

Old Age in English History, Past Experiences, Present Issues. By Pat Thane (Oxford University Press, 2000)

Anyone who has had to look into the literature on the topic of old age will immediately see the value of this book. In a field bestrewn with historical, sociological and cultural studies of old age in many different times, places and cultures, the overwhelming impression is one of confusion. Authors of these studies have not been reluctant to make generalisations on the basis of their knowledge of a single period of time or one particular methodological approach. The result is that the old age found in scholarly discussion is often at odds with the old age we see around us. The experience of retirement, for example, receives much attention but the abrupt transition from a lifetime of full-time paid work to full-time retirement has been confined mainly to men whereas the majority of people who survive into old age are women.

The generalisations developed through an influential social science narrative about old age provide the fundamental questions addressed in this study. Were old people a rarity in past societies? Was their experience and knowledge valued and respected by younger members of their community so they continued to play an important part in community life even as they aged? Did families always take care of their aged and infirm relatives? In short, does the conventional narrative of a progressive decline in the status of old people over time, and increasing numbers and social costs, survive scrutiny? The real value of this study is that it brings coherence to the study of old age. This derives principally from the author's focus on the long-term, from medieval times to the present, and on a specific region, England, where social, economic, political and cultural factors can be distinguished even from its near neighbours Wales and Scotland.

The structure of the text contributes further to the coherence of this study. In keeping with the author's objective to highlight the complexities of the experience of growing old, the narrative, although divided into two broad sections covering pre-modern and modern periods, moves deftly between experiences as they appear in public records, academic studies, and private diaries, and representations in literature, folklore, and public documents. Within this framework, the documentary records and multitude of investigative studies that Pat Thane has assembled are amplified by

skilful and judicious interpretation that brings into play the varied insights of this not inconsiderable body of work. There may be specialists who will dispute some aspects of her conclusions but her approach sets an example for the further development of realistic studies of the social experience of growing old, which can then form the bases for comparative work.

What picture of old age emerges from this survey of English social, cultural and political life? The most striking difference between the two periods under investigation concerns the sources available to the historian. The difference in size in the two sections attests to this, the section covering the pre-modern period being much smaller in quantity and scope. Nevertheless, there are records that provide a basis for answering the question, were there old people in the past? These include records of the ages when certain civic obligations ceased to apply as, for example, the age of seventy for jury service and around the age of fifty to sixty for the cessation of labour obligations. Population records for the period in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries indicated that people over the age of sixty made up 9 and 10 per cent of the total population respectively and, even then, the experience of old age was largely a female one. However, the real marker of old age was functional capacity. No matter how old in years a person was, so long as s/he was able to continue in their vocation, and to supervise their property or labour to provide the necessities of life even to a minimal extent, chronological age was not as significant a distinction as class.

This is where the modern period differs from earlier times. When the old-age pension was introduced in the early twentieth century in the form of State and occupational pensions, with the age of eligibility set at sixty-five years, the fit between the formal designation of a chronological marker of old age and the everyday experience of the mass of the population was much closer and any local variations were erased. At the same time, however, rising standards of living during the twentieth century have ensured that people who reach this age are now likely to be in good physical condition. Whatever coincidence there may have been in the past between the social categorisation of old age and the biological experience of ageing, this relationship has been altered by such changes. A distinction has always been made between 'green' old age—a time when some powers weaken but, in general, activity and fitness persist—and the period of 'sad decrepitude', now referred

to as 'old' old age. However, this distinction has taken on a different complexion in late twentieth-century England and perhaps there is a case for advancing the accepted chronological marker of old age to a point later than sixty-five years. On the whole people remain fit and active into their seventies and the changes in work at the end of the twentieth century suggests that the notion of retirement itself is being reconstructed when people leave full-time paid work in their fifties, either by choice or otherwise.

No consistent picture of old age emerges from this study. There are continuities in that, throughout both periods, families in general have been prepared to assist their elderly parents, where they can do so without impoverishing themselves, and that old people themselves have made substantial contributions in kind, if not in money, to their children. Continuity also lies in the fact that there has always been some effort on the part of local and national authorities to make provision for the destitute aged. The clearest discontinuity has been in the replacement of the meagre and uncertain benefits under the Poor Law with the predictable and calculable benefits provided by the welfare state. These policy measures, which did so much to frame old age in the first fifty or so years of the twentieth century, were directed towards the elderly, certainly on grounds of age but also to relieve desperate poverty. Many eligible old people had been poor all their lives, even though frequently they may have worked hard. The subsequent interpretation of these measures as a process of marginalising the elderly misses this vital point. Similarly, the introduction of geriatric medicine addressed serious medical neglect of infirm old people.

The meaning of old age is not fixed. The physical changes of ageing, indisputably constant and universal, are malleable in the face of social, cultural and economic influences. The changes in English society over the past fifty years have included the emergence of a society in which the majority can expect to live out their years without the poverty that blighted their forebears. This reframing of old age has occurred within a commitment to relieve poverty and sickness in the name of social justice. The success of this achievement should be encouragement to continue on, not occasion for hand-wringing about the plight of an ageing society.

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