

Women and Ageing in the Twentieth Century

Pat Thane

This article seeks to explore the changing experiences of older women through the twentieth century, mainly in Western Europe and in English-speaking countries elsewhere. It examines the main trends and stresses the diversity of experience within this very large, and growing, age group.

The growing numbers of older people

In the twentieth century, for the first time in history, it became normal to grow old. Survival to old age was more common in past centuries than is sometimes thought.¹ However, it was only in the middle of the twentieth century, in high-income countries such as those of Western Europe and North America, that the overwhelming majority of every age cohort survived from birth to old age. There was a rapid decline, from the later nineteenth century, in death-rates at all ages. In Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century an average of 74 people each year reached the age of 100; by the end of the century almost 6,000 did so.² In Japan, with its later and very rapid economic development, even in 1960 there were only 144 centenarians; in 2005 there were 25,000.³ In both states and in most others, with the exception of a cluster of countries in South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) most very old people were female and, in general, women outlived men, as, so far as we can tell, they long had.⁴ In Britain, to take quite a typical example, life expectation at birth in 1901 was 51 years for men and 58 for women. In 1991 it was 76 and 81 years respectively.

1 Cf. Pat Thane ed., *The Long History of Old Age*, London 2005.

2 *The Demography of Centenarians in England and Wales*, in: Roger Thatcher, *Population Trends*, 96, London 1999, 5–24.

3 Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Government of Japan, September 2005, reported in: *The Scotsman Newspaper*, September 13, 2005.

4 Cf. Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History. Past Experiences, Present Issues*, Oxford 2000, 21–24.

These figures do not mean, as is often thought, that most people who survived to adulthood at the beginning of the twentieth century, and for long before, died in relatively early middle age. Rather, the high infant mortality rates that characterized all societies before the early twentieth century reduced *average* life expectancy at birth. Since female infants tended to have higher survival rates than males, the chances of female survival to old age were greater from birth and females retained this advantage at later ages. At all times, those who survived early childhood had a good chance of surviving at least to their 50s or 60s. As infant mortality fell in the twentieth century a higher proportion of those who were born survived to adulthood and old age.⁵

Not only death rates but also birth rates fell to historically low levels over the twentieth century. One consequence was that in most developed and many less developed countries, the *proportion* of older people rose to historically high levels. And, not only did women and men live longer, they remained healthy and active to later ages than before. Strangely, this prolongation of active life, which had been dreamed of for centuries, initially caused not general rejoicing but gloomy predictions of ill-effects due, in particular, to the assumed growing costs to the working population of medical and social security services for older people, who were represented as dependent burdens once they passed a certain age. These concerns were first voiced from the 1930s to 1950s,⁶ especially in Britain and France. This may have been because the study of demography was most advanced in these countries: their demographic patterns at this time were not very different from those elsewhere in western Europe.⁷ The predictions of economic and demographic doom were not fulfilled due to the upturn in birth-rates during and after World War II. They recurred in the 1980s and 90s⁸ following a renewed decline in birth-rates and a continuing rise in life expectancy. By the end of the century about 20 percent of the population was aged 60 or above in Britain, Germany and other West European countries compared with about five percent at the beginning of the century.⁹

But what did 'old age' mean in the twentieth century? How old was 'old'? As in earlier centuries¹⁰ old age was defined in a variety of ways, shaped by many influences, including the imperatives of government bureaucracy and of statistical measurement,

5 Cf. United Nations World Population Prospects 1995, New York 1995.

6 Cf. Pat Thane, The Debate on the Declining Birth-Rate in Britain: The 'Menace' of an Ageing Population, 1920s–1950s', in: *Continuity and Change*, 5, 2 (1990), 283–304.

7 Cf. Philip E. Pegden, Evolution of the Population: A Slow Growth, in: Daniel Noin and Robert Woods eds., *The Changing Population of Europe*, Oxford 1993, 6–22; Michael S. Teitelbaum and Jay M. Winter, *The Fear of Population Decline*, London 1985.

8 Cf. World Bank, *Averting the Old Age Crisis*, Washington, DC 1994.

9 Cf. Paul Johnson and Jane Falkingham, *Ageing and Economic Welfare*, London 1992, 21; United Nations, see note 5.

10 Cf. Thane, *History*, see note 1; Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane eds., *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, London 2001.

the images disseminated by a proliferating range of communications media (magazines, newspapers, advertisements, novels, film, TV, the internet, scholarly publications), by subjective experience and each individual's perception of the experience of others as they aged. Definitions and images of old age differed according to gender, social condition and race, the latter becoming increasingly important as more societies became more multi-cultural later in the twentieth century. 'Old age' is a very diverse condition. It plays a variety of roles in modern culture and many identities are available, serially and simultaneously, to older, as to younger, people.

'Official' definitions of old age

When old age pensions were first introduced they were payable at ages which varied in different countries between 55 and 70. They were first implemented in Germany in 1889 and paid at age 70, or earlier for the permanently incapacitated. Denmark followed in 1892 at age 60, then New Zealand in 1898 and Australia in 1908 both at 65. Pensions were introduced in Austria in 1906, Britain in 1908 at age 70, reduced to 65 in 1925 and, for women only, to 60 in 1940; in Canada from 1927 and the United States from 1935, both from age 70. They were introduced in Switzerland in 1946. By the end of the century minimum pension ages still varied between 55 and 70, but were most commonly 65 or 60.¹¹

Pensions were everywhere an official acknowledgement that, past a certain age, people were no longer physically able to work to support themselves, that poor people were unable to save to provide for this period of life and after long, hard-working lives, deserved support from society. The first pensions were initially everywhere paid only to manual workers and the poor. Only after World War II did they become universal in most countries. From the beginning it was widely acknowledged that incapacity due to old age in reality afflicted different people at differing ages, but administrative convenience and economy required that pensions be paid at common ages. The age chosen in each country was influenced by prevailing conceptions of the age at which most people were incapacitated from regular work and by considerations of cost: the later the age, the fewer survivors and the lower the cost. Though those countries which initially chose higher ages later reduced them under pressure mainly from trade unions and other representatives of workers who argued that payment at too late an age left many old people in poverty for too long before they could claim a pension.¹²

11 Cf. Peter Flora and Arnold J. Heidenheimer eds., *The Development of Welfare States in Europe and America*, New Brunswick/London 1982, 59; 108.

12 Cf. Flora/Heidenheimer, *Development*, see note 11, 37–124; Thane, *Old Age*, see note 4, 308–332, 364–384; Ugo Ascoli et al. eds., *Comparing Social Welfare Systems in Southern Europe*, Paris 1997, 27–134, 229–302.

The case of Great Britain is especially well documented. The pension age for British women was reduced to 60 in 1940 following demands from unmarried women who argued that they faced discrimination in the labour market from their late fifties, employers preferring to employ younger women whom they regarded as more decorative.¹³ The pension age for men and women will gradually, between 2010 and 2020, be equalized again at 65 following a sex discrimination ruling by the European Union in 1990: a ruling which reversed a rare example of sex discrimination which had favoured women by granting their pension at an earlier age than to men.

There are two principal forms of old age pension: Insurance pensions such as those in Germany¹⁴ (and introduced in Austria in 1906¹⁵) tended to provide primarily for men, since fewer women had regular or sufficient incomes to enable regular contributions. Non-contributory pensions, paid by redistribution through the tax system, as initially in Denmark, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, favoured women because they were normally means-tested and confined to the poorest and old women tended to be poorer than old men. In Britain it was awareness of the greater poverty and need of older women that determined the choice of a non-contributory rather than an insurance pension system in 1908. Two-thirds of the first British pensioners were female. An insurance scheme favouring men was added onto the existing pension system in 1925, as it was in Denmark in 1933.¹⁶

The establishment of state pension ages signified the official general definition by governments of the age of onset of old age, though from at least medieval times European governments had specified ages (normally 60 or 70) at which people (mainly men) were deemed incapable of specific tasks such as military service or public office.¹⁷ It was normally assumed that on receiving the pension, pensioners would cease paid work, though this was not always obligatory, especially in non-contributory systems, and pensions were generally so small that many older people struggled on in at least part-time employment in order to survive. It was only after World War II that pensions in most high income countries became large enough to enable most pensioners to retire from work.

Towards the end of the twentieth century retirement ages tended to fall further until by 2000 about one third of all workers in western European countries had retired before

13 Cf. Thane, *Old Age*, see Note 4, 330pp.

14 Cf. Gerhard A. Ritter, *Social Welfare in Germany and Britain*, New York/London 1986; Peter A. Kohler and Hans F. Zacher eds., *The Evolution of Social Insurance, 1881–1981: Studies of Germany, France, Great Britain, Austria and Switzerland*, London 1982.

15 Josef Ehmer's work on this seems not to be available in English and unfortunately I do not read German; cf. Josef Ehmer, *Sozialgeschichte des Alters*, Frankfurt a. M. 1990.

16 Cf. Stein Kuhnle, *The growth of social insurance programs in Scandinavia*, in: Flora/Heidenheimer, *Development*, see note 11, 125–150; Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity. Class Bases of the European Welfare States, 1875–1975*, Cambridge 1990, 63pp, 75.

17 Cf. Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, London 1997.

the age of 60,¹⁸ often involuntarily due to high unemployment. It was (frequently?) argued by economists that earlier retirement was the inevitable outcome of rapid change in technology and the incapacity of older people to replace old with new skills, though the evidence about the learning capacities of older men and women strongly challenged this. Rather older people were rarely given opportunities to retrain and gain new skills.¹⁹ In the first years of the twenty-first century the value of delaying retirement and keeping older people in the workforce was increasingly recognized due largely to government fears of the growing costs of pensions and of the shrinking younger work-force. There were pressures to raise pension and retirement ages, for example in France, Germany and Britain. In both the latter countries the government was proposing raising the pension age in 2006, although, as elsewhere, such suggestions were resisted by workers, who had come to value retirement.

The spread of retirement

The spread of retirement in the twentieth century created a new cultural barrier between the lives of older and younger people. In previous centuries retirement of older people from regular work had been common enough among those who could afford to make the choice. It was rarely available to very poor women and men.²⁰ Retirement affected the lives of women less comprehensively than those of men. For women, whether or not they were previously in paid employment, work, in the form of domestic responsibilities, continued unchanged across the life-course. Women who retired from paid work had normally long carried the double burden of work in and outside the home. Continued responsibility for domestic work after 'retirement' provided continuity in their everyday lives. For men, whose lives were often centred on their employment, retirement created a disruption, a sudden confrontation with old age, which many found shocking, especially among the first generation of manual workers to experience it on a large scale after World War II. Ageing women, in consequence, generally experienced less of a loss of self than men.²¹

For the first time people were expected to 'retire' from paid work at a fixed age regardless of whether they felt physically fit for work. In doing so they might lose the

18 Cf. Martin Kohli et al., *Time for Retirement: Comparative Studies of early Exit from the Labour Force*, Cambridge 1991.

19 Cf. Paul Baltes and Margaret Baltes eds., *Successful Aging. Perspectives from the Behavioural Sciences*, Cambridge 1990.

20 Cf. Leslie Hannah, *Inventing Retirement. The Development of Occupational Pensions in Britain*, Cambridge 1986.

21 Cf. Alice Day, *Remarkable Survivors. Insights into Successful Aging Among Women*, Washington 1991, 45p.

social status often associated with paid work, though the degraded work at which many poor old people had previously struggled conferred little status. At the beginning of the century, old women toiled as laundresses, cleaners, childminders, hawkers, labourers. More positively, towards the end of the century a period of leisure between working life and physical decline created new possibilities in the later lives of women and men. Faced with rising expectations and greater general affluence in the second half of the twentieth century, more older people than ever before – though not all – could enjoy new possibilities for leisure, travel and active retirement. Successive age cohorts were able to imagine and plan for this phase of life, as the first generation to retire on a mass scale in the 1940s and 50s had not.²²

But, notwithstanding a commonplace representation of people past their 60s as dependent and fragile, influential older people, in high status occupations, did not retire and relinquish power unless they wished to do so, and they were not necessarily publicly perceived as ‘old’. Margaret Thatcher was not defined as weak and decrepit when she remained Prime Minister past the female pension age of 60, and she remained formidable after her involuntary retirement as Prime Minister, aged 65, in 1990; nor was Queen Elizabeth II when she reigned aged 75 at the end of the century; nor indeed her great-great grandmother, Queen Victoria, who occupied the throne, aged 81, when the century opened. Role models of strong older women existed throughout the century.

In the first seventy years of the twentieth century in most high income countries, society became more clearly stratified by chronological age, signified in particular by fixed ages for leaving school and receiving the pension. The cultural changes in the lives of older women and men in the mid-twentieth century were dramatic. Not everyone experienced them as gains. Though ‘old people’ were of all age groups the most likely to be stereotyped as possessing unitary characteristics, in fact social, economic and physical differentiation was greatest at later ages, not surprisingly in a ‘group’ comprising people aged from their 60s to past 100. In terms of physical condition, ‘old’ men and women varied from the very fit to the extremely frail; in terms of income, from some of the richest to the very poorest and included some of the most and the least powerful.

Curiously, the age of retirement from work fell at the very time that women and men were remaining physically fit to later ages than ever before. Improvements in living standards, including diet, and consequently in health, for most of the population, improved medical knowledge and care and improved access to it even for poor people in most high income countries after World War II, had the result that by the 1980s medical

22 Cf. Thane, *Old Age*, see note 4, 273–286, 385–406; Johnson/Falkingham, *Ageing*, see note 9, 49–125, 152–176; Peter Townsend, *The Family Lives of Old People*, London 1957; Paul Thompson, Catherine Itzin, Michelle Abendstern, *I Don’t Feel Old: Understanding the Experience of Later Life*, Oxford 1990, 135, 272p; Carole Haber and Brian Gratton, *Old Age and the Search for Security: An American Social History*, Bloomington 1994.

opinion placed the onset of serious debility associated with old age at around age 76, in contrast to the assumption at the beginning of the century that old age decrepitude began around age 60/65. Those who were fit and active in their mid 60s were likely to remain so for at least another decade, though with some weakening, for many people, from the later 60s.²³ At the very time that women and men became physically 'old' later in life than ever before, their formal social and economic roles during the years of added vigour appeared to be diminishing. Hence, in the early twenty-first century it was increasingly suggested, by gerontologists as well as by politicians, that those who were fit to work beyond age 60 or 65 and wished to do so should be enabled to defer retirement until a later age.

Means of Survival in Old Age

Despite improved pensions in most countries, old age was popularly associated with poverty throughout the twentieth century. As in all centuries, by no means all old people were poor, but old women were more likely to suffer poverty than old men. The reasons for this also changed little over time. Women outlived men, so had to live longer on often meagre pensions, with diminishing savings and household goods. Some acquired prosperity and independence as a result of marriage and widowhood, but many more lived on in poverty having never married (more common in the first half of the century), being widowed by poor men, or, an increasing experience in the later twentieth century, following divorce, which normally left women poorer than men. Though more women had high income jobs by the end of the century, they still tended to earn less and, consequently, to have lower pensions than men. In Britain the very poor pension situation of most women compared with men was described even by the government minister responsible, in 2005, as "a scandal".²⁴ Women in general still had fewer opportunities than men to accumulate assets to protect them in later life due, above all, to more limited opportunities for employment, employment interrupted by family responsibilities and to lower earnings.

It was widely assumed, in popular and political discourse and among some scholars, that families were not important providers for the support of older people in the modern, highly mobile societies of Europe, North America and Australasia. This was reinforced by the conviction of economists that welfare states 'crowded out' family support, that altruism and reciprocity were redundant in modern market-based societies. It was also assumed that the falling birth-rate and falling family size in the later part of the century would leave old people with fewer children to support them. Such predictions

²³ Cf. Tom Kirkwood, *The End of Age. Why Everything about Ageing is Changing*, London 2001.

²⁴ *The Guardian*, March 29, 2005.

seemed to be supported by statistics of the steadily growing numbers of old people, especially women, who lived alone. In Britain at the end of the century almost 50 per cent of women (and about 20 per cent of men) over aged 60 lived alone.²⁵ There were similar findings from the US.²⁶

These statistics could be, and often were, interpreted as evidence of the increasing isolation of old people from their families. Yet there was also consistent evidence, especially in the second half of the century, that many old people lived alone (as did growing numbers of younger people) not because they were neglected, but as a positive choice. At last, growing numbers had the resources to exercise the preference for independent living that older people had expressed for centuries.²⁷ Some, sadly, as at all times *were* isolated and neglected, sometimes because they had no surviving family. But the fact that older people lived alone did not, as many surveys showed,²⁸ necessarily mean that they lacked frequent and close contact with family and friends, who gave support when it was needed, just as old people themselves gave support to others. No more than in earlier centuries could old people be stereotyped as undifferentiated dependents upon others. It was often forgotten that they gave to as well as took from their communities, in the case of older women, often in the form of care for grandchildren or sick or disabled friends or relatives.

The speed and ease of late twentieth century communications compensated for the effects of greater spatial mobility. "Family care can be among the very best and the very worst experiences that human beings can devise for one another"²⁹ which was why many old people preferred to preserve their independence. Not all old people had close relatives, but probably more did so at the end of the century than at the beginning. Though average family size fell over the century, rates of marriage and childbirth and survival rates of infants rose, so by the end of the century more older women had at least one surviving child than at the beginning of the century. In the twentieth century as in earlier centuries³⁰

25 Cf. Thane, *Old Age*, see note 4, 479pp.

26 Cf. Day, *Survivors*, see note 21, 169pp.

27 Cf. Thane, *Old Age*, see note 4, 428–433; Hazel Qureshi and Alan Walker, *The Caring Relationship*. London 1989 18p; Sara Arber and Jay Ginn, *Gender and Later Life*, London 1991; Susan McCrae ed., *Changing Britain: Families and Households in the 1990s*, Oxford 1999.

28 Cf. Day, *Survivors*, see note 21, 180pp; Townsend, *Family Lives*, see note 22; Hazel Quereshi and Alan Walker, *Caring for Elderly People: the Family and the State*, in: Chris Phillipson and Alan Walker ed., *Ageing and Social Policy: A Critical Assessment*, Aldershot 1986, 109–127; Claire Wenger, *The Supportive Network: Coping with Old Age*, London 1984; Martin Rein and Harry Saltzman, *Social Integration, Participation and Exchange in Five Industrial Countries*, in: Scott Bass ed., *Older and Active*, New Haven 1995, 237–262.

29 Quereshi/Walker, *Ageing*, see note 28, 117.

30 Cf. Amy Froide, *Old Maids: The Lifecycle of Single Women in Early Modern England*, in: Botelho/Thane, *Women*, see note 10, 89–110; Sherrie Klassen, *Social Lives of Elderly Women in Eighteenth Century Toulouse*, in: Susannah Ottaway, Lynn Botelho and Katharine Kittredge, *Power and Poverty. Old Age in the Pre-Industrial Past*, Westport 2002, 49–66.

older women without close relatives, in particular, often formed networks of friendship which provided the same supportive role as blood kin. Older women in general coped better than men with living alone, being better able to care for themselves and with stronger social networks.³¹

The growing affluence of many old people at all social levels in high income societies, the availability of a new and wider range of consumer goods, plus the effects of medical and technological change profoundly influenced the experience of old age in the twentieth century. New technologies generated new and widely disseminated sources of imagery of older people, as of everything else, in magazines, advertisements, films, television. Individuals, mostly female, could manipulate their own images with the use of a growing range of items of make-up, hair-dyes, cosmetic surgery, together with increasingly widespread attention in the later part of the century to the very long known age-retardants of diet and exercise.³² All of these techniques were, of course, most easily available to the most affluent, but the growth of the mass market made them more cheaply available to more people than before and they became more widely socially acceptable in the second half of the century.

Disguising the visible signs of age by older women was condemned by some as obeisance to a 'cult of youth', encouraged by the mass media, which was said to induce refusal to accept the 'realities' of ageing and to 'grow old gracefully' and 'naturally'. This overlooked the reality experienced by women and men through the centuries, that 'natural' ageing, unassisted by adornment or medical intervention, could be far from 'graceful'. The assumption that at a certain age women should cease practices, such as use of make-up and hair-dyes, that might have been a part of their everyday experience since their teens, or that 60 year olds who had worn jeans for 40 years should abandon them because they had reached a certain age, suggested a new kind of stereotyping. It was underpinned by a belief that in earlier times older people had presented themselves 'fittingly', adopting a dress code suited to their years and that, for some unexplained reason, this was desirable. Like many of the assumptions about change over time which pervade the discourse of ageing, this was unfounded. There had long been unconventional women who were criticized for dressing 'unsuitably' past a certain age.³³ Concern about the appearance of older people was associated with a more widespread awareness of their sexuality which aroused ambivalence and fears, perhaps of competition, among younger people.³⁴

31 Cf. Day, *Survivors*, see note 21, 82.

32 Cf. Pat Thane, *Geriatrics*, in: William Bynum and Roy Porter eds., *Companion Encyclopaedia to the History of Medicine*, 2, London 1993, 1092–1118.

33 Cf. Botelho/Thane, *Women*, see note 10, 217; Thane, *History*, see note 1, 134, 205.

34 Arber/Ginn, *Gender*, see note 27; John Macnicol, *Age Discrimination. An Historical and Contemporary analysis*, Cambridge 2006.

It was unclear, in the twentieth century as in earlier centuries, who, other than themselves, had the right to decree what was a fitting appearance for 'older' people, and why it was 'unnatural' to grow old disgracefully, as some older women preferred. Some commentators, of all ages, still expected uniformity of behaviour from 'old people'. Later in the century more older people resisted such stereotypes. Rather, they welcomed the greater flexibility of codes of appearance for all age groups which characterized high income countries at the end of the twentieth century.

Medical advances such as hip replacements and heart by-passes improved the quality of life for many older people, despite the extraordinary neglect, until the very end of the century, to research into the effects upon old people of some of the diseases most likely to kill them, in particular cancer and heart disease.³⁵ At the same time the last days and months of some old people were made miserable by the capacity of modern medical technology to sustain life past the point at which it was worth living.

Last not least, the menopause was more extensively discussed as a medical problem than before, as indeed were many conditions during the century in which scientific medicine made unprecedented advances. Remedies, such as Hormone Replacement Therapy, were introduced to counter its ill-effects, though its benefits were increasingly questioned. The discomforts of menopause were much discussed but it remained quite unclear whether it caused women more distress than in previous periods of history when it seems rarely to have been discussed and, if so, to what proportion of women and why. Though all women who survive to old age experience the menopause, there is a remarkable lack of historical or contemporary research into the proportion of women who find it painful or distressing.

Experiences of Old Age

How old women perceived themselves and how they were seen by others can be glimpsed in a variety of personal documents. Many diaries, letters and other such sources survive in a great variety of archives and published volumes but can only be briefly sampled here. To take just a first example, the energetic, committed, well-to do, English social reformer Beatrice Webb reflected in her diary in the 1930s on her own ageing and that of her husband, the Labour Party politician Sidney Webb. She had unusual opportunities to discover how her ageing was perceived by others. On her 75th birthday in 1933 she recorded:

Mrs Webb retains to a remarkable degree her mental vigour and industry' observes the *Evening Standard*. Telegrams, greetings, newspapers ringing me up for interviews which I refuse. I don't feel mentally vigorous and industrious, but relative to the senility usual at that age I suppose I am so. And Sidney certainly is so.³⁶

³⁵ Cf. Medical Research Council, *The Health of the UK's Elderly People*, London 1994.

³⁶ Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie eds., *The Diaries of Beatrice Webb*, London 1986, 4, 121.

She oscillated between commenting on her failing powers and relief at the degree of activity of which she was still capable. She observed the variety of experiences of ageing among her friends and relatives.

Her youngest sister, Rosy, who as a young woman had been a highly problematic anorexic, at also close to 70 was enjoying greater independence than ever. She was here for a week, between her voyage to the Arctic regions round about Spitzbergen and returning to Majorca for the winter ... at seventy Rosy is happier and healthier than I have ever known her during her youth and prime of life ... she has become a globe-trotter with a purpose – the enjoyment and picturing of nature and architecture ... her husband and children are more or less dependent upon her for subsidies and she certainly is generous with her limited income-travelling third class or cheap tourist, staying at cheap lodging ... the secret of her happiness is her art, her freedom to go and do as she likes and make casual friends by the way ...

But an 84 year old friend had slipped into miserable advanced old age:

Louise is hopelessly crippled and creeps about the house. Her mind is clear and old age and helplessness have softened her outlook on the world ... but she is desperately lonely and bored with existence ... The plain truth is that the aged feel what their children and some of their friends are thinking about: 'If you are not enjoying life, why don't you die and be done with it'. And the old person may feel that there is no answer, except that he does not want to die or does not see any comfortable way of doing it.³⁷

Beatrice Webb died, aged 85, in 1943. Her diary conveys an explicit struggle against a stereotype of helpless dependency, initially triumphant, but less successful as time went on.³⁸ She was an unusual woman in her fame and influence.

Simone de Beauvoir's fiercely negative depiction of old age in her book of the same name, nevertheless described varied individual experiences. In 1968 a 75-year-old former waitress lived alone in poverty in central Paris, in an attic, without gas, electricity or running water up, three storeys of handsome staircase, then two half-floors of steep narrow steps:

"It is a nightmare for me" said Madame R. "Sometimes in winter, when I am not very steady on my feet, I stay there leaning against the wall, wondering whether I shall ever get down again" ... She is not bored she says. She walks about a great

³⁷ MacKenzie, Diaries, see note 36,146.

³⁸ MacKenzie, Diaries, see note 36, 150.

deal; she reads the headlines at the newspaper stand and neighbours give her yesterday's paper. When she can she goes to ceremonies in Paris.³⁹

More cheerful were the findings of a survey of French centenarians carried out in 1959. There were six or seven hundred, four out of five of them female.

[They] had had a great variety of jobs ... they were living in the country with their children or grandchildren or in some cases in institutions ... They had very little money... Many of them were strong and well ... Some of the women were slightly shaky, they were a little hard of hearing and their sight was dim but they were neither blind nor deaf. They slept well. They spent their time reading, knitting or taking short walks. Their minds were clear and their memories excellent. They were independent, even-tempered and sometimes gay; they had a lively sense of humour and they were very sociable. They were high-handed towards their 70-year-old children and treated them as young people. Sometimes they complained of the present-day generation, but they were interested in modern times and kept in touch with what was going on ... they had never suffered from any chronic illness. They did not seem afraid of death.⁴⁰

In 1992 the British *Mass-Observation Archive* invited, mainly middle class, men and women to write about their observations on 'Growing Older'.⁴¹ A dominant theme of the responses from women was the relativity and the diversity of the process of ageing. A 65 year old retired local government officer summed up a widespread feeling that

... its this habit of wanting to treat all people of a certain age group in the same way that seems wrong, whatever that age group is. People are no longer allowed to be individuals.⁴²

A 67 year old housewife wrote:

These days you aren't classed as old until you are 80. I don't feel old, with fashions very flexible you can look fashionable up to any age. My mother is 95 and she wears very fashionable clothes.⁴³

39 Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age*, London 1972, 15.

40 Beauvoir, *Old Age*, see note 39, 605p.

41 Cf. *Mass-Observation Archive*, University of Sussex, file: Growing Older (MO).

42 MO, file C 2091.

43 MO, file B 1665.

And a 78 year old widow noted:

I regard anyone under 40 as young. From 45 to 65 as middle aged. Elderly under 75 and old as 75 plus. *But* although I am aged 78 I do not think of myself as old but elderly. Perhaps because I am fairly independent and can look after myself.⁴⁴

Such relativism cannot simply be ascribed to self-deception among old women, seeking to deny the unpleasant reality of ageing, for it was shared by younger women. A shop-supervisor, who was approaching 40, discussed the diversity of ageing she saw among women around her:

I remember my mother saying "I may be a wrinkled 57 on the outside, but I'm 17 inside," when I caught her playing hopscotch out on the pavement with my daughter. I'm beginning to understand what she meant ... some people are born 'middle aged' while some old folk sparkle, are open-minded and have a zest for life.

I find it very difficult to estimate peoples' ages. Indeed age doesn't seem a very important consideration in view of improved housing, nutrition and medicine ... with extended life expectancy, I believe you can be considered young until the late 40s, then be at a peak until 55–66 years (perhaps retirement age is one of life's landmarks) then enjoy a further rewarding and active phase (perhaps this is middle age) until the physical deterioration which eventually comes with advancing years forces you to slow down into 'old age', which can still be a rewarding experience if you have your faculties and a decent standard of living ...

As a volunteer worker for social services, I have supported women I've regarded as being a generation older than myself and suddenly realized that they are ten years younger than me. They have a poor self-image, are worn down by marital and financial problems, are in poor shape physically ...

On the other hand as a member of a keep-fit association, I am often amazed when fellow-members reveal their ages. Women in their 70s with trim, supple bodies glow with vitality and enthusiasm for life and look 20 years younger.⁴⁵

The women expressed a deep dislike of what they saw as pervasive stereotyping of older people, which was seen as constraining their lives excessively. A 66 year old retired social worker commented:

The need to look young [for men and women] is much more to do with careers and getting jobs. And this is, I think, the crucial point about ageing, how it gets

44 MO, file B 2645.

45 MO, file B 1215.

in the way when job hunting or seeking promotion, and in other aspects of social life. Ageism is not seen as a problem like racism or sexism yet it is as damaging and as widespread.⁴⁶

A writer and counsellor, living in London expressed her response to conventional stereotypes:

Yesterday I was 60. There – I have come out and said it. How does it feel? Well a whole lot better than I thought. Never, but never have I so dreaded a birthday. But why should this be such a milestone? We are indoctrinated, that's why. I got my travel pass this morning and hoped I would not bump into anyone I knew at the office. So I am a Senior Citizen and an old age pensioner? This is ludicrous because I feel 25 going on 18. The years I suppose have been kind to me but no-one stays the same. Still I know my personality is as eccentric and adventurous as it ever was. ... is it my imagination or are people stepping outside the age categories as it becomes increasingly difficult to tell how old they are ... even if they almost kill themselves with aerobics etc. ultimately it is what is in the mind that is going to make the difference ... I know a very chic lady, not thin, looks about 65 or so, who has just had her 80th ... good personality, sharp, attractive. ... Another local lady died before Christmas at 89 years. ... again, good personality and she kept her own house to the end. ... But I cannot say I would wish to be another age or that there was a favourite time. NOW! that's it. Never have I been so happy, secure, had a job I love with such satisfying hobbies and interests.⁴⁷

This optimistic woman had a good marriage to a younger man, following an earlier disastrous marriage. The ageing of their husbands influenced the outlook of many women on their own ageing. A 67 year old retired clerk wrote:

I feel considerably older than I did even five years ago, probably because I have a husband who has Parkinson's disease and I am unable to leave him to himself for more than a week. I am not enjoying getting old and I don't believe if everyone was honest they would not agree with me.⁴⁸

46 MO, file B 1553.

47 MO, file B 1120.

48 MO, file A 1223.

A part-Chinese civil servant aged 47 had an interesting perspective on the widespread belief that old people are less respected in 'western' than in 'eastern' cultures:

We were brought up to respect our grandparents and that attitude continues in this family (the Chinese influence) but this means that grandparents are remote. They get their own way and people running round after them but they are not their grandchildren's friends.⁴⁹

Several women discussed the changing experience of old people over the century by making comparisons between their own ageing and that of their parents and grandparents. A retired social worker recalled:

... my grandparents did not *do* very much outside their homes whereas my elderly and old friends attend day classes (university extra-mural) and visit family and friends in this country and abroad.⁵⁰

Or they remembered their own attitudes earlier in life. A 44 year old receptionist wrote:

When I was 20 or 30 then 50 seemed quite old to me. In the 1980s 50s can be seen as attractive, interesting, experienced and valuable. This wasn't the case in the 1960s when I was in my teens as the Twiggy thin-as-rake-look was in and everything seemed to revolve around teenagers ... I don't think of 60 year olds as dodder any more but only as middle aged.⁵¹

Conclusion

The *Mass-Observation* respondents provide valuable and convincingly diverse expressions of how individual women perceived and experienced the major changes in the lives of older women over the twentieth century. Above all, survival to old age became an almost universal experience and it acquired new characteristics: By the second half of the century most people retired from paid employment whilst they were still physically fit, with a secure, if not necessarily large, income; more people remained fit to late ages whilst having access to a greater range of activities. These experiences were shared by men and women though not always in identical ways: Women were less

⁴⁹ MO, file C 1990.

⁵⁰ MO, file C 1405.

⁵¹ MO, file C 2142.

likely than men to experience retirement from paid employment as a seriously disruptive break in the life-course, partly because their places in the labour market were less secure than those of men, partly because they had stronger social and family ties. And women were more likely than men to suffer poverty in old age, as had long been so. This was only one of many long-term continuities between the twentieth and earlier centuries. Still women outlived men, not always, due largely to their greater poverty. Still, there was immense diversity in the living conditions of old people, from the very rich to the very poor, from the very active to the sadly decrepit. Also continuous through the centuries was resistance to simple chronological definitions of old age and awareness of differences in individual experiences of ageing; and persistence of stereotypes of 'fit' behaviour among old women, and resistance to them, combined with strong feelings about the importance of independence and assertion of the capacity of very many (but sadly not all) people at late ages to control their own lives and to play positive roles in their families and communities.