

Embracing the Darkness: A Cultural History of Witchcraft

John Callow

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This is a wide-ranging, well-researched and highly persuasive study of witches and witchcraft in Western culture. Illustrated with a number of photographs, John Callow challenges stereotypes, assumptions and literal ‘old wives’ tales’ to offer a re-reading of the treatment of, and attitudes to, witches. He does this through a range of examples, from the brief discussion of Mother Redcap that opens the first chapter, through the notorious ‘Devils of Loudun’, to the intriguing figure of artist Robert Lenkiewicz, who created the extraordinary mural on Plymouth’s Barbican and kept the bones of the witch Ursula Kemp in his collection of occult artefacts.

Rather than taking a purely chronological approach, Callow organises his material around a range of interesting ‘cases’ or key figures. Each of the ten chapters tells a new tale, or a new version of a well-known tale. Chapter 2, ‘The Witch House of Bamberg’, describes the 17th century witch-hunt in the Bavarian town of Bamberg and illustrates with chilling detail the spread of witch-paranoia and the ease with which anyone could be accused and found guilty. More than 600 so-called witches were executed during a period of about four years, a succession of futile and violent deaths that was only brought to an end by the invasion of the Swedish army in 1631. It is a good starting-point for the book, being a story of the harmless and/or innocent victims of fear, exploitation of power and what seems to have been a kind of neurosis.

This is the narrative of witch-hunting most often told to a modern reader. However, Callow also gives us stories of those who proclaimed themselves witches. Chapter 7, ‘I Shall Go Unto a Hare’, tells of Isabel Gowdie of Auldearn in Scotland, immortalised in song by both Steeleye Span and The Sensational Alex Harvey Band, who ‘met the Devil while out

walking and had entered into a covenant with him' (133) and who subsequently 'walked into a courtroom, seemingly of her own volition, in the spring of 1662, in order to confess her crime of witchcraft' (132). The account that Gowdie gave of her witchcraft practices, and the reasons for her unsolicited confession, were seemingly rooted in a fear of her own damnation, and what may possibly have been a deluded sense of the 'harm' she had done to others through magic. What is so intriguing is that, in spite of Gowdie's apparent eagerness to disclose a whole range of supernatural practices, including encounters with the King and Queen of the Faeries, there is no actual documentation of a death sentence or execution. Gowdie's case was referred to the central court in Edinburgh, and as Callow points out, the key difference between the experience of Gowdie and the other witch accused with her, Janet Breadheid, and the witches of Bamberg was that in Scotland at this time the authorities were increasingly resistant to handing out extreme sentences for cases that could be the product of local tensions rather than large-scale evil. Whether Gowdie was discharged or not will probably never be known, but Callow uses her story as part of the book's wider project to examine the history of witches and witchcraft through a different lens – one that engages with the complexity of witch-history rather than focusing on abuse and suffering. As he points out in the chapter's concluding remarks, 'we can only go so far in reconstructing cases of, and motives for, witchcraft' (147).

Callow moves seamlessly through history, art, drama and film. Chapter 6, 'Little Sister Jeanne of the Angels', gives the backstory of Aldous Huxley's *The Devils of Loudun* (1952) and John Whiting's play, *The Devils* (1960). Sister Jeanne, an Ursuline nun, makes accusations of witchcraft against Urbain Grandier, a cleric and the object of her obsession, who was tortured and ultimately executed. Callow then evaluates Huxley/Whiting's retellings of this as well as discussing Ken Russell's notorious 1971 film, *The Devils*, offering a revisionist view of this much-maligned version of the Loudun horrors. He suggests that the film has been subjected to 'wilful misreadings' and that 'a sense of spirituality and true religious revelation [are] at the heart of the film' (128). Callow ultimately sees *The Devils* as having a hopeful ending in spite of Grandier's violent death, an argument based on the quest for change and revelation he sees in the story of Grandier and his mistress, Madeleine (who survived the persecutions). He also positions the film in relation to early 1970s style, pointing out the presence of Twiggy and Justin de Villeneuve as extras in one of the scenes and suggesting that there is an analogy between the ambiguous gender identity of the characters and fashion styles of contemporary London.

It is this ability to interweave a range of cultural aspects that makes *Embracing the Darkness* so readable. Callow's final chapter incorporates an extraordinary mix of examples: the 1970s children's series *Catweazle*, the stories of Rosemary Sutcliff, and various characters and episodes of the 1980s drama series *Robin of Sherwood*. The discussion of the latter pivots on a comment made by its creator, Richard 'Kip' Carpenter, who observed that 'mythology is as intertwined with magic as the mistletoe is with the oak' (201-2). The chapter (and book) concludes with an analysis of the figure of Herne the Hunter through a range of sources, not the least of which is Harrison Ainsworth's underrated 1842 novel, *Windsor Castle*. In these modern versions of magic and witchcraft, the culmination of a journey through cultural history, Callow sees a form of rejuvenation embodied by the figure of the witch: 'That these stories have survived ... is, therefore, victory enough. The witch, so long reviled, is the vehicle for this transformation ... her story is not so much about the need to embrace the darkness of witchcraft but to make the winter turn once more into spring' (219).

This slightly enigmatic ending concludes a book which, while exhibiting meticulous research, remains highly accessible and appealing, in part due to Callow's enthusiasm for and knowledge of his subject, but also because it offers a different narrative of the witch in culture. In his opening chapter, Callow refers to the terror of the witch in the Western imagination (1). His book, however, creates a fascinating and varied figure deserving of a more complex understanding in history than she/he has received.