

## The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War and the Making of the Democratic Self in Post-War Britain

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Helen McCarthy

Sometime, around the middle of the 20th century, the British began to think differently about the well-being of children. Where anxieties had once dwelt on malnourished and disease-ridden bodies, they now shifted to contemplate the civilizational consequences of young disordered minds. The emotional resilience of children had, the experts decided, been overestimated; children were reimagined as fragile creatures with complex psychologies fuelled by irrational fears and inner conflicts. The continuous presence of a dedicated caregiver became the best defence against a future life of mental disturbance. Conversely, the absence of such a figure had grave implications for a child's chances of becoming a happy, functional citizen. Prolonged separation from mothers, in the words of psychoanalyst John Bowlby, caused 'wounds to the spirit' which could scar children for life. Preventing such harm became the object of social policy and the mainstay of parenting literature in the decades after the Second World War.

Historians have for some time known in general terms about the influence of men like Bowlby and his fellow psychoanalysts Donald Winnicott, Anna Freud and Susan Isaacs, their involvement in wartime evacuation policies and contribution to post-war thinking about family, motherhood and mental health. Feminist historians in particular have debated the ideological legacy of psychoanalytic theories which seemingly made the mother-child dyad bear the burden of responsibility for the collective emotional well-being of a nation reeling from the upheaval of war. As Juliet Mitchell memorably noted in 1974, by locating

the remedy for society's ills in 'normal' families founded on a conventional sexual division of labour, 'the developments of child psychoanalysis contributed very neatly to the political demands of the epoch'.<sup>(1)</sup>

But what is less well understood, until now, are the processes by which these ideas left the elite circles of professional psychoanalysis which produced them to become conventional wisdoms of social policy and, eventually, to borrow Michal Shapira's potent phrase, 'constructed sensitivities' internalised by Britons until they seemed 'natural' and intuitive truths. It is to these complex, multifaceted processes that Shapira's illuminating book attends, marshalling into a carefully argued analysis an eclectic set of archival sources ranging from Melanie Klein's clinical notebooks to the written archives of the BBC.

Chronologically speaking, Shapira's critical hinge is the Second World War, a conflict which heightened awareness of the fragilities of civilian morale and of the threat posed to Britain's war aims by the destructive potential of mass fear on the home front. Shapira does a superb job of narrating the shift in both clinical thinking and public attitudes effected by the suffering of the shell-shocked in the previous war, demonstrating how, by the 1940s, fear and anxiety were recognised as legitimate responses to war but ones that needed careful management by the state. Children's fears were the special concern of psychoanalysts, who became actively involved in government evacuation schemes; some ran hostels and nurseries, replicating as far as possible for displaced children the comforts and intimacies of the family structure. Others spoke out publicly against widely-voiced assumptions that bed-wetting and ill-disciplined evacuees were the products of lazy parenting amongst the urban poor rather than expressions of profound anxiety brought on by enforced separation.

The unique conditions of the home front created a space in which these experts identified the link between the war 'outside' and the trauma within which Shapira sees as the key to understanding the wider social and political purchase of psychoanalysis mid-century. War, even for non-combatants, was seen to have brutalising effects on human psychology, with prolonged exposure to a world full of bombs, barbarism and death imperilling the kind of rational selfhood required for democratic citizenship. With the coming of peace, the task of psychoanalysis became the nurturing of democratic selves by educating Britons to recognise and manage the 'war inside,' now understood as a fundamental element of human nature.

Shapira shows through a series of deeply-researched chapters how psychoanalysts pursued this project: by broadcasting radio talks aimed at new mothers (Winnicott); by intervening in policy debates about juvenile delinquency, capital punishment and homosexuality (Edward Glover and colleagues at the Institute for the Scientific Treatment of Delinquency); and through research and advocacy demonstrating the harm done by hospitalisation policies which separated sick children from their parents for long periods of time (Bowlby and James Robertson at the Tavistock Clinic). Through Shapira's elegant discussion, psychoanalysis emerges as a creative and socially-engaged discipline with a history that speaks to the social and political context of its times. It also speaks, incidentally, to contexts beyond the nation-state: Bowlby developed his ideas about attachment theory through research commissioned and published by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Glover, we learn, advised the United Nations on the prevention and treatment of crime, whilst Robertson's hard-hitting film of a traumatised child in hospital toured the US under the auspices of the federal Child Bureau and the WHO; the latter distributed copies in Africa and India and hired Robertson as a temporary mental health consultant. Tracing and elucidating this international story lies beyond the scope of Shapira's book, but it surely will not be long before this subject finds its historian, given the recent upsurge of interest in international organisations as sites for transnational exchanges of knowledge and ideas.

More problematic, however, for the book's purposes is Shapira's notable reluctance to engage fully with the gender politics of her story. She suggests early on that historians must look beyond established feminist critiques which brand figures such as Bowlby and Winnicott as conservative ideologues pursuing a mission to send women back to the home. We should appreciate instead, she argues, that psychoanalytic ideas were progressive in comparison with older behaviourist models of childrearing and can be read as having served to enlarge women's domestic authority and independence rather than narrowing their horizons. Yet Shapira chooses to close her chapter on Winnicott's BBC talks by self-consciously paraphrasing Juliet Mitchell's

observation quoted above, concerning the ideological congruence between theories of maternal deprivation and the restoration of the sexual division of labour after the war.

This tension in Shapira's analysis might have been at least in part resolved had she considered more explicitly the implications of Winnicott and Bowlby's ideas for different groups of women. As the book reveals, psychoanalysts presented their theories as objective accounts of human nature, a claim seemingly vindicated by the appreciative letters they received from 'ordinary' people, many of whom welcomed psychoanalytic thinking because it appeared to legitimise their existing childcare practices and parental instincts. Shapira cites a grandmother who wrote to Winnicott describing breastfeeding as the loveliest thing of her married life, and later on a mother, whose letter to *Good Housekeeping* recalled her childhood distress at being left in hospital with only one parental visit a week. 'Bowlbyism', one might argue from this evidence, appealed most where it seemed to reproduce or explain 'real' experiences or 'natural' feelings which were, as Shapira suggests, in reality rooted in concepts about mother-child relations that only became knowable in the middle of the 20th century.

Yet what Shapira fails to do is take a further step and ask to whom did these 'constructed sensitivities' belong? It is hard not to see class dynamics at work here. The working-class mothers who were berated for their selfishness in 1939 for refusing to be parted from their children during evacuation were to be proved 'right' by psychoanalytic knowledge about the dangers of maternal deprivation. They were the ones who stood to gain most from Winnicott's expert systematizing of what 'every mother of an infant knows naturally' (p. 123) and his efforts to elevate mothers to the status of the nation's first defence against societal disintegration. From this perspective, the 'losers' of Bowlbyism were middle-class women, and not just the small minority who wished to combine motherhood with paid work, but those who in earlier decades would have lived leisured lives courtesy of servants, nannies and boarding schools. This domestic support system would have enabled them to pursue hobbies and pastimes, participate in voluntary work or simply enjoy the pleasures of domesticity and the private sphere. That, according to Alison Light's seminal study of conservative modernity between the wars, was what independence and 'being in charge' meant to middle-class women before the Second World War.<sup>(2)</sup> The home was a site for the expression of self and the search for privacy, but children were incidental rather than central to these endeavours, as reflected in the full and varied fictional lives of Jan Struther's *Mrs Miniver* or E. M. Delafield's *Provincial Lady*. Psychoanalysis, one could argue, supplanted this bourgeois model of feminine autonomy with one more proletarian and inclusive which valorised the child-centred mothering of working-class women at the expense of their middle-class counterparts. It could be regarded, in this sense, as contributing to that wider redistribution of 'social esteem' which scholars such as Ross McKibbin and James Hinton see as following in the war's wake.

At the same time, it seems implausible that psychoanalytic ideas, influential as they were, would have altered behaviours overnight. We can, as Shapira shows, trace psychoanalytic 'talk' in the popular press, magazines and radio broadcasts, and we can, additionally, catch snatches of 'ordinary' voices in the oral histories of other scholars. Angela Davis detected notable traces of Bowlbyism in the views towards work and childcare expressed by the mothers she interviewed in Oxfordshire, as did Elizabeth Roberts in her classic oral history of working-class women in Lancashire.<sup>(3)</sup> And yet Shapira notes that as late as 1983, only half of all hospital children's wards had unrestricted visiting hours for parents, demonstrating the uneven adoption of psychoanalytic ideas. We also know that many middle-class parents continued to employ full-time nannies and to send their children away to boarding schools in the post-war decades, whilst single mothers with young children who worked out of economic necessity did so without attracting undue social opprobrium.

Even today we live with this mixed legacy of psychoanalysis's mid 20th-century project. Any new mother in Britain in 2014 will recognise the post-Winnicott paradigm which demands she trust her maternal 'instincts' whilst deferring when required to the opinions of 'experts' as to what's best for her baby. And those same mothers will return to paid employment after six months or a year under the black cloud of parenting literature and news stories warning of the risks of psychological harm when mothers go back to their jobs too soon. Even if the psychoanalysts of the 1940s and 1950s never had everything their way, they helped to

bring about an extraordinary shift in cultural expectations of familial relationships which transformed understanding of what was 'natural' or 'normal' in the way parents related to their children, a legacy we are still living with today. Historicizing that legacy in all its dimensions is a vital task for scholars, which is why Michal Shapira's absorbing book is such a valuable contribution to the literature.

## Notes

1. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York, NY, 1974).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London, 1991).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England, 1945–2000* (Manchester, 2012); Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1995).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/79292>