Robert Love's Warnings: Searching for Strangers in Colonial Boston

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Author: Cornelia Hughes Dayton
Sharon Salinger

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Reviewer: Kristin O’Brassill-Kulfan

Cornelia Dayton and Sharon Salinger’s Robert Love’s Warnings: Searching for Strangers in Colonial Boston describes the efforts of one man on Boston’s city payroll who was tasked with locating non-resident transients in the city, inquiring into the origins of hundreds of arriving strangers between 1765 and 1774. The process of ‘warning’ individuals who arrived in towns or cities where they did not possess legal residency was common in New England during the 18th century. Generally used as a means by which to absolve the town of the responsibility of providing poor relief to persons who had no ties to the town, it has often been described by historians as an attempt by authorities to assert social control over the lower and wandering classes. Dayton and Salinger argue, however, that the process by which their subject, Robert Love, located non-residents in colonial Boston, and read them the official warning which verbalized a requirement for them to depart within 14 days, should not be taken literally. Rather, the authors side with legal historian Lawrence M. Friedman in their analysis of the intent behind the warning scheme, arguing that it was essentially bureaucratic, a legal method that made it possible to determine whether a poor individual’s relief ought to be paid for out of the town account or the province account, as the latter was reserved for non-residents (p. 15). It is this perspective that drives the book’s analysis of the city’s official interactions through the person of Robert Love with the ‘strangers’ who found themselves in Boston.

In its narrative structure, Robert Love’s Warnings systematically follows Love on his duties as town warner.
This approach is warranted by the subjectivity imbued in the law he carried out, as well as the fact that his perambulations were central to the process of warning. While the purpose of warning was to apprehend all ‘strangers,’ only those who were deemed to be in ‘low circumstances’ were to be formally warned (p. 7). In order to contextualize how Love may have defined ‘low circumstances,’ the authors offer a detailed and impressively reconstructed account of his personal history. The reader gains insights into the socioeconomic milieu of Boston in the 1760s almost strictly through this lens, with an entire chapter devoted to the man himself. Further contextualization as to the material wealth of colonial Bostonians is woven into the chapter titled ‘Lodgings,’ which chronicles those who received sojourners into their homes as lodgers or businesses as labourers. Indeed, though general economic discussion in this text is not expansive, readers can infer much from the physical circumstances of the ‘sojourners of the respectable sort’ and ‘travellers in distress’ that are described in detail.

Perhaps the two most important contributions of this volume lie in the detailed breakdown it offers of categories among the lower classes that passed through Boston just prior to the Revolutionary War, as well as the methodological example it sets in its interpretation of even seemingly formulaic encounters recorded by Robert Love. The warning interview is cast not only as a data collection technique but recognized for the public performance that it was, with the consultation of townsfolk for corroborating strangers’ testimonies, recognizing that the eyes and ears of passers-by would have been drawn to the meeting. The authors infer that Love ‘must have carried his warning book,’ or other method of recording his warnings throughout the day. Thus, ‘his pen and paper were physical artefacts marking the warner…as an agent of the king’ (p. 57). Surely the conspicuous nature of these exchanges would have had a lasting impact on the ‘strangers’, as well, possibly opening their eyes to a previously unknown level of monitoring of their activities.

The legacy of this colonial bureaucratic theatre is in the portrait it paints of the social makeup of would-be Bostonians, and by extension, the socioeconomic status and something of the identities of many destitute sojourners in the Anglo-American world. Dayton and Salinger astutely note mentions of transients’ clothes, physical health, and displays of material wealth or lack thereof. The intensely concentrated source material allows for them to designate three types of migration (and thus, migrants) that landed individuals in Love’s warning book: classic migration, of individuals seeking to settle in Boston, travellers, merely making a pit stop in the city, and ‘sojourners,’ as they describe the largest category among the warned, who were essentially shorter-distance subsistence migrants, usually having arrived from a not incredibly long distance, and intending to remain for an undetermined length of time, frequently depending on availability of work (p. 75). The authors’ research indicates that the majority of these individuals, though formally ‘warned to depart in His majesty’s name,’ were actually ‘welcome to stay’ (p. 64). This included many among even the most distressed travellers, which Dayton and Salinger have divided into four categories: beggars and ‘those unambiguously displaying neediness,’ alms seekers of many forms, the unwell, and the unwelcome (p. 134).

Material culture, too, plays an important role in this study, if not through direct object analysis but instead through analysis of visual consumption by contemporaries. This is not only significant for the moral conclusions reached by the warner based on the apparel of the indigent but also in considering the impact of imperial crises on populations within New England. Of course military mobilization and demobilization were life-changing for soldiers, veterans, and their families, but in this case, it also played a role in understandings of nationhood for colonial Bostonians. The authors discuss the conspicuous identities of British soldiers or former soldiers, even as alms-seekers, by their red coats, while provincial soldiers blended in more easily with the general population. Of the many varied impetuses for destitution in colonial New England, a stint in ‘His Majesty’s Service’ was nearly a guarantee of semi-permanent indigence. According to Love’s records, the vast majority of veterans remained stranded, unable to return home or find solid employment in Boston (p. 150-1).

The residence of some members of Boston’s lower class teetered precariously on the brink of forced relocation. Because removing individuals who would be a burden on the poor accounts was expensive and time-consuming for administrators, it was reserved for those deemed to be immoral or more likely to generate greater financial duress. Vagabonds and vagrants, especially able-bodied men, were customarily punished not by removal but rather, through forced labour extraction in ‘a short stint of labour at the
workhouse.’ Dayton and Salinger have posited that women were more vulnerable to the punishment of removal as a result of mores governing gendered behaviour, especially actions that could be determined ‘outrageous’ or ‘disorderly’ (p. 65). Pregnancy, too, was a serious liability for poor non-resident women, as overseers of the poor were eager to have them removed prior to giving birth to avoid a new charge on the relief rolls. Families traveling together with young children were also more likely to be forced out of town, seen as an overabundance of mouths to feed.

While warning may have been primarily a disclaimer to protect overdrawing municipal funds in aid of the poor, the authors seem to downplay somewhat the impact that the warning and removing process had on the poor, under-cutting accompanying discussions of the hardships faced by the ‘very ragged’ and ‘very much indisposed’ (p. 146). It should be noted, also, that the nature of the warning process, and thus its study, requires careful attention to the subjectivity written into the system by statute definitions, which were inherently distrustful. This was a result of ‘a culture in which strollers,’ those who literally wandered about, some begging, others peddling their wares, or merely traveling on foot, ‘were associated with crime and likened to…rogues’ (p. 144). Dayton and Salinger document gendered language in contemporary understandings of ‘strolling’ to include the illicit sexual activity of women, too (p. 145). Women of colour, who in colonial Boston were primarily of African and Indian descent, were not surprisingly subject to racialized versions of these gendered assumptions of promiscuity. Presumptions of enslavement or servitude led to more frequent investigations into the movements of people of colour in the 18th and 19th century, though these patterns differed for indigenous travellers. The brief mention in the text of differential perceptions of movement by Algonquians, ‘cast as a wandering people’ whose ‘journeys…remained incomprehensible to colonists’ warrants further study (p. 83).

Dayton and Salinger discuss the historiography of the colonial city as a destination, with the acknowledgment of historians’ scepticism as to how Boston could have absorbed so many sojourners (p. 86). The authors argue that while the city was in dire straits at this time, it remained a destination for travellers seeking work for a reason. Still the largest urban centre in New England, Boston was an important sea port for trade, though Bostonians were significantly less wealthy, on average, than New Yorkers or Philadelphians in this period. While Boston’s port did not receive the same scale of international immigrants as New York and Philadelphia, the city was still a regional magnet, drawing New Englanders hoping to connect with far-flung family, Quakers seeking communities of Friends, and young labourers seeking apprenticeships. Dayton and Salinger posit that the influx of ‘the lower sort’ into the city was just one part of a larger dynamic in which unskilled labourers moved repeatedly in search of subsistence, as the work of Alan Karras and Douglas Lamar Jones suggests. The authors take a nuanced stance in their categorization of the transients they discuss, honing in on what they would call ‘betterment sojourning,’ in which individuals moved within a region seeking improved circumstances, rather than out of necessity, with a nod to Gary B. Nash’s larger emphasis on the latter sort in his studies on pre-revolutionary poverty. The book does an impressive job of exploring the lives and processes associated with poverty and transiency in this bustling, if not economically thriving, New England city. It shines the light on the mechanisms by which an Ulster Scot migrant became responsible for determining an individual’s class status in the eyes of the law in one of the most important sites of the burgeoning revolutionary movement. The warner did not need to be a highly educated bureaucrat to carry out his duties, but he did need an ability to visually decode socioeconomic status in a glance. That ability made it possible for city authorities to monitor movement in, out, and within the city, without themselves leaving Faneuil Hall.

There is a fair amount of speculation in the text’s analysis of Love’s motives, including recurring attention to his punctilious use of the phrase ‘in His Majesty’s name’ in his warning records and his apparent ‘obsessive pursuit of duty’ (p. 248). The authors argue that this was the result of a personality trait, wondering if Love possessed an eidetic memory. At the time of Love’s appointment as warner, he served as one of three men given warning duties in Boston, apparently competing for the reward of £53.6s.8d. ‘to be divided among them ‘in proportion to the number of persons each have warned’ (p. 7). Given that the authors later note that Love himself was likely only a crisis or two away from indigence for much of his life, it would appear that the chance to take home a larger portion of the funds on offer would have driven his activities. Beyond
angling for compensation, though, Love does appear to have been zealous in his work, to the point of
warning some individuals which he had received no instruction to question, namely, those visually
presenting as ‘respectable.’ According to the authors, this stemmed from his overarching ‘belief that nearly
anyone in society might suffer injury, illness, or unexpected misfortune and need relief’ (p. 116). The stories
recounted in Robert Love’s Warnings illustrate just that point.

This book will prove valuable for scholars of early American migration and transiency, poverty and poor
relief, as well as local governance and law enforcement. It may appear at first glance to take a micro
historical approach to a singular legal system using limited sources (the warnings). But it quickly becomes
clear that the authors have marshalled a huge swath of source material, and have set the bar high as a new
wave of scholarship attempts to employ record linkage methodologies on a wider scale. To this end, readers
with an interest in the colonial urban histories of New York and Pennsylvania, too, will note the value of the
book’s contribution to scholars’ understandings of a network of indigent migration between these locations,
as each is addressed as an important source of migrants to Boston. Not only have a huge number of external
sources been cross checked, but due diligence has been done in seeking warning processes outside of New
England. The authors have taken careful note where their subject could have deceived them in his
assumption that individuals who had been sent out of other states had been formally ‘warned’ (p. 51).
According to Dayton and Salinger, the only evidence of this in the northern colonies was in a few outlying
pauper removals in Chester County, Pennsylvania, during the first half of the 18th century (p. 52).

The keen critical eyes of Dayton and Salinger allow for the exploration of far more than stories told by
nervous newcomers, offering an ‘extended interpretation’ of warning records that reprises Josiah Henry
Benton’s 1911 study with the benefit of a century’s worth of progress in social history research, as well as
shrewd understanding of the two-tiered system of poor relief that underscores the book’s main argument.
The book makes an excellent companion to Ruth Wallis Herndon’s Unwelcome Americans: Living on the
Margin in Early New England, which focuses on the warned in 18th century Rhode Island. Dayton and
Salinger state in their introduction, one of their primary goals was ‘to capture how sojourners’ stays in
Boston fit into their life experiences.’ While this is accomplished in some cases, the main accomplishment of
the biographical sketches generated by their research is that of illustrating not only how porous Boston’s
borders were in the colonial period, but that that porosity often had life and death significance for the
poor, seeking relief in a province with a reputation for aiding strangers. This research fills an important gap
in the on-the-ground history of pre-industrial poverty in the United States, and ought to serve as an example
for how to navigate the key transition in historical scholarship from singular source analysis to large scale
interpretation.

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