

POVERTY & DESTITUTION IN HALIFAX

An old woman bundled in layers of Salvation Army handouts trudges along behind a rusted grocery cart. A ratty scarf hides her face. Her movement is clumsy, but she is not drunk. She stumbles because her rubber boots are two sizes too big. She mutters constantly. Now and then she stoops to inspect a garbage bin or the ground beneath a hedge, looking for returnable bottles and cans. It is seven o'clock on a Saturday morning and minus fifteen degrees. She should be home in a warm bed. But this woman has neither home nor bed. And for her, one day of the week is little different from the next. Her mental illness may be a cause or an effect of her condition. Untreated and unloved she wanders the streets between stays at a shelter. It is hard to look at such vulnerability and suffering, so most do not; they hustle past denying witness. In the 1970s, this woman's situation would have seemed strange to most Canadians. Over the past two decades it has become commonplace in cities across the country. It has come to be known as homelessness.¹ Some see homelessness as a systemic problem. Others see the homeless as authors of their own misfortune. While the debate over responsibility continues, the homeless are becoming more visible everywhere in Canada from St. John's to Victoria.

Despite the prevalence of "bag ladies," most Canadians, as well as outsiders, see Canada as a benevolent country. Over the past century Canada has developed a complex array of social welfare programs, federal transfer payments and crown corporations such as Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Farm Credit Canada. In general, these organizations attempt to provide Canadians with a minimum of social and economic wellbeing, a social safety net. It is in the patina of these social welfare policies that we see our benevolence. Because he is commonly identified as the person most responsible for creating public health care, Tommy Douglas was dubbed "the greatest Canadian" in a CBC contest.² At the same time, as Dennis Guest points out, welfare programs have been shrinking, sometimes at an alarming rate, over the past twenty years.³ Perhaps the selection of Tommy Douglas as "the greatest Canadian" represents a desperate attempt to preserve our social welfare policies and an image of ourselves increasingly threatened by high costs, government cutbacks and bitter arguments over who should pay.

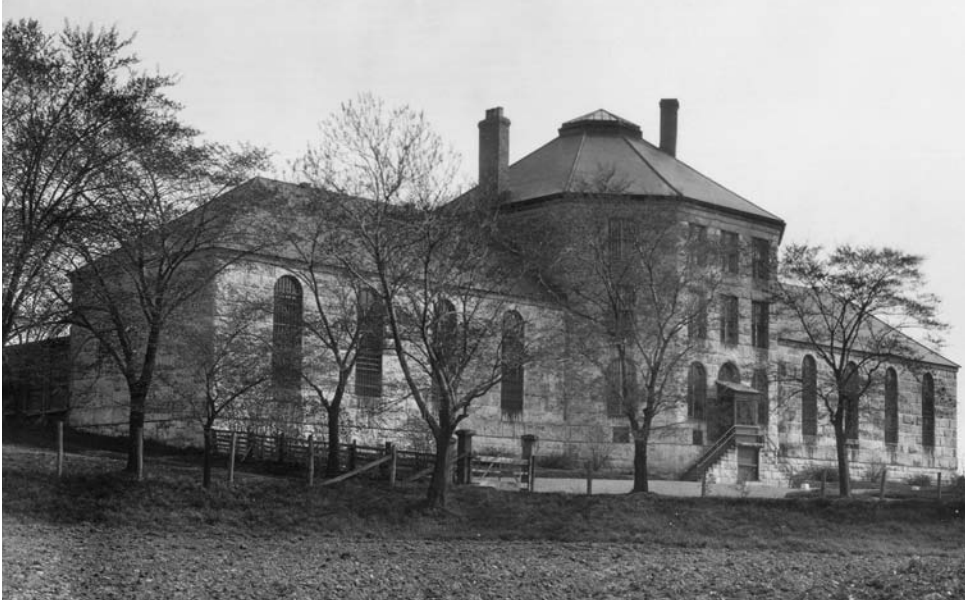
The Canadian economy has seen modest but steady growth in recent

years. Government revenues are holding or increasing. So is the number of Canadians barely or unable to make ends meet.⁴ Meanwhile taxpayers and governments are increasingly leery of “dependence” and “welfare cheats.”⁵ Accountability and measurable results are the new clarion calls for program managers. Many government offices, boardrooms and households once again have to decide where the line between individual and social responsibility should be drawn. That debate sets the gage of our social safety net. Canadians have never been as well protected from the outcomes of that debate as they want to believe.

The modern-day homeless have fallen through the social safety net. They are the least protected members of contemporary society. Thomas Berrigan, who grew up in late Victorian Halifax, is an example of the itinerancy and extreme poverty that existed within Canada’s past. Thomas was sentenced to ten days in Halifax’s Rockhead Prison for the first time when he was fifteen years old. He was found guilty of being drunk in the street. The year was 1881. Over the next thirty years Thomas was in and out of Rockhead for similar offences. Clearly, he had a problem with alcohol. In this he was not alone. Late nineteenth-century Canadian society floated on alcohol, as Halifax historian P.B. Waite colourfully notes, Canada was a very “un-Victorian” society, particularly in regards to alcohol consumption.⁶ Throughout much of his adult life Thomas had no address other than Rockhead or the City Home. Most likely he never had more than a few dollars to his name or an address that could be called permanent. He lived what Robert Humphreys describes as a “rough” life.⁷ A life marred by drink, poverty and itinerancy was often a ticket to the poorhouse in late nineteenth-century Canada. The records of the Halifax poorhouse, the City Home, show that 335 men resided there between 1 May 1900 and 30 April 1901. Some stayed for only a day. John McCready was there for all 365 days of that year. So were 133 other men.⁸

Such records regarding the hard facts of poverty and internment have survived. But little has been done to reconstruct the pattern of life at the bottom of Halifax society during the later years of the Victorian period⁹ and the early decades of the twentieth century. Halifax is not an exception. Nowhere in Canada has the history of extreme poverty received much attention.¹⁰ The research described in this book represents one step toward correcting this oversight. It follows individuals who faced the greatest struggle to remain and survive within Halifax society from the 1890s until the onset of World War I. It examines how the extremely poor and their better-off neighbours shared physical, economic and social space within an area of Halifax known as the upper streets.

The local press of a century ago described the poorest residents of the upper streets as notorious and dangerous. European writers of the



Rockhead Prison, opened in 1860. Like the City Home and other institutions of the city's emergent social welfare system, Rockhead frequently housed the poorest residents of the city. Credit: History Collection, Nova Scotia Museum.

day argued that poverty was an individual responsibility and that the extremely poor constituted an “underclass” that, if left unchecked, could threaten the social and economic order of a nation. Their work helped to stigmatize the extremely poor by arguing that they were different, outside of mainstream society. During the later decades of the nineteenth century, many residents of Halifax had grown up in England. They would have been familiar with journalist Henry Mayhew and his many articles on poverty, which were originally published in London’s *Morning Chronicle*.¹¹ Following the writings of Thomas Malthus, Mayhew was largely responsible for popularizing the idea that the poorest members of society were a dangerous underclass — an idea that came to North America with British immigrants.¹² Sociological research done in the 1960s built on these earlier works to form renewed conceptions of an underclass. Some modern historians have used these updated conceptions to describe and account for those at the very bottom of society. This book refutes the existence of an underclass in Edwardian Halifax. It finds the extremely poor of that time to be more similar to their better-off neighbours than different from them. Moreover, the actions of those who lived in close proximity to the extremely poor did not indicate fear of an underclass.

The research presented here is located at the interaction of many

fields: sociology and political science, as well as many areas of study within the discipline of history. The following four sections survey the work of Canadian and international historians who have examined poverty and the extremely poor. I discuss their entry points and approaches, particularly their vocabularies, findings and questions that are relevant to my research. For the same reasons, I also examine some contemporary studies of homelessness.

HISTORIES OF CANADIAN SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY

Histories of social welfare can be important in a number of ways. They can show how past ideas regarding the causes and solutions for poverty were formed and used. They can show how social policies have been created. Histories of social welfare can identify policy accomplishments and limitations over the long term. And they can show how past groups within society have responded to need as well as to policies designed to address their need. Anyone concerned with the intentions and effects of social welfare policy, past or present, can benefit from this historical knowledge. A summary of the history of Canadian social welfare policy helps to contextualize local events and policies examined in this book and helps to show how they fit within the broader evolution of the Canadian welfare state. The cornerstones of the modern Canadian welfare state evolved from local relief efforts, private and public. How these early policies came into being, the roles of municipal, provincial and federal departments as well as key individuals, is well summarized in *The Emergence of Social Security in Canada* by Dennis Guest. Guest offers what Kenneth McNaught terms an establishment point of view, similar to most early works in labour or political history.¹³ Guest does not provide an explicit theory of the state. However, James Struthers argues that Guest presents the state through the functional approach, based on the work of Harold Wilinsky, where the welfare state is seen as a logical response to the forces of industrialization and urbanization. The inability of individuals and families to meet all needs comes to be seen as “normal” and programs of assistance become “institutional.”¹⁴ In addition to mapping out a detailed chronology of social welfare legislation, Guest identifies the terms of the debate that have surrounded poverty and social security in Canada. He also addresses a fundamental question faced by policymakers and historians. Where does state responsibility for individual welfare begin and end? Guest favours the view of a comprehensive welfare state enunciated by Marsh and Beveridge.¹⁵ Others point out the negative influences of this particular type of welfare state.

In his opening to *Social Policy and Practice In Canada: A History*, Alvin Finkel argues that “once uncritically celebrated national proposals for

cradle-to-grave welfare, such as Britain's Beveridge Report and Canada's Marsh Report" are being re-examined, "particularly by feminist scholars such as Jane Lewis who identify their 'prescriptive effect' regarding gender roles."¹⁶ In addition to feminist interpretations of the state and the evolution of social welfare policy, Finkel outlines Gøsta Epsing-Anderson's three ideal types of social welfare state:

The social-democratic welfare state stresses state-run universal programs and social equality, with state programs compensating heavily for the inequitable distribution of wealth in the marketplace.... By contrast, in conservative or corporatist welfare states, programs are class-based, with administration of programs delegated by the state to institutions representing different class and group interests. Such states use social policy as much to reinforce market and non-market inequalities as to ameliorate them. Finally, in residual welfare states, there are few universal programs; social policy aims only to prevent the destitute from starving or going without any form of medical care.¹⁷

Like Guest, Finkel's work focuses on the institutional point of view. But Finkel is more direct about his view of the state and how he believes social policy is formed. He believes human agency rather than socioeconomic structure determines the course of events. In Finkel's view the state serves as the arbiter and reflection of the primary forces within society. For him social policy is the official outcome of competition and compromise between particular values and material interests; a view familiar to those who know the work of political cultural theorists such as Seymour Martin Lipset, Louis Hartz and Gaston Rimlinger.¹⁸

An excellent companion to the works by Guest and Finkel is a collection of essays edited by Allan Moscovitch and Jim Albert, *The Benevolent State: The Growth of Welfare in Canada*.¹⁹ These essays present a mixture of views regarding the intentions behind many state programs. In discussing the Canadian State, Leo Panitch warns against treating the state as a monolith.²⁰ Attributing to it some "intentions" does just that; nevertheless, this collection contains a variety of keen perceptions that help us to understand the history of social welfare policy in Canada. However the authors did not set out to examine social policies in the context of the lives of the poor, the lives most directly affected by social welfare policy. In order to see poverty close up and to fully appreciate public policy, a different approach is required, one that moves beyond the establishment point of view.

The studies noted above survey and analyze some provincial but mostly federal legislation. So do similar works by Albert Rose, D.C.M.

Platt, Malcolm G. Taylor and James Struthers.²¹ They also tell us about individuals such as social worker Charlotte Whitton and journalist John J. Kelso, who were able to direct public and political attention toward particular social issues. These studies focus on prominent characters and public policy as the measure and direction of society. However, rather than assume a universal application of policy, it is important to examine events at the local level as there is often a marked difference between a policy's design and its application. None of these authors examine social welfare policy in operation through interactions between local officials and those in need. Their work belongs to a tradition of political history that focuses on the central government and policymaking. An exception to this top-down approach can be found in Dominique Marshall's *The Social Origins of the Welfare State: Québec Families, Compulsory Education, and Family Allowances, 1940–1955*. Marshall examined the links between social programs and families in Quebec, in particular the way family allowances and compulsory schooling benefitted the children of farm families. While theories of political culture or functionalism can help our understanding, Marshall argues that a complete understanding of public policy formation and impact requires a close-up examination of lived experience. This study has more in common with Marshall than with Guest. While not forgetting the legislative context, this book presents policy in action through the lives of those in need in the belief that what happens at this level is the best indication of the effectiveness of our social welfare policy and the quality of our benevolence.

This research supplements broad historical surveys of social welfare legislation by offering an analysis of policy in operation at the local level and by adopting a “bottom up” approach. It focuses on the lower ranks of the social order, where the fields of labour history and studies of poverty converge. It demonstrates that the populations identified by these discrete areas of research are more similar than different. Over the past thirty years, labour historians have paid a great deal of attention to the everyday lives and consciousness of Canada's working classes. As Carl Berger outlines in the final chapter of *The Writing of Canadian History*, the advent of the “new social history,” in the 1960s, saw studies of the Canadian working classes move from examinations of labour unions and leaders toward examinations of the everyday lives of urban workers. Hardship and struggle are visible throughout this body of literature. For example, Bettina Bradbury shows how poor families in Montreal in the 1860s to the 1990s used the work of women and children to cope with increasing dependence on low-paying wage labour and frequent unemployment.²² An important aspect of Bradbury's work is her insistence on the agency of the labouring poor, their ability to shape events, not be merely subject to them. Authors such

as Greg Kealey, Eric W. Sager and Peter Baskerville also ascribe agency to the working classes.²³ The agency of workers, their ability to affect policy change, falls in line with the social democratic theory of the state as identified by Struthers: “The level of any nation’s or region’s social policy development reflects the extent to which the working class, through trade union organization and political mobilization, can move the state to meet its needs rather than those of capital.”²⁴ Informed by these examples, this research approaches the extremely poor of Halifax expecting them to have influence, to act in their self-interest, to recognize societal norms and to sometimes follow and to sometimes stretch those norms.

LABOUR HISTORY, THE GROWTH OF UNIONS
AND THE AGENCY OF WORKERS

The history of social welfare has done much to reveal the evolution, implementation and effects of policy. But it has told us less about the actions of the majority of Canadians. Labour history, particularly the “new” labour history dating from the 1970s, has done a great deal to show how unions have affected working conditions as well as the formation and action of the Canadian state. The new labour history has gone beyond the recognition of worker agency to examine the broader implications of that agency. The work of Greg Kealey suggests that the form and limits of worker agency helped to determine the form and limits of the Canadian economy. In his study of Toronto between 1867 and 1892, Kealey concluded that Toronto’s workers were able to achieve a degree of class consciousness in response to factory production and consolidating capital. It was a consciousness strong enough to increase the protection of unionized workers and to push governments into creating more comprehensive social welfare programs. But it was not strong enough to realize a socialist economy or full employment.²⁵ While workers were able to win some concessions from employers, the linked processes of industrialization and urbanization that dominated the Victorian era did not deliver higher levels of income, job security or material comforts to the majority of Canadians. Many individuals in cities across the country continued to lack safe affordable housing. Particularly at the lower ranks of the working classes, economic stability was fragile at best.²⁶

In its assessment of worker agency and broader social reality, the new labour history acknowledges that economic independence through wage labour was impossible at times. That said, times of employment rather than unemployment, and workers’ efforts to maintain employment and job security through unionization, remain the primary focus of labour history. Many of the people at the heart of the research in this book were often dependent upon charity and institutions such as the poorhouse. Some,

however, maintained economic independence for much if not all of their adult lives. As the extremely poor struggled to survive, labour groups were trying to define their members in the public mind as victims of capital and government policy. Politicians were looking for someone to fault for economic woes. Both groups blamed and separated themselves from the poorest members of society, who became increasingly known within the lexicon of economic and social welfare policy as dependent and undeserving. Meanwhile those within the ranks of the labour movement and those who belonged to the emerging professional classes became increasingly known as independent and deserving. These distinctions, less visible within the old labour history, have evolved more within the new labour history, particularly within the work of Eric W. Sager, Peter Baskerville, Bettina Bradbury and Peter McInnis.²⁷ These authors point out that the actions and circumstances of the “deserving” and the “undeserving” were often indistinguishable. Nevertheless, the undeserving were denied union protection and at least to that extent intentionally abandoned, despite the fact that many individuals who were at the forefront of the labour movement were also devout Christians, bound by their faith to help the poor and often involved in a wide range of social reform endeavours. The linkages between labour and the broader push for social improvement is evidenced within examinations of Canadian Victorian reform offered by Ramsay Cook, Richard Allen and Andrew C. Holman.²⁸ While the new labour history also points out this linkage, it does not satisfactorily explain why it did not result in a more inclusive labour movement. One of my arguments, based on the evidence of similarities between those protected by the labour movement and those it left behind, is that the new labour history can go further. It can include a group of people previously seen to be outside the working classes and recognize their efforts to be independent, contributing members of society.

If the new labour history can go further, why have most of its proponents not done so? One reason is that labour history continues to adhere to boundaries set in the past by the very people it studies. In the process of organizing and asserting itself during the late Victorian period and the early decades of the twentieth century, labour’s political discourse identified the lowest rank of society as “others.” That process of distinguishing between workers and others is drawn out very carefully by Baskerville and Sager, as well as by Struthers, in their discussions of the language of unemployment as it developed a century ago.²⁹ It is also visible in Kealey’s presentation of labour politics, which focuses on the union vote, not on the welfare of the masses.³⁰ In the later part of the nineteenth century, through its politics and political discourse, labour drew itself apart from those who were intermittently or chronically dependent upon charity

and public relief. That distinction has extended into the present, with Canadian labour history following suit. While labour historians such as those named above have acknowledged links between the working poor and those more destitute, in general, the extremely poor have been left outside the purview of labour history. The separation between labour history and studies of poverty may be an instance of fragmentation such as that explained by Michael Bliss as “privatizing the mind,” specialization within the research and writing of Canadian history.³¹

THE ACTIONS AND VALUES OF MIDDLE-CLASS REFORMERS

While recent labour history pays a great deal of attention to the consciousness and agency of workers, historical examinations of poverty in Canada often focus on the ideas held by society’s middle classes and their responses to poverty. What, in their eyes, caused poverty? Could it be eliminated? If it could be eliminated, was it a collective or individual responsibility? The overarching questions asked by middle-class reformers who wrote and implemented social welfare policies in the past are sometimes uncritically adopted by contemporary historians who study poverty. This is similar to labour historians who do not challenge the distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving as drawn by their subjects. The work of Judith Fingard, Susan E. Houston and Alison Prentice confirm that the middle classes in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada were imbued with fears of moral degeneration, a threatened social order and a dangerous poor.³² Their fears and moral values were translated into policies that praised work and were often harsh in pursuit of social discipline, an example that supports Finkel’s notion of how social policy is formulated. In *The Dark Side of Life*, Judith Fingard characterizes the extremely poor of mid-Victorian Halifax as an underclass.³³ Fingard ascribes agency to her underclass subjects, but she seems to see them as striving to operate outside of prevailing morality rather than attempting to fit within it as best they could. In *The Dark Side of Life*, social welfare policies appear to be conceived and imposed by middle-class reformers. And, as Daniel T. Rodgers points out in *Atlantic Crossings*, the concerns of North America’s middle classes were shaped by ideas and policies emanating from Europe.³⁴ This book approaches relations between the extremely poor and the middle classes in Halifax, knowing that those relations were tempered by local experience as well as perceptions and examples emanating from such places as London and New York. Moreover, I see the poor, as well as the middle class, as having agency and the ability to affect social relations and public policy.

The international literature on poverty highlights the details of Victorian poverty, particularly in Western Europe, and ideas regarding the

causes of that poverty. Within this body of work we can examine the ideas and circumstances that existed in Europe as they were seen by Canadians of that time, and, in the process, we can uncover many roots of Canadian social welfare policy. Bronislaw Geremek, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Arlette Farge and Steven King all studied the history of poverty on the other side of the Atlantic. European industrialization produced extremes: extreme wealth, extreme poverty and extreme responses to poverty on the part of European authorities.³⁵ As authorities and the poor in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Halifax interacted, they did so with knowledge of the European context. Did interactions in Halifax justify or belie European clarion calls for action against moral degeneration, a threatened social order and a “dangerous poor”?

The international literature on poverty, in particular, the work of Arlette Farge and Steven King,³⁶ can help to establish the legal and ideological framework surrounding events in Halifax, as well as provide useful examples of how to approach events within that framework. In *Fragile Lives*, an examination of eighteenth-century Paris, Arlette Farge uses the ideas of her teacher and collaborator Michael Foucault to study the morals and identities of artisans and labourers as social constructs. Within the Parisian neighbourhoods she examines, life was lived in public and behaviour was guided by the community as witness rather than by an overarching set of laws or mode of production. Her subjects were complex characters guided as much by self-interest as by the reactions of others.³⁷ In *Poverty and Welfare in England*, Steven King sets out the letter and spirit of the Poor Laws emanating from London between 1700 and 1850 and examines how they operated across the country.³⁸ Unlike Farge, King is not driven by a particular theory. He is guided by his belief that examining familiar data in new ways can help us to better understand the operation of the Poor Law. For example, King moves away from examinations of employment and wages and “offers alternative measures of poverty — such as exemption from local taxes, rate arrears, and low rental payments.”³⁹ King concludes that central policies acted more as guide than gospel. The Poor Law operated according to local economics, but more so according to a process of negotiation between those in need of relief, overseers of the poor and land-owning ratepayers. Practice varied widely. King concludes that Victorian England had relief systems not a system of relief.

These works by Arlette Farge and Steven King do not fit neatly into one of the six historical interpretations of social welfare policies identified by Canadian historian of social welfare James Struthers.⁴⁰ Farge and King do not approach the past from a Marxist perspective. Unlike Prentice and Houston, they do not argue for social control. Rather, they claim that their subjects played a key role in forming, maintaining and legitimizing the so-

cial order. Farge and King have little in common either with the top-down functional approach Struthers ascribes to Guest. In fact their bottom-up view is the antithesis of Guest's. Their techniques very much informed my research as I assessed how national policies and trends identified by Guest operated on the ground in Halifax. The work of Farge and King does not fit well either with Struthers's depictions of what he calls "the social democratic model," "the new institutionalism" or "gender analysis." The political cultural approach as outlined by Struthers argues that "a societal consensus around certain values, ideas and core beliefs" largely determines the shape and limits of social welfare policies.⁴¹ However, this approach does not stress the elasticity of values, ideas and beliefs or that they are influenced by members at the low end of society as much as they are by those who hold higher positions. Farge and King argue that the poor held such influence. In their interpretations, the poor, the working and middle classes hold similar values, ideas and beliefs. They are divided by wealth, not morality, and it is through a fluid morality shared and affected by all members of society that consensus is reached on matters such as the form and level of relief and workplace conditions. This book offers an alternative approach to the study of extreme poverty in Halifax. Following the examples of Farge and King, as well as ways of interpreting actions found in the contemporary literature on homelessness,⁴² this study approaches the extremely poor in terms of their sameness with the working and middle classes. It approaches social welfare policy as a product of consensus, which was sometimes an uneasy resolution of conflict, reached by the community as a whole. This is a departure from the way the history of extreme poverty in Halifax has been approached in the past.⁴³

HISTORIES OF EXTREME POVERTY

Within the expansive literature on poverty only a small number of studies closely examine extreme poverty and homelessness. Vagrancy laws, poorhouse legislation and outdoor relief efforts are typical entry points. Historical studies that focus on extreme poverty and homelessness in Canada are few in number⁴⁴ and among them only a handful examine extreme poverty and homelessness in Atlantic Canada.⁴⁵ Within this group, poverty on a regional scale is a dominant theme.⁴⁶ But little has been done to explore wealth disparity within the region at the community level or to examine the lives of those at the very bottom of Maritime society. By focusing on those who lived "rough" in Edwardian Halifax this research helps to fill in an unfortunate gap in our historical examination of Atlantic Canada. It also encourages further research into extreme poverty and homelessness elsewhere in Canada, where this aspect of the past has also been largely overlooked.