


BOOK REVIEW

## Neil Penlington. *Men Getting Married in England, 1918–60: Consent, Celebration, Consummation*

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Engagements, weddings, and honeymoons have largely been a subject for scholars of women's history, so a book concentrating on men and masculinity is welcome. The period covered by the book is also ideal—a time when a high percentage of people married, did so at young ages, and took part (or aspired to take part) in the traditional white wedding. The author has used a wide source base, including etiquette books, law cases, Parliamentary debates, newspaper coverage, and oral history interviews.

In three cultural/social chapters, Neil Penlington discusses prescriptive literature first, then uses the oral history sources to parse out what men actually did. The newspaper coverage and etiquette books described actions suitable only for the middle and upper classes, but some issues crossed class borders. Men were to be the assertive partner, proposing the marriage and asking permission from the women's fathers. Many of men's roles prefigured their duties as breadwinners and heads of the family, such as giving gifts or planning honeymoons. The so-called proper masculinity, though, involved walking fine lines. A man must be romantic, but not too emotional, and must negotiate with his father-in-law in a way both respectful and independent. He must also avoid over-dependence on his own family or male comrades, but make sure to include them in the celebrations.

Continuity with earlier views of masculinity was clear. Men were the aggressive sex, pursuing women and more interested (and experienced) in sexual intimacies. The connection between masculinity and provision remained, and the gendered symbolism of the white wedding involved one man handing property (the bride) to another. The main change in weddings was their increasingly elaborate arrangements, with numerous attendants and expanded roles for children. In addition, class differences dictated men's choices, as in earlier times; working-class couples had to be pragmatic, and working women had more freedom of action. Both men and women agreed on the definition of a proper wedding, meaning a church wedding with traditional vows. Penlington argues that the emphasis on the Anglican, monogamous union fed the racial, class, and especially gender hierarchies of the mid-twentieth century. For women, the wedding was the highpoint of their lives. For men, the wedding was important but enmeshed with social standing, work, and male friendship.

Penlington does see some change over time. By the 1930s, newspapers were less critical of men who broke engagements, and a manly man could also show more emotion without losing face. Women did most of the planning and preparation for the wedding itself, but men helped with tasks involving provision, such as paying for catering or for honeymoons. Penlington's survey of newspapers showed the cultural pressure put on this early stage of

marriage, the beginning of sanctioned sexual intimacies. Since most working-class couples could not afford honeymoons, the class divide was especially obvious here, and even better-off couples often could not live up to the idealized honeymoons of popular culture.

Interleaved with these social-cultural histories are two chapters about legal issues, one on consenting to marriage and one on consummation. In the former, Penlington uses an intersectional approach to assess various bars to marriage. Stereotypes of “Indian” child marriages and Muslim/Hindu polygamy as others were tropes against which companionate, Christian marriage was measured. Gender was more noticeable in other bars to marriage, such as marriages of affinity or underaged unions, while class was central to cases concerning mental debility. As regards consummation, Penlington primarily relies on nullity petitions brought after the 1937 Divorce Act. Most of these suits were brought by men, claiming their wives willfully refused sexual relations. This fitted with the assumption of female passivity in sex and the increasing view of impotence as psychological rather than physical. Sex was narrowly defined as “penile-vaginal intercourse” with the man as the initiator (180), and a manly man had such sex throughout the marriage, meaning consummation was a continual process.

This book has an excellent source base; Penlington’s primary research is thorough. He does have some gaps in secondary literature, and, more importantly, his work lacks intellectual interaction with this material. Most of the chapters mention other historians only at the beginning, followed by long passages based solely on primary documents. Penlington’s discussion of masculinity in breach of promise suits entirely ignores the chapter on gender roles in my book (*Promises Broken: Courtship, Class and Gender in Victorian England* [1995], 40–57). Similarly, when discussing polygamy cases, he misses the chance to consider how a focus on masculinity enriches or challenges Jordanna Bailkin’s more postimperial approach to this issue (*The Afterlife of Empire* [2012], 132–63). Nor does he cite or discuss Gail Savage’s articles about masculinity and divorce in his sections on nullities (“‘...Equality from the Masculine Point of View’: The 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Russell and Divorce Law Reform in England,” *Russell: The Journal of the Bertram Russell Archives* 16, no. 1 [1995]: 67–84). These oversights are frustrating, as they squander the opportunity to explore changes in masculinity over longer periods of time and to make direct comparisons to others’ assessments of legal sources.

In addition, the chapters on the legal issues differ greatly from the three others. They have no oral history accounts and depend on close analysis of Parliamentary debates and legal arguments. Though these analyses are persuasive, they wander far from the focus on masculinity, especially in the long discussion of willful refusals of sexual intercourse (151) and condonation. Moreover, Penlington’s attempt to include racial differences, though laudable, has too few examples to be helpful. Thus, race mainly factors in the legal chapters, with cases involving age of consent and polygynous unions. Finally, Penlington does not consider remarriages; the bulk of the book is about first marriages only.

Despite these limitations, *Men Getting Married* is well worth reading for gender, family, and legal historians. It demonstrates that these wedding activities were important rites of passage for men, and Penlington’s approach describes common patterns while respecting the wide variety of human behavior. In addition, its careful unpicking of law cases highlights changes in views of heterosexuality in a time of rapid social change.