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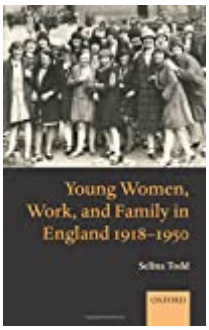

Selina Todd. *Young Women, Work, and Family in England, 1918-1950.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. x + 230 pp. $99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-928275-3.

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Growing Up Working-Class in Mid-Twentieth-Century England

From the end of the First World War until the early 1950s, two images of young working-class women predominated in English cultural discourses. On the one hand there was the Lancashire mill-girl dressed in shawl and clogs. Set against this was the modern, young woman who modeled her appearance on Hollywood film stars. These representations have remained relatively static in much historiography of the period until recent interventions, such as Selina Todd's study, have explored the reality that lay behind such stereotypes. *Young Women, Work and Family in England, 1918-1950* continues the work of historians who have sought to rescue young working-class women from invisibility and, at the same time, to assert the significance of this group as agents of change in early-twentieth-century England.[1] The study draws on contemporary census data, official reports and records, social surveys, and oral testimony. This is an eminently readable and timely study that should be widely read by social and economic historians, not only those who concern themselves with English society, but also those whose interests lie elsewhere.

Todd goes beyond simply recovering the lives of a specific social group at a particular historical moment. Her analysis has a much broader focus which is to show the centrality of employment opportunities and the workplace in the wider experience of young working-class girls. In turn, she argues that family and leisure opportunities influenced, but did not determine, the kinds of work that young women aspired or expected to undertake. The central argument of the study is that young women's relationships within the family and their access to leisure were profoundly shaped by their developing role as wage-earners, whilst this role as wage-earners was just as equally shaped by changes in family politics and economics, and increasing opportunities for leisure-time consumer activities. Young working-class women were frequently seen as emblems of (a sometimes despised) modernity. They frequented the public places of urban England, enjoying their leisure time at the newly established cinemas and dance halls, or walking and talking with friends in shops, on the street and in public parks. As such they were increasingly visible and sometimes provoked criticism from middle-class commentators and officialdom. Todd argues that their perceived modernity was a consequence of their emerging role as

wage-earning citizens whose labor was to become increasingly crucial in a modernized economy.

Todd argues that the young woman worker in England has previously fallen "between two historiographical stools": on the one hand, studies of the paid work of married women and men, on the other studies of "women's and young people's social and domestic lives" (p. 2). Her study brings together these two strands by examining what happens when the lives of young women are scrutinized through the lens of their employment. This approach yields new and significant insights into the experience of young women in England in the first half of the twentieth century. Equally importantly, it challenges historiographical methodologies that separate work and domesticity, and assigns these along gender lines. Todd argues convincingly that any examination of the lives of young women (and by definition other groups) requires a holistic approach that explores the, always symbiotic, relationship between employment opportunities; workplace relationships; family economies, both emotional and economic; access to leisure, and aspiration and expectation.

Young Women, Work and Family in England, 1918-1950 begins with an overview of the employment opportunities open to young women after the First World War. Todd argues that the period between the end of the First World War and the end of the Second was significantly transitional for young women. Residential domestic service, which until the 1940s was the largest employer of young women, was in gradual decline from the end of the nineteenth century. Employment opportunities increased with technological developments and structural shifts in the economic base. These new opportunities included factory, office and retailing jobs that enabled young women to reject domestic service in favor of paid work that was structured around the industrialized working day rather than the whims of individual employers. Although these new employments continued to be characterized by low pay, lack of security and limited promotion opportunities, they did offer young women some financial independence and some leisure time in the period between leaving school and marriage.

The ways in which financial independence and access to increased leisure opportunities were negotiated by young women in the context of family obligations and gendered attitudes was, Todd argues, the result of a variety of factors. Age was one: among young women, those who were older might receive more pocket money after "tipping up" their wages than those women who had just left school. Again, however, as Todd shows, this could be as dependent on locality and regional custom as age. Furthermore, the economic position of the family–whether the father was employed or not, what other income was coming in–influenced the amount of pocket money a daughter might receive. Equally, boys might be allowed more money for leisure or might be able to escape domestic obligations because of gendered attitudes to the respective roles of men and women. Sometimes, as her evidence demonstrates, position in family, the emotional ties between mother and daughter and the desires of young women themselves could shape the extent to which young women felt able to assert a degree of financial independence. That such possibilities were open to them is a challenge to the belief that young women had little room for maneuver and were, in the words of contemporary commentators, "generally apathetic." Todd's study refutes such notions, showing how, in the workplace as much as in the home, "women clearly attempted to negotiate relationships with employers, often in subtle and covert ways" as well as through militant action and trade unionism (p. 165).

I have only one minor quibble and that is that I would have welcomed more detailed examination of some of the oral accounts. Quotes were often used to illustrate points made and were often out of context from the overall life story of the women quoted. However, this is as much my desire to know more about the lives of the women discussed: the study did not claim to be an oral history and was not drawing on interviews undertaken by the author. This is an engaging and timely study that draws on a variety of relevant sources. It challenges historians to pay more attention to young women's paid employment. Such scrutiny, Todd believes, "could offer insights into how far and how fast the postwar welfare state and the rise in married women's work reduced the economic importance of young wage-earners for their households and altered the wider experience of youth" (p. 230). Overall I found the study interesting and thought-provoking and would recommend it to those interested in a wide variety of twentieth-century social history topics both in England and elsewhere.

Note

[1]. For example, Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty* (London: Pandora, 1989); and Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

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