

BOOK REVIEW

Charity Rediscovered

by Margaret Simey¹

Liverpool University Press 150 pages

Paperback - £9.35

Charity Rediscovered was originally published in 1951 under the title *Charitable Effort in Liverpool in the Nineteenth Century*. The present re-publication by the Liverpool University Press should not be seen as some form of parochial self-indulgence. The book is concerned with matters of relevance to all those interested in charity today.

On one level the book can be read as a history of the response of individuals and society in the nineteenth century to the appalling problems created by rapid unplanned urban growth. On another, it can be read as a critical analysis of the development of women's contributions to the wellbeing of the community; the activities of Eleanor Rathbone and Josephine Butler had effect and influence well beyond Liverpool. It can most profitably be read as a stimulus to thought about the state of charity in the 1990s.

Inevitably, much of the discussion centres on that perennial concern of the Victorians - the need to differentiate between the undeserving and the deserving poor when distributing any form of charity. What strikes a chord with the present day reader, however, are the descriptions of the problems created by indiscriminate giving and the attempts made to instil method into the distribution of aid and to encourage co-operation between the various societies operating in the same field.

Although many of the obligations once considered the reserve of charity have now been taken over by the state, the operations of the Victorian charities have left their mark on present day practice. Thus, the 1890s saw the acceptance of voluntary charitable work as a suitable occupation for women and the beginnings of training for social workers. The book contains an interesting account of the setting up and early life of the Settlements established in poorer areas of the city.

The provisions of the Charities Act 1992 introduced to deal with abuses of fund-raising are merely a new method of dealing with an age-old problem. Bogus charities, excessive administration expenses and retention of funds by collectors figured all too often in charitable activities in the nineteenth century. Nor were charities well administered. In the absence of effective legislation, it was left to the press to highlight the problems. So, on the 27th January 1866, the *Porcupine* (a distinctly non-establishment Liverpool newspaper) opined:

¹ Also author of *Government by Consent* (1985) and *Democracy Rediscovered* (1988).

"The charities, unfortunately, are managed without system. A few old figures are put upon the committee, and are considered gods; and anyone recommending an improvement is pooh-poohed."

Margaret Simey's careful analysis of charitable effort in Liverpool shows a transition from individual work to community based movement during the course of the nineteenth century and a growing realisation that charity was inevitably linked to social and economic problems. For those concerned with the place of charity in society at the end of the twentieth century, *Charity Rediscovered* provides a valuable and thought-provoking starting point.

Jean Warburton
University of Liverpool