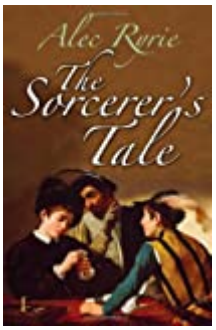
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Alec Ryrie. *The Sorcerer's Tale: Faith and Fraud in Tudor England.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 212 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-922996-3.

Reviewed by Paul Griffiths (Iowa State University)

Published on H-Albion (March, 2009)

Commissioned by Brian S. Weiser (Metropolitan State College of Denver)

Mind the Gaps

More than usual when digging deep into a book I find myself asking what kind of a book it is. Not what is it about, but into what genre does it fit, if any at all? *The Sorcererâs Tale* is on the short side: 183 shrunken pages of text (the pages are 5â x [almost] 8â). It is about someone, but it is not a biography; there is not enough evidence about its central character–shadowy, slippery, silver-tongued, sharp-witted magician, medicine man, con man Gregory Wisdom–for it to fit that genre. There are not enough of his "footprints" to lead us somewhere, just "echoes" of his long ago steps (p. 181). This book is not micro-history for the same reason, and it cannot be a case study when so many dots stay unconnected. Nor is it out-and-out narrative if by that we mean a flowing story in which one piece follows from another in seamless sequence with pace. And there is not a lot of deep analysis in these pages, and no real resilient overarching thesis that holds it all together. So it is hard to hang this book on a hook and say this is what it is. Alec Ryrie tells us that it is "a damaged portrait," but that assessment does not really have anything to do with type or method, and reveals more about a story and central character who are both frustratingly fuzzy and incomplete (p. xiii).

It is a tricky job to stitch a book together from shadows, silences, and gaps when pivotal people go missing for a long while and plots end suddenly, leaving us guessing what the next throw of the dice might have been. And why bother to start stitching in the first place when archives run dry so quickly; as a sympathetic fellow traveler and toiler I can imagine Ryrie holding his hands up in the air in despair asking himself where has Wisdom gone now or from where did he get that? Nor are the fields crossed in this book Ryrie's usual stomping grounds; he has been more at home in the past successfully tackling complex issues of theology and piety (though there is some of that here). The good reason why it is worth bothering is that Ryrie is fascinated about what he found quite by chance one day in the Bodleian when he was looking for something else: a confession from one of Englandâs upper crust, Lord Neville, revealing a grisly plot to kill his wife and father with the help of magic. Ryrie met Wisdom for the first time and he was hooked. "Itâs scraping

the dust off age-old pieces of paper that makes you feel like a historian," Geoffrey Elton once told me when we were colleagues at Clare College, and finding good stories too he probably added, although I do not rightly remember. And this is what Ryrie is doing in *The Sorcererâs Tale*, getting excited about something in the past, and it shows because he writes with gusto for the most part. I do not think that the story that popped up out of the blue in the Bodleian is really that remarkable, although it is certainly intriguing, curious, and worth writing about. This is what Ryrie found on that day in 1998.

In Autumn 1546, Henry, Lord Neville, was accused of trying to get rid of his wife and father once and for all. He was an heir in one of Englandâs oldest families with a rich seat up north in Durham. Henry was in deep trouble in 1544 at the age of only twenty. True, he had been knighted that year after Boulogne, but he was up to his neck in debt and his marriage was on the rocks. A family retainer (Menville), seeing an opportunity to line his own pockets, said that another servant in the house (Stafford) could put him in touch with someone called Wisdom who could get him back on an even keel. This Wisdom apparently dripped with charisma in his flashy clothes and could smooth talk anyone round to his point of view. Henry was at his wit's end and, more important, easy to fool and fleece. He was a sitting duck and Wisdomâs first scam was soon under way; for a Â£10 annual payment and some fishy looking out-of-pocket expenses, Wisdom, using his knack for conjuring spirits, promised to make a magic ring that would control the roll of the dice and fill Nevilleâs purse to the brim. But nothing out of the ordinary followed. Neville had no red letter days at the dicing table. His purse continued to leak coins. Donât worry, Wisdom coaxed, keep your spirits up, I know a blind Jew who can send a spirit to your northern estates where Iâm told thereâs a stack of money buried under a wayside cross. Good news, he told Neville the next day, thereâs Â£2000 under the cross, Iâll leave at once, with Menville, youâll have it soon. But, surprise surprise, the pair came back empty-handed. Itâs something inside you that brings us bad luck, Neville was told, you donât love your wife. The solution was simple: cast an evil spell on her, kill her, and also, it later transpired, Nevilleâs father, presumably to get hold of his inheritance. We are not exactly sure why, but not long after Wisdom was under lock and key at Nevilleâs house, although he stayed cool and managed for the last time to change Nevilleâs mind, Menville was sent north to the family estate, Wisdom slipped away, and Neville claimed that he never saw either of them again. Now, locked up in a debtorâs prison, with the 1542 Witchcraft Act that mandated death for conjuring spirits hanging over him, Neville made a groveling confession to Secretary William Paget, pleading for his life, although it was perhaps his wifeâs and fatherâs interventions that got him out of prison in spring 1547. His father was also asked to clear his debts, so that his son could start all over again with a clean slate.

That is the story. I imagine that Ryrie had a choice on the table: there was an essay here but was there enough for a book. I managed to squeeze the story into a single longish paragraph. It would clearly need some serious padding to get a book out of it. Like any detective story, there were loose ends: leads to follow, people to trace, gaps to plug. What happened afterward? Some people were easier to track down than others. Nevilleâs father and wife both died in 1549. He had two more wives, they were sisters, and he died a little short of his fortieth birthday, after a modest incumbency as the fifth Earl of Westmoreland, always changing his color to suit any change of reign in the see-saw 1550s. Wisdom was harder to find; Ryrie did not even know his first name. But he is fairly certain that he has found him; two for the price of one, in fact, father and son, John and Gregory Wisdom, physicians but without the proper accreditation, and bugbears of the Royal College of Physicians until 1542 when the king turned the tables on the college and gave the Wisdoms a green light to practice physic in any part of the land. They must have been good at their jobs, and they were sorely needed at a time when there were widespread scares about rampant syphilis. Gregory is the Wisdom who turns up in Nevilleâs topsy-turvy three years. After this fuss had died down, Wisdom got his dearest wish much later in 1582 when he joined the cream of the crop, getting admitted to the Royal College of Physicians at long last. He died seventeen years later, apparently respectable. To nail the case that this is Nevilleâs magician, Ryrie turns up occult books in his fatherâs will and a couple of cases from around the time of his main story involving Gregory and fabrics similar to those he used to con Neville. The link between the two seems sound enough.

But this also seems to me to be the place in this book when we lose the narrative, big gaps appear, digressions spoil any flow, and points are sometimes stretched too far. Ryrie expands this tale to 186 pages by trying to make the Wisdoms seem credible crooks, magicians, and, believe it or not, "hot" Protestants. He does this by describing the cultures and communities in which he thinks they might have moved and contacts that might have connected them to someone, some of which are more

convincing than others. There is a chapter on criminal underworlds, another on magic, and a final one on religion. Ryrie believes that Gregory was "a part of Londonâs criminal fraternity" with contacts in this basement, but I do not think that he shows this (p. 1). Like much else in these three chapters, imagination is strained, there is too much insinuation and not enough confirmation or corroboration–Wisdom could have done this and he might have read this because others were doing so at roughly the same time. Wisdom pops in and out of the underworld chapter but it is not really about him. It is about fairly familiar stuff: rogue pamphlets, safe houses, Wotton, gambling, bits and pieces on prostitution, and nice material on sham magic, but nothing of substance that pins down Wisdom. Ryrie writes that "if Wisdomâs case is a snapshot of this nexus of criminality, the other evidence we have seen corroborates and complements it" (p. 107). But it seems to me that this "evidence" is made up of allusions, possibilities, and seeming similarities in the main. A couple of pamphlet accounts of other cases featuring fairies, spirits, swindlers, fortune tellers, and buried treasure, all things that crop up in the Neville affair, do give us "insights" into magical fraud, and they might tell us something about what might have been credible to readers at the time, but quite frankly these pages tell us little about Wisdom: what he did, what people thought of him, what was going through his mind, or where he was at a particular moment in time (p. 95).

And this is also true of the chapter on magic where Ryrie wants us to get to know Wisdom better by understanding the magic in which both he and his victims believed. There follow longish discussions of Renaissance magic, alchemy, and astrology. We hear about a German alchemist whose heart was set on turning iron into gold. But where has Wisdom gone? Finally, after sixteen or so pages, he shows up again, but not for long. A discussion of the theories behind magic will show the large part magic played in Wisdomâs life, Ryrie explains, none more so than the Solomonic tradition with its repertoire of angels, rings, spirits, and sunken treasure. Gregoryâs father passed on a book called the *Practice of Damnel* to his son, and Ryrie thinks that this might be the *Damnel* that was solidly Solomonic, but he is not certain. A number of cases follow that are similar sounding to the one that Wisdom was in the middle in 1544-45–one involving a ring and gambling, others involving buried treasure–but we are not with either Wisdom. I take the point that a physician worth his salt ought to have known his astrology, that some of this magic is close to what Wisdom might have done, and that Ryrie is wanting to paint Wisdomâs world as best he can to show that he was a physician who was a magician and con man on the side. But this is writing history based on educated allusion, not archives, not lived lives, and not firsthand comment. And then all of a sudden we meet a new Wisdom without any warning: Robert, Johnâs nephew, the "white sheep of the family" (p. 150). Robert was a staunch backer of new Protestantism and no stranger to controversy. He had spats with bishops, ended up on the wrong end of heresy charges, got banned from preaching, and crossed over into Germany when Catholics took back the throne. Ryrie is certain that the Wisdoms shared their nephewâs/cousinâs brand of religion. John once stood sureties for him when he landed in deep water for heresy, and both John and Gregory drew up impeccably Protestant wills. And then we leave the family behind again for twenty pages–a long gap, almost one-ninth of the entire text–in which Ryrie argues that Protestantism and magic were not polar opposites in order to show that Gregory could have been a red-blooded Protestant and shifty magician at one and the same time. "It is time now to return to the Wisdoms," he says on page 176, but there is some clutching at straws as the book draws to a close: Gregoryâs sound religion should not rule him out as a likely murderer because Protestantism taught that a single sin that allowed people to start again was far better than a life of sin.

So, I go back to the question with which I started: what is this book at the end of the day? It is a nice, if sometimes frustrating, read when we go off on another road from the one on which we were traveling to show what Wisdom might have been or what he might have done. I have "fragments," Ryrie says, and, after more than 180 pages, "most of what we think we know" about Wisdom remains "uncertain" (p. 181). Does Gregory deserve a book, or, to put it another way, does what is left of him in these shreds and shards merit a book? Ryrie does what others have done before him when faced with conundrums resulting from scanty evidence; he tries to imagine the worlds in which his ghostly central character lived without the benefit of solid evidence. We actually learn next to nothing of Wisdomâs material and emotional life–his friends, the streets he walked up and down, whether or not he ever loved anyone, or where his house was in say 1552. Nor can we be sure where he was for the best part of four decades. This is where historians often work in the lands between nothing and everything where grey is the dominant color and contrariness and contradiction threaten to end our books before they begin. That said, however, there is too much speculation,

insinuation, and not knowing between these covers for my taste at any rate. The conclusion that Gregory was a man of many talents and multiple overlapping identities who grew more respectable as he got older will not alter much on historiographical fronts. We have met religious astrologers who dabbled in medicine and dodgy magic before. There are deeper discussions of magic, crime, medical practice, and religion elsewhere (including Ryrieâs own work). When all is said and done, however, for a book like this to be a complete success Wisdom would have to come alive for us in ways that make him seem someone significant for what he had done not what he might have been. "As usual he will not tell us," Ryrie writes when wondering what Wisdom was thinking when he chose to take the road to run-of-the-mill respectability as he slipped into old age (p. 183). We needed more than this, I think. There are too many gaps.