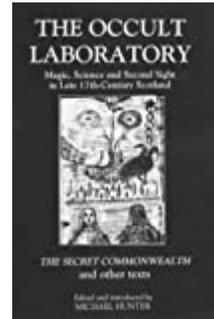




Michael Hunter, ed. *The Occult Laboratory: Magic, Science and Second Sight in Late Seventeenth-Century Scotland—A New Edition of Robert Kirk’s “The Secret Commonwealth and other texts”*. Bury St Edmunds: Boydell Press, 2001. 256 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85115-801-3.



Reviewed by Roger L. Emerson (Department of History, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario)

Published on H-Albion (August, 2001)

Thirty years ago, Keith Thomas ended *Religion and the Decline of Magic* by claiming that the works of Isaac Casaubon, Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, John Ray, and other like-minded men in the Royal Society, along with a host of continental philosophers, had made it possible for magical thinking to be overthrown among the elite intellectuals and for religious claims to be chastened by “rationalism.” Beliefs in things like second sight and communion with witches and fairies were being relegated to the lower orders. He noted the role in this process of social developments, such as the wider and quicker dissemination of news by more presses and better roads, the optimism which came with the increased ability to predict and control events in one’s life, and of the emergence of attitudes that gave the new sciences and medicine more purchase on a world which seemed less magical and spirit-haunted. He so saw these developments as being based in the “methods of the scientists,” which he characterized as “controlled experiment and innovation,” methods which were not those of the religious or the magicians.[1] Thomas’s view has been much qualified since 1971. Here, the distinguished historian of science, Michael Hunter, in this latest installment of his ongoing work on Robert Boyle, gives us more qualifications to that view.

Hunter has abstracted from the papers and writings

of Boyle and his friends and correspondents, texts dealing with second-sight and its significance. For Hunter, the latter lies primarily in the presumed ability of second sight and its attendant phenomena to establish empirically a realm of spirit and thus aid in the defense of the Christian religion against Hobbists, other atheists, deists and sceptics. Boyle’s interests in this material were much the same as those which around 1680 led Joseph Glanvill, Cambridge Platonists Ralph Cudworth and Henry More, and the Scottish engineer and professor George Sinclair, to study, such things as poltergeists, witches, second sight, and other things which today are generally lumped into the category of the paranormal, a category not now generally seen as having a relation to things providential, devilish or angelic. For Boyle and his correspondents, Scotland seemed to offer a new place to collect evidence of the spirit world, evidence whose novelty and unimpeachable sources would impress even the scoffers of London.

The authors and participants in the discussion which Hunter traces included an interesting cross-section of English virtuosi: Boyle, John Aubrey, John Evelyn, Samuel Pepys, the great Anglo-Saxon scholar and later non-juring cleric George Hickes, Edward Lhuyd (the Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford), the antiquary Ralph Thoresbury, and on the edges, peers, other

clerics, and men of learning. In Scotland, in one way or another, many of the most advanced thinkers of the day were involved, as were some important politicians. Among the first were Sir Robert Sibbald; various members of the Gregory family; the mystics and theologians James and George Garden of Aberdeen; the Rev. Mr. Robert Kirk, who translated the Psalms into Gaelic and later edited a Gaelic Bible set in Roman type; Robert Wodrow, a learned minister, naturalist and historian; Dr. Martin Martin, who wrote on the still rather unknown Hebrides; and three well educated ministers John Gray, John Fraser, and James Kirkwood. Among the politicians who helped to make Boyle interested in second sight in Scotland were George MacKenzie, 1st Earl of Tarbat, FRS; George Mackay, 3rd Baron Reay, FRS; Sir George MacKenzie, a member of the Oxford Philosophical Society, Scotland's first novelist, and a longtime Lord Advocate; and others such as the 1st Duke of Lauderdale; the 2nd Earl Bruce; and various Highland chiefs. These were almost all men as committed to the methods of the scientists as were the colleagues which so many of them found in the Royal Society of London but they were men who did not quite fit Thomas's description of what science was doing for the intellectuals because they all seem also to have been believers in the second sight and some believed in other strange things such as elves, poltergeists, and witches. It was well into the eighteenth century before such views were banished by the scepticism which this group also shared and helped to flourish in Britain. They did not yet have a sure sense of what was natural and what belonged to the supernatural realm to which most had given considerable thought. By about 1730 this would have changed for the reasons which James Garden gave Aubrey for his belief in second sight: the evidence of the senses and well vouched testimonies of the genteel and learned, sound inferences and reasoning, and conjectures based on them to guide future work. The new sciences and the enlightenment were rooted in such beliefs but they did not come into existence fully formed.

Another feature of the book is its attention to the world of folk belief, practice, ritual and custom which so intrigued Edward Lhuyd. The texts "bring to light crucial information about belief systems which might otherwise never have been fully recorded at all" (p. 31). This information is fascinating and could well have received more attention because what is described sometimes lasted in many of its aspects until the nineteenth century. The collecting activities of Alexander Carmichael, his daughter Catherine Watson, and his grandson James Carmichael Watson show that. The selections from their *Carmina*

Gadelica, edited by G.R.D. McLean in 1961 and published by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge under the title *Poems of the Western Highlanders*, include curses, charms to ward off evil from man and beast, poems invoking God's healing powers, prayers to saints who look like local spirits, addresses to fairies and brownies who are related to fallen angels but need to receive offerings of milk, poems said by men and others reserved to the use of women, poems praising Michaelmas and Beltane, and poems about the second sight and divination said to be related to the life of Christ. Martin Martin's books were useful in the explication of these poems. Similar themes and materials are to be found in the poetry of Burns and others who wrote popular works using the ideas of the people whom they sought to reach. All that lay behind the intense interest in "civilizing" the highlands and bringing enlightenment to the ordinary people of Scotland in the period after 1700. Civility, good religion, manners, improvement, and a wholly new *mentalité* was what the enlightened wished to force upon the spell-casters of Scotia's backward areas. By looking at the world of the Scots Highlanders as it appears here, it is easier to understand the Lowlanders growing distrust of it. Their beliefs changed more rapidly and their sense of cultural differences changed with that. The attitudes of the highland gentry in the period shortly after the time dealt with here also diverged greatly from those of their clansmen.

The third notable feature of this volume is manner of its editing. Hunter has elsewhere written on the editing of texts from this period; here he gives exemplary texts which show how his methods work in practice. This is interesting partly because most of the material presented here is already in print in some form or other. His texts are closer to the originals but sometimes lack some of the critical materials or annotations to be found in other publications. J.L. Campbell's edition of *A Collection of Highland Rites and Customs* (The Folklore Society, 1975) has not been rendered useless by this more accurate presentation of the text because Campbell noted substantive matters while Hunter's notes concern mostly the texts, those named within them, and the accurate citations of the passages quoted or alluded to.

This is a useful book which deserves to be read by historians interested in Scottish social history as well as by historians of science interested in Boyle and his circle.

Note

[1]. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), p. 662.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Roger L. Emerson. Review of Hunter, Michael, ed., *The Occult Laboratory: Magic, Science and Second Sight in Late Seventeenth-Century Scotland—A New Edition of Robert Kirk’s “The Secret Commonwealth and other texts”*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. August, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5397>

Copyright © 2001 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.org.