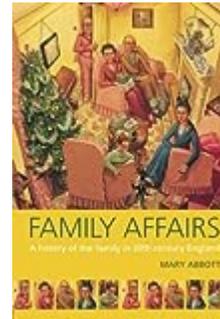




Mary Abbott. *Family Affairs: A History of the Family in 20th Century England.* London: Routledge, 2003. viii + 195 pp. \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-14587-9.



Reviewed by Ginger Frost (Department of History, Samford University)

Published on H-Albion (June, 2005)

A Century of Change

Family norms often resist change, yet the twentieth century began with Victorian ideals of chastity and indissoluble marriage firmly ensconced and ended with mass divorce, cohabitation, and illegitimacy. A number of factors must account for this transformation in the most intimate area of people's lives. Mary Abbott's study, which surveys the history of the family from 1920 to 1990, offers a description of the process, but not an explanation for it.

The audience of the book is clearly the general public. Lists of suggested reading at the end of each chapter comprise the entire scholarly apparatus, and the length of the actual text is under 180 pages. Abbott relies on printed sources, especially autobiographies, which she admits "biases the sample towards an articulate minority," but she argues that these writers grew up in "ordinary families" (p. 2). Though she makes an effort to include working-class voices, they are fewer (proportionately) than the middle and upper classes, due to the source base.

Family Affairs is organized chronologically. Each chapter discusses family life for a certain period of time,

divided up into a standard series of topics, including incomes and housing, birth and education, relations between men and women and parents and children, and old age and death. Within these sections, Abbott describes both the "norm" of the family and the occasional exceptions. The sharp distinctions between classes are clear, and Abbott also discusses in the different gender roles within those classes, though that aspect could have been stressed more throughout.

Abbott's primary method is descriptive. She gives brief overviews of her main topics, illustrating them with telling quotations from her sources. To demonstrate the lack of privacy in working-class homes between the wars, for instance, Abbott quotes a Sheffield woman whose four-year-old daughter had to share the bed during her mother's labor. The girl told her the next morning, "Naughty mamma dirtied the bed" (p. 33). The fascination of new technologies in the 1960s comes through in a story about a family entertained by the washing machine: "we all sat around and watched our clothes going around and around through the glass porthole at the front" (p. 138). As these examples indicate, Abbott often

chooses amusing and poignant examples from the memoirs and autobiographies, and readers of all types will enjoy this aspect of the book.

On the other hand, Abbott does not have an overarching thesis that holds together these disparate chapters, so the reviewer must tease out possible themes. The structure of the book, because it is chronological, tends it towards a story of slow “liberation,” though Abbott indicates at one point that the changes, especially the decline of marriage, were not all positive (p. 121). The role of the state in the family also comes up throughout, but Abbott does not address this aspect systematically either. Obviously, though, the state withdrew from intrusive policing of sexuality and family relationships over the course of the century, with the one exception of the relationship between parent and child.

Inevitably in a short book with a large topic, Abbott opens herself up to criticisms of what she chooses to include and exclude. The main troubling omissions for this reviewer are those that concern larger debates in family history. On the whole, as indicated above, Abbott does not engage in any historical arguments. For example, she does not come down firmly on either side of the issue of what was the most important turning point for the family in the century—World War II or the 1960s—though most of her evidence points to the latter. She also skates over major concerns in the role of the state on the family. How effective was state intervention, and what kind was most effective—economic help through welfare provisions or criminalizing and de-criminalizing certain behaviors? And did governments lead the masses or follow them on family issues? Readers can only surmise her opinions.

In addition, for my taste, Abbott spends too much space on descriptions of clothing, education, and funerals, and too little on actual family relationships, especially those between siblings and wider kin. The contemporary family member has fewer horizontal relationships (cousins, siblings) and more vertical ones (grandparents and great-grandparents). What are the implications for this? For example, does the welfare state give older generations more or less power within their families? Most crucially, Abbott needs a more systematic argument for causation for the vast changes in the family during these seventy years. She lists various factors throughout (the rise of the welfare state, the women’s movement, the birth control pill), but does not make a case for the relative importance of them in comparison to the others.

Of course, this book is a popular history, which partly explains its limited contribution to historical issues. However, without a clear thesis or argument, the descriptions of housing, etc., become a simple laundry list, checked off for each chronological period. Nor is this problem addressed in other ways. Abbott has no introductory or conclusive remarks in any chapter. The introduction to the book is less than three pages, and the conclusion is a list of predictions about the problems of families in the future rather than a summary of the major themes of the book.

In addition to the perceived needs of a popular audience, I suspect one reason for this lack is that the publisher insisted on a short manuscript. I understand that publishers want to keep books at reasonable costs, but they must stop insisting that every book be extremely brief. Some topics require more thorough treatment, and readers need more signposting than subheadings with clever names (yes, even in popular histories). Publishers are not doing the public or academia any favors by eliminating much of what makes social history books valuable and easy to read, including clear arguments, introductions and conclusions, and engagement with other historians.

In addition, Routledge’s editing leaves something to be desired. In one five-page spread, the text has two comma splices (p. 66), a misplaced semi-colon (p. 66), a missing plural (p. 70), and an omitted word (p. 71). Two sections of page 16, one at the top and one in the middle of the second paragraph, apparently have words or lines missing, since the juxtaposition of the sentences makes no sense. Though this level of carelessness was not typical, the errors need to be corrected in any future editions. Small errors of fact have also crept in. For instance, Joe Ackerley’s book about his father is called *My Father and I* in the text (p. 14) and *My Father and Myself* in the list of readings on page 20 (the latter is correct). The text can also be repetitive. Abbott describes two different women as surprised that one of the housemaid’s jobs is to put toothpaste on toothbrushes (Mrs. McAlpine in the late 1920s and Bronwen Astor in 1960, pp. 48 and 138). In the same way, she mentions the marriage of Diana and Charles twice, describing them in very similar language: “The fairytale ... had a sour ending” (p. 148) and “The fairytale royal wedding ... had a sour, sad sequel” (p. 176). A good editor could have helped rid the text of these minor faults.

Family Affairs may well appeal to a broad, general audience, since its anecdotal approach is more accessi-

ble than demographic studies or jargon-filled arguments. When she makes a broader point, Abbott is convincing, and she has read enough biographies, memoirs, newspapers, and magazines to give a basic outline of the family saga of last century. However, I would not recommend this book for classroom use, because students will find it hard to discern the point or to prioritize the reasons for historical change. Specialists will not find much that they did not already know, and the spotty coverage of many issues means that it is not really a reference work either. In short, Abbott has done a great deal of research, but this book does not express the depth of her knowledge or insights as effectively as it might, particularly for an academic audience.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Ginger Frost. Review of Abbott, Mary, *Family Affairs: A History of the Family in 20th Century England*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10588>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.