
Book Reviews

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R. Colin, G. C. Gosling, A. Penn, and M. Zimmeck. (2011). *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action: Historical Perspectives on Current Social Policy*. Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press.

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Members of Great Britain’s Voluntary Action History Society worry that many policy makers, social analysts, and voluntary sector leaders do not know their history. In his introduction to this edited volume, Colin Rochester argues that policy makers who determine the role that voluntary organizations can and should play in meeting social needs too often act on unexamined assumption or myth. He cites a bit of history to make his point.

In the 1980s, British administrations eager to trim the size and cost of government turned to voluntary organizations to provide social services. Rochester contends neither proponents nor opponents of the transition grounded their beliefs about what voluntary organizations could or should do on an understanding of what voluntary groups had done in the past. Policy makers adopted a rosy view of voluntary providers’ ability to respond to a wide range of complex social needs without first considering complicated issues such as whether the changes would alter the value of the service to recipients or the consequences of requiring providers to expand. As a result, both the public and private sectors are left to grapple with fall out from the “high expectations” placed on voluntary providers and the “unintended consequences of the attempt to cast them in this new role” (p. 2). If policy makers consider the lessons of the history of voluntary service, Rochester and his coauthors argue, the policy-making process and resulting service delivery would improve.

The 12 chapters in this edited volume are part of the Society’s effort to combat this historical-knowledge deficit. The book includes chapters originally presented at the Society’s Third International Conference on the History of Voluntary Action, which took place in 2008. Organized into four thematic sections, the essays in the collection move across subjects ranging from child-saving activities in Scotland to mutual aid in the coal-fields of South Wales, and the history of the first polytechnic institute in London. Although the subjects of the book are British, the themes the chapters explore are more universal.

Section 1 of the book focuses on what William Beveridge identified as the “moving frontier” between state and voluntary action. Beveridge, an economist, authored a 1942 report that challenged the government to fight “Want, Disease, Ignorance,

Squalor and Idleness” (p. 1). This report formed the basis for much of the British social welfare system. In a 1948 follow-up report, Beveridge emphasized the need for a vibrant philanthropic sector engaged in providing voluntary and mutual assistance, even in the face of an expanding state welfare system. This later report serves as the jumping-off point for three articles that challenge the idea of a bright and clear line dividing the voluntary sector from the state.

Alison Penn argues that changes in voluntary organizations and their operations since the Beveridge reports resulted from the altered context imposed by government choices. This transition from a system of social assistance administered chiefly by private providers to one dominated by government agencies was not uniform but rather erratic, complex, and protracted. Other chapters in this section explore the specific consequences of these shifting contexts in the field of services to children.

The chapters in the second and third sections of the book focus on the philanthropic activity of individual actors or institutions. Part 2 is organized around the search for the “springs of voluntary action,” those factors that lead individuals to engage with voluntary organizations, whereas Part 3 explores organizational challenges to voluntary social service institutions. These articles provide lessons on the ability of donors, volunteers, and beneficiaries to navigate different motivating values and work methods.

Bridget Yates’ study, for example, explores how the villagers of Cawthorne in South Yorkshire built the oldest volunteer-led museum in England. The creation and operation of this institution resulted from the combined efforts of the village gentry and members of the local working class. The museum succeeded because these stakeholders successfully negotiated their differences. A second article, by Steven Thompson, illustrates the consequences of an inability to agree. He studied “different and even contested conceptions of the role and significance of volunteerism” held by “different sections of coalfield society” in South Wales from 1880-1948 (p. 82). Thompson and Yates illustrate the importance of understanding the competing needs and expectations of providers and stakeholders as a precursor to satisfactory and sustainable partnerships.

Anne Logan’s article provides another lesson on the value of alternative voices, even the “essential amateur,” in successful planning. (p. 131). Logan explores the work of women volunteers in the criminal justice system from the 1920s to the 1960s. The women profiled served as justices of the peace, a voluntary role they took when they were otherwise excluded from work in the justice and correction systems. Trained in voluntary social work and veterans of the suffrage movement, these women possessed significant political savvy that they used in their volunteer positions to advance innovative and important reforms.

Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action concludes, fittingly, with a clever essay that uses history to challenge the “contemporary consensus that there is something distinctively ‘new’ about philanthropy at the start of the twenty-first century” (p. 182). Beth Breeze considers three commonly asserted novelties: new types of donors, new types of causes, and new ways of giving. Breeze concludes, however, that historical evidence shows that, “none of the alleged characteristics of new philanthropy is particularly new” (p. 192). Rather, the label *new* is a trope that reflects

a “preference for novelty” and a “desire by contemporary givers to be distinctive” (p. 192). Breeze’s article can be read as a caution against the belief that modern philanthropists are engaged in some unprecedented effort. Such a belief discourages any inclination toward historical learning. Breeze and the others who contributed to this volume argue through their work that a thoughtful consideration of the history of prior philanthropic effort can only improve the work of those earnest and eager to improve society through contemporary effort.

The format of *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action* is reminiscent of Friedman and McGarvie’s important contribution to philanthropic history, *Charity, Philanthropy and Civility in American History* (Friedman & McGarvie, 2002). Both works avoid the single voice, single subject structure common in philanthropic history. Instead, collected articles are organized around particular themes. This clustering approach gives the work increased value and wider appeal. Read individually, the articles appeal to readers interested in a particular subject such as the history of social welfare organizations. Read collectively, the chapters contribute to our understanding of broad, critical issues—particularly, how public and private service providers can coexist and serve effectively. For this reason, the work is worthy of attention from those in and outside Britain.

References

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Without a doubt, the communications landscape is changing rapidly. For example, some well-known music and book publishing enterprises have not been able