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SAMANTHA WILLIAMS, *Poverty, Gender and Life-cycle under the English Poor Law, 1760-1834*, Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013. Paperback. ISBN 978 1 84383 866 1, £17.99. (Hardback: 2011. ISBN 978 0 86193 314 3.)

Over 15,000 parishes in England and Wales were individually responsible for relieving their poor in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The question of how to examine a system of relief which was in fact a patchwork of local practices is central to any study of the old poor law. Williams's method is to concentrate on two communities in Bedfordshire: rural Campton, and the neighbouring market-town of Shefford. This tight focus enables her to link the reconstructed family biographies of paupers and of ratepayers from the Cambridge Group (1997) project to an array of other available archival sources including records of overseers, settlement examinations (establishing rights to relief), vestry minutes, pauper inventories, land tax, pauper letters, and baptism, marriage and burial registers.

This methodology has several advantages. One is the emphasis on pauper agency, in line with much recent historiography. Any analysis of poverty and poor relief must have something to say about how the poor themselves navigated their lives. The poor were not simply passive recipients of relief and their voices can be heard, to some extent at least, through their letters, inventories and settlement examination records. Williams forcefully makes this point by deploying biographies put together from multiple sources to show how local policy directly affected individuals.

These biographies are particularly useful for bringing forward the life-cycle aspects of relief in the two communities. Childhood, early parenthood, widowhood and old age tended to be precarious stages of life, especially when they intersected with ill-health. This is no surprise. But the biography method permits some interesting findings: fewer orphan paupers than might have been expected, for example, or that the majority of widowed paupers had received relief before their spouses' deaths. Family biographies also emphasise the gendered nature of access to poor relief. Most pensions to the elderly were to women. Of lone-parent pensioners, over 80 per cent were widows and unmarried mothers. Overseers of the poor feared the high costs of bastardy for the poor rates, and Williams identifies 12 cases of the ratepayers of

Campton and Shefford paying for the forced or encouraged marriages of the parents of illegitimate children.

A further advantage of the micro-history approach is that it allows Williams to link poor relief practice to local economies of makeshifts, taking in the complexities of employment, settlement and charitable support for the poor. It also permits a balanced consideration of ratepayers as well as poor law officials and paupers. This contextualisation demonstrates the importance of scale in understanding the poor law. Comprehending the huge variation in parish practices across England and Wales is impossible from a national perspective without the detailed local inquiry that Williams undertakes. The book shows how Campton and Shefford contrasted with other communities in Bedfordshire, a county which has already received a certain amount of attention from poor law scholars owing to its notable rise in relief costs in the late eighteenth century. Parts of the county suffered common problems, but individual communities attempted to deal with them in their own ways. Shefford, for example, gave far more non-resident relief than Campton, especially as pensions. Such details reinforce the point that local differences can be more illuminating than regional trends.

The book does not attempt to compare these case studies with other parishes in Bedfordshire directly nor in as much detail – understandably, given the depth of analysis Williams has achieved for just these two communities. Nonetheless, she is keen to place her findings for Campton and Shefford in their regional and national contexts. To do this she draws attention to the contemporary national discourses on poor relief, such as discussion over the ‘Speenhamland’ and ‘allowance’ phenomena in which some parishes in the south-east subsidised low-paying employment through the poor rates. National debates over these systems contributed to reform of the poor laws in 1834. Campton and Shefford did not adopt the schemes, though child-allowance scales were in place for a short time of crisis from 1799 to 1802 in Campton. Williams also shows how local experience influenced national reformists. For instance Samuel Whitbread, member of Parliament for the Bedford borough and justice of the peace, was as energetic in Westminster presenting bills about poor relief or arguing with Thomas Malthus as he was hearing claims from the poor at home. Whitbread was hardly representative of local gentry, however. More effectively for placing her case studies in context, Williams alerts readers whenever the evidence of

Campton or Shefford contradicts the generalisations other historians have made about the county, region or country. The parish is shown to be the appropriate scale for exploring the effects of poor law practice on individuals and families over their lifetimes.

This is an important work for historians of poverty and poor relief, particularly for those interested in the lives of the poor. It also demonstrates skilful use of family reconstruction linked with other sources to shed light on a much wider range of historical problems. A paperback edition is welcome.

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