

# Guilty of Being Poor

*By Neil Davie*

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**In *La Prison des Pauvres*, Jacques Carré considers the history of poverty and poor relief in England between the 17th and early 20th centuries, focusing in particular on the complex evolution of the workhouse system. Often dreaded by paupers for its harsh discipline, it dominated English responses to poverty for several centuries, and was not abolished until after World War Two.**

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*Reviewed : Jacques Carré, *La prison des pauvres : l'expérience des workhouses en Angleterre*, Paris : Vendémiaire, 2016.*

As early as 1601, England and Wales possessed a national legislative and judicial framework regulating the provision of assistance for the country's Poor. Though repeatedly amended and modified, the Poor Law would survive until the late 1940s. For much of its history, the law provided only general guidelines, leaving individual parishes to make the key decisions concerning the organisation and finance of the help provided on the ground. One arm of that parish assistance, or "relief" as it was known, and one which gained considerably in importance over the centuries, was the workhouse. The long history of that institution, from its origins under Elizabeth I until its disappearance in 1948, is the subject of this book by French historian Jacques Carré, Emeritus Professor of British Studies at Paris-Sorbonne University.

## **The workhouse: continuity and change**

The workhouse is perhaps best known today in its 1830s incarnation, as depicted in the savagely satirical opening chapters of Charles Dickens' novel, *Oliver Twist* (1837-9). It was a time, according to the novelist, when the Poor were faced with "the alternative ... of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it." We shall return to this

period presently, but it is important to note that one of the strengths of *La Prison des Pauvres* is the attention given to the lesser-known antecedents of the Victorian workhouse, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While it is true that out-relief, that is say help provided outside the workhouse, was the dominant form of parish assistance during this period, the first two parts of Jacques Carré's book provide striking evidence for the existence of a range of local initiatives aimed at gathering paupers together under the same roof. The objectives, scale and means of financing of these institutions varied widely, as did the names chosen for them. This was a reflection both of the varying opinions of those involved (parliamentarians, local councillors, justices and philanthropists, among others), as well as the role of local specificities. Carré's analysis, illustrated by a series of case-studies, demonstrates, as might be expected, that certain workhouses of the period were intended above all to punish or segregate paupers (much like the significantly-named "houses of correction" intended for petty criminals). Such thinking was based on a conception of poverty which placed the blame squarely on what one 1618 source called the "thriftless" behaviour of the Poor themselves; branding the group a menace both for public order and public morality. However, this was not the only model available. Some workhouses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries placed the emphasis rather on restoring the pauper to the community by means of productive labour, religious instruction or a combination of the two. Others again catered for those considered – to quote the same 1618 author referred to earlier – "Poor by Impotency and Defect" or "by Casualty". The aged, the sick and disabled, along with orphans and the widowed fell into this category.

While a certain continuity can be observed in the range of opinions expressed on the subject of the causes of poverty and the measures needed to deal with it (the author notes that "the stereotype of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, a regular feature of nineteenth century debates, had in fact been in use for a long period before then..."), it remains the case that the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, often known as the New Poor Law, represented a veritable sea-change in thinking and policy on poor relief in England and Wales. From this point on, the workhouse was intended as the only means by which the Poor could obtain assistance from the parish – at least in theory (a point to which we will return). All parishes not in possession of a workhouse were required to build one forthwith. Smaller parishes were encouraged to band together in "unions" in order to share the construction and running costs of the new institutions. In addition, the Whig government put in place a new centralised bureaucracy in London, the Poor Law Commission, charged with making sure that the law was applied on the ground. Over the next few years the Commission would bombard parishes with an avalanche of directives and rules, intended to regulate every last detail of the new-look workhouses.

As Jacques Carré makes clear in one of the strongest sections of his book, the New Poor Law represented a *punitive* turn in the history of the workhouse. According to the government and its liberal and utilitarian backers, in order to succeed in its primary deterrent purpose, the workhouse needed to encourage the able-bodied poor (aka "the idle poor") to pull themselves up by their boot-straps and begin searching for work. For this to succeed, it was considered vital that the workhouse regime be made as severe and harsh as possible. The regime chosen

was in fact modelled on that of the prisons. Only the threat of such an unpleasant and uncomfortable institution, it was reasoned, would galvanise the Poor into taking responsibility for their own lives and shake off the bonds of dependency.

## An ambiguous and controversial reform

For those unwilling to seize this opportunity, despite the less than appealing nature of the alternative, there were seemingly few grounds for hope. In this respect, notes the author, there was a fundamental shift in the function of the nineteenth-century workhouse, compared with earlier experiments:

After having previously functioned as a school for work, the workhouse now became explicitly linked to marginal status. From now on, the work imposed on inmates within its walls amounted merely to a form of punishment, for it offered no prospect of either immediate or future gain. ... By accepting to withdraw from conventional market relationships, the able-bodied poor were forced to perform unskilled manual labour, which in no way prepared them for a return to the community...

This conception of the Poor as a group of incorrigible outcasts, perennially idle and hermetic to any civilising influences (a conception which had much in common with that of the “criminal classes”, blamed for the sharply rising crime rates of the period) did not convince everyone, even within those liberal and evangelical circles otherwise well-disposed towards the reform. One common objection was the way in which the new-look workhouse regime appeared to abandon any idea of productive work; thereby, arguably, reinforcing rather than correcting the rejection of “honest labour” by the able-bodied poor. There was also criticism of the new law from radicals and working class groups, as well as from a large number of more traditional Conservatives, alarmed at what looked to them like an attack on the political and fiscal autonomy of local elites from an overweening state bureaucracy. The result was widespread protest against the New Poor Law at all levels of society. Opposition was particularly intense, and occasionally violent, in the industrial North of the country. The virulence of that criticism, coupled with the lack of any effective machinery in the act to ensure compliance, meant that it was some time (several decades in some cases) before the new-look workhouses became the dominant form of parish relief in England and Wales.

Jacques Carré stresses that there was ambiguity, even contradiction, at the heart of government policy towards the Poor in this period. We have seen that the Poor Law Amendment Act was directed above all at tackling the problems linked to the *able-bodied* poor; with the new-look workhouses intended in the first place to deter them from seeking assistance, and if that did not work, to punish and/or reform them thanks to a regime based on back-breaking, monotonous manual labour. For men, work such as stone-breaking, bone-grinding and oakum-picking was recommended; for women the emphasis was placed on domestic tasks such as washing and ironing clothes, cooking, sewing, etc. (which had the added advantage of

cutting down on running costs for these establishments). This was precisely the kind of work demanded of prisoners in this period; a fact not lost on workhouse inmates. It is understandable, in these circumstances, that among the working-class communities whose members were most at risk of entering the workhouse, nicknames inspired by the prison – like the “bastille” – were commonplace.

To return to the question of ambiguity and contradiction, for all the tendency in government and parliamentary circles and among contemporary commentators to focus largely on “the problem of the able-bodied poor” (and in particular on that of the *male* able-bodied poor), in reality this group represented only a small minority of those actually residing in the workhouse. In 1860, for example, it has been calculated that just 5 per cent of inmates came from this category. In other words, a regime conceived above all for the “idle” poor ended up being directed largely at those drawn from the “deserving” poor; a group for whom, logically, neither punishment nor reform were called for. Thus, as the author notes, “[t]he tragedy of the workhouse of these years resides in the contradiction between its theoretical logic and the reality of the needs on the ground.” Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a realisation of this contradiction began to influence official thinking on the workhouse, with the result that more attention was given to the provision of education and healthcare to its inmates. That being said, conditions improved only slowly and unevenly. As for the feelings of fear and humiliation which the workhouse inspired in those most likely to find themselves behind its walls, they changed even more slowly; casting a shadow over popular culture well into the twentieth century.

## Conclusion

Tracing the complex history of the English workhouse over more than three centuries, whether in theory or in practice, is an ambitious task for any book, even one like this of more than 500 pages. *La Prison des Pauvres* succeeds very well in guiding us through this complex history, providing a clear and erudite discussion of the shifting legislation and the debates on the subject, while at the same time introducing us to the heterogeneous group of actors involved at all levels of the system. Few authors have approached the subject from this perspective. Inevitably, this choice means sacrificing detail on certain points. Thus, readers seeking a detailed understanding of daily life in the workhouse – the rhythms of the inmate’s day and the role played by work, religion and (occasional) leisure; the recruitment and behaviour of workhouse personnel; workhouse architecture and spatial organisation; the extent and nature of punishment of inmates, etc. – will need to look to other sources, particularly those based on research in the very rich holdings of Britain’s local archives. The same is true for those interested in the history of out-relief, a key part of poor relief before the passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, and to a certain extent after that date too. The book’s bibliography provides some useful guidance on these points. To conclude, *La Prison des Pauvres* offers a valuable introduction to the history of poverty and poor relief in England between the

seventeenth and early twentieth centuries, and will be interest to both students of British history and the general reader.

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