



## **A History of Witchcraft in England from by Wallace Notestein**

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A HISTORY OF WITCHCRAFT IN ENGLAND FROM 1558 TO 1718

BY WALLACE NOTESTEIN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HISTORY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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PREFACE.

In its original form this essay was the dissertation submitted for a doctorate in philosophy conferred by Yale University in 1908. When first projected it was the writer's purpose to take up the subject of English witchcraft under certain general political and social aspects. It was not long, however, before he began to feel that preliminary to such a treatment there was necessary a chronological survey of the witch trials. Those strange and tragic affairs were so closely involved with the politics, literature, and life of the seventeenth century that one is surprised to find how few of them have received accurate or complete record in history. It may be said, in fact, that few subjects have gathered about themselves so large concretions of misinformation as English witchcraft. This is largely, of course, because so little attention has been given to it by serious students of history. The mistakes and misunderstandings of contemporary writers and of the local historians have been handed down from county history to county history until many of them have crept into general works. For this reason it was determined to attempt a chronological treatment which would give a narrative history of the more significant trials along with some account of the progress of opinion. This plan has been adhered to somewhat strictly, sometimes not without regret upon the part of the writer. It is his hope later in a series of articles to deal with some of the more general phases of the subject, with such topics as the use of torture, the part of the physicians, the contagious nature of the witch alarms, the relation of Puritanism to persecution, the supposed influence of the Royal Society, the general causes for the gradual decline of the belief, and other like questions. It will be seen in the course of the narrative that some of these matters have been touched upon.

This study of witchcraft has been limited to a period of about one hundred and sixty years in English history. The year 1558 has been chosen as the starting point because almost immediately after the accession of Elizabeth there began the movement for a new law, a movement which resulted in the statute of 1563. With that statute the history of the persecution of witches gathers importance. The year 1718 has been selected as a concluding date because that year was marked by the publication of Francis Hutchinson's notable attack upon the belief. Hutchinson levelled a final and deadly blow at the dying superstition. Few men of intelligence dared after that avow any belief in the reality of witchcraft; it is probable that very few even secretly cherished such a belief. A complete history would of course include a full account both of the witch trials from Anglo-Saxon times to Elizabeth's accession and of the various witch-swimming incidents of the eighteenth century. The latter it has not seemed worth while here to consider. The former would involve an examination of all English sources from the earliest times and would mean a study of isolated and unrelated trials occurring at long intervals (at least, we have record only of such) and chiefly in church courts. The writer has not undertaken to treat this earlier period; he must confess to but small knowledge of it. In the few pages which he has given to it he has attempted nothing more than to sketch from the most obvious sources an outline of what is currently known as to English witches and witchcraft prior to the days of Elizabeth. It is to be hoped that some student of medieval society will at some time make a thorough investigation of the history of witchcraft

in England to the accession of the great Queen.

For the study of the period to be covered in this monograph there exists a wealth of material. It would perhaps not be too much to say that everything in print and manuscript in England during the last half of the sixteenth and the entire seventeenth century should be read or at least glanced over. The writer has limited himself to certain kinds of material from which he could reasonably expect to glean information. These sources fall into seven principal categories. Most important of all are the pamphlets, or chapbooks, dealing with the history of particular alarms and trials and usually concluding with the details of confession and execution. Second only to them in importance are the local or municipal records, usually court files, but sometimes merely expense accounts. In the memoirs and diaries can be found many mentions of trials witnessed by the diarist or described to him. The newspapers of the time, in their eagerness to exploit the unusual, seize gloatingly upon the stories of witchcraft. The works of local historians and antiquarians record in their lists of striking and extraordinary events within their counties or boroughs the several trials and hangings for the crime. The writers, mainly theologians, who discuss the theory and doctrine of witchcraft illustrate the principles they lay down by cases that have fallen under their observation. Lastly, the state papers contain occasional references to the activities of the Devil and of his agents in the realm.

Besides these seven types of material there should be named a few others less important. From the pamphlet accounts of the criminal dockets at the Old Bailey and Newgate, leaflets which were published at frequent intervals after the Restoration, are to be gleaned mentions of perhaps half a dozen trials for witchcraft. The plays of Dekker, Heywood, and Shadwell must be used by the student, not because they add information omitted elsewhere, but because they offer some clue to the way in which the witches at Edmonton and Lancaster were regarded by the public. If the pamphlet narrative of the witch of Edmonton had been lost, it might be possible to reconstruct from the play of Dekker, Ford, and Rowley some of the outlines of the story. It would be at best a hazardous undertaking. To reconstruct the trials at Lancaster from the plays of Heywood and Brome or from that of Shadwell would be quite impossible. The ballads present a form of evidence much like that of the plays. Like the plays, they happen all to deal with cases about which we are already well informed. In general, they seem to follow the narratives and depositions faithfully.

No mention has been made of manuscript sources. Those used by the author have all belonged to one or other of the types of material described.

It has been remarked that there is current a large body of misinformation about English witchcraft. It would be ungrateful of the author not to acknowledge that some very good work has been done on the theme. The Reverend Francis Hutchinson, as already mentioned, wrote in 1718 an epoch-making history of the subject, a book which is still useful and can never be wholly displaced. In 1851 Thomas Wright brought out his *Narratives of Sorcery and Magic*, a work at once entertaining and learned. Wright wrote largely from original sources and wrote with a good deal of care. Such blunders as he made were the result of haste and of the want of those materials which we now possess. Mrs. Lynn Linton's *Witch Stories*, published first in 1861, is a better book than might be supposed from a casual glance at it. It was written with no more serious purpose than to entertain, but it is by no means to be despised. So far as it goes, it represents careful work. It would be wrong to pass over Lecky's brilliant essay on witchcraft in his *History of Rationalism*, valuable of course rather as an interpretation than as an historical account. Lecky said many things about witchcraft that needed to be said, and said them well. It is my belief that his verdicts as to the importance of sundry factors may have to be modified; but, however that be, the importance of his essay must always be recognized. One must not omit in passing James Russell Lowell's charming essay on the subject. Both Lecky and Lowell of course touched English witchcraft but lightly. Since Mrs. Lynn Linton's no careful treatment of English witchcraft proper has appeared. In 1907, however, Professor Kittredge published his *Notes on Witchcraft*, the sixty-seven pages of which with their footnotes contain a more scrupulous sifting of the evidence as to witchcraft in England than is to be found in any other treatment. Professor Kittredge is chiefly interested in English witchcraft as it relates itself to witchcraft in New England, but his work contains much that is fresh about the belief in England. As to the rôle and the importance of various actors in the drama and as to sundry minor matters, the

writer has found himself forced to divergence of view. He recognizes nevertheless the importance of Professor Kittredge's contribution to the study of the whole subject and acknowledges his own indebtedness to the essay for suggestion and guidance.

The author cannot hope that the work here presented is final. Unfortunately there is still hidden away in England an unexplored mass of local records. Some of them no doubt contain accounts of witch trials. I have used chiefly such printed and manuscript materials as were accessible in London and Oxford. Some day perhaps I may find time to go the rounds of the English counties and search the masses of gaol delivery records and municipal archives. From the really small amount of new material on the subject brought to light by the Historical Manuscripts Commission and by the publication of many municipal records, it seems improbable that such a search would uncover so many unlisted trials as seriously to modify the narrative. Nevertheless until such a search is made no history of the subject has the right to be counted final. Mr. Charles W. Wallace, the student of Shakespeare, tells me that in turning over the multitudinous records of the Star Chamber he found a few witch cases. Professor Kittredge believes that there is still a great deal of such material to be turned up in private collections and local archives. Any information on this matter which any student of English local history can give me will be gratefully received.

I wish to express my thanks for reading parts of the manuscript to William Savage Johnson of Kansas University and to Miss Ada Comstock of the University of Minnesota. For general assistance and advice on the subject I am under obligations to Professor Wilbur C. Abbott and to Professor George Burton Adams of Yale University. It is quite impossible to say how very much I owe to Professor George L. Burr of Cornell. From cover to cover the book, since the award to it of the Adams Prize, has profited from his painstaking criticism and wise suggestion.

W. N.

Minneapolis, *October 10, 1911.*

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