REVISITING THE ROOTS OF VOLUNTARY ACTION

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Introduction

The most important reason for setting up the Voluntary Action History Society in 1991 was the concern felt by its founders that people who worked in and with voluntary organisations - and those who studied them - were remarkably uninterested in the history of voluntary action. It would be encouraging to report that, since then, the work of the VAHS has been a major influence for change but it remains only too true that, while those who lead individual organisations might dip into their records to provide selected images, incidents and personalities with which to add sparkle to their promotional and fund-raising materials, very few of them have made serious attempts to understand the concerns and the external forces that have shaped both their founding mission and the ways in which it has been adapted to changing circumstances. And, from a wider perspective, discussion of the growing role to be played by voluntary agencies in the public and social policy arena has been largely uninformed by any understanding of the historical experience which has shaped today's institutions and relationships and any lessons from the past have been left unlearned. As a result there seems 'to be little doubt that a lack of understanding of past experience represents a serious gap in the armoury of the policy-maker and the social analyst as well as voluntary sector leaders' (Rochester et al, 2011; 4).

This regrettable reality provides some of the context for today's paper but it is not its focus. Instead I hope to move the conversation on from the continuing struggle to interest those involved in voluntary action in its past to raise some questions about the way in which we discuss that history; in other words what kind of historical account should we be trying to put in the hands of those who practise voluntary action?

In order to pursue this discussion the paper will argue that there is a serious problem with the nature of the historical material that is available to us which provides only part of the story; conventional accounts of the development over time of voluntary organisations and volunteering are incomplete. It will then suggest ways in which we might develop a more inclusive and comprehensive view of the roots of voluntary action and the development of its activities, institutions and role in the wider society. And the paper will conclude by

attempting to tease out some of the implications for policy and practice – as well as further research of a more rounded view of the history of voluntary action.

Existing Accounts of Voluntary Action History

The mid 1990s saw the publication of two attempts to provide an overview of the voluntary sector's characteristics, role and institutions. The first of these is a collection edited by Justin Davis Smith, myself and Rodney Hedley (the founders of VAHS) entitled *An Introduction to the Voluntary Sector* (Davis Smith *et al*, 1995). Davis Smith's contribution to this book was an account of *the voluntary tradition; philanthropy and self-help* which covers the history of voluntary action up until 1945. The second book is Kendall and Knapp's *The Voluntary Sector in the UK* which reported on the findings of the British leg of the Johns Hopkins transnational programme of mapping the nonprofit sector (Kendall and Knapp, 1996). This includes a chapter on the *History of the Voluntary Sector* written by Marilyn Taylor and Jeremy Kendall.

Clearly it would be unreasonable to expect a comprehensive review of five hundred years of voluntary action in a single chapter and, order to cut his task down to size Davis Smith takes his cue from Beveridge (1948) and focuses on the 'division … between the two main impulses of voluntary action: philanthropy and mutual aid' (Davis Smith, 1995: 10). This enables him to avoid focusing – as earlier writers tended to – exclusively on the history of philanthropy. [As a postgraduate student of the voluntary sector in 1986 I attended a lecture by a highly regarded social historian who discussed the sector's history entirely in terms of philanthropy.] Davis Smith does not, however, manage to give anything like equal attention to his two themes; his account of mutual aid occupies less than a third of the space devoted to philanthropy. For their part, Taylor and Kendall also give much less attention to mutual than to the philanthropic impulse. Both chapters also focus on social welfare (and more especially the relief of poverty) and the changing relationship between voluntary action and the state – what Beveridge described as a 'moving frontier'.

Neither chapter makes the claim that philanthropy and mutual aid are the only themes worthy of study. Davis Smith (p15) argues that the 'rich tradition of voluntary activity concerned with campaigning and political protest' seen during the 'golden age' of the late nineteenth century makes a good case 'for extending Beveridge's simple two-fold distinction … and including campaigning activity as a third element in its own right' but he has no space to explore this in any depth. Taylor and Kendall go further: they refer to the 'growth of more radical middle- and working class organizations pushing for electoral reform' at the end of the eighteenth century (p 39); 'an explosion of recreational activities' in response to growing leisure time in the nineteenth century (p 44); the flowering of new campaigning organisations in the 1950s and 1960s (pp 55-56); and the attention paid to community development in the 1960s and 1970s (p57). Again, their treatment of these activities is rather cursory and hardly justifies their concluding remarks that voluntary action has 'played a major role in change; that 'it has been a channel for dissent'; and that it has been 'a way for groups excluded from political and economic power to gain a stake in society' (p 60).

The reason for using these two chapters as my starting point is not to criticise their authors for sins of omission but to throw some light on the state of the historiography of voluntary action on which they drew and which I fear has not moved on very far since these accounts were written. Nor am I questioning the value of studying the philanthropic and mutual aid elements of voluntary action history. I will briefly sketch out some of the key lessons from this orthodox account of voluntary action past before turning my attention to what I regard as the neglected ingredients in this history – including themes that were flagged up but not discussed in any depth in the two chapters.

The Impulse from Above

The history of philanthropy is the by far the most prominent element of voluntary action history and the philanthropic perspective still plays a large part in contemporary discussions of voluntary action. Much – perhaps too much – of our history is devoted to manifestations of what Beveridge (1948; 93) characterised as 'social conscience, the feeling that makes men who are materially comfortable, mentally uncomfortable as long as their neighbours are materially uncomfortable'. And a great deal of our thinking about charitable giving and volunteering is based on this perspective.

I do not, of course, have the space in this paper to present an adequate account of the role of philanthropy in the history of voluntary action but I can identify some of the key developments that have helped to shape the contemporary landscape. The Elizabethan response to the economic and social upheaval of the sixteenth century gave us a new organisational form in the shape of the charitable trust; laid the foundations for our legal definition of charity; and introduced a system of regulation by Charity Commissioners appointed by government. A second flowering of the philanthropic impulse – in the second half of the nineteenth century – can also be seen as the product of major economic and social change. Its key achievement was the development of the associational charity which provided the template for the voluntary agencies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The associational charity – made up of a number of philanthropists and committed to raising funds – had emerged in the eighteenth century and became the key vehicle for nineteenth century philanthropy taking its place alongside and ahead of the older form of the charitable trust endowed by a single philanthropist and concerned with spending the income from an endowment. The new charitable form also developed a separation between those who provided the funds and directed its activities and those who carried out the work of the organisation. They divided along gender lines: very few women were involved as members of the governing bodies of nineteenth century charities but their voluntary workforce was almost entirely female.

The late nineteenth century also witnessed the development of the first attempts to co-ordinate the work of voluntary organisations and the establishment of the precursors of what are now described as 'infrastructure' bodies. The first of these – the Charities Organisation Society founded in 1869 – was an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to rationalise the activities of charities that had grown in an uneven and random fashion so

that the availability of assistance was imperfectly matched with social need; there was a considerable overlap of activities; and resources were being wasted. It was succeeded by new form of local co-ordinating organisation that came to be called Councils of Social Service sprang up across Britain accompanied by the establishment (in 1919) of a National Council of Social Service (these were later to become Councils of Voluntary Service or CVSs and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations or NCVO). These new bodies embraced what was called the 'new philanthropy', an approach which emphasised 'a new technique of co-operation between statutory and voluntary services' (Macadam, 1934; 11) rather than the idea of 'separate spheres' promoted by the COS.

The Impulse from Below

Beveridge (1948; 93) characterised mutual aid or the impulse from below as 'a sense of one's own need for security against misfortune, and realisation that, since one's fellows have the same need, by undertaking to help one another all may help themselves'. While the historical roots of mutual aid are at least as deep as those of philanthropy, comparatively little is known about manifestations of the 'impulse from below' until the later middle ages and, subsequently, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Self-help in the middle ages took three major forms. The first of these as found in the craft guilds and livery companies that emerged in the 14th century and which provided support and help to their members who fell on hard times and might also take responsibility for meeting wider social need by, for example, the provision of almshouses (Taylor and Kendall, 1996). The second medieval form of mutual aid was found in the religious fraternities whose main function was to offer prayers for the dead but which also provided food and shelter for members in need. (Davis Smith, 1995). A third aspect of mutual aid in the medieval period which has received very little attention was the practice of organising 'church ales' and 'help-ales' for which beer was specially brewed as means of raising money for repairs to the parish church in the first case and the relief of poverty in the second instance (Clark, 2000).

Very little of the medieval approach to self-help survived the sixteenth century. The fraternities were swept away with the monasteries and the chantries under Henry VIII (Davis Smith, 1995) and the help-ales gave way to the Elizabethan institution of poor relief (and the growing disapproval and distrust of the associated carnival atmosphere) (Rochester, 2008). On the other hand, it has been suggested that 'the legacy of the guilds, with their emphasis on mutual support and democratic control, lived on and was to re-emerge with the development of the friendly society movement in the late eighteenth century' (Davis Smith, 1995: 29).

At their peak in the late nineteenth century the friendly societies rivalled the importance of the philanthropic associations of their time. The first societies were established in the late seventeenth century as a means of providing insurance for their members against loss of earnings during times of ill health and meeting the costs of their funerals. They were local, independent and quite small scale organisations with a typical membership of about a hundred which met once a month usually at a local public house to collect members'

contributions. By 1801 it has been estimated that there were about 7,200 societies with a total membership of more than 700,00 (Gosden, 1974; 12) a figure that had risen to more than four million by 1872. While the number of independent local societies continued to grow during the nineteenth century they were overtaken by the 'affiliated orders' – national federated bodies that were seen as providing a more robust and 'professional' set of arrangements. Despite these advantages, however, the affiliated orders came under increasing pressure from the demands of their members and competition from commercial enterprises. In the short run, the friendly societies began to move away from their roots in mutual aid and, in the longer run, were supplanted by the development of government measures to provide social security (Taylor and Kendall, 1996).
The decline and fall of the friendly societies did not, however, bring to an end the role of mutual aid as a feature of voluntary action. Many of the organisations founded in the wake of the establishment of a post war welfare state have their roots in the mutual aid tradition. The parents of children with learning disabilities came together to form Mencap; single parents set up local Gingerbread groups; relatives of people with dementia established the Alzheimers Disease Society; and the pre-school playgroups movement promoted opportunities for play among young children that actively involved their mothers in providing them. And, at the same time, there has been a proliferation of unaffiliated local groups of people with shared health and social problems while 'twelve step' groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous have also became a feature of the landscape of voluntary action (Davis Smith, 1995; Wann, 1992).

The Moving Frontier

The third focus of the conventional view of voluntary action history is the relationship between the state and voluntary organisations. Again, this is a vast subject in its own right and I can only draw attention to what seem to me to be some key issues. In the first place we need to guard against the tendency to slip into a Whiggish view in which an inadequate voluntary response to social need is replaced by the inexorable growth of state provision. The reality was altogether less coherent and clear-cut; boundaries and relationships 'always contained elements of ambiguity and tension' (Davis Smith, 1995: 18). Nonetheless historians have discerned three broad models of relationships between voluntarism and the state in the period 1830-1979.

1. For most, if not all, of the 19th Century voluntary action played the major role in social welfare; the relief of poverty was addressed by the philanthropy of charitable trusts and the new charitable associations on the one hand and friendly societies on the other while voluntary action also provided social housing; education; and healthcare (Harris, 2010). State provision tended to be seen as residual.

2. At the end of the 19th and the early years of the 20th Century, there were important developments in the state's responsibilities for welfare services and a change of attitude towards them on the part of some elements of the voluntary sphere. These changes challenged voluntary organisations to reconsider their role in the provision of welfare and led to the development of institutions that not only took on the role of co-

ordinating and supporting voluntary action but also promoted mutually supportive links between the statutory and voluntary sectors.

3. The post war welfare settlement gave the major role and the overall responsibility for social welfare to the state. The creation of the welfare state did not, however, lead to the marginalisation of voluntary action expected by many at the time. While the services and expertise of a number of established organisations remained indispensable in the new context new bodies had been conceived during the war and afterwards in response to heightened expectations which had not been met by the statutory services (Davis Smith, 1995).

The survival and further growth of voluntary action after the formation of the welfare state strongly suggests that the state and voluntarism do not compete for the same space. Instead, they are and have been interrelated in an almost symbiotic relationship. This was true even in the 19th Century when voluntary action and public provision were, it has been widely suggested, taking place in 'separate spheres'. In fact, they were interconnected on at least two levels – the personal and the financial. In the first place, 'Those who sat as Poor Law Guardians would very often be the same people who sat on the committees which controlled schools, hospitals and dispensaries and the other varied forms of charitable organisations; they would often also be among those who took the lead in sponsoring local voluntary efforts in times of disaster or communal celebration' (McCord, 1976 quoted in Harris, 2004; 29). And ' the two sectors supported each other by cross-funding'. Money raised by endowed charities was used to supplement the poor rates while local authorities (Town Councils and Boards of Guardians) made donations from public funds to charitable organisation and subscribed to local hospitals to secure treatment for sick paupers (Harris, 2004; 29).

Perhaps the most significant change in the relationship took place not in the 1940s but in the early years of the twentieth century. Alison Penn (2011) has argued that the reforms of the 1906-11 Lloyd George administration added up to more than the incursion of the state into what had been the territory of voluntarism: they also had a major impact on the ways in which voluntary action was organised. In the first place voluntary organisations felt the need to establish a national presence in order to influence the new governmental actors on the social policy stage. And, secondly, they followed the state in adopting a 'business' model of organisation. Industrial society had created the large 'firm' - a formally organised, strictly hierarchical and increasingly bureaucratic form. This became the organisational template for the new state agencies that began to take shape in the inter war period and then became the norm for the voluntary organisations with which the state was increasingly allied.

Penn argues that philanthropic charities were best able to adapt themselves to meet this template while the mutual aid groups were less susceptible to remaking themselves in the image of the firm. Similarly, those organised as a unitary body or with high degrees of control exercised by the central or national body over its branches were at an advantage over looser federations where local units had a great deal of autonomy on the one hand and the typically small, locally based friendly societies on the other. Mutual aid organisations were displaced and philanthropic institutions remade by the forces of state-sponsored

isomorphism. She refers to these processes as the 'metamorphosis of philanthropy' (Penn, 2011; 22) and the 'displacement of mutual aid' (*ibid.*; 26).

Some tentative conclusions at this stage

What I have called the conventional approach to voluntary action history has provided us with some important keys to understanding the nature of today's voluntary sector as it is conceived and understood and some of the processes that have helped to invent it. These include:

- The symbiotic nature of the relationship between the state and voluntarism and the perception that it is not a 'zero sum' game: the voluntary sector does not contract when the state assumes some of its functions and the retraction of the state is not a recipe for an enlarged role for voluntarism.

- The way in which philanthropy has become the central narrative for voluntary action while mutual aid has been marginalised;

- The continuing search for coordination and control of an anarchic set of organisations; and

- The dominance of the for-profit firm as the organisational model for voluntary action.

The 'Dark Matter' of Voluntary Action History

The invention of the modern day voluntary sector has been facilitated by – and has in turn helped to shape – the conventional historical narrative. And it has taken the form it has as a result of the neglect or exclusion of other important aspects of voluntary action history some if which were mentioned in the two chapters which provided my starting point but which were not pursued by their authors. The two key perspectives that will be presented in this part of the paper are:

- Voluntary action in pursuit of social change and social justice; and

- Voluntary action as conviviality and expressive behaviour.

Voluntary action in pursuit of social change and social justice

The conventional approach to the history of voluntary action focuses on efforts to 'relieve poverty' and ameliorate the condition of people in need of help rather than activities aimed at tackling the underlying causes and roots of inequality and social disadvantage. Literature on the historical involvement of voluntary organisations in campaigning and (non-party) political activities is scant and tends to use two kinds of lens. It is either seen as part of the story of the specific issue that is the subject of the campaign (such as electoral reform or

changes in the law) or more generally, discussed as part of the literature on social movements. There are important limitations on the value of studies of specific campaigns: they focus on the extent to which organisations influence change and succeed in their aims rather than on the character of the voluntary effort involved. And the usefulness of the literature on social movements is also limited. Empirical studies have been outweighed by 'theorising' about 'the features which distinguish social movements from other forms of political action' (Byrne, 1997; 12) and writers have shown little interest in history earlier than thirty or forty years ago when, they suggest, the modern social movement began to take shape.

Social movement theory does, however, offer a framework for discussing voluntary action as a means of pursuing social change and social justice which, in the process can add a new dimension to the definition of voluntary action as a whole. While there are many disagreements about the definition of social movements and the 'term has been used rather indiscriminately' (Byrne, 1997; 10) there is a fair degree of consensus about their key characteristics. These are:

- They are not in themselves formally organised but can be seen as 'networks of interaction, which may either include formal organisations or not' (Diani, 1992; quoted in Byrne, 1997).

- They are held together by shared values and have expressive rather than instrumental functions: 'they have beliefs and moral principles and they seek to persuade everyone – governments, parties, the general public, anyone who will listen – that these values are the right ones, but do not compete for political office' (Byrne, 1997; 13).

- They are 'outsiders' who challenge the existing situation and do so outside the conventional institutions of political society; and

- They employ a variety of tactics that include direct action and might involve breaking the law.

Some but not all voluntary organisations that are engaged in campaigning activities may be part of these networks of interaction - while others will not - and the degree and kind of involvement of those that are connected will vary greatly and may change over time.

The main focus of the literature treats social movements as a phenomenon of the second half of the twentieth century, taking place in advanced industrial societies and 'centred on students, women, environmentalists and peace activists' (Byrne, 1997: 26). But two authors have set the social movements of the contemporary world in historical context (Tilly, 2005) and located them in a longer tradition of 'contentious politics' (Tarrow, 1994). They place the origins of the social movement in the eighteenth century when the 'repertoire' of collective action was expanded from individual acts of resistance such as food riots and peasant revolts to include demonstrations, strikes, rallies and public meetings; contentious action ceased to be locally based and directed at specific concerns and began to address issues that affected many localities; and it was transformed from isolated and episodic

actions into concerted and sustained activity. These changes were made possible by the availability of widely accessible printed material and the new institutional framework provided by the development of clubs, societies and associations (Tarrow, 1994).

In the nineteenth century vigorous campaigning led to the abolition of slavery in 1833; the passage of the Reform Act in 1832; and the mobilisation of the massive national movement of the Chartists. The latter 'provided the seedbed and a template for the nineteenth century's major popular mobilizations' most notably the long campaign for women's suffrage' while some of its activists moved on to other causes such as 'temperance, cooperatives, local betterment programmes, or educational, land or property reform' (Tilly, 2004; 48). There is little discussion of this major activity in the social movement literature, however, which seems to be based on the idea that nothing of any importance happened before 1960.

Another insight into the campaigning role of voluntary action is provided by Crowson, Hilton and McKay (2009) who have invented a new category of voluntary organisation they call NGOs despite the fact that they are involved in national politics rather than international development. According to Crowson and his colleagues, these organisations are a consequence of the welfare settlement which followed the second world war when, in their view, the voluntary sector underwent a fundamental transformation; '(I)n place of service provision, the sector became more engaged with … the shaping of the broader socio-political agenda' *(Ibid*; 5). While few would accept their generalisation that voluntary agencies turned their attention away from service provision after 1945, Crowson, McKay and Hilton's argument that the coming of the welfare state provided the conditions for greater voluntary sector activity on the campaigning front is supported by the case studies presented in their book. These range over the territories of the major social movements – peace, women's issues and concern for the environment – and also include poverty; human rights; and drugs on the domestic front and international issues such as aid and development, fair trade and the anti-apartheid movement.

We have also seen a resurgence of locally-based contentious action in the twentieth century either loosely connected with wider movements – such as disability rights and environmental issues – or in completely autonomous forms. Studies in the history of campaigning at the community level are hard to find. The authors of a recently published 'short guide' to community development locate its main foundations of community development in the housing and planning field; '(T)he origins of the tenants' movement … lie in the early twentieth century with campaigns for social housing and rent strikes and the associations formed by tenants of the new local authority housing estates as the century progressed' (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2011; 28). A review of the first forty years of the Community Development Journal also reminds us that the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed an upsurge of activism at a local level: 'action groups protested at the closure of public services including hospitals and schools … and the action of squatter groups was becoming an increasing concern for local authorities' (Popple, 2006; 13).

Voluntary action as conviviality and expressive behaviour

I have argued in another paper (Rochester, 2008) that the impulse to conviviality was of similar importance to the development of voluntary action to that of philanthropy and mutual aid. Activities devoted to the enjoyment of festive company have a long history. Medieval England celebrated the great festivals of the church with the kind of festivity and dancing that has been described as 'carnival' until the Reformation suppressed such unruly and anarchic activities as a threat to good order (Ehrenreich, 2007). Conviviality, however, found new outlets in the associations and clubs that became such an important feature of social life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While many clubs aspired to the collective improvement of its members they gave at least equal weight to socialising which included 'drinking, feasting, singing and gambling' (Clark, 2000: 225).

Conviviality has had a long history as a close ally of mutual aid. Until the seventeenth century the cost of maintaining the local church or relieving poverty in the parish was met from the sale of food and specially brewed beer at 'church-ales' and 'help-ales'. For their part friendly societies provided more than insurance; part of the members' subscriptions was used to meet the cost of drink at their monthly meetings at a local inn and for an annual feast (Gosden, 1974). Both the Oddfellows and the Foresters (national 'affiliated orders') 'had developed from purely social clubs of the eighteenth century by adding to their traditional activities various financial benefits. In the process of doing this they had never abandoned their social functions' (*Ibid*: 48). Not surprisingly, there were concerns that the members' subscriptions would be spent on drink instead of mutual insurance and here many attempts to restrict the convivial activities of the societies after the passage of the friendly Societies Act in 1829. These, however, were 'the cause of many societies breaking up'. 'The critics failed to understand how vital a role the cheerful club evening played in attracting and holding members' (Gosden, 1974; 24).

At first sight, the philanthropic associational charities of the nineteenth century owe little or nothing to the convivial impulse. They were earnest undertakings carried out by respectable members of the Victorian middle and upper classes and aimed at addressing social ills including drunkenness. On closer inspection, however, they raised some of their funds by inviting potential donors to a handsome dinner; rewarded the efforts of their volunteer case workers and lady visitors with an annual social event (Prochaska, 1988); and, in the case of the settlements, included the provision of 'the means of recreation and enjoyment for the people in the poorer districts' (Briggs and Macartney, 1984; 9).

The working men's clubs which flourished in the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries represent another significant manifestation of conviviality which has been overlooked by many historians of voluntary action. By 1927 there were 2,500 of them affiliated to the Club and Institute Union (CIU) with a total membership of more than 900,000 (CIU, 1927; 1). In their case conviviality was not an ally to mutual aid or philanthropy but their primary purpose: 'the first aim and ideal of the Union is to secure for the workman a higher and wider level of happiness in his leisure hours and in his daily personal and civic life' (*ibid*.; 68).

The impulse to conviviality is close related to an involvement in recreational activities and the enjoyment of one's leisure time. For many people, involvement in voluntary action may be prompted by a desire to learn a new skill or gain knowledge often for its own sake rather

than for a given end; the impulse for self-expression; and a perceived need for recreation. This dimension is captured by Konrad Elsdon (1995) whose study of voluntary organisations encompassed:

> Not just those organisations which provide services to the people who need help, advice or care; it embraces all those … which people set up because they like to play football or sing, perform plays, garden, watch birds, study the heavens or dig up the past, engage in politics, worship or take part in Morris dancing.

Leisure-time, recreational and expressive activities have been the focus of a great deal of voluntary action since the late nineteenth century when 'For the employed classes, growing leisure time led to an explosion of recreational activities' (Taylor and Kendall, 1996: 45). They included philanthropic ventures designed to distract the working classes from the 'wrong' use of leisure but also clubs and associations run by their working class members and middle class societies that were the successors of the clubs of the eighteenth century. Some were national in scope, others were local and yet others were national federations of local branches or groups. Many of them were attached to religious denominations. Between them they catered for a wide range of leisure activities including: culture and the arts; education and self-improvement; physical activity and sports; and sociability and recreation.

Many leisure-promoting organisations were established in the later years of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth centuries and have survived until today despite the growth of commercial ventures and local government provision. Reviewing the period between the two world wars, Jones (1986; 6) pointed out that:

> Leisure goods and services provided by commercial enterprises, the State – at both national and local level – and voluntary organisations all expanded. In addition, earlier associational forms of group-created leisure survived and adapted to the new economic and social context.

This rich vein of voluntary activity has attached all too little attention. A seminar convened by the VAHS in May 2013 was based on the perception that historians of leisure did not tend to give detailed attention to the voluntary organisations that provided much of the recreational activities on which they focused, and those who studied the history of voluntary organisations rarely looked beyond the philanthropic charities and the mutual aid societies that embodied Beveridge's twin roots of voluntary action.

Does It Matter?

Clearly developing a more complete view of the history of voluntary action matters – or should matter – to historians; it is after all their job to get the story right. But the lessons are of more general interest and they have important implications for the theory and practice of voluntary action in the twenty-first century that recognises how narrow and unhelpful the idea of a 'voluntary sector' has become.

I suggest that a better grasp of its history enables us to see that:

- Philanthropy is not the only - or the primary reason - for involvement in voluntary action: as well as self-help and mutual aid people are just as likely to be motivated by a commitment to social change or social justice; by a desire for conviviality; or by a need to engage in recreational and expressive behaviours.

- It follows that voluntary organisations should not be viewed simply as a means of delivering services or in purely instrumental terms. People come together not just to achieve specific ends but also to express value and provide opportunities for socialising.

- The bureaucratic or corporate model of the private sector firm is not the only organisational form through which voluntary action is organised. The 'networks of interaction' of a social movement and their more or less organised component parts, the short-term local campaign groups, and the voluntary associations and clubs which are the sites of social and leisure-time activities need to take their place alongside the endowed charitable trusts, the voluntary agencies based on the associational charity form and organisational expressions of mutual aid.

- While the relationships of organisations in the service-providing area of the sector with the state may well be symbiotic, there are at least two other kinds of relationship between the state and voluntary action: campaigning organisations explicitly exist to challenge government and influence what it does and many other forms of voluntary action exist independently of government and have no explicit relationship with the state.

- The quest for co-ordination and rationalisation of voluntary action which has occupied the minds of government and self-appointed leaders of the voluntary sector is quixotic: the 'loose and baggy monster' of voluntary action is too anarchic and too diverse to be organised and controlled.

And, finally, we need to be cautious about characterising voluntary action as a whole. Voluntary organisations can be complex phenomena with their roots in more than one of the four broad 'impulses' sketched out in this paper. The relationship between their roots and the organisational forms they take may not be straightforward: campaigning organisations and recreational bodies, for example, may adopt the associational charity model, while organisations delivering social welfare services might be constituted as purely voluntary associations or mutual aid groups. Similarly, an organisation's interaction with government might not conform to type; recreational organisations might develop a campaigning role while some providers of social welfare might exist in isolation from the state. As well as trying to develop a more inclusive view of the roots of voluntary action, we need to be aware of the complex nature of the origins and development of each individual voluntary organisation.

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