

but their subject matter is not as personally significant as McClanahan's family history clearly is to her. While others may have produced work that resembles McClanahan's work in some ways, very few have matched the ambition on display here.

McClanahan has combined the historian's scholarly rigor with the storyteller's attention to characterization and language. The result of this combination of approaches is a book that explores the history of a family and a region (specifically, Indiana) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries while simultaneously revealing and reflecting on the inner lives of those people (mostly women, but a few men) to whom McClanahan feels herself connected, before eventually exploring her own experiences with family. For its

meticulous research and attention to detail, McClanahan's memoir ought to appeal to any student of history; for its gripping prose and thoughtful meditations of what life was like for those who lived not too very long ago, the book should appeal to any curious or thoughtful reader.

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### *Almost Worthy: The Poor, Paupers, and the Science of Charity in America, 1877-1917*

By Brent Ruswick

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii, 265. Illustrations, charts, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$37.00.)

Brent Ruswick opens *Almost Worthy: The Poor, Paupers, and the Science of Charity in America, 1877-1917*, with a tale of misdeeds by the managers of an Indiana poorhouse in 1881. Reports of the events sensationalized the almshouse residents instead of focusing on the evils of the perpetrators—not surprising, Ruswick argues, given the percolating fear of “the seemingly contagious moral and physical disease

known as pauperism” (p. 7). *Almost Worthy* examines the charity reform movement over a forty-year period and explores how some reformers tried to use the tools of emerging social sciences to address and even eliminate the problem of pauperism.

Charity reformers sought to avoid indiscriminate aid because of their shared belief that ill-directed charity only enabled the shiftless and

the criminal. The risk could be avoided, reformers thought, through employment of scientific methods, including systematic data collection and analysis. Reform societies across the country sent “friendly visitors” to interview aid applicants, and the gathered data was used to sort applicants, with “worthy” recipients passed on to charities for help and the “unworthy” left—sometimes literally—in the cold. The concept of worthiness rested heavily on the belief that chronic poverty was the product of a personal or moral failing.

The book’s central character is the Reverend Oscar C. McCulloch, a devoted preacher of the Social Gospel movement, who founded the Indianapolis Charity Organization Society (ICOS). In addition to creating one of the most prominent reform societies in the country, McCulloch also authored “The Tribe of Ishmael: A Study in Social Degradation,” an 1888 study of a poor extended family in Indianapolis. With many others, he went on to cite the study as evidence of a link between heredity, chronic poverty, and criminality.

Ruswick effectively uses exemplary documents, including visitors’ notes and logs, to show how the reformers collected, categorized, and considered their own data. As his analysis reveals, some reformers interpreted these data in the context of events like economic crisis and began to see poverty as the product of a complex calculus of personal and social pressures. After examining data

collected in the wake of the financial panic of 1883, for example, leading charity reformers like Josephine Lowell Shaw gave “increasing weight to the importance of environmental reform in shaping the individual behavior of the poor” (p.161). Ruswick argues that changes in the terminology used by reform societies suggest that reformers at all levels were moving away from a direct link between poverty and moral weakness.

As *Almost Worthy* recognizes, not everyone took a more charitable view of the poor. While some reformers used their new understanding to begin working on social reform efforts that would mark the Progressive Era, others, including important members of the ICOS, advocated more odious steps to eliminate the “unworthy,” like supporting measures such as Indiana’s forced sterilization program. By focusing so extensively on McCulloch, who led the ICOS for only fourteen years, *Almost Worthy* misses the opportunity to explore more fully the fascinating division among reformers that emerged after McCulloch’s death, with some fighting for extended social welfare programs while others moved toward eugenics. Such an oversight is unfortunate, as charity reform leaders after McCulloch are equally fascinating and their work possibly more consequential.

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