

Stories of Strife? Remembering the Great Depression

*Katrina Srigley, Nipissing University*¹

In this article on memory and memory making, Katrina Srigley examines four sisters' recollections of their Depression-era family, focusing on their father, a Toronto Transit Commission motorman, bookie, and bootlegger. His role in their lives was dynamic and exciting, but also troubling and difficult. The sisters painted deeply textured portraits of him, revealing how individual identities, collective narratives of unemployment and family, as well as silences, shaped the stories that they told. As Annette Kuhn points out, "families are imagined communities," and remembering them is a "key moment in the making of ourselves," and, as Srigley argues, our families and our communities.²

It was a family story straight out of a Hollywood movie. A fantastic Depression-era tale of shady dealings and its consequences: a swashbuckling father with new cars and easy-flowing money, gifts and trips to Europe for a deserving mother, police officers who dropped in occasionally, but always left with a jovial hand shake. For the Tapp children, the excitement and burden of secrets: hidden kitchen compartments, conspicuous tickets on the dining room table, and smells of alcohol wafting from the basement. This along with responsibilities, keeping quiet about their father's gambling and bootlegging operation, pulling phone cords or "run[ning] like the blazes" across the tracks to Bill the Barber's or Happy at the Drugstore, to say "Don't phone in bets! Don't phone in bets!"³ And then, as is often the case in stories of ill-begotten wealth, there was a tumultuous end with a legitimate police raid. A confrontation, the betting tickets removed from their mother's dress, the bootlegging exposed, and the entire operation closed down. Stripped of his influence and status, James Tapp, their father, vanished into the difficult and unpredictable world of mental illness and alcoholism, leaving the

¹ I thank Nell Moran, Jack Moran, Ivy Phillips, Margaret McLean, Joyce Cahill, and James Moran for sharing their family stories with me. The advice I received from anonymous reviewers, as well as Alexander Freund and my co-editor Stacey Zembrzycki, helped me write a much better article, thank you. I also appreciate the support and feedback I received from the participants at the History Department Seminar Series at Nipissing University. All remaining errors are my own.

² Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, 2nd edition (London: Verso, 2002), 1, 2.

³ Margaret McLean and Joyce Cahill, interview with Katrina Srigley, Ajax, Ontario, 23 February, 2002; Nell Moran with Jack Moran, interview with Katrina Srigley, Toronto, Ontario, 31 January, 2002; Ivy Phillips, interview with Katrina Srigley, Pickering, Ontario, 22 March, 2002. Unless otherwise noted, the author conducted all interviews.

household with no breadwinner. To pay the bills their “proud mother” Amelia started to scrub floors and pulled her daughters, one by one, out of school to earn wages to help support the family. Add to this the humiliation of relief and the Tapp sisters’ family stories lurched into the more familiar terrain of Depression-era narratives of poverty and unemployment.⁴

This is a compelling story for a variety of reasons. You can imagine the dealings and decline of this gambling and bootlegging operation: the flurry of activity on race day, ringing phones, and trips down to the track; James Tapp’s camaraderie with the police, the jealousies and whispering about the working-class bloke with money to burn, and then, anger and confusion, and the *schadenfreude* of neighbours who quietly tucked away their winnings or proclaimed that they knew he was up to no good. Though there has been little written about such illegal activities in the 1930s, Tapp’s operation was not particularly unusual. Crime was a strategy many people used to line their pockets or make ends meet in the 1930s. We know this from court records, but we have few individual testimonies to that fact, particularly when it comes to misconduct involving the family home and family members, and even less historical scholarship that explores how family stories about such events are constructed and told.⁵

The Tapp sisters’ memories provide us with such an opportunity, and a fascinating one at that. For three of the Tapp sisters, Ivy Phillips (b.1921), Margaret McLean (b.1922), and Joyce Cahill (b.1927), this Depression-era tale plays a prominent role in their recollections, highlighting the centrality of their mother to their sense of stability and the importance of collective narratives of unemployment, as well as poverty and shame, to their stories. What makes the Tapp sisters’ memories even more intriguing for an oral historian is the counter narrative offered by Nell Moran (b.1914), the eldest sister. On the topic of crime, relief and poverty, or her father’s precipitous decline, there is silence. Instead, Moran’s memories speak of economic stability and celebrate a respectable,

⁴ McLean and Cahill, interview; Phillips, interview.

⁵ For more on crime in the Great Depression see, for instance, Janis Appier, “We’re Blocking Youths’ Paths to Crime’: The Los Angeles Coordinating Councils During the Great Depression,” *Journal of Urban History* 31, 2 (2005), 190-218; Constance Backhouse, *Colour Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Alan Block, *East Side West Side: Organizing Crime in New York, 1930-1950*, 4th edition (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1999); Lara Campbell, *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario’s Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); James P. Huzel, “The Incidence of Crime in Vancouver During the Great Depression,” *B.C. Studies* 69-70 (1986), 211-248; Suzanne Morton, *At Odds: Gambling and Canadians 1919-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Joan Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women: Sexuality, the Family, and the Law in Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001); Katrina Srigley, *Breadwinning Daughters: single women in a Depression-era city* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

benevolent, and prosperous father. Analyzed in concert, the Tapp sisters' recollections provide excellent historical ground to explore how experiences in the present and the past, individual identities, and collective narratives intersect in our telling and retelling of our histories. They expose the manner in which family stories, much like national historical narratives or dominant cultural ideals, create belonging and sustain societal ideals while they disenfranchise and silence.

Historiography

Oral historians have long used recollections to complicate and challenge our understanding of the past. In fact, many were drawn to the methodology because of its democratic possibilities. Unlike most other sources, recorded memories provide the opportunity to consider the voices and experiences of those traditionally silenced in the historical record. This article continues this long tradition, building most explicitly on the work of feminist oral historians. Women who have interviewed women with clear political goals in mind: to generate knowledge of the complexity and variety of women's pasts, rewrite an historical narrative dominated by the stories of men, and, in doing these things, challenge the persistent disempowerment of women. The memories of women "extend well beyond the personal," and by examining them we can destabilize and "subvert sanctioned historical myths and narratives."⁶ As Judith Bennett reminds us, *History Matters*, not just in a clichéd doomed-to-repeat-the-past sense, but in profoundly politically ways that should inspire all of us to think about how the history we write matters to the places and people we write about.⁷

The connection between the present and the past, particularly with regards to "power relations between researchers and researched," is an equally important theme in feminist oral history methodology.⁸ Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai's edited collection, *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, is the most well-known for initiating conversations about the liberatory potential of interviewing. The authors in this volume disrupt assumptions of sisterhood and lay bare the power dynamics inherent in research relationships.⁹ This has allowed scholars, Joan Sangster argues convincingly, to maintain a

⁶ Kuhn, *Family Secrets*, 5. Billie Melman, "Gender, History and Memory: The Invention of Women's Past in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *History and Memory* 5, 1 (spring-summer 1993), 5-41. Cited in Marlene Epp, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 15.

⁷ Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

⁸ Kristina R. Llewellyn, "Productive Tensions: Feminist Readings for Women Teachers' Oral Histories," *Oral History Forum/ Forum d'histoire orale* 23 (2003), 89-112.

⁹ Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

feminist commitment to understanding women's experiences in the past, while also exposing the ways in which the present is implicated in memory construction.¹⁰ In recognition of this fact, feminist oral historians have broadened their investigative scope, bringing the interview context and their own identities into analytical purview. Many have drawn on poststructuralist insights about "language and narrative form" to analyze "the cultural and ideological influences shaping women's memories" and memory making.¹¹ They have exposed how stories become understandable to speakers and listeners, and vested with power because of their structure, symbols, and cultural referents. At the same time, oral historians have become ethnographic observers of the interview context, its relationships, rituals, and results. They understand, as psychologists do, that dominant cultural narratives have power in our society, and that individuals build narratives and counter narratives to establish belonging or challenge the dissonance between their stories and those of the society they live in.¹² This interdisciplinarity has pushed the boundaries of the historical discipline in remarkable directions. Today scholars can build on fascinating studies of

¹⁰ Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 87-100. See also S Geiger, "What's So Feminist About Women's Oral History?" *Journal of Women's History* 2, 1 (1990), 169-170; Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989). There are many examples of this kind of scholarship within feminist oral history and the following have been particularly influential for me: Denyse Baillargeon, *Making Do: Women, Family and Home in Montreal during the Great Depression*, trans. Yvonne Klein (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier Press, 1999); Epp, *Women without Men*; Franca Iacovetta, "Post Modern Ethnography, Historical Materialism and Decentering the (Male) Authorial Voice: A Feminist Conversation," *Histoire/Sociale/Social History* 64, 132 (November 1999), 275-293; *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Post-war Toronto* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999); Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

¹¹ Sangster, *Earning Respect*, 11.

¹² My methodological approach to narratives and narrative analysis has benefited greatly from scholarship in the field of psychology, including P. Atkinson, A Coffey, and S. Delamont, *Key Themes in Qualitative Research* (Oxford: Altarmira Press, 2003); R. Atkinson, "The Life Story Interview as a Bridge in Narrative Inquiry," in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 224-246; L.C Hydén and L. Örvulv, "Narrative and Identity in Alzheimer's Disease: A Case Study," *Journal of Aging Studies* 23, 4 (December 2009), 205-214; Hilda Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001); Cassandra Phoenix, Brett Smith, Andrew Sparks, "Narrative Analysis in Aging Studies: A Typology for Consideration," *Journal of Aging Studies* 24, 1(2010), 1-11; Ross Thompson and Elita Virmani, *Self and Personality* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010).

storytelling, the impact of trauma on recollections, and the influence of myths and collective identities on individual memory, which show us that the ways people remember, the cultural frameworks they employ, as well as the context of memory generation, are just as, and sometimes more important, than what they tell us about the “truths” of a particular time period.¹³

While inspired by a range of scholarship in this field, this article builds on the work of scholars who have explored storytelling as both a method for historical analysis and an object of study. In his examination of the 1949 shooting death of Luigi Trastulli in central Italy, Alessandro Portelli examines individual and collective storytelling, focusing, in particular, on the explanatory power of inconsistent memories. “‘Wrong’ tales” are much more than faulty recollections, writes Portelli. They provide the opportunity for scholars “to recognize the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them.”¹⁴ They also highlight, as Marlene Epp, Daniel James, and Luisa Passerini have done in their work, how historical actors employ collective narratives and myths to sustain their own identities and those of their communities.¹⁵ Stories are cultural artifacts.¹⁶ By analyzing them we add value to our knowledge of the past by revealing how

¹³ For an excellent review of shifts in the field of oral history see: Alistair Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 34, 1 (2007), 49-71. There is a vast range of scholarship in oral history and memory studies. See, for instance, Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story: life stories of three Yukon native elders* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990); *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in Yukon Territory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Epp, *Women without Men*; Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr., and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper and Row, 1980); *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Thomas Klubock, “History and Memory in Neoliberal Chile: Patricio Guzman’s Obstinate Memory and the Battle of Chile,” *Radical History Review* 85 (2003), 272-282; Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: the cultural experience of the Turin Working Class*, trans. Robert Lumley and Jude Bloomfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); “Mythbiography in oral history,” in *The Myths We Live By*, eds. Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (London: Routledge, 1990), 49-60; Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, eds., *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990); Paul Thompson, *Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁴ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Others Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 2. See also Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); *The Order Has been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Plgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹⁵ Epp, *Women without Men*; “The Memory of Violence: Soviet and East European Mennonite Refugees and Rape in the Second World War,” *Journal of Women’s History* 9, 1 (1997), 58-87; Daniel James, *Doña Maria’s Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000); Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*.

¹⁶ C. Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 105.

societal ideals are mobilized and why they persist.¹⁷ With their stories people heal wounds, foster identities, and develop essential connections between themselves, their families and communities, and the world around them. They also perpetuate myths, which can in themselves sustain and extend power structures, leading to inclusion or exclusion.

Storytelling is particularly relevant to the study of the Great Depression. In unprecedented numbers Canadians picked up their pens and wrote letters to federal and provincial politicians to tell their stories and plea for help during this desperately difficult time. Overwhelmingly they spoke about male unemployment and its consequences for families, of good men and women pushed to their absolute limit, of children without enough to eat. Given that the challenges of this period were deeply personal and highly material this is unsurprising. Poverty affected sustenance and shelter; it disenfranchised parents; it humiliated children. In the decades since the Great Depression, this culture of storytelling has expanded, as the stories of grandparents have been passed down to children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, solidifying our sense of the 1930s as a period symbolized by downtrodden men in relief lines.

Perhaps as a consequence of these trends, the historiography of the 1930s relied on individual narratives from its earliest days, nourished, if you will, by generations of storytellers and listeners. As Lara Campbell points out at the very beginning of her recent book, “Almost everyone has a story to tell about the Great Depression.”¹⁸ Working with personal correspondence and interview material, journalists and historians have done a great deal to highlight the value of individual stories to our understanding of the trials and tribulations of these years, with the most recent scholarship adding the stories of women and families, as well as the questions of gender historians to a conversation initially dominated by stories of the unemployed male.¹⁹ This article builds on this work, shifting focus

¹⁷ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 2.

¹⁸ Campbell, *Respectable Citizens*, 3.

¹⁹ See, for example, Baillargeon, *Making Do*; Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression, 1929-1939* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990); Pat Bird, “Hamilton Working Women in the Period of the Great Depression,” *Atlantis* 8, 2 (1982), 125-36; Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years: Memories of Canadians Who Survived the Depression* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1973); Christina Bye, “I Like to Hoe My Own Row: A Saskatchewan Farm Woman’s Notions about Work and Womanhood during the Great Depression,” *Frontiers* 26, 3 (2005), 135-67; Campbell, *Respectable Citizens*; Amy Ruth, *Growing Up in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 2003); Sangster, *Earning Respect*; Srigley, *Breadwinning Daughters*; “Clothing Stories: Consumption, Identity, and Desire in Depression-Era Toronto,” *Journal of Women’s History* 19, 1 (2007), 82-104; “In Case You Hadn’t Noticed!? Race, Ethnicity and Women’s Wage-Earning in a Depression-Era City,” *Labour/Le Travail* 55 (Spring 2005), 69-105; Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England, 1918-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986); T.H.

from the experiences outlined in recollections to an exploration of how and why people remember the Great Depression as they do.

Stories of Strife

I interviewed Nell Moran, the oldest Tapp sister, first. One of Moran's family members had put me in touch with her, but from her perspective I was a young graduate student studying the Great Depression. There were tea and cookies, and a grandparent-like concern about the winter storm raging outside, which I had just navigated using public transit. Then Moran began to tell her story, responding to the first question I always asked, "What are your memories of the Great Depression?" She said with gratitude, "We didn't have any money problems, thank god." I was not particularly surprised by this revelation. Though we rarely think of the 1930s in these terms, most people in Canada were not unemployed or forced to rely on relief in these years. The majority may well have lived in fear of poverty, but those with work also enjoyed greater economic prosperity because the cost of living dropped. Moran's story fit these narratives: her father had steady employment as a motorman for the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC); they had a car; she graduated from high school. Such realities, particularly a regular wage in a city job, certainly tell the story of a family that did not have the "bad problems a lot of people had."²⁰ Nonetheless, Moran's narrative began to take on different meaning when I interviewed her three sisters, as did her husband Jack's playful charge, "Don't believe her. She doesn't tell all [...]. Tell her your father went to prison for bootlegging," which was dismissed during the interview with mock annoyance and a wave of Moran's hand, "Oh Jack. I'm glad you're not around."²¹

This raises the question, why did Moran insist on a family story of prosperity? The interview context provides some explanation. In 2002, Moran was 88 and the oldest surviving member of her family. In this sense, she was the family matriarch nearing the end of her life, a point at which there is greater urgency to tell your story, write your memoir, and distinguish between tales that you will never share and those that will become your legacy. As a recent article in the *Journal of Aging Studies* observes, people whose life narratives are threatened by disease or death hold tightly to stories that bolster their sense of self.²² They do so to "restore" or to secure the "value to [their] lives."²³ This form of recollection

Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2000).

²⁰ Nell Moran, interview.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hydén and Örvulv, 205-214.

²³ R. Atkinson, "The life story interview," 224.

tends, although by no means exclusively, to be driven by the positive developments of the teller's life. This can "draw a veil over more tragic elements," or it can reveal a sense of closure to, or acceptance of, difficult times.²⁴ As Mark Klempler points out, in his fascinating article on life-review interviews with survivors of trauma, elderly interviewees have often come to terms with difficult issues and will therefore remember them with humour, or fail to see why they are important to discuss at all. This sometimes comes as a shock to an interviewer who is hearing about these experiences for the first time.²⁵ As such, life-review narratives reveal with great clarity how people understand and deal with the events of their lives. Nell Moran presented a story that gave her history and her family the greatest value in her mind, a story of middle-class respectability, which erased social problems and affirmed ideal cultural scripts.²⁶

The presence and identity of the interviewer is also important to the construction of life-review narratives, influencing how stories are told and what is revealed within them. During our interview, Moran responded to questions I had prepared for our meeting about her education, wage-earning, leisure time, and family life during the Great Depression. Although our conversation developed organically, as much as possible I allowed Moran and all participants to set the direction of their recollections, I had themes and issues that I wanted to address. Inevitably we gave these topics greater attention and steered away from others, an indication of my influence and power as a university-educated researcher. Most of my interviewees did not finish high school, and only a handful attended university. This, along with the great emphasis placed on the relationship between a university education and success in Canadian society by the end of the twentieth century, certainly shaped our meetings. In this context of memory making, Moran was also sitting down with a stranger. Unspoken understandings and short forms integral to personal and family stories are lost in these contexts. They also shape a willingness to share secrets. As Annette Kuhn points out "families without secrets are rare," but these "secrets inhabit the borderlands of memory," places that family members, not to mention strangers, are rarely welcome.²⁷ Most of my interviewees were uneasy about sharing family secrets with me. When they did relate these stories, the majority first requested, by gesturing silently or whispering conspiratorially, that the tape recorder be turned off, making them off limits for a wider audience. Despite such influences, we should also remember, as

²⁴ Passerini, *Fascism and Popular Memory*, 21.

²⁵ Mark Klempler, "Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma," in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd edition, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2006), 206-207.

²⁶ Joan Sangster also notes the tendency to erase the problems of the 1930s and affirm familial ideals amongst her interviewees. *Earning Respect*, 27-28.

²⁷ Kuhn, 2.

Marlene Epp says, that narrators are not powerless. They exert control through silence, fabrication, and emphasis.²⁸ They determine the story they will tell.

As I would learn from Nell Moran's sisters, telling a positive story of the Great Depression may well have been easier for Moran than explaining the events of the 1930s. In 1933-1934 when James Tapp lost everything, Moran was in her early twenties and the eldest child in the family. Her sisters were much younger: Phillips was thirteen, McLean was twelve, and Cahill was six. As such, Moran was much more aware of the economic situation her parents' faced and bore the emotional burden of that knowledge. More importantly, as an adult who drove the family car, Moran was implicated in her father's criminal activity. Describing it as her sister's "moment of fame," Margaret McLean explained, "[Nell] had to go and witness in the court, and she was written up as the titian haired daughter of the bookie James Tapp." Although Moran's sisters, McLean and Joyce Cahill, both recalled this description of their sister with great laughter in our interview one-month later, when you made it into the scandal sheets of *Hush* "you were really in the news," they agreed that it must have been hard for her to be involved in the legal drama. It was one thing to "toodle about" in the car and quite another to have to testify against her father in court. To make matters worse, after his illegal operation collapsed the father Moran knew disappeared; enveloped by mental instability and medicated by alcohol, he left her mother and the oldest daughter he had lavished gifts on to figure out a way forward.

To counter this reality, Moran remembered an ideal father: a provider, a strong and dominant force in the household, and a respectable man in his community.²⁹ With obvious pride, she spoke of the family home on Swanwick Avenue in Toronto's East End, a working class and British area of the city, which her father bought when he returned from the front following World War I. "It was a brand new house," said Moran, "and we were all raised in there, seven kids." The house was surrounded by gardens, but not for vegetables "just flowers and grass to sit on." As for unemployment or the wage cut backs so closely associated with the thirties, she insisted that her father "always worked" and took care of the family. When asked whether her mother earned wages, Moran answered with some incredulity, "No. She had seven kids [...]. She took care of the house, of course." Her own job as a salesgirl was not required, explained Moran at three different points in our interview; instead it protected her feminine respectability. When she graduated from the Eastern High School of Commerce in 1932, Moran said laughingly I did "nothing! I came home and uh I was eighteen-years-old and there was a gang of us young people in the neighbourhood" that hung out

²⁸ Epp, *Women without Men*, 13.

²⁹ For more on fatherhood during the 1930s see: Campbell, *Respectable Citizens*; Cynthia Comacchio, "A Postscript for Father: Defining a New Fatherhood in Interwar Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 78, 3 (1997), 385-408; Srigley, *Breadwinning Daughters*.

together. In explaining the job, Moran said that a woman in her neighbourhood suggested it was the respectable choice for a young woman her age. Apparently, “she thought I should not be running with this gang of boys,” she said, elaborating, “We were perfectly innocent.” In any case, this neighbour, a manager at the Jenny Lind Candy Store, thought that she should give Moran a job. When asked whether there was any resistance to women working during the 1930s, Moran told this story again, adding that wage-earning “was becoming natural” for young women.

To complete this picture, Moran emphasized her father’s benevolence. “Father helped a lot of people, I know that. He would. He was that kind of person.” Moran’s sisters also remembered their father’s generosity. “He would give all the kids on the street presents at Christmas,” explained McLean.³⁰ But, this gift giving was bittersweet because their father was not equally generous with them. “Dad gave so much away sometimes he forgot Christmas. I’ll never forget,” continued McLean, “Ivy and I had a baby carriage between us, and these were good times, and we each had a doll [...]. In the meantime Dad is giving away parcels” to kids on the street but he forgot presents for us. Such experiences were not part of Moran’s story. Instead, she ended her interview by reiterating that her “Dad took care of [them],” fulfilling his appropriate role as a breadwinner and, at the same time, satisfying Moran’s need and desire to remember and celebrate a “normal” father.

Along with the male breadwinner ideal, material wealth was integral to Moran’s family story. As a motorman for the TTC, James Tapp would have earned about seven hundred dollars a year.³¹ This was a stable income, but not sufficient for luxuries. Nonetheless, “here is a man who was supposed to be working on the TTC as a driver,” explained daughter Joyce Cahill with laughter, “but [he] had a great big car, a new Buick every year, [or] a Durant, and his two oldest daughters had fur coats! And, he’s working for the TTC!” A car of this size cost between eight hundred and one thousand dollars in the early thirties.³² As the only child old enough to drive, Moran benefited particularly well from their prosperity. In 1932, when she turned eighteen her father pushed her to get her license so that she could drive. “I started to drive then because he was a lousy driver. He hated it,” explained Moran. She used to run errands for her parents and sometimes, Moran said laughingly, she and her sister Violet would “toodle off” on excursions of their own. This freedom was a luxury few Torontonians enjoyed

³⁰ McLean and Cahill, interview.

³¹ Canada, Census, 1931 Vol. XII, 196. In 1931, this was the average yearly earning of conductors and motormen of streetcars in Ontario.

³² For an advertisement for and cost of the Durant and similar cars see: *Toronto Daily Star*, January 2, 1931, 13; *Toronto Daily Star*, August 28, 1931; *Toronto Daily Star*, March 9, 1933; *Toronto Daily Star*, March 10, 1933.

in these years, let alone a young woman. Nell really thought “she had it made,” said her sister Ivy Phillips with resentment still evident in her voice. “She really thought she was something, *really*. I mean she drove the car, and uh she had a fur coat. Believe it or not she really thought she was somebody.”³³ Since James Tapp put great weight on his material possessions and reputation in his community, it is unsurprising that his eldest daughter learned that cars and fur coats were markers of acceptance. When her father lost everything, Moran’s privileges suddenly turned to responsibilities that were far less glamorous: an emotionally and economically dependent father, work as a domestic and then in a candy store, along with childcare responsibilities when her mother started working outside the home. In Moran’s words, “I was always carting children around.” Her sisters were certain she was resentful of this role, explaining that their sister “wasn’t very kind” to them. She was “too busy with her social life”.³⁴ This was because “she was dad’s favourite and the first born,” explained Margaret. “She was, I guess, resentful about having to stay with us.” The need to maintain a certain image, replete with symbols of wealth, lasted throughout Moran’s life. Her grandson, James Moran, explained that she always placed great importance on the car she drove and the quality of her jewelry.³⁵ As the association of material goods with success has only intensified in North American society since the Great Depression, this is unsurprising. Moran never deviated from her story of respectability, and at eighty-eight she sustained a respectable present with her respectable past, deploying collective narratives of the ideal male breadwinner and using symbols of her family’s material wealth to do so.

I met Margaret McLean and Joyce Cahill at their apartment building in Ajax, Ontario, one month after I interviewed their oldest sister. When giving me her sister’s phone number, Moran had assured me that Marg would have a lot to tell me. She was certainly right, though perhaps not in the sense that Moran had imagined. We started the interview before Cahill arrived. I sat listening from the corner of McLean’s overstuffed couch as she said immediately, and with surprising finality, that she “thought of the word poge” when reflecting on the 1930s. The only good thing about being on relief, McLean explained, “was that most people were on the same boat” in their “average” neighbourhood. What McLean remembered most of all was her “mother’s shame” because “she was a very proud women and the trucks, the green trucks, if memory serves me right, pulling up to the house [that] was shameful for her.” Youngest sister Joyce Cahill breezed in shortly thereafter, along with admonitions from her sister for being late, orders to sit down, and jokes about her newly waxed upper lip, which she urged us to ignore with a wink. As for the 1930s, Cahill was equally clear: “We

³³ Phillips, interview; McLean and Cahill, interview.

³⁴ McLean and Cahill, interview; Phillips, interview.

³⁵ James Moran, conversation with Katrina Srigley, Vancouver, British Columbia, 2008.

were *poor* you know. We were poor.” The clothing, particularly the shoes, which “squeaked” and “flapped”, were humiliating. With resentment still apparent in her voice Cahill affirmed, “I *hated* those pogeys shoes and I hated wearing them.”³⁶ And so their story began. With little prompting, the sisters told me about their father the bookie and bootlegger: the “tremendous raids” and “crooked cops” who came to the back door, gifts for neighbourhood families and money for the local baseball team, the breakdown when it all ended. At this point, McLean asked Cahill her “opinion of [their] mother,” and Cahill replied with gravity, “The most wonderful woman in the world.” Yes, “absolutely,” agreed Margaret.

At many points during this interview, I was little more than a spectator. McLean and Cahill clearly took pleasure in telling their family story together, in reaffirming their sisterhood through joint storytelling. In these moments, their narratives were a source of connection and belonging.³⁷ On the topic of their mother’s wage-earning, they recounted with fierce pride a woman who made the best of a horrible situation. “She had to do something,” explained McLean, “so she just gritted her teeth and did it.” Cahill picked up the story from there. “She couldn’t do anything. Our mother was not schooled [...] well she couldn’t have got a job then anyhow (“No, good heavens!” interjected McLean), but what she did do was (“Clean!” said Marg) clean offices.” Their storytelling was also ebullient and gregarious, playful as they prodded one another’s memories with the teasing, sarcasm, and disagreement typical of siblings. In 1937, when McLean was fifteen, she related that she “was a homely looking kid” with bushy eyebrows, straight black hair, and a mustache. That was until her older sisters got a hold of her. “Nell says ‘let’s take her over.’ They sat me down in the kitchen chair. They shaved my mustache. They plucked my eyebrows. They curled my hair.” And, “out came Cinderella,” said Joyce. “I didn’t look all the bad I tell yah.” But, asked Joyce impishly, “Are we still in the Depression or was that 1960?” The sisters burst into uproarious laughter. In these shared interview contexts, stories are lengthened, changed, and adapted by mutual recollection. There is great security in telling a story together and, as was the case with these sisters, frivolity and laughter. This can, as Luisa Passerini reminds us, wrap the difficult events of the past in a safer more comfortable present, making it easier to remember.³⁸

It is undeniable that McLean’s and Cahill’s memories of their mother undergird their family story. As a strong counterweight to a seemingly absent and

³⁶ McLean and Cahill, interview.

³⁷ Though clearly analyzing different contexts, Becki Ross’s articulation of the relationship between language, pleasure, and belonging has influenced my thoughts on storytelling. *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex, and Sin in Postwar Vancouver* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

³⁸ Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, 21.

difficult father, Amelia Tapp has a central and much celebrated role in the sisters' recollections. She takes on hagiographical proportions, which "lift [her] above others [...] [to] a celestial realm."³⁹ If their father was flawed, Amelia Tapp was a perfect mother: she was thrifty, devoted, and self-sacrificing, softening the jagged edges of hard times.⁴⁰ She was "the last of the women with a capital W," said McLean. A title she defined in the following way: "Well first of all she was a good wife, secondly she *adored* her children." Though she ruled with an "iron fist," her children "idolized her." She was a "saint", said Cahill. She was also giving, the picture of a good Christian woman:

She was so kind to other people. A few blocks back of our house was a railroad track, and when the Depression came there were a lot of hobos and I suppose word got around. They would come through the lane through the back and knock on our mother's door, and if mother only had a dollar she would give them maybe fifty cents. She never turned anybody away from the door. And she used to tell us children 'I was born without anything and I will go without anything.' And that was her creed in life.

Finishing her story with a wry chuckle, McLean said, "They don't make them like that anymore."⁴¹

Along with stories of their perfect mother, all three daughters recognized her as a unifying force in the household. As for feeling disappointment during the 1930s, "no" the sisters explained, "We had mother." She was the "backbone" of the family. When their father was paralyzed by depression, their mother worked as a domestic. To earn wages and run a household with seven children meant that she would leave the house at "three of four o'clock in the morning for two hours, come back get us kids ready for school or whatever and then go again."⁴² She

³⁹ Allan Greer, *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2005), viii.

⁴⁰ Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, 34-35; See also: Passerini, "Mythbiography in Oral History". On motherhood in the Canadian context in these years see: Katherine Arnup, *Education for Motherhood: Advice for Mothers in Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); Baillargeon, *Making Do*; Campbell, *Respectable Citizens*; Cynthia Comacchio, *Nations are Built of Babies: Saving Ontario's Mothers and Children, 1900-1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); *Infinite Bonds of Family: Domesticity in Canada, 1890-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Susan Porter Benson, *Household Accounts: Working-Class Family Economies in the United States* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007); Srigley, *Breadwinning Daughters*.

⁴¹ McLean and Cahill, interview.

⁴² McLean and Cahill, interview; Phillips, interview.

always left a pot of porridge on the stove. Cahill wondered whether I might not find the story of their mother more interesting:

She was such a wonderful women and she did so much for us and worked like you wouldn't believe. This poor little woman going [to work] at three o'clock in the morning. She was 5'3 and never weighed more than 100 pounds [...]. She was everything that a mother could be even though she didn't have the money to do it [...] and she had a husband that had a mental breakdown.

She was incredibly resourceful. Once when the family was really out of money, their mother went around the house with the vacuum, sticking it in heat ducts and hidden corners. There was great celebration when she "got 25 cents outta there" and sent the children to buy fish and chips for dinner. Even the embarrassment of relief was tempered by her presence. "Half of the kids in our area were flapping around" in those "pogey" shoes, said Cahill. The sisters remembered being embarrassed, but they were young enough, they explained, that they "didn't really know and we, we had so much not fun, well I guess it was fun, and a really good mother. You can't laud her enough." "No," affirmed Joyce, "you can't because if it hadn't been for mother things would have been entirely different." After bickering playfully about who was their mother's favourite, McLean turned to her mother's photograph, which was standing on a nearby table, and greeted her endearingly, "Hi mom."

Along with celebration and pride, the stories McLean, Cahill, and Phillips tell of their mother are built around silences and omissions. They avoided, for instance, her connection to the underground operation, which was run out of the household she ruled with an "iron fist". In their memories, she appeared as an observer rather than a participant with betting tickets stuffed down the front of her dress, a victim in the situation instead of a benefactor of prosperity or a co-conspirator. She may have allowed the police to enter through the back door, but her saintly generosity towards hobos from the nearby railway tracks was far more important to their understanding of her role in their lives. Where their father failed, their mother succeeded, giving cohesiveness and stability to their family story.

In similar ways, collective narratives of Depression-era male unemployment also bring normalcy to their stories. To explain the family's situation and their experiences during the 1930s, McLean and Cahill did not reflect on their father's culpability; instead they aligned him with other down and out men. If there was one "bright side" to the Great Depression, said McLean, it was that "everybody was in it together. There was more of, I think uh people binding together during the Depression." When the Tapp family found themselves

without money, forced to rely on government assistance and cope with relief shoes, they were suddenly just like everyone else on their street. "Nobody cared" about the family's situation "because everybody was poor." In this way, James Tapp became a downtrodden unemployed male rather than a common criminal. As his daughters explained it, their father's biggest mistake was his generosity. He was a "charitable bookie," said McLean, and he got a little foolish giving everything away. When his operation collapsed "because of his generosity he had no money to fall back on, so mother had seven of us. She had to do something." Their father's mistakes were explained by his charity and wrapped in respect for and humour about a "very clever, very smart" man who lost his way. The raids were "tremendous"! The sisters' jobs and the secrets surrounding them were a source of mischievous adventure. The gifts for neighbours were about munificence rather than a handy way to keep the neighbours quiet. "Think of it, illegal, imagine," said McLean with incredulity. Now the police officers, "they were crooked. They were very very crooked police," explained Cahill. "They would tell him when there was going to be a raid," elaborated McLean, "and dad would pay them and pour them drinks and duh de duh," everything would go away.

This story of a foolishly charitable father does not entirely hide the negative consequences of James Tapp's activities for his family. The following photograph well highlights this underlying narrative. When shame entered their recollections, whether it was "a bit" or "a lot" of shame, McLean and Cahill resisted associating it with their father. "Not about dad being a bookie," said Cahill. "Gosh no," affirmed McLean.

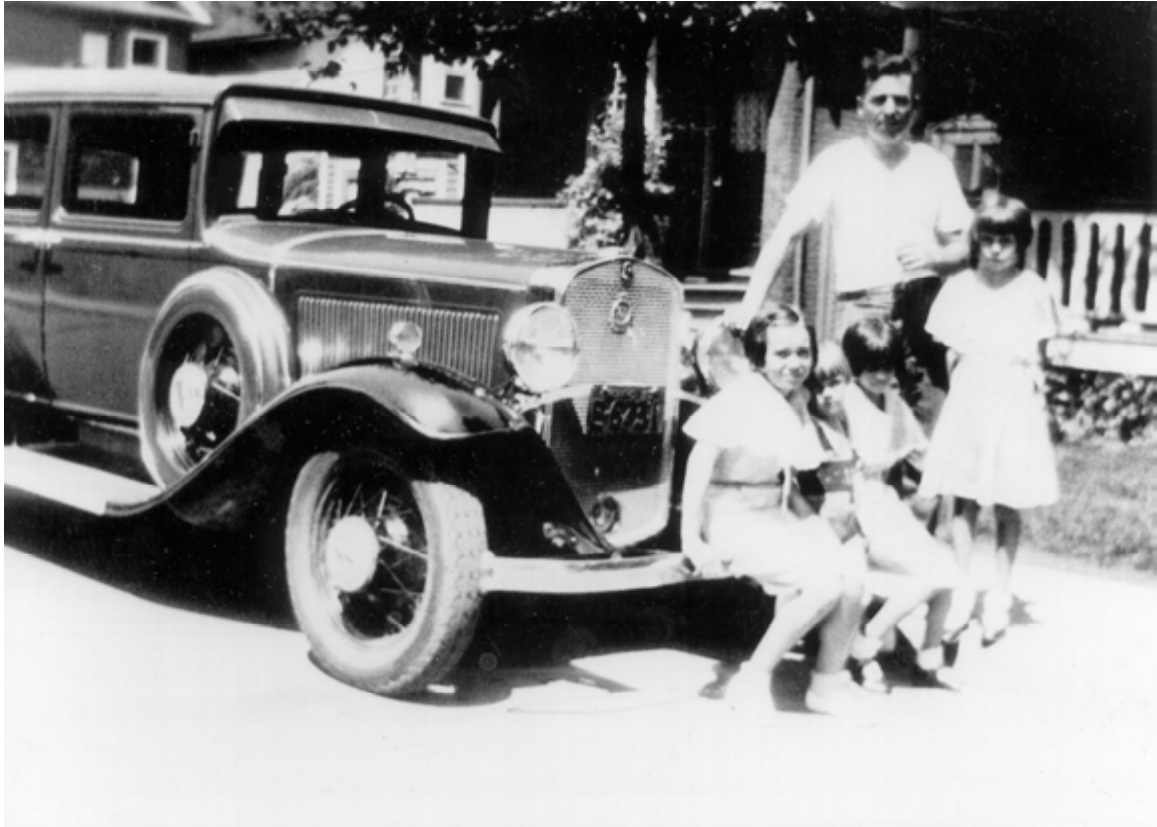


Image 1: James Tapp and his daughters, from right to left, Ivy, Margaret, Joyce, and Ella. Photograph courtesy of Margaret McLean.

In this memory-making context, my interviewees shared this photograph to explain the family's prosperity and Tapp's happiness. It became "a prop, a prompt, a pre-text" for explaining his success.⁴³ James Tapp certainly appears proud, leaning with casual purpose on his new vehicle while he posed for the photographer. But what about his children perched around him? They do not appear jovial or proud or excited by the adventure of the mischievous underground operation that made the car possible. Instead, they look uncomfortable, sad, embarrassed, even resentful about posing for the photograph and their father's performance.⁴⁴ Despite casting their father as a benign bookie and bootlegger, there is much to suggest that he played a troubling role in their household.

My interview with Ivy Phillips one month later was more subdued than my meeting with her two younger sisters. We met alone and shared a cup of tea in Pickering, Ontario, where she was living with her daughter. As for the Great

⁴³ Kuhn, 13.

⁴⁴ Kuhn, 15.

Depression, “I liked my childhood. I was born in 1921 [...] and we were poor, yeah, but the thing is I liked it,” Phillips explained with a wise chuckle at the beginning of our interview. “I liked it. I didn’t think of being poor really. I didn’t think that. I thought everybody was the same.” In later years, she realized the extent of their economic vulnerability and its impact on her family. Phillips related the day of the final raid in great detail. It was an otherwise normal Saturday afternoon: the phone was sitting on the dining room table where her father did his business; Ivy had turned on the Rudd heater in the basement, she was going to take a bath. But then the calm of normal routines was shattered by the unannounced arrival of the police, including a female police officer, something Phillips recalls was necessary for searching Tapp’s wife and daughters. They found betting tickets in the big grandfather clock and in Amelia Tapp’s dress, which produced a loud confrontation that all three sisters recalled. They then waited to seal the deal with an incriminating phone call, but Phillips had done her job:

I was having a bath, going to have one, when they broke in and they made a fuss and immediately they cleared the room and the man sat waiting for the phone to ring so he could [catch Dad] [...] so I asked the woman if I could go down and turn off the Rudd heater or it would blow and she said ‘yeah’. So I went down and pulled the plug and turned off the heater and came up again.⁴⁵

In the end, Tapp was charged with gambling and bootlegging offences. The sisters are not sure whether he paid a fine, spent time in jail, or both, a curious and notable lack of specificity. They do remember that he was charged. Whatever the specific outcome of the trial, Tapp lost everything. He “had spent his money like no tomorrow so he had nothing behind him,” explained McLean. The family “was really destitute.” To make matters worse for Tapp, nobody “stood up for him when he lost his money.” After he lost everything, “he changed,” said Phillips, “I mean mentally he changed. He wasn’t the same smart man.”

The consequences for the entire family were dire: left with no income and an ill husband, their mother worked and so did each of the sisters to help put food on the table. “Even Nell!” had to work, exclaimed Phillips. It also accelerated his reliance on alcohol. This numbed him to the world around him, to the unemployment that changed him mentally. Ivy was clearest in her story of the negative side of her father’s alcohol and gambling. “He was a drunk,” she explained matter-of-factly, and when he had his beer, he was happy. When he lost everything she remembered sitting on the basement stairs with her siblings and

⁴⁵ Phillips, interview; McLean and Cahill, interview.

watching him respond with anger. "One day he was absolutely finished with the beer, so he smashed everything down in the cellar, all the bottles, everything he ever did." This did not stop his alcoholism, which had a great impact on Phillips who remembered him being very confrontational and "nasty" when he was drunk. "[I] have never had a glass of beer and I have never drunk and I never will. It made me feel so bad." With the operation shut down, at least the police stopped coming to the back door. At least they did not have to put up with that anymore. "Our childhood, I am sure my sisters will agree with me," said Phillips, "focused around mother."

At thirteen, Ivy Phillips was seven years younger than her oldest sister, and unlike Moran, was willing to discuss her father's downfall in the context of the difficult Depression years. Her memories were also shaped much more clearly with sadness and regret than those of Cahill and McLean. This was in part a consequence of her individual story. As a teenager in the mid-thirties and the middle child, Phillips found herself caught between the responsibilities of age and the carefree pastimes of childhood. As with her other siblings, Phillips experienced the immediate consequences of economic destitution through the reduced prosperity of the household, including stretched budgets, a mother who worked outside the home, relief, and the emotional instability of her father, but she was also thrust into a position of sacrifice and responsibility sooner than Margaret or Joyce. When Phillips turned sixteen, her mother told her that she was "finished" with school. Like her older sisters Nell, Violet, and Ella, she had to find work to help pay the bills. First she earned wages as a domestic and then joined Nell at the Jenny Lind Candy Store. This reality was exceptionally difficult for Phillips who had dreamed of becoming a nurse. "All I know is I wanted to be a nurse more than anything in the world. Ella and I both went to apply [...] and we couldn't because we didn't have our [high school]," explained Phillips. "I didn't even get to high school." She therefore remembers the Depression as a time of great personal sacrifice that had a long-term impact on her choices.

To cope, Phillips explained, "We all did what we could do," but such acceptance did not eliminate her envy of more economically secure families, which she spoke movingly about:

Well, I felt envious of the girls that went to Malvern and you'd see them the way they were dressed that bothered me. I hated going down that time of the morning and I had to pass all the girls all the kids going to Malvern [...]. I really *hated* it. That's something that bothered me that I couldn't go on to high school.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ivy Phillips, interview, Toronto, Ontario, March 22, 2002.

Phillips also recalled how the family's poverty affected her health. When she was hospitalized for appendicitis, she had to stay for two weeks in a crowded hospital ward because her father could not afford coverage. After she left the hospital, she was sent right back to work as a domestic. On the first day, she collapsed and her sister Violet put her in bed, insisting that she stay there until she felt better. McLean's and Cahill's memories also make clear a sense of shame and vulnerability produced by the family's impoverishment. While both sisters noted that nobody cared about poverty because "everybody was poor," they also shared stories of exclusion and resentment because of class differences. When she was invited to a birthday party on Lyle Street, a wealthier area in their neighbourhood, Cahill remembered that the family "really didn't want me to go because I was poor," but their young daughter invited her anyway. She was given a necklace, costume jewelry, at the party, and she thought, "that was the most wonderful thing in the whole world" for a young girl wearing "pogey shoes" and her brother's hand-me-down coats. During these difficult years, McLean recalled having to work as a domestic on Christmas Eve, serving a table of eight, as well as washing and drying every dish and pot. At the end of it all, "nobody came out to say thank you, good bye, how are you, or Merry Christmas. I think they gave me two dollars. I took it home gave it to mother, but I never forgave those people or the likes of them that could treat children like that. That was the only bitterness, people who spurned us," finished McLean with a chuckle. Despite their laughter, it is clear that the sacrifices of the 1930s were difficult for the Tapp sisters. Their father's generosity and desire to maintain appearances meant that he sometimes forgot his own children. Shame, about relief trucks and clothing, class differences, and giving up dreams of higher education, was also central to their narratives.

Conclusion

Like so many men during the Great Depression, James Tapp was unemployed and, as a consequence, suffered from a loss of self respect when his family was forced to scramble to make ends meet through government relief and wage earning. He was not, however, a typical jobless man, having lost his source of income when the police shut down his gambling and bootlegging operation. Just how Tapp's criminal activities and unemployment factored into the stories of his four daughters offers us a window on the role of identity and collective narratives in memory and memory making. In interesting ways, the Tapp sisters' stories of strife bolstered their individual identities, building on and perpetuating ideals of motherhood, male breadwinning, and middle class respectability to do so.

Nell Moran, the oldest and the most involved in her father's criminal activity, constructed a life story that did not address crime, poverty, and shame. She left such experiences in the past, and chose instead to remember her father's

generosity and success, reaffirming her image of him and developing a particular legacy for him. He was an ideal father, a provider in every sense. In contrast, though not as sharply as it initially appears, James Tapp's underground operation and subsequent collapse figured centrally in the memories and stories told by her three younger sisters. As children and young women, they were less affected than their older sister Nell, but faced equally difficult economic times. Nonetheless, McLean and Cahill regarded their father's activities as socially acceptable. To explain the problems the family faced, they built on broader collective narratives of unemployment and poverty. Phillips drew far more direct connections between her father and her individual struggles and sacrifices. A middle child, she was forced into the adult world earlier than Cahill and McLean. As for the very obvious, difficult, and much less discussed emotional challenges of a father who drank and was depressed and who, in his most generous times, forgot his youngest children, the sisters championed their mother. By doing this they avoided the complicated and difficult issue of the place of their father in their lives and in their Depression-era stories and highlighted, through their recollections, the ongoing importance of gender and class ideals, which were hardly representative of the family life that they lived.