BOOK REVIEWS

Two Reviews of *The Truimph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft.* By Ronald Hutton. NY: Oxford University Press, 1999. 486 pages. US$32.50 cloth.

Reviewed by Gina O'Connor
University of Colorado

Ronald Hutton's groundbreaking book *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* introduces a variety of material pertinent to understanding how and why modern Witchcraft or Wicca evolved into the forms it has today. With painstaking intricacy, Hutton presents little-known details of anthropological and historical importance. Hutton's attention to detail serves at least two purposes. The first is to whet the appetite for even more in-depth investigations into the little-researched occult past. The second is to weave together a finely constructed argument that illustrates how (primarily) English views on magic and the alleged persistence of ancient Pagan practices in rural life created the climate in which Neopagan Witchcraft could flourish. Although Hutton certainly encourages the reader to accept his point of view, he commendably notes that this book is a history, but not necessarily the only history of Witchcraft.

The book's first section covers Victorian and Edwardian culture, and demonstrates that Wiccan beliefs contain many elements from the literature of those periods' scholars, novelists, and poets. Throughout the book, Hutton relentlessly seeks to deconstruct misconceptions that have lingered about the pagan past. He exposes the errors and fantasies of many seminal pagan texts such as Sir James Frazer's

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Reviewed by Sarah Whedon
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The Triumph of the Moon is a systematic history of British Wicca written by Ronald Hutton, a historian of Britain and ancient British paganism. A distinctively historical approach to his latest subject matter makes it a book which has no parallel either in Britain or North America. As such it adds a new voice to the growing body of scholarship on contemporary Paganism, which already has voices from a variety of other fields, including religious studies, anthropology, sociology, and journalism.

Hutton's book is divided into two sections. The first, the "macrocosm," explores the various ideas, group structures, and magical practices which make up the milieu in which Wicca developed. Here he makes use of themes from literature (although the technique can be found throughout the book), to explore the development of ideas and attitudes in British culture toward things like paganism, nature, and witchcraft. At first glance one might expect this to yield skewed results, because literature cannot possibly represent the thinking of the entire population. However, Hutton asserts in the second section of the book that people who read widely figure prominently in the origins of Wicca. Furthermore, he spends no small amount of time exploring

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Golden Bough and Robert Graves' *White Goddess*. He also attacks widespread beliefs of a universal Goddess represented in archaeologically excavated Neolithic statuettes as well as the overblown demographic figures that had once estimated the executions of medieval witches to be over nine million. Through this evidence, Hutton makes clear that revived 19th and early 20th century pagan religions were substantially based on a romanticized view of the past and the natural world, as well as Victorian misconceptions about evolutionary hierarchies. (Wicca, he postulates, most readily fits into this subfield of "revived" religious traditions.) In conscious and/or unconscious efforts to revitalize and advance paganism, early Rosicrucians, Freemasons, Medieval magicians, Theosophists, and "cunning people" all became part of the complex web of historical movements and folk cultures that inspire important aspects of Wiccan beliefs and rituals today.

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The second section of the book details the development of British witchcraft over the past 50 years, arguing that Gerald Gardner was the founding father of Wicca in 20th century Britain. Hutton describes the directions Gardner's followers took Wicca, with detailed attention to Janet and Stewart Farrar, Alex Sanders, Starhawk, Doreen Valiente, Robert Cochrane, and Marian Green. He devotes a chapter to the ways in which Wicca has transformed since its introduction into the United States, and subsequently how these changes have affected present forms of Wiccan beliefs in England, including the feminization of Wiccan practices due to the popularity of the "Gaia hypothesis" and the reconstruction of a potential Goddess worshipping culture in the prehistoric archaeological past. The last chapter deals with Hutton's personal views on how modern Wicca can be analyzed using a sociological approach to understand its religious aspects. He then concludes with a discussion on the importance of the study of paganism in academia in which he categorizes the field within "nature religions."

While Hutton is a scrupulously meticulous and entertaining scholar and author, can this history be determinative over all past attempts of understanding the pagan past? Hutton does confuse the specifics of Theosophy and Spiritualism. He also makes some questionable choices of representation, such as depicting Madame Blavatsky as a Christian at heart. Portrayals like these might be very misleading. At other times, he leaves sections of history undeveloped, leaving the reader with the sense that something important is missing. For instance, what happened to the "cunning people" in modern history? Is it possible that some of these people are still around and would in some way influence modern Wiccan practice and profile? While he notes that folk practices were recorded in England in the 20th century, he fails to explain anything about their current relevance. Although many of the proponents of folkways are Christian like the early cunning people were, so many Wiccans are also influenced by Christian beliefs. After all, as Hutton explains, many of the core

rituals and beliefs of societies such as the Rosicrucians and Golden Dawn contained Christian elements and these in turn passed on some of their practices to Wiccans. It also would have been interesting and informative to know more about the specific kinds of effects neighboring countries' folk culture and beliefs may have had on England (whether or not they self-identify as Christians). Might further investigation reveal that England was not the only source to credit for the birth of Wicca in the 20th century? Undoubtedly, specialists in areas in which he may be less familiar will find reasons to debate some of his inferences and presentations of the particulars of history.

Furthermore, Hutton's theory that Gerald Gardner was the definitive founder of Wicca is not totally convincing. It seems too simple to believe that there was a single creator of modern Wicca, whether Gardner coined the term or not. Nevertheless, Hutton spends a lot of effort persuading the reader to accept that this is the case. Yet Hutton himself shows some hesitancy. When discussing the authenticity of Gardner's grimoire, Hutton states, "My personal opinion is that the text does not provide any conclusive evidence for the question of whether Gardner composed those entries which have no known provenance or copied them from a pre-existing source; in other words, whether he was initiated into an existing religion or created one himself" (228). If Hutton is not entirely satisfied with the results of his findings, how can the reader be? On the other hand, to Hutton's credit, perhaps the fact that he leaves the door open for further questioning is part of the appeal of this book.

Whether or not the reader finds this book totally incontrovertible, it is the most comprehensive and readable of its time. There is no doubt that the study of paganism deserves to be kept alive and thriving and hopefully this book will instigate further studies of this caliber in the future interested in broadening our knowledge about the roots of paganism.

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the ways in which scholarly ideas seep slowly into the popular consciousness.

This second section, the "microcosm," is where Hutton works to unravel the stories of the early development of Wicca and the involvement of such figures as Gerald Gardner, Dorothy Clutterbuck, Doreen Valiente, and Alex Sanders. He draws on letters, liturgical materials, and personal testimony to piece these stories together. Significantly, much of this material is in private collections and required him to gain the trust of many current practitioners of the Craft in order to work with it. He has made apparently difficult decisions about what to publish and what to keep secret, because much of the material is traditionally secret. Such decisions could only be evaluated by someone with access to these materials, and so leaves the reader who has no such access with a nagging feeling that he may not have chosen well. However, Hutton can hardly be faulted for this; it is a mark of his sensitivity to the material of a mystery religion.

Furthermore, these concerns are largely assuaged when confronted with Hutton's honesty in being willing to leave some questions unanswered. He does this whenever his source materials fall short of providing definitive answers, often suggesting several possible interpretations. These chapters often read like mysteries, as Hutton takes the reader through the process of exploring evidence and piecing it together. The mysteries are packed with so much detail, that it is inevitable to find areas where some is obviously missing. Therefore, while answering many questions, this book also opens up countless possible fields of inquiry.

The last chapter is really a third distinct section or subsection of the book. Here Hutton abandons his historical methods for an impressionist description of present-day British Pagans accumulated over the course of his research. This is bolstered by brief sociological interpretation that he freely admits is not his strength, making for a disappointing conclusion. I was all the more disappointed given his demonstrated ability to produce critical and well-documented arguments throughout the book. For an anthropologically rigorous study of British Witchcraft one might be better served by T.M. Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witches Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*. It might make more sense if he had devoted more attention to drawing connections between the history that he has pieced out and the current status. In fact, Hutton arrives at this chapter partly by way of a chapter which seeks to demonstrate the impact of American Paganism on British Paganism, but which does so in a less thorough fashion than the work of his other chapters.

These criticisms are minor in the face of an ambitious work that contributes much to the academic study of Paganism. A large part of Hutton's sensitivity to the material which he works with seems to come, in fact, from his contact with contemporary practitioners. While many of his revelations may be difficult for "fundamentalist" Wiccans, it remains clear throughout that he is sympathetic to the Wiccan community. This (only in part, of course) marks him as distinct from Philip G. Davis who has sought in *Goddess Unmasked: The Rise of Neopagan Feminist Spirituality* also to find the historical roots of ideas, magical practices and so forth (though specifically for American Goddess religion), but with the polemical agenda of revealing the supposed threat which the Goddess poses to contemporary society.

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In this book Hutton provides history which was sorely lacking, writes in a manner accessible to the educated practitioner as well as meaningful to the scholar, and opens up areas needing further research with the academic boost of having been presented by an established scholar in a publication from a well-respected press. Indeed, he voices his own interest in the growth of the field, writing that, "although pagan witchcraft has had a prominent public profile for half a century, it has been less studied than other religious movements which have appeared or arrived more recently. Perhaps the present book will do something to alter that pattern" (416). Certainly this book has the potential to do just that. *Triumph of the Moon* is a book which neither Pagan nor scholar of Pagans should go without reading.