Pagan Survivals or Surviving Paganism?

Mick Gowar

***Queens of The Wild: Pagan Goddess in Christian Europe: An Investigation*.**
Ronald Hutton.
Yale University Press, 2022. 256 pages, £18.99.
ISBN: 978-0300261011

—

Over the past thirty years, Ronald Hutton has established himself through numerous articles and a number highly praised books as a leading British scholar of early modern British political and military history[1]. He is now also widely accepted to be the foremost authority in the more controversial area of the history of modern paganism, and in particular the still much contested subjects of the survival of paganism into the early modern period and the prehistoric monotheistic worship of a Great Goddess.

As with his previous books on esoteric and occult subjects *Queens of the Wild: Pagan Goddesses in Christian Europe* presents exemplary archival historical research and literary scholarship in clear and readable prose with the aim of engaging both the scholar and general reader. In previous books Hutton has tended to concentrate on historical, re-imagined or revived forms of pagan worship and the gods and goddesses of past and present paganism;[2] *Queens of the Wild* examines instead four female figures and one male figure who, despite their apparent antiquity and supernatural aspects, have no discernible roots in either Christianity nor any form of pagan worship. As Hutton explained in a recent *BBC History Extra* podcast:

> I decided to write this book, because I spotted a problem with our attitude to the question of pagan survival in the Middle Ages. And that was that there are a number of figures rather goddess like figures around in medieval culture, who didn't seem to me to be surviving from the pagan ancient world. But there was absolutely nothing Christian about them. And so they didn't fit into the idea that either something had to be Christian, or it had to be a survival from ancient Paganism. It raised the possibility that medieval Christian Europeans were capable of encountering or imagining entities, beings that were utterly unChristian, that looked fairly pagan, but were actually encountered or imagined by them.[3]

The four beings are Mother Earth or Mother Nature; the Fairy Queen; The Lady of the Night; the Cailleach, or ogress of mountains and wild places; and in an epilogue, The Green Man, an entity of apparent antiquity which can be shown to have been created in the twentieth century. Hutton devotes a chapter to each, in which he investigates their various possible origins: in the case of Mother Earth the Greek Gaia and Roman Natura (although neither were actually worshipped as goddesses in classical times); the Fairy Queen in the malevolent elves of the Anglo-Saxons; the Lady of the Night from tales of a night riding spirit and her retinue dating from the tenth and eleventh centuries; and the *Cailleach* or *Cailliach* from Gaelic personifications of mountains and winter as a gigantic hag-like woman of great age. Hutton then traces the development of each figure, and the nature of belief in each, and how they evolved as their deeds were recounted, retold and reimagined in folk tales, elite literature – and eventually analysed and deconstructed in anthropological articles and books.

What Hutton reveals, through the accumulation of his observations and readings, is neither evidence of surviving pagan worship in these figures, nor that they were part of a form of popular or rural Christianity as some younger historians have suggested. Instead, he proposes a process of literary composition revealing the potential for the dynamic creativity of popular culture which was unthinkable to the scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who promoted the theories of pagan survival. In *Queens of The Wild* Hutton cites in particular the opinions of the most influential scholar who promoted the thesis of serving paganism in folk culture, J. G. Frazer, and quotes Frazer's comments in *Baldur the Beautiful*:

> The truth seems to be that to this day the peasant remains a pagan and savage at heart; his civilisation is merely a thin veneer which the hard knocks of life soon abrade, exposing the solid core of paganism and savagery below. The danger created by a bottomless layer of ignorance and superstition under the crust of civilised society is lessened, not only by the natural torpidity and inertia of the bucolic mind, but also by the progressive decrease of the rural as compared with the urban population in modern states.[4]

One of the highlights of *Queens of the Wild* is the concise account of the development of 'pagan survival' in the introductory chapter titled 'What Is Pagan Survival?'. Up until the 1970s there had been a widely held belief among scholars, folklorists, novelists, poets and many others that a Europe-wide pagan cult had persisted from pre-Christian times, through the Middle Ages and into the early modern period. Furthermore, according to this thesis the 60,000 women and men who were put to death as witches during the notorious period of witch-hunting and witch trials which

reached their peak between 1560 and 1670 was an eventually successful attempt to eradicate this surviving paganism. Hutton locates the development of this belief in Germany between 1825 and 1840, during the time of high Romanticism and emerging nationalism, eventually spreading to France where Jules Michelet published his highly influential and highly imaginative book on witchcraft, *La Sorciere.* This in turn influenced Anglophone writers including the American feminist Matilda Joslyn Gage, and the folklorist Charles G. Leland whose *Aradia* or *The Gospel of The Witches* is still in print and available in several paper and digital editions. But the most influential contribution to the idea of the survival of paganism, from a British perspective, was surely made by the Egyptologist Margaret Murray during the first half of the twentieth century. Using as proof her interpretations of the records of mostly Scottish witch trials, Murray set out in two books, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of The Witches* (1933) and a number of articles, what appeared to be an unimpeachable scholarly argument for a witch religion which Hutton describes as:

> the cult of a horned god representing the generative powers of nature, organised in Groups of thirteen run by women or men which met to transact business and celebrate festivals with feasting, animal and human sacrifice and ritualised sex. She came to refer to it simply as 'the Old Religion' and to characterise it as one of joy and affirmation of life, contrasted with the gloom off Christianity. As such, [Murray] suggested, it retained the allegiance of the bulk of the population until the end of the Middle Ages.[5]

This belief that an 'old religion' survived in rural communities throughout the Middle Ages will undoubtedly be

familiar to many readers, and still has considerable popularity today even though, as Hutton ruefully notes:

> [Murray's] work was immediately and consistently rejected by historians familiar with the evidence for early modern witchcraft beliefs and trials, who judged at once that she had misused it. These were, however, very few in number, and it won rapid acceptance among respected historians expert in other subjects, novelists […] occultists and mystical Celticists, and authors of popular books on witchcraft. Some folklorists also rapidly adopted it. Murray was invited to write the entry on witchcraft in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* and used it to state her own theory as proven fact, so taking it to a much wider public. (Ibid, p. 12)

Historians as respected as Sir George Clark, Christopher Hill and Sir Stephen Runciman in the UK, Carlo Ginzberg in Italy and Emmanuel Le Ropy Ladurie in France supported Murray's thesis, and the final accolade came when Mircea Elide the Rumanian born doyen of comparative religion gave it his endorsement. But, as Hutton observes, it was uniquely in Britain that the belief in a surviving pagan cult, and an ancient matriarchal, matrilineal society throughout Europe in the mesolithic and neolithic periods based on the worship of a single Great Goddess, was accepted by the academic establishment and became the scholarly consensus for almost a century, despite a striking absence of any firm evidence.

However, as Hutton recounts, in the late twentieth century:

> The belief that people prosecuted for the alleged crime of witchcraft in early modern Europe were practitioners of a surviving pagan religion collapsed completely among professional historians. From 1970 onwards a

> steady process of systematic and detailed research began into the trial records and associated documents and published literature, in one region or another, and it revealed absolutely no evidence for the belief [….] The witch hunts between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries were generated by an unhappy combination of general fear and anguish produced by uncanny misfortune, blamed on malicious magic, and a new elite belief in a satanic conspiracy to subvert Christianity. The worship of old deities played no part in it. This shift of scholarly perspective was the more final in that it was brought about not by a few iconoclasts but by studies produced by scores of academics covering in the end every part of Europe. (*Queens,* pp. 27-28)

This collapse of what had been the scholarly consensus naturally caused much distress to the growing numbers of modern pagans who described themselves as Wiccans, and who practiced a form of spirituality which had drawn on symbols and practices from what they had hitherto believed to be a coherent system of ancient beliefs for which so many of their precursors had been martyred. However, contrary to what has been widely assumed – particularly among practicing modern pagans in the USA, Canada and Australia – Hutton was not, and is not, an iconoclast whose objective is to undermine modern pagan practice. The believe in surviving paganism had collapsed as a result of the historical research of a the generation of scholars preceding Hutton's, and it has been an important part of Hutton's objectives in publishing both the first and second editions of his major *The Triumph of The Moon* to provide modern practicing pagans (a number of whom he considered to be close and valued personal friends) with a true history to their religious beliefs and rites of which they could be proud.[6]

Another highlight is the epilogue in which Hutton explores the phenomenon of The Green Man, which as a distinct supernatural entity is indisputably a twentieth century creation. Images of a man with foliage forming his hair and beard, or flowing from his mouth, nose or eyes is a familiar one, carved in the stonework and woodwork of numerous medieval cathedrals and churches. This image, like the female entities investigated in previous chapters of *Queens of The Wild*, appeared to have nothing of Christian belief to explain its popularity as a decorative motif. The colour green and the foliage particularly suggested a figure associated with the fertility of the land, the rhythm of the seasons and in particular the reappearance of the green shoots of spring after the 'death' of winter. When considered alongside the presence of Jack-in-the-Green, a foliage covered figure central to many traditional British May Day celebrations, and the apparently ancient legends of the green clad, woodland dwelling outlaw Robin Hood, there seemed only one conclusion to be drawn by any early twentieth century folklorist steeped in the theories of J. G. Frazer, Margaret Murray or Jessie Westo: it must be a pagan survival. And that was the conclusion to which Julia Somerset, Lady Raglan, came in her influential article 'The Green Man in Church Architecture' which was published in *Folk-Lore,* the journal of the Folk-Lore (later Folklore) Society in 1939. However, as Hutton shows, Lady Raglan was 'simply wrong': the decorative motif of heads sprouting vegetation has no connection with British May Day customs, or other European customs of greeting summer such as the creation of the *Johanniskrone*, or British figures from popular ballads and chapbooks like Robin Hood. However, with his customary generosity Hutton allows that:

> It is perfectly legitimate to pick foliate or woodland figures from all over European and Near Eastern art, folklore and literature, across the ages, and group them

> together now as expressions of the human relationship with green and fertile nature. Such figures are indeed found in many different religions and ethnicities, and there is no reason why the foliate heads in churches, the Jack-in-the-Green, Robin Hood and the Green Knight should not be included among them. (p. 190)

But he warns that:

> The trouble only starts if those who embrace such beliefs back project them upon the past and declare they are revealing an ancient mystery, or an eternal and universal archetype which once underpinned a global – or even just continent-wide – belief system, or else the truth about ancient or medieval religion. (p. 191)

By which of course he means the early twentieth century theories of surviving paganism in the 'old religion' of early modern witches, and the belief in a Great Goddess and a peaceful, creative and nurturing matriarchal Golden Age of pre-Indo-European Europe. However, his conclusion is not to ridicule or dismiss these hypotheses as of no significance or interest, but to hope for some rapprochement between the opposing groups who respond so vigorously to the dismantling of the established certainties about pagan survival in the 1970s and 1980s.

> One concentrated, among those concerned with sustained research into the past, was to examine and deconstruct them, and reject them if they were not found to match up to the apparent evidence. The other, concentrated among those concerned with responses to the problems of late modernity, and especially with those associated with counter-cultures, has been to appropriate the figures and beliefs embodied in those

> hypotheses and to remodel them for a new set of causes. Both have their value as reactions to a changing world, and it would be a very positive achievement they could be diverted from each other. (p. 191)

For although the Green Man may appear to have been invented from nothing by Lady Raglan and quickly taken up by believers in pagan survival, and subsequently rejected by the rationalist iconoclasts of the 1970s, as Hutton concludes:

> In essence, however, he belongs to neither, but is an effective enough representation of a divinity-like being who has appeared in response to modern needs and within a Post-Christian society. (p. 192)

In many respects *Queens of The Wild* is an ideal introduction to Ronald Hutton's researches in the field of the history of pagan beliefs, practices and possible survivals. Particularly commendable is his decision to focus not on obscure gods and goddesses but on figures familiar through popular folk and fairy tales, 'high' culture such as Shakespeare's plays, Spenser's epic verses, and the folk songs recorded and sometimes composed by contemporary performers such as Fairport Convention, Steeley Span, Martin Carthy, Karine Polwart and Ninebarrow. Many readers may be content to stop at *Queens of The Wild,* but I hope not. As Francis Young, a younger scholar of folklore, paganism and medieval Christianity notes in a generally highly supportive review of *Queens of the Wild*:

> Hutton has always balanced his scrupulously polite eviscerations of neopagan wishful thinking with an insistence that the history of paganism nevertheless matters, even if the real history is not the one many of us expected.[7]

And he concludes his review with a very fitting commendation:

> In the end, Prof. Hutton is left posing the question of whether the binary categories of 'pagan' and 'Christian' are adequate or useful at all for fully understanding the past or the present. This is not to say that the categories are meaningless, but cultural artefacts exist that cannot be fitted adequately into either. The polemical approach of contemporary pagans intent on discrediting Christianity and portraying the medieval world as pagan at heart does little to advance our ability to reconstruct the thought-world of the past. That thought-world, we must surely conclude, allowed for rather more subtle distinctions than ours does and transcended some of the more simplistic binary oppositions of modernity. (Young)

Mick Gowar is a widely published author of children's books and a teacher of creative writing. Since 1980 he has written or edited over one hundred books for children and young people, including books of poetry, novels, short stories and non-fiction books for educational series including Oxford University Press's Treetops and Project X. He has visited schools, libraries, colleges and festivals throughout the United Kingdom and abroad to give readings, performances and lead workshops and has undertaken educational projects for, among others, the Philharmonia Orchestra, the Britten Sinfonia, Scottish Chamber Orchestra and the Fitzwilliam Museum and Kettles Yard Gallery in Cambridge. He has tutored the Arvon Foundation and Taliesin Trust and was a member of the judging panel for the W. H. Smith Young Writers' Competition. Before retiring he was senior lecturer and university teaching fellow at the Cambridge School of

Art, Anglia Ruskin University. He is currently editor of *Book 2.0* and secretary of the Ted Hughes Society.

NOTES

[1] Ronald Hutton has written extensively on the English Civil Wars, the Protectorate and the Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II. He is presently working on a multi-volume biography of Oliver Cromwell, the first volume of which, *The Making of Oliver Cromwell,* was published by Yale University Press in 2021.
[2] See especially *The Triumph of The Moon.* 2nd edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); and *The Witch: A History of Fear from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
[3] Ronald Hutton, 'Fairy Queens & Giantesses: Pagan Goddesses in Christian Europe,' History Extra Podcast, 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/49jQWzvINFgB9cJCA7K3Ql?si=ca55e861edda4bb1> [accessed 6 August 2023]
[4] Ronald Hutton, 'Fairy Queens & Giantesses: Pagan Goddesses in Christian Europe,' History Extra Podcast, 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/49jQWzvINFgB9cJCA7K3Ql?si=ca55e861edda4bb1> [accessed 6 August 2023]
[5] Ronald Hutton, *Queens of The Wild: Pagan Goddess in Christian Europe: An Investigation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), p. 12.
[6] As Hutton has pointed out on numerous occasions, the fact that Wicca has drawn on symbols and practices from a past with which there was little evidence of direct continuity, did not invalidate it. In fact such searching back in the past for practices or principles through which to give momentum to a religious revival was in no way unusual. The Christian reformers of the sixteenth century had similarly drawn from what they believed to be the spirit and practices of the church as it had been in the first century, which they believed had been forgotten or deliberately rejected by the controlling hierarchy of the early modern Roman Catholic church.
[7] Francis Young, 'The Real History of Paganism' in *First Things* (1 June 2022).