Title of Paper: “Their Discontent has Been Abated”: Commissioned Happiness in Poor Law Reform
Author: M. Colleen Willenbring
Affiliation: Eastern University
Section: Conference Papers
Date of Publication: August, 2013
Issue: Volume 1, Number 1

Abstract:

This study examines the 1834 Report of Great Britain’s Poor Law Commission (PLCR), asking what sort of role such a document ought to be granted in literary or cultural histories. I approach these questions about the PLCR and its audience through formal analysis of the text, drawing attention to moments when the Report's authors turn to characterization strategies of realist fiction to construct political arguments. Key examples center on the principle of less-eligibility—the idea that the poor seeking relief would have to subsist on minimally comfortable support while confined within the workhouse or forgo support altogether to maintain their freedom and support themselves. Arguing that this principle represents a shift away from simplistic conceptions of the poor that equated hunger-satisfaction with happiness, I conclude that the PLCR shaped recognition of more complex individual realities for the poor in ways that would prove valuable for realist novels later in the century.

Keywords: Victorian poor; poor laws; poverty; characters; characterization; happiness; commission reports; reform; welfare; economics

Author Bio:

M. Colleen Willenbring completed her PhD in 2009 with a dissertation entitled Economizing Characters: Harriet Martineau and the Problems of Poverty in Victorian Literature, Culture and Law. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century English Literature at Eastern University in St. Davids, PA.

Author email: mwillen1@eastern.edu
In a sharp critique of The 9/11 Commission Report in the October 2004 issue of Harper’s Magazine, Benjamin DeMott accuses it of disappointing future audiences with its missed opportunity as a historical record, and sardonically characterizes its discussion of serious questions as undercut by “pop ambience” and “loose-limbed feel-good geniality” (45). At the intersection of DeMott’s lines of reproach is a violation of his expectations about the document’s purpose for its audience: “The ideal readers of The 9/11 Commission Report are those who resemble the Commission itself in believing that a strong inclination to trust the word of highly placed others is evidence of personal moral distinction” (36-37). In his terms, this inclination in The Report reveals itself as continual refusals to blame anyone for the US’s vulnerability to the attacks. He further charges that in the commissioners’ reluctance to judge the character and behavior of most of their interviewees and subjects, they withhold from their audience all but “brief glimpses” of the materials of judgment, disappointing those who turn to it for anything other than an “assault on the blaming sensibility” (37, 45).

DeMott’s critique raises interesting questions about the many commission reports of the Victorian era and about what kind of place they ought to be granted in the cultural or historical records of their time. Raymond G. Cowherd, in his classic study Political Economists and the English Poor Laws (1977), seems equally concerned that no one should mistake the 1834 Report from His Majesty’s Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws for a useful historical document. His reason is ostensibly the opposite of DeMott’s; he suggests that the Commissioners are much too inclined to lay the blame of poverty on the poor themselves, that they devote excessive attention to descriptions of the poor's behavior and attitudes, and that they neglect evidence of more complex causes of poverty like unemployment and trade cycles. In closing his case he quotes R.H. Tawney’s pronouncement that the Report is “wildly unhistorical” and concludes with the probably unnecessary, if slightly unreasonable, admonishment that “it should continue to be so regarded by the historians writing in the second half of the twentieth century” (239).

Today, in the twenty-first century, in full agreement that the documents produced by the Poor Law Commission are indeed guilty of too much attention to the poor and too little to poverty, I propose that a literary-historical reading of the Report and Extracts will prove rewarding precisely for the practices of judgment they recommend to their readers. One goal of this paper is to nominate these texts as fresh examples of the value of formalist literary readings of not-obviously literary texts,

1 In addition to the final Report, the Commission published an earlier document in 1833 entitled Extracts From the Information Received by His Majesty’s Commissioners as to the Administration and Operation of the Poor-Laws. This publication is altogether less polished than the Report, and consists, as its title suggests, of apparently unedited sections of the reports of the various assistant commissioners arranged in the order they were received. It appears to have been met with some criticism, especially for the bias apparent in its Index, which is conspicuous. See the Report 3-4 for fuller discussion and the Commissioners’ response.
illuminating the interplay of discursive convention and artistic invention in the Victorian canon. Another is to position the representations of the poor from the Report into a context of others from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sandra Sherman’s discussion of texts from the 1790’s draws attention to the conspicuous absence of complex individuality and experience in their depictions of the poor and to the consequent substitution of hunger for all other, more uniquely human desires. In her argument, one of the key problems with these early representations is their consideration of the poor’s happiness: “By focusing on hunger, it implied that satisfying the poor’s needs—making them happy, keeping them quiet—could be met by allaying hunger. . . . as if the poor had no higher functions” (76). Sherman sets this moment as the beginning of a narrative that ends with the industrial novels of the 1840s and 1850s, works that do sometimes allow readers “to make sympathetic contact with the poor, to imagine their subjectivity” (16). While an examination of the Report reveals little that would enable readers to imagine the poor’s subjectivity in the way novels would do later, some of its illustrations do depict the poor with more complex desires and inner lives than those Sherman describes from previous decades. To explore these contrasts in the paragraphs that follow, I will first examine the Report’s narratives of less-eligibility, the plan for managing the distribution of relief that was designed to redirect the poor’s pursuit of happiness toward their own independence. I then turn to its arguments about the more enduring effects of dispauperization on social life and in the lives of individuals. In both sets of examples, as the Report documents various small-scale reform victories (as recommendations for the adoption of similar measures nationwide), the poor’s individual desires, experiences and inner lives become socially meaningful in ways that its readers understood their own.

The most crucial element of the Commission’s plan for successful reform was Bentham’s principle of less-eligibility, or the deliberate arrangement of poor relief into forms that made the experience of that relief less ‘eligible,’ or desirable, than what the poor’s own labor could produce; most concretely, less eligibility abolished ‘outdoor’ relief, cash or food given to workers who lived in their own homes; it established the workhouse as the only option for those who couldn’t work or live on their earnings. Encapsulating the arguments of Bentham’s disciple, Edwin Chadwick, in the Report, Cowherd explains: “Although Chadwick magnified the evils of the existing system, he was confident that he had discovered the proper remedy . . . It was the embodiment of his principle of less-eligibility, which enabled him to draw ‘a broad line between the independent labourers and the paupers’” (236). This image of the single “broad line” appears frequently in the section of the Report Chadwick

---

In the essay on the 9/11 Report, DeMott invokes the scene of literary history somewhat pointedly in several italicized passages that satirically deploy a Jane Eyre-style narrating voice: “This will be gripping, Reader, not taxing. Enjoy” (45). To the end of understanding the relationships he posits between individuals’ actions and political fallout, the most instructive of these is his mocking echo of Mark Antony’s death of Caesar speech: “People differ, of course. But of course. And they believe with the utmost sincerity in their own account of events. And they are all honorable men and women” (37).
The Victorian

authored (“Remedial Measures” 227-341). In these deployments, the line most often conveys the principle’s advantage of eliminating officers’ responsibility for knowing the character and circumstances of the poor well enough to make judgments about when such allowances were and were not warranted in individual cases—preventing their having to draw as many lines as there were poor in need of help, to carry the metaphor further. The workhouse test, as this provision was sometimes called, accomplished this classification by forcing the poor to perform the truth of their claims of need by crossing a more literal line at the threshold of the workhouse, generally surrendering their accustomed manner of living as the price for public support. To assist the negative impression that choosing public support over independent life would make on those who did so, Bentham had outlined a second provision that maintenance within the workhouse “should not be made more desirable than self-maintenance” (qtd. in Cowherd 93). In the more precise terms Chadwick outlines, public support should not be “really or apparently so eligible as the situation of the independent labourer of the lowest class” of a particular community (PLCR 228). Documenting the need for such a provision, the Extracts publication includes the following episode of a family who enters the workhouse at Newington:

When the regular rations were served out to them, they were all in astonishment as to the quantity; the man had never before been in a workhouse, and he especially was amazed: when the food was first taken in, he asked the person who served it how much of it was intended for them? and was lost in astonishment when he found that they were allowed the whole of it. He declared that he had more meat to divide amongst his family in one day, now they were paupers, than he had been able to obtain for them during several months, when he was an independent labourer; and he repeated afterwards, that during the whole of his life he had never lived so well as he lived in the workhouse. (Extracts 319)

In terms of the contrast I’ve alluded to between representing the poor as insensate eaters and as more fully human subjects, the man in this episode might function as an interesting half-way-point, in that he seems impressed by the appearance of the sumptuous meal and aware of the ways it contradicts the middle-class value of rewards for industry in other aspects of his life, but seems at the same time to be unaware of his opportunity to enjoy it. It is as if this speaker, like the interviewee who recounts his story and Chadwick who reproduces it, has internalized his audience’s expectation for statements about the facts of poor relief, fulfills that expectation instead of providing testimony as to his experience, and, we are told, continues to try to fulfill it afterwards as well.

Between the requirement that the workhouse be exactly as unpleasant as it needed to be and that it should be the only source of support available, it was assumed that less-eligibility would compel the poor to draw their own broad line, to reckon their ability to support themselves with greater accuracy and to approach doing so with greater determination, so that only the truly needy would be left to be housed and fed by the public. Thus it is that when Chadwick devotes the beginning of his section
The Victorian

of the Report to documenting the success of these measures in places where they’ve been tried, he seems to be gathering in one place all the evidence of their effects on individual poor, evidence that of necessity involves some accounting of the poor’s experiences and ways of reasoning about their greater chances for happiness. Furthermore, the examples he includes illustrate both causes and effects in ways that highlight the poor’s less calculable motivations for choosing independent life. For example, although Bentham had identified confinement in the workhouse as the foundation of his plan of pauper management, he suggested that the denial of physical freedom would work in conjunction with the regulation of food and requirements for labor while confined inside to generate an overall impression of less-eligibility. Yet Chadwick includes the following excerpt from one of the assistant commissioners’ reports, a response to an interview question by a local clergyman, which seems crafted to suggest that the poor will sometimes choose physical freedom even at the expense of assured creature comforts:

In fact, the speed with which this method produces its ameliorating effects, is one of its most remarkable characteristics. . . . one man, after having been at Uley workhouse but a few hours, was so disgusted that he begged permission to leave it instantly; and upon being told that the rules did not permit any one to quit the workhouse who did not make application before twelve o’clock in the day, displayed the greatest anxiety at the prospect of being kept in till that hour the next day, and pestered the governor with repeated requests to be permitted to depart in the interval. Yet this was a man pretending that he was starving for want of employment; and though he knew that he was secure of enjoying in the workhouse excellent food, lodging and clothing, yet the prospect of restraint spurred him instantly to quit it, and seek to maintain himself. (248, emphasis in original)

Although this is far from a flattering depiction, it does contradict an argument like Joseph Townsend’s: “The poor know little of the motives which stimulate the higher ranks to action . . . In general it is only hunger which can spur them on to action” (1786, qtd. in Sherman 17). Instead, this man is characterized as initially motivated by his disgust, a reaction to the workhouse that the earliest readers of the Report were probably prepared to approve, even in the absence of a more clearly defined object for it. Later, when he becomes anxious about having to stay overnight, the repeated requests seem intended to indicate that whatever tangible experience created the original disgust, it has taken now second place to the notion of restraint in the abstract. Although in this sense the man’s anxiety appears irrationally excessive, in depicting him preferring physical freedom over the assurance of food, clothing and shelter, the Report suggests that the difference between him and its readers might be in the degree of response rather than kind.

The forceful interpretive frame applied to this character’s experience by the effect-and-cause argument of “ameliorating effects” and the “prospect of restraint” creates a certain amount of incoherence between the definition of this character and its presentation. What is the ameliorating effect, his speedily wanting to leave the
workhouse, or a speedy transformation in his character that will cause him to maintain himself? Even the phrase “prospect of restraint,” while it credits him with a certain capacity for abstract reasoning, might have reflected his process of reasoning more realistically by citing the prospect of continued restraint. Yet it is this framing that makes his experience relevant to the purposes of the Report, so that in the very space of this description, the qualities that begin to make him readable as a character really don’t seem to exist until they are made politically relevant by the less-eligible workhouse policy. In the final sentence alone, he first appears utterly unable to assess his experience in any way other than hunger (even allowing for the nineteenth-century’s common use of the word “pretend” in the sense of “contend,”) before the law’s requirement that he be restrained created the “prospect of restraint” as an effective deterrent, and created him as a character able to base his actions on a prospect of undesirable experience instead of just tangible physical needs.

As I’ve suggested, the previous example’s indication of “excellent” provisions poses a possible challenge to an understanding of the poor as motivated only by hunger. A fuller challenge of that logic is evident in a passage from another interview, one that also, significantly, relates to the workhouse at Uley:

It has been said that many respectable poor persons are now starving in Uley from a dread of the workhouse.—I know no such persons, but I have very lately heard of one woman who is in distress, and who said that if she took her family to it, they should all live much better than they now do, but the character of the inmates was so exceedingly bad, that she did not choose to be among them with her family. (247)

Although readers never ‘see’ this woman develop her aversion to the character of the other inmates, the idea is that in her case the workhouse test has done its job; she is unwilling to surrender aspects of her independent life by going into the workhouse. Again, those aspects are defined as more complex than hunger and also more convincing; here the desire for respectability and to associate with those of good character fulfills the role that the desire for physical freedom played in the previous example. While it isn’t hard to imagine reasons for avoiding the workhouse that have nothing to do with those stated here, the woman is depicted as able to observe her social relations in much the same way as the upper classes themselves would. While the speaker is quick to insist that no one is starving out of an excessive desire for respectability, he does implicitly praise the family’s willingness to endure a certain amount of need on behalf of their character. As with the previous example, the efforts of reform—to encourage the poor to make these kinds of judgments—creates a space (in the Report, but also in the culture more generally) for those judgments to take forms that make them socially meaningful beyond the reduction of poverty alone.

As the Report documents the effects of its proposed reform measures in the places where they’ve already been tried, many of its arguments relate to the quantifiable impact of dispauperization: reductions in workhouse populations and parish expenditures, and increases in wages. Simultaneously, though, less quantifiable effects emerge, often presented with acknowledged aesthetic contrast to the dull but functional data that proves the success of the new policy:
Nothing can be more prosperous than we are here. I am this moment returned from the vestry, which meets every fortnight, and where we talk of the state of Portugal, having nothing else to do there. I carried 15l. to the savings’ bank at Maidenhead a fortnight ago, for a poor man who earns 12s. a week, and yesterday delivered 93 tons of coals to the poor, for the purchase of which they had subscribed last summer; I am to have for the use of the poor 14 tons more. But that which gives me the greatest satisfaction is, that the wife of a poor man (who was insane, and was about to be sent to St. Luke’s) told the overseer, that if he would advance the money for her husband’s expenses of admission, carriage to London, &c., she would repay him, for that she did not wish to trouble the parish. Pleased with this account, I went to the woman and gave her a guinea; it happened that before the man could be admitted to St. Luke’s he partially recovered the use of his reason, upon which his wife, with her duty, returned to me my guinea. (249)

The speaker (another subject of one of the assistant commissioners’ interviews) seems determined to sentimentalize the simple particularity of the story of the woman and the guinea in contrast to the vastness of the other topics he references. International relations contrast with the local relations the vestry members are gathered to discuss, while the fantastical ratio between the man’s savings and his weekly earnings makes it difficult to imagine particular circumstances behind his saving it. Even the poor’s own purchase of coal, because it takes place via group subscription (pooling their money in order to get a lower price for each family’s share), contrasts with the story of this one near-widow and her duty about the single guinea. Although the speaker is clearly pleased with the woman’s request to borrow funds for the expense of her husband’s commitment rather than receive them as charity, the real point of the story is that when her circumstances change, she returns the money in the exact form as she received it. The implication seems to be that the “account” of her not wanting to trouble the parish would at one time have been a posture designed to get the money in hand without intending to pay it back. As with less-eligibility more generally, this example creates a sense of the poor’s behavior as a social performance that might testify to more than just their ability to fulfill their basic needs.

In addition to changing the poor’s attitude toward the sort of testimony represented in the example above, the Report cites a more general dissipation of evidence of need in the community as one of the effects of successful reform. Again, the speaker aligns this evidence to the poor’s attitudes about their own need, in this case suggesting a complete reversal of their inclinations about public display of that need:

The prudence and economy, the desire of having comfortable homes, exhibits itself in a great variety of ways; for instance, many now keep pigs who did not and would not have done so before because the fact of their being known to possess them would have precluded them from any claim on the parish; they are more anxious now to hire bits of garden ground for cultivation at odd hours; their cottages are better furnished; the men keep more at home, and are less at alehouses; are
more independent in their characters altogether. He knows that they bring up their children with a scorn of pauperism; does not believe that they would wish to change to their former state if they could; believes so because many of those who used to hate and revile him as overseer, are now quite changed, have saved money, and placed it in the savings’ bank, of which they know he is secretary, and never show any jealousy of his being acquainted with the amount of their savings. (Report 247)

The argument that the poor deliberately lowered their apparent standard of living in order to gather extra handouts is a commonplace of the Report’s descriptions and of poor law debates more generally; it frequently relates to their clothing and personal appearance. Here, the reluctance the poor are claimed to have felt in the past toward displaying their pigs, well tended gardens, and savings is not explained as a character flaw (as though they were incapable of predicting the happiness they would experience) but as a deliberate strategy (they could imagine it, but preferred not to exert themselves to obtain it while there was outdoor relief to take its place). In either case, the speaker emphasizes not only that the poor now have domestic comforts to display, but explains the visibility of those comforts as evidence not only of lessened poverty in the community, but of the poor’s desire to demonstrate their enhanced prosperity.

Although passages such as these—that articulate ‘good news’ for the Report’s reading audience and begin to recognize more complex individual desires and experiences for the poor—are by far the exception among the arguments included in its pages, they do constitute a conspicuous moment in which the poor’s potential happiness comes to perform a central role in both political and literary histories of the nineteenth century, a role that the ambiguous textual species of the commission report seems able to showcase. Although these passages stop well short of characterizing the poor with full subjectivity, they nevertheless introduce the idea that the behaviors and desires of these individuals might be socially meaningful, and might support DeMott’s sense of value in the “blaming sensibility” by offering later artistic representations a foundation for sympathy.
Works Cited


