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Men, Women and Property in England, 1780–1870: A Social and Economic History of Family Strategies amongst the Leeds Middle Classes

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The Recycling of the English Middle Class

R. J. Morris has spent at least the last forty years studying the social history of Leeds. In this excellent volume he shows that these decades of careful and painstaking scholarship have paid off. None of the sources used by Morris will be unfamiliar to other researchers, and most of his hypotheses can be found somewhere else, in embryo.(1) Morris has simply milked his sources harder, and pressed his hypotheses farther than anyone hitherto. The empirical core of Morris's book is a study of 374 Leeds wills, probated between 1830 and 1834. He uses these documents to capture a snapshot picture of middle class family structure and its relationship to property, but also to trace this relationship forward and backward in time. An effective will had to accomplish multiple purposes: it had to provide for widows and minor children, it had to divide up family property for the next generation and it had to keep a family business going as long as necessary for the support and security of the members. But then it also had to throw this business on the market at an opportune moment, liquidate the assets, and distribute them to individual heirs, in a manner appropriate for their age, gender and personal capability.

As Morris shows, the Leeds middle class (in sharp contrast to the rural gentry and aristocracy) almost universally practiced partible inheritance. Property was almost invariably divided equally among the children, but the forms that these divisions took were extremely variegated and complex. This was a system that forced each generation to start anew, accumulating its own wealth and capital. At the same time, the extended family was kept alive as a network of loosely connected relations, who could help one another in times of difficulty. In a harsh, competitive, and unpredictable world where premature death, illness, economic misjudgment, or commercial recession could be fatal, this 'reserve army of cousins', as Morris terms them, might provide a cushion of security and assistance that could be obtained nowhere else.

To accomplish all these different functions and purposes, family property had to be held in multiple forms: on the one hand, it was necessary to have a strong competitive firm in some entrepreneurial sector of the local economy that could generate wealth, savings, and assets on which family members could borrow and draw. On the other hand, it was necessary gradually to transfer accumulated assets into passive, rentier forms of investment, such as urban real estate, government bonds, and (later) company shares, which could provide income streams to support retirement and family dependents in the event of premature debility or death. This leads Morris, in chapter 4, to his central analytical concept: what he calls the middle-class 'property cycle'. During the early stage of family formation, he argues, entrepreneurial capital would predominate, as families strove to achieve a comfortable livelihood, and to save up for the vicissitudes of life that lay ahead. Gradually, the accumulated wealth would be transferred into passive rentier forms of investment that could provide an income for retirement, and insurance for dependents, in the event of premature debility or death. At the end of the family cycle, the family property would be divided, and a new generation would begin it all over again.

Morris's analysis of the family cycle is a model of brilliant generalisation, grounded in careful, painstaking empirical research. It is a beautiful example of what micro-history can contribute to our macro understanding of the past. Although he bases his argument on only a relatively small number of well-documented case studies, the evidence is so clear-cut (see Tables 4.4; p. 155, 5.5 p. 209; and Fig. 4.4, p. 168) that one is immediately persuaded as to the basic soundness of his concept. Moreover, in chapter 5, he extends it to show how the operation of the property cycle operated in tandem with the local real estate market to significantly impact the physical development of the urban environment itself. Drawing on a close analysis of wills, maps, rate books, and property transactions, he zeroes in on specific tracts of several acres, which were purchased by particular middle class investors, who gradually developed, sold, or leased parts of them, according to the needs of the family, either for housing, cash, capital or rental income.

During the first half of the century, these 'urban peasants' used their small 'rentier republics' (p. 203) to provide for widows, to obtain loans for their businesses, housing for their workers, retirement income and civic prestige, depending on their needs and priorities at any given time. During the second half of the century, many of these rentier republics were further developed and retained, even as less burdensome, and more impersonal, forms of investment opened up. In particular, the advent of the railway boom, the rise of share capital, and the shift towards capital export to America, India or other colonies in the empire, reduced middl-class dependence on these local property parcels. The long-term result was to free the Leeds middle class from these burdensome responsibilities of local real estate management, but also to subject them to the vagaries and vicissitudes of global capital markets, and to detach them from their sense of rootedness and identity within the urban environment of Leeds itself.

In chapter 6, Morris considers the situation of women, who were responsible for 27 per cent of the probates in his sample (p. 234). Most of these people were widows or spinsters who had inherited property from their husbands or fathers. In general, Morris finds a widespread use of formal or informal trusts for women's property, which gave even wives a certain amount of independent income and input into the family's economic affairs. As testators, women tended to be more focused on the dispersal of 'things', rather than with capital or real estate. In chapter 7, Morris contrasts the cases of two widows from the 1820s, whose husbands died prematurely. In one case, where the widow took an active role in the management of the family real estate holdings, the family emerged in excellent economic condition, earning between £350 and £1,962 per year (p. 281). In the other case, where the estate was left relatively undeveloped, in a poorly managed trust, the family survived, but did not become nearly so well off.

In such cases, Morris shows, in chapter 7, extended family networks were essential in helping the individual member branches negotiate their passage through hard times. These networks were loose and amorphous, providing employment opportunities (or recruits) for the reserve army of cousins, and often linking businessmen in Leeds with kindred firms in London, or abroad. Lubricated by the social work of spinster aunts, or maiden daughters, such far-flung networks had to be tended and managed by travel and correspondence, so that they could provide resources and protection for branches that were facing insolvency or economic privation, due to the death or dereliction of the local family head. By helping one another, members of the extended network were able to keep up their individual reputations, and improve their chances of success in an extremely harsh, competitive, and uncertain world.

Considered as a whole, this book must be deemed a great achievement. Morris's claim that the property cycle was at the very centre of the urban middle-class experience – that 'it was as pervasive for the property owner as the poverty cycle for the wage earner' (p. 369) is almost certainly correct. For this reason, no social historian of nineteenth-century Britain can afford to ignore this volume. Those who do not wish to plough through the many fascinating (though sometimes dryly presented) tables, maps, figures, and micro-analyses will find a masterful summary of the overall argument between pages 367 and 381. Nevertheless, despite its many virtues, this volume is not uniformly successful, and some of its specific arguments may be exaggerated or one&-sided.

In the first place, the main analysis of the Leeds middle class (chapters 3 to 8) are book-ended by two broader, more sweeping interpretive essays, based on national data, (chapters 2 and 9) that are not well integrated into the rest of the book.(2) Chapter 2 takes the place of a conventional introduction, but it neither provides a preliminary review of the literature, nor leads us directly into Morris's analytical framework. As a result, it fails to provide an adequate context for grasping the full significance, and limitations, of this book. Correspondingly, chapter 9 offers some intriguing data on the relationship of national probate values to population and GNP. These results indicate that the 1830s and 1840s were a period of great economic difficulty for middle-class families on a national level. Only during the 1850s and 1860s did safer, more lucrative investments and entrepreneurial opportunities open up.

One wishes that Professor Morris had integrated these findings more thoroughly into the body of his middle chapters. This would have enabled him to place the Leeds experience in a national context. Even more importantly, it would have encouraged him to step back from his quantitative databases, so as to integrate these findings into a broader account of the social history of the town. Morris does a very good job of capturing the lived experience of many middle-class families, but his book inserts these families back into the Leeds urban context only in the most cursory way. Indeed, table 2.8 notwithstanding, an uninitiated reader might actually come away from this volume not realising that Leeds was one of the main centres of the industrial revolution. The fact that its population increased tenfold during the period of Morris's study is surely worthy not only of mention but also of integration into the larger story.(3) Perhaps Professor Morris thinks that this story has been told sufficiently often in other places, and therefore it need not be rehearsed again in the present venue.(4) The problem is that the story of urban industrial transformation is central to the circumstances of his subject, and yet remains strangely absent from the analytical framework of his book. Neither the entrepreneurial endeavors in which his subjects made their money, nor the rentier real estate investments through which they enjoyed its fruits can be separated from the larger expansive cycles of urban industrial capitalism, in which the local economy was regionally, nationally and globally enmeshed.

To be sure, Morris does not entirely ignore this wider expansive context, and yet there is a curiously static quality to his presentation of the property cycle, which simply repeats itself again, in every successive generation, from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century. As Morris himself acknowledges, there were some fundamental changes, particularly in the shifting profile of rentier investments, which began in the 1840s, as his subjects supplemented their holdings in local urban property with railway shares, foreign bonds or imperial venture capital schemes. Morris hints that this shift may have had profound consequences for the political, cultural and ideological orientation of his subjects. However, considerably more probing into the ways in which these changes played themselves out would have been appreciated. The fact that Leeds was a hotbed of class, sectarian and political party conflict during the 1830s and 1840s could not be inferred from the present book.(5) The identities and allegiances of Morris's subjects are sometimes mentioned in passing, but no significance is ascribed to them, and there is no consideration of the possibility that the property cycle played out differently for different groups. Professor Morris's silence perhaps indicates that he believes it did not. Yet he shows no evidence of having tested this hypothesis.

These gaps in Morris's analysis are compounded by certain problems in his sources, and by the notorious difficulty of defining a group as amorphous and variegated as the 'middle class'. If, as he suggests, we take inclusion in city directories as evidence of membership in a broadly defined middle class then, by Morris's own calculations, the probate filers represented only about 40 per cent (presumably mostly in the upper half) of the larger group. By focusing on those who died between 1830 and 1834, Morris has, in practice, grounded his work in the experience of two generations - those born in the 1750-85 period, and their children, mostly born before 1815. Given the biases of the surviving data, Morris's detailed case studies are necessarily drawn from an even narrower group of quite wealthy local families that were already well established in the late eighteenth century, and were hoping to perpetuate their descendents amidst the shifting cross-currents of the urban industrial age.

If one were to move a generation ahead - say, into the 1860s - one would continue to encounter many of Morris's successfully strategising families, but in the context of a vastly transformed middle class. Between 1841 and 1871, the population of Leeds increased by more than one hundred thousand, approximately a third of whom were recent immigrants to the town. From this we can infer that the mid-Victorian middle class encompassed several thousand recent arrivals - the products of both geographical and social mobility - whose parents had not been present in the Leeds middle class of the 1830s. It would have been interesting if Professor Morris had conducted a second study of wills and probate from the 1860s and 1870s, so as to compare its profile with that of the 1830-4 group. It would be interesting to see if the property cycle played out different for these recent arrivals, as they negotiated the passage from being an emergent to becoming (or so they hoped) an established middle class.(6)

Of course, given the amount of time and energy that Professor Morris has devoted to this project, it may be unreasonable to ask him for a further study along similar lines. Yet, his theory of the property cycle is so analytically powerful and intellectually intriguing that it is important for historians (perhaps other historians) to apply it at other time-points, and to other sectors of the British middle class. When all the results are in, we should not be surprised if the final picture does not, in some important ways, depart from Morris's urban upper-middle-class snapshot of early nineteenth-century Leeds. For the time being, however, we will have to content ourselves with this path-breaking, innovative and impressive piece of work.

Notes

1. Morris's most original contribution – his notion of the middle class 'property cycle' – has already appeared in some of his previous articles, although not with the depth, complexity and richness that the present volume provides.Back to (1)
2. It is symptomatic of the organisational oddities at the beginning and end of this book, that Morris's conclusion finishes the actual work of concluding on p. 384, but then goes on for another thirty-one pages discussing the national campaign for married women's property rights in the second half of the nineteenth century.Back to (2)
3. Calculated from information in C. J. Morgan, 'Demographic Change, 1771–1911', in ed. Derek Fraser, *A History of Modern Leeds* (Manchester, 1980), p. 48.Back to (3)
4. See the various essays in *A History of Modern Leeds*, as well as R. J. Morris's own *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds, 1820–1850* (Manchester, 1990).Back to (4)
5. Morris did centrepiece these matters in *Class, Sect and Party*, but he offers no indication of how his findings in the present volume relate to his earlier work (or vice versa).Back to (5)
6. The global analysis of published probate data, which Morris presents in chapter 9, might be taken as a

proxy for such a study, but it cannot capture the richness of insight to be gleaned from the study of the wills themselves. Not surprisingly, the probate data suggests that the middle class was getting wealthier – a trend, however, that is more clearly demonstrated through the calculations made by Harold Perkin, thirty-five years ago, than by the more oblique estimates that Morris offers in this part of his present book. See Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880,* (1969), pp. 135–6.Back to (6)

Other reviews:
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