A ‘dreamy interlude’?
The Role of Work in the Construction of Women’s Working Class Identities in Interwar Britain.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the role of work in the lives of women in interwar Britain. In order to gain an understanding of the real experiences of women in this period, this project is underpinned by the study of thirteen autobiographies from the Burnett Archives in Brunel University, written by women about their experiences of the interwar period. Analysing these sources through concepts of identity and self, exposes the role work not only played in their lives but also its influence upon forging their identities as working class women. This dissertation will argue therefore that work was a key element in how these women negotiated their sense of self and identity, by the role it plays in their narratives and how they choose to present themselves both in terms of gender and class.
INTRODUCTION

‘I began to wonder what I had let myself in for, if this was married life, then give me single life with a job and company. Fortunately, when I started taking in visitors, ... I was too occupied to be lonely, cold or homesick, but really enjoyed the hard work, and the company ... It made a lot of work for me single-handed ... however, I was young, and active, and really enjoyed it.’

Katherine Dudley writing under the pseudonym Katherine Henderson was born on 23rd February 1908 in the village Ruckinge, Kent. Her narrative describes a childhood dominated by a strict father, and her reluctance to leave school at the age of fourteen to go into service. Her narrative, however, continues with a mostly positive recollection of her time at work until she married John in October 1937 and became a housewife. It is here that the extract comes from, wherein after fifteen years of working, there is a sense of longing for her old life, and a sense her new life was lacking in purpose.

The second half of her narrative discusses her experiences after 1939, including the personal tragedies of her husband murdering their son, and her attempt to rebuild her life in which both religion and work play a prominent feature. Her narrative concludes in the 1970s with Dudley in her late sixties discussing her retirement. Thus, her life is very much defined by her work. Her discussion of her interwar experience shows her positive identification with work, evoking typically working class notions of pride in labour and work ethic. Therefore, like many of the other women studied in this project, Dudley shows the importance of work to her life, and its role in her sense of self and identity as a working class woman.

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2 Ibid., p.1.
The working classes of interwar Britain are remembered as the victims of structural unemployment and the decline of the staple industries.\(^3\) In the aftermath of the First World War, it was also a period dominated by issues of class identity and gender relations, questioning the role of women, which had been altered by their wartime experiences.\(^4\) Women’s work in this period, however, has been discussed within a discourse of conservatism, wherein traditional gender norms were re-established. As a result, women’s working experiences have been viewed as a merely stop-gap measure, as J.B Priestly suggested in 1933, a ‘dreamy interlude’ after childhood until they embraced their ‘proper’ roles as wives and mothers, and one that they had little interest in.\(^5\)

Nonetheless, women’s experiences during this period has resulted in much historical debate. Mid-century historians such as Arthur Marwick and David Mitchel viewed the First World War as a liberating experience for women, as their contribution to the war effort ‘emancipated’ them from their previously submissive roles.\(^6\) However, the emergence of second wave feminism and women’s history undermined such ideas. Historians such as Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield argued instead, that it was a period of backwardness and restoration of pre-war gender norms.\(^7\) Furthermore, feminists grew critical over women in this period, as Deirdre Beddoe suggested it was, ‘anti-progressive’, as the women’s movement failed to rekindle the pre-war enthusiasm, reinforcing the conservatism.\(^8\) Moreover, social and political studies such as by Martin Pugh, have exposed the friction in gender relations, and the attempts to curb the emergence of

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7 Braybon and Summerfield, Out of the Cage.

'irresponsible and undisciplined' women who gained ‘ideas above their station’, through enforcing traditional gender norms.9

Nevertheless, recent revisionism has significantly questioned the negative image of women’s interwar experiences during this period. Cheryl Law has reassessed the ‘failures’ of the interwar women’s movement, suggesting the success of the 1918 and 1928 franchise reforms and other important welfare campaigns, significantly improved women’s lives.10 Additionally, Andrew Bingham’s study of contemporary press, questions the notion of an, ‘era of domesticity’, claiming instead it was a period of distinct social and cultural change for women.11 Moreover, through her study of culture and literature, Clair Culleton criticised the creation of a ‘victimisation’ myth by historians, suggesting instead women experienced a great deal of positive change.12

Attempts to reassess women’s interwar experiences have also raised debates about women’s experiences of work in this period. Second wave feminists such as Braybon and Summerfield exemplify the hostility of society towards women’s work as indicative of little change for women.13 The closure of day nurseries, the introduction of the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act (1919) and marriage bars outweigh the work of the Sex Disqualification Removal Act (1919) which attempted to open professions to women, but could do little against workplace discrimination.14 These actions were seen by feminists as attempts to restore pre-war gender norms of motherhood and marriage.15 Moreover, social historians such as Joanna Bourke, and Pugh have identified that such roles were not only enforced upon women, but also propagated by them themselves.16 Conversely, case studies on women workers such as by Selina Todd, Deborah Thom, Rex Pope and Nicola

11 Ibid., p.226.
13 Braybon and Summerfield, Out of the Cage.
15 Braybon and Summerfield, Out of the Cage.
Verdon have shown that for women, especially working class women, work played an important role throughout their lives. Studies of women’s involvement in labour disputes, their experiences of war work, the impact of female unemployment and their attempts to protect their right to work, suggests that women's work played an important and valued role in their lives, but one that ran alongside their traditional gender roles rather than in opposition.17

Recent revisionism of women’s experiences of work has also resulted in a re-evaluation of the role work played in women’s working class identities. It has long been understood by cultural and social historians such as Patrick Joyce, Susan Kingsley Kent, John Tosh and Sociologists such as Del Roy Fletcher that work is an important element of men’s identity.18 Nonetheless, in relation to women, McKibbin has argued that the ‘the primacy of marriage, the consequent lack of involvement in their work ... discouraged in women the emotional or long-term interest in work’ experienced by their male counterparts.19 This idea is reinforced by contemporary writers such as Ray Strachey who described a ‘meanwhile attitude’ of women towards their work.20 Recent studies by Todd and Culleton, however, contest these ideas, suggesting instead that work was an important part of women’s identity also. Culleton suggests that women’s experiences of war work had deeply altered their culture and their sense of working class identity as a whole, which was reflected in their interwar experiences.21

20 Todd, Young Women Work and Family, p.145.
21 Culleton, Working-Class Culture, p.173.
Consequently, previous studies of women’s interwar experiences have often concentrated on their representation, and society’s ideals about their role within it. Moreover, attempts by feminist historians have focused heavily on the negative restrictions upon women’s lives in this period. Revisionist approaches, however, show that for working class women, work was very much a part of their life. Little is known, however, how women understood these experiences of working life and, how they shaped their sense of self and identity as working class women. Nonetheless, recent studies on women’s testimonies such as Selina Todd’s study of young women in the interwar period and Deborah Thom’s study of women workers at the Woolwich Arsenal (1915-1919), has highlighted the ability of autobiographies and oral testimony to provide an insight into women’s genuine experience. As Todd suggests, they ‘illuminate individual experiences’, whilst Thom claims they enable insight into ‘their attitudes towards their work’, information that is often missing from the records.22

Consequently, in order to gain insight into women’s genuine experiences and the role of work in their construction of identity, this dissertation is underpinned by a series of manuscript autobiographies. As Thom suggests, ‘people’s own perception of the past is ... in some respects better informed than the historian’s’.23 The sources themselves come from the Burnett Archives at Brunel University, of individuals who lived in Britain between 1790 and 1945. The archive was created by John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall as an attempt to compile a collection of autobiographies from 'history libraries and record offices, but also extant private memoirs, many of which remain hidden in family attics', to unearth this rich source of information about the lives of working class people.24

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This dissertation is based on a selection of thirteen autobiographies by women discussing their experiences of the interwar period. The ages of these women at the end of the period vary from nineteen to forty-six, whilst their locations differ from London to Merthyr Tydfil and Yorkshire to Kent. All these women were selected by the archive curators for being working class ‘for at least part of their lives’, though most in this study experienced a ‘typical’ working class experience of the period. Consequently, many of these women had very ‘typical’ lives, leaving school at fourteen to enter service and continued to work as they went on to marry and have children. In contrast, others experienced rather ‘unusual’ lives as Edith Williams put it, as she went from domestic service to work for the Labour Party and gained employment in the Court of Referees. Furthermore, Kathleen Betterton’s life went from a very poor background in Fulham to her studying at Oxford University. The childhood experiences of these women also differ, from poor but happy childhoods in mining communities, to abusive, drunkard fathers, and dire poverty with a family of ten, sleeping in one room. Their occupations also vary significantly, with many experiencing domestic service at one point in their lives, whilst others went on to be Clerks, Teachers, Governesses and Shop Assistants. Not all the women provided a reason as to why they decided to write, however, Edith Williams claimed it was to ‘offer my own contribution’ to the social histories of the time, whilst May Rainer claimed it was to create a story for the future generations. This selection of autobiographies provides a broad base of women’s experiences of the interwar period, both in terms of their geographical location, their point in their life cycle, but also their experiences in which all are united under a common theme of work and the role it played in their lives.

26 Williams, Edith, ‘(Untitled)’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:832, p.4.
27 Kathleen Betterton, 'White Pinnies, Black Aprons', Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:71.
28 Williams, '(Untitled)', p.4; May Rainer, 'Emma’s Daughter', Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:644, p.4.
The autobiography as a source, however, has been significantly criticised by a variety of academics. Scholars of literature such as Julia Swindle and Laura Marcus have identified the possible social, political and personal influences upon the author, whilst Marcus herself describes it as a ‘dangerous double agent’ moving between literature and history.\(^{29}\) Moreover, Linda Anderson’s study on the uses of autobiographies highlights the role of memory, wherein the autobiography is a construction of the past, influenced by the author in the present.\(^{30}\) This has also been recognised by historian David Vincent in his study of nineteenth-century working class autobiographies.\(^{31}\) In addition, studying the autobiography through Linguist and Feminist theory, Marie-Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet suggested that autobiographies are a ‘process of fictionalisation’, creating a world in which the narrator becomes a character within.\(^{32}\) Furthermore, Sociologist Liz Stanley, stresses the role of ‘audits’ in life stories, raising questions about the innate subjectivity of the autobiography, as it balances between the realms of both fact and fiction.\(^{33}\)

Nonetheless, as an academic of women’s studies, Swindles recognises the utility of the autobiography in ‘countering silence and misinterpretation’, an important part of women’s history.\(^{34}\) Furthermore, Vincent’s study dismisses the importance of factual accuracy, but urges historians to look at the broader picture, of what these autobiographies can tell us about the experiences of individuals in the past and how events affected them.\(^{35}\) Tess Cosslett also suggests autobiographies are crucial

\(^{34}\) Swindells, ‘Introduction’, p.7; p.9.
\(^{35}\) Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge & Freedom*, pp.5-6.
in studying women’s lives by providing a platform to ‘express themselves as subjects with their own selfhood’, providing their own history.  

Consequently, the autobiography as a source has significant limitations, as our faith is to be entrusted in the narrator. Alone, they cannot provide a holistic view of women’s lives in this period, or even the whole life story of individuals, for they can only tell what the writer chooses to disclose. Instead, they provide small but telling insights into the lives of these women. Furthermore as Liz Stanley suggests, the autobiography is ‘a central means for constructing a sense of identity’, therefore, subjectivity is useful when trying to understand how individuals construct their sense of self. Nonetheless the concepts of identity and self have been the source of considerable debate. Richard Jenkins argues, however, ‘identity denotes the ways in which individuals and collectives are distinguished in their relation with other individuals and collectives’. As Jenkins suggests it is a natural process of similarity and difference as we define ourselves both in relation to and against others. Whilst selfhood, is instead ‘an individuals reflective sense of his or hers’ owns particular identity’. Consequently, through careful consideration, these autobiographies can provide insight into how these women understood their lives and how they used these experiences to construct their identity as working class women.

As a result, through the use of these autobiographies alongside other sources and within the context of the current historiography, this dissertation will explore the role of work in the lives of women in the interwar period. Through this study, it will be argued that contrary to some arguments, work played a continual and dominating role throughout their lives. Therefore, work became an increasingly important element of women’s identities and sense of self both in terms of gender and class and how they constructed themselves as working class women.

39 Ibid., p.17.
40 Ibid.,p.5; p.17.
41 Ibid., p.49.
CHAPTER ONE

‘The slump loomed over us’

Recent historiography, contrary to previous belief, shows that work was a fact of life for the majority of working class women in the interwar period. It dominated their lives, and thus is a key theme found within their autobiographies. The interwar period was, however, subject to the post-war depression, with increasing unemployment and the fear of an intrusive and degrading benefits system, which significantly impacted upon the working classes.¹ In the context of the economic downturn, work came to signify independence in the face of an increasingly dependent and depressed society. This chapter will argue therefore that within this context, work, both paid and informal, was increasingly important to women and played a key role in their construction of self. Through these autobiographies, a sense of work ethic and pride in labour is presented, through a discourse of independence, wherein these women construct their working class identities.

Studies on work ethic and pride in labour during the interwar period have significantly focused on men. Exemplified through the detailed studies of mining cultures, the General Strike (1926) and the rise of trade unionism. Women’s lack of involvement in trade unionism has been exemplified by many as evidence of disengagement between women and their labour, contrasted against their male counterparts.² Ross McKibbin has suggested it was the monotonous nature of women’s work, which resulted in this disengagement.³ Others have suggested it was the tendency of women to regard work as a ‘stop-gap’ measure between childhood and marriage, unlike their male counterparts who were expected to

³ Mckibbin, Classes and Cultures, pp.127-138.
maintain a life-long relationship with it. As contemporary J.B Priestley noted, ‘they expect less from work’ but instead are preoccupied with ‘that dream life which occupies their minds’. Nonetheless, the focus on unions has often neglected the individual experiences faced by women who were often separated from the culture of unionism. In contrast, recent revisionism, such as Selina Todd’s work on female strikers, reassesses the notion of disengagement and flippant attitude of women towards their employment. In addition, Claire Culleton’s study has shown the active role young women took in enforcing the marriage bar in the Civil Service to protect their own jobs and right to work. As a result, recent re-discovery of women’s workplace cultures has revealed a strong sense of work ethic and pride in labour, traditionally identified with men.

Furthermore, through studying the role of work in women’s autobiographies, a strong sentiment of work ethic and pride in labour emerges as a distinctive part of their class identity. Alice Pidgeon wrote fondly of the strong work ethic of her parents, ‘both Father and Mother must have been very hard-working, as I used to hear the typewriter and sewing machine rattling away until I fell asleep’. Through this recollection, Pidgeon evokes a sense of admiration of her hard-working parents, that she later replicated in her own life, walking from Bolton to Fallowfield, ‘14 ½ hours on an empty stomach’, for an interview after losing her job. Characteristics of physical and mental fortitude are frequently identified with men of this period. Consequently, the significance of their portrayal in Pidgeon’s autobiography indicates her own sense of struggle and construction of self as a working class woman, and the strength that is part of this identity. Similarly, Marie Millet recalled that:

9 Ibid., p.13.
10 McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*. 
‘when I was 12 I went to work every evening after school to a Nursing Home a mile away, ran all the way ... I did the work that the servants did not want to do’. 

Like Pidgeon, Millet constructed her identity through her presentation of self with working class characteristics of physical and mental strength, as well as a distinct work ethic and pride in labour.

The importance of pride in labour and work ethic in the working class identity is also seen in Lillian Westall’s narrative. Westall recalled that after getting married:

‘I got a new job.... the hours were long, 8am to 7pm, but I was happy here, it was the best job I’d ever had. I left to have my first child, a boy, in November 1919. As soon as I could get someone to look after the baby I went back to work’. 

Westall evokes a sense of engagement in her work, in which she presented it as a key part of her life and thus her construction of self as a working woman.

Conversely, for Kathleen Betterton, who left her working class family to study at Oxford University, her autobiography presents a sense of anxiety and guilt:

‘I remember someone who had not seen me for some time asking if I was still at school. When I explained with dignity that I was still at Oxford, he responded with an approving pat on the shoulder, “That’s right, my dear, that’s right ... you stay in school as long as you can!” it was all very wounding to my self-esteem ... it was saddening and filled me with a vague sense of guilt, as though in some undefined way I had rejected my own class’. 

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Betterton reinforces the central role work played in working class identity, in which by staying in education she lacked a sense of work ethic, evoking a sense of crisis about her position in the class system. Similar ideas are shown in Katherine Henderson’s narrative, as she recounted her time as a newly-wed, ‘if this was married life, then give me single life with a job and company’, suggesting that there was a lack of purpose in her life after she gave up work, which had played an important role in her sense of self. Henderson wrote later on in her autobiography after taking in visitors she ‘really enjoyed the hard work and the company’, again reinforcing her pride in labour.

Subsequently, these extracts exemplify a distinct identification with working class characteristics. Patrick Joyce defined the ‘working class’ as ‘a common consciousness arising from a shared and usually life-long condition of waged labour, involving a positive identification with values of manual work’. Therefore, through their autobiographies, these women present themselves as working women, thus indicating the role it played in their lives and sense of self. This, therefore, questions previously held ideas of disengagement and flippant attitudes of women towards their work. Instead, they identify themselves firmly within the working class characteristics of physical and mental fortitude, work ethic and pride in labour in which work is key to their lives and sense of self.

The pride and work ethic exemplified within the autobiographies, however, must also be understood within the context of the interwar depression. Although the depression is a topic debated amongst historians about the degree of its severity, it resulted in the unemployment rate reaching three million by 1932, and, as Bernard Harris, suggests became ‘the most powerful image of the 1920s and 1930s’.

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14 Katherine Henderson, ‘Had I But Known’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:384, p.25.
15 Ibid.
Although not a universal experience, Britain faced structural issues, ingrained within the staple industries as areas were devastated by successive years of unemployment and poverty.\(^{18}\) The depression itself, however, was far from static; cyclical problems resulted in a degree of prosperity from the start to the mid-1930s, rooted in the expansion of ‘New Industries’.\(^{19}\) By the end of the period, however, Britain was slipping back into a recession.\(^{20}\) As May Rainer noted herself, ‘between 1920-1938 roughly everyone seemed to be in a state of perpetual poverty’.\(^{21}\) Despite the detailed study on male unemployment, Rex Pope and Todd have argued, that female unemployment in this period has often been overlooked, believed by contemporaries and historians alike as a significantly less important issue.\(^{22}\) Furthermore, there were anxieties amongst contemporaries about encouraging the work shy through providing benefits, with significant suspicion of women. This is presented in contemporary media which tainted women as ‘work shy’ for refusing domestic employment and accused them of abusing the system.\(^{23}\) Consequently in fear of encouraging the ‘undeserving poor’, the State introduced various conditions including the ‘genuinely seeking work’ clause in 1921, later replaced by the debilitating ‘means test’ in 1931.\(^{24}\) In turn, the system severely affected women’s abilities to claim financial aid, but at the same time also


\(^{19}\) Baines, *Recovery from Depression*.

\(^{20}\) Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s*.


\(^{23}\) ‘Indictment of ‘Work-Shy’ Novel-Reading Young Women’, *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 8 November 1938, p.5,

discouraged many from allowing the State to intervene in their private lives, evoking a sense of failure and humiliation for those who did.25

Conversely, despite contemporary fears, work ethic underpinned by the struggle for independence against the depression features significantly within the autobiographies. Pride in autonomy from the State amidst a period of crisis is illustrated in May Rainer’s narrative, as she discussed how her mother ‘did not make any bones about it, she went out and did all kinds of jobs’, whilst her father was unable to work and denied unemployment benefit.26 Rainer later wrote, ‘life was not an easy one’, but they always had the necessities to live without aid.27 This, therefore, contributes to her construction of self and her family’s identity, that through the work ethic of her mother and the resilience of the family they remained self-sufficient and avoided the dole. In comparison, Alice Pidgeon recounted:

‘When Noreen was four years old she started school and I got a job ... when my husband told the labour exchange that I was working and what I earned, so much was deducted from the unemployment pay that it was hardly worth my while working, but still we carried on’.28

Although they were forced to rely on the State, Alice continued to work to limit their reliance and provide a small degree of independence. Also by taking on this masculine breadwinner role, like Rainer’s mother, Pidgeon’s identity is constructed through her work, in providing for her family in times of need through her strong work ethic and struggle for independence from the State.

Furthermore anxiety about unemployment and loss of independence features throughout Kathleen Betterton’s narrative, as she recalled her fears about unemployment after graduating from University, ‘since the slump loomed over us,  

25 Pope, ‘Unemployed Women in Inter-war Britain’, p.749; Mckibbin, Classes and Cultures, p.123.
27 Ibid., p.43; p.47.
I should have to push and shove to find a job’.\textsuperscript{29} Whilst later in her narrative, after becoming unemployed, she stressed, ‘I was able to pay my way at home while I looked for work’.\textsuperscript{30} This portrays the importance work played in her construction of identity coming from a working class background; there is a distinct need to maintain her economic independence in which her working class identity was rooted. Henrietta Burkin’s narrative, a woman who appears to have come from a slightly more privileged background, contrasts the experiences of many working class women. After the loss of her parents and becoming unemployed she recounted:

‘With hind-sight, I can see I should have found a job, but it was a time of great unemployment … after a year or so my unhappiness eased a little … but made friends by joining the Badminton club, and Church Affairs, and taking up elocution … I even had a go at Grecian dancing!’\textsuperscript{31}

This, therefore, illustrates a lack of anxiety about unemployment, which contrasts to the narratives of other less well-off working class women. Unlike the other women, Burkin appears to have other means to survive and thus the fear of being reliant on the State does not feature within her narrative. Therefore, in Burkin’s narrative, work does not appear to be as significant in her construction of self. This suggests a degree of variation amongst different levels of the working classes, from those facing poverty and those who experienced a more privileged life, reflecting the variation in the depression itself. For many of the women, the context of the depression shaped their relationship with work, and underpinned their identity, as it could provide a means to escape poverty as well as an intrusive and degrading benefits system.

As a result, these narratives demonstrate a sense of social status these women attach to being economically independent. The period saw growing contemporary concerns, such as those by The Pilgrim’s Trust over the emotional and mental

\textsuperscript{29} Betterton, ‘White Pinnies, Black Aprons’, p.178.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p.221.
\textsuperscript{31} Henrietta Burkin, ‘Memoirs of Henrietta Burkin’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:118, p.43.
impact of unemployment. Whilst the Lancashire Evening Post wrote in 1933, ‘unemployment is the chief bugbear of cheerfulness... husbands and sons loitering about the house each loosing more and more of that fine British characteristic, self-respect’. This is supported by McKibbin, who argues that the unemployment crisis resulted in a crisis of identity, as those who identified themselves through their work were unable to do so. Consequently, their working class identities were underpinned by notions of independence in being able to provide for themselves. As Richard Jenkins suggests, identification is a process, of similarity and difference. Therefore, their independence distanced them from both those who relied on the State but also those responsible for the distribution of benefits.

In conclusion, work played a key role in the lives of women and as part of their working class identity. As Betterton suggested, the ‘slump’ loomed over them, therefore, their sense of self is judged within the context of the depression. Though as a piece of retrospective literature, they understand and present their experiences within the concept of their working class identity. Through working class characteristics of physical and mental fortitude, pride in labour and work ethic, and strive for independence they survived depression that is so firmly rooted in many a mind, as a period of hopelessness. As a result, notions of female disengagement and ‘meanwhile’ attitude are called into question. Instead, work played a key role in their lives and was crucial to their working class identity and sense of self, as a means to endure the depression.

33 Marion West, ‘Let Us Be Glad It’s 1933: Resolutions Are So Hard To Keep – But Trying Is Good Fun: Pride- An Asset’, Lancashire Evening Post, 2 January 1933, p.8,
<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000711/19330102/178/0008?browse=false>
34 McKibbin, Classes and Cultures, p.110.
35 Richard Jenkins, Social Identity, (Oxon: Routledge 2008), pp.16-27
CHAPTER TWO

‘When the man’s money does not provide’

It is clear that for women of the interwar depression, work played a key role in the construction of their working class identities. Furthermore, the experiences of work during this period also impacted their sense of gender identity, in which women’s roles in the family economy significantly changed. Stephen Brooke argues that the interwar period resulted in a change in gender identities, as the male breadwinner was undermined by unemployment. Moreover, Selina Todd has suggested that women were increasingly relied upon to financially provide for households with low paid or unemployed men. This, therefore, questions ideas about the period as restoring traditional gender norms of the strong male breadwinner and the meek, submissive housewife. Their roles in the family economy, however, changed throughout their stages in life, as they were faced by different sets of concerns as daughters, wives and mothers. This chapter will argue, therefore, that work not only became a means to construct their class identity, but also informed their gender identity, presenting their sense of self through notions of endurance and selflessness in embracing the breadwinner role, and upturning traditional gender norms.

Recent studies on the interwar economic climate have highlighted the increasing role of daughters as breadwinners within the home. Martin Pugh’s study of contemporary culture, however, presents the concerns about the independent, corrupt, and ‘unruly’ ‘flapper’ of the 1920s. Moreover, Canon Hicks claimed in

1927 that ‘not mere frivolity, but downright immorality was imputed to the
‘Flapper’ ... the great temptation and danger to the moral life of our girls and young
men’.\textsuperscript{5} In reality, for most working class families, daughters were relied upon to
contribute to the family economy, wherein young women constituted to forty-five
per cent of the overall work force.\textsuperscript{6} Furthermore, Todd’s study on young women’s
employment exposes the significant impact of family need, noting that areas with
greater male unemployment rates resulted in higher levels of young women
employed to supplement the family income.\textsuperscript{7} Moreover, between 1921 and 1931
there was a slight increase in domestic service as young women were encouraged
into live-in service to alleviate the pressures at home and to provide financial
assistance to their parents.\textsuperscript{8} In addition, daughters were also relied upon to
manage domestic duties of housework and childcare, enabling their mothers to
partake in paid employment.

As a result, daughters played a significant role within the family economy during
the interwar years, and women’s experiences of this role informed their sense of
self within their narratives. During the 1930s, only fifteen per cent of girls went on
to secondary education, with most leaving at the age of fourteen to work.\textsuperscript{9} Thus, by
providing for the family there was often an element of sacrifice, a theme present
within the autobiographies, exposing the importance of daughters to the
household. May Rainer shows the sacrifice made by many daughters who left
education due to family need:

‘I was most reluctant to give up the pleasure of carefree curriculum... the
early 20s was an unfortunate time in history for all who aspired to higher

\textsuperscript{5} ‘Danger of the Flapper: Canon Hicks Warns Parents’, \textit{Hull Daily Mail}, 3 October 1922, p.3,
<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000324/19221003/014/0003
?browse=false>
\textsuperscript{6} Todd, ‘Young Women, Work and Leisure’, p.792.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., p.794
\textsuperscript{8} Selina Todd, ‘ Young Women, Work and Family in Inter-War Rural England’, \textit{The
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., p.138
things, unless your parents were particularly well placed... the wages of the majority were too low to enable a child to take further education'.

Bessie Wallis also discusses the degree of sacrifice through her narrative:

’I won the County Scholarship. It was doomed from the start though ... it was the child’s bad luck if she were both clever and poor ... I had to take my chance in service like any other girl’.

Consequently, both Rainer and Wallis expose the sacrifice of many young daughters, who gave up the prospect of a good education to provide for their family.

Nevertheless, within the narrative of Molly Keen, there is a strong sense of status in being able to provide for her family as a daughter. After receiving a bonus from work whilst her mother was seriously ill, Keen recalled, ’that evening I opened my pay envelope and spilled the sliver over her bedclothes saying, “this is all for you” ... I was thrilled to be able to do it’. Moreover, after her mother died, her sisters took turns managing the household duties and providing for their grieving father. Additionally, Marie Millet recounted that from the age of twelve she had been working and contributing to their struggling family economy, ’I received 2/9d a week... all of this I had to give to my mum for the rent’. Therefore, within these narratives, the sacrifice daughters made to provide for their families, evokes a sense of social status. These women construct their identities as daughters, presenting their selflessness and work ethic, driven by concerns for the good of their family. This, therefore, influences their sense of gender identity, undermining notions of the ‘unruly’, selfish ‘flapper’ presented in contemporary media. Instead,

11 Bessie Wallis, ‘Yesterday’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:794, p.17.
12 Molly Keen, ‘Childhood Memories’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:449, p.2.
13 Ibid., p.7.
14 Marie Millet, ’Autobiographical Letter, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:528, p.2.
these women present themselves as self-sacrificing, generous young working class women, who took on the burden of the breadwinner to provide for their family when their parents could not.

Pugh's social study of interwar Britain indicates that, in comparison to the Edwardian Period, a higher percentage of women married, suggesting the continuation of ‘marriage and motherhood as major goals in life’, in which married women’s role in the labour force remained limited.\textsuperscript{15} As Joanna Bourke suggests, women instead strived for ‘snug domesticity’ based upon traditional gender norms.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, the census between 1921 and 1931 shows that the married women’s employment rate only ever reached sixteen per cent.\textsuperscript{17} Nonetheless, not only is female employment significantly under-recorded, for many working class marriages, the traditional roles of domestic wife and breadwinner husband were unsustainable in the context of the depression. Self-provisioning activities such as keeping allotments, although argued by Joanne Klein as a masculine territory, often became a means by which women could supplement the income of a low paid husband.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, Susan Kingsley Kent argues that many women often worked unknown to their husbands, ‘in fear that his demised sense of manliness might be further eroded’, as contemporaries were deeply concerned with the mental and emotional impact of unemployment upon men.\textsuperscript{19} The Home Office records show that between 1921-1931 suicide rates rose by sixty per cent amongst men, as their masculinity was threatened by their loss of breadwinner status.\textsuperscript{20} Consequently, driven by concerns about their husbands, and a need to provide when their husbands could not, work became an important role in their sense of self as working class wives through notions of comradeship and getting by.

\textsuperscript{15} Pugh, \textit{State and Society}, p.226.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p.64
\textsuperscript{20} Kent, \textit{Gender and Power}, pp.303-304.
The impact of unemployment upon wives is a theme frequently illustrated within the narratives, although their husbands’ experiences are presented through traditional gender norms, as their inability to provide threatens their masculinity as breadwinners. Nonetheless, Alice Pidgeon recalled the helplessness of her husband:

‘It was really heart-breaking to see him having to walk to town to save his bus fare only to find there were literally hundreds of other applicants for the same job. He once came home looking dreadfully upset and went straight upstairs. I went up a few minutes later with a cup of tea … I found him sitting on the bed with his head in his hands sobbing and saying “Alice how much longer can this go on. It’s all so hopeless.”’

Consequently, this account exposes the personal struggle of many husbands who faced unemployment. In addition, by including this personal element to her narrative, Pidgeon shows not only the debilitating effects of the depression, but also constructs the strength of her marriage and herself as a wife, presenting class solidarity and comradeship. This sense of comradeship is again repeated in Pidgeon’s narrative:

‘He did all our shoe repairs to save money, and had an allotment and grew most of our vegetables and some fruit which I bottled. It saved us from getting into debt which we both dreaded.’

Furthermore, Grace Martin recalled; ‘we grew all our own vegetables, we also had chickens … so we weathered the storm’. In both narratives the use of inclusive pronouns present a sense of unity and comradeship, characteristics often associated with the working class as a whole, but also reflective of these women’s

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23 Grace Martin, 'From 1906', Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:15, p.13.
construction of selves as working class wives in which both formal and informal work was about doing their part and working together to keep afloat during times of crisis.

Moreover, May Rainer discussed the difficulties of being a working wife ‘they have to turn to and take a job when the man’s money does not provide ... it is not a very good life to have to run a home as well as going to work.’ This, therefore, builds upon her construction of self; through reflecting the burden often placed upon wives to both work and manage the household. Nevertheless, Katherine Henderson presents a sense of status in being able to contribute to her husband’s wages; ‘what John’s money would not buy, we went without, until I in turn could add to the wage packet by taking in visitors’. This, therefore, evokes working class characteristics of pride in labour and work ethic, but also constructing her gender identity as one of equal importance to her husband and her marriage as one of comradeship.

Consequently, historians such as Jane Lewis have argued that the period saw a decline of patriarchal marriages, replaced by ones built on companionship and cooperation. Nevertheless, Braybon and Summerfield argue that marriage remained traditionally patriarchal where ‘wifely submission’ was expected, particularly in areas with cultures of hard drinking and male violence. These narratives, however, present a strong sense of comradeship, away from the notion of wifely submission and inferiority. Thus, there is recognition of their own gender roles, and the impact of the depression upon them. Nevertheless, by writing in retrospect, these narratives present working class values of ‘getting by’, with the recognition that although it was tough, the ‘storm’ did pass. Therefore, constructing not only their class identity through work, but also their gender identity as strong working class wives, enduring the depression, and stepping up

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24 Rainer, ‘Emma’s Daughter’, p.64.
25 Katherine Henderson, ‘Had I But Known, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:384, p.25.
27 Ibid.
to play their part, presenting their gender identities away from the image of the meek housewife but instead as an important part of a team.

Although closely linked to their role as wives, women’s roles as mothers produced a whole new set of concerns as work was not only tied into notions of comradeship and providing for their marital unit, but also for their children, shaping their identities as mothers. Braybon and Summerfield suggest that mothers were frequently involved in supplementary activities such as pawning, cleaning and sewing as a means to provide for their families.\(^\text{28}\) Furthermore, contemporaries themselves such as the *Sheffield Independent* in 1937 praised working mothers ‘who are striving to keep their homes neat and their children well fed despite the bad times’.\(^\text{29}\) Nonetheless, notions of femininity are intrinsically tied into notions of motherhood and the expectations of this role. Therefore, Todd recognises the ‘double burden’ these women took on with the breadwinner role along side their domestic duties.\(^\text{30}\) Work, however, formed part of these women’s gender identity, presenting their self-sacrifice to be good mothers. Kent’s study has shown that mothers often went without food in order to feed their children.\(^\text{31}\) Consequently, the 1933 Women’s Health Committee Inquiry found that forty-six per cent of working class mothers were in poor or in ill health.\(^\text{32}\) As a result, the interwar period both reinforced traditional gender roles, but also presented new ones for women.

Lillian Westall presents these notions of endurance, work ethic and selflessness expected within the maternal role. Westall recalled her work in a hotel, ‘it was hard work; sweeping, washing paintwork in the long corridors, cleaning making beds, turning out bedrooms’ in order to provide for her first child whilst her husband returned to the Navy.\(^\text{33}\) Thus, Westall presented her self-sacrifice as a

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\(^{28}\) Ibid., p.146.
\(^{31}\) Kent, *Gender and Power*, p.302.
\(^{32}\) Pugh, *State and Society*, p.222.
\(^{33}\) Lillian Westall, ‘The Good Old Days’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 1:1746, p.9.
mother to provide for her child whilst taking on the masculine role of the breadwinner and the characteristics of endurance that came with it. Moreover, Annie Ford presents her mother's strength and resilience:

‘From the age of two, my father came off work through illness with neurasthenia ... and so what must have been the hardest part of my mother's life ... mother never complained, I never realised we were just about scraping through ... Monday's washing took nearly all day as mum washed for the people who lived in the big house. This was how Mother supplemented our income, I realised years later’.34

As a result, Ford constructs her mother's identity within the traditional gender role as a good mother, but also within a new one, taking on the responsibility of the breadwinner and the social status this evokes.

Furthermore, May Rainer presents the sacrifice mothers made to provide for their children. Rainer recalls how her mother sold the treasured family heirlooms claiming, 'money was paramount when there was a family to feed'.35 Whilst Marie Millett's narrative described the poverty of her family in which, 'our Mum had to go out charing 4 shillings a day 9 till 4', to provide for her children.36 Thus, Westall, Rainer and Millet construct their mothers' identity within the traditional maternal framework, whose role it was to provide for their children, but also in the new role women took on as the financial providers of the home. Billie Melman, however, argues that the interwar period witnessed 'the disappearance of the 'home' as a locus of female interest'.37 These narratives show that for mothers, however, this was not the case, as the home and the family continued to remain of prime concern for mothers faced with unemployment and low wages of their husbands. The nature of their work, however, often reinforced traditional gender norms, through its often domestic and supplementary nature. Nevertheless, the discussion of mother's work within their narratives, suggests a sense of admiration for their

34 Annie Ford, ‘Untitled’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:291, p.3-4
35 Rainer, ‘Emma’s Daughter’, p.17.
mothers in providing for the family, and recognition that work formed part of their identity. Driven by maternal expectations of providing for their children, work became a means to form both their class identity but also their gender identity as strong working class mothers who took on the double burden of providing for their family.

As a result, these narratives expose the driving factors behind women’s work, as daughter, wives and mothers. Additionally, they also provide insight as to how the demands of the family economy shaped women’s identities both in terms of class and gender. As Clair Cullenton suggests, work provided a sense of ‘class assertiveness’, a means for individuals to understand their identity. Whilst Ross McKibbin suggests that the ‘interwar unemployment deeply marred the working class’ and provided a ‘social experience’, dealt with by no other section of society and significantly influenced their sense of self and identity. By taking on the masculine role of the breadwinner, these women construct their class identity in terms of work ethic, pride in labour and physical and mental fortitude. In addition, however, work also helped construct their gender identity through notions of self-sacrifice, comradeship and strength, away from ideas of the unruly selfish flapper and the meek submissive housewife. But instead as daughters, wives and mothers, who took on the breadwinner identity, and did all they could to provide for their family when their men could not.

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CHAPTER THREE

‘This was not the life I wanted’

Within the autobiographies, it is clear that work was a key element in constructing women’s identities both in terms of class and gender. Nonetheless, within the context of the interwar period, work is also presented as a means for these women to forge new identities, through providing new opportunities for women to improve their lives. As Selina Todd suggests, it was a period that witnessed a ‘new generation of women’, born out of the new occupational opportunities of the period.¹ Consequently, work increasingly offered women social status, job security, greater financial independence and overall personal fulfilment. Despite these growing opportunities for social betterment, this chapter will argue, that notions of self-improvement were rooted within their working class culture rather than outside. Furthermore, as reflective pieces of literature, David Vincent has highlighted the role of hindsight and the broader historical context in which such narratives were written through notions of ‘change and movement’.² Therefore, these narratives are presented through a lens of change, creating a historical consciousness of their place in history, which further informs their sense of self and identity.

Ross McKibbin suggests that unlike men, the ‘temporary condition’ of women’s employment resulted in work playing a limited role in women’s sense of self and identity.³ As a result, unlike their male counterparts, ideas of disengagement

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prevailed as for women; their work was a means of gaining ‘pin money’ rather than forming an identity.\(^4\) In contrast, work on the growing occupational opportunities of this period reveals that many women endeavoured to improve their lives through their work, and seek a sense of personal fulfilment. Todd suggests that the rise in white collar and light manufacturing work provided the opportunity for greater social and financial independence for women.\(^5\) Moreover, Mike Savage and Andrew Miles have estimated, that by 1931 the number of female clerks rose from 179,000 in 1911 to 648,000, whilst Todd suggests that by the mid-1930s the light industries expanded opportunities for women in factories.\(^6\)

Nevertheless, A.J Selzer’s study on female banking clerks shows that women were still very much restricted by the use of marriage bars, capped salaries and limited promotional opportunities.\(^7\) Whereas, various other factors including location restricted women’s opportunities as the new industries were mostly emerging within, ‘inner Britain’, including greater London and the East and West Midlands.\(^8\) Consequently, Todd’s study of Northumberland shows that in 1931 twenty per cent of employed women were still in domestic service.\(^9\) For those who were lucky to have access to the new opportunities, Savage and Miles have suggested, however, that such work enabled a degree of social mobility for women who were moving into typically ‘middle class’ occupations such as teaching or as office clerks.\(^10\) This is also reflected in the contemporary press as the *Western Morning News* debated the decline of domestic service in 1925, claiming that ‘the modern “advancement” of the social system, the attractions of city life, a desire for more

\(^4\) McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.135  
\(^7\) Seltzer, Andrew, ‘Female salaries and careers in British banking, 1915–41’ *Explorations in Economic History*, 4 (2011), 461-477  
freedom ... and a greater ambition’ meant women no longer wanted to enter service but instead seek new opportunities.\textsuperscript{11}

Emily Lea exemplifies the endeavour for occupational fulfilment experienced by many women in this period, and its importance to their sense of self. Despite her seemingly good jobs as a shop assistant and a dressmaker, Lea wrote about her decision to change her career pursuing personal fulfilment, ‘I made a definite change of job by going into ‘service’ and leading a totally different life ... I was saving quite a bit and feeling better about life in general’.\textsuperscript{12} This change recorded by Lea resulted in a ‘totally different life’, indicating the role work played in her sense of self, in which personal fulfilment was important. Furthermore, Katherine Henderson also described the strive for personal fulfilment as she strove for independence and her own identity:

‘Mother did not want me to go out to work, as by this time she was in her sixties and needed help in the dairy and with milking etc., but I knew this was not the life I wanted, I wanted to go out into the world and make a life of my own’.\textsuperscript{13}

The stress put upon the ‘I’ represents her construction of self, as for Henderson she identifies work as an important element to her identity, in which she struggled to take control of. Moreover, there is also recognition of a generational shift, that she rejected the prescribed identity encouraged by her mother, expressing a sense of change in women’s lives and opportunities for a greater sense of fulfilment away from the traditional gender roles. Additionally, Alice Pidgeon also reflects the importance of job satisfaction, after working for an elderly lady she recalled, ‘I wanted a change. I had always loved children so went to Clacton on Sea ... I had no


\textsuperscript{12} Emily Lea Gertrude, ‘Reflections in the Setting Sun, or ‘I Remember’ after Fifty Years Commencing 1902’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:619, p.16.

\textsuperscript{13} Katherine Henderson, ‘Had I But Known’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:384, p.8.
control over them what-so-ever, but they were really a nice lot of kids’.\textsuperscript{14} Whereas Kathleen Betterton wrote, ‘I was bored with typing letters and doing accounts; I felt I needed a job with more human interest’.\textsuperscript{15} As a result, arguments put forward that suggested women had little interest in their work are undermined. Through evoking working class characteristics of work ethic and pride in labour, there is a distinct recognition of the importance of personal fulfilment and engagement in their work, which informed their sense of self and identity.

Additionally, Mary Millett presents the role of work in providing personal, social and economic improvement. Working since the age of twelve in domestic service to support her family, Millet recalled, ‘I got a job as a cashier in a Grocery store at Lewisham and went on to bookkeeping and taught myself to type. I worked for high-class firms’.\textsuperscript{16} Within her narrative, however, this sense of personal betterment is rooted within working class characteristics of work ethic, as she came from humble beginnings to improve her life. Bessie Wallis also wrote about the role of work in providing an opportunity for social improvement. After working for her aunt without pay, Wallis recalled an argument with her family, ‘I was adamant I would not be a skivvy. It would not be me! I was shocked at my spirit and fire but I fought on’.\textsuperscript{17} The use of ‘spirit’ and ‘fire’, indicates the importance Wallis felt that her work had on her sense of identity, in which she refused to settle. It also suggests the sense of struggle that these women encountered to seek futures that differed to those traditionally experienced. Moreover, by subverting her class and gender norms of an obedient young lady, the reference to her ‘shock’, suggests a sense of accomplishment and pride that she fought to forge her own identity and the ability to seize the opportunities to build a life away from the one expected of her.

\textsuperscript{14} Alice Pidgeon, ‘Looking Over my Shoulder to my Childhood Days and After’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:619, p.11.
\textsuperscript{15} Katherine Betterton, ‘White Pinnies, Black Aprons’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:71, p.207.
\textsuperscript{16} Marie Millett, ‘Autobiographical Letter’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:528, p.2.
\textsuperscript{17} Bessie Wallis, ‘Yesterday’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:794, p.30.
Furthermore, May Rainer recounted her time working in the West End:

‘Every angle of life was an improvement ... it gave me poise that I never would have achieved staying with the factory orientated life in the place where I had been brought up, all of it was an education to me’.\(^{18}\)

For Rainer, there is a strong recognition that work provided an important role in her identity, in which she believed that the opportunity to gain a better job working in a Bridge Club in the West End significantly improved herself and her life in general. As Todd suggests, work was, in fact, a key element in women's lives, as ‘a valued component of their identity from which they derived a great deal of interest’, and thus they struggled to make the most of their occupational opportunities.\(^{19}\) Nonetheless, by stressing their hard work from humble beginnings, there is no sense of abandonment of their working class identities, but rather rooted within the working class culture of personal betterment, there is a sense that they sought to construct their own identities, and make the most of the new opportunities.

The recognition by these women of the opportunities for personal betterment also presents a historical consciousness, as the narratives reflect a change in opportunities and their need to embrace them. As a piece of reflective literature, Marie-Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet suggests that autobiographies are the ‘means by which individuals attempt to give meaning to their life experiences, to their identity’, thus their narratives become an attempt to understand their life experiences.\(^{20}\) As Edith Williams recognised herself, her narrative required her to ‘penetrate deeply into my inner self, in order to get the essential texture of my life, which is the very stuff of autobiography’.\(^{21}\) Nonetheless, Tess Cosslett suggested that autobiographies require two versions of the writer, the present and the past,

\(^{18}\) May Rainer, ‘Emma’s Daughter’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:384, p.67.
\(^{19}\) Todd, Selina, Young Women, Work and Family, p.159.
\(^{21}\) Edith Williams, ‘Untitled’, Burnett Archives of Working Class Autobiographies, University of Brunel Library, Special Collections, 2:832, p.4.
creating a ‘critical consciousness’ wherein the individual judges their life in retrospect.\textsuperscript{22} Furthermore, Nancy Chodorow suggests that for women, their mothers play a significant role in how they define themselves. Due to their role as primary caregivers, young girls define themselves with their mothers whilst boys define themselves against them.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, within these narratives, there is a strong sense of these women understanding their own lives and accomplishments within the context of their mothers’ experiences. Through this, there is recognition of change and the opportunities their place in history offered, reflecting a sense of achievement of the lives they forged but also a sense of change in women’s experiences.

The sense of historical consciousness is evident within the autobiographies both explicitly and implicitly. Edith Williams evokes a historical consciousness indirectly by starting her narrative with the unhappy lives of her parents, especially that of her mother:

‘my parents were disappointed and disillusioned with the conditions of life in a mining village... my mother, as chancellor of our home exchequer, excellent though she was, would find it difficult to make ends meet. Then the constant bearing and rearing of children made her feel an old woman’.\textsuperscript{24}

The use of a governmental title for her mother both subverts and emphasises the unjustifiably subordinate place of her mother, by showing her importance within the household. Williams’ narrative, however, juxtaposes her own experiences, discussing her education and eventual role in the Labour Party, recalling, ‘it was an unforgettable experience.’\textsuperscript{25} Nevertheless, Williams wrote later on in her narrative, ‘it was many years later, the importance of these first hesitant steps towards the light of knowledge was fully understood by me’.\textsuperscript{26} The juxtaposition of both hers

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\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., (p.6).
\textsuperscript{24} Williams, ‘Untitled’, p.5.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p.15.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
and her mother's life reflects a sense of change over time, whilst there is a recognition that only through her distance by writing later on in life, she was aware of the greater opportunities available to her. Therefore creating a historical consciousness within her narrative of her place in history and a sense of accomplishment that she embraced these opportunities.

Similarly, May Rainer also wrote a story of progression and recognition of the greater opportunities she experienced. She wrote about her parents who, 'had not really had much out of life, all hard work and very small reward', whilst contrasting her own experience:

‘The 20s was a marvellous decade... I became more sophisticated, dressed with taste... I wanted to be different to all the petty little people that existed in humdrum places, lived narrow provincial lives'.

For Rainer, there is a recognition that her life was physically very different to her parents, but these opportunities were provided by her place in history. Furthermore, Kathleen Betterton more explicitly shows her historical consciousness and understanding that her life provided greater opportunity. Coming from a working class background, but moving up to Oxford University and then as an office clerk, she recalled that in the 1920s, 'life moved at a faster tempo, and everyone (except the unemployed) seemed better off. To my parents, life must have seemed more secure than they ever remembered'. Again the reference to her time in history in comparison to her parents', reflects a historical consciousness of change in experiences between her life and that of her parents. Consequently, these narratives are formed within a discourse of mobility, stressing their humble origins and their struggle to move up in the world. Through the creation of a historical consciousness by the juxtaposing of their lives in relation to their mothers, there is a sense that these women understood their own experiences and historical change through the lens of their mothers’ lives. Consequently, these women firmly root their identities within the working class,

27 Rainer, 'Emma’s Daughter', p.91.
28 Ibid., p.57-58.
stressing their origins, but reflecting through a historical consciousness, a sense of their distinct place in history and the new opportunities it provided.

The new opportunities of this period, however, have raised questions about women’s class position. As Savage and Miles suggest, the ‘middle class’ characteristic of many of these new jobs, and the increasing inter-class mingling of women resulted in women occupying a ‘more shadowy, ambiguous position’. This can be seen through Kathleen Betterton, as she described her anxieties around her class position and a sense of abandoning it through her university education, ‘I seemed to grow yet further away from the class to which I belonged’. In contrast, Patrick Joyce suggested it was not the occupation that defined a class but the ‘persistence of a consciousness of being a worker’. This is shown by Edith Williams, that despite working on the Court of Referees dealing with applications for unemployment insurance, Williams wrote:

‘it was a difficult & sometimes heart-breaking task, for we were aware of the impossibilities of finding work in the area... we knew we were dealing with technical breaches of the law, but what could we do?’

Within this extract is a strong sense of class solidarity, and that despite her occupation she still identified with the working class through understanding their experiences. Whilst the emphasis put upon these women’s journeys and their humble beginnings, is evidence that these women did not abandon their working class identity but instead it remained firmly rooted within them throughout their lives. Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis’s study has suggested that when individuals experience social mobility, their identity remains in their heritage, whilst their new lives form just the ‘other part’ of this identity. By returning to their origins through reflective writing, these women are making sense of themselves and their

30 Savage and Miles, The Remaking of the British Working Class, p.25.
33 Williams, ‘Untitled’, p.17.
life experiences, by understanding where they came from and the journey they experienced. This, therefore, evokes notions of achievement and social status, that through worth ethic and pride in labour and seizing the opportunities presented, they improved their lives, but maintained their class identity.

In conclusion, by providing an opportunity for personal fulfilment, it is clear that women were concerned with having job satisfaction, evoking notions of pride in labour and a work ethic, key to their working class identities. Work, however, also provided a means for personal, social and financial betterment, as the focus upon their journey to greater lives represents a sense of achievement in making the most of these opportunities. Nonetheless, the existence of a historical consciousness expresses an acknowledgement of their place in history. As Todd argues work, therefore, provided a means to ‘escape from the poverty and domestic burden their mothers had experiences’. However, this is not by abandoning their heritage, but by forging new identities firmly rooted in their working class culture. Thus, work, and the opportunities it provided, played a key role in their sense of self and their working class identities, in which they seized the opportunities provided and constructed the lives that they wanted.

35 Todd, ‘Poverty and Aspiration, p.139.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this dissertation has explored the role work played in the lives of working class women in interwar Britain. It is a theme that features heavily within their autobiographies reflecting its centrality to their lives. Furthermore, the use of women’s autobiographies enables these women to provide their own account of their working lives, their individual experiences and how they understood them. Consequently, contrary to arguments that propagate the supposedly temporary status of work in women’s lives, this project has shown that for working class women at least, work was never a ‘dreamy interlude’, but instead dominated throughout their life cycle, in which a life-long relationship was established.

As a result, this project has also demonstrated the significant role work played in the construction of women’s working class identities. Work has long been understood as a vital part of masculinity and men’s sense of self, however, it is clear that this was an experience common between both genders. This, in turn, calls into question ideas about female disengagement and flippant attitudes towards their labour, but alternatively shows that work was a key element of their internal sense of self.

Consequently, work became a fundamental way in which these women understood and presented their class identity. Characteristics of work ethic, pride in labour, physical and mental fortitude and the endeavour for independences in the face of an increasingly dependent society, underpins their construction of self. They also firmly root these narratives in working class cultures, and are a means by which they construct this identity. In addition, work also played a role in their construction of gender identity. Evoking notions of self-sacrifice and comradeship, they explored what it meant to be a daughter, wife or mother during the depression and the roles they took on as both homemaker and breadwinner, forging their own gender identities away from those prescribed. Furthermore, as reflective literature, these women also present a history of women’s changing experiences. They present both their traditional identities alongside the expansion
of new ones, underpinned by growing opportunities provided by the interwar period, and understood within their historical consciousness. Nonetheless, these new roles are constructed within their working class heritage, in which their narratives are about the formation and improvement of their working class identities rather than its abandonment.

Therefore, work was as much a part of their lives and experiences as their roles as wives and mothers. Through looking at the genuine experiences of women, and most importantly, understanding how they understood these experiences themselves, it provides a greater insight into the lives of women in this period. As a result, for the women of interwar Britain, work played a significant part in the negotiation of their own experiences and understanding their sense of self. But through the medium of their autobiographies, work was also the means by which they constructed their identities as working women, both in terms of gender and class. Consequently, work was key in the construction of women's sense of self, and most significantly their identities as working class women of interwar Britain.
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