

## A New History from Below

Thomas Sokoll, ed., Essex Pauper Letters 1731-1837. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2001. ISBN 0-19-72642-2. Pp. xli + 727. £50.

On Friday 1 June 1825 Ann Herbert sat down to write to the overseer of the poor of her home parish, Chelmsford in Essex. She wrote:

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I recived your letter and I am still Living and I am now entered in my 6.3 year I git my Livelehood by plain Knedle work and on a Fair Calculation I Can say truly it will not a mount to more than 3 Shillings p<sup>r</sup> Week - as my Helth is in a very precerous State - and I am very unwell at the present But having my Daughter with me tho she has a very Bad state of Helth that renders her - Incapable of servitude to Gether by industry and What you are Kindly allowing wee G[ett] Due - this is a Just and true Statement - you may Depend on - I am Sur - With great respect

Yours ann Hurbert [Sokoll,

p.213]

Ann was one of the tens of thousands of paupers forced to put her situation down on paper, and to negotiate with her fellow parishioners in order to make her own particular 'economy of makeshift' work. 758 of these letters, found in the Essex archives, form the basis for Thomas Sokoll's path

breaking volume, in which the lives, the suffering, the authority and the emotions of some of Britain's poorest inhabitants are fully chronicled.

The county archives of England and Wales are stuffed to overflowing with records of the Old Poor Law. They, in combination with the records of crime and the criminal justice system, form the vast bulk of Britain's massive store of historical artefact. And yet at first sight these records seem particularly discouraging. Six pence for a bit of medicine, a shilling for a pair of shoes, page after page of rate collection material, seem to always keep the historian at arms length. Pauper letters are only a small fragment of this vast archive and yet, more than any other source, they bring in to focus the rest. Written in almost equal numbers by men and women, these letters express the hopes and claims of working people. People far from home, people hoping to find work. People who, when that search proved fruitless, or when illness struck them down, appealed to the 'mini welfare state' of their home parish. Some laid out their circumstances in semi-literate scrawls, pleading for help and peppering their prose with marks of respect; while others used more direct language, threatening to come home, forcing the parish to pick up the tab. Each letter punctuates the smallest phrase in the ongoing negotiation between the least regarded of English men and women, and the smallest fragment of the British state. Collectively, they form the very stuff of historical change.

Thomas Sokoll's volume of Essex pauper letters is the first of its kind, the first attempt to make available to a wider audience these 'pauper scripts' in their original form. In the process Sokoll has both helped make possible and reflects a subtle revolution in social history. His volume adds a further stone to the foundation work for a *new* history from below. The publication of these letters comes just as other historians are reading court records with

a newly keen ear for real speech and subtle meaning. Just as the internet is giving us new forms of access to huge bodies of otherwise intractable text; and just as the tools of literary analysis, developed in response to the linguistic turn, give us a new confidence in the meaning of words. It comes also, at a moment when the overweening interest in the middling sort and elite, an interest which dominated the social history of the 1980s and 90s, comes to seem increasingly reactionary.

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In the 1980s the social history of the poor, and of the political struggles of the working class gradually evolved from what had been perhaps the most humane and internationally important facet of British history in to an increasingly disregarded fragment of historical studies. In a perhaps vane attempt to provide social scientific proof of contested economic models, and using the tools of early computing, historians of working people began to write increasingly unreadable books that challenged the commitment of the most ardent fan of history from below. At the same time, the growing sophistication and technical complexity of literary criticism discouraged many historians from engaging with the emotional content of historical documents. It is a profound irony that the single most inclusive history of England, Tony Wrigley and Richard Schofield's Population History of England 1541-1871: A Reconstruction (1981) is also the most unreadable. And while a few stalwarts continued to produce accessible working class history for a wider audience the academy largely turned its back on the poor in a new found interest in the middling sort.

Inspired by post-modernism, and post-structuralism, by the neo-liberalism of Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas, it came to seem to many that the language of the past was our only legitimate object of study.

And that only the middling sort and then the middle classes could use it effectively. In the process, the poor, the women and men who left few words between leather bindings, lost their appeal.

For the followers of Michel Foucault the individual (of whatever class) almost disappeared. By locating authority in 'discourse', Foucault and his many imitators, allowed historians to ignore the experience of the individual in favour of an analysis of that peculiar miasma of words that fill the archives and libraries of our imagination.

Similarly, in political history, after the false triumphalism of historians such as JCD Clark, the 1980s heard in full voice the siren call of Jürgen Habermas, with his 'authentic public sphere' and coffee house politics. The publication in translation of his neo-liberal Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere provided a powerful justification for an increasing concentration on the writings and thinkings, musings and actions of the middling sort and elite. In the work of John Brewer, Paul Langford, Dror Wahrman and Kathleen Wilson, the significance of what middling sort and rich people did became ever more central to the political history of Britain.

In field after field, this process of refocusing away from the experience of the poor and on to the words of the middling sort can be found. Even in fields like economic history (traditionally so concerned with the behaviour of the 'masses') consumption came to take pride of place - effectively excluding the poor by virtue of their limited ability to buy. In women's history the gentry and the aristocracy, the flashy and the well heeled, took up more and more space, leaving their servants and drudges the smallest of walk-on parts.

In intellectual history, and in its well-funded Siamese twin, medical history, universalising stories of intellectual change, based largely on elite sources, made steady progress. In the work of historians such as Thomas Laqueur, the vision of how the body worked found in Latinate and obscure and expensive medical sources was used to create an immensely powerful story of the evolution of modern sexual and gender divisions, that simply ignored the lived experience of people. The body became a linguistic construct, defined in languages that only the well educated could use. For intellectual historians in the 1980s and 90s, the awkward question of who read what books, and what influence published ideas actually had on the broader population was seldom asked and never answered.

In other words, for much of the last twenty to twenty-five years academic history seems to have abandoned the poor in favour of the glittering lives of the better off. Post-graduate students were directed towards medical casebooks or the archives of gentry women, and social division and class conflict were gradually written out of the script. One excuse for this gradual decline in academic interest in the lives of the poor has been the perennial complaint that the poor are difficult. That while we all had a due sympathy for the benighted and poverty struck, they just did not leave the kinds of joyous scripts that the modern historian, influenced by literature, post-modernism and psychology, needed in order to practise their craft. Tom Sokoll's work demonstrates, if demonstration is really necessary, that there is no lack of sources for the lives of the poor, that their most personal and internal worlds can be recovered. But, more than this, what Thomas Sokoll's volume does in combination with a dozen other works in a similar vein is challenge the meta-narrative that gives unity to most of the intellectual developments touched on above.

The literature of the 1980s and 1990s about early modern and nineteenth-century England and Britain has at its root concerned itself with one over-arching issue and development: the emergence of 'modernity'. This has been a modernity refracted in the psychology of the individual, their sexual, racial and national identities, and in the creation of a new kind of nation state that responded to these newly 'modern' individuals. It has been a modernity found in the bright lights of a new shopping experience, and in the emotional affect felt on reading a good novel. In the process it has been a modernity found primarily between the ears of the middling sort. Thomas Laqueur's most recent volume on the history of masturbation, Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation (2003) perhaps reflects the epitome of this process, with the lonely masturbator, imaginative fiction in one hand and sexual identity in the other, standing in for the modern 'self'.

The only problem with this story is that the poor do not fit. If modernity, if our sense of self, is created in novels and in coffee houses, there ceases to be any substantive role for working people. Some of the poor may well have read novels, and some may have argued politics over a pint, but it is clear that in many historians' mind's eye this only occurred as a result of an emotional trickle-down economy of affect from the rich to the poor. What Thomas Sokoll's volume does, in combination with the work of historians such as Peter King, Anna Davin, James Stephen Taylor, Laura Gowing, Keith Wrightson, Steve Hindle, Paul Griffiths, Pamela Sharpe, Robert Shoemaker, Heather Shore, and John Marriott, and on the continent, by Catherina Lis and Hugo Soly, is to provide an alternative. The work of these historians has demonstrated that perhaps our richest archives, the archive of the majority population of Britain, do allow us to write a history

**from** below, that at least hints at a very different 'meta-narrative' to the inherently elitist script described above.

Once researchers started to look, the number of pauper transcripts available grew ever more voluminous, and continue to do so. Pauper letters are just one of a series of sources which most historians have hitherto been too timorous to tackle. Court records, settlement and bastardy examinations, autobiography (of which there are many more and many more very early ones, than were traditionally acknowledged), the petitions that fill the archives of the great charities, and the long and apparently tedious lists created in the administrative revolution of the late eighteenth century, all provide a new scope for analysis. The imaginative use of these materials gives us access to a new level of detail.

Since the mid-1990s, more and more works, based on a careful cross-reading of these sources have emerged, and are beginning to reveal a new story, a new meta-narrative. When Ann Hitchcock wrote to the churchwardens and overseers at Braintree on 22 December 1823 she knew she could make a powerful case. She explained that she was in debt:

...I tell them all that they Must take my goodes For I have no money,  
for I cannot pay no Rent but Gentlemen if I am to Come Home you  
must let me know for I may as Well come as stop hear to be starved  
...But if I come home you will have to buy me Goodes for if I have to  
come home my Creators will tak my goodes and chatels for  
money...[Sokoll, p.101]

The threat of extra expense explicit in Ann's letter forced open the clenched hand of the state. As a result, much or more than any novelist, or merchant,

Ann personally moved resources from the state to the individual. In the work of historians such as Steve Hindle it is becoming increasingly clear that the poor had a strong sense of entitlement and the rich an equally strong sense of obligation. What emerges again and again in these texts is the extent to which the poor knowingly manipulated the system; that the poor recognised and utilised a powerful sense of agency in their dealings with the British state.

In relation to modernity, this has a number of profound implications. First, it suggests that the poor controlled and manipulated one of the most expensive functions of the British state to at least as great a degree as did the middling sort and elite. Poor relief was hugely expensive, and the transformation of the Old Poor Law into the New in 1834 was a response to that expense. At a fundamental level, the creation of the New Poor Law was a result of the success of the poor in manipulating the old one.

The modernity that historians have identified and located in the sixty years between 1780 and 1840 is characterised by attempts to unpick the fabric of social obligation, and to draw a significant line between the poor and the middling sort. In other words, the creation of that system of workhouses and prisons, hospitals and asylums that forms the brick and mortar of Britain's modern and newly carceral state, was a response to the ever more powerful demands of the poor. It is not the middle class revolutionary, novelist or Parliamentarian that created modernity, but the discovery by the poor of how to use and manipulate the language and ties of a traditional society to their own advantage. Thomas Sokoll's Pauper Letters provide the basis for a new understanding of this powerful 'modernity'.