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## Book Review

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Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient times to the Present* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2017), 376pp., £25 (hbk), ISBN: 978-0-3002-2904-2.

The Cambridge and Oxford-educated, University of Bristol-based historian Ronald Hutton is a well-known and colourful figure both in Britain and throughout the Neopagan world. Extending his original academic interest in Early Modern Britain (17th century), he has come to publish three books on folklore (*The Rise and Fall of Merry England* [1991], *Stations of the Sun* [1996] and *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* [2003]), one on shamanism (*Shamans: Siberian Spirituality in the Western Imagination* [2001]), two on Druidism (*The Druids* [2007] and *Blood and Mistletoe* [2009]) and three on Paganism (*The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* [1991], *The Triumph of the Moon* [1999] and *Pagan Britain* [2013]). His Pagan works in particular have been controversial in as much as he has challenged, among other things, the established belief in Margaret Murray's contention that the contemporary Pagan movement represents a continuation of actual but *sub rosa* pagan practices from the advent of Christianity. *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient times to the Present* represents Hutton's sixteenth significant publication.

Keeping to his custom of presenting debatable and arguable contentions, Hutton's definition of the 'witch' as 'an alleged worker of...destructive magic' will upset many practitioners of Wicca or contemporary Witchcraft, but as his subtitle indicates, he is presenting a history of fear. Since his concern in this work is with the fright or panic that arises within a group or collective rather than with that which involves external enemies, the paradigm of the witch as an agent of internal anxiety is appropriate. Consequently, the reader is taken on an excursion that relates to witch-related killings ranging from state considerations of illegal crimes to lethal vigilantism in Africa, South America, Mexico, India, Melanesia, Islamic states, and elsewhere but including the West as well. The casualties involved with torture and execution are reduced primarily to numbers, but, throughout the work's analysis as a whole, an underlying horror forms the subtext.

Hutton's encyclopaedic initial chapter surveying extra-European beliefs concerning witchcraft provides his foundation for understanding early modern mindsets and the witch trials these generated. Five basic characteristics of the witch stereotype according to the early modern European are delineated: one who causes harm by uncanny means, one who is considered an internal threat to a community, one who works within a tradition, one who is evil, and yet one who can be resisted. These are reputedly found all around the planet though not among all peoples. Europe's original uniqueness, however, is in its embracing the belief that witchcraft represented an

'organized heretical anti-religion' (p. 41) but also, and most importantly, the development of a spontaneous rejection of that belief. Hutton supports without reserve educational programmes that encourage local reconciliations. His exploration of ancient traditions of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds is designed to elucidate the duration of European witchcraft beliefs concerning the hidden enemy and menacing Other—the principle subject of the book. Specifically, Hutton investigates the representations and ways of thinking about magic and witchcraft independent of possible influences from Siberian shamanism and Viking Age Scandinavian practice.

In examining Western ceremonial magic in both Europe and the Near East, Hutton unravels successive stages that progress from Neoplatonic, Gnostic, and Hermetic mystery religions, through rabbinical Judaism and Christian dominance as well as Islamic success, into the Renaissance, Reformation, late nineteenth-century Europe and the late twentieth-century West. What comes to light is an innovative yet non-conformist belief in superhuman beings. Among others, some key figures that Hutton discusses are Margaret Murray, Mircea Eliade, Norman Cohn, Carlo Ginzburg, Gustav Henningsen, Éva Pócs, and Wolfgang Behringer. Examined are the medieval tradition of nocturnal spirit hosts (e.g., the Wild Hunt, the Wandering Dead, the Followers of the Lady or benevolent phantom women of the night) and the demonic Witches' Sabbath. Hutton develops an understanding of witch-hunting in the Middle Ages as a combined influence of Mesopotamian demonology, Persian cosmic dualism, the fearful impiety of Graeco-Roman magic, Roman concepts of the evil witch, and the Germanic idea of cannibal women who roam at night—a matrix of thought that eventually, though not initially, crystalized within the Christianity that became the dominant religion of the Continent. 'The most important feature of the concept of the satanic witch that appeared at the end of the Middle Ages [however] was that it was new' (p. 168) even if inherited largely from popular beliefs belonging to the ancient pagan world but also deriving from official Christian notions of heresy. Consequently, in the fifteenth century a major and unprecedented satanic cult was fabricated to include elements of secret assemblage, Devil worship, child-killing, orgiastic sex, and the like—one that flourished through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Witchcraft executions, ranging most likely from forty to sixty thousand people, occurred between those in the Pyrenees and Rome in 1424 to the last in 1782 in Switzerland.

Hutton is intrigued with the relative absence of witchcraft persecution in the Catholic Mediterranean world south of the Pyrenees and Alps. I find this reminiscent to two examples in twentieth-century Netherlands in which a baby in one case and a twelve-year-old in the other were put to death after arousing suspicions of having the evil eye. As my informant explained, this behaviour only occurred in the rural Protestant areas of the country and not in such Catholic sections as Limburg or Brabant. As Hutton uncovers, from 1542 the Roman Church began to institute a more liberal and professional protocol that countered superstitious witchcraft accusations and local inquisitions. By contrast, in the German-speaking lands to the north as well as in Poland to their east and the French-speaking Rhine and Moselle basins to the west, inherited local beliefs deriving from specific folklore and ancient motifs concerning—though not exclusively—a flying nocturnal retinue of women and/or the dead, fomented, to some degree, the witchcraft tribunals. More important than folk beliefs for Hutton, there was instead 'a new, almost pan-European concept of witchcraft propagated by [local Lutheran Church] elites and accepted into general culture' (p. 210-11).

The third part of Hutton's tome is focused on Britain. Here he explores the relationship between service magicians and/or accused witches, on the one hand, and fairies, on the other—this last including angels, ghosts, elves, and the circumlocutive 'good neighbours' or 'seely wights'. Hutton dismisses Ginzburg's shamanic argument that communication with superhuman beings occurred in an altered state of consciousness since both the Scottish and English trials involved people who confessed to fairy communication but made no reference to dealings while in trance. Hutton discovers the literary construct of the fairy kingdom to have become fully formed and pan-British by the fifteenth century. But he continues at this point to reveal that there is a low-level of witch-hunting in the early modern era among those people understood as 'Celtic': the Bretons, Cornish, Welsh and Manx, and Irish and Scottish Gaels. This reluctance, he suggests, was cultural. Despite an extensive literature that pictures humans relating to superhumans who are conceived in human form, possessed of magical powers and as inhabiting a parallel otherworld from which they could access our world, these peoples 'represented a set of societies that traditionally lacked a serious fear of witchcraft' (p. 261). This conclusion conforms to Hutton's insistence that commoners demonstrate an ability to develop new beliefs beyond Christianity that are not based simply on ideas that predate that religion (p. 287).

What is left out in a history of internal European fear is precisely that which deals with environmental worry—except that this last is a comparably recent development without a lengthy history behind it. In his discussion of British fairy belief, Hutton mentions the associations of such spirit beings with domestic spaces, tumuli, and perhaps predominantly with 'natural environments such as forests and bodies of water' (p. 227), but he denies that referring to them as 'nature spirits' is appropriate. Instead, the 'recent identification of fairies with the natural world reflects a modern literary image of them in which they function as representatives of an older land being reshaped by urbanization and industrialization' (p. 228). Nevertheless, Hutton concludes that the word 'witch' is now to be purged of any automatic negativity. Unambiguously, he affirms that the modern concept of witchcraft, while clearly based upon nineteenth-century scholarship, is now understood 'as a pagan nature religion, standing for a wild and green spirituality of feminism, environmentalism, humanitarianism and personal liberation and self-realization' (p. 279). One line I appreciated is made in reference to imagined encounters through altered consciousness, namely, 'In addition, to be perfectly just, one might admit the final possibility that some of the people concerned actually met non-human beings' (p. 226). In all, Hutton's *The Witch* is a most comprehensive exercise and a veritable *tour de force*. Despite the work's density of information, it rests firmly on the assumption that early modern beliefs and the concomitant witchcraft trials they engendered must be understood when both worldwide parallels and successive periods of time throughout history are taken into consideration. If there is a single seminal and informative word employed by Hutton in his examination, it is 'local'.

Michael York  
 Department for the Study of Religions  
 Bath Spa University  
 exchange@michaelyork.co.uk  
 www.michaelyork.co.uk