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Witchcraft. By PENNETHORNE HUGHES. *Longmans.* 21s.

An interest in the supernatural is, we are told, symptomatic of a society in decline, and it is perhaps significant that, quite apart from the Sunday paper astrologers and such bogus adepts as the late unlamented Aleister Crowley, the production of books about witchcraft and allied subjects seems to have increased notably since the first world war. Among the more serious contributions have been those of Montague Summers, Charles Williams, Miss Christina Hole and Professor E. M. Butler; and all of these (with the possible exception of Summers) owe much to the remarkable investigations of Professor Margaret Murray, whose *The Witch-cult in Western Europe* was published as early as 1921.

Mr. Pennethorne Hughes is no exception, and acknowledges his debt to Professor Murray, though he differs from her in some of the views which he now holds. His approach is, as he says, eclectic and historical, he is "neither a theologian, an occultist nor a materialist"—and such negative qualifications, in a work of this kind, are probably desirable. The disadvantage of such an attitude is that too great a detachment may prevent the writer from forming any conclusions of his own—and, in fact, Mr. Hughes is, generally speaking, unwilling to commit himself in the matter of belief or disbelief. His own interest in the subject, it may be added, began frivolously enough, for he was one of those who (with Mr. Calder-Marshall and the late Hugh Speaight) attempted to form a coven at Oxford in 1928. (A full account of this notable undertaking is given in Mr. Calder-Marshall's *The Magic of My Youth*). Mr. Hughes mentions this circumstance, however, merely in order to point out that witchcraft was, so to speak, "in the air" at that date, and that, if his own initial approach—and that of his fellow warlocks—was flippant, the Oxford "Black Mattins" did at least suggest to him that the cult of the Horned God was a subject worthy of serious treatment.

He has now, a quarter of a century afterwards written what I take to be the best and most comprehensive survey of the

subject which has so far appeared. A professional historian, he has read widely and intelligently, and his treatment is both scholarly and humane. He traces the history of the Black God from his Paleolithic beginnings, through the cults of Europe, Greece and Rome, up to his reappearance as the forbidden, dualistic complement of official Christianity in the Middle Ages. (In dealing with mediaeval witchcraft, Mr. Hughes does not, perhaps, attach sufficient importance to the crypto-daemonic heresies of the time—in particular that of the Cathari, for whose connection with the witch-cult Mr. Hugh Ross Williamson has made out a plausible if not altogether convincing case.) Thenceforward Mr. Hughes follows the vestigial manifestations of the "Old Religion" (it is still so called in Italy) through the Age of Reason up to our own day, though permitting himself only a passing reference to contemporary orgies at Brighton (one could wish that this aspect of the subject were better documented). He is, as I have said, unwilling for the most part to commit himself: thus, one is not sure how far he agrees or disagrees with Professor Murray in her views upon Jeanne d'Arc (and upon Giles de Rais). Yet here are the facts, such as they are: you pays your money and (according to your temperament) you takes your choice. The maddening part about writing such a book must be the innumerable lacunae in the extant accounts of cult-practice: thus, in a list of eighty-seven suspected persons, in 1584, occurs a reference to "Ould Birtles, the great devil"; one would give a good deal to know more about Ould Birtles, and about a good many other practitioners whose activities we can only guess at from their own confessions or from the evidence of witnesses at their trials. Take, for example, Isobel Gowdie, the seventeenth-century witch of Morayshire: her confession is one of the fullest and most detailed on record, and reads in parts like a surrealist poem; yet we shall never, one supposes, learn much more about the circumstances of her life.

Mr. Hughes's book is well written, though occasionally marred by facetiousness. One could wish that he had attempted a rather deeper exploration of cult-symbolism: an approach from the Jungian point of view might, for instance, have proved rewarding, if inconclusive (one remembers Mr. Layard's fascinating book, *The Lady of the Hare*). However, this is a good book, and seems likely to remain the best one on the subject for a long time to come.

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