

Review Essay: Ethnography and Understanding Homelessness

Maeve McGlenaghan (2020)

No Fixed Abode: Life and death among the UK's Forgotten Homeless

London: Picador, pp.361

Paul Moran & Frances Atherton (2019)

The Philosophy of Homelessness: Barely Being

London: Routledge, pp.184

Introduction

No Fixed Abode and *The Philosophy of Homelessness* are impressive and innovative additions to the established body of ethnographic work on homelessness. Both give voice to people experiencing homelessness, narrating frank and revealing individual accounts of life experiences. There is much regret and some hope in these accounts, but mostly it is resignation. For 18 months Maeve McGlenaghan, an investigative journalist, traversed the UK – from Belfast to Glasgow to London to Brighton – gathering firsthand information. As the subtitle of her book indicates, her research, at least initially, was driven as much by a concern with the deaths of homeless people as with their lives: when, where, and how many died, what were their back-stories, the entanglements of their lives that led to their often premature death, or – in too many cases – suicide? Paul Moran and Frances Atherton spent five years researching the homeless communities of Chester, an historic, touristic town with a population of c. 80 000, located in the northwest of England, 16 miles south of Liverpool. They focused on teasing out individual life courses and giving expression to personal experiences, hopes, and disappointments; and in a wholly innovative approach they seek an understanding of homeless behaviour and experience in the work of philosophers (more on this later).

Telling 'Practice Stories' and Ethnographic Method

In the Author's Notes which preface her book, McClenaghan states without elaboration or explanation, 'This is a work of non-fiction' (p. xi).¹ In making this declaration, McClenaghan and the publishers ensure that there is no obfuscation regarding the deplorable life and death experiences she documents; these are real events, not the invention of a novelist's imagination. McClenaghan's literary style is characterised by a first-person narrative that powerfully conveys the intimacy and immediacy of the personal 'stories' she records. 'Story-telling' (as opposed to 'telling-stories' i.e., fabrication) has a long and venerable history in ethnography. James Clifford (1986), along with many scholars before and after (e.g. Geertz, 1988; Heikkilä, 2020; Narayan, 1999), was comparatively relaxed about the use of 'ethnographic fiction': the use of 'literary techniques to craft conventional ethnographic materials... into a compelling story' (Jacobson and Larsen, 2014, p.179).² For McClenaghan, her investigation 'was a project to get to the truth and to tell stories that were being forgotten – or worse ignored' (p.338). To the best of my recollection, the word 'ethnography' never appears in McClenaghan's book (there is no index), yet evidently, she is up to date with modern ethnographic practice. Indeed, in a concluding chapter (pp.364-368), she details her methodological practices re participant observation: informed consent, reflexivity, anonymity, and transparency; thereby formally demonstrating her conformity to the best ethnographic traditions (see Hoolachan, 2016).

Moran and Atherton also employ first person story telling to great effect. Their lengthy 3-5-year immersion in the space and places of Chester's homeless communities afforded them privileged insight and familiarity with the quotidian routines of many of Chester's homeless people, allowing them to develop trusted and close friendships. As a consequence, Moran and Atherton's stories often have a depth which rivals those of McClenaghan whose homeless contacts were, as a consequence of her itinerant fieldwork, generally more purposeful and fleeting. In contrast with McClenaghan's concern to demonstrate her ethnographic *bono fides*, Moran and Atherton deploy their ethnography with a surety that comes with familiarity, they are academics well versed in this methodology. The evidence of their expertise in this regard is apparent throughout their book.

¹ Matthew Desmond (2016, p. xi) makes the same declaration at the beginning of his acclaimed book *Evicted*, an account of poverty and homelessness in the USA that closely resembles *No Fixed Abode* in approach and content.

² It is a moot point as to whether the fictional accounts of homelessness in say William Kennedy's 1983 novel *Ironweed* or John Berger's 1998 *King: A Street Story* are any less evocative and 'true-to-life'. Stories are a form of knowledge, they often have as much potential to inform and instruct as many more academic, non-fictional ethnographic accounts.

There is a further sense in which the ethnography on display is sound in that the authors of both books demonstrate a keen sense of 'context'. There is an interpretative ethnography that complies with Clifford Geertz's (1973) concept of 'thick description' in that their writing is sensitive to the subjectivities of the intentions and motivations of the homeless people participating in their research. Additionally, McClenaghan, Moran, and Atherton have a tenable claim to compliance with what O'Reilly (2015) has labelled 'practice stories'.³

Practice stories pay attention to people's feelings and emotions, their experiences, and their free choices, but also to the wider constraints and opportunities within which they act. More than that, practice stories take account of how these different features of social life interact, and thereby how structures... get produced or reproduced (O'Reilly, 2015, pp.15-16).

For O'Reilly, practice stories are the 'the central emerging trend' in ethnography. In assembling such stories ethnographers not only provide remarkable accounts of individual and community life, but also engage with the perennial debate regarding the agency-vs-structure dualism; a debate that has rumbled on in social sciences over the past several decades.⁴ Practice stories set ambitious and encompassing targets. The sensitivity of all three authors to 'context'- to the problematic interpretation of agency/structure intersections – are palpable and clear. McClenaghan, for example, demonstrates an acute awareness of the failures of successive UK governments in dealing with homelessness. Indeed Leilani Farha, a UN special rapporteur on adequate housing, is full of praise in her endorsement of *No Fixed Abode*:

'[while] (t)elling rich and varied personal stories of the path to homelessness... [McClenaghan]... keeps a steady gaze on the societal structures and government policies that make homelessness part of the UK's socio-economic fabric'. (copied from the back cover of the book)

Following the publication of *No Fixed Abode*, McClenaghan recalls,

While researching the book I was often shocked at just how fragile the system is, how easy it is to fall through the net. Budget cuts to mental health services, and substance abuse treatment programmes, the freeze on housing benefits, the hostile immigration environment and spiralling private rents have all culminated in a perfect storm, leading inevitably to the homelessness crisis that we see today (McClenaghan, 2020).

³ Practice stories are a formulation derived in part from Bourdieu's (1972) work on practice theory. Friedrich Engels' (1987) *Condition of the working class in England 1844* – described as an 'ethnography of the proletariat'- is sometimes cited as a precursor (see Magubane, 1985).

⁴ See also Wacquant (2002) and Pleace (2016) for consideration of these issues in homelessness studies.

Moran and Atherton are similarly categorical,

...while the daily events of the homeless people that populate this work are arresting enough in themselves, it is their implications, their ontological and political implications that are most shocking and telling about the brutal and parlous state of contemporary first world society and the growing number of marginalised and dispossessed people it begets (p.x).⁵

These convictions pervade the story telling of all three authors.

No Fixed Abode: Life and Death Among the UK's Forgotten Homeless

No Fixed Abode is the product of nearly three years of research. Through the stories of those living homeless, their families and the people working to support them, the book charts how the safety net we expect to save us all fails time after time (McClenaghan, 2020).

Dying homeless

McClenaghan's interest in homelessness had already been piqued by news reports of alarming increases in homelessness in London and by her own encounters with people experiencing street homelessness on her daily commute to work, when in the winter of 2017 she read of the death of 'Tony' (a pseudonym) from exposure in the garden of the house from which he had been evicted a few months previously. As a campaigning journalist of some repute,⁶ McClenaghan's reporter instincts homed in on the question, how many people were dying homeless in the UK and were their numbers increasing (McClenaghan, 2020)? After several weeks of research McClenaghan realised what many already knew, that there was no central official facility systematically recording the deaths of people experiencing homelessness. Shocked and incredulous, she set about constructing her own database. With the help of Bureau Local – an arm of the London based Bureau of Investigative Journalism – McClenaghan set up the 'Dying Homeless' project. Between October 2017 and March 2019, Dying Homeless documented the deaths of 800 homeless people, recording (when known) the name, age, and gender, as well as the location and circumstances of each death (Bureau Local, n.d.).

⁵ Extracted from the *Foreword* which, in departure from tradition, is written by the authors themselves.

⁶ McClenaghan has an impressive journalistic reputation: <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/profile/maevemcclenaghan>

Paralleling the collection of data, 180 articles were published in a variety of newspapers and other media (Bureau Local, 2020). Alerted to her project, the ONS (the UK's Organisation for National Statistics) made contact. Chapter 7 records the meeting between the ONS statistician responsible for death records and McClenaghan. The statistician was acutely aware of the lack of systematic recording of homeless deaths and had been working on ideas for their official counting for some time; this was a meeting of the minds. Within a matter of months of this meeting, the ONS produced its first experimental⁷ data for England and Wales on the deaths of people experiencing homelessness between 2013 and 2017 (ONS, 2018); shortly afterwards the NRS (National Records of Scotland) produced similar data for Scotland (NRS, 2020).⁸ Since then, updated estimates for 2018 and 2019 have been published (ONS, 2020; NRS, 2021). The advisory contribution of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (i.e., McClenaghan) is prominently acknowledged by the ONS. The experimental data produced by the ONS and NRS provides a provisional answer to the question McClenaghan posed at the beginning of her research. Year on year, there are more people living on the streets (an estimated 169% national increase, 2010-18), more people are dying homeless (a 7% increase in England and Wales, 2018-19), and their proportion has been increasing (6.5% increase in deaths per million, 2013-19).

At the conclusion of her research in 2019, McClenaghan handed her Dying Homeless database of 800 records to the London based Museum of Homelessness. The Museum has embraced the spirit of McClenaghan's project and continues her work. Data published on the Museum's website takes the form of a virtual memorial wall on which the name, date of death, and age at death for each homeless person is displayed. Of the 2 466 deaths documented at the time of writing this review, 1 626 were unnamed and 70 were recorded as anonymous, together they accounted for 69% of the total.⁹

*Homeless in Britain*¹⁰

By her own admission, McClenaghan had little knowledge of the history or causes of homelessness when she embarked on her study. Her 18-month investigation of homelessness in Britain, sparked by her Dying Homeless project, changed that. Her ethnographic fieldwork encompassed a meticulous search of local newspaper

⁷ ONS employs capture-recapture stochastic modelling using death certificate data – see ONS, 2018 for details; the methodology is undergoing evaluation and awaits verification.

⁸ At the time of writing the Northern Ireland Housing Executive had not produced equivalents.

⁹ Recently the Guardian newspaper has emulated the Museum in publishing its own *Tributes to Homeless People who have Died*: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2019/dec/20/your-tributes-to-homeless-people-who-have-died>

¹⁰ McClenaghan uses 'Britain' interchangeably with 'UK', reflecting common parlance.

reports and archive material, attending funerals and court proceedings, checking coroner, police, and medical records together with freedom of information requests, interviews and conversations with people experiencing homelessness and their families, visiting squats, shadowing support workers, and taking part in an overnight count of people experiencing street homelessness (in Islington, London). Shaping this evidence into a coherent account, McClenaghan has produced an unrivalled compendium of frequently tragic, though occasionally heartening, narratives recounting the lives and deaths of people experiencing homelessness in twenty-first century Britain -- a portrait of Britain unknown to many, ignored by others, and contested by some.

McClenaghan's portrayal of homelessness captures the complexities and 'messiness' (McClenaghan, 2021) of the day to day lives of homeless people whether rough sleeping, in overcrowded temporary accommodation, in communal shelters or in insecure squats, where the routines of survival (food, ablutions, sleep, security) can be disrupted by mental malaise (depression, poor self-esteem, fear, disorientation) and the impediments of physical disabilities; where resolve and ambition are undone by poor decision making often associated with substance use; where the camaraderie of the homeless community – though often 'more honoured in the breach than the observance' – contrasts with public indifference and hostility; where homeless lives are made tolerable – at least for short periods – by the kindness of strangers and the support offered by charities, volunteer workers, food banks and street kitchens; where fortitude and resilience are sorely tested by a dysfunctional social welfare system and by the seemingly insurmountable obstacles and constraints imposed by hostile legislation and indifferent political decision making.

McClenaghan is a talented journalist and an accomplished writer with a surfeit of empathy and compassion. As her book demonstrates, she is well able to capture the human stories that lie behind bland reports and stark statistics: *No Fixed Abode* is exposé of the highest order.

Given McClenaghan's achievements it seems a bit invidious to introduce some critical observations. Yet there are times when she falls short of the demanding standards of O'Reilly's 'practice stories' in that she is guilty of falling into the 'trap' of what has been identified as the 'ethnographic fallacy' (Burawoy, 2013). The ethnographic fallacy has several dimensions of which the most prominent in this context is that McClenaghan's emphasis on relaying the individual stories of people experiencing homelessness tends to overshadow her analysis of the systemic/structural causes that perpetuate homelessness. The most pervasive illustration is McClenaghan's focus on the failures of the social safety net (i.e., the welfare state) to the detriment of the operation of the housing market and housing

policy. For example, in her perfunctory examination of the 1997 Rough Sleepers Unit (RSU, 1997-2002) introduced by Tony Blair's Labour government, McClenaghan simply recounts that,

'Funding was pumped into prevention initiatives and given to councils to pay for local support services. Rough-sleeping numbers dropped dramatically... *a decade later the cardboard camps were springing up again*' (p.37, italics added).

The reasons for the failure of the 1997 RSU to halt the re-emergence of street homelessness are never explicitly examined. There is no further reference to the RSU which ceased operating in 2002, or any reference to the 'Rough Sleepers Initiative' (1990-99) that preceded it, nor to the 'No Second Night Out' programme of 2011 or the more recent 'Rough Sleepers initiative' introduced in 2018. Each of these policy programmes are examples of systemic failure. Characterised by limited objectives and short termism, they are little more than 'sticking plasters' for a haemorrhage in the social fabric of society. Accounting for the prevalence and permanence of homelessness in modern Britain (which includes sheltering in various forms of temporary accommodation as well as rough sleeping) certainly requires examination of austerity cuts to support services – McClenaghan's safety net, but also and more fundamentally necessitates confronting the dysfunctionality of a housing market dominated by rentier capitalism (Christophers, 2021).

McClenaghan's inability (or is it reluctance?) to draw out the lessons of the various rough sleeper initiatives is also detrimental to her assessment of the prospects of Housing First to 'solve' the homelessness problem in the UK and elsewhere (Chapter 25). Unduly influenced, perhaps, by a visit to Amsterdam to check out its Housing First programme, McClenaghan's enthusiasm for Housing First lacks informed evaluation. Many studies, and indeed much operational experience, have shown that Housing First, though undoubtedly a very progressive policy, is no silver bullet for the eradication of homelessness (e.g., Allen et al., 2020). Here, perhaps, is the key to understanding McClenaghan's short sightedness. If her citations are a true reflection, she has not consulted any of these 'many studies'. Indeed, her citations are curiously, even alarmingly, devoid of academic references. Only two papers from academic journals are included in her endnotes (there is no bibliography) and the publications of the half dozen or so named academics quoted in her book are exclusively reports for government departments or homeless organisations. Burawoy (2013) attributes the ethnographic fallacy to 'inadequate attention to theory' (p.533) and the absence of academic literature in McClenaghan's text strongly suggests that this is the root of the problem.

The Philosophy of Homelessness: Barely Being

As pointed out in the introduction to this review, while *No Fixed Abode* and *The Philosophy of Homelessness* share a similar ethnographic approach, Moran and Atherton's 'practice stories' are fewer in number but typically more detailed and penetrating in content, reflecting sustained contact and multiple meetings with participants over several years. A further difference between the two books is the extent to which the authors themselves are part of the 'dramatis personae' of their narratives. While McClenaghan is for the most part an 'observer', Moran and Atherton are 'participant observers' in that they are often embedded as passive actors in their practice stories. Additionally, while McClenaghan's narrative, focusing on constraints and prospect, mostly looks 'outwards' exploring the ways homeless people relate to and experience the external (institutional) world of 'the housed'; Moran and Atherton look 'inward', to the 'quotidian level of realisation' (p. x) examining, through the prism of philosophy, motivations, feelings, and personal relationships within Chester's homeless community. Of course, this distinction is not absolute, there is plenty of scrutiny of interpersonal relationships in *No Fixed Abode* and equally Moran and Atherton have much to say, for example, about homeless people's interaction with the criminal justice system. However, I think it fair to say that *No Fixed Abode* – as befits an exposé – is more of an invitation to 'action',¹¹ while *The Philosophy of Homelessness* – as befits its title – is more 'contemplative'.

The Philosophy of Homelessness is an erudite book, cleverly conceived and eclectic in its coverage of philosophy.¹² In a notable introduction (pp.3-5), Moran and Atherton capture the essence of the homeless 'condition' by juxtaposing the quotidian routines of 'homeless people' with those of 'the housed'. They frame their analysis of homeless routines around the concept of 'being' or more precisely 'being without' – without shelter, money, privacy, belongings, food, certainty, and warmth; without somewhere to wash and sleep; without meaningful agency; without being able to participate in society... without identity or prospects; without 'ways of being' that we (the housed) routinely take for granted... and significantly without the 'right to be' (pp.2-3). And herein lies a conundrum that sporadically surfaces throughout the book, namely the absence of reference to significant published research on homelessness that sometimes overlaps with and mirrors that of Moran and Atherton.

The concept of 'the right to be' is precisely the phrase which the political philosopher Jeremy Waldron used two decades ago to encapsulate his understanding of what it is to be homelessness. Waldron's views and analyses (1991; 2000) bear an

¹¹ McClenaghan ends her book with instructions on 'What can I do' to help prevent homelessness (pp.339-340).

¹² Moran and Atherton's 'philosophy' routinely elides with psychiatry and sociology, with the likes of Lacan and Bourdieu grouped together with Socrates, Kant, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Derrida.

uncannily similar to those of Moran and Atherton, yet there is no reference to Waldron in their book. A further omission relates to the concept of ontology, the branch of philosophy which studies, among other things, 'being', 'becoming', and 'reality'- the very essence of Moran and Atherton's research. The first reference to ontology by Moran and Atherton is in their summary statement of the book's objectives on the inside of the front cover:

The Philosophy of Homelessness explores the daily experience of chronic homelessness from a perspective that renders its ontological impress in ways that are explicitly felt, often in forms that are overtly political and exclusionary in character, especially in terms of identity and belonging within the city.

The relevance of ontology for homelessness research links back to the 1960s and the work of R.D. Laing, the psychiatrist who coined the term 'ontological security', a concept that was introduced in the 1990s to Anglophone social research by the sociologist Anthony Giddens. Subsequently it has been adopted as a critical construct in many homelessness studies). As Padgett (2007) suggests, "markers of ontological security such as constancy, daily routines and privacy" are "closely related to having a secure base for identity construction"- that is, a home (see also Stonehouse et al., 2020). While the word 'ontology' frequently occurs in Moran and Atherton's text, there is no overt recognition of the notion of ontological security nor of its importance in relation to homelessness research. Moran and Atherton's apparent unfamiliarity with the work and insights of researchers such as Waldron, Laing, Giddens, and Padgett is symptomatic of their lack of attentiveness to published homelessness literature, an indifference they share with McClenaghan. Among their 100+ cited references, only nine are directly related to homelessness and housing research.

While there is much of interest to students of homelessness in *The Philosophy of Homelessness*, all too often it can be hard to find. Moran and Atherton identify three themes that 'emerge' from their research: 'the economy of chronic addiction and its impact upon the body; the relationship between chronic homelessness and the law; and chronic homelessness and identity and desire'. However, none of these can be easily sourced. Neither chapter headings nor index entries provide much guidance. Coverage of these themes is fragmented and scattered throughout the book, making it difficult for the reader to grasp them in the round. Further, on numerous occasions the book's homelessness message is stymied by prolonged philosophical exegeses. The authors are clearly well schooled in philosophy and cognate disciplines, but for the untutored reader the links between their philosophy and homelessness can be opaque and occasionally border on the perverse. For example, when Socrates ('the father' of Western philosophy who committed suicide) is considered to be 'pretty much the same' (p.104) as Alex (a man experi-

encing homelessness on the streets of Chester with a reputation for saving lives and a severe drug use problem). This judgement was arrived at following a somewhat convoluted discourse on 'mimesis'¹³ juxtaposing the work of Leslie Kurke, a distinguished professor of classics, with that of the 'controversial' psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. It is not at all clear how this discourse is of much or any relevance to the stated aim of the book – elucidating the quotidian routines of Chester's homelessness population. The tendency of Moran and Atherton to 'overplay' their philosophical hand in seeking understanding of people with long histories of homelessness is apparent throughout their book, this can be incredibly frustrating and is frequently irritating, though, it must be admitted, it is also almost always challenging and sometimes enlightening and informative; as with their deliberations on alienation (ref: Marx), abjection (ref: Kristeva), habitus (ref: Bourdieu), and gender relations (ref: Butler, Braidotti).

Beneath the welter of philosophical rumination there are practice stories of the homeless lives of Carrie, Ella, Alex, Sean, Eddie, and others that the authors befriend during their years of research. Moran and Atherton are good story tellers – a talent they share with McClenaghan. Their character vignettes vividly capture the mediations, the motivations, and the good and bad decision making that constitute the homeless experience. For example: Carrie, a single woman experiencing homelessness, an anguished substance user, and sometimes dealer with 'a pallid, clammy, pot marked face and a gaunt body' (p.73), has

'... remarkable fortitude, she meets aversion frequently and crippling administration regularly, but she also encounters philanthropy in many guises'. For Carrie, 'homelessness is existence laid bare... it is full of lack... to wake up in the morning is dependent upon surviving the night... if [she] can avoid being urinated upon, set on fire, beaten, robbed, raped or arrested, a new day will dawn'. [She] 'wears homelessness... when she wakes up she is already dressed... homelessness has a uniform, a particular style, it is a distinctive brand purchased from the [Chester] Share Shop, a mecca for the impoverished'. (Chapter 3, passim).

¹³ Mimesis is defined as 'the deliberate imitation of the behaviour of one group by another as a factor in social change'.

Afterword

For a taught course on homelessness in the UK, *No Fixed Abode* and *The Philosophy of Homelessness* would provide worthy bookends. McClenaghan as the accessible introductory and course text with Moran and Atherton providing a challenging conclusion. Matthew Desmond's book *Evicted* – with which *No Fixed Abode* can be compared – has been adopted in North America as a teaching text with a published 'pedagogic guide' (Hudack, n.d.); McClenaghan's work has similar potential.

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