This book uses a wide range of primary sources – legal, literary and demographic – to provide a radical reassessment of eighteenth-century marriage. It disproves the widespread assumption that couples married simply by exchanging consent, demonstrating that such exchanges were regarded merely as contracts to marry and that marriage in church was almost universal outside London. It shows how the Clandestine Marriages Act of 1753 was primarily intended to prevent clergymen operating out of London’s Fleet prison from conducting marriages, and that it was successful in so doing. It also refutes the idea that the 1753 Act was harsh or strictly interpreted, illustrating the courts’ pragmatic approach. Finally, it establishes that only a few non-Anglicans married according to their own rites before the Act; while afterwards most (save the exempted Quakers and Jews) similarly married in church. In short, eighteenth-century couples complied with whatever the law required for a valid marriage.

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PREFACE

This book has taken shape over many years and has benefited in different ways from conversations with numerous people, including Stephen Cretney, Judith Masson, Anne Barlow, Brian Dempsey, Steve Hindle, John Snape, and Gary Watt. Gren Hatton provided invaluable context on Kilsby, while Gwen Wilkins kindly let me consult her Warwickshire marriage index. My wonderful mother-in-law Rachel Brown was always willing to provide accommodation in London when I needed to use the libraries there, and made sure that I was well fed. Emma Watt provided both the first reference in the book and, indirectly, the last, and Ruth Foster-Smith provided encouragement throughout.

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Office Huntingdon, the Cobh Genealogical Project, Michael Snape, Martin MacGregor and Rosemary Harden of the Fashion Museum in Bath. Since the Exeter archive holding the Devon marriage index was unfortunately closed when I visited, Heather Holmes kindly agreed to act as a research assistant and checked the index for the marital status of the final few couples that I had been unable to trace. Tony Foster-Smith provided valuable information about life in eighteenth-century Anglesey, incidentally confirming my suspicion that Lewis Morris was not a source to be relied upon (see pp. 98–9). And I would also like to thank Helen Riley of the University of Warwick library for always informing me of the latest electronic resources available from my desk.

But, above all, I would like to thank my husband Liam, not only for his patience and forbearance, but also for his diligence as a research assistant, his willingness to engage with the arguments in the book, and his meticulous proof-reading. If he had not discovered that the marriage register of Llansantffraed Glyn Ceiriog not only existed, but was available to order as a transcript, I might never have developed the case studies that form so important a part of this book (and we would certainly have had fewer holidays located by local record offices). This book is dedicated to him, with all my love.