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Review of "The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America"

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

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Review of "The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America"

Abstract
The history of witchcraft is booming. Brian Levack introduces this volume by noting the furious pace at which publications appear. The field is also well-seeded by a sub-torrent of syntheses, reference works, and guides. This is partly because of the field's dynamic development, and also because publishers know that books with the word "witchcraft" in their titles will sell. How, then, can a new volume aiming to survey the history of witchcraft distinguish itself? It might stretch the traditional boundaries of its topic, addressing not just maleficent witchcraft per se but also elite ritual conjurations, popular healing practices, divination, or other aspects of the broader magical culture of early modern Europe in which the beliefs and practices associated with witchcraft were embedded. While some essays here gesture in that direction, however, this volume remains resolutely focused on witchcraft and above all the witch trials that have long been the main focus of historians working in this area. Another approach might be to stretch the chronology or geography under consideration, but as its title indicates, this volume concentrates on early modern Europe, along with two essays addressing Europe's American colonies. The third option, in some ways the most daring, is simply to provide outstanding coverage of the core areas of witchcraft studies, geographically, chronologically, and thematically. This volume takes that third approach, and it succeeds brilliantly.

Disciplines
Cultural History

Comments
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Brian Levack has assembled a first-rate team of authors. For almost every essay, he has managed to get one of the best scholars working in that area. The volume's promise to summarize the current state of the field is, therefore, well realized. The Handbook is divided into three sections. The first presents eight essays addressing "Witch Beliefs." Here we find (inter alia) Richard Kieckhefer connecting witchcraft to earlier medieval notions of harmful magic, Edward Bever discussing common magical beliefs and practices that provide the broader context for witchcraft, and Willem de Blécourt dissecting the notion of the witches' sabbath. But the heart of the Handbook is its second section, on "Witchcraft Prosecutions." The first essay, again by Richard Kieckhefer, sets the stage by charting the rise of witch trials in the fifteenth century. The last essay, by Levack, discusses the decline of witch hunting across Europe. In between are fourteen essays that treat, in turn, Germany, France, the borderland "Rhine-Moselle Region," the Netherlands, Italy, Iberia, England, Scotland, Poland, Hungary, Russia, Scandinavia, British North America, and Spanish and Portuguese Central and South America. The final section deals with "Themes of Witchcraft Research," looking at witchcraft from the perspectives of gender, legal
Certain themes run through much of the volume. Many essays stress the fact that there was never a single overarching stereotype of witchcraft that applied across Europe. Rather, multiple stereotypes converged or diverged, producing a rich tapestry of regional variation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of gender. While women were widely regarded as more likely than men to be witches, in all regions some percentage of witchcraft accusations were leveled against men, and in certain regions the majority of accused witches were male. Several essays also highlight continual skepticism about witchcraft, or at least about certain aspects of witches’ supposed practices, throughout the entire period under consideration, rather than just as an aspect of witch-hunting’s decline. Walter Stephens contributes an excellent essay focused exclusively on this topic, and it emerges elsewhere in discussions of demonology and of the trials themselves. Several essays also stress the early end of witch trials in many regions, usually long before overall belief in witchcraft had faded to any extent. The volume also emphasizes the continual reduction over the past several decades in estimates of the overall number of trials, although a few essays suggest there could be grounds for bumping the estimates back up, in light of how many trial records have been lost and how many accusations may not have made it to a court hearing. Experts will not be shocked by any of these findings, but those using the Handbook as an entry point into the field will find them valuable.

Despite the extensive coverage, a few important topics are addressed only obliquely. Rather than any single essay addressing sources, the Handbook leaves it to the regionally focused essays in the “Prosecution” section to discuss the nature of trial records, or not, as their authors see fit. There are, in the “Beliefs” section, essays on demonological treatises and on witchcraft in art, as well as an essay by Diane Purkiss on “Witchcraft in Early Modern Literature,” although it actually focuses only on English literature. Some treatment of witchcraft in the literatures of other European vernaculars would have been desirable, but that might have necessitated multiple essays on multiple lands, like we have here with trials in the “Prosecution” section. There is also no single essay surveying the complex historiography of witchcraft, although all the essays address the historiography of their particular topics to some degree, and a few are almost entirely historiographical in their approach.

I found myself both grateful for and mildly frustrated by the central “Prosecution” section. There is no doubt that witch trials have been and remain the core of witchcraft studies. Given how the volume is framed, it obviously should give extensive treatment to the trials, and considering the incredible variations in legal regimes for witch-hunting across Europe, a geographical approach is very sensible. But given that trials
have long been the focus of so much work, for many regions there is relatively little new to say about them. In pointing out directions for future research (something every essay in the volume explicitly addresses), several authors in this section indicate that the utility of simply adding more and more trial studies to our database is probably decreasing. Again, however, the Handbook is intended for newcomers to the field, as well as experts, and the dominance of regional trial studies up to this point is certainly a key feature of the state of the field. And even experts will appreciate reliable overviews of trials in regions with which they are less familiar.

Michael D. Bailey, Iowa State University


In eGods, veteran sociologist of religion William Sims Bainbridge explores the intersections between religion and forty-one fantasy video games ranging from World of Warcraft, a massively multiplayer online (MMO) personal computer game, to The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, a solo game for the Nintendo 64 console. Suggesting that “firm conviction in a well-defined dogma is not the natural state of human religion,” and that “ancient people” understood their myths to be fictive “fantasies” rather than literal accounts, Bainbridge proposes a “curvilinear model of religion,” which maintains that “faith was fluid and inseparable from fantasy early in human history, and it will be the same late in human history.” As the prominence and influence of “traditional religion” continues to wane, Bainbridge argues that fantasy video games have the potential to reawaken ancient religiosity in a modern key, offering fresh modes of spirituality which hearken back to the very “origins of religion” (4-5).

Bainbridge organizes the chapters of eGods around a selection of topics pertinent to the study of religion, including “Deities,” “Souls,” “Magic,” “Morality,” and “Death.” He frames his research as the result of “nine great quests” given him by the “gods of science” (21), a grand exploration of the psychological, sociological, and cultural significance of fantasy video games as they relate to religion. His arguments and suggestions are accordingly ambitious, provocative, and forward-facing, while also appealing to the purported example of ancient religion. At the broadest level, Bainbridge points out that fantasy video games, much like religions, offer participants intricate mythologies and immersive “quest(s) for meaning” (264). Interactions with non-player characters can provide “morally instructive parable(s)” (197), and
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