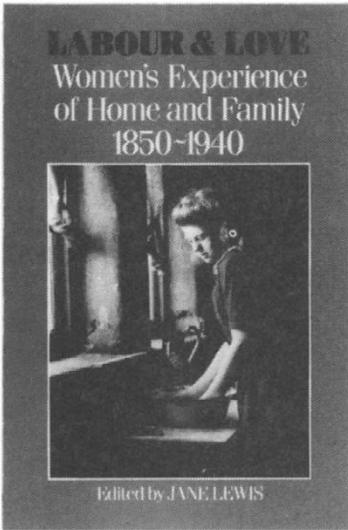


184 pages: just over 10p a page. The *Biographical Dictionary* is similarly costly at £40, and is not even provided with a decent index – one which referenced those mentioned rather

than simply listing its main entries. Cheap paperback editions would be of benefit to all.

Rosalind Delmar



Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family 1850-1940

Jane Lewis (Ed)
Basil Blackwell Oxford, 1986
 £25 Hbk £6.95 Pbk

Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918

Angela V. John (Ed)
Basil Blackwell Oxford, 1986
 £25 Hbk £6.95 Pbk

If a single message can be read from these companion volumes, it concerns the complexity of women's lives and the impossibility of compartmentalizing them. Reproductive work and productive work, the family and the workplace move in and out of focus, merging at the end into a common identification.

No history of women can be writ-



ten without locating women within their class. At the same time, class is not the sole determinant of gender behaviour and history. Both volumes bring out the relationship between women and class, though *Labour and Love* points to the similarities in women's lives which cut through class, and those features which remain class specific. The heavily ritualized life of the middle-class wife and daughter in the nineteenth century, which Carol Dyhouse describes, clearly contrasts with the lives of working-class wives and daughters described by Lynn Jamieson or Ellen Ross. The irony is, however, that in their way, and for different reasons, both middle-class and working-class women succeed in subverting the ideal. The issue, in a sense, was perhaps more complicated in the case of working-class women where economic survival and the attitudes

of the state, as Jane Lewis points out, imposed further stresses and variables.

But if class is one dimension of women's lives, then family is another, and women's role within and attitudes towards the family remain a central feature of most women's lives. The difficulty of charting attitudes towards sex and sexuality – the most concealed area of women's history – is interestingly handled by Lucy Bland and Barbara Brookes, who look at the shifts in attitudes towards the functions and meaning of sexual relationships, and arguably the additional burden which such shifts implied for women. Controlling reproduction may, for some, have reduced the burden of continuous childbearing but it was not a neutral benefit: less time spent with children implied more time for the husband, and successful sex became an additional criterion by which women were to be judged in their contribution to a successful marriage.

The quality of relationships, the degree of support between men and women within the family, poses equally formidable tasks of excavation for the historian. Dina Copelman investigates London's women teachers and finds the extent to which their male colleagues and husbands (often teachers themselves) offered support to their wives, enabling and encouraging them to continue their careers after marriage. In contrast, Pat Ayers and Jan Lambertz look at working-class marriages in Liverpool, at the demarcations of duties and obligations of gender roles, demarcations which continued in ignorance and were preserved in deceit – potent undercurrents which often led to tensions and violence.

Nevertheless, for most women the family, large or small, was the prime focus for their energies and their love, and the strategies for survival display, as Elizabeth Roberts argues, considerable ingenuity. Indeed, as both Roberts and Ross show, suc-

cessful family survival was one of the ways through which women could display their love. But in all the discussion of survival in working-class households, the importance of kin and neighbours is continuously stressed, both in the provision of support and in the maintenance of family boundaries. Diana Gittins, in her work on women and the woollen industry in Devon in particular, looks at the importance of kin in these two respects, and at how women move within and through the family structure, movements which coincide as much with the economic life cycle of the family as with an individual life cycle.

Unequal Opportunities looks at women and class from the perspective of the workplace. Nancy Osterud, Felicity Hunt and Jenny Morris, in their work on the Leicester hosiery industry, London printing and the London and Leeds tailoring trade respectively, look at the relationship between the division of labour in the workplace and at home and at how mechanization was used by employers and male workers to support a gender hierarchy in the workplace. Although the areas of work were substantially and geographically different, similar processes were involved as new machinery became increasingly the preserve of men. As it did so, it made women increasingly vulnerable to low pay and unemployment – a vulnerability which was both cause and effect to the refinement of an ideology which confirmed many women in these positions. Gill Burke's contribution on the decline of the Cornish Bal Maiden is a poignant case in point.

Ironically, one area where mechanization increased opportunities for women was in office and clerical work, and this much-neglected area has been explored by Meta Zimmick who traces not only the development of office work but also the exquisite ideological contortions which were necessary to explain

and justify the development. Office work was not the only area of expansion. Throughout the nineteenth century, opportunities for domestic service were extended. In many ways, domestic service appeared the ideal work for women. Women were considered naturally suited to it, and at the same time it offered opportunities for social improvement and advancement. But, as Edward Higgs shows in his study of Rochdale, the reality was different. Women's domestic work was varied and highly productive but rarely socially improving, and neither employers nor servants fitted neatly into nineteenth-century stereotypical categories.

Perhaps the most controversial area of women's employment has concerned the trade unions where, it has been argued, women have been notoriously difficult to unionize because of the nature of their work and their commitment to it. Joanna Bornat, Ellen Mappen and Deborah Thom investigate trade union activity and show that not only were women in many industries both heavily unionized and militant but also that many were pioneers in the campaigns for a minimum wage and the wage councils.

Both Angela John and Jane Lewis have written succinct and useful introductions to these volumes, pulling together the themes of the essays and focusing them on the key questions relating to women's family and working lives. The two volumes are a valuable summation of the variety, industry and argu-

ments of women's history in the last fifteen years. They are not pioneering works, but that is a point of congratulation rather than criticism.

Nevertheless, what they say still has a contemporary resonance, for the circumstances of many women's lives have changed little and remain in substance the same. In that sense these volumes offer a depressing testimony to women's struggle. But in a wider sense there is an optimism, for each act of survival is also an act of resistance, and the resilience and ingenuity of women, their will and capacity to survive, is a message of strength. For this reason, these volumes continue to challenge.

The overall impression is of women as battlers, juggling the demands of husband and children, home and work, with consummate skill. And yet ... there seems little voice given to dreams and imaginings, hopes and fantasies. Life for many women has been and still is a relentless struggle and negotiation. But within that there is space for a mental world, one which provides a rationale, a comparison and a future. It is this world which provides the structures through which women can make sense of their lives and accommodate the conflicting demands made upon them. It is this world which negotiates the self with society and culture. It is this world which offers an alternative and makes for change. Without it, even survivors become victims.

Mary Chamberlain