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Review of The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England

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The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England. By *Susannah R.*

Ottaway. Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy, and Society in Past Time, volume 39. Edited by *Richard Smith* et al.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. xiv + 322. \$70.00.

The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England is an ambitious and much-needed examination of a pivotal century in the history of old age, especially as it pertains to the history of the family, gender relations, poverty, and the growth of the modern state. In this well-reasoned and extensively researched monograph, Susannah Ottaway imaginatively employs a varied collection of evidence to address an array of issues—from the conceptual to the methodological, chronological, and categorical—in her admirably successful effort to characterize the construction and experience of aging in this transitional era.

Broadly speaking, Ottaway contends that much as strong habits of individual independence and family and community support continued to function in ways that acknowledged both the contributions of the aged and the obligation to assist them when needed, both the quality and quantity of care declined by the 1790s in response to economic pressures. Accordingly, Ottaway credits the elderly with subscribing to the ideal of “engaged independence” in old age, and as far as possible acting to achieve it, but in the context of increasing vulnerability, marginalization, and societal perception of the old as burdensome. Additionally, Ottaway reminds her readers that one sector of society cannot stand in for the whole when it comes to analyzing the history of old age. She demonstrates that gender, wealth, degree of agedness, extent of physical debility, and level of familial interaction were significant factors in an individual’s experience of aging.

The analysis begins with a nuanced look at sources such as diaries, literary works, and medical treatises as a basis for addressing the troublesome issue of the definition of “old.” Interestingly, while rejecting the use of men’s experience as normative, Ottaway also refuses to consider menopause as the “old moment” for women. She instead places the marker at the calendar age of sixty for both sexes. Challenging the emphasis historians place on the end of childbearing as critical to women’s experience of aging, Ottaway redefines menopause as a gradual transition process in middle age rather than as the start of old age. Problematic as this de-emphasis is, it does fit with Ottaway’s argument that an intensified concern with chronological age was symptomatic both of parishes’ need to keep track of age for awarding pensions and of an Enlightenment-fostered interest in classification.

Ottaway then turns to the ways in which an older person might strive to enact the ideal of self-reliance while engaging with a network of family support, and she examines the variety of meanings of “retirement” in this context. Her compilation of age data on members of the House of Commons and the vestry at Puddletown, for instance, bolsters her depiction of gradual, optional retirement for prosperous men based on self-assessment of health and capacity. Further down the social scale, Ottaway detects a growing conception of retirement as deserved repose in old age rather than as simply the stoppage of work due to physical disability and, correspondingly, a pension considered as a benefit earned by a productive life rather than as merely an insurance policy.

This ideal of independence also extended to housing arrangements: Ottaway shows that the elderly wished to live in homes of their own, that wealthier old people were generally the heads of their own households, and that communities subscribed to this ideal in arranging for the elderly poor to remain in their homes or in residences separate from work-houses. While coresidence was an option, especially for widows, Ottaway places it within a rhetoric of reciprocity rather than dependence. Ottaway also describes (and might well have expanded upon) the mutual emotional and practical support available in the relationship of grandparents and grandchildren as well as in wider kin networks.

When Ottaway addresses mechanisms of community support for the elderly, her study shifts in tone in a way that highlights her capacity to make equally perceptive use of

literary commentary and generalized inverse projection. She uses data from three localities—Terling, Puddletown, and Ovenden—to argue that poor relief should be understood despite regional differences as a national system in which communities took seriously a responsibility to relieve the aged poor and that, in turn, the elderly poor regarded themselves as entitled to such aid. She characterizes community relief as dependable, though not generous, and based on the prosperity, food prices, and employment prospects of a locale rather than on religious complexion or depth of family connections.

Ottaway's conclusions underline the usually successful efforts of the old to maintain themselves, since "a majority of the older individuals in the parishes studied were able to stay independent of parish relief throughout this period" (219). But for the most vulnerable, "the parish's role in supplying economic support to its elderly members changed from that of a very strong safety net that extended over a relatively small area to a far-flung but all too weak-fibered net strained to the breaking point" (221). Even though Ottaway's data indicate that a consistently high proportion of funding continued to go to the elderly (contesting Paul Slack's findings that poor relief shifted to the young after 1750), the doubling of the number of old people on poor relief late in the century meant that pensions were unable to keep up with inflation.

Ottaway argues that, as a result, overseers burdened by the increasing demands of individualized outdoor relief turned that responsibility over to a workhouse governor, thus transforming the experience of poverty-stricken old age from maximized autonomy to permanent institutionalization. While Ottaway finds the material conditions of workhouses to be more comfortable in terms of diet and furnishings than lurid literary descriptions would indicate, she highlights the marginalization, restriction, and indignity of the workhouse, and she concludes that among competing Enlightenment values, efficiency trumped autonomy when towns were faced with the new demographic reality.

Ottaway ends her monograph with a call to scholars to consistently incorporate consideration of life stage into social history. Her incisive, lucid, and multifaceted analysis is an admirable model for putting that call into action and, as such, makes a lasting and important contribution to the field.

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The Statesman's Science: History, Nature, and Law in the Political Thought of

Samuel Taylor Coleridge. By *Pamela Edwards*.

New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. Pp. xi + 294. \$45.00.

The Statesman's Science is a very welcome addition to our understanding of Coleridge's politics—last addressed fully in John Morrow's *Coleridge's Political Thought* (London, 1990)—which also has wider implications for students of the romantic period. Pamela Edwards's starting point is the rejection of the notion of apostasy, the tired formula that the Lake Poets began their adult lives as extreme radicals but later turned into arch-conservatives. Instead, she begins with the deliberately provocative claim—borrowed from John Stuart Mill—that Coleridge founded a "second strand" of liberalism that would have "set a Tory's hair on end" (29). In order to show this, Edwards wants to argue that the popular attempt to interpret Coleridge's ideas through the framework of "agrarian republicanism and civic virtue" (6) has meant that his engagement with the jurisprudential approach to liberty and commerce has been neglected. The balancing of these two discourses turns out to be central to Coleridge's politics.

In her account of the youthful Coleridge, Edwards argues that he ought not to be viewed as a democrat and republican in the style of Thomas Paine and John Thelwall. Rather, Coleridge was closer to traditional Whig thinking in his respect for the framework of the constitution. He defended the balanced constitution against what he saw as William Pitt's