

(emotion)

Emotion, feeling, psychology

[The following introduction comes from the Report to the E.S.R.C. written by Alan Macfarlane in 1983]

This is a particularly difficult area to probe through written documents about the past. Yet there is material available, albeit indirectly, in the records of our villages. The feelings of parents towards children, of the young for the old, of humans for animals, of the wealthy towards the poor, are all expressed in deed and word. Often the remarks are in highly charged court settings, or couched in the formal prose of standard phrases. Thus there are great barriers to understanding. Yet the whole realm of the study of hate and love, of warmth and coldness which has begun to attract historians, can be given an added dimension through detailed local studies.

A few preliminary and very tentative impressions may be recorded. Certain historians, assuming that our ancestors approximated to certain stereotypes of peasants, have imagined that Elizabethan villages were filled with cold, aggressive, loveless people. What is striking about our first impressions from both Earls Colne and Kirkby Lonsdale is that it was not at all like that. The society was not disintegrated and hostile; it was united and integrated by many bonds, though they are the relatively unusual ones of money, writing, courts, occupations, friendship. There were, of course, quarrels and even armed encounters. Yet the society, looked at cross-comparatively, appears if anything to have been highly ordered and even highly controlled. Perhaps it was rather formal and rigid in certain respects because of the elaboration of etiquette, of courts, of officers; perhaps it was reserved in a way which struck foreigners sometimes as unfriendly, lacking the demonstrativeness of many races, but it was scarcely filled with hate and bitterness. Throughout the documents there are frequent glimpses of humour, of tolerance, of mutual understanding and of affection.

The impression we have is that we are dealing with a society where the poor, the old and the young were, to a certain degree, protected by Church, State and Community, where neighbours felt responsibilities for each other, and where there was a good deal of warmth in human relationships. Since most of our intimate detailed material is of a negative sort - the records of courts and crime - this is especially impressive. There is certainly no evidence of a thick atmosphere of distrust and intrigue, or age-old vendetta and feuding. The geographical mobility allowed people to move and escape. Perhaps the passionate emotions of intense devotion were muted, but correspondingly the negative hatreds were also absent. It is easy to slip into misinterpreting this, as people still do, as lack of emotion. It is more that the emotion is steady, even, widely distributed and muted - like the English climate and English cooking.

The best analogy is of a complex game, where people tried constantly to defeat opponents, but with certain mutually accepted rules. Good reputation for honesty, decency, thoughtfulness and kindness were far above those for naked force. It was not ultimately winning, but how one won that counted. After all, in this mobile situation, the winner today might be a loser tomorrow and one should therefore treat a defeated opponent with magnanimity. The dominant was tolerance and affection, solemnity and a

sense of proportion. Although many did not live up to this, it was quintessentially a demonstrated in the ideals of the nonconformist sects, and particularly the Quakers. It was show in the absence of inquisition, torture, the unbridled use of force in social relationships. The curious combination of warmth and economic competition that we find in the nineteenth century in Dickens or Trollop, in the eighteenth century in Austen, is not an inaccurate representation of the emotional structure of the earlier formation.