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What Ever Happened to Family History? A Review Article

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Family History at the Crossroads: A Journal of Family History Reader, edited by Tamara Hareven and Andrejs Plakans (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction, 1300–1840, by Alan Macfarlane (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present, by John R. Gillis (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America, by Karen Lystra (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America, by Beth L. Bailey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850, by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

In a 1982 review article Daniel Blake Smith proclaimed family history a “growth industry in American historical writing.”¹ Almost a decade later, as family history has become a quieter field receiving less fanfare, this assessment seems dated. Although historians have continued to describe and analyze various aspects of past family life,² some have changed their approach or subjects. A revealing window on the current state of family history can be obtained by examining a new collection of articles from the most important journal in the field and some new books appearing on courtship and marriage, which have long been among family history’s most important topics. These various volumes show the continued influence of the social sciences and historical anthropology on family history and also indicate the impact of gender history.

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¹ Daniel Blake Smith, “The Study of the Family in Early America: Trends, Problems, and Prospects,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 39 (January 1982), 3–28.

² For the United States, consult Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988); for western Europe, James Casey, *The History of the Family, New Perspectives on the Past* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), and Michael Mitterauer and Reinhard Sieder, *The European Family: Patriarchy to Partnership from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Karla Oosterveen and Manfred Horzinger, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

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Although the beginnings of family history have been well chronicled elsewhere,³ one needs to know family history's past to understand the present. Central to both past and present has been an informal division of family historians into two major camps: one primarily focused on sociology, demography, and quantitative techniques on the one hand, and a second concerned more with aspects of *mentalité*, *la vie intime*, and a general openness to a variety of approaches.

Perhaps no periodical has better presented the concerns and research of historical demographers and social scientists than the *Journal of Family History*, which in 1986 celebrated a decade of publication. The festivities included an international conference whose papers were published in 1987 as *Family History at the Crossroads: A Journal of Family History Reader*. Yet the very title of this collection bespeaks a sense of urgency that rarely emerges from the welter of historiographical essays and case studies. The image of a crossroads would seem to suggest that family history is faced with pressing alternative questions and methodologies, but Hareven's introductory article and the other historiographical pieces in this collection indicate that these family historians expect to continue along much the same road, writing demographic and social studies which will refine approaches and theories that they have used during the last two decades. Indeed, even the principal agendas Hareven and Charles Tilly set for the future—paying closer attention to kinship and connecting change within families to larger structural changes in society—are quite familiar to family historians oriented to the social sciences.

To be sure, hints of competing approaches occasionally surface elsewhere in the volume. Ruminating about the tasks of family historians, Peter Laslett maintains that they must be able to master the techniques of the social scientists but also be open to other approaches: "The teachings of the Church or French literary theorists of deconstruction could be as important on particular occasions as multiple decrement life tables or the computer simulation of kin numbers using Monte Carlo methods" (p. 267). But in the conclusion of a historiographical essay on kinship, Robert Wheaton reveals these scholars' basic skepticism about competing methods even as he acknowledges them. He notes the existence of an "alternate tradition in kinship history" that has focused on *mentalité*. Stating that this tradition has relied on two approaches, the "scrutiny of language" and the anthropologists' "thick description," Wheaton asserts the superiority of quantitative methodology: "The core of contemporary kinship history rests on quantitative structural analysis." In his view, linguistic analysis or thick description can only augment rather than

³ In particular, see Smith, "Study of the Family" 3–28; Mary Ryan, "The Explosion of Family History," *Reviews in American History*, 10 (December 1982), 181–95; Lawrence Stone, "Family History in the 1980s: Past Achievements and Future Trends," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12 (Summer 1981), 51–87; and Stephen Mintz, *A Prison of Expectations: The Family in Victorian Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1983), 1–10.

stand alone because “until it is linked to the quantitative core, it remains conjectural” (pp. 296–97).

In terms of its findings, *Family History at the Crossroads* is perhaps most successful at indicating the numerous countries, time periods, and topics that family historians have examined. Its case studies, many of which are quantitative or demographic, range over Japan, North America, and Europe from the medieval period through the twentieth century. Despite attempts at unity by grouping articles together, few sections achieve much coherence. Perhaps the subdivision that holds together best is that on the life course perspective adopted by Hareven, Glen Elder, and others. It emphasizes how decadal cohorts encounter transitions in status, such as marriage, first job, or the birth of children. Still, the specific case studies in that section seem both extremely limited in their focus and disappointingly sparse in their findings.

Coexisting with the emphasis of *Family History at the Crossroads* on quantitative and social science case studies is much recent historical writing on courtship and marriage that draws upon various aspects of the alternate tradition. One particularly rich approach for the family historians interested in la vie intime has long been that of historical anthropology. Alan Macfarlane’s *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin* (1970) was a pivotal book for many family historians, indicating that the close analysis of documents and relationships could reconstruct the world of a Puritan clergyman. But historians have continued to develop the anthropological approach and to bring new insights to the study of past families. Two recent ambitious explications of England’s systems of courtship and marriage over long spans of time by eminent scholars John Gillis and Alan Macfarlane attest to the vitality of family history written from the anthropological perspective.

Even though these scholars study overlapping periods in the same country using anthropological approaches, their books are quite dissimilar in both method and findings. Indeed, Macfarlane and Gillis draw on different aspects of their anthropological heritage. Macfarlane looks to comparative anthropology to try to place early modern English practices in context. Thus, even though he examines rules and customs, he focuses on broad typologies to marshal evidence—usually from first-person written accounts, such as letters, diaries, or memoirs. His book demands respect by its command over such broad sweeps of time and place. In contrast Gillis looks to ritual and symbol to illustrate the forms of behavior found in the changing economic climates of England. His close examination of the shifting rituals governing betrothal and the wedding makes his study particularly exciting. Whether exploring beliefs and practices through folklore, ballads, oral histories, or traditional social history sources, such as the records of a foundling hospital, Gillis carefully analyzes a multitude of data and gives a nuanced presentation of change over time.

Perhaps the best evidence of the continued vibrancy of historical anthropology can be found by examining the sketches emerging from MacFarlane’s and Gillis’s divergent methods. Concentrating on the transition

from preindustrial to industrial society, Gillis emphasizes change over time and variations among regions and among social classes, most often contrasting the pastoral east and south with the west and north. Macfarlane, however, argues for continuity and for basic similarities over all of England and among all groups.

In both books the main features of courtship and marriage seem closely connected to the kind of society that the authors find. Nowhere do we see this better illustrated than in the clear-cut differences between these authors' treatment of the individual's relation to kin and community. Macfarlane, in accordance with some of his earlier researches, which have tended to emphasize the early emergence of individualism among the English,⁴ presents what he calls a Malthusian model of marriage in which wedlock results from "cost-benefit calculations for both men and women" (p. 321) and marriage and children are items of consumption whose worth is calculated. Focusing on the individual's decisions about courtship and marriage, Macfarlane shows how sons and daughters left home for service in their early teens and never really returned. They chose their own mates and set up their own households, rarely in the village of their birth. Not only was parental consent not necessary, those parents who wished to arrange a marriage had to rely on securing the assent of the child.

In contrast, Gillis presents England up to the late seventeenth century as a far more traditional society in which communal pressures were significant. While agreeing with Macfarlane that parents had limited power over courtship at that time, Gillis portrays a peer group and community actively interceding in courtship and marriage. Not only was the preindustrial peer group ubiquitous in courtship and betrothal, even the traditional big wedding Gillis describes was a community event that ratified the latter's importance in witnessing and approving matches. Although the artisans and small farmers continued these old customs, the wealthy, the poor, and an emerging proletariat were giving them up by the eighteenth century. Well-to-do parents gained increased authority over marriage with the mid-eighteenth-century legislation tightening church control over marriage ceremonies. Indeed Gillis argues that they shut out the communitarian "big wedding" in favor of nuptials in the private family. At the same time poorer people could no longer afford the "big wedding" and turned to small ceremonies or irregular unions. By the twentieth century the upper class had created the large wedding anew, this time at church, where attention focused on the bride. This new "big white wedding," with varying degrees of community participation, then came to predominate among all classes.

In keeping with their views on individualism and communal pressures, these two authors also differ over the importance of romantic love. Macfarlane emphasizes the importance of affection and mutuality both in deci-

⁴ Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: Family, Property and Social Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

sions about marriage and the actual unions themselves, but Gillis believes that reasons to wed, although closely tied to social and economic conditions, varied among different groups and over time. In general, he resists any tendency to find marriages increasingly companionate and indicates how bourgeois parents during the nineteenth century carefully supervised courtship to prevent misalliances. Cottage manufacturing tended to spur young independence and marriage, but by the late eighteenth century some customs, such as sexual relations after betrothal but before the wedding, that had worked well in tight preindustrial communities led to pregnant abandoned young women in the city. The late nineteenth century saw the beginnings of what Gillis calls compulsory marriage, as it increasingly came to be seen as the only appropriate course of action for adult females. Such marriages reflected the stress on the growing economic dependence of women but did not entail emotional intimacy or even companionship between the sexes.

Can the radically opposed pictures of courtship and marriage and of England in these two studies be reconciled at all? One partial solution comes from their differing focus: Macfarlane writes primarily on the the middling and upper classes; Gillis primarily concentrates on working men and women, whether agricultural or industrial. Thus, each may be describing a part of the whole. Nevertheless, significant differences remain, especially about the extent of preindustrial traditionalism and eighteenth-century changes in customs and rules. Whichever side prevails or whatever compromises emerge, these books develop extraordinarily nuanced, complex, and thoroughly exciting pictures of the past. As such they testify to the way historical anthropology applied to family history can enrich our understanding.

Despite the continuing role of older approaches, several of the most arresting recent examinations of family history, particularly of courtship and marriage, have been written from a different viewpoint—that of women's history enriched by gender as an analytic category. The links between women's history and family history are not new, but the relationship has been uneasy. Louise Tilly, in a particularly thought-provoking essay in *Family History at the Crossroads*, examines the connections between women's history and family history. A distinguished practitioner of both genres, Tilly asserts that even when women's historians have examined the family, they have primarily been concerned with women's power and status within it. Arguing that women's history has been oriented toward the individual and the event, she believes that it needs family history's focus on institutions to broaden it; and she closes her essay: "To the extent that women's historians accept this challenge, they will move closer to family history (p. 313)."

Even as Louise Tilly was penning her article, historians of women were not only examining the social context of women's world and indeed whether there was a separate female culture and world view, but they were also borrowing categories and methodologies from literary criticism and other postmodernist

forms of analysis. However, a funny thing happened on the way to bringing women's history closer to family history: As women's history expanded, it drew enrichment from family history but did so in large part by engrossing significant parts of the latter field. In other words the scholars in women's history undertook the study of aspects of the family but did so using the questions, paradigms, and the scholarly writings of women's studies rather than those from family history.⁵

The findings of three recent studies of courtship and marriage provide insight into how women's historians undertake family history from their own perspective. Karen Lystra's *Searching the Heart: Women, Men and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* is a close appraisal of Victorian love letters for their revelations about both attitudes and behavior. She examines courtship largely from within, scrutinizing love letters not only as a kind of performance but also as indicators of attitudes and behavioral patterns. Ostensibly an examination of romantic love, her book actually goes far beyond that to explore male–female relations in Victorian life. Some of her most fascinating chapters come from her search for a typology of nineteenth-century American courtship. Courtship as Lystra depicts it was a time of self-examination for middle-class young lovers, who not only sought to gain intimacy with their affianced but also to discover themselves. A typical courtship might pass through a phase of negative self-revelation in which each lover revealed her or his faults expecting to be reassured about his or her own essential worthiness, as occurred in successful courtships. Later in courtship the woman likely would test the man by breaking or threatening to break the engagement. After the wedding came the sometimes unfulfilled expectation that the passions of courtship could be tamed into the calmer mutuality of a successful marriage.

Although Lystra occasionally uses advice books and prescriptive literature, she is always seeking to link them to the courtship of actual people, unraveling the contradictions and deeper meanings of discourses and behavior. In contrast, Beth Bailey's *From Front Porch to Back Seat* shows the author to be decidedly outside the courtships she depicts, with her nose pressed to the glass to observe the whirl of activity. Her position as outside observer springs from her use of campus publications and popular magazines to determine the "historical and cultural constructs" (p. 5) framing twentieth-century American dating.⁶ From these sources Bailey mines the language of economic exchange that she believes characterized dating after 1920. The emergence of the date

⁵ This has been true for other areas of family history. See, for example, some of the recent work on family violence and child welfare such as Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988); Elizabeth Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of American Social Policy against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁶ Steven Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), chs. 2 and 5, explores courtship both from the perspective of gender history and from internal and external views.

away from home lessened the young woman's power in courting. Furthermore, that dates away from home demanded money to pay for them meant a new economic side to courting. The youth culture evaluated young men according to the expensiveness of the date they could finance and young women according to how much males were willing to spend on them. Relations between the sexes had come to be defined by the language of consumption.

In contrast to Lystra's and Bailey's concentration on courtship, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes* focuses more on marriage. Believing that the formation of a middle class with a distinctive world view proceeded hand-in-hand with that class's construction of a specific set of gender conventions, the authors examine various ideologies and institutions among the middle classes of Essex and Birmingham, England. In their exploration of middle-class ideas and life, Davidoff and Hall employ both traditional social history methods and close linguistic analysis. They pay close attention to the role of religion, both in empowering and restricting women, and they scrutinize numerous facets of family history, including courtship, marriage, family formation, inheritance, and maternal and paternal roles. Of particular concern to them are the concepts of women and gender found in popular expressions, whether advice literature, poetry, or architecture.

Closer examination of these books reveals the way that, despite their interest in family history, the special concerns of women's and gender history run through their works. All three studies share a common orientation: the desire to explore the division between the private and the public spheres of activity. Although Philippe Ariès's classic *Centuries of Childhood* (1960) first described the privatizing of the family and other early works in family history then delineated how the family came to be seen as refuge from the public world, this concept in recent years has been far more frequently explored by historians of women. Indeed, women's history often focuses on the distinctions between the private and public spheres in terms of how the society constructs gender roles. Davidoff and Hall are most thorough in this respect, exploring not only men's and women's roles but their implications for society at large. An especially intriguing part of *Family Fortunes* is their analysis of women's part in family businesses. The authors argue that women's contributions of both labor and money to such businesses were essential to the firms. Yet in the nineteenth century men increasingly structured women's investments so that the latter might receive income but have no control over the companies.

Another part of the nineteenth-century private sphere is courtship and sexuality. Perhaps Lystra's most provocative conclusions come in relation to sexual behavior. Nineteenth-century people rested part of their defense of confining women to the private sphere on the need to protect natural female chastity and virtuousness. A common view is that these middle-class women, dreading frequent pregnancies and disliking male lust, limited sexual encounters that

tended to be rather unfulfilling.⁷ Lystra would agree with Davidoff and Hall that sexuality “was relegated to the inner core of marriage” (p. 26), but unlike them she believes that there this sexuality burned bright and hot.

Although Lystra presents the frank and even somewhat earthy expressions of desire and sexual satisfaction found in the letters of engaged—or more often—married couples, she does not solely depend on those. Instead she develops a new explanation for why the Victorians have been seen as hostile to sexuality. According to Lystra, the Victorians’ division between public and private and their passion for privacy have misled historians. Not only did these middle-class men and women shield their private lives from view because it was proper to do so, but also because secrecy actually intensified their pleasure in their sexual lives. Love letters—the most private of letters—give us a glimpse of this secret world. According to Lystra, “Victorians gleefully censored their own private correspondence and worried about being found out. But the idea of someone reading their letters hovered like a ghost of lasciviousness over correspondence, making their missives almost a secret erotic art” (p. 91). Thus, when Sophia Hawthorne inked out passages about physical intimacy written by her novelist husband, she only highlighted, in Lystra’s view, the importance of sexuality to that relationship. Dismissing the opinions of some of the sex manual writers who celebrated women’s uninterest in sexual matters, Lystra characterizes these as jeremiads that were essentially prescriptive rather than descriptive writing.

Bailey also is interested in the division between public and private spheres but believes that in the twentieth century “youth increasing moved their courtship from the private to the public sphere” (p. 3). In this public sphere, dating assumed a form akin to the economic competition of business as young men and women and their advisers thought and wrote in terms of scarcity, abundance, and consumption.

Along with the divisions between private and public, gender boundaries form another important subject in these three books. Whereas *Family Fortunes* acknowledges that men and women did not always follow the gender conventions of the day, Lystra goes further and persuasively discusses how a role was a “dynamic and contextually fluid relationship between people” (p. 128). Although Lystra generally agrees with Davidoff and Hall about the areas that were defined as male—business, the financial support of a family—and those that were female, she believes that men and women found ways to

⁷ This subject takes us into the burgeoning field of the history of sexuality. For the lack of sexual fulfillment, see Peter Cominos, “Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict,” in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, Martha Vicinus, ed. (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1972), 155–72. For opposing views, see Carl Degler, “What Ought to Be and What Was: Women’s Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century,” *American Historical Review*, 79 (December 1974), 1467–90, and more recently, Peter Gay, *The Education of the Senses*, vol. 1, and *The Tender Passion*, vol. 2 of *The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984, 1986).

maneuver within the societal constraints. She asserts that men and women dealt with tensions caused by rigid gender roles in a variety of ways. In some cases, they used “reframing,” that is taking actions that violated sex-role definitions but then redefining that behavior so that it “fit the socially sanctioned standards of masculinity and femininity” (p. 143). Thus, they were able to follow some of their own inclinations without overtly challenging the norms of the day.

Given the great interest that Lystra, Davidoff and Hall, and Bailey all show in gender roles and prescriptions, perhaps it is not surprising that each of the three books find the period it examines of particular importance for such roles. For example, Davidoff and Hall assert that as the English middle class created its ideology, it also perfected a separation of the sexes in all institutions and an ideology to support that division. Later in the nineteenth century this increasing rigidity would breed increasing tension. Similarly, Lystra argues that male anxiety over women’s gender roles seems to have intensified in the wake of the Civil War, becoming especially acute late in the century. On the other hand, Bailey argues that when the belief that gender differences were innate began to dissolve in the twentieth century, a crisis of masculinity occurred. By the post-World War II period the rigid etiquette of gender roles in dating had resulted from males feeling their definitions of masculinity under attack. Yet the thaw in gender roles that logically would seem to precede the reactionary hardening of the 1940s and 1950s seems nowhere directly in evidence in Bailey’s book. Instead one might posit from her depiction that gender roles were continually in crisis almost from the 1890s to the 1960s.

In the early days of family history, women’s historians often were critical of it for subsuming women into the family and viewing that family as a unit and unity.⁸ These three books continue that feminist practice of insisting that women were individual actors within courtship and marriage, but this critique has had considerable influence on social science and the alternate tradition as well. Indeed, Gillis insists on the flexibility of gender roles in past marriages, and both he and Macfarlane try to identify all the actors in courtship and marriage.

Despite the contribution women’s history has made to family history and the strengths of these three books from that perspective, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that moving the study of courtship and marriage into the realm of gender analysis has had a narrowing aspect to it. Louise Tilly’s observation about the problems women’s history has encountered in linking women to institutions largely holds for Lystra’s and Bailey’s studies, which tend to remove the institutions of courtship and marriage from the nuclear family and kinship grouping. To be sure, Bailey perhaps represents one extreme as she tends to write about dating as though its participants, whether those of 1940 or

⁸ Rayna Rapp, Ellen Ross, and Renate Bridenthal, “Examining Family History,” *Feminist Studies*, 5 (Spring 1979), 174–200.

1960, were orphans. In her study, parents appear only subsumed in the “older generation”: They play virtually no role in the structuring of dating, whether formulating the rules governing sexual behavior or even providing the money for dates. Even if one posits, as does Lystra, that parental influence on courtship weakened by the nineteenth century, a total disregard of it in the twentieth century seems mistaken. In contrast, Davidoff and Hall in their huge, densely written book link women to numerous institutions, such as the church, benevolent organizations, businesses and manufacturing firms, as well as the family. But the all-inclusive nature of *Family Fortunes* means that despite its examination of many different aspects of family life from childhood to inheritance, it still tends to view the family merely to find the formation and carrying out of gender roles.

What might the future hold for family history? No doubt historians will continue to write about the family using all three of the general approaches outlined above. Possibly family history will become less distinctive and less a distinct field as either it seeks to bolster social history, as Charles Tilly has urged, or as it becomes a part of the gender analysis of the private sphere. More likely, in the short term it will continue along the paths outlined above, with changing trends in scholarship most likely to influence family historians of the alternate tradition. Indeed family historians may be able to refine the women’s history construct of private and public spheres so that it can aid the analysis of the family’s (and its members’) interactions with other institutions.

Beyond the three approaches chronicled above, can one foresee other new and perhaps more boldly innovative directions for family history? A recent unpublished essay by Alan Williams suggests some possibilities.⁹ Challenging Ariès’s notion of the privatizing eighteenth-century family, Williams shows that eighteenth-century Parisians, bourgeois and poor alike, expected the state to play a role in family life, either by direct intervention or by assuming functions of the family. Because much of the earlier scholarship on the family and the state has assumed a punitive intrusive state only able to act upon the poorer and more helpless classes,¹⁰ Williams’ work suggests that family historians should again investigate this relationship. Even more important for family historians is his examination of the various concepts of public and private spheres, ranging from that of Jürgen Habermas to those used by women’s historians. Williams suggests that the division of spheres into private and public may be too confining and that scholars should consider the possible of multiple and overlapping spheres or domains, each with its boundaries and norms.

⁹ Alan Williams, “The State and the Family in Eighteenth-Century Paris: Toward a Sociology of Spheres” (paper presented at the 8–10 November 1990 meeting of the Western Society for French History).

¹⁰ Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families*, Robert Hurley trans. (New York: Pantheon, 1979).

Whether or not these new directions are taken, one should not underestimate the ingenuity of family historians. Family history in the course of its own relatively short history has been quite sensitive in subject and methodology to many kinds of analysis—whether those of demography and sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistic or other forms of poststructural analysis. Perhaps because of its ubiquity, the family continues to fascinate. As long as it appears a major institution of daily life, the various academic disciplines will find methods to study it, and family historians are likely to apply those methods to the past.