Book Reviews

PAUL SLACK, *Poverty and policy in Tudor and Stuart England*, Themes in British Social History, London and New York, Longman, 1988, pp. viii, 229, £6.95 (paperback).

It is rare that a publisher's blurb undervalues a book, but this is one such occasion. This is much more than a "rounded synthesis of recent scholarship". For the first time we have an integrated study of the multifaceted subject of the poor and the government in this period. It is enriched by a wealth of telling detail from the author's own researches, which are used to instil a note of caution with regard to his general conclusions as well as to illustrate them.

England by the end of the seventeenth century was seen by both foreign and home commentators as a most generous provider for the poor. Unlike other countries, England combined a uniform and nation-wide system of poor relief, founded on the 1598 and 1601 Poor Laws, with a locally-executed practice based on the parish that resulted in wide variations in the rates and amounts of relief given and allowed the overseers of the poor discretion as to who was worthy of relief. The system preserved the desire for local autonomy and initiative whilst satisfying central government's need to lay down national policies (an analogous example is that of the locally-based enforcement of the law in this period), and it was not until the nineteenth century, when national priorities were undermining local independence, that the Poor Laws were replaced.

Behind such a bare outline lies a complex story. Slack shows how a mixture of charitable funding and, especially in the later sixteenth century, fear of the poor helped to shape attitudes and legislation. The mix of Christian charity and punitive intention towards the impotent poor and the able-bodied vagabond respectively (the two categories were often ill-defined, as is illustrated by the debate as to whether a person fell into poverty through his or her own fault or through misfortune or large-scale economic factors), also lay behind the founding of hospitals and houses of correction. However, as Slack points out, these schemes for the improvement of the manners of the poor usually came to nothing, being the brain-children of godly magistrates then overtaken by political events, or who, later in the period, were faced with the entrenched hostility of parish and municipal officers, which saw off the large-scale and centralizing corporations for the poor. In the last forty years of the seventeenth century, attempts were made to remedy a weakness of the poor relief system—the lack of provision of work for the poor—but these, often associated with corporations for the poor, also failed.

Other aspects of policy towards the poor, such as the alleviation of famine and the control of plague, are discussed by Slack. One of the merits of his book is that he integrates economic, social, and political analysis. For instance, the conciliar famine orders made out the local commercial élites to be profiteers and so appealed to popular sentiment. Yet by prohibiting the transfer of corn from growing to non-growing areas, these orders would, if fully implemented, have made starvation worse. Again, on the question of legislation on control and relief of the poor, Slack shows how fear of popular unrest, whether for political reasons or because of dearth, pushed Parliament to legislate. On the purely economic side, Slack provides a valuable assessment of economic growth as a background against which to judge the changing levels of poverty (how these are and were judged [illegible] lso discussed). More specifically, Slack gives sensible estimates of the total amounts of relief for the poor at different times, both in the aggregate and in different places, and he shows how from £10,000 in 1614 the poor rate yielded a minimum of £400,000 by 1700 with charitable benefactors another £150,000, so that roughly 5 per cent of the population could be aided by the poor rate.

There is much else in this book, a surprising amount in a small compass: the greater discrimination that was being urged as time went by in choosing which of the poor to support, the long-lasting feeling that the pensions of the poor were still alms just as they had been in pre-Reformation times, the care that parishes took over the education and apprenticing of foundlings and orphans, the flexibility of the poor laws in practice where overseers could mitigate some of the punitive provisions of the law. Despite Slack's economic and political

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perspective, he always enlivens his argument by references to the experiences of specific individuals; in two chapters on 'The respectable poor' and 'The dangerous poor', he puts on view the people who made up the two major groups for whom poor relief was formulated, and he tells us how they fared.

Longman's 'Themes in British Social History' series is aimed at the student market. Students reading this book are lucky, for they have been presented with a major historical work.

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PHILIP D. CURTIN, *Death by migration: Europe's encounter with the tropical world in the nineteenth century*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 8vo, pp. xix, 251, £27.50/$39.50 £8.95/$11.95 (paperback).

In his classic history of tropical medicine, Harold Scott points out that throughout most of the nineteenth century, life in the tropics for Europeans was very hazardous: "Going in search of a living many succeeded in finding death". Philip Curtin's book is about the reduction of that hazard for European soldiers between 1815 and 1914. He chooses to focus on this subset of the colonizing population because of the quality of military mortality records, and he promises to examine the mortality experience of non-European troops in a later study. The mortality data is limited to the forces of Britain and France (with a little information on the Dutch in the East Indies) and to the West Indies, Madras, and Algeria. But there are enough common experiences, and differences, for the author to draw general conclusions confidently about the pattern of mortality change and its probable causes. Morbidity data are presented extensively for British forces but not for French troops, because of problems with French sources. He has a little to say also on the health of European women in India in the late part of his period.

As the author states at the outset, *Death by migration* is essentially a quantitative study of the "relocation costs" paid by European troops; that is, the excess mortality in the tropics compared with that in Europe. The quantitative data are summarized in a formidable array of 31 tables, 10 figures, and 5 maps scattered through the text, plus another 52 tables located in an appendix. Curtin is able to compare the mortality experience of troops at home and in the tropics in what is a natural experimental situation, with those at home constituting the control group. He finds that although this was the century of the "mortality revolution" in Europe, when death rates of the general population fell substantially, the mortality of overseas troops declined even more than that of troops in Europe. However, this study not only reveals some of the human costs of nineteenth-century empire, it also adds something to our understanding of the causes of the mortality revolution itself, and in particular questions the significance of nutrition, a causal factor ranked very high by the initiator of the contemporary debate, Thomas McKeown.

The book is divided into two parts. The first covers the decades of the 1860s when medical practice still reflected a mainly pre-industrial order, and the second relates to the period from the 1870s when, with the emergence of microbiology, medicine began to become a scientific, laboratory-based enterprise. Each part has an introductory chapter which discusses disease patterns and mortality change. Chapters 2 and 5 look at European thought about tropical medicine, the first at mid century when knowledge was still empirical, and the second late in the century when bacteriology was turning the discipline upside down. Chapters 3 and 6 examine the applications of knowledge in each era. There is a very brief concluding chapter.

Curtin draws attention to the striking differences in disease patterns early in his period. In Britain, lung diseases were the great killers, whereas in the West Indies it was fevers, and in Madras, bowel infections. He claims much for the role of military doctors in reducing significantly the death rates in the middle years of the century: for example, in Madras, mortality from malaria fell 60 per cent between the 1840s and the 1860s, and the regular use of quinine must have contributed a good deal to the decline in fever mortality. He very briefly mentions the role of new enlistment legislation of the late 1840s in reducing the average age of soldiers and so cutting down the number of older troops, who were known to contribute

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