

Parenting in England 1760-1830: Emotion, Identity, and Generation

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This is an outstanding book, which will open up a new area of research for historians of the family. We have so many good histories of children and childhood, but Joanne Bailey's book is the first to consider the history of parenting in the Georgian period. What is more, the methods and sources deployed in Bailey's book demonstrate just how far we have travelled since historians started thinking about the history of the family some 40 years ago. As well as drawing upon the reminiscences of parents and parenting contained in autobiographies, and the life-writing found in diaries and letters, Bailey examines many forms of print and popular culture, and uses visual sources to great effect. For the latter, while fully aware of the findings of historians such as Kate Retford (1), whose work has focused on formal portraiture, Bailey chooses to comment upon visual images that are less well known. Her book contains several sketches made by the amateur painter John Harden (1772–1847), for example, which were not designed to be sold, and reveal an intimate and relaxed view of parenting. Material culture also has its place in this book; a patchwork piece, embroidered with a heart, and left by a mother with a baby at the London Foundling Hospital, speaks volumes about how parents of lowly status could use objects to express love for their children. It would be all too easy to resort only to the advice literature aimed at the middling and upper classes, and to write an account of parenting based on the life writings of the social elite. But, by piecing together evidence from a wide range of sources, and, through an examination of the language and purposes of the many letters written by pauper parents to the poor law authorities, Bailey has been able to research the meanings and experience of parenting across the social scale. This is cultural history at its very best. Terms like 'sensibility', 'romanticism', and 'domesticity', often used imprecisely by historians of the family, are explained clearly, and through her careful analysis of primary sources, Bailey achieves her aim of considering 'how cultural values interacted with the experiential' (p. 8).

As her subtitle suggests, Bailey focuses on three main aspects of parenting between 1760 and 1830. First, she considers the emotions: as she writes, this is 'a history of parenting "from the inside out"' (p. 2). Taking the affection of parents for their children as a given, Bailey shows how the expression of parental love was shaped by cultural conventions and the language of sensibility, romanticism and domesticity. Parenthood was thought to give rise to new emotions, which adults might not have experienced before they became parents. 'Who, that has felt them, can ever forget the emotions awakened by the first gaze upon the face of his child, by the first embrace of his babe', asked John Angell James in 1830 (p. 22). Parents were expected to be emotional about and towards their children, and in this period affection was demonstrated and celebrated through the ideal of the 'tender' parent. There were elements of tender parenting that were gendered; women had the spiritual model of tender mothering from Mary's relationship with Jesus, and mothers were expected to take a more physical role in the routine care of their children through nursing and feeding them, for example. But tender parenting was not just left to mothers. Bailey shows how Georgian fathers were expected to cuddle their children (their bosoms could also be nurturing in this way), kiss them, and shed tears at their pain. Hence this book questions the originality of the ideal of the demonstrative Victorian father. From love stemmed other emotions for parents, including anxiety, grief and distress. Bailey builds upon her earlier work to show how the language of feeling and tender parenthood was used right across the social scale, with paupers resorting to it in their calls for aid.(2) In a time of high infant mortality and low life expectancy, grief for the loss of child or parent was perhaps the most commonly shared experience of parenting. For the modern day reader, Bailey's descriptions of the emotional suffering felt by parents and their children are deeply moving.

The second area of focus is upon identity. In her previous book on marriage, *Unquiet Lives: Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England, 1660-1800* (3), Bailey had remarked that historians were too ready to study just one aspect of people's family lives, by examining their marriages, without also appreciating that husbands and wives were often also parents, for example. In *Parenting in England*, Bailey proves the importance of not splitting people's identity into different components, by showing how profoundly each affected the other. Furthermore, she challenges Dror Wahrman's view that this period saw the birth of the modern introspective self by arguing that the Georgian self 'was at once collective, familial and internal' (p. 251). In other words, the family was understood to be a source of social and inner identity. Being a parent had vital significance for both public and personal identity. Parents had a public duty to raise healthy,

educated citizens who would contribute to a stable and patriotic society. This was especially important in the politically turbulent years of 1760–1830. Furthermore, the experience of being parented and parenting had an impact upon how men and women thought about themselves. So profound was the attachment formed between parents and children, and being a mother or father was so central to the notion of identity, that contemporaries used the term ‘second self’ to write about their children. The devastating consequences of this were seen when children died, or when marriages broke down and fathers took custody of children. Fathers and mothers were left mentally shattered and could experience a loss of self. This crisis of identity was summarised by Hannah Robertson in the 1790s, who (recalling the death of all nine of her children) wrote how she was ‘deprived of my children – abandoned by the world – and deserted (as it were) by myself’ (p. 157).

Throughout her book, Bailey is keen to show how identity as formed by parenting was a process, and for individuals was a matter of becoming, or something that was constantly evolving. Changing social and economic circumstances, developing relationships, and the life-cycle (especially as it affected age), each had an impact. ‘Parental identity was a journey rather than a culmination or end-point’, she argues (p. 144). Remembering parents, and thinking about parents as a generation who passed on family values, is the third key theme. While John R. Gillis has written movingly about the meaning of myths and rituals in family life (4), Bailey is the first to consider what motivated Georgians to remember and record their family stories, especially following parental death. ‘People’s emotional relationships with their parents continued long after their decease’, she argues (p. 244). The process of remembering enabled the next generation to preserve what they held as precious, and to make sense of themselves. As Sydney Morgan wrote to her brother-in-law, following her father’s death in 1812, ‘I can look neither to the past nor to the future without connecting everything with him, and the present is all, all him’ (p. 125).

The sheer originality of much of this research is startling, and this book is bound to stimulate fresh debates and ideas. Bailey recognises that not all parenting was carried out by mothers and fathers. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, paid and unpaid carers could share the burden of parenting, and perhaps take on an unequal share of the more mundane aspects of childcare, leaving mothers and fathers to focus upon the nurturing of a child’s mind and values. Interestingly, Georgian parents, including those who left their children in the charge of others while they worked, do not seem to have suffered any of the guilt or dilemmas of conscience so often experienced by working parents today. One absence from this book is a discussion of the role of the godparent. In an Enlightenment world, when the established church faced challenges from evangelicalism, it might have been revealing to know how this aspect of parenting was affected. In earlier periods we know that godparents were intended to provide spiritual guidance to their godchildren, but could also play a more practical role in their upbringing. How was godparenting practised and experienced in the period 1760–1830?

It is fascinating to learn from Bailey that by this period bad parenting was understood to breed badly behaved children. Parental influence during childhood was thought to have a profound impact upon an individual's personality and qualities in later life. Hence from the 1770s, during trials of juveniles at the Old Bailey, parents and masters could find themselves held responsible for the criminal behaviour of their young charges. But the logic of this thinking seems to have only gone so far. Why, in cases of marital breakdown and legal separation, did fathers always win custody of their children? It was not until the 1839 Custody of Infants Act that mothers could petition the Court of Chancery for custody of their children up to the age of seven, and for periodic access to children who were seven years and older. Since one of the legal grounds for marital separation was violence, this meant that before 1839 children of separated parents could be left in the care of men who had been proved to be violent. While contemporaries expressed great concern about how children might be 'contaminated' if they lived in the homes of their adulterous mothers, there was an absence of discussion about either the physical harm or psychological damage that they might face from their violent fathers. The authorities would intervene to protect children if their fathers inflicted serious, life-threatening violence upon them, but the idea that children's impressionable minds might be affected by witnessing the violence of their fathers upon their mothers does not seem to have been entertained. Why? Is this another case of the preservation of patriarchal authority in the family? In a society that held tender parenting so dear, why were children left in the custody of violent men?

Notes

1. Kate Retford, *The Art of Domestic Life: Family Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 2006).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Joanne Bailey, "'Think wot a Mother must feel': Parenting in English pauper letters c.1760-1834", *Family and Community History*, 13/1 (2010), 5-19.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Joanne Bailey, *Unquiet Lives: Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England, 1660-1800* (Cambridge, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
4. John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making* (Oxford, 1997).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/32391>