

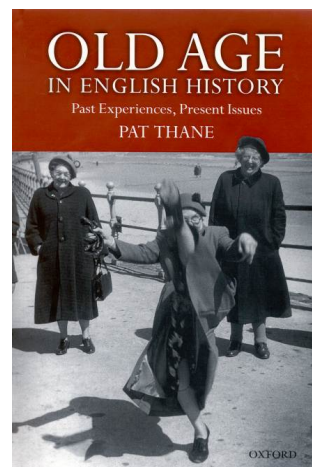


Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. xi + 536 pp. £25.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-19-820382-9.

Pat Thane, formerly of the University of Sussex but now of the Institute of Historical research in London, has returned to the theme of her doctoral thesis to write a broad ranging and ambitious study of *Old Age in English History*.

Covering the period from classical antiquity to the present, this book examines the representation and experience of the elderly as well as the government policies affecting them. Thane's analysis takes in old men and women, rich and poor, educated and illiterate and weaves together a nuanced account of the nature of old age through the ages, that stresses the diversity of the phenomenon. As she herself states: "Old people' are not and have never been a single, simple category. They are divided by gender, class, income, race, by multiple individual characteristics, and also by age" (p. 459).

The wide scope of *Old Age in English History* is definitely a strength, but at times it is hard for Thane to maintain the high level of scholarship displayed in many of the sections of the book. Not surprisingly for someone who has made her name as a contemporary historian, Thane's treatment of pre-industrial England is rather sketchy and lacks the depth of analysis those familiar with her abilities will have come to expect. If the book's first section on "Old Age in Pre-Modern England" is judged on the same basis as a specialist monograph on the subject, it will disappoint. If it is seen as an extended introduction to a study of "Old Age in Modern England", however, it fares much better. This is in fact what it proves to be, for it is in her analysis of the elderly in industrial England that her skill as an historian and enthusiasm for her subject becomes apparent. Even the prose improves. In the first portion of the book, it is laboured and cumbersome giving the impression that Thane did not enjoy writing it, and may only have done so on the insistence of a persistent commissioning editor. By the time she gets to the nineteenth century,



however, the style of writing is much more engaging and the reader can enjoy the language as well as the historical insights conveyed by it.

This book is particularly enjoyable when Thane allows her historical subjects to speak for themselves through such sources as the reports of the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor (pp. 186–92) and the University of Sussex's Mass Observation Archive's directive on "Growing Older" (pp. 463–72). In the sections where she gives such material a prominent position, she is able to draw out the human dimensions of ageing and show that old age is not simply a matter of concern for policy makers, but has very real meanings and consequences for those individuals who experience it.

Another major achievement of *Old Age in English History* is its convincing attack on the modern stereotype of the old person as burdensome and dependent, requiring much but contributing little. Throughout the book, Thane emphasises the agency of the elderly in English history. Whether it was through retirement contracts in medieval England (pp. 75–81), or the clever manipulation of the New Poor Law in the late nineteenth century (p. 168), old people have consistently sought to take control of their own lives and find their own solutions to the difficulties caused by ageing. Rarely have they simply been passive victims awaiting their fate at the mercy of others.

Overall, *Old Age in English History* is a worthy contribution to British historiography that is sure to have a wide audience. Its use to specialists interested in pre-industrial England is limited, but, on the whole, contemporary British historians and general readers alike will find this book interesting and worthwhile.

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Tiivistelmä suomeksi / Abstract in Finnish

Pat Thanen teos *Old Age in English History* kattaa laajan aikajakson antiikista nykyisyyteen. Kirjassa esitellään hyvin laajasti ikäihmisten historiaa Englannissa, ja temaattisen ja ajallisen laajuuden yhteensovittamisen vaikeudet näkyvät siinä, ettei esiteollista Englantia itse asiassa käsitellä kovinkaan syvällisesti. Modernin historian tutkijalle lähemmäs nykyisyyttä painottuminen on toki ymmärrettävää. Thanen päästessä vauhtiin teoksen loppupuolella myös hänen kielensä terävöityy tekstistä tulee todella nautittavaa luettavaa. Kirjoittaja antaa tutkimuskohteidensa puhua itse puolestaan lähdesitaattien kautta, ja lisäksi teoksessa painottuu käsitys, etteivät vanhukset ole välttämättä mikään taakka yhteiskunnalle, vaan että monet ikäihmiset ovat itsekkin hyvin aktiivisia etsimään ja löytämään ratkaisuja vanhuuden aiheuttamiin ongelmiin. (*Abstract translated by Jouko Nurmiainen.*)

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