

Book Reviews

Penelope Ismay (2019), *Trust Among Strangers: Friendly Societies in Modern Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, £22.99, pp. 228, pbk.
doi:[10.1017/S0047279420000574](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279420000574)

During the spring and summer of 2020, several observers highlighted the importance of the role played by mutual aid in helping individuals and communities to deal with the Coronavirus pandemic and its consequences in different parts of the UK. Volunteer Scotland estimated that approximately 220 mutual aid groups were formed in Scotland during the early stages of the pandemic, while Rebecca Solnit, writing in *The Guardian* newspaper, argued that the ‘rise of mutual aid’ reflected a ‘spirit of generosity that will help guide us out of this crisis and into a better future’.

Penelope Ismay’s study of *Trust among strangers* reminds us that mutual aid has a much longer history than some commentators might suggest. Her book focuses on one particular aspect of this history – namely the history of friendly societies – and, as such, it also builds on a number of recent studies (Cordery, 2003; Weinbren, 2010). However, she goes further than other authors by focusing more explicitly on the ways in which the friendly society movement sought to address the particular problem of trust and reciprocity in welfare provision.

As Ismay explains, friendly societies were defined by the Friendly Societies Act of 1793 as ‘societ[ies] of good fellowship . . . for the purpose of raising from time to time, by voluntary contributions, a stock or fund for the mutual relief and maintenance of all and every the members thereof, in old age, sickness and infirmity, and for the relief of widows and orphans of deceased members’. They were therefore welfare organisations whose ultimate purpose was to protect their members against the vicissitudes and misfortunes of life. However this protection was underpinned by a commitment to sociability and conviviality.

Ismay begins her account by observing that ‘the reciprocity that one comes to expect from others, and the conditions under which these expectations are met, produce the diffuse bonds of social trust that hold societies together’ (p. 8). She argues that ‘the transformation of British society from a collection of trading towns and agricultural communities to a highly-mobile, industrial and urban society put pressure on the mechanisms through which Britons had long met these expectations’ (*ibid.*) and that this forced them to develop new ways of fulfilling them. The concept of ‘friendly society’ and the development of friendly societies lay at the heart of this endeavour and Ismay argues that their history has an enduring significance.

The remaining sections of the book consist of five empirically-focused chapters and an epilogue. In Chapter 1, Ismay argues that the concept of ‘friendly society’ encapsulated the ethical obligations which individuals owed to each other in the early-modern period. In Chapter 2, she explores the relationship between the growth of friendly societies and the introduction of the Poor Law Amendment Act in England and Wales in 1834. Chapter 3 focuses on the ‘battle’ between friendly societies and savings banks. Ismay highlights the importance of the distinction between savings banks, which offered an individualistic version of self-help, and friendly societies, in which members helped themselves by helping others.

Although the early friendly societies were local organisations, they faced increasing pressure to organise on a more national basis. This was reflected in the development of what

became known as the Affiliated Orders, the largest of which was the Independent Order of Oddfellows (Manchester Unity). In Chapter 4, Ismay provides a broad overview of the origins and development of the Manchester Unity during the first half of the nineteenth century. In Chapter 5, she continues the story, with a particular focus on the years between 1850 and 1875. This period played a central role in the development of the organisation because it saw the introduction of more scientifically-grounded actuarial methods. However, despite this, Ismay argues that the organisation continued to place great emphasis on the importance of sociability.

As Ismay suggests, the role played by sociability in friendly society life has often seemed controversial. Many contemporaries argued that the societies devoted too much attention to the development of elaborate membership rituals and that these limited their ability to provide practical assistance. In contrast, Ismay argues that sociability and conviviality were central to the creation of the bonds of trust and reciprocity on which the societies depended. However, this argument may be less original than the author suggests. During the 1990s, David Green argued that the rituals of friendly society life played a central part in their efforts to control malingering, and the same issues were also discussed in a less polemical way by Gorsky (1998) and Weinbren (2010).

Ismay also considers the relationship between friendly societies and the growth of the modern welfare state. This has become an increasingly controversial topic in recent years, with commentators on both left and right arguing not only that friendly societies (and other forms of mutual aid) were ‘crowded out’ by the rise of the welfare state, but also that they offered a viable alternative to it (see Harris, 2018). However, as Ismay points out, many contemporaries believed that the ethos of welfare mutualism was also reflected in the creation of institutions such as the NHS. She therefore challenges us to reconsider the role of that ethos in the development of welfare services today.

References

- Cordery, S. (2003), *British friendly societies, 1750-1914*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Gorsky, M. (1998), ‘Mutual aid and civil society: friendly societies in nineteenth-century Bristol’, *Urban History*, 25(3): 302-22.
- Harris, B. (2018), Social policy by other means? Mutual aid and the origins of the modern welfare state in Britain during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’, *Journal of Policy History*, 30(2): 202-35.
- Weinbren, D. (2010), *The Oddfellows, 1810-2010: 200 years of making friends and helping people*, Lancaster: Carnegie.

BERNARD HARRIS
University of Strathclyde
bernard.harris@strath.ac.uk

Sonja Blum, Johanna Kuhlmann and Klaus Schubert (eds) (2020), *Routledge Handbook of European Welfare Systems*, Second Edition, London: Routledge, £140.00, pp. 618, hbk.
doi:[10.1017/S0047279420000586](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279420000586)

This book sets itself the ambitious task of providing “topical, and comprehensive information on the welfare systems of all 28 EU member states [now sadly 27 of course!] and their recent reforms” in one volume. It comes close to fulfilling this ambition, which is a creditable achievement in a book dealing with such a broad range of topics and contexts at this level of detail. There are also an introductory chapter, two chapters at EU level and a conclusion.