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On: 04 April 2013, At: 08:43

Publisher: Routledge

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Women's History Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwhr20>

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Version of record first published: 28 Jan 2011.

To cite this article: Pat Thane (2011): Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England, *Women's History Review*, 20:1, 11-29

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2011.536383>

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Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England

Pat Thane

This article explores the experiences of unmarried mothers who kept and tried to raise their children between World War One and the end of the twentieth century. It argues that there has not been a simple progression from their experiencing social stigma and ostracism to more enlightened attitudes since the 1970s. Rather there is a great deal that has hitherto been unknown about what the evidence suggests were very diverse experiences and attitudes throughout the period. A major change since the 1970s has been from pervasive secrecy about unmarried motherhood, cohabitation, adultery and similar 'irregular' practices, especially among the middle classes, to greater openness. The article uses a variety of sources, including the records of the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child (founded in 1918, now One Parent Families), oral histories, contemporary interviews and official and unofficial investigations.

Introduction

Unmarried motherhood is an experience as old as marriage itself, and one with which few societies have been at ease. As other articles in this issue show, in England, for as long as we have records, attitudes to unmarried mothers have oscillated between sympathy and support for them as 'wronged women', and condemnation as 'sinners' or 'scroungers', seeking undeserved support from the community. Throughout the history of the Poor Laws, since the sixteenth century, continuing in the modern welfare state and the Child Support Agency (since

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December 2008 the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission), there has been conflict and uncertainty as to how mothers and their children should be supported: through forcing the father to pay or forcing the mother to work, from the public purse, or from a combination of these sources. All have been tried, repeatedly, up to the present. None has succeeded in eliminating the relative poverty and disadvantage suffered by all too many lone mothers and their children. Few social problems have changed so little over such a long time without effective resolution.

But, familiar as it is, this is not the whole story. Not all unmarried mothers have been poor, or alone, though these are the ones we know most about. Nor have private attitudes to them been uniform throughout society, throughout certain social classes or through time, or necessarily the same as those expressed in public, official discourse.

This article seeks to provide a more nuanced account of the issue in England and Wales through the twentieth century, a place and time when, especially in the first half of the century, surprisingly little is known about the experience of unmarried motherhood. The same is true of Scotland and Northern Ireland, but the legal and administrative structures and their outcomes in both have long been different, hence my focus upon England and Wales.

The article focuses on women who kept and tried to bring up their children. It asks how many such women and children there were throughout the twentieth century in England and Wales, how they lived, and how they were perceived and treated by others, including by government and the legal system. It challenges simple notions that social attitudes became increasingly enlightened over the century, arguing that, at least in some sections of society, there was considerable tolerance of unmarried motherhood before World War Two, a continuation of a much older tradition, and in some respects some of these women and children's lives initially became more difficult in the post-war 'welfare state', though there were also gains. Greater social acceptability since the 1970s has not signified wholly new social and sexual attitudes, but, in part at least, a return to older patterns following the culturally and demographically unusual immediate post-war period. At all times, sympathy and condemnation have co-existed and conflicted in shifting measures.

This survey is partly based on the records of the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (NC), which was formed, mainly but not exclusively by women, some of them feminists, in 1918, the year in which women aged 30 and above gained the vote.¹ Part of the aim is to document further the way in which women used their new power as voters to promote legislative change designed to improve the lives of unmarried mothers and their children, among many other causes, supported by other women's organizations and by male parliamentarians.² The NC continues to be active and prominent, having changed its name to the National Council for One Parent Families in 1973. Until very recently it was known as One Parent Families. It is now Gingerbread after merging with another voluntary organization formed in the 1970s by a lone mother, Tessa Fothergill, to enable lone parents to support one another. It has always confined its

work to England and Wales. A separate organization, the Scottish Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child, was formed by social workers in 1944, changing its name to the Scottish Council for Single Parents in 1973 and One Parent Families, Scotland in 1995.

The English NC was established in response to the rise in unmarried motherhood during World War One. It had three main aims: (1) to ensure that fathers acknowledged and supported their children; (2) to help mothers keep their children; and (3) to ensure that the children of unmarried parents were treated by the law and society in exactly the same way as other children and did not suffer discrimination due to circumstances over which they had no control. The people who established the NC did not regard unmarried mothers as 'saints' but nor did they stereotype them as 'sinners' or 'scroungers'. They believed that they should have the opportunity to bring up their children securely with an equal chance in life with other children.

The NC's support for unmarried mothers and their children over ninety years has generated unique insights into the experiences of these families. It has also enabled us to create an account of how a voluntary organization, espousing a cause which was not widely popular, has survived and adapted to social and political change, working with a growing and changing welfare state to become, along with other such associations, an influential 'Third Sector' organization in the early twenty-first century.³ This case study of the role of voluntary action through the twentieth century is interwoven with the stories of the women and children who were at its heart. We explore the latter using the NC archives, oral histories, social research such as that collected by Mass Observation, and contemporary interviews, such as those conducted by Dennis Marsden for his best-selling book *Mothers Alone* (Penguin, 1969), all of which bring their experiences alive, often movingly.

Becoming an Unmarried Mother in the Early Twentieth Century

The rise in 'illegitimacy' during World War One often was, and is, attributed to a 'loosening of morals' in wartime. Sexual behaviour in the distant past will always be elusive but, most probably, behaviour changed less than circumstances. It had long been normal for couples to have sexual relationships before marriage, until pregnancy precipitated the ceremony.⁴ Charles Booth noted in his survey of poverty in London in the 1890s:

With the lowest classes, pre-marital relations are very common, perhaps even usual. Amongst the girls themselves nothing is thought of it if no consequences follow, and very little even if they do, should marriage follow, and more pity than reprobation, if it does not. As a rule the young people, after a few experiments, pair off and then are faithful and usually end by marrying.⁵

Ellen Ross's work on 'motherhood in outcast London, 1870–1918' confirms this picture.⁶ But a problem for the present study is that we know more about the private lives of the 'lowest' classes than of other classes, who were less often intruded upon by social researchers.

In wartime, there was a higher probability that the father would be killed, or have moved on, before the pregnancy was discovered and marriage arranged. The unmarried mother, before and after the war, faced a number of possibilities when her child was born. All too often, the child might die. The fact that the death rate of 'illegitimate' children was twice that of 'legitimate' children was an important reason for the foundation of the NC. The founders believed that the main cause was the poverty and absence of family or other support for many mothers, whom they vowed to help.⁷

The parents, though unmarried, might be living in a stable relationship. The NC found this to be true of most births out of wedlock between the wars. To an unknown extent, this was because one or both partners was married to someone else, but deterred from divorce by the difficulties and the cost. Booth commented:

It is noted by the clergy who marry them, how often both the addresses given are from the same house More licence is granted by public opinion to the evasion of the bonds of marriage by those who have found it a failure, than is allowed to those whose relations to each other have not yet assumed a permanent form. This peculiar code of morality is independent of recognized law, and an embarrassment to religion, but . . . those teachers of religion who come in closest contact with the people are the most forward in recognizing that the word 'vice' is inapplicable to the irregular relations that result, whether it be before or after the legal marriage; though they would probably cling (in religious desperation) to the appellation of 'sin'.⁸

A striking feature of this observation is less that such irregular partnerships occurred, which is known from other sources,⁹ but that those who might have been expected to be their sternest critics, the clergy, could accept this.

The Royal Commission on Divorce and Matrimonial Causes, 1910–12, gave the prevalence of this practice (which it recognized was in part due to wives fleeing violent marriages) as a reason for easing the divorce legislation.¹⁰ During World War One, large numbers of servicemen claimed and received dependents' allowances for their 'unmarried wives', as they were officially described, and children.¹¹

Joanne Klein's study of 'irregular marriages' among that most respectable section of the working class, policemen, in three major British cities, 1900–39, concludes that 'flexible notions of marriage persisted within the working class . . . into the interwar era . . . while only a small minority of policemen lived in unusual situations, their more conventional colleagues had few problems with their choices. Even senior officers showed remarkable tolerance for domestic irregularities' and 'their choices did not necessarily meet with disapproval from their respectable neighbours'.¹² Klein also comments that by no means all irregular partnerships involving policemen came to official notice.

Male and female workers in a similarly respectable occupation, in the Post Office, protested vigorously in 1924 against the Post Office regulation that unmarried mothers should automatically be dismissed. This, wrote 'A Mere Man', 'attempts to starve the innocent child and force the unfortunate mother to desperation'. There are signs also that at least some senior Post Office officials quietly ignored the rule and kept unmarried mothers on.¹³ An explicit reason for the

eventual easing of the Divorce Law in 1937 was 'the reduction of illicit unions', again indicating their prevalence.

After 1926, following a change in the law promoted by the NC, children could be legitimized by the subsequent marriage of the parents, provided that neither had been married to someone else at the time of conception—an amendment to the original bill introduced in Parliament due to fears among Members of Parliament (MPs) of encouraging adultery.¹⁴ Alternatively, following the passage, also in 1926, of the Adoption of Children Act, which for the first time introduced a legally recognized adoption process (see below), the child could be adopted by the parents after marriage.¹⁵

Social surveys and oral histories of the 1930s and 40s reveal that many unmarried mothers and their children vanished from the official record through absorption into the mother's own family.¹⁶ Again, we have no idea of the numbers. It was perhaps more common among younger mothers. (Contrary to stereotype, not all unmarried mothers were very young. The NC encountered older widowed or separated women, abandoned by their lovers, whose lives could be especially difficult.) The census is unhelpful for attempts to establish how many unmarried mothers and their children lived with the mother's family, because it recorded the relationships of family members only to the head of household, not to one another. A child would be recorded as a grandchild of the household, with no indication as to who his/her mother might be. And, of course, people do not necessarily tell census enumerators the truth about sensitive matters.

Such arrangements could be short or long term, enabling the mother to work while the child was cared for, perhaps ending with her marriage to the child's father or to another man, though it was not unknown for a new husband to reject another man's child, who would remain with their relatives. They were less visible, especially if the mother was young, at a time when large families were still common and siblings twenty years apart less surprising than today. Also, at a time when levels of mortality and poverty were high, flexible family arrangements, with grandparents and other relatives rearing the children of widowed, deserted or impoverished parents, were more common.¹⁷ Sometimes the child would grow up thinking that the grandmother was his or her mother and the mother a sister (Eric Clapton is a famous example). Sometimes it was traumatic for the child to discover the truth about his or her parentage; others valued a loving home life provided by grandparents or other relatives.

These arrangements were probably more common in working-class families, but middle-class experience is harder to reconstruct. The lives of the middle classes were more secret and less exposed to intrusive social investigators. Better-off families could more easily arrange a discreet adoption or abortion, but not all 'middle-class' families were well-off, especially among the growing lower middle class, and abortion, even when performed by a doctor, was by no means safe before effective antibiotics became available from the late 1930s. Pressure on a couple to marry may have been the common response. A high proportion of first babies were born within eight months of marriage, as they long had been. The National Council worked hard, and with some successes, to persuade middle-class families to

support their pregnant daughters and take them home. They found that some fathers could be especially intransigent.

Before World War Two many women unable to live with their families placed their children with foster parents for a weekly payment, as Ray Litvin, actress mother of Stephen's Spender's second wife, Natasha, did, first with 'the awful Mrs James' in Sussex, who left Natasha in a high chair every day. A friend of Ray's persuaded her to move Natasha, at two-and-a-half, to Mrs Busby in Maidenhead, 'this wonderful, steady, working class woman' as Natasha later called her. Natasha felt that 'I really owe all the stability I have in my temperament, such as I have, to Mrs Busby'. She called her 'Mother'. Ray was 'Mummy', and would pay 'rather alarming visits' every three months. At age nine, she removed Natasha, without warning, to live alone with her in London. Her father was a married music critic, whom she heard about, then met, for the first time at age twelve, when her mother sent her to ask him for money for her piano lessons. She found him 'rather frightening', but he paid.¹⁸ Other mothers later married and reclaimed their children from foster-care. The Poor Law in some areas followed its ancient practice of funding some mothers to remain at home as foster mothers of their own children.

Alternatively an unmarried mother might hide from history and from her contemporaries by moving to a new place and claiming to be widowed; again, a more commonplace status among younger women then than now, especially after the Great War. This was also easier for middle-class women with secure incomes.

Unmarried mothers generally only came to the notice of the authorities if they failed to support themselves and their children and claimed public relief, which in the inter-war years could lead to incarceration in a workhouse, a fate from which the NC tried hard to protect them. Some were found decades later still in mental hospitals to which they had been transferred from workhouses—three such women were discovered as late as 1971.¹⁹ Those who earned enough to support their children, or were supported by the father (again a wholly unknown number) or by their own families went officially undetected, though they survive in surveys and memoirs.²⁰

There are no statistics of the numbers of unmarried mothers who kept their children (as distinct from statistics of 'illegitimate' births which had been officially collected since 1837) until the report of the official Finer Committee on One Parent Families in 1974 (see below). This established that the 1971 census recorded only 49,000 unmarried mothers bringing up their children. But 61,000 were claiming Supplementary Benefit at the time, and the General Household Survey (instituted in 1973) found a further 30,000 in full-time work or otherwise supporting themselves and their children, and not claiming benefit: 90,000 in total.²¹ Since then official statistics have been reasonably reliable.

Surviving as an Unmarried Mother between the Wars

The proportions of unmarried mothers and their children living independently or needing public support were probably not markedly different in earlier decades. So how did they survive if they were not living in a stable partnership or with

supportive families? Some women could not be supported by their families because they had no family or the family was too poor, like the pregnant, unmarried factory worker who wrote, in desperation, to the Ministry of Health in 1945: 'I am not a bad girl ... I dare not let my mother know, she has had such a hard life herself, still has, there are eleven of us in the family ... Please, I am pleading with you for some advice and help'.²² This plight cannot have been uncommon in earlier decades. She received a supportive reply and was referred to the National Council.

Some fathers provided support, voluntarily or otherwise. A mother could obtain a court affiliation order, if she could prove who was the father of her child. This could be a painful process and especially difficult for a poorly educated woman unable to afford legal advice, or a woman fearing to confront a violent former partner. Courts could not order blood tests in such cases until 1969, though this was technically feasible from the 1930s. Legal aid became available only in 1961, though the NC gave aid and advice from its foundation.

In 1925 the NC campaigned successfully for a doubling of the maximum affiliation award to £1, with the support of other women's organizations and of mainly male MPs (since there were few women in Parliament). These included Neville Chamberlain, future Conservative Prime Minister and also Vice-President of the NC through the 1920s and 1930s and President 1928–31—a facet of his interests overlooked by his biographers. Chamberlain introduced into the House of Commons in 1920 an unsuccessful Bastardy Bill, the first private member's bill to be initiated by the NC. Among other things, it would have compelled fathers to make proper financial provision for their children and enabled the legitimization of children by the subsequent marriage of their parents.²³ The latter passed into law in 1926 (see above); the former provision of the 1920 Bill was achieved in the Bastardy Act, 1923, also promoted by the NC and supported by Chamberlain, which doubled the maximum weekly amount payable under affiliation orders. But, then as now, fathers often had very low incomes, or were unemployed, or had another family and could not afford to support both. Special affiliation proceedings on behalf of 'illegitimate' children continued until they were abolished by the Family Law Reform Act, 1987 (see below). Thereafter, fathers who were absent for whatever cause were subject to identical processes.

Some unmarried mothers could support themselves and afford childcare. Evidence is scanty because, understandably, such women generally kept a low profile. A few are well known and made no secret of their experiences, such as the writer Rebecca West, who had a child by the married H. G. Wells at the age of nineteen in 1914. She gave birth in lodgings Wells had found for her in a seaside town and later adopted her son, Anthony. She was confident and unconventional enough to live openly as an unmarried mother, though he was to write with some bitterness of his upbringing with her and considerably more affection for the father 'who blew into my life and out of it whenever he felt like doing so'.²⁴

The NC helped poorer women to find work where they could keep their child. Between the wars this often meant living-in domestic service, which might expose the woman to exploitation by employers who realized she was desperate. Others were helped to find places in hostels which provided childcare while they worked.

Many of these were run by voluntary organizations, often religious foundations, and were strictly disciplined, sometimes requiring sleeping in large dormitories and attending daily prayers. These seem never to have been popular. By 1944 the NC found 'difficulty in inducing young women, nowadays, to give up their freedom for any length of time after the child is born, however great their need beforehand.'²⁵ By the 1950s a generation of better-educated, less deferential women were rebelling even more strongly against the restrictions, and the implied stigma, imposed by such institutions, and the numbers dwindled. The problem remained, however, that it was difficult for a mother to live independently with her child unless she had adequate financial resources. Childcare was hard to obtain. Landladies were often unwilling to let rooms to unmarried mothers and their children, and they were rarely eligible for council housing before 1977 (see below).

If the mother could not get support from the father and had no other resources, she and her child could apply for means-tested benefits. Between the wars these were provided through the Poor Law (renamed Public Assistance in 1929), which throughout its history varied from place to place and among individuals in its treatment of unmarried mothers. Those deemed 'deserving' might be supported in their own homes. Others were separated from their children and confined to workhouses or mental hospitals, on the assumption that any unmarried mother was 'mentally deficient' (see above). They might receive charitable help. The NC provided small sums—it could rarely afford more—to help mothers equip their homes, provide for their children, or find work. Particularly after World War Two the NC assisted some lone-parent families to emigrate, especially to Australia as 'ten pound Poms'²⁶ under the low-cost, assisted migration scheme. One of these women the NC sought to assist, however, had her child, though not herself, turned down by the Australian authorities, because her child's father was black and the child could not be admitted under the 'white Australia' policy. She would not migrate without him.²⁷

When mothers couldn't manage they often had no alternative but to have their children adopted. Again, the numbers are not known. Adoption, especially of 'illegitimate' children, had always occurred, but informally. Concern about the outcomes of some informal adoptions led to demands for legal supervision of adoption which culminated in the Adoption Act, 1926. The NC was strongly committed to enabling unmarried mothers to keep their children and consistently sought to protect them against pressure to have their children adopted. It recognized, however, that sometimes adoption was the best course for mother and child. Also, it encouraged unmarried mothers to adopt their own children. This gave the child legitimacy in the eyes of the law, removing their previous, sad, legal status as *filius nullius*, 'nobody's child', and granted them legal rights, including that of inheritance if the mother died intestate.²⁸ Even after 1926 informal adoptions continued and it was only after World War Two that adoption was comprehensively regulated and statistics become more reliable.²⁹

The Adoption Act also allowed unmarried men and women to adopt (though single men might not adopt girls without special permission of the court, which was granted on occasion), thus creating single-parent families, again suggesting a

certain flexibility about social norms and family arrangements at this time. This was supported by some women's organizations since it enabled the many women who could not marry to fulfil their desire for motherhood. A Home Office survey of the first year of the law showed that 3548 adoption orders had been made in county courts, of which about 450 were to men and 150 to women adopting singly. About two-thirds of the children were illegitimate and 'among these there were a small number whom one or both of their parents sought to adopt'.³⁰

World War Two

During World War Two the numbers of unmarried mothers rose, as in World War One—from 4.19% of total live births in 1939 to 9.18% in 1945,³¹ and for similar reasons, though in this war there was a striking increase in the numbers of older unmarried mothers (i.e. aged twenty-five–thirty-five).³² At the same time the number of children born within eight months of marriage fell, suggesting, wrote Richard Titmuss, that 'the proportion of premarital conceptions did not differ very much from that obtaining before the war' but that war separation and death prevented marriage.³³ And in this war, the infant death rate fell, from ninety per 1000 illegitimate births in 1939 to sixty-nine per 1000 in 1944—indicating the general wartime improvement in child and maternal welfare services.³⁴ Some babies were legitimized when fathers returned from war service.

At the same time life became harder for many of the mothers, as, just as in the previous war,³⁵ the number of foster mothers declined when women found other, better-paid, work. Also, many nurseries and residential homes were closed early in the war due to lack of staff, or were destroyed by bombing. As a result, 'for a time there was a fever of adoptions' by desperate women,³⁶ which the NC did its best to prevent by supporting the mothers. From 1941 the government embarked on a policy of opening day nurseries in order to encourage women into the workforce.³⁷ The Ministry of Health treated all mothers, married and unmarried, equally, and gave increasingly effective support during and after childbirth, including opening hostels where they could live with their children. But not all regions were equally tolerant, especially of the large numbers of unmarried evacuees from London, and areas with unaccustomed large numbers of war workers resented the burden on health and welfare services.

The government gradually acknowledged its particular responsibility for women war workers and servicewomen. Pregnant unmarried servicewomen were especially embarrassing because they fuelled rumours of immorality in the services. In general they had more supportive treatment than civilian workers, though, unfortunately, the Ministry's confidential case files were destroyed after the war. The government's first resort was to encourage unmarried mothers to look for help to their parents or other relatives and they were assisted to return home. The numbers who could not or would not do so forced the Ministry to subsidize and urge local authorities and voluntary organizations to provide support and hostel accommodation before and after the birth. The National Council worked increasingly closely

with government and local authorities in this process, though it was short of staff and funds during the war.

A government survey found that 30% of pregnant unmarried servicewomen were accepted, apparently supportively, by their families. Of those who applied for hostel accommodation, almost one-quarter were homeless, having been brought up in institutions or by foster parents or coming from unhappy homes; 24% were rejected by their families. Another group had sympathetic parents who for various reasons could not help. One-fifth refused to contact their families. Adoptions almost doubled, from 26,500 in 1934–38 to 50,000 in 1940–44—though one-third were said to have been adopted by their own mothers, often with the stepfather after marriage, and the majority by relatives or foster carers.³⁸

A Ministry of Health survey of 7500 illegitimate babies, shortly after the war, estimated that 81% stayed with their mothers, two-thirds of whom lived with their families, with the child's father, or were self-sufficient in their own homes. Some 12% were adopted and 4% placed in foster care or nurseries. As ever, class variations are difficult to detect in the sources, but there are signs that these may be less stark than is sometime thought. The wartime Mass Observation diary of a fairly senior civil servant describes her pregnancy by a man who was, and remained, married to someone else. She gave birth to twins. Her mother would initially allow her to visit only after dark, for fear of the neighbours, though she later relented. Her situation was known to her superiors and she returned to her civil service post and could afford to bring up her children, successfully, alone, in suburban London with help from the father and a nanny. She never married. She was not alone in her experiences, though, again, we have no idea of numbers.

Not all experiences were so successful. The NC encountered the problem of married women having children by men other than their absent husbands, to which 'there is and can be no solution ... all present heart-breaking features: all too few show any sign of happiness for the child, whether it remains with its mother or not'.³⁹ Some fathers came from other countries, some of them Black or Asian, creating 'increased trouble for children who are not only illegitimate but also coloured'. The NC tried to ensure that 'these children should be brought up among other children, and in no way segregated, so that they may take their place among the other British subjects with whom they will live'.⁴⁰ Into the 1950s, the NC spent a lot of effort trying to persuade the US and other armed services to encourage fathers who had returned home to support women and children they had left behind; and to persuade the British services to pursue British servicemen who fathered children in occupied Germany and elsewhere. They had no great success with either.⁴¹

William Beveridge's wartime report on social insurance recognized the issues of poverty among 'unmarried persons living as a wife' and divorced and deserted wives and their lack of access to public support except on demeaning conditions. Though he is often accused of neglecting such women, Beveridge recommended 'further examination' of ways to provide state support, since—especially where the male cohabitee was already married or a divorced man had remarried—they could not easily fit into the system of social insurance (which depends upon regular work

and contributions by a woman or her partner), which was strictly the purpose of his report.⁴² Like many of Beveridge's recommendations, this was not taken forward by the post-war Labour government.

Unmarried Motherhood in the 'Welfare State'

After the war, unmarried mothers were rather better supported by the social security system in the reconstructed welfare state. They were no longer required to register for work in order to claim means-tested assistance (known as National Assistance from 1948, renamed Supplementary Benefits, 1966, Income Support in 1988) as they had previously, so long as they had a school-age child at home. Eligibility rules and levels of benefit were nationally uniform for the first time. Also the pre-war household means test was abolished, so an unmarried mother living with her parents could claim benefit for herself and her child(ren) regardless of her parents' income and without affecting their benefit status. She was also now eligible for a maternity allowance. The improved benefit helped poorer unmarried mothers. But they were means tested, which many found demeaning; and women were disqualified if they were suspected of living with a man. They were visited regularly by National Assistance Board (NAB) officials to check on their status, surveillance which toughened in the 1960s.⁴³

However in 1950 the NAB estimated that 'the great majority' of unmarried mothers and separated wives 'succeed in keeping independent of assistance', either because they were supported by the father or 'probably more often' because they 'maintain themselves by their own efforts', often, in practice, helped by their families or by the father.⁴⁴ A survey in the supposedly highly conventional early 1950s found that one-third of unmarried mothers were co-habiting with the father.⁴⁵ The National Council, which was in a good position to assess change over time, commented in its Annual Report for 1956–57: 'Since our Council was founded in 1918, the whole social scene has changed and with it the position of the unmarried mother. She is no longer "ruined" as a matter of course, but can usually go back fairly easily, after her confinement, to whatever employment she had before'. This produced unfavourable comment from people who thought they 'were making light of sin'. In the following year the Report commented that some parents were still rejecting their erring daughters. Attitudes and experiences were still very divided. If some mothers were having easier lives, others were not.

When the father was not supportive, either the mother or the NAB had the right to seek a maintenance and affiliation order against him (in the case of the mother, within a year of the birth, unless he had already paid some maintenance). Maintenance payments were offset against benefit. But by 1953 the NAB decided that this was not worth the effort and cost. They found, as the Poor Law authorities long had, that fathers were too hard to trace and, when found, often could not afford to pay. The NAB encouraged mothers to seek their own affiliation orders and paid their legal costs.⁴⁶ But few women claimed this support. In 1945 there were 63,420 illegitimate births but only 4464 affiliation orders; in 1959 the respective figures were 38,161 and 4160. Not all claims succeeded, but the main problems were that

many fathers could not afford to pay or mothers shied away from the stress of the courts. And, still, an unknown number of fathers paid voluntarily.

The Legitimacy Act, 1959, at last allowed all children whose parents subsequently married to be legitimized, amid suggestions that divorce courts speeded up proceedings to enable couples to marry before the birth of their child. There were still protests that this would undermine marriage, but they were less influential than in the 1920s. The Act also allowed fathers of 'illegitimate' children to apply for custody and access, bringing their rights into line with those of divorced and separated fathers.

The lives of unmarried mothers and their children changed after the war in other ways. The number of adoptions rose to a peak of 24,861 in 1968 compared with 7926 in 1939, 23,564 in 1946, and 13,303 in 1958. This may have been partly due to the relatively conventional cultural climate of the time, especially concerning marriage. From the end of World War Two to the early 1970s was the golden age of the long, stable marriage. Though this is sometimes believed to have been a historical norm, in all previous times marriages were often broken by the early death of one partner, more often the male, leading to single motherhood and/or serial partnerships; and a high proportion of people never married (in the 1931 census 15% of women and 9% of men were unmarried). This 'golden age' came to an end in the early 1970s when divorce and unmarried cohabitation began to increase rapidly. The post-war period was an unusual time of near universal marriage, early marriage ages and rising life expectancy. There were more divorces than before the war but fewer than later in the century because divorce was still expensive, difficult to obtain and stigmatizing, especially for women. The belief that marriage and a family was a social norm was reinforced by psychological studies at a time when psychology was newly influential in Britain. Particularly important in the field of mother-child relationships was the work of John Bowlby, who argued that unmarried mothers were likely to be 'psychologically disturbed' and therefore 'unfit mothers' whose children would benefit from adoption.⁴⁷

However, it is possible to exaggerate the influence of such ideas. Other changes also influenced the growing number of adoptions. The Adoption of Children Act, 1949, further tightened the law against informal adoptions, which is likely to have increased the numbers of officially recorded adoptions. The Act introduced a new safeguard for mothers. It held them to be incapable of giving consent to adoption until the child was at least six weeks old. At this time the NC expressed concern that unmarried mothers were coming under pressure to adopt, even from doctors and nurses while in hospital giving birth.⁴⁸ The change in the law seems to have been designed to protect women from such pressure. We cannot tell whether the pressure was greater than before, or women were reporting it more, or whether it reflects the growing number of hospital births after the inauguration of the National Health Service in 1948.

It was officially estimated for 1950 that 80% of adopted children were illegitimate and that 'in a significant number of cases the adopter was the mother (either alone or jointly with her husband)'.⁴⁹ 26% were adopted by a natural parent in 1962, and 50% in 1971, the great majority with a spouse.⁵⁰ Other adopted children

were orphaned, and increasing numbers were removed from their 'unfit' parents by local authorities, which gained, and used, stronger powers under the Children Act 1948. In 1961 2981 'illegitimate' and 3019 'legitimate' children were adopted; in 1968 the figures were 19,348 and 5483 respectively.⁵¹

There are also signs that in the conditions of the late 1940s and 50s more unmarried mothers felt that they had no option but to have their child adopted. Other options were closing, especially for those who did not have strong support from their families or from the father. It became harder to find daily childminders or foster mothers. Older women who had previously provided these services took better-paid jobs at a time of unprecedented labour shortage and demand for their labour. Day nurseries continued to be all too few, after their brief wartime expansion. And in the late forties and early fifties housing was run down, overcrowded and in short supply, following the bombing and lack of building and repair during the war. It must often have been harder for families to find space for an unmarried daughter and child or to take in a foster child.

Live-in domestic service had never been a popular option for unmarried mothers, though it had enabled some women to keep their children, and it dwindled after the war. Almost certainly it was harder after the war for an unmarried mother to support herself and her child, despite the easier benefit rules, unless she had substantial support from the father, her family or a good job.

Housing conditions improved in the 1950s, with the building of thousands of council houses. But these were often small, with strict rules about overcrowding, again restricting the opportunities for mothers to return to their families. And they could rarely qualify for council housing in their own right because allocation systems gave preference to married couples.

The NC could not always help unmarried mothers and their children as much as it would have liked in the late 1940s and 50s because it found it harder than ever to raise funds. The coming of the 'welfare state' led some to believe that voluntary action was no longer needed. Voluntary organizations themselves were uncertain of their roles now that state provision had expanded. The NC continued to promote its cause as best it could, making imaginative use of modern mass media, including radio, women's magazines and film.⁵² As much as possible, it assisted unmarried mothers, in particular to get training to improve their work opportunities.

But by the mid 1950s it was increasingly clear that there were many holes in the welfare state 'safety net' which voluntary action could fill. Support for unmarried mothers and their children was among them. Giving and campaigning revived, spurred on in the early 1960s by the 'rediscovery of poverty', especially among children and most of all among the children of lone mothers.⁵³

The 1960s and 1970s

Through the 1960s and 70s the NC revived and, like many other voluntary organizations, became increasingly professionalized and media savvy, less a voluntary organization on the old model, more a modern non-governmental

organization.⁵⁴ Increasingly it turned to campaigning on behalf of a wider range of lone parents, male and female, as their numbers grew. The number of divorces increased following the Divorce Act 1969. There was a growing, international, trend towards open co-habitation and increased social acceptability of unmarried motherhood. This is harder to explain, but must be associated with the advent of the birth control pill, which for the first time provided safe contraception, enabling people to delay marriage without deferring sexual relationships, with much less fear of pregnancy than before, encouraging serial and experimental partnerships before marriage.⁵⁵ In some respects this was a return to the older social norms described by Charles Booth, though the *openness* of non-marital relationships, in all social classes, was new. Public secrecy on sexual matters began to break down. The shift was assisted by the 'second wave' women's movement which was dedicated to sexual openness and put such issues as rape and domestic violence onto the public agenda, where they have remained. Language also changed, due to growing awareness of its social significance. In 1973 the National Council announced that it would 'cease using language that is offensive and wounding to a group of people who have enough disadvantages without suffering the indignity of being referred to in pejorative terms'. Thereafter it referred to children born out of wedlock as 'natural' and their parents as 'natural' parents. These changes, including the growing number of appeals for help from single fathers, led the NC in 1973 to change its name to the National Council for One Parent Families.

In the 1960s real cultural changes co-existed with strong continuities. The 'illegitimacy' rate rose sharply over the decade. Attitudes changed more slowly. Unmarried, pregnant students were still expelled from universities. The Annual Report of the National Council commented in 1965–66: 'Our society is more compassionate to the unmarried mother than it was a generation ago, but she and her illegitimate child are still seen as a threat to normal family life'. And in their anniversary year, 1967–68: 'Although society is less punitive towards the mother than when NCUMC was founded fifty years ago, there is still considerable residual hostility to single mothers'. The increasing cultural complexity of British society, due to post-war immigration, encouraged in some social groups greater tolerance of flexible family structures, especially given their prevalence in Afro-Caribbean communities, and growing numbers of cross-cultural sexual relationships; but other minority ethnic groups promoted more rigid codes of conduct, especially for women, even than previous public norms in Britain.

Concern at the implications of social and cultural changes gave rise to the appointment by the Labour government in 1969 of the Committee on One-Parent Families, chaired by the QC, Morris Finer. The NC campaigned for such an investigation, fuelled by the research findings of O. R. McGregor, Professor of Social Institutions at Bedford College, University of London, a supporter of NC and a prominent member of the Finer Committee. His research had revealed the continued poverty of many single mothers and of many of the fathers of their children.⁵⁶ He and the NC campaigned for a 'fatherless child allowance', to be paid, as of right, to all lone mothers, as the only means to diminish their disadvantage.

The Finer Committee reported, to another Labour government, in 1974. It described the economic and social circumstances and legal position of lone parents and their children, establishing without doubt that, overwhelmingly, whatever the reason for their single parenthood, they were more disadvantaged than two-parent families. It described the difficulties of women struggling on their own to combine paid work and childcare, when work, especially for women with few skills, was still generally low paid. They could rarely earn enough to support themselves and their children. The Committee wished to reinforce the obligation of fathers to support their children but recognized that often they also were poor, and young; also that placing the obligation on the mother to pursue them was too great a burden on women who were often struggling. The Committee recommended that the state should maintain mothers and children with a means-tested Guaranteed Maintenance Allowance and, through the Supplementary Benefits Commission, take responsibility for pursuing the father for reimbursement.⁵⁷

The Finer Committee reported, unfortunately, shortly after the 'oil shock' sent most developed economies, including that of Britain, into economic crisis. In these circumstances the government refused to introduce an expensive measure. However, one real improvement came in 1977 when local authorities were required to house all homeless people regardless of background, including unmarried mothers, for which the National Council had long campaigned. But all too often they were allocated the worst housing. And it was not long before they were pilloried for taking up housing, in particular by Conservative politicians and the increasingly raucous tabloid press. In 1988, the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, attacked 'young single girls who deliberately become pregnant in order to jump the housing queue and gain welfare payments'. Few people noticed that the reason for the rising numbers of single mothers in council housing was not that there were more 'scroungers' but that previously they had been excluded.

The 1980s and 1990s

Through the 1980s, under Mrs Thatcher's Conservative governments, political rhetoric attacking unmarried mothers, divorce and other deviations from conventional family life reached a peak, quite ineffectually, since divorce, co-habitation and birth out of wedlock rocketed. By the end of the decade one-third of children were born to unmarried, though often co-habiting, parents,⁵⁸ But over two million children were living in single-parent households, usually with a mother, on incomes on average 37% of that of two-parent families, a situation exacerbated by the high unemployment of the decade.⁵⁹

However, it was also the decade in which legal changes were achieved, for which the NC, or One Parent Families (OPF) as it was increasingly known, had been fighting throughout its career. This time its success owed much to support from the European Union. Particularly significant was the Family Law Reform Act, 1987, on which OPF had considerable influence, including through publication of a book, *Illegitimate*, narrating moving life-histories of people born 'illegitimate'.⁶⁰ The Act gave children born within and outside marriage broadly equal legal rights,

including the right to claim maintenance and inheritance from the father. The term 'illegitimate' was at last formally removed from legal and official discourse. For example, official statistics no longer referred to the 'illegitimacy rate' but to 'non-marital' and 'extra-marital' births.

But moral panic was the keynote of the decade, concerning family life and lone parents in particular, culminating in the establishment of the Child Support Agency (CSA) in 1991. The numbers of lone-parent families on benefit climbed during the 1980s, as did child poverty.⁶¹ This had much to do with rising unemployment and the widening gap between rich and poor over the decade. Mrs Thatcher, however, was convinced that 'feckless fathers' were at the root of the plight of many mothers and children, whatever the cause of their lone parenthood, and that child support should be provided through vigorous attempts to identify and extract support from the father. Her determination led directly to the construction of the Agency. It was created in a hurry, with no attention to the evidence in the not-far-distant *Finer* report, though the issue of the real inability to pay of a substantial number of fathers had not gone away.⁶² Indeed the problems of the early 1990s (and since) which the CSA was expected to tackle were those with which successive relief and legal structures had grappled unsuccessfully for centuries. The legislation defined absent fathers as the 'sinners', and for the first time in British law, obliged them to support the mother as well as the child, even if they had never co-habited or been married, and to give precedence to the needs of first over second families. For the first time, also, mothers were required to name the father of the child and were penalized by 20% loss of benefit if they failed to do so 'without good cause'. Definition of 'good cause' was at official discretion and penalized some at least of the one in six divorced and one in ten single and separated mothers who gave violence as the reason for leaving the father and, reasonably, feared further violence if they named him.⁶³ Maintenance paid by the father reduced the maintenance paid by the CSA to the mother and child by an equivalent amount.

The CSA failed to extract the expected amount of support from fathers, who were further castigated as a result, though in many cases they, like their predecessors, could not afford to pay. It also failed to cut poverty among lone-parent families or to cut the benefit bill, like its many predecessors.⁶⁴ By the mid 1990s, the Conservative government switched to encouraging lone mothers of school-age children to enter paid employment. There was strong evidence that many lone mothers would have preferred paid work to life on low levels of benefit, but were deterred above all by lack of affordable childcare.⁶⁵ This did not improve. From 1997 the Labour governments continued the policy of providing assistance and incentives to lone mothers of school-age children to take paid employment, with some improvements in access to childcare and advice on work and training, but also withdrawal of benefit for failure to enter the labour market. The numbers of lone mothers in paid work increased, though it is unclear to what extent this was due to the wider reduction in unemployment at the time.⁶⁶ The policy also ignored questions as to whether paid work, as distinct from unpaid caring by the mother, was in the best interests of the chil-

dren, especially in view of evidence that a working, harassed single mother disadvantaged children emotionally and educationally, and she herself often led a miserable life.

In the early twenty-first century, public attitudes to unmarried mothers are more relaxed than often in the recent past, but intense divisions and ambivalences continue, as they always have, as does the poverty of too many lone mothers and their children, with public policy always haunted by the fear of encouraging the 'sinner' or the 'scrounger'.

Notes

- [1] The research has been funded by ESRC grant number RES-000-23-0545 and has been carried out by Tanya Evans as Research Fellow, and myself as Principal Investigator.
- [2] See also Pat Thane (2001) *What Difference did the Vote Make?*, in Amanda Vickery (Ed.) *Women, Privilege and Power: British politics, 1750 to the present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 253–288.
- [3] The history of voluntary organizations in twentieth-century Britain is under-researched and their role sometimes underestimated. See Frank K. Prochaska (2006) *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: the disinherited spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). But see Geoffrey Finlayson (1994) *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830–1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press); Kate Bradley (2009) *Poverty, Philanthropy and the State: charities and the working classes in London, 1918–1979* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); and James McKay, Matthew Hilton & Nicholas Crowson (Eds) (2009) *Non-Governmental Organizations and Politics in Contemporary Britain* (London: Palgrave).
- [4] Peter Laslett (1978) *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Tanya Evans (2005) *'Unfortunate Objects': lone mothers in eighteenth century London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave); John Gillis (1988) *For Better for Worse: British marriages, 1600 to the present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Alyssa Levene, Sam Williams & Thomas Nutt (Eds) (2005) *Illegitimacy in Britain, 1700–1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).
- [5] Charles Booth (1902) *Life and Labour of the People in London: religious influences*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan), p. 55; Elizabeth Roberts (1984) *A Woman's Place: an oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), pp. 72–80; Virginia Wimperis (1960) *The Unmarried Mother and Her Child* (London: Allen & Unwin).
- [6] Ellen Ross (1993) *Love and Toil: motherhood in outcast London, 1970–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 63–64.
- [7] Lettice Fisher (1946) *Twenty-One Years and After, 1918–46* (London: National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child). The Chair of the National Council throughout this time.
- [8] Booth, *London*, pp. 55–56.
- [9] E.g. Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 64.
- [10] Royal Commission on Divorce and Matrimonial Causes (1912–13) *Report. Parliamentary Papers, vols 18–21*. Cd. 6478-81 (London: HMSO); James Hammerton (1992) *Cruelty and Companionship: conflict in nineteenth century married life* (London: Routledge).
- [11] *Parliamentary Papers*, vol. XX1, Cd 7756 (1914–16) (London: HMSO), pp. 4–5. Arthur Marwick (1967) *The Deluge: British society and the First World War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 43.

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- [13] Helen Glew (2009) Women Workers in the Post Office, 1914–1939 (Ph.D. thesis, Institute of Historical Research, University of London).
- [14] Ginger Frost ‘Revolting to Humanity’: oversights, limitations and complications of the English Legitimacy Act, 1926 (in this issue).
- [15] Jenny Keating (2005) Chosen Children? The Legalization of Adoption in England and its Aftermath, 1918–1939 (D.Phil. thesis, University of Sussex); Jenny Keating (2008) *A Child for Keeps: the history of adoption in England, 1918–1945* (London: Palgrave).
- [16] Wimperis, *Unmarried Mother*; Roberts, *Woman’s Place*, pp. 72–80.
- [17] Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 134.
- [18] Interview with Natasha Spender by Harriet Lane, *The Observer*, 9 May 2004.
- [19] Sue Bruley (1991) *Women in Britain since 1900* (London: Macmillan), pp. 77–78.
- [20] Doreen Bates, Mass Observation Diary, D 5245. Thank you to the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex for permission to quote from this diary.
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- [28] Frost ‘Legitimacy Act’. Stephen Cretney (2003) *Family Law in the Twentieth Century: a history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 548–551.
- [29] Keating, *Child for Keeps*; Cretney, *Family Law*, pp. 596–615.
- [30] Ferguson & Fitzgerald, *History of the Second World War*, quoting Home Office survey, pp. 139–140.
- [31] Fisher, *Twenty-One Years*, p. 19.
- [32] Ferguson & Fitzgerald, *History of the Second World War*, p. 93.
- [33] Richard Titmuss (1950) *History of the Second World War: problems of social policy* (London: HMSO and Longmans), p. 211, n. 2.
- [34] Ferguson & Fitzgerald, pp. 171–175. Fisher, *Twenty-One Years*, p. 19.
- [35] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [36] *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.
- [37] Ferguson & Fitzgerald, *History of the Second World War*, pp. 176–203.
- [38] Ferguson and Fitzgerald, *History of the Second World War*, p. 134.
- [39] Fisher, *Twenty-One Years*, p. 19.
- [40] NC, *Annual Report*, 1943–44.
- [41] NC, *Annual Reports*, 1946–47, 1947–48 and CMM, 12 November 1946. Most meetings contain some discussion of this issue between the years 1946 and 1950, 5/OPF/2/1/1/1g. See also TNA/FO/371/70845, 1948.
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- [43] Kathleen Kiernan, Hilary Land & Jane Lewis (1998) *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 155–170; Dennis Marsden (1969)

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- [58] Office of National Statistics (1990) *Birth Statistics*, Series FM1, Table 5.2.
- [59] Kiernan *et al.*, *Lone Motherhood*, p. 139.
- [60] Cretney, *Family Law*, pp. 563–565.
- [61] Kiernan *et al.*, *Lone Motherhood*, p. 190.
- [62] Witness Seminar: 'The Child Support Act, 1991: a case study'. University of Oxford, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, 16 November 2007.
- [63] Kiernan *et al.*, *Lone Motherhood*, pp. 200–209.
- [64] *Ibid.*
- [65] *Ibid.*
- [66] Rodney Lowe (2005) *The Welfare State in Britain since 1945* (3rd ed.). London: Palgrave), p. 403.