

REVIEW ARTICLE

Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England - A Regional and Comparative Study. Alan Macfarlane. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970. £4.50.

Religion and the Decline of Magic - Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England. Keith Thomas. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971. £8.00.

There was no 'witch-craze' in England; rather, for a hundred years after 1563, the country knew witchcraft as anthropologists know it. But also as they don't. In the period, in Essex alone, at least seventy-four people were hanged as witches. It was witchcraft without District Officers, feral and consequential. From villages throughout the country, witches were regularly presented to Quarter Sessions and Assize Courts. Thomas Cooper asked in 1617: "Doth not every Assize almost throughout the land, resound of the arraignment and conviction of notorious witches?"

Two new books by academic historians introduce the topic to anthropologists: Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England by Alan Macfarlane and Religion and the Decline of Magic by Keith Thomas. The two books complement each other: Dr. Macfarlane offers a detailed sociological analysis of patterns of legal prosecution for witchcraft in Essex, and Mr. Thomas offers an ambitious survey of the intellectual context of the English witch-beliefs, with a tentative explanation of the decline of magical ideas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Both authors have clearly read widely and critically in the anthropological literature, and take their lead from Evans-Pritchard's Witchcraft Oracles and Magic among the Azande. And as historians they build on the achievements of Notestein and Ewen. But for both disciplines their work breaks new ground. Historians will recognize an extraordinary difference in their approach from, say, that of Professor Trevor-Roper in his essay: The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. And anthropologists will be intrigued by all the problems that the authors set up in their analysis of Tudor and Stuart witchcraft through time. (Indeed, they have almost two hundred years to work over.)

In his book, Macfarlane is concerned first to establish the facts of informal suspicion and legal prosecution of witchcraft in Essex during the period in which the witchcraft statutes were in force. He presents his account as a model for future investigations of other areas, and offers a careful evaluation of all the different kinds of source that he has found useful in his task. He writes: "Possibly the most important expansion of sources in the study of witchcraft ... will prove to be in what we may term 'indirect sources'. That is to say, the huge volume of local records which help us to recreate the context of village life within which witchcraft suspicions occurred." The initiative was his own. As a complement to his overall study of prosecutions in Essex, he undertakes a closer analysis of accusations in three sample villages, making full use of his 'indirect sources'. In this exercise he shows that the historical analysis of witchcraft

in England can be taken to a fully anthropological point of focus.

Macfarlane concentrates on the frequency curve for prosecutions and their distribution through Essex, and on other statistics that may possibly relate to these. Also, he traces, as closely as he can, the process of suspicion, accusation and prosecution, looking in particular at the relationship between accused, accusers and village consensus. He is most interested in the questions: why the prosecutions are distributed in time and space as they are, and what determined the evident regularities in the pattern of accusation - in the relative status of accused and accusers, and in the nature of the quarrel between them.

Macfarlane assumes that his two questions are linked, that they may admit of a common explanation; but the point is arguable. A witch was prosecuted at court, but the accusation was a village affair. Different kinds of people were in control of the action in these two theatres - independent juries and judges, and fellow villagers. Given that the society of Tudor and Stuart England was markedly heterogeneous, these simple facts create problems for the historian of witchcraft. The facts of accusation and prosecution will only be fully connected if accusers and prosecutors are in agreement on the nature of witchcraft, and if their accusations and prosecutions are motivated by the same fears and have the same objective. And there is considerable room for doubt on this matter.

To take the question of agreement first, both Thomas and Macfarlane recognise as one of the important features of witchcraft in the period, the fact that among all the different groups of people that acted in conjunction to prosecute witches, there was great variation and confusion in views on the nature of witchcraft. For instance, Sir Edward Coke, who had a part in the drafting of the 1603 statute, defined a witch as "a person, that hath a conference with the Devil, to consult with him or to do some act". (Third Part of the Institutes of Laws of England, 1644). He was referring to the 'myth of Satan and his human servants' that was radical to the tradition of 'hammering' witches on the Continent. (See Cohn's article in A.S.A.9). But it is clear from the English pamphlets and depositions that this idea was only ever marginal to the popular conception of witchcraft in England. In his essay on the European 'witch-craze', Trevor-Roper argues an important distinction between witch-beliefs as used by villagers in their day-to-day social life ('practical' witchcraft, to adapt Leach's phrase) and, in his case, "the inflammation of those beliefs, the incorporation of them by educated men into a bizarre but coherent intellectual system, which, at certain socially determined times, gave to otherwise unorganized peasant credulity a centrally directed, officially blessed, persecuting force". The English witch-beliefs, both in their content and use, differed in many important ways from their Continental counterparts. But all the evidence suggests that an equivalent distinction to Trevor-Roper's does need to be drawn for the English material. Macfarlane himself comments in his appendix on English definitions of witchcraft: "Examination of historical definitions ... immediately reveals that there was immense confusion and variation. There are a number of obvious

reasons for this. Some authorities based their definitions on the works of Continental demonologists; others on the opinions of country folk. Opinions of witchcraft changed between 1560 and 1680. Attitudes differed between social and religious groups".

So the legislators, judges and villagers very possibly meant different things by the word 'witch'. Then, insofar as they were talking about different things their accusations and prosecutions cannot have been motivated by the same fears, or directed to the same end. Perhaps those who were hung as witches were killed because they were unfortunate enough to get caught in an intersection of belief-systems, victims of homonymy.

In the analysis of the process of accusation and prosecution, the situations in court and village must surely be kept well apart, and will have to be linked in a complex model, in which people have, as members of different analytical categories, entirely disparate motives for acting in coordination. Macfarlane does not emphasize these distinctions.

For the situation at the courts, Macfarlane offers in his book only six pages on the legal background to secular prosecutions. (In his view, Notestein's work "makes more than a very general survey of the literary and legal controversies unnecessary".) He is unable fully to clarify the situation that held at law before the introduction of the first witchcraft statute in 1542. (In Religion and the Decline of Magic, Mr. Thomas manages little better.) And he describes how, in the seventeenth century, the decline in the number of presentments for witchcraft to the Assize Courts was linked with a growing tendency for Grand Juries to reject presentments with the call: "Ignoramus", and for Petty Juries to acquit the witches brought before them. Thus, on either side of the peak for prosecutions, the reader is left to doubt whether the major features of the curve may not be susceptible of an explanation in terms of the situation at the courts, rather than the situation in the village.

Obviously, further research needs to be done in this area. If any historian takes on the task, anthropologists can look forward with great interest to a focussed account of 'witchcraft at law' in Tudor and Stuart England. The case of English witchcraft is doubly interesting as the topic is constituted (as the game of chess is constituted by its rules) by statutes in a legal system without parallel in the ethnographic record. The witchcraft statutes were easily slotted into a highly formalistic legal framework with an evolved tradition of theory and exegesis, and themselves received commentary, for instance in Richard Bernard's A Guide to Grand Jury Men (1627). Macfarlane's account of the treatment of the problem of proof suggests that the history of the administration of the statutes may offer an ideal case-history for students of the problem of rationality in anthropology. (For instance, from his description, it is quite uncertain what would count as an argument that one was not a witch, once one had been accused at the Assize court).

For the situation in the village, we must remember that Macfarlane's statistics cover only legal prosecutions for witch-

craft. In his statistics he is only catching 'end-games', and again, the events on which he is working -- the presentments and depositions -- apart from being only terminal were also crucially determined by the fact that they were taking place on an entirely different stage from their antecedents. Macfarlane can only follow the action closely after it has been translated from the village to the court. He has only the hints and generalizations of contemporary writers on witchcraft as further evidence for the pattern of events before an accusation of witchcraft was taken to law, with other scattered references, for instance in diaries and astrologers' case-books.

So Macfarlane cannot manage a full account of witchcraft at the village level, by the nature of his material. But in his account of those suspicions and accusations that were taken to the point of legal prosecution, he does reveal very striking regularities in the pattern of accusation. He is refreshingly sceptical of the explanatory power of the idea that witchcraft 'explains' and offers a means of reaction to misfortune, and he considers the accusations instead as motivated by recurring tensions in social life. He argues, very forcefully, that the accusations were commonly related to problems of 'neighbourhood' (the clearly charged relationship between 'neighbours'). He shows how the image of the witch was, in certain important respects, simply a transformation of that of the ideal neighbour, how, when the suspected witch wished exactly to assert her neighbourliness, her conduct could be directly reclassified as 'witchcraft', as a repudiation of neighbourhood.

He observes, on the small quarrels about gifts, loans and invitations that were believed to motivate the maleficium, that it was always the victim who had made the open breach in neighbourly conduct, rather than the witch. And on the triviality of the issues, "the object of dispute was merely the final stage in the severing of the relationship". In the quarrel, and the following accusation, it was the total relationship, not the particular item, that was at stake. Those accused of witchcraft were commonly old women, wives or widows, and moderately poor, though not necessarily receiving poor relief. The accusers were commonly younger and better off, yeomen as against husbandmen and labourers.

From these findings and others, Macfarlane develops a very attractive argument about the pattern of accusation. He suggests that in a period of economic and social change, the witch-beliefs were used as a radical force effecting a transition from a neighbourly, highly integrated and mutually interdependent village society to a more individualistic pattern of life. It is a new, and rather terrible slant on the old 'dissolution of redundant relationships' idea. He suggests that the witch-beliefs were used in covert denial of the older values of neighbourhood, at a time when Christians could quote Exodus 22.23-24, with Thomas Ady, against those who withheld their charity from the poor: "If thou any way afflict widows, and fatherless, and they at all cry unto me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath shall wax hot against thee". In the period the traditional informal institutions dealing with the old and poor were coming

under strain, as the ideals of neighbourly conduct, to which they were tied, were losing out to a new way of life. And in an overtly christian community, only through accusations of witchcraft could the links be broken.

There are two difficulties with Macfarlane's argument about witchcraft accusations at the village level. First, in his initial discussion of "witchcraft prosecutions and economic problems", he concludes that "no direct connection can be drawn between poverty and accusations". This does seem clear from his findings. But the connection in his final argument is surely direct, and it is not clear how he can square this argument fully with his earlier conclusion. And then there is a problem about the interpretation of the gifts and loans that appear to be the crux of the matter. Macfarlane sees the witch's request as the 'last straw', and the refusal as the point at which the victim decides finally to withhold his charitable support from the indigent witch. But one can doubt whether economic support was at all important in the relationship, whether it was not simply Maussian exchange that was refused, rather than charity (in the modern meaning of the word). Macfarlane quotes a "classic instance of the neglected neighbour at neighbourly celebrations" which surely invites the first rather than the second interpretation: a man "having a sheep-shearing about that time, and not inviting her thereto, being his neighbour, she, as he supposed, bewitched two of his sheep". All the other objects of dispute could be interpreted in the same way. If you accept the possibility, then at once, unhappily, the argument about charity crumbles. The quarrels can no longer be seen as traces of the grounds for the accusations. They appear instead as preliminary acts in the process of exclusion from the village community, to which end the accusations may have been directed. The witch was resentful at being 'cut' by the neighbourhood (Macfarlane emphasizes that a developed suspicion was a social, village affair), and the accusers could fully recognise this. The grounds for the refusal cannot then be traced directly, and in the task of explaining the accusations, we would be back to square one.

I mention the possibility only because it does not seem to have occurred to Dr. Macfarlane, and because I cannot see how to rule it out. He presents his explanation as provisional, and suggests that further work is needed on all aspects of the general topic of witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England. He concludes: "Attempts directly to correlate prosecutions, either in time, area, or personnel, with economic, religious, medical, or social factors have only been partially successful. But the attempt has suggested, it is hoped, some new areas of inquiry for the historian, and shown that the society of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is as susceptible to sociological and anthropological analysis as any modern housing estate or African tribe". Macfarlane's book has achieved all this, very clearly. It stands also as one of the most useful and intriguing of all ethnographies of witchcraft in the literature.

Those who want to read Macfarlane's book seriously, should also read at least the large section on witchcraft in Keith Thomas' Religion and the Decline of Magic. If they have the time, they

will find the whole book endlessly fascinating. Mr. Thomas offers his account of the witch-beliefs as part of a general survey of a number of "systems of belief which were current in sixteenth and seventeenth century England, but which no longer enjoy much recognition today". After a preliminary discussion of the ideological changes involved in the English Reformation, he surveys the practice of magic and astrology, the appeal in political action to ancient prophecies, witch-beliefs, beliefs in ghosts and fairies, times and omens. The book is intended as a contribution "to our knowledge of the mental climate of early modern England". Mr. Thomas aims first to elucidate the beliefs, and then to establish the nature of their relations with each other, and with the system of organised religion. He works generally on the theme of misfortune and reaction to misfortune. He is careful always to consider the beliefs in relation to their daily use. He presents us not with a catalogue of superstitions, but with an intricate portrayal of a series of whole ways of life.

Mr. Thomas' complete argument has an extraordinary range and depth, and is quite beyond the scope of this review. I can at least allay one fear about the work as a whole, generated by the phrasing of its title: that its terms of reference are 'Frazerian'. Mr. Thomas does use the terms 'religion', 'science' and 'magic', as Frazer might have done, but he does so because it was in such terms that the intellectual issues were defined in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Lollards in the fourteenth century would have clearly understood Mr. Thomas' title. It was Frazer's terms of reference that were antique.

Mr. Thomas is faced with a very great difficulty in the definition of his topic, when ideas of what was magical, and indeed what magic was, shifted, considerably and were confused throughout the period. Throughout the book, Mr. Thomas distinguishes between religion, magic and science according to the eighteenth century map, progress towards which he reckons was direct, if halting, from the time of the Reformation. His argument would have been more complicated, but might have gained in clarity, had he chosen instead to work through time on the changing meaning and boundaries of the terms 'superstition', 'magic', 'religion', 'scientific', and so on. Consider the following quotations: "If the distinction between magic and religion had been blurred by the medieval Church, it was strongly reasserted by the propagandists of the Protestant Reformation". (p. 51). "There is little more reason for asking why the wizards were able to retain their prestige than for inquiring how it was that the pretensions of Galenic physicians remained so long unchallenged". (p. 207). "The (weapon-salve), said Robert Fludd, was not "cacomagical, but only naturally magical". (p. 224 What is the distinction?) "In the last resort, the only means of telling whether a cure was magical or not was to refer it to the authorities - the church, the law and the Royal College of Physicians". (p. 192) And on page 640: "At the end of our period we can draw a distinction between religion and magic which would not have been possible at the beginning". Certainly a closer account of the development of the three-way opposition between magic, religion and science across the Reformation and through the Scientific Revolution would have been helpful to Mr. Thomas'

argument. If ever there was a call for the nominalist approach in anthropology, it is here.

Otherwise, Mr. Thomas was perhaps overbold in his decision on the task of explanation: "Astrology, witchcraft, magical healing, divination, ancient prophecies, ghosts and fairies, are all now rightly disdained by intelligent persons. But they were taken seriously by equally intelligent persons in the past, and it is the historian's business to explain why this was so". Anthropologists, who have been working on similar problems for years, are still far from agreement on the most basic questions of procedure for the explanation of 'belief'. Mr. Thomas has too great a confidence in the explanatory power of a relatively simple functional approach.

In his section on witchcraft, Mr. Thomas offers a wide-ranging survey of the English witch-beliefs, of their relation to other systems of belief that could be used in explanation of misfortune, the situation at law, the situation of the witch in the village community, of the controversy on the reality of witchcraft, and on its legal treatment. He shows how the English witch-beliefs could make sense in relation to the contemporary conception of Satan, and of his powers of intervention in human affairs, and he offers an explanation of why, in England, witch-prosecutions and the Reformation arrived together. (Which makes the situation on the Continent problematical, where the initiative for prosecution clearly came from the Catholics with the Malleus Maleficarum and the Papal Bull 'Summis Desiderantes Affectibus'.)

Mr. Thomas' accounts of "the making of a witch" and "witchcraft in its social environment" are particularly striking. He discusses in detail how attitudes to ritual cursing were retained or modified across the Reformation, and shows how, deviously, they were tied in with the witch-beliefs. Exodus 22.23-4 (quoted above) and other texts supported a popular belief that the curses of beggars and the unjustly treated were especially potent. And yet, "when a bad-tongued woman shall curse a party, and death shall shortly follow, this is a shrewd token that she is a witch" (Thomas Cooper: The Mystery of Witchcraft, 1617). Legally, successful cursing constituted a 'strong presumption' of witchcraft. We are faced here with another of those deft and devastating reclassifications of conduct that are so characteristic of the English witch-beliefs. Mr. Thomas considers also 'the temptation to witchcraft', an issue that is not often raised with such force in the anthropological literature. And he discusses the isolation of the witch as a nonconformist in a tightly bound and tyrannically inquisitive local community.

At the end of his survey, Mr. Thomas takes up the question of the decline in the number of prosecutions and the final repeal of the witchcraft statute. He is surely correct in his insistence that the decline in prosecution can only reflect changes in "the intellectual assumptions of the educated classes who controlled the machinery of the law-courts". Then, any questions that we might like to raise about the decline of witchcraft accusations and suspicions at the village level, will probably be unanswerable. There is clear and general evidence for the survival of witch-

beliefs at a popular level long after the repeal of the witchcraft statute. But the situation cannot be monitored adequately. For traces we only have isolated reports of village lynchings, and scattered references in diaries and the like. (This point is obviously important for Dr. Macfarlane's argument about witchcraft at the village level. His argument cannot be tested in the matter of the decline of witch-beliefs, and what should we make of the survivals?)

On the shift of educated opinion, Mr. Thomas observes that it was as silent as the shift of opinion on astrology. That is to say, the arguments for scepticism had been in circulation for a long time. (Scot's The Discovery of Witchcraft was published in 1584.) In the second half of the seventeenth century, they just came to be accepted, by an apparently free choice. Mr. Thomas suggests that the shift in view may have been related to a change in the conception of the Devil and of his temporal powers. And he refers also, more tentatively to the growing acceptance of the assumption of an "orderly, regular universe, unlikely to be upset by the capricious intervention of God or Devil". He sees Newton's mechanical philosophy as the consummation of this movement. He writes: "Accusations of diabolical witchcraft were thus rejected not because they had been closely scrutinized and found defective in some particular respect", (a reference to the growing diffidence in the legal treatment of witchcraft) "but because they implied a conception of nature which now appeared inherently absurd". This very same idea was taken up at the time by "J. G. (Glanvill), a member of the Royal Society" in his Philosophical Considerations Touching the Being of Witches and Witchcraft (1667). (In this book, the system of belief attempted a last, desperate self-confirmation. Glanvill says, of scepticism of the reality of witchcraft: "So confident an opinion could only be held (against the evidence) by some kind of witchcraft and fascination in the fancy". The Devil encourages the belief that there is no such thing as himself - the sceptics are themselves an argument of what they deny!) Mr. Thomas does not refer to the essay, but in it, Glanvill argues confidently and clearly, exactly against scepticism of the plausibility of witchcraft, leaving to authors like Baxter the task of "fully evincing" "the certainty of the worlds of spirits ... by unquestionable histories of apparitions and witchcraft" (the phrases are taken from the title of a book published in 1691). (And remember that Robert Boyle reckoned that all that was needed to confound the sceptics was "one circumstantial narrative fully verified"). Glanvill's essay is certainly a witness to the fact that simple arguments against the plausibility of the idea of witchcraft were current. But then it also shows that the idea was not necessarily absurd to all educated men of the time. Glanvill was presumably a competent natural philosopher. He must surely have been more familiar with the developments in scientific thought to which Mr. Thomas refers in his argument than the "looser gentry (or) small pretenders to philosophy and wit" who were generally "deriders of the belief in witches" (Glanvill, quoted by Thomas). May not the choice for the argument from absurdity have been as 'free' as the choices for the other arguments? If we decide that it could have been, then, again, we will be back to square one.



Anthropologists should be deeply grateful to Mr. Thomas and Dr. Macfarlane for their two excellent introductions to the topic of witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England. Perhaps, by their success, they will encourage anthropologists and historians to active collaboration, at last. They would be the first to recognize that their accounts can only be provisional in the present state of knowledge. Their achievement was not to explain, but to explore the topic in a new way. The situation that they have revealed is very much more complex than those that anthropologists are accustomed to handling. It offers an important challenge to anthropology, and with the work of Thomas and Macfarlane, we can hope for the future that we may come to a full understanding of the problem, expressed by Montaigne after witnessing a witch-burning on the Continent: "It is rating our conjectures highly to roast people alive for them".

Randal Keynes