
Conference Report

Paths to Marriage: Courtship in England and Wales, *c.* 1700–*c.* 1945*

Local Population Studies Society Autumn Conference 2019

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The Local Population Studies Society Autumn Conference took place on 26 October 2019 in the familiar surroundings of Rewley House at the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education. It was attended by both members, non-members and students. We were particularly pleased to welcome four students attending for the first time and sponsored by the May Pickles Fund. The conference was entitled ‘Paths to Marriage: Courtship in England and Wales, *c.* 1700–*c.* 1945’ and delegates enjoyed seven papers which explored marriage and courtship practices in England and Wales from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries.

Session 1

In the first session, Steven King (University of Leicester) delivered a fascinating paper entitled ‘The marriage done to her: regional cultures of courtship from the 1780s to early 1900s’. He focused on regional comparison of courtships amongst the ‘below middling’ people of England and Wales. He was interested in the construct of flirtation versus courtships, why courtships failed and in changes over time and space. Sources such as diaries (both manuscript and printed), autobiographies, letters, pauper stories, coronial court evidence, newspaper accounts and letters to editors can be analysed using linguistic software to isolate facts about courtship.

Power was exerted by both parents either to ensure that marriages succeeded or were prevented. Examples included fathers persuading daughters that marriage would unite families or warning sons against a disreputable female whose father had committed suicide.

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Some parents forced their children to marry within a certain religious ambit and there are records of young people committing suicide if they were refused by a partner. Courtships were fragile and could fail at any point. Shared experiences and equality were vital to success, as was approval from a partner's family. Physical interactions came out in the details: sex was important but love and affection played a variable role. One Gawthern took bets on whether various courtships would end. Many people engaged in multiple courtships, both sequential and simultaneous. In general, Welsh woman had less power than English women; but urban dwellers had no more freedom than their rural counterparts. The poor did not have much freedom, although the poor law payments could be a huge incentive to marriage.

Angela Muir (University of Leicester) then presented an absorbing paper on a similar topic, entitled 'Romantic pursuits? Courtship and coercion in eighteenth-century Wales'. She discussed the practice of bundling, by which young couples spent time 'bundled' in bed together with a board separating them, as a prelude to marriage. This was a dubious folk custom deriving from reports created by English travellers. Angela's objective was to review alternative practices in Wales and to analyse the dark area of assaults involving coercion. Sources included the Court of Great Sessions, depositions, examinations, and confessions giving details of everyday life.

During the long eighteenth century active courtship involved men visiting female homes after the family retired to bed: for example in 1820 Griffith Roberts of Anglesey, who had been drinking, entered the bedroom of servant woman Jane through the window. Courtship was dangerous for young women, as pregnancy or physical violence (or both) could ensue. In extreme cases, some courtships resulted in murder, Thomas Rees courted Elizabeth Jones for two years but, when she fell pregnant, he poisoned her. Cases of pursuit and entitlement demonstrate blurred lines between male desire and women's consent. Mary Rees was afraid of Josiah Hugh, who said he wanted her or he would 'finish her'. Josiah waited for Mary, beat her round the head and then strangled her. Forcible seduction was prevalent in the eighteenth century. In 1779 Margaret Francis went to collect milk, Thomas Phillip followed her over the river, forced her to the ground, strangled her into unconsciousness and raped her. Margaret was innocent, but Thomas was still not charged. In her conclusion, Muir challenged the perception of 'quaint customs' in Wales, courtship did take place at night in the home but also outside as was normal practice elsewhere. She also emphasised the need to establish a line between courtship and physical violence.

Session 2

In the second half of the morning session we enjoyed two papers with widely contrasting sample sizes and geography. Rachael Jones's paper 'Maria Russell and Syed Ameer Ali: an inter-racial relationship in Victorian London' looked at the friendship and courtship between a colonial suitor and a British citizen whereas Kevin Schürer's paper 'How far will some people go to marry? Courtship and distance in the early twentieth century' took a 'big

data' approach to examine the extent of endogamy in relation to place across England and Wales between 1851 and 1911.

Jones introduced us to her study of Maria Russell a well-connected and well-educated young woman living in the heart of liberal Bloomsbury in the 1870s. Maria was courted through letters and personal meetings by Syed Ameer Ali, a young Indian lawyer for whom she had translated books from German to English. Ali's letters to Maria have survived, although her replies and correspondence with him do not. Ali wrote repeatedly to Maria, urging her to write back; he put pressure on her to communicate with him and to learn Persian so that he might converse with her in his first language. Jones theorised that as Ali tried to control Maria he was rebuffed as his letters became more maudlin over time. That rejection was not based on either race or religion (Maria came from a traditional Anglican background) but because he tried to be too controlling of a woman who, unusually for the time, enjoyed some personal freedoms. Ali eventually returned to India on family business and Maria married Arthur Humphreys-Owen. Ali became a prominent and influential scholar on Muslim history and Islam who returned to England and became a member of the Privy Council. There is no evidence that he ever met Maria again and, despite his infatuation, his extensive memoirs make no mention of her.

In contrast, Schürer's paper did not look at named individuals but presented a macro-study of marital exogamy. This research is still at an early stage and Schürer hopes that by examining the extent to which couples married within or outside of their own locality the data will reveal something about identity and belonging and whether there was change over time. Using the census data from 1851 through to 1911 and a cohort of married couples who, at the time of census were under the age of 30 years, Schürer analysed where married couples were living in relation to where they were born. This created a data set of four million couples and captured 90 per cent of all the marriages in England and Wales.

Schürer's analysis showed that couples were much more likely to marry within their own nationality and that English men rarely married Scottish women, preferring English brides followed by Welsh and Irish partners. The data also showed limited migration patterns. In 1851, 60 per cent of couples were living in the parish or place where one of them had been born; this number had reduced to 40 per cent by 1911. However, the number of couples who were both born in the same place increased over time from 33 per cent in 1851 to 36 per cent in 1911, indicating high levels of intra-parish marriages even if the couple lived outside their place of birth. The pool of people available for endogenous marriages grew as place sizes expanded with urban growth and rural depopulation. Studies have shown that apprentices returned to their home parishes to seek marriage partners and there are indications of reverse migration when couples began to raise a family. Schürer has also started to look the distances involved in exogamous marriages and found that, while the mean distance between where couples were born increased slightly over time, the proportion of people who married someone within five kilometres (i.e. a one hour walk) of where they were born remained constant at 40 per cent. So far, these data suggest that, despite increased mobility and rapid industrialisation in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the

twentieth century, people looked to the local and familiar in their choice of marriage partners. The next phase of Schürer's research will look at average distance from a railway station and examine whether distance from the rail network makes individuals more or less likely to marry locally. We look forward to hearing more about Schürer's findings in the future.

Session 3

After lunch, Stephanie Ward (University of Cardiff) began the late afternoon session with her paper, "The old, old game of man and woman chase: courting, romance and attraction in South Wales, 1920s–1950s". Courtship, she argued, was predicated on a range of factors, involving class, culture and the coal mining industry. Owing to an economic depression in mining, up to 80 per cent of the male working population were unemployed in some areas of South Wales during this period. Opportunities were also limited for women, who usually ended up in shop work or domestic service. Based on the economic climate, much media attention and social commentary was concerned with how younger people squandered their leisure time through 'sexual thrills and excitement'. Decades before the so-called 'birth of the teenager', South Wales was recorded as having a strong youth sub-culture. Leisure time was facilitated by commercialised forms of entertainment which became affordable after the First World War. The cinema was an ideal place for courting, as were dances organised in city halls, smaller chapels and in events co-ordinated by the Labour party. Working-class young people were recorded as idling their time on the streets, a space which Ward argued was 'an arena for courtship as well as part of the landscape of leisure'. Street activities included 'the monkey parade', where groups of men and women paraded past one another, and men shining torches on women's faces in the dark to determine whom to court. While parents expressed concern for their daughters' courting activities, young girls saw courtship as a period of potential freedom and social advancement, because they could take the decisions to choose their ideal partner. As a result, men felt that they had to disguise their occupational identity as miners; instead, they emulated the look of Rudolph Valentino and other Hollywood stars of the day. Snobbery existed, as some parents wished their daughters to go out with men that were not occupied as miners. Unemployed men were also disadvantaged by lack of income: they could not afford to attend clubs and events to do their courting, hence their spending time on the streets. The decline of marriage rates from the 1930s also led to societal concerns that the key life-cycle stage of marriage was disrupted. Clubs set up by local health services taught young men proper conduct in their relationships with women. Overall, Ward provided an insightful local and regional perspective on courtship, based within the economic and demographic context of mid-twentieth-century South Wales.

The next presentation by Lynne Pearce (University of Lancaster) was titled "Walking out": the mobilities of courtship in two World War II diaries'. Pearce is a literary and cultural theorist interested in how historical romance writing can inform us about cultural geography and how courtship relates to movement and place. Through the Second World War diaries of Audrey Deacon and Doreen Bates, Pearce argued that courtship is not only

based on its literal materiality, but also on the diarists' imagination. Both diarists held professional positions during wartime. Audrey, from Plymouth, was in the Women's Royal Navy Service and Doreen, from London, was a tax inspector. Pearce discussed how the two diarists' courting patterns contrasted. Audrey and her boyfriend, Terry, were childhood sweethearts, marrying on 10 April 1943, although they were married for less than a year owing to Terry's accidental death as a war officer in training. On the other hand, Doreen was pursuing a clandestine relationship with a married man whom she only names in the diary as E. His wife, noted as K., was eventually told about his affair. Pearce presented two maps that helped schematise the diarists' courting patterns, which showed how their relationships developed in relation to expanding geographical location. She further argued that the diaries reveal how the extensive leisure time of courting couples was unaffected by the war time. While Audrey and Terry pursued hikes and weekend breaks to destinations where the latter was stationed, such as Derbyshire, Doreen and E. made visits to suburban places just outside London. Doreen and E. even enrolled on the same extension courses. Both couples prepared to go out in all weathers, but Audrey and Terry also recreated the conditions of everyday life indoors, such as toasting crumpets by the fire. This, argues Pearce, is an example of 'micro-mobilities'. Unlike Audrey, Doreen had a tendency to embellish descriptions of the places visited and to exaggerate boring, rained-off days with fantasies of her own. Pearce suggests that D.H. Lawrence novels, of which Doreen was an avid reader, may explain why her entries offer only 'a partial relationship to a material reality'. Doreen was also more likely to record her psychological state of mind, as several entries point to nightmares where her lover's wife destroys her wish fulfilments. Pearce concluded that geographical mapping is only one of the many methodological frameworks based on mobility studies. Micro-mobilities of the body and of the imagination are also important concepts, and Doreen's diary, in particular, highlights how literal and metaphysical forms of mobility are oftentimes inextricably linked.

The final speaker was Colin Pooley (University of Lancaster) with his paper, "I thought I would faint he kissed me so much and I only knew I was kissing him back and loving it": changing representations of courtship and romance in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British life writing'. Pooley's research is based on the close reading of 60 personal diaries recorded in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain. The diaries are deployed for two reasons: first, to demonstrate the representation of courtship and romance over two centuries; and, second, to investigate whether the nature of courtship has changed over time. Pooley first discussed the limitations of life writing as source materials. Young women were more likely to write diaries than men, who preferred autobiographical accounts. There are also more middle-class than working-class diarists, presumably due to differential literacy. Issues with legibility, especially if the diarist was writing in code, can make detailed studies of life writing time-consuming. The emotions of some diarists can be subdued, and the researcher can over-interpret their recorded actions and choices. Pooley has broken down the nature of courtship into several stages, starting with the diarists meeting potential partners. Often relationships began through dances, although higher-status individuals met

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their love interests elsewhere including on trains, sometimes contriving to meet them. Pooley described how the diarists assessed potential partners: an 1888 entry in Elizabeth Lee's diary notes meeting 39 different men, none of which resulted in marriage. In 1955, Gillian Caldwell produced 15 assessments of men based on their smoking, drinking and swearing habits (a member of the audience murmured that Gillian's diary was like an analogue version of a dating app!).

Next, Pooley examined how courtship was realised through 'going out' on valley walks and travels by car, the latter usually at night. Elizabeth Lee saw courtship as an opportunity to escape from living with her ten siblings. However, embraces could be restrained based on the density of people surrounding their space, thereby capturing the public and private voices of the diarists. Intimacy was often expressed positively and was performed frequently, an example being Elizabeth Lee's comment of 'regular spoony'. Sometimes, intimacy was unwelcomed or coerced. The diaries reveal that some couples slept together without full sexual intercourse taking place, perhaps indicative of the deeply religious times in which the diaries were written. Descriptions of marriage proposals could range from the factual to the celebratory. Pooley then argued that little is said about love and romance post-marriage, concluding that there is plenty of information about the route to romance. Every diarist is individual, so comparisons about the changing nature of courtship can be difficult. Although Steven King's studies of the linguistics of courtship may contradict Pooley's argument, the diaries nonetheless demonstrate how little relationships have changed over time, albeit that constructions of courtship alter slightly through cultural norms, behaviour and changing transport (for example increasing car ownership).

The conference ended with a brief discussion summarising the day's presentations, along with the methodological frameworks gained from the conference which can aid further research on courtship. Two fruitful subjects for future study are 'sites of courtship', as discussed in Ward's paper exploring the South Wales streets, and demographic changes in the life-cycle phase between leaving the parental home and subsequent marriage.