

**REVIEW OF *THE PERREAUS AND MRS. RUDD: FORGERY AND BETRAYAL
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LONDON****

by

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Book: *The Perreaus and Mrs. Rudd: Forgery and Betrayal in Eighteenth-century London*

Author: Donna T. Andrew and Randall McGowen

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I am by training an historian. And because I am an historian, I suppose that I should care about history in a serious way. Sadly, I do not. At night, instead of heading off to the library, I go home and watch TV, dividing my time between *Court TV*, *City Confidential*, and reruns of *Law & Order*. I never seem to tire of these shows. On the contrary, each time I watch a courtroom spectacle, whether real or staged, I experience the most exquisite frissons of *schadenfreude*. I eye the defendant and tell myself that I am smarter, and I eye the prosecutor and tell myself that he or she is a fool, and that had I committed the crime, I would have gotten away with it.

In 1775, even as the American colonies verged on open revolt, all of London was riveted on a case every bit as sensational as those that routinely fill my evenings. Two brothers, Robert and Daniel Perreau, stood accused of forgery. At first, the common-law wife of Daniel, the redoubtable Mrs. Rudd, confessed to the crime; nobody, however, chose to believe her story, leaving the two brothers to stand trial. The case immediately attracted attention, both in the press and among the public at large. For starters, all three parties to the offense were social-climbers, and one, Mrs. Rudd, claimed a pedigree allowing her entree into London's most exalted social circles. The two brothers, moreover, happened to be twins, thus further complicating the thorny problem of determining who had done what.

What made the case especially titillating was the prospect that one or all of the parties might hang for the offense. No one, however, seriously thought that this would happen, that is, until Robert and Daniel were both convicted and sentenced to hang. It was at this point that Mrs. Rudd was also charged with forgery, notwithstanding a previous grant of immunity. This, however, meant that evidence that she had given against herself could not be used in her trial; it also helped that she happened to be defended by what might today be called a "dream team," each of whom was prepared to badger, mock, and humiliate the witnesses for the prosecution. In the end, Mrs. Rudd was acquitted, if only on a technicality; even so, her reputation was in tatters, and to that extent polite society could derive some satisfaction from the outcome of the trial. Not so with the brothers Perreau. Here public opinion was sharply divided: some pitied the brothers, believing them to be the unwitting dupes of the scheming Mrs. Rudd, while others reviled them, seeing in their handsome visages the very face of

upstart greed. Whatever the merits of their case, the brothers' fate was sealed when Mrs. Rudd was acquitted. To the end, they insisted on their innocence. This was in fact highly unsettling: unlike most condemned felons, the Perreaus steadfastly refused to accept the justice of their verdict, and by so doing they succeeded, if only posthumously, in rehabilitating their reputations.

Even today it is a riveting story, and the contribution of Andrew and McGowen is to link it to the larger preoccupations of the defendants' contemporaries. Above all, the authors ask good questions, each time providing detailed answers. Why, for example, was forgery a capital offense? Their answer, one that is entirely convincing, is that forgery, like theft, was a crime that especially affected men and women of property, most of whom routinely parlayed reputation into credit. Under the circumstances, "If seemingly honest dealers were exposed as unworthy of the trust bestowed on them, if reputations could not be relied upon, then the wealth so ostentatiously displayed in London might well prove to be an illusion." And the authors are on especially strong ground in their discussion of fashion—and of the ways in which the Perreaus and Mrs. Rudd exploited it as they sought admittance into London's highest social circles:

. . . the make-believe world of fashion . . . held out promises, especially for people who wished to rise quickly. For the world of fashion was in tension with the world of birth and fixed hierarchy. The latter claimed a static and stable character, while the former not only exposed a dynamic principle but revealed the shifting composition of the upper classes. Fashion depended upon consumption, upon display and leisure. It required wealth, but it converted wealth into taste. If it announced exclusion, it also offered a principle of mobility, a means to translate money into elegance. (125-126)

The research is first-rate. Over the course of a detailed and exhaustive narrative, there were only two missteps, both entirely minor. On page 9, the authors seem to imply that complaints about bad behavior at public executions were somehow recent. These were in fact complaints of long-standing¹. And on page 23, the authors speak of "a country growing richer." This was doubtless true for a good many people, including the exalted circles to which both the Perreaus and Mrs. Rudd aspired, but the fact remains that most people, as measured by real wages², were growing poorer in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Perhaps there should have been a few paragraphs about those people, if only to bring home why the Perreaus and Mrs. Rudd took such extraordinary risks in their scramble to befriend and bilk the well-to-do.

But again, these are entirely minor quibbles, and in no way do they detract from the solid research that went into this book—or from the ways in which the authors succeed in using a seemingly superficial scandal to cast light on some of the darker undercurrents of eighteenth-century England. That said: this is an oddly disjointed book, a function, I suspect, of having two cooks in the kitchen. The book starts with a compelling description of the trial and subsequent execution of the two Perreaus, but after that the narrative loops and becomes overly long. As far as I can tell, the two authors took on separate chapters, each presumably speaking to a particular area of expertise. The problem is that the discussion then starts to

repeat; there are also occasional inconsistencies. There is, for example, a great deal of overlap in the discussion of how the press covered the trial; Mrs. Rudd is for the most part called “Mrs. Rudd,” but is in spots simply called “Rudd”; and only late in the game do we discover that the Perreaus, with their distinctive surname, were of Huguenot stock.

In fairness, this is not an easy story to tell. And Andrew and McGowen are right in linking the trial and the anxieties that it aroused to larger currents in the social and economic history of late Georgian England. But their attempts to do so necessarily come at the price of maintaining a seamless and pleasing narrative. Under the circumstances, collaboration was probably not the best way to go; at the very least, it should have been attempted on a very different basis, with one author controlling the narrative and the other taking on a complementary and more technical task.

ENDNOTES

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¹ See, for example, Bernard Mandeville, *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Frequent Executions at Tyburn: and a Proposal for Some Regulations Concerning Felons in Prison, and the Good Effects to Be Expected from them. To which Is Added, a Discourse on Transportation, and a Method to Render that Punishment More Effectual* (London: J. Roberts, 1725), and *The London Magazine; or, Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer*, February 1751, p. 82.

² L. D. Schwarz, “The Standard of Living in the Long Run: London, 1700-1860,” *Economic History Review* 38, no. 1 (1985), pp. 24-41.