

The Magician, the Witch, and the Law by Edward Peters Review by: E. William Monter

El mago, la bruja y la ley de Edward Peters Reseña de: E. William Monter

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The incredible mass of information unleavened by interpretation leaves the reader searching for the precise relation between the historical material and broad generalizations about kingly rule, elite rivalries, and geographic influences. We are frequently told that discrete developments had deep roots in the past, but the enduring importance of "formative conditions" is asserted, not demonstrated. Historical outcomes are presented as self-explanatory. When cause and effect relations are introduced, they tend to emphasize circumstance rather than choice.

The "intellectual mobilization" stressed as central to the new mandate to rule is handled with the same passive acceptance of final result. There is little sense of the dynamics of intellectual life: the controlling effect of language, the strategic use of ideas, and the searching for concepts to make intelligible a radically altered world. A part of the problem is that Bendix gives little attention to the economic developments which touch at every point the questions that he is addressing. He explains this neglect by saying that some mass movements, such as nationalism, do not have "a simple basis in the division of labor or class interest" (226). The reader could infer from this statement that, despite the past two decades of pioneering research, our understanding of changing material conditions has not advanced since Adam Smith and Karl Marx.

Viewed either as a detailed history of five contemporary world powers or as an explication of how kingdoms become nations, *Kings or People* is disappointing. Its theoretical propositions are too vague to be tested, and the surfeit of historical fact has the ironic effect of robbing the accounts of their historicity. If the study of history has any light to shed on the process of social change, it is the discovery of how actual human beings in concrete situations responded to circumstances and opportunities and made choices which illuminate the human experience. The coherence of social history comes from a commitment to explore what it is that structures human life and when and how the structures are fractured. This requires the integration of fact and hypothesis and the illumination of detail with interpretive insight. It also implies that the outcome is open-ended. Despite our metaphorical use of words like roots and origins, historical forces achieve their permanence through the consent of successive generations. To assume the contrary is to deliver men and women to the determinism of their past.

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The Magician, the Witch, and the Law. By Edward Peters (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978) 218 pp. \$15.95

Considering that three important books on the history of medieval witchcraft have appeared within the past six years, one's first question

on confronting another interpretation of this subject is to ask if it is necessary. After reading Peters, I am persuaded that his book is plausible and well assembled, with admirable internal coherence; that the author is well read, evenhanded in his judgments, and argues a personal thesis. Yet somehow the whole enterprise seems superfluous.

Peters' central argument is revealed late in his second chapter:

It is commonly accepted that the prosecution of witches grew out of the prosecution of heretics. It will be the contention of this book that in fact magicians and heretics had always been associated, and that while the forms of legal prosecutions of heretics paved the way for similar actions taken against witches after the fifteenth century, it was the fear and actual prosecution of magicians in several key trials of the later thirteenth through fifteenth centuries that is the real stage following the persecution of heretics, and the preliminary stage in persecuting witches (46).

Peters' problem is that this amounts to a restatement with modifications of Cohn's criticisms of Jeffrey Russell. Unlike Russell, he did not get there first; unlike Cohn, he is not an expert at demolishing spurious evidence about medieval "witches"; and unlike Kieckhefer, he cannot offer an heuristic system to distinguish between high and low culture as it affects this problem—although his contribution, like Kieckhefer's, occasionally finds new ways to discriminate among the different types of sources that affect his topic.¹

At his best, Peters is able to reexamine the ways in which different literary genres approached the condemnation of magic between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. He argues that "a great deal of what is commonly called 'medieval' witchcraft belief must be identified by the nature of the sources that discuss such topics, the purpose of the genres in which such discussions occur, and the kinds of writers who do (or do not) show much interest in the topic of magic" (70). Peters practices what he preaches, digging into such little-used genres as early medieval rhetoricians, canon-law glossators, and post-1250 penitentials in order to investigate the connections (or lack of them) between forms of magic and forms of heresy. Repeatedly he offers us reminders and illustrations of how to read texts in the contexts of literary genres with particular conventions. Considering that all too often the interdisciplinary relations between history and literature are either taken for granted or else honored in the breach, he furnishes welcome proof that these relations continue to function well in medieval intellectual history.

But much of the time Peters finds himself trapped in a semantic thicket about the origins of European witchcraft, which is not necessarily his main subject. What concerns him is a triangle formed by magicians, moralists, and lawyers. His attentions are divided unequally among its three points: he has much to say about how moralists regarded magi-

1 Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (London, 1975), 121–125; Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (London, 1976), ch. 3.

cians, and something to say about how they influenced lawyers' attitudes towards magicians, but curiously little about the magicians themselves. His scope is less ambitious than his title suggests; what he has actually given us is a skillful but ultimately minor essay in the history of medieval Christian condemnations of learned magicians.

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Chance and Change: Social and Economic Studies in Historical Demography in the Baltic Area. Edited by Sune Akerman, H. C. Johansen, and David Gaunt (Odense, Denmark, Odense University Press, 1978) 292 pp. 100 Dan. KR.

In 1976 Sweden hosted a multidisciplinary conference on the historical demographic problems of the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. *Chance and Change*, an anthology of twenty-seven papers on Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, and West Germany, is the result. As the authors note, aggregate-level studies of northern European populations have existed for some time; but only in recent years, conjointly with a similar reorientation in other lands, has historical demography turned to microstudies and microprocesses. Parish-level data, of course, create the need for infusing findings with general significance, a challenge which all of the authors in this volume take seriously and by and large succeed in meeting. Their use of such methods as Henry's family reconstitution procedures and Laslett's household classification scheme ensure that the findings for northern Europe will rank high on a scale of comparability.¹

The editors have grouped the contributions under six headings, two of which—The Demographic Transition and the Family Reconstitution Technique (two essays) and Methodology (two)—are concerned primarily with method. The others—The Background To Demographic Behavior (five essays), Household Structure (six), Family Planning in Historical Populations (six), and Individual Life Chances (four)—involve analyses of the substance of historical population change; but even in these, methodology is clearly spelled out. In the latter essays the most prominent concern is the variation of demographic rates (illegitimacy, fertility, etc.) and structural attributes (primarily of domestic groups) over a range of occupational and social groupings, ecologically defined subpopulations, and regions within the northern European area. Variation is established through a determined effort (explicit in most of the essays) to view statistical information contextually. The number of so-

1 Michel Fleury and Louis Henry, *Nouveau manuel de dépouillement et d'exploitation de l'état ancien* (Paris, 1965); Peter Laslett and Richard Wall (eds.), *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, 1972).