

The emotions of motherhood: love, culture and poverty in Victorian England.

Are the emotions that tie family members together fixed in form and ahistorical in nature? Or are they fluid and changeable, contingent upon the context and culture within which individuals are placed? When historians began to study the family in the 1970s, the formal parent-child relations they observed appeared to suggest that mothers felt little love for their offspring, and led some to suggest that maternal love was not a timeless, biological instinct, but a creation of the modern world – as Edward Shorter boldly put it: “good mothering is an invention of modernisation.”¹ Yet no sooner had these dark thoughts been uttered than scholars busied themselves with denying their possible truth. Linda Pollock, for example, retorted that “the thesis of dramatic transformation in the capacity for experiencing emotion is a myth. There is no such transformation.” Parental care, she concluded “altered little from the sixteenth century to date.”²

¹ E. Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London, 1976). See also: Lloyd deMause *The History of Childhood* (New York, 1974); L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England* (New York, 1977), 81, 420, 680, 70, 117; Randolph Trumbach, *Rise of Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York & London, 1978); E. Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood: an Historical View of the Maternal Instinct* (London, 1981)

² Linda Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge, 1983), 269. See also; Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, Mass, 1983), who concluded: “There is little basis, in fact, for believing that the parents of Reformation Europe loved their children any less or mistreated them any more than modern parents do,” 162.

Although this statement was made more than thirty years ago, the emphasis on the transhistorical and constant nature of parental love can be found throughout the recent literature. Whether looking at elite or non-elite groups, at mothers or fathers, or at Britain or the US, historians advance much the same set of claims about the essentially unchanging nature of the love parents feel for their children. Indeed, even the discipline's recent "emotional turn," with its focus upon the mutability of emotions, has done little to shake family historians' faith in the constancy of parental love over time.³ Of course, scholars now show far greater awareness of the multiple, fragmentary, and sometimes contradictory conceptions of fatherhood and motherhood available to Victorian parents. Yet the ways in which these ideals map onto emotional experience of family life have received far less attention.⁴ This – so far as it is considered at all – is regarded as something fixed. As one

³ For thoughts on the "emotional turn," see in particular Jan Plamper, "The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns," *History and Theory* 49, no. 2 (2010): 237–265; and the excellent forum in this journal in 2012.

⁴ For mothers see: Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class* (London, 1987); M. Jeanne Peterson, *Family, Love, and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen* (Bloomington IN., 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, *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal* (Columbus, 2008). For fathers, see: S. M. Frank, *Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century North* (Baltimore, 1998); J. Tosh, *A Man's Place: masculinity and the middle-class home in Victorian England* (London and New Haven, 1999); Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Industrializing*

scholar reminds us: "fathers then, as now, were bound to their children by powerful and primitive emotions."⁵ Another observes that whilst cultural ideals changed, the "innate emotions of parenthood did not change."⁶ Similar thoughts are echoed by those looking at working-class parents. These, it is admitted, did not use intimacy and affection to raise their children in ways that are immediately recognisable as "love" to us; they demonstrated their love instead in the labour required to house, feed and clothe dependent family members.⁷

America (London, 2001); Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers, eds., *Gender and Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2007).

⁵ Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 100.

⁶ Joanne Bailey, *Parenting in England, 1760–1830: Emotion, Identity, and Generation* (Oxford, 2012), 27, 47. See also Linda W. Rosenzweig, "'The Anchor of My Life': Middle-Class American Mothers and College-Educated Daughters, 1880-1920," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Autumn, 1991): 5-25; Claudia Nelson, *Family Ties in Victorian England* (Westport CT., 2007).

⁷ Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in outcast London, 1870-1918* (Oxford, 1993); Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010); Carl Chinn, *They Worked all their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor in England, 1880-1939* (Manchester, 1988); Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place is in the Home: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984); Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870-1914* (London, 1996). For fathers see: Julie-Marie Strange, *Fatherhood, Attachment and the British Working Class, c.1870-1914* (Cambridge, 2013). See also Andrew Walker, "Fathers" pride? Fatherhood in industrialising communities," in Broughton and Rogers, eds., *Gender and Fatherhood*, 113-125; Helen Rogers, "First in the House: daughters on working-class fathers and fatherhood" in ibid., 126-137; Lynn Abrams, "'There Was Nobody like My Daddy': Fathers, the Family and the Marginalisation of Men in Modern Scotland," *Scottish Historical Review*, 78, no. 206 (1999),

Thus in contrast to the first generation of family historians, who read the evidence of vastly different parenting practice as evidence of different emotional experiences, most work published in the last twenty-five years emphasises the continuity of certain core, inner emotions despite these changing external forms.

It is perhaps helpful at the outset to repeat an observation that emotions historians have tentatively dared to voice: despite our pretensions to objectivity, scholars bring their own emotions to the material they study.⁸ Historians of the family bring a lifetime's personal experience of family life as well as years of exposure to our culture's conception of the proper and "natural" affections of motherhood to bear on their work.⁹ It should thus be understood that the oft-repeated claim in the historical literature that love forms the core of mother-child relationships is to some extent a restatement of our own society's views about the primacy of love in mother-child relations. It must also be admitted that the separation of mutable outward cultural forms from a more stable set of inner emotions has served a strategically useful function in allowing scholars to discuss unfamiliar parenting styles and

219-242; Laura King, *Family Men: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain, 1914-1960* (Oxford, 2015).

⁸ The point is eloquently expressed in Dorothy Ko's analysis of the Chinese practice of footbinding and her observation that through exposure to anti-footbinding sentiment modern western readers have learned to view the custom with disgust. Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005).

⁹ For more on how mothering became "natural", see Ann Dally, *Inventing Motherhood. The Consequences of an Ideal* (London, Burnett Books, 1982).

values. It was obviously unsatisfactory to upbraid historical constituencies for their failure to conform to the ideals of the modern western family, and discriminating between changing cultural forms and a static emotional core has permitted historians to discuss historical difference without passing moral judgement. Yet when set against the burgeoning literature on the history of the emotions, there is something troubling about the working assumption that the emotional ties that bind family members together are ever fixed in form.¹⁰

As the history of the emotions continues its rapid development as a distinct field of study, its central tenets become more difficult to summarise.¹¹ Nonetheless, important contributions by Peter Stearns, Barbara Rosenwein and others have done enough to force a fundamental rethink of the assumption that emotions are unchanging.¹² Particularly pertinent to this study of the emotional underpinnings of family life is William Reddy's concept of "emotional regimes," laid out most fully in his *The Navigation of Feeling: A*

¹⁰ For more on the tension between universalist and constructivist approaches to the study of the emotions, see, in particular, Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2015).

¹¹ *Ibid.* for a comprehensive introduction to the current state of play.

¹² Peter N. Stearns & Carol Z. Stearns, "Emotionology: clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards, *American Historical Review* 90, no. 4 (1985): 813-830; Barbara Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions in History," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (June 2002): 821-845.

*Framework for the History of Emotions.*¹³ In this work, Reddy posits a direct relationship between a society's cultural configurations for emotional expression and the actual emotions experienced. Not only are both mutable, he suggests, but a society's emotional norms and expectations – its “emotional regime” – have tangible emotional consequences for those who live within it. This provides a powerful new way of thinking about family life. Clearly, if Reddy is correct that cultural norms and expectations play a role in shaping one's inner, emotional experiences then the claim that the ideas and language surrounding family life changed whilst inner emotions did not must be rejected. In Reddy's formulation, different emotional regimes create, ipso facto, different emotional experiences; and the historian's task therefore becomes to explore how.

In the decade or so since Reddy set out this template, the field has burgeoned. We now have numerous studies of discrete emotions, and whilst some of this literature confines itself to tracking changing cultural scripts in essentially familiar ways, at its most innovative emotions history seeks to probe the territory between cultural scripts and emotional life, between expression and experience.¹⁴ Indeed, it is arguably this marriage of

¹³ William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001).

¹⁴ Carol Stearns and Peter Stearns, *Anger: The Struggle for Emotional Control in America's History* (Chicago, 1986); Stearns and Stearns, *Jealousy: The Evolution of an Emotion in American History* (New York, 1989); Barbara H. Rosenwein, ed., *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca NY., 1998); Martin Francis, ‘Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth: The Emotional Economy of Three Conservative Prime Ministers, 1951–1963’,

poststructuralist insights concerning the free-floating nature of discursive tropes with the much older social historian's concern to understand the lived experience of historical actors that has made recent research in emotions history such a distinctive and innovative form of enquiry.

In this article, I seek to draw upon new approaches from the history of the emotions to rethink one of our most elemental emotional experiences: the love between a mother and her child. My focus is upon families in Britain that can loosely be described as "working class," in other words fathers (where present) were employed in manual labour; resources

Journal of British Studies, 41/3 (2002), pp. 354-387; Susan J Matt, *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890-1930* (Philadelphia, 2003); Joanna Bourke, *Fear. A Cultural History* (London, 2005); Michael Roper, "Between Manliness and Masculinity: The 'War Generation' and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914-1950," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 343-362; Michael Roper, 'Slipping Out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History', *History Workshop Journal* (2005) 59(1): 57-72; Jan Plamper and Benjamin Lazier, eds., *Fear: Across the Disciplines* (Pittsburgh, 2012); Michael Laffan and Max Weiss eds. *Facing Fear: The History of an Emotion in Global Perspective* (Princeton, 2012); William Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan* (Chicago, IL, 2012); Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia: 2012). Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013); Ute Frevert, Pascal Eitler, Stephanie Olsen, et al., *Learning How to Feel: Children's Literature and Emotional Socialization, 1870-1970* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2014); Ute Frevert et al., *Emotional Lexicons: Continuity and Change in the Vocabulary of Feeling 1700-2000* (Oxford, 2014); Bourke, *The Story of Pain* (Oxford, 2014); Thomas Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

- money, food, space, time - were always scarce. This focus on working-class families is not incidental. When the Stearns first put the history of the emotions on the historical map in 1985 they highlighted the difficulty of accessing the emotions of the lower classes, adding that this difficulty provided no grounds "for neglect of a basic ingredient of human history."¹⁵ Yet the Stearns' intervention has arguably been less effective in this regard than in any other. Almost all of the recent work that explicitly engages with the emotions takes middle- or upper-class subjects as its focus. As Stearns and Matt soberly conclude in their recent survey of the field, the emotional history of articulate groups "is clearly easier to do" than work on groups which less actively consume any formal literature. We thus know "far more ... about the experience of the upper and middle classes than about the working classes and the impoverished".¹⁶

It is, of course, hardly necessary to point out that the poor had emotions too and that uncovering them forms a worthwhile historical project. But the motivation for the present study is not simply to fill a gap in historical coverage. It is to challenge the tenets of a fast-growing historical specialism that has yet to consider the consequences of excluding large parts of the population. As a generation of postcolonial historians have forced us to recognise, when we attempt to reconstruct past worlds through the eyes, words and deeds

¹⁵ Stearns & Stearns, "Emotionology," 830.

¹⁶ Susan J Matt and Peter N Stearns, eds., *Doing Emotions History* (Champaign, IL, 2013), 5. The emphasis on articulate groups is readily evident in Peter N Stearns & Jan Lewis, eds., *An Emotional History of the United States* (New York, 1998).

of powerful white men our reconstructions reproduce the politics and perspective of those white men in subtle ways.¹⁷ Different historical actors have differential access to resources, education, and power, and thus uneven means to create an archive. Furthermore, the project of interrogating the silent voices of subordinate subjects has not simply *added* to our understanding of imperialism; it has upended earlier narratives that were founded on their exclusion. The problem of differential access to archive creation is not one only for the global historian. The same problems exist for European societies too, with their complex social and gender hierarchies and unequal distributions of goods and power. This then forms my motivation for looking at a non-elite constituency. The goal is not simply to provide a parallel body of emotions history for the poor and female, to mark out a new and separate silo in which we may carry on business as usual, sketching out emotional trajectories for an as-yet unstudied social constituency. The aim is to think more deeply about how emotions are fashioned, experienced and expressed, and about how one's place in the social order feeds into this process.

¹⁷ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995); Jordanna Bailkin, "Where Did the Empire Go? Archives and Decolonization in Britain," *American Historical Review* (2015) 120 (3): 884-899; Durba Ghosh, "Decoding the Nameless: Gender, Subjectivity, and Historical Methodologies in Reading the Archives of Colonial India," in Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity, 1660-1840* (Cambridge, 2004), 297-316; Ghosh, "Another Set of Imperial Turns?," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (June 2012): 772-793; Ranajit Guha, "Chandra's Death," *Subaltern Studies* 5 (1986): 135-165; Mary Poovey, "The Limits of the Universal Knowledge Project: British India and the East Indiamen," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 1 (2004): 183-202; Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fiction, and the Writing of History* (Durham, N.C., 2005).

The mothers looked at here all lacked the simple necessities of life that help to make life pleasant: adequate food, decent housing, access to healthcare, and effective means to limit their family size. Hunger, tiredness, cold, physical discomfort, lack of privacy, and lack of peace and quiet – these do not constitute part of a society's cultural codes or emotional regime; nor are they the same as the emotions themselves. But it is, at the very least, reasonable to ask whether such things had an impact upon the ability of a woman to mother her children. To ask: how does a family maintain loving ties when its members are forced to compete to fulfil their basic human needs for food, space and rest? How does a mother experience love when she is hungry, and those she is supposed to love have a claim on her own limited rations? Unpacking the emotional experience of life within the working-class family opens up a raft of questions about the interplay of the cultural and the emotional and invites a reconsideration of our sub-discipline's conceptual frameworks.

What follows is drawn upon life-writing by those born into impoverished, working-class families in Britain between 1840 and 1903, and therefore describing childhoods down to the outbreak of WW1. The sources have been drawn from an exhaustive survey of the bibliography of working-class autobiography compiled by John Burnett in the 1980s.¹⁸ This bibliography lists 458 items in this timeframe, a small proportion of which have proved unsuitable for this study, generally either because the autobiography contains no family

¹⁸ John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall, *The Autobiography of the Working Class. An Annotated, Critical Bibliography, 1790-1900*, i (New York, 1984).

detail, or because the item has become lost or proved unobtainable. This, along with other autobiographies that have come to light, provides a total of 411 life-histories, and amounts to a near comprehensive analysis of the available records.

Autobiography has long formed the mainstay of historical enquiry into family life, but its use is of course not without problems.¹⁹ Carolyn Steedman's superb and self-aware account of her childhood in post-war London reveals the story-telling involved in telling life-stories and highlights the difficulty of bridging the gap between written accounts of childhood and earlier lived experiences.²⁰ It is a problem which many scholars have addressed and one to which I will return in due course.²¹ At the outset, however, there is a rather different concern to address; namely, how far these writers provide an accurate cross-section of the

¹⁹ See in particular: Julie-Marie Strange, "Fatherhood, providing and attachment in late Victorian and Edwardian working-class families," *Historical Journal* 55 (2012): 1007-1027. See also Regenia Gagnier *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* (Oxford, 1991); T. Cosslett, C. Lury and P. Summerfield, eds., *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London, 2000); M. Roper, "Re-remembering the soldier-hero: the psychic and social construction of memory in personal narratives of the Great War," *History Workshop Journal*, 50 (2000); 181-20.

²⁰ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London, 1983). The problem is also addressed in a very different way by Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Enquiry* 17 (1991), 773-797. Also useful is: C. Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford, 1993).

²¹ A thoughtful analysis of the difficulty of writing the history of one working-class woman is contained in Seth Koven, *The Match Girl and the Heiress* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

broader working-class community? Do those who penned an autobiography capture the spread of working-class, including those from the most impoverished and marginal quarters? It is well-known that autobiographers tended to have achieved something of note by the time they pen their autobiographies. Did these future achievements correlate with a set of family characteristics that all had shared earlier in life?

In fact, so far as it is possible to measure “typical” working-class family characteristics, our sample of autobiographies corresponds well with the wider population. In terms of geographical origins, family size and family structure, those who wrote autobiographies closely mirror the wider public.²² Thus whilst some (though by no means all) of the

²² The census of 1851 indicated that 45 percent of the population lived in towns of more than 5,000 souls. Our collection of autobiographies mirror this closely: 51 percent of the cohort from 1840-1870 lived in towns over 5,000. By 1891, the census recorded 68 percent of the population living in towns; as did 66 percent of the cohort from 1871-1903. Urbanisation figures taken from C. M. Law, “The growth of urban population in England and Wales, 1801-1911,” *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers*, 41 (1967), 125-43, table III. A range of different demographic estimates indicate that somewhere between 20 and 30 percent of children had lost either their father or their mother before the age of 16. 24 percent of female writers and 27 percent of male writers had lost one parent by the age of sixteen. The wide range stems from the fact that family breakdown in all its forms is difficult to detect historically. See the discussion in Humphries, *Childhood*, pp. 64-5; Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1971); Barry Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800-1930* (Cambridge, 1996). There is, unsurprisingly, a gender imbalance in the autobiographies; the majority were written by men (sixty-six percent) whilst women wrote approximately a

autobiographers went on to achieve something of sufficient note to justify the writing of an autobiography, there is nothing remarkable about their families of origin.

Of course, there is more to interpreting the stories contained in the autobiographies than simply demonstrating that their families of origin were representative of working-class families more broadly. Autobiographical accounts involve the reinterpretation of earlier lived events at many years' remove, the rendering of complex lived experiences into simple, intelligible narratives, acceptable both to surviving family members, to the book-buying public, or to other audiences.²³ Inevitably, finished works contain silences, absences, and contradictions, all of which will need to be addressed. Yet for all their complexity, these slippery sources offer the best, indeed the only, way of penetrating the private recesses of the working-class family.

third of the autobiographies. In the figures given below, I use weighted samples for each gender.

²³ For a consideration of some of these issues in very different contexts, see: James R. Barrett, 'Was the Personal Political? Reading the Autobiography of American Communism', *International Review of Social History*, 53, 2008, pp. 395-423; Ryan Hanley, 'Calvinism, Proslavery and James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw', *Slavery & Abolition: a Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 35:1 (2015), pp. 1-22; Annie Devenish, 'Performing the Political Self: a study of identity making and self representation in the autobiographies of India's first generation of parliamentary women', *Women's History Review*, 22:2 (2013), pp. 280-294; Igal Halfin, *Terror in my Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).

I.

Let us start with the cultural codes within which family life was situated. What did working-class culture expect of mothers? How were mothers *supposed* to behave? Such apparently simple questions are far from straightforward when looking at those who left little in the way of written records. Conduct books, novels, sermons and the like form the material to which historians usually turn in order to reconstruct cultural values, but how does one proceed when with subjects who have signally failed to bequeath an archive of this nature? In the absence of such records, some attempts have been made to use ballads and songs to reconstruct the mental horizons of working people, but such approaches are beset by the fact that scholars are generally unable to establish the authorship of printed versions of songs and ballads.²⁴ We are therefore forced back to the autobiographical records as the only place where authentically working-class values about family life were regularly articulated.

But in order to use autobiographies to reconstruct cultural values, we must appreciate the operation of memory in their creation. Although this article seeks to understand Victorian values, these records were not, for the most part, produced during the Victorian period at all. A handful of individuals born early in the reign wrote their autobiographies in the twilight years of Queen Victoria's reign, but the majority were born after 1850 and did not get around to writing their autobiography until the twentieth century – a time of rising

²⁴ Chinn, *They Worked all their Lives*, 12-13.

affluence and rapidly changing family values.²⁵ As a result, autobiographical writing offered individuals the opportunity to reevaluate their early years in the light of a new cultural climate. This does not prevent the use of twentieth-century sources to reconstruct Victorian values, but it does require us to explore the writing strategies that authors used to negotiate the difference between contemporary norms and their own earlier experiences.

It is immediately clear that there was considerable shared terrain amongst a large number of writers concerning what constituted a good mother.²⁶ Good mothers, they agreed, worked tirelessly to ensure a clean, well-ordered home. Their duties involved the wise spending of a husband's meagre wage, and the endless round of cleaning, cooking and sewing necessary for the physical wellbeing of the family. Time and again, autobiographers indicated how their mother measured up to this ideal. "She counted and took care of the scanty wages. She planned out the week's need."²⁷ She "scrupulously remov[ed] every speck of dirt or dust from the uneven stone floor."²⁸ She was "up with the lark in the summer, and long before daylight in winter, preparing the meagre morning meal of oatmeal

²⁵ A wonderful introduction to some of these shifts is contained in: Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Living with Shame from the Victorians to the Present Day* (London, 2013). Also useful are: Langhamer, *The English in Love*; Francis, 'Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth; Dixon, *Weeping Britannia*.

²⁶ Philip Inman, *No Going Back, An Autobiography* (London, 1952), 13; Frank Hodges, *My Adventures as a Labour Leader* (London, [1924]), 2.

²⁷ David Kirkwood, *My Life of Revolt*, with forewords by the Rt Hon. Winston S. Churchill and the Rt. Hon. George Lansbury (London, 1935), 25.

²⁸ John Fraser, *Sixty Years in Uniform* (London, 1939), 18.

and skimmed milk.”²⁹ A mother’s role was not primarily to earn the wherewithal to keep the family. It was to transform the husband’s wages into a tolerably comfortable domestic existence for each and every member of the family.

The regularity and ease with which writers recorded their mothers’ household labour points to the strong association between motherhood and housekeeping in working-class culture. Indeed, housekeeping was not only the dominant motif amongst twentieth-century autobiographers; it was also the vernacular used by Victorian autobiographers (who were for the most part describing childhoods before the Victorian period). It is remarkable that working-class autobiographers writing prior to the twentieth-century scarcely provided any information about their mothers at all, and certainly very little of a personal nature. Mothers were described (if at all) in a handful of words. She was a “good help-mete,” a “thoughtful,

²⁹ Sir James Sexton, *Sir James Sexton, Agitator: The Life of the Dockers' MP. An Autobiography*, with a preface by the Rt. Hon. David Lloyd George, MP (London, 1936), 24. See also: Chester Armstrong, *Pilgrimage from Nenthead: An Autobiography* (London, 1938), 32; John Eldred, *I Love the Brooks* (London, 1955), 20; Thomas Jordan, “Thomas Jordan, coal-miner,” in John Burnett, ed., *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London, 1982), 100; George Ratcliffe, *Sixty Years of It: Being the Story of my Life and Public Career* (London, [1935]), 6; Fred Kitchen, *Brother to the Ox: The Autobiography of a Farm Labourer* (London, 1940), 9; Sidney R. Campion, *Sunlight on the Foothills* (London, [1941]), 1; John McGovern, *Neither Fear nor Favour* (London, 1960), 11; Ben Turner, *About Myself, 1863-1930*, with a foreword by the Rt. Hon. J. Ramsay Macdonald P. C (London, 1930), 42

thrifty mother" a "most persevering, industrious woman."³⁰ Any more extended discussion invariably turned exclusively upon the work she did, whether paid or unpaid, on her family's behalf. Mothers were remembered for their "toiling life", for "toiling hard to keep the home together," or for their "hard struggle" in the home.³¹ Indeed, so far as we can decipher from autobiographies written during the Victorian period, motherhood was at that time conceived and described almost wholly in terms of the physical rather than emotional labour that it involved.

Clearly, though, by the twentieth century writers no longer wanted to limit their discussion of childhood to the efficiency with which their mother had performed the labour of the home. Conceptions of motherhood had started to lay a heavy emphasis upon a mother's supposed natural capacity for love and nurture in the nineteenth century, and these ideas

³⁰ Timothy Mountjoy, *The Life, Labours and Deliverances of a Forest of Dean Collier* (N.p., 1887), 1; Edward G. Davis, *Some Passages from My Life* (Birmingham, 1898), 8; William Hollingsworth, *An Autobiographical Sketch of the Life of Mr Wm. Hollingsworth* (London, n.d.), 3. See also J. G., *Prisoner Set Free. The Narrative of a Convict in the Preston House of Correction with a few Remarks by the Rev. John Clay* (Preston, 1846), 5.

³¹ William Hanson, *The Life of William Hanson, Written by Himself* (Halifax, 2nd edn 1883); Edward Allen Rymer, 'The Martyrdom of the Mine, or 60 Years' Struggle for Life', ed. with an introduction by Robert G. Neville, *History Workshop Journal*, 1976, vols I and II, 220–244; Roger Langdon, *The Life of Roger Langdon, Told by Himself* (London, 1909), 18. They also described mothers as good housekeepers, who could bake, brew, knit and sew. See: James Nye, *A Small Account of my Travels Through the Wilderness*, ed., Vic Gammon (Brighton, [?]), p.11. Thomas Whittaker, *Life's Battles in Temperance Armour* (London, 1884; repr. 2009).

became widely disseminated in the twentieth.³² This provided a new framework within which working-class autobiographers could re-evaluate their own early years and opened out a space for discussion of the more personal elements of family life.³³

Certainly, many of the autobiographical writers had experienced something close to the warm, nurturing mother-child bond now emphasised by psychologists, though they often lacked a clear and consistent language with which to discuss it. A few writers helpfully used that familiar word: “love.” Arthur Newton, for example, recalled being “loved and cared for in a simple sort of way” by parents who were “rich in love and affection.”³⁴ But most writers invested “love” with their own, often rather idiosyncratic set of meanings, and many bypassed the concept altogether. After all, as Elizabeth Bryson put it, family’s like hers were “shy of the word ‘love.’”³⁵

³² Cathy Urwin and Elaine Sharland, “From bodies to minds in childcare literature: advice to parents in inter-war Britain,” in Roger Cooter (ed.), *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare, 1880-1940* (London, 1992), 174-99; Denise Riley, “War in the Nursery,” *Feminist Review* No. 2 (1979), 82-108; Uffa Jensen, “Mrs. Gaskell’s anxiety”, in Ute Frevert, Pascal Eitler, Stephanie Olsen, et al., *Learning How to Feel: Children’s Literature and Emotional Socialization, 1870–1970* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2014).

³³ Plamper’s study of fear describes a similar in arc of change with respect to the degree of fear writers and soldiers were able to express. See Jan Plamper, “Fear: Soldiers and Emotion in Early Twentieth-Century Russian Military Psychology,” *Slavic Review* 68, no. 2 (2009): 259–283.

³⁴ Arthur Newton, *Years of Change: Autobiography of a Hackney Shoemaker* (London, 1974), 2.

³⁵ Elizabeth Bryson, *Look Back in Wonder, with an introduction by K. L. Brooker* (Dundee, 1966), 30.

Instead “love” was just one of several ways in which writers tried to indicate wellbeing within the family. Autobiographers wrote about “affection” rather than “love,” and drew attention to particular maternal qualities, such as gentleness, warmth, kindness, good humour, and sympathy.³⁶ They recalled such things as the “smile on her face;”³⁷ her “large heart [and] warm temperament;”³⁸ or specific acts of kindness and care.³⁹ These working-class writers had been raised in a context without a neatly formulated cultural convention validating the place of love in mother-child relationships, and this left them without a simple, readymade language. But the absence of clearly articulated concepts did not preclude the existence of strong mother-child bonds. Clearly many mothers had found their own ways of striking a significant emotional connection with their children.

At the same time, however, we must not get too carried away by the ability of poor women to transcend their culture’s restricted vision of motherhood. This, after all, might be expected to some degree. Emotional norms do not have to be universally obeyed and individuals will always construct their emotional lives from the materials they have to hand in distinct and unique ways. Furthermore, the alternative possibility must also be

³⁶ Alfred Ireson, “Reminiscences,” in John Burnett, ed., *Destiny Obscure*, 70-77, 71-2.

³⁷ Sir Thomas J. Lipton, *Leaves from the Lipton Logs*, with a foreword by W. Blackwood (London, n.d.), 37. See also John Fraser, *Sixty Years in Uniform* (London, 1939), 18.

³⁸ Thomas Whittaker, *Life’s Battles in Temperance Armour* (London, 1884), 14, 5

³⁹ Elizabeth Oakley, “The autobiography of Elizabeth Oakley, 1831-1900,” *Norfolk Record Society*, 56 (1993); 113-50.

considered: cultural codes underscoring the importance of material rather than emotional care may not have *prevented* the development of loving familial relationships, but did they play any role in limiting or restricting the emotional bonds between mothers and their children?

The evidence on this score is rather more depressing, for if we look closely at the family lives described in the autobiography it appears that the focus on housekeeping was not an effective or reliable mechanism for sustaining emotional wellbeing. In fact, cultural configurations of motherhood which emphasised material rather than emotional care helped to foster mothering styles in which maternal love was difficult for children to discern. Admittedly, performing the expected rites of motherhood *could* illicit a positive emotional response. A bowl of hot, tasty food or an item of hand-stitched clothing could protect a vulnerable young child immersed in a world of deprivation from cold, harsh elements, and have significance beyond the purely material. As Edward Humphries recalled, his mother's ability to keep the family well fed even when times were hard "brought comfort to us all."⁴⁰ Yet in over four hundred autobiographies connections between housekeeping and wellbeing were only occasionally drawn, and writers were far more likely to comment upon the disconnect between the two.

⁴⁰ Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiography, Brunel University: Edward Humphries, "Childhood. An Autobiography of a Boy from 1889-1906," 1:361, p. 29

Writers were capable of writing about their mothers' devotion to housework in remarkably neutral tones. Harry Pollitt remembered all "that cleaning of the front step and flags! That scrubbing down of the back-yard! Those steel fenders and fire-irons! Those brass candlesticks that had to be polished till you could see your face in them!" Yet he thought that the struggle to keep everything clean was not an act of love, but a subterfuge so that "people thought you were better off than you ever dared hope to be."⁴¹ Arthur Goffin declared his mother was "never really happy unless she was working in one capacity or another", though he also noted that the unending work made her difficult and irritable.⁴² Edward Brand's mother catered for her family to the point of obsession. She was "was always busy cooking, baking bread, jam making, pickling, wine making and ham curing." She was, in fact, "an expert wine maker." But she was also "quiet and reserved [and] never seemed to have time to play and read to us." She was "very strict" and "we never got the love from her that we did from Father who would take us on his knee and sing all the old songs to us..."⁴³ Many autobiographers recognised the struggle their mothers had had to

⁴¹ Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time: An Apprenticeship in Politics* (London, 1940), 18-19.

Thomas Bell was even more prosaic. He thought the reason for all the "scrubbing, cleaning, airing of beds and whitewashing of walls that went on" was simply to keep the family in "decent health Thomas Bell, *Pioneering Days* (London, 1941), 18.

⁴² Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiography, Brunel University: Arthur Frederick Goffin, 'The Story of a grey life, being the autobiography of Arthur Frederick Goffin', 1:271, no pag.

⁴³ E. P. Brand, *A Fenman Remembers* (Huntingdon, 1977), 13. For other busy mothers, see: Howard Spring, *Howard Heaven Lies about us* (London, 1956); 52-56. Thomas Alfred Jackson, *Solo Trumpet: Some Memories of Socialist Agitation and Propaganda* (London, 1953), 39.

manage the household's scant resources: to put meals on the table, clothes on backs, and boots on feet. It was, they recognised, hard, useful and back-breaking work. At the same time, however, this contribution was not usually read as an act of love in the eyes of children.

Furthermore, as the twentieth-century progressed and working-class writers became more comfortable with the thought that love and intimacy held a central place in mother-child relationships, authors became more willing to explore the space between modern values and their own earlier experiences. Take, for instance, George Acorn, raised in desperate poverty in a one-roomed hovel with a hard-drinking and often unemployed father and a mother who was "incapable" of affection. As a child he felt unloved and unsafe. The warring between his parents was continuous, with regular night-times rows that had the children cowering in their beds and the neighbours racing upstairs to separate the combatants.⁴⁴ When she was not fighting with her husband, Mrs Acorn battled against her eldest son, using taunts and physical violence to extract compliance. As an adult, George could recognise that his mother, living with a precarious breadwinner and too many children (one of whom died before the age of two), faced multiple challenges. "Her struggles to supply our physical needs, especially during my father's enforced absence, were quite, quite heroic." Yet her heroic toil could not fill the void created by her years of harsh words and rough treatment. "If only to her strength of purpose had been added some

⁴⁴ George Acorn, [pseud], *One of the Multitude*, with an introduction by Arthur C Benson (London, 1911), 2-4.

spiritual sympathy, some ray of tender love, I know I should have responded with generous affection – my mother would have been so much to me.”⁴⁵

There were others who shared a similar story of mothers who were effective housewives, yet who were at best emotionally distant, at worst outright hostile. Kathleen Woodward mused that she had been bound to her mother by “ties which existed without love or affection.” Her mother “sweated and laboured for her children, equally without stint or thought, but was utterly oblivious to any need we might cherish for sympathy in our little sorrows, support in our strivings. She simply was not aware of anything beyond the needs of our bodies.”⁴⁶ It was the absence of affection that Amy Grace Rose also remembered the best. As a child, she “always used to feel that that nobody loved me.” Her mother was a “severe kind of woman … not kind and gentle;” it was unthinkable to “put [your] arms around her and kiss her.”⁴⁷ Faith Osgerby’s mother was a competent housewife, who worked hard for her husband and seven children, one of whom was unable to walk. But these competencies did not compensate, in Faith’s eyes, for a childhood that “was really ruled by FEAR” and was devoid of affection – “I can never remember in all my life being

⁴⁵ Ibid., 281. See also George Meek, *George Meek, Bath-Chair Man, by Himself*, with an introduction by H. G. Wells (London, 1910), 21, 40, 42, 45-6.

⁴⁶ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street* (London, 1928; repr. 1983), 18-19.

⁴⁷ Cambridge Record Office, Cambridge: Amy Grace Rose, volume of reminiscences MS (1945), P137/28/3, pp.1-2.

cuddled or kissed or “loved” as we love our babies today”.⁴⁸ Hannah Mitchell also made a clear distinction between good housekeeping and good mothering. With respect to the former, her mother could not be faulted – she was a well-dressed housewife, “everything in order,” “work and cleanliness were her gods.”⁴⁹ But her temper was “so uncertain that we lived in constant fear of an outbreak.” Her “violent passions,” triggered by “the merest trifles,” could last for days and sometimes ended with the children spending the night without food in the outside barn.⁵⁰ Clean or not, it was not, Hannah concluded, “a good atmosphere to grow up in.”⁵¹

Not only was efficient housekeeping no guarantee of a child’s emotional wellbeing, so was the reverse emphatically true: relationships could thrive even without much skill in the housekeeping department. Frederick Spencer admitted that his mother was “no Martha.” She had “no special love for house-work,” was “untidy [and] unmethodical” and had very

⁴⁸ Faith Dorothy Osgerby, “My memoirs,” in John Burnett, ed., *Destiny Obscure*, 82, 79. Lack of affection was also noted in: Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiography, Brunel University: M. Abbley, ‘Soul Adrift – being the memoirs of a queer child’, Uncatalogued; Nora Hampton, ‘Memories of Baptist End, Netherington, Dudley, 1895-1918’, 3:68; Amy Langley, Untitled, 2:466; Wallis, Bessie, ‘Yesterday’, 2:794; Daisy Noakes, *The Town Beehive – a Young Girl’s Lot, Brighton, 1910-1934* (Brighton, 1980), p.9.

⁴⁹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel*, with a preface by George Ewart Evans and ed. with intro by Geoffrey Mitchell (London, 1968), 39, 57.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 39-40.

⁵¹ Ibid., 62.

little interest in “the eternal round of cooking, scrubbing, cleaning, mending.” But she was “sweet” and had a “good heart.” In her son’s eyes, she made “a good home … in non-material things.”⁵² Meanwhile Elizabeth Flint made the rare confession that although “washday was on Monday really … Mum did not always bother.” She sometimes left it for another week and even after the wash “the clothes never looked much better.” But it did not really matter, because Elizabeth’s mother nonetheless created a home full of “love and true kindness.”⁵³

Good housekeeping was the dominant cultural convention defining the working-class mother. It was the motif to which writers returned over and over again, and it was not, as many of the writers make clear, commensurate with the love that children craved. But it was not the only norm to inflect family life. Physical chastisement was legal and socially acceptable in Victorian Britain, and widely used in schools, workplaces, homes and families. Of course, as most family historians remain wedded to a model of unchanging emotional experiences, the fact of physical punishment is not allowed to disrupt the narrative of the loving, working-class family. Jane Humphries, for example, suggests that “mothers’ chastisement was [a] mundane” experience, because women (lacking the strength and size

⁵² F. H. Spencer, *An Inspector’s Testament* (London, 1938), 14-15, 22. See also Sir Edward Brown, *Memories at Eventide* (Burnley, 1934), 2-3.

⁵³ Elizabeth Flint, *Hot Bread and Chips* (London, 1963), 24, 17. See also Kate Taylor, “Memoir,” in John Burnett, ed., *Destiny Obscure*, 305.

of their husbands) were “less able to hurt”.⁵⁴ It is certainly true that some writers did recall the punishments of their childhood as a mundane experience. A stick that was used to stir dirty clothes and “our backs when we tried her patience beyond endurance.”⁵⁵ The absurdity of going into the woods to find the “jinni fetw,” or birch, which would be used on one’s own back.⁵⁶ Corporal punishment is everywhere in the autobiographies. It was socially and culturally acceptable, and some writers internalised these norms. As Humphries says, they simply “made light of it”.

But to dismiss the significance of physical punishment because it was doled out by women fails to do justice to the meaning of those acts. Women may be smaller than men, but when they used sticks and belts to punish, they had the capacity to both shame and injure their children, and posed a serious threat to their emotional wellbeing. As attitudes towards child discipline became more lenient in the twentieth century, autobiographical writers became ever more willing to reconsider a childhood dominated by violence, a childhood that had been manifestly different from those enjoyed by children at the time of writing.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Humphries, *Child Labour*, 143. See also Ellen Ross, who asserts that most of the corporal punishment administered within families fitted within community norms, and contrasts it with the unacceptable violence associated with abuse. Ross, *Love and Toil*, 149-151.

⁵⁵ Sir James Sexton, *Sir James Sexton, Agitator: The Life of the Dockers' MP. An Autobiography*, with a preface by the Rt. Hon. David Lloyd George, MP (London, 1936), 24-5.

⁵⁶ Wil Edwards, *From the Valley I Came* (London, 1956), 13, 26, 27-8.

⁵⁷ For more on this shift in attitudes, see: Deborah Thom, “‘Beating children is wrong’: domestic life, psychological thinking and the permissive turn,” in L. Delap, B. Griffin, and

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was a considerable overlap between writers who complained of emotionally distant mothers and those who reported high levels of violence. George Acorn, Kathleen Woodward and Faith Osgerby all had a large stock of such memories. Acorn remembered countless thrashings, a “good hiding,” “savage punishment,” and objects of various kinds being hurled in his direction – a fork, a loaf of bread, a knife, “a fusillade of cups” that had been sitting on the table.⁵⁸ Woodward’s mother’s anger was “frequent and violent” and “she aimed her blows without feeling or restraint.” Once she split Kathleen’s head open, and another time aimed a fork at her “which dangerously pierced my side.”⁵⁹ Osgerby, who we saw a moment ago could never remember having been “cuddled, or kissed or ‘loved’” as a child, could remember being hit only too clearly. The punishment, she grimly recalled “was always done by my mother, and truly she was very capable at the job.” My bottom “was smacked so very often sometimes for such small faults, such as a sulky look … if any of us cried for some reason she was not aware of we got a smacked bottom so that she *would* know what we were crying for.”⁶⁰ And many other writers had their own tales to tell. Jack Lawson described several incidents of physical violence at the hands of his mother, including one where she tore into the children’s bedroom in a fury, ripped off their clothes and a “leather strap swished and crackled against

A. Wills (eds.), *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke, 2009), 261-83.

⁵⁸ Acorn, *One of the Multitude*, 62, 42, 14, 12, 63.

⁵⁹ Woodward, *Jipping Street*, 19.

⁶⁰ Osgerby, “Memoirs,” 79.

our bare bodies.”⁶¹ Such was her loss of control that her husband ordered her to stop, fearful for his children’s lives. One writer remembered a mother’s “solid, terrifying discipline;”⁶² and another living in fear of a “cruel and spiteful” mother with a short temper and a cane that was frequently taken down from its place on the wall.⁶³ To suggest that incidents such as these are “mundane” and can be straightforwardly accommodated within the framework of loving parents is a shameful misreading of the evidence.

Furthermore, the autobiographies reveal that although occasional corporal punishment might be accommodated within families, high levels of violence were detrimental to the quality of the emotional tie between mother and child. Amongst Hannah Mitchell’s complaints about her mother were her “nagging, ravings and beatings.”⁶⁴ It was not the basis of a successful relationship, she concluded, but helped to create “an antipathy ... between us, which lasted all our lives.”⁶⁵ Another linked the violence she experienced to more general feelings of fear that pervaded her childhood: she had “lived in a world uncertain and often afraid ... My mother’s face, when I touched her, was always cold and I

⁶¹ Jack Lawson (John James), *A Man’s Life* (London, 1932), 23.

⁶² Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiography, Brunel University: Kay Garrett, Untitled, 2:305, p.1. See also May Jones, Untitled, 1:401, p.4.

⁶³ Kathleen Dayus, *Her People* (London, 1982), p.6.

⁶⁴ Mitchell, *Hard Way Up*, 55, 62.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 57. See also Dayus, *Her People*, p.6. George L. Reakes, *Man of the Mersey* (London, 1956), 10 – his mother’s cane was almost the only thing he remembered about her.

knew that all was not well.”⁶⁶ Almost none of those who reported high levels of physical punishment did so in the context of loving or successful family relationships. Sticks, straps and belts may have been commonplace, but they still had the power to damage.

It is clear from this evidence that the standard claims about working-class family life simply won’t do. The harsh mothers of George Acorn and Kathleen Woodward are well-known to historians, yet there has been a collective refusal to accept that their accounts of emotional and physical abuse might upend the established narrative. Instead, their stories are dismissed as “atypical”⁶⁷ or even ingeniously reworked to find a “statement about mother love” or the “great, loving maternal instinct” within the Victorian working-class.⁶⁸ This is a distortion of what Acorn, Woodward and many others were trying to say. Their point rather was that *although* their mothers were hardworking and industrious within the home, they were also emotionally distant, at times physically abusive, and that this mattered. It is time to engage seriously with these non-standard narratives, and to situate these mothers and their unhappy children within our historical understanding of the emotions of family life.

⁶⁶ Crosby Library, Waterloo: Zoe Fairhurst, “Our Zoe of Gilling West: Her Life Story,” 920.7 FAI, pp.2-3. See also Meek, *George Meek*, 41; Acorn, *One of the Multitude*, esp. 42. The reverse was also true. Contented children often remarked upon the fact that their mothers had not sought to enforce obedience through the use of physical force. See, for example, Bryson, *Look Back in Wonder*, 15

⁶⁷ Humphries, *Childhood*, 138, 239.

⁶⁸ Ross, *Love and Toil*, 168; Chinn, *They Worked*, 49. Compare, however, with Steedman’s very different interpretation of Woodward’s complex text: Steedman, *Landscape*, 91-2.

It is also clear that the emotions framework, with its emphasis on the mutability of human emotions, is more convincing than the cultural history paradigm of underlying continuity in human emotion across time and space. The autobiographies reveal just how powerful cultural constructs really were. A construction of motherhood stripped bare of emotional content did not automatically strip all loving emotion from the heart of mother-child relations – as we have seen many mothers did forge successful, intimate relationships with their children these precepts notwithstanding. But it certainly did play a role in validating and sustaining patterns of maternal behaviour that left children feeling unloved. And this, following Reddy, constitutes a core working principle for historians of the emotions: culture does not just describe emotional life, it shapes it.

2.

The previous section looked at mothers who managed to live up, in some measure at least, to the usual expectations of motherhood. They kept their children housed, fed, and clothed, even if some were less successful at meeting their emotional needs. But as we continue to read across the autobiographies we are soon forced to confront an uncomfortable truth. Not all mothers managed even this. In a number of cases, mothers were unable to fulfil the most basic of duties, such as the provision of food, warmth and shelter. It is time to analyse the working-class family further by looking at cases like these.

Getting at these kinds of experiences, however, poses new challenges. As the previous section showed, changing ideas about the treatment of children in the twentieth century

opened up a space for writers born in the Victorian period to discuss matters that had previously been out of bounds, such as the extent to which they had felt loved and nurtured, and how they experienced physical punishment. But some things had not changed. Mothers were not supposed to be alcoholics. They were not supposed to neglect their children, or raise them in dirty, squalid conditions. They were certainly not supposed to abandon them. And the ongoing hold of these expectations posed problems for writers who had experienced something that lay outside any recognisable social norm.

In the 1990s, with the publication of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir*, a new literary genre – the misery-memoir – provided a template for writing about such themes. But the autobiographies discussed here were penned many years before the emergence of the misery-memoir. Our authors had no model for describing parental neglect and almost no appetite to do so.⁶⁹ They deployed a number of different strategies. For example, when recalling her hard childhood and the many chores she had had to perform for her mother, Mrs Wrigley placed her complaints in the mouth of her sister: "I'm not saying what my other sister said, but she thought my mother was very cruel."⁷⁰ Flora Thompson shielded

⁶⁹ For more on the shift away from secrecy in the twentieth century see, in particular, Cohen, *Family Secrets*.

⁷⁰ Mrs Wrigley, "A Plate-Layer's wife," in Margaret Llewelyn Davies, ed., *Life as We Have Known It by Co-Operative Working Women*, intro. Anna Davin (London, 1990), 57. Also interesting are those writers who unfavourably contrasted parents with grandparents: A. V. Christie, *Brass Tacks and a Fiddle* (Kilmarnock, 1943), 20; Anon, *I walked by Night, Being*

her drunken father by writing her autobiographical memoirs in the third person and with names of individuals and places changed – though even with this precaution she left out the more unsavoury aspects of his behaviour.⁷¹ Kathleen Hilton-Foord turned to poetry. The prose version of her autobiography provided a simple narrative account of her childhood with her grandmother; the verse version revealed the emotional pain caused by her exclusion from the home her parents shared with her four brothers – the heavy ‘feeling of rejection’ that she carried round for years after.⁷² Others opted simply to omit any discussion of their early years at all. Frank Bullen wrote four volumes of autobiographical reminiscences, but it was only in the fourth that he referred to his early home life and the absence of his mother, and even then did so in the most coded of terms.⁷³ Earlier versions of his lengthy life story had begun when he was aged nine.

the Life and History of the King of the Norfolk Poachers. Written by Himself, ed. Lilius Rider Haggard. (London, 1935).

⁷¹ Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, with an introduction by H. J. Massingham (Oxford, 1939; repr. London, 1973); Idem., *Heatherley, Her lost sequel to 'Lark Rise to Candleford'*, ed. Anne Mallinson (Headley Down, Hampshire, 1998), p.83; See also Barbara English, ‘Lark Rise and Juniper Hill: a Victorian Community in Literature and in History’ *Victorian Studies*, 29, 1985, pp. 7-34.

⁷² Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiography, Brunel University: Kathleen Hilton-Foord, “The Survivor: the memoirs of a little Dover girl”, 2:398, 1-3; and “Grannie’s Girl”, 2:398, no pag.

⁷³ Frank Bullen, *Recollections: The Reminiscences of the Busy Life of One Who has Played the varied parts of Sailor, Author & Lecturer* (London, 1915), 29.

In reality, of course, most authors could not tell their life story without at least some reference to their childhood, and the failure of basic care or the absence of a mother was so obvious and so serious that it was generally impossible to avoid some details slipping out. Yet the memory of such things could be unpleasant and difficult. Herbert Harris wrote about his separation from his mother and subsequent incarceration in an orphanage some seventy years after it had happened, yet confessed that “even now I have pangs of anguish and depression when I give thought to the story”.⁷⁴ He, like many others, wanted to brush over negative experiences and offered no more than the sketchiest outline of this part of his life.⁷⁵ As a result, new reading strategies are required to make sense of life-stories that were incomplete, muddled or incoherent.

Consider, for instance, Les Moss’s verdict of his mother. She was, he declared, “a good mother,” she “couldn’t have been a better mother.” Indeed, he had “two good parents, there’s no shadow of a doubt about that.” But gnawing away at this account of “good” parents are some contradictory facts he also disclosed. There was his father: an alcoholic whose drinking reduced the family to poverty. And his mother – “very strong willed ... [and] a jawpot. She couldn’t seem to be enjoying herself unless she was jawing at something.” All this had had serious implications for his childhood self. His mother’s

⁷⁴ Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiography, Brunel University: H.J. Harris, “Autobiographical letters, 1978-1984”, 2:363, letter dated 4th May 1978

⁷⁵ Indeed, his account is so elliptical that I am unable to establish exactly what *had* caused the break up his family when he was three years old. See *ibid.*, letter dated 3rd May 1978, pp.2-3.

"weakness," he concluded, had "spoilt everything in the family." When his parents began fighting late at night he was "frightened to death ... and used to dread what was going to happen".⁷⁶ Moss's autobiography provides his reader with two very different versions of his childhood: a home with two good parents doing their best; and a home destroyed by heavy drinking and domestic conflict. And this captures a recurring difficulty of using autobiographies to try and recover the reality of working-class life. Historians are dependent upon the words of individuals who were deeply, sometimes tragically, bound up in events with serious personal consequences.

This tendency of writers to provide ambiguous accounts emerges particularly clearly in cases of neglect and abandonment. Many simply did not want to analyse a childhood that had contained a prolonged period of neglect or separation. Rebecca Jarrett, for example, insisted that her mother was a "good mother." Yet her own narrative contained evidence that fatally undermined that assessment – it explained that her mother was an alcoholic and a prostitute who had started selling Rebecca for sex at the age of twelve.⁷⁷ Mrs Layton's mother took to drinking gin when her children were small, leading to years of poor health and an early death. But like Rebecca Jarrett, the adult Mrs Layton refused to countenance that the alcoholism may have ultimately diminished the quality of the care she had provided:

⁷⁶ Les Moss, *Live and Learn: A Life and Struggle for Progress* (Brighton, 1979), 6-7.

⁷⁷ The Salvation Army International Heritage Centre, William Booth College: Rebecca Jarrett, "Rebecca Jarrett: written by her own self," RJ/2/2, p.3.

she was “a good kind mother … she could not have done much better for her children than she did.”⁷⁸

A similar tension is evident in those who were abandoned by their mothers. James Hawke, for example, spoke in warm tones about the mother who had left him. He concluded that she “must have had great courage,” adding that he had “always felt kindly towards my mother,” and expressing regret that he had not been able to find her as an adult. But the truth was that James’ mother had left him at such a young age that he could not really remember “anything personal” about her. And those things that he could remember do not make easy reading. Before abandoning James, his mother “did not show much affection for [me]”. His few recollections of their years together included an “unmerciful hiding,” and a “sound beating with the buckle-end of a belt” that he received from her hands.⁷⁹ The only other things he could remember were the ache in his heart when he realised his mother preferred his sister to him, and the actual moment of her departure.⁸⁰ Betty May interpreted

⁷⁸ Layton, “Memories of seventy years,” 8. For alcoholic mothers, see also Catherine Cookson, *Our Kate: An Autobiographical Memoir* (London, 1969); [Arthur Harding], *East End Underworld. Chapters in the life of Arthur Harding*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London, 1981); Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiography, Brunel University: Kay Garrett, Untitled, p.1, 2:305 and Annie Lord, ‘My Life’ 2:486; Pat O’Mara, *Liverpool Slummy* (London, 1934; Liverpool, 2009); Sam Shaw, *Guttersnipe*, with a foreword by Bertrand Watson (London, [1946]); Jane Walsh, *Not Like This* (London, 1953). The idea of the “good mother” is also problematized in Steedman, *Landscape*, 1, 16-7

⁷⁹ James (Major) Hawke, *From Private to Major* (London, 1938), 13-14.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 14.

her abandonment in a similar way. After a furious row between Betty and her brother, their mother unceremoniously dumped the pair of them with their father – an alcoholic running a brothel – from whom she had separated many years previously.⁸¹ Yet Betty May did not condemn her mother for sending her to live with her drunken father, in fact she took much of the blame for the calamity upon herself. After all (she reasoned) she and her siblings had “needed a great deal of looking after” and was it not her own misbehaviour – she had thrown her brother’s boots into the canal – that had precipitated the separation?⁸² Henry Price’s mother had twice abandoned her son, first as an infant and a second time after a brief reunion when Henry was seven. He could recollect only the second rejection and he placed the blame for it squarely on his step-father. His mother, he claimed had not wanted the separation – for her the parting “was a bitter one.”⁸³

Repeatedly writers made brave attempts to reframe the circumstances of their abandonment, so that although this vital detail is shared with the reader, no complaint is made of the mother for her role in it. Thomas Luby, in attempting to explain how he had ended up

⁸¹ Betty May, *Tiger-Woman: My Story* (London, 1929), 19.

⁸² Ibid., 14, 17-18.

⁸³ Islington Local History Centre, Finsbury Library, London: Henry Edward Price, “My diary,” 5, 1032 S/HEP. In fact, by the time that the illegitimate Henry returned to his mother at the age of seven she had married and given birth to another son, who she had also named Henry. Her naming choice suggests she had not anticipated taking her firstborn Henry back into her home. See Price, “Diary,” 5. See also Hilton-Foord, “The Survivor”, 1, 5; and “Grannie’s Girl” no pag.

homeless and living with a drunkard when just nine years old, needed to describe the home-life he had previously shared with his mother: she had not been feeding him, he was treated “much like a dog or any animal.”⁸⁴ Yet he never articulated any criticism of his mother for his childhood of homelessness and neglect. Others provided narrative accounts of their mother’s departure without making any attempt to explore its meaning or significance. Jim Uglow, for instance, recalled how his father had returned from a two-year trip at sea to find “a three months old baby in a pram, a pile of debts and three very neglected children.” After a few ugly scenes, his mother left with the new baby and its father. She “just disappeared from our lives.” By the same token, she just disappeared from Jim’s narrative.⁸⁵ Alongside these writers unwilling to explore the significance of their abandonment were others who had been left at such an early age, they really knew nothing of their birth family.⁸⁶ They were unable to provide any kind of account of their mothers at all.

The ways in which writers addressed difficult childhood experiences has served to obscure the historical record. If there was one thing that autobiographers liked to write about, it was their hardworking mothers; and the prevalence of these mother-figures in the

⁸⁴ William Luby, “William Luby, sweet-boiler,” in John Burnett, ed., *Useful Toil*, 89-90, 96.

⁸⁵ Jim Uglow, *Sailorman: A Barge-master’s Story* (London, 1975), p.16.

⁸⁶ See, for instance, Francis Anthony, *A Man’s a Man* (London, 1932); John Gray, *Gin and Bitters*, with an introduction by Ethel Mannin (London, [1938]); Sir Henry Morton Stanley, *The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley*, ed with a preface by Dorothy Stanley (Boston & New York, 1909); Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiography, Brunel University: Edward Balne, “Autobiography of an ex-Workhouse and Poor Law School boy,” 1:37; Edward Brown, Untitled, 1:93.

autobiographical narrative has encouraged historians to emphasise the importance of domestic work, and even to interpret this as an alternative expression of love. But we should not confuse the dominance of a particular motif in written documents with the dominance of those traits in historical reality. As we have seen, the autobiographers include individuals with a very different story to tell; individuals whose mothers had suffered from addiction or who had neglected or abandoned their children for other, sometimes unexplained, reasons. And although writers were sometimes able to discuss parents who had failed to live up to part of the twentieth century's new ideals concerning affection and discipline, they were far less willing to expose and dwell upon these more fundamental failings of care. Instead, their stories were told in hesitant, unconfident, non-critical, and sometimes confusing ways. But we do not need to accept our writers' blithe assurances that maternal addiction or abandonment had not disrupted their childhood, that despite it all they had had a "good mother." These difficult stories may not resonate clearly through the autobiographical literature in the way of the hard-working, industrious housewife, but we nonetheless need to find a place for them in our understanding.

In order to do this it is helpful to try to evaluate how widespread they really were. Reading across the autobiographies has illustrated that family life consisted in a material and an emotional element and that these two elements could combine in many different ways. There were mothers who provided a safe, clean home for their children rich in love and affection, but also mothers who performed the same household tasks without meeting their children's emotional needs. More occasionally mothers failed to provide either material or emotional care. So how do the various kinds of experiences described in the 411

autobiographies looked at here stack up? Was emotional and material neglect a marginal experience of the underprivileged few, and therefore something that we historians can also put to the edge of our accounts? Or was it a more common experience for the working-class child?

Let us start with those writers who described happy homes, loving mothers and contented childhoods. Around 40 percent of all the autobiographers fit into this category – 35 percent of men and 40 percent of women. In most of these cases, the mother performed her housework efficiently, but it was not this alone which caused their children to feel contented. In all of these cases, the writer drew attention to some additional maternal qualities – love, affection, kindness, patience, good humour – that had underpinned their wellbeing. At nearly half of the autobiographical writers, this provides some support for the standard view that family love was able to thrive despite the very different socio-economic context of Victorian Britain. Yet with more than half of all writers failing to describe their family life in these terms, this account is also far from complete.

A further third of writers produced neutral accounts that are not open to further interpretation. There is a large gender difference in writing styles here: 45 percent of male writers, as against 28 percent of female writers, displayed this reticence. About half made some reference to their mother's domestic skills – her cooking, cleaning, provisioning; but did not say anything about the emotional texture of their childhood. The other half wrote nothing about their mothers at all, not even indicating how she fared as a housekeeper. The tendency has been to assume that as these writers did not indicate otherwise, they were

presumably raised in loving homes, but we must resist this temptation. By the twentieth-century, working-class writers had the tools to describe an emotionally content childhood – as we have just seen, some forty percent of all writers did so. But this thirty percent did not. Silence in the autobiographies is complex, and it should certainly not be readily equated with comforting notions of familial love and well-being.

This leaves a final group who provided a far more disturbing account of neglect, addiction, excessive violence, abandonment, or simple indifference from their mothers. This group is not negligible. Just over 20 percent fell into this category; 18 percent of men and 25 percent of women. The gender difference may be owing to the fact that female writers tended to be more critical of their mothers and more indulgent towards their fathers (whilst for men the reverse was true) or it may stem from that large group of men (45 percent) who wrote nothing about their families: perhaps men were more likely to use silence to conceal negative experiences. Either way, amongst both sexes, just under ten percent reported serious neglect, addiction or abandonment. The remainder (8 percent of men and 15 per cent of women) wrote about mothers who were emotionally distant or physically aggressive, but who nevertheless played their expected part in providing food, clothes and lodging. At somewhere between one in five and one in four writers, this was a fairly sizeable subset of working-class children experiencing a range of problems ranging from emotional detachment to severe neglect.

Of course, how far the life stories narrated in the autobiographies map on to lived experience is more difficult to assess. In the final analysis, it is not possible to step from the few to the

many, nor to know what lay behind the silence of the third of writers who did not discuss family matters. There will always be questions about who wrote an autobiography and why. Nonetheless, there is surely enough evidence to suggest that these writers reliably draw attention to a significant and neglected feature of life in the working-class family in Victorian England. If the stories reported here are anywhere close to lived experience, large numbers of working-class children were at risk of emotional or material neglect. Somewhere between a fifth and a quarter of all children in our sources reported receiving insufficient care from their mothers to ensure their wellbeing. There are no grounds for believing that the experiences described in the autobiographies were any more bleak than that of the population at large, and good reason to suspect that at least some of the writers who did not divulge any personal family detail may have been concealing negative experiences. Clearly we are dealing with a very substantial minority, sufficient to force a reassessment of comforting notions about the stability of family love through the ages.

3.

This article has sought to bring ideas and insights emerging from the study of the emotions to the history of working-class families. In conclusion, it is time to travel back from the specificity of Victorian Britain to the general terrain of emotions history. To ask: how do the central tenets of emotions history stand up when we take men from the centre of our studies and put women in their place? And does it matter if those women lacked power, were sometimes illiterate, and always poor?

It must be clear that the conceptual framework provided by the history of emotions has allowed us to move away from a concept of maternal love as universal and unchanging, and acknowledge the true range and complexity of familial experiences. Furthermore, exploring the space between cultural prescription and emotional reality has greatly enhanced our understanding. Reddy argued that emotional life does not sit apart from prevailing cultural values, or “emotional regimes,” but is shaped by them, and so indeed it seems from the evidence considered here. These sources indicate that working-class culture placed greater store on the provision of material care than emotional care. The absence of sustained emphasis on love and affection did not mean that love and affection *never* existed between mother and child, but it did permit a range of legitimate parenting styles in which these emotions were expressed only ineffectually. Equally, cultural norms allowing parents an unfettered right to strike their children had direct emotional implications. As one autobiographer wrote of his father whose discipline had been “rigid” and “inhumane”: “I rarely recall feeling for him the faintest glow of affection – remembrances of stern discipline were always too near for that.”⁸⁷ The cultural norms for raising children in Victorian Britain were austere. We should not attempt to gloss this by redefining the performance of arduous household labour as an alternative expression of love. Instead, we should accept the central insight of recent research into the emotions: emotions are changeable and shaped by the cultural norms in which they are situated. Victorian Britain produced historically contingent cultural configurations for family life, and these in turn contributed to unique patterns of emotional experience.

⁸⁷ Michael Home, *Autumn Fields* (London, 1946).

Yet for all that emotions history can help us to penetrate some aspects of working-class family life, there are others that it fails to elucidate. We have seen that a space existed between cultural precept and social practice that could be filled in different ways by different mothers; but we have also encountered a stubborn core of mothers whose choices sat outside all expected bounds. How do we understand mothers who simply failed to conform to Victorian expectations? Cultural configurations were never monolithic, but some certainly had a very wide purchase. There was little dissent from the belief that mothers should provide the unpaid labour required to feed and clothe their children. I have found no configurations anywhere that permitted mothers to spend the housekeeping money on drink, or to neglect or abandon their children. Yet in a significant minority of families, these unscripted behaviours occurred. Some mothers and their children were living out their family relationships in ways that were almost wholly untouched by the prevailing values. So what were the determining influences in families such as these? If culture was not effective in ensuring these children's core physical needs were met, what other forces were at work?

We must also question the existing literature's preoccupation with the interplay between emotions and power. The most innovative work in emotions history has sought not only to explore the relationships between culture and emotions; it has also endeavoured to situate these processes within a wider political framework. As Ute Frevert has observed, feelings were "very important to social and political order. They could generate and stabilize such

order, but they could also do the opposite.”⁸⁸ Or as Reddy has recently restated, “Emotional experience … is always of great political significance.”⁸⁹ Indeed, it has arguably been this concerted effort of emotion historians to connect cultural, literary, emotional and political worlds that has given emotions history its keen analytical edge.

But these connections have been overwhelmingly drawn from analysing the emotional history of social elites, and of men more often than women.⁹⁰ When elite adult males are decentred from our analyses, this project to decode the politics of emotion looks far less compelling. This is not to deny that there is a political aspect to motherhood. Of course, states do sometimes take an interest in the practices of working-class mothers (one thinks, for example, of the pro-natalist polices of the twentieth century),⁹¹ and the family is certainly the site of small-scale power relations between men and women. Yet these general observations do not take us far in understanding why the Victorian working classes

⁸⁸ Frevert et al., *Emotional Lexicons*, p.271.

⁸⁹ William M. Reddy, “Emotional Turn? Feelings in Russian History and Culture: Comment”, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (2009), pp. 329-334, p.330.

⁹⁰ In addition to *ibid.* see S. D. White, ‘The Politics of Anger’, in Rosenwein (ed.), *Anger’s Past*; Eustace, 1812: *War and the Passions*; Barbara Rosenwein, “Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions”, *History Compass*, 8/8 (2010): 828–42; Margrit Pernau, Helge Jordheim, et al, *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in Nineteenth Century Asia and Europe* (Oxford, 2015); Ute Frevert et al., *Emotional Lexicons*.

⁹¹ See S Michel and S. Koven, “Womanly duties: Maternalist politics and the origins of welfare states in France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States, 1880–1920@, *American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), 1076–1108.

privileged the physical labour of motherhood over the emotional, or why mothers forged their parenting practice out of the cultural material they had to hand in the precise ways they did. To give just one example: when an exhausted George Acorn fell down a flight of steps whilst carrying up the family's water, his mother did not soothe her son's bruised body, or offer him "sympathy", or enquire "whether [he] was hurt." She gave him a thump and berated him for breaking the family's water bottle.⁹² We can agree that that there is a political context for mothering, yet this does little to help us understand why Mrs Acorn's mothering strategy involved thumps rather than the other more recognisable elements aspects of maternal love.

We can only proceed by recognising that there was a very large difference between the largely male social elites who lie at the heart of most emotions research and the women, poor and often illiterate, who have been studied here. Elite adult males are firmly embedded within their society's formal networks of power. Even when this is not manifested in formal political office-holding, male elites nonetheless enjoy favoured access to resources and power. These conditions do not hold for poor women, but a very different context does come into view: poverty. The historical actors we have looked at here were not middle-class groups grasping out for a firmer grip on power, but lower-class groups scraping along a very course material edge. Power was firmly out of reach; poverty and hunger were terrifyingly close. And there was something about this economic precariousness that seeped into the core of these families.

⁹² Acorn, *One of the Multitude*, pp.40-42.

In order to make sense of the fragility of some children's relationships with their mothers, we must address the social and economic realities within which they were situated. Many of the unhappy families described here endured conditions of desperate poverty and this had a direct impact on the emotional texture of their lives. A number of themes repeatedly appear: extreme poverty; fathers who were drunken or absent (often of course a cause of extreme poverty); very large families (again a potential cause of poverty); violent fathers, and bereavement within the family. These themes run like a thread throughout more than a third of the autobiographies – and although sometimes present in the loving families, some combination was almost always present for the writers describing unhappy homes.

Single mothers faced particular challenges, working long hours to keep a roof over their family's head, yet still responsible for the day-to-day care of dependent children. Allan Taylor's single mother got around the difficulty of reconciling the need to provide for her four-year old son with the need to look after him by working at the factory and leaving him alone in their room. She tied a string around his waist and attached it to the leg of the bed so that he could move around the room but not approach the fire. The adult Allan Taylor appeared to regard this as an example of his mother's ingenuity – like so many, he was not one to complain. But leaving a child of this age for a twelve-hour day with nothing but short visits at mealtimes was clearly far from ideal as a parenting strategy.⁹³ Betty May also recognised that the circumstances of her mother's life meant that she could not care

⁹³ Allan K. Taylor, *From a Glasgow Slum to Fleet Street* (London, [1949]), 1-2.

adequately for her four children. Having been abandoned by her husband, she worked twelve-hours a day at the chocolate factory to keep her household running, all for the meagre sum of 10 shillings a week. "It would have been excusable if she had neglected us," Betty ruefully noted.⁹⁴

Arthur Harding's mother faced a range of problems which worked against her ability to provide for her children and contributed to her descent into alcoholism. Following a road accident in early adulthood, she was unable to walk properly and suffered from chronic pain. Early in marriage, she lost her first child – a boy aged two years and nine months.⁹⁵ And her husband, though present, was hardly an effective family breadwinner. According to Arthur, he was "too lazy to earn a living" and "just an encumbrance really".⁹⁶ In the absence of a regular male wage, Mrs Harding took up sweated labour, working long hours to make matchboxes for a pittance. It can hardly be wondered that her children were neglected, nor that her drinking eventually spiralled out of control.

Long hours away from home not only made it impossible to provide adequate care to young children, it was also exhausting and left mothers without the resources to enjoy life. Alfred Coppard, for example, thought that after his father's death his mother had "became

⁹⁴ May, *Tiger-Woman*, 14.

⁹⁵ Harding, *East End Underworld*, 22, 24-5, 28-9, 65.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 69, 65.

something of a martinet; she had no time to be kind.”⁹⁷ Back-breaking laundry work and the endless round of domestic chores turned her life into a battle to be endured, rather than something to enjoy. It was only as an adult, that Kay Pearson understood some of the reasons why growing up “no one in our house showed affection.”⁹⁸ Then she saw the “heartache, poverty, hunger, and above all the loneliness which pervaded her [mother’s] existence,” following her husband’s desertion.⁹⁹ In many of these families, the prevailing cultural prescriptions of motherhood were just a hazy background that provided no more than a vague guiding light. For the most part, these mothers were not framing their mothering around external cultural codes. They just scraped by from day to day as best they could.

The absence of a breadwinner created a life of poverty, overwork and exhaustion as women vainly attempted to double as both wage-earner and caregiver. But the presence of a male head of household was no guarantee of an easier life. Alcoholism was rife in Victorian cities, and the presence of a drunk or aggressive father posed problems of a different kind. Not only did heavy drinking deplete the family finances, it also placed mothers and their children at risk of violence and abuse and the emotional toll could be heavy. Septimus O'Reilly's mother had fourteen children to raise and a husband with a “terrible temper ...

⁹⁷ A. E., Coppard, *It's Me, O Lord! An Abstract and Brief Chronicle of Some of the Life with Some of the Opinions of A. E. Coppard, Written by Himself* (London, 1957), 30.

⁹⁸ Kay Pearson, *Life in Hull From Then till Now* (Hull, 1980), 68.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 72. See also Jarrett, “Rebecca Jarrett,” 3; Jack Lanigan, “Incidents in the life of a citizen,” in John Burnett, ed., *Destiny Obscure*, 85-90.

coming home drunk on a Saturday night and beating her up – and sometimes doing the same thing mid-week, when he was sober, too.” The last assault that Septimus observed was so severe – his father “pasted into her until he’d kicked and punched all the sense out of her” – that Septimus and his siblings feared he had killed her. It all took its toll her mothering making her (in Septimus’ opinion) a “whiner and a nagger,” who had never been seen to “smile or look pleasant.”¹⁰⁰ Alice Foley’s father’s drinking left the family mired in poverty and at risk of unpredictable outbursts of violence. From time to time “he disappeared for weeks, leaving his whereabouts unknown, then just as suddenly he turned up penniless and unkempt.” When recovering from a boozing bout, “his temper was most vicious and unpredictable” and Alice had a large stock of memories about the outbursts she had witnessed as a child. Worse still, thanks to him her mother ended up with seven children, “none of which she had really wanted.”¹⁰¹ Such tales were told many times over: seventy of the autobiographies mentioned alcoholic fathers, fifteen percent of the total with living fathers.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Septimus O'Reilly, *The Tiger of the Legion. Being the life story of "Tiger" O'Reilly as told to William J. Elliott* (London, [1936]), 26.

¹⁰¹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood* (Manchester, 1973), 9.

¹⁰² For a few other examples, see: Charles Spencer (Charlie) Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London, 1964); Lanigan, “Incidents in the life of a citizen;”; Jack Martin, *Ups and Downs: The Life Story of a Working Man* (Bolton, 1973); Shaw, *Guttersnipe*; Walsh, *Not Like This*; Emlyn Williams, *George: An Early Autobiography* (London, 1961).

Even sober, wage-earning husbands risked adding new members to the family, with the result that mothers who were only barely coping were further taxed with an unending round of pregnancy and birth. Faith Osgerby's mother let them all know that "babies were not welcomed in the family" and even told her daughter about her unsuccessful efforts to abort her – she took gunpowder, "mixing it to a paste in a soapdish on her washstand every night."¹⁰³ Alfred Rowse's mother thought she had successfully limited her family to just two children, when five years later Alfred made an appearance. From early childhood he was made to realise what a "regrettable accident" his birth had been, and grew up with a "feeling of not being wanted."¹⁰⁴ Hannah Mitchell noticed how matters at home had deteriorated after the birth of her mother's last two children. This, she opined, "seemed to be more than she could endure and our home became more unhappy than ever."¹⁰⁵

Not only were women unable to control their fertility and thus burdened with unwanted children. This was also an era of high mortality, and the death of husbands, children and babies could throw managing households into complete disarray. Following the death of her husband, Joseph Williamson's mother did a valiant job of raising her eight children the youngest just an infant of three months old, but was also subject to occasional "fits of

¹⁰³ Osgerby, "Memoirs," 79. See also John Langley, *Always a Layman* (Brighton, 1976), p. 14

¹⁰⁴ A. L. Rowse, *A Cornish childhood: Autobiography of a Cornishman* (London, 6th edn. 1956), 80, 86. See also Brand, *Fenman Remembers*, 13.

¹⁰⁵ Mitchell, *Hard Way Up*, 40.

depression.” At these times the home became a “dead house” and the children witnessed terrible displays of “sadness and tears.”¹⁰⁶ Having lost a husband and three infants within the space of a few short years, the cause of her low spirits is not hard to understand. Infant death appears to have been the trigger to the departure of George Severn’s mother. First a daughter of less than two years, then “another baby girl died” when just a few weeks old. Mrs Severn left the family home within weeks of the second death.¹⁰⁷ George Meek, whose mother failed to show him “any love or affection,” lost no fewer than four of her eight children.¹⁰⁸ The endless cycle of (unwanted) pregnancy and birth placed strains on women’s physical and mental health, and the added burden of burying infants and small children completely undid some mothers’ ability to care for those who remained in their care.

What starts to emerge in these women’s stories are a host of forces that must be acknowledged in order to make sense of their emotional lives. There was clearly a material dimension to the emotions of motherhood. Extreme hardship, inadequate and overcrowded housing and insufficient food placed enormous stress on family relationships and

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Williamson, *Father Joe: The Autobiography of Joseph Williamson of Poplar and Stepney* (London, 1963), 19.

¹⁰⁷ J Milliot Severn, *The Life Story and Experiences of a Phrenologist* (Brighton, 1929), 5-6.

¹⁰⁸ Meek, *George Meek*, 21. The legacy of a child’s death is also evident in the autobiography of the writer, H. G Wells. Herbert George Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a very ordinary Britain (since 1866)*, (London, 1934). See also Acorn, [pseud], *One of the Multitude*; Harding, *East End Underworld*.

undoubtedly played a role in wearing down individual's capacity for meaningful relationships founded on love rather than more practical considerations. But there were non-material components as well. The mother of H. G. Wells did not live at the most impoverished margins of society. The family had no servants, but it did enjoy the luxury of sufficient domestic space for the parents to sleep in separate bedrooms – “their form of birth control” opined the adult Wells – which at least permitted her to limit her family.¹⁰⁹ Yet it was still far from the comfort that the daughter of a respectable innkeeper might have hoped for in her marriage to Mr Wells. Furthermore, Mrs Wells’ female status rendered her dependent upon the hopelessly ineffective breadwinner her husband proved to be and unable to forge an alternative, more satisfactory life. Then there was the “great tragedy” – the death of her dear daughter, Fanny, at just nine years old – an event that permanently fractured her relationship with all her remaining children. Her story reveals us what a messy and complex web of experiences she brought to her mothering and how fundamental those experiences were for the emotional lives of those close to her.

Clearly there are elements of working-class family life that are not well captured by the existing frameworks of emotions history. A literature which draws heavily on the experiences of elite social groups has convincingly drawn the connections between culture, emotions and power, but this schema is of only limited use in explaining how emotions functioned in impoverished families. Working-class mothers founded their parenting decisions on prevailing cultural norms, but they also lived in a harsh world which inflected

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.24

and constrained their parenting choices in significant ways. Poverty, large families, absent, violent or alcoholic fathers, and bereavements were powerful external, non-cultural forces which also helped to shape the emotional texture of family life.

Above all, these stories of poor and powerless women struggling to raise families on a purse that was always running empty are not presented as an alternative way of conceptualising emotional life – a template that is suitable for poor people, with all the specific disadvantages they endured, that can sit alongside that which has been developed for social elites. But rather they are there to suggest that there is a material, experiential dimension to *all* emotion life, a dimension that may less relenting for those more comfortably circumstanced, but one that nonetheless cannot be discounted. And this is why it is necessary to cease the handwringing over how hard it is to “do” the emotions of the poor. We fit the socially excluded into our narratives not simply to plug gaps in historical coverage and provide parallel accounts to sit alongside those we already have. We include subaltern voices in our historical reconstructions because the world starts to look fundamentally different when we do.