

Skimmington Revisited

By

Dr M.J.George F.R.S.A.

Neuroscience Saint Bartholomew's and Royal London Hospital Medical School
Queen Mary and Westfield College Mile End Road London E1 4NS, UK

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The address for correspondence with the author is c/o Dewar Research, 'Constables', Windsor Road, Ascot SL5 7LF. England and for e-mail malcgeorge@btinternet.com

Inherent to the exposition and research of intimate violence and abuse of women by male partners during the past twenty to thirty years has been the historical perspective of 'Patriarchal' authority. The subordinate status of women during earlier periods of history, whereby women had fewer legal rights than men, has been supplemented within the field of study of intimate violence by reference to wives being the appropriate victims of marital chastisement by husbands over history (Dobash and Dobash, 1978). A consequence of such analysis is that a world view (Dutton, 1994) has developed in which only, or almost only, women as wives, cohabitees or girlfriends, are viewed as the victims of intimate violence under the schema of Patriarchal authority. This paper, however, contends that English historical evidence, and later analysis of it, shows that in the Nineteenth century and before there was not only concern for male violence against wives, but also considerable concern for the violation of Patriarchal norms of the violence of wives against husbands. This paper explores the evidence of the Charivari exposure of men who were beaten by their wives (Steinmetz, 1977). It attempts to appraise this historical evidence and relate it to the present day situation in which violence by women to intimate males has become controversial and what has been termed 'The Great Taboo' (George, 1994).

A Rule of Thumb?

A central tenet to Patriarchal male authority, the dominance of males in heterosexual relationships, has been suggested to be that both in England, and later in America, a 'law' existed which allowed husbands to chastise their wives providing that they used a stick no thicker than their thumb. The so called 'Rule of Thumb' has, over the last thirty or so years of research and advocacy for female victims of intimate violence, been an important clarion for the exposure of the ordinariness of male violence towards women and the subsequent enactment of measures to combat it.

Surprisingly, despite vast and wide reaching research of the subject of intimate violence, rather little further examination of historical issues has been undertaken. In her book

'Who Stole Feminism', however, Hoff Sommers (1995) touched upon this historical matter and undertook research into the so called 'Rule of Thumb' noting that a popular textbook in women's studies stated that:

"The popular expression 'Rule of Thumb' originated from English common law which allowed a husband to beat his wife with a whip or a stick no bigger in diameter than his thumb. The husband's prerogative was incorporated into American law." (page 203)

In other writings it had been suggested that this common law resulted from Blackstone's 1768 treatise 'Commentaries on the Laws of England' which codified the laws of England. Hoff Sommers, however, opined that no such law existed in Blackstone's seminal work and that British and American law from this time prohibited wife beating, even though the extent of enforcement was oft times variable. Earlier Pleck (1979) had also noted that wife beating was illegal in the Plymouth Bay Colony of 1655 and that wife beaters were often the subject of social approbation or sanction. Hoff Sommers reported that Blackstone's 1768 work actually related that there was an ancient 'law' of this nature, but stated that in the "politer reign of Charles the second... a wife may now have security of peace against her husband". How far back this ancient law existed in England is a matter of conjecture, for it was already apparent that in the first codification of a system of written law by Anglo-Saxon kings such as Aelhelberht (circa 587 AD) and Alfred the Great (circa 878 AD), there was recognition of individual rights and a rule of law within which women received protection from violent acts by men (Saklatvala, 1969). So, well before the Norman invasion of England, there is evidence that there was a long tradition of a belief in 'a rule of law' which respected the rights of the individual. Even before the year 1000, Anglo-Saxon men who were found to be guilty of assaulting a woman had to pay her recompense according to their crime (Lacey and Danziger, 1999, p 172). In the Elizabethan period, Court records became more systematic and many have survived allowing later historical analysis. Such records show that domestic disputes and violence were a considerable proportion of indictments for violence brought before Courts (Cockburn, 1977). Although they contained cases between all manner of domestic relations, certainly examples of the prosecution of men for violence against their wives can be found over the entire period since then (Wiener, 1975; Cockburn, 1977; Cockburn, 1991).

More recently, it has been a common assumption, at least in lay culture, that the issue of wife beating first came to public attention in the early Nineteen-seventies with the opening of a refuge in Chiswick, London, England by Erin Pizzey. Thereafter by the efforts of women's advocates both in North America and Europe, through the modern media, the issue has attracted much attention prompting social, legal and political initiatives. A large body of research, focusing upon women as victims of abuses by male partners, has accumulated during the intervening period. However, perhaps it is more accurate to acknowledge that during the Victorian period in England considerable social disquiet over the plight of battered wives in the poorer districts of cities like London and Liverpool is evident (eg. see Tomes, 1978). Indeed, an increasingly severe series of measures were enacted by Parliament during the mid Eighteen hundreds. Between 1840 and 1882, tougher measures were enacted by Parliament against men who beat their wives, such as the 1853 Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assaults on Women Act and the 1882 Wife Beaters Act. These Acts, for instance, allowed for men found guilty of beating their wives to receive harsher prison sentences and be publicly flogged. During these times a society, founded for the protection of women, brought pressure to bear ensuring harsher treatment of men convicted of offenses against their wives or female partners. Even before the introduction of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, it became a well established legal practice to include the equivalent of modern restraining or non-molestation orders in deeds of separation, although the first true injunction in this modern sense seems to be in the case of *Northledge vs Northledge* in 1894 (Fricker, 1988). However, women had been able to seek a 'prayer for peace' against husbands even in the Eighteenth century and prosecutions of men for violence against wives are evident in Elizabethan records (Cockburn, 1977, p57). Other examples of prosecutions can be found in the records of the assizes which are still available for inspection in such places as the Public Record Office and elsewhere. So the exposure of domestic violence and abuse of female partners in the early Nineteen-seventies might be more accurately described as a rediscovery of the issue, which is most notable for the way in which it has engaged public awareness, via the use of the modern mass media, and led to co-ordinate efforts to provide services and protection for women.

Out of this renewed interest modern academic research followed. One particular method applied has been that using the gender neutral survey methodology of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979). This has confirmed assaults by males against intimate females be they dating partners, wives or cohabitees. However, it has also found extensive evidence of assaults between intimates which may be bi-directional, only male-on-female or only female-on-male (eg. Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980; Straus and Gelles, 1986). The findings of

assaults on males by females have been at the center of a controversy, which has raged over most of the ensuing period, debating the extent to which men are the victims of violence by female partners. The validity of these results has been debated hotly since Steinmetz (1977) (see George, 1994) seemingly proclaimed the heresy of a 'Battered Husband Syndrome' and hypothesized that there were as many battered husbands, as wives, in America. In making the case for the victimization of males by intimate females, Steinmetz drew upon the historical evidence of the 'Charivari' in Europe; social customs, involving a procession, in which beaten husbands were ridiculed by the wider community. Evidence of these customs, drawn from contemporary records and later analysis, shows that such customs did indeed exist, were widely known in Europe and not infrequently used up until the Eighteenth or Nineteenth century in England, after which they disappeared.

Charivari

Right across mainland Europe, in the early modern period, social customs existed whereby individuals who transgressed social norms in the eyes of the community could be disciplined by a process of humiliation and collective rule to force conformity. Such customs or 'Charivari' involved a noisy demonstration and were used by communities to expose or punish a wide range of anomalous social situations or behavior considered undesirable. Husbands who supposedly permitted themselves to be beaten by their wives were the subject of particularly sharp censure under the Charivari according to historical records and the processional exposure at its most elaborate in this case (Underdown, 1985a&b). The evidence from England is particularly worth examining as copious historical documentation exists, although considerable documentation for such customs also exists for other European countries, eg. France (Davis, 1971). For example, a French record of around 1400 exists which shows that it was prescribed that a beaten husband should be "paraded on an ass, face to tail" (Davis, 1971). Other evidence in the Sixteenth century indicates that essential features of the Charivari enacted there, eg. Lyon in 1566 under which beaten husbands were punished, went back to, and were derived from, the classical laws of ancient Greece and Rome. Further there is some evidence which suggests that a social organization amongst young bachelor men was important to the process of Charivari ritual wherever used across Europe, including England (see footnote 48, Davis, 1971).

English evidence in existence from the Sixteenth century onwards is in the form of parish records, court records, contemporary chronicles, diaries, letters and newspapers as well as in literature from at least the 1500s to the Nineteenth Century. These sources indicate that the Charivari was seen as a folklore right of the populace to supplement the official legal system and that the enactment of this 'folklore right' varied quite considerably from region to region. It could vary in scale from involving just a handful of people to major spectacles involving large numbers and often occurred at festive holiday times. All the evidence points to the fact that the great majority of these 'processions' were designed to scandalize the situation of the battered husband and in this particular instance were most likely to occur at any time of the year, not just at festive holidays. Whilst these humiliations by social convention were unofficial and emanated from popular culture, it is of note that similar public procession type humiliations were also sometimes used by the Courts in these times for particular offenders and that these could take a similar form. Also, wife beaters could also be subjected to such public exposure. Thus the Charivari, and the forms of it used to punish the situation of the beaten husband, represent a mix between the ancient folklore traditions of festivity and a lay social disciplining system with quasi- legal connotations to enforce social conformity and punish, by social humiliation, those deemed errant.

Riding Skimmington

The popular custom, which characteristically involved a noisy and mocking procession often involving hostile laughter and derision, was a widely distributed and well known phenomenon in England, although it may have originated and been particularly associated with certain regions such as the West Country (Barrett, 1895). A key element of the procession was that either the victim himself or the victim and his wife or indeed "the neighbour next nearest the church" or even a paid volunteer, were paraded on a donkey or horse. In other versions, a 'stang' or 'cowlstaff' was used in the procession. Where only the man was the subject, he was forced to ride facing backwards holding the horse or donkey's tail, but where both the man and his wife were subject they were often forced to ride 'back to back'. Neighbours of the beaten husband were sometimes the subjects ridden and ridiculed on the basis that they were guilty of failing to convince the errant couple to conform to the social norm of a man being the authority in the household.

It is from the West Country (ie. Somerset, Wiltshire, Dorset, Devon) of England that the name most associated with the custom arose. 'Riding Skimmington' or 'Skimmington' was the term particularly associated with the beaten husband. Although these processional devices were also known as 'Riding the Stang' and other terms in other parts of the country (see Davis, 1971, footnote 48), it is uncertain as to whether these other terms referred to Charivari customs that were aimed particularly at beaten husbands (Barret, 1895). Thus it is probably as 'Riding Skimmington' that the Charivari against the beaten husband was most known and the word 'Skimmington' became a name of derision for the beaten husband as well as for the processional humiliation, whilst 'Mrs Skimmington' denoted the husband-beating wife. The word itself derives from the skimming ladle used by women in the West Country in the process of making cheese and depicted as a useful weapon to assault their husbands. For instance, an English stone church engraving, surviving from the period around 1200 AD, shows a woman hitting a prostrate man with just such a ladle.

FIGURE 1

An integral part of a Skimmington procession was the use of a number of symbolic elements. An accompaniment by 'Rough Music', which was the clanging of pots, pans and bells with the raucous playing of musical instruments, was central. The procession itself also usually featured a posse of armed men and animal horns often featured as well as a mocking commentary upon the victim or victims. Animal horns were the symbol of cuckoldry, the assumption being that the beaten husband was also being 'cuckolded'.

An early example of a reference to one such 'Skimmington' procession is reported by the contemporary author Lupton as occurring in Charing Cross in London in 1562 as "1562 Shrove Monday at Charing Cross, was a man carried by four men, and before him a bagpipe playing, a shawm and a drum beating, and twenty links burning about him. The cause was, his next neighbours wife beat her husband". Other examples of the spectacle can be found, for instance, in clerical records whereby at Waterbreach in Cambridgeshire in 1602 a vicar was reported to have been beaten by his wife and a riding occurred. An official record of a Skimmington occurs in Suffolk in 1604 and another fine example is recorded in Marsden (Wiltshire) in 1626 whereby the woman had not only badly beaten her husband and badly scratched his face, ensuring that the matter came to public attention, but she also threatened

that she would "make an end of him" and his daughter by a former marriage. A riding in Aveton Gifford in Devon in 1738 was seemingly attended by some 150 people which included two gentleman and the wife of the squire. In most cases these actual records of beaten husbands and the attendant Skimmington exist not by virtue of the personal facts of the case in themselves, but because of some other more notable factor. The unofficial lay nature of Skimmington processions obviated against routine official record, although there is good reason to assume they occurred not infrequently (Underdown, 1985a&b).

These actual records, however, are supplemented by a larger body of evidence drawn from other contemporary historical sources. References to the phenomenon of the Skimmington can be found quite copiously indicating a widespread knowledge of the phenomenon (Barret, 1895; Davis,1971; Ingram,1984; Underdown, 1985a&b). A remarkable and easily visible testament even today resides in exactly that English countryside from which the word 'Skimmington' first arose. At the Great House of Montacute, which was built around Sixteen hundred in Montacute, Somerset, an original plaster facade in the Great Hall depicts a woman hitting her husband overseen by a neighbour and then a procession with the husband 'Riding'. This house is now owned by the National Trust and was used in a recent very successful film of Jane Austen's 'Sense and Sensibility' (Columbia Films, 1999) whereby the plaster frieze and its battered husband and 'Riding' were clearly visible in one scene. The house is open to today's public and the frieze can be viewed (Rogers, 1991).

FIGURE 2

An equally convincing testament to previous public knowledge of the battered husband was discovered quite by chance by this author, during the writing of this paper, in London's Covent Garden district. In a shop selling antiquarian prints, the author discovered, displayed prominently in the shop window (Grosvenor Prints, 28 Shelton Street), a print of a painting by Dawes entitled 'The Hen Peckt Husband' from around the end of the Eighteenth century. The print shows a bare breasted woman in her nightdress hitting her tremulous husband over the head with an iron. The reasons for this act of violence by the wife appears to be that the husband had walked into their bedroom and found her in bed

with her lover. The print reinforces the notion of the battered husband being not only dominated and battered by his wife, but cuckolded as well.

Beyond this, literary references and other artifacts, as researched by historians, support the contention of a wide knowledge of Charivari processions, Skimmingtons, in England. In his seminal work on Charivari in England, Martin Ingram (Ingram, 1984) cites an extensive list of examples including plates depicting Skimmington scenes. One such scene 'The Henpecked husband and his punishment' dates from a publication in London from around 1635 and other such illustrations depict similar or even a caricature of 'Mrs Skimmington' and her husband 'Skimmington'. Whilst references can be found in the broadsheets and pamphlets of those times, there is also more than passing mention in texts of literary merit. Ingram cites five noted authors who lived between the 1560's and 1660's to whom the Skimmington was a common place phenomenon. He also identifies that the writer Jonathon Swift, famous for his book Gulliver's Travels, wrote a poem on the plight of the 'patient husband' and the ordeal of undergoing a 'Riding'. Samuel Butlers 'Hudibras' (1664) also contains a reference to a Skimmington occurring in London and this work contains an illustration (now located in the British Museum) by the artist Hogarth of such a procession. Barret's discussion of Skimmington from 1895 (Barret, 1895) gives other examples of contemporary written evidence such as from the author Strype and Lupton in his 'Too good to be true' from 1580 which is used to provide a quote which is illustrative

" In some places, with us, if a woman beat her husband, the man, that dwelleth next unto her shall ride on a cowl staffe, and there is all the punishment she is likely to have".

Also reproduced is a verse thought to have been used in conjunction with a riding

"With a ran, tan, tan

On my old tin can Mrs and her good man She
 bang'd him, she bang'd him For spending a penny
 when he stood in need She up with a three footed
 stool; She struck him so hard, and she cut so deep,
 That blood ran down like a new stuck sheep"

Another such verse given lays more emphasis on the 'Riding'.

"when the young people ride the Skimmington There
 is a general trembling in a town
 Not only for he whom the person rides Suffers,
 but they sweep other doors besides And by that
 Hieroglyphic does appear That the good woman is
 the master here"

And also quoted from Marvell (see also Davis, 1971 , footnote 48)

" A punishment invented first to awe Masculine
 wives transgressing nature's law Where, when the
 brawny female disobeys And beats her husband 'tit
 for peace he prays No concern'd jury damage for him
 finds Nor partial justice her behaviour binds But the
 just street does the next house invade Mounting the
 neighbour couple on lean jade The distaff knocks, the
 grains from kettle fly And boys and girls in troops
 run headlong by."

The diarist Pepys also made mention of the practice and Ben Johnson's works contain more than just a passing reference to Skimmington processions of battered husbands. Later, in the Nineteenth century, Thomas Hardy makes reference to such a procession in his book 'The Mayor of Casterbridge', although the suggestion is made that such a riding had not occurred for sometime. Also, reference can be discerned in a work by Sir Walter Scott.

There can be little doubt based upon such evidence of the existence of the phenomenon and hence underlying that an incidence of husbands subjected to violence by their wives. But the inferences that can be drawn go beyond. It is clear that 'Ridings' belonged to the common people but that, whilst there are instances of disapproval amongst the higher classes and ruling elite and particularly from those of Puritan belief, there is also clear evidence of a good measure of approval by the elite and ruling classes as well. Perhaps the most notable is that Montacute House was built by Sir Edward Phelips, a lawyer, who was

both Speaker of the House of Commons and Master of the Rolls. It must surely be an inference that, including a frieze depicting the punishment of the beaten husband in his Great Hall, where he would entertain others of import, shows an approval of the punishment of the Skimmington from a man of great political power. The other early writings mentioned are also all either approving of the Skimmington or lacking in any essential condemnation, although in some instances show some sympathy for the beaten man. In other instances there is more direct evidence of approval such as the fact that some ridings were carried out with the encouragement of the local elite. In one case cited Lady Haslewood, wife of a local squire and justice Sir William, actually proposed a riding should be held.

In concluding his analysis of Charivari, Ingram (Ingram, 1984) has attempted to expose the deeper meanings of the practice. He suggests that far from a folklore tradition exercised by common or lower class and less well educated people, Skimmingtons actually represented a link between ruled and rulers, common folk and elite. Tolerance, acceptance or approval by those in authority resulted from a need to supplement official, yet by no means all pervading and efficient, mechanisms of law by popular co-operation to the perceived overall good. So a certain degree of approval occurred whereby the unofficial paralleled the official and perhaps reduced the need for the latter's involvement. Another alternative suggestion by Davis (Davis, 1971) is that in the Skimmington there was an element of recognition of the strength and indomitable spirit of women.

Other Matters

Evidence from the late Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries shows that all women were not timid and passive. The fact that they participated in acts of violence is evident in the historical record of the many risings, riots or disturbances that occurred in the early modern period in England, mainly in connection with food or grain shortages or profiteering related to food and grain. Women were often the initiators of such riots and participated in them prominently with vigor such that the respected historical scholar Thompson (Thompson, 1972, page 116) reviewing such events stated in a somewhat less than academic tone

"These women appear to have belonged to some pre-history of their sex before its Fall, and to have been unaware that they should have waited for some two hundred years for their Liberation".

He went on to quote an author writing in 1807 who stated, in comment upon the matter of these disturbances, "Women are more disposed to be mutinous; they stand less in fear of the law, partly from ignorance, partly because they presume upon the privilege of their sex, and therefore in public tumults they are foremost in violence and ferocity". Even in the Elizabethan period, there is reason to believe that women played a similar part in public disturbances. In an analysis of factors surrounding the English Civil War, Underdown (Underdown, 1985b) provided evidence that gender and the role of women was one of the social issues that underlay that eventual conflict and also identified examples of female violence, and concern over it, from historical records of the period.

In reviewing the criminality of women in Surrey and Sussex (two southern counties of England) between 1663 and 1802, Beattie (Beattie, 1975) sampled from 62 specimen years and found that the ratio of male crime to female crime was essentially in line with modern figures. Violence constituted about one third of all crime and a male to female ratio of 3:1 or greater existed. Although it is difficult to get exact pictures from such retrospective data some clear inferences appear, which are also evident from other historical analyses of crime in general over these periods in English history. In such an analysis figures for the extent of female violent crime such as 18% of the total are found and it is commented that "it is not difficult to find..... numerous examples of women whose physical strength and courage cannot be doubted". For women charged with murder, the analysis notes that far from only resorting to methods, such as the use of poison, which might be thought of as a more female method of murder, there was evidence of women charged with using knives to stab, a club or iron spit to strike blows to the head, and a pistol as well as acts involving punches and kicks and throwing a victim out of a window to commit murder. Amongst the cases cited, is a woman charged with cutting her husbands throat in Southwark in 1774 in a fit of jealousy and then "dashing his brains out with a poker". What is notable is that the murders by women surveyed were rarely against strangers and were much more likely to be against close relatives to the woman. For instance, these Surrey victims included husbands, children and household servants. Other historical evidence on murders within the family

over a similar period, whilst showing a three to one murder rate of wives by husbands as opposed husbands by wives, do show evidence of wives killing husbands using planned means, such as poisons, whilst men were found to have killed wives often in a drunken rage (Cockburn, 1977, p57).

Further there was good evidence for a substantial number of beatings by women of their female domestic servants such that domestic bullying and abuse by women was not uncommon. Also, women participated in assaults on neighbors often with their husbands and also occasionally on public officials, such as a constable. Within this, husbands were also recorded as victims and perhaps, in contrast to most evidence, occasionally magistrates were called upon to protect a man. Thus one case involved a shoemaker who told how his wife stabbed him and another was of a man who was "so severely beaten by his wife that a magistrate committed her to a house of correction for his protection". In 1734, Susannah Hill was sent to the county jail to be tried at assizes because she attacked her husband with a hammer and a hand whip in such a cruel manner he was deemed to be "in danger of his life" from her. However, the data suggested women's assaults within a domestic context were less well reported than were men's and that crime by married women was particularly under-reported. Significantly, however, the cases sampled reveal that 40% women indicted for assaults were married to men of some substance or position in society such as artisans, tradesmen or even in odd cases a gentleman. So it is difficult to put this evidence of female violence down merely to impoverished, desperate or oppressed women striking out.

Looking Backwards

The available evidence, such as the reference to a Skimmington made by Hardy and the historical analysis of Barret (1895), indicates that at the very least by the end of the Nineteenth century Skimmingtons and similar Charivari processions had ceased to be used widely by the common populace in England. Some sources, however, cite occurrence of a Skimmington Ride in the West Country region as late as 1917, but it is also known that the practice had again been declared unlawful in case law under the 1835 Highway Act as late as 1882 (Firor, 1968). Thus, although uncertainty exists over the exact time of the demise as a lay vehicle (Ingram,1984), the phenomenon of the Skimmington and its

extinction from popular culture is worthy of examination because of what inferences might unfold for present modern consideration of intimate violence and the attendant controversy over male victimization in heterosexual relationships.

In weighing the historical evidence, Ingram asserted that, whilst Skimmingtons can be viewed as a phenomenon of 'low brow' culture, in reality its continued existence over centuries signaled a shared set of views between elite and popular culture. Whilst ample evidence was presented to back this analysis, and a lack of any manifest suppression by the ruling elite, other countervailing aspects of disapproval are also evident.

As already indicated, whilst plenty of official approval or tolerance of Skimmington processions can be found, there were dissenting voices. However, the demise of the Charivari against the beaten husband seems probably not to result totally from this criticism, although there was some mounting sensitivity to such a man's plight. Perhaps not unimportant was the way in which the ideas of inversion, misrule and ridicule inherent in the punishment increasingly became to be used as a vehicle for the expression of popular dissent against authority in general. Hence, for instance, in the many risings that took place in the Eighteenth century and into the Nineteenth century over the price of bread and in other demonstrations against authority figures, a mocking of those authorities utilized elements of the Skimmington. One manifestation of this was the way in which men participating in such demonstrations often dressed as women. By seemingly portraying 'Mrs Skimmingtons', common men were able to invoke the ridicule and derision, otherwise directed at beaten husbands and intended to enforce Patriarchal authority, against Patriarchal authority itself or at least those men deemed to have the power and position who represented it. In some instances the potential of Skimmington inversion as undermining of authority was used as a mechanism for political satire or even mainstream political dissension. The recognition of this potential for subversion and social ferment by men of power and position can be seen even during the Seventeenth century, whereby the potential for public disorder was recognized. Between 1676 and 1693 the King's Bench, one of the highest English Courts, decided that a 'Skimmington Riding' could constitute a riot and was cause for an action of libel, even though cases were rarely brought subsequently.

However, a yet deeper inference drawn by Ingram is the fact that the Skimmington allowed the release of tensions between the notion of an all embracing ethos of Patriarchal authority and the lived experience of male-female relationships in which reality was rather different. Reality was that there were termagants and beaten or cuckolded husbands at all levels of society and the recognition of this uncomfortable fact. The quoted observations of one observer in 1609 illustrates the point: "If I should chance marry with a stout and valiant woman..... and after a while from Cupid's wars fall unto marital arms, I doubt learning would not save me from some unlearned blows", an observation reinforced by Ingram in the further quoted examples of Socrates and Aristotle, and their wives Xanthippe and Phyllis. Indeed, a further inference dating back to ancient Greece might be drawn as the unacceptability of exposure of men's domestic reality by men, which Skimmington reinforced, is evident in the ancient Greek concept of 'oikos' (Cartledge, 1993).

The fundamental tenet and underlying philosophy of Skimmingtons was, of course, the notion that men should be the head of the household and dominant over their wives (ie. oikos). Thus the fact that Skimmingtons occurred can be viewed, not just in the context of the unfortunate subjected man, but in terms of the message that was important to sent to all men. It was meant to convey to men that they were *expected* to be head of their household *or that is how it should seem*. But it was actually the counter-point to the dichotomy between the notion of a male being the figure of authority in male-female relations to the actuality of the reality of lived experience across the whole population as rather a different story (eg. see Coleman and Straus, 1986). However, if this reality was actually openly visible the notion of male dominance would be illusory and its supposed authority decimated. By use of the inversion of the Skimmington in 'the man riding backwards' and 'the woman on top', a safety valve was created which ensured a perception of the rarity of battered husbands existed in contrast to an everyday reality. Order out of disorder, rule out of misrule, but with truth not the only casualty.

Little analysis is apparent for the demise of this lay cultural phenomenon. It is of interest that shortly following on from its disappearance there is the real emergence of social concern for victimized wives, although it is far from certain whether a connection can be conjectured. Perhaps an increasing assimilation of 'middle class' values whereby the acceptability of violence in society waned and male violence against women was seen as

'unmanly' and uncivilized played a part (Tomes, 1978). However, this appears to be a phenomenon of the middle to late Nineteenth century by which time Skimmingtons had already virtually ceased. Otherwise, a series of social changes during the period between the Seventeenth and Nineteenth century are relevant. Speculatively, it might be hypothesized that greater urbanization, industrialization, a growing efficiency of the political and legal processes and perhaps the development of modern organized forces of law (ie. police forces) brought about a reduction in the need or possibilities for social control via neighbourly or local community oversight (Lane, 1974). Industrialization may have impacted by virtue of shifting the focus and energies of young males, who previously had been instrumental in the maintenance of Charivari customs, to an emphasis upon employment practices and wages within a growing class struggle between the 'working class' and their employers, which later gave rise to the Trade Union movement. Modern analysis of Masculinity by authors such as Connell (Connell, 1995) speculate that the advent of industrial society had considerable impact upon men and concepts of Masculinity. It is also apparent (Tomes, 1978) that this process during the Nineteenth century, ironically, saw a greater subjugation of women by restricting their economic opportunity and reinforcement of notions of a virtuous and acquiescent femininity.

Whatever, the loss of the practice does not signify the loss of the reason for it or the attitudes upon which it depended. Clearly, according to Bates (1981) a profusion of legal cases of battered husbands can be found dating from a period when Skimmington was not a distant memory up until the time of writing his paper. Cases such as Willan vs Willan (Bates, 1981), Bateman vs Bateman and Calloby vs Calloby and Perowne (Fricker, 1988) have been cited for their legal merit and interest. These legal records of actual cases drawn from the late Nineteenth century up until the Nineteen-seventies are 'post-Skimmington'. However, in one way vestiges of this former public humiliation continued in the dark humor of cartoons, postcards and stand up comics whereby an effigy of the violent wife and victim husband remained (Saenger, 1963). In this guise, the Charivari was removed from the pointedly personal to a social level, but still conveying the same uncomfortable message, particularly to men. This more modern lay social representation, however, utilized another inversion seeking to portray the dominating wife as the large and sturdy domestic tyrant to her smaller and weaker long suffering mate to invoke uncomfortable humor. The reality that in real, rather than cartoon, life it was just as likely to be large and sturdy

successful men with status outside the home who were the victims of much smaller and supposedly soft, virtuous and feminine women inside the home, was deliberately disguised. Thus a continuous thread of evidence from modern studies of intimate violence, in which Conflict Tactics Scale studies expose female perpetrated assaults and male victimization (eg. Straus, 1993; George, 1994; Morse, 1995) to the times of the Skimmington can be traced with the latter giving credence to the former and vice versa.

History and modern evidence also coincide in other ways. From Elizabethan times, analysis of social mores and crime indicates that women received more favorable treatment being less likely to be indicted and more likely to be acquitted or given less harsh sentences than English men (see Beattie, 1977 p182; Wiener, 1975). This is also a finding of an analysis of criminal statistics in the Nineteen-nineties by the British Government's Home Office (Hedderman and Hough, 1994) in which the same is evident and a specific rebuttal of women receiving harsher treatment for killing husbands, as opposed to men killing wives, was proffered.

Skimmington Revisited

Denial and trivialization of battered husbands has marked the period since Steinmetz's original 1977 claims. The evidence of intimate female aggression in the Conflict Tactics Scale studies has been fiercely suppressed (Fillion, 1997) or attacked as founded upon methodological errors or misconceptions (eg Dobash, Dobash, Wilson and Daly, 1992; Schwartz and Dekeseredy, 1993). This onslaught within academia has been paralleled by similar dismissal and contemptuous disregard within much political, legal and governmental consideration (for instance, see Davis, Radford and Richardson, 1998). Central to this resistance has been an ideology of ubiquitous female victimhood exquisitely founded upon the battered wife. Whilst a begrudging acknowledgement of a very few victimized husbands has occurred, the centrality of the schema of female victimization and male oppression has precluded any more honest exposition least the simplistic representations of gender for lay consumption become inconsistent. Thus, 'elite' culture (ie. that of academia, social commentators such as writers and journalists, politicians, professionals, etc) has sought to manipulate lay consciousness utilizing a presumptive historical framework coupled to the power of modern mass communication systems.

The historical evidence reviewed here on the Charivari and Skimmington highlights that, in this modern analysis of gender, a subtle re-scripting or none to subtle side lining of previous historical realities has occurred. It is as if recognition of the equality of exercise of control in intimate relationships (Stets, 1991) would now threaten muliebrity and show up the present neurosis of gender ideology, rather than just undermine the ethos of supposed male dominance. Moreover, it is suggested that this current discourse can be surmised as extant and contiguous; a predictable development of the attitudes that underlay Skimmington. This lasting attitudinal exigency was recently exposed (George, 1998) in a rebuttal and critique of a British Medical Association report (Davis, Radford and Richardson, 1998) whereby it was commented that:

"The most apt demonstration of the power of prejudicial attitudes is shown by the study of Cook and Harris, 1994. The study used a vignette technique, as espoused and used by a UK researcher quoted in the BMA report (Mooney, 1994), to compare subject's responses to a battered wife, battered husband and battered male homosexual scenario. They reported that in nine out of eleven ratings the heterosexual battered male was rated more negatively than the homosexual battered male. Both males were rated less favourably or sympathetically than the battered female, but the stark point is the difference between the heterosexual and homosexual male. Prejudices and discriminations against homosexual men have been pervasive and deeply ingrained historically and yet that against the battered heterosexual male, uncovered in this study, is even more entrenched and severe. Nothing could ever say more for the plight of the man suffering violence from his female partner; this prejudice alone explains his relative absence from 'official' figures and crime surveys and the denial of his existence in reviews of domestic violence. As previously asserted, the victimization of males by females in domestic relationships is 'The Great Taboo' (George, 1994). Whilst domestic violence male-on-female reinforces stereotypes of strong, dominant, aggressive men and weak, vulnerable, passive women, the reverse operates against two taboos; that females can be aggressive and violent (White and Kowalski, 1994) and that men can be subjected or dominated by an intimate female. Or as Farrell (Farrell, 1994) has pointed out, 'female as victim' attracts men (and elicits sympathy from other women) whilst the 'male as victim' is repugnant to everyone; men and women. The reality is, however, that domestic violence and abuse, whoever the victim, is never inconsequential (Steinmetz, 1987) and affects the health of both women and men (Grandin, Lupri and Brinkerhoff, 1997). The fact

that relationship problems, let alone the experience of violence and abuse, are not inconsequential for men is evidenced by a quote from a book on the treatment of problems in relationships by the leading British professionals in the field (Crowe and Ridley, 1990) at the Institute of Psychiatry. They state:

"When the woman is the overtly dominant partner she will often be volatile and outspoken, socially confident but prone to lose her temper at times. She will often criticise her husband for trivial 'offenses', even in front of third parties, and the male partner, even though he is quite competent and effective in his work, will go along with his wife's wishes and 'give in for the sake of peace'. Such men seem to present in the clinic with loss of interest in sex within the marriage;....., while in others they may also experience erectile impotence". (See page 325) " "

Clearly the attitudes shown by the sample population of this study by Cook and Harris (1994), are rooted firmly within the same continuum of entrenched prejudice that gave rise to Skimmington Ridings centuries ago. Also, recent evidence of the discrimination that victimized men experience within the wider social framework when they try and seek help or sympathetic action by professionals or social or legal agencies is consistent (see Stitt and Macklin, 1995; Cook, 1997). For instance, it is noteworthy that, although some examples exist (see Ingram, 1984, footnote 27; Beattie, 1975), the rarity of prosecutions being brought against females for assaults of intimate males has been historical (Wiener, 1975), not just modern and contemporary (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980; Cook, 1997). Indeed, it might be stated that it is not intimate violence by men against female partners that has been ignored historically and accorded under 'The Rule of Thumb', but rather that the unassailable rule of thumb of history is that, as the ancient poem states very clearly

"No concern'd jury damage for him finds. Nor partial justice her behaviour binds".

So now it is the very denial and trivialization within a public discourse, in what many might consider a more enlightened age, which is the Charivari. The prejudicial treatment of victimized men within legal and social agencies is the means by which the Skimmington is re-enacted and revisited. Such is the manner for the historical enforcement of Patriarchal

authority, the dictum of oikos and the oppression of the ordinary man and hence every man. An inversion by which predominantly now a malfeasant elite, rather than just a malevolent common folk, exact a punishment and humiliation of men, not just for their forbearance of abuse, but for deeming to bring their plight to official attention - for the former transgression giving rise to the 'Skimmington Rides' of old was not just that the abuse occurred, but that it was seen by another. All in order to keep the secret of the 'Great Taboo' (George, 1994). Uncertainty out of certainty, misrule out of rule, disorder out of order and all vice versa, with truth the greatest casualty.

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Figure Legends

Figure 1. English stone church furniture dating from around 1200 A.D. depicting a woman holding a prostrate man by his hair and hitting him with a cheese skimming ladle.

Figure 2. The plaster frieze from Montacute House, Somerset. The scene shows a husband, who is holding a baby, being hit over the head by his wife with a clog. This is being observed by a neighbour with the result that the husband is ridden on a 'cowl staffe' in public to expose him and his wife. The Church in the scene depicts that they are married and supposedly the wife had promised to 'obey' her husband in marriage. (From a photograph taken by the author with the kind permission of the National Trust, Montacute House).