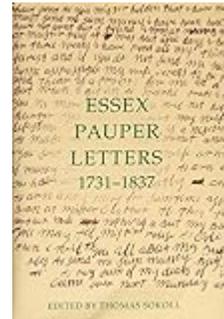




**Thomas Sokoll.** *Essex Pauper Letters: 1731 - 1837.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 727 S. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-726242-9.



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**Published on** H-Albion (April, 2004)

I waited for this book with almost as much expectation as for Harry Potter, and I am glad not to be disappointed. Thomas Sokoll's excellent book is divided into three parts of uneven length. The bulk of the book is given over to the reproduction of pauper letters written by ordinary people in, or on the verge of, poverty and destitution, back to the parishes in which they had settlement under the English settlement laws. The letters, 758 of them, are transcribed in their original form. They often lack punctuation, usually have only loose orthographic structure and are hard to read. Sometimes we have only a single letter from a pauper. Sometimes paupers wrote a long series of letters which allows us to trace their evolving style and posturing. Sokoll has approached these letters in the most exemplary fashion, noting assiduously any editorial changes, linking the letters or the letter writers to other sources where these are available, and noting any inferences that he has made as a result of reading a series of letters from the same person. Readers will see before them a whole landscape of the history of ordinary English men and women that requires interpretation, and frankly my students have loved this book. As an introduction for my 170 first-year students to the nuances of English economic, social, demographic, and cultural history it has been a valuable tool. As a source and methodological base for my second- and third-years it has been very well received. Several of my

students have been Germans who even now are looking for petitions in German archives to underpin their dissertations. It is the sign of a very good book that I can say these things in a review *and* mesh them with other positive comments on scholarly merit.

Readers must make of these letters what they will, and it is in making use of them that we can move to the other main part of the book. The first seventy-seven pages discuss comprehensively the nature of the letters and the methodology for using them. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the usage of pauper letters, suggesting, rightly, that while English historians have known about the existence of pauper letters for a long time, and while they have been used sporadically, little real analytical work has been done on them. Chapter 2 deals with the global context within which pauper letters were created. Under the settlement laws, poor relief could only be obtained from a parish of settlement. For those who moved only short distances from their parish of birth or apprenticeship or the place where they last paid rates, applying for poor relief was a matter of turning up and appealing to the vestry or the overseer directly. For those too ill or sick to make such representation or for those who had moved further away, obtaining relief often involved writing a letter setting out their circumstances. In the case of those who had moved further away, parishes might of-

ten find it more convenient (and cheaper) to grant relief to the person where they were now living rather than have them move back to the parish of settlement with all of the costs of disruption and transport that this would entail. This was the system of non-resident relief and Sokoll suggests that up to 25 percent of all of the poor from any parish might have been living elsewhere during the early-nineteenth century. He notes provocatively that these proportions are similar to those often found in the north of England, where non-resident relief has often been found to be more common.

Chapter 3 shows that the sample of pauper letters is unevenly distributed in place and time. Most letters were written in the period 1817-35, with peaks in 1819 and the late 1820s/early 1830s. However, Sokoll warns us that this distribution might be artificial, for when we move to the parish level we can see that there are probable survival gaps in the parish archives. Losses of letters might be accidental, for as he notes it was rare to bind such letters up into volumes, but the growing professionalization of poor law administration from 1818 onwards probably helps to explain why more of them are stored after this date than before. Sokoll also notes there is an uneven spatial distribution of pauper letters. The towns of Braintree, Chelmsford, and Colchester provide by far the bulk of the surviving series in terms of recipient parishes, and Chelmsford, along with London and its hinterland, dominates the league table of places from which letters were sent. The differences with the north of England, where smaller places (at least in terms of the *surviving* archives) dominated league tables of recipients of letters, is marked. Chapter 4 takes us into a consideration of the letters as sources, using examples of pauper letters drawn from the series. Sokoll deals with the setting out of the letters, their physical properties and the nature of the writing. As a genre, pauper letters represent what Sokoll labels “oral writing,” but in practice the nature of the letters is more nuanced than this simple phrase allows. In particular, he notes that letters might take the

form of either a petition or a “familiar” letter, with the latter form by far the most dominant. Many letters do indeed make use of deferential rhetoric, but often in the context of blunt self-confidence and familiarity with the system and its administrators. Sokoll also makes a very useful distinction, given that the provenance of pauper letters is often unsure, between the author of letters (the people who set out the case to be written), the sender of letters, and the writer of letters. A pauper may do all three things for him/herself, but there was no inevitable reason why this should be so. In practice, then, pauper letters probably tied many people in the communities from which they were sent into the plight of the pauper that the letter reported! Sokoll also deals with the issue of credibility, arguing first that we should read these letters as fairly accurate documents and, secondly, that we should accept that relatively few people who wrote such letters were turned away by their home parishes. Both conclusions are contentious and require further exploration. Chapter 5 deals with the editorial treatment of the letters.

In the third part of the book, Sokoll provides indexed lists of pauper letters by place of receipt, sender, place of sender, and date of sending. Such meticulous work gives me the ideal place to finish this review. As an edition, Sokoll’s book is exemplary. However, it barely scratches the surface of what we can actually learn about the Essex poor from more than seven hundred pauper letters. These indexes might help welfare historians to come to grips with such questions, and it is to be hoped that Sokoll’s promised analysis of the letters is not long delayed. Finally, it is important for readers new to the subject to appreciate that Essex was not unique in either generating or preserving pauper letters. They survive in many other places too and it is surely time that welfare historians from around the country started to synthesize different regional perspectives to get at the experience of being poor in the waning decades of the Old Poor Law.

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**Citation:** Steve King. Review of Sokoll, Thomas, *Essex Pauper Letters: 1731 - 1837*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2004.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9191>

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