

## Uncertain Unions: Marriage in England 1660-1753



In the highly acclaimed *Road to Divorce*, the first of a three-volume history of marriage in early modern England, renowned historian Lawrence Stone explored the different ways in which marriage could take place, and analysed the confusion and uncertainty surrounding the legality of the institution in its various forms before the Marriage Act of 1753. Now, in *Uncertain Unions*, Stone presents a multitude of case-studies showing just how these courting and marrying couples were able to maneuver around the ambiguities of marriage law in England, and the many reasons they did so. Based on a massive archive of court cases that illustrate the extraordinary variety of legal, quasi-legal, and illegal ways of making a marriage, here are stories of forced marriages, clandestine marriages, prenuptial pregnancies, unwise courtship, and other situations in which people often became entangled in a web of moral and legal contradiction that could, and often did, lead to personal catastrophe. Stone shows how, as a result of glaring defects in the laws of marriage, very large numbers of people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could never be quite sure whether they were married or not. For instance, in *Elmes v. Elmes*, we see a wife by ecclesiastical marriage, and a wife by clandestine marriage fight over a man and his inheritance--in this case, each woman could rightfully claim legitimacy as Mr. Elmes's wife. Other cases reveal how a parish easily pinned the blame of fatherhood onto an innocent man and thus the financial burden of a bastard child onto another parish, and how a married man threw the blame for a bastard child onto a fellow townsman, among many other intriguing schemes. Lawrence Stone illuminates the ways in which, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, demands by individuals for love and affection were starting to take precedence

over family interests in the search for a spouse. The studies he has drawn on for *Uncertain Unions* enable us to see this moral transition played out in the lives of the men and women within these pages. Revealing various types of marriages, and the different levels of sexual liaisons, *Uncertain Unions* is vivid human history, from the leading historian on family life. Praise for *Road to Divorce: A New York Times Notable Book of the Year, 1990*: There are many...gems to be found in this volume...from the current spectacular levels of illegitimacy to the increased economic dependence of women...*Road to Divorce* offers a sure-footed and fascinating commentary.--*New York Times Book Review* His energy and his achievement are stupendous....*Stones* book...breathes new life into an old subject by advancing fresh hypotheses and much fascinating new material.--*The New York Review of Books*

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