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### Review of Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society

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PHILLIPS, RODERICK. *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society*. Pp. xx,

672. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988. No price.

This ambitious, impressive, and absorbing book seeks to chronicle the history of divorce in Western society from the Middle Ages to the present. It begins by describing the ideological positions on divorce of the Catholic Church and of the Protestant reformers. From this description grows the book's first theme, the story of the development of divorce legislation. Phillips examines the insistence of Catholic states on marital indissolubility, traces the acceptance in Protestant states of divorce — primarily for adultery — and reviews the strikingly liberal law of revolutionary France. After noting that divorce law was procedurally and substantively secularized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Phillips details the liberalization of divorce law in the early nineteenth century and the conservative reaction in the later nineteenth century. The liberalization of divorce law resumed after World War I, a process that culminated in the explosion of no-fault divorce from the 1960s through the 1980s. Intertwined with this history of divorce statutes is the book's second theme, the study of the incidence of divorce. Rates were trivially low for centuries, increased in the nineteenth century, and culminated in the rise of mass divorce in the twentieth century.

Phillips's third theme is the related but separate question of the extent of marriage breakdown. He argues that for many centuries marriages were stable because spouses had no economic and social alternative to marriage and because spouses accommodated themselves to these realities with low expectations of marital happiness. As economic and social circumstances changed, those expectations rose, and with them rose the incidence of marriage breakdowns.

Phillips has undertaken to study an important social phenomenon over a major part of the globe over a millennium of history. Considering the difficulties, he does admirably. But the difficulties are formidable. Phillips is rightly anxious to show that divorce legislation, divorce rates, and marriage breakdowns must be seen in their fullest context, but showing them in this

context is dauntingly complex. He is unable to deal with some crucial aspects of divorce: questions of child custody, marital property, and alimony are hardly considered; the intellectual history of divorce with which he opens gets lost in the shuffle. Moreover, except for his discussion of legislation, he is dealing not only with an area in which research must be difficult to conduct but with one in which research has hardly begun. It is thus understandable that Phillips gives more fully studied countries like France, whose divorce history Phillips himself has examined before, England, and the United States perhaps disproportionate prominence.

In a sense, then, this imposing book is premature. In a better sense, however, *Putting Asunder* is very much what we need now to draw our attention to a neglected area of family history, to analyze what we know, and to chart a course that others can profitably follow.

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