

Katherine Holden, 'Finding the nanny in autobiographical narratives and childhood memoirs'

Synopsis of Paper delivered at the West of England and South Wales Women's History Network Autumn Study Day, Saturday 15 November 2014

"Writing women's lives: Historians and Autobiography"

At the start of the paper I focussed on two autobiographies, Penelope Lively's *Oleander Jacaranda*, which recalls a British colonial childhood in Egypt and Carolyn Steedman's very influential memoir *Landscape for a Good Woman*, the story of her own and her mother's lives in Lancashire and south London. I drew on these books first for theoretical insights on the nature of childhood memory. The idea of memory flashes came from Lively's description of her memories as a 'headful of brilliant frozen moments, already dangerously distorted by the wisdoms of maturity' and I went on to look at Steedman's argument that 'memory alone cannot resurrect past time because it is memory itself that shapes it' and 'gives an understanding that the child can't possess'.

The content of both these books was then linked to my own work. Steedman's sense of childhood exclusion embodied by a scornful health visitor telling her mother 'This house isn't fit for a baby' can be better understood if we relate it to autobiographical narratives of single women (including oral history). I did this in my book *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England 1914 to 1960* where I considered the reasons why the despised a spinster health visitor, and women like her, deployed their knowledge of childcare as a source of power over mothers. I used a similar approach in *Nanny Knows Best*, a history of nannies, most of whom were also single women. There I discussed their importance in the lives of upper and middle class children. This approach enabled me to cast light on why nannies were often idealised or demonised in childhood memoirs and on the economic and emotional dimensions of nanny employment and nanny care.

I went on to look at Lively's memories of her nanny in more detail, including the powerful attachment between them, the reasons why her nanny left and why Lively had forgotten the pain she had felt when they parted (rediscovered in letters sent to her nanny when she was in her early teens). Other memory flashes revealed to me in oral history interviews focused on the intense pain of parting from a nanny and the embarrassment and discomfort that an upper-class child felt when she had to mediate between her nannies, parents and servants.

Finally, I considered the significance of the fact that I had myself been a nanny and talked about the interview I did with my ex-employer. This episode raised wider questions about how the research process for historians is often driven by our own autobiographies in ways that are not always conscious yet are integral to the way we interpret our subject's pasts.

Bibliography

Katherine Holden *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914–60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

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Penelope Lively, *Oleander Jacaranda: A Childhood Perceived*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994).
Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London Virago:1985).