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Book Reviews

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Alysa Levene, *The childhood of the poor: welfare in eighteenth-century London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Pages xii +250 + 6 Tables + 11 Figures + Index. £55 hardback.

At the heart of this book lies an exploration of how the changing ideological definition of childhood translated into the treatment of poor children in eighteenth-century Britain. Roussean ideas about the malleability and potential goodness of children gave rise to utilitarian schemes by which to mould the characters of the poor, leading to a wide range of projects to train children to become productive citizens and which also promised moral reform and financial returns. From the malleable bodies of the young, with due training, could emerge productive men and women capable of fostering national well-being.

In this meticulously researched book, Alysa Levene explores how these ideas were implemented through poor relief practices and charitable efforts aimed at supporting the children of the poor and moulding them into useful adults. Focusing on London, she provides a wide-ranging analysis of how poor children were cared for by the poor law, by charities and within their communities. The patchwork of provision for children of different ages and conditions revealed the diversity of approaches that sought to turn infants into productive members of the community. This diversity is explored through detailed analysis of relief practices in several London parishes: St Martin in the Fields, St Luke Chelsea, St Clement Danes, St Marylebone workhouse, and St Mary Lambeth, together with the activities of Christ's Hospital and the Marine Society.

Throughout London, children formed a significant proportion of those in receipt of poor relief and keeping them alive as they travelled through the system was a major

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consideration. As infants, in the first half of the eighteenth century they suffered appallingly high death rates as they were sent out to nurse. After Jonas Hanway's reforms in the 1760s, the parish nursing system was reformed and Levene demonstrates how the changes helped to reduce death rates of pauper infants. In particular, she argues that after 1767 the care provided by parish nurses improved both in response to the time and money spent by parishes and in improved levels of supervision. Better supervision by authorities and greater accountability removed the worst features of the system. In some cases, nursing became a professional activity – a far cry from the decrepit and wretched women into whose care parish infants had been sent, often to die within a pitifully short time.

The decision to send children to nurse, however, was not a simple one. Although there may have been the desire to break the cycle of poverty by removing children from their pauper parents, nevertheless there was a preference for parental care to be prioritised. Where parents were absent, it was more likely that children were sent out to nurse but where one or both parents were present, authorities often sought to support the child through provision for the family. Compassion, and perhaps an eye to the parish purse, meant that many children therefore remained in the workhouse, either with their parents or with a sibling. Levene skillfully uses workhouse admission registers to explore the demographic characteristics of these children who came under the care of the poor law in different places. Their particular circumstances not only coloured the kind of treatment they were likely to receive but also the mode of exit from the workhouse, with a greater proportion of parentless children being sent to nurse or, in later years, to be apprentices than those with a sibling or parent.

Beyond the workhouse, children were cared for through the provision of outdoor relief, charity and by community, friends and family – collectively comprising the economy of makeshifts that others have pointed out was crucial to the poor's survival. The shifting ideological understanding of childhood meant that in the second half of the eighteenth century there was a growing number and greater diversity of charities specifically oriented towards caring for poor children, including the larger and better-known institutions, such as the Foundling Hospital and the Marine Society, as well as several medical charities, soup kitchens and refuges for the destitute. What they shared in common was a more benign view of childhood that emphasised the possibility of reform and an awareness of innocence – themes that provide a narrative structure to the book as a whole.

In this tightly argued and carefully researched book, Levene has compiled a very impressive body of evidence that links practice with rhetoric, and that demonstrates differences as well as similarities in the care of poor children between London parishes. Not content with focusing on the poor law, Levene very skillfully weaves individual pauper experiences and a much wider range of relief institutions into the story, providing a rich and comprehensive body of evidence from which to evaluate the changes in attitude and reform of provision that took place in the second half of the eighteenth century. This is no mean achievement within a concise book of some 250 pages. Such diversity makes generalisations difficult to uphold, but there is a convincing narrative here that provides a clear framework within which that diversity can be interpreted. The scale and sheer breadth of experiences across London is a challenge for any historian interested in the

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history of welfare in this, or indeed, other centuries. In this book, that challenge has been well and truly met in relation to understanding how poor London children fared in the eighteenth century.

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Vincent Gourdon, *Histoire des grands-parents* (Paris: Perrin, 2012). Pages 702. €12 paperback.

This revised second edition of Gourdon's 2001 book of the same title reveals the growing interest in the history of grandparents, as well as the lack of new research and work on this topic. Indeed, grandparenthood has been a flourishing topic of research for sociologists but forgotten for a long time by historians, even historians of the family. Gourdon aims to change this situation and to provide a historical approach to grandparenthood.

In his book, he draws a first synthesis of the history of grandparents from the eighteenth century until the interwar period in France, outlining the importance of grandparents within the family. He also demonstrates that grandparents were not always the authoritarian and despotic figures often perceived. Gourdon thus contradicts the idea that young, kind and indulgent grandparents ('softy grandparents' or '*grands-parents gateau*' in French) are characteristic of the twentieth century, claiming that they were to be found much earlier.

To cover such a wide theme, the author uses a variety of sources, written and iconographic ones, including paintings, plays, songs, books of etiquette, autobiographies and novels from less well-known to classical ones. Victor Hugo, for instance, focused on grandparenthood in several books, highlighting ageing, which for him was the height of life ('*apogée de la vie*'; p. 205) and a moment of wisdom. Gourdon also presents a quantitative analysis of parish registers in a region to the west of Paris (Vernon) and tutorship records in Vernon and Paris. Although his study does not cover all French territory, he nonetheless believes that variation existed. It would be valuable to have further studies of other French regions, which could reveal wider differences.

These data were used to prove that the object of research, being a grandparent, is not new. Gourdon demonstrates convincingly that, since the eighteenth century, there was a strong probability that grandchildren would have known one or more of their grandparent (s), especially female ones. Compared with nowadays, grandparents were less present and for less time but they were still in contact with their grandchildren, and asked to help the family on several occasions. In the case of parents' death, widowhood, remarriage or if parents had to work, grandparents could be called upon to care for grandchildren.

The author outlines that traditionally grandparents had an active role in the family, describing different forms of solidarity and sociability. Before the twentieth century, there was an important sociability in rural and urban areas, with families either cohabiting with grandparents, or living in the same neighbourhood, especially in the South of

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