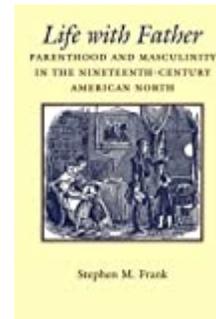




**Stephen M. Frank.** *Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century American North.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. x + 240 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5855-0.



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Yes, there was domestic life with father in northern middle-class families of the nineteenth century. Stephen Frank challenges the notion that Victorian patriarchs withdrew into the masculine sphere of business and public life, leaving child rearing exclusively to mothers ensconced within a domestic sphere where men were strangers. Since, as Frank notes, recent historians have already modified the mutually exclusive dichotomies of earlier writing on gendered spheres, his book's strength lies not in this challenge to those dichotomies but rather in the nuanced discussion of men's domestic involvements that follows.

Focusing on the native-stock middle class, Frank defines it broadly. Despite the sociological tradition of including farmers within the middle class, however, his attempt to trace a single (albeit changing) tradition of fatherhood in both rural and urban settings proves cumbersome. Frank notes so many differences between farm and nonfarm fatherhood that an exposition built around two divergent styles might have been clearer. Basically, his story centers on the urban middle and upper-middle classes.

Though nineteenth-century advice writers initially celebrated motherhood to the virtual exclusion of fathers, by the 1830s authors also advocated Christian fatherhood. Of course fathers had above all to func-

tion as good providers, but they also faced increasing adjuration to be loving spouses, support their wives' moral training of the children, and help educate their offspring. Writers urged fathers to play with young children. Increasingly, the balance shifted from the duties of fatherhood to its benefits. Post-Civil War writers de-emphasized what fathers could do for children and instead praised fatherhood as vital to achieve mature manliness. Noting Anthony Rotundo's view that the "primitive," chest-thumping style of late-nineteenth-century masculinity rendered domesticity incompatible with true manhood, Frank asserts that countervailing rhetoric in celebration of fatherhood trumpeted paternal domesticity as proof of virility.[1] Frank also modifies Robert Griswold's chronology, which dates the emergence of "therapeutic" views of fatherhood after 1900, whereas Frank finds numerous assertions of fatherhood's benefits for men in the second half of the nineteenth century.[2] Frank further reconfigures the chronology of change by arguing that the spread of a "commercial economy" (p. 57), rural as well as urban, was what reduced fathers' time with their families, rather than the shift from farm to urban-industrial life. Indeed, (somewhat blurring his class focus) he asserts that poor farmers of the early nineteenth century spent more time away from home, on extended migrations in search of income, than did later members of the urban middling class. As Frank acknowl-

edges, though, time spent at home measured involvement poorly; an exhausted farmer staring at the fire differed from an office worker playing with his toddlers on the carpet. Frank is commendably open about his sources' limitations. Teenage diaries, grown children's reminiscences of their parents, and letters from absent fathers fill in emotional context; but such documents overrepresent the well-to-do; except for the first, they downplay conflict; and all but the last miss early childhood. What increased most clearly over the course of the nineteenth century, Frank believes, was not the amount of time spent but the *expectation* of togetherness. In the evening and especially on Sunday and the great family holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas, father was expected to be involved. And he commonly was, his presence gaining ritual significance precisely because it was not constant. Thus modern fatherhood emerged, as a part-time occupation, during the nineteenth century.

Furthering his contention that fathers were not aloof patriarchs, Frank reinforces Karen Lystra's portrait of loving, companionate nineteenth-century courtships and marriages. Breadwinning took precedence, but fathers stayed close at childbirth, though more as supportive husbands than as fathers.

As disciplinarians, Frank believes that middle-class fathers ceded primacy to their wives and that typically neither parent made much use of physical punishment. Although he rightly rejects Philip Greven's charges of pervasive brutality, a penchant for seeing the best in fathers may lead him astray. In reading "autobiographies and personal papers of ninety-four individuals who grew up in the nineteenth century," Frank found only two "accounts of corporal punishment" by fathers and two by mothers (p. 119). Yet Elizabeth Pleck, also using autobiographies, judged hitting and whipping quite common in the nineteenth century, while my own use of oral histories finds corporal punishment (by fathers and mothers about equally) more common than not in the years 1900-1920.[3]

More convincingly, Frank shows that fathers played with small children throughout the century, although this play typically subsided when children reached age six or seven and was often forgotten by them, leaving an "emotional gap" (p. 133), especially between fathers and sons. For the fathers, as home became a utopian retreat from pressured commercial and professional work, "frolics" with the children offered refreshment and license for open sentimentality. Here farmers fade from view. As Frank recognizes, home and work stayed coupled on

the farm. The playful father was a creation of the urban middle-class family.

With older children, especially sons, the father's obligation to model and inculcate successful behavior fostered tension, Frank believes. Some urban fathers expected trophy accomplishments from daughters, such as high grades in school, and some farmers demanded field work; but many daughters of the urban middle class remembered their fathers as indulgent. Though fathers reinforced standard gender roles and commonly tried to control courting practices, most deferred to their daughter's choice of spouse, and typical father-daughter relations remained affectionate. Dealing with sons was harder; and as with play, the work demands of the farm family economy strikingly differentiated farm fathers' relationships with their sons from those among the non-farm middle class. Farmers believed their sons were obligated to labor-heavy chores when young, long days when older.[4] Under virtual contract to work until age twenty-one, sons grew resentful if fathers quashed their educational ambitions and were doubly angered if their father failed to help launch them economically when they reached their majority. By contrast, as early as the 1830s, providing extended education for his children came to seem an urban middle-class father's duty. Unlike the son's debt of service to his farmer father, the burden now fell upon the father to prepare his son to win success in an uncertain economy. Ironically, the son's resulting sense of obligation created strains different from those between farmers and their sons but also capable of chilling affection.

Frank's portrayal of relationships with older children is subtle and sometimes moving. Yet the overarching argument might have been clearer if he had emphasized from the start that the family economy fundamentally differentiated farm fatherhood from that of the urban middle class. As Frank observes in his conclusion, "willingness to work hard for the sake of a child's education and life chances became a way that middle-class urban fathers distinguished themselves from bachelors ... and working-class fathers" (p. 176). But this self-sacrifice also distinguished them from farmers, who perforce worked their children early and hard: "Modern fatherhood emerged, in short, as part of the nineteenth-century consolidation of middle-class identity" (p. 176). This is well said, and having demonstrated that farm fathers do not fit, Frank might well emphasize that his story leaves them behind.

This is not a comprehensive history of fatherhood in

the nineteenth-century North; the urban working class and rural poor did not leave the necessary diaries and memoirs, and even more prosperous farmers fit uncomfortably into a narrative centered on a distinctly non-farm middle class. But within those limits this is a well researched, engagingly written, and convincing demonstration that a version of modern fatherhood, akin to twentieth-century fatherhood before the rise of postwar feminism, actually emerged well back in the nineteenth century. And the narrative and argument are far more subtle and astute than a summary can suggest.

#### Notes

[1]. E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 262-63.

[2]. Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 6, 88-91. Griswold hedges his chronology, noting nineteenth-century precursors of these views. *Ibid.*, 93.

[3]. Frank recognizes that reticence and loss or repression of early childhood memories may distort the count. See Philip Greven, *Spare the Child: The Religious*

*Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Elizabeth Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of Social Policy against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 206-11; David I. Macleod, *The Age of the Child: Children in America, 1890-1920* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 56-60. Unlike autobiographies, the oral histories on which I draw often included direct questioning about childhood discipline. They overrepresent midwestern farm children, but Frank includes farm fathers. Though the period is slightly later than Frank's, it is unlikely that disciplinary practices had suddenly harshened.

[4]. Frank notes that the "father's authority" (p. 144) descended especially heavily at age fourteen, but he may underestimate earlier labor demands. Cf. Macleod, *Age of the Child*, 69-71, 101-6.

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