Charity Disestablished? The Origins of the Charity Organisation Society Revisited, 1868–1871

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The Charity Organisation Society is conventionally assumed to have emerged as a natural response to chronic problems of urban poverty relief which, by 1869, had become acute. While accepting that such an approach identifies a necessary dimension of explanation, the argument presented here contends that no sufficient explanation of the emergence of the COS can be given without taking into account the ecclesiastical dimension of events, in particular, the key role played by Whig Broad Churchmen determined to ‘hold the line’ against ideals of religious voluntarism in the aftermath of the shock of Gladstone’s 1868 disestablishment of the Church of Ireland.

I

The Charity Organisation Society (COS), as all the surveys acknowledge, was a major late-Victorian institution. Its morally-conditioned quest for a reliable point of distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor seemed to embody the key social policy concern of the age: its insistence on disciplining the charitable to observe professionally-certified and co-ordinated methods of relief-giving seemed to signal the ultimate refinement of a system committed to the reconciliation of Christian duty with the precepts of a market-organised society. How it came to be founded, however, remains an area of major neglect – this in spite of (or equally likely because of) its ultimate

APPC = Association for the Prevention of Pauperism and Crime in the Metropolis; COS meeting (1870) = Meeting of the society for organising charitable relief and repressing mendicity, held at Willis’s Rooms, on March 30th, 1870, the earl of Derby in the chair (1870); COS minutes = Charity Organisation Society, minute books, London Metropolitan Archives, A/FWA/C; CO Rev. = Charity Organisation Review; NAPSS: Trans. = National Association for the Promotion of Social Science: Transactions; PD = Parliamentary debates; PP = Parliamentary papers; SP = Papers of the Revd Henry Solly, British Library of Political and Economic Science; SRD = Society for the Relief of Distress; TP = Papers of Archibald Campbell Tait, Lambeth Palace Library

The Tait papers were consulted by kind permission of the archbishop of Canterbury to whom I make grateful acknowledgement.
achievement of secure public recognition for its mission. Those seeking an authoritative modern interpretation of the society’s origins find themselves offered accounts concerned far more to explain what the society became than to investigate what its founders set out to achieve through it.¹

My purpose here is to revisit the events which led to the foundation of the COS, as far as possible without benefit of hindsight. Two conclusions will emerge. The first is that it is an ‘airbrushing’ of the historical record to talk of any one ‘story’ of the foundation of the COS: behind the official record of the emergence of a ‘public institution’ seethes evidence of a contested narrative including contributions from ‘founding fathers’ of a wide, sometimes incompatible, range of objectives. The second conclusion is to suggest that explanation of the society’s foundation, hitherto argued entirely in socio-economic terms, fails to achieve plausibility until a further key dimension – the ecclesiastical – is given full contextual recognition. The evidence upon which this attempted recontextualisation is based includes the official records of the early COS but also, and, equally important, the surviving correspondence and polemical publications of participants in the foundation acts of the mutant society itself. It stands as a warning to historians that the first attempted History of the COS, written by its secretary, C. B. P. Bosanquet, in 1874 begins with the lame (but itself contested) assertion that ‘It would be difficult to give any accurate account of the various influences and movements that suggested and gave its final direction to the Charity Organisation Society.’²


² Charles B. P. Bosanquet, The history and mode of operation of the Charity Organisation Society, London 1874, 3. For controversy within the society about Bosanquet’s History see COS administrative committee minutes, entries for 9 July, 16 Dec. 1874; 7, 14, 28 Jan., 17 June, 8 July 1875, London Metropolitan Archives, A/FWA/C/A3/1/1. Pamphlet elaborations of the controversy by COS committee members include [Thomas Hawksley], Objections to ‘the history’ of the society, n.p. [1875]; G. M. Hicks, A contribution towards the history of the origin of the Charity Organisation Society, London 1875; W. M. Wilkinson, A contribution to the history of the origins of the Charity Organisation Society, London 1875; Sartor Minor [?Thomas Hawksley], Philanthropic tailoring and historical cobbling, n.p. [1875]. For further ‘first-generation’ contributions to the controversy see the ‘war of obituaries’, CO Rev. lxxvi (1892), 45; lxxxviii (1892), 121; xciv (1892), 335; cxxxiii (1896), 57.
To twentieth-century historians, following in the footsteps of their more partisan nineteenth-century predecessors, the ‘ultimate emergence’ of the COS seemed readily enough explained; it emerged to remedy chronic social evils which, in the later 1860s, became at last intolerably acute. As David Owen, most scrupulous of modern investigators of the actual foundation, put it: ‘[S]omething like the COS had been in the air for some years.’ Indeed it had – for at least seventy years. This is precisely the problem. Why, given the longstanding perceptions of the chronic nature of the ‘problem of indiscriminate charity’, was the COS so long in coming? What explains the breakthrough from blueprint to successful institution?

The implicit answer to this question conventionally suggested is that the COS was a natural propertied urban response to the experience of urban growth. It has long been recognised that certain ‘conjunctures’ of conditions in urbanising England produced peaks of cultural anxiety among educated and propertied elites. Economic fluctuations, such as those which occurred in the aftermath of the French wars (1815–20), and in the ‘hungry forties’, seem to link with such social developments as urban police reform campaigns and the launching of evangelical missions of moral reclamation. Political crises, such as the reform bill crisis of 1830–2 and the crises of Chartism and corn law repeal in the period 1838–48 are similarly linked to expressions of anxiety about social discipline and the bases of communal trust. Cultural crises such as the Queen Caroline affair of 1820 and, more diffusely, the debate over Darwinism after 1859 are also invoked as sensitising experiences.

There is much to be said for this approach. All these experiences and more can be identified as playing a part in the ‘sensitisation’ of metropolitan ‘social policy elites’ in the 1860s. As Gareth Stedman Jones has lucidly set out, the London of the 1860s was a population mass increasingly segmented in its economic functions and employment expectations, with the resulting segregation of classes an increasing source of middle-class professional concern. This became especially the case after the commercial crash of 1866, the typhus outbreak of 1866, the parliamentary reform tensions of 1866–7 and the winter unemployment crises of 1860–1 and 1867–9. By this stage, too, a ‘social Darwinist’ sense of the metropolitan environment itself as ‘a gigantic engine for depraving and degrading our population’ was helping to arouse yet further

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There was, however, no immediate consensus about what was to be done to bring the situation under control.

The precedent set by two previous generations of metropolitan decision-makers suggested that first priority should be given to the overhaul of public systems of social order enforcement: there needed to be more, and more professional, policing, a more rigorous implementation of the poor laws, and of their punitive auxiliary arm, the vagrant acts. Thereafter it had been customary to direct energy into the volunteer mobilisation of (usually) religion-based ‘charity’ – district visiting, elementary education provision, provident societies, seasonal distress relief funds and so on. Fitful attempts had been made since the 1790s to co-ordinate the increasingly denomination-driven charitable activities which had resulted, but these attempts had never long survived the crisis periods which had prompted the initial release of charitable energies.

In later 1860s London a comparable pattern of responses may be traced – first ‘crime control’, next a tightening of poor law and vagrant administration, an intermittent expansion of charitable activity and finally a growing impulse to co-ordinate and ‘organise’ the results. The difference between London in the later 1860s and in earlier generations, however, lies in the fact that this time round, as we know by hindsight, charity organisation as a distinct goal not only emerged but was able to sustain itself in permanent institutional form.

First, then, the debates on problems of metropolitan crime control and pauperism. The debate on crime control had in practice been begun as a response to the phasing out of transportation as a punishment in the early 1860s and to the popular feelings of insecurity which arose as a result of the extension of the ‘ticket of leave’ system of prison release. It was further fuelled in some quarters by fear of criminal elements merging with the faceless urban ‘mob’ to produce outrages such as the 1866 Hyde Park reform riots. It is therefore no great surprise to find in 1868 the man with the most persistent claim to have founded the COS (the Revd Henry Solly) appropriating the post-transportation crime-control platform as the most reliable vantage point from which to gain a public hearing for his plans. The prototype volunteer association which emerged from the discussions which followed chose indeed to advertise itself (in its pre-COS phase) as the ‘Association for the Prevention of Pauperism and Crime in

5 Sir Charles Trevelyan, Seven articles on London pauperism, London 1870, quoted ibid. 244. (Trevelyan was ex-assistant secretary of the Treasury and a future COS activist.)
the Metropolis’. This preoccupation is also apparent in the publicly expressed views of others in COS founding circles.\(^8\)

In statistical fact, so far as can be seen, the later 1860s stand (when put into the context of the Victorian period as a whole) as a distinctly minor setback in a general trend towards lower levels of metropolitan acts of violence, theft and vagrancy.\(^9\) Yet COS founding fathers were not abnormal in their sensitivity levels: they, rather, shared concerns widespread among propertied Londoners. These concerns were to have a direct impact on political and public office-holders over the COS foundation period as may be deduced from the decision to expand metropolitan police numbers by 1,000 in 1868, to set up a formally recognised detective force in the following year and, above all, by the decision of Gladstone’s incoming Liberal government in January 1869 to sponsor a habitual criminals act. (This doubtfully effective piece of ‘progressive’ legislation was an attempt to calm public concern about the prevalence of released-prisoner repeat offences by setting up a system of post-release surveillance.\(^10\))

Debate about the problem of metropolitan poor law administration followed a similar pattern of development over the decade. The existence of the problem was acknowledged before the onset of a period of panic between 1866 and 1870. Indeed, London, with its huge, migrant-attracting, yet increasingly ‘class-segregated’ workforce, had never fitted easily into the workhouse-dominated system set up by the new poor law of 1834; the effective metropolitan dismantling of the remaining barriers to migrant labourers claiming on their parish of current residence (Bodkin’s Act) in 1847 had thereafter stored up further unresolved problems of civic responsibility. It was not until the trade depression triggered by a crisis in commercial credit in 1866, however, that theoretical administrative flaws translated into widely visible social burdens. Between 1865 and 1867 the expense of metropolitan poor relief rose from £905,640 to £1,316,759; the number of paupers relieved in December 1867 had risen by 43 per cent over the number two years earlier. The immediate result was a collapse in the ability of the East London parishes to meet demand for relief as their overstretched

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ratepayers themselves fell into payment arrears. A ‘plague of beggars’ followed.

The range of responses from informed London observers was considerable. Among future COS supporters they in fact ranged from attack on the anti-communal impersonality of the 1834 system on the one hand to criticism of the inappropriateness of its locality-based system of relief entitlement in an age of national labour markets on the other. Yet, as with the debate on crime, few felt the urge to go behind ‘first principles’. The assumption that the ratepayer should act as default provider of relief on conditions of ‘less eligibility’ remained largely unchallenged. The question which attracted attention was how to prevent the principle from being subverted in practice. A part of the answer required official action. This duly came in 1867 with the granting of access to poorer metropolitan authorities of a common fund to finance a system of in-house relief of credible inmate capacity; and with instructions from the Poor Law Board from 1869 onwards to ensure the phasing out of arrangements for provision of casual relief outside the workhouse to the able-bodied.

However, an equally large part of the answer seemed to clergy, parish officials and charity volunteers to lie with the regulation of ‘total giving’, both ‘official’ and ‘private’. The most famous convert to the cause of non-pauperising charity was, after his death in 1870, the pioneer East End gentleman settler, Edward Denison. ‘[T]he real truth is’, he wrote at Christmas 1867, ‘sensation writings and reckless alms are fast doing away the great work of the New Poor Law in bringing up the people to providence and self-restraint.’

While Denison had no direct part in the founding of the COS (in spite of its later appropriation of his aura), his general views on the pauperising cultural effect of unco-ordinated charity articulated powerfully the conclusions of many who did eventually contribute. The determination with which the emergent Association for the Prevention of Pauperism and Crime committed itself on the subject leaves no doubt of this:

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13 For example, Hawksley, Charities of London, 14; Alsager Hay Hill, Our unemployed, London 1868, 9, 11.


16 Cf. Bosanquet, History, 3; Sartor Minor, Philanthropic tailoring, 5; CO Rev. xciv (1892), 364.
It is notorious that whilst vast sums are expended annually for charitable purposes, the want of system and co-operation in the distribution of relief but too often tends to the increase of the very evil which that relief was intended to remedy.  

(The ‘vast sums’, when quantified by Dr Hawksley, the association’s chief authority on the subject, appeared to confirm the dominant role played by voluntary associational charity rather than rate-paid relief in metropolitan culture: £4 million in 1867–8 as compared with £1.5 million in poor-rates, £1 million in church collections and an estimated £0.5 million in ‘alms to beggars’.)

If, however, indiscriminate charitable giving was identified as acting as a stimulus to pauperism – a condition of distressed habitual dependency – a variety of explanations was put forward for the upsurge in the virulence of its effects in the 1860s. Some focused special attention on types of charity which were based on outmoded assumptions. Endowed charities fell into this category. Administered by City corporations or parish officials, they summoned up visions of a medieval past in which the superstitious wishes of long-dead donors swamped any consideration of behavioural effects on present-day beneficiaries. Because London was richest in them (and London property receipts a significant generator of their revenues), endowed charities, it was alleged, had become a magnet acting to distort national labour migration patterns (though in practice it was usually admitted that they tended to reward importunate settled local residents).

Less inherently indefensible but still potentially pauperising were the recurrent metropolitan emergency relief charities. These were subscription funds, usually endorsed by public authorities as a means of avoiding the overburdening of ratepayers (and of preserving the able-bodied from the demoralisation of being relieved in the workhouse) at times of temporary labour market disruption. (Such disruptions were agreed to include cold winters and occupational unemployment brought about by ‘accidental’ disruption of trade, as in the early ‘60s Lancashire cotton famine.) In London in the 1860s there was an uneasy awareness that Lord Mayor’s relief funds and other volunteer-organised funds for emergency relief seemed to be becoming more frequent.

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19 Times, 17 June 1869, 10e (Sir Charles Trevelyan); NAPSS: Trans. xiii (1869), 148 (Thomas Webster 96).
The most continually available type of charitable relief on offer in late 1860s London, however, was that available direct from individuals in the street, or from the activities of denominational or pan-evangelical mission associations. Public begging from individuals, while widely admitted to be a pauperising public nuisance, was usually regarded as a matter for police action under the Vagrant Act (though certain founders of the COS had sterner views about it and at least one advocated the criminalisation of street giving). Relief offered by volunteer missions posed more delicate problems of assessment. In a major sense, these associations embodied a considered mid-nineteenth-century response to the challenge of reconciling Christian cultural duty with the new duty of citizens not to obstruct the workings of a market-organised society. And no advocate of the COS ever attacked the duty of Christians to give – quite the reverse. In the words of a speaker at its first annual general meeting: ‘We should not forget that though indiscriminate charity is wrong, nevertheless charity is absolutely necessary. (Hear, hear.) … [N]o Christian society can exist unless there is a sphere for mutual sympathy, and mutual love, as well as justice.

The problem lay in the continuing tension within such religion-based associations between the duty to obey the inclinations of the heart and the duty to calculate the secular and, indeed, ecclesiastical effect. Mission bodies such as the (Anglican) Metropolitan Visiting and Relief Association, the (pan-evangelical) London City Mission and the (Methodist) Stranger’s Friend Society were, after all, fighting for ‘market share’ themselves.

It became increasingly less easy for even loyal religious voluntarists to brush aside this tension – endemic since at least the 1840s (the peak period of denominational organisation-building) – as the mid-Victorian labour market stabilised and came under ‘expert’ secular scrutiny in the course of the ’60s. As Eileen Yeo has recently pointed out, the attention which these experts devoted to the plight of the symbolically important marginally self-sufficient able-bodied male impelled them to a particularly careful revision of the standards applicable to the assessment of deservingness. It was not by accident that charity organisation assumed a central conceptual significance: it was by effective manipulation of social subsidy to ‘accident-prone’ working men that the greatest ‘preventive’ impact on pauperism/mendicity might be achieved, the

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22 COS meeting (1870), 25.


greatest risks of cultural contamination from criminal and pauper subcultures avoided.\textsuperscript{25}

It was at this point also that ‘charity organisation’ faced its most administratively acute challenge in the later ’60s – a challenge sufficiently well-recognised to act as a ‘trigger’ to following action. The key step in argument which is being indicated here is that, in the context of social policy debate since the time of the wars against revolutionary France some sixty to seventy years before, the policing, poor law and charity coordination debates rehearsed above had been both cyclical and endemic. Charity organisation was a goal repeatedly desired, never achieved. In 1868 it looked like reaching another peak of cyclical intensity before predictable fall-back. Yet this time, in defiance of the cyclical pattern, we find the cause breaking through to precarious but permanent institutional form. What made the difference? I would argue that it was the political and constitutional context of the debate – a context shaped by the enactment of the Reform Act of 1867 and the capture of the political agenda by Gladstonian Liberalism which followed.

For the central message received by the politically aware from at least 1867 onwards was that ‘the voluntary principle’ was on the point of becoming more, not less, generally applied in public life. The ‘separation of Church and State’ – with areas such as education, local administration and social welfare provision left uneasily stretched between the two spheres – had been in progress in England since the lifting of religious tests on political life in 1828–9. Yet it was not until 1868, with Gladstone sweeping to power on the basis of a mandate to disestablish the Church of Ireland given him by a newly extended electorate, that the full range of organisational adjustments required by a society based on religious voluntarism came to the forefront of ‘practical administrative agendas’. What if Irish disestablishment was only the first step? Its apparent popularity as a blow for ‘freedom’ among the new electors suggested that the dismantling and redirection of the resources of the Church of England might well be canvassed next – sooner rather than later if the buoied-up minority of militant Nonconformists on Gladstone’s back bench was any indication.\textsuperscript{26} As we shall see, the extended negotiations which led to the eventual foundation of the COS coincided almost exactly with the debate over, and parliamentary execution of, Gladstone’s plan for Irish disestablishment. It will be argued in the section which follows that the key players in the institutional ‘coup’ which transformed the broad-front Pauperism and Crime Association into the specifically charity-focused


COS were in fact Whig–Liberal Broad Churchmen unsettled enough by the Gladstonian version of an unleashed voluntarist future to attempt an experimental reconstruction of the charity-overseeing functions of a once-National Church on a secular basis. To the extent that this case can be proved, the launching of the COS may possibly be seen to be as much an attempt to stave off the imagined future as to embrace it. But this is to anticipate a complicated narrative of contested action.

III

The earliest plausible date for the foundation of the Charity Organisation Society given by any member of its argumentative inner circle is 22 June 1868. It was on that date that the Revd Henry Solly, under the presiding chairmanship of Bishop Tait of London, delivered his address on ‘How to deal with the unemployed poor of London and with its “roughs” and “criminal classes”’. The venue was the Society of Arts, the audience a gathering of ‘leading social reformers’ assembled by the efforts of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science. In fact, it will be argued, the COS was launched at least three times over in three different sets of circumstances before three distinct (if overlapping) audiences. The meeting of 22 June was, however, the first, even if it was not quite clear to those who attended what precise outcome they were supporting.

Henry Solly (1813–1903) was a Unitarian minister and, as such, a marginal figure in the world of both ecclesiastical and secular voluntarism. Yet his social networks were extensive and his marginal public status, for the short term at least, was probably an advantage. He shared interests with many; he threatened no-one. Among his networks the most useful to him in 1868 were three. In the post-1867 era of democratised politics he was a plausible friend of the working man with credentials which included a record of support for Chartism, a founding and continuing role in the working-men’s club movement (until his ejection from the position of salaried secretary to the movement in 1867) and a continuing relationship with the leaders of the London Trades Council (at whose invitation he became, in 1869, editor of the trades newspaper, The Beehive). He was also an active participant in the key mid-Victorian social policy forum, the Social Science Association: indeed, it was through his patron both there and in the working-men’s club movement (Lord Lyttelton) that he had secured the services of the Broad-Church bishop of London for his meeting. Finally, and more tenuously, Solly had some visibility as a one-time metropolitan clergyman, a status which he was able to exploit to

27 Henry Solly, These eighty years, London 1893, ii. 344. For a specimen invitation ticket see SP ix, J 26.
28 Solly, These eighty years, ii. 159, 196–7, 322–4, 344, 383.
invite co-operation from the Roman Catholic Archbishop Manning as well as from Bishop Tait, from the Quaker prison reformer William Tallack as well as from metropolitan parish clergy.\textsuperscript{29}

Though ‘the hall was crowded to excess’ on 22 June 1868, not all who attended Solly’s address were impressed by what they heard. Bishop Tait, exercising chairman’s privilege, chose, after listening, to doubt that ‘God, having been good enough to give us civilization, would allow it to disappear’, and suggested that ‘the power and influence of the Christian Church’ was likely to achieve more than yet another committee in an age ‘run mad about committees’.\textsuperscript{30} The meeting agreed, none the less, to set up a committee of inquiry. It was a subcommittee of this body which first defined the task of charity co-ordination as a necessary part of any cure to metropolitan ‘rough’ culture.\textsuperscript{31}

At the same time, however, other participants in the inquiry were working towards quite different ‘preventive’ strategies, and the evidence of goals put on record by Solly at the annual meeting of the Social Science Association in September shows him eager to act as co-ordinator of a diverse group of activists. His private correspondence at this time, and the evidence of the early prospectuses of the emergent Association for the Prevention of Pauperism and Crime (as it was to be called), confirm the range of objects thought desirable by identifying the expert individuals Solly most wished to tie into his project. They included a contingent of experts in criminal rehabilitation (Sir Walter Crofton, ex-English gaols commissioner), of enthusiasts also for industrial schools for at-risk juveniles (Dr Hawksley), for work-creating wasteland reclamation schemes (Thomas Webster QC) and for labour exchanges (Alsager Hay Hill).\textsuperscript{32} To this set of interests Solly added his own in working-class cultural reformation (working-men’s clubs, pure literature provision) as well as, finally, ‘the co-operation of charitable bodies and Poor Law authorities to prevent the scandalous waste of charitable funds that was going on’.\textsuperscript{33} As the otherwise unwearying Lord Shaftesbury put it in declining Solly’s invitation to join: ‘I confess I am [a] little alarmed at the extent of your plans, and the difficulties that must necessarily beset them.’\textsuperscript{34} Shaftesbury was not alone in his doubts and by the end of November 1868 Solly

\textsuperscript{29} For a record of proceedings see the \textit{Daily Telegraph}, 25 June 1868 (SP ix, J29), supplemented by \textit{The Record} (London), 24 June 1868, 4d.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{The Record}, 24 June 1868, 4d. (Tait’s chief positive contribution was to recommend efforts to promote the extension of elementary schooling.)
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Daily News}, [?] July 1868 (press clipping, SP ix, J32, corroborated in Joseph Dare to Henry Solly, 11 July 1868, SP ix, J325). See also \textit{CO Rev}, xciv (1892), 350–60.
\textsuperscript{32} See \textit{inter alia}, Alsager Hay Hill to Solly, 19, 24 June 1868, SP ix, J31–9; H. Fuller to A. G. Bellamy, 25 Sept. 1868, J106–9; Sir Walter Crofton to Solly, [Oct.] 1868, J185–6. For a Crofton proposal which partly prefigures Solly’s 1868 plan see \textit{NAPSS: Trans.} vii (1864), 466–8.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{NAPSS: Trans.} xii (1868), 373.
\textsuperscript{34} Shaftesbury to Solly, 10 Oct. 1868, SP ix, J126.
himself was coming to acknowledge the damage being done by ‘the composite and unwieldy character of our Prospectus’.35

The fault lines which ran through Solly’s association were basically two. The first was a tension concerning permissible goals and methods of operation. The key question which committee members faced was the extent to which it was allowable, in the preventive struggle against pauperism and crime, to intervene in the labour market itself. How far, in other words, ought charity to go, in efforts to prevent ‘demoralisation’, by acting to preserve cultural predisposition to economic self-sufficiency among the ‘able-bodied’? By the early 1870s the Charity Organisation Society was to become identified with a fiercely narrow interpretation of ‘deservingness’ for able-bodied working men caught in the cycles of the labour market.36 This viewpoint was certainly represented in Solly’s society but the prevailing view was notably more paternalist in its assumptions about social obligation. The paternalist impulse is most clearly visible in the attempts made by two committee members (the businessman, Francis Fuller, and the barrister, Thomas Webster) to commit the association to schemes of job creation by means of ‘wasteland reclamation’. These schemes were regretfully found to be beyond the association’s financial means and their promoters were invited to detach themselves into a separate organisation in November 1868.37 This did not end the tension, however, as several of those who stayed on, notably John Ruskin, continued to envisage the project as ‘this committee for employment of destitute poor’. (Ruskin, as contributor of the only significant donation the association ever received – £100 in January 1869 – was in a strong position to influence priorities, the more so given Solly’s reverence for Ruskin as intellectual mentor.38)

Ruskin’s prominence on Solly’s committee was an indication, too, of Solly’s second continuing difficulty – his inability to convince key elites of his capacity to organise business on the scale required for success. The two issues blended. As the business-like rector of Bethnal Green (another committee member) reported privately to Bishop Tait after resigning in
disgust: ‘I have heard the most impracticable theories for the employment of labour propounded by some of these men, especially by Mr Ruskin …’. But his main complaint was that Solly was a job-hunter who ‘packed the council with his friends’ who did ‘nothing but talk’. Existing opponents on the committee had reached similar conclusions some time before, using Solly’s position as a Unitarian minister as a further charge against him.

Solly’s reaction to the onslaught was to reassert his public commitment to the more tightly-focused goal of charity organisation, and, privately, to move with some desperation to regain the patronage of Bishop Tait, from January 1869 translated to Canterbury as the new archbishop. It was a move in the most promising direction but it was carried out too late from too vulnerable a position. (Solly had been promised a salary in December 1868.) A disastrous attempt in February 1869 to sponsor a plan for the co-ordination of the London charities by means of a network of thirty-six district charity co-ordination offices paid for by a 1 per cent levy on the incomes of the charities to be co-ordinated seemed to spell the end of any rational hope of further voluntary action. (The charities either rejected the plan or failed to acknowledge the initiative.) Yet, within little more than two months, using the same minute book, and some of the same personnel, the defeated Prevention of Pauperism and Crime Association was relaunching itself as the ‘Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicity’. What had made this possible?

Some of those within Solly’s society had always been committed to the idea of charity co-ordination as chief priority and had only withdrawn their support when frustrated by the sectarian in-fighting of its final phase. Even at the last moment, when Solly and his remaining allies had realised that their best line of survival was to highlight this aspect of activity, this had been enough to rekindle the interest of a significant number of London church leaders – not Tait, it is true, but at least the new bishop of London, Jackson, and some of the more active lay leaders of the diocese.

The core of support for a ‘re-founding’ of the Solly association,

39 Revd Septimus Hansard to Tait, 1 Feb. 1869, TP 164, fos 215–16. See also Hansard to Solly, 12 Nov. 1869, SP x, J239–40.
40 Francis Fuller to Solly, 13, 26 Nov. 1868, SP x, J193–200.
41 Ibid. x, J255–6 (‘Memorandum in re my connexion with the Soc. for the Prevention of Pauperism & Crime’), J259 (‘Lord Lyttelton’s opinion on the case submitted to him by Lord Lichfield & Mr Solly – March 26 1872’).
42 Wilkinson, History, 7–14; see also press clippings in SP ix, J158–9.
43 Hansard to Tait, 1 Feb. 1869, TP 164, fos 215–16.
however, was new, and may be identified fairly precisely on the credentials both of its brand of ‘churchmanship’ and of its social rank. These are clearly identifiable in the lineage and career record of the transformed society’s new leader, Thomas George Anson, second earl of Lichfield (1825–92). Lichfield was a Whig grandee, a Palmerstonian and Broad Churchman caught in a new Gladstone-dominated era of religious enthusiasm. As an ‘Adullamite’ he had played a part in the parliamentary attempt to deflect the extension of the franchise in 1866–7. As a supporter of church establishments – both for their role as civilising agents and as bulwarks against clerical fanaticism – he also supported the principle of ‘concurrent endowment’ of all religions in Ireland.45 (This allied him with that group of several dozen Whig peers which, led by Earl Russell and supported by Tait, worked for as long as it dared to deflect the ‘declared will’ of the new electorate that Irish disestablishment include disendowment – as articulated by Gladstone in the triumphant 1868 election campaign which had won him the premiership.)

Lichfield’s Whiggery also helps to explain the form of his interest, during the 1860s, in metropolitan charitable relief. His chief commitment, taken on at the time of its foundation during the severe winter of 1860–1, was to the Society for the Relief of Distress (SRD). (In 1869 he remained its chairman and had been one of its key financial ‘guarantors’ throughout the decade.) This deliberately non-denominational (indeed potentially anti-clerical) organisation, recruited from among the political and plutocratic elite, had begun its work with the explicit goal of restoring ruptured relations of mutuality between the West and East Ends of London. It could claim to be an innovating organisation not only because of its non-denominational approach but also because of its invention of the role of ‘district almoner’ – a gentleman volunteer whose task it was to encourage co-ordinated activity among all local relief agencies, official or voluntary. The prime justification which it had given, however, for its urge to ‘organise’ charity distribution had been the impeccably paternalist one of the cure of ‘neglect’ (‘an evil so disgraceful to our social system’) rather than the cure of ‘imposture’ and cultural demoralisation.46

It is not clear what precise chain of events turned Lichfield from a paternalist to a tighter administrative approach in 1869. It is likely, though, if the evidence left by two fellow workers in the SRD in the late


46 Society for the Relief of Distress, ‘Prospectus’ [1861] & ‘Rules for the guidance of almoners’ (1 Feb. 1862) (both items pasted to inside cover of SRD minute books, vol. 1, London Metropolitan Archives, A/SRD/1). For a contemporary appraisal of the social background of SRD members, and of their sometimes frosty relations with parish clergy see Memoirs of an unappreciated charity (1879), 6, 8.
'60s is typical, that direct observation of the apparent effects of charity distributed to supplement East End poor law out-relief caused some revulsion against ‘indiscriminate doles’, a revulsion which can only have been magnified by the apprehension of what might happen in an era ever more widely committed to the ideal of religious voluntarism. At any rate, Lichfield, whom Solly had been trying to capture without success for the cause, suddenly began to give signals that he was prepared to support the association on condition that it restricted its work to charity organisation. In March 1869 he began to attend committee meetings and to introduce his West End friends and business agents to the association. It was one of these, the Anglican–Swedenborgian solicitor, William Martin Wilkinson (1813–97), who was charged with the task of picking up the pieces of the old association and of drafting a more tightly focused prospectus. This he did:

The excellent plan of District Offices, which I found suggested in Dr. Hawksley’s pamphlet, was ready to hand; and the Rev. Mr. Martyn Hart’s very taking system of free mendicity tickets ... at once approved itself. Mr. Bidder, of the Society for Relief of Distress, had complained ... of the miserable inefficient relief given by the [poor law] guardians; and ... one of the Marylebone guardians, answered him by complaining of the action of charity in ... paralyzing the effect of the Poor Laws ... This suggested to me that Poor Law and Charity should be kept absolutely distinct [but] should work in concert and no longer supplement one another’s cases ... Finally, there should be no distinction of religion, but all ministers should be ex-officio members of the Committees.

It was Wilkinson who, on 29 April 1869, proposed that the name of the association be changed to the ‘Society for Organizing [sic] Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicity’. Meanwhile, Lichfield’s private secretary was being paid to set up a new central office, and his West End philanthropic associates (notably Earl Grosvenor) were pledging to act as guarantors of the society’s running expenses. (This sidestepped the need

47 Denison Letters, 20–1; Hicks, History, 7–8. Note, however, Lichfield’s continuing immunity from the ‘crime wave’ aspect of late ’60s social policy anxieties: PD, 3rd. ser. clxxxiv. 1333 (debate on Habitual Criminals bill, 1869).
48 Lichfield to Hawksley, 9 Feb. 1869, in Hawksley, Objections, 6; Lichfield to Hawksley, 7, 9 Dec. 1874, CO Rev. xciv (1892), 372. See additionally Solly, These eighty years, ii. 245, 319, 354–5. (Solly had first secured Lichfield’s patronage – for the Working Men’s Club & Institute Union – in the mid-’60s.)
49 For Wilkinson’s family background and pre-1869 career, see Clement John Wilkinson, James John Garth Wilkinson: a memoir, London 1911, 44, 90, 143, 196. In the absence of a CO Rev. obituary (promised but never delivered) see the obituary in The Times, 22 June 1897, 6f.
50 Wilkinson, History, 15.
51 COS minutes, 29 Apr. 1869. Wilkinson gives credit to C. J. Ribton-Turner for the precise form of words of the society’s title: History, 22. For council approval of the words (and spelling) ‘Charity Organisation Society’ as the official ‘short title’ of the society see COS minutes, 9 May 1870.
52 SP x, J255; Wilkinson, History, 23–4; CO Rev. lxxvi (1892), 46, 122.
to demand public subscription or charity levy.) Key London diocesan lay organisers were also attracted to the reshaped society. (C. B. P. Bosanquet, honorary secretary to the Tait-founded London Diocesan Lay Helpers’ Association, soon to be appointed salaried secretary to the COS, joined its committee at the time of the name-change.53) As Lichfield was chairman of the SRD and Grosvenor (from October 1869 marquis of Westminster) the son of the president of the London Society for the Suppression of Mendicity, the new society was well placed to work towards acceptance by the two principal non-denominational metropolitan relief societies as well.54

In this way the ‘refounded’ society became a plausible centre for practical voluntary co-operation to a degree never achieved by its predecessor. Nor did it rest on its initial success. Lichfield’s influence appears to have assisted the society to a sympathetic hearing before the president of the Poor Law Board on the need to tighten co-operation between charity and poor law authorities.55 It was also later claimed as the decisive factor in the recruitment of Sir Charles Trevelyan (ex-assistant secretary to the Treasury) to the COS council in February 1870.56 By the time of the first annual general meeting in March 1870, proceedings were being chaired by the earl of Derby, and Mrs Gladstone was noted as present in the place of her vice-president husband, the prime minister.57

By this point, too, the COS council was drawing on the support of a growing number of ‘district committees’ set up to put the council’s policy recommendations into local practice. At least one of these committees predated the foundation of the COS itself. (This was the society set up at Blackheath in December 1868 to promote the ‘ticket’ system of pauper referral for specialist investigation of claim, endorsed by W. M. Wilkinson in his 1869 COS prospectus.58) The ‘model’ district committee was, however, the Marylebone committee, launched by ‘conference’ of its

53 Bosanquet first appears as a COS council member on the day of its name change (see n. 51 above). For his diocesan status see Association of lay helpers for the diocese of London, n.p. 1869 (BL shelfmark 4405.k.1(144)).

54 COS minutes, 8 Nov 1869, and see in addition COS meeting (1870), 13, for official Metropolitan Visiting and Relief Association endorsement of COS work. The Grosvenor link with the London Mendicity Society is evidenced in Roberts, ‘Reshaping the gift relationship’, 229 n. 99.

55 COS minutes, 23 Nov. 1869; CO Rev. lxxvi (1892), 46.

56 COS minutes, 14 Feb. 1870. It is possible that Trevelyan’s links with retired Indian administrators also played a role in recruitment, though, in the absence of the diaries of the most prominent of these (Sir Orfeur Cavenagh, member of both the Solly and the Lichfield society) it is impossible to verify. The location of the Cavenagh diaries, cited in ‘The origin of the London Charity Organisation Society’, CO Rev. xciv (1892), 359, is no longer known to the National Register of Archives: personal communication, 7 Oct. 1997.

57 COS meeting (1870), 6.

promoters with ‘representatives of the Vestry, Clergy of all denominations, the Poor Law Guardians, and the Local Charities’ at Marylebone court house on 4 June 1869, and it is this event which we may plausibly identify as the third moment of foundation in the history of the COS. After Marylebone came a flurry of West End committees (Hawksley’s St George, Hanover Square and Bosanquet’s Kensington parish committees prominent among them) and, more slowly, a number of East End committees, until, by March 1870, twelve districts had been ‘organised’ and the necessary London-wide coverage of at least one committee per poor law union seemed to be within reach. (It was not actually achieved until 1875.)

The fact that local mobilisation spread from West to East End can have been no surprise to the organisers: COS council ‘Suggestions’ to potential local leaders made it clear that the council viewed the task as one essentially of locating and enlisting existing local elites. The first step, it suggested, was to secure ‘the interest of some active and influential person, with time at his command’. This person (assumed to be male) was then advised to ‘solicit’ help from the clergy and the local board of guardians before calling a ‘Public Meeting of Ratepayers and Residents’ in order to achieve the goal of a district committee representative of ‘all denominations and interests’. Such recruitment practices very naturally procured local committees heavily loaded with peers, professional men and retired or half-pay military officers and, above all, with clergy. And it is through the recorded preoccupations of one of this last group that we gain a chance to glimpse some of the wider concerns which propelled the first contingent of local organisers into action.

The Revd W. H. Fremantle (1831–1916) is a pivotal figure in the early history of COS district committee development: he is also a ‘public intellectual’ linking COS concerns back into the wider frame of mid-Victorian political culture. As rector of St Mary’s, Bryanston Square, Marylebone, Fremantle was parish clergyman to, among others, Lord Lichfield. He had been present at the COS foundation council meeting in April 1869 and presided over the Marylebone court house ‘conference’ of June that year. Since 1861 he had been chaplain to Bishop Tait and his

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59 COS minutes, 13 May 1869. For minutes of the Marylebone meeting of 4 June see COS minutes, vol. 1, fo. 16.
60 Ibid. 10 Jan. 1870; [COS] ‘General objects of the Society’ [Oct. 1870], SP ix, J181; CO Rev. lxxxvi (1892), 45; cxxxiii (1896), 57–8, corrected at cxxxiv (1896), 113.
61 [COS] ‘Suggestions on the best method of organising district charity committees’ [1869], SP ix, J160.
62 List of district committee officers on inside cover of CO Reporter, i, 17 Jan. 1872, reveals 23 clergy, 10 officers of military/naval rank, 15 peers, MPs or holders of hereditary title in a total of 118. Further research would no doubt confirm significant participation by lawyers, medical men and other professionals.
63 COS minutes, 29 Apr. 1869; CO Rev. lxxxvi (1892), 46–7.
confidant on ecclesiastical affairs. Committed Broad Churchman as he was, he had acted as spokesman for that Whig-associated party throughout the Irish disestablishment crisis now (July 1869) coming to an end. His first post-disestablishment preoccupation was to publicise his hopes for a renewed English Church Establishment to be brought about by encouraging the participation of the widest range of voluntary efforts in its parish life by its laity. To survive the new age of electoral democracy, he argued, the English Church had to become ‘much more than it is now the Church of the people’. This would require the serious encouragement of lay initiative. As he finally defined his ‘community vision’:

We cannot, indeed, expect the parish church to be a spiritual home of all the parishioners, but we can still make it a centre of good in which the rich may aid the poor, and the school may become a nursery of the Christian family, and various institutions may arise for mutual good and for common interests far beyond our own narrow boundaries.

In Marylebone, between 1869 and 1874, this vision helped to encourage three developments. Its first effect was to ensure a sympathetic climate for the evolution of the society beyond charity co-ordination towards a more sustained client monitoring role. In a ‘community setting’, in association with other (usually denomination-based) voluntary relief agencies it was possible to square the circle between virtuous intention and virtuous outcome in a way not achievable by more impersonal administrative action. The Marybebone experiment was designed explicitly to ‘raise the people … to be energetic, self-reliant, provident, and industrious’ by ensuring that a link was provided between ‘inquiring and relieving bodies’. This link was not merely one of district committee collation of disparate records of multiple charitable acts but of oversight of training of existing volunteer district visiting agents to COS-certified ‘judicious and organized modes of work’. ‘Social work’ was evolving a step further towards independent professional status from its denominational origins by way of Broad Church parochial experiment.

64 W. H. Fremantle, Lay power in parishes: the most needed church reform, London 1870, 4. See also Machin, Politics and the Churches, 28; Parry, Democracy and religion, 61, 70.

65 Recollections of Dean Fremantle chiefly by himself, ed. the Master of the Temple, London 1921, 84. See also the explicit linking of COS work to this vision made at p. 87. The question of the intellectual origins of Fremantle’s ‘community vision’ is an interesting one, more likely to be traceable to the post-first (1832) reform act schemes for Protestant reintegration of Thomas Arnold than to the ‘Chalmers/Elberfeld’ blueprint, later claimed as part of the COS pedigree by C. S. Loch (though see Bosanquet, London, 199, 210ff., for evidence of one COS founder who was aware of both blueprints). See also the ‘ancient constitution’ frankpledge version of communal mutuality presented by Solly to the public meeting of June 1868: SP ix, J28.

66 PP., 1874, xxv [c1071] (Local Government Board: appendix to the third annual report [1873-74], 126–7). See also Bosanquet, Social work, 42, 54; Gillian Darley, Octavia Hill, London 1990, 123.
The executive officer whom the Marybebone COS invited to set up this system was the well-known model housing administrator, Octavia Hill – a choice which helped to resolve another dilemma of practical charitable action. Given Fremantle’s concern to promote active citizenship among the church laity, given also the strong existing belief that ‘charity by proxy’ was less than effective as a ‘civilizing and healing influence’ in a class-stratified urban society, it was clear from the start in Marybebone that part of the mission of the COS was to encourage not just professional charitable action but also an increase in the scale of inter-class contact. This was already an area of anxiety among informed observers because it was widely acknowledged to be linked to certain problems of gender imbalance in charitable action: women, stereotypically, were held to be easy to mobilise but hard to control, while men were easy to train in abstract principles of action but difficult to recruit to the practical work of ‘domestic visitation’. There is some evidence that key early members of the COS council continued to regard female district visiting as a potential threat to the values of ‘far-sightedness and … regard for general rules’; and the exclusion of women from a formal role in any of the three ‘foundation acts’ of the COS can hardly have been unplanned. Octavia Hill’s record of administrative and social policy ‘firmness’ thus gave the Marylebone committee a useful opportunity to rethink its attitude towards women, charity and professionalism – though it must be admitted that the COS as a whole was slow to encourage women’s participation in its work.

A final aspect of the Whig active male citizen approach to charity organisation may be glimpsed in the Marylebone committee’s attempts to create effective links with the public authorities in its area of operation. It will be recalled that early COS council advice had been to aim for the co-option of local elites but, by the end of 1869, it was becoming clear that this was more easily sought than won. After fruitless attempts ‘to confer with the [poor law] Guardians of St Marylebone as to the nature of cases to be relieved out of the rates and by charity respectively’, the district

67 Sir Charles Trelvelyan in 1870, quoted in Bosanquet, Social work, 53.
69 Quotation from a speech by C. B. P. Bosanquet in Church congress reports (1875), 106; see also Hicks, History, 70–2. Note that ‘lady almoners’ were a feature of SRD organisation, as well as of denominational district visiting charities: Memoirs of an unappreciated charity, 6, 46.
70 Octavia Hill, ‘The importance of aiding the poor without almsgiving’, NAPSS: Trans. xiii (1869), 589–93; PP 1874, xxv. 129–39; Darley, Octavia Hill, 120–8. Hill was a protégée of Ruskin before Fremantle recruited her, though they later quarrelled. For Hill’s recruitment as first woman member of the COS central council see COS minutes, 27 Sept. 1869. (By 1872 Hill was one of three women on a council of about 60 people.)
committee turned to more direct methods of influence: two of its leading members (Lichfield and Colonel Lynedoch Gardiner) stood for, and won, election to the board of guardians after which co-operative action proved easier to obtain.\(^{71}\)

On one aspect of active citizenship alone the Marylebone committee dragged its feet. The impeccably decentralised plan of district self-reliance which the central council had drawn up in June 1869 was not implemented in spite of calls from other district committees. (Hawksley’s Hanover Square committee was particularly insistent on the need for liberation from the heavy hand of central direction.\(^{72}\)) The delay was no doubt due in part to the fact that the majority bloc on council were also Marylebone committee members. It also seems to have been linked to Lichfield’s priority goal of completing the metropolitan district committee network, by cross-subsidy if necessary, and the financial strains resulting required strong executive action.\(^{73}\) By December 1870, however, the logic of active community citizenship could no longer be withstood. The self-recruited foundation council of the COS was to be reconstituted to become a ‘federation’ of district committee representatives.\(^{74}\) The first meeting of that reconstituted council on 9 January 1871 marked, in effect, a fourth symbolic act of foundation for the society.

IV

What, then, had the founders of the Charity Organisation Society set out to achieve through it?\(^2\) On the evidence examined here there is no clear-cut, single-goal answer to this question. The earliest attempts to write the history of the society had been contested because the participants in the retrospectively identified acts of foundation had not been in agreement about their significance at the time of enactment. This stance allowed them, among other things, to continue to push for the resurrection of suppressed agenda items for as long as the new society remained relatively unbureaucratised in its policy-declaring procedures.\(^{75}\) This phase of COS

\(^{71}\) Sir Lynedoch Gardiner to editor, 29 June 1892, CO Rev. lxxxvi (1892), 47; PP 1874, xxv. 127–8, 131.

\(^{72}\) COS minutes, 12 June 1869, 28 Mar. 1870.

\(^{73}\) CO Rev. lxxxvi (1892), 47; minutes, 20 Dec. 1869 (appointment of Ribton-Turner, Marylebone district secretary, to position of central council organising secretary with a brief to promote the extension of the metropolitan district committee network).

\(^{74}\) COS minutes, 19 Dec. 1870, and see full version of new rules in minutes, vol. 2, fo. 164.

\(^{75}\) For example, COS administrative committee minutes, 22 Dec. 1870 (Hawksley attempt ‘to renew the question of Industrial Employment’); COS minutes, 27 Nov. 1871, 21 Jan. 1872 (consideration of scheme, ultimately abandoned, to merge the COS with the SRD to create a relief-providing as well as relief-monitoring society). Note also Bosanquet’s 1874 admission (History, 9) that, while ‘[t]heoretically it is not essential to the plan of the [CO] Society that the [District] Committees should relieve… it is found necessary in practice’ for them sometimes to supplement existing relief efforts.
existence effectively ended only in the mid-1870s. (It was at that point that the balance of influence tilted decisively in favour of its new, professionally committed secretary, C. S. Loch.)

If, however, we accept the point that the search for 'something like the COS' was not fortuitous – that the COS was a product of the particular crisis of cultural adjustment which followed the concession of (urban) franchise reform in 1867 – then we immediately put ourselves in a position to see why 'charity organisation', relatively quickly, became an item on the social agenda ripe for settlement. That settlement was ultimately sponsored, as we have seen, by a fairly well-defined political and cultural elite in order not only to resolve a chronic cultural problem but also to pre-empt the canvassing of alternative solutions. Much the same thing happened a year later in a related sector of hitherto voluntary charitable action with the passing of the landmark 1870 Education Act. This near-coincidence was no accident. Resolution of both these problems of religion-linked 'social service supply' in an 'age of democracy' required a new balance to be struck between religiously influenced donor intention and state-articulated 'public need'. While provision of education to potential citizens had always been a higher priority of governments than control of 'private' charitable relief – and remained so in the period 1867–70 – the attempt to rescue charity from the danger of subversion by forces of sectarian religion, middle-class sentimentality or new voter ignorance produced a strong wish to create a centre of charitable authority which might act 'as if it were a Department of State' (as W. M. Wilkinson proudly put it). The charitable activists who reacted most single-mindedly along this line of reasoning, tended, as we have seen, to be associated with a Whig view of political reform and a Broad Church view of religious purpose. They deplored sectarian enthusiasm yet relied

[76] Machin, Politics and the Churches, 33–7; Parry, Democracy and religion, 105–10, 302–6. Note also the COS recruitment of W. F. Cowper-Temple (vice-president from early 1869). Cowper-Temple was the Whig sponsor of the key religious instruction compromise clause in the 1870 Education Act, much to Gladstone’s displeasure.

[77] Wilkinson, History, 30. It may be pointed out here that the later reverence of some COS members for the 'Chalmers' and/or 'Elberfeld' systems of integrated community relief provision also becomes more explicable when viewed as a stage in reconciliation to a strategy of 'compensating' for the loss of institutions based on assumptions of citizen/confessional identity. C. S. Loch, in particular, was much given to anxiety aroused by the need to retain a sense of religious ‘mission’ among recruits while, at the same time, preserving uniform implementation of ‘principle’. diary of Charles Stewart Loch, entries for 17 Sept. 1876; 15, 30 April 1877, University of London, Department of Palaeography, ms 801. For the COS role in publicising an influential 1871 local government board report on Elberfeld, a document compiled at the urging of the Liverpool philanthropist, William Rathbone MP, see CO Reporter i (1872), 63, 167, 188; iii (1874), 317 ('The Elberfeld system in London'); M. E. Rose, 'The crisis of poor relief in England, 1860–1890', in W. Mommsen (ed.), The emergence of the welfare state in Britain and Germany 1850–1950, London 1981, 66–7.
on the mobilisation of active participant citizens to ensure that necessary political democratisation did not lead to avoidable state centralisation and cultural levelling. The price which they were prepared to pay for avoidance was the voluntary co-ordination of voluntary charitable effort, assisted by sponsorship of professional training for volunteers in market-accepting techniques of `family support'. By the early twentieth century such an approach had come to seem antique. From the vantage point of a Broad Church Whig in 1869 it made very good sense.