HOUSEHOLD MOBILITY IN 
RURAL SCOTLAND: THE IMPACT OF 
THE POOR LAW AFTER 1845

Introduction

Studies of the Poor Law in Scotland have tended to the 
general. Whilst overviews of the system’s administration 
have drawn on both primary and secondary sources in 
some depth, there has been little systematic examination of the 
movements of those who were affected by its operation as appli-
cants and claimants. Consequently, although Mitchison tells us a 
great deal about the absence of fit between what the Old Poor 
Law aimed to do and what actually happened in the parishes, 
individual paupers are only encountered as illustrations. Likewise with, say, Devine’s analyses of emigration, or Levitt and 
Smout’s multi-faceted mapping based on data derived from 
the 1844 Royal Commission. These and other studies provide 
clues to the impact of the welfare system on Scottish mobility 
patterns in the aggregate, but they do not unearth the precise 
dynamics of interaction between individuals, families and the 
local bureaucracy in ways that explain why and how people 
moved. To do this, I will argue, requires, first an evaluation of 
how welfare legislation was operationalised, second an assess-
ment of the utility of the sources produced by the system and 
third an analysis of the interaction between the authorities and 
the claimants. This last entails enquiry at the micro-level of the 
household.

The New Poor Law in Scotland: 
rigid legislation, flexible operation

While ‘much of the development of the Poor Law between 
1700 and 1780 had been designed to make it an effective instru-
ment to cope with the problems of harvest shortfall or other 
general emergencies’ and thus expand the scope for relief, the 
early nineteenth century saw the gradual creation of the rule
whereby ‘disablement’ as well as ‘destitution’ became a necessary qualification for relief.6 On the face of it, the Scottish Poor Law, particularly in its secular guise after 1845, was harsher and more constraining than its English equivalent. The stringent New Poor Law affirmed the principle ‘under which, unlike under the English New Poor Law, no person who was fit to work had any entitlement to receive relief of any kind even for a short period of time’.7 There were poorhouses in Scotland, but since paupers had to be both disabled and destitute ‘there was no tradition of “setting the poor on work”’, thus no equivalent to the organised system of the English workhouses.8 A central body, the Board of Supervision, legislated for and monitored the operation of local Parochial Boards (later Parish Councils) who levied rates, and each of these appointed an Inspector as the primary official channel through which all applications filtered.

At this local level the apparent rigidity of the Scottish system rather collapsed. The Inspector and his Board were granted full discretion in decision-making, and in practice disability and destitution were ‘two very elastic terms’, capable of a great deal of variation across parishes. There was no one procedure for any one category of pauper and applications were treated according to individual circumstances and local tradition. Uniform strategies across districts were impossible since no consensus existed as to what exactly constituted ‘respectable’, whilst ‘destitution’ was not an absolute requirement and ‘disability’ might be interpreted to include social and economic deprivation. These designations ‘were often applied differently at different times within a single parish’.9 For example, with regard to widowhood in Victorian Scotland, Winter has remarked that because of the low wages single women with children might earn, ‘a widow could be fully employed and still destitute, healthy and still disabled, an able-bodied pauper and still one of the deserving poor’. The fact of notional ‘undeservingness’ militated against similar sympathy for the unmarried mother, yet her offspring were less easily marked out.10

Outdoor relief persisted in practice rather than the divisive regimen of the workhouse, and if dependence on the collectivity represented family failure, it was also true that, ‘the Poor Law authorities pursued a consistent policy of keeping these dependent households in being rather than disbanding them and
putting their members in institutions'.

Despite this, Scottish Poor Law policy concerning the family was fraught with contradictions. Clearly the ideology of pauperism affected decisions regarding need, and here a key tension existed between official policy, which aimed at maintaining the nuclear family ideal, and the local administration of relief, which effectively led applicants to modify actual family arrangements to the point of attenuation. In theory, the welfare system operated to assert the moral obligations of kin by refusing relief wherever family members could be found to provide succour. In this sense it was non-interventionist. However, according to directives from the central Board of Supervision, and especially those after the late 1860s, those living outside the confines of the ideal family - unmarried mothers and deserted wives - were to be offered only indoor relief in the poorhouse. Other categories of claimant - orphans and lunatics - were to be boarded out with respectable families who would be given resources, or incarcerated in asylums and industrial schools. A ‘distinctive ideology of pauperism - adequate but discriminatory relief’ had been created. Nevertheless, practice varied from place to place and many succeeded in obtaining interim outdoor relief despite not matching up to the desiderata of ‘deservingness’.

Morals made a difference, but the Poor Law operated in a pragmatic manner. To satisfy themselves that they were being suitably sympathetic while appropriately pious, Parochial Boards often sought compromises. Thus, for example, in a Dumfriesshire case, Agnes Thorburn, 86, and her daughter, a rather weakly widow subsisted on very scant resources, with occasional family help. The local Inspector saw them as a fit case for support, but limited the aliment to a weekly 2/- ‘as son and grand-children often loaf about the house, work as little as they can help, and drink nearly all they make’. Boards were keen to reconstitute nuclear families wherever they could. Nevertheless, for all their apparent powers the ability to affect such changes was limited. Mary Fraser looked after her grandson Richard, aged 5, who was provided with ‘a little help from family’. But when her husband became ill and had to go into the infirmary she asked for support on grounds of age and infirmity. It was refused because ‘she is keeping a grandson, who should be with his parents, and her family should be able to maintain her’.
Such a system, if we may call it that, becomes particularly interesting when its geographical implications are considered. In Scotland the movements of Poor Law claimants throughout the country were documented in the parish of settlement. Thus, the impact of relief decisions upon mobility can be assessed from local records. Until 1845, the (Old) Poor Law was administered by the parish kirk, but its session minutes rarely divulge information about requests for support. Although payments were minuted, individual cases are seldom monitored in any detail and in some years names do not appear at all, only the date and total distribution being given. Reasons for admission to the parish roll tend not to be documented while age and status are similarly absent. Furthermore, in recording those enumerated as ‘pauper’ or ‘parochial dependant’ the church was simply registering those who were on the permanent Poor Roll, in other words those effectively accorded the status of pensioner since they had reached an age and physical status beyond which they were able to earn a living. But most poverty was episodic and the majority of people who obtained only temporary and sporadic relief were not enumerated.

However, the administration of the Scottish Poor Law was transformed under the New Poor Law, when secular parochial boards took over the work of the kirk sessions, recording their deliberations in standardised General Registers of Poor. Since the assessment of need depended upon setting each claim against the possibilities of alternative means of support, the details of every applicant’s genealogy and extended family circumstances had to be discerned and documented by the Inspector before the local Parochial Board would make a decision. The New Poor Law required that ‘all the particulars relating to each registered pauper must be entered consecutively so that it may contain the whole history of the case’.

Sources

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26
been established they became chargeable to that parish; if not, their case would be referred to their appropriate parish of settlement, though while an individual's settlement was being debated he or she would be relieved by the parish where the claim had been made. From the records of that system, the General Registers of Poor and Applications for poor relief, we can glean a sizeable amount of biographical material that is unavailable elsewhere. In particular, it is possible to trace movements of individuals over space, which are precluded by all other forms of parish-based data. This is because any person with a settlement in the parish could apply to the Parochial Board for support in time of need, wherever they happened to be living at the time. Moreover, help could not legally be refused simply because the applicant had no settlement in the parish. And while the granting of temporary relief to all-comers was discretionary, nevertheless all details still had to be recorded and the applicant's information relayed to their 'home' parish. Although the English system at the time was not markedly dissimilar, comparable records do not appear to have survived. In Scotland, therefore, we have a valuable and unique database from which to analyse the movements over time of a distinctive sub-population. Once successive entries have been collated among the Applications and related to the Registers, personal narratives - albeit abbreviated in form - can be linked with census schedules and civil registration certificates of births, marriages and deaths to generate interconnected sets of information about individuals, households and the wider family membership in the context of their dealings with the welfare system.

Who were the movers?

This paper relates to an ongoing project based on community reconstructions in two Scottish rural regions, the south-west and the north-east, between 1855 and 1955. Using longitudinal data, the analysis explores the connections between Poor Law administration and family arrangements. My contention is that the coherence of simple family households was rather less significant, or workable, than building networks that drew on combinations of collective welfare provision and extended family resources. Such interdependence questions both the dependency of supposedly passive claimants and the independence of the household unit.
The Scottish system of poor relief was both enabling and controlling. In England, it has been argued that household nuclearity created a need for poor relief while, owing to their institutional dependence, unmarried mothers were more likely to remain in a parish than others. However, in the rural lowlands of both south-west and north-east Scotland, the availability of extensive kin links and the nature of settlement regulation facilitated considerable flexibility and mobility. Mothers chargeable on the parish because of their birth, or that of the father or child, could apply for relief from the parish despite sometimes living far away. Against such apparent freedom of movement, the local Parochial Board was empowered to assess their claims and could thus deny support unless specified conditions were met. Not only this, but it could disband or redistribute families, by, for instance, segregating children from ‘dissolute’ mothers or offering the poorhouse as the only alternative to destitution.

Who, then, was most affected? Who were the movers, and who the stayers? And, as a consequence, can we discern the types of family arrangement most likely to result in - or, indeed, from - residential mobility? It may be argued that recourse to relief rescued the more vulnerable and it was those on the margin of poverty, who did not receive support either from the collectivity or their families, who were most likely to suffer. Or again, we might expect individuals in particular life-course predicaments to appear as claimants - unmarried mothers, older people, and persons with physical or mental disabilities - but not married couples in employment. Certainly, welfare was highly feminised: mothers were central figures in most family networks, and grandmothers, often widows, were crucial to extended household support. By dint of their nurturing responsibilities, and expectations governing the care of relatives during critical life situations, they became gatekeepers as well as ‘kin-keepers’. They held together kin networks, but were also the locus of Poor Law intervention.

Frequently the absence of husbands rendered unmarried women dependent upon relatives and the Poor Law for the care and upbringing of their children, and their residential dispositions in turn generated support for their parents. Against this, the prevalence of married offspring with their own families to support frequently meant that ageing parents were left alone to
seek parish support, hence the high proportions of solitary old women among the permanent pauper population.

Children whose mothers had died frequently found that their fathers had others to maintain and were ‘unable to support this one’, whilst unmarried mothers who died in the poorhouse or infirmary left children wholly destitute since all traces of their fathers had long been lost. In such circumstances, the orphaned and deserted children were boarded out with ‘respectable’ guardians in the locality. Instances where children had become separated from mothers due to ill health, alcoholism or insanity of the latter all occurred. While boarding out could function here as a means of segregating children from ‘undesirable’ parents and thus represent an attempt to minimise the imputed ‘hereditary taint of immorality’, local boards were legally bound not to ‘violently sever domestic relationships’ without the mother’s express consent.

Often siblings became separated from one another. However, as cases from the north-east demonstrate, redistribution of offspring was often a consequence of independent family adaptations using the kin network. One could cite the instance of a woman who claimed in Marnoch but lived in Aberdeen, 40 miles away, with her youngest child (for whom the father paid alimony) while one of her daughters stayed with her grandmother in Aberchirder and the other was ‘kept by W. Walker, Carter, Rubislaw’.17 Or consider Anne Mitchel, who gave birth to three bastards in Rothiemay between 1864 and 1867. The Register entry for 8 November 1870 reads: ‘This pauper’s child, Elizabeth Anne, whose father is now dead, is boarded with her maternal aunt, Widow Simpson, Coldhome and receives direct from the Inspector 2s.6d. weekly…. The mother is in service and pays her aunt for the keep of her child Jane. The other twin is kept by the paternal grandfather in the parish of Skene - the father is now in America.’18 The Children’s Separate Register indicates several instances of boarding out. In June 1870 a deserted illegitimate whose mother subsequently married but left the country was sent to live with a crofter in Alvah. Two years later he was returned to Rothiemay, lodged with another crofter and sent to the Parish School. The next year he became an apprentice seaman in Banff.19 The Board could exercise considerable influence in such affairs since they provided all funding. Thus
a deserted child boarded in Turriff whose ‘guardian refused to allow the child to be removed to Aberchirder’ had his relief summarily terminated. They seldom placed children in institutions, preferring to settle them in domestic homes at the lowest possible cost to the parish. When the mother was institutionalised, distribution of her dependants among extended kin networks was common.

**Case histories**

The following sample cases, taken from an analysis of the parish of Torrhorwald in south-west Scotland, reveal that interaction between the Poor Law and the family could produce both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. On the one hand, some individuals provided the fulcrum around which household survival was secured. This was the case with Elizabeth Irving, whom the local inspector noted ‘keeps house for her father and has charge of four children, one belonging to a married sister who is living in service and separate from her husband, the other three are illegitimate children belonging to her niece who is at harvest’. Her initial claim was rejected on grounds that she was able to support herself. However, when she fell ill she was granted temporary sums to tide her through. Elizabeth was the pivot on which the coherence of the household turned: between 1861 and 1891 at least twelve grand- and great-grandchildren lived in the house, and at any one time over those thirty years, the household consisted of at least a parent, children and grandchildren, with Elizabeth fulfilling the key ‘housekeeper’ role throughout. She appears to have provided the locus of support for the extended Irving family, with the authorities supplementing her on occasion as they saw fit.

On the other hand, although mothers were central to most family arrangements, it is important to recognise that this dominance did not necessarily require their presence within the household. In many cases where single or widowed grandmothers co-resided with their grandchildren, the situation was clearly one of mutual dependence upon the mother, or mothers, who worked elsewhere to provide an income to support both. Observations like ‘while she was in service, children were left with applicant’s parents’ are common and apply to single women, widows and deserted wives alike. In such instances most claims
were for supplementary relief on grounds of partial destitution or disability on the grandmother’s part. For example, Christina Gibson, aged 71, and sometime farm labourer, was granted 2/6 weekly on grounds of ‘old age and infirmity’, the inspector remarking that ‘an illegitimate grand-daughter resides with her whose mother is at service’. The daughter was a cook working in England who sent remittances and paid her mother’s house rent. The Board was clearly comfortable with this joint set up since they continued to supply aliment until the old woman died, some eleven years later.

When biographies are reconstructed over a longer time-frame, the complex dialectics of household change reflect rather less clear distinctions between movers and stayers, since the same personnel are at times critical to household persistence, but at others are the instigators or subjects of its dissolution. The 1881 census records a seamstress, Janet Jardine aged 58, living with her daughter Jane Ann, unmarried, 27 and a dairymaid, and Jane Ann’s son James.23 In February 1883, having ‘been unwell for a considerable time, Medical Officer attending’ Janet Jardine claimed relief. The inspector’s assessment revealed that:

She has been deserted by her husband for over 26 years. She has 2 daughters, 1 married to William Kae, a ploughman, they have 9 young children; Jane Ann aged 30, has one illegitimate child aged 7 (father not known) who is with her mother; and 2 sons, William who learned to be a smith. When last heard of about 2 years ago he had gone to New Zealand as a fireman on board a steamer; James, a mason and 26 years of age.24

A deserted wife and her daughter, a single parent, have co-resided to support one another and a child, but Janet’s illness has reduced the household income such that they require outside support. At this juncture it becomes clear that her other children’s circumstances are such that they cannot be expected to provide help, partly because of their own hardship but also due to their wide geographical distribution. Dependency upon the parish of settlement effectively ties Jane Ann to the locality. Janet died on 5th March, and a month later the Medical Officer noted that Jane Ann’s child was seriously ill. He bluntly recorded that
‘there is no hope of his recovery’, adding that this prevented his mother from earning a living ‘as she has no person to take charge of the child she cannot get out of the house to her work’.

The Board granted 7/-, but withdrew support immediately when the child died four weeks later. Jane Ann then supported herself for a while, but within two years gave birth to a bastard child who only lived for ten months, and then married George Rae, a widower aged 60, before bearing a third child, William. Throughout this period she remained within the parish, maintained by her husband’s income. But, when her son was just two months old, Rae assaulted her then deserted, leaving wife and child destitute. The parish gave them a one-off sum of 2/.

However, without the cushioning provided by her mother and unable to earn a wage herself Jane Ann was soon forced to accept relief in the poorhouse while a daughter Mary was boarded out. The viability of the family unit had been precarious, but it was the actions of the Parochial Board, on whom they were finally dependent, that effected the decision to disband it. This move brought about further dispersal, then return, with Mary and her own daughter Agnes being removed from the poorhouse in Kendal - some 80 miles away in another country - to Dumfries Poorhouse in 1892, shuttling back and forth between there and the parish, as and when her husband saw fit to desert. By 1902 the now orphaned daughter Agnes was again living in Kendal. However, having established her settlement in Torthorwald, the Board admitted her to the permanent roll until she was 14 and was found both work and a good home. She was the first and only member of her family to be given such support.

This bleak tale affords a tantalising glimpse into the fluidity of household circumstances over just twenty years. Had we been reliant upon persons being recorded as ‘pauper’ in the census enumerators’ books we would have entirely missed these household histories, and indeed those of the great majority of claimants, whose appeals were either rejected or temporarily accepted. However, it was just such applications and their outcomes that either sustained or broke up families during crisis. In the above narrative, the actions of the Parochial Board sometimes forced inertia upon the household, at others times caused disbandment and dispersal, and at others still enabled the family...
to make its own decisions. The sphere of circulation encompassed temporary moves relatively far afield, but the nature of settlement legislation was such that individuals found themselves returned to their home parish at intervals, as though attached by reins. Such was the surveillance of the local welfare state.

The regional geography of relief

These narratives reveal the role of Poor Law decisions in the patterning of households and kin, but it is important to recognise too the linkage between relief dependency and the social relations of production. Analysis of the moves made by Poor Law applicants in sample parishes in north-east Scotland illustrates how the welfare system effectively buoyed up a system of social relations that required intense local mobility to maintain it. In this region, single farm and domestic servants were hired on six-monthly contracts, and were thus required to be mobile. They moved regularly between farms, being accommodated in the farm buildings rather than in family homes.

Thus was set in train a remarkably gender-biased pattern of poverty. A consequence of the absence of parental, or quasi-parental supervision of these youngsters was a high incidence both of illegitimacy and of desertion by the male partners who could abscond with relative ease. Police were empowered under the Civil Imprisonment Act of 1882 to apprehend and gaol men neglecting to pay alimony but paternity was often denied, obliging mothers to sue at law with costly and often unsatisfactory results. Meanwhile, Laws of Affiliation tended not to favour women, with low allowances being provided. Few were willing to take legal proceedings: in 1858, 295 illegitimate births were recorded in Banffshire; in the 211 cases where paternity was not acknowledged at registration, it was found by decree of court in just twenty instances. In such circumstances, it was normal for the expectant mother to return to her parents to bear the child, but thereafter to return to work elsewhere whilst the grandparents reared her offspring. In some instances this required no recourse to poor relief, but the absence of regular financial support during the period of confinement and weaning was frequently crippling, and here it was considered, ‘better for the parish to support the family, than incur the expense of prosecuting the parent who deserts his offspring’.
At certain life-course stages, particularly confinement and old age, women could not be expected to earn an independent living. Importantly, these stages differ greatly in length, confinement periods frequently being very short because in this region young women could easily return to service (especially where wet-nurses were sought and grandmothers took on childcare responsibilities from very early on) whereas old age dependency was generally long-term. Thus, although single mothers may have applied for and obtained short-term relief to cover the immediate parturition and weaning period, their older children were more likely to appear in the Poor Law records as inhabitants of households from which their grandmothers claimed relief, intermittently or for longer periods, both because of the children’s needs and due to their own disabilities.

In wholly rural parishes where landlords favoured the ‘small crofter system’ of tenancy rather than large farms, such a pattern was commonplace. However, some mothers, particularly older mothers whose own parents were no longer alive or who were too aged to lend support, were forced to seek cheap accommodation in local towns. Thus the Huntly Inspector remarked, ‘it often happens that girls who have had illegitimate children in the country, and cannot get support from the father of the child, come into the town and throw themselves upon the rates’. Similarly, Keith was ‘said to be a centre for rearing farm servants, and hither the females return at a certain stage’.

While this suggests parallels with the English pattern of ‘open’ and ‘close’ parishes, the actual locations of claimants disguise their connections to supporting parishes that could be many miles distant. An analysis of the recorded birthplaces of all applicants obtaining relief in the two adjacent parishes of Marnoch and Rothiemay between 1845 and 1900 indicates that only a small majority - 57% - were natives. Meanwhile, when the parishes of residence of paupers chargeable to the two parishes - that is, having a settlement but not necessarily residing there - are studied, 44% are seen to be living outside the district. Most incomers to Rothiemay had been born in the immediate rural sub-region of Lowland Banff, but the more distant towns of Aberdeen, Elgin, Peterhead, Turriff and isolated locations throughout a wide area contributed paupers to Marnoch, a fact largely attributable to the parish containing the village of...
Aberchirder, which was known for its cheap available accommodation. Amongst those with settlements in Marnoch and Rothiemay but living elsewhere, concentration on Aberdeen City was significant, while the Buchan Combination Poorhouse at New Maud was the locus for a secondary, far smaller cluster (committals to lunatic asylums, the vast majority of which were to Aberdeen and Banff were omitted from the calculations).

The demonstration of continuities and discontinuities in policy depends to a degree on the specific parishes selected, and in both Rothiemay and Marnoch welfare arrangements were initially rather sympathetic. Of 88 persons applying for relief in Rothiemay between 1855 and 1869 only 12 were refused help, and then for strong reasons - two, for example, are recorded as being ‘Imposters’.

Thirty-nine were admitted temporarily and 37 permanently. Between 1851 and 1900, the majority of unmarried mothers claiming support in Rothiemay - over 60% - were natives, but only a minority of women chargeable - two-fifths - were actually resident there. Similarly, in Marnoch 55% of successful claims came from mothers with settlements living outside the parish, half of these living in the urban parishes of Aberdeen. These totals imply that it was relatively easy for unmarried mothers to obtain relief from the home parish when residing elsewhere. However, when the figures are disaggregated to take account of the implementation of the poorhouse test, clear distinctions become evident. After 1868, only 15% of out-relief recipients were outsiders who had come to Rothiemay - a drop of fully 27% on the 1845-67 proportion. Such was the impact of a new and harsher code being adopted against claimants without a birth settlement there.

Since only four incomers obtained relief over the 32 years from 1868 to 1900 in Rothiemay, whereas 17 did so in the 22 years before 1868 it is reasonable to assume that these discrepancies were caused by changes in relief policy. In fact, the real effect began ten years later. In January 1878, immediately following the local Inspector’s dismissal for bankruptcy, the case of each pauper on the list was re-assessed, in keeping with a Board of Supervision circular, with comments ‘Not on Roll at this date’ and ‘Allowance reduced’ appearing frequently. In the same month the Rothiemay board resolved to rent two beds in the Buchan Combination Poorhouse, ‘to be used as a test’.

35
From this date onwards it became procedure to make offers of
the poorhouse to mothers with illegitimate children who request-
ed relief. As indicated, this change in policy, effected in part
through the replacement of such a key official, had considerable
impact on those already enlisted on the roll. Yet although
only 36% of recipients were immigrants, 77% of claims on the
parish came from Rothiemay women living extra-parochially.37
Ironically, it seems that the Poor Law facilitated considerable
mobility among bastardbearers and it was these women who
buoyed up the overall numbers of paupers for which each parish
was responsible.

With opportunities increasing in the cities, an exodus of
female domestic servants from the countryside had begun in the
1870s. The comment of a Banffshire clergyman, in 1888, that:
‘Many who are now in service ... are the illegitimates of the
country’ implies that those remaining were somehow trapped by
their status.38 They were probably the offspring of women with
settlements there who had grown up with their grandparents, but
the evidence suggests that many of their mothers had themselves
resided elsewhere. The substantial number of young women,
some still in their teens, who gave birth to bastards in Aberdeen
City but had settlements in Marnoch, and to a lesser extent
Rothiemay would certainly indicate this.

Therefore, in the case of unmarried mothers - and this group
formed a goodly proportion of applicants in areas of high illegiti-
macy like the north-east and south-west - the very nature of
settlement regulation facilitated the mobility of mothers outside
the parish. The high persistence rates found among unmarried
mothers in English parishes owing to their institutional depen-
dence simply do not occur. Indeed, the practice of unmarried
women working elsewhere while boarding their children with
relatives was sufficiently common in the general population as
to merit consideration as customary behaviour. Thus, it could
be argued that rather than itself creating a particular pattern
of mobility, the Poor Law simply allowed it to continue when
families fell on hard times.

Implications for further research
What impact did Poor Law practice have on the family’s
ability to sustain its particular household pattern? Recent demo-
graphic research into the relationships between individuals, households and community has focused on the historically shifting balance between family and parish support for the impoverished, Laslett’s ‘nuclear-hardship’ hypothesis stating, for example, that ‘the more dominant simple-family households are ... the more important will be support for such individuals from the collectivity’39. This presupposes a distinction between family and community that was in practice unlikely to have been so rigid, for degrees of nuclearity or extension can only be measured superficially where household structures disguise shifting interdependencies between households and over space.40 If dysfunctional families were sometimes disbanded through institutionalisation and boarding out, the Poor Law authorities maintained a material as well as moral interest in holding together dependent households. Yet, since many households were characterised by instability, disharmony and fragmentation it would be fallacious to talk of consensual ‘family strategies’ on the part of those affected. The case studies suggest that individuals and family groups were enabled by resource inputs from the Poor Law, however meagre or temporary, to hold together something like workable domestic units. Nevertheless, the fact that many of these fell apart again over time indicates the absolute constraints that poverty itself ultimately placed upon their viability.

In Scotland, the containment and monitoring of mobility via the laws of settlement and the poorhouse test were axes of the system of administration, and relief decisions played a significant role in redirecting household arrangements. But the nature of relief, and crucially its openness to geographical dispersal of families, did not create parish populations composed of isolated poor individuals (the welfare dependants) and stable nuclear families. As the frequency of desertion among the examples above illustrates, marital discord did much to disrupt household cohesion and independence. Many partners had relationships that were either fleeting sexual encounters or unstable marriages. Meanwhile, women’s employment, though always poorly paid was clearly significant, at least in the rural lowlands, and ‘the concept of a family as dependants on an active male worker does not appear to have had currency, understandably, for family resources were often the result of input from every member’.41
The fact that many unmarried mothers worked in service while their parents looked after their offspring is evidence that mature single women were expected to find outdoor labouring. The centrality of mothers to webs of dependency weakens the case for the household as the key object of study because although some women provided a pivotal role in heading households, just as many, if not more, held together their families by moving between households. Thus, the pattern of kin support can only be detected if one considers the family network both within and beyond the household.

This paper has focused to a degree on patterns of return migration and mobility within a restricted geographical range. The sample study has, of course, only considered negotiation between the Poor Law and the people in two rural regions, and there is no reason to believe that patterns in north-east and south-west Scotland were typical of the country as a whole. On the contrary, the diversity of population patterns, social processes and levels of poverty across Highland/Lowland, mainland/insular and rural/urban divides suggest that rather different outcomes would emerge in other areas. It would therefore be highly instructive to know how the dialectic between poverty and mobility was managed in such differing contexts, not least because discerning how circuits of mobility operated regionally has clear implications for the interpretation of permanent migration and emigration farther afield. This will require a biographical, life-course approach to the family as process which, from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, the case-records of the New Poor Law in Scotland uniquely allow.

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Endnotes

1 Parts of this paper were presented to an Ethnicity and Migration Network session at the European Social Science History Conference, The Hague, The Netherlands, February 2002. The author is grateful to the audience and fellow panellists for comments and to the British Academy for funding support.

2 R. Mitchison, *The Old Poor Law in Scotland: The Experience of Poverty*,
1574-1845, (Edinburgh, 2000); see also R.A. Cage, The Scottish Poor Law, 1745-1845, (Edinburgh, 1981). By contrast, local studies are ripe with anecdotes but thin on analysis - see, for example, J.M. McPherson, The Kirk’s Care of the Poor with Special Reference to the North-East of Scotland, (Aberdeen, 1941).


Two exceptions are C.W.J. Withers, Urban Highlanders: Highland-Lowland Migration and Urban Gaelic Culture, 1700-1900, (East Linton, 1998) pp.76-7, which uses ‘particulars of settlement’ details in the General Registers of Poor [GRP] for Glasgow parishes to illustrate intermediate locations and duration of stay in the stepped migration of three Highlanders to the city, but does not develop a more systematic study using this source, and H. Macdonald, ‘Boarding-Out and the Scottish Poor Law, 1845-1914’, Scottish Historical Review, LXXV (1996), pp.197-220, which again uses local GRP material but for one specific group of children only.


7 M. Anderson (unpublished MS). He continues: ‘This further increased the pressure for out-migration to somewhere where work might be available [and] it also provided a major disincentive to marriage. Even where housing was available, a couple, before they married and had children, had still to consider whether there were likely to be suitable ongoing opportunities available to them to be able to support a family’. Meanwhile, ‘compared with most of England, housing was in short supply [and in a country with low real wages] expensive’.


9 Paterson, p.185. Until 1859 local boards could exercise discretion in giving aid to the able-bodied (p.178), whilst even the Board of Supervision began to encourage it, recognising in 1878, that: ‘It is
obvious that if a person is really destitute no long period would elapse before he also became disabled from want of food' (R. Mitchison, A History of Scotland, 2nd edition [London, 1982] p.389).

13 Torthorwald General Register of Poor [GRP] 228, 19/8/08. Two years previously another son, whose address was a mystery, had been reported as 'a drunken wastrel who has done nothing for some time to support his mother' (Torthorwald Applications [Apps.] 184, 26/6/08).
14 Torthorwald GRP 218, 9/1/2/05.
15 W. S. Walker, Rules Relating to a New Register of Poor to be Called 'The General Register of Poor', (Edinburgh, 1865).
17 Marnoch GRP, 18 (1880).
18 Rothiemay GRP, 69 (8/11/70).
19 Rothiemay Children's Separate Register, 5 (8/11/70, 26/10/72, 30/7/73) - mother in Adelaide, Australia.
20 Marnoch GRP, 574 (1899).
21 Levitt, Poverty and Welfare, p.30; see also Marnoch GRP, 575 (13/11/99, 2/8/1900) where a hawker's widow residing in Elgin Poorhouse had one child taken from her and boarded in Aberchirder whilst another was incarcerated in Nazareth House, Aberdeen.
24 Torthorwald Apps. 221, 12/2/83.
25 Torthorwald Apps. 223, 19/4/83.
26 Torthorwald Apps. 248, 10/10/85.
27 Torthorwald Apps. 169, 16/12/87; 178, 21/11/88.
29 Torthorwald GRP 215, 31/5/02, 26/7/02, 23/8/02, 22/12/05.
Scottish Tradition Vol. 27 2002

30 G. Seton, The Causes of Illegitimacy Particularly in Scotland, with relative Appendices, (Edinburgh, 1860) Appendix VII.


34 Rothiemay Apps., 70 (28/6/65).

35 The local Sheriff, concerned that the poorhouse test encouraged vagrancy, advocated outdoor relief for single mothers since many women by refusing to enter or remain in the poorhouse not only deprived themselves of all means of support, but putative fathers were ‘enabled with impunity to neglect their children’, because Parochial Boards would not prosecute them (W. Watson, ‘The Poor Law from the Poor Man’s Standpoint’, in T. Ivory, ed., Pauperism and the Poor Laws, (Edinburgh, 1870) separately paginated, 24 pp (p.13.).)

36 Rothiemay Parochial Board Minute Book 29/1/78, 4/5/78 (List of Registered Poor).

37 Absolute figures are not directly comparable since birthplace calculations refer to individuals whereas chargeability indicates place of residence and, over time, one person might claim from several sequential locations.

38 Cramond (1888), p.43.


41 Mitchison, Old Poor Law, p.110.