



DEBORAH COHEN

FAMILY

SECRETS

Shame & Privacy in Modern Britain

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For Alice Kasdan and Tom Silfen

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“Of my father, my mother, myself, I know in the end practically nothing.”

—J.R. Ackerley, *My Father and Myself*

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Family Secrets

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|| Introduction ||

Celia Ward was resourceful, and she was desperate. Thirty-seven years old, the well-heeled wife of a director of English Steel, she wanted the baby that neither God nor nature had provided. To Ward's aid in the winter of 1920 came Miss Edith Hart, a capable spinster keenly attuned to the virtues of secrecy. Since the start of the war, Miss Hart had arranged the illicit adoptions of hundreds of illegitimate children. There were plenty of babies to be had, for illegitimacy rates had soared during the war, and Britain's homes for unwed mothers were packed with disappointed would-be war brides. "I intend to do everything in my power to introduce the child as my own to everyone (except of course my husband)," Ward confided to Miss Hart.¹ She would take the youngest female infant Miss Hart had available. She would proceed to a nursing home for a month in order to complete the ruse. None of her friends or neighbors would ever know what she had done. When her daughter was ten, Celia Ward reported to Miss Hart with pleasure that the girl was turning out "splendidly," but reminded her co-conspirator of one fundamental condition: Miss Hart should never call again.²

This is a book about what families attempted to hide in the past and why.³ It journeys from the secrets British men made on the frontier of empire in the late eighteenth century to the confessional vanguard of modern genealogy more than two centuries later. Both a history of secrets and of how they were revealed, it tells of agonized discussions behind closed doors and traverses, too, the crowded, perfume-suffused chamber of the Divorce Court, where a family's most intimate disgrace was filleted for public view. It is a book about personal, apparently idiosyncratic, decisions: taking a disabled son to a garden party, hiding an adopted daughter's origins, talking ceaselessly (or not at all) about a homosexual uncle. In delving into the familial dynamics of shame and

guilt, it investigates the part that families, so often regarded as the agents of repression, have played in the transformation of social mores from the Victorian era to the present day.

Today the closely guarded skeleton in the closet can seem as quaint an item as the rotary telephone. A substantial segment of the population is eager to share with strangers even the most humiliating of life's trials; the rest of us are more than willing to listen. That Americans, caricatured the world over as indiscriminating blabbermouths, display little deference to familial shame is perhaps not surprising. But what of the British, whose reputation for gentlemanly reticence and the stiff upper lip once helped to define a national stereotype?⁴ From the House of Windsor, whose dirty linen has been aired so minutely that hardly a seam remains unscrutinized, to the ordinary house next door, skeletons have been mercilessly routed from Albion's cupboards. Confessional culture has become a fixture in a country where, it was once said, Englishmen when sober do not "give themselves away."⁵ It was in the U.K. that the so-called "misery memoir" dominated the bestseller lists, racking up in 2006 eleven of the country's top-100 selling paperback titles.⁶ To the British, too, belongs the feat of transforming genealogy from a leisure-time occupation of retirees into international prime-time television. *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which exposes the ancestral secrets of the nation's celebrities for a domestic viewing audience of five to seven million, is the thinking person's reality TV, with spin-off versions in twelve other countries, including the United States.

Shame has not been banished of course. But secrecy as a familial strategy for reckoning with disgrace or misfortune is now viewed as destructive, a malign practice that erodes trust, especially between family members.⁷ Its burdens are handed down through the generations in the form of mysterious silences and subjects best avoided. Family secrets interrupt truth, deforming identity. To restore to the family tree the bastard or the suicide pruned out by a judgmental ancestor is thus to know oneself better. And yet, for all of the attention that has been devoted to unmasking the family secrets of the past, we understand very little about the functions they once served. To encounter Celia Ward and her husband in their elegant sitting room, laying the groundwork for the concealment of their newly arrived baby, is to enter a world whose emotional

habits, though in many respects very different from our own, were neither as irrational nor as benighted as they are often portrayed.

This is a story in which basic premises are in constant motion. What counted as a dread secret in one era hardly raised eyebrows in another. “Nothing changes more than the notion of what is shocking,” observed the writer Elizabeth Bowen in 1959, on the cusp of a decade that would vividly bear out her pronouncement.⁸ While much that was previously shameful, especially in the realm of sexuality, was normalized in the 1960s and 1970s, secrecy tends to run in circles rather than straight lines.⁹ In the mid-twentieth century, families sought to hide away for a lifetime mentally disabled children whom their Victorian grandparents had cherished at home. Enlightenment generates as many family secrets as ignorance. Incest, the most shocking of modern secrets, was viewed by many middle-class Victorians as a deplorable but also unexceptional consequence of life in a one-room tenement.¹⁰ Similarly, domestic violence is today more secretive than it was in the late nineteenth century, when many, especially in working-class neighborhoods, tended to view it as inevitable.¹¹

Running through this book are the entangled histories of secrecy and privacy. Secrecy and privacy share a common past, which has been obscured by the fact that privacy is today a hallowed right, while secrets are perceived as damaging.¹² And yet, the distinction between privacy and secrecy has not always been so bright. For Samuel Johnson, writing his famous *Dictionary* (1755), the two terms were nearly interchangeable. Privacy was the “state of being secret; secrecy,” while secrecy was “privacy; state of being hidden.”¹³ While the ideal of privacy was well established by the late eighteenth century, protecting oneself and one’s family from incursions was ever a struggle, all the more so as the tide of evangelical revival—and the pervasive moralism left in its wake—toppled the wall between private character and public conduct that the Georgians had sought to erect.¹⁴ “In this country,” acknowledged the *Spectator* in the 1860s, “privacy is almost impossible.” Between a legal system that insisted upon transparency and a burgeoning and relentless press, “Somehow or other everything gets divulged...”¹⁵

For the Victorians, then, privacy meant keeping people out of one’s own business; the domestic fortress was privacy’s stronghold, and Dickens’