

A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working Class Women 1890-1940

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Author:

Elizabeth Roberts

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Sally Alexander

No history of class or industrialisation is taught now without the demography of the household, the value of domestic labour, the items of working class consumption, the texture of sexual difference. Elizabeth Roberts' fine oral history of the everyday lives of "ordinary" working class women in Lancashire between 1890 and 1940 has provided a detailed study of these themes since its first publication in 1985. The reprint is welcome. Through Roberts' analysis of the transcripts of the 160 respondents from Barrow, Preston and Lancaster we know more now about the hidden lives of mothers and grandmothers of those of us born mid-century in Britain. The story is a bleak one. Women's lives were repetitious and hard - in the idiom of the time and place - all "work and bed." "The women they worked and worked" Roberts was told, "They had babies and worked like idiots. They died. They were old at forty." Among the poor, wrote Ada Neild Chew, trade union organiser and suffragist in Lancashire before the first world war, were "women who had not lived".⁽¹⁾

This is not a feminist history, Roberts insists, because she found no evidence of patriarchy among the working classes of Lancashire. Women blamed poverty not men for their plight, and women had power - of a sort - in household and family. The mother/daughter bond was the "linch-pin" of the family. Roberts also resists feminist history's fixation - as she sees it - on suffering. Yet she finds no other word to describe women's often harsh experiences of marriage, childbirth, their labours and love for children alive and dead. Nevertheless, the women "knew their place, were secure in it, and gained much satisfaction from their

achievements" which were, Roberts tells us crisply, in the manner of the sociologist, the management of the family budget, the education and socialisation of large families, and the upholding of the family and neighbourhood mores. Roberts reasons respectfully with the research of fellow historians, but she takes her cue from the words of her respondents on the survival of kin, the centrality of the wage to women, the spread of birth control knowledge among married couples, the moral economies of the communities which made up industrial Lancashire. Continuity and change is her theme, and although she is only partially convinced by modernisation theory (Lancashire had been industrialised for generations) she concludes that "modern" attitudes were haphazardly established by the 1940s. The book is offered as a memorial to the women who embodied - she tells us - a way of life that has disappeared.

Tony Blair would agree with her. His generation he assured Sue Lawley on Desert Island Discs earlier this year, born in the 1950s, children of the welfare state, have no memory of the first decades of the twentieth century, the formative decades of the Labour Movement - "old Labour" as Ross McKibbin among others has put it - so the institutions of old labour are neither appropriate or adequate to deal with modern injustices. No-one wants to return to the thirties - in Lancashire Winifred Holtby wrote in 1933, a "war was being waged" against poverty and unemployment.⁽²⁾ And anyway, Labour's old institutions had little to offer women, and often obstructed their demands, for example, equal pay, family allowance, or birth control. So why the lament from the old left about New Labour's willed forgetting of them? Does anything remain of these lives? What should we remember about them?

A Woman's Place tells the story of a conformist generation, obedient to tradition, their emotional and material wants narrowed by poverty and fatalism, their manners and morals disciplined by Christian values (not doctrine). They inhabited a moral world of sharing, duty to others and a sense of fairness which derived, Roberts repeats, from Christianity and working class custom. Children had "transmitted to them," as they were growing up, "a working class culture, a complete design for living and a set of rules to be learned about 'proper' behaviour".

From childhood - which was short-lived and never clearly demarcated from adult lives - girls learned the habit of obedience, seldom criticised their parents, and submitted their wishes to family need. Families had to abide by one another to survive. Waged work brought little pleasure, and only a glimpse of independence; sexual knowledge was dangerous and a source of shame; marriage the universal expectation. Marriage was a life-long partnership, and as one man told Elizabeth Roberts, the "height of anyone's life was how they looked after their family". "All women hoped to be able to feed, clothe and house their families" Roberts writes, to have failed would have meant death. A "woman's place" was in the home, where she was both the provender of need and the "prevailing" authority. "I was fifty-six before I answered my mother back", one Preston woman remarked. "Talk of the subjection of women" Helen Bosanquet wrote of the London poor in 1906 and Roberts quotes her approvingly,

I doubt if the bare idea of father being equal to mother in rank and authority ever entered the mind of any child under sixteen.

Children remembered their parents' authority as absolute. The vivid recall of instruction, refusal, warning - "don't ask where babies come from"; "don't show your nakedness"; "say nothing about the blood;" "keep silence"; "you know too much" undermined feminine self-esteem. Obfuscations and euphemism made conception and birth, not to mention desire, mysterious and shameful processes about which it was better to know nothing. Bodies were hidden, their parts and functions unnamed. Only when dead could the body be looked at and touched. Among the labouring poor, Roberts reminds us, appearances were everything: hands, faces, outer clothing, doorsteps and entrances were kept spotless, as were reputations. Death offered a rare and valued opportunity for display. All but the destitute aspired to the horses, ostrich plumes and procession of the funeral cortege, while the laying out of the body, visitors coming to call, look and touch, were the gestures and rituals of a communal spectacle which formed a carapace of feeling. Rules to govern behaviour and thought were intended to stifle curiosity, to suffocate desires. But although only the most "brazen" defied their parents' authority, the young remained remarkably true to the inventions of their peers: zips and belly buttons rather than silence and old wives tales.

"Scant knowledge" - one of Elizabeth Roberts' telling phrases -formed one of the bonds between mothers and daughters, unbroken through adult life. Mothers it seems, right through to the 1940s, had known as little as their daughters did at their age. They had been awakened by marriage, and the shock of birth, as Ellen Ross has documented for women of the London poor before the first world war.⁽³⁾ Mothers refused to enlighten their daughters, Roberts believes, for fear of the consequences of such knowledge: babies, abandonment, poverty and loss of respectability. Women strove for respectability and respectability once meant, Roberts reminds us, respect from others, an aspiration which made sense in a world in which neighbourhood and kin gave affiliation. Respectability was measured by cleanliness, provision for the family, an absence of shame - ruthless taskmasters in conditions of overcrowding, irregular pay, long hours of hard physical labour, the unpredictable advent of births and deaths.

The consequences of extra-marital sexuality were dreaded: "My mother went mad"; "I would have drowned myself"; "my father would have murdered me". A fathers' word was law: "One word from my father" ... If this violent imagery refers to a mythical power, then the myth in this case seems to follow Freud's model of having been founded on some real event. *A Woman's Place* records two startling pre-second-world-war memories of avenging violence: one of a pregnant bride stoned at the church; the other, a father beating his pregnant daughter to death. Some pregnant women drowned themselves. Such memories give chilling resonance to the phrase reiterated by the respondents: "we were as innocent as the grave".

Whether the deaths were apochryphal or not they reinforced the prohibition. Illegitimacy over the period remained remarkably constant at about 5%. And they endorsed a climate of fear and shame, the two emotions most readily admitted to by the women (John Burnett too found fear and shame the universal emotions of working class autobiography in the nineteenth century).⁽⁴⁾ Shame extended beyond the act to its legitimate outcome. Women hid themselves when they were pregnant, as one woman said, explaining her self-consciousness, "I knew that they would think what I had been doing". A Mrs. Harris summed up the atmosphere of the urban villages where everyone knew everyone else, which made up industrial Lancashire: there was tolerance and pity, but the shame too which came from being talked about.

Sex other than for procreation was something that only men indulged in. The double standard was stronger in Lancaster than Barrow and Preston. No-one tells of a man being punished. The closest the respondents came to the mention of pleasure, was by admitting either that "some took the risk", or that someone, usually a father or husband, was or was not "a lustful man". One woman quotes her husband as saying, "if they had seen this squad" referring to his six children in the 1920s, "anyone would think we had had a wonderful time". No-one of course used the word sex - it wasn't needed: "flying their kites"; "tasting their soup before it was ready"; "doing wrong" or "dirty" were some of the phrases. "Don't go all the way to Blackpool" was one bus conductor's caution; "he just came home to sort of make us" was a child's account of her father's presence; "it was him as was playing the game", was the lament of an aggrieved wife.

Given the mental atmosphere of conformity, fatalism, shame and fear, Roberts is hard put to explain the

decline in family size between 1890 and 1940 - the most profound change in the period, and arguably the defining feature of twentieth century modernity. "Family limitation" is "formidably complex" she argues, and oral evidence doesn't help much since it is "bedevilled by inhibitions, ignorance and reticence about sexuality". Roberts runs through the familiar explanations for fewer children: higher aspirations, and rational calculation (Habbakuk); no single causal explanation (Banks and Gittins). Roberts herself follows Gittins in favouring a multiple explanation with differential strategies according to occupation, education and degree of communication between husband and wife. She rejects as too simple the assumption that "all women, if only they had not been so ignorant or fatalistic, would have limited their families". The emotional economy of these women, she outlines, was a protean mix of devotion to children, constant worry, the admission that sex was something to be avoided, and the acceptance of whatever God sends. As one mother of six told her,

Well, I mean, we never thought of it. They just came and that was it.

Roberts' findings are contradictory however. She does find a correlation between the infant mortality rate and family size as Habbakuk had suggested, although as Carol Dyehouse demonstrated, this was not necessarily linked to women's waged work. There had been no incentive to limit family size when babies died as often as they had done in the 19th century. She also finds that among the couples who defied "tradition" and overcame "ignorance" at least one of them valued either education or leisure and a more comfortable standard of living. A "malthusian determination to match family size to material resources" can be found among the labouring poor in the inter-war years, presumably because relative living standards were rising, though not as fast as material expectations. People began to limit families because "I was too valuable working", and "there was no family allowances then you know". But this - not quite Habbakuk's rational calculation - was retrospective wisdom.

How families were limited is also a puzzle. Roberts found no evidence from the respondents that either birth control propaganda, nor books, nor doctors were sources of information; neither did the knowledge filter down through the middle classes as historians once believed. If that had been the case, then the families of domestic servants could be expected to be smaller than average, and they were not in her sample. Roberts condemns the British government's refusal to make (birth control) information available until 1931 when General Practitioners could offer limited advice to married women if their health was threatened. Government prevarication reinforced the attitude strongly held by some women that artificial limitation of births was both immoral and distasteful (though several women confessed to lying about limiting their families). Birth-control did not become respectable until after the second world war. The Lambeth Council issued only a cautious approval in 1930, and all three towns had sizeable Catholic minorities. Nevertheless, there is evidence from the respondents, admittedly often oblique, of determined attempts to limit family size in spite of the very uneven knowledge of methods. Mechanical appliances were expensive, breastfeeding, and coitus interruptus - as every woman knows - were not foolproof. Withdrawal and abstinence were the most frequent resort - one woman's response to her daughter's persistent questioning was, "He didn't do it often but when he did he made a good job of it". Most women improvised. They slept in separate beds, pleaded illness, a stonemason's wife sat on the window ledge until her husband fell asleep. Some took desperate risks. They pushed needles inside themselves, they used washing soda, slippery elm bark, quinine, Epsoms salts and hot baths - "everybody tried that". No woman admitted to having had an abortion, but many repeated stories (usually when their husbands left the room, or the tape recorder was turned off) of home-abortions, imprisonment and death. If women did "accept what came" they did so it seems only when all else failed.

The unwillingness of demographic historians to hear women's wish to refuse the dangers of child-birth and the stresses of raising children on no money now seems extraordinary. Sixty years into the literature of family limitation, only Diana Gittins in the mid-eighties and Simon Szreter and Wally Secombe recently have recognised the strength of women's own wishes to avoid too many children.⁽⁵⁾ Feminist writers through the twentieth century - Maud Pember Reeves, Ada Nield Chew, Stella Browne, Leonora Eyles, Sylvia Pankhurst, Eric Charles and Marie Stopes, Eva Hubbock knew of and wrote about women's resistance to frequent childbirths. The records of the first birth control Clinics in the 1920s, the letters to the Women's Co-operative Guild and to Marie Stopes, testify to the huge number of illegal abortions,

miscarriages and suspicions of infanticide. The memories have always been there but few historians have heard them. Paul Thompson in *The Edwardians* listened to one son's memory of his mother:

My mother nursed a bit of bitterness because she had a big family and would have liked to have done different...Me mother used to be upset when she used to see her sister with only two and we'd the houseful.

(6)

A mother's wish for fewer children, Kathleen Woodward has shown, was printed indelibly on the minds of the young to powerful effect.(7)

Roberts' emphasis on fatalism and the tenacity of working class custom reflects her qualified acceptance of the modernisation thesis. The decline in drinking (part revulsion, part Government policy), education, cinema and the increasing interference of the state into family life had began to break the back of working class custom between the wars. But working class custom, insofar as it springs from social structure and conditions, was perhaps more fluid, more improvised than Roberts allows. Neither the populations in the three towns nor the economy were stable. Well over half the respondents from Barrow and Lancaster came from migrant families, and of the 43 respondents from Preston, only 21 had both parents born there, or in its neighbouring villages. Migration, as E.A. Wrigley has pointed out, creates new people.

The wage in the hands of young women was a leaven of change. A man's wage was seldom enough to support a family, and young women could earn almost as much as their fathers in some places and occupations during the depression. The wife's domestic labour was often more valuable to the family's standard of living than their waged work. Some men anyway did not like their wives to work because it seemed to reflect badly on their status as earner and Roberts found no evidence that the women disagreed with this. Most mill-workers worked part-time after their children came. The minority who worked full-time in the mills in Preston, for example, the poorest of the three towns, barely covered costs of childcare, cooked meals and laundry.

The wage did not bring immediate financial or moral independence - it was handed straight over to the mother for the first years - but it did bring a change in status within the family. Immediately the young worker, like her father, was given more to eat. Mrs. Mulholland, for instance, one of thirteen surviving children, became a drummer at the skating rink in Barrow aged thirteen. She earned 18s a week, when her father earned 21s as a labourer. Her mother gave her a poached egg on toast for her tea, saying "she was not going to kill the goose that laid the golden egg."

Causes cannot be assumed, they have to be looked for, Marc Bloch wrote.(8) Oral testimony in this respect delivers few certainties. Sentences begin with a "yes" move to a "but well..." and end on a question; "I" shifts to "you" mid-clause; conversation is punctuated with sudden reversals, admissions of ignorance; stories blend hearsay with anecdote. Alessandro Portelli stakes his claim for oral history on these qualities unique to speech which expose, he argues, the truths of subjectivity, as well as the provisional nature of all historical narratives.(9) The truths of subjectivity which the memory-work of *A Woman's Place* reveals include the enduring features of the female life-cycle - the tensions of sexual knowledge, the continuities of myth and family romance, the repetitions of domestic labour - traces of female experience as indicative of human need, and as unlikely to go away, as poverty however differently formed and experienced in different epochs.(10) The sources of individual change are more elusive. Few women were politically conscious. Labour's institutions - based on masculine collectivism and mutuality - scarcely touched women's lives. Before the second world war the women of Lancashire's labouring poor lived outside the provenance of all institutions including the Law. The spirit of change sounds from private memory: Mrs. Hesketh's remark for instance as she described her father, a skilled man, a fitter,

He always had that little wallet at the back that wasn't ours. On a Saturday night he would get ready and put his jewellery on, his gold chain and rings, and what not. He would turn with his back to Mum, like this, to count his money. He had an eye for the ladies when he were out. He used to go to what they called the Long Vaults... Well, we have come a long way since then.

Notes

1. Ada Nield Chew, *The Life and Writings of a Working Woman*, presented by Doris Nield Chew, Virago, 1982.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Winifred Holtby, *Women*, John Lane the Bodley Head, 1934, p.190.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil, Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918*, Oxford University Press, 1993, ch.4.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. John Burnett, *Destiny Obscure, Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s*, (1982), Penguin edn, Introduction.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Diana Gittins, *Fair Sex: Family size and structure, 1900-39*, Huchinson, 1982; Simon Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender in Britain, 1860-1940*, Cambridge, University Press, 1996, Part 1V; Wally Seccombe, *Weathering the Storm, Working-class families from the Industrial Revolution to the fertility decline*, Verso 1993, ch.5.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians, The Remaking of British Society*, Routledge, edn. 1992, p.43.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, (1928), Virago 1984.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, Manchester University Press, 1954, p.xviii.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop Journal*, issue 12.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. National patterns of ill-health and the cases and ages of death in Britain have returned to the patterns established during the 19th century industrialisation and constant till the second world war. *Evening Standard*, 16.8.97.[Back to \(10\)](#)

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