

**A HISTORY OF ENGLISH
PHILANTHROPY FROM THE
DISSOLUTION OF THE
MONASTERIES TO THE TAKING
OF THE FIRST CENSUS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9781760575021

A History of English Philanthropy from the Dissolution of the Monasteries to the Taking of the First Census by B. Kirkman Gray

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

LONDON:
P. S. KING & SON
ORCHARD HOUSE
WESTMINSTER

1905

PREFACE.

PHILANTHROPY plays a considerable part in our social economy, and a still larger one in the popular imagination. It is urged as a religious duty by the churches; it is proposed as an honourable occupation to those who wish to do something for their poorer or less healthy neighbours. The impulse, of course, is not a new one, but side by side with it we can trace a growing conviction of the need for careful scrutiny of the thing, whatever it is, which it is proposed to do. This critical reflection itself is not altogether new—springs from a large experience of the extreme difficulty of achieving what is likely to be permanently beneficial, and the facility with which mischief may be done. But this experience gives rise to a not infrequently expressed doubt whether philanthropy have indeed any useful function to fulfil. There is a tendency to pass beyond the criticism of particular benevolent projects to an examination of the nature of philanthropy itself. What fresh insight, men are asking, does philanthropy yield into the secret of the problems of distress? How far is it conducive to social well being? Is it in any way inimical to this? In what relation does it stand to other ameliorative activities of an evolving society? Such an enquiry seems to deserve serious consideration and to be of sufficient importance to justify a comprehensive investigation of the character of philanthropic action in general. The one question, in effect, into which all the others resolve themselves is this:—"What is the meaning and worth of philanthropy?"

This question, which is in the nature of a challenge, had fashioned itself in my mind as one to which I should endeavour to supply an answer. I had become aware, in the course of several years' work among the unfortunate subjects of philanthropic activity, of what is, of course, a matter of common knowledge, viz., that philanthropy does not entirely fulfil its aim, since the evils which it seeks to allay still continue, and many of them in an increasing degree.

Now philanthropy is something more than a social ideal; it has become a national institution. It has acquired, as all institutions must do, a great weight of inertia, so that, while it is no doubt modifiable in response to changing ideas, it is not readily susceptible of any radical alteration, whether for better or for worse. It exists, and in very much its present form it is likely to exist for a considerable time to come. However that may be, it has had a long history in the past, and if we retrace this history we ought to be able to throw some light on its present meaning and problems. In the expectation that this would be the case, I turned back on the past with such questions as these:—"What at different times has philanthropy regarded as its proper task? By what means has it sought to pursue it? How far has it fulfilled its aim? What proportion did the work accomplished, or the aim proposed, bear to the work that needed to be done?" I could find no modern book which gave me the information I desired, and accordingly it became necessary to interrogate for myself the actors in the philanthropic world. The knowledge thus gained seemed to be full of interest, illustrating as it does, the manners and social life alike of the thriving and the distressed classes. At the same time the importance of its bearing on the evolution of philanthropic thought and practice proved to be even greater than I had anticipated. Before entering on a critical examination of the present-day

problems, it seemed necessary to write the history of modern English philanthropy. And the present volume is the result.

The choice of the period of the dissolution of the monasteries as a starting-point is convenient for two reasons. It was then that modern problems began to formulate themselves with great precision. And charity was then ceasing to be under the immediate direction and tutelage of the Church. Catholic charity is closely connected with the doctrine of *pœnitentia*. The effect of almsgiving on the soul of the donor was theoretically more important than its effect on the body of the recipient. This motive for charity did not cease with the Reformation: men have continued to give of their substance to the poor in recompense or contrition for the sin of their souls. It would hardly be possible to write about pre-Reformation philanthropy without considering this subject of motive. It is quite easy to do so for the post-Reformation period when, although this motive was still operative, it was ceasing to be explicit. I do not enter here into the deeply interesting study of the hidden springs of charitable impulse, but confine myself to the more objective study of social effects, to describing the achievement of the executive will, not probing the greater or less worth of soul which may accompany it. I cannot, indeed, avoid the thoughts and feelings of philanthropists, but when I dwell on them, it is for their bearing on the nature of the work done and its greater or less social efficacy.

The reason for bringing the history to an end with the close of the eighteenth century may not be so obvious, but is really of the same kind as suggests its starting-point. To have begun earlier would have involved us in questions of theological interest, to have continued into the nineteenth century would have involved matters of present-day controversy, and led us from a description of what was to a discussion of what ought to be. The period I have chosen is remote

enough from our own for the reader to be more interested in the history than in the fact of his agreement or disagreement with the opinions of the writer. And in the present volume it is a description of the past in which I wish him to be interested. I do not, indeed, refrain entirely from indicating my own judgment. The reflections of an author may serve sometimes to relieve the narrative. But such reflections are by the way ; the main purpose of the book is to describe things as they have been. At the same time it should yield information of events and discover laws of development which will be of service when we turn to modern controversies. In other words, the knowledge of things as they are is a stage in the progress towards a true perception of their worth.

It has not always been easy to decide what to include or to leave out, because philanthropy, in common with other terms in general use, is difficult, or more probably incapable, of strict definition. We may perhaps say safely that it proceeds from the free will of the agent, and not in response to any claim of legal right on the part of the recipient. Such a description will include the English poor law, for although under this law the state assumes the duty of relief, there is no accompanying right in the pauper to enforce it. The distinction is rather a fine one for practical purposes ; but it is worth remembering that the poor law was in its inception, and has been since regarded as a charity. It might be called a quasi-philanthropy. At some parts of our period the relations between private philanthropy and this state philanthropy have been close and important, and when this is the case, I have trenched to some extent on the history of the poor law because it illustrates our more immediate subject. For the most part, however, I have followed pretty closely the popular usage of the word. Action for which the state has definitely made itself responsible is not generally

regarded as philanthropic. It may conceivably be better, but that is beside the question. In the main, we shall be concerned with the actions of private persons, and with corporate policy only when the interactions of the two are numerous.

The greater part of philanthropy may be said to consist in contributions of money, service, or thought, such as the recipient has no strict claim to demand, and the doer is not compelled to render. Strict claim, for there is a larger consideration, whether the fact of a common humanity does not itself constitute a claim of right. Such a claim, however, in the absence of any power of enforcing it, must remain exceedingly vague. In some dim sub-conscious recognition of such a vaguely outlined right as this, all philanthropic action has its roots. And it may well be that philanthropy has failed of perfect success, just because it has allowed the conception of humanity to remain an indeterminate and feebly operative one.

It is not always possible to discover any clear end and purpose in philanthropic action, but so far as it possesses an aim more comprehensive than the relief of a transitory emotion, it may perhaps be described as a process of modifying the existing distribution of wealth in the interests of the more unfortunate classes, and of doing this with a view to improvement in the quality of life.

These remarks are no more than roughly descriptive ; but they serve to indicate the principle of selection adopted in the following pages. The period which I am about to describe may be divided into three sections of very unequal length. The first of these comprises almost exactly a hundred years, and closes with the outbreak of the strife between Charles I. and his Parliament. During this time it was necessary to build up anew the whole structure of charitable relief, and to adapt it to changed circumstances. The interest centres on the early perplexity and failure to do this ; in the recognition of unemploy-