

Hecate's Offspring

The Dark World of Witches, by Eric Maple. *New York: A. S. Barnes & Company, Inc., 1964. 200 pp. + bibliography and index. \$5.00.*

THE ANCIENT art of witchcraft is still very far from extinct in our Western World, as the police court records of almost any large city will attest. Only two years ago, according to a news report cited by Mr. Maple, the authorities in New York found it necessary to prohibit the sale of such charm-working commodities as bats' blood, graveyard dust, love ointments, and "prayer candles inscribed, Death unto mine enemy!" The cult flourishes of course mainly among the poor and ignorant, though it crops up occasionally in high places, as for example in one of the Washington embassies during the Second World War when the Ambassador's lady was said to have begun each day by sticking a fresh pin into a waxen image of Adolf Hitler.

In England, where the removal of an old prohibitory statute now permits witchcraft to compete on even terms with nudism, Zen, Yoga and bomb-ban pilgrimages for the favor of the faddish, the cult has had an ostentatious revival with curious modern trappings. The various witches' covens, it seems, have combined to form a sort of trade union or professional association with a full-time public relations officer to assure the sisterhood a fair share of attention from the press, radio and television. Of these new and modish *magae*, "with their suburban orgies and comic covens," Mr. Maple, an English antiquarian and folklorist, is altogether scornful; they belong, he tells us, "to the horror comic rather than to history." The witches themselves take a very different view, and claim a history far more ancient than the Norman or Saxon or even Roman conquests. They speak of themselves take a very different view and claim a adopted the theory expounded by Professor Margaret Murray that European witchcraft was a clandestine but conscious and widespread survival of a paleolithic or neolithic nature worship, marked by orgiastic fertility rites and human sacrifices, against which for centuries the Christian churchmen are said to have waged an unremitting but never quite successful struggle.

Of this theory Mr. Maple is scornful too; he considers the notion of witchcraft as a vast underground conspiracy against Christianity to have

been an invention of the Inquisition, for whose officers and agents the extirpation of heresies, whether real or imagined, had become a profitable vested interest. There is, he insists, no evidence that such subversive groups as the witches' covens ever existed, or that such convocations as the scandalous witches' sabbaths ever occurred, apart from confessions extracted under torture or the accusations of patently hysterical or mendacious witnesses. Much the same records drawn upon by Miss Murray to build up her case for an elaborately organized witch cult are employed by Mr. Maple to demonstrate the palpable absurdity of any such hypothesis. He shows how closely the imagined covens parallel the real conventicles of sectarian heretics and how neatly "The Man in Black"—identified by both inquisitors and Protestant divines with Satan, and by Miss Murray with various horned dieties of antiquity—fits the popular sixteenth-century image of the Puritan hedge preacher.

Nor does Mr. Maple recognize any real kinship between traditional witchcraft and the sort of psychopathic diabolism associated with such bizarre characters as the Abbé Guibourg, Catherine Deshayes (La Voisin), Mme de Montespan, the Duchesse de Gramont, the Marquis de Sade and the English eccentric Alestair Crowley. Observing that "satanism was making its bow at the very time witchcraft was making its exit" from the historical stage, Mr. Maple implies that the diabolist cult was much more like what the inquisitors, Miss Murray, and the late Fr. Montague Summers imagined witchcraft to be than what witchcraft really was and is.

True witchcraft, in Mr. Maple's view, is nothing more or less than magic in its most primitive and universal form, and as it has been described by countless anthropologists. In pre-scientific societies illnesses and other misfortunes are most often attributed to hostile influences of a supernatural kind. It is the work of the white witch, or wizard, to determine the source of this influence and to remove it by the counter-magic at his command. The agent of misfortune may turn out to be a spirit which can be appeased by offerings or rendered harmless by appropriate incantations or ceremonies. Again the agent may prove to be a human enemy with power to command an evil spirit—that is to say, a black witch. Thus the belief in black (or malevolent) magic is necessary to the practice of white (or beneficent) magic.

The methods of the European white witch, male or female, did not differ essentially from those of

the African witch doctor or the American Indian medicine man. In all three instances a good deal of downright charlatanism was doubtless combined with a genuine belief by the magician in his own powers; all three appear to have had some intuitive understanding of what is now called psychosomatic therapy and all had some empirical knowledge of herbal properties. The female white witch, or "wise woman," of Europe was most often the village midwife (*sage femme*) as well, and was sometimes able through her magical prowess to transfer the pains of parturition from mother to father—a possible explanation of the primitive custom of *couvade*. In some cases, no doubt, a white witch could be induced, for a suitable reward, to contrive an abortion.

It will be seen that white witchcraft by its nature opened innumerable opportunities for intimidation, blackmail, and pure vindictiveness. It is too much to suppose that the witches never availed themselves of these opportunities. When his own magic proved unavailing the white witch might by some conjuration disclose the identity of the black witch whose spells were working the mischief, thus placing her—for it was usually, though not invariably, a woman—in some danger of assault or murder by the bewitched person, or of lynching at the hands of infuriated neighbors. Such a result occurred as recently as 1928 in the hex-ridden York County of Pennsylvania.

In the Middle Ages neither the ecclesiastical nor the temporal authorities seem to have been greatly perturbed about the prevalence of white witchcraft, except where poisonings or other extreme mischiefs might be suspected; after all, the line between magic and what we now call medical science was almost impossible to distinguish. The mediaeval church was also disposed to view with a tolerant eye the seasonal revels and other customs and practices of undoubted pagan origin and even succeeded in giving to some of them a Christian significance. In times of calamity, such as famine or pestilence, there was occasional recourse to forbidden rituals and heathen invocations, but it strains plausibility to suppose that these represented anything more than acts of desperation.

Most of the accusations of malicious magic recorded from the Middle Ages involved persons of powerful position, against whom prosecution was difficult or impossible. The great European witch mania, which persisted throughout two centuries and to which so many thousand lives, including those of children and infants were sacrificed, was not a mediaeval but a renaissance phenomenon that continued into the age of the baroque. The *Malleus Malificarum*, or *Hammer of Witches*, by

the German friars Sprenger and Kramer, which set off the frenzy, was not published until more than two decades after the birth of Desiderius Erasmus and only six years before Columbus' discovery of the New World. This wild work, as Mr. Maple says, became "the handbook of the persecutors"; it "defined witchcraft in such terms that made it impossible that any suspect could ever escape the inquisitorial net" and prescribed "methods of interrogation and torture that would inevitably result in confession." The mania gradually infected all classes, educated and ignorant alike, and gathered fresh violence with the Reformation. In Catholic minds witchcraft became vaguely associated with the Reformed religion and in Protestant minds with the hateful popery, so much so that in England, as Mr. Maple tells us, one of the most damaging evidences that could be brought against a suspected witch was that she had been overheard saying payers in Latin.

The cruellest and most extensive persecutions were in Germany, in both Catholic and Lutheran areas. So many persons were employed in the detection, examination, and execution of witches that to have halted the prosecutions would, in the opinion of one writer, have produced a severe economic crisis, comparable perhaps to that which might follow a sudden dismantling of our Federal bureaucracy. The number of victims is not known but it must have run into tens or even scores of thousands, virtually all of them innocent or at worst deluded, according to the Jesuit Friedrich von Spee, whose passionate protests against the daily holocausts went largely unheeded. The Inquisitor Savini, who directed the persecutions at Metz, is said to have boasted that he could make the Pope himself confess to witchcraft, if he were permitted to examine the Pontiff under the usual procedure. France had its indefatigable witch-hunter in the learned jurist and demonologist Pierre de Lancre, and the political scientist Jean Bodin had lent the weight of his reputation to the crusade. Before the end of the seventeenth century, however, the new rationalistic spirit had begun to prevail and Louis XIV called a halt, much to the anger of the provincial parliaments. Meanwhile, alas, publicity had had its usual effect; sorcery, sometimes combined with satanism and infanticide, had become the new recreation of the jaded lords and ladies at Versailles, and some of the highest nobility were soon involved in a series of monstrous and partly suppressed scandals.

On the Continent, where the property of convicted witches was confiscated, many of the victims were from the well-to-do classes; in England, to which Mr. Maple devotes most of his attention, it

was another story. There the prey, with very few exceptions, consisted of the poorest and most miserable elements of the rural population. Most were old and half-demented women. Some were beggars; some peddlers; some were village harlots with bastard children, sired, as they were persuaded to confess, by Satan or some lesser devil. Mr. Maple cites a medical authority who found in our familiar Hallowe'en picture of the black witch—peaked chin, deep-sunken eyes, shambling gait and so on—symptoms of osteomalacia, a softening of the bones by prolonged malnutrition. As for the disorders supposed to have been wrought by witches' spells, many are identifiable from contemporary descriptions as cerebral hemorrhage, infantile paralysis, rheumatic fever, malaria, gangrene, and ergot poisoning.

English common law forbade mechanical tortures of the sort employed in Scotland and on the Continent, but the English "witch finders," such as the infamous Matthew Hopkins, found efficacious substitutes. "They starved their prisoners, kept them without sleep, tied them cross-legged on stools in an agony of cramp or marched them backwards and forwards until they broke down and confessed." There were also the "fleetings," or swimming tests, to which King James I and his judges attached as much credibility as our prosecutors and police give to lie-detector devices or as a psychiatrist might give to admissions made under the influence of hypnotic drugs. There were public exposures of nakedness in the search for the tell-tale "devil's mark," the supernumerary nipple with which the witches were supposed to suckle their familiar demons.

The saddest thing is to note how many able minds were infected by the craze. Sir Thomas Browne, in asserting that disbelief in demoniac witchcraft was tantamount to atheism, undoubtedly reflected the dominant religious opinion of the age, although to salvage some credit for the educated class there were a few like Fr. von Spee, already mentioned, and the Dutch parson Balthasar Bekker, who never ceased to denounce the witch-hunting, or who, like the English squire Reginald Scot, that *bête noire* of James I, attacked it with savage satire. However, the alarms and anxieties of the learned in general were not without some small basis in fact. As the superstition waxed, and the evil exploits attributed to the witches grew more exaggerated, it gave rise to a new astute and sinister class of professional sorcerers prepared for almost any sort of dirty work. Almost every nobleman of consequence, as the late Sir Charles Oman pointed out, was likely to keep one or more such fellows

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in his retinue to amuse him with feats of divination or necromancy, to cast horoscopes and consult auguries, and now and then perhaps to perform an odd job of poisoning on one of his patron's enemies. A good example of the ilk would be the notorious Dr. John Lambe, who had the powerful protection of the Duke of Buckingham. Although convicted of various crimes, including murder and rape, he escaped punishment until he was set upon and beaten to death by a London mob.

One cannot, however, read this and other accounts of the witch mania without observing how much the psychological climate in which it thrived resembles that of our own age, which is likewise an epoch of fanatical wars and revolutions, of profound philosophical hatreds and of vast spiritual and moral confusions. Demonologists of a new sort, hardly less influential than were Bodin, Lancre, James Stuart, and Cotton Mather in their day, occupy many places of power. In their fantastic implausibility the witch confessions cited by Mr. Maple are curiously reminiscent of the self-criminations in the Moscow show trials. And our age, like that of the great religious wars, is one that may demand a sudden and radical alteration of loyalties.

. . . Cruel are the times when we are traitors
And do not know ourselves, when we hold
rumour
From what we fear, yet know not what we fear,
But float upon a wild and violent sea. . . .

Reviewed by J. M. LALLEY
