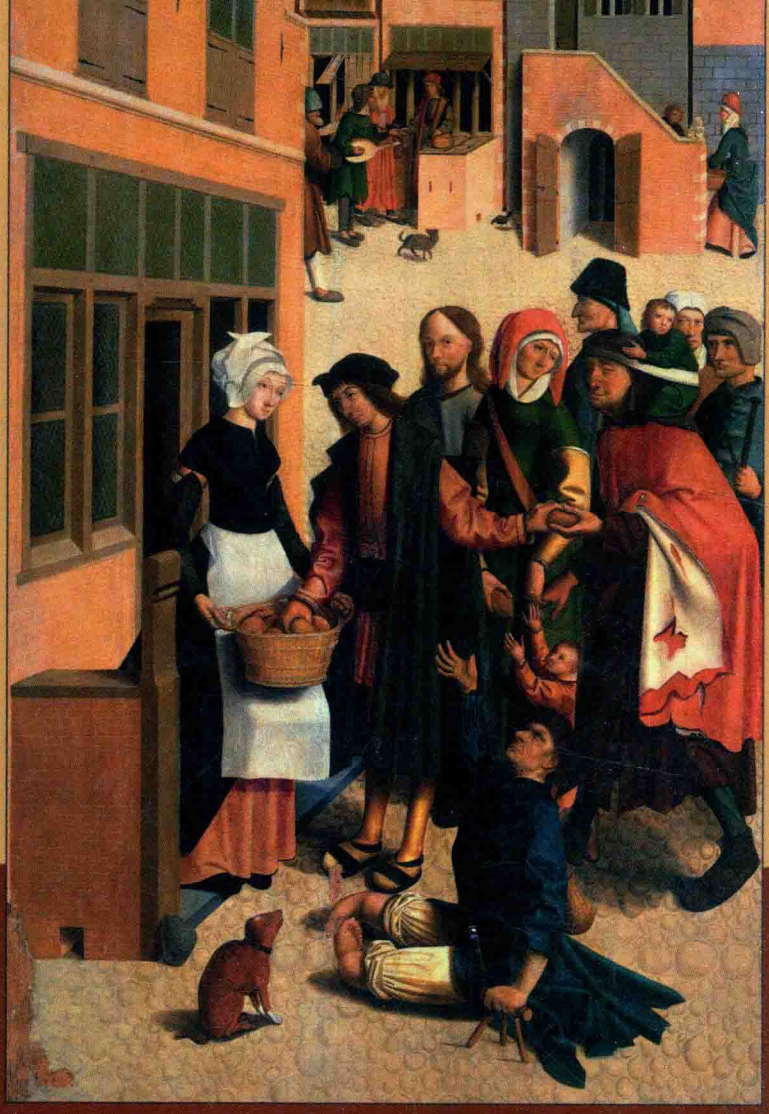

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Poor Relief in England, 1350–1600

Between the mid fourteenth century and the Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601, English poor relief moved towards a more coherent and comprehensive network of support. Marjorie McIntosh's study, the first to trace developments across that time span, focuses on three types of assistance: licensed begging and the solicitation of charitable alms; hospitals and almshouses for the bedridden and elderly; and the aid given by parishes. It explores changing conceptions of poverty and charity and altered roles for the church, state, and private organizations in the provision of relief. The study highlights the creativity of local people in responding to poverty, cooperation between national and lower levels of government, the problems of fraud and negligence, and mounting concern with proper supervision and accounting. This ground-breaking work challenges existing accounts of the Poor Laws, showing that they addressed problems with forms of aid already in use rather than creating a new system of relief.

Marjorie Keniston McIntosh is Distinguished Professor of History Emerita, University of Colorado at Boulder. Her previous publications include *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370–1600* (Cambridge, 1998), *Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620* (Cambridge, 2005), and two books about African women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Acknowledgements

Writing this book has heightened my gratitude to the many teachers who helped me become a social historian. David Riesman and Erik Erikson guided my initial independent studies on the relation between history, sociology, and psychology in 1960–1; Myron Gilmore supervised my attempt to utilize those approaches in an undergraduate honors thesis on the late medieval Dance of Death. During my first year in graduate school at Harvard, I focused on African history. But shortly before classes started the following September, the History Department decided that Africa was not a suitable field for Ph.D. work, because its history relied so heavily on oral sources. I therefore signed up at the last minute for a seminar on the reign of Edward VI of England. Led by W. K. Jordan, who was writing his two-volume study of the reign of the boy king, our discussions were structured around a series of interpretive questions. Each student was given a document to analyze and present weekly, an experience from which I gained an affection and respect for primary sources that has lasted ever since. Professor Jordan then supervised my Ph.D. thesis on the Cooke family of Gidea Hall with his usual gentlemanly courtesy. Joel Hurstfield provided valuable suggestions and friendship while I was doing thesis research in England, as did Michael Postan and Geoffrey Elton during the next decade. After Professor Jordan suffered an incapacitating stroke, Giles Constable kindly stepped in to offer advice and encouragement. To all of them, I am deeply indebted.

Because the sources for early poor relief are disparate in nature and scattered among many different collections, research for this study stretched over several decades. The book pulls together manuscript material from more than 70 archives, joined by information from printed primary sources and secondary studies. Most of the research in local record offices was done while I was working simultaneously on two earlier projects (*Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370–1600* and *Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620*). The extended period of travel, analysis, and writing that finally resulted in this book was generously supported by a Research Fellowship from the National Endowment for

the Humanities and the Visiting Research Fellowship in the Arts at Newnham College, Cambridge, 1983–4; a Visiting Research Fellowship at the Borthwick Institute for Historical Research, University of York, summer 1992; a Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1995–6; and multiple grants from the Committee on Research and Creative Work, the Graduate Committee on the Arts and Humanities, and the Distinguished Professor program at the University of Colorado at Boulder, 1984–2010.

Notes on conventions and online resources

Several conventions need explanation. The 125 churchwardens' accounts or other church books used to analyze parish activity are cited in notes as CWA followed by a number (for example, CWA #52). The CWAs are listed numerically, with archival/bibliographic information, in part 1 of the References. In recent years I gained some information through the online entries in Access to Archives. That material is cited with a reference to the archival source, as "used through A2A," to make clear that I did not consult the original document. When a second reference is provided at the end of a given note with the wording "For below, see . . ." it refers to the following sentence. Money is given in the system of pounds (£), shillings (s.), and pence (d.) in use at the time, in which 12d. = 1s. and 20s. = £1. When an accounting year spans more than a single calendar year, the date is shown in the format 1576–7. I have modernized the spelling of place names, personal first names, and direct quotations from English manuscripts or early printed sources; Latin quotations are translated into modern English. Manuscript citations give fol. or p. before the folio or page number, with r indicating the front of a folio and v the back. The index includes all places mentioned in the text, but personal names appear only for major entries. Hospitals and almshouses are indexed under their location, not the name of the institution.

To lessen the mass of this book, ten of its detailed methodological and quantitative appendices have been posted on a permanent, open access website maintained by Cambridge University Press. They are cited in the notes as "CUP Online Apps." and are numbered, to distinguish them from the appendices included in the printed volume, which are labeled with letters. The web address for the supplementary appendices is: www.cambridge.org/mcintosh/appendices under the "resources" tab.

Abbreviations

A2A	Access to Archives, an online catalogue of document listings from many county and national collections
APC	*Acts of the Privy Council of England*
Beds&LA	Bedfordshire and Luton Archives, Bedford
BerksRO	Berkshire Record Office, Reading
BIA	Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York
BodlL	Bodleian Library, University of Oxford
BristolRO	Bristol Record Office
BritL	British Library, London
B-u-TwRO	Berwick-upon-Tweed Record Office
CalB&EMSS	Calendar of the Bridgewater and Ellesmere MSS, Dockets, section 8 (an unpublished list of items in Huntington Library EL 3044–5609)
CambsA	Cambridgeshire Archives, Cambridge
CambUL	Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts
CantCA	Canterbury Cathedral Archives
CBucksS	Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, Aylesbury
CHAbing	Christ's Hospital, Abingdon, Berkshire
ChChRO	Cheshire and Chester Record Office, Chester
CKentS	Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone
CornwRO	Cornwall Record Office, Truro
CorpCCC	Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
CPR	*Calendar of the Patent Rolls*
CSPD	*Calendar of the State Papers, Domestic Series, 1547–1625*
CumbAS-C	Cumbria Archive Service, Carlisle
CWA	Churchwardens' accounts or parish books (see References, part 1)
DerbRO	Derbyshire Record Office, Matlock
DevonRO	Devon Record Office, Exeter
DoncA	Doncaster Archives

DorsetHC	Dorset History Centre, Dorchester
DurhUL	Durham University Library, Special Collections, Palace Green Library
ERYoAS-B	East Riding of Yorkshire Archives Service, Beverley
EssexRO-Ch	Essex Record Office, Chelmsford
EssexRO-Colch	Essex Record Office, Colchester
ESussRO	East Sussex Record Office, Lewes
GloucsA	Gloucestershire Archives, Gloucester
GuLLond	Guildhall Library, London, all of whose MSS are now at the LondMA
HadlTR	Hadleigh, Suffolk, town records
HampsRO	Hampshire Record Office, Winchester
HarvUA	Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Mass.
HerefRO	Herefordshire Record Office, Hereford
HertsA	Hertfordshire Archives, Hertford
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
HullCA	Hull City Archives, Kingston upon Hull
HuntL	Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.
HuntsA	Huntingtonshire Archives, Huntington
JP	Justice of the Peace
LambA	Lambeth Archives, Minet Library, London
LambPL	Lambeth Palace Library, London
LancsRO	Lancashire Record Office, Preston
L&IS	List and Index Society
L&P	*Calendar of Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*
LichfRO	Lichfield Record Office, Lichfield
LincsA	Lincolnshire Archives, Lincoln
LondMA	London Metropolitan Archives, Clerkenwell, London
MS or MSS	Manuscript or manuscripts
NELA	North East Lincolnshire Archives, Grimsby
NewCO	New College, Oxford, Archives
NoDevRO	North Devon Record Office, Barnstaple
NorfRO	Norfolk Record Office, Norwich
NorthantsRO	Northamptonshire Record Office, Northampton
NottsA	Nottinghamshire Archives, Nottingham
N-u-TrMus	Newark-upon-Trent Museum
NYksRO	North Yorkshire County Record Office, Northallerton
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*

OxfdsRO	Oxfordshire Record Office, Oxford
ROLeics	The Record Office for Leicestershire, Wigston Magna
ShakespCLA	Shakespeare Centre Library & Archive, Stratford-upon-Avon
ShropsA	Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury
SomstRO	Somerset Record Office, Taunton
SouthCA	Southampton City Archives
SR	*The Statutes of the Realm*
StaffsRO	Staffordshire Record Office, Stafford
StGeoCh	St. George's Chapel, Windsor Castle
SuffRO-BSE	Suffolk Record Office, Bury St. Edmunds
SuffRO-I	Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich
SurreyHC	Surrey History Centre, Woking
T&WAS	Tyne and Wear Archives Service, Newcastle upon Tyne
TNA-PRO	The National Archives, Public Record Office, Kew
TRP	*Tudor Royal Proclamations*
ULondL	University of London Library, Archives and Manuscripts
UNottL	University of Nottingham Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections
VAI	*Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation*
VCH	Victoria County History (= *The Victoria History of the County of . . .*)
W&FM	Wisbech and Fenland Museum, Wisbech
WarwsRO	Warwickshire Record Office, Warwick
Wilts&SA	Wiltshire and Swindon Archives, Chippenham
WorcsRO	Worcestershire Record Office, Worcester
WSussRO	West Sussex Record Office, Chichester
WYksAS-L	West Yorkshire Archive Service, Leeds
YorkCA	York City Archives

Contents

1 Introduction

Between 1350 and 1600, poor relief in England moved from a complex array of diverse kinds of assistance towards a more coherent and comprehensive network of support. The first century after the massive outbreak of bubonic plague in 1348–9 was marked by low population and relatively mild problems with poverty, but unstable economic and demographic conditions in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries rendered more people vulnerable to short-term hardship. Throughout those years most aid was awarded only occasionally, typically to individuals struck by some particular misfortune. Between around 1530 and 1553, poverty intensified and the forms of relief changed significantly. Whereas attitudes towards the poor and almsgiving had been shaped by Catholic beliefs during the later medieval years, the new patterns were influenced by humanist or "commonwealth" ideas about the responsibilities of a Christian state and by early Protestant theology. The most important development, initiated by the central government, was the introduction of parish-based aid, financed by regular payments made by wealthier members of the community. During the second half of the sixteenth century, as need continued to mount, local communities and generous individuals experimented with how best to provide assistance. The elderly and chronically poor now qualified for help, sometimes receiving ongoing support. The bad harvests of the later 1580s and 1590s increased the suffering and heightened public concern about poverty, leading to the massive Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601.

This book examines three main forms of poor relief across those centuries: licensed begging by individuals and gathering for charitable institutions; the free housing and sometimes other benefits offered by hospitals and almshouses; and aid given through or by parishes. Other kinds of aid receive only peripheral attention here, including the essential help provided by friends, relatives, and neighbors.[1] Although many people drew upon informal support, it is seldom documented in writing prior to the

[1] For these kinds of aid, see ch. 1.4 below.

seventeenth century and hence cannot be examined in any detail. The three kinds of semi-institutionalized aid, by contrast, found their way into the records, enabling us to trace their history over time.

I argue that the development of poor relief between the mid fourteenth and the late sixteenth centuries was molded by three main factors: major transitions in the material context, stemming from demographic and economic factors; the changing ideology of poverty and charity; and altered patterns of government, primarily the increasing legislative activity of Parliament, the initiative and energy of the royal Privy Council, the new authority of county Justices of the Peace (JPs), and the expanding roles of parishes in their secular capacity. My account emphasizes the originality of the statutes formulated at a national level and the creativity of the practices tried out at local levels during the middle and later sixteenth century. It highlights also the importance for poor people of access to predictable assistance during a period of need and in some cases to ongoing relief, through admittance to a residential institution or parish support.

This book offers a different analytical perspective from the many fine studies of late medieval and early modern poor relief written during the past century.[2] The pioneer scholars of English poor relief focused on the Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601.[3] Their interest in earlier developments rarely extended beyond the kinds of assistance found in sixteenth-century cities and the role of Parliament and the Privy Council in devising and enforcing policy. The legislation of 1598 and 1601 was presented as significant in two respects: it contained some unusual features, principally its use of the parish as the basic institution for administering aid and its reliance upon local taxes to pay for the needy; and it ushered in a new era of parish-based relief that continued – with some adjustment during the 1660s and the 1790s – until 1834. That era became known as "the Old Poor Law."

I show that the 1598 and 1601 laws did not create a new system of poor relief. With regard to parish aid, they offered corrections to certain features of the foundational statute of 1552, as modified slightly in 1563. If one wished to assign a birth date to the Old Poor Law's system of parish-based relief, the mid sixteenth century would be a better choice than 1598 and 1601. The late Elizabethan legislation also recognized that authorized begging and gathering were crippled by irremediable problems, and it

[2] For the historiography of this full span, see McIntosh, "Local Responses"; for the medieval period see also Horden, "Small Beer?" and Fideler, *Social Welfare*, chs. 1–2; for the sixteenth century, see also Fideler, "Introduction."

[3] E.g., Leonard, *Early History*, and Webb and Webb, *English Poor Law History*, *Part I*.

improved the functioning of residential institutions for the poor. The statutes created a more secure legal status for charitable activities and a new legal process through which proper performance of their functions could be demanded. The 1598 and 1601 laws thus enhanced the loosely connected network of relief that was already in operation in many parts of the country. That pattern, which has been described for a later period as "the mixed economy of welfare," combined parish-based assistance, private charities, and informal help.[4] The multiple kinds of potential aid – usually occasional – that had been available prior to the ending of Catholic institutions had thus been narrowed into a somewhat more coherent system.

In the past few decades, historians of poverty have broadened our horizons. We now have some excellent surveys of the early modern period. Paul Slack's *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* provides a concise and thoughtful overview that includes discussion of the legislation that preceded the late Elizabethan poor laws; the earlier sections of Steve Hindle's *On the Parish?: The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England, c. 1550–1750* integrate political, economic, and social factors in investigating responses to poverty.[5] Other scholars have examined the lives and agency of the poor themselves, in rural as well as urban settings, at various times between the later sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries.[6] Medievalists have mined their own documents to see what can be extracted about needy people and aid to them, and we have several preliminary accounts of broader patterns of assistance.[7] Certain kinds of informal support have been described as fully as the sources permit.[8]

By the early twenty-first century, the pendulum of historical assessment concerning the relation between medieval and Elizabethan patterns had swung to the opposite extreme. Whereas the period before 1530 had previously been largely ignored, some medievalists now claimed that aspects of poor relief considered distinctive by early modernists were in place by the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. Late medieval villages, they

[4] Innes, "'Mixed Economy'."

[5] Certain aspects of Slack's study were expanded later in his *From Reformation to Improvement*. Fideler's *Social Welfare* is unusual in discussing sub-periods between 1350 and 1610 as well as later ones.

[6] E.g., Hitchcock et al., eds., *Chronicling Poverty*, Schen, *Charity*, Botelho, *Old Age*, Hitchcock, *Down and Out*, Ottaway, *Decline of Life*, Ben-Amos, *Culture of Giving*, and Snell, *Parish and Belonging*.

[7] E.g., Rubin, *Charity and Community*, Cullum, "And Hir Name was Charite," Cullum and Goldberg, "Charitable Provision," and Clark, "Charitable Bequests." For valuable surveys, see Dyer, *Standards of Living*, ch. 9, and Horden, "Small Beer?"

[8] E.g., Clark, "Social Welfare," and Ben-Amos, "Gifts and Favors" and her *Culture of Giving*.

proposed, were already doing much of what had been seen as novel about Tudor legislation and local practice, including a linkage between taxation and assistance to the poor, use of a special box in the church to collect donations, and the particular techniques used to raise funds for parishioners who needed help.[9]

The evidence presented in this book shows that although many forms of aid were indeed present during the later medieval years, the range and predictability of institutionalized assistance were limited as compared to what began to develop during Edward's reign. Over the rest of the sixteenth century, authorized begging was extended to a wider range of people, while almshouses and hospitals continued to move towards sheltering the elderly poor. Many parishes went beyond the earlier pattern of handing out a little food or money from bequests or at funerals in favor of regular collections from their more prosperous members, using the income to help local people who could not work to support themselves. Some parishes imposed fixed, obligatory assessments on those who were able to pay and gave weekly sums to those who needed relief. Late Elizabethan assistance was different in intensity and scope from what had been present before around 1530. This chapter introduces some essential concepts and lays out the three types of aid to be analyzed below, together with some analytic questions and the sources used. After summarizing the ideological and practical context within which poor relief developed, we look briefly at some additional forms of help that will not be explored fully in this study.

1.1 Poverty, charity, and three forms of relief

Late medieval and early modern English people wrestled with complex issues concerning poverty and poor relief. What circumstances led to undeserved need, and how could the various types of poverty be defined? What forms of aid were available, and how should they be awarded? In deciding which sorts of poor people warranted assistance, should officials impose residency requirements or behavioral conditions? How could relief be structured so as to lessen the possibility of fraud on the part of those requesting relief and of dishonesty or incompetence on the part of those administering it? Was helping the poor primarily a religious and moral obligation, or were there more functional reasons for awarding

[9] Dyer, "English Medieval Village," esp. 415–16, his *An Age of Transition?*, 240 and 248, Smith, "Charity, Self-Interest," esp. 32, Bennett, "Conviviality and Charity," and see ch. 4 below.