance' – readily acquiesced in receiving a smaller share of food than other family members, putting the needs of younger people as the first priority. Doubtless, they had internalised some of the ageism that had washed over the framing of social policy in the 1930s and 1940s (which Thane reviews in a particularly interesting and well-researched chapter of the

book). Indeed, 50 years on, one million older people in Britain are still failing to claim the full range of benefits: old attitudes would appear to have died hard, even in later generations.

Pension politics

One conclusion from *Old Age in English History* is that provision for older people developed from a complex interaction between national and local politics. Being an older person has never of itself been sufficient justification for receiving resources. Rather, issues arise about the prosperity of society and individual communities at any one time, competing economic priorities, the views of powerful elites (or the ruling class), and the extent of mobilisation amongst older people. It is precisely the last two that concern John Macnicol in *The Politics of Retirement in Britain*. Macnicol takes the period from 1878 to 1948, beginning with the publication of Blackley's state pension proposal and ending with Beveridge's plans for social security. Along the way he explores some of the key factors driving the debate about pensions. First, in the introduction to the book, he reviews 'demand' and 'supply-side' explanations for the spread of retirement, opting strongly for the former as the major factor which 'triggered' modern retirement:

Pension systems were thus not the prime cause: retirement was not 'manufactured' by the state via social policies. In Britain, the trend to 'jobless' retirement commenced roughly two decades before the first (1908) state pension scheme, and rates of retirement seem not to have been affected by subsequent pension legislation (notably the introduction of a retirement condition in 1946). The growth of state pension coverage was thus a response to prior labour market conditions. (Macnicol 1998: 21)

In the case of pensions, the first major initiative came in 1878 from a rural vicar, Canon William Blackley, who called for a system of national insurance to help stem the spread of pauperism. The latter he saw (in suitably biblical terms) as: ' … creating a new class in our state which confuses our whole social order, and does the work of Satan in awaking and fostering immeasurable social discords' (p. 61). Blackley's solution was to get wage earners to pay a lump sum early in their working life (between the ages of 17 and 20) into a national fund that would mature and fund sickness benefit along with a pension (from the age of 70). Apart from many practical difficulties (not least of which was that few young workers would be able to afford the scheme), the opposition of the Friendly Societies (anxious to preserve their role in providing sickness benefit) meant that Blackley's scheme made little progress.

Campaigns for pensions were launched, however, with increasing intensity from the late 19th century, culminating in the 1908 Pensions Bill. Macnicol sees a dual imperative underlying this development. On the one hand, the need to stiffen the Poor Law as a mechanism for disciplining able-bodied workers, thus boosting industrial productivity; on the other, the need to assist the exit of the 'worn out' older worker, increasingly regarded as surplus to the needs of industrial capitalism. Macnicol identifies three main factors which brought the pensions debate into the realm of practical politics: first, the

interest of politicians such as Joseph Chamberlain, and social reformers such as Charles Booth; second, new evidence of the extent of poverty experienced by older people; third, the adoption of the pensions issue by the newly emerging labour movement.

Macnicol is especially good at analysing the way in which class interests were expressed in debates about pensions. Throughout the period under discussion, political agendas veered between schemes designed to alleviate poverty in old age, and concerns about the cost and the potential burden that would be placed upon future generations. Fears about undermining virtues such as 'thrift' and good character also ran through these debates. Chamberlain, for example, despite acknowledging the problems facing working people when trying to save, stuck to the line that: 'the promise of universal pensions to everyone, without reference to previous character, would be the greatest blow ever struck at thrift in this country' (p. 72). And Macnicol argues that, like Canon Blackley, 'Chamberlain seems to have been primarily concerned with the remoralisation of the male breadwinner via a pension scheme that would encourage him to save when young; ... (this) seemed more important to him than relieving poverty in old age' (1998: 73).

Moral issues also concerned Charles Booth who, despite a generally conservative political stance, developed a radical position on pensions. He concluded that only a tax-funded, non-contributory scheme would alleviate pensioner poverty. The thrust of Booth's approach was that, by removing the 'deserving' from the clutches of the Poor Law, the full force of a disciplinary social policy could be focused on the 'incorrigible residue' left behind (p.82). He favoured a punitive workhouse system to keep the able-bodied male up to the mark.

By the 1890s, the battle for pensions intensified, with the oppositional view being expressed most forcefully by the Charity Organisation Society (COS) and the larger Friendly Societies. The COS re-visited the issue of thrift and self-reliance, arguing that state pensions would simply encourage fecklessness at the same time as weakening communal bonds of mutual aid and support. Booth, as a leading advocate of pensions, came under particular attack, causing one COS activist to remark: 'Mr. Charles Booth is evidently a born demographist, not easily to be restrained from the manipulation and decimal-pointing of all figures within his reach' (p. 107). And the class dimension was brought out by Octavia Hill who, whilst declaring herself against 'all systems of pensions ... in any form', admitted in the next breath that 'pensions to higher class people' were 'utterly different' (p. 108). In direct contrast with the COS, the nascent labour movement embraced pensions from the start, and securing provision for old age became a cornerstone of socialist welfare policies. Again, Macnicol provides a valuable discussion about the range of interest groups involved, and the differing views expressed by moderates and radicals:

On the moderate wing were activists like Francis Herbert Stead and Frederick Rogers, who viewed old age pensions primarily as a question of social justice. Stead's famous account of the labour movement campaign, *How Old Age Pensions Began to Be* (1910), is written in an almost mystical Christian socialist style, with virtually no trace of hostility towards the capitalist class ... By contrast radical left-wingers viewed old age

pensions as a part of a broader strategy for using the parliamentary machinery to pass expensive pieces of social legislation, involving punitive levels of income tax levied on the rich: by this parliamentary, constitutional means, the capitalist class would be stripped of its wealth and power. (Macnicol 1998: 139)

Progressing into the 20th century, trades unionists became increasingly aware of technological changes threatening the livelihoods of older workers, and pensions became a key part of their strategy for assisting those on the margins of the labour market. But the dangers in this were quickly acknowledged: on the one hand, pensioning off the old might create more jobs for the young and those with families; on the other, it might also lead to a 'reserve army' of cheap labour with pensions subsidising low wages. The attraction of the former became especially prominent given the depth of the economic recession in the 1920s and 1930s; there was increased interest in the idea of pensions conditional upon retirement as an immediate and simple cure for unemployment. Macnicol provides an excellent overview of the twists and turns of the debate, and a particularly good account of the different schemes advocated by leading figures in the labour movement.

Missing from the book, however, is a stronger sense of what older workers felt about unemployment, and indeed the variations across different industries and occupations. More might have been made, for example, of studies in the depressed industries and regions, where a number of researchers identified employment problems facing older unskilled and semi-skilled workers (Chapman and Hallsworth 1909; Rowntree and Lasker 1911; Richardson 1936). Some of the autobiographies of working men living through the depression years, might also have been useful for source material. The individual tragedies around this time could certainly be immense. *The Birmingham Post* in December 1929 reported the following note left by an unemployed man who killed his wife and then committed suicide:

I feel so terribly worried. I am writing this while I am able to do so, for at times I get so strange I hardly know what to do with myself. My inside trembles, my head aches and I go dizzy, often on the verge of collapse, and even crossing the road I fear I shall get knocked down. Sometimes I cross as in a dream. Therefore, if something happens it will not be the fault of the driver, but my own inability to get out of the way.

The note was signed 'Frank Thornby, aged 62', with the coda: 'Out of employment and can't get a job! The younger men get the jobs'.

The politics of ageism

Despite the intensity of the debate inside the Labour Party, social policy reform was put on hold in the 1930s whilst more general concerns about demographic change were aired. Macnicol (like Thane) provides a valuable summary of what was to be an influential period in setting the tone for debates about ageing. The decline in fertility – in evidence from the 1870s – prompted three kinds of speculation: that at a future date the population would go into numerical decline; that the population stock would decrease in quality (the eugenicist view); and that the proportion of non-productive elders would grow

in comparison to the productive young. If the tone of many of the scholarly contributions to this debate was reasonably sober, the contribution of the media of the 1930s was anything but. Macnicol highlights many commentaries found in the regional and national press 'predicting severe depopulation, with lurid fantasies of deserted villages, idle factories, seaside and spar towns 'clogged up' with geriatrics in bath chairs, a loss of 'vitality', 'enterprise' and 'initiative' in public life and other dire consequences' (1998: 261–2).

Seventy years on, this might be taken as an early example of media hyperbole, somewhat remote from the views of academics and those involved in framing social policy. Unfortunately, these early signs of institutional ageism infected some of the key figures of the day. Beveridge, in a 1935 radio broadcast, warned that Britain could be facing 'the ultimate disappearance of [its] population' (p. 261). Richard Titmuss served notice that there would be 'an increasingly higher proportion of older persons who will hold appoint-ments by virtue of their seniority. It will take far longer for youth to arrive at responsible and leading positions in every sphere of our social and economic life … society will lose the mental attitude that is essential for social progress' (p. 262). Even Keynes weighed in with the view that enterprise would be affected as 'producers' became increasingly hard-pressed with higher taxation, this arising from the increase in pensioners (p. 262).

Macnicol argues that the 'population panic' of the 1930s ultimately created the basis for the ageism discovered by gerontologists in the 1960s. Again though, the book would have been strengthened with a discussion about how middle-aged and older people responded to alarmism about population change. Almost certainly they moderated any lingering expectations that retirement might be a positive experience, but some images and illustrations of the time could have been more systematically incorporated into the discussion.

One facet of 1930s 'ageism' that Macnichol reviews, concerns attitudes towards poverty amongst the old. The Treasury, faced with pressure to curtail public expenditure, maintained the line that only a minority of pensioners were really experiencing poverty (an official view which re-surfaced in the 1950s and early 1960s when the subject was re-visited by Townsend and Wedderburn (1965) and others). Poverty surveys of the time could shed only limited light on the issue given the dominant focus on the problems facing male breadwinners and the health and nutrition of children. Older people (and women in particular) lost out in the search to document the problems faced by those regarded as 'productive' members of the population. Even more revealing were the attitudes displayed by social investigators such as A.L. Bowley and Herbert Tout, for whom the minimum needs of older people were invariably placed below those of working adults. Macnicol notes that: 'What particularly jarred with pension campaigners was the assumption that the minimum dietary level for a person aged 65 plus should be put lower in value than a working-age adult … and when social researchers noted that old people ate less than did working-age adults, they inferred that this was physiological in origin, rather than a desperate social necessity' (1998: 279).

Inevitably, the general tenor of debates of the 1930s was to infuse the work of the Beveridge Committee when it was established in 1941. Again, like

Thane, Macnicol provides a mass of detail in reviewing the evolution of the Beveridge proposals, and greatly extends our knowledge of this area. He is especially good in drawing out the immensely important role played by the Treasury in scrutinising proposals for reform, developing his analysis from extensive work in the Public Records Office. Macnicol takes the view that the Beveridge Report recommendation for a new contributory pension scheme can be seen '…as a victory for the Treasury in its long campaign to shift pension finance away from non-contributory tax funding … to the safer and much more redistributive mechanism of contributory social insurance' (1998: 289). Macnicol also demonstrates the extent to which the ageism of the 1930s permeated Beveridge's thinking, leading to statements in early drafts of the report such as: 'It would be a reprehensible extravagance to give full subsistence income to every citizen, as a birthday present on his or her reaching the age of 65 or 60' (p. 381). He notes that in another sentence left out of the Report, Beveridge even went so far as to insist that: 'the state should reserve the right to reduce pensions below subsistence if the cost of living fell, or there was an economic recession' (p. 381).

Macnicol concludes his study with a brief review of post-war developments, leading up to the concerns of the late-1980s and 1990s about generational equity and the financing of pensions. One interesting point that he might have reflected upon is the contrasting positions of Britain and the USA in the immediate post-war years. Graebner (1980: 263), for example, argues that during the period 1940 through to 1965, retirement in the USA 'triumphed over alternative methods of dealing with the aged'. He suggests that:

By the mid-1950s even the organisations of the retired had internalized the new ideology of retirement and had accepted that the sheltered workshops, retraining programs, and age discrimination legislation that were the stock-in-trade of liberal capitalism could hardly solve the problems created by technology and ongoing labor surplus. (1980: 263)

The British experience was in direct contrast to this and, for much of the 1950s and 1960s, older people and their representative organisations continued to kick against the injustices of mandatory retirement (Phillipson 1993). In a sense, this experience was a logical outcome of the ideologies of ageing that unfolded in the period covered by Macnicol. These left a legacy – still permeating social policy today – that retirement was of much less significance in comparison to other periods of the life course. Beveridge's strictures about the 'reprehensible extravagance [of giving] a full subsistence pension' (1998: 381) on reaching 60 or 65 was to haunt governments for many years to come.

History or historical sociology?

Both the books under review engage the reader with historical debates and actors that have shaped the institutions associated with old age. Both are skilful in revealing the influence of 'turning points' in history, such as changes to the Poor Laws, welfare reform and in particular the Beveridge Report, and

changes in the position of older people within the family. Yet the question might be posed: to what kind of historical analysis is the study of ageing best suited?

Pat Thane writes as a historian interested in 'experiences of the past' and the implications these might have for the present. She is critical of the kind of sociological theorising which emphasises the marginalisation and exclusion of the old, preferring to stress the (undoubted) benefits of retirement. Macnicol, on the other hand, taking critical gerontology as a vantage point, wants to develop both sides of the argument: the politics of retirement *have* invariably been about exclusion and loss of status, but 'human agency' is also important. This may be expressed through the political power of the organisations of the old or, at an individual level, through people simply making do and getting as much as they can from the limited resources which are on offer.

But both books raise dilemmas (especially acute in Thane's case) about how ageing may be interpreted over different historical periods. Writing a 'history of old age' suggests that it is meaningful to talk of an institution having 'continuities' which reach back over hundreds of years. Thane, for example, argues against seeing the formalising of pensions and retirement as marking the beginning of a new self-consciousness about the life course, and of old age as a distinct time of life associated with retirement:

Such a consciousness had long existed in English culture, though the threshold of old age acquired a more formalized chronological definition. What changed over the centuries was that an old age of pensioned retirement became a real possibility for a widening range of people.

But there are two major difficulties with this position: in the first place, in a world where epidemics always threatened and infant mortality was devastatingly high, people, as Stearns (1977: 22) has pointed out, often expressed a 'disinterest [or] disbelief in ageing'. In this sense, growing old hardly has much of a history or at least one which can be said to resonate with individual meaning. In the second place, it is precisely the opening-up of institutions such as retirement (from the privilege of elite civil servants) which transformed them in numerous ways. Widening the institution of retirement has indeed involved change, and a growing consciousness of a period of life separate from that of old age. This has surely made for a fundamental discontinuity in experiences of ageing past and present.

John Macnicol cuts through some of these problems by acknowledging more clearly the pivotal role of elite institutions and their representatives but, to some extent, his analysis comes at the expense of a deeper examination of action and attitudes at the grassroots. He draws upon some of his pioneering research (with Andrew Blaikie) on the role of pensioner organisations, but the shaping of retirement at an individual and community level remains under-explored in his study.

The two books represent major landmarks in the study of growing old, and confirm the value and importance of historical and policy analysis. But there is also a case for extending the different approach which each takes, with the aim of developing a more explicit historical sociology of later life. It would be about matching the strengths of Thane's attention to process and activity (the

'story' of how we have aged), with the concern which Macnicol has with linking policy to the upheavals associated with industrialisation and capitalism. The weakness of Thane's approach is that these latter hardly figure at all in her story, even though they provide the essential explanation for much of what she describes. A problem for Macnicol is accounting for the variety of sources involved in the construction of ageing, some of which at least may be out of step with the conventional political economy paradigm (Phillipson 1998).

Following the above, perspectives from historical sociology would shed light on two major dimensions to growing old. The first concerns the relationship between ageing and modernity, and the second, the issue of consciousness and identity. Beliefs in ageing (or the view that ageing might at least be controlled) emerged from the search for rational explanations of human development. Touraine (1995: 9) notes that: 'The idea of modernity makes science, rather than God, central to society and at best relegates religious beliefs to the inner realm of private life'. This at least is a major discontinuity in the experience of ageing, longevity moving from the world of chance, luck or spiritual attainment, to questions of public health and material advantage.

But a historical sociology might highlight and explore an interesting paradox: on the one hand, longevity has been viewed as a sign of human progress, with further extensions to life being promised from the application of the biological sciences. On the other hand, the history of ageing – as Macnicol and Thane show in different ways – is essentially one of containment: holding back the demands that the old and retired might make as active citizens. The interesting question here concerns how past and present continue to lock horns in directing possibilities for old age. Abrams (1982: 8) argued that ' … what people do in the present [may be seen as] a struggle to create a future *out of* the past'. A historical sociology would allow us to explore this linkage with more precision, providing a clearer sense of the 'raw material' out of which present and future patterns of ageing are likely to be constructed.

Finally, historical sociology might also explore the roots of modern consciousness about ageing. Where do beliefs about ageing come from? What is the interaction between the institutions of modernity (and the ideologies about ageing and retirement which they generate) and the actions of individuals, cohorts and generations? In the 21st century (for a select group of nations) growing old has become possible, and a different future for ageing might be envisaged. The studies of Thane and Macnicol provide the basis for a fascinating comparison between the ageing which emerged from the pre-modern into the modern era, and which is now being transformed in the period of late modernity. Here, the most compelling question raised by their research is whether late modernity will lead to an enhanced consciousness of the potential of ageing, as laid out by Laslett (1989) amongst others. In this regard, the lessons from history are not encouraging: growing old has invariably been 'object' rather than 'subject', borne along by the wider transformations of industrialisation, urbanisation and (now) globalisation. At the very least, armed with the greater sense of the past provided by these studies, a clearer vision for the future might also now be possible. Certainly,

with these two books, the contribution of historical research in Britain to the study and understanding of ageing, has been substantially enhanced.

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