

BOOK REVIEW

HATRED PURSUED BEYOND THE GRAVE

JANE COX

H.M.S.O., 1993 (2nd. imp., 1995) xiii+124: £9.95.

A review by John Holden, Deputy Chancellor of the diocese of Manchester

This is a *de luxe* paper back book, produced on high-quality paper, with attractive illustrations, beautifully clear print and excellent page design. I detected only one typographical error. The author is a distinguished and respected genealogist and former Principal Assistant Keeper at the Public Record Office. The work is based on the records of the London Church courts (similar in many respects to those of the provincial ecclesiastical courts upon which I have been working, on and off, for the last thirty years). For me, all the constituents are there for what should be a flawlessly pleasurable read, but I have to say that I found myself a little unsatisfied by the time I reached the last words of the final chapter. I am hard put it, to explain why. I suspect the 'fault' is in me, and my tastes and expectations. I have, however, managed to tease out two factors which seem to account for my disappointment, and which could affect a wider readership. I hope that a reference to them, as well as to the undoubted merits of the volume, will assist those consulting this review to determine whether or not it would be worthwhile exploring further the possible investment of the best part of ten pounds.

I have difficulty with the author's style of writing. (I realize that my present readers may be experiencing similar problems with mine). I am well aware that style is a notoriously difficult thing to assess by proxy. Clearly, what delights one will, often, bore or enrage another. Each reader can and does feel comfortable with the writing in front of him, or does not. It seems to me to be a process like that of tuning in to the appropriate band of a wireless. I like history to be presented in a rather dry, wholly objective manner, but recognize that many will prefer to have their history presented in a colourful and animated way. In her book, Jane Cox communicates with a very distinctive and identifiable 'voice', one I should find delightful in correspondence, but one which I feel overly colours the record upon which it comments, rather than elucidating it. I find that she obviates the exercise of my imagination by pre-emptively substituting her own in the way she tells the stories. One brief, but characteristic, example may illustrate what I mean. She describes the courtroom of Doctors' Commons at the end of a working day:

Had we been here a little earlier we might have seen, as Boz did, an array of old gentlemen with red gowns and wigs sitting on old-fashioned dining chairs round this (horseshoe-shaped) platform, a winking owl of a judge in the middle. Below the doctors sit the proctors in black, with wigs and white cravats, like a flock of magpies. The stove is still chirping in the centre of the room; it seems a quiet, sleepy, cosy place'.

I think that is a characteristic passage. It has all the qualities which I have tried to describe. If it is to your liking, then the book is clearly right for you; if not, then you may well have difficulties with it. However, it would obviously be precipitate to make a judgement on any book, purely on the basis of its manner. What of the substance?

The book has a Preface, Acknowledgements, a Note on the Use of Source Material, an Introduction, four Chapters, a Postscript, a Glossary and a Bibliography. The two latter are particularly useful: the Glossary, because it

explains, in a simple, straightforward way (for the lay reader) something about the system of courts and their personnel; and the Bibliography, for its detailed references to the cause and other original court papers, as well as to printed secondary sources. The chapters are called, '*Setting the Scene*' (a potted history of the London church courts), '*At the Court of Marriage*', '*At the Court of Scolds*' and '*At the Court of Death*'. The second of these deals with suits, involving husbands and wives, in the consistory court; the third, defamation cases in the same forum and before the Archdeacon, and the last, probate proceedings in the Prerogative Court.

In all three chapters, the author deliberately ranges over a considerable span of time, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and all social groupings, from the aristocracy to vagrants, and from the clergy to prostitutes and fraudsters. She acutely observes that the proceedings were often initiated by women and that women, anyway, took a leading part in a high proportion of cases, in terms of the making of depositions.

The problem which Jane Cox meets is one which besets all those who make use of the records of the ecclesiastical court, namely their—almost inevitable—incompleteness. They tend to be full of fascinating historical detail, but a complete 'story', from end to end, is rare. That is why this book, in common with predecessors dealing with the provincial ecclesiastical courts, e.g. John Addy's '*Sin and Society in the Seventeenth Century*', and Paul Hair's '*Before the Bawdy Court*', could meet with some criticism from historians as merely being 'lollipops', colourful but inconsequential confections, neither fictions nor truly illuminating fact. Certainly, Jane Cox's book is not (like, say, R. H. Helmoltz's '*Marriage Litigation in Mediaeval England*', or Martin Ingram's '*Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640*') a methodical historical thesis but, then, it does not seek to be. It is a collection of anecdotes drawn from common sources, arranged round chosen common themes and held together by Jane Cox's—whatever else—knowledgeable, vivacious narrative. And the records themselves are brimming over with interest; funny, sad, bizarre, touching. A series of unconnected snapshots, they are full of insights into how people were, in certain circumstances, at certain times and in certain places. The advertising blurb claims that, 'here are the authentic voices of our ancestors' and in the depositions quoted throughout the book that is so. Indeed, for anyone not already acquainted with the records of Doctors' Commons or the provincial church courts, this will be the most delightful and entertaining offering of '*Hatred Pursued Beyond the Grave*'.