

Women and Families

AN ORAL HISTORY, 1940-1970



Elizabeth Roberts



Women and Families

An Oral History,
1940–1970

Elizabeth Roberts



BLACKWELL
Oxford UK & Cambridge USA

Copyright © Elizabeth Mauchline Roberts, 1995

The right of Elizabeth Mauchline Roberts to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 1995

Reprinted 1996

Blackwell Publishers Ltd
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

Blackwell Publishers Inc.
238 Main Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Roberts, Elizabeth.

Women and families: an oral history, 1940-1970/Elizabeth Roberts.

p. cm. - (Family, sexuality, and social relations in past times)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-631-19612-9 - ISBN 0-631-19613-7 (pbk)

1. Working-class women - England - History - 20th century.

2. Working-class families - England - History - 20th century.

I. Title. II. Series.

HQ1599.E5R624 1995

305.4'0942 - dc20

94-20715 CIP

Typeset in 11 on 13pt Garamond 3
by Pure Tech Corporation, Pondicherry, India.

This book is printed on acid-free paper

Women and Families



FAMILY, SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS IN PAST TIMES

GENERAL EDITORS:

Peter Laslett and Michael Anderson

Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times**

Edited by Philippe Ariès and André Béjin

The Explanation of Ideology: Family Structures and Social Systems**

Emmanuel Todd

The Causes of Progress: Culture, Authority and Change

Emmanuel Todd

An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England**

Susan Dwyer Amussen

Sexuality and Social Control, Scotland, 1660–1780

Rosalind Mitchison and Leah Leneman

A History of Contraception: From Antiquity to the Present**

Angus McLaren

The Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood since the Seventeenth Century

Hugh Cunningham

A History of Youth**

Michael Mitterauer

Marriage and the English Reformation

Eric Josef Carlson

Medieval Prostitution*

Jacques Rossiaud

Wet Nursing: A History*

Valerie Fildes

Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity**

Aline Rousselle

Highley, 1550–1880: The Development of a Community*

Gwyneth Nair

The English Noble Household, 1250–1600*

Kate Mertes

Country House Life: Family and Servants, 1815–1914

Jessica Gerard

Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940–1970

Elizabeth Roberts

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

Elizabeth Roberts

FORTHCOMING

Londoners: The Family and Kinship in Early Modern London

Vivien Brodsky

Pre-Marital Sex in Rural England

Gwyneth Nair and Derek Sayer

* out of print ** available in paperback

For my parents, *and* Hugh, David, Eleanor, Kate and Jeremy

Acknowledgements

I owe the deepest debt of gratitude to Dr Lucinda McCray Beier (now of Illinois State University) who worked as my Research Assistant in the years 1987–9. Half the interviews were carried out by her, and I benefited enormously from her perceptions and her keen analysis of the data. She also undertook the task of critically reading the book in draft. Without her the book would not have been written.

I am also very indebted to colleagues who read parts of the manuscript and provided many helpful comments. My thanks to Dr Lynn Abrams of Lancaster University; Dr Joanna Bornat of the Open University; Dr Lynn Hayes, Lancaster University; Dr Kereen Reiger, La Trobe University, Melbourne; Dr Penny Summerfield, Lancaster University, and Melanie Tebbut, Tameside College of Technology. Professor Michael Anderson was particularly helpful in the later stages of preparing the manuscript. Needless to say, the final responsibility for any errors or misinterpretations is mine.

My special thanks go to my husband, Hugh, who did so much to produce the several 'final' versions of the typescript.

Grateful acknowledgement is due to the Economic and Social Research Council who funded the original research project in 1987–9: 'Familial and Social Change and Continuity in Working-class Families, 1940–1970'.

This book could not, of course, have been possible without the cooperation of our respondents. We received abundant help, hospitality and kindness from them. Not all have been quoted, but everyone, through his or her evidence, contributed to our thinking about the project. It seems inadequate simply to offer them our sincerest thanks in return.

Contents

<i>Plates</i>	xii
<i>Tables</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
1 The Context	1
The oral evidence	1
Location of the survey	3
The working class	6
Poverty and prosperity	7
Changing standards of living	9
Cultural values	13
Individualism	14
Continuing traditions	16
War and national service	17
Continuity and change	18
2 Homes and Houses	22
Change and continuity in housing conditions	22
Owner-occupation and council housing	25
Domestic appliances	29
Housework routines	30
The family and housework: children	33
The family and housework: husbands	35
Family activities in the home	40
Meal times	41
Conclusion	43
3 Growing Up – Relationships with Parents – Getting a Job	45
Financial interdependence	45

Teenage affluence	46
Challenges to authority	47
Continuing dependence?	50
Careers and jobs: parental choices	51
Job satisfaction and dissatisfaction	53
Conclusion	57
4 The Opposite Sex: Courtship and Weddings	59
The facts of life	59
Boy meets girl	62
Attitudes to pre-marital sex	63
Pre-marital pregnancy	67
Illegitimacy	69
Change or continuity in sexual mores?	70
Weddings	72
Conclusion	75
5 Family Planning and Role Relationships in Marriage	76
Contraception and family planning	76
Infertility and low fertility	81
Role relationships in marriage: the earlier part of the century	83
Changes in role relationships: the decline of the powerful woman	84
Changes in women's role: financial control and household management	89
Continuing 'traditional' roles	93
Conclusion	94
6 Marriage: For Better? For Worse?	95
Companionate marriages	95
Affection	96
Companionship	97
Gendered leisure activities	99
Strains and resentments	101
Problems of baby-sitting	102
Working patterns	103
Leisure in the home	103
Equality?	104
Did companionate marriages exist?	105

Marriage breakdown: domestic violence	105
Marriage breakdown: separation and divorce	106
Adultery	108
Drifting apart	112
Conclusion	113
7 Married Women's Paid Employment	115
The Second World War and women's work	115
Government policies towards married women workers	117
The increase in women's paid work outside the home	117
Characteristics of women's paid work	119
Decline of paid work in the home	123
Reasons for married women working	124
Husbands' attitude to working wives	129
Work and the family: women's expectations and priorities	131
Childcare	133
Conclusion	139
8 Changing Attitudes to Childcare	141
Influences on ideas of childcare	141
Anxieties about childcare	143
The care of infants	144
The influence of professional carers	145
Mothering	150
Fathering	154
Conclusion	157
9 Attitudes to Social Conditioning and Education	158
Setting norms of behaviour	159
Authority figures	162
The police	162
Neighbours	164
School teachers	164
Changes in educational opportunity	166
Parental attitudes to formal education	167
Ambitious parents	169
Conclusion	174
10 The Extended Family	175
Who was included in the extended family?	175

Co-residence	177
Reasons for helping kin	180
Obligation	180
Affection	181
Instrumentality and reciprocity	182
Exploitation	184
Attitudes towards kin	186
Other help for kin: grandparents and grandchildren	188
Young couples and in-laws	189
Care of the elderly	190
Help for non-resident kin	192
Family occasions	195
Conclusion	196
11 Neighbours and Neighbourhoods	199
Introduction	199
Mutual help	201
Social life	202
Bereavements	204
The continuing ethos of traditional neighbourhoods	205
Gossip	207
Changing neighbourhoods	211
Keeping one's distance	212
Some recollections of changing neighbourhoods	216
Changes in housework and increasing social isolation	221
The acquisition of labour-saving equipment	223
Neighbourhood hostility	225
The decline of the neighbourhood?	226
Conclusion	229
12 Conclusion	232
Change and continuity	232
Women at home	233
Women outside the home	234
Parents and children	235
Working class or working classes?	237
Some ambiguities of 'progress'	237

CONTENTS

	xi
<i>About the Respondents</i>	240
<i>Notes</i>	249
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	268
<i>Index</i>	273

Plates

2.1	House interior, Preston, late 1930s	26
2.2	Nile Street, Preston (demolished in 1960)	27
2.3	New domestic appliances in the 1950s did little to change attitudes to who did the housework	31
4.1	A dance held as part of the Preston Guild celebrations, 1952	62
4.2	A wedding reception, 1960	73
6.1	A family watching television, 1957	104
7.1	Women mechanics at work near Lancaster in 1940	116
7.2	Young women working in a commercial laundry in the late 1940s	120
8.1	Mothers increasingly sought professional medical advice and treatment for their children	146
9.1	The friendly policeman teaching a toddlers' group their kerb drill in London in 1957	163
10.1	Families relaxing on Biggar Bank, Walney, in the 1950s	195
11.1	A VE Day party on the Ryelands Estate, Lancaster	203
11.2	Neighbours talking in a back street, c.1950	209
11.3	A woman donkey-stoning her doorstep	222
11.4	A corner shop in Lancaster in 1965	223
11.5	The official opening of Tesco's supermarket in Barrow in the 1960s	224

Tables

1.1	Summary of respondents	2
1.2	Occupations of respondents' fathers, male respondents and husbands of respondents	2
1.3	Main male occupations in 1931	4
1.4	Main male occupations in 1951	4
1.5	Main male occupations in 1971	5
1.6	Average real weekly earnings	9
1.7	Infant mortality rates: five-year averages	10
1.8	Legitimate fertility rates in Census years 1901-71	19
1.9	Population aged 65 and over (%)	19
5.1	Average age at marriage	88
6.1	Number divorcing per 1000 married people: England and Wales	107
6.2	Divorced women: numbers and percentages of women aged 15+, 1931-71	107
7.1	Women in the labour force: Great Britain, 1951-71	118
7.2	Married women in paid work (%)	118
7.3	Main female employment, 1931	120
7.4	Main female employment, 1951	121
7.5	Main female employment, 1971	121
7.6	Proportions of women in Great Britain with dependent children, working full-time and part-time at different dates, by age of youngest child	122
7.7	Historical trends in numbers of part-time and full-time employment (Great Britain)	122
7.8	Married women economically active in each age group, 1971 (%)	134
7.9	Respondents' childcare arrangements, pre- and post-Second World War (%)	134

1

The Context

It is a truism that individuals contribute to and in turn are affected by the times in which they live; the exact relationship, however, between the general and the particular is almost impossible to unravel. The social historian, in a single study, has to concentrate on the one rather than the other aspect of history. As this is a book based chiefly on oral evidence, it is primarily concerned with the local and the personal. It would be unwise to draw from it too many conclusions about a wider society, but it is hoped that it will raise questions in other historians' minds about the complex and contradictory thirty-year period, 1940–70. It was clearly a time of fundamental social, cultural, demographic and economic changes, all of which profoundly affected the family, and especially the lives of women. As will be seen, these changes meant that in such vital matters as family size, occupation, type of home and possessions, ordinary people had more, but not unlimited, choice than ever before. And yet, as in all historical periods, there were also continuities. It is the interconnections and interrelationships between general changes, individual choices and working-class traditions which made this study both challenging and rewarding.

A Woman's Place was first published in 1984. It is an oral history of working-class women in the period 1890–1940.¹ This volume is, to some extent, a sequel to that book, but it also stands on its own account. Its chief focus remains the lives of women but, as the title indicates, there is consideration of families too. Clearly, women themselves, as well as contemporary experts and politicians, perceived their lives as being inextricably interconnected with, and influenced by, both possible future children and those already alive.²

The Oral Evidence

This book is one result of a study of working-class family and social life in the period 1940–70.³ It is largely based on interviews carried out with

ninety-eight men and women in the years 1988–90. Summaries of the respondents appear in tables 1.1 and 1.2. The appendix 'About the Respondents' contains biographical information about those respondents who are directly quoted in the text. Much has been written about the use of oral

Table 1.1 Summary of respondents

Date of birth	Town to which their evidence relates		
	Barrow	Lancaster	Preston
1910–19	2 men 2 women	1 man 1 woman	nil 1 woman
1920–9	5 men 4 women	6 men 5 women	4 men 4 women
1930–9	6 men 6 women	5 men 6 women	4 men 6 women
1940–9	4 men 4 women	4 men 7 women	6 men 4 women
1950–9	nil	nil	1 woman
Totals	17 men 16 women	16 men 19 women	14 men 16 women

Overall total: 47 men and 51 women = 98 respondents

Table 1.2 Occupations of respondents' fathers, male respondents and husbands of respondents

A Respondents' fathers' occupations ^a						
Unskilled	Skilled	Self-employ.	Professional ^b	Clerical/finance	Commercial	Mgmt
57	20	10	2	3	4	1
B Male respondents' and respondents' husbands' occupations in 1970 ^c						
Unskilled	Skilled	Self-employ.	Professional	Clerical/finance	Commercial	Mgmt
21	27	2	9	3	4	1

Notes

^a One respondent was illegitimate and did not know her father's occupation.

^b Professional includes chemists, police, nurses (male), teachers.

^c Clearly, not all women respondents were married and not all men had finished their education.

evidence.⁴ It is not intended to discuss here its potential or its limitations. It is perhaps permissible to observe that all history contains bias, there are omissions, distortions and ambiguities in all primary historical sources, whether they be written or oral. There is also bias in the historian, because he or she has to select material and construct arguments, processes which are inevitably affected by her own experiences and preconceptions as well as by conscious choice.

The project began with the researchers adopting no particular theoretical standpoint but with assumptions inherited from the previous study which was recorded in *A Woman's Place*. These included an expectation of finding women in a central and important position in the home and family, controlling the family budget, being responsible for the children and their upbringing and contributing to the financial well-being of the family by their household management skills and possibly also through their own wages. It was also anticipated that the extended family and neighbourhood would offer practical help and social support. As will be seen, the empirical evidence for the period 1940–70 did not always accord with these assumptions.

Location of the Survey

The study was carried out in the three northern towns of Barrow-in-Furness, Lancaster and Preston. Barrow was a town of heavy engineering, ship-building and iron and steel-making. In the post-war period there were attempts to introduce newer lighter industries; these never played a dominant role in the town's economy but they were successful during this period. Lancaster continued to have a very mixed economy with linoleum and oil-cloth works, some cotton and artificial fibre mills, a furniture and fine joinery works and a great variety of small shops and businesses. The nature of its economy began to change at the end of the 1950s with the transference of the major part of its linoleum works and workers to Kirkcaldy in Scotland and the closure of the furniture factory. There had always been a large service sector in the town with several large hospitals. This sector was greatly enhanced in the early 1960s with the arrival of a College of Education and a University. Preston enjoyed a brief boom in the cotton trade in the post-war period but the industry was entering a time of terminal decline; indeed, this trend had been irreversible since at least the 1920s.⁵ Engineering played a more and more important part in the town's