

## The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914–60

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**Author:**

Katherine Holden

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Tanya Evans

This is a ground-breaking social history of single men and women in England from the early to the mid-20th century. Up until recently, historians of the family have prioritised the experiences of those men and women who married and became parents. This book draws on an admirably wide range of sources (including oral history, autobiography, social surveys, census data, organizational records, parliamentary debates and reports, advice literature, films, novels, children's stories, newspapers and magazines) and focuses on the much neglected lives of people who did not marry and who, mostly, did not have children. Its main aim is to enable us to better understand the married/single divide and the impact of the continuities and changes in marital beliefs and practices on women and men who never married from 1914–60.

Over the past few years some excellent work on the history of single women, mostly focused on the early modern period, has emerged. Amy Froide's, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005) encouraged us to shift our preoccupation with 'ever-married women' to the 'never-married' and to acknowledge the significance of marital status to the representation and experiences of single women in the past. It also allowed us to question longstanding assumptions about the historical experiences of spinsters and bachelors and urged us to explore the differences between single people at different stages in the life cycle and the importance of a wide range of familial relationships including those between siblings and the extended family. The burgeoning interest in the lives of single people in the past encouraged Froide, Holden and June Hannam to jointly organise a conference on the 'History of Single Women' in July 2006. Some of the papers presented at that conference have been published in a special issue of *Women's History Review – Winners or Losers? Single Women in History 1000–2000*.[\(1\)](#)

Other readers and consumers of history have also had their appetites whetted by the widespread publicity

that surrounded the publication of Virginia Nicholson's popular history *Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men after the First World War* (London, 2007). Holden's book enables us to further deepen our understanding of the historical experience and construction of spinsterhood.

More and more historians are convinced of the necessity of bringing to light the history of men and women who did not marry. For most of the period under discussion nearly half of the adult population was single and well over a third never married. It is clear that the nuclear family has dominated as a social structure in our understanding of people's lives in the past and even if men and women did not experience marriage it nonetheless dominated their lives. It is hard to draw clear conceptual boundaries between singleness and marriage. This book makes clear, however, that single men and women's lives have been marginalised by models of marriage and the nuclear family. The stories of the single people given space here are a testament to the variety and richness of these people's lives. Holden's starting point is her own life-story, both as a single, childless woman and one who was surrounded by single, childless women in her childhood during the 1950s and 1960s. Unmarried aunts dominated her early life within a middle-class colonial family and she carefully explores the triangular relationships between mothers, their children and their carers (both paid and unpaid). Holden's approach to each of her chapters is similar as she works through each source to examine the different ways in which singleness was represented and experienced. The introduction discusses the general difficulties of men and women who could not marry and the following chapters move on to discuss work, housing and lifestyle choices, single people's relationships (as brothers, sisters, daughters, sons, aunts and uncles), sexual relationships outside of marriage, the consequences of those relationships (which included pregnancy, adoption and fostering) and end with a discussion of single people's professional and paid work with children. Her focus is on representation as well as experience and through the life stories she explores we get to grips with the conflicts and contradictions of many of the images of singleness familiar to many of us. She suggests that it has been through the negative stereotypes of spinsterhood particularly that of the sad, frustrated old maid that we have learned the limits of normative female behaviour.

The first section explores how difficult some single people found living independently or finding employment particularly during the depression of the 1930s. There was a regional disparity in the experience of employment for single people with more single men to be found in rural areas. This section also highlights the significance of some campaigning groups including the National Spinsters Pension Association and Over Thirty Association which represented the needs of single people over the course of some of the 20th century by attempting to improve their rights with regards to pension entitlements and to secure decent housing and welfare. I, for one, would love to learn more about these organisations. Spinsters were better served by voluntary organisations than bachelors who had no political organisation established to further their interests. Nonetheless, their usually higher earnings meant that they were more capable of supporting themselves without outside help. Throughout this period, single women earned between 60–80 per cent of the wages of men working in similar jobs. Spinsters often found it hard to support themselves alone in accommodation but many used friendship networks, sometimes sought through professional women's networks such as the British Federation of University Women and the Federation of Professional and Business Women's Clubs, to set up home successfully with other single women. There was a significant gap between the numbers of upper- and middle-class and working-class single women due to the death of the officer class in the First World War. It is clear, therefore, that for many single women and men the establishment of a professional identity was especially significant to their lives. Female spinster professionals were clustered particularly in teaching, health and welfare work as well as the civil service. In 1931 half of all single professional women aged between 35 and 44 worked as teachers. Male bachelors, although fewer in number, also worked predominately as teachers. But both men and women as they grew older might become poorer and less secure with fewer family members, both young and old, to fall back on. Townsend's research in particular has suggested that many single people experienced greater economic insecurity, compared with those people who married, as they aged.

The fact that men are included in her discussion makes Holden's book more valuable than it would be if she had only focussed upon women's experiences of singleness. Drawing on Scott, she argues that it is necessary to examine the experiences of men as well as women and that obviously there was a gender division in the

experience of singleness. Nonetheless, the experiences of men were much harder to unearth because of their invisibility in the sources. They are rarely mentioned in the advice literature and few male autobiographers examine their marital status. Holden was able to draw on many more sources on women and her research shows that spinsters experienced more discrimination and hardship and they were represented in an overwhelmingly more negative light than bachelors. The state was complicit in this discrimination.

Holden is keen to emphasise the significant part that children played in the lives of single men and women despite the fact that they might not have become parents themselves. Unmarried men and women were often enmeshed in a complex family web of obligations and responsibilities as well as support. It is in her third chapter that Holden introduces us to her use of the interesting concept of 'family standbys'. This role could give spinsters and bachelors significant roles within a family albeit with circumscribed power. Relationships with children were much valued but frequently experienced as provisional. She suggests, clearly drawing on her own familial experiences, oral histories, as well as surveys including the New Survey of London Life and Labour and the research of the Institute of Community Studies, that maiden aunts and bachelor uncles could allow children to grapple with the possibilities of life outside of marriage and parenthood. This evidence also points to the limits of the census as well as some surveys in describing family and household life in 20th-century Britain. It is through her use of all her sources that she allows us to appreciate the importance of sibling relationships for single people. The role as standby validated many single people's existence within their family. The flip-side of this role, exclusion from the powerful core of the nuclear family, could also be extremely frustrating and humiliating for single men and women.

In chapter four she examines the consequences of 'irregular relations' but instead of focussing on the homosexuality of some single men and women who chose not to marry and which has been explored by a range of historians elsewhere she chooses instead to focus on friendship, as an alternative to 'wifedom' through the well-used examples of Vera Brittain, Phyllis Bentley and Winifred Holtby together with Eleanor Rathbone and Elizabeth Macadam amongst others. She acknowledges that these details of female friendships are far easier to discover for middle- rather than working-class women. It is clear that the virulent anti-homosexuality of the 1940s and 1950s made a significant impact on female subcultures and spaces. She suggests that single men and women in the 1950s were caught within an uncompromising heterosexual climate and overwhelmed by an aggressive married culture while many hoped to avoid the institution of marriage. Moreover, single women were often deeply personally affected by the vehement anti-spinster rhetoric of the inter-war and post-war periods.

She suggests that women were discouraged from having children out of wedlock through a variety of instruments of social control including the women's auxiliary police force, the British Social Hygiene Council and commercial propaganda films such as *Damaged Goods* (1919). Many women, of course, ignored these teachings and most, including social commentators such as Sybil Neville-Rolfe and Esther Harding, held contradictory views on matters regarding sex outside of marriage. Nonetheless, the book's conclusions allow us to question the dominant historiography on offer on the 1950s by describing the intense friendships between women and men who did not marry and the capacity with which some were able to pursue motherhood either through childbirth, fostering or adoption.

Chapter five includes a lengthy discussion of the experience and representation of parenthood outside marriage. The First and Second World Wars had allowed some men and women space and opportunity for greater intimacy than in the period either before or immediately after and this had enormous implications for the increase in the illegitimacy rate during these two wars. Holden's discussion of the history of women who gave birth to children out of wedlock is particularly welcome in the light of Pat Thane and my work on unmarried motherhood in 20th-century England, to be published next year.[\(2\)](#)

Holden is keen to stress that there are many gaps in the sources for the study of intimate lives, but nonetheless it was clear that there was a strong gender divide in the experience of unmarried parenthood. Single mothers bore the brunt of enormous discrimination as parents out of wedlock, while men escaped moral opprobrium. Throughout this period motherhood was frequently unconstrained by marriage which suggests how fragile the institution was. Again she argues that statistics are an ultimately unsatisfactory

source from which to discover anything meaningful about unmarried parenthood and most other sources only illuminate the lives of those who needed help. Those who had the material resources with which to cope with unmarried motherhood usually elude discovery by historians. She explores the implications of the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913 and, through her use of oral histories, and with some reference to the work of voluntary organisations who worked on behalf of unmarried mothers she shows the different ways in which women tried to mother on their own despite their common experience of stigma. The Second World War and the later 1940s represented a watershed in treatment towards unmarried mothers. With many from this period regarded as objects of sympathy and incorporated into the net of the welfare state. Holden also shares her findings from a wide ranging reading of novels in the early to mid-century period. The exploration of the representation of single people in popular culture is particularly welcome here. Many of us will already be familiar with her joint work with Janet Fink.<sup>(3)</sup> Both have explored the representations of unmarried mothers in novels from the mid-Victorian period and films in the 1950s and 1960s. They have suggested that the image of the fallen, outcast woman persisted well into the 1960s to warn other women against participating in sexual activities outside of marriage. Both novels and films worked to emphasise the necessity for unmarried mothers to hide their pregnancies and the births of illegitimate children by resorting to abortion, adoption or fostering. Unmarried motherhood was overwhelmingly stigmatised and few positive images, apart from that of the self-sacrificing mother, were suggested in these cultural genres. The New Wave films of the 1960s such as *A Taste of Honey* (1961), *The L-Shaped Room* (1962) and *Women of Twilight* (1952), often adapted from plays and novels written by women, allowed a more nuanced picture of unmarried motherhood to emerge. These tended to focus on the complex reasons for 'illegitimate' pregnancy, the difficulties these women faced and the limits of the routes out of this state. Nonetheless, the deviancy of unmarried mothers was still the central focus of these films measured against the normality of nuclear family life. Beliefs about unmarried fatherhood were also contradictory throughout this period but many men avoided association with the children they had created out of wedlock both in reality as well as in the literature on 'illegitimate' parenthood. Successive pieces of legislation failed to ensure paternal responsibility towards 'illegitimate' children, the legacy of which remains with us today.

Holden suggests that increasing numbers of single women were adopting children from the late 1920s although societies tended to prefer adopting couples and the prospect of children being assimilated into nuclear families. Paradoxically for some single women during this period it was easier to adopt or foster children you had not born yourself than it was to become a mother through an 'illegitimate' pregnancy. Nonetheless, many women struggled to do so both materially and culturally. We know very little about the history of adoption in this country and Holden's discussion in chapter six, together with Jenny Keating's forthcoming book *A Child for Keeps: the History of Adoption, 1918-45* (Palgrave 2008), is particularly welcome. Adoption was an overwhelmingly informal process, devoid of regulation, both before but also for a long time after the passage of the Adoption Act of 1926 which legalised adoption for the first time. Many parents' childcare arrangements remained fluid throughout this period and adoption and fostering remained part of a spectrum of care used both long- and short-term. Women who re-married often had their illegitimate children adopted by their new husbands. Moreover, adoption by two parents was becoming the norm by the turn of the 1960s especially following the publication of the Hurst Report on the Adoption of Children in 1954. The publication of the Houghton Report 1972 helped to implement a more centralised system of adoption.

Holden's seventh chapter explores the relationships between aunts and uncles and children as revealed in fiction, oral histories and autobiographies. Her final section discusses the involvement of spinsters in the professional care of children as teachers, social workers, nannies, nurses, probation officers and psychoanalysts. Throughout her book she refers to the significance of professional identity to single men but especially to women. It was through this work that women could make their maternal and emotional investment in the future generation. She charts the long-standing belief that women's work was best focused on the care of children and the development of the professionalisation of women's initially voluntary work and the emergence of single female middle-class experts on childcare. She outlines that for many of her interviewees their personal relationships with children were key to their emotional as well as professional lives.

This is an ambitious book and Holden is not afraid to draw on a wealth of methodological approaches and sources to explore her theme. She is less willing to engage with theoretical approaches although frequent reference throughout the book is made to Freud's 'Family Romances'. This book certainly enriches our understanding of the complex history of family and friendship in the past and allows us to rethink hierarchies of relationships of kin and friendship. It is essential reading for undergraduates and postgraduates working on the social history of 20th-century Britain as well as historians of the family and gender. The blend of the personal and political in the way history is recounted and explored in this book is particularly welcome and allows the reader to engage with an author for whom friendship and support from a wide family network is a major source of strength, both intellectual and emotional, in a world that remains overwhelmingly dominated by the couple.

## Notes

1. *Winners or Losers? Single Women in History 1000-2000*, *Women's History Review*, Special Issue, 17, 3 (2008). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried Motherhood in Modern England* (forthcoming). See also *Papers presented at the Symposium on the History of Lone Mothers, The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University, 23rd November, 2007*, *Women's History Review*, Special Issue, ed. Tanya Evans and Pat Thane (forthcoming). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, 'Pictures from the margins of marriage: representations of spinsters and single mothers in the mid-Victorian novel, inter-war Hollywood melodrama and British film of the 1950s and 1960s' *Gender and History*, 11, 2 (1990), 233-55. See also Janet Fink, 'For better or for worse? The dilemmas of unmarried motherhood in mid-twentieth century popular British film and fiction', *Women's History Review* (forthcoming). [Back to \(3\)](#)

### Other reviews:

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