

Education and the working-class girl of the 1970s: reconstructing the theoretical field of Carolyn Steedman's *The Tidy House*

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Abstract:

This article asks historians of education to think about the influences that we bring to bear on our work. It uses, as an example, Carolyn Steedman's book *The Tidy House: Little Girls Writing* (1982). *The Tidy House* set out to interpret a short story written by three primary school girls in Britain in 1976. Steedman contextualised this source against the backdrop of modern children's writing and childhood experience in nineteenth and twentieth-century Britain. Viewing the book itself as a source, this article explores the intellectual background (the 'theoretical field') that gave its ideas meaning. This involves looking at the historiographical surroundings of the author, such as Marxism and feminism, in a wider lens. It also entails a consideration of how *The Tidy House* relates to educational thought today – as well as to key issues tackled by some of the most celebrated historians of education in the last forty years.

Keywords: Writing; Class; Gender; Childhood; Society

This article encourages historians to reflect on the contemporary influences that we bring to bear in our thinking – intellectual, personal, and political. In the late 1970s the sociologist Paul Hirst used the term 'theoretical field' as a way of describing how a text is informed by its context.¹ Considering how an era's conceptual approaches are shaped by such a field is an

idea which bridges historical and textual analysis. This article endeavours to apply this approach by revisiting a landmark text: Carolyn Steedman's book *The Tidy House: Little Girls Writing (TTH)*, published in 1982. The aim of this article is to reappraise Steedman's text and historical writing in the 1970s, and the larger intellectual and political climate in which it emerged and circulated.

There is a special relevance in exploring Steedman's scholarship in this way. Steedman's approach to the life history of women and girls has already become a subject for consideration within historical methodology. She has, as Krista Cowman says, achieved 'a shifting of the biographical focus' by using her subjects' lives as a key rather than an end in itself. Rather than simply study 'the life of an individual', the approach developed by Steedman aims to look at 'aspects of the world through the prism of a particular life.'² So Steedman's interest is not merely in a life's details. This is exemplified by what is perhaps her most well-known monograph, her 1990 biography of the educationalist Margaret McMillan. McMillan had left few private papers, only public writings; but to Steedman this was an opportunity rather than a hindrance. Counter to the tendency for biographies of women to be intensely personal and private, the book was given a more general title, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain*.³ This links directly to Steedman's approach. For Steedman, McMillan's life was a window into British life as a whole.

An important facet of Steedman's focus on 'aspects of the world' is her acknowledgement of her own social and political positionality as a writer. A sign of this reflexivity is her membership, in the early 1990s, of the influential historiography reading group at London's Institute of Historical Research.⁴ What united the historians connected with this circle (led by Raphael Samuel and Patrick Joyce) is a commitment to historical studies that are not narrowly documentary. Rather, the approach represented by the group is one that admits the situated nature of historical writing. It is an active, open engagement with

the historian's presence and vulnerability in the face of wider intellectual and political worlds, both past and present. This applies to *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain*, which Steedman says is 'written out of a reflection' on the pessimism of late-Thatcher era political discussion. The optimism of McMillan's life is seen by Steedman to epitomise 'a climate of thought in the past' which might help to illuminate the present.⁵ More generally, in a chapter written for a cultural studies anthology in the early 1990s, Steedman explains of history that: 'the story isn't finished, can never be finished, for some new item of information may alter the account that has been given'.⁶ Here it is not merely that some new information regarding the past will be added to the account, to fill in gaps or give greater detail. It is that the whole perspective on a historical topic is open to change, and that this new information may be information about present-day issues, as well as past ones. Steedman seems to posit that the categories of past and present are false, because '*things [in the story] are not over*'.⁷

Given that such awareness runs through Steedman's work, it is productive to apply it, retrospectively, to *The Tidy House*. *TTH* was Steedman's first book on educational history, and has become a much-used and cited publication. By its most recent academic commentators, the historian James Greenhalgh and the literary scholar Jessamy Harvey, it is seen primarily as a deconstruction of childhood. Greenhalgh cites it as a 'repudiation of the idea that we can access the "authentic" voice of the child'.⁸ For Harvey, accordingly, *TTH* is a critique of how, in the nineteenth century, 'adults established a set of theories' that separated childhood from adulthood 'as a distinct and separate' time.⁹ Yet Greenhalgh, in particular, notes the wider implications. The notion of childhood has been described by Steedman as a cognitive construct and a means of representation: 'an imaginative structure that allows the individual to make exploration of the self and gives the means to relate that understanding to larger social organisations'.¹⁰ Yet this to Steedman is not only a description of the fiction that childhood is. This to her is also what writing is, 'a *form*', and this is the

function that writing performs.¹¹ Accordingly, Greenhalgh explains that Steedman in general ‘views written work as the product of utilising various accessible discursive elements’.¹² It would follow (though Greenhalgh does not pursue the point) that children’s childhood is built out of, and is a window into, the wider reality of their times: and so too is the written output constructed by historians and other writers.

So the idea of childhood as a natural and asocial time is a myth, as is the idea that the historian is objective and impervious to societal influence. The one is a metaphor for the other. This is one reason why re-reading *TTH* here may be interesting and productive. The text is a vehicle for understanding several strands of historical writing at the time, especially feminism and Marxism. Above all, as will be unfolded below, Steedman’s text is emblematic of history at a particular time – the 1970s – as much as it is a historical study of children’s lives and schooling.

‘A Nest of Babies’: The Source and its Interpretations

TTH can be framed, to begin with, as a book about childhood and girlhood. At its analytical core is a short story called ‘The Tidy House’ written by three primary school girls in Britain in 1976. (In this article the girls’ story will be called ‘The Tidy House’, as distinct from Steedman’s book, *TTH*). Already an academic by 1982, Steedman had formerly, during the 1970s, been a primary school teacher. The story was produced in dialogue with Steedman by the girls in classroom sessions. Steedman, who in 1979 had come out of ‘quite a long period of refusing to write anything at all’, started work on the book in 1980.¹³ Eight years earlier, in 1972, she had completed her Cambridge PhD research on a quite different topic: the Victorian police force.¹⁴ Making use of Victorian settings, *TTH* sets ‘The Tidy House’ against the backdrop of children’s writing and experience in nineteenth and twentieth-century Britain.

Yet *TTH*, published by the feminist house Virago, was also a critique of cultures of class and gender. The authors of 'The Tidy House' are three 'working-class' girls, Melissa, Carla and Lindie. These were pupils of Steedman's in a school in a '1930s housing estate', one of many such estates built in the wake of the clearances of Victorian slums across the country. Subsequently however, like many such places, it had been 'used from time to time as a dump for "problem families" from a very wide geographical area'. Thus, Steedman explains, it had become the kind of neighbourhood where children, because of poverty, 'have to deal with problems that would floor many twice their age'. In these environments, she says, the problems of adulthood, instead of waiting in the wings, become a 'dominant' part of a child's growing 'sense of self'.¹⁵

Steedman describes 'The Tidy House' as a personal testimony, written by the girls over the course of one week in July. Steedman stresses how much thought they had put into the work. For example, the girls had serialised the story into three discrete 'books' and even, at times, scripted a range of versions of the same scene.¹⁶ Summarising its main themes, Steedman says that it is: 'a story about romantic love, marriage and sexual relations, the desire of mothers for children and their resentment of them, and the means by which those children are brought up to inhabit a social world'.¹⁷ It was not Steedman's intention at the outset to do a research project with these children. Rather, 'The Tidy House' was an unexpectedly rich product of class activity. By happenstance, Steedman found the materials interesting enough to then pursue as a potential publication, encased in a surrounding historical analysis.

In 'The Tidy House', which is reprinted both in transcription and in facsimile (with scrawled writing) in Steedman's book, there are a handful of major adult characters. There are four main protagonists. Two of these are Jo and Mark, the mother/wife and father/husband of the 'tidy house'. The other two are their friends who are also married,

Jamie and Jason. Jo and Mark have twin sons, Simon and Scott, and Jamie and Jason also have a son, Carl. (Crucially for Steedman, there are no daughters in 'The Tidy House'. The girl authors, as we will see, identify with the perspectives of the mothers in the story rather than with the children.) Jamie and Jason then have a second son, Darren, who is born during the story. Darren's birth and its effect on Jamie and Jason is a plotline that is conveyed by Melissa in the final part ('part four') of the story. Melissa explains how Jamie had wanted a sister for Carl, and had to content herself with another son instead. Jamie's disappointment is compounded by the family's subsequent lack of money and Carl's worsening behaviour:

Jamie wanted a baby. / She wanted a girl / because she had thought up a name. / The name was Jeannie.... So when Jamie had her / Carl's brother was called Darren / and they did not have so much money as before / which got Carl into tempers / and went in his bedroom and cried / so he was quite naughty. / One day, when Jamie / was down the town / Jamie bought Darren a little bottle of lemon / and only got Carl a cake / and that made Carl get into a temper / and he started shouting / and Jamie gave him a hard smack / which made Carl cry all the way home.¹⁸

There are other, similar episodes, such as Jamie's repeated reprimands to Carl for crying. Jamie also subsequently comments to Jo that: 'Carl is getting on my nerves. / I am really fed up with him. / ... It's because he's so spoilt. / I don't like children being spoilt.'¹⁹ The kernel of these exchanges, in Steedman's assessment, is the mother's irritation. The child is seen as a burden, so much so that: 'Jamie was quite pleased / to get him off to school.'²⁰

However, *TTH* is not what it at first might be taken to be: a simple textual study of 'The Tidy House'. Rather, the girls' work is used by Steedman as a bridge into a periodised historical study of children's 'interiority'. Specifically, in this regard, it is the 1850s and 1860s that are critical for Steedman. These were decades that she had covered for her doctoral research. She was also to revisit these a decade later in her book *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780–1930* (1995). Writing of the 1850s and 1860s in *Strange Dislocations*, Steedman traced how conceptions of children's

interiority had emerged in several scientific discourses. These emerging discourses linked a child's growing nervous system to its growing feelings, and especially to its feelings of social obligation.²¹ In *TTH*, evidence is drawn from the Children's Employment Commissions of the period. These, Steedman explains, were set up by successive British governments to investigate the lives of working children. Steedman pinpoints how, from the 1860s, these Commissions began to be animated by the scientific discourses of children's interiority. They started to pay increasing attention to these children's 'beliefs about the world', along with their 'state of mind and its expression in spoken language'.²² For her, this moment was important because it represented a decisive deepening of the (political) interest in the psychic worlds of children. As a historian, Steedman seems to have found 'The Tidy House' of interest because it shows these worlds in action. It therefore illuminates, and is illuminated by, her Victorian historical context.

In terms of how this works in the book's arrangement, the approach taken in *TTH* required some justification at the close of the book's first 50 pages. That early part is composed of an analysis and transcription of 'The Tidy House' and its origins. Then, for three chapters, the girls' story is grounded in events that happened more than a hundred years previously. Asking the reader to 'leave the tidy house' for a while, Steedman apologises for this 'excursion'. She justifies it as 'a reflection of the difficulties that the writer was placed in by "The Tidy House"'. Nonetheless, she affirms, it will help the reader 'to see more clearly how the story served the children who wrote it' as well as giving the text meaning for readers today.²³

Into the mid-1980s, however, the insistence on providing context was a controversial aspect of the book's reception. This was seen when *TTH* was reviewed together with a number of other books in 1985 by the sociologist James Donald. Donald remarked sceptically that 'the historical evidence ... is offered [by Steedman] as a way of getting behind the text of

the girls' story to reveal its true meaning'.²⁴ Steedman had argued that it 'was necessary' to use history to 'construct' an 'interpretative device' in this way.²⁵ Donald challenged that claim. For Donald, who was to found the postmodernist journal *New Formations* in 1987, the meaning of a text was defined by its own play with language. Therefore there was no explanatory context; 'nothing "behind" texts in this sense'.²⁶ For Donald, Steedman should have been focusing on meaning-construction *within* the text.

Yet, coming back to the 'form' of Steedman's writing, such ideas did not serve her imaginative structure as a meaning-creator. Donald's critique was cutting-edge at a time when postmodernist ideas about history were beginning to take hold in neighbouring disciplines.²⁷ However, a purist linguistic approach did not aid Steedman's objectives – or 'duties', to use Richard Aldrich's term – as a historian of nineteenth-century Britain. Aldrich, defending the history of education against postmodernist critique in 2003, put it succinctly: 'Historians continue to search after truth, even when they have come to terms with history's processes of production.'²⁸ Steedman may definitely be said to have done this later in her career. She wrote *Dust* (2001) about history 'as *process*' (emphasis in the original), and 'as a form of writing which celebrates [its] constraints'.²⁹ Indeed, in *Dust*, Steedman gave a twist to the apology about 'The Tidy House' recounted above. Wryly, she ventured that such constraints are said by historians to be 'made by the [limitations of the] documents themselves'.³⁰ For Steedman, the historian was not the over-confident figure alleged by critics such as Donald. Rather, as she came to see it, it was the historian's modesty that was characteristic of the discipline.

Furthermore, in *TTH* Steedman does in fact look at the discursive play of language. Though she admittedly views the girls as real people, she analyses how they are able, through text, to construct an outward-looking 'social world'. It is useful here to see the advance that *TTH* makes over Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), which is cited in the

bibliography. In Hoggart's classic study of the 'real' world of post-war England's working class, what is emphasised is ordinary people's blithe ignorance of public discourses.³¹ By contrast, Steedman emphasises children's connection to the public sphere. As David Bartholomae has remarked, *TTH* informs educational practice by suggesting how writing helps to give children a critical awareness of their social context.³² Steedman stresses how, through writing, children tend 'to notice things' about the adult world 'that might otherwise have escaped them'. For Steedman, two things have this relevance. These are, first, 'relationships', which writing, she says, allows children to explore 'in a way that they cannot be examined in real life'. Second, there are 'forms of desire' which children may explore via 'the desires and wishes of their fictitious characters'.³³ For example, Steedman identifies how Melissa put what she called 'a nest of babies' in a sketch that she was drawing of Jo and Mark's bedroom for the cover of the second book. This, Steedman explains, was not due to an ignorance of how babies were conceived. The children 'knew ... and knew that I knew they did'. Rather, the nest was being used by Melissa as a metaphor for the inner sanctum of private space that she felt 'lay behind the [parents'] closed bedroom door'.³⁴ Thus Steedman's insights are more than narrowly historical. She is also exploring how children are intelligent interpreters of the adult world.

'In the arm of me': motherhood, role-play and the daughter's fate

Accordingly, in *TTH*, Steedman considers the double motion by which girls both identify with, and resist identifying with, the obligations placed on their mothers. A core issue in the book is the uncomfortable weight of obligation that girls may feel when they imagine themselves, in the future, taking on maternal roles. In the 1970s, the educational and historical dimensions of this problem had been tackled by Carol Dyhouse, both in this journal and elsewhere. For Dyhouse, as well as for June Purvis, the late Victorian period was a

pivotal era for exploring the official ideology that girls should be formally trained for motherhood. In a context where adult women's education was being focused on the domestic ideal of 'the good wife and mother', it was also at the heart of ideas of education for girls, culminating in the promotion of Domestic Economy as a subject for girls in elementary (working-class) schools in 1878.³⁵ Interestingly, Dyhouse mentioned the objections of one turn-of-the-century doctor that the junior (pre-11) phase of elementary school was too early to be taught infant care.³⁶ In *TTH*, however, the focus on the 1850s and 1860s is used to explore the relevance of girls' feelings on that specific topic. As Steedman says, many working-class children of the time, especially daughters, were already taking on childcare responsibilities or sharing them with their mothers. A girl might have a 'pretend fireplace', or 'toy cutlery', but might have no need of a doll because 'to all intents and purposes she and other girls like her were mothers'.³⁷

This linkage between play and real experience may help to explain where Steedman's view of writing stood in relation to the postmodernist ideas of Donald. *TTH* relates the children's acts of creative self-expression with their social relationships. This was part of a historiographical trend within gender history that has, as Ruth Watts reflects, been greatly influential in the history of education. In Watts's words, Steedman's vision brought together 'both [on one hand] linguistic understanding and [on the other hand] knowledge of [material forces in subjects' lives]'.³⁸ Accordingly, Steedman explains in *TTH* how the girl authors were exploring 'the meaning of the work' done in looking after babies and children. She stresses that despite the burden of childcare responsibilities not being 'as common an experience for working-class girls as it was ... it is still a felt experience'.³⁹ Here she cites a poem written by Carla in April 1976:

My sister is the youngest
I am the eldest.

My mum works in town
With all my family
And leaves my little sister
In the arm of me.⁴⁰

The 'Tidy House' story, then, is read by Steedman as a 'resentful' text. The girls' depiction of 'irritated mothers' was, she explains, a form of protest. They were railing 'against the future that awaited them' in the domestic sphere – 'a female future that they saw fraught with irritation and confinement'.⁴¹

This theme of mother–daughter identification was picked up and explored again by Steedman and others in related publications. Especially notable are two books also published by Virago, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) and *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties* (1985). *Landscape* was Steedman's subsequent autobiographical book. *Truth, Dare or Promise* was a collection of 10 autobiographical pieces authored by various British women, including Steedman. Liz Heron (b.1947), who edited that collection of later-life personal reminiscences, disclosed how difficult mother–daughter relationships were for her generation of girls. This was because, Heron suggested, their mothers' generation had been 'not, perhaps, the warm, supportive, generous and loving beings' that mothers are supposed to be. Becoming mothers in the difficult post-war years of the late 1940s, many had done so 'with reluctance (however unacknowledged), with material hardship or with bitterness'.⁴² Here, then, is the figure of the irritated mother that was so vital to Steedman's imaginative structure. She was intent on exploring it, whether with her pupils in the 1970s or in *Landscape*, where she wrote about her relationship with her own mother. In *Landscape*, Steedman critiques the rosy picture of mother–daughter communion which she attributes to US feminist psychologists such as Nancy Chodorow. Chodorow had stressed how mothers tend to feel a close bond with their daughters, more so than with their sons.⁴³

Pointing out the middle-class bias of such an image, Steedman says that it ignores its 'darker social side'.⁴⁴

The interrogation of the mother–child relationship had been a prominent feature of feminist psychoanalysis in the 1970s. An important text here was Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), published in Pelican paperback in 1975. Mitchell had discussed the weight that the nuclear family had been made to carry by various discourses in post-war Britain. The common theme, Mitchell argued, was how they stressed the positive influence of the mother–child relationship on the child's (ie the citizen's) personality growth.⁴⁵ A similar thread was pursued by Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering*, which critiqued the 'social and cultural translation of [mothers'] child-bearing and lactation capacities'. In spite of its rosy view of the mother–child bond, then, it exposed how the supposedly innate maternal nature of women was culturally constructed.⁴⁶ Finally, in 1982, the inside/outside binary was also, in a more abstract sense, the main theme of *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* by Jane Gallop. Gallop, a US literary professor, identified how all of the male-dominated modern modes of thinking have a tendency to see the idea of inside/outside in terms of property. As Gallop illustrated, they are therefore bound to characterise internal existences as a private realm that needs to be protected from outside (public) pressures. As a way forward, Gallop proposed the relinquishing of concepts of 'closure'. Instead, she advocated for thinking of relationships between inside and outside in terms of 'dialogue, intercourse, exchange' between the two.⁴⁷ Steedman was exploring the notionally private worlds of childhood and primary school in somewhat similar fashion. The link between internal and external is clear. *TTH* links both from the primary school of the 1970s to the outside, civic world, and from childhood to the world of adult responsibility.

Essentially, then, Steedman sees the relationship of the two selves, mother and daughter, as one with strong political and economic dynamics. In this view, the daughter has

two emotions: first, guilt, as she is conscious of being a financial burden to her mother, and of compromising her mother's sense of identity. Second, a daughter also feels resentment, as she identifies, in advance, with the mother's burden, being aware that she may well become a mother herself. What Steedman explores, here, by way of Melissa, Carla and Lindie, is put beautifully by John Kucich. It is, Kucich says: 'the sexual *and political* factors shaping the psyche of a woman – her mother, but also herself, and, more generally, a specific class subject – who does not want to have children, who seems to confront a choice between having children and having a self'.⁴⁸ Having children, then, is seen as producing an existential crisis for the mother. Furthermore, that crisis is seen as being internalised by mothers' daughters, giving the relationship its intense quality, as we will see below.

'At the Door of the Tidy House': entering the theoretical field

This article will now turn to situate Steedman's politicised account of mother–daughter relationships as part of 1970s feminism's challenges to public/private distinctions. In the 1970s, transatlantic academic feminism was known for affirming the links between family life and political structures and practices. In the US, in particular, this political relevance was asserted by foundational texts such as *Clio's Consciousness Raised* (1974), *Liberating Women's History* (1976) and *Becoming Visible* (1977). These books questioned the 'static', 'ancillary' vision of women as being 'outside of history' in this way.⁴⁹ Instead, they emphasised the reach, complexity and political meaningfulness of women's worlds.

Steedman's use of the girls' story, accordingly, considers the politics of home and school as interconnecting spheres. This occurs immediately in the opening chapter, which is tellingly called 'At the Door of the Tidy House'. Taking the reader back to the heatwave summer of 1976, the chapter's first lines question the boundaries between inside and outside. Steedman evokes how the classroom doors and windows 'stood open' to the 'stained cement

houses ... parched hills [...and] rubbish tip' outside.⁵⁰ Writing six or seven years before the English National Curriculum, Steedman discloses the teacher's powers *in loco parentis* in the classroom. She recounts the generic advice sometimes given to aspiring teachers that they can 'shut the door, keep them [the children] quiet and ... do pretty much what [they] like'.⁵¹ In Steedman's hands, this image brings to mind the classic historical depiction of the Victorian gentleman found for example in Martha Vicinus's *Suffer and Be Still* (1973).⁵² In Steedman's words, the teacher is an absolute ruler of the domestic realm with a 'liberal freedom to do what they will within the confines of their own classroom'. Steedman secondly compares the primary school's layout to the domesticity that a working-class female pupil of the 1970s might expect to experience as a wife and mother. Classrooms are: 'private places, rows of tidy houses strung along a corridor and a terrible intimacy grows there, six hours a day, eleven months a year'.⁵³ Importantly, however, this critique of the private and the intimate is not merely an issue that Steedman seeks to propose in her own analysis. Rather, she traces how it is present in the writing, and childhood, of the 'little girls' themselves.

However, to return to the point made at the beginning of this article, this presence is not simply objective. As the postmodernist critic of history Keith Jenkins has argued, there is an unconscious (Jenkins uses the word 'serendipitous') aspect to historical reconstruction – something that applies to Steedman's writing of *TTH*. As Jenkins says, intuitively the historian does more than look with a trained eye at 'the "evidential materials" or the "sources" or the "documents"' themselves.⁵⁴ What comes naturally to the historian in how they perceive the evidence at hand is shaped by the influences that have formed the conventions of their field of study. These include not merely the facts themselves, but also bodies of theoretical enquiry.

Such bodies provided *TTH* with an outlook: in particular, Marxism. Alongside feminism (to be considered again in more detail below), Marxism was part of the theoretical

field that fed into the book. Sensitivity to class struggle is a major facet of the book. For example, Steedman considers the distortions made by some middle-class social investigators in the nineteenth century: those who caricatured the working-class child as ‘a curiosity’ or ‘[a] figure of pity and amusement’.⁵⁵ Likewise she criticises the ‘genteel horrors’ of middle-class teachers whose methods make it plain to working-class children that they ‘aren’t very clever, really’.⁵⁶ Accordingly, it is no surprise that in the bibliography of *TTH* are two texts by the foremost British Marxist writer in the history of education, Brian Simon. As Kevin Brehony explains, Simon’s work helped to drive forward the Marxist interest in class struggle. For Simon, ideas were weapons, ‘linked’, as Brehony puts it, ‘to social and political groups [that] are in conflict’.⁵⁷

For Steedman, social and political conflict was a concern that had germinated in her doctoral research. That project was to be in the end prefaced by her in 1984 as ‘not so much an account that tells of the police’ as one of ‘class society’ and ‘their class position’.⁵⁸ In *TTH*, the policing – in the broader sense – of class society is seen as intersecting with adult-child interactions. Steedman reflects self-critically about how ‘mild and genteel’ women, ‘like me’, are responsible for gently policing the intellectual ambitions of ‘working-class children’.⁵⁹ It is the ideas of the teachers that are the weapons here: truncheons of social prejudice. Indeed, it is often at the interface between middle-class adults and working-class children that *TTH* locates the ‘social policing’ of selves within larger social organisations.⁶⁰

‘Knowing what it is to be a woman’: History Workshop, girls’ experiences and feminist history

More-so than Marxism, however, it is the lived experience of being a woman – another form of self-exploration – that is key to the imaginative structure of *TTH*. An indication of this is provided in the book’s introduction, where Steedman says that: ‘it is only by a deal of effort

on the part of feminist historians that *the experience of being a woman* [emphasis added] has been allowed a foot in the door of historical analysis'.⁶¹ The text focuses clearly on Melissa, Carla and Lindie's awareness of womanhood. Steedman suggests that little girls may already feel and anticipate it, even as children. This is because of the mother's visibility in what she calls 'the asymmetrical family', where mothers are more often present to their children than fathers. Unlike boys in relation to manhood, she says, girls in 'contemporary society' have a real sense of '*knowing* what it [is] like to be a woman' (emphasis in the original).⁶²

It is important, therefore, in this section and the next, to close by considering the background of how *TTH* attempts to bring out that experience. The aim here is to consider the way that the experience of learners, more broadly, was coming to the forefront of radical pedagogic practice among historians in the 1970s. Here, the renowned History Workshop (HW) movement based at Ruskin College in Oxford will be an important point of reference. However, this article will also seek to go beyond positioning Steedman merely within such an in-house British context. The ideas shaping her cognitive framework were part of wider currents, and here it is Steedman's dialogue with US feminism in particular that deserves attention.

A British-centred background to Steedman's account of working-class girls might justly revolve around the importance of HW. In *TTH*, Steedman encourages and utilises what in effect is a research project based on the girls' own experiences. In this respect, the book represents a further application of the pedagogical approach of HW. From the 1960s, in the institutional context of Ruskin, a trades-union college, its leader, the tutor Raphael Samuel, had sought to encourage working-class students to use their own knowledge and enthusiasm for working life as inspiration for self-designed historical research projects. By the 1980s, too, family life, not just working life, was becoming central to Samuel's historical thinking and that of HW. As has been explored elsewhere, Samuel became an admirer of Steedman's

work during that decade. His ‘Lost World’ articles on his communist upbringing for *New Left Review* (1985–1987) were to link his own political education explicitly to his relationships with his parents.⁶³

The concerns of *TTH* – identification of learners’ negative experiences, and the alienating effect of traditional teaching practices and content – were essential to HW. As Ken Jones notes, ‘the workshops were part of that great expansion of the idea of education that occurred in the 1970s, whose principal feature was the identification of learners’ experiences as a central point of curricular and pedagogic reference’.⁶⁴ Many of Ruskin’s students had of course had negative prior experiences of learning. As Samuel reflected in retrospect in 1981, ‘many ... had experienced education as an oppression’.⁶⁵ In this vein, Kynan Gentry writes of how the aim of HW was to give workers more confidence *as intellectuals*, thereby ‘breaking down the isolation of intellectual life from the people’.⁶⁶ Steedman, similarly, was seeking to promote an intellectual framing of working-class experiences in her writing.

However, *TTH* was about inserting not just people, but women, into intellectual and cultural life as well as intellectual and cultural history. This was a task undertaken apace in the 1970s by academic feminism in both Britain and America. As Julie des Jardins puts it, the task for feminist historians at the beginning of the 1970s was ‘to make new historical lenses and metanarratives through which women appeared collectively as empowered agents’.⁶⁷ As such, one of the major targets of emphasis was the experience of the female learner confronted with male-centred narratives that excluded or marginalised women. This was a clear aspect of the books cited earlier from the US, *Liberating Women’s History* in particular. In that book, Dolores and Earl Schmidt critiqued the invisibility of women’s experiences in undergraduate history texts prescribed to both sexes, arguing that what was being presented to the ‘American woman college student’ was ‘a world without women’; and that such a student should ‘[demand] her money back on the basis that she had paid for a history course

and been sold a male fantasy instead'.⁶⁸ Similarly, in *TTH* Steedman notes in passing how, in studies of the human psyche, the model of the child is always the male child; the male child is the norm, and the female child is not seen in her own terms.⁶⁹

More important, towards the end of the book, Steedman focuses on distorting views of the female that are insinuated in wider culture outside of the school gates. Here her interest above all is in the informal education provided in the girls' lives by the classic European tradition of Gothic fairy tales. These were, as Steedman says, the 'most familiar non-school books' available to Melissa, Carla and Lindie and 'the [other] children in the class'. The UK's popular Ladybird Books editions were sold in local newsagents and supermarkets. Steedman, seeking to explain the wider influences on the girls' storytelling, considers the negative impact of these fantasies in shaping their perceptions of family life. They were, she says, a suite of 'vast and destructive messages' conveyed 'to little girls (and of course to little boys) ... at the mythic level'.⁷⁰

Her key inspiration here was a transatlantic one, namely the work of the radical US feminist Andrea Dworkin. In particular, Steedman's discussion of fairy tales cites Dworkin's book *Woman Hating* (1974). *Woman Hating*, in its more general account of the deeply societal roots of misogyny, begins with two chapters on the narrative models of fairy tales. In these chapters, Dworkin pinpoints how the mother in these stories is often an 'evil woman'; in particular, a wicked stepmother. In the case of Hansel and Gretel, for example, Dworkin notes how she proposes to their father 'that they abandon the children in the forest to starve'.⁷¹ This relates, not just to *TTH*, but also to some of the other writings by Steedman and others, considered earlier in this article, on strained mother-child relationships.

In *TTH*, Steedman adopts Dworkin's view that the result of such schema is culturally entrenched self-hating and mother-hating in girls. The reader should here recall Liz Heron's comment cited earlier in this article, from *Truth, Dare or Promise*, that she and her

contemporaries were tempted to see their rationing-era mothers as ‘not, perhaps, the warm, supportive, generous and loving beings’ that mothers are supposed to be. As Dworkin had noted 10 years earlier, the ‘good woman’, in this sense, is meant to be entirely passive and subservient to children (as well as husband). Any defiance in affirming their own selfhood goes against this ideal.⁷² As Steedman reflected on her own mother’s painstaking attempts to be good in *Landscape for a Good Woman* – ‘she’d told us ... : we’d never gone hungry; she went out to work for us ... didn’t go out dancing or drinking’. Yet in the end ‘it hadn’t worked’. In the end she was selfish and embodied, like all people. Trying to be a good woman was an ‘ineffective war’ that she had fought against the realities of being a human being.⁷³ The nub of this for Steedman is that mothers are held to standards that they cannot keep, and are demonised for their humanity. For Steedman, the wicked (step-)mother of fairy tales is ‘a highly articulate rendering of what every little girl knows, that mothers are quite simply monstrous ... and the real problem, for little girls, is that they too are likely to become mothers’.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Overall, in tracing the theoretical field of *TTH*, the influences on its imaginative structure have been seen to be multi-layered. The book does not wear its feminism or socialism on its sleeve, and does not position itself as part of a political or intellectual movement. As has been said elsewhere, Steedman’s outlook in her writing seems to show a ‘pronounced sense of discomfort with comradeship or solidarity, whether with fellow radicals or fellow women’.⁷⁵ Accordingly, *TTH* confounds categorisation. It builds on but moves on from the Marxist interest in class struggle, reflecting the new feminist focus on structures of social dominance and ideology. Yet, nonetheless, the primary focus is on class, not gender, challenging radical feminist notions of gender’s primacy as a dimension of oppression. What this article has

attempted to show, in this light, are the precise discursive elements in which that confusing position may be understood. *TTH*, along with the works mentioned latterly, is emblematic of a particular era: the 1970s. This was a time when academic feminist writings in Britain examined the education of working-class girls through a feminist class perspective.

The book may also, as we have seen, be positioned in conjunction with the development of history-writing within, and beyond, HW. Steedman's identity as a historian shines through in *TTH*, in the text's pull away from text to context. It seeks to locate its enquiry in a more distant historical past, rather than the more immediate past of the 1970s. It also focuses its analysis on the psychological profile of children in the nineteenth century, rather than those of the 1970s primary school. This, Steedman seems to suggest, is part of a characteristic distancing mechanism in the profession. In *Dust*, she discusses the solitude that historians experience when they are able to ponder on historical subjects that are of no interest to anyone else except they, the historian, themselves. In the isolated archives of, for example, a county record office, Steedman suggests there is an 'extraordinary kind of aloneness' that the historian cherishes.⁷⁶ That said, even the links made here with the historical discipline, and HW, are not a given. Steedman was not herself a contributor to *HWJ* until after *TTH* was published. She was to write (so far) only two articles for *HWJ*, within a year of each other in 1984 and 1985.⁷⁷ Her stance, as we have seen, does not sit easily with the idea of feminist history-writing as a complement to history-writing within socialism. Her work suggests a more unified, radical agenda – one more indebted to the influence on history of psychoanalysis.

Reflecting on the theoretical field of this article, one timely aspect of the rediscovery of *TTH* is the current academic interest in children's self-organisation. The childhood studies scholar Barry Percy-Smith is particularly known for this approach, 'where children are acknowledged as competent active social agents and partners in change within everyday

contexts such as school'. Writing in a collection recently published in tribute to the anarchist writer Colin Ward, he describes this as a new kind of 'action research'. He takes aim at participation initiatives that are limited to merely *consulting* children and thereby running by them a set of adult-defined options. Instead, he advocates an understanding that is 'located in the everyday worlds of children'. His focus is on how 'children engage with their environment and the extent to which people (especially children) organise themselves if left to do so'.⁷⁸ Steedman, we have noted, was not overtly seeking to engage children in participatory research. Yet nonetheless 'The Tidy House' is, as she says, a record of, and monument to, children's own 'system of meanings'.⁷⁹ This makes it important for historians of education for, as she puts it, 'what it demonstrates of children's involvement in the process of their own socialisation'.⁸⁰

¹ Paul Q. Hirst, *Marxism and Historical Writing* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 80–1.

² Krista Cowman, 'Collective Biography', in *Research Methods for History*, ed. Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2012), 90.

³ Carolyn Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan, 1860–1931* (London: Virago, 1990).

⁴ See acknowledgements in John Seed, *Dissenting Histories: Religious Division and the Politics of Memory in Eighteenth-Century England* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), v.

⁵ Steedman, *Childhood*, 11.

⁶ Carolyn Steedman, 'Culture, Cultural Studies, and the Historians', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), 614.

⁷ Steedman, 'Culture', 614 (emphasis in the original).

⁸ James Greenhalgh, "'Till We Hear the Last All Clear": Gender and the Presentation of Self in Young Girls' Writing about the Bombing of Hull during the Second World War', *Gender & History* 26, no. 1 (2014): 169.

⁹ Jessamy Harvey, 'The Cult of the Child-Poet: Interpreting Elsa García Novo with Reference to L'Affaire Drouet', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 49, no. 2 (2013): 127, 128.

¹⁰ Carolyn Steedman, 'Introduction', in her *Past Tenses: Essay on Writing, Autobiography and History* (London: Rivers Oram, 1992), 11.

¹¹ Steedman, 'Introduction', 11 (emphasis in the original).

¹² Greenhalgh, "'Till We Hear'", 169.

¹³ Steedman, 'Introduction', 15, 17.

¹⁴ Carolyn Steedman, *Policing the Victorian Community: The Formation of English Provincial Police Forces, 1856–80* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), viii.

¹⁵ Carolyn Steedman, *The Tidy House: Little Girls Writing* (London: Virago, 1982), 9.

¹⁶ Steedman, *TTH*, 18.

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- ¹⁷ Steedman, *TTH*, 1.
- ¹⁸ Steedman, *TTH*, 54–5.
- ¹⁹ Steedman, *TTH*, 50.
- ²⁰ Steedman, *TTH*, 48.
- ²¹ Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780–1930* (London: Virago, 1995), 73.
- ²² Steedman, *TTH*, 115.
- ²³ Steedman, *TTH*, 59.
- ²⁴ James Donald, ‘Troublesome Texts: On Subjectivity and Schooling’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 6, no. 3 (1985): 347.
- ²⁵ Steedman, *TTH*, 59.
- ²⁶ Donald, ‘Troublesome’, 347.
- ²⁷ See e.g. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- ²⁸ Richard Aldrich, ‘The Three Duties of the Historian of Education’, *History of Education* 32, no. 2 (2003): 140.
- ²⁹ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 67, xi.
- ³⁰ Steedman, *Dust*, xi.
- ³¹ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), 87.
- ³² David Bartholomae, ‘The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum’, *Journal of Basic Writing* 12, no. 1 (1993): 17.
- ³³ Steedman, *TTH*, 128.
- ³⁴ Steedman, *TTH*, 20.
- ³⁵ June Purvis, ‘“Women’s Life is Essentially Domestic, Public Life Being Confined to Men” (Comte): Separate Spheres and Inequality in the Education of Working-Class Women, 1854–1900’, *History of Education* 10, no. 4 (1981): 235; Carol Dyhouse, ‘Social Darwinistic Ideas and the Development of Women’s Education in England, 1880–1920’, *History of Education* 5, no. 1 (1976): 48.
- ³⁶ Carol Dyhouse, ‘Good Wives and Little Mothers: Social Anxieties and the Schoolgirl’s Curriculum, 1890–1920’, *Oxford Review of Education* 3, no. 1 (1977): 28–9.
- ³⁷ Steedman, *TTH*, 123 (emphasis in the original).
- ³⁸ Ruth Watts, ‘Gendering the Story: Change in the History of Education’, *History of Education* 34, no. 3 (2005): 230.
- ³⁹ Steedman, *TTH*, 124. The post-industrial question of the meaning of work was a cutting-edge one in British historiography in the 1980s. See Patrick Joyce, ed., *The Historical Meanings of Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- ⁴⁰ Steedman, *TTH*, 39.
- ⁴¹ Steedman, *TTH*, 128–9, 139.
- ⁴² Liz Heron, ‘Introduction’, in *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties*, ed. Liz Heron (London: Virago, 1985), 8.
- ⁴³ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 166.
- ⁴⁴ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago, 1986), 86–7.
- ⁴⁵ Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 231.
- ⁴⁶ Chodorow, *Reproduction*, 30.
- ⁴⁷ Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter’s Seduction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), xiii. There was subsequent controversy surrounding Gallop’s academic

and personal life (specifically, her relationships with graduate students) which suggests that, for her, challenging the divide was important particularly in sexual terms. She explains this autobiographically. See Jane Gallop, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

⁴⁸ John Kucich, 'Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780–1930 by Carolyn Steedman' (review), *Victorian Studies* 40, no. 3 (1997): 558 (emphasis added).

⁴⁹ Mary S. Hartman, 'Preface', in *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, ed. Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), ix; Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, 'Introduction', in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 2; Ann D. Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle and Nancy Schrom Dye, 'The Problem of Women's History', in *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 88.

⁵⁰ Steedman, *TTH*, 17.

⁵¹ Steedman, *TTH*, 10.

⁵² Martha Vicinus, 'Introduction: The Perfect Victorian Lady', in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), x.

⁵³ Steedman, *TTH*, 7.

⁵⁴ Keith Jenkins, *On 'What is History': From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London: Routledge, 1995), 83 (emphasis in the original).

⁵⁵ Steedman, *TTH*, 118.

⁵⁶ Steedman, *TTH*, 7.

⁵⁷ Kevin J. Brehony, 'Education as a "Social Function": Sociology, and Social Theory in the Histories of Brian Simon', *History of Education* 33, no. 5 (1985): 552.

⁵⁸ Steedman, *Policing*, vii–viii.

⁵⁹ Steedman, *TTH*, 7.

⁶⁰ Steedman, *TTH*, 8.

⁶¹ Steedman, *TTH*, 37.

⁶² Steedman, *TTH*, 127.

⁶³ Joseph Maslen, 'The Personal Politics of Raphael Samuel', *Biography* 33, no. 1 (2010): 216.

⁶⁴ Ken Jones, 'Against Conformity: Raphael Samuel', *Changing English* 5, no. 1 (1998): 18.

⁶⁵ Raphael Samuel, 'History Workshop, 1966–80', in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 412.

⁶⁶ Kynan Gentry, 'Ruskin, Radicalism and Raphael Samuel: Politics, Pedagogy and the Origins of the History Workshop', *History Workshop Journal* 76 (2013): 196.

⁶⁷ Julie Des Jardins, 'Women's and Gender History', in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, Vol. 5: *Historical Writing since 1945*, ed. Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145.

⁶⁸ Dolores Barracano Schmidt and Earl Robert Schmidt, 'The Invisible Woman: The Historian as Professional Magician', in Carroll, *Liberating*, 42, 54.

⁶⁹ Steedman, *TTH*, 88.

⁷⁰ Steedman, *TTH*, 142.

⁷¹ Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: Dutton, 1974), 45.

⁷² Dworkin, *Woman*, 48.

⁷³ Steedman, *Landscape*, 1, 30.

⁷⁴ Steedman, *TTH*, 142.

⁷⁵ Joseph Maslen, 'Autobiographies of a Generation?: Carolyn Steedman, Luisa Passerini and the Memory of 1968', *Memory Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 28.

⁷⁶ Steedman, *Dust*, 72–3.

⁷⁷ Carolyn Steedman, 'Battlegrounds: History in Primary Schools', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 17 (1984): 102–12; Carolyn Steedman, "'The Mother Made Conscious": The Historical Development of a Primary School Pedagogy', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 20 (1985): 149–63.

⁷⁸ Barry Percy-Smith, 'Reclaiming Children's Participation as an Empowering Social Process', in *Education, Childhood and Anarchism: Talking Colin Ward*, ed. Catherine Burke and Ken Jones (London: Routledge, 2014), 213.

⁷⁹ Steedman, *TTH*, 153.

⁸⁰ Steedman, *TTH*, 12.