

Lucy Delap

*‘For ever and ever’’: Child-raising, domestic workers and emotional labour in twentieth century Britain<sup>1</sup>*

Relationships between servants, children, and parents have proved enormously historically variable, and a source of popular and scholarly fascination. Many of the historical accounts of these relationships have given us portraits of exploitation of servants by callous employers. They have outlined the equivocal love, resentment, and other emotions that are difficult to name, that were felt by servants and the children they cared for, about each other. This paper will draw on material from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including oral histories and memoirs of servants and employers, to supplement the predominant narrative of victimhood in relation to domestic service, and offer a broader picture. The emphasis here will be less on the upper class models of servantkeeping which have come to dominate contemporary popular memories of this institution, in which the availability of relatively large staffs enabled an unusually high degree of delegation of care well into the twentieth century. Instead, I will focus on the middle class or ‘suburban’ household experiences, where forms of housework were shared by mistress and servant (usually single-handed, and often non-residential), in houses that lent themselves to higher degrees of intimacy between employer and servant. I point to diverse affects and experiences in these relationships of emotional labour, and the material and social relationships in which they were embedded. The paper will focus on key moments where the unsaid is brought into focus, by examining laughter, and gift-giving. These have been relatively underused sources, that can help us understand the nature of the relationships of that developed between servants, mothers and children. Through these cases of the delegation of care, it is possible to gain a greater understanding of the types of care which mothers felt they could pass on to others, and which seemed essential to their mothering. We can also learn something of the material, moral, and emotional dimensions to mothering, its relationship to social class, and its change over time.

There are relatively few sources from mothers that reflect their sentiments at delegating care to servants, and this paper draws more on the reflections of children themselves. It was sometimes the everyday conventions that suggest the maternal subjectivities associated with servantkeeping. Mrs Wood-Hill, whose father was a Suffolk

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doctor, was interviewed in the 1970s as part of an oral history project. She recalled that all of a series of nursery nurses employed by her Edwardian mother were called Kate. It was a common practice to change the names of servants into something memorable, or in keeping with their station. But in this instance, the name chosen for the nurses, Kate, was the name of her mother. As an adult, Mrs Wood-Hill found this to be extraordinary. It is suggestive of the desire to efface servants, to disguise their lack of permanence in the lives of children, and make them simply into a stand-in for the mother.<sup>ii</sup> Servants, of course, found ways to subvert this, and to sustain individual identities and relationships with children. But it also suggests that there was already a degree of guilt about the delegation of care in the early twentieth century. Though the practices of distant mothering continued into the twentieth century in upper-class and upper-middle class homes, the more intimate, emotionally direct forms of mothering (and indeed, fathering) that had become more common amongst Edwardian lower-middle class families had already pointed towards more active roles for parents towards their children. Both groups of middle and upper class mothers relied upon servants, though they occupied very different kinds of social spaces. But advice literature aimed at ‘middling’ households had begun to advise limits to be set upon the care role that servants should adopt in relation to children in the later nineteenth century, and mothers may have been more likely to reflect upon their adequacy.

Most mistresses were unforthcoming on how mistresshood was integrated with motherhood. However, there was one way in which they openly reflected upon a form of mothering. Talk of mothering was a long established and hegemonic metaphor for the interactions of female employers and servants; mistresses were widely encouraged to think of and treat their servants as their ‘foster-children’, and see themselves as surrogate or actual mothers, rather than employers.<sup>iii</sup> This was perhaps one of the more positive ways to portray a relationship that was universally acknowledged to be troubling and troubled. In part, this metaphor was a recognition that servants were in some cases children – it was normal for early twentieth century households to employ 13 or 14 year old girls and boys, as kitchenmaids, tweenies, knife boys, and boot boys. Memoirs of some who became servants at very young ages recall having little access to cash, but the money that was available was often spent on sweets by servants. Some recall genuinely seeing their employers as mother-like figures, and being treated with consideration for childish behaviour such as choosiness over food. Others felt exploited, or lonely, homesick, or exhausted, and were well aware that their mistresses did not provide substitute mothering. However, if servants were sometimes

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categorised or treated as children, the presence of the children of employers necessarily disrupted such models and left the status of the servant uncertain.

Children of employers were often unusually mobile across the spatial boundaries of the household, and might be found in the attics, kitchens or basements that servants inhabited. Their presence added substantially to the physical hard work undertaken by servants; it was not just nursemaids and nannies who might be expected to wash their clothes and nappies and clean up after them, but also general servants and chars. This labour inevitably shaped the relationships established between them. Though we may choose to reflect on the emotional labour and surrogate parenting that domestic service entailed, we must not lose sight of the demanding physical needs of children which were delegated to servants by those who could afford it.

Many children of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have commented on their deep attachment to the servants who cared for them. But such love was often ephemeral and quickly abandoned when the norms of social hierarchy became clearer to older children. The often-cited comment by the upper class Robert Graves about his nanny seems representative: like many upper and middle class children, Graves commented that his nanny ‘meant more to us than our mother’. Graves went on: ‘I did not despise [Nanny] until about the age of twelve... when I found that my education now exceeded hers, and that if I struggled with her I could trip her up and bruise her quite easily. Besides, she went to a Baptist chapel.’<sup>iv</sup> In this single, perhaps deliberately brutal comment, he summed up much of the pain that children might inflict on servants, despite and perhaps because of their emotional dependency.

Children problematised authority relationships within servant-keeping households; it was not clear whether the authority of age could be exerted over the authority of employer-status. Parents often displayed tolerance or amusement over children’s misbehaviour which made it impossible for servants to sustain their authority over children; the rudeness of children towards servants was a repeated complaint.<sup>v</sup> This was particularly acute for children on the cusp of adulthood. Servants had some level of authority over young children, but their status vis-à-vis older children was often uncertain and difficult to manage. One nanny, Dora Holtom, described an encounter with an aristocratic 11 year old, while she was his nanny in the 1930s. The child demanded: “‘Who said I’ve got to go and wash now? Why should I?’ I said, ‘because you don’t go to the table in that condition, you know that.’ So he said, “‘Who do you think you’re talking to?’” ... One day I’m going to be Lord Allendale, and

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then nobody will tell me whether to wash or not.” I said, “all the same, right now, I’m telling you or asking you to go and wash yourself and be back here as soon as you can, please?” Her equivocation between ‘telling’ and ‘asking’ is revealing of her inability to exert her authority in such a situation.<sup>vi</sup> Servants were forced to resort to other emotional strategies to control their charges, using threats, or supernatural stories, to induce fear and compliance. It was these practices which had prompted advice manuals to suggest that affluent mothers should become more closely involved with the care of their children towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Employers were often extraordinarily insensitive to servants’ need to set limits on their relationships with children and establish boundaries of behaviour. Dora Holtom was well aware of her deep love for one child she’d raised for five years. Yet she also remembered that: ‘Once in the garden the child said ‘Nanny will be with us forever and ever and ever, won’t she Mummy?’ So her mother said, ‘yes of course.’ I said, ‘now wait a minute... forever and ever and ever only happens in fairy stories darling, it doesn’t always happen in real life.’<sup>vii</sup> Dora struggled to name and set boundaries on her emotional commitment to her employers and their children, and found it corrosive of her own life choices. Despite the love she felt, Dora never returned to visit the family after quitting their employment, preferring to sever her links and return home to care for her own mother.

For children, the impact of the turnover of carers, or navigating hierarchies of caregivers was potentially harmful; Michael Roper has noted in his work on soldiers and mothers during World War One that middle- and upper-class children might suffer split subjectivities as a result of their dual attachment to the domains of servants and parents. Experiences of loss loom large in memoirs by children raised by servants.

The children of servant-keeping households fantasised in later life about the unconditional love servants might supply – and often tacitly implied that their parents had not provided this emotional security. Violet Markham was born in 1872 to an upper class family. She nostalgically recalled that ‘As we grew older and many dreams had faded in the light of common day, what warmth it was to be gathered to the heart of one of those faithful souls whose eyes were olden to all our faults and who dowered us with virtues and merits which existed alone in their imagination.’<sup>viii</sup> In the same generation, Beatrice Webb similarly recalled feeling gratitude and warmth towards the servants of her childhood. But despite these retrospective nostalgic fantasies, the love of servants was rarely unconditional, and children needed to make themselves lovable in their desire to sustain the care and attention of servants.

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Unlike many others, Beatrice Webb was aware of the cost to servants of their emotional commitment to their employing family. She noted of her beloved nurse Martha's fairly late marriage that it was probably prompted by being 'weary ...of continuously giving and never receiving solicitous affection.' There is a recognition of the unreciprocated emotional labour that was a frequent part of domestic service jobs; and this emotional labour was not only in relation to children, but also in managing the emotions of parents, providing reassurance and non-intrusive care of children, while also, as one servant recalled 'admiring their hats.'<sup>xix</sup>

Children recognised their privileged place within the hierarchies of subservience and superiority that inflected domestic service.<sup>x</sup> Webb commented that being brought up in a late-Victorian servant-keeping household gave her 'consciousness of superior power. As life unfolded I became aware that I belonged to a class of persons who habitually gave orders, but who seldom, if ever, executed the orders of other people. My mother sat in her boudoir and gave orders – orders that brooked neither delay nor evasion.' The sense of 'place' established in relation to servant-keeping was highly formative. It became recognised as potentially traumatic for children in the advice manuals that increasingly emphasised the need for parents to limit the role of servants in childcare. Superficial reasons were sometimes given – the fear that the wrong accent would be learnt, for example, but there was also a new interest in the psychological damage that might result, as psychology became popularised in the 1920s.<sup>xi</sup> This was also around the same time that the metaphor of the mistress as foster-mother became usurped by talk of contracts and professionalism in domestic service – or by more negative metaphors of mistresses as slave drivers and parasites. But this is not to imply that these relationships were untroubled in earlier times. It was never in fact simple to establish the easy authority of Webb's mother, and the relationships children witnessed between their mothers and servants, or sustained themselves with servants, were often confusing, or might be judged comic. Robert Graves was aware of his mother's ambivalence towards servants, remembering: 'I can well recall the tone of my mother's voice when she informed the maids that they could have what was left of the pudding, or scolded the cook.... It had a forced hardness, made almost harsh by embarrassment.'<sup>xii</sup>

Strong fears of the influence of servants upon children persisted, often constructed in terms of sexual and social 'contagion' – an acknowledgement of the deep physical intimacy of many such relationships. Indeed, children and servants had to negotiate the dangerous erotic charge of service. The Edwardian teenager Sonia Keppel recorded her letters to Mr Rolfe,

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the family's butler, while she was evacuated to the countryside during World War One. She wrote letters, as she recalled, 'invariably beginning: "Darling Mr Rolfe" and ending "Your loving Sonia"'. Aware of the unsuitability of this, Rolfe answered her: 'You are getting a big girl now, and you must call me Rolfe. And you must stop signing yourself "Your loving Sonia"'. It does not do. Yours respectfully, W. Rolfe.' *'He put me in my place,'* she concluded.<sup>xiii</sup> 'Place' was a construct that both parties of domestic service, employing and employed, contributed to and were troubled by.

Gift-giving was a moment where place might be transgressed, but which often expressed the uncertainties of the relationships of care. Between servants and employers, gift giving was sometimes a moment in which friendship or generosity might be expressed. But it was also prone to laughter and satire, at the pretensions or ignorance displayed. Most of the gifts given were from employers to servants, and as unreciprocal forms of exchange, they suggested the inequalities of power in the relationship. Servants were acutely aware of the paternalism of the gift; one reported that her employers had given her a lace tablecloth at her wedding in 1969, though 'it was not real lace.' Embodied within this shoddy gift was a clear sense of her relative lack of worth, and an acute ability to judge the value of the gift and its intentions: 'They thought they were giving you the world'.<sup>xiv</sup> But servants sometimes had the opportunity to give gifts themselves, particularly in relation to children. They reversed the gift-giving traditions of domestic service, and gave birthday or wedding gifts, which aimed to make the relationship more reciprocal, as well as to express genuine emotional attachment.<sup>xv</sup>

The gifts of children to servants were less common, but where they occurred, parents sometimes disapproved, perhaps reading them as symbolic of the threat to the parent-child intimacy that relationships with servants implied. Joan Evans, for example, was scolded severely by her mother for buying her nanny a gold chain out of her own meagre savings during her Edwardian childhood. Joan considered herself and her nanny 'tacitly banded together against the powers that be', in particular, against a mother who, she believed, had not wanted her to be born.<sup>xvi</sup> The relationship with servants sometimes threw into relief the ambivalent feelings children had about their parents.

The laughter associated with gift giving, often mocking or patronising, is notable, and points to laughter as an important means of gaining authority, of resisting indignities, or even for abandoning the social scripts that governed interactions between employers and servants. The laughter of mothers at servants was a means of giving voice to their feelings of guilt, threat and relief at the presence of servants in their households. Mothers were well aware that

the apparent superior domestic knowledge of servants might call into question their mothering. Dora Holtom noted that when she took up a post as a Nanny, the mother had been bullied into giving her daughter a daily cold bath by the previous Nanny. ‘Why did Mrs. Hughes not tell her to stop? I don’t know, she hadn’t got the guts to I suppose. But she wasn’t used to telling people you know.’<sup>xvii</sup>

Many employers responded to the difficult relationships within their homes by laughing at their servants. One child of a servant keeping family who grew up between the wars recalled the intimacy established between his mother and himself over joking at the servants, despite his very warm relations with his carers. With his mother, he laughed at the socially inappropriate name ‘Denise’ that one longstanding maid had given her daughter, and at the slapstick humour of this same servant’s lisp, the result of a hare-lip. Yet this child also came up against the limits of what intimacies might be shared with servants – he recalled being disciplined for having shared a mild joke at the expense of an aunt with the servants.<sup>xviii</sup> Children moved across boundaries within servant-keeping homes, yet were also at times painfully reminded of the harshness and uncertainty of the apparently warm or workable relationships amongst the adults of the household.

Parents used mockery to disrupt the intimacies that unsettled the hierarchies of servant-keeping. In her memoir of a late Victorian childhood, Olive Haws recalled that when a long-serving servant, Ann, had been jilted by her fiancé, the response from her mother was a hurtful joke: ‘What did she expect with a face like that?’ This might be read as heartless mockery, but the aftermath to this joke suggests that it was also motivated by this mistress’s disquiet at the relationship sustained between Ann and her daughter, Olive, as well as the threat to domestic composure that Ann’s courtship offered. Indeed, Ann gave notice when the daughter reported the joke to her. The mother responded with an acknowledgement of the underlying problem of excessive intimacy between servant and child, commenting to her husband: ‘there you see she’s got such a hold over her, it is just as you said, it’s time she went.’ In response, her daughter declared unequivocally: ‘I hate her and I love Ann.’<sup>xix</sup>

Children also used laughter to mediate and manage their relationships. One child of a Victorian clergyman, Agnes Davies, recalled the attraction of the ‘vulgar kitchen jokes’ they overheard amongst the servants. She and her sister sought to elicit more laughter by dressing up and impersonating their own relatives to the servants.<sup>xx</sup> Children were also sensitive to the permitted laughter *at* servants, and sometimes made the mockery of servants more overt than

their elders would have thought seemly. Ursula Holden, educated at a girls' boarding school in the 1930s, recalled discussing with her friends who they would least like to kiss: 'One maid in particular got the vote. She was hideous, cretinous, and she smelled. Would anyone dare? Wanting to be thought brave and outrageous and so increase my popularity, I volunteered. We trapped her in a passage and I kissed her greasy face amid cheers. I was the female Judas and I think she understood the mockery.'<sup>xxxi</sup> Humour, indeed, allows for an ironic, parodic adoption of rituals of power by groups such as children whose access to them is uncertain. Yet, Ursula Holden found that her ability to mock servants or control her relationship with them was precarious. She recalled the servants of her earlier childhood, and *their* laughter, with extraordinary detail, particularly the exclusions their laughter implied. Her memories of laughter also conveyed the very physical presence of her nursery maid and nanny of the early 1920s was evoked: 'Didi was red faced and cheerful. I remember her and Nanny laughing so hard at some joke that Nanny's teeth fell into the basin in the bathroom. Those red gums and the clatter they made frightened me.'<sup>xxii</sup> Servants laughed in unacceptable ways, drawing attention to their mouths and bodies and transgressing norms of genteel physicality. Though the servants often laughed amongst themselves, she wrote in a memoir, 'Nanny never smiled for me.'<sup>xxiii</sup> The refusal to smile or laugh *with* a child can be read as a refusal of emotional labour, and the excessive claims that were made on servants who were also carers.

In conclusion, love and intimacy did exist between servants and children, but it was inevitably shot through with awareness of social chasm, and the ephemerality of the relationship. Some childcarers clearly did feel a lasting attachment, and continued to stay in touch with their charges after they had moved on. But servants had to set boundaries on the love they felt for the children they cared for, as well as negotiating the sometimes emotionally laden relationships with the mothers of such children. The character of the relationships servants sustained with employing families was necessarily complex and ambivalent, much as the relations mothers and other care-givers sustain with those they care for. These relationships cannot be summed up, or in many cases, even named.

It seems appropriate to give the last word to Margaret Russell, a nanny to the Graves family. She was still writing to Graves and the rest of his family years later, when she had become a mother herself. We should not take Graves' comment in *Goodbye to all That* which I quoted above to sum up his relationship to servants. His diary in the 1930s notes her gift to him of a fountain pen, his to her of £5, and what he termed a 'jubilee souvenir', without mockery or laughter. They went to the cinema together when she came to stay with him in



London in 1935. She wrote to his companion reflecting on her relationship with another employer, who was an adult, but clearly childlike in his dependency on her. She wrote: 'Norman, he seems to want me to remain with him so much ... he does seem to hang on to me like a drowning man to a straw, but, I am no straw...' <sup>xxxiv</sup> There's an ambivalent metaphor offered here, describing a relationship between employer and domestic servant. But like most of the twentieth-century servants whose experiences I have explored, there is no passive submission or endurance, but rather an active, vocal reworking of the complex intimacies of the relationships of care encountered in domestic service.

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<sup>i</sup> This paper is based on work published in Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth Century Britain* (Oxford, 2011). I am grateful to participants at the MaMSIE study day on Motherhood, Servitude and the Delegation of Care, and at the West of England and South Wales Women's History Network conference, 'For Love or Money?: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Emotional Labour', for their useful comments on this research. Some names have been changed in the interviews and oral histories used in this paper.

<sup>ii</sup> Mrs Wood-Hill, Interview 3, *Middle and Upper Class Families in the Early 20th Century, 1870-1977* (Qualidata Reference : Q197 / QDD/Thompson1/FLWE). The National Social Policy and Social Change Archive, Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex. Henceforth cited as *Middle and Upper Class Families*.

<sup>iii</sup> Relationships understood as forms of pseudo-parenting sometimes existed between upper and lower servants employed in large houses. One child, whose family kept six servants, recalled that the lower servants called the butler 'Daddy', though to the employing family, he was always 'Macdonald'. Mrs Philpot, Interview 1, *Middle and Upper Class Families*.

<sup>iv</sup> Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Penguin, 1976 [1929]), p. 20.

<sup>v</sup> Beatrice Bezzant, 'What's Wrong with Domestic Service?' *The Labour Woman*, July 1938, p. 105.

<sup>vi</sup> Dora Holtom, (b. 1914), City of Westminster Archives Centre, Upstairs Downstairs Collection, henceforth cited as Westminster, Upstairs Downstairs.

<sup>vii</sup> Holtom, Westminster, Upstairs Downstairs.

<sup>viii</sup> Violet Markham, *Return Passage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 36.

<sup>ix</sup> On emotional labour, see N. James, (1992), "Care = organisation + physical labour + emotional labour." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 14(4): pp. 488-509.

<sup>ix</sup> A.R. Hochschild, *The commercialization of intimate life : notes from home and work* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>ix</sup> Beatrice Webb, *My Life* (1926), 17, quoted in K Muggeridge, *Beatrice Webb: A Life* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1967), p. 37.

<sup>x</sup> M. Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2009), pp. 170-3.

<sup>xi</sup> M. Thomson, *Psychological subjects : identity, culture, and health in twentieth-century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>xii</sup> Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p. 19.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sonia Keppel, *Edwardian Daughter* (London: Hamilton, 1958), p. 110. For a sensitive account of the interactions between children and the often single, mostly female individuals who cared for them, see Davidoff et al., *The Family Story: Blood, Contract, and Intimacy 1830-1960* (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 221-43.

<sup>xiv</sup> Claire Smith, (b. 1946), interview with the author, 19 April 2007.

<sup>xv</sup> See for example Mrs Dora Bucknell (b. 1894, Hull), Interview 191, *Edwardians* and Mrs Hawkins (b. 1899), Interview 4, *Middle and Upper Class Families*.

<sup>xvi</sup> Joan Evans, *Prelude and Fugue* (New York: Museum Press, 1964), p. 24.

<sup>xvii</sup> Holtom, Westminster, Upstairs Downstairs.

<sup>xviii</sup> Graham Cross, interview with the author, 8 May 2007.

<sup>xix</sup> O. Hawsis, *Four to Fourteen* (London: Robert Hale, 1939), pp. 78-9.

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<sup>xx</sup> Agnes Maud Davies, *A Book with Seven Seals: A Victorian Childhood* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974), pp. 82-3.

<sup>xxi</sup> Holden, 'More about maids', 4, unpublished mss., undated, in possession of the author.

<sup>xxii</sup> Holden, 'More About Maids'. A similar anecdote was told by George Abedou: 'I remember another early childhood memory, when [Mrs Ogden, the char] showed me that her teeth were not real and she dropped her upper set and I ran out the room utterly horrified. A total nightmare.' Mr. George Aberdou, interview 165, *100 Families*. The National Social Policy and Social Change Archive, Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Holden, 'Maids', 1, unpublished manuscript, undated, in possession of the author.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Margaret Russell to Laura Riding, 3 Sept 1938, Robert Graves Collection, University of Victoria Library.

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