

Green, David R. *From Artisans to Paupers: Economic Change and Poverty in London, 1790–1870*. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995. Pp. xvii, 298. Figures, tables, index. US\$76.95

Victor M. Batzel

Volume 25, numéro 1, octobre 1996

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016106ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016106ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Batzel, V. M. (1996). Compte rendu de [Green, David R. *From Artisans to Paupers: Economic Change and Poverty in London, 1790–1870*. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995. Pp. xvii, 298. Figures, tables, index. US\$76.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 25(1), 67–68. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016106ar>

essarily trivial, but would have been more appropriate in niche journals.). These are, first, the proto-biography of the 1790s United Irish exile William Sampson, written by Walter J. Walsh. The life of Sampson is employed as an entry point for a subtle, and nicely revisionist discussion of the place of religion, ethnicity, and Irish-derived political behaviour in the early life of the American republic. Second, John Kuo Wei Tchen presents an unexpected, and highly original, case study of the relations of the Chinese and the Irish populations in certain locales. He introduces the tormented figure of Quimbo Appo, a Chinese criminal-cum-psychotic, as an iconic figure in an essay that highlights how, by the end of the Civil War, the Irish had "become white" and were acting against non-white minorities with a fervour that would have made any Nativist proud. Third, Graham Hodge studies the relationship of the Irish and the African-Americans in New York's third ward during the middle one-third of the nineteenth century. The achievement of this essay is that Hodge is able to free the question of Black-Irish relationships from the heavy shadow of the Draft Riots. And, fourth, Lawrence J. McCaffrey provides a general overview of the Irish in New York at the turn of the nineteenth century. McCaffrey is at home in both the history of Ireland and of Irish-America, and he presents an allusive, masterful essay of the sort G.M. Young did years ago for Victorian England.

Fine as they are, these four essays would not warrant purchase of the book by anyone but an enthusiast for the local history of New York City, or by any library, except a large research facility. However, the thick volume has a secondary characteristic that increases its usefulness. It is itself a fascinating historical document. Collectively the books contributors (not all, but most) indicate a parochialism and an innocence of front-edge scholarship on matters central to the topic. McCaffrey is the only contributor to evidence any significant knowledge of the historiography of Ireland that has been produced in the last three decades. Collectively (again, with rare exception) the authors write as if the history of the Irish in New York began when they got off the boat. Knowledge of the quickly-expanding field of Irish emigration studies is almost totally absent, and, instead, potted histories are employed as background data. The intense parochialism of this volume is indicated by the almost entire absence of any sense of awareness that the Irish diaspora—a worldwide phenomenon—is one of the contexts within which the Irish in New York must be assayed. What has caused this cultural parochialism on the part of the authors is indeterminate, but it is a historical question that in itself is worth investigation.

Most interesting is the unconscious and pervasive sectarianism that runs through this volume (again, with minor and honorable, exceptions). There is a confusion of the statistical fact that most Irish persons in New York City were Catholic with the political-theological position that Irish identity can only be Irish Catholic identity. One encounters a constant binary position of Irish Catholics and Protestant New York. This not only drops from the picture the hundreds of thousands of persons of Irish Protestant

ethnicity who lived in New York City during the years covered by this volume, but implicitly endorses a present-day political viewpoint that every one of the major political parties in the Republic of Ireland has explicitly disowned: that to be Irish one has to be a nationalist and a Catholic. Why the historical study of the Irish in New York City should itself compromise a cultural museum area warrants attention.

Donald Harman Akenson
Department of History
Queen's University

Green, David R. *From Artisans to Paupers: Economic Change and Poverty in London, 1790-1870*. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995. Pp. xvii, 298. Figures, tables, index. US\$76.95

A quarter century ago, Gareth Stedman Jones made reference to outcast London and in a book of that title, examined the growth of poverty and destitution during the latter half of the nineteenth century. He portrayed an urban middle class increasingly fearful of the growing number of casual poor who increasingly threatened their property and their security. The subject has now been revisited by David R. Green who has chosen to view the subject from a somewhat different perspective, focusing upon the relationships which existed between economic change and the growth of poverty rather than upon political or social issues. Not only has the perspective changed but so too has the style. If the argument of the earlier study was, as Stedman Jones himself admitted, clouded by his penchant for drama and metaphor, this cannot be said of Green's study. Indeed, Green seems frequently to forget that there was an intensely human dimension to the transition of London labourers from skilled artisans to poverty-stricken piece-workers. Though *From Artisans to Paupers: Economic Change and Poverty in London, 1790-1870* is an intellectually challenging and stimulating study, it is one which comes perilously close to treating economics as Carlyle's "dismal science".

The metropolitan economy had its own internal dynamic, quite distinct from that of the rest of the country. At the beginning of the century, one in nine inhabitants of England and Wales lived in London; by 1871, the ratio was one in seven. The city lacked cohesion. It was politically fragmented, each parish a local commonwealth of privilege and power. It was socially fragmented; as the middle-class flight to the fringes gained momentum, contact between them and the lower classes diminished. It was economically fragmented; while finance and commerce flourished, and London retained its traditional role as the centre of the nation's political and social life, the manufacturing sector was subjected to enormous pressures which forced employers to find ways to reduce the cost of production.

The manufacturing sector was built less upon large factories (whose growth was hindered by high fuel and land costs) than

upon a growing number of small firms. The figures suggest that nearly three-quarters of London firms employed less than five men. As a consequence, the average master had little room for manoeuvre; economies of scale were not possible. Savings had to be found in lower labour costs, so that the brunt of change was, Green points out, borne by artisans and labourers. The most frequent response to growing competition from the cheaper provinces and from overseas was to simplify work tasks and to hasten the division of labour. The consequences were two-fold: the increased employment of lesser-skilled workers and the introduction of piece rates with the subsequent spread of sweated labour. The scene was set, between 1825 and the 1860s, for the transformation of skilled artisans into poor casual workers in unprecedented numbers. Silk weaving and watchmaking almost disappeared; shoemaking, clothing, and furniture-making all survived only by introducing cheaper methods of production.

Emphasis upon cheaper production invariably hit the eastern end of the city hardest. One cabinet-maker said plaintively: "I don't know that we have any great grievances to complain of except one and that's the East-end." (p. 176) While artisans did have friendly societies and trade unions, these failed, ultimately, to provide adequate protection against the market forces at work in nineteenth century industrial capitalism. Between 1825 and the late 1840's Green detected a significant decline in labour militancy as artisans turned to other means to protect wages in the face of growing economic pressure. Ultimately, labour turned inward, avoided conflict and hoped for the best. The best turned out, for the larger number, to be a significant decline in living standards, unchecked by either private philanthropy or by state-operated poor relief. The system of indoor relief introduced by the poor law of 1834, was augmented by the Poor Removal Act of 1846 which allowed ratepayers in wealthier districts to escape responsibility for maintaining non-resident poor. Consequently, Green found that the incidence of relief increased most dramatically in poorer, largely eastern, districts while it fell substantially in richer districts. "Faced," he notes, "by a rising tide of pauperism, boards of guardians throughout the capital, but especially in eastern districts, turned increasingly towards a stricter policy of indoor rather than outdoor relief." (p. 242)

This is interesting material. Much of it is new; all of it is clearly presented, well-organized and supported by substantial evidence. But, it is also curiously bloodless. When, finally, he does get to the "crisis of pauperism" which he says swept across London in the late 1860s, he notes that the subject belongs to a different period and to a different study. He rests content with his charts, his graphs and his distanced scholarly observations.

Victor M. Batzel
Department of History
University of Winnipeg

Kowalesky, Maryanne. *Local Markets and Medieval Trade in Medieval Exeter.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xvi, 442. Annexes, tables, maps, bibliography, index.

Until recently, models of economic development for medieval towns have presented them as foci of commercial activity derived from the concentrated demand of urban consumers. Since Henri Pirenne, historians using this model have studied the merchants involved in long-distance trade. This is because the sources for large scale trade are accessible, the trade had high status in the eyes of both contemporaries and their historians, and because this commerce emphasized international banking and transportation infrastructures which admirers believe to be hallmarks of sophisticated capitalism. Maryanne Kowalesky's study of later medieval Exeter challenges this model and this approach by focusing upon traders involved in regional and local commerce in South-east England. Following in the stead of recent work, notably that of R.H. Britnell, she shows how this small river port prospered despite a population too small (3,100 people in 1377) to affect demand patterns in a large region. In the trough of the late medieval economic depression, 1350-1450, Exeter channeled into its port the demand of a hinterland whose traditional mix of pastoral and cereal agriculture adapted well to the structural transition of the post-plague economy. Its markets served as a distribution center for an area including most of Devon and parts of eastern Somerset and Dorset. Thriving textile and pastoral activities in the hinterland gave Exeter the highest rate of economic growth of any town in England between 1334 and 1525, propelling it into the first rank of English towns in the late fifteenth century.

The heart of this study lies in a painstaking prosopographical study. Kowalesky reconstructs from some 105,000 references a social structure dominated by a narrow merchant oligarchy of some twenty families. After the Black Death, while politics remained the monopoly of this oligarchy, its efforts to limit retailing to those in the "freedom"—full citizens numbering 34% of householders in 1377—were thwarted. After 1400, artisan apprentices entered the "freedom", enlarging it beyond its merchant base, while in the same period the fines and penalties which had heretofore protected marketing privileges became regulatory rather than prohibitory. The effect was to lower transaction costs for all traders, both within Exeter and without.

This opening up of Exeter markets is reflected in the share of imports controlled by Exeter's elite. Because Kowaleski complements the normal source for English overseas trade—royal customs accounts—with municipal customs accounts which highlight coastal shipping, she will force historians to take a new look at this trade. Using these sources to compare the period 1302-20 with the period 1381-91, the author found that the merchant oligarchy continued to monopolize the most lucrative import trades. But the number of Exeter importers fell by 9% between 1302-20 and 1381-91, while the ranks of outside traders increased dramatically; they owned 60% of the value of imported goods in the later period. This loosening of the market