

Public Lives: Women, Family and Society in Victorian Britain

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Public Lives: Women, Family and Society in Victorian Britain by Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair is a meticulously researched study of the lives of middle-class families in Glasgow. In particular, they focus upon the residents of twelve streets drawn from the Claremont/Woodside/Woodlands estates, situated west of the city centre. This seemingly narrow sample nonetheless provides the authors with a wealth of material with which to illustrate the heterogeneity of the middle-class experience and its diverse socio-economic make-up.

The main strength of the book lies in the manner in which the authors have exploited to the full the opportunities provided by ESRC funding. Their exhaustive compilation and interpretation of statistical information, painstakingly collated from census returns, inventories, wills, marriage contracts, valuation rolls and the like is genuinely impressive. It allows them to uncover a number of striking demographic patterns that will do much to illuminate our understanding of the dynamics of middle-class households. Thus they reveal that, in their sample, only half of the households in 1851 conform to the 'standard bourgeois model of a male-headed nuclear unit'. By 1891, only just over a third of households could be classified as such (p. 36). Indeed, they assert that, by that date, forty per cent of all households were headed by women (p. 169). Moreover, they discover that throughout the period, between 30 and 38 per cent of single men over the age of 30 lived in a female-headed household (p. 170). They explain that 'Whilst there are some examples of the "classic" situation of sister keeping house for brother, there are also counter-examples of brothers living in households headed by their sisters' (p. 43). Furthermore, their figures suggest (and here they are referring to spinsters over the age of 30) that 'A majority of daughters and sisters lived in *female*-headed households, and were not the social dependants of men' (p. 177).

These examples are suggestive of the diverse ways in which women may have conceptualised their domestic identities. The household could be the site of autonomy and independence for women. As the authors note, 'it is salutary to remember that wives comprised a minority of adult women' (p. 232). Equally compelling are their findings concerning the intricate nature of family networks that comprised the local neighbourhoods. Such evidence should assist in reconceptualising the significance of community and neighbourhood for Victorian middle-class women and shed new light on the complex contours of social relations in the urban environment.

Occasionally, the restrictions of Gordon's and Nair's sample become apparent. For example, in their determination to prove that the image of the aged, impoverished spinster is an exaggerated stereotype, they note that 'those who remained in our area were not living in absolute poverty' (p. 197). While they acknowledge that some women may have been 'forced to leave the area to live more cheaply elsewhere', they do not allow this qualification to override their substantive point. Obviously, by selecting a solidly middle-class sample area, they are unlikely to find people living in 'absolute poverty', and so the logic appears rather strained. Also, much of their discussion tends to cluster in the mid-Victorian period (where, indeed, the authors appear to be most at home). Greater attention to both the 1830s and 1840s and post-1895 years would have been most welcome. However, such minor quibbles should not detract from the broader achievements of these statistical surveys.

One of the reasons why this part of their book is largely successful is that it is able to appeal to both a general and a specialist audience. Through the judicious use of vignettes they are able to bring this discussion to life and thus combine statistical analysis with highly effective illustrations of how such trends impacted upon the lives of individuals. Certainly there appears to be a concerted effort to package the book so as to widen its appeal among a general audience. Many of its chapter headings are drawn from pop songs ('It's a family affair', 'What's love got to do with it?', 'I will survive'). Similarly the nature of many of the book's arguments appears to be designed to capitalise on popular interest in women's history (it shares the same publisher as Amanda Vickery's *The Gentleman's Daughter*). This is particularly apparent in its broader aim of exposing what the authors refer to as 'the many stereotypes about Victorian women and their families'. Here they are on trickier terrain, and the project of writing for a diverse audience begins to stumble somewhat. According to Nair and Gordon these stereotypes are diverse and ubiquitous. Indeed, the book reads, at times, as a litany of such images: 'It is rare for the adjective "Victorian" to be used other than pejoratively', they proclaim on the first page. Elsewhere they complain of the 'commonly held view of Victorian prudery' (p. 126), and at another point bemoan the fact that 'Too often the Victorians have been portrayed as obsessed by appearances and ritual' (p. 117). Similar statements are peppered throughout the text, including the rather bizarre claim that 'the nineteenth century is frequently depicted as a time when love conquered all' (p. 71) (a point which is substantiated only by reference to Lawrence Stone's work on the early modern period).

Where do all these stereotypes come from? The authors claim that ‘In large part we have derived our (i.e., the reading public’s) view of the Victorian home from the prescriptive literature of the period’ (p. 107). Certainly they frequently evoke ‘prescriptive literature’ as the source of common misconceptions of the Victorian family (see pp. 58, 71, 89, 134-5). Yet, the book is lacking in any detailed or systematic discussion of such literature. At one point the authors make rather vague reference to ‘Enlightenment thinkers’ (p. 71) and the only prescriptive text to which they refer (although it does not appear in the bibliography) is Lord Kames’s *Loose hints upon education chiefly concerning the culture of the heart*. As this text was published in 1781, and was primarily directed towards upper-class women, it is hard to trace its relevance for the Victorian middle class. The only contemporary source that the authors cite in this regard is the *Waverley Journal* – but as a reforming, proto-feminist periodical this can hardly be said to represent ‘prescriptive literature’. A study of the wide range of genres and approaches that comprise what we might loosely term ‘prescriptive literature’ would have been extremely helpful to Gordon’s and Nair’s discussion. As recent scholarship has suggested, works such as the advice literature to women authored by the likes of Sarah Ellis and Sarah Lewis actually articulated far more complicated, expansive and unpredictable views on women’s role and domestic ideology than Gordon and Nair suppose.

A further, related, problem in constructing a book around such stereotypes is that the analytical framework established in such a strategy is simply too unnuanced to allow for consistently arresting arguments. The result is that the authors too often fall back upon self-evident truisms to structure their work. As they put it in their conclusion: ‘Domestic ideology, then, did not have the effect of isolating nuclear families in “fortress” homes, nor of stripping them of close association with the extended family. Neither did it inevitably elevate the status of the “man of the house” to that of demi-god’ (p. 233). Who, in fact, has ever claimed that the Victorian male was endowed with quasi-divine status, or that the Victorian family was ‘stripped’ of contact with its wider kin? Moreover, as historians we all now know, *surely*, that Victorian middle-class women were not ‘debilitated and virtually housebound’ (p. 221). Consequently many of Gordon’s and Nair’s discussions are lively and engaging but should be seen as amplifying and extending existing insights, rather than as offering new interpretations. For example, given the richness of recent and emerging scholarship on women’s business and economic opportunities (think of the work of Penelope Lane, Margot Finn or Alastair Owens, or the raft of recent PhD dissertations by such historians as Christina de Bellaigue, Nicola Pullin and Christine Wiskin), it is not surprising to learn that women of the Glaswegian middle class could exert considerable financial agency (although it is certainly useful to have these patterns more fully explored with reference to Victorian Scotland.)

In their handling of the ‘separate spheres’ debate these issues become more telling. Here the authors follow much recent scholarship in arguing that ‘The discourse of separate spheres, while powerful, is not sufficient to explain how middle-class women’s experience was shaped and their identities constructed’ (p. 7). Such an approach has been so repeatedly considered, debated and exemplified over the last fifteen years that their arguments in this regard are unsurprising and somewhat predictable. Furthermore, although they rightly point out that the ideology of separate spheres was not ‘a simple spatial contrast between a domestic and non-domestic setting’ (p. 200), much of their argument assumes just such a dichotomy. They use the fact that women enjoyed dancing and visiting to argue that they ‘went out into a world whose horizons ... were far wider than those suggested by the discourse of separate spheres’ (p. 202). It was disappointing to find that the analysis collapsed back into such a level of argument. Of course Victorian women went out: has anyone ever seriously argued that they were actually in a state of purdah? Now that historiographical debate on these matters has reached such a mature state of affairs it would have been rewarding to see the issue of separate spheres considered at a more sophisticated level, perhaps through analysing the ways in which this language might have helped to structure identities and perceptions in more delicately-negotiated processes of social practice.

If many of their arguments appear to be knocking on a door that has already been flung open, Gordon and Nair suggest that their particular contribution is to consider that the attention paid to gendered identities in recent years has been at the expense of analysing the common stock of values upon which both men and women drew. The ‘middle-classness’ of women, they assert, ‘is often underestimated as a formative

influence on their identity' (pp. 4-5). In this the authors may be situated within a broader historical trend that is seeking to investigate more precisely how gender may be conceptualised as but one factor in the matrix of identity. While their insistence that the gendered nature of domestic space has been greatly exaggerated is a sensible contribution to the debate, I was not fully convinced that their broader arguments were sufficiently finely-tuned to further this project. For Gordon and Nair it appears to amount to recapturing the importance of middle-class values such as 'liberalism', 'Christian duty' and 'Protestant values of moral responsibility' in analysing the subjectivities of middle-class women. If I have read them correctly, then, I find this a little puzzling. There are very few studies of middle-class women, I would venture, that have not taken such values as an absolute given in their evaluation of female identity (not least given the extensive literature devoted to such themes as women and philanthropy, missionary work and religious engagement).

Nonetheless, there are muted hints that the authors might have been tempted to cross more innovative conceptual terrain. Their footnotes to the introduction include a citation to Terry Lovell's excellent essay on the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu.⁽¹⁾ The potential implications of Lovell's insights are not elaborated in the text, but Lovell's feminist reading of Bourdieu is highly suggestive as to the ways in which notions of class and gender may intersect, shift and complicate one another. It would have been instructive to see how Gordon and Nair might have developed such ideas with greater precision and intricacy in the course of their analysis.

The absence of a fully-developed theoretical framework is also apparent in the blunt distinction that is drawn throughout between the 'discursive' and the 'material'. They note, for example, that 'Middle-class mothers were not simply the products of domestic discourses' (p. 147), arguing further that 'the material context means that some things are not shaped by discourse alone' (p. 235). There is little sense here of the mutually constituted nature of agents' material and discursive experience. Discursive identities emerge in this work as curiously detached and abstract, rather than as rooted within a complex web of practice, experience and ideology. They are presented almost as goods on a supermarket shelf – women can simply choose the one that most appeals, Gordon and Nair writing of a repertoire of discourses on which men and women could draw. A more satisfying analysis might have probed more deeply to consider the ways in which individual subjectivities were constructed and how different kinds of identity formation were made possible. What constraints, influences and resistances led women to privilege one particular construction of femininity over another?

These criticisms perhaps stem from the inevitable difficulties associated with attempting to pitch a book at both a specialist and a general audience. While the general reader might occasionally be a little perturbed by such phrases as, 'the occupation of space may have been diachronically gendered' (p. 125), on the whole (for this reader at least) the pendulum swung too far in the opposite direction. There are many points in the book where the authors' desire to state the obvious mars what might otherwise have been delightful and fresh descriptions of Victorian family life. Do we really need to be told that 'When not in each other's company family members would correspond' (p. 56), or that families who lived close enough to one another would have paid short, rather than extended visits to each others' homes? (p. 56). At times this style of writing can be distinctly unhelpful. I am sure that many hackles will be raised by their assertion that, 'Inasmuch as she (the Victorian mother) was a slave to her children, she would be a more than willing one' (p. 145). This is not to detract from the purpose of catering for multiple audiences *per se*. However, I think it is a project of enormous difficulty, and one that requires subtle analytical sophistication and exquisite prose if it is truly to engage and convince such a broad constituency.

To conclude, this is a book that will do much to inform and entertain – not least because it succeeds so well in bringing its subjects to life. Specialist readers may find themselves underwhelmed by the conceptual and interpretative bases of the book, but it will bring further evidence to bear on the ongoing re-evaluation of gendered identities in this period, as well as offering some intriguing glimpses into the highly variable nature of Victorian middle-class domestic life.

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Notes

1. T. Lovell, 'Thinking feminism with and against Bourdieu', in *Reading Bourdieu on Society and Culture*, ed. B. Fowler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000), 27-48.[Back to \(1\)](#)

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