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Witchcraft Historiography (review)

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Abstract
This important collection should be of interest to almost all readers of this journal. There have been countless book-length studies, and no few general surveys, of the history of European witchcraft and witch-hunting from the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries. The historiography of witchcraft, however, has received much less attention, and always in journal or encyclopedia articles, or as sections within books. This is hardly unusual. Book-length historiographies are rare. Yet the historiography of witchcraft is exceptionally fascinating. As the editors note, few other topics have engaged so directly with so many different methods and approaches to doing history. Especially given that much of the work in witchcraft studies is relatively recent (the field really came alive in the 1970s), the number of major methodological problems confronted (and contested) is impressive.

Disciplines
Cultural History | History of Religion | Other History | Social History

Comments

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Witchcraft Historiography (review)

Michael D. Bailey

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This important collection should be of interest to almost all readers of this journal. There have been countless book-length studies, and no few general surveys, of the history of European witchcraft and witch-hunting from the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries. The historiography of witchcraft, however, has received much less attention, and always in journal or encyclopedia articles, or as sections within books. This is hardly unusual. Book-length historiographies are rare. Yet the historiography of witchcraft is exceptionally fascinating. As the editors note, few other topics have engaged so directly with so many different methods and approaches to doing history. Especially given that much of the work in witchcraft studies is relatively recent (the field really came alive in the 1970s), the number of major methodological problems confronted (and contested) is impressive.

The essays in this volume begin long before the 1970s, however, for many of the problems historians face when working on witchcraft stem from the way this phenomenon was conceived and constructed in the past. The first article, by P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, focuses on the era of the trials themselves, and examines how early modern authorities and prosecutors of witchcraft placed the object of their attention in time. His point is that early modern authorities did not generally regard witchcraft as a historical phenomenon, but rather as a manifestation of perennial demonic hostility toward humanity. Although most treatises against witches were very much products of their time, deriving from reformist energies or being spurred by anxieties concerning confessional conflict or wars of religion, their authors did not conceive of witchcraft as a product of any particular age, and so simply did not discuss it in such terms.

Maxwell-Stuart’s piece is followed by an essay by Peter Elmer focusing on the relation between ideas of witchcraft and the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century. Elmer notes that ever since the Enlightenment, a standard interpretation of the historical decline of witchcraft, or at least of witch trials, has been that progressive developments in science and medicine alleviated the anxieties that fed fear of witches, and ultimately undermined belief.
in a supernaturally infected universe. Starting in the 1960s, however, and especially since the 1990s, scholars have increasingly rejected the notion that early modern science was incompatible with belief in witchcraft. Whatever finally pushed fear of witches out of mainstream Western consciousness, it was not some inherently progressive quality of Western intellectual culture.

After these two chapters focusing on how ideas of witchcraft interacted with other intellectual currents in the past, the volume begins to move more or less chronologically through post-Enlightenment historiographical developments. Christa Tuczay outlines the mainstream nineteenth-century “liberal-rationalist” tradition that regarded early modern witch-beliefs as remnants of “medieval” superstition and the prosecution of supposed witches as an example of irrational religiosity run amok. She associates this tradition above all with Germany and the United States (e.g., Wilhelm Gottlieb Soldan and Joseph Hansen, George Lincoln Burr and Henry Charles Lea). She also notes a countervailing tradition based in Romanticism that regarded witches (potentially) as bearers of ancient and laudable folk beliefs. While she sees the earliest appearance of such ideas in Germany (with Jakob Grimm), she associates it mostly with England and France (Walter Scott and Jules Michelet). In the early twentieth century, strains of the Romantic tradition were responsible for giving rise to the fanciful notion that an actual cult of witches existed in medieval and early modern Europe, either as a functioning ancient fertility cult (Margaret Murray) or, in a quite different vein, as a real diabolical cult (Montague Summers). These developments, and these two personalities, are discussed in the subsequent essay by Juliette Wood.

In the second half of the twentieth century, most work on witchcraft continued to follow the “liberal-rationalist” view that elite fears of supposed diabolical conspiracies drove witch-hunting, and that witch trials represented a horrible example of the persecution of innocents. Scholars drew back from declaring such fears or their consequences to be “irrational,” however, because, as Raisa Maria Toivo next argues, they were conditioned by the experience of World War II to realize how persecutorial and even genocidal trends arose out of specific historical circumstances and could hardly be relegated to a conveniently irrational premodern past. While major figures such as Hugh Trevor-Roper and Norman Cohn clearly did place witch trials in larger frameworks of persecution, I am unsure how directly this should be traced to the reverberations of the Holocaust, unless it be through more general changes in the practice of professional history and a more general loosening of conviction in the progressive certainties of the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the effects Toivo identifies constituted the next major stage in witchcraft historiography.
Beginning in the 1970s, multiple channels began to develop in the increasingly complex and rich historiography of witchcraft. Seeking to situate the rise of witch trials more specifically in early modern European culture, some scholars, led by Robert Muchembled, argued for the use of witch trials as a key element in early modern state formation and in the acculturation of the European masses to new systems of state control. Other scholars challenged the “acculturation thesis,” both as applied to witchcraft and as employed in other areas of early modern history, on numerous grounds. In the 1980s and 1990s, Margaret Murray’s discredited notion of witchcraft representing an ancient fertility religion was somewhat revived in studies by Carlo Ginzburg (who had done his earliest work in the 1960s) and others focusing on links between the witches’ sabbath and archaic shamanism. Marko Nenonen gives a good account of the strengths and weaknesses of the acculturation thesis. Willem de Blécourt brings sharp criticism to bear on Ginzburg, and gives some taste of the very newest historiography in this area by suggesting that the connection between witchcraft and shamanism may be entirely misplaced.

Brian Levack next argues that if witchcraft is to be linked to anything, it should be to the history of the law, something too rarely done despite the fact that the main sources for witchcraft studies are trial records. Levack argues convincingly that legal procedure played a major role in shaping witch trials, and that legal skepticism played a major role in ending them. He then suggests that the next step, only beginning to be taken now, is to situate witchcraft within more general histories of early modern crime and criminality. While such an approach would help elucidate the context of trials, the most promising approach to elucidating the still-murky thought of demonologists that supported intellectual acceptance of the basic idea of witchcraft involves bringing the resources of the linguistic turn in cultural studies, and particularly ideas developed by Stephen Greenblatt and other literary New Historians, to bear on witchcraft. Here, as Marion Gibson shows, especially Stuart Clark but also other scholars such as Diane Purkiss have led the way, critiquing both how we have read sources of witchcraft from the past and how we have written our own histories of the subject.

Continuing into the 1990s, Katherine Hodgkin notes that despite witchcraft’s long association with women, only very recently has witchcraft scholarship come to take up this issue in a serious fashion. Even in the 1970s and 1980s, most of what was written on women and witchcraft was produced by committed feminists working outside of academia, or at least outside of the discipline of history. Their work was thus all too easy for historians to dismiss. Only in the 1990s, Hodgkin asserts, as history turned seriously to issues of
“mind and body,” were historians finally able to explore the nuanced ways in which witchcraft was a gendered construction. In particular she focuses on Lyndal Roper’s application of psychoanalytic theory and broad ideas of concern over bad motherhood and fertility in general to assert the centrality of women as women in witchcraft. Hodgkin notes with slight alarm the most recent tendency to focus on male witches (of which there were certainly large numbers). While obviously gender studies should concern both sexes, she wonders whether the ready acceptance of studies focused on male witches will quickly resubvert women in our understanding of witchcraft.

Moving outside of history per se, Richard Jenkins addresses how other social sciences have figured in the study of witchcraft. He notes that social and cultural historians, beginning in the 1970s and continuing until today, have proven eager to adopt anthropological and sociological theories into their studies of historical witchcraft. On the other hand, anthropologists and sociologists have only much more rarely addressed early modern witchcraft (as opposed to witchcraft in the modern world). Jenkins surmises this is because, while theories may travel easily from one discipline to another, actual historical methods of examining the past cannot so easily be picked up by social scientists. Witchcraft continues to exist in modern Europe and the United States (Jenkins does not address Africa or other regions in the world where witchcraft also exists in modern times), and he notes this is a subject to which anthropologists and sociologists can and do turn their attention.

The final article by Jo Pearson addresses the challenge that modern witchcraft presents for historians, particularly in its Wiccan variety. Wiccans, of course, have their own pseudohistory of witchcraft as a fertility religion, based on the fallacious ideas of Margaret Murray, and their own dearly held myths of the so-called “burning times” when (one standard lines goes) nine million women perished in the fires of witch hunts. All this has been shown to be historically false, and most Wiccans now accept that fact. Most also persist in maintaining their myths and deliberately false history as an essential element of their beliefs and their basic social stance (against patriarchal religion, for the empowerment of women, and so forth). Pearson neither fully approves nor strongly condemns. She notes that all religions are, at some level, based on mythical and ahistorical beliefs. She also notes, however, the particular quandary of founding beliefs on a deliberately falsified history—one set, after all, only four hundred to five hundred years ago, rather than one, two, or three millennia. What does it mean for a believer not simply to use myth to fill in the gaps or flesh out a largely historically opaque ur-time, but to proclaim a mythic story in considerable opposition to known and well-established history? Yet not all the uneasiness here is on the side of the Wic-
cans. What does it mean for historians to go about performing their craft in a field that is also occupied by very immediate and important (to believers) religious myths? Who owns history? Those who study it with (to their minds) rigorous detachment, or those who make use of it for (to their minds) essential spiritual and moral goals?

This tension makes a fine concluding note to this collection, which of course cannot really “conclude” since the historiography of witchcraft is in no sense done developing. This volume should be regarded as a survey. Readers will find little new information on topics they know well. Only very rarely do the authors get deep enough into the minutiae of historiographical debates to really contest specific points (De Blécourt’s criticism of Ginzburg is by far the sharpest attack on any historiographical position). Yet the volume does what a survey should do—provide a clear and sensible overview of a broad field, setting major trends in coherent relation to one another. Such an overview of the historiography of European witchcraft has never before been presented. The editors did an outstanding job of eliciting complementary essays that flow extremely well into one another. This survey will be valuable for every scholar working on any aspect of historical European witchcraft. Insofar as the study of European witchcraft is still the central arena of magical and witchcraft studies, frequently offering models and methodologies to scholars working in other geographic and chronological zones, I reiterate my opening that this book should be of interest to virtually all readers of this journal.

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Sarah Ferber’s incisive, well-written, and exhaustively researched monograph is a fascinating addition to the field of early modern history. It appears at a time when the publication of a host of new texts has signaled a renewal of scholarly interest in the role of diabolic possession in the premodern world: Philip C. Almond, Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England: Contemporary Texts and their Cultural Contexts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Nancy Caciola, Discerning Sprits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003); J. H. Chajes, Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism (Philad...