Writing the History of Witchcraft: A Personal View

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Abstract

Over the past forty years, professional historians have taken an intense, and unprecedented, degree of interest in the early modern European witch trials, resulting in a huge amount of new publications. These have had a knock-on effect on the self-image of modern witches, a self-image traditionally based on an interpretation of early modern witchcraft that itself was firmly rejected by these new studies. This resulted in a period of re-evaluation, to which both academics and Pagans have contributed (sometimes being the same people). As a contributor to that process, I would like here to situate my own work within it, and suggest that important opportunities have been provided by changing scholarly attitudes, both for professional historians and for modern Paganism. I would also suggest that in some respects they have also been missed, by both groups. Some attempt will be made, in the light of this, both to suggest ways of pursuing further research and predicting directions in which further research is most likely to go.

Many religions have foundations myths or legends. Wicca, the most influential and numerous variety of Paganism in the late twentieth century, is unusual in that its foundation claim was bound up indissolubly with historical research. As most or all readers of The Pomegranate will know well, it was revealed to the public by Gerald Gardner, between 1951 and 1954, most notably by his book, Witchcraft Today. He claimed specifically that the Pagan witch religion into which he had been initiated was essentially the same as that which most scholars of the time believed had been practised by the victims of the European witch trials of the early modern period. The dominant belief among historians, articulated most famously by the books of Margaret Murray, but resting on a scholarly tradition going back a hundred years, was that the trials concerned had represented the final persecution and extermination of this religion. Gardner’s claim was that it had survived in secret, among a few families, and that he had been received into one of the last existing covens of it. His aim in publicising it was to help ensure its persistence and revival,
and he devoted the rest of his life to this cause. The problem that beset those who joined his religion, which came to be called Wicca, and those who entered parallel traditions of Pagan witchcraft which claimed to spring from the same root, was that the nurturing scholarly interpretation collapsed in the 1970s. A new and systematic process of research into the early modern trials was undertaken by specialist historians, working out of the greatly expanded Western academic system, who decided that the victims of the trials had not been members of a Pagan religion. They seemed, indeed, to be practitioners of the same religion, some variety of Christianity, as their persecutors. That development left both modern Pagan witches, and those historians who knew and cared about their existence, with a problem to be solved.

My own contribution to the solution was a book published by Oxford University Press in 1999 entitled *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. It may be helpful to begin by saying what it was not supposed to be. It was not a general history of Paganism, ancient or modern, in Britain or anywhere else. It did not treat of the history of witchcraft outside Britain, except in as much as that affected British developments. It was certainly not intended to attack the foundation claims of Wicca, because in Britain confidence in those claims had already collapsed. Historians of the witch trials had, as said, scrapped the interpretation on which they had been based, while the most celebrated Wiccans in the nation had lost faith in them. I have described a meeting at King’s College London, in 1990, at which I watched as a succession of these Wiccans described those foundation claims as myth and metaphor rather than historical reality. Furthermore, most of the people whom I met who had worked with the founding figures of modern British witch traditions, such as Gerald Gardner, Robert Cochrane, and Alex Sanders, expressed to me deep doubts about the historical reliability of the information which those personalities had imparted to them. My trajectory of belief had followed the same course. I had begun in the 1960s by believing completely in the concept of early modern witchcraft as a Pagan religion of feminism, liberation, and affirmation of life. In 1973 I debated against the historian Norman Cohn at Cambridge University, defending the historical legitimacy of Charles Godfrey Leland’s “witches’ gospel,” *Aradia*, and was floored by him. During the rest of the decade my belief in the old orthodoxy concerning the witch trials slipped away, as I read more and more of the new research and checked the original records (for England and Scotland) myself. I also came to realise that the old model,

as well as being wrong, had certain serious practical disadvantages. By characterizing witchcraft as a good Pagan religion, persecuted by Christianity, it made nonsense of the fact that ancient European Pagans had tried and executed people, sometimes on a huge scale, for the same crimes (essentially, attempting to harm others by magical means) as those alleged against early modern witches, only lacking the element of Satanism. Images of early modern witchcraft were based firmly on ancient Pagan models, and indeed across the world traditional peoples had held very similar stereotypes and staged witch-hunts as a result. In modern Britain, a religion which claimed to be based on a tradition which had for many centuries been opposed by mainstream society, and feared and hated by it (however unjustly), was a concept appealing to a counter-culture. It was, however, designed to provoke immediate and lasting feelings of hostility and suspicion in the bulk of the nation, which still held to a negative view of the figure of the witch.

*Triumph* was therefore written not to demolish a belief system but to fill a vacuum created by the collapse of one. Both in professional terms and those of my standing among Pagans, it would have been far better for me had I been able to rescue the old orthodoxy instead. To prove the existence of an early modern Pagan witch religion, after all, would have been a sensational coup among historians, while to prove its endurance to the present day would have endeared me to all modern Pagan witches. I simply found the task impossible, and indeed it became more so as my research for the book went on. For example, on a particular day, 26 September 1995, I went to the Bournemouth area to continue my researches there into the coven that Gerald Gardner had claimed to have joined, still firmly believing in his account and reading the evidence in the light of it. I returned that evening, after further discoveries, reflecting for the first time that an alternative reading had to be admitted; and there were other such pivotal moments along the way. What I faced was a situation in which Wicca and its siblings had apparently been reduced to a set of rootless modern sects, created by a few eccentrics and with no relevance to anybody save their personal followers. What I substituted was a new picture, based on firm and verifiable sources, whereby it became a distillation of major developments within the whole of British society over the previous two centuries, which sprang from the essence of modernity. Its goddess and god were not the deities of a few cranks, drawing on long-distant ancient images, but deity-forms who had manifested themselves to some of the greatest of all British poets, novelists, and scholars. Its beliefs and rites reflected some of the deepest needs of the modern British soul, and it was not a phenomenon marginal to society in general but drew on impulses which were central to it. As part
of this repositioning, my work re-evaluated generally beloved writers such as John Keats, Percy Shelley, Robert Browning, Algernon Swinburne, Charlotte Bronte, Rider Haggard, Kenneth Grahame, and D. H. Lawrence, among many others, and entitled Pagans today legitimately to claim them as forebears. Even the former orthodoxy concerning the witch trials was not the self-promoting mythology of a cult but an idea propagated by mainstream scholarship, because it had satisfied some powerful emotional needs. My overall message was that Wicca was the only fully-formed religion that England had ever given the world (other parts of Britain could claim forms of Druidry), and one of which it could therefore be proud.

The reviews—which were spread through the national press as well as learned journals—showed that British readers in general approved of this message: my favourite, in The Independent from the novelist Robert Irwin, whose latest best-seller had warned of the dangers of occultism, ended with the comment that he was now tempted to become a witch. The only hostile one, in The Times, by the scholar of literature Marina Warner, faulted me for being too favourable to Wicca. British Pagans also understood exactly what I was trying to do: but then the main groups of them had been in contact with me during the research and discussed it with me. A prominent Wiccan, subsequently president of the national Pagan Federation, wrote in that organization’s magazine to rebut a writer who saw the book as destructive of Wicca (and celebrated the fact), by calling it a powerful affirmation of the intrinsic value of his religion. Reviews in Pagan journals across the world were, indeed, favourable, and I got a large friendly postbag from leading Pagans and ritual magicians, and from some who told me that I had restored their confidence as Wiccans, after the collapse of faith in their foundation story, and especially after Aidan Kelly’s earlier attack on the reputation of Gerald Gardner. I also received letters which alerted me to the fact that in other countries, especially the United States, my book was read by Pagan witches who had not known of any problems with their foundation story, and took my book as an attack on it; but most of the hate-mail was from Christian fundamentalists who now regarded me as an ally of the Devil. My happiest moment came with a letter from the editors of the latest version of the Dictionary of National Biography, the official literary pantheon in which all the people who are thought to have been significant in British history

4. Aidan Kelly, Crafting the Art of Magic (St Paul: Llewellyn, 1991).
are recognised. It informed me that as a direct result of my book, Gerald Gardner, Alex Sanders and Doreen Valiente would now take their place in it, together with Shakespeare, Nelson, Churchill and the rest.5

**Tying Loose Ends**

On completion of the book I was very conscious that some loose ends of its argument still needed to be tied. To change the metaphor, by shining attention on certain aspects of its subject I had tended to put others into apparent deeper shadow, which I now needed to dispel. One of these consisted of definitions. I had not looked clearly at that of witchcraft, because most of the specialist writings on it in early modern Europe had done so, taking malevolent magic as the most general and practical meaning. It also troubled me that Anglo-American scholars of the early modern witch trials had lost interest in studies of the subject in other parts of the world, after working very closely with those texts in the mid twentieth century. These issues came home to me particularly because of my increasing role as an expert adviser to the British police, caring services, and school and judicial systems in cases involving Pagans and witches. This not only brought home to me the depth of the surviving prejudice against both Pagans and witches among the ordinary public, but the lingering fear of witchcraft in it.

Furthermore, I also became aware of the strength of belief in bewitchment among immigrants to Britain from other parts of the world and the increasing pressure of that belief, to which they testified, in their own countries. This was reinforced by my friendship with the South African Pagan Federation, members of which were facing attempts to revive laws against witchcraft in their country at the behest of the indigenous population. Between 1999 and 2002 I therefore read 130 studies of the subject by anthropologists working outside Europe, which included the great majority of those made and all of the most important.

On the basis of these, I published an article in the *Historical Journal* which called for a great awareness of anthropology among historians of early modern Europe and offered a definition of the traditional witch-figure which could hold up worldwide.6 This definition was subsequently printed in *The Pomegranate*,7 and may be summed up thus: tra-

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ditionally, a witch uses apparently supernatural means to cause injury to other members of the same community; is inherently evil and not merely working for profit; operates in a tradition, by inheritance or initiation; and can be effectively opposed by counter-magic or physical punishment. All over the world, too, I found that societies which believed in witchcraft also had specialists, known in English as cunning folk, wise folk, or shamans, who were there to identify witches and break their spells. Although individuals could stray from one category to the other, such people were clearly distinguished from, and opposed to, witchcraft. My immersion in anthropology also alerted me to the existence of a body of medical literature that proved that people who believed themselves to be bewitched often died of stress-related disorders. In that sense witchcraft could literally be lethal in a society which firmly believed in it. This argument was indeed being used in Africa to justify the revival of laws against it; but my position remains that to educate people out of the belief is the surest way of making everybody safe, including modern Pagan witches.8

The second loose end that I wanted to tie concerned the definition of magic. In Triumph I employed that which was both traditional among Western scholars and still standard and unproblematic among experts in the medieval, early modern, and modern period. By this, religion involved requests for aid from a deity, over the results of which humans had no control, while magic accorded them some power to manipulate spiritual forces to their own ends. After delivering the book I became aware that this formula was now deeply controversial among specialists in the ancient world. I therefore intervened directly in this debate, by proposing that the traditional distinction was still workable, and indeed a genuinely ancient one. I also emphasised that magic and religion were different points on a single continuum, and could overlap, while some extra-European societies (like ancient Egypt) had viewed them as integrated and harmonious. This model enabled me to propose a general framework for the history of Western magic. It also gave me the opportunity to look directly at certain late kinds of ancient ritual and deity forms which corresponded more closely to modern Paganism than the ancient norm. I did not find Neoplatonic theurgy to make as good a fit as some had proposed, but the practices of the Greek Magical Papyri had a notable resemblance. I traced these in direct transmission through the Middle Ages to the modern period; but then back in 1991 I had already published the view that if seen as system of ritual magic, rather than

proceedings of the conference on witchcraft held at Vardoe, Norway, in 2007.

8. Ibid., 129-30.

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as a separate religion, Wicca had just such an unbroken and important
lineage. I published all these ideas in 2003, and they have provoked
no criticism from specialists since. They were accepted by the classicists
of my own university, which is a centre for the study of ancient magic,
and in 2007 I was invited to debate my definition of it at Ohio State Uni-
versity, which contains the celebrated experts Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles
Johnston. To my huge delight and relief, it was also accepted as viable
there.

My third loose end consisted of my realization that in focusing on the
origins of particular Wiccan images and rites, as other authors had done,
I had failed to show what was particularly distinctive about Wicca as a
religion. I believed in particular that it possessed, from its first appear-
ance, a strikingly different and full-formed concept of the two most
important aspects of a religion: its concepts of deity and of the fate of
the human soul after death. In the end I published these ideas in an
article in 2008. The final area which I had neglected in the book was that
of the links between ancient and modern Paganisms, though that was
largely because I had already set out my views on them, in my keynote
address to the first big academic conference on modern Paganism, at
Newcastle University in 1994, which was published in the proceed-
ings. I should perhaps have reprinted that address at the opening of
*Triumph*, but having already put it out as a manifesto, I saw no reason to
repeat it. It took direct issue with the view, often heard from colleagues
in the university system, that there were no direct links at all. I identi-

fied four: ritual magic (again); cunning craft; folk rites, both ad-hoc and
seasonally repeated; and (above all) the general love affair of Christian
culture with the art and literature of the ancient world. I acknowledged
that all had been carried on in Britain between the early medieval and
modern periods by people who had been at least nominally Christian.
The appearance of modern Paganism there had consisted of a filtering
out of the non-Christian elements in these four streams of heritage and
their recombination with an active religious allegiance to ancient deities.
I then set out the framework of argument that I was going to follow
through the first half of *Triumph* within this context, assuming that
people would read the book after the address: which many in Britain, at

1991), 337.
least initially, did.

In general, when looking at the combination of Pagan and Christian elements which made up medieval culture, I agree with Karen Jolly, the leading expert on early medieval English blessings and charms, some of which famously mix the two elements together: “These ceremonies indicate a strong Christian sense of God’s presence governing over the natural world: they have incorporated their folk sense of nature into the Christian cosmology quite neatly, in a holistic view of the world that is both metaphysically and personally satisfying.”13 Where my emphasis differs from hers is in its heavy stress on the importance of the Pagan element as a major and all-pervasive part of the British, and wider European heritage. This seems to me completely just in historical terms, but it also militates further against the disposition to regard modern Pagans as a counter-culture on the fringe of society. I pursued this point further after publishing Triumph by carrying out research into Pagan images and ideas embodied in the work of medieval European intellectuals. Here I made an argument, novel in its extent, that many of those medieval intellectuals had made a place in their cosmologies for classical Pagan deities, especially through the medium of astral magic, even if the Christian deity were left in overall charge. These authors included some of the more prominent figures of medieval and Renaissance culture, and the tradition which they represented more or less spanned the gap between ancient and modern Paganism.14 I also continued my work of pointing out the importance of Pagan elements in mainstream modern English literature. Many of my Pagan friends, for example, enjoyed the novels of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, authors who were themselves, beyond doubt, devout Christians, and who were increasingly being claimed by their co-religionists as straightforward apologists for the Christian faith. I sought to show that it was the mixture of Pagan with Christian figures and concepts in their fantasy worlds that gave their fiction such imaginative power. Having published an essay on this in 2003,15 and given a major address on it at the conference on Tolkien in Birmingham in 2005, I found myself under attack by Christian opponents, above all a Lutheran academic based in Norway. I stuck to my views, and the result was a debate in an edited collection on Tolkien’s relationship with religion.16

15. Ibid., 215-38.
Some Problems in Current Research into the Early Modern Witch Trials

Over the past forty years a huge amount of research has been carried out into the early modern trials, by well over a hundred historians and their research students, covering between them the whole of Europe and the European colonies overseas. As a result, we know now more or less where the trials happened; what sort of person was accused in them; how they were conducted; and what motivated the people who brought the accusations, the magistrates who heard them, and the intellectuals who provided a theoretical structure for them. We also, at last, have some real sense of the overall number of people executed as a result, and since this has occasioned some confusion at times I shall set out the details here. Back in 1991, on the basis of the existing evidence, I proposed a figure around forty thousand, which was smaller than most that had been suggested before and some which were to be canvassed soon after. By 2001, when Geoffrey Scarre and John Callow published their short summary of current thought about early modern witchcraft and magic, it had become recognised as the standard one, having been reached independently by Wolfgang Behringer, Robin Briggs, and James Sharpe. Ironically, by then I had slightly revised it, in the light of fresh data, to between forty and fifty thousand, a number which I presented in a Ford Lecture at Oxford University in 1999. In the course of the 2000s, Wolfgang, joined by Lyndal Roper, went up further, to between fifty and sixty thousand. On the other hand, William Monter proposed thirty-three thousand for the boom period 1560 to 1660, which would mean no more than forty thousand overall, implying that the possible error either way was at most twenty percent. At the same time, Brian Levack arrived independently at my new figure.

We can therefore be reasonably sure that the overall number of executions is somewhere between forty and sixty thousand. Recorded lynching
ings of suspected witches are very rare. Although the actual figure for them must be forever unknown, there is a functional reason for thinking that it is not much larger: where magistrates were strong in early modern Europe, they strongly disapproved of people taking the law into their own hands, while where they were weak, accusers could be more or less sure of securing convictions. Deaths in prison are more significant, but still form a relatively low figure, because custodial sentences were uncommon for witchcraft, and trials usually followed swiftly after interrogation. Together, these factors would probably add only a few thousand to the total.

British historians have contributed notably to the recent research into the trials, and have proved especially adept in applying insights drawn from cultural studies, philosophy, psychology, criminology, literary theory, and the philosophy of science. There are, however, two areas in which they have been more limited. The first concerns the part played by ancient ideas in the formation of early modern witchcraft identities. Continental scholars have been much more ready to consider these: pre-eminently Carlo Ginzburg, but also a list of other distinguished figures. The British aversion, which is equally characteristic of American historians, seems to spring from two sources. One is the revulsion against the idea that witchcraft had been a surviving Pagan religion, which had been especially popular among British authors of the previous generation. The other was a feeling that Carlo Ginzsburg had overstated his case by comprehending all European witchcraft beliefs within a generalized and ill-defined category of shamanism, which created more problems than it solved. At any rate, the Anglo-American tradition came to

22. Lorraine had one of the most intense witch-hunts in Europe, with about three thousand executions, but the excellent records show thirteenlynchings in 128 years, significantly bunched at the main periods of formal trials, when panic was at its height: Robin Briggs, Communities of Belief (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 28-9.


concentrate wholly on the early modern context, and that seemed to me to leave many aspects, even of early modern witch beliefs, unexplained. I accordingly began to argue that historians of the early modern trials needed to be more aware of the ancient roots of the beliefs embodied in them, making this the theme of lectures and papers delivered at five universities between 1994 and 2001. In 2002 I published my first essay to argue the case; this campaign of course ran parallel to my arguments that British and American experts in the subject needed to engage with anthropology again.

In 2009 Harvard University held an international colloquium of historians, archaeologists, literary experts, and anthropologists to mark the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Carlo Ginzburg’s *magnum opus*, *Storia Notturna*, and debate its themes. I was the British historian to be invited, and after four days of exhilarating discussion all there had come to agreement on the basic issues. In my own presentation, I suggested that Ginzburg’s perspective and mine could complement each other. His made useful links between different phenomena across Eurasia which brought out genuine common patterns but ignored regional differences in a way which left key problems of the witch trials unresolved: why trials were numerous in some areas but not others; why women were the usual people accused in most, but not in some; and why local images of witches varied so much in their detail. These, I proposed, could best be explained by defining distinctive regional traditions of the supernatural, based upon prehistoric cultural differences. This was accepted by the rest of the company, Ginzburg being especially gallant in his enthusiasm. I went on to test some of these ideas with an article which defined one of these distinctive traditions, that of the Celtic-speaking peoples, which I held to explain why witch trials were so few among them, because their tradition embodied a legitimate right to curse in the face of injustice and also attributed uncanny misfortune more to fairies than human beings. This theme, of regional witch traditions, will be the subject of the book that I am going to write over the next couple of years.

Pagans could well find this a fruitful area for study, in which they could make a genuine impression on scholarship, partly because of its

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relative neglect by professional historians in the English-speaking world and partly because of the wide range of their interests and imaginative boundaries.

The same factors make it even more likely that they could contribute to the second area in which academic historians in the same world have been less active: that of the inner mental world of early modern witchcraft and magic. Some excellent work has indeed been carried out in this field from inside the academy. Gustav Henningsen has reconstructed, in his study of the investigations of witchcraft in Spanish Navarre, how an apparently convincing picture of a full-blown witch religion could be constructed from pure fantasy. Lyndal Roper, Philip C. Almond, and Thomas Robisheaux have made painstaking reconstructions of the mental processes of the accused as well as the accusers in trials. There has, however, been a reluctance to deal directly with the possible relations between the people concerned and a spirit world, and this is where the contributions of Emma Wilby are so important. Her first book examined the relations between British cunning folk and assistant spirits, in the light of international studies of shamanism, and their parallel reflection in the tradition of the witch’s familiar. Nobody had done anything like this before. I gave it all the help that I could, in making suggestions for improvement of the manuscript, encouraging a publisher, and writing an endorsement, and she repaid my faith richly with the result, and even more with her second book, on the sensational Scottish witch trial of Isobel Gowdie. This is in my opinion the finest reconstruction of the thought-world of somebody accused in an early modern witch trial yet made, making sense of elements that most people would find wholly fantastic. Certainly I think some of her suggestions more speculative than others, and (as she knows) I worry a bit about her selective use of widely scattered examples of what can be called shamanism taken from other parts of the world. This, however, does nothing to diminish my enthusiasm for her work. The most significant factor here is that, although she has done some part-time teaching for Exeter University, she is essentially an independent scholar with a personal interest in the subject of shamanism. Her example shows what Pagan witches might be able to achieve.

That consideration brings me, finally, to what independent researchers, with an attachment to Paganism, have actually achieved in writing the history of their own religion. Within the academy there is a growing interest in the subject, even though—as I have indicated with one example above—it as yet remains marginal and the preserve of a relatively few scholars who rarely occupy positions of strength. Examples of output have regularly graced the pages of this journal, and produced a few fine books, of which, just for the record, my personal favourite is Chas Clifton’s narrative of the appearance of Paganism in America.32 My concern here, however, is with practitioners outside the academic system. I had hoped after the publication of Triumph that many of them would turn to the rich resource of literature from the nineteenth and twentieth century which I had identified as the embodiment of the immediate source of the contemporary movement. Not only did this literature contain many beautiful passages of poetry and prose in itself, but I had barely scratched the surface of it. Fresh gems have kept coming my own way without any concerted quest for them. To cite one, in 1909 a novelist using the name of Forrest Reid wrote a story containing as coherent and passionate a defence of modern Paganism as anybody could produce at the present day.33 Such authors are immediate spiritual ancestors. As their texts are published in English and include a lot of famous and readily accessible work, they would be a relatively easy focus of research for independent scholars; but little or none seems to have been undertaken by them.

Instead the sort of book that has been produced can be represented by three very different examples. The first is the History of Pagan Europe written by Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, which appeared in 1995. The authors were both prominent members of the British Pagan community with differing linguistic and historical expertise, and between them they provided an excellent portrait of ancient European Paganism, and its legacy, from a Pagan perspective. I gave them all the help that I could, encouraging the inception of the project, reading through the book in manuscript, and assisting the negotiations to find a mainstream publisher (Routledge). After that I wanted more of the kind and indeed more major books from both authors, but they have put their literary energies elsewhere—Pennick into a series of valuable booklets on tradi-

32. Chas S. Clifton, Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira, 2006). There is of course a much greater number of fine academic studies, some by practitioners, on the contemporary sociology and anthropology of Paganism.

33. Forrest Reid, The Kingdom of Twilight (London: Unwin, 1904), 266-7. I am grateful to my former postgraduate student, Jennifer Hallett, for coming up with this.
tional crafts and on geomancy, and Jones into a study of ancient goddess forms which correspond best to those of modern Paganism, which has improved on my own work in *Triumph* and which I incorporated into my later essay on late antique religion.34

The second example consists of Philip Heselton’s work on Gerald Gardner. He had been one of the leading lights of the British Earth Mysteries movement for over thirty years when, in the mid 1990s, he began to research the history of Pagan witchcraft. Provoked by various assertions (notably Aidan Kelly’s) that Gardner had made Wicca up by himself, Heselton wished to investigate evidence to the contrary, and— with characteristic courtesy — contacted me, in the knowledge that I was working on the subject, and asked if to do so would cut across my studies. I replied that, on the contrary, it would be excellent to have two different minds address the same problem, and, as I was just finishing work on *Triumph*, gave him the source references and personal contacts that I had accumulated for Gardner’s career. He exceeded even my already high expectations, by proving a master of research into life materials and in two successive books provided the best account of Gardner’s activities during the critical period ever published.35

My immediate opinion of his books was expressed in the forewords that I wrote to both. Some minor differences emerged between our views, as I had expected and indeed hoped. Having inherited a firm belief that Gardner was initiated into Wicca at the home of a woman called Dorothy Clutterbuck, I came to have doubts about her involvement in Wicca, though I thought it still possible. Heselton strengthened the argument for its possibility, without being able to clinch it. For the broader problem, of proving Gardner’s claim that he was initiated into an existing coven, Heselton could reconstruct a plausible hypothetical membership for such a group, but acknowledges that the case for it is as yet inconclusive. In his own conjectural reconstruction of Gardnerian Wicca, it developed not in the 1940s but a couple of decades earlier, which would fit my overall portrait of British Paganism in *Triumph* perfectly well. Heselton went on to write a full-length biography of Gerald Gardner, which builds on his previous achievement and surpasses it, but it has struck the perils of publishing on this subject. At more than 200,000 words, it is long for the sort of press which normally issues Pagan books,


but the subject matter (despite my own best efforts) does not attract a mainstream publisher. As a result, its appearance has been held up for years, but there is now good hope that it will appear before the end of 2011.

The third example is a short book entitled *Trials of the Moon*, the work of a New Zealand Wiccan called Ben Whitmore, which appeared in 2010 and is very different in kind. It is devoted entirely to my own work. Although he allows that I have some virtues, at the opening and the end, these concessions seem very hollow in view of everything in between. He sums up the message of *Triumph* as being that modern Pagan witchcraft is “entirely a new invention, cobbled together by a few eccentrics,” with no link to any earlier form of “Pagan spirituality.” This is of course a travesty of its intended message. The whole purpose of his own book is to destroy my reputation as an authority upon the history of Paganism and witchcraft, at least among Pagans, and especially belief in the arguments of *Triumph*. He has carried out very little research into primary source material. What he employs instead is a number of secondary texts of varying quality and drawn from a wide span of time. Whenever he finds a passage in these which apparently contradicts me, he proclaims that I am proved wrong. He also examines some of the works from which I have quoted myself and claims that I have misrepresented them. Nobody who believes his assertions can be left with anything other than the impression that I am an unscrupulous and deceitful individual motivated by a concealed hostility to Paganism. Most of the use that I make of source material is passed over in silence: only the apparent faults are highlighted. Where I address properly in later publications matters that he accuses me of neglecting in *Triumph*, this is taken as confirmation of my earlier guilt rather than a negation of it. By the same tactic, aspects of earlier work of mine to which he takes exception, and which are differently handled in *Triumph*, are still made to stand as examples of my turpitude. He criticises me for not defining terms like “witchcraft” with absolute precision, but then makes no attempt to do so himself, keeping them as fluid as possible so that they can fit a range of different meanings. He likewise makes no attempt to construct an alternative history of witchcraft and Paganism to my own: his whole purpose is simply to undermine confidence in me, so that—presumably—Pagan witches can go back to believing whatever they did before I wrote. Most of the points on which he tries to fault me are of detail, often trivial, and his hope is clearly that if he can put enough small cuts into my reputation

37. Ibid., 1.
for reliability, then faith in it will leak away. The majority of these minor and specific instances of contention can be swept up in the book that I am currently writing, on Britain’s Pagan heritage, and the one to follow, on the figure of the witch. The main issues at stake can, however, be handled here, and in doing so a better appreciation may be achieved of the problems of dealing with Paganism and witchcraft as historical issues.

Against the idea that early modern witchcraft was not a surviving Pagan religion, Whitmore quotes a range of good historians who testify to the presence of elements of folk belief inherited from ancient Paganism in the ideas that early modern people held of what witches do. His hero here is Carlo Ginzburg, whom he asserts that I cannot have read. The problem with his use of the material is that medieval and early modern people mixed together Christian and former Pagan motifs in constructing all parts of their world picture, including witchcraft. The most remarkable known example, which is Ginzburg’s own, is that of the Italian benandanti, local magicians who believed that they sent forth their spirits at night in dream to fight witches and so protect their communities. They believed themselves to be good Christians (and their fellow villagers agreed) until the local inquisition discovered them and declared that their beliefs were in fact inspired by the devil.38 Across most of Europe there is no trace even of such special groups of people in the trial records. Whitmore seems to imply that there were actual societies of witches in early modern Europe who held residual Pagan beliefs that were peculiar to them and who were persecuted as a result. None of the scholars whom he quotes argues that. Some, including myself, are willing to believe that some of the alleged witches had actually cursed their neighbours, or had dreams or fantasies in which they committed some of the actions alleged against them. That is, however, a long way short of a vestigial Pagan religion practised by witches.

My portrait of the emergence of the distinctive Wiccan deities was of how forms of deity—an all-powerful moon or earth goddess and the god Pan—that were of lesser importance than most in the ancient world and had retained that relative lack of prominence in Christian art and literature since, suddenly came to dominate the British imagination at the opening of the nineteenth century. Whitmore counters this by arguing that both were more prominent in ancient and medieval times than I had suggested, but does not tackle my actual point, which is the remarkable and rapid shift by which they became the favourite deity

forms of the modern British and central to their consciousness.\textsuperscript{39} He does suggest that my reliance on poetry as a source may conceal a greater former importance for them, but poetry is the main medium in which the British between 1400 and 1850 addressed Pagan deities. I am very familiar with other British literature and art of the same period, and the relative unimportance of the nature-goddess and Pan in works from before 1800 is sustained, whereas the importance of both gets into every type of source—fiction and non-fiction—after it burgeons in poetry. My critic tells me that my book has discouraged a literal belief in deities, but, on the contrary, the sudden eruption of particular deity forms in the human consciousness is what has long been termed revelation.

In my section on cunning folk, he accuses me of minimizing a sense of coherent tradition among them, while doing nothing to demonstrate the existence of one. Instead he suggests that a greater examination of trial records, folklore, and historical anthropology would provide a different portrait to mine. In fact, my treatment of the subject was the most careful ever published until that point and more or less exhausted the English and Welsh folklore records. I did relatively neglect trial evidence, and confine myself to modern cunning craft (as that is the kind from which Pagan witchcraft is said to have arisen); but that is because the trials, and the pre-modern dimension of the subject, were becoming the special preserve of Owen Davies, whom Whitmore confidently and wrongly describes as my student.\textsuperscript{40} In a succession of books, Owen proceeded to provide a deeper study of English and Welsh cunning folk throughout history, which we agree matches well with mine.\textsuperscript{41} Whitmore suggests that witchcraft and cunning craft blurred into each other, and I have agreed that individuals could sometimes slip between them. As concepts, however, they were distinct, not just in folklore but in the early modern trial evidence and also in extra-European anthropology, as my later work cited above reveals and as Owen’s research has confirmed, and that of James Sharp, the main expert in English witch trials.\textsuperscript{42} Some confusion is created by the fact that during the Reformation period evangelical Protestants attempted to equate the two as delusions or instruments of the devil (and Whitmore quotes one of these, Reginald Scot);
but popular opinion never accepted this.\textsuperscript{43} The situation seems to be comparable abroad: Robin Briggs has called the overall percentage of cunning folk accused as witches across Europe “a miniscule fraction.”\textsuperscript{44} Whitmore accuses me of underestimating the number of executions in the early modern trials; for which see above. He adds the accusation that I denigrate Charles Godfrey Leland, who published the alleged witches’ gospel, \textit{Aradia}, in 1899. This serves to distract attention from the fact that I did not rule out the possibility that the text was actually what Leland claimed it to be, the gospel of a witch religion which had survived to modern times from antiquity. What I explained was that I thought this unlikely, for a series of reasons with which Whitmore never engages.\textsuperscript{45} Instead, he focuses on the elements of genuine Italian folklore in \textit{Aradia}, something which nobody has ever denied, but which do nothing to solve the problem that in Leland’s text they are combined, uniquely, with an actual witch religion for which there is no independent evidence. He questions my suggestion that learned ritual magic underwent a shift in the nineteenth century from being mainly concerned with practical ends to being concerned with cosmic truths. It is certainly the case that examples of that concern are found in late antique and medieval magic, as I went on to explore in my essay in 2003, but—as in the case of deity-forms—it is the shift of emphasis which is new. The rest of his criticisms of my treatment of magic are all at the level of detail. For example, I suggested that the pentagram only emerged as the symbol of magical power par excellence in the twelfth century, though it was known in the ancient world. He seems to think me proved wrong simply by restating that it was known in the ancient world. After that, he unsurprisingly prefers Philip Heselton’s take on the appearance of Wicca to mine, and then he has done with \textit{Triumph}.

Instead he turns to savaging selected parts of other books of mine. He accuses me of having been too favourable to early Christianity in 1991, as part of his design of making me seem anti-Pagan. To prove this he quotes against me a single historian, Ramsey MacMullen, without observing that the latter was reacting against a prevailing tendency among experts which I was merely reflecting. He considers my work on the Middle Ages and seems to assume that if medieval intellectuals incorporated classical Pagan deities into a Christian framework, they could not have been Christians. He ends with my history of seasonal festivals in Britain, in which I augmented a large body of recent research

\textsuperscript{43} Both Owen and James, in the references above, are clear on this point.  
\textsuperscript{44} Robin Briggs, \textit{Witches and Neighbours} (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 122; see 174-79 for their role in hunting witches.  
\textsuperscript{45} Hutton, \textit{Triumph}, 145-6.
with mine to suggest that fewer of their customs had come down from Pagan times than had been thought; though I emphasised that customs of relatively modern provenance could reproduce genuinely primeval sensations and embodied timeless needs and motifs.\(^4\) He finds one more custom which might have Pagan origins and then leaves Britain to find others abroad. He points out that the latter often have traits similar to those found in the alleged activities of early modern witches; and so we go round to the first issue again, of how popular perceptions of witchcraft were constructed. All this trawling of Europe for Pagan-friendly folklore not only has problems of context, but fails to approach the problem of why modern Pagan witchcraft appeared when it does, and in its particular form, and in England rather than anywhere else — which \textit{Triumph} actually did.

The most revealing chapter of Whitmore’s book is also the most mean-spirited: the last, in which he assembles every criticism that he has been able to find of \textit{anything} that I have written. The total haul consists of two spiritual feminists,\(^4\) two Wiccans, and one first-rate British expert on the Iron Age. The inclusion of the latter, J. D. Hill, is heavily ironic, because I had challenged him over the case of Lindow Man, a bog body which is one of the most famous exhibits of the British Museum and which he then curated. This body has been interpreted as one of the best pieces of evidence for human sacrifice in Pagan Britain, and been repeatedly used not just to denigrate ancient Paganism but modern Pagans as well. I believed that it had been both misinterpreted and misdated, and argued that the museum should recognise those possibilities. Whitmore approvingly quotes Hill’s riposte to me, without realising either the context or the result: that I replied in turn; that Hill conceded my point in \textit{The Times} newspaper; that his successor, Jody Joy, published a pamphlet on the museum’s behalf which recognised the justice of it; and the museum altered the exhibit accordingly.\(^4\) It is rare for such a complete victory to be won in a scholarly debate, and it was one which benefited Paganism as well as studies of prehistory.

The real significance of Whitmore’s list of witnesses against me,


\(^4\) One of whom, Asphodel Long, subsequently recognised that she had misunderstood me and became a lasting friend. I am, incidentally, baffled by Whitmore’s charge that I made a personal attack on the other, Max Dashu, on a now defunct website. I rarely give interviews, and would not have dismissed anybody in the terms credited to me. I have provided a proper interview which refers to her work in different terms, for the electronic magazine \textit{The Magickal Light}, 3.11 (1 November 2010).

\(^4\) See the \textit{Times Literary Supplement} on 30 January, and 5 and 12 March 2004 and \textit{The Times} on 22 March; and Jody Joy, \textit{Lindow Man} (London: British Museum, 2009).
however, is the extent of the omissions. Where are the leading figures of British and American Paganism, who have written its key books, founded or perpetuated its main traditions, headed its national organisations, and shaped its identity over decades? Still more important, where are the professional historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, classicists, and literary experts? Academics are notoriously territorial, and the chronological and conceptual range of my writings has been wide enough to encroach on the special preserves of a great many of them, who have a lifetime of expert knowledge on which to call. My work has been submitted to scores of published reviews and hundreds of citations, and of course each piece of it is criticized by anonymous reports before being accepted for publication. Both groups, the Pagan leaders and the academic scholars, understood the contexts of what I was doing well enough, and the latter the material involved, to be able to form an accurate judgement.

I do feel distressed to have failed Wiccans like Ben Whitmore by not providing the kind of history that they feel that they need. There was no necessary collision between us. Had he been content to suggest that *Triumph* was fine as far as it went, but that there was now room for a book which emphasised the richness of the ancient and medieval images and texts on which Pagans could still imaginatively draw, I would have encouraged, supported, and advertised his work. His world picture, however, is constructed around a series of binary oppositions: good/bad, true/false, insider/outsider, him/me. Another of these is Pagan/Christian. His hostility to Christianity is made very clear, and his response is to strip from the European cultures of the past fifteen hundred years any Pagan or possibly Pagan elements and declare them to be the property of his religion. Whether or not such tactics are suitable for a multi-cultural, multi-faith society is a matter for subjective consideration; but they cannot be employed by a historian. The work of the latter is to reconstruct past ages holistically, so that their nature can be recovered as well as possible, and it can be better understood how and why historical change (such as the appearance of modern Paganism) occurs.

49. Just for the record, I experienced my first Wiccan rite nine years before Ben Whitmore was born, and he is a proud representative of a Wiccan tradition founded by somebody whom I encountered in his hey-day and from whom I learned some useful things. Whitmore lectures me on not having paid enough attention to Doreen Valiente, but Doreen’s respect for me, based largely on my work, was enough for her to name me as one of the remarkably small number of people whom she wanted to be present at her funeral. He is, however, determined to pose as the defender of Paganism against a hostile outsider.
Conclusions

It may tentatively be proposed that there are three different but not wholly incompatible futures possible for the writing and reception of Pagan history by practitioners outside the academy. The first is that trial, error, and debate produce a consensual picture, solidly based on primary research and accepted by professional scholars who are not themselves Pagan, to which Pagan authors have made a significant contribution. This has always been my own dream. There is often some disjuncture between the adoption of changing ideas about the past by popular readers in general, often amounting to a generation, but the process normally occurs. On the other hand, the British public needed a century to absorb the idea that the Druids did not (or did not definitely) build Stonehenge, and where religious identity is concerned, the transmission may be incomplete: Christian creationism is a case in point.

The second future is that Paganism, and especially Pagan witchcraft, divides into a number of mutually hostile sects, with different versions of history centred on rival writers. This is not merely probable: to judge from recent debates on the Internet, it has actually started to happen already. Religions have, of course, very commonly divided into sects over the interpretation of texts, but the latter are normally the sacred writings of the religious tradition concerned. Modern Paganism lacks such scriptures, and instead different publications on the historic past are coming to fill their space. In part the cleavage is one between academic and non-academic, reflecting the visceral distrust of established authority figures manifested by some Pagans. In the case of a writer such as Ben Whitmore, however, the clash consists of putting up one set of academic authors (mixed with publications from outside the academy) against others, although the use of professional historians by such polemicists is not reliably that which the authors themselves would have intended.

The third possible future is also one of often acrimonious division, but by generation and length of experience. It is very apparent, in Paganism as in other religions, that recent converts are often the most insistent upon the need for a sense of direct contact with ancient truth, and the most stridently self-assertive, and hostile to opposed ideas and faiths. Those whose life in the tradition concerned has been much longer tend often to be mellower, more accepting of differences and more ready to re-evaluate ideas and honour creativity. This is as true in my own country as others, and suggests that attitudes to historical scholarship in both individuals and groups may prove to be cyclical as well as sectarian. The comfort in all this to me, as a historian, is that it demonstrates how crucially important my subject remains to present identities.
Having said that, the caveat should also be entered that most varieties of Paganism, including heathenism, Druidry, and traditions based firmly on Mediterranean and Near Eastern models, have not (yet) been significantly convulsed by disputes over historical revisionism. This remains a trait of Pagan witchcraft; but then that is still the most important single tradition.

There is, moreover, a major oddity in this pattern: that Pagan witchcraft seems increasingly to be concerned with authenticity of tradition as the basis of its claim to be a viable complex of religions in the contemporary world. This is precisely the opposite direction in which it ought, both logically and by historical precedent in the history of religion, to be evolving. After more than half a century of continuous and quite prominent public existence, its practitioners could more readily appeal to factors such as authenticity of religious experience, a relatively long presence (with quite high public visibility) in the modern world, and an increasingly accepted position within society as a whole. At the very least, that position suggests that Pagan witchcraft is no threat to the wider national communities within which it exists, and at best it can plausibly be claimed to enrich them culturally. The most remarkable aspect of this emphasis on historical authenticity, however, is that it seems to relegate to a lesser place, if not discount altogether, what is normally the central feature of any religion: the relationship between its members and the deities or deity whom it honours, and the overwhelming sense of the good, the beautiful, and the true that practitioners find in that experience.

Bibliography


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