WRITINGS ON FOLK HORROR

Philip Jenkins

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Dark Majesty and Folk Horror

July 29, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
8 Comments

This coming Monday, August 1, marks the medieval feast of Lammas, Loaf-mass, the year's first harvest festival, and that coincides with one of the great feasts of the ancient Irish calendar, *Lughnasa*. This also brings me to a curious anniversary, which tells us a little bit about medieval history, and a great deal about the making of modern day mythologies. I'll be writing several columns on this general topic, which overlaps nicely with Beth Barr's recent posts at this very blog about myths concerning paganism and witchcraft.

On August 2, 1100, the English king William Rufus was killed by an arrow while hunting in the New Forest, probably in an assassination, possibly by a genuine accident. We really don't know. In modern times, though, that story developed an unexpected afterlife through the work of a bizarre scholar called Margaret A. Murray (1863-1963). Murray was a distinguished Egyptologist, who developed a grand unified theory of European witchcraft. She argued that the records of witch-trials were not simply fictitious, but actually contained accounts of genuine underground pagan cults that flourished within a notionally Christian Europe.

This theory was not wholly new to her, and she had plenty of predecessors over the previous decades, including feminists like Matilda Joslyn Gage. However, Murray brought the idea to a mass audience. That theory was expressed in Murray's enormously influential 1921 book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, and in *The God of the Witches* (1931). These books inspired countless horror novels, and Murray's writings are even cited in H. P. Lovecraft's *Call of Cthulhu*. They also largely inspired the actual creation of the Wicca movement, the supposedly revived witchcraft created by Gerald Gardner in the 1950s. Notionally, that too was a revival of an ancient pagan cult.

Modern scholarship has thoroughly demolished Murray's claims, but she got battier and more aggressive as she got older. Seeing crypto-pagans everywhere, she developed a still more grotesque theory that drew on Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough*. The last chapter of *God of the Witches* presented a theory of continuing human sacrifice in English history, a theme that she developed even further in *The Divine King in England (*1954). In ancient times, she believed, pagan kings were regularly sacrificed for the good of the land and the flourishing of the crops. That custom, she believed, survived among the nobility into notionally Christian times, and some historical royal deaths were actually thinly described human sacrifices.

Among these, she prominently included William Rufus's death in 1100, This death, she noted, occurred the day after Lammas, that ancient pagan celebration. Further, she claimed, this day was was once known as the Gules of August, which she took to mean a "Red" day: so why else was William called Rufus, red? It all fitted together. He was a sacred king, the Divine Victim, and a voluntary sacrifice, on this red day of blood. (Gules does not in fact mean Red in this context, but let that pass). The king's favorite oath was "By the Face of Lucca," referring to a popular relic. For Murray, though, this actually meant the holy face of a pagan god, perhaps the Norse Loki, or the Celtic Lugh.

However weird that all sounds, that thesis was presented in other works, and made some impact in popular culture. Back in 1968, I remember a stunning and very spooky BBC radio play that presented this view of Rufus's death, Lydia Ragosin's *Dark Majesty*. Does a copy survive anywhere?

Murray included other deaths in her mythology. One of the odder was St. Thomas Becket, who was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170, a couple of days after the Winter Solstice. That dating, by the way, indicates one of the key problems with her whole work. It would be wonderful if her kings and prelates had died precisely and punctually on special sacrificial dates, but they never did. They died a day or two before or after: these were extremely moveable feasts. Even William Rufus inconveniently died on August 2, not 1. In her later writings, she noted that X's death was suspicious because it occurred in one of the so-called "sacrifice *months"* – so statistically, pretty much half of all deaths of any kind fell into her grand scheme just by virtue of date.

Oh yes, and Joan of Arc was also a pagan human sacrifice, the work of the witch-cult.

As I say, nobody takes Murray's work seriously now, and her divine king thesis was thought really embarrassing at the time. As early as 1956, Angus Wilson's novel *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* contains a riotous sketch of a thinly disguised Murray, depicting her as sliding into paranoid insanity. (Wilson had met her through his work at the British Museum, and they must have had some astonishing conversations).

But her writings were influential in their way. In Britain, the decade after 1968 or so marked an explosion of what is now labeled Folk Horror, films and novels that assumed something like the Murray mythological scheme. The term Folk Horror is quite recent, and was apparently coined by Mark Gatiss in a television documentary in 2010. The phenomenon itself, though, is much older and is a major cultural fact. These films (and books, and television plays, and songs, and rock albums) emphasized themes of landscape, superstition, folk customs and deep heritage, all of which concealed a lethal pagan past. There really were pagan cults lurking in every quaint village, witches really were out to sacrifice you. The greatest monument to this was probably the 1973 film *The Wicker Man*, which shows up on many lists these days as one of the three or four greatest British films ever made.

Ultimately, this all had real world consequences, as the Folk Horror fictions of the 1970s became the essential foundation for the Satanic and Ritual Abuse panics of the 1980s and beyond.

I just add a side note. William Rufus died in the New Forest, in Hampshire, and that New Forest connection plays a role in the later history of occultism. From 1938, a resident of the same region was one Gerald Gardner, the retired civil servant who created modern Wicca, and who moved to Highcliffe, just over the Dorset border. He claimed to have been initiated into an older witches' coven in the area, a group whose actual existence is hotly debated. Gardner himself claimed it was an authentic survival of the ancient witch cult as imagined by Murray. Almost certainly, what had actually happened was that a group of educated local occultists had read Murray, and formed their New Forest coven based on her literary inspiration. This was a classic example of nature imitating art.

One great book on these matters is Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon* (1999).

It all makes me think of the wonderful definition offered by Ambrose Bierce in his Devil's Dictionary:

MYTHOLOGY, n. The body of a primitive people's beliefs concerning its origin, early history, heroes, deities and so forth, as distinguished from the true accounts which it invents later.

More on all this next time, and specifically on the deep literary roots of *The Wicker Man*.

And a happy Lammas-tide to you all. I don't think my Hallmark store has the appropriate cards.

I see that *The Wicker Man* continues to inspire! See now the amazing video for Radiohead's Burn the Witch.

The Black Dog and the Wicker Man

August 5, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Last time I described how rogue academics produced a mythology of continuingpaganism and human sacrifice in supposedly Christian England, right up to modern times. The main rogue in question was an Egyptologist gone bad by the name of Margaret Murray. Supposedly, there was a continuing tradition of secret underground paganism linked to ancient cults and rituals, committing their misdeeds at the same sacred places, with a central element of human sacrifice. That folklore inspired the 1970s fictional genre of Folk Horror, the centerpiece of which was the 1973 classic *The Wicker Man*.

Feeding into the Murray mythology was a story that occurred in February 1945 in the Warwickshire village of Lower Quinton, a few miles from Stratford on Avon. It's a large saga with huge resonances in popular culture, so I will sketch it briefly here. It's suggestive about the making of wholly bogus modern legends, and how they come to be believed as sober fact.

From the outset, let me state one golden rule when you read anything about the Walton case: doubt pretty much every statement associated with it and you won't go far wrong. Many of the major "experts" discussing the case were wildly unreliable, and one – Donald McCormick, or "Richard Deacon" – was a serial liar and regular fabricator of bogus sources. Many of the myths are debunked in Simon Read's recent book on *The Case That Foiled Fabian: Murder and Witchcraft in Rural England* (History Press, 2014).

On Valentine's Day in 1945, elderly agricultural laborer Charles Walton was found murdered, his throat slashed. A leading Scotland Yard detective, Robert Fabian, investigated the case, which remains unsolved to this day. Almost certainly, the death resulted from a local feud, quite unrelated to religion or the occult – it might even have been a fight over unpaid wages. However, the story soon acquired a vast attendant mythology. Walton, it was rumored, was killed because he was a

witch, and there were many were stories of witch-like practices, and reputed visions of a demonic black dog.

Claims about the nature of Walton's death escalated rapidly. Originally, the claim that this was a "witch-murder," perhaps committed by someone who thought that the murdered man was a malevolent witch, and that violence was the only way of breaking his spells. Such an interpretation is not ridiculous in its own right, as such crimes have indeed happened in modern times. (One notorious Irish example occurred in 1895). There was in fact no evidence for such a motive in Walton's case, but it was just within the realms of plausibility.

Soon, though, more extreme claims surfaced, charging that Walton was a human sacrifice, presumably killed by a pagan or Satanic ring or cult. That interpretation goes much further in its implications, attributing the crime not just to one deranged individual but to a whole organized clandestine subculture. In 1950, the 87 -year old Margaret Murray herself turned up in Lower Quinton to "investigate," and to nobody's surprise, she found the case supported her theories wonderfully. As the story grew and metastasized through the years, Walton became a sacrificial victim whose blood was shed for the good of the crops.

With a bit of sleight of hand, even the date could be made significant. The crime happened on February 14, but theorists like Murray soon pointed out that under the old British calendar that applied through 1752, there would be a twelve day difference in dates, so that Walton died on Old Candlemas, which coincided with *Imbolc*, one of the great feasts of the pagan Celtic year.

In his memoir, *Fabian of the Yard* (1950), the detective wrote that "on the hilltops round Lower Quinton there are circles of stones where witches are reputed to hold Sabbaths." That is very problematic. Briefly, no, there weren't sabbaths there c.1945, and never had been. Witches Sabbaths were unknown in England until they emerged as a modern literary concoction. The nearest plausible circle was Rollright Stones, twelve miles away, which is actually quite a distance in the micro-communities of this area of England. And no, Charles Walton's body was not found in the heart of a stone circle, potent though such an image might be.

Many years after the event, Fabian also wrote the following: "I advise anybody who is tempted at any time to venture into Black Magic, witchcraft, Shamanism – call it what you will – to remember Charles Walton and to think of his death, which was clearly the ghastly climax of a pagan rite. There is no stronger argument for keeping as far away as possible from the villains with their swords, incense and mumbo-jumbo. It is prudence on which your future peace of mind and even your life could depend." Fabian even claimed a personal encounter with the black dog.

Fabian was very much a media cop, and stories based on his memoirs formed the basis of a 1950s television series that offers a close English analogy to *Dragnet*. I would treat pretty much everything he said about any topic whatever very skeptically.

His occult emphasis is really surprising for the time, and requires some explanation. The main other name in the story was thriller writer Dennis Wheatley, who in 1934 published the very influential *The Devil Rides Out*. This not only imported the theme of occult cults and conspiracies to modern Britain, but also integrated the originally separate mythologies of Witches Sabbaths and Satanic black masses. Among other things, that brought the Celtic ritual calendar into the mix, with demonic dates

like Halloween, Beltane/Walpurgisnacht, Lammas, and Candlemas. Wheatley was also innovative in depicting such cults in the present day, as a manifestation of elite decadence. He continued to build on and recycle his books right through the 1940s and beyond, with a couple of later rehashes into the 1960s. (One reviewer calls Wheatley "the suburban bluffer who sold 20 million books," and draws a comparison with Dan Brown).

Fabian must have been getting his material from Wheatley, directly or otherwise. (For the cultural overlaps between the two men, see Gareth Medway, *Lure of the Sinister: The Unnatural History of Satanism*, 2001). In his 1954 book *London After Dark* Fabian has quite a bit to say about alleged Black Magic and Satanism in modern London, but the events he claims to have witnessed sound like sado-masochistic vice operations rather than anything more devotional, still less homicidal.

Incidentally, the date of Charles Walton's death followed by only a few months the trial and conviction of Helen Duncan, one of the last people to be convicted under England's 1735 Witchcraft Act – and in fact, she was jailed. She was in no sense a witch, but rather a (admittedly bogus) medium, but it is amazing to think that the legal apparatus against witchcraft still existed in this time. But that case was in the news at the time of reports of Walton's death, and it sensitized journalists to the appeal of a juicy occult story with a "witch" tag.

I would add one other influence. In the 1910s and 1920s, there was a whole school of popular English writing that depicted dark and nameless horrors in degenerate rural villages, a best-selling genre represented by the works of Mary Webb. Although not centrally concerned with occult matters, witches and spells did feature regularly. Today, that writing is recalled, if at all, through the riotously funny parody found in Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), where the characters can never quite bring themselves to describe the "something nasty in the woodshed," the ineffable horror that blights their lives. But such writing left its mark in the popular consciousness. (The 1995 film of *Cold Comfort Farm* is wonderful).

Whatever its sources, the Walton story seemed to confirm the idea of paganism and witch murders continuing in modern England. The story grew and metastasized through the years – although one of my complaints about Simon Read's book is that he really says surprisingly little about this popular culture afterlife. The Walton case supplied the essential foundation for the whole folk horror genre, and beyond that, contributed mightily to the Satanism and Ritual Abuse panic of the 1980s and 1990s.

In his 2013 book *Pagan Britain*, Ronald Hutton includes an excellent chapter on what plausibly can and cannot be said about possible pagan survivals into Christian and modern times. I may disagree with him on specifics, but this is a solid basis for any future discussions.

Witches in the Village

August 8, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

In 1945, English villager Charles Walton was gruesomely murdered in what sensationalist media decided was a sinister "witch murder," even a human sacrifice, in the community of Lower Quinton. That story, as described by detective Robert Fabian, became the foundation of a whole genre of fantastic fiction, Folk Horror, and this spilled over into the real world.

The Walton story received something like canonical form on television in 1961 in an episode of Boris Karloff's wonderful *Thriller* series, entitled *Hayfork and Billhook*. This depicts something very close to the Walton case, with a Fabian-style detective investigating dark doings in a backward English village – I mean, *really* backward. This is a ludicrous parody of contemporary rural England where witchcraft beliefs run riot, witches are commonly murdered, and everyone knows about the dark sacrificial rituals that proceed unchecked in the ancient stone circle. The script was by a popular English actor and television writer of the day called Alan Caillou, who took his name from his wartime nom de guerre in British special forces. (I have never quite determined how authentic those reported heroic deeds were. I raise that question because I am conscious of the fantasy military life of the much better known Christopher Lee, who starred unforgettably in the classic 1973 film of *The Wicker Man*.)

If you suspend critical judgment, *Hayfork and Billhook* is actually great watching, with one disastrous exception. At points in the story, the heroine must see and be horrified by the spectral black dog that featured so centrally in the Walton myth, but the actual beast cast in the role may be the least frightening mutt ever put on screen. On the positive side, the final struggle within the local stone circle is terrific. I watch the episode whenever I can, although it is definitely a guilty pleasure. It is a genuine and pioneering example of the Folk Horror genre, although its American origins mean that it is virtually never listed in that canon. It was assuredly broadcast in the UK in the early 1960s, because I saw it then, although I don't know precisely how it might have influenced later works.

The Lower Quinton horrors inspired another pivotal work, namely David Pinner's 1967 novel *Ritual*, in which a visiting detective has to solve occult-related deaths in an English village. (Note the same Fabian-derived format). In this instance, the murder victims are children or teens, with a strong sexual element. This might reflect the British fascination with serial child murder following the horrific Moors Murders of the mid-1960s.

That brings us neatly to the film directly linked to *Ritual*, namely *The Wicker Man,* which likewise has a child-murder theme. Although this film changes many details of the Pinner novel (notably the changed setting, from Cornwall to Scotland), that book clearly was the source, and is now acknowledged as thus in all the many writings on the film. Christopher Lee bought the film rights from Pinner in 1971.

Another influence was the widely viewed (and utterly chilling) 1970 television play *Robin Redbreast*. After many years of being unobtainable, it is now on Youtube. Glory be! I won't summarize it in too much detail here, except to say that it portrays a modern day village pagan cult in terms absolutely and explicitly drawn from Margaret Murray, and from Frazer's *Golden Bough*. A young man becomes the Sacred King, who is to be killed and dismembered for the good of the land. Killed and dismembered, but not necessarily in that order. In a conclusion, the lethal pagan leader expounds a Frazerian fertility cult myth – in fact, he tells a visitor that she must read an important book on the history of religion, *The Golden Bough*, "in seven volumes." Bookish antiquarian speculation merges with ancient fertility cult.

The play's author, John Bowen, said that he based the story on the Lower Quinton murder, although his account of the Walton case is absolutely mythical. Walton, he says, was a tramp murdered by villagers, and dragged along so that his blood might serve for the good of the crops. Wrong on all counts.

In multiple ways, *Robin Redbreast* is very significant in its own right, not least as daringly innovative television drama. Broadcast in primetime, it introduced those Frazer-Murray ideas to a mass audience. Beyond doubt, also, it influenced *The Wicker Man*, which was then in gestation.

Folk Horror reached its climax in these years. Just to take a couple of examples out of many, 1968 brought the wonderful film of Dennis Wheatley's *Devil Rides Out* (with Christopher Lee yet again) and also Donald McCormick's highly unreliable book *Murder by Witchcraft: A Study of the Lower Quinton and Hagley Wood Murders* (writing as Richard Deacon). The film *Witchfinder-General* appeared in 1968, as did the radio play *Dark Majesty*, which I referred to in a previous post. A series of horror films and TV presentations followed over the next few years. You can still see some of these TV productions on Youtube, such as The Stone Tape (1972), or Penda's Fen (1974).

The pagan/sacrifice myth also made an enormous impact in music, in the folk revival. Even the name folk horror was invented as a kind of tribute to "folk music." This was the era of groups like Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention, who revived medieval folk songs and ballads in electronic form. Much of that music was deeply supernatural and witchy in tone, with all its fairies, elves and gnomes. In 1970-1971, Britain acquired its legendary rock festival at the spiritual center of Glastonbury, with all its ancient religious associations, and those pioneering events were awash with pagan and New Agey trappings. (I know, I was there). As in the US, underlying so much of the spiritual upsurge was a deep new concern with the environment, with the sanctity of the Earth, and the landscape.

We hear echoes in rock. 1968 was the year that the rock group Black Sabbath was formed, under heavy Dennis Wheatley influence. In 1973, Led Zeppelin brought out the album *Houses of the Holy,* with its interior art depicting an apparent pagan child sacrifice. That album features the track *No Quarter*, with its Viking death squads. Looking back at such themes today, it is difficult to avoid seeing them through the lens of the hilarious parody in *This is Spinal Tap*, with its bungled attempt at mounting a sinister Stonehenge-and-druids ritual on stage. At the time, though, it all seemed deadly serious.

Plenty of recent lists have tried to assemble a folk horror canon, including television programs that proliferated through the 1970s. Looking at such collections these days, the main thing that strikes us is not just how abundant these productions were, but how many of them were explicitly targeted towards children and teens, and made for children's television. Amazing in retrospect, perhaps.

This all goes a long way to explaining how, between the 1930s and 1970s, people came to believe that witches, Satanists and human sacrifices were alive and well in contemporary Britain. By the 1980s and 1990s, staggeringly gullible and irresponsible police officers, therapists and social workers were seeking out and investigating supposedly genuine witches and Satanists, who were allegedly organized in ritual child abuse gangs. Those modern day witch-hunters did a terrifying amount of harm in the process.

It should be said here that this is not a case of "no smoke without fire." In Britain as in the US, the Satanic Ritual Abuse scare was wholly bogus from start to finish, without a shred of plausible fact. As so often in the world of alleged Satanism and devil worship, the primary detonator for the mythology was a tacky piece of pulp fiction, amplified through (supposedly) true crime exposés. In such cases, it never hurts to throw in a sensation-grabbing detective, and an academic prepared to follow stories uncritically down all sorts of weird rabbit holes.

Thank heaven that all this is in the distant past, and no such credulous cops, lying journalists, or gullible academics can be found today.

A useful book on all this is Joanne Parker, ed., *Written on Stone: The Cultural Reception of British Prehistoric Monuments* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009). In that book, see especially Charles Butler, "Children of the Stones: Prehistoric Sites in British Children"s Fantasy, 1965-2005," and Neil Mortimer, "Pulp Archaeology: Megaliths in Popular Culture ."

Wood Magic

August 12, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
5 Comments

I have been posting about pagan survivals into Christian times, not in terms of actual continuities so much as modern romantic reconstructions of those matters. As I noted, scholars like Margaret Murray used such a vision as the basis for a whole recreation of a supposed ancientpaganism surviving in modern times in the form of the witch-cult. My colleague Beth Barr has blogged often about such modern mythologies concerning medieval times, and on witchcraft.

I use this discussion as an excuse to reproduce here a poem I like a lot, from the Scottish writer John Buchan, from his 1910 collection *The Moon Endureth*. Buchan had a very strange mixture of interests, and is best known for sturdy all-British heroes fighting German spies, as in *The Thirty Nine Steps*. He seems like the ultimate Establishment insider, who ended his days as Lord Tweedsmuir and Governor General of Canada. At the same time, he had a powerful interest in occult and esoteric matters. I have blogged about his astonishing conspiracy novel *The Power-House*, and his 1927 book *Witch Wood* used the Murray theory of pagan survivals into Christian times. Buchan was a much weirder writer than we often give him credit for.

Anyway, here is *Wood Magic*, with its memorable closing lines.

Wood Magic

(9th Century)

I will walk warily in the wise woods on the fringes of eventide,
For the covert is full of noises and the stir of nameless things.
I have seen in the dusk of the beeches the shapes of the lords that ride,

And down in the marish hollow I have heard the lady who sings.
And once in an April gloaming I met a maid on the sward,
All marble-white and gleaming and tender and wild of eye;–
I, Jehan the hunter, who speak am a grown man, middling hard,
But I dreamt a month of the maid, and wept I knew not why.

Down by the edge of the firs, in a coppice of heath and vine,
Is an old moss-grown altar, shaded by briar and bloom,
Denys, the priest, hath told me 'twas the lord Apollo's shrine
In the days ere Christ came down from God to the Virgin's womb.
I never go past but I doff my cap and avert my eyes–

(Were Denys to catch me I trow I'd do penance for half a year)–
For once I saw a flame there and the smoke of a sacrifice,
And a voice spake out of the thicket that froze my soul with fear.

Wherefore to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,
Mary the Blessed Mother, and the kindly Saints as well,
I will give glory and praise, and them I cherish the most,
For they have the keys of Heaven, and save the soul from Hell.

But likewise I will spare for the Lord Apollo a grace,
And a bow for the lady Venus – as a friend but not as a thrall.
'Tis true they are out of Heaven, but some day they may win the place;
For gods are kittle cattle, and a wise man honours them all.

It's notable that this was written long before Murray had developed her theory, so this was an independent contribution.

Putting this in context, I also think of Rudyard Kipling's then-recent exploration of England's deep roots in *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906). That includes the Tree Song, with the lines

Oh, do not tell the priest our plight,

Or he would call it a sin;

But–we have been out in the woods all night,

A-conjuring Summer in!

And we bring you good news by word of mouth —

Good news for cattle and corn —

Now is the Sun come up from the south,

With Oak, and Ash, and Thorn!

In *Rewards and Fairies* (1911), Kipling imagined the continuing problem of "[medieval] girls dancing on the sly before Balder," long after their notional Christian conversion.

And for comparison, here is Kipling's own poem that is not too far removed from Buchan's – also from 1910, in fact. This is *The Way Through the Woods*:

They shut the road through the woods
Seventy years ago.
Weather and rain have undone it again,
And now you would never know
There was once a road through the woods
Before they planted the trees.
It is underneath the coppice and heath
And the thin anemones.
Only the keeper sees
That, where the ring-dove broods,
And the badgers roll at ease,
There was once a road through the woods.

Yet, if you enter the woods
Of a summer evening late,
When the night-air cools on the trout-ringed pools
Where the otter whistles his mate,
(They fear not men in the woods,

Because they see so few.)
You will hear the beat of a horse's feet,
And the swish of a skirt in the dew,
Steadily cantering through
The misty solitudes,
As though they perfectly knew
The old lost road through the woods …
But there is no road through the woods.

Kipling, like Buchan, came to be regarded as a stolid pillar of the literary establishment, but he could be a very interesting writer indeed.

Around 1910, it seems, various writers were looking into the dark woods and seeing ghosts, and maybe even pagan pasts

Britain's Pagan Twilight

August 19, 2016 by Philip Jenkins

I have been writing about the long-standing British fascination with the idea of a continuing ruralpaganism, ideas that in the 1960s grew into the genre of Folk Horror. But why did the ideas of witch-cult theorist Margaret Murray attract such a wide and credulous following?

Looking at the writings of such mainstream figures as John Buchan and Rudyard Kipling suggests how very mainstream such notions were in the late Victorian and Edwardian era, roughly 1890-1918. British culture was saturated in occult and esoteric thought at this time, with extensive beliefs in ghosts and the demonic, Theosophy and spiritualism, and (yes) fairies, and those by no means imagined just in terms of children's literature.

This was a golden age of horror and fantasy literature, which did their bit to popularize these themes. Think of M. R. James, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, Lord Dunsany, and strictly mainstream figures like W. B. Yeats. We don't usually put them together under the same cultural roof, but Stoker's *Dracula*, for instance, appeared in 1897, and Barrie's play of *Peter Pan* in 1904. Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, spent much of his life trying to prove the truth of Spiritualism. Meanwhile, Yeats, Lady Gregory, and others kept the Celtic Twilight literature in full flow throughout these Edwardian years, with all its fairies, curses, visions, and supernatural trappings. Giving a pseudo-scientific basis to so much of this were the successive editions of Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, which appeared between 1890 and 1915.

It's suggestive how many of these key figures were Scottish, Irish, or (Machen) Welsh – actually, Celts like Buchan were in a fair majority.

Before saying anything else about paganism, I really have to define my terms. From the Renaissance onwards, most writers in English made great use of Classical literature and analogy, and often cited Roman or Greek pagan deities. Any poem about the sea is likely to cite Neptune or Poseidon. What changed during the nineteenth century is that scholars and authors became aware of the distinctive gods of their own landscape, the German or Norse deities, and later, of the ancient dark gods who preceded them, chthonic figures whose very names were generally lost. What I am discussing here is the idea that the cults of those old native gods survived and continued in the landscape, perhaps recalled in the guise of devils or demons. Even Buchan's poem Wood Magic cites the old gods as Apollo and Venus, though the speaker explains that it is the learned priest who has told him these Classical names.

Oddly, if I was looking at the critical pioneer of the "continuing paganism" genre, it would be Thomas Hardy, another writer who went on to core Establishment respectability. But if you look at early novels of his like *The Woodlanders* (1887) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), they have a huge amount in common with later Folk Horror. *Tess*, for instance, begins with the heroine marching in a women's May Day event that Hardy clearly thinks of as a modern day continuation of an ancient pagan rite. When Tess sings a psalm, Hardy calls it "a Fetishistic utterance in a Monotheistic setting; women whose chief companions are the forms and forces of outdoor Nature retain in their souls far more of the Pagan fantasy of their remote forefathers than of the systematized religion taught their race at later date."

Tess ends with her facing capture and death within Stonehenge, almost as a sacrifice to the pagan gods.

Although it is not well known to non-specialists today, *The Woodlanders* delves deep into pagan ideas. The book follows the cycles of the year in a village dominated by its apple orchards, with all the pagan-looking ceremonies attached to different seasons of the year. The character Giles Winterborne is described explicitly as an incarnation of a pagan deity, the spirit of the Fruit:

He looked and smelt like Autumn's very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-color, his eyes blue as corn-flowers, his boots and leggings dyed with fruit-stains, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips, and everywhere about him that atmosphere of cider which at its first return each season has such an indescribable fascination for those who have been born and bred among the orchards. …..

He rose upon her memory as the fruit-god and the wood-god in alternation; sometimes leafy, and smeared with green lichen, as she had seen him among the sappy boughs of the plantations; sometimes cider-stained, and with apple-pips in the hair of his arms, as she had met him on his return from cider-making in White Hart Vale, with his vats and presses beside him.

This is a deeply and authentically visionary pagan novel. Its ideas run very close to those of Frazer, but the latter's work would only appear from 1890 onward, and when they did, Hardy read him with much interest. But if anything, it looks as if Hardy influenced Frazer, rather than the other way round.

He did not mean it in this context, but I think of Marlowe's first words about London in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899): "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth."

I would also add one point that might seem obvious, but which rarely gets stressed enough when discussing the origins of witch-cult myths. In the early twentieth century, most educated Brits (and Irish) had studied German, and had read some Goethe. If they knew anything, they knew *Faust* and the spectacular witches sabbat scene on the Brocken on Walpurgis Nacht. They thus had an established framework of what witches did into which later ideas could easily be slotted. Reading *Faust* also gave them a religious sense of the Eternal Feminine.

So pagan witches and their ancient gods and goddesses …. Why not?

The best book on the historical and cultural background of all this is G. R. Searle, *A New England?* (2004) and especially the long chapter on Art and Culture. This is very good on the rural revivalism and romanticism of this age, the attempts by elites to rediscover "authentic" folk cultures and generally get back to an imagined countryside, paganism and all.

There are of course any number of more detailed books on the occult and esoteric movement of the age. Ronald Hutton's excellent books tell us a great deal about the early history of these pagan notions. And see also Marion Gibson, *Imagining the Pagan Past: Gods and goddesses in literature and history since the Dark Ages* (Routledge, 2013).

The Place Called Dagon

August 29, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I have been posting abut the modern mythology that tried to understand witchcraft as an authentic underground survival of ancientpaganism, and how those myths of witchcraft and devil worship evolved into the modern farrago of Satanism. Throughout, I stress the role of academics, and of fiction-writers, whose ideas came to be believed as sober fact. Here, I want to look at one of the most influential books in this process, albeit one that is today largely forgotten. This is Herbert Gorman's 1927 novel *The Place Called Dagon*.

I should say that I wrote about this topic some years ago in an essay called "Weird Tales: The Story of a Delusion," in M. W. Anderson and Brett Alexander Savory, *The Last Pentacle of the Sun: Writings In Support of the West Memphis Three* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004): 35-41. That essay has been quite widely quoted, but the actual book is quite hard to get, hence the present posting. By the way, that book is the only example to date where I got to share pages with Metallica's frontman James Hetfield, not to mention Margaret Cho.

In the 1920s, British Egyptologist Margaret Murray put forward her notorious theories about the witch-cult-as-pagan-survival, and these had a huge influence in the interwar years. They had a natural appeal in the United States, where an increasingly urban society was open to dark fantasies about what was going on in those rural backwaters. A sensationalist media focused on local tales of witches, wizards, and witch-murders (see my 2000 book *Mystics and Messiahs*). Those ideas fueled fictional writings in magazines like *Weird Tales* (founded 1923), and in the writings of authors like H. P. Lovecraft.

For present purposes, though, the main work was *The Place Called Dagon*, which portrays a secret cult in a western Massachusetts town populated by descendants of refugees from Salem, and still practicing what Lovecraft describes as "the morbid and degenerate horrors of the Black Sabbat." The novel thus appeared several years before Dennis Wheatley attempted a similar English modernization of those stories in his novel *The Devil Rides Out* (1934).

Herbert Gorman (1893-1954) was born in Massachusetts, in Springfield. He is best known today as an early biographer of James Joyce, whose genius he already recognized by the early 1920s. However, his career had two other main aspects. First, he was thoroughly familiar with nineteenth century France, so that he could draw on French speculations concerning the Black Mass. The Black Mass achieved a literary revival in the decadent literature of late nineteenth century France, and an extensive account appeared in J.-K. Huysmans' novel *Là–Bas* (*Down There*). Gorman knew this literature well.

But he also wrote extensively on nineteenth century American writers like Longfellow and Hawthorne, and it was precisely in 1927 that Gorman also published his biography, *Hawthorne: A Study In Solitude*. Now, the Hawthorne link is critical, since that writer too was deeply interested in New England witch persecutions. His classic "Young Goodman Brown" can be read as describing a genuine rural witch-cult, though the standard reading is that the story involves a fantasy or delusion.

What Gorman did was to bring that idea into the twentieth century, and to take the unprecedented step of presenting an occult or Satanic theme in modern-day 1920s America.

Gorman argues that the Salem witches "belonged to a secret and blasphemous order that met all over the world, that they were divided into covens or parishes, that they each had their leader in the shape of a Black Man who represented the devil, and that they attempted to practice magic…. The trappings and the ceremonies and the results might appear supernatural, but that was because the people in those days did not know about such things as thought-transference, auto-suggestion and the impulsion of the will."

But they had not vanished after the great persecutions of 1692. Instead, some of the group fled to "Dagon" where they raised the great altar of the Devil Stone. "By day they were taciturn people, carrying on the quiet masquerade of pioneers, building up homes in the clearing, pushing the forest farther and farther back; but when the moon rose, the madness that was in their blood swept them out of themselves and they became other creatures employing pagan symbols and ancient phallic ceremonials. They existed in a domain out of place and time then, in a land of hallucinations and dreams and primitive urges."

In modern times, a charismatic leader "reinstituted witch meetings, formed a coven here, and made himself the ruling Black Man … These people lead two lives, and one of them is the surface life that we see going on about us. The other is the secret life that centers about the place called Dagon."

At the climax, we see the secret rituals at Dagon, at which Asmodeus is invoked in a kind of Black Mass. The affair culminates in the attempted sacrifice of a woman, which is interrupted by the forceful intervention of the hero, who attacks and kills the group's leader, the Reverend George Burroughs. That was of course the name of the actual minister at Salem.

The name Dagon evoked some bitter controversies of seventeenth century New England, which suggested that that Puritan society really had had its covert pagan side. The case in question was the notorious incident in 1627-28 in which dissidents erected a maypole of the type familiar from the English countryside, and held a festive gathering under the auspices of the Lord and Lady of the May. The story is recounted in Hawthorne's "Maypole of Merry Mount" (1836), and is echoed faithfully by Gorman throughout *The Place Called Dagon*. Aware of its pagan connotations, outraged Puritan leaders denounced the maypole as a Dagon, after an idol mentioned in the Bible.

I think this is only coincidence, but Gorman's *Dagon* appeared the very same year as John Buchan's *Witch Wood*, which has some similarities, despite its late seventeenth century setting. These themes were just in the air by the late 1920s.

I can't prove that Gorman knew Murray's writings, but it would be an amazing coincidence if he did not (Lovecraft certainly cited her). But he does show how much of the witchcraft/Satanism mythology could be constructed fairly independently based on purely American sources.

But in the US as in England, the whole occult mythology was a purely literary/academic concoction.

The Nightmare Before Halloween

October 28, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I love Halloween, and I love horror fiction. One of the most powerful and evocative contributions to both areas is a lengthy poem that is now regarded as one of the greatest exemplars of modern poetry in the British Isles. As we approach Halloween, it amply repays your attention.

The poem is the Ballad of the Mari Lwyd, published in 1941 by Wales's Vernon Watkins (1906-67). The Ballad takes as its subject a startling ritual that long prevailed in Welsh rural areas at New Year or Christmas. Groups of men would go door to door in costume, following the Mari Lwyd, a kind of hobby horse with a horse's skull. They would sing and recite poems, engaging in rhymes and competitions with householders, but the basic goal was to be given food or drink. And definitely, alcohol was involved throughout.

Although this spooky custom was long regarded as an ancient pagan survival (and it might indeed be so) it is only documented from the 1790s. The Mari Lwyd came close to extinction in the early twentieth century, but it has since revived and become popular once more. Ironically, that revival has only been made possible by the preservation of some of the old rhymes and rituals by Puritanical clergy who were furiously trying to suppress the custom as a pagan abomination. In its modern guise, the Mari Lwyd is much more conspicuously neo-pagan, with strong borrowings from films like *The Wicker Man*.

Full disclosure: the custom's main areas of popularity were and still are within twenty miles or so of my birthplace.

The Mari Lwyd is a symbol of the turning of the year, when living and dead encounter each other, and some writers think the custom might have been displaced from an older association with *Samhain*, Halloween. I personally think we might have gone too far in recent years in rejecting the ancient roots and pagan origins of such things, but let me just state the case and leave it there.

Vernon Watkins's phenomenal poem is in fact more of a dramatic production, with assigned parts for speakers, and choruses. Rowan Williams calls it "one of the outstanding poems of the century, [which] draws together the folk-ritual of the New Year, the Christian Eucharist, the uneasy frontier between living and dead, so as to present a model of what poetry itself is – frontier work between death and life, old year and new, bread and body." It is an incredible achievement in terms of its metrical quality, and its importation of intricate Welsh verse-forms into English. I do not attempt here to expand upon Williams's analysis, but rather to point readers to the poem itself, and to suggest it as deeply appropriate reading for the season. You can download it full text here.

In a way, the poem makes the New Year event sound more like a Mexican Day of the Dead, as the dead return to the homes. But it is more frightening than that quite benevolent celebration, in that the Welsh dead are back to judge the sins of their successors, who remain in terror under a kind of siege. It is a thoroughly liminal work, about the thin borders separating living and dead.

Some samples:

Go back. We have heard of dead men's bones

That hunger out in the air.

Jealous they break through their burial-stones,

Their white hands joined in a prayer.

They rip the seams of their proper white clothes

And with red throats parched for gin,

With buckled knuckles and bottle-necked oaths

They hammer the door of an inn.

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:

A horse's head in the frost.

…

Out in the night the nightmares ride;

And the nightmares' hooves draw near.

Dead men pummel the panes outside,

And the living quake with fear.

Quietness stretches the pendulum's chain

To the limit where terrors start,

Where the dead and the living find again

They beat with the selfsame heart.

In the coffin-glass and the window-pane

You beat with the selfsame heart.

…

None can look out and bear that sight,

None can bear that shock.

The Mari's shadow is too bright,

Her brilliance is too black.

None can bear that terror

When the pendulum swings back

Of the stiff and stuffed and stifled thing

Gleaming in the sack.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.

Hark at the hands of the clock.

Ideal for the Halloween season.

By the by, T S Eliot read and annotated a draft of the poem, which he praised highly, although he worried that some readers might find it "forbiddingly Welsh."

Where Did All The Pagans Go?

November 25, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

I have been posting about a source on religion in Wales around 1715 , which illustrates how Christian communities maintain themselves when church structures and institutions have been removed. The author, Erasmus Saunders, tells us a lot about the rural society of his time, and its religious life. Almost as important, though, is what he does not tell us. Although this is not really a live argument these days, reading Saunders makes nonsense of what was once a powerful historical theory, namely that early modern Britain (and Europe) was awash with clandestine ruralpaganism, complete with secret human sacrifices. (I have already blogged quite a bit on this theme).

Saunders portrays a society with plenty of medieval and Catholic survivals, including prayers for the dead, the invocation of ancient saints, and the veneration of holy wells associated with those saints. From other sources, we also know that those ancient Celtic saints were particularly commemorated in the feast days of the *mapsant* or patronal festival celebrated by each parish, and which served as the focal point of the rural year. These events reinforced the connection of the given territory with a saintly founder, Teilo (Teilaw) at each of the various Landeilos, Cadoc at Llangadog, David at Llanddewi, and so on. A large proportion of Welsh place-names recall the church (*llan*) or martyrdom site (*merthyr*) of this cloud of Celtic witnesses, places commonly associated with special fairs and holy wells.

The *mapsant* and the ritual landscape with which it was associated survived largely intact until uprooted by Methodist and evangelical revivals between about 1780 and 1830. The evangelicals hated the older practices as signs of paganism, which they emphatically were not. Those practices were Catholic, and historically very Christian.

Other than the holy wells (just possibly), Saunders describes nothing whatever that fits the Margaret Murray secret paganism theory, and if anything like that had indeed been happening, he would have trumpeted it forth because it fitted his theme so exactly. We can even imagine what he might have said. Look, these villagers are so deprived of proper pastoral care that they are performing ancient pagan rituals! They are sacrificing bulls to Celtic gods! There are naked fertility rituals! Oh, the horror! Quick, give us lots of money to pay more clergy!

Do we find anything like this? Absolutely not a word. Nor is there anything from any of the later evangelical writers who were likewise so anxious to portray the Welsh (and English) villagers as buried in a swamp of primitive ignorance and lust. But paganism? Of course not. That concoction would not appear until the romantic speculations of the late nineteenth century.

Wales, incidentally, produced plenty of folklore and superstitions about witches and conjurers, soothsayers and cunning men (or women), but at the same time, there is very little evidence indeed of formal witchcraft charges or cases. The total executed on such charges through the whole of its history runs to five names, all between 1594 and 1655. (Richard Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales,* History Press, 2008). When witchcraft does feature in court records, it is commonly in church court records of slander cases ("You damned witch!") Wales in fact runs as close as we get in Europe to being witchcraft-free.

Where we actually have evidence of what those accused Welsh witches were using for their charms and spells, it commonly involved pre-Reformation Catholic material. Protestant regimes might not have liked that, but pagan it clearly was not.

Proving a negative is very difficult, but in this case, it really does seem possible. That theory about covert paganism is simply and demonstrably wrong.

That REALLY Old Time Religion

December 16, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

Over the past few months, I have posted quite a few items on the subject of possible pagan survivals into medieval and even modern societies, as indeed has my Baylor colleague Beth Barr. I stand by everything I have written in those pieces – but I really have some questions that remain open. They are actually good questions to ask around the time of Christmas, and the Winter Solstice.

My basic point here: with the best intentions in the world, I think scholars have just gone too far in our skepticism about such possible pagan continuities. We have thrown out the pagan idols with the bathwater.

Let me begin with some background. In the early twentieth century, various scholars (and quite a few pseudo-scholarly cranks) argued that ancient pagan religions had survived en masse after the European conversion to Christianity. In this view, ordinary country people kept up the old religion, even including human sacrifice, and we see the traces of that authentic religion in the form of the "witch cult." Let me say right away, I don't believe that formulation for a second, and you would be hard pressed to find a reputable scholar who believes that today. It's nonsense. Peasants in the seventeenth century (say) were not sacrificing sheep to pagan gods, never mind slaughtering virgins.

But how much further can we go along those lines? One scholar I admire enormously is Ronald Hutton, who has written a series of fine books about alleged pagan survivals in Britain, and in virtually no case does he find evidence of continuity. Time and again, he looks at something that initially seems pagan-looking, and he traces it convincingly to medieval church custom, or Tudor-era fads and fashions, or deliberate antiquarianism in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. He is a model example of a critical scholar, who asks all the right questions. He warns for instance about the dangers of taking something recorded in one place, and extending it to other sites where it may not have been valid. No, you can't just look at Irish stories of the *Samhain* season, and assume that they are the bases for all the Halloween customs we find in England, Scotland, Germany and elsewhere. His bottom line: romantic antiquarians have a lot to answer for. At every stage, fair enough.

But here is my problem. Hutton asks great questions, but can we really reject *all* those seeming pagan manifestations and survivals? Is it all smoke and no fire?

I was recently reading a lecture by the wonderful author Alan Garner, in which he dissects a folk tale from his English region of Cheshire, a version of the old Sleeping King motif. (This appears in his collection *The Voice That Thunders*). Yes, he says, this is a folk tale that is generic in lots of ways, but one part of it is a route that the characters have to tread, and if you look at that map in detail, it makes no sense whatever in any modern or medieval era. It does, though, preserve a set of ancient landmarks and tombs that would have been very notable in ancient times, perhaps the Bronze Age. So does the story really represent a kind of oral history from that distant antiquity? Should we see pagan antecedents for its components: "white horses, boundaries, beacons, hill-tops, caves, treasure, buried heroes, intermediaries, old women, cows, fertility wells, sacred trees, the Devil associated in a place name, stone alignments, stone chairs, elves, the sun, moon, and town fairs." This assemblage, he argues, is Celtic rather than English, and it long predates Early Modern England.

Frankly, I don't know whether or not to accept his interpretation in this instance, particularly in suggesting a continuity over such lengthy periods, but it does raise some interesting points. Let me summarize:

First, pre-Christian people in Britain, for instance, assuredly had some quite elaborate religious forms and structures, even if we cannot say precisely what those might have been. We do know that ancient peoples had a very strong sense of the landscape, which they recognized by erecting deeply impressive structures.

Second, it is inherently unlikely that ordinary people would immediately renounce each and every custom and habit associated with that old world view, provided that it did not overtly conflict with Christian orthodoxy. Horse sacrifices, no; but sympathetic magic, charms, and scrying, why not?

And what about all the legends and tales associated with those old sacred places? Were they all instantly forgotten and tabooed? Was that amnesia instant and 100 percent effective?

Third, we know from Bede and other writers that early Christians did not make any concerted effort to stamp out those religious forms, and they tried to adapt them as best they could. It is very likely that at least some ancient feasts and holy days really did survive in Christian form. I would cite the name of Easter in this regard, though Hutton would argue with me on that, and so would Beth Barr. We disagree on this. Bede's evidence clearly suggests the preservation and repurposing of old pagan temples and shrines in the new ritual landscape.

Finally, and this seems very important to me, plenty of comparative and international evidence amply confirms and documents the survival of old religious forms under new religious regimes. Scandinavia produces lots of such examples, as witness the work of church councils trying to stamp out old habits long after conversion, not to mention major folklore survivals. It is at least plausible that the stave churches in Norway really do reproduce the architecture of older temples.

Full disclosure: one of the people who taught me at university was the brilliant Hilda Ellis Davidson, who knew more about North Europeanpaganism and its survivals than anybody apart from possibly Mighty Thor himself.

Or to take another telling example, look at the many cases where communities in the Middle East made the transition from older forms, especially from Christianity, to Islam. Across the region, Christian and Christianized habits and structures continued very slightly below the surface for many centuries after notional conversion. We see this for instance in the continuity of old religious cults, shrines and pilgrimage centers, especially those focused on Saint George. In turn, George may well have drawn some imagery from still older pagan figures.

Colonial Latin America offers perhaps the best examples of all. In Mexico, Peru, wherever we look, we find the Church making massive compromises with the old pagan religions, absorbing devotional forms, appropriating old deities, consecrating holy days and feasts … just look at the cult of Santiago across the continent. Old Maya priestly societies persisted as Catholic confraternities. Even the "eagle basins" that the Aztecs used to collect the blood of human sacrificial victims were repurposed as baptismal fonts. The church lived happily with those "pagan" continuities – not surprisingly, as one major textbook they used to formulate their relations with the old native faith was the work of the Englishman Bede, who described the Christian encounter with the Anglo-Saxons a millennium before. (You might check out the quotation at that post from Fernando Cervantes, which I will not reproduce at length here).

Most scholars would see such an act of "conversion" in the Mexican cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who bears many feature of an Aztec goddess who was once worshiped on the site of her apparition at Tepeyac in 1531. Today, the Virgin is a central feature of Mexican religious life, and Pope John Paul II elevated her to the rank of Patroness of the Americas, both North and South.

Did the old pagan religions continue intact? No. But their traces and memories are everywhere you look. It is an open question whether such survivals are so extensive or so explicit as to allow you to reconstruct the lost originals with any confidence.

Even in the case of Africans taken from their homeland and enslaved in the Americas, scholars increasingly find convincing evidence of semi-clandestine cultural and religious survivals, far more in the Caribbean and Latin America than in the US, but in this country also. If that was true of people so savagely and suddenly uprooted from their homes, how much more would it have applied to peasant families still living in the same regions that their ancestors had lived through the centuries?

So here is the problem we face. If you look at many parts of the world, scholars have no difficulty at all in accepting that mainstream dominant religions do in fact preserve plenty of older ghosts from their predecessors. In that sense, religions don't die, they leave their ways to serve as "interference" for their successors. Those survivals may take the form of folklore and custom, of sacred sites and holy days, or they might be still more substantial.

In so many other places then, we happily acknowledge that old religions survive in veiled form. In Britain, though, we are required to believe that the old pagan ways utterly vanished in a spiritual holocaust, and more or less overnight. Even in the age of BREXIT, I have real trouble accepting this kind of radical British exceptionalism. That global, comparative, perspective demands our attention, and our respect.

So yes, I am prepared to believe in the possibility of later customs preserving ancient pagan foundations. But I plan to be very careful indeed in the evidence I choose to support these ideas.

Ancient Pagan Ways, Continued

July 21, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I did quite a few blogposts last year about the possible survival of ancient pagan ways into the Christian Middle Ages and beyond, with a special focus on British conditions. The general consensus these days is to minimize or deny such connections and continuities, and in general I sympathize with that view. But I am open to being convinced, and a recent case raises some intriguing possibilities.

The continuity argument suggests that British people maintained their veneration for the same sacred sites through repeated conquests, conversions, and relocations, and that continued through Christian times. The problem, for advocates as well as critics, is finding hard evidence. Now, though, look at a story from Shropshire, in the English West Midlands, not far from the Welsh border. Archaeologists were investigating a church site at Sutton, near Shrewsbury, and more important, the area immediately surrounding that church. Earlier investigations had turned up Mesolithic and Bronze Age remains.

Back then archaeologists discovered burial mounds and cremations, slots for standing stones and two rows of Neolithic post holes and a ditch, known as a cursus, which they interpreted as processional walkway. It was aligned east to west, extending towards the current late 12th/early 13th century church. The recent archaeological dig now shows that the prehistoric site extends to a larger area to the west of the church and that the building is built directly on top of both a previous Anglo-Saxon church and prehistoric structures. The current 10–metre long church itself was discovered to have originally been three times longer and to have once had transepts.

In the medieval foundations, archaeologists found remains of a standing wooden post that was incorporated into the church building, presumably because it was regarded as special or even sacred. They guessed it was Anglo-Saxon, but radio-carbon dates showed it was far, far earlier – to be precise, 2033 BC, in the era of the pyramids.

Other significant finds from the archaeological dig include a carved Saxon stone from an archway, the remains of what is thought to be an Anglo-Saxon apse, a prehistoric worked flint and a Neolithic stone counting disc. Some unusual animal burials were found, but these are thought to be Medieval and have yet to be dated. …

In summary, then:

It appears the current Medieval church is built over the site of an ancient pagan burial ground that's been in use from the late Neolithic period through to Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman, Anglo-Saxon and through to today.

This all makes Sutton the oldest sacred site in Britain that is still in use. (Other churches have those prehistoric roots, but they are not still functioning). And that continuity is at least four thousand years.

Reports of the Sutton dig don't say much about the historical context, so let me fill that in, as it is actually highly relevant. As a known Christian site, Sutton dates to the late seventh century, when it was given to the Anglo-Saxon St. Milburga. In this western area, though, it is highly likely that Sutton was an older Celtic Christian place, a church or monastery. Significantly, the western location on the Welsh border makes it probable that a site passed from Christian Celtic hands to Christian Anglo-Saxon, without going through an age of pagan neglect or destruction. You would be less likely to find such a continuity to the east, in an Anglo-Saxon heartland like East Anglia.

In fact, Sutton stands in an area of well known early Christian settlement. It is less than five miles from the critical Roman and post-Roman site of Wroxeter, which in Roman times was the city of Viroconium, the fourth largest city in the Roman province, and the center for the tribe of the Cornovii, the Horned Ones. Viroconium continued into the post-Roman era as the capital of a Welsh/Celtic (and Christian) kingdom, and there was a surprising amount of rebuilding there through the sixth century. It was probably the original capital of the Welsh realm of Powys, who were the successors of the Cornovii, although they moved their capital west as English pressure mounted. The name Viroconium survives in the hill named the Wrekin, the focus of a great deal of legend and lore in that part of the world. This may be too good to be true, but some etymologies of Viroconium derive it from man-wolf, or even "werewolves." I wish …

Under the name of Pengwern, Shrewsbury itself was another major center of that Christian Welsh kingdom, which gained importance as Viroconium declined. The fall of Pengwern to the Anglo-Saxons in the seventh century is commemorated in some of the very earliest surviving Welsh poetry, such as the elegy (*marwnad*) for the last native king of the region, Cynddylan.

There must have been Celtic bishops in residence, likely from the fourth century through the mid-seventh.

Whatever the exact historical sequence, the compact Wroxeter/Shrewsbury area was a key political/ecclesiastical region, and Sutton stands right in the heart of it. It must have been a vital

religious center in the post-Roman era. Conceivably, that followed on from a period as a major Cornovian ritual site for – how many centuries beforehand?

So the question arises. At various transition points, including around the conversion to Christianity, people reused ancient pagan sits and buildings. So what did they do with the old pagan ways, rituals and customs associated with those places? Did they keep them up discreetly in private; did they Christianize them in some form; or did they forget them more or less overnight? If there was continuity, how long did that continue? We would love to know.

I offer one analogy, which may or may not be relevant. When white people discovered the vast mound settlements of the American heartland, they naturally asked local Indian people about them. Those Indians assured the questioners that they knew nothing about those mounds and remains, they must have been built long ago by some mysterious race. Those Indians then went away and did what they had always done in keeping the old ritual sites alive. Of course, they were not going to tell the truth to the invaders and occupiers. I wonder if early Brits and Europeans were just as discreet when they faced questions about old pagan sites and customs from inquisitive scholars and clerics. Nothing to do with us! Never heard of them! Now go away and leave us be.

By the way, Sutton church in pre-Reformation times was dedicated to St. John the Baptist, whose feast falls on June 24. As I have written before, St. John's Eve (June 23) was in medieval times a spectacular Midsummer celebration marked by fire rituals. All over Europe, that commemoration inherited a lot of pagan-seeming customs and ideas from an older world.

The Last Religion Standing

July 24, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
4 Comments

Last year, I wrote several posts about the pagan mythology that was so rife in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, and which found expression in so many fine films and television programs, the "films of Old, Weird, Britain." Together these items have come to be known as "Folk Horror", which is now the subject of a book by Adam Scovell. This was in its way a major contribution to popular culture, but it also achieved a lot of credibility in the real world, and one that demands some closer examination today. Oddly, this whole Pagan Revival mythology briefly achieved a rare status within religious thought, as a genuine and systematic alternative to the whole Judeo-Christian scheme, and that is rarer than you might think. Looking at this abortive Religion-That-Might-Have-Been is instructive for understanding both the attractive and deterrent features of the Christianity that we actually do possess.

I spelled out these pagan and would-be pagan ideas at some length, and traced their descent from anthropologists of varying credibility, especially Sir James Frazer and Margaret Murray. To oversimplify, they offered a whole reconstruction of religious history that dated back to polytheistic and pagan fertility cults, rooted in local rural communities. According to this model, this is the prehistory we all share, with its common mythology of a great Goddess. Also common was idea of the spirit of the crops being manifested in a particular individual, a ritual king, who was sacrificed

and replaced when his strength began to fade. According to this theory again, those ancient ideas, rituals and customs survived very close below the surface of later life, with Christianity as a thin veneer. Holy days of the Old Religion were preserved in Christian guise, so that a pagan festival on August 1 became Lammas.

Further, we are told that the misunderstood practice of the Old Religion provided the source for stories of the "witch cult", as it was noted across Europe. It also manifested in a whole preserved culture of ballads and folk songs, customs and dances, all of which were being revived in the twentieth century. Folk horror was preceded and massively overshadowed by the Folk Music revival. These ideas reached their height with the counter-culture movement between roughly 1968 and 1975. There is a beyond-brilliant 2010 book on all this by Rob Young, called *Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain's Visionary Music*.

Quite apart from that fertility cult, theories of bygonepaganism also offered a whole vision of the landscape and countryside with its holy sites – its megalithic monuments and stone circles, its carved hill figures and other numinous places thinly concealed in Christian form, its inconceivably deep history. In some versions, the lost history included the legendary ley lines that sprawled across the landscape, uniting places of historic sanctity.There were giants and heroes on the earth in those days – and who knew, perhaps they might yet be raised again. For anyone who cared to look, you could spend the rest of your life exploring this ancient world of dormant spiritual power. As William Blake wrote, all things begin and end in Albion's ancient, druid, rocky shore. Christianity, in this whole scenario, featured very poorly, as a light dusting of belief scattered over a fundamentally and irredeemably pagan core.

You get a good sense of this whole world from a major travel feature by Rosie Schaap in a recent *New York Times*, on The Weird, Mystic Pull of Southwest England. Glastonbury, Tintagel …

So please, could we have our sacred landscape back?

The main problem with all this – apart from the little peccadillo of occasional human sacrifice – is that historically, it was totally factually incorrect from beginning to end. No component of it was historically true. Insofar as the whole system had a history, it was that of late Victorian and Edwardian Romanticism, mightily magnified by the demented fantasies or outright falsehoods of some of its exponents – demented in the case of Margaret Murray, and conscious invention in the case of such other leading lights as Robert Graves and Gerald Gardner. The scholarly work of Ronald Hutton convincingly disproved most alleged continuities from ancient pagans to modern times.

What we were left with, then, was two distinct but related phenomena. One was the popular culture achievement, the Folk Horror, which had to be seen as wholly fictional; and then we had the actual practiced religions of the emerging neo-pagan networks, from Wiccans through Druids and miscellaneous mystics. As religious systems, any and all of those might be considered authentic in terms of the devotion they attract from their members, but they have no historic roots before (at most) the early to mid-twentieth century. Wicca, as a religion, is roughly as old as I am, and much like the popular culture, it entirely derives from invented literary fictions.

At last in terms of seeking a deeply rooted, age-old, spiritual tradition, which offers a sacred landscape available more or less outside your front door – when you get there, there's no there there.

But consider all this in the context of the time, and understand why, for about a decade, it was so attractive. For long centuries, religious life in the West has been absolutely dominated by versions of a Judeo-Christian vision, which to varying degrees comprehends or underlies not just Judaism and all Christian traditions but also Islam and Mormonism. That is above all a scriptural tradition, which assumes a shared mythological narrative with a common cast of characters, and above all a shared theater of events, in the land of Palestine and neighboring regions. Week by week, Christians read and recite passages concerning their relationship to such paladins of faith as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to the minutiae of exactly what happened at such places as Moriah and Midian, Zion and Bethel.

So familiar are we with all this that it rarely strikes us how odd it might appear to a true religious outsider. For Jews, the whole system makes wonderful sense, in that they are commemorating the deeds of their quite authentic ancestors, in real places that once belonged to them, and which today are restored to their descendants. Christians, in contrast, act on the principle that they have been grafted into this historical continuity, so that in some symbolic sense these individuals and places belong to them: that the patriarchs and matriarchs are fathers and mother in faith. Seventeenth century Scots Calvinists used to speak of the whole length and breadth of the kingdom of Scotland, from Dan to Beersheba.

Christians might have their holy places, where that Judeo-Christian stories continues through history. But the basic fact remains that their Holy Land is a borrowed one, an appropriated one. They sing longingly about a Jordan river they have never seen. What am I to Moriah, or what is Moriah to me?

As to their ancestors, this is not a dilemma in societies that have been Christian for millennia, but it is of course a pressing issue in newer Christian lands, such as in contemporary Africa. So you missionaries are telling us that nothing we inherited from our ancestors is valid or worthwhile, and that we must now act as if these patriarchs of yours should matter to us?

If you care about historical roots – if you seek history and meaning and spirituality in the landscape – these are real issues. The search for a locally valid spiritual history is what drove Joseph Smith to invent his Mormon mythology, with its American settings (although he also borrowed the Hebrew ancestors). At least as originally conceived, he was describing the North America of the Lakes and the Midwest, lands he knew well, even if his attention later strayed to Central America.

And of course, while I am talking here about Anglo-American traditions, this attempt to localize the pre-Christian Holy is a theme in many European nations, certainly from nineteenth century Romanticism onward. Sometimes, as in Goethe, it also gets mixed up with tales of witches and demons.

I would argue that Christianity faces a basic dilemma that should agonize us much more than it does: how far can most of the assumptions of faith make sense without assuming that Jewish context, and

specifically the issue of biological descent and continuity? Obviously, those assumptions do indeed make sense for the vast majority of thoughtful believers, but they demand some thinking through.

Assume for the sake of argument that I am a contemporary Westerner who finds it difficult to live in those borrowed historical landscapes, to accept that mythology. Assume that I admire these traditions, but that they don't make sense to me personally. What are my alternatives for religious expression? Not, obviously, in any form of Christianity, or of the other Judeo-Christian derived faiths. So where do I go? To Hinduism or Buddhism, which are so definitively rooted in non-Western languages, cultures, and regions? What else is there?

And that is why that pagan synthesis was so tempting in a British context, and for any other traditionally Christian country. Was there really a British Old Religion traceable back to the creation of Stonehenge some five thousand years ago, and beyond? Was it even possible today to share in that pristine faith, to know its rituals and songs, its dances and customs, to visit and celebrate its holy places? Might it even be imagined as some kind of autochthonous British Hinduism, a British Shinto? Did Britain have its own Dreamtime? It was a dazzling prospect.

And it was false. The whole concoction was the creation of academics and journalists and creative artists, who themselves were virtually all products of mainstream British Christianity, and of its secularist offspring. Sure, you could join a neo-pagan movement, but always knowing that every aspect of its ideas and mythology and symbolism was a thoroughly modern, and post-modern, construction.

Suddenly, with a shock, you realized that Britain indeed had an ancient religion rooted in the soil, and it was Christianity. That was the only religion left standing, the last viable faith for the West.

So let me enjoy the Folk Horror fictions, with its stone circles and churchyard rituals. But the real religion is in the church itself.

Next time I'll be discussing one of the great Christian mystics of the land and soil of England, namely Gerrard Winstanley.

Churches, Mosques and Temples: Who Came First?

September 15, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

One really divisive issue in European religion these days concerns the question of "Who came first?" and who is properly entitled to own great buildings and places of worship. This is a grave matter separating Muslims and Christians. The topic has been in the press recently, though, for less weighty reasons.

The issue focuses on such great buildings as the mighty cathedral of Córdoba, in southern Spain, built on the site of a mosque, and incorporating large sections of that older structure. So should Spain's restored Muslim community have any rights to that building, or even to reclaim it altogether?

No, say Catholics, because the mosque was built on an ancient Christian church dedicated to St. Vincent of Lérins. On the third hand, that church was almost certainly built on an older Romano-Celtic temple. So who wins? De facto, present possession decides future ownership.

Similar stories encompass many other great churches and mosques scattered over Europe and the Mediterranean world.

Recently the English *Daily Telegraph* published a startling story headlined "Pagans demand return of church buildings 'stolen' 1,300 years ago." Reportedly, the Odinist Fellowship has noted that many early Christian churches were built on or within older Anglo-Saxon pagan temples, and they would like the symbolic restoration of at least two of these edifices, one in each of the great archdioceses. This would provide some recompense for "spiritual genocide." As the group writes, "We wish you to be aware that the great majority of Odinists believe that honor requires the English church to issue a public apology for its former crimes against the Odinists." Britain's Odinists, incidentally, run at most a thousand strong.

There are multiple problems with this request, not least that all British and European pagan groups are historically very new, developed after the Romantic movement, and England's Odinists were formally organized only in 1988. (I have posted quite a bit on the very modern roots of neopaganism). They thus have zero connection with the Anglo-Saxon pagans of the seventh century, whose temples were appropriated.

But as in the Córdoba example, the question of priority also surfaces in this story. The *Telegraph* quotes historian James Palmer, of the University of St Andrews, who plausibly notes that "many of the pagan temples had been originally converted from Christian churches left behind by the Romans, who had left at the start of the fifth century":

"It's all very nice of the Odinists to say that the English were there and they're pagans, but actually the British were there too, and they were Christians," he said. "They've only been ancestral lands for at best a hundred years before the pagans turn up, and it is most likely that any pagan temples were on old church sites. "I think it's all a bit of tit for tat. If you can claim that the church took the land off the pagans, they had taken it off Christians to start with."

Christians and Muslims might indeed have some reckoning up to do with Europe's old places of worship, as do Jews. With a couple of possible exceptions (Lithuania?) the old pagans, though, have left no lineal heirs who might factor into the equation.

Witches, Witchcraft, and Ronald Hutton

December 15, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I have blogged a lot on themes of paganism, "folk horror," and witchcraft, so this particular post follows naturally. This is my review of one of this past year's really impressive books.

Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (Yale University Press, 2017). 360 pages + xv.

Ronald Hutton's *The Witch* is a fine book in its own right, insightful and thoroughly researched. It gains greatly in value when understood as part of the career trajectory of an impressive polymath scholar who remains far better known in Britain than in the US.

Hutton is a laudable example of a historian gone rogue. He began his career in the early 1980s, studying the rather conventional field of seventeenth century Britain (which incidentally is where my own scholarly career began). He developed an interest in the ritual year as it was known at that time, the cycle of festivities and celebrations that corresponded roughly to the medieval church year. At the time he wrote, there was a lively belief in popular culture – and to some extent in academe – that such celebrations retained a still more significant imprint from ancientpaganism, and that archaic rituals had somehow been converted or adapted under a thin Christian veneer.

A belief in such very long continuities manifested in claims that modern day neo-pagans and Wiccans were in some sense the authentic heirs of old pagan traditions that had remained semi-clandestine for centuries. Through the Early Modern period, it was suggested, those hypothetical underground faiths had sporadically been exposed in the notorious witch-hunts. In the 1960s and 1970s, these ideas were widely popularized by the thriving British genre of Folk Horror, films and novels in which unwary strangers stumbled into the clutches of lethal pagan sacrificial cults lurking in modern–day villages and suburbs. (Think of *The Wicker Man*). Britain's bloody religious past was not dead: it was not even past.

Hutton regarded such claims of pagan continuity as wholly misguided, and his scholarly efforts to reconstruct the authentic origins of modern day neo-paganism and witchcraft consumed the next phase of his career. In very influential books such as *The Triumph of the Moon* (1999), he showed irrefutably how and why that modern day pagan synthesis had been concocted. He focused particularly on the creative fictions of buccaneering literary entrepreneurs like Gerald Gardner, and deluded witchcraft fantasists like Margaret Murray. Neo-paganism and Wicca, Hutton argued, might be quite genuine new religious movements, but they were indeed new, and invented, and had no genuine roots before the early twentieth century. His arguments about Fake History were fiercely debated within the neo-pagan world, especially in North America, but they have now been largely accepted.

Even those with no interest in the specific topic of neo-paganism can learn much from Hutton's acutely critical historical method. Repeatedly, he takes modern myths about supposed pagan survivals and through painstaking archival research he shows convincingly how these ideas originated in the accumulated fantasies and obsessions of successive centuries. Through those eras, scholarly speculations interacted with popular culture, as each worked with the other to build an ever more awe-inspiring castle of dreams and nightmares. Seeking the origins and foundations of such ideas, though, the historian generally finds that when you get there, there is no there there.

In recent years, Hutton has published extensively on aspects of paganism, witchcraft and druidry, always demonstrating a commendable zeal to draw on disciplines far beyond his home field of history, venturing deep into anthropology and archaeology. He is very comfortable with global and transnational comparisons.

The Witch thus fits precisely into this long scholarly arc. Among its many strengths is its global approach. That may sound unremarkable, but Hutton offers an excellent and rather startling

narrative of how anthropologists of the past generation or so came to reject any attempts to compare contemporary non-European witchcraft with the behaviors we observe in, say, seventeenth century England. He seeks to restore the study of witchcraft as a cross-cultural phenomenon, a task that is essential and, one would think, it should be uncontroversial.

Hutton spends much space on defining his terms, drawing careful distinctions between witchcraft, sorcery, and magic, and applying the witchcraft label only where strictly appropriate according to his terms. Ancient Egyptians, he says, had no concept of witchcraft, but they did believe in hostile magic and specifically the Evil Eye. To the untrained eye, evil or otherwise, that sounds a lot like what I would call witchcraft. Anyway, here is Hutton's meticulous definition: a witch is taken to be an alleged worker of destructive magic, "somebody believed to use magic for harmful purposes." I will neither explore nor observe his distinctions too closely in a review of this length, except to say that his precision is admirable.

In the popular mind, witches are a distinctly Early Modern phenomenon, and moreover Euro-American, so they are generally imagined as women wearing the distinctive hats and garb of England or Germany around 1640. The standard American vision is that of Salem in 1692, as refracted through Arthur Miller's *Crucible*, in which harmless and even virtuous people are used as scapegoats for the fears and nightmares of a conflicted and intolerant society, driven by repressive religion and profound misogyny. They are victims of Puritanism par excellence.

We can certainly find historical examples that fit this stereotype, but there is so much more to the story. Not only do witchcraft fears long predominate the Reformation era, or Christianity itself, but as far as we can speak in such terms, they are close to universal. Significantly, Hutton does not really focus on the Early Modern experience until midway through the present book.

So widespread are witchcraft ideas, so globally distributed, that the related assumptions seem to be deeply rooted in the human consciousness, perhaps even hard-wired in the human brain. The fundamental theory is that bad things do not just happen, they are inflicted by human agency, and that it is imperative to find the person responsible, both to retaliate, but also to prevent further wrongdoing. In his recent book *Inside the Whirlwind*, Jason Carter tells a chilling story from a Christian community in contemporary West Africa. He quotes an elderly Presbyterian woman who remarks that, "In our culture, friendship is not deemed friendship until a child dies." "In other words," says Carter, "only when retributive blame and witchcraft accusations are not directed at family members and friends during a crisis is that friendship counted as genuine."

No less universal is the wish to believe that effective responses do exist for illnesses and misfortunes, and that these are controlled by ritual specialists of various kinds – often by what Hutton terms "service magicians." The problem then is that, during times of chaos or mass despair, it is precisely these benevolent magicians and charmers who fall under immediate suspicion as evil witches.

Witchcraft ideas might be universal, but the structures of society and organized religion in a specific community decide how they will be interpreted and constructed into a larger framework. The key variables will then include the belief structure of the larger society, but also the official means of detecting and investigating witchcraft. In Continental European history, one major reason why witchcraft panics reached such epic proportions between about 1550 and 1680 was that Roman Law

countries followed inquisitorial prosecutorial methods, supported by the extensive use of torture. Suspects faced overwhelming pressure not just to confess, but to implicate ever more individuals, and to confirm the witch-hunters' speculations about far-reaching diabolical conspiracies. In turn, the rise of printing circulated emerging ideas about devil-cults, and gave inquisitors a rich panoply of questions which they would ask of suspects. Neither for the first time nor the last, the rise of modernity actually promoted the belief in witchcraft, rather than discouraging it.

European countries thus developed the florid mythology of the witch cult as a whole anti-Christian subterranean religion, whose devotees gathered at orgiastic Sabbats. England, in contrast, forbade judicial torture, so that witchcraft charges remained strictly limited and localized, and the idea of the Sabbat never sank local roots. English witchcraft was thus punished as a supernatural form of assault or murder, not as heretical ritual. Meanwhile, Roman Law Scotland did torture, and regularly claimed to find Satanic cults and Sabbats.

As those ideologies and stereotypes become established, so they shaped the thought of individuals who actively adopted the prevailing witch image, and even voluntarily boasted of their sinister powers. However cynical some of the witch-hunters might have been, they often were dealing with people who genuinely did believe they wielded occult powers, and who confessed accordingly. As a side note, such psychological processes are brilliantly described in two of the finest historical films of recent years, the American production of *The Witch* (2015) and the stunning Swedish/Finnish film *The Devil's Bride* (*Tulen Morsian*, 2016).

Although the Satanic Witch cult/Sabbat idea was not universal, it was very widespread. Many societies through history, and on several continents, have linked witches to imaginary cults that scorned all the assumptions of proper society. According to this nightmarish vision, each individual group is organized on tightly disciplined and hierarchical lines, and keeps tight secrecy. The groups' practices are based on a principle of inversion, reversing all the norms and standards of civilized society, praising or worshipping principles like death, chaos, anarchy and evil. This principle characterizes the rituals of the sects, especially the initiation practices, which involve extreme acts of violence or sexual perversion. The sects' alleged rituals involve a variety of practices that include the sacrifice of animals and humans; sexual rituals featuring every conceivable perversion; cannibalism and the consumption of loathsome foods; grave robbery and corpse abuse; orgiastic gatherings featuring bizarre ritual music and dancing. Evil cults particularly targeted children or babies. In ages of high infant mortality, evidence of witch atrocities was seldom lacking.

So were there ever real witches? I remarked earlier how Hutton demolished the case made by Gerald Gardner and others for Wicca being an authentic ancient paganism. Yet Hutton remains open to continuity arguments when properly advanced and substantiated, and he pays respectful attention to tantalizing evidence of the survival of shamanism in various parts of Europe. Drawing no firm conclusions, he discusses how such ancient forms might have affected later witch beliefs.

Witch persecutions did not begin in Early Modern Europe, nor did they end then. One curious pattern in European witchcraft history is how they progressed very slowly east and north across Europe from the fifteenth century onwards. The worst Swedish incidents did not develop until the end of the seventeenth century, and Poland and Russia experienced some of their worst nightmares in the eighteenth.

And of course, there is so much more to the story than Europe. Witchcraft remained, and remains, a deeply inlaid part of African religious belief, and much of the modern history of the expansion of African Christianity can be written in terms of how churches came to terms with witchcraft beliefs and anti-witchcraft movements. Contrary to expectations, not only have witch fears not perished with modernity – with globalization and urbanization – but they seem to be entering a new phase of intensity. Witches are just as likely to be lynched in today's sprawling African mega-cities as in remote bush villages. The experienced hunter or detector of African witches can count on a career as long and lucrative as could his or her counterparts in seventeenth century Germany. In the present century, European societies have had to respond to African witch-fears and "witch churches", and the media have commonly done so by adopting and reinforcing racist stereotypes borrowed directly from the *Heart of Darkness*.

The Witch is a major contribution to scholarship, all the better for not following the well trodden path of familiar cases, all the familiar heroes and villains: even Cotton Mather makes no appearance! Particularly interesting are three major chapters on commonalities in British witchcraft beliefs, namely the relationship between witches and fairies; witches and animals; and witches and Celticity. In each instance, so rich is his material that any one of these chapters might have spun off into a full-length book in its own right, and who knows, it might yet do so.

A terrific book on a pressing global issue of the 21st century.

The Amber Witch and the Higher Criticism

May 11, 2018 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

In the early nineteenth century, German scholars launched an intellectual revolution that transformed attitudes to the Bible, and to Christian origins. Just how fundamental that change of attitude was is difficult for us to appreciate precisely because that revolution has today become so familiar and institutionalized. I want to describe a couple of contemporary literary responses to that transformation – partly because they raise interesting questions, but also because they are such fascinating items in their own right.

In the 1820s and 1830s, scholars like Friedrich Christian Baur studied the Bible with the critical tools that had long been applied to Classical texts. They claimed to identify layers of composition and editing, and to attribute texts to particular schools of thought. One early monument to this school was the Life of Jesus, *Leben Jesu*, of David Friedrich Strauss (1835), which controversially denied Jesus's divinity, as well as many standard beliefs of Christian orthodoxy. (Strauss was Baur's student). Christian pastors were alarmed to see the impact of such ideas on their faithful congregations, who regretfully accepted that they could not quarrel with cutting edge scholarship. You could respond to such challenges by thundering against the blasphemers and urging their suppression, but was this an acceptable solution for the educated and enlightened?

One conservative-minded pastor sought an alternative, if risky, response. He baited a trap for the Higher Critics.

A near-contemporary of Baur and Strauss was pastor Wilhelm Meinhold, the son of a Lutheran pastor on the Baltic island of Usedom. He followed his father into the clergy. In 1838, Meinhold published a book that created a literary sensation.* He claimed to have discovered an ancient vellum-bound manuscript that was supposedly written by the Rev. Abraham Schweidler in the mid-seventeenth century. Reportedly, Schweidler had almost lost his daughter to false witchcraft charges during the crisis of the Thirty Years War, in a case that Meinhold thought was one of the most remarkable such cases ever told. Meinhold thus printed the story of *Maria Schweidler, The Amber Witch* (*Maria Schweidler, Die Bernsteinhexe*).

In his preface, he explained his editorial decisions, listing the parts of the book he had purged. He faced one problem in that many of the middle parts of the manuscript were missing. Never mind, though, he said, he had filled in those parts, being careful to write in the exact style of the time. Or as he said,

I have therefore attempted, not indeed to supply what is missing at the beginning and end, but to restore those leaves which have been torn out of the middle, imitating, as accurately as I was able, the language and manner of the old biographer, in order that the difference between the original narrative and my own interpolations might not be too evident.

This should not be too much of a problem, he said, as Europe had so many fine critical scholars who had no difficulty in distinguishing between different parts of a manuscript:

This I have done with much trouble, and after many ineffectual attempts; but I refrain from pointing out the particular passages which I have supplied, so as not to disturb the historical interest of the greater part of my readers. For modern criticism, which has now attained to a degree of acuteness never before equalled, such a confession would be entirely superfluous, as critics will easily distinguish the passages where Pastor Schweidler speaks from those written by Pastor Meinhold.

As you may have guessed, Meinhold was not being truthful. He had found no ancient text, and had invented every word of his tale, although he had managed to write the story impeccably in the style and language of the seventeenth century. It was a historical novel, rather than an edited memoir. He was actually making a polemical point, and indeed (as I remarked) setting a trap. So people like Strauss and Baur thought they could identify different parts of Biblical books from two thousand years ago? Well, let's see how they are at detecting an obvious modern forgery, and even better, one written in German. Note the irony in his comment about how modern higher criticism "has now attained to a degree of acuteness never before equaled." That dripping sarcasm should have been a clue.

I would love to recount how the Biblical critics failed to spot the deceit, but I can't, because I don't know if they specifically ever read it. When Meinhold sent a copy to Strauss himself, baiting a deliberate trap, Strauss wisely refused to review it. What we can say is that educated readers in their many thousands loved the book, as did foreign readers. An 1844 English translation remained hugely popular for a century. It even became a Victorian opera. And most people accepted it as real history.

Meinhold himself became the victim of his own subterfuge. His book was so good, and so authentic – and its language so precisely right – that when he finally announced it was a forgery, people just

did not believe him. Only very gradually did he establish his claim to be a novelist, rather than the lucky discoverer of an ancient treasure. Sadly, a disappointed and angry public showed him little sympathy, and denounced him as a forger and fraud.

In his way, he did make the point about how difficult it can be to date texts, or to sort between the work of different authors. He was perhaps being too subtle for his audience. The Amber Witch story was still being cited as authentic well into the twentieth century.

It's interesting that Meinhold did not try to prove his point by forging a gospel or pseudo-scriptural work, as plenty of other writers did in that century.

You can find a complete English text of the *Amber Witch* at many sites on the Internet, and it is a terrific novel.

*This does not matter for present purposes, but reference books I consult, whether English or German, split down the middle on whether the book first appeared in 1838 or 1843. A disparity like that is unusual for a book that was so important in its time.

America's Last Witches?

August 9, 2019 by Philip Jenkins

Through the years I have written on the history of witchcraft, in many aspects – the historical realities, but also the popular culture elements, and the abundant mythologies. Recently I have been intrigued by one question, namely how and when classic witchcraft persecutions faded and ceased in North America. The answer is: a great deal later than might be thought. That has many implications for general statements we often make about the impact of modernity – of literacy and urbanization – in the West.

Everyone knows about Salem (1692), and there were odd outbreaks of mob violence in the colonies in the early eighteenth century. Just for convenience, look at the *Penguin Book of Witches*, edited by Katherine Howe (2014), which actually has a strong American focus, rather than covering witchcraft generally. She quotes a 1712 story from South Carolina where suspected wiutches were tortured and "roasted," but not actually killed, by a vigilance committee; and then there is a 1720 case of a bewitched family in Littleton, Mass.

This fits the English chronology quite well, and obvious cases fall off steeply after 1720 or so. The last witches executed legally in England died in 1716, and the last in Scotland in 1727. In 1735-36, England repealed laws against witchcraft, but retained penalties for those who deceptively claimed occult powers to get money. The last English conviction under that witchcraft law occurred in 1944 (that is not a typo). The last remnant of the Witchcraft Act finally vanished in 1951, and that gave the signal for the modern "revival" of witchcraft in the form of Gerald Gardner's Wicca movement.

So let's say that in the English-speaking world, the turning point comes around the start of the eighteenth century, with a few stubborn holdouts thereafter. Continental Europe lagged a bit behind

in these matters, and Switzerland managed to behead a witch as late as 1782. There are lots of good histories of occult and witchcraft belief in later periods also, for instance in Judith Devlin, *The Superstitious Mind: French Peasants and the Supernatural in the Nineteenth Century* (1987).

But there is an afterlife to the witch persecutions, and on a considerable scale. Even if we are looking at the North American colonies and the USA, witchcraft beliefs continued steadily through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as did accusations. These latter-day cases very much followed the classic Anglo-American format, of malicious individuals targeting the innocent for supernatural harm, *maleficia*, without any of the Continental trappings of Devil-worship, covens and Sabbats, organized conspiracies, Black Masses and so on. Nor, crucially, did Anglo-Saxon justice use the kind of torture that so infallibly produced confessions confirming such insanities in European courts following Roman law.

The difference from earlier times was that the authorities could not legally be involved, so that we are dealing with degrees of mob justice or lynch law. That has the added difficulty of making it very hard to find records of persecutions. We must instead rely on chance references and recollections, which are nothing like as certain as the formal documents we have for earlier cases.

I give full credit here to Owen Davies's important book *America Bewitched: The Story of Witchcraft After Salem* (Oxford 2013), which discusses the uses of witchcraft and Salem in popular culture, as well as actual instances of witch killing and persecution. With some really admirable digging in newspapers and printed records, he traces some 150 unofficial or illegal witch killings in American history, mainly through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I am certainly not going to run through these, so will just say here "Read Davies for details." Briefly, Americans killed far more witches after 1700 than before that date.

One American case in particular has been cited quite a bit in work on the early National period, and the era of the Constitution. In 1787, an "Old Whig" published an anti-Federalist pamphlet, and in order to make his point about liberty of conscience, he told this story:

It would have been treated as a very ridiculous supposition, a year ago, that the charge of witchcraft would cost a person her life in the city of Philadelphia; yet the fate of the unhappy old woman called Corbmaker, who was beaten—repeatedly wounded with knives—mangled and at last killed in our streets, in obedience to the commandment which requires "that we shall not suffer a witch to live," without a possibility of punishing or even of detecting the authors of this inhuman folly, should be an example to warn us how little we ought to trust to the unrestrained discretion of human nature.

That appears to be a classic example of a mob persecuting and actually killing a witch, and were it not for this one pamphlet, we would know nothing about it. And if we are reading the text correctly, this suggests a mob killing in the streets of Philadelphia itself. This is also about five years after the Swiss case I noted above, which has gone down as "the last witch execution in Europe."

The obvious question is just how many other such instances were occurring around this time, or in the larger period from, say, 1740 to 1840, and especially in out of the way regions of the country? Davies tells us a lot, but (despite all his research skills) he might well be missing plenty that never made it to the newspapers. How many such instances happened, but stopped short of actual killing?

How many people were expelled or ridden out of town on a rail, possibly after suffering severe physical harm, or "roasting"? We honestly don't know, and we can't.

So much of the relevant material here is scattered around in studies of local history and folklore, work that is of enormously variable quality. Take one example that is reported in a reputable and indeed excellent book by Thomas White, *Witches of Pennsylvania* (History Press, 2013). In 1802, B. F. Brewster was a judge who had settled in Allegheny County, not far from Pittsburgh. One day, he was startled to find an angry mob dragging a woman to his door, and demanding that she be punished as a witch. To calm them down, he began a sham trial, but matters soon escalated as the mob started demanding her immediate execution. He withdrew with an excuse that he had to consult his law books, and he used the opportunity to help the woman escape. The crowd of witch-hunters was predictably furious, and he was lucky to avoid injury himself.

Over that century after 1740, were there ten such non-lethal cases? A thousand? How would we know?

Other questions arise. How did local churches and clergy respond to such cases? Did they preach against witches, or urge sanity and restraint? This raised real theological questions. As John Wesley famously complained in 1768,

The English in general, and most of the men of learning in Europe, have given up all account of witches and apparitions as old wives' fables. I am sorry for it …. They well know (whether Christians know it or not) that the giving up of witchcraft is in effect giving up the Bible. With my latest breath I will bear testimony against giving up to infidels one great proof of the invisible world; I mean that of witchcraft and apparitions, confirmed by the testimony of all ages.

On the other side, also in the 1760s, William Hogarth published his savage satire of an evangelical preacher extravagantly warning his terrified congregation about witches, demons, apparitions, and other mythical nightmares. The work is titled Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism. A real religious debate was in progress (for which, in the English context, see Owen Davies's 1999 book *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture 1736-1951*.

Thomas White demonstrates the strength of popular witchcraft beliefs in Pennsylvania right up to modern times, with a whole flourishing subculture of hex doctors and pow-wowers, witches and witch finders. Most of those instances were from rural or backwoods communities, but the cities also had their own stories. He reports many instances where communities or churches acted against suspected witches, using various traditional means to test them and their powers. In addition, Richard L. T. Orth has another really good book on these matters called *Folk Religion of the Pennsylvania Dutch* (McFarland, 2018). There is no reason to believe this region was too distinctive in that way.

We face an interesting paradox of evidence here, as so much of our best recorded evidence about actual witchcraft comes from societies where it is already in steep decline. In the US context, much available material about such cases comes from the later nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, especially from the 1880s onward. In these years, newspapers and folklorists regularly published stories that were deliberately meant to attract a readership fascinated by what they were meant to see as the stupid excesses of those rubes living in the backwoods. One 1928 "witch killing" in York, PA,

became a global sensation on exactly those terms. That kind of reporting assumes a more educated and literate readership seeking entertainment, and probably an urban audience that has itself abandoned witchcraft beliefs, at least in their most overt form. It also suggests quite a sophisticated world of media, publishing, and syndication. In earlier years, beliefs and practices were much more widespread, but newspapers and pamphleteers reported them less because at that point they seemed less bizarre and outré.

In a sense, the boom in witchcraft reports in the late nineteenth century actually contributed to promoting modernity, as it sent a message to the newly urbanized about the gulf that would and should separate them from their recent rural kin and neighbors. The reporting drew a line between acceptable behavior, and practices fit only for mockery. Just look at those people! They still believe in witchcraft! Why, we haven't done anything like that in … oh, about a decade.

In the American context, I am mainly referring to those parts of the new nation with a British/Celtic/German foundation, as opposed to other cultures with potent witchcraft traditions – African American, Hispanic, Native American, and others. In the Philadelphia instance, the name Corbmaker sounds German, or Pennsylvania Dutch. It's rather like Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, which is based on the conceit that each group or race or tribe that sets foot in the US brings along its own gods, and those gods remain in the spiritual landscape. Much the same thing has happened as successive waves of immigrants have brought their own ideas of magic and witchcraft. And that process is very much alive and continuing today.

The last person to be killed as a witch in the United States has not yet been born.

This is helpful to remember when we consign witchcraft belief and superstition to the "Middle Ages" (actually, the Early Modern period) and imagine that the Enlightenment transformed the world overnight. It did nothing of the sort. Cases surfaced quite regularly long afterward, and ordinary people were clearly outraged and terrified.

When Western Christians today look at modern Africa, they are often stunned to see the persistence of witchcraft belief, and how strongly those ideas exist within churches. Isn't that something out of our own Middle Ages? But we are not quite as far removed from that world as we might think.

Embracing the Darkness

October 28, 2019 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I have posted often on the theme of witchcraft, which is a critical topic for anyone studying Early Modern history in Europe or the Americas – or actually, for understanding large sections of the modern world. I recently read a major book that contributes much to this literature. It makes a great read in the days leading up to Halloween! Here is my review.

John Callow, *Embracing the Darkness: A Cultural History of Witchcraft* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018). 263 pages + xvii.

While many books provide well-informed surveys of shifting responses to witchcraft as a (supposedly) real phenomenon, John Callow focuses strictly on cultural and artistic representations, and he does so superbly.

In the process, Callow reminds us just how central a theme witchcraft has provided in Western culture, and not just as incidental decoration to plots. There is so much more than *Macbeth*, *Faust*, and successive depictions of the Witch of Endor, although all those canonical images receive proper attention. He is good on rediscovering books or tracts that were wonderful best-sellers in their time, but which have subsequently vanished for all but the most fanatical collectors. How many of his readers will have heard of Francis Marion Crawford's *The Witch of Prague*, a towering success in the 1890s? Throughout, he stresses the intimate connection between such fictional and popular culture depictions and the actual conduct of witch-hunters, or of self-conceived witches themselves.

The book is so rich that it is invidious to devote too much space to any one aspect or cultural figure, but I will particularly praise one section on the grounds that it so precisely echoes a long-standing prejudice of my own. Since my student years, I have loved the Italian Baroque master Salvator Rosa (1615-1673), and I actually posted about one of his pieces at this site a while back. In 2010, the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth held the first major US exhibit of Rosa's work, and the show beggared belief, not just for its exceptional quality, but for how it rewrote the standard histories of Western art. Rosa was regularly turning out images of witches, demons, and sabbats which would have caused little surprise had they been painted by Goya around 1800, or some daring German Romantic in 1820, but these were from the 1650s and 1660s. Both the Gothic and later Romanticism, in fact, begin to look like mass plagiarism from Rosa, and it is excellent to see Callow giving the artist his full due. (Throughout, *Embracing the Darkness* is gorgeously illustrated).

Callow tracks his themes strictly up to the present, and is equally learned in addressing film and contemporary literature or popular culture as he is with European Old Masters. His account of Urbain Grandier and the notorious 1630s case in Loudun naturally leads into discussions of the book by Aldous Huxley, to John Whiting's theatrical adaptation, and to Ken Russell's still shockingly over the top film of *The Devils* (1971).

That idea of following a significant character through his or (usually) her various metamorphoses works admirably well in helping the reader to follow an often complex story. He devotes a chapter to the shifting cultural images of the Scot Isobel Gowdie, who in 1662 confessed to an astonishing array of supernatural acts that she had allegedly committed, complete with covens and sabbats. Her tales were all the more jaw-dropping because they were probably produced without the use of torture. Gowdie is the source of a very large share of what we know or think we know about witches and witchcraft, and she may well deserve recognition as the most influential exponent of creative fiction in Early Modern Europe.

For Callow's purposes, Isobel Gowdie is a gift whose price is beyond rubies, as he traces her influence through the following centuries. This allows him to describe the debate over the Margaret Murray thesis, which basically accepts that Gowdie was telling sober truth about an underground pagan religion. He then traces Isobel's image through romances and supernatural novels – where this hapless underclass lunatic becomes the most gorgeous redhead in Europe – and then through the rock and folk-rock scenes of the late twentieth century.

I should signal here that Callow's book is very British in its approach, and its range of more modern references. That is not so much a criticism as a warning to readers who might expect, unreasonably, that his coverage of US or European popular culture might be anything like as comprehensive as his British material. It is not, because it couldn't be. It would be quite possible to write a very lengthy book on witch themes and images as they appear only in US fiction, television, cinema and rock music, drawing on names that make little or no appearance in *Embracing the Darkness*.

You could do much the same for (say) German or Russian or Spanish culture. To take an obvious example, the Spanish counterpart to Salem is the town of Zugarramurdi, which was central to the notorious seventeenth century witch trials in the Basque country. Those stories have been quite as productive for later artists, myth-makers, novelists, and film makers in Spain or France as has the story of Isobel Gowdie in Britain. There is a quite wonderful comic horror film called *La brujas de Zugarramurdi* (2013: directed by Álex de la Iglesia), which in its English translation is called, ahem, *Witching and Bitching*. It's just a perfect Halloween film.

Callow does not cover those European manifestations, and to that extent, his book falls short of the comprehensive "cultural history of witchcraft" promised by the title. Having said that, he could only accomplish such a feat with the aid of a large and dedicated team of imps and familiars. It's so hard to find reliable staff these days.

John Callow's book is instructive and enjoyable, and well worth reading.

Of Revivals, Convulsions, and Witchcraft Panics

Last updated on: December 6, 2021 at 7:19 am
December 6, 2021 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

Last time I wrote about the amazing ecstatic behavior of followers of a radical Catholic sect in France in the 1730s, who became known as the *Convulsionnaires*, focused on what became a popular shrine at St. Médard. I was struck by the similarities of that upsurge to the fringes of revivals and awakenings in the Anglo-American world, for instance in 1740 and 1798, and asked why the French movement should not have evolved in the same way, into a mass religious revival. My answer lay chiefly in the power and vigilance of the French state and police mechanisms, which were vastly great and better organized than anything that would exist in the Anglosphere until quite modern times.

So we can understand why France did not have a revival at that point. But I offer one other and closely related question. Why did the events at St. Médard not turn into a witchcraft panic, and on an epic scale? Look back at the accounts of the time:

In the excited crowd women were especially noticeable, screaming, yelling, throwing themselves about, sometimes assuming the most astounding and unseemly postures …. their bodies, subjected during the crisis to all sorts of painful tests, seemed at once insensible and invulnerable; they were not wounded by the sharpest instruments, or bruised by enormous weights or blows of incredible violence. A convulsionary, nicknamed "la Salamandre", remained suspended

for more than nine minutes above a fiery brazier, enveloped only in a sheet, which also remained intact in the midst of the flames.

They acted in what an earlier generation would have described as a "hysterical" way, and the stories are very familiar to American historians. Are such reactions not what occurred with the alleged victims of the Salem witches, who went into "hysterical" paroxysms whenever they were brought into the company of their supposed tormentors? Remember the fictionalized version in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Exactly the same story could also be told of many other witch persecutions of the seventeenth century, in Sweden and elsewhere, and in virtually every case the supposed victims were teenage girls or young women. The fact that they behaved thus was thought to be clear proof of their possession by an evil spirit controlled by the accused witch, who was duly investigated and punished. Insensibility to pain was also a factor in many trials, when investigators searched a suspect's body for the witch's mark left by the Devil.

The sensational behavior is fairly constant over time, and the catalog of seemingly miraculous bodily reactions will immediately resonate with observers of so many movements in primal religions, not to mention many charismatic Christian sects. We could easily be in the world of hostile commentators on the Azusa Street revival, or of many later upsurges in the Global South. If such events had happened in the US in 1820, they would be seen as marking a religious revival. In modern Brazil, we would be writing about Pentecostal enthusiasm. But the interpretations differ enormously in different eras and settings. If something like the St Médard eruptions had happened a century before 1730, virtually certainly they would have been understood as the marks of witchcraft. In fact, that is very much what did happen with the notorious case of the possessions in the convent of Loudun in the 1630s, which became the subject of Aldous Huxley's *The Devils of Loudun*.

So why did French authorities in the 1730s not think in terms of witchcraft or possession, as their predecessors assuredly would have done? Largely, this was because the ideological setting of the time was changing so fast in Enlightenment Europe, and belief in witchcraft was increasingly viewed as a sign of ignorance and raw superstition. The last witch to be executed in Sweden perished in 1704; in England, in 1716; and in Scotland, in 1727. France generated a panic in the classic mode during the economic crisis of the early 1740s, when twenty-seven people (including three priests) were implicated in a large case involving Black Masses. But this "trial of the Wizards of Lyon" was an isolated outbreak, and in 1745, one of the executed priests became the last person to be legally killed for the offense in France. But otherwise, witchcraft was definitely yesterday's news. Do note that the 1742 cases happened far from sophisticated Paris. (Benighted Switzerland did not execute its last witch until 1782).

The behavior that we see among the *convulsionnaires* is a recurring and even timeless human phenomenon. How it is interpreted – whether as revival, miracle, possession, witchcraft panic, or psychiatric meltdown – depends on a variety of factors, including ideological and cultural trends, and the powers available to particular state and bureaucratic mechanisms. Witchcraft panics have more in common with "conventional" and approved religious behavior than we might immediately think.

Infidels, Demons, Witches, and Quakers

Last updated on: December 26, 2017 at 8:27 am
December 8, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I have an article out in the new issue of *Fides et Historia*, under the ambitious title of "Infidels, Demons, Witches and Quakers: The Affair of Colonel Bowen" (vol. 49(2)(2017): 1-15). You can read the whole article of course, but I just want to summarize it here and suggest some of the reasons the topic so appealed to me. The core story tells us a lot about the directions that Anglo-American Puritanism traveled in its first decades. It also offers a nice example of how a detailed case-study can reveal a lot about the wider society – about religious history in general, Baptist and Quaker history in particular, the history of gender and family, and imperial history. Obviously, the published version of my article contains a great deal more material and illustration than I can possibly offer here.

The basic tale is easy enough to find, because it became a popular moral lesson in the seventeenth century and beyond. In the 1650s, under Cromwellian rule, there was a Welsh army officer named Henry Bowen, who was serving in the garrison in occupied Ireland. He had developed ideas that other Puritans considered to be outright atheism. Katherine Bowen, meanwhile, his pious Baptist wife, continued to live in the family house in Wales, which was increasingly troubled by horrible ghostly manifestations. These activities are superbly and intricately described, and I demand the rights to what should be an incredible horror film. The haunting culminated when Katherine was visited by a ghostly double of her husband, who wanted to join her in bed. She fled, and called in her pastor and other pious people to exorcise the house.

For early commentators on the story, notably the great Richard Baxter, the story was doubly valuable in combating skepticism and atheism or infidelity. From a pious perspective, Bowen's beliefs had opened his family to demonic assault, and at the same time, the documented reality of the hauntings proved that such supernatural incursions could and did occur. Up to modern times, then, the story has often been retold as a Great Welsh Ghost Story.

But there is so much more to Colonel Bowen. Bowen demonstrates the trajectory we find remarkably frequently among early Puritans across the British Isles, especially those who favored Baptist ideas and polity. That Baptist context was critical for much of what followed. Familiar as we are with the idea of baptism as a voluntary procedure for adult believers, it is easy to forget how extraordinarily radical this concept was at the time, rejecting as it did the familiar identification of the church community with a larger society, whether or not that society defined itself as Christian. This introduced a whole new element of voluntarism and individualism, which speedily ran unchecked – the common metaphor at the time was "like fire in the thatch." Like so much else in early Protestantism, the Baptist movement was ultimately about questions of spiritual authority.

The movement raised a further question that proved traumatic. Yes, the true believer should withdraw from a sinful society to adhere to a pure church of the Elect. But did that same imperative apply to seceding from a family one had come to see as ungodly? Could or should a true Christian be yoked together with an unbeliever? Families could and did split. The fault-lines of the Radical Reformation ran through families, and that dynamic shaped the Bowen affair.

Many of these Puritan pioneers, then, followed highly individualistic paths and scriptural interpretations, combined with a sweeping rejection of any worldly hierarchies or clerical power, and they came to doubt many aspects of traditional orthodoxy. Some became Seekers, and many evolved from that position into the Quakerism of the 1650s, with its emphasis on the Inner Light. God was within, the stance I have called Immanentist. (I have blogged about this trend on several occasions). However radical the ideas might appear, they followed a direct and even logical trajectory from early Baptist thought.

Among other consequences, this package implied a rejection of familiar hierarchies and assumptions, including those concerning gender. The Spirit was poured out on men and women alike, on rich and poor, young and old. Among their many provocations, radicals refused to use the proper forms of speech to their social superiors, addressing them instead with the familiar thee and thou.

One of my discoveries about Colonel Bowen is that his sister was an outspoken Quaker militant, who publicly denounced the Puritan clergy of the day and their churches – their "steeple houses" that pretended to be houses of God. One minister actually struck the woman for theeing and thouing him. So right away, the relationship within the Bowen family becomes a highly theological struggle, between Seekers, Ranters, and Quakers on the one hand, and orthodox Puritans and Baptists on the other. Katherine Bowen belonged firmly to the orthodox side of the divide, her husband and sister-in-law were at the other extreme. Family dinner conversations must have been, well, eventful.

Adding to the brew, the family's Baptist pastor, John Miles, was a staunch upholder of orthodoxy, and a bitter enemy of heresy as he defined it.

That religious schism acquired a psychological and sexual dimension. Imagine Katherine Bowen mulling over her sharply divided duties through a long Welsh winter. As a faithful Christian wife, she must obey her husband, including in his sexual desires. But as a faithful wife, she also knows that he has traveled into damnable heresy, and that (to repeat) she must never be yoked with such an unbeliever. To some extent, he had already abandoned and rejected his family, and treated her scornfully. So how could Katherine reconcile the two absolutes, the competing demands of scripture and divine law?

And one stormy night, perhaps in a dream or a semi-waking state, she imagines the form of her husband appearing to her, with his pathetic plea of "What! Not the husband of thy bosom?" Still, she must reject him sexually, and the dream vision is reimagined as a demonic seducer, a demon lover. The ensuing account of the panic in the household suggests a powerful sexual dimension, with most of the narrative occurring in and around the marital bed, and Katherine and her cowering serving women in various stages of undress.

Another theme that emerged was how very close this incident came to detonating a major witchcraft panic. So much of what happens here sounds like the opening stages of one of the notorious cases of that era, not least the spectral apparitions that would be so pivotal to the Salem cases. Early contemporaries actually did refer to it in these alarming terms, and it is easy to see how allegations and accusations might have spiraled out of control. This was one of the great British witch panics that never happened.

The final key point of the story for me was the very strong American and New England dimension. The pastor, John Miles, was a pioneer of the Baptist movement in North America, and several characters in the tale travel readily between continents. When Henry's sister and the other (mainly female) Quakers were denouncing Puritan ministers in the 1650s, their deadliest enemies and persecutors were men recently returned from New England. They naturally viewed these insurgencies in south Wales in the terms they were familiar with in the Americas. In turn, some of them went back to New England, determined not to let the same kind of anarchy they had witnessed in Britain manifest itself in Boston. It was between 1659 and 1661 that Boston Puritans executed three Quaker martyrs.

British, Irish, and North American stories were thoroughly integrated, and no one strand can be disentangled from the others. It was one world.

For me, the Bowen story is multiply instructive. Among other things, it helps demonstrate why the country's elites were so happy to see a return to royal authority in 1660, and to halt the wild theological experimentation and speculation that was running riot in the Cromwell years. In whatever form, the national church had to be restored. The tighter the net was drawn in Britain, the greater the pressure for Quakers, Baptists and others to seek freedom across the seas.

So yes, the Bowen affair is a wonderful ghost story, but it is so much more than that.

Excuse me, I have to go cast a horror film.

Witchcraft … By Any Other Name

Last updated on: August 16, 2019 at 9:02 am
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0 Comments

I suggested that witchcraft beliefs were actually much slower to decline in the West than we commonly think, and that this has implications for how we assess the impact of Enlightenment modernity. In the US, witchcraft was still a common idea for many rural dwellers through much of the nineteenth century, to the growing mockery of educated urbanites. But what did those urbanites themselves believe?

Back in 2000, I published the book *Mystics and Messiahs*, about new and fringe religions in American history. I argued that such alternative religions, often esoteric and occult in nature, were a very persistent theme of American religious history, to the point of being near-mainstream, and there has always been a good deal of interchange between "cults" and respectable churches. Those new sects had many beliefs in common through the years, above all a strong commitment to healing and spiritual healing, and also to unlocking the supernatural powers of the individual, such as clairvoyance and psychokinesis. The closer we look at those ideas, the more they look like the sort of occult practice that could get you burned (well, hanged) a couple of centuries earlier.

Very frequently, these ideas were dressed up in the form of science or pseudo-science, best exemplified by the massively popular nineteenth century beliefs in Mesmerism and Spiritualism. If the telegraph could span the world – some call it the Victorian Internet – why should similar human expertise not expand contact into the spiritual realms of the dead? Mesmerism after all claimed to be dealing in version of magnetism.

Incidentally, the *New York Review of Books* just posted a very good item on Mesmerism in Antebellum America, drawing on the aptly titled book *Credulity,* by Emily Ogden (2018).

Mesmerism begat Phineas Quimby, which begat Christian Science, which begat New Thought, which contributed mightily to the New Age, not to mention lots of later therapy and self help movements. Early twentieth century Pentecostals commonly faced charges that they were themselves incorporating many of those esoteric ideas and practices into their services and revivals. Moreover, those esoteric ideas laid the way for the reception of Eastern spiritual ideas from the 1870s onward, in the form of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Vedanta. Theosophy owed as much to Mesmerism, New Thought, and Spiritualism as it did to Asian faiths.

In 1910, Ray Stannard Baker wrote his best-selling account of the great spiritual transformation that he believed to be sweeping progressive America:

The new idealism lays its emphasis upon the power of mind over matter, the supremacy of spirit. Its thinkers have interested themselves as never before in the marvelous phenomena of human personality, most of which were contemptuously regarded by the old materialistic science. The wonders of the human mind, the attribute we call consciousness, the self, the relation of mind to mind, telepathy, the strange phenomena of double or multiple consciousness, hypnotism, and all the related marvels, are now crowding for serious attention and promise to open to us new worlds of human knowledge.

So assume you were a sophisticated and educated person in a big city in 1850 or 1900, an elite person of wealth and status. Over and above your church membership, you likely believed in the unseen forces commanded by spiritually gifted individuals, who could control minds and environments by their special powers. Perhaps you thought that healing was likely to be accomplished by mental force, rather than modern medicine. You also held firmly that death was not the end, and that spiritually sensitive mediums could transcend the worlds and dimensions, to communicate with dead souls. More often than not, those healers, mediums and sensitives were women.

At every point, those sophisticated and would-be scientific principles sound very much indeed like the thought world of the pre-modern village, although the vocabulary has changed utterly. The older villages had healers and hex doctors, with their special skills navigating the borders between natural and supernatural, with the special focus on healing, and those older professionals were likely to be female.

By the 1880s, a character in Henry James's *The Bostonians* is told that a feminist activist is going to one of her "weird meetings."

"What kind of meetings do you refer to? You speak as if it were a rendezvous of witches on the Brocken."

"Well, so it is; they are all witches and wizards, mediums, and spirit-rappers, and roaring radicals."

It's a joke, of course, partly at the expense of radical feminists. And yet,those supernatural themes make the witchcraft analogy more plausible. To see just how plausible, consider some scandals that were happening in and around Boston in the very years *The Bostonians* was written. Mary Baker Eddy was one of the most successful spiritual entrepreneurs of the nineteenth century, but she was also fiercely contentious. Her attacks on rivals and insubordinate followers were given a supernatural basis in the form of Malicious Animal Magnetism, MAM, by which one individual could inflict occult harm on another at a distance. (Animal magnetism was the core idea of Mesmerism). In the 1880s, Eddy accused her enemies of constantly mounting MAM attacks upon her, to the point that she was aptly accused of demonophobia. She even believed that her enemies could stage a "mental assassination."

The ensuing conflicts gave rise to predictable press reports of "modern witchcraft" and witch-trials, while the Christian Science church's attempts to control or excommunicate dissidents were discussed in terms of heresy hunts. Again, the names had changed, but a seventeenth century cleric would not have had too much trouble understanding the processes involved.

So here is a suggestion. When we describe the end of Western beliefs in witchcraft, we usually do so by looking at the formal end of witch trials and executions, at various points in the eighteenth centuries. But actual witchcraft beliefs endured long, long after that – both people's beliefs that they commanded supernatural powers, and popular fears that evil individuals might use those powers for harm. And when actual witchcraft ideas faded, virtually the same ideas resurfaced in pseudo-scientific and metaphysical movements that exercised a vast influence over educated people. In that sense, perhaps witchcraft belief did not die in the eighteenth century, nor the nineteenth, and it remained very much alive through the twentieth. What changed was the rhetoric of spiritual power.

That is all over and above the recurring waves of panic about alleged Satanism and "Ritual Abuse," which flourished in the 1980s and 1990s. Those reproduced the most florid aspects of the European witch panics in undiluted form, complete with covens and Sabbats. The main difference between those disgraceful episodes and Salem was that someone accused of witchcraft in Massachusetts in 1692 probably had more legal safeguards than did an alleged ritual abuser in California or Minnesota in 1992.

So when did witchcraft belief decline or vanish in the West? I'll let you know when it happens.

Why THE WITCH is One of the Greatest Historical Films Ever Made

Last updated on: May 31, 2016 at 5:24 am
May 29, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

I am several months late on this topic, but bear with me. Robert Eggers's film *The Witch* is now available on DVD, and I finally got the chance to see it. It is one of the truly great horror films, no argument, but it is also an astonishing piece of historical reconstruction.

The Witch is set in 1630s New England, and there is a great Telegraph review here. Approaching it, I speak as a long-standing aficionado of horror films, literally from the very first Hammer films in the late 1950s. (I was a precocious kid). With that background in mind, I say again, this is one of the finest and scariest horror films ever made. I may have more to write about that when I finally emerge from behind the sofa.

I also enjoy historical films, but I have the problem of an imp who sits on my shoulder and constantly nags about points of detail: Look, that hairstyle is a decade off! Oh my, they would never use that word then, that's an anachronism. It's even the wrong century! And that costume uses a color that just was not available then. I still enjoy the films, but I am aware of the inconsistencies.

With that in mind, you know what is wrong with *The Witch*, what is out of period? Absolutely *nothing*, nothing whatever, and I can't remember when I ever said that about any film. The houses and farmstead are impeccably reconstructed. Even the dialogue is flawless, and that is virtually impossible to get right. As a historical vision, this is as close to perfect as you get. It may actually have been filmed by using a time machine to visit Connecticut in 1635.

To use an odd analogy, the last time I thought that about the dialogue in any historical film was the Coens' *True Grit*, not what we normally think of as a historical epic. But that was perfect too, in its way. I think you should see *True Grit* twice, the second time wearing a blindfold so the gorgeous visuals don't distract from the dialogue.

You can check out a superb interview with the director Robert Eggers about how he actually went about filming *The Witch*, and how he got the history so precisely right. It's deeply impressive.

Obviously, I am not using this accuracy issue as the sole gauge of a film's quality, far from it. There are films that are wildly off base historically, but you just suspend disbelief and enjoy them for what they are. As a case in point, one of my all time favorite films is John Ford's *The Searchers*, which is based on an abduction incident that occurred in Texas in 1836. The film, though, transposes the action to Arizona in the 1870s. And as in most of Ford's films, the Indians are all played by Navajos and are clearly speaking Navajo, even if they are notionally Comanche, Apache, Cheyenne, or whoever. No big issue there, you just enjoy the film for what it is. *The Witch,* similarly, is a magnificent film anyway, regardless of its historical accuracy. But I am just saying that the degree of that accuracy is stunning.

You can use *The Witch* as a virtual documentary on witch trials and witch fears. At every point, the film brings out themes that are so recurrent in the historical record. How, for instance, children and their rivalries are the detonators to many or most cases. How cases emerge within families, commonly because of one illness or disaster, and then spread further afield. How one ill-chosen remark or joke can provide the launching pad for a bloody persecution. How the worst cases often emerge on the margins of society, among people already regarded as suspicious and cast-off. And how speculations and fantasies acquire material form, transitioning from rumor and gossip to hard evidence produced in courts of law.

If you are teaching a college course with witchcraft as a theme, *The Witch* is essential viewing.

At every point, too, I was struck by how easily this whole saga could have been relocated to modern-day Africa. Seriously, it might in fact be too close to comfort to be shown in many African countries.

If I think hard, I'll try and come up with something negative to say about the film, but nothing comes to mind yet. Oh yeah, and both direction and acting are also close to perfect. But as a historian, that's the least of my concerns….