

NICHOLLS, ANGELA. *Almshouses in Early Modern England. Charitable Housing in the Mixed Economy of Welfare, 1550–1725.* [People, Markets, Goods: Economies and Societies in History, vol. 8.] Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2017. xii, 278 pp. Ill.

Almshouses for the elderly were once a ubiquitous form of social housing in many parts of north-western Europe – and perhaps beyond. We do not know much about the geographical reach of these fairly small foundations – on average, the number of residents of a particular almshouse ranged in the tens at most, although much smaller numbers seem to have been more usual. Unlike the much larger and often monumental hospitals, many of these small almshouses have disappeared over time, sometimes without leaving much of a physical, let alone archival, trace. Even where almshouses survive, the archives of these institutions of often private philanthropy are – frustratingly – more sketchily preserved than the semi-professional administrations of larger hospitals. Consequently, one might say, social historians have tended to overlook this particular aspect of charitable housing. Moreover, what historical research there is tends to be confined to regions where almshouses have survived both as buildings and institutions to the present day, as in Great Britain, with about 1,700 foundations still in existence, and the Netherlands, with about 120 remaining historical almshouses. It is clear, however, that almshouses could, and sometimes still can, be found in at least the North Sea regions, including Flanders, northern Germany, Denmark, and Norway, and perhaps further afield.

Also in the UK and the Netherlands, however, studies of almshouses, in particular or in general, have been limited in number. Many books about almshouses offer little more than a broad overview. In that respect, Angela Nicholls's thoroughly researched and thoughtful study of almshouses in three English counties during the early modern age is a welcome and pioneering addition to the historical literature on almshouses. Nicholls comprehensively studies and compares the early modern almshouses of the counties of Durham, Warwickshire, and Kent, and discusses their chronological and geographical distribution, their founders, their residents, and the benefits almshouses offered, before concluding with a case study of the Humphrey Davis almshouse in the Warwickshire parish of Leamington Hastings.

A recurrent theme of Nicholls's book is the great diversity and variety in almshouses: some foundations were large, with splendid buildings and liveries for their residents, who thus served as living advertisements of the magnanimity of their founder; other foundations were modest and seem indeed to have comprised the majority of English almshouses, although historical attention has tended to focus on the more enduring and physically striking ones. Nicholls repeatedly points out that excessive generalization does not work in the case of an early modern institution that varied immensely in scope: almshouses could provide a comfortable old age for a privileged few in stately surroundings, but more often they offered little more than free housing in a simple row of one-room residences, the charitable housing intending to alleviate the poverty of the poorest of a parish. Founders could be prominent noblemen or clerics of national importance, such as the Duke of Leicester and the Bishop of Durham, but also a schoolmaster; residents could be reasonably well off or could belong to the parish poor; the almshouses could be controlled by the heirs of the founder or by a parish. In her conclusion, Nicholls states that "almost any attempt at categorization seems destined to fail in the face of such diversity" (p. 225). Yet, this diversity also points to the great popularity of this form of charitable

housing, as the founding and running of an almshouse obviously allowed for a great deal of flexibility and individual leverage when it came to shaping charity.

Nicholls's exhaustive research and treatment of her subject also offers multiple possibilities for comparison with almshouses in other regions, however. Her observation, for example, that there were not only more almshouses in wealthy Kent, but that they also tended to be larger than in rural Durham points to the close connection between wealth and almshouses: in the Netherlands, too, the largest almshouses can be found in the wealthiest towns, though they differ from the almshouses studied by Nicholls in that they tended to be located in those parts of Dutch towns where land was cheap, whereas the English almshouses tended to be close to churches. No doubt this is a reflection of the much higher real estate prices in the constrained Dutch towns during much of the early modern age.

Despite this diversity, one can see a clear resemblance between England and the Netherlands in the chapter on almshouse founders: like Nicholls's almshouse founders, their Dutch counterparts tended to be childless, wealthy, driven by religious conviction, a desire for post-mortem memorialization, and the need to shore up or establish societal status. Nicholls, however, rightly points out that we know most about the socially more prominent founders: there are also a great number of smaller foundations by persons much less prominent and who remain largely unknown. To identify and classify them with confidence is rarely easy and requires painstaking local research, which even then might not result in a clear picture, as her case study of Humphrey Davis and his Leamington Hastings almshouse illustrates. Despite Nicholls's efforts, Davis remains a shadowy figure whose motive in founding an almshouse remains fairly obscure. This is no different in the Netherlands, where, likewise, identifying almshouse founders of the smaller, often by now defunct, foundations can be time consuming and require extensive archival research. Nevertheless, despite these caveats, Nicholls's chapter is, I would argue, in many ways the first profound comparative study of the characteristics and motives of English almshouse founders, offering a most useful reference for interregional and international comparison.

This also applies to the subjects of the chapters on the characteristics of residents and the benefits offered by the almshouses. In many cases, parallels can be found with almshouses in the Netherlands. Obviously, there are also great differences between the Netherlands and England, such as the prominent role of the parish in compulsory poor relief in England, whereas Dutch poor relief tended to be both decentralized and voluntary – at least officially. Nicholls engages with the voluminous and rich literature on English poor relief, of which she shows a firm grasp, as is evidenced by her excellent and lucid first chapter on the poor laws and the changes she detects over time. She engages critically with previous ideas on English almshouses and their role in the mixed economy of welfare – concluding that almshouses played a greater role in parish poor relief than has previously been assumed. Most interesting is her conclusion that the number of new foundations in England declined after 1730, partly because of new forms of charity, the rise of workhouses, and changes in the way the poor were seen and treated. Until then, many almshouses seem to have been expressions of the belief that poor and needy parishioners, too, were entitled to live in an independent household. Whether this was peculiar to English almshouses or might have had a parallel in the Netherlands, for example, where new foundations also tended to decline after the Dutch Golden Age, remains to be seen.

Despite this being a comparative study, in her examination of Leamington Hastings Nicholls shows that, also at the local level, much can still be learned through in-depth

case studies of individual almshouses. She quotes Nigel Goose, the author of a case study of a Norwich almshouse, pointing out that “[a]lmshouses require the attention of historians working at the local level if we are ever fully to understand their place in the history of the mixed economy of welfare” (p. 188), obviously agreeing and making a case for the study of individual almshouses, which in themselves can serve to dissect an overly static image of almshouses and their history.

To conclude, it would be laudable if Nicholls’s excellent and ground-breaking study were to inspire the study of almshouses in other regions of the British Isles, and beyond. The only criticism one might have of this rich and detailed study is that the recurrent emphasis on the great diversity of almshouses and the difficulty of categorization sometimes seems to play down the many things it does tell us about early modern English almshouses, their founders, residents and rules, and the scope for comparison this book offers. It seems to me that Nicholls is being overly modest, even if her restraint is inspired by the correct observation that the early modern age tends to escape our modern desire for systematization and categorization. The study of social history in general and of almshouses in particular is not necessarily helped by overly rigid schemes of past human behaviour. If Nicholls’s study shows us anything, it is the great resilience and adaptability of early modern humanity with regard to the eternal problem of averting and alleviating poverty.

Henk Looijesteijn

International Institute of Social History
Cruquiusweg 31, 1019 AT, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
E-mail: hlo@iisg.nl
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The Second International held nine congresses from its founding in 1889. These were grand events that brought together the leading representatives of the socialist world for a week of debate, celebration, and networking. The tenth congress, scheduled for August 1914 in Vienna, was hastily cancelled as troops mobilized across Europe and the anti-war promise of the International became an uncomfortable memory. Ever since, historians have focused upon the presence of nationalism and internationalism within this fascinating and complex institution. The historiography is intimidating, both for its sheer size and canonical status. But new scholars are needed to refresh the field, and Pierre Alayrac’s new historical sociology is a welcome contribution. Alayrac treats the 1896 congress in London as a microcosm from which to show the diversity of “experiences and activities” in late nineteenth-century socialist internationalism (p. 94). “Historians of socialism”, he writes, “have often restricted themselves to the study of relations between national movements, neglecting the plurality of social profiles, and the resources available to each to impose their views” (p. 202). Alayrac’s project seeks to rectify this tendency by unpacking socialist parties and revealing their individual members.