

FATHERHOOD, PROVIDING, AND ATTACHMENT IN LATE VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN WORKING-CLASS FAMILIES*

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ABSTRACT. *Histories of the late Victorian working-class family focus overwhelmingly on mothers. When men feature in family dynamics, it is within the context of their obligation to provide. Despite the familiarity of this model of family life, it is problematic, not least because it is partial. Written from a women's history perspective, such analyses have inevitably, and understandably, focused on the 'dark side' of breadwinning and privileged women's experiences as wives and mothers. Further, they have tended to make husbands synonymous with fathers. Drawing on working-class autobiography, this article revisits the cliché of the 'good provider' to suggest that children could invest the normative paternal obligation to provide with intimate and individual meaning, reimagining breadwinning as an act of devotion that distinguished particular father–child relationships within a context of more general working-class values. It does not suggest that women were not oppressed by the breadwinner ideal, or that attachment to mothers and fathers was the same. Rather, it calls for recognition of the fluidity of a sexual division of affective labour whereby, in memory at least, fathers' obligation to provide could be deeply embedded within an understanding of the emotional dynamics of everyday life.*

Historical studies of the 'breadwinner' model in Britain fall into several categories: the contested periodization of the male breadwinner model; critiques of male breadwinning as contingent on female dependency and oppression; campaigns for enfranchisement and a 'family wage'; state and welfare policy towards families; and working-class cultures of respectability. The gap between breadwinner ideology and families' experience of the breadwinner model, and the extent to which the 'family' wage worked against women's interests, is well

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recorded.¹ Within this model, the tasks of parenting, that is, feeding, nurturing, and training, fell to women and were associated with ‘mothering’, a distinction embedded in poor law relief by the end of the nineteenth century.² In contrast, father practices were grounded in earning sufficient wages to support the family economy. This division of labour in parenting tasks can also be classified as ‘caring about’ (breadwinning) and ‘caring for’ (nurturing) children.³ This article examines how working-class autobiographical accounts of late Victorian and Edwardian childhood appropriated paternal breadwinning, a normative component of fathering, to tell particular father–child stories and invest breadwinning with nurturing connotations. In doing so, the article elucidates working-class subjectivities to integrate emotion and attachment into social histories of men’s work, breadwinning, and working-class family life.⁴

¹ The literature on breadwinning is vast. See W. Seccombe, ‘Patriarchy stabilized: the construction of the male breadwinner wage norm in nineteenth-century Britain’, *Social History*, 11 (1986), pp. 53–76; S. Horrell and J. Humphries, ‘The origins and expansion of the male breadwinner family: the case of nineteenth-century Britain’, *International Review of Social History*, 42 (1997), pp. 25–64; Colin Creighton, ‘The rise of the male breadwinner family: a reappraisal’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 38 (1996), pp. 310–37; C. Creighton, ‘The rise and decline of the “male breadwinner family” in Britain’, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 23 (1999), pp. 519–41; A. Janssens, ‘The rise and decline of the male breadwinner family? An overview of the debate’, *International Review of Social History*, 42 (1997), pp. 1–23; J. Lewis, ‘The decline of the male breadwinner model: the implications for work and care’, *Social Politics*, 8 (2001), pp. 152–70. For breadwinning and marriage, see Joanna Bourke’s lively account of women’s imaginative navigation of power dynamics within the family, Joanna Bourke, *Working-class cultures in Britain, 1890–1960: gender, class and ethnicity* (London, 1993), pp. 67–71. Ellen Ross’s insightful analysis of working-class marriage notes that ‘good men’ were common but focuses on women’s difficulties and resentments towards the ‘family’ wage, Ellen Ross, *Love and toil: motherhood in outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 72–6. See also Elizabeth Roberts, *A woman’s place: an oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1995); Carl Chinn, *They worked all their lives: women of the urban poor, 1880–1939* (Manchester, 1988); Andrew August, *Poor women’s lives: gender, work and poverty in late-Victorian London* (London and Cranbury, 1999); Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman, ‘Women’s work, gender conflict and labour markets in Europe, 1500–1900’, *Economic History Review*, 44 (1991), pp. 608–28; and Megan Doolittle, ‘Fatherhood and family shame: masculinity, welfare and the workhouse in late-nineteenth-century England’, in L. Delap, B. Griffin and A. Wills, eds., *The politics of domestic authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke and New York, NY, 2009), pp. 84–108.

² See C. Pateman, ‘The patriarchal welfare state’, in C. Pateman, ed., *The disorder of women: democracy, feminism and political theory* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 179–209; Anna Clark, ‘The New Poor Law and the breadwinner wage: contrasting assumptions’, *Journal of Social History*, 34 (2000), pp. 261–82; M. Levine-Clark, ‘The gendered economy of family liability: intergenerational relationships and poor law relief in England’s Black Country, 1871–1911’, *Journal of British Studies*, 45 (2006), pp. 72–89.

³ Tracey Warren, ‘Conceptualising breadwinning work’, *Work, Employment and Society*, 21 (2007), pp. 317–36.

⁴ Pioneers in the field of the history of emotion call for an integration of emotion into existing fields of study. See Jan Plamper, ‘The history of emotions: an interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns’, *History and Theory*, 49 (2010), pp. 237–65. For introduction to the history of emotion see William Reddy, *The navigation of feeling: a framework for the history of emotions* (Cambridge, 2001); Joanna Bourke, ‘Fear and anxiety: writing about

Since John Tosh's seminal call to study masculinity in the 1990s, research into Victorian and Edwardian middle-class men's involvement in family life has burgeoned to suggest the permeability of men's public and private selves whereby formal conceptions of men's breadwinner role and responsibilities integrated with fathers' playful, doting, and indulgent capacity.⁵ Working-class fathers, however, remain 'strangers in the midst' in 'family' studies that are dominated by marriage, domestic economy, women's labour, hygiene, and mothering.⁶ Historical correlations between domestic life, women, and children have excluded plebeian men as affective agents in family life although the 'provider' model is not divorced from men's family commitment. A sufficient number of social historians have drawn attention to wives and children's claims that 'good' men provided financially for the model to have become a cliché.⁷

And yet, there is little interrogation of the ways in which men and children invested men's paid work with affective significance. The historiographical focus on mothering has perpetuated a model of household relations and attachment that privileges mothers' love and toil. Written mostly from a women's history perspective, the 'good provider' model is problematic for navigating fatherhood, not least because the status and dynamic associated with husbands is often made synonymous with that of fathers.⁸ The legal rights of

emotion in modern history', *History Workshop Journal*, 55 (2003), pp. 111–33; and Michael Roper, 'Slipping out of view: subjectivity and emotion in gender history', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), pp. 57–72.

⁵ John Tosh, 'What should historians do with masculinity? Reflection on nineteenth-century Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), pp. 179–202. See also J. Tosh, *A man's place: masculinity and the middle-class home in Victorian England* (New York, NY, and London, 1999); Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, 'Domestic fathers and the Victorian parental role', *Women's History Review*, 15 (2006), pp. 551–9; Valerie Sanders, *The tragi-comedy of Victorian fatherhood* (Cambridge, 2009); S. Olsen, 'The authority of motherhood in question: fatherhood and the moral education of children in England', *Women's History Review*, 18 (2009), pp. 765–80; Joanne Bailey, 'A very sensible man: imagining fatherhood in England, 1750–1830', *History*, 95 (2010), pp. 267–92. See also Martin Francis, 'Tears, tantrums and bared teeth: the emotional economy of three Conservative prime ministers, 1951–1963', *Journal of British Studies*, 41 (2002), pp. 354–87.

⁶ John Gillis, *A world of their own making: myth, ritual and the quest for family values* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 179. There are a few exceptions, mostly focused on the twentieth century. See Tim Fisher, 'Fatherhood and the British Fathercraft Movement, 1919–1939', *Gender and History*, 17 (2005), pp. 441–62, and Laura King, 'Hidden fathers? The significance of fatherhood in mid-twentieth-century Britain', *Contemporary British History*, 26 (2012), 25–46.

⁷ This is the classic social history line on family and household economy. See Roberts, *A woman's place*; Bourke, *Working-class cultures*; A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty: working-class culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Milton Keynes, 1992); Karl Ittmann, *Work, gender and family in Victorian England* (London, 1994); W. Seccombe, *Weathering the storm: working-class families from the industrial revolution to the fertility decline* (London, 1993).

⁸ Andrew Walker also makes this point, noting that Chinn's index entry for 'father' takes readers to pages on men's general role in households. A. Walker, 'Father's pride? Fatherhood in industrialising communities', in T. Broughton and H. Rogers, eds., *Gender and fatherhood in the nineteenth century* (Basingstoke, 2007), pp. 113–25.

fathers were contingent on marriage and affective economies were not removed from gendered roles and responsibilities. Nevertheless, on an interpersonal level, husbands were very different to fathers. Further, the rich seam of correspondence, diaries, and memoir that enable historians of emotion to mine middle-class interiority is notably absent for working-class men and women prior to the First World War. If recent scholarship has staked a claim for the affective lives of middle-class fathers, historical insight into the labouring father as an agent, or recipient, of affection remains obscure.

Drawing on working-class autobiographies from a sample of over a hundred published texts, written mostly between 1920 and the 1960s about childhoods between c. 1870 and 1910, the article revisits the cliché of the ‘good provider’ to examine how plebeian men’s normative role as provider could be invested with intimate significance by fathers and children. It does not suggest that emotive conceptions of providing were exclusive to working-class families but, rather, that autobiographical accounts of men’s labour offer insight into a formerly ambiguous set of interpersonal dynamics. Social historians have long exploited working-class autobiography for information about a social world.⁹ This article demonstrates that authors also mediated subjective identities and interpersonal relationships through reflection on everyday obligations. The term attachment is used to indicate bonds between family members and incorporates the abstract and affective meanings invested in legal and economic practices.

The majority of autobiographers self-identified with ‘respectable’ working-class values and related their family stories within a politicized framework. Accounts of late Victorian and Edwardian family life produced in a twentieth-century context also had to navigate shifting expectations of parenting, notably, an assumed correlation between maternity and attachment and declining birth rates associated with perceived increases in parents’ emotional investment in children. Assumptions about fathering in this context, however, remained overwhelmingly focused on breadwinning. Male autobiographers were also implicated in a model of masculinity that valued wage-earning as the principal father-practice; for autobiographers committed to labour politics, men’s right to work adopted further significance. Revisiting the cliché of the ‘good man’ in these accounts, this article stakes a claim for working-class children’s attachment to fathers and suggests the affective complexity of apparently impersonal testimony.

I

Working-class accounts of late Victorian childhood usually focus on mothers to reflect women’s dominance of domestic labour and time. Many authors were

⁹ For use of autobiography as empirical evidence of childhood see Jane Humphries, *Childhood and child labour in the British industrial revolution* (Cambridge, 2010).

effusive about their mothers and acknowledged how the practices of motherhood could, as Ellen Ross demonstrated so well in *Love and toil* (1993), be understood as a language of love. As Ross noted, many autobiographers writing in the twentieth century did not necessarily recognize contemporary models of idealized maternity. Ross's mothers in Victorian and Edwardian London were neither tactile nor sentimental; their maternal identities were rooted in working hard for children so that 'love and toil' were inextricable.¹⁰ For some, the conception of mother's work was so ingrained with everyday childhood that mothers were 'not a person really' but a sensibility and service; most sick or troubled children knew they wanted their mother.¹¹ Others felt the need to explain the apparent gap between contemporary expectations of mother love and experiences of being mothered by apparently rough or 'hard' women.¹²

Fewer authors wrote explicitly about attachment to fathers. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of fatherhood rooted paternity in financial provision. Life story conventions tended to reflect and perpetuate such assumptions, especially when authors were circumspect about including personal detail in texts ostensibly concerned with recording political, educational, and social change. Mostly, autobiographers emphasized the dynamic between fathers' work, self-identity, security, and access to opportunities.¹³ Men's labour, and the domestic comforts purchased by his wages, operated as a public sign of fathers' family commitment. As one speaker at the 'Workers of the World' conference (1913) noted, men did not sit at home telling their families they loved them; they went to work to prove it.¹⁴ That such assumptions were commonplace is undoubted: they formed the bedrock of men's claims to citizenship, countless self-improvement schemes, and were ingrained in working men's rhetoric about self-respect and independence. Acknowledgement of provision as a symbol of masculine commitment may be well documented but, usually, these accounts tell us more about men's legal, economic, and political obligations rather than children's attachment to fathers.

Literary critics have typically lamented the absence or limitation of subjectivity in plebeian autobiography; revelations were of class rather than 'self'.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ross, *Love and toil*, pp. 3–10.

¹¹ See for instance, Elizabeth Bryson, *Look back in wonder* (Dundee, 1966), p. 29, and Grace Foakes, *Four meals for fourpence: a heart-warming tale of family life in London's old East End* (London, 2011), pp. 15–25, 37–52.

¹² See, for example, Alice Foley, *A Bolton childhood* (Manchester, 1973), pp. 3–4, 8; Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street* (London, 1983), pp. 6–7; and Jack Lawson, *A man's life* (London, 1932), pp. 14–16.

¹³ D. Vincent, *Bread, knowledge and freedom: a study of nineteenth-century working-class autobiography* (London and New York, NY, 1981), pp. 62–86.

¹⁴ *To the workers of the world: an appeal for personal religion by eight members of parliament* (London, 1913), p. 34.

¹⁵ Nan Hackett, 'A different form of self: narrative style in British nineteenth-century working-class autobiography', *Biography*, 12 (1989), pp. 208–26, and Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: a history of self-representation, 1832–1920* (Oxford, 1991), p. 139.

In particular, the conventions of political memoir emphasized the ‘respectability’ of fathers. The ‘good man’ model of fathering could also circumvent awkward questions about ambivalence or hostility between family members. As an adult, Herbert Morrison (born 1888) was clearly frustrated with his father’s conservatism. This was partially generational but there are hints of a more personal antagonism in the father–son dynamic too. Reference to his father’s ‘good’ provision (they had an enviable house) smoothed such suggestions and enabled Morrison’s narrative to move swiftly to his political career.¹⁶ Certainly, it is a mistake to equate commonplace references to ‘good men’ with affection. Grace Foakes (born 1901) was explicit that her father was a ‘good man’ in that he toiled long and hard for his family yet she did not love him; in retrospect, she thought that her father had not allowed love.¹⁷

While adult children’s reflection on fathers’ wage labour acknowledged breadwinning as a duty, it could also be imagined as an act of devotion. As the anthropologist Daniel Miller has demonstrated, conceptions of obligation can obscure the sacrificial rites of everyday life that transform duties into transcendent practices performed for subjects of devotion. In Miller’s study, the obligation to shop for essential household items in the late twentieth century is an act of devotion performed, overwhelmingly by mothers, for other family members. Duty and obligation are not exclusive to love and affection. Provisioning, a mundane chore, can become a ‘beautiful’ rite when rationalized by the discourse of thrift (for the ultimate benefit of the family), shopping for goods to promote family members’ wellbeing and, crucially, the deliberate sacrifice or limitation of individual consumer desires to invest the household shop with extra meaning. This does not mean that provisioners enjoy shopping but, rather, that they transform a tedious responsibility into a transcendent act of love. Miller emphasizes that the subjects of devotion are not necessarily subjects of idealized love but, rather, of love as a practice that incorporates a medley of pressures, including affection, obligation, resentment, and ambivalence.¹⁸

Miller’s model has application to late Victorian and Edwardian family dynamics where paternity, legally, meant an obligation to provide and the pattern and expression of affective lives were shaped by insecure material circumstances. Set against a recurring ‘slum’ narrative of lower-class men as intrinsically profligate, men’s subjugation of individual desires to work hard for their families potentially invested extra-legal and economic meaning into the performance of such tasks. Likewise, whilst wives might lament men taking ‘pocket money’ from wages, the deliberate limitation of personal spends (which often included treating children, travel costs, and lunches at work) invested the ‘household’ wage with extra significance.

¹⁶ Herbert Morrison, *An autobiography* (London, 1960), pp. 11–12, 16–17.

¹⁷ Foakes, *Four meals*, pp. 26–36.

¹⁸ See Daniel Miller, *A theory of shopping* (London, 1998).

For individual narrators, attempts to articulate the devotional elements of men's work often took the form of cliché. (Lord) Bernard Taylor (born 1895) noted that his father began working life as a farm labourer but economic necessity forced him to switch to colliery work. Taylor's pedestrian epitaph to his father was that he 'was a good man': retiring, shy, and reserved. His preoccupations were work, gardening, and doing the best for his family. This résumé of a man's life did not, perhaps, amount to much, especially when set against the son's achievements as politician and peer. Yet, it was in the mundane qualities of the 'good man' that Taylor identified exceptional esteem for his father: 'To me he was one of nature's gentlemen.'¹⁹ Guy Aldred's (born 1886) parents separated in his infancy and he went to live with his mother's parents. Aldred's eulogy to his grandfather's hard work, dignity, thrift, and constancy testified to respectability, self-identity, and the sexual division of labour: his grandmother was skilful in stretching resources; his grandfather was 'a good and considerate' provider, solicitous of his family. Aldred's grandfather underlined the biological father's shortcomings, not least because he forbade his daughter seeking paternal maintenance. The older man was not obliged to provide for Aldred but elected to. Providing was the rite through which the grandfather became the father: 'A better parent it would be impossible to find. After a lapse of so many years I hold his memory green.' Aldred's description of boyish delight in watching his grandfather at work raised his labour from the mundane to a political and personal sign: 'As a child, I loved to look across the street and watch him at work. To me he was a very great man.'²⁰

Taylor's and Aldred's commitment to championing the rights of ordinary working men invested their fathers' labour with public-political significance. As a freethinker committed to socialism, it is no surprise that Aldred disdained his pretentious actor-father to trumpet the craftsmanship of the 'thoughtful, gentle, yet robust' bookbinder grandfather. Similarly, Jack Lawson's (born 1881) autobiography opened with an elaborate description of a man, his physique, walk, clothes and tattoos, as he strolled along a road: a working man and, 'obviously', 'one of the millions'. The commonplace was a ruse. The man Lawson described was also one in a million: 'to me, he was a great man; he was my father'. For Lawson, his father's magnitude was underscored by the 'great' sacrifices he made: he performed 'killing work' in the mines 'for his children' and walked miles to and from his workplace so those children could live in a healthy environment. Again, this was political; a Labour MP at the time of writing, Lawson was deeply critical of post-war policies on unemployment.²¹

If the 'great' man of labour biography was clichéd, this should not obscure the sincere meaning authors attempted to convey. As Michael Roper notes with regard to correspondence from soldiers in the Great War, public conventions

¹⁹ Lord Taylor, *Uphill all the way: a miner's struggle* (London, 1972), p. 4.

²⁰ Guy Aldred, *No traitor's gate! The autobiography of Guy A. Aldred* (London, 1955), pp. 13, 22.

²¹ Lawson, *Man's life*, pp. 9–11.

were adapted to individual purpose; what appeared to be ‘mere’ cliché could be invested with profound interpersonal significance.²² Taylor’s reflection that his colliery father was a gentleman established a direct relationship between the normative role of the good father, the ‘for me’ of men’s labour, and the personal father–child dynamic of providing, that is, what father’s obligation to labour meant ‘to me’. Taylor’s elevation of his father to a natural elite (by the son who was a peer in an artificial hierarchy) confirmed his father’s respectability. The ‘to me’ invested this with extra meaning because it excluded the public and substituted social hierarchies with an imagined authentic ‘natural’ order. Taylor’s appeal to nature also echoed his father’s love of rural life.²³ Within the micro-hierarchies of everyday life, such expressions of attachment position the ‘place’ of an Other within a familial hierarchy that outstripped macro-level social status.²⁴ Taylor’s epitaph to his father reflects the political valorization of labour while suggesting that affective attachments lend a different kind of cohesion and stratification to everyday life.

Authors’ insistence on taking labour that was ‘for me’ in conjunction with ‘to me’ meanings drew the public elements of men’s obligation to work into a more personal realm. Regenia Gagnier’s study of subjectivities in working-class autobiography notes that authors could simultaneously assert their ordinariness, epitomized by George Acorn’s *One of the multitude* (1911), and claim individual agency; this did not overcome anxieties about the ego and many authors who insisted on differentiating a personal story found it difficult to express their story.²⁵ A similar process is at work with reference to ‘ordinary’ fathers and their commonplace obligation to work. Authors who introduced ‘to me’ meanings into acknowledgement of their fathers’ ordinariness conceded the unexceptional quality of working men but, simultaneously, asserted individual agency by suggesting the specificity of paternal ties. Thus, for Lawson, it did not matter that his father was illiterate and uneducated for, to him, his father was one of the wisest men he ever met.²⁶ Likewise, the use of cliché to convey a personal relationship potentially meant that some readers would know exactly what authors meant; they might not judge Lawson’s father to be ‘great’ but they could appreciate the dynamic that rendered an ‘ordinary’ father exceptional to his children. In such accounts, authors’ appropriation of supposedly universal values associated with the ‘good man’ to convey their father’s ‘to me’ status stressed the individuality of father–child relationships.

Lawson interpreted his father’s labour as evidence that the older man cared *about* and *for* his children. He injected the image of his miner father walking home from work with explicit nurturing connotations: the strong miner carried

²² Michael Roper, *The secret battle: emotional survival in the Great War* (Manchester, 2009), p. 23.

²³ Taylor, *Uphill all the way*, p. 4.

²⁴ See Candace Clark, ‘Emotions and micro-politics in everyday life: some patterns and paradoxes of “place”’, in T. Kemper, ed., *Research agendas in the sociology of emotions* (Albany, NY, 1990), pp. 305–34.

²⁵ Gagnier, *Subjectivities*, p. 144.

²⁶ Lawson, *Man’s life*, p. 13.

the infant Lawson, cradled in his arms. That Lawson could not have remembered is freely acknowledged: he was an infant and it seems unlikely that his father would have carried his child from his night shift. Although fictionalized, the image highlighted Lawson's attempt to express the emotive dynamic in labour. In middle age, this memory was so real that Lawson could almost sense his father's arms holding him. The memory was a 'golden day' in the landscape of Lawson's past; a 'luxury' that brought him peace.²⁷ The imagined scene was a motif for summarizing his father's qualities and the pathway of identity that made Lawson the man he was but its very sumptuousness intimated the affective meanings Lawson attributed to his relationship with his father as a child and an adult.

Many working-class autobiographies were political; as Gagnier noted, the personal elements of such texts trod a fine line with argument.²⁸ Nevertheless, to read such life stories in terms of political rhetoric alone risks minimizing authors' personal investment in politics. For Walter Benjamin, social democracy lulled the working classes into dreaming of liberated descendants instead of focusing on the sacrifices of ancestors. The oppression and alienation of parents and grandparents represented a source of personal outrage, the 'greatest strength' of working-class mobilization.²⁹ That politically motivated autobiographies were deeply ambivalent about fathers' labour, referencing pride in skill and survival alongside pity and anger at the conditions under which men toiled, suggests how memories of fathers' labour could operate as a motor towards political consciousness. Communist party activist, T. A. Jackson (born 1879), located his political sensibilities firmly in relation to his father's occupational, intellectual, and political experiences as a compositor, trade unionist, radical, and Irish fenian sympathizer. The abstract and intimate dimension of this relationship was manifest in Jackson's 'treasured' preservation of his father's fifty-year span of London Society of Compositors' membership cards.³⁰

Even autobiographies that were ostensibly apolitical could reference fathers' alienation from work to intimate the personal significance of such toil.³¹ Mark Grosseck (born 1888) was incredulous that his father, a tailor, worked so hard for such little pay and accepted the humiliation of his position without demur. Even so, Grosseck also recalled evening companionship in his father's workroom when he listened 'with approval' to his father's discourses about 'whatsoever'. Grosseck symbolized a generational shift in attitudes to employment yet, in recognizing his father's backbreaking toil for meagre wages, the son acknowledged the tenderness of everyday sacrifice. Grosseck's recollection of the sounds,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

²⁸ Gagnier, *Subjectivities*, p. 161.

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', xii. See T. Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or towards a revolutionary criticism* (London, 1981), p. 147.

³⁰ T. A. Jackson, *Solo trumpet* (London, 1953), p. 38.

³¹ See Harry Gosling, *Up and down stream* (London, 1927), pp. 6–20; A. V. Christie, *Brass tacks and a fiddle: reminiscences* (Kilmarnock, 1943), p. 14.

as well as content, of his father's voice, his quirks, and foibles, reflected and reinforced the extra-economic meanings attached to the tailor's exploitation.³² Similarly, the injury or death of fathers at work facilitated particular insights into the dynamic between fathering, finance, and affective economics. Mining was notoriously dangerous and children's bitter reflection on the exploitation of men's lives was inseparable from the 'precious' status 'their' miners occupied.³³ Popular depictions of mining disasters assumed the heartbreak of bereft children and proved pivotal in fundraising for families of killed miners.³⁴ Although it was politically incendiary to suggest that employees were responsible for pit disasters, Wil Edwards (born 1888) suggested that miners (paid by the weight) took more risks towards Christmas in order to pay for seasonal treats for their children. Underscoring the close relationship between love and toil, Edwards's suggestion was especially poignant because so many pit disasters occurred in the run up to Christmas.³⁵

Awareness of risk and men's alienation from work could fuse anger at men's working conditions with bitter personal significance; the personal cost of a father's obligation to labour 'for me' sharpened the 'to me' implication of that labour. Bernard Taylor noted acidly that, having worked hard almost to the end of his life in a job he did not enjoy, his father retired on a pittance with ruined lungs.³⁶ Edwin Muir (born 1887) recounted that his farmer father, so suited to the untamed Orkney idyll of Muir's childhood, could not adapt to city life and died shortly after moving to Glasgow in search of work. Years later, Muir's bitterness and grief remained raw in an autobiography that emerged from his encounter with psychoanalysis.³⁷

Of course, work was not the only signifier of attachment available to fathers and children; autobiographies detailed tactile intimacy in a father's chair, father time, and, for daughters especially, explicit vocabularies of emotion, notably, 'love'.³⁸ Yet, the commonplace expectation of fathers to provide rendered 'work' an accessible motif for authors' navigation of attachment to fathers in the context of autobiography ostensibly concerned with the external

³² Mark Grosseck, *First movement* (London, 1937), pp. 119–21.

³³ See especially Elizabeth Andrews, *A woman's work is never done* (Dinas Powys, 2006; orig. publ. 1967), pp. 8–14.

³⁴ A prime example is the pathetic music hall song, 'Don't go down the mine, Dad', printed on Bamforth postcards and performed in magic lantern shows. See, for instance, Lilian Slater, *Think on! Said Mam: a childhood in Bradford, Manchester, 1911–1919* (Manchester, 1984), p. 47; *Screening the poor, 1888–1914*, curated by Martin Loiperdinger and Ludwig Vogl-Bienek (DVD-ROM, Edition Filmmuseum, 2011); and British Library sound recording at <http://sounds.bl.uk/World-and-traditional-music-in-England/025M-C1023X0014XX-1400Vo> (accessed 10 May 2012).

³⁵ Wil Edwards, *From the valley I came: reminiscences of the author's life up to 1926, with special reference to his mother* (London, 1956), pp. 4–8, 34.

³⁶ Taylor, *Uphill all the way*, p. 4.

³⁷ Edwin Muir, *An autobiography* (London, 1954), pp. 90–3.

³⁸ Julie-Marie Strange, 'Fatherhood, furniture and the interpersonal dynamics of working-class homes, c. 1870–1914', *Urban History*, forthcoming.

world and, where words such as 'love' were unfamiliar or awkward. David Kirkwood (born 1872) located his first conscious rush of love for his steelworker father in puberty as he and his father passed a gypsy family in the street. Comparing the gypsies to his father and himself, Kirkwood was struck by similarity and difference: a common happy companionship set against disparity in material circumstance. This was, and was not, about men's labour as Kirkwood realized that children's attachment to their parent could develop without orthodox provision. Nevertheless, the contrast prompted Kirkwood to identify his father as an individual who made particular choices and root his attachment to his father in pride: 'I walked beside my father. For the first time I was conscious that I loved him and that this man was my father.'³⁹

Expressions of pride and admiration can act as markers that confirm the place of feeling persons within social interaction.⁴⁰ Kirkwood's link between pride in his provider father and love is, again, partly about politics: as a Labour politician with strong trade union interests, Kirkwood conceived of men, public and private, in relation to their role as workers. The unspoken question is whether Kirkwood could have loved his father if he had not provided. It is, of course, unanswerable: his father's identity was so deeply ingrained with his labour that it was impossible to imagine him without it. Moreover, in a family that was, Kirkwood suggested, embarrassed by emotion, a language of 'winning through' (survival) shaped understandings of affective bonds. Kirkwood could not think how to express sentiment towards his father without reference to 'winning through', a technique for living that depended, overwhelmingly, on paternal wages.⁴¹ To dispense with work as an affective sign raised the question of how to rethink 'good' fathering and attachment outside the boundaries of conventional assumptions about masculine obligation. In this sense, Kirkwood's statement that he 'loved' his father is radical in that it deployed an explicit emotional vocabulary for the benefit of an external reader. Within the emotional community that was his family, however, such words were neither necessary nor desirable when father's breadwinning could be understood as something beautiful or, in Miller's terms, an act of devotion.⁴²

As contemporary studies of fathering demonstrate, provisioning as a component of fathering has more significance for men whose material status is precarious.⁴³ In this light, the material insecurity of late Victorian working-class lives meant men's providing adopted extra meaning for these autobiographers. For some, fathers' unemployment or slippage from skilled into

³⁹ David Kirkwood, *My life of revolt* (London, 1935), pp. 52–3.

⁴⁰ See Candace Clark, *Misery and company: sympathy in everyday life* (Chicago, IL, and London, 1997), pp. 229–33.

⁴¹ Kirkwood, *Life of revolt*, pp. 52–3.

⁴² For discussion of the plurality of emotional communities, see Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional communities in the middle ages* (New York, NY, and London, 2006), and Rosenwein's discussion of 'emotional communities' (as distinct from William Reddy's 'emotional regimes') in Plamper, 'The history of emotions', at pp. 252–4.

⁴³ Esther Dermott, *Intimate fatherhood: a sociological analysis* (London, 2008), pp. 25–42.

unskilled work was heartbreaking, not simply for the material hardship it occasioned but, also, because of the emotional consequences of fathers failing to provide. Elizabeth Bryson (born 1880) ‘knew that my father’s heart had broken when he thought he had failed his children’.⁴⁴ Conversely, working for children could invest the meanest of jobs with dignity. The apparent ignominy of Michael Llewellyn’s (born 1888) blacksmith father turning to quarry work in middle age was eclipsed by the man’s satisfaction in honest toil undertaken for his family and the opportunities it afforded Llewellyn to accompany his dad to the quarry to ‘play’.⁴⁵

In retrospect, it was perhaps easier for independent adult children to be sympathetic to fathers who failed and re-imagine hard times from an affective, rather than material, standpoint. Walter Southgate’s (born 1890) father kept the shoe-lasts that belonged to his boot-maker dad. Serving no useful purpose to the pen-maker son, the dead man’s shoe-lasts appeared to have been retained for sentimental reasons. Wooden shoe-lasts crudely mimicked the naked foot; that the father’s hands would have smoothed and worked over the lasts for many years added further meaning to the objects. The lasts were eventually burned for fuel when Southgate’s parents hit hard times. Southgate used this anecdote to highlight the precarious conditions of his childhood, sympathy for his long-suffering mother, and the pity of affective economies that could not afford to keep material mementoes. The wry tone of this story emphasized the affective range of Southgate’s writing and memory: the shoe lasts were burned because his hapless father, who was full of ideas about the rights and wrongs of the working man, never earned enough. That the grandfather had ‘provided’ fuel, despite being dead, heightened the shortcomings of the father but Southgate’s sympathetic register underscored the extent to which frustration at his father’s inadequate fulfilment of paternal obligation was tempered by acceptance and awareness of a broader context whereby the middle-aged narrator could locate his political career, partially, at least, in relation to his father’s more abstract provision; his radical sensibilities.⁴⁶

II

The reflective quality of life writing enabled adult children to impose affective frameworks on the mundane features of their past. Retrospection facilitated identification of milestones, but, also, enabled authors to renegotiate the dynamics of relationships past and present. For working-class autobiographers, key milestones in the shifting dynamic of relationships with fathers included the transition from childhood to wage-earning independence and becoming a parent. For male autobiographers especially, adult participation in paid labour

⁴⁴ Bryson, *Look back in wonder*, p. 89.

⁴⁵ Michael Llewellyn, *Sand in the glass* (London, 1943), p. 84.

⁴⁶ Walter Southgate, *That’s the way it was* (Oxford, 1982), p. 12.

could stimulate assessments of work as an emotive mechanism in relation to being fathered. Jack Jones's (born 1884) recollection of early childhood was dominated by his mother in terms of time, contact, and intimacy; his miner father was absent in the 'day's battle for bread' or asleep in recovery. Jones and his siblings knew little about their father except that he worked hard and his exhaustion was, at times, brutal. A father sometimes made unreasonable demands on resources and could appear ignorant of his children's needs; a mother, who explicitly placed her children first, sought to correct this by clever deceit and defiance. Parental priorities were, at first glance, sometimes at odds. When the miners went on strike, it was Jones's mother who went begging for food, much to his father's humiliation; yet, strikes for better wages were premised on the need to support wives and children.⁴⁷ Jones added nuance to this familiar model of working-class parenting, however, in his account of leaving school to join his father at the coalface.

Jones's depiction of entering the manly world of work transformed the dehumanizing levy of toil into a beautiful act of sacrifice that enabled him to re-evaluate his ambivalence towards his father: the corporeal strength of the miner was matched by the craftsman's skill and mental agility; commonplace work practices were imbued with ritualistic significance; his father was knowledgeable as he explained about coal markets, prices, wages, geology, and politics; he caressed and coaxed coal into his trams but, paid by the weight, he moved it at 'a mile a minute'. For Jones, this toil had pragmatic and emotive meaning as he reinterpreted his father's exhausting labour as his love token. Jones's narrative of his first day at his father's work repeated 'My dad' almost as punctuation. The informality of 'dad' over 'father' indicated the easy rapport between father and son; 'My dad' suggested pride in the intimate bond that separated this father and son from the other miners in the pit. Father's labour was a 'work of art' and it was, Jones says, a privilege to watch him.⁴⁸

The inclusion of this narrative in a chapter entitled 'To meet the prince', where the royal prince is never seen at all, confirmed the miner as heroic. Yet, Jones inflected labouring pride with personal attributes. Working alongside his father facilitated new insights into the older man and his toil, and fostered an easy tactility of guardianship and intimacy whereby his father touched him and called him 'Son' and 'Johnny'; in place of habitual tiredness, Jones witnessed animation. The highpoint of Jones's first day at work was his dad's appraisal of him: 'Yes, you'll do.' While the memory referenced a milestone in adult socialization, Jones related this explicitly through the medium of his particular relationship with his father. The other miners joshed the boy but his father

⁴⁷ This tension was played on by a conservative press who portrayed men as selfish and starving their children. See A.J. Croll, 'Starving strikers and the limits of the "humanitarian discovery of hunger" in late-Victorian Britain', *International Review of Social History*, 561 (2011), pp. 103–31.

⁴⁸ Jack Jones, *Unfinished journey* (New York, NY, 1937), pp. 65–9, 72.

treated him with solicitude and tenderness. As Jones notes, this ‘kindly, jolly and protective’ dad was, and was not, the same father he had known before; shared toil made visible the hidden meanings in his father’s everyday labour and exhaustion. This did not topple his mother from her position at the heart of family life but work enabled Jones to navigate his relationship with his father in real time and reflection. Through the shared experience of mining (and the revelation that providing generated corporeal pain), Jones re-evaluated the enigmatic man of early childhood to invest the act of providing with interpersonal significance. Indeed, Jones noted that his autobiography was his father’s book.⁴⁹

The homo-sociality of men’s jobs, politics, and leisure is what, superficially at least, sustained paternal detachment, especially when family was defined as mother, small children, and home. Yet, the homo-social culture of wage labour could work positively for boys who were invited into a hitherto mysterious world of a father’s work, whereby ‘dad’ represented someone exciting and privileged, however workaday his toil to the adult observer.⁵⁰ The district nurse, M. E. Loane, noted that men drifted away from their sons for five years or so from the age of eight. The relationship was renewed when lads began to work. For Loane, the middle-class supposition that this was because the wage-earning child had ceased to be a financial burden on the breadwinning father was ‘dull’ and foolish. Rather, work provided shared experiences for dads and lads to rediscover a common language: they had the ‘same plane of difficulties and interests’. Fathers understood the conditions of work that were a revelation to the boy and the boy realized ‘as he has never done before’ his dad’s ‘daily toil and self-sacrifice’.⁵¹

Lewis Jones’s (born 1897) autobiographical *Cumardly* notes that the protagonist Len was just a ‘baby’ when he entered the pit with his father, Big Jim. On first descending the pit, excitement gave way to fear and Len searched for his father’s hand in ‘love and confidence’. Jim navigated a path between ‘manly’ silence, intended as reassurance, and sympathy for his son. By the end of the second day, the exhausted boy wept with regret for his lost education and his father carried him ‘like a child’ to bed. Both are caught in a liminal moment where Jim is instrumental in assisting Len at work but, also, in helping him navigate a boy–man identity between the pit and home. A coming-of-age novel about the discovery of radical politics, Len’s journey to political consciousness is mirrored by his relationship with his father. The pit is as an occupational, political, and emotional field through which men negotiate rights, responsibilities, and identities as a group and as individuals implicated in particular

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 64–77.

⁵⁰ For example, George Baldry, *The rabbit skin cap: a tale of a Norfolk countryman’s youth* (Ipswich, 1974), p. 57; Joseph Stamper, *So long ago* (London, 1960), pp. 21, 107–8; Harry Harris, *Under oars: reminiscences of a Thames lighterman, 1894–1909* (London, 1978), p. 39; Walter Citrine, *Men and work: an autobiography* (London, 1964), pp. 13–18.

⁵¹ M. Loane, *From their point of view* (London, 1908), pp. 155–6.

interpersonal relations.⁵² Of course, men and boys frequently worked alongside each other without necessarily being related. Yet, authors made distinctions between paternalism in general and working with fathers. Barnabas Britten (born c. 1880) idolized his father, a sailor: ‘Yes Dad’ and ‘Right-O, Dad’ punctuate his dialogue to affirm the older man’s qualities and the boy’s ambition to join his sailor-father’s boat. As skipper, his father occupied a dual authority over his son but cognisance of his father’s work-self threw his sentimental status into relief and Britten was careful to distinguish between ‘the skipper’ who happened to be his father, and his dad, who was also skipper.⁵³

Even when sons pursued different occupations to fathers, the transition of boys from school into work could facilitate peculiar moments of masculine intimacy. Where boys took up apprenticeships, the transition to work adopted a more formalized and ritualistic significance. On signing his son’s apprenticeship papers, William Lax’s (born 1868) father regretted that his paternal role had shifted into a new phase, where all he could offer his growing son was advice (cream always rises to the top) and prayer. Despite the hackneyed character of this exchange to the literary reader, Lax charged the moment with sentiment, noting that his father was tearful and that the father–son communion took place before they returned home; it was only when man and boy composed themselves that they entered domestic space.⁵⁴ If families understood providing to be a key component of fathering, the removal of this economic relationship had emotive significance for father and child. For some fathers, other protective components of fathering provided an alternative mechanism for expressing attachment. David Kirkwood noted that his father was so affected when his daughter left home for domestic service that he made, for him, a powerful declaration of attachment: he promised to go to her call if ever she needed him.⁵⁵ That he selected another pragmatic component of fathering, one that was particularly pertinent, perhaps, to girl children who were excluded from masculine rituals of shared work experience, indicated the extent to which individuals transformed duties and actions into affective testimonies.

Work could, also, represent a source of antagonism rather than attachment. Autobiographers sometimes deployed parental clashes over a boy’s future to highlight the lack of sympathy or generational and political differences with fatalistic or seemingly conservative fathers.⁵⁶ Even here, however, reflection on such moments could throw emotional attachments into relief. John Eldred’s (born 1885) parents fought bitterly over his future. His mother was ambitious

⁵² Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy: the story of a Welsh mining valley* (Cardigan, 2006; orig. publ. 1937), pp. 137–66.

⁵³ Barnabas Britten, *Woodyard to palace: reminiscences* (Bradford, 1958), pp. 191–2.

⁵⁴ W. M. Lax, *His book: the autobiography of Lax of Poplar* (London, 1937), p. 89.

⁵⁵ Kirkwood, *Life of revolt*, p. 24.

⁵⁶ See for instance, Sidney Campion, *Sunlight on the foothills* (London, 1941), pp. 29–38; George Ratcliffe, *Sixty years of it: being the story of my life and public career* (London, 1935), pp. 5, 35.

that her bookish son should escape manual drudgery, a potentially damning comment on her stonemason husband, let alone his desire that their boy follow his trade. As a child, Eldred was delighted that his father was building his new school; he exaggerated the importance of his father's position to his peers and sought status from helping his dad. The pride faltered when Eldred realized that the work was monotonous and that his after-school assistance was a prelude to an apprenticeship. Eldred's mother won the battle over his future but his father succeeded in initiating his son into the world of work by requesting Eldred's company on a job the day before the boy began his working life.

Eldred reflected that, at the time, he thought this was another interlude in the parental war over his career. In hindsight, Eldred saw the gesture as his father's attempt to redeem something meaningful from defeat. The job transpired to be at a newspaper office, the locus of the boy's ambition.⁵⁷ An awkward man on the periphery of family life, work was intrinsic to the selfhood of Eldred's father: he excelled in occupational skill where he failed in personal dynamism. In this context, Eldred reflected that the stonemason's skill was his father's intended gift for his son. Eldred's rejection of that trade was, therefore, personal. Viewed thus, the trip to the news offices adopted multiple interpretations: it was his father's peace offering and a form of compensation for defeat but it also represented the affective significance the older man invested in rites of passage between fathers and sons at work. Eldred identified his ham-fisted father's gift of work, in this case a preliminary insight into his ambitions, as an eloquent intimation of attachment to his son.

Overall, political and auto-didactic autobiographies did not divulge the meanings of becoming a father.⁵⁸ However, retrospective evaluations of fathers often identified an author's model of good fathering, whether a feckless father galvanized individuals into becoming 'good' providers or a steadfast man was seen anew in light of personal paternal responsibilities.⁵⁹ Authorial confessions of failing at fatherhood highlighted the exemplary efforts of stalwart fathers. Jack Jones's eulogy to his father carried extra meaning when set against Jones's fecklessness at the outset of his marriage: Jones gambled away the family home, prompting his pregnant wife to return to her family in mid-Wales. To win his family back, Jones had to prove his mettle as a provider. Although a miner, the only work in his wife's locale was 'boy labour': unskilled, low-paid bark stripping. His account of the work drew heavily on Christian symbolism: he walked in his muddy and torn clothes through the main street of his wife's hometown

⁵⁷ John Eldred, *I love the Brooks: reminiscences* (London, 1955), pp. 86–8.

⁵⁸ A notable exception is Chester Armstrong, *Pilgrimage from Nenthead: an autobiography* (London, 1938).

⁵⁹ For feckless dads as motors to 'good' fathering, see James Royce, *I stand nude* (London, 1937), and Sam Shaw, *Guttersnipe: an autobiography* (London, 1946). Other writers contrasted their father's faults with their peers' fathers to suggest a blueprint for fathering. See V. Garrett, *A man in the street* (London, 1939), p. 72, and Robert Roberts, *A classic slum: Salford life in the first quarter of the century* (London, 1971), p. 117.

carrying a log over his shoulder listening to the jeers of onlookers who remembered his finer days. It was precisely in the humility (and humiliation) of such toil that Jones demonstrated the authenticity of his provider-father claim; the incentive to perform such labour was the privilege of holding and knowing his newborn baby.⁶⁰ Ostensibly concerned with regaining the right to be a father, Jones's account paid an implicit tribute to his own father and the privilege of fathering. Indeed, the rest of his narrative noted his kisses for, and indulgence of, his ageing father alongside statements of love for his offspring and, in turn, their children.

Kathleen Dayus's (born 1903) experience as a working widow demonstrated the extent to which paid labour could be construed as nurturing, even in the absence of children. Widowed in the 1920s, the practical necessity of paid work led to Dayus placing her three children in a Dr Barnardo's orphanage. As a mother, Dayus's expectations of parenthood were inextricable from notions of nurturing. Her story made explicit the dynamic between love and wage-toil that was embedded within father narratives partly because of her compulsion to explain her 'mother' identity within an unorthodox framework. Dayus classified her wage labour as a concrete and abstract expression of attachment that enabled her to accept the removal of her children: she worked hard in her job so that, eventually, she would be able to care for them herself; in labouring for her children, she also integrated the absent offspring into her everyday experience. After building an enamelling business through outwork, she earned sufficient money to rent a house. The provision and furnishing of this home placed Dayus in 'seventh heaven' because it materially secured the children's return but wage labour symbolized Dayus's yearning for her children long before she succeeded in acquiring the house.

Dayus's desire to fuse providing with nurturing shaped her understanding of her parents and she strongly identified with her father. While cautious about interpreting 'love' from within a twentieth-century maternal context, Dayus reflected that, as a child, she believed her father loved her. This was rooted less in tactility or affectionate declarations than in her father's work and the distribution of 'his' pocket money among his children. At the outset of her story, Dayus's unskilled father was unemployed. When he found work casting brass, Dayus located this within an affective framework: announcing his job, the newly employed man expected a kiss (which his wife did not grant). That her father's work involved long hours for meagre wages heightened the correlation between his love and toil; work made him 'miserable, tired, dirty and wet through'. That Dayus understood the stultifying labour as devotional was symbolized through the story of his homecoming: Dayus knelt at the tired man's feet to remove his boots and soothe his sores. In contrast, her mother's ambivalence to her father's work and his tiredness was emblematic of the lack of affective sympathy between the spouses and Dayus's alignment with her dad against her mother.

⁶⁰ Jones, *Unfinished journey*, pp. 127–35.

That Dayus and her father understood the dynamic between love and toil was underscored in the account of her father's childhood: his mother had been abandoned by her husband. The older woman never got over the shock of desertion. As Dayus's father explained, 'she loved Dad and so did us three boys'; he was 'our only breadwinner'. This could be construed as grandmother and children loved the man *because* he was their provider, rooting the dynamic firmly in economic terms. However, given that the emphasis here is on the shock of abandonment, the breadwinning appears to be marshalled as evidence that the father appeared to love them in return; breadwinning operated as an external sign of affective ties reciprocated although, undoubtedly, the loss of breadwinning compounded the grief of abandonment. Her father's narrative ended with a particular moment of togetherness as father and child cried and Dayus planted a kiss on her father's cheek to symbolize the empathy between them. That the story moved on to her father's pay night further highlighted the emotional attachment intertwined with men's wages, not least because 'father's treats' included gifts for his children.⁶¹

For some authors, re-assessments of fathers' attachment through work represented a renegotiation of their everyday childhood from a perspective not only of adult work and parenting but, also, the death or dependency of their fathers. It is possible that debility and weakness feminized older men but, in autobiography at least, the vulnerabilities of older men could make explicit the affective status of men in their prime. Intrinsic to Guy Aldred's account of his grandfather was sadness that the older man had died before his adult grandson could tell him just how much his labour mattered.⁶² Evidently, this was the regret of one who had taken provision for granted in childhood but subsequently invested it with affective significance. For others, the death of parents prompted a wholesale renegotiation of the dynamics of childhood. Although 'half-dead' from cancer, John Eldred's father carried on working through 'sheer willpower' until the week he died, much to the astonishment of the medical practitioner Eldred paid to attend. More sorrowful, perhaps, was his father's anxiety that he had not 'helped you very much'. Eldred reassured the dying man that he had been a 'good' father, the only father he wished for. This acknowledged the older man's toil but also went beyond this to intimate Eldred's adult re-evaluation of childhood.⁶³

Mothers represented powerful narrators of paternal identities either through complaints about, or praise for, their husband. As the historian Carolyn Steedman noted in her autobiographical study of class and gender, children choose which side they 'belong to' at an early stage. She began her 'long lesson' in hatred of her father around the age of seven, picked up initially from her mother's dislike for his coarse habits but ingrained over time by mother and

⁶¹ Kathleen Dayus, *Her people* (London, 1982), pp. 11–13.

⁶² Aldred, *No traitor's gait*, p. 13.

⁶³ Eldred, *I love the Brooks*, pp. 162–3.

children blaming him for not being good enough. It was thirty years later that Steedman felt regret for the father of her early childhood who had ‘probably loved me, irresponsibly’.⁶⁴ As Steedman demonstrates, children’s relationships with fathers might be shaped by dynamics between husband and wife but these were not static. Ross’s *Love and toil* names the chapter on maternal nursing of sick children (‘She fought for me like a tigress’) with a quotation from Eldred’s autobiography. As Ross notes, many mothers worked tirelessly to bring children from the brink of death and were devastated if they failed.⁶⁵ There is no doubt that Eldred’s memory of being dangerously sick was dominated by his mother’s struggle to save her boy and the family’s subsequent understanding of this story as a monumental act of love. Yet, this is the only incident from Eldred’s life story that Ross uses in her study of London motherhood. Eldred’s biography is not a paean to mother love; alongside the story of his career is a painful account of an unhappy family.

Eldred’s father was a ‘good provider’ but flawed, indulging in bouts of heavy drinking and violence. Retrospectively, Eldred related these flaws within a context whereby, as a child, he perceived his father through the lens of his mother’s contempt for her husband. Indeed, the adult Eldred doubted his father’s drinking had been as heavy as his child self believed and he wished his mother had not goaded her husband to violence. Eldred did not condone his father’s behaviour but infused it with sadness. His father was a large, awkward man who craved affection from a wife who had married a meal ticket. Revisiting incidents of his father’s apparently inexplicable violence, Eldred rationalized them in light of this. In telling the story of family life, Eldred actively shifted from his mother’s perspective, which had informed his childhood fear of his father, towards compassion for the older man’s disappointment in marriage and recognition of his father’s clumsy attempts to navigate attachment with his son. Husband and father, here, represented fluid identities, hopes, and relationships in lived experience and in memory. Eldred Senior was a good man with faults but, as his son testified, the husband was different to the father.⁶⁶ When he reassured his father (and reader) of the older man’s goodness, then, this was not just the clichéd ‘good’ man model of social history or family economy but, rather, an oblique reference to the shifting navigation of complex affective identities over time and the position of his dad’s waged work within a medley of pressures, duties and desires.

III

Adult children’s reflections on relationships with fathers (and mothers) were not static but suggested the ongoing negotiation of interpersonal

⁶⁴ Carolyn Steedman, *Past tenses: articles on writing, autobiography and history* (London, 1992), pp. 21–40.

⁶⁵ Ross, *Love and toil*, pp. 166–94.

⁶⁶ Eldred, *I love the Brooks*, pp. 161–5.

dynamics over time. Writing of affective relationships with fathers in a public context drew heavily on assumed norms of paternal duty and obligation, although men who fulfilled their responsibilities were by no means always held in affection. Nevertheless, the subjective elements of breadwinning provided a key motif for adult children trying to articulate what their father meant to them. It is also possible to see some men's accounts of their fathers framed in relation to how they understood fathering. Writing in a social context of what John Gillis calls the 'fun dad', a kind of Sunday fathering emergent in the inter-war period, most autobiographers were aware that expectations of fathers in the twentieth century, while remaining tied to breadwinning, were beginning to incorporate additional ideals to those of their fathers' generation. Post-war social and economic changes, such as contracted working hours and the introduction of paid holidays, located men more firmly within family time and space, changes that were supported by shifting cultural ideals about home and domesticity.⁶⁷ Autobiographers' efforts to explain their late Victorian and Edwardian fathers' work as devotional highlight the difficulties of articulating intimate meanings within altered cultural contexts. Attempts to translate a father's normative obligation to work 'for me' into personalized accounts of what Father meant 'to me' sought to bridge an assumed experiential gap by arguing that Victorian fathers were not simply dutiful but, also, tender and affectionate in their performance of seemingly detached parenting tasks. That this argument often had political implications did not depersonalize the accounts but, rather, demonstrated how ideologies were inextricable from personal experience.⁶⁸

In turning to labour to represent affective relationships, autobiographers challenged the assumption that working-class men were peripheral to interpersonal family life. Rather, they used the meanings invested in work to give shape and voice to intimacy. This distinguished fathers from men in general and from mothers' husbands. Autobiographers' investment of men's work with intimate meaning suggests a fluid, gendered culture of expressing, accepting, and reproducing affect. Some adult children nursed rage against feckless or selfish fathers and some sympathized with mothers who were exploited or oppressed by their husbands. Written overwhelmingly by adult men engaged in auto-didacticism or labour politics, many autobiographies also expressed sympathy for the exploitation of masculine paid labour. Compassion for fathers as workers who toiled for children could generate insights into, and revisions of, father practices and identity, even where fathers fell short of fulfilling their obligations.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Gillis, *A world of their own*, p. 196.

⁶⁸ Indeed, anthropological research into post-Soviet Cuba demonstrates how female breadwinners appropriate state ideologies of 'struggle' to express individual agency, claim personal virtues, and narrate a particular sense of self. See Anna Pertierra, 'Creating order through struggle in revolutionary Cuba', in Daniel Miller, ed., *Anthropology and the individual: a material culture perspective* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 145–58.

⁶⁹ See for instance, Joseph Keating, *My struggle for life* (London, 1916).

While recognizing that men's public role as legal providers and protectors of family placed them in the realm of caring about dependants, retrospective evaluations of men's work could blur the boundaries between neat distinctions of gendered cultures of parenting whilst, at the same time, underlining differences in parental styles of attachment. Authors' reliance on providing as an act of masculine devotion exploited shared languages of male identity and paternity and invested them with personal meaning. None of this suggests that women and children were not oppressed by the breadwinner ideal or the rights attendant on paternity, or that attachments to mothers and fathers were the same. Rather, it calls for recognition of the fluid boundaries of a sexual division of affective labour whereby, in memory at least, fathers' obligation to provide could be deeply embedded within an understanding of the interpersonal dynamics of everyday life.