Labours Lost

This is a unique account of the hidden history of servants and their employers in late eighteenth-century England and of how servants thought about and articulated their resentments. It is a book which encompasses state formation and the maidservant pounding away at dirty nappies in the back kitchen; taxes on the servant's labour and the knives he cleaned, the water he fetched, and the privy he shovelled out. Carolyn Steedman shows how deeply entwined all of these entities, objects and people were in the imagination of those doing the shovelling and pounding and in the political philosophies that attempted to make sense of it all. Rather than fitting domestic service into conventional narratives of 'industrial revolution' or 'the making of the English working class' she offers instead a profound re-reading of this formative period in English social history which restores the servant's lost labours to their rightful place.

CAROLYN STEEDMAN is Professor of History at the University of Warwick. Her previous publications include *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (2007) and *Dust* (2001).

Frontispiece. Doing all sorts, in W. H. Pyne, *Microcosm; or a Pictoresque Delineation of the Arts, Agriculture and Manufactures of Great Britain*, London, 1806. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library

Labours Lost

Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England

Carolyn Steedman

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Signposts left at random in the no-man's land between what can and cannot be represented, they indicate only that the other side of the border is inhabited.

Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand* (1993)

None of us has time to live the true dramas of the life that we are destined for. This is what ages us – this and nothing else. The wrinkles and creases on our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, insights, that called on us; but we, the masters, were not at home.

Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1972)

Mary: 'Do People reason so much about Servants?'

Jonas Hanway, *Virtue in Humble Life* (1774)

CARRYING . . . It is good for a Servant to dream he is carried by his Master, and for the mean Man to be carried by the rich.

Anon., *Nocturnal Revels* (1706)

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Abbreviations

BCRO	Berkshire County Record Office
BCLA	Birmingham Central Library Archives
BUL	Birmingham University Library
BL	British Library
CRO	Cambridgeshire Record Office
CCA	Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies Service
DCRO	Derbyshire County Record Office
DRO	Devon Record Office
DMA	Doncaster Metropolitan Archives
ESCRO	East Sussex County Record Office
HCRO	Hertfordshire County Record Office
KU	Keele University Special Collections and Archives
LRO	Lancashire Record Office
LIL	Lincoln's Inn Library
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives
NMM	National Maritime Museum
NCRO	Norfolk County Record Office
NA	Nottinghamshire Archives
SA	Shropshire Archives
SP	Scone Palace
SCRO	Somerset County Record Office
SHC	Surrey History Centre
TNA	The National Archives
WCRO	Warwickshire County Record Office
WYAS	West Yorkshire Archive Services
WRO	Wiltshire Record Office

Acknowledgements

A therapist might say that I have a good relationship with the state, in the way that relationships with parents, employers, and other forms of authority are described as being 'good'. This would mean that I do not experience the relationship as onerous, or oppressive; that I have a cheerful-seeming, passive, and somewhat childlike acceptance of its place in my life and consciousness. (A psychoanalyst on the other hand, might well make me plumb the depths of my desire to express self-identity in such terms. I am, by the way, entirely with the psychoanalyst here, not the therapist.) The state gave me good teeth and strong bones (National Health orange juice, school milk, many jars of Virol); the state taught me to read, got me away from home and sent me to university. In the shape of the then Social Science Research Council, the state funded my PhD and made me a historian. It is *in* me; the state is imprinted *on* me; I carry it with me, as the person it has made me. This is not an entirely unusual attitude for children born, reared and educated in the early years of the National Health Service and as beneficiaries of the Education Act of 1948.[1] I have never asked for welfare benefits, been imprisoned, or subjected to military service; if any of these things had happened to me, no doubt my attitude would be different. As it is, I shall always be some kind of child who knows that the morning break-time milk and, later, the university grant cheque are provided by some distant but kindly force. I shall always be grateful to the state. But to describe myself as being married to the state for three years past, is probably taking things too far. This is how I explained my coming absence from the University of Warwick to a group of students in the autumn of 2004, shortly after I had been awarded an Economic and Social Research Council Professorial Fellowship to work on this book: 'you won't be seeing much of me over the next three years;

[1] Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Virago, London, 1986; Michael Wadsworth, *The Imprint of Time: Childhood, history, and adult life*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991.

from 1st October I shall be married to the state'.[2] They did not laugh; I enjoy my own jokes far too much for them to be at all funny. One of many things that I have discovered from the work here presented, is where my jokes come from. They come from the eighteenth century. Employers thought through (the therapist would say, *dealt with*) the great questions of state and society, and social and class formation that their domestic servants embodied, by making servant-jokes. Sometimes they laughed self-deprecatingly at themselves for suffering the depredations of the lower orders represented by their servant. Alison Light reports Virginia Woolf making this kind of joke about her servants in the 1920s and 1930s; she did not know that their form was at least 200 years old.[3]

How I learned this form of deeply unpleasant self-regard dressed as self-deprecation, is a different matter: I have been doing it since my teens, long before I knew what the eighteenth century *was*. However, my idea of marriage to the state was prescient (though as this book will show, I would have done better to describe the relationship as a contractual one, *tout court*. But then nobody would have laughed, not even I.) I have worried a great deal about my obligations to the state (in its aspect as the ESRC) over the past three years: whether I am doing what I said I would do, writing the book it wants (*might* want – what *does* the State want?); whether I am keeping my promises. I have invented the state's needs and wants, to express my anxieties ('They'll want tables! My only tables are kitchen tables!'; actually, there are tables of the first sort in this book). In my pitch to the Fellowship interview panel I said, somewhat piously, that I took my responsibilities as a historian seriously; that most disciplines in the human and social sciences are grounded in an overt or implied history of state and class formation in the UK that . . . isn't quite right . . . ; that histories of the working class, and accounts of modern social structure based on these histories miss out the waged domestic workers who comprised a majority of working people. I said that I could rectify this to some extent, and provide a new and better history. That here and now I have been able to tell the story of writing this book in this way is my acknowledgement of the interest, support, and – yes – distant kindliness of the ESRC over the three years it took (and expression of a profound gratitude for its allowing me to get on with the work in the first place). What I didn't know back in 2004, and do know now, is how useful was going to be my childlike belief that the state manifests

[2] ESRC RES-051-27-0123 (2004–2007), 'Service, Society and the State: The making of the social in England 1760–1820'.

[3] Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, Fig Tree, London, 2007. But one modern mistress does know the antiquity of servant-jokes: Kate Clanchy, *What Is She Doing Here? A refugee's story*, Picador, London, 2008, p. 243.

itself in the ordinary things of everyday life. That is why this is a book about state formation *and* the maidservant pounding away at the dirty nappies in the back kitchen; about the tax on the servant's labour *and* the knives he cleaned, the water he fetched, and the privy he shovelled out. It is about those entities, objects and people; how they related to one another; how deeply intertwined they were, in the imagination of those doing the shovelling and the pounding and in the many philosophies that attempted to account for it all.