

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Steven King, Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s–1830s (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 2019)

Douglas H.L. Brown

Volume 86, automne 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074497ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2020.0061>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Brown, D. (2020). Compte rendu de [Steven King, Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s–1830s (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 86, 222–224.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2020.0061>

new, nor as the one we should necessarily be focused on, despite its appealing sci-fi qualities. Instead it is just one piece of a puzzle in the class struggle which includes “globalization, off-shoring of production to low-wage countries, and anti-union and neoliberal free-market labor policies.” (121)

All in all, I think this book highlights a number of important fields of study and discussion in world of political economy that cuts across disciplinary boundaries. The one missing element, however, is any substantive discussion of the political corollary of Marxism: socialism and communism. While political economists are not necessarily advocating for either (there are quite a few liberals in our midst), it is a key dimension of the political legacy of Marxism and even left Keynesianism. It’s also a topic that I think it’s safe to say that those interested in political economy will want to discuss. The discussion of cooperatives gets us there in some regards, but I feel like it elides the ghosts of the 20th century’s many experiments in socialist production, for good or ill. It is a big can of worms to open in such a short book, but it is worth serious reflection, especially in light of the ongoing economic crash that the COVID-19 pandemic heralded. Nevertheless, I would easily recommend this book to my friends who are reading *Capital* for the first time as well as veterans of the field who are looking to update their knowledge with references to contemporary research.

DANIEL JAMES JOSEPH

Manchester Metropolitan University

Steven King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s–1830s* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 2019)

IMPOVERISHED PEOPLE in late 18th and early 19th century England and Wales

fought tenaciously for poor relief, exercising their right, as it was commonly understood, to be supported by their parish of settlement in times of need. Evidence of the strategies they employed—claiming, negotiating, demanding, pleading, defending—show us they were not mere grateful recipients but, as has been highlighted in a number of studies over the past twenty-five years or so, had a degree of agency in their dealings with their relieving parishes. Steven King is one of many to have used letters written by paupers to demonstrate how they framed their claims for relief and how they conceived of their relationships with their parish authorities and wider communities. This book takes a significant step forward in developing the field of research.

Pauper letters are all over the archives, distributed across local and county record offices, libraries and collections of private papers. For this reason, much of the work on them until now has consisted of regional or county studies. In the course of the research project which led to *Writing the Lives of the English Poor*, King and his team assembled a corpus of nearly 26,000 letters to and from paupers and parish overseers in all parts of England and Wales. As a result, this original and important book is the product of a more systematic approach, and is on a wider scale, than has been attempted hitherto. This gives it a broader geographic and temporal span than earlier works and enables an empirical approach to the development of an analytical framework. The book’s focus is on England, and work on Wales is due to be published by King’s colleague on the research project Ben Harvey.

The book begins with a focus on the materiality of the letters and on the process of writing, sending and receiving them as much as on their content. King emphasizes the significance of different qualities of paper, of concerns about

postage costs, and of the strategic use of requesting that replies be sent via a third party, a tactic which might increase confidence in a claimant's trustworthiness. Claimants had to strike the most appropriate tone and know when to change it. What, for example, would be more effective given the circumstances: the formality of a letter by post, or the urgency of hand delivery? There are some hints of patterns: requests for very large payments such as rent arrears tended to be shorter and more to the point than those asking for a 'trifle', for example. However, King notes that it is impossible to relate the monetary value of requests to any other feature of the correspondence because of the vagueness of applications – most did not specify an amount – and the fact that they were often distributed across a series of letters.

The discussion of how parish officials received letters from the poor asks the important question, what might success look like for an applicant for relief? Writers might be subject to refusals, delays, or inadequate or irregular allowances. Yet if we see an application as a starting (or continuing) point of a negotiation, perhaps many writers aimed high and expected less. King usefully suggests that instead of thinking in terms of "binary concepts of success and failure" we should adopt "experiential and mutable indicators such as hope and disappointment" (110). Context, therefore, is all, and we should look not simply to absolute sums of money but also to individual and local circumstances to understand how generous or otherwise a payment – or indeed a parish – might be.

One of the book's most useful contributions is a framework for understanding the rhetorical moves employed by writers. King sets out a broad typology of letters: those instigating correspondence, requests to renew relief, requests to change relief type, testamentary

statements of condition, notes of desperation, statements of finality of status such as the prospect of death, and other letters interspersed throughout the course of correspondence. Each of these types of letter contains its own set of common narrative features, some unique altogether to the letter type and others found in more than one but with specific qualities. Notes of desperation, for example, were characterized by containing references to the running out of time and to hopelessness. Appeals to dignity, meanwhile, are found in several types of letter, whether drawing attention to the prospect of shame, or stating that a humiliation has already taken place. Across all types of letters is a backdrop of "struggle, custom, law, right, duty, friendship, and humanitarianism" (197-8), and King sets out examples of paupers strategically deploying each. There was, he finds, an increased use of references to the law over the period, though this is not quantified, and neither are the numbers of letters in each category. There is also, perhaps, room for more detailed geographical comparisons.

The book's final section considers conceptions of identity and interiority among the letter writers. Especially telling are the examples of writers who, having received relief and thereby gained the status of pauper, were keen to undermine the label and its associated stigma. King also finds evidence to support the impression that the concept of selfhood changed somewhat over the course of the late 18th century. He is careful to surround any claims of a new selfhood with caveats regarding the purposes of the correspondence and the ambiguities of the material, but if such evidence is to be found anywhere, it is surely in a corpus of texts with the common theme of the assertion of personal agency.

This book is as much about literacy, rhetoric, technologies of communication, storytelling, negotiation and

autobiographical narrative as it is about poor relief. Quotations from letters start each chapter as well as being used throughout the discussion, thereby focusing attention specifically on the words of the writers. King notably avoids using vocabulary like 'data' which might serve to distance the reader from the distressed and anxious people whom we encounter.

Parish administration forms the setting, but there is little on, for example, the intricacies of settlement law, which is probably a wise choice: readers from a wide range of disciplines beyond the poor law specialism will find it as accessible and engaging as it is detailed and nuanced.

DOUGLAS H.L. BROWN

Kingston University, United Kingdom