

## Book Reviews

Ben Whitmore, *Trials of the Moon: Reopening the Case for Historical Witchcraft* (Auckland: Briar Books, 2010) x + 100 pp., \$11 (paper).

Scholars should rejoice when their findings are challenged. Researchers and authors working in fields such as history and religious studies – both disciplines subject to the vagaries of shifting attitudes, approaches, and discoveries – are indeed accustomed to adjusting, augmenting, and reframing their work. These adjustments may occur in revised editions, new books, scholarly articles, or talks presented at conferences. Since Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* was published in 1999, its author has been moved to amend a number of his initial findings utilizing some of these forms, as detailed in his article for this issue of the *Pomegranate*, "Writing the History of Witchcraft." Hutton also describes the "current state of Pagan historical scholarship" and in so doing offers his own review of the book that is the subject of this review.

Ben Whitmore's book has a second subtitle in addition to the first ("A Critique of Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*"), suggesting that the author is not entirely sure what kind of book he wishes to write: is it a critique, as this second subtitle suggests, or an attempt to explore the "case" of historical witchcraft? By stating that he is "reopening" this case in this critical context, Whitmore is, perhaps unwittingly, acknowledging that Hutton's book is an authoritative, if not definitive, document on the subject. Still, he claims to wish to disprove most of Hutton's suppositions, structuring his book to take on *Triumph* chapter by chapter.

Whitmore is clearly intelligent and well-read, and he writes in an engaging style. The problem with this ambitious undertaking is that Whitmore is not an historian. He is also not an academic. He is a Alexandrian Wiccan high priest and Co-Freemason, among other things. This is not to say that researchers or authors outside the academy are incapable of penning scholarly works or respectable critiques; a number of very fine scholar-practitioners have produced very exciting research and laudable writing in recent years.

Whitmore's self-published book seems to be presented as a legitimate scholarly work, chockablock with footnotes, but it demonstrates repeatedly how unfamiliar he is with how research and scholarly writing are done. There is no foreword nor acknowledgments. There are a voluminous bibliography and a fairly comprehensive index. But if Whitmore is

to achieve his goal of challenging Hutton's claims, he would do better to utilize the methods of an historian, including researching primary sources, which he does not do, even once. He does utilize a number of secondary resources, some well-known, some obscure. But, unfortunately, his primary technique is a consistent tone of condescension and sarcasm.

In his first chapter, entitled "Stars and Black Holes," after initially praising Hutton's book for its scope and influence, he then calls it "overstated and deeply misleading." He claims he might have accepted Hutton's conclusions if not for the happy coincidence that he had just finished reading Carlo Ginzburg's *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (1991), "which arrives at radically different conclusions regarding the nature of historical witchcraft." A few paragraphs later Whitmore states that despite mentioning him numerous times, Hutton appears not to have actually read Ginzburg, or "not in any detail." He then states that *Triumph of the Moon* is "riddled with big black holes. Large sections of the book—entire chapters, even—are one-sided, misleading, or plain wrong." Whitmore footnotes this vague yet outrageous comment by quoting Hutton's own claim in his preface that his book "contains no conscious subterfuges, circumlocutions, half-truths or significant silences." In this way Whitmore seems to be rather baldly calling Hutton a liar, or at the very least a fraud. He then notes Hutton's tendency to misrepresent his sources (whatever that means) and to frequently make claims for which he provides "no evidence at all."

In the next chapter, he begins by praising Hutton's superb knowledge of history, then undermines it by stating "This seemingly superhuman feat was, I found, marred by some rather odd errors, which made me dig deeper; and as the errors multiplied I began to wonder how familiar he really was with his material." Whitmore paints himself as a righteous sleuth bent on exposing Hutton's laziness and deception; in other words, he saw a need to attack Hutton's status as a, or even the, pre-eminent historian on Wicca and contemporary Paganism (what Hutton termed "modern pagan witchcraft") and to offer himself as a logical successor. The transparency of motive, the petulant language, the megalomaniacal attitude: all of these tonalities undermine the text to an extent that it's very hard to take it seriously. This is a shame, since Whitmore does occasionally make some interesting points, and puts forth a unique perspective given his own experiences with ceremonial magic.

Eventually, however, Whitmore's personal experience with modern Pagan witchcraft overshadows his objectivity and leads him into faulty reasoning. He counters Hutton's assertion that Gardner lied about a good deal of his vaunted magical pedigree by saying, in essence, well,

maybe Gardner wasn't a Royal Arch Freemason of the status he claimed, but he could have achieved such a degree if he had been a Co-Freemason! His proof for this is that other members of the purported New Forest Coven that Gardner claimed membership in were Co-Freemasons: "Given the interests of his friends and acquaintances, I would be surprised if a man of Gardner's leanings hadn't been a Co-Freemason and a member of the Holy Royal Arch." His other proof: "He certainly would have been foolish to falsify this degree to Aleister Crowley, who could easily test him." This statement is problematic on many levels, not the least of which being that we don't know if Gardner ever did try to falsify this degree to Crowley (certainly Whitmore offers no citation of such an event), and the fact that Crowley himself was a notorious liar.

Whitmore also weakly challenges Hutton's assertion that the first use of an inverted pentagram to signify evil, and the tracing of the pentagram in the air used as elemental invocations and banishings, is attributable to Eliphas Levi in the nineteenth century. Whitmore says the pentagram "had long symbolized spirit (at the topmost point) in dominion over the four elements; not such a leap, then, to employ it in dominating and directing the four elements of the quarters." Whitmore seems to be saying that it doesn't actually matter that Hutton has essentially revealed a citation from the late modern period for one of the most fundamental aspects of Wiccan ritual; he still wishes for Wicca to be composed of ancient mysteries, and any historian's rebuttal of this myth is anathema to him. Whitmore says that the sequences finalized by Levi were "largely suggested by the points' pre-existing elemental attributions; all that remained was to trace them." Which Levi did. Whitmore footnotes this comment by citing the 1494 work of Joachim Reuchlin in which he links elemental attributes of the Hebrew Pentagrammaton to Jesus, and opines, "he probably was not the first."

Whitmore's apparent disdain for the amount of work it takes to sift through historical documents and literature in search of answers is here writ large in his casual assumption that it just does not matter who does something first, as long as one is comfortable stating that a contemporary "tradition" has ancient origins. In Whitmore's final chapter he includes a footnote recommending additional books for study, but tempers one recommendation by saying it is "a valuable source for more recent events, but may not always be entirely accurate, if his account of my mother-coven in New Zealand is anything to go by."

Whitmore does occasionally manage a convincing argument or two, as when he refutes Hutton's straightforward claim that Apuleius is the only source from antiquity who posits a goddess who is the sum total of all the goddesses; Whitmore lists a number of additional sources that

suggest Isis was seen as a Great Mother figure. What at first glance seems like a reasonable critique is revealed as a pedantic point, however, when later in the same chapter Whitmore misinterprets the conclusion of Hutton's chapter "Finding a Goddess," in which Hutton states that Robert Graves and his pseudo-history *The White Goddess* (1948) was more or less responsible for creating and planting the image of a universal European deity into the mid-century imagination. Hutton writes: "By the time that he [Graves] wrote, the image of his goddess had been developing for about a hundred and fifty years. No temple had been built to her, and no worship accorded; yet she had become one of the principal cultural images of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (42).

Whitmore writes: "Hutton is similarly dismissive of the concepts of either a Great Mother or a Triple Goddess, which he lumps together as a nineteenth-century fallacy that swept through academia in a wave of 'burgeoning enthusiasm,' but, he tells us, 'No temple was built to her, and no public worship accorded.' In that case, the following invocation should come as a surprise." Whitmore then quotes lines from an invocation to multiple triple-goddesses from the Greek magical papyri, translated by Hans Dieter Betz. Whitmore's response to Hutton's critique of Graves' conception of the "Maiden-Mother-Crone" triad seems to issue from the assumption that Hutton was saying there had never been any temples built, or any worship accorded, to any Great Goddess or Triple Goddess, ever. And he then quotes a translated text from "antiquity" as proof that Hutton is incorrect. Clearly Whitmore is ignoring or perhaps missing Hutton's point about modern Pagan witchcraft's Great Goddess, in particular, the sort of descriptive language that has come to embody her. The point is not that she had never been known prior to the late modern period, but that we find the most viable expression of her existence in the poetic literature of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (much of it, of course, inspired by classical literature and the paganism of antiquity).

Whitmore repeatedly takes Hutton to task for being inaccurate, incomplete, or misinformed, but his own attempts to explore the implications of these criticisms are often peppered with inconsistencies, or his arguments fizzle out amidst irrelevant tangents. For example, in his chapter "The Elusive 'Old Dorothy,'" Whitmore complains that, in *The Triumph of the Moon*, "we are obliged to rely upon Hutton's own interpretation of the data...but we can rely upon his interpretation to be fair?" Again, there is an odd sense that somehow Hutton is a mean-spirited witch-hater. Hutton's main point is that Dorothy Clutterbuck, supposed to be Gardner's initiator into an inherited witchcraft tradition, was neither a witch nor his initiator.

Whitmore's way of proving Hutton incorrect is to quote from Philip Heselton's (admittedly fascinating, well-documented, and well-written) book about Gardner, *Wiccan Roots* (2000), in particular the passages of Dorothy's diaries that describe fairy-like women and include rapturous verse about the moon. He then quotes (again, via Heselton) the diary entries of one of Dorothy's friends, a children's author who writes about fairies (Who would have guessed that Englishwomen fascinated by fairies were all actually cleverly disguised witches?), and another associate who was "implicated" by Doreen Valiente to be part of the New Forest Coven associated with Clutterbuck and Gardner.

Whitmore throws down his gauntlet thus: "It seems that Dorothy could easily have been exposed through her social circle to ideas surrounding paganism, secret societies, witchcraft and ceremonial magic." Mr. Whitmore, I like to go to Vespers services at Christmas time, and I enjoy the Passion Play on Palm Sunday; these proclivities most assuredly do not make me a Catholic in good standing. And Dorothy Clutterbuck's occult-fascinated circle of friends does not make her a witch. Whitmore eventually agrees with Heselton's claim that Dorothy acted as a hostess for New Coven meetings. "This hypothesis, supported by large quantities of new evidence, resolves all of the major faults Hutton finds with the story, apart from the inarguable fact that Dorothy was a member of the Anglican church." Of Hutton's discussion of Gardner, Whitmore writes that his "facts are so tangled up with his fallacies that I would look to Valiente instead for the most reliable account of the man." Yet Whitmore himself is an admirer of Hutton's frequent critic Don Frew, who has stated unequivocally that Valiente cannot be considered a "primary source."

Despite his lively style, Whitmore often uses language in ways that are at best inexact and at worst confusing or contradictory. In decrying Hutton's seeming sympathies towards Christianity, Whitmore looks at Hutton's book *Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* and writes that Hutton characterizes Pagans as "radical and irrational," whereas Christianity "he positively eulogizes, with turns of phrase that make 'providence' rather than chance determine victory for Constantine and the rising Christian empire, while pagans 'brought catastrophe upon themselves.'" Yet, two pages on, Whitmore refers to a passage on Constantine by historian Ramsey MacMullen: "One of the greatest innovators was surely Constantine himself, who seems to have been aware he was not so much conforming to an existing religion as inventing a new one according to his own whims. Witness his comment: 'We have received from Divine Providence the supreme favor of being relieved from all error.'" I was nonplussed to read that Whitmore disapproves of Hutton's use

of the word “providence” as it relates to Constantine, and then to read a few paragraphs later, without irony, that he quotes Constantine using the same word.

Perhaps some of these minor points seem trivial. This is an ambitious work, after all, and a writer who is not an historian can hardly be expected to issue a book that purports to “reopen” the case on a historical topic by using research methods such as actual historians use. However I would at least have appreciated a book that utilizes the most rudimentary of scholarly critical approaches, rather than mean-spirited jabs such as “Hutton’s brush is never short on tar,” or that he is “apparently oblivious,” or “unaware” of the work of scholars like Ginzburg (a patently ridiculous accusation). In Whitmore’s penultimate chapter, he offers a compilation of negative criticisms of Hutton’s body of work (including books and articles) from other reviewers. Whitmore quotes reviews of Hutton’s books that have appeared on websites with names like “suppressed histories” or a Pagan magazine called *Wood and Water* (which ceased publication in 2003). He speaks of Hutton’s “vilification” of Don Frew. He relates that Hutton receives “occasional criticism” from outside the contemporary Pagan community, but only cites one example.

In his concluding chapter he continues his jabs at Hutton, saying that his books (yes, books, not just *The Triumph of the Moon*) “contain much to enlighten, but just as much to mislead, and they cannot be treated as a straightforward, objective summary of the topic.” And then we find that despite never once engaging with a primary source, Whitmore, despite admitting he has no academic qualifications in history, evidently does fancy himself something of an historian after all: “Until a better book appears, the student will face a stack of books and a multitude of details, sometimes conflicting, and never to be discounted prematurely. It will take hard work and a critical eye. I hope this small book of mine will help others navigate this task, and I urge them to evaluate my own claims just as carefully as they do Hutton’s or anybody else’s.” And there you have it. It is not really so much that Whitmore considers Hutton a poor historian; it is only that he wishes he himself were one of equal standing. And clearly he feels strongly about the subject matter:

As a priest of the Goddess and God no historian can take away what I’ve found within the Craft...Sincere or cynical, having once offered our service to the Gods there is every chance that we will deliver, and wittingly or unwittingly be drawn to their work. The founders of our cult were imperfect, and Hutton is imperfect, too; and if ever Hutton was inspired to honour the Goddess in some way, I think She has taken him up on the offer: he says his book is a triumph for the Moon, and perhaps it shall prove so, for it stands as a challenge to all the Craft, an incitement to seek the real truth.

Clearly Whitmore is urging others to take up arms in the fight against poor scholarship; and with the current proliferation of self-publishing options now available, I sincerely doubt his rallying cry will go unheeded.

*Trials of the Moon* is ultimately very interesting and often quite well written, and there is a good deal to appreciate in it. But it is not, and never will be, the work of an historian or a scholar. Nor will it ever be a proper work of scholarly criticism by a layman, and it is certainly not a work of history. These are neither good things nor bad things; they're merely true. What matters is that anyone wanting to discuss this book with any depth must first understand these truths.

Peg Aloï  
Albany, New York