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Anne M. Scott, ed., *Experiences of Poverty in Late Medieval and Early Modern England and France*. Farnham, England and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012. xviii + 335 pp. Select bibliography and index. \$134.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4094-4108-3.

Review by Janine Lanza, Wayne State University

The essays in the volume *Experiences of Poverty in Late Medieval and Early Modern England and France*, edited by Anne M. Scott, reflect a range of approaches to understanding poverty, both as lived and as conceptualized, across four centuries. Scott explains in her introductory essay that the authors examine poverty as it is embedded in reciprocal relationships between the poor and the comfortable, with each group having obligations and benefiting from their interactions. As she frames the volume, “[i]ts unique contribution to the field lies in allowing us to explore the symbiotic relationship between those in authority dealing with poverty and the poor themselves” (p. 3). This thinking builds upon recent historiographical trends in the study of early modern poverty. In addition to considering the poor less as objects of elite relief and more as parties in a relationship, recent work on poverty, as reflected for example in Paul Fidler’s essay in *Albion*, pays greater attention to the experiences of the poor. [1] The thirteen essays in this volume each examine a particular element of the experiences of the poor and poverty; together these essays provide the reader with a broad sense of how poverty was lived, how it was perceived, and how change took place from the fourteenth to nineteenth century. In concentrating on England, and to a lesser extent France, but taking a broad chronological approach, these essays also reveal the particularities of this process.

This volume is divided into three parts, each of which focuses on a particular aspect of poverty. Part 1, on survival strategies, looks most explicitly at the poor themselves and what they did to get by in their unfortunate circumstances. Christopher Dyer’s piece on the poor in late medieval England takes a prosopographic approach, seeking to construct the lives of as many of the poor as possible by using manorial records. Although looking at a marginal population, Dyer’s creative use of this source results in a surprisingly complete picture of the poor in fifteenth-century Yorkshire. He demonstrates the ways that the poor fell into that state through misfortune—illness, death, price inflation—but he also shows that they could move back and forth across the border of solvency as circumstances dictated. Because penury was situational, Dyer finds that community members supported their neighbors rather than labeling them “unworthy.” His essay provides a good example of how relationships, more than poverty itself, determined how poor people were labeled—whether they were deemed worthy or unworthy poor—a theme that is carried through in many of the other contributions. Phillippa Maddern’s essay on single mothers illuminates the ways that gender intersected with poverty. Maddern shows that church courts often forced fathers of illegitimate children to support them; single mothers, while precarious, did have a level of community support. Like Dyer, Maddern paints a nuanced picture of poor single mothers, demonstrating that all single mothers were not ostracized from the community but were judged in terms of their individual circumstances. Lesley Silvester also considers the plight of single women, a group particularly prone to poverty. But Silvester, while echoing Maddern, shows that most single women did not have children and that they were able to support themselves, even if they did generally live precariously. Ann Minister’s essay on pauper apprentices in the eighteenth century takes a different approach to the strategies used by the poor. Poor children put to apprentice could acquire valuable skills

and even escape poverty; this serves as an example of a strategy to escape poverty that could provide a permanent solution.

Minister's essay looks ahead to the theme and the time frame of the second section of this volume that examines official responses to poverty. If section 1 prioritizes the voices of the poor to describe their experiences, section 2 takes the other side of the dialectical relationship that Anne Scott references, the non-poor. Section two also moves past the medieval period, into the early modern era. The essays in this volume suggest that the response to poverty changes in the sixteenth century, from a local problem dealt with in small scale or even individualized ways to a larger problem that called for broader institutional responses. The essays in section two all point out how relief became more regularized, administrative, and accountable. Nicholas Brodie's consideration of parish poor relief in sixteenth-century Exeter emphasizes the systematic nature of the relationship between assistance and gratitude in looking at the relationship of the poor to those who gave them assistance. Here, rather than the individual assistance Dyer recounts for an earlier period, we see corporate and parish poor relief doled out on a regular schedule and based on consistent criteria. Susan Broomhall and Lisa Keane Elliott discuss the ways that Catholicism infused poverty relief efforts made by secular groups. Like Brodie's parish relief, the assistance given by Paris city aldermen, the group Broomhall considers, was funneled through the *Hôtel Dieu*, an institution that demanded accountability and organized giving meant to ensure the effectiveness of alms given. Elliott examines the Nevers foundation, founded by aristocrats to provide dowries to poor, pious girls. Both of these charities, while run by secular bodies, took their motivation from Catholic teachings. Elliott argues that the granting of dowries served as a "weapon in the battle to preserve the Catholic faith" (p. 163). Broomhall argues that the men who donated to charity saw it as their Christian duty to take care of the needs of the penniless. While Scott does not draw distinctions between England and France in her introduction, we see sectarianism at work in French anti-poverty institutions that seems not to be present in similar English institutions. It is likely that the religious conflict affecting France in the sixteenth century shaped attitudes toward poor relief, sharpening the religious meaning of giving and molding the institutions involved.

Two other essays in this section examine the ways poor people dealt with these emerging institutional approaches to poverty. In her essay, Margaret Dorey looks at the complaints of debtors in Newgate prison. They repeatedly grieved the quantity and quality of food that they were given there only to be rebuffed. Here again we see the poor speaking, but unlike in the earlier period when communication seemed more reciprocal, by the end of the eighteenth century the poor were ignored. Michael Bennett considers programs that forcibly vaccinated the poor in order to better understand the effect of the smallpox vaccine. Without consideration for their wishes, the poor were used as guinea pigs to advance medical understanding. Both of these instances took place in the late-eighteenth century, pointing toward the ways that the poor came to have less agency within increasingly structured systems of poor relief, and systems that were not interested in the kinds of reciprocal relationships that the poor and non-poor had enjoyed in an earlier period.

The last part of the volume includes essays that look at representations and perceptions of poverty. Using literary texts Mike Nolan, Mark Amsler, and Anne Scott identify how poverty was understood in cultural discourse. These essays suggest that the poor were judged largely on how outsiders thought they had fallen into poverty; in other words, even before the categories of worthy and unworthy poor were fully adopted in the administration of poor relief, they had been embraced in literary texts. All of these authors find evidence that non-poor categorized the poor based on whether and to what extent they were believed to have a part in their own poverty. Scott analyzes a medieval French poem that provides advice to a newlywed wishing for happiness. The poem emphasizes the extent to which riches and success were a result of hard work and discipline, rather than happenstance. Similarly Amsler's examination of medieval poverty as depicted in various devotional texts, suggests that the idea that poverty could be the result of lack of effort and discipline was well established in popular opinion by the sixteenth century. Nolan's text, a Jacobean play, blames poverty not on sloth but on the machinations of

the rich and powerful. In all of these instances, we see the concept of worthy and unworthy poor emerging, sooner in literary texts than in the practice of charitable giving. The attitudes found in these texts, several from the late medieval period, were not consistent with the ways that communities at this time continued to take care of their poor. These texts pointed toward the future in terms of outlooks on poverty.

The last essay in part 3 provides a fitting end to this volume. Peter Denney looks at literary portrayals of the rural poor as silent and largely unseen. Denney examines the reshaping of the English countryside as rural villages emptied out, their inhabitants migrating to growing cities in search of employment. As the countryside became less populated, it also became quieter, and city tourists began to connect silence with poverty. This perception of the poor as silent aligns with the increasing sense that the poor were objects of relief, without effective voice or agency. Just as the poor prisoners of Newgate were rebuffed when they asked for adequate food, and the poor who were vaccinated for smallpox gave no consent, the poor of English villages were also without voice or agency. As poor relief was institutionalized, it may have provided more relief to more impoverished people, but the sense that the poor were part of communities and had a voice there seems to have diminished. The poor became more marginalized and eventually nearly silent.

This volume presents the reader with a variety of approaches to the question of how poverty was experienced and understood in England and France over several centuries. Taken together, these essays provide insight into how the poor came to be categorized as “deserving” or “undeserving.” Further, the findings here show how the experience of poverty responded not only to changing material conditions, of course, but also to the changes in perceptions of the poor. Destitute men and women struggled wherever and whenever they lived; but as poor relief became more institutionalized, as the poor came to be judged based on their comportment rather than their need, the lives of the poor became more difficult. And, as Peter Denney shows, their voices, and their expressions of their experiences, eventually came to be silenced.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Anne M. Scott, “Experiences of Poverty”

Christopher Dyer, “The Experience of Being Poor in Late Medieval England”

Philippa C. Maddern, “‘Oppressed by Utter Poverty’: Survival Strategies for Single Mothers and Their Children in Late Medieval England”

Ann Minister, “Pauper Apprenticeship in South Derbyshire: A Positive Experience?”

Lesley Silvester, “The Experience of Single Women in Early Modern Norwich: ‘Rank Beggars, Gresse Maydes and Harlots’”

Nicholas D. Brodie, “‘The Names of All the Poore People’: Corporate and Parish Relief in Exeter, 1560s-1570s”

Susan Broomhall, “The Politics of Charitable Men: Governing Poverty in Sixteenth-Century Paris”

Lisa Keane Elliott, “Charitable ‘Intent’ in Late Sixteenth-Century France: The Nevers Foundation and Single Poor Catholic Girls”

Margaret Dorey, "Reckless Endangerment?: Feeding the Poor Prisoners of London in the Early Eighteenth Century"

Michael Bennett, "Inoculation of the Poor against Smallpox in Eighteenth-Century England"

Mark Amsler, "Poverty as a Mobile Signifier: Waldensians, Lollards, Dives and Paupers"

Anne M. Scott, « Le Chastel de Labour, La Voie de Povreté ou de Richesse and a Luxury Book, Widener 1, Free Library of Philadelphia »

Mike Nolan, "The Gifts of the Poor: Worth and Value, Poverty and Justice in Robert Daborne's The Poor Man's Comfort"

Peter Denney, "The Sounds of Population Fail': Changing Perception of Rural Poverty and Plebeian Noise in Eighteenth-Century Britain"

NOTES

[1] Paul Fideler, "Introduction: Impressions of a Century of Historiography," *Albion* 32.3 (2000):381-407.

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