H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brian P. Levack. *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe.* New York and London: Longman, 1995. x + 297 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-08069-0.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Lane Furdell (University of North Florida)
Published on H-Albion (March, 1995)

The second edition of Brian Levack's survey of the age of witch-hunting in Europe and colonial America improves on the significant success of the first edition, published to good reviews in 1987. Necessitated by eight years of scholarly activity on witchcraft, this new paperback version repeats Levack's insistence that witch-hunts were sparked by diverse and complex causes. In fact, Levack states that recent regional and thematic studies buttress his multi-causal conclusions. There are, however, few textual additions apparent to this reader after a thorough paragraph by paragraph comparison of the two editions except some fresh material on Dutch, Hungarian, and Russian witch-hunts in chapter seven.

One strength of Levack's impressive synthesis is its use of printed sources in many languages to provide national examinations of the witch-craze. For instance, the author concludes that while German communities exhibited frenzied paranoia directed at "witches," England only did a little witch-hunting. His explanation for these regional differences is reliable and, of course, multiple.

The English elite, Levack argues, never accepted witch beliefs, and rejected continental ideas about demons. Even when some were charged with witchcraft, torture was rarely used to extract confession or recanting. Since in England trial was by jury, not by inquisitor, and since unanimity was required to convict, fewer convictions were forthcoming. In Scotland, by contrast, a simple majority of jurors was necessary for a guilty verdict.

Although his arguments remain unaltered by the avalanche of new research on the subject, Levack has updated his bibliographical essay, citations, and the fifteen-page bibliography to include the most recent publications. Conspicuously missing from the bibliography, however, are the multiple volumes on witchcraft and demonology edited by Levack himself for Garland Press. One wonders why no reference to any of the twelve books, available since 1992, on such subjects as witchcraft in England, in Scotland, in colonial America, and in continental Europe, appears in the list of works worth consulting.

Author Levack and publisher Longman have responded wisely to criticism about the first edition's production values and the usefulness of its chaotic endnotes. Citations are now placed at the bottom of the page and are complete, following the accepted format for historical scholarship. In addition, illustrations, some of them new, are much clearer, and tables, now with percentages rounded up, are easier to read.

The book offers a solid, reasonable interpretation of the accusations, prosecution, and execution of thousands for witchcraft in Europe between 1450 and 1750. Levack is careful to avoid rash explanations or single cause theories. He is also careful to delineate what happened and why from one country to the next in the witch-craze (a term Levack assiduously rejects) phenomenon. There is no model, he persuades the reader, which applies everywhere. And since Levack focuses on the background from which witch-hunts emerge, he has little occasion to examine the resulting dramatic trials.

Because of this emphasis on pre-trial activity, the book lacks the power and passion one would expect in a subject as flamboyant as witch-hunting. In opting for a reasonable and cautious analysis of his topic, Levack also writes in a sensible, text-book fashion. After a while, however, the logical skeleton of the author's style begins to protrude through the fleshy data. Written as though from an outline, paragraphs sequentially tick off reasons, causes, and factors. Irritated, the reader longs for an engaging sentence or a controversial contention. Levack states in his preface that he undertook the task of synthesizing previous work on witchcraft for the benefit of his students who were overwhelmed by the cacophony of the scholarly debate. I fear that while students may benefit from the thorough examination of a fascinating subject which Levack provides, they may not be sufficiently inspired by the author's spartan writing style to appreciate it.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Elizabeth Lane Furdell. Review of Levack, Brian P., *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. March, 1995.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.