

## Poor Relief as ‘Improvement’: Moral and Spatial Economies of Care in long 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland

*Eliska Bujokova and Juliette Desportes, University of Glasgow*

Throughout the Eighteenth-century, Scottish landed elites, professionals, literati and merchants engaged in prolific debates on the best ways to ‘improve’ the nation while worrying about the social and moral costs of ‘progress’. Social securities and care provision for both the able-bodied and deserving poor were foremost concerns. Scots were traditionally reluctant to adopt the legalistic English system of relief and favoured more paternalistic, voluntary forms of charity. The Scottish climate of ‘improvement’, socio-spatial engineering and moral as well as economic reform became manifest in the provision of poor relief. ‘Improvement’ was not, however, a co-ordinated and stable ideology implemented from above, but rather a series of discourses and practices implemented through horizontal chains of patronage and vertical networks of dependency. Its focus was long-term reform, of the individual, as well as the nation, through human capital investment. Its anti-welfarist approach relied on providing the poor with ‘tools’ to better themselves whilst stressing their collective potential of fuelling the nation’s economic growth. The rhetoric of progress was blended with narratives of Christian caritas, social responsibility and Smithian populationsim. The Scottish system was a mixed economy of care, combining localised community networks and parish oversight and support with customary practices of overlordship in an increasingly institutionalised and/or centralised form.

This paper takes as its point of departure the common assumption that the Scottish system of poor relief was an ‘undeveloped version of the English system’.<sup>1</sup> Its reluctance to centralise has been often depicted as a failure or inadequacy by historians, caused partly by the paucity of scholarship on the subject and partly by early nineteenth century Scottish discourse leading up to the New Poor Law reforms of 1845.<sup>2</sup> This paper maintains that whilst the Scottish system indeed came to resemble its southern counterpart in the nineteenth century, its genesis was rather different, rooted in the nature of the more provincial society shaped by the lasting strongholds of heritors, kirk sessions and tightknit

---

<sup>1</sup> R. A. Houston, ‘Poor Relief and the Dangerous and Criminal Insane in Scotland, c.1740-1840’, *Journal of Social History*, 40.2, 2006, pp. 453-, p453.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Mitchison, *The Old Poor Law in Scotland: The Experience of Poverty, 1574-1845* (2000, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), I. Levitt, C. Smout, *The State of the Scottish Working-class in 1843* (1979, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), L. H. Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers. The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (1998, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

communities of the early modern period. Enlightenment thinkers such as Henry Home, Lord Kames or Adam Smith widely regarded institutional poor relief as an impediment to progress delaying the emergence of a commercial society.<sup>3</sup> The eighteenth century thus represents a period of an important shift of the Scottish system, shaped by the post-Union rhetoric of growth-oriented utilitarianism and pursuit of ‘improvement’ mixed with localised traditionalism and Presbyterian notions of charity and social order. Drawing on two short case studies, we will now move onto demonstrating the practical implementations of the Scottish relief system in the urban and rural contexts.

## PART I

The first brief case study uses the Dean’s Orphanage, an Edinburgh institution founded in 1733 by Andrew Gardiner, an Edinburgh merchant and treasurer of the Trinity Hospital, with significant support from the public and the Society in Scotland for Propagation of Christian Knowledge. I will introduce the hospital’s ethos as expressed by Gardiner who became the hospital’s treasurer, and his successor in this post, Thomas Tod, in order to outline the specific Scottish attitudes to reforming and transforming the city’s poor as seen in the urban context. It is argued that in the period between 1720s and 1790s, the Scottish system of ‘poor relief’ was motivated by populationism and the notion of human capital formation. The shared anxiety about slow population and economic growth that predated Malthusian growth theory fuelled the belief in the need to reform the poor through Christian moral education as well as practical instruction to prevent them from idleness and indigence. Whilst directed at children, habitually counted amongst the ‘deserving poor’, institutions such as the Dean’s were established to prevent the perpetuation of poverty through individuals’ lack of education and means of self-subsistence seen as leading to their dependency on the community, emphasising the long-term effects of ‘human capital investment’ as implemented by the orphanage. They thus represent the practical and spatial deployment of this long-term project, the rootedness of which in 18<sup>th</sup> c evangelism as well as the notion of improvement, progress and national growth are symptomatic of the double emphasis on ‘religion and reason’ made by the Scottish ‘improvers’.

---

<sup>3</sup> Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment* (2013; Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 2014).

In his plea for support of the proposed orphan hospital published by Gardiner in 1727 he wrote, 'as these hospitals are for the advantage, so likewise they are for the Honour, and an Ornament to the City; and for this Orphan Hospital, it is evident it will be the most profitable Hospital that has yet been erected, considering it is for Children cast on the Care of Providence, and the Way proposed how it will be managed will be Means to introduce Trade and Business, not only about the City, but also through the Nation'.<sup>4</sup> Gardiner's writing on Christian charity is preoccupied with the rootedness of generosity, compassion and benevolence in religion and virtue, his plea for support of the orphan hospital's establishing is, however, more focused on the long-term utility of investment in education and upbringing of poor children in a climate of post-Union structural, political and economic change accompanied by slow population growth. The connectivity between the space of the hospital, the city of Edinburgh and Scotland as a country and a nation is palpable, demonstrating the imagined trickle-down effect of reform as extending from the institution to its wider contexts.

Gardiner's emphasis on the national and societal benefits of charity directed towards orphaned children here serves to elucidate the tone used by those in charge of the system of poor relief that has been deemed de-centralised and lacking in consistency. Such accounts as Gardiner's, however, demonstrate the distinct properties of a system focused on moral, social and spatial reform of the poor, as opposed to their institutionalisation and management. This rhetoric was brought further by Gardiner's successor, also a merchant and a fellow member of the SSPCK, Thomas Tod, who employed socio-scientific precision as well as Presbyterian zeal to his management of the hospital. He wrote in his 1785 account of the institution's progress, 'To every hour there is assigned some employment, and not a child but has some post or place, from which, it is their greatest correction to be degraded, though the meanest office in that little republic'.<sup>5</sup> His notion of virtue gained through work, social order and an imposed sense of belonging served a didactic purpose through which society could be remodelled from within its smallest units, such as the biological or institutional family. The clear spatial and temporal designation speaks to the emphasis placed on the embodied nature of order. He continued in the spirit of Gardiner's populationism in believing that 'the prosperity and happiness of a state

---

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Gairdner, *An Historical Account of the Old Peoples Hospital, Commonly called, The Trinity Hspital, in Edinburgh; with Arguments and Motives pleading for Assisatnce to pay ff the present expensive Reparations, and to raise a Fund for maintaining many more People.* (1727, Edinburgh), p. vii.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Tod, *An Account of the Rise, Progress, Present State and Intended Enlargements of the Orphan Hospital. To which is added, Poetical Meditations on Various Subjects* (1785, Edinburgh) p. 4.

greatly depend on the number of its inhabitants, if properly educated and employed' and maintained a strong notion of strictly hierarchized social order with mutually beneficial and co-dependent relations across the strata.<sup>6</sup> He, however, exercised a much stricter admissions policy only allowing the healthiest and most capable children from one family to be admitted in order to maximise their chances for success, in turn securing the maintenance of their biological family. During their stay in the hospital, children were largely prevented from most contact with their families and friends, with an emphasis placed on the corrupting influence of their unrefined morals and inhospitable abodes, demonstrating the belief in strong determinism of nurture and environment on children's characters.<sup>7</sup>

The figures of Gardiner and Tod and the increasingly scientific approach to the management of the Orphan Hospital elucidate the broader context of poor relief, improvement and management of the poor in 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. The example of the Orphanage serves to elucidate the urban approach to long-term treatment of poverty through investment in human capital formation with the envisioned outcomes of reducing the poor's idleness and indigence resulting in dependency, whilst also fuelling the industrialising economy with skilled labour. The poor were to be transformed into a labour force, which transformation was to benefit the nation, the poor themselves, as well as their benefactors whose charity was understood as a principal Christian virtue. The Dean's amongst the many institutions dedicated to maintaining and educating orphaned or destitute children was thus a transient space intended for the long-term voluntary project of national improvement in the context post-Union Scotland and its changing economic, political and social climate.

## PART II

After the 1707 Union, local and regional bodies were established to further the nation's economic development. In the Highlands, decades of instability and two Jacobite Risings called for Treasury funded schemes in view of 'civilising' the barbarous inhabitants. In this section, I will turn to one of these bodies, the Board for the Forfeited and Annexed Estates,

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

as an example of the management of rural poor relief. After the 1745 Jacobite Rising, 13 Jacobite estates became permanently annexed to the British Crown and were managed by a Board of Commissioners based in Edinburgh. The Board's management of the estates reflects 'improvement's discursive instability in the second half of the eighteenth-century. The push for profit-driven farming was accompanied with a reluctance to dispossess existing tenantry. The Board was faced with a crucial problem: how to re-arrange space to commercial ends while preventing moral corruption, depopulation and an increase in the vagrant poor.

The Annexed Estates were populated by a great number of poor people. Given the physical geography of the Highlands, the area was overcrowded; farms were small and competition for land rife. While every parish was obliged to 'canton it's real poor' at the discretion of both parish and neighbouring heritors, the lack of provision for the able bodied meant that vagrancy and widespread emigration daily increased and pressure was laid out on the Board to relieve the parish. Touring the estates in 1756, the Board's inspector general Francis Grant reported that, 'there should be no beggar upon these Estates nor anywhere in Town or Country. It is a reflection on the Character of Christians and the police of a well governed Kingdom'. Significantly, Grant commented that 'the Poor Rates in England is a Grievance and by bad Management does not answer the purpose', reflecting Scottish 'improvers' distrust of formalised relief schemes. Instead, he recommended hospitals for the sick and deceased and workhouses for the young and out of business.<sup>8</sup>

The Board's implementation of spinning schools or workhouses throughout the estates reflected 'improvement's opposite strands and discursive instability, oscillating between commercial laissez-faire and a hands-on interventionist approach towards care and the economy. The schools were typical of Scottish attitudes towards the relief of the able-bodied and involved charities, voluntary contributions and state intervention. Until Annexation in 1752, the SSPCK, in combination with the Board of Trustees for Manufactures, ran the majority of education and informal labour schemes intended for relief on the estates. Early on in 1727, proponent of agrarian patriotism Robert Maxwell had hoped to run a farm for Highland children in combination with the SSPCK 'to promote Industry, which is an Ornament to Christianity . . . to supplant and undermine Idleness, the Parent of Vice, the Mother of Mischief, the Bane of Society and the Destruction of every

---

<sup>8</sup> National Records of Scotland (NRS), E730/39.

country where it prevails'.<sup>9</sup> The Board of Commissioners were inspired by the Irish Charter school movement and wrote the secretary of the Society in Dublin asking for advice 'for promoting English protestant working schools'.<sup>10</sup> By targeting the young, the Board hoped to get at the root of the problem, an attitude replicated in the SSPCK's bottom up approach.

The Board followed a combined spatial logic of exclusion and transformation. The annihilation of spaces where the majority of the poor lived, the runrig and subdivided farm, was accompanied by the creation of new spaces where the needy could be made useful to society. The schools were portrayed as charitable institutions in order to maintain 'the small tennants and cottars that give the greatest attention to the manufacture, and who are mostly poor, they stand much in need of public aid'.<sup>11</sup> The Commissioners' bounty would enable 'poor destitute creatures to gain their bread, that would otherways been starving or begging through the country'.<sup>12</sup> Schools were established across the Highlands and mostly in small towns such as Callander in Perth, Forres in the North-East or Lochbroom in Cromarty. In Inverness, manufacturer Alex Shaw complained the bounty, which allowed maintenance for 50 girls, was not enough, 'for it being in the mouth of the Highlands, numbers of beggars resort from all quarter; so that we have many destitute orphans, & cripple & blind to maintain, for none that can either maintain themselves by spinning, or live in the town, and procure subsistance from their parents, or friends, share in this allowance'.<sup>13</sup> Itinerant spinning mistresses also travelled across the estates, offering free lint and reels to poor women. This dual approach was driven by the Highlands' geography, as many girls would not be able to go schools, as well as the belief the poor should help themselves.

These schools acted as temporary accelerators of good behaviour and morals. Women and girls were explicitly targeted as being the most idle and in need of useful employment, especially in winter and in the evenings. The schools would teach the girls the value of work by maintaining them at the school between three and six weeks, distributing premiums, wheels and reels for the best and fastest spinner. Lint seeds were to be given to the poor for free across the estates. While at the school, the girls were not allowed to use

---

<sup>9</sup> Robert Maxwell, *Select Transaction of the Honourable The Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1743), pp222-235.

<sup>10</sup> NRS, E721/1.

<sup>11</sup> NRS, E727/25/2.

<sup>12</sup> NRS, E727/25/4.

<sup>13</sup> NRS, E727/25/5.

Gaelic and often wore clothes they had made themselves. Older women were not to be admitted as they were considered too set in their ways and incapable of 'improvement'.

Of course, the schools were first and foremost commercial enterprises reflecting 'improvers' belief that the linen manufacture would bring the estates' great commercial success. The schools were always meant to be temporary: once the poor had been taught, they would go home and spend their evenings spinning, turning the household into an improved productive unit. Just like in the Dean's Orphanage, only one member of each family was to be instructed in the hope she would then teach others. These were ambiguous spaces, reflected in the fact that the women who could maintain themselves would be paid for their work.

Overall, these schools are just one example of the ways Scottish poor relief sought to combine Christian morality and commercialism with the express aim of avoiding formalised relief. Charity hospitals, workhouses and crofting colonies all represented variations of the same spatial imagining for the nation-based moral preservation and economic transformation of the poor.