

**THE OLD POOR-LAW AND  
THE NEW SOCIALISM: OR,  
PAUPERISM AND  
TAXATION**

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The old poor-law and the new socialism: or, Pauperism and taxation by F. C. Montague

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**F. C. MONTAGUE**

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BY

F. C. MONTAGUE.



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## P R E F A C E .

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I HAVE been requested to state in a few words why it has been thought important that the Cobden Club should bring into general notice the gist and substance of the Report of the Poor Law Commissioners of 1832, upon which our present Poor Law is founded.

Few now alive remember the frightful state of the agricultural districts of England which that report disclosed; and it is evident, from various proposals now made for the benefit of the poor, that many of its lessons have been forgotten even by our statesmen.

The famous statute of Elizabeth was not successful in dealing with pauperism; but it was after the change made by the statute of the 36th year of the reign of George III. that the evils arising from a bad law, carelessly administered, began to advance with an extreme rapidity. A reader of Mr. Montague's paper will find in his statement of the operation of the law that "in 1817 a Committee of the House of Commons expressed the fear that the amount of the assessment for the relief of the poor would grow till it had absorbed all the profits of the land on which it was levied;" that "in 1832 this prophecy seemed to be approaching fulfilment;" that at the same time the system of relief forced the independent labourer to become a pauper, bribed the women to unchastity, loosened

family ties, and destroyed family affection. In one word, the Poor Law was fast confiscating the rents of owners and the profits of occupiers, whilst utterly demoralising the labouring population. Strange to say, all classes seemed blind to the fact that they were working together to accomplish their common ruin.

The startling facts disclosed by the Report emboldened the Liberal Ministry of that day to propose the new Poor Law—a measure which the Duke of Wellington, then leader of the Conservative party, justly described as one of the most valuable, but also most courageous, measures which he had ever known to be proposed by a Government.

In the hope that we may profit by the experience, and not repeat the blunders, of our fathers, I moved in the House of Commons the reprinting of the Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, and Mr. Montague has written his very able abridgment of that Report, which is strongly recommended to the careful study of all who are interested in the welfare of the working classes or the security of property.

W. RATHBONE.

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I.—THE OLD POOR-LAW.

A LEGISLATION, inspired by just and humane feelings, yet more harmful than many of the worst enactments of selfish power; a legislation which aimed at assuaging misery, yet chiefly served to make it more inveterate, hereditary, hopeless; a legislation which, in many instances, proved almost ruinous to the employer, whilst it everywhere depressed the wages of the workman; a legislation which turned the peasant, for whose good it was designed, into a wretched dependent, too often into a lawless ruffian; a legislation directed to save the weak from overwhelming temptation, which filled the country with paupers and prostitutes; a legislation, carried out by the rich, which surely tended to render all property worthless, in particular the property of the class predominant in the Legislature: such a legislation might seem the wildest paradox of wasted ingenuity, were it not to be traced in the Statute Book of England, had it not left its marks upon the history of our country. In the old laws relating to the relief of the poor, we have a memorable example of the mischief which crude common-sense can do when it assumes a competence to deal with the most delicate of social questions. The study of those laws is full of in-

struction ; especially at the present time, when there prevails a general desire to improve the condition of the poor. Now, if ever, we need to be reminded that good intentions are not in themselves enough ; that they are no substitute for knowledge or discretion ; that at best they afford a poor excuse for mistakes which may jeopardise the welfare of millions or the very existence of a great State. The lesson has been often repeated in history ; but mankind have an admirable gift of forgetfulness.

The English poor-law has passed through several stages, very clearly distinguishable from one another. The earlier poor-law was harsh ; often brutal in the extreme ; yet it availed as little for the correction of idleness as for the relief of distress. The famous statute of Elizabeth, passed in 1601, placed the poor-law upon a new footing. It provided that the churchwardens and overseers of every parish should take measures for setting to work the able-bodied and for relieving the impotent poor ; and gave them all the necessary powers of raising money for this purpose and for carrying out its other provisions. This Act established the principles, that the impotent poor have a claim to be maintained at the public expense, and that the able-bodied poor have a claim to be employed by the public : principles recognised down to this day. During the seventeenth and the early part of the eighteenth century the Act appears to have worked tolerably well. There was much pauperism, but it showed no regular tendency to increase. An Act of the ninth year of George I., which empowered parishes, either singly or in combination, to purchase or hire a work-house and to refuse relief to all who would not enter it, appears, in many instances, to have reduced the number of paupers.

At the close of the last century, the war with France and a series of bad seasons, assisted by other causes, occasioned a great rise in the price of necessaries, whilst the law of settlement, which chained the labourer to his parish, the miserable state of popular instruction, and many other causes, hindered wages from rising in proportion, and the distress of the poor was extreme. In order to mitigate