Popular Witchcraft: Straight from the Witch’s Mouth (review)

Michael D. Bailey
Iowa State University, mdbailey@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs
Part of the Cultural History Commons, History of Religion Commons, Other History Commons, and the Social History Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs/32. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.
Popular Witchcraft: Straight from the Witch's Mouth (review)

Abstract
This book, a revised second edition, appears under the imprimatur (one hopes not the nihil obstat) of the University of Wisconsin Press, which recently acquired the Popular Press line in which the book first appeared in 1972. The updating for the 2004 edition was surely not difficult. Since the book has no real structure or argument, snippets of new information, mainly references to Mel Gibson's film The Passion of the Christ or the Harry Potter books, could simply be tossed into the mix. None of the vast scholarship on witchcraft that has appeared in the last thirty years is taken into account, but then, the first edition did not reference any real scholarship either.

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

Comments

Rights
All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations used for purposes of scholarly citation, none of this work may be reproduced in any form by any means without written permission from the publisher. For information address the University of Pennsylvania Press, 3905 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-4112.
Popular Witchcraft: Straight from the Witch’s Mouth
(review)

Michael D. Bailey

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 1, Number 2, Winter 2006, pp. 249-251 (Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: 10.1353/mrw.0.0012

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mrw/summary/v001/1.2.bailey.html
infused with Christian names and symbols is well established. Does this mean that the magicians were monks, priests, or Christian laymen—or perhaps even pagan practitioners pandering to nominally Christian clients? If they were Christian, are they more likely to have been orthodox or Gnostic? Fascinating as they are, these questions do not admit of confident answer. Much depends on one’s assumptions about how quickly the ascetic movement produced a monastic “underworld,” and how much contact the monks in this underworld had with laypeople. The normative literature of Egyptian monasticism comes mainly from the hermitages and monasteries remote from urban life, but there were monasteries in or near the cities, and the latter are more likely to have harbored monks with the inclination to practice magic and ready access to clients.

If there is any particular reason to think that monks who otherwise waged war against demons might have turned to demonic aid, it comes from a theme that Brakke notes: it was a commonplace that every individual had an attendant angel, and some early Christian writers thought that everyone also had a demon companion as a tempter. Might this personal fallen angel have served also as the “assistant” or “companion” envisaged at times in the magical papyri, as Brakke suggests? Yes, the notion might well have been ripe for such interpretation. Still, these are among the more speculative points in a book that, on the whole, is distinguished for amply documented insight and carefully established argument—meticulous, but never dull.

RICHARD KIECKHEFER
Northwestern University


This book, a revised second edition, appears under the imprimatur (one hopes not the nihil obstat) of the University of Wisconsin Press, which recently acquired the Popular Press line in which the book first appeared in 1972. The updating for the 2004 edition was surely not difficult. Since the book has no real structure or argument, snippets of new information, mainly references to Mel Gisbon’s film The Passion of the Christ or the Harry Potter books, could simply be tossed into the mix. None of the vast scholarship on witchcraft that has appeared in the last thirty years is taken into account, but then, the first edition did not reference any real scholarship either.
Jack Fritscher was ordained an exorcist in the Catholic Church in 1963, but by the late 1960s he had become interested in the occult and counterculture scene in San Francisco. The book begins by reprinting a 1971 interview with Anton Szandor LaVey, founder of the San Francisco–based Church of Satan, that now is little more than a time-capsule piece. The first real chapter addresses witchcraft and the law, and is the most historical part of the book, if such a term can be applied to this mishmash of misconstrued information wrenched from any meaningful context. On a single page the author jumps from Frankenstein to My Fair Lady to Ovid’s Metamorphoses (in that order), all putatively to explain something about the gender-identity dynamics of the Malleus maleficarum (p. 42) Very little attention, in fact, is given to the long and complex legal history of witchcraft. Instead witchcraft is simply presented as a thing opposed by intolerant, oppressive Christianity. In this capacity, it is lumped crudely with Judaism and homosexuality. There is no doubt that historically, Christianity did not approve of witchcraft, Judaism, or homosexuality. Simply saying so again and again, however, adds little to our understanding.

The second chapter focuses on modern pop culture and its appropriations of witchcraft and the occult, speedily surveying movies, music, television, advertising, and other cultural areas. No one can deny that occult elements have figured in all these fields. Given the many obvious references on which to draw, one wonders at the need to cite Bing Crosby’s ‘‘rather Wiccan ‘White Christmas’’’ (p. 79). The reference is never explained, but the songs of another crooner, Frank Sinatra, are put under more extensive scrutiny. It is revealed, for example, that ‘‘Old Blue Eyes’’ nickname is actually a coded reference to his ability to cast the evil eye (p. 80). In the realm of movies and television, Fritscher hits some obvious targets. Rosemary’s Baby gets extensive consideration; The Exorcist gets a mention or two. We also learn, however, that The Godfather is a prominent occult masterpiece, since the Mafia is a “secret society” (p. 82), apparently no different in its goals and activities than the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Even more jarringly, the talking horse Mr. Ed is presented as a prime example of “lycanthropy” (pp. 115–16). But the value of such assertions is beside the point. Fritscher is not building any argument; he is simply presenting a laundry list of such dazzling disarray that it ultimately conveys nothing.

The third chapter focuses on sex and witchcraft. Again, one would think there would be plenty of ground to cover dealing either with the complex ways historical witchcraft has been linked to female sexuality, or the ways in which modern culture has sexualized much of the occult. Instead, Fritscher discourses mainly on male homosexuality, which he reports “has survived as
a secret culture as old as witchcraft itself’’ (p. 137). It is revealed, in fact, that the first witch was actually a homosexual man. “The scenario is this: Abel, with his queer eye, saw through his brother, Cain, and laughed ironically at his brother’s patriarchal demands, because Abel’s secret knowledge made him the first seer, the first witch, the first gay man on the sacred path, and the first ‘bashed’ queer’’ (p. 143). A neat story. Except in the Bible Cain slew Abel because Abel had made a more pleasing offering to the Lord. So it would appear that Abel, in fact, was more apt at fulfilling “patriarchal demands.” Fritscher quickly defends his reading by noting that it is “as valid as any private interpretation of the Bible” (p. 143).

The book has no argument and engages in no analysis. It simply spews out a torrent of mostly misconstrued information, snaps its fingers, and dares you to tell it that it is wrong. The fourth and final chapter consists of a batch of interviews with witches and occult practitioners—thereby fulfilling the “straight from the witch’s mouth” promise of the title—equally invulnerable to critique and devoid of any analysis. Yet one wonders what real witches and practicing occultists would think of this book. Since he offers no serious critical engagement with any of the issues he raises, Fritscher is able to remain untroubled by his own facile association of all aspects of modern occult practice—astrologers, satanists, and Wiccans all get stirred together in the same cauldron. Yet these groups have real differences. This is evident from the opening interview, in which the satanist LaVey proclaims his detestation for all Wiccans. Yet such points do not trouble Fritscher. Why should they? His reading of modern occult subcultures is, after all, as valid as any other private interpretation.

MICHAEL D. BAILEY
Iowa State University


To the commoners, legalists, theologians, magistrates, and theater professionals of early modern England and its American colonies, witchcraft presented a compelling epistemological puzzle. Today’s cultural and literary historians, in turn, are bent on unraveling the multilayered and often contradictory solutions to this puzzle offered by the early moderns. At issue—then as now—are the distinction between illusion and reality, determining the agency of supernatural acts, establishing and evaluating the authorship of