**Chapter Two: Victorian Professions: the Galvanising (and Shaping) Force of Death on Families**

**Introduction**

The historical study of the family has long been shaped by the fact that historians, social scientists and genealogists have attempted to define the term ‘family’ in different, often competing ways.[[1]](#footnote-1) For the historical demographers Lawrence Stone and Peter Laslett, writing in the infancy of family history as a discipline, the eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries saw for the upper and middling sections of British society a distinct bonding of the nuclear core of families at the expense of relationships with neighbours and wider kin.[[2]](#footnote-2) In much of the early historiography, then, ‘the family’ was conceptualised and ordered through the lens of its direct members (husband, wife, offspring and a limited number of ‘other’ kin) or through the shifting membership of the household and houseful, including servants and other non-kin.[[3]](#footnote-3) These labels seemed ‘natural’ and inevitable in the sense that the census, the single most important source for early writers, counted the people under a given roof on a specific evening and ordered the membership under such roofs according to the binary categories of kin and non-kin.[[4]](#footnote-4) As Chase and Levenson remind us, the need to use census material as evidence was a primary driver of the mechanism by which ‘family’ became a spatial *and* a social unit.[[5]](#footnote-5) For Laslett in particular, the key questions were about the size, complexity and depth of families, rather than about the socio-cultural processes that shaped how family life was experienced and constructed.[[6]](#footnote-6) Subsequent family historians have been more centrally concerned with the enormous range of permutations of family configuration, the complex drivers of family formation and re-formation, and the quality as opposed to just the extent of kinship connections. Di Cooper and Moira Donald, for instance, have used detailed record linkage for a middling street in Exeter to call into question the meaning of labels such as ‘servant’ which usually signal the distinction between household and family.[[7]](#footnote-7) They argue powerfully that such labels effectively disguised kinship connections within the household. At the other end of the social spectrum, Steve King argues that pauper households were more complex in kinship terms than has ever been allowed and that whatever the structure of their co-resident family grouping, the dependent poor were enmeshed in a complex network of functional kinship which brings into question the utility of talking about the individual co-residential unit.[[8]](#footnote-8)

These are important historiographical advances, but one group that has received relatively little attention are the professionals who emerged out of a more amorphous ‘middling sort’ between the mid eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries.[[9]](#footnote-9) Leonore Davidoff has described the ‘difficulties’ of truth in family history, ‘not least because many records are more informative of what people in the past thought the family should be, rather than…how families were actually constituted’.[[10]](#footnote-10) She has also questioned the sensitivity of family-focused historiography because of its overdependence on case study or crude impersonal macro-views of ‘families’ reaped from vast demographic formulations reflected in the censuses.[[11]](#footnote-11) Such issues have particular traction when we try to consider the constellation and re-constellation of professional families and the quality (rather than simply the extent and nominal complexity) of family relations given that we have no significant body of research that can act as a benchmark for this group. The current chapter thus seeks to investigate the nature of relations in the nineteenth century professional family. It does so through an analysis of death in a family and the impact the loss of different familial protagonists had on the surviving members of their family. The death of a household head is particularly important in this regard. The death of a breadwinner – especially in the early years of a career – could be catastrophic across a spectrum of economic, emotional and social levels. It also altered the structure and meaning of established family groups and could represent a heady precursor to momentous change. Using an innovative methodology – a welding together of genealogical methods, case-study, prosopography and qualitative data analysis – arising out of a research project on the Victorian professions the chapter suggests that the structural transformations occasioned by deaths were varied and widely anticipated, including remarriage for adults (creating a new familial order), adoption for bereaved children and the formative impact of personal loss on future family and career choices.[[12]](#footnote-12) In short, the chapter (alongside those of Regina Poertner and Goeff Monks elsewhere in this volume) rises to Davidoff’s challenge that ‘For a rounded picture, the cycle of individual lives as they form and disband families must be observed.’[[13]](#footnote-13) To this end, the next section deals briefly with the nature of the professional family. The main focus, however, is in section three where we trace through both cohort analysis and individual case studies the impact of bereavements on different sorts of family members. A focus on Scottish data means that the chapter contributes, alongside those by Iain Riddell and Regina Poertner, to this relatively neglected aspect of British family history.

**The Victorian ‘professional’ family**

Historians have tended to ascribe the professional class with a separate identity from the middle class. This largely stems from the work on Victorian professions by Harold Perkin. To him, the professions were a distinct group with economic strength and durability.[[14]](#footnote-14) Yet he used limited empirical research and recent historians have questioned the distinction. As Sheila Sullivan observed ‘…the regulated self (and the regulating texts) that professionalism presupposes is difficult to separate from middle-class status and ideology’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Perkin also imbued the professions largely with a goal of professional legacy through their own offspring. It is in this respect that his views have had the most profound implications for how we have considered their families.[[16]](#footnote-16) The empirical base for these views was in fact slim. In order to test this view, the Victorian Professions project built a database that stemmed from over a thousand professional men from nine towns stratified from the 1851 census.[[17]](#footnote-17) Using archive and genealogical methods, the project team traced their wives (and both partners’ parents) and their descendants’ in two further generations, resulting in over 15,000 individuals broadly spanning the periods from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. In addition to a mass of analytical data collected for every census until 1911, the project team dredged local archives and online material, collecting a vast range of archive material from schooling, matriculation and marriage contacts, to *inter alia* professional associations, diaries, newspaper cuttings, memorials and wills.[[18]](#footnote-18) Together, this research suggested that the weakness of the Perkin approach was an over-concentration on traditional, well established professions such as the law, church, military and medicine. In contrast, the Victorian Professions project reframed professionals to include a broader ambit encompassing a more recognisably diverse range of sectors and occupations. The project established that these ‘new’ professions – teaching, engineering, banking, architecture and so on – are essential for inclusive analyses of the broad range of professional families cementing their place in the socio-economic structure of Victorian Britain. In contrast to Perkin’s original analyses, which portrayed professions as economically solid, the project found that these newer professional families (and indeed some of older professions) were relatively insecure, sometimes living in fragile financial circumstances.

Against this backdrop, career security was a preoccupation of parents and their children because it *mattered*; families were shaped by the success or failure of a young professional. As historians, such as Sullivan, have argued, the appropriation of success and failure to underpin masculine ideals in the professional project further hardened gendered roles in professional families.[[19]](#footnote-19) This played a key part in the professions, their family life and in death’s impact on their families. In married life, women were often subsumed into a family life that was the epitome of gendered romanticism in the nineteenth-century. As Davidoff and Catherine Hall have noted, engendered expectations ‘indelibly fixed the image of a rose-covered cottage in a garden where Womanhood waited and from which Manhood ventured abroad: to work, to war and to the Empire.’[[20]](#footnote-20) There is of course a substantial empirical base for these views, particularly by the later Victorian period, and we explore this matter further in the final section of the chapter. Yet, many women lived a more independently-steered life than this model allows. Davidoff and Hall also recognised that there were constantly shifting shapes for gender roles and a consequent variety of female kinship structures: ‘The variability of family forms cannot be overstressed; there is no essential “family”, but always “families”.’[[21]](#footnote-21) This broad perspective both informs the rest of my chapter and is also the singular theme of the other chapters in this volume.

In some striking ways this research therefore adds weight to recent scholarship that has begun to reinterpret the traditional view of the Victorian family. Certainly the majority of Victorian Britons would have spent some of their lives within a domiciled family group based on matrimony. For most this began as a child of marriage and then, later, as married adult and parents themselves. Even this broad model came under pressure from changes to fertility and birth rates. The 1870s is seen as a turning point in British population birth rates, when numbers on average began to decline dramatically. The professional classes were at the vanguard of falling numbers of children born in wedlock.[[22]](#footnote-22) More widely, however, a larger number of lived years were expended in roles beyond that ‘traditional’ model, not least because death frequently spliced and reshaped the family. Cohort analysis from the Victorian Professions project shows clearly that a large number of the middling sort spent their childhoods with different parental figures than is generally given credence – as stepchildren, orphans, nieces/nephews or grandchildren. As adults, too, Victorians were likely to spend some of their life beyond the normative model in one or some of a number of common roles (imbued with distinct cultural and gendered agency): bachelor or spinster; widow or widower; step-parent; grandparent; or as ‘in-laws’. In short, the data for this research suggest that the lived experience of alternative family groups is important because many people spent the majority of their life in roles beyond a traditional familial structure, pointing to the need for reconsideration of actual lived years *en masse*. Beginning this process, the next sections will explore further how the death of a loved one could interplay with family structures, create mixed-parenthood families and, in some cases, alter the course of a career.

**An experiential account of bereavement in a professional family**

Gaining an insight into how families were re-constellated after a death and the ultimate meaning of that re-constellation for the relatives left behind is no easy task. As Davidoff notes: ‘Even today few people go around speaking about or leaving written records detailing their changed relationships and ambivalent feelings due to the loss of a sister or brother through permanent estrangement or death—they *live* it out.’[[23]](#footnote-23) Diaries provide a unique opportunity to discover emotional and physical responses to death in the past. Thus, the exquisitely detailed journals of Alexander Beazeley (1830-1905) are a rare insight into the career of a Victorian professional, from his indenture as an apprentice to Beazeley’s notable international recognition and success. Beazeley was a civil engineer from Brighton who maintained journals documenting most aspects of his life from an urbanite young Englishman to Nova Scotia and Australia and finally a jubilant return to Europe as an established engineer.[[24]](#footnote-24) They also provide a glimpse into the interactions of bereavement, emigration and career. Indeed Alexander seems to have altered his life’s direction after the death of his beloved sister. This section will therefore adopt his experience as a case study to argue that death could sometimes galvanise people by forcing change in their lives, rupturing and altering their – and their family’s – life course.

Alexander’s father, George (1789-1875) was a successful naval commander with an unusual backstory: he was the illegitimate son of a Russian count of aristocratic origin.[[25]](#footnote-25) Both of his sons became engineers and the family were an exemplary ‘professional’ family. Despite their closeness, a cursory glance at Alexander’s family tree (figure 2.1), shows that death had created a family of step-children. By the time he was 10 years old, Alexander had already experienced the deaths of five siblings. The impact of this can only be surmised (there is no intimation in his journals) but the closeness of the adult Beazeley family is perhaps at least partly a result of childhood bereavements. Both of his surviving sisters, Catherine (‘Kate’, 1829-1903) and Simeona (‘Owo’, 1821-1851) were children of George’s first two marriages to women who had also died relatively young.[[26]](#footnote-26) Alexander’s mother, Margaret (1800-1850), adopted Kate and Owo on marriage, creating a blended family of the sort also explored by Geoff Monks later in this volume.[[27]](#footnote-27) She was exceptionally close to Owo, the pious cherished heart of the family. Nevertheless, it was a focus on Alexander’s career that seems to have led the family to further tragedy in adulthood. His story presents an enticing picture of early career instability, remarkable change, and eventual success.

Alexander’s diaries provide an intriguing and contrastive juxtaposition. His early journals, set in southern England, contain very little of professional value. His later diaries, set in Australia, are by contrast mostly about the challenges of engineering and the engaging environment of his new home – reflecting a contemplative and professionally engaged man. These are punctuated with documentation of complex engineering formulas and problems – and his descriptions of overcoming work-based challenges. His successful career in Australia is interesting because in England, as will be discussed below, he was languishing in his apprenticeship, facing an uncertain future. What had happened in the intervening years? How did Alexander ‘make it’ and what role – if any – had his family played in this success? Thus, in the late 1840s, Alexander was indentured to a London engineering practice. As an apprentice, Alexander was a bit of a layabout. Whilst amusing, this does not seem particularly unusual in itself. His diaries indicate a well-meaning but unfocused youth. Yet, his (and his father’s) fears of career failure were acute. Alexander seems to have made a number of mistakes on the job – at one point missing a crucial curve in the laying out of the London to Portsmouth Direct Railway, which delayed work for a day. His manager was clearly unimpressed by Alexander’s potential as an engineer, and the diaries consistently show that Alexander was distracted with his social life; primarily focused on finding a ‘sweetheart’ and wife.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Despite his comfortable upper-middling sort background, it is also clear from his diaries that Alexander was by no means assured of professional success. In one sense this is not surprising. The histories of other professions describe overstocked and competitive environments, a theme also visited by Carol Beardmore in her chapter later in this volume.[[29]](#footnote-29) Not many professionals could afford to fritter away career prospects. Zuzanna Shonfield’s study of the Marshalls of Saville Row traced the prospects of an upper-middle class family of professionals and their struggles to excel. Their lives echo the Beazeleys and other professional families: ‘There is a great deal of evidence to show that the elevated situation in which the successful professionals found themselves in the latter part of the nineteenth century was precarious.’ [[30]](#footnote-30) It is thus unsurprising that the insecurity of professional life became a (not misplaced) preoccupation of Alexander’s father. In 1848, the tension built between father and son, bursting into a heated conversation about the errant engineer’s prospects:

This morning at breakfast there was a most ridiculous scene. Father and I were talking upon the subject of my emigrating in case there was no work for me in England when my time was out … At last Mother began to cry, and said how ridiculous and wrong it was to talk about my leaving England, and unsettling my mind about my profession. A long discussion ensued on that point, and it ended by Father protesting that he did not want to distract my mind from my profession, but only to have the liberty of conversing as to what might be done in case that there should be no opening in Engineering for me when out of my time. When all the rest had left the breakfast room, he told me that if he were in my place he would endeavour to learn engineering by all the means in his power, and would get some little wooden bricks and build bridges for practice. From what he said he seemed to imply that I did not study my profession enough. I was not best pleased by the whole scene, and felt excessively vexed…[[31]](#footnote-31)

One month later, the Beazeley parents were set on emigrating – alternating between proposed destinations until finally settling on Canada. Alexander reflected, ‘I was much disgusted at the idea of us all going out, because I only could not succeed in England.’[[32]](#footnote-32) His optimism was misplaced; one year later he had not secured an engineering post and the entire family emigrated from England, setting sail on 20 August, 1849 for Prince Edward Island.

[Figure 2.1 here]

The voyage was unexceptional but would ultimately be the cause of a fracturing of the family because Alexander’s mother and sister, Owo, caught an infection of the chest. On arrival the family established themselves in the local community, but again Alexander was unsuccessful in his career aspirations, becoming a low-level bureaucrat for the probate office. The diaries detail his limited social life and a preoccupation with hunting wildlife. Engineering was barely mentioned. Storm clouds were, however, brewing and these would have important consequences for the shape and meaning of the family. Barely a year after arriving in Canada, Margaret succumbed to her chest illness and died.[[33]](#footnote-33) A few months after her death, Alexander reflected, ‘On the night she died, as I lay in bed, I fancied several times, quite vividly, that she was arranging my pillow and that I felt her breath on my face. Oh, that she *were* near me and would visit me in my sleep!’[[34]](#footnote-34) Owa (Alexander’s adored sister) continued to waste away at the same time. During the summer of 1851 it seemed as though she rallied and there was a remission, ‘…Owo seemed so well and happy…She is still pleased at the idea of going to England, but thinks she will not live long after her arrival. Pray heaven, though, she may! And may live with recovered health and strength for many years!’[[35]](#footnote-35) Even so, the doctor (and family) expected her to die within a year and she succumbed on 1 September 1851.[[36]](#footnote-36) Although Alexander stated: ‘It must be such a blessed rest for dear [Owo] now, after long suffering, to lie in that quiet state’, he was obviously deeply grieved at her passing.[[37]](#footnote-37) Davidoff has said of siblings: ‘According to time, place, social group, or fate there have been wide discrepancies in the circumstances of sibling loss…the structures, culture, and beliefs of the particular society in which the loss occurs may mould and temper mourning reactions.’[[38]](#footnote-38) In many ways, the Beazeleys were typical of the early nineteenth century, but their emotional response provides a nuanced and rare experience of coping with tragedy at this time.

Alexander, Kate, Michael and their father retreated to their rooms for a number of days, taking pills supplied by a doctor. Yet, they were able to emotionally absorb Owo’s death because it had been protracted, virtually painless, and there was time for her to say her goodbyes – even time for Owo to plan her funeral rites, coffin and clothing. For Victorians this was the ‘good’ death, described so well by historians, such as Jalland.[[39]](#footnote-39) Alexander was reassured by the words of the doctor: ‘He says he never saw anyone so well aware of their condition and so perfectly calm, resigned and happy in the prospect of death.’[[40]](#footnote-40) The family would have been strengthened by Owo’s piety, salubriousness and courageous conviction in death, especially after the shock of Margaret’s more sudden and unexpected expiration. Alexander described his feelings at the funeral, ‘I did not shed a tear – indeed have hardly done so since dear [Owo] died – I don’t feel as if she were so separated from us as dear Mother is, and I sincerely hope she will come to us in dreams as she promised to do if permitted.’[[41]](#footnote-41) Although Alexander was initially disappointed, four weeks later he dreamed of Owo – she ‘evidently wished me to be resigned to [her death], not grieving.’[[42]](#footnote-42) The family had emigrated ostensibly to further an engineering career that had not materialised and lost two cherished members, in effect reconstructing the meaning of the family unit. There is no intimation from Alexander’s diary that the remaining family members blamed Alexander’s youthful follies for his sister’s death, but her demise nonetheless seems to have galvanised Alexander into leaving Canada for Australia in 1852, perhaps to seek a fresh beginning. Her death occupied his psyche as he prepared to embark: ‘I was dreaming last night of my going to Australia, and wished very much to say good bye to Owo, whom I thought of as still alive. She came and kissed me, but did not say “goodbye”…I woke up crying bitterly and clasping her tight to my heart.’[[43]](#footnote-43)

Beazeley signalled the decision to leave Canada in January, barely four months after Owo had died. By March 1852 he had solidified his plans. His career was among a number of the reasons cited for his motivation: ‘[Australia offered] the chance of bettering my condition more rapidly than I could do here, and if I failed, I could then return here and live at Belvedere, I should be just where I should be if I stayed here till out of my time...’[[44]](#footnote-44) Thus, on Christmas Eve, 1852, Alexander disembarked from his ship in Sydney Harbour. He had two letters of introduction for the Governor of New South Wales, Sir Charles Augustus FitzRoy (1796-1858) and:

[FitzRoy] said that there was no opening for me in Government appointments, as they were all filled up; and asked me what my views were. I told him that my profession was a [Civil Engineer] and that I wished chiefly to obtain employment in that – which appeared to relieve him of a great weight and he said he would put my name down as an applicant for it and that if I could wait a month or two, there would probably be an opening for me, if competent, but that would be seen by examining me – to which I bowed assent…Then we fell into a general conversation about the Island and so on.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The letters of introduction had effectively opened the door for Alexander because they came from officials in Prince Edward Island where FitzRoy had formerly served as governor from 1837 to 1841. He had arrived in Sydney with the intention of seeking a further government administration post but his introduction led to a foothold back into engineering as assistant engineer to the colony. Within eight years, he had accomplished enough for acceptance to the London-based Institution for Civil Engineers (ICE). Civil engineers were elected to the ICE on the strength of their professional accomplishments and their recommendations by members. Alexander’s were outstanding.[[46]](#footnote-46) He rose to Executive Engineer in the public works department of New South Wales, building some of Australia’s most iconic lighthouses. In 1863 he returned to England as chief engineer for Trinity House, using the expertise gained in Australia to build various lighthouses around the coast of Britain (becoming a recognised authority on fog signals). He contributed extensively to the Oxford English Dictionary and became Librarian to the Royal Institute of British Architects. In 1873 he also went to Sweden as resident engineer on the Halmstad and Jönköping line, and subsequently worked on the North of Europe Railway.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Beazeley’s exchange with the Governor of New South Wales reveals that he stepped back into the profession with a mixture of guile, courage, chance and a ‘favourable’ letter of introduction. His father’s (arguably well-founded) fears of Alexander failing, in 1848, had pushed the family to emigrate, but it was the death of his mother and sister that had finally galvanised the son into career action of independent volition. In a very short space of time Alexander had moved from living in a normative nuclear family in England (and thus one that was traceable in the nineteenth century census) to one in which he was a singleton living in Australia. In between these two states of living, he had also been briefly resident in a family headed by a widower. The sort of short-term fluidity in family form traced by Steven King in his contribution to this volume is also seen here. There is, however, a bigger narrative and this centres on the way in which locality – particularly the choice to stay or relocate – played a key role in weathering (or not) the storms of a familial tragedy. It is to this matter that the next section turns.

**Declining fortunes in nineteenth-century Dundee**

Different towns, within and between different regions, created contrasting circumstances for professional families. Environment could also interact with a family’s life course, amplifying or reducing the impact of death. On the one hand, for example, the fallout from the death of a breadwinner could be mitigated in a relatively stable profession in an economically prosperous environment such as Leeds or Brighton. On the other hand a town in economic turmoil could present a catastrophic scenario if a breadwinner died before establishing themselves or preparing their family economically for their loss.For those professionals concerned with extending economic prosperity into the next generation and maintaining (or creating) professional dynasties, the fear of an early death must have been ever-present. With a biological clock ticking against the need to establish a career before marriage, the continuation of a family meant that ‘life’ was quite literally hanging in the balance for an aspiring professional in the nineteenth-century. Many faced a crude choice: forego marriage to increase economic prosperity and success or marry early and risk economic hardship (and catastrophe in an unexpected early death).

A case study drawn from the wider project outlined above and focusing on Dundee provides a particularly acute rendering of this sort of dilemma. Throughout most of the eighteenth century Dundee had enjoyed status as a major trading centre in Scotland. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was an established port, chiefly trading in flax and linen.[[48]](#footnote-48) The city excelled at manufacture, shipping in raw produce and exporting manufactured hardware, such as bleached linen, sail cloth, bagging and rope making. It therefore attracted a large working class populace. In turn, an able workforce encouraged more manufacturing. This mix of shipping, industry, growth and migrant population was the ideal breeding ground for Dundee’s famous foray into globalised industry and trade: jute processing.[[49]](#footnote-49) From the mid-nineteenth century, jute became the dominant product manufactured and refined in Dundee. By the century’s end, the city skyline was punctuated with over 200 factory smoke stacks, mostly built for processing the raw jute that had been shipped from India. Both locals and the Scottish press acerbically referred to the town as ‘Juteopolis’.[[50]](#footnote-50) The switch from a diverse hub of trade and industry, to a mono-manufacturing jute centre, brought sweeping urban demographic changes.

Nineteenth-century Dundee has received notoriety because of its large working class population (dominated by female workers) highly-dependant on factory employment.[[51]](#footnote-51) It was though in many ways representative of the urban population explosion across British regions as a whole at this time, including the demographic concentration in Scotland across its central industrial belt (spreading from Glasgow eastward to Dundee).[[52]](#footnote-52) This region drew in large numbers of Scottish migrants and Irish immigrants at the height of the famines, with 19 per cent of Dundee’s population claiming Irish birth in 1861.[[53]](#footnote-53) They came for the thriving opportunities for work at Dundee. In return, they ‘earned amongst the lowest rates in textiles in the UK’.[[54]](#footnote-54) Poverty and overcrowding was rife. By 1911, 70 per cent of Dundee’s housing was composed of one or two-bedroom dwellings.[[55]](#footnote-55) Great slums emerged and the town’s historical diversity was eclipsed by the labouring classes needed for factory work.[[56]](#footnote-56) The professional and middling sorts rapidly moved out to the ‘healthier’ and conspicuously wealthier suburbs. Satellite villages, like Broughty Ferry (a former fishing village), were among the most expensive real-estate in Europe.[[57]](#footnote-57)

While the working-class populace engulfed the town, manufacturing had slipped into the hands of a cadre of extremely rich and influential Dundonians.[[58]](#footnote-58) Profiteering among these manufacturing elites led them to shift jute production to India, in the late-nineteenth century, where cheap labour and the free market ensured greater profits.[[59]](#footnote-59) As a result there was a reversal in the earlier period’s tide of people coming into Dundee – and the city began to decline almost at the same time it had become most successful. Scottish historians have long-argued that jute manufacture planted the seeds of the city’s decline, but less well known are the effects of manufacturing and recession on the professional classes. The Scottish historian, Louise Miskell, described such oversight, ‘[The] varied picture of middle-class economic activity is easily overlooked given the dominance of the textile trade as a source of employment for Dundee’s workers.’[[60]](#footnote-60) Many in the professional classes suffered. Jute manufacturing strangled a thriving city; destroying its diverse community of production, mercantilism, trade and shipping. This would have been devastating for the professions who, for the most part, were dependent on fee-paying classes. Arguably in response to the economic instability and hardship brought about by jute many of the children of the professionals in the Victorian Professions’ cohort seemed to have reacted by seeking careers outside the professions. Others became part of that broader story of Scots from all classes who emigrated abroad or migrated to other parts of Britain.[[61]](#footnote-61) Given this backdrop, it is unsurprising that nineteenth-century Dundee was a difficult climate in which to succeed as a professional and it thus provides an excellent prism through which to think about death and the shaping of the professional family. The Scottish focus is also of course valuable in its own right given the relative lack of work on the Scottish family highlighted by Regina Poertner and Iain Riddell elsewhere in this volume.

To this end, Dr David Lyell, a Dundee surgeon, was 75 years of age when he died from ‘softening of the brain’ (senile dementia) in 1881.[[62]](#footnote-62) Although dementia would have stripped him of the time to bid his farewells, the Lyell family’s circumstances would indicate that the doctor died in presence of a number of family members. He had had ample time to prepare for death and, above all, ensure that the family were looked after financially beyond the grave (Lyell left over £8974 in his will).[[63]](#footnote-63) At 32 years of age, Lyell had married within the common age range for the Victorian Professions project cohort, though above the average of 29 for the Dundee professional classes at the time. This tallies with the well-recognised trope that professionals delayed marriage until relatively late in life – 31-33 years being the modal age range in the project’s data. In turn, late marriage age is important because it interacted with the age of death (most males died between their mid-40s and mid-60s), leaving a small window to create and sustain a family and making it more likely that some offspring would spend their childhood years under the shadow of a deceased father. In this sense, Lyell was one of the lucky ones. He lived to see his surviving five sons and four daughters thrive in adulthood. His children were very successful, but outside of the professions. Their choices reflect the character of industry and commerce in Dundee at this time: they all became either a manufacture or a merchant. Lyell’s children seemed to have followed their grandfather’s line. David Lyell (snr) was a linen manufacturer at the end of the eighteenth century – in the era before jute dominance. Four of of his grandsons also became manufacturers (but for jute). Only one of those had a brief period of professional training, as a mechanical engineer (perhaps following his maternal grandfather’s profession of engineering) before turning to jute. The fifth became an East India Merchant; more than likely also in the jute trade. Of the four surviving daughters, only one married (to a commander in the Royal Navy) – a common pattern of female single life for the daughters of professional families, discussed further below. The Lyells escaped financial risk in the professions with an exodus into manufacturing, but their father’s relatively long life and professional success had played an important part in their ability to excel. The late-life death of the Lyell breadwinner had without doubt played into the success of his offspring, shaping the not insubstantial quality of life for descendants who were married or single.

In contrast, the Guthries were at the other end of the scale for professional families faced with Dundee hardship. The head of the family, Charles Guthrie was a law clerk, one of the lowliest of the professions. Such clerks could occasionally move up the social scale, becoming accomplished as a writer (solicitor) in Scotland or moving into the legal administering of business or local governance. Whether or not Charles Guthrie was on an upward career trajectory is unclear, but his wife Grace and their four surviving children were completely unprepared when tuberculosis took Charles’ life in circa 1861.[[64]](#footnote-64) The Guthries experienced the key ingredients for a catastrophic death of the breadwinner: early-aged death; lowly-paid profession; career instability (Dundee had few opportunities for young professionals, as we have seen); and a number of children either dependent or unestablished in their careers. Given the successful transition of Lyell’s children into jute manufacturing, the Guthrie’s fate seems more tragic.[[65]](#footnote-65) Of his children, Helen became a jute weaver, while Isabella, Charles and David worked in mills or factories. Grace looked after the house until the family unit was broken up and their trace was lost in the archives. Death had forced the family out of the professions and down the social scale at the same time as altering family structure and the meaning of internal family relations. It is difficult not to wonder how Grace Guthrie and her children would have fared if circumstances had been slightly different – a diverse town, a few more years for Charles’ career or at least one child earning a decent living. The bereaved but working Guthrie daughters and the spinster Lyell daughters also provides the end point for this chapter. Of all the alternative familial structures in the Victorian Project archival research, one of the most common were women who resided together; be they sisters, mothers and daughters or companions. Steven King has described elsewhere in this volume the ‘fluidity and the porousness of family and household boundaries’ – that people in the nineteenth century were more than adjuncts to nuclear families; they moved about, travelled and returned, sometimes as singletons forming (as heads) their own households. Nevertheless, the richness of the lives of widowed or single women was often obscured or missed by the inadequate and sometimes inaccurate decennial census radar. Despite women outliving men by far in the Victorian Professions database, they were also the hardest to evidence with the same quantity of empirical data for male professionals. Their silence in the project data speaks volumes of a common engendered weakness of otherwise empirically-strong historical research.

**Widows and Spinsters**

The Beazeleys, the Lyells and the Guthries all hint at a subsection of familial structure that death created: widows and spinsters. The lives of both could be chiselled out by the preparation (or not) for the death of a husband or father. It is a truism that death played a singularly strong role in reshaping the lives of woman that married and indirectly for those that did not, in the latter case for instance limiting funds for a daughter’s marriage if a father died impoverished. This could be doubly catastrophic for women because widows frequently outlived their husbands by many years – outstretching the unprepared intestate. On average, Dundee widows outlived their professional-class husbands by approximately two decades. Very few widows remarried but it was not uncommon for widowers to find a second or even a third wife. This alone marks out a severe and starkly gendered difference between men and women after bereavement. Historians of death and mourning in the Victorian period have noted the propensity for widowers to marry, sometimes very soon after the death of a beloved wife. Jalland described how remarriage was less the wayward man seeking further fulfilment and continuation of life, but was more commonly an immediacy of need, weakness, distraction and a desire to bring life into a darkened home and affected children (who sometimes documented years of ‘hell’ until their father remarried).[[66]](#footnote-66) Needless to say, widows were given no such encouragement to remarry. According to Jalland, ‘Widows generally had an even tougher time than widowers, with no paid occupation to divert their time, and no social expectations of re-marriage, except for the youngest and prettiest.’[[67]](#footnote-67) The Victorian mantra of thriftiness was a practical necessity for these long lived female lives. Even so, Robert Morris suggests that women’s spending was constrained by pressures on them to re-invest inherited money in the familial-tied business interests of their mostly male siblings – keeping funds in-house.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Victorians were of course constantly aware of the presence of death. Daughters could benefit from a father’s death, through inheriting funds and relative independence, but the paternally impoverished could be condemned to a single life and economic hardship. Given their lack of earning options (and excluded potential) widows were much more likely than widowers to encounter financial hardship. Wills were innately important. It would seem that husbands and fathers in Dundee bucked gender expectations and prepared specific funds for their daughters and wives to survive independently in their death. Perhaps, in Scotland at least, the length of life as a spinster or widow was not lost on contemporary men. Records of wills in Scotland contrast with those for England. Dundee’s, particularly, prepared their wives and daughters for independence – in which funds were an ever-present problem and necessity for survival. Dundee wills not infrequently ring-fenced funds for their daughters, stipulating that money would not go to husbands, recognising a need for holding wealth in the family or meeting the need for a widow to survive – or perhaps both? It was not uncommon for Dundonians to ring-fence their daughters’ money from future husbands.[[69]](#footnote-69) Sons did not take the lion share – male and female siblings would ‘share and share alike’.[[70]](#footnote-70) Whatever the motivation, Dundee men were concerned with the future finances of their daughters – whether in marriage, spinster- or widowhood. Moreover, widows and spinsters pooled their emotional, social and financial resources. They are not infrequently housed together in the census. Sisters, also, could spend their entire lives as single women in co-habitation. Spinsters were therefore not directly created by a death, but their single status could be defined by an untimely parental death. They were also commonly sustained by the inherited funds of a dead father. As Davidoff described, ‘If through lack of funds, reclusive tendencies or ineptness a family did not go into local Society, girls were almost doomed to remain unmarried.’[[71]](#footnote-71)

In short, beyond Dundee’s well-documented high ratio of women to men in the jute industry, there were nevertheless a high number of spinsters in Dundee families mirroring a trend for Victorian professional families across Britain. The Lyells ratio of one out of four daughters marrying was not uncommon for a professional family in the Victorian Professions database. Across all generations covered in the research dataset of several thousand women, at least half of surviving and traceable daughters did not marry. The Victorian idolised version of the spinster is one of a somewhat stigmatised woman who had failed to secure marriage. We know very little of such women, but the sheer number of single women points to a divergence between image and reality. This was a substantial population group in the Victorian Professions dataset. In contrast to an image of failure, many of these women seem to have lived relatively rich lives. Many widows and spinsters travelled great lengths in Britain and went abroad to visit family in various countries – most commonly, the nineteenth-century centres of immigration, such as Canada, USA and Australia. Some of the Dundee women worked in a mix of trades and professions, such as shop-keeping, artists, nurses, and teachers.[[72]](#footnote-72) Although most towns demonstrate that the majority of women would give up an occupation after marriage, it is clear from the project data underpinning this chapter that a large proportion of British women were living in alternative family structures for much of their lives; alone, together or with kith and kin for much of their lives. However, the day-to-day substances of those lived experiences have been diminished by a lack of substantial research or by the masculinised objectives of projects, such as that underpinning this chapter, that by necessity prioritise economic power over reflecting on the heady impacts of social diversity. The long shadows of literal creations, such as Charles Dickens’ Miss Havisham, continue to warp understandings of female bereavement and their independent lives because for the most part, a male-dominated experience of death in the archives (probates, wills, divorce – the legal machinery) has dictated the empirical agenda. Clearly male death deeply influenced the form of female households but it should not contort historical conceptions of how bereaved and single women carved out and lived their lives beyond the shadow of masculine death.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, this chapter has argued that death rendered family structures differently, but that there were a range of relatively common households that we know little about, such as spinsters and their mothers or enriched and loving step-siblings (and their adoptive parents). The chapter has argued that death was an unwelcome but all-too common (re-)shaper of professional family structures in the Victorian period. Given the instability of professional life in Dundee and the threat of financial failure, the pressure on the Beazeleys to emigrate seems in context for the times. ‘Making it’ in the professions was not the cast-iron financial security that Perkin described. In contrast, there were enormous pressures on professionals in which death played a major part. Establishing oneself in time to marry and have children (and to be able to provide for those children), must have been a constant preoccupation for Victorians. Understanding the ability (or not) to build a professional career is therefore critical, but we know little of this process. Furthermore, we know less about the push or pull of emigration for those who were seeking a career in the professional classes. The survival chances of a young Victorian family sustaining their biological structure until all children were established or married were slim. Towns like Dundee, destabilised under the weight of a mono-manufacturing culture, further exacerbated familial insecurities.

Although the professional family would no doubt have fared better than those of the labouring classes, they were nearer the doors of the workhouse than Perkin described. A professional family *could* be well connected but they could also be isolated. Death, of course, comes to all. Nevertheless, Victorian professionals constructed their familial life within a narrow window of biological and financial opportunity. A family accustomed to life among the professional classes still needed to parry away the grim reaper for as long as they could manage: a bereaved wife would need her children to be grown, with one foot in a professional career or succeeding in a lucrative job sector (such as merchants and manufacturers). The motivation, stress, anxiety and pressure to succeed should be added as an important part of the history of family formation in Victorian Britain. Moreover, the shadow (and circumstance) of death was cast over a range of important ‘survivor’ family groupings that remain darkened. In conclusion, historians should focus more light on the alternative lived experiences of these bereaved families who constituted a large and formative part of Victorian familial and social life.

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3. J. Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle-Class Families in England, 1850-1910* (Manchester: Manchester university Press, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Recounted and countered in: L. Davidoff, ‘The Family in Britain’, in FML Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950. Vol. 2: People and their Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Census,* xxxv quoted in K. Chase and M. Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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10. Davidoff, ‘The Family in Britain’: p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This research draws from an ESRC-funded project held by Professor Michael Moss and Professor Laurence Brockliss (PIs): http://www.victorianprofessions.ox.ac.uk/. I would like to thank them for allowing me to publish this paper as an offshoot from that research, which is described in further detail below. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Davidoff, ‘The Family in Britain’: p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880. Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2002): pp. 1-26; H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society. Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2002): pp. 218-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. S. Sullivan, ‘Spectacular failures: Thomas Hopley, Wilkie Collins, and the reconstruction of Victorian masculinity’, in: M. Hewitt, An Age of Equipoise? Reassessing Mid-Victorian Britain (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000): p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*: p. 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See: http://www.victorianprofessions.ox.ac.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The forthcoming edited volume will detail the full range of this research and data: Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sullivan, ‘Spectacular failures’: p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. L. Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850. Revised Edition* (London: Routledge, 2002): p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid: p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The average crude annual birth rate per thousand increased in the nineteenth century, but declined rapidly from the 1880s so that it was considerably less at the end of the Victorian period than it had been in 1841 (down from 32.3 to 19.9): J. Banks, *Victorian Values: Secularism and the Size of Families* (Aldershot: Gregg Revivals, 1990): p. 97-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. L. Davidoff, *Thicker than Water: Siblings and their Relations, 1780-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): p. 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I am extremely grateful for the permission granted by the Beazeley collection’s executor to use the Beazeley diaries and transcriptions held at the Library and Archives of the Institution of Civil Engineers, held under the transcribed Journals of Alexander Beazeley (Hereafter: ICE Beazeley). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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26. Eliza died of tuberculosis in circumstances the epitome of the ‘good’ death. Ibid: p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Davidoff, *Thicker than Water*: pp. 309-334 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. ICE Beazeley: see Vol. 1 and Vol. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. J. Openheim, "Shattered Nerves": Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): pp. 141-80; K. Price, *Medical negligence in Victorian Britain: the Crisis of Care under the English Poor Law, c. 1834-1900* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015): pp. 35-47; A. Tomkins, ‘Mad Doctors? The significance of medical practitioners admitted as patients to the first English County Asylums up to 1890’, *History of Psychiatry*, 23, 4 (2012): pp. 437-453; A. Tompkins, *Medical Misadventure in an Age of Professionalisation, 1780-1890* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017): pp. 34-116. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Shonfield, *The Precariously Privileged*: p. vi. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. ICE Beazeley: Vol. 1: 18 May, 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. ICE Beazeley: Vol. 2: 3 June 1849. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. ICE Beazeley: Vol 5: 13 November 1850 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. ICE Beazeley: Vol 5: 28 November 1850. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. ICE Beazeley: Vol. 5: 21 June 1851. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. ICE Beazeley: Vol 5: 1 September 1851. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Davidoff, *Thicker than Water*: p. 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*: pp. 39-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
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41. ICE Beazeley: Vo. 5. 3 September 1851. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. ICE Beazeley: Vol. 5: 28 September 1851. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. ICE Beazeley: Vol 5: 11 May 1852 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. ICE Beazeley: Vol 5: 26 March 1852 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. ICE Beazeley: Vol 6: 24 December 1852. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
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