

Zitierhinweis

McCarthy, Helen : recension de : Laura King, Family Men. Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain, 1914-1960, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2015, dans : Reviews in History, 2015, June, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/2014/1778, téléchargé depuis Website



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Rather like the ever-rising middle classes, in every decade of modern history British men appear to be in the midst of becoming better fathers. Better, that is, in the sense of moving closer towards our contemporary idea of the 'good' father, who is present at the birth of his children, is emotionally available to them at all times, and who shares the burden of childcare and housework equally with his partner. The 21st-century father is quite the polar opposite of the stern unbending patriarch who once ruled his household with an absolute authority invested in him by God. This simplistic and Whiggish narrative always lurks wherever fatherhood moves to the centre of public debate. Somehow, men got from there to here: from the Victorian paterfamilias with cane in hand, to the metrosexual Dad pushing the *Bugaboo* through the park.

In this beautifully researched and ambitious book, Laura King brings some much-needed nuance and complexity to this familiar but often caricatured story of sweeping social change. Covering half a century or so between the First World War and the early 1960s, King seeks to elucidate the 'cultural norms and prescriptions about behaviour, feelings and identities' that shaped public understandings of fatherhood, alongside 'the attitudes and social experiences of men and their families' (p. 2). To this task she brings a dazzlingly varied battery of sources: tabloid newspapers and women's magazines, Hollywood films and Enid Blyton novels, parenting literature and BBC broadcasts, sociological studies and Mass Observation directives, diaries, letters and archived oral testimonies. Scrutinising this rich and multivalent evidence with a careful and critical eye, King anatomizes change and continuity across different aspects of the male parenting role, from the 'traditional' economic responsibility of men as breadwinners to the increasingly valorised image of fathers as affectionate and sympathetic 'pals' to their children.

Out of this painstaking sifting of sources emerge a number of compelling themes and arguments. Whilst locating the origins of many attitudes and behaviours in the inter-war period, for King the 1950s stand as a pivotal decade in this history of fatherhood. This was the moment, she contends, when men's identities as fathers came to dominate public and private narratives of masculinity. Drawing on recent work by Claire Langhamer and Jon Lawrence, King concurs that post-war affluence enabled working-class families to embrace an increasingly 'home-centred' existence in which relations between husbands and wives, and between parents and children, were democratised. This had particular meanings for fathers, who became increasingly 'hands-on' in their involvement in child care – changing nappies, pushing prams, playing games – and more ambitious for their children's material welfare and educational mobility. Home-made toys, generous pocket-money and lovingly-chosen presents were a means of demonstrating paternal affection, whilst working-class fathers as much as their middle-class counterparts took an active part in nurturing sons and daughters' aspirations for the future.

This closer bond between fathers and children was also reflected, as King shows, in a newfound emphasis on emotional intimacy, linked to the growing cultural resonance mid-century of psychoanalytic ideas about childhood well-being. Whilst John Bowlby, Donald Winnicott and other childcare experts regarded the mother-infant relationship as fundamental, fathers were not wholly excluded from the emerging orthodoxy around children's emotional needs. Men were encouraged to engage in 'creative play' as a means of ensuring growth of personality, whilst popular representations of fatherhood celebrated warm, physically-demonstrative and affectionate parenting styles. Oral testimonies add substance to King's claim that these cultural prescriptions often validated or crystallised personal experiences and desires. The generation coming of age after 1945 recalled inter-war childhoods marked by emotionally-distant fathers, and vowed to do things differently with their own families. King offers some poignant human detail to illustrate this shift in sensibility, quoting moving testimonies from post-war children who remembered with fondness the feel and smell of their fathers' bodies during cuddles or the rough and tumble of physical play.

A third theme in King's story is the waning domestic authority of men as fathers. This arguably began in the late 19th-century reforms to family law, but King shows how, by the 1940s and 1950s, the idea that a man's power in his household was absolute had become culturally unacceptable as well as legally unsound. This was part and parcel of the wider democratisation of the family referenced above, and could be discerned in small but significant outwards signs: breadwinners no longer got the largest and best cut of meat at the dinner table as matter of course; 'guvnor' and 'pater' were replaced by 'dad' and 'daddy' as typical forms of address; a father who thrashed his child as punishment for wrong-doing was seen to be abusing his position, not exercising his rights. King argues that by the post-war decades, the 'good' father was a man who earned his status in the family by meeting his financial responsibilities, building a strong emotional bond with his children and enforcing discipline with fairness and benevolence. Men who fell short could not expect to be obeyed. A father's power was conditional, not positional.

King echoes the sociological literature of the day in viewing these developments as essentially cross-class in character, with a gradual convergence in parenting values taking place, even as class remained an important social and cultural marker in other domains. But she is appropriately critical of the post-war sociologist's excessive optimism about the rapid spread of the small, egalitarian family as a result of higher living standards brought about by full employment and the welfare state. Observers such as Peter Willmott and Michael Young saw an irresistible momentum building behind the companionate marriages and family-oriented fathers they observed in Bethnal Green in the 1950s: the affluent worker proudly pushing the pram on a Saturday morning symbolised the future, they argued, whilst the Victorian patriarch who caroused in the pub and refused to change nappies belonged to the past.

King offers a far more nuanced account of continuity, noting in every chapter instances of men who stood outside these trends – fathers for whom, to quote Carolyn Steedman, the 'central interpretive devices of the culture don't quite work'.⁽¹⁾ There were fathers who took little pleasure in family life, who found entertaining small children a tedious chore, and who viewed handing over the weekly housekeeping allowance as the full extent of their paternal responsibilities. At the blackest end of the spectrum, there were men who physically and sexually abused their children, who neglected or deserted them, who failed absolutely to fulfil even the most basic tasks of clothing, feeding and sheltering their dependents.

King gives full recognition to these fathers who refused to conform to dominant norms, and she accepts, too, a more fundamental continuity which ran throughout her period from beginning to end concerning the sexual division of labour in the home. However democratised or 'symmetrical' the British family might have become in these decades, women's ultimate responsibility for the care of children and home was never seriously questioned. This public assumption about gender roles was, King's oral testimonies reveal, closely aligned with private attitudes and behaviour. Breadwinning supplied fatherhood with its ideological moorings as much in 1960 as it had in 1914.

Nonetheless, King insists upon change rather than continuity as the central dynamic of her story, arguing that 'the focus on power and the relationship between masculinity and femininity should not obscure change occurring within each gender as well as between the two binaries' (p. 155). In other words, men's experience of fatherhood could undergo significant transformation *within* the framework of prevailing sexual divisions. As King spells out, the emotional bond between fathers and children deepened without any basic alteration in the daily routine of men's waged work outside the home; free time once spent in the pub or club was now spent with the family instead. For some fathers, close and meaningful relationships with children could be nurtured even when physically absent, as illustrated by the often emotionally-intense letter-writing of soldiers to their families during both world wars. This, King argues, should alert historians to the danger of conflating a 'family-oriented'

masculinity with a 'domesticated' one. Fathers could be 'family men' without disturbing the established sexual relations of the private and public spheres.

This is arguably one of the more important and original contributions of *Family Men*, although King doesn't fully spell out its implications for our understanding of the history of gender in the 20th century. The feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s tended to characterise the post-war period as an era of reactionary gender politics. In the work of feminist sociologists like Ann Oakley, the much-vaunted ideal of companionate marriage and mutuality was a 'myth' peddled to women to maintain their oppression in the home. Second-wave feminists insisted that patriarchy was alive and well in the nuclear family, shored up by social policies and legal categories which perpetuated women's economic dependency on men. Historians have typically provided greater nuance in their more recent accounts of post-war gender relations, but the debate over how this period ought to be understood remains very much a live one. Did the mid-20th century enshrine a conservative and deeply functionalist conception of the 'normal' family rooted in specialised gender roles? Or was it a period of flux and instability in gender relations and identities, a prelude – rather than interlude – to the radical sexual politics of the 1970s?

Because King ends her study in 1960 she is unable to engage directly with these larger questions, but the analysis of *Family Men* would seem to lend weight to the latter perspective, revealing how small and subtle shifts in sensibility and behaviour, replicated millions of times in millions of homes over the course of several decades could amount to a major transformation in British men's lives. This is the kind of complex social change that only patient, sensitive scholarship can capture and explain. In *Family Men*, Laura King proves herself more than equal to this task, and her book deserves to be widely read. It can only be hoped that others interested in the 20th-century history of men and masculinity will follow her lead.

Notes

1. Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London, 1989), p. 5.