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This volume arrives with high praise. The book '[d]eserves to become another classic', opines Peter Burke at the top of the front cover. It '[c]ompletely overhauls our view', observes Ronald Hutton somewhat further down. The work itself is not shy of ambition either. Both the title—*The Decline of Magic*—and the subtitle—*Britain in the Enlightenment*—promise sweeping panoramas. The former, of course, invokes Keith Thomas's half-century-old *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), one of the foundational texts for the study of early modern witchcraft. That work was over 700 pages in length, though Thomas's prose is so mesmerizing few readers will notice either its length or the passage of time. Can the present work, which comes in at exactly 180 pages if we exclude the appendices and notes, live up to the praise and aspirations? This book undoubtedly makes an important contribution and fills in parts of the puzzle, but the last word on the decline of belief in witchcraft and magic remains to be written.

Michael Hunter situates the decline of magic between 1650 and 1750, within the areas of research in which he has built his career: the history of the early Royal Society, in particular that 'Christian Virtuoso' Robert Boyle, and the widespread fear of atheism in elite circles. Given Hunter's decades of rumination on these adjacent subjects, this book unsurprisingly has deep roots—the opening chapter first appeared in 1995 and appears here 'in close to its original form'; other parts were published more recently (p. 25). Still the overarching argument, previewed bullet-point style in the preface, is extremely well-articulated, as punchy as that of the coffee-house wits that partly occupy Hunter in this volume (pp. vi–vii). In fact, the book could be shorter still. One could quite easily omit two of the book's six chapters (chapters 4 and 6). These case studies provide useful scaffolding, but without them Hunter's tree would still stand.

The Decline of Magic does not begin, as one might expect, with the Royal Society but with John Wagstaffe's *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* (1669, 2nd enlarged ed. 1671). The opening lines of Wagstaffe's preface—'The zealous affirmers of Witchcraft think it no slander to charge all those who deny it with Atheism'—already make the major theme of late 17th-century demonology crystal clear: spirits were a defence against irreligion.(1) I agree with Hunter that *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* is remarkable, though like him I find it difficult to articulate why. With perhaps one exception, Wagstaffe offers nothing that cannot already be found in Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) a century earlier. Hunter is right to emphasize the work's 'punchy, cynical tone', its 'boldness and iconoclasm', though Scot's sarcasm—'He that can be perswaded that these things are true ... may soon be brought to believe that the Moon is made of green Cheese'—was already legendary (pp. 47, 35).(2) Certainly Wagstaffe's work was not notable, *pace* Hunter, for his humanist learning. The claim that 'the influence of antiquity can be argued to have had a crucial "modernising" effect' is by far the least convincing part of Hunter's argument (p. 51). Wagstaffe lifted his classical references straight out of Martin Delrio's *Disquisitiones magicae* (1599–1600), the most-read demonology of the early modern period.(3) Evidence that this Jesuit had adduced to prove the universality of witchcraft was repurposed to demonstrate its 'heathenish' origins. Other arguments put forth by Wagstaffe, for instance, that the Bible, when speaking of witchcraft, had been mistranslated, were also decidedly old hat.

These observations support Hunter's claim that *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* 'brings us closer to the otherwise elusive phenomenon of oral, fashionable scepticism' (p. 31). Wagstaffe's sarcasm found an audience, whereas Scot's had not, at least not originally (*The Discoverie* was reprinted in 1651, 1654, and 1665). The evidence adduced to establish Wagstaffe as a free-thinker and 'a quintessential "wit"' (33) is plausible but marred by an odd emphasis on his drinking habits. (Wagstaffe's contemporaries may have equated free-thinking with free-living, but there is no reason we should.) I would also note Anthony Wood's claim, overlooked by Hunter, that '[f]or writing of [the witchcraft] book he was also laughed at by wags of this university, because, as they said, he himself look'd like a little wizard.'(4) The wits of Oxford may have taken to the book but not the author.

As Hunter notes, the debate between Wagstaffe and his orthodox critics barely contains anything of intellectual interest: 'one comes away ... with a strong sense that ... a proper debate did not really occur at all', 'it is almost as if intellectual change does not really occur through argument at all' (pp. 44,45). All this is very true, and it goes to the very essence of the science of demons. As the 16th century progressed, the realm of the demonic was increasingly situated within the preternatural, that part of the natural realm of which humans were ignorant. The devil was able to work wonders, not true supernatural miracles, *only* because humans did not understand *how* he worked them. The devil's actions were axiomatically unverifiable. His existence, as established by Scripture, was thus impossible to disprove. Yet by the same token, his handywork could never definitively be seen behind any particular event either. This was demonology's Faustian bargain: what made it irrefutable in theory—and immune to Wagstaffe's arguments—had the potential of disabling it in practice. It would also doom the efforts of the Royal Society demonologists, because while God may have created a clockwork universe, the devil was a free agent.

Scepticism about witchcraft inevitably entailed impugning the intelligence, credibility, and/or motives of witch-hunters ('lewd Inquisitors and peevish witch-mongers' as Scot called them⁽⁵⁾) in order to discredit their evidence. Wagstaffe's one innovation was to tie his criticism of inquisitors to witchcraft's supposedly 'heathenish' origins and develop it into a historical narrative of clerical cynicism and malfeasance. Other (Cambridge trained?) reviewers will be able to assess the Hobbesian roots of this link between priestcraft and witchcraft, but the through line sketched out by Hunter with subsequent Deists and their 'application of a cynical psychology to the history of religion' is certainly convincing. For Toland, Shaftesbury, and others '[m]agical beliefs appear mainly as the ultimate, most laughable extreme of superstition' (p. 50). Still, this cynical attitude should surprise no one. It fits in well within the longer history of the concept of superstition brilliantly studied by Euan Cameron, in which religion, originally superstition's opposite, gradually became subsumed by it.⁽⁶⁾ Although understated in this particular chapter, the rhetorical nature of the free-thinkers' disdain, as exemplified by their carefree application of 'superstition', is equally clear. Later on, in Chapter 4, a case study examining the 'Drummer of Tedworth', perhaps the most famous haunted house in history, Hunter shows that the other tool in the sceptics' arsenal, alleging (priestly) fraud, was by no means conclusive. Approaching these arguments, not as a historian of science, but as a historian of religion working on the beginning rather than the end of the 'Long Reformation', I cannot help but be struck by how unoriginal these arguments are. Elizabeth Barton, the 'Holy Maid of Kent', was already accused of fraud before the Reformation in Britain had properly started.

As with *The Question of Witchcraft Debated*, Hunter is keen to represent the printed outputs as the tip of the proverbial iceberg of libertine scepticism emerging out of London's coffee houses where 'such risqué ideas were likeliest to be expressed' (p. 56). Hunter's impressive mastery of the manuscript material allows him to shine light in some dark corners, although the sources may not take him as far as he would like. For instance, he quotes the responses of the Leeds antiquary Ralph Thoresby who, as Laura Sangha has recently shown, encountered some scary ghosts of his own.⁽⁷⁾ Twice, the pious Thoresby left the London coffee houses shocked—'Lord pity and pardon! ... Lord enlighten him!'—by the impiety he found there (pp. 56, 57). I cannot judge whether Thoresby was the sensitive type, but if these views were indeed that common the antiquary should not have been surprised by them. I would similarly not deduce 'libertarian tendencies' from the fact that Thoresby's heterodox conversation partner later committed suicide (p. 58).

Still, the picture sketched out is clear and convincing enough. Witchcraft scepticism in late 17th- and early 18th-century Britain was perceived by the orthodox to be aligned with free-thinking and with atheism. Almost inevitably, this leads us back to the well-known troika of Royal Society Fellows that picked up their pen in defence of the spirit world, consisting of Robert Boyle, Joseph Glanvill, and Henry More, and in particular to Glanvill's ever-

expanding *Saducismus Triumphatus* project. Ensconced in the terrain of which he has surveyed every nook and cranny, Hunter shines brightest, drawing a very clever and entirely persuasive distinction between intent and effect. The Society's records on the subject of magic were 'extraordinarily taciturn' because, despite their best efforts, Glanvill and company were never able to persuade it to take an interest (p. 69). The scepticism of others, notably Robert Hooke and Henry Oldenburg, created 'a kind of stalemate' (p. 77). The subsequent silence has engendered considerable historiographical debate, but this 'boundary work' implicitly placed the spiritual realm beyond the Society's purview and allowed 18th-century scholars to attribute the decline of witchcraft to its supposed activities, and thus to orthodoxy rather than to free-thinking. Hunter illustrates this point with a fabulous retort by Richard Bentley: 'What then has lessen'd in England your stories of Sorceries? Not the growing sect [of freethinkers] but the Growth of Philosophy and Medicine. No thanks to Atheists, but to the Royal Society and College of Physicians...' (p. 80).

As the Bentley quotation already illustrates, the 18th-century developments captured in the second half of Chapter Two and Chapter Five consist of the orthodox reclaiming witchcraft scepticism for themselves and eliding the heterodox origins of their position. Hunter is surely right to argue that the radical and anti-religious nature of the Deists' claims delayed their more general reception, just as Stuart Clark once observed that Reginald Scot's 'very extremism blunted his impact.'⁽⁸⁾ This brings us to Francis Hutchinson's *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1718) and the entry of witchcraft scepticism into the orthodox camp. Again, what remains striking is how little the actual arguments changed over the centuries. Demonology, at its most successful, was always an appeal for consensus and a search for a *via media*. (Surely not everything reported was a fraud?) Hunter describes Francis Hutchinson's attempt to navigate 'betwixt an Atheistical Sadducism on one hand, and a timorous Enthusiastical Credulity on the other' as navigating between Scylla and Charybdis, but those same two sea monsters were already invoked by James VI and I in his 1597 *Daemonologie* for his middle path:

'in eschewing the not beleieving of [confessions] altogether on the one part, least that drawe vs to the error that there is no Witches: and on the other parte in beleieving of it, make vs to eschew the falling into innumerable absurdities, both monstrouslie against all Theologie diuine, and Philosophie humaine.'⁽⁹⁾

The attitudes of the mid-18th-century physicians—in particular Sir Hans Sloane and Richard Mead, surveyed in Chapter Five—provide a similar sense of *déjà-vu*. With allegations of fraud not as definitive as hoped (as the Chapter Four excursion to Tedworth showed), they diagnosed visionaries with a range of medical disorders. The disease *du jour* was hypochondria rather than hysteria, but the attempt to medicalise (and thus explain) the preter- or supernatural experiences of patients was no different from that invoked by Johann Wier in his 1563 *De praestigiis daemonum*.

The decline of magic thus emerges from an oral culture of sarcasm and wit that flourished in the coffee houses. At first, this was seen as a threat to orthodoxy, in part because it was taken up by free-thinking Deists, but later the position was co-opted by religious, medical, and scientific establishment figures who worked hard to elide its heterodox origins and implications. Hunter is careful to stress the 'pluralism that has come to be seen as characteristic of Enlightenment thought', perhaps because in his mind the pendulum has swung too far towards the study of occultism (p. 142). Chapter Six, the second case study, partly fills in this pluralist picture further and provides some reasons behind the orthodox shift in attitude.

This chapter studies the phenomenon of second sight, the ability of some individuals (especially those living in the Scottish Highlands) to see into the future, from Robert Boyle onwards. Hunter argues that Boyle turned away from witchcraft and towards 'new sources of evidence to prove the reality and elucidate the workings of the supernatural realm.' Following the interminable trench warfare of the Tedworth controversy, second sight 'must have seemed

ideal' (p. 148). Hunter also links the growth of scepticism in the phenomenon to a change in scientific 'fashion', namely the displacement of 'the Boylian tradition of Baconian science' with 'an essentially mathematical mode' based on a 'new, Newtonian ethos' and general laws of nature (pp. 154, 161). Boyle's biographer does not approve. Hunter notes 'a degree of intellectual arrogance about the infallibility of this [new] paradigm which contrasted with the rather humble sense of the provisional nature of knowledge that had characterised Boyle For better or worse, the new scientific world view challenged both the inclusiveness of the Boylian style of science and the rather heroic open-mindedness that Boyle displayed about the causation of phenomena.' (p. 162)

It is hard to disagree with these observations—the latter also has a rather marvellous sense of irony—but an evident tension exists between Boyle's attempt 'to prove the reality ... of the supernatural' and his 'rather heroic open-mindedness' about causation.

The Decline of Magic has taken us on an exploration of 'an undeniably complicated topic' that claims to have 'attempt[ed] to do justice to all its complexity' (p. 167). But when we take stock at the end of the journey, much remains unknown. We have followed a clear path, yet we are rather fuzzy as to why and how it came to be there. Hunter himself is aware that we might need to look at other pastures for answers, that 'there was an element of the emperor's new clothes' about the new orthodoxy. Rather belatedly, he concurs with Charles Webster's observation, made as far back as 1982, that '[w]e must look in places other than science for the explanation of these changes' (p. 172).

Looking beyond his field, Hunter is disdainful of the efforts of Ian Bostridge and Peter Elmer to connect the decline of witchcraft belief to 'the role of party politics in the early eighteenth century', dismissing it as 'tangential' and even as 'mere froth' (pp. 173, 174, 175).⁽¹⁰⁾ I cannot comment on the only concrete piece of evidence submitted: a sceptical manuscript treatise in a Penzance library composed by a Jacobite, at a time when scepticism was meant to be the preserve of Whigs. Elsewhere, I have been critical of Elmer's reductionist attempt to reduce witch-hunting to its political context 'alone', but I have also learned a great deal from his stimulating book.⁽¹¹⁾ Hunter's criticism does not acknowledge the central insight offered by both historians: that witchcraft beliefs can be used alternately to foster community cohesion (the witch as ultimate outsider against which the community could unite) or, conversely, to undermine it (by demonizing opponents). Witchcraft, I would argue, is always (also) about identity.

So, where does Hunter take us in the few pages that remain? He does not attempt to explain the scepticism of Restoration wits or the Deists, taking both as given. He devotes a paragraph to why 'the orthodox' came to follow in their footsteps, very plausibly suggesting that they came to realize that abandoning witchcraft belief caused no damage to the fabric of Christianity. He also proposes that the pursuit of 'civil religion', a subject about which my Cardiff colleague Ashley Walsh has just published an eloquent book, was a possible factor.⁽¹²⁾ This suggestion has much promise. Within the context of a pursuit of a minimalist, stripped-back Christianity that could comprehend as much of the population as possible, priests were generally redundant, so the spirit realm could well be relegated to the adiaphora as well. Still, while this argument takes us somewhere, it surely is not the whole hog. In fact, it is perhaps more revealing of the type of historical argument, located in the realm of ideas, that Hunter is most comfortable with.

Let me end therefore with two other, more important, factors, implicit in *The Decline of Magic* but which its author seems intent to keep under wraps. When they surface as part of a quotation, they pointedly elicit no comment. The first is to emphasize (again) the conservative and derivative nature of the arguments put forth by the newfound orthodox sceptics. Hutchinson, as Hunter already concedes, was no Wagstaffe. Nor was he, we might add, a Balthasar Bekker. There was no rejection of the spirit world. Hunter surveys some of the well-trodden arguments advanced by the 'orthodox': particularly fraud and 'physiological or psychological defects', yet he pays scant attention to the new historicizing wrapper in

which they were often delivered (p. 177). By the time Hutchinson came to write, it had been—the 1712 trial of Jane Wenham notwithstanding—‘thirty five years last past’ that a witch had been hanged in England, and the clergyman who entitled his essay *An Historical Essay* well knew it.⁽¹³⁾ Part of this historicizing umbrella was an accommodationist approach to Scripture, mentioned by Hunter: the argument that Christ, when curing demonic possession, ‘could only be expected to speak the language of his own time’ (p. 136). Yet witchcraft was also presented as the product of the ignorance and superstition of past generations (see the quotes on pp. 61, 137–38). At the most pusillanimous end of the spectrum, as I noted elsewhere, 18th-century thinkers could merely wonder why the devil had *stopped* working his magic.⁽¹⁴⁾ One straightforward way of dealing with witchcraft, then, was to banish it to the past.

The other approach, of course, was to make witchcraft belief the preserve of the uneducated, superstitious lower classes. This ever-widening chasm in attitudes is a historical reality and, I would argue, a causal factor in its own right. As Thomas Waters has shown in a marvellous new study, witchcraft belief positively thrived in the British countryside well into the 19th, even 20th century.⁽¹⁵⁾ References to witchcraft belief as a popular superstition abound in *The Decline of Magic*. Toland denounced ‘idle and superstitious Fables’ and ‘Vanitys ... impossible for *thinking* men to believe’ (pp. 52–53; italics added). Shaftesbury reproached those who wanted to set religion ‘on the foot of popular tradition’ dressed up with ‘parish tales and gossiping stories’ (p. 53). Hutchinson’s *An Historical Essay* cites Scripture on its title page (printed on p. 63): ‘But refuse profane and old wives’ fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness’ (1 Timothy 4:7). John Wesley resented that ‘most men of learning ... have given up all accounts of witches and apparitions as mere old wives’ fables’ (p. 117). When the Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge bought a charm, ‘the King’s Professor of Divinity in a famous university’ was being ridiculed for being ‘such a fool’ (p. 140). Second sight was being ridiculed as being limited ‘to a doting old woman or a hypochondriacal tailor’ (p. 159).

The list goes on, but it takes Hunter until page 160 to notice the growing elite disdain of popular belief. Even then, he refuses to attach much, if any, significance to it. The subject warrants only a single, grudging sentence in the conclusion: ‘It may be true that a more rigid polarisation between popular and educated belief than hitherto was coming into place ... [but] the association of such ideas with the “vulgar” seems not to have been a causal factor in educated rejection of them but a corollary of it’ (p. 178). This is odd as Hunter, and Bostridge before him, have shown that witchcraft belief was never really disproven. The Enlightenment rejected it, as Hunter rightly says, for ‘bad’ reasons (p. vii). Instead, I would argue, such beliefs had become unfashionable (an ‘act of inurbanity’ in Lord Byron’s memorable phrase). Witchcraft was presented as something which only superstitious, ignorant, foolish people believed. As the preserve of the common people, witchcraft and ‘superstition’ enabled the construction of an alterity against which enlightened male identities could be defined—not just those of orthodox clergymen, but those of coffee house wits, deists, free-thinkers, and scientists as well.

In sum, Hunter has taken us on a fascinating journey, providing us with some astute case studies and pointed observations along the way, but it is almost as if he refused to look down to study the stones his path was made out of.

[1] John Wagstaffe, *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* (1671), sig. A2r

[2] Reginald Scot, *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1665), p. 240.

[3] Jan Machielsen, *Martin Delrio: Demonology and Scholarship in the Counter-Reformation* (2015), pp. 265–66.

[4] Anthony à Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses* (1817), vol. 3, col. 114.

[5] Scot, *The Discovery*, p. 23.

[6] Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250–1750* (2010).

- [7] Laura Sangha, 'The Social, Personal, and Spiritual Dynamics of Ghost Stories in Early Modern England', *Historical Journal* 63/2 (2020): 339–59.
- [8] Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (1997), p. 212.
- [9] Francis Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1718), pp. 150–51; James VI, *Daemonologie* (1597), p. 42.
- [10] Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations* (1997); Peter Elmer, *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, and Politics in Early Modern England* (2016). Also worth reading is Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs: The Life of Bishop Francis Hutchinson (1660–1739)* (2008), a target of Hunter's that does not escape the footnotes.
- [11] Jan Machielsen, 'Review of: 'Witchcraft, witch-hunting, and politics in early modern England. By Peter Elmer'', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 68/3 (2017): 636–38. 'Alone' is a direct quotation from Elmer's book but social isolation prevents me from providing a precise page reference.
- [12] Ashley Walsh, *Civil Religion and the Enlightenment in England, 1707-1800* (2020).
- [13] Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay*, 49.
- [14] Machielsen, *Martin Delrio*, 267.
- [15] Thomas Waters, *Cursed Britain: A History of Witchcraft and Black Magic in Modern Times* (2019).