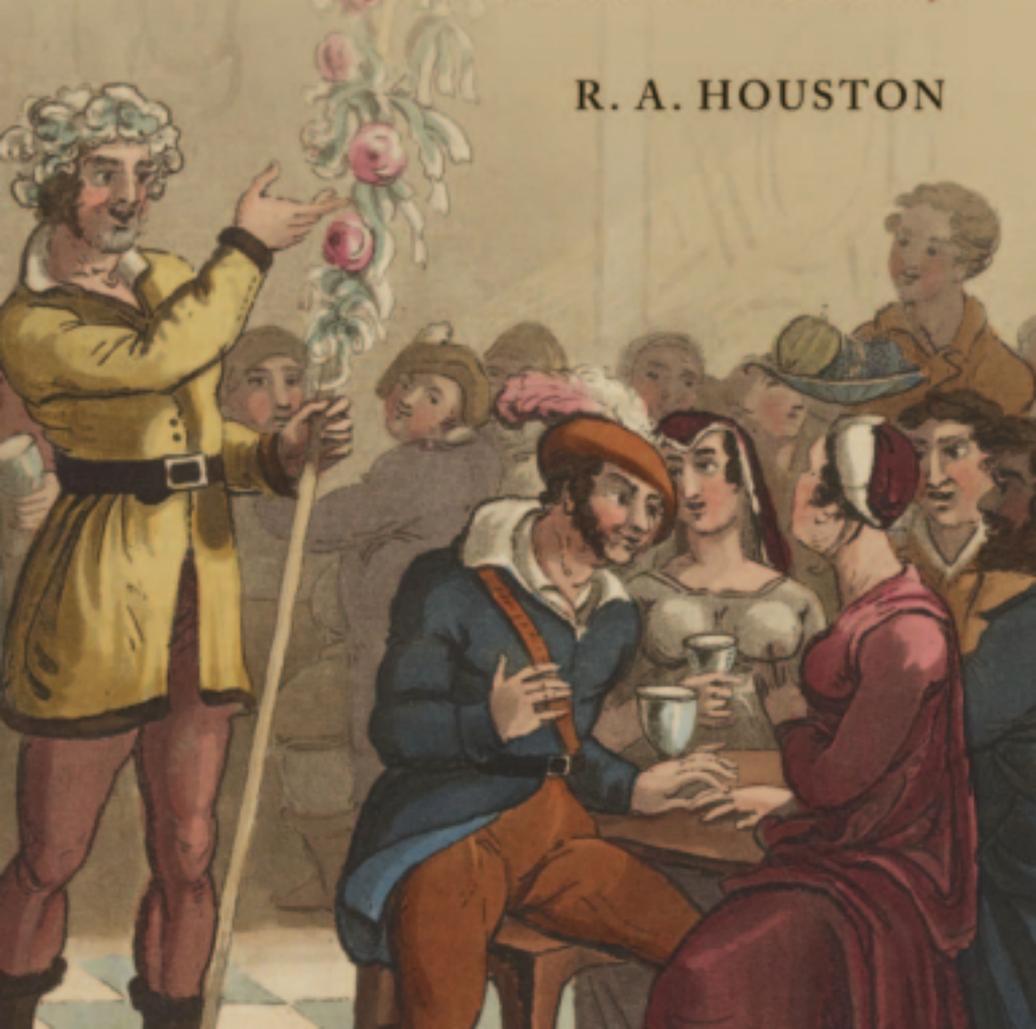


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BRIDE ALES AND PENNY WEDDINGS

*Recreations, Reciprocity, & Regions in Britain
from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century*

R. A. HOUSTON



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R. A. Houston

Table of Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>Note on Currencies and Counties</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Introduction: Marriage and Recreation, Historians and Social Scientists	1
PART I ALES AND BRIDALS: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SOCIABILITIES	
1. Communal Drinkings in England and Wales, c.1400–1600	21
2. Religious Change and the Demise of English Church Ales	26
3. Public and Private Festivities: the Geography of Church and Other Ales	43
PART II WEDDING CELEBRATIONS IN EARLY MODERN BRITAIN	
4. Weddings in South-East England	59
5. Recreations, Religion, and Bridals in Post-Reformation Scotland	66
6. Who Held Contributory Weddings and Why?	77
7. The Costs and Benefits of Bridals	92
8. Country, Town, and the Commercial Element in Hospitality	109
9. The Social Universe of Contributory Weddings	121
10. Numbers	136
PART III COERCION AND THE LIMITS OF VOLUNTARISM	
11. Lovedargs, Boon Days, and Boon Works	143
12. Thigging	151
13. <i>Cymorthau</i>	156

PART IV CONTEXTS AND COMPARISONS

14. Contemporary Explanations of Cultural Change	171
15. Regional Social and Economic Contexts	176
16. Cultural Patterns and the 'Celtic Fringe'	196
17. Cultural Patterns and Continental Parallels	205
18. The Decline of Reciprocity	211
Conclusion	219
<i>Select Bibliography of Printed Primary Sources and Secondary Literature</i>	227
<i>Index</i>	233

Abbreviations

APS	Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland
BL	British Library
CAS	Cumbria Archive Service
CSP	Calendar of State Papers
GCA	Glasgow City Archives
HL	Huntington Library
NA	The National Archives
NAS	National Archives of Scotland
NLS	National Library of Scotland
NLW	National Library of Wales
RPCS	Register of the Privy Council of Scotland

Note on Currencies and Counties

Until the eighteenth century Scotland did not use the pound sterling extensively. Unless otherwise stated any mention of a pound (£) in connection with Scotland is to a Scottish pound, worth approximately one twelfth of a pound sterling. Those who wish a crash course in Scottish history, with its many legal, administrative, religious, and social differences from England, may find helpful my *Scotland: a very short introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2008). I have used terms like Cumbria to describe a geographic region, rather than a modern administrative area, and I have chosen to locate all place names within pre-1975 counties or shires.

Preface

I first became curious about contributory or ‘penny’ weddings in Scotland while a research student and have wanted to explore them in more depth ever since. Occasions when guests paid for their own entertainment and gave money or other gifts to help the newlyweds set up house and business, they are the sort of mundane yet curious event that offer a way of understanding otherwise obscure aspects of culture, mentalities, and social relationships in the past. Since doctoral days too I have been fascinated by the similarities and differences between the three historic realms that made up early modern Britain, as well as by the significance of regional differences within England, Wales, and Scotland. This book stems from these interests and from the belief that things which seem routine are seldom unimportant: in this case manifestations of sociability, hospitality, gift exchange, and celebration, especially at weddings. It is about informal communities of people whose aim was maintaining and enhancing social cohesion.

The late-Georgian Durham antiquary John Brand described contributory wedding celebrations, not just in Scotland, where they were also called ‘siller’ (silver), ‘pey’ (pay) or ‘ca’ (call) weddings, but also in other regions of Britain. Brand termed the equivalent of penny weddings ‘Welsh weddings’ or ‘bid weddings’ there and in north-west England.¹ Brand’s descriptions are widely quoted in subsequent literature, but he was far from the first to comment on these distinctive festivities. William Vaughan, a native and resident of Carmarthenshire, described ‘bidding’ to Welsh weddings as early as 1600:

in some shieres, when the marriage day approacheth, the parents of the betrothed couple, doe certaine dayes before the wedding, write letters, to inuite all their friends to the marriage, whom they desire to haue present. Afterwards, the mariage day being come, y^e inuited ghests do assemble together, and at the very instant of the marriage, doe cast their presents, (which they bestow vpon the new married folkes) into a bason, dish, or cup, which standeth vpon the Table in the Church, readie prepared for that purpose. But this custome is onely put in vse amongst them, which stande in neede.²

Vaughan’s description encapsulates how ‘setting, phrases and gestures allowed the giver and recipient to understand that a gift relationship had been established’.³ This bond and its neighbourly ramifications are our core concerns.

In Brand’s day, antiquaries were concerned (in the words of Samuel Johnson) ‘to speculate upon the remains of pastoral life’.⁴ They praised weddings that involved ‘benevolent presents, contributions, in order to enable the new-married pair to

¹ J. Brand, *Observations on popular antiquities* 2 vols (London, 1813), vol. 2, 15, 70–6; T. Blount, *Nomo-Lexicon: a law-dictionary* (London, 1670), ‘Bidale or Bid-all’.

² W. Vaughan, *The Golden-groue moralized in three Bookes* (London, 1600), book 2, ch. 6.

³ N. Z. Davis, *The gift in sixteenth-century France* (Oxford, 2000), 14–15.

⁴ Quoted in P. Burke, *Popular culture in early modern Europe* (London, 1978), 8.

begin their new mode of life with comfort, and the means of prosperity... and by this most excellent custom, worthy of general adoption in every parish, a provision is made without any great inconvenience to any individual; and yet such collectively sets a deserving young couple at once in a state of comparative wealth and independence'.⁵ As a Welsh bidder might have said: 'A great many can help one, but one cannot help a great many.'⁶ While they thought contributory weddings a hangover from a simpler age, late Georgian antiquaries recognized they remained vital traditions. For example, a late-eighteenth-century contributor to the *Gentleman's Magazine* found bid weddings still common in south Wales among

servants, trades folks, and little farmers... before the wedding, an entertainment is provided, to which all the friends of each party are bid, or invited, and to which none fail to bring or send some contribution, from a cow or a calf down to half a crown or a shilling. Nor can this be called absolutely a present, because an account of each is kept, and if the young couple do well, it is expected that they should give as much at any future bidding of their generous guests. I have frequently known of 50l. being thus collected, and have heard of a bidding, which produced even a hundred, to a couple who were much beloved by their neighbours; and thereby enabled to begin the world with comfort.⁷

Seven years later a description of weddings in Cardigan provides a slightly different angle that enriches our overall perspective on the ripples of reciprocity that emanated from the event.

Welsh Weddings are frequently preceded, on the evening before the Marriage, by presents of Provisions and articles of Household Furniture, to the Bride and Bridegroom. On the Wedding-Day, as many as can be collected together accompany them to the Church, and from thence home, where a Collection is made in money from each of the Guests, according to their Inclination or Ability; which sometimes supplies a considerable aid in establishing the newly married couple, and in enabling 'them to begin the World', as they call it, with more comfort: but it is, at the same time, considered as a debt to be repaid hereafter, if called upon, at any future Wedding of the Contributors, or of their Friends or their Children, in similar circumstances. Some time previous to these Weddings, where they mean to receive Contributions, a Herald with a Crook or Wand, adorned with ribbons, makes the circuit of the neighbourhood, and makes his 'Bidding' or invitation in a prescribed form.⁸

Bid weddings lived on in Wales, where a correspondent of *The Times* said of rural Aberystwyth (Cardiganshire) in 1843: 'The system of a young couple raising a little capital at their wedding is quite common.'⁹

⁵ P. Roberts, *The Cambrian popular antiquities* (London, 1815), 159–60; L. T. Davies and A. Edwards, *Welsh life in the eighteenth century* (London, 1939), 230–1; M. C. Harris, *Crafts, customs and legends of Wales* (London, 1980), 58–61.

⁶ M. Curtis, *The antiquities of Laugharne, Pendine, and their neighbourhoods* (London, 1880), 210.

⁷ *The Gentleman's Magazine* 54 (May 1784), 343.

⁸ [Lewis Morris] 'Cardigan weddings', *The Gentleman's Magazine* 61 (1791), 1103; *The Cambrian Register* (1796), 430.

⁹ Quoted in *The Scotsman* (26 August 1843), 2.

Early antiquaries placed contributory bridals amid a broad spectrum of other recreational sociabilities that offered social, psychological, and material support. Thus seventeenth-century Worcestershire-born lexicographer Thomas Blount described another communal collection, a bid ale (Welsh *cwrw bach*, also known as a *pastai* when held in a public house). This took place ‘when an honest man decayed in his estate is set up again by the liberal benevolence and contribution of friends at a Feast’.¹⁰ Blount thought ‘bidales’, ‘bidder ales’ or ‘helpales’ were ‘most used in the West of England’.¹¹ Later commentators were more precise about forms and their geography. William Owen’s 1797 Welsh dictionary has two entries about these events in the principality. The more pertinent is ‘Cwrw cymhorth, Ale of contribution. It is customary for poor people, in Wales, to brew ale, or to provide any other entertainment, and invite the neighbourhood to partake, when a collection is made on the occasion; and they have a priodas gymhorth, or marriage of contribution, to which every guest brings a present of some sort of provision, or money, to enable the new couple to begin the World.’¹² The third variant was *cyvarvod cymhorth* or meeting of aid—a day or evening ‘bee’ that involved young women spinning or knitting and enjoying conviviality—though there were other variants including summer *nosweithiau gwau* (knitting evenings) or winter *cym-mortheu gwau* more inclusive of ages and sexes; a variant covered ploughing (*afael*) or reaping (*fedel*).¹³

The examples so far are mainly of Wales. From Elizabethan to Victorian times antiquaries like Brand nevertheless saw similar cultural forms in what we shall term ‘middle Britain’, which also includes Lowland Scotland, Cumberland, Westmorland, Lancashire, Cheshire, the West Riding of Yorkshire, and parts of Derbyshire and Shropshire. Fundamentally different in law, government, landholding, and religion, the component parts of northern and western Britain nevertheless shared significant social and cultural patterns, exemplified in contributory weddings and other kindred forms of communal sociability. These manifested the importance of what anthropologist Marshall Sahlins calls ‘generalized reciprocity’: ‘transactions on the line of assistance given and, if possible and necessary, assistance returned’.¹⁴ Sahlins focuses on the timing, intention, and equivalence of returns in a spectrum

¹⁰ T. Blount, *Glossographia: or a dictionary, interpreting all such hard words . . . as are now used in our refined English tongue* (London, 1656), ‘Bid = ale’. *Pastai* is Welsh for pie. R. M. Evans, ‘Folklore and customs in Cardiganshire’, *Cardiganshire Antiquarian Society Transactions* 12 (1937), 55; T. M. Owen, ‘West Glamorgan customs’, *Folk Life* 3 (1965), 47.

¹¹ Blount, *Nomo-Lexicon*, ‘Bidale or Bid-all’.

¹² W. Owen, *Geiriadur Cymyraeg a Saesoneg. A Welsh and English dictionary* 3 vols (London, 1797), vol. 1, ‘cymhorth’ [help].

¹³ J. J., ‘Cyvarvod cymhorth’, *The Cambro-Briton* 3 (November 1821), 36–7; J. G. Jenkins, ‘The woollen industry’, in D. Moore (ed.), *Wales in the eighteenth century* (Swansea, 1976), 106, describing Bala, Merioneth and using H. Ellis, *Original letters, illustrative of English history* 2nd series, 4 vols (London, 1827), vol. 3, 42; T. Pennant, *A tour in Wales, 1773* 2 vols (London, 1778–1783), vol. 2, 77, is the original source.

¹⁴ M. Sahlins, *Stone age economics* (London, 1974), 193–4. Sahlins’s other two categories of reciprocity are ‘balanced’ (direct, immediate; like barter or exchange) and ‘negative’ (exploitative and unidirectional; ‘getting something for nothing’). Sahlins’s ideas are discussed in chs 6, 8, and 11. A. D. Rees, *Life in a Welsh countryside: a social study of Llanfihangel yng Ngwynfa* (Cardiff, 1951), 93.

of exchanges. With contributory weddings the giver of a gift does not expect equiparation, because his or her circumstances and those of the recipient are never exactly comparable, but he or she does anticipate reciprocation. Both the form of return and its timing remain imprecise, even if the expectation of comparability is implicit and strongly felt. For Sahlins, counter-obligation

is not stipulated by time, quantity, or quality: the expectation of reciprocity is indefinite. It usually works out that the time and worth of reciprocation are not alone conditional on what was given by the donor, but also on what he will need and when, and likewise what the recipient can afford and when. Receiving money or goods lays on a diffuse obligation to reciprocate when necessary to the donor and/or possible for the recipient. The requital thus may be very soon, but then again it may be never.¹⁵

In this scheme the level or form of the return and its timing are both less important than the giving and receiving itself, which created networks of reciprocal trust. A vague if strongly felt expectation existed that someday the givers or their heirs or kin might need the same help. A contribution at a wedding could be construed either as a gift, loan, or repayment, but the moral obligation to reciprocate was equally pressing in all cases because early modern people thought ingratitude deeply offensive.¹⁶ These exchanges were profoundly social, their 'indirect, transferred or delayed returns' constituting 'an extended subterranean chain of reciprocity'.¹⁷ Historian Gary West believes that giving and receiving created 'latent neighbourliness'.¹⁸ Thus the rituals surrounding some types of wedding tell us not only about conjugality, but also about belonging to community.

Penny or bid weddings demonstrate distinctive social priorities that balanced the needs of the collective with the rights of the individual.¹⁹ Personal choice about the timing of marriage and perhaps even the event itself were powerfully influenced by the need for approval from family and community, who not only gave material things, but also transferred less tangible capital. Strategies 'to maintain independence and to avoid becoming a burden on others by accumulating enough "social capital" which could be exchanged for instrumental help or advice' may be ubiquitous, but the tactics used and their context varied over space as well as time.²⁰ Drawing on Sahlins's ideas, this book is about the form of aid some newlyweds received from their universe of kin, friends, and acquaintances, and the social significance of giving and receiving.²¹ It takes us through the processes of household formation and the workings of neighbourhood to the heart of community. Covering c.1450–1850, it seeks to change the way historians think about social identification in the British past.

¹⁵ Sahlins, *Stone age economics*, 194.

¹⁶ A. Beale, *Traits and stories of the Welsh peasantry* (London, 1849), 290, 295–6, 298, 302–4.

¹⁷ A. J. Kidd, 'Philanthropy and the "social history paradigm"', *Social History* 21 (1996), 185;

M. Bulmer, *Neighbours: the work of Philip Abrams* (Cambridge, 1986), 112.

¹⁸ G. J. West, *An historical ethnography of rural Perthshire, 1750–1950* (Lampeter, 2007), 273–4.

¹⁹ Sahlins, *Stone age economics*, 185–6, 193–4.

²⁰ R. Jütte, *Poverty and deviance in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1994), 84; P. Bourdieu, 'Marriage strategies as strategies of social reproduction', in R. Foster and O. Ranum (eds), *Family and society: selections from the Annales* (Baltimore, 1976), 117–44.

²¹ Foster and Ranum (eds), *Family and society: selections from the Annales*, 185–6, 193–4.

The argument is that contributory wedding festivities in Britain cannot be dismissed as archaic survivals, which evidence a simpler age—‘an almost antiquarian commitment to hospitality’²²—or as substitutes for something else—like economic development and rated poor relief—or as epiphenomena of politico-religious change. They were instead robust, dynamic, and enduring evocations of regionally related social priorities. Less a form of taxation or a unidirectional exercise in benevolence, they are best seen as examples of multilateral reciprocity. Profane celebrations around the time of marriage were normal, but not all wedding feasts were the same and offerings by and to the couple also varied. In what follows we shall be particularly interested in giving to the couple by invited guests. This could take the form of repayments of donations previously made by the bride, groom, or their family to others or gifts by persons not previously associated in this way. Contributory weddings were a prominent part of marriage formation in north and west Britain from at least the sixteenth until the nineteenth century and a valuable indicator of distinctive forms of social organization in these regions.

Weddings are usually happy events and this book tries to put the positive back into the past, following historian Linda Pollock’s recent call for ‘a new approach to culture: one which would accord values, bonds and consensus a more prominent place, one which would reintegrate subjective experience... and one which would grant subjects creative intentionality’.²³ Historians, even the best, may be anxious to explore ‘social and cultural contradictions’ or even ‘malice and hatred’, but this emphasis detracts from understanding the constructive compromises that made early modern societies work.²⁴ At the same time, the book’s approach is what historian Charles Phythian-Adams calls ‘integrative history... [treating] the fluctuating development of recognisable social entities in the round, and... their changing interrelationships... over longer time scales’.²⁵ The geographical unit of analysis is the region, seen by Phythian-Adams as a set of ‘cultural provinces’ with identifiable characteristics.²⁶

The main question puzzled antiquaries who commented on cultural patterns as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and it continues to intrigue. Historian David Underdown restated it not long ago: ‘Why do we find one cultural form—a shaming ritual perhaps, or a popular sport—in one region, another in another.’²⁷ Historians and historical geographers alike are alert to regional differences

²² F. Heal, ‘Food gifts, the household, and the politics of exchange in early modern England’, *Past & Present* 199 (2008), 69.

²³ L. A. Pollock, ‘The practice of kindness in early modern elite society’, *Past & Present* 211 (2011), 151.

²⁴ E. P. Thompson, *Customs in common* (Hardmondsworth, 1991), 6; L. Stone, *The family, sex and marriage in England, 1550–1800* (London, 1977), 95, 98.

²⁵ C. Phythian-Adams, ‘Local history and national history: the quest for the peoples of England’, *Rural History* 2 (1991), 1.

²⁶ C. Phythian-Adams, ‘Introduction: an agenda for English local history’, in C. Phythian-Adams (ed.), *Societies, cultures and kinship, 1580–1850. Cultural provinces and English local history* (Leicester, 1993), 9–23; J. D. Marshall, ‘Communities, societies, regions and local history: perceptions of locality in High and Low Furness’, *Local Historian* 26 (1996), 36–47; A. Green and A. Pollard, ‘Introduction: identifying regions’, in A. Green and A. Pollard (eds), *Regional identities in north-east England, 1300–2000* (Woodbridge, 2007), 1–25.

²⁷ D. Underdown, ‘Regional cultures? Local variations in popular culture during the early modern period’, in T. Harris (ed.), *Popular culture in England, c.1500–1850* (Basingstoke, 1995), 28.

in political loyalties, industrial development, agricultural specialization, and some social forms.²⁸ With the notable exception of historian Ronald Hutton's powerful call for investigation of 'a framework of diverse and differing regional cultures characterized by belief systems which derived from much earlier tradition', the importance of local and regional dimensions to comparative social and cultural experience remains under-researched.²⁹ From a long-term, comparative standpoint we can use contributory weddings and other communal festivities to assess whether, as historian Bob Scribner argues, there was a single national culture, with multiple sub-cultures subject to a gradual but universal change, or genuinely distinct regional forms that show the existence of significantly different types of social organization and whose chronologies and reasons for change were also different.³⁰ The argument of the book is that the peoples of north and west Britain were not just backward neighbours waiting to catch up with the south-east of England. Instead they had a distinctive approach to social relationships; their culture was differently fashioned rather than old-fashioned.

The introduction sets out the historiography of marriage, recreations, and sociability, arguing that all are relevant to the present study and need to be taken together. The book uses a wide spectrum of primary sources, but this opening chapter discusses the particular problems with folklore. The introduction also sets out the different disciplines with an interest in marriage, recreations, and social relationships, each with their own angle. In particular, it assesses the significance of social-scientific work, on issues such as reciprocity, trust, and social capital, to historical analysis of the social contexts of marriage formation and community life. Weddings were voluntary, but they took place against a background not only of complex systems of gifts and payments, but also of extensive neighbourly involvement in intimate areas of life. Lacking the overt authoritarianism of the medieval manor court or the early-modern parish, contributory weddings nevertheless contained elements of control from a wide range of local parties with an interest in marriage. The introduction explicates them. It also explores widely accepted models of social and cultural change, which propose that once ubiquitous recreations and festivities gradually became confined to Britain's social and geographical margins during the early modern period.

The body of the text is structured to allow disaggregation of the components of reciprocity and sociability over time, the better to understand their social meaning. Part I is mostly about England and Wales. It starts off by looking at 'ales' or 'potations'—communal drinkings to raise money—because historians have long recognized wedding festivities, at which drink was sold to help the couple (commonly, if perhaps misleadingly described as 'bride ales'), as one feature of community life.

²⁸ J. Langton, 'The industrial revolution and the regional geography of England', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* new series 9 (1984), 145–67; P. Hudson (ed.), *Regions and industries: a perspective on the industrial revolution in Britain* (Cambridge, 1989); H. M. Jewell, *The north-south divide: the origins of northern consciousness in England* (Manchester, 1994).

²⁹ R. Hutton, 'Witch-hunting in Celtic societies', *Past & Present* 212 (2011), 71.

³⁰ R. Scribner, 'Is a history of popular culture possible?', *History of European Ideas* 10 (1989), 173–91.

Understanding the variety of different ales and the agencies promoting them makes it easier to investigate other recreations and festivities. The reason is because there is a danger of conflating cultural forms that look the same (like official church ales and unofficial help ales or bid weddings), especially when proscriptive and descriptive evidence for their form and function is sometimes far from robust. In fact, church ales emerged in the south and east of England during the late Middle Ages to fund church projects and, increasingly condemned by Protestants and promoters of public order, they were largely gone from this region by the end of Elizabeth's reign. Lowland Scotland, the north of England, and Wales had no comparable tradition of church ales; an emphasis on action by the wider community, rather than the institution of the parish, lay at the heart of social obligation there. We shall consider the relative significance of parish identities compared with other types of communal or neighbourly solidarity—and indeed the nature of the parish in different parts of Britain. The north of England and Wales did, however, have distinctive communal festivities called wakes (annual feasts to celebrate the building and dedication of the parish church) which survived the Reformation to flourish in the longer term. Unravelling the geography and chronology of different types of festivity or recreation is important because explanations of cultural change often use a single explanatory model—usually a version of modernization or rationalization that sees one set of institutions or practices replacing another—when distinctive forms may each require their own explanation.

Understanding ales helps to establish the recreational context for early modern marriages because the diversity of wedding celebrations in different parts of Britain echoes the geographical difference between ales and wakes (chapter 4). In the south and east marriages were mostly low key and small scale, in the north and west often lavish and large. Chapter 5 explores in depth contributory weddings in Lowland Scotland, setting them in the context of recreations, rituals, and religion after the Reformation. It revisits the issues of sociability and 'social control' introduced in Part I. Rather than uniformly proscribing lively forms of sociability, secular and religious authorities across north and west Britain leant towards controlling what they recognized as a central institution for the societies they served. The subsequent chapters of Part II treat together all areas with contributory weddings in order to emphasize that the diverse regions of middle Britain shared important social and cultural features. More than mere curiosities, contributory weddings were an important part of societies that valued generosity, reciprocity, hospitality, and communality. The five further chapters in this Part analyse which social groups held bridals and why; who they invited and what participation meant; the numbers, costs, and venues involved. These chapters explore in depth the social pressures to give and to reciprocate at weddings, as well as teasing out what a broad range of participants from gentry to servants got from the festivities. Sometimes called 'beggar marriages', bid and penny weddings were seldom for the truly poor; they were a way of consolidating the status of couples who were already socially integrated into, and economically viable within local communities. Participation was for them a cultural act that structured the lived world, defined status, and constituted social relationships.

Part III surveys the broader field in which weddings, reciprocity, and hospitality take their place in Britain. It examines the limits of voluntarism, when it came to gifts, by looking at more-or-less coerced giving that was either prescribed as an incident of land tenure or proscribed by statute. It argues that these contractual or legal markers touching boons (agricultural work days), 'thigging', and *cymorthau* (both species of directly solicited or coerced gifts—*cymorth* translates as 'help') help us to establish the boundaries of expectation and acceptability, invitation and imposition in societies which placed great importance on generosity. The final Part seeks to explain the importance of generalized reciprocity by looking at some European societies which manifested it and others, much closer at hand (the so-called 'Celtic fringe'), which did not. It investigates certain regions of Britain that had traditions of gifting through an investigation of their social and economic structures. In Britain's middle zone, we find an emphasis on communities of producers who commonly took on live-in servants, dwelt in scattered farms rather than nucleated villages, dealt with relatively small urban centres, and frequently made economic transactions in kind and service rather than cash and day-labour. These were also areas where rating for poor relief was adopted only reluctantly—if at all—prior to the late eighteenth century and where begging remained important for as long, to a system of charity that was never generous. While the book is mostly about states of being rather than becoming, the final substantive chapter suggests some necessarily speculative reasons for the final demise of cultural forms that included contributory weddings and wakes. Contrary to the narrative of an early and steady decline thanks to processes of modernization, offered by contemporaries and some historians, these remained vital in middle Britain until well into the nineteenth century and do not disappear from the record until the Victorian era. Their end is best explained by changing attitudes towards the use of time.

Fy let us all to the Briddel,
For there will be liting [singing] there,
For Jockie's to be married to Maggie,
The lass with the gauden hair

Francis Sempill, 'The blythsome wedding', in J. Paterson (ed.),
The poems of the Sempills of Belltrees (Edinburgh, 1849), 67.

First, you mun ken, a youthfu' pair,
By frugal thrift exceyted,
Wad hev a brydewain an', of course,
The country roun' inveyted

John Stagg, 'Bridewain', *Poems*.

Introduction

Marriage and Recreation, Historians and Social Scientists

Early modern marriage does not lack historians. Marriage's different forms and their legal and demographic implications, courtship and marital relations, procreation within and outside wedlock, and religious and ideological conceptions of unions are all familiar.¹ Whereas earlier historians set out the demographic parameters of the family and tried to extrapolate from these to lived experience, more recent studies focus on qualitative evidence and the recreation of the significant contours and subtle nuances of individual behaviour. Social historians are keen to discover how 'modern' or 'individual' was partner choice, while historical demographers want to understand the constitution of unions before the law and in the customs of communities. As legal historian Richard Helmholz points out, canon law made marriage easy to contract, but difficult to prove and the ambiguities in definition provided fertile ground both for medieval and early modern church courts and for modern social historians who use their records.² Driven by statements like historian Michael Sheehan's, that medieval attitudes were 'astonishingly individualistic', analyses of marriage formation privilege the personal, informal, and even emotional aspects of decision making, at the expense of aspects of its public and formal side.³ Historians stress the legal freedom of British couples to marry regardless of advice or supervision, suggesting that while 'approval was felt to be desirable, its failure to emerge was not an insurmountable obstacle to wedlock'.⁴

The emphasis on the individual is understandable because historians sought to disprove the occasionally wild conjectural models of a changing (or even modernizing) family, posited most famously by Edward Shorter and Lawrence Stone.⁵ Instead,

¹ T. C. Smout, 'Aspects of sexual behaviour in nineteenth century Scotland', in A. A. MacLaren (ed.), *Social class in Scotland: past and present* (Edinburgh, 1976), 55–85; R. Mitchison and L. Leneman, *Sexuality and social control. Scotland, 1660–1780* (Oxford, 1989); K. Barclay, *Love, intimacy and power: marriage and patriarchy in Scotland, 1650–1850* (Manchester, 2011); R. B. Outhwaite (ed.), *Marriage and society: studies in the social history of marriage* (London, 1981); *Clandestine marriage in England, 1500–1850* (London, 1995).

² R. H. Helmholz, *Marriage litigation in medieval England* (Cambridge, 1974), 62.

³ M. Sheehan, *Marriage, family, and law in medieval Europe: collected studies* (Toronto, 1996), 76. Sheehan plays down the role of family and lord in making later medieval English marriage, but he allows for the exercise of 'social control': 117; R. Houlbrooke, 'The making of marriage in mid-Tudor England: evidence from the records of matrimonial contract legislation', *Journal of Family History* 10 (1985), 339–52.

⁴ J. A. Sharpe, 'Plebeian marriage in Stuart England: some evidence from popular literature', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series 36 (1986), 75.

⁵ E. Shorter, *The making of the modern family* (London, 1976); L. Stone, *The Family, sex and marriage in England, 1550–1800* (London, 1977).

the 'new social historians' tried to present a more measured and better substantiated picture of the rich and complex lives of early modern people. Late medieval and early modern marriage was, at one level, a very personal matter and couples clearly had some notion of their own private affairs into which outsiders should not trespass.⁶ In some ways marriage was indeed highly individualistic. Historians nevertheless cautiously balance the apparent modernity of past families by contextualizing decisions about when and who to marry within a suite of distinctively early modern attitudes. To borrow from legal historian Frederic Maitland, the end result is that late medieval and early modern individualism was 'rough and rude', constrained by a wide range of forces.⁷ 'The family was a social, public institution, not a private one that could be left to its own devices.' So wrote historian Susan Amussen.⁸ More specifically, historian Judith Bennett reminds us: 'Medieval marriage was both a private matter and a public institution.'⁹

The same is true of marriages in all ages for they are not only open statements of present personal commitment, but also forward-looking announcements about the creation of a new unit within a community that, through public participation, ended any 'blurriness' about the married state and initiated collective memory about issues such as legitimacy.¹⁰ To be married meant not simply satisfying legal requirements, but also engaging in performances that rendered the marital state visible and active: betrothals (also known as 'handfastings' or 'spousals'), banns (known as 'axin' or asking in Lancashire), a public (usually religious) ceremony, and a social celebration; these marked 'a series of ever-widening circles of publicity about the marriage'.¹¹ Marrying couples saw themselves as individuals seeking personal fulfilment, but they knew they existed in connectivity and assumed no necessary antagonism or opposition between self and society. Marriage, therefore, involved

⁶ M. Ingram, *The church courts, sex and marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1987), 195–7, 245; E. Longfellow, 'Public, private, and the household in seventeenth-century England', *Journal of British Studies* 45 (2006), 313–34.

⁷ F. Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *The history of English law before the time of Edward I* 2 vols (London, 1968), vol. 1, 616; S. D. White, 'Maitland on family and kinship', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 89 (1996), 91–113; R. M. Smith, 'Marriage processes in the English past: some continuities', in L. Bonfield, R. M. Smith, and K. Wrightson (eds), *The world we have gained: histories of population and social structure* (Oxford, 1986), 43–99.

⁸ S. D. Amussen, *An ordered society: gender and class in early modern England* (Oxford, 1988), 36.

⁹ J. M. Bennett, 'The ties that bind: peasant marriages and families in late medieval England', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15 (1984), 111; J. M. Bennett, *Women in the medieval English countryside: gender and household in Brigstock before the plague* (Oxford, 1987), 91–9; B. Hanawalt, *The ties that bound: peasant families in medieval England* (New York, 1986), 197–204; D. O'Hara, *Courtship and constraint: rethinking the making of marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester, 2000), 38–49.

¹⁰ C. Beattie, "'Living as a single person": marital status, performance and the law in late medieval England', *Women's History Review* 17 (2008), 327–40; J. Nugent, "'None must meddle between man and wife": assessing family and the fluidity of public and private in early modern Scotland', *Journal of Family History* 35 (2010), 219–31.

¹¹ S. McSheffrey, *Love and marriage in late medieval London* (Kalamazoo, 1995), 9–10; E. Clark, 'The decision to marry in thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Norfolk', *Mediaeval Studies* 49 (1987), 496–516. Contrast, among others, P. Rushton, 'Property, power and family networks: the problem of disputed marriage in early modern England', *Journal of Family History* 11 (1986), 205–19; J. McNabb, 'Ceremony versus consent: courtship, illegitimacy, and reputation in northwest England, 1560–1610', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 37 (2006), 59–81.

social processes as well as individual choices. Bridal celebrations came at the end of a series of increasingly serious commitments conducted with the knowledge and approval of kin, acquaintances, and church, but no less important for that. Judith Bennett observes that these festivities ‘acknowledged the validity of a private agreement through public feasting and drinking’ and also ‘accepted the new couple and their household into the village’.¹²

While setting out the agenda for the new social history in the late 1960s, historian Peter Laslett remarked on how much ‘work would have to be done to discover quite how the mass of the people got married’.¹³ Even today, how early modern couples found resources, and who or what influenced their decisions about who and when to marry, remain the subject more of scholarly speculation and plausible generalization than detailed research. Despite the excellent work of historian Diana O’Hara, in exploring ‘a wide range of constraining factors, from the internalised expectations of courting couples to the external pressures exercised by family, kin and community’, the social context remains slanted towards discussion of the largely psychological role of family and friends in influencing partner choice.¹⁴ Influence was subtler than ‘arranging’ marriages. The ‘guiding’ hand of parents can be detected, for example, in elite marriages and in the younger age at which London’s upper-middle-class women, who lived with their parents, first married compared with poorer, immigrant girls.¹⁵

There are, of course, exceptions to this picture of selectivity in research. In 1980, sociologist Michael Anderson summed up efforts to understand the history of the early modern and modern family under four headings: psychological, demographic, sentimental, and economic.¹⁶ The present study hopes to add a further *social* dimension, which nevertheless encompasses Anderson’s categories and which also includes important lessons learned from anthropology. Again it builds on a strong body of existing scholarship. Early modern historian Ralph Houlbrooke did important archival work on marriage and the family as well as offering a valuable early synthesis while David Cressy amassed mountains of fascinating material on rites of passage.¹⁷ For his part, social anthropologist-cum-historian Alan Macfarlane offered an unusually broad analysis of marriage formation, covering the importance of friends, acquaintances, communities, and institutions in making families—and in seeing them succeed or fail.¹⁸ Ethnography too accepts that a group finds its identity on shared understandings occasionally articulated in public. Set against this structural

¹² Bennett, *Women in the medieval English countryside: gender and household in Brigstock before the plague*, 94.

¹³ P. Laslett, *The world we have lost* (London, 1971), 102.

¹⁴ O’Hara, *Courtship*, 30; R. Adair, *Courtship, illegitimacy and marriage in early modern England* (Manchester, 1996), 133–9; C. Carlton and T. Stretton, ‘Illegitimacy and authority in the north of England, c.1450–1640’, *Northern History* 48 (2011), 23–40.

¹⁵ V. Brodsky, ‘Single women in the London marriage market, 1598–1619’, in R. B. Outhwaite (ed.), *Marriage and society: studies in the social history of marriage* (London, 1981), 81–100.

¹⁶ M. Anderson, *Approaches to the history of the western family, 1500–1914* (Cambridge, 1980).

¹⁷ R. A. Houlbrooke, *The English family, 1450–1700* (London, 1984); D. Cressy, *Birth, marriage, and death* (Oxford, 1997).

¹⁸ A. Macfarlane, *Marriage and love in England, 1300–1840* (Oxford, 1987).

element is what anthropologist-turned-sociologist Pierre Bourdieu terms ‘practice’: an approach that recognizes the variety of individual strategies, the uncertainty of decision making, and ‘the game element in social life’.¹⁹ At the interface comes history, providing ‘ethnographies of the particular’ that explain how structures evolve and are understood over time.²⁰

Thus Tudor and Stuart specialist Steve Hindle advocates a socially and institutionally contextualized analysis of marriage decisions, setting emotion and instrumentality alongside what anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls the ‘hard surfaces of life... the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained’.²¹ One surface, the economic precondition of household formation, is well understood, because in north-west Europe couples normally established an independent household at marriage. Indeed it is precisely their economic and residential independence that made nuclear family households more vulnerable than complex or extended ones with supportive kin networks. As a result newly married couples needed more help from the collective.²²

There were, broadly speaking, two recognized pathways to creating a viable unit: on the one hand through wealth transmission between generations (both inheritance *post mortem* and transfers *inter vivos*) and on the other by saving among those dependent on labour, the latter commonly through another distinctive feature of north-west European demography and society, life-cycle service.²³ Most studies therefore focus on kin as transferor or couple as creator of resources. Historians debate how important kinship was to economic, social, and cultural life in early modern England, though the extent and authority of kin networks (early modern ‘friendship’) was considerably weaker than in many contemporary European societies.²⁴ The role of the broader community remains veiled, except for the interventions of ‘friends’ (in the modern sense of the word) as guides to partner choice, revealed most clearly in church court depositions about disputed unions. If kin could not automatically be relied upon to offer assistance, nor was living in a neighbourhood a guarantee of social interaction or help; networks had to be activated and reactivated.

The importance of reputation, honour, or ‘credit’ to early modern social and economic life, including the recruitment of aid, is now well established by the

¹⁹ P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice* [1972] trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, 1977); W. M. Reddy, *The invisible code: honor and sentiment in postrevolutionary France, 1814–1848* (London, 1997), 1–2.

²⁰ Reddy, *The invisible code: honor and sentiment in postrevolutionary France, 1814–1848*, 2.

²¹ S. Hindle, ‘The problem of pauper marriage in seventeenth-century England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th series 8 (1998), 71–89; C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures* (London, 1975), 30.

²² R. M. Smith, ‘Charity, self-interest and welfare: reflections from demographic and family history’, in M. Daunton (ed.), *Charity, self-interest and welfare in the English past* (London, 1996), 27.

²³ A. Kusmaul, *Servants in husbandry in early modern England* (Cambridge, 1981), 81–4; G. Morgan, ‘Dowries for daughters in west Wales, 1500–1700’, *Welsh History Review* 17 (1995), 534–49; J. Whittle, ‘Servants in rural England c.1450–1650: hired work as a means of accumulating wealth and skills before marriage’, in M. Agren and A. L. Erickson (eds), *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain 1400–1900* (Aldershot, 2005), 89–107.

²⁴ W. Coster, *Family and kinship in England, 1450–1800* (Harlow, 2001), offers a balanced overview.

important work of historian Craig Muldrew and others; Muldrew writes of ‘the sociability of credit and commerce’.²⁵ We know how individual actions could add to or detract from the store of good will that was a precondition of a peaceful, stable, and successful life.²⁶ Other than an important article by Marjorie McIntosh, building most notably on the influential work of political scientist Robert Putnam, and suggestive studies by historian Steve King, what is missing for Britain is a broader contextualization of how credit or ‘social capital’—the ‘trust, norms, and networks within communities’—worked at the formation of the most basic social unit, the nuclear family, and how these workings helped to ‘improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action’.²⁷ Used in many different ways by a range of disciplines, social capital is for historians best conceptualized as ‘the network of associations, activities, or relations that bind people together as a community via certain norms and psychological capacities, notably trust, which are essential for civil society and productive of future collective action or goods’.²⁸ More specifically, our interest here is in fiduciary trust, where the obligations and responsibilities are moral and founded upon reciprocity.²⁹

Medieval historians are alert to the many individuals and groups who supervised the transmission of social capital. Promoting good neighbourhood was one of the lord’s roles and historian Rosamond Faith believes his presence or that of his representative at medieval weddings, sometimes receiving gifts, suggests ‘some kind of interest in peasant marriages’.³⁰ Faith further observes that marriage ‘was seen as the lord’s concern at every level: very few people in medieval society would have expected to marry without the permission of some superior or other, at least where

²⁵ C. Muldrew, *The economy of obligation: the culture of credit and social relations in early modern England* (London, 1998), 123–47.

²⁶ F. Dabhoiwala, ‘The construction of honour, reputation and status in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th series 6 (1996), 201–13; C. B. Herrup, *A house in gross disorder: sex, law and the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven* (Oxford, 1999).

²⁷ R. D. Putnam, *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy* (Princeton, 1993), 167; M. McIntosh, ‘The diversity of social capital in English communities, 1300–1640’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29 (1999), 459–90; S. King, ‘Chance encounters? Paths to household formation in early modern England’, *International Review of Social History* 44 (1999), 23–46; R. Wall, ‘Beyond the household: marriage, household formation and the role of kin and neighbours’, *International Review of Social History* 44 (1999), 55–67; S. King, ‘Love, religion and power in the making of marriages in early nineteenth-century rural industrial Lancashire’, *Rural History* 21 (2010), 1–26. Continental historians offer much better analyses. See e.g. L. Roper, “‘Going to church and street’: weddings in Reformation Augsburg”, *Past & Present* 106 (1985), 62–101; C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, family, and ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, 1985).

²⁸ J. Farr, ‘Social capital: a conceptual history’, *Political Theory* 32 (2004), 9; P. Bourdieu, ‘Le capital social: notes provisoires’, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 31 (1980), 2–3; M. S. Granovetter, ‘The strength of weak ties’, *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1978), 1360–80; J. S. Coleman, ‘Social capital in the creation of human capital’, *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1989), 95–120; S. Ogilvie, *Institutions and European trade: merchant guilds, 1000–1800* (Cambridge, 2011), 6–7, 427–33.

²⁹ S. Cooper, ‘Kinship and welfare in early modern England: sometimes charity begins at home’, in A. Borsay and P. Shapely (eds), *Medicine, charity and mutual aid: the consumption of health and welfare in Britain, c.1550–1950* (Aldershot, 2007), 60–1.

³⁰ A. J. L. Winchester, *The harvest of the hills: rural life in northern England and the Scottish borders, 1400–1700* (Edinburgh, 2000), 39–40; R. Faith, ‘Seigneurial control of women’s marriage’, *Past & Present* 99 (1983), 138–40; S. H. Rigby, *English society in the later Middle Ages* (Basingstoke, 1995), 258–60, 263.