

Vicky Holmes, *Living with Lodgers: Household Economy and Social Relations in Working-Class Victorian England*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2025. x + 174 pp. 9781526170286

Vicky Holmes's new book *Living with Lodgers: Household Economy and Social Relations in Working-Class Victorian England* is an illuminating look into the lives of lodgers and householders between 1840 and 1900. Holmes, who teaches at the University of Notre Dame's London programme, has written widely about working-class domestic spaces and material culture.

Living with Lodgers is on lodgers in working-class homes (not in common lodging houses) and the householders who lodged them (the term "landlady" was, it turned out, rarely used by contemporaries in this context (4). Holmes seeks to correct many of our assumptions about the lodging relationship: householders were not always impoverished widows, lodgers were not always young single men, and women householders were more likely to be seduced by their male lodgers than they were to play the part of the lusty entrapping widow from music-hall songs. In their place Holmes delineates a more complex lodging ecology.

Holmes's main source base is coroners' reports, which she has used in her previous scholarship and which, she argues, "made almost daily records of life behind closed doors" (5). In the Introduction she explains the work of the coroner in spatial as well as legal terms and makes a strong argument for the importance of these sources. Her main access to coroners' reports (many of which are no longer extant) is through newspaper reports of coroners' court proceedings, many of which relay witness testimony verbatim. Holmes used the British Library Newspaper Archive and its search function, an unparalleled resource which was hard to imagine even 20 years ago. She sampled newspapers from 1840 to 1900 to create a database of almost 900 inquests and over 1,000 lodgers (7-8). Where she was able, Holmes used censuses, birth, marriage, and death records, and newspaper articles to expand her knowledge of her subjects' lives. Holmes' clear explanation of her source base, along with her very readable prose and her well-chosen examples, make her book one that could easily be assigned to undergraduate students.

The book consists of six chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter starts with a case study, and then continues with broader assertions supported by quantitative and qualitative evidence. In Chapter One, we are introduced to the wide range of households that took in lodgers. We begin with the story of Mary Webb, a mother of three. Mary took in lodgers first as a young widow, then as the wife of a violent drunkard, then as a widow again. She married for a third time in the early 1890s and stopped taking lodgers until 1912 when, widowed once again, she pivoted back to lodgers. This case study is a good example of the complexities Holmes teases out—Mary needed to take in lodgers as a widow, but also as a wife—and of her excellent research, as she traces Mary Webb from Oxfordshire to Devizes to Liverpool and back to Oxfordshire over more than thirty years and four surnames. Many of those who took in lodgers were deserted wives (though interestingly there are no spinsters in her sample). Male-headed households also took in lodgers, since the ideology of the male breadwinner was not a reality but an ideal (husbands who did not work or who drank away their wages, however, very much a reality). Taking in lodgers was one aspect of the economy of makeshift, and the cruelty of the Poor Laws factored in here as well.

In Chapter Two, we meet the diverse group of people who were lodgers. Holmes shows that the stereotype of the young single male lodger described the majority of lodgers, but not all of them.

Many lodgers were not new to town (Holmes calls them “non-migrants”); they were young single women or men, widows, and married couples. Parental death could send young single adults into lodgings, and so could family tensions. Married couples might live in lodgings when they first married, before they could afford a household, or later on in hard times. Lodging was often but not always temporary: some single men lodged for decades.

Chapter Three explores the process of finding lodgings or lodgers. People usually found one another through fellow workers, neighbours, and friends. This chapter also demonstrates the gendered nature of expectations for lodgers. Male lodgers usually paid in money and did not contribute to household chores; female lodgers were expected to help out around the house, and could sometimes pay for their lodgings with services, usually childcare.

Chapters Four and Five enter into homes to explore the details of intimate spaces and relationships. Holmes has figured out who slept where, in which rooms and which beds. Householders usually had their own room to sleep in (though this might be the parlour); male lodgers usually shared rooms and even beds. Male lodgers were more likely to pursue their female householders than they were to be pursued by them sexually. When adultery happened between a male lodger and a married female householder, it seems to have been the result of the pressures that had led to the couple taking in lodgers in the first place.

Chapter Six looks at the various ways that householder-lodger relations ended. Some female lodgers married a householder when his wife died, moving up into the position of wife; some female householders, when they lost their lodgers, became lodgers themselves. The conclusion gestures towards the return of hard times and of lodgers in the present-day housing crisis.

This well-written and worthwhile book will be of interest to historians of material culture, gender, domesticity, and the working class. It will be a valuable addition to reading lists and libraries.

Susie Steinbach
Hamline University