

## Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865–1914

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Julie-Marie Strange's study of Victorian and Edwardian fatherhood begins with a question. In her 1908 collection of essays, M. E. Loane, a district nurse, asked, 'Is the working-class father as black as he is painted?' (p. 1). It is this question that animates the exploration of the problematic narratives and stereotypes of fatherhood in the 19th and early 20th centuries that follows. While this question is the driving force behind the research, Strange is keen to give us a counter narrative, shifting the focus from a model of fatherhood that is defined by deficit and the failures of men instead onto how fatherhood has been shaped through factors including labour, affection and duty. The study does not argue that absent fathers and 'bad', tyrannical fathers did not exist, but that they have a preponderance in our understanding of fatherhood and do not represent the norm, in spite of the large amount of critical attention they have received. There is not a binary here of good versus bad fathers; instead, the very idea of being a father and 'fathering', Strange argues, has different meanings at different times and in different contexts. This is one of the key strengths of this study: although it cannot ignore their existence, it moves away from static ideas about fatherhood, not simply arguing for the death of one stereotype, but showing that even within one life or one family there is a fluidity to the notion of fatherhood. At the same time, these negative tropes are ever-present, haunting the narratives told in the life writing this study presents as a shaping influence. But even where fathers are negative influences, it is important to understand how the children understand those influences and what impact this has on the family dynamics.

This is achieved through a focus on working-class autobiography as a source of evidence, building on Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers' model in *Gender and Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century*, in which they mapped out the ways in which Victorian fatherhood had been explored and argued for the need to explore fatherhood as a process with many changing facets and influences over time.<sup>(1)</sup> This methodology is striking in that it does not engage with the more conventional definitions of men's contribution to the domestic economy. It also does not dedicate much space to the changing nature of the spousal relationship over the book's chosen time period, or conflicting ideas of class and status brought up by the different factions that make up what we think of as the working class, or even the influence of changes to welfare and social policy. As Strange points out, these kinds of studies exist; instead, what she gives us are the untold stories. This book bridges the gap between literary representations of Victorian and Edwardian fatherhood

and masculinity, and the historical quantitative approach to the 'data' of fatherhood. Strange seeks to complicate debates about working-class men, often defined by their work, in contrast to the middle-class father. She does this not by removing fatherhood from labour, but by showing its importance in familial relationships and childhood experience, in the words and works of these family members themselves.

A key problem in understanding fatherhood is one of classification and terminology, and Strange deftly handles these considerations: rather than focusing on the contemporary idea of parental 'love' and its implications both as an idealised concept or as a manifestation of Victorian sentiment (something Edwardians sought to avoid), Strange uses 'attachment' and the idea of 'near to love' care, as outlined by Carol Smart (2); the definition centres on feeling and, as Strange describes, 'how the performance and understanding of obligation and everyday practice can be steeped in feeling' (p. 17). The reader is shown the significance behind everyday activities, here 'work-talk' is reclaimed for the family and the sacrifice inherent in working life is explored for its implicit – and explicit – paternal connection.

In this way, Strange is able to provide a narrative about the kinds of factors that the working-class in these periods dwelt on and concerned *themselves* with; this also helps the book steer clear of imposing our own contemporary idea of fatherhood onto the idea of a Victorian or Edwardian 'good' father. The focus here is on children and fathers together, with the book keen to separate 'men as fathers from men as mothers' husbands' (p. 2); the nature of the source material is such that the roles often change, and the dynamics of the autobiographer over their life can provide us with an insight into generational ideas about fatherhood. As with all life writing, the motivations of the authors must be taken into account: these range from propaganda and morality tales to entertainment and commemoration. However, this is not just a study of autobiographies. The book explores case studies, a short film sponsored by the London and North Western Railway Company depicting miners in 1910, Victorian and Edwardian fiction, popular jokes and comic songs, Victorian literature on disciplining children, even design questions around the idea of the chair in chapter three, and the gendering of house decoration and furniture design.

This study is deliberately limited, because it is working against a background of broad and wide-ranging existing scholarship. Strange's use of life writing is innovative but, as she recognises, not without its problems: published life writing has often made it to publication because the subject's life has been marked out as exceptional, meaning that it is difficult to make the samples of life writing representative. However, the writers often discuss their own working-class beginnings and their 'unexceptional' siblings, and though many of the auto/biographies come from activists, trade unionists and those involved in the church, there are also those by domestic workers and farm workers. Although the demographic is mostly men, there are some women writers. However, once again, these are 'exceptional' lives: they are activists, writers and medical practitioners. A consequence of the bulk of the source material being written by men is that it does not often interrogate or critique the gendered dynamic of the family. By using these diverse examples in conversation with one another, however, the book builds a convincing picture of wider concerns about fatherhood, told through close reading of first-hand accounts. Although the scope is necessarily narrow in this sense, Strange makes a very clear argument for its importance and hints tantalisingly at future work which may help redress these limitations: for example, she mentions research she has done into oral history collections, which may work well as a study together with this work on published auto/biography. The nature of the book is that it does not claim to cover every facet of the topic, but paves the way for new work and new critical approaches.

The six chapters are thematic rather than chronological. This decision has been made to separate the book's focus and argument from the influence of policy changes: the writers used, Strange tells us, do not mark the passage of their lives with reference to 'major' events, perhaps excepting the wars. Chapter one discusses and problematises the cliché of the absent father, still very present in the autobiographies themselves, and shows the personal significance of the father – even in his absence – rather than the stereotype. Strange reclaims fathers' subjectivity, giving voices to individuals rather than making them the mouthpiece of the whole working class. The crux of this chapter is the close examination of the language used to draw out the personal significance from the socio-political one that the autobiographers often try to enforce; this involves finding the implicit personal feeling behind childhood admiration of, and pride in, labour. This chapter

presents the key argument about attachment over love: with the difficulty of expressing sentiment without using the language of deficit, 'work-talk' gave autobiographers a way to articulate their feelings. The centrality of labour, until now, has been used to place fathers on the periphery of the home, but Strange argues that it shows intimacy through the use of the language of economic support and sacrificial labour.

Chapter two, in dialogue with the language of work in the first chapter, puts pressure on the connection between love and labour by exploring stories of fathers' unemployment. How can fathers legitimate themselves and their familial relationships when the labour is gone; what happens when the language of labour is taken away? Alongside exploration of auto/biographies, Strange discusses the case studies of unemployed families conducted by Seebohm Rowntree and Bruno Lasker in York in 1910. She shows how lack of employment could severely affect family dynamics. This is not to say that these fathers represent the 'failed' fathers of Victorian literature; instead, the autobiographies show fathers who want to work but are not able to. Rowntree and Lasker worked against the backdrop of public opinion of unemployed fathers as of bad character, by claiming that more than half of those they interviewed had 'good character and physique' (p. 53). What comes out here is the fragility of fathers and established paternal roles. For Strange's writers this is not a failure, however; rather it enables the paternal relationship to develop in other ways.

Chapter three further undoes the work of the absent father stereotype by reframing working-class fathers as central to the home. It does this through a tight focus on the everyday events of family life. This chapter is structured around such domestic objects as tables and chairs, as indicators not only of relationships that take place over the table and in the chair, but also of the perceived connection between material objects and moral character. We are shown, for example, the importance of the teatime ritual, whether families eat together or eat separately, and whether the father coming home signalled togetherness or whether it instilled fear. Strange's exploration of the gendering of Father's chair and its role in masculine identity formation is particularly nuanced, and she demonstrates a clear move from memories and narratives of physical and sentimental childhood experience in the home to shared work between father and son later in life, reinforcing the points made in the previous chapters. Just as the language of labour is used to express sentiment and affection, objects are a focal point for writing about childhood, becoming central in the mourning process later in the writer's life.

Chapter four contrasts with the everyday focus of chapter three by discussing leisure time in the narratives, including Christmas and holidays. However, Strange does not argue for the simplistic equation of time spent together with feelings of 'togetherness': the importance of play was foregrounded in the mid-20th century, so we should not judge the idea of fatherhood and affection as expressed through duty and distance as necessarily one that is lacking. Rather, she draws attention to the heightened expectations of holidays: fathers are seen as a Santa Claus figure, and holidays are particularly vividly related as a consequence. The second facet of leisure time concerns identity construction: it is a way to distinguish the individual father from the broader working-class perspective, but also forms part of the agenda of autobiography. How leisure time is spent reflects on character and 'worthiness', and self-improvement is the key motivation. Many of the writers discussed were producing their autobiographies at a time when the image of the 'fun dad' was becoming more important: they, like their own fathers, could not spend the time with their children that the 'fun dad' image necessitated, and so revisited their own childhoods to find a model of effective fatherhood that they could identify with.

Following on from the fleeting fun of the holidays explored in chapter four, chapter five discusses the wider importance of laughter, comedy and fun and its multiple purposes, for example as a mechanism for relating unhappiness and trauma or as a way to subvert masculine authority. Strange shows us who laughs and what they laugh at, detailing jokes and media from the time that reinforce the idea of comedy as a way of clarifying parental roles and responsibilities, and resolving conflict that arises from these family dynamics. Within the auto/biographical form, laughter can be subversive: the reader is shown how writers could communicate trauma such as suicide, for example. Laughter could also show affection, even through jokes made about the stereotype of the cruel father. Once again, the deficit definition of fatherhood rears its head.

Chapter six deals with the idea of duty and discipline, and the problems of enacting these without falling into the stereotype of the absent or cruel father. Strange juxtaposes this by showing the protective side of fathers, and how authority and protection become ‘powerful motifs for the ultimate rejection of fathers or, reconciliation and connectedness, in later life’ (p. 20). Within the auto/biographies considered, obligation and protectiveness are sources of conflict. However, few of the writers talk about corporal punishment and those who do mention it do not show any less attachment to their fathers than those who do not. The dynamics between mother and father are explored here: Strange suggests that part of the assertion that fathers should be disciplinarians came from mothers and a sense of the division of parental duty. Discipline remains a battleground for representations of fatherhood: it is dangerous territory that can lead back to the stereotype of the bad father. To remedy this and protect against accusations of failed fatherhood, autobiographers emphasise the seemingly trivial performances of duty or commitment as acts of the utmost affection. The instilling of moral values becomes a paternal gift, once again trouncing the ‘bad’ father stereotype.

Strange limits the study to fathers or those who raised children as their own, for example grandfathers, stepfathers or adoptive fathers, rather than father figures. The importance of this, she says, is to ‘situate fathers with mothers’ in order to ‘understand the importance of family, in all its formations, as a site for the constitution of self’ (p. 20). Each chapter follows the same kind of structure, using particular autobiographies and families to argue for a reevaluation of the wider evidence and of fathers’ place in our understanding. Each chapter’s conclusion then situates the argument in the wider debates about fatherhood. Strange shows that, in spite of an ongoing critical focus on absent fathers, most fathers represented in her work were home every day. When physically absent, their presence was still felt, from the chair to the house itself. The language of labour, previously used to justify the absence of fathers, is shown to be one of attachment and family care. This argument raises questions about the alignment of the family with the home, and the home with the figure of the mother, when imaginative spaces and connections have become increasingly important. This book is itself a compelling reason to reconsider working-class memoir and to work to change the limited perspectives that have been offered thus far. This call is particularly timely, as work is taking place to create the *Archive of Working-Class Writing Online*, a collaborative project to make available an online archive of British working-class writing since 1700. This project, spearheaded by academics from Brunel, Liverpool John Moores, the Open University and Sheffield Hallam, will be an open access collection aimed at the preservation and understanding of working-class life writing in context.(3)

The question of why studies of working-class fatherhood have taken a back seat to scholarship on middle-class fathers is an interesting one, and it is difficult to answer. Strange suggests that it reflects the preoccupations of historians and literary scholars, particularly since the 1990s, and that concerns with the ‘absent’ father reflect mid-20th century worries about the same kinds of patterns, but she shows that this has led to an ‘othering’ of working-class experience and the assumption that the middle-class fathers that form the basis of these studies are representative. Often acknowledgements in academic books are skimmed or skipped, but the crux of this book lies here, in the final sentence: the acknowledgement that ‘This book is, of course, partly our story too’ (p. ix). While Strange is referring to her own family, the sentence aptly points to the importance of this study for understanding contemporary readings of fatherhood and parenting, and also for greater insight into critical approaches to topics that are shaped by the lens of our own time.

## Notes

1. Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers, *Gender and Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Carol Smart, *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking* (Cambridge, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Writing Lives*, 17 March 2013 <<http://www.writinglives.org>> [2] [accessed 5 August 2015].[Back to \(3\)](#)

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<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/fatherhood-and-the-british-working-class-1865-1914-by-julie-marie-strange/2019729.article>

[3]  
Telegraph  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/11353943/Victorian-fathers-the-original-new-dads.html> [4]

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[3] <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/fatherhood-and-the-british-working-class-1865-1914-by-julie-marie-strange/2019729.article>

[4] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/11353943/Victorian-fathers-the-original-new-dads.html>