

Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy

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In *Bread Winner* Professor Emma Griffin weaves together a large number of autobiographical accounts of working-class family life, including many by women, to describe the nature and causes of poverty in 19th and early 20th century Britain. It is well presented, easy to read and will be enjoyed by social, economic, and gender historians. Congratulations to Professor Griffin for bringing together these wonderful stories.

Griffin crafts a clear and determined argument from this copious material. She begins with an allegedly neglected 'enigma': the persistence of poverty in the midst of prosperity, specifically the ongoing deprivation of children. Macroeconomic explanations, such as the *Belle Epoque* shifts in income distribution documented by Thomas Piketty, are side-stepped to focus instead on the working-class family. Griffin argues that the ways in which families were structured and functioned explains how Britain could become the richest country in the world yet numbers of its children could remain undernourished, ragged, and homeless. Working people's life writings expose the mechanisms. No other source can peer into families and show how they worked like the reminiscences of those who lived in them. They were participant-observers.

Griffin claims that the increasing male wages of the Victorian era, widely assumed to augur improvement, not only failed to 'raise all boats' but ironically triggered responses at the household level that increased the risks of poverty. These responses were rooted in the economic, social, and emotional exchanges that structured working-class families. Men in these families were the principal earners on whom all other members depended. This 'male breadwinner family' structure is the root of subsequent problems.

Dependence on male wages was embedded in the gendered labour market. Women and girls were crowded into a limited number of jobs, low pay ensured by excess supply and rationalized by social norms that included the ideal of male breadwinning. Married women fared particularly poorly for few jobs, and fewer still that paid decently, could be combined with household responsibilities and childcare, which devolved almost entirely on wives, a domestic division of labour reciprocally cemented in place by comparative wages alongside gender stereotypes. Consequently, although many married women worked, employment was often episodic and opportunist. Contributions to family incomes were modest. Not that women enjoyed significant leisure, for transforming men's wages into meals, clothing, and domestic comfort involved long hours of hard work which, combined with bearing and caring for children, crowded out both waged employment and

relaxation.

Pressures could be lessened by contributions from working children for, although in retreat, child labour remained pervasive. Boys, by adolescence, could often out-earn mothers and become secondary breadwinners, while girls with more limited options could be hived off as skivvies in richer households or could help at home with childcare and the endless domestic round. The gendered experiences of the juvenile labour market heralded adult prospects which, alongside division of labour within homes, prepared working-class children to replicate the families of their childhoods. So far, the account is familiar.

For all its apparent coherence, the male breadwinner family too often broke down, leaving women and children without support. Men died, became unemployed, or fell ill, leaving unbridgeable gaps in family budgets. This too is well-known. Less obviously but all too frequently, men were incompetent, even reluctant, breadwinners. Some absconded, others were idle or drunken, and yet others, even if they earned decent wages, begrudged sharing, a selfishness that Wally Seccombe over 20 years ago termed 'breadwinner abuse' (1993, p. 148). These men are Griffin's focus. Her account weaves Victorian reformers' stress on personal failings into standard accounts of late 19th century poverty to claim that failing and abusive breadwinners became more common or mattered more post-1840. How did this happen?

One suggestion is that previously women and children had been more self-reliant, an old idea now widely contested. However, Griffin's eye-catching paradox is her claim that men became less willing to shoulder the burden of breadwinning in the context of economic growth even though this enabled them to earn more. As sole earners, men felt entitled to top slice to finance their own pleasures even if this meant that their wives struggled to stretch the housekeeping to provide the basics for the rest of the family. Larger pay packets unbalanced the previous equilibrium with unpaid domestic work, which became increasingly devalued. Preferential treatment spilled over into family life with fathers privileged in terms of food, attention, and comfort, inequity rationalized by indispensability. Economic growth delivered increased pay but also increased incompetence, selfishness and breadwinner abuse and wives and children suffered. What is the evidence for this intriguing claim?

Griffin works systematically through her particular primary materials. She recounts only her own findings; there is no discussion of previous studies linking family structure and household economy with deprivation. Footnotes cite contributions but without dialogue readers have no idea how they fit in. Maybe, this style of historical writing is the way of the future but if so we should recognize its downside.

There are two main historiographies within which *Bread Winner* might be set. One is the study of life writing, which has its own sophisticated theoretical and methodological framework, the other is the history of family and household structures. Some earlier authors straddle these fields, using working-peoples' narratives to get inside their worlds, including their families. The pioneering collectors and historians of working-class autobiographies were John Burnett and David Vincent. Burnett did not just 'compile' the standard bibliography and establish an archive. He also published annotated excerpts, many relating to family life. In *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* David Vincent—who initially is not even named but subsumed as part of Burnett's 'team' (p.8)—dealt explicitly with the misery children suffered as a result of dead, missing and irresponsible fathers. Ellen Ross, in *Love and Toil*, also used autobiographies to provide a pathbreaking account of motherhood in deprived families at the turn of the century. More recently, Julie-Marie Strange, Ginger Frost, Helen Rogers and Emily Cuming, and I have used autobiographies, including some of the same sources as Griffin, to understand working-class families, and so, like her, to 'bridge the social and the economic' and even 'shed light on large economic questions' (p.296) yet, whether this earlier work anticipated or disputed Griffin's account remains undisclosed.

These writers join an army of family and gender historians, who from the 1960s challenged excessive reliance on men's wages to measure living standards. Against the backdrop of this well-known work it is surprising to find Griffin claiming that '... we need to recognize the gap that could, and did, exist between real wages and family living standards' (p. 134). Many researchers did just that in their

investigations of wellbeing. Even economic historians, selected for particular reproach, have contributed by tracing *family* living standards and including women and children in the recent explosion of wage studies (for example, Horrell and Humphries, 1990; Horrell et al., 2019). Let me be clear, I am not advocating tedious literature reviews intended only to credential. However, failure to engage with earlier contributions stymies debate, and while much of *Bread Winner* is consistent with conventional wisdom there are some points of disagreement. Let us look first at some basic concepts.

The chronology, causes, and consequences of the male breadwinner family and its sister concept of a wage sufficient to support a family, i.e. a ‘family wage’ have been the subjects of extensive debate. At least four positions emerged. Orthodox economists interpreted the male breadwinner family as the optimizing outcome of individual decisions as male wages rose. Radical feminists saw it, combined with protective labour legislation and trade union activity, as a strategy to subordinate working-class women. Marxist feminists saw it, combined with demands for family wages, as a strategy to raise male wages, protect women from a double shift, and improve working-class living standards. Institutionalists understood it as a reflection of the state’s dawning interest in social and demographic reproduction. Some general agreements have emerged (Creighton, 1999). First, when combined, a male breadwinner family and a family wage helped to raise living standards, reconcile the demands of paid work and reproduction, provide more time for family life and childcare, shield women from the burdens of the double shift, and secure the autonomy of the family. The reduction of poverty among families with young children 1900-1940 indicates the benefits (Mingione, 1996). On the other hand, these gains were achieved at the expense of women, since they rested on full-time domestic labour and economic dependence. Second, when a male breadwinner family structure was unaccompanied by family wages, inevitably the case for lone mothers, families on low wages and the long-term unemployed, poverty ensued, as the surveys of Booth and Rowntree and the investigations of a generation of women social reformers who worked with working-class wives and mothers demonstrated, and as the ‘feminization’ of poverty in our own times continues to illustrate.

Griffin begins with the standard reasons why family wages went missing: fathers died, were incapacitated, faced unemployment, or had deserted either before or after marriage. It is easy to get a handle on such breadwinner failures from both autobiographical and other evidence. But Griffin’s codicil is an allegedly huge substratum of need created by men’s widespread and increasing irresponsibility and selfishness. A wage sufficient for family support was earned but was not shared. Wages might rise but, since women and children got a fixed or even smaller absolute amount, their situation could deteriorate: a negative ‘breadwinner effect’ offsetting the positive ‘income effect’. Since researchers typically observe only the resources acquired by families, not their internal allocation, it is not so easy to detect this kind of breadwinner breakdown. Economic historians have tried by *inferring* breadwinner bias and its effects from systematic inequality by gender and age in heights, weights, morbidity and mortality. While findings are mixed, there is scope to question the mechanistic link between monetary contributions and command over resources implicit in Griffin’s hypothesis and strong evidence to suggest that privileging earners generated unequal welfare outcomes only when households were severely constrained (Horrell and Oxley, 2013). Breadwinner bias left scars in very poor families, not where wages were rising.

Griffin does not pursue the anthropometric route but, absent direct observation of family behavior, she too has to rely on *conjecture*. She judges fathers on their breadwinning competence according to evaluations in their children’s autobiographies. By ‘reading and rereading’ (p. x) the autobiographies she consigns fathers to various ominous categories (dead, deserted, ill, unemployed) but also applies a dichotomous reliable/unreliable breadwinner distinction, her own judgement tiered on the autobiographer’s judgement. She then works through a verbal spreadsheet, wonderfully illustrated by individual stories. Griffin sees tables and charts as obfuscation: ‘transforming stories into histograms’ (p. ix). But her dismissal of quantification is selective. Her methodology relies on *counting* fathers in the various categories and using relative proportions to demonstrate the significance of breadwinner incompetence.

At first sight, Griffin’s findings are shocking. Classic sources of poverty—breadwinner death, unemployment, and ill health—appear dwarfed by the proportions of men judged selfish and irresponsible.

‘Of the fathers who did not for one reason or another provide for their families, only 30 per cent were unable to find work or physically incapable of undertaking it. Personal failings emerge as a more significant factor: drunkenness, irregular working patterns and a refusal to share earnings explains 63 per cent’ (pp. 119-120). Consider other ways to cut the data. The 79 irresponsible fathers represent only 16 per cent of classifiable cases (501) or 24 per cent of classifiable cases with fathers present (330). Death, unemployment, and ill health generated 42 per cent. Nonetheless fecklessness appears widespread. Has Griffin uncovered a tsunami of male irresponsibility paradoxically set in motion by improving circumstances?

Strangely, although Griffin’s hypothesis relates unreliability to increasing wages, she does not explore trends over time, nor seek to identify better and more poorly paid fathers. Instead, location and specifically an urban/rural dichotomy sets up the comparison, the expectation being that breadwinner failure would be lower in the countryside with its agricultural employment and poor pay. Unfortunately, locational differences extend beyond employment structure and wage levels. Urban spaces offered more temptations to selfishness, more opportunities to abscond, and more chances to start again without encumbrances. Simultaneously, they offered substitutes for family life: alternative sources of sustenance, sociability, and sexual satisfaction. Whether resulting cross-sectional differences in family integrity and commitment to breadwinning can be read as measuring a secular response to economic growth is debatable. Moreover, the rural sub-sample is sketchy. Only 14 fathers were judged unreliable providers out of the 142 individuals raised in the countryside. What proportion of the other 128 could not be classified? Why here turn to ‘chronically low wages, short stints of unemployment and high food prices’ as extenuating circumstances (p. 123)? Similar factors made life difficult for dockers, porters, cab men, and myriad urban casual workers. Why too exclude rural craftsmen from consideration? Did they not share the cultural and economic context that Griffin thinks made the agricultural labourer so dutiful? Nor is it clear why, when comparison is made with the evidence from Griffin’s earlier book, *Liberty’s Dawn*, only agricultural workers are considered. Moreover, this citation raises important issues about consistency since, while based on an overlapping sample of autobiographies, it provided a sunny account of popular experience including that of working-class women. More generally, if the hypothesis relates increasing unreliability to higher wages, then why focus on location? Changes over time could be explored directly by cohort analysis and men’s relative pay inferred confidently from occupation using established historical stratification scales such as HISCAM.

Another sample of working-class life accounts, including some from an earlier era, is also full of fathers who had lost contact, become alcoholics, worked irregularly, were unemployed, imprisoned, or transported, in the army or navy, or simply irresponsible (Humphries, 2010, pp. 96-102; pp. 129-136; p. 120). Moreover, poor law records, settlement examinations, family reconstitution and multiple qualitative sources from the mid-18th century until Victoria’s reign document a tidal wave of marital instability and child neglect (see Emmison, 1933; Stone, 1977; Outhwaite, 1981; Snell, 1985; Kent, 1990; Sharpe, 1990; Humphries, 1998; Bailey, 2003). The ‘frail breadwinning’ (Humphries, 2010, p.172; pp. 367-8) of these decades was no selfish reaction to higher wages but the creation of an unregulated capitalist economy and a state set on imperial expansion. For many men, it was a struggle to earn a family wage. Their families were large. They suffered from cyclical unemployment. Technology rendered their skills irrelevant and their wives dependent. They were recruited into the army and navy and separated from wives and children. They were insufficiently disciplined to bear the burden of family support, and the distractions observed for the later period, including drink, were already pervasive. Not surprisingly men failed to live up to prescribed roles. Breadwinner frailty *in all its forms* was common a century earlier than Griffin’s depiction, long before wages struggled upwards post 1840. Was it then a persistent feature of an exacting economic system or did frailty gather momentum as wages rose, nourishing the personal failings that Griffin stresses? The scars left on suffering children provide independent evidence.

Inadequate support damaged children’s life chances. Specifically, they started work at younger ages and had fewer years of schooling. These effects are detectable in working-class autobiographies documenting the extent and frequency of breadwinner failure over time and across families in different economic circumstances. For example, boys whose fathers were absent for reasons other than death, or never present during childhood, started work about 1.4 years younger, controlling for other relevant factors: a significant

and chilling effect. But this disadvantage was completely offset by being born after 1850 (Humphries, 2010, pp. 204-6). More significant still, fathers' occupations influenced child wellbeing. Although the ranking of occupations shifts over time, there is clear evidence that fathers in better paid jobs spared children from employment for longer and provided more schooling, other things being equal (Humphries, 2010, pp. 180-182, p. 340-343). Moreover, there was a general uplift post-1850, before effective labour legislation and compulsory schooling (Humphries, 2010, p. 346-9). It is hard not to conclude that the slowly rising wages of the Victorian era improved life for most working-class children.

Nor is it clear that increasing wages created an imbalance in perceptions of breadwinner-homemaker contributions. De Vries (2008) is best known for his identification of 18th century 'industriousness' but he also documents a mid-19th century working-class appreciation for 'unpurchasables' such as cleanliness, health, and domesticity. Without servants, these goods necessitated male breadwinner families, which thus provided mutual benefits, so strengthening commitment. At the same time, new understanding of the transmission mechanisms of infectious disease raised the value of cleanliness and so of housework (Mokyr, 2000).

Turning back to the other framework relevant to *Bread Winner*, historical autobiography, Griffin's case rests on her ability to judge the performance of fathers from the accounts of their children. The methodology raises well-known issues about the complexity of life-writing and 'the difficulty of "fixing meaning"' (p. x) especially when asking tricky questions about, for example, the quality of a man's breadwinning. One obvious problem is that in the period after 1840, as in the earlier evidence, the categories into which fathers can be sorted bleed into one another and were all fed by exogenous pressures. Fathers could be good providers at one time and feckless sloths at another; they could both provide and drink; selfishness could reflect depression and violence mental illness. Breadwinners were haunted by the spectre of the workhouse, emasculated by job-destroying technology and regimented by workplace rules and hours. As a result, they could be inaccessible, even disinterested. Work separated them from their families, and eroded the ties of familiarity and affection that made the grind bearable *and their children understanding*. And here is the nub: the autobiographers were not (dispassionate) observers of domestic drama they were *participants* in it.

Many factors could influence writers: their intended audiences; the family life cycle; ideas about parenting; a gendered standpoint; incomprehension of the pressures of breadwinning. Do authors exaggerate? Griffin is adamant that her writers could not have been influenced by a later era's 'misery memoirs', but contemporary literature celebrated the heroic child who triumphed over (familial) adversity. Could it have framed memory? While George Acorn's shiftless parents wept at his reading of *David Copperfield*, did he identify with the eponymous hero? Autobiographers' views softened as they aged and they, themselves struggled both to provide and parent, as Julie-Marie Strange demonstrates in her (2015) rehabilitation of Victorian fathers. Writers reflected back through a mist of shifting standards and from a perspective overshadowed by their own perceived achievements. Victorian ideals of self-help and individual responsibility may well have promoted increasing impatience with stumbling breadwinners (Humphries, 2010, p. 100-102), while a female standpoint perhaps involved less forgiveness (Humphries, 2019; 2021). Birth rank within the family and sibling rivalries possibly sharpened resentments. These confounding factors have to be understood and controlled for before concluding that prosperity created additional deprivation. Was unreliability correlated with the timing of the memoir, with subsequent experience as a parent, with gender, with birth rank? Far from crowding out individual stories, such a statistical overview could structure 'a collective jigsaw of individual lives' (Rogers and Cuming, 2018) but it would also clarify cause and effect.

In conclusion, this book is crammed with wonderfully vivid accounts of working-class life. It deserves the wide readership it will undoubtedly gain. While many of the findings confirm conventional wisdom, it offers a startling new claim: that higher wages rendered fathers more unreliable and self-centred thereby worsening the situation for women and children. Here there is a serious weakness: the weight placed on the doubly subjective reading of a slippery and shifting ideal of male breadwinning. To illustrate, take the case of Matthew Cowper who features in *Bread Winner*. Unusual within the corpus of working-class autobiography, we have two accounts of Cowper's fathering provided by sisters, Agnes the older and Daisy the younger, in

his large family. Their accounts are very different. Agnes remembered her father as 'affectionate and fond' though a strict disciplinarian. He was a clever man who, with little formal education, could converse in many languages and, by the age of 28, had become master of a clipper. His occupation required extended separations from his family and on return he seemed to resent the 'love and affection' that his wife bestowed on her children, an attitude that Agnes thought stemmed from this early life 'entirely devoid of affection' (p.18). She reflected on his emotional baggage: 'I am convinced that my father had no understanding of children, probably due to his having had but little experience of home life and family affections, for when very young he had lost his father at sea, a loss followed shortly by the death of his mother' (Cowper, 1948, pp.17-18). With his drowning, the third generation in his seafaring dynasty to perish in this way, she concluded that her mother had lost 'an affectionate and faithful husband' and his children a father 'who although not "indulgent"' 'looked well after his family' (pp.66-7). Daisy's picture, as Griffin relates, is of an unsympathetic martinet increasingly failing in his duty: 'As the years passed, the intervals of his home-staying before seeking another command grew longer, and the successive commands smaller; the cash saved during one long voyage would all be drawn from the bank before he went off again, always leaving our mother struggling with little money and an ever growing family' (Cowper, TS, 1964, np). Daisy embarrassedly confessed that she was not sad when he died and cried only in sympathy with her mother. How to interpret these different judgements?

Agnes's autobiography was published and perhaps, therefore, sanitised. She overlooked the drinking that Daisy emphasized. Yet Daisy was only five when her father drowned and she admits to barely remembering him, so whose views coloured her own judgement? As the last child of nine, she captured her father's support at its lowest ebb while, as the second eldest, Agnes benefitted from a smaller sibset and a more virile parent. Personalities and experiences intrude. Agnes displayed an independence ahead of its time, pursued a career, and supported their mother. As a breadwinner herself, Agnes may have been more sympathetic to Cowper's faltering. Daisy's apparently successful partnership in a functional male breadwinner family underpinned the standards by which she judged her siblings. Her hypercritical thumbnails of her brothers' lives convey her expectations. All seven men were found wanting as sons, brothers, and husbands! Significantly, her particular gripe was their failure to provide financial support to their mother and sisters.

Captain Cowper's frailties were probably overlooked by his older and exaggerated by his younger daughter. Objectively, he does not deserve a zero in the breadwinner stakes. During his lifetime his children were well fed, clothed, and housed and enjoyed small treats (though unappreciative of the visits to the Walker Art Gallery that he organized) and although, after his death, 'shortness of means was our abiding portion', Cowper, 1964, np) he did manage to leave a nest egg, £80 according to Agnes, shaved down to £60-70 by Daisy. By 1894, when he took his last voyage, he had endured over 20 years of sea service and was clearly struggling with the stress of breadwinning in a hazardous job. When the waters closed above his head, alongside the terror, there may have been an element of relief.

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