

Scholarship and Margaret Murray **A Response to Donald Frew**

Jacqueline Simpson

Volume 22, numéro 2, 2000

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087903ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087903ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Simpson, J. (2000). Scholarship and Margaret Murray: A Response to Donald Frew. *Ethnologies*, 22(2), 281–288. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087903ar>

SCHOLARSHIP AND MARGARET MURRAY A Response to Donald Frew

Jacqueline Simpson

The Folklore Society, University College London

In the 1998 issue of *Ethnologies*, Donald Frew expressed strong criticism of recent writings on the work of Margaret Murray and on the beginnings of Wicca (Frew 1998). I would like here to answer some of the specific issues he raises with regard to my own article on Margaret Murray (Simpson 1994); what he says about the work of others is outside my scope of reference.

At the outset, Frew challenges folklorists to take on board David Hufford's warning that those who study religious groups and individuals must examine what assumptions of their own may colour their approach (Hufford 1995: 1-11). I fully agree with the general point that one should display sensitivity and self-awareness and avoid ethnocentricity when considering religious material, and that this tact would be relevant to any analysis of Wicca itself, as a body of present-day religious beliefs. However, this was not my subject; I was discussing Margaret Murray, not Wiccan religion, and I must stress that Murray never presented her writings as expressions of religious faith. On the contrary, she insisted that her work was that of an anthropologist and a historian; despite the emotional language in her later books, she regarded them as objective and factually based investigations of past events. Her personal beliefs, if any, are unclear; those who knew her in her old age as a member of the Folklore Society have told me that she was a complete rationalist and sceptic, but there is also some evidence that she believed in "an unseen over-ruling Power" and in an afterlife, and possibly also in the validity of magic (Hutton 1999: 200-1). The question is, in any case, irrelevant to discussion of her books; she wanted her theory to convince as scholarship, and it is by the standards of scholarship that she must be judged.

My interest in the writings of Margaret Murray arose as part of a current trend among British folklorists to reassess the work of our predecessors, setting it in its historical context and seeing how it can relate to the present state of knowledge and to areas of current research. Murray is a particularly interesting subject, since for many decades her theories on the nature and origins of witchcraft have been discarded by historians and folklorists alike, yet they retain a strong hold on the popular market, have influenced many novelists and film-makers, and are a “foundation myth” for Wiccans. There is thus a link between her writings and some aspects of the neo-pagan movement, itself a topic of considerable sociological investigation nowadays. I set out to look at her writings on witchcraft, to reassess how far, with due regard to the information available to her at the time, they could be regarded as a valid contribution to historical scholarship, and the reasons for their initial acceptance and later rejection. The result was a paper in *Folklore*, “Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her and Why?” (Simpson 1994).

The topic was a strictly limited one; I was not concerned with the cultural trends which shaped the growth of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occultism in general, or the beginnings of Wicca in particular — vast topics, now amply documented in Hutton (1999)— but it was inevitable that I should make some brief allusion to Murray’s importance to Wiccans. I therefore wrote that “in the 1950s her descriptions of alleged rituals, festivals and organizations of witches were used by Gerald Gardner as a blueprint for setting up a new system of magical and religious rituals, the Wicca movement” (Simpson 1994: 89). Surprisingly, Frew queries my right to say this without giving citations in support — the reason it is surprising is that his next two paragraphs are devoted to making exactly the same point, in more detail than I did (Frew 1998: 47). He says Murray’s theory had a “shaping influence” on Gardner’s *Witchcraft Today* (1954), as is indeed self-evident from reading that text; that they had “an overwhelming influence on the popular Craft movement”, which accepted the Murrayite view of history and the Murrayite festival calendar; but that Gardner’s earlier writings, including *Ye Bok of ye Art Magical*, show “absolutely no trace” of Murray’s influence.

All this indicates that publication of *Witchcraft Today* in 1954 marked a turning point in Gardner’s thought. Nobody disputes that it was also in the 50s that he began openly founding covens, publicizing Wicca, and building it into an organized system, for which *Witchcraft Today* served as a manifesto. Since Frew can see that that Murray’s ideas shaped that book, why does he

object to my saying they were a “blueprint” for Gardner in the 50s, and why should I look for more citations to prove the point? The question of what other factors may have affected Gardner in the 30s and 40s is irrelevant to a discussion of Murray’s influence on him in the period when *Witchcraft Today* was taking shape in his mind, i.e. the early 1950s, and in subsequent developments. Since I wrote my paper, the many broader trends of intellectual history which contributed to modern paganism have been thoroughly explored by Ronald Hutton, and I am glad to say that on the topic of Murray’s career and her effect on Gardnerian Wicca his conclusions are similar to my own (Hutton 1999: 194-201).

Donald Frew also takes issue with me on several points of accuracy. One problem arose because I used the first edition of Murray’s *The God of the Witches* (1933), while he used a 1981 paperback reprint with different pagination; this, he complained, made it difficult for him to check my citations. The confusion was exacerbated because we both made bibliographical errors. I mistakenly said the 1933 edition had been published by the Oxford University Press, whereas it was by Sampson, Low and Marston; Frew on the other hand, misled by an error in the 1981 reprint from OUP, thought there had been a first edition in 1931 and none in 1933. The bibliographies in Murray’s *My First Hundred Years* and in *Folklore* 72 (1961) both give the year of first publication as 1933; so does the British Library catalogue, and the latter knows of no 1931 edition, whether by Sampson Low and Marston or anyone else. The combined result of my error and Frew’s own was that he made no attempt to obtain the first edition and check my citations in it (Frew 1998: 40-1).

In itself this would matter little, but it contributed to his impression that I mispresent Murray by inaccurate and selective quotations. He attacks my remark that Murray “invented the idea that a coven must have thirteen members, on the basis of just one statement in one Scottish trial, as she herself admitted” (Simpson 1994: 89, giving reference to Murray 1933: 47). He writes “Murray ‘admitted’ no such thing”, and claims that the uncertainty about which edition I was using “makes it difficult to check Simpson’s alleged citation” (Frew 1998, 40-1). However, he overcame the difficulty rapidly, for three lines later he cites the very passage I was referring to: “There is only one trial in which the number thirteen is specifically mentioned, when Isobel Gowdie stated . . .” (*God of the Witches*, p. 47 in my copy, p. 69 in his). Surely, coming as it does shortly after her sweeping assertion “The number in a coven never varied, there were always thirteen, i.e. twelve members and the god” (*ibid.*, p.

46 in my copy), this statement that she had only one piece of evidence to support it can justifiably be called an “admission”? I can only suppose that Frew misunderstood my punctuation; perhaps he thought I was saying Murray “admitted inventing”, whereas what I wrote was that she “admitted” there was “only one trial” in which a coven of thirteen is mentioned.

If Frew feels I misrepresent Murray, I feel he misrepresents me. His first major attack (Frew 1998: 38) concerns my criticisms of her attempts to explain away the supernatural elements in the witch confessions — a procedure absolutely crucial to the development of her theory, but which Norman Cohn had already shown to be flawed (Cohn 1976: 112). Developing Cohn’s argument further, I gave as one example the way that Murray accounts for the Devil’s cloven hoof by supposing that the coven leader, as his human representative, wore “a specially formed boot or shoe” as a token of his identity (Murray 1921: 31-2), and commented that this rationalization was “unintentionally funny” (Simpson 1994: 90-1). Frew retorts that “Murray never said this”, that I am putting words into her mouth, and that “There is no mention of a cloven hoof in this section of Murray’s book”. But there is, and more than one. The sentence I quoted comes from the introductory summary to the section, and carries a footnote, “It is possible that the shoe was cleft, like the modern hygienic shoe.” There follows a long series of quotations from the confessions of accused witches describing how they met the Devil in the form of a man, including (Murray 1921: 33-8): “sometimes like a man in all proportions, saving that he had cloven feet” (John Walsh, 1566); “a man in blackish clothing, but had cloven feet” (Joan Wallis, 1646); “a black man . . . with cloven feet” (Alice Huson, 1664); “his foot forked and cloven” (Isobel Gowdie, 1662); “observed one of the black man’s feet to be cloven” (John Stuart, 1678).

Perhaps Frew’s point is the hair-splitting one that the texts say cloven *foot* and I said cloven *hoof*. But in this particular context “foot” and “hoof” are interchangeable, for the whole significance of these confessions rests on the iconographic convention that the Devil has one or both feet shaped like an animal’s — usually goat or cattle, sometimes horse or feline. In modern English, “cloven hoof” is the most common idiom for this malformation; in French, *piéd fourchu*. If this was not what Murray was thinking of, what can she possibly have meant by ascribing significance to a specially formed and possibly cleft shoe? Why else should such a shoe serve as a recognition token for the coven’s “Devil”?

Frew then turns to a passage in which I discussed Murray's refusal to accept the normally agreed etymology of the witches' "sabbath" as deriving from a contemptuous use of the Hebrew word "Sabbath", and in which I gave five references to show that "in the course of her book she quotes no fewer than five texts from the sixteenth century which use the equally common term 'synagogue' for a gathering of devils and witches . . . which should surely have alerted her to the fact that Jewish words were indeed jeeringly applied to witches" (Simpson 1994: 91). On this, Frew points out that Murray uses one of her quotations twice over, and that my fifth reference leads to a page where there is no mention of a synagogue, "so in fact Murray quoted only three such texts" (Frew 1998: 40).

Literally, this is correct. But my fifth and final reference (Murray 1921: 149) is to a passage which also has a direct bearing on my contention that Murray should have been aware of hostile allusions to Judaism in a context of witchcraft. Here, she cites a passage from Michaelis describing how Louis Gaufrede sprinkled consecrated wine upon the gathering at the Sabbath, at which all cried out *Sanguis ejus super nos et filios nostros*. This phrase, "His blood be upon us and upon our children", was allegedly the cry of a Jewish crowd demanding Christ's death (Matthew 27: 25); it is a key text in Christian antisemitism, for it was traditionally taken to mean that from then onwards the Jewish race was accursed for shedding Christ's blood. The blasphemous act reported at Gaufrede's Sabbath equates witches and Jews and implies damnation for both. I had originally written a paragraph pointing this out, to show how mistaken Murray was in interpreting the passage as showing a fertility rite, but later pruned it for reasons of space, and forgot to remove the corresponding page reference. If Frew had looked it up, he would have seen that though no synagogue is there mentioned, it nevertheless supports my contention that the documents Murray used repeatedly made derogatory connections between Judaism, Satanism, and witchcraft, and that she should have taken this into consideration. However, for the sake of complete precision, I shall amend my original statement to: "On no fewer than four occasions she quotes texts which use the term 'synagogue' for a gathering of witches and devils, and in a fifth place she cites a passage alleging that a famous antisemitic Gospel text formed part of the sabbath ritual; this should have alerted her to the fact that Jewish references were indeed jeeringly applied to witches."

On another occasion, Frew attempts to counter one of my criticisms by ignoring its main thrust and turning to a minor detail. I said that Murray

showed a logic “even more eccentric than usual, consisting solely in an argument by reversal of evidence” when trying to demonstrate that witches had ever been credited with bringing fertility to crops, and gave as an example her comments on Isobel Gowdie’s charm using a toad and a miniature plough to make a field sterile (Simpson 1994: 92). But because in the same paragraph I made a more general point about her fondness for buttressing a weak argument with the word “obviously”, he chooses to argue over whether Murray’s language was cautious or dogmatic when speculating about the toad charm. In fact, in *The Witch-Cult* she is fairly cautious, but in the corresponding passage in *The God of the Witches* another favourite word of hers, “clearly”, twice slips in (Murray 1921: 115; 1933: 102). This, however, is mere side issue in a fairly long paragraph devoted to Murray’s disregard for logic and her ruthless distortions of primary documents to fit predetermined theories.

I am also accused of reliance on unrepresentative sources (Frew 1998; 52) because I use an article by Rosemary Guiley as authority for saying (a) that Gardner at first prescribed worship of the Horned God alone, not the God and Goddess jointly, and (b) that his prayers and rituals were at first much influenced by Crowley’s, till rewritten by Doreen Valiente. As regards the first, were I writing now I would also cite Hutton as an authority for the fact that in *High Magic’s Aid* (1949) Gardner spoke only of a male god, Janicot, and that references to a goddess began appearing in the second recension of “The Book of Shadows” at some time between 1948 and 1952 (Hutton 1999: 224-5, 233-4). As regards the second, I must point out that not merely Rosemary Guiley but Doreen Valiente herself has written that “the influence of Crowley was very apparent throughout the rituals” of the original “Book of Shadows”, that she argued with Gardner over Crowley’s “prevalent and obvious” influence within the cult, and that he eventually let her rewrite these texts, “cutting out the Crowleyanity” but preserving passages from Leland’s *Aradia* (Valiente 1989: 57, 60-2). I can therefore see no reason to think that Guiley led me into error on these points.

It is rather embarrassing for me to burden readers with points of detail which can all too easily seem mere pedantry. But it is precisely by latching onto details that Donald Frew tries to show that I have been unfair to Margaret Murray; he seems utterly unaware of the “bigger picture”. It is almost forty years since Murray died, and more than eighty since she first formulated her theory, and research into the history and context of witchcraft accusations and magical beliefs in Europe has not stood still. Particularly over the past twenty-

five years, there have been very numerous books, articles, and conferences in Britain, Europe, and America, presenting the research of a multitude of scholars, none of whom uncovered any evidence to support her theory, while finding a great deal which is incompatible with it. Carlo Ginzburg is no exception, despite Frew's claim (1998: 61; see Ginzburg 1983: xiii-xiv and 1990: 8-11). I summarised some of the main results of this investigation a few years ago (Simpson 1996), but such is the pace of research that what I wrote then already requires substantial additions. Anyone who hopes to reclaim Murray's reputation as a historian, let alone to argue that "the hypothesis that Witchcraft was a survival of paganism . . . can't yet be ruled out" (Frew 1998: 61), can only begin to do so by confronting squarely the issues which this huge body of scholarly work has raised. These are the dragons which a defender of Murray would have to challenge — and they are fiercer creatures than I.

References

- Cohn, Norman. 1976 [1975]. *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt*. St. Albans: Paladin Press.
- Frew, Donald. 1998. Methodological Flaws in Recent Studies of Historical and Modern Witchcraft. *Ethnologies* 20, 1: 33-65.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. 1983. *Night Batties: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth Centuries*. London. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- . 1990. *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*. London: Hutchinson Radius.
- Guiley, Rosemary. 1992. Witchcraft as Goddess Worship. In *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, ed. C. Larrington. 411-424. London: Pandora.
- Hufford, David J. 1995. The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies. *Western Folklore* 54: 57-76.
- Hilton, Ronald. 1999. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Murray, Margaret. 1921. *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1933 *The God of the Witches*. London: Samson, Low and Marston.
- Simpson, Jacqueline. 1994. Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her, and Why? *Folklore*, 105: 89-96.
- . 1995. Witches and Witchbusters. *Folklore*, 107: 5-18.
- Valiente, Doreen. 1989. *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*. London: Robert Hale Ltd.