

Book Reviews

David Cressy, *Birth, marriage, and death: ritual, religion, and the life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. xv, 641, illus., £25.00 (0-19-820168-0).

Thanks to such works as Keith Thomas's *Religion and the decline of magic* (1973), Lawrence Stone's *The family, sex and marriage in England, 1500–1800* (1977), Ronald Hutton's *The rise and fall of merry England: the ritual year, 1400–1700* (1994), and Anthony Fletcher's *Gender, sex and subordination in England 1500–1800* (1995), the cultural and social history of the early modern period is blessed with penetrating and authoritative overviews. David Cressy's huge but highly readable volume will now take its place in such company, charting as it does the social rituals which governed mortal life from womb to tomb. Drawing upon a mass of archival sources (e.g., ecclesiastical visitations) and primary printed materials, while ever sensitive to problems of gaps in the evidence (what did the illiterate majority think and feel?), Cressy emphasizes the ubiquity of ceremonies in a world of biological uncertainty and political instability. Public rites provided both personal meaning and social cohesion, sometimes imposed from above, sometimes an authentic expression of community sentiment. Yet the rituals of birth and baptism, betrothal and marriage, death and burial also served as focal points of disaffection in a nation whose new and compromising Protestantism was seen by many as invalidating many of the old Romish rites while, rather arbitrarily, retaining others. Why replace the crucifix with the pulpit as the centre-piece of worship, and then continue to insist upon the making of the sign of the cross in the baptism ceremony? The result was that rituals sparked (ritualized) anti-ritualism, in a manner that continued to dog English religious observance down through the Victorian age.

One of the great strengths of Cressy's work is to reveal how completely the temporal and the spiritual, the biological and transcendental,

were united. The management of childbirth was (so to speak) a medical matter but it was always liable to have religious implications, not least with respect to baptism. Was a midwife entitled to baptize a dying baby in dire necessity? That was a practice widely allowed, yet one which the High Church Laudians attempted to eliminate in the 1630s. As readers of *Tristram Shandy* will remember, medico-religious controversies over baptism had a long intellectual pedigree and continued to run and run. Not the least of the virtues of this book for medical historians will be not only to reassert (in a manner already stressed by Adrian Wilson) the ritual elements of the practice of medicine but also to illuminate the powerful interaction of healing and holiness in the observances of the time.

Cressy's interpretations are highly judicious. He can see virtue in the models of the sociologists and anthropologists, while insisting that it is not helpful to reduce the great variety of practices to phrases like "rites of passage". In particular, with respect to the position of women in early modern England, Cressy avoids the extreme views currently in circulation. A ritual like the churching of women was neither a misogynistic instrument of gender control nor was it a celebration of female power.

Birth, marriage and death has two major shortcomings. It never looks beyond this island to venture comparisons with analogous rituals in France, Germany or Italy. And it makes no real attempt to assess how far things changed in the more than two centuries covered. In particular, I wish Cressy had dwelt on morsels of evidence which he cites seemingly suggesting that by 1700 certain rituals (baptism included) were for many losing their primarily religious qualities. Those criticisms aside, this book is a masterly survey and a vast fund of fascinating insight into the conventions governing the world we have lost.

Roy Porter,

Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine