

BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE CHANGING FAMILY

As always in periods of unusual upheaval, some people profit. Among them these days are the American writers, editors, publishers, and sellers of popular books on such subjects as "Creative Divorce," "Utopian Motherhood," "How To Be Your Own Sex Therapist," "Part-Time Fathering" (for the "Second-Time Single Man") on through a seemingly endless list that demonstrates, if nothing else, the existence of a vigorous sub-industry in U.S. publishing.

Some of the self-help manuals have serious ideas behind their exhortations; some avoid the turgid prose that characterizes much of the published research on marriage and the family; some may even provide practical advice to the troubled. But make no mistake. These are not books. They are "products," so designated by their manufacturers and in the book trade journals.

A great deal of the academic writing and publishing in this field is also "product"—though never so described in periodicals like the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* and the *American Sociologist* where both work-in-progress and reviews of published books by recognized specialists and new researchers appear. Too often, professional jargon ("decoupling," "dyads," "serial monogamy," "serial polygamy," "the coefficient of preservation") fails to cloak advocacy or hack work aimed at the college textbook market.

In short, books on marriage and the family are legion, but few are worthy of the general reader's attention. Several notable technical studies of women, black families, and the effects of modern life on children have been published

in recent years. These are, however, too narrow to provide sufficient perspective on the broader causes of contemporary discontents. For a longer-range view of changes in marriage and the family, we turn to two books that introduce to American readers the promising new work begun in the 1960s and '70s by European social historians of the *Annales* school.

These scholars combine the techniques of demography, anthropology, sociology, economic history, biology, linguistics, group psychology, and other disciplines. Their close attention to shifting marital patterns in France and elsewhere has produced a new understanding of the forces behind fundamental changes in the family from the 16th through the 19th centuries. Some of their esoteric findings are available in **Family and Society: Selections from the *Annales* Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations** (Johns Hopkins, 1976, cloth & paper) edited by Robert Forster and Orest Ranum. This book can be recommended to readers with an interest in minutiae, the significance of which they may wish to ponder for themselves.

Much wider in its appeal is Edward Shorter's breezy **The Making of the Modern Family** (Basic Books, 1975), the first successful synthesis of *Annales* papers and similar historical work done by Philippe Ariès, Etienne van de Walle, John Demos, author of **A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony** (Oxford, 1970), and scores of other European and American scholars. Shorter, associate professor of history at the University of Toronto, brings the story down to our own perplexing time.

His rueful conclusion: "Towards the

end of the eighteenth century a transformation in domestic life occurred, the shift from traditional to nuclear family. I argued that 'capitalism' was the driving force behind that change. What master variable is at work today though, I must say, is unclear. . . . I think that things are much more complex than just the 'wish to be free' suddenly popping itself into the consciousness of the millions and millions of anonymous women about whom this book has mainly been."

The best path to understanding the social forces that are disrupting American family life in the 20th century may eventually emerge from scholarship of the *Annales* sort applied to the recent past. If so, the four-volume study, **Five Thousand American Families—Patterns of Economic Progress** edited by Greg J. Duncan, James N. Morgan, et al. (Institute for Social Research, Univ. of Mich., 1974-76, cloth & paper) is a move in the right direction. The Michigan researchers, investigating the economic well-being of their 5,000 subject families over an extended (seven-year) period, learned much as well about changes in family composition (often as a result of divorce and remarriage).

It is in the interpretation of such raw data to depict causes—not only effects—that problems arise, however. Much of even the better social science output in this field is excessively colored by the author's own biases or acceptance of current fashion. Many of Shorter's comments, for example, seem clearly derived from first-hand experience. And a tendency to reflect the attitudes of the moment flavors the prolific output of Jessie S. Bernard, emerita professor at Pennsylvania State University, who is to the sociology of American marriage what Margaret Mead is to the anthropology of family life in primitive cultures. Her first book, written with her

husband, L. L. Bernard, and published in 1934, was on sociology and the study of international relations. After that she switched to "interpersonal relations."

Mrs. Bernard's successive volumes (and views) on courtship, dating, mating, and marriage, the renovation of marriage, divorce, remarriage, teen-age culture, women, wives, mothers, the future of motherhood, the future of parenthood, and related subjects constitute a veritable fever chart of American family life.

For example, her **American Family Behavior** (Harper, 1942), a straightforward textbook, marches firmly forward to the optimistic conclusion that, although "a certain amount of malfunctioning and maladjustment is inevitable," social science "will help us discern trends and give us methods of adjusting family life to them."

How changed her tone 30 years later! In **The Future of Marriage** (World, 1972, cloth & paper), Mrs. Bernard explores such matters as the different perceptions of the same marriage held by husband and wife, as seen in their contradictory answers to interviewers' questions concerning sex, money, who disciplines the children, even who mows the lawn. She now says that marriage has a future but not with its traditional form retaining a monopolistic sway. As options, she sees many different living arrangements, including "temporary permanent" marriages for child-rearing, and new relationships for middle age and beyond, including, perhaps, polygynous combinations (one man, more than one woman). In an autobiographical afterword she adds that she did not "expect this book to turn out to be on the destructiveness for women of marriage, with its 'structured strain'—a result all the more remarkable because most of the facts had been generally known. . . . I had reported many of

them myself a generation ago. This time round, however, they looked different. The message of the radical young women had reached me."

Only the demographers seem able to preserve a certain detachment. The outstanding compilation of American data is **Marriage and Divorce: A Social and Economic Study** by Hugh Carter and Paul C. Glick (Harvard, 1976, rev. ed.), based on statistics gathered by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, where Mr. Glick is a senior demographer. Its authors note that though their new research "highlights extensive recent changes in life-styles relating to marriage," it also "documents the continuing preference of a vast majority of post-adolescent adults for life as married (or remarried) persons." Many of the changes, they say, "may be properly interpreted as reflections of a deep desire for greater satisfaction from married life, even if delayed marriage or divorce is required to realize it."

A few scholars have turned to the study of fiction to help illuminate the puzzles of family life and marriage. Among them is William J. Goode, sociologist and author of an important work on marriage and kinship in Arabia, Africa, India, and the West entitled **World Revolution and Family Patterns** (Free Press, 1963, cloth, 1970, paper).

With Nicholas Tavuschi, he compiled **The Family Through Literature** (McGraw-Hill, 1975, paper), organized to fit the framework that Goode uses in teaching students about the family as institution. It includes excerpts that range from Tolstoy to Portnoy.

Jenni Calder, in **Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction** (Oxford, 1976) also analyzes the work of Tolstoy—along with that of Jane Austen, Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, Meredith, Hardy, Gissing, Marie Corelli, Mrs. Gaskell, and others. The sharp images of family life—good and bad—that she has chosen mirror an institution that was, in the 19th century, essentially static and well-defined, hence easier to portray than is now the case (one is led to speculate whether a connection exists between the growing instability of family life and the decline of the novel in the mid-20th century). Not that the writers of the Victorian era were invariably successful in dealing with their basic material. Tolstoy's **Anna Karenina** may be as fine a book about marriage as we will ever have. But in an 1889 short story, "The Kreutzer Sonata," even Tolstoy finds himself, in Ms. Calder's view, defeated by "the contradictions of marriage and family life" in a way that suggests "we should not under-estimate their depth and influence."

—Lois Decker O'Neill, Associate Editor (Books)