

Family Men: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain, c. 1914-1960

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Despite the continuing interest in the history of masculinity, fatherhood has been surprisingly neglected in the history of twentieth-century Britain. Nevertheless, a focus on the experiences and expectations of fathers is, as Laura King aptly demonstrates in this excellent monograph, vital for illuminating debates about ‘manliness’ as a whole. One of King’s central arguments is that ‘the shift in men’s involvement in domestic tasks largely occurred within their role as fathers’ (p. 84); she suggests, therefore, that claims for the ‘domestication of the male’ are rather misleading. Men were able to take an increasing role in childcare across this period precisely because it could be categorised as a non-domestic chore, and while this ‘family-orientated masculinity’ represented significant change, alongside the ‘intensification’ of both motherhood and fatherhood during this period, it did not eradicate a fundamentally gendered division of labour.

King’s book is remarkably ambitious. Given the sparseness of the historiography on fatherhood for this period, she sets herself the task of filling this gap. The first chapter considers the familiar image of the father as breadwinner. King demonstrates the increasing emotional importance of breadwinning by exploring the father’s role as provider of education and career advice, as well as of family income, and the introduction of pocket money. With the advent of the welfare state, men’s breadwinning role was repositioned, but not subsumed. Moving on to explore another familiar trope, the mother who threatens ‘wait until your father gets home’, she concludes that the reality of parental discipline was more complex; despite the advice of childcare experts, fathers were positioned as threats, but mothers could be equally or more important in governing their children’s behaviour. On the other hand, men’s role as playmates, familiar at the start of this period, took on increasing weight as theories about the importance of play, promulgated by psycho-

analysts such as Susan Isaacs and Donald Winnicott, entered popular understanding. Explicit displays of emotion were still taboo for most men, however, and the idea of paternal 'pride' was positioned in contrast to maternal love as an acceptable outlet. John Caldwell, whose first child was born in Leeds in the 1940s, insisted that he 'filled up... with emotion' when he saw the baby, but did not cry; his wife recalled seeing 'tears in his eyes', indicating that despite John's willingness to talk about his feelings, admitting crying was a step too far (p. 108).

The second half of the book opens with a consideration of the declining authority of the father in an age of toppling hierarchies; decolonisation, the decreasing salience of religious concepts of patriarchy, and the sense of 'class convergence' felt after the Second World War contextualised the destabilisation of the father's position, while the earlier Guardianship of Infants Act of 1925 emphasised the equal rights of parents over their children. Nevertheless, King argues, ideas of father as the 'boss' continued, particularly in working-class households, although with a greater stress on the duties he had to perform to deserve this accolade. The book concludes with a consideration of fathers' changing identities, and the association of fatherhood with protection, virility and strength. In line with much recent historiography on social and cultural change in modern Britain, King suggests that concepts of fatherhood began to alter fundamentally in the inter-war period, and these changes were consolidated in the 1950s.

King notes that 'expectations placed upon men were as high as those of women' (p. 122). One interesting thread throughout the text serves to complicate, although not refute, this statement. While men had duties they were expected to perform, the intense emotional relationships with their children that were demanded of mothers may not have been as binding on fathers. Closeness between fathers and children was often celebrated; the *Mirror* printed a photograph of a wounded man kissing his child in 1940, headlined 'Daddy's tonic – once a week!' (p. 119). Yet, as King demonstrates, children were often depicted as an understandable irritation to men; fathers were depicted as craving peace and quiet after incessant questioning, for example (p. 105). In 1950, the *Mirror* criticised large or multi-generational households because they led to father 'keeping out of

the way' and having to 'find solace' elsewhere rather than spending time with a new baby (p. 149). The father's emotional role was valued, but his limitations were accepted. This is a very different rhetoric from that directed at mothers of young children, whose emotions were often expected by writers and popular broadcasters such as Winnicott to be entirely engaged with their baby; no boundaries could be imposed on this 'psychological matrix'. This thread does not contradict King's primary argument, but it demonstrates how important her work is for the history of motherhood as well as fatherhood.

Any weaknesses of this book stem from its strengths. King has taken on such a huge and important task that there are inevitable gaps in her narrative. Occasionally, there are awkward chronological jumps not fully accounted for in the text; for example, the grouping of examples from 1922, 1944 and 1959 to demonstrate fathers' concerns about education (p. 33). More broadly, there is little consideration of demographic shifts such as the falling age of first-time fatherhood, and single or absent fathers are (understandably) missing. The range of sources she draws from is rich and impressive, including newspapers, magazines, advice literature, film and fiction, government papers, contemporary social research, letters and autobiographies, and six oral history collections. This is a great asset, but occasionally leaves insufficient space to explore the peculiarities of a certain source set. Fiction suffers especially – it isn't clear whether children's literature is important because parents read it to their children, or because it helped to form children's ideas of fathers. Richmal Crompton's *William* stories, for example, were originally aimed at adults, not at children, which potentially affected the way they were read (p. 105-6). Nevertheless, King's book is so accomplished that these are minor issues. *Family Men* will surely become a key text for students of contemporary Britain.

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