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Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law, 1760-1834

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Author:
Samantha Williams
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In essence, Williams? monograph examines the poor relief given to individuals and families during the final decades of the old poor law in one Bedfordshire parish, namely Campton. The book starts with a by-now-familiar account of the origins and policy innovations of the old poor law, highlighting how the difficulties with its administration and the overall increase in poor relief expenditure during its final decades were used by the Royal Commission to develop the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. While the story is familiar, this version draws out effectively three critical themes. The first is how ?generous? the old poor law was towards relief claimants. In particular, this argument has hitherto been made through the comparative analysis of regular monetary ?pensions?, or allowances, historians ? most notable Steve King ? noting that the south and east was, compared to the north and west of England, ?generous?. Second, Williams notes that there were gendered and ?life-cycle? dynamics to the receipt of poor relief too. For instance, it is now well known that disproportionate numbers of female widows, made up relief roles compared to other groups. Following from Rowntree?s ?discovery? of life-cycle poverty, poor law historians, including myself, have been inspired to investigate the exact moments in peoples? lives when they received poor relief and what possible socio-economic, demographic and policy-related factors could have prompted it. Williams? third theme is the ?economy of makeshifts?, a concept which has now generated a substantial historiography, the concept informing many studies of poverty. Instead of dogmatically focusing on the assistance given by statutory

relief, such histories of *the poor* have concerned themselves with the provisions of the church-based charity and pawnbroker, and the profits of the prostitute and tea leaf, amongst other avenues of support. These are all themes, in addition to paying the poor rates, which Williams explores in forensic detail through the lens of life in Campton.

Although only one parish, Campton contained two distinct communities: one rural, Campton itself, the other ?urban?, the market-town of Shefford. So distinct were these communities that parish officials administered relief to each one in differing ways and relief accounts were kept in separate books. It is thus understandable why Campton was chosen. This was a complex and richly documented parish. Its archive allows for close comparative analysis of poor relief levels and dynamics, as well as comparisons of the alternatives beyond the vestry pay table that were available to the poor. The different employment opportunities offered in each Campton community also offer interesting economic dynamics, whilst many women and children of both communities would sell their own plaited straw goods at Shefford market. These points are made in the first chapter of the book, alongside a detailed analysis of the populations of Campton and Shefford. The justification used for focusing upon Bedfordshire is less effectively realised. Williams states that it is ?a highly appropriate county to study? because ?it was one of the counties in which both contemporaries and historians believe parish allowances to have been widespread?, which was thought to have been the main cause of the increase in the poor rates prior to 1834. Indeed, it was an early innovator in Speenhamland-style allowance systems and was one of several ?Speenhamland counties? as identified by the 1824 Select Committee on Labourers? Wages. While it is now realised that such systems were commonly used to allocate relief by parish officials throughout the midlands and south of England, the 10 per cent of individuals so relieved in Bedfordshire in 1831 was actually rather low compared to most other counties in the depressed south and east. Indeed, the proportion of the Bedfordshire population receiving any form of relief was, compared to other southern and eastern counties, relatively low (p. 21). Such an analysis, being based on such government-commissioned snap-shots, is necessarily partial, and levels of relative poverty between counties probably fluctuated markedly in the late-18th and early-19th centuries.

The main expense of Campton parish came not from the totemic un- and under-employed agricultural worker but instead from the payment of pensions. Williams discerns that while the scope of welfare spending widened, and over the period the proportion of money spent on pensions declines, pensions payments accounted for 70 per cent of relief costs. Useful graphs in chapter two (p. 37) illustrate that spending on poor relief increased between the late 1760s and 1830, this dynamic being especially dramatic in the rural portion where expenditure increased ten-fold. There were, of course, peaks and troughs in expenditure that are explained by virtue of periods of particular hardship during the agricultural depression. Using parish reconstitution and poor relief records to create relief biographies, Williams links the poor relief receipt to over one thousand families and individuals residing in the parish of Campton as a whole. Although the outline details of this linking process are provided in the text (pp. 30?4), the methodology?s shortcomings are relegated to the footnotes ? where we are also directed to the voluminous works of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure on reconstitution. In this sense Williams?s approach is far from novel, but her findings do throw light on some important dynamics. The life-cycle analysis detailed in chapter four demonstrates that elderly individuals and couples, families, lone parents and orphans made up approximately 85 per cent of regular relief recipients (p. 101). In some ways, the parish appeared to be ?generous? with these regular pensions. Pensions increased in value up to 1820, were more likely to be received by lone female parents and older people, and for lone parents were often given over extended periods and were worth 37 per cent more than family allowances. Older men, women and couples received a pension which equated to 62 per cent of the household income of a Campton labouring family not in receipt of poor relief, and lone men and women also fared relatively well, receiving sums worth 45 per cent. Couple-headed families ? the typical labouring class family ? were less likely to be in receipt of a pension, their allowances often ran for a limited duration and were worth just 29 per cent of a labouring family?s income. As such, Williams sees Campton parish as being less ?generous? than initially assumed. The relative paucity of support for couple-headed families in the parish ? this being largely confined to years of chronic distress, the food crisis of 1799?1802 and the nadir of the post-Napoleonic depression between 1815?22 ? she argues, casts some doubt over the position, taken by some economic

historians that the destitution of labouring-class families was the cause of the increase in poor rates.

So, Williams asserts, ?allowances to married couples with children ... were relatively short and low in cost to the parish? (p. 162). With this in mind, the author asks how parishes dealt with the increase in demand for relief from these families as a result of the under- and unemployment of agricultural labourers in the final decades of the old poor law. Parish officials? attempts to ?tighten up? relief provision are littered throughout the book. They were keen to remove people who did not have a settlement (chapter three), and from 1810 relief provision in kind was reduced and medical contracts and infirmary subscriptions were established (chapter two). After 1815, large numbers of men and adolescent boys did receive occasional relief due to unemployment, this duly impacted on the straw-plaiting industry where due to women?s narrowing opportunities to labour in the field, straw-plaiting became considered as women?s and young girls? work. Consequently, many adolescents who would have returned to this employment in the winter months, when they could not work the fields, went without a wage. Allowances to ?make up? adult men?s pay can be found recorded in overseers? accounts and parish-based employment schemes came into use. These were either agricultural-based tasks, such as weeding, grubbing and stone-picking, or were road-building based tasks, such as digging, moving and sieving gravel. The notorious ?roundsman? employment system, whereby male labourers were sent around principal farms to undertake tasks that supposedly would not be completed by the employer?s regular workforce, was also used in both communities, albeit only for brief periods. As Williams details in chapter five, other parish policies and schemes were applied with neither more nor less tenacity during this period, but were still necessary, if usually irregular, elements to families? economies of makeshift. Parish-employed carers and nurses, for instance, were, so Williams?s reconstitution data shows, were not necessarily poor relief recipients.

Beyond the copious detailing of the nature and dynamics of poor relief provision, two sections of the book are more notably distinctive: the analysis of poor ratepayers (in chapter three) and the analysis of charity provision (in chapter five). As Williams states, we ?still know little about ratepaying, the proportion of the parish paying the rate, the wealth distribution of ratepayers and their familial characteristics? (p. 71). The author links the details of surviving poor rate books of Shefford (1803?20) to the family reconstitution records to produce ratepayer biographies to cover each of these areas. Between 15.4 and 20.6 per cent of the population in Shefford were ratepayers, and including dependents, it is estimated that between 30 and 40 per cent of the residents were in rate-paying families. In addition, one fifth of ratepayers also claimed relief at some point in their lives, sometimes poor relief being claimed simultaneously as the payment of poor rates. Charitable provision, so it is shown, was more concentrated in the market town compared to the agricultural district of the parish, charities providing very little assistance to defined groups of individuals and their families. Williams? finely-grained research has also revealed that few people received poor relief and charity money in the same year. This suggests that the recipients of charity were different from those who obtained relief, and although it could be seen as form of social control ? obtaining it meaning that the recipient was expected to conform to set codes of behaviour ? Williams argues that it created a ?hierarchy of resort? and facilitated ?local status and belonging? (p. 154).

Few parishioners were housed in poorhouses in either community, although the archive did not permit the any precise account. Williams therefore asserts that they were of little importance in either community, stating ?these were more like modern council houses than workhouses, and those accommodated were usually transient and expenditure on them small, never exceeding 6 per cent of total spending? (pp. 35?6). In other Bedfordshire parishes, though, significant proportions of the relief receiving community were offered and accepted indoor relief (pp. 51?3). Using the notebooks and estate papers of the local justice of the peace, Samuel Whitbread (MP for Bedford Borough from 1790), it becomes clear that workhouses were an area of particular local concern. Indeed, whilst calling for improvements to labourers? homes and parish accommodation, he reserved particular criticism for the management of workhouses, his critiques forming the basis for a Bill as how to better regulate workhouses which he presented to parliament in 1807. His parliamentary attempts at poor law reform also extended to plans for expanding the amount of money to be spent on the poor and for a free school system (p. 93). Thomas Gilbert?s Act of 1782 that allowed parishes to combine in the provision of supposedly better regulated workhouses being another example of local

concerns generating national ? and nationally adopted ? policy.

In conclusion, this book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the nature of the old poor law, as well as the complexity of the many local dynamics in its operation and the importance of differing household survival strategies for the agricultural poor. Only Williams?s careful, forensic approach allows her to defiantly make such claims. For this alone, the book has to be essential reading for all poor law specialists and welfare historians. There is, however, one important note of caution that must be sounded, a conceptual point that extends to many recent studies of the old poor law. How far we can, as poor law historians, extrapolate conclusions from the study of one parish, one town, one city? Necessarily, of course, expediency and the variable quality of the archive determines that we adopt some sampling framework, choosing one or a handful of parishes for intensive study. Once determined, we raid the archive of our chosen parish/es and scour every relevant extant document ? overseers account books, vestry minute books, bastardy and settlement examinations ? linking them to other documents such as census returns and quarter sessions minutes to provide a rich local account that highlights complexity. But, and here I sound a note of caution, we must engage with the more conceptually-driven literature which considers how we extrapolate from the local. Barry Reay?s *Microhistories* is the most emphatic ? and therefore obvious ? source of inspiration here, being footnoted by Williams on page one, and Postan?s idea of ?microcosmic? history subjects (versus ?macrocosmic? subjects) is also mentioned in passing. But it is not clear how microhistory and the microcosmic have influenced this work ? how they have informed the selection, research and analysis of the two communities. This being the case, what Campton adds beyond nuance and methodological inspiration to the regional, let alone, national understanding of poor law practice, policy and effects is illusive. This book might have been the ideal opportunity to engage conceptual innovation with methodological innovation in poor law studies, but, as it stands, work remains to be done.

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