

Introduction: O Father, where art thou?

‘Is the working-class father as black as he is painted?’ The question was posed by the district nurse, M. E. Loane, in the first line of a chapter on ‘The working-class father’ in her collection of short essays, *From their point of view* (1908). As Loane noted, the ‘prejudice’ that the working-class father was rough, drunken and profane was ‘so strong’ that even commentary in his defence was apt to be misread or ignored. Why, Loane asked, was he always out of favour? True, he was no paragon of long-term planning and had limited powers to control or direct the future of his offspring. But did this make him ‘less affectionate’ than the bourgeois paterfamilias? For Loane’s part, she admired working men’s patience, good humour, pride and ‘genuine personal feeling’ for offspring. There were ‘no bounds’ to what a ‘mere ordinary’ father might do for the sake of his children.¹ Some ninety years later, the historian Lynn Abrams echoed Loane’s lament. Despite historians’ discovery of Victorian bourgeois men as fathers, the working-class man remained out of favour: he was ‘rarely associated with home’, ‘still less’ with his children and located overwhelmingly in work, the pub or club, his allotment or with his pigeons. When historians and contemporaries talked about ‘family’, they overwhelmingly meant mothers and children. This ‘unflattering’ portrayal identified working men as ‘absent fathers’, a prototype of the absent father of tabloid reportage at the end of the twentieth century. As Abrams noted, working-class fathers existed, for sure, but working-class fatherhood remained uncertain.²

Loane’s essay on the working-class father noted that readers often took it for granted that middle-class fathers were self-sacrificing, solicitous and devoted. Was the working-class father that different? This book seeks to develop Loane’s question and address the persistent gap in histories of

¹ M. E. Loane, *From their point of view* (London: Edward Arnold, 1908), 144–56.

² 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), 219–42.

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the working-class family that Abrams identified. It advances a counter-narrative to histories and contemporary commentaries that rely on a ‘deficit’ model of fatherhood, that is, a focus on the failures, flaws and shortcomings of men.³ The book acknowledges that feckless, tyrannical or absent fathers existed, to be sure. But, it argues, they do not represent the family experience of most working-class children. This is not to say that working-class fathers were paragons of virtue or sentimental fathers. Rather, it suggests that fathering meant different things, at different times, to different actors: much depended on context.

Engaging with working-class autobiography, this book deviates from most social histories of the working-class family in that it does not dwell on contested contributions to domestic economy, spousal dynamics, differences within and between elements of the working class, specific labour issues or claims to citizenship. Neither does the book trace the development of welfare and social policy on family life during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. Superb studies addressing these issues exist already. The established scholarship highlights the marginalisation of fathers as parents by labour, state and voluntary organisations in favour of mothers and compounds that marginalisation by focusing, overwhelmingly, on men in family life as women’s husbands or, it refracts men’s role as fathers through the prism of male claims for suffrage and representation. Rather, this book looks to working-class autobiographers for a research agenda and follows the preoccupations and priorities of authors in producing meaningful and coherent life stories. It interrogates how children and fathers invested meaning in paternal identities and practices. In doing so, it distinguishes men as fathers from men as mothers’ husbands. It also alights on unexpected facets of family stories, such as the importance of laughter and comedy. Focusing on authorial literary styles and processes of reflection, the fathers and children under discussion in this book are often multiple characters in one story; their roles and dynamic rarely stayed the same over the life cycle.

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The standard text on working-class family is Ellen Ross’s 1993 monograph, *Love and toil*. An excellent and important book, it is unmistakably about mothers: the clue is in the subtitle, *Motherhood in outcast London, 1870–1918*.⁴ Scholarship that focuses on women’s experience and

³ Adrienne Burgess, *The Fatherhood Institute: advocating for involved fatherhood in the UK, 1999–2012* (London: The Fatherhood Institute, 2012).

⁴ Ellen Ross, *Love and toil: motherhood in outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

oppression will inevitably sideline men in family life because they are peripheral to the story being told, or, they are present as the negative embodiment of patriarchy.⁵ However brilliant Ross's study of women and children, it does not tell the story of fathers. Yet it is impossible to fully understand child development and women's inequality if we fragment family into opposing interest groups that do not necessarily map onto lived experience.⁶ Carolyn Steedman urged in 1986 that history needed to consider how (non-bourgeois) fathers mattered and to interrogate father-child relationships, 'not just a longing that they might be different'.⁷ More specifically, classic histories of women and family do not unpack the differences between women's relationships with husbands and children's dynamic with fathers.⁸ In interpersonal terms, a husband is not the same as a father. Likewise, histories that chart the negative interventions of some men in some families do not necessarily enable us to understand how, as adults, children explained and understood the micro-workings of family inequalities and everyday unhappiness.⁹

Prescriptive literature and official welfare policy in the nineteenth century increasingly diminished the significance of fathers while motherhood gained increasing ideological importance and responsibility. Claudia Nelson's *Invisible Men: Fatherhood in Victorian Periodicals, 1850–1910* (1995) and, to a lesser extent, John Gillis's, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual and the Quest for Family Values* (1996) identified the 'absence of fatherhood' rather than the absent father: men were fundamental to Victorian legal and political definitions of family but, aside from that, they were 'strangers' who hovered on the threshold of

⁵ Abrams, 'There was Nobody like my Daddy'.

⁶ As Burgess stresses, this is not the same as claiming that fathers are 'victims': such an approach risks, equally, forgetting to embed fathers within family life and overlooking the fact that, clearly, 'men are still the ones with the power'. Burgess, *The Fatherhood Institute*, 23; 29–31.

⁷ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a good woman* (London: Virago, 1986), 18–19.

⁸ Classic examples of the women's history approach to 'family' include: Elizabeth Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); Carl Chinn, *They worked all their lives: women of the urban poor, 1880–1939* (Manchester University Press, 1988); Andrew August, *Poor Women's Lives: Gender, Work and poverty in late-Victorian London* (London and Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1999); Jane Lewis, *The politics of motherhood: child and maternal welfare in England, 1900–1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1980); Jane Lewis, (ed.), *Labour and love: women's experiences of home and family, 1850–1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). An exception to the trend is Joanna Bourke's *Working-class cultures in Britain, 1899–1960* (London: Routledge, 1994), 81–95. Bourke conflated husbands with fathers to a degree in examining the power dynamics of domestic space but she at least recognised that men had different roles to perform within family contexts.

⁹ For a sociological perspective on everyday unhappiness in families see Carol Smart, *Personal life: new directions in sociological thinking* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 133–55.

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everyday and interpersonal family life.¹⁰ John Tosh's groundbreaking *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (1999) sought to locate men in family life and correct the stereotype of the Victorian father as merely a disciplinarian who believed children should be seen and not heard. The 'tyrannical' father existed but in a minority; his fathering probably said more about a dysfunctional personality than about fatherhood in general. For Tosh, three other kinds of father were also readily discernible. First, the 'absent' father: men who spent little time with offspring, were aloof, irritated and bewildered by the world of children. Tosh makes the point that this, too, is a common stereotype of the Victorian father, recycled in histories because it foregrounds the late-twentieth-century preoccupation with encouraging fathers to be more 'involved'. Far more common to most bourgeois families' experience, Tosh asserted, were distant or fond fathers.

The distant man was deeply concerned with the responsibility of parenthood but manifested his obligations and responsibilities in anxiety for his children's moral welfare and unease with what seemed the 'feminine' world of affection and play. Tosh's moving study of Edward Benson's hard-hearted fathering in the 1860s and 70s demonstrates the chasm between what his children experienced, a harsh and intimidating man, and what the father imagined, that his adherence to duty gave adequate intimation to the fulsome love he felt towards his children, expressed only in correspondence with his wife. His children realised their father's affection for them after his death when they read their parents' letters. In many ways, this distant father was the most perplexing because he hovered on the periphery of family life, uncertain of his place within it. In stark contrast, the 'intimate' or fond father enjoyed demonstrative and easy familiarity with his offspring: they were playmates and friends with a respect for the authority and protection of fathers.¹¹ In the preface to the paperback edition of *A man's place* (2007), Tosh wryly commented on the criticism he received for his discussion of 'tender and tolerant' fathers as a 'gratuitous feelgood approach'. Some reviewers were so attached to the negative stereotype of Victorian paterfamilias as the emblem *par excellence* of patriarchy that they were unwilling to counter the possibility that not all fathers quite fit that mould.¹²

¹⁰ Claudia Nelson, *Invisible Men: Fatherhood in Victorian Periodicals, 1850–1910* (Athens, Georgia, and London: University of Georgia Press, 1995); John Gillis, *A world of their own making: a history of myth and ritual in family life* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹¹ John Tosh, *A man's place: masculinity and the middle-class home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, [1999] 2007), 91–100.

¹² Tosh, *A man's place*, xi–xii.

Thankfully, studies post-Tosh confirmed the complexity of the bourgeois father.¹³ Most recently, Valerie Sanders's *The tragi-comedy of Victorian fatherhood* (2009) traced fathering among the intellectual and cultural elite. Sanders's fathers by turn are affectionate, demanding, suffused with self-recrimination and guilt, cross at the shortcomings of offspring, consumed by grief for dead children, educators and guides, disciplinarians and friends.¹⁴ Despite the inclusive title of the book, Sanders's fathers were a relatively small group of men. The ongoing conflation of 'Victorian' fatherhood with bourgeois men perpetuates assumptions that working-class fathers' experiences are 'other' without interrogating what those experiences might be or, how working-class actors invested meaning in paternal identities and processes. The focus on histories of bourgeois fatherhood since the 1990s is, perhaps, a reflection of the ready availability of sources for middle-class interiority but, also, that middle-class scholars have a preconceived notion of what affect and attachment look like that precludes interrogation of obscure working-class selfhoods. Aside from studies of fatherhood in popular culture and social science in the mid-twentieth century, the interpersonal dimensions of working-class fatherhood remain obscure.¹⁵ Yet, as Steedman noted, we must resist the temptation to gloss working-class lives with the 'patina of stolid emotional sameness'.¹⁶

Research into working-class men and family remains preoccupied with paternal role and its relation to family economy, citizenship, men and work and the highs and lows of spousal relations.¹⁷ Histories of working-class family life in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries rely

¹³ See especially, Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, 'Fathers and the Victorian Parental Role', *Women's History Review* 15:4 (2006), 551–9; Valerie Sanders, 'What do you want to know about next? Charles Kingsley's model of educational fatherhood' in Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers (eds.), *Gender and fatherhood in the nineteenth century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 55–70; Elizabeth Buettner, 'Fatherhood real, imagined, denied: British men in Imperial India' in Broughton and Rogers, *Gender and fatherhood*, 178–189.

¹⁴ Valerie Sanders, *The tragi-comedy of Victorian fatherhood* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ See especially Tim Fisher, 'Fatherhood and the British Fathercraft Movement, 1919–1939', *Gender and History* 17:2 (2005), 441–62; Laura King, *Family men: fatherhood and masculinity, c.1914–1960* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷ See for example, Ginger Frost, *Living in sin: co-habiting as husband and wife in the nineteenth century* (Manchester University Press, 2008); Anna Clark, *The struggle for the breeches: gender and the making of the British working class* (London: Rovers Oram, 1995); Matthew McCormack, 'Married men and the fathers of families: fatherhood and franchise reform in Britain' in Broughton and Rogers, *Gender and fatherhood*, 43–54; Andrew Walker, 'Father's pride? Fatherhood in industrialising communities' in Broughton and Rogers, *Gender and fatherhood*, 113–125.

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overwhelmingly on official discourse. Inevitably, such methodologies reproduce a contemporary fixation with separate spheres and the increasing social welfare policies targeted at mothers. They focus on the minority of fathers who were drunk, violent or who deserted their families. Even accounts of good husbands tend to place them in a negative context; they did not drink their wages nor did they beat their wives.¹⁸ Likewise, the dominant chronology of social reform skews the research agenda towards legislation and policy initiatives aimed at cementing the ‘family wage’ and men and women’s prescribed roles within it. This closes down potential questions about everyday working-class life and imposes a model on working-class family members that does not necessarily tally with the priorities of individuals seeking to make sense of childhood experience.

At the outset of this project, I also turned to the substantial corpus of social investigation and commentary on working-class family life. The vast majority of these texts discuss men as agents of family decline, through drink, wilful idleness or brutality. Where studies did engage with working or ‘respectable’ men, it was primarily in the context of the labour question and economics. Little wonder the ‘absent’ or ‘feckless’ father is such a perennial figure in histories of the plebeian family; other kinds of fathers are literally ‘absent’ from the political, welfare or social family story.¹⁹ It is not surprising that despite Abrams’s call to take up the cause of ‘invisible’ fathers, there has been little published scholarship to rectify working-class men’s peripheral status in the family story. A notable exception to this trend is Megan Doolittle’s incisive mapping of the power dynamics of family life in relation to gender, age and fathers’ responsibilities.²⁰

In the introduction to their collection of essays on gender and fatherhood in the nineteenth century, Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers (2007) mapped the key sites in which Victorian fatherhood had

¹⁸ Lynn Abrams, ‘There was nobody like my daddy’.

¹⁹ This is not to say that these sources cannot be used in others ways. The development of a critical literature on the ‘slum imaginary’ and analysis of social investigators’ motives is one example. See for instance, Seth Koven, *Slumming: sexual and social politics in Victorian London* (University of Princeton Press, 2004) and Ellen Ross (ed.), *Slum travellers: ladies and London poverty, 1860–1920* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 2007), 1–39.

²⁰ Megan Doolittle, ‘Missing Fathers: Assembling a History of Fatherhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century England’, PhD Thesis, University of Essex, 1996; Megan Doolittle, ‘Fatherhood and family shame: masculinity, welfare and the workhouse in late-nineteenth-century England’ in Lucy Delap, Ben Griffin and Abigail Wills (eds.), *The politics of domestic authority in Britain since 1800* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 84–108; Megan Doolittle, ‘Time, space, and memories; the father’s chair and grandfather clocks in Victorian working-class domestic lives’, *Home Cultures*, 8:3 (2011), 245–264.

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typically been the subject of scholarly analysis: the law, industrialisation, demography and fertility and religion.²¹ These could only partially account for fatherhood as experience and identity. Rather, they argued, fatherhood needed to be approached as a process whereby men could embrace the multiple dimensions of fathering and family over the life course.²² This book runs with Broughton and Rogers's model of fatherhood, constituted of multiple components that certainly brought power but also responsibilities, pleasures and anguish, and that were subject to continual contextual change.

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Walter Citrine was born in Liverpool, 1887. He wrote his autobiography at the age of seventy-seven having spent his adult life engaged in trade union activism and Labour politics. His mother was a hospital nurse before she married Citrine's father, a widower seafarer, in 1881. Citrine had five siblings, including a half-brother from his father's first marriage. Citrine said little of his mother except that he loved her, bore deep gratitude for her self-sacrifice on behalf of her children and that she was a 'kind soul'. His discussion of his father focused overwhelmingly on the ship rigger's working life and identity. Citing neither love nor gratitude, Citrine rehearsed his father's youthful adventures at sea combined with reflections on the sailor's lot, and the impact of his father on home life. A strong and powerful man, Citrine Senior was inclined to fight and drink heavily, sometimes standing drinks for mates instead of handing his wages immediately to his wife.

And there we might leave Citrine and his father: so far, so predictable. Adult children (especially males) were grateful for the sacrifices of their mothers but said little about feelings for their fathers. Although working-class women rarely fit bourgeois or twentieth-century conceptions of the loving mother, their battle to feed, clothe and nurse offspring to better futures was a well-established trope of mother love.²³ The same children were typically more circumspect about fathers. Sure, most worked for their families but these men spent comparatively little time at home (especially the seafarer who left for weeks or months at a time) or engaged in what we commonly recognise as 'nurturing' tasks. The vast majority of working-class adults who grew up at the turn of the twentieth

²¹ See also Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The family story: blood, contract and intimacy, 1830–1960* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), 135–57.

²² Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers, 'Introduction: the empire of the father' in Broughton and Rogers, *Gender and fatherhood*, 1–30.

²³ This is the key argument shaping Ellen Ross's *Love and toil*.

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century replicated official bifurcations between women and men, home and work. Although such polarisations reflect a degree of lived experience, scholarship on working-class domestic economy shows that, financially at least, the sexual division of labour was usually muddier than that.²⁴ The implications of this polarised model, however, mapped onto the affective economy of family, places fathers at the periphery of family life, as Citrine's memoir might initially suggest.

The objective of my book is to complicate this model. Citrine sketched out a familiar dynamic: mother and children formed a unit of togetherness while father made contributions or incursions to that unit. But he, and his peers, rarely left their stories there. Neither should we. This book is interested in adults, like Citrine, and the stories they told about late Victorian and Edwardian fathers. Citrine's account of his father's labour was a story of sacrifice. On a literal level, labouring for his family took a significant toll on the man's body: his hand was crushed, he lost two fingers, his knee smashed, he was shipwrecked three times and each sailing was a dalliance with death. Citrine presented his father's everyday martyrdom as different entirely to that of his mother. Hers was rooted in the domestic interior and readily associated with her children; his father's sacrifice took place outside the home. The older man's courage, 'wonderful stamina' and determination to survive hardships that 'would have killed many men' were in no doubt. More to the point, although situated beyond the domestic, the meaning Citrine invested in his father's experience was grounded firmly within family.

The older man was flawed: he sometimes drank and shouted belligerently about the house. Nevertheless, Citrine did not depict his father in one-dimensional terms as merely feckless or neglectful, for this was not who his father was all the time. He had long periods of sobriety, drank mostly beer (although if he did drink spirits, his temper was foul) and became far steadier as he got older. He often threatened to thrash his offspring but never delivered; he was neither cruel nor inconsiderate; he defended his children against other men's violence; he had a clear intelligence and masterful personality. His father enabled Citrine's occupational future, securing him an apprenticeship on the understanding that his son would forego wages (in other words, the family forfeited wages) for the first six months in lieu of his father paying an apprenticeship premium he could not afford.

As a staunch trade unionist and Labour peer, the adult Citrine's 'labour' angle on his father's life was not surprising. Yet this emphasis hinted at other kinds of interchange too, where a father's strength,

²⁴ This is discussed further in Chapter 1.

courage and work provided a prism through which father and son could communicate. When his father ran a ship around the port to check that all was in working order, he would take the young Citrine with him for a boys' own adventure. Citrine knew so much about his father's work because, when the older man came home, he regaled his family with stories of the sea in all its terrible glory: they 'drank in every word' of his quarrels, escapades and accidents aboard ship. Work remained a mode of 'man-talk' for Citrine and his father as the boy matured into the trade union activist and successful politician. After his father retired, Citrine acted as amanuensis, recording his memories.

Inevitably, politics featured in Citrine's reconstruction of his childhood. As a boy, Citrine had donned a blue rosette and accompanied his Conservative father to political meetings, helping him canvass for local elections. 'What was good enough for my father', Citrine reflected, had been 'good enough for me.' Citrine's mischievous tone made the serious point that parents, and particularly fathers who, after all, were the ones with the vote, were strong formative influences on offspring while hinting at the young boys' admiration for, and pride in, the father that so often gave way in juvenile years to a bid for independence and varying degrees of conflict. That his father became a Labour voter in his older years suggested that father and son continued to talk politics, the Labour child delighting in his Tory pater's defection across the political divide. More importantly, Citrine's autobiography indicated the ways in which relationships that characterised childhood adopted different hues throughout the life cycle. As Citrine noted, people had to develop or they stagnated. The adult Citrine, a proud father of two sons, viewed his father from an entirely different perspective to the boy(s) he had been.²⁵

Drawing on the published autobiographies of working-class children born between c.1865 and 1910, this book interrogates, first, the caveats, qualifications and motivations that characterise personal accounts of fathers and, second, the ways in which authors chose to relate stories of fathers. As Citrine's career as a politician, government minister and peer indicates, many authors of published autobiography were exceptional.²⁶ But what makes them so exceptional is their banal beginnings. If Citrine and authors like him were extraordinary, it is notable that their siblings, cousins and friends were usually markedly more pedestrian. Census returns for 1891, 1901 and 1911 show that three of Citrine's brothers

²⁵ Walter Citrine, *Men and work: an autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), 11–27; 54–5; 61.

²⁶ Citrine felt the need to explain at length his peageage: he claimed it as a necessary responsibility to get Labour representation in the House of Lords. *Ibid.*, 310–322.

trained as a pupil teacher, a locksmith's apprentice and a sheet metal worker. His sister was a laundry clerk. None of them appears to have been distinguished in public life at local, regional or national level.

A pioneer of reading working-class autobiography as historical source, David Vincent argued that authors with exceptional life outcomes were able to 'project a pencil of light into the darkness of unspoken memories' of others whose 'lives were conditioned by the same social experience'.²⁷ The life stories considered here were written by political activists, trade unionists, Labour politicians, campaigners for adult literacy, lay ministers, clergymen and evangelists, and agrarian, industrial and domestic workers. Some were written as propaganda, entertainment, self-examination or morality tales; others fell into a 'commemorative' genre, charting a disappearing world. Mostly men composed published autobiography. Vincent pointed to the reasons for this: the exclusion of women from working-class organizations that proved a stimulus and guide to self-expression; the lack of women who attained public position in this period; the subordinate position of women within the family (they were too busy to write and the important task of committing family stories to posterity was left to men); and that they lacked self-confidence.²⁸ Other scholars have focused on women's reluctance to write about themselves as a form of feminine self-effacement.²⁹ When women did write, they were typically much more explicit about interpersonal dynamics, family conflicts and men at home. They were also alive to the gendered dynamics of family life. In her study of three working and lower-middle-class women's writing on fathers, Helen Rogers pointed to the particular sensitivity of female authors to paternal nurturing and their acute perception of the uneven separation of work and family in households.³⁰

It is notable that, with the over-representation of male autobiography, relatively few authors studied here paid explicit critical attention to the gendered dynamic of family. It is likely that many male authors unthinkingly replicated the inequalities of their parents' relationship in their marriages. Certainly, almost all the male authors cited here subscribed

²⁷ David Vincent, *Bread, knowledge and freedom: a study of nineteenth-century working-class autobiography* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

²⁹ For discussion of relationship between female self-effacement, autobiography and the camouflage of biography, see Helen Rogers, 'In the name of the father: political biographies by radical daughters' in David Amigoni (ed.), *Life writing and Victorian culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 145–164.

³⁰ Helen Rogers, 'First in the house: daughters on working-class fathers and fatherhood' in Broughton and Rogers, *Gender and fatherhood*, 126–37.