

University of Wisconsin  
Department of History  
Semester I, 1985-6

History 572--Undergraduate Seminar in European History

Criminals and Deviants in Early Modern England

For two decades social historians have doted on criminals and lunatics. They have shown that studies of patterns of crime and of attitudes to anti-social behavior illuminate the fundamental character of societies in the past.

English historians have produced a particularly rich and exciting literature about crime and deviance, and this seminar will read and discuss some of the most important books and articles published since 1970. Our aim will be to fashion a critical understanding of the alternative approaches to the study of crime and its place in the history of early modern England (from about 1500 to 1800). In our classroom discussions we will analyze the neo-Marxian theories of law enforcement advanced by E.P. Thompson and his followers, the principal criticisms of that perspective, and the some of the main alternatives to it.

One of the appealing aspects of the history of crime and deviance is that the most important theories about its significance have been advanced in the context of concrete case histories of various kinds of law-breaking. Not only are studies of crime intellectually stimulating, they are often intrinsically fascinating, and at times entertaining. Among the topics and kinds of deviance that we will read about and discuss are the place of violence in society, theft, riots, political protests, poaching, smuggling, witchcraft, madness and suicide. We will find out what kinds of activities were believed to be especially heinous and how the law was enforced to control deviant behavior. We will also consider the cultural meanings that were attached to crime and deviance and how those meanings related to the central values of early modern social life. To this end we will examine in some detail the legend of Robin Hood.

Reading in this course will be demanding, and every student will be expected actively to participate in class discussions. Each student will lead two classes and write brief papers (approximately five pages each) about the assigned readings for the weeks that he or she acts as a discussion leader. There will be two or more discussion leaders each week. Papers will be due on the days of the class discussions that the student has chosen to lead. A detailed syllabus will be available on the first class meeting.

PLEASE NOTE: Admission to this course is limited to about 15 students. Permission to register can be obtained only from Professor MacDonald who will be in 5118 Humanities to interview interested students Tuesday through Friday of registration week.