

Family and Kinship in East London

Michael Young and Peter Willmott





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Michael Young

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FAMILY AND KINSHIP IN
EAST LONDON

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FAMILY AND KINSHIP

IN EAST LONDON

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MICHAEL YOUNG
AND PETER WILLMOTT



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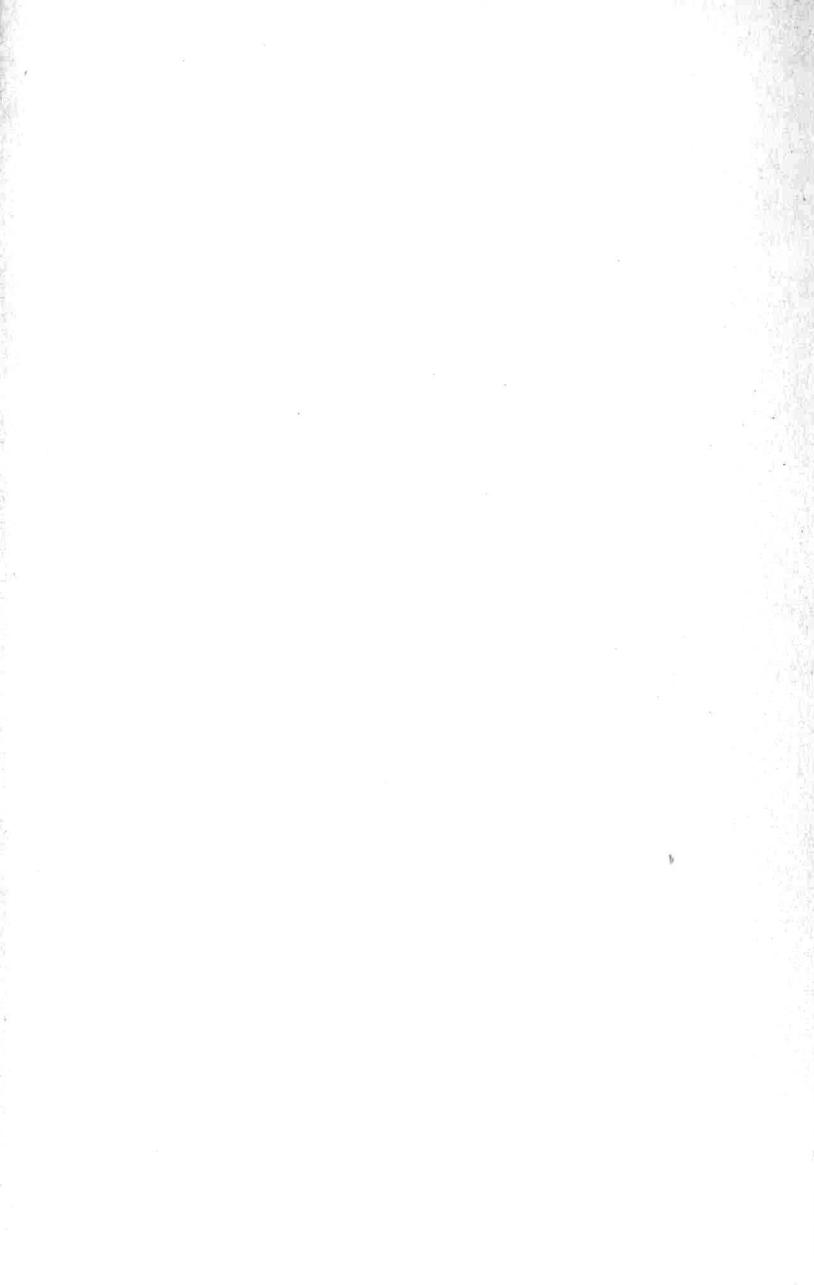
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INTRODUCTION

THIS book is about the effect of one of the newest upon one of the oldest of our social institutions. The new is the housing estate, hundreds of which have been built since the war. In the last century people moved into the cities; in this they have been moving steadily out again, towards the countryside from which their ancestors came. The middle classes led the exodus into the inner suburbs; the working classes of London and other large cities followed by jumping over the earlier settlers into the outer ring of municipal estates.

The old institution is the family. It has been official policy to move people out of the cities; and we felt it would help in the assessment of this policy if more were known about its effects upon family life. For our purpose, we needed to make a comparative study, in the place from which people had come as well as in the place to which they had gone. For the one, we chose a London borough, and for the other, an estate which was one of those built by the London County Council on the outskirts of the metropolis during the years after 1945. The book is divided into two parts; the first describes the borough and the second, the estate.

We were least prepared for what we found in the borough. The wider family of the past has, according to many sociologists, shrunk in modern times to a smaller body. The ancient family consisted not only of parents and their children but also of uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, cousins and grandparents. Kindred were bound together throughout their lives in a comprehensive system of mutual rights and duties, which were almost as binding in the agricultural society of our own past as in some of the surviving primitive societies studied by anthropologists. But as a result of the social changes set in motion by the Industrial Revolution, relatives have, we are told, become separated from each

other. In urban, if not in rural areas, children remain with their own parents only while they are still dependent. The literature of psychology, too, contains a great deal about parents, very little about grandparents.

We were surprised to discover that the wider family, far from having disappeared, was still very much alive in the middle of London. This finding seemed to us of more interest than anything we had been led to expect, all the more so when it transpired that the absence of relatives seemed to be as significant on the estate as their presence in the borough. We decided, although we hit on it more or less accidentally, to make our main subject the wider family.

This has so far been mainly the province of anthropologists. They have investigated kinship in more primitive societies where it is of so much greater importance than our own that the study of society is sometimes in large part the study of kinship. The vocabulary they have employed for describing such societies is not necessarily apt in describing our own. We have therefore felt it necessary to use certain special terms. When they marry, husbands and wives are already members (as we put it) of the 'families of origin' into which they were born. Three families are therefore involved in any marriage – the wife's family of origin, the husband's family of origin, and the new 'family of marriage' which they create. Each of the members of a husband's (or wife's) family of origin may connect him with yet other families – his (or her) parents with *their* families of origin, that is with grandparents and uncles and aunts; his (or her) siblings with *their* families of marriage and to the nephews and nieces contained within it.

Every relative is thus a link with yet another family, each family of marriage being knitted to each family of origin and each family of origin to each family of marriage by a member they have in common. The common member may be a mother who is also daughter and sister, a father who is also son and brother, a sister who is also wife and mother, or a brother who is also husband and father. The interlocking pattern is repeated in different forms throughout society in

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the way that is so familiar. We refer to all the relatives whom a person knows to exist, in all the families to which he is linked in this way, as his 'kinship network'.

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The chosen borough was Bethnal Green in East London. Most of the 54,000 people it contained in 1955 belonged to the 'working class', in the sense that they were predominantly employed on manual work, in such locally important industries as furniture, clothing, transport, docks, and engineering. Contrary to a general impression, the great majority of the people were Gentiles; according to our survey, only about eight per cent of the population was Jewish. The chosen housing estate was 'Greenleigh'. We have given it a fictitious name in order to conceal the identities of our informants there who form a high proportion of ex-Bethnal Greeners on the estate.

We obviously could not see all the people in these districts. In fact we saw not many more than 1,000. But these were chosen rather carefully. We wanted, as far as we safely could, to talk about all the local people although we were seeing only some of them. This object was achieved by following the usual practice of sociologists and selecting 'samples' of people for interview. In Bethnal Green, for instance, we picked from the electoral register every thirty-sixth name appearing on it. We then called on each of the people whose name had come up in this way and asked if he or she would be willing to talk to us. Most of them were. These people were in what we call the *general sample*; in addition we interviewed a second or third time, and much more intensively, a smaller *marriage sample* of couples with young children. Further details about the samples are in the Appendix. We have, to conceal identities, given everyone a fictitious name.

Both of us worked either in the borough or on the estate throughout the three years in which the research was done. One of us also lived in the borough with his own 'family of marriage' for most of the time, and both his wife and his

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children, who attended local schools, provided further side-lights on the place. An example was the comment of the small son who came back one day from school to say, 'The teacher asked us to draw pictures of our family. I did one of you and Mummy and Mickey and me, but isn't it funny, the others were putting in their Nannas and aunties and uncles and all sorts of people like that.' As a result of this close connexion with the district, we came to know well a number of local residents who gave us full accounts of their family relationships which helped us to understand and assess the information given to us in the formal interviews. We also did what we could to check what people told us verbally by personal observation in homes, churches, clubs, schools, parks, public houses, and street markets. But we should say, what is as obvious as it is important, that for the most part we can only report what people say they do, which is not necessarily the same as what they actually do.

We should also make it clear that the research was done between 1953 and 1955. Our account is of the borough, the estate, and the London County Council's housing policy as they seemed to us at that time.

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