

## Young Women, Work, and Family in England, 1918–1950

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Mary Abbott

Previous investigators, whom Todd scrupulously acknowledges, have focused, she argues, on London and on urban communities such as Preston and the Potteries with a strong tradition of working wives—or on the world beyond work. In pursuit of her own pioneering and ambitious project, Selina Todd has trawled a deep pool of material, ranging from census data and official reports to recorded interviews with eighty-one women held in museums, Record Offices, Local Studies Libraries, and the Lewes Branch of the University of the Third Age. As she acknowledges, casual and seasonal workers, and women who made their livings as prostitutes or thieves, escape her net.

Todd tracks her subjects from their twelfth or fourteenth birthdays—transition from classroom to workplace was often shockingly abrupt—to twenty-four, the average age of the first-time bride. Between the end of the Great War and the Festival of Britain, the character of young women's employment was transformed. In 1918 a girl was most likely to go into service; by 1950 white-blouse jobs in shops and offices had taken the lead. This shift reflects profound, but uneven, changes in society, the economy, and the cultural climate of England. Todd contends that her young women were not victims but agents of change.

Todd explores the characteristics of women's work. Conditions were often poor. In factories and workshops health and safety were at risk. Nor were high-tech enterprises exempt; in the 1920s operatives in the Ferranti factory were spattered with bird droppings. Maids might have one afternoon a week to call their own. In the retail field the Co-op was a model employer. The Second World War, which emancipated domestic servants, brought factory girls music while they worked.

Todd next evaluates the contribution young women made to their families' budgets. She challenges the myth of the male breadwinner. Young women shouldered an 'adult burden of responsibility' in families shattered by the Great War or hit by unemployment—indeed the Means Test demonstrated official recognition of the composite nature of many households' incomes. Big families could not get by on a single wage. Daughters who 'put something back into the house' were rewarded. There were 'wee extras' on the table; their 'clout' increased. Todd underlines—and illustrates through case studies—dramatic regional variations in occupation and in young women's participation in the workforce. In Leicester, nine out of ten went into employment. In Northumberland, only half left school for paid work. Miners, relatively well-paid, prided themselves on 'keeping [a] lass at home'. Mill workers' daughters learned to weave while still at school, running looms while their mothers popped home to see to chores.

Between the wars the authorities displayed considerable interest in the strategies young people used to find work. In contrast, youngsters and their parents had little time for Employment Bureaux. Family, friends, and neighbourhood networks operated as careers advisers and employment agencies. Family traditions determined many destinations: 'I was born in a lace work-cot', a Nottingham woman explained. The new 'plum' jobs in factories, in offices and in shops, were reserved for employees' daughters and protégées. That having separated parents might be a bar to respectable shopwork demonstrates the gulf between the England of 1941 and the England of 2006.

While their choice of a first job was severely constrained, many young women, as Todd demonstrates, had the confidence to move on. Better pay was by no means their sole motive. Female friends were a major factor: they were a source of intelligence about the labour market—and they made dull work bearable. War work was perceived as both patriotic and glamorous. Employment was a vehicle for social mobility. 'Good service', which provided both a training in domestic science and a social and cultural education, disappeared, but office work served as an escalator that could transport a young woman into the middle class. Mill girls, with the means to, dressed like typists.

Family hierarchies and dynamics were mirrored in the work place: in domestic service; in family-run business; and in the relationship between a boss and his office wife. Family sponsors, crucial in job finding, intervened to chastise young women who misbehaved at work. Parents challenged employers when their daughters were unfairly treated. At the same time, family values were undermined, even in segregated, all-women settings. Young women acquired a, sometimes shocking, understanding of their families' place in the social pecking order. Eavesdropping and direct questions provided an education in sex. Young women learned to subvert authority by skiving or, if paid by the piece, petty theft.

Todd plots the unsteady emergence of young women as 'worker-citizens'. The General Election of May 1929 was the first to give these young women a say. Patterns of union membership reflected the industrial labour market, peaking in times of war, dipping in the Twenties and early Thirties. Craft unions, with their mission to protect the interests of men who had served their time as apprentices, were slow to admit women. Unions, representing the unskilled and semi-skilled were more welcoming. With every employee a Union member, the Co-op was unique. To illustrate young women's capacity for militancy in the workplace, Todd focuses on three disputes: one official; one unofficial; and, most striking, an illegal strike over wages—brilliantly timed and successful—at the Bath Co-op on 23 December 1941.

Todd's final chapter tracks the escape route from work through the world of leisure and courtship to marriage as a career. Here, once again, she is mindful of historiographical gaps. Paid work in factories, shops, and offices gave young women the wherewithal to buy clothes and makeup, and to pay for hairdos

and outings to the pictures and the palais de danse with mates from work. Maids were the Cinderellas of the Thirties. But girls whose income was their families' lifeline, or who stayed at home to cook, clean, mend, and mind their siblings, had little better access to the bright lights. Determination not to start married life sharing with the in-laws made for long engagements.

*Young Women, Work and Family in England 1918–1950* is in almost every respect an admirable book—it does what it says on the jacket and its footnotes catalogue the rich evidence for this important topic. My only regret is that, for the reader, the dense and properly cautious text is sometimes hard-going and may defeat less-confident student readers.

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