Fatherhood, as Thomas Laqueur once complained, has long "been regarded as a backwater of the dominant history of public power" (qtd. 169). Although a number of historians and cultural critics of the nineteenth-century have recently worked to redress this neglect--to bring into view the everyday practices and political effects of fatherhood--their labor has been largely Sisyphean. No matter how persuasively such "fatherhood specialists" (5) as John Tosh (A Man's Place, 1999) have argued otherwise, or how influential Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's Family Fortunes (1979) has been almost since the moment of its publication,--the stereotype of the remote, stern Victorian paterfamilias, ruling both public and domestic spheres with a heavy hand (though, in the latter case, often from an armchair in his London club), has proved dismayingly difficult to dislodge. Every critical study engaged in toppling that figure (and Valerie Sanders has researched the field well) finds itself doing so anew and with little sense of collective or lasting force--as though Lytton Strachey's acid portrait has been too deeply etched on the popular imagination for most of us to keep within our critical sights any alternative image or perspective.

Even Sanders has some trouble holding the power of the stereotype in check. Drawing largely from letters, diaries, autobiographies, and other sorts of life-writing, she describes a "wide range of fathering styles" (22) as practiced by fourteen "high-achieving Victorian men" (21): Prince Albert, George Henry Lewes, Archbishop Archibald Tait, Thomas Hood, Charles

Although preoccupied with their personal lives, Sanders distinguishes her method "from 'straight' biography" in emphasizing "only a few aspects of each subject's life" and in organizing her book as a series of comparative "case histories," designed "to highlight shared relationships and experiences" (21). The result, then, is not a collective biography, a literary analysis of fathers in Victorian fiction (though there are references to the work of some of the novelists under discussion), or a social history of fatherhood among the professional classes in mid-nineteenth-century England. Rather, "in selecting these particular examples," Sanders intends "to restore the experience of fatherhood to a more central position in the lives of [these] high-achieving Victorian men"--or, perhaps more accurately, to reveal the heretofore overlooked centrality of the experience of fatherhood to these individuals, whose lives we otherwise think we have come to know. Despite notable differences in style, Phyllis Rose's Parallel Lives (1983) may offer the closest formal resemblance--though a helpful alternative model may be found in Rosemarie Bodenheimer's innovative, admirably nuanced, genre-bending Knowing Dickens (2007), which likewise focuses upon her subject's correspondence and which ruminates at length on his understanding of himself as a father.

If moving across and between genres liberates Sanders from a strict adherence to the narrowly defined disciplinary methods of any of them, it also makes her line of argument hard to track at times. In sketching the historical background, she posits several assumptions about Victorian cultural attitudes toward fatherhood--such as the threat to masculinity posed by fatherly sentiments or the anxious desire for "positive role models" (19)--that she then goes on to
argue are not, in fact, especially pertinent to the fathers she studies: "Because of his public profile . . . each father had the opportunity to clarify or develop the conditions in which fathering was performed" (21-22), as each “embark[ed]” (though perhaps not self-consciously so) “on a moral journey of domestic accountability” (26). For both Thomas Arnold and Charles Kingsley, this means that their "sense of their own masculinity was both strengthened and tempered when they became fathers" (22). If this is indeed the case--if all fourteen of her "involved, 'hands-on'" fathers (4) successfully negotiated, where they did not escape, the anxieties about their masculinity or lack of role models that other Victorian fathers putatively experienced--might the reason for this lie not in their exceptionalism, as Sanders seems at least intermittently to imply, but in their exemplarity? I wonder, that is, whether Sanders may be conflating Victorian cultural attitudes with our Strachey-ite view of them and whether doing so leads her to credit, however unwittingly or ambivalently, a stereotype that she is otherwise at pains to disavow. Rather than assuming that Victorian fathers as a group felt a historically-specific conflict between their manliness and their sometimes doting affections for their children, or that the "nature of fatherhood" was particularly "contested . . . at the time" (22), or that-- on the testimony of the late nineteenth-century novel-- the "Victorian 'heavy father' seemingly ends the century as secure in his bullying presence as he began it" (3), perhaps we ought to question the a priori nature of such assumptions as well as the truth-value of literary representations. On what evidence were Victorian fathers more susceptible to anxieties about their masculinity than fathers of, say, the late eighteenth century or the early twentieth --especially while Albert (seen romping with his children on Sanders's jacket illustration) was the national icon of fatherhood? Were they really much more likely than fathers (or, for that matter, mothers) in other decades to want to be their children's "all-powerful protector against the chance contingencies of modern life" (196)? And
how much historical accuracy should we grant to the fathers imagined in the work of Lewis Carroll, Samuel Butler, and Edmund Gosse?

I wonder, too, whether Sanders's comparative case history approach serves her project as well as it might. While this method certainly helps to keep issues of fathering in the foreground—resisting detours into intriguing, but less focused biographical discussion—it also occasionally leads her to exaggerate differences or similarities among her subjects. For instance, in reporting on an exchange of letters between Hooker and Darwin, she sees so much agreement in what she calls (in her chapter title) their "scientific fathering" that she mistakenly attributes Hooker's worry about "unmotivated sons" (194) to Darwin as well. (The letter cited—dated 16 Jan 1862—clearly indicates that Hooker's worry is not one that Darwin personally shared, at least not at that particular moment.) Indeed, Darwin appears in Sanders's view—and in contrast to the consistent assessments of their many biographers—to be as troubling a domestic figure as Dickens: "however often Darwin appeared to fail as a father—largely by retreating into a state of distinctly un-masculine self-absorbed anxiety, hypochondria and illness—Emma (whom Darwin sometimes addressed as 'Mammy') never faltered" (140). Similarly, Gladstone is firmly identified, along with Benson, as a "Victorian patriarchal stereotype" (165), even though his children testify in their memoirs to the contrary—thereby leading Sanders to suspect a cover-up: they "closed ranks to defend their father from all allegations of domestic tyranny" (166).

Nevertheless, even though some of Sanders's conclusions give me pause, her talents and energy as a researcher are prodigious and enviable, uncovering a wealth of detail about the fatherly lives of her subjects that makes for extremely compelling reading. She has examined
not only published correspondence and journals—a feat of awe-inspiring magnitude in the case of Dickens, Darwin, and Gladstone—but archived materials and periodical writing as well. In doing so, she brings to light such evocative facts as Lewes’s family-hating bachelor persona in his *Leader* articles (under the nom de plume of "Vivian") and the *Times* and *Illustrated London News* coverage of Dickens’s home theatre production of *The Frozen Deep*, in which his daughter Mamie first played the erotically-charged role of "a woman torn between two lovers: one acted by her father" (60)—a role later assumed by Maria Ternan, with such fateful consequences for both Dickens and her sister Ellen. Her stories of Macready, Hood, and Tait—which focus on their fatherly feeling under crisis—are especially welcome, as they bring to our attention material that most readers will not have encountered before. While not strictly true of the ghastly story of the Taits’ serial loss of five daughters to scarlet fever in as many weeks in 1856—a story that has been recalled by a number of scholars, including M. Jeanne Peterson (*Family, Love, and Work*, 1989), Pat Jalland (*Death in the Victorian Family*, 1996), and Laurence Lerner (*Angels and Absences*, 1997)—Sanders is the first (to my knowledge) to consider the Taits’ loss specifically from the father’s point of view.

In recent years, critical interest has turned more and more often—especially in nineteenth-century studies—to the work of the emotions and their ethical consequences for both personal and public history. For all those drawn to such projects, and particularly for those of us who are engaged in thinking about family feelings and the ways in which Victorians themselves reflected upon them, this book contributes significantly to the discussion and points to areas worthy of further inquiry and investigation.
Eileen Gillooly is associate director of the Heyman Center for the Humanities and associate faculty in English and women's studies at Columbia University. Her books include Smile of Discontent: Humor, Gender, and Nineteenth-Century British Fiction (1999) and Contemporary Dickens (2009), co-edited with Deirdre David. A 2009-10 NEH Fellow at the National Humanities Center, she is completing a study of parental feeling in nineteenth-century middle-class Britain.