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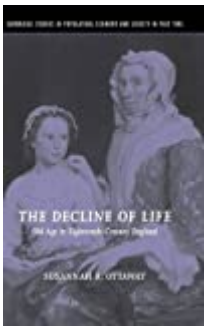


**Susannah R. Ottaway.** *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xiv + 322 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-81580-2.

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Ottaway's book seems particularly timely given our current concerns in the West about aging populations, adequate pension funds, and assisted living communities. She reveals that such concerns are anything but new. In a well-researched study, making use of both quantitative and qualitative sources and methodologies, Ottaway presents the changing experience of old age in the eighteenth century. She argues that while there was no "Golden Age" of aging in England, changes in the care of the aged over the eighteenth century resulted in a lesser quality of care, an increased marginalization of the aged, and a more dependent elderly population. Ottaway views the latter as particularly problematic since she argues that the English strove for independence in old age.

The book's first four chapters examine the definition of who was old in the eighteenth century, the expectations for the elderly to continue to work and participate in their communities, the goal of a private, autonomous residence for retirement, and the importance of family and kinship to the aged. Ottaway does an admirable job of showing the variable experiences of aging in the eighteenth century. She concentrates especially on how attitudes toward and provisions for the aged varied by class, gender, and region. Most of the book focuses on the laboring poor. More comparisons to the middle-class and elite might have answered such questions as whether all classes age the same and whether more financially comfortable persons have a more benign view of old age.

Ottaway's book, however, does serve as a model for how to write a gendered social history. She explores equally the experiences of old men and women, and in doing so she provides some revealing comparisons. Ottaway says that women were perceived to be old before men although she disagrees with other historians that it was menopause that signaled a woman's entry into old age. Intriguingly, she points out that there was little discussion of menopause by physicians and "almost complete silence regarding menopause in personal accounts from the period" (p. 39). In comparing aged men and women, Ottaway also posits that retirement was a less relevant term for women because of the nature of women's work. Women continued to care for home and family in old age. More importantly, the by-employments in which women worked earlier in their life cycle were thought to be suitable for them to continue in old age as a supplement to any poor relief. One of Ottaway's more important findings is that while historians talk of a feminization of poverty, she finds the opposite. Poor and aged men, even unmarried ones, received higher pensions than aged poor women. Poor relief was gendered, but it was not feminized.

In chapter 4, Ottaway contributes to a growing chorus on the significance of family and kinship in England. She points out that our focus on the common experience of widowhood in the past means that we know little about the roles of spouses in old age. And she argues for more work on the relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren. Ottaway weighs in on the issue of children caring for aged parents by pointing out that aged parents assisted their children as much as vice versa. Co-residence with adult married children was low, and in England children could not be forced to take in their parents. Although, as Ottaway points out, most people were poor and could not afford to take in their parents even if they had wanted. I would argue that we have focused too much on married adult children taking aged parents into their homes, when the more common scenario was for an aged parent to keep an unmarried child (usually a daughter) in his or her home. Ottaway does note that unmarried daughters cared for parents during short-term (but not long-term) illnesses. Nevertheless, my own work on adult single women shows that long-term care was common and led to many women staying single into their forties and fifties, as they became long-term caretakers of their aged kin.

In chapters 5 through 7, Ottaway provides case studies of how the elderly poor were relieved in Terling, Essex, Puddleton, Dorset, and Ovendon, West Yorkshire. She points out that while the poor law was nationally mandated it was administered locally and so there were variations. Nevertheless, she puts to rest any clear cut regional difference between North and South, preferring instead to attribute differences to local economic contexts. In chapter 6, Ottaway addresses how relief for the elderly changed over the eighteenth century, with more aged relieved by the 1790s but a consequent decline in the quality of that relief. The historiography has concentrated on the shifting focus of poor relief from the old to the young, but Ottaway counters this by arguing that while numbers of poor increased, the proportion of aged poor remained high. The aged poor also received a higher percentage of relief funds since their pensions were larger than those given to younger paupers. Chapter 7 looks at the increasing use of workhouses for housing the aged poor by the end of the eighteenth century. Ottaway carefully strips away the Dickensian image of the workhouse to show that the living conditions (in the century before Dickens wrote, at least) were quite adequate. She argues that the real problem was the psychological impact of the workhouse on the aged English, whose desire for autonomy, independence, and privacy was crushed by an institutional setting. Ottaway's focus in these chapters is understandably on public relief, but her work makes it apparent that there is ample room for further study of private charity. The role of almshouses, in particular, has been studied by local historians and antiquaries, but not by social historians.

This is a thoroughly researched and evidentially based monograph, but at times it would be helpful for Ottaway to step back and muse on the place and significance of her findings. The book is written with eighteenth-century specialists in mind, but the author misses an opportunity to situate her work within a longer context, to show how the eighteenth century differed from what came before and after in its approach to the elderly. The section on the institutionalization of the aged poor would also benefit from a European comparison, since institutional solutions were more common on the continent. And lastly, the significance of "age" to the way historians write and think about the past could have been beneficially weaved throughout the book, instead of leaving it to the conclusion. That said, historians of demography, family, society, gender, and, of course, the eighteenth century, will find much in Ottaway's book to interest and instruct them.



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