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Paul Heelas
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We have never been less interested in the details of history than we are today, and we have never been more committed to a weak and often reductive view of a romanticized past. In different ways, both these books address the fading of historical specificity from consciousness and its consequences, and in different ways both seek to assert the importance of specificity in a world increasingly committed to affective generalities. Yet while Ronald Hutton patiently dismantles the historical narrative which endorsed the creation of the past as a field of pleasurable play, Paul Heelas as carefully shows just how extraordinarily influential those narratives have been in creating lifestyles and attitudes. If Heelas is right, Hutton may be too late to alter this particular historical record. In the minds of many, Deep England is so central that there is now no hope of uprooting it.

Social historians before the great epiphanies of the 1970s used to spend a good deal of time overlapping with

folklorists, studying and celebrating the oddities of Folk Custom in order to cry up the glories of Deep England. Maypoles and wassail were indispensable to comprehension of the English Folk, and detailed descriptions of these rituals and their significance was substituted for more mundane knowledges of what the Morris dancers ate for dinner or thought about as they danced. Leaning heavily on literary sources, especially Shakespeare, Jonson, Herrick and that old trickster John Aubrey, this school of thought made few allowances for the specificity of point of view. Oddly, a lot of people were attracted to the study of early modern culture in general (and, before the war, Shakespeare in particular) by these often beautiful lies, thickly coated with the sugar of idealization. This spectacularisation of the People, always looking nervously over its shoulder at the less tractable People of the twentieth century, differed radically from its successor social histories of the 1970s, eager to get to grips with the grim and gritty details of birth, copulation and death while leaving merely decorative dances to the folklorists.

The only problem with their salutary reaction was that it left Morris dancers pretty much where they had always been; vehicles for a rickety ideology of folk continuity. In the final volume of his immensely erudite and important trilogy, Ronald Hutton sets out to tackle calendrical custom, long the linchpin of romantic and Leavisite faith in ?organic culture?. All three books in the now-complete series are judicious and remarkably wide-ranging, drawing on a wealth of evidence in order to rethink the complexities of ritual and the investments people make in it. While The Pagan Religions of Ancient Britain assessed the claims made by Romantics for prehistory and The Rise and Fall of Merry England examined the historical particularity of the calendar and its invention and reinvention, the last volume, Stations of the Sun extends the work of Merry England forward to look at the process by which supposedly immemorial customs are constantly updated, reinvented, re-created and reinterpreted by their practitioners, but also by the small and formidable army of folklorists who are often the causes of the events they purport to describe. Hutton has some hilarious tales o folklorists who urged villagers to incorporate some ?crucial? element into a ritual.. When the obedient villagers complied, the folklorists, nodded, satisfied; now the ritual was ?typical?.

What makes Hutton?s book so rewarding is the marvelous stories he has to tell, stories rich in the kind of detail which allow us to understand ritual not as a series of archetypal structures, but as a series of diverse inventions by individuals and communities rather than by the völk or the geist. Hutton?s lucid, elegant prose is the ideal vehicle for the unlikeliness of such stories, bringing them close to the reader by establishing just the right amount of distance from them. There is the Norfolk dragon, ?Old Snap?, who survived the abolition of St George?s Day only because he had somehow sneaked into the mayoral procession; ?Snap? remained lively until 1835, but even then was resurrected by imitators; one such impersonation is in the Castle Museum, a lone survivor of the saint?s feasts of medieval England. There is the midsummer wheel, a cartwheel swathed in straw which must contrive to keep alight till it reaches the bottom of the hill, or the harvest will be poor; Hutton himself cautiously concedes that this ritual at least may have some links to a pagan past. There is the long historical story of the transmutation of the sombre Day of the Dead into the modern masquerade of Halloween: where kings and their trains once dressed in purple and black, children now dress as their fears, as ghosts, witches and monsters. As Hutton rightly shows, the opening of the season of darkness and cold is and remains an opportunity to confront fear and death, though the mode of confrontation has changed.

Some of Hutton?s stories themselves strongly militate against any nostalgia for the ?organic? society of the past, and indeed refute any notion that it was ?organic? in the sense of being inclusive: there is the intelligent substitution of a daffodil for a leek on St David?s Day by Welshmen tired of being beaten up and burned in effigy on 1 March by the xenophobic English, for instance. Shrovetide and Halloween were times when gangs roamed the streets, entertaining themselves with cockfights, violent football matches or by begging money or food with menaces. The wakes, too, were increasingly deplored -and ultimately ended - by the disapproval generated by the feasters? commitment to cruelty. Marveling at the youthful violence Hutton uncovers, one cannot help wanting to relate these calendrical outbursts to the current sporting calendar, equally tyrannical, and equally prodigal of nearly-licensed disorder. Complainants, too, have been with us since the Reformation at least, and attempts to control such disorders using force majeure as likely to backfire then as now. Revellers in Somerset chased away a man bringing the justices? ruling on their

activities with cries of ?we will keep revel despite all such tithing calves as thou art?. Ritual could divide communities as well as uniting them, and reinterpretation is not always a seamless and even historical process; sometimes it was imposed from above on an unwilling populace.

By analogy, too, one wonders how far wakes and shrovings were rites of passage for the young men who took part in them, as football violence can be today. Hutton says little about gender, but it is all too evident that the most bloodthirsty and violent rites were almost exclusively male affairs. Thinking of Ladurie?s Carnival at Romans, with its violent rape, one wonders whether the rougher, rawer portrayal of medieval and early modern festival that Hutton offers might lead us to rethink the current knee-jerk tendency to follow Bakhtin in endorsing carnival in as a positive image of liberation for all, a dissolution of identity. Rather, it seems that identity goes with us to the party, and inflects what happens there. Hutton?s mass of evidence might over time be sifted to this end. We might want to begin to task what the costs of liberation are, just as we might want to ask whether inclusiveness and cohesion can ever really be comprehensive, or must always take as their object that which is not included. Does successful ritual depend on the weary notions of same and other, after all, and is it in that sense no different to the middling sort rituals of today, the dinner in the smart restaurant, the foreign holiday to the ?unspoilt? area devoid of ?package tourists?, Modern Times?s racist diners? The New Age movement described by Heelas, sprung from a particular set of misapprehensions about the ritual past, certainly depends very strongly on its difference from what it posits as the norm, on it supposedly of being above it all, on a higher plane. As Paul Heelas knows, this pose can easily translate into elitism and outright fascism.

To resolve these doubts, or at least to begin profitable speculation, one sometimes wants to know more than Hutton tells. Wonderful as these stories are, one might sometimes welcome what Clifford Geertz called ?thick? descriptions of these our English equivalents of Balinese cockfights. It may merely be my own ignorance that leads me to ask that an already compendious book look for God in the details; moreover, details are not always available, especially for medieval and early modern rites. Hutton has chosen however to tell the reader about events rather than, as it were, to invite the reader to join him at the hobby horse dances, and occasionally one wonders whether a more immediate and elaborate sense of ritual is required.

Moreover, while disputatious and concurrent views of particular rituals are recorded meticulously for the past, little comparable recording is offered for the modern descendants of those rituals. We hear about Victorian dislike of waits, but not about modern Guardian readers? dislike of Christmas, about the terror of Buzz Lightyear who stalks the nightmares of parents, about the morbid middle-class loathing of festivals of indulgence (even as we indulge). On Halloween, rather surprisingly, we hear little about either fundamentalist Christian objections, or about moral panics over drugs in Halloween candy, which has in the US led to the relocation of trick or treating to guaranteed safety in that modern shrine, the mall. (When you can?t trust your neighbours, you can at least pin your faith to J. C. Penney.) Perhaps the mall is an appropriate place to represent the public sphere nowadays, rather than the neighbourhood. Hutton?s focus on rituals that descend from early modern equivalents sometimes leads him to neglect rites important in modern Britain: the most obvious is the Notting Hill Carnival, which uncannily reproduces many of the same anxieties which used to be produced about Bartholomew Fair, with the added twist of racial otherness.

Reluctance to think about how customs work and who they work for is another problem here; a reluctance to synthesise, to ask why on earth people bothered and in some cases still bother to get dressed up as horses and go clop-clopping through the streets. A chance to play a starring role? A sense of what Heelas would call perenniality? Nothing good on television? While Hutton reasonably announces that this book is more narrative than analysis, one sometimes feels that the narrative would make more sense, would be less reducible to anecdote, if some analysis were embedded in it. While it?s good to see the flawed syntheses of Frazer and the folklorists jettisoned with such exemplary tact and élan, it?s occasionally worrying that nothing takes their place. Resistance to Heelas?s perenniality sometimes seems to threaten to drown all structure in an avalanche of particularity; while some rituals are allowed their share of continuity and meaning, there is no sustained attempt to talk about ritual itself. Neither psychoanalysis nor economics are invoked, and nor is the kind of empathetic anthropology with which we might approach the rituals of the Nuer or the Trobrianders. In part this may be historical caginess: there is not much of the kind of evidence

which would allow such ruminations to rise above speculation, and perhaps the effort of restoring what was once folklore to respectability imposes undue caution. At times, however, one wonders whether the caution is not overdone. Hutton?s prose style is not that of an unimaginative man, but at times one might mistake him for one.

There are actually some big and daring ideas here, quite apart from the thorough and painstaking correction of errors, but Hutton seems reluctant to do much with them; they are apologetically stuffed away in the beginning and ending remarks. For this reader, the most striking were Hutton?s depiction of a general tendency for festivals that were once public, social or communal to become private, familial, and child-oriented, especially clearly documented in the cases of Christmas and Easter. I don?t know how he resisted the temptation to relate these notions to grand theories of the decline of the public sphere, the loss of public identity, and the dereliction of public life. Perhaps he had faith in the reader?s ability to do so, but it looks as though he is a little reluctant to spend time trying to account for the alteration of social ritual with reference to social context. (This is the more surprising because The Rise and Fall of Merry England is much richer in contextual observation.) Hutton has another wonderful idea, which has all the surprise value and explosiveness of a pinatà at a Mexican funfair, but he slyly buries it in the conclusion, and refuses it the space it needs to dominate our thinking as it should. Responding to the widely-shared sense that England is a country which lost a crucial explanatory story about itself at some point, Hutton suggest s that this story is not paganism, as many now suppose, but medieval Catholicism, which knitted together a ritual year, including its surviving pagan elements, holding its individual pieces in liquid suspension. Not only does this make miraculous sense of much of Hutton?s own material, it means his work dovetails with other, earlier attempts to recover that ritual past: Eamon Duffy?s, Christopher Haigh?s, and even Keith Thomas?s. It perfectly fits many witch-trials, too, where that buried Catholic (not recusant) knowledge was sometimes awkwardly excavated by people already unable to understand or interpret it. It might even explain the sense a few of our more eccentric poets have had reading Shakespeare that he is somehow both a Catholic and pagan author. Dazzling as the idea is, it remains undeveloped here; one can only hope that Hutton?s marvelous compendium of stories encourages others to evaluate it, and much else, more fully.

Paul Heelas?s work will also encourage some urgent re-evaluation of where we are to go for meaning these days, though historians might well find his work hard going at first. It is stiff with a mixture of New Age and sociological terminology, and the result is to deflate much possibility of storytelling or listening pleasure, as well as much chance that he book will be read by many of its ostensible subjects. Nonetheless, it is worth persevering, because Heelas offers the first full academic study of the New Age movement as a whole. The problem is, as Heelas acknowledges, that the New Age movement is not really a whole at all, but a wide and almost insanely diverse series of practices, preachers and precepts, often in violent disagreement with each other. Frustratingly, the unifying pressure that it is necessary to exert in order to create something resembling a work of scholarship falsifies the picture, or at any rate involves a departure from the way New Agers themselves would represent what they are doing, and Heelas is acutely aware of the problems of answering questions about a movement typified by its diversity and fluidity. If particularity is a problem, so is generality. Some of the features of the New Agers defined in Heelas?s introduction - self-actualisation and the self-ethic, for example - are widespread among the undergraduate population at large, including those who intend to go into management consultancy. Others - magical power, for example - arouse less widespread assent. This matters because one question provoked but not answered by Heelas?s book is just how influential the ideas he describes are or are likely to become; do we need to concern ourselves with them? Are New Agers heading for the mainstream?

Heelas evidently thinks that they may be; at times he almost hopes so, but his central theme is the tension between the spiritualisation of the self and the self as hedonistic consumer and he is anxious that the latter may oust the former. ?Love children of the New Age/Just a hippie with a weekly wage?, said Tim Finn. Unlike Hutton, Heelas is a painstaking contextualiser and theoriser of the movements he describes, and the sees the New Age as a response to the legitimation crises besetting traditional politics and lifestyles. About the latter, Heelas draws heavily on Eugen Weber?s theory of modernity as an iron cage, a cage which pins down and controls the individual in ways which make him or her long for escape. The problem with this as

an explanation for New Age practices is that New Age beliefs do not necessarily involve giving up the day job. Among the community of modern Pagans, for example, there are many with highly orthodox careers and lifestyles, often in such techno-dominated industries as computing.

This fits perfectly with the much more persuasive thesis of Marvin Harris that the New Age is primarily a response to the financial insecurities of what was at one point optimistically termed late capitalism. Although Heelas is right to assert that Harris overstates his case, ignoring the transformative aspects of est, Heelas in turn neglects the possibility that spiritual transformativity is just as much an attempt to deal with economic uncertainty as cruder attempts to win friends and influence people through TM. Downsizing expectations creates a hole in the ego which can be filled by replacing material with spiritual progress. The emphasis is still on progress, and New Age ?therapies? often involve a reassuring structure of movements through ?levels?; the very notion of self-improvement is shares its vocabulary with the yuppiest of yuppie self-actualisation though Bang and Olufson, as Heelas knows and fears. Similarly, Heelas rightly says that many are drawn to New Age practices through alternative medicine because of the perceived failures of allopathic medicine, but he says little about why allopathic medicine has suddenly been seen as such a failure by so many, or how this might connect with the movement?s rejection of every Enlightenment value except individualism. As old ways of coping with uncertainty are discarded, it seems important for both Hutton and Heelas to ask why, to ask how it is that what was once central is shifted to the margins.

The New Age is not concerned with this kind of question, and that is its weakness; it has no idea how it came into being, which makes self-criticism or self-awareness an uphill task. Its forgetting of the past is clearly manifested in the brilliant and disturbing invented past of new Paganisms, which trace their ancestry to a non-existent tradition of witchcraft and through that to ancient Paganisms. This is a pity, because there are many other more convincing reasons for a revival of paganism, even in its current rather ersatz form. Heelas rightly grants Pagans centrality in New Age thought, writing that they are the ?key resource? for those who have counter-cultural concerns. Documenting this, far too briefly, Heelas gives little attention to its whys, wherefores or functions, and although the knows a little about the bewildering variety of paganisms on offer, he has little to say about their diverse appeals. Yet it is these paganisms which spring from precisely the kind of history Hutton is out to undo, the kind which elevates popular ritual into pereniallty,a locaus of reliable permanence in a changing world, and hence an index of spiritual value which also possesses all the charisma of the outsider. Heelas says little about how new Pagans might react to challenges to their views; it will be extremely interesting to see how they react to Hutton. My own limited experience suggests that they are currently reacting with a characteristic mixture of open-minded curiosity and anxious scepticism about the debunking of whatever myths are most important to them, mixed with what Michel de Certeau calls ?poaching?, impertinent reading via the reader?s agenda and not the author?s; no doubt some stories from Hutton?s book will find their way into new rituals, and perhaps Snap might get a few more visitors. But the solipsism on which much New Age thought is based is not soluble in reason, even reason as seductive and judicious as Hutton?s, because it is produced by the general discourses of society as ineluctably as greenhouse gases are produced by burning fossil fuels. What might help to alter things are New Age involvement in politics - the roadbuilding protests, for instance - which necessarily involve experience of collectivity, even community, in collective action. Eventually this might create a more willingly disciplined, less hedonistic political subject; there is some sign of this in the martyr-cult of Swampy, who at least had to subordinate his body to severe constraint.

It seems important to invoke these ?real? New Agers here, because their voices are hard to hear in Heelas?s book and they get surprisingly little attention from Hutton either, in keeping with his occasional inattention to the modern. Both these books raise important historiographical questions about how to deal with popular cultural forms in historical work, questions which interrogate not only the reliability of evidence, but also the extent to which history, like anthropology, can become the dissection of an object of observation carefully and even ritually distanced from the historian-observer. Though neither Hutton nor Heelas is at all hostile to what they describe, neither brings us very close to it either, preferring an analytic framework and a controlling narrative voice respectively to the fragments of microhistory to which we have of late become more accustomed. Heelas in particular offers little in the way of narrative at all, contenting himself with

abstract observation. Though narrative has its risks, Hutton demonstrates how vital it is in drawing readers closer to an alien subject. though wildly different in tone and style, both books share a concern with the historiography of the popular, but Hutton approaches a solution much more nearly than Heelas by using the best of traditional methods; the final elegant irony in a book which seeks to overturn so much of what we thought we knew about the past.

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