

Book Reviews

Pale Hecate's Team by K. M. Briggs. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1962. 291 pp., 8 plates. 40s.

Witchcraft is a perennially fascinating subject and interest in it is by no means always healthy. For the squeamish, accounts of witch trials and executions are both nauseating and depressing, while for the more sadistically-minded, such accounts offer endless scope. Many studies of the origins and nature of witchcraft and its related quasi-magical practices have been made, and there are various theories, both scholarly and romantic, as to its true character. Some would trace its ancestry back to Stone Age fertility cults, whereas others see true witchcraft as a phenomenon peculiar to the mediaeval era.

Dr Briggs, in her scholarly and sensitively-written book, considers some of the theories of the origins of witchcraft with caution and with critical appraisal. She is primarily concerned with the impact of witchcraft on English life and letters, and she investigates the emergence, and then the development, of witchcraft references in the writings of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and in the literature of seventeenth-century England. She discusses the probable sources of these witchcraft elements—whether they occur as a result of the growing influence of the Continental witch trials which were connected with the great witch persecution by the Church, or whether they stem from genuine folk beliefs and practices rather than from academic or ecclesiastic concepts. In her brief, but stimulating conclusion she says: 'The expression of witch beliefs in England from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, might be graphed like a temperature chart. From a steady, almost matter-of-course level of belief it rises gradually to a low peak somewhere soon after the accession of James the First, drops steadily until the Civil War and then rises to its sharpest and highest peak at about 1650. Thence it drops and rises in saw-like jags until the beginning of the 18th century, when it falls into a lysis, and goes steadily and swiftly down to almost zero.'

Dr Briggs begins her study with an examination of the background of belief in witches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the subsequent witch mania which was apparently encouraged by extreme Puritan and Roman Catholic opinions. An interesting aspect of the cult was the fact that the educated as well as the ignorant believed in it. Indeed, highly learned people were sometimes regarded with suspicion and believed to possess powers of a non-natural kind. She examines the differences between black and white magic. In the writings of the period it is not easy to disentangle classical allusions to witchcraft and magic from native folk beliefs. The Elizabethans themselves were not greatly preoccupied with the fear of witchcraft, but after James I's accession, and his own personal concern with such matters, it came more

into prominence. Although, as Dr Briggs emphasises, it is very difficult to find out how much witch belief in the England of our period was founded on oral tradition and how much stemmed from classical and scriptural allusions, the witch trials themselves give us a true insight into the nature of popular belief at the time. In England, torture as such was banned, although methods were used, such as the keeping of the accused from sleep until they were almost frenzied with fatigue, which could hardly be called anything else. For evidence, the witch trials in England relied more on the accusations of neighbours, including young children, than on the evidence of the accused, and as a result, in the accusations we get to the real level of folk belief. The writings of the learned are next considered, and here we see them to have been on the whole moderate and unemotional. These are discussed in some detail, as is the poetry of witchcraft, with many attractive passages of quotation. In the drama of the Elizabethan era too, witchcraft was treated less seriously than in seventeenth-century plays. Dr Briggs points out that magicians were much more common literary characters than were witches, and again many passages are quoted in illustration. After magicians, other semi-occult figures, such as quacks and tricksters, exorcists, astrologers and pseudo-alchemists are considered in their relationship to the literature of the age. Next come devils and imps, for the Devil himself was a very real being in seventeenth-century minds, and he was frequently associated with witch orgies. Other aspects of folk belief, such as amateur magic, charms, spells and potions of every kind are dealt with, and this is followed by an interesting section on fate and fortune. The lives of the people then, as now to a certain extent, were hemmed in and stifled by superstitious practice and the belief in the inexorable nature of fate, and interpretations of dreams. There is a final chapter on the role of Robin Hood and his link with witch traditions.

The appendices are extremely useful, especially perhaps the short glossary of terms used in the writings on witchcraft and magic, and the charms and spells given in Appendix IV. There is a valuable classified bibliography which gives the reader an idea of the range and nature of Dr Briggs' researches into her subject.

Altogether, it is a book on a subject which is in itself endlessly fascinating, written in a calm and objective fashion, with charming illustrations and many excerpts from the literature under consideration, and it provides pleasurable and stimulating reading for both layman and specialist alike.

ANNE ROSS

Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition by Anne Ross. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1967. xxxiv + 434 pp. 10 maps, 96 plates. £6 6s.

Dr Ross's long-awaited book, the scope and calibre of which was foreshadowed by the various detailed studies which she has produced in the last decade, marks a turning-

point not only in this specific branch of Celtic research but in related aspects of Iron Age and Romano-Celtic archaeology. The book itself, like Janus, has two faces, and like the Janiform figures which the author interprets and illustrates in passing, these faces have been most skilfully addorsed. Excluding the diffuse, if valuable, comments by contemporary Classical authors, comments inevitably proceeding from an external viewpoint, our information about what may loosely be called 'Celtic pagan religion' is derived from two bodies of data. One is the corpus of surviving portrayals (normally in stone) of deities and semi-deities, with or without cult attributes; the other is the mass of references (normally oblique and gnomic) embedded in the oldest strata of Celtic literature, much Celtic poetry of the 'middle' period, and (so Dr Ross claims) even, marginally, in current or nineteenth-century popular belief and legend.

There is, of course, no shortage of books purporting to describe the beliefs and religious practices of the pagan Celtic-speaking peoples, both of these islands and of the Continent. It would be invidious to specify examples, but this is a genre which shows no signs of decay, and is well-represented in the last two decades. The difference between these books, and Dr Ross's, is fundamental. The commonest source for the 'popular' work seems to be pre-extant writing on the same broad topic, though gleanings from the (now often very extensive) runs of such periodicals as *Folklore*, and to a minor extent information derived orally in the field, are also used. Such works are often, at best, useful syntheses of existing views (errors and all); at worst, they tremble on the fringes of lunacy. They probably bear no more relation to the past as it really was than did the equally numerous accounts of (say) the complex social organisations of the Australian aboriginal tribes compiled by rangers and missionaries in the late Victorian era.

Dr Ross's strength lies in her power of associative thought, her prodigious memory, and the unique combination of talents which she has brought to bear on her work. The approach to the Celtic literary and popular sources is linguistic, not romantic, the outcome of a first-class Honours degree in the appropriate languages and of many seasons of field-collection in the vernacular. The treatment of the tangible remains of Celtic belief, some in Roman contexts, some in native ones, is based on years of patient, painstaking, often frustrating field-work, where bad weather, the absence of adequate photographic light, and the unrecorded removal (or loss) of individual sculptures can easily deter. The worn or eroded condition of so many sculptured pieces makes personal inspection, sometimes re-inspection, essential; and the whole corpus of contemporary European thinking on the archaeology and origins of the Celtic-speaking peoples, a rapidly-changing subject, must at the same time be not only followed but mastered.

Viewed simply as a great descriptive catalogue, Dr Ross's achievement would command our admiration and our gratitude. Despite constant exhortations and resolutions to produce such, British archaeology is not all that well served when it comes to illustrated corpora of prehistoric or later documents, and (by comparison with our European colleagues) this is notably true of the Iron Age and later periods. But *Pagan*

Celtic Britain goes much further. The author's approach is to some extent taxonomic. Having introduced the topic of sanctuaries, temples, and cult-sites (chapter I), she is able, with some justification, to split the portrayals, actual and literary, of religious beings and cult-objects up into six main classes (the cult of the head, horned gods, warrior gods, goddesses, birds, and animals), to each of which a chapter is devoted; and within each class, to list the partly-overlapping varieties and derivatives. A final chapter, for which Romanists will be peculiarly grateful, analyses the plethora of native cults in North Britain, particularly those which seemed to have flourished in the shadow of Hadrian's Wall, with its kaleidoscopic and polyglot population of natives, legionaries, auxiliaries, traders, and invaders, its remote hinterlands, and its dramatic history.

In describing the various sculptured stelae, heads, figured panels, and minor metal-work—and these range, as the numerous plates show, from the mundane and derivative right up to some magnificent pieces of stark power and terrifying understatement—Dr Ross adduces, from a very wide range of (mostly Old and Middle Irish) sources, passages which describe similarly attributed heads, figures, juxtaposed objects, and even partly narrative scenes. This is a device which, from imperfect sampling and much mis-handling, has tended in the past to arouse suspicion, archaeologists being most reluctant to accept such links as anything but fortuitous. The sheer weight of the author's evidence, the cumulative effect of these extraordinary and sometimes quite nightmareish extracts (they read like Jungian or psychedelic writings), coupled with—might one add?—the reader's confidence in Dr Ross's ability to translate afresh from these sources, must forever still uninformed criticism on this score. Modestly described (p. 5) as 'a suggested method of approach, not a final statement, on a much-falsified aspect of life in a limited area of barbarian Europe', the author's work appears to lead her, and us, to the conclusion that the 'religion' of the pagan Celtic-speaking peoples was a state of mind, a bundle of (to us) not-quite-comprehensible attitudes to a world in which the real and the potential were never wholly distinguished.

Two strong after-impressions remain, at any rate with this reader. The first is the concept, reinforceable from kindred lines of research but all too often overlooked, that the Celtic-speaking peoples were already old when they reached Britain—old linguistically, old in their social structure, old in their beliefs—and that, as Henri Hubert with Gallic detachment long since stressed, the story of Celtic Britain is that of the Decline, not of the Rise, or of the Greatness, of the Celts. Dr Ross deals, and she is probably the only scholar qualified to do so, with the religious beliefs of the Celts from a late baroque stage onwards and downwards into their inevitable confusion and decline. Centuries of dark and turgid practice, its rationale wholly forgotten, must underlie the iconography she depicts. The second thought is that her book forms yet another timely reminder, to the very wide public who seem to be interested in anything Celtic, that Celtic art, in the legitimate meaning of this term, has nothing to do with the Iona High Crosses, the Book of Kells, the tartan epidemic, war memorials, or those horrible little pattern-books which still trickle out from Glasgow. It is an art as powerful as that

of the great sullen monoliths of Easter Island, of pre-dynastic Egypt, of early Etruria, of the Eskimos; and here, with the authority which springs from years of purposeful study and grinding hard work, its most important manifestation is given a proper significance.

CHARLES THOMAS

ROBERT KERR

(1889-1967)

Robert Kerr, Honorary Research Fellow at the School of Scottish Studies, who died on 4th December 1967, will be remembered at the School with particular gratitude and affection.

In 1933, while Keeper of the Royal Scottish Museum's Department of Art and Ethnology, Kerr helped to found the Scottish Anthropological and Folklore Society and, as its Honorary Secretary for two decades, sustained it by his enthusiasm and energy.

Retiring from official duties in 1954, he offered his services as an indexer in an entirely voluntary capacity to the School of Scottish Studies, then recently-established in his old university. (Kerr had graduated with first-class honours in Classics, and for many years commanded the Infantry Unit of the University O.T.C.)

There followed many busy and happy years. Unfailing each morning at nine o'clock he was at his desk in the School's library; while his afternoons were regularly spent working, as Honorary Curator, on the coin collections in the National Museum of Antiquities. Thus he continued a full day's work right up to his last illness. No one sought his help in vain, and he was respected and loved by all of us who had the good fortune to work with him. Above all else the development of the School's Central Card-Index, for which he accepted responsibility as co-ordinator and one of the principal contributors, testifies to his competence and zeal.

Another side of his character has been aptly described by a former colleague: 'A man of kindly and modest demeanour, he could exercise a penetrating wit, free from malice, whenever the occasion called for it, usually supported by an appropriate quotation from the classics.'

In paying tribute to the memory of this generous man, it is fitting to remember his wife and two sons who survive him.

B. R. S. MEGAW