CHAPTER 3

THE HISTORY OF SOCIAL WORK

The Development of a Profession

The systematic giving of charity to the poor coincides, more or less, with the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution and, in particular, with the consolidation of the wage-labour system. The immediate antecedents of Anglo-Canadian social work can be found in such socio-economic changes in Britain and the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Broadly speaking, relief in the nineteenth century was based on the poorhouse or workhouse. In the twentieth century, it shifted to the provision of food and other necessities to people in need in their own homes, and later to the provision of cash. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, the state came to play an increasingly important role. Following World War II, Canada’s economic surplus grew, as did the expectation that the state would ensure the economic and social security of its citizens. As state provision of social welfare expanded, so did the social work profession itself.

PHASE 1: The Era of Moral Reform—Pre-1890

The pre-industrial phase of the development of social work includes the period from the formation of Canada up to the 1890s. Private charities developed during this time, offering material relief and lessons in moral ethics. Many were explicitly associated with religious organizations, and it was religiously motivated individuals working through these organizations who became the early social workers. This period saw the rise of the charity movement, epitomized by the Charity Organisation Society (COS). The roots of casework and the notion of helping people adjust to their environment can be traced to the COS.

The response to urban poverty in Canada during this phase was the result of two types of religious motivation. The explanation by James Leiby of the development of charitable activity in the United States provides some insight into similar development in English Canada as well:

The early institutional responses to urban poverty came from people who had religious interests and motives. There were two broad types. One was native, Protestant, and missionary. It expressed a concern of pious and rather well-established people for those whom they perceived as strangers and outsiders (and of course unchurched). The other type developed among the immigrant groups as forms of mutual aid and solidarity in a threatening environment (Leiby 1978, 75).

These two religious thrusts underlie the subsequent history of divergent views of social work. The missionary motive led to the COS and, ultimately, to social casework. The solidarity motive led to initiatives such as the settlement house movement and, later, community work and social justice.

Early Charity Organization: The Roots of Social Work

In the nineteenth century, public assistance in English Canada was guided largely by the example of England. Early English legislation, the Poor Laws, required local parishes to provide relief to the deserving poor (those who were elderly, ill, or disabled). Parishes were administrative districts organized by the Church of England. Each had a local council that was responsible for assistance to the poor, known as poor relief. The Poor Law of 1601 and its reform in 1832 carefully distinguished two types of indoor relief: one for the elderly and sick who could receive relief in almshouses or poorhouses, and one for the able-bodied poor who were made to work for relief in workhouses, the purpose of which was to make public assistance cruel and demeaning.

Early in the nineteenth century, “relief,” where it was available, was provided primarily by private philanthropic societies founded in the territories that became Canada. Organizations such as the Society for...