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Rebecca Probert (ed.), Cohabitation and non-marital births in England and Wales, 1600-2012 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) [review]

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Cohabitation and Non-marital Births in England and Wales, 1600-2012, ed by Rebecca Probert (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 253, ISBN 978-1-137-39625-9 hb.

Nowadays the marital status of new parents barely merits comment; this is not surprising given that, as Rebecca Probert explains, 'almost half of all children in England and Wales are born outside marriage, with cohabiting relationships accounting for the majority of such births' (p. 1). The aim of this collection of interdisciplinary essays is twofold: to provide the historical context of non-marital child-bearing since 1600, alongside a study of residential sexual relationships outside marriage. Divorce was to all intents and purposes impossible before the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (p. 52), so co-habitation was then the only practical option for a couple where one or both parties had previously married. However, as contributor Joanne Bailey notes this was the way of life for only a fraction of 1 per cent of the population in the first half of the span of this book (p. 51).

This collection ambitiously spans 400 years but successfully manages to provide a full overview by way of a range of essays ordered chronologically. The contributors' expertise derives from a range of fields from history, literature, social scientists, to the editor Probert herself, whose expertise is in family law. Thus collection contains ten chapters which start in the bawdy courts of early seventeenth century London and ends at cohabitation and birth patterns after 1970. The technique of pairing of chapters, with one focussed on cohabitation and one on births, is used on occasion and allows both topics space to be explored in detail.

The book opens with a thematically similar pairing of 'Bridewell, Bawdy Courts and Bastardy in Early Seventeenth-century London', co-authored by Eleanor Fox and

Martin Ingham, followed by Ingram's solo chapter on 'Co-habitation in Context in Early Seventeenth-century London'. These chapters might usefully be considered in conjunction with Adrian Wilson's recent work on the same topic in *Ritual and Conflict: The Social Relations of Childbirth in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013). Fox and Ingham concur with the position Wilson takes to the extent that it would seem that most extra marital sex was between eligible young couples with a view to eventual marriage (p. 12), and so any mischance in the courtship could change a woman's status from one of the twenty per cent of pregnant brides to instead becoming a 'bastard-bearer'. What the chapters elucidate is the contemporary attitudes to such births were complicated, and not all such mothers lost their standing in the community.

Moving into the long eighteenth century Joanne Bailey examines 'Broken Marriages and Cohabitation'. Despite the microscopic numbers of people who cohabited, Bailey argues that this is social phenomenon still worth investigating since the subjects of study inhabited 'the same world as formal marriage' and wished to reap the 'benefits of that union' (p. 53); one of the key findings of this chapter is the way wealth and power inured a man from the sorts of censure from this arrangement that others lower down the social scale would face. Samantha Williams discusses 'Plebeian Courtship, illegitimacy, and Broken Relationships in London, 1700-1840' and notes that there were 292 trials for bigamy in the eighteenth century (p. 77), and that bigamous marriage produces illegitimate children too; Julie Shaffer concludes this section with 'Bastardy and Divorce Trials, 1780-1809'. Shaffer points to the prevalence of illegitimate children in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novel and how this demonstrates that legitimacy and illicit sexual

relations were of great interest to the reading public (p. 80). Like Bailey, she finds that the elite had their own social rules and children produced from illicit relationships could be provided for in numerous ways such as by being raised as 'orphans' within their extended family. The use of the term 'by-blows' in the chapter (which the *OED* has as out of use since 1868) to describe these children, is a little jarring, with its derogatory connotations.

The nineteenth century is covered in Chapters Six and Seven with Elizabeth Hurren and Steven King's chapter first examining the 'Coronial Records of the Midlands Circuit'. This chapter, being taken from coroners' reports necessarily focuses on cohabitation when it resulted in conflicts and deaths (p. 122), but at the same time the authors conclude that 'tolerance of cohabitation is not, seemingly, an entirely modern phenomenon' (p. 124). Ginger Frost's discussion of 'Fostering, Adoption and Illegitimacy in England 1860-1930' describes how illegitimate children at this time were often shunted between carers, and seldom brought up by both parents (p. 125); reassuringly Frost concludes that despite the often depicted accounts of neglect 'kindness outpaced cruelty' in such arrangements on the whole (p. 144).

The collection is brought up to the present with editor Probert's own chapter 'The Context of Illegitimacy from the 1920s to the 1960s', a period she has identified as being a key moment for the shift in the relationship between marriage and births (p. 157). A pair of chapters beginning with John Haskey's examination of cohabitation and births outside marriage, followed by Éva Beaujounan and Máire Ní Bhrolcháin's co-authored discussion of cohabitation and marriage in Britain both

since the 1970s, conclude the edition. Both highly informative chapters are enhanced by tables and figures. Haskey argues that the social change identified by Probert became a 'veritable tsunami' (p. 190) post 1970s; indeed Beaujounan and Ní Bhrolcháin find that more than half of all couples marrying now have cohabited and that 'pre-marital cohabitation has been a majority practice for a quarter of a century' (p. 198).

This collection of essays is an important addition to our knowledge on this topic in so many ways. An important legacy of the collection is in the diverse human stories it includes which highlights, despite the various ways people found to live outside of the institution, some more happily than others, the centrality of marriage in England and Wales throughout the majority of the period under consideration in this book.

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