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The Family Life of Peter and Ruth Townsend: Social Science and Methods in 1950s and Early 1960s Britain

Abstract

Peter Townsend (1928–2009) was one of the most important British social scientists of the twentieth century, best known for pioneering and innovative research on poverty, as well as his political campaigning, most notably for the Child Poverty Action Group. This article returns to Townsend's influential work on ageing, for which he first became widely known, during the 1950s and early 1960s. It does so to recover the ways in which his research, first in Bethnal Green at the Institute of Community Studies (ICS), and then at the London School of Economics, as well as the professional and political networks he built during this period, were rooted in and shaped by his home life in Hampstead. As will be shown, the most important figure in the interconnecting spheres of Townsend's career was his wife, Ruth (1927–2011), who not only was central to the construction of a way of life in which the boundaries between research, the domestic sphere, and politics were often so blurred as to be non-existent, but also made significant and underappreciated contributions to her husband's research.

In mid-January 1959, a researcher was talking with the warden of Luxborough Lodge, the largest old people's home in Britain, on Marylebone Road in Westminster, central London. The researcher was there to thank the warden for their cooperation over the course of the previous three days, when they and three colleagues had interviewed staff and a sample of the home's more than 1,200 residents as part of a survey of the UK's system of residential care for the old. 'I really thought in 1948', when the Labour government had passed the National Assistance Act, promising to abolish large residential institutions and replace them with small homes for 25–30 people, 'that we would begin to see these

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terrible places dwindling', the warden remarked of the former workhouse. 'But it appears that the demand is even greater for vacancies in these Homes', the warden remarked. 'I really don't know what can be done with them. Perhaps the outcome of your book will help to show us'. 'With this we parted', the researcher reported; 'me with a certain determination, he with his disillusionment. A man who had the right ideals in the back of his mind but lacked the courage of his convictions'.[1] The warden would have to wait more than three years to lay eyes on Peter Townsend's *The Last Refuge* (1962), which would offer a highly critical analysis of the system Luxborough Lodge was a part of. Yet the researcher the warden had expressed his resignation to that day wasn't Peter Townsend, it was his wife, Ruth.

Townsend (1928–2009) was one of the most important British social scientists of the twentieth century. Although he is best known for pioneering and innovative research on poverty, most notably *The Poor and the Poorest*, a pivotal moment in the 'rediscovery of poverty' in 1960s Britain, which was co-written with his friend and collaborator Brian Abel-Smith, he published influential work on a wide range of topics, including old age, disability, and human rights.[2] Moreover, he was a regular presence in the public sphere, including the press, radio, and television, not least as a campaigner for the Child Poverty Action Group, which he helped found in 1965.[3] Thanks to scholarship on the history of social policy, in particular the approach to it that emerged from the London School of Economics during the post-war period, we know a significant amount about the content, reception, and influence of Townsend's work, as well as his well-known associates.[4] We know much less, however, about the role played by individuals outside his immediate professional circles in the production of that work—an issue that is important to our understand of not

[1] Ruth Townsend, 'Matron of Luxborough Lodge. 19th Jan., 1959', Townsend Papers, Box 36, File HO6, p. 4.

[2] Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend, *The Poor and the Poorest: A New Analysis of the Ministry of Labour's Family Expenditure Surveys of 1953-54 and 1960* (London, 1965). On the 'rediscovery of poverty', see: Keith G. Banting, *Poverty, Politics, and Policy: Britain in the 1960s* (London, 1979); Ian Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain, 1900-1965* (Basingstoke, 2003), ch. 6; Nicholas Timmins, *The Five Giants: A Biography of the Welfare State. Rev. & Updated Edn* (London, 2001), 254–8.

[3] On the history of the Child Poverty Action Group, see Pat Thane and Ruth Davidson, *The Child Poverty Action Group, 1965-2015* (London, 2016); Maria Lesley Meyer-Kelly, 'The Child Poverty Action Group, 1965-1974: The Origins and Effectiveness of a Single Issue Pressure Group', PhD Thesis, University of Bristol, 2001.

[4] Sally Sheard, *The Passionate Economist: How Brian Abel-Smith Shaped Global Health and Social Welfare* (Bristol, 2014); John Stewart, *Richard Titmuss: A Commitment to Welfare* (Bristol, 2020). For overviews and analysis of social policy see, among others, Banting, *Poverty, Politics and Policy* and Peter Sloman, *Transfer State: The Idea of a Guaranteed Income and the Politics of Redistribution in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2019). For more on Townsend's life and career see Howard Glennerster, 'Peter Brereton Townsend, 1928–2009', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 172 (2019), 303–21.

only Townsend as an individual but also social science in Britain during an era when it was undergoing expansion and profound change.[5]

As this article will show, one of the most important but overlooked figures when it comes to understanding Peter Townsend's work during the first phase of his career, when he rose to national prominence as both an academic expert on poverty and a political campaigner, was Ruth Townsend (1927–2011), his wife. Ruth's importance was twofold. On the one hand, she was integral to the construction of a specific kind of family life in Hampstead, North London, where the boundaries between research, the domestic sphere, and politics were so blurred as to be often non-existent. This family life was a central feature of the context of production for Peter's published work, not only enabling Peter's well-known activities but also becoming a site of social scientific practice itself. On the other hand, Ruth's involvement was not limited to the home. As we will see, she made significant contributions to Peter's work through her unpaid labour and insights, which, in the process, helped to shape methods and conclusions.

We will explore these issues by returning to Townsend's work on social gerontology, the field in which he first became widely known, during the 1950s and early 1960s, which we will view through a range of different sources, including the surviving records of his two major surveys of old age, *The Family Life of Old People* (1957) and *The Last Refuge* (1962). Sociologists and historians of modern Britain have, of course, shown great enthusiasm during the past decade for reanalysing social survey data from the post-war era, which they have approached, very broadly speaking, with two different sets of intentions. The first has involved using records such as interview notes as primary sources that enable fresh insight into issues such as class and gender.[6] The other has seen scholars analyse the methods that researchers used in those studies—something that has led to criticism of the results those methods produced and, by extension, ideas that were central to politics and culture in post-war Britain.[7] Both of these approaches have been criticized, notably by social

[5] Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010); A. H. Halsey, *A History of Sociology in Britain: Science, Literature, and Society* (Oxford, 2004).

[6] See e.g. Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?: The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford, 2019); Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910-2010* (London, 2014); Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, 'Vernacular Discourses Of Gender Equality In The Post-War British Working Class', *Past & Present*, 254 (2022), 277–313; David Cowan, '"Modern" Parenting and the Uses of Childcare Advice in Post-War England', *Social History*, 43 (2018), 332–55.

[7] See e.g. Savage's pathbreaking work, including *Identities and Social Change* and 'Working-Class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', *Sociology*, 39 (2005), 929–46; Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?*, especially pp. 124–5, and 'Inventing the "Traditional Working Class": A Re-Analysis of Interview Notes from Young and Willmott's Family and Kinship in East London', *The Historical Journal*, 59 (2016), 567–93.

scientists who have taken issue with the entire rationale for returning to the original survey records.[8]

This article does not return to Townsend's two major surveys of old age to look again at the people who were interviewed—something Charlotte Greenhalgh has done effectively in her re-analysis of his notes and records as part of a bigger project on ageing in twentieth-century Britain.[9] Instead, and by utilising a range of other sources, including an unpublished diary Townsend kept periodically during the period, as well as insights from historians such as Mathew Thomson, David Cowan, and Helen McCarthy, we will throw light on the Townsends' domestic life, showing how social science was not something that was practiced elsewhere but was central to their everyday existence. In the process, we will come to a better understanding of a number of issues. One is how Ruth came to work as an unpaid interviewer for *The Last Refuge*. Another is how her experiences reflect Ann Oakley's arguments—developed in her study of Charlotte Shaw, Mary Booth, Jeanette Tawney, and Janet Beveridge, the mostly overlooked wives of famous social scientists—about the ways in which marriage has contributed to the marginalisation of such work.[10] A third is how the recovery of this work can transform our understanding of well-known men such as Peter Townsend: both their thought and the worlds they inhabited, as recent scholarship on female thinkers has shown.[11] To appreciate these points, though, we must first consider how Peter Townsend came to work on old age during the mid-1950s.

[8] John Goldthorpe, 'Historians' Uses of Archived Material from Sociological Research: A Response to the Commentaries on My Paper', *Twentieth Century British History* 33 (2022), 394–411. See also Ray Pahl's somewhat mixed review of *Identities and Social Change*, which included the assessment that 'One is left with the question of who will read this book?': 'Book Review: Identities and Social Change since 1940: The Politics of Method', *The Sociological Review*, 59 (2011), 165–76. For more on the debate about these issues, see the other articles on the relationship between history and sociology in the recent special issue of *Twentieth Century British History*: Roslyn Dubler, 'The Sociologist and the Subject: Two Historiographies of Post-War Social Science', *Twentieth Century British History* 33 (2022), 412–15; Mike Savage, 'History and Sociology: A Twenty-First Century Rapprochement?', *Twentieth Century British History*, 33 (2022), 416–31; Lise Butler, 'The Social Scientific Turn in Modern British History', *Twentieth Century British History*, 33 (2022), 44–50; Jon Lawrence, 'On Historians' Re-Use of Social-Science Archives', *Twentieth Century British History* 33 (2022), 432–44; John Goldthorpe, 'Historians' Uses of Archived Material from Sociological Research: Some Observations with Reference to the Affluent Worker Study', *Twentieth Century British History*, 33 (2022), 451–9.

[9] Charlotte Greenhalgh, *Aging in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oakland, 2018), chs 2 and 3.

[10] Ann Oakley, *Forgotten Wives: How Women Get Written Out of History* (Bristol, 2021).

[11] For a recent example of such efforts see Patricia Owens et al. (eds), *Women's International Thought: Towards a New Canon* (Cambridge, 2022).

Old Age and Bethnal Green

Peter Townsend was born in Middlesbrough but raised in London from the age of four, first in Pimlico then Belsize Park, after his mother, an actress and music hall singer, had separated from Peter's father and needed help from her parents with childcare. An academic high achiever in his youth, Peter went on to study at the University of Cambridge and the Free University in West Berlin in late 1951 and early 1952, where he had held a visiting studentship and been accompanied by his wife Ruth, whom he had married in 1949. On their return to the UK, several months earlier than planned, when Ruth confirmed she was pregnant, Peter had taken a job as a researcher with Political and Economic Planning (PEP), a think tank based on Queen Anne's Gate, not far from St James' Park in central London. After a brief period commuting to London from Cambridge, the Townsends moved to a rented one-bedroom flat in Westminster, from which Peter was able to enjoy the hustle and bustle of politics and its countless networking opportunities.[12]

Founded in 1931 and rooted in an interwar critique of the British state as outdated and amateurish, PEP employed groups of researchers dedicated to different problems. These groups produced reports, known as broadsheets, which PEP endeavoured to get under the noses of the politicians, businessmen, industrialists, and intellectuals they believed would be receptive to their ideas and put them into practice.[13] Townsend worked in the social policy group, which was focused on two different questions. The first was whether the new social services and reformed system of national insurance, which had been launched in 1948 and would soon be known collectively as the 'welfare state', were an improvement on what had come before.[14] The second—an issue that became more prominent as Conservative MPs raised concerns about growing costs—was whether the new services represented good value for money.

Townsend took on this agenda in both its broadest and more focused senses. He produced wide-ranging analyses of funding for the social services and more narrow investigations of the education system, which was struggling under the weight of new expectations and resourcing that fell

[12] In some cases, these networking opportunities led to what would turn out to be lifelong friendships, such as with Brian Abel-Smith, who was working nearby for the National Institute of Economic and Social Research in a two-year post that was tied to the Guillebaud Committee's investigation of NHS costs. *Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Cost of the National Health Service*, cmd 9663 (London, 1956).

[13] For more on PEP during the middle decades of the twentieth century see Richard Cockett, *Thinking the Unthinkable: Think-Tanks and the Economic Counter-Revolution 1931-1983* (London, 1995); John Pinder, ed., *Fifty Years of Political and Economic Planning: Looking Forward, 1931-81* (London, 1981).

[14] On the term 'welfare state' during this period, see David Garland, 'The Emergence of the Idea of "the Welfare State" in British Political Discourse', *History of the Human Sciences*, 35 (2022), 132–57.

far short of its needs.[15] He also pursued a series of self-designed studies of what would turn out to be a life-long interest in the definition and measurement of poverty. These studies began with a demolition of Seebohm Rowntree's widely-cited, though limited, third survey of York, which had concluded that the new social services had essentially eliminated the kind of absolute poverty that had blighted Britain before the Second World War.[16]

Townsend's work for PEP attracted attention from the likes of Alexander Carr-Saunders, Richard Titmuss, and David Glass, social scientists associated with PEP who were also instrumental in putting sociology on a new footing in Britain in the early 1950s.[17] But Townsend had quickly grown frustrated with life at PEP. While PEP was hierarchical, something that was illustrated by researchers like himself working in shabby offices several floors away from 'The Club', a large lounge where PEP's directors entertained guests, it could also be conservative and formulaic. Townsend wanted to experiment with new methods such as interviewing, which, as Mike Savage has shown, was being used in new ways by social researchers after the Second World War.[18] In 1952, for instance, Townsend had travelled to Lancashire to carry out an informal programme of conversations with workers who had been made unemployed during the recession in the cotton industry.[19] PEP were not persuaded by these innovations, though, and insisted he stick to the organization's tried and tested approach of scrutinizing government policy and statistics.

Townsend was therefore enthused when Michael Young, another former PEP employee who had grown disillusioned with the organization, suggested he join his new project: the Institute of Community Studies (ICS), based in Bethnal Green in East London. Young, who had enrolled for a PhD at the LSE, and, following a short-term post at the Tavistock Institute, tried and failed to secure a university lectureship, was highly

[15] Peter Townsend, 'Cost of the Social Services, 1938-52', *Planning*, 354 (1953); 'After the Deluge: Prospect for Mid-1960s', *Times Educational Supplement*, 44 (29 January 1954), 97; 'Prospect from Five to Ten. I—National Scene', *Times Educational Supplement*, 43 (6 March 1953), 205; 'Prospect from Five to Ten. II—Local Detail', *Times Educational Supplement*, 43 (13 March 1953), 229; 'Prospect from Five to Ten. III—Easing the Burden', *Times Educational Supplement*, 43 (20 March 1953), 250; 'Schools Under Pressure I: The Shortage of Teachers', *Planning*, 358 (1953); 'Schools Under Pressure II: Buildings and Costs', *Planning*, 359 (1953).

[16] Peter Townsend, 'Poverty: Ten Years After Beveridge', *Planning*, 344 (1952), 21–40; 'Measuring Poverty', *British Journal of Sociology*, 5 (1954), 130–37; B. Seebohm Rowntree and G. R Lavers, *Poverty and the Welfare State: A Third Social Survey of York Dealing Only with Economic Questions* (London, 1951).

[17] Townsend's connections to the new British Sociological Association via PEP led to him presenting his research on poverty at the BSA's first invitation-only conference in March 1953. Townsend, 'Measuring Poverty'.

[18] Savage, *Identities and Social Change*.

[19] Peter Townsend, 'Social Security and Unemployment in Lancashire', *Planning*, 349 (1952).

critical of much academic social science, which he thought was divorced from the reality of people's day to day lives. 'Hark[ing] back to an earlier tradition', including the likes of Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree, and Beatrice Webb, 'which is, you might say, the tradition of the iconoclastic amateur', Young created the ICS as an alternative approach to social research.[20]

A particular method, the in-depth interview, was central to Young's plans in Bethnal Green. To be sure, earlier generations of researchers had spoken to people as part of their work. Yet when the likes of Booth, Rowntree, and their assistants had done so, they had been interested primarily in experts or individuals in positions of authority, such as the school board visitors whom Booth had relied on for windows into working-class life. Drawing on approaches that social anthropologists had used to study non-Western societies, Young wanted to talk to 'ordinary people' in a variety of settings, including their own homes. As Savage has argued, these convictions put Young on the cutting edge of social research in post-war Britain, when there was a sharp shift towards the idea that 'ordinary people'—a nebulous but increasingly pervasive category that has been explored by Claire Langhamer—could be the source of important and reflective insights into their own lives and the social structures that shaped them.[21]

The work that emerged from the ICS in the late 1950s would famously claim to have discovered an overlooked kinship system among working-class families in East London. According to Jon Lawrence, though, kinship was not so much stumbled upon in studies such as *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), co-written by Young and Peter Wilmott, as identified in advance.[22] Indeed, as Lise Butler has shown in her comprehensive study of Michael Young and the ICS, the intellectual resources that shaped the institute's agenda always made it likely that kinship would feature prominently. These resources included the functionalism that dominated mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American sociology, work by the LSE-based anthropologist Raymond Firth, who was conducting seemingly—though, according to Lawrence superficially—similar work a short distance away in Bermondsey, and the psychologist John Bowlby's arguments about the importance of maternal love in child development, which would become increasingly influential in middle-class circles

[20] Michael Young, 'Aims of Social Studies. No. 2', 8th January 1956, Townsend Collection, University of Essex, Box 60, File B, 2.

[21] Savage, *Identities and Social Change*, esp. ch. 7; Claire Langhamer, '"Who the Hell are Ordinary People?" Ordinariness as a Category of Historical Analysis', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (2018), 175–95. On the interview as a research tool in post-war social research and sociology in particular see M. Savage, 'Elizabeth Bott and the Formation of Modern British Sociology', *The Sociological Review*, 56 (2008), 579–605.

[22] Jon Lawrence, 'Inventing', 570; *Me, Me, Me*, ch. 2.

during the mid-1950s.[23] Young was clear with all the researchers he hired that they were expected to write sympathetic accounts of working-class life, described on its own terms, using these reference points.[24]

After a series of discussions in the autumn of 1952, Young and Townsend agreed that, once funding had been secured, Townsend would move to the institute to work on old age, specifically the extent to which people of retirement age's needs were being met by relatives and social services. Politicians and social researchers had been increasingly interested in old age since the turn of the century. While demographic trends had seen the proportion of males over sixty-five and females over sixty rise from 6.2 per cent of the population in 1901 to 13.5 per cent fifty years later, interrelated developments in what we would now call social policy, most notably the introduction of a state pension but also an expanding market for private provision, had produced significant changes.[25] Britain had created a large class of people, 'the retired', who did not participate in the labour market—or were, at least, understood to be involved in it to a negligible degree—and were dependent on other sources for their income, not least younger workers, whose contributions funded state pensions.[26] This rapidly growing group was a significant concern at the Treasury, where there were worries about the long-term affordability of the universal state pension. Researchers across the social and biomedical sciences were interested in a broad range of questions, though: in what ways were the old different from the young and middle aged? Did they have different ideas and attitudes? Were their health needs different? What were the implications of an ageing workforce?[27]

[23] Butler, *Michael Young*, ch. 3. On the relationship between Young and Firth's studies see Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me*, ch. 2.

[24] The positive views of traditional family life, particularly working-class family life, advanced by ICS researchers in this period would be the subject of much criticism from sociologists during the 1960s, who thought they overlooked the family's role as a conservative and constraining force, especially for women. See e.g.: Richard Wollheim, *Socialism and Culture* (London, 1961), 13; Juliet Mitchell, 'Women: The Longest Revolution', New Left Review, First Series, 40 (1966): 11–37.; Jennifer Platt, *Social Research in Bethnal Green: An Evaluation of the Work of the Institute of Community Studies* (London, 1971). For his part, Townsend would later reflect that he had failed to acknowledge the difficulties these critics identified. Townsend in Paul Thompson, 'Interview with Peter Townsend' in *Pioneers of Social Research, 1996-2018* (4th edn, 2019), Para. 155, <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?cid=q-d8246a66-7bc4-43d6-a708-9e1e8c59f202> accessed 26 May 2023.

[25] Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford, 2000), 333. For more on the concerns policy makers had about the implications of demographic developments, including a growing population of old people, in post-war Britain, see Glen O'Hara, '"We Are Faced Everywhere with a Growing Population": Demographic Change and the British State, 1955–64', *Twentieth Century British History*, 15 (2004), 243–66.

[26] Leslie Hannah, *Inventing Retirement: The Development of Occupational Pensions in Britain* (Cambridge, 1986); John Macnicol, *The Politics of Retirement in Britain, 1878-1948* (Cambridge, 1998).

[27] For a useful summary see Greenhalgh, *Aging in Twentieth-Century Britain*, introduction; Thane, *Old Age*, chs 17–23.

Following a small pilot exercise in the autumn of 1953, Young and Townsend approached potential funders with a proposal, written by Townsend, eventually securing a three-year grant from the Nuffield Foundation, which allowed work to start in March 1954. Townsend's first few weeks at the institute were a process of orientation to both new surroundings and expectations. Bethnal Green, with its 'stalls, jellied eels, boiled sweets, bootlaces in packets, fish and chip shops, cragy ironmongers, second-hand clothing shops, old women in thin coats shiny with age, stolid, resigned men & women waiting in doctor's surgeries which look like laundry shops', turned out to be very much to his liking.[28] While taking this all in, he was also put through an intensive few weeks of induction seminars, designed to immerse him in the ideas and methods he was expected to put into practice. Edward Shils, the American sociologist who held chairs at the LSE and the University of Chicago and sat on ICS' advisory board, paid a visit. 'He has been closely connected with the founding of this Institute', Townsend wrote in his diary, and he 'explained things lucidly, tended to talk too much, but the range of his ideas and reading made one want to whistle through parted lips'.[29] More sessions followed—'too much work—too many meetings', Townsend complained, with 'Titmuss from L.S.E., Louis Moss (Head of the Social Survey), a woman anthropologist & one or two others have occasionally been at these meetings on "Social Class", "Family & Social Structure", "Housing & Behaviour in Bethnal Green" (a rousing talk by Peterson, Warden of University House . . .), and so on'.[30]

Having finished this training, Townsend headed out into Bethnal Green, where, over the course of the following two years, he would conduct a programme of fieldwork, including interviews with more than 200 people, which would eventually lead to the publication of a report entitled *The Family Life of Old People* (1957). However, the contents of that report were shaped by much more than Young's ideas about what ICS researchers should be doing or what Townsend had learned during this induction at the institute.

Mansfield Place

In late 1952, when Ruth was pregnant again, the Townsends knew they needed more space than was available in their one-bedroom flat in Westminster. 'For months we had searched everywhere for a house, contemplating all sorts of preposterous schemes of paying off an exorbitant mortgage', Peter wrote in his diary in the summer of 1953. But, 'by chance', the final six years of the leasehold on a four-room end-of-terrace

[28] Townsend, '9th March 1954', Diary, 1953-80, Alan Walker's Private Collection, 32.
[29] Townsend, '9th March 1954', Diary, 33.
[30] Townsend, '15th March 1954', Diary, 33.

workers' cottage on Mansfield Place, in Hampstead, north London, where both Ruth and Peter had been brought up and Ruth's mother still lived, had become available. With the baby due in May, Peter 'spent every evening and weekend for two months' in the house, 'painting over hideous wallpapers and chocolate-painted doors and windows, and laying a rubber floor in the kitchen and installing fixed tables and draining boards covered with formica'.[31]

By the end of the twentieth century, Hampstead would be a byword for hyper gentrification, having become home to the largest concentration of millionaires in the British capital. In the mid-1950s, however, things were somewhat different. To be sure, Hampstead had always had an affluent population, including middle-class politicians, artists, and intellectuals, such as Hugh Gaitskell, who lived in the small and highly-desirable area that was satirized in the national press as being home to the 'Frognal Set'.[32] But 'gentrification', as Ruth Glass would famously label it in *London: Aspects of Change* (1964), was still underway in the 1950s, meaning it was not until the 1960s that the area came to be considered expensive, leading those who might previously have become 'Hampstead lefties' to head for areas like Islington instead.[33] As Townsend remembered it, Mansfield Place was 'a very working-class cul-de-sac … with a warehouseman, a carpenter and a fish and chip restauranteur, and there was a local builder as well as widowed pensioners living alone'.[34] 'Living in an area where it was literally true that there were people of … wealth, as well as professional class, but also manual labourers, and newly-arrived immigrants from the Caribbean' was something he and Ruth 'luxuriated in'. 'We knew we were lucky', he later recalled, 'that we had around us, within very short distances, people of every class and age'.[35]

The Townsends quickly became embedded in the local community, inspired by the likes of George Lansbury, the leader of the Labour Party during the 1930s, who lived in East London throughout his political career, as well as the collectivist spirit shared by many of the generations who came of age in the shadow of the Second World War.[36] While having

[31] Townsend, '16th July 1953', Diary, 6.
[32] Joe Moran, 'Early Cultures of Gentrification in London, 1955–1980', *Journal of Urban History*, 34 (2007), 114.
[33] F. M. L. Thompson, *Hampstead: Building a Borough, 1650-1964* (London, 1974), ch. 10. Moran, 'Early Cultures of Gentrification', 114.
[34] Townsend in Thompson, 'Interview with Peter Townsend', para. 528, <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?cid=q-4648c475-8cfa-4be1-9b8c-2efb05984dba> accessed 26 May 2023.
[35] Townsend in Thompson, 'Interview with Peter Townsend', para. 556, <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?cid=q-00a29d31-a375-497f-bee4-20dad6dc5d08> accessed 26 May 2023.
[36] Townsend in Thompson, 'Interview with Peter Townsend', para. 530, <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?cid=q-a177ade0-01c9-4a7c-ab29-6d6956bdef74> accessed 26 May 2023.

children meant they established connections with other families close by, Ruth and Peter also undertook a wide variety of voluntary work, such as providing meals for homeless people around the neighbourhood and helping local pensioners, for whom they would cook, clean, run errands, and act on behalf of, such as in correspondence with landlords or the local authority over housing repairs and other services. One of the closest relationships the Townsends formed was with their next-door neighbour, Percy Morris, a widower in his mid-60s, whose health gradually deteriorated, leaving him needing assistance getting in and out of bed each day, along with almost everything else—responsibilities that fell mainly to Ruth, given Peter's long absences from Mansfield Place for work.[37]

Mansfield Place would also become a hub in Peter Townsend's professional and social network. An active member of the Labour Party and Fabian Society, his home would be the site of regular dinner parties and gatherings, attended by politicians such as Tony Benn and Richard Crossman, other social researchers, most notably Richard Titmuss and Abel-Smith, as well as myriad journalists, charity workers, and campaigners. Ruth Townsend was a crucial figure in these networks and events. The daughter of a dentist who had been President of the British Dental Association during the mid-1930s, Ruth had grown up in Hampstead and studied at Cambridge at the same time as Peter, meaning she fitted easily—and much more naturally—into the circles Peter was now moving in. Indeed, often even more radical in her politics than Peter, who developed a reputation for an uncompromising attitude towards social policy and the Labour Party during the 1960s and 1970s, Ruth was an active and forthright participant in the lively discussions that were typical of these circles.[38] In early December 1958, for instance, Peter wrote in his diary about an

> evening at the Crossmans with Richard & Kay [Titmuss], Brian [Abel-Smith] & [the economist] Tommy Balogh. Dick wants us to have fortnightly discussions on what a Labour Government could do. We depressed him by reminding him how few commitments there were in the new glossy Party summing-up of policy & Ruth by saying straight out that we had no faith in the leadership.[39]

[37] When Morris faced moving to a former public assistance institution in the early 1960s, the Townsends bought his house from his landlord, along with their own, and converted them into a single dwelling, charging Morris a peppercorn rent in return for full-time care and accommodation.

[38] Writing in his diary, Peter, for instance, recalled having to 'forcibly restrain [Ruth], then pregnant, from running to pull [a mounted police officer] off his horse' during a charge at protestors at a demonstration in Trafalgar Square in late 1956. Townsend, '25th October 1956', Diary, 45.

[39] Townsend, '2nd December 1958', Diary, 1953–80, 77.

Nevertheless, Peter and Ruth Townsend had very different experiences of life in Hampstead. As a Cambridge graduate from a comfortable background, Ruth may have expected to build a career of her own but things had worked out somewhat differently after the birth of their first child in 1952, just a year after they had both finished their degrees. With Peter earning a decent salary, plus the cushion of her family's wealth, Ruth had opted not to enter the labour market and the Townsend household had taken on a stereotypical gendered structure. While Peter, the single-income earner, would leave the house for work each day, Ruth remained at home to look after the children, manage the household, and run the vast majority of day-time errands for neighbours, which were integral to their involvement in their local community.[40]

Domestic set ups like this were not unusual on the left of British politics, where there had long been a popular view that a goal of progressive social policy was to ensure married mothers did not need to work, rather than change society in ways that enabled women to be simultaneously mothers within the home and workers outside of it.[41] Sources from the period reveal the arrangement was a source of friction for the Townsends, though. Peter, for example, wrote in his diary in 1958 that while Ruth 'envies the variety & interest of my work', he found himself jealous of 'the continuity & obvious worthwhileness of what she does'.[42] Nevertheless, Peter was always adamant that their roles were something they agreed on and balanced conflicting demands within the constraints of the period. Their relationship, he argued later in life, was 'romantically egalitarian': built on 'a kind of division of labour' in which they 'talked about complementarity', which enabled a way of life they both saw as achieving a particular set of shared political goals.[43]

An essential aspect of this division of labour was an agreement that Ruth would be allowed to participate in Peter's work whenever the opportunity arose. The ICS' rigid template dictated that Peter, as the researcher responsible for writing up the final report, should do all the interviewing himself, meaning there was initially little scope for Ruth to

[40] In this respect, the Townsends were different to both working-class families, where finances made it necessary for wives to take on paid work, and aspirant families, both working and middle-class, where dual-income households were a key feature of the new 'affluent society'. See Helen McCarthy, *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood in Modern Britain* (London, 2020), esp. chs 9 and 10. Indeed, dual-income households were typical of gentrification.

[41] McCarthy, *Double Lives*, 155. See also Susan Pederson, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914-1945* (Cambridge, 1995) for more on the longer history of this idea about motherhood in British political discourse.

[42] Townsend, '2nd December 1958. Swansea", Diary, 78

[43] Townsend in Thompson, 'Interview with Peter Townsend', para. 528, <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?cid=q-a7b346a6-427b-44e7-a9c9-540738615ac8> accessed 26 May 2023.

become directly involved.[44] However, Peter was still as keen to experiment with different methods as he had been at PEP. He had, for instance, travelled as an observer with a group of 400 old people on a day trip to Brighton in June 1954.[45] Then, later that year, as he looked to broaden further the range of ways he collected information about life in Bethnal Green, Townsend decided it would be useful if a small number of his interviewees kept diaries, where they could record information about their daily routines. Two years into the project, though, he did not feel he had the time to devise a suitable pilot. He therefore asked Ruth to help test the idea.

Townsend's intention for the diaries was to harvest several different but specific pieces of information, which he believed would improve his understanding of old people's social networks by providing not only qualitative records but also data on how frequently participants saw relatives, as well as other people who were not family members. Townsend therefore wanted participants to keep track of events such as the times they woke up and went to bed, when they ate, where they went, who they saw and for how long, and what they did when they were alone. To this end, Ruth and Peter kept diaries for one week, from Monday to Sunday, at some point around March 1954. While the results illuminated their very different experiences of life on Mansfield Place, the diaries simultaneously revealed the integration of that home environment with the social scientific ideas that shaped Peter's research. In so doing, the pilot highlighted how Ruth was not only equally engaged with those ideas but also shaped Peter's understanding of what such methods could achieve.

Direct and to the point, with little gloss of contextual information, Peter's entries revealed a consistent routine from Monday to Friday. Typically the first to rise in the morning, around 7am, he would make tea for Ruth and start breakfast for the children. After walking the family's dog on Hampstead Heath around 9 am, he would arrive in Bethnal Green an hour later. Working days were varied, with meetings at a variety of locations, including PEP, and the occasional lunch with friends. Returning home around 7 pm, he would help put the children to bed, eat an evening meal, work for an hour or more, and enjoy some downtime with Ruth, reading and chatting together, before retiring to bed between 11 pm and midnight. The weekend was not work free but it was largely filled with routine domestic duties: walking the dog, trips to the shops,

[44] Towards the end of the fieldwork, when Townsend faced significant time pressures to complete the interviewing, fellow ICS research officer Peter Marris stepped in to carry out forty interviews.

[45] See Townsend, 'The Aged and their Families in Bethnal Green: Interim Report', September 1954, Townsend Papers, Box 35, File B6, pp. 71–3. It is unclear who organized a trip for such a large group but the description comes in a section about the importance of clubs and societies for many old people.

and time with the children. Sometimes, both during the week and on a Saturday, a babysitter—a neighbour or Ruth's mother—would watch the children for a few hours in the evening so that they could see a film at the cinema.[46]

Ruth's diary was rather different. Filled with more information, including the general feeling of the day, such as 'cold and depressing' or 'cold and miserable', entries were dominated by the constant needs of two young boys, whose periodic breaks from clambering up furniture and hitting one another 'over the head with collected essays of George Orwell' elicited remarks such as 'PEACE!'[47] Although the Townsends employed a home help, who came once a week to wash floors and dust around the house, Ruth's days were crammed with domestic tasks, structured by the constant preparation of meals and snacks and cleaning up afterwards. Friends, relatives, and neighbours would call, bringing treats for the children and, in the case of Peter's and Ruth's mothers, stay to help with jobs such as ironing or washing up. There were short breaks for exercise and trips out of the house—to pick up essentials or take laundry to the wash house—but, for the most part, life while Peter was at work was focused on Mansfield Place and the routine imposed by a world where things like shop opening hours were restricted to the day time.[48] As well as visits to the cinema, spare time was taken up with reading, including *The Manchester Guardian*.[49]

Ruth's entries, which helped shape the instructions that would be issued to the participants in Bethnal Green, were also revealing in connection with the kind of life as a form of political and social scientific practice that she and Peter aspired to create in Hampstead. At 9:20 pm on the Monday, for example, she sat down to read 'John Boulby [sic] on Child Care'—most likely his recently-published *Childcare and the Growth of Love* (1953), in which Bowlby, a member of the ICS' advisory board, had argued that mothers needed to be constantly available during the first three years of a child's life due to the central role of maternal love in their development.[50] A best seller, *Childcare and the Growth of Love* was a key

[46] Townsend, Diary, Townsend Papers, Box 35, File B4. No date but very likely to be March 1954, based on the age given for their second child, Adam. See also Townsend's recollections of domestic life in Thompson, 'Interview with Peter Townsend', para. 532, <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?cid=q-150e00f1-7a44-413d-b1be-722cf8dc0fcd> accessed 26 May 2023.

[47] Ruth Townsend, 'Mrs. T. Housewife (25) 2 children (Matthew 2 years, Adam 10 months)', Townsend Papers, Box 35, File B4, p. 1, 3. No date but very likely to be March 1954, based on the age given for their second child, Adam.

[48] For reflections on how life was more routine and regularised because of these issues, see Townsend in Thompson, 'Interview with Peter Townsend', para. 532, <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?cid=q-1a323e5e-1420-4034-a3fb-9d943c09de00> accessed 26 May 2023.

[49] Ruth Townsend, 'Mrs. T. Housewife'.

[50] Ruth Townsend, 'Mrs. T. Housewife', 1.

vehicle through which 'Bowlbyism', as it was often known, was delivered into British middle-class culture, where it shaped attitudes towards working motherhood that now seem distinctly conservative but had a broader appeal during the 1950s.[51] Reading Bowlby was indicative of not only Ruth's interest in ideas that reinforced decisions she and Peter had made about their domestic arrangements but also behaviour associated with 'modern parents', who eschewed tradition and instead looked to expert and professional opinion in order to generate their own approaches to childcare.[52]

Townsend considered the diary pilot a success and he decided to ask a small number of his interviewees to keep diaries for him. But it proved difficult to generate the kinds of data he had hoped for. In particular, most participants failed to record information in the systematic way he had asked for, meaning it was tough to make comparisons or identify patterns. The exercise was not futile, though: excerpts from some of the diaries were reproduced as an appendix in the final version of *The Family Life of Old People*. These extracts were part of the anecdotal evidence and colour for the book's central arguments about the existence of thriving multi-generation and multi-household networks, built on the ties between mothers and daughters. These networks were integral to community life, Townsend argued, and compensated for the welfare state's failings, with old people revealed to be active and significant participants in reciprocal relationships involving care and services at different stages of the lifecycle.

The Family Life of Old People was well received when it was published in October 1957. Reviews were positive and a wave of books offering similarly warm accounts of a vision of traditional working-class life, including Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), not to mention *Family and Kinship in East London*, helped drive interest and sales. Yet by the time the public were able to read his conclusions, Townsend had moved on from Bethnal Green to pursue a new project at the London School of Economics. The move to a very different type of institution was very far from the end of Ruth's involvement in Peter's work, though.

The Last Refuge

Townsend left the ICS in the summer of 1957. Having once grown tired of PEP's conservativism, he had become frustrated with Young, especially

[51] McCarthy, *Double Lives*, 247, 286. For more on these aspects of the spread of psychological ideas about childhood and parenting in postwar Britain, see Shaul Bar-Haim, *The Maternalists: Psychoanalysis, Motherhood, and the British Welfare State* (Pennsylvania, 2021), chs 5–6; Mathew Thomson, *Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child and the British Post-War Settlement* (Oxford, 2013), ch. 3; and Michal Shapira, *The War inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2013), ch. 7.

[52] Cowan, '"Modern" Parenting'.

his attempts to interfere in the writing of his final report, which, along with a dispute with Routledge about the inclusion of photographs, contributed to a ten-month delay in publication. Townsend departed for a three-year research post at the LSE, where he was to be mentored by Richard Titmuss, who was head of the Department of Social Administration. Townsend had known Titmuss since his days at PEP and had recently worked incredibly closely with him and Brian Abel-Smith on the Labour Party's plans for 'National Superannuation': a new state pension, based on variable contributions and benefits.[53] Indeed, by the time Townsend arrived at the LSE in the autumn of 1957, the three men had become targets of the right-wing press, after John Boyd-Carpenter, the Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, had mocked them as a 'skiffle group of professors' backing his Labour shadow, Richard Crossman.[54] Before long, they would be known by other nicknames, notably the 'Titmice', which started as a joke with unclear origins but stuck.[55]

Social administration, a field that would later become known as social policy, was undergoing profound change at the LSE under Titmuss' headship when Townsend started work. As a number of scholars, most notably Ann Oakley, have documented, the Department of Social Administration looked quite unlike the rest of the LSE and UK universities more generally at the start of the 1950s. Largely vocational and with a female-dominated student population and staff, who were paid on a lower scale than other departments, social administration traced its lineage back to the late Victorian conception of social work, associated with the philosophy of self-help and university settlements such as Toynbee Hall in East London.[56] Titmuss, however, was dismissive of this tradition and believed the field should instead focus on tracking developments in the new social services and their capacity to meet social needs.[57]

[53] *National Superannuation: Labour's Policy for Security in Old Age* (London, 1957). On the development of Labour's National Superannuation scheme see: R. H. S. Crossman, *The Politics of Pensions: Eleanor Rathbone Memorial Lecture* (Liverpool, 1972); Sheard, *The Passionate Economist*, 93–100; Stewart, *Richard Titmuss*, ch. 13; Pemberton, 'The Failure of "Nationalization by Attraction": Britain's Cross-Class Alliance against Earnings-Related Pensions in the 1950s', *The Economic History Review*, 65 (2012): 1428–49.

[54] From Our Special Correspondents, 'Conservative Conference', *The Times*, 12 October 1957, 3. See also 'Skiffle Group in Perspective', *The Economist*, 23 November 1957, 666; Richard Titmusset al., 'Skiffle Group in Perspective', *The Economist*, 30 November 1957, 767.

[55] Stewart, *Titmuss*, 2–3; Ann Oakley, *Man and Wife. Richard and Kay Titmuss: My Parents' Early Years* (London, 1996), 202.

[56] For more on the department's early history see Ann Oakley, *Father and Daughter: Patriarchy, Gender, and Social Science* (Bristol, 2014), ch. 9; Ralf Dahrendorf, *LSE: A History of the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1895-1995* (Oxford, 1995), 124–7, 380–6; Jose Harris, 'The Webbs, the Charity Organisation Society, and the Ratan Tata Foundation: Social Policy from the Perspective of 1912', in Martin Bulmer, Jane Lewis, and David Piachaud (eds), *The Goals of Social Policy* (London, 1989), 27–63; Stewart, *Titmuss*, chs 10–11.

[57] For one of Titmuss' early articulations of this vision see his inaugural lecture 'Social Administration in a Changing Society', *British Journal of Sociology*, 2 (1951): 183–97.

Townsend was one of the many scholars, including the likes of David Donnison and Tony Lynes, who were hired to pursue these goals, transforming the department in the process. At the beginning of the 1950s, the department had thirteen staff, ten of whom were women; by the early 1960s, twelve of the twenty staff were men.[58]

Townsend arrived in the department to work on another but very different Nuffield-funded study of old age. Following a visit to a former workhouse that had been turned into an old people's home, he had decided to shift his focus from 'normal people' living in their own homes to individuals living in institutions—a group that he noticed in Bethnal Green tended to be poorer and have few, if any, family connections they could rely on. The new project was also a national survey, based on a random sample of more than 170 homes across England and Wales, rather than tightly focused on a specific small community, making it much bigger and more ambitious.

Most of the fieldwork for *The Last Refuge* (1962), which would explore the failings of the national system of residential care for the old that had developed since 1948 and become a landmark in the anti-institution movement in the US and UK, was carried out during the 1958/59 academic year.[59] Travelling across England and Wales in his family's Ford Thames van, Townsend visited residential homes of all different kinds: private, voluntary, and state-run; small, medium, and large; old and new; converted and purpose-built; in the centre of towns, on suburban streets, and set in acres of land. When the twelve months of fieldwork was up, seventy Chief Welfare Officers, 250 members of staff, and 500 residents in more than 170 homes had been interviewed.

Townsend participated in most visits but the immense volume of work was only possible because, in a departure from the ICS model, he employed assistants, who conducted a significant number of interviews, especially in large homes, where there were sometimes more than 1,000 residents. Initially, Townsend had thought he could get by with just two assistants, Robert Pinker and Brian Rees, who joined the project on short-term contracts in January 1959. But Townsend quickly concluded he needed more help, turning first to June Vernon, a recent graduate of the LSE's Certificate in Social Science and Administration, and then Ruth, who was given the kind of full, though unpaid, role as an interviewer, taking part in visits to homes in London and Liverpool, which the

[58] Stewart, *Titmuss*, 230. For an account of this transformation see Oakley, *Father and Daughter*, chs 9–10.

[59] Examples of studies associated with this movement, which was dominated by concerns about psychiatry, include Russell Barton, *Institutional Neurosis* (Bristol, 1959); R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness* (London, 1960); Erving Goffman, *Asylums. Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York, 1961); and Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York, 1965), which was first published in French in 1961.

Townsends had always agreed should be a possibility as part of their domestic arrangements.

In mid-January 1959, for example, Ruth joined a visit to Luxborough Lodge, the largest old people's home in the country, on Marylebone Road in Westminster. The atmosphere among the more than 1,200 residents was among the worst the team encountered. The premises, a former workhouse composed of buildings that had been put up in phases from the mid-eighteenth century through to the early 1900s, were 'in many respects ... still Dickensian'—people sleeping twenty to a room, next-to-no outdoor space, cracked floors, and inadequate provision of facilities such as toilets.[60] 'Many of the frail residents seem to be confined to sleeping the night in their ward, staggering next door into the dayroom to sit during the day', Peter Townsend observed, 'and, if they are lucky, moving one room further to have their meals'.[61] Staff were generally intimidating and all kinds of problems, such as theft, were either tolerated or went unreported because there seemed no prospect of any action being taken.

A sharp-eyed observer, Ruth was unafraid to pass judgement on what she saw and heard. Exploring the premises, she found herself entering all kinds of disturbing scenes. For instance, there was 'an old man of 92', Peter recorded in his notes, whom Ruth thought needed help.

> She went to find the ass't warden and just outside his room encountered a woman weeping. The ass't warden came out and was very embarrassed to find Ruth was there. The old woman was crying and pointed to her arm, saying, 'Look what the sister has done to me, sir, she's poured boiling water over my arm. She's very cruel'. The ass't warden ushered Ruth away.[62]

On another occasion, Ruth interviewed a 78-year-old woman who acted as though she was afraid of everyone around her. The woman had been living alone since before Christmas, when her husband had been hospitalized, and had been taken to Luxborough Lodge recently by her son after a fall in the street. 'For a long time she was clearly terrified of being interviewed by Ruth', Peter reported, 'and when asked about satisfaction with the Home and its arrangements said again and again, "I don't want to say anything against the Home. I'd rather not answer. I don't want trouble. I daren't answer these questions"'. Ruth asked the woman whether she had been able to exert any agency over her situation:

[60] Townsend, 'Notes on interview with Warden and Others of Staff of Luxborough Lodge', 19th January 1959, Townsend Papers, Box 36, File HO6, p. 1.
[61] Townsend, 'Notes on interview with Warden and Others of Staff of Luxborough Lodge', 7.
[62] Townsend, 'Notes on interview with Warden and Others of Staff of Luxborough Lodge', 3.

had she written to her son to ask him to visit? Had she requested an interview with the welfare officer? Her responses were always the same: 'I dare not. They say I mustn't cause trouble'. Ruth saw someone who had quickly become lost in a system and had 'no idea to whom she can turn to find out about her predicament. She has now been there about 2 weeks and the interviewer felt sure that in some way she had been tricked into going into Luxborough Lodge and that maybe her son and his wife intended her to stay'.[63]

Ruth followed up her encounters with residents by interviewing Luxborough Lodge's matron—a woman in her mid-sixties who had worked there for more than 10 years, whom Ruth concluded was 'not openly or offensively patronising (during the interview) towards the residents' but was 'bigoted and conformist in her attitudes'.[64] To be sure, the matron possessed 'a certain efficiency', Ruth wrote in her report, but she also had 'little imagination for such a gigantic task'. For example, when pressed on whether there were any differences between male and female residents her answer was simply 'I haven't noticed anything of the kind'. 'Although we talked around this point a good deal from all angles', Ruth wrote, 'some of the most obvious conclusions had never struck her'. Indeed, Ruth went on,

> she could throw very little light on some of the human problems affecting residential life – the loss of independence, the loss of identity, the loss of privacy. She thought glass panels in the wards might solve the question of privacy. She thought money collected for flowers on the ward after the death of a resident was an indication of close friendship. She thought it was important to get to know the old people in order to understand their problems and gain their confidence and yet she wanted no increase in welfare staff. She thought the absence of obligations in the Home (on the part of the resident) gave them a sense of security. She believed resignation after a month's residence to be peace of mind and happiness. She believed relatives, after a time, to be unimportant in the lives of old people. She thought that once infirm you were not sensitive to the indignities of large ward procedures concerning incontinence, etc. She did not see that living in the past could be indicative of dissatisfaction with the present or fear of the future.[65]

What struck Ruth most about the matron, however, was that 'the words boredom, loneliness and depression had such limited meaning to her she could not envisage their use in discussion on life in the Home'.[66]

[63] Townsend, 'Notes on interview with Warden and Others of Staff of Luxborough Lodge', 3.
[64] Ruth Townsend, 'Matron of Luxborough Lodge. 19th Jan., 1959', Townsend Papers, Box 36, File HO6, p. 3.
[65] Ruth Townsend, 'Matron of Luxborough Lodge', 2.
[66] Ruth Townsend, 'Matron of Luxborough Lodge', 2.

These attitudes seemed to permeate everything Ruth saw when she toured the home after the interview. In one ward, she saw a woman laying 'in bed with a screen round her'. Residents were coming 'in or out for something or other' and, as they did, 'they shouted some remark at her'. It was 'bitterly cold', Ruth reported, 'and I had to remove my overcoat to put round the lady I was interviewing'.

> The one in bed told me that they called her 'one eye' (she had a cataract over her left eye). 'I'm the one they all talk about – put two children away in a home old one eye did'. 'Been here two years and never said a word against anyone – but this place is terrible, they won't leave you alone, keep on abusing you and throwing something up in your face, you just have to ignore it —you can't believe half they say'.[67]

When it came to writing up the report of these observations and experiences, Peter Townsend worked alone, marking up his assistant's notes to highlight key words, ideas, or facts that fed into his summaries and conclusions. As Charlotte Greenhalgh has observed, his specific concerns in *The Last Refuge*—to analyse the national system, rather than individual homes—meant only a small number of the hundreds of residents and staff who had been spoken to for the book were quoted in a few chapters to illustrate specific points.[68] The assistants' voices were mostly missing too; their ideas and impressions drawn upwards into Townsend's overall view of the project, which drew on his earlier conclusions about the importance of kinship and extended family networks.

To be sure, he argued, there were good homes for old people in UK and well-intentioned staff, doing their best in often difficult circumstances. But, when he looked beyond these examples of good practice, it was a bleak and too-often demoralizing picture, especially, but not only, in the country's cities, with residents living in fear of both staff and other residents, without privacy or meaningful social interaction, and stripped of individual identities. Indeed, in an observation that would permeate his work for the rest of his career, Townsend concluded it was impossible to escape the impact of class, given professionals and those of means resided in the nicest and smallest homes, while the poor filled up least desirable, worst resourced, and largest institutions.

Conclusion

The visits to residential homes in London and Liverpool were not the last time Ruth Townsend would be involved in her husband's research. As the fieldwork for *The Last Refuge* drew to a close in the summer of 1959,

[67] Ruth Townsend, 'Matron of Luxborough Lodge', 4.
[68] Greenhalgh, *Aging*, 96–7.

Peter Townsend started a pilot investigation, run by Brian Rees, that would eventually lead to a much bigger cross-national study, involving collaborators in Europe and North America.[69] Ruth reprised her role as an interviewer on this project, speaking to old people in their own homes in a number of different locations in London, trialling a questionnaire that helped standardize questions, concepts, and definitions for international research in social gerontology, as well as a new approach to measuring individuals' capacity for self-care.[70] Moreover, when Townsend and his collaborators were able to get that cross-national project off the ground in the early 1960s, Ruth was once again involved, carrying out more than 70 interviews with old people living in institutions, including nursing homes and psychiatric hospitals. Her contribution to these projects was never exactly hidden, given she received acknowledgements in the final reports, but, as we have seen, gestures of that kind reveal little of the involvement we have seen in this article.[71]

Yet by the mid-1960s the Townsends' lives had changed in important ways. Peter left the LSE in 1963 to become the founding Professor of Sociology at the University of Essex, a new university based in Colchester and created during the first phase of the expansion of higher education in the UK during the early 1960s. He had always been busy, with work filling evenings and weekends, whether it was attending meetings, giving talks, or catching up on correspondence. Taking on significant responsibility in the building a new higher education establishment, an almost two-hour journey from Hampstead, was a different matter, though. In the first instance, Peter had no choice but to commute to Colchester, taking up weekday lodgings not far from Wivenhoe Park, where the university was going to be built. But long-term arrangements were a matter for further negotiation. While Peter was conflicted, seeing the attraction, not to mention personal convenience, of playing a full part in a new community, Ruth did not want to uproot herself or their children from north London.[72] Eventually, they decided that Ruth and the children would

[69] Ethel Shanas, Peter Townsend, Dorothy Wedderburn, Henning Friis, Poul Milhøj, and Jan Stehouwer, *Old People in Three Industrial Societies* (London, 1968).

[70] Peter Townsend and Brian Rees, *The Personal, Family and Social Circumstances of Old People: Report of an Investigation Carried Out in England in 1959 to Pilot a Future Cross-National Survey of Old Age* (London, 1959).

[71] Peter Townsend, *The Last Refuge: A Survey of Residential Institutions and Homes for the Aged in England and Wales* (London, 1962), p. xiii; Townsend and Rees, *The Personal, Family and Social Circumstances of Old People*, p. 3. Ruth did not receive an acknowledgement in Ethel Shanas, Peter Townsend, Dorothy Wedderburn, Henning Friis, Poul Milhøj, and Jan Stehouwer, *Old People in Three Industrial Societies* (London, 1968). Her interviews were conducted for part of the project that was intended to be a separate book, *Old People in Hospital*, which Townsend co-wrote with Sheila Benson. Although a full draft of the book was completed, Townsend, much to Benson's anger and frustration, never considered it good enough to publish. See Townsend Papers, Box 38.

[72] When the University of Essex's Academic Planning Board were deciding on a site for the university, they opted for Colchester, rather than Chelmsford, for the specific reason that

stay in London, with the availability of comprehensive secondary schools, of which both Peter and Ruth were strong supporters, in Hampstead but not Colchester turning out to be a significant issue.

Living in Colchester during the week throughout term time meant Peter was absent for substantial periods of the year and then busy with the likes of the Child Poverty Action Group, the Fabian Society, and the Low Pay Unit when he was back home. These absences fuelled an estrangement that would lead to divorce in the mid-1970s. For Peter, Ruth's decision not to move to Essex was the crucial factor in this outcome because he saw it as contributing to the construction of separate lives. Ruth, on the other hand, believed she had done more than enough to support his career and quickly grew tired of the domestic demands that came with sole responsibility for four children, Percy Morris, and numerous different relatives, including Peter's mother and grandmother, who came to stay at various points. In 1973, when three of their children were aged 16 or older, Ruth bought a Land Rover and went travelling for twelve months with their youngest son, visiting countries including Afghanistan and Iraq.

These developments revealed much about the nature of Peter and Ruth's relationship and their earlier household arrangements. Ruth had made significant contributions to Peter's research during the 1950s and early 1960s, which were important in the construction of Peter's career and revealed the ways that work, and the social scientific ideas that shaped it, were embedded in their household. Despite the satisfaction and worth Ruth drew from her role in those arrangements, she was also limited by them, unable to emerge outside the Townsends' personal circles as the independent political and social scientific thinker she was clearly recognized as within them. In this respect, family life—the subject on which Peter first built his reputation—is a necessary lens for recovering not only Ruth's role in an important part of modern social science history but also the origins of Peter's ideas and work, as well as the contours of the worlds they both inhabited.

* * *

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