

Introduction

In May 1914 a leading article in *The Times* claimed that ‘Philanthropist is about as much a term of abuse as of praise’.¹ This one sentence introduces a key element in public discourse on philanthropy in Britain, that it was criticised as much as it was praised. Philanthropy is a word of Greek origin meaning love of humankind. It became widely used in Britain only from 1750. How was it that many people from the end of the eighteenth century onwards could come to dislike philanthropy and philanthropists with a passion that can shock? This book seeks to find out.

A second issue was prompted by a White Paper on Giving issued by the Coalition government in 2011. It contained a page headed ‘Philanthropy Advice’ and was addressed to people who ‘give substantial sums’. There were going to be ‘local portals, channeling philanthropists to a range of donor models and proactively connecting mass affluent and high net worth individuals to the best help and support for their charitable giving’.² Cutting through the jargon, why was ‘philanthropy’, distinguished from other forms of giving, promoted as exclusively for the rich? A love of humankind does not, in itself, have anything to do with money. How did philanthropy become associated with wealth, how did it become monetised?

Historians of philanthropy tend to assume that it is self-evident what their subject matter will be. They look to the past for evidence of private individuals giving money to beneficial public causes; they write histories of giving and gifting. They are then able to make some assessment as to whether the early seventeenth century did or did not outshine the Victorian period as a golden age of philanthropy. Or, as some argue, perhaps the golden age lay in the eighteenth century.³ No one claimed that it lay in the twentieth century, except perhaps towards its close and reaching into the twenty-first century when a ‘new philanthropy’ was proclaimed.

An alternative approach, and one to which a number of historians have made valuable contributions, is to turn the focus on what contemporaries made of philanthropy. This study of the reputation of philanthropy falls into

this category. Its starting point is a study of the words ‘philanthropy’ and ‘philanthropist’ and of the contexts in which they were used. ‘Philanthropy’ had little purchase in English until the mid-eighteenth century. ‘Philanthropist’ emerged a little later. People in the seventeenth century or before who are now described as ‘philanthropists’ were not so-called by their contemporaries. They were most likely ‘benefactors’. The history of these words – and the importance of it – is well illustrated in a remark of John Dryden in 1693. Seeing ‘philanthropy’ ‘every where manifest’ in the writings of Polybius, he commented that ‘we have not a proper word in *English* to express’ it. But it was not only that there was no currency to the word ‘philanthropy’. Perhaps more surprising was that Polybius’s philanthropy was displayed not in giving money but in writing history ‘Wherein he has left a perpetual Monument of his publick Love to all the World’.⁴ For better or worse, it is difficult to imagine a modern historian being credited with philanthropy.

Philanthropy as it emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century was wrought out of an amalgam of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. It was a feeling of love for all humans, experienced physically – and inclining those who felt it to express this in verse. It might entail, but did not require, giving money. It could have potentially huge implications. The slave trade and slavery jarred implacably with any feeling of love for all humans. Love of humankind implied that all humans had rights, rights that were universal and not country-specific as were the ‘rights of the free-born Englishman’. Even criminals fell within the compass of philanthropy. The first person to win the accolade of ‘philanthropist’ was John Howard, the prison reformer, who counted the miles he travelled across Europe, not the money he gave.

This first phase of philanthropy began to be sharply challenged with the outbreak of war against revolutionary France in 1793. Could you, should you, love the enemy you were fighting, who was trying to invade your country? Many answered no. ‘Universal philanthropy’, a philanthropy that knew no borders, became much more rarely invoked. To add to the problems for philanthropy, radicals and those seen as revolutionaries began to proclaim philanthropy, seeing it as a potent weapon against those who would deny them rights. The followers of Thomas Spence, the radical land reformer, called themselves the ‘Spencean Philanthropists’.

It was, ironically, the opponents of philanthropy who did most to define the next phase in its history. Campaigners for the abolition of the slave trade (achieved in 1807) and of slavery (achieved in 1833) rarely spoke or thought of themselves as philanthropists. Their opponents, however, criticised what they saw as their ill-judged philanthropy. Evangelicals played a prominent part in the campaigns against slavery – and those campaigns in time came to be thought of as an achievement in which the nation could take great pride. So it was that there grew up an association between evangelicalism and philanthropy. Enlightenment and Romantic philanthropy was followed by evangelical philanthropy, a phase that was dominant in the period up to the mid-nineteenth century. Evangelicals were prominent in innumerable

organisations and institutions that could be described as philanthropic and themselves proclaimed the merits of ‘Christian philanthropy’ – and decried any other kind. But what gave most specificity to this phase was the virulence of the criticism of this evangelical philanthropy. Expressed volubly in *The Times*, it reached an apogee in the mid-century fulminations of Thomas Carlyle against prison reform and anti-slavery, the two causes with which evangelical philanthropy was most closely associated.

Evangelical philanthropy became less controversial, less central to public discourse, in the second half of the nineteenth century. A new phase, marked by the relationship between capitalism and philanthropy, began to dominate discussion. That relationship, with different sub-phases, has characterised philanthropy ever since.

From its outset philanthropy had an uneasy relationship with political economy, which, like philanthropy, came to the fore in the later eighteenth century. Political economy put a premium on the free workings of the labour market. Its advocates railed against those who sought in any way to supplement wages or to give help to those who were deemed to be undeserving. Some argued that philanthropy might work in harness with political economy to bring order and rationality to charitable giving. Others came increasingly to feel that philanthropy was no better in this respect than charity. Both, it was often said, did more harm than good. The relief of poverty had been at the heart of charitable giving and activity since the fifteenth century. In the nineteenth century those who sought to contribute to this cause found themselves looking over their shoulders in case a political economist was bearing down upon them. Would-be philanthropists turned their attention to other causes that would avoid the censure of political economy.

Three in particular marked the second half of the nineteenth century, each of them, now for the first time, associated with the giving, expenditure or investment of money. The first consisted of donations of land and money by local capitalists for the provision of cultural and social facilities in towns and cities. Libraries, public parks, museums, art galleries, hospitals and universities became part of the urban landscape, some of them aided by money from the rates, many of them outright donations. Second, there was a marriage of philanthropy and capitalism in attempts to ease urban housing problems. Five per cent philanthropy, as it was called, offered a return on capital, set below market rates, for those who put up money to build new tenements for the working classes. Third, some employers, the Quaker chocolate makers most prominently, began to build model villages and provide leisure facilities for their employees in a policy that was part good industrial relations and part a genuine desire to improve lives.

Many philanthropists themselves, however, doubted whether these three forms of philanthropy, even if they escaped the criticisms of political economists, did much to solve deep-rooted urban problems. Towards the end of the nineteenth century there came a call for a ‘new philanthropy’, to be marked not by money giving, but by ‘service’. Toynbee Hall in Whitechapel

was the headquarters of this new movement, a place where the young middle classes could spend time living in the midst of poverty and seeking to raise the aspirations and standards of living of the poor. A more radical response was to argue that philanthropy had failed and to call upon the state to intervene in the resolution of social and economic problems.

By the early twentieth century philanthropy was dropping out of public discourse, seen as a thing of the past. Building on the work of volunteers, most of them women, there evolved a new profession, 'social work', for tackling intractable problems. Some argued in the inter-war period that yet another 'new philanthropy' could work in harmony with the professionals, and to some extent this happened, but philanthropy was slipping into a role that David Owen described as being the 'junior partner in the welfare firm'.⁵

In the late twentieth century the welfare state came under attack from those who, like the political economists of the nineteenth century, argued that welfare, like charity before it, created a dependency class. This facilitated the rise of another 'new philanthropy'. Buoyed by accumulated wealth, its advocates asserted its claims to be able to use methods honed in business practice to do what the state had tried and failed to do. The *Economist* bluntly asserted what enabled such a new philanthropy to flourish: 'inequality is a friend of philanthropy, and large fortunes encourage individual generosity'. Another 'golden age', it hoped, 'may be about to dawn'.⁶

Histories of gifting or giving provide invaluable data and often allow insight into motivation. They are not in themselves, however, histories of philanthropy. The history of 'philanthropy' and 'philanthropist' as words reveals big changes in their meaning and reputation. A close attention to context alone can both demonstrate and explain these changes. Such an approach shows that philanthropy existed in a public and political domain. The Enlightenment, Romanticism, evangelicalism and capitalism provide essential context. They open gateways into topics without which understanding of philanthropy is diminished: poverty and the Poor Laws; slavery and anti-slavery; political radicalism; mutualism; civil society; national identity; gender; poetry and fiction; empire; voluntary societies and volunteering; citizenship; the welfare state.

Philanthropy occupied for a time a prominent place in public discourse. Well-known people – perhaps they could be called 'public intellectuals' – assessed its merits and demerits. They included Adam Smith, William Godwin, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Chalmers, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle, George Bernard Shaw and William Beveridge. This book is more about them and about the novelists, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, John Galsworthy, Virginia Woolf and others, who dissected philanthropy than it is about those who were called philanthropists. I am interested in who the label was attached to and why – and to that extent in what they did or gave. But this is not the book for those who want to find out more about Angela Burdett-Coutts or George Peabody or Dr Barnardo, or about those who were sometimes called 'philanthropists in humble life' of

whom three stood out in the publications of the day: John Pounds (1766–1839), disabled Portsmouth cobbler, who taught the poorest children, Sarah Martin (1791–1843) who was a prison visitor in Great Yarmouth, and Kitty Wilkinson (1786–1860), famous in Liverpool for her work in the cholera epidemic of 1832.

Philanthropy was frequently seen as an articulation and embodiment of national identity. The language in which this was expressed poses problems. Philanthropy was seen variously as ‘English’ or ‘British’, rarely ‘Scottish’ or ‘Welsh’. The English often wrote of ‘England’ when they meant ‘Britain’. As Lord Rosebery, a Scot, put it, England’s wealth, power and population ‘make her feel herself to be Great Britain’. There were certainly articulations of Englishness that were specific to England. That was the case in much writing about the landscape. It was also true of popular Conservatism in the later nineteenth century, which could be overtly anti-Scottish or, less strongly, anti-Welsh.⁷ With philanthropy, however, at least for the English, England and Britain were interchangeable. Scottish philanthropy did have distinctive features. In providing an entry into the public sphere for women in the later nineteenth century, for example, there was in Scotland an emphasis in discourse and action on the temperance issue that was much stronger than in England.⁸ Olive Checkland, however, concluded from her study of the motivations and achievements of Scottish philanthropy that ‘the Scots, though they achieved much, did so largely on an imitative and emulative basis, rather than by invention and innovation. Time and again the story is one of borrowing ideas from the larger world, especially England’.⁹ That perhaps does less than justice to some of her own evidence: Scots were, for example, in the forefront of the ragged schools movement, and in the formation of the YMCA and the Boys’ Brigade. Nevertheless, the point remains that the English and Scots broadly thought in the same way about philanthropy and created institutions that bear a remarkable similarity. Moreover, Scottish writing about philanthropy, for example that of Adam Smith and Thomas Chalmers, was influential in England, suggesting that at this level, too, there was considerable common ground between the two countries. Welsh philanthropy has received less attention than English or Scottish. It had its own distinctive features, largely dependent on environment. In Cardiff, for example, growing from small beginnings and heavily influenced by the ownership of much of its land by the Scottish Marquis of Bute, philanthropy was highly dependent on donations from the Bute Estate and there was less evidence of the strong middle-class influence that was to be found in a city such as Bristol, the two separated only by the mouth of the Severn river.¹⁰ There is nothing, however, to suggest that the Welsh had a substantially different view of and attitude towards philanthropy than the English or Scots. This book, then, encompasses Britain, even though, if we give literal credence to contemporary writings, some of it seems to be about England alone.

British philanthropy reached out beyond the shores of Great Britain. The British saw themselves as the most philanthropic nation in the world and an

important element in their sense of themselves was their global role. Take three examples. First, missionary societies established themselves overseas from the 1790s. By 1900 there were about 10,000 British missionaries at work in the world, the largest number of them in the China Inland Mission.¹¹ Second, solutions to what was seen as a problem of surplus children from the 1820s onwards were often thought to lie in transporting the children to supposedly healthier environments in South Africa, Canada and later Australia, a policy continued into the 1960s.¹² Third, anti-slavery campaigns ensured that philanthropy remained in the public eye for decades after the abolition of slavery in British possessions in 1833. All these forms of philanthropy had their cheerleaders, but also critics. In all three philanthropy's reputation was at stake.

Less contentious were the connections that British philanthropists established and maintained with their counterparts in other countries. In the eighteenth century strong links between British and American philanthropists survived the trauma of the American Revolution. In opposition to the British Empire, an 'empire of humanity', Enlightenment-inspired, and sustained by correspondence, publications and visits, was made up of a network of like-minded reformers on both sides of the Atlantic. Prison reform was an abiding common concern.¹³ These international links were taken a step further after the Napoleonic Wars when 'philanthropic tourism' spread: philanthropists crossed national borders to visit institutions for reform that seemed to promise a solution to pervasive social problems, particularly those for children. Agrarian colonies, for example, originating in the Netherlands and Switzerland, spread to Germany and Belgium, to find their most famous exemplar, Mettray, in France in 1839. Matthew Davenport-Hill described how 'No Mahomedan ... believes more devoutly in the efficacy of a pilgrimage to Mecca, than I do in one to Mettray'.¹⁴

Links of this kind were sustained and grew throughout the nineteenth century. In the late 1880s Jane Addams visited Toynbee Hall and took from it inspiration for Hull House in Chicago, as well as establishing a lifelong friendship with Henrietta Barnett, a prominent British philanthropist. In association with the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 'thousands of philanthropists from the United States and Europe convened for a weeklong International Congress of Charities, Correction, and Philanthropy', some of its proceedings published in *Women's Mission*, edited by Angela Burdett-Coutts.¹⁵

These international links suggest the possibility of a history of philanthropy that includes within its ambit both Europe and North America. Within such a broad framework there were, however, distinct national variations. French philanthropy, for example, like British, was Enlightenment and secular in origin; unlike British philanthropy, it maintained this emphasis through and beyond the years of revolution, the period when in Britain philanthropy was becoming associated with evangelicalism. Philanthropy, argues Arthur Gautier, is a 'historically contested concept' within nations; it is also one between them.¹⁶

Chapter 1 analyses the way the history of philanthropy has been written, highlighting the fact that making definitions at the outset of what

philanthropy is, or is not, shapes the narratives that follow. This is followed in Chapter 2 by a profile of philanthropy in public discourse, using data on mentions of philanthropy in periodicals and newspapers. Philanthropy on these measurements came into existence in the second half of the eighteenth century, rose sharply in the 1830s and 1840s and fell equally sharply in the very late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. It has then grown again since the late twentieth century. This data and other sources are then probed for content in chronological chapters, starting, in Chapter 3, with the genesis of a discourse relating to philanthropy in the second half of the eighteenth century. In Chapter 4 the focus is on John Howard, the eighteenth-century prototype of what a philanthropist should be. This is followed in Chapter 5 by examination of Howard's legacy through the nineteenth century, both as a philanthropist who could not be equalled and for the linkage that his life established between philanthropy and prison reform. Chapter 6 analyses the deep impact on philanthropy of the French Revolution and the conservative reaction to it in Britain. Chapter 7 covers the period from the end of the Napoleonic Wars up to mid-century, a period marked by a dominant association between philanthropy and evangelicalism, with many lauding philanthropy and others equally strongly opposed to it, not least for the alleged neglect of the poor at home in favour of slaves and others overseas. In the mid-Victorian period from 1850 to 1880, surveyed in Chapter 8, philanthropy took new forms in association with capitalism; it was praised as part of the identity of the nation, but continued to be subject to heavy criticism by political economists, by those who saw it as 'effeminate' and by others who disliked the 'professionalism' that seemed to provide jobs and salaries for those who worked for the voluntary organisations that made up the philanthropic world. The volume of criticism rose in the period 1880–1914 that is analysed in Chapter 9. Radical alternatives to philanthropy as it had been understood took shape, at Toynbee Hall and other settlements, and in the arguments of socialists and New Liberals that an increased role for the state was essential. In the century since the First World War, the subject of Chapter 10, philanthropy was first in danger of being overtaken by a new language centered on citizenship, democracy and volunteering, and then made an unanticipated revival in the shape of a 'new philanthropy' built on new wealth. The Conclusion stresses the extent to which the philanthropy of the Victorian age was unashamedly political in the causes it adopted and was consequently deeply implicated in the public discourse of the age. For most of the twentieth century it carried too much baggage to be resuscitated and quietly dropped out of public discourse and concern. Its revival was closely linked to the rise of neoliberalism. The book closes by considering the implications of the findings, particularly the level of criticism, and pointing to how the world leadership of philanthropy passed from Britain to the United States in the late nineteenth century. Philanthropy there in the twenty-first century raises controversial issues, some of which are equally evident in Britain.

Notes

- 1 *The Times*, 12 May 1914.
- 2 White Paper on Giving, 2011, CM. 8084, p. 20.
- 3 D. Owen, *English Philanthropy 1660–1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 469. For the eighteenth-century, B. Rodgers, *Cloak of Charity: Studies in Eighteenth-Century Philanthropy* (London: Methuen, 1949), p. 3.
- 4 *The Works of John Dryden*, Vol. XX (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1989), p. 21.
- 5 Owen, *English Philanthropy*, pp. 527–53.
- 6 *The Economist*, 29 July 2014.
- 7 A. Howkins, ‘The discovery of rural England’, and H. Cunningham, ‘The Conservative party and patriotism’, in R. Colls and P. Dodd (eds), *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880–1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 62–88, 283–307, quoting Rosebery, p. 294; D. Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion, 1998).
- 8 M. Smitley, *The Feminine Public Sphere: Middle-Class Women in Civic Life in Scotland, c. 1870–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).
- 9 O. Checkland, *Philanthropy in Victorian Scotland: Social Welfare and the Voluntary Principle* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1980), p. 332.
- 10 N. Evans, ‘Urbanisation, elite attitudes and philanthropy: Cardiff, 1850–1914’, *International Review of Social History*, 27 (1982), 290–323.
- 11 A. Porter, ‘Religion, missionary enthusiasm, and empire’, in A. Porter (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol. III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 222–46.
- 12 J. Parr, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1879–1924* (London: Croom Helm, 1980); P. Bean and J. Melville, *Lost Children of the Empire: The Untold Story of Britain’s Child Migrants* (London: Hyman, 1989).
- 13 A. B. Moniz, *From Empire to Humanity: The American Revolution and the Origins of Humanitarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); K. Lloyd and C. Burgoyne, ‘The evolution of a transatlantic debate on penal reform, 1780–1830’, in H. Cunningham and J. Innes (eds), *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform: From the 1690s to 1850* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 208–27.
- 14 J. J. H. Dekker, ‘Transforming the nation and the child: Philanthropy in the Netherlands, Belgium, France and England, c. 1780–c. 1850’, in Cunningham and Innes (eds), *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform*, pp. 130–47.
- 15 S. R. Robbins, ‘Sustaining gendered philanthropy through transatlantic friendship: Jane Addams, Henrietta Barnett, and writing for reciprocal mentoring’, pp. 211–35, and F. Q. Christianson and L. Thorne-Murphy, ‘Introduction: Writing philanthropy in the United States and Britain’, in F. Q. Christianson, and L. Thorne-Murphy (eds), *Philanthropic Discourse in Anglo-American Literature, 1850–1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), pp. 1–3.
- 16 A. Gautier, ‘Historically contested concepts: A conceptual history of philanthropy in France, 1712–1914’, *Theory & Society*, 48 (2019), 95–129.