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Dr Peter Jones

Looking through a Different Lens: Microhistory and the Workhouse Experience in Late Nineteenth-Century London

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Abstract: This article uses a microhistorical approach to investigate the “workhouse experience” of a single pauper in late nineteenth-century London. Its subject is Frank Burge, a remarkably prolific (though by no means unique) correspondent who wrote several lengthy letters of complaint from the Poplar workhouse to the Local Government Board (the central poor law authority) between 1884 and 1885. By placing these letters and the official responses they stimulated alongside other public and official sources it uses a blended methodological approach to uncover a rich narrative of hardship, struggle and individual (pauper) agency. It argues that, in contrast to other, more orthodox histories of welfare, it is only through this kind of painstaking and sensitive historical reconstruction that we truly can

understand the nature, impact and legacy of poverty and the “workhouse experience” on the nineteenth-century poor.

Introduction:

Who were the “workhouse poor” in the nineteenth century? At first sight, the answer to this question might seem obvious: they were those who, from mendicancy or misfortune, required the assistance of the local state. They were the elderly, the sick, widows and orphans (the “deserving poor”); or they were vagrants and idlers, the able-bodied and the unemployed (the “undeserving”). Thanks to a raft of recent studies by geographers and local historians we now have detailed snapshots of how workhouse populations were constituted in particular poor law unions at particular times.ⁱ Beyond this, welfare historians have even begun to illuminate, sometimes in great detail, what the “workhouse experience” may have looked like for generic cohorts of inmates, particularly the aged poorⁱⁱ, the sick poorⁱⁱⁱ, children^{iv}, the mentally ill and the learning disabled.^v In fact, given all this activity one could argue that the question is not so much, “who were the workhouse poor” as “what more is there left to say about them?” At one level, this feels like a perfectly reasonable response given that we have begun to establish a sophisticated overview of the demography of selected workhouse populations and a growing understanding of the ways that the various classes of the indoor poor could expect to be treated. But on another, much more intimate level the truth is that we still know virtually nothing about the millions of men, women and children who spent anywhere between a single night and many decades in these iconic institutions.^{vi} In all but a handful of cases, we know nothing about their life-stories or what led them to the workhouse in the first place; about what happened to them when (or if) they left; about their personal journeys as workhouse inmates; or about the impact of workhouse residence on them as individuals. The

few written accounts from ex-inmates that exist are more often than not the result of highly mediated attempts to come to terms with the stigma of workhouse residence and were written long after the fact, and as such they tend to emphasise triumph over adversity and, hence, the exceptionalism of the writer. While they fulfilled important functions for those who wrote them they do not necessarily offer us a clear picture of the lived realities of workhouse life, or its legacy, for the great majority of inmates.^{vii}

Of course, the question of what, if anything, individual “life stories” can add to our understanding of the workhouse experience as a whole is a perfectly legitimate one. Social history as a discipline works most commonly (and, many would argue, most effectively) in aggregates. Despite the much heralded death of its “grand narratives” and a growing emphasis on the experiences of minorities, persecuted and “subaltern” groups (those who traditionally have been ignored, marginalised or excluded from the canon) social history, in common with the social sciences (rather than the arts with which it is most often identified), is still beset by a taxonomical tendency that divides the objects of its study into broad classes based on an ever-expanding array of shared characteristics.^{viii} These might be socio-economic, ethnic, racial or religious in character; they might be based on gender or sexuality, or on occupational, behavioural or medical criteria. It is, I would suggest, a tendency that flows from the sympathetic impulse to understand collective experience and to explain collective behaviour more fully, one borne of a fundamental aspiration to uncover a “wider, more human history’...a history which describ[es] how and why people live and work together.”^{ix} In many ways, aggregation is the unavoidable currency of social history. Yet there are, and for a long time have been, concerns that it allows some of the most intimate and profound aspects of the human experience to fall between the cracks in our understanding. In viewing historical actors only (or predominantly) taxonomically, defined by the common features of the “classes” into which we place them, we inevitably smooth out

the bumps and blemishes of individual experience that, in our own lives, we believe make us fully who we are. It is a tendency which also allows us, very often, to downplay or even ignore the importance of individual (as opposed to collective) agency in history. Concern about this aspect of aggregation accounts, in part, for a recent upsurge of interest in more intimate histories – histories of emotion and embodiment, for example – and what they can tell us about individual experience.^x

One longer term response to the disquiet about the way we construct our aggregate histories is the growth of microhistory which has blossomed since it gained a secure foothold in the 1970s.^{xi} Microhistory is arguably not so much a historiographical approach as an intention, a commitment to reducing the scale of historical inquiry rather than an approach which offers a specific methodology, and it is often an essential component of many of the “new” histories alluded to above.^{xii} Despite the lack of a coherent methodological identity, most of those who have described what they do as “microhistory” would agree that its most useful function is that it encourages us to drill down into the everyday experiences of ordinary people, to understand their lives in ways that they may have done themselves, and to take full account of the strategies and methods they used to influence the trajectory of those lives, often against considerable odds.^{xiii} In other words, it encourages us to treat individuals as historical actors and to listen to what they have to tell us rather than simply applying the programmatic lessons of historiography to their experience. This is not to suggest that microhistorical enquiry starts and ends with the individual: rather, that it is through the lived experiences of individuals that we find new things to say about past lives more generally.

What follows is an example of how we can apply some of the lessons of microhistory to the experiences of a single individual in order to understand what residence in an English workhouse meant to him. It relies predominantly on his direct testimony rather than on the bureaucratic records that were generated around him. Our protagonist is Frank Burge, an out-

of-work (or, more accurately, spasmodically employed) legal clerk who entered the workhouse at Poplar in 1883 with his family and who was still resident there in June 1888. Burge is extraordinary (though not unique) in that he left considerable personal traces in the archive while he was an inmate, and the cornerstone of what follows is a remarkable series of letters he sent to the Local Government Board (the central authority that oversaw the application of welfare policy; hereafter LGB) between September 1884 and December 1885.^{xiv} Despite the fact that the project on which this study is based has uncovered many other serial letter-writers from the workhouse, Burge's life story is of course unique and a central purpose of what follows is to bear witness to his story as far as the archives will allow.^{xv} But this being a kind of microhistory, his epistolary largesse will also be used to draw wider lessons which can potentially be applied to the lives of others who came into contact with the New Poor Law and its institutions. In common with any study that relies predominantly on narrative sources, we cannot simply excavate these letters uncritically, hoping to find a definitive version of Burge's experiences or his struggles with local and central officials. Instead, it is important to understand from the very beginning that a close reading of his correspondence is useful as a way of shining a light on how and why he constructed his experiences as he did and that this, in turn, may offer us much-needed insights into the impact of workhouse confinement on paupers as individuals. The nature of his letters, and the very act of writing, are, therefore, at least as important to this study as their content and it is important to 'de-code' the meaning of the messages they contain with a critical eye. Burge's personal history and his relationships with a range of actors – from workhouse and union officials to members of his own family – are also crucial to this story and will be explored as part of it. But at centre-stage is Burge himself and what his reclaimed narrative can tell us about the physical and emotional impact of workhouse confinement on individuals in nineteenth-century England.

“No blame is attachable to Fr. Burge”

Having stated that this study is, in part, intended to provide a corrective to the aggregations of much social history, it might seem strange to begin by ascribing a label to its main subject; but there is value in acknowledging that, in many ways, Frank Burge belonged to what would once have been described as the “shamefaced poor.” In the early modern period, the “shamefaced” were those “who had fallen from prosperity, could not maintain the style of living appropriate with their rank, and were threatened more with dishonour than with outright starvation.”^{xvi} They are often identified as having been treated more generously than those who had less far to fall (and, by implication, less to lose) and charitable assistance was often given to them without fanfare, even covertly, in order to spare their blushes (tellingly, synonyms for the shamefaced poor included the “bashful” or “modest poor”).^{xvii} Notwithstanding the contention that “the concept was always less significant in England” than in many parts of continental Europe, the shamefaced poor were nonetheless a preoccupation, a constant reminder that no matter how economically secure they may have seemed very few people could entirely guarantee against an uncertain future.^{xviii} In England, as elsewhere, foundations and endowments were established to cater for the needs of the shamefaced poor: for example, they were far more likely than other groups to be selected by trustees for almshouse accommodation.^{xix} As Steve Hindle has pointed out, the shamefaced presented a particular problem to early modern societies because the obvious or visible economic descent of the well-to-do could disrupt “the stability of a ‘society of orders’” (yet another reason why the charity they received was often relatively generous and quietly applied).^{xx} It is axiomatic, however, that even as the ties that bound the social order loosened in the nineteenth century, life remained as precarious as it had always been for this group

(perhaps even more so) and decayed householders were as likely as ever to require charity and public relief during periods of misfortune, sickness, and old age. Yet we know virtually nothing about how this group fared in the later period, or about how shifts in sentiment towards the poor more generally affected their treatment by central and local relieving authorities.^{xxi}

There is no reason to suppose that those who had fallen on hard times from a position of economic and social security were any better protected than the habitual poor in Victorian England. Despite the fact that the New Poor Law aimed at the strict classification of those who came within its purview, it did not differentiate between the high and the low-born.^{xxii} In fact, there may be a case for suggesting that what were once known as the shamefaced poor suffered a significant loss of status from the early years of the nineteenth century onwards – rhetorically, at least – as the notion of “respectability” gradually became detached from markers such as gentility and social standing and was reassigned, via the virtues of diligence, thrift, sobriety and hard work, to those among the labouring classes who maintained independence from charity and relief. In other words, it was increasingly a way of distinguishing the industrious from the “ragged,” the “dangerous” and the “degraded” poor.^{xxiii} Indeed, there is some indication that by the mid-nineteenth century the phrase “shamefaced” had come to denote anyone, regardless of background, who refused to apply for relief when in great hardship rather than applying specifically to the decayed middle classes as it had in the early modern period. Hence, the *Daily Telegraph*, in a report on “London Poverty and Charity,” reported that: “there are many poor men and women whose lives are one incessant struggle...These are the quiet, the meek, the uncomplaining, the shamefaced poor, who hide their heads in holes and starve and die there.”^{xxiv} This, in essence, was the problem faced by Frank Burge. He was (as he tells us often in his letters) a “Solicitors Managing Clerk”; a man who, it transpires, had commanded the substantial salary

of £400 a year as an agent for the Grosvenor estate in London less than twenty years prior to his correspondence with the LGB; and who, throughout the period covered by his correspondence, continued to act as an administrator for the estate of a solicitor acquaintance.^{xxv} Yet, in July 1883, aged forty-seven, he found himself “incarcerated” (in his own words) in a union workhouse, unable to provide for himself or for his wife and four children who consequently became inmates with him.^{xxvi} Under the Old Poor Law, it is easy to imagine that Burge and his family would have been given temporary or semi-permanent relief to tide them over, especially given his potential earning capacity. But by the 1880s this was highly unlikely, especially in the east end of London.^{xxvii} Burge’s misfortune (or one of them, at least) was to have required assistance at the height, and at the very epicentre, of what historians have described as the “crusade against out-relief,” a period lasting from the 1870s to the mid-1890s during which reformers attempted to reassert the fundamental principles of the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834), and in particular to further restrict outdoor relief to the able-bodied poor and enforce the workhouse test with renewed vigour.^{xxviii}

These long-term shifts in sentiment towards the “shamefaced,” or decayed, poor are important for an understanding of Frank Burge’s actions and motivations; but so are the finer details of his life both before and during his confinement. Fortunately, he wrote at least eight letters of complaint to the LGB whilst he was an inmate, amounting to almost 15,000 words, and it is largely thanks to these that we are able to construct such a detailed picture of his experience as a workhouse pauper and the impact that his descent had on a former man of means. His first two letters have, unfortunately, been lost: the bound volume of LGB correspondence in which they would have appeared no longer exists. However, this is less of an obstacle than it might otherwise have been because the letters that remain cover much the same ground (often word-for-word) as those in the lost volume. In particular, his first extant letter (which, with enclosures, runs to more than 10,500 words on its own, and covers thirty

four sides of foolscap writing paper) contain verbatim copies, not only of his previous (now lost) correspondence with the LGB, but of other letters sent between himself and the Guardians of Poplar Union.

Nowhere in his letters did Burge give specific details of how he and his family ended up in the workhouse, but he did establish very early on that:

The causes of [my] pauperism are not material to the questions herein appearing inasmuch as the antecedents of a pauper having nothing to do with his rights or responsibilities as a pauper[;] but it may as well be stated that no blame is attachable to Fr. Burge. The circumstances relating to his domestic affairs are in the knowledge of the Guardians and as to his business relations the subjoined facts speak for themselves.^{xxix}

This early passage is illuminating for a number of reasons. The first is that it is clear he was keen to deflect responsibility for his economic plight away from himself. The hint that he had been badly used in business and, perhaps, personally as well is strong: we do not know what “The circumstances relating to his domestic affairs” were (those “subjoined” details are not included with his copied correspondence) but there is something darkly ominous in the phrase. This approach is far from unusual in pauper correspondence and complaints under both the New and the Old Poor Laws. Many of those who wrote sought to establish their right to be heard by the authorities, at least in part, by assuring them that they were blameless for their poverty and should not, therefore, be punished for it. In contrast, however, Burge was also very clear that his right to fair treatment was not in any way contingent on his conduct in the past and in this he was quite different from many, if not most, pauper correspondents who were keen to emphasise their good character either to establish a right to consideration or as a

way of contrasting their own behaviour with that of negligent officials.^{xxx} The second thing of note about this passage is that Burge writes here of his own experience in the third person. As we shall see, this is consistent with other letters and passages from his correspondence, and taken with an assertion of the right to be treated fairly regardless of his character or past conduct, and with the assertive and supremely confident tone of his address to the LGB, it becomes clear even from this brief passage that Burge was an unusually accomplished correspondent.

In marked contrast to their tone, the substance of Burge's complaints seems rather insubstantial given that he pursued them so doggedly and taking into account a general emphasis in both contemporary reportage and later workhouse literature on "scandals" and cruel treatment.^{xxxi} Principally, he complained that he had been denied the opportunity to leave the workhouse without his family in order to look for work. He tells us that this had been granted to him on a number of occasions and that, each time, he had secured short-term employment but nothing substantial enough to enable him to regain his independence (which is why he kept returning to the workhouse). In January 1884, however, his application for a further period of leave was denied, and it transpires that the Poplar Board of Guardians refused on this occasion because they believed it was a strategy on his part "to be relieved of the care of his family" (something that is dealt with at length below).^{xxxii} Later, Burge made a number of subsidiary complaints of persecution, many of which, he implied, arose from his refusal to bow to the Guardians' decision. The first, and most important, of these was that Alfred Power, one of the Guardians, reportedly said of him at a Board meeting that "there were many more sane persons than this man in lunatic asylums," a comment that resulted in an accusation of slander by Burge. He also alleged that he had been denied an audience with the Guardians to appeal against their decision; that he had been punished for his persistence (he was put to work in the stone yard, a form of labour he alleged was reserved as a

punishment for paupers, although the Guardians strongly disputed this in their letters to the LGB); and that his children had been “tampered with” in order to turn them against him (he alleged that the matron had told his daughter, “your father is a drunkard...[otherwise] he could get work”).^{xxxiii}

These, in essence, were Burge’s grievances against the Guardians of Poplar Union: hardly the stuff of Victorian melodrama. But they were sufficient to precipitate his extended correspondence and to encourage him to initiate a legal action against four of the Guardians at the Queen’s Bench. Despite his paralegal training and (as we shall see) not inconsiderable skills as an advocate he was quickly nonsuited by the presiding judge, meaning that the case was halted effectively before it had begun.^{xxxiv} Despite this setback, Burge was not dissuaded in his campaign for justice as he saw it. Two years later, and four years after the first refusal of the Guardians to grant him leave of absence, his complaints even reached the floor of the House of Commons when, in June 1888, Cunninghame Graham, M.P., asked the then president of the LGB, Charles Ritchie:

if the Guardians of the poor of the parish of Poplar exceeded their duty in refusing Mr. Frank Burge, an inmate of the workhouse of that parish, three weeks’ leave to provide a home for his family, thus rendering him a permanent pauper, and making his family chargeable on the rates.

Ritchie responded that, in his view, the Guardians had not exceeded their duty on the grounds that Burge’s repeated applications for leave of absence “tended to interfere with the discipline of the workhouse.”^{xxxv} The length of time between Burge’s original complaint and this Parliamentary intervention underlines once again his doggedness and determination. It is, in part, explicable in terms of his previous history as a legal clerk; but beyond this, there is a

sense that it was not merely (and, perhaps, not even predominantly) the achievement of redress which was at issue for him. In order to understand this more fully we first need to look in more detail at his campaign for “justice.”

Making a Drama out of a Crisis

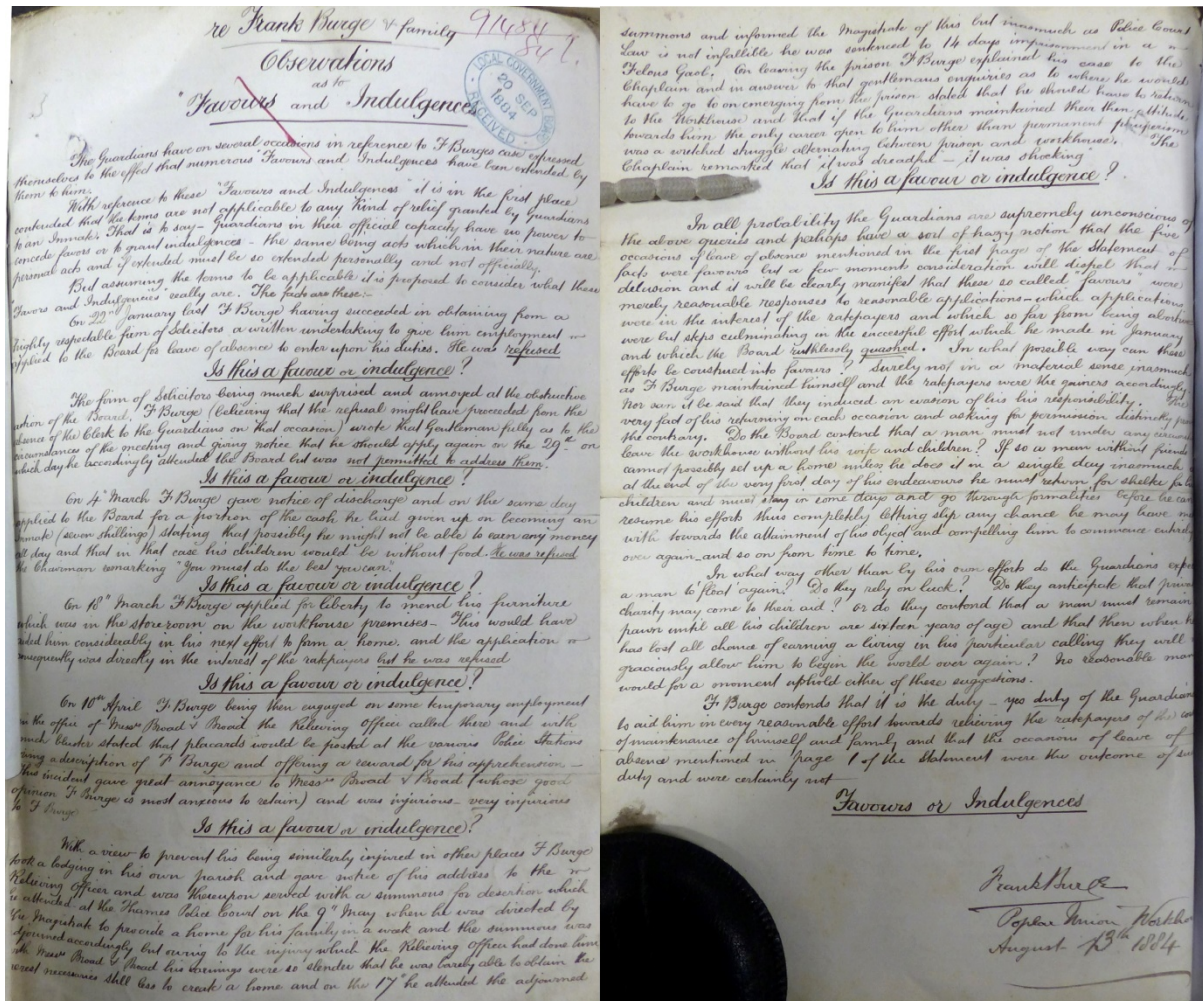


Figure 1: “Favours and Indulgences”: An enclosure with Burge’s first letter to the Local Government Board, 18 September 1884 (Source: The National Archives, MH12/7698/91484/84)

As noted above, Burge often (though not always) framed his complaints and recounted his experiences in the third person. This is most clearly illustrated in a long passage (in fact, a standalone document annexed to his first letter) entitled “Observations as to Favours and Indulgences” (Figure 1). In it, Burge began by explaining that, “The Guardians have on several occasions in reference to F Burges case expressed themselves to the effect that numerous ‘Favours and Indulgences[’] have been extended by them to him.” He, however, believed that:

the terms are not applicable to any kind of relief granted by the Guardians to an Inmate. That is to say – Guardians in their official capacity have no power to concede favours or to grant indulgences the same being acts which in their nature are personal acts and if extended must be so extended personally and not officially.³⁶

Having established this principle, he went on to rehearse each of his grievances in turn. First, he stated that when he had applied for leave of absence to go to work in January 1884, he had a written undertaking of employment from a “respectable board of Solicitors” (Messrs. Broad and Broad, in the City of London), yet the Board still refused him: “Is this a favour or indulgence?” he asked. Second, he charged the Guardians with refusing to hear a further request at their Board meeting on 29 January: “Is this a favour or indulgence?” he asked again. And so he went on. He accused the Board of refusing him access to savings he had deposited with the workhouse authorities when he first arrived; he revealed that he had been refused liberty to mend his own furniture, which was held in store at the workhouse; and he stated that union officials had ordered the police to apprehend him for desertion when, on a

later occasion, he had again succeeded in securing short-term employment and his family had returned for shelter to the workhouse (he spent fourteen days in jail for that offence). Each time, he ended his complaint with the same rhetorical flourish, asking: “Is this a favour or indulgence?” Perhaps unsurprisingly, he glossed over his imprisonment in most of his correspondence with the LGB, except to point out that whilst out of the workhouse he was “barely able to obtain the merest necessities,” let alone earn enough to “create a home,” and that “if the Guardians maintained their...attitude towards him the only career open to him other than permanent pauperism was a wretched struggle alternating between prison and workhouse.” In his response to the Guardians’ “Favours and indulgences,” he went on to ask:

In what way other than by his own efforts do the Guardians expect a man to ‘float’ again? Do they rely on luck? Do they anticipate that private charity may come to their aid? Or do they contend that a man must remain in pawn until all his children are sixteen years of age and that then when he has lost all chance of earning a living in his particular calling they will graciously allow him to begin the world over again?

He argued that, “No reasonable man would for a moment uphold either of these suggestions,” and “that it is the duty – yes duty – of the Guardians to aid him in every reasonable effort towards relieving the ratepayers of the cost of maintenance of himself and family”.

Despite Burge’s paralegal experience and his evident rhetorical sophistication, however, it is clear that his case was not a strong one. As has already been noted, the LGB, like the Poor Law Board that preceded it, actively discouraged Guardians from allowing able bodied paupers out of the workhouse for any reason without their families and dependents.³⁷

Boards of Guardians were permitted, under particular circumstances, to allow them leave to seek work, but Article 116 of the General Consolidated Order (1847) specified that: “This permission ought to be given only from time to time, as the occasion may arise, and not at stated intervals, for example, once a week or a fortnight [because] permission to leave the house at stated intervals is found in practice to be abused.”³⁸ To have directed otherwise would have undermined one of the most fundamental principles of the New Poor Law: that the “workhouse test” should be sufficiently awkward, inconvenient and unpleasant for the able-bodied that they would be forced to consider very strongly their options when applying for relief. Yet, in later correspondence between the Board Clerk and the LGB, it emerged that Burge was actually allowed leave on seven different occasions, both before *and after* the date of his most detailed letters of complaint. These periods of leave ranged from a single day or a few days (between January and April 1885) to three and six weeks (in January 1884 and September 1883) during which times he was supposedly in paid employment while his family continued to be supported in the workhouse. It is clear from its correspondence that the Board of Guardians, with the LGB’s sanction, allowed Burge his brief spells of leave after its initial refusal in January 1884 in an attempt to forestall any further extended complaints or actions by him. It is equally clear, on the basis of his subsequent actions, that this attempt comprehensively failed.³⁹ Given that their sanction was both unusual and entirely discretionary it is difficult not to view the Guardians’ decisions in these cases as an “indulgence.” Burge, of all people, surely understood this.

In terms of his other major complaint, that he had been slandered by one of the Poplar Guardians, this too seems strangely insubstantial when we look at it in more detail. As noted above, Power merely quipped that “there are many more sane people than this man inside lunatic asylums”; yet Burge maintained that “[t]hese words clearly gave me a right of action for damages,” because “it would be hopeless for me to endeavour to obtain a situation in the

office of any Solicitor who had read that report.”⁴⁰ In order to succeed in his claim Burge would have had to persuade the court that the comment was made maliciously, that it was made as an assertion of the truth (rather than as a light-hearted aside), and that it would, in fact, have substantially affected his chances of employment. As with all actions for slander, great discretion would be required in judging this case; but, under the circumstances, it was always going to be very difficult to prove. This, certainly, was the decision of Justice Denman, the judge appointed to consider its merits, who concluded that Power’s comment was “not really an actionable statement.”⁴¹ Denman’s nonsuiting of Burge applied, not only to the allegation of slander, but to additional grounds for damages which Burge brought against the Guardians on the basis that their refusal to allow him leave of absence was “malicious.” Once again, for his case to succeed he would have had to demonstrate that their refusal was contrary to normal practice or was against the regulations governing their decisions – and, as we have seen, this was clearly not the case. Under these circumstances, it was inevitable that his case would be thrown out and the original decision was confirmed by another judge at appeal, in January 1887.⁴² So, how are we to account for Burge’s persistence in pursuing legal and epistolary campaigns that seem to us to be so obviously destined to fail?

By now, it should be abundantly clear that Frank Burge had a keen sense of the dramatic. This is indicated in his eagerness to resort to the law with what seems a rather lightweight case, and it is evident in the tone, tenor and presentation of his correspondence. His case, however implausible, was always meticulously constructed. For example, at one point he included a detailed calculation of the likely cost to the ratepayers if he and his family were to remain in the workhouse indefinitely because of the Guardians’ refusal to allow him out to look for work (Figure 2). His reasoning is clear and logical, and his conclusion – that the “Total cost of the mistake made by the Guardians on 22 Jany.” would, under the circumstances he outlines, be a little over twelve hundred pounds – seems far from

unreasonable. As Figure 1, above, demonstrates his letters are in themselves things of great craftsmanship and artistry and it is obvious that as much consideration went into the appearance of the letters as into their content – although, as the extracts above demonstrate, the two were inextricably linked so as to create maximum impact. But despite their rhetorical sophistication, there is also something self-consciously performative about them – as we have seen, he often wrote of himself in the third person – and evidence of Burge’s dramatic streak is not confined to his correspondence.

The decision of the Board

If then with such a combination of circumstances favorable to the applicant it was considered by the Board preferable to detain him within the walls of the workhouse to allowing him to make an effort for himself outside it is hard to imagine by what means a better state of facts would be likely to accrue. Indeed it is only fair to assume that the longer a man is detained from his particular calling the less able is he to resume his place in the ranks of it. In other words if there was little chance for the applicant to make a home in January last there would be less next January and still less as time proceeds until at length permanent pauperism would result.

The applicant is 47 years of age, is in good health, has no disease, and might live to 75. This would give 28 years which at say 7/- per week would cost the ratepayers £ 504

The wife of applicant is 45 years of age and also in good health. Assume the cost at the same amount } 504

The children of applicant are aged 13, 11, and 5 respectively and might occasion the ratepayers a very large outlay (there are numerous instances where children brought up as paupers have become paupers on their own account off and on for many years) but assuming the ratepayers to be free of applicants children at 16 years of age it is within the mark to estimate the cost of them at £50 each } 200

Total cost of the mistake made by the Guardians on 23 Jan 1844 £ 1208

Figure 2: Burge’s calculation of the likely cost to the ratepayers of keeping him and his family in the workhouse (Source: The National Archives, MH12/7698/91484/84)

In a letter he wrote to the Chaplain of the workhouse (later reproduced as an enclosure to the LGB) he explained that:

My spare evenings when I was a younger man were chiefly passed in Literary Institutes where I pursued many studies amongst others that of elocution in which it is a matter of dry fact to state that I attained great proficiency[,] so much so that I earned numerous sums by exemplifications of my abilities on the platforms of Literary Institutions and other places.

The occasion of his writing to the Chaplain was to ask if it would be possible to give “a most attractive list of recitations” in the workhouse school room to a paying audience. The Chaplain failed to respond to his offer, but this did not stop Burge giving the other residents the benefit of his recitals, free of charge, in the “young men’s room.”⁴³ His claim to have been a successful amateur performer in earlier years is confirmed by reports in the local press. Between 1863 and 1873, numerous adverts and reports appeared in the *Islington Gazette* and *North London News* relating to his life on the stage, which included dramatic sketches and parts in plays as well as recitals accompanied by his sister (referred to only as “Miss Burge”) on the piano. These reports are generally very favourable, describing his performances as “excellent,” and as having been “played with great judgement and effect.”⁴⁴ There is no indication that he had wider ambitions for his dramatic career, but he did travel beyond the East End as a result of it. *The Leicester Guardian*, for example, reported that “[t]he next popular evening” at the city’s Music Hall:

will take place on Monday, the 11th January [1864], when Mr. Frank Burge, assisted by Miss Burge, will give his New Characteristic Entertainment with appropriate costumes, entitled “Love and Money, or the Breach of Promise.”

“We may safely predict a crowded house,” the report concluded.⁴⁵

We know that Burge had aspirations for his voice to be heard more widely in print, as well. In the same copied letter to the Chairman of the Board of Guardians in which he calculated the likely cost of his family's confinement, he also confided that "I have made an effort in literature[,] my subject being 'Life in a Workhouse'," which he had submitted to the *Daily News*. The editor declined to publish his article, but, characteristically, Burge was not deterred by this rejection. Over the next several years he wrote a novel entitled *Johnson's Luck*, which he also made efforts to publish. We know about this novel because it was eventually the cause of yet another legal dispute when, in 1900, Burge brought a case against a "lady journalist" at Westminster Magistrates' Court. He had entrusted her with his manuscript (the fruit of eighteen years' labour, he claimed) on the promise that she would make every effort to get it published; but, he alleged, she held onto it without his consent and had made no real efforts on his behalf.⁴⁶ As was the case in his earlier action against the Poplar Guardians, his suit against her was effectively thrown out before it began and the only reason it made the newspapers was because of the amusement it caused among the court journalists. In a short piece entitled "'Johnson's Luck' and Burge's Lack," for example, the *Westminster Gazette* observed that:

We suppose that as long as authors write they will continue to consider their particular work epoch-making – if it only got a chance. But the faith of Mr. Frank Burge in his work and in publishers does not seem to be shared by Mr. Francis [the presiding Magistrate], which is sad, seeing that Burge's case is hard enough.⁴⁷

A report of the case appeared in several newspapers, and there is the same note of mild, condescending mockery in each of them.

As with his earlier pursuits of the Poplar Guardians and the LGB, there is something self-defeating and, viewed from one angle, perhaps even pitiable about his attempt to claim damages in this case. It is an episode that would be of marginal interest on its own as a further demonstration of Burge's penchant for courtroom drama. But it takes on a particular significance when we realise that at the time of this second legal challenge, Frank Burge was once again a workhouse resident, this time at Kensington.⁴⁸ It raises the possibility that there was a causal link between his confinement as a pauper and his courtroom actions, just as there was between his time in the Poplar workhouse and the nature of his extended correspondence with the LGB.⁴⁹ In particular, there seems to be a clear sense that it was the guarantee of a public hearing (no matter how brief or unlikely to succeed) that was Burge's true goal in these actions. To put it another way, both his legal proceedings and his letter-writing campaign become much more explicable when we recognise that the *process* was more important to him than the *outcome*; and to understand why this might be the case, we need to look again at his life story.

Looking through a Different Lens

For all that Frank Burge – Solicitor's Managing Clerk, one-time agent for the Grosvenor estate in Mayfair, and erstwhile amateur performer on the East End stage – may seem an unlikely character to find in the nineteenth-century workhouse, he was clearly no stranger to it. As we have seen, he spent an extended period as an inmate at Poplar in middle-age along with his wife and four dependent children, and another, alone, as an elderly man at Kensington. But, potentially, the most affecting experience of workhouse residence occurred much earlier in his life. According to the 1841 census, he was at that time, aged four, a pauper in the Billericay workhouse in Essex along with his parents, John and Mary, and

sisters Ellen, Rebecca and Elizabeth.⁵⁰ Of course, it would be foolish without further detailed evidence to speculate how his early confinement affected the young Frank or whether this single incident influenced the course of his life in any significant way. For one thing, we do not know how long he was an inmate on this occasion or if this was the only period he spent as a child in the workhouse.⁵¹ Nonetheless, it is at least possible that it had some bearing on his later life.

In 1841, Burge's father was described as an "Officer of the Exqer," or a tax official; by the time of Frank's marriage to Isabella Morris, in 1863, Burge senior was noted as a commercial traveller.⁵² At times, it is clear that he was successful enough to give his son a decent education and at least one of his daughters the opportunity to learn the piano. But, for whatever reason, Burge Sr. found it hard to maintain his economic independence and he ended up, along with his family, dependent on the ratepayers at least once in his life. The fact that his son – who equalled and, as a paralegal clerk, perhaps even exceeded his father's position in life – also had periods as a dependent pauper might suggest that there were issues in the private lives of both men which contributed to their periodic downturns of fate. There is no indication in his letters, or in the correspondence from the Board of Guardians and the LGB that surround them, of any specific physical, mental or emotional illness on Frank's part, and he himself strongly disputed the Matron's veiled accusation that he was an alcoholic. But the sense of a precipitous fall, and the ignominy that would have been attached to it, must, in themselves, have been hard for him to bear, perhaps even more so in light of his early experiences.

As stated above, we do not – and cannot – know the fine details of his personal history; but we can at least conjecture on the impact of confinement in the Poplar and Kensington workhouses on his conduct whilst he was an inmate, and it is certainly of interest that these were not his first experiences of workhouse residence. Under such circumstances

what might seem, at best, eccentric and, at worst, self-defeating behaviour as a complainant and correspondent could instead be viewed as a perfectly reasonable response to the impact of having been “incarcerated” (as he saw it) with the attendant loss of power, autonomy and status that that involved. At even the most superficial level, his extended correspondence makes sense as a way of reclaiming agency over his situation and ensuring that his voice would be heard at the highest level. Indeed, it is clear from the extensive corpus of pauper correspondence gathered for the “In Their Own Write” project that the LGB and its earlier incarnations were assiduous in responding to almost all letters from paupers, even if only to acknowledge receipt; and as we have seen, Burge’s complaints even reached the floor of the House of Commons. His legal action against the Guardians gave him another stage on which to express both his frustrations and to demonstrate his paralegal experience and his rhetorical abilities, despite the fact that it failed at the first hurdle. Taken together, both of these outlets were a way of reclaiming a presence in the world beyond his status as a dependent pauper. They would have given him a sense, no matter how fleeting, of autonomy – or, at least, of control over his life. Whatever it was that led him once again to become a workhouse pauper as an old man it is notable that he seems to have followed a very similar path, drawing on his paralegal training and earlier dramatic successes to stage a courtroom drama of his own and to claim a further brief moment of fame (or, at least, notoriety). Whether this was sufficient compensation for his loss of independence we cannot possibly know; but what we can say with reasonable certainty is that, under the circumstances, it was a response that made perfect sense to him.

Serial Complainers and the Workhouse Experience: Taking Stock

Recently, Jones and King argued that the actions of serial pauper correspondents under the New Poor Law, and particularly those who wrote to the central authorities to complain about poor treatment and conditions in the workhouse, need to be understood within the context of a much wider movement for reform; that they were keenly aware of other currents within that movement and of the importance and influence of the growing popular press, particularly in the second half of the century. We wrote that, as well as workhouse inmates, they were “morally cognizant citizens” who “considered it their duty to bring the shortcomings of local officials to the commissioners”.⁵³ This is no less true of Frank Burge as it is of the other letter writers we identified. Throughout his correspondence he questioned both the practical and the moral foundations of the Guardians’ decisions, as well as those of the LGB when they chose to support the local Board. He consistently used the language of “tyranny” when describing those decisions, and frequently framed himself as David confronting the indiscriminate and unrestrained power of the Guardians’ Goliath. When informing them that he was preparing to take his case to the Queen’s Bench, for example, he wrote that:

It will be useless for the Board to consider that this is an idle threat and to conceive that because I am a pauper they can take a dastardly and tyrannical advantage of me. There is law for the pauper and the law assumes that when it is necessary for a pauper to invoke the law he will do so.⁵⁴

However, none of this negates or contradicts the interpretation of his actions suggested in the previous discussion. The possibility that he mounted his campaign within the context of wider calls for workhouse reform is not at all incompatible with the function of his correspondence and litigation as an expression of agency in the face of personal misfortune and (as he saw it) enforced confinement. But it is equally important to note that the reverse is

true: that the actions of those other serial correspondents we identified as “workhouse crusaders” also makes perfect sense within the context of a personal struggle against powerlessness and loss of status.⁵⁵ In fact, it is striking how many characteristics they shared with Frank Burge.

Henry Jones, for example, was a master seaman who lost everything in a shipwreck after 40 years at sea, and who wrote six detailed letters of complaint to the Poor Law Board between May and July 1868.⁵⁶ Mungo Paumier was a down-at-heel clerk, descended from wealthy Huguenot merchants who, by his own admission, had lost the family fortune before he found himself in Bethnal Green workhouse, and he mounted a campaign against the Guardians between 1866 and 1872.⁵⁷ Thomas Gould stated that he had been a senior parish official in the early-nineteenth century, and claimed that he had also been a workhouse master and “Superintendent of [pauper] Labour” in London for many years. When, like Burge, he found himself in Poplar workhouse (this time in the 1850s) Gould, too, insisted that instead “of calling it an asylum...it ought to be written up in large characters, Tyranny [and] Inhumanity.” Finally, John Rutherford had been, and would again be, a successful author and journalist when he became a workhouse inmate and began his own extended letter-writing campaign.⁵⁸ Rutherford’s case is of particular interest to us because he was a contemporary of Burge’s at Poplar and he claimed to have resisted the latter’s attempts to recruit him in his own campaign against the Guardians. There was clearly considerable friction between the two men: Rutherford even claimed to have been assaulted by Burge and some of his “accomplices”; although, to muddy the waters still further, he also admitted that Burge had, in fact, brought a complaint against him for the same reason.⁵⁹ Whatever the truth of the matter, it is clear from their letters that, not only did the two men share an epistolary history, they also vied for influence with their peers within the institution itself.⁶⁰ This lends weight to the suggestion that these men, all of whom had come down considerably in the world through

malice, misfortune, mismanagement or some unknown cause, were likely to have found solace in their extended correspondence and in the campaigns they mounted against the officials who held power over them.

It is notable that pauper “campaigners,” such the ones described here, who pressed their claims urgently and insistently on the Poor Law Commissioners were exclusively men. In the wider sample from which these examples are taken, relatively rare examples of women as serial correspondents do exist; but whereas the content of their letters is often quite similar to that of the men, the tone and tenor is strikingly different. For example, Frances Land, who wrote eight letters to the Poor Law Board from Great Yarmouth workhouse between 1851 and 1869, complained of everything from the tyrannical nature of the workhouse master to the vile state of the food; yet her letters were rhetorically and linguistically quite distinct from those of the men cited above. For one thing, she never pressed her case on the basis of prior status, and gave no indication of her current “standing” in the community, instead describing herself merely as an “oppressed and unadvised” pauper.⁶¹ For another, her letters were far less assertive, instead relying heavily on the traditional conventions (familiar from Old Poor Law pauper letters and from familiar letters more generally) of humility and even diffidence: phrases such as “humbly crave,” “humbly subscribe,” “you will confer a favour,” and “I have the honour to subscribe” figure heavily.⁶² Finally, and perhaps crucially, in none of her letters did Land challenge the authority of the Commissioners. Instead, she asked repeatedly for their *protection* from the actions of local officials (“the men in power” and the “scoundrels in power” locally), describing herself and fellow (adult) paupers as the “oppressed poor children” of Great Yarmouth and asking for the Commissioners to “kindly rescue us” from oppression.⁶³ This gendered language of diffidence, supplication and humility is, perhaps, to be expected in mid-Victorian England.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, it contrasts sharply with the assertive, insistent and, at times, belligerent campaigns mounted by the once well-to-do men who not

only demanded the intervention of the Commissioners and suggested solutions which they should adopt, but openly questioned their efficacy – and even their integrity – when they failed to do so.⁶⁵

On the other hand, it is quite possible that a practitioner of the new medical discipline of psychiatry may have described the actions of the male “crusading” correspondents such as those identified above – and Burge in particular – as having been rooted in a type of delusional mental illness first described by the pioneering German psychiatrist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, in 1879: *paranoia querulanteum*, or querulous paranoia.⁶⁶ Krafft-Ebing described its main characteristics as, “persistent claiming of injustice, petitioning the authorities, and associated persistent litigious behaviour.” He also observed that, unlike other delusional disorders, the reason and intellect of the querulant individual “remained intact throughout the course of the illness.”⁶⁷ In the mid- to late-twentieth century, the diagnosis of querulous paranoia fell from favour as the psychiatric community recognised that it could obscure as much as it explained in terms of the behaviour and motivations of persistent complainers.⁶⁸ By the 1970s, there was considerable disquiet about the way that, in certain places and at certain times, it had been used to quell legitimate grievance and political dissent. In particular, Olli Stålström argued, in 1980, that “diagnosis on the basis of questioning authority can be used to silence and devalue the individuals and arguments involved.”⁶⁹ He cited the obvious example of the Soviet Union where dissent itself was often characterised as a psychiatric disorder; but he also used examples from his native Finland to demonstrate the ways that more liberal societies have also pathologised legitimate complaint when it challenged official or cultural norms. Notably, however, Stålström also surmised that, in general, “paranoid reactions of the psychotic type connected with being discriminated against” are closely related to “Projections of one’s own failures, felt as unbearable,” and that

“Paranoid reactions are [therefore]...usual in prisons, prison camps and in other situations where one feels dominated by people who are often felt to be hostile.”⁷⁰

Conclusion

Taken together, Stålström’s observations sum up Frank Burge’s situation very neatly. In the first place, it suited the local and national poor law authorities to dismiss his complaints as the product of excessive zeal and a querulous personality, regardless of their validity or justice. Hence Alfred Power’s quip that he was quite possibly mad, but also the LGB’s internal observations that “Burge is a man who has given the [Guardians] an infinity of trouble,” that “any further legal proceedings must be purely vexatious,” and, in response to his final extant communication, that “Burge’s letters are not as a rule worthy of much consideration.”⁷¹ However, Stålström’s conclusions also support the view that the extent and nature of his complaints and actions can be seen as being closely related to his own “unbearable” personal failures, and his “incarceration” in a place where he felt dominated by hostile forces. As we have seen, his case was far from unique, particularly in London which was the centre of much workhouse reforming activity both within and beyond the context of the crusade against out-relief.⁷² It seems that, in a British context, the diagnosis of querulous paranoia arrived just in time to be applied to a relatively new kind of persistent complainer: the troubled and articulate middling sort who found themselves on hard times; those who might once have been described as the “shamefaced poor” and treated with understanding and discreet charity; but who, by the later nineteenth century, found themselves facing the same fate as the habitual poor, even being forced to rub shoulders with them in the New Poor Law workhouse. To the authorities, they were a particular problem because, whatever personal issues contributed to them ending up in the workhouse, once there they were

unlikely to be content to submit to what they viewed as the law's iniquities or to the petty tyrannies of local officials, and they had a formidable armoury of rhetorical weapons at their disposal.

To return, finally, to the question of what, if anything, a focus on the life and experiences of a single pauper can tell us about the impact of the workhouse more widely, we can at least say that Frank Burge's case encourages (one might even say demands) that we look beyond the usual aggregations of the sick, the able-bodied, the elderly, and all the other "classes" of paupers that form the usual currency of welfare history. It is notable that these classes were originally imposed with a clear ideological purpose by the architects of the New Poor Law itself, and it has proved remarkably difficult for social historians to shake free of them when attempting to tease out the "pauper experience."⁷³ Burge and his family were classed as able-bodied, and his treatment by the relieving officers, Guardians and the LGB amply reflects this. Beyond a pragmatic "indulgence" to allow him the opportunity now and then to go out of the workhouse to seek employment, he was treated the same as any other pauper in his "class": he was denied outdoor relief, and was given little option but to enter the workhouse and its strict regime of regimentation, separation and imposed (sometimes hard) manual labour. Yet, because of his history, it is axiomatic that he would have experienced these hardships very differently from many other able-bodied paupers, and perhaps even the majority (although this, too, remains to be tested against the sources). This is not a subtle way of implying that he had it harder than any other pauper, and neither is it intended as a defence of differential welfare treatment on the basis of class, education or prior social standing. It is merely to point out that there were as many ways of experiencing the nineteenth century workhouse as there were workhouse paupers; and it is only when we recognise this, and take full account of it in our historiography, that we will be able to do justice to the millions of individuals who passed through its doors.

ⁱ Nigel Goose, "Workhouse Populations in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The case of Hertfordshire," *Local Population Studies*, 62 (1999): 52-69; Andy Gritt and Peter Park, "The Workhouse Populations of Lancashire in 1881," *Local Population Studies*, 86 (2011): 37-65; Andrew Hinde and Fiona Turnbull, "The Populations of two Hampshire Workhouses, 1851-1861," *Local Population Studies*, 61 (1998): 38-53; David G. Jackson, "Kent Workhouse Populations in 1881: A Study Based on the Census Enumerators' Books," *Local Population Studies*, 69 (2002): 51-66; Johanna Purser, "The Workhouse Population of the Nottingham Union, 881-1882," *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017): 60-80; Christine Seal, "Workhouse Populations in the Cheltenham and Belper Unions: A study based on the census enumerators' books, 1851-1911," *Family and Community History*, 13 (2013): 83-100.

ⁱⁱ For example, George R. Boyer, "Work for their prime, the workhouse for their age: Old age pauperism in Victorian England," *Social Science History*, 40 (2016): 3-32; George R. Boyer and Timothy P. Schmidle, "Poverty among the elderly in late-Victorian England," *Economic History Review*, 62 (2009): 249-278; Nigel Goose, "Poverty, old age and gender in nineteenth-century England: The case of Hertfordshire," *Continuity and Change*, 20 (2005): 351-384; E.H. Hunt, "Paupers and pensioners, past and present," *Ageing and Society*, 9 (1989): 408-422; Alistair Ritch, "English poor law institutional care for older people: Identifying the 'aged and infirm' and the 'sick' in Birmingham Workhouse, 1852-1912," *Social History of Medicine*, 27 (2014): 64-85; David Thomson, "Workhouse to nursing home: Residential care of elderly people in England since 1840," *Ageing and Society*, 3 (1983): 43-69.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, Alistair Ritch, *Sickness in the Workhouse: Poor law medical care in provincial England, 1834-1914* (Rochester, 2019); Jonathan Reinartz and Leonard Schwarz

(eds.), *Medicine and the Workhouse* (Rochester, 2013), esp. Part Two: “The New Poor Law”; and, from a slightly different angle, Kim Price, *Medical Negligence in Victorian Britain: The crisis of care under the English Poor Law, c.1834-1900* (London, 2015), esp. Chapters 5: “A Latent Failure: the Crusade against Outdoor Relief,” and 6: “Survival of the Fittest: Indoor neglect”.

^{iv} Frank Crompton, *Workhouse Children: Infant and Child Paupers under the Worcestershire Poor Law, 1780-1871* (Stroud, Glos., 1997); Lesley Hulonce, *Pauper Children and Poor Law Childhoods in England and Wales 1834-1910* (self-published online, Kindle, 2016); Jane Humphries, “Care and cruelty in the workhouse: Children’s experiences of residential poor relief in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England,” in Nigel Goose and Katrina Honeyman (eds.), *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England: Diversity and agency, 1750-1914* (Farnham, 2013); Angela Negrine, “The treatment of sick children in the workhouse by the Leicester Poor Law Union, 1867-1914,” *Family and Community History*, 13 (2010): 34-44; Audrey Perkyns, “The admission of children to the Milton Workhouse, Kent, 1835-1885,” *Local Population Studies*, 80 (2008): 59-77.

^v For example, Emily S. Andrews, “Institutionalising Senile Dementia in 19th-Century Britain,” *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 39 (2017): 244-257; Peter Bartlett, *The Poor Law of Lunacy: The administration of pauper lunatics in mid-nineteenth century England* (Leicester, 1999); Elaine Murphy, “Workhouse care of the insane, 1845-90,” in Pamela Dale and Joseph Melling (eds.), *Mental Illness and Learning Disability since 1850: Finding a place for mental disorder in the United Kingdom* (Abingdon, 2006), 24-45; Leonard Smith, “Lunatic asylum in the workhouse: St. Peter’s Hospital, Bristol, 1698-1861,” *Medical History*, 61 (2017): 225-245; Steven J. Taylor, *Child Insanity in England, 1845-1907* (London, 2017); David Wright, “Disability and the New Poor Law in England, 1834-1867,”

Disability and Society, 15 (2000): 731-745. The conflation of mental illness and intellectual impairment was commonplace until the twentieth century, particularly in the context of welfare and treatment provision. For an excellent discussion which takes the long view, see Murray K. Simpson, "Idiocy and the Conceptual Economy of Madness," in P. McDonagh, C.F. Goodey and T. Stainton (eds.), *Intellectual Disability: A conceptual History, 1200-1900* (Manchester, 2018).

^{vi} Anywhere between eight and fifteen million individuals were likely to have been admitted to workhouses in England and Wales between 1840 and 1900. Peter Jones, Steven A. King and Karen N. Thompson, "Clothing the New Poor Law Workhouse in the nineteenth century," *Rural History*, 32 (2021, forthcoming).

^{vii} For example, Charlie Chaplin's account of his brief stay in Newington workhouse in *My Autobiography* (London, 2003), and Henry Morton Stanley's memories of life in St. Asaph workhouse, North Wales, in *The Autobiography of Henry Morton Stanley* (Cambridge, 2011). For other accounts written long after the fact, see in Jane Humphreys, "Care and cruelty," and *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010), esp. Chapters 7 and 10.

^{viii} See, for example, Matthew Sharpe, "The Demise of Grand Narratives? Postmodernism, power-knowledge, and applied epistemology," in David Coady and James Chase (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Applied Epistemology* (Abingdon, Oxon., 2019), 318-331; Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne (eds.), *World Histories from Below: Disruption and Dissent, 1750 to the Present* (London, 2016); Bill Schwartz, "Subaltern Histories," *History Workshop Journal*, 89 (2020): 90-107.

^{ix} The words are those of the great French *Annaliste*, Marc Bloch, and his interlocutor, Joseph Strayer, in *The Historian's Craft* (New York, 1953), x.

^x See, for example, Karen Harvey, "Epochs of embodiment: Men, women and the material body," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 42 (2019): 455-469; Andrew Lynch and Susan Broomhall (eds.), *The Routledge History of Emotions in Europe, 1100-1700* (Abingdon, 2020); Kirsti Niskanen and Michael J. Barany, *Gender, Embodiment and the History of Scholarly Persona* (Cham, 2017); Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A history of emotions, 600-1700* (Cambridge, 2016); Justin E.H. Smith, *Embodiment: A history* (Oxford, 2017).

^{xi} Beginning with Carlo Ginzburg's pioneering text, *The Cheese and the Worms*: Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi: Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500* (Turin, 1976).

^{xii} See, for example, the wide-ranging discussion of different approaches to microhistory in Carlo Ginzburg (trans. by John and Anne C. Tedeschi), "Microhistory: Two or three things that I know about it," *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (1993): 10-35.

^{xiii} John Brewer, "Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life," *Cultural and Social History*, 7 (2010): 87-109; Brad S. Gregory, "Is Small Beautiful: Microhistory and the history of everyday life," (review essay) *History and Theory*, 38 (1999): 100-110; Francesca Trivellato, "Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory," *French Politics, Culture and Society*, 33 (2020): 122-134.

^{xiv} The Local Government Board (1871 onwards) was the final incarnation of the New Poor Law's central authority. It was preceded by the Poor Law Commission (1834-1847) and the Poor Law Board (1847-1870).

^{xv} The underlying project from which the material for this study is drawn located thousands of letters from the nineteenth-century poor to the central Poor Law authorities, including a significant number from prolific and serial letter-writers like Burge (see acknowledgements, above, for further project details).

^{xvi} Brian Pullan, "Catholics, Protestants, and the poor in early modern Europe," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 35 (2005): 445. See also, Laurinda Abreau, *The Political and Social Dynamics of Poverty Poor Relief and Health Care in Early-Modern Portugal* (Abingdon, Oxon., 2016), 23-24; Sandra Carvallo, *Charity and Power in Early Modern Italy: Benefactors and their motives in Turin, 1641-1789* (Cambridge, 1995), 112, 220, 254.

^{xvii} For example, Pullan, "Catholics, Protestants"; Abreau, *Political and Social*, 13-14, 23-24; Carvallo, *Charity and Power*, 112, 220, 254; M. Flynn, *Sacred Charity: Confraternities and social welfare in Spain, 1400-1700* (London, 1989), 79-80; Giovanni Ricci, "Naissance de pauvre honteux: Entre l'histoire des idées et l'histoire sociale", *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 38 (1983): 158-177; Richard C. Trexler, "Charity and the Defence of Urban Elites in the Italian Communes," in Frederic C. Jahrer (ed.), *The Rich, the Well Born, and the Powerful* (Urbana, 1973), 64-109.

^{xviii} The quotation comes from Martin Dauntton, "Introduction," in Martin Dauntton (ed.), *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past* (London, 1996), 8. See also, Patrick Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis* (6th ed., London 1805), 362; Frederick Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor: or, an History of the Labouring Classes in England*, Vol.3 (London, 1797), 718; Henry Mills, *An Essay on Generosity and Greatness of Spirit. The Builders of Colleges, Hospitals and Schools, Prais'd and Commended* (London), lix; Robert Saunders, *An Abstract of Observations on the Poor Laws* (London, 1802), 1.

^{xix} See, for example, Anon, *The Endowed Charities of the City of London; reprinted at large from Seventeen Reports of the Commissioners for Inquiring Concerning Charities* (London, 1829); Angela Nicholls, *Almsouses in Early Modern England: Charitable housing in the mixed economy of welfare 1550-1725* (Woodbridge, 2017), 90-91.

^{xx} Steve Hindle, "Dependency, Shame and Belonging: Badging the deserving poor, c.1550-1750," *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004): 14.

^{xxi} This is in contrast to our understanding of the shamefaced poor well into the nineteenth century in other parts of Northern Europe, as noted by Marco H.D. van Leeuwen, "Surviving with a little help: The importance of charity to the poor of Amsterdam, 1800-50, in comparative perspective," *Social History*, 18 (1993): n.39, 333. See also Peter W. Hansen, "Grief, Sickness and Emotions in the Narratives of the Shamefaced Poor in Late Eighteenth-Century Copenhagen," in Andreas Gestrich, Elizabeth T. Hurren and Steve King (eds.), *Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe: Narratives of the Sick Poor, 1780-1938* (London, 2012), 35-50.

^{xxii} The literature on the form and function of the New Poor Law is huge, but for a useful introduction see David Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law reform: From Chadwick to Booth, 1834-1914* (Harlow, 1998).

^{xxiii} Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (New York, 1984), 330-346, 371-400.

^{xxiv} Quoted in the *Cork Daily Southern Reporter*, March 27, 1869.

^{xxv} The National Archives (hereafter TNA)MH12/7698/91484/84, F. Burge to the LGB, September 18, 1884; TNA MH12/7698/105475/84, F. Burge to the LGB, November 4, 1884; TNA MH12/7698/56182/85, F. Burge to the LGB, May 30, 1885; TNA

MH12/7698/114278/85, F. Burge to the LGB, December, 10, 1885; F.H.W. Shepard, *Survey of London: Volume 39, the Grosvenor Estate in Mayfair* (London, 1977), 35-36.

^{xxvi} TNA MH12/7698/91484/84.

^{xxvii} George R. Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, UK, 1990), 1.

^{xxviii} Geoffrey Finlayson, *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830-1990* (Oxford, 1994), 92-93; Elizabeth T. Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism* (Woodbridge, 2007). Poplar was one of the unions in the East End which took to the Crusade most enthusiastically. Pat Ryan, "Politics and Relief: East London unions in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," in Michael Rose (ed.), *The Poor and the City: The English New Poor Law in its urban context, 1834-1914* (Leicester, 1985), 133-172.

^{xxix} TNA MH12/7698/91484/84.

^{xxx} For the Old Poor Law, Steven A. King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor 1750s - 1830s* (Montreal, 2019), 229-255, 317-320. For the New, see Peter Jones and Steven A. King, *Pauper Voices, Public Opinion and Workhouse Reform in mid-Victorian England: Bearing Witness* (Cham, 2020), 79-84; Peter Jones and Natalie Carter, "Writing for Redress: Redrawing the epistolary relationship under the New Poor Law," *Continuity and Change*, 34 (2019): 386-393.

^{xxxi} On reportage, see Jones and King, *Pauper Voices*, 13-23, 94-101. On Scandal, see, for example, Price, *Medical Negligence*; Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*; Samantha Shave, "'Immediate Death or a Life of Torture Are the Consequences of the System': The Bridgwater Union Scandal and Policy Change," in Reinartz and Schwarz (eds.), *Medicine*

and the Workhouse, 164-91; and Peter Gurney, *Wanting and Having: Popular Politics and Liberal Consumerism in England 1830-1870* (Manchester, 2015).

^{xxxii} TNA MH12/7698/91484/84.

^{xxxiii} Ibid.

^{xxxiv} TNA MH12/7699/67435/86, Printed report of Burge v. Power at the Queen's Bench, n.d.; *The Times*, October 26, 1886.

^{xxxv} *Hansard* (HC), Poor Law (Metropolis), Vol.326, Col.1525, June 8, 1888.

³⁶ TNA MH12/7698/91484/84.

³⁷ n.32, above.

³⁸ William Cunningham Glen, *General Consolidated Order issued by the Poor Law Commissioners on the 24th July, 1847* (London, 1847), 63. This rule was restated in the 1860s, in William Golden Lumley, *Manuals of the Duties of Poor Law Officers: Master and Matron of the Workhouse* (2nd ed., London, 1869), 67.

³⁹ TNA MH12/7700/54238/88, B. [Heberclough], Clerk to the Guardians of Poplar Union, to the LGB, June 6, 1888.

⁴⁰ TNA MH12/7698/91484/84.

⁴¹ TNA MH12/7699/67435/86

⁴² TNA MH12/7700/54238/88; *Reading Mercury*, January 29, 1887.

⁴³ TNA MH12/7698/91484/84.

⁴⁴ *North London News*, November 7, 1863; *Islington Gazette*, February 4, 1865 and September 7, 1866. See also other reports in the *North London News* June 20, 1863, October 4, 1863, September 9, 1865, September 9, 1866, May 4, 1867; and *Islington Gazette*, October 10, 1863, December 12, 1863, January 23, 1864, June 22, 1866, September 7, 1866, May 3, 1867, December 5, 1873. All of these and the following newspaper references were found via the British Library's online archive: <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/> (accessed December 5-7, 2020).

⁴⁵ *Leicester Guardian*, December 26, 1863.

⁴⁶ *The Daily Telegraph*, February 8, 1900.

⁴⁷ *The Westminster Gazette*, February 8, 1900.

⁴⁸ This is confirmed in the newspaper reports, and also with reference to the 1901 census, which still saw him resident and alone in Kensington Workhouse on 31 March of that year. UK Census, 1901, Kensington Workhouse, accessed online at: https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/7814/images/LNDRG13_33_34-0018?pId=307621, on 01/22/2021.

⁴⁹ Unfortunately, we cannot know whether he mounted a further campaign of correspondence to the LGB while he was an inmate at Kensington, as the extant correspondence from the Kensington union, held at The National Archive under the general catalogue number MH12, ends in 1891.

⁵⁰ UK Census, 1841, Billericay Workhouse, Essex, accessed online at: https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/8978/images/DURHO107_321_322-0290?pId=4119178, on 01/22/2021.

⁵¹ Unfortunately, the Billericay workhouse registers do not survive, and neither do the Board of Guardians' Minutes or the Relieving Officers' Reports for this period. The extant records for the Billericay union are held at Essex Record Office, Cheltenham.

⁵² UK Census, 1841, Billericay Workhouse; marriage certificate for Frank Burge and Isabella Morris, September 16, 1863, St. Stephen's Church, St. Stephen, Hammersmith, accessed online at: https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/1623/images/31280_190838-00529?pId=1724115, 01/22/2021.

⁵³ King and Jones, *Pauper Voices*, 100-101, 78.

⁵⁴ TNA MH12/7698/91484/84.

⁵⁵ King and Jones, *Pauper Voices*, 94-101.

⁵⁶ Jones and King, *Pauper Voices*, 86-90.

⁵⁷ *Family Records of the Paumiers and Twentyman Collected & Arranged by Mr. M.W. Paumier, with an Autobiography of Himself &c.* (unpublished manuscript dated "London, 1856"). I am indebted to Valerie Kemp (a direct ancestor of Mungo Paumier) and her husband, Brian, for allowing me access to their transcription of Mungo's self-penned life story.

⁵⁸ King and Jones, *Pauper Voices*, 90-94.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 91. Burge makes no reference to Rutherford in his correspondence.

⁶⁰ On the subject of internecine strife in workhouses, see Caroline Walton, "Taking Control: Gossip, Community and Conflict in Basford Union Workhouse 1836 to 1871," *Family and Community History*, 23 (2020): 23-41.

⁶¹ TNA MH12/8634, 41684/52, Frances Land to the Poor Law Board (hereafter PLB), November 6, 1852.

⁶² TNA MH12/8644, 9485/51, Frances Land to the PLB, February 10, 1851; TNA MH12/8634, 47526/51, Frances Land to the PLB, November 26, 1851; TNA MH12/8634, 36988/52, Frances Land to the PLB, October 1, 1852.

⁶³ TNA MH12/8644, 9485/51; TNA MH12/8634, 47526/51; TNA MH12/8634, 41684/52.

⁶⁴ C. Bland and M. Cross, "Gender Politics: Breathing Life into Old Letters," in C. Bland and M. Cross (eds.), *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter-Writing, 1750-2000* (Abingdon, UK, 2004), 4-6; C. Geisler, "Gender-Based Variations in Nineteenth-Century English Letter-Writing," in P. Leistyna and C.F. Meyer (eds.), *Corpus Analysis: Language Structure and Language Use* (Amsterdam, 2003), 104-106.

⁶⁵ Jones and King, *Pauper Voices*, 72-98.

⁶⁶ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, "Ueber den sogenannten Querulantenwahnsinn," *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Psychiatrie*, 35 (1879): 395-419.

⁶⁷ Grant Lester, "Searching for the Spectrum of the Querulous," in Wayne Petherick and Grant Sinnamon (eds.), *The Psychology of Criminal and Antisocial Behaviour: Victim and offender perspectives* (London, 2017), 494.

⁶⁸ Grant Lester, "Vexatious Litigants and Unusually Persistent Complainants and Petitioners: From querulous paranoia to querulous behaviour," *Behavioural Sciences and Law*, 24 (2006): 335.

⁶⁹ Olli W. Stålström, “Querulous Paranoia: Diagnosis and dissent,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 14 (1980), 149.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 147.

⁷¹ TNA MH12/7698/114278/85; TNA MH12/7699/67435/86.

⁷² Jones and King, *Pauper Voices*, 23-28, 100.

⁷³ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, 22-26.