Inequality, poverty, migration, welfare. In the United States during the past few decades, capitalist globalization intensified inequality, the Great Recession broadened poverty, a slowly improving economy drew more migrants, and wrangling about government benefits has become political spectacle. In that sense, this book could hardly be more timely as it analyzes those issues for Boston in the late colonial era, but with wider implications both for early American history and for our own times. Robert Love’s Warnings, Cornelia H. Dayton and Sharon V. Salinger claim too modestly, is merely an “extended interpretation of Love’s warning records” (5)—a remarkable set of documents the authors discovered and pieced together in archives. The major achievements of the volume, however, are much more interesting and valuable.

Dayton and Salinger, two very distinguished historians, challenge much of the conventional scholarly understanding, turning some of our conceptions of eighteenth-century New England society upside down. Rather than an unwelcoming, penny-pinching people with a puritan heritage, Bostonians were perhaps the most generous Britons in the empire when it came to assisting the poor. Rather than an army of impoverished stragglers and strangers tramping the backroads of pre-revolutionary New England, as Douglas Lamar Jones found, many migrants moved for specific reasons involving enhancing their careers or reuniting their families. Instead of people fearful of other ethnic and religious groups, as Susan F. Martin depicts them, New Englanders financially supported other peoples, even African Americans and the Irish. The arguments and findings are not without controversy, which makes them even more important for historians of early America. It all results in a marvelous book.

The clever narrative structure is to follow Robert Love—an obsessive record keeper who left an amazingly rich cache of registers—as he walked the streets of Boston during the decade before the American Revolution, stopping at inns, houses, and wharves to discover new arrivals in the city. He “warn[ed]” the “strangers” he deemed to be in “low Circumstances” to leave the city within two weeks or to “give security to the satisfaction of the [city’s] Selectmen” (7) that they would not land on the poverty rolls and become a burden to the city.

In the seventeenth century, as the authors explain, Puritans used warning liber-
ally, often forcing strangers to move out of villages and towns. That, along with banishing Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams, and proselytizing Quakers, gave New Englanders a bad name in the realm of tolerance.

The eighteenth century, Dayton and Salinger contend, was different. Warning became less a way to dislodge new arrivals and more a legal means to determine whether the city or the province should pay for any aid that might be necessary. Provincial authorities bore the financial burden for assistance to nonresidents of Boston who had received a warning. Both the Warner and the warned understood the bureaucratic game. “Rather than a gesture meant to exclude,” the authors argue, “warning facilitated the province’s policy of making available a larger pool of welfare funds for Britons and non-Britons, native born and stranger, than existed elsewhere in the empire” (4). Gary B. Nash’s extensive study of poverty in early America lends support to their assertion. During the decade preceding the American Revolution, Boston Puritans spent slightly more on poor relief than did the reputedly more compassionate Philadelphia Quakers.2

The book adds flesh to the skeleton of the early welfare system, discussing the process of “warning out” (10) from its origins in the poor laws in England and their transformation in New England, to the instructions issued to and judgments required by Love, to his walking the streets and interacting with immigrants in “low Circumstances.” Dayton and Salinger vividly re-create daily life in Boston, allowing us to observe Love strolling through the twisty streets and back alleys as well as entering private houses and taverns. The rich context within which the authors place Love is one of the book’s major strengths. This kind of detail is admirable. It emerges only from mature scholars who have spent hundreds of hours getting their hands dirty and sweating (or shivering in air-conditioning) in archives. The authors also include an imaginative five-page “Interlude: A Sojourner’s Arrival,” wherein they draw on their knowledge and findings to create a firsthand account of what a migrant to the city might have experienced. It serves as an approach that might be considered by other historians, especially scholars who study ordinary people by reconstructing mass biographies from bits and pieces of evidence, none of which are sufficient to support a fully developed life story. Reminiscent of John E. Murray’s recent use of a remarkable set of records to analyze the first orphanage in the United States, Dayton and Salinger model how to exploit a treasure trove of records—the kind that historians dream of uncovering. To use economic terms, they add tremendous value with dedicated digging in other primary and secondary sources.3

One of the volume’s most important findings is about the nature of domestic migration to an early American city. While officials often recorded


ships and passengers docking in ports, hardly any registered people arriving
from the countryside. Scholars often depicted them as migrants who moved
out of some desperation: younger sons who could not inherit the family farm
or women unable to find marriage partners when young men fled econom-
ically stressed New England. Dayton and Salinger describe a more complex
migration stream comprised of classic migrants, travelers, and sojourners.
People whose goal was to settle long term in Boston comprised the first cat-
egory. Travelers planned to stop only briefly in the city before moving along.
Sojourners, the largest group warned by Love, usually moved from other areas
of New England, and the length of their stay depended on the availability
of jobs—an important variable in a society whose economy fluctuated in a
cyclic as well as a seasonal fashion. Love also warned former soldiers from “His
Majesty’s Service” (151), as well as their wives, widows, and children. Beggars
and the “very Rag[ged]” and “Indisposed” (146, brackets in original) likewise
found refuge in Boston, although their numbers were comparatively small.

Robert Love’s Warnings raises a number of questions and perplexing
paradoxes when placed in the historiography. Somewhat surprisingly, the
authors chose not to engage directly Ruth Wallis Herndon’s study, *Unwelcome
Americans: Living on the Margin in Early New England*. The title conveys
one of that book’s major arguments: officials and taxpayers in New England
“were not inclined to be generous with those already in poverty.” Herndon
paints a much bleaker picture of impoverished New Englanders and of the
reluctance of their middle- and upper-class neighbors to assist them. Some
transients, according to Herndon, even suffered public whippings along the
lines specified in the old English poor laws. Dayton and Salinger note, but
somewhat dismiss, Herndon’s conclusions, arguing that the warning-out
systems in Rhode Island and Massachusetts were considerably different and,
thus, apparently incomparable. Still, the findings of the two books seemingly
are at odds. It is not clear how to square rising poverty rates and inequality in
pre-revolutionary Boston, as found by Nash and other scholars, with the con-
ditions of the majority of new arrivals that Love encountered. Who accounted
for the increasing numbers of the poor if not domestic migrants? Widows, as
Dayton and Salinger suggest, surely accounted for some, but probably not in
sufficient numbers to pack the almshouse or fill the relief rolls.

Let me raise another issue regarding the evidence and its interpretation.
Love’s instructions enjoined him to warn out people in “low Circumstances,”
yet many of the migrants apparently told him they had jobs and appren-
ticeships lined up or family and friends with whom they could stay in the
city. They appeared far from on the edge of financial desperation. Why the
discrepancy? Perhaps, in part, the new arrivals dissembled as a welfare strat-
egy. Clerks who kept almshouse dockets in Philadelphia and other areas

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4 Ruth Wallis Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans: Living on the Margin in Early New
frequently complained about applicants making false claims about themselves. Love noted his own uneasiness about how people presented themselves or refused to articulate their own stories. The new arrivals, according to Dayton and Salinger, were sufficiently well informed to ignore Love’s words: “I warn you to depart” (64). Surely, the migrants also knew the major requirement they had to fulfill—to convince Love that they were sturdy and respectable, in no danger of depending on the city for relief. A bit of shading of the truth may have been common.6

This marvelous book deepens and broadens historians’ knowledge in significant ways. It is also beautifully written. It reshapes our conceptions and makes us ask new questions about Boston, New England, and early America in general. It is hard to ask much more of any book.

6 On complaints by clerks of the almshouse, see Billy G. Smith, Life in Early Philadelphia: Documents from the Revolutionary and Early National Periods (University Park, Pa., 1995), 34–36.