



Laura Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons in the English Middle Class, c. 1870–1920* (New York, 2021)

Source: *Midlands Historical Review*, Book Review

Published: 06/05/2022

URL:

<http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/laura-ugolini-fathers-and-sons-in-the-english-middle-class-c-1870-1920/>

Review: Laura Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons in the English Middle Class, c. 1870–1920* (New York, 2021)

Lucy Morgan

Abstract

In this article, Lucy Morgan reviews *Fathers and Sons in the English Middle Class, c. 1870–1920* by Laura Ugolini, which was published in hard copy and as an e-book in April 2021. Over the course of the book, Ugolini navigates how the relationships between fathers and sons in the English middle class were constructed in both childhood and adulthood. Ugolini employs late-Victorian and early-Edwardian fiction and non-fiction texts, as well as a sample of oral history interviews as her primary source material in order to create an “in their own words” historiographical study of ideal versus actual father-son relationships in this period.

Keywords: family, gender, masculinity, Victorian, Edwardian

Biography

Lucy Morgan is a second-year PhD student at the University of Sheffield. Her thesis deals with the social lives and cultural depictions of single men in early modern England. She is more widely interested in historical conceptions of gender and fatherly authority, and how notions of acceptable behaviour were enforced within different social groups. You can follow her on twitter [@Lucy R Morgan](https://twitter.com/Lucy_R_Morgan).

When considering the stereotypical Victorian father, one of two images emerges: either the stern *paterfamilias* or the doting papa. These stereotypes existed alongside one another in Victorian popular culture, perhaps most notably in the prolific work of Charles Dickens, where father-figure characters like Dombey of *Dombey and Sons* and the Cheeryble brothers of *Nicholas Nickelby* represent both extremes of fatherly cruelty and affection. In *Fathers and Sons in the English Middle Class, c. 1870–1920*, Laura Ugolini goes a step further to argue that not only did these contrasting images of fathers exist alongside each other in wider society, but that individual men could also embody both of these apparently juxtaposed characteristics simultaneously. Consequently, a more nuanced interpretation of fatherhood is needed. Central to this re-evaluation of the Victorian father is the nature/construction of the father-son relationship in this period, which Ugolini describes as ‘inextricably linked to wider household and family dynamics’ and also ‘gender specific norms and practices’.¹ To recapture a more historicised understanding of fatherhood, three distinct groups of sources are used: seventeen novels and plays written during the Victorian and Edwardian periods, sixty-seven autobiographies by middle-class men published between 1879 and 1994, and twenty-six oral history interviews recorded by Thea Vigne for a project at the University of Essex titled “Family Life and Work Experience before 1918: Middle and Upper Class Families in the Early 20th Century, 1870–1977”. These sources are also supplemented by cases heard by the Middlesex Appeals Tribunal between 1916 and 1918, and local and national newspaper reports of domestic violence published from 1870 to 1919.

The influence of John Tosh’s *A Man’s Place* is clear throughout the book in the way that Ugolini centres gender and class as reciprocal influences which moulded the behaviour of fathers and sons.² First published in 1999, Tosh used *A Man’s Place* to argue that middle-class male domesticity increased in importance throughout the Victorian period, but peaked and declined after 1870. By

¹ L. Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons in the English Middle Class, c. 1870–1920* (Oxford, 2021), p. 2.

² See J. Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, 1999).

incorporating the perspective of both fathers and sons, Ugolini challenges and builds on Tosh's ideas of the middle-class Victorian home. Viviana Zelizer's concept of the 'emotionally priceless' child can also be seen in the book's depiction of middle-class understandings of parental authority and childhood obedience.³ Zelizer suggests that children became increasingly economically "worthless" throughout the Victorian period, with their potential value as wage-earners being replaced by the "priceless" value of the sentimental comfort they provided to their parents, a notion which Ugolini's middle-class sons reaffirm. The crux of the book is Ugolini's argument that the social and cultural construction of the "worst" type of father in the period was not violent or abusive, but rather 'ineffectual and unproductive' and unengaged with their children, expanding on the earlier work of Joanne Begiato.⁴ Ugolini finds this notion reinforced through fiction and non-fiction texts, and is further re-affirmed through the oral history interviews, where "good" fathers are seen as interested in their sons' lives, even if they did not regularly interact with them in person. By drawing inspiration widely from historical and sociological studies of masculinity, family, and childhood, Ugolini provides the field with a new perspective by uniting parent-first and child-first approaches, allowing both fathers and sons to define what fatherhood meant to them.

Whilst the book is divided chronologically into two halves dealing with childhood and adulthood relationships between fathers and sons respectively, the chapters are arranged thematically, with titles such as "Intimacy and Distance" and "Responsibility and Authority". This thematic approach is useful in that it allows for the examination of particularly niche topics, meaning that gift-giving, emigration, and corporal punishment are all covered in the same book. The use of oral histories throughout the work, rather than in one distinct chapter, also serves to highlight the homogeneity of some middle-class experiences (such as attending public school), whilst also allowing for an examination of more unique or unusual father-son relationships (such as those within single-parent households). However, this rigid

³ See V. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, 1985); Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons*, pp. 66, 78.

⁴ J. Begiato, "'A Very Sensible Man': Imagining Fatherhood in England c.1750–1830,' *History*, 95/319 (2010), p. 278; Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons*, p. 67.

adherence to thematic chapters results in a lack of clarity at certain points, such as when Ugolini argues that even adult sons were bound to fatherly authority, which could be beneficial ‘when sons were unable, because of illness, absence or other causes, to speak or act on their own behalf’.⁵ Yet the three examples Ugolini cites as proof of this statement all relate to attempts by fathers to prevent the conscription of their sons during the First World War. This may be Ugolini’s blind spot, as much of her other published work deftly examines how various aspects of masculinity were challenged or affirmed during the First World War. However, its invocation here makes it difficult to gauge whether this circumstance can be considered wholly representative of the 1870 to 1920 period as Ugolini claims. The thematic approach is therefore useful in constructing the roots of the ideal-versus-actual middle-class father-son experience, but as this example shows, it also reduces the importance of chronology and denies the possibilities of ideas changing over time, either gradually or at certain historical “crisis points”.

At other times, Ugolini’s mention of certain themes brings attention to matters that are absent from the book. In the chapter “Conflict and Reconciliation”, Ugolini found that there were eighteen cases of middle-class patricide and four cases of filicide in England between 1870 and 1918.⁶ In the chapter, however, she only discusses patricide and not filicide, despite the possibilities for comparison. Ugolini briefly mentions that sons who committed patricide were often described as ‘waifish and stray’ by newspapers, language which clearly emphasises the hierarchical nature of the parent-child bond.⁷ There is no evidence provided to illustrate what descriptive language was most often invoked in filicide cases, which raises questions around whether the betrayal of paternal authority or of filial obedience was seen as more serious in contemporary society. Certainly, middle-class filicide was less common, but corporal punishment of children was still socially acceptable throughout the period. A deeper examination of the topic could test the limits of acceptable violent conduct within the middle classes, and would

⁵ Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons*, p. 194.

⁶ Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons*, p. 171.

⁷ Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons*, pp. 167, 168.

provide an interesting counterpoint about the changing legality of domestic corporal punishment across the United Kingdom today.

Other sections could have benefited from Ugolini providing more in-depth explanations of the topics that she writes about. For example, in the section about first jobs and the expectation that sons would follow their fathers into business, Ugolini presents the testimony of a young man who was estranged from his father. He was given a job by an uncle whom he described as ‘well-meaning . . . [but] no substitute for an active father’.⁸ This is presented as a straightforward statement with no deeper meaning, but it could have been an excellent opportunity for Ugolini to dig deeper into the cultural connotations of fatherhood in this period. What was the difference in the support offered by an “active father” and another paternal figure, such as an uncle, grandfather, or godfather? Were non-father figures actively construed both socially and culturally as “lesser” than fathers? This is a tricky debate, which broadly intersects with histories of emotions, and would benefit from being followed up on in further research.

Nevertheless, in *Fathers and Sons* Ugolini does provide a useful re-interpretation of many of the assumptions held by those who are new to or already familiar with the topic. Ugolini’s emphasis on physical versus emotional closeness challenges depictions of the physically and emotionally absent middle-class father by pointing out that practices like sending sons to boarding school were rooted in expectations of conformity and a desire for betterment, rather than a dislike for their children.⁹ Moreover, the strengths of this book are fully demonstrated in the chapters “Consumption” and “Succession and Inheritance”, where the focus turns to material culture practices. Ugolini introduces the concept of the idealised ‘consumer world’, which was integral to the affirmation of the Victorian middle class identity, then moves more specifically into a discussion of how items like pocket watches, pipes, and alcohol came to be associated with adulthood by the sons whose admiration for their fathers led them to ultimately

⁸ Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons*, p. 70.

⁹ Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons*, pp. 42, 50.

desire and emulate their consumer practices.¹⁰ This, combined with emotional and economic approaches, also serves as a lens to examine inheritance in new ways, which Ugolini presents as an ‘uncomfortable ambiguity’ for many young men in the period.¹¹ They were reliant on the potential of their future inheritances to sustain their middle-class status, but had to reckon with the notion that their fathers must die for that to occur. The resultant ideological clash between the abstract notion of middle-class economic values and the highly personal relationships between individual fathers and sons is thoroughly dissected by Ugolini, providing a new perspective on the relationship between money, independence, and the transition from youth to adulthood in the Victorian period.

Ultimately, this is a work of breadth, rather than depth. Many aspects of middle-class father-son life are explored, spanning the mundane and exceptional events of the whole life cycle, from family dinners to family holidays, covering instances of anger, violence and disinheritance, as well as instances of affection, closeness and economic provision for both young children and aged parents. This paints a more complete picture of the everyday experiences of the middle classes than those that have been depicted in other scholarly texts. The sources used are rich—equally delightful and emotionally devastating in turns—yet by opting for an “in their own words” approach, Ugolini’s own voice is unfortunately sometimes absent.

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¹⁰ Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons*, p. 92.

¹¹ Ugolini, *Fathers and Sons*, p. 137.