

Moody, Margaret J. *The Royal Poorhouse in 18th Century Turin, Italy. The King and the Paupers*. Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001. x, 152 pp. ISBN 0-7734-7364-5 US\$79.95.

This book is a study of the *Ospizio di Carità di Torino* based on a database constructed from the admissions and governance records for the even years in the decade between 1747 and 1757. The study does not focus on the institution itself, but rather on the people who would have used it. The book succeeds in bringing to life the experience of poor relief applicants in this period, and makes a dual contribution to our understanding – first to the development of systems of poor relief, and second to state administration in Piedmont-Savoy.

The first chapter, “The Applicant at the Window,” walks the reader through an applicant’s first contact with the institution – the types of questions asked and the process of streaming applicants based on their requests. Birthplace, number of children, marital status and income all played a part in the initial interview. It also outlines all of the other options for poor relief in Turin, and shows that the *Ospizio* aimed to provide a unique service among the other social service agencies.

Though it had medieval antecedents, the *Ospizio* took on its modern form in 1650, and continued to operate until after WWII. Inmates were given a daily bread allowance, and the able-bodied were expected to work in the artisanal workshops designed to help offset the costs of room and board.

Chapter four, “The Typical Applicant,” gives a glimpse of the average applicant at this institution – a male between 20 and 40 years of age, likely married but with no children or a very small family. In startling contrast to the conventional wisdom that eighteenth-century Italian families, especially poor ones, were large, the author shows that two-thirds of the poor relief applicants were childless.

The author also takes a close look at the bureaucratic environment of the *Ospizio* and suggests that, in many cases, it was the bureaucrat’s diligence and attitude that helped applicants jump through the hoops to get the help they needed. In fact, it was sometimes the bureaucrats who speeded up the process to enable those in need of medical help to gain admission more swiftly.

Overall this is a useful book for helping us to understand how one aspect of state-sponsored poor relief worked on the ground in eighteenth-century Turin. By presenting the human face of this institution through a careful study of its records, the author not only gives us a sense of who the inmates were, but also how they were treated and how the system worked or failed to work for them.

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