
In recent years a growing body of research has greatly enriched our understanding of the history of crime, youth, and child welfare in Britain and Europe from 1600 to present times. For the most part, and especially for the period before 1800, these various research agendas were explored separately, within the confines of national histories and along the more conventional chronological divisions of pre-modern and modern times. *Becoming delinquent: British and European youth, 1650–1950*, a collection of essays based on an international conference held in Cambridge in 1999, is deliberately designed to cross these boundaries, and to provide a comprehensive overview of the history of young delinquents in the European past. While the chapters as a whole do not provide a unified narrative or a systematic comparison, they do point out important themes and directions for a general framework within which the history of juvenile delinquents may proceed.

Following a broad introductory survey of themes and trends in the literature on juvenile delinquents, Paul Griffiths offers an essay on the early history of the criminal young from around 1600 onwards. The essay challenges a well-established historiography in which it was argued that the phenomenon of ‘juvenile delinquency’ was invented in the nineteenth century. Griffiths points to continuities in modes, attitudes and practices regarding young criminals by surveying early practices such as policing measures that targeted the young, early prisons where young men, most of them servants, were sent, and early modern projects for the reform of the young. He suggests that changes over time occurred in cycles, ‘where meanings are never stationary but shift as circumstances, culture and
ideologies alter’. Benjamin Roberts examines forms of youth culture in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, in a chapter rich with details about youthful gambling and drinking, sexual promiscuity, plundering, stone throwing and window breaking, and pointing to the involvement of upper-class youth who were a threat not only to the public order but to familial honour and reputation. Valentina K. Tikoff offers an analysis of a correctional institution in Seville that was recognized from its inception in 1725 as a juvenile reformatory. For France, Cat Nilan shows how nineteenth-century press coverage of the trials of murderous children rendered romantic notions of the innocent child more poignant by stigmatizing and dramatizing the monstrosity of the murderous child. A particularly detailed and telling picture of prison life and forms of resistance among young inmates is provided in Jenneke Christiaens’s examination of Belgian boys imprisoned in the special disciplinary section of the maison de force in Ghent by the end of the nineteenth century.

Other papers throw light on a host of issues, from the fifteen international penal congresses held across Europe between 1846 and 1950 and the European movement for reform of the penitentiary system, to the long-term impact of imprisonment on juveniles, especially females, in inter-war Norway, and to public discourse and learned interpretations of the rapid increase in juvenile delinquency in Vichy France. These attitudes in war-time France, by reinforcing pre-existing assumptions about character formation in a child, impeded serious rethinking for reform in the treatment of the young. Pamela Cox brings the collection to the present day by pointing to enduring features in racial attitudes towards children of white working-class, Irish, Jewish, mixed-race and black families from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth. Nourished by continuing anxieties about poverty, education and parenting, and sustained by commonly perceived notions of the alien youngster as a product of character defects that debilitated his capacity to integrate into the mainstream culture, such prejudices structured the attitudes of all public and voluntary services – with only minor exceptions in the case of state agencies – until recent times.

Two major themes recur throughout the volume. First, there were significant continuities between the early modern and modern periods in terms of perceptions and practices of treatment of the delinquent child. From the 1650s, a well-articulated construction of the delinquent as the youth who presented a menacing threat to society gave rise to a range of practices and institutions that catered especially for the criminal young. Second, attitudes and perceptions of the delinquent child were structured along two differing models: the ‘punitive’ and the ‘reformatory’. The punitive model placed greater emphasis on the juvenile delinquent as the pernicious wrongdoer who required harsh treatment, internment and incarceration. The reformatory model encapsulated a more integrative attitude in which the delinquent was perceived as the vulnerable victim in need of re-education, guidance and care. The lines between the two models were not always clearly drawn, and at different points in time one model, often the harsher mode, tended to prevail. The late nineteenth century was perhaps the most vigorous in its punitive measures all across Europe. But shifts and some tension between the
two models of practice and perception surfaced in most periods, and even by the late nineteenth century the two modes competed vigorously, as the international congresses, with their bitter disagreements between supporters and critics of the solitary confinement of young delinquents, suggest.

Other themes surface as the articles shift between periods and across national boundaries, for example poverty and the role played in welfare provision by charitable agencies; family, church and civil authority; gendered attitudes to the young; and the emergence of international bodies dealing with welfare, human rights and the child. Historians interested in these, as in the twists and turns of the long and often painful confrontation of adults with the criminal child, would find much to their tastes in this wide-ranging and fine collection.

ILANA KRAUSMAN BEN-AMOS
Department of History, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

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It would be unfair to suggest that in recent years early modern English historians have developed a morbid fascination with death, but a number of full-length studies bear witness to a burgeoning interest in the topic. In choosing this field of enquiry, moreover, they are building on a corpus of work previously dominated by French historians, notably Philippe Ariès and Pierre Chaunu. Vanessa Harding’s work engages with both the traditional and current historiography in its concern with the overlap and tensions between the living and the dead, as well as developing a valuable new dimension by her comparative approach. She presents a coherent and convincing case that a study of the rituals and attitudes surrounding death in Paris and London, two of the biggest cities in early modern Europe, can prove both meaningful and fruitful. Although the documentary survival is much better for London than for Paris (and the author is consequently dependent on the work of Chaunu and his students for the latter), throughout the book discussion of similarities and differences are effectively balanced and integrated. Indeed, as Harding herself points out (p. 120), the similarities make the divergences that much more striking. The period covered is significant too. It encompasses the experience of Reformation in both countries and considers its impact on funerary and other practice. In contrast, the turbulent times of the French religious wars and the English civil wars are less evident influences. The book is divided into manageable-length chapters, and there is a useful series of appendices that discuss and demonstrate the sources used.

From the outset it is clear that a number of themes unite or differentiate the individual urban experiences of London and Paris. Both cities saw huge population growth, and therefore had to make provision for an increased number of deaths and consequently burials. More than half of those whose death was
recorded in the documentary sources were under the age of fifteen, and a quarter of those who died in Paris did so in one of the city’s hospitals, which often had their own burial sites. It is very much with the practical side of dealing with the dead that Harding is chiefly concerned. She considers the extent to which the place where someone was buried mirrored their social position in life, the marginality of religious minorities (principally the Huguenots) and the poor being particularly marked, as was the increase in communal burials in charnel houses. In contrast, the wealthy in Paris sought exclusivity through the establishment of private chapels and family vaults, whereas monuments and epitaphs were favoured in the more secularized world of post-Reformation London. In both cases familial rather than devotional concerns were paramount. The price charged for burial sites and funeral services was, of course, the determining factor, so that Harding views the dead as consumers. Few could afford the privilege of private secure burial and long-term commemoration. Increased use of lead-lined coffins added to the cost. One of the most notable changes was the introduction and impact of new sites of burial to cope with the growing demand. In Paris the cemetery of the Innocents was purpose-built although it did have other functions; in contrast, St Paul’s in London (though its Dance of Death mural was modelled on that at the Innocents) was more clearly multifunctional. This use of new sites, Harding argues, weakened the bonds between the living and the dead and depersonalized the whole process of choosing a place of burial as the dead were increasingly transported to the outskirts of the city.

The final three chapters focus on funerals. Harding concludes that funerary rituals reflected the collective urban consciousness, through self-definition and shared belief. However, the impact of religious change is also most marked here. In London it led to greater stability and in Paris to conflict. The doctrinal changes which accompanied the adoption of Protestantism led to a distaste for the traditionally lavish pomp of elite funerals in England. The preference for the so-called ‘charitable funeral’, however, allowed for the retention of the traditional attendance of the poor and children in funeral processions. Aside from the presence of the religious orders and a greater degree of formality in Paris, Harding suggests that the rituals did not greatly differ between the two capitals. Thus, both funeral and burial practices were above all a reflection on society and the social order rather than confessional affiliation, though it played its part. This conclusion neatly encapsulates a carefully researched and thoughtful book which adds an important comparative dimension to a topic of enduring and universal interest.

Penny Roberts
Department of History, University of Warwick

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Joanne Bailey’s assertion that records of marriage breakdown can tell us as much about attitudes towards functioning as about dysfunctional relationships in the
long eighteenth century is proven by the wide range of issues that she uncovers in this important new book. We learn about patterns of work, the household economy and consumption, child-care, domestic service, changing attitudes to adultery and marital violence, and how women and men continued their lives after marriage breakdown. Thus there is much within this book that will interest historians of the eighteenth-century economy, family and gender relations, as well as those researching marital separation and divorce. Bailey’s findings are based on evidence from some 1,400 marriages from the period 1660–1800 that were documented in marital disputes heard in the church and quarter sessions courts, and in provincial newspapers where husbands announced their failed marriages so that they could avoid their wives’ debts. The use of this latter type of source is particularly novel, as is her focus on church courts from northern England. Previous work on marriage and gender has tended to draw overwhelmingly from the London courts, and has overemphasized the uniqueness of the patterns found there. Bailey’s work redresses the balance, and shows how London women and men shared national understandings, standards and expectations of marriage. In her reading of the records of the church courts, Bailey also demonstrates the crucial importance of examining the complaints of plaintiffs and defendants in their entirety. She argues that historians have been too ready to draw conclusions from the ‘primary’ complaints of parties, which were accusations of adultery and/or cruelty, and were the formal legal grounds by which marriage separation could be achieved, to the neglect of their ‘secondary’ complaints. Secondary complaints were used to support allegations of adultery and cruelty, but outlined a wider range of grievances, sometimes at greater length than primary complaints. They gave the context to marriage breakdown, and provide the rich detail about married life that is so useful to social and gender historians.

Pursuing this new methodology allows Bailey to reach fresh conclusions about marriage in this period. Two of her findings are particularly worthy of comment. First, Bailey stresses the co-dependency of wives and husbands in marriage. This was not just emotional, but also material. As she first demonstrated in an article published in this journal (vol. 17, part 3, 2002), married women’s economic contribution to marriage, through their portions and subsequent paid and unpaid labour, gave them a measure of authority and a sense of entitlement that allowed them to negotiate their relationships with their husbands. This also had an impact on men and contemporary understandings of masculinity. While men’s dominance over women may have had legal and institutional support, husbands were still vulnerable to their wives because of their reliance upon their wives’ economic decisions and management. As the period progressed towards industrialization, the changing nature of the economy and working patterns were less important to marital relations, Bailey argues, than the continued reliance of husbands upon their wives for their credit. This had profound effects upon how women and men approached marriage, and how they managed their married lives. It also determined the fate of those whose marriages broke down, the second of her main findings. Until Bailey’s book, we knew remarkably little about the features of life for individuals whose marriages had ended through separation,
desertion or divorce. Once a separation decree was granted the records tend to fall silent, unless there was subsequent disagreement about the payment of alimony. But by mainly drawing upon the records of the poor law, Bailey is able to reconstruct a picture of the accommodation and working arrangements for those women and men who were no longer in stable marriages. Her theory of the positive benefits of economic co-dependency in marriage is supported by the finding that it was once individuals lived apart from their spouses that they became more likely to find themselves recipients of poor relief. Most of Bailey’s work on this topic is based on wives who were deserted by their husbands, and clearly more work needs to be done to piece together the lives of those who separated or divorced. Perhaps mistakenly, however, Bailey assumes that the post-marriage experiences of men and women can be compared and were similar to those of other lone individuals in this period, notably those who never married and the widowed. While addressing the economic consequences of marriage breakdown, this neglects the social stigma that was attached to couples whose marriages had ended, especially when they were so outnumbered by couples who remained together. Marital conflict was not unusual, but irretrievable marriage breakdown marked the couples it affected as exceptional.

ELIZABETH FOYSTER
Clare College, University of Cambridge

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N. Schindler, Rebellion, community and custom in early modern Germany, translated by Pamela E. Selwyn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.) Pages xiv+311. £55.00. (First published in German as Widerspenstige Leute. Studien zur Volkskultur in der frühen Neuzeit (Fischer Tashenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1992).)

This book contains six essays written by Norbert Schindler in the 1980s, when he and other young German scholars were trying to re-invigorate the study of popular culture (Volkskultur) in Germany, an endeavour fraught with particular difficulties given the propaganda purposes to which the Nazis had put the concept of a unified ‘Volk’ and its supposedly homogeneous culture. This concept was rooted in what Schindler describes critically as ‘folklore ideologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ that ‘located the essence of cultural phenomena in some notion of allegedly primeval metaphysical roots’, thus rendering them ahistorical (pp. 2–3). Schindler sidesteps these pitfalls by approaching the culture of the lower classes in early modern Germany not as a unified system of beliefs, but as a set of practices (including rituals, gestures, naming strategies and bodily movements) that could vary in meaning according to the context and participants, but that could also change over time. Popular culture could thus be historicized. Like E. P. Thompson (a huge influence on him), Schindler also sees culture as a product of social interaction and as a site of negotiation and conflict.
between people of different socio-economic status and religious allegiance. Popular culture could thus also be politicized, not in the reductive manner employed by the Nazis but by analysing the ways in which power was exercised and resisted through cultural practices in the early modern period.

The six essays that make up the volume constitute vivid micro-histories in their own right, but share common concerns and exemplify Schindler’s approach to popular culture in instructive ways. In “Marriage-weariness” and compulsory matrimony: the popular punishments of pulling the plough and the block’, Schindler shows that a custom in which a group of village lads brought a tree trunk into a village and auctioned it off to fund a village feast was not an old woodcutter’s custom (as a folklorist of the Alpine region erroneously claimed in the twentieth century), but the remnants of an early modern Shrovetide ritual, in which young men of marriageable age forced groups of young single women to pull either a plough or a heavy block of wood through the streets of their town or village. This was a ‘punishment’ meted out to women who were apparently reluctant to marry by the young men most affected by this reluctance. However, while Schindler notes the patriarchal and potentially humiliating nature of the ritual, he is careful to note that the women involved also exercised some power: by explaining why they were still single, individual women could voice criticisms of men’s behaviour within marriage, while a group of women who made a good job of pulling the block or plough gained the respect of onlookers. That the ritual may have been part of a wider set of courtship rituals is also suggested by the fact that the women involved were treated to a feast financed in rural areas by the proceeds from the sale of the block they had just pulled.

Schindler explores further the meanings of carnival rituals in the context of the everyday lives of the lower orders in ‘Carnival, church and the world turned upside-down: on the function of the culture of laughter in the sixteenth century’. For example, he argues that the importance of the figure of the bear in Shrovetide symbolism was due not to the fact that it worked well as an allegory of vice, drawn from a medieval clerical bestiary tradition, but rather because it symbolized especially effectively the contradictions between wilderness and civilization for early modern Germans. Carnival was such an important festival for them precisely because it made visible all the ‘pairs of opposites between whose poles everyday experience takes place’ (p. 106). In addition to wilderness and civilization these included poor and rich, male and female, young and old, and so on. Schindler argues convincingly that the ‘carnivalesque delight in inversion revealed itself everywhere, in spectacular conflicts as well as in everyday interactions’ (p. 126), and gives several examples from the early Reformation in which Protestant journeymen used the inversionary license of carnival to stage anti-Catholic mock processions at Shrovetide. This use of mockery as a means of challenging the established order is the starting point for Schindler’s idea that laughter was an important way in which the lower orders could, throughout the rest of the year as well, resist the official world by robbing it of its dignity. The sharply observant character of popular joking is explored further in ‘The world of nicknames: on the logic of popular nomenclature’, in which Schindler shows that, while nicknames
fulfilled important informative and identifying functions, they also often tested, gently or savagely. That the Nuremberg Reformer Andreas Osiander, for example, whose surname had been Hosemann (‘Trouserman’) before he had Latinized it, was known as Trouser Andy (Hosen-Änderla) in the city was surely tantamount to calling him pompous.

Despite his primary interest in popular culture, Schindler is also interested in the ways in which nobles participated in the practices of popular culture in order to articulate their own power over the lower orders. He suggests that the cultures of the upper and lower classes still shared many elements in the sixteenth century, so that the aristocratic populism of this century was ‘the continuation of the practice of domination by other, playful means’ (p. 226). The noble tactic of playing the commons at their own games is explored in ‘Nocturnal disturbances: on the social history of the night in the early modern period’, in which Schindler shows that the night-time streets of German towns were the province of brawling, noisy unmarried male youths who enjoyed the freedom of the streets as an alternative to the tavern. The nocturnal disturbance that forms the main focus of this chapter did not involve lower-class youths, however, but twenty-year-old Count Froben Christoph von Zimmern and his retinue who, on a winter night in 1540, led the bailiff of Messkirck and his assistants a merry dance round the streets of the town before finally being run to ground in a house where they had taken refuge. Two aspects of the incident stand out for Schindler. The first was that the young Count had acted at the request of Count Gottfried Werner von Zimmern, his uncle and the lord of Messkirch, who instigated the disturbance to test out the mettle of his nephew and the abilities of the town’s officials to deal with disorder. The second significant aspect was the bad feeling the episode doubtless created amongst the citizens of Messkirch, who had been duped into thinking that they were under attack and who could not even punish the tricksters because of their noble status. Here Schindler shows that von Zimmern’s attempt to teach the townspeople a ‘playful’ lesson in noble rule may have backfired because it depended too greatly on popular humiliation and noble privilege for its success. The risk of such personal displays of power backfiring in the aftermath of the German Peasants’ War, Schindler suggests, was one of the factors contributing to the withdrawal of the higher nobility to court society, ‘where, shielded from the vulgar public, they could perform their theatre of refined self-representation in peace’ (p. 234).

That the exercise of noble power came to depend on spatial distance from the lower orders rather than on ‘stage-managed’ social encounters with them (an idea firmly rooted in Norbert Elias’s theory of the civilizing process) is one of the key narratives of long-term change within which all of Schindler’s micro-studies are situated, either implicitly or explicitly. Another is the effort of the Counter-Reformation Church to abolish or change popular rituals it interpreted as immoral or as evidence of a disturbing blurring of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, or to offer the lower orders more acceptable religious rituals in their stead. Schindler is aware of the patchy and limited successes of the Church in this endeavour and of the lower orders’ capacity for undermining clerical efforts: nocturnal Good Friday processions, introduced in many Catholic areas
in the seventeenth century as a means of colonizing the night with new, pious practices, for example, had to be moved to daylight hours in the eighteenth century because the pranks engaged in by some members of the public under cover of darkness threatened to reduce the solemn processions to the level of farce. Despite such caveats, however, Schindler is generally of the opinion that a new message of moral asceticism, preached by humanists and then the Reformed and Counter-Reformation establishment (or ‘educated proto-bourgeois elite’, as he calls them on p. 143) began to challenge the ‘boisterous culture of laughter’ and the ‘body-centred way of life’ shared between aristocratic and popular culture (p. 141). The third narrative of long-term change framing Schindler’s case-studies is that of the emergence of the absolutist state, with its politics of social order. This is discussed in ‘The origins of heartlessness: the culture and way of life of beggars in late seventeenth-century Salzburg’. In this chapter Schindler focuses on the Zaubererjacckl witch trials from the Catholic arch-diocese of Salzburg (1675–1690), during which around 200 people were executed. A significant proportion of them were young, male beggars who were feared capable of working sorcery as a rite of revenge against householders who rejected their pleas for alms. Schindler reads the trial records ‘against the grain’ in order to reconstruct something of the lives and culture of these beggar youngsters. He also suggests that the willingness of the Salzburg judicial authorities to prosecute them as witches was one aspect of the state’s ongoing process of the social marginalization and control of beggars (which would culminate in the spread of workhouses in the eighteenth century), and of the state’s ongoing attempt to deepen the chasm between the settled and itinerant segments of the population in its own interests.

Some readers may find the ways in which Schindler fits his case-studies into broader narratives of change too neat and schematic: to suggest that the association of beggar culture with sorcery was ‘a political strategy adopted by the state authorities’, for example, surely pushes the evidence too far, as well as doing the genuine fears of witchcraft of peasant accusers a disservice. This is, however, a minor quibble with a book packed with such dense detail, such a vivid evocation of early modern German life and such a plethora of inspiring ideas that it should be read and re-read by all social and cultural historians of early modern Europe. In pursuing his analysis of popular culture Schindler also offers ideas on how to write histories of laughter; of paternalism; of almsgiving; of the body; and of the night that demonstrate how fruitless it is to try to separate the cultural from the social and political in history. In an otherwise excellent translation from the German the only disappointing thing about the book is the English title: Schindler’s focus is on those forms of popular resistance to hegemony that stop short of ‘rebellion’ but that problematize an easy notion of an homogeneous early modern ‘community’, while the complete omission of ‘popular culture’ is strange, given the seminal contribution made by the book to the historiography of popular culture in Germany in the 1990s.

ALISON ROWLANDS
Department of History, University of Essex
Early modern Rothenburg ob der Tauber was a typical, middling-sized, Lutheran Imperial city in the south-west of Germany with a large hinterland of villages. By 1648, 70 per cent of the villagers had perished. The Thirty Years’ War had put the region under severe strain for decades. ‘Cunning’ men and women were still in charge of managing many of the illnesses and misfortunes that befell people, their infants and livestock. Everybody believed that witches practised black magic and lived among them. Rothenburg, like any other Imperial City, was proud of its councils’ sole authority to decide who was to be punished for crime, and employed a full-time executioner. In fact, Rothenburg nowadays is known mainly for its pretty, early modern houses and its museum of crime, which displays torturing tools, executioners’ swords and other implements of a pre-Beccarian age.

Given all these circumstances, we might well expect that Rothenburg’s hangman had a busy time collecting firewood to burn witches, as in other nearby Franconian places, where thousands of women lost their lives in witch-panics; one community even complained that not enough wood was left for their everyday needs. But nothing of the sort happened. A mere 41 men and women were accused over nearly a hundred years, between 1561 and 1652. Only one of them was executed.

Alison Rowlands’ excellent and exceedingly clearly argued study is the first monograph to explain such a pattern of restraint from prosecutions within an urban context. Wolfgang Behringer’s study of witchcraft in Bavaria, in particular, has shown how discussions in the ducal council were permanently divided between those arguing for restraint and those arguing for persecution. Which side gained more influence depended just on how many hailstorms there had been in one year, or on whether the roof of a newly built Catholic church in Munich had been taken off – that is, on whether matters got so bad that the sheer possibility that witches might have caused them convinced most council members and the duke himself to favour punishment as a rule. Then again, for long periods of time hardly any witches would be executed. Lyndal Roper’s work on witches in the large city of Augsburg likewise has shown that its council was extremely reluctant to question alleged witches. It punished a string of them during a brief period after the Thirty Year’s War, each of whom tapped into the same fear that live-in maids might kill infants, an anxiety which for complex reasons had become overpowering. In most of Germany, at most times, reticence was the norm. In fact, in Rothenburg, after the disasters of the Thirty Years’ War, parts of the population accused the council of timidity, and it did show greater severity in questioning two accused women. But the lay judges only became less certain about how to sentence them, and finally returned to a policy of acquittals. One of the women, a defiant 60-year-old peasant who was married and had two children, was asked to prove that she had not caused swarms of fleas and used salves to kill people. Amazingly,
she then claimed that an angel had visited her in prison and told her in verse, ‘If my lords do not reach their verdict justly, / They will loose their imperial law. / If my lords do not want to run a good council, / He [the Emperor] will set a new council in their place.’ This demonstrates powerfully that Germans at every level of society understood that they could appeal to the Imperial Chamber Court if they believed they were being treated unjustly, and that the larger political and specialist legal framework of the Empire could protect them from local authorities, whom they knew, after all, were made up of ordinary ‘hometown’ elites, who were rarely legally trained. The peasant woman certainly did not behave like an obedient Lutheran housewife, and the council was advised that the angel had been the devil in disguise, but she was freed. The council’s answer to how such a woman could talk about the legal structure of the Empire was precisely this: the devil was the arch deceiver. He played his tricks on women and children, in particular, and deluded them into spiritual crime. Sixteenth-century children who admitted their sins to the council were sent to the hospital and pitied. Even more importantly, legal advice during the seventeenth century confirmed that it was better to free a hundred guilty individuals than to execute one person innocently. God would know who was truly guilty; witchcraft was simply too difficult to prove. Accusations would lead to further accusations. Rothenburg’s councillors for generations preferred not to support enmity of this kind in order to preserve stability.

ULINKA RUBLACK

Faculty of History, Cambridge University

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Lisa Bitel has written a polemical book, in which she criticizes historians for failing to see early medieval history from women’s perspectives. She is quite right to take this view and I, who have published essays making similar points, support her attempts to change the status quo. However, as someone who has researched and taught in this area for twenty years I found the execution of the book so flawed that I cannot recommend it to the students at whom such a Cambridge Medieval Textbook is aimed. The problems start right at the beginning. Bitel’s florid prose is extremely hard to follow. For example, what is one to make of the following?

They [i.e. the women described in the book] were all born of men’s expectations and men’s pens rather than of women; even those among them who were verifiably real took on fictional aspects in the documents. I may seem to use them as typical but you, the reader, must never forget that they are merely emissaries from the past: they speak in diplomatic voices that are not necessarily their own. Their native tongues and customs are far more exotic than first impressions suggest. (pp. 8–9).

Why not question the reliability of the evidence in simple language? Women wrote few texts at this time and when they wrote they did so under enormous constraints
which men placed upon them. It is a perfectly fair point but it seems in conflict with one made on p. 12: ‘This book is not just a history of women, but a history of the early European Middle Ages through the eyes of women.’ How, if these women do not ‘speak’ in their own voices? There are many similar inconsistencies elsewhere which needed to be removed by a good editor.

A more serious problem is Bitel’s cavalier use of evidence and tendency towards inaccuracy. This is frequent in the opening chapter which begins thus: ‘The physical world of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries was the same, with minor climatic variation, for all the inhabitants of Europe’ (p. 13). This statement surely flies in the face both of common sense and of years of work by specialist scholars, especially archaeologists, who have demonstrated the importance of local variations between what were, by common consent, small-scale societies. Mistakes follow one after the other. Bitel’s grasp of geography is poor. Piemonte may be north of Rome but it’s not south of the Po: the river skirts the eastern edge of the region (p. 15). She quotes as fact very old population figures (those of Josiah Cox Russell) which are estimates made in the 1970s (p. 14). Similarly, figures for life expectancy (p. 23) are those of David Herlihy (c. 1975) rather than more recent archaeologically-derived ones. Were roads really the greatest accomplishment of the Roman Empire (p. 16)? Throughout this chapter Bitel repeatedly advances the idea that forests were places which contemporaries feared, a view comprehensively demolished by Chris Wickham in a famous essay first published in 1989 but not cited here.

Bitel’s reliance on hagiographical evidence when sketching her picture of early medieval landscapes is surely misguided. She takes little account of the formulaic nature of these texts, perhaps at their most formulaic when dealing with the physical world. Surely a thorough discussion of the copious archaeological evidence – which certainly includes women – would have been much more useful? The reliance placed in this chapter upon the vita of Genovefa is surely unwise given the disagreements among specialists regarding the authenticity of its various versions. Readers are not made aware of these controversies. And did Genovefa really ‘roam’ Gaul (p. 32)? Chapter Two is equally eccentric. It’s not true that Paul the Deacon was the only ‘barbarian’ historian to ‘use women as a tool for defining ethnic identity’ (p. 52). The sources he used did so too (notably the Origo gentis langobardorum). The view that ‘what these historians produced was fiction’ (p. 56) may faithfully reflect the ideas of Walter Goffart who is cited, but what about those many historians who have criticized him, who are not cited? A few pages further on (p. 64) Bitel dismisses archaeological work which sexes burials by relying on gendered artefacts. While it is certainly right to be skeptical of such practices, it’s not fair to criticize Guy Halsall in this respect as he goes out of his way in the article cited (in note 39) to prioritize evidence from bones when linked to artefacts in order to sex graves, rather than to use artefacts alone.

The rest of this book is equally flawed, but there is not space here to go through everything in the necessary detail. As I read into the book, it improved a little. Bitel is undoubtedly right that the ‘origins of our gender system lie in the earliest Middle Ages’ (p. 295) and her desire to write European history from women’s
perspectives is wholly laudable. However, in my view, this book is very dis-
appointing as a work of scholarship and as an introductory ‘textbook’ dealing
with a complex and much-debated period.

ROSS BAZARETTI
School of History, University of Nottingham

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John Demos, Circles and lines: the shape of life in early America. (London and

In Circles and lines John Demos examines the mindset and mentality of early
Americans from first settlement to the early nineteenth century. The work, which
is the publication of the three William E. Massey Sr. Lectures delivered by Demos
at Harvard in 2002, examines how Americans’ perceptions of themselves and
the world around them changed fundamentally in the two centuries following the
founding of the colonies.

In this work Demos investigates some basic concepts of early American life, the
‘circles’ of the title. He stresses that in the seventeenth century life was shaped by
‘Nature’ and was cyclical (or circular) in nature. So basic were these cycles to life
that few people felt the need to comment on them. This began with the very cycle
of day or night, when the world of colonial Americans changed from the broader
community in daylight to the narrow confines of the family at night. It continued
through the cycle of the seasons which shaped many aspects of life, not only for
those who worked in agriculture but also the changing number of daylight hours
shaping the work-lives of artisans. Finally, it was echoed in the concept of the cycle
of life, with no clearly defined childhood or old age and certainly no middle-age.
Because life was viewed as cyclical, diaries and accounts of the colonists’ lives
provide at best only a very limited record of their lives: the same events were
expected to occur again and again, and diarists were interested only in recording
extraordinary forces from eclipses to epidemics, events outside nature – the super-
natural. This view, Demos argues, also prevented early American colonists from
fully appreciating the extent to which they were creating a new society: ‘there was
an element of “denial” in the way they carried on’ (p. 29).

This view was challenged by the American Revolution. The concept of revolution
was initially viewed as a return to a traditional pattern – a complete revolution of
the cycle. This view, Demos argues, was reflected in early American Republican-
ism, which was fundamentally cyclical (accepting the classical cycle of anarchy,
monarchy, tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy, returning to anarchy).
By the early nineteenth century, Americans had a new view of life in which self-
improvement and striving for the new were central. Ambition was now viewed as a
positive trait and new terms emerged, such as ‘career’. These changes were in turn
shaped by urban growth and technological innovation. Most importantly, they
reflected a new linear configuration of life, a steady progress from cradle to death,
with clearly defined stages of childhood, youth, middle age and old age. This was defined by a clear self-consciousness and self-absorption and was reflected, in turn, in an ideological shift to what Demos defines as ‘Liberalism’, which was fundamentally linear with an emphasis on progress. 

_Circles and lines_ crosses many boundaries between social, intellectual and cultural history to present a cogent and compelling picture of Americans’ changing world-view from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. That Demos is able to do this in just 80 pages of text and in a highly readable work is a testament to the author’s skill. However, unfortunately, as Demos himself confesses, there are limitations to this work. Restricted to three chapters – the three original lectures – the discussion pays little attention to the mindsets of women, the poor or African-Americans. In addition, while Demos illustrates his comments with numerous examples, the majority of these are taken from New England and there is little material from the other British North American colonies, and no mention at all of the Caribbean and Atlantic island colonies. This is all the more frustrating because many of the comments apply not only to North America but also to other parts of the British Atlantic empire and even to early modern Europe. Consequently, it is not clear how far the transitions that Demos identifies are changes only in the New England mind rather than in the early American mind.

_Circles and lines_ deals with fundamental issues of early American life and mindset, and Demos successfully demonstrates the ways in which seventeenth-century concepts of life were alien from today’s. In itself, this makes the work a worthy achievement. While severely limited by its length and scope, this is still a challenging and innovative approach to early American social and intellectual history and serves to focus attention on many of these new ideas. It is certainly an important introduction to the topic, and it is to be hoped that many of the challenges and issues raised by Demos will be taken up in other works.

MATTHEW C. WARD
Department of History, University of Dundee