

GIRLS GROWING UP IN LATE VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN ENGLAND

Carol Dyhouse

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CAROL DYHOUSE

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To Alexandra

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Introduction

This book is about the socialisation of girls – and the social construction of ‘femininity’ in late-Victorian and early-Edwardian England. I use the word ‘socialisation’ rather than ‘education’ advisedly because the latter is often understood to mean formal schooling. One of my major purposes here has been to show that the majority of girls living in the period 1860-1920 received at least a crucial part – if not the major part – of their education in the family, and not through schooling of any kind.

This work differs from most histories of women’s education, then, in looking closely at girls’ experiences in the family and in attempting to assess the influence of schooling in a broader social context. At the same time there are a number of other ways in which my aims have been different from the majority of those who have written on the subject to date. In the first place, I have been interested in the history of working-class, as much as middle-class, girls. Secondly, I have attempted to consider *experiences* of growing up and of school and family life, being anxious to avoid the kind of approach which is almost exclusively occupied with chronicling the history of educational *provision*. Where I have been concerned with the latter – with the structure and evolution of the school curriculum, for instance – I have been especially concerned with the wider ideological and institutional pressures which were brought to bear upon specific debates; such as the pressures which members of the Medical profession (insisting that the ignorance of mothers accounted for high infant mortality rates in the 1900s) exerted upon the Board of Education to include lessons in infant management and childcare to girls in elementary schools early this century.

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental preoccupation with what I believe to be the social construction of 'femininity' has led me to scrutinise Victorian concepts of 'femininity' in both popular and 'scientific' thought. Centrally, the Victorian ideal of femininity represented economic and intellectual dependency; its prescribed service and self-sacrifice as quintessential forms of 'womanly' behaviour. From early childhood girls were encouraged to suppress (or conceal) ambition, intellectual courage or initiative – any desire for power or independence. The feelings of guilt and/or ambivalence which many strong intelligent women wrestled with in the attempt to reconcile their drives with what they had been taught to perceive as their 'feminine' social identity are a recurrent theme in the pages which follow.

The first chapter of the book examines girls' early experiences of the sexual division of labour in the family; the clear demarcation between the male/public and female/private realms so characteristic of nineteenth century middle-class life; the early initiation into sex-specific tasks further down the social scale. Relations between girls and their fathers, brothers and (particularly) their mothers structured learning about femininity through childhood and adolescent years. The second chapter is concerned with schooling and college education for middle-class girls: it argues that even the newer girls' high schools and colleges of the late-nineteenth century were in many ways highly conservative institutions, fostering conventional ideals of 'feminine' behaviour and reinforcing, essentially, the lessons of family life. In the third chapter I have set out to trace and analyse attitudes towards the socialisation of working-class girls, reflected in both the evolution of the curriculum in elementary schools and also in the organisations catering for adolescent girls which mushroomed during the period: the Girls' Friendly Society, for instance; 'Snowdrop Bands' and Guiding. The fourth chapter is concerned with theories about, and the early social-psychology of female adolescence, and particularly the work and influence of G. Stanley Hall. Finally, Chapter 5 examines feminist theory in relation to girls' education, focusing on the extent to which feminists were able to challenge the sexual division of labour and concepts of 'femininity' during the period 1860-1920. It is argued that even if the history of girls' education is narrowly conceived of as the history of the widening provision of 'educational opportunities' for middle-class girls, there is no simple tale of steady progress towards sexual equality.

1

First lessons in femininity: the experience of family life

Any understanding of the education of girls in the nineteenth century must commence with some study of family life. The family is the primary and most powerful agency of socialisation. Its role in the socialisation of girls, in particular, was even more important in late-Victorian and early-Edwardian society than it is today. It was then much more able to determine and control the influence of other social groups and institutions — especially the impact of schooling — on the growing girl. Up until the first world war, a significant proportion of upper middle-class girls never went to school at all, being educated at home under the aegis of governesses. Most of the middle-class girls who did go to school attended private schools over which the state had no control and the choice of which was entirely in the hands of their parents. In working-class families, in spite of moves towards compulsory elementary education in the 1880s and later attempts to lengthen the period of school life, girls' schooling remained a fairly short-term experience; judged by the majority, perhaps, as rather 'unreal', and commonly bitten into and ultimately curtailed by the much more real and pressing needs of the family.

Inside the family, relationships between parents and the organisation of domestic life constituted first lessons in the sexual division of labour, and if these relationships conformed to the patterns the child perceived in a widening world around her they were likely to be accepted as 'normal', part of the given order of things. Mothers provided small girls with their first models of feminine behaviour; fathers their first examples of paternalism — distance, indifference or benevolence,

perhaps. They commonly appeared invested with authority or power. Where there were children of both sexes girls would be quick to perceive differences in treatment: even if they resented it they would have no choice but to realise that their parents entertained different expectations of and ambitions for their children according to sex. Then, if the household included servants, the growing understanding of social relationship and authority would be amplified by a class, as well as a sexual dimension. In this chapter I want to explore the ways in which girls learned about the sexual division of labour characteristic of their society; to see how patterns of authority were presented to them, and how they were encouraged to conceive of 'femininity' and to define themselves as 'feminine', from their childhood onwards in the family. I shall then move on to consider some of the conflicts of emotion and personality this learning implied.

Late-Victorian middle-class society had developed a very marked sexual division of labour. Men went outside the home to earn money to maintain the household. Their wives, on the whole, stayed in the home and were economically dependent on the male breadwinner. From mid-century onwards, particularly following the establishment of a railway system, urban growth had taken a distinct form which emphasised the sexual division of labour by widening the physical gap between home and workplace. Well-to-do, middle-class businessmen migrated in large numbers to leafy residential suburbs remote from the pollution and griminess of central commercial and industrial districts. Daily they travelled into work on commuter trains, leaving their women-folk and children stranded in suburbia. Katharine Chorley, growing up in Alderley Edge, a prosperous suburb of Manchester, late last century recalled that:

After the 9.18 train had pulled out of the station the Edge became exclusively female. You never saw a man on the hill roads unless it were the doctor or the plumber, and you never saw a man in anyone's home except the gardener or the coachman.¹

The pattern was repeated in suburbs characterised by greater or lesser degrees of affluence, all over urban England. Children of suburban households grew up in a world where they expected their fathers to be absent all day; seeing them briefly, perhaps, in the evenings, otherwise only at weekends. The distinction between mother's world — the private, comparatively leisurely routine of the home and neighbourhood activities; and father's world — distant, invisible — a public world

of regular time-keeping and rather vague but decidedly important activities, was abundantly clear.

In working-class families the sexual division of labour might be less clear cut. For those who remained in the central areas of large towns there was less separation of home and workplace. In the metal-working districts of Birmingham and Sheffield, for instance, families might still live alongside small workshops. Children would have seen their fathers working and fathers did not necessarily automatically absent themselves from the daily life of the family. In areas where work was organised in larger factories, fathers might disappear regularly, but the kind of work they did might still have been more visible and familiar to their children. In some parts of England such as the textile districts of Lancashire or the Potteries a sizeable proportion of married women — even those with small children — remained in fairly regular, full-time employment. Further, working-class mothers almost everywhere were very likely to supplement the family income with some form of home or neighbourhood-based casual employment. In rural areas this might have taken the form of casual, seasonal work on the land: gleaning at harvest time, stone picking, or gathering fruit. In the towns women ran corner shops, or even set up shop in their front rooms. They often went charring or took in washing for other families. Sometimes there were lodgers to be seen to, or babies to mind for other working mothers.

All these factors served to blur the distinction between a father's world of paid work and a mother's world — dependent, and in the home — that most middle-class children took for granted. But it is important not to exaggerate the picture: working-class children were also presented with a society in which there were important differences between 'men's work' and 'women's work'. To begin with, the categories themselves were distinct: that is, there were certain trades in which men worked, others dominated numerically by women. In trades which employed both sexes, there tended to be certain processes defined as women's work and different processes employing men. And women's work tended to be less secure and, of course, markedly less remunerative, than men's. Most important of all we should remember that if we take the figures for the country as a whole, the proportion of married women who remained in full-time employment outside the home was relatively small. One cannot know the precise figure. The 1901 census for England and Wales recorded that 917,509 out of a total of 6,963,944 married or widowed women were returned as having a full-time occupation.² However, several historians

have pointed out that this is probably an under-estimate: many women, aware of social opposition to married women's work outside the home, may have preferred not to declare themselves as 'occupied'. The figure cannot indicate the extent of *casual* labour amongst women in working class areas.³ At the same time, we are left with the impression that most married women did give up full-time paid work outside their homes. This was particularly likely when there were very young children at home: it should be pointed out that the figure of 13 per cent mentioned above would have included married or widowed women who were childless, as well as those whose children were no longer fully dependent on them.

The 1901 General Report of the Registrar-General suggested that the proportion of occupied married women had decreased over the country as a whole since 1881.⁴ There were economic and social reasons for this. As real wage rates rose in some occupational groups after 1870, social aspirations changed. Middle-class ideals of domestic organisation filtered down the social scale.⁵ Katharine Chorley, recording her closeted, middle-class upbringing could not

remember any woman in our circle who had a career or a paid job of her own, either a married woman or a spinster. A paid job for one of his womenfolk would have cast an unbearable reflection of incompetence upon the money-getting male.⁶

Concepts of dependency may not have spread quite so far lower down the social scale, in that a workman would not necessarily have felt that it was his duty as a man to maintain his sisters. But in the last quarter of the century a 'respectable' working man aimed to support his wife and children in some degree of comfort. Married women's work — for a wage, outside the home — was decidedly *not* respectable. A working wife endangered a husband's status and self-respect, bringing into question both his class position and somehow, his manhood, because definitions of masculinity were so intimately bound up with a particular form of domestic life. So, too, were patterns of authority, still revealed in common speech. Men might object to their wives working lest they should want 'to wear the trousers' — a crime against what they would argue to be the natural order of things.

Social opposition to married women's work can be argued to have increased in early twentieth-century Britain. The contribution of women to industry and commerce during both world wars did little to break down barriers against the employment of wives and mothers in