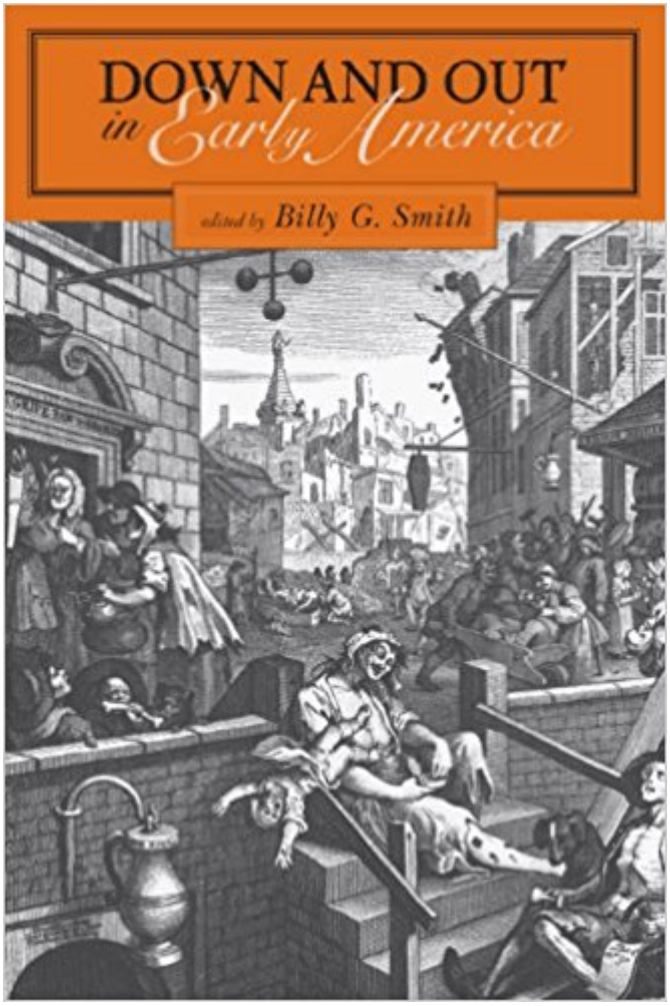
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Down And Out In Early America



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Synopsis

It has often been said that early America was the "best poor manÃ¢â ¬â„¢s country in the world." After all, wasnÃ¢â ¬â„¢t there an abundance of land and a scarcity of laborers? The law of supply and demand would seem to dictate that most early American working people enjoyed high wages and a decent material standard of living. Down and Out in Early America presents the evidence for poverty versus plenty and concludes that financial insecurity was a widespread problem that plagued many early Americans. The fact is that in early America only an extremely thin margin separated those who required assistance from those who were able to secure independently the necessities of life. The reasons for this were many: seasonal and cyclical unemployment, inadequate wages, health problems (including mental illness), alcoholism, a large pool of migrants, low pay for women, abandoned families. The situation was made worse by the inability of many communities to provide help for the poor except to incarcerate them in workhouses and almshouses.The essays in this volume explore the lives and strategies of people who struggled with destitution, evaluate the changing forms of poor relief, and examine the political, religious, gender, and racial aspects of poverty in early North America. Down and Out in Early America features a distinguished lineup of historians. In the first chapter, Gary B. Nash surveys the scholarship on poverty in early America and concludes that historians have failed to appreciate the numerous factors that generated widespread indigence. Philip D. Morgan examines poverty among slaves while Jean R. Soderlund looks at the experience of Native Americans in New Jersey. In the other essays, Monique Bourque, Ruth Wallis Herndon, Tom Humphrey, Susan E. Klepp, John E. Murray, Simon Newman, J. Richard Olivas, and Karin Wulf look at the conditions of poverty across regions, making this the most complete and comprehensive work of its kind.

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Customer Reviews

Ã¢â ¬Å“Billy Smith brings together an impressive group of scholars who examine poverty in a wide range of settings. The resulting essays are remarkable not only for their inclusiveness but also for the way they give a truly human face to the poor. Down and Out in Early America is an important contribution to the scholarship on early America.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â •John K. Alexander, University of CincinnatiÃ¢â ¬Å“These essays portend a new, exciting stage in poverty and poor relief studies.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â •Robert E. Cray, Jr., Journal of American History

Billy G. Smith is Professor of History at Montana State University. He has edited two Penn State Press books: The Infortunate: The Voyages and Adventures of William Moraley, an Indentured Servant (with Susan Klepp; 1992) and Life in Early Philadelphia: Documents from the Revolutionary and Early National Periods (1995).

Billy Smith provides a quality array of authors in the book "Down and Out in Early America", who present a telling and moving picture of what life in the Early American Colonies was like for those brave souls who made their way across the Atlantic Ocean. Most Americans are not aware of the impoverishment that plagued the fledgling colonies, holding on, instead, to a fantastical story of prosperity and abundance for all who ventured onto the North American continent. The harsh reality of those days involved long periods of great penury and strife for many of the immigrants; hardships that were fueled by the greed of rich merchants, private interests, and the local politics and religion. Smith provides a variety of historical accounts, predicated upon myriad primary source materials that create a realistic view of early American poverty; what the lives of the poor were like; how poor relief and charity were distributed throughout the colonies; and how politics and religion contributed to overall poverty. This book provides a sobering account of what the real Early American lifestyle entailed, and is recommended by this reviewer, to anyone who wishes to understand the true underpinnings of America’s original history, as opposed to the storybook version that many of us recall from our childhood.

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