

Quotes from A Victorian's Inheritance

(Some with images)

Why look at ancestors through a psychological lens?

Understanding psychological inheritance can illuminate our ancestors, but it can also give us the language to consider our own thoughts, beliefs, and behaviour. It can add to the narrative we construct in order to make sense of ourselves and our family.

Our psychological and biological characteristics are profoundly affected by the contexts in which we grow up, what happens to our grandparents reverberates through the ages to affect their descendants.

Our psychological inheritance need not define how we lead our lives. We *can* become more aware, live positively in our communities, thrive, and pass on a different legacy.

Mental Health

Psychiatrist Myrna Weissman's thirty-year study covering three generations concluded that 59 per cent of grandchildren who had two generations of major depression preceding them had either depression or an anxiety disorder.ⁱ

Emotions not explained by the individual's own experiences may stand for the intergenerational transmission of unresolved loss, conflict or trauma unwittingly passed on as a psychological inheritance.ⁱⁱ

The price paid by the children of traumatised parents can be confusing as they can struggle with debilitating depression, unexplained grief, and an increased vulnerability to stress, without understanding the cause.ⁱⁱⁱ

A parent who has unresolved loss can become dissociative and display 'a range of perplexing behaviours during parenting, including dissociative-like stilling, distorted and frightening facial and vocal expressions and poorly timed, rough or intrusive caregiving'.^{iv}

Studies repeatedly show that close relationships play a vital part in our personal happiness, health, and general wellbeing.^v

While there is a genetic connection to psychological states, genes *predict* behaviour; they do not determine it. The good news is that even without psychological intervention, positive development can continue throughout our lives, so early experiences need not dictate our destiny; there is always the hope that other factors in our present environments can steer us in a new direction.

Medical

In the second half of the nineteenth century, treatments at the Bristol Lunatic Asylum included the surgical removal of the clitoris and the labia and a hysterectomy in pauper inmates.^{vi}

During the Victorian period infectious diseases killed. The most dangerous illnesses in terms of the number of children who died following infection were tuberculosis, diarrhoea and dysentery, whooping cough, measles, scarlet fever, typhoid, diphtheria, and smallpox.^{vii}

The school logs detail a cycle of typhus and typhoid, cholera, smallpox, measles, whooping cough, and scarlet fever. These epidemics were as much part of the yearly calendar as Garland Day and the Peterborough Fair.

With few effective treatments, the schools were regularly closed in the hope of reducing the number of people subsequently infected. For example, 17 July 1893, six cases of scarlet fever. Winter brought diphtheria, alongside the usual colds. The school closing for five weeks was not uncommon.^{viii} **(See Photo Gallery for image 01 Example School closed epidemic 1913.)**

Bovine TB

In Victorian England drinking milk was akin to Russian roulette: although those with a compromised immune system were more vulnerable, it was impossible to know which children would become infected by bovine tuberculosis until it was too late. Shockingly, the British government did not impose a workable system through which bovine TB could be eradicated until the 1950s. It was a preventable tragedy that infected cows would pass the infection to generations of children well into the middle of the twentieth century. For each person who died of bovine TB, seven to ten people lived with the lifelong emotional scars and physical consequences of the infection in their bones and joints.^{ix}

Education

Working-class children up to the age of fourteen, were taught reading, writing and arithmetic competency, alongside acceptance of the teacher's authority and the need for punctuality and conformity.

Education was seen as little more than preparation for future adult work and as a means of teaching the required social character – habits of regularity, 'self-discipline', obedience, and trained effort.^x

Children were examined according to one of six 'standards' in reading, writing and arithmetic. Teachers were expected to get as many children through the exams as possible and, as the educationalist and historian Brian Simon said, 'the most effective way of doing this, especially with very large classes, was by rote learning and drilling'.^{xi}

An example of Standard III:

Compound Subtraction

£	s.	d.
20,710	14	2½
4,983	17	3¾
<hr/>		
15,726	16	7¾

When you have finished each sum add the number you have subtracted and the remainder together; if your sum is right; the total of these two is the top line of the sum. It is not necessary to do this with pen or pencil; just run it over in your mind, noticing whether it is right or not as you go along.^{xii}

In 1892 materials costing £2-1s-5d [£328] were bought by the school. The work produced was sold to support it. The girls sold items to the value of £17-10s-5d [£2,300], while the efforts of the infant girls raised a further £3-9s-5d [£520]. The 'sales-of-work' raised enough to pay Miss Annie Crabb, head teacher of the infant and girls' school, her annual salary of £17-10s [£2,293].^{xiii}

All children attending school were expected to be able to write letters in a clear, legible hand by the time they left.^{xiv}

Social History

Many enterprising boys also shovelled horse manure from the roads, to enrich the earth used for food production or to sell. Children also collected snails, sow thistle, dandelion and choice grass to supplement the barley meal and pot-liquor made of boiled potato peelings and vegetable trimmings to be fed to their pig.

Victorian children knew they were contributing something significant to their home life. They were not talking or playing a game *about* living; they were *experiencing* it.

Working-class Victorian women made their own health remedies, cleaning products and alcoholic drinks to consume at home. **(See Photo Gallery 02 Parker Family Recipe for Furniture polish)**

Before the National Insurance Act of 1911 and the establishment of the welfare state in 1945, friendly societies insured workers against loss of work through bad weather, ill health, accident, or death. The Foresters were such a society, providing sickness, travelling and funeral benefits. Members' widows and orphans were provided for if the wage earner had paid in. In this way, those who could afford it did their utmost to keep their families out of the workhouse should they, as breadwinner, become incapacitated or die.^{xv} **(See Photo Gallery 03 Ancient Order of Foresters sashes)**

In 1898 the mayor of Peterborough, at a meeting to float a new building society, extolled the virtues of financial planning to all working men:

[Some men] persistently fool their money away without having first endeavoured to make some provision for the future... He urged every young working man to religiously put something by before he gratified every little whim and fancy.^{xvi}

Marriage was more of a practical affair than a romantic one. A working-class couple needed to work hard as a team to bring in enough of an income, raise children and manage household affairs.

In the absence of a universal state pension, it was not unusual for children to support their parents financially. Even if the parent received parish relief, it was customary to recoup as much of this as possible from adult working children.

Reading novels was apparently a suitable pursuit for women, 'and for many cribbed, cabined, and confined as their lives are, with so little outlet for their emotions, they are a wholesome necessity'.^{xvii}

Music and Dance

Whatever their age or taste in music, people knew the same songs and hymns. 'We were surrounded by music. All generations sang everywhere – out walking, with friends, in the taproom, in the street and at the kitchen sink. We danced whenever and wherever we could, indoors and out, on carpet, stone kitchen floors, and wooden platforms laid to protect the grass. It's just what everyone did'.

Skating

Although speed-skating was practised in other parts of the country, fenmen, with their unique style and combination of stamina and speed, were the acknowledged masters. [Lancashire](#) sent three of their top skaters to the Swavesey match in January 1879.^{xviii} On the day, George 'Fish' Smart was found to be the 'best man'. His reward was a badge, a sash, and a cash prize. To stop the champion binge drinking, the committee decided to hand the money over in instalments. **(See Photo Gallery 04 English speed skates, c. 1890. Photograph by the Marsden Brothers from the Virtual Ice Skates Museum)**

Cycling

The *Worcester Journal* of 1896 warned of the dangers of cycling:

Bicycles are responsible for many things in our social life. A doctor has [described] the bicycle face. Anxious, weary worn, haggard looks are due to the bicycle. So much anxiety is developed in learning to ride, and afterwards in avoiding accidents that it...affects the muscles of the face, and the care worn expression is retained during the other hours of life. At least the doctor – an M.D. London – says so, and he ought to know.^{xix}

Alcoholism

'Alcohol consumption was a waste of money, a waste of potential labour, and a waste of the maternal gifts that a woman 'naturally' possessed. The body of the female alcoholic was, then, by definition, wasted'.^{xx}

Alcoholism, particularly in women, was at times thought of and treated as a form of madness or moral insanity, defined as ‘deviance from socially accepted behaviour’.^{xxi}

Epigenetics and DNA

Early-life environmental conditions can cause epigenetic changes in humans that persist throughout life’ leading to increased risk of schizophrenia, coronary heart disease, obesity, and Type 2 diabetes.^{xxii}

Professor of Psychology David Moore adds that DNA does not solely dictate our fate, ‘what we do *matters*, and that the environments we occupy profoundly influence how we end up’.^{xxiii}

Researchers from the University of Zurich and ETH Zurich have discovered that ‘Not only trauma but also the reversal of trauma is inherited’.^{xxiv}

ⁱ Costello, V. (2012). *A Lethal Inheritance*. New York: Prometheus Books, p. 149; Weissman, M. (2009). ‘Translating intergenerational research on depression into clinical practice’. *JAMA*, 302(24), p. 2695.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kirmayer, L., Brass, G. and Tait, C. (2000). The Mental Health of Aboriginal Peoples: Transformations of Identity and Community. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 45(7), pp. 607–616.

^{iv} Fearon, P. (2004). Comments on Turton et al: On the complexities of trauma, loss and the intergenerational transmission of disorganized relationships. *Attachment & Human Development*, 6(3), pp. 255-261; Diamond, D. and Blatt, S. (2017). *Attachment Research and Psychoanalysis: Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 19.4. Routledge, p. 518.

^v Mineo, L. (2017). *Over nearly 80 years, Harvard study has been showing how to live a healthy and happy life*. Harvard Gazette. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life/> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2019].; Diener, E., Seligman, M., Choi, H. and Oishi, S. (2018). Happiest People Revisited. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 13(2), pp. 176–184

^{vi} Bushel, C. (2013). *The hysteria surrounding Hysteria: Moral management and the treatment of*. Undergraduate. University of Bristol, p. 18.

^{vii} Anderson, I. (1993). *The decline of mortality in the nineteenth century: with special reference to three English towns*. MA. University of Durham, p. 69.

^{viii} Thorney Infant School Log Book, 25 October – 6 December 1912, p. 181.

^{ix} Foot, S. (2011). *The Alexandra Hospital for Children with Hip Disease*.

^x Gillard, D. (2018). *The History of Education in England – Introduction, Contents, Preface*. Educationengland.org.uk. <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/history/> [Accessed December 2019]

^{xi} Simon, B. (1965). *Education and the Labour Movement 1870–1920*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, p. 116.

^{xii} *Blackie’s Comprehensive Arithmetics. Standard III*. (1893). London: Blackie & Son Limited, 49 Old Bailey. E.C., p. 26. (Housed at the Blackie & Son Archive, University of Glasgow Library, Research Annexe.)

^{xiii} Thorney School Board Cash Book, 1875 – 1899, 1892, p. 103.

^{xiv} *Thorney Abbey Girls Logbook 1863–1895*, C/ES155A/5, 20 March 1894, p. 495.

^{xv} ‘The object of Forestry is to unite the virtuous and good in all sects and denominations of man in the sacred bonds of brotherhood so that while wandering through the Forest of this World they may render mutual aid and assistance to each other’.

Appears under heading ‘Court No.3095 Banner – Reverse’ The Foresters Heritage Trust (2018). ‘The Foresters Heritage Trust: the history of the Foresters Friendly Society’. <http://www.aoforestersheritage.com/Banners.html> [Accessed December 2019].

^{xvi} ‘The application of the principle of thrift’, from a speech by the mayor of Peterborough, *Peterborough Advertiser*, 8 January 1898, p. 6, column 1.

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} G. Willcocks and the Boydells.

^{xix} *Worcester Journal*, Saturday 22 August 1896, p.5, column 4.

^{xx} Skelly, J. (2014). *Addiction and British visual culture, 1751–1919*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, p. 28.

^{xxi} Showalter, E. (1987). *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980*. Virago Female, p. 29.

^{xxii} Heijmans, B., Tobi, E., Stein, A., Putter, H., Blauw, G., Susser, E., Slagboom, P. and Lumey, L. (2008). Persistent epigenetic differences associated with prenatal exposure to famine in humans. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 105(44), pp. 17046–17049; Lavebratt, C., Almgren, M. and Ekström, T. (2011). Epigenetic regulation in obesity. *International Journal of Obesity*, 36(6), pp. 757–765; Remely, M., de la Garza, A., Magnet, U., Aumueller, E. and Haslberger, A. (2015). Obesity: epigenetic regulation – recent observations. *Biomolecular Concepts*, 6(3).

^{xxiii} Escher, J. (2015). *David Moore Q&A*. Germline Exposures. <http://www.germlineexposures.org/david-moore-qa.html> [Accessed January 2020].

^{xxiv} ScienceDaily. (2016). *Not only trauma but also the reversal of trauma is inherited*.

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/06/160623120307.htm> [Accessed January 2020]. Further information: Moore, D. (2017). *The Developing Genome: An Introduction to Behavioral Epigenetics*. 1st edition. Oxford University Press.