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Writing a history of the family

THE family has only recently become the focus of sustained historical inquiry. A number of models for research are now available, but the path is by no means straightforward. This chapter outlines the course taken in the writing of this history of the family; first, coming to grips with the concept of family, and second, defining the scope and methods of the study. In the process, the chapter introduces the main themes and overall structure of the book.

The concept of family

On first appearances, it seems odd that defining the family should be so difficult a task. After all, we all know what families are—mum, dad and the kids. Admittedly, it has become a little confusing in recent times. Sometimes there is mum and the kids; or dad and the kids; or mum and her new husband and the kids; or mum and her kids, and her boyfriend and his kids; or even 'de factos' without kids; but these are all variations on a theme. Tucked away there is something fundamental; the building block of society, as some people say.

The appeal of 'commonsense' definitions of the family is closely associated with a belief in biological determinism. The family is 'natural', and so are the roles of its various members. This view has underpinned several prominent accounts of the family: notably the functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons, which dominated the field in the 1950s and 1960s.[1] More recently, the social historian Edward Shorter conceptualised 'the making of the modern family' as the triumph of sentiment over tradition. Employing the metaphor of the family adrift on high seas, Shorter argued that 'it was the ship's own crew—Mum, Dad, and the kids—who severed the cables by gleefully reaching down and

sawing through them so that the solitary voyage could commence'.[2]

Certainly there are biological imperatives. All societies must find ways of meeting their material needs and reproducing themselves. Yet the ways in which they do so are highly variable. So too are patterns of relations between men and women on the one hand, and adults and children on the other. Take, for example, the oft-cited Nayar of south-west India, whose women took as many as twelve 'lovers' for sexual relations and reproductive purposes; or the Menangkebau of Sumatra, where brothers and sisters formed the residence group and husbands only visited for sexual purposes; or the Sambia of Papua New Guinea, where boys are separated from their mothers around the age of seven and enter into extensive homosexual experience until marriage as part of the process of achieving 'maleness'.[3] Parson's sociology was insensitive to cross-cultural variation and the potential for change in the family.[4]

In relation to European societies, social historians have established that the nuclear family did not 'sail' through history as a discrete unit. Accounts of early modern Europe have noted in particular the pervasive influence of kinship and community, the transfer of children from poor to wealthy households, and the institution of wet-nursing.[5] Shorter's argument that the modern family represented the triumph of sentiment over tradition begs the question as to how tradition got the better of sentiment in the first place. More broadly, the focus on the nuclear family bestows on it a spurious identity, obscuring substantial differences in the past.

In any case, consider the complex diversity of circumstances even at the time when the nuclear family was most widespread in the mid-twentieth century: children born out of wedlock adopted by 'respectable' families; households including ageing parents and lodgers; barracks accommodating single immigrant workers; husbands who spent only intermittent periods with their wives on account of their work; men who married for appearances and visited homosexual beats; children who spent most of the year at boarding school; 'broken families', where women raised children on their own; and so on. Sociological research during the period ignored or obscured such circumstances, precisely because of conceptual limitations. The point is that mum, dad and the kids are not a pre-given unit, but a set of relations constructed in history.

In this respect, the origins of the word 'family' are revealing. The word entered the English language in the fourteenth century from the Latin words *familia*, 'household', and *famulus*, 'servant'. Until the mid-seventeenth century, its usage was divided between notions of co-residence (members of a household not necessarily related by ties of blood or marriage), and kinship (persons related by blood or marriage but not necessarily living together). Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries these usages were amalgamated and the dominant meaning of family came to be a small kin group living in the same house.[6]

Even so, the dominant meaning of family was not the *only* meaning of family. The older usage of family as 'household' (including servants) survived in late nineteenth century Australia. In 1880 Margaret Lyon, the daughter of a Sydney small businessman, began her diary, 'I must tell the names of our family'; there was Mama, Papa, Maggie aged 18, Johnny aged 12, Percy aged 10, Bertie aged 8, Lily aged 4, Elsie aged 2, 'and Julia, the girl, or as she is generally called our Julia'.[7] The other usage, as 'kinfolk', survives today as a subordinate sense of the word. On this account social scientists have invented a distinction between the nuclear family and the extended family, but the distinction is not usually observed in everyday language.

In the course of the twentieth century there have been ongoing disputes over the meaning of family in relation to various changing social practices; notably birth control, divorce, informal cohabitation and new reproductive technology. In 1904 a New South Wales royal commission described birth control as a threat to 'the value of the family as the basis of social life'.[8] By the 1950s social scientists described birth control as a feature of the Australian family, and regularly distinguished between large families and small families. At the same time they identified divorce as a new threat to the family, resulting in 'broken families'.[9] By the 1960s broken families had become 'one-parent families'.[10] In the 1980s the growth of informal cohabitation and ex-nuptial births led the Australian Bureau of Statistics to incorporate unmarried couples and ex-nuptial children in their definition of family.[11] At the same time new reproductive technology forced legal refinements of definition, with unprecedented evaluation of the relative significance of egg, sperm, womb and post-natal care. A small co-resident group of kin the family may well have been, yet the make-up of this group was still fluid. More generally, the nuclear unit is no more pre-given in language than in social life.

One response of historians to such problems has been to adopt broader definitions. For example, Lawrence Stone in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* defined the family as 'those members of the same kin who live together under one roof'.[12] On another tack, Mark Poster defined the family as 'the place where psychic structure is formed and where experience is characterised in the first instance by emotional patterns'.[13] The problem with these definitions is again that they assume too much, imposing an illusory unity upon the past. Shifting meanings illustrate the point. Stone's definition excluded servants, who were certainly understood as family members in past times. Poster's definition, on the other hand, led him to define peasant communities as families, when they clearly were not understood as such. The bottom line is that the family is not a pre-given unit of any kind, nuclear or otherwise.

As the meaning of family has been problematised, some researchers have given up on the concept and reduced their focus to the household or, hedging their bets, the 'family-household'. The Cambridge school of demographers, led by Peter Laslett, blazed the trail here by measuring household size in past times.[14] Since then there has been a growing number of books organised round the concept of household. A recent Australian study on domestic production, for example, was entitled *Households Work*.[15]

There are several problems with this shift in focus. First, it preempts (as James Casey has pointed out) debate concerning significant categories for analysis, no less than the concept of family. Household membership says nothing in itself, given diverse arrangements for economic cooperation, sexual relations, sleeping and so on.[16] This is true not only for the past but also the present. Take the example of domestic production: 'households work', yet as households become smaller a growing amount of unpaid caring work occurs between households. More specifically, women less often have ageing parents move in, and more often care for them in independent households with the help of car and telephone. Ironically the basis for this care is 'family' responsibility. Second, the shift in focus implicitly reduces family to household. The Cambridge school, for example, measured households but then proceeded to make generalisations concerning families. In other words, the focus upon household does not resolve problems of historical diversity and shifting meaning, but displaces them.

The family must be defined. If it cannot be defined in terms of a particular group of people or set of activities, then it follows that a

more flexible definition is in order. This has been the case advanced by a growing body of writers, operating from a range of theoretical positions. Take, for example, the Marxist–feminist theorist Juliet Mitchell; the French historian in the Foucaultean school, Jacques Donzelot; and the English social historian James Casey, who drew heavily from Durkheim and Le Play. Mitchell in her pioneering study *Woman's Estate* argued that any analysis of woman and the family needed to 'uncoil this ideological concept of their permanence and of their unification into a monolithic whole'.[17] Donzelot conceptualised the family 'not as a point of departure, as a manifest reality, but as a moving resultant, an uncertain form whose intelligibility can only come from studying the system of relations it maintains with the sociopolitical level'.[18] Casey argued that the family was more readily understood if viewed as a flexible way of ordering social relationships, rather than in terms of objective criteria.[19] In broad terms, these writers converge around issues of meaning and ideology. The unity of the family is conceptual rather than material.

While the family may be, in Casey's words, 'a creation of [people's] minds and their culture',[20] it is not just any creation. As countless writers have pointed out, the concept consistently addresses biological and household relations. The point is that it does not address these relations in a consistent way; nor do these relations themselves have a discrete unity through history. The concept, as Casey put it, 'orders' these relationships in a flexible way. Sometimes servants are family; sometimes they are not. Fathers are family when they live with their children; when they are sperm donors related by biology alone they are certainly not family. Mothers who gave up their children for adoption were not family thirty years ago; in the current climate of finding one's 'real' family this has retrospectively changed.

The ordering is flexible, but not random. As Donzelot argued, the intelligibility of this ordering comes from studying the 'sociopolitical level'. More to the point, the sociopolitical system necessarily addresses the social relationships which inform kinship and co-residence. In particular, it is concerned with patterns of obligation and dependence. The concept of family, then, represents a sociopolitical ordering of kinship and co-residence in order to affix relations of obligation and dependence.

Obligation and dependence can mean different things. Some groups—the young, old, sick and disabled—are necessarily dependent. Any society must settle upon some way of affixing

responsibility for these groups. The concept of family designates responsibility, working over relations of kinship and co-residence. In the late nineteenth century, for example, the pioneers of adoption attacked institutions for destitute children on account of their 'utter variance from the family system recognized by nature in the constitution of human society as the best fitted for the training of the young'.[21] Similarly, new criminal codes for children in the early twentieth century were designed 'to improve home surroundings and home conditions (as the primary cause of children lapsing into crime or vice)—*without in the first instance removing the child from the family circle*'.[22] More recently, government agencies have redefined family to include informal cohabitation and ex-nuptial births, thereby containing a potential blow-out of social security payments to unmarried mothers.

While some groups are necessarily dependent, others are forced into dependence. This is most obviously the case with women, whose dependence is an artefact of the market (or, in earlier societies, of law and custom). Here the concept of family constructs dependency and orders the consequences. In the early twentieth century, for example, the professional and political leaders of Australian society defined birth control as a threat to the family. By the same token, arbitration judges defined a reasonable wage for a man as a 'family wage', or the amount needed to support a wife and dependent children. As one New South Wales judge stated in 1905, it was his duty 'if possible to arrange the business of the country so that every worker however humble, shall receive enough to enable him to lead a human life and marry and bring up a family'.[23] In the 1950s 'working mothers' were said to be a threat to the family. In recent times this view has fallen by the wayside. Even so, there are heavy pressures on women to put their 'family' before their job. (See any issue of *Women's Weekly* or *New Idea*.)

Servants are a special case of this type of dependence. The inclusion of servants in definitions of the family was based upon the overlap of co-residence and dependence upon the paterfamilias, or head of the household. Here the concept of family designated the responsibilities of the head of the household and the service expected from the servant. As the market increasingly regulated this relation and removed servants from the household, servants were excluded from definitions of family. A 1940s treatise entitled *Old Order Homes or New Order Houses: Some Reflections of a*

Middle-class Woman was symptomatic in this respect. The author, 'Camina', warned of the disturbing effect that servants could have on child development. 'Camina' recalled her own experience with servants:

> One, when I was five years old once took me into her bed persuading me to 'play babies' and suck her nipples... Another apparently sanctimonious religious woman, was in reality a thief and terrified me with the old-fashioned 'cupboard-bogey' threats if I told my parents what I had seen... A third introduced me to some most revolting and terrifying sex notions when I was ten.[24]

The author recommended that only 'good homes and family groups' provided the conditions for children to reach 'the summit of individual usefulness to the State'.

As 'Camina's' reflections indicate, the sociopolitical ordering of kinship and co-residence is contested. In the early twentieth century the professional and political leadership defined birth control as a threat to the family; liberals, feminists and organised labour resisted this view, suggesting that less children meant more quality family life. In recent times moral conservatives—the religious right in particular—have sharply criticised the redefinition of family. To quote one critic: 'The primary family cannot but be a married man, a married woman, a husband and wife and their children... Why should we try to talk about one-parent families? There is no such thing as a "one-parent family".'[25]

While the concept of family is contested, it is also consistently represented as a product of nature. This is the point made by Mitchell—that 'the dominant ideology of the family gives its very various forms and functions an atemporality and permanence'.[26] There is an enormous irony here. Interventionist agencies simultaneously eulogised the family and designed strategies for its reconstruction. Take, for example, the words of Charles Mackellar, the leading architect of state intervention into the family in the early twentieth century: 'the most sacred feature in the life of society, the most sacred influence on the social life of the individual, is the family group... Destroy this influence by breaking up the family, and what is the result? The moral ruin of the individual.'[27] About the same time the feminist Rose Scott—frequently at odds with Mackellar, notably over birth control—justified her own political programme in similar terms: 'if Family Life is

selfish, evil and impure, National Life will assuredly be the same—and inasmuch as Family Life is pure and wholesome, National Life will be the same.'[28] In current times the religious right is in the contradictory position of calling for the state to support the nuclear family and the full-time housewife, while insisting that this family form is natural.

Although the family is defined at the sociopolitical level between contesting groups, there is another level of improvised definition in the course of everyday life. People take the definitions fashioned at the sociopolitical level, and rework them for their own purposes. The process is difficult to document (precisely because of its improvised everyday character), so I will draw upon the reflections of Kim, my 'de facto step-son'. When I asked Kim who his family was he came up with three lists of people. The first was loosely based upon co-residence, although not exclusively so. Kim has always lived in group households, but he does not necessarily include householders in his family. The second list was based upon biological kinship, although again not in a deterministic way. He included maternal grandparents of two generations, but not the paternal grandparents whom he scarcely knows. The third list cast the widest net, drawing from household and kin but extending to adults closely involved in his upbringing. The point of departure here was care and affect; the people who look after him, and to whom he is emotionally attached. Kim's definitions are both reactive to dominant sociopolitical meanings, and inventive in terms of reworking these meanings to meet his own circumstances. No doubt he will further rework his definitions as his circumstances change.

To sum up: the family cannot be defined by fixed criteria, such as kinship and co-residence. Rather, the family is a social ordering of kinship and co-residence. The ordering occurs at the sociopolitical level in order to affix relations of obligation and dependence. In turn, this ordering is reworked by ordinary people to meet the contradictory demands of everyday life.

Scope and methods

This study addresses the making and breaking of the 'Australian family'. The point of departure here is the Australian family of the post-war decades; mum, dad and the kids. Public discourse in this period addressed the family on an unprecedented scale. The

renaming of the Racial Hygiene Association, a eugenicist organisation responsible for Sydney's first birth control clinic, as the Family Planning Association in 1948 was symptomatic. So too was the publication in 1957 of *Marriage and the Family in Australia*, the first Australian sociological study in the field. For the most part the study conceptualised the family as the 'basic unit of society'; assumed that the Australian family consisted of a male breadwinner, housewife/mother and dependent children; normalised birth control as a functional adjustment to declining infant mortality, resulting in 'large families' and 'small families'; and pathologised divorce as a 'threat' to the family, resulting in 'broken families'.[29]

This account of the family was qualified in the 1960s, and became untenable in the 1970s. Critiques drawing from feminism and gay liberation demonstrated that the account was narrow in its focus and normative in its effect. Changes in social life—women's workforce participation, divorce, single mothers and informal cohabitation—made the account increasingly unrealistic in any case. In turn, there was a proliferation of family research, placing the post-war family in long-term historical context. This research occurred along two main lines.

The first line of research was demographic in orientation, documenting various trends; birth rate, marriage rate, women in the workforce, and so on. The major writers here were John C. Caldwell and Peter McDonald.[30] Qualitative evidence elaborated the demographic account, while the meaning of family was largely assumed as self-evident. Explanatory frameworks were eclectic; multi-causal, demographic, attitudinal, functionalist and economic. This line of research was strong on data, but weak on meaning and interpretation.

A second line of research, largely feminist in orientation, began by problematising the concept of family, drawing upon qualitative evidence; demographic trends were considered in this context. Kerreen Reiger's *The Disenchantment of the Home* is the major study of this kind. Reiger was concerned with 'attempts to transform the Australian family' between the 1880s and 1930s. She followed Mitchell's model of differentiating the elements of family life, and explored the reform attempts of an 'emergent class of professionals, technocrats or experts' in the areas of production, reproduction, socialisation and sexuality in turn. Her point was that these attempts were profoundly contradictory; undermining

the established construction of the family as natural and private with a notion of the family as a 'set of rational and manipulable social practices'.[31]

Reiger's analysis was essentially concerned with the ordering of family at the sociopolitical level, hence her sub-title, 'modernizing the Australian family'. The focus here, as in Donzelot's *Policing of Families*, was on regulation from above. This study has a different focus, being less concerned with regulation, and more concerned with the lived experience of family; more specifically, the impact of interventionist campaigns, and the reactive and inventive responses of ordinary people in the construction of family life.

The focus of this book explains the use of the concept 'making' in book and chapter titles. Since E. P. Thompson wrote *The Making of the English Working Class* in the 1960s there has been a plethora of books on the 'making' of one thing or another. Thompson was trying to strike a balance between structure and agency in the historical process; the working class 'made itself as much as it was made'.[32] The point is reiterated here. The Australian family was a product of both regulation from above and improvisation from below. The same was true for what was defined as antithetical to the family. The homosexual, for example, was the object of massive legal and medical regulation on the one hand, and the creator of a distinct and subversive lifestyle on the other.

An integral aspect of the making of the Australian family was the reconstruction of language, or meaning frames. Between the mid-nineteenth century and the present day, some concepts—such as the distinction between ladies and women—lost their significance. New concepts—such as the homosexual, large and small families, nuclear families, broken families, one-parent families—were invented. Other concepts—such as the housewife—became more widely used. Still other concepts—such as delinquency and motherhood—were redefined. These conceptual shifts are the basis of book and chapter titles.

Chapters 2–7 take key components in the ordering of the post-war family and explore their construction. Their order is based upon the rough chronological criterion of *when* change occurred. Chapter 2 outlines the construction of child dependence in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the making of a specialised world of childhood. Chapters 3–5 address three developments underpinned by the decline of household production from the late nineteenth century. These were the nuclearisation and privatisation of households, in chapter 3; the construction of

the housewife/breadwinner division, in chapter 4; and the widening use of birth control and 'the making of the small family', in chapter 5. Birth control had major ramifications for definitions of femininity and masculinity. Chapter 6 explores new constructions of femininity organised around the care of children, and the consolidation of the child-centred family. Chapter 7 looks at new constructions of masculinity centred around sexual preference, and the making of a homosexual sub-culture against which family was defined.

All of these developments have been documented to a greater or lesser degree in the new social history of the past two decades. Feminist historians in particular have worked over this ground, in the process substantially rewriting our picture of the past. This book has drawn heavily upon the work of social historians, notably Ian Davey and Pavla Miller on childhood, Anne O'Brien and Shirley Fisher on the nineteenth century household economy, Beverley Kingston on women's work, Rosemary Pringle on birth control, Jeffrey Weeks on sexuality, and Judith Allen on most of these things. For the most part, though, the focus of social historians has differed, centred in particular upon gender and urban life. The novelty of this study is its focus on family; exploring various developments as inter-related elements in the making of the family.

Chapter 7, 'the making of the homosexual', is a little different from the others. Chapters 2–6 specifically address elements of the post-war family: childhood, the nuclear family, the housewife, the small family, motherhood. In contrast, the homosexual was the antithesis of this family form; indeed, a threat to it. Yet this is the point of its analysis. The family was defined not only by inclusion, but exclusion. Moreover redefinition meant shifting ground between what was included and what was excluded. In the mid-nineteenth century child labour supported the family; by the early twentieth century child labour signified parental neglect. At the turn of the century birth control was defined as a threat to the family; by the 1950s it was intrinsic to the family. The making of the homosexual during the same period was accompanied by a new emphasis upon marital relations. In recent times marital sex has become increasingly central to definitions of family, while there have been bids to include homosexual relations within the ambit of family.

Chapter 8 maps out the family of the post-war era; the period when the Australian family was 'made'. It also explores the

dissolution, or 'breaking', of the family form; the 'cracks' at the time of its hegemony, and the rapid changes from the early 1970s. 'Breaking', unlike making, is a concept not widely used in social history or sociology. Moreover, its use—sociological in the 1950s, and popular since then—has been heavily normative and moralistic. It is generally considered undesirable that families are 'breaking up'. Even so, the concept makes sense in several ways. First, new family forms were more diverse and smaller than before; that is, 'fragments' of the old. Second, breaking—alongside making—captures the dialetic underpinning the history of the family. What is made may also be broken; conflict and change lie at the heart of family history.

To get a grip on conflict and change, some understanding of class and gender is necessary. In this respect the study draws heavily on the work of R. W. Connell. Class and gender, Connell argues, are not categories into which people must be slotted. Rather, they are historical relationships: complex, refractory and changing. They are dynamics whereby people conduct their day-to-day lives, organise into groups, mobilise around interests, and transform the conditions of their lives.[33]

Social class is understood as a historical relationship centred around property, wealth and the labour market. Through ownership of productive resources and accumulations of wealth, the 'ruling class' exercises substantial control over the organisation of everyday life and definitions of family. Since the mid-nineteenth century the expansion of market and state have been pivotal in the transformation of family life. Yet the ruling class is internally divided. In particular during the period, professionals and experts challenged established constructions of the family. Through the state and voluntary organisations they mounted diverse campaigns designed to 'rationalise' the family, with varying success.

The 'popular classes' in this study incorporates a motley group, distinguished by their lack of substantial property holdings. They include small producers, wage earners, piece workers and welfare recipients. The 'working class' refers to wage earners alone. The popular classes have constructed diverse forms of family life in accordance with their material conditions; sometimes 'respectable', sometimes 'dangerous'. There has been consistent struggle around forms of family life, spontaneous and organised. Moreover, popular and working-class movements have on occasions mobilised around notions of family.

Gender is understood as a social relationship centred around reproduction and sexuality. The relationship is often constructed as biological, along with the family. Yet biological explanations provide no grip on the changing relation between men and women. Indeed, from the 1880s women 'redefined' their own 'nature' and the family through the use of birth control. In turn, men—through the state, church and professions—warned that this 'revolt against nature' had dire consequences for women and threatened family life. They also constructed a revised biological destiny for women via the 'maternal instinct', again couched in terms of the family.

Biological explanations provide no clear insight into divisions within each sex. This is most obviously the case with regard to sexual preference. The word 'homosexual' only came into use in Australia in the early twentieth century. It reflected new ways of thinking about sexual behaviour, and new divisions among men in particular. Growing state and medical regulation of homosexual behaviour produced sub-cultures defined in opposition to the family, and families defined more sharply in terms of marital relations.

At this point it is necessary to consider more practical aspects of this study. Historical records pertaining to the history of the family are indefinite. At a fairly early stage in research it became necessary to restrict the focus, one result being that the study does not address Aboriginal families. The economic and cultural framework here was radically different, as was the scale and scope of state intervention. That subject requires analysis in its own right.

For the same practical reasons, most of the study focusses upon Sydney. There were certainly significant differences from one city to another, and between city and country. This was especially the case with regard to patterns of household formation. Yet available research on other parts of Australia (and Western countries generally) indicates that the changes considered in this study varied mostly in degree and timing rather than kind. The final chapter on the post-war period in fact does not draw upon original research data, as its purpose is to place the historical material in its broad context; hence its focus extends beyond Sydney to the 'Australian family'.

While historical records on the family are indefinite, they are also highly selective. They largely derive from the sociopolitical level, and those social groups which dominate this level; politi-

cians, philanthropists, capitalists and professionals. Studies which focus upon 'modernisation' and 'policing' of families can build upon the selective sources of historical records, though they run the risk of confusing interventionist rhetoric with effect. This study with its focus upon lived experience faces different problems.

Records from the sociopolitical level necessarily provide the broad framework for the history of the family in Australia. These records are of three main types. The first are state records, including census data, minutes of government inquiries (especially select committees and royal commissions), reports from government departments, and unpublished archival records, mostly deriving from the criminal justice system. Second, there are the records of voluntary associations, organised around philanthropy, welfare and social reform. Representative examples include the Benevolent Society, the Kindergarten Union, the Royal Society for Welfare of Mothers and Babies, and the Racial Hygiene Association. Third, there are newspapers, magazines and books; information and entertainment produced by entrepreneurs for profit.

These records frequently provide indications of the lived experience of family, though framed in the terms of their producers. For example, education reformers and administrators in the second half of the nineteenth century documented massive popular resistance to compulsory school attendance, though this was explained in terms of the 'ignorance' and 'cupidity' of parents. Similarly, from the early twentieth century state agencies gathered a growing amount of statistical data on the birth and death of infants. This was on account of concern regarding the declining birth rate, which was explained in terms of 'women's selfishness'.

The best records provide a glimpse into the lived experience of family, and how ordinary people constructed their lives and responded to interventions. In the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, a number of government inquiries interviewed parents and children to determine employment practices regarding children and justify further state intervention. Parents and children spoke of child labour in the context of a collective 'family' strategy designed to make ends meet. Similarly in 1903–04 a Royal Commission into the Decline of the Birth-Rate collected extraordinarily detailed evidence on the means whereby women restricted the number of their offspring, including home-made contraception, widespread abortion and infanticide. The minutes

of evidence were printed in a separate volume, but not made available to the general public for fear of their subversive impact.

Most of the illustrations in this book were produced at the sociopolitical level. They were posed and framed according to the purposes of reformers, politicians and publishers. At the turn of the century, for example, government reports documented overcrowding in inner city areas and their liability to outbreaks of infectious disease with photographs of 'slums' and 'overcrowded tenements' (see p. 38). From the early twentieth century voluntary agencies distributed leaflets on 'The Errors of Maternity' (see p. 90). In the post-war decades publishers featured advertisements on how to bring 'smiles to the faces of all the family' (see p. 112). Above all, these illustrations represent a sociopolitical ordering, structured by class and gender. Sometimes they also illustrate aspects of lived experience. In the case of inner city photographs they do so at several levels. By intention they illustrate high density living; inadvertently they reveal young children looking after infants and babies on a regular basis.

Apart from records produced at the sociopolitical level, there are personal records of everyday life. These include diaries, autobiographies, letters and photo albums. The production of such items is limited in the first place, and skewed towards the affluent and literate. Their survival is also problematic, and even then their availability is often restricted. Historians have to some extent dealt with these problems for recent times by 'producing' the records themselves, through collecting oral histories. Personal records often provide extraordinary insight into how people constructed their families in the course of everyday life; for example, the diaries of Hester Massie, Eleanor Stephen and Helen Fell in the late nineteenth century include immense detail on the work of a 'lady' and her reliance upon servants. Private photograph collections record the place of specialised servants such as governesses and nurses in mansions and villas (see pp. 34, 82). Around the turn of the century autobiographies by Rose Lindsay and Lewis Rodd graphically demonstrate the precariousness of the working-class household economy.

Personal records have their disadvantages. More specifically, they are time consuming, idiosyncratic and partial. Diaries, for example, are difficult to locate in the first place. Then they may prove to be volumes of frequently repetitious observations, interspersed with occasional 'gems', written in an illegible hand over several decades. The observations pertain to one person's experi-

ences, and their construction of those experiences on a day-to-day basis. The diaries of nineteenth century ladies are rich on servants and hospitality, but silent on reproduction and sexuality. Similarly, oral history interviews take time to arrange, conduct and process. In this case people construct their family self-image in retrospect, selecting and suppressing information before an interviewer. The upshot is that oral histories are frequently banal: conventional observations through the filter of the present, with 'dark secrets' screened out.

At one point I commenced an oral history project, in the expectation that oral histories would be a key source for this study. The rewards reaped from the interviews did not justify the time spent on them, and the project was discontinued. This experience reflects the general strategy adopted in the study. I drew upon personal records when they were readily accessible. Otherwise I used sociopolitical records, which yielded a wider range of insights for less work.

The family is political and private. Each family is different, yet constructed within the structural and sociopolitical constraints of a time and place. This study looks at Australia from around the mid-nineteenth century to the present. It explores the socio-political ordering of families and the everyday construction of families. It shows how families are different, how they are the same, and how they are changing.