The value of motherhood: understanding motherhood from maternal absence.

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In the late eighteenth century, as the unpaid work performed by western mothers emerged as something worthy of discussion, a clear image of the good mother was created: she was supposed to be selfless, tender, full of love, and ever devoted to her offspring.[1] These writers were interested in the sentiments of motherhood rather than the more the mundane aspects of the day-to-day work involved in caring for a child – a focus that was no doubt connected to the fact that their writing emanated from elite culture, where the rearing of infants and children was undertaken by paid servants rather than the birthmother herself. And inevitably, the concerns of these early writers and thinkers inflected the ways in which historians of the second half of the twentieth century later approached the topic. The first generation of family historians did not, of course, accept these claims about maternal love uncritically. But they did place the existence of love (or otherwise) at the heart of their enquiries, focussing upon the emotional texture of mother-child relationship and the extent to which expressions and experiences of love have evolved over time.[2]

Yet since second-wave feminism in the 1970s, feminist scholars have been arguing for an alternative frame for understanding motherhood. Motherhood, they pointed out, might make emotional demands, but it involves physical labour as well – the shopping, cooking, washing, cleaning and other forms of domestic work necessary to sustain life. The point was explained with some force by the German feminist, Alice Schwarzer, in 1984. She wrote: 'Given that one can hardly tell women that washing up saucepans is their divine mission, they are told that bringing up children is their divine mission. But the way things are in this world, bringing up children has a great deal in common with washing up saucepans.'[3] This offered a new discourse of motherhood, though one rooted (once again) in the experience of its creators – in this case of feminist scholars trying to carve out an intellectual life whilst burdened with the

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[1] For some examples, see: William Buchan, *Advice to Mothers on the Subject of Their Own Health* (London, 1811); Mrs William Parkes, *Domestic Duties – Instructions to Young Married Ladies* (London, 1825); Sarah Ellis, *The Mothers of England: Their Influence and Responsibility* (London, 1843).

[2] Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London, 1976); Elisabeth Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct* (London, 1981); Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge, 1983); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987); M. Jeanne Peterson, *Family, Love, and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen* (Bloomington Ind., 1989); Claudia Nelson and Ann Sumner Holmes, eds., *Maternal Instincts: Visions of Motherhood and Sexuality in Britain, 1875–1925* (Basingstoke, 1997); Ellen Bayuk Rosenman and Claudia C. Klaver, eds., *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal* (Columbus, Ohio, 2008). Joanne Bailey, *Parenting in England, 1760–1830: Emotion, Identity, and Generation* (Oxford, 2012).

[3] Alice Schwarzer, *After* The Second Sex. *Conversations with Simone de Beauvoir* (New York, 1984), p.114. See also: M Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London, 1980); Idem and M. McIntosh, 'The 'Family Wage': Some Problems for Socialists and Feminists,' *Capital and Class*, no. 11, (1980), 51-72.

care of children. It provided a context for historians to move away from the emotions of motherhood and focus instead upon motherhood as a form of labour.[4]

Yet the historical study of motherhood remains difficult. Although mothering involves work, it is, in contrast to most forms of work, unpaid rendering it particularly difficult to pick up in historical sources.[5] . .. tasks that have to be done .. without which homes simply cease to function at all. But also tasks that are correctly understood as work, in that they can be undertaken by somebody else. But like other writers in this volume, also draw attention to what has been variously labelled 'worry work', 'organisational labour', and 'emotional work' .. more nebulous – overseeing the welfare of children

What follows is based upon a comprehensive reading of autobiographical records covering the long nineteenth century.[6] The authors I consider were born between 1750 and 1906. In all, I have surveyed 921 autobiographies, which provides a rich seam of evidence for exploring the theme of maternal labour. It is certainly clear that these working-class writers viewed their mothers as having 'worked' for the family and regarded housekeeping as belonging to the sphere of work. Many of the autobiographers had crystal clear memories of how hard and how long their mothers had worked to ensure that the household functioned and some provided detailed accounts of every aspect of their daily routines. Albert Card, for example, remembered that his mother had been 'busy all day long' with her housework and shopping.[7] George Gregory's mother did not have a paid job outside the home, but he nonetheless concluded that she 'did her work well'.[8] Looking back over his life in a mining village, Jim Bullock thought that the women in his community 'worked as hard' as the men 'and even longer hours' than them.[9]

Nonetheless, the difficulty remains that the autobiographers did not write about their mothers' work in a way that enables us to probe its value. Inevitably, the autobiographers did not write about maternal labour using a simple vocabulary of pounds, shillings and pence, or in a way that enables us to set a monetary value on the caring and domestic work that they

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[4] Denise Riley, 'War in the Nursery', *Feminist Review*, 2 (1979), pp. 82-108; Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place is in the Home: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984); Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in outcast London, 1870-1918* (Oxford, 1993);

[5] Jane Whittle, 'A critique of approaches to 'domestic work': women, work and the preindustrial economy' (unpublished paper).

[6] John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall, eds., *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography, 1790–1900* vol.1 (New York, 1984). A small proportion of the items they list have proved unsuitable for this study, generally either because the autobiography contains no family detail or because the item has been lost or proved unobtainable.

[7] Bedfordshire Local Studies Library, Central Library, Bedford: Albert Card, 'A working-class lad's view of life in Bedford in the early part of the century narrated by Albert Edwin Card', LS BED/CAR, p.3.

[8] Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiography (BAWCA), Brunel University: George Gregory, Untitled, 1:283, pp.31-2.

[9] Bullock, Jim, *Them and Us, With a Last Word by Lord Robens* (London, 1972), p.14. A point echoed in Harry Lathey Hemmens, *Such has been my Life: An Autobiography, with an introduction by Hugh Martin (London, 1953)*, p.11

did.[10] Nor, of course, did they employ more recent concepts such as emotional labour or dwell upon the organisational work involved in raising children. As such, a straightforward engagement with the autobiographical texts simply indicates that the domestic labour that mothers performed was arduous and time-consuming. If we are to probe the value of this labour, rather than to provide a descriptive account of its nature, we will need to proceed in a different way.

Instead, we will proceed by thinking about absence: mothers who were not there. What happened to families when mothers were not present to provide care for their children (and husbands)? It is my contention that we can learn something about the social value of motherhood by looking at families were mothers who were absent.

Let us start with some numbers. Throughout the nineteenth century and down to the eve of the First World War, the mortality rate was relatively high. Conventional demographic data puts expectation of life at birth for adults at around forty years through most of the nineteenth century, rising to fifty years by the Edwardian period.[11] We can use the autobiographies to estimate the proportion of families effected by maternal death: just under ten percent lost their mothers before the age of sixteen. Though in fact, death was not the only means by which mothers and children became separated. In addition, family breakdown caused some children to become separated from living mothers. A further seven percent of writers had become motherless by the age of sixteen by this means. The problem of motherlessness was thus clearly not negligible: nearly one in five of all writers spent at least some part of their childhood without a mother to perform the customary maternal duties of providing care. So how exactly did families function without mothers to do this work?

It is immediately apparent from the autobiographies that although mothering was unpaid, maternal work acquired a more tangible value when birth mothers were not available to do it. When mothers died (or were absent), the space could not be left unfilled. Just one of the autobiographer's fathers attempted to dispense with any form of surrogate mother when his wife died. This was the father of George Lloyd – a sailor whose wife died in childbirth, when George was ten.[12] She left an infant-in-arms and several dependent children. His grandmother came and took the baby away leaving the remaining children at home in their father's care. Mr Lloyd, however, was struggling to find work and (in his son's words) was 'terribly depressed', so when an opportunity to work on a ship bound for the West Indies presented itself he took it, leaving his children at home alone. George was ten and he was the second eldest of the children. Inevitably, George and his elder sibling were unable to assume the roles of parents for a family comprising several young children and the authorities eventually stepped in, placing all the children in an industrial school and charging Mr Lloyd with neglect when he returned from sea. Clearly, making no plan was not an option and Mr

[10] For more about autobiographies as a historical source, see Emma Griffin: *Home Economics: Money and Family in the Age of Victoria* (Yale, UP forthcoming).
[11] Andrew Hinde, *England's Population. A History since the Domesday Survey* (London, 2003), figure 12.1, p.194.
[12] (BAWCA): George Lloyd, 'The Autobiography of George Brawd', 3:108

Lloyd's decision in this respect placed him on the wrong side of the law. Fathers needed to fashion some form of domestic arrangement for their children. What did they do? And what did it cost them?

Most men turned initially to their wider family in search of female relatives to take on some of the duties of their departed wife, though they often found that their family were unable to provide very much help. Although single mothers occasionally returned to their families' homes along with their children,[13] there is virtually no evidence anywhere in the autobiographical record of bereaved fathers giving up their own home and moving in with their extended family with their children in tow. Following the unexplained breakdown in his wife's health shortly after the death of a baby boy, Ralph Rooney initially moved next door to his in-laws, presumably so that his sister-in-law could help care for his two surviving children. The census indicates that the two families later moved into one home.[14] But the amalgamation of two families under one roof was extremely rare, particularly where one of the families was headed by a single-father, and this was clearly not a standard solution.

More commonly, a single-father's parents, siblings, in-laws or extended kin helped out by taking a motherless child into their home, but there were limits to how many children extended family members could absorb into their own homes, and it was unusual for them to take more than just one, or at most two, children. When John Patterson's mother died, his father sent his infant brother to their grandmother and his elder brother to an uncle, leaving just John at home with him.[15] John Severn's father coped with his wife's departure by sending John to his uncle's home, whilst his older sister 'was packed off to Derby, to be with one of our aunts'.[16] These arrangements were usually sufficient to ensure that a level of material comfort was provided, though they also involved the break-up of the family. Furthermore, established households could not usually accommodate more than one or two children, so fathers of large families needed to make a more substantial arrangement for their now motherless children. And although they had not previously paid for their wife's labour, they usually incurred costs in doing so.

A more stable solution was to find a female family member to move into the home and perform the mother's duties. Older daughters, if of a suitable age and unmarried without a household of their own, were the first and most obvious solution, though occasionally aunts

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[13] For example: Rawtenstall Local Studies Library, Rawtenstall: Mary Luty, 'My Life has Sparkled', LG3 LUTY, Mary/LUT; Tom Tremewan, *Cornish Youth. Memories of a Perran Boy (1895-1910)* (Truro, 1968). John Taylor, 'Autobiographical sketch', in *Poems; Chiefly on Themes of Scottish Interest* (Edinburgh, 1875), pp. 1-48

[14] Ralph Rooney, *The Story of my Life*, with a preface by J. H. (Bury, 1947; 4th edn. 2011), p. 6, Census, 1901. See also Arthur Gair, *Copt Hill to Ryhope: A Colliery Engineer's Life* (Chester-le-Street, 1982).

[15] John Edward Patterson, *My Vagabondage: Being the Intimate Autobiography of a Nature's Nomad* (London, 1911).

[16] J Milliot Severn, *The Life Story and Experiences of a Phrenologist* (Brighton, 1929), p.6. See also Joseph Gwyer, *Life and Poems*, p.5.

or grandmothers moved in and took on the role in their place.[17] Nellie Barter was nineteen, when her mother became bed-ridden and unable to run the home. Nellie realised that as she was 'the last girl not married, it was my duty to give up my work', and this she duly did.[18] Mildred Curtis had to pass up the opportunity to stay on at school and train to be a teacher because 'my mother's health was failing, so it was housework for me, cooking, cleaning, washing, mending and so on'.[19] But unlike mothers, older sisters were not usually economically inactive. Daughters who were old enough to run a household, were also old enough to work outside the home – so this effectively meant their redeployment from paid work into unpaid work. Mothering might have been unwaged, but when young women gave up their work to do a mother's work they lost a wage in doing so.

This consideration was of course even more acute for those who had lost their mothers. Indeed, it was almost inevitable that motherless daughters would spend some part of their adolescence helping to run the family home. Hilda Barnard's elder sister had taken over the housekeeping following their mother's death whilst Hilda found a position as a sewing maid. When her elder sister died, it was Hilda's turn to return home and 'look after Father and my brothers'.[20] When Frank Kibblewhite's mother died his sister returned from her position in service to 'take Mother's Place' at the home.[21] Catherine McLouglin was ten and the eldest daughter when her mother died in childbirth, so with a grim inevitability her mother's duties soon devolved to her. Her attempt to start at the mill at the age of twelve came to nothing: she had to 'stop going to the mill and ensure the boys were cared for'.[22] Once again, in each of these cases, young women had to exchange waged work for unwaged work. Although the solution was cost neutral to their families, their lost wages remind us that although mothers were not paid for their work, it still had a cost.

Of course, many families did not have an elder daughter to draw upon, and where this was the case some form of alternative solution needed to be found and paid for. When John Castle was widowed with one child in the 1840s he realised he could 'not get on without a woman in the house', so hired a live-in housekeeper for one shilling a week. But he soon found 'everything going to ruin – bad washing, bad bread' and needed to look for an alternative solution.[23] A mother's work was worth more than board and lodging and a shilling a week. Jim Uglow's father similarly struggled to find a suitable surrogate carer for his three children

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[17] Cecil Hewitt Rolph, *Living Twice. An Autobiography* (London, 1974), p.34. See also: Ralph Reader, *Ralph Reader Remembers* (Folkestone, 1974), p.10; Marianne Farningham, *A Working Woman's Life: An Autobiography* (London, 1907), p.43.

[18] Nellie Hoare née Barter, *A Winton Story* (Bournemouth, 1982), p28.

[19] Mildred Edwards née Curtis, *Our City, Our People 1889-1978: Memories* (Carlisle, 1978), pp.50-4.

[20] Hilda Barnard, *A Life in Charing* (Charing and District Local History Society, 1986), p.5.

[21] Imperial War Museum: F. H Kibblewhite, Private Papers of F. H. Kibblewhite, Documents 4766, chapter 2, p.1. Others raised by elder sisters include: (BAWCA): Lottie Barker, 'My life as I remember it', 2:37 [pp.39]. Southwark Local History Library and Archive: Ivy Violet Meader, Untitled, [p.3].

[22] (BAWCA): Catherine McLouglin, Untitled, 1:477, no pag [pp.7-9]. See also: See also: Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie: From Suffragette to Stepney Councillor* (London, 1980); Farningham, *Working Woman's Life*, p.44. Alice Rushmer, p.78.

[23] John Castle, 'Memoirs', in A. F. J. Brown, ed., *Essex People 1750-1900, from their Diaries Memoirs and Letters*. Essex Record Office Publications, 59, 1972, p.121

aged eleven and younger, when his wife absconded with another man. Although the first of his housekeepers 'looked after us well', she left the family after eighteen months, and the situation rapidly deteriorated thereafter. Another four housekeepers followed 'in quick succession', who between them provided very little care and pawned most of the household goods. Before long it seems that his father had hoped to dispense with any form of payment beyond food and lodging at all. The subsequent housekeepers, Jim thought, were just 'prostitutes he had picked up in public houses and relied on their good nature to tide things over for a month or two', and when these failed the responsibility for housekeeping fell on Jim's shoulders.[24] One recurring feature of the households that employed housekeepers was their rapid turnover. As W. H Stevens observed, of his motherless household: 'we had many domestic help changes.'[25] In the pre-modern era, a considerable amount of domestic work was necessary to sustain households – and the women who did it clearly considered it was worth more than free food and lodging and a few shillings a week in pocket money. As Marjory Todd grimly recalled: 'What woman … would have considered coming to a home like ours, with five children under fourteen and for the tiny wage and stark accommodation which was all that we could offer? We were soon to know …'[26] More generally, it is clear that many widowed fathers found that the labour their wife had provided for their family could not easily be bought on the open market – or at least not at a price they were willing to pay.

Once the goodwill and resources of extended family and older daughters had been exhausted, fathers turned to paid lodgings to provide care for their children. This was the solution chosen by George Barber's father, when their mother died leaving George, aged five, and his younger brother who was just nine months old. Their father placed them in lodgings, 'whilst he went away seeking work'.[27] Elsie Oman's father also found lodgings for his motherless children – in this case the widow of his brother.[28] Inevitably, the children involved were not aware of the finances behind these solutions, but these kinds of surrogate carers certainly needed to be paid – a reminder once more that though mothers were not paid for their labour, when they were absent somebody else had to be paid to do it. Perhaps no less striking, however, is how unusual these kinds of paid solutions were. Just six fathers paid for live-in housekeepers (usually for short duration and in the case of Jim Uglow it is not even clear if payment to the housekeepers was made). Just two paid for lodgings. In fact, men were considerably more likely to turn to institutions as a solution to their dilemma. In contrast to the eight children

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[24] Jim Uglow, *Sailorman: A Barge-master's Story* (London, 1975), pp.16-18.

[25] W. H. Stevens, *A Likely Victorian Lad: An Autobiography* (Leicestershire, [1985]), p.6. See also John Edward Patterson, *My Vagabondage: Being the Intimate Autobiography of a Nature's Nomad* (London, 1911); Gair *Copt Hill*, pp.23-5; John Gray, *Gin and Bitters* with an intro by Ethel Mannin (London, [1938]).

[26] Marjory Todd, *Snakes and Ladders: An Autobiography* (London, 1960), p.70. Two other families hired paid housekeepers. See: Joseph Gutteridge, 'Autobiography of Joseph Gutteridge', in V. E. Chancellor, ed., *Master and Artisan in Victorian England; The Diary of William Andrews and the Autobiography of Joseph Gutteridge (*London, 1969); Newport Central Library (Local Studies Collection) Newport: Henry Hughes, 'Autobiography', qM380.920.HUG.

[27] George H. Barber, *From Workhouse to Lord Mayor. An Autobiography*, with a foreword by Rev. Geo H. Marshall (Tunstall, 1937), p.3. See also Stevens, *Likely Victorian Lad*, pp.2-3.

[28] Elsie Oman, *Salford Stepping Stones* (Manchester, 1983)

cared for by paid surrogates, thirty-five of the autobiographers had spent some part of their childhood within an institution.

Although typically called orphanages, many of the children living in Victorian institutions were not orphans. Amongst these thirty-five autobiographers, just four had no living parents – all the others had at least one, sometimes two, parents who were alive yet unable for one reason or another to provide a suitable home.[29] With no apparent sense of the contradiction, Thomas Burke recalled that on the morning of his admittance to a 'Home for Orphans', the orphans all lined up on a bench with their 'mothers and guardians'.[30] Institutions were used both by single-mothers who lacked the means to provide for their children following the death or departure of their breadwinner, and by single-fathers, as a solution to their childcare needs following the loss of their wife. They were clearly a vital part of the social fabric, playing an important role in raising children when their biological parents were not able to do so themselves. The financing of these institutions is worth noting. Orphanages were not, of course, free to run: the children required food, clothing, and supervision, and each of these elements had to be paid for. Yet they were almost always free at the point of use. This point may seem obvious, but it is worth emphasising that the Victorian state and society did not generally provide any public services to parents free of charge, so the existence of free-to-use institutions for motherless children is significant. It reinforces that cash transactions for mothering work were not customary. It was not simply that fathers were unwilling to pay for surrogate mothers. The belief that mothering and childcare was supposed to be done for free had a much wider cultural currency and was sustained by a network of institutions.

Given the challenges that single-fathers faced in finding care for their children, many inevitably looked to remarriage as the most satisfactory answer to maternal absence. After his unsuccessful experience with a housekeeper, John Castle concluded that 'the best thing would be to marry again'. He settled his sights on Esther Grove, an acquaintance of his deceased wife, and after a short courtship of 'some weeks', they tied the knot.[31] It was a common solution, as fathers found themselves unable to keep the home running without some form of female domestic work, and marriage was the only means of accessing that labour.

Stepmothers certainly fared better than housekeepers in maintaining a functioning household, and a small number of the autobiographers provided very positive accounts of their lives with

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[29] These were: Rev. J. H. Howard, *Winding Lanes. A Book of Impressions and Recollections* (Caernarvon, [1938]); [James B Turnbull], *Reminiscences of a Stonemason, by a Working Man* (London, 1908); Bedfordshire and Luton Archives Service, Bedford: Joseph Bell, 'The Story of 12 Years in the Life of an Orphan 1846-1858 told by himself: Chapters from the autobiography of a village lad', 2 volumes, Z1288/1/1-2. (BAWCA): Alice Pidgeon, 'Looking over my shoulder to childhood days and after', 2:619

[30] Thomas Burke, *The Wind and the Rain: A Book of Confessions* (New York, 1924), p.68, though see also Anne Veronica Witchard, *Thomas Burke's Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown* (Routledge, 2017) for important qualifications about his childhood, pp.7-8.

[31] Castle, 'Memoirs', p.121. See also William Hanson, *The Life of William Hanson, Written by Himself* (Halifax, 2nd edn 1883), pp.12-13.

their new mothers.[32] But criticism and complaint were more common. A few levelled serious allegations of abuse and neglect. Walter Freer, for example, remembered that both he and his younger sister were 'rebuffed and neglected' by their stepmother, adding that he had been 'singled out for particularly harsh treatment'.[33] 'Hunger, continuous scolding and punishment were my lot,' declared Benjamin Tillett of his first stepmother. Of his second; 'lack of care and short commons in food, shoes, and clothes … she was a good mother to her own four children, but I was the odd one out.'[34] The best that Robert Wearmouth could say of his stepmother was that despite her 'ignorance, prejudice, and preference' she was not 'an absolute failure'.[35] Several others provided more muted accounts of mistreatment or neglect.

Quite apart from the clash of personalities that may have underpinned some of these difficulties, lay a number of structural problems militated against successful relationships. In working-class households, the pressure on resources was acute, and the amalgamation of different families of course served to increase that pressure. Some stepmothers brought a number of their own children to the marriage and more were often born afterwards, so children found themselves with new mothers taxed with expanding responsibilities and limited financial means. One writer recalled the slow but inexorable deterioration in her relationship with her stepmother. Their life together was initially not 'very unhappy; she was not unkind at first.' But in time she had children of her own and began to view her stepdaughter as 'an interloper and a nuisance'. It did not help that the family was poor and she was 'unable to provide for me as well as her own children'.[36] Of course, the pressure on resources was acute in many nuclear families too, and we should not imagine them to be havens free from conflict.[37] Nonetheless, complaints over the division of work, food and other basic necessities were certainly more frequently voiced by the autobiographers raised by stepmothers than by those living with their mothers.

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[32] John Wood, *Autobiography of John Wood, an Old and Well Known Bradfordian* (Bradford, 1877), p.7; Mary Smith, *The Autobiography of Mary Smith, Schoolmistress and Nonconformist* (Carlisle, 1892), pp.4-5. Hughes, Untitled; Rolph, *Living Twice*, p.34.

[33] Walter Freer, *My Life and Memories, with a foreword by E. Rosslyn Mitchell* (Glasgow, 1929), p.189.

[34] Ben Tillett, *Memories and Reflections, with a Foreword by the T. Hon. Philip Snowden, M. P.* (London, 1931), p.25, 28-9.

[35] Robert F. Wearmouth, *Pages from a Padre's Diary: A Story of Struggle and Triumph, of Sorrow and Sympathy* (Cullercoats, n.d.).

[36] *Confessions of a Dancing Girl. By Herself* (London [1913]), p.9. See also (BAWCA): M. Abbley, 'Soul Adrift – being the memoirs of a queer child', Uncatalogued; (BAWCA): Margaret Watson, Untitled, 2:802; Barnes, *Tough Annie;* Huw T. Edwards, *Hewn From the Rock: An Autobiography of Huw T. Edwards* (Cardiff, 1967), pp.18-19; Joseph Gutteridge, 'Autobiography of Joseph Gutteridge', in V. E. Chancellor, ed., *Master and Artisan in Victorian England; The Diary of William Andrews and the Autobiography of Joseph Gutteridge (*London, 1969); James Inches Hillocks, *Hard Battles for Life and Usefulness: An Autobiographic Record; also a Review of the Roots and Remedies of London Miseries* (London, 1884), p.27; Louise Jermy, *Memories of a Working Woman* (Norwich, 1934); Kenneth MacKenzie, *Been Places and Seen Things*, with an introduction by George Blake (London, 1935), pp.14-15; Meader, Untitled, [p.3].

[37] I discuss the significance of this in Emma Griffin, 'The emotions of motherhood: love, culture and poverty in Victorian England', *American Historical Review*, 123/1 (2018)

Indeed, whilst remarriage provided a reasonably effective solution for fathers' needs for meals and laundry, it was far less successful in providing a stable solution to their children's needs. .. emotional work. .. whilst rightly moved away from thinking of motherhood as a emotional … . this was something that those separated from their mothers felt particularly keenly.

As we have seen, most fathers' solutions to maternal absence involved breaking up the household and sending their children away to such relatives and institutions they could find. Although remarriage held out the promise of holding the family together, the reality was that many of the newly formed families did not last long. Occasionally, the father's children were rehomed swiftly after the remarriage.[38] Far more usually, however, the father's children were absorbed into a newly created household, which subsequently unravelled as tensions between children and stepmothers emerged. This was the outcome for Walter Freer, Ben Tillett, and Robert Wearmouth, who all indicated that they had run away from home as soon as they were able, and there are other examples amongst the autobiographers.[39] Kenneth MacKenzie, for example, wrote than when his father married the 'fat Salvation Army woman' he had been 'getting friendly with … [it] intensified my longing to get away from home'.[40] The fragmentation of families was further compounded by the departure of older children of their own accord if the household was reorganised in a fashion they disliked. In consequence, although the youngest children remained in the home, they no longer lived with the family they had previously known. Huw Edwards recalled that after his mother's death the family was 'completely scattered'. None of his siblings liked his father's new wife, and they found themselves new homes within a few short months of her arrival, leaving just Huw, 'the baby of the family' at home.[41]

Men who found themselves solely responsible for their families turned to many different strategies, but there was one unifying element to them all: they all involved finding other women to do the caring and domestic work that their wives had previously performed. By the same token, there was one strategy that was noticeable absent: men did not attempt to take over the domestic work themselves – to add housekeeping to their primary task of breadwinning. In a collection of almost 1,000 autobiographies, there is just one example of a father who successfully tried this strategy. This was the father of Robert Murdie, who made the highly unusual statement: 'My father brought me up. He was good at looking after us.' Robert's mother had died when he was six months old, and his father had managed to hold his family together largely through his own efforts – 'he was good in the house and did most things until my sister was old enough to do it for us'.[42] These unusual actions made him one

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[38] Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (London, [1859], p.92.

[39] See for example: Abbley, 'Soul Adrift'; Watson, Untitled; J. W. Emsley, Autobiographical introduction to *Social Questions and National Problems their Evils and Remedies* (Bradford, 1901), pp. 9-28; Gutteridge, 'Autobiography'; Jermy, *Memories*; Barnes, *Tough Annie*.

[40] MacKenzie, *Been Places*, pp.14-15.

[41] Edwards, *Hewn From Rock*, pp.18-19. Meader, Untitled; Barnes, *Tough Annie*.

[42] Robert Kerr Murdie, 'Robert Kerr Murdie', in *Looking Back: a Selection of Northumbrian Childhood Memories, 1891-1945*, ed. Jane Torday (Morpeth, 1983), p.39. See also: Benjamin North, *Autobiography of Benjamin North* (Aylesbury, 1882).

of a handful of single-fathers who appears to have kept all his children at home together, and the only one to play a meaningful role in raising them and running the home.

It is also important to point out the asymmetry between the sexes when it came to single-parent families. Men became single-fathers; but women of course became single-mothers too. Indeed, there were far more single mothers amongst the autobiographers than single fathers, as not as only was the male mortality rate higher, the male desertion rate much higher too. Amongst our collection of autobiographies, there were seventy-four single fathers and double that number of single mothers – 150 in all. It is valuable to compare the different strategies by men and by women when faced with the same problem.

Single mothers made use of many of the same solutions as single fathers. They turned to extended family, institutions and remarriage in order to ensure care for their children. But these options were all dwarfed by one other: they simply muddled by on their own, finding whatever work they could to replace their husband's missing wage and somehow managing to keep their deeply impoverished household afloat. When Dorothy Ash's father died, friends and family proposed a familiar set of solutions for the five children: a great uncle would take in the eldest son; friends offered to secure a place in an orphanage for the two youngest boys; and a childless aunt offered to adopt Dorothy. But according to Dorothy, 'Mother said "No!"' to all these offers. She was young and healthy; 'she would work and keep us all together to share and share alike.'[43] Of course, we should not romanticise the situation of the single-mothers. The loss of a breadwinner and the need to add wage-earning to their housekeeping often took a very harsh toll on the wellbeing of single-mother families. Winifred Relph could divide her childhood 'into two parts, before my father's death and after'. Her father died when she was eight and 'almost overnight our life changed from a happy secure family … to a fatherless family with a worried, irritable mother, struggling to "Make ends meet"'.[44] Yet the desire to hold families together was strong and although it was difficult, it was something that most single-mothers managed to accomplish.

The figures tell the tale. Of the seventy-four single fathers who found themselves solely responsible for their family, forty-nine broke up the household, and just twenty-five kept the original household running through some combination of older daughters, housekeepers and remarriage. As housekeepers and remarriages were not always successful, some of these households in fact subsequently broke down. Amongst the 150 single-mothers, by contrast, the great majority kept the household together: 110 kept their families intact, and only twenty broke it up. In some of these twenty instances, the family was subsequently reunited again. (In a further fifteen instances the outcome was unclear.) It was clearly much more straightforward, and more culturally acceptable, for women to add breadwinning to their housekeeping than it was for men to add housekeeping to their breadwinning.

[43] Dorothy L Ash, *Memories of a London Childhood, recalled by Dorothy L Ash* (London, 1984), pp.9-10.
[44] Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxford: Winifred Relph, 'Autobiography', section entitled 'Childhood', p.1.

It is tempting to condemn the fathers for their individual failure to care for their children, but the sheer scale of the problem suggests that larger structural issues were at work. It is clear that most single fathers lacked any template for the role they had inherited. As Ben Tillett noted, following his mother's death his father 'was absolutely at a loss in meeting his domestic responsibilities'.[45] There was a practical element to men's difficulties in combining wage-earning and housekeeping. Men worked long hours and it was of course difficult to provide good quality care when working hours away from the home. Following the death of his wife, Margaret Watson's father made an attempt to keep his household together, but his efforts were sorely compromised by the long night shifts that he worked. His solution involved locking the children up in their room at night, and returning on his breaks to check up on them. His night work also meant that he slept during the day, so the children – they were six and four – were also unsupervised during much of the day.[46]

Of course, single-mothers often found they needed to return to the labour market, and were thus also in the position of having to work outside the home. Over eighty percent of single mothers returned to the labour market, though the availability of part-time work meant that many did not take on jobs that required very long hours. Yet some women did work long hours outside the home, and when they did so they still somehow managed to cope with the double burden. Where necessary, mothers put strenuous efforts into maintaining a degree of supervision over the domestic sphere that is in striking contrast to the single-fathers' engagement in household matters. Thanks to her job at the café, the widowed Mrs. Greenwood did not get home until seven in the evening. Her long daily absence was sorely felt by young Walter returning from school to a cold and empty house, but she cannot be faulted for her efforts to ensure her children's needs were met. She charged Walter with the care of his younger sister, made an arrangement with two neighbours to oversee both children, left two plates out on the table and arranged (and paid) for a neighbour to fill them with a hot lunch on a daily basis, and left food in the cupboard for their tea.[47] Aubrey Darby's mother went to a similar effort. Unable to provide for her son's meals whilst out at work, she contracted 'Muff Smith's family for meals'.[48] A range of small actions such as these were sufficient to sustain a child's wellbeing in a situation that was far from ideal.

The inability of fathers to act as surrogate mothers for what were, after all, their own children, was cultural as much as practical. Whilst long hours certainly made this dual role difficult, several of the autobiographers indicated that the problem went beyond the matter of time. Even outside working hours, their fathers were occupied by the external world and simply did not have their children's interests and little concerns in mind. The lack of concern that fathers had for their children is most visible in the actions of some of those who placed their children in institutions. When Alfred Lay's mother died in childbirth, his father put Alfred and his four siblings in the Aylesbury workhouse.[49] None of them ever heard from him again.

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[45] Tillett, *Memories*, p.25.
[46] Watson, Untitled, p.5
[47] Walter Greenwood, *There was a Time* (London, 1967), p.70.
[48] Aubrey S. Darby, *A View from the Alley*, ed. with notes by J. G. Dony (Luton, 1974), p.10.
[49] (BAWCA): Alfred George Henry Lay, 'Adventure', 3:211. And census.

One autobiographer reported that he had had had virtually no contact with his father after his mother's death. His father 'deserted the family' and the writer ended up in the Orphan's Hospital.[50]

Yet even those who made a more determined attempt to provide for their children were nonetheless often remote from their day-to-day lives. John Patterson's father installed a series of indifferent housekeepers to care for his motherless child, but his son thought he scarcely noticed how they treated him: he was 'wrapped up as ever in his own interests'.[51] Most single fathers believed that once arrangements had been made for extended family members, or older sisters, or anyone else, to run the home, their duty had been done. Their children, however, consistently reported that the role of mother had involved more than these formal aspects of domestic care. Annie Barnes was highly critical of her father's failure to engage with affairs at home following the death of her mother. Annie was at this time in her early twenties, and she took charge of her six younger siblings – the youngest just eight, five, three, and one.[52] 'My father didn't care about us kids. He kept us and that was it'. She later reinforced the point: 'Our old man didn't care about us kids. We worked there [in his fruit shop] and lived upstairs, that was all.'[53] Lottie Barker remembered her elder sister's valiant efforts to take their dead mother's place, but she had less praise for her father: he 'was not much help to her, she could never rely on him.'[54] Miss Grimshaw's father had managed to provide a home for his motherless children, but not much in the way of supervision – 'we were a wild bunch of kids,' she declared.[55]

The same pattern is evident with the fathers who remarried. Fathers were on the periphery of domestic life, and never intervened when, as so often happened, the relationship between their children and new wives broke down. Louise Jermy endured a harsh childhood under the care of her stepmother, but she did not fail to recognise that her father had done nothing to intervene: 'If my father had any love for me he certainly didn't show it.'[56] The continuity of experience across so many individuals suggests that the difficulties single-fathers faced were more than an individual matter and need to be understood in the context of broader social structures and expectations concerning the gendered nature of family and work.

Throughout this period, every form of domestic work was powerfully coded as female, and men had expectations about their rights to unpaid domestic work, whether or not there were actually children in the home who needed care. As a young woman, Elizabeth Holder agreed to give up her paid work in order to keep house for her father although there were no children in the home. Elizabeth described herself as 'very happy' in her position as a live-in nanny, and was devastated when her father called her home to be his housekeeper. He had decided

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[50] 'Autobiography of a Scotch Convict', *Daily News*, 5 June 1849.
[51] Patterson, *Vagabondage*, p.22.
[52] Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.13; Census, 1911 58 Turners Rd, Limehouse, London.
[53] Barnes, *Tough Annie*, 21-22.
[54] Barker, 'My life as I remember it', [p.23]
[55] Burnley Local History Collection, Burnley Library; Miss M Grimshaw, 'Memories of Burnley', LG3 Grimshaw,
[56] Jermy, *Memories*, p. 28.

to move to the country to take a smallholding and as 'he would not have dreamed of looking after himself, he decided that [Elizabeth] would have to give up [her] post with the Armstrongs and go to keep house for him'. Elizabeth was appalled at the idea, but 'His word was law. I had no alternative but to give in my notice.'[57] Across a wide collection of sources, girls almost always complied with orders to return to the family home, regardless of whether it was their father or siblings who needed care. We tend to regard mothering in isolation from other forms of domestic work, yet there was an element of mothering that was, quite simply, work. Furthermore, men had an unshakeable belief in their entitlement to this work from their female family members – both wives and others.

At the same time, however, the inexorable breakdown of family life following a maternal death also suggests that there was something else to mothering. Undeniably, a lot of mothering was housework: the endless round of purchasing, preparing, and clearing meals, and of cleaning and mending clothes. Yet there must have been some additional role that mothers were filling, for, as we have seen, when mothers were absent family life tended to break down altogether. As more than one writer explained, mothers were the pin that held the family together. 'Family life was closely knit, attached to mother, who was the linchpin of the family wheel,' wrote Walter Southgate. 'Nothing was done without mother being consulted.'[58] Mothering involved a form of emotional labour that fathers were almost never able to replicate, and this anchor to a child's life was lost when a mother died.

William Stevens thought that he and his two sisters had 'never got over' the loss of their mother when William was eight: 'My father did his best, but nothing like a mother's love'.[59] George Healey reflected that: 'Death causes great changes in a family.' He found that returning home from work and 'no kind mother was there to greet me … was dark and gloomy'. Like many bereaved children, he left home early and moved into lodgings.[60] Life settled back down to normal in Lottie Barker's home after her mother's death following protracted illness. An older sister took on the running of the home, but Lottie missed her mother very much: 'I think it was her love that left such a void, for despite what happened she was always there with her love and counsel. The love no one could replace, well, not for me.'[61]

There are some clear continuities in the experiences of maternal absence across the autobiographical literature, but there is also a chronology of change. The problems posed by motherlessness changed significantly between the early Victorian and Edwardian periods, and if the pre-Victorian autobiographies are included those changes are magnified further. The Factory Acts of the 1830s and 1840s introduced restrictions on the employment of young children in factories and mines and were further consolidated towards the end of the

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[57] Elizabeth Coleman née Holder, *The Tangled Garden: Memories of my Girlhood* (London, 1988), pp.13-15.

[58] Walter Southgate, *That's the Way it Was: A Working Class Autobiography, 1890-1950,* with a foreword by Stan Newens, M. P. and edited with an afterword by Terry Philpot (Oxted, Surrey, 1982), pp.21-2

[59] Stevens, *Likely Victorian Lad*, p.4.

[60] George Healey, *Life and Remarkable Career of George Healey* (Birmingham, n.d.), p.2

[61] Barker, 'My life as I remember it', [pp.21-22]. Stamper, So Long Ago, p.109.

nineteenth century by a series of educational and legislative reforms which mandated school attendance until the age of ten, prohibited the employment of children younger than ten, and subsequently progressively raised the school leaving age to fourteen, with some permitted exceptions. These changes radically extended the period of time that children remained in the family home and had significant implications for family life.[62]

Although fathers in early- and pre-Victorian Britain used essentially the same set of solutions as those we have looked at here, they often used them for a much shorter period of time. From the age of seven, children could be found employment and lodged with their employer, so their period of dependency upon their parents was considerably less. This also meant that single-fathers rarely had more than two or three dependent children to provide for. In the 1830s, one writer being raised by a single-father was found employment whilst 'only about six years old'. His father had found a chimneysweep who was prepared to take him on and provide food and lodging in return for the boy's labour, though being so small he was initially unable to provide much work. As he explained, he was 'really too young for the work, so they made me do odd things about the house, such as lighting the fires and nursing the baby'.[63] A decade later, Hannah Cullwick's parents died within a fortnight of each other when she was fourteen.[64] The loss of parents was personal catastrophe, but it was not a problem in the practical sense, as she had already been working since the age of eight and living away from home in domestic service for much of that time. In the 1860s, Frank Bullen was in the custody of his father. He had placed him in the care of an aunt, and when she died when Frank was nine, he was catapulted into the workforce – he found a position as an errand boy and a new home with a laundress.[65] For those born after 1870, these kinds of solutions were not available. Indeed, one overlooked consequence of late-nineteenth-century legislation to protect children, was that it radically extended the duration and responsibility of mothering.

In this article, I have tried to think about how we might uncover the value of mothering in a historical context. The evidence uncovered powerfully reminds us that there is a very fine line between mothering and other aspects of domestic work. All homes, not just those with small children, required domestic labour and as the quote from the feminist, Alice Schwarzer, at the opening of the essay indicates, there is a clear continuity between mothering and other forms of domestic labour. Unlike other forms of work, however, mothering was regarded as unsuitable for men and unworthy of payment. At the same time, it seems clear that motherhood involved a form of emotional labour that has not been adequately acknowledged. Finally, motherhood was not unchanging. Reforms to the employment of child workers and the introduction of compulsory schooling in late Victorian Britain extended the period of childhood dependency. These developments significantly increased the responsibility and workload associated with motherhood, but were not accompanied by any corresponding rise in the status or value of women's maternal labours.

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[62] See also: Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1914* (New York, 1993)

[63] John Arthur Turner, *The Life of a Chimney Boy, written by himself*, edited and concluded by J. A. Turner (London, 1901), p.12. See also Barber, *From Workhouse*, p.3

[64] Hannah Cullwick, *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick* ed. Liz Stanley (London, 1984), p.36.

[65] Frank Thomas Bullen, *Confessions of a Tradesman* (London, 1908), p.8.