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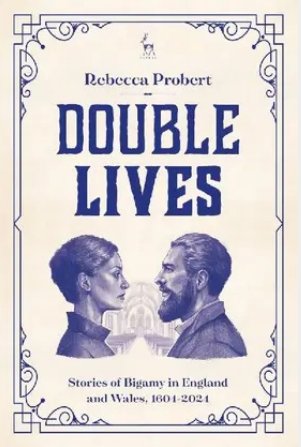
Double Lives

Stories of Bigamy in England and Wales, 1604-2024



This book explores the fascinating backstories and unexpected sequels of bigamous marriages from the 17th century to the present day. A woman remarries after hearing that her husband has drowned, only for him to turn up alive and well. Is she now a criminal? A deserted husband, unable to afford a divorce, finds happiness in a new union. How many did the same? A conman advertises for a wife and then disappears with her lifesavings; he has already done the same to many other women. How was he brought to justice? These are just a few of the hundreds of bigamous remarriages put under the microscope in Double Lives. As a companion volume to Double Trouble: Bigamy and the Law in England and Wales, 1604-2024, this book goes behind the law reports to reconstruct the stories of those involved. Drawing on archival sources, pamphlets, newspapers, census data, parish registers, divorce petitions and family histories, it shows the different forms that bigamy might take - accidental, consensual, deceptive or exploitative - and how bigamists' stories in turn helped to shape the law. Double Lives shows how bigamy should not be dismissed as a comical or victimless crime. Every case had its own complex mix of desire and deception, and, all too often, heartbreak for someone.

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