

Boyer, George, *The Winding Road to the Welfare State: Economic Insecurity and Social Welfare Policy in Britain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 384 pages. Hardcover. \$45.00.

Economic historian George Boyer begins his ambitious study, *The Winding Road to the Welfare State: Economic Insecurity and Social Welfare in Britain*, with the bold proclamation that his work aims to “rewrite the history of working class living standards and the growth of government social welfare policies in Britain since 1834” (p. 24). At the heart of Boyer’s argument is his contention that Britain’s approach to state welfare between 1830 and 1950 is incomprehensible without considering the ebbs and flows of standards of living for British workers. To demonstrate his assertions, Boyer divides his book into two principle sections that hinge upon major milestones in the evolution of British Welfare policies: The New Poor Law of 1834 and the Liberal Welfare Reforms of 1906-11.

Part I chronicles the legislation—and the philosophies guiding it—that framed Britain’s approach to public welfare through the majority of the Victorian Age. Here, Boyer demonstrates that the British Government intended the New Poor Law to inaugurate a novel era of self-help, wherein manual workers might guard *themselves* against unemployment and income loss by increasing their savings and joining friendly societies; yet, Boyer shows these measures were insufficient to carry laborers through the economic crises of the Victorian age. Though the New Poor Law did result in expanded savings among the working classes, laborers rarely had enough to survive the perils of unemployment for more than a few weeks before being forced to seek refuge in the Poor Law which, Boyer argues, was insufficient in meeting public needs. These developments, combined with the inefficiency of charitable institutions, resulted in a “breakdown” of the Poor Law in the 1860s (p. 73).

According to the author, Britain's middle classes and government elite were aware that the New Poor Law was not working—the lessons of the economic turmoil of the “Hungry” 1840s and, especially, the 1860s had taught them that; yet these realizations were taken by contemporaries not as evidence of the deficiencies of the law, but as an indication that British workers were not being responsible, saving less than they needed in spite of continually rising wages. Such widely held assumptions among the middle classes resulted in initiatives like the Crusade Against Outrelief, which drastically reduced outdoor relief to the poor in the decades after the 1870s and resulted in the stigmatization of government aid. Boyer chronicles instances wherein, having fallen on hard times, manual workers sometimes *chose* to suffer in poverty rather than accept government relief or enter the workhouse. Indeed, the 1870s stand as a major turning point in Boyer's history, as he proclaims that it was only then that the principles of the 1834 New Poor Law actually reached their peak, resulting in the nadir of British welfare policy.

Part II begins with a detailed historical analysis of the origins of the Liberal Welfare Reforms inaugurated following the General Election of 1906 and continues through to the publication and debate of the Beveridge Plan in the late 1940s. Here, Boyer illustrates how the Liberal Party, motivated by both humanitarian and political concerns, reacted to a wave of new information about the plight of the working-class poor during the Edwardian Era. It is at this point that a bevy of familiar actors enter the story who fundamentally altered the conversation surrounding government-run poor relief. As Chancellor of the Exchequer and President of the Board of Trade, respectively, David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill led the charge toward extending assistance to the sick, unemployed, and the elderly by sharply increasing social welfare spending. Shifting much of the onus for poor relief to the central government, Boyer explains, did much to reduce (though it did not eliminate) the stigmatization of public assistance.

These measures laid the groundwork for further expansion in the interwar years and culminated with the inauguration of the British Welfare State in 1948.

While the book skillfully navigates familiar themes in nineteenth century British social and economic history such as Victorian concepts like “self-help” and the Malthusian intuition that morality and financial security were intimately connected, Boyer’s work truly excels in that it fills in the gaps left in the historiography with an impressive abundance of quantitative data. Of particular note is Boyer’s work in Chapter 5, which adds remarkable insight into the struggles of Victorian Britain’s working-class elderly, most of whom received poor relief that was wholly insufficient to meet their needs. This chapter alone is filled with no less than thirteen incredibly revealing charts and tables denoting workhouse participation, rates of pauperism, and other valuable demographics. Indeed, it is this exhaustive commitment to numerical detail that makes Boyer’s work unique, and that brings the realities of British workers into sharper focus.

For all the book’s contributions, it is worth asking whether Boyer’s narrative stands up to its claim of rewriting the history of working-class living standards *and* Britain’s social welfare policies from 1830 to 1950. In the first instance, the answer has to be a resounding “yes.” *The Winding Road to the Welfare State* stands as one of the most complete and authoritative reconstructions of the realities facing the British working classes in recent memory. As for the second criteria—reworking the narrative surrounding Britain’s social welfare policy—this is where the author’s contentions fall a bit short. Though, admittedly, Boyer alters the periodization by, in his own words, ending “where many histories of the welfare states begin, with the adoption of the postwar Labour reforms” (p. 285), placing the Liberal Welfare Reforms as a turning point toward the British Welfare State is not entirely new.

In sum, Boyer offers a meticulously researched, thought-provoking re-creation of the living standards of the British working classes and their correlation to the British government's efforts at poor relief. Due to its highly technical approach, it is best suited for scholarly audiences and researchers.

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