

BOOK REVIEW

The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment by Michael Hunter. Yale University Press, 2020, 243 pp., £18.50 (paperback). ISBN 078-0-300-24358-1.

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In the preface to this very scholarly—and sometimes almost confusingly well-informed—book, the author tells us that his aim is to offer “a fresh view of the change in educated attitudes toward magical beliefs that occurred in Britain between about 1650 and 1750.” In this he unquestionably succeeds. Actually, the book continues somewhat beyond the later date, but there can be no doubt that there were changes—mostly declines—during the designated period in many of the miscellaneous human beliefs and activities that have for whatever reason been labeled as ‘magic’ or ‘magical’.

Hunter begins the body of his book with a chapter-length **Introduction** entitled **The Supernatural, Science, and ‘Atheism’**. This opens with an attempt to define what he means by ‘magic’, based, he says, on the similar attempt made by Sir Keith Thomas in his classic *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), though unlike Thomas he very wisely does not include alchemy and astrology. Even so, he includes quite a wide variety of topics, so wide indeed that it is hard to see what if anything these phenomena—if they do indeed occur—could have in common except that they are difficult to explain, or to explain away, in ordinary, accepted terms. The proposed list includes such matters as witchcraft, witch covens, involvement with the spiritual realm (good or evil, angelic or demonic, benevolent or pestilential), possession, conjuration, prophecies, ghosts, apparitions, fairies, omens and lucky charms, and what would now be called poltergeists. Other varieties of

curious events linked to or supposedly similar to the above could in practice no doubt be included.

Much of the rest of this chapter is perhaps best described as introducing readers of the book to parts of the social, historical, and religious background of the time, and to some of the most relevant individuals whose lives were enacted against that background. The most likely parts of this background to link with the waxing and waning of matters 'magical' and mysterious are obviously the religious ones, more especially since religion in Britain during this period was both central to many peoples' lives and liable to assorted differences of opinion. But in a review for a journal of scientific exploration there are certain further features of the British scene from about 1650 to 1700 that should be specially noticed, namely the persisting influence of Francis Bacon (1561–1626), the so-called "father of empiricism," who, Hunter says (p. 10), "urged that systematic 'natural histories' [i.e. collections of facts] should be built up which would form the basis of a reliable philosophy of nature," and of course one of the possible offshoots thereof could be collections of cases of certain types of odd phenomena that might nowadays be called 'paranormal' or 'supernormal' but might then have fallen under the above heading of 'magical'. The early collectors of such cases mostly hoped that their collections would counterbalance the activities of sadducees, skeptics, disbelievers, doubters, freethinkers, and Deists whose supposed negative effects upon religious and related beliefs worried many contemporaries.

An early influence on such case collection was Matthew Poole, a graduate of Emmanuel College, Cambridge University, who in 1657 wrote and circulated rather widely a document (mentioned by Thomas [1971, pp. 94–95] though not by Hunter) entitled *A Design for Registering Illustrious Providences*. Poole's *Design* (I rely here on a slightly imperfect copy preserved in Cambridge University Library) attracted some attention, but unfortunately was (so far as I know) never implemented by anyone at the time, though Increase Mather's *Remarkable Providences: An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (1684) owes something to it. But Poole had some ideas that were well in advance of his time. He proposed that for each county a Minister (of religion!) should be appointed to collect cases, with the help of four

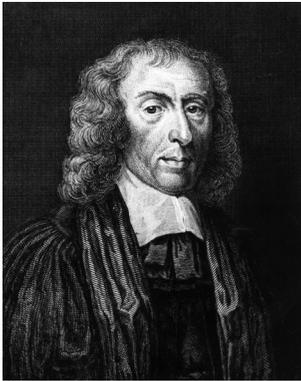


Figure 1. Thomas More.

or five others of judgment, activity, and zeal for God, who would take pains to seek out cases of extraordinary providences, apparitions of spirits, and so on, and to make sure that all cases, the events and the circumstances and status of the witnesses, should be properly recorded, the witnesses should sign the record, and the whole be promptly forwarded by the Ministers to a central depository.

It would be a couple of hundred years before such ideas were to an extent implemented (though minus the religious overtones), but it is not unlikely that some of them had filtered through to relevant case collectors well before the end of the seventeenth century, by which time there were quite a few such cases, as Hunter makes clear. The best-known and most-remembered today are Henry More (1614–1687) (Figure 1), the Cambridge Platonist, and his ally Joseph Glanvill (1636–1680) of Oxford (Figure 2), who between them wrote and edited the collection of cases and articles entitled *Saducismus Triumphatus* (roughly translated as ‘Disbelief Defeated’) (first edition in 1681), usually but wrongly attributed just to Glanvill. Another notable collector (and



Figure 2. Joseph Glanvill.

follower of Francis Bacon) was Robert Boyle (1627–1691), probably the outstanding chemist of his time. Hunter has written a book about him (Hunter, 2009). Unfortunately, Boyle’s relatively early death prevented the full publication of his collection.

During the period under discussion, individuals from certain groups seem to have been rather excessively keen to fling the accusation of ‘atheism’ at members of certain other groups. Exactly who these accusers were and why they handed out such pleasantries is not always clear, but Hunter’s extended account of the matter near the end of his Introduction makes it clear

that the targets were more likely to be witchcraft doubters than case collectors. The mere hint of such an accusation in the earlier part of the period we are concerned with could carry implications of suspect morals, religious dissent, poverty of intellect, or general cynicism. Of course, in classical times the Greek term 'atheism' (as Hunter points out) had a range of possible meanings (this can easily be discovered from a variety of current dictionaries and reference works), but how widely, in the post-Renaissance times we are discussing, this would have been known to scholars and capitalized on, or spread around the less educated, I could not say.

The following chapter (numbered the first) is entitled **John Wagstaffe, Witchcraft, and the Nature of Restoration Free-Thought**, and continues the theme of doubters and their doubts. Wagstaffe (1633–1677) was a well-educated and independently wealthy person, who for the most part wore his learning lightly (he was seemingly among the 'wits' who were privately given to mocking controversial issues, religious ones not excepted, in fashionable coffeehouses). He was chiefly known, and is to an extent remembered, for the highly skeptical book *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* (1669, and several enlarged later editions). Hunter remarks (p. 33) that in addition to the 'learned component' in Wagstaffe's work another characteristic was its "boldness and iconoclasm." Wagstaffe scoffs at on rational grounds most of the then-standard arguments favoring the reality of witchcraft. Biblical support for the idea he dismisses as due to mistranslation of words in the Old Testament, further distorted by ideas about pacts with the devil and prejudiced by deliberate human deceit. He offers explanations of the prevalence of witchcraft beliefs, losing no opportunity to blame Catholic priestcraft and the Inquisition. Indeed, he is cynical also about the early Christians "whose blind intemperate zeal tempted them to forgery, and whose undue openness to Platonic influence made them perpetuate the exorcising of the heathen" (Hunter, p. 39). Into all this could easily be read the irreligious standpoint of which Glanvill and More were so apprehensive and which they tried to combat in *Saducismus Triumphatus*.

However, Hunter thinks that though Wagstaffe's views were caustic they were less extreme than has sometimes been thought. He seems to have been a Christian, like his sixteenth-century predecessor

Reginald Scot, whose *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) is notable for humor as well as common sense. A humanitarian, Wagstaffe rightly feared the danger of a witchcraft inquisition in the hands of “ambitious, Covetous and malicious men” (Hunter, p. 43).

Hunter discusses attempted rebuttals to Wagstaffe by Meric Casaubon and an individual known only by the initials R. T. and concludes (p. 43) that the two sides did not really engage in a proper debate with each other.

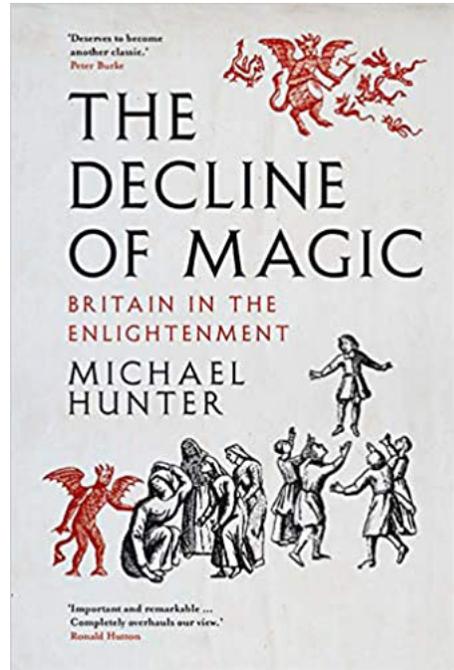
Outright religious skepticism or anything approaching and possibly implying it, such as Wagstaffe’s bosh-and-fiddlesticks approach toward all forms of ‘magic’, is rather hard to find in printed form in the period with which Chapter One deals (say the last two quarters of the seventeenth century). No doubt fear of possible legal repercussions had something to do with it. Hunter notes that coffeehouse ‘wits’ among others seem to have been ready enough to talk in private about such matters. But a person who, though somewhat neglected by Hunter, did publish a quite substantial book, expressing pretty deep-rooted skepticism concerning a goodly selection of the ‘magical’ phenomena listed above, was John Webster (1610–1682), a Yorkshire physician whose *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (1677) attracted a good deal of notice because its skepticism is criticized in Glanvill and More’s *Saducismus Triumphatus*.

Despite his resolute skepticism, Webster had one weakness—he was, it appears from his penultimate chapter, interested in and even prepared to consider cases of ‘spectral evidence’ or ‘ghosts before the law’, in which a recognized or identified apparition of a recently murdered individual allegedly returns to give vital information about the identity of his or her murderer. (Sir Walter Scott, himself a lawyer, shared this interest, as, later, did the nearly omniscient Andrew Lang.) By the early nineteenth century, judges had begun to look with disfavor on this form of second-hand evidence, but in his penultimate chapter Webster was able to collect a number of then relatively recent examples. With regard to one of the more interesting of these he informed his readers that he had lost his notes but was sure he could remember all the crucial facts. Perhaps this might encourage one to hope that normally he was always accustomed to take contemporary notes.

Hunter’s next chapter (Two, **From the Deists to Francis**

Hutchinson) has as its central concerns not just the freethinkers and Deists in whose publications skepticism about magical beliefs had by the early eighteenth century become more or less axiomatic (p. 49), but also notes how, around the transition between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of the more orthodox Christians began in a cautious way to explore some of the skeptics' arguments about witchcraft and related matters. Seen in retrospect, this might be thought of, Hunter says, as the beginning of a very important development, first brought fully into focus, some have suggested, by the publication of Francis Hutchinson's *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1718).

This work gives us a brisk account of a number of leading Deists, and anyone who supposes that because Deists were not tied to the tenets of any particular religion they were likely to be similarly tolerant of other people's 'magical' beliefs will be quickly disillusioned. Hunter (p. 55) cites one of their number (the 1st Viscount Molesworth) who privately wrote that the pretenders to such stories should be immediately taken up and whipped at a cart's tail (one might have thought this was simply an expression of the gentleman's sense of humor had he shown the slightest sign of possessing one). As for the gradual encroachment of certain skeptical arguments—particularly ones concerning witchcraft—into the thinking of the orthodox, Hunter goes into the question in far greater detail than I can possibly encompass here. Publications by Deists and freethinkers grew more frequent toward the end of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, though Hunter produces evidence that arguments



on such matters remained most likely to be exchanged (or laughed over) face-to-face between coffeehouse wits than earnestly debated through the printed word. His most interesting (though certainly not his only) sources for saying this are the diary and correspondence of the Leeds antiquary, and orthodox Christian, Ralph Thoresby, coupled with the correspondence and notebooks of the delightfully named Obadiah Oddy, a classical scholar and freethinker whom Thoresby had encountered in a coffee shop or shops during a visit to London, and the correspondence of the arch-Deist John Toland with whom Thoresby had exchanged letters.

There is also further relevant correspondence between Oddy and an Oxford scholar and diary writer named Thomas Hearne, who described him as “an irreligious Latitudinarian.” It is apparent that Thoresby was greatly shocked by the (to his mind) sacrilegious conversations he heard and overheard in the coffeehouses. In fact, he was so alarmed by their tenor and possible long-term influence that he started his own substantial collection of cases on the Glanvill and More model. (The collection no longer exists, though it might be possible to reconstruct its outlines from information still in existence.) An observer could have felt that it would be only a matter of time before the orthodox began to see and respond to the apparent incompatibility of certain of their beliefs with the skeptical views that were gaining ground. And this did indeed happen, a central figure in the change being the aforementioned Francis Hutchinson, D.D. Hutchinson (1660–1739) may first have become interested in questions of witch trials and their reliability when in 1691 he became perpetual curate of St. James’s, Bury St. Edmunds. In decades gone by, Bury had been at the sitting for two appalling witch trials, about which he may well have heard a good deal. Hunter has evidence that Hutchinson was planning a book on witch trials for more than ten years before he eventually produced his *Historical Essay*, inspired, some think, by the narrow escape in 1712 of an old and impoverished woman, Jane Wenham, from an execution decreed by uneducated jurors but averted through the action of the trial judge. (This has been claimed by some to have been the last trial for witchcraft held in England.)

Hutchinson’s book might be described as well-organized, though its format as a dialogue between a clergyman (i.e. Hutchinson), a Scottish

Advocate, and an English juryman can become a little tedious. He provides a chronological list of relevant cases, from which he derives some of the characteristics of those ages and nations in which supposed cases of witchcraft have or have not been particularly numerous. These in turn led him to remark that in regard to penal laws wise men have thought it necessary to



Figure 3. Francis Hutchinson.

be “wonderfully cautious” as to laws that involve their neighbor’s blood or reputation. He therefore suggests the adoption of such principles as that witches should not be convicted upon the tricks of swimming or scratching, or upon confessions extracted by torture or enforced wakefulness. He adds that things ‘odd and unaccountable’ should be ‘respited’ until we understand them, and that where there is no known rule to decide by, no judgment should be made. Furthermore, we should show our faith in God by leaving doubtful cases to his Providence, which is powerfully active in the world.

After this, Hutchinson devotes a series of chapters to notorious witchcraft trials, in the majority of which the accused (often quite a few of them) were executed, and which, he makes clear by rational analysis of the evidence, involved serious miscarriages of justice. It seems to me that even three hundred years ago no one of a balanced mind could fail to recognize that such miscarriages had taken place on a considerable scale, and that the substantial influence that his book had is quite understandable. Hunter’s view (p. 65) is that the most significant thing about the *Historical Essay* is the extent to which Hutchinson felt that he was negotiating a route between an Atheistical Sadducism on one hand, and a timorous Enthusiastical Credulity on the other. There is clearly truth in this, and Hutchinson makes it obvious that he does

not want to appear, and probably was not, hostile to the Christian Faith. His demonstration that religion and rational thought were not incompatible, together, just possibly, with his appointment in 1721 as Bishop of Down and Connor, were probably central to his and his book's subsequent influence.

Hunter's third chapter has the title **The Ambivalence of the Early Royal Society**. The Royal Society of London was founded in 1663 out of a slightly earlier association of 'natural philosophers' (as scientists were then termed). It has more than once been suggested that it was principally the growth of science as exemplified by the Royal Society that brought about the decline of belief in witchcraft. Hunter, however, who has gone into the history of the Royal Society in some detail, thinks otherwise, but into such detail we cannot go. Obviously, the Royal Society did have a key role in defining the boundaries of the studies that came to be regarded as within the remit of science, but these boundaries, as Hunter remarks, cannot be delineated by counting the early eclectic interests of the Fellows of the Society, but has to be assessed by the contents of its published *Proceedings* and the records of its meetings. A number of the Fellows (quite apart from More, Glanvill, and Boyle) had interests in topics that might have been classified as 'magical', but excursions into such arcane matters are exceedingly rare in the *Proceedings*, and a couple of very influential members, Henry Oldenburg, the Society's first secretary, and its curator of experiments, Robert Hooke, were much opposed to anything of the kind. Internal arguments within the Society could have broken out, and there was also "a particularly potent body of public opinion" among the London intelligentsia (or those who fancied themselves as such) represented by the coffeehouse and playhouse wits, engagement with whom might have injured the Society's public image at a time when it was still fragile enough to be damaged by mockery. Some Fellows could have recognized that there were good reasons for the Society to refrain from linking the study of natural philosophy with 'magical' phenomena. Indeed, Hunter proposes, with evidence (p. 79), that by the eighteenth century this attitude had been institutionalized. . . . Even if not intentionally, "by thus ostracizing [magic] from science, the early Royal Society did play a significant role in the decline of magic."

Hunter's Chapter Four, **The Drummer of Tedworth. Competing**

Interpretations and the Problem of Fraud, is the longest chapter, and since the Tedworth (now Tidworth) case is—despite being well over three hundred years old—still perhaps the best-known of all British poltergeist cases, I will not go into detail. It took place in the home of John Mompesson, a well-connected Wiltshire landowner, from April 1662 until some uncertain time toward the end of 1663. The phenomena were attributed, at least by Mompesson and most of his neighbors, to the malign activities of a traveling drummer and dancer, William Drury, of somewhat nefarious reputation which included or soon came to include involvement with witchcraft. Mompesson had him arrested and his drum confiscated—it ended up in Mompesson's house, at which point the odd phenomena began there, and, it should be noted, subsequently went on for months while Drury remained in prison.

The phenomena naturally began with sounds of a drum being quite skilfully beaten (even after the drum itself had been destroyed), and subsequently there were sounds as of a drum being imitated by human fingers on wooden surfaces such as wainscoting and possibly external weather boards. (Mompesson was aware of the possibility that servants, secure in being irreplaceable, could have been playing tricks.) Other phenomena included responsive knocking, chairs 'walking about', objects being thrown, people being lifted up in or with their beds, bedclothes being tugged, scratching as of talons on floors, mattresses, etc. Over appreciable periods of time a number of these events were recorded by eyewitnesses fairly soon after their occurrence; a number of the relevant documents, or copies of them, still survive, for instance Mompesson's letters to his Oxford friend William Creed, a sort of diary of the phenomena kept by Mompesson from the 10th to the 21st of January 1663, and Glanvill's notes of his experiences at Tedworth in the same month. There is a good deal else besides—Hunter's account of the case; it should be emphasized, it is so far as I know the richest in such details that we so far have. But even setting aside the plenitude of detail, there are some points that are worth noting.

At the start of this case, Mompesson's neighbors and contacts seem in general to have accepted the reality of the odd happenings that were taking place in his house, and even the possibility that witchcraft and the drummer might be responsible. Mompesson—a deeply religious man—believed in witchcraft, and probably took the view that reasons

for believing in it were also on biblical grounds reasons for believing in the truths of Christianity. But as word about the alleged Tedworth phenomena began to spread rather widely, curious persons started to turn up at Mompesson's house, invited or uninvited, or sometimes as aristocratic representatives of even more aristocratic or sometimes royal patrons. At first these visitors seem to have been relatively polite whether or not they had witnessed any phenomena for themselves (as some did and others did not), but over time they became less polite and more and more demanding and more and more annoying to Mompesson. Before long the coffeehouse wits (whom we have met before) realized there was amusement to be derived not so much from inflicting themselves on Mompesson as from vying with each other in mockery from afar. Notable among them was the Earl of Rochester (1647–1680), rake, libertine, and writer of verses sometimes bawdy but rarely dull. Tall tales found their way into circulation, no doubt invented by the aforementioned 'wits', for instance that Mompesson had confessed it had all been his own juggling, and even that he had admitted the same during a supposed interview with the King, which Mompesson strongly denied in a letter to Glanvill. Still worse was the report that Glanvill himself no longer believed in the veracity of the affair, of which Hunter remarks (p. 109) "there is not the slightest evidence that Glanvill ever had any such doubts."

More serious arguments continued for the rest of the seventeenth century, and into the next, and Hunter suggests (p. 117) that by 1716 (the date of Addison's play *The Drummer or the Haunted House*) skepticism had indeed become the order of the day, which was certainly the case so far as witches and witchcraft in general were concerned. He adds, however, the caveat that "the invocation of fraud in this case [Tedworth] was by no means as straightforward as might be expected." It seems unlikely, he goes on, that the invocation of fraud by itself "made many converts to the skeptical cause of people who had reasons to believe in the reality of the phenomena in question." An obvious counterargument to accusations of fraud was that many of these accusations were produced by "pressure on those of lower status" of which apparent examples could likewise be proffered. He therefore concludes (p. 120) "that the fundamental point about the Tedworth case [was] that the accusation of fraud was not really decisive at all" and that it was a predisposition to

believe or to disbelieve rather than any decisive piece of evidence “that was fundamental in dictating people’s response to what had occurred.”

Hunter adds a little to his account of the Tedworth case in his Appendix I (pp. 181–184). Here he goes into further details concerning relevant Mompesson documents, and their locations, and accuses me of omitting significant passages from several when I reproduced them myself in Gauld and Cornell (1979). These omissions ran to a total that he puts at 70 lines plus a few stray sentences. I did indeed omit the passages, simply to save space. I regarded them as adding little to the overall significance of the documents, and indicated the omissions in the text. Clearly opinions differ! He also accuses me of omitting a whole document, a letter from Sir Thomas Mompesson, which he regards as of some importance. However, so far as I can discover no copy of this letter ever reached me, presumably because being unaware of its existence I never asked for it.

It is really rather unfortunate that the Tedworth case achieved so much prominence and with it undeserved notoriety and argument, not just at the time, but over subsequent years and indeed down the centuries to the present. A different case, of course carefully observed and promptly recorded, but also much less publicized, especially among persons of limited intellects and strong preconceived opinions, might have been far more helpful to future understanding of such things. I think, as an approximation, of a case published in 1682 by Henry More as editor of the second edition of *Saducismus Triumphatus*. This is Case Five of those he called ‘A Continuation of the Collection’. It is the second of two from the Parish of Lessingham (now Leasingham) near Sleaford in Lincolnshire, both written up by William Wyche, a resident of that Parish. The facts come from the principal but by no means the only witness, Sir William York(e) (c. 1646–1702), also of that Parish. He must, I think, have communicated them directly to Wyche, a recent graduate of Emmanuel College, Cambridge University, who was ordained in 1680–1681 and in the following year became vicar of New Sleaford. From 1683 he was headmaster of Carre’s Grammar School in Sleaford (still in existence today). Wyche sent his account to John Richardson, a fellow of Emmanuel from 1674 to 1685; who in turn passed it to More. More sent various questions back through Richardson and received answers from ‘a very certain hand’ (whose it was is not stated).

The phenomena lasted from about May to mid-October 1679, by which date they were already weakening. They ceased completely on October 16th, when York, who had recently been elected a Member of Parliament, had to head for London. It could hardly be alleged that those principally involved in the case were all uneducated liars and tricksters. The phenomena reported have some overlap, far from complete, with those said to have occurred at Tedworth. York's house seems to have been fairly substantial, and like Mompesson's, to have had a fair amount of wood in its construction. The events included very noisy lifting up and down of the latch of the outmost door, chairs found moved when no one could have moved them, loud knockings on doors as with a hefty stick, sometimes as if with a plank of wood, and so violent that carpenters working in the house declared that the doors would have been broken, sounds as of a man walking or running, or someone in stilts knocking on the ceiling, sounds like a plumber putting up lead, and knocking with a hammer, sometimes like the chopping of wood in the yard, or like knocking at the doors of outhouses, or of the wash house, brew house, or stable doors, three or four nights a week, of someone running up and down stairs, of knocking on the wood of windows from inside or outside. Once, at night, the sounds moved outside the house to come from a sundial in the garden (Sir William followed them out). Sir William, who did not want to be thought a believer in such things, repeatedly organized stratagems to catch whoever might be causing these happenings by normal means, or to prevent any fraud from occurring, as by locking the doors of targeted rooms, but he discovered nothing and nobody.

Chapter Five is called **The Enlightenment Rejection of Magic: Mid-Century Scepticism and Its Milieu**, and in light of its title the actual contents seem a trifle out of balance. Much of them have to do with the views on magical matters from the late seventeenth century until well on into the eighteenth century of various well-known medical men. This may be of passing interest in the history of medicine, but is surely somewhat peripheral to the decline of belief in magic, except insofar as we are concerned only with the beliefs of a smallish number of quite intellectual people. The beliefs of the doctors themselves, however, are not without interest. They are presented by Hunter in his usual knowledgeable detail, and tend, as one might expect, toward

reductionism and naturalism. Some were much influenced by the rapidly growing ideal of Newtonian physics, which might have inspired the thought that there should be laws to guide the practice of medicine as exact as those of geometry or physical science—if one could only agree on what such laws could be. Some doctors certainly thought that the (presumably delusory) magical beliefs cherished by numbers of their patients were due to some underlying physiologically based condition such as melancholia, and could be dispelled accordingly. Thus, we find doctors setting out to treat such conditions by physical treatments. The trouble with their approach (not I think recognized at the time) was that even if one could treat a liability to delusions and hallucinations on such assumptions, it still leaves some main problems of ‘magic’ as defined above largely untouched. It does not deal, for instance, with fulfilled prophecies, with ‘veridical’ apparitions as now defined (e.g., ones that coincide or cohere with events distant in space or time, including the experiences of other persons, in ways for which no ordinary explanation could or can be as yet found), or with possession, clairvoyance, and thought-reading, or hauntings and poltergeists. It seems that one must either accept some implausible ad hoc solution to these problems, or admit defeat.

At the end of the chapter, Hunter again draws attention to the fact that the voice of the more skeptical of medical men on magical questions resonated with some of the radical ideas emanating from the more liberated clerical circles. Indeed, we find members of both sides privately mixing rather than pursuing differences all the time. As one of his examples, Hunter points out that Conyers Middleton (1683–1750), a notoriously, sometimes savagely, argumentative clerical academic, went as a patient to Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), a well-known physician who was among the foremost of the medical skeptics.

Chapter 6, on **Second Sight in Scotland**, is an interesting treatment of a relatively unusual topic, and has the advantage of recapitulating in short order some of the leading kinds of issues that have arisen in previous chapters in somewhat different contexts. The chapter is divided into three fairly clearly demarcated sections, the first of which tackles writers from the later seventeenth century until well into the eighteenth who thought that cases of apparent second sight might be worthy of investigation and study, the second gives the views

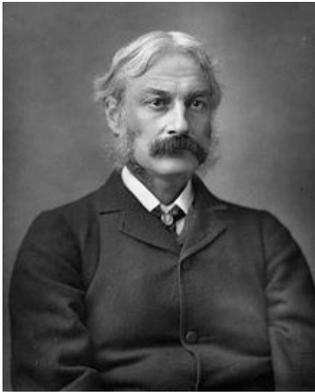


Figure 4. Andrew Lang.

of ‘enlightened’ skeptics from (roughly) the mid-eighteenth century until well into the nineteenth, and the third presents Hunter’s own thoughts on the topics.

First, however, we need to ask what exactly can be meant by the still current, if somewhat rarely used, term ‘second sight.’ A helpful digest is provided by the Scottish folklorist and historian Andrew Lang, whose chapter on second sight (Lang, 1896, pp. 217–228) is still one of the best short introductions to the subject:

In second sight the percipient beholds events occurring at a distance, sees people whom he never saw with the bodily eye, and who afterwards arrive in his neighbourhood; or foresees events approaching but still remote in time. The chief peculiarity of second sight is that the visions often, though not always, are of a symbolical character. A shroud is observed around the living man who is doomed; boding animals, mostly black dogs, vex the seer; funerals are witnessed before they occur, and ‘corpse candles’ . . . are watched flitting above the road whereby a funeral is to take its way. (Lang, 1896, pp. 217–218)

Different cultures may have comparable phenomena but different symbolisms—however, we are talking here principally of Scotland and the Isle of Man. When second sight is imminent the seer or seeress may pass into a detached state and become unaware of his or her surroundings. This can tell knowing observers what is happening. Many seers would rather it didn’t happen at all, let alone be guessed at by others. In later times the problem might be simply to avoid embarrassment, but the first recorded cases come from the early seventeenth century when the seers could be burnt at the stake as witches on the assumption (vigorously advocated by Presbyterian clergymen) that they must be in league with the devil, or be controlled by fairies (which more or less amounted to the same thing)—unless, of course, the seers happened to be clergymen themselves, in which case their remarkable gifts were taken as indicative of holiness.

Hunter, however, is more concerned with the situation toward the end of the seventeenth century and on into the eighteenth, by which time the frightful risk of incineration had receded (much to the regret of certain Scottish clergymen) and English and Scottish savants had begun to be curious about the actual nature of the supposed phenomena. He attributes the effective start of this wider inquisitiveness no doubt correctly to Robert Boyle, about whom (as mentioned before) he has written a biography.



Figure 5. Robert Boyle.

Boyle's interest was aroused in 1678 by the Scot Lord Tarbat who gave him information on the subject both in conversation and by correspondence. A letter from Tarbat to Boyle, though not published until much later, seems to have circulated and occasioned a wider interest. Boyle, as a dedicated disciple of Francis Bacon, began to collect as much factual information on the subject as he could, regarding this as an essential preliminary to reaching a proper understanding of any kind of natural occurrence. Among other well-known Englishmen who became interested in 'Scottish second sight' and its possible implications, and collected accounts of it, were John Aubrey (1626–1697), probably best remembered for his often-humorous *Brief Lives*, Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), the diarist and subsequently a President of the Royal Society, and Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), lexicographer. The Scottish believers are on the whole rather less well-known—Robert Kirk (d. 1692), a highly educated Scottish cleric, author of a work that despite its title *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves and Fairies* contains a good deal about second sight, and John Fraser, Dean of the Isles, another such well-educated individual, and author of *Deuteroskopia: Or a Brief Discourse of the Second Sight* (1707). Hunter goes on with further believers and debunkers, continuing from the middle eighteenth into the early nineteenth centuries, making it quite clear that among the educated of the Age of Enlightenment the debunkers (who could have

traced their forebears back to the much older Deists and freethinkers, had they known about them) were by far the dominant party. I have to confess that on the whole I find the believers more impressive than the skeptics. The believers at least provide a fair number of rather odd cases supplied by witnesses who might be regarded as credible. What is lacking is examples of cases in which what the seers saw (or thought they had seen) remained unconfirmed by events, thus making it difficult to assess how many 'hits' might simply have been due to happenstance. The skeptics, however, tend to rely in one form or another on the even less satisfactory tactic of simply assuming that those who can believe such absurd stories must be credulous idiots, probably ill-educated, and very likely mentally disturbed. At best they were likely to be vivid dreamers, in thrall to local superstitions. Often confident in the widespread assumption that natural phenomena, even when as yet not fully understood, were ultimately to be explained in terms of neo-Newtonian mathematical laws, the skeptics were rather too ready to accept that any sort of explanation seemingly incompatible with the Newtonian assumption could be instantly set aside.

In the final section of the chapter, headed 'The Realm of the Imagination', Hunter takes up the idea that although the skeptics had pretty much knocked such 'magical' ideas out of the ring, the notion of second sight was able to take on a new lease in life in the realm of poetical or fictional fantasy. Thus,

we now enter the era when second sight became part of the culture of Romanticism, and a typically Romantic blending of fact and fiction created a powerful image that was elaborated during the Victorian period and that continues to have resonances today. (Hunter, p. 166)

This is all very well when taken in a context of the history of literature, but of little relevance as regards the stated purpose of this book, which is ostensibly (p. 2) to demonstrate and understand the changing attitudes toward 'magical' beliefs, such as the sorts of beliefs listed at the beginning of this review, between (in practice) the mid-seventeenth century and the early part of the nineteenth, thus comfortably covering the period often termed the Age of Enlightenment. But the relevant

questions with regard to the general waning or otherwise of 'magical' beliefs (as distinct from the romantic appeal of magical ideas to readers and writers of poetry or fiction) are factual ones as to the causes of such waxing or waning—the forcefulness of the various arguments for and against these beliefs, the strength and dissemination of the evidence on each side, the intelligence and education of those presenting and those assessing that evidence, their open-mindedness and prejudices, and so on.

The final chapter (unnumbered), **The Decline of Magic Reconsidered**, is an overview of the conclusions that the author thinks he can draw from the preceding chapters (there is another, more concise, overview at the beginning of the Preface). A prime message that emerges seems to be how it gradually became apparent that the once-standard arguments deployed against belief in 'magic' were untenable or impossible to decide about. For instance, the argument that all these supposedly 'magical' phenomena were fraudulent raised the question of how so many people could be so gullible as to take them seriously in the first place, which led to the further proposal that these dupes were for the most part stupid, ignorant, or psychologically vulnerable, an assumption that is not exactly well-supported by independent evidence. Or again, consider the 'priestcraft' argument popular with Deists such as Conyers Middleton, that magical and related beliefs were deliberately fostered by fraudulent priests to increase their power or for pecuniary gain. As a general hypothesis, this was monstrously implausible, and devoid of any extensive evidence.

Following the publication of Newton's *Principia* in 1687, a new picture of nature and nature's laws (no longer 'hid in night') became dominant, at least among the sufficiently educated. According to this view (mentioned briefly above), natural laws, even where not yet discovered, were bound to be of a Newtonian kind, mathematical and leading to precise predictions. If one encountered alleged phenomena that were obviously never going to be susceptible to such treatment, one could dismiss them out of hand. Hunter (p. 161) quotes Sir Walter Scott: "if force of evidence could authorise us to believe facts inconsistent with the general laws of nature, enough might be produced in favour of the existence of the Second Sight." Skepticism with regard to inconvenient phenomena had never seemed easier or more cut and

dried. Such an attitude lingered into the nineteenth century, where we find it exploited not just by Scott, about whose 'real' views I share Andrew Lang's doubts, but by two well-known medical men (John Ferriar, 1765–1815, and Samuel Hibbert, 1782–1848) who each wrote a well-received book attempting to demolish the belief in apparitions, second sight, etc., by such standard explanations as illusions based on memory and psychophysiological problems of various kinds, and by deliberately selecting outdated and unconvincing cases to demolish, for which Hibbert was in turn demolished by Andrew Lang (1996, pp. 188–193). They were not the last such skeptics, but signs of coming change were not far off.

Overall, I hope I have made it clear how very informative and sensibly critical this not overlong and not overpriced book is. And it forcefully and rather worryingly brings out how much there is in common between on the one hand the sometimes ferocious and nearly always pointless disputes conducted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries between believers in what is here called 'magic' and the skeptical Deists and freethinkers who strongly opposed them, and on the other hand the present disputes between parapsychologists and materialistic proponents of 'scientism'. There is often the same tetchiness and the same failure even to look at the other fellow's case. Though the ill-temper may be a little bit less, the warning about engrained narrow-mindedness is still salutary.

Hunter is free of such prejudices, but his book runs into certain problems. Most of them arise from the overly wide definition of 'magic' that it took to begin with. The central thread of the first four chapters relates to traditional witchcraft beliefs (evil witches, mainly female, covens, worship of the devil, a reward of magic powers from him, flight through the air to gatherings where unseemly rites and activities took place). Beliefs in all this was largely gone from Britain by the end of the second quarter of the eighteenth century, certainly among persons who had power to prosecute and sentence offenders, and though the concept of witchcraft still lingers on, it is just for purposes of dressing up for parties or having fun at Halloween. Of course, village 'white witches', the so-called 'cunning men' and 'cunning women', despite certain problems, were still going strong during the nineteenth century, as witness the once-famous 'Cunning Murrell'. Indeed, they went on

into the early parts of the twentieth century (I myself knew an elderly gentleman, an expert, among other things, on folklore, who told me about being advised to visit ‘her at the end of the village’ bringing sugar or tea, before setting out to fish or shoot.) But that was, I think, long past the end in Britain of anything that could be called witchcraft in the traditional sense, though some villagers probably suspected cunning persons of knowing a spell or two.

However, other sorts of magic mentioned in the loose and incoherent definition of the subject with which we started, have lingered on varyingly as objects of belief among some people. These beliefs may be more or less linked to each other or largely independent of each other and may wax and wane in synchrony or otherwise. For instance, stories of apparitions and haunted houses may be linked, and apparitions may be recognized or unrecognized and unshared or (more rarely) shared. They went on, whether or not much reduced under pressure from conventionally well-educated disbelievers we can hardly tell, but they did not wholly cease. Though the educated ceased to bother with cases of apparitions, one can certainly find examples through the eighteenth century, not least ones recorded by respectable Methodist pastors, as in the diaries of John Wesley or among the popular religiosities of John Tregortha’s *News of the Invisible World* (new edition, 1827). Poltergeists were reported from time to time, though not often properly investigated. Sometimes, there was overlap with hauntings, but the classic, young person-centered poltergeist rarely has any attached apparitions. Then how about prevision? Scottish second sight might be thought of as a peculiar, symbolic, version of it. It certainly didn’t wholly disappear in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. In fact, belief that it still goes on has survived in more remote regions of Scotland until quite recently, indeed may well still survive as evinced by the very interesting and relatively recent work of Shari A. Cohn, which Hunter mentions but does not pursue.

In a 1994 article, Cohn reports a questionnaire survey of 615 people randomly selected from four Scottish regions. Questions included whether the respondents themselves had had a second sight experience, whether a relative had, and whether a person known to them had. The response rate (39%) was “reasonably good,” and of these respondents (put at 235 after certain adjustments) 37, or 15.7%, reported

second-sight experiences in which they were themselves the experiencers. Subsequently, Cohn has published several further and more extensive investigations which confirm her earlier findings that second sight has continued, with women on the whole being rather more gifted than men. Of particular interest has been her 1999 investigation of the often-heard suggestion that second sight runs in families. She was able to construct and study the history of 130 families through questionnaires and interviews with 70 individual members. Her conclusion was that second sight may be linked to a single abnormal (or shall we say unusual) gene from either parent. This is a line of work that could merit further investigation. It would indeed be rash to maintain that second sight or a good many of the other types of 'magical' phenomena that Hunter discusses have permanently declined in Britain let alone may forever go away.

Investigating the very variable 'decline' of 'magic', when magic was defined in such wide and woolly and multifaceted terms, was surely a task impossible from its beginnings, but this is not to say that one does not meet with some very interesting issues in Hunter's learned pursuit of it.

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