

WOMEN'S
AGENCY
in
EARLY MODERN
BRITAIN
and the
AMERICAN
COLONIES

∞
ROSEMARY
O'DAY



Women's Agency in Early Modern Britain and the American Colonies

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Women's Agency in Early Modern Britain and the American Colonies

Patriarchy, partnership
and patronage

Rosemary O'Day



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Preface

I was commissioned to write this book shortly before my husband (and soulmate) David Englander died. In their infinite wisdom administrators at the Open University suggested that I become acting and then actual head of department in order to overcome my grief. Partly as a result, this book has taken a decade to complete. I hope, however, that the long gestation period has produced a better book than I had at first envisaged. When he was dying, David advised me to find happiness where I could and especially in a return to early modern studies. He was right, and I did.

I owe so many debts of gratitude. First of all, I wish to thank the authors of the books, articles and theses that I have read. I have listed in the bibliography all works from which I quoted or drew significantly. Secondly, I thank the archivists and assistants, past and present, who have helped me at the various record offices: British Library, Bodleian Library, Lichfield Joint Record Office, William Salt Library and Staffordshire County Record Office, North London Collegiate School, Nottingham University Library, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Record Office, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC; Library of Congress, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. I must single out for special mention Dr Mary Robertson of the Huntington who has given generously of her time and expertise regarding the Egerton, Temple and Brydges families and their papers; Karen Morgan of the North London Collegiate School, for her immense cooperation; Mairi Macdonald of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust for her generosity and Dorothy Johnston of the University of Nottingham Library for her interest and assistance. Thirdly, I thank especially Ian Harris, Barbara Donagan, Patrick Collinson, Dorothy Johnston, Anne Laurence, Gill Perry and the Gender in the Humanities Group at the Open University for their conversation, comments and support. I am particularly grateful to the Huntington Library for allowing me to work there for an extended period each year and to its fellowship committee for

awarding me an Andrew Mellon fellowship in 2005/6. Financial support was also extended by The Open University, for which I am most grateful. I acknowledge the above libraries and record offices for quotation from documents in their possession. I gratefully acknowledge the Church Commissioners, North London Collegiate School and Stoneleigh Abbey Limited for other permissions.

I owe a great debt to Dr John Stevenson, editor of this series, for his enthusiastic support and helpful suggestions and to Dr Rachel Gibbons, my research assistant, for her bibliographical work and her generous comments. In addition I thank Christina Wipf Perry of Longman/Pearson for her help and patience.

Last but not least, I thank my family – Andrew O'Day and Dan and Matthew Englander – and my good friends Janet Dawson, Catherine Roe, Sheila Taylor, Meg Kesten, Yvonne Alton, Lee Stolzman and Sian Lewis for support when I was brought low by life's vicissitudes, and for listening patiently when I was eventually revived by this book.

Rosemary O'Day
The Open University, June 2006

*I dedicate this book to my parents and siblings, with thanks
for their unfailing support and love:*

My mother Beryl Robinson Brookes (1902–1989)

My father Thomas Henry Brookes (1895–1980)

My sister

Kathleen Mary Brookes Poole (1929–)

My brothers

Bryan John Brookes (1931–)

Neville Hugh Brookes (1936–)

Abbreviations

BL	British Library
CSPD	Calendar of State Papers Domestic
FSL	Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC
HEH	Huntington Library, San Marino, California
HM	Huntington Manuscript
L.J.R.O.	Lichfield Joint Record Office
MHR	Maryland Hall of Records
MO	Montagu Papers
NLCS	North London Collegiate School
NLW	National Library of Wales
SBPTRO	Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Record Office, Stratford-upon-Avon
SCRO	Stafford County Record Office
ST	Stowe Collection
STT	Stowe Temple Papers
STB	Stowe Brydges Papers
UNL	University of Nottingham Library

Conventions

Spelling and punctuation in quotations have been modernised where necessary for clarity. Otherwise no changes have been made.

Citations are given in full for contemporarily published works. Citations for other items are abbreviated; full details of publication can be found in the Bibliography.

CHAPTER 1

General introduction

There is a good deal of interest in the history of women. This interest has produced excellent detailed work by historians, which has led to several exciting debates. It (and associated interest in the history of gender) has also led to a broadening of the perspective adopted by socio-economic, socio-religious and other historians, who now see women's history as an essential part of any historical writing, if only at the level of explaining why women's history plays a minor role in some political, diplomatic or military histories. At its best we see women as more than half the population of these countries, who were important agents in their social, economic, religious and cultural life and who exercised considerable influence, both direct and indirect, on their development.

What should such a book contain? At the very heart of this book is the idea that the history of women's experience is a central concern. It is certainly also important to learn about attitudes to women; there is necessarily a relationship between theory and practice both for the women themselves and the individuals and communities with whom they interacted. This was part of women's experience. While inevitably indebted to the work of many scholars in the field, such a book should be equally grounded in the author's own research into and understanding of the issues. In this case, research areas have included the history of the family and family relationships, the history of education and the social history of religion: and this book has, as a result, a rather different perspective on women's history than have many others.

When detailing the manner in which men and women conducted themselves in the past, there could be a temptation to assume that 'normal behaviour' within a society was 'natural' rather than socially and economically constructed. The inclusion of comparison across such a wide

spectrum – not only across the kingdoms of the British Isles but also across the Atlantic and not only across ‘old world’ societies but also ‘new world’ – will possibly reveal not only that ‘gender’ is a social construct but also that different societies will create it differently, even when they have recently experienced another ‘construction’. So we are not in the business of simply describing differences across these societies and these periods but also of pinpointing explanations for such differences.

There will always be the problem, of course, of distinguishing between, on the one hand, common patterns of behaviour and experience that could be described as ‘characteristic’ of a particular time and place and, on the other hand, the unusual behaviours and experiences. This is especially true for the medieval and early modern periods when documentation is relatively scarce. Similarly, there will be the problem of achieving some balance between how contemporaries considered that women should behave in society and how they actually behaved, between how contemporaries regarded women and between how women regarded themselves. Historians, however, will always at their best employ their own experiences, humanity and understanding to reflect upon and interpret the sources.

The truth has gradually been acknowledged by modern historians that, in order to understand women’s history, we need to cast our net wider. Not only does this mean that we need to consider ‘gender roles’ of both men and women, it also means that we need to place both sexes in a more general social context. So some of the issues that we will consider in this book are not only, or even mainly, concerned with the lives of women but their resolution in all cases will also have a profound effect upon our interpretation of the experiences of women. For instance, there is an important debate concerning the prevalent laws of inheritance in all these societies. Historians differ in their views concerning whether and where primogeniture or partible inheritance ruled. They differ in their views about the economic dependence and independence of various categories of people – men, women, older sons, younger sons, daughters, widows, singletons. They differ in their views of who baked the bread and brought home the bacon. They differ in their views concerning the age at marriage. They differ in their views concerning the seasonality of marriage. They differ in their views on the relative importance of marriage and other forms of partnership in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the British colonies. Upon their answers depend so many aspects of our picture of the place of women and experience of women in these societies.

One corollary of this is that a book about women cannot properly take the form of a narrative that simply describes the lives of women and

conveys a sense of absolute certainty. Some things are certain, others are surmise based upon the latest scholarship.

Another central premise

A further basic premise is that people in the British Isles in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were interested in both men and women not as individuals but chiefly as role players in a household and a social hierarchy. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been seen as a watershed between a peasant society and a capitalist one. For example, the German sociologist Max Weber remarked on the gradual movement from a 'clan' society to a 'household' society to a 'modern individualistic society'. He identified the seventeenth century as the period of transition between the final two stages.¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels saw the break-up of the 'household' society in place in the sixteenth century. In their view there emerged in the sixteenth century in Europe the preconditions of modern individualist society: separation between home and work; a large, landless labourer class; a change in ethic from dedication to the survival of the family/household to one of unlimited acquisitiveness, fostered by the religious reformer John Calvin's stress on the individual. Perhaps the most renowned British proponent of this idea was R. H. Tawney, author of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. He saw a sharp distinction between the peasant and the capitalist family:

*The household does not merely imply what we [today] mean by 'the family', a group of persons connected by blood but pursuing often quite separate occupations and possessing quite separate economic interests. It is, on the contrary, a miniature co-operative society, housed under one roof, dependent upon one industry, and including not only man and wife and children, but servants and labourers, ploughmen and threshers, cowherds and milkmaids, who live together, work together, just as one can see them doing in parts of Norway and Switzerland at the present day. When the economic foundations of their small organism are swept away by a change in the method of farming, the effect is not merely to ruin a family, it is to break up a business.*²

More recently, Alan Macfarlane, a demographer and socio-economic historian, challenged the assumption underlying this position. He maintained that England's had not been a true peasant society since the thirteenth century and that the origins of capitalist society stretched back into the medieval period because England had had a large landless

labourer class – a rural proletariat – for some two hundred years by 1500 and was fast urbanising. He demonstrated that the law already favoured individual rather than family rights. There was already a good deal of individual geographical, social and economic mobility. Although the family was important, marriage was late and was not universal. According to this view English and Welsh society was made up of free-moving individuals (presumably motivated by individual economic and social interest) rather than of household production units. If so, this was in sharp contradistinction with the situation in, for instance, Ireland or in Scotland where there was a strong land–family bond in the clan or lordship system.³ England's according to Macfarlane was not an industrialised society but it was capitalist – exploitation of waged workers by the drones was already the order of the pre-industrial world before the Reformation.

Macfarlane's views have not gone unchallenged. R. W. Hoyle pointed out that although landowners could dispose of their land as they wished during their lifetimes and could disinherit presumptive heirs by will, they could also deny those rights to future generations by using instruments such as settlements and entails. 'Indeed' he wrote, 'it might plausibly be argued that disinheritance was most frequently used to maintain the integrity of lands when the next generation seemed careless of their preservation.'⁴ He went on to demonstrate that although the right to sell was acknowledged, customs evolved to give the heir or kin first option to purchase. Both Hoyle and Govind Sreenivasen challenged Macfarlane and David Levine and Keith Wrightson's argument that land markets were active and that little property remained in the same family for more than two generations. Sreenivasen sought to prove that much land in fact remained within the family. Hoyle urged that it was more important to ascertain why farmers were selling their land. He concluded that this was because of economic and social distress.⁵

This apart, there is much to be said for the view that England and Wales underwent an early capitalist apprenticeship but very little for the view that this was an individualistic society. It was the household that mattered in that society. It was perhaps not a peasant household but it was a household. The individual within it who counted was the head of the household – commonly but not always the oldest male. Macfarlane unfortunately confused the concepts of capitalism and individualism. The two are by no means identical. Capitalism may take both individual and corporate forms. Even more importantly from our point of view, he equated the individual with the head of the household and totally forgot the people who were subsumed in and subordinate to him/her within the

family. Even if families or households were acquisitive and competitive with one another, a different ethic applied *within* the household. The ethic of individualism did not apply to family relationships within the household, whether between the head of household and the rest or between the rest of its members. Neither did proto-industrialisation introduce this ethic.

At a time when historians of women rightly emphasise that women's history and history of the family are not the same, it could appear heretical to suggest that we cannot sensibly study the history of women without a profound understanding of the historical family and the role that women, of different status, were expected to play and did play within it. This family may be defined as those individuals dwelling together along with their servants in a household. Other individuals who are related to this 'family' are frequently called kin although I prefer to see them as a 'wider family'. The 'household society', frequently consisting of the nuclear family, relied for its success very heavily upon the roles of women, whether they were wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters. Even in a traditionalist clan society, women's roles were defined and important. While there may be some dispute about the nature of kinship and the extent of kin interaction in England, there can be little doubt that contemporary women in all these societies did also see that kinship whether close or distant brought with it certain obligations. Women acknowledged these obligations themselves and they also claimed them from others, whether distant cousins or step-relatives or even relatives and connections by marriage, whenever these women deemed it necessary.⁶

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, in her brilliant short book *Good Wives* about women in seventeenth-century New England, expressed very well the fact that contemporaries did not emphasise the personalities but the roles of women and, moreover, that those roles changed according to circumstance.

*Certain patterns of behaviour could be put on and taken off according to circumstances without altering the essential nature of the person; women could act as 'deputy husbands' or men as 'brides of Christ' without becoming any less 'submissive' or 'masterful' in other social relations.*⁷

This approach to studying the lives of women draws not only upon Weberian understanding of the external ordering of family lives but also upon Foucauldian theories of the informal negotiation of power within the family.

History of women, not only the history of women in the family

This said, it is crucial to decide to what extent the individuality of women was important to themselves and to their kinfolk and friends. The history of women is *not* encompassed by the history of the family or the roles women played. It was, moreover, the case that society did gradually move towards the ethic of individualism that we know today. In this book I have attempted to show how far women's experience was determined by their family roles but also to show to what extent they existed as individuals and expanded their horizons. Contemporary correspondence and also accounts of friendship between women and women, and women and men, are explored from this point of view.

Nevertheless, contemporaries often set the development of a woman's individual personality, character, and accomplishments in the context of her family responsibilities. The book concentrates on the education of women and the cultural and religious roles of women. It was increasingly accepted that women required a degree of education if they were to be good wives and mothers and if they had to support themselves during periods as a singleton. Within the household women had special religious and cultural roles. Eventually this led to women exercising these roles and responsibilities outside the household, leading to a more individualistic approach. So we may regard the development of individualism as a by-product of the emphasis upon preparation for family responsibilities. When women exercised cultural and religious patronage they also exercised a social and economic power, which made them important as individuals.

So the contribution of individual women and women to the culture and belief of these societies in general is important to this book. How many women writers, painters, poets, sculptors or translators can you name? In all probability not many, and if you can name sixteenth- or seventeenth-century examples ten to one it's because they're also known for other things – for example Queen Elizabeth I because she was Queen, or Margaret Roper because she was Sir Thomas More's daughter. Why is this? Historians have uncovered the lives of many cultured women who made distinct contributions to the life of their contemporaries – from Bess of Hardwick to Cassandra Willoughby, from Mary Wroth to Mary Wollstonecraft – but many still had not been heard of until the later decades of the twentieth and the start of the twenty-first century – why? During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a number of women scholars made determined attempts to trace the cultural activity of particular women

but, generally speaking, their efforts did not receive the imprimatur of a male academy and hence made little impression on general histories. As a result, their works did not enter the canon of literary or artistic study. But women should not be seen as important culturally solely because they produced critically notable works of music, art or literature. There were other ways in which they participated in and contributed to cultural life. Relatively recently the effort to uncover the ways in which women engaged with and helped shape their contemporary culture has been redoubled and has begun to have somewhat more recognition from both female and male social, religious and cultural historians and, especially, from literary historians.

But why was uncovering their contribution such a difficult process in the first place? Largely this was because historians of this period relied very heavily upon the written and especially the printed record. Where archives were used, they were generally those of central or local government or of male-dominated trades and professions. Professional historians were largely male and the notable female historians were active on the margins and were unacknowledged by them or their focus dismissed by them as 'not serious'. A few historians did push the boundaries further but found it difficult to gain ground in a profession dominated by political, institutional and diplomatic history. The opening of academia itself from the 1960s to large numbers of women with very different interests and an awareness of feminism spelt change. At the same time local and ecclesiastical archives were made more accessible, and by stimulating academic interest in socio-economic and religious history they created a more receptive environment within the profession.

Investigation of the cultural role of women also has a bearing upon the long-standing debate about public and private spheres. The idea that males completely dominated the public sphere and that women were relegated to the private, domestic sphere has most resonance when applied to the upper middle classes of mid-Victorian Britain and the United States of America and, even then, best describes a situation that some men desired rather than one that actually prevailed.⁸ In the early modern period privacy was certainly hard to come by: domestic life was lived in a semi-public fashion. Nevertheless historians have accepted that elite males did dominate the political and economic arena to a great extent and that women lived in a society that presumed their dependence upon men in these areas and accorded them little 'voice' in society in their own right. Latterly historians have begun to modify this picture to show how women managed to manipulate their socio-economic and legal environment in order to survive and even prosper. Amy Louise Erickson's seminal study

of women and property has shaped the way that historians now approach the subject. In the United States a number of historians have studied what they call the 'agency' of women in seventeenth-century colonial societies, contrasting them with the Anglicised societies of the later colonies. Yet women were also pivotal in the shaping of English society itself and the way in which both men and women conducted themselves in it. In *The Family and Family Relationships* I have shown how the women of the Ferrar family of Little Gidding fully participated in the family's decision-making, even to the extent of voting on important issues.⁹ Susan Whyman's somewhat neglected *Sociability and Power in Late-Stuart England* demonstrates how during that period the 'control of manners increasingly fell to women' and that women played an important role not only in determining the formalities of social life in both public and private but also in giving political commentary and advice to menfolk in their social networks (drawn from their personal experience and observation). Study of the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Temple family in this book indicates that this was not a new phenomenon (as Whyman implies) but rather something that had its roots in the earlier part of our period. And indeed the evidence of the Paston and Stonor correspondence in the fifteenth century may suggest that women acted in this way as soon as vernacular letter-writing became popular.

Structure and agency as explanations for the ways in which particular women and women in general lived and behaved

There has been much discussion of the 'dominant discourses of gender' that formed a background to and constructed women's lives.¹⁰ There is more awareness than there once was, however, of the complex relationship that existed between theory and practice. There were multiple and competing ideas about the nature and role of women and of how women should behave. These ideas frequently differentiated between women of various types – single, married, mothers, widows, servants. Women themselves reacted in different ways to such discourses, sometimes internalising them but often modifying them, ignoring them or even, on occasion, explicitly rejecting them.¹¹ As this book indicates, their menfolk and their kin and friendship circles were frequently permissive.

Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford boldly state: 'Women had a limited range of scripts, or stories, by which they could understand their

experiences. The stereotypical choices were sharply polarized.’ They could be virtuous or they could be witches or whores.¹² These historians argue that stereotypically women were presented in an inferior light. Although individual women were often valued and lauded by their menfolk they were seen as exceptions to the rule. Women as well as men internalised this message and so accepted the generally negative view of womankind. There is much to be said for this interpretation but the same evidence can more convincingly be used to support alternative arguments. In their edited collection of essays treating women in Scotland after 1400, Yvonne Galloway Brown and Rona Ferguson argue that women did not internalise this stereotype but rather ‘resisted repression’ and that their deviancy expressed through political radicalism, unbalanced piety, brutality, and subversion added up to ‘positive resistance and a force for change’.¹³ Equally the evidence would support an interpretation that many women and men rejected such stereotypes in practice (or, at least, only fell back upon them when they were annoyed with one another), in much the same way as moderns regard jokes and comments about husbands, wives and mothers-in-law as containing part but only part of the truth about the sexes.

So, when women were relatively strong and assertive within a marriage (as for examples Honor, Lady Lisle, Hester, Lady Temple, or Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle), was this just because their menfolk allowed them to be so? Well, yes, perhaps, but this would certainly suggest that these men (and perhaps their own birth families) also reacted in different ways to the ‘dominant discourses’ and that they presented alternative ‘scripts’ for their wives and female children to learn. The evidence that survives about the role of consecutive generations of women in particular families (for example, the Sidneys) suggests that different families had different cultures and attitudes to their womenfolk.

What this adds up to is that the lives and opinions of men and women frequently did not correspond closely with the model of social order presented by public commentators. Documenting the tension between the public and secret ‘transcripts’ of gender requires ingenious use of sources.¹⁴

Why a book that considers the history of women across the British Isles and Britain’s colonies?

Women, like men, did exercise some individual choice or agency in their lives and relationships but this choice was considerably restricted by society, economy, religion and culture. Even within a society differences

in social and economic status, for example, had considerable bearing upon the roles women were conditioned to play. The wife of a nobleman had to be a mistress of a large household and a patroness as well as a wife and mother; the wife of a landless labourer had no real household to run and did not have the necessary 'power' to be a patroness. Some historians argue that differences in ideology and in religious belief were also directly reflected in the roles women played. Comparison across these Old World and New World societies presents an additional challenge – unless the societies were identical there would have been differing constraints on female agency.

There has been something of a renaissance in Scottish, Welsh and Irish historical studies recently, which has produced some important work particularly touching on marriage, inheritance and witchcraft. It will be some time before the volume and depth of such work matches that for England.¹⁵ Nevertheless Scottish (and, to some extent, Welsh and Irish) historians have now provided the all-important socio-economic, political and religious 'backcloth' for the lives of women which enables the historian to make some sensible and sensitive comparisons.

While the book does compare the lot of women in all these societies it does not pretend to give them attention equal to that accorded English women, who unashamedly form the heart of the book. In part the decision to give them this status was pragmatic: the book's length and its intended audience, the relative scarcity both of detailed sources and of scholarly study for, for example, Scotland and Ireland, and the dangers of repetition within the narrative all pointed towards this approach.¹⁶

A union of love? Similarities and differences between the three kingdoms and the principality

There is, however, a problem when treating the history of the British Isles which also stretches far beyond the bounds of women's history. Although this book is not the place to discuss the historiography of this problem in detail, readers should be aware of the nature of the debate, which has some impact upon our own comparisons of women in these societies. This problem is, in a nutshell, whether the Islands in any real sense shared cultural, religious, political and social norms, even after the union of the three kingdoms in the person of James VI and I. In other words, how similar were these societies? Taking Scotland as an example, some historians, notably Brian Levack, have emphasised that King James's aspirations to a union of love between the kingdoms of England, Ireland, and Scotland

and the principality of Wales had a certain credibility because of the successful 'union of the Welsh and English people after the constitutional union of 1536 and 1543'.¹⁷ Jane Dawson detected that the relative success of protestant reformation in both England and Scotland created an Anglo-Scottish Protestant culture and 'a common language of print'. Both acknowledged, however, that religion contributed as much to division as to unity and diversity as conformity.¹⁸ And these divisions were not only those marked by geo-political boundaries between states, they were very present within the states themselves. For instance, Jane Dawson found that evangelicals in the Highlands and Islands were not accepted as members of the same religious or cultural community by Lowland ministers, purely because they used Gaelic and not the language in which the Scriptures were printed. This was also true in different ways in the other kingdoms. Protestantism met with a patchy reception in England and parts of the kingdom clung to Catholicism; Protestantism made very slow progress in both Wales and Ireland. In Ireland there was a sharp division between Protestant settlers and non-Protestant native Irish. Steven Ellis attributes this situation to the central government's lack of interest in remote parts of the jurisdiction; the presence of relatively few educated clergymen in both Wales and Ireland until the later sixteenth century; limited contact between the Welsh and Irish and continental Protestants; and a failure on the part of missionaries to face up to linguistic challenges. In Ireland English reluctance to promote English-speaking residents of the Pale to positions of import in church and state probably strengthened loyalty to the Old Religion.¹⁹ They (like Welsh Catholic gentry) sent their sons and daughters away to the Continent for education. In the case of Wales these educated young priests were most often sent to England to work whereas the Irish Catholic priests returned to Ireland to work. This relative weakness of the Catholic mission in Wales and its strength in Ireland has been adduced to explain the failure of resistance to evangelicalism in Wales and its success in Ireland.²⁰ In Ireland the Old English (as the Catholics came to be known) were excluded from government but created a strong economic and social presence in the country, reinforced by family networks.²¹

Nicholas Canny, a foremost authority, argues that while attempts to bring religious conformity throughout the kingdoms had patchy success, attempts to make English the common language among the ruling elites were much more successful, at least partly because of the enthusiastic support of local as well as 'national' elites, who supported the introduction of 'English' English as opposed to Scots (previously the language of literary composition) and Gaelic.²² However, even here there was division and

difference. Scots continued to be used as a spoken language and Gaelic persisted in the Highlands. In Ireland English had been on the decline from the fourteenth century onwards and so the advocates of the English language had a more difficult task than the Scots in converting those outside the elite to its use. Within the elite of the Pale, 'English' English was dominant in everyday life, reinforced by the presence of a multitude of English-born or educated settlers. There were parts of the kingdom, for example Ulster, where Scottish influence was so strong that Scots was the predominant language of discourse. There have been sharp differences of opinion between historians regarding the extent to which knowledge and use of English reached down to lower social levels. Nicholas Canny maintains that by the mid-seventeenth century knowledge and use of English was widespread, especially where British settlement was intense or where English had maintained a presence throughout the later Middle Ages.²³ Alone among the societies, Wales clung to its native tongue. It is estimated that around 90 per cent of Wales was Welsh-speaking throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Welsh elite continued to support Welsh culture and even the English authorities appear to have accepted that Welsh should be the language of print as well as speech when they authorised a Welsh-language Bible in 1588.²⁴

The North American colonies

The historiography of the European settlement of North America has undergone considerable change since about 1970. Initially, (predominantly white) historians of European extraction concentrated upon the settlers as religious migrants, the innocent victims of persecution, or as commercial adventurers. Hardly anyone took seriously the existing settlements of the indigenous peoples of the Americas or the experiences of the non-white immigrants during the colonial period. Francis Jennings's *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest*, published in 1975, changed all that.²⁵

This is in many respects a laudable development although it has tended towards an idealisation of life before the European invasion, a certain lack of objectivity in some quarters, a tendency to cast the Indians as victims who simply reacted to European settlers and their demands, and a turning away from studies of the European immigrants and their descendants. Black American history has until relatively recently also emphasised the way in which whites imposed their culture upon blacks and the ways in which a separate slave culture developed and survived notwithstanding.

Mechal Scobel has now introduced a new perspective, showing the extent to which there was interaction and symbiosis between the two cultures, so that historians cannot understand one without the other.²⁶ In itself this development seems to point to the wisdom of detailed study of white culture as well as of black and indigenous cultures.

‘The European presence in America *was* an invasion, but it was also partly an invited settlement, partly a commercial interchange and partly a folk migration.’²⁷ The uneven migration to the thirteen British American colonies in terms of motivation, geographical and social origin, and timing and density makes comparing their development with that of the mother country problematic.²⁸ The fact that historians disagree considerably over the extent of white immigration in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries does not help.²⁹ However, there does appear to be some general agreement now that between 278,000 and 486,000 immigrated in the period 1700–1780, although historians differ a good deal about the composition of that number in terms of origin, some claiming that half were from Ireland, for example.³⁰ It certainly makes for difficulties when attempting comparisons between the several colonies of the Atlantic seaboard and the component parts of the British Isles, already fraught enough! Notable already in the seventeenth-century colonies is the wide diversity in the colonial laws of inheritance, often as a result of the local origin of the immigrants, which had a direct impact upon the lives of women in the various colonies.³¹ In her recent study of women in seventeenth-century Maryland Debra Meyers was able to ‘situate her Marylanders as English women and men in a new locale’.³² This situation was not to last. The predominantly English phase of colonial settlement ended in the later seventeenth century. Most scholars agree that large numbers of the eighteenth-century immigrants were Scots–Irish, Irish and German, although they differ as to the precise numbers involved. Smaller but still significant numbers arrived from France (Huguenot), the Netherlands and Wales.³³ These new immigrants also brought with them customs, traditions and attitudes that presumably had some impact upon their settlements, which tended to fall in particular colonies. For example, most immigrants from Germany entered the New World through the port of Philadelphia and spread out through Pennsylvania and adjacent colonies.

So, to avoid overmuch complexity, while trying to accommodate conclusions from the recent work on Indian and Black women in North America and accepting the moral force of the Jennings/Salisbury argument,³⁴ I have emphasised in this book the experience of white women of European (especially British) extraction. I have done this for several reasons,

the most important of which are: the availability of high-quality research into the experience of women which, with honourable exceptions, favours work on immigrants rather than indigenous peoples; and the role of the North American example as a way of establishing whether 'British' patterns of female life were 'natural' and 'inevitable' and simply transplanted to the far side of the Atlantic or whether such patterns were changed in response to new circumstances.

A view of the difference between English and American women has crept into American popular history, in which patriarchy is seen as rigid in England and, at least at first, resisted in the Americas.

*[I]t appears that not one of the three groups had what we think of as 'traditional' sex roles. In Indian Virginia, for example, and in much of West Africa, women were the farmers. Among the English, meanwhile, ideas about the proper roles of women were often undermined by the fluid conditions of life and death in the New World. By 1700 the English had established dominion over Virginia, and English men were establishing increasingly effective dominion over women. But none of this was a foregone conclusion in 1607.*³⁵

During the second half of the twentieth century, American historians emphasised the comparatively favourable status of women in early modern America. As more and more work is done by British historians on the experience of English, Welsh and Scottish women, the stark contrast between 'oppressed' British women and 'liberated' American women in the seventeenth century is tending to disappear. Some American historians claim to have uncovered a tendency for colonial men to exercise *greater* dominion over their womenfolk in the period after 1650, at a time when others would argue that English women were still resisting patriarchy with effect.

The validity of such comparisons is also contestable on grounds of the sources available. Comparison of women in England with women in the American colonies is difficult because of the differing social structure. Until the 1730s, America, unlike England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, was not dominated by elites. Early elite settlers soon returned to England and for a period in the seventeenth century society was fluid. The distribution of wealth was much more unbalanced in the south than in the north.³⁶ Local elites began to emerge from old English settlers by the late seventeenth century. Their composition varied considerably, however – Virginia, for instance, was dominated by planter families such as the Beverlies, the Carters, the Lees and the Byrds (which approximated in their lifestyle to that

of rural upper-gentry families in England) while Massachusetts was ruled by merchant families such as the Sewalls and Hutchinsons who were rooted in urban communities and had more in common with England's urban oligarchs.³⁷ So there is a real problem of comparing like with like both within the colonies and between the colonies and the British Islands. Where there is source material for the seventeenth-century colonies, this most often refers to women who were comparable to working or middling-sort English women rather than the aristocratic English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish women with which this book is chiefly concerned. This means that it is only possible to make a confident and direct comparison between elites in the eighteenth century. It also means that much of the evidence cited by Americanists for the seventeenth century relates in fact to women of the middling sort who are more strictly comparable with middling-sort women of the Old World, among whom women also appear to have had considerable practical freedom of action.

English colonies in Ireland

As noted above, the nature of early modern Ireland has proved difficult for historians to determine, with its division into the 'English' lordship of the Pale and the Gaelic provinces that surrounded it. There are ongoing debates about the nature of Tudor rule and ambitions in Ireland, about the extent of the Gaelicisation of the Pale and the Anglicisation of the Gaelic lordships, and about the relationships between New English, Old English and Irish peoples which cannot but impinge upon any study of the women of this society. In Gaelic Ireland, for example, society was organised in clans which were agnatic groupings (that is, from a common male ancestor through male links) as opposed to the cognatic descent prevalent in England.³⁸ During our period the English colonised parts of Ireland (although Old English or Anglo-Norman families were to some extent already integrated into native Irish culture and society) and, certainly by the end of the sixteenth century, sought to impose English political rule over the whole island. The New English aristocrats who were now responsible for Ireland's rule more often than not did not bring their wives and families to live in Ireland. Much of the early Tudor colonisation involved large numbers of male soldiers, who had relationships with and married native Irish women. After this experience later colonisation encouraged male colonisers to bring with them English wives and create exclusively English enclaves. Varying degrees of segregation from the Irish population were envisaged. The final 1650s project was rather different because it

involved soldiery once more and met up again with the problems caused by liaisons with the native women. Because of the dearth of documentation, historians have in the past often relied for information about indigenous women on the attitudes and opinions of the 'New English' colonial power.³⁹ More recently scholars have begun to use Gaelic sources to explore the position of native Irishwomen before, during and after the Tudor period. Simultaneously they have shown that in many respects the lordship system of Old Ireland (and with it the Gaelic law) had effectively collapsed by the early seventeenth century as a consequence of Anglicisation. This said, they have become more sensitive to regional differences, noting that Munster's ties with southern England were of growing importance at a time when Ulster was 'becoming an extension of south-west Scotland'.⁴⁰ Yet disagreements among historians of Ireland as to the chronology and character of colonisation certainly present a challenge to the historian of Irish women.⁴¹

Sources

Historians of women and womanhood have to be acutely aware of the provenance and purpose of the sources they use. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford deliberately privilege women's writing and women's words. More survive than is commonly supposed, especially for the English experience.⁴² These sources generated by women include letters, diaries, manuscript autobiographies, memoirs and works of fact and fiction and literary collaboration as well as published texts. There are, of course, also numerous documents written by men in which women figure. These offer a different view of women's lives, experience and importance which should not be overlooked. Historians may also use visual evidence to indicate ways in which the norms of expected female behaviour were conveyed to both men and women. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when manuscript illumination of books of hours and other works flourished and when cults of female saints were prevalent and were supported by images, we can see how women of all classes were constantly made aware of these norms against which to measure themselves.

Whichever society we are considering, historians have to take care that they do not mistake an increase in documentation for the eighteenth century for social change. Sometimes the evidence, even for England, is so thin for the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries that it is simply not acceptable to argue enormous change. This means that in some cases the question of change has to be left open.

There is certainly a more acute shortage of documentation for the study of women in Ireland and in the early American colonies. For Ireland few court records or personal and family papers survive before the 1660s. There survive for Gaelic Ireland a variety of sources, ranging from law tracts to poetry, and annals to genealogies but their study is still in its infancy as scholars strive to set them in historical context and some of this work is highly controversial.⁴³ The search for a clearly identifiable Anglo-Irish experience, separate from that of England, is also difficult and exemplified by the case of Elizabeth and Percy Freke. Peirce or Percy was born in Ireland near his family's castle at Rathbarry in 1643. His father Arthur had married Dorothy Smith of Youghal, daughter of Mary Boyle and niece of the powerful Earl of Cork. Percy, however, left for England twenty years later and became a student at the Middle Temple in 1663. Six years on he married 'Mrs Elizabeth Freake of Martin in the Fields' by licence but without her father's permission. They spent much of their married life in England but also spent considerable periods, both separately and together, in Ireland. Elizabeth's detailed remembrances, however, indicate that, while her husband's commitment to Ireland was genuine, she resisted his attempts to move permanently to Ireland. Between 1692 and 1694 the family lived together on the Rathbarry estate with their son but, despite their prominent position in the social life of County Cork and the shared English heritage of this society, Elizabeth felt so isolated that she took the dramatic step of leaving her husband and son in order to return to their Norfolk estates and make her own way. This instance reminds us that it is dangerous to assume that because a family had Irish possessions, residence and influence, the culture of its women was Irish.⁴⁴ For the New England and Chesapeake colonies there are legal court records and statutes but very little in the way of other documentation until the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Mary Beth Norton and others have shown, for example, that several purported diaries of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonial women were, in fact, nineteenth-century fakes: Dorothy Dudley, Mary Titus Post and the 'Puritan Maid' Hester Shepard.⁴⁵ While some of Norton's reasoning about the fraudulence of Shepard's diary is itself suspect (for examples, the Oxford English Dictionary is not the last word on the first appearance of words either in the colonies or Britain; and, worse still, 'Young women – indeed *any* women – didn't keep diaries in 17thC America' is an argument against ever accepting evidence of the unusual!) she does prove that Hetty Shepard's diary is a fake by painstakingly checking the references and finding errors and anachronisms. Real colonial diaries date from the second and third

quarters of the eighteenth century. Normally they fall into two categories: reflective religious journals and routine work or social diaries. During the revolutionary period women also wrote lengthy letters of a diurnal character to relatives and friends which are highly revealing of their lives. As a result historians of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century America have been forced to approach the history of women more obliquely than they would have wished. Nevertheless, in the case of Ireland, Scotland and the colonies, some excellent work has been forthcoming, displaying considerable ingenuity in the exploitation of such sources as do exist.⁴⁶

Women's writings have to be regarded as critically as those of men but some historians have urged that 'Women's words were . . . filtered through the barrier of men's expectations . . .'⁴⁷ and therefore require an even more critical approach. For instance, men perceived female criminality differently from that of male criminality. Also women themselves quite frequently curtsied to convention and apologised for nonconformist behaviour. Most images of women should be similarly viewed, they argue, especially as most were portrayed by men: the deliberate self-representation of a woman artist such as Mary Beale was very much the exception that proved the rule.⁴⁸

Our eyes have been opened to the possibilities of many other types of evidence than the written and printed words of or about women. Historians are only now beginning to explore and exploit more fully the riches of women's contributions to the furnishings and decorations of their time – bed hangings, tapestries, clothing – and also to the buildings themselves and to their gardens.⁴⁹ Such sources may be used not only to demonstrate the important role women played in organising the lives of their families and structuring their environment and incidentally contributing to the overall landscape of Britain and her colonies but also to indicate how far women accepted or rejected the stereotypical views of the female gender. The needle as well as the pen could liberate a woman's creative powers.

Why a book that considers the history of women across more than two centuries?

In some ways the long chronological sweep of this book has proved a disadvantage, yet it alone gives an opportunity for tracing trends and changes in the experience of women, the roles of women, the attitudes towards, and of, women. Chronologically the book does focus upon the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but makes forays into both earlier and later

periods with respect to particular themes and debates. This approach has been adopted in the main to prevent overlength and to avoid repetition.

One of the disadvantages of the long time period is the temptation to substitute the broad, general picture and statistical summary for evidence of the lives of women themselves. There is here an attempt to counter this tendency by using relatively detailed case studies of particular women wherever appropriate. During the course of the book the reader will become acquainted with the lives of women of the period who left rich documentation such as Hester Temple of Stowe, and her daughters and daughters-in-law, Bess of Hardwick, Margaret Clifford, Cassandra Duchess of Chandos, Margaret Lucas Cavendish, Grisell Baillie, Lettice Bagot, Constance Fowler, Elizabeth Stout, Elizabeth Carey, Mary Sidney, Mary Wroth, Lady Katherine Boyle Jones, Viscountess Ranelagh, Elizabeth Freke, and Aphra Behn. In leaving such literary or other remains they were, of course, unusual and, untypically, they have as a result had some influence at least upon the canon but in other respects these women were not atypical. Their doings seem to point to and exemplify characteristics of the lives of many other contemporary women. It has not proved possible to balance these case studies of English and Anglo-Irish women with equivalents from the American colonies – although some attention is given to Ann Hutchinson, Phyllis Wheatley and Abigail Adams – as there are few surviving personal archives for American women before the American Revolution.

Women of all social classes?

For a variety of reasons this book concentrates upon the experience of elite and middling-sort women. This is, in a real sense, an advantage because it was at these higher reaches of society that one is led by traditional historians to believe that the hold of patriarchy upon women was tightest. In fact, the evidence for this seems far from compelling. Some men may have attempted to keep a stranglehold on their womenfolk but the evidence seems overwhelming that, if so, they failed miserably. What is clear, however, is that many, even most, women did subscribe willingly to the general commitment in society to the good of the family.

Where there are appropriate data, however, some attention is accorded to women of the lower sort but such data is patchy on the ground. In particular an attempt is made to provide a statistical demographic backdrop which includes all social groups in England and Wales where the sources permit. In the case of the colonies – Ireland and the North

American colonies – the book treats available data for the colonisers (and in the case of North America their imported black slaves and servants) rather than the indigenous peoples. This is in large part because the scholarly work to facilitate such a treatment of existing populations is at present insufficient. In small part it is because the scope of the book is already enormous and space simply does not allow for such a study.

Debates

Some areas of women's history have assumed greater importance because they have stimulated debates among historians. In a book intended for undergraduates and university teachers, it seems important not only to offer a synthesis of modern scholarship regarding women but also to preserve the distinctions between different positions. In this way the book acts as a companion to women's history of the period. Thus, although some of the chapters in this book focus on the 'ages' and 'stages' of women's lives, and others are organised around broad issues – such as, what religious role did women perform and what part did women play in the culture of their time and place? – the chapters themselves also try to give a flavour of debate where this is current and important. Overall there has been an attempt, nonetheless, to provide a readable, concise and accessible account.

Organisation

The present book is divided into substantial parts. **Part One** treats the business of marrying; **Part Two** the experience of marriage and widowhood; **Part Three**, containing chapters on the cultural and religious life of women, forms a bridge between the various phases of women's lives. This arrangement reflects a conviction that, while women's lives were dominated by the prospect of, or actuality of, marriage (even when they elected to, or were destined to, remain single) there was no sharp division in their lives when they passed from the single to the married state. Throughout their single years, girls and young women were prepared for their married lives and widowhood not only through formal education but also through training in the running of household, family and estates. (The type of such education and training varied according to social and economic circumstance.) During the same years young women developed cultural and religious lives that also affected their experience as wives and mothers. Each one of these parts is subdivided into shorter chapters. There follows a select bibliography.

One of the chief problems that any author of a history encounters is the fact that the material does not fall into neat categories. This, in the present instance, was because women's lives were not divided into compartments. In an age dominated by religion, almost every aspect of women's lives had a religious dimension and so to write a single chapter on 'women and religion' or belief must be artificial. Similarly 'power' relations were observable in many different aspects of women's lives. Women's role in contemporary culture was also not neatly compartmentalised. There has also, inevitably, had to be some repetition in order to explain the relevance of, for example, the laws and patterns of inheritance to women and their kin during different life stages. Nevertheless, in this book there are separate chapters on different dimensions of women's experience that add up to a particular interpretation. Students using the book will find this organisation convenient but should be aware that relevant material might be found elsewhere in the book and that careful use of the index is advisable.

Notes

- 1 Historians who sympathise with this view would nevertheless caution that western societies did not always develop at the same rate and that, for example, parts of Scotland were dominated by clan society until the eighteenth century.
- 2 R. H. Tawney (1912) p. 233.
- 3 J. Wormald (1985) *passim*; Liam Kennedy (1991) p. 478.
- 4 R. W. Hoyle (1995) p. 154.
- 5 Govind Sreenivasen (1991) pp. 3–37.
- 6 See Rosemary O'Day (1995) pp. 64–128; David Cressy (1986), 'Kinship and kin interaction in early modern England', pp. 38–69.
- 7 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (1991) p. 185.
- 8 For standard accounts of the position of women in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and America see Martha Vicinus (ed.), *Suffer and Be Still* (1972); Janet Wilson James (1954) pp. 34–64; Mary Beth Norton, (1984) pp. 593–619; Lauren Thatcher Ulrich (1991) pp. 103–5; Nancy Cott (1978–9) pp. 219–36; and Cott (1977).
- 9 Rosemary O'Day (1995) pp. 271–2.
- 10 I. Maclean (1980) was a pioneering work in this area; see also L. Woodbridge (1984); A. Fletcher (1995); S. Gosling (1999).

- 11 See R. O'Day (1995) *passim* and especially pp. 129–63.
- 12 Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford (1998) p. 17.
- 13 Yvonne Galloway Brown and Rona Ferguson (2002).
- 14 See James C. Scott (1990) p. 18.
- 15 For two interesting articles on early modern Scottish history see Allan I. Macinnes (1994) pp. 30–46; and Michael Lynch (1994) pp. 47–63.
- 16 Christine Peters (2004) succeeds brilliantly at the level of generalities in comparing women over four countries but it is more difficult to execute systematic comparison in detail.
- 17 B. Levack (1987) p. 179.
- 18 J. Dawson (1995) *passim*.
- 19 S. G. Ellis (1985) *passim*.
- 20 See S. G. Ellis (1985) pp. 108–27; and N. Canny (1995), 'Irish, Scottish and Welsh responses to centralisation, c.1530–c.1640' pp. 150–55, for an excellent summary.
- 21 See Canny (1995) pp. 153–5.
- 22 Ibid pp. 158–61.
- 23 Ibid p. 160; and A. Bliss (1979) for an opposing view.
- 24 Garthine Walker, 'Strange kind of stealing: abduction in early modern Wales', in M. Roberts and S. Clarke (eds), *Women and Gender in Early Modern Wales*, 2000, especially p. 69.
- 25 Francis Jennings (1975); see also Neal Salisbury (1982); James Axtell (1978), 'The ethno-history of early America' pp. 110–44; James Axtell (1981); Bruce G. Trigger (1982) pp. 139–55; Bruce G. Trigger (1979) pp. 205–23.
- 26 Mechal Scobel (1988) *passim*.
- 27 Quoted in James Axtell (1984) p. 645.
- 28 See Bernard Bailyn and Barbara DeWolfe (1986); and Bernard Bailyn (1986) for a general introduction to the varied development and demography of the thirteen colonies.
- 29 See Henry A. Gemery (1984) pp. 318–20.
- 30 John Higham (1984) p. 18.
- 31 George L. Haskins (1960); Marylynn Salmon (1986); Carole Shammas *et al.* (1987).
- 32 Maryland Debra Meyers (2003) p. ix.
- 33 For a good summary and suggested estimates see Aaron Fogleman (1992) pp. 691–1709.

- 34 I note especially the work of Mechal Scobel (1988).
- 35 Anon., *A Share of Honour. Virginia Women 1600–1945*, p. 11.
- 36 Paul Clemens (1980); Kenneth E. Lockridge (1970); Gary B. Nash (1979).
- 37 Richard Middleton (1992) pp. 224–5.
- 38 See Steven G. Ellis (1985) pp. 40–1.
- 39 Mary O’Dowd (1999) pp. 156–71.
- 40 Bernadette Cunningham (1986) pp. 152–64; Michael McCarthy Morrogh (1986) pp. 172–89.
- 41 See Introduction, Ciaran Brady and Raymond Gillespie (1986) pp. 11–17, for a brief but illuminating discussion of the historiography down to 1986. Steven G. Ellis (1985) provides a useful interpretation of the situation prior to the English rule of all Ireland imposed from 1603 onwards.
- 42 Patricia Crawford (1985); Sara Mendelson (1985); also James Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women’s Letter-Writing 1450–1800*, 2001.
- 43 For a good discussion of the problems involved see Bernadette Cunningham (1986) pp. 148–70.
- 44 Raymond A. Anselment (2001) pp. 7–14.
- 45 Mary Beth Norton (1998) pp. 141–54; this problem is not unique to American sources, as some English diaries such as the published *Diary of Elizabeth Pepys* also appear to be fake, despite the editor’s claim to have found the manuscript in an attic.
- 46 Mary O’Dowd (1999) pp. 156–71.
- 47 Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford (1998) p. 11.
- 48 Her self-portrait (painted in c. 1675) is reproduced in Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford (1998) p. 7.
- 49 Anne Laurence (1994, 2002 reissue) pp. 293–303.

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PART 1

Marrying: an active proposition

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Introduction

One of the key concerns for a young woman in each of these societies (and for her mother and father) was the question of her marriage. The specific vocations of the great majority of women were those of wife and mother, notwithstanding important recent work on other forms of partnership and on singletons. Those who did not marry felt obliged to explain their departure from the norm. For the historian of women, therefore, it is important to investigate how this question of marriage was settled, revealing in the process the variety of views and practices. It is also important to recognise that gender played a relatively small role in the way in which marriages were arranged: much of the evidence shows that the major distinction was that between ‘parents’ and ‘family members’ and ‘friends’ on the one hand and ‘children’ or ‘young people’ on the other.

Historians have focused upon issues which surround the purpose of marriage; the choice of marriage partner; the contractual arrangements surrounding promise, ‘engagement’ and marriage. These debates are closely linked and in this section each is not treated separately, which would be repetitive, but a series of short chapters attempt to show how treatment of these issues sheds light on the place of women in early modern society. These chapters are not equal in length: for some aspects there is much to be said, for others relatively little, largely owing to the paucity of documentation. The dearth of evidence makes it difficult to grapple with the question of change over time as well as the differences between these societies.

The question of whether marriage was equally important in each of these societies is broached and, in the process, definitions of marriage and indications of the ways in which it was arranged and solemnised are teased out.

CHAPTER 2

How and where were marriages solemnised?

Forasmuch as N and N have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and have therefore given and pledged their troth either to the other, and have declared the same by the giving and receiving of a ring, and by joining of hands, I pronounce that they be man and wife together.¹

Introduction

In early modern societies marriages could be divided into ‘regular’ and ‘irregular’ unions. Regular unions obeyed rules set down by the state and/or the church. It is with these regular unions that this chapter is concerned. Irregular unions (often called clandestine or secret marriages) were valid but any ceremonial attached to them was by definition hidden from history. There were differences in the conduct of regular marriages between England and Scotland and between England and her American colonies. Some of these differences were due to religious differences between the societies. Others were shaped by the circumstances of settlement in the New World.

How and where were regular marriages conducted?

*When Advent comes do thou refrain
Till Hillary set thee free again
Next Septuagesima saith thee nay
But when Low Sunday comes thou may
Yet at Rogation thou must tarry
Till Trinitie shall bid thee Marry²*

In Catholic countries where marriage, or holy matrimony, was a sacrament (that is, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace), marriages took place in church at given seasons of the year and during daylight hours. Marriage was forbidden, for example, during Lent (the season of preparation for Easter), Rogationtide and Trinity (in the late spring), and Advent (the season when Christians prepared themselves for Christmas). Once England and Wales broke from Rome, the status of marriage as a sacrament was contested but the prohibitions on unseasonable marriages were retained. Only two sacraments were accepted by many Protestants – Baptism and the Eucharist or Lord's Supper – and even these were not seen as essential to salvation. In the more radical second Prayer Book of Edward VI's reign, the English marriage service nonetheless expresses the common Protestant view that marriage was a holy estate to be entered into before God and not lightly: 'And there the Priest shall thus say . . . we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of his congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in Paradise . . .' By the later revisions of the Prayer Book marriage was reinstated as a sacrament and many of the Catholic practices reappeared.³

In Scotland, as we shall see in the next chapter, approaches to the question of a valid marriage varied. In Scotland handfasting arrangements appear to have been very common. Handfasting (betrothal) often consisted of public (and parentally approved) exchange of marriage vows, without the subsequent marriage ceremony before a minister. In 1562 the Aberdeen Kirk Session declared that such unions although legally valid were 'manifest fornication and whoredom'. In 1568 the Aberdeen Kirk Session forbade ministers to attend handfasting ceremonies, thus trying to rob them of ecclesiastical respectability. But in 1570 the Scottish General Assembly reversed this policy by insisting that handfasting took place in the Kirk and that sexual abstinence was practised thereafter until the marriage itself. In 1575 this policy was again reversed (with a ban on any other ceremonies than marriage itself) and the Kirk sessions eventually contented themselves with requiring couples applying for banns of marriage to take out bonds that would be declared forfeit if the bride was found to be pregnant prior to marriage. Marriage itself was to be performed by the minister in the Kirk.⁴

In the Middle Ages spousals and marriages were celebrated in the church porch: the Sarum Missal, which was widely used in southern England, specified that the service should begin 'before the door of the

church, or in the face of the church', although people of high rank might be married in the nave of the church itself and all couples would come before the altar for a nuptial mass after they were wed standing beneath a pallium.⁵ The spousals ring which had been given to the bride-to-be and worn on her right hand since the signing of the betrothal agreement some time earlier was now blessed with holy water and transferred to her left hand by the groom. Vows were exchanged and afterwards the couple were 'crowned' before they left the church. Weddings were followed by a breakfast in church of blessed wine, bread and cakes – literally a breaking of the fast insisted upon before the Eucharist.

Contemporary accounts of marriages themselves and the preparations for them show that throughout the period brides and grooms clad themselves in as much finery as they could muster. Leonard Wheatcroft went with his bride-to-be on a shopping spree as soon as the ink was dry on their marriage settlement. Some clearly spent to excess, at least in the opinion of those who were expected to foot the bills. So Margaret Harlakenden from Essex spent £120 in London on wedding attire and her father was 'exceeding angry . . . for her vanity'.⁶ It may not always have been the parents who bore such expenses directly, however. Joyce Jefferies, a well-to-do Hereford spinster, for example, recorded in May 1641 'Anne Davies wedding gown which I gave her, she was married to Joshua Ailway on Whitsun Thursday' and in December 1643 she gave Eliza Acton, her god-daughter and maid £20 to 'pay for her wedding clothes'. In both cases Joyce Jefferies had been given charge of the girls' portions when they came to dwell with her as maids and a responsibility to pay for their weddings may have been part of the arrangement.⁷ Grooms too attended to their dress as did attendants and guests. English brides customarily completed their outfits with garlands of flowers and carried floral bouquets. The flowers they bore had symbolic significance, indicating that marriage brought an end to strife and that the wife and husband would have particular virtues. Buckinghamshire rector Roger Hacket preached a marriage sermon that drew attention to the flowers in the bridal bouquet – primroses, violets, rosemary and maiden's blush – as recommendations of obedience, patience and faithfulness for the bride and wisdom, love and loyalty for the groom in their future life together.⁸

Following the break from Rome, marriages in England were supposedly all brought into the nave (main part) of the church building: 'the persons to be married shall come into the body of the church, with their friends and neighbours' instructed the Edwardian order of service. In fact there is some evidence that marriages continued to take place in the

church porch. For example, licences issued in the midland diocese of Coventry and Lichfield in the 1660s stipulated that weddings must be solemnised 'in the face of the parish church'.⁹ It was a public occasion, not just because the whole community should rejoice at this entry into a holy estate but also to prevent bigamous and other irregular marriages. Other measures were taken to guard against such irregularities: this was why marriages took place during daylight (between 8 a.m. and midday) during divine service;¹⁰ why veils were lifted to expose the bride's face; why banns were ordered to be read during public service on three successive Sundays in the parishes where bride and groom resided and also during the marriage service itself, inviting anyone who had good reason why the marriage should not take place to come forward and explain themselves; why licences were contingent upon both parties swearing that they had entered into no prior contracts. This practice of reading the banns on three occasions was extended to the 'English' colonies of the Atlantic seaboard of America, albeit in colonies where there was civil marriage the banns had to be read or posted in writing in 'a public place' rather than necessarily in a church.¹¹ Scotland also maintained a similar system. All this reflected considerable anxiety concerning the problem of bigamous unions and/or outright desertion in these early modern societies,¹² and the need to avoid the resulting complications concerning establishing who were the legitimate heirs, and where the responsibility lay for the maintenance of both mothers and children. Although marriages were ordered to be recorded in the parish registers, it was not until 1653 that civil marriage was introduced into England for a brief period.¹³

Studies have shown that the English obeyed the prohibition against Lenten weddings throughout the period 1500–1760 but, although they more or less obeyed the other prohibitions against marriages during Rogationtide, Trinity and Advent throughout the sixteenth century, by the seventeenth century people were increasingly ignoring these rules regarding the season of marriage.¹⁴ (Marriages during the prohibited seasons technically required a special licence but this rule often seems to have been disregarded.) In rural areas especially, though, harvest time in the autumn and also after lambing or calving in the spring proved highly popular times to celebrate a union, because food was plentiful and work had been done.¹⁵

The American colonies appear to have altered this Old World pattern of seasonality in many respects, at least partly as a reflection of the changed climatic conditions. Marriages in the late seventeenth-century/eighteenth-century New England colonies on the Atlantic seaboard were flat from

February through May, slumped in the summer and picked up again in October, peaking in the early months of winter. New Jersey also followed this pattern but marriages picked up and ended a month earlier than in New England (perhaps in an effort to beat the onslaught of bad weather further north). Examination of marriages among particular groups show more variation. For example, both New England and New Jersey Quakers displayed a surge in May marriages but New Jersey Quaker couples were much less likely to marry during the summer and showed a more dramatic and early preference for autumn–winter marriages. In Maryland there was a very marked preference for marrying in December, January and February (peaking two months after that in New England and a month after that in New Jersey) and avoidance of marriage during Lent and between May and October. French Canadians followed the French peasant disinclination to marry in Lent but whereas in France there was a marked mid-summer peak in marriages, Canadians preferred not to marry between May and September. A flurry of Canadian marriages in February perhaps represented an attempt to celebrate unions before the Lenten prohibition.¹⁶

Although the Church of England did not specify any particular day for marriages, English couples did prefer certain days of the week. Roger Schofield extrapolated from the reconstitution of twenty-six parishes across England (1538–1831) that whereas Sunday and Monday were the most popular wedding days in the period 1538 to 1575, there was a marked decline in their popularity between 1575 and 1660, with a commensurate rise in the popularity of Tuesday, Wednesday and especially Thursday. 32 per cent of marriages had taken place on a Thursday in the mid-seventeenth century, and this trend was especially dominant in agricultural parishes. From 1660 to 1780 Thursday became a much less favoured day (falling to 14 per cent of marriages) and Monday became the increasingly frequent choice. ‘The rise of the Monday marriages, on so-called “St Monday”, has been taken as the mark of the appearance of proto-industry, or of an urban working pattern, in which the working week ran from a Tuesday to a Saturday.’ The modern preference for Saturday is a post-Second World War phenomenon.¹⁷

Marriage rituals and feastings

There had long been rituals connected with the ceremony, which the Catholic Church had tolerated and which the Church of England continued to wink at, allowing some to take place in the church porch. For example,

in parts of the north of England the couple would be locked into the church and only allowed out once the groom had pushed a 'ransom' under the church door. In Yorkshire and Wales there was often a race from the church to the couple's new home. Here the winner could claim the bride's garter as his prize. In many places obstacles would often be placed in the couple's way and be removed only on the payment of fines. In Wales couples were even seized and roped together. Rough music (when the couple were mocked) was very common in all parts of England and Wales.

Typical was a procession of the youth of the parish, boys and girls, accompanied by fiddlers and/or pipers, to escort the bride and groom from church to wedding feast. This feast was followed by kissing and fondling. Fuelled by drink the young couple and their guests sang, danced and frolicked, and engaged in sexually explicit jesting and playing games that involved throwing around intimate items of clothing. There was no coyness here regarding the climax of the night!

*O! Give them active heat
And moisture both complete:
Fit organs for increase
To keep and to release
That, which may the honour'd stem
Circle with a diadem.*¹⁸

This climax was prepared for by the virgin bridesmaids who showered the couple with flowers and wheat as they left the church and at their new home scattered flowers on the marriage bed. Here the disrobing of the bride was performed in front of the young male and female attendants.

Late at night when the happy couple retired to bed they met with further obstacles and intrusion: the bed might contain branches and be short-sheeted; a band might strike up; rowdy visitors might burst into the chamber and pelt the couple with stockings filled with sand. In 1665 Samuel Pepys recorded invading a bridal chamber in order to kiss the bride in her bed, and more than a century later this custom was continuing. Puritans objected to these practices but there is small doubt that they continued until late in the nineteenth century in many parishes.

Once the happy pair were bedded the festivities continued for their friends and neighbours, sometimes for several days. When George Cely, a merchant, married Margery on Tuesday 18 May 1484, the groom provided feasting over about five days costing around £12 16s. (comparable to six months' normal housekeeping) that included liberal quantities of meat, poultry, fish and white wine, and delicacies such as rabbit, oranges

and figs. In addition to the three dozen rabbits to be eaten at the wedding breakfast there were live rabbits to be let loose amongst the guests!¹⁹ Higher up the social ladder, the marriage festivities of Prince Arthur and Katharine of Aragon in 1501 were yet more lavish, including, as they did, disguisings and pageants.²⁰ Yet again 'many quick conies [rabbits] . . . ran about the hall and made very great disports'. On this occasion white doves and other birds were also released and this caused 'great laughter and disport'.²¹ No matter what the social status of the couple, a great fuss was made of weddings and the humble wedding breakfast was augmented by feasts. In 1537 the entire parish turned out to celebrate the wedding of Margaret Timewell and William Taylor of Morebath, Devon, specially held on St George's Day which was a holiday when no one worked.²² Such celebrations continued in some situations from the Reformation onwards. Henry Machyn described in his sixteenth-century diary the 'big weddings' of freemen of London, celebrated over several days, with processions, 'the trumpettes blohyng', formal feasts, dancing and merrymaking.²³ We know that the urban guilds made much of the weddings of their members: some of them, such as the chimney sweeps, continued well into the nineteenth century, with elaborate, noisy and colourful celebrations of members' weddings. The wedding of a London Alderman's son at Draper's Hall in 1675 lasted three days. In 1682 Ralph Thoresby attended a two-day wedding feast in Yorkshire and there is evidence that this practice was common in the north.

These festivities and the giving and receiving of invitations and of gifts and tokens such as gloves and trinkets served to consolidate the connection to which bride and groom belonged. The reading of the banns for three weeks before the wedding served to invite the whole parish to the public ceremony. By the late sixteenth century literate parents were also sending out personal written invitations to especial friends.²⁴ Many were individually invited by word of mouth. Colourful ribbons were distributed to all who attended the feast and were worn on hats or as garters. Customarily pairs of gloves were given by the happy couple to friends and kin. A pair of gloves, signifying the hand of friendship, would be sent to close family members who could not be present (in much the same way that modern couples send small portions of wedding cake to absent friends). The bride's garters were given away and treasured (as bridesmaids today treasure the bridal bouquet). The couple also entertained the guests to a feast (which in times of hardship would be highly valued).²⁵

At the feast or during the wedding service the parents or guardians might give the bride's dowry or something symbolising the dowry. To the

feast guests brought a variety of presents ranging from food, drink, money and plate to household goods. A major concern seems to have been to prolong the wedding celebrations themselves. So, in 1567, guests at the wedding of Surrey gentry Richard Polstead and Elizabeth More contributed birds such as capons, partridges, swans and woodcocks and game, fish, sweetmeats, puddings, cheeses and wine.²⁶ Even the clergyman who celebrated the wedding could be munificent, if the diary of the Sussex Restoration clergyman Giles Moore can be regarded as in any way typical, sometimes donating a sermon and forgiving the marriage fees, treating the fiddlers and pipers and so forth.²⁷ Doles were made by the bridal party to the poor. This was a practice followed from the beginning to the end of our period, and beyond.²⁸

Protestant attitudes to marriage varied – was it a sacrament or wasn't it? Should it be a religious or a civil ceremony? Was the ring to be used or not? Should marriage be celebrated with feasting, drinking and dancing? One contemporary account suggests that these different views were echoed in the actual wedding practices of religious groups. Henri Misson, a Frenchman, commented of late seventeenth-century English weddings that they

*[g]enerally vary according to the several customs of the countries, the rank or quality of the persons and their different religions. The Presbyterians profess so great a strictness, and such much a reservedness, that their weddings are very quiet [whereas those of the middling sort] invite a number of friends and relations; every one puts on new clothes, and dresses finer than ordinary; the men lead the women, they get into coaches, and so go in procession, and are married in full day at church. After feasting and dancing, and having made merry that day and the next, they take a trip into the country, and there divert themselves very pleasantly.*²⁹

The story of the Willoughby–Ridgway marriage in 1610 is one of the most detailed available for such an early date and it certainly suggests very elaborate festivities at this social level in Anglo-Irish Protestant circles. David Cressy has collected together many accounts of elaborate wedding festivities amongst the middling and upper sorts of people: from the court wedding of Sir Philip Herbert, the weddings of Cornish gentry, to the marriage of a shipwright's daughter to an apprentice in 1637 when the many guests were royally entertained under a 'marquis' (marquee) in the garden. Cressy, however, suggests that, although there are certainly examples of Puritan critique of contemporary excesses, Misson exaggerated the

opposition of Presbyterians and other dissenters to wedding celebrations. Cressy argues that Christians could discern between acceptable festivity and unacceptable excess. He cites the examples of Oliver Heywood, a dissenting preacher, who married Elizabeth Anger in 1655 and 'feasted above an hundred persons of several ranks, ages and sexes'; of Ralph Josselin Puritan minister and diarist who wrote approvingly of a marriage feast that lasted three days; and of Leonard Wheatcroft of Ashover whose wedding deliberately echoed those of popular literature. Wheatcroft, married during the Protectorate (a time associated in the popular mind with austerity), held eleven feasts on eleven days. He entertained full two hundred people to breakfast, dinner and supper. There were merry bells in the morning, sweet music for dancers in the afternoon, choice tunes in the evening after supper.³⁰ Even jousting was laid on. All in all, the marriage feasting at Canaan provided a comforting New Testament model for all Christians to follow.

New World marriages

Some of the evidence from the New World suggests that Cressy is wise to be cautious in drawing too firm a divide along religious lines. The wedding of Governor Bradford of Plymouth Colony in 1623 suggests an adaptation of customary celebrations to accord with local circumstances for it was similarly marked with entertainment (on this occasion from native Americans) and a great feast of turkeys.³¹ In this Puritan colony, however, weddings were civil ceremonies that mostly took place not in church but in the bride's home and were not marked by feasting. John Demos believes that such marriages were 'characterized by a kind of rough and ready spontaneity', being short and to the point. He argues that these Old Colony home weddings had little in common with developing traditions in neighbouring Massachusetts, of which New Plymouth Colony eventually became a part.³² There marriage was also a civil institution but there are indications that they were accompanied by jollity and festivity.³³ By making marriage a civil institution, presumably Puritans felt justified in allowing celebration. It was in the marriage itself that the differences between 'Puritan' and other Christians (Catholic or Anglican) were really seen. Following the English example set in 1645 (whereby the reading of three sets of banns was a necessary prelude to a legal marriage) and the ruling of Oliver Cromwell in 1653 that marriage should be a civil ceremony performed by a magistrate before two witnesses, in the Puritan colonies of New England (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut),

civil marriage before a magistrate was the order of the day and it was a public affair. Calvinists in the southern colonies of Virginia, Maryland and the Carolinas seem to have continued the old English Puritan practices, refusing to use the ring in marriage and viewing marriage as a contract publicly entered into and preferably in a church. In Maryland for most of the period the old Catholic customs of celebrating a nuptial mass, of marrying under a pallium, of using a ring blessed with holy water and of crowning bride and groom persisted, however. Marriage for both Catholics and 'Anglicans' in Maryland remained a sacrament and the main distinction between Catholic and Anglican ceremonies lay in the fact that the Anglicans dispensed with the pallium and holy water. The various stages of marriage from betrothal through marriage settlement through reading of banns to marriage in church were followed. Large numbers of betrothal rings, duly inscribed with loving words, have been discovered in the former St Mary's City. Christians of both persuasions insisted on a religious ceremony even where no ordained priest was available to perform the marriage. In such circumstances couples copied the Prayer Book service and made their vows within a religious context. It was even relatively common for Catholic priests to marry Anglican couples when the couple could not find an Anglican priest. Quakers also sought religious marriages, approved of and witnessed by the Meeting and seem to have followed practices similar to those instituted in England by George Fox.³⁴ Although Maryland eventually (largely because of a shortage of ordained ministers of religion) instituted civil marriage and permitted Justices of the Peace to perform marriages, for many couples religious marriage persisted, and only the precise wording of the vows slightly modified the ceremony. The Maryland Assembly commanded that all marriages, whether civil or church, should use repetition of the traditional vows before two witnesses: 'I [A] do take thee [B] to my wedded [wife or husband] to have and to hold from this day forward for better or worse, for rich or for poor, in sickness and in health, till death us do part and thereto I plight thee my troth' and the magistrate or priest declared, 'I being hereunto by law authorised doe pronounce you lawful man and wife'.³⁵

Conclusion

Whatever their religious affiliation early moderns regarded marriage as an occasion for rejoicing and celebration and for the confirmation of old and new alliances and connections. The differences in approach were to

the rite of marriage itself. Within Catholic countries Holy Matrimony was a sacrament and was performed in church. Within Protestant countries there was controversy concerning its standing as a sacrament. The Scottish Presbyterians did not include it as a sacrament but did insist that it be performed in a church. The imposition of episcopacy and eventually of the English liturgy on Scotland in the reigns of James VI and I and Charles I meant that Anglican views and rites of marriage were introduced but were also robustly resisted. Within Anglicanism, matrimony remained one of the sacraments and there was an insistence that regular marriages be performed in church by a priest and according to canonical rules. Puritans disliked the ceremonies surrounding the rite (especially the use of the ring) and, while regarding marriage highly, did not see matrimony as a sacrament. In 1653 such views found their expression in the introduction of civil marriage by Oliver Cromwell. This experiment was short lived. Broadly speaking, the Puritan New England colonies followed Cromwell's lead whereas the Anglican and Catholic colonies of the Chesapeake region adhered to the traditional forms of marriage which returned to England at the Restoration. Local conditions – as in the case of the extreme shortage of ordained ministers – could and did lead to some modification of English practices.

Notes

- 1 Service of Holy Matrimony, Book of Common Prayer.
- 2 Mnemonic verse in the Everton, Nottinghamshire Parish Register, quoted by D. Cressy (1997) p. 299; and Meyers (2003) p. 50.
- 3 The two chief sacraments were those of Baptism and of the Holy Eucharist, which according to Article 25 of the 39 Articles of the Church of England of 1563 were differentiated as the 'two sacraments ordained of Christ . . . in the Gospel' from the 'five commonly called sacraments', including marriage, confirmation, penance, ordination and extreme unction. These Articles, themselves a slight revision of the 42 Articles of 1553, contained short summaries of the Anglican view of matters of contemporary controversy. David Cressy (1997) does not acknowledge this reversionary change.
- 4 A. E. Anton (1958) pp. 89–102, especially pp. 96–9; J. Stuart (1846); T. C. Smout (1981) especially pp. 211–12; see also C. Peters (2004) pp. 15–17 for a good summary.
- 5 This was a cloth or veil held over the bride and groom while they exchanged vows.

- 6 A. Macfarlane (1976) p. 410.
- 7 Account Book of Joyce Jefferies, BL Egerton MS 3054, fos 43v, 70v.
- 8 Roger Hacket, Rector of North Crawley, Buckinghamshire (1607) pp. 1–2.
- 9 See, for example, the licence for marriage of John Ryley and Mary Downy of Bradeley in the face of the parish church of St Mary's Stafford contained in L.J.R.O. B/C/6, Folder 4, no. 1, 1660.
- 10 See Canon 62 of 1603.
- 11 William Brigham (1836) p. 272; John Demos (1978) p. 159.
- 12 See, for example, L.J.R.O.
- 13 D. Cressy (1997) pp. 336–76, provides the best summary of what is known about the medieval and early modern marriage service and the rituals surrounding it. Another valuable, and more detailed, account is given by John R. Gillis (1985) which attends to northern as well as southern English practices.
- 14 E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield (1981) pp. 298–305, 519–25.
- 15 Cressy (1985) pp. 1–21. See also A. Kussmaul (1990) especially pp. 3–4, 36–8, and A. Kussmaul (1981) pp. 755–79.
- 16 R. Schofield (1985) pp. 1–21; R. V. Wells (1987) pp. 299–307.
- 17 R. Schofield (2005) pp. 93–109, quotation from p. 104.
- 18 Robert Herrick, 'An Epithalamie to Sir Thomas Southwell and his Ladie' in F. W. Moorman (1921) p. 217. An Epithalamie was a nuptial verse. Herrick wrote a number of these, which can be read in the above edition of his works.
- 19 A. Hanham (1985) pp. 312–15.
- 20 Appearing in disguise and/or masks was very popular at court in the later Middle Ages and the early modern era.
- 21 John Leland (1770) p. 372. Cited in Hanham (1985) p. 314.
- 22 E. Duffy (2001) p. 7.
- 23 Henry Machyn (1847) pp. 243–4, 288.
- 24 William Vaughan (1609) book 2, [ch. 6](#).
- 25 See D. Cressy (1997) pp. 365–7.
- 26 J. Evans (1855) pp. 36–44.
- 27 R. Bird (1971) pp. 300, 301, 316–18, 327, 333, 335.
- 28 T. F. Thisleton-Dyer, *Church-Lore Gleanings*, 1892, p. 123; and Anon. (N. H.) *Ladies' Dictionary, Being a general entertainment for the fair sex*, 1694, pp. 505, 740; both cited in Cressy (1997) p. 367.
- 29 Henri Misson (1719) pp. 349–51.

- 30 G. Parfitt and R. Houlbrooke (eds) (1986), pp. 83–8.
- 31 S. V. James (1963) p. 29.
- 32 J. Demos (1978) p. 163.
- 33 A. M. Earle (1894) pp. 73ff., R. S. Dunn (1998) pp. 37–8.
- 34 D. Meyers (2003) p. 53.
- 35 Browne, *Archives of Maryland*, 2, 523. The ampersand (&) was used indiscriminately in early modern manuscripts, frequently being mixed with the spelt-out version (and). Henceforth in this book, for convenience, the ampersand is spelt out.