



December 1999

The Politics of Retirement in Britain, 1878-1948. John Macnicol.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(1999) "*The Politics of Retirement in Britain, 1878-1948.* John Macnicol.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 4 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol26/iss4/17>

This Book Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



These and other chapters in this book offer a provocative case for the return of residential care as a primary instrument of child welfare policy. However, it is unlikely that this proposal will gather much support either in professional or political circles. While simple solutions to very complex problems were once greeted with acclaim, there is greater recognition today that no single, apparently straightforward remedy to perplexing social issues can be found. Residential services have an obvious role to play in a complex, multifaceted child welfare service system but they are not the panacea to the difficult challenges it faces.

John Macnicol, *The Politics of Retirement in Britain, 1878–1948*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. \$74.95 hardcover.

In 1942, at the height of the Second World War, the British government published a document proposing the creation of a comprehensive, national social security system. The document, which subsequently became known as the Beveridge Report, attracted widespread attention and was hailed for its visionary proposals to eradicate poverty, ignorance and disease. Its appeal was understandable. After the privations of the Great Depression and the death and destruction of the war, it offered the hope of a new society from which social need, deprivation and injustice would be banished.

Although the Beveridge Report laid the foundation for the post-War expansion of the British welfare state, it was not, as Macnicol demonstrates, the result of a flash of utopian inspiration but rather of many decades of intense political struggle to introduce state funded retirement provisions. The struggle reflected the activities of which different interests groups who campaigned around issues of poverty, aging and dependence. The struggle also reflected changing demographic, social and economic realities which changed the way elderly people participated in economic and social life. While the impact of the Beveridge report should not be underestimated, it was not as revolutionary as many historians have suggested but rather an attempt by the state to accommodate diverse and complex social forces.

This detailed and readable account of the history of state funded retirement pensions in Britain in the 70 or so years preceding the Beveridge report shows once again how deeply issues

of power pervade social policy. It also shows how complex these issues are. The introduction of social security in Britain was not only the result of the efforts of competing interest groups but of more fundamental struggles around the role of the elderly in society, of labor markets, of income and wealth and indeed of the survival of capitalism as an economic and social system.

In an attempt to frame the discussion and interpret the chronology, Macnicol draws on established theoretical perspectives which offer different explanations for the origin of modern day social security systems. However, having stated his own theoretical preference, he does not always integrate theory with the historiography, and the mustering of historical evidence does not seem to lend sufficient weight to the argument. Nevertheless, this is an important contribution to literature which should be consulted by anyone interested in the historical evolution of social policy in Britain.

Jack Rothman, (Ed.), *Reflections on Community Organizing: Enduring Themes and Critical Issues*. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers, 1999. \$35.00 papercover.

Although community practice has been an integral part of social work for many decades, it has taken enjoyed different degrees of popularity at different times during the profession's history. In the early years, community practice found expression in settlement work and in agency coordination, and, by the 1950s, community social services planning was well established. In the 1960s, community practice adopted a more political stance, using a variety of organizing tactics to assist low income communities campaign for civic and social rights. By the 1980s, the political impetus for community action had weakened and it appeared that few social workers were much interested in the field. However, by the mid-1990s, there were signs of a resurgence of interest in community practice. By this time, a new journal devoted to community social work had been established, and many more papers on the subject were being presented at national conferences.

As community practice enjoys a resurgence, the time is ripe for scholars working in the field to engage in a thorough review of its history. There is a need to account for the different orientations community practice has taken, and to examine the way it has