Comptes rendus – Book Reviews

Relief of the Poor in England

J. R. POYNTER. — *Society and Pauperism. English Ideas on Poor Relief 1795-1834,* University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1969.

E. C. MIDWINTER. — *Social Administration in Lancashire 1830-1860. Poor Law, Public Health and Police,* Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1969.

In recent years the writing of English Poor Law history in the 19th century has become a major growth industry and these volumes add considerably to our knowledge of the subject in two consecutive but very different periods. *Society and Pauperism* by J. R. Poynter is, despite its title, essentially a work of intellectual history, tracing the debate on pauperism and public welfare through its most important phase, the generation immediately preceding the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. E. C. Midwinter's *Social Administration in Lancashire,* on the other hand, treats the introduction of the New Poor Law along with the rural police and the Public Health Acts as case studies in the local history of the early 19th century revolution in government. Yet, different as these two works are, each adds to an understanding of the other, though it is largely the reader who must see and make the connection, since both authors tend to stay very close, perhaps too close, to their central concerns.

A full treatment of the debate on poor relief during this period has long been needed. As Poynter rightly emphasizes, this generation witnessed the gradual replacement of the individual amateur peddling some pet theory by semi-professional economists and administrators armed with a formidable theoretical framework and so confident in their knowledge that they felt both willing and able totally to reconstruct the two-century-old system of poor relief. Since their proposals were adopted almost without change by government and Parliament in 1834, and since the edifice they built was to outlast the century, the emergence and triumph of this school is a subject of the utmost importance.

Such a development would have seemed inconceivable half a century before 1834. There was little that could properly be called a theory of public welfare or, for that matter, any commonly accepted view of the nature of poverty. There was, to be sure, a good deal of interest in the subject and many reforms were proposed, but characteristically they tended to be poorly thought out and wildly contradictory. Then, at the worst of the social crisis of the 1790s, with food prices and relief costs spiralling out of control, T. R. Malthus intervened in the debate, altering its terms dramatically and permanently. He gave to the case for total abolition of poor relief, heretofore considered an extreme, even outlandish view, a firm

basis in economic theory and his own views on population, thus rendering it respectable and placing it at the very centre of debate.

Not that the Malthusian view swept all before it even at the height of its influence. Totally different views of the poor, of pauperism and its solution continued to be argued and at times, and particularly right after the Napoleonic wars, to find a sympathetic audience. Tory humanitarians, Robert Owen and other social radicals as well as occasional renegade economists such as Poulett Scrope, bitterly assailed the Malthusian dogma and proposed a variety of alternatives, many of them perhaps absurd, but some of them quite beguiling, at least to modern ears. More important at the time, however, was the emergence of a younger generation of political economists, more inclined to dilute Malthusian doctrine and question some of his more extreme conclusions such as total abolitionism. This in turn opened the way for the influence of local experiments in Poor Law reform as well as for the entry of the ubiquitous Benthamites. Bentham himself had written his major works on poor relief at about the same time as Malthus (and Poynter treats the two together) but Bentham's work was not published until many years later so that his ideas gained influence slowly and largely through the efforts of his friends and disciples. Yet in the end that influence was enormous and decisive, for it was largely through the Benthamite principle of less eligibility as enforced through the workhouse system that it became possible finally to reconcile a modified Malthusianism with the concept of statutory relief for the poor, thus laying the foundations for the New Poor Law of 1834.

Poynter traces the often complex main lines of these developments with great care, refreshing clarity and precision, and a commendable desire for comprehensiveness. This book is indeed that overworked word, *definitive*. Yet, for all his care, the thread is sometimes lost, or nearly so. Englishmen at the time appear to have been possessed by a compulsion to rush into print on any and every controversial subject and unfortunately Poynter feels obliged to accord almost anyone who did so at least some attention. As a result, not only are the woods often obscured by the trees, but at times even the undergrowth becomes nearly impenetrable. Furthermore, in his concentration on individual works and authors he rarely says enough of the context in which they were written. Occasionally this leads to some rather embarrassing observations. For example, in comparing the late with the early years of the French and Napoleonic wars, while he does concede that "some areas remained more or less continuously depressed", he nonetheless concludes that "on the whole the pressure of discontent on most of the ranks and orders of society was reduced." The years to which he is specifically referring at this point are, incredibly, 1812 and 1813 !

Even where his judgments are unexceptionable, they are usually too briefly developed and too scattered. Thus, for example, while he takes us author by author through the great debates on public welfare in the 1790's, at no point does he provide an overview of that decade of mounting crisis

in which the transformation of social attitudes was so profound that undiluted Malthusian, however ill-conceived, could come to the fore and very nearly smother a host of alternatives concerning the state's responsibilities to the poor and the possibility of some form of state association with institutions such as the friendly societies then being created by the poor themselves.

Much the same can be said of the post-Napoleonic war period when the debate was renewed and the Malthusian view was again directly challenged primarily by proposals for a variety of make-work schemes for the poor, of which Robert Owen's was simply the most famous. There was little chance that any of these alternatives would be adopted even in part, for, as in the 1790's, the entire debate was conducted under political and social circumstances so threatening and in an atmosphere eventually so reactionary that almost inevitably the earlier tendencies were reinforced. Though passions cooled on both sides during the following generation, the balance was permanently weighted, if not on the side of the out-and-out Malthusians, certainly far more towards them than towards their opponents. It is only if these developments lasting two generations are fully understood, not only in terms of the thoughts of individuals, where Poynter is at his strongest, but in the broader historical context, which he does not adequately provide, that it is possible to comprehend the almost unchallenged victory of the younger generation of philosophical radicals who actually rewrote the English Poor Law in 1834.

The New Poor Law of 1834 may well have been the end product of an intellectual revolution, but that does not by any means imply that it worked a revolution in practice. There is little doubt that its framers intended that it should do so. As Midwinter clearly demonstrates in his cogent but often frustratingly brief introductory sections, the Utilitarians led by Chadwick saw the increasingly critical issues of public health and crime as well as poor relief as three intimately related aspects of a general and growing social crisis which taken together demanded a set of preventive measures that would clear the way for a society freed from the obstacles of a shackled labor market, and economically crippling health problem and the inroads of crime into national production. Furthermore, they had all the usual Benthamite visions about implementing their schemes: elective boards, central inspection, full time trained professional social servants at the local level, and so on.

There is little evidence to show that there were very many at the local or, for that matter, at the national level who either fully understood or accepted the Benthamite analysis or program without serious misgivings. By and large such men were moved to action, if at all, by the exigencies of the social crises themselves; but the Benthamites were usually able very quickly to assume a central role since they alone possessed not only the expertise but the self assurance to give shape to the administrative imperatives of the period. This is not to say that a good deal was not done. Many

of the worst anomalies were removed and any number of serious abuses were checked, or at least exposed. The hodge-podge of local authorities, commissions and trusts charged with providing a variety of essential services were brought under some central control and a degree of local uniformity as well. Local administration was infused with a measure of expertise, and responsible semi-democratically elected boards were created to oversee some programs. Midwinter's book sums up all of these changes — and their limitations — with admirable thoroughness.

Yet for all that, things changed far less than they ought to have considering the nature of the crises. Each major area of social concern tended to be dealt with on as limited a basis as possible and with a minimum of disruption to established patterns and practices. Thus a mere twenty-six townships in Lancashire took advantage of the voluntary Public Health Act of 1848 and, while a great many others did seek special legislative sanction for their own plans, this is indicative of a less than overriding concern with what we usually think of as the Victorian fixation with the subject of adequate drainage. As for the establishment of police forces, here again the enabling legislation, the 1839 Constabulary Act, was voluntary in nature and Lancashire's early adoption of it was in sharp contrast to the dilatory tactics of most of the boroughs of the county, a few of which only acted to save themselves from coming under county police jurisdiction. As for the new poor law, that of course was not voluntary, yet it took well over a decade before the whole county was even nominally integrated into the system administratively, let alone in terms of policy.

It was an uninspiring record, even a shocking one. The motives of the participants were mixed. Many local worthies were actuated by little more than a desire to save money. (So were many of the Chadwickians, but they proposed immediate expenditure as a means to later savings — quite a different matter.) Others proved reluctant to disturb a system with which they were familiar and which was staffed by themselves or their friends. As often as not old offices and old office holders tended to survive with little more than a change in title and slight additions to their duties. All in all it is fair to say that almost all local officials preferred to incorporate new regulations into existing institutions rather than see new ones created. In the face of such reluctance to act and such administrative inertia, it is, as Midwinter notes, surprising that so much was actually accomplished.

All of this is a very useful corrective to the usual London-centred discussions about the 19th century revolution in government. At the same time, because it is a local study, one must be very careful in drawing broad conclusions from it and in recognizing the limitations both of the argument and of its applicability. Lancashire was decidedly a peculiar area. No district in England could match its reputation for cantankerous local pride and hostility towards outside interference. Not without reason, Lancastrians tended to assume that their problems like their achievements were larger than life, different from anyone else's and not subject to national solutions.

Local objections to the police bills, public health acts, and above all perhaps the new poor law stemmed at least as much from this intense parochialism as from selfish concerns with money or jobs or existing administrative patterns, many of which, as Midwinter repeatedly demonstrates, were hardly affected at all. This was particularly the case with the old poor law which most Lancastrians did not regard as an onerous financial burden or as an intolerable situation which cried out for emergency measures, as, say, both the public health and public order issues fairly clearly did. So that in this area at least the revolution in government and all that it entailed was regarded as both unnecessary and alien, not as a response to a clear need but as an outside imposition by an insensitive, interfering bureaucracy.

There was yet another set of local difficulties and peculiarities which were perhaps even less easy to compromise, and of which Midwinter makes far too little. Many of the changes proposed were resisted not merely because they promised to rock the boat, but because many Lancastrians looked on them with real fear. The new poor law and the police bills were regarded as measures of repression, primarily but not only among the radical working class, a point which Midwinter, with his emphasis on bureaucratic inertia as the main barrier to change, mentions but tends to minimize. For example, while he argues that it was the nearness of poor law administration in the North to the national model which accounted for the comparatively small change in administration that actually took place in the area, it might be more legitimate to argue that it was Lancashire's dogged and sometimes violent refusal by a broad cross-section of its population to conform to national policies which accounted for the small degree of change. The difference here is more than merely one of emphasis and, if there is a serious criticism that can be made of Midwinter's book, it is that it is too narrowly a piece of administrative history with too little account taken of the social and political context in which the administrative revolution took place.

This indeed is the central criticism that can be levelled at each of the books reviewed here; yet that aside there is an enormous amount that can be learned from both of them and three things in particular stand out. There is no doubt that the intellectual transformation wrought during the terrible war and postwar years at the turn of the 19th century had a permanent (and some might say tragic) effect on the revolution in government which was to follow, and not only in regard to the poor law but, as Poynter frequently hints, in almost all aspects of economic and social policy. Far less clear is the role of the Benthamites as opposed to local *ad hoc* administrative action in the actual implementation of change. Certainly there was some action taken at the local level by a few responsible local authorities before the major social legislation of the 1830's and 1840's. A number of local authorities were very active in seeking special legislation for the creation of commissions for policing, lighting, paving, general improvements and the like. But the fact remains that progress along these lines was painfully slow and pitifully limited. Had London not prod-

ded (though that in itself could often stiffen resistance to change) it is hard to imagine that anything short of major disaster would have moved most local governing bodies to serious action. To that extent therefore it would seem clear that the role of the Benthamites in all the early stages of the 19th century revolution in government was central and critical, for it was they who gave it form and impetus, not only in the measures dealt with here but through legislation of such potentially enormous impact as the Municipal Corporations Act. Finally, a hardly surprising conclusion, it appears that once away from the offices of Whitehall or Somerset House both the new patterns of thought and the structures built upon them were altered, misunderstood or simply ignored by that larger England which they sought to transform than England itself was changed by them.

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Claude GALARNEAU. — *La France devant l'opinion canadienne (1760-1815).* Les Cahiers de l'Institut d'histoire, n° 16. Québec et Paris, Les Presses de l'Université Laval et Librairie Armand Colin, 1970. 400 pp.

> Il s'en faut pour que les faits décrits dans l'histoire soient la peinture exacte des mêmes faits tels qu'ils sont arrivés; ils changent de forme dans la tête de l'historien, ils se moulent sur ses intérêts, ils prennent la teinte de ses préjugés.
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> (J.-J. ROUSSEAU, *Émile,* Livre IV.)

Les progrès de la connaissance historique depuis deux siècles ont-ils rendu suranné le jugement du célèbre philosophe du « Siècle des Lumières » ? Ceux qui le croient perdront leurs illusions en lisant *La France devant l'opinion canadienne (1760-1815).* Cet ouvrage les convaincra que l'histoire est indissociable de l'historien qui impose toujours à la connaissance des faits historiques les limites de son objectivité et de sa propre compréhension des phénomènes sociaux.

Claude Galarneau a certainement le mérite d'avoir fait une longue, patiente et minutieuse recherche pour étayer son sujet sur de nombreuses sources documentaires, tant manuscrites qu'imprimées, provenant de divers centres et dépôts d'archives publiques et privées. Il y a recueilli une riche collection de données de toutes sortes qui constitue son apport le plus original à la connaissance historique. Si l'on peut louer la présentation des documents et le choix des citations qui étoffent et émaillent son livre, l'on ne peut juger aussi favorablement l'interprétation de l'opinion canadienne que nous offre ce professeur de l'Université Laval.

Son principal effort de recherche a porté sur l'étude de la réaction de l'opinion canadienne face à la Révolution française. Il consacre une partie substantielle de sa documentation pour démontrer que l'année 1793 (exécu-