

Ralph Houlbrooke, *Love and Dishonour in Elizabethan England. Two Families and a Failed Marriage*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2018, pp. xx + 272, £50.00, ISBN: 978-1-78327-240-2.

When the clandestine marriage between Charles Forth and Elizabeth Jerningham took place in around 1581–2, two unhappy families collided, engendering still greater unhappiness for all concerned. But Ralph Houlbrooke's latest book does more than serve literary cliché, and the families' misfortune is our felicity. *Love and Dishonour in Elizabethan England* is an exercise in mastery. It contains a world of understanding about early modern family life and combines razor-sharp analysis with exemplary archival research and a richly-textured narrative.

Production quality is high, with minimal copy-editing errors, and the reader benefits from a full scholarly apparatus, including footnotes, a bibliography, an index, a map, two genealogical tables, and nine black-and-white plates. A table of witnesses who appear for Robert Forth on 6 April 1595, giving details of their relationship to him, residence, status, and age (p. 191), is particularly illuminating. Readers should note that the list of archival sources runs to some four pages. The book is divided into three parts, with eight chapters in total. Six of these are dedicated to the work's heartland: telling the story, disentangling the individuals, and exploring what happened, to whom, and why. The final two complete the story and offer conclusions and avenues for future research.

The Catholic Jerningham family and their recent strife are the subjects of chapters one and two. The Jerninghams, headed by Elizabeth's father, John (d. 1598), had seen a downturn in fortunes compounded by John's involvement in a conspiracy against Protestant refugees from the Netherlands, emboldened by the Northern Rebellion, in 1570. We meet the Forths in chapter three, and learn of their early associations with evangelicals, in sharp contrast to the Jerninghams. This unpicking of the early careers of older generations within the two families is characteristic of Houlbrooke's forensic approach, and the reader feels at times as though they are with him in the archive. Not until we have grasped the respective families' character, experience, and present situation, are we rewarded with the marriage itself, and then with its collapse, in the later chapters. This is more than carefully-crafted suspense, because it is the family itself with which Houlbrooke is most concerned.

Part two begins with chapter four, on the marriage itself. Plausible connections between fragmentary evidence are made, supported by Houlbrooke's expertise. The financial aspects of the case are better documented. Elizabeth Forth's marriage portion of £300 is shown to have been the fulcrum of subsequent legislation. Her father-in-law Robert Forth's actions in relation to it were extremely unusual, and likely 'poisoned' marital relations (p. 133). Through the quotation of witness testimony,

Houlbrooke gives us a sense of the character of the marital relationship, and helps us to understand how it failed.

Chapter five charts marital breakdown with arresting acuity. We read that Charles Forth confided in his uncle Philologus that he suspected Elizabeth of adultery. Philologus Forth testified seven years after this conversation that his nephew had complained in ‘wordes or speches to the like effect’ of Elizabeth’s ‘treacherous dealinges’ with him, that ‘she have [sic.] refused [his] company’ while he had ‘adventured the losse of [his] frindes’ (p. 146). Houlbrooke is content, perhaps overly so, to take Philologus Forth’s testimony at face value after a seven-year interval during which the failure of the marriage had preceded Charles Forth’s death. Houlbrooke takes opportunities for contextualisation where his material presents them. Readers unfamiliar with naming practices (to take one example) will find useful explanations with further reading offered in the footnotes. But letting the story take centre stage means adopting a very light touch indeed with historiography. Other than short segues into key historiographical themes—kinship, the history of the emotions, Catholicism—there is little in the way of historical debate in the work. This need not be a criticism. There are several points at which the marriage and its unravelling brings the families into contact with prominent figures. We move between courts and Court, when Lords Cobham and Buckhurst of the Privy Council—the former being Elizabeth’s maternal uncle and the latter a Forth patron—intervene to mediate between the parties in 1591. It is against the backdrop of the first Armada crisis that Elizabeth leaves the marital home to stay with her mother during her first pregnancy in 1588, and Houlbrooke is right to lean on this as a polarising factor between the confessionally-opposed families.

Familiar hallmarks of English Catholic life come into view in the final three chapters. In chapter six, on the case in the Court of Requests, Elizabeth’s brother-in-law and fellow litigant, Henry Jerningham, was a complicating factor. His sons George and Edward had been stopped en route to Louvain, betraying their father’s ‘clear commitment to a renewed English Catholicism re-invigorated with help from abroad’ (p. 174). The attorney general, Sir Thomas Egerton, and the solicitor general, Sir Edward Coke, put the brothers’ education into the hands of none other than Lords Cobham and Buckhurst, who, ‘little more than a year previously had attempted to settle the Forths’ matrimonial dispute’ (p. 175). In chapter seven, which charts the aftermath of the case, we learn of later and more notorious Catholic ties. Elizabeth Forth’s widowed mother Katherine Jerningham married Richard Bellamy, whose family had sheltered Edmund Campion and succoured the Babington conspirators, the latter episode resulting in the execution of Richard’s brother. Richard himself had harboured Robert Southwell. In chapter eight, reassuringly titled ‘conclusions, reflections, and speculations’, Houlbrooke called the Cobhams and the Jerninghams ‘one example of the multitudinous ties of

kinship that linked Protestants and Catholics in Elizabethan England’ (p. 237). He drew attention to Henry Jerningham as an illustration of the ‘highly uneven impact of the ostensibly draconian legislation of Elizabeth I’s later years against English Catholics’ (p. 237). Jerningham was neither imprisoned nor fined for his recusancy, though we may question whether the temporary loss of his sons to Lords Buckhurst and Cobham was as trifling as these concluding comments suggest.

The work is best summarised in Houlbrooke’s own words, as a ‘fascinating case study in the micro-politics of family, gender, and religion’ (p. 231). It teaches us about female agency and limited patriarchal power, about the minutiae of litigation, and about how the godly and the ungodly lived alongside each other. Houlbrooke’s characters are not caricatures, but complicated individuals who make mistakes and act inconsistently, and this is of greater value than a series of artificial models.

This is not a book that places itself self-consciously within the field of English Catholic history, but it has much to teach those working within it—as well as those who wish to know more about religious and social history more generally. Nor is this a book ostensibly about Catholicism, but it *is* about Catholics, and in treating English Catholics as a natural part of English society, Houlbrooke does readers within and without the field a great service. The book constitutes a gentle invitation to place Catholics firmly within mainstream English historiography.

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