



# "The World We Have Lost":<sup>1</sup> Western Historiography and Attitudes Toward Death and Bereavement among Peoples of Pre-Industrial Europe

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Historians tend to view the casualties of war and disaster through a long lens, evaluating numbers against a backdrop of previous catastrophes and assessing social reactions in the context of how particular groups have received bad news in the past.

In this year of war and disaster, where the casualties have been exacted disproportionately from the ranks of those who do not reside in the West, the impact of sorrow and loss has been felt by people other than ourselves. We have thus, formally or informally, been confronted with evaluating our notions of the "other." The literature of social psychology describes the process by which one group manages to objectify another, in order not to feel connected, not to feel guilt or obligation, or, even, not to feel discomfort when inflicting harm [1-3].

To create "the other" by objectification can be accomplished by a process of dehumanization, strip-

ping members of a group of human attributes in order to eliminate all bases for identifying with them. A particular mechanism of dehumanization is very characteristic of those born and raised in Western societies: ascribing to those who live in other societies, usually pre-industrial, a lesser regard for the value of human life.

The notion that a respect for human life is unique to modern, developed nations may make intuitive sense. The sensibilities that create this respect tend, according to this intuition, to be associated with societies characterized by low mortality and morbidity rates, that is, industrialized nations. It is assumed that people whose daily lives are filled with suffering, death, and dying have little opportunity to cultivate a respect for human existence.

The tendency of Westerners to dehumanize pre-industrial peoples in this manner has been commented on at length by scholars such as Herbert Kelman, and there currently exists a large body of literature exploring the psychological processes involved in the creation of in-groups and out-groups, of which dehumanization is an extreme example [4-6]. Usually implicit in this literature is the assumption that moral exclusion encourages injustice and seriously threatens peace. To confine human qualities to a particular group legitimizes discrimination and facilitates violence.

0051-2438/1991/0104-0185\$03.00/0

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<sup>1</sup>I have taken this part of the title from Peter Laslett's pioneering study of the pre-industrial family, *The World We Have Lost*, London: Methuen, 1965.

Historians approach notions of the other from a slightly different perspective. We likewise observe the process by which groups construct zones of moral exclusion, outside of which other groups no longer matter, or at least matter much less. But we are also interested in how the notion of the other may have developed from our readings of the past. It is suggested here that a factor in determining this particular Western notion of the other as not respecting the value of human life has its roots in our serious misreading of our own pre-industrial past.

The nature of our own ancestors' attitudes toward loss and death is the subject of an important debate within the community of historians who study Western Europe. Throughout much of the twentieth century, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have provided support—albeit indirect and inadvertent—for the belief that life is cheap in pre-industrial societies. They have done this in two ways: in general, by depicting traditional and modern societies as so starkly different that one is led almost inexorably to the conclusion that the people themselves must be radically different in fundamental ways; and, in particular, by depicting pre-industrial peoples as relatively unloving and uncaring about the most basic of relationships—those between husband and wife and parents and children. By accentuating disparities and ignoring, or at best downplaying, the similarities between traditional and modern societies, some scholars have lent credibility to the contention that pre-industrial peoples experience violence, death, and dying less painfully than we in the modern world do. In so doing, they have provided an intellectual foundation for those who would define the moral community in an exclusionary way.

This widely known version of history has been challenged by recent historical research. It is far from clear that scholars in other disciplines much less the general public, have gotten the message. Indeed, a more traditional view of the Western European past, as peopled by those inured to death and loss, seems firmly embedded in the social science and medical literature, appearing both in introductory textbooks and in more specialized monographs [7-13].

In an effort to disseminate the newer scholarship more widely, it is argued here that the differences between traditional and modern societies, at least with regard to interpretations of Western European history, have sometimes tended to be exaggerated

and the affinities understated. In particular, it is suggested that relationships within the family have shown remarkable continuity across time, social conditions, and geography. The implication of this continuity is that pre-industrial peoples, both then and now, might well experience life much as we in the modern world do. By making this point, historians in recent assessments have weakened the intellectual underpinning of the dehumanization process, and in so doing have helped to bridge the chasm between "us" and "them."<sup>2</sup>

Section I reviews some of the scholarly work that underestimates the continuity between pre-industrial and industrial societies. Section II discusses more recent contrary historical opinions that, while admitting the divergence, also acknowledge the fundamental continuities in life before and after the Industrial Revolution.

## I. LIFE IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL WESTERN EUROPE: THE TRADITIONAL HISTORICAL VIEW

The belief that traditional and modern societies assess and experience life in vastly divergent ways is part and parcel of a larger historical, anthropological, and sociological perspective that sees the Industrial Revolution as one of the great watershed in world history: not only does it transform economic, social, and political institutions, but it also radically alters the way people behave, think, and feel. In a word, it is industrialization that makes "us" different from "them." As some scholars would have it, whereas we in the modern world are rational, literate, secular, unfriendly, competitive, individualistic, motivated to achieve, fond of change, enamored of progress, confident of our abilities to manipulate the universe to our ends, and engaged mostly in impersonal relationships, people in traditional societies are irrational, illiterate, religious, friendly, neighborly, cooperative, dependent, unmotivated to achieve, passive, deferential to authority, and well-integrated into their rural communities [14-19]

<sup>2</sup> The timetable for the spread of the Industrial Revolution is as follows: England, 1760-1850; France, 1830-1900; Germany and the United States, 1850-1900; Scandinavia, 1860-1930. Carlo Cipolla, *Economic History of the World*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1978:28



### *Summary of Historical Views*

Despite the fact that these characterizations have been roundly criticized as overly simplistic and wanting in supportive evidence [20–22], the theorizing continues to ground the work of many historians of the European family. In particular, influential scholars such as Phillipe Ariès, Lawrence Stone, and Edward Shorter see family life in traditional societies as radically different from life in the industrialized world. Their views are summarized as follows: Whereas families in pre-industrial Europe consisted of extended, stable groups of kin accustomed to living in well-integrated communities, the families in modern societies consist of small, nuclear units living in urban areas. But more than family structure and household organization distinguish pre-industrial peoples from those in the modern world. The most intimate and personal of family relationships also differ greatly. Thus, modern society is characterized by an affective and companionate marriage in which husband and wife value each other for who they are and children are treated as priceless treasures entitled to special nurturing and protection, while, in pre-industrial society, couples married for practical, utilitarian, and economic reasons and treated one another and their children indifferently or outright brutally [23–28].<sup>3</sup>

Simply put, husbands and wives and parents and children did not love one another as we do. Relationships within the family were characterized by remoteness, restraint, formality, and patriarchy, and not, as today, by warmth, affection, and intimacy. Children, sometimes viewed as less than human, were swaddled at birth, put out to wet-nurse, sent to other households to do service, and then put to work. Such callousness, so it is said, resulted in large measure from the high mortality rates associated with pre-industrial societies: because death was so common, pre-industrial peoples developed an insensitive and benumbed approach to life around them, which in turn created loveless and unempathic relationships [23–25].

### *Nature of the Evidence*

One does not have to read between the lines to understand that these scholars view family life in

<sup>3</sup> I do not mean to imply that these scholars are in complete accord. They differ on several points, such as exactly when and why the transformation in family relationships occurred.

what Shorter calls the “Bad Old Days” as inferior to the modern counterpart [25,29]. In support of their positions, Ariès, Stone, and Shorter adduce a variety of sources, including letters, diaries, published books, sermons, medical manuals, and moral treatises. Given the nature of medieval and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historical evidence, it is not surprising that much of their proof is anecdotal, though Stone’s study of marriage in the English aristocracy makes good use of records such as wills and marriage contracts. In discussing children and childhood, Ariès, Shorter, and Stone rely overwhelmingly on second-hand observations of parent and child interactions rather than first-hand accounts written by mothers, fathers, and the children themselves [30].

Family relationships within the lower classes present the historian with an acute problem, since peasants and laborers, having neither the learning nor the leisure, left few literary traces. For evidence of their experiences, Ariès, Shorter, and Stone rely primarily on the observations of governmental officials, physicians, and others of the educated elite, some of whom were unsympathetic or downright hostile to the laboring poor. Another part of their proof is negative: since the sources contain so few references to feelings and emotions among the lower orders, they did not exist [14,29,31].

### *Conjugal Relationships and Attitudes Toward Loss of Spouse*

Scholars of all inclinations agree that the tone of family life in pre-industrial society was set by the nature of conjugal relationships, which were in turn colored largely by the fact that choice of spouse rested with parents and not with children. Most scholars also agree that, in families with any wealth at all, marriages were arranged by parents, who entered into legally binding agreements that specified in great detail exactly what each spouse would bring to the union. The many extant marriage contracts from the middle ages and sixteenth and seventeenth centuries strongly suggest that the motivations for marriage were practical and utilitarian: the purpose of the new union was to improve or consolidate the economic, social, and sometimes political positions of both families, with love and affection playing little or no part [24–26].

Nor was marriage any more affectionate among the lower orders, where children and not parents

sometimes chose their spouses. Indeed, here conjugal relationships were not merely cold, they were blatantly hostile. Peasant husbands in particular enjoyed a reputation for routinely brutalizing their wives, whom they were said to value far less than their farm animals. This misogynistic strand runs throughout the observations of French medical and governmental authorities. According to one eighteenth-century prefecture, for example,

"the loss of a stable animal grieves a peasant more than the loss of his wife. The first may only be recuperated with money; the second is repaired with another woman, who will bring with her some money and furniture and who, instead of impoverishing the household, will increase its wealth" [24,25]

Given the quality of marital relationships among the lower orders, it is not surprising that neither spouse mourned the death of the other. As one French physician noted of the peasantry in eighteenth-century Anjou, husbands spent money willingly on the veterinarian but balked at hiring a doctor for their wives, who were "here today, gone tomorrow" [25]. Shorter finds further evidence of the lack of grief in proverbs current in pre-industrial France:

"Rich is the man whose wife is dead and horse alive"  
"Your late wife you so deplore until you enter your front door."  
"The two sweetest days of a fellow in life are the marriage and burial of his wife" [25].

Peasant widows were apparently capable of giving as good as they got. Thus, according to one observer of eighteenth-century Provence,

"If it is a woman who has just lost her husband, she emits cries of lamentation [at the wake] capable of bringing the very stones to tears before each newcomer . . . She strikes her head against the wall, omitting nothing to persuade all of the immensity of her grief; tears and contortions cease immediately as soon as no one is about, but begin with the next arrival" [25].

Similar pronouncements from government and medical officials lead Shorter to conclude that "the prospect of death seemed to arouse no deep sentiment among spouses" in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French countryside, a judgment that Stone also makes for pre-industrial England [24,25]

Spouses' lack of affection is usually attributed to the high mortality rates. Thus, moral theologians warned people not to love immoderately: "Let this

caution be minded, that they don't love inordinately, because death will soon part them" [24]. In addition, with regard to the lower orders, Stone suggests that illiteracy must have played a role in determining the callous relationship between husbands and wives. The ability to love is, he suggests, learned from one's culture, and, because the working classes were illiterate, they could not learn to love their spouses. Only when they were able to read novels and newspapers could this transpire, but, until then, they had little "in common to talk about" [24].

For some historians, then, warmth and affection were absent from the pre-industrial family at its very inception. If the basic conjugal unit was characterized by a lack of love and emotion, it follows that the family environment would be similarly bereft, and it was into this loveless atmosphere that children were born.

#### *Attitudes Toward Children and Death in Childhood*

With regard to children and childhood, many historians suggest that, just as people in pre-industrial society married for utilitarian reasons, so did they procreate. The purpose of having children was to provide hands to work and heirs to inherit, a motivation that meant that children were valued less for who they were than for what they could do. So deplorably did adults treat children before modern times that the psychohistorian Lloyd de Mause was moved to write:

The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized, and sexually abused [27,32].

The precise nature of the relationship between parents and children in pre-industrial Europe has attracted immense interest in the past several decades. Ariès was one of the first scholars to tackle this aspect of family history. In his seminal work, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), which has achieved the status of holy writ, he presents a picture of children and childhood that has guided a generation of scholars, both within and without the historical profession. Indeed, few contemporary studies have so successfully penetrated other disciplines, and it is not an exaggeration to say that Ariès' views on childhood have become common coin [7-12,33,34]. Recent scholarship, however, casts doubt on his



methodology and seriously undermines his conclusions. Still, Ariès' influence is such that his views merit close attention.

Ariès' major finding is that the concept of childhood, as we know it today, is a relatively recent development. Neither the middle ages nor the early modern period knew such a construct. By using as evidence art, clothing, games, sports, diaries, and letters, Ariès presents a picture in which children were viewed as adults writ small and not as innocent creatures in need of special protection and attention [23]

Medieval art, to use one of Ariès' best-known proofs, portrayed children as small adults, the lone exceptions being the infant Jesus, the Virgin Mary as a child, and the Holy Spirit. Further, medieval paintings usually show children mingling with adults, indicating the absence of separate spheres—a contention that is, however, disputed by art historians [29,31].

**Wet-Nursing.** A window into the history of childhood is also provided by certain aspects of the parent-child relationship, in particular, the practice of putting babies out to wet-nurse. While historians sometimes differ as to the frequency with which infants were put out, the best opinion is that only the wealthy resorted to it, though maternal death, illness, or economic hardship sometimes prompted others to hire wet nurses [31,35].

Whatever the case, scholars who see pre-industrial parents as indifferent to the needs of their offspring find incontrovertible proof in the practice of wet-nursing. By putting out their babies, mothers not only deprived themselves and their infants of an opportunity to bond, they also sentenced their offspring to death at the hands of uncaring and poorly nourished women [25,36]

Motivations for putting out varied. David Hunt suggests that, in seventeenth-century France, contemporary perceptions of infants and infancy played a role. Thus, many parents viewed babies as blood-thirsty leeches possessed of voracious and unquenchable appetites. Indeed, so fearsome were the little creatures that their mothers' milk supply, thought of as whitened blood, was often inhibited, leaving infants without sufficient food [26]. Female vanity was also said to play a role, a sixteenth-century French observer suggesting, for example, that women disdained nursing because they wanted to retain "a slender figure, pretty breasts, firm nip-

ples, round and smooth" [26]. The main impetus for putting babies out came, however, from the father's jealousy. After all, a child at the breast became a competitor for his wife's affection, time, and energy. Its very presence led to conflict within the family. Add to this the general prohibition against a nursing woman's having intercourse, which doctors saw as "troubling the blood" and ruining the milk, and we understand why women of wealth might decide to hire a wet nurse [26].

Whatever the motivations, the practice often proved harmful to the nurslings because of the conditions under which many wet nurses lived. Shorter's study of traditional French society suggests that the majority of nurses came from the agricultural classes, those people who could least afford more mouths to feed and who lived in hovels where disease was rife. As one contemporary observed,

"the dwellings of many nurses are badly aired. Several have only a single room, in which are crowded together a number of beds and chests. Some have but a single bed, and three nurslings" [25].

Another wet nurse's dwelling was described as housing, in addition to her own family, pigs, goats, sheep, and poultry. So smoky was the hearth that the door had to be kept open, permitting "mortal" drafts to blow across the infants. The babies slept in several large beds, as well as in hammocks suspended from the ceiling bunk-style. Immediately outside the door rested a huge pile of fertilizer, while the floor of the hovel was layered with "a sort of black water, greenish and fetid. . ." [25]. Others reported that wet nurses often failed to change the bedding from baby to baby, so that the mattress, "impregnated with sweat, urine, and fecal matter, exhaled an odor of foul ammonia" [25]. Sometimes crying infants were silenced with alcohol and opium-based tranquilizers called "Godfrey's Cordial" and "Dalby's Carminative," concoctions that occasionally killed them [25].

Yet, according to contemporary observers, the worst part was not the physical surroundings but the nurses' neglect and outright abuse. One nineteenth-century French physician told of a particularly extreme case of mistreatment:

"The nurse was drunk, and carried the infant with its head downwards. I saw what the fate would be of the poor, innocent creature. Assigned several months later by the police commission to investigate the death of this nursling who had arrived at Nogent so fresh

and rosy, I found in the shack which this woman inhabited a dessicated little form, its features shriveled, laid out upon a foul, stinking straw mattress without sheets. The poor child was dead of hunger and misery. In the nurse's absence, an absence which had lasted the entire morning, the neighbors had finally been moved by the plaintive cries, which all of a sudden had stopped. They had to break in the door to ascertain that the infant was dead" [25]

If we trust the reports of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century doctors in rural France, such neglect was typical, though it often went unnoticed because parents seldom visited their babies. In Shorter's view, this shameful indifference sharply distinguishes these parents from their solicitous modern counterparts [25].

Deprived of adequate care from their nurses, infants who were put out died in great number. Shorter, for example, estimates that, in eighteenth-century Rouen, the death rate of babies who stayed with their mothers was 19%, whereas that of babies sent to rural wet nurses was 38%. Similar statistics exist for other areas of France [25].

**Infanticide.** But even infants kept at home were by no means safe since they were often mistreated or left to their own devices. Many were underfed, some mothers choosing to spend their money on brandy instead of food [25]. Children were also physically abused. Thus, in eighteenth-century England, a well-bred lady remarked that "anyone who has been accustomed to live in a country village must know that the children of the poor there are brought up on blows" as well as with "harsh words" [25]. An observer of eighteenth-century Languedoc recorded that mothers often referred to their children as "it" or "the creature," not even bothering to distinguish the sex. Some, in addition, forgot their children's ages, one mother relating that her son was either six or eight months old, another that he was eleven or fourteen. Still another did not even know how many children she had. What sort of mother, Shorter asks rhetorically, does these sorts of things [25]?

An obvious answer is: the kind who also kill their own offspring. For many historians, the practice of infanticide provides additional proof of the callous indifference to human life in pre-industrial society [37-41]. Although punished by both ecclesiastical and secular authorities, infanticide is often said to have been commonly practiced, even functioning, David Baken suggests, as a method of population

control [42]. Still, the records do not permit exact calculation, and we cannot know how frequently parents resorted to killing their own. However, literary sources, such as diaries, letters, and autobiographies, contain numerous references to the practice. Pope Innocent III, for example, expressed concern over the large number of women who, in the thirteenth century, threw their babies into the Tiber. And in 1527 a priest lamented that "the latrines resound with the cries of children who have been plunged into them" [27].

Sometimes the killing was active, as in the above examples, but more often it was passive, with babies simply left unattended and unfed. An anecdote from an observer of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anjou illustrated how infants could be passively dispatched. "At eight in the evening," a father wrote,

"my wife delivered a girl who didn't seem capable of surviving. The midwife baptised her in the presence of eyewitnesses as she did have signs of life. It was more than an hour before she cried. . . The next day she was baptised. . . in the church. . . and on the following day sent away en nourrice at a distance of six leagues and died on the fifth day of life" [43].

Such mistreatment, many historians insist, was common and expressed not mere parental misjudgment as to a baby's viability but outright rejection of an unwanted newcomer [25].

**Abandonment.** Sometimes parents chose abandonment as an alternative to killing. Indeed, it has been suggested that, in one area of seventeenth-century France, only about one-third of the inhabitants of orphanages had actually lost a father; the rest were *enfants trouvés*, left by their parents to be cared for by charitable institutions [44]. Toward the mid-nineteenth century, as many as 33,000 French infants were being abandoned every year. However, so deplorable was the treatment afforded at the orphanages that some scholars see the practice as a surrogate for infanticide. Parents dropped their children off in the expectation that they would not survive, and, once left, they were seldom retrieved [25].

**Possible Explanations Advanced by Traditional Historians.** The explanations for parental mistreatment and abuse are many. First and foremost is the theory that links demography to emotion. Because the infant mortality rates were so high—perhaps as many as one-third to one-half of all children never



reached the age of twenty—parents resorted to “psychic numbing” in order to defend against undue attachment. Parents modulated their love based on a reckoning of how long their children would live and consequently refused to make the sacrifices essential to the survival of their offspring [23,24,26].

Then there were economic considerations. Poorer peasants, it is said, were especially quick both to kill and to mistreat their own. As Stone puts it, “the culture of poverty” led to an attitude of “easy come, easy go” [24,25,41]. Still other scholars suggest that children were neglected, badly treated, and killed because of pervasive personality traits embedded in pre-industrial people. Barbara Kellum, for example, attributes child murder to the “widespread infanticide component . . . present in the medieval personality” [38]. Baken argues that parental indifference derived from mothers’ and fathers’ memories of their own powerlessness when they were children, which in turn prevented them from empathizing with their offspring [42].

Because parents loved their children less than we love ours, they naturally mourned their deaths less. Witness the behavior of mothers in eighteenth-century London, who were said to abandon their dying babies to rot in gutters and dung heaps [27]. One particular mother, a Mrs. Thrale, allegedly “regarded the death of various daughters at school with great equanimity.” Sir Ralph Verney, for his part, “cheerfully remarked when two of his fifteen children died that he still had left a baker’s dozen” [25,45]. Moreover, in one Angevin parish, parents seldom attended the funerals of children younger than five, and in other cases only one parent would show up. As a contemporary observer remarked with regard to the French peasantry, “infant death is almost a banal accident, which a subsequent birth will recuperate” [25].

In sum, many respected and influential historians depict family life in pre-industrial Europe as “poor, nasty, brutish, and short”—to borrow Hobbes’ words from another context. From such conditions it follows that people themselves were fundamentally different. In a word, they were less sensitive than we. Loving less, they grieved less. Inured to pain and loss, they suffered less. Hardened by tragedy, they agonized less. Only with modernization would societies cultivate the sensibilities, sensitivities, and insight that mark our familial and personal relationships and give us our fundamental respect for life.

## II. LIFE IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL EUROPE: THE CURRENT HISTORICAL VIEW

Despite the plausibility and currency of this tale, there is another side to the story. This section presents interpretations of historical evidence that highlight the continuities between pre-industrial and industrialized European societies. This evidence suggests that, in fundamental ways, we are not so very different after all. Importantly, much of the evidence adduced by this second group of scholars consists primarily of first-hand accounts of family life, as well as systematic studies of legal records such as coroners’ inquests.

### *Conjugal Relationships and Attitudes Toward Loss of Spouse*

For the relationship between husband and wife, historians are correct in insisting that the high incidence of arranged marriages and marriage settlements indicates that most people married for practical reasons and not because of romantic love and physical attraction. However, it by no means follows that affection was consequently absent from marital relationships. On the contrary, scholars such as Jack Goody, Barbara Hanawalt, David Herlihy, and Ralph Houlbrooke find ample evidence of loving conjugal relationships in the families of pre-industrialized Europe [46–49]. Houlbrooke’s study of English families in the late medieval and early modern periods is particularly relevant. Not only does he make use of first-hand accounts of family life, but he also explores much of the same literature that Stone used. Matching him anecdote for anecdote, Houlbrooke, however, reaches very different conclusions.

Houlbrooke’s analysis of numerous first-hand accounts written by husbands and wives leads him to conclude that “in many marriages expectations were high, and emotional demands extensive, mutual involvement deep, and shared interests and sense of humor very important.” In letters and diaries, literate spouses of the upper and middling classes expressed sadness at separations, difficulty in sleeping alone when apart, romantic longing, respect for each other’s counsel, pride in each other’s success, and joy in each other’s company [49].

Given the existence of conjugal love, it is not surprising that the death of a spouse brought grief and despair. Thus, in the mid-seventeenth century, Oliver Heywood wrote of his first wife as being “as

loving a wife as ever lay in any man's bosom," and he insisted that no couple had ever taken "so much comfort in each other and so little discontent, as we had in the six years we were together," a sentiment expressed by numerous bereft spouses [49].

Nor were such feelings limited to the wealthier segments of society. A rare glimpse into peasant life comes from a physician's account of an eighteenth-century French household. As Dr. Maret told the story:

"I was sent in 1760 to the village of Ruffy [Cote d'Or]. A malignant fever had been epidemic there. In my round of the sick I was taken to a woman of perhaps thirty whose husband had just died several days earlier. She had been attacked by the same disease. I was accompanied by the curé of the place and a surgeon, but our arrival scarcely seemed to interest the woman; she kept a profound silence. I approached her, interrogated her, tried to raise her spirits. . . Succumbing to my importunities she turned and said in a tone that fairly broke my heart, 'I thank you kindly but I don't want no medicine. My husband is dead. We was poor but we loved each other a lot.' After that moment she never again spoke to a soul, took neither food nor medicine, and died on the morrow, the sixth day after the death of her husband" [25].

Evidence other than literary confirms the view that husbands and wives mourned one another's death. Thus, Houlbrooke's study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century funeral inscriptions indicates how frequently epitaphs celebrated the joys of marriage, remarking in particular on the length of marriage, the love shared, and the virtues of the deceased [49].

#### *Attitudes Toward Children and Death in Childhood*

Just as historians have profitably reworked the view of pre-industrial marriage as loveless, so have they repudiated the belief that adults routinely treated children with indifference or cruelty. Research of the past decade, in particular the work of Herlihy, Houlbrooke, Hanawalt, John Gillis, Patricia Crawford, and Linda Pollock, shows that a concept of childhood as distinct from adulthood was indeed known and that, moreover, many parents treated children in a loving and nurturing manner [31,46,48-53].

Pollock's study, *Forgotten Children*, is especially illuminating. Here she systematically investigates some 350 first-hand accounts of parenting as contained in British and American diaries, autobiogra-

phies, as well as sources such as newspaper reports. Covering the period from 1500 to 1900, the sources depict the relationship between parent and child as strikingly similar to that in the modern world. Perceiving children as gifts from God and as the primary source of happiness, parents typically provided warm nurturance, education, advice, and financial assistance to their offspring. Indeed, throughout the medieval and early modern periods, commentators on family life generally depicted the bond between parent and child as one of the very strongest and most impassioned of all human ties [31,49].

It was, however, a bond that increased with time. As one seventeenth-century observer remarked, parental affection grew as the child grew: "the longer they have them, the more they affect them, and the loather they are to leave and forgo them" [49]. That this should be so is not surprising, since many modern parents probably feel similarly. Thus, a 1980 British study indicated that 40% of the women surveyed admitted that, when they held their babies for the first time, they felt "detachment or blank-indifference, deadened, neutral emotional reactions." Another 11% experienced mixed feelings [49]. Parental love, then and now, takes time to grow.

While contemporary sources suggest that both parents loved their children, maternal love was usually deemed the greater. Thus, with regard to nursing mothers, one seventeenth-century Englishman was moved to ask rhetorically, what man would be able

"to endure that clamor, annoyance, and clutter which she goes through without complaint among poor nurslings, clothing, feeding, dressing and undressing, picking and cleansing; what is it save the instinct of love which enableth her thereto" [49].

**Childbirth.** Our knowledge of family relationships in traditional Western Europe has also been enlarged by the scholarship of Patricia Crawford, whose study of nursing in seventeenth-century England well documents the tender care that adults lavished on children. Relying on the first-hand accounts contained in letters, diaries, autobiographies, and contemporary lives, as well as on mothers' medical commonplace books and physicians' advice books, Crawford finds that concern for babies began in utero. Women wrote, for example, of their fears of deformity and concerns about proper diet and ex-



ercise [53]. Moreover, adults sometimes attempted to empathize with the unborn. One man, for example, believed that babies in the womb "lie in the greatest lukewarmness and tranquillity, but as soon [as] they feel the cold air outwardly and breathe it in, they are hurt, which appears by their crying." Another described the womb as "a quietly enjoyed bed" [53].

The birth itself was, of course, a frightful experience for all concerned. While an uncomplicated delivery was perhaps little more dangerous than today, the smallest abnormality or mishap could mean disaster. Houlbrooke suggests that allowing for mothers who died undelivered or in childbed of stillbirths, the overall maternal mortality rate in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was 25 per 1,000 births, compared to a 1979 figure of 0.12 per 1,000 births [49,53].

The anxiety experienced by wives and husbands leaves traces in the sources. Before delivery some particularly pious women prepared for death. One observer, Dr. William Gouge, criticized husbands for being insensitive to their wives' fears, though others, including Gouge himself, experienced the event as one of utter terror [49]. Writing of his feelings while his wife was in labor, William Jones confessed that his

"heart was anxious and uneasy, day and night, relative to that dearest of all human beings, my dearest Theodosia, who was then pregnant. The 6th of June arrived—and I may almost as well attempt to describe fully the miseries of the damned, as to express the horrible pain, the anguish with which I was racked during her labor. I am astonished, and shudder at the bare recollection of it. May it never be erased from my memory; but may it always engage me to treat her with grateful tenderness, and to consult her inclination on all occasions!" [54]

Another anguished husband asked his minister, "What shall I do? My wife is entering into her travail, and I think she will die with very fear." John Bunyan related that his dwindling faith in God was restored when, after prayer, his wife, who had already received final unction, miraculously recovered [49].

Then, as now, parents, friends, and relatives exulted at the birth of a baby. The diaries, letters, and autobiographies of the period are filled with expressions of joy at the safe delivery of a healthy infant and the survival of its mother. Thus, in eighteenth-century England, Melesina Trench recalled the birth

of her first child in this way:

"I had not long attained my nineteenth year, when I became a mother. The delight of that day would counterbalance the miseries. When I looked in my boy's face, when I heard him breathe, when I felt the pressure of his little fingers. . . I looked on myself as one of the happiest of women" [54].

Evidence of parental love following birth abounds. Special care was taken in the selection of names, and baptisms and christenings were occasions for great joy and celebration. Parents delighted in playing with their children and were quick to recognize their special qualities. Katherine, Duchess of Buckingham, for one, found joy in the way her daughter clapped her little hands and took pleasure in "her pretty ways." She wrote in great detail to her husband, who was eager to read about the "particulars of our pretty moll" and took delight in the stories of his daughter's development. Another parent, Henry Newcombe, found pleasure in his baby's warm wet kisses [49,53].

**Parental Pride and Health Concerns.** Parental pride was also present in John Churchill's letter to his wife, Sarah:

"You cannot imagine how pleased I am with the children, for they having no body but their maid, they are so fond of me that when I am at home they will be always with me, kissing and hugging me. . . Miss is pulling me by the arm that she may write to her dear mamma, so that I will say no more" [54].

Parents took great interest at their children's passage through developmental stages, especially walking and talking. Thus, in the early seventeenth century, Nathaniel Bacon wrote to his wife, Jane:

"Our children are well; and little Nick [aged 3] hath cast his coat, and seemeth metamorphosed into a grasshopper. Jane [aged 18 months] is a very modest maiden, and is wholly taken up with travelling by herself which she performeth very handsomely and will be ready to run at your command when you return."

Later Bacon wrote again to his wife: "For little Jane in particular, I should have been glad to have understood some of her new language" [54].

Medical advice books typically exhibit great concern and solicitude for infants. Dr. Felix Wuertz, for example, compassionately described how babies cried to alert adults to their needs and told mothers to comfort infants frightened in their sleep by nurs-

ing and carrying them about [53,54]. An adult should be nearby at night in order to provide the necessary care. When an infant cried, mothers were told to check for wetness. Jane Sharp, another medical writer, advised mothers to change their infants frequently, lest "the piss and dung" harm their skin [53].

The health of their children loomed large as a parental concern, and the medical commonplace books kept by mothers show a deep and abiding interest in caring properly for the young. Teething, protruding navels, and discharges from eyes and ears occupied much of a mother's attention. Parents were particularly worried about teething, since it brought irritability and feverishness. In 1613, Anne Clifford, for example, expressed concern for her thirteen-month-old daughter, Margaret, in a letter to her mother.

"On the 29th of the last month I was sent for to Boilbroke in all haste for the poor child was extremely ill with her teeth, and so I carried Dr. Barker down with me, who gave the nurse and her some things he carried down with him, and I thank God she is so well amended as I could wish, or desire and begins to prattle and go" [31].

And seven months later she wrote: "We perceived the child had two great teeth come out so that in all she had now eighteen" [31].

Physicians, too, took teething seriously. Dr. Thomas Gibson, for one, counseled parents to rub the infant's gums with the brains of a rabbit, but others recommended massaging with an object such as smooth coral or jasper stone. If the teeth did not erupt in good time, some doctors encouraged the cutting of the gums (a practice which, however, could result in death) [53].

The lengths to which adults went to keep babies healthy and happy are especially evident in women's diaries and letters. In 1660, for example, Abigail Harley told her brother-in-law Colonel Edward Harley of the pains she had taken with his "sweet babe," dosing her with a drink made of maidenhair, violet leaves, and hysop, combined with syrup of violets and sugar candy.

"I sat up with her at night and finding that she slept very unquiet and had no stool I made a glisten and gave her next morning . . . I used to annoint her stomach with orange flower butter: yesterday morning we sent for the Dr finding her still grew worse. . . I have comfort in that I hope nothing has been neglected that I know to be good for her" [53].

Fathers, too, took part in the care of children, fretting when they were sick, consulting with medical authorities, and helping apply remedies. Witness, for example, the behavior of Claver Morris, who in early eighteenth-century England treated his ten-year-old son, William:

"My son being ill, and supposing it would come to the measles, I gave him a gentle purge just as I saw immediately some breaking out on the skin. The purge made him very sick, and worked with him three or four times. About five in the afternoon five spoonfuls of his cordial mixture were given" [54].

Though seriously ill, William survived.

**Loss and Mourning.** Predictably, a child's death occasioned grief, though, as mentioned earlier, the quality of parental mourning depended to some extent on the age of the child. In general, older children were mourned more than younger ones, though there were many exceptions. Thus, in 1660, Alice Thornton expressed her sadness at the loss of her infant son, William. William had taken ill in the morning, and by afternoon

"his face. . . was full of red round spots like the small-pox, being of the compass of a half penny, and all wheeled white over, these continuing in his face till night, and being in a slumber in my arms on my knee he would sweetly lift up his eyes to heaven and smile, as if the old saying was true in this sweet infant, that he saw angels in heaven . . . On Saturday morning he sweetly departed this life, to the great discomfort of his weak mother, whose only comfort is that the Lord, I hope, has received him to that place of rest in heaven where little children behold the face of their heavenly Father, to his God and my God" [54].

Sir Simonds D'Ewes also mourned the death in 1636 of his only son, Clopton, at the age of one year and nine months. Describing himself and his wife as "the saddest and most disconsolate parents that ever lost so tender and sweet an infant," he told how they sorrowed at the loss of this child on whom they

"had bestowed so much care and attention, and whose delicate favor and bright grey eye was so deeply imprinted in our hearts, far to surpass our grief for the decease of his three elder brothers, who, dying almost as soon as they were born, were not so endeared to us as this was" [53].

Nehemiah Wallington described his feelings at the death of his four-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, in these words:

"The grief for this child was so great that I forgot myself so much that I did offend God in it; for I broke



all my purposes, promises, and covenants with my God, for I was much distracted in my mind, and could not be comforted, although my friends speak comfortably to me" [54].

One of the most touching statements of parental grief was Ben Johnson's farewell to his 17-year-old son. Referring to him as "thou child of my right hand," Johnson accounted him "my best piece of poetry" [49].

While we lack extensive literary sources for the peasantry and laboring classes, their attitudes toward children can sometimes be inferred from legal records, folklore, and poetry. Barbara Hanawalt, in her masterly study of peasant families in medieval England, finds ample evidence of parental love and concern. Coroners' inquests, for example, show that one-third of the bodies of children were discovered by a family member. Of these, 43% of boys were found by fathers and 45% by mothers. As for girls, fathers discovered 33% of the bodies and mothers 59% [48]. Given the small geographic areas involved, which resulted in bodies being easily found, these figures suggest that, when children went missing, parents and other relatives quickly searched for them.

Taking aim at those historians of the modern family who characterize the relationship between parent and child as one of neglect and indifference, Hanawalt emphasizes the degree to which parents were willing to sacrifice for their children, even to the point of death. One particularly poignant example of such love comes from court records.

"On Friday last [August 9, 1298] John Trivaler and Alice his wife were in a shop where they abode in the parish of St. Mary late at night, ready to go to bed, and the said Alice fixed a lighted candle on the wall by the straw which lay in the said shop, so that the flame of the candle reach the straw before it was discovered and immediately the fire spread throughout the shop, so that the said John and Alice scarce escaped without, forgetting that they were leaving the child behind them. And immediately when the said Alice remembered her son was in the fire within, she leapt back into the shop to seek him, and immediately when she entered she was overcome by the greatness of the fire and died" [48].

The coroners' inquests also yield information as to how parents routinely treated offspring. Focusing on home accidents involving children, Hanawalt found that parents tried to avoid leaving unattended youngsters at home, since doing so both imperiled

the offspring and also brought community censure. Instead, mothers resorted to babysitters and neighbors. Sometimes, of course, parents had to leave their children unattended, especially during the peak of the agricultural season—from May to August. During this period, children were at the greatest risk, with almost half of the accidents involving children occurring at that time [48].

**Neglect and Abuse.** To be sure, not all parents behaved lovingly toward their children. Some, in fact, resorted to physical violence and abuse which, on occasion, resulted in a child's death [31,48]. However, we must keep in mind that contemporaries perceived such behavior as horrifying. Then, as now, individuals and communities at large expressed outrage and shock when children were physically abused. Indeed, parents who seriously harmed their offspring were often viewed as mad, for the simple reason that they engaged in behavior that was destructive of the most basic of affiliations—those familial bonds that determined an individual's identity. For example, a woman who committed infanticide was considered insane "because of the deed's irrational disregard for motherhood," having violated society's assumptions about how normal people act. Parental love was very much taken for granted, so much so that extreme departures were a sign of mental illness [55].

Pollock's study of cases in *The Times* of London confirms this judgment. In 385 cases of child neglect and sexual abuse, 19% of which were for incest, Pollock found that the defendant was judged guilty in the majority of cases and that reporters typically described offenders as "unnatural," "horrific," and "barbarous." In December of 1787, for example, *The Times* carried a story in which a guardian had cruelly abused his ward. Deemed sufficiently important to occupy a full page of the newspaper, the case involved a three year old who had been so badly treated that he was now physically deformed. When he appeared in court, "he drew tears from almost everybody," and the paper described the case as "one of the most savage transactions" ever heard by the court. In 1810 a mother was charged with "barbarously beating and ill-treating her own child," a four-year-old girl. When the mother left the building after the trial "it was with the greatest difficulty she could be protected from the fury of the women on the outside." Several years later a Mr. and Mrs. Cayzar were charged with child abuse

that was so "barbarous" and "inhuman" that *The Times* could not fully present the facts of the case for fear of upsetting its readers. When the parents were being taken to prison, the police could hardly protect them "from the fury of an immense crowd that had assembled" [31].

**Wet-Nursing.** Such official and popular reactions suggest that the young were viewed as particularly vulnerable and as deserving of special protection. That children merited uncommon consideration is also evident in parental concern for their nourishment, especially in infancy. Medieval and early modern nursing practices provide ample evidence of parental love across classes, demonstrating that mothers and fathers cared deeply about their offspring. As mentioned earlier, most scholars agree that the vast majority of women nursed their own infants, wet-nursing being a privilege affordable only by wealthier families. Certainly, physicians generally advised women to breast-feed, deeming it the best way to keep infants alive, since mothers were more concerned than others with their babies' health and welfare [53,56]. Moreover, breast-feeding had the advantage of imprinting the baby with the mother's character, principles, and values. As one contemporary wrote in the seventeenth century of the nursing Lady Essex, just as she had passed on her admirable character to her baby in the womb, so now did "she restamp her own good qualities upon her offspring" [53].

Typically, babies seem to have been deprived of their own mother's milk immediately after birth, existing medical knowledge holding that the infant was fed in the womb by the mother's blood, which after birth required time to be converted into milk and carried to her breasts. Accordingly, physicians advised mothers not to nurse their babies the first week or so, because their milk was initially "foul, turbid and curdy" [31,53]. Those who heeded this advice, of course, deprived their infants of colostrum, but out of ignorance, not malice.

As for feeding schedules, many advice manuals disdained strict timetables, suggesting instead that mothers feed their babies whenever they cried. Some writers, to be sure, advised against feeding on demand, warning that babies who were so treated were "almost continually sucking and never satisfied." Most, however, showed a compassionate attitude toward infants and encouraged mothers to gratify their babies' needs as soon as possible [53].

Contemporaries also noted that breast-feeding bonded mother and infant and promoted love between them. The relationship that resulted was well-described by a seventeenth-century English doctor in this way: "[The infant] plays a number of apish tricks about her, strokes her hair, nose and ears. . . . and as he groweth bigger, he finds other sports with her, which causeth that they bear one another such an affection, as cannot be expressed; and makes that they can never be parted" [31,53].

Mothers, for their part, claimed to enjoy nursing. Alice Thornton, for one, "was overjoyed to give my sweet Betty suck," and thanked God that with the birth of her eighth child she enjoyed "the blessing of the breasts to give suck, with much comfort in my infant" [31,53]. And in the late eighteenth century Elizabeth Wynne wrote three days after the birth of her son: "My little boy begins to suck very nicely and I am not at all troubled with my milk; he is a charming child and never cries" [54]. Some women who wanted to nurse were unable, as was the case with Frances Hatton who in the late seventeenth century expressed her great disappointment in a letter to her husband, Christopher:

"There were but two things in the world that I set my heart upon. One of the first was to suckle my poor child myself, but my sore nipples would not give me leave. I am so really discontented at it that I shall never be cheerful again but I am resolved if ever I should have another I must try again" [31].

Such women had to find wet nurses for their babies, as did mothers who had no desire to nurse their own. However, contrary to the judgments of many historians, these mothers were not necessarily guilty of indifference or cruelty. On the contrary, many parents took great care in selecting wet nurses. For example, when Bishop Patrick's wife collapsed and dropped her ten-day-old baby, her physicians ordered her to forgo suckling. This turn of events caused the mother and father "great distress," since they had troubling finding a suitable nurse, trying out three "before we could fix upon one that was to our comfort" [53]. That parents could indeed be picky was echoed by Dr. Percival Willughby. One father of his acquaintance was so concerned that his child be suckled by a proper nurse instead of "any pocky nurse in or about London," that he kept the baby from nursing at all until a suitable woman was found, by which time six days had passed and the infant had lost the knack [53].



The D'Ewes family also took great care in selecting a healthy, morally upright nurse, trying out several before finding the right one for their son [53]. When in late seventeenth-century England Abigail Harley learned that her daughter was being nursed in a home where a fever had broken out, she took pains to ensure that the sick child had been sent away and decided to leave her infant there, motivated by the fact that the woman

"is so good and careful a nurse that I think such another would hardly be found, her milk agreeing with it so it thrives mightily and is very well, not the least [s]peck all over it" [53]

A particularly interesting account of parental concern came from John Stedman, who in the mid-eighteenth century recorded his travails at the hands of wet nurses.

"Four different wet nurses were alternately turned out of doors on my account, and to the care of whom I had been entrusted, my poor mother being in too weak a condition to suckle me herself. The first of these bitches was turned off for having nearly suffocated me in bed; she having slept upon me till I was smothered and with skill and difficulty restored to life. The second had let me fall from her arms on the stones till my head was almost fractured, and I lay several hours in convulsions. The third carried me under a mouldered brick wall, which fell in a heap of rubbish just one moment we had passed by it, while the fourth proved to be a thief, and deprived me even of my very baby clothes. Thus was poor Johnny Stedman weaned some months before the usual time" [54]

In addition to choosing wet nurses with much care, parents often took pains to ensure that their infants were safely transported. Thus, in 1647, Mary Verney instructed her manservant, Will, as to the precautions he should take to convey her three-week-old son Ralph to the wet nurse's house:

"Good Will, upon Tuesday next I intend to send my child to St. Albans; the nurse is most extremely desirous to be at home, so . . . I would have you be there on Tuesday. . . . The nurse saith her husband hath a very easy going horse, and she thinks it will be best for him to carry the child before him upon pillows, because she cannot ride. . . and hold the child. When you come there, you will quickly find which will be the best way to carry it; pray provide for both ways, and bring a footman to go by it. If her husband doth carry the child, she cannot ride behind him, so you must provide a horse for her; my sister Mary goes down with them, so you must bring up a pillion to carry down behind you. . . . Pray do you see that they

take a great care of the child, and that they go softly, for the weather is very hot; if he carries the child before him it must be tied about him with a garter, and truly I think it will be a very good way, for the child will not endure to be long out of one's arms" [54].

Once children had been put out to wet nurses, parents by no means ignored them. Thus, letters, diaries, and autobiographies often tell how they provisioned their infants by sending food, candles, soap, and cradles to wet nurses [53]. Nor were parental visits unheard of. For example, in seventeenth-century England, Bulstrode Whitelocke's mother visited him at his nurse's home, where she found that the woman had been feeding her son porridge made from eels and bacon. Anger at the nurse and concern for Bulstrode's health led her to take him home [53,54].

Sometimes wealthier families brought wet nurses into their own homes instead of sending babies away. One woman advised her sister-in-law to import a nurse so that she could "see the ordering of it yourself and feed the nurse at your one trencher," thereby increasing the infant's chances of being well-nourished [53]. Such arrangements had the added benefit of enabling mothers to be close to their children, a circumstance that some obviously welcomed. Thus, an apprentice said of his master's wife that, even with a nurse at her disposal, she nevertheless insisted on indulging her children by playing with them [53].

Sometimes, too, when mothers sent their infants a distance, a nearby friend or relative watched over the baby. Thus, in 1638, Anne Temple retrieved her granddaughter because the nurse was ill with a fever. When she had recovered, the grandparents found themselves disinclined to send the infant back, "so pretty and loving a child" was she [53].

While wet-nursing was usually limited to the wealthier classes in pre-industrial Europe, the laboring classes sometimes put their babies out. In eighteenth-century France, for example, the families of artisans and tradesmen frequently hired wet nurses because of economic necessity. Times were sufficiently hard that families would not have survived unless mothers worked, which they could do only if they sent their babies to wet nurses during the first years of life [57].

**Infanticide and abandonment.** There is, then, a solid body of evidence depicting parents of all

classes as loving and caring for their children. There remains, however, the reputedly high incidence of infanticide and abandonment. What meaning are we to derive from these practices? The question is difficult to answer because the nature of record keeping was such that we cannot know for certain precisely at what rate parents *did* kill and abandon their children. With regard to infanticide in pre-industrial England, scholars have been unable to find concrete evidence that it was at all widespread. Hanawalt, for example, found only three cases of infanticide out of more than 4,000 homicide cases in the coroners' and jail delivery rolls [48,49]. Ecclesiastical records also indicate that, among the medieval English peasantry, infanticide was less common than many scholars have believed [40]. Keith Wrightson has drawn similar conclusions for the early modern period [58].

Indeed, given the nature of life in pre-industrial Western Europe, we would be surprised to find a disposition toward child killing. After all, humans constituted the primary source of power, and, in John Boswell's words, "it would require extraordinary circumstances—for example, a great oversupply of workers and a very high cost of food—to render children valueless to anyone in such a society" [59].

Still, child killing was so frequently mentioned in literary sources that its existence, if not its frequency, must be admitted. At question, however, is its meaning: did infanticide, at whatever level it occurred, reflect parental cruelty and lack of respect for human life, as has so often been claimed? Or does the explanation lie elsewhere? Many historians suggest that parents who kill their own were usually motivated by economic concerns. In pre-industrial society, the vast majority of people sometimes lived perilously close to subsistence. Such were the priorities of peasant and working-class families that children necessarily ranked low, being subordinated to the needs of the family unit. If a new mouth to feed threatened its survival, the newcomer had to go: the needs of the family and not the demands of childhood took precedence. Understandably, smothering or starving an unwanted baby struck parents as eminently preferable to ridding the family of an older child, whom the parents had grown to love and value [60].

Abandonment of children was an alternative to infanticide, and parents sometimes dropped chil-

dren off at hospices and orphanages. But, once again, it would be wrong to conclude that this behavior necessarily reflected parental indifference or cruelty. On the contrary, economic necessity often motivated parents to leave their offspring at institutions, though children were sometimes abandoned for other reasons, such as the desire for gender balance within a family. Whatever the parental motivation, abandoned children were usually saved by "the kindness of strangers," as Boswell's elegant study has shown [59].

Moreover, abandonment was often only a stopgap temporarily resorted to when families faced particularly difficult times. Thus, Cissy Fairchild concludes from her investigation of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Aix-en-Provence that children were regularly enrolled at orphanages because their families could not feed them. Moreover, once a child was enrolled, brothers and sisters were likely to follow. Sometimes a child would be placed in the orphanage during hard times and then retrieved when the economy improved. One girl, for example, entered an Aix charity in 1746, rejoined her family in 1747, went back to the orphanage, then back home, only to re-enter the institution in 1755. This time she stayed until 1760, when she left to marry [44]. Although such practices might not have produced happy, secure, well-adjusted offspring, historians are wrong to see them as a surrogate for infanticide or as evidence of parental cruelty. For poorer parents the situation was all too often one in which they *had* to choose between saving the child and saving the family. While the decision must often have been wrenching, the survival of the family unit mattered more than the needs of the individual child [60,61].

## CONCLUSION

In sum, a number of studies, based on a variety of sources and making systematic and rigorous use of first-hand accounts of family life, find remarkable continuity in the most basic of human relationships across time and geography. Although industrialization and other historical developments transformed much in traditional Western Europe, they did not radically alter the ways in which husbands and wives and parents and children felt about and behaved toward each other. Evidence is plentiful that, far from being unique to modern society, affective



and empathic relationships, as well as a respect for life, existed in pre-industrial Western Europe as well.

This is not to say that there are no differences between "us" and "them." On the contrary, with regard to family life, we in modern society sentimentalize children and childhood more than our forebears. Ours is, or so we are fond of saying, a more child-centered world. Further, our greater freedom to choose whom we marry allows us to take romantic considerations and sexual attraction into account, giving short shrift to material and utilitarian concerns. Moreover, expecting that marriage will make us happy, we can much more easily sever the conjugal bonds when our expectations are not met.

Nevertheless, as E.P. Thompson has noted, it is far from clear that "we are so much better, more companionate, more caring than our forefathers and mothers. . . that, in those days, hearts broke less painfully or lifted less with joy than they do now" [29]. Nor is it self-evident that the most vulnerable and powerless in society—then as now the women and children—are treated more humanely. On the contrary, the ever-present specter of family violence should give pause to those who extol the virtues of the modern family and trumpet its superiority to the pre-industrial counterpart.

If we assume that continuity rather than change characterizes family relationships in Western European history—and this is the ineluctable conclusion of the most reliable scholarship—how can the phenomenon be explained? How is it possible that the ways in which people think and feel about one another have remained relatively unaffected by the enormous historical changes that have swept across the Western world? Why have history and culture *not* mattered more decisively?

Where parent and child relationships are concerned, the answer may well have to do with the constants of biology. Living things are concerned with the reproduction and rearing of offspring. Infants and children have certain needs that must be met, and mothers and fathers respond accordingly. If they did not, the species would become extinct. This explanation is supported by many biologists, anthropologists, and students of animal behavior, who recognize the parental imperative to care for helpless infants and shepherd them safely into an independent and productive adulthood. Cultural and historical variations in child-rearing practices exist, but the biological need to reproduce and per-

petuate the species remains constant. Toward this end, parents will make extreme sacrifices to ensure the survival of their children, and, in the service of this goal, they will grow attached to their offspring [34,48,63]. In Goody's words, "attachment behavior, contributing as it does to species survival, thus emerges as one of the best forms of social adaptation to be found in the higher vertebrates" [62].

A review of the historical record of Western Europe, suggesting the constancy of affective familial bonds across time and geography, should give pause to those who would define humanity in terms of moral exclusion, whereby some societies are considered to value human life less than others. To the extent that we can discern how people in pre-industrial Western Europe experienced life, it appears that they did so in much the same way we do now, mourning the loss of a spouse and grieving at the death of a child. The lesson to be learned from the history of the family in Western European societies is that, to husbands and wives and mothers and fathers, life was precious in the meanest of circumstances.

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