

Californian Marriage

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First published in
Comments on Etymology 12, 1983

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We have all heard a good deal about the peculiar matrimonial habits of the present-day inhabitants of the state of California, and some such reputation seems to have attached itself at quite an early period to the same general area. However, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Webster*, and the other usual sources have no entry for “Californian marriage,” a term which occurs in a paper written in the 1680’s by Sir William Petty, one of the founders of modern economics.

In the early 1650’s Petty had himself made head of the land survey that was in progress in Ireland in preparation for the confiscation of property from its rightful Irish owners to pay the victorious but impecunious and voracious English army of Oliver Cromwell. This project was the famous Down Survey, and Petty made a handsome profit from directing the work alone. He also bought a great amount of land at low bargain prices from cash-strapped soldiers who sold their land “rights” for whatever ready funds they could get.

One of the problems of owning land, however, was the difficulty of making it productive; one needed people to work it, and people were in short supply after Cromwell’s bloody depredations. The problem was present, of course, both in late seventeenth-century America (about which Petty speculated a good deal), and, in striking form, in Ireland at the same period. By Petty’s calculations, and after his Survey experience he was in an excellent position to make accurate ones about Ireland, at least one third of the population of that country had perished by war and its concomitants (famine, disease and forced exile) between the years 1641 and 1652 as a result of Cromwell’s attempt at a Final Solution of the Irish Question.

Petty’s answer to the consequent economic problem, not just for Ireland and America, but as a general economic principle, was the “multiplication of mankind.” One of the first to calculate the value of labor into the total assets of a country, he believed that “a nation wherein are eight millions of people are more than twice as rich as the same scope of land wherein are but four” (*Treatise of Taxes*). If doubling the population with speed meant relaxing the normal matrimonial ties or adopting a more lenient attitude towards illegitimacy, then so be it; such ties and attitudes must not be allowed to get in the way of the multiplication of working mankind. Hence Petty’s advocacy of Californian Marriage, an arrangement designed to produce offspring with the fewest possible inconveniences. When the population reached the desired point, however, the old

restrictions could be applied again: morality in the service of economics.

Like Petty's editor,¹ I do not quite understand how things were supposed to work in the menages envisioned by Petty. The paragraphs which I reprint below are followed in the original by "The Reasons for the said Marriage", too long to reproduce here but well worth reading in full; the "Reasons" consist of a series of bewildering calculations to justify the economics, human and financial, of these arrangements. Perhaps it is not surprising that this little tract was not published in Petty's lifetime. Here and elsewhere his ideas and calculations have about them the cool ruthlessness satirized by Swift in his *Modest Proposal* for Ireland written not many years later.

Here, then, is Petty's extended definition of Californian Marriage:

THE PETTY PAPERS

No 93

Californian Marriages with the Reasons

Thereof

In California 6 men were conjugerted (?) to 6 women in order to beget many and well conditioned children, and for the greatest venereall pleasure, in manner following, viz:

One man excelling in strength, nimblenes, beauty, wit, courage and good senses, had 4 ingenious healthy women assigned him; to bee kept apart from all other men, and under penaltyes,

One Great Rich Women had 5 men at her command, and was absolute mistress of them all; and all

¹ The Marquis of Lansdowne, The Petty Papers (Boston and New York:Houghton Mifflin, 1927) II, 52-54; Tracts 1, 92, 94 and 95 in the same volume are also of considerable interest.

these 5 men had also one woman in comon to them all, kept strictly up, so as to bee ready for any of the same 5 men upon all occasions,

(Memorandum, That the said Mistris usd which of the said 5 men shee pleasd; but none of the said 5 men medled with the comon woman without leave of the mistris, and unlesse she had no need,)

And the mistris pitched upon one of the 5 till shee was with child. And the comon woman prevayld with the 5 to have one man in particular for the same end. The 4 other women brought excellent children, and the other better than none (?) by 2 of 5.

As I said, I do not know quite how to disentangle exact meaning from these arrangements, not do I still know where he got the term Californian Marriage.