Records of crime are one of the richest sources available to historians of early modern England, not simply because of the light they shed on the patterns and processes of prosecution, but because of the wealth of incidental detail they contain. They have proved particularly valuable to scholars seeking to reconstruct history 'from below', not least in recent approaches to the state from the bottom up. In this book Malcolm Gaskill probes such records even further in search of a history 'from within'. He is less interested in reconstructing the deeds of relatively humble social actors than the more elusive thoughts which informed them, in order to produce 'a history of social meanings' or 'the way ordinary folk thought about their everyday lives' (p. 4). While administrative records (particularly assizes depositions) are privileged as most revealing of such mentalities, Gaskill places them alongside a wealth of other printed and manuscript material illustrative of both normative and impressionistic opinion. This extensive range of evidence is handled with considerable nuance, drawing on the approaches of the annales school, 'new' social history, and historical anthropology to show that early modern mentalities were more complex and contingent than has often been allowed by different master narratives. Issues of change are not sidelined, however, and the central argument of the book is that the early modern period witnessed a fundamental transition from mental worlds governed by belief in transcendent supernatural forces to a new sense of certainty about human agency.

Gaskill focuses on three felonies – witchcraft, coining, and murder – and has new things to say about each. Rejecting previous generalizations about patterns of witchcraft prosecution, he argues that the differences between cases are more striking than their similarities. Each case was context-dependent and usually revolved around some sort of competition for resources. The only overriding theme admitted, therefore, is that of interpersonal strife, which rekindles a view of late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century English society as characterized by 'malice, jealousy, and bitter conflicts of interest' (p. 66). Even gender is treated as an incidental rather than integral part of witchcraft prosecutions, although given the disproportionate numbers of women involved and an emphasis on the contextual importance of the household, there was perhaps a missed opportunity here to shed further light on vexed issues such as the gendered use of space, the perceived sources of women’s power and the ways in which it was circumscribed.

In detailing the broad spectrum of meanings attached to witchcraft, Gaskill scrupulously avoids plotting particular beliefs against standard axes of difference. Thus he emphasizes both the potential for overlap in the assumptions of accusers and the accused, and the inadequacy of explanatory models based on diverging elite and popular opinion. While acknowledging the emergence of deepening cultural fissures
from the later seventeenth century, Gaskill stresses that the decline of witchcraft as a crime was not a matter of elite withdrawal from unchanging popular opinion, but a major process of reinvention in which all social groups were variously involved. Thus witchcraft remained as a potent idea, if not a regularly prosecuted crime, open to deployment in relation to a growing, rather than shrinking, variety of agendas.

The crimes of coining and murder carry less historiographical baggage, and as a result they offer greater scope for exploring new ground. Coining, perhaps more than any other offence, exacerbated the tensions inherent in a voluntary system of law enforcement which relied on at least a degree of mutual agreement between rulers and the ruled about what constituted a crime. Largely viewed as a harmless by-employment by the majority of the population, coining was none the less taken very seriously by the authorities – a view which they ultimately succeeded in cultivating more widely by the end of the seventeenth century. Tentative steps towards state professionalization (with the increased powers of the Mint to pursue coiners) drew people more directly towards the centre of state bureaucracy and, harnessing concerns about national security and the shortage of coin, extended the horizons of ordinary people beyond the parish towards a sense of the expanding domestic economy and the threat coiners posed to it.

That murder constituted a crime, on the other hand, was undisputed. However, interpretations of what constituted proper evidence of guilt shifted dramatically over the course of the early modern period, particularly in the context of the courts. Appeals to the role of divine providence in exposing the guilty party, rooted in a consensus of local opinion, were gradually replaced by demands for higher evidential standards and forensic proof, with popular testimony increasingly marginalized as priority was given to medico-legal criteria.

Such changes were representative of far broader shifts propelled by secularization, professionalization, and an expanding state. Mental worlds shaped by faith, custom, rumour, and collective feeling were gradually overtaken by value systems emphasizing empirical certainty and the efficacy of human intervention as represented by agents of the state and the law, increasingly removed from the community. These are major changes indeed. There is an occasional tension, however, between this narrative of dramatic change and Gaskill’s painstaking emphasis on multiplicity, contingency, and the unique specificity of the many cases he documents. None the less the book is a pioneering monument to the complexity of early modern mental worlds and the profound shifts they underwent.
concludes that ‘the most ubiquitous and therefore perhaps the most significant politics in early modern England were the politics of the parish, and especially those of the poor rate’ (p. 237). Viewing the state from the bottom up allows Hindle both to reinterpret state formation, and to invert some cherished hierarchies within traditional political history.

Leading agency in the growth of governance within early modern society is accorded not to monarchs, ministers, legislators, or privy councillors, but to parish governors – the ‘middling sort of people’, as Hindle terms them. The book commences with two sharp historiographical chapters. Four succeeding chapters reassess outstanding themes: increasing litigation at central courts; the role of legally minded village governors in stimulating a ‘civilising process’; the increase of business at criminal courts; changes in policy towards poverty, dearth, and vagrancy. The final two chapters deal with governors’ attempts to reform popular ‘manners’, and with the institutional forms and socio-politics of parish government. A vast secondary literature, supported by archival case-studies, is synthesized into an argument which advances three central propositions: that state formation developed from the creative interaction of national elites and village governors; that Hindle’s ‘middling sort’ formed the key collective actor in this process; and that this ‘middling sort’ enjoyed significant local autonomy within the resultant state structures (p. 25).

Since this ‘middling sort’ occupies such a central place in the book, this review will focus upon Hindle’s treatment of that social fraction. Social historians have long accepted that the early modern period saw local power increasingly monopolized by wealthier villagers. Some sensitive passages in this book assess the relationship between changing state structures and the increasingly harsh language used by village rulers in description of their poorer neighbours. But Hindle simplifies the social identities of those village rulers, homogenizing them into a uniform ‘middling sort’ (p. 228). Despite recognizing the diversity of contemporary social classifications, Hindle’s discussion attributes to his ‘middling sort’ a self-conscious homogeneity and a coherent ‘political culture’ (pp. ix, 104, 203, 225). This ‘political culture’ was given institutional focus in the select parish vestry, whose members aspired to dominate village life: ‘First and foremost, vestry authority was an expression of politics, understood here as the pursuit, maintenance and control of power’ (p. 205).

A further problem, given Hindle’s strong rural bias, lies in the metropolitan origins of parish vestries and of the phrase ‘middling sort’, and in his assumption that select vestries subsequently proliferated across rural England (p. 209). Hindle goes some way to providing a history of the vestry, but his evidence is too piecemeal, and too uninterested in the urban context, to be fully persuasive. None the less, some massive conclusions are drawn: it is argued that ‘in some sense the vestry itself had become a “parochial public sphere” … These habits of association and service prefigured wider, later, cultural developments including the emergence of a “bourgeois public sphere”’.

Finally, ‘These developments represent the birth pangs of a participatory democracy in which the middling sort came to exercise a degree of political choice’ (pp. 115, 229, 235, 226).

Hindle assumes that the multiplicity of pre-civil war descriptions of parish governors – the ‘chief inhabitants’; the ‘wealthier sort’; the ‘honest and credible persons’ – were both contemporary to and synonymous with the term ‘middling sort’ (p. 49). Yet, although his index provides some twenty-seven references to the ‘middling sort’, he cites only one contemporary use of the phrase, dated 1635. Hindle is not alone
in this: despite protracted searches, other historians have found scarcely any use of the term prior to the English Revolution. This absence suggests that the social identities of pre-war village rulers were more varied, more fragile, and more locally specific than Hindle implies. Viewed from the village perspective, the ‘chief inhabitants’ were ‘great governors’ (p. 204). In contrast, the ‘middling sort’ label presumed not only a tripartite social division, but also a larger spatial context, in which the ‘middling sort’ were positioned beneath the gentry and nobility. Use of the label proliferated during the English Revolution, as parliamentarian propagandists reached for a term which distinguished them from the ‘vulgar commons’, but which also implied a valuable hint of populism. Thereafter, the phrase was to catch on as a descriptor for the prosperous classes of Augustan England. Thus, while the embryo of the ‘middling sort’ might be faintly detected within pre-civil war parish politics, its birth as a political identity occurred during the English Revolution.

This intelligent, sophisticated, polemical book demands to be argued with. In an age in which younger historians in the United Kingdom, driven by the productivist priorities of the Research Assessment Exercise, are pushed to publish too early, resulting in the mass production of insufficiently considered narrow case studies, it is good to read a first book which courageously advances a broad, controversial thesis. Hindle’s energetic and ambitious book deserves to be read not only as a significant study of state formation, but as a forceful contribution to the new social history of politics in early modern England.