Laura King

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Fatherhood & Masculinity in Britain, c.1914–1960
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For my dad
Preface

The history of masculinity in twentieth-century Britain remains incomplete because of the frequent omission of fathers and fatherhood. This book provides a new dimension to the social and cultural history of gender and family in the twentieth century by bringing fathers to the forefront, by examining them as individuals and considering changing family life from the perspective of men. It challenges the current assumption that the post-Second World War focus on motherhood left fathers and fatherhood in the shadows, and rejects the overriding yet narrow focus on ‘domestic masculinity’ and the ‘domestication’, or otherwise, of men.

I have many people to thank for their kind support and encouragement that has been essential to the completion of this book. Adrian Bingham has offered exemplary help and advice as supervisor of the doctoral research at the core of the book, and Clare Griffiths, Mary Vincent, and Karen Harvey also provided helpful comments at different points. I am also very grateful for Pat Thane’s suggestions as external examiner of the original thesis. Colleagues at both Warwick and Leeds have also helped me develop the work further, and the supportive atmosphere at both institutions as well as Sheffield has been instrumental to the successful completion of the book. Thanks also to colleagues who have commented on various iterations of the research at numerous conferences and workshops. In particular, discussions with Helen Smith, Julie-Marie Strange, Joanne Bailey, Selina Todd, Mathew Thomson, Hilary Marland, Roberta Bivins, Daniel Grey, and Angela Davis have also been incredibly helpful in further sharpening and developing my arguments around fatherhood and masculinity, and I’m grateful to Angela for valuable comments on the full final draft. I am also grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for their very helpful suggestions, as well as the editorial team at Oxford University Press, who have been supportive and helpful throughout.

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I owe a lot to various family members for their generosity with time, advice, and spare rooms at various stages, including Sylvia King, Anna Higgs, Dan Wichett, Helen, Carole, and Bill Quirk, as well as my brother Charlie, parents Phil and Alison, and most of all Joe Quirk, for their love, support, and encouragement throughout.
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List of Abbreviations

BBC  British Broadcasting Corporation
BFI  British Film Institute
BMA  British Medical Association
ERA  Elizabeth Roberts Archive
IWMA Imperial War Museum Archive
MP   Member of Parliament
NSPCC National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
RAF  Royal Air Force
UKDA United Kingdom Data Archive
Introduction

CHANGING FATHERHOOD IN A CHANGING CONTEXT

In 1956, an article in the *Daily Mirror* entitled ‘Happy Families’ reflected on change in recent years in terms of both fatherhood and the dynamics of family life. The anonymous writer invited opinions from readers, and noted:

Family life is more enlightened today than it used to be. Gone (and good riddance to him) is the Victorian father who thought he was God—with a mission to hold down those perishing sinners, his offspring. Dad is no longer the Great I Am laying down the law from Way Up High.

The journalist added that ‘Modern parents stay young with their children and discuss family affairs with them like good pals.’ This article illustrates a number of important trends in popular culture. It reflects a sense of change over time, a conscious focus on modernity, and an explicit contrast to the Victorian patriarch. The rhetoric of equality and friendship used here permeated public debates about family life. Above all, this piece situated the father at the heart of the family; numerous articles from a variety of newspapers continually reinforced fathers’ importance and influential presence in their children’s lives. Social researchers found this reflected individuals’ behaviour and attitudes: at the end of this period, John and Elizabeth Newson concluded that the high level of participation of fathers in their children’s upbringing was a ‘distinctive feature of modern family life’, and Ferdynand Zweig highlighted that the factory workers he studied took ‘an intense, sometimes passionate, interest’ in the upbringing of their children. *Family Men* examines such suggestions, and provides a new contribution to the histories of family and gender. It provides the first academic history of fatherhood in this period, and considers a number of key questions. Did the father’s role at this time extend much beyond breadwinning? Were fathers taking an active role in childcare and developing close relationships with their sons and daughters? Was fatherhood a prominent or celebrated aspect of culturally exalted versions of masculinity? Did change occur in this period, and why? How does this relate

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to the wider contexts—of war and unemployment, of the increased influence of psychological ways of thinking, and of a newly national culture?

This book examines fatherhood as a cultural institution and a social role, fathering as part of the life course of most men, and fathers as actors and emotional, embodied individuals. It adopts a socio-cultural history approach by examining cultural norms and prescriptions about behaviour, feelings and identities, alongside investigating the attitudes and social experiences of men and their families. It examines men and masculinity in the context of the family, thus providing a new perspective on the history of family life in modern Britain. The fusion of social and cultural approaches emerges from a belief in the need to examine experiences, attitudes, emotions, and subjectivities as well as the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which these are shaped. Indeed, *Family Men* responds to calls for 'more sophisticated historical knowledge' of the family, a focus on parenting as a formative experience for parents as well as children, and more research into masculinity in the twentieth century. It rejects assumptions that fatherhood was somehow more clearly defined in the past, and suggests we need a more complex understanding of fatherhood in its historical context. It highlights how fatherhood and individual fathers were multidimensional, complex, and often contradictory. It unpacks the actions, attitudes, emotions, and identities that constitute this concept, by analysing a wide range of sources relating to fatherhood in Britain between the First World War and the end of the 1950s.

An increased willingness of men to involve themselves in the chores of looking after children has been noted in some histories of the family, gender, and class culture in this period, particularly by the end of the 1940s and 1950s. It is argued

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5 Burghes, Clarke, and Cronin, for example, suggest that ‘Neither roles nor behaviour are as clearly or definitively socially defined as they once were’, whilst Moss writes that ‘While what fatherhood was is perhaps fairly clear, what it might become is less so.’ Louie Burghes, Lynda Clarke, and Natalie Cronin, *Fathers and Fatherhood in Britain* (London, 1997), p. 9; Peter Moss, ‘Introduction’, in P. Moss (ed.), *Father Figures: Fathers in the Families of the 1990s* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. xi.

6 For example, Lynn Abrams, ‘“There Was Nobody like My Daddy”: Fathers, the Family and the Marginalisation of Men in Modern Scotland’, *Scottish Historical Review* 78:2 (1999), esp. pp. 226–38; Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford,
here that fatherhood took on a new cultural and social significance, particularly
from the mid-1930s. The greater involvement of men in childcare tasks is one
element of this change. The rise of popular psychological modes of thinking and
raised standards of living, coupled with an emphasis on the family at the heart of
post-Second World War reconstruction, led to a new stress on the father–child
relationship and an increased assumption that men should focus their mascu-
line identities on fatherhood. This shift in cultural meaning both reflected and
influenced the rise in numbers of men taking their relationships with their chil-
dren seriously and embracing the identity of ‘family man’. Like mothers, fathers
found their children to be a source of pleasure, pain, and frustration; yet, unlike
mothers, their position as a parent of secondary importance meant they could
choose to disassociate themselves from aspects of family life they did not enjoy.7
Involved fatherhood could be a positive experience for many men. Many parents
emphasized change between generations. Particularly in the latter half of this
period, both men and women drew contrasts between their (husbands’) conduct
in contrast to that of their fathers and fathers-in-law.8 We must be mindful here of
the recurrent idea of change in fatherhood that can be found throughout modern
history; as Charlie Lewis noted, the idea that men have recently become more
involved in family life ‘is as old and perhaps as prominent as patriarchy’.9 The
insistence on the novelty of fathers taking their roles seriously in popular cultural
debates does not necessarily neatly reflect men’s behaviour. The following chapters
analyse cultural and social change, and attitudes towards change on the part of
parents and children.

Fatherhood is a crucial component of men’s identities and experiences, com-
mon to the vast majority of adult men at some point in their lives. As Robert
Griswold notes, ‘Throughout human history, most men have been fathers, and
all fathers have been sons, and thus comprehending men’s experiences as fathers
and how fatherhood has been culturally constructed over time is fundamental to
understanding human experience.’10 Indeed, as parenting became at least notion-
ally a choice rather than an inevitability for increasing numbers of people, with
increased availability of birth control technology and knowledge about family
limitation, motherhood and fatherhood were arguably situated more centrally

7 On the complexity of individual fatherhood, see Julie-Marie Strange, Fatherhood and the
8 On generational change, also see Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, Sex before the Sexual
9 Charlie Lewis, Becoming a Father (Milton Keynes, 1986), p. 5.
within an individual’s identity. This book examines a period of political, economic, social, and cultural upheaval; what the family looked like in this period changed in the wake of a decreasing birth rate and the rise of the smaller family across all social groups. Furthermore, the growing significance of a truly national culture shifted the way in which individuals negotiated norms and ideals within the context of their own family life, and this was a culture increasingly dominated by newly popular psychological ways of seeing the world and the family within it. The dramatic political and economic events of the period, most notably two world wars and the interwar economic depression, also had significant consequences for fatherhood, often in very tangible ways, such as unemployment or the splitting up of families through conscription and evacuation, but also in their reconfiguring of gender roles and ideas about identity.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL LANDSCAPE

A growing literature exploring fatherhood in Britain in the nineteenth century and earlier, as well as in other national contexts such as the USA, demonstrates that this is a fruitful and significant area of history. Sociologists have also researched fatherhood and family life much more extensively since the 1980s. Yet only a small handful of historians have started to examine fatherhood in the twentieth century. Tim Fisher’s unpublished thesis explores working-class fatherhood in early twentieth-century Britain. Lynn Abrams and Margaret Williamson have

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14 For example, Burghes, Clarke, and Cronin, *Fathers*; Brian Jackson, *Fatherhood* (London, 1984); Lewis, *Becoming a Father*; Lorna McKee and Margaret O’Brien (eds), *The Father Figure* (London, 1982); Moss (ed.), *Father Figures*.
employed oral history methodology to examine fatherhood in the twentieth century, in Scotland and the north-east respectively. These glimpses into certain communities and sections of the population start to demonstrate that the history of fatherhood is largely an untold story and deserves more sustained attention. Fathers appear in more general histories of family life. Yet the idea that there are gendered, separate spheres for men and women is still powerful and means that fathers are not usually treated as individual historical actors in histories of family life. In the period in question here, a focus on the intensification of motherhood has also limited the attention paid to fathers as parents and the critical assessment of all family members. Furthermore, a focus on the process of male domestication, which can conflate men’s roles as husbands and fathers and their relationship with the home, has meant fatherhood as a specific experience has been marginalized in the historical literature. This book suggests that we must examine fatherhood as separate from roles and relationships associated with being a husband, as involving more than just a potential capacity for domestic labour, and finally, as an identity, a nexus of relationships, and as a position within the family as well as a role to be fulfilled. It uses the concept of a ‘family-orientated masculinity’ to recognize a more active fatherhood in this period alongside the strong gendered division of labour that remained intact. Fatherhood here is understood to be a social construct based around biological paternity and is defined widely to encompass men who did or could fulfil this parenting position within children’s lives.

Any study of fatherhood must also be concerned with masculinity to at least some extent. From a twenty-first-century perspective, there remained a strong gendered differentiation in terms of male and female roles within and outside the home throughout the period in question, with more dramatic change occurring only from the 1960s and 1970s onwards. Yet the twentieth century cannot be viewed as a simple progression towards the convergence of the sexes, or gender equality. Gender identities can and did shift even when the distinction between them remained strong, certainly in terms of parenting and the family. Whilst gender remains a crucial category of analysis for the family in particular, focusing

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16 Abrams, ‘There Was Nobody’; Williamson, ‘He Was Good’.
21 On gender, identity and parenting, see Bailey, Parenting, pp. 10–11.
too exclusively on the convergence or divergence of men and women’s roles and identities can obscure change elsewhere. As John Arnold and Sean Brady highlight, ideas about masculinity and men were as frequently configured relationally between men as between men and women. It became increasingly possible in this period for men to embrace fatherhood as a means to become more involved family members without challenging their masculinity.

From the First World War to the end of the 1950s, the intensified focus on fatherhood, in public debates and in individual attitudes, was connected to an increased emphasis on the family as an independent social unit. The family was in this period increasingly constructed as self-sufficient, capable of fulfilling the emotional, physical, and social needs of family members. This changing notion of the family was linked to the increased prominence of ‘companionate marriage’ as an ideal. The importance of this concept within public discussion and to individuals at the time, from various social backgrounds, has been widely debated.

It is argued here that there was a substantial emphasis on complementary and equal roles between mothers/wives and fathers/husbands, in evidence from popular culture and individual attitudes. Another important context is the decreasing average family size in this period, as the decline in birth rate spread to families of all social classes. Indeed, the family functioned as an independent social unit in its leisure time most readily if it was limited to a certain size, and in turn, the potential companionship between wife and husband both encouraged this closeness and was encouraged by a smaller family.

Angela Davis, Simon Szreter, and Kate Fisher have argued that there was a more uniform experience of family life after the Second World War. An important

27 Gittins, Fair Sex, pp. 9, 19; Simon Szreter, Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860–1940 (Cambridge, 1996); Szreter and Fisher, Sex, e.g. p. 28; Richard and Kathleen Titmuss, Parents Revolt: A Study of the Declining Birth-rate in Acquisitive Societies (London, 1942), pp. 9, 28.
dimension to this debate about changes to class is the notion that working-class culture underwent a process of ‘embourgeoisement’. As Diana Gittins has pointed out, this period was not one of a simplistic emulation of middle-class ideals on the part of working-class communities.\textsuperscript{29} As Jon Lawrence notes, in everyday usage class was a mutable and ‘fuzzy’ concept.\textsuperscript{30} Yet in terms of family life, as John Goldthorpe et al. argued, a process of ‘normative convergence’ between different class groups took place, particularly in the wake of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{31} The relationship between different class communities and class values was complex, and we should be mindful of the importance of the exchange of ideas between different classes, the overlapping and fluid nature of class identities, and the significance of middle- and upper-class control of cultural and social institutions, such as the press, and therefore the shaping of popular debate.\textsuperscript{32} As Claire Langhamer notes, post-Second World War social conditions, and increased affluence for working-class communities particularly, allowed for a greater flourishing of ideas around mutuality, love, and domesticity that had their roots in the interwar period.\textsuperscript{33} Ideals of family life more common in middle-class culture became important to working-class individuals because of social conditions rather than a desire to become middle-class per se, even if the practices of love and courtship still varied according to the class of the individuals involved.\textsuperscript{34} In this sense, the concept of class has two important, distinct, though interrelated dimensions to it: the economic and social conditions particular or common to a class group, but also the more self-conscious identity that could be associated with that group.

The First World War represents a significant moment marking the beginnings of substantial social change, relating to gender roles particularly,\textsuperscript{35} and the starting point of a more wholeheartedly national British culture.\textsuperscript{36} The study ends in 1960, as though there were deep continuities beyond the 1950s, the 1960s witnessed the start of a new period of social change, relating to ideas about child welfare and a questioning of the family,\textsuperscript{37} and the start of a more wholeheartedly consumerist

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\textsuperscript{29} Gittins, \textit{Fair Sex}, pp. 18–19, 176.


\textsuperscript{32} Alston, indeed, highlights the power of children’s literature in spreading middle-class ideals. Ann Alston, \textit{The Family in English Children’s Literature} (London and New York, 2008), p. 3.


\textsuperscript{34} Langhamer, ‘Love’, p. 184.

