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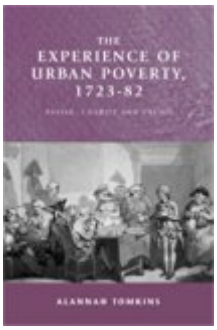

Alannah Tomkins. *The Experience of Urban Poverty, 1723-82: Parish, Charity and Credit.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. 288 pp $85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-7504-9.

Reviewed by Padhraig Higgins

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Commissioned by David S. Karr (Columbia College)

Since the 1990s, historians of eighteenth-century England have been preoccupied with the world of consumption, the politicization of the middling sort, and the influence of war and empire on domestic politics and national identity. In many such studies, the working poor have received short shrift. Recent work however has begun to focus on what Tim Hitchcock describes as a "new history from below."[1] Building on previous attempts to construct a social history from below, and infused by the cultural turn, historians of the poor are exploring traditional archival sources such as pauper letters and bastardy examinations with a new attention to the narrative devices utilized by the poor in these sources as well asquestions of gender and life-cycle, and with a more nuanced understanding of the reciprocal sense of obligation and entitlement between rich and poor. Hitchcock himself has recently provided an innovative and engaging cultural history of the London homeless. John Styles meanwhile has shown that consideration of the consumption habits of the parish poor can yield fruitful results. [2] Alannah Tomkins's book is attuned to these recent advances in the field, while also adopting a prosopographical approach in order to move beyond administrative histories of poverty and illuminate the "experience" of the poor. The central question this work addresses is, "how persistent was the parish relief system in the lives of working people en masse?" (p. 3).

She focuses mainly on the towns of Oxford, Shrewsbury, and York, largely on source-driven concerns (though, as Tomkins demonstrates in the introduction, the towns did have much in common), examining the twelve best documented of the forty-eight parishes that comprised the three towns. Parish records and overseer's accounts are central to this study, while she also makes good use of the records of non-statutory relief and charitable bodies, thus combining traditional parish sources with others to build up a more rounded picture of the experiences of the poor. Rather than attempting to reconstruct any single institution or parish, Tomkins is concerned with the poor populations of multiple parishes in their

interactions with both parish poor relief authorities and formally run charities.

Her investigation of the different sites of poverty and poor relief begins with a detailed and illuminating chapter on the experience of the workhouse. Her research supports the commonplace claim that nutrition in the workhouse may have been better than in the homes of the laboring poor. Workhouse inmates were not passive recipients of indifferent food or inadequate rations, rather, “the pattern of local food consumption, and the concurrent discourses of poverty, had a profound impact on the reception of workhouse food by inmates” (p. 64). Workhouse diets often contained comforts such as treacle to make food more palatable and tobacco to make life more bearable. The material standards of the workhouse were also not as squalid as contemporaries suggested, while the provision of clothing and shoes also became a basic function of the workhouse by middle of the century. Overall, while the poor’s experience of the workhouse was in part determined by parish policy, overseers also responded to the needs of the varied groups of poor within the parish and often met these needs with goods and services.

Chapter 3 examines a relatively neglected aspect of the "economy of makeshifts," forms of voluntary charity. A range of different charities, including almshouses, charity schools, infirmaries, and non-residential endowments, provided relief to applicants for a significant proportion of the urban population. Focusing exclusively on almshouses and the more ephemeral handouts by municipal and parish endowments in Oxford, Tomkins shows how parish paupers used charity through a comparison of their names with lists of charity recipients, concluding that “local knowledge of what was available enabled paupers to enter into negotiations for non-residential charity” (p. 111). Chapter 4 provides an innovative account of what Tomkins describes as a “distinctive urban economy of medical makeshifts” through an analysis of provincial parish and subscription infirmaries along with pauper births and burials (p. 121). Tomkins outlines the range of medical treatment available to paupers, the choices they made about medical relief, as well the broad range of the urban population catered to by the various agencies of medical relief beyond parish paupers. A chapter on charity schools covers some familiar territory with a discussion of elite debates over the necessity and desirability of charity schooling for the children of poor; but it also attempts to gauge access to these schools among the poor, differences in parish treatment of poor children, and the actual impact such educational opportunities had on the social and cultural mobility of poor children.

The excellent final chapter considers the use of credit among the poor based on a rare surviving pawnshop pledge book of George Fettes of York. From this document, Tomkins analyzes the weekly pattern of pawning, the objects pawned, and the gender balance of Fettes’ trade. Tomkins demonstrates the pervasiveness of pawning amongst the inhabitants of the town, with perhaps 17 percent of the town’s population making use of Fettes’ services over a two-year period. Pawning, she concludes, was “deeply embedded in the survival economies of many working people” (p. 228). This chapter contributes to the new microhistory of credit as practiced by historians such as Margot Finn (whose work is surprisingly not included in the bibliography).[3]

Tomkins’s prosopographical and statistical approach does not always make for an easy read. Some readers might long for a more narrative-based approach that foregrounds particular stories and the voices of the poor themselves. owever, after offering some tantalizing examples of the “life histories” approach, Tomkins explicitly rejects this method due to the tendency of such sources to privilege male stories and obscure the fact that the majority of urban paupers were female. Moreover, those paupers who generated the

range of sources necessary for such a biographical approach tended to be particularly needy or criminal and hardly typical of the vast majority of the poor population who “were born, made ends meet, and died without being substantially traceable” (p. 238).[4] Overall, this is a thoroughly researched and balanced addition to the growing body of literature that speaks to the agency of the poor in the eighteenth century. By focusing on the different forms of relief available to the poor Tomkins demonstrates that such relief was accessible and inclusive, though by the end of this period, this openness was increasingly tempered by discretion and a hardening of attitudes towards the poor and their need for relief.

Notes

[1]. Tim Hitchcock, “A New History From Below,” *History Workshop Journal* 57, no. 1 (2004): 294-298. For a more skeptical view of the "new history from below" see Nicholas Rogers, "London's Marginal Histories," *Labour/Le Travail*, 60 (Fall 2007): 217-234.

[2]. Tim Hitchcock, *Down and Out in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Hambledon, 2004); John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

[3]. Margot Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[4]. For a recent collection of such male pauper narratives see Tomkins’s “Male Pauper Narratives” in *Narratives of the Poor in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Alysa Levene (London: Pickering and Chatto 2006), vol. 1, 205-297.

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