

## “Disgusting Details Which Are Best Forgotten”: Disclosures of Child Sexual Abuse in Twentieth- Century Britain

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**Abstract** For those who by the end of the twentieth century came to be termed “survivors” of child sexual abuse, different genres and forms have been available to narrate and evaluate that abuse. This article explores the reception and practical results of such disclosures: the unpredictable effects of telling, and the strategies of containment, silencing, or disbelief that greeted disclosures. I make note of the ethical challenges of writing the history of child sexual abuse and conclude that twenty-first-century observers have been too ready to perceive much of the previous century as a period of profound silence in relation to child sexual abuse. At the same time, historical and sociological accounts have also been too ready to claim the final third of the twentieth century as a period of compulsive disclosure and fluency in constructing sexual selves. The history of child sexual abuse reveals significant barriers to disclosure in the 1970s and 1980s, despite new visibility of child sexual abuse in the media and through feminist sexual politics. Attention to such obstacles suggests the need to rethink narratives of “permissive” sexual change to acknowledge more fully the ongoing inequities and hierarchies in sexual candor and voice.

Some have hardly spoken of it, but even those that have talked incessantly feel that they managed to say very little that was heard. None find peace in silence, even when it is their choice to remain silent.<sup>1</sup>

In 1915, a milliner and suffrage activist, Gertrude Lind Setchfield,<sup>2</sup> noted in her diary a story heard through several removes, via her friend Grace:

Grace’s family keep a maid, Rose, who has a little niece, 5 or 6 yrs of age. One day, about a fortnight ago, this child did not return home from school at her usual hour. Her mother ... went to look for her but found no trace and at last came home. The child

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<sup>1</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London, 1992), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Names of some historical actors have been changed to protect their privacy.

returned home about 6 o'clock, having left school at 3.30pm. She was in a dreadful state, but could tell them nothing beyond the fact that a man had met her at the school gates and taken her home. Her mother and Rose then took her to a Dr to be examined, after which he informed them that the poor little soul had been outraged 3 times. He could not tell at present if there were any diseases caught also.<sup>3</sup>

This story was significant for Setchfield because it illustrated her motivation for political activism. She concluded, "If that is not enough to make one a Suffragette, I don't know what is."<sup>4</sup> This source is revealing of how important an issue child sexual assault was for feminist and suffrage activists in the early twentieth century, but it tells us little about how children themselves might come to tell and understand their experiences. Indeed, Setchfield assumed that a medical professional was the best judge of what had happened, even though it seems unlikely that physical evidence could indicate how many acts of sexual assault had taken place.

The silent testimony of bodies has often been prioritized over children's testimony of sexual assault; yet it is clear that both as children and as adults, many victims of abuse did try to disclose their experiences. Recent studies suggest that a large majority of sexual abuse survivors disclose before the age of eighteen, although the average length of time between abuse and disclosure—seven years—is still lengthy.<sup>5</sup> While these high levels of disclosure cannot be assumed to characterize earlier periods, Linda Gordon's research into experiences of family violence in early twentieth-century Boston suggests that child victims of sexual abuse were "usually very active in trying to get help, more so, for example, than victims of nonsexual child abuse."<sup>6</sup>

In this article I offer an historical account of the possibility and consequences of disclosure and points to the silences and obstacles that made disclosure so difficult, or caused it to be received with such inattention, in twentieth-century Britain. While the cases I discuss can represent only a tiny proportion of the likely total, oral histories and autobiographies provide a sample of cases where abuse was disclosed.<sup>7</sup> In some instances, they also provide evidence of attempts at resolution or reparation. Through these sources, I chart the responses to child sexual abuse of individuals, families, and in some cases, welfare practitioners (police, teachers, social and moral welfare workers, medics), and feminist activists, as well as wider public attitudes. I also reflect on the ethical challenges posed by this material and assess the

<sup>3</sup> Papers of Gertrude Lind Setchfield, 7GLS, The Women's Library, London School of Economics.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Debbie Allnock and Pam Miller, *No One Noticed, No One Heard: A Study of Disclosures of Childhood Abuse* (London, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Linda Gordon, "The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse: Notes from American History," in "Family Secrets: Child Sexual Abuse," special issue, *Feminist Review*, no. 28 (Spring 1988): 56–64, at 60.

<sup>7</sup> No claim can be made about the representativeness of the sources examined, though their predominant focus on abuse within the family by individuals known to the child match estimates of wider prevalence of child sexual abuse. Major public inquiries have similarly struggled to be able to assess what is a representative sample. See Johanna Sköld, "The Truth about Abuse? A Comparative Approach to Inquiry Narratives on Historical Institutional Child Abuse," in "Marginalized Children: Methodological and Ethical Issues in the History of Education and Childhood," special issue, *History of Education* 45, no. 4 (May 2016): 492–509, at 505–6.

extent to which the larger historical narratives of modern sexual mores have been able to register the persistent obstacles faced by victims and survivors of sexual trauma in being heard.

Ian Hacking usefully describes child abuse as a “kind” or category that has been powerfully expanded and reworked over time.<sup>8</sup> The concept of “child sexual abuse” by the late 1980s became a relatively stable category that encompassed “contact” and “non-contact” sexual assault of minors. Commentators across the twentieth century used a range of language to describe this behavior, often preferring terms and euphemisms such as *molesting*, *tampering*, *flashing*, *fondling*, and *ill-usage*. The term *child sexual abuse* is used here to group together a range of historical sources that are only retrospectively read as concerning abuse. Nonetheless, there is justification for this categorization; despite the lack of consistency in terminology, historical actors were concerned over sexual acts that involved children, and did sometimes describe this as abusive. The issue was repeatedly raised in Parliament, in the press, and in public inquiries, though usually prefaced with an acknowledgment of the lack of sustained public attention.<sup>9</sup> Though public and policy-maker terminology and attitudes lacked consistency, the problem of child sexual abuse has received episodic recognition.

Archival traces of child sexual abuse largely only exist where a complaint was made and an investigation undertaken.<sup>10</sup> Much of the existing historical research on child sexual abuse has focused on what is thought to be a small minority of cases—estimated by a recent report at one in eight—that came to the attention of the authorities.<sup>11</sup> The records of case files, correspondence between practitioners in social work,

<sup>8</sup> Ian Hacking, “The Making and Molding of Child Abuse,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 253–88.

<sup>9</sup> Concerns over sexual offences against children gained a brief high profile through W. T. Stead’s “Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” a series of articles published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885. See Deborah Gorman, “The ‘Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’ Re-Examined: Child Prostitution and the Idea of Childhood in Late-Victorian England,” *Victorian Studies* 21, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 353–79. Nonetheless, the Liberal MP Frank Briant still noted a reluctance to acknowledge the topic (Briant, House of Commons debate 12 July 1923, *Hansard*, vol. 166, cc1629–91.) Two departmental committees—in 1925 (*Sexual Offences against Young People*, London, Cmd 2561) and 1926 (*Sexual Offences against Children and Young Persons in Scotland*, Edinburgh, Cmd 2592)—investigated the prevalence of child sexual abuse, though they did not hear from any victims. Calls for reform were taken up by mostly female campaigners from the National Vigilance Association, the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene, and the Six Point Group. A prolonged campaign encompassing the middle decades of the twentieth century is catalogued in the papers of the National Council of Women and the Association for Social and Moral Hygiene, 3AMS/F/17/02, 4/BVA/3/2, The Women’s Library. Nonetheless, mid-twentieth-century commentators still acknowledged the low profile of child sexual abuse (“The Problem of the Moral Pervert,” *Journal of the Institute of Hygiene* [1933]: 236–38). Campaigning is documented in Alyson Brown and David Barrett, *Knowledge of Evil: Child Prostitution and Child Sexual Abuse in Twentieth-Century England* (Cullompton, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Criminal justice statistics either do not exist or give misleading figures for the prevalence of child sexual abuse for much of the twentieth century. Louise Jackson, “Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales: Prosecution and Prevalence, 1918–1970,” *History and Policy*, June 2015, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/child-sexual-abuse-in-england-and-wales-prosecution-and-prevalence-1918-1970>.

<sup>11</sup> Children’s Commissioner for England, *Protecting Children from Harm: A Critical Assessment of Child Sexual Abuse in the Family Network in England and Priorities for Action* (London, 2015). There are no robust figures to indicate the historical prevalence of the proportion of cases known to the authorities. The 1925 report *Sexual Offences against Young Persons* simply noted that “there are very many more cases of sexual offences against young persons than there are cases reported to the police” (12). A 1934

philanthropy, police and the medical profession, press coverage, and policy debates can give glimpses into the experiences of abused children and their treatment within punitive or welfare systems. In police, court, and newspaper reports, the child who suffered assault or rape frequently became understood in passive terms, as a victim, or occasionally as a culpable, active sexual agent. Except through fragments of reported testimony in the courts, their voices have rarely left many historical traces. Where the words of abuse survivors are recorded, they tend to be what Carolyn Steedman has termed “enforced narratives,” produced through the encounters between survivors of abuse and those representing welfare and criminal justice systems. These encounters often produced formulaic stories, in which ambivalence, inconsistency, or personal reflections were edited out.<sup>12</sup>

This article addresses the shortcomings of these archives by reviewing the kinds of narratives produced *about* child sexual abuse and setting these sources into dialogue with narratives produced *by* its victims and survivors. It explores a collection of more open-ended, personally crafted narratives of first-person disclosure to reconstruct how sexual abuse was acknowledged and named across the twentieth century and, from the perspective of the survivor, what happened next. Some accounts are forthcoming and composed. Others offer opaque or resistant narratives that are not easy to interpret. These sources span a variety of genres of ego-document—autobiographies, personal memoirs, and oral histories. All the disclosures occurred outside of the context of public inquiries and possible financial reparation schemes.<sup>13</sup> They relate mostly to cases of sexual abuse that took place between 1900 and 1970 and were disclosed in the years after 1910. Most document multiple moments of disclosure. The oral histories and autobiographies are disclosures in their own right; they also reveal longer “trajectories of disclosure” that can illustrate the opportunities for, and responses to, disclosures of abuse.<sup>14</sup>

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pamphlet estimated that “probably not one case in twenty, if so many, is ever reported to the police”; see *Sexual Offences against Young Children: A Call to Action* (London, 1934), 1. Historical accounts include Louise A. Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England* (London, 2000); Roger Davidson, “‘This Pernicious Delusion’: Law, Medicine, and Child Sexual Abuse in Early-Twentieth-Century Scotland,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 1 (January 2001): 62–77; Brown and Barrett, *Knowledge of Evil*; Timothy Willem Jones, “Finding Child Sex Abuse in the Archives: The Treatment of Sexually Offending Clergy in the Church of England, 1871–1960,” in *The Sexual Abuse of Children: Recognition and Redress*, ed. Yorick Smaal, Andy Kaladelfos, and Mark Finnane (Clayton, 2016), 45–57; Yorick Smaal, “Historical Perspectives on Child Sexual Abuse,” part 1, *History Compass* 11, no. 9 (September 2013): 702–14; Carol Smart, “A History of Ambivalence and Conflict in the Discursive Construction of the ‘Child Victim’ of Sexual Abuse,” *Social Legal Studies* 8, no. 3 (September 1999): 391–409; Carol Smart, “Reconsidering the Recent History of Child Sexual Abuse, 1910–1960,” *Journal of Social Policy* 29, no. 1 (January 2000): 55–71.

<sup>12</sup> Carolyn Steedman, “Enforced Narratives: Stories of Another Self,” in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, ed. Tess Coslett, Celia Lury, and P. Summerfield (London, 2000), 25–39.

<sup>13</sup> Critics have argued that possible financial compensation has unduly shaped abuse disclosures (see, for example, Mark Smith, “Victim Narratives of Historical Abuse in Residential Child Care,” *Qualitative Social Work* 9, no. 3 [September 2010]: 303–20.) The sources examined here, however, suggest a wider set of personal and social dynamics that influence disclosures and that historically precede any possible financial reparation scheme.

<sup>14</sup> On “disclosure trajectory,” see Charlotte Gagnier and Delphine Collin-Vézina, “The Disclosure Experiences of Male Child Sexual Abuse Survivors,” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 25, no. 2 (2016): 221–41.

The first-person sources represent an assembled archive, drawn together by searching existing oral history databases, and by collaborative sharing amongst scholars working on quite disparate historical themes. Child sexual abuse emerges, perhaps unexpectedly, in the interstices of other projects. The sample is unusual in spanning cases where external authorities were notified and those where no formal complaint or notification was ever made. The cases are selected to shed light on the circumstances and asymmetries of power that shaped disclosures of abuse over the twentieth century—though the selection is deeply constrained by the scarcity of this kind of testimony. Sexual abusers of children have long deployed manipulation and threats of violence to prevent disclosure. Combined with social commitments to privacy and sexual discretion in the period prior to the 1960s, some survivors of child sexual abuse did not feel it was possible to put their experiences into words.<sup>15</sup> However, twenty-first-century observers' claims that a "veil of silence and denial" prevented disclosure in the past is too broad-brush.<sup>16</sup> It reveals little about the *kinds* of silences that might be experienced. This article echoes the work of psychologist Robyn Fivush in seeking a more nuanced sense of how silence might prevail and what kinds of narratives and practices challenged it.<sup>17</sup> Undoubtedly, within vernacular speech, sexual abuse remained hard to name, yet child sexual abuse was not an unmentionable taboo. Despite the codes of euphemism, languages were available to name it as a moral and policy problem, and a personal experience.

## ENFORCED NARRATIVES

The sexual abuse allegations at the Home Office–licensed children's home the Little Commonwealth in Dorset give some insight into the dynamics of disclosure when delivered and phrased in ways that victims and survivors did not choose. In 1918, Homer Lane, the leading figure at the experimental school, was accused of "sexual immorality" with some sixteen-year-old girls in his care. Their allegations were recorded by one of Lane's co-workers, Elsie Bazeley, in her subsequent memoir, and in Homer Lane's own short description of the events. Concern had been raised after one girl wrote to her mother of Lane having "insulted" her, and another similarly wrote to her parents describing Lane as "improper." But when Lane challenged them in front of the entire school to give details, they refused to speak. As Lane recounted the situation, "I challenged her to tell. She sat down and refused to speak. The chairman appealed to her to either tell what she had said she could tell, or withdraw her statement ... but she added that she would tell some time. She was pressed from all sides to tell until she finally said she would tell one

<sup>15</sup> On cultures of privacy, see Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010); Leonore Davidoff et al., *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830–1960* (London, 1999); and Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Living with Shame from the Victorians to the Present Day* (London, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> One in Four, *Survivors' Voices: Breaking the Silence, on Living with the Impact of Child Sexual Abuse in the Family Environment* (London, 2015), 5, [http://www.oneinfour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Survivors\\_Voices\\_Report\\_November\\_2015-2.pdf](http://www.oneinfour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Survivors_Voices_Report_November_2015-2.pdf); Christian Wolmar, "Breaking the Silence Will Halt Child Abuse," *Daily Express*, 16 January 2003, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Robyn Fivush, "Speaking Silence: The Social Construction of Silence in Autobiographical and Cultural Narratives," *Memory* 18, no. 2 (February 2010): 88–98.

of the women-helpers some time after the meeting.”<sup>18</sup> In private, she made fuller accusations of “impropriety,” and on the same evening, Lane recalled the entire school to hear from his accusers—unsurprisingly, the girls once again refused to speak in public. The female assistant confirmed, however, that “improper conduct” was alleged.

Lane allowed the other children to threaten violence and “hurl invective at the girls” for a further two hours, but they would not disclose in public. Eventually he offered them the chance to take their allegations to the police. In his words, “Then a most remarkable thing happened. Both girls seized upon my suggestion eagerly and affirmed at once that they proposed to adopt this course.”<sup>19</sup> Lane, however, did not take them to the police. Instead, he subsequently took them on a trip to London, where they shared a hotel, and on a camping trip. It was not until some months later, when one of his accusers, Ethel, ran away to London, that she repeated her accusations. This led finally to a full-scale investigation, headed by a Home Office-appointed external figure, the barrister and Member of Parliament John Rawlinson.<sup>20</sup>

The accusations against Homer Lane are the first well-documented case of alleged institutional child sexual abuse in Britain. They reveal the difficulties of making disclosures by victims who were disadvantaged by their age and class status. Most came from troubled and impoverished backgrounds. The social status of looked-after children, and their histories of sexual experience or knowledgeability from the period prior to admission to the children’s home, meant that their claims were mostly not believed by the welfare practitioners who encountered them. Despite expertise in identifying sexual threats to children loosely grouped under the term “moral danger,” welfare practitioners were often inclined to disbelieve children who talked of specific sexual encounters. Mathew Thomson documents such a case in 1917, in which a child who had attended a special school was recorded as having “invented stories [in offensive language] as to what boys have been doing to her on the Common, also of the behavior of her father and step mother.” The child was categorized as “a very serious source of moral danger to all the children of the neighbourhood,” and was certified under the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act, without any investigation of her claims.<sup>21</sup> “Moral danger” thus diverged sharply from later discourses of child protection. It functioned as an imposed label that provided little scope for listening to vulnerable children. It was typically used to displace attention from children’s testimony and to impose supervision.

The Little Commonwealth case also reveals the ease with which those with class advantages and institutional power were able to defend themselves. The managing committee of the Little Commonwealth continued to endorse Homer Lane. One aristocratic supporter, Earl Lytton, commented on the situation, “Promiscuous misconduct of the kind suggested could only be committed by a man who was

<sup>18</sup> Lane, appendix, published in Elsie Bazeley, *Homer Lane and the Little Commonwealth* (London, 1928), 177–93, at 187.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>20</sup> Bazeley, *Homer Lane and the Little Commonwealth*, 194–200.

<sup>21</sup> Mathew Thomson, “Family, Community and State: The Micro-Politics of Mental Deficiency,” in *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities*, ed. David Wright and Anne Digby (London, 1996), 207–30, at 209–10.



supersexual and morbidly unnatural. There are such men but Mr Lane is not one of them. If he were we should have to admit that he was also a super hypocrite ... and that all of us who have known him intimately for many years have been *completely duped* as to his character."<sup>22</sup>

In Lane's defense, a welfare worker from the Women's Training Colony at Newbury wrote to the Home Office claiming complacently that "such accusations are an occupational hazard. ... all rescue workers are accused of immorality, male or female, by the girls if there is a loophole."<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, and despite their reluctance to give details, the Little Commonwealth girls were interviewed by Eilidh MacDougall, a welfare worker for the Southwark Diocesan Board of Women's Work and Lady Assistant to the Metropolitan Police. MacDougall was employed by the police to take statements from female victims of sexual assault, and she recorded the following blunt statement from one of the girls: "He lifted my clothes up, in front, and pulled down my knickers—they have an elastic band around the edge. I only said 'Don't Mr Lane.' He was holding me on the bed—he loosened my pyjamas—he touched my private with his private—he put it into my private, he didn't hurt me much—then he was lying on top of me—he was moving up and down."<sup>24</sup> The painful detail given here is starkly different from the disclosures examined below, which avoid this blow-by-blow account of physical penetration. Its impersonal tenor is suggestive of MacDougall's expertise in eliciting pared-down forensic narratives suitable for courtrooms. In this case, the testimony was sufficient to cause the Home Office to withdraw its license, leading to the closure of the Little Commonwealth. But there was no further pursuit of Lane for sexual assault, and he was allowed to retain custody of some of the children from the Home.

There is no archival record of what the girls who alleged indecent conduct thought of this process; only their reported speech survives, mediated through welfare professionals or voiced by their alleged abuser. But the troubling nature of disclosure is clear. It is therefore unsurprising that many children were resistant to disclosure and opted for self-protective silence. A similar preference for silence is visible in a much later account of an enforced narrative from a magistrate, recorded in Ronald Blythe's 1969 *Akenfield* collection. A Suffolk magistrate named as Mrs. Christian Annersley described her shame at her court's treatment of a "little boy" who had been sexually abused in the 1960s. He was "struck dumb with shock" at being in court: "[He] could not bring himself to say what had happened. ... He wouldn't say, he *wouldn't* say. ... The child sat on a chair right up close to us and we asked and he couldn't answer. His eyes and our eyes were stuck together for hours. God

<sup>22</sup> Victor Bulwer-Lytton, quoted in Judith Stinton, *A Dorset Utopia: The Little Commonwealth and Homer Lane* (Norwich, 2005), 89 (emphasis added).

<sup>23</sup> Letter from M. L. Shaw concerning the closure, to Dr. Wilson, MSS.16c/3/LC/9, Modern Records Centre, cited in Stinton, *A Dorset Utopia*, 88. Marie Paneth's 1944 account of philanthropic work in London slums also noted children who "incessantly accuse every grown-up person of promiscuity." Paneth clearly viewed such claims as mischievous and ill-founded. Paneth, *Branch Street: A Sociological Study* (London, 1944), 26, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Stinton, *A Dorset Utopia*, 91. Stinton's analysis of this bald description is that it has "the soft unrealised touch of female adolescent fantasies." Without any further evidence, she concluded that the accusations were "gossipy" and inaccurate. *Ibid.*, 89.

knows what harm we did him. ... Finally he said it. He was seduced into saying it. We seduced him.”<sup>25</sup>

Mrs. Annersley’s recognition of the sexual dynamics of this “seduction” convey the re-traumatizing potential of a forced disclosure.<sup>26</sup> *Akenfield*’s oral testimony cannot be taken as a direct account, as Blythe fictionalized and edited the material, which was drawn from several locations.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, his account provides a sense of the intrusive techniques that persisted into the later twentieth century, despite the more child-centered criminal justice system.

Notwithstanding her sensitivity to the trauma of disclosure, Mrs. Annersley was less sympathetic to other child victims. She termed sexually active children as “hardened little tarts,” and claimed of one thirteen-year-old victim, “I honestly feel that [abuse] left no scar at all on the child. Her sexual experiences fitted into the lowness and crudity of everything else about her.”<sup>28</sup> For much of the twentieth century, enforced disclosures of sexual abuse were not only often damaging to personal reputation and composure but they were also unlikely to lead to a conviction.<sup>29</sup>

## SELF-CRAFTED DISCLOSURES

There are nevertheless traces of what can be retrospectively identified as child sexual abuse in occasional personal memoirs. In 1939, for example, Frank Steel published an autobiography describing his childhood in a Poor Law institution, the Forest Gate District School. He had experienced abuse by a female nurse, and described his memories of the lavatory where it had occurred:

It was a dark corner, sickeningly and insistently redolent of strong, coarse soap and rancid hair-oil. But darker in my memory than its shaded visual aspect, and ranker than its revolting odor, the evil shadow of Kate and the taint of her iniquities rest eternally upon it. The systematic ill-usage of helpless, depressed, and under-fed children enacted within the four walls of that unsavoury little lavatory, the volume of juvenile misery and fear that went daily in and out at that dingy little portal, render it sinister in my recollection to the last degree, and fix it for ever in my thoughts in the abhorrent category of torture-chamber and dungeon-cell.<sup>30</sup>

However, Steel did not reveal any further details, except to stress the effect his experiences had on his later life, characterized by “heart-breaking hope deferred; of painful groping in the dim and tangled ways of sordidness and deprivation.”<sup>31</sup> His

<sup>25</sup> Mrs. Christian Annersley, in Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield* (Harmondsworth, 1969).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>27</sup> Lynn Abrams, “Akenfield: Forty Years of an Iconic Text,” in “Forty Years: 1929–1969,” special issue, *Oral History* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 33–42.

<sup>28</sup> Annersley, in Blythe, *Akenfield*, 287, 288.

<sup>29</sup> Criminal justice statistics either do not exist or give misleading figures for the prevalence of child sexual abuse for much of the twentieth century. However, Louise Jackson suggests that conviction rates varied dramatically for the different offences under which child sexual abuse could be prosecuted, and that conviction rates were markedly lower in the second half of the twentieth century, when reporting rates were rising. Jackson, “Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales.”

<sup>30</sup> Frank Steel [pseud.], *Ditcher’s Row: A Tale of the Older Charity* (London, 1939), 91.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 297–98.



euphemistic account only hinted at sexual content.<sup>32</sup> Even though he was writing under a pseudonym, Steel may have been seeking to protect his composure. He was more open about the psychological aftermath of abuse than the events themselves.

A similar strategy was adopted by Edward Balne (b. 1894) in his 1972 unpublished autobiography, which talked of an "incident" that took place when he was fourteen, during a cricket match. He noted that, "being a highly sensitive lad, I was never to forget the incident (which I will not describe here) which occurred that afternoon. The shock of the realisation that I was considered to be a member of the lowest form of human creation was an experience from which I have never fully recovered. It affected my nerves and my whole outlook upon life. It affected my confidence and personality and it left a feeling of a deep and profound inferiority complex which generally has overshadowed everything I have tried to accomplish over the years."<sup>33</sup>

Both authors allowed the lifelong impact to give their readers a sense of the seriousness of abusive experiences. Their gender may also help explain some of their reticence. Archival traces of male experiences of child sexual abuse are relatively few and tend to be allusive or opaque. Long-established cultural traditions made disclosing sexual trauma by boys and men particularly hard.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to Balne and Steel, a remarkably frank autobiography, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, published pseudonymously by a working-class woman in 1954, offers a polished, composed account of child sexual abuse and its subsequent aftermath. "Emma Smith" was brought up in chaotic and neglectful surroundings. She was an illegitimate child, born in 1894 and raised in Cornwall by her grandparents and in the workhouse, after being rejected by her mother. She lived with a traveling organ grinder named Pratt for some years, when her own family could not support her, and worked with him by singing and collecting money. In her autobiography recounting her experiences, she recalled,

One evening I found myself alone with Mr Pratt. For a while he sat looking at me in an evil way that made me afraid. At last he said, "Come here, Emma." I obeyed, slowly. This beast—old enough to be my grandfather—grabbed hold of me, a child about six years of age, if I was that. He undid some of my clothing and behaved in a disgusting way. Presently he said, "Don't tell Ma or Charlie what I've done, or something awful will happen." As he said this his face was so evil and threatening that I was overwhelmed with fear.<sup>35</sup>

This behavior was repeated, and Emma was also sexually abused by a casual lodger who was allowed to sleep next to her on the pile of coats that made up her bed.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Balne, *Autobiography of an Ex-Workhouse and Poor Law Schoolboy* (1972), Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies, 34–35, <http://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/9415>, accessed 28 October 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Contemporary surveys report the incidence of male survivors of child sexual abuse of boys at around seven to ten in every one hundred individuals, compared to female rates of around eighteen in one hundred. Male survivors are more likely to receive responses of disbelief, leading to psychological distress and social isolation. Gagnier and Collin-Vézina, "The Disclosure Experiences of Male Child Sexual Abuse Survivors," 230.

<sup>35</sup> Emma Smith [pseud.], *A Cornish Waif's Story: An Autobiography* (London, 1954), 31.

Emma's care was fluid, and when her foster family refused to have her for a period, she was housed at a Salvation Army home. She greatly appreciated the better material surroundings and opportunities for education this provided, but she was abruptly expelled from this home, aged nine, accused of having been "very naughty." She had not told anyone of her experiences of abuse, but speculated that she had unwittingly sung obscene words to a song, despite being innocent of their meaning. It was common practice in children's residential care in the early to mid-twentieth century to categorize and segregate children according to their sexual knowledge; a survey of a children's home in 1945, for example, found that the girls were labeled as "clean minded" or "foul minded."<sup>36</sup> Reformers were obsessed with the damage that sexually "knowing" children might inflict on others. Despite her age, Emma Smith may have been assumed to be corrupt and thus a danger to other children. She was not, however, directed into one of the specialist care homes for victims of sexual assault run by the Salvation Army, but was returned to the care of her mother, who remained unwilling to take her in. After some temporary stays with other families, she was given the option by her mother of traveling again with Pratt, her abuser. Aware that her family could not support her, her autobiography dwelt on her sense of having few options, in justifying why she chose again to go on the tramp and make further abuse possible.

Pratt continued to make sexual demands on her. When she attended school, she "longed to be able to confide my worries" to her teachers. However, "Fear of Pratt ... kept me silent, in addition to which I did not know how to express myself about the matter of his unnatural behaviour." Her ability to disclose her experiences was not helped by the stigma caused by her neglected appearance and origins: "The street I lived in with the Pratts had a very bad name."<sup>37</sup> Those from "respectable" backgrounds had long found it easier to gain a hearing for their disclosures. An evacuated schoolgirl, for example, complained in 1939 of the sexual assault she had suffered in her billet. Initially, she was not believed, due to her history of "slight nervous trouble." But after a visit from a moral welfare worker, who was aware that the girl came from "good parents and a comfortable home," she was moved to a new billet.<sup>38</sup> Emma Smith had no such class advantages. Around 1906, she eventually ran away from her foster family. She was taken to the police, who temporarily placed her with a "little black-veiled lady," Miss Butler, previously a Sunday School teacher of Emma's, but who had no other apparent status or authority. This turn to voluntary and informal sources of support was common practice as a response

<sup>36</sup> *Committee Inquiry into London County Council Remand Homes* (London, 1945) HMSO Cmd 6594. See also Smart, "A History of Ambivalence and Conflict," 403–4; Louise Jackson, "'Singing Birds as Well as Soap Suds': The Salvation Army's Work with Sexually Abused Girls in Edwardian England," *Gender and History* 12, no. 1 (April 2000): 107–27.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, *Cornish Waif's Story*, 90.

<sup>38</sup> *Report of the Committee for the Moral Welfare of Children in Islington and Finsbury* (London, 1941), 9, A/LWC/251, London Metropolitan Archives. Evacuation clearly left many children physically and emotionally vulnerable; in a 1990 oral history collection, another evacuee was able to name her experience of being "fondled" by a youth club leader as sexual abuse. She had not previously disclosed because "I knew it was wrong but there was no-one to tell and I was always afraid of getting other people into trouble. I suspect too, that it was a comfort to think somewhat misguidedly, that someone liked me when no one else seemed to." Anonymous, *Goodnight Children Everywhere: Memories of Evacuation in World War II*, ed. Pam Schweitzer (London, 1990), 14.

to children who were regarded as in "moral danger" or suffering from venereal disease—often euphemistically termed "specific diseases."<sup>39</sup>

Emma had yet to disclose her experiences of sexual abuse. However, Miss Butler sought a certificate to testify to Emma's sexual status, which may have been inferred from the physical neglect she suffered or from other aspects of her behavior. She was taken to a doctor and declared (in her hearing) to have been "ruined by a man." The doctor had been unwilling to examine her since she was dirty and covered with sores; he offered to give a certificate without physical inspection. Both the use of the word "ruined" and the doctor's willingness to certify her as sexually assaulted without any physical evidence haunted Emma, who described herself with hindsight as "still in the medical sense of the word a virgin."<sup>40</sup> Aged twelve, she was quickly placed at a penitentiary intended for young women involved in prostitution. She continued to be labeled a prostitute throughout her adolescence; her status as an innocent victim of sexual abuse was eroded by the habitual assumptions of welfare practitioners. Nuns within the penitentiary greeted Emma's presence with disbelief that a child so young could have "fallen," and spoke of the shame that attached to her position. She had been unable to tell anyone of her "sordid memories," and this prohibition meant that "I was burdened ... with an awful sense of guilt which made me feel older than my years."<sup>41</sup>

Emma worked in the laundry and at needlework and largely enjoyed the penitentiary as a place of relative safety, despite the strict regimen the "penitents" were compelled to follow. Her laundry work offered practical benefits for the institution and symbolic purification for the individual penitent. It also prepared her for the only workplace ever envisaged for "fallen girls"—domestic service.<sup>42</sup> She was sent into service shortly before her fifteenth birthday, with the warning never to tell of her past experiences and time spent at a penitentiary. This advice aimed to preserve her reputation but was also based on a strong belief that children were best served by forgetting any sexual incident. The Home Office Children's Branch reported regularly on work with children who were victims of sexual assault. Its 1928 report noted the difficulty of balancing justice and "the welfare of the child." The "ordeal of telling a painful story" and thus dwelling on "disgusting details which are best forgotten" meant that many families of abused children avoided seeking reparation through the courts and preferred silence as a means of "moving on."<sup>43</sup> Justice and reparation were thus displaced by attempts to promote forgetting.

This silence around her past caused Emma great distress, and she found it very hard to stay in the domestic service jobs she was found. Her clothes marked her as having come from residential care, and it was assumed that she had been promiscuous. The ban on talking about her past meant that she was not able to offer an

<sup>39</sup> Pat Starkey, "The Feckless Mother: Women, Poverty and Social Workers," *Women's History Review* 9, no. 3 (February 2000): 539–57; Lucy Delap, "Child Welfare, Child Protection and Sexual Abuse, 1918–1990," *History and Policy*, 30 July 2015, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/child-welfare-child-protection-and-sexual-abuse-1918-1990>.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *Cornish Waif's Story*, 105.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>42</sup> Pamela Cox, *Gender, Justice, and Welfare: Bad Girls in Britain, 1900–1950* (Basingstoke, 2003), 86–87, 128.

<sup>43</sup> Home Office, *Report on the Work of the Children's Branch* (London, 1928), 69–73.

alternative narrative. Unusually, she returned to the penitentiary and stayed until she was nineteen. During this second stay, she was able to make “a full confession” to the chaplain and attain what she described as “mental freedom” from “all that had worried me hitherto.”<sup>44</sup> Yet it was still not a topic she could discuss outside of a religious setting. Despite a marriage and three children, she continued to suffer depression, and made several suicide attempts: “I am easily worried and upset over certain things.”<sup>45</sup> Her memoir ends with her (unfulfilled) fantasy for a home that might bring her mental peace.

How was it possible for Emma to give this account of her experiences of sexual abuse, when the cultural scripts of both her Edwardian childhood and her mid-twentieth-century adulthood provided so few ways to acknowledge these experiences? Some composure may have been gained through of the passing of time—her account was written some five decades after the abuse. She had also gained elements of social respectability through her marriage and children. Her religious faith clearly gave her a confessional mode that perhaps made the autobiography easier. During her troubled childhood, she recalled that, to adults, “Not one word could I say about what really was troubling me. ... Nevertheless I poured out my trouble to my Maker in private.”<sup>46</sup> In sexual matters, her autobiography still resorted to euphemism. Her account of the abuse she experienced from a lodger was addressed apologetically: “I shrink from making my little book sound more sordid than need be. I will therefore touch lightly on the subject by saying that he was not the sort of sleeping partner my Sunday School teacher would have chosen for me. This man was nasty.” It was also important to her authorial composure to claim innocence: “I was innocent of any sin. I was sinned against.”<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, some elements of her story were hard to fit into this moral compass. Her obscene singing and her choice to return to the household of her abusers both required explanation and clumsy maneuvers to reconcile with claims of innocence.

The ability to write of her sexual abuse may also have been aided by external interventions. Emma Smith’s authorial voice was not entirely her own; her manuscript was heavily edited by her literary mentor, the historian and poet A. L. Rowse. Rowse had secured publication, obtained the rights to Emma’s book, and initially, split with her the profits gained by its success. His intervention may have helped convert chaotic memories into direct prose, and to impose narrative form or literary modes of presentation onto the life story. Emma’s story was often presented with reference to Dickensian literary characters. It is hard to know how much was her own work and how much was imposed externally by her mentor or publisher. The relationship between Rowse and Smith broke down fairly quickly after publication, and despite her ambitions to be a writer, she was not able to publish anything further. Nonetheless, her first book was extremely successful—it was reviewed widely and even serialized on the BBC radio Western Regional Programme in January 1955. Yet, despite sexual abuse being central to the narrative of the memoir, her publisher, Odhams, adopted the euphemistic and cautious conventions

<sup>44</sup> Smith, *Cornish Waif’s Story*, 139.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

of the time, and marketing materials made no mention of the sexual nature of her abuse.

In the press, reviewers were also noticeably disinclined to discuss or even name her mistreatment as sexual. Reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* by biographer Rosalie Glynn Grylls (Lady Mander), the book was declared to have “the appeal of a primitive, at once pathetic and compelling.” The sexual abuse was referenced only as “Pratt’s behavior to her.”<sup>48</sup> The cause of Emma’s flight from home was presented as equally to do with inadequate mothering as sexual abuse. Published at the height of the popular reception of Bowlby’s theories of maternal attachment, there was more interest in the heartlessness of the mother and mother substitutes than in sexual assault.<sup>49</sup> In its review, the Labor weekly, the *Tribune*, also blamed Emma’s mother for being “criminally heartless.” Emma’s condition was described as “a story of under-feeding, cruelty, and of human beastliness in the good old days before the welfare state.” There is no mention of sexual abuse. The *Tribune* clearly sought to use Emma’s story to make a political defense of the welfare state, and to label the care of the church-run penitentiary to which Emma was committed “inhuman.”<sup>50</sup> In contrast, the more conservative periodical *Country Life* reviewed the book in order to stress how valuable Salvation Army and penitentiary care was for Emma: “It was what she needed. It was the security she was seeking.”<sup>51</sup> Again, the reviewer did not name sexual abuse. Only the more radical journal the *New Statesman and Nation* was willing to go beyond euphemism and mention sexual content.<sup>52</sup> The response to Emma Smith’s disclosures illustrates the silences that might greet disclosures of abuse in public discourse. The reviews also suggest ways in which disclosures might be used for other purposes—in this case, for political point scoring about welfare systems.

In the aftermath of the book’s publication and its reception, Emma experienced a personal breakdown, triggered by her loss of control over her story. While a transhistorical experience of trauma associated with child-adult sexual interactions cannot be assumed, many twentieth-century sources suggest that contact abuse had deep psychological effects, particularly centered on feelings of powerlessness. Contemporary research in this field concludes that subsequent experiences of powerlessness, for example, through bureaucratic or intrusive questioning, can retrigger the emotions and symptoms of abuse.<sup>53</sup> In Emma’s case, she had requested that her name and her village of origin be anonymized. Her publisher did not keep this agreement, and Emma blamed Rowse, her collaborator. She wrote to a friend afterwards, “I live in dread that one day I shall appear in a film without warning.”<sup>54</sup> She had never intended her disclosure of abuse to invade her personal privacy. Just as

<sup>48</sup> Rosalie Glynn Grylls, “Singing for Supper,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 December 1954, 838.

<sup>49</sup> John Bowlby, *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (Harmondsworth, 1953). On “Bowlbyism,” see Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Woman and Family in England c. 1945–2000* (Manchester, 2012), 112–14, 122–23; Michal Shapira, *The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Bruce Bain, “Workhouse Girl,” *Tribune*, 12 November 1954, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Howard Spring, “Workhouse Girl’s Misery,” *Country Life*, 11 November 1954, 1693.

<sup>52</sup> G. W. Stoner, “Living It Over,” *New Statesman and Nation*, 4 December 1954, 751.

<sup>53</sup> J. L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York, 1997).

<sup>54</sup> “Emma Smith” to L. P. Hartley, 12 March 1956, folder 2/3, Special Collections, John Rylands Library, Manchester.

disturbing was learning that she had signed away the rights to income from a book that the publisher termed a bestseller. The discovery precipitated a major nervous breakdown: “My little book was meant to do good in a quiet way—but the different shocks I have had from the time it first appeared have almost made me feel suicidal. ... This is my own intimate story being blazed abroad.” She vividly perceived a parallel between sexual abuse and the exploitation of her authorship: “Rowse is now able to exploit me for gain just as surely as ever this Fagin of a Pratt exploited me as a child.”<sup>55</sup>

Emma Smith’s memoir is a relatively unique, detailed narrative of abuse and institutional care. It can be seen as an example of the “confessional” memoir, adapting earlier, often religious genres of self-examination to become a recognizable means of literary self-fashioning, particularly after World War II.<sup>56</sup> Smith’s autobiography narrated a blighted childhood but also stressed the preservation of innocence and the redemption of Christian faith. Nonetheless, she struggled to gain authorial composure and found her literary self being read as primitive or pathetic.

The unusual conditions of production of *A Cornish Waif’s Story* suggest it was an exceptional rather than typical disclosure, in a period when a vernacular language of child sexual abuse was not readily available. It was published in a period of confidence that the abuse of children had been overcome by the welfare systems and affluence of postwar Britain. Emma herself regarded her childhood as a relic of “former times,” of little relevance to children’s lives in the 1950s. Her motive for recording the terrible events of her childhood was that they were now “unimaginable.”<sup>57</sup> The postwar era, with its investment in ideas of protected childhood, intense parenting, and preservation of innocence, seemed worlds away from the Edwardian tramping, assault, and lack of care that she had experienced. Yet there is irony in her optimism, for subsequent decades saw continuing cultures of abuse in families and communities. Child sexual abuse also continued to feature in institutional settings such as children’s homes, as well as religious, sports, and entertainment circles, though this was only belatedly recognized.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> “Emma Smith” to L. P. Hartley, 12 March 1956, folder 2/3, Special Collections, John Rylands Library, Manchester.

<sup>56</sup> Jo Gill, *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays* (London, 2006); Michael O’Neill, “Poetry and Autobiography in the 1930s: Auden, Isherwood, MacNeice, Spender,” in *A History of English Autobiography*, ed. Adam Smyth (Cambridge, 2016), 331–44; Rita Felski, “On Confession,” in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA, 1989).

<sup>57</sup> Smith, *Cornish Waif’s Story*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> See the work of the Northern Ireland Executive Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse, <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/index/work-of-the-executive/inquiry-into-historical-institutional-abuse.htm>, accessed 26 September 2016; Waterhouse Tribunal, *Lost in Care: Report of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Care in the Former County Council Areas of Gwynedd and Clwyd since 1974*, [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130124064403/http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_134777.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130124064403/http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_134777.pdf), accessed 28 September 2016; Dame Janet Smith, *The Jimmy Savile Investigation Report*, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/dame\\_janet\\_smith](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/dame_janet_smith), accessed 28 September 2016; Kate Lampard QC, *Themes and Lessons Learnt from NHS Investigations into Matters Relating to Jimmy Savile*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/jimmy-savile-nhs-investigations-lessons-learned>, accessed 14 January 2017.



## ORAL HISTORIES AND ABUSE DISCLOSURES IN POSTWAR BRITAIN

The postwar period was one of changes in the aspirations for, and value of, childhood and the family. As Mathew Thomson has documented, the period saw a heightened awareness of a range of dangers to children, including that of indecent exposure outside the home setting. Yet Thomson notes that despite parental concerns, there was surprisingly little concern amongst welfare professionals and establishment figures over children's sexual vulnerability. The divergent attitudes found in popular culture and among practitioners make for a complex historical context. Both new influences and older traditions can be discerned in debates about child sexual abuse. The continuing presence of groups such as the Family Welfare Association (formerly the Charity Organisation Society) after World War II meant that older traditions of "moral danger" that had judged Emma Smith to be a dangerous influence to others remained persistently influential on child welfare. Welfare workers continued to voice judgmental and often pessimistic views of the proclivities of the sexual delinquent or "the flotsam and jetsam of errant girlhood."<sup>59</sup> Contributors to the periodical *Moral Welfare*, published by the Moral Welfare Association, for example, noted the lack of sexual hygiene of fourteen-year-old girls, whose "laziness" and "habitual promiscuity" led to the spread of venereal disease.<sup>60</sup> This attitude was set within a general confidence that wider affluence would lead to declining sexual abuse, which was often blamed on poverty, poor housing, and challenges faced by "problem families."<sup>61</sup>

Pat Thane has charted the "considerable social investment" in the mid-twentieth century in "an image of the small, contented, 'normal' family."<sup>62</sup> Adrian Bingham has also explored the vocal support for "decency" and "family values" expressed by the mid-to-late twentieth-century media, which also inflected how child sexual abuse was understood.<sup>63</sup> In 1957, for example, in a report prompted by the Wolfenden Committee, the *Observer* discussed incest. It concluded that incest should remain illegal—less because it was individually damaging to children but more because "it is likely to shatter the family unit."<sup>64</sup> The postwar emphasis on the social value of the "ordinary" family could obscure the conflicting interests of individual members. Social workers, for example, were prone to eliding child welfare with family welfare. A 1967 report on child welfare centers, for example, noted unequivocally, "To promote the emotional well-being of the family promotes the well-being of

<sup>59</sup> Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes, "Producing the Prurient through the Pedagogy of Purity: Childhood Sexuality and the Social Purity Movement," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 20, no. 4 (December 2007): 443–61; Louise A. Jackson, "'The Coffee Club Menace': Policing Youth, Leisure, and Sexuality in Post-War Manchester," *Cultural and Social History* 5, no. 3 (September 2008): 289–308.

<sup>60</sup> *Moral Welfare*, January 1960, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Mathew Thomson, *Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child and the British Post-War Settlement* (Oxford, 2013), 157–68. See also Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor, "'Mrs Fairly Is a Dirty, Lazy Type': Unsatisfactory Households and the Problem of Problem Families in Norwich, 1942–1963," *Twentieth Century British History* 18, no. 4 (January 2007): 429–52.

<sup>62</sup> Pat Thane, "Family Life and 'Normality' in Postwar Britain," in Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann, *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History during the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge, 2003), 193–210, at 198.

<sup>63</sup> Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press, 1918–1978* (Oxford, 2009), 263.

<sup>64</sup> "Sex and Sense" *Observer*, 15 September 1957, 10.

the child.”<sup>65</sup> In an oral history interview in 2010, Mrs. Panton (b. 1947) recalled recounting abuse to her social worker, without gaining any response. She had been in care at the Erdington Cottage Homes between the ages of five and thirteen but was returned to live with her brother around 1960. She recalled that as a young teenager over the following years, “I was trying to tell [my social worker] I was being abused and she was telling me I was imagining it, I told her my brother was touching me in places and he was loving me. She said she couldn’t comment on what he was doing.” Mrs. Panton remained extremely angry about this disbelief and inaction. With access to her case file some years later, she appropriated the terminology of moral danger to accuse social workers of serious neglect: “Reading my notes ... to me they wronged me, they wronged me ... [b]ecause they thought I was in moral danger, but they put me back in that moral danger.”<sup>66</sup>

The postwar years did not, however, only register continuity with older traditions; new influences on social work and public opinion also inflected attitudes to child sexual abuse. Testimony to the 1954–57 Wolfenden Committee, for example, raised the previously little-discussed issue of the sexual abuse of boys. However, this issue was raised only to be closed down again; experts presented it as solvable by the decriminalization of homosexuality. With the exception of a small minority of what the Wolfenden Report termed “paedophiliacs,” homosexual men were thought to turn to sex with minors because it was less likely to lead to blackmail than sex with adult men.<sup>67</sup> This perspective implied that pedophilic desire was of little overall significance and likely to be displaced in a more progressive sexual landscape. The term *pedophilia* remained limited to specialist commentary and rarely featured in media debate, which remained framed around the dangers of the “dirty old man” and “park pervert.”

The growing influence of ideas of the child as sexually active, or an agent with sexual rights, was another new component of thinking about childhood. Insights from psychiatry and psychotherapy were integrated into the work of welfare professionals in the 1950s and ’60s, but often in ways that reduced attention to disclosures of abuse by reading them as fantasy or as “normal” childhood sexuality. Initially, then, these ideas tended to limit appreciation of the scale and significance of child sexual abuse, particularly in residential institutions and private domestic settings.<sup>68</sup> A 1963 pamphlet *Child Victims of Sex Offenders* by criminologist Joyce Prince and forensic psychiatrist Trevor Gibbens noted that “the most elaborate and circumstantial accusations are sometimes made without any basis in fact.”<sup>69</sup> They also explored the increasingly influential idea that children were sexual beings who might seek out sexual encounters with adults. According to Prince and Gibbens, “Many little girls

<sup>65</sup> Standing Medical Advisory Committee of the Central Health Services Council, *Child Welfare Centres* (London, 1967), 19. On how “family welfare” was operationalized, see Selina Todd, “Family Welfare and Social Work in Post-War England, c.1948–c.1970,” *English Historical Review* 129, no. 537 (April 2014): 362–87.

<sup>66</sup> Mrs. Panton [pseud.], MS2838/1/14/3, Library of Birmingham.

<sup>67</sup> The Wolfenden Report, citing the sexual offences survey conducted by Leon Radzinowicz in 1957, estimated that only 8 percent of men who committed sexual offences against children were pedophiliacs, motivated by the age rather than gender of their victims. *Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution*, Cmd. 247 (London, 1957), 23.

<sup>68</sup> Mathew Thomson, *Lost Freedom*.

<sup>69</sup> Joyce Prince and T. C. N. Gibbens, *Child Victims of Sexual Offences* (London, 1963), 8.

know a great deal about sex behavior from observation from an early age, and it holds no great surprises. They may not participate emotionally in offences, but they certainly precipitate them; and, if supported by another child of the same age, will blackmail adults to pay them weekly for the repetition of the same indecent act."<sup>70</sup> British child psychologist Lindy Burton summarized the psychoanalytic consensus in her 1969 study of vulnerable children. She concluded that there was very little evidence that sexual assault caused long-term psychological harm to children, unless it was "brutal or sadistic." Her own analysis of a group of sexually abused children suggested that, if deprived of appropriate parental affection, children sought substitute affection and "unconsciously provoke attacks by befriending strangers."<sup>71</sup> *A Cornish Waif's Story* could thus feasibly be read as a narrative of a sexually active child who sought emotional fulfilment in inappropriate sexual behavior. Neither the older language of "moral danger" nor the newer stress on children's sexual agency provided a workable language for victims and survivors.

A new genre that came to flourish in later twentieth-century Britain, however, could allow for a different reading of Emma Smith's memoir: the turn to "history from below." The 1960s and after saw a widespread democratization of practices of life narrative and recording of one's experiences. There had long been a genre of working-class memoirs and autobiographies, though relatively few women had contributed to it. Prior to the 1960s, most lives captured were of politically active or upwardly socially mobile men.<sup>72</sup> But with the subsequent rise of women's, family, and local history, the writing of memoirs became available to a wider range of individuals. This trend gave more opportunities for working-class, female, and young people to situate their lives as part of history and rethink their intimate or sexual experiences.<sup>73</sup> Oral historians cemented these opportunities; influenced by feminist theories of power, they recorded interviews that were deeply attuned to inequalities of power and the need to listen to "hidden" elements or "weaker signals."<sup>74</sup> Oral history was also a site of innovation in the understanding of trauma, and practitioners developed sensitive approaches to its analysis.<sup>75</sup> Though there was as yet no recognition of a "survivor" identity, these various cultural

<sup>70</sup> Prince and Gibbens, *Child Victims of Sexual Offences*, 5. The Wolfenden Report similarly noted children's tendency to be a "willing party to, and in some places even the instigator of, the act which takes place." *Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> Lindy Burton, *Vulnerable Children: Three Studies of Children in Conflict* (London, 1968), 87–98, 99, 88. As Mathew Thomson has argued, there are clear links between the psychoanalytic literature stressing consensual child-adult sexual relations and attempts to normalize the pedophile identity in groups such as the Paedophile Information Exchange. Thomson, *Lost Freedom*.

<sup>72</sup> See Julie-Marie Strange, *Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865–1914* (Cambridge, 2015), 10.

<sup>73</sup> Ben Jones, "The Uses of Nostalgia: Autobiography, Community Publishing, and Working Class Neighbourhoods in Post-War England," *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 3 (September 2010): 355–74. Victoria Bates argues that it was not until the 1990s that sexual abuse came to feature widely in such memoirs. Victoria Bates, "'Misery Loves Company': Sexual Trauma, Psychoanalysis, and the Market for Misery," *Journal of Medical Humanities* 33, no. 2 (March 2012): 61–81.

<sup>74</sup> Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analysis," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (London, 1991), 11–26.

<sup>75</sup> Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff, and Graham Dawson, eds., *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives* (London, 1999); Mark Klempner, "Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma," *Oral History Review* 27, no. 2 (July 2000): 67–83.

resources nonetheless created new possibilities for disclosing and narrativizing sexual abuse.

Emma Smith's ability to co-narrate her experiences through the help of an editor provided a more coherent, "processed" account than those produced within oral history interviews. The disclosure of an experience of sexual abuse was usually incidental to the main thrust of these interviews, and did not always appear to be premeditated. Mrs. Freeman (b. 1891) was interviewed in 1971 as a participant in one of the earliest and most ambitious British oral history projects, "Family Life and Work Experience before 1918." Her interview is suggestive of the fractured, hard-to-assess disclosures that might be made of traumatic experiences, particularly ones that, as Robyn Fivush has argued, run counter to the "culturally dominant narrative."<sup>76</sup> Mrs. Freeman struggled to convey what had happened to her as a child at a London railway station. At around the age of ten, she had gone to meet her father, who was returning from work. She described how she usually bought some sweets at the station, and then recalled, "After that—after I was nearly—I tell you I was nearly strangled, and—I—I don't know what saved me."<sup>77</sup> Some kind of assault occurred, likely of a sexual nature, that led to questioning by the police. She felt she could not identify her assailant, and no further action was taken by the police. However, strict limits were subsequently placed on her mobility, and she recalled that her trips to play in Kensington Gardens were ended.

Parks were widely identified as places of sexual danger for children, particularly girls. Cases of abuse (including indecent exposure) that occurred in the open air were more likely to proceed to trial and conviction than the harder-to-prove assaults in homes, where corroborative witnesses were unlikely to exist. The newspaper coverage of child sexual abuse therefore gave the impression that parks and other public spaces were particularly perilous, and reformers stressed the need to police them.<sup>78</sup>

When interviewed in 1971, Mrs. Freeman was unable to elucidate this assault. The mention of sweets may have been a tacit sign of sexual content—the offering of sweets to children was widely associated with malign sexual intentions and featured in many press reports of abuse.<sup>79</sup> A further clue to what her rather opaque anecdote might refer to is offered by her substitution of another story in place of her own. Moving seamlessly, and without any external prompt, from her late-Victorian childhood to more recent events of the 1960s, she recalled an assault on a girl from her neighborhood by "a drunken Irishman," who was jailed for nine months. The sexual content of this later assault was also left implicit. But it was hinted at in Mrs. Freeman's summary of the defense offered by the defendant, that he had

<sup>76</sup> Fivush, "Speaking Silence," 91.

<sup>77</sup> Mrs. Freeman, interview 386, in Paul Thompson and Trevor Lummis, *Family Life and Work Experience before 1918, 1870–1973*, 7th ed. (Colchester, 2009).

<sup>78</sup> A 1923 conference of church-based child protection workers, for example, stressed the dangers of open spaces and parks. *Portsmouth Evening News*, 29 November 1923, 2. Similarly, in January 1929, the National Union of Women Teacher's annual conference claimed that "at present mothers simply dare not allow their children to go into the parks ... because of the pests of society who frequent them." *Western Daily Press*, 4 January 1929, 7.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, *Bath Chronicle and Record*, 4 January 1930, 26. The trope was repeated enough for the pro-pedophile magazine *Magpie* to satirize it a cartoon depicting a boy offering a stranger sweets: "Would ya like a sweet, Mister?" *Magpie: Journal of the Paedophile Information Exchange*, no. 11 (May 1978): 9.

spent the evening treating (that is, paying for treats for) his victim, who was “a very pretty girl.” Mrs. Freeman had almost no words to describe her own experience of assault. She preferred to deflect questions by repeatedly returning to the more recent case—though, in turn, this story was also hard to tell. The case from the 1960s acted as a stand-in for her own experience of assault and left the interviewer struggling to understand the chronology. Clearly, Mrs. Freeman found the assault discomposing, and because of its trauma or the broader absence of a language to name sexual assault, had not been able to work it into a coherent narrative.

While Mrs. Freeman was silent or evasive about her experiences, or substituted other anecdotes to avoid a first-person narrative, others who could name their experiences nonetheless display and recount ambivalence and silencing. Mrs. Collinson (b. 1925) was interviewed in 1986 as part of the 100 Families project. She had been repeatedly sexually assaulted by her grandfather, with whom she lived in Dundee, between the ages of six and nine. After some years, her response to one of his sexual approaches brought the abuse into the open. She had been scared enough by his behavior to lock her bedroom door, and this action led her grandmother to confront her and demand an explanation. When she explained that her grandfather had “pulled his toto out—that was what we called his private part—and he had asked me to hold it,” her grandmother responded with outrage and practical action: “I was never to be left alone with him ever again and if my nanny [grandmother] wasn’t in and he was just there on his own, I had to stay outside and play.”<sup>80</sup> Without any grounds for divorce or means of pursuing it, the grandmother nonetheless declared her marriage over. She never spoke to her husband again.

It is impossible to know how typical this course of action was. As Louise Jackson’s study of child sexual abuse in earlier decades suggests, poor communities regarded abuse as shocking and punishable, though they did not always look to external authorities to pursue justice.<sup>81</sup> Mrs. Collinson’s Scottish working-class relatives sought a pragmatic, reputation-preserving solution. Nonetheless, a disclosure of abuse could rend the social fabric of families in a dramatic fashion. For Mrs. Collinson, the solution of familial silence and segregation was less than ideal. She recalled being blamed by other family members for having precipitated the breakdown of her grandparents’ marriage: “Auntie Peggy used to say to me that maybe I had imagined it and it was wrong for her Dad to get in trouble with her mum over it.” The familial resolution had not provided a means to clearly identify where guilt should lie; Mrs. Collinson concluded, “I blamed myself for a long time.”<sup>82</sup>

Mrs. Collinson was typical in experiencing feelings of guilt and confusion about what had happened to her, though she also displayed resilience in making a direct and relatively composed disclosure. Given the rising profile of child abuse within policy and public debate in the 1980s, she may have been able to compose her account with greater fluency than Mrs. Freeman. She was also able to present her own innocence, through her use of childish euphemism for the penis (“toto”) and

<sup>80</sup> Mrs. Collinson [pseud.], interview subject in Paul Thompson and Howard Newby, *Families, Social Mobility and Ageing, an Intergenerational Approach, 1900–1988* (Colchester, 2005), <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=4938>, accessed 10 November 2017.

<sup>81</sup> Louise Jackson, “Family, Community and the Regulation of Child Sexual Abuse,” in *Childhood in Question: Children, Parents and the State*, ed. Anthony Fletcher and Stephen Hussey (Manchester, 1999), 133–51.

<sup>82</sup> Collinson, in Thompson, and Newby, eds., *Families, Social Mobility and Ageing*.



her comment that “I didn’t know at the time it was rude.” She foregrounded her actions to defend herself (locking her bedroom door). She was able to reflect on how her later understanding of her grandfather’s actions as a sexual attack had led her to reevaluate his earlier behavior with her: “He used to bounce me on his knee, as a kid, and I used to feel awful about it. I can remember it as far back as that.” Thus, from a perspective of the mid 1980s, she had been able to link the isolated memories of early childhood and redefine them as “rude” treatment of her. Nonetheless, she insisted, “he as I realise now, never sexually assaulted me”—despite the quick response of the interviewer, asserting that this was indeed sexual assault. Using language such as “rude” and “dirty,” but not that of sexual assault, her testimony shows sufficient composure to tell the story, yet with resistance to the formalization of this as an offense.<sup>83</sup>

The interviews recorded in the 1970s and ’80s reveal the shifting language available to narrate abuse, in a period when newspapers were beginning to focus more heavily on the threats posed by “child sex rings” and “pedophiles” and witnessed declining confidence in the “normal” family. As Adrian Bingham and Louise Settle have demonstrated, the daily press became more interested in stories of “perverts” and “pedophiles” from the 1970s onwards.<sup>84</sup> Spurred by a more competitive newspaper market and the turn to tabloid formats, newspaper editors and journalists helped develop a new vernacular for child sexual abuse, though not always in formats that were workable for survivors. A sensational tabloid language emerged that framed sexual abuse in terms of “stranger danger,” the pedophile, and the moral decline of a “permissive” society.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, for the *Daily Mail* in 1982, incest remained “unspeakable” and “a no/go area.”<sup>86</sup> The various terms available in the 1980s to name Mrs. Collinson’s experiences (*child abuse, sexual assault, pedophilia*) were not ones that she chose to adopt, perhaps because her experiences did not correspond to the common media stereotypes of “perverts” or “sex maniacs.” The reality of the majority of abuse—perpetrated by family members or acquaintances—remained culturally muted and hard to describe. Institutional abuse was relatively unrecognized. The resources offered by public debate, which became increasingly dominated by the idea of the “pedophile,” had not yet widely percolated into life histories and first-person disclosures.

## CHANGE POSTPONED: THE FINAL DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The final quarter of the twentieth century showed uneven change in attitudes to child sexual abuse, with greater visibility of abuse within families but also some resistance to serious public discussion and policy change. A profound challenge to approaches

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Adrian Bingham and Louise Settle, “Scandals and Silences: The British Press and Child Sexual Abuse,” *History and Policy*, 4 August 2015, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/scandals-and-silences-the-british-press-and-child-sexual-abuse>.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. Mathew Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, 168–79; Jenny Kitzinger, *Framing Abuse: Media Influence and Public Understanding of Sexual Violence against Children* (London, 2004); Bingham, *Family Newspapers?*, 196–97.

<sup>86</sup> Herbert Kretzmer, “Victims of the Unspeakable,” *Daily Mail*, 14 May 1982, 23.



to child sexual abuse was prompted by feminist campaigning of the 1970s and '80s. Like their feminist forebears in the 1920s, women's liberation activists highlighted sexual violence against women. While the violence and abuse suffered by children had a lower profile, it was nonetheless an important subtheme of feminist campaigns, which identified the family as a site of quotidian sexual violence. The feminist magazine *Spare Rib* began to discuss incest and child sexual abuse around 1977, though much of its reporting was on campaigns and research conducted outside of Britain.<sup>87</sup> After the 1978 publication in the United States of Louise Armstrong's exposé of incest, *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*, the British revolutionary feminist Sheila Jeffreys presented a paper at the 1979 Bradford Feminist Summer School titled "The Sexual Abuse of Children in the Home." Jeffreys cited the American literature and called for further work in Britain.<sup>88</sup> An Incest Crisis Line had been set up in 1978, and many local and national groups for incest survivors emerged within the women's movement.<sup>89</sup> Feminist activists rejected discourses of disbelief and sponsored practical options for both women and children who had suffered abuse, in the form of refuges and helplines. Competing versions of feminist sexual politics emerged, but the overall effect was to begin to destigmatize experiences of abuse. As Sue Bruley has argued, feminist consciousness-raising groups had been structured around commitments to unconditional emotional support and belief.<sup>90</sup> This position allowed for a range of confessions of experiences from both the distant and recent past to be categorized as abuse.<sup>91</sup> Rather than seeing abusers as motivated by "deviant" sexual impulses, feminists linked child sexual abuse to patriarchal power structures and conventional social norms.<sup>92</sup>

Feminist efforts to make visible sexual violence suffered by women and children helped usher in changed sexual and gender attitudes. Media and policy reports in the 1980s and '90s increasingly recognized abuse as a serious policy issue, captured through the still widely used term "incest," as well as the less abstract category "pedophile."<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, feminist campaigning on sexual abuse was limited by its own

<sup>87</sup> "Jailed Victim of Incest," *Spare Rib* 62, September 1977, 29; *Spare Rib* 83, June 1979, 14; *Spare Rib* 144, July 1984, 6–7. In 1981 *Spare Rib* published a practical and direct article on child sexual abuse, citing literature from New Zealand and the United States: Romi Bowen and Angela Hamblin, "Sexual Abuse of Children," *Spare Rib* 106, May 1981, 6–8, 31. In contrast, the fourteen issues of the socialist feminist journal *Red Rag* published between 1973 and 1980 did not discuss incest or child sexual abuse.

<sup>88</sup> Louise Armstrong, *Kiss Daddy Goodnight: A Speakout on Incest* (New York, 1978); Sheila Jeffreys, "The Sexual Abuse of Children in the Home," in *On the Problem of Men: Two Feminist Conferences*, ed. Scarlet Friedman and Elizabeth Sarah (London 1982), 56–66.

<sup>89</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies: Moral Panics in Contemporary Great Britain* (New York, 1992), 108; Jennifer Crane, "Painful Times: The Emergence and Campaigning of Parents against Injustice in 1980s and 1990s Britain," *Twentieth Century British History* 26, no. 3 (September 2015): 450–76.

<sup>90</sup> Sue Bruley, "Consciousness-Raising in Clapham: Women's Liberation as 'Lived Experience' in South London in the 1970s," *Women's History Review* 22, no. 5 (April 2013): 717–38.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Special edition of *Feminist Review* 28 (1988): 60; Sam Warner, *Understanding the Effects of Child Sexual Abuse: Feminist Revolutions in Theory, Research and Practice* (London, 2009); Smaal, "Historical Perspectives on Child Sexual Abuse, Part 1."

<sup>93</sup> Gordon, "The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse: Notes from American History," 60. See for example, Anthony Baker and Sylvia Duncan, "Child Sexual Abuse: A Study of Prevalence in Great Britain," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 1985: 457–67; Google Ngram shows a significant divergence between "paedophile" (or occasionally "pedophile") and "paedophilia" from 1994, with the former rising much more sharply than the latter in their corpus of British-published books. Incest, however, remained the predominant

blind spots. An oral history interview in 2013 captured the experiences of Jakob Stern, born in 1949. He described how he had been abducted and sexually assaulted by a man when he was between the ages of eight and ten. Stern noted in the 2013 interview the relief he felt in being able to speak of this experience. However, it was not the first time he had publicly acknowledged his experiences of abuse. He had earlier attempted to tell others of this part of his life history by sharing a written account of his experiences in 1982 with his Jewish feminist consciousness-raising group in London, whose members were strongly associated with the women's movement. He chose a written format because of the painful nature of face-to-face disclosure. The response of a dominant (female) member of the group was for him "completely unbelievable." Rather than acknowledging his experiences, the group leader accused him of bringing pornographic fantasy to the discussion. Stern left the group, deeply angered and saddened by their response.<sup>94</sup>

Like Stern, female survivors of child sexual abuse also sometimes found feminists to be unpredictable or judgmental.<sup>95</sup> Despite their sensitivity to power inequalities, there continued to be tension between the needs of children and mothers. Sheila Jeffreys's 1979 essay stressed the need to defend mothers from blame. She concluded, "The ultimate solution is the destruction of the political system of male supremacy."<sup>96</sup> This rather abstract goal had the potential to displace listening to survivors. Feminist practice was uneven, despite clear intentions to support survivors and victims. One reader, Anne, wrote to *Spare Rib* in 1985 complaining of the lack of care shown to a friend who had attempted to gain support from the Incest Survivors Group in London by writing a letter disclosing her experiences of abuse. Her letter had been read but then returned, marked "no longer lives here." After a two-month delay, the friend had also been sent an information sheet described as one "we usually send to social workers." Anne concluded angrily, "Survivors should not be forced back into silence because of a lack of interest. Women should not get angry and protest about incest without remembering that the most important thing is curing survivors and rescuing sufferers. They need our support for themselves as well as their anger for the perpetrators."<sup>97</sup>

These tensions between activism and support also emerge in the testimony of a women's liberation campaigner, Alice Mitchell (b. 1947). When she was around eight, Mitchell recalled that her mother began paid employment, including shifts at weekends. This meant that she and her siblings might be alone in the house with their father, who "seized his opportunity, and, for the rest of my childhood,

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term, used beyond its strict legal definition of sex between close blood relations, to capture child sexual abuse more generally. See for example, BBC television investigations (*Brass Tacks*, first screened 13 May 1982, and *Horizon, Prisoners of Incest*, March 1984), and women's magazine reporting (Linda Newman, "Sexual Abuse within the Family," 19, May 1983, 35–39).

<sup>94</sup> Jakob Stern [pseud.], interviewed by Lucy Delap, *Unbecoming Men* collection, British Library.

<sup>95</sup> This tendency was visible in older variants of feminism, which drew strongly on discourses of moral purity. A moral welfare worker Jessie Higson, for example, noted in a 1955 memoir that "an older generation of social worker—the feminist, shall we say," placed the needs of the unmarried mother above the child. Jessie Higson, *The Story of a Beginning: An Account of Pioneer Work for Moral Welfare* (London, 1955), 135.

<sup>96</sup> Jeffreys, "The Sexual Abuse of Children in the Home," 65.

<sup>97</sup> Anne, *Spare Rib* 150, January 1985, 43.

sexually abused me, and I later discovered in my adult life, my sister. Unbeknownst to me. ... So, the seasons of the day, and, the week, would be, dominated by, him, and the dangerousness of his presence and the power that he had in our family."<sup>98</sup>

For Mitchell, the women's liberation movement provided valuable support: "It was a politics that was helping you make sense of yourself, and find a vocabulary for your own pain, and, that didn't pathologise the pain but made, made an agenda out of your disappointment and depression, and rage." Nonetheless, feminism for Mitchell was a means of "honouring the toil of mothers." She described her reluctance and struggle "to place children at the centre of that narrative, and, and so to say, to take the side of children, and myself, to take the side of myself as a child." She noted how hard it was for her feminist peers in the 1970s and '80s to accept that women might be perpetrators of abuse, and that mothers might fail to protect their children. On child sexual abuse, therefore, she felt, "there was no guarantee of ... where feminists would stand on this." She did not disclose her own abuse until 2010.<sup>99</sup>

Among welfare professionals, responsiveness to disclosures of child sexual abuse was slowed by restructuring and cutbacks within welfare and criminal justice services. Both social work and policing were reorganized in the 1970s, resulting in a loss of specialist expertise. Male police forces already had a poor record on taking seriously child sex offences. One police officer recalled that during the 1960s, he encountered "no child abuse or no peadafiles [*sic*]. None of those. ... So the hidden aspects of family violence for so long we were either blind to or we didn't consider it to be any of our business."<sup>100</sup> Women police, in contrast, had developed expertise in these cases. However, the amalgamation of Women Police Departments with their male counterparts in 1975 resulted in diminished attention to the needs of women and children. One policewoman recalled that her work prior to integration had included "child abuse, a lot of sexual abuse, missing persons, the prostitutes that went missing, [work that] from the eighties, we never, ever tackled. ... We have gone from being specialists to generalists. But our skills went because they said, 'Oh, well, the police woman's department doesn't exist anymore, we just need to push away all the child abuse.'"<sup>101</sup> Integrated working with social services was also persistently resisted. One former male chief constable recalled attitudes of "God forbid, don't let a social worker in here, they contaminate the rest of us." Divisions and lack of cooperation between statutory services persisted into the late 1980s, until

<sup>98</sup> Alice Mitchell [pseud.], oral history, 2010, transcript in possession of the author.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> I. Loader, "Interview with Serving Police Officer 2," in "Policing, Cultural Change and 'Structures of Feeling' in Post-War England, 1945–1999," 1, UK Data Service (distributor), 2003-07-14, SN:4594, para. 4 (hereafter "Policing, Cultural Change"). An early acknowledgment of child sexual abuse was published in the *British Medical Journal* by a former police surgeon: Nesta Wells, "Sexual Offences as Seen by a Woman Police Surgeon," *British Medical Journal* 2, no. 5109 (6 December 1958): 1404–8. A further report and editorial followed in 1961: Nesta Wells, "Sexual Assaults on Children," *British Medical Journal*, vol. 2, no. 5267 (16 December 1961): 1623–24, 1628–33. Nonetheless, a high attrition rate in police investigations and the courts was common for cases of indecent assault, rape, or carnal knowledge of children; child testimony was widely regarded as unreliable, and a prosecution was rarely brought unless there were corroborating witnesses or other evidence. Jackson, "Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales."

<sup>101</sup> "Interview with Female Police Officer 3," in "Policing, Cultural Change"; Louise Jackson, *Women Police: Gender, Welfare and Surveillance in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 2006), 205.

the 1988 Cleveland report recommended multidisciplinary investigative teams as best practice in relation to child abuse, a practice widely adopted in the 1990s.<sup>102</sup>

The reorganization of social work in the 1970s was equally problematic. Policy makers sought to improve consistency and professional training. However, the absorption of Children's Departments into Social Services and Social Work Departments from 1968 to 1971, and the winding up of specialist bodies such as the Children's Moral Welfare Workers Association, abolished in 1968, meant that "general" social work was less attentive to specific issues of child sexual abuse. A 1978 survey by social-work investigator Eileen Younghusband concluded that child welfare work sometimes regressed or stood still because "specialist skills were diluted and scarce resources allocated to other parts of the social services." In such an atmosphere, child protection visits were often "at the bottom of the list" for "overburdened Child Care Officers."<sup>103</sup> Physical abuse of children had become better recognized, but remained disturbing and unexpected to a profession committed to supporting families. Younghusband found that "many social workers found it difficult to accept the reality of child battering and reacted with anxiety or withdrawal, which limited their ability to help."<sup>104</sup> Sexual abuse was even more discomposing; despite rising referrals in the 1980s, responses were uneven or inadequate. In 1988, two Islington social workers noted, "we were unprepared for the sudden emergence of so many sexual abuse cases ... there [was] no policy on how to deal with them."<sup>105</sup> An article in the *British Medical Journal* charted a sharp rise of referrals for child sexual abuse in 1980s Leeds but still acknowledged that different welfare services had "inconsistent response[s] to sexual abuse, as few agencies have uniform procedures of management and coordination between agencies is poor."<sup>106</sup>

Social work in the 1970s also reflected the rise of radical claims around rights to sexuality. Pedophile rights groups had argued that children benefited from sexual contact with adults, and though this specific claim was strongly contested, there

<sup>102</sup> "Interview with Chief Constable 8," in "Policing, Cultural Change"; Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, *Report of the Inquiry into Child Abuse in Cleveland 1987* (London, 1988). An early attempt at interagency cooperation was made in Bexley and was influential across other police services. Metropolitan Police and Bexley London Borough, *Child Sexual Abuse: Joint Investigative Project: Final Report* (London, 1987).

<sup>103</sup> Eileen Younghusband, *Social Work in Britain, 1950–1975: A Follow-Up Study*, 2 vols. (London, 1978), 1:68, 70.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:220.

<sup>105</sup> Margaret Boushel and Sara Noakes, "Islington Social Services: Developing a Policy on Child Sexual Abuse," in "Family Secrets: Child Sexual Abuse," special issue, *Feminist Review* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 150–57.

<sup>106</sup> N. J. Wild and J. M. Wynne, "Child Sex Rings," *British Medical Journal (Clinical Research Edition)* 293, no. 6540 (19 July 1986): 183–85. The growth of forensic medicine in the later twentieth century encouraged more attention to the traumatized bodies of victims of child sexual abuse but less expectation that their experiences could be voiced. Jennifer Crane's work on the x-ray, widely used to identify physical child abuse from the 1960s, suggests "an early challenge to the cultural denial and ignorance of child abuse": Jennifer Crane, "'The Bones Tell a Story the Child Is Too Young or Too Frightened to Tell': The Battered Child Syndrome in Post-War Britain and America," *Social History of Medicine* 28, no. 4 (November 2015): 767–88, at 769. But it is significant that a higher profile for child abuse was achieved in relation to physical abuse, and through a technology that displaced attention from what children *said*. The prioritization of the physical evidence of children's bodies culminated with the notorious use of the Reflex Anal Dilation test during the Cleveland abuse scandal in 1987.

was a wider debate about child sexuality.<sup>107</sup> Residential social work witnessed calls for the "taboo on tenderness, touch, and sexuality in residential institutions" to be lifted, and for staff to be more open about their sexual attachments to adolescent children. "What actual harm has been done? ... what is gained from the identification of a 'victim' and an 'offender' [?]" asked Leonard Davis in the *British Journal of Social Work* in 1975.<sup>108</sup> Ambivalence also characterized radical politics. A contributor to the *Men's Anti-Sexist Newsletter* in 1980 expressed only a vague unease about child pornography: "[I] do not feel very happy about children being used or pictured. Would make me feel uncomfortable, yet *am not necessarily outraged by pederasty*."<sup>109</sup> The writer's willingness to sanction child/adult sexual contact is indicative of a brief period of relative tolerance towards pedophilia.

Overall, the effect of reorganization and the ideological challenge from sexual libertarians left frontline practitioners poorly placed to respond proactively to the emerging evidence of sexual abuse. A series of scandals since the mid-1980s significantly raised the profile of child sexual abuse. The final years of the century saw an environment of wider disclosure, and eventually, more robust institutional responses. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, or NSPCC, expanded its campaigning around the abuse of children in the 1980s, and charted the rising proportion of children on Child Abuse Registers who were sexual abuse victims—from 2 percent in 1981 to 25 percent in 1986.<sup>110</sup> ChildLine was founded in 1987, providing a telephone line for children who needed support. It was overwhelmed by demand, and by 2011–12, it was counseling almost 16,000 children a year in relation to child sexual abuse.<sup>111</sup> The NSPCC also launched a child protection helpline in 1991 and initiated the National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse in 1994.<sup>112</sup> Where disclosures of sexual abuse had earlier been treated as a product of fantasy or attention-seeking, practitioners became more willing to listen. NSPCC director Christopher Brown declared in 1990, "We have learned over many years that young children telling us about these things tend to tell the truth."<sup>113</sup> That assessment, however, was still optimistic; the high profile given to "false memory syndrome" in the 1990s suggested a wider culture of skepticism.<sup>114</sup> In terms of practitioner responses and public discourse, the changes witnessed in the late twentieth century represented only a partial challenge to the culture of disbelief, inattention, and containment faced by

<sup>107</sup> Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, 168–79. See also Gay Left Collective, "Happy Families? Paedophilia Examined," *Gay Left* (Winter 1978/79): 2–5; Steven Angelides, "Feminism, Child Sexual Abuse, and the Erasure of Child Sexuality," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 2 (January 2004): 141–77.

<sup>108</sup> Leonard F. Davis, "Touch, Sexuality, and Power in Residential Settings," *British Journal of Social Work* 5, no. 4 (January 1975): 397–411, at 410, 409.

<sup>109</sup> Simon Reynell, *MAN: Men's Anti-Sexist Newsletter*, no. 12 (1980): 11 (emphasis added).

<sup>110</sup> NSPCC Information Briefing, "Child Sexual Abuse: Guidelines for Case Management," 8 March 1986, cited in David Midgley, *Who Are the Lonely Kids? Report of an Enquiry into Treatment Options for Sexual Abusers of Children within the Family* (Durham, 1987).

<sup>111</sup> Allnock and Miller, *No One Noticed, No One Heard*.

<sup>112</sup> Roger Courtney, *Strategic Management for Voluntary Non-Profit Organizations* (New York, 2002), 285.

<sup>113</sup> Christopher Brown, "Dangers of Ignoring Children's Stories," *Guardian*, 19 March 1990, 22.

<sup>114</sup> The 1990s saw significant contestation of ideas of the recovery of memory of abuse. Controversies around "false memory syndrome" were prominent from the mid-1990s; see Bates, "Misery Loves Company."



survivors and victims. Inattention was particularly notable in relation to institutional abuse. Large numbers did not come forward until the scandals, campaigns, and public inquiries of the twenty-first century finally made disclosure more feasible.<sup>115</sup> Particularly since the widely publicized Jimmy Savile abuse revelations, sexual abuse survivors have spoken with increasing openness about their experiences.<sup>116</sup>

Significant numbers of twenty-first-century oral history interviews have included accounts of abuse, which was more likely to be identified as a significant and formative experience than in earlier interviews. The narratives tend to be more rehearsed and fluent than earlier oral histories; the stories may have been previously told to others, or shaped by the more widely available, culturally sanctioned resources that can script the story. For example, Rosamund (b. 1946) described in an oral history interview in 2014 how she had been “molested” by her grandfather and uncle as a child. Her silence as a child was partly due to the threats and emotional manipulation of her abusers: “I thought I was naughty and I deserved everything I got.” Her grandfather had also molested her mother and uncle, and Rosamund was further inhibited from disclosing in earlier decades by her suspicion that her parents already knew that sexual abuse was occurring in their household, although “nothing was said.” Nonetheless, uniquely amongst the disclosures examined here, in her 2014 interview she had felt able not only to tell her story but also to set it within an assessment of how children *in general* respond to abuse: “That’s how indoctrinated and molested children are taught, that’s what they are taught, that’s what my grandfather and my uncle told me, that you should keep things to yourself, don’t go telling Mum and Dad.”<sup>117</sup> By 2014, disclosure itself had become a knowable, discussable topic.

## CONCLUSIONS

Telling stories is not simply an act of individual choice. It is a complex intervention; individuals must find a degree of internal coherence in their narratives and must also “learn to shape their stories to harmonize with the events and values of the main institutional narratives.”<sup>118</sup> As scholars of postcolonial and indigenous experience have noted, stories are collectively produced. Sometimes the process is collaborative; sometimes it is instrumental, or framed in ways not of the teller’s choosing; stories are negotiated and authorized within settings and relationships of power. The work they do is unpredictable.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Most prominently in Britain, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse has from 2015 provided new opportunities for disclosure: <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/share-your-experience>. The rise of grassroots digital forums where survivors and victims of child sexual abuse can share their narratives has also been important in challenging disbelief. See, for example, <https://www.survivorsuk.org/blog/> and <https://www.shirleyoakssurvivorsassociation.co.uk/personal-testimonies>.

<sup>116</sup> Documenting problems of disclosure in the late twentieth century (and particularly the barriers faced by those from ethnic minority backgrounds), as well as indicating the transformation of the 2010s, see Shirley Oaks Survivors Association, *Looking for a Place Called Home: Interim Report on Child Abuse, Shirley Oaks Children’s Home* (London, 2016).

<sup>117</sup> “Rosamund,” interviewed by Maria Marven, 16 September 2014, transcript in possession of the author.

<sup>118</sup> Charlotte Linde, *Narrative and Institutional Memory* (New York, 2008), 4.

<sup>119</sup> Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan, *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand* (Sydney, 2001), xii.



The narratives presented in this article give glimpses of the experiences of sexual abuse suffered by children—or at least, what they thought they should say about their experiences, and what others heard them to be saying. Abuse narratives can never be understood as a simple recitation of fact, nor a direct window onto experience. Many of these narratives are such that one would never mistake them for unmediated experience. They are disorganized, or full of non sequiturs; they clearly display trauma and its aftereffects. Memories are sometimes incoherent or repressed, and the experience is sometimes felt at the physical level rather than narrated in words. As Alice Mitchell put it, “I lived with all of my life a kind of, an unease that came from ... a kind of internal bodily unease, and a massive struggle across my life to, to feel at ease, ongoing.”<sup>120</sup> As well as being shaped by internal psychic needs, the narratives are also shaped by the filtering of the words of abused children by editors and publishers and by the interests of those who interviewed them.

The narratives reveal how the ability to disclose abuse shifted over the twentieth century, as a variety of practices and discourses changed the landscape in which abuse might be named and narrated. Moral and medical expertise, developments in the media, and political and intellectual influences produced or sustained “ways of telling.” “The veil of silence” is an inadequate descriptor to characterize the complex moral landscape in which child sexual abuse was experienced, named, and assessed. Such abuse was far from unmentioned and unmentionable, even before the shifts in sexual cultures and sexual politics dating from the late 1960s. The extensive campaigning to change the law, court procedures, and medical responses suggests that serviceable languages did exist, though they were more easily adopted by policy makers and commentators than by victims and survivors. By looking beyond institutional records to oral histories and memoirs, this article has demonstrated the ways in which survivors of child sexual abuse in this period found avenues for disclosure.

There are strong elements of continuity in the twentieth-century sources. Male survivors and those disadvantaged by learning disability, class, and poverty found it persistently difficult to make their voices heard. Inappropriate responses (or no response) from family, police, social workers, teachers, and peers remained prevalent, or even increased in later decades. Judgmental attitudes persisted across the century, and practitioners continued to stress forgetting and moving on over justice and reparation. Historically, more stable and publicly recognized narrative frames emerged in the 1990s, but there has been no single watershed moment when it became easy to disclose sexual abuse. These stories are disruptive and disturbing; their telling does not bring closure to those abused. Disclosures are interwoven with different kinds of silence—imposed by families, by the individuals themselves, or by other audiences. Their narratives are adopted and adapted for other purposes. It is sobering that in no case did any of these first-person narratives lead to a criminal conviction.

While it seems valuable to acknowledge a wider range of sexual experiences in the history of twentieth-century Britain, drawing together an archive of stories of child sexual abuse raises ethical conundrums. Emma Smith did not want to become historically known as a victim, or survivor, of child sexual abuse. Her narrative sought to

<sup>120</sup> Mitchell, oral history.

show a fuller life that included marriage and raising children, emigration, and above all, a deep commitment to her own status as a writer. She contested the efforts made by institutions to control her access to her past and to define her identity. Yet, as Leora Auslander's reflections on the place in history of Jewish Holocaust survivors suggest, experiencing severe trauma in a life can make memorable a subject who otherwise would be unlikely to leave many historical traces.<sup>121</sup> Beyond the memories of their families and acquaintances, many of these survivors of abuse are likely only remembered for their misery and loss. This fact poses an ethical dilemma to those writing their history. By juxtaposing painful elements of their lives with the tragedies suffered by other abuse victims, this article has grouped them around, and defined them by, that which their testimony sought to repudiate. In writing their history as "victims and survivors," we are allowing them to bear witness to their lives, but not on their own terms. Our interest may be prurient, or at best, focused on experiences that survivors do not want to place at the center of their life narratives. As Alice Mitchell noted, "It can be very releasing for people to talk about [sexual abuse], but it is not something I want to talk about. Partly because, it's bloody awful, I don't want it in my head. ... It would be the last thing I'd want to, you know, have to give voice to."<sup>122</sup> And though we may listen to their voices, the survivors of abuse often have little agency in the brief accounts of their experiences that might emerge in the historical record.

There can be no trite knitting together of the tentative, chaotic, or hard-to-voice threads of sexual abuse disclosures. Witnessing to child sexual abuse is a significant practice for contemporary efforts to bring justice and understanding to the past. It features prominently in the work of current police investigations and wider public inquiries. As historians, however, we must keep in mind the disservice we may do to survivors in fragmenting their lives and imposing labels. Nonetheless, their stories can serve to give a history to sexual abuse that might otherwise be taken to be a human constant, inevitable and unchanging in its misery.

Finally, locating these sources within the overarching narratives of sexual change in twentieth-century Britain suggests the need for a more sustained awareness of experiences of sexual trauma. The extent of sexual change in the final third of the twentieth century has been overstated. Typically drawing on sociological rather than historical accounts of the twentieth century, much scholarship has assumed a profound transformation in sexual cultures. As Jeffrey Weeks has argued of the postwar decades, "in little more than thirty years ... the sexual world had been irretrievably transformed."<sup>123</sup> Hera Cook echoes his sense of progressive change and sexual pluralism, though she acknowledges its longer trajectory. Anthony Giddens's account of the "reflexive project of the self" located at the heart of "high modernity" also stresses sexual agency and choice. He sees sexual experiences as part of the "coherent yet continually revised, biographical narratives" that make up the

<sup>121</sup> Leora Auslander, "Archiving a Life: Post-Shoah Paradoxes of Memory Legacies," in *Unsettling History: Archiving and Narrating in Historiography*, ed. Sebastian Jobs and Alf Lüdtke (Chicago, 2010), 127–48, at 129–30.

<sup>122</sup> Mitchell, oral history.

<sup>123</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (London, 2007), 59.

individualist self.<sup>124</sup> However, incorporating experiences of child sexual abuse makes these assertions less convincing. There is no dramatic appearance of what Chris Pullen has termed “narratives of self-invention ... uninhibited by histories of shame, stigma or oppression.”<sup>125</sup> The period after the “permissive” 1960s was no watershed of fuller disclosure, voice, and agency for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. Battling reorganization and lacking resources, welfare practitioners since 1968 were in some aspects *less* attentive and responsive to child sexual abuse than in earlier periods, at least until the gathering pace of change in the late 1990s and 2000s.

The late twentieth century saw the beginning of a process of change, but one that cannot be explained by the apparent turning point of sexual and countercultural permissiveness in the 1960s and ’70s, nor by the subsequent feminist transformation of sexual politics. Instead, victims and survivors encountered uneven support and entrenched resistance, until the significant surge in disclosure caused by the scandals of the 2010s. The history of disclosure of child sexual abuse thus demonstrates the changing sexual cultures of the twentieth century, but also its continuities. There was no steady erosion of stigma and judgmentalism. Despite the critical sexual politics and (selective) sexual candor of the late twentieth century, disclosures continued to be misheard, contained, or discouraged until celebrity-fueled coverage of serial and systematic abuse forced exposure and public scrutiny in the 2010s. Incorporating a stronger recognition of child sexual abuse forces a critical reassessment both of clichéd narratives of silence and sexual taboo and of optimistic accounts of selfhood built on fluency of sexual disclosure.

<sup>124</sup> Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception* (Oxford, 2004), 338–40; Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, 1991), 5. See also Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds* (London, 1995), 77.

<sup>125</sup> Chris Pullen, *Gay Identity, New Storytelling, and the Media* (Basingstoke, 2009), 22. For a critique of chronologies of permissiveness, see Frank Mort, “The Ben Pimlott Memorial Lecture 2010: The Permissive Society Revisited,” *Twentieth Century British History*, 22, no. 2 (June 2011): 269–98.