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# Tim Hitchcock and John Black, eds., Chelsea Settlement and Bastardy Examinations, 1733-1766

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Review

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Allen's "Hartleyopathy" is what gives the book both its peculiar structure and its sometimes-impressive insight.

*Boston University*

AARON GARRETT

Tim Hitchcock and John Black, eds. *Chelsea Settlement and Bastardy Examinations, 1733–1766*. London: London Record Society. 1999. Pp. xxii, 177. £20. ISBN 0-90095233-4.

Paul Slack (*Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* [1988]) has argued that economic growth had begun to banish "deep poverty" from England by the end of the seventeenth century, leaving the aged and disabled, along with the unemployed, as fit objects of relief through the Poor Law. But the complex statutes concerning legal "settlement" played a role in directing this assistance, and historians disagree about their significance. Some insist that magistrates used the laws to exclude immigrants who might deplete local resources. Others assert that migration was actually encouraged by the fact that, in principle, all English men and women possessed a settlement in some parish and therefore felt free to take their chances moving. The documents at hand are valuable because they illustrate the efforts of the poor to establish a claim to relief in a rapidly urbanizing parish on the outskirts of Hanoverian London, the scene of tumultuous economic and social change.

The editors provide a useful interpretive introduction. By the mid-eighteenth century, the activities of parish government in relieving poverty amounted to "a welfare state in miniature" (p. xvi). Chelsea apparently was a model of efficiency—even its workhouse children survived longer than average—and its archives are certainly extraordinary in their completeness. The documents reproduced here describe inhabitants thought likely to become a financial charge on the parish, either by having a bastard child or by falling into need. The examinations conducted by local justices were designed to elicit the information necessary to determine paternity or a settlement—the circumstances of birth, marriage, apprenticeship, and residence—and they also gave the examinee an opportunity to fashion a life-story. The editors suggest that the "power relationship" implicit in this interrogation did not leave the poor helpless. "By judicious self-censorship the apparent victim of the process could, within limits, effectively control its result" (p. vii).

The over 400 biographies represented in these examinations yield insights into the nature of migration, work, and sexuality in the period. Immigrants to the capital tended to come not only from nearby rural counties but also from more distant locations, including Ireland and Scotland, where men entered the army only to end their careers years later as "Chelsea pensioners." The parish was undergoing a shift from agricultural to industrial employment; how this affected the poor can be studied through the useful entries for occupations in the index. Women who delivered bastards were mainly young, unmarried, migrant servants, a conclusion broadly confirmed by Nicholas Rogers' work on Westminster ("Carnal Knowledge," *Journal of Social History* [1989]). Those who did marry often took advantage of a cheap ceremony at the Fleet prison, where neither banns nor license were required. All these trends underlined the authorities' fear of "violence and disorder, represented by unwed mothers, abandoned children, and the unemployed" (p. xxi).

Even a cursory survey reveals that the capacity of the poor to influence their fate was indeed "limited." With the completion of the parish workhouse in 1737, many of those needing relief were placed there; a substantial proportion of the rest (judging from the index) were "passed" to another parish. But local officials could not escape the requirement to assist

qualified paupers. By 1749, a footnote informs us, the parish increased “outdoor relief” to cope with the overwhelming demand. Moreover, the examination was not just a means of restricting relief, but also a court of appeal for those who had pawned everything, like the mother who was still unable to pay burial expenses for her child, “which obliges her to apply to the parish officers for relief” (p. 57), or for concerned relatives, like the man appearing on behalf of his brother, who had “gone to sea and left his child unprovided for” (p. 26). The editors of this volume wish to underline the suggestion, based on recent research in different sources, that the poor increasingly came to believe that access to parish relief was their “right” (p. viii). Whether the Londoners whose lives are recounted here emerge primarily as “victims” or as “agents” will depend upon the perspective of the reader. In either case, the Poor Law gave them somewhere to turn.

Truman State University

JOHN D. RAMSBOTTOM

Kirstin Olsen. *Daily Life in Eighteenth-Century England*. (Daily Life through History.) Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press. 1999. Pp. xiv, 395. \$45.00 ISBN 0-313-29933-1.

Compendia of information on everyday English life in past time, often written by nonacademics, are currently a modestly thriving genre, as witness the success of Liza Picard on *Restoration London* or Daniel Pool on *What Jane Austen Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*. Now Kirstin Olsen has added to their number, rather nicely filling the chronological gap with *Daily Life in Eighteenth-Century England*, part of a series from Greenwood Press on everyday life in different historical eras.

Olsen’s introduction begins with a series of parallels between eighteenth-century England and modern America both countries are dynamically capitalist, see challenges to traditional values, are technologically innovative, and so on. Although she does not exaggerate the class mobility of the period, Olsen’s is a modern, dynamic, bustling, and secularizing eighteenth century, not a J. C. D. Clark-style Church and monarchy-dominated old regime. (It is significant in this respect that religion is the subject of the eighteenth chapter, out of a total of nineteen.) Her principal scholarly sources for eighteenth century social history are Paul Langford, Roy Porter, and E. P. Thompson. She avoids both the Scylla of the “Merry Olde England” approach and the Charybdis of an overemphasis on hopeless misery to paint a picture of an England where vast differences in power between classes, genders, and races combined with a fundamental ideological consensus on the virtues of the system.

*Daily Life in Eighteenth-Century England* is more a topically organized reference book than a unified treatment of eighteenth century social history like Porter’s *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*. The pleasantly written chapters cover the basic topics of social history—politics, the family, the economy and so on—as well as classic subjects of everyday life books such as clothing and food. As her title indicates, Olsen’s focus is English rather than British. Her knowledge of the period has some problems—she accepts the old and discredited feminist chestnut about the purported derivation of the term “rule of thumb” from the legal restriction of the size of a stick a man could use to beat his wife.

Information is presented in a variety of ways, including tables, illustrations and a brief timeline of dates relevant to the topic at the conclusion of most of the chapters. The illustrations, mostly from the Print Collection of the Lewis Walpole Library at Yale, are well chosen although the reproductions are not always good and the scale is often too small to make out the detail. Quotations from primary sources are also well chosen, although not