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David R. Green. *Pauper Capital.* Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010. xviii + 279 pp. $114.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-3008-1.

Reviewed by Christopher Ferguson (Auburn University)
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Ferguson on Green, *Pauper Capital*

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, more commonly known as the New Poor Law, is arguably the most notorious piece of legislation in British history. Deeply controversial in its day, it has unsurprisingly generated a dense and diverse scholarly literature ever since, yet one in which the national capital has played a remarkably minor role. Indeed, David R. Green's study is the first to attempt to explore the history of the Poor Law in nineteenth-century London in its geographic and administrative entirety. One need not read far to understand why, for the history of the Poor Law in London prior to and post 1834 is enormously complex. Green is to be commended both for undertaking a difficult task and for producing a study that is remarkably easy to read, despite the intricacies of its subject matter. His study makes the arcane history of poor relief in nineteenth-century London accessible to the non-specialist, while simultaneously yielding significant insights about this history for specialist scholars of poverty, policy, and the nineteenth-century British state.

Green's chosen title captures two important themes that are repeatedly emphasized throughout the book: (1) the size of the metropolis and its pauper population, and (2) the role economies of scale played in making London a focal point for experiments and innovations in administering poor relief. As the largest city in Britain, London presented both geographic and demographic challenges that made the "implementation of poor relief exceptionally complex" (p. 17). Indeed, as Green observes, the populations of London's larger parishes were equivalent in size to those of many of the nation's industrial towns. The number of paupers in London was also substantially larger than in other parts of the country. This was a product not only of London's substantial relative size, but also of its much larger, ever-expanding casual labor market and higher percentage of newly arrived migrants, whose distance from home made the costs of removing them to their native parishes prohibitively expensive. The outlay required to relieve London's large pauper community was equally substantial and weighed heavily on ratepayers. In 1837, for example, poor relief expenditures for the *parish* of St. Marylebone were the fourth largest in the nation, being only slightly lower than those of Birmingham, Manchester, and Liverpool. In the two decades before 1834, the "relative cost of pauperism in London exceeded that of all other regions" (p. 34), a pattern that only increased as the century progressed. By 1870, "London unions accounted for close to 20 percent of the total expenditure on poor relief in England and Wales" (p. 194).

The size of London's pauper population and the serious challenges that providing for them posed to officials and ratepayers ensured that the metropolis remained a place of innovation in poor law policy throughout the century. Long before 1834, Green demonstrates, the anonymity promoted by London's size combined with the costs of removing paupers encouraged parish officials to take a stricter, more suspicious approach to distributing poor relief–one that resulted in an early resort to "indoor" relief within the workhouse–as both a disciplinary and cost-cutting measure. "Given the circumstances," he notes, "the workhouse appeared to be a pragmatic and efficient way of dealing with some of the specific problems of metropolitan pauperism" (p. 41). Economies of scale likewise encouraged the early development of specialized sub-institutions (schools, insane asylums, and hospitals) within the metropolitan context that would have been impossible to develop in the provinces. This move toward specialized provision was given greater codification by the Metropolitan Poor Act of 1867, which allowed for the construction of workhouse infirmaries and separate poor law hospitals out of a common fund, levied at the metropolitan rather than the parish level. This demonstrated not only a growing realization that the primary

role of the poor law was to care for the sick and elderly, but also that parish officials would have to sacrifice some of their cherished autonomy to allow for the rate equalization necessitated by London's changed socioeconomic geography following the slum clearances of the 1850s and 1860s.

A third component of Green's study is to question the "significance of the transition" from the Old Poor Law to the New Poor Law (p. xiv). As already observed, the scale of London pauperism and the costs of its relief meant that parishes had already begun to move toward an emphasis on "indoor" relief and the use of deterrent and disciplinary measures like work tests decades before 1834. While the majority of London parishes voted to be unionized under the New Poor Law, eleven did not (and these included some of the most populous parishes in the metropolis). That poor rates dropped in *all* London parishes in the late 1830s, regardless of their adoption of the New Poor Law, suggests that the choice made little difference. What mattered instead was a common focus on "indoor" relief within an institutionalized context, and a reduction in the distribution of temporary funds for the poor ("outdoor" relief). Furthermore, economies of scale dictated that poor relief in London could never be conducted entirely in the workhouse even after 1834. Pre-1834 practices of "pauper farming" persisted, as poor law guardians continued to employ private institutions (especially for the housing of children and the insane) well into the 1840s. Even after a series of scandals in the late 1840s made private provision untenable, relief continued in separate institutions albeit now administered by poor law guardians instead of by private individuals.

For Green, therefore, the case of London demonstrates that 1834 was less of a turning point than either contemporaries or subsequent historians have acknowledged. While he is not the first to make this argument (one thinks, for example, of Peter Mandler's observations about the move toward discipline and deterrence before 1834, and David Englander's evidence of the persistence of "outdoor" relief after 1834), Green does so while also offering a different chronology of change.[1] For the metropolis at least, Green argues, it was 1867, not 1834, that was the crucial turning point. "Looking across the threshold of the 1870s," he asserts, is "to peer into a different administrative landscape in which collective metropolitan ratepayer responsibility became an accepted part of poor law policy" (p. 246). In this respect, London once again "led the way" forward, not only in altering the nature of poor relief at the national level, but also in helping to lay the groundwork for the welfare policies of the twentieth century.

Green's stated purpose is to explore the relationship between "place and policy" (pp. xiv, 82), and I came away from this study convinced that London's unique conditions made the administration of poor relief in the metropolis evolve in a distinctive and important manner. This left me wondering, however, about the relationship between "place" and the way in which these policies were experienced. A nineteenth-century French visitor observed that, "to be poor in London is one fortune Dante forgot to mention in his spiral of miseries," and it would be interesting to explore how much the Poor Law increased or decreased this misery.[2] "However harsh the new poor law appeared to be," Green contends, "it did not absolve officials from their obligation to provide some form of assistance to those who applied for relief" (p. 22). Yet, he also observes that the desire to cut poor rates often gave the administration of poor relief in London a particularly draconian character. The Bethnal Green Workhouse was especially notorious in this respect, restricting visiting hours, drastically limiting the diet, and forcing even elderly paupers to break stones in return for relief. There is also the question, however, of the miseries of a psychological, rather than a purely physical nature. In 1840, the elderly Burton sisters chose to go to prison for begging, rather than enter the workhouse, because the law of settlement dictated that they would have to receive relief in two different institutions. In prison, however, they could remain together, and thus to prison they went.[3] Theirs, too, was a story of place and policy. By mapping the history of the poor law in London on a macro-level, Green has offered us the means to understand the background in which the microhistories of paupers like the Burtons unfolded, and for this all historians of London poverty should be most grateful.

Notes

[1]. Peter Mandler, "Tories and Paupers: Christian Political Economy and the Making of the New Poor Law," *The Historical Journal* 33, no. 1 (March 1990): 81-103; Peter Mandler, "The Making of the New Poor Law Redivivus," *Past and Present*, no. 117 (1987): 131-157; David Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Nineteenth-Century Britain, 1834-1914: From Chadwick to Booth* (London: Longman, 1998), esp. 85-86.

[2]. Théophile Gautier, *Caprices et Zigzags* (Paris: Victor Lecou, 1852), 133.

[3]. *Times,* December 4, 1840, 7C.

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