

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00370-4 - The English Poor
Thomas Mackay
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE LIBRARY COLLECTION

Books of enduring scholarly value

History

The books reissued in this series include accounts of historical events and movements by eye-witnesses and contemporaries, as well as landmark studies that assembled significant source materials or developed new historiographical methods. The series includes work in social, political and military history on a wide range of periods and regions, giving modern scholars ready access to influential publications of the past.

The English Poor

In 1889, British wine merchant Thomas Mackay published *The English Poor*, which espoused the ideas of Darwin and applied them to British social and economic history. An acolyte of social Darwinist Herbert Spencer, Mackay writes that human history has been a struggle between individualism and socialism, and argues that only through individual competition (not state social support) will poverty be eradicated. The opening chapters discuss the human instinct for property accumulation, primitive forms of society, elite control of workers during the plague years, and the growth of the proletariat. Later chapters discuss social legislation, the evolution of England's poor laws, and the Industrial Revolution. Finally, Mackay debates the scholarship of socialist Ernest Belfort Bax, bemoans the misguided ideas of Christian charity, and argues that the lives of 'lower types' of people have been prolonged by the poor laws. This is a fascinating document of late Victorian economic thought.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00370-4 - The English Poor
Thomas Mackay
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press has long been a pioneer in the reissuing of out-of-print titles from its own backlist, producing digital reprints of books that are still sought after by scholars and students but could not be reprinted economically using traditional technology. The Cambridge Library Collection extends this activity to a wider range of books which are still of importance to researchers and professionals, either for the source material they contain, or as landmarks in the history of their academic discipline.

Drawing from the world-renowned collections in the Cambridge University Library, and guided by the advice of experts in each subject area, Cambridge University Press is using state-of-the-art scanning machines in its own Printing House to capture the content of each book selected for inclusion. The files are processed to give a consistently clear, crisp image, and the books finished to the high quality standard for which the Press is recognised around the world. The latest print-on-demand technology ensures that the books will remain available indefinitely, and that orders for single or multiple copies can quickly be supplied.

The Cambridge Library Collection will bring back to life books of enduring scholarly value across a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and in science and technology.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00370-4 - The English Poor
Thomas Mackay
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

The English Poor

THOMAS MACKAY



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00370-4 - The English Poor
Thomas Mackay
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge New York Melbourne Madrid Cape Town Singapore São Paulo Delhi

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108003704

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2009

This edition first published 1889

This digitally printed version 2009

ISBN 978-1-108-00370-4

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00370-4 - The English Poor
Thomas Mackay
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

THE
ENGLISH POOR

THE
ENGLISH POOR

*A SKETCH OF THEIR SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC HISTORY*

BY T. MACKAY

The rich man's wealth is his strong city; the destruction
of the poor is their poverty'—*The Proverbs of Solomon* x. 15

LONDON
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET
1889

All rights reserved

P R E F A C E



THE purpose of this work is to direct attention to the influences which have dominated the history of the poor in this country. It will be found that the view presented differs from the popularly conceived opinion as to the causes which have produced the inequalities of modern life.

Assumptions have been made without sufficient inquiry, yet of such importance that they control with disastrous effect the whole course of modern speculation, and, consequently, of modern practice. It has been assumed that Socialism is something new, and that in the past, human destiny has been entrusted to the care of the individualistic principle. The main object of the present volume is to show that this is the very contrary of the truth. The dominant principle in human affairs has been Socialism. History is the record of the gradual and painful emancipation of the individual from the socialistic tyranny of slavery, feudalism, and centralised authority.

The salient distinction between the Socialist and the Individualist theory of life, as it is understood in these pages, may here be stated. By Individualism is meant the rule of conduct which obliges each individual man to adapt his instincts, habits, and character to his surroundings. These surroundings in civilised and associated life are governed by economic laws, which though not of inflexible rigidity are yet more permanent in their nature than human character. They are indeed the environment in reference to which human character must be formed. The definition assumes that man has inherited a capacity for this course of action, a capacity which can be developed by use and transmitted with ever-growing intensity to successive generations. This to the Individualist is Nature's Covenant of Progress.

By Socialism is meant the instinct which induces men to reject, unconsciously for the most part, Nature's offer of safe conduct, and to submit themselves, in their search for happiness, to the guidance of groups and associations of men. A study of primitive ideas will show that such associations owed their first origin to the desire for giving effect to some universal superstition or wish; that by a natural process of deterioration (for the individualistic instincts of self-preservation and acquisition are ineradicable and in the long run more potent than the combining motive of

PREFACE

vii

association) they soon fall away from their ideal purpose and become mere close corporations working only for the benefit of those who from time to time can control the authority of the State. Such is the origin of all government that is not based on the mere right of conquest. The Socialist points to the chaos and oppression which has arisen in this conflict of opposing principles, and attributes the disorder to 'Individualism run wild.' But in his analysis of cause and effect he forgets mankind's primitive surrender to socialistic control.

These definitions disclose the line of argument which is to be followed. In the introductory chapter, with a view of obtaining a master-key to the situation, appeal is made to the modern doctrine of Evolution. The preference given to an individualistic basis of society is supported by this, the greatest scientific discovery of the century. For, beyond all dispute, in the world of creation it is to individual organisms and not to groups and associations of these that Nature has confided the secret of progress, the power of self-adjustment to environment. The argument goes on to show that property, wealth, or the surplus of maintenance over and above what is necessary for the hand-to-mouth life of a savage, is a main part of the environment of civilisation. To this mankind has to adjust itself.

It becomes, then, a pertinent question to ask—To which of the rival motives of action has man yielded in his dealing with the tenure and distribution of property? An answer is given in the text, and it will appear that in some of the most important crises of the history of property man has surrendered to his socialistic impulses. Notably this has been the case with regard to land, for long the most important item in the country's wealth; indeed, while the laws against usury continued to restrict the larger operations of trade, it would hardly be an exaggeration to call land the sole form of national capital. As far, therefore, as English history is concerned, the feudal tenure of land is described as the most noteworthy instance of socialistic usurpation.

The attempt to establish these propositions will bring the reader to a brief consideration of the Village Community, the Villenage of the feudal manor, and of the somewhat analogous institutions of the town—the Merchant and Craft Gilds of mediæval life. Some description will be given of the struggle of the labourer to free himself from the serfdom which resulted from this dedication of property, his means of progress and survival, to the maintenance of a stereotyped form of Socialism. It will be seen how he emerged from the struggle, with his character warped and with his acquisitive instincts atrophied by disuse; how he was then

PREFACE

ix

delivered, unarmed, so to speak, to the mighty forces of modern Industrialism.

At length the inquiry brings us to the problem of to-day. The difficulty of the situation is enormous, and Society stands halting between two opinions.

The larger proposals of the thorough-going Socialist seem condemned by the experience of the past. His demand is for the endowment of democratic Socialism and the permanent maintenance of a state of society in which all gain their living by labour. To the present governing class, the workmen of England, such an ideal, impracticable though it may be, has its attraction; but in a world of evolution and progress all human ideals are of necessity evanescent. Already there are signs of a writing on the wall. The every-day-increasing substitution of machinery for manual labour, and the straits to which unskilled labour is put to compete with it, might suggest to one who wished to play the prophet, a new ideal.

But it is more difficult to find an answer to those less logical but more plausible advocates who recommend an extension of the duties and responsibilities of the State. With them the matter must be argued out in detail. State socialistic action seems to promise so much. The order to stand aside and let Nature assert herself seems so cynical and cruel. Even if the correctness of the diagnosis

here presented is admitted, it may still be argued that the disease is to be cured by further application of socialistic remedies.

With a view of throwing light on this remaining doubt, it has seemed necessary to make a brief examination of some of the more prominent enterprises of the limited State Socialism under which we live.

Practical politicians may differ as to the temporary necessity of such measures, and no sane man will urge indiscriminate or wholesale changes in existing legislation ; but in the long run it should be borne in mind that every attempt on the part of the State to distribute economical advantages or property by any means other than by the free play of the individual instincts of self-preservation and acquisition, is unsatisfactory and incomplete. It is *unsatisfactory* in that, excuse it as we may, it is essentially an endowment of incompetence. Nature's plan is the endowment of caution, self-control, and capacity ; and if men contract themselves out of this law they will lose in the end more than they gain. It is *incomplete*, for no power of man can provide adequate guarantees of happiness for those who have never learnt in Nature's school the rudimentary arts of competition and self-protection.

Such is the argument of the following pages. Of the facts it is only to be said that no claim of

PREFACE

xi

new discovery is put forward. The main purpose is to supply a true interpretation of facts which are for the most part notorious and beyond dispute.

Those who accept this diagnosis of disease are little tempted to produce a numbered schedule of panaceas, but something is gained if the disease is understood and the errors of past physicians exposed. 'Natura non nisi parendo vincitur.' Nature is the true physician; if we can but return to the guidance of her hand the future is secure.

It only remains for the author to avow his obligation to the teaching of Mr. Herbert Spencer.

As a rule, where such corroboration appears necessary, the source of information as to facts is stated in the text. Acknowledgment of indebtedness is due to Mr. Thorold Rogers' 'Six Centuries of Work and Wages' and to his 'History of Agricultural Prices.' These works are a mine of information as to the rural economy of mediæval England. For the ancient history of the Poor Law the author has relied mainly on the work of the late Sir George Nicholls, and for the modern aspect of the question the evidence of Sir H. Owen before the Select Committee of the House of Lords has been used.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. PROPERTY THE MAIN CONDITION OF SURVIVAL. THE GENERAL PROPOSITION STATED	I
II. THE SAME CONSIDERED HISTORICALLY. PRIMITIVE FORMS OF SOCIETY AND THE VILLAGE COMMUNITY	24
III. ENGLISH VILLENAGE	39
IV. THE BLACK DEATH AND THE DIVORCE OF THE LABOURER FROM THE LAND	55
V. THE INCREASE OF SHEEP-FARMING, AND THE GROWTH OF A PROLETARIATE.	72
VI. TOWN LIFE AND THE TRADE GILDS	96
VII. SOCIAL LEGISLATION AND THE POOR LAW	110
VIII. THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY	130
IX. THE THEORY OF WAGES	146
X. PRIVATE PROPERTY AND POPULATION	176
XI. THE MODERN ASPECT OF THE POOR LAW.	193
XII. THE POOR LAW, <i>continued</i>	217
XIII. INSURANCE A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE POOR LAW	239
XIV. SOME FORMS OF SOCIALISTIC LEGISLATION	255
XV. THE ETHICAL ASPECT OF THE QUESTION	283