



David Hitchcock, *Vagrancy in English Culture and Society, 1650-1750*

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- 1 Before the advent of the “New Social History” in the 1960s, conventional wisdom among historians about vagrancy in early modern England was founded on a number of contemporary print commentaries which depicted vagrants as a threat to the well-ordered commonwealth, portraying them as an organised and hierarchical “fraternity of vagabonds” whose values subverted the social norms and values of respectable society. Early work on relevant archival sources (Paul Slack and A.L. Beier were two noteworthy contributors to this process) discovered little by way of organised and hierarchical bands of criminal vagrants, but rather a varied body of the mobile poor, in which migrant workers and casualties of those numerous misfortunes which could afflict the lower orders of society in the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods (and, indeed, most others) vastly outnumbered hardcore criminal vagrants. These archival researches, however, while admittedly pushing on to the 1650s, followed the long-familiar print sources in concentrating on the reigns of Elizabeth and James I. There was an assumption that vagrancy as a social issue died down after 1650, as the demographic pressures seen as underlying the “vagrant problem” slackened, and the standard of living of the poor improved in consequence.
- 2 David Hitchcock’s book very much challenges this interpretation. Using a wide range of sources he demonstrates the persistency of vagrancy, both as a reality and as a perceived social problem, throughout the period he deals with. As he points out, between 1563 and 1751 the English state passed thirty-two separate acts dealing with

vagrancy (for his purposes, the 1662 Act of Settlement was probably the most important) which allowed a bewildering variety of people and behaviours to be classified as “vagrant” if the need occurred. So wandering minstrels, the owners of dancing bears, people pretending to be Gypsies (“Egyptians”), all persons over the age of seven taken begging, common labourers refusing to work for “reasonable wages”, and servants departing service without a testimonial from their employers, along with many others, could be classified as “vagrant”. Obviously, the aim of the vagrancy laws was to control the mobile workforce which was essential to the early modern economy but whose very mobility and fluidity offered an affront to the social stability which political theorists and legislators of the period regarded as so desirable.

- 3 The problem for any historian of vagrancy is, of course, that of the nature of the relevant historical records. As Hitchcock comments, “The social history of vagrancy is composed of fragments of past lives, stories otherwise lost to posterity” (p. 7), but these “stories”, usually statements given by vagrants at the point of their apprehension, while often poignant, are characteristically rather skeletal: we have very little by way of elaborate testimony on the part of the vagrant. Hitchcock does, however, draw on a wide range of documentary sources, mainly generated by local courts and administrative officials, which allow him to flesh out the lived experience of vagrants in this period. Above all, he stresses the problem of distinguishing between the vagrant and the migrant worker, and also uncovers many of the individual stories, intrinsically linked to the realities of the life of the poor, which recount the disastrous progress from having a settled role in society to becoming an outsider. To this he adds a wide knowledge of the voluminous literature of social improvement which flourished between 1650 and 1750, and which frequently commented on the problem of the poor in generally and vagrants in particular. A variety of measures were instituted to deal with the “idle poor”, and accordingly vagrants found themselves being incarcerated in workhouses, pressed into the army or navy to help William III and his successors fight their wars, sent to England’s North American or Caribbean colonies, and, if young, offered the benefits of being educated (and socialised) in a charity school.
- 4 Two of the approaches which Hitchcock follows are particularly worthy of note. Firstly, he examines the images of vagrants and vagrancy which are embedded in the popular literature of the period, with a very interesting and pertinent focus on ballads. These display a “complex and contradictory mix of attitudes” (p. 89) which could incorporate both images of “jovial crews” of beggars harking back to the Elizabethan rogue literature and others seeing the vagrant as an innocent victim of circumstance deserving Christian charity. And, secondly, Hitchcock devotes a chapter to female vagrants. Although the pre 1650 image of the English vagrant was predominantly male (A.L. Beier’s book on vagrancy, it will be remembered, was entitled *Masterless Men*), Hitchcock argues that, on the strength of many of the documentary samples of vagrants he has uncovered, sometimes the women apprehended, many of them with young children, outnumbered men by two to one, an interesting transition from the earlier period. This is obviously a point which merits further attention, but Hitchcock is surely correct in stressing the relevance of the increase in women being employed as domestic servants, and hence experiencing the insecurities inherent in that status. Not least of these were sexual harassment and exploitation by male employers, with pregnancy, and hence loss of employment, as a frequent consequence.

- 5 *Vagrancy in English Culture and Society, 1650-1750* is therefore an important book which displays a real understanding of its subject, and offers many new approaches. I have only one criticism of any substance, although a germane one for a review in a journal dealing with the history of crime. When working, many years ago, on seventeenth-century criminal records, I was struck by the frequency with which vagrants were investigated as perpetrators of thefts. Obviously, these vagrants constituted nothing like the organised criminal bands of the Elizabethan imagination, but they do seem to have constituted a constant irritant. Hitchcock is aware that for those labelled as vagrant in his period, working, begging, and stealing were all strategies which could be resorted to as occasion demanded. But, while giving due attention to the misfortunes which put vagrants on the road, and the sometimes heart-rending stories vagrants had to tell, maybe a little more focus on the vagrant as petty criminal may have deepened our understanding of vagrancy's contemporary image.
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