

HISTORY

OF SOCIAL WORK

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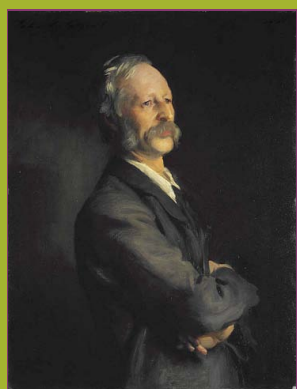
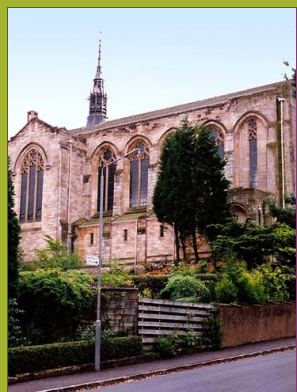
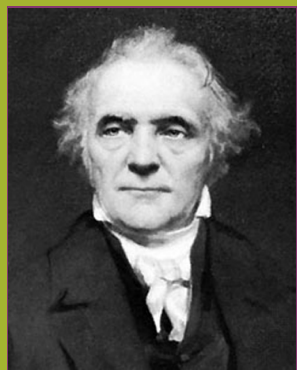
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1819 Thomas Chalmers

`To help the poor to help themselves`



Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) was born in Anstruther on the east coast of Scotland and trained as a Presbyterian preacher (Church of Scotland). He devoted much of his time to mathematics and became assistant to a professor at St Andrews (Scotland's first university). In 1803, he was ordained as minister the parish of Kilmarnock. After a severe illness, in 1815 he moved on to Glasgow where he became minister of the Tron Church. His reputation as preacher spread throughout the UK. It was in industrial Glasgow that he was confronted with severe poverty which he found deeply disturbing from his rural background. He started experimenting with the organizational structure of the parish, work that continued after September 1819 when he became minister of the church and parish of St John, also in Glasgow. He strongly dissuaded the poor in his parish to rely on the official poor relief organised by the city council, as he strongly opposed public assistance. In fact, he thought almost any kind of help was an disincentive to finding work and using one's own resources. Chalmers was convinced that local solidarity and mutual support in the neighbourhoods were significantly more effective than the alms given by the government. Those would only be an incentive to increasingly ask for more and hence erode the individuals own responsibility and efforts.

What was needed was an active link to the community that, according to Chalmers, would address problems through local solidarity. Included in the community, the poor could work and be modest while enlarging their own responsibility. Whenever financial help was needed, this should come from the religious community. Charity had to be preferred, as it generated altruism from the giver.

Chalmers' systematic mind led him to divide his parish into several districts (*proportions*) and to link one responsible person (*deacon*) to each of them. Very frequent home visits were to be made to residents. One of the deacons' tasks was to establish a friendly relationship with the poor and monitor their situation: material context, family ties, friendships and the like. This would be the basis for support and care. At the same time, Chalmers organised decent primary education and weekend schools where children received an extra portion of education, both secular and religious.

With these principles he translated one of his core concepts into practice: to help the poor to help themselves (which is remarkably similar to Octavia Hill's motto *Help without alms*). This was all supported by friendly visiting. The approach of Thomas Chalmers raised substantial interest, and influenced others such as Charles Loch (who established the English Charity Organisation Society), Joseph Tuckermann (founder of the Boston Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, 1835), [Mary Richmond](#) (who used it in her *Friendly visiting among the poor*, 1899). Chalmers' ideas were exported for instance to Germany (the Elberfelder model in Wupperthal, 1853) and to the Netherlands (the *liefdadigheid naar vermogen*, 1871).

To the present day, Chalmers' concepts are relevant to social work. Key elements of his approach can be found in community care and the current policy developments on [Big Society](#) in Britain. His criticism of welfare benefits is remarkably similar to much more recent criticism of social policy by Charles Murray.

Read more

- [Majonis, J. \(2004\), *T. Chalmers, C.S. Loch and M. E. Richmond's Development of Increasingly Secular, Interpersonal and Purposeful Helping Methods*. Currents \(open access journal\)](#)
- [Young, A. F., & Ashton, E. T. \(1956\), *British social work in the nineteenth century*. London: Routledge, especially p. 67-80](#)

Additional information



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The history of social work project is foremost a website.

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This initiative also exists in Dutch, where it covers the history of social work in the Netherlands, in Flanders, and internationally.

See www.canonsociaalwerk.eu

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Majonis, J. (2002), *C. S. Loch and M. Richmond's genesis of the social situation and social work*. *Journal of religion and spirituality in social work: social thought*, 57 - 74 (subscription needed to access full text)

Links

- [Wikipedia on Thomas Chalmers](#)

Google Earth

- [St John Renfield's church in Glasgow](#)

(this option only works if Google Earth software has been installed on this computer)



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