Hi everyone,

Thank you so much for taking the time to look through my work.

The chapter I’ve sent is a thematic one and will probably make more sense with a little context. So, to orient you, here’s a brief overview:

My thesis follows on from the various literatures relating to shifts in identity and politics in the mid-twentieth century, especially the (now not-so) ‘new political history’; sociological theories of identity in ‘late-modernity’ (particularly of Anthony Giddens); and the more recent studies of postwar individualism by Mike Savage, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, and Jon Lawrence.

The source material for the thesis are autobiographies by quotidian authors, written between 1945 and the 1980s. I’ve concentrated on these sources for two reasons. First, much of the literature on identity in this period emphasises the self and selfhood, and there seems to be an opportunity to interrogate this with sources that are, themselves, histories of the self. Secondly, although there are several studies that use autobiography as a source for nineteenth-century subjectivities, twentieth-century autobiography does not seem to have attracted quite the same attention. Helpfully, however, John Burnett’s bibliography of working-class autobiography already includes several hundred autobiographies written or published after 1945.

My approach to this material has been to read it for the author’s subjectivities at the time of writing – and, borrowing from oral history, for their narrative composure. The idea has been to explore similarities in the way the autobiographies are composed as evidence of common attitudes that, in turn, might tell us something about how people made sense of their lives.

The thesis is in two parts, dealing with two kinds of autobiographical narrative. The first part, including the chapter here, addresses the ‘social self’: autobiographies that describe the author’s passage through the exterior, social and material, world. The second part of the thesis explores autobiographies of the ‘interior self’, stories that are mainly about self-development and discovery. I use this segmentation to explore a central claim in the literature: that quotidian attitudes went through an epochal change in the years after 1945, shifting towards a stronger sense of self, and self-interest, and away from an earlier class-consciousness. What I hope the analysis will reveal is a more complex picture, structured particularly by gender and age. My tentative conclusion is that there was a marked continuity of quotidian attitudes in this period. But alongside this, there was a process of generational change with people growing up after the war feeling that their parents’ codes of behaviour applied only to a static world and not, as they saw it, to one of rapid change.

The chapter I’ve selected is one of three in Part I that describe the ‘social self’. Each of these follow the same analytic structure and I’ve also included an (optional and short!) introduction to Part I that you might find helpful as context.

I’m sorry to have gone on for so long; and I should apologise, too, for sending not one but two pieces. Still, I do hope you find this interesting, and I’m very much looking forward to your thoughts.

Ivan

Part I: The Social Self

The stories in the following chapters are outward looking, concerned with events and material lives, and often preoccupied with social expectations. They are stories of the social self in the sense that they describe an external rather than interior world: they are not stories structured by the passage of thoughts and emotions, nor are they introspective journeys towards self-discovery. Most autobiographies of the social self can loosely be described as quotidian, in that they are not about the lives of famous people, nor are they stories of radical social mobility. But within these constraints, these autobiographies – around [160] of them – differ wildly in subject matter and style.[[1]](#footnote-0) They include stories of single mothers and housewives, skilled and unskilled work, heavy labour, factory work, office jobs, good and bad fortunes, physical and mental impairment, scholarships taken and missed, memories of childhood and early adulthood, experiences of marriage and childrearing, and writing about old age. These stories contain a wonderful variety of writing, from melodrama to tragic understatement, from deft turns of phrase and human observation to descriptions accompanied by maps, documentary photographs, and hand-drawn schematics.

What binds these stories together is the profound effect upon them of social expectations. Above all, these autobiographers were preoccupied with conformity: they believed that their stories would be given wider significance because others would recognise in them similar codes to the ones that had shaped their own lives. Each of these stories claimed to describe a life well-lived; yet it was a life defined not on individual terms, but by the author’s sense of what was considered to be appropriate. These expectations left marks on the form, structure, and style of autobiographical writing. And, by making a close reading of these stories, the following chapters explore how individual autobiographies were shaped by similar attitudes and, in particular, three processes – three sets of expectations – about how a life should be lived.

As we will see, by far the most visible of these processes was the autobiographers’ acute awareness of social boundaries. Assumptions about gender roles, and about age, had a remarkable effect on what was included and excluded in these stories. Thus, men’s descriptions of domesticity were often sporadic and short on detail; women’s autobiographies were more varied but, in a mirror image to men’s writing, they tended to orient themselves around family life and domestic responsibilities. This feature of autobiographical writing is unsurprising for this period, but it overlaps in turn with different perspectives on aging. Some autobiographers saw the process of getting older as one of increasing discontinuity, of a growing disjuncture between the past and present. Others, however, emphasised the continuity of their lives with those of preceding generations, particularly in working practices or in their experiences as parents. As we will see, the combination of these distinctions with those of gender led the autobiographers to three remarkably discrete areas of subject matter: they wrote either about family, or work, or about childhood.[[2]](#footnote-1) To write a story about one of these did not preclude an author from writing another autobiography on a different topic, and some did. But it was rare for authors to mix their subject matter within a single story.

It follows from this that the autobiographers had to make some sort of decision about which kind of story to write, and this seems to have involved a second process that might loosely be described as self-selection.[[3]](#footnote-2) It is hard to say precisely how this worked. But it is clear that it had to do with similar desires about what it meant to write about family life, work, and childhood. Thus, writing about family life reflected hopes for domestic respectability; writing about work drew on the respect given to skilled labour; and writing about childhood was shaped by memories of neighbourly support.[[4]](#footnote-3) It seems to have been the attraction, not the attainment, of these hopes that mattered in the autobiographers’ choice of topic. What mattered was that individual authors could demonstrate their agency in pursuing these common desires; indeed, it was the evidence of struggle that made such hopes all the more desirable.

The third process was the autobiographers’ evaluation of whether they had, in fact, lived up to expectations. Authors who felt their lives had been satisfactory tended to enjoy re-living the past through favourite anecdotes and descriptions of challenges overcome. Dissatisfied autobiographers, on the other hand, tended to be more explicit in their assessments and often sought to exonerate themselves by blaming the problems of their life on uncontrollable forces. In both cases, other kinds of social difference – not least class and ethnicity – were used to create a sense of a world outside that described by the autobiography. For authors who felt satisfied, their responses were ambivalent; for those who were dissatisfied, as we shall see, these differences became the focus of their discontent and an explanation for why society had failed them.

The following chapters explore these dynamics by looking, in turn, at autobiographies about family, work, and childhood. Each chapter is organised around the three processes described in this introduction – of boundaries, self-selection, and evaluation – and, as we will see, these produced a variety of responses. Yet alongside these idiosyncrasies, what emerges from the autobiographies are their similarities in form and content. The conclusion to Part I will argue that this relates to the force of certain expectations but, as importantly, it seems to reflect the resilience of attitudes among people who came into adulthood before World War II. As we will see in Part II, the expectations of this group – and their emphasis on social conformity – were the subject of increasing scrutiny and scepticism among later generations.[[5]](#footnote-4)

Family

In October 1925, Ifan Edwards contracted lobar pneumonia and, over the next six weeks, his wife starved herself and their young daughter so that he could eat. Their only income was Ifan’s state insurance (then 15 shillings a week) and, Ifan explained, they subsisted on this for further five months before the doctor cleared him for work. They managed to survive only by refusing to pay the rent, the cost of which Ifan promised against his future wages. But it must have been hard going.

Ifan explained all these circumstances in his autobiography, published in 1947. However, instead of describing the effect of those months on his family, he wrote about this period as one in which he had been free, as never before, to ruminate on the state of the world. ‘There was now plenty of time to think,’ he said,

and on my long walks during convalescence I thought very hard about a good many things. I looked back over my experience of industry, and what it had brought me to, and tried to see where-in lay the reason for this distress and misery […] Industry itself must furnish the clue to the riddle, so I would study industry, its history and its mode of operation. There was plenty of time for reading it all up, so I looked round in my usual haunt at the public library’.[[6]](#footnote-5)

In the following pages, we are treated to a lengthy description of Ifan’s reading of *Das Kapital*, which he claimed to have come across by accident, and the many hours he spent thinking – mostly inconclusively – about the implications of that book and about party politics. In the midst of all this, he mused on the unfairness of being born poor and the ‘listless crowds of thin-faced women at the relieving officer’s door’. But of his wife’s hunger, or that of his daughter, he said nothing.[[7]](#footnote-6)

This chapter explores how descriptions of family life were shaped by three processes. Firstly, boundaries defined by expected gender roles had a marked effect on what women and men wrote: many men, Ifan Edwards included, said little about their wives or children; and, as a consequence, much autobiographical writing about family life was by women. In and of itself, however, this hardly does justice to the writing of these women. Rather, there seems to have been a second process in which these autobiographers were self-selecting: each of them used a variety of rhetorical strategies to emphasise their conformity and, especially, their agency in building a satisfactory life for their family. Domestic respectability was not seen as straightforward to achieve, however, and in a third, evaluative, process the women tended to draw firm conclusions about their success or failure. As we shall see, this led to several stories of self-satisfied domesticity but, among the women who felt their lives had fallen short, self-assessment produced some of the most frustrated and angry autobiographies written by quotidian authors.

Boundaries

Men often turned family stories into ones about themselves. Patrick McGeown, writing in the mid-1960s, used a chapter on ‘marriage’ to describe his return to work after illness; the loss of his life savings at the greyhound track; a debate extra pay in lieu of the wedding; his signing on for the dole; his contact with neighbours and people roundabout; his commute to work; a side-job selling ice-cream – in fact, most things except his fiancé, the wedding, married life, or their children.[[8]](#footnote-7) Patrick turned to his family only at the end of the chapter and, seemingly, he might have written half a book not half a paragraph about the events of the late-1920s:

A lot happened during the years [we lived] in Ancoats. Our first child Kevin Peter was born and died there while still an infant. My wife was ill for [a] long time but recovered completely. My mother died, and that was the greatest blow, for I wondered how my father would fare without her. He took it sensibly, peacefully, and kept his grief to himself. My sister Anna Mary kept house for him, and there were only the two of them, for my brother Peter had married and was living near the steelworks.[[9]](#footnote-8)

Rather than dwell on the implications of all this, Patrick immediately turned the narrative back to himself for, though his father was aging, ‘I was in good trim, and lean after the fashion of most steel melters’.[[10]](#footnote-9) And better still, ‘I had some money in the bank; that was nothing wonderful but the determination which put it there was an unusual feature for me.’[[11]](#footnote-10)

Other men were, if anything, even less forthcoming. The closest many got to a description of their home life was the briefest of appearances of their wives and children – often as just that: ‘my wife’ or ‘the children’. The important moments shared between couples and within families - like courtship and proposals, marriage, or the birth of a child - were often left out or, if they were mentioned, then it tended to be a sentence or two in an aside from the main story.[[12]](#footnote-11) Such silences reflected an acute sense of gender roles. When male autobiographers mentioned their families – unless it was to do with some major event, like marriage or death - it was almost always to do with their failure as breadwinners. In fact, men often produced their most intimate writing when describing such moments.[[13]](#footnote-12) Joe Bloomberg, a London docker, wrote almost nothing in his autobiography about his wife or children, bar one story from the 1930s:

in the beginning of December […] we were asked whether we would like ten shillings as a Christmas Box or a turkey. I chose the turkey and when I got home that night told my wife Rose, “We'll be alright at Christmas as I'll be getting a turkey.” The day before Christmas arrived and there were about eight hundred people working on the site, we all lined up, to get our wages but no turkey. I was told I didn't warrant one. My inside turned over, everyone had received an [sic] Christmas Box but me […] That night I cried in front of my wife. I have never felt so humiliated in my life.[[14]](#footnote-13)

Not all men were quite so revealing. But almost all men’s autobiographies offered a picture of domestic contentment based, for the most part, on a balanced reciprocity between a husband’s contribution as wage-earner and a wife’s responsibilities for childrearing and management of the household.[[15]](#footnote-14) The women, as they are described in these books, are notably mainly for their quiescence: their lack of complaint and amenability to their husband’s wishes; and their apparent disinterest in work.

While most men said little about family life, the exception were stories by men who felt themselves almost incapable of fulfilling their breadwinning responsibilities. The autobiographies of disabled men were especially preoccupied with an idealised domesticity and the difficulties of achieving it – of earning a wage and, in turn, of finding a woman who accepted them.[[16]](#footnote-15) Leo Harris, who contracted polio as an infant, recalled desperately wanting ‘to live with a wife and kids in a tidy home reading the newspaper on Sundays, going to work at nine and returning at five to a big steaming mug of tea, and a pair of slippers in front of the fire’.[[17]](#footnote-16) For Leo, the consuming anxiety of his early adult life was to find and marry a woman who was not be repulsed by the sight of his twisted legs. He felt that women seen with him were objects of curiosity and that most viewed him with ‘mocking revulsion’; during sex he would cover his legs and, when one girl tried to remove his calliper, he punched and kicked her before fleeing from the house.[[18]](#footnote-17)

The experience of many of these men, they felt, was to be ridiculed and ostracised; and many of them believed that only an exceptional woman would be willing to marry them.[[19]](#footnote-18) This belief allowed the men to relate the challenges in their relationships to their disability, rather than look more critically at themselves. Allan Counsell, who was brain damaged at birth and lived with severe speech difficulties, emphasised the exceptional qualities of his wife and the environment she provided as one of unconditional ‘assurance and security’ and in turn, he said, this made him feel ‘a great deal less handicapped.’[[20]](#footnote-19) But Allan had little to say about what he contributed to the relationship; rather, he described marriage as an achievement in and of itself since neither he, nor those around him, expected his life to match up to social norms. When Allan did succeed in becoming engaged, he wrote that not only were his parents were delighted, but their neighbours rushed over in such numbers that the house ‘became like Piccadilly Circus’.[[21]](#footnote-20)

These men rarely challenged the stigma attached to disability. Instead they were preoccupied with breadwinning or, rather, were deeply troubled by the prospect of dependency: characteristically, what concerned them was not the health of their wife, but their own mental strain. Peter Marshall was paralysed by polio in his late teens and fell in love with his nurse during a prolonged stay in hospital. Together they dreamed of marriage and three children and a bungalow. But Peter worried about his ability to ‘live an ordinary family life’ and the emotional strain of dependency: ‘The day-to-day attention, the dependence on others who might be tired or busy. Would the cripple feel he was in the way, a burden, and if he did would it destroy him?’[[22]](#footnote-21) John Petty, who suffered from an undescribed psychological condition, described much the same anxiety in his autobiography to a love affair with a teenage girl. When he realised he could not earn enough to keep them, John said it was his decision – and not his girlfriend’s – that ended the relationship:

“I would have only sick benefit – and I think it’s twenty-six bob a week. In other words” – she was bolt upright again, her mouth tight and her eyes glitteringly hostile – “in other words I would be partially dependent on you. Think of how I would feel”, I pleaded […] “How do you think I would feel? There I would be sitting or lying about all day, waiting for a girl to come in after a hard day’s work in a factory – a girl who would be on the threshold of life and enjoyment.”[[23]](#footnote-22)

John’s story closes a few years later, in the mid-1950s, when he described seeing his former love - now a ‘middle-class’ housewife - and his bitter-sweet satisfaction that she, at least, had found domestic contentment.[[24]](#footnote-23)

Men’s writing about family life is strikingly inconsequential. John Petty’s mother felt acutely the differences between her domestic life and that of their neighbours who, by the early-1950s, could afford a car, good clothes, and long summer holidays.[[25]](#footnote-24) John’s attitude towards their neighbours, who affected the dress and accent of the ‘middle-classes’, was that they had fallen into ‘shallowness, a bastardisation and often a screamingly-funny distortion of voice and manner and character’.[[26]](#footnote-25) He saw little to envy in their lives and, when his mother finally gave vent to her feelings, he thought she had gone mad. One Christmas, John said, he and his father were woken by a prolonged screaming:

For a month or so she was lost - like those people in mental homes who are beyond ordinary life - then there was a sharp change. She became unusually active; from morning to night she scrubbed and she cleaned, and she polished […] She poured out what must have been festering in her mind for years: the hard life she had had, the joys she had missed, the good times and the pleasures she would have had if she had married another man. “What a fool I have been!” she would say. “What a fool I have been!”[[27]](#footnote-26)

Rather than take his mother’s feelings seriously, John put this outburst down to a mental deterioration. She had caught tuberculosis while John was at school and, he said, ‘For years she was mildly eccentric’ before this ‘acute and astonishing deterioration’.[[28]](#footnote-27) Like so many men, John managed to turn this episode back to himself, speculating that his mother’s condition was the antecedent of his own.[[29]](#footnote-28)

Well into the 1970s, men effectively precluded themselves from writing about domesticity unless it could be directly linked to their ability, or mistakes, as breadwinners. Women, on the other hand, wrote about their working lives, childhood, and their experiences of domesticity and childrearing. Among those women who chose to write about family life, the descriptions of domesticity are frequently as conformist to gender roles as the autobiographies of men. As we shall see, however, women who wrote about domesticity did so not only to demonstrate their conformity but also to assert their agency.

Self-Selection

Women’s writing about family life is as much about the desirability of respectability as its attainment. None of these women described their pasts as being wholly respectable: instead, their autobiographies are often characterised by a tension between the demonstration of their respectability and a desire to show how difficult it had been to achieve. Though it is not always immediately obvious, these stories are frequently preoccupied with the women’s autonomy and their agency in striving to meet social expectations – even when the goal of respectability comes close to fantasy. Jane Walsh, whose story was not a happy one, remembered a house she and her husband had bought in the 1920s and, especially, the possibilities it had held of a different life:

There was an entrance hall with the stairs going up from the middle, a sitting-room on the edge of the hall, with a big bow-window, a cupboard under the stairs, and a big kitchen-living-room, with the sink concealed behind a sliding door. Upstairs were one large and two small bedrooms, with a little bathroom. Hot water was supplied from a tiled range in the living-room. There was a bit of a garden back and front – a magnetic attraction for me. How we admired and exclaimed![[30]](#footnote-29)

The rooms, the size of the windows, the garden, the bathroom were all signs of a new domesticity and, Jane said, they allowed her to dream of a happy life with children. Eventually Jane and her husband had to give the house up and, when they were back living in a cramped inner-city court, it became harder than ever to imagine the sort of life they had wanted. Her husband, she wrote, would not even discuss the possibility of having children: ‘“What,” he asked, “is there to bring children into the world for? God knows we’ve worked and we’ve tried, and what have we had? Just one long struggle to exist […]”’.[[31]](#footnote-30)

Even in the happier versions of these stories, domestic respectability was not a straightforward thing to achieve, for it involved multiple expectations around marriage and emotional intimacy, children and childrearing, and standards of domestic material comfort.[[32]](#footnote-31) These three themes recur throughout women’s writing about family life in greater or lesser detail. What was critical, however, was that these expectations worked in combination: Jane Walsh, who was left widowed and living in a tenement flat, felt her life had fallen far short. On the other hand, Gertrude Sutton, writing a few years later, explained that her happiest years had been when they had furnished the house, when her husband no longer went out drinking or flirting with other women, and when she was repaid for her childcare when her children found themselves good jobs:

What a treat to live properly. The children were able to ask their friends in. We had a garden and all the family worked on it. By now my boys were very handy [at] doing jobs. They built a summerhouse in the garden and Frank, my husband, painted everything green and white. We planted flowers, it was very nice and everyone was happy. By this time Frank, my husband, seldom went out, except to work […] He spent a lot of time at home […] The eldest boy used to play football, just a little club in our street, and all the boys used to come to our sitting room for the meetings. After they would have a sing-song, because we had a piano and a jazz-band by then. They used to be grand nights. I would make them tea and biscuits.[[33]](#footnote-32)

Gertrude’s husband died in an accident in the early-1940s. But although this may have made her life easier in some respects (her husband not appearing to have been an easy man), and although her house and children remained well cared-for, Gertrude seems to have thought that her domestic situation was no longer what it was. Indeed, after her husband’s death, she truncated her narrative covering fifteen years in barely two pages, much of which was to do with her search for new accommodation after her house was marked for demolition in the mid-1950s.[[34]](#footnote-33)

Partly, these autobiographies are concerned with demonstrating the present respectability of their authors. After she had written her autobiography, Gertrude’s grandson, David, noticed several differences between her written recollections and what he remembered of her family storytelling, settled in her favourite armchair, ‘one hand tucked under the other elbow and a “fag” being waved in the air’.[[35]](#footnote-34) Some of what David noticed was language: there was ‘undoubtedly some gentrification in my grandmother’s memoirs of her earlier days. The front room was surely always “the front room”, not “the parlour” in our circles and certainly not “the sitting room” as she refers to it. Terms like “dining room” and “vegetable dishes” and “lunch-time” sound as improbable [in the text of the manuscript] as her later standard reference to her meals as “steak with an egg on it”.’[[36]](#footnote-35) But as well as shifts in vocabulary, David realised that Gertrude had left out several ‘expected anecdotes’:

There is no extended reference to the fights in Corbett’s Lane [where Gertrude lived as a child] or [nearby] under the [railway] Arches. There is little about clothes, no mention of the famous 14s. 11d[.] hat which she bought with savings from her first paid job, at fourteen […]despite the forgivable vanity of much later years with her insistent shuffling of velvet toque hats, black dresses, shoes, wigs, and heights of heels. There is nothing of the rather vague and perhaps over-emphasised family tradition that my grandfather, as a young man, had ‘trodden the boards’ in local music halls, singing the songs of the place and period, even as an amateur.[[37]](#footnote-36)

In fact, Gertrude made a quite systematic job of cutting out stories that impinged on her ideas of ‘“Self respect” and “keeping up appearances” and “being respectable” and “good manners”’.[[38]](#footnote-37) In a few cases she edited her anecdotes, even sacrificing the punchline, for the sake of propriety. Gertrude’s autobiography described one episode when she had taken her sister’s prized hat, without permission, for a night out at the South London Music Hall. In her manuscript Gertrude wrote austerely that she had ‘arrived home to find my sister waiting for me’. David, however, connected the episode with a more colourful family story, ‘customarily remembered as finishing with my great-aunt hanging out of an upstairs window to shout at her sister, “Gert, have you got my best hat?”’[[39]](#footnote-38)

Yet, while it was important to assert their respectability, these women were equally keen to demonstrate their agency; to show that, whilst they had kept up appearances, being respectable and keeping one’s self-respect had not been at all straightforward. Gertrude Sutton, while self-editing her writing, was also willing to admit that the early years of her marriage had been marred by her husband’s drinking, his violence, his disinterest in their children, and a tendency to play around with other women. While Gertrude said relatively little about this behaviour, she was happy to write, at some length, about episodes that underlined her commitment to her children – not least her habit of shaking down her husband’s clothes in the hope of finding some loose change. Eventually he became suspicious and Gertrude seems to have relished telling a few stories of their cat-and-mouse games:

[I]f he had had a drink more than he should, he was very careful. He would reckon [up] what money he [had] and write [the amount] in chalk on the sole of his boots. After he had gone to sleep I would [take some money from his wallet and] alter [the figures]. Believe me, I became an expert. Another time I got into bed [and felt] something hard as I turned: my husband had tied his money to the tail of his shirt. I untied it, took some, and tied it up again.[[40]](#footnote-39)

Throughout all this, Gertrude was careful to underline her inherent respectability. ‘I suppose some people will think this was awful of me’, she wrote, adding later that, ‘This all seems dreadful’.[[41]](#footnote-40) But it was worth including such a confession for what it did to her reputation as a mother and, more generally, for holding up the standards expected of her husband: after all, she said, it was only right that his wages go towards the care of their children.[[42]](#footnote-41)

Another way of combining claims to respectability with agency was to use humour. An author’s autonomy could be underlined through of disreputable behaviour that, to protect their present respectability, was then passed off merely as an entertaining episode. Dorothy Scannell’s sequence of three autobiographies – all published in the 1970s – tell a conventional and largely unremarkable story: she grows up in a loving East End family; leaves school at fourteen; finds work for a few years; marries a promising young man; acquires a house; has children; survives the war; runs a grocery shop; and, eventually, she and her husband leave London for suburban Essex. But Dorothy her writing is full of anecdotes about how she had tested the bounds of respectable behaviour. In one episode, Dorothy described how she had bought an expensive wool bathing suit – in jade green – that was intended to leave her future husband ‘overcome’ at the sight of her beauty. It was a hot day and, with no one left on the beach, she joined her sister and friends in the sea:

Suddenly two hands grabbed me round the knees and dragged me under the water. I was choking and struggling and fighting to get to the surface when I heard [my sister] Marjorie’s frantic voice. “Keep under the water until I can help you, your costume’s stretched and you look naked.” [Once they managed, somehow, to get back onto the beach, they realised] It was difficult to know what to be done, embarrassment all round, for I couldn’t go home naked under a frock. Suppose the wind blew. Then a young man appeared from some bushes and handed me his pants. “It’s the best I can do,” he said.[[43]](#footnote-42)

Dorothy often used sex and bodily intimacies as the basis for a good story, but also her determinations to act in and of her own accord.[[44]](#footnote-43) Equally, however, none of Dorothy’s anecdotes seriously implicated her respectability; rather, they tended to accentuate it, since she could then demonstrate how well she now understood the expectations that made the story funny. After the bathing-suit episode, she was careful to add that her mother was so ‘disgusted’ for her to have worn something ‘so depraved’ that ‘for the first time in my life she looked as though she wanted to slap me.’[[45]](#footnote-44)

Not all women were quite so adept in managing the tension between agency and respectability. Joyce Crump’s autobiography, published in 1980, was composed through a series of tape recordings. This process produced a rare moment where we see an autobiographer at work and, particularly, how Joyce was torn between desires to show that she lived respectability and, on the other hand, how difficult it had been to achieve.[[46]](#footnote-45) Joyce had grown up in a series of Barnardo’s homes, one of which she decided to visit as part of the making of her autobiography. But on the night of the visit, she was unable to sleep ‘because I was worried about the impression’:

I didn’t want them to come to my place. I’m not ashamed – but I wouldn’t have them here. Mind you it’s no thanks to them. Maybe later on when my son Roy gets new furniture and gives me his old I’d be happy for them to come to my home so they can see I’m doing all right. The only new furniture I’ve had in 27 years is one new bed – all the rest is what people have given me.

Maybe I feel a bit guilty about the way I live. Lots of mums have got better homes than I have, and they keep them better [...][[47]](#footnote-46)

What is striking about this passage is the way Joyce seems to triangulate towards a concern for respectability, self-editing as she went, from the defensive ‘I’m not ashamed’, to the more ambivalent ‘I’m doing all right’, to her admission that, ‘Maybe I feel a bit guilty’. At the same time, the tension was never fully resolved: after confessing that other mums had nicer homes, Joyce again defended her own choices saying that such tidiness was restrictive for children, ‘They don’t learn by that. They learn by messing about.’[[48]](#footnote-47)

For women who wrote (rather than recorded) their autobiography, rhetorical strategies offered a way of describing the past whilst also protecting their respectability in the present. Different approaches were sometimes combined, particularly in the writing of women like Gertrude and Dorothy, both of whom evidently enjoyed a good story. However, the larger significance of these techniques is what they say about the desirability of domestic respectability to these women. They wrote about family life partly to demonstrate their social conformity but, perhaps more so, because it allowed them to describe their agency and self-reliance in struggling and striving to make a better life. These women rarely challenge the boundaries of their autonomy; they implied, rather, that it had been difficult enough achieving what they had. Nevertheless, as we will now see, there were some women who felt satisfied with their lives, and there were those who felt that circumstances had put respectability almost completely out of reach.

Evaluation

Autobiographers who claimed to be satisfied with their lives, women like Gertrude Sutton and Dorothy Scannell, tended not to explore the reasons for their success. Instead their writing tends to assume their respectability and, for the most part, their stories are distinctive mostly for the blandness with which events and relationships are described. The drama of these stories comes mainly from mild disagreements between family members; rarely, if at all, are more alarming or disruptive events allowed to intrude. Elizabeth Flint’s autobiography of her married life included the death of her infant son during the 1930s and, at the end of the book, the tragic deaths of her father and nephew as they ran for shelter during the Blitz. Elizabeth kept to herself her feelings at the loss of her child, except to say that she and her husband were later ‘afraid of fate where babies were concerned’.[[49]](#footnote-48) She also avoided describing her reactions, or those of her family, to the killing of her father and his grandson; the significance of those deaths was marked not so much in what Elizabeth wrote as that that they mark an abrupt end to the book. In fact, the main subject of Elizabeth’s story was not the war or personal sorrow, but family differences about the material standards of domestic respectability. Elizabeth and her sisters had turned their back on their mother’s ‘happy, dirty kitchen’ and moved away from the inner-city to a different sort of life: Elizabeth to a small farm outside of London; her eldest sister to Dagenham; and her younger sister for Woodford and a house, Elizabeth noted, with a three-piece suite, an indoor toilet, and lino in the kitchen. For their parents, Elizabeth said, these new desires were incomprehensible – ‘How could they understand? How could they possibly understand?’ – and this caused, in turn, a long-running feud between her parents and younger sister. [[50]](#footnote-49) This dispute is the dramatic thread that runs through Elizabeth’s book, starting with the moment when her sister walked out on their parents and, towards the end of the book, when they moved towards a reconciliation. It was, she admitted, ‘Such a little thing’ to fall out over. But, in making it her central theme, it also underlined the bland irreproachability of her own domesticity: the pleasures of moving in, of her family’s visits, Christmas at the farm, and the birth of her children.

Social differences are not frequently discussed in these autobiographies. The social division that appeared most often was class, but what the women had to say tended to be not simply ambivalent, but almost ostentatiously disinterested. In one passage, Dorothy Scannell remembered that her father would bang the table and shout for ‘better conditions for the workers’; her mother, meanwhile, would refuse to complain about the inequities of her earlier domestic service, and would not be drawn into an argument. She would ‘smile gently and he knew, however fierce he waxed, that she would remain a Conservative’; at this, Dorothy said her father ‘nearly choked when he thought of what Kier Hardie, Beatrice Webb and Ramsay Macdonald (well not so much him) had done for Mother and she was still disloyal to her class’.[[51]](#footnote-50) Dorothy hinted at some disapproval of her father’s radicalism in the sense that it linked, somehow, to his ability to be ‘selfish and sometimes uncouth’.[[52]](#footnote-51) But the story’s purpose was really to praise of her mother’s level-headedness in the face of class difference. As Dorothy approvingly noted, her mother never used her tales of domestic service to complain and, in Dorothy’s rendering, she applied as similar equanimity to her husband’s behaviour. ‘[S]elfish as he was [Mother] was very proud of him, and his comfort and well-being were her chief concerns’; she nursed him when he was ill, scrimped to send him out to work with a shilling in his pocket, and even ‘washed and disinfected his spittoon’.[[53]](#footnote-52)

Elsewhere in her writing Dorothy suggested that, much as relations between husband and wife were based on a respectful reciprocity, so were the divisions between the classes. She noted that her mother’s ‘high born’ employers had treated her ‘like the “lady and gentleman” they were […] They *requested* a service from her and did not demand it’; by contrast, Dorothy’s mother in law had been in service to employers who were ‘in trade’ and who purposely pronounced her name wrongly to impress upon her ‘(the mistress’s) superiority of class’.[[54]](#footnote-53) Reciprocity of this sort could incorporate a sense of personal foibles - one of the favourite stories told by Dorothy’s mother was the demands of one employer who called up the ‘many flights of stairs’ in their house because he ‘thought his bathmat wasn’t quite straight’.[[55]](#footnote-54) But reciprocity across classes also involved a degree of self-depreciation or, as Dorothy put it, ‘We would listen as little children to the tales of “the gentry”, of the enormous joints of meat and of the terrible waste of lovely food. The larders were bigger than our little house […]’.[[56]](#footnote-55) Jean Rennie, writing in the mid-1970s, took this a stage further in her description of ‘Mrs Helen Johnson’, director of a wartime Red Cross Services Club, and Jean’s former employer at a services club in Scotland. Jean recalled that, sitting in a café in Norwich,

I was having coffee when I noticed at a table near a corner, an American officer and a woman in an officer’s blue uniform. [Jean passed a note, through the waitress:] Gracefully she stood up, and her escort stood with her. She came across, and I jumped to my feet. If there is an awkward way of doing things, I’ll find it. Like a gawky, awkward school girl, I stood there as she shook hands with me. I felt elated, presumptuous, happy, proud and gormless; she had such poise…. Oh, if only I could have the grace and poise that *she* had![[57]](#footnote-56)

So impressed was Jean that she dedicated her book to this woman and included a portrait photograph of her. More than this, however, Jean projected onto Helen not only her feelings of inadequacy, but a glamorous – and effectively unreachable – life. On seeing Johnson’s makeshift bedroom, in a headquarters in the bishop’s palace in Norwich, Jean concluded approvingly that it ‘should have been on a Hollywood set’.[[58]](#footnote-57) And, though she could barely remember the man Helen had married, Jean had no doubt that the latter ‘had lost a dear husband’, a man who was ‘always at her side’.[[59]](#footnote-58)

Such passages suggest that domestic respectability afforded these women a way of inhabiting class. The lives of the upper- and even the middle-classes were often described as impossibly distant; but this, in turn, allowed these women to describe their own agency without appearing to be envious of those of higher status or material wealth. In 1915 Gertrude Sutton had been forced to seek parish relief and, on attending the local office, was berated by for having ‘brought four children into the world, and thrown them on the rate-payers to keep’.[[60]](#footnote-59) In Gertrude’s telling, however, this story became not about the unfairness of class but about her personal determination to take care of her family, whatever the cost. She had crept out of the house while her husband was asleep ‘so he did not know that I had gone’ and, when confronted by the relief officer about when her children had last eaten, she described herself as replying:

Dinner time and you are going to give them their tea. Do you not realise that, if it were not for poor people like me, you would not have your job and if we were all like you the community would stand still. All my children were born in wedlock […] I am not ashamed of them.[[61]](#footnote-60)

Gertrude was not interested in challenging the difference between the officer and ‘poor people like me’; in fact, she purposely rejected the idea that everyone might be ‘like you’. What counted more was her agency in going through this ordeal for her children and, indeed, her inherent sense of respectability, illustrated through her children’s legitimacy of her children.

If domestic respectability often depended on women’s determination, it followed that disreputable lives were evidence of a failure of agency. Thus, for women to fail without fear of recrimination involved a massive constriction of their freedom of action. And, indeed, the few women who wrote about the failure of domesticity described their lives as ones of prolonged misfortune. Jane Walsh’s autobiography, written in the early-1950s, described sequentially: the loss of her first relationship; her failure to keep up the mortgage on her ‘dream house’; the death of her husband; her daughter’s diagnosis with polio; her inability to move from a cramped three-room flat; and, towards the end of the book, her own nervous breakdown.[[62]](#footnote-61) Claire Langhamer has argued that, in the years after 1945, people’s hopes for marriage created ‘the possibility of greater disappointment if the gap between expectation and reality grew too great or volatile’.[[63]](#footnote-62) Certainly, it is hard to understate Jane’s sense of disappointment. She vividly remembered her first love, ‘every line of his face, and the crinkles by his eyes when he laughed, and the shape of his long, beautiful hands’.[[64]](#footnote-63) Particularly painful, though, was the memory of losing her house, into which she had poured an imagined future of settled domesticity:

The day we moved, when everything was packed in the van, I took a last look around my dream house. Silently I stood awhile in each room. I felt beaten. I was losing everything I had struggled for. A few hours would find me back where I started from, in Number Five Court … with dustbins to look at instead of trees … I closed the door for the last time. Not only on my dream house, but on my dream children. They were farther away than ever.[[65]](#footnote-64)

Not content simply to describe the ups and downs of her life, Jane often played with narrative time, passing quickly over periods of contentment to move onto the next misfortune.[[66]](#footnote-65) Jane tried to end her story on a more positive note but this, too, she found difficult. Instead, she celebrated meeting someone who shared her belief in limited fulfilment. Jane’s daughter, a scholarship girl, dreamed of going to university but, when Jane took her to see a Higher Education Officer, he told her not to bother. ‘He was sensible,’ Jane wrote approvingly. ‘He didn’t advocate university – airily assuming, as some people do who have never tried to get it, that we would be given help. He just ruled it out.’[[67]](#footnote-66) With her daughter set to go to training college, Jane claimed she had done what she could. It was a process of learning to ‘make the best of things’, a formulation which turned out to be code for acclimatising herself to disappointment, ‘just as one gets used to the shadow of a blank brick wall in front of one’s only window’.[[68]](#footnote-67)

By the 1970s, such disappointments seem to have led some women to question domestic respectability, particularly marriage.[[69]](#footnote-68) Joyce Crump’s autobiography described a Barnardo’s childhood followed by a lengthy violent relationship in which both she and her infant son were abused. Without reflecting directly on her own experience, Joyce nevertheless described marriage as a trap and was at best ambivalent about its benefits:

I never stopped my kids from getting married. In a way I’d like to see them married: but neither of them bothered. I don’t believe in marriage. It’s all the bother of getting a divorce and separation and all. I just never bothered with getting married. I never would. I think there’s more respect with people that are living together. I mean, they have their rows; but they seem closer together and more attached to the kids than they do if they get married.[[70]](#footnote-69)

Joyce’s attitudes echo evidence from other sources of a shift in this period towards romantic love as the foundation of lasting relationships – an attitude, Claire Langhamer argues, that had a destabilising effect on marriage.[[71]](#footnote-70) Certainly, Joyce’s attitudes – along with those of other dissatisfied women writing in the 1970s – are some distance from those of Jane Walsh, writing twenty years earlier. For Jane, it mattered that her husband was ‘gentle’, but mainly she saw attracted him for his dependability and level-headedness. ‘He was unlike the other boys in the neighbourhood’, she wrote, ‘because he didn’t drink and he didn’t swear, and he talked to a girl in a sensible and friendly way, instead of with a lot of smart-aleck chatter.’[[72]](#footnote-71) She added, apparently with relief, that after her first whirl-wind romance, ‘Our courtship followed a much more usual fashion. We went round together, for a long time just as friends, without any love-making.’[[73]](#footnote-72)

In other ways, however, there are fewer differences between Jane and women like Joyce Crump. They each shared an acute sense of disappointment in their family lives and, especially, a feeling of obligations and guilt towards their children.[[74]](#footnote-73) Jane described her agony at the sight of her daughter, stricken with polio, climbing the stairs to her flat; the patching on their ‘sheets blankets, floor coverings, table linen’; her inability to afford clothes and supplies for her eldest daughters; and her sadness at her youngest daughter’s unconditional love: .

‘Do we look poor, darling?’ I asked her.

She looked around the bedroom critically.

‘Oh no,’ she said.

She loved our bits and pieces, and a child has no sense of money value. A few bright flowers can dress a room up beautifully for them. They’d lived with shabbiness too long to notice it.[[75]](#footnote-74)

Such admissions were not easy to make. Among the later autobiographers, Joyce Crump’s is the most candid story and the most expressive of her feelings of guilt. After her first abusive relationship, which lasted six years, Joyce admitted that she had tried to give her son away, first leaving him at a police station with an instruction to ‘“put him in Barnardo’s”’ and then placing him for adoption (the adoptees sent him back into care).[[76]](#footnote-75) Later, she described in some detail how the same man had abused their son, passages that are notable in the context of the rest of her writing for Joyce’s absence. In fact, many of Joyce’s descriptions of her children project a lack of agency and, seemingly, her guilt in being unable to protect them. Joyce’s daughter came back from school one day,

with a questionnaire thing (which apparently they still do) ‘does your dad live with you?’ ‘does your dad work?’ ‘does your mother work?’ ‘what’s your mother like?’ ‘how do you get on with your mother?’ ‘have you a television? is it a colour? has your dad got a car?’ ‘has your mother got a car?’ ‘do you sleep with your mother?’ ‘have you got your own bed? have you got your own bedroom?’ – and things like that. Linda came home to me in tears and said to me, ‘How can I answer this? all I can answer is that I’ve got a mother, and a brother at boarding school.’ At that time we never had a telly or anything.[[77]](#footnote-76)

Joyce insisted she did ‘live for my kids’, but she found it more difficult to describe their behavioural problems - her son was sent to a ‘boarding school’; and her daughter expelled for two years, though aged not much more than ten.[[78]](#footnote-77)

What these disappointed women had most in common, however, was that they vented their frustrations – and laid much of the blame for their misfortunes – on class. Early in Jane Walsh’s book she described an episode, in the 1924 general election, when her neighbourhood was visited by the wife of the Conservative candidate: a ‘Lady X’ who, Jane said, ‘was doing a bit of slum-canvassing for her husband’.[[79]](#footnote-78) ‘“[C]ould you tell me,”’ Jane asked her, ‘“what your husband – and you – know about *our* lives? And how can he do anything for us if he doesn’t?”’

There was a murmur of agreement from the [other women gathered around], and Lady X began to look uncomfortable. ‘He’ll explain all that better than I can,’ she said, ‘and he’ll be most happy to answer your questions at his meeting to-night in the Jubilee Hall. Six o’clock, – you will come, won’t you?’

A sudden spasm crossed the faces of the group. It was a smile, a pitying, condescending smile for this beautiful lady who was trying so hard, and being so daft. ‘Six o’clock?’ said one woman. ‘And who’s to get our men’s tea?’[[80]](#footnote-79)

Time and again, Jane pointed out how poorly the working-class were understood. Pregnant with her first child, her doctor suggested she get in someone help with the housework – a thought that made Jane laugh.[[81]](#footnote-80) More often, however, this lack of understanding led in Jane’s writing to her humiliation. She is spoken to ‘like a criminal’ by one of her doctors; her application for public assistance is turned down by ‘a young man wearing very loud plus fours’, who sits filing his nails as she sets out her story; and another clerk, ‘a young man with a very self-assured attitude’, tells her that ‘“we expect young women like yourself to get married again.”’.[[82]](#footnote-81) Jane’s children are also described as suffering class prejudice. Her eldest daughter is shamed for receiving free milk at school;[[83]](#footnote-82) her youngest daughter, taken on holiday by a ‘charitable institution’, hears ‘someone say we were, “the poor children from the home”’.[[84]](#footnote-83) When Jane uses an education grant to buy her daughter a new school uniform, and adds gym knickers to the list, the assistant in ‘an expensive shop’ claims, ‘in a loud voice that navy blue knickers were not “uniform” […] She took up a phone on the end of the counter, and, having got through to the person she wanted, discussed it at the top of her voice, waving my credit note in her free hand. By this time every eye was on me; every ear was listening […] when I looked down at my poor little Margaret I saw her bottom lip was trembling.’[[85]](#footnote-84)

Each of these women projected their difficulties onto class and, in turn, each of their books addresses a middle-class readership whom they hope to educate. For Jane this involved going to some paints to spell out the practical realities of her daily life – as in the improvements to her diet and clothing when her husband’s wage had gone up to ‘the dazzling sum of £2 14s. a week’.[[86]](#footnote-85) Later autobiographers were, if not more bitter, then certainly more confrontational. May Hobbs, writing in the early-1970s, complained that:

There are books about the East End, like Arthur Morrison’s *A Child of the Jago* [1896], and people read them and think that is what it was all like, with honour among thieves and that kind of crap. To anyone who has actually lived in the East End such books read like packs of lies. No one that ever lived in a house in the Jago and worried about where their next meal was coming from wrote about how it seemed to them. Such books have all been written by middle-class authors for whom the East End was like a figment of their imaginations. They only saw what they wanted to see there.[[87]](#footnote-86)

May said that one of her reasons for writing was ‘to correct the picture’. And like Jane Walsh, this correction involved the re-education of her readership: ‘it was so much easier’, she wrote, for the ‘upper and middle classes […] to have in other people to wash their children’s shitty nappies and pissy drawers, and then hire some poor husbandless old cow, known as a nanny and in need of a couple of shillings, to look after their children’.[[88]](#footnote-87) May hoped her book were encourage her readers, ‘to take a good long look at how all your privileges have been founded on misery’.[[89]](#footnote-88)

Joyce Crump, reflecting on the problems of her own life and the lives she read about in magazines, commented that:

some of the things they write upset me. I think to myself, ‘They’re not speaking the truth.’ You know, they say: ‘Their hobbies are walking and children and cooking.’ To me, it’s ridiculous. I know there are people who live like it, because I’ve been in service. To me, they’re not real people. They can’t be living real lives.[[90]](#footnote-89)

Joyce said she had written her book, ‘to tell you about my real life’ – the ‘you’ suggesting she imagined a readership that would find it difficult to believe that Joyce’s experiences really did belong in British society. At the same time, like May Hobbs, Joyce’s assertion that her life was ‘real’, and those in her magazines were not, hinted at her class consciousness: that it was the lives of the working class that held real value, with her autobiography a way of forcing the middle-class to pay attention.

In fact, each of these women seems to have seen their autobiography, in and of itself, as a form of political activism. Jane, whose book was printed by the radical publisher Lawrence & Wishart, took some pleasure in quoting her correspondence with her MP.[[91]](#footnote-90) She had written to him about rising food prices and received a reply that brushed her off with the argument that, ‘The present level of taxation is already having a very serious strangling effect on trade’ and the priority ought to be ‘to restore our great country’s prosperity, and cut out waste, so that *everyone* may have a decent standard of living’.[[92]](#footnote-91) The MP noted that her ‘political views are not in sympathy with the Party to which I belong’ – presumably Conservative – and this, in turn, produced a sardonic response from Jane:

This letter filled me with awe. How ever could he know my politics? I had none. I had had no time to study them. Did the fact that I wondered why we could afford to pay countless five shillings to people with fabulous incomes and let orphans like mine live on the same amount give me some special kind of politics? It did not make sense.[[93]](#footnote-92)

Jane certainly did have a sense of her own politics.[[94]](#footnote-93) But she also made clear her limited expectations of party politics: correspondence with her MP, she said, ‘was not the place to find the answers’; the implication being that a larger shift in people’s attitudes was required.[[95]](#footnote-94)

By the 1970s, autobiographers were more activist. May Hobbs organised a group of women into a Cleaners Action Group and, soon after, found herself invited to speak at ‘meetings or to university groups’ and, eventually, at a Women’s Lib rally in Trafalgar Square.[[96]](#footnote-95) On a more modest scale, Joyce Guest spent two years setting up a local club for disabled people, which she managed to get off the ground as she was finishing her autobiography.[[97]](#footnote-96) Joyce Crump, meanwhile, led several squats and led several campaigns as part of her tenants’ association and with other local activists.[[98]](#footnote-97) Activism seems to have given Joyce a sense of her own abilities. But perhaps more importantly, it was an escape from a domestic life in which she found little reward:

All I could do before [I become involved] was sit at home and knit and do housework – I’d sooner be out in the community than indoors doing housework. It’s been a tremendous help to me. I found that before I was just sitting on my nerves. I just relied on tablets. So I looked upon the community as doing something for me as well as me helping the community. The community has made me realise what life is all about. It’s given me a lot of pleasure and a lot of happiness. It’s made me a whole person.[[99]](#footnote-98)

The other women, too, found activism more enjoyable than staying at home. Joyce Guest said it was ‘a real hard life being a woman and trying to get things done when you’re left on your own’ – and she felt she had little other option but to encourage other disabled people to campaign together.[[100]](#footnote-99) May Hobbs said, similarly, that she had decided not to go ‘back into the quiet life of a little housewife’.[[101]](#footnote-100)

The activism of these women seems to have been mirrored by their sense of a lack of agency in their domestic lives; Joyce’s dissatisfaction with sitting at home knitting and doing the housework. But their activism did not lead to a radical questioning of gender roles or, particularly, of domestic respectability. In fact, they each claimed to have been drawn into political activism by their commitment to improving the lives of other families. Joyce Crump said she had first become involved in local activism when she led a group of mothers squatting against the closure of a local day nursery (at a time when her own children were in their teens). Later, Joyce said she went on to campaign for other children’s amenities, including a local playground and zebra crossing; and she led campaigns and further squats to help homeless families find accommodation.[[102]](#footnote-101) May Hobbs wrote, similarly, that what had led her into ‘politics’ in the first place, was helping homeless families, each of whom tended to see the mother ‘separated from her kids or her man’.[[103]](#footnote-102) Joyce Guest hung onto what she called her ‘adopted family’, a pair of friends who took her on holiday with their children; outside of this, what she felt most acutely was the need for domestic appliances and material comforts that might allow her to live as other, complete, families did.[[104]](#footnote-103)

Conclusion

There seems to be a gulf between stories by women like Dorothy Scannell, whose writing is full of humour and self-satisfaction, and those of someone like Jane Walsh, whose disappointment flows through every chapter of her autobiography. The circumstances that Jane related about her life, of poverty and widowhood and class indifference, seem incomparable with the contentedness that underpins Dorothy’s descriptions of her family life in North London. In other ways, however, the autobiographies of these two women are quite similar. Both women had working lives that they talked down.[[105]](#footnote-104) Both of their stories are structured around their courtship and marriage, the birth of their children, and their attempts to find better accommodation. Both women were preoccupied, too, with conformity. They each interpreted family life as involving well-cared-for children, a degree of material comfort, and a relationship that included emotional as well as material reciprocity. Throughout their books, both women used various rhetorical devices to show how they strived to attain these things, against the whims of circumstance, personal error (in Dorothy’s case), and (for Jane) the prejudice and misunderstandings of class.

Autobiographies about family life are often markedly similar in their structure and the way they are framed, in what is included and excluded. They are one side of a sharply defined boundary between domesticity and working life: it is striking that men were so unwilling to write about their families; but it is just as noticeable that women’s descriptions of domesticity rarely encroached into the working lives of their husbands. As we have seen, the women who chose to write about family life did so partly from a desire to express their conformity with social norms, but also because they felt that descriptions of family life would allow them to demonstrate their agency.[[106]](#footnote-105) For Gertrude Sutton it was possible to tell many stories about how she had strived, through difficult circumstances, to put her family on a respectable footing. The same logic applied for Jane Walsh: despite her pessimism, she poured into her writing story after story of her single-handed efforts to safeguard her family.[[107]](#footnote-106)

By the 1970s and 1980s, some of these assumptions were being questioned by women who, like Jane, felt their lives to be a disappointment. Marriage, in particular, drew sceptical responses from women who had experienced unsuccessful, and sometimes abusive, relationships. This shift seems to have been generational: women born before *c.*1920 – like Gertrude or Jane – tended to describe marriage in pragmatic terms, and often shaped their narratives around relationships that were decidedly unromantic.[[108]](#footnote-107) Women like Joyce Crump or May Hobbs belonged to a later cohort who, as Claire Langhamer has argued, attached more significance to the emotional bonds within a relationship.[[109]](#footnote-108) But even among these women, the questioning of marriage did not extend to any dramatic challenge of gender roles or, to any significant extent, the idea of domestic respectability as an acceptable ambition for most women.[[110]](#footnote-109) Indeed, most writing about family life is strikingly inward looking, preoccupied often simply with the world within the walls of the family home. Descriptions of economic, social, or cultural change – often found in other forms of quotidian autobiography – are almost completely absent from these stories. Similarly, the assumption of most of these women was that class was not of great interest. Even disaffected and activist women took the view that the people who should be engaged were the middle- and not the working-class; none of these books attempts anything that might be seen as a call for solidarity.

Writing about family life seems to have carried with a sense of empowerment: these autobiographers turned the history of their family into a story about their own agency in securing the right relationship, sacrificing for their children, and gradually building up the material comforts of their home. Domestic respectability was not thought to be easy to achieve, but these autobiographers assumed that any self-respecting woman would strive for it nonetheless. It was this tension – that respectability was hard to attain and yet eminently achievable – that led to the divergence of autobiographers’ assessments, from the satisfied writing of Gertrude Sutton to the deeply pessimistic stories of disabled men or women like Jane Walsh. For autobiographers who saw their lives as a failure, the challenge was to portray themselves as people who might otherwise have lived up to expectations. They achieved this by producing stories in which their agency was all but eliminated by debilitating misfortune: the death of a husband, a prolonged abusive relationship, severe disability, disfigurement, or incapacity. The men blamed their failure as breadwinners on their physical and mental impairments and, in doing so, tended to reinforce a social stigma surrounding disability, that ‘normality’ was both desirable and impossible to achieve. Among women autobiographers, it was class that took the blame and, especially, the disinterest of the middle-class in the realities of working-class life. This led them to various forms of activism but, as we have seen, their causes tended to be ones to do with the family lives of other women, and not interests that took them in new directions.

There is a tension between the consistency of these autobiographies and the scale of postwar changes in family life. Improved living standards, suburban migration, falling family sizes, greater numbers of working women – to name a few – had marked effects on the attainability of a comfortable domesticity. Yet even into the 1970s and 1980s, autobiographers writing about family life assumed that the struggle for domestic respectability remained socially relevant. As we shall see in later chapters, authors born after *c.*1920 had less to say about the struggle for adversity in their domestic lives and, by the 1960s and 1970s, it seems there were alternative, and potentially more attractive, ways in which women could attach meaning to their lives.[[111]](#footnote-110)

1. [The sample is drawn from the bibliography of working-class autobiography compiled by John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall in the mid-1980s. The 160 autobiographies include all available works published or written between 1945 and 1969 and around half the relevant works published during the 1970s – so the total number of autobiographies about the social self is probably closer to 200. The sample ranges across a wide number of occupational groupings, urban and rural geography, writers in their 30s to those in the 70s, and those born in the late-nineteenth century up to the 1930s. The publication histories are also varied, ranging from manuscript to provincial publishers to the small and larger London houses. Details of the sampling strategy and the effects of editorial mediation are discussed in the introduction. See further: *The Autobiography of the Working-Class: An Annotated Critical Bibliography*, ed. by John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall (New York: New York University Press, 1989).] [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. On the idea that boundaries operate to define a group, and not *vice versa*, see: Andrew Abbott, ‘Things Of Boundaries’, *Social Research*, 62.4 (1995), 857–82. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. A useful discussion of self-selection, including its connections to social theory, is: Jennifer Johnson-Hanks, ‘Populations Are Composed One Event at a Time’, in *Population in the Human Sciences: Concepts, Models, Evidence*, ed. by Philip Kreager, Bruce Winney, and Stanley Ulijaszek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 238–54. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. [A tentative conclusion at the moment.] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. [Also tentative conclusion at this stage.] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Ifan Edwards, *No Gold on My Shovel* (London: Porcupine Press, 1947), pp. 173–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Edwards, p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Patrick McGeown, *Heat the Furnace Seven Times More* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1967), chap. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. McGeown, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. McGeown, p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. McGeown, p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. For example: Cliff Dearman, *Up and down the Hertford Road* (Edmonton Hundred Historical Society, 1979), pp. 12, 19, 21; Arthur Randell, *Fenland Railwayman*, ed. by Enid Porter (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 76, 94; Frederick Wigby, *Stoker-Royal Navy* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1967), p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. See, additionally: Edwards, p. 172; McGeown, p. 130. On connections in the nineteenth-century between breadwinning and affective family relationships, see: Julie-Marie Strange, *Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865–1914* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015), chap. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Joe Bloomberg, *Looking Back: A Docker’s Life* (London: Stepney Books, 1979), p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. See, similarly: Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918–1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. For example: Alan Counsell, *So Clear in My Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp. 138, 178, 200; Peter Marshall, *Two Lives* (London: Hutchinson, 1962), p. 145; John Vincent, *Inside the Asylum* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948), pp. 70–71, 107, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Leo Harris, *You Can Tell He’s a Gentleman - Look at His Boots* (Northampton: Shoemaker Press, 1982), p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Harris, pp. 84, 86, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. On social exclusion see, for example: Vincent, pp. 105–7; Counsell, pp. 138, 178–81, 200. On exceptional women, see: Harris, p. 102; Marshall, p. 128; Vincent, p. 61ff; Counsell, pp. 136–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Counsell, p. 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Counsell, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. Marshall, pp. 135, 145, 154–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. John Petty, *Five Fags a Day: The Last Year of a Scrap-Picker* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956), pp. 220, 221–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. Petty, p. 233. Petty’s autobiography also includes a precis of his novel, which revolves around a husband and wife and their departures from and return to marriage and romantic love. Petty, pp. 188–97. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. Petty, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. Petty, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. Petty, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. Petty, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. See, further: Petty, pp. 65–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
30. Jane Walsh, *Not Like This* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1953), pp. 55–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
31. Walsh, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
32. Other studies have suggested that the desirability of these aspects of domestic life cut across boundaries of status and class but, as Simon Szreter and Kate Kisher have noted, the ‘details’ differed between working- and middle-class marriages. Szreter and Fisher, p. 221. See also: Claire Langhamer, ‘The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40.2 (2005), 341–62; Claire Langhamer, ‘Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-War Britain’, *Cultural and Social History*, 9.2 (2012), 277–97. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
33. Gertrude Sutton and David Wickham, ‘Head Cook and Bottle-Washer’ (Bermondsey, London, 1997), p. 32, Southwark Local Studies Library, RES920.Sutton. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
34. Sutton and Wickham, pp. 42–44. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
35. Sutton and Wickham, p. i. I am very grateful to David Wickham for his correspondence in which he kindly provided a more recent account, and some additional detail, of how Gertrude’s autobiography came about. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
36. Sutton and Wickham, p. ii. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
37. Sutton and Wickham, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
38. Sutton and Wickham, p. ii. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
39. Sutton and Wickham, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
40. Sutton and Wickham, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
41. Sutton and Wickham, pp. 15, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
42. Sutton and Wickham, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
43. Dolly Scannell, *Mother Knew Best: An East End Childhood* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
44. For a small selection, see: Scannell, *Mother Knew Best*, pp. 179, 180–81, 182; Dolly Scannell, *Dolly’s War* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 14–16, 23, 27, 36–37, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
45. Scannell, *Mother Knew Best*, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
46. Such moments of discomposure are familiar to oral historians but were rare in autobiographies of the social self. On discomposure, see: Penny Summerfield, ‘Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews’, *Cultural and Social History*, 1.1 (2004), 65–93 (pp. 69–70); Michael Roper, ‘Re-Remembering the Soldier Hero: The Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War’, *History Workshop Journal*, 50.1 (2000), 181–204 (p. 200). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
47. Joyce Crump, *The Ups and Downs of Being Born* (London: Vassall Neighbourhood Council, 1980), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
48. Crump, p. 7. As discussed below, Joyce’s own children suffered significant behavioural problems. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
49. Elizabeth Flint, *Kipper Stew* (London: Museum Press, 1964), p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
50. Flint, *Kipper Stew*, p. 113. See, similarly: Flint, *Kipper Stew*, chaps 1, 3, 5, 6, 11, 13 and prologue; Elizabeth Flint, *Hot Bread and Chips* (London: Museum Press, 1963), p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
51. Scannell, *Mother Knew Best*, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
52. Scannell, *Mother Knew Best*, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
53. Scannell, *Mother Knew Best*, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
54. Scannell, *Dolly’s War*, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
55. Scannell, *Mother Knew Best*, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
56. Scannell, *Mother Knew Best*, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
57. Jean Rennie, ...*...And Over Here!* (Wymondham: George R. Reeve, 1976), p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
58. Rennie, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
59. Rennie, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
60. Sutton and Wickham, pp. 22–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
61. Sutton and Wickham, pp. 22–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
62. Walsh, pp. 33, 64–65, 127, 137–39, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
63. Langhamer, ‘Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-War Britain’, p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
64. Walsh, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
65. Walsh, pp. 64–65. On the postwar discourses of ‘dream homes’, see: Langhamer, ‘The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain’, pp. 345–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
66. For example: Walsh, pp. 22, 78, 107, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
67. Walsh, p. 143. For the few instances where Jane felt she was treated as an equal or with compassion, see: Walsh, pp. 57–59, 73–74, 99–101. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
68. Walsh, p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
69. See, similarly: May Hobbs, *Born to Struggle* (London: Quartet Books, 1973), pp. 51, 65; Joyce Guest, *Nobody’s Perfect (an Autobiography)* (Birmingham: Trinity Arts Association, 1981), pp. 56, 60–61, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
70. Crump, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
71. Langhamer, ‘Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-War Britain’, pp. 292–93. See, similarly: Guest, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
72. Walsh, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
73. Walsh, p. 34. For a longer discussion of the terms of ‘unromantic love’, see: Szreter and Fisher, chap. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
74. On children specifically, see also: Hobbs, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
75. Walsh, p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
76. Crump, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
77. Crump, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
78. Crump, pp. 30–34, 36–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
79. Walsh, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
80. Walsh, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
81. Walsh, pp. 70, 70–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
82. Walsh, pp. 71, 115, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
83. The experience of Jane’s daughter, at grammar school, was different to that of Carolyn Steedman, whose self-confidence was boosted by the free milk and orange juice she received at school. Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Women*, 2005 reprint (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 122–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
84. Walsh, pp. 115–17, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
85. Walsh, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
86. Walsh, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
87. Hobbs foreword. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
88. Hobbs foreword. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
89. Hobbs foreword. Joyce Guest, who was disabled from birth, wrote similarly: ‘I would like to see Margaret Thatcher to have to push my wheelchair up and down to the shops, go shopping and manage on my pension, I’d like her money for a change and see how I could live.’ Guest, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
90. Crump, p. 3.i [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
91. On Lawrence & Wishart’s history with quotidian authors, see: Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 130–31, 135–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
92. Walsh, p. 129. Original emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
93. Walsh, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
94. See further: Walsh, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
95. Walsh, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
96. Hobbs, pp. 80–83. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
97. Guest, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
98. Crump, pp. 40–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
99. Crump, p. 43. This sense of finding herself perhaps explains why Joyce was inspired to write after reading the autobiography of a recovering alcoholic, James Nelson. Both Joyce and Nelson were connected to Union Place, on Brixton Road, but seem to have had no direct contact. Crump, p. 3 and back cover. See also: James Nelson, *No More Walls*, revised edition (London: Nelson’s Column Intercontinental publications, 1984), pp. 5–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
100. Guest, pp. 65, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
101. Hobbs, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
102. Crump, pp. 40, 42–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
103. Hobbs, p. 66. May’s commitment to families seems to have evolved, in contact with second-wave feminism, toward a more explicit interest in women’s rights. She was involved, she said, in campaigning for ‘the rights of young mothers and their children’. Equally, her efforts to unionise cleaners tended to emphasise their gender and May’s disappointment with the male representatives of the Transport & General Workers Union. Hobbs, pp. 77–85, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
104. Guest, pp. 60–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
105. Discussed further in the next chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
106. [A possible implication from this is that these autobiographies complicate Mike Savage’s argument that individualism and class consciousness were interlinked – a claim I will explore in the conclusion to Part I. See, further: Mike Savage, ‘Sociology, Class and Male Manual Work Cultures’, in *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79, Vol. 2*, ed. by John McIlroy, Nina Fishman, and Alan Campbell (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1999), pp. 23–42; Michael Savage, ‘Working-Class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study’, *Sociology*, 39.5 (2005), 929–946.] [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
107. Of the many examples, a particularly forcible one is when Jane made her husband sell his trousers so that they might have money for food. In the end, she could not let him go, but her writing makes clear that – with her husband unemployed - she was in control. Walsh, pp. 83–84. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
108. Dorothy Scannell was much the same. See: Scannell, *Mother Knew Best*, pp. 172–73. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
109. The autobiographies are supportive of Claire Langhamer’s argument for a generational shift in attitudes towards romantic love and marriage. That said, there is less evidence in the autobiographies of these women for the association of love with a mutually satisfying sexual relationship. Langhamer, ‘Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-War Britain’, pp. 287–88. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
110. As Joyce Crump put it: ‘Lots of mums have got better homes than I have, and they keep them better.’ Crump, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
111. [A tentative conclusion for the moment.] [↑](#footnote-ref-110)