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Writing in a Field with Many Audiences, Outlooks, and Opinions: Celebrating the Work of Dr. Ronald Hutton

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From the vantage point of one field that I occupy, Pagan Studies, Dr. Ronald Hutton's contributions include tracing how ideas from early modern history have shaped Contemporary Paganism.[1] From the vantage point of another field that I occupy, the sociology of knowledge, his work illuminates (and embodies) another important phenomenon, namely, how scholars interact with the communities that they study. Hutton has not only done tremendous work to foster the growth of Pagan Studies, but he also highlights how academia interacts with lived communities. At times scholars and Pagans collaborate and recognize the value of working in mutual partnership. At other times practitioners dislike the research this sub-field produces and strongly voice their critiques. Scholars often interact with communities whose perception of reality they may not fully share, causing clashes of opinion. Hutton deserves praise for not shying away whenever this occurs and handling such debates respectfully and informatively.

Some disciplines are keenly attuned to how research impacts the community being studied. For example, anthropology depends on sustained, intimate interaction with the communities under study; moreover, anthropologists may be less concerned with "what actually happened" during a ritual than

1. Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, New Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Ronald Hutton, "Paganism and Polemic: The Debate Over the Origins of Modern Pagan Witchcraft," *Folklore* 111, no. 1 (2000): 103–17.

with participants' *perceptions* of what happened. This sensitivity to perceptions makes ethnographers aware of how communities may respond to research. In contrast, scholars in other fields may envision themselves as experts informing the public how data *should* be interpreted, asserting "this is what happened, and this is what that means." Hutton expertly balances these two approaches, holding himself to the standard of what the evidence reveals, but also highlighting how people *engage* with history.

The division of labor in constructing Paganism's history is complicated: distinguished amateurs have contributed significantly to the understanding of witchcraft and magic in England, while professional scholars have sometimes been mistaken in their analyses.[2] In several cases, Hutton has supported amateur scholars by sharing his references and resources, offering suggestions, and helping manuscripts get published.[3] Such examples demonstrate that professional scholars are not infallible, amateurs make valuable contributions, and collaboration between Pagans and scholars *can* be congenial and productive.

Other interactions between Pagans and scholars have been less positive, often due to each group's differing modes of discourse and ideas about the uses of history. Clear guidelines facilitate how scholars interact with each other's work. As Hutton explains for the benefit of his large non-academic audience, all of his work "is criticized by anonymous reports before being accepted for publication."[4] Before publication, scholars must pass through several steps, offering opportunities for others to identify problems or errors. Even after publication, reactions are mediated through formal processes, such as citations and positive review, or critiques that, channeled through peer review processes, ideally consist of valid counter-arguments devoid of personal attacks. Such is not the case when the broader public disagrees, as Hutton can surely attest. Pagans who dislike research about them or their history often voice their displeasure through blogs or self-published books, which do not adhere to the same principles of scholarly decorum.

The book of Hutton's that has prompted the strongest negative reactions among some Pagans is undoubtedly *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Although he traced the currents of thought and

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2. Hutton advances the examples of C. L'Estrange Ewen and Owen Davies as amateurs whose research has been important in the study of witchcraft and magic, though, as he notes, Davies now holds a professional academic position. Ronald Hutton, "Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism in Pagan History," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagans Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011): 230.

3. Ronald Hutton, "Writing the History of Witchcraft: A Personal View," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 12, no. 2 (2010): 251.

4. Hutton, "Writing the History of Witchcraft," 258.

practice from which modern Paganism springs through several centuries of British history, Hutton also concluded that Gerald Gardner introduced Wicca to the world in the 1950s.[5] This conclusion was hardly the book's only concern, and was supported by rigorous research and analysis. Regardless, some Pagans disliked the implications of this conclusion for their beliefs. Rather than delve into the various attempts to 'refute' Hutton, I will instead highlight the principles that such debates illuminate. For Pagans subscribing to the Murray Thesis of a unified pre-Christian religion that had survived across Europe, or Gardner's proclaimed ancient lineage, Hutton destabilized their symbolic universe. Hutton did *not* claim that Wicca or any Pagan traditions are illegitimate. Indeed, he has defended Paganism's legitimacy throughout the book and on other occasions, suggesting that while Paganism "evolved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries . . . it was no less genuine than any other faith which had undergone a process of renewal and revival."[6] However, some practitioners may consider their religion legitimate because it is old, or because they place trust in their founders. Traditional or charismatic authority are powerful legitimizers. Some Pagans' symbolic universes are supported by believing in an ongoing lineage of magical traditions. Some Wiccans especially value Gardner's supposed role in preserving and promoting ancient knowledge for new generations. As is not uncommon among New Religious Movements, many Pagans look to (their interpretation of) the past for the legitimacy and authority of their tradition.[7]

Seeking to avoid such negative reactions, Hutton explicitly outlined that his book did not intend to offer a general history of Paganism, did not discuss the history of witchcraft outside Britain, and did not intend to attack Wicca's foundational claims.[8] However, some disregarded these disclaimers, taking issue with the *perception* that their religion had been maligned through Hutton's scholarship. Practitioners who criticize scholarship may ignore the steps used to reach a conclusion (or even what that conclusion itself truly claims) and instead critique what they *believe* a scholar is claiming. As Hutton's work and its reception illustrate, regardless of one's intentions, a scholar

5. Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 214.

6. Ronald Hutton, "Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism," 227. Hutton similarly praises the innovation within and legitimacy of modern Paganism in his "Afterword" to *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West: Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of 'The Triumph of the Moon,'* eds. Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

7. James R. Lewis, *Legitimating New Religions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 12.

8. Hutton, "Writing the History of Witchcraft," 240.

who questions certain foundational beliefs may be seen as dismissing that religion entirely.

As many have noted, debates between scholars and Pagans are especially contentious because academic research previously supported Pagan interpretations of history.[9] However, this previously "supportive scholarly interpretation of witchcraft" has been discredited among academic historians of the subject since the 1970s.[10] Updating older interpretations—what Hutton calls the "revisionist process"—made modern Paganism's foundation story untenable, and paved the way for new constructions of history.[11] While some Pagans followed scholars who laid out this new history, others clung to interpretations that were now outdated and unsupported from the perspective of academic history. Hutton calls this the counter-revisionist stance.

Counter-revisionists have not produced any evidence proving the "survival of any fully-formed and self-conscious Pagan religion" in medieval European Christian societies.[12] However, counter-revisionists *have* produced concerted efforts to discredit revisionists. By attacking selected pieces of research or individual scholars, counter-revisionists support older interpretations of Pagan survivals. Counter-revisionists also support their outlook by locating traces of Pagan figures and ideas in medieval societies, which supports their suggestion that Pagan lineages survived. Religious communities' need for reality maintenance in part explains the counter-revisionist reaction. As Berger and Luckmann suggest in their classic work on the sociology of knowledge, "procedures of universe-maintenance become necessary when the symbolic universe has become *a problem*."[13] Pagans who critique Hutton are performing nihilation, or denying "whatever phenomena or interpretations of phenomena do not fit into that universe."[14] In their minds, counter-revisionists do not

9. See, for example, Christine Hoff Kraemer, "Perceptions of Scholarship in Contemporary Paganism," *Presentation at the American Academy of Religion Annual Conference* (2011).

10. Caroline Jane Tully, "Researching the Past is a Foreign Country: Cognitive Dissonance as a Response by Practitioner Pagans to Academic Research on the History of Pagan Religions," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 13, no. 1 (2011): 100. Hutton himself, very early in his career, debated historian Norman Cohn, arguing in favor of "the old orthodoxy concerning the witch trials" against Cohn's revisionism. However, Hutton admits to having been "floored" by Cohn, and the experience contributed to his growing doubt this old historical interpretation as his studies continued. Hutton, "Writing the History of Witchcraft," 240.

11. Hutton, "Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism," 226–27.

12. Ibid., 232.

13. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 105.

14. Ibid., 114.

need to supply new data or explanations. They must simply neutralize any data that contradicts their symbolic universe. This means ignoring, destabilizing, or 'disproving' the revisionists. Those who critique Hutton's (widely respected) research do so as a form of reality maintenance. Hutton's work reveals how scholarship has an audience outside the academy, although not always a supportive reception.

Another (much less contentious) instance of research traveling outside academia to serve other purposes concerns the folklore of 'The Wild Hunt.'[15] In different regions of Europe and in different times from the Middle Ages into the nineteenth century, phenomena later identified by folklorists with this Hunt were led by various figures riding at night accompanied by different creatures, for different purposes. Despite such variations, Hutton explains that since the 1960s the term has become "shorthand in folklore studies for [any] ghostly or superhuman riders operating at night."[16] Context-specific details are eventually overlooked to describe supernatural nighttime riders of any kind. This conflation shapes how such phenomena are understood outside of scholarship. Comparing the Wild Hunt in fiction and non-fiction during the 1970s, Hutton suggests that "one reinforced the other, so that the same idea bobbed around . . . that part of British culture which was concerned with folkloric motifs."[17] Using the term 'Wild Hunt' without acknowledging its many variations demonstrates how ideas can leave Folklore Studies and simply become Folklore, thereby becoming available for re-interpretation. Scholarship *about* certain ideas influences how groups engage with those ideas. This is another key principle that Hutton's work illuminates. Scholarship may inspire people to integrate new ideas into their beliefs, or reinforce that one's beliefs are supported by research. Scholars unconsciously and unintentionally legitimize (or refute) certain beliefs and practices. However, audiences ultimately determine an idea's interpretation and subsequent uses.

Offering one final example of how scholarship travels outside academia, Hutton reflects on the discovery of the Lindow Man, a human corpse found

15. The historical roots of this folklore and its transformation from ancient to modern times is covered in great detail in Chapter 5 of Hutton's most recent book: Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear: From Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). Hutton also briefly addresses this folklore in *Pagan Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014): 281–82.

16. Ronald Hutton, "The Wild Hunt in the Modern British Imagination," *Folklore* 130, no. 2 (2019): 181. Hutton adds that these interchangeable uses overlook factors which were previously important, such as the presence of dogs or the explicit activity of a hunt.

17. Hutton, "The Wild Hunt in the Modern British Imagination," 187.

in a peat bog in 1984.[18] Discussing the historical debate over whether the Lindow Man was a Druid and a victim of human sacrifice, Hutton explains that certain interpretations led to an editorial in a Christian publication calling for the suppression of *modern* Druids.[19] Ironically, while some Pagans had previously critiqued Hutton for questioning a link between ancient and modern p/Pagans, some Christians used a link connecting ancient and modern Druids to delegitimize modern Pagans. Interpreting history is a task in which many parties participate, including some who may call for the suppression of others. This is a complicating factor for scholars, as it may be difficult to predict what different groups will do with one's conclusions.

Researching living communities (or in the case of Paganism, researching the same historical periods that members draw upon for their self-understanding) occasionally causes heated debates. When researching such Pagan-adjacent topics as the practices of cunning-folk in premodern times, historians are not just exploring some remote past, but also, whether they wish to do so or not, commenting directly on practitioners' constructed realities. Scholars and Pagans hold different understandings of what constitutes data, how to interpret data, and why that data is important. Interpreting the past (which historians rightly consider their area of expertise) is also a quasi-religious activity for some Pagans. As Hutton's work and reactions to it have made clear, disagreements about the past might not be considered a matter of differing opinions, but rather as attacks on one's symbolic universe.

These epistemological battles in which scholars may find themselves involved can have practical consequences. Discussing attacks from one critic, Hutton suggests that if these attacks were to gain credence among people in authority, risks included losing his research post or undermining his "ability to act as an expert witness" in trials.[20] All Pagan communities might lose valuable allies if opponents were to succeed in undermining Hutton's authority on Pagan issues. Another consequence includes the sheer nuisance of having to respond to angry critics. Whether one responds through formal essays, private correspondence, or by simply deleting emails that appear in one's inbox, weathering attacks can be both time consuming and emotionally draining. This is a task that those who study more innocuous topics need not confront. Hutton deserves credit for maintaining his composure throughout these heated

18. Ronald Hutton, "Why Does the Lindow Man Matter?" *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* 4, no. 2 (2011): 135–48.

19. Hutton, "Why Does Lindow Man Matter?" 139.

20. Hutton, "Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism," 238–39.

interactions, and for continuing to conduct important inquiries into topics that he knows will be highly scrutinized.

Hutton's work also prompts some reflection on scholars' responsibilities in debates that shape communities. Hutton has discussed the likelihood of Paganism splitting into "opposed sects" according to how Pagan foundations are understood.[21] He adds that while religions often split over textual interpretation, this usually concerns sacred writings. Since Paganism "lacks such scriptures . . . different publications on the historic past are coming to fill their space."[22] This makes historians and other scholars key players in these debates. While some Pagans integrate new research into their conceptual frameworks, others resist. Describing issues he sees between revisionists and counter-revisionists, Hutton emphasizes, "there is no intention here of suggesting that one of these sets of attitudes is inherently more virtuous than the other; it simply seems to be the case that the actual historical evidence, and the consensus of current professional opinion, supports the [revisionist] position and not the [counter-revisionist]."[23] However, one must keep in mind that "the consensus of professional opinion" is a sort of *social* virtue that carries cultural capital. By emphasizing that one party has scholarly support which another lacks, scholars come close to *advocating* for this group. Indeed, some Pagan beliefs may in fact align with academic consensus. However, positioning religious beliefs through this language can amount to suggesting (despite Hutton's clear and intentional efforts to avoid any such suggestion), that some Pagans are "right" and others "wrong."

This consideration makes necessary a note of caution for scholars who study such Pagan-adjacent issues. Regardless of the details that scholars uncover, whether these concern Wicca's development or the victims of early modern witch trials, some Pagans will continue to reject academic knowledge, and to react strongly to the implications of that knowledge. Of course, scholars in many fields encounter communities who hold different beliefs, or different interpretations of data—this is perhaps especially true of anthropology, a field Hutton has helped to bring back into conversation with the historical disciplines after several decades of estrangement.[24] Anthropology

21. Ibid., 233.

22. Hutton, "Writing the History of Witchcraft," 259.

23. Hutton, "Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism," 232.

24. See, for example, Ronald Hutton, "Anthropological and Historical Approaches to Witchcraft: Potential for a New Collaboration," *The Historical Journal* 47, no. 2 (2004): 413–34; or Hutton, *The Witch*, in which he expands on this collaborative potential more fully.

offers methods by which scholars can reduce harm, or engage with communities that dispute research. Through reflexivity, scholars reflect on and account for the ways that they connect to their object of study.[25] Through multi- or polyvocality, the multiple voices with vested interests (and at times competing interpretations), are presented.[26] Hutton's rigorous historical analysis frequently also makes space for differing opinions and contributions from a variety of voices.[27]

Hutton writes, "the present fuss over revisionism in Pagan history is not a debate in the normal sense, because the counter-revisionists have not invited supporters of revisionism to a discussion: rather, they have sought instead to persuade other Pagans to stop believing those supporters."[28] In response Pagan Studies scholars have proposed potential solutions to the impasse, such as keeping practitioners better informed, offering Pagans updates on scholarly conversations, and explaining how conclusions were reached.[29] However, these suggestions only work if and when Pagans want to hear from scholars. As Hutton notes, some "debates" lack an interlocutor willing to be persuaded. Since in such cases disagreement exists at a more fundamental level, some Pagans are unlikely to be convinced by scholars talking more, or using less jargon.

This raises a deeper question of whether a scholar's job is to change people's minds, or rather to simply provide data to inform decisions. As Hutton notes regarding the Wild Hunt, practitioners may agree with scholars' conclusions, but re-interpret these to form new beliefs. Scholars who research alternative archaeology similarly find that people accept scholars' conclusions, but find

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25. See, for example, Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Ronald L. Grimes, "Ritual Criticism and Reflexivity in Fieldwork," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 2, no. 2 (1988): 217–39.

26. These different voices need not be given *equal* weight and consideration. However, polyvocality stresses that they are at least represented. See, for example, Kathryn Rountree, "Archaeologists and Goddess Feminists at Çatalhöyük: An Experiment in Multivocality," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23, no. 2 (2007): 7–26; Viola Thimm, Mayurakshi Chaudhuri, and Sarah J. Mahler, "Enhancing Intersectional Analyses with Polyvocality: Making and Illustrating the Model," *Social Sciences* 6, no. 37 (2017): 1–19.

27. Hutton, "Paganism and Polemic," 116; Hutton, "Writing the History of Witchcraft," 259; Hutton, "Afterword," 254.

28. Hutton, "Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism," 250.

29. See, for example, Hoff Kraemer, "Perceptions of Scholarship in Contemporary Paganism"; and Tully, "Researching the Past is a Foreign Country."

new, creative ways to enmesh this data into their beliefs.[30] Helen Cornish finds that British Traditional Witches who visit the Museum of Witchcraft combine official histories with sense, emotion, and experience to form new accounts of Witchcraft's place in history.[31] That Pagans might accept updated academic consensuses to a point, but use this data to construct their own historical narratives reveals that some practitioners' interpretations may never completely align with scholarly discourse.

Hutton's work helpfully prompts deeper reflection on how scholars can confront those who hold truth claims at variance with the data that scholarship uncovers. Scholarship entails answering questions, and perhaps even reiterating these answers so that more people hear (or understand) them. However, should scholars care if Pagans *accept* scholarly interpretations? By way of conclusion, I would suggest that they should not. *Why* do some Pagans assert a counter-revisionist position? Is it out of a desire to legitimize the religion? Is there resentment that Paganism has gone mainstream? If practitioners reject scholars' conclusions, these are important follow-up questions, offering new data for the field to explore. Scholarship and religious belief are two different worlds, and two different modes of knowing. Disagreements are not in need of correction.

Hutton's work demonstrates that Pagans are eager to read (and even to assist in the development of) research related to their traditions. I have highlighted some of the more controversial interactions, but these are exceptions; as a rule, interactions are enthusiastic and pleasant.[32] Indeed, even regarding those instances of disagreement, Hutton writes, "If the book is really good, then the author will be the subject of criticism not merely after years but after centuries,"[33] revealing how critique may be the more sincere form of flattery. Beyond occasional challenges that Pagan Studies scholars face, I wish to end on an optimistic note offered by Hutton. Reflecting on his experiences researching witchcraft, he writes, "the comfort in all this to me, as a historian, is that it demonstrates how crucially important my subject remains to present

30. See, for example, Kevin A. Whitesides, "The Highest Common Factor: Heterodox Archaeology and the Perennialist Milieu"; and Joseph Laycock, "Religious Aspects of Pseudoarchaeology: The How and the Why" which both appear in *Nova Religio* 22, no. 4 (2019).

31. Helen Cornish, "Other Sides of the Moon: Assembling Histories of Witchcraft," in *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West: Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of 'The Triumph of the Moon,'* eds. Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 77.

32. Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, xiii; Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, ix.

33. Ronald Hutton, "'99 Per Cent Perspiration,'" *History Today* 35, no. 12 (1985): 5.

identities."[34] Pagan Studies has struggled to establish itself and convince others of this field's value. While it may be tiring, frustrating, or intimidating to have practitioners angrily refute one's conclusions, one should not lose sight of the benefit in this sub-field having such an invested audience. Hutton reminds us that the importance which lived communities attribute to Pagan Studies is a strength of the field, and should comfort all those involved. The best scholars write with broad audiences in mind, or perhaps multiple audiences who interact with one's work in different ways. Hutton does a fantastic job writing to these multiple audiences simultaneously, and doing so in an informative and respectful manner.

34. Hutton, "Writing the History of Witchcraft," 259.