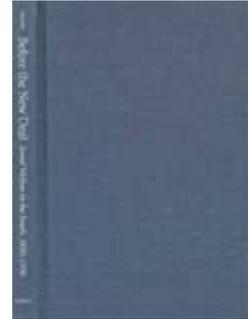**Elna C. Green, ed.** *Before the New Deal: Social Welfare in the South, 1830-1930.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1999. xxvi + 222 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2114-1; $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2091-5.

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Discovery of the Southern Asylum

The publication of *Before the New Deal* is a long overdue event. During the last three decades an impressive wave of sophisticated studies exploring the history of social welfare in the United States has appeared. This new scholarship has addressed questions of social control and the agency of the poor and working class with vigor and imagination. But it has said little, if anything, about the South. Reflecting the lack of work on the region, Elizabeth Wisner's *Social Welfare in the South from Colonial Times to World War I*, published in 1970, remains the sole historical survey of developments below the Mason-Dixon line.[1]

Before the New Deal is a welcome corrective to this neglect, and it promises to shape the research on the formative years of southern welfare history for some time to come. Edited by Elna C. Green, this stimulating collection of ten essays by younger scholars deepens our understanding of the complex interplay of race, gender, and class in the southern past, and it makes a persuasive case for paying attention to regional variations in American social welfare history. "By examining the role of the South's unique political economy, the impact of slavery

and racism on social institutions, and the region's experience of war and reconstruction," observes Green, "this volume insists that the South's social welfare story is no mere carbon copy of the nation's" (p. xx).

In her introduction, Green provides a helpful overview of recent scholarship on American social welfare history, and she attempts to sketch out the contours of how this history unfolded in the South, a difficult task given the relative paucity of secondary sources. As one might imagine, the Civil War and Reconstruction loom large in her account of the transformation of social welfare policy in the South. While slavery tended to keep African Americans from becoming public dependents, the poverty and dislocation produced by the war led to a rapid expansion in the numbers of black and white southerners who received assistance. Southern social welfare continued to display unique regional characteristics after Reconstruction, as Green points out, but national philanthropies such as the Rockefeller Foundation and organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers began to exercise a growing influence in the twentieth century. Even more important in bringing the South

into the mainstream of social welfare policy and practice was the impact of the federal government during the New Deal. Rounding out her introduction with a valuable list of suggestions for future directions in research, Green underscores the wealth of materials available and the range of topics that are as yet unexplored in this emerging field.

The body of the book is separated into two sections, "State Policies" and "Local Case Studies." Although this distinction seems clear enough at first glance, it tends to dissolve when applied to the individual papers. For example, James H. Tuten's "Regulating the Poor in Alabama" turns up in the first section, but its detailed analysis of the Jefferson County Poor Farm also qualifies it as a candidate for inclusion in the second section. Why is Lee S. Polansky's piece on the treatment of delinquent girls in Georgia considered a local case study and not an assessment of state policy? Enough of the essays fit into either category, in short, to give the impression that their placement in the volume is fairly arbitrary. Organizing the contributions chronologically – a common approach in such anthologies – would not have worked much better, since most of the pieces deal with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But perhaps they might have been more effectively divided between those that investigate social welfare during the Civil War and its aftermath and those that consider social welfare in the New South.

Before the New Deal will disappoint those hoping to find detailed coverage of developments in the Old South. Peter Wallenstein's essay on state institutions for the insane, deaf, and blind in Georgia, which draws on his *From Slave South to New South*, is one of the few pieces in the volume that takes into consideration the antebellum era.[2] His lucid discussion stresses that the appearance of these asylums in Georgia lagged behind the North by twenty to thirty years and that under slavery "social control outweighed social welfare in importance" (p. 5). The military and financial turmoil of the Civil War, together with the crisis sparked by the issue of black inclusion after emancipation, contributed to the distinctive experience of the state's welfare institutions.

While Wallenstein sweeps through the antebellum, wartime, and postbellum periods examining a variety of welfare institutions, Kathleen Gorman zeroes in on how Georgia moved after the war to construct a pension system for Confederate veterans. Because these men took up arms against the Union, they did not qualify for federal assistance. Southern states thus stepped in following

the overthrow of Radical Reconstruction and provided pensions for the veterans. The effort placed a huge strain on the resources of the Georgia government, requiring a level of state expenditures that was second only to education during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pensions, however, served not only the practical purpose of caring for aging veterans and their widows; they provided a way to honor the Lost Cause. As Gorman perceptively argues, these purposes were inextricably linked, and it was their very interconnectedness that marked this as a southern social welfare system.

Two other papers explore the effects of the Civil War on southern social welfare. E. Susan Barber takes up the treatment of white Civil War orphans in Richmond, while Susan Hamburger assesses the care of Confederate widows, mothers, and daughters in that same city. Both studies illuminate the activism of women in the nineteenth-century South, suggesting that the long-standing image of the southern lady on her pedestal has obscured the ways in which white southern women gained access to the public arena before they had the right to vote.[3]

Barber, like Wallenstein, places her analysis of social welfare during and after the Civil War in the context of antebellum developments. The Female Humane Association, which is the focus of her investigation, established its orphan asylum for white girls in 1805. White women from the more affluent neighborhoods of Richmond made up the backbone of the benevolent association. As Barber asserts, although motivated by humanitarian concerns, the members "were also staking their own claim to a portion of the public sphere and a voice in Richmond society that was often denied to elite and middle-class women by the gender prescriptions of the nineteenth century" (p. 124). The explosion in the number of orphans and the financial reverses precipitated by the Civil War posed an unprecedented challenge for the Female Humane Association. Barber concludes astutely, however, that the wartime experience ultimately strengthened the organization by infusing its work with a new sense of dedication and purpose and by compelling its members to reevaluate their fund-raising strategies.

As Hamburger reveals in her engaging narrative, "We Take Care of Our Womenfolk," the activism of the Richmond women who founded the Home for Needy Confederate Women was no less remarkable. Obtaining a charter from the Virginia General Assembly in 1898, these women, including LaSalle Corbell Pickett, the wife of General George E. Pickett, raised sufficient funds from public and private sources to open the home in 1900.

When a fire seriously damaged the building in 1916, Elizabeth Montague, who was married to a Virginia congressman, led a new round of lobbying efforts that eventually resulted in the relocation of the institution to the Lee Camp Soldiers' Home property owned by the Commonwealth. The home, which moved into its more expansive quarters in 1932, stood not only as a memorial to the sacrifices of white women in the South during the Civil War, but also to the continued involvement of Richmond women in politics.

The participation of southern women in social welfare reforms after the Civil War emerges as an important theme in several other essays. Mazie Hough's analysis of the efforts to provide unwed mothers a home in Memphis during the 1870s and 1880s is especially intriguing. Hough contends that elite evangelical women in Tennessee contested traditional male control of illegitimacy by operating asylums for "fallen women" in the state's four largest cities. In Memphis, the Women's Christian Association (WCA) developed a wide assortment of programs for women after its founding in 1875, including a women's hospital, a women's cooperative, and an employment agency. Its most radical activity, however, involved the mission for unwed mothers, where the WCA "minimized the importance of a woman's reputation" and "stressed women's responsibility to protect other women." (p. 110). As Hough notes, such an approach contradicted several of the key assumptions underlying the defense of lynching, among them the notions that a woman's reputation, once damaged, was ruined forever and that white men served as the natural protectors of white womanhood. But, with the outburst of racial hysteria in the 1890s, the organization ended its experiment, endorsing the importance of a woman's reputation and acknowledging the reliance of women on men to protect them. The refuge, according to Hough, "became a place of punishment and a means to force young women to comply with the society norms" (p. 116).

Joan Marie Johnson highlights the volatile dynamics of race, gender, and class in the New South through a comparative analysis of the activities of black and white clubwomen in South Carolina. Although white women in the early twentieth century bolstered the cause of segregation through "their emphasis on southern identity and their outreach programs for whites only," black clubwomen defied Jim Crow by developing their own social welfare agenda (p. 160). The African American clubwomen, in particular, opened a home for delinquent girls, pursuing a strategy of racial uplift that stressed the need to adopt middle-class norms and values. As Johnson

rightly observes, "Black southern women who promoted respectability undermined white justification for oppression" (p. 176). Of course, this does not mean that the oppression itself lessened, but at least the claims of Ben Tillman and other white political leaders in the state regarding the supposed immorality of black females did not go unanswered.

Lee Polansky's essay also addresses what became known as "the girl problem." Anxiety about the behavior of white teenagers in Georgia led clubwomen, social workers, businessmen, and church groups to support the establishment of a female reformatory outside Atlanta in 1914. As Polansky points out, given the New South's rigid race and class hierarchies, "wayward girls seemed to present an even more pressing problem than in the North" (p. 140). The Georgia Training School attempted to make proper ladies out of poor and working-class white girls who engaged in socially unacceptable behavior that ranged from taking up prostitution to disobeying their parents. Polansky should be commended for the effort to tell us something about the girls committed to this institution, but in the end we find out much more about the middle-class women and others who tried to impose their moral and social standards on the delinquent adolescents.

Many of the historians in this collection, not just Polansky, draw a fuller portrait of the reformers and policymakers than of those they sought to help and control. Elna Green's study of social welfare in New Orleans, for example, exhibits this same tendency. Noting the patchwork of charitable organizations in the city at the end of the nineteenth century, Green traces the rise of a more centralized and efficient approach to philanthropy. In New Orleans, according to her, this movement served to reinforce rather than challenge the racial and social order. Since the Charity Organization Society, which spearheaded the call for "scientific charity," restricted its activities largely to the white community, blacks in New Orleans developed a "parallel social welfare system of mutual societies, religious charities, and separate institutions" (p. 90). Readers wanting to know more about the grassroots relief activities of African Americans in the city, however, will have to look elsewhere, for Green concentrates on the attitudes of professional social workers rather than on the experience of those they served or ignored.

In contrast, James Tuten's "Regulating the Poor in Alabama" investigates in detail those who entered the welfare system. Employing a sample of the 1885, 1915,

and 1930 records from the Jefferson County Poor Farm in Alabama, Tuten uncovers significant changes in the inmate population. His data reveal that over time the average age of the population increased dramatically and that residents became less able to care for themselves due to declining health. The alteration in the age structure stemmed in part from the fact that by 1915 children were no longer admitted; reformers wanted to protect them from conditions at the county institution. While there was a rough balance of the sexes at the poor farm in 1885, men made up about two-thirds of the population during the later years. Furthermore, although the percentage of blacks varied during the period under study, the disproportionate representation of African Americans remained a constant, as did the segregation of the races within the confines of the poor farm.

Tuten provides us with a clearer sense of who the poor were, but he does not examine how they exercised agency within the institutions designed to regulate and assist them. Georgina Hickey's look at the participation of working-class women in the debate over urban development in Atlanta furnishes a more rounded view of the poor. Hickey stresses, in particular, that women who sought relief were not simply passive objects of charity. As middle-class social workers moved during the early twentieth century to establish themselves as experts on the city's poor, black and white working-class women pursued their own agendas, using "the attention focused on them to create a space in which to bargain for care and support that most closely met their own values, needs and conceptions of the city" (p. 190). Organizational records disclose, for example, that clients played agencies off one another in their efforts to acquire aid for their families. Beginning in the 1920s, welfare organizations and reformers in Atlanta shifted their attention from the plight of poor women to that of needy children. The unwillingness of the female welfare recipients to conform to the dictates of the social workers, according to Hickey, led charitable agencies to search for "more pliable subjects," youngsters who could be easily contacted in the schools (p. 201). Unfortunately, Hickey does not explore this change in any detail, and she offers no direct evidence to support her explanation of why it took place, but it is an interesting argument that emphasizes the contested nature of the emerging welfare system.

Despite weaknesses in the organization of the book, the thin coverage of the antebellum South, and the ten-

dency to view the operation of social welfare from the perspective of elites, *Before the New Deal* marks a significant step towards identifying the central themes of southern social welfare history. A deep-seated suspicion of outside interference and a strong commitment to localism have long been hallmarks of southern attitudes toward state intervention. Even in the midst of the Progressive Era, as William A. Link reminds us, social reformers met a wall of resistance in the South; local control and personal liberty, not improvement, were the region's top priorities.[4] Building on Link's insights, this volume highlights the local nature of welfare and the forces hindering a broader response by southern states before the Great Depression. The fascinating work presented here should inspire other scholars to investigate this important but overlooked dimension of the southern past.

Notes

[1]. Elizabeth Wisner, *Social Welfare in the South from Colonial Times to World War I* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970).

[2]. Peter Wallenstein, *From Slave South to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). For other explorations of this topic, see Barbara Bellows, *Benevolence Among Slaveholders: Assisting the Poor in Charleston, 1670-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); and Gail S. Murray, "Charity Within the Bounds of Race and Class: Female Benevolence in the Old South," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 96 (January 1995): 54-70.

[3]. Recent studies that challenge this image and emphasize southern women's participation in the public sphere include Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998)

[4]. William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of No

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