

CAROLYN STEEDMAN. *History and the Law: A Love Story*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 294. \$99.99 (cloth).
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2023.17

Carolyn Steedman's *History and the Law: A Love Story* invites readers to consider how a range of historical actors—both present and past—have loved the law, where love is not that of romance but of living, of the feeling that shapes how we construct ourselves and relate to the other. It makes two considered contributions. The first is to historiography; this book is an exploration of how some historians, including Steedman, have worked with legal materials, made decisions, and constructed stories of the past from this material. The second is to historians' understanding of how people of the long eighteenth century lived the law as part of their experience and *mentalité*. These contributions, of course, are not and cannot be separate, with the second arising from the first. Accordingly, Steedman does not manage these themes separately but interweaves them across the book's eight chapters.

In the introduction, riffing on Stephen Dunn's poem, "History," Steedman engages with the types of law that historians have loved. She does not attend to Chancery versus the Common Law, but to the way that historians prefer stories with beginnings and middles and ends, with victors and villains, and tragic reversals that disrupt narratives of progress that nonetheless proceed apace. The law—as is a theme across this book—is tightly bound to narratives of historical progress, a key domain where we identify the constraints on liberty and the opening up of freedoms. The introduction is followed by a series of case studies that explore different dimensions of this issue. In chapters 2 and 3, Steedman looks at the threatening letter as sent by the lower orders as part of political and personal protests; chapter 2 does so in conversation with the letters between E. P. Thomson, the academic historian paying for archival work, and Edward Dodd, collecting data on his behalf. Three chapters follow on coverture and the spaces provided, or not, for women to exercise legal-personal agency in eighteenth-century society. In the first, Steedman looks at how coverture is imagined by William Blackstone, the preeminent legal commentator of the period; in the second she looks at Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria* (1798) in relation to the law of copyright and her husband, William Godwin's, ownership of her property; and in the third she looks at poor women's engagement with the poor law, and the way that coverture interfered (or often did not) with the right of settlement. In chapter 7, Steedman uses Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams* (1794) as a case study in hating the law, demonstrating the ways that text continually questions the possibilities of justice within the criminal system of the period. Godwin's change of heart is the subject of the following chapter as he attempts to write his *History of the Commonwealth of England* (1824), where like for so many historians, the big legal moments—the contractions of monarchical power through statute or the refiguring of liberty for the ordinary man—become the heroes of an evolving narrative of statehood. The hater becomes the lover—or rather he always was.

As is characteristic of Steedman's scholarship, her account resists narrative, intending to trouble how we produce stories of our records. Thus, a history coverture, as she shows, is as much an anxiety of historians of woman—who have placed particular weight on this legal device—as the realities of eighteenth-century women's lives, where the term plays a relatively small role in legal commentaries and everyday engagements between women and the law. At times this refusal of the narrative possibilities of the record is frustrating; she tells, or tries not to tell, a particular story of the law that can be easily countered by numerous alternative examples. "Yes, but . . ." is the emotion of this book's readers. Similarly, Steedman's insistence, both here but across many of her earlier works, that the law is particularly hard to access for the modern reader seems somewhat overdrawn—harder than what? Any other historical source? Not least because, for some time, legal historians have placed emphasis on the law not as a thing, but a practice, something that comes into being as it is applied,

whether in courtrooms or private homes or a public house. Thus, what is to be understood in the law is much more localized and quotidian than the grand accounts of nation states. Yet even as one makes this criticism and feels this frustration, one also suspects that is and has been exactly the point of the work—there is no history of the law, or at least not one that avoids the “zigzags”—as Dunn describes it—of the past.

Steedman’s book is both beautifully written and hard to read; as is appropriate for the topic, she refuses to let the reader jump ahead or to skip over the details. This is a readerly work that requires one to settle in and to consider word choice and how one topic is juxtaposed with another. Perhaps in its own way this forces a linearity through the zigzags of past and present, legal rights and wrongs, and the way that law is loved and lived.

Katie Barclay 

University of Adelaide

katie.barclay@adelaide.edu.au

DAVID WILSON. *Suppressing Piracy in the Early Eighteenth Century: Pirates, Merchants and British Imperial Authority in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2021. Pp. 312. \$130.00 (cloth).
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2023.32

Until the last decade, the prevailing historiography of early modern piracy in the Atlantic world held that the British Royal Navy stamped it out in the 1710s and 1720s through short, sharp campaigns of pirate hunting that culminated in exemplary trials and executions. This scholarship primarily focused on the pirates themselves at their Golden Age peak, and explained their suppression as the story of a powerful imperial state manifesting its fury in an effectual, centrally-coordinated campaign of extermination.

In *Suppressing Piracy in the Early Eighteenth Century: Pirates, Merchants and British Imperial Authority in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans*, David Wilson delivers a more comprehensive and nuanced account of the last gasp of the Anglo-American pirates (1716–1726) and the myriad, often uncoordinated counter-piracy efforts that brought about their downfall. In Wilson’s telling, the internal coherence and effectiveness of the imperial state in this period has been overstated, with the result that scholars have accorded too much credence to the idea of an organized war on pirates. Centering his analysis on the patchwork of institutions and actors that made up the British empire, Wilson draws together the disparate incentives and activities of the metropole and the periphery to tell a more complex story about how piracy was all but eradicated in the 1720s.

Suppressing Piracy is organized geographically and chronologically, roughly following the general movement of pirates from their Caribbean center to friendlier hunting grounds as they faced increasing resistance. Wilson’s detailed introduction provides the reader with an overview of the systemic factors that led to large-scale piracy in the Caribbean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, along with the cultural, legal, and logistical challenges facing those who sought to combat it. The book’s seven chapters form three broad groups. In chapters 1, 2, and 3, Wilson addresses piracy and counter-pirate activities in the Caribbean and Atlantic islands from 1716 to 1718. Wilson discusses the conditions following the War of Spanish Succession that produced a surplus of men ready to turn to piracy, examining also the derisory efforts of both the metropole and the colonies to protect Caribbean trade, and the public-private partnership that eventually eliminated a major pirate haven in the Bahamas. In chapters 4, 5, and 6, he explores counter-piracy efforts between 1718 and 1722 in the North American colonies, around the slaving forts of West Africa, and in the Indian Ocean.