James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*

Harlow etc., Pearson Education, 2001, xiii + 144 p., ill., ISBN 0 582 32875 6

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- 1 Already in the first sentences of the preface to this book Sharpe shows that he is aware of the present flourishing of the historiography of witchcraft. Indeed, hardly a month passes without the appearance of new syntheses, studies, theoretical works or source editions. So, one is inclined to ask, why add a new title to this rapidly expanding list? The reason simply is that despite this booming, books like this one are only rarely produced. It is not meant as a contribution to debates of specialised scholars, but as a short introduction to the subject. Its intended public are relative outsiders like students, pupils of secondary schools and other readers with an interest for the history of witchcraft. The language is well adapted to this purpose as jargon and complex formulae are avoided. A concise survey of the subject and the interpretations that historians have worked out to explain this phenomenon, is followed by lists of printed English source material, of secondary works on witchcraft and demonology, on the history of witchcraft in and outside England, and of a few other works that are cited in the text itself. Sharpe, who has an extensive list of publications about the history of English witchcraft on his name, is without doubt highly familiar with the subject.
- 2 The book starts with a brief examination of the key explanations that have been proposed: the Christianisation thesis, according to which the witch trials were a by-product of early-modern attempts to enforce Christian morals more thoroughly than before; the Murrayite claim that witches really were followers of pre-Christian religions; the Macfarlane-Thomas view that witchcraft accusations functioned as a sort

of social safety-valve; and the claim that the trials were part of a large campaign to subjugate women. This introduction is followed by a survey of the views among the elite on witchcraft and demonology and how these affected English law and criminal prosecution. It seems that in England, just as in France at that time, the willingness of the courts to admit indictments for witchcraft was weakening in the 1630s. But at that time the belief in the reality of witchcraft was still quite strong among non-elite groups. The third chapter focuses on popular beliefs and socio-economic and demographic developments that intensified fears that social life was being disrupted and that life itself was threatened by hideous but hidden forces. In the 1970s Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas postulated that the sudden outbreak of witchcraft accusations was prompted by the transformation of English village life. In a critical assessment of this thesis Sharpe discusses the value of the different types of sources (trial and other official records and pamphlets) and the differing ways in which these can be used. He concludes that in many cases tensions between poor people and their slightly better off neighbours were indeed the forebode of direct accusations, but that there are also many examples that do not fit in with this model. The socio-cultural context in which suspicions of witchcraft were articulated forms the subject of the next chapter. Counter magic, demonic possession, the belief in so-called familiars, the half-demon, half-animal bloodsucking pets of English witches, the dynamics of accusation and the female sphere of witchcraft are discussed there. Chapter five centres on the decline of witchcraft, with the outbreak of trials that was instigated by Matthew Hopkins in Essex and neighbouring counties in the 1640s as last major upsurge and a number of smaller outbreaks and individual trials that kept on occurring until further prosecutions became impossible in 1736 when witchcraft acts were repealed. The book is rounded off by a run-down of the conclusions and a collection of sources.

- 3 This book fulfils the objectives that are given in the introduction. It is indeed an easily accessible introduction for new readers on the history of early modern English witchcraft. The parts that deal with general topics will also be useful for newcomers with an interest for witchcraft elsewhere. A single critical note could be made though. As the scope of this book is England, a detailed survey of developments outside this realm should of course not be expected. But the addition of some comparative notes, even if limited in size and number, would have helped to show what aspects were peculiar to English early modern witchcraft and what elements it shared with other nations.

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