Robert Thurston, *Witch, Wicce, Mother Goose: The Rise and Fall of the With Hunts in Europe and North America*

Harlow etc., Pearson education, 2001, xvi + 202 p., ill., ISBN 0 582 43806 3

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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/chs/582>

DOI : 10.4000/chs.582

ISSN : 1663-4837

Éditeur

Librairie Droz

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 décembre 2003

Pagination : 129-131

ISBN : 2-600-008990-3

ISSN : 1422-0857

Référence électronique

Hans de Waardt, « Robert Thurston, *Witch, Wicce, Mother Goose: The Rise and Fall of the With Hunts in Europe and North America* », *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [En ligne], Vol. 7, n°2 | 2003, mis en ligne le 23 février 2009, consulté le 23 mars 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/582> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.582>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 23 mars 2022.

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- 1 The American historian Robert Thurston, who until recently had concentrated on the history of the Stalinist repression in Soviet times, endeavours in this book to develop 'a broad cultural approach to the witch hunts' (168). The book is intended for 'a general audience' (182), although the author hopes that scholars will also benefit from it. Thurston's starting point is formed by research he has done on witchcraft trials in Ban de la Roche or Steinthal, a small domain in bilingual Alsace. Till 1620 only one such trial took place there and after 1630 the local lord prevented suspicions of pernicious magic to evolve into full trials. But in the years 1620-1622 and 1629-1630 this territory was rocked by two waves of criminal proceedings in which at least 174 people stood trial on the suspicion of witchcraft and at least 50 women and 30 men were burned for that crime. As the population of this domain numbered about 1.200, this meant that in these years, according to my calculation, at least 14% of the residents were accused and about 6 or 7% executed for witchcraft. This is without doubt a high quantity, but not a unique phenomenon as there were other places with similar victim-rates, for instance in nearby Westphalia. A detailed analysis of the trials that occurred in Ban de la Roche, a

systematic comparison with data about communities that produced similar figures, and also with the situation in the direct surroundings of Ban de la Roche might have deepened our understanding of the local circumstances that promoted suspicions of witchcraft.

- 2 This is however not what Thurston has chosen to do. Here, the trials of Ban de la Roche are only systematically compared with the ones that occurred in the 1690s in Salem Massachusetts. The author refrains from informing his readers on his motives to compare late-seventeenth century trials from New England with developments that took place much earlier in a tiny domain on the European continent. As a result, the developments in Ban de la Roche are not really put in perspective. The ideas and convictions of a number of demonologists and inquisitors are discussed, but as most of them did not live or work in Alsace, this analysis is not really helpful. No systematic comparison is made between the trials that took place in Ban de la Roche and those that occurred in the vicinity of that territory. Thurston mentions the studies of Monter and Midelfort on the regions to the south and east of Alsace, but he does not really incorporate their results. Of Robin Briggs' publications the handbook-type *Witches and Neighbours* is mentioned, but other, far more detailed studies of this historian on the witchcraft trials in Lorraine are ignored, just as the work of Etienne Delcambre on that same region. This selective approach is also recognisable where the gender balance is discussed. Thurston specifically mentions a publication from 1999 by William Monter about the overrepresentation of men among the witches in Normandy, who there formed about 75% of the accused. But he ignores a study of Briggs from 1991 in which this remarkable fact is compared with data from central France, where slightly over 50% of the accused were male, and regions now in the north and east of France like Alsace, where women constituted the large majority of the accused.
- 3 A similar incongruity can be noticed where the causes of the periodic waves of witchcraft trials are discussed. To explain the occurrence of these outbursts Thurston adopts the well-known thesis of Jean Delumeau that in the course of the Middle Ages a general feeling of massive fear built up all over Europe. This massive fright he then holds accountable for the eruptions of large-scale witch hunting that swapped Europe between 1500 and 1650. Thurston rejects explanations like misogyny, a desire to subjugate the lower classes, the need of a social safety valve, hallucinations, hatred of midwives, efforts to stamp out fertility cults or the use of magic, and the religious struggles of the early-modern period. However, his claim that it was fear and fear alone that caused the trials is not satisfying. Fear is without doubt a necessary precondition for any such outbreak of persecutions, but it is in itself not a sufficient one. There has to be an extra circumstance to explain why in different parts of Europe large-scale prosecutions were concentrated in specific moments, e.g. in the years round 1590 and in 1629. There must have been other factors that sparked off this urge to search and destroy the accomplices of the devil.
- 4 The defective quality of the explanatory model is in itself enough reason to discourage the use of this book. The amount of strange or even silly mistakes that appear throughout the book should be an extra motive to discard it. What to think for instance of a map called 'Seventeenth-century France' (xiv) where the present state frontiers are given to help us understand the political situation of the early modern period? Such a map is confusing to say the least, especially for regions like Alsace. And what to think of the linguistic qualities of this study? On page 5 the author claims that in 'various

European languages, a witch was different from a sorcerer'. According to him the French language 'never produced a word more precise than the inclusive *sorcier*, female *sorcière*. That is simply untrue. In the fifteenth century the meaning of the word 'vaudois', female 'vaudoise', shifted from 'Waldensian' to 'diabolically inspired witch'. Thurston goes on to claim that around 1420-1430 the German word 'Zauberer / Zauberin' (magician or sorcerer) began to yield to *Hex / Hexe* as a result of the introduction of the notion of the devil's pact. However, in southern Germany the common word for witch was not 'Zauberin', but 'Unhold', along the Rhine it was 'Trutt', and in northern Germany 'toversche'. Furthermore, people kept on using these terms long after the notion of the devil's pact had been introduced. The sharp conceptual difference between 'Zauberin' and 'Hexe' was introduced only in the 21st century by German historians who strived for a conceptual dichotomy that was similar to the opposition that in English was made between sorcery and witchcraft.

- 5 Many more instances of this rash method could be given, but one last example perhaps suffices to round off this review. On pp. 158-159 Thurston claims that the relatively early ending of the witchcraft prosecutions in the Dutch Republic cleared 'the ground for representations of females as serious, productive, but also fully human'. To underscore this he points to the work of Jan Vermeer where 'delightfully peaceful women carry on conversations or the business of daily life with a calm dignity that the viewer can hardly avoid sensing'. A claim like this will leave aghast anyone who has any knowledge of the history of Dutch art, of seventeenth-century Dutch gender relations, and of the history of witchcraft in the Netherlands.

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