



Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and mentalities in early modern England*

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. xiv + 377, ISBN 0-521-57275-4

J.A. Sharpe



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/243>
DOI: 10.4000/chs.243
ISSN: 1663-4837

Publisher

Librairie Droz

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 July 2002
Number of pages: 127-128
ISBN: 2-600-00803-9
ISSN: 1422-0857

Electronic reference

J.A. Sharpe, « Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and mentalities in early modern England* », *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [Online], Vol. 6, n°1 | 2002, Online since 03 February 2009, connection on 22 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/243> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.243>

This text was automatically generated on 22 September 2020.

© Droz

Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and mentalities in early modern England*

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. xiv + 377, ISBN 0-521-57275-4

J.A. Sharpe

REFERENCES

Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and mentalities in early modern England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. xiv + 377, ISBN 0-521-57275-4

- 1 Malcolm Gaskill is one of a number of young British historians who have studied crime and related matters in the early modern period, and is the author of a number of incisive articles in the field. The publication of this book, in effect a revised and expanded version of his Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, marks an important addition to the literature on the subject.
- 2 Gaskill concentrates on three aspects of serious crime: witchcraft, coining, and homicide. In all three areas, he is anxious to distance himself from studies of early modern crime based on statistical analyses, but is rather concerned with mentalities. His book, as he puts it (p. 3), 'is about the changing mental world of English people between the mid - sixteenth and mid - eighteenth centuries, and how that world might be reconstructed and understood through the history of crime and criminal justice'. He is concerned with seeing how crime provides insights into mentalities, rather than with crime itself, and argues that the three offences upon which he has chosen to concentrate his attention allow the historian to investigate how people of all social ranks perceived themselves, their social environment and their universe, and how, on the other hand, those perceptions helped in turn to shape popular beliefs and practices.
- 3 The analyses of the three main areas of interest are carried out in a fashion which combines both painstaking scholarship and a good historical imagination. Gaskill shows the ability to marshal evidence from a wide range of sources to illustrate and support

his arguments, this tendency being perhaps at its strongest in the chapters on witchcraft. Throughout, however, he combines evidence from court archives with that provided by literary sources, broadsides, ballads, newsheets, diaries and letters, and such normative sources as statutes, proclamations and sermons. These sources, allied to the author's originality of approach, permit the reconstruction not only of aspects of mentality, but also of important qualitative insights into the crime of the early modern period. Nowhere is this most clearly illustrated than in the two chapters dealing with coining, a subject of considerable importance which has so far (and important essay by John Styles apart) attracted little attention from historians. On Gaskill's analysis, coin clippers were both ordinary people clipping for a small return, and a small minority enmeshed in organised clipping, some of whom made a vast profit from their activities. But as the English state and its financial institutions burgeoned in the later seventeenth century, new steps were taken by officialdom to curb this misuse of the currency, among them the promise of indemnity to members of coining gangs who turned king's evidence. Gaskill argues that changes in mentalities about coining illustrate changing religious sensibilities, the willingness of the state to take new initiatives against certain types of crime, and reactions to the rise of capitalism and a more thoroughly money – based economy.

- 4 There is much of value in this book, and it is essential reading for all historians of crime in early modern England. I must, however, end this review with two criticisms. First, Gaskill's implication that all of those working on the history of crime before him have ignored or marginalised the importance of qualitative aspects of the history of crime in favour of quantitative ones is a little overdrawn. Secondly, the themes he emphasises in his conclusion are really rather familiar: secularization, the rise of capitalism, the rise of individualism, the growth of social mobility, the emergence of the 'middling sort', a shift towards the recognition and acceptance of more abstract and objective modes of thought. Gaskill shows great originality in his work, in terms both of his conceptualisations and in his ability to meld various types of source material: yet his conclusions do seem to confirm what is an already established model of economic and intellectual change. Perhaps Max Weber was right after all.

AUTHORS

J.A. SHARPE

University of York (U.K.), jas19@york.ac.uk