I agreed to review this book because of its title and subtitle, which claims it to be “a comparative and interdisciplinary history.” It is nothing of the sort and both editors and publishers should be ashamed of the announcement. It is in fact a collection of essays of varied quality by historians and anthropologists, largely drawn from those presented at a conference entitled “Matrilineality and Patrilineality in Comparative and Historical Perspective” organised by a group in Comparative Women’s History at the University of Minnesota. The regions and peoples covered include ancient Rome, the contemporary Nayar, eighteenth-century New England, and Highland Austria. The editors have contributed a general introduction to the volume but its central theme seems to be human variability and, following Collier and Yanagisako, the calling into question of some of the fundamental premises of anthropological kinship theory, “namely the indisputable basis of nature or biology for the mother-child bond or for male authority.” To many, the second challenge has long been acceptable (even if we have to explain the widespread distribution of such authority) while in this crude form the first is not (even if that bond is variable, it exists, in nature as in culture). A recognition of variability, they argue, will facilitate the construction of more sensitive analytic categories, but they engage neither in this worthy task nor yet in the establishment of “a new general theory of kinship.”

It is difficult to conceive of what such a “general theory of kinship” would look like. Or one of religion for that matter. So it does not seem altogether profitable to pursue that grail. In any case, both editors
and authors are concerned with more immediate topics, such as those embodied in the title of the original conference, namely "patrilineal and matrilineal aspects of human kinship systems," a topic (that of descent or unilineal descent groups) that was of central concern to the nineteenth-century founders of anthropology, largely because of this same interest in variability. The problem with the present collection is not only that it avoids the main "historical" questions, which it may be difficult or impossible to deal with satisfactorily on the evidence we have available at this time, but most of the authors seem to neglect the more subtle distinctions in descent and kinship systems that some have tried to delineate in more recent times. Not that there is complete agreement on these points in scholarly circles, but the authors might have paid more attention to some of these technical contributions since they broach technical questions.

For example, a number of contributors employ a loose use of "patrilineal," which at various times is identified with patrifiliation, agnation, patrifocality, and patriarchy. Historians (and some anthropologists) have not caught on that there are some useful distinctions to be made here that serve to illuminate some of the questions with which they are dealing. Patrifiliation for example is usually used in relation to paternity; patrilineality has to do with descent in its technical usage as membership of a unilineal group such as a clan or lineage. A recognition of these differences would alter the frame of enquiry. At the most concrete level we are entitled to ask, were there really patrilineages in medieval London in the sense that comparative research has given to this form, for example, in the work of Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer of the Southern Sudan. Here is at best a loose usage which seems to cover the existence of any patriline or manifestation of patriarchy.¹

Even when dealing with patrilineal descent groups, the authors are constantly dogged by some vision of a "patrilineal society" in which kinship appears to be traced through exclusively male links. Many modern (feminist) writers shed valuable light on male-female relationships in human societies. They do so by pointing to contradictions (or conflicts?) within patrilineal (or sometimes patriarchal) systems. In this book, societies are divided into patrilineal ones, which include north India, the Cameroons, and Italy (medieval England is patriarchal), and matrilineal ones, with some movement from the latter to the former.