

Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

John Addy — *Sin and Society in the Seventeenth Century*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. Pp. xi, 246.

Until one is halfway through *Sin and Society*, John Addy's study of the records of the consistory court of the diocese of Chester, one wonders what was so very sinful about that society, and why a press like Routledge would publish this pedestrian compilation of cases. The first half of the book deals with the transgressions of the clergy, of church wardens, of schoolmasters, none of whom seems to have been sinful so much as poor, or neglectful, or lazy.

Then, the reader reaches the second part — the section on sexual and marital offenses with chapters on defamation, fornication, adultery and bastardy — and one understands what inspired the title, the dustjacket with its titillating Rowlandson drawing, and the publication of this book by Routledge. Extensive quotation of the earthy language of sexual encounter certainly qualifies this volume as “soft-core” history. Sin, Addy asserts, was by the seventeenth century merely the “violation of the norms of behaviour” (16); but the sin that sells books is sex.

This book is the product of some thirty years of sorting, cataloging, and finally selecting material from the diocesan archives. It is useful in exemplifying the range of cases to be found in the files of a consistory court (omitting tithe, faculty and testamentary suits), although the picture it reveals is already quite familiar in the work of Ingram, Houlbrooke, Marchant, Quaife and others. To justify another such study, we need to ask what was different about Chester.

To his credit, Addy attempts to answer that question, but he has little success in imposing an interpretative context on the selected cases. For example, his opening chapters describe the diocese and its courts. He recounts how the sheer size of the diocese and its geographical barriers made communication and court business difficult. In many parishes, poverty resulted in poorly trained and badly paid clergy. Quakers and Catholics created another challenge for diocesan administration and local officials. Addy describes these problems well enough (although the muddily reproduced map is little help), but once he enters the discussion of the cases themselves, this sense of geography and social context is quickly lost. He provides virtually no sense of the local circumstances of most of the cases he presents. It would have been far more effective to present fewer cases with more sense of the particular setting in which they occurred.

Similarly, in the last two chapters, Addy appends a discussion of how ecclesiastical justice changed over the course of the seventeenth century. He even extends his comments into the virtually untreated territory of the eighteenth century, exploiting the unusually late reliance on ecclesiastical jurisdiction in this diocese. But in the heart of the book, the implications of this chronology are completely ignored; cases from all periods of both centuries are jumbled together without comment.

Addy also briefly suggests other unusual characteristics of the diocese: the earthiness and directness of language of sexual encounter (as reported in defamation and adultery cases); a higher incidence of child marriage. He follows J.A. Sharpe in observing that women readily went to court to protect their sexual honour against defamatory remarks. On the basis of the evidence Addy offers, it is difficult to assess whether women in this diocese were in some way more sensitive than women elsewhere to accusations of sexual impropriety. Certainly, women's aggressive participation in sexual offenses often suggests a contrary conclusion (although Addy's unfortunate practice of mixing quotations from defamation suits with testimony in fornication and adultery cases presents problems of interpretation here). Many of the cases cry out for a more sophisticated analysis of gender differences in sexual expression and expectation. Women's desires seem to be every bit as phallo-centred as any male imagination could wish. Was this true, or is it a product of the distortive effects of reporting and of legal constructions of sexuality that tended to equate "sex" with penetration?

So, although Addy does provide some contextual analysis, it seems half-hearted and "tacked on". At times, the book borders on the amateurish; for example, in a concluding truism, Addy irrelevantly observes that "we are continually reshaping the past" (215, quoting Christopher Hill). Some egregious errors escaped editing: on page 129, for example, we learn that between 1642 and 1648, England experienced both civil wars and Commonwealth.

Describing and exemplifying the business of the courts of this diocese is useful service. Even more valuable is Addy's work in organizing the archives he describes here. Because of his work as archivist, future scholars will be able to "flesh out" the analysis of sin in its social setting which Addy only begins in this volume.

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Jan Breman — *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989. Pp. xviii, 321.

In the year 1902, a journalist named Johannes van den Brand published a pamphlet entitled *De Millionen uit Deli*, an outspoken condemnation of the treatment of labor on plantations on the east coast of Sumatra. The disclosures in the pamphlet shocked public opinion in The Netherlands and compelled the government to order an investigation. J.L.T. Rhemrev, the investigator who was chosen for this task, looked into the allegations of physical abuse, mistreatment and exploitation of labor made by van den Brand and, in essence, found evidence to substantiate the allegations. However, the Rhemrev Report was never made public. It was Jan Breman's recent discovery of a copy of this elusive report in the General State Archives at The Hague that led to the writing of this book.

The book being reviewed is an English translation in revised form of Breman's analysis of labor conditions in east Sumatra originally published as *Koelis, Planters en Koloniale Politiek* (Coolies, Planters and Colonial Politics), Leiden, Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde, 1987. The English edition does not