

*Chapter 5*

GRANDFATHERS, GRANDMOTHERS AND  
THE INHERITANCE OF PARENTHOOD IN  
ENGLAND, C. 1850–1914

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An unprecedented proportion of fathers and mothers in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century England were raising children in the company of their own parents. This experience was becoming more common with each generation from the final quarter of the nineteenth century, as life expectancy rose and child-bearing became increasingly concentrated early in marriage (Anderson 1999). Yet older women and especially older men are conspicuous by their absence from much of what we know about the lives of fathers, mothers and their young children in these decades. This chapter explores how age, gender, place and class intersected in the passing-on of practices of parenthood within these multi-generational families. The analysis suggests that these relationships mattered in fundamental and multiple ways, but that working-class men's and women's evaluations of their own – and others' – parenthood were always centred on moral judgements about selfless adulthood. Not only did the presence of these men and women in later life have a lasting impact on the subjectivities of their children, and especially grandchildren, but grandparents' relationships with younger generations both sustained and fractured the socio-economic inequalities in whose shadows families were being formed.

There is a rich and long-standing literature on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British families. Over the last twenty years studies have built on the foundational research on the nuclear family and marital relationships by emphasizing four key characteristics: the presence and significance of wider networks of kin and ‘friendship’ (Davidoff 2012; Marcus 2007); the tensions, ambivalences and inequalities, especially of gender, at the heart of all familial relations (Clark 1995; Hammerton 1992); the emotional depth of familial and domestic intimacy as an integral part of masculinity as well as femininity (Roper 2009; Strange 2015; Tosh 1999); and the largely unproblematic gap with which men and women lived, between the moral principles that they often expressed vocally and the practices through which they lived their messy, contingent lives (Cohen 2013; Thane and Evans 2012). Research across the social sciences is increasingly demonstrating the significance of grandparents to the well-being of families (Chan and Boliver 2013; Long and Ferrie 2012), while historians have revealed some of the material and emotional importance of older men and women through analysing the autobiographical accounts of their grandchildren (Humphries 2011; Thane 2000; Thane 2010; Thompson, Irzin and Abendstern 1991). This chapter builds on this work by opening up some of the roles, practices and meanings of lifelong multigenerational parenthood as older men and women shaped the circumstances under which their children were growing to become parents.

Grandparenthood is approached here through a deeply contextualized, comparative study of three large contrasting localities in England. This allows us to consider – rather than to assume – which aspects of the multigenerational transmission of practices and values in raising children were peculiar to a particular place, class or gender, which patterns were common across England, and how this came to be so. The first locality, Bromley, was a small market town in agricultural Kent that, with the arrival of the railway from the 1850s, became only a twenty-minute train journey from London. The district attracted many comfortably prosperous families who lived in newly-built and increasingly suburban villas. In common with middle-class couples throughout England, these men and women substantially reduced their family size from at least the 1870s. This is compared to two localities that were dominated by working-class populations and norms. The town of Burnley in Lancashire grew around its cotton-weaving mills, which provided unusually well-paid opportunities for female and child employment. Many couples were unusual amongst the working class in reducing their fertility

from the 1870s. The third locality is Auckland in County Durham, where male employment was dominated by coal mining and heavy industry. There was little female employment available and average family size remained high until the First World War.

In the decades before 1914, it was rare for non-elite adult men or women to have the time or inclination to write about their families. Even if they had wished to, older generations often lacked the written literacy to do so. This means that the sources that allow historians to begin to consider how everyday working-class parenthood was practised and transmitted are inevitably patchy in their survival and often ambiguous in their meanings. This ambiguity is partly the result of having to read sources ‘against the grain’ from which they were formed more than a century ago: accounts that people offered to answer one set of questions are used to illuminate our own quite different ones; descriptions of the exceptional are used to interpret what was normal; and the narratives imposed by those with the authority to record and investigate cannot be assumed to be shared by those they sought to regulate (Samuel 1975: xiv–xviii; Peel 2012: 1–20). This chapter adopts this fragmentary approach so as to include something of the ineloquent and the mundane that suffused these most intimate relationships with meaning, significance and tension. Most of the sources considered emerge from the concerns of the state: through accounts of criminal court cases, through inquests that were reported in local newspapers and through the households listed in decennial census enumerators’ books. It should be noted that this focus on everyday practice recorded in state records allows us to examine the vast majority of the population, who were working class and therefore subject to state investigation and regulation in these decades. It neglects the most elite ten per cent of the population who seldom appeared in these records, but who more frequently and eloquently wrote about their familial relations in sources that were published and archived (Cohen 2013; Davidoff 2012). Insights from these state-authored sources are contextualized through comparison with the ways in which grandparenthood was recorded in published texts to which some of these men and women had access, as well as in the autobiographical narratives that people occasionally constructed from memory in later life, sometimes in published forms.

In exploring the inheritance of reproductive cultures, this chapter is structured around the two most widely used cultural tropes of grandparenthood. First, the extent to which child-rearing practices and values were divided generationally is examined, revealing

the power of cross-generational judgements about moral character. Second, the inequalities upon which these intergenerational relations were founded, but by which they were also fractured, are explored. This suggests the significance of the intergenerational transmission of practices of care between grandparents and grandchildren.

## **The War against the Practices of the Older Generation?**

Middle-class advice writers constructed a novel generational narrative of how the transmission of parenthood was changing across the English-speaking world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Writers were ever more definite that they had identified a shift from a 'traditional' culture in which daughters learnt from, and sustained in adulthood, the practices of their mothers, to a self-consciously 'modern' outlook of contemporary young mothers who rejected the expertise of the older generation of women. Doctors were the most vocal exponents of this perceived shift. Dr George Smith's advice manual, *How to Feed a Baby* of 1907, was typical in opening by stating:

I am aware that books on this subject are looked upon with considerable prejudice by some mothers as interfering with their prerogatives, handed down from mother to daughter, generation to generation ... Their knowledge on the subject of infant feeding has until late never been questioned, but now war is being declared against the old, the time-accepted, and the prejudiced. The difficulty the young mother has in many cases to overcome is the advice tendered by her own mother and others. And what presumption lies in such advice given by a mother who has probably lost one or perhaps several children during infancy, whom nature intended, but fate forbade, to live! (1907: 4)

The 'war' against the ignorant, the superstitious and the dangerous was presented as a project of modernity, which was widely proclaimed in such elite-authored texts to be a generational phenomenon. Persuasive evidence – both personal and statistical – for the fewer children that 'modern' parents buried in infancy seemed to support this narrative of the shift away from the child-care practices of their presumptively advice-giving mothers. The rise of scientific infant care and the increasingly burdensome forms of working-class motherhood that it prescribed have been studied

extensively (Lewis 1980; Ross 1993; Wright 1988). Yet the relationship between this story of generational change and everyday practice within multigenerational families is far from clear. Grandfathers are notably absent in such didactic accounts, and how grandmothers responded to the younger generation of parents' supposed condemnation of the knowledge founded in their experience is not known. Further, it is apparent that what change there was in understandings of expertise and authority was slow. Post-war sociologists and subsequent analyses of oral history testimonies have concurred in arguing that mothers shifted towards placing greater trust in state-legitimated 'expert' advice only after the Second World War (Beier 2008; Davis 2012).

The fragments of working-class family life analysed here suggest that, in contrast to the narratives in advice manuals, generational conflict over child-rearing practices was rare throughout the period 1850–1914. It is difficult to substantiate this claim strongly since it is founded on the absence of evidence. Disagreements between husbands and wives about feeding, looking after, spending money on, schooling, disciplining or providing medical care for children are commonplace in surviving records. Yet generational differences in practices or attitudes to parenthood were seldom articulated as an issue that divided these three-generational families. As a result of the increased concern about infant mortality and the 'neglectful', 'ignorant' care that infants received, local authorities were increasingly active in the early twentieth century in bringing prosecutions against those who they believed were responsible for damaging the health or causing the death of a child. The records of court cases in which children became ill while in the care of a grandparent would be obvious contexts in which family members or expert witnesses had the opportunity to blame older generations' outdated, unscientific or inappropriate knowledge for the child's death. Yet in all of the cases where grandparents were mentioned in court, this attitude was never expressed. This was not because there were no attempts to allocate responsibility or because witnesses were loath to pass judgements on others' capabilities, as the following cases from Burnley in Lancashire indicate.

In contrast to the other studied localities, local philanthropic and state institutions in Burnley had been unusually vigilant in investigating and prosecuting cases of child neglect from the 1860s. The introduction of the 1908 Children Act across England and Wales established new offences with which parents, who were thought to be failing to provide adequate care, could be charged, including

through the absence of a fireguard (Hendrick 1994). On Good Friday 1909, Thomas Naylor, a labourer in a warehouse, went on a bank holiday outing to Blackpool, returning in the early hours of the morning. His wife had died two years earlier (B.M.D. 1907), so he was bringing up five children, aged between two and twelve years, alone. His mother, Margaret Naylor, aged around fifty-four and also living in the town, 'kept house for her son' that day while he went to the seaside resort. The verb used – to keep house – reveals the way in which this role was normatively interpreted. It was primarily about the complex labour of sustaining all the parts of a household – to metaphorically as well as practically keep a fire burning in the hearth of the four-roomed home – rather than being centred on the provision of specifically feminized, individualized childcare. This also highlights the need to explore how intergenerational interaction was gendered rather than to assume that mother-daughter bonds mattered most. Demographic circumstances in these decades made it practically necessary to mobilize intergenerational duties and companionship that crossed genders. In spite of a slowly increasing adult life expectancy from the late nineteenth century, families rarely had a choice about which grandparent to form a close relationship with. It was not until the interwar years that a grandmother who had followed a demographically average life course would expect to live to meet all of her grandchildren (Anderson 1999: 53), and it took longer for a grandfather, on average, to live to do this. The opportunity for most working-class families to rely on mother-daughter bonds in post-war Britain (Young and Willmott 1957) was thus a recent historical phenomenon, the product of transformative demographic change, not a feature of 'traditional' working-class 'community'.

Margaret Naylor's three older grandchildren took themselves out for a day trip, but while Margaret was lying down upstairs, three-year-old Florence fell in the fire and later died of her burns. At the inquest, Margaret was subject to intense questioning as to why she had allowed her granddaughter to fall in the fire, but the explanations that she, her son, the neighbours and the coroner sought to offer all related to her moral qualities and especially whether or not it was drunkenness that had prompted her to go to bed. No reported interest was shown in whether or not the grandmother was practically capable of looking after the children (when sober or drunk), her age or experience, or whether she understood recent child protection laws. While the coroner painted the fact that she had drunk a 'share of two pints at dinner time' as 'disgraceful' and suggested

that she had a reputation for drunkenness, her son defended her character. When asked ‘Has your mother been in the habit of taking drink?’, he replied, ‘No, but she likes her glass like anybody else. We can’t get drink off £1 a week.’ It was a judgement based on the moral character of the older woman, rather than her knowledge, which the authorities believed determined whether or not she was capable of providing childcare. In responding to this allegation and seeking to defend his mother, Thomas similarly did not emphasize her specific earlier experience in having raised her own family, but sought to present his mother as just ‘like anybody else’ in her habits. He resisted the gendering of moral virtues by instead speaking of the prized companionship that ‘anybody’ enjoyed through alcohol and the shared predicaments of chronic poverty that the ‘we’ of mother and son experienced.

Interestingly, although reported more briefly in the *Burnley Gazette* (24 April 1909: 8, 8 May 1909: 2), presumably because it was thought to be less sensationally interesting to readers, it was also the morality of providing care that was used to attack Thomas’s failures in his paternal role. It was alleged that ‘if the father could afford to go to Blackpool he should have taken reasonable care to provide something to protect children from fire’. As a relatively new form of popular leisure activity, trips to seaside resorts by groups of young bachelors were an accepted part of growing to working-class manhood, but this sort of leisure activity was more morally dubious when enjoyed by poor lone fathers. Good childcare – whether by men or women, parents or grandparents – was not about what carers knew or even how they practised it, but about the lax moral conscience that led them away from being attentive and selfless towards the children in their care. Perhaps partly as a result of their awareness of the dominance of this moral interpretation of the raising of children, both father and grandmother were reported as articulating to the courts the impact that the tragedy had on them. This was expressed by the father by his need to tell of his purchase of a fireguard within a day of his daughter’s death and by the grandmother through her description of her ‘deep sorrow’. Although a verdict of accidental death was recorded, the local authorities were not persuaded by the argument that Florence’s death was an accident for which no one was culpable, so successfully prosecuted both the father and grandmother for neglect under the 1908 Children Act. Each pleaded guilty and was fined ten shillings – half of Thomas’s estimate of his weekly household income. Within four months of this verdict, Thomas got married again to a younger woman and

Margaret died soon afterwards (B.M.D. 1907, 1909, 1911; Census 1901, 1911). At the most superficial level, this was a court case about how quickly those who cared for children responded to new, technologically modern, expert-driven and state-legislated norms. Yet all of the actors, including the elite coroners and magistrates, interpreted these new demands as resting on the already well-established, shared and uncontroversial belief that the practice of caring selflessly for children made fathers, mothers and grandparents moral. Choices that undermined attempts to strive for this character were dubious. Thus, even at the end of this time period and in localities that were most rigorously proactive in imposing new state-legitimated practices of childcare on parents, the model of generational divide did not seem to cross people's minds as a way of understanding changing parenthood or of explaining reproductive practices.

Compared to the number of court cases in which grandmothers were reported as having been 'looking after' children, there are relatively few cases in which grandfathers were recorded as being responsible for providing childcare. This could be interpreted in three contrasting ways. It could be a direct reflection of the rarity with which grandfathers interacted with grandchildren. Yet given that fatherhood was central to working-class men's intimate lives and sense of adult masculinity (Strange 2012), it would be illogical to place much explanatory weight on grandfathers' lack of involvement, especially given that we know that with age and infirmity men spent an increasing proportion of their days at home (Thane 2000). Second, it could be an indication of grandfathers' perceptions that even when children were nursed on their laps and were playing around their feet, the older men understood themselves to be substituting for a female relative rather than being held responsible for the supervision that they were providing. Or, third, it could suggest that families were aware that when facing a court case in which they had to explain their childcare practices, it was a better defensive strategy to identify a mother, aunt or grandmother as being in charge, a tactic that allowed the much less publicly-scripted, but routine, acts of 'looking after' provided by children, men and unrelated individuals to be hidden.

This is illuminated by one case in which a grandfather did provide evidence on how he looked after his granddaughter. In 1894 a young couple in their mid-twenties, again from Burnley, married: Wilson Palmer worked as a carrier and Ellen Hurley was a dress-maker. They shared a four-roomed home with Ellen's widowed



father, John Hurley, where their daughter Isabella was soon born. Ellen continued to work as a sewing machinist after Bella's birth, leaving the child in the care of her grandfather. However, in 1899, five-year-old Bella died and Ellen was prosecuted for neglect. The following court evidence on the care provided for the child was reported in the *Burnley Gazette* (26 May 1900: 6):

Dr Robinson corroborated and said that although the grandfather had attended to the child in every way he could, yet it did not receive the attention which it needed from the mother. – Wilson Palmer, the husband, elected to give evidence, and said his wife had been giving way to inhabitants [*sic*] of intemperance for some time. She neglected the child, but the grandfather gave it good attention. – John Hinley [*sic*], the grandfather, said the child had not been neglected. He had looked after it, and being an old army man he could do as well for it as its mother. He attended the child when it was taken ill and had carried out the doctor's instructions. – Defendant said she had not neglected the child, but left it in its [*sic*] grandfather's care, because she went out to work as a baby linen manufacturer at Mrs Walkdens.

It was typical of Burnley that none of the commentators implicated maternal work as leading to the neglect of the child. Indeed, it was by emphasizing the respectability of her own skilled employment that Ellen countered the condemnation of her character. About one-third of mothers in the town recorded themselves as being in paid work. This norm of highly-paid, regular female employment grew out of, but was not confined to, those employed in weaving sheds, but was exceptional across the nation. In the other two studied localities in County Durham and Kent only two and eight per cent of mothers respectively recorded themselves as being in paid employment in 1901 (Census 1901). Instead of making work culpable, the case again underlines the significance of the perceived moral weakness of turning selfishly towards drink, and thus turning away from striving for her child, as a marker of inadequate motherhood. Ellen Palmer was found guilty of neglect and fined twenty shillings.

Yet in contrast to the consistent, nationally-articulated and legally-enforced moral script that created a strong model of how a man or woman was a good parent – always most sharply, vocally and sensationally articulated in relation to mothers in the popular press – there was no agreement on how to interpret the grandfather's care. The doctor identified Bella's need for maternal 'attention', but he could not specify what the five-year-old lacked when in her grandfather's care. Before the mid-twentieth-century rise of theories of maternal

attachment, there was indeed no coherent, widely cited explanation as to why the gender, generation or blood relationship of a carer to a child mattered (Shapira 2013). What is most revealing, however, is that when John Hurley rejected the critique of how he ‘attended’ to his granddaughter, he founded his claims neither on his experience as a father of at least three children who had grown to adulthood nor on the domestic skills derived from his work as a ‘cook shop keeper’ only a few years earlier (B.M.D. 1894, 1895; Census 1901, 1911). Instead, he used his status as ‘an old army man’ to make claims to good character. When John had served in the army in Ireland and around the ‘East Indies’, he had been accompanied by his wife and children, but it would be surprising if he believed that any personal experiences of his own fatherhood would be immediately intelligible and persuasive evidence for the court. Instead, John used his pride in his own service to speak to the masculine ideal of the army’s reliability, resourcefulness and strength of character (Dawson 1994). He could thus sound convincing in explaining how he could ‘do as well for it as its mother’. Grandparents’ confidence lay in the evidence of moral habit, but that experience did not solely derive from their own parenthood. The knowledge of how to look after a five-year-old was assumed, but his moral strength to do this had been crystallized and made persuasive to others by his decades of serving the nation and regulating the empire. In the same way that fatherhood and motherhood were understood to be complementary – and thus essential to what allowed men and women to be conceptualized as fundamentally different – it was assumed that grandparenthood was naturally gendered. Grandfathers needed to explain their moral capacity to be the primary carer for children, while grandmothers had to explain if they had lost this moral virtue. Both, however, practised the habits of ‘attending’ to the young on an everyday basis.

It is thus clear that, irrespective of gender, the capacity of working-class older men and women to look after their grandchildren was taken for granted by their own family and neighbours, and accepted by elite and state-legitimated onlookers. This might appear surprising when placed in the context of publicized contemporary representations of older women. The popular press in these decades created frequent moral panics about shrivelled old women acting as paid ‘baby-farmers’ and using murderous, neglectful and ignorant practices to harm their charges (Bentley 2005; Grey 2013). This powerful script, however, was not made relevant when people made sense of familial care that lacked this mercenary, and

therefore always potentially selfish, basis. Working-class familial and local practices for raising children were diverse across England, such that quite different patterns of feeding, nappy-wearing or the gendering of parental roles were normative in the three studied localities (Pooley 2010). Yet elites within these localities understood these norms and, even when critical in principle, rarely thought that they had the power to work against them without parents' consent. Even following these exceptional and acknowledged private tragedies, the courts were unable to enforce reformed practice, but instead relied on press publicity, community norms and parental guilt (and a presumption of the material means to respond to this guilt) to effect change. The morality that underpinned the judgements, however, was shared more fundamentally across England than were the practices of care. Importantly, the working-class men and women to whom the principle of the centrality of selflessness to parenthood was being applied showed no signs of rejecting this moral code, but only sometimes disagreed on where the boundary to selfishness was crossed. These ideals of selflessness were actively taught to children in schools, Sunday schools, churches and especially homes across England, so as to cut across boundaries of class, gender and place in these decades (Brown 2001; Olsen 2014; Roper 2009). It was thus assumed that the practices through which one brought up a child were shared between familial generations. Even when elite child-rearing texts, powerful experts and the state were introducing new ways to provide for children and to regulate those who supervised them, there was little practical questioning of the capabilities, experience and necessity of the care provided by grandparents.

### **The War against the Power of the Older Generation?**

The intimate, everyday practices of looking after children were not fractured by generational differences in knowledge or by the much more powerfully invoked cultural understandings of morality, but this did not mean that the transmission of parenthood between generations occurred seamlessly. The second cultural script of grandparenthood was again feminized and presented grandmothers similarly as a social problem. Older women were culturally and socially conceptualized as destructive women, capable of wielding the power to disrupt the marital harmony of the nuclear family. Such images of elderly women were of course far from new (Botelho and Thane 2001; Chase 2009), but in the nineteenth century older women's

power was understood to be founded more in the accidental results of their ineffectual meddling than their authoritative command or evil powers. Mothers-in-law figured in comic, misogynistic songs that compared the ‘uproar’ of married life, exacerbated by visiting grandmothers, to the ‘bachelor’s life’ when a man was ‘single and happy’ (Diprose 1884). Intended in a more serious vein, young women were warned in didactic texts against ‘helplessness’ soon after becoming mothers: ‘If her mother be living near, daily visits are implored; this intercourse leads to interference in household matters, and thus discontent is produced between husband and wife’ (Warren 1865: iii). While the first trope of generational rupture lacked practical purchase amongst working-class families, this gendered and generational negotiation of power did resonate with men and women, including among those who were unlikely to have read these didactic texts. Yet what made these intergenerational encounters particularly fraught was not the intrusiveness of grandmothers’ ‘interference’, but the families’ variously constrained material circumstances, which necessitated diverse forms of grudging dependence in adulthood. These patterns will be traced through the thread of the relations of power and dependency that developed between four generations of one working-class family before the First World War. They lived in the market town of Bishop Auckland in northeast England, a district where such intergenerational disputes were unusually frequent in records of schooling, criminal trials and inquests.

John Lieser was born in Germany, but by 1856 he had married Mary, an Irish woman, and settled in County Durham. There he brought up at least six children and worked as an ‘instrument maker’, while the older generations of both John and Mary’s families apparently remained overseas. Given that we have no quantitative measures of how engaged older men and women were with the lives of their adult children in these decades, it is useful to begin by considering the proportion of parents of children who were – unlike Mary and John – likely to have their parents (and indeed any kin) living nearby. In common with most parts of England throughout the nineteenth century, the populations of the studied areas were growing rapidly and were highly mobile. The specific chronologies of economic development in each locality determined the precise generational dynamics. In 1861 it was the coal-mining district of Auckland, where the Lieser family settled, whose population was most mobile. Parents who were likely to lack frequent face-to-face contact with their own parents predominated, such that fewer than

one-fifth of parents living with at least one child aged under twenty-one had themselves been born within the 60,000-acre registration district. Similarly, only just over half had been born within the county of Durham and ten per cent – like Mary – were migrants from Ireland. However, by 1901 more than twice as many parents had been born within the district, enabling much more prolonged intergenerational interaction and more stable ‘community’ norms to develop, especially between generations of mothers, who were less mobile than their husbands. By contrast, the suburban growth of agricultural Bromley occurred later in the century, so that while almost thirty-five per cent of parents living with children aged under twenty-one in the 1860s had been born in the district, this proportion had almost halved to eighteen per cent among their counterparts by the 1900s. As a result, within living memory, intergenerational interactions were experienced through opposite chronological narratives of change. The textile town of Burnley had developed fastest early in the nineteenth century, so that throughout the second half of the century around forty per cent of fathers and mothers had been born within the town. Extensive networks of kin and the presence of at least one grandparent nearby were thus more normal for young parents in the town (Census 1861, 1901). As these quite different localities suggest, there were few parts of England that could be considered to be stable, homogenous ‘communities’ over several decades in this period. Although it is possible that some of the migrants’ elderly parents had also settled in the same area, it is clear that intergenerational bonds and tensions were as vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the economy and of the resulting flows of migration as they were to demographic contingency. Migration mattered in shaping how these distinctive, localized cultures of parenthood were passed on.

These diverse experiences of migration were reflected in patterns of three-generational coresidence, which were also consistently highest in Burnley. This was in spite of the greater shortages of housing in the other two, later developing, districts. In 1861 thirteen per cent of working-class parents in Burnley were raising children while living with one (or occasionally two) of their own parents, contrasting with only five per cent in Auckland and three per cent in Bromley at the same date. Importantly, in both 1861 and 1901 mothers in Burnley who were recorded as being in paid employment were only two percentage points more likely to be sharing their home with wider kin than were those who did not record themselves as being in paid work, suggesting that these high rates

of coresidence cannot primarily be explained by working mothers' need for practical assistance at home. Rates of three-generational coresidence increased among grandmothers and their adult daughters in Auckland with the decline in in-migration (and were the source of frequent disputes), but among working-class families in Bromley in Kent three-generational coresidence was never accepted as anything other than a temporary, grudging solution (Census 1861, 1901). Nevertheless, in all three districts the day-to-day presence – either through coresidence or living within walking distance – of a parent was a haphazard and unequally available bond for men and women raising their own children, rather than an inevitably interfering female presence. Interestingly, cases of intergenerational dispute seldom reached the magistrates' court when adult children and their parents had been sharing a home. This is not to suggest that there were no tensions between generations, but that these were clearly managed privately or informally and thus in ways that are seldom articulated in the historical record. In order to find a way into understanding the negotiation of intergenerational power relations, it is useful to consider the two principal forms of unwilling dependency in adulthood that did generate disagreements that were sufficiently intense, prolonged or open to need resolution in a way that was publicized through courts and the press.

When multiple generations did live sufficiently nearby and for long enough to interact face-to-face while raising children, the youthful age of parents was the first common feature that was identified publicly as problematic by the older, younger or both generations. John and Mary Lieser's children grew up in a locality in which young people expected to marry early. In Auckland, age at marriage remained low and amongst some young people was falling in these decades, while the median age at marriage across England rose by about two years, reaching twenty-seven years for men and more than twenty-four years for women by the 1910s. This unusual reproductive culture was largely the result of the gendering of economic opportunities: muscular young men could earn relatively high wages from their late teens as coal hewers underground, young women had almost no local opportunities for paid employment and often sought to escape unpaid domestic labour in their parents' homes, and many of the owners of the large coal mines provided tiny, but independent, homes for their young employees on marriage as an incentive to young men to remain working underground. In 1861 fifty-nine per cent of women in Auckland in their early twenties had already married (Anderson 1999: 32–33). It

was thus unusual, but not extraordinary, when in 1886, at the age of fourteen or fifteen John's youngest daughter, Kate Lieser married a local-born coalminer, Robert Stobbs, two years her elder (B.M.D. 1886). By 1889 people still commented that they both 'looked very young, and did not at all present the appearance of having been married three years last July'. Their only child, Sarah, was born within a year of their marriage, so it is possible that Kate's awareness of her pregnancy made the marriage urgent. In reporting on problems that were articulated publicly within three years of the Stobbs's marriage, the local newspaper used the headline 'the sequel to an early marriage'. The journalist – like many middle-class state-legitimated commentators across England – framed the story as the result of the couple's shared youth on marriage. This irresponsibility was increasingly constructed as a social problem that was normally blamed on the moral recklessness of young men and women in not containing their ambitions for longer. Yet across England the challenge of negotiating autonomy between what rapidly became two generations of parents was made acute by the temporary lending of necessary money and furniture – especially the symbolically weighted marital bed or cradle – on marriage. It was rare for older men and women to be willing to continue for many months without their possessions, so it was the negotiation of the return of these objects that then became the emblems of much wider tensions in which grandfathers (who, if living, had ownership of these goods) were central players. It was thus the context of the chance to almost – but not quite – realize young men's and women's aspirations for autonomy that made these relations especially intense, as two generations of parents were forced into, often reluctant, contact through their simultaneous material vulnerability.

It was these inequalities in wealth that were part of a wider second source of gendered intergenerational tensions, amongst older as much as younger marrying couples: parents turned to their own parents when they were already dealing with periods of crisis in their own lives. In this case, within three years of the Stobbs's wedding, their marriage was in difficulties. Kate Stobbs accused her husband of both neglecting to financially maintain his family and of violence towards her. She was reported in the *Auckland Times and Herald* (24 October 1889: 5) as having given the following testimony in the local police court:

Complainant [Kate Stobbs] said it was three weeks last Friday since her husband brought anything into the house for her and the child

to eat, and they had not had anything to eat during that time except what her mother had taken them. Last Wednesday her husband took her by the neck and pushed her and the child out of the house. She went back afterwards and found all the things had been taken out of the house and the door locked. In the meantime she saw her husband and he said a stable was good enough for her and the child to sleep in.

Fluctuations in food, fires, furniture and front doors were the markers that signified the relative well-being of a marriage. Their loss was a feared, immediately legible, clue to onlookers, including to the couple's parents, that a marriage was troubled. As their relationship struggled, Kate made, and then withdrew, an allegation of assault against Robert, but asserted in court that, 'I am afraid to live with him; I am afraid of my life'. The young father and mother sought refuge in their respective parental homes, both of which were then within a few miles from their previous marital home. Yet as in the case of the much older Margaret Naylor whose moral probity was questioned because of her drinking, both the husband in his testimony and the landlord (who said he had evicted the couple because of the wife's 'horrible language – the worst he had ever heard') made Kate's moral failures culpable for the destruction of the family home. In their interpretation, it was not the irresponsibility of youth, but Kate's inadequate femininity and maternity that were responsible for undermining the home into which she had brought her daughter.

The defence typically built on these arguments for the culpability of failed youthful maternity by blaming marital breakdown on intergenerational relations between mothers and daughters. Robert Stobbs's lawyer argued that there was no failure on the part of the husband to maintain his masculine and paternal duties, but instead 'it was only a case of mother-in-law'. Understood as a routine problem of family life by the local court and reading public, the wife's mother was too present, too proactive and too influential for the necessary gendered inequalities of marriage to be sustained. Such intergenerational explanations were especially common in this coal-mining district where families were built on the expectation that wives and mothers had access to few resources except those that were supplied by their breadwinning husbands. So, in countering these accusations of routine feminized intergenerational meddling, the grandmother, Mary Lieser, spoke in court of her relationship with her daughter and granddaughter:

She had paid them visits, and found they had no food in the house. On four different occasions she took them some food, on the last



occasion she took them a cake and 6d [pence] to buy some tea or coffee. Defendant [Robert Stobbs] had said he would starve her daughter in, as she had no home of her own.

Grandmother and mother thus created an emotive narrative of their shared intergenerational female victimhood in the courtroom: a child abandoned to sleep in a stable, a mother assaulted on her own doorstep, and a grandmother sharing her meagre earnings with the two younger generations so as to undermine the male breadwinner's weapons of starvation. Absent from this account – though perhaps evident from appearances in court or known by local readers – was the inequality between the relative comfort of Robert's parental home and that of Kate's. Kate reported that 'Her husband went to sleep at his mothers', a relatively spacious house of six rooms. It is typical that the home was identified with his mother, but the household was supported by the wages of at least three men, including Robert's father, all of whom earned high wages in the coal mines, and Robert could add his regular earnings to the household's budget. Kate, however, had no earnings. By then her mother, Mary Lieser, was in her late fifties and also living separately from her husband, working as a peddler, but not earning sufficient to pay rent to maintain a stable home. Thus, both husband and wife turned to their own mothers to deal with this familial crisis, in the same way that fathers and mothers did when coping with illness, bereavement and unemployment. Yet in spite of the fact that it was the paternal grandparent's home that offered the most secure household, it was through the narrative only of unacceptable mother-daughter relationships that these ties were held responsible for marital breakdown in court and made into a social problem for the readers of the press. The trope of the meddling grandmother intervening in her daughter's marriage was drawn on at times across England. It was, however, made especially resonant and relevant by men who sought to reproduce a model of parenthood with strongly gender-differentiated roles and freedoms that emerged most powerfully in particular economic, demographic and social contexts.

As one of the principal sources of support in dealing with the vicissitudes of life on the edge of poverty, the contexts in which the two generations of adults came into these most publicized – and presumably for some the most intense and remembered – contact were during these periods of perceived crisis. Yet it is important to finish by briefly underlining the importance of the youngest children in shaping how parenthood was passed on. Contemporaneous sources

rarely offered reflections by the children who were at the centre of these disputes about how to live as parents. Yet it is clear from snippets of everyday interactions that emerged in these accounts that it was children who were most commonly the intermediaries in these sometimes grudging and fraught relationships between generations in adulthood. While their own fathers and mothers were immersed in the demands of their own paid or unpaid labour to sustain their household, it was through the relationships between children and any surviving, nearby or coresident grandparents that a particular form of intimacy developed. Such relationships were founded in early childhood on supplying and sharing food, on running errands for and between the two older generations, and on spending relatively unregulated free time as an occasional, unremarkable and cherished part of the social life of their grandparents. An indication of the significance of these relationships in the contexts of greatest vulnerability is offered if we return briefly to the Lieser family. In spite of their publicized problems, Robert and Kate Stobbs followed the magistrate's parting advice and returned to each other, with their only child, Sarah. Yet whatever the problems of the grudging dependence with Robert's mother-in-law – or perhaps because of them – within a few years the couple turned to living in an explicitly interdependent household that spanned three generations. By 1901 four people from three generations were living in just one room: Robert, Kate, their fourteen-year-old daughter Sarah, and Kate's sixty-nine-year-old widowed mother, Mary Lieser. Mary died in 1905. The following year her great-granddaughter was born, seemingly the illegitimate daughter of nineteen-year-old Sarah. Sarah named the child Mary, perhaps a reflection of the centrality of the infant's great-grandmother's life to the stability and security of the home in which Sarah had grown to motherhood. By 1911, the household had constituted itself in a new multigenerational form: Robert and thirty-nine-year-old Kate were bringing up their five-year-old granddaughter, Mary, sharing their three-roomed home also with Kate's younger brother, a travelling showman. Their daughter, Sarah, had apparently married and moved to start a new legitimate family elsewhere.

Early parental mortality, family breakdown and large average family size meant that in 1901 eleven per cent of working-class children aged under thirteen were living without at least one of their parents, and three per cent lacked both (Census 1901). In seeking to avoid institutional provision, most of these vulnerable children relied on care from whomever in their family was willing to take

them in. In this way, grandparents were especially significant to the survival of these many, most vulnerable, children who lacked parents with the ability to maintain a stable home throughout their childhoods (Alexander 2010; Thane and Evans 2012) or to act as models of parenthood on which they might draw later in life.

Yet relationships with a grandfather or grandmother were also formative for children who did not lack parental support. First, it was through relationships with grandparents that many young children began to learn the practices and moral values of familial care. Boys and girls spent time in the company of, and consequently reciprocally attended to, their increasingly frail and often isolated grandfathers or grandmothers. Davin (1996) and Ross (1993) have argued that girls were moulded into motherhood through caring for their younger siblings, but these norms of providing care were also absorbed, practised autonomously, and given meaning for children in the presence of grandparents, irrespective of gender. Typical of this was the care provided for John Howe, an ‘old man’, who died aged sixty-four in Bishop Auckland, County Durham in 1901. At the inquest his nine-year-old grandson described how ‘he visited his grandfather on Sunday last, and saw him both morning and afternoon. He was alone sitting by the fire. He ... took him some caster oil, ginger “snaps” and threepennyworth of whisky in the afternoon’ (*Auckland Times and Herald* 11 January 1901: 7). The older man had both refused to access the state’s welfare provision by entering the workhouse and had rejected the option of sharing the home of his married daughter, the wife of a fruit hawker. So instead she sought to sustain her father through the mediated care she could offer through her young son. These roles were partly taken on through children’s own volition and enjoyment of their grandparents’ company, but they were also often charged to be the envoys and representatives of the middle generation, who were more rarely and often less comfortably in the company of their own parents. Although importantly rarely conceptualized as such, the passing-on of one of the central aspects of familial care occurred not only between mothers and their daughters, but also across three generations and across genders.

Second, the idealized cottage of a childhood home was a common, nostalgic trope in popular culture throughout these decades (Diprose 1856; Wilkinson 1875). However, when the generation of children who grew to adulthood around the First World War reflected in autobiographical sources from the mid-twentieth century on why they had chosen to bear only two or three children and

how they had escaped the routine insecurity of their childhoods, grandparents were an especially emotive model whose lives they used to explain the parents they had grown to become. These older men and women were described not just as figures of drudgery and self-sacrifice, as their mothers often were, but as the representatives of a set of clearly articulated and remembered opinions, of 'saintly' lives lived in another era (Barlow Brooks n.d.: 33), of evidence for the malleability of moral and sexual norms, and of bodies and selves that were quite different to those this twentieth-century generation now thought normal. Harold Heslop's account of 1971 formed part of this autobiographical genre. He had grown up in County Durham from 1898, the son of Primitive Methodist pit foreman, but he recalled the contrast that he saw between his parents and his grandmother. He characterized – admiringly – the older woman as the 'most unreligious woman I have ever met', whose 'every spoken thought held a sexual urge' and who fruitlessly advised her daughter against allowing herself to experience more than five pregnancies. In writing from memory, he emphasized the generational distance that she represented, as a 'peasant bawd in her own right', and her distinctively aged features that had remained with him for life: 'I remember her face, an unkissed, unloved parchment made by the years' (Heslop 1994: 55, 82). Grandfathers as much as grandmothers figured prominently as – lovingly described – models of long-vanished parenthood. Of course, when this younger generation started to think of their grandparents in this way is unknowable. Yet it is clear that the reproductive cultures that they felt they had pioneered were understood by them to be malleable partly through their childhood interpretations of this oldest generation with whom they were intimate.

## Conclusion

At the most basic level, it is clear that it is rewarding to think more carefully about lifelong relationships between parents and children, which continued to influence social practices, moral values and cultural choices long after a child's infancy. Given that in the decades that social history was developing as an approach, social scientists were charting the centrality of the mother-daughter bond to what they identified as the 'traditional' working-class family of the mid-twentieth century (Townsend 1957; Young and Willmott 1957), it is surprising that there is relatively little research on

relationships between generations of parents. While the power of older women was increasingly stigmatized and subject to misogynistic mocking in the popular and elite print culture of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England, working-class men's relatedness and engagement with their families was largely written out of published scripts. In spite of this binary gendering of intergenerational relationships, it is clear that cultures of reproduction were not simply the domain of mothers and their young daughters, but understandings of the power of passing-on were integral to interactions between generations of working-class men and women alike, throughout their insecure lives. This suggests the importance of examining age and generation as lived, malleable categories, not solely as ones that were imposed discursively.

Although institutions of the state and civil society across England intervened in pioneering ways in the family in these decades and sought to create a generational change in practices of child-rearing, it was primarily through the local and intimate evidence of experience that grandparents, parents and children passed on, but also subtly altered, cultures of reproduction. Grandfathers and grandmothers, like parents, founded their knowledge of how to make the next generation on their own gendered moral worth, demonstrated by their habits and character, not by specialist child-focused knowledge. Instead of intergenerational rupture, it was fundamental and locally-textured insecurities – through the unequal distribution of resources, the diverse structures of labour markets and the uncertainties of migration, birth, marriage and death – that both necessitated the sustenance of relations of grudging dependence between generations and fractured these relations. As a result of these tense interactions between adults, the intergenerational transmission of practices of care between grandparents and children was crucial, not just in shaping child survival and subjectivity, but also in exerting a lasting impact on the fathers and mothers that children grew to become. This had important consequences for how the children who became the grandparents of the mid-twentieth century remembered the injustices of their own childhoods, shaping their later interpretation of the reproductive cultures that they had created and the narratives of generational change from which they constructed their own lives.

The practices of selflessly 'attending to' others were central to the moral framework of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century England. Judgements about how to live a moral life were not unconnected to the practice of reading the expanding number of

moralistic accounts that offered sharply-drawn, simplified and distant examples of virtuous and vice-ridden lives. Yet it was the complex, constrained examples of those to whom men and women were close that offered the models for forming intergenerational relationships that were most powerfully and painfully present. Learning when and how to care, as well as testing the gender-, place- and age-specific boundaries of when not to care, was an essential part of forming the self. Not only was it essential to the making of successively established – but often simultaneously maintained – relational, fluid identities as child, parent and grandparent, but it was also part of a lifelong, unequally demanding, struggle of establishing oneself within the contingent boundaries of moral manhood and womanhood.

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