
The twilight of human life remained for a long time the least understood stage in the life cycle and a relatively late comer to what is by now a vast historical literature on family and household in the past. Recent years have witnessed the appearance of several studies and collective volumes that focus on old age, and *The decline of life: old age in eighteenth-century England* is a major study that contributes substantially to this emerging literature. Written in the best tradition of the ‘Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society’ series, it is based firmly on a quantitative analysis of household listings and other records of selected parishes in the south and the north (especially in Essex, Dorset and West Yorkshire), to which much else has been added from prescriptive literature and personal documents such as diaries, autobiographies and letters.

The result is an illuminating and at times gripping account that challenges simplistic stereotypes and corrects and refines various hypotheses and arguments as well as filling large gaps in our understanding of old age in the past. Ottaway’s study proceeds through an examination of several themes, the first and perhaps most surprising of which revolves around the independent living of the elderly. Contrary to some older as well as more recent accounts, the elderly expected to maintain themselves on their own longer than has hitherto been presumed. There was a deeply entrenched preference for independent living based on work as well as the support of spouses (including, for women, husbands’ provisions in wills), with the majority of people over age 60 heading households, married to household heads or living alone. A sharp decline in independent living can only be observed from age 75. A second and complementing part of the argument is that, the
importance of independence notwithstanding, from the beginning to the end of the eighteenth century family and community played an enormous role in the lives of the elderly, especially where their responsibility and ability failed. Weaving her argument through current debates on the precise balance between different support systems, Ottaway demonstrates that support occurred first and foremost within the nuclear family, between parents and their offspring, taking the form of emotional and material assistance as well as co-residence. Further assistance flowed from other networks – grandchildren and more distant kin, as well as friendly societies and a host of charities. In all these, Ottaway finds little evidence of change across time, but immensely significant variations along lines of class and gender. While for aged males among the elite and the middling sorts this support system, based on savings during life and family networks in old age, created ‘a veritable golden age’ for the aged poor and the economically vulnerable portions of the population, the idea that people could be self-supporting in their later years was ‘a fiction’. These people were also least likely to rely on their kin, who were themselves burdened and constrained in their ability to offer help. Friendly societies, which grew markedly over the course of the eighteenth century, had no impact on the lives of the aged among the lower sections of society and paupers.

It is here that public relief based on the compulsory rates came to play such a crucial role, and the examination of parochial relief forms the final part of the book. Ottaway demonstrates that despite some regional difference between the north and the south – due especially to economic factors and divergent social practices, the former was both less generous as well as more flexible – overall there was considerable consistency and many similarities that highlight two features of public relief for the elderly, namely, the dependability of the elderly and the regularity of relief. By 1760, between a fifth and up to a third of those over 60 became dependent on the parish for relief that provided for most or all of their needs. These features, which, as some historians have also pointed out, contrasted favorably with Continental schemes of relief and underline the degree to which eighteenth-century English society ‘placed a high priority on maintaining its indigent elderly’. Yet public relief was also the one area most subject to change, and over the course the century it disadvantaged those poorer people who from the outset were most likely to be dependent on it. As the scope of relief grew, under the economic pressures of the late eighteenth century, the quality of relief declined both in terms of the real value of relief and in terms of an increasing use of the workhouse instead of outdoor relief, which deprived the elderly of the relative freedoms preserved earlier in private homes or almshouses. The argument here stresses the importance of the Old Poor Law system, but at the same time cautions against viewing it as a ‘welfare state in miniature’. In the long term, the vulnerabilities of public relief, which became ever more apparent by the late eighteenth century, set the stage for subsequent developments that witnessed a fundamental shift in perceptions and in the practice of the provision of pensions and welfare for the elderly.

Ottaway’s book thus provides an insight not only into old age but also into a range of issues regarding informal versus formal forms of support more generally.
and into the mixed economy of caring that characterized much of the era from the late sixteenth century onwards. It shows the strengths and desirability but also the vulnerability and limitations of both voluntary giving and the public relief system, in a period when, following more than a century from the enactment of the Poor Laws, it reached a peak. The book tells us a great deal about welfare and survival strategies of the poor, and also about familial reciprocities and affections, social obligations and habits of mind, as well as the tensions, apprehensions and generational dysfunctions that were built into structures of social relations in the English past. Some aspects of old age could still be pursued (almshouses, which continued to proliferate in scattered places across the country, are relatively neglected here), but overall little is left uncovered. Attentive to nuance and rich with detail that does not lose sight of a broad argument, Ottaway's book is indispensable reading for all those interested in the history of welfare, old age and a host of related issues regarding personal interactions and the cultural habits of the past.

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The archive of the Verney family has stimulated some remarkable research monographs. Miriam Slater (for example in Family life in the seventeenth century: the Verneys of Claydon House (1984)) and, especially, Susan Whyman (in Sociability and power in late Stuart England: the cultural world of the Verneys 1660–1720 (1999)) have shown what rich opportunities for social analysis of the seventeenth-century family it offers, and John Broad followed his doctoral research on the estates with several important articles on local economy and society. Now Broad has integrated and expanded his studies into a coherent and thoroughly convincing monograph using the archive as its foundation, but building a superstructure that is a comprehensive examination of the three Claydon villages in Buckinghamshire. The narrative thread that links together his sophisticated analysis of land and community is the long process by which the Verney family came to dominate the villages, transforming first Middle Claydon, then Steeple Claydon and, in lesser degree, East Claydon into estate communities. Middle Claydon was enclosed during the seventeenth century, and thereafter was effectively controlled by the family, whose early methods of management can be traced in the wonderfully comprehensive correspondence between Sir Ralph Verney and his stewards. The other villages were not absorbed so fully until the late eighteenth century when the family recovered from a period of serious indebtedness and was able to revive its earlier policies. About a third of the volume
is devoted to the history of the family: its pattern of marriages, contacts with London and increasingly extravagant ambitions for the house it had inherited. This is all of interest, though the earlier parts of the story are already quite well known from Slater and Whyman. The distinctive elements here are the choices of leasing policy and estate management, especially the evidence that in each generation the heir was trained to have a ‘hands on’ responsibility for the properties. The nature of the archive that was formed from this focused policy commits the author to a more ‘top-down’ approach than he would have desired in an ideal world. However, the transformation of the villages and their ordinary inhabitants emerge as a central interest of the text.

The Verneys feature as unsentimental landlords: Sir Ralph’s obsession with restoring the family fortunes after the civil war débâcle and the businesslike attitude of his immediate successors admitted little paternalism in tenurial relations. The most that can be said about their post-civil-war enclosures is that they managed to avoid overt conflict with the tenants. Broad cites in full a long ‘confessional’ letter that Sir Ralph wrote late in life. This acknowledged a certain harshness, but insisted upon the virtues of the market in fixing rent levels, and that he had reserved his generosity for deserving tenants who had failed through no fault of their own. Later generations of the family ensured that the Poor Law was enforced and that extreme misery was relieved, but there was always a readiness to exploit economic opportunities and to rid the estates of the unproductive. Firm management did not, however, equate to drastic innovation. Broad shows that the Verneys continued to favour peasant farming on essentially traditional lines, only moving cautiously towards larger farming units when the opportunity to do so arose. The combination encouraged efficiency and produced reasonably profitable pastoral farming.

_Transforming English rural society_ is a significant contribution to the debates about landownership and society in early modern England. It is a model monograph in the depth of its research. It also does more than most rural studies, on the one hand subjecting the Verney archive to rigorous economic analysis and on the other humanizing the story of agrarian change with evidence of the views of the family who impelled it and its servants.

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David R. Green and Alastair Owens, _Family welfare: gender, property and inheritance since the seventeenth century_. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004.) Pages xii + 306. £42.99.

This set of essays originated with presentations to various sessions of the European Social Science History Conference, meeting in Amsterdam in 2000. The conference is held biennially and, like its American-based counterpart, the Social Science History Association (which meets annually), is an ideal forum in which to
encourage speakers from different countries, even different continents, to examine particular issues in social, economic and legal history from a variety of perspectives. The problem that these conference sessions encounter is that, as much of the research has been completed in advance of the selection of the theme of the session, the research has to be adapted to fit a new objective, with the result that a number of the papers can be, as political spin-doctors would put it, seriously ‘off-message’.

Such strengths and weaknesses are evident in the present volume. The time span is impressive, from the seventeenth century through to the twentieth. So is the range of countries featured, with two papers apiece on France, Germany and Sweden and single studies on Bohemia, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the USA. The one major omission is that there is no chapter devoted to the United Kingdom, but even this omission usefully corrects those other studies which claim to provide a European perspective yet allocate a third or half of their contents to the UK. Moreover the United Kingdom (or at least England) does feature in the present volume, in the introduction by the joint editors and as a point of comparison in some of the other chapters (as indeed does Germany), notably in those on Sweden by Ann Ighe and Kirsti Niskanen. All this strengthens the comparative perspective provided on the major theme these essays are intended to address: the role of affluent and moderately affluent families as welfare organizations, particularly in supporting those of their members who were not destined to inherit the principal property (if there was one) or those such as the widows and dependants of office-holders, whose standard of living could collapse with the death of the head of the household.

Such an approach, as the editors argue, is a useful corrective to most research on welfare in the past, which has focused on the situation of the poor and on support by the state, churches or private charity (although for an exception, not listed in the bibliography, see Elles Bulder, The social economics of old age: strategies to maintain income in later life in the Netherlands, 1880–1940, Rotterdam: Tinbergen Institute, 1993). The problem with the present volume is that the various contributors are unable to offer much detail on how much welfare support was provided to minor heirs or non-heirs, whether in relation to the value of parental property, the resources allocated to the principal heir (when there was one) or the extent of support that might be available from other sources such as the state, the local community, employers or landlords. Gérard Béaur, for instance, shows how land sales in France were used to equalize shares of parental property but provides no detail on the status and wealth of the various heirs. Similarly, Sandro Guzzi-Heeb stresses the importance of distinguishing the support received from kin against that received from neighbours and other members of the Swiss community but is unable to offer much evidence (p. 110 and note 29), while Hermann Zeithofer admits that it is difficult to determine whether siblings in Southern Bohemia were adequately compensated for foregoing their share of the inheritance (p. 78).

Moreover, the evidence on family welfare that the various authors do provide actually suggests that support emanating from the family was not particularly
generous. Rose Duroux, for example, argues that migrants from the Auvergne probably accumulated less wealth in Spain than their share of the inheritance and less than that awarded to the heir (p. 60). Hermann Zeithofer notes that retired parents in Southern Bohemia are listed on the registers of the poor in the late eighteenth century (p. 96). The emphasis in many of the other chapters (including those covering later time periods) is on how measures which, taken at face value, appear to protect the interests of disadvantaged or dependent members of families were either thwarted by more powerful members of these families or in fact were even designed to benefit others. Such is the argument in studies of the role of guardianship in Germany and Sweden (by Robert Beachy and Ann Ighe respectively), life insurance schemes for German widows (Eve Rosenhaft) and the share of martial property awarded to divorced women in inter-war Sweden (Kirsti Niskanen). Ann McCants, in examining the protection offered to orphans in Amsterdam, remarks that many gifts from parents to children had not yet been made when the parent died (p. 157).

The two editors have clearly worked hard on these essays. They read well even though English would not be the first language of many of the authors. Just occasionally a phrase has escaped editors and copyeditors – such as ‘for the 114 who remained unmarried out of the total of 234 single individuals who remained single’ (p. 55) – and there is clearly some problem with Table 11:3, where a sub-total exceeds the totals reported in Table 11:2 (p. 251). But these are minor blemishes. Nor do I think it is critical that the essays constitute more a set of disparate articles exploring property relations within the context of marriage and the family than a cohesive body of evidence focused on the editors’ agenda of the family as a welfare institution.

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