

Marjorie Keniston McIntosh. *Poor Relief in England, 1350–1600*.

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This thoroughly researched and nuanced monograph explores three forms of support for the poor in the 150 years before the formalization of the Elizabethan poor law: residential care in hospitals and almshouses, parochial support administered by churchwardens, and licensed begging. At the heart of its research base lies a database of 1,005 hospitals and almshouses in existence in England between 1350 and 1600 and a survey of churchwardens' accounts from 125 parishes in thirty-two counties. Although the database (based on information derived from the Victoria County Histories, the reports of the nineteenth-century Charity Commissioners, and previous surveys by historians like David Knowles) is not comprehensive, it is used to make interesting comparisons across time. There were probably 617 hospitals and almshouses in the 1520s sheltering between 4,900 and 6,400 people, but later sixteenth-century foundations were insufficient to replace funding lost at the Reformation dissolutions: there were only 500 houses with between 3,000 and 5,300 people in the 1590s. These residential institutions tended to become more secular in nature and more subject to external control; there was a gradual shift over the period toward concentrating support on the elderly and women; and there was a growing emphasis on privacy in domestic arrangements. The churchwardens' accounts show a steady increase in parochial involvement in the support of the poor, accelerating in the mid-sixteenth century. Whereas 28 percent of the parishes record some involvement in poor relief in the period 1404–1546, 52 percent did so under Edward VI (reflecting the instruction in the 1547 Royal Injunctions to provide poor boxes, and important legislation in 1552 requiring listings of the poor and regular parochial collections), and 60 percent in the years 1554–98. But in spite of this growing institutional support, various forms of licensed begging were tolerated throughout the period: licences to solicit alms (usually for some unexplained misfortune such as shipwreck or fire) were issued by authorities as varied as the crown, the Lord Chancellor, bishops, justices of

the peace, and towns, while various institutions used proctors to gather alms. McIntosh's method is more impressionistic than statistical here, but she has gleaned an extraordinary amount from varied sources on this underexplored aspect of welfare. The sums involved could be impressive, perhaps none more so than the extraordinary £477 gathered by the proctors of St Anthony's Hospital in London in 1497–98 and used to fund a lavish diet for the fortunate inmates. Begging licences were subject to increasing problems of fraud. It is a remarkable finding, and a reminder of the limits of Tudor bureaucracy, that so many of the letters of protection issued by the crown in the 1590s were given to institutions (no fewer than eleven in Dunstable) that apparently did not exist!

The overall effect of McIntosh's findings is to downplay the significance of the Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601, which are seen as a tidying-up operation, addressing problems of enforcement, accountability, and fraud. The essential foundations are seen as being laid in the legislation of 1552 and 1563: while individuals were allowed to determine the size of their contributions the penalties for noncompliance were gradually tightened. She has found evidence for the appointment of collectors for the poor in 208 communities, over half of them villages, before 1598, a higher level of enforcement than previously recognized. The story of evolutionary change is by and large convincing. Indeed, the sources may underestimate the earlier level of involvement by parishes: the accounts of churchwardens were concerned with their responsibilities toward the church fabric; expenditures on the poor may have been separately recorded, and Chris Dyer's recent work using wills largely confirms the picture of increasing parochial involvement in the fifteenth century. On the other hand, it's difficult to assess the quantitative impact of the charity she chronicles. She notes that in the 1520s the ratio of almshouse places to people was just 1 to 370–480, and the situation deteriorated in the later sixteenth century, but the selective impact (especially for the elderly poor for whom they were largely devised) in communities like Hadleigh where there were thirty-two places in 1594 may have been much greater. Likewise the evidence on the level of parochial support is ambiguous: some of the amounts being given in the later sixteenth century were very small indeed, and could only have made a very marginal impact on their communities. The terminal date of the study means that the impact of the legislation of 1598 and 1601, a very suggestive exploration of the early operation of the commissioners for charitable uses apart, is not covered. The reforms may have been more significant than acknowledged here: after all, McIntosh's demonstration that historians have consistently misread the 1572 statute as requiring compulsory rating for the poor means that rates were in fact required for the first time in 1598. The poor laws clearly evolved, but the later Elizabethan measures perhaps did entail a significant ratcheting up of the level of support.

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