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[Review of the book *The Scottish Poor Law, 1745-1845*]

Abstract
[Excerpt] While much has been written in the past 20 years concerning the Old Poor Law in England, very little attention has been given to the development of the Scottish Poor Law. This is surprising, given that the Scottish Poor Law differed radically from its English counterpart in its response to the increasing poverty of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. R. A. Cage's descriptive account of the administration of the Poor Law in Scotland from 1745 to 1845 is therefore a welcome addition to the existing literature on the early development of the British social welfare system.

Keywords
Scotland, poverty, Scottish Poor Law, relief, social welfare, public policy

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The Scottish Poor Law, 1745-1845. By R. A. Cage. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1981. Pp. v, 180. $20.00.

While much has been written in the past 20 years concerning the Old Poor Law in England, very little attention has been given to the development of the Scottish Poor Law. This is surprising, given that the Scottish Poor Law differed radically from its English counterpart in its response to the increasing poverty of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. R. A. Cage's descriptive account of the administration of the Poor Law in Scotland from 1745 to 1845 is therefore a welcome addition to the existing literature on the early development of the British social welfare system.

Cage's major contribution is his description of the administration of poor relief in rural and urban parishes. His findings will be of special interest to students of the English Poor Law. The major source of poor relief funds in both rural and urban parishes was voluntary contributions, either in the form of church door collections or donations to charities. Most parishes appear to have avoided the use of legal assessments (the major source of funds in English parishes) whenever possible. Assessments "were viewed as an evil, which were to be used only as a last resort" (p. 27). Over time all urban parishes were forced to adopt legal assessments because church door collections failed to increase as rapidly as urban population. Still, the development of urban charities enabled the rate of assessment to be kept very low even during periods of high unemployment.

This brings us to another of Cage's important findings. Local Poor Law officials throughout Scotland refused to grant relief to unemployed able-bodied laborers. Periods of large-scale unemployment, especially in urban areas, saw the establishment of independent committees "to raise funds by voluntary subscriptions and distribute them to the unemployed" (p. 73). For example, the Edinburgh Committee for Relief of Labouring Classes raised £7,188 during the three-month period ending March 17, 1817, which was used to relieve 1,798 persons.

Cage's second important contribution is his discussion of the early nineteenth-century Scottish Poor Law debate. Unlike the concurrent English debate, the Scottish Poor Law debate was generated by forces intent on ameliorating the condition of Scottish paupers. Long-standing public discontent with the system of relief turned into a major attack on the Poor Law in 1840 when Dr. W. P. Alison published a series of pamphlets supporting the granting of relief to the unemployed, an increase in the generosity of relief payments, and the adoption of a general uniform assessment. The Church joined in the demand for

a reformed Poor Law after the Disruption of 1843 significantly reduced church door collections, making it impossible for the traditional source of funds to meet the needs of the poor. The result of the demand for reform was the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1845, which encouraged the adoption of legal assessments, established a national Board of Supervision, and ordered parishes to supply paupers with necessary medical relief.

Cage's book is a good introduction to the administration of the Scottish Poor Law. As such it is an important contribution to the literature. Unfortunately Cage does not follow up his factual account with an analysis of causal factors. He spends very little time examining why the Poor Law was administered as it was, dependent on voluntary church contributions for its funds and granting relief only to non-able-bodied paupers. A reader familiar with the English Poor Law wonders repeatedly why the Scottish system of poor relief differed so significantly from the English system. Cage provides few clues. The book's major deficiency is the lack of analysis concerning the refusal of Scottish parishes to relieve able-bodied laborers. Cage assumes that the self-interest of relief administrators, in both rural and urban areas, led them to minimize expenditures on the poor. He ignores the fact that the persons who administered relief were often also the largest employers of labor in the parish, and that therefore they had an interest in using the Poor Law as a system of unemployment insurance. The fact that they did not relieve unemployed laborers suggests either that Scotland was plagued by surplus labor (and hence employers did not find it necessary to hoard labor) or that nonemployers of labor contributed large sums of money to the private charities that relieved the unemployed, making charities the cheapest method available to employers for retaining temporarily unneeded laborers. Cage, however, does not discuss the state of the labor market in Scotland, nor does he give any information concerning the donors to charities set up to relieve the unemployed. He simply argues that "administrators failed to make the crucial link between destitution and unemployment" (p. ii). This is hard to believe. Despite some analytic shortcomings, however, the book is a pioneering effort. The study of the Poor Law needs further studies like it.

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