

SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

Chance Encounters? Paths to Household Formation in Early Modern England*

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Since 1981, nuptiality has been identified as the main driver of rapid eighteenth-century English population growth. Over the course of the long eighteenth century, “national” rates of female non-marriage declined while female age at first marriage fell by roughly three years, reaching 22–23 years by the 1820s.¹ The cumulative impact of more and earlier marriage on fertility is believed to have greatly outweighed the effect of falling mortality in generating aggregate population growth. Such a perspective has not gone unchallenged. There have been persistent calls for the re-examination of the place of urban demography within this framework.² Concern has also been voiced over the sources which underpin the family reconstitutions on which calculations of marriage ages are based,³ the technique of family reconstitution itself,⁴ and over the representativeness of the marriage samples which family reconstitution yields.⁵ However, the most recent work of the Cambridge Group, based upon twenty-six family reconstitutions, appears to confirm the centrality of marriage ages to the English demographic system. Percentile distributions of marriage ages suggest that over the course of the eighteenth century there was an important decline in the proportion of marriages

* This article was written with the generous support of the Scoloudie Foundation. It was completed and refined at the University of Trier, Germany, during a three-month period of research leave funded by the DFG. I am very grateful to Professor Dietrich Ebeling of the University of Trier for arranging this visit and for the challenging work schedule in which we became involved.

1. E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541–1871: A Reconstruction* (London, 1981).

2. See for instance C. Galley, “A Never Ending Succession of Epidemics: Mortality in Early Modern York”, *Social History of Medicine*, 7 (1994), pp. 29–58 and N. Goose, “Urban Demography in Pre-Industrial England: What is to be Done?”, *Urban History*, 21 (1994), pp. 273–284.

3. C. Galley, N. Williams and R. Woods, “Detection Without Correction: Problems in Assessing the Quality of English Ecclesiastical and Civil Registers”, *Annales de Demographie Historique*, (1995), pp. 161–184.

4. S.A. King, “Historical Demography, Life Cycle Reconstruction and Family Reconstitution: New Perspectives”, *History and Computing*, 8 (1996), pp. 62–78.

5. See S. Ruggles, “Migration, Marriage and Mortality: Correcting Sources of Bias in English Family Reconstitutions”, *Population Studies*, 46 (1992), pp. 507–522 and E.A. Wrigley, “The Effects of Migration on the Estimates of Marriage Age in Family Reconstitution Studies”, *Population Studies*, 48 (1994), pp. 81–97.

undertaken by women in their late twenties and thirties, more than balanced by the development of an early marrying group in their late teens.⁶

Explaining this experience has proved more difficult than observing it, and four familiar macro-explanations have usually been deployed. First, the idea that the increasingly active eighteenth-century English poor relief system may have provided a welfare safety net for families, effectively underwriting the economic impact of early marriage and childbearing and providing a floor to people's expectations.⁷ Second, the idea that the climate of resource acquisition might have loosened in the eighteenth century, making it easier to establish households. The decline of live-in service, progressive loss of links with land and an increasing eighteenth-century tendency for will-makers to concentrate resources on immediate family, might, for instance, have bolstered the resource acquisition strategies of young people and helped them to marry earlier.⁸ Third, and related to the latter point, the idea that proto-industrialization and agrarian reorganization might have yielded more and better paid work opportunities for young people, allowing them to undertake household formation at a much earlier stage than had been the case before 1750. The observation that marriage ages tumbled furthest in the three proto-industrial parishes analysed by the Cambridge Group lends implicit support to this point. Finally, the idea grew that there was a direct connection between marriage ages and real wage levels, which on balance rose over the eighteenth century.

The potential flaws of these and other macro-explanations are familiar, and have been increasingly exposed by research elsewhere.⁹ If proto-industry had the sort of uniform effect on marriage ages which the analysis of the Cambridge Group implies, then England would be outstanding indeed in a European literature which increasingly emphasizes the sheer variety of demographic responses to rural industry.¹⁰ If the poor law in the south and east was generous and active in providing a welfare safety net, in the north

6. E.A. Wrigley, R.S. Davies, J.E. Oeppen and R.S. Schofield, *English Population History From Family Reconstruction 1580–1837* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. table 5.4. On this basis, the English demographic system appears somewhat more stable than in other European countries: see D.S. Reher, A. Bideau and R.S. Schofield (eds), *The Decline of Mortality in Europe* (Oxford, 1991).

7. See G.R. Boyer, "Malthus was Right After All: Poor Relief and Birth Rates in Southeastern England", *Journal of Political Economy*, 97 (1989), pp. 93–114 and R.S. Schofield, "British Population Change 1700–1871", in R. Floud and D. McCloskey (eds), *The Economic History of Britain Since 1700*, vol. I (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 60–95.

8. For the definitive exploration of institutional and resource constraints on marriage behaviour, see H.J. Hajnal, "Two Kinds of Pre-Industrial Household Formation Systems", *Population and Development Review*, 8 (1981), pp. 449–494. On inheritance, see J. Johnston, "Family, Kin and Community in Eight Lincolnshire Parishes", *Rural History*, 6 (1995), pp. 179–192.

9. For a review of this literature, see P. Hudson and S.A. King, "Two Textile Townships: A Comparative Demographic Analysis" (forthcoming, 1999).

10. See R. Leboutte (ed.), *Proto-Industrialisation: Recent Research and New Perspectives in Honour of Franklin Mendels* (Geneva, 1996).

and west it played no such role and yet female marriage ages fell here too, even in areas not largely affected by the development of rural or heavy industry. And in the supposed link between wages and nuptiality, the lag between changes in marriage behaviour and prior changes in real wage indices is now infamous.

I

However, these flaws are just symptoms of three more important problems with the way in which we conceptualize explanations of nuptiality experience in an English historiographical literature which has lagged behind that in many continental areas. First, all the potential macro-explanations of marriage behaviour have their roots in two basic assumptions about the process of household formation: that in order for marriage to take place, a couple would have had to achieve the necessary level of resources to be economically (and preferably spatially) independent from the households of their relatives; and that the marriage decision was an individualistic or couple-centred matter based upon a balancing of the past and present, and expectations of the future, economic situation.¹¹ This model has attracted sustained criticism when placed against research on many European communities.¹² The empirical base for such assumptions is not as strong as it might be in England, either. We know almost nothing about the detailed processes of household formation and resource acquisition, and there is no real notion of what a “sufficient level” of resources for marriage was in different areas, at different times or amongst different occupational and social groups.¹³ Indeed, the marriage event itself has become the confirmation that this level of accumulation has been reached. Equally, there is no real yardstick to measure whether a fledgling household was economically viable or not.

Second, even if we knew all about the resources necessary to marry and the channels for getting them, there would still be an essential tension

11. See Hajnal, “Two Kinds” and P. Laslett, “Family, Kinship and Collectivity as Systems of Support in Pre-Industrial Europe: A Consideration of the Nuclear Hardship Hypothesis”, *Continuity and Change*, 3 (1988), pp. 29–64.

12. See for instance D.W. Sabean, *Property, Production and Family in Neckerhausen 1700–1870* (New York, 1990) and P.G. Spagnoli, “Industrialisation, Proletarianisation and Marriage: A Reconsideration”, *Journal of Family History*, 8 (1983), pp. 230–247. See also the various contributions to *Journal of Family History*, 16 (1991), and P. Kriedte, H. Medick and J. Schlumbohm, “Proto-Industrialisation: Bilan et Perspectives: Demographie, Structure Sociale et Industria Domicile Moderne”, in Leboutte, *Proto-Industrialisation*, pp. 29–72.

13. Wrigley *et al.*, *English Population History*, cite evidence on the saving capacity of farm servants, but the enduring feature of the accumulation process prior to marriage may actually have been its weakness and uncertainty. Few of the labouring writers reviewed in J. Burnett, *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People From the 1820s to the 1920s* (London, 1974) had managed to accumulate much prior to marriage as they shifted numerous times between poorly paid positions.

between the statistical description of marriage regimes and macro-explanations of trends, and the nature of the individual marriage decision. In crude terms people often did not behave as macro-theories say they should. This is not a new observation. O'Hara's use of deposition evidence to show how family and friends might influence the decision-making process, effectively creating and enforcing a segmented marriage market at most levels of society well before 1600, makes this important point very well.¹⁴ In pointing to the anonymity which historical demographers appear to assign to women as actors in the marriage process, Hill was also highlighting this issue.¹⁵ So was David Levine when he concluded that there was little system in the marriage decision, which took place "for their own reasons".¹⁶ We see this reflected in the dispersal of marriage ages around the mean. Even after a century of falling female marriage ages at the "national" level, the mean of family reconstitution data still conceals wide dispersal of marriage ages (and presumably marriage motivations) within and between communities. English historical demographers have never denied this basic fact, but nor have they placed the degree of dispersal, as opposed to mean ages, at the centre of theoretical conceptions of nuptiality.

Third, most analyses of nuptiality have failed to see the marriage event as the last (and least important) stage of a long process of "getting married". The process began with the decision to enter the courtship market in the first place, continued through an individual finding the ceiling and floor to their marriage expectations imposed by social and economic status, identifying potential partners, entering into *successful* courtship, and only then ending with marriage. Whether long or short, the process of "getting married" was littered with pitfalls and the end result was never certain. To understand and explain both mean marriage ages and dispersal around the mean, we have to understand and explain the whole process of "getting married", not just one part.¹⁷

Most commentators on the marriage and household formation processes reach an understanding of these complexities by way of discounting all of the potential material, economic and inheritance influences which form part and parcel of the foundations of macro-models. This article will start from

14. D.O. Hara, "Ruled by my Friends: Aspects of Marriage in the Diocese of Canterbury 1540–1570", *Continuity and Change*, 6 (1991), pp. 9–42.

15. B. Hill, "The Marriage Age of Women and the Demographers", *History Workshop Journal*, 22 (1989), pp. 129–147.

16. D. Levine, "For Their Own Reasons: Individual Marriage Decisions and Family Life", *Journal of Family History*, 7 (1982), pp. 255–264. None of this, of course, is to deny the continuing importance of economic variables on nuptiality.

17. For important exceptions to these general comments, see J.R. Gillis, *For Better, for Worse: British Marriages 1600 to the Present* (Oxford, 1985), and R. Adair, *Courtship, Illegitimacy and Marriage in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 1996). Adair in particular contains important perspectives on the degree to which the courtship process was supervised for different socio-economic classes.

a different perspective, using the words of ordinary people in autobiographies and diaries between 1660 and 1850, to explore the courtship, marriage and household formation processes at the micro-level.¹⁸ In doing so, it will begin to correct a key fault-line in English historical demography which has attached little importance to micro-research generally, and narrative in particular, in its attempts to model and explain demographic systems.¹⁹ The article will concentrate on three key issues: the degree of planning and balancing of economic position which underlay the marriage decision, the role of kinship and friendship in the marriage process, and the role of rigidities in dictating who and when people married. It will reinforce perceptions of the essential complexity of nuptiality, arguing that much in the household formation process was accidental, much was enterprised and supported by kin and in many cases there was at best only a brief and inadequate balancing of resources. However, it will also attempt to identify regularities of experience and influence, tentatively suggesting a number of key developments which might help to underpin a reconceptualization of declining marriage age in the later eighteenth century.

II

The diary of Roger Lowe, an apprentice from Ashton-in-Makerfield (see Figure 1) in Lancashire during the late seventeenth century provides the first perspective.²⁰ At the opening of his diary in 1663, Lowe was trying to free himself from an understanding with a local girl called Ann Barrow. By May 1663, he was undertaking a secret love tryst with one Mary Naylor, talking two months later of her “virtuous and womanly qualities” and regretting

18. Such textual material presents many interpretive problems. The poorest people generally did not leave written testimony, and for all classes the writings which survive would seem limited in number to economic historians. Amongst those who did write, we can never be sure about how selective a portrayal of a life cycle is. Even if they were remembering accurately, some subjects were taboo in diaries and autobiographies while constraints in linguistic form in early modern England may cloud our ability to read between the lines on issues such as love and emotion. The case for using autobiographies has been well put in D. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth Century Working Class Autobiography* (London, 1981).

19. The autobiographies and diaries at the heart of this analysis deliberately focus disproportionately on the industrial north and midlands. These were the areas which apparently had the most distinctive nuptial experiences in the data deployed by Wrigley *et al.*, but have also been the most under-researched areas in terms of household, family and household formation. Lancashire, Cumberland and Westmorland feature particularly heavily for the same reason. Within this general constraint, the specific texts were chosen to give good social status and chronological coverage from a body of fifty suitable published or manuscript sources. Wider corroborating material for these autobiographies has either been lost or never existed, but neither this fact, nor the relatively small sample size, detracts from the central proposition that we can learn much about “getting married” from autobiographical material.

20. W.L. Sasche (ed.), *The Diary of Roger Lowe of Ashton in Makerfield, Lancashire, 1663–1674* (London, 1938).



Figure 1. Spatial reference points for autobiographical material

that “[. . .] there should be actors and abettors against it as her father and others”.²¹ By September 1663, Mary Naylor was wanting to call the whole understanding off “because of fear of her friends, lest they would never respect her”. Undaunted, Lowe switched his attentions once more to Ann Barrow, speaking “much for my selfe by way of motive that shee would except of me”.²² This she agreed to on condition that they waited until her

21. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 46. In other words, he wanted to get engaged to Barrow.

father, whom she had to nurse in a long-running illness, had died. While they waited, love letters from Lowe to Mary Naylor were shown to Ann Barrow by Mary Naylor's brother and the engagement floundered. Ann subsequently married Naylor's brother Richard, while Mary Naylor, "a false, disembling, hated person",²³ had also got a new sweetheart by June 1664. Undeterred, Lowe professed love to one Emm Potter in August 1664 and after a turbulent courtship they married in 1668.

The autobiography of William Stout, a Quaker from Lancaster (see Figure 1) who was at various times during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries a grocer, venture capitalist and ironmonger, suggests that the courtship and marriage processes were no less complex fifty years later.²⁴ Despite some close encounters Stout remained unmarried and childless, but his autobiography provides an extensive canvas on which the courtship and household formation process of many more ordinary people are painted. His sister, for instance, remained unmarried and a nurse to their mother, notwithstanding offers of marriage from several substantial yeomen,

but being always subject to the advise of her mother, was advised, considering her infirmities and ill state of health, to remain single, knowing the cares and exercises that always attended a married life.²⁵

In 1719, Elizabeth, the eldest of Stout's nieces, married at the age of 19 and against the advice of Stout and her parents. Because she had married so young and imprudently, Stout resolved not to help her financially and the viability of the union was only ensured by a gift from her father. In 1727, Stout's second niece, Jennet, married. She had been Stout's housekeeper for a while and because the match was not deemed imprudent he advanced the couple some money. This was just as well, for Jennet married a man with limited trade and in a patchy earning career prior to marriage had not accumulated any resources to underpin household formation.

Other examples of the complexity of household formation can be found in the experiences of Stout's apprentices. In 1697, Stout decided to give up trade and offered the business and his stock to his then apprentice John Troughton and his mother. Stout stayed with the Troughtons for upwards of one year to ease their succession to the shop. However, John Troughton became dissolute and the shop failed, allowing Stout to buy back all of his goods and establish his trade again. Troughton married, but only after the material resources for effective household formation had passed out of his hands and all he could afford was a single room with no furniture for his new wife. A similar story involved Stout's nephew, William Stout junior. In 1721, Stout set out all that he had done for his nephew and noted that

23. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

24. J.D. Marshall (ed.), *The Autobiography of William Stout of Lancaster 1665–1752* (Manchester, 1969).

25. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

his brother now desired William to become an apprentice. Despite reservations as to his suitability for trade, Stout agreed to take him on due to “natural affection and my desire to promote his children”. He subsequently stuck with his nephew despite many telling incidents, such as when he blew up the shop in a gunpowder prank. In 1728, Stout gave over trade to his nephew, leaving him a cash float, substantial stock, the use of scales and other shop equipment, the use of warehouse facilities, free board and lodging in Stout’s own house, and Stout’s assistance for as long as required to ease him into the business. Relations subsequently deteriorated and Stout wanted to “be out of the sight of the ill management and conduct of my ungrateful and insensible nephew”.²⁶ The nephew married Jennet Brabbin in 1730, aged about 24 and apparently already on the downward spiral into bankruptcy, without a portion from his wife, and without telling her parents or his own relations. At the time his uncle was paying the rent and “they found no entertainment from me or his parents, we being sensible that he had nigh wasted what he had”.²⁷

By 1731, Stout was obliged to enter his nephew’s shop and discharge ample debts from his own pocket, taking over the running of the shop and recording his nephew’s apparent remorse. Then, in 1732, Stout the younger once again entered the shop. By Stout’s own reckoning, the nephew had had a small fortune from him in the previous four years, suggesting that at no point was William Stout junior ever economically independent and, for much of the time, not spatially independent either. Thus in 1734 Stout gave over his newly rebuilt house to his nephew and went to lodge above his former shop, taking in two of his nieces as housekeepers. When this failed, Stout went back to his own house as a boarder and paid his nephew rent despite the fact that he saw the couple on the slippery slope to ruin. By 1737 the nephew was bankrupt and he, his wife and two children were dependent upon Stout for welfare. In 1739, Stout told his nephew to vacate the house, and the nephew found a house for £3 16s rent nearby. To help them, Stout assigned his errant nephew “rents due” to the amount of £21 and agreed also to pay £5 per quarter for the upkeep of the family. In 1742 the family were on the edge of being distrained, but his nephew’s wife got a small sum from her brother and Stout once more intervened, converting his money allowance to an allowance of goods. This is the last we hear of them, and the autobiography ends in 1743.

Forty years later, the diary of Thomas Craven recorded his time as a weaver in the upland parish of Saddleworth (see Figure 1), giving us lengthy details of his courtship history. As with Roger Lowe over a century earlier, Craven had brief courtships with several women. Each of them failed, reflecting doubts over Craven’s reputation in a parish where he had not

26. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

been born and where his own friendship network was not sufficiently dense to counter those into which these native women were engaged. Of one liaison, he complained “[. . .] without friends in this matter to give me character I must be lost”.²⁸ Only after three failures did he manage to marry Hannah Wade, a seventeen year old, in 1787. His diary does not give his own age, but it is clear that but for the issue of reputation, he would have been married somewhat before he actually managed this happy state. In turn, the marriage with Hannah Wade was conducted in secret and without the consent of her parents, who none the less supported their fledgling household by recommending them to a cottage and giving 20 shillings to help with the rent. However, Craven was a sloppy weaver and the couple rapidly fell into debt, calling on her family and friends five times in the three years between 1787 and their removal in 1790.

A nineteenth-century life-story exemplifies many of the same issues. When Joseph Gutteridge, a ribbon weaver from Coventry (see Figure 1), met a childhood sweetheart at an Easter fair in the 1830s, it marked the start of a serious relationship which was brought to the attention of his relatives. At this point he was still an apprentice and,

I was cautioned and rated severely by one of my uncles [. . .] He taunted me with the lowly condition of the young woman. As if her condition could have been worse than my own.²⁹

As a result of ensuing conflict over his refusal to give up the girl he was flung out of doors and kept short of work to bring him to his senses such that, “I had no relatives to take council with or aid me, but was thrust out into the world to sink or swim as chance might befall.”³⁰ On this precarious basis, the couple made plans to marry, convincing her mother to assent with the argument that they

might [. . .] do better for our united efforts than either of us could do singly. The step might also be the means of bringing about a better understanding with my relatives, who might be induced to hold out a friendly hand to us should need arise.³¹

When the banns were published, his relatives turned up to object, forcing a postponement. Gutteridge wrote on this occasion,

Though exceeding the bounds of legality in thus contemplating matrimony before I had been released from my indentures, I yet consider myself morally entitled to choose and to follow that course which appeared most certain to lead to happiness.³²

28. J. Haswell (ed.), *The Diary of Thomas Craven, Weaver, 1785–1794* (Bradford, 1902).

29. V.E. Chancellor (ed.), *Master and Artisan in Victorian England: The Diary of William Andrews and the Autobiography of Joseph Gutteridge* (London, 1969), pp. 109–110.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 110.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 113.

32. *Ibid.*

They subsequently married, only living thereafter by the charity of her relatives and the help of friends and neighbours in a long period of his life that Gutteridge himself labelled "Hard times". Later, after the death of his wife, Gutteridge met another woman at an exhibition, got her character from his friends, proposed and was accepted the same week, he having "Perfect confidence [. . .] that the contemplated union would be for the advantage of us both."³³

III

These narratives teach us a number of important and interrelated lessons about the nature of the marriage and courtship process which are frequently ignored in a literature that has given little credence to the value of narrative. First, that in many marriage decisions there was little or no planning, saving, or balancing of economic prospects.³⁴ This was not simply a reflection of economic prospects which were so poor that there was nothing to lose from "imprudent" marriage. William Stout's niece, Elizabeth, clearly did not think out the economics of her match, and courtship was too rapid a process to believe that there was much forward planning. His apprentice John Troughton married only after he had managed to drink away all of his prospects; William Stout junior married without prospects, with apparently little planning and a certain knowledge that he was not economically viable. At no point when he was undertaking his earlier courtships was Roger Lowe solvent or able to identify any firm prospects. He was running a shop for his master, but seeing none of the profit. In November 1665, when the turbulent courtship with Emm Potter was well under way, his prospects improved markedly. His master released him and set him up in business, but he did not marry Emm. By March 1666 he was heavily in debt and by 1667 he had given up independence, contracting to a new master in Warrington. Only then, when he was on the downward spiral, did he marry Emm Potter. At this point he had no capital, nowhere to live and very few prospects, and Emm had lost her place in domestic service by virtue of moving with him. The diary is not explicit about the motivations of the women involved, but it would seem reasonable to suppose that had some of them not been warned off by gossip and rumour, they would have entered marriage with the same readiness and lack of thought about the

33. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

34. All of these texts are silent on the issue of pre-nuptial pregnancy, either because this was a subject not likely to find its way on to paper or because there simply was none. Adair, *Courtship, Illegitimacy and Marriage*, shows that pre-nuptial pregnancy could spring from or bring forward the marriage decision. If the former, then there may have been more planning than this argument allows. However, while English historical demographers agree that the extent of this practice was increasing in the eighteenth century, there is little consensus as to how one should interpret such a trend.

economic situation as Emm Potter.³⁵ Robert Craven meanwhile at least had a trade, but he whisked his marriage partner off after a very short courtship indeed, and could offer nothing by way of security, not even a house. Nearly fifty years later the marriage decisions of both Joseph Gutteridge and the two women he married were apparently underpinned by little in the way of planning, between people with barely pennies to rub together and no real prospects of economic advancement. Indeed, both unions appear to have been based upon mutual love and the search for happiness in spite of economic logic.³⁶ It is no surprise, then, to find David Vincent concluding that, “the great majority rested their decision on the state of their affections and took a chance on the practical consequences”.³⁷

This failure to plan or to place economics at centre stage in the marriage decision can be followed through other texts. James Bowd of Swavesey (see Figure 1) married at age 26 in 1849. All that sixteen years of agricultural labouring had got him to underpin marriage was a bed, a bible and three shillings, along with almost no prospects of better wages and no cottage. He still found someone to marry him.³⁸ The early nineteenth-century autobiography of Robert Spurr of Ossett (see Figure 1) recorded his marriage to Miss N. Dewhurst and subsequently,

I then found I had been very foolish for I soon began to learn the cares of the world. My wages been so very small, at spring I went to work with my brother William out of doors.³⁹

More widely, Burnett furnishes a substantial selection of the writings of workers from industrial and agricultural sectors which show that many of them faced life “on the tramp” in search for work. They still married and some did so on their travels in an economic situation which was at best precarious and offered negligible prospects of a decent future livelihood. Such men still found women willing to marry them, suggesting that risk-taking was no bar to the marriage decision on the part of women.⁴⁰ The ultimate expression of this feature of the courtship, marriage and household formation process was in elopement, which figures in most diaries and auto-

35. In the absence of more, and more informative, female biography, such unsatisfactory conclusions must stand. Gender historians have long argued that women had few options but marriage in the long term. However, much less has been written about the key problem of when the “prospects of youth” changed to being the “problem of singleness”. If this was not until the mid-twenties, then it is clear that all of the women reviewed here were marrying through choice, not compulsion. Lack of evidence of pre-nuptial pregnancy adds weight to this point.

36. Bridget Hill’s contention that economic desperation, not good economic prospects, was often an arbiter of the marriage decision can perhaps be seen to apply to Joseph Gutteridge’s first marriage: see Hill, “The Marriage Age of Women”.

37. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p. 48.

38. J. Burnett, *Idle Hands: The Experience of Unemployment 1790–1990* (London, 1994).

39. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

40. Burnett, *Useful Toil*.

biographies. Jack Lindsay noted the case of a girl of 15 who eloped with a clergyman.⁴¹ Roger Lowe's friend, John Chaddock, eloped with his sweetheart and with almost no hopes in the world. The niece of the Hertfordshire brewer John Izzard Pryor eloped with a man whose only way in the world was a farm management post on a small salary.⁴²

Other examples abound, but the key point is that any approach to marriage motivations must take more account of how easily expectations and rational economic behaviour could be shelved in the face of more powerful emotions and attractions.⁴³ When nuptiality behaviour at "national level" was beginning to change, so a vigorous pamphlet literature on the poor law, population growth and wages was repackaging traditional concerns about "beggar marriages" and representing them as a social problem in the English context. Many of the couples in this article would have had their marriages characterized thus. This is not to say that basic economic prospects were unimportant in the process of "getting married". Over a whole courtship process, which might involve several failed relationships, young people would have had time to think about the economics of marriage and to ask kin, friends and others to help in the eventual process of household formation. However, the concept of "independence" is probably a less useful analytical tool. Few of our autobiographers and diarists were "independent" in the true sense of the word, and to explain how and why the process of "getting married" was brought to a successful outcome at the age it was, we have to cast our explanatory net widely. Micro-histories detailing the relationship between marriage and the release of young people from parental households would help here. So would a consideration of the marriage strategies of children from households which were always poor, sometimes poor or never poor. Elaboration of the relationship between courtship and marriage processes, industrial and agrarian change, and the classification and uses of space within a locality might also help to take forward a new model. So would a rather more refined linkage between demographic processes, the wider cultural and economic ideologies tied up in notions of eighteenth-century consumer revolution, and changing perceptions of the nature of risk.

The narratives suggest other equally important lessons. For instance, it is clear that kinship, friendship and neighbourhood networks could be a pivotal positive or negative influence in the courtship, marriage and household formation process. This influence might take the form of providing

41. J. Lindsay, *1764: The Hurlyburly of Daily Life Exemplified in One Year of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1959), p. 32.

42. G. Curtis (ed.), *Chronicles of Small Beer* (Stroud, 1986), p. 112.

43. Clandestine marriage might also be included in the list of factors influencing planning. This topic has been extensively reviewed elsewhere: see R.B. Outhwaite, *Clandestine Marriage in England 1500–1850* (London, 1995) and D. Lemings, "Marriage and the Law in the Eighteenth Century: Hardwick's Marriage Act of 1753", *Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), pp. 339–360.

resources.⁴⁴ William Stout was willing time and again to help relatives in both household formation and household support operations. Despite considerable provocation to end all goodwill to his nephew, he continued to support him. This was not an issue of rights to inheritance, but reflected feelings of duty and obligation to the nephew and, more importantly, to his own brother.⁴⁵ The young people concerned may have expected support, and this may help to explain the apparent inviability of many of the fledgling households formed. Others had no expectations of this sort but were given a helping hand anyway. The Cravens, for instance, were lucky in the willingness of kin to support a fledgling household, despite a secret marriage. Joseph Gutteridge saw both sides of the story. The refusal of his own relatives to help him on the occasion of his first marriage strained the new household (which was clearly not economically viable), to breaking point. The efforts of Gutteridge to bring his relatives “on-side” is testimony to the importance he placed on their emotional and financial support. His household was only formed and subsequently survived because of the generosity of his wife’s aunt and uncle, friends and neighbours. His second household required the support of his brother, friends and his new in-laws. As Davidoff argues, then, adopting any sort of family life course view of the role of kinship foregrounds a system of relationships which might on the face of it seem shallow and fragmentary when viewed from one point in time.⁴⁶

But relatives, friends and neighbours could also have a wider role. Aunts and uncles attempted to frustrate the marriage plans of Joseph Gutteridge, while his friends were instrumental in communicating his good character and thus facilitating further (if brief) courtship leading up to his second marriage. Roger Lowe found Mary Naylor’s father against their potential union, and the power of her friends in influencing her behaviour is clear. “Friends” and neighbourhood gossip networks frustrated his courtship of Ann Barrow and made that of Emm Potter more turbulent. Thomas Craven fared no better. By his own testimony he was unable to draw on a local friendship network or neighbourhood where he was known to give him the good character necessary for his courting and to combat the rumours put around by the “friends” of the women he was wanting to woo. William Stout’s sister was persuaded out of marriage altogether by a tyrannical mother with a clear need for nursing and a brother in need of a housekeeper. In a more positive vein, Roger Lowe was a key matchmaker in his own friendship group.

44. Providing support to fledgling households needs to be viewed in a different manner from ante-mortem disposal of real property. The relationship of inheritance to family formation has been discussed, and downplayed, extensively in other works: see Levine, “For Their Own Reasons”.

45. L. Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (London, 1995), p. 207, argues that we have paid insufficient attention to the scale and intensity of relationships between siblings, whom she labels “possible strangers”.

46. *Ibid.*

Once again, a wider selection of perspectives confirms the importance of kin and other networks in the courtship and marriage processes. The diary of William Fisher, a yeoman of Barrow (see Figure 1) provides evidence of kinship agreements which tied young women into arranged marriages. In 1831 Margaret Fisher, aged 17, was obliged to marry a much older mercer in an arranged marriage; in 1836 her sister, aged 18, was married off to a farmer from Cartmel under similar arrangements.⁴⁷ Burnett reproduces the autobiography of a navy who recorded the story of the son of a farmer for whom he worked. The son fell in love with a dairy maid, and because he refused to give her up, he was thrown out. The son took a job as a labourer, put his intended through school and then married her, renting a small farm in the course of time. Irrespective of the economics of the decision, the activities of kin in this affair are significant.⁴⁸ More quantitative sources lend weight to these important ideas. In 1718 William Hodgson, a yeoman from Westmorland, entered a deed of security with his son Richard. Under the deed, property was transferred to the son at marriage in consideration of an annuity of ten pounds per annum, a lump sum payment of one hundred pounds on the death of the father, and the son to allow him to live separately using lofts, outhouses and kitchens and access to his own well and wood for fuel.⁴⁹ Such arrangements have been noted before, but often in the context of elderly relatives moving into established households as a mechanism of support, rather than the older generation moving out of their own house to support the household formation of the younger generation. William Stout did the same thing for his nephew on at least two occasions, and in other places house splitting seems to have been common.⁵⁰ In this case, the decision to marry was taken on the basis of explicit arrangement with an older generation and implies much planning. Other marriages were not planned, not viable and not approved of, but still attracted support which we can measure. Thus in 1740, John Whiteside of Kirkham “sold” to his grandson, John Whiteside the younger, a range of household goods and chattels on the occasion of his marriage. The list of goods included looking-glasses, chests, clocks, two sofas, five beds, pictures, tools, stock and “all the small things of all descriptions in the hows that is not mentioned in full”.⁵¹ The grandson paid a notional sixty pounds for the goods, well

47. W. Rollinson and D. Harrison (eds), *The Diary of William Fisher of Barrow 1811–59* (Lancaster, 1986).

48. Burnett, *Idle Hands*. This is of course an extreme case, but it makes the point very well that parents continued to have a substantial role in the process of “getting married”.

49. Cumbria Record Office Kendal (hereafter CRO) WD/MM/17, “Deed of Security, April 1718”. I am grateful to L. Mghie for this and other references to Westmorland material used in this article.

50. D.R. Mills, “The Residential Propinquity of Kin in a Cambridgeshire Village”, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 4 (1978), pp. 265–276.

51. Lancashire Record Office (hereafter LRO) DDA/140, “Bargain”.

below open market rates and with little prospect of meeting the obligation. His father had not approved of his marriage, but a strong relationship with his grandfather had carried the day. In 1752, Edward Cummings of Westmorland made a list of goods and payments which had gone to his son-in-law Thomas Pearson since his “shotgun” marriage to their daughter in 1740. In the year of marriage, the young couple received gifts of cattle valued at twenty-six pounds, crops valued at thirteen pounds, other bought goods valued at fifty-five pounds, and employment for the son-in-law to the amount of fifteen pounds. In subsequent years, the couple received cash and crops which varied in amount with their family size, receiving twenty pounds cash in both 1743 and 1744, and fifty pounds cash in 1752. Significantly, the account ended with a note that many other household goods had been passed on and that,

many things as above charged were less than the value and none above to my knowledge all which goods and money being a gift is not hereto to be accountable for or to any person.⁵²

A similar dialogue between the generations can be observed in the deed of gift of 1818 between Emmanuel Burton of Kendal (see Figure 1) and his son, Emmanuel Burton junior, a soldier. The elder Burton devolved a house occupied by a surgeon in Kendal, rented at eight pounds per year, to his son in consideration of love and affection and the desire to provide maintenance for the son should he marry when coming out of the army.⁵³

To say that kin, friends and other networks were important in the courtship, marriage and household formation process, providing help or obstacles in courtship, helping or not helping new households, and undertaking ante-mortem asset disposal, is not perhaps a new observation. The fact that the narratives and other evidence deployed here can show us the importance which people attached to these helping or hindering hands and in some cases allow us to quantify the support given, is new within the context of an English historiography which has done no more than scratch the surface of the changing dimensions of intergenerational relationships.

A third lesson can also be drawn. Thus, many of the people passing through these textual sources had their courtship and marriage plans frustrated and elongated by what we might label rigidities in the process of getting married. The fact that kin were important to the process of “getting married” in a negative as well as a positive sense might be regarded as a rigidity. A variety of other constraining factors also spring from the narrative evidence. By William Stout’s own admission, his sister could have married on several occasions; the fact that she eventually remained a spinster is less

52. CRO WDX/513/12, “Schedule of Goods and Payments Made by Edward Cummings to Son in Law Thomas Pearson from 1740, Being the Time of his Marriage to Daughter Hannah”.

53. CRO WD/MM/7/B, “Deed of Gift, by Lease and Release, 1818”.

important than the fact that but for the presence of a domineering mother who needed nursing, she could have been married at an early stage of the life cycle. The role of rigidities in the marriage of Joseph Gutteridge is even more explicit; had things turned out differently, Gutteridge could either have been married much earlier or not married this woman at all. But for the rumours circulating about him, Roger Lowe could have been engaged and married well before 1668. Indeed, his relationship with Mary Naylor was shaping up to go the same way as that of his fellow apprentice John Chaddock, who in February 1664 stole his sweetheart away. Thomas Craven had a similar experience, and might have been married four years earlier than he actually was. All of these experiences might be labelled “rigidities”.

There are parallels in other sources. The young Dudley Ryder talked in the following terms about his cousin Watkins, an apothecary with a new shop in early 1715, who,

Is upon the affair of matrimony, after disappointments in two attempts before. Talks that he has good hopes, I am afraid upon as little foundation as his former were.⁵⁴

By October 1715 he was once more lamenting his cousin Watkins who,

has made love and proposals of marriage to several young women within this year and they have all failed [. . .] I wonder at the assurance he has to make so many attempts after having failed in the former but he has no sooner finished his affair with one but he is engaged in the pursuit of another. One would be apt to believe he thinks the more he courts the greater chance he has for gaining a wife and that is it hard if he does not get one out of so many.⁵⁵

Roger Lowe was on a similar trajectory as we have seen. Both men married somewhat later than they intended despite the fact that they were eligible in their respective ways – Lowe because of his literacy, Watkins because he was apparently a prosperous apothecary with a new shop. For both men, the discovery of a “reputation” probably had consistently bad effects on marriage prospects. The marriage decision in this sense was hardly a decision at all, but merely the favourable outcome of a route which these two players, and many other people, had found blocked by rigidities on previous occasions.

William Rowbottom from Oldham (see Figure 1) noted the way in which the arrival of soldiers or the militia could compromise such rigidities. In January 1794 he wrote,

As proof of the influence which the military have over the fair sex, a young woman possessed with less virtue than beauty decamped from the Cotton Tree [Inn]

54. W. Matthews (ed.), *The Diary of Dudley Ryder 1715–1716* (London, 1939), p. 46.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

Oldham with one of the train of artillery but by the timely interference of her friends this affair was quashed in its infancy.⁵⁶

Then on 23 January, “the young woman and the soldier who decamped from the Cotton Tree tavern were privately married at Stockport”.⁵⁷ Others were not so successful. In 1842, a niece of John Izzard Pryor tried to elope but was discovered and made a ward of chancery to prevent her marriage to a “man of bad character but of specious and good address”. She was in turn obliged to marry a slovenly clergyman in 1845 against her will. But for the intervention of friends and parents, she would have married someone else, and years earlier than she did. The same applies to Izzard Pryor’s own daughter. In October 1833, a Hertfordshire clergyman approached Pryor to be asked to allow to court his youngest daughter Juliana. Pryor told the clergyman that he,

considered him by no means in a situation to marry, having merely a curacy and no prospect of preferment [. . .] I should positively not allow of his visits as, from conversation I had had with my daughter, although I found he had made an impression upon her, she was disposed, like a good daughter, to be guided by my sentiments.⁵⁸

This was one encounter lost. The clergyman sought the help of Izzard’s brother and wife, sending secret notes to Juliana that he intended to continue the courtship. He was rebuffed and obliged to give up. Later, when one of her cousins obtained a curacy and preferred an address to Juliana which was entertained by Izzard Pryor, she did not want the man concerned. She was enjoined to at least see him in December 1842 “to the satisfaction of all her family”, and agreed to a marriage (which took place in 1844) under pressure. Pryor was not a typical case. His daughters had ample dowries to take with them. The key point though is that had chance taken a different turn, this young woman would have married ten years earlier and for very different reasons. The presence of these and other rigidities might thus considerably delay the onset and successful conclusion of the process of “getting married”.⁵⁹

IV

All of our narratives are unrepresentative in their own way. Stout was a Quaker, Lowe was a very literate apprentice, Gutteridge was a man with learning and sensibilities well beyond his position, Craven would have had

56. A. Peat (ed.), *The Most Dismal Times: William Rowbottom’s Diary 1787–1799* (Oldham, 1996), p. 57. My brackets.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

58. Curtis, *Chronicle of Small Beer*, p. 43.

59. Other rigidities are less easily discerned but no less powerful, for instance a locally accepted “norm” at which it was proper for courtship to begin.

to work hard to be such a sloppy weaver. Even where we add in other narratives and quantitative evidence, we might view the conclusions of the last section sceptically. The texts could be seen to provide us with incomplete chronological coverage and material that is anecdotal, a timeless textual counterweight to the flimsy statistical evidence which is used to support macro-theories of nuptiality change in England. The evidence might also be seen to shed little direct light on the crucial marriage motivations of women.

Such perspectives would be shortsighted. Albeit anecdotally, the narratives and other evidence show that courtship and marriage were more complex processes than macro-theories allow, and they do so in a much more direct sense than those studies which first discount other potential influences before coming to the same conclusions.⁶⁰ The failure to engage with the issue of gender differentiated motivations reflects both inadequate information for the period before 1850, but also the inexact science of reconstructing attitudes and expectations. While commentators such as Bridget Hill talk persuasively about women marrying because they simply had no choice, the lesson of these narratives is that there was an abundance of choice and that the analogue of marriage on the part of men which was unplanned, irrational and had little basis in past, present or future economic prospects was equally unplanned and economically irrational behaviour on the part of the women who apparently flocked to marry the men who wrote our narratives. Above all, for all that they are anecdotal the narratives presented here do more than simply confirm that people married “for their own reasons”. They suggest some remarkable regularities of influence, experience, behaviour and sentiment which might help us to begin to tie together the words of ordinary people and the wider statistical debate on falling marriage ages in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, providing the starting point for more sophisticated modelling of demographic behaviour. Where we also refine what exactly needs explaining in this wider statistical debate – the experience of communities with different absolute levels if not trends in female marriage ages and the key appearance of a teenage marrying group and the expense of the thirty-somethings – this conclusion carries greater force.

Three speculative ideas might be developed. The first centres on the observation that kinship, friendship and neighbourhood networks were important in the marriage process. If we could argue that kinship links in particular became more dense and more positively functional over time then we might lay the foundations of an interesting reconceptualization of

60. See Levine, “For Their Own Reasons”. One of the few “systematic” influences which Levine found was for the eldest daughter to marry late because of her function in acclimatizing parents to children marrying. This idea has been substantially modified by the most recent research of the Cambridge Group, which found little evidence of such patterns: see Wrigley *et al.*, *English Population History*, p. 361.

marriage motivations which would see falling marriage ages, falling female celibacy levels, and a reorientation of the distribution of marriage ages equated in part to the greater willingness of kin and others to play a positive role in courtship, marriage and household formation. Against this backdrop, the “rediscovery” of kinship as a subject worth studying in English historiography is highly significant, and has begun to generate studies which show that kinship was by no means as diluted in a quantitative sense as early commentators believed.⁶¹ In some proto-industrial townships, up to 88 per cent of all families were related to at least one other by the later eighteenth century, while lesser but still very significant kinship densities have been found in rural villages, small towns and ports.⁶² The studies are not so numerous as to allow a generalization that kinship networks became more dense at the same time as marriage ages fell, but proto-industrialization, the rise of coal mining and increased competition for rural labour in the north in particular, have all been associated with increasing kinship density.⁶³

V

A deeper study of narratives would reveal whether such networks became more functional over time in terms of supporting household formation, a more important question than simple kinship density. There is some evidence that this was the case. As the work of Anderson and others shows very well, migrants to urban areas were heavily dependent on kin for economic openings, lodgings, courtship opportunities and help in keeping a fledgling household stable through the provision of resources and childcare.⁶⁴ In Coventry, we might usefully contrast the attitude of Joseph Gutteridge’s aunt and uncle with the material help proffered by his brother, the relatives of his wife, a former servant and, in his second marriage, his friends. Pains-taking micro-reconstruction of household relationships in Exeter centred on

61. See for instance D. Cressey, “Kinship and Kin Interaction in Early Modern England”, *Past and Present*, 113 (1986), pp. 38–69.

62. See Hudson and King, “Two Textile Townships” and B. Reay, “Kinship and the Neighbourhood in Nineteenth-Century Rural England: The Myth of the Autonomous Nuclear Family”, *Journal of Family History*, 21 (1996), pp. 87–104, and also M. Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1971).

63. See Hudson and King, “Two Textile Townships” and J. Langton, “People from the Pits: The Origins of Colliers in Eighteenth Century Southwest Lancashire”, in D.R. Siddle (ed.), *Migration, Mobility and Modernization in Europe* (Liverpool, 1996), pp. 43–68. There is of course some circularity in these arguments. Even where we can show that in the communities where kinship was strong from an early date, where kin were active in supporting fledgling households and where kinship was sufficiently dense to allow for few surprises of character and marriage ages were low and stable, it is difficult to disentangle whether increased kinship or the increased opportunities which held some people in place where they might previously have left, or increasing kinship density was the key experience.

64. Anderson, *Family Structure*.

wills and census data appears to suggest that many of those who on the face of it were unrelated to the household head, may have been distant relatives.⁶⁵ These findings support the idea that in urban areas in particular, kinship, even distant kinship, could be highly functional on a whole range of fronts in addition to marriage and household formation. More widely, perceptive analysis of the language of friendship, kinship and neighbourliness suggests that the new types of risk engendered by agrarian and industrial change after 1750 may have been accompanied by more sustained recourse to these networks and more flexibility in their operation.⁶⁶

The second speculative idea is grounded in the often obscure relationship between mean and individual marriage ages. The mean age at marriage stands at the heart of a wide distribution of marriage ages within and between communities in the early modern period. In turn, the fact that the mean age at first marriage for women fell in the later eighteenth century masks two distinct aspects of continuity and change in this distribution. On the one hand, the majority of women continued to marry at roughly the same ages (and certainly in the same age grouping) as they had done earlier. On the other hand, the really significant change was the disappearance of a core of late marrying women and the appearance of a core of those marrying much earlier than had been usual. It is this latter reorientation of marriage behaviour which holds the key to explaining a large part of falling mean marriage ages. Historical demographers clearly need to understand who these women were, what their social status was, and what type of man they married, if they are to unlock the complexity of “getting married”. One possible interpretation is that some important rigidities in the process of “getting married” lost their restrictive power over time, so that more courtships were brought to a more speedy conclusion and there was less reason for women in particular to delay marriage.⁶⁷

William Stout's sister was earnestly persuaded to reject offers of marriage by a mother who required long-term nursing. She remained unmarried, while other women in the same position (such as Ann Barrow) might have been obliged to postpone marriage for the same reason, marrying much later than they intended, and much later than average. Anything which relieved women of their nursing obligations for other kin could thus have a radical effect on a group of those who married later. In this sense, demographers who have tried to link the poor law allowance system with earlier marriage have really been missing the most important potential demographic impact of relief in the sense of an increasing eighteenth-

65. D. Cooper and M. Donald, “Households and Hidden Kin in Early Nineteenth Century England: Four Case Studies in Suburban Exeter”, *Continuity and Change* (1995), pp. 257–278.

66. N. Tadmor, “The Concept of the Household Family in Eighteenth Century England”, *Past and Present*, 151 (1996), pp. 111–140.

67. Such an explanatory path would also help to tie up changes in the mean age at marriage, the distribution of marriage ages and the course of female celibacy in England.

century willingness to provide allowances and/or nursing cover to meet the liabilities of sickness. More empirical work is needed to substantiate this point, but while the north and the south differed markedly in the scope and generosity of relief payments, what they appear to have had in common was a late eighteenth-century willingness to look favourably on genuine sickness. By the early nineteenth century most poor law bodies had some sort of formal or informal contract with doctors and the poor law frequently paid for nursing services, medicines and childcare where parents were sick. If we are right to think that families, and in particular elder daughters, had filled this nursing role before, then at the level of individual communities the intervention of the poor law in this way could remove an important restriction on the courtship behaviour of a significant number of women and help to explain the changing distribution of marriage ages.⁶⁸

A second rigidity concerns knowledge of the strengths and failings of potential marriage partners. Craven, Watkins and Lowe were defeated by a reputation which they could not shake, marrying later as a consequence. Later writers appear less concerned with the issue of reputation, and this might have reflected either a diminution in the importance of reputation in courtship, or a trend for reputations to become more transparent. In many rapidly growing proto-industrial areas during the crucial marriage age decline, increasing population density and township size went hand in hand with the creation of districts within townships in which the characters of young people were well known, and also with a pulling-in of marriage horizons, as it became conventional to find a marriage partner within one's own parish township and even district. The scope for something going wrong with courtship because of previously hidden character failings was thereby limited. The same sort of refocusing happened in many rural areas, where in any case it might be possible to argue that increasing out-migration removed those with the worst reputations or the most to hide from the village. The same processes may have contributed to friendship groups becoming increasingly diluted in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁶⁹ Given the important role in our narratives which friends played in frustrating marriage, it would be unwise to reject an idea which linked the disappearance of friends with declining marriage ages and the changing shape of the distribution of marriage ages.

The final speculative point centres upon the question of how people internalized risk. Perhaps one of the most important observations arising

68. For a review of medical spending by the poor law in the later eighteenth-century north of England, see S.A. King, "Preaching Parsimony: Attitudes to the Sick Poor in Lancashire 1679–1820" (forthcoming). Levine, "For Their Own Reasons" notes that falling adult death rates might also have released women from the household earlier in the later eighteenth century than before.

69. J.G. Williamson, *Coping with City Growth During the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 1990). See also the observations on the uncertainty of the courtship process in Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p. 48.

from our narratives, particularly those of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, is simply the very riskiness of economic, social and cultural life. If we divest ourselves for the moment of the baggage of having to define and measure the level of resources needed for household formation, then it is clear that southern agricultural labourers, many later eighteenth-century proto-industrialists and some factory workers had little basis on which to plan a future on the basis of a past which had only given them a long history of economic marginality. Trade cycles, intensified seasonality, changing tenancy and employment practices in agriculture, industrial in-volution, rapid population growth and the phenomenal growth of firm and farm failure must surely have undermined the whole notion of planning? John Burnett's navy and others on the tramp had no real prospects and knew it. The women who married them knew the same reality. We could argue then that knowledge of a lifetime of risk and uncertainty had a liberalizing effect on marriage motivations, since there was little reason to balance or plan when people did not have experience of a stable medium-term future to enable them to do so.⁷⁰ We might end in this sense with the experience of Joseph Gutteridge. Maybe he was not a typical ribbon weaver, but he was very definitely someone who, in his own words, married for happiness and in the micawberish hope that something might turn up in the way of help from relatives, rather than on any hopes of economic advancement. He did not learn his lesson, for he married his second wife on the same terms. Gutteridge was saved by people with equally uncertain pasts and futures, and it may be that we ought to look hard at the need for a more sensitive modelling of perceptions of (social and economic) risk before we will ever satisfactorily approach explanations of nuptiality regimes.

VI

These narratives are valuable in three important and (in England) new respects. First, they contribute a human voice to the statistics of nuptiality, a means for understanding the complexity of demographic motivation that historical demographers have copiously ignored. Second, they highlight the fact that discussions which note the individualization of the marriage decision can still identify important behavioural regularities which can carry consideration of macro-debates forward. Third, they suggest new avenues for explaining a decline in marriage ages (and related fall in celibacy) which had a remarkable uniformity over communities of very different socio-economic "types". Some of these avenues are not particularly new; others rely on a judicious level of speculation to make up for a lack of empirical work. However, when set against the very shaky empirical English foun-

70. See Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, for a wider review of potential influences on the way in which young people formed expectations.

dations for much macro-theorizing, they are worthy of consideration. More work on labouring autobiographies would in this sense be very revealing indeed.

As things stand, we can learn a number of specific lessons. For instance, there appears little place here for the economically rational marriage decision or the viability of fledgling households. The households of Gutteridge, Lowe, Stout junior and Craven cannot be regarded as economically independent under any circumstances. Data for Westmorland, admittedly for middling families rather than the labouring poor, suggests that the support of kin and others could be required for many years. The way in which people formed their expectations must also perhaps be rethought; many of our writers either had, or encountered people with, no real expectations and little ability to assess their past objectively. Many of them were buffeted by chance and the marriage decision itself was not really a decision at all but simply the favourable outcome of a process which had happened before and been frustrated. This is not to say that economics had no place. The intervention of Gutteridge's aunt and uncle was only partly malicious, with the rest of their concerns centring on his inability to see an economic way in married life. Rather, we need to think more carefully about exactly what needs to be explained in looking at changing nuptiality patterns and achieve a more sensitive balance of economic, cultural and social variables. Once we start to undertake this process, then we have much more freedom to explore the nature of the courtship and marriage processes with micro-histories. In so doing, there is other baggage to dispose of; while this has not been a study which has tried to sort out the different motivational factors influencing men and women, female marrying groups do figure importantly in this canvas. And rather than showing motivations which differed from men, they duplicated exactly many of the motivations of the diarists themselves. When they eloped they often cut themselves off from all expectations. When they married people on the tramp they were signing up to a life of marginality. When they married literate ribbon weavers and had no real prospects of their own and no confidence in his, they were telling us to cast aside the sometimes artificial distinction between the sexes.⁷¹ If there was one area where the differences emerge, it is in the sphere of nursing, and when liberated from this task, which could delay marriage for months, years or decades, there is a close relationship with first the decline in celibacy and then the fall-off in late marriage. The importance of female relationships to the old poor law is thus clear. Overall there were

71. Indeed, we might take this analysis further to suggest that by the later eighteenth century women in the process of "getting married" had a much more sensitive awareness of risk and a much more flexible approach to counteracting risk than did the men they eventually married. Thus, at the very time when the economic and social environment was most "risky" – the late eighteenth and opening years of the nineteenth centuries – female marriage ages were falling most slowly in many individual communities, and were even stable in the national sample as a whole.

many paths to household formation, as Levine saw, but greater analysis of the relationships between demography and kinship patterns, the poor law, courtship practices, friendship networks and the physical geography of villages, may yet redeem the macro-explanations for what is after all a remarkably uniform decline in English marriage ages in the late eighteenth century.