

ANGELA NICHOLLS. *Almshouses in Early Modern England: Charitable Housing in the Mixed Economy of Welfare, 1550–1725*. People, Markets, Goods: Economics and Societies in History, 8. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017. Pp. 278. \$25.95 (paper).  
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“A roof over one’s head”: protected by Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, housing is still one of the most pressing problems of the modern poor. Where early modern England’s poor rested heads is perhaps one of the greatest unknowns in our increasingly nuanced understanding of poverty, charity, and the lived experience. Angela Nicholls’s *Almshouses in Early Modern England: Charitable Housing in the Mixed Economy of Welfare, 1550–1725* indicates both the importance of the question, as well as the complexities of answering it.

Nicholls singles out almshouses as “the most well-known and documented examples” of accommodation of the poor, yet one that seldom figures into the narrative of poor relief. Her aim is to situate almshouses within the wider “welfare economy,” as well as to establish “how important they were as institutions of relief” (4). She is correct about their historiographical absence and she works to place such institutions into the blended circumstances of public and private charity. Paradoxically, she is less successful in conveying their overall importance. We learn a great deal about their founders’ motivations, the terms and conditions of residence, and even whether or not they had their own fires or shared a hearth. Yet, we ultimately do not know how large or significant a role almshouses played in meeting the needs of England’s at-risk population. It may be some time before historians have enough data to wrestle with the complexities of accommodation, but Nicholls’s study of almshouses is an important component of this complex calculus of understanding.

With her book organized into six chapters, Nicholls first provides an overview of the policies surrounding the housing of the poor, underlining both its essential and understudied nature, as well as highlighting contemporary need. Next, the chronology and distribution of almshouse foundations is surveyed and her three case studies (Durham, Warwickshire, Kent) introduced. It is here that problems begin to appear and opportunities for understanding are lost. For example, we learn the number of almshouses and places for each county in 1550, 1600, and 1670, as well as the percentage of increases in places between 1500 and 1700. Yet we are not given the percentage of population increase or the number of elderly (45). Are these percentage increases, ranging from 83 to 142 percent and spanning 120 years, a response to larger populations and/or larger numbers of elderly? Or, true, overall growth? When Nicholls does engage with the tell-all issue of bed-to-elderly ratio, she bases her conclusion—it was relatively stable—on two figures 130 years apart, 1670 and 1800 (53), leaving unanswered the question of what happened in the middle.

In a historiographically wide-ranging chapter, “Almshouse Residents and the Experience of Almshouse Life,” Nicholls looks at a host of variables: eligibility, age, gender, poverty, and behavior. What emerges is a world very unlike that of popular myth. Instead, Nicholls paints a picture of “a disorderly and motley array of residents,” that were not always old, and with little direct oversight or rules of behavior (136).

In the next chapter, “The Material Benefits of an Almshouse Place,” Nicholls does not so much as place the almshouse into the greater context of poor relief, as she suggests in her introduction, but rather she *compares* (which is somewhat different) their inhabitants to people on parish poor relief. Nicholls looks at a wide assortment of items, from clothing, stipends, and whether or not they bought and cooked their own food to whether they shared a room or lived alone. What eventually emerges is that most almshouses neither intended nor provided total support. The poor were still required to bear a considerable share of their own upkeep through work, charity, and help from friends and family. This less generous assessment of almshouse living, in combination with the discovery that not all alms people were elderly and even

fewer supervised, creates an important new understanding of the early modern almshouse and thoroughly puts paid to the Trollopean images that continue to linger in our imaginations.

Nicholls's final chapter is a case study of the inner workings and funding of the almshouse in Leamington Hastings, Warwickshire. This is good local history, but again an opportunity is lost. Rather than interweaving this almshouse into the greater picture painted earlier, it rests in isolation and rather awkwardly at the end, leaving the reader to do the intellectual heavy lifting of contextualization and the drawing forth of significance.

Despite doing a great service to the historiography of almshouses and our understanding of the accommodations of the poor, the book stumbles. In places, such as the motivations behind the foundations, it surveys a range of causes, but provides no trends nor indication of change over time. Elsewhere, there are leaps of logic—asserting, for example, that Nigel Goose's calculations were “probably unrealistic” (44), or that the marks in a parish register were “presumably from where the vicar ... had been checking the register to establish when and where” a particular woman was born (151). There is also a troubling lack of precision of language. I am very aware of my intellectual indebtedness to the work of Keith Wrightson and Philippa Levine; therefore, Nicholls's statement that “Wrightson and Levine agree with Botelho” struck me at once as backwards. Small as it seems, this and other issues compound over time to sometimes overshadow the good work that is here. They also highlight the difficulties and complexities behind such research. The variables are many, the considerations and implications vast and far-reaching, and the historiography undernourished. In short, no single book can yet capture it all. Still, Nicholls clearly shows the importance of almshouse culture, as well as the complexities and insecurities that swirled around putting a roof over one's head.

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LYNETTE OLSON, ed. *St. Samson of Dol and the Earliest History of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales*. Studies in Celtic History. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017. Pp. 219. \$99.00. (cloth). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.104

This collection of eight essays makes a useful contribution to scholarship on the *First Life of Samson* (identified with the acronym *VIS*), and to the study of the Insular milieu in the early medieval period generally. The volume's editor, Lynette Olson, leads the reader through the arguments about the date and stages of composition of *VIS*, and its relation to an earlier life, termed the *\*Vita primigenia* (or *primigenia*). Olson broadly agrees with Richard Sowerby in thinking that the *Vita primigenia* was composed probably by a member of Samson's family in a monastery founded by Samson in Cornwall; it was then reused by a monk writing in Dol to create the *VIS*.

Sowerby draws attention to the way that Samson's family features prominently in the *VIS*, and how the hagiographer has to work hard to accommodate this with the norms of ascetic renunciation of family. Sowerby suggests that the treatment of nepotism in the *VIS* may have been the result of a need felt by monasteries and churches founded by Samson and headed by members of his family, to defend themselves against the charge of nepotism. Sowerby argues that this theme in the *VIS* could only have stemmed from the earlier *\*Vita primigenia*, because for a monk writing at Dol in the late seventh or early eighth century such issues would not have been a concern. Sowerby suggests a date of around 600 for the *\*Vita primigenia*.

Joseph-Claude Poulin also addresses the question of the dates of the *VIS* and the *\*Vita primigenia*, with analysis of traces of reworking in *VIS*. His essay is in French, with a summary in