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[Review of the book *Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700-1850: A Regional Perspective*]

Abstract
[Excerpt] The last decade has seen an upsurge in research by social historians on the English poor laws, largely in the form of local studies. These have greatly increased our knowledge of the demographic makeup of the "pauper host," the generosity of relief benefits, and the ways in which paupers combined poor relief with other forms of income assistance in order to subsist. In this book, Steven King uses "poor law and other documentation" for 60 English communities to extend our understanding of the role played by poor relief from 1700 to 1850. He argues that during this period there was not in fact one national system of poor relief, but two macro-regional patterns: a relatively generous and benevolent system in the south and east, and a stinting and harsh one in the north and west.

Keywords
economic history, Great Britain, English Poor Laws, income, assistance

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Comments
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Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective. By Steven King. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000. Pp. x, 294. $74.95, cloth; $29.95, paper.

The last decade has seen an upsurge in research by social historians on the English poor laws, largely in the form of local studies. These have greatly increased our knowledge of the demographic makeup of the "pauper host," the generosity of relief benefits, and the ways in which paupers combined poor relief with other forms of income assistance in order to subsist. In this book, Steven King uses "poor law and other documentation" for 60 English communities to extend our understanding of the role played by poor relief from 1700 to 1850. He argues that during this period there was not in fact one national system of poor relief, but two macro-regional patterns: a relatively generous and benevolent system in the south and east, and a stinting and harsh one in the north and west.

The first three chapters of the book contain background material. The argument is introduced in chapter 1. Chapter 2 examines the legal framework of the poor law. King stresses that most parliamentary acts dealing with poor relief were not compulsory, and that custom, local needs, the size of the tax base, and politics all influenced how communities administered the poor law. The historiographical debate on the poor laws is discussed in chapter 3.

In chapters 4 and 5 King attempts to measure the extent of poverty. He argues that the available poor-law statistics underestimate the poverty problem, because many poor people did not apply for relief, and because local relief expenditures were constrained by the supply of tax revenue and by communities' willingness to pay. He offers alternative measures of poverty—such as exemption from local taxes, rate arrears, and low rental payments—for four communities (two in the northwest, one in the east midlands, and one in the south). These suggest that in the 1820s over two-thirds of the population was poor, and that poverty "widely defined" was as severe in the north and west as it was in the south and

east. However, King admits in a footnote that "these communities are not representative of either of the regions" (p. 137). Moreover, the number of poor people falls sharply if exclusion from taxes is not included as an indicator of poverty—and he offers no convincing evidence that those exempted from taxes were in fact living in poverty.

In chapters 6 and 7, King estimates numbers on relief, and average benefit levels, for communities in the south and east and in the north and west from 1700 to 1820. He concludes that, on average, southern and eastern parishes relieved a larger share of their populations and paid more generous benefits than did communities in the north and west. Indeed, the poor law in the north and west was a harsh institution, "something less than a welfare safety net" (p. 215). These regional differences were evident in the early eighteenth century, and, he argues in chapter 8, they persisted even after the adoption of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834.

King suggests in the concluding chapter (chapter 9) that the two macro-regions can be divided up into eight subregions with "distinct" welfare policies. These subregions correspond to broad socioeconomic divisions. The two regions with the largest numbers on relief and the most generous benefits were the south and southeast, rural regions dominated by arable agriculture. On the other hand, the poor law was less generous in rural areas dominated by pastoral agriculture, and in urban and industrial areas. This suggests that socioeconomic differences between subregions were a major determinant of differences in their relief policies, such that "it might be possible to write a more sophisticated sub-regional history of the poor law and welfare based upon socioeconomic community typologies" (p. 265). King concludes, however, that the differences in relief administration *between macro-regions* were not determined by economic structure but rather "reflect very different welfare cultures on the part of both the poor and the poor law administrators" (pp. 267–78). He offers little explanation of how and why these cultural differences developed.

The book sorely needs an appendix providing more detailed information on the community-level data used in the analysis, to supplement the macro-regional averages deployed in the text, and to allow readers to reach their own conclusions about the regional nature of poor relief. Many of King's conclusions are based on data for a handful of communities, which he admits are not necessarily representative of parishes in either macro-region. In sum, despite the large amount of research that clearly went into this study, the book is frustrating, because King insists on viewing the data in terms of macro-regions, and because he too readily dismisses the importance of communities' economic structures in determining their relief policies. Still, he asks the right questions, and the community-level studies that he and other social historians have undertaken in recent years have significantly increased our understanding of the poor law. We need many more local studies, however, before we can safely generalize about the regional nature of the poor law.

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