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Article Title: Chinese whispers and Welsh weddings

Year of publication: 2005

Link to published version:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0268416005005539>

Publisher statement: None

## Chinese whispers and Welsh weddings

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*ABSTRACT.* It has been claimed that in the late eighteenth century sixty per cent of couples in the Welsh village of Llansantffraid Glyn Ceiriog married by jumping over a broomstick, and a number of commentators have inferred that informal marriage was widespread in this period. Yet an examination of the primary and secondary sources shows that both the initial claim and subsequent speculations are based on ‘Chinese whispers’ rather than evidence. This casts a new light on the way in which people reacted to the 1753 Marriage Act, and illustrates how myths may be created through uncritical reliance on secondary sources.

Last Christmas I was introduced to a version of Chinese whispers:<sup>1</sup> one person mimed a short scene – changing a baby, planting some seeds, cutting someone’s hair – and a second person then had to copy these actions for the benefit of a third who had not seen the original mime. That third person then called a fourth into the room and attempted to recreate the actions. By the time the sixth person acted out the scene, the original was often barely recognizable. On other occasions, the basics were preserved, but with some omissions or even additions.

It struck me that the same process often occurs with research. How often do we rely on secondary sources without checking their authority? And how far may subsequent paraphrases of such sources – paraphrases of paraphrases – depart from the original? This article will illustrate how misunderstandings can arise by examining one claim that has gained widespread credence, relating to the prevalence of informal marriages in a village in North Wales in the second part of the eighteenth century. The village in question is the tiny parish of Llansantffraid Glyn Ceiriog,<sup>2</sup> which lies on the river Ceiriog, six miles west of Chirk, a small town on the Welsh borders, and three miles from Llangollen. The claim that numerous couples in Llansantffraid married by jumping over the broomstick was originally

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made by a Welsh folklorist, Gwenith Gwynn, in the 1920s.<sup>3</sup> John Gillis subsequently relied on this to make the widely quoted assertion that in the late eighteenth century 60 per cent of the population of the Ceirog valley were living in informal relationships that had some degree of recognition.<sup>4</sup> This claim is central to Gillis' hypothesis that the Marriage Act of 1753 was a failure: that it was neither consistent with, nor capable of overriding, local custom. This Act provided that no marriages would be valid unless conducted according to the rites of the Church of England and preceded either by the calling of banns or the obtaining of a licence. Prior to the Act it had been – in theory – possible to contract a binding union simply by exchanging words of consent in the present tense. Gillis goes so far as to argue that 'common law practices' increased after 1753, as a means of compensating for the lost right of clandestine and contract marriage, and that 'it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that as much as a fifth of the population may, at one time or another in their lives, have lived in an illicit relationship, most no doubt as a prelude to legal marriage, but some also as a substitute for it'.<sup>5</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the Act was not such a radical departure from previous practice as has been assumed, and that if, prior to 1753, marriage was usually celebrated with due formality, the impact of the Act would be lessened.<sup>6</sup> My concern in this article is with the extent of informal marriage after the 1753 Act. The two issues are of course interlinked: had informal marriage been prevalent prior to the Act, one would expect the task of enforcing compliance to be harder; if informal marriages took place after 1753 it would be plausible to infer that they had been common prior to that date. The claims made in relation to Llansanffraid are of key importance in this debate because the data relate to the period immediately after 1753. Alternative practices in this period, if found in a rural area, would more likely be a continuation of pre-1753 practices than the result of later industrialization – if, of course, they actually occurred. My contention is that the existing evidence does not support the claims that have been made about the popularity of informal marriage.

This article has three aims: first, to demonstrate that the inferences drawn by Gwynn were unwarranted; secondly, to discuss the implications of this for current assumptions about the way in which the populace reacted to Lord Hardwicke's Act of 1753; and, thirdly, and more broadly still, to consider the way in which myths may be created through reliance on secondary sources.

#### I. JUMPING THE BROOMSTICK

Gwynn's speculation that couples in Llansanffraid may have married by jumping over a broomstick was based on two main sources: his interviews

with elderly inhabitants in the 1920s, and the baptismal parish register. In addition, there was some secondary evidence referring to the practice elsewhere in Wales. This, however, was somewhat equivocal. One source quoted a woman as saying ‘she thought no more of marriage in the Register’s office than of marriage by jumping over a besom’,<sup>7</sup> which could be read as derogatory of both rather than confirming that the latter was a widespread and respected practice. Her knowledge of ‘besom weddings’ was hazy, to say the least: ‘Questioned about the expression she said she had heard in olden times people could be married by jumping over a broomstick.’<sup>8</sup> Another source referred to the evidence of one woman that, in Anglesey, couples were described as having jumped over the broom whether they had married in a church or registry office. This was interpreted by Gwynn as showing that ‘The expression “jumping over the besom” had exactly the same meaning, therefore, as the word “marriage” in the nineteenth century in Anglesey. This goes far to prove that, at one time, the Besom Wedding was the only form of marriage known on that island.’<sup>9</sup> It hardly needs to be pointed out that this is an almost comically broad inference from the most limited of data. The evidence could equally well indicate that the expression was merely figurative, and bore a different meaning. After all, stepping over a broom was a traditional chastity test, mentioned in the Welsh mythological cycle *The Mabinogion*.<sup>10</sup> A third source relied on by Gwynn indicates that different meanings were attached to the phrase in Caermarthen and Glamorgan: it was used to describe a couple who lived together unmarried, a couple who were planning to marry and, where the girl was pregnant, sweethearts.<sup>11</sup> Such diversity makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the true meaning attached to the phrase in Wales. It is also worth reiterating that this was evidence drawn from other books and articles rather than actual interviews: through what process of paraphrase and mutation had these accounts, none of which was supplied by eye-witnesses, already passed?

What about the evidence for Llansanffraid itself? The first and most crucial point to note is that none of the three elderly people who gave evidence to Gwynn of such unions had ever seen a besom wedding. ‘It must have disappeared before I was born, and I am seventy-three’, said one old man.<sup>12</sup> They were, moreover, somewhat hazy on the details of such celebrations, their evidence being peppered with phrases such as ‘it must have’ and ‘I should think.’<sup>13</sup> Others interviewed by Gwynn had never heard of the practice. The dangers in relying on such evidence are obvious. Fox has pointed out that ‘As studies of diachronic verbal communication reveal, imperceptible alterations in narrative, and the practices which structure it, gradually take place, adding up to substantial changes in the long run.’<sup>14</sup> One would not expect people to invent

traditions of this kind, but it is all too easy for stories to change as they are passed down the generations, and for the original meaning of actions to be lost in transmission.

Gwynn's second source was the baptismal register. Of the 608 entries made between 1768 and 1799, he found that in 199 the mother was described as the father's 'wife' and in a further 6 she was said to be his 'lawful wife'. In 257 cases both parents were described by name without any further description, while 112 entries recorded only the father, and 34 described the child as illegitimate. Gwynn hazarded the suggestion that this represented a tripartite distinction between children of parents whose marriage was recognized by the church (their mothers being described as wives or lawful wives); children of parents whose marriage was not recognized by the church but who for some reason could not be classified as illegitimate (their parents, or only the father, being simply named); and children who were illegitimate (those who were described as such).<sup>15</sup> A number of problems with this inference are immediately obvious. Would a system devised for classifying children according to the marital status of their parents have different types of entries *within* separate categories? One could take the 6 references to 'lawful' wives as 'proof' that informal unions constituted over 99 per cent of all unions – or, more realistically, one could accept the possibility that the record-keeping of the incumbent was not uniform. Secondly, Gwynn did not check whether the parents listed in the baptismal register had married or not: according to him the marriage register did not exist. Thirdly, there was nothing unusual in referring only to the father in the baptismal register.<sup>16</sup> Fourthly, an illegitimacy rate of 6 per cent (based on those actually described as illegitimate) would be far more consistent with national figures.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the link between his second category and the supposed tradition of broomstick weddings was speculative: there was no mention of such weddings anywhere in the register.

An examination of the original baptism register<sup>18</sup> shows that Gwynn's theory of a tripartite distinction for distinguishing different types of unions is fatally flawed: what the register in fact shows is changes in the recording of baptisms over time. From 1768, when the register begins, to 1777, mothers are almost invariably described as 'wife of', apart from a handful whose children are designated as 'base' or 'illegitimate'. After 1777 they are only rarely described as wives, and in some years few are named at all. At this point the curate, David Jones, began to confine entries of baptisms to a single line. The only instances of mothers being described as wives in this period generally occur when the names of the parents are short enough for this additional information to be added on the same line. Had Gwynn read on past February 1799, he would have

seen that the practice of attaching the label ‘wife’ resumed – coinciding with the demise of David Jones, who was buried on 17 July 1799. And under a keen new incumbent in 1803, there is a run of entries that record the date of the child’s birth and the mother’s maiden name – although by 1804 the effort seems to have become too much and these details are no longer included.

This much is obvious upon the most cursory look at the register. A closer examination confirms that discrepancies in the register are due to individual errors and idiosyncrasies rather than a system for distinguishing between different types of unions. Many couples were recorded differently at different times. To take just one example, David and Dorothy Gabriel produced six children. The first three entries record Dorothy as being David’s wife, the fourth and sixth just give her name and the fifth makes no mention of her at all.<sup>19</sup> Oddly enough, Gwynn does acknowledge that some such discrepancies existed, but his calculation of different categories ignores them.

The other important fact to note about David and Dorothy Gabriel is that they married in the parish church, by banns, before starting a family.<sup>20</sup> Why Gwynn claimed the marriage register did not exist is difficult to fathom: it does, and establishes that 69 couples, accounting for 230 entries in Llansanffraid’s baptismal register, had married in its church.<sup>21</sup> An examination of the marriage registers of surrounding parishes shows that a further 57 couples had married elsewhere, accounting for another 160 entries in the baptism register. In total, 390 entries out of 608 can be traced to a known marriage. This leaves 67 sets of parents in the baptism register who cannot be linked to a known marriage. It is, however, perfectly plausible that they may have married elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> I examined the marriage registers of all of the surrounding parishes,<sup>23</sup> but a definite link between a baptism in Llansanffraid and a marriage in another parish was only made if the marriage register noted that one party was resident in Llansanffraid, or if the baptism register supplied evidence of the parties’ parish of origin. This means that any couples who married elsewhere and then moved to Llansanffraid would not be counted, nor, indeed, would those whose residence was mis-recorded or simply missing. The reason for my adopting this approach was the limited range of both forenames and surnames that appear in the registers: there are simply too many possible candidates. For example, trying to trace the Thomas Jones whose first child by Mary was baptized in Llansanffraid in 1797, I found marriages in the parish of Llangollen between persons of those names in 1756, 1758, 1761 (two), 1772, 1774, 1775, 1788, 1790 (another two) and 1796. The last would fit, but the sheer number of possibilities – in just one parish – made the link too tenuous. The 67 missing marriages include 12 grooms by the

name of Jones, 5 called Thomas, 4 each of Davies, Hughes, Morris, Richards, Rowland, Roberts and Williams, 3 Edwards, and 3 Evans. Add to this a narrow range of first names for both husband and wife, and often a lack of information in the baptism register as to where they were living, and any apparent links, without supporting evidence, may be no more than coincidence.

Moreover, there are many reasons why a couple might baptize their children in a parish where they had not married: relocation, convenience or tradition. Their motivations may not be readily discoverable: Lord Denning noted in his memoirs that in 1798 his great-grandfather was taken forty miles to be christened, adding 'We do not know why.'<sup>24</sup> The historian would be equally baffled.

All but 20 of the 67 mothers whose marriages have not been traced were, at some point, described as 'wife of' in the register. These remaining 20 account for only 38 baptisms out of the total 608. Ten of these were the offspring of Thomas Wynne, one of the few men to be designated 'Mr', who seems an unlikely candidate for an irregular marriage. In this and other cases the baptisms were recorded at a time when the register was at its sparsest. If the baptism excludes the mother's name there is little chance of tracing the marriage; if the surname is not included there is even less. It should also be noted that 44 mothers whose marriages have been definitively traced are nowhere described as wives in the baptism record. It would be most unwise to assume that the fact that a mother was not described as a wife confirmed that she was living in an irregular union.

The above discussion will have made the discrepancies in the register clear. The reliability of the Anglican registers as a tool for population estimates has been much debated,<sup>25</sup> and it would be foolhardy to attempt a full parish reconstruction from these incomplete and badly kept registers. The point is not that the registers contradict other evidence, but that they have been used as evidence on a false premise. If we adopt Gwynn's reasoning that being described as a wife signifies that the parties have married in church, then 88 per cent of the mothers in the register did so (based on the number of baptisms attributable either to a known marriage or to a mother described somewhere in the register as a wife), rather than the 34 per cent he suggests.

This does not, of course, prove that Gwynn's elderly interviewees were mistaken when they claimed that couples had once married by jumping over the broomstick. It is possible that there was a substratum of society that made no appearance in the parish registers, who married informally and who did not bring their children to be baptized. I examined the burial register to ascertain whether it gave any clue as to the presence of other persons present in the parish.<sup>26</sup> Since it very rarely recorded the age of the

deceased, and frequently omitted to indicate his or her relationship with other parishioners, it did not provide a sound basis for parish reconstitution. Censuses do not record the names of inhabitants until 1841, long after the events recorded in the register. The records thus do not allow the evidence of the baptism register to be checked.

Another possibility is to investigate whether there are any entries in the baptism register that could support the idea that couples married by jumping the broomstick, if on a more limited scale than Gwynn suggested. Might the children who were baptized as illegitimate have been the product of a union that was not recognized by the church but that had some *social* recognition? It is possible, but all one can say is that the baptism register does not provide any positive evidence of stable unions behind these illegitimate births. In only 14 out of 35 cases were both parents recorded: 7 gave the father's name only, 11 the mother's and 3 neither. The couples were not necessarily cohabiting: in 9 cases it was recorded that they were from different parishes. Moreover, parents of base children tended to appear only once in the baptism register. Mary Roberts was an exception: she produced five illegitimate children, but since they all had different fathers it does not seem that she had a long-lasting relationship with any of them. The incumbent's disapproval was clear: in 1799 he recorded Sarah Roberts (Parry) as 'ye fifth base child to ye said wicked debauched animal Mary Roberts'.<sup>27</sup> The fact that even the children of 'poor strolling'<sup>28</sup> Mary appear in the register makes it less plausible, if not impossible, that a section of the parish existed altogether outside its pages.

To conclude: while Gwynn's suggestion that couples in Llansanffraid married by jumping over the broomstick can never be conclusively disproved, this section has shown that the parish registers provide no support for such a belief. The next section considers the significance of this in the light of Gillis' hypothesis that informal marriage was common.

## II. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

According to Gillis:

Sixty percent of all births were attributed by Jones [the incumbent of the parish] to conjugal arrangements which, while not yet formally solemnized in church, were nevertheless sufficiently stable to be recorded as separate from those births in which no father was declared. On further investigation Gwynn found that the irregular unions notarized by Jones were known locally as 'besom weddings'.<sup>29</sup>

A gloss of certainty is thereby laid over Gwynn's speculations with the use of words such as 'notarized' and the assertion that the unions recorded had not yet been solemnized in church. Differences in recording baptisms



become 'recorded as separate', implying a clearer distinction than in fact existed. Gillis' figure of 60 per cent is based on Gwynn's second hypothesized category: a concrete statistic replaces a speculation. If these differences creep into an account by a reputable historian based on a printed source, one is forced to wonder about the reliability of the original account given to Gwynn by elderly villagers.

The fact that this one source does not support Gillis' argument about the prevalence of informal marriage might not matter, were it not for the dearth of other reliable sources for the key period, the second half of the eighteenth century. Can any support for his thesis be drawn from the clear demographic evidence of an increase in illegitimacy in the second half of the eighteenth century? A number of commentators have linked this increase to the 1753 Act, the suggestion being that relationships that would previously have been considered to be marriages had to be classified as concubinage in the wake of the 1753 Act.<sup>30</sup> Gillis goes further, suggesting that common law unions were actually increasing after 1753, not simply being reclassified, stating that 'recent studies suggest that a very large part of the rise was the result of the simultaneous increase in common law unions, whose offspring were recorded as bastards'.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately for this claim, one of the studies cited, Gandy's examination of the parish of Culcheth in Lancashire, actually contradicts this assertion.<sup>32</sup> Two quotations from it will suffice to make the point: 'in Culcheth ... their mothers, even if they had more than one child, appear not to have been cohabiting with a man'<sup>33</sup> and 'The existence of consensual unions does not, to my knowledge, contribute directly to the illegitimate births with which the parish registers are studded.'<sup>34</sup>

So this source does little to establish the link between the increase in bastardy and the incidence of cohabitation. This is of importance in quantifying the extent of cohabitation. In the study of Culcheth, linking consensual unions to the 30 per cent of births out of wedlock would produce a far higher figure than the 4 per cent of first births attributed by Gandy to consensual unions in the period 1801–1850 and the mere 0.9 per cent detected between 1781 and 1800.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the true levels of consensual unions may be still lower. The children of these unions were baptized as legitimate. This could indicate that the incumbent was willing to baptize children of consensual unions as legitimate. A more likely explanation is that the couple had in fact married elsewhere – as Gandy notes, there is no evidence that this was not the case.<sup>36</sup> His finding that there was very little to distinguish the behaviour of such couples from those married in church, and no evidence that they had to have been living together for a significant period of time before their children were baptized as legitimate, is also more consistent with the latter explanation than with the socially

recognized form of cohabitation that he posits.<sup>37</sup> Another possibility – overlooked by Gandy – is that some of the missing couples went through a civil ceremony after this became a possibility in 1837.<sup>38</sup>

The only other study cited by Gillis on the relationship between illegitimacy and ‘common law’ unions – apparently providing evidence of an ‘even higher’<sup>39</sup> illegitimacy rate – is that of Gwynn, of which no more need be said. It is also worth pointing out that other scholars have specifically refuted the idea of a link between the 1753 Act and the rise in illegitimacy. Laslett has noted that ‘The ratio of baptisms to marriages returned in the 1700s to its level in the 1600s, and it would seem that clandestine marriage declined markedly at that time’,<sup>40</sup> while after the 1753 Act ‘There was no consequent rise in marriages detectable in the parish registers, certainly not outside London, and no sudden effect on the number of illegitimates.’<sup>41</sup> In any case, the fact that the number of legitimate births also increased suggests that the causes of the rise in illegitimacy were more complex than a simple shifting of categories.

Having examined these sources, it is worth returning to Gillis’ claim that one-fifth of couples may have been living in consensual unions. Upon what data is that figure based? His first piece of evidence is that ‘ten per cent of marriages in Gloucestershire cannot be located in the official record’.<sup>42</sup> But the source for this relates to the late seventeenth century, and cannot be taken as evidence for the prevalence of informal unions a century later.<sup>43</sup> Other parishes suffered from defective registration in the late seventeenth century but saw an increase in recorded marriages in the eighteenth.<sup>44</sup> In addition, the missing marriages could be attributed to unrecorded but valid clandestine marriages, which were distinct both from the informal exchange of consent without the presence of a priest and from cohabitation.<sup>45</sup>

Gillis’ second source is Newman’s calculations of illegitimacy in the Kent parish of Ash-next-Sandwich.<sup>46</sup> She suggests that ‘it seems possible that a proportion of up to 15 per cent for non-church unions might be reasonable at this time’.<sup>47</sup> This figure is based on the fact that no record of the marriages of 20 per cent of couples baptizing children in the parish in the period 1813–1837 could be traced, even after the registers of surrounding parishes had been searched. The 15 per cent figure is reached by making allowances for marriages taking place further away that were not traced. It would be more convincing if it had been backed up with evidence about the number of parishes that were searched, rates of immigration, whether the missing partners originated in the village and the likelihood of couples returning to the wife’s parish of origin to marry. It does not provide evidence that some couples cohabited without marrying, merely that no evidence of a marriage has been found. In any case, these

calculations relate only to the nineteenth century, rather than to the eighteenth as suggested by Gillis.<sup>48</sup> Following on from these two figures – one of which is irrelevant and the other inconclusive – Gillis claims that since ‘we have seen that the proportions in parts of Lancashire and North Wales were even higher’,<sup>49</sup> one-fifth may be a reasonable figure. Since this article has shown that the 60 per cent figure for North Wales is pure speculation, and that the figures for consensual unions in Lancashire are not as high as Gillis claims, his arbitrary figure of one-fifth cannot be sustained.

These are not the only pieces of evidence that Gillis relies upon in his argument that informal marriage practices existed in the late eighteenth century, but they are the only ones that attempt to put a precise figure on the extent of such practices. Again, I am not arguing that informal marriage practices did not exist, any more than I can argue that broomstick weddings never happened. The point is that the figures that give an aura of certainty to both of these claims are flawed. Statistics have an alluring air of certainty, of empirically provable fact, yet unless they are based on sound foundations they are no more than an opinion. Take the example of Colquhoun’s suggestion that there were 50,000 prostitutes in London alone at the end of the eighteenth century, 25,000 of whom ‘live partly by Prostitution, including the multitudes of low females, who cohabit with labourers and others without matrimony’.<sup>50</sup> Some commentators have accepted these suspiciously round figures without question.<sup>51</sup> Yet the population of London was under one million at the time, and Colquhoun’s methods have not gone uncriticized. According to Schwarz:

Colquhoun’s attitude to the statistics of London’s population combined an occasional scrupulous count ... with another set of figures that were almost biblical in the sweep of their range ... his renown in the field of social statistics when his work was first published might be thought to have come from the willingness of his alarmed readers to believe any figure he gave them, provided it was large.<sup>52</sup>

In this case there was no such count: Colquhoun merely asked the reader to consider the numbers who might resort to prostitutes, and claimed that in view of ‘the profligate state of Society in vulgar life, the intelligent mind will soon be reconciled to the statement, which at first view would seem to excite doubts, and require investigation’.<sup>53</sup> One should always bear in mind the purpose for which a statistic has been produced: Colquhoun was not attempting to produce a census of cohabitants but to convince readers that prostitution was a growing evil – and for this purpose, as he remarked airily, a few thousand either way was hardly relevant.<sup>54</sup>

It follows that we need to rethink the assumption that the Marriage Act of 1753 was a failure, and to examine how the population did react to

its provisions. Much of the evidence of cohabitation dates from the nineteenth century, and cannot automatically be interpreted as the survival of earlier plebeian practices. Trumbach, for example, found that ‘There was not yet present in eighteenth-century Shoreditch the practice attributed to the weavers in the 1830s of ... keeping ... “women whom they call tacks”’.<sup>55</sup> He cited Gillis’ argument with apparent approval but added that ‘it is not clear how well it works for London in the second half of the eighteenth century.’<sup>56</sup>

The registers from Llansanffraid provide some insights into the extent to which the populace complied with the 1753 Act. There were, as noted earlier, 57 couples whose marriages in a different parish have been traced. It should be stressed that these were not runaway marriages: the couples were not marrying outside Llansanffraid to evade the requirements of the 1753 Act. If the bride or groom belonged to a different parish, they might legally choose to marry there instead. In addition, many of the couples baptizing their children in Llansanffraid actually belonged to one of the neighbouring parishes of Llangollen, Llansilin, Llangadwaladr, Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog, Corwen or Llangar. The high numbers – 37 of the 57 – marrying in Llangollen but baptizing their children in Llansanffraid can be explained by the topography of the two parishes. The much larger adjoining parish of Llangollen extends south from the town of Llangollen, across the mountains of the lower Ceiriog valley, and tucks neatly into the curve of the river Ceiriog as it flows through the village itself. For those living on the south bank of the Ceiriog, it was far easier to carry their new-born babies a mile or so to have them baptized in Llansanffraid church than to struggle over the steep exposed mountains to their parish church of Llangollen. That they made this journey to get married is a testament to their willingness to comply with the requirements of the Marriage Act. Similarly, if one lived in Hafod-y-garreg, just over the border in the parish of Llansilin, it was less than two miles to the parish church of Llansanffraid – but at least ten to the village of Llansilin. Baptizing one’s children in Llansanffraid was a logical choice; marrying in one’s parish was a legal requirement. This is consistent with Snell’s finding that the 1753 Act dramatically reduced the number of marriages involving non-resident spouses – which ‘bears witness to the effectiveness of that 1753 Act in bringing marital behaviour under tighter control’.<sup>57</sup>

There is also evidence of the extent to which nonconformists complied with the Marriage Act. It has been speculated that nonconformists may have cohabited rather than going through the required Church of England ceremony.<sup>58</sup> Such marriages would have had no legal status, since the 1753 Act exempted only Quakers, Jews and the Royal Family from the requirement that a marriage be celebrated in an Anglican

church.<sup>59</sup> There are no records of any such marriages taking place in Denbighshire before the Marriage Act of 1836 relaxed the rules and allowed a wider range of ceremonies. While Llansanffraid had a Baptist chapel from 1771, the marriages of those who had their children baptized there are to be found in the Church of England parish registers from Llansanffraid and the surrounding parishes.<sup>60</sup> This means that the Anglican baptisms that cannot be linked to a known marriage are unlikely to be attributable to nonconformists cohabiting. It would be perverse for couples to choose to have their children baptized in the Anglican church – which was not a legal requirement – but to marry in a nonconformist ceremony that had no validity. Furthermore, given that the punishment for solemnizing a marriage outside the conditions laid down by the 1753 Act was transportation,<sup>61</sup> it is unlikely that non-conformist ministers would be willing to take the risk.<sup>62</sup>

### III. FOLLOW-MY-LEADER

The general thesis put forward by Gillis – that informal marriages were prevalent – has been widely accepted, as has the specific claim relating to the practice of broomstick weddings. His followers include demographers,<sup>63</sup> historians<sup>64</sup> and lawyers,<sup>65</sup> and parallels have been drawn between his findings and the position elsewhere.<sup>66</sup> The popularity of the idea that a large section of the populace married by jumping over the broomstick can be attributed to a number of factors. First, it fits with a number of theories about the relationship between law and society. The 1753 Act has been seen as a patrician measure, designed to benefit a particular class and enacted without regard to the needs of the poor or of women.<sup>67</sup> There is considerable sympathy for the idea that customary rituals survived in this sphere at a time when the common law was riding rough-shod over other long-established customs.<sup>68</sup> Hay and Rogers note that the 1753 Act ‘was designed to regularize state control over marriage and ... echoes ... the triumph of law over custom’<sup>69</sup> but they go on to argue – relying on Gillis – that consensual unions may actually have increased, representing the triumph of custom over law.<sup>70</sup>

Secondly, it corresponds with certain views about the relationship between the church and society in the eighteenth century: liberal agnostic academics are more likely to believe in an account of history that sees the church as alien to the majority of the population. Cornish and de Clark comment that:

up and down the country, and particularly in its less conspicuous corners, there were people who resorted to folk ceremonies – exchange of rings, broom-jumping and the like – to notarise their arrangements .... These practices mark at once how important to social

acceptability some form of marriage was, and how little consequence attached to compliance with the Church's procedures in their post-1753 form.<sup>71</sup>

Thirdly, broomstick weddings are consistent with two opposing views of industrialization. On the one hand they support a sentimental view of pre-industrial society, exemplified by Davidoff's claim that 'in the mid-eighteenth century it is estimated that at least half of all unions were sealed in a simple folk ceremony, exchanging rings or in rituals such as jumping over a broomstick before a few witnesses'.<sup>72</sup> On the other, they may also be seized upon by those who wish to show that cohabitation occurred before industrialization, to exculpate the latter from responsibility for social change.

Fourthly, the evidence is used to reinforce calls for reform of the modern law relating to cohabitants, by showing that cohabitation is a long-standing practice and that informal practices had some legal protection before the 1753 Act.<sup>73</sup> And, finally, the idea of a broomstick wedding is simply more exciting than a regular marriage. Quirky customs are more memorable than dull uniformity, especially when allied to the apparent certainty of a statistic.

It is interesting to see how other scholars have employed Gillis' arguments. Parker's assumption that the clergy were willing to 'notarise these arrangements even after the 1753 Act, when there was no conceivable legal validity and when the priest was liable to fourteen years' transportation'<sup>74</sup> leads him to the view that this 'must support the view that they were prepared to do so in the first half of the century'.<sup>75</sup> Howell makes a similar point, noting that there is 'no reason to suppose' that broomstick weddings did not occur before the 1753 Act as well as after.<sup>76</sup> Thus an account of a practice in the late eighteenth century is used as evidence that it also occurred in the early part of the century. The geographical scope of Gillis' argument is also expanded: Parker notes that 'One simply has no idea how many other parts of Wales retained earlier marriage forms to such a degree.'<sup>77</sup> A speculative account of practices in one parish at one point in time thus becomes the basis for inferences about practices elsewhere and at other times. Since the original assumptions on which Parker and Howell relied were flawed, such extrapolations merely compound the original error.

Two problems should be identified amongst those who have relied on Gillis' account. First, some scholars have quoted the original source – Gwynn – without reading it. This creates the impression that their interpretation is first-hand rather than second-hand, and gives their statements an authority they do not deserve. It is very easy to identify who has read the original and who has not, since Gillis reports Gwynn's interview with a 73-year-old *woman*, but in Gwynn's original article the

interviewee is actually a man. It can be inferred that later commentators who refer to a woman are relying on Gillis' account. The second problem is a failure to cite any source at all.<sup>78</sup> This means that there is no way for a reader to check the original. It also implies that the claim is so well-established as to obviate the need for any supporting reference. Both mean that the myth becomes further entrenched: as one moves further from the original source, claims lose their original qualifications. A quotation from Parker's account illustrates the point:

Gwenith Gwyn, whilst looking through the baptism records of the parish of Ceiriog Valley for the period 1768–1805, discovered that a staggering 60 per cent of all births were attributed to conjugal arrangements which were not solemnised in church (and were therefore non-legal). They had been kept by the vicar in a separate category from the few 'illegitimate' births where no father was declared. This was presumably the nearest a priest dared go to recognising officially marriage forms which now had no legal effect.<sup>79</sup>

The differences from Gillis' account are subtle, but worthy of note: we now have a 'separate category' of baptisms, and the point about the non-legal status of such unions is made more forcefully. More significantly, the claim is shorn of its context: unlike Gillis, Parker does not mention the (allegedly) missing marriage register.

It is surprising that, while Gillis' overall argument has attracted criticism, there has been no attempt to question his sources. Commentators such as Outhwaite have criticized Gillis' theory, noting that much of his information is drawn from folklore,<sup>80</sup> but there has been no detailed critique of Gillis' work. It is one thing to doubt the reliability of folklore as a source; it is quite another to establish that the source does not even support what is being claimed.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It would be foolish to assert that broomstick weddings never occurred. It is of course entirely possible that Gwynn's elderly interviewees were not mistaken, and that couples in the Ceiriog Valley jumped over a broomstick as part of their courtship rituals. The phrase 'living over the brush' is known elsewhere, but no one single meaning attaches to it. Bloom, for example, notes that 'among Warwickshire folk a hasty, or at any rate irregular, marriage is spoken of as a marriage over the broomstick',<sup>81</sup> but his example involves a girl not being allowed to marry until she was capable of jumping over the broom (in this case held behind her). Elsewhere in his book, Gillis associates brooms with the rites used to celebrate a couple setting up home together,<sup>82</sup> and notes that to describe a couple as having jumped over the brush was a way of announcing a pregnancy outside marriage.<sup>83</sup> It would be equally foolish to claim that all couples

complied with the requirements of the Marriage Act. Some clearly did not,<sup>84</sup> but the extent of non-compliance needs to be re-evaluated in the light of the findings in this article.

What the present article *has* shown is that there is no evidence that broomstick weddings were used as a large-scale alternative to regular marriages in the Ceiriog valley in the second half of the eighteenth century, and in doing so it removes the foundation on which many wider assumptions about cohabitation in that period have been based. Without the support of the parish registers, the only evidence that such unions occurred at all in Llansanffraid is the word of three elderly people who had never seen one. Statistics may add much-needed precision to folklore, but unless such statistics are accurate they may simply create new myths. Through repetition speculation has become assertion, and assertion orthodoxy. Chinese whispers is an excellent game, but it should have no place within academia.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Liam Brown and Professor Bernard Capp for their helpful comments on earlier drafts, and the staff at Denbighshire Record Office for their assistance.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The concept of ‘Chinese whispers’ derives from the fact that the preponderance of dialects within a tonal language group such as Chinese results in meanings changing with increasing communication and distance from the source.
- 2 Literally, ‘St Bride’s church in the Ceiriog valley’. This article will refer to the parish as ‘Llansanffraid’, and the location as the Ceiriog valley.
- 3 Gwenith Gwynn (actually W. Rhys Jones), ‘Besom Wedding in the Ceirog Valley’, *Folklore* 39 (1928), 149.
- 4 J. Gillis, *For better, for worse: British marriages 1600 to the present* (Oxford, 1985).
- 5 Gillis, *For better*, 219.
- 6 See R. Probert, ‘The judicial interpretation of Lord Hardwicke’s Act 1753’, *Journal of Legal History* (2002), 129 and ‘The Marriage Act of 1753: was it really “a most cruel law for the fair sex”?’’, *Eighteenth Century Studies* (2005), 247.
- 7 Gwynn, ‘Besom wedding’, 159.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, 161.
- 10 In the story of Math, Aranrhod has to step over a bent wand to prove her virginity – and drops a child in the process; see J. Gantz (trans.), *The Mabinogion* (London, 1976), 106. See also T. Gwynn Jones, *Welsh folklore and folk-custom* (London, 1930), 185.
- 11 Gwynn, ‘Besom wedding’, 163.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 153.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 153–5.
- 14 A. Fox, ‘Custom, memory and the authority of writing’, chapter 3 in P. Griffiths, A. Fox and S. Hindle eds., *The experience of authority in early modern England* (Basingstoke, 1996), 99.



- 15 Gwynn, 'Besom wedding', 151.
- 16 See G. N. Gandy, 'Illegitimacy in a handloom weaving community: fertility patterns in Culcheth, Lancashire, 1781–1860' (unpublished D.Phil. dissertation, University of Oxford, 1978); D. J. Steel, *National index of parish registers*, Vol 1: *Sources of births, marriages and deaths before 1837* (London, 1968), 42.
- 17 P. Laslett, *Family life and illicit love in earlier generations* (Cambridge, 1977), 116.
- 18 Denbighshire Record Office (DRO), PD/75/1/1 (1768–1805). The page references in this article are to the more accessible transcript published by Clywd Family History Society, *Llansanffraid Glyn Ceiriog parish registers 1754–1814* (CFHS, 1992; hereafter 'CFHS, transcript'). This is, however, deficient in that it does not refer to the marital status of mothers, unlike the original baptism register. Llansanffraid was within the county of Denbighshire until 1976, then became part of Clywd and it is now part of Wrexham County Borough.
- 19 DRO PD/75/1/1, 13 February 1772, 13 March 1774, 28 August 1776, 21 February 1779, 11 March 1781 and 12 October 1783.
- 20 DRO PD/75/1/4; CFHS transcript, p. 25, 23 April 1771.
- 21 This may seem low, but a study of Terling found that only a third of couples baptizing children there had been married there; see K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and piety in an English village: Terling 1525–1700* (Oxford, 1995). Wrigley has also commented on the perennial problem of the 'reconstitutable minority': see E. A. Wrigley, *Poverty, progress and population* (Cambridge, 2004), 367.
- 22 The Act required the banns to be called in both parishes, but the incumbents of Llansanffraid seem to have been rather lax in either calling the banns or recording that they had been called. A failure to call the banns in the correct parish did not invalidate the marriage, although it would be void if the banns were not called at all.
- 23 Registers were examined for the immediate surrounding parishes of Llangollen, Llansilin, Llangadwaladr, Llarnarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog, Corwen and Llangar. Further afield, marriages were traced in Clocaenog, Llanellidan, Llantysilio, Llandrillo Yn Edeyrnion, Trelawnyd, Ruthin, Llanymynech, Oswestry, Llanrhaedr-ym-mochnant and Llarnamron Mynydd Mawr. The registers of more remote parishes were also examined but they yielded no further information.
- 24 Lord Denning, *The family story* (London, 1981), 10–11.
- 25 See e.g. E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The population history of England, 154–1871* (Cambridge, 1981), Part 1, chapter 1.
- 26 DRO PD75/1/1.
- 27 DRO PD75/1/1, 18 January 1799; CFHS transcript, p. 14.
- 28 DRO PD75/1/1, 18 November 1785; CFHS transcript, p. 8.
- 29 Gillis, *For better*, 198.
- 30 See in particular J. Schellekens, 'Courtship, the Clandestine Marriage Act, and illegitimate fertility in England' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1995), 433.
- 31 Gillis, *For better*, 110.
- 32 Gandy, 'Illegitimacy'.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 21
- 34 *Ibid.*, 170.
- 35 *Ibid.*, Table XIV.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 380.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 392–4.
- 38 According to Gandy's account, he examined only the church records.
- 39 Gillis, *For better*, 110.
- 40 Laslett, *Family life*, 132.

- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 Gillis, *For better*, 219.
- 43 See B. Frith ed., *Marriage allegations in the Diocese of Gloucester, 1681–1700*, Vol. II (Bristol, 1954).
- 44 E. A. Wrigley, ‘Clandestine marriage in Tetbury in the late seventeenth century’, *Local Population Studies* (1973), 15, 20; P. Sharpe, ‘Locating the “missing marryers” in Colyton, 1660–1750’, *Local Population Studies* (1992), 49.
- 45 Probert, ‘The Marriage Act’.
- 46 A. Newman, ‘An evaluation of bastardy recordings in an east Kent parish’, in P. Laslett, K. Oosterveen and R. M. Smith eds., *Bastardy and its comparative history* (Cambridge, 1980).
- 47 Newman, ‘An evaluation’, 151.
- 48 See Gillis, *For better*, 206 and 219.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 219.
- 50 P. Colquhoun, *A treatise on the police of the metropolis: containing a detail of the various crimes and misdemeanors by which public and private property and security are, at present, injured and endangered and suggesting remedies for their prevention* (London, 1800), 340.
- 51 A. Clark, ‘Whores and gossips: sexual reputation in London 1779–1825’, in A. Angerman et al. ed., *Current issues in women’s history* (London, 1989), 232; S. Parker, *Informal marriage, cohabitation and the law, 1750–1989* (London, 1990), 67.
- 52 L. Schwarz, ‘English servants and their employers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’, *Economic History Review* 52 (1999), 236, 238.
- 53 Colquhoun, *A treatise*, 340.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 341.
- 55 R. Trumbach, *Sex and the gender revolution*, Vol. 1: *Heterosexuality and the third gender in Enlightenment London* (Chicago, 1998), 261.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 267.
- 57 K. D. M. Snell, ‘English rural societies and geographical marital endogamy, 1700–1837’, *Economic History Review* 55 (2002), 284.
- 58 Parker, *Informal marriage*, 70.
- 59 Marriage Act 1753, sections 17–18.
- 60 Again, not all of the marriages can be traced – hardly surprising given that one couple were recorded as being from Wrexham. But 21 out of the 23 who were recorded as living in Llansanffraid have been traced.
- 61 Marriage Act, s. 8.
- 62 See further D. J. Steel, *National index of parish registers*, Vol. 2: *Sources for nonconformist genealogy and family history* (Chichester, 1973), 504.
- 63 M. Murphy, ‘The evolution of cohabitation in Britain, 1960–95’, *Population Studies* (2000), 43; K. Kiernan, ‘Unmarried cohabitation and parenthood in Britain and Europe’, *Law and Policy* (2004), 33, 34.
- 64 D. Hay and N. Rogers, *Eighteenth-century English society: shuttles and swords* (Oxford, 1997).
- 65 Parker, *Informal marriage*; W. R. Cornish and G. de N. Clark, *Law and society in England, 1750–1950* (London, 1989).
- 66 Leah Leneman, *Alienated affections: the Scottish experience of divorce and separation, 1684–1830* (Edinburgh, 1998), 330; N. Cott, *Public vows: a history of marriage and the nation* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 35.
- 67 E. Tavor Bannet, ‘The Marriage Act of 1753: “a most cruel law for the fair sex”’, *Eighteenth Century Studies* 30 (3) (1997), 233.

- 68 See also C. Hill, who argues that ‘Hardwicke’s Marriage Act of 1753 was resented, among other reasons, because it made illegal practices which were still tacitly accepted in some areas: it posed law and property against customary liberties’ (*Liberty against the law: some seventeenth century controversies* (London, 1996), 205).
- 69 Hay and Rogers, *Shuttles and swords*, 37.
- 70 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 71 Cornish and de Clark, *Law and society*, 362–3.
- 72 L. Davidoff, ‘The family in Britain’, in F. M. L. Thompson ed., *The Cambridge social history of Britain 1750–1950*, Vol. 2: *People and their environment* (Cambridge, 1990), chapter 2, 90. Davidoff does not specifically cite Gillis, but since she favourably reviewed *For better for worse* two years earlier (see *History Workshop Journal* (1988), 174), it is likely that her account is derived from his.
- 73 Law Society, *Cohabitation: the case for clear law* (London, 2002), paras. 18–19.
- 74 Parker, *Informal marriage*, 20.
- 75 *Ibid.*
- 76 D. Howell, *The rural poor in eighteenth-century Wales* (Cardiff, 2000), 147.
- 77 Parker, *Informal marriage*, 66.
- 78 See e.g. Davidoff, ‘The family in Britain’, and Cott, *Public vows*, 35.
- 79 Parker, *Informal marriage*, 66.
- 80 R. B. Outhwaite, *Clandestine marriage in England, 1500–1850* (London, 1995). See also L. Pollock, ‘“An action like a stratagem”’: courtship and marriage from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century’, *The Historical Journal* **30** (1987), 483.
- 81 J. H. Bloom, *Folklore, old customs and superstition in Shakespeare’s land* (London, 1929), 10.
- 82 Gillis, *For better*, 75.
- 83 *Ibid.*, 202.
- 84 Trumbach, *Sex*, chapter 8.