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978-0-521-88478-5 - The Tragi-Comedy of Victorian Fatherhood

Valerie Sanders

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THE TRAGI-COMEDY OF VICTORIAN FATHERHOOD

Examining Victorian middle-class fatherhood from the fathers' own perspective, Valerie Sanders dismantles the persistent stereotype of the nineteenth-century paterfamilias by focusing on the intimate family lives of influential public men. Beginning with Prince Albert as a high-profile patriarchal role-model, and comparing the parallel case histories of prominent Victorians such as Dickens, Darwin, Huxley and Gladstone, the book explores the strains on men in public life as they managed their private relationship with their children and found a language for the expression of their pleasure, grief and anxiety as fathers. In a context of cultural uncertainty about the legal rights and moral responsibilities of fatherhood, the study draws on a wealth of unpublished journals and letters to show how conscientious Victorian fathers in effect invented a meaningful domestic role for themselves which has been little understood.

VALERIE SANDERS is Professor of English at the University of Hull.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For my own father

Dr Michael Sanders

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Epigraph

My eldest boy – married not particularly to my satisfaction – is in business as an Eastern Merchant in the City, and will do well if he can find continuous energy; otherwise not. My second boy, with the 42nd Highlanders in India, spends more than he gets and has cost me money and disappointed me. My third boy, a good steady fellow but not at all brilliant, is educating expensively for engineers or artillery. My fourth (this sounds like a charade), a born little sailor, is a Midshipman in H.M.S. Orlando now at Bermuda, and will make his way any where. Remaining two, at school; . . . and Francis Jeffrey (I ought to have counted him as the third boy, so we'll take him in here as No. 2 and a half) in my office, pending a vacancy in the Foreign Office. Now you have the family bill of fare.

Charles Dickens enumerating his children in 1862

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction. Looking for the Victorian father	1
1 The failure of fatherhood at mid-century: four case histories	27
2 Theatrical fatherhood: Dickens and Macready	58
3 ‘How?’ and ‘Why?’: Kingsley as educating father	83
4 Matthew and son (and father): the Arnolds	109
5 ‘A fine degree of paternal fervour’: scientific fathering	136
6 Death comes for the Archbishop (and Prime Minister)	164
Conclusion	191
<i>Notes</i>	197
<i>Bibliography</i>	221
<i>Index</i>	238

Illustrations

1	Archibald Campbell Tait. From a photograph by John Jabez Edwin Mayall, engraved by D. J. Pound.	<i>page 43</i>
2	W. C. Macready as King Lear (1838) with Helen Faucit as the dead Cordelia; by permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.	67
3	Thomas Henry Huxley reading: pencil drawing by his daughter Marian Collier; by permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.	155
4	W. E. Gladstone with his granddaughter Dorothy Drew; by permission of Sir William and C. A. Gladstone, Flintshire Record Office and St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden.	170
5	Edward White Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury. Photograph by William Downey; by permission of the Mary Evans Picture Library.	176

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Valerie Sanders

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments*

The initial idea for this book came from a conference, *Father Figures: Gender and Paternity in the Modern Age*, held at Liverpool John Moores University in 2003, which opened up a fabulously rich field for researchers from all disciplines. The paper I gave on Kingsley, included in the book of conference essays, *Gender and Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century* (2007), edited by Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers, has been expanded for this current book. The chapter on Dickens and Macready was given as a research paper, first at Hull University and then for a seminar at the University of Sunderland: I am grateful to colleagues past and present for their comments on each occasion. Further topics, such as the ‘idle son’ theme, Thomas Arnold’s attempts to make his daughter curtsy to her mother, and patterns of godfathering, were prompted by other conference opportunities: the British Association for Victorian Studies in Liverpool in 2006; *Gendering the Subject*, University of Wales, Gregynog in 2004; and *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain* at King’s College, Cambridge, in 2006. I owe much to people I met at these events, who are unaware that they had a hand in producing this book.

Among those who are, special thanks are due to Linda Bree of Cambridge University Press for her positive response to the initial proposal, and to Maartje Scheltens for guiding the finished product towards publication. Noël O’Sullivan suggested the importance of ‘contingency’ to the psychology of the Victorians, and an email correspondence with Martin Danahay helped develop my ideas on idle sons and masculine work. Janet Clare kindly checked the material on Macready and Shakespeare. Practical help was offered by many librarians who always had the boxes of papers ready on the day, especially Anne Barrett at Imperial College, and staff at the Flintshire Record Office. Teaching relief to begin and complete the research was provided by the University of Hull, and The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Research Leave

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88478-5 - The Tragi-Comedy of Victorian Fatherhood

Valerie Sanders

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

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Quotations from Matthew Arnold's letters are reprinted by permission of The University of Virginia Press, from Matthew Arnold, *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1996–2001), © The University of Virginia Press 1996–2001.

The book is dedicated to my own father, Dr Michael Sanders, who took me to my first day at school, cured me of many childhood illnesses, and still worries about my walking home alone. My mother, Patricia Sanders, like all the wise wives and mothers in this book, has provided constant support, and more hot dinners than I care to mention.

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