Jeffrey B. Russell and Brooks Alexander. *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2007 (second edition), 216 pp., £10.95, paper.

In this concise and copiously illustrated work, Jeffrey B. Russell and Brooks Alexander present an elaborate overview of the construction of witchcraft in the Western world from Late Antiquity until the Enlightenment. This narrative is followed by an account of the emergence of contemporary Paganism in Britain and North America from the late nineteenth century until the late 1990s.

The authors begin their discourse on witchcraft by briefly describing practices of sorcery across cultures and time periods. Sorcery here is defined as the myriad rituals and practices in which human beings engage to manipulate fate and the otherwise mysterious forces of the natural world. The authors claim that, in spite of superficial cultural differences, witchcraft accusations and persecutions across continents and centuries stem from similar underlying causes. These can be explained not as flaws within specific theological systems, but rather as fallacies in the human condition whereby people often project their deepest fears and insecurities onto others. This process of turning human beings into scapegoats often resolves itself by means of established cultural practices, or, in some cases, it may escalate into violence.

To illustrate these processes, the authors provide a detailed narrative of the construction of European witchcraft, from its beginnings in the laws against simple sorcery in the ancient Greek and Roman world, to the spread of Christianity in Europe and its shadow aspects of heresy and diabolism, whether real or imagined. Russell and Alexander offer multiple case studies of specific witch accusations, trials and, in many cases, executions, as well as the conditions under which the persecutions occurred. Witchcraft accusations, they argue, occurred in areas where there was much social and demographic upheaval and political unrest due to a perceived lack of centralized authority. Also, the intellectual climate of the Renaissance and the early modern period allowed no room for dissent with regards to the perceived veracity of the existence of diabolical witchcraft as a satanic plot to overturn the rule of Christ on Earth. It was only during the Enlightenment that a mechanistic, rationalist, and scientific view of the world overturned supernatural explanations of natural phenomena. Belief in diabolical witchcraft then fell out of fashion and came to be perceived as a badge of shame in the intellectual history of Europe.

The post-Enlightenment period, characterized by the nostalgia for an enchanted view of the universe, provided fertile ground for the emer-

gence of the late nineteenth-century occult revival in Britain and continental Europe, and the subsequent invention of contemporary witchcraft in the English-speaking world by Gerald B. Gardner and others during the twentieth century. Russell and Alexander's account of the growth of contemporary Paganism categorically denies any factual historical link between medieval notions of diabolical witchcraft and the Wiccan religion. They also refute all claims of the antiquity of Wiccan traditions as survivals of the pre-Christian pagan religions of Europe. This, they claim, does not invalidate Wicca and contemporary Paganism as religious systems. In fact, they argue that the flexibility and adaptability of contemporary Paganism are its greatest strength and asset in a world where rapid change has become the norm.

This non-judgmental view of the contemporary Pagan movement is in keeping with the apologetic tone of the book with regards to the perceived tragic flaws in human thinking that produce witch persecutions in human societies, of which the European witch craze of the Renaissance and early modern period is but a tragic and well-documented example. From a purely historical perspective, Russell and Alexander's A History of Witchcraft is an excellent work of reference. It successfully explains and illustrates many of the underlying conditions that sometimes foster a climate in which human beings may be compelled to externalize their misfortune and blame others for the perceived whimsy of their fate. From an anthropological perspective, however, this book does not elaborate upon case studies of witchcraft persecutions in non-Western cultures, details of which are widely available for contemporary researchers. This book would have been greatly enriched if the authors had provided at least an extra chapter discussing contemporary cases of witchcraft persecutions in, say, Central Africa, where in recent years large numbers of children have become accused of witchcraft and ostracized by their communities as a result of the massive unrest caused by the die-off of a large portion of the adult population due to the AIDS epidemic. Such an addition would have made this otherwise first-rate book even more timely and relevant to students of anthropology as well as religious history.

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