

Thicker than Water: Siblings and their Relations, 1780-1920

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Eleanor Gordon

Thicker than Water is an impressive book, both in terms of its quality and its size. At over 400 pages, it presents a daunting challenge to the reviewer with its wide-ranging discussions of the literature on families and sibling relationships which span the disciplines of sociology, history and psychology, as well as the fields of literature, poetry and film. The historiographical discussions are leavened by richly textured descriptions of particular families over the period. The book is organised into three sections: the first section discusses diverse disciplinary approaches to the study of the family and the ways in which the social, cultural and economic context shaped these approaches. The second section provides an overview of the middle classes (the group that the book is concerned with) before exploring sibling relationships at the different stages of the life cycle, whilst the third section adopts a case study approach to explore themes such as sibling incest, sibling power relationships and sibling loss.

The importance of sibling relationships in the popular imagination is so embedded as to be taken as a given. It may seem surprising then that historians have almost entirely neglected this topic. Davidoff is not the first historian to note the importance of sibling relationships but never have they been so comprehensively studied and accorded such importance in shaping personal and public life. The phenomenon of the 'long family', a term Davidoff uses to describe the large families that characterised the period from the last decades of the 18th century to the first decades of the 20th century, lies at the heart of this study. These large, complex webs of kinship relationships were all-encompassing; they shaped individual psyches, sexual and social identities and often were the engine of economic life. As Davidoff notes:

As in no other time since, sisters and brothers, often in tandem with their spouses and children, shared material fortunes, social and emotional circles. They worked, played, travelled and worshipped together ... Above all, they were just there – an inextricable part of the warp and weft of existence (pp. 163–4).

Indeed Davidoff identifies the decline in family size that began around the third quarter of the 19th century as ‘one of the most dramatic phenomena of the modern period’ (p. 103), with far-reaching consequences . The more widespread availability of birth control and the will to limit fertility coincided to produce a shift in attitudes and practice over the next 50 years or so that had a ‘momentous impact on public as well as personal life’ (p. 107). By the end of the 20th century the large Victorian family had more or less disappeared. The decline of vertical and horizontal kinship ties means that friends and peers have to a large extent displaced siblings, aunts and uncles as the primary source of emotional, social and material support with the state providing a safety net that has released relatives, often women, from many of the responsibilities that would have fallen to them in the past. The quest for ‘me time’, personal fulfilment and privacy are encouraged and individual children have far more emotional and financial resources lavished upon them. Of course, the changes have not been universal or linear and there have been losses and gains in this process. However, Davidoff’s concern is not to address the fruitless quest of establishing whether things are now better or worse but to illuminate the changes and continuities over time, to shed light on the present by a greater understanding of the past and to question the ‘naturalness’ of human behaviour and social organisation.

The book begins with a survey of the different disciplinary approaches to the study of the family and its representation across a variety of fields. Davidoff notes the relatively recent development of the history of the family in Britain which was spearheaded by the historical demographers of the Cambridge group. They successfully scotched the myth that families in the past were large multi-generational units by demonstrating that the nuclear unit had been statistically dominant for centuries. Sociologists influenced by Parsonian functionalism argued that the nuclear family emerged in the 19th century in response to the psychological, social and economic demands of industrialised society. These approaches led to a focus on the nuclear family as the significant analytical category and the most important family form, particularly in the 19th century, and a consequent neglect of the extended family, of the complexity of family forms, of the shifting meanings given to the category ‘family’ over time, of the role of the family as an agent of change and of power relations within the family. The work of Michael Anderson, Stephen Ruggles and others has reinstated the importance of extended families in the past, particularly in the 19th century. Many other omissions have been redressed by subsequent historians, particularly those who have viewed the history of the family through a gender lens. However, gender historians are open to criticism too for the narrow way in which they have conceived the family. Many feminist historians have been in thrall to the dominant 19th-century discourse of gender, separate spheres, and the enthronement of women as moral guardians of the household. Consequently, the husband-wife relationship and the parent –child relationship, particularly that of the mother and child, garnered more attention than other roles and relationships. Davidoff is to be congratulated for her contribution to addressing this omission and reminding historians of what psychodynamics and popular belief have long known – that sibling relationships are enduring and of immense emotional significance.

The case studies of the Gladstone, Wordsworth and Freud families are used to explore in more detail some of the themes discussed in part two with a particular focus on sibling intimacy, incest and ‘close marriage’. There is an obvious rationale for the focus on famous families in that these families will have left extensive records as well as a clutch of biographers who have trawled through the private correspondence, diaries etc and created ready-made accounts . The richness of the sources yielded by such families certainly makes them a compelling study. However, it is a little disappointing that ordinary middle-class families are not a more prominent feature of the book and one also has to ponder how typical these renowned families were. Davidoff might justifiably counter that she is less interested in how representative her case studies are than with the insights that they provide into contemporary understandings and meanings of categories often

regarded as universal or natural. Her discussion of incest reminds us that it is culturally defined, that its parameters have shifted over time and that official opinion and popular practice have not always coincided. Authorities were more concerned with adultery than incest in the early modern period and the official policy that those related through marriage were included in the incest taboo was often ignored in practice.

The ubiquity of cousin marriage across time and place is charted in chapter nine. For centuries groups as diverse as the nobility, peasants and Jewish communities viewed close marriage as central to maintaining economic, social and cultural bonds. However, cousin marriage reached its zenith amongst the middle classes of Western Europe in the late 19th century, aided by the combination of their prosperity and fecundity with the decline in mortality. The close marriage practices of the middling strata were not only central to cementing business dynasties and securing the social standing of families, but were an essential part of the process of social class formation. Indeed Davidoff speculates that the religious prohibition of close marriage in Eastern Europe may have been responsible for the absence of an effective middle class in capitalist development in that region. Although there has been a weakening of the strictures that define incestuous relationships since the 19th century, particularly amongst those of in-law status, paradoxically cousin marriages in this more permissive age are regarded as abnormal and a cause for comment. Although Davidoff does not posit a definitive explanation for the shift from acceptance to prescription of close marriage, it is clear that cultural, political and scientific factors all played a role and that primordial instincts have very little to do with it.

Thicker than Water is an unqualified success in demonstrating the complex mix of economic, social and cultural factors that shape families past and present. The forms which families take are not random or individual but dependent on the interaction of economic, social and cultural factors. The 'long family' that characterised the 'long 19th century' was a product of its time and place and had immense significance for psychic processes and public life. The shift to a different family form and to a different family ideal from the early decades of the 20th century has had equivalent, but different, individual and social consequences, although Davidoff is at pains to point out the enduring significance of sibling relations in shaping personal and social identity within the smaller contemporary family unit.

Whilst *Thicker than Water* demonstrates the dense linkages between the private life of the family and public life, it is less successful in exploring the impact of wider social, cultural and economic formations on psychic and emotional processes. In recent years historians have taken an increasing interest in emotional life and the history of emotions, the basic premise being that emotions are not universal or timeless and that how emotions are expressed and interpreted is shaped by the societies in which they are embedded. Davidoff might have engaged with Peter Stearns' view that the needs of a newly industrialised society shaped the emotional vocabulary of the Victorian middle classes.⁽¹⁾ Davidoff has done much to alert us to the socially constructed nature of aspects of families and family life that have often been presented as universal or 'natural'. However, there is little attempt to problematise the feelings of the past and to see them as a product of time and place or to interrogate the meanings given to named emotions. The detailed case studies she draws on could have yielded sufficient source material to provide a more nuanced picture of the emotional community of the middle classes than the broad sweep provided by Stearns. Given that a central aim of the book is to highlight the dramatic impact of the decline in family size on public and personal life, a fuller exploration of the continuities and changes in the emotional landscape of the Victorian bourgeoisie, or at least their sibling relationships, would have been welcome if challenging.

Thicker than Water has much to commend it but it does not add much to our scant knowledge of this aspect of the history of family life. Perhaps historians have to accept the limitations of their discipline as well as their sources or perhaps this is an area ripe for an interdisciplinary approach that can harness the concepts of psychology, anthropology, psychoanalysis and other disciplines to an understanding of the emotional and psychic impact of sibling relationships in the past.

Notes

1. Peter N. Stearns with Carol Z. Stearns, 'Emotionology: clarifying the history of emotions and emotional standards', *The American Historical Review*, 90, 4 (October 1985). [Back to \(1\)](#)

The author does not wish to respond to this review.

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