

Department of History
Hist*4280 Poverty and Policy in the Victorian Age
Winter Semester 2026
"The Cold Hand of Charity:" Poverty and Philanthropy in England



Land Acknowledgement: Guelph

The University of Guelph resides on the ancestral lands of the Attawandaron people and the treaty lands and territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. We recognize the significance of the Dish with One Spoon Covenant to this land and offer respect to our Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Métis neighbours. Today, this gathering place is home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and acknowledging them reminds us of our important connection to this land where we work and learn.

Calendar Description

Starting with the debates over the New Poor Law of 1834, this course will examine the changing content of the notion of poverty, and changing methods adopted to treat it. It will also look at the lives of the poor, in so far as these can be reconstructed from contemporary sources.

Course Description

The notion of the 'cold hand of charity' reveals the influence of evangelical ideas of sin and salvation and blames poverty on the moral condition of its victims. By implication, many eighteen to mid-twentieth century writers on the poverty problem chose to define it in terms of the conditions of 'pauperism,' a consequence of an individual's chosen lifestyle: idleness, drunkenness, irreligion, imprudent marriage and sexual promiscuity. By the mid-Victorian period social welfare policies and practices reflected this way of thinking. However, competing approaches to the problem of poverty emphasized self-help as illustrated by the formation of the cooperative movement, friendly societies, and criticisms of capitalism apparent in Marxist influenced socialist organizations.

The aim of this course is to introduce students to the social history of poverty, using Britain as a case study. The focus will be the rise of major social welfare institutions and the developing professions of social work and investigative journalism. Basically, the bulk of the course will be organized around 7 group presentations. The topic titles and rubrics for the group and individual

presentations will be explained in more detail in class and on Courselink under Contents. The topic titles are as follows:

1. 1700-1845: The Old Poor Law
2. 1834-1870: The New Poor Law
3. 1840-1851: London Labour London Poor (Volume 1)
4. 1850-1861: London Labour London Poor (Volume 1 and 2)
5. 1848-1885: Communist Manifesto of Poverty
6. 1988-1904: Around about a Pound a Week
7. 1900-1933: Down and Out in Paris and London

Each week, three-to-four students will serve on the Advisory Panel (AP) for the week. Look under Courselink Groups for your group number and date. On the day of your Advisory Panel's presentation, you will meet me in class at 2:30 for a 15 minute preparatory discussion. Your AP questions are due the day of presentation and must be in a format that can be distributed to the class. When the other class members arrive at 2:45 your AP will be responsible for leading the class (2:45-5:00). This will include: a 20–25-minute research-based presentation containing 12 to 20 informative, professional-looking PowerPoint slides. This will be followed by an AP-led Question and Answer discussion focused on the issues arising from the assigned readings. It is strongly advised that the Advisory Panels meet outside of class at least once [approximately 1-2 hrs. in person or over Zoom] to determine an overall division of labour for their AP. This will include sharing research notes, formulating Q&A discussion questions, contributing to the PowerPoint presentation, and writing their presentation script.

This is a reading intensive course. Most readings are primary source monographs. Every student will be expected to demonstrate completion of the weekly readings and participate fully in the Q&A discussion. To demonstrate completion of the required readings you must bring to class: paper copies of monographs, chapters, and or/downloaded-searchable electronic copies, reference notes [paper or electronic, laptops or tablets]. You must have access to the readings during class if asked. The assigned monographs are all available as cheap paperbacks or in free online formats. Copies of Mayhew are in the UoG bookstores, I suggest you buy a notebook to record your research notes and the ideas that will help you formulate your essay topic

Course Objectives

By the end of the course students should be able to:

- Collect and analyze primary sources and historical information to support an historically grounded public/social policy argument
- Engage in a respectful debate about sensitive and controversial topics related to social class and racial tensions
- Make connections between historical research and real-world events and the public policy challenges facing North America today
- Complete an original primary source-based research project that demonstrates critical analysis of the historical construction of poverty, voluntary action [charity], and state policy and practices.
- Develop oral communication skills

Required Reading (available at the Bookstore, any second-hand websites, or as free downloadable PDFs)

Henry Mayhew, London Labour and The London Poor (1861)

Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels. The Communist Manifesto, (1948)

Maude Pember Reeves, Around a Pound a Week (1913)

George Orwell, Down and Out in Paris and London (1933)

Course Evaluation – Overview

Advisory group presentations—Power Point: 20 marks (due the day of the presentation)

Advisory group oral presentations: 5 marks (due the day of presentation)

Advisory panel questions/performance: 5 marks (due the day of presentation)

Advisory panel reflection piece: 10 marks (due one week after panel/presentation)

Research Project: 40 marks (rubric on Courselink; due April 10, 2026, 11:59 PM)

Individual Research presentations: 10 marks (sign up on Courselink)

Class participation: 10 marks (rubric on Courselink).

Research Project: Essay or Unessay (40 marks)

After we finish the Mayhew discussion (January 29) you will be in a good position to chronicle the lives of the poor in Victorian London. After carefully considering all the street folks you encountered in Henry Mayhew's survey, select an occupation (example: street sellers, hawker, dockers, chimney sweeps, scavengers, flower girls, buskers, beggars, etc.) and create a detailed account of the survival strategies, shadow economy, political and economic survival strategies of the poor in Victorian society. To all students, an important warning: you can turn in the most creative thing, but if you do not have a well-defined and historically grounded research question and cannot demonstrate your research, I can't give you full credit. This is the major assignment of the class with two options.

The Essay

Time to spend: Roughly 20 hours. Write a research essay on an approved topic making significant use of a minimum of five academic articles, all appropriate assigned course material, and two main primary sources. Your essay should be approximately 10 pages (Chicago format,

bibliography not included). You may build your essay thesis and bibliography around your AP presentation, but the final shape and direction of your final paper must be unique and original. By the middle of the semester you should have chosen your topic, met with the instructor, and identified your primary sources and most of your secondary sources.

The Unessay

Time to spend: Roughly 20 hours. After your topic is approved you must make significant use of a minimum of five academic articles, all appropriate assigned course material, and two main primary sources. You will be expected to write a three-page explanation of your unessay and how it was informed by the research you did. Be sure to include a Chicago format bibliography. The unessay is an alternative to a traditional essay. Play to your strengths. Be creative. Find alternative way of knowledge dissemination. Consider your strengths, talents, and skills and think about how to apply them.

Examples of an unessay include:

- 'Authentic' Artifact (ceramics, cloth, papier-mâché, edible meal)
- Visual Representation (paintings, 3-D collages, diorama, board game, London Market map)
- Audible Representation (compose music, podcast, interview)
- Alternative Written Representation (diary, notebook, court trial transcript, petition, financial records)

If the concept of the unessay intrigues you, it is required that you meet with me to talk through your idea. This way we can make sure that you meet the assignment requirements. Creating a historically grounded research question is just as important for an unessay. You will turn in a three page-description or explanation of your unessay that helps illustrate how your sources informed your research and final project. Think about pieces displayed in museums and art galleries; many of them come accompanied by a plaque that describes/contextualizes/analyzes the piece.

Tentative Schedule for each class

2:30-2:45 Advisory Panel meets with [REDACTED]

2:45 Class arrives (wait in hall until door opens)

5:00 AP and Discussion end. Final comments by Mahood, class leaves, short meeting with next week's AP.

Week One January 8

Background Reading: Lynn Holland Lees, The Solidarities of Strangers, 'Residualism Taken for Granted, 1700-1834, pp. 19-112. Lynn Holland Lees, The Solidarities of Strangers, 'Residualism Redefined and Restricted, 1834-1960, pp. 113-217.

Week Two: January 15:

Jonathan Swift, A Modest Proposal (1729)

Henry Mayhew, London Labour and London Poor, Volume One: Of the London Street folk, pp. 5-193

Week Three, January 22

James Greenwood, A Night in a Workhouse (1866)
<https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Greenwood/1866/>

Henry Mayhew, London Labour and London Poor, Volume Two: Of the London Street folk, pp.193-294

Week Four, January 29

Henry Mayhew, London Labour and London Poor, Volume Three and Four: Of the London Street folk, pp. 294-467

Week Five, February 5

Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels. The Communist Manifesto, 1948

Seth Koven, Slumming, 'Workhouse Nights', pp. 23-87.

Week Six, February 12

Formulate Essay/Unessay, Library and Archives Research Class

Week Seven, READING WEEK

Week Eight, February 26

Maude Pember Reeves, Around a Pound a Week (1913),
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/58691/58691-h/58691-h.htm>

Week Nine, March 12

George Orwell, Down and Out in Paris and London (1933)

Week Ten, March 19 REVIEW CLASS

Lynn Holland Lees, The Solidarities of Strangers, 'Residualism Taken for Granted, 1700-1834, pp. 19-112. Lynn Holland Lees, The Solidarities of Strangers, 'Residualism Redefined and Restricted, 1834-1960, pp. 113-217.

Weeks Eleven-Twelve (March 26 & April 2)

Research presentations (sign up on Courselink)

Last Day to Drop Course

The final day to drop Winter 2026 courses without academic penalty is the last day of classes: April 6.

After this date, a mark will be recorded, whether course work is completed or not (a zero is assigned for missed tests/assignments). This mark will show on the student's transcript and will be calculated into their average.

Course Grading Policies

Submission of Assignments

All course material must be submitted by the last day of class

Late Assignment Penalties

5% per day

Generative AI

The use of Generative AI software is not permitted in this course for research assignments, and may be considered academic misconduct.

Standard Statements for Undergraduate Courses

Academic Integrity

The University of Guelph is committed to upholding the highest standards of academic integrity and it is the responsibility of all members of the University community – faculty, staff, and students – to be aware of what constitutes academic misconduct and to do as much as possible to prevent academic offences from occurring. University of Guelph students have the responsibility of abiding by the University's policy on academic misconduct regardless of their location of study; faculty, staff and students have the responsibility of supporting an environment that discourages misconduct. Students need to remain aware that instructors have access to and the right to use electronic and other means of detection.

Please note: Whether or not a student intended to commit academic misconduct is not relevant for a finding of guilt. Hurried or careless submission of assignments does not excuse students from responsibility for verifying the academic integrity of their work

before submitting it. Students who are in any doubt as to whether an action on their part could be construed as an academic offence should consult with a faculty member or faculty advisor.

The [Academic Misconduct Policy](#) is outlined in the Undergraduate Calendar.

Accessibility

The University promotes the full participation of students who experience disabilities in their academic programs. To that end, the provision of academic accommodation is a shared responsibility between the University and the student.

When accommodations are needed, the student is required to first register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS). Documentation to substantiate the existence of a disability is required; however, interim accommodations may be possible while that process is underway.

Accommodations are available for both permanent and temporary disabilities. It should be noted that common illnesses such as a cold or the flu do not constitute a disability. Use of the SAS Exam Centre requires students to make a booking at least 10 days in advance, and no later than the first business day in November, March or July as appropriate for the semester. Similarly, new or changed accommodations for online quizzes, tests and exams must be approved at least a week ahead of time. For students at the Guelph campus, information can be found on the [SAS website](#).

Accommodation of Religious Obligations

If you are unable to meet an in-course requirement due to religious obligations, please email the course instructor within two weeks of the start of the semester to make alternate arrangements.

See the Academic calendar for information on regulations and procedures for [Academic Accommodations of Religious Obligations](#).

Copies of Out-of-class Assignments

Keep paper and/or other reliable back-up copies of all out-of-class assignments: you may be asked to resubmit work at any time.

Drop Date

Students will have until the last day of classes to drop courses without academic penalty. The deadline to drop two-semester courses will be the last day of classes in the second semester. This applies to all undergraduate students except for Doctor of Veterinary Medicine and Associate Diploma in Veterinary Technology (conventional and alternative delivery) students. The regulations and procedures for course registration are available in the [Undergraduate Calendar - Dropping Courses](#).

Email Communication

As per university regulations, all students are required to check their <uoguelph.ca> e-mail account regularly: e-mail is the official route of communication between the University and its students.

Health and Wellbeing

The University of Guelph provides a wide range of health and wellbeing services at the [Vaccarino Centre for Student Wellness](#). If you are concerned about your mental health and not sure where to start, connect with a [Student Wellness Navigator](#) who can help develop a plan to manage and support your mental health or check out our [mental wellbeing resources](#). The Student Wellness team are here to help and welcome the opportunity to connect with you.

Illness

Medical notes will not normally be required for singular instances of academic consideration, although students may be required to provide supporting documentation for multiple missed assessments or when involving a large part of a course (e.g., final exam or major assignment).

Recording of Materials

Presentations that are made in relation to course work—including lectures—cannot be recorded or copied without the permission of the presenter, whether the instructor, a student, or guest lecturer. Material recorded with permission is restricted to use for that course unless further permission is granted.

Resources

The [Academic Calendars](#) are the source of information about the University of Guelph's procedures, policies and regulations which apply to undergraduate, graduate and diploma programs.

When You Cannot Meet a Course Requirement

When you find yourself unable to meet an in-course requirement because of illness or compassionate reasons please advise the course instructor (or designated person, such as a teaching assistant) in writing, with your name, id#, and e-mail contact. See the Undergraduate Calendar for information on regulations and procedures for [Academic Consideration](#).