

BOOK REVIEWS

Bernard Capp, *The Ties that Bind: Siblings, Family, and Society in Early Modern England*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Pages xi + 222. £60.00 hardback.

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Library shelves sag under the weight of books about the early modern family, yet sibling relations have attracted relatively little sustained attention. The exceptions, in an English context, concentrate on the Hanoverian period, and so Bernard Capp's foray into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provides a welcome intervention in this somewhat neglected topic.

The book is divided into two sections: a series of thematic chapters, followed by a number of more detailed case studies. Many of the historical actors encountered throughout the book are familiar names, and it is intriguing to discover the extent to which their lives were influenced by their siblings. Capp uncovers genuine affection and friendship between brothers and sisters, but also rivalries and resentments, and often huge disparities between expectations and experiences. Inevitably, the analysis is skewed towards the wealthier sections of society, and male voices predominate in the diaries, family letters and autobiographies that provide the richest sources of evidence. Nonetheless, the social reach of the investigation is extended using more fragmentary and mediated evidence from court records and wills.

Section 1 begins with a chapter on 'Childhood Experiences', and here, Capp emphasises the duration of women's childbearing years and the age gaps between what were often large numbers of siblings. Moreover, male offspring left home at a relatively early age, whether to attend school or embark on an apprenticeship, which meant some siblings had little opportunity to get to know each other. At the same time, a fifth of all children lost their father by the age of 11, and in this circumstance, an elder brother might be expected to take on a quasi-parental role. When it came to parental favouritism, it is striking that, despite the clear desire for boys and the elevated position of the eldest male, it was often the youngest or a daughter that was doted upon. Such childhood experiences could have long-term consequences within sibling groups, as the remainder of the book demonstrates.

The next three chapters concentrate on the relationships between brothers, those that cut across the gender divide, and those between sisters. Perhaps unsurprisingly primogeniture loomed large, heightening the significance of birth order and

gender. At times, concerns surrounding inheritance and the size of marriage portions seem more prominent than considerations of personality, friendship or love. Yet, demonstrations of affection abound and even in adversity bonds of obligation could endure. High mortality rates and frequent remarriage made step- and half-siblings common and these relationships are given a chapter of their own, focusing upon the financial implications for the various sibling groups, including the question of illegitimacy. This chapter also includes a very brief section on heterosexual incest, which sits rather oddly and might have been more appropriate in the discussion of sibling relations that crossed the gender divide. The final chapter in Section 1 takes a distinct approach as attention is focused upon 'Siblings and Salvation'. During a period when religious turmoil resulted in some very public familial fractures, this is an insightful chapter, demonstrating that the strength of some sibling loyalties proved able to withstand spiritual cleavages, whereas a heartfelt desire to ensure the salvation of loved ones might drive long-term wedges between siblings rather than creating strong lifelong bonds.

Having identified common threads in diverse sibling relations, Capp then turns to short case studies that expose the complexities of the bonds between specific sibling groups. In the first of these vignettes, we are introduced to the networks of 'Solidarity and Support' that bound William Stout and his siblings, in particular, the care and financial support he and his elder brother provided for their sisters and their younger brother's children. This brotherly love often appears to be entirely altruistic, but it could involve a level of reciprocal benefit; for instance, sisters acting as housekeepers. Samuel Pepys provides the second example of such brotherly support, but here the emphasis is on 'Care and Control' as Pepys displayed a domineering paternalism, in which his moral obligations as the eldest brother seemed to outweigh his disapproval and even dislike of his siblings. In both of these cases, it would have been interesting to consider whether these brothers would have adopted different positions had they also been fathers. In other words, to what extent would parenthood have trumped sibling obligations?

For some sisters, an elder brother was evidently an asset, but his support might come at a cost. For instance, the sibling relations of Alice Thornton and Dorothy Osborne were shaped by tension over the interlinked issues of inheritance and marriage plans, and for both women, there was an obligation to marry for the good of the family. This sense of the extended family as a shared concern is also seen in the experiences of 'Favouritism and Sibling Rivalry' recounted by James Young and John Cannon. Here, despite lifelong resentments, overlapping interests made it pragmatic to maintain sibling relations. Finally, in the case of Roger North, the eldest brother was completely estranged from the extremely close group of younger siblings, reflecting both the best of sibling relations and the rivalry that primogeniture created.

So what do we learn from all of this? The perceived value of sibling relationships is irrefutable, as is the sense of moral obligation between brothers and sisters. Experiences were not always positive. Even within one family, there could be examples of benevolence alongside scheming self-interest. Yet, any suggestion that sibling relations at this time were characterised by 'emotional indifference' is unequivocally disproved by this book, which overflows with examples of 'strong emotional relationships between siblings, from love and care to rivalry and hatred'

(p. 201). The richness of the evidence is in fact the book's greatest asset, and yet to some extent, the desire to demonstrate the diversity within sibling groups is at the expense of analysis, and Capp raises many issues that will hopefully inspire further contributions to the field. One thing that emerges from the evidence, and deserves greater consideration, is the dynamic nature of sibling relationships. The ties that bound brothers and sisters were forged in the nuclear family unit but developed into kinship networks that were repeatedly transformed during the life cycle of the family, and it is testimony to the strength of such ties that so many of the sibling groups considered by Capp withstood the test of time.

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Guido Alfani and Matteo Di Tullio, *The Lion's Share: Inequality and the Rise of the Fiscal State in Preindustrial Europe*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Studies in Economic History, 2019). Pages xii + 232 + figures 29 + tables 21. £31.99 hardback.

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This short book is a very interesting read that shows economic history at its best. The underlying argument is that the organisation of societies reflects institutional decisions and, as a consequence, that human beings have the power to address societal problems, provided there is an awareness of why things are as they are and a willingness to change the social contract. The authors illustrate their point by considering wealth and income inequality, a matter of new and growing interest among economic historians: the location is Venice and the time frame is the early-modern period. Apart from the two authors' area of expertise in Italian history, there are at least two good reasons for choosing Venice. Firstly, the wealth of the archives of the Republic, including both Venice and the *Terraferma* (the hinterland), allows for an in-depth study of the relationship between institutions and inequality across the period. Secondly, the relative economic decline of Venice from the seventeenth century, following the plague of 1630, which devastated Italy, and the loss of Crete to the Ottomans after the war of Candia (1645–1669), calls for a comparison with another Republic, that of the Netherlands which experienced its Golden Age at that same time.

Arguably, Venice is a proxy for a pan-European research into the evolution of economic inequality in preindustrial societies (or before Piketty's period of