

The Workhouse

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THE 'Victorian values' associated with the workhouse are not as straightforward as they might seem. Most obviously, the workhouse was not Victorian at all. Model workhouses could be found in Nottinghamshire and elsewhere well before the passing of the New Poor Law,¹ while the law itself was Georgian, not Victorian. The workhouses also long outlasted the Victorian era, until 1948, though renamed 'Poor Law institutions' in 1913. But the architecture of most workhouses was Victorian; and whether built to house a few hundred rural poor, or over a thousand town dwellers, they dominated the landscape. The Victorians inherited the task of turning the Benthamite utopia of 1834 into a practical system.

The workhouse was intended to restore essential social values previously undermined by indiscriminate outdoor relief. Fear of the workhouse was to be a 'stimulant to exertion and to the observance of thrifty and provident habits.'² Moreover, it was to reinforce personal morality and social order.³ Labourers would support their families, children their aged parents, without relying on a subsidy from the parish. Mothers of bastards would no longer enjoy a parish premium for their errors, nor would the young enter into imprudent marriages expecting a subsidy for each child.

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¹ J.D. Marshall, 'The Nottinghamshire reformers and their contribution to the New Poor Law', *Econ.Hist.Rev.*, 2nd ser., 13 (3) (1961), 382–96.

² MH 10/1/ circular 2.

³ S.G. and E.O.A. Checkland (eds), *The Poor Law Report of 1834* (1974), 123, 374.

Employers would be forced to raise wages and workers become more deferential if wages, not subsidies, became the chief economic relationship. All this, with the promise of greatly reduced poor rates, enabled the new system to pass into law with a minimum of Parliamentary opposition. And, in spite of criticism, it remained at the heart of Victorian social administration.

Only in a few recalcitrant unions was the building of the new institutions long delayed. The massive investment, over 13 million pounds for building costs between 1834 and 1883, gained an unstoppable momentum.⁴ Yet throughout the Victorian period, the workhouse was a focus not for consensus, but dispute. Very soon after the new law was passed, the enthusiastic certainties of Chadwick's rhetoric were challenged from several quarters, and this debate never died away. Few, apart from the most irreconcilable radicals or paternalists, argued that workhouses be pulled down, but their purpose no longer seemed straightforward.

It is not easy to decide exactly which 'Victorian values' are represented by the workhouses. They proved indestructible, but were enormously disliked, even by the social classes who created them. Today the popular image of the workhouse is entirely negative, its original purposes seeming either misguided or hypocritical. It has become a symbol of the ruthlessness of Victorian capitalism, especially as applied to helpless groups such as children and the elderly. Yet this symbolic status was not created by the twentieth century reinterpreting the nineteenth as the 'Bleak Age.' Rather, the Victorians themselves created it as they continued to support the workhouse with ever larger amounts of finance, while abusing it in political polemic, in public meetings, in the pulpit, in art and in literature.

Studies of the opposition to the Poor Law have, reasonably enough, concentrated on the anti-Poor Law movement of the 1830s and 1840s.⁵ This included both the brief period of rural rioting in the southern and eastern counties, and the more durable northern campaigns, led by substantial figures in local politics, like Richard Oastler and John Fielden. Such protests shaded into the Ten Hours Movement, the Rebecca riots in Wales, and ultimately into Chartism. All such activities were at an end by the 1850s; yet amongst the rural working class, especially in the

⁴ For a detailed geography and costing of workhouse construction, see F. Driver, 'The historical geography of the workhouse system in England and Wales, 1834-1883', *Jnl Hist Geography* 15 (3) (1989), 269-86

⁵ The most substantial studies are N.C. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement 1834-44* (Manchester, 1971), and J. Knott, *Popular Opposition to the 1834 Poor Law* (1985); cf. also M.E. Rose, 'The anti-poor law agitation', in J.T. Ward (ed), *Popular Movements, c 1830-1850* (1970).

eastern counties, the legacy of bitterness left by the New Poor Law was long, showing itself in occasional rick-burning or cattle maiming.⁶ In the towns, the most favoured action was a mass gathering at the workhouse to intimidate the guardians with a demand for outdoor relief in times of unemployment.

Although anti-Poor Law sentiment amongst the working class remained strong, expressed in pamphlet and ballad, melodrama and popular song,⁷ members of the ruling classes developed their own forms of criticism. These have been underestimated because most of them were not opposed to the main principles of the new Poor Law. Acceptance of the law, but hostility to many aspects of the workhouse test, characterized upper and middle-class attitudes, and this inconsistency persisted throughout the nineteenth century. This is paradoxical, given the apparent unanimity of Parliament in 1834, although its motives at that time have given rise to considerable historical discussion. Whereas the Webbs and other early historians of the Poor Law described it as triumph for Benthamite utilitarianism, more recent historians have debated the continuing interest of the landed gentry in maintaining control over the new Poor Law unions. It is disputed whether the Act aimed to assert traditional authority over the increasingly violent rural poor, or whether it revealed a new capitalist spirit, or 'Christian individualism', as attractive to Tory squires as to Whig bureaucrats.⁸ The events of the decade after 1834 were to show that, however compelling the principle of the law might seem, the workhouse did not command the wholehearted loyalty of its original supporters.

Anti-workhouse attitudes manifested themselves in Parliament soon after the passing of the 1834 Act. According to Gladstone, then a fledgling

⁶ See, e.g. A. Digby, *Pauper Palaces* (1978), 224–8; D. Jones, 'Thomas Campbell Foster and the rural labourer: incendiarism in East Anglia in the 1840s', *Social History*, 1 (1976), 9ff.

⁷ Some of the popular anti-Poor Law songs are reproduced in Roy Palmer (ed.), *A Touch on the Times: songs of social change 1770–1914* (1974), 260–70.

⁸ For the main argument in favour of the continuing landed interest in the Poor Law, see A. Brundage, *The Making of the New Poor Law: the Politics of Inquiry, Enactment and Implementation, 1832–1839* (1978); for the counter argument that the Poor Law reflected the Whigs' concern for both economic liberalism and social order, see P. Dunkley, 'Whigs and paupers: the reform of the English Poor Law, 1830–1834', *Jnl Brit Stud*, 20 (2) (1981), 124–49 and *The Crisis of the Old Poor Law in England 1795–1834: an interpretive essay* (NY, 1982); for the Poor Law as arising from the views of a 'modernized' county gentry, see P. Mandler, 'Tories and paupers: Christian political economy and the making of the New Poor Law', *Hist Jnl*, 33 (1) (1990), 81–103 and 'The making of the New Poor Law *redivivus*', *Past & Present*, 117 (1987), 131–57; for a general debate, see A. Brundage, D. Eastwood, P. Mandler, 'Debate: the making of the New Poor Law *redivivus*', *Past & Present*, 127 (1990), 183–201

member, disenchantment began very early. Although in opposition in 1834, Gladstone himself had strongly supported an Act

which rescued the English peasantry from the total loss of their independence. Of the 658 members of Parliament about 480 must have been [its] general supporters. Much gratitude ought to have been felt for this great administration. But from a variety of causes, at the close of the session 1834 the House of Commons had fallen into a state of cold indifference about it.⁹

Early enthusiasm was soon tempered when the effects of the law were considered and as local discontent mounted.¹⁰ The Poor Law Commissioners were originally established for five years, and their powers were then annually extended until 1842, when Robert Peel secured them another five-year term. As each period of renewal approached, although only a small minority supported the abolition of the law, the debate became more heated, and criticism of various features of the Act more intense. The most dangerous moment came in 1841, as Russell's Whig government was collapsing, and the radical chorus against the Poor Law was joined by the voice of Young England. The Webbs attributed this simply to factional strife, political manoeuvres rather than principled debate,¹¹ but the attitudes expressed in this acrimonious session are worth more attention, for they encapsulate anxieties about the workhouse which were to persist for several generations. Such anxieties were not enough to bring down the Poor Law itself, but they reveal the general confusion on the purpose and management of workhouses, and led to a steady attrition of Chadwick's original idea.

Between 1834 and 1841 the Poor Law, and most particularly the workhouse system, were subjected to violent attack, both in Parliament and the press. Thomas Wakley, redoubtable editor of *The Lancet* and MP for Finsbury, adopted the same approach in the Commons as did *The Times* outside it: they recounted lists of appalling evils in specific workhouses – elderly and infirm people of blameless life torn from their homes and friends when they became destitute, husbands and wives separated in the workhouses, children forced from their mothers, starvation dietaries, brutal and indecent behaviour by workhouse officers, paupers left to die alone in the house without their families in other wards being informed.¹² Added

⁹ Quoted in J. Morley, *Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (1908), i, 85

¹⁰ For local Tory objections to the law on paternalist and humanitarian grounds, see G. Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (1984), chap. 7.

¹¹ S. and B. Webb, *English Poor Law History, part II: the Last Hundred Years* (1963 ed.), i, 174 ff.

¹² The stories are fully discussed, and largely discounted by D. Roberts, 'How cruel was the Victorian Poor Law?' *Hist Jnl*, 7 (1) (1963), 97–106; see also U. Henriques, 'How cruel was the Victorian Poor Law?', *Hist Jnl*, 11 (2) (1968), 365–71.

to these were the pamphlets, the broadsides, and, in 1841 the enthusiastic compilation of largely unattributable stories, *The Book of the Bastiles*.¹³

The Poor Law Commissioners and their assistants spent much time investigating such stories, and decided that most of them were untrue. In proven cases, officials were disciplined, since the law gave them no authority for such behaviour. In the Commons, defenders of the Law argued, with considerable justification, that abuses had always existed under the Old Poor Law, and the Commissioners had brought them to light. Historians like David Roberts have argued that the evils of the New Poor Law were much exaggerated; but it is more likely, given the wide range of local studies now available, that widespread abuses of authority did exist. This was not surprising, since the new workhouses were much less open to public scrutiny than the old, and their officers were overworked, untrained, and not always well supervised by the guardians.¹⁴ The early years of the workhouse show a rapid turnover of staff, many of them dismissed for offences against property or paupers. The Commissioners permitted no physical cruelty; but they did sanction a minimal dietary in many parts of the country, monotony, discipline, and separation of families.

Nevertheless, whether the widely publicized stories were true or false, they forced themselves on public attention. Special committees of both Houses investigated them, and MPs became involved in detailed debates about the truth or falsity of certain cases. Wakley, in particular, provoked hours of discussion on such matters in the Commons. The debate of 1841 revealed the Poor Law in an uneasy state after years of public sniping.

The debate began when Lord John Russell tried to extend the Commissioners' powers for a further 10 years, and to amend the Act of 1834 in some minor ways. It revealed a pattern well established in Parliamentary discussion of the Poor Law. Russell's ministry was tottering, but the Conservatives were not inclined to take advantage. As in 1834, few members from either side of the house actually challenged the principles of the New Poor Law, or wished to return to the old. Only Wakley, Fielden and a small group of radicals disliked the New Poor Law enough to aim for its total destruction; in this they were joined by a few paternalist Tories who objected to bureaucracy and interference with local affairs. Among these was Disraeli, just arrived at the bottom of the greasy pole. His attitude later received stern comments from the Webbs, who obviously saw him as a frivolous and irresponsible young man. Disraeli, with the mixture of paternalism and antiquarianism that made up Young England, stressed the need for social cohesion in the parishes: 'the great boast in

¹³ G.R. Wythen Baxter, *The Book of the Bastiles* (1841).

¹⁴ M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929* (1981), 33-5, 118-25

this country,' he argued, 'had been that society was strong and government weak.'¹⁵

Around 140 amendments were tabled to Russell's proposals, from a wide spectrum of MPs.¹⁶ Yet the support for most of these amendments was small, rarely able to muster more than 50 votes. The speeches of radical and Tory opponents, spread over several months and often lasting late into the night, taking up interminable pages of *Hansard*, became predictable. Wakley argued that the law was 'unsuited to the charitable and kindly disposition of the people of this country,' Disraeli added that 'to suppose for a moment that . . . the poor population could be controlled and managed by shutting them up in prisons, was to suppose that which was contrary to every principle of humane society.'¹⁷ More interesting were the responses from the large majority supporting the principles of the Poor Law, reminding the objectors that the previous law had become extravagant, cruel, unworkable. But as each speaker defended the new system, he added a clause asserting his right to attack features of it which he found unacceptable.¹⁸ Wakley complained that there was no agreement on whether, or how long, the Poor Law Commission should be extended, or on which parts of the Poor Law were most in need of amendment, and so 'the effect of this difference of opinion was, that there was always a majority in favour of the bill.'¹⁹ Each speaker had his own crotchet, but certain themes began to emerge, some becoming the subject of later legislation.

The chief objection to the workhouse was its rigid separation of families, particularly elderly couples.²⁰ This had previously been raised in the Lords by a small group of dissident peers, and the Bishop of Exeter, who felt that it was unchristian.²¹ Such feelings forced Russell to drop a highly utilitarian clause proposed by the Poor Law Commissioners, that guardians be allowed to make efficient use of their property by renting out empty space in workhouses to one another. The result would be further separation of families and removal of paupers from their own neighbourhood.²² In fact, rationalization was never permitted except in the case of specialized

¹⁵ *Hansard* 56, 8 Feb. 1841, 382. (This and subsequent references are to the third series of *Hansard*). Cf. the comment of one of his successors, 'There is no such thing as society', quoted in H. Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (1989), 490.

¹⁶ *Hansard* 57, 27 Sept. 1841, 902.

¹⁷ *Hansard* 56, 29 Jan. 1841, 157; 8 Feb. 1841, 378.

¹⁸ E.g. speeches by Knatchbull, *Hansard* 56, Feb. 8 1841, 428; Darby, *idem* 435-8; Somerset, 57, 26 March 1841, 631; Wood, 57, 27 Sept. 1841, 905; Philips, 57, 28 Sept., 957.

¹⁹ *Hansard* 57, 19 March 1841, 401. Cf. also Edsall (1971), 137-8.

²⁰ E.g. speeches by Darby, *Hansard* 56, 8 Feb. 1841, 437; James, *ibid*, 445; Somerset, 57, 1 April 1841, 774-5.

²¹ *Hansard* 43, 25 June 1838, 986.

²² *Hansard* 57, 1 April 1941, 774-7.

institutions such as district schools, asylums for the insane, and (later) special institutions for the handicapped. The first rationalization along the lines proposed by Russell came during World War I, when elderly paupers were moved to workhouses with spare capacity to make room for military casualties. Disquiet over elderly married couples continued until 1847, when enough country squires united to amend the law and permit couples over 60 to share a room, if they so requested.²³

The pervasive tendency in debate, amongst many who supported the workhouses, was to make exceptions of certain groups. The deserving unemployed had their supporters, who wished to operate an outdoor labour test rather than the workhouse test.²⁴ This power was confirmed by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1844 as a way of solving the intractable problem of sudden slumps in industrial areas, but was widely extended during the nineteenth century.²⁵ Another amendment, imposing the workhouse test on wives whose husbands were overseas, was dropped because of its possible repercussions on the navy (in 1844 the law was amended to treat these women the same as widows – to prevent their removal from their usual place of residence, and to allow them outdoor relief).²⁶ Widows, children, the sick and the elderly, all had their champions, who felt that the workhouse test might be bent to favour them. The general unease is exemplified in the unhappy comments of an MP who had supported Poor Law reform and now found himself opposing many of Russell's clauses;

he hoped that the commissioners would see that a proper allowance was made to the poor, and particularly to the sick poor, that out-door relief should be afforded to as great an extent as possible, and that no such cruelties or inhumanities as had unfortunately more than once taken place in the workhouses should again be permitted.²⁷

In May, after months of debate in which amendments were added and dropped, Russell gave up his attempt to amend the Poor Law, and the Commissioners' life was prolonged for only one more year. Peel, coming to power in September, had to take over the task. In 1842, having taken account of some of the most strongly voiced objections to the Law, he was able to prolong the Commissioners' remit until 1847.²⁸ The opponents of the law were vociferous, but had no alternative to offer. To return to the

²³ 10 & 11 Vict c. 109 s. 23. See also D Roberts, *Paternalism in Early Victorian England* (1979), 257–8.

²⁴ *Hansard* 56, 8 Feb. 1841, 428, 437.

²⁵ Webb (1963), II i, 142–50; Driver (1989), 274–5.

²⁶ *Hansard* 57, 1 April 1841, 788. The 1844 regulations were in 7 & 8 Vict c.101, s.25–6. Widows with illegitimate children were disqualified, however.

²⁷ *Hansard* 57, 26 March, 638 (Halford).

²⁸ Russell's Act was 5 Vict c.10, Peel's 5 & 6 Vict c.57.

Old Poor Law seemed impossible, nor did any doubt the need for some kind of institutional provision. Workhouses, once constructed, developed a logic of their own, since they represented a heavy investment, and soon began to fulfil the functions of hospitals and asylums. The government in 1834 had passed, by an overwhelming majority, an act which appeared, by a simple device, to end long-standing grievances. But the act provoked much popular unrest, and aroused great nervousness among many of its original supporters. Unable to go back, the government saw no clear way forward, except perhaps some tinkering with administrative detail.

The workhouse system, therefore, created discord even among supporters of the New Poor Law, and provoked a major clash of Victorian values. It was supposed to invigorate family responsibility, but did so by breaking up families; it was supposed to encourage the industrious worker and discourage idleness and depravity; but in the general mixed workhouse the sick and destitute were mixed together whatever their background: moral classification, apart from a few experiments later in the century, was rarely possible. The ambivalent regard in which workhouses were held by their creators is unintentionally summarized by the Duke of Wellington, in his speech introducing Peel's bill of 1842 to the House of Lords:

It [the Poor Law bill of 1834] has undoubtedly improved the condition of the working classes, and it certainly does put on a better footing the relations between the working classes and their employers . . . My Lords, I don't mean to say that I approve of every act that has been done in carrying this bill into operation. I think that in many cases those who had charge of the working of the bill have gone too far, and that there was no occasion whatever for constructing buildings such as have acquired throughout the country the denomination of bastilles, and that it would have been perfectly easy to have established very efficient workhouses, without shutting out all view of what was passing exterior to the walls.²⁹

If Parliament was prepared to upset workhouse principles by special pleading, the local guardians who administered the law were even more benighted. Poor Law Inspectors regularly complained about the activities of well-meaning but misguided guardians and members of the public, 'these anti-poor-law pseudo-philanthropic agitators' as Edward Carleton Tufnell, the most dedicated of Chadwick's assistants, called them in the early years of the law.³⁰ For the first decade, Tufnell had to fight against Kent and Sussex guardians anxious to give outdoor relief during hard winters. Their inspector noted testily: 'I am wearied to death with preaching theory to

²⁹ *Hansard* 65, 26 July 1842, 619–20.

³⁰ MH 32/71 12 June 45.

these dull-headed people.³¹ Embarrassment was compounded because in some unions the magistrates and clergy were vocal against aspects of the workhouse test.³²

Nor did these difficulties subside. J.S. Davy, Inspector for most of Yorkshire, reported at length in 1879 on the unsatisfactory habits of guardians in his district. His report came at the end of a decade notable for the Local Government Board's attempts to tighten up the administration of the law, and to reduce outdoor relief. Yorkshire unions, at first resistant to the New Poor Law, were mostly applying either the workhouse test or the labour test by the 1870s, though the workhouses never had enough accommodation to deal with the unemployed during trade depressions. Davy believed that the poor would deliberately apply in large numbers in hard times, knowing that the guardians would be forced to give outdoor relief; he suggested that guardians pack as many beds as possible into the dormitories and corridors of the workhouses, as a deterrent. His report indicated the wide variety of opinions in the district: some guardians were subsidizing men on short-time working to keep families together; others offered test work not as a deterrent but as a form of public works. In Hunslet and Holbeck, 'veritable "*ateliers publiques*"' had been set up, where men on stone-breaking work were paid by the ton; in Saddleworth, where correct principles applied, a man would work a full day for a small fixed sum.³³ One guardian carried economy to excess, another told Davy 'The word pauper as applied to everyone who gets relief from this Board rings most detestably in my ears. Our test men are as honourable as I, & would never trouble us but for the frost.'³⁴ Philanthropists tried to persuade guardians not to take charitable assistance into account when dispensing relief, while in Bradford, where the same frost had disrupted the building trade, two clergymen 'placed themselves at the head of a mob of several hundred persons, and made a demonstration in front of the Town Hall.'³⁵ They aimed to persuade the guardians to end the labour test or increase the rate of relief. Although this demand failed, they succeeded, Davy reported, in stirring up much uneasiness in the town.

Historians are now in dispute over the effects of the workhouse test in reducing outdoor relief for able-bodied men after 1834: some have argued that the test succeeded not only in cutting back on relief, but in keeping wages low in areas of labour surplus: others that outdoor relief continued

³¹ MH 32/69 21 Oct. 1837.

³² Digby (1978), 211–14. Roberts (1979), 154–6 describes the divisions in attitude which the Poor Law produced among the clergy.

³³ MH 32/98, 13 Feb 1879.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ MH 32/98, 30 Jan. 1879.

surreptitiously in many unions, particularly in the north.³⁶ The debate probably proves no more than that regional practices varied widely. Even if we assume that local guardians followed the requirements of the law in this fundamental matter, there is less doubt that conditions for the indoor poor were not uniform, but depended on the amount of local finance, the state of the building, and the attitudes of both guardians and local pressure groups. Keith Snell, whose admirable work on the southern and eastern counties suggests severe exploitation of the rural poor after 1834, draws much of his evidence from the writings of concerned paternalists, including the clergy.³⁷ The conflict of values was at its most severe at the local level.

In this discussion of Parliamentary and local debates, little time has been left for the other ways of analysing public response to the workhouse. Here, literary and artistic representations would take a central place. The workhouse was the bogey not only of Chartist pamphleteers, but of middle-class organs like *The Times*, *Punch* and several of the Tory daily papers of London.³⁸ Dickens was the most famous of many writers who used the workhouse as an essential plot device, and hence helped to shape public perception. Since workhouses were relatively closed to the public gaze, artistic representations possibly had greater significance. Against the views of tract writers such as Harriet Martineau, where the workhouse waited as the inevitable end of the indolent and vicious, was the workhouse of Dickens, or Hardy, or the popular melodrama: where the workhouse existed not to admonish the disreputable, but to terrify the helpless.

In particular, the workhouse system dwelt uneasily alongside another Victorian value: belief in private charity. The Poor Law report of 1834 ended with a veiled attack on private charities for giving indiscriminate relief. Such charities, the report argued, 'are often wasted and often mischievous', and it hinted at the need for government control of their actions.³⁹ Given that two Bishops had signed the report, perhaps it could go no further;⁴⁰ but in 1841 Russell attempted to define the relationship

³⁶ Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (1981) chap. 2; A. Digby, 'The labour market and the continuity of social policy after 1834: the case of the Eastern Counties,' *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 28 (1) (1975), 69–83; William Apfel and Peter Dunkley, 'English rural society and the New Poor Law: Bedfordshire, 1834–47', *Social History*, 10 (1) (1985), 37–68; M.E. Rose, 'The allowance system under the New Poor Law', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 19 (3) (1966), 607–20.

³⁷ K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: social change and agrarian England 1660–1900* (Cambridge, 1985), chap. 3.

³⁸ Roberts (1979), 192–8.

³⁹ Checkland (1974), 495–6.

⁴⁰ Mandler (1990) discusses the relationship between current political economy and religious thought.

between Poor Law and charity. The guardians, he argued, could not distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor, but had to use the workhouse deterrent in an impartial manner. Only charity could use proper discrimination in identifying deserving recipients of relief.⁴¹ Unfortunately, the Poor Law Commissioners chose that moment to suggest that charity undid the good work of the Poor Law by giving indiscriminate aid, but Sir Robert Peel responded vigorously:

he should abominate the Poor-law if he thought it relieved the rich from almsgiving . . . it was unwise in the commissioners to issue a public notice announcing that 'a principal object of a compulsory provision for the relief of destitution was the prevention of alms-giving.' One object might be the prevention of mendicancy or vagrancy, certainly not of alms-giving. Good God, it was a complete desecration of the precepts of the Divine law . . .'⁴²

For the rest of the century, the relationship between charity and the workhouse was uneasy. The law's harshness undoubtedly stimulated charitable activities, at first designed to 'save' deserving cases from the workhouse, and later attempting to permeate the workhouse itself with charitable values.⁴³ It is virtually impossible to compare the scale of charitable provision with the scale of the poor law; equally, it seems impossible to doubt that the charitable efforts of the kingdom outweighed its public provision. David Owen's deliberately conservative estimate for 1874–5, excluding missionary, Bible, and Tract societies, and unable to estimate casual or personal charity, suggests that nearly £4 million was raised by organized charity in London alone: at the same time, Poor Law expenditure for the whole of England and Wales was around £7.5 million.⁴⁴ Charity at all points overlapped with or duplicated Poor Law functions: it provided hospitals, orphanages, almshouses for the elderly, homes for the handicapped, refuges for prostitutes, aid for widows, the unemployed, and the virtuous distressed. Charities such as the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants, were specifically designed to prevent a vulnerable group from going into the workhouse when out of work. The type of charity constantly denounced by Poor Law authorities – casual giving to beggars – continued unabated, and indeed the Local Government Board frequently argued that it would not be reduced until conditions in workhouse casual wards were improved to the point where people felt no guilt in sending vagrants into them. As an alternative stratagem, the determined efforts of Louisa

⁴¹ *Hansard* 56, 1 Feb. 1841, 172–3.

⁴² *Hansard* 57, 19 March 1841, 444.

⁴³ Crowther (1981), 67–71.

⁴⁴ David Owen, *English Philanthropy 1660–1960* (Oxford, 1965), 477; K. Williams (1981), 170.

Twining and other charitable women attempted to bring charitable values into the workhouses by improving conditions in the sick wards and softening the treatment of children and the elderly, while discriminating against the 'undeserving'.⁴⁵ Society was not content to let workhouse values take care of all social casualties.

The immense confusion of functions, and the possibility of artful dodgers taking advantage of them, was of course the main impetus behind the famous, if unavailing, efforts of the Charity Organization Society to rationalize Poor Law and charity, by a strict investigation of individual circumstances. Their attitude was enshrined in the Majority Report of the Poor Law Commission in 1909, enjoining charitable aid for the deserving, the Poor Law for the 'residuum'.

The conflict of ruling-class opinions, rather than working-class protest, provides the key for the changing functions of the workhouse during the nineteenth century. Chadwick had never intended it to be purely a deterrent: it was to provide education for the children, and 'indulgences' for the elderly; but in its early years its impact was largely negative. During the course of the nineteenth century it began to shed its punitive image for the helpless poor, with better diets, a wide range of hospital functions, cottage homes for children, and so forth. By 1909 the Webbs were looking forward to a system of specialized and purposeful institutions, whether to heal the sick or set vagrants to compulsory labour.

An examination of the Victorian workhouse system shows that efforts to treat the poor in a mechanistic fashion are likely to be confronted by an equally powerful set of alternative values: in fact, the more strongly the authorities attempt to deter the poor from seeking relief, the more they encourage alternative forms of provision. The workhouse produced a clash of values which might fairly be described as 'Victorian,' since that age was characterized by robust debate, and willingness to take sides. To adopt the terminology of one eminent Victorian, Karl Marx, the thesis of Benthamite efficiency was confronted by its antithesis of paternalism and charity. The workhouse is therefore a symbol, not of certainty, but of conflict.

⁴⁵ Her views are outlined in L. Twining, 'Workhouse cruelties', *Nineteenth Century*, 20 (1886), 709-14, and *Workhouses and Pauperism, and Women's work in the administration of the Poor Law* (1898).