

A WORK OUT OF TIME: *RELIGION AND THE DECLINE OF MAGIC* AT FIFTY★

The year 2021 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), a book that set the agenda for decades of scholarship on the history of supernatural beliefs. Half a century after its first publication, Thomas's masterpiece remains an inspiration — and a foil — for countless students of social, cultural and religious history. Its legacy is complex. It is often presented, alongside a 1967 essay by Hugh

* This article is the product of many conversations between the authors that began digitally during lockdown as a result of our shared response to Michael Hunter's *The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment* (New Haven, 2020). We shared some of our early thinking on these issues in two sole-authored essays: Jan Machielsen's review of Hunter's book in *Reviews in History* (May 2020), <<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2393>>, and Michelle Pfeffer's 'Intellectual History and the "Decline of Magic"', a blogpost written for the launch of the Oxford Centre for Intellectual History (April 2021), <<https://intellectualhistory.web.ox.ac.uk/article/intellectual-history-and-decline-magic>> (both accessed 9 Feb. 2023). Our thinking was further shaped by the discussion at a hybrid conference held in September 2021 that we organized to mark the fiftieth anniversary of *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. We are grateful to all the speakers and attendees, in person and online, for their thoughts and contributions, and in particular to Sir Keith himself for his forbearance and reflections on the day. The conference would not have been possible without the enthusiastic endorsement, support and encouragement of our co-organizer, Robin Briggs, and the financial backing of All Souls College, Oxford, the Oxford History Faculty (in particular, the then chair of its board, John Watts) and the Past and Present Society. We also owe a considerable debt to Alexandra Walsham for her encouragement, for her commissioning of this review article, and for her characteristically insightful and generous comments on an early draft. Adam Sisman and Sara Holdsworth helped us locate Valerie Pearl's papers. Our thanks are also due to Bethany Hamblen, Judith Curthoys and Michael Townsend, the archivists of, respectively, Balliol and Christ Church Colleges, Oxford and the Institute for Historical Research, London. The Literary Estate of Lord Dacre of Glanton and its executor Blair Worden kindly gave us permission to cite from the Lord Dacre papers.

Past & Present, no. 261 November (2023) © The Author(s) 2023. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Past and Present Society, Oxford. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial reproduction and distribution of the work, in any medium, provided the original work is not altered or transformed in any way, and that the work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact journals.permissions@oup.com
<https://doi.org/10.1093/past/gtad012> Advance Access published on 18 August 2023.

Trevor-Roper, as the starting point for the modern historiography of witchcraft, but the book ranged significantly beyond that topic.¹ Renowned for its rich accumulation of evidence as well as its pioneering engagement with social anthropology, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (hereafter *RDM*) sought to reveal the logic underlying a diverse but ‘interrelated’ set of beliefs: witchcraft, but also magical healing, astrology, prophecy, ghosts, fairies and omens. While all of these were now ‘rightly disdained by intelligent persons’ they were taken seriously by ‘equally intelligent persons in the past’. It was the task of the historian, Thomas argued in his preface, to explain why this was the case.² *RDM* proceeded to bring this lost world back to life, but it did so in a highly paradoxical fashion. While its title and final chapters gesture towards the decline of magic, the bulk of *RDM*’s twenty-two chapters instead conjure up the vitality of magical beliefs in a particularly vivid fashion. Taking his cue from anthropology, Thomas also showed the deeply useful functions of these beliefs for those living in a world under constant threat of hunger, disease and death.

Few history books have provoked the sort of embodied reaction that has been typical of *RDM*. Many readers still vividly remember exactly where they were when they first encountered the book: in their university library, an undergraduate seminar, or, less traditionally, an occult bookshop or a cross-channel ferry.³ *RDM* connects the generations, perhaps because it connects so many readers to their own beginnings as historians. The book’s importance was quickly noted in the early 1970s. In 1972, it won an inaugural Wolfson History Prize, while the American Historical Association allocated it a session at its annual conference. It has remained influential within and outside academia ever since. Erudite yet highly readable, *RDM* continues to be a staple on undergraduate reading lists and still occupies prime real estate in bookstores. Widely acknowledged by historians of

¹ Thomas A. Fudge, ‘Traditions and Trajectories in the Historiography of European Witch Hunting’, *History Compass*, iv, 3 (2006), 495 (online only).

² Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (first publ 1971; Harmondsworth, 1973), ix. References in this article are to the 1973 Penguin reissue.

³ See, for example, Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations, c. 1640–c. 1750* (Oxford, 1997), ix.

all stripes as one of the most significant British historical monographs of the last century, it seemingly inevitably ended up on a 1995 *Times Literary Supplement* list of the 100 most influential books in post-war public discourse.⁴

Yet in 1971 the success of *RDM* was not a given. Not all contemporary reviewers had been equally positive. Writing for the *Observer*, John Kenyon listed it as one of the books of the year, but morosely concluded that ‘there were no really outstanding books in 1971’.⁵ The book shared the Wolfson prize (as was customary then), with the larger sum going to a work of military history.⁶ There were also hurdles the book needed to overcome. For instance, its length — the Penguin edition is over eight hundred pages long — was commonly held against it. Although Peter Laslett claimed to have ‘never read a really academic work which was so long yet so continuously interesting’, Lawrence Stone complained of ‘intellectual overkill’ and a ‘baroque display of examples’. The work’s sheer size, he feared, would ‘frighten off many potential readers’.⁷ While early reviews of *RDM* read like a who’s who of the historical discipline in the 1970s, in April 1971 one of Thomas’s students could complain that it ‘hasn’t had the reviews it deserves’, probably because of the difficulties of dealing with a book that was ‘so huge’.⁸ Moreover, as Thomas himself recalled, the original publisher, the fashionable Weidenfeld & Nicolson, had only reluctantly agreed to take on the volume at the urging of its talent scout, the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, and had priced it at £8 — the equivalent of £120 in 2021.⁹ In his anonymous review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Robin Briggs described the book as ‘disconcertingly

⁴ *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 Oct. 1957, 39.

⁵ *Observer*, 19 Dec. 1971; John Kenyon, ‘That Old White Magic’, *Observer*, 14 Feb. 1971.

⁶ Keith Thomas, *The Wolfson History Prize, 1972–2012: An Informal History* (London, 2012), 33. The other work was Michael Howard’s *Grand Strategy, Vol. IV, August 1942–September 1943* (History of the Second World War. United Kingdom Military Series, London, 1972).

⁷ Peter Laslett, review of *RDM*, *Guardian*, 17 Mar. 1971, 8; Lawrence Stone, ‘The Disenchantment of the World’, *New York Review of Books*, 2 Dec. 1971.

⁸ Alan Macfarlane to his parents, 10 Apr. 1971. Private collection. We are grateful to Alan Macfarlane for allowing us to cite this letter.

⁹ <<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>> (accessed 9 Feb. 2023). We are grateful to Mary O’Connell, the original copy-editor of *RDM* for Weidenfeld & Nicolson, for sharing her experiences with us.

expensive'. This comment led to a flurry of letters to the editor about the cost of monographs, with one bookseller pointing out that £8 was about the cost of taking one's wife to the theatre in London, and shouldn't a book 'be worth as much as the ephemeral and often doubtful pleasure of a visit to the theatre'?¹⁰

When we organized '50 Years of Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic*', a hybrid conference held at All Souls College, Oxford, in September 2021, we hoped to stimulate renewed reflection on the book's legacy and how it came to have such a lasting hold on the historical imagination. The papers presented on the day, as well as comments from the hundreds of people who attended, demonstrated that the book's enchantment is such that, for many, *RDM* still feels as fresh and revelatory today as it did in 1971. The work's apparent timelessness perhaps explains why it has continued to be 're-reviewed', a practice pioneered by Thomas's students Paul Slack and Alan Macfarlane in 1981, but continued by Jonathan Barry (1996), Theodore Rabb (2009) and, most recently, by the late Hilary Mantel (2012).¹¹ The present article seeks to be more than yet another instalment in this now venerable tradition. Here we approach the work and its success in light of its origins, reception and legacy. Crucially, writing half a century after the book's publication, we can read *RDM* in the context of Thomas's wider oeuvre. There is a unity to that corpus both in terms of its author's preoccupations — 'a retrospective ethnography of early modern England' — and method.¹² The further away we travel, the clearer our perspective becomes not only on *RDM*'s legacy, but also its methods, purpose and argument.

Key to *RDM*'s enchantment, we suggest, is the fact that it seems to exist out of time. After fifty years, the book 'still weaves

¹⁰ [Robin Briggs], 'Witches and Clerics, Astrologers and Society', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 Mar. 1971, 296; W.W. Brown to the editor, *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 Mar. 1971. See other letters in that issue and in the issue of 9 Apr. 1971.

¹¹ Paul Slack and Alan Macfarlane, review of *RDM*, *History Today*, xxxi, 4 (Apr. 1981); Jonathan Barry, 'Introduction: Keith Thomas and the Problem of Witchcraft', in Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (eds.), *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief* (Cambridge, 1996); Theodore K. Rabb, review of *RDM*, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, xl, 1 (2009); Hilary Mantel, 'The Magic of Keith Thomas', *New York Review of Books*, 7 Jun. 2012.

¹² Keith Thomas, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2009), 2; Keith Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England* (New Haven, 2018), 12.

its spell over successive generations of readers', to quote the cover of the Penguin edition.¹³ This article probes the enduring freshness of the book in three ways. Like all great books, *RDM* is better understood when considered in its original historical context. We therefore start by placing a seemingly timeless book in a time-specific set of circumstances: the Oxford History Faculty of the mid twentieth century, when the nature of historical study itself was in flux. There is considerable irony in the fact that one of the most revolutionary works of modern history writing emerged from an institution that was widely criticized at the time for its perceived insularity and conservatism. Secondly, we argue that the book's remarkable durability can be attributed in part to several factors that are intrinsic to its approach and Thomas's methods more broadly. Although much attention has been paid to the book's engagement with anthropology (discussed in section II below), here particular emphasis is placed on the book's approach to theory, method and historiography. Finally, we close by exploring the fact that although the book has weathered the shifting tides of early modern historiography remarkably well, much of its conceptual apparatus — some of which was cutting edge in the 1970s — now looks dated.

I

When pressed to trace the book's beginnings, Thomas himself has repeatedly depicted *RDM* as fundamentally an Oxford book. The book's origins were, in his view, 'largely a matter of chance', a fortuitous by-product of his undergraduate teaching. Thomas has pointed to a third-year special subject, 'Commonwealth and Protectorate', which he co-taught at Oxford with John P. Cooper, a little-published colleague who, as Thomas put it, did not 'subscribe to Hugh Trevor-Roper's concept of fertile error'. Their classes opened with long papers by one of the two convenors, and the resulting competition sent Sir Keith to the Bodleian Library in search of material on the Civil War sects. In the papers collected by Elias Ashmole, Thomas found a strange letter from the Leveller Richard Overton to the astrologer William

¹³ The quote is taken from Barry, 'Introduction', in Barry, Hester and Roberts (eds.), *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, 45.

Lilly, in which Overton, a notorious attacker of superstition, surprisingly asked for celestial career advice.¹⁴ This discovery, which led Thomas to mine the rich veins of Lilly's casebooks for astrological and, eventually, witchy ore, makes for a compelling beginning for *RDM* and, by grounding it in the university's manuscript and rare book collections, further underscores Thomas's emphasis on the book's Oxford origins.

These origins may not appear particularly auspicious. Few student memoirs speak favourably of Oxford's History Faculty or its curriculum at the time. One described the latter as 'a chipped and crumbling monument to a dusty and cloistered lack of imagination'.¹⁵ Yet even at Oxford, as Thomas himself later noted in his contribution to the history of the University, research was becoming part of a typical don's life by the 1960s.¹⁶ And perhaps surprisingly, magic as a research interest was very much in the air at Oxford in these years. As noted above, Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of Modern History, wrote an important article on the 'witch-craze' in 1967, which built upon ideas he developed in several essays in the late 1950s.¹⁷ Magic had also garnered the attention of the Marxist historian Christopher Hill, whose work on seventeenth-century Puritanism led him to explore the Puritan rejection of magic as well as the 'semi-magical' nature of medieval religion.¹⁸ 1960s Oxford was also never as

¹⁴ Keith Thomas, paper given at the Conference on '50 Years of Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic*', All Souls College, Oxford, 3 Sept. 2021 (available online at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XGyK4QjSd0>>; accessed 29 May 2023); Michael Heyd and Elliott Horowitz, "'A Feather in the Wind": An Interview with Sir Keith Thomas', *Journal of Early Modern History*, ix (2005), 181; Maria Lúcia G. Pallares-Burke, *The New History: Confessions and Conversations* (Cambridge, 2002), 97.

¹⁵ Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, 2005), 206 ff.

¹⁶ Keith Thomas, 'College Life, 1945–1970', in Brian Harrison (ed.), *The History of the University of Oxford*, gen. ed. T. H. Aston, *Volume VIII: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1994), 195.

¹⁷ Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Pincer and the Book', review of H. C. Lea, *Materials Towards a History of Witchcraft*, ed. Arthur C. Howland, *New Statesman*, 4 Apr. 1959; Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Persecution of Witches', *Horizon*, ii, 2 Nov. 1959.

¹⁸ Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (first pubd 1964; London, 2018), 296–7, 330, 645, 793–4; Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603–1714* (first pubd 1961; London, 1980). Hill kept personal notes on 'science and magic' and later gave seminar papers on the topic: Christopher Hill Papers, Balliol College, Oxford, box 18, item 200 and correspondence copies Feb.–Jul. 1976, Hill to Mrs Bernal, 17 Jun. 1976.

insular as it might from the outside appear. The History Faculty boasted a thriving seminar culture that drew rising stars from outside Oxford who were also working on the history of magic. The Warburg's Francis Yates, whose important *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964) was making waves, spoke at a seminar run by Trevor-Roper and Thomas.¹⁹ Robert Mandrou, whose 1968 *Magistrats et sorciers en France* was a milestone for French witchcraft history, was another famous visitor in these years.²⁰ By 1967, Thomas's student Alan Macfarlane could reflect that 'witchcraft has been rather flogged at the seminar level'.²¹

Other Oxford roots, acknowledged by Thomas himself, take us back still further in time, to his arrival as an undergraduate at Balliol College in the early 1950s and particularly to the teaching he received there from Hill. Thomas has reflected that he became an early modernist because he won an essay prize on the topic but also 'because that was what Christopher Hill was'. As a student, Thomas often chose the subjects Hill taught.²² In a 1977 letter of recommendation, Hill would describe Thomas as 'the ablest pupil I ha[ve] ever had' and 'the greatest living historian writing in English'.²³ Hill helped connect Thomas to new subversive strands of historiography that sought to overturn the traditional modes of history writing still dominant in Oxford. Like others beyond the city's spires, Hill pursued the study of neglected groups, including what he called 'the lunatic fringe'.²⁴ In both his work on Puritanism and *The World Turned Upside Down* (published one year after *RDM*), Hill was interested in the beliefs of ordinary people and their attempts to find their own

¹⁹ Adam Sisman, *Hugh Trevor-Roper: The Biography* (London, 2010), 390.

²⁰ Robin Briggs and Blair Worden recalled this visit in conversation with the authors.

²¹ Alan Macfarlane to Keith Thomas, 13 Jan. 1967, in Alan Macfarlane, *Oxford Postgraduate, 1963–1966* (unpublished memoir), 426, online at <<https://www.alanmacfarlane.com/autobiography/OXFORD%20POSTGRADUATE.pdf>> (accessed 10 Feb. 2023).

²² Pallares-Burke, *New History*, 84–5.

²³ Christopher Hill Papers, correspondence copies Apr.–Jul. 1977, Hill to G. Yeats, 23 May 1977.

²⁴ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (New York, 1972), 15.

solutions to the problems of early modern life. The influence of this approach on *RDM* — and of Marxist history more generally — is discussed in section III. Yet Hill's influence on Thomas was also procedural and stylistic: many years later Thomas would endorse the view of Hill and himself as representing an 'Oxford method' of excerption, accumulation and re-presentation of source material, a concept we examine in section II below.²⁵

There are good grounds, then, for endorsing the Oxford roots the book's author has repeatedly emphasized. At the same time, there is an equally compelling case for situating *RDM* within a larger historiographical and geographical frame that make it into a distinctly *anti*-Oxford work, a criticism of the sort of history its dons traditionally taught and the historical methods they practised. Geoff Eley, reflecting on his experience at Balliol College in the late 1960s, remarks that in those years Oxford's History Faculty 'seemed organized precisely for the purposes of restraining imaginative thought, keeping our perceptions tethered to the discipline's most conservative notations'. Although British historians elsewhere were developing a 'new' social history with help from Marxism, the social sciences and the French *Annales* school, Oxford dons, Eley continues, 'willfully closed their eyes to the changes occurring outside'.²⁶ History as a discipline was indeed changing rapidly. The 1960s saw the publication of several landmark British historical monographs deeply influenced by the social sciences, including E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and Peter Laslett's *The World We Have Lost* (1965), both of which cut deep into the wider culture.²⁷ This also came with broader ambitions around what social history could address: not simply labour history or the history of class, but perhaps every part of human life. The middle decades of the twentieth century witnessed the proliferation in Britain of endeavours to institutionalize social history through the founding of new societies and journals that helped shape and direct the study of the history

²⁵ Keith Thomas, 'Diary: Working Methods', *London Review of Books*, 11 Jun. 2010.

²⁶ Eley, *Crooked Line*, 1–2.

²⁷ Michael Bentley, 'British Historical Writing', in Alex Schneider and Daniel Woolf (eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, 5 vols. (2011–15), *Volume 5: Historical Writing Since 1945* (Oxford, 2011), 300.

of below.²⁸ The present journal, for instance, had already been founded in 1952 by Marxist and non-Marxist historians with the subtitle ‘A Journal of Scientific History’, with the anthropologist Max Gluckman joining the editorial board in 1957.²⁹ New chairs in Social History at Birmingham (1963) and Lancaster (1967) also placed the burgeoning field on a more secure, institutional footing.³⁰ Wider societal changes, reflected by Harold Wilson’s call for a new Britain forged in ‘the white heat’ of social and technological revolution, further helped to make the case for more inclusive and science-driven approaches to the past.³¹ By 1971, the year *RDM* appeared, Eric Hobsbawm declared that it was ‘a good moment to be a social historian’.³²

Yet in the 1960s and 70s, the modern history curriculum at Oxford remained largely impervious to these changes, despite the efforts of students — and some staff — to encourage reform.³³ Indeed, there can be no doubt that Thomas saw himself as dragging Oxford into the twentieth century. In 1961, while a young history don at St John’s College, he publicly bemoaned that in Oxford ‘a narrow syllabus based primarily on old-fashioned

²⁸ For example, The Society for the Study of Labour History was founded in 1960, along with its journal *Labour History Review*; The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure was founded in 1964; History Workshop in 1967 and *History Workshop Journal* in 1976; and The Centre for the Study of Social History at Warwick University in 1968.

²⁹ See Christopher Hill, R. H. Hilton and E. J. Hobsbawm, ‘Past and Present: Origins and Early Years’, *Past and Present*, no. 100 (Aug. 1983).

³⁰ See the helpful surveys by Geoff Eley, ‘Marxist Historiography’, and Thomas Welskopp, ‘Social History’, in Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (eds.), *Writing History: Theory and Practice* (London, 2003), 63–82, 203–22.

³¹ David Edgerton, ‘The “White Heat” Revisited: The British Government and Technology in the 1960s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, vii, 1 (1996).

³² E. J. Hobsbawm, ‘From Social History to History of Society’, *Daedalus*, c, 1 (1971), 43.

³³ Jose Harris, ‘The Arts and Social Sciences, 1939–1970’, in Harrison (ed.), *History of the University of Oxford*, gen. ed. Aston, *Volume VIII: The Twentieth Century*, 237–8. As an undergraduate, Tim Mason (later a founder of *History Workshop Journal*) helped campaign for curriculum reform at Oxford. He described the requirement for students to produce two short and undigested essays a week as ‘the greatest vice of the present system’, and expressed regret that students lacked the opportunity to produce ‘a piece of sustained historical writing’: Tim Mason, ‘What of History?’, *The New University*, Dec. 1961, 14. *The New University* (1960–3) was a short-lived student publication.

political history has . . . insulat[ed] the study of history from the progress of modern knowledge' in 'allied disciplines'.³⁴ His influential 1963 call in *Past and Present* for historians to study anthropology aimed some arrows in Oxford's direction, criticizing 'the university history schools of this country' with 'the endless analysis of the gymnastics of minor politicians'. Undergraduate historians were taught to produce 'dogmatic and personal interpretations on the basis of rapid reading of the secondary sources'.³⁵

More stridently anti-Oxonian was Thomas's 1966 manifesto 'The Tools and the Job', part of a special issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* entitled 'New Ways in History'. Thomas advocated the increased use of computation in historical research alongside the 'systematic indoctrination' of historians in the social sciences. Here his appreciation of the pioneering work of historians overseas was particularly evident. With a handful of exceptions (including Hill, Hobsbawm, Stone and Laslett), British historians, Thomas maintained, were 'decades behind their colleagues in other countries'. He pointed not only to France, where the *Annales* school of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre 'urged the historical study of *la psychologie collective*', but also the United States, 'the home of social sciences *par excellence*'. Rather embarrassingly, it had been 'left to Americans' to study English history with cutting-edge techniques, borrowing social and political theories from sociologists and quantitative tools from statisticians. Yet, in Britain, too, major change was afoot in the profession and the primacy of politics was already being resisted by the Marxist school. As Thomas saw it, Oxford was at risk of being left behind. *Past and Present* had 'already . . . eclipsed' the Oxford-based *English Historical Review*. The final volume of the *Oxford History of England* (1965) was a 'swansong for the dying concept of real history as past politics, and social history as an undemanding subsidiary'.³⁶

³⁴ Keith Thomas, 'Should Historians be Anthropologists?', *Oxford Magazine*, 1 June 1961, 387. (Limited access: see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Oxford_Magazine> for information).

³⁵ Keith Thomas, 'History and Anthropology', *Past and Present*, no. 24 (April 1963), 18, 5.

³⁶ Keith Thomas, 'The Tools and the Job', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 Apr. 1966, 275–6.

RDM's prehistory is folded into these (anti-Oxford) calls to action. Thomas's 1961 lament about Oxford's history curriculum was prompted by a lecture on 'Anthropology and History' in Manchester by the All Souls anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard. Inspired by the findings of anthropologists, Thomas called for 'serious historical studies' of witchcraft and superstition but also food, education, family life, mental health, sex and suicide, a list that now reads as a prescient forecast of many historiographical trends of the last fifty years.³⁷ Thomas's *Past and Present* article applied the 'conclusions of anthropologists' to 'church history', its discussion of the 'implacable hostility' of the Puritans towards 'features of a more primitive society' foreshadowing *RDM*'s discussion of the Reformation. Evans-Pritchard's study of witchcraft among the Azande of South Sudan also gave Thomas an early opportunity to reflect on the dynamics of early modern witchcraft accusations.³⁸ Thomas's 1966 manifesto similarly proclaimed that 'the witchcraft accusations of seventeenth-century England are coming to be seen as a reflection of hostilities engendered by the breakdown of the old village community'. This research 'benefitted directly' from Evans-Pritchard, but also from Bronisław Malinowski's writings about witchcraft and social strife; Max Gluckman's work on witchcraft, conflict and economic status in Africa; and Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton's discussion of witchcraft and social aggression in *The Navaho* (1946).³⁹

Thomas was a frequent visitor at the library and lectures of Oxford's Anthropological Institute in the 1960s, but his methodological innovation inevitably took him out of Oxford as well. Both Thomas and Macfarlane were involved in the anthropology seminars run by Mary Douglas out of University College London as well as the 1968 Association of Social Anthropologists conference

³⁷ Thomas, 'Should Historians be Anthropologists?', 387; Thomas, 'History and Anthropology'; cf. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Anthropology and History: A Lecture* (Manchester, 1961), 14–15. For the centrality of anthropology to early work on these topics, see William Pooley, 'Native to the Past: History, Anthropology, and Folklore in *Past and Present*', *Past and Present*, no. 239 (May 2018).

³⁸ Thomas, 'History and Anthropology', 7–9.

³⁹ Thomas, 'Tools and the Job', 276. The footnotes in Thomas's *Past and Present* article shed light on his reading: Thomas, 'History and Anthropology'.

in Cambridge.⁴⁰ In 1970, Thomas contributed a chapter, tellingly entitled ‘The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft’, to *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, a volume edited by Douglas. From the outset Thomas acknowledged his ‘substantial indebtedness to the long flow of anthropological studies of witchcraft’. With a section devoted to the ‘function’ of witch beliefs and a promise to examine such beliefs ‘in the light of anthropological studies of witchcraft elsewhere’, its debt to the functionalist school of social anthropology may indeed seem as ‘obvious’ as the author hoped. The concluding conviction that a ‘functional interpretation of the role of witch beliefs’ could be combined ‘with a theory of social and intellectual change’ helped to set the expectations with which *RDM* — a book ‘which I plan to publish shortly’ — would be greeted.⁴¹

RDM’s roots therefore can be traced in part to Oxford: to the Bodleian Library and, somewhat ironically, to its much criticized curriculum and a class on, of all things, political history.⁴² Yet the book also emerged from a methodological maelstrom that was explicitly anti-Oxonian, which has been elided from *RDM*’s origin story. These narratives are far from incompatible. They reflect a generational shift and a campaign for syllabus reform within Oxford, as well as changes in the composition of its History Faculty. Its postgraduate body had ballooned in line with the general expansion of higher education, and for the first time a critical mass of early modernists — then a novel periodization — had formed.⁴³

⁴⁰ Alan Macfarlane, *London School of Economics, 1966–8* (unpublished memoir), 57, 129, online at <<https://www.alanmacfarlane.com/autobiography/LONDON%20POSTGRADUATE%201966-1968.pdf>> (accessed 29 May 2023); Macfarlane, *Oxford Postgraduate*, 446.

⁴¹ Keith Thomas, ‘The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft’, in Mary Douglas (ed.), *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* (London, 1970), 47–8, 66, 72–3.

⁴² Thomas has conceded that in his teaching he ‘didn’t lose interest in conventional history’: Pallares-Burke, *New History*, 91.

⁴³ As well as the names already mentioned, valuable work in the field was carried out at Oxford by Valerie Pearl, Joan Thirsk and Lawrence Stone (until he left for Princeton in 1963), alongside graduate students including Robin Briggs, Peter Burke, Brian Harrison, Alan Macfarlane, Wilfrid Prest, Paul Slack, Nicholas Tyacke and Blair Worden. For the history of ‘early modern’ as a periodization, see Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *What is Early Modern History?* (Medford, 2021), 4. For further discussion, see Randolph Starn, ‘The Early Modern Muddle’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, vi, 3 (2002), esp. 298; Merry Wiesner-Hanks, ‘What is Early Modern History? An Origin Story’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, xxv, 6 (2021).

Both the author and his work must be situated at the heart of the thriving early modern community these changes helped to generate, which met regularly at seminars and college dinners and was known to exchange ideas and source material relatively freely.⁴⁴

Yet, as Sir Keith's reference to his weekly competition with Cooper suggests, there was also a competitive edge to this community of early modernists and to *RDM* itself, which accounts in part for its bifurcated origins. Thomas's methodological interventions help identify the fault lines within this community. The key rival here was not Cooper but the older Trevor-Roper, who in 1966 was also 'working like mad on witches'.⁴⁵ Thomas's manifesto earlier that year had belittled as 'mis-guided' Trevor-Roper's concerns about 'the creeping paralysis of professionalism'.⁴⁶ The Regius Professor saw Thomas, and his as yet unnamed book project, as introducing unwelcome, outside ideas. When he reviewed the Douglas volume, he charged Thomas and Macfarlane with setting off together 'on the fashionable anthropological broomstick, non-stop to darkest Africa'.⁴⁷ In 1968, Trevor-Roper had confessed to his confidante, the one-time Somerville historian Valerie Pearl, that he could not face a conference in the United States, 'listening to all the Keith Thomases of America pontificating about "new ways in history" — it is too much'.⁴⁸ When *RDM* appeared he would write to several colleagues attempting to divine which of Oxford's Thomas supporters had authored the generous review in the *Times Literary Supplement*: 'There was a passage which seemed to me to show the cloven hoof from a certain stable'.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ For the exchange of sources, see Macfarlane, *Oxford Postgraduate*, 42–3, 104, 120–1, 208–9.

⁴⁵ Hugh Trevor-Roper to Alan Macfarlane, 16 Jul. 1966, in Richard Davenport-Hines and Adam Sisman (eds.), *One Hundred Letters from Hugh Trevor-Roper* (Oxford, 2014), xxxiii.

⁴⁶ Thomas, 'Tools and the Job', 276.

⁴⁷ Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'Witch Hunt', *Sunday Times*, 8 Nov. 1970. The phrase is repeated in Christ Church College, Oxford, MS Soc. Dacre 2/1/24, fo. 03^r.

⁴⁸ Hugh Trevor-Roper to Valerie Pearl, 12 Apr. 1968, Institute for Historical Research, Valerie Pearl Papers, box 3/2.

⁴⁹ Hugh Trevor-Roper to John P. Cooper, 12 Nov. 1970, Christ Church College, Oxford, MS Soc. Dacre 3/6.

Trevor-Roper's essay on 'The European Witch-Craze' therefore also needs to be situated within this rivalry and within the wider context of *RDM*'s genesis. Although indebted to the *Annales* school's preoccupation with collective mentalities, Trevor-Roper for the most part saw the witch-hunt through the prism of the world war in which he himself had served.⁵⁰ It was ultimately a story of 'collective, organized lunacy and cruelty', and Trevor-Roper wrestled with the question of why 'liberal, humane, learned men' were caught up in 'an artificial system of nonsense'.⁵¹ When the essay was reprinted as a short book, he took aim at Thomas's approach to the history of magic, explaining that, by contrast, he was 'not concerned with mere witch-beliefs; with those elementary village credulities which anthropologists discover'.⁵² To Pearl, he confessed that he had been rash to tackle the subject 'but it will annoy Keith Thomas, which (I suppose) is something'.⁵³ Yet having set out to annoy his younger rival, he was nevertheless bothered when he succeeded.⁵⁴ In a review for the *Guardian*, Thomas described Trevor-Roper's witchcraft chapter as 'the least successful' of his essays; the 'sociological analysis is distinctly lame'. Even the ostensible praise — lauding Trevor-Roper as a 'master of belles-lettres' and comparing him to Gibbon — has something of a sting in the tail, given Thomas's views at the time of literary history.⁵⁵

Although deeply influenced by methodological developments in faculties elsewhere in Britain, Europe and America, *RDM* is thus an Oxford book in more ways than one. Oxford's research community and competitive culture throughout the 1960s were fundamental in shaping *RDM*. Ultimately, the skirmishes and methodological conflicts with Trevor-Roper helped produce

⁵⁰ The debt to French historiography is ironically more explicit in Trevor-Roper's essay than it is in *RDM*.

⁵¹ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London, 1969), 63.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 9, our emphasis. Trevor-Roper explained in a 1972 lecture that this passage was written in response to Thomas's review of the original essay: Christ Church College, Oxford, MS Soc. Dacre 2/1/24, p. 2.

⁵³ Sisman, *Hugh Trevor-Roper*, 378.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 380–1.

⁵⁵ Keith Thomas, 'Tilting at Apple-Carts', *Guardian*, 1 Sept. 1967, 5.

two of the most important contributions to witchcraft history of the mid to late twentieth century. For better or worse, Thomas's book promised to mark a generational shift and became totemic for a new form of history. There is, however, a considerable irony in this, one that may also explain why methodological concerns are missing from Thomas's own story of *RDM*'s origins. As the next section outlines, the debates, arguments and rivalries of the 1960s led to a work of scholarship very different from what that world expected or, indeed, what readers of this article might have expected, based on our discussion so far. Already at the moment of its publication, *RDM* was a work out of time.

II

Thus far we have situated *RDM* in a specific historical and historiographical moment. It is nevertheless clear that the book has managed in large part to transcend its origins and — in spite of historiographical developments since 1971, as discussed in section III — it has achieved a kind of ahistorical permanence in the field of early modern history. The book's success can be attributed to numerous factors, not least its pioneering contribution to the study of magic and popular religion, its fresh approach to social and cultural history and its function as a model for interdisciplinary history. But more is at work. We argue that the sense of enduring freshness surrounding *RDM* can also be attributed to three overlapping characteristics of the book, namely its approach to theory, method and historiography, which are as much a product of the contexts sketched above as of Thomas's own distinctive approach to history writing.

As we have seen, Thomas's articles of the 1960s publicly signalled his interest in the theoretical tools of the social sciences, particularly anthropology. He criticized 'old' empirical history for its distrust of theory and assumption that historical writing required 'no recondite conceptual tools', just 'common sense and good judgment'.⁵⁶ These essays primed early readers to expect from *RDM* a book heavily laden with theory. Indeed, some readers, especially critical ones, immediately embraced an anthropological reading of *RDM*. For Brian Copenhaver, the

⁵⁶ Thomas, 'Tools and the Job', 275; Thomas, 'History and Anthropology', 3.

book was 'devoted almost exclusively to functionalist explanations'.⁵⁷ At a conference in 1972, Trevor-Roper accused Thomas of creating a 'synthetic witch, a Frankenstein monster with a head from Essex, a right leg from the Azande, a left from the Navajo Indians, etc.'.⁵⁸ Yet while early reviewers generally divined some commitment to functionalist anthropology, many noted, often in surprise, the absence of any general theory or framework. Some simply rejoiced to discover that there was, in fact, no theory. Katharine Briggs commended the author for being 'no slavish disciple of modern science'.⁵⁹ According to Peter Laslett, it would go 'too far' to describe Thomas as 'a finally accomplished social scientist'.⁶⁰ E. P. Thompson reminded his readers of Thomas's call for 'systematic indoctrination' and professed himself delighted when he discovered the absence of what he clearly dismissed as scientific 'mumbo-jumbo'.⁶¹

The anthropological reading of *RDM* has nevertheless proved durable.⁶² Certainly, Thomas still describes his life's work as an exercise in historical ethnography and has frequently acknowledged his debts to anthropological studies of witchcraft. Ethnography appealed to Thomas for its insistence on cultural and historical specificity, which moved away from earlier anthropological attempts to construct universal laws about human society.⁶³ Meanwhile, functionalism was attractive to Thomas because it helped explain why 'intelligent' people in the past made use of apparently ineffective magical techniques. In response to critiques that *RDM* relied on out-of-date anthropology (by 1971 many anthropologists had abandoned functionalism), Thomas maintained that he did most of his reading in

⁵⁷ Brian P. Copenhaver, review of *RDM*, *Church History*, xli, 3 (1972), 423.

⁵⁸ Christ Church College, Oxford, MS Soc. Dacre 2/1/24, fo. 06'. Trevor-Roper filed his correspondence about Macfarlane's and Thomas's work in a folder entitled 'The Anthropologists': Christ Church College, Oxford, MS Soc. Dacre 3/6.

⁵⁹ K. M. Briggs, review of *RDM*, *Folklore*, lxxxii, 2 (1981), 168.

⁶⁰ Laslett, review of *RDM*, 8.

⁶¹ E. P. Thompson, 'Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context', *Midland History*, i, 3 (1972), 41, 48.

⁶² A recent undergraduate textbook, Simon Young and Helen Killick, *An Analysis of Keith Thomas's Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 2017), presents the book's explanatory system as anthropological.

⁶³ Thomas, 'History and Anthropology', 4.

anthropology in the early 1960s, when the books on the shelves were functionalist works from the 1940s and 50s. In any case, Thomas later found the ‘lucidity’ of older social anthropology preferable to the ‘inflated pretensions’ of more recent anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, which were ‘harder to relate to historical writing’.⁶⁴ Through the lens of functionalism, early modern belief in witchcraft emerged as a ‘conservative social force’ that on the one hand discouraged individuals from transgressing moral and social codes of charity (for fear of igniting the ire of a village witch) and on the other hand encouraged older women to reconsider before cursing their neighbours (for fear of being accused). Yet for Thomas, witch beliefs were not merely about social utility; they were also about meaning: they helped early modern people to understand and accept the inexplicable. As Thomas acknowledged elsewhere, this was ‘not the sort of conclusion which the historian would be likely to come to without [the] external aid’ of anthropology.⁶⁵

However, as some early reviewers saw, on the whole *RDM* largely eschews anthropological theories, whether ‘functionalist’ or otherwise. When it came to it, Thomas tended to use his anthropological examples (drawn from ‘primitive peoples’, ‘primitive societies’ and ‘primitive countries’) mostly comparatively, rather than to carry a historical argument.⁶⁶ As the anthropologist Hildred Geertz noted in her careful critique, Thomas made use of anthropologists’ ‘scattered specific hypotheses’ but not their ‘general theoretical approach’.⁶⁷ Thomas’s use of functionalism is most obvious in *RDM*’s chapter on ‘Witchcraft and its Social Environment’, where he outlines the social tension model described above. Yet this is only one of many explanations he provides for the making of the witch. Indeed, historiographical fixation on the book’s five witchcraft chapters and the relative neglect of the other seventeen chapters — which rely less on functionalism — has contributed to an overplaying of anthropological readings of *RDM*. Tellingly, Thomas himself has

⁶⁴ Pallares-Burke, *New History*, 92–3; Keith Thomas, ‘An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vi, 1 (1975), 105–6, 108.

⁶⁵ Thomas, ‘History and Anthropology’, 9.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Thomas, *RDM*, 52, 57, 497.

⁶⁷ Hildred Geertz, ‘An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vi, 1 (1975), 77. See also at n. 117 below.

since presented his interest in anthropology as simply a stimulus to his historical imagination. In a 1989 interview he stressed the importance of reading outside of history because ‘historians don’t have any ideas of their own’. When reading anthropology in the 1960s, Thomas was ‘never looking for a system or a key to all mythologies’, and he never reached ‘a carefully worked-out, well-defended and defined intellectual position’. In his 1975 response to Geertz, Thomas acknowledged that ‘the main substance of [RDM] is what anthropologists would call ethnography rather than theory’.⁶⁸ RDM, then, by its author’s own implicit admission, does not fulfil the ambitions for a historical discipline shaped by the social sciences that he sketched out in the 1960s.

The book similarly hesitated to offer the theories of social and intellectual change that Thomas’s 1970 chapter had promised. As John Bossy pointed out, ‘the book’s purpose is to assemble a corpus of information with interpretive commentary rather than to propose a controlling synthesis’.⁶⁹ RDM wears its arguments very lightly. In his review, Copenhaver lamented ‘the open-endedness and self-doubting’ that ‘marred’ the end of the work; William Monter claimed that ‘the only thing which prevents this book from being an unrelieved masterpiece is its conclusion, or rather its lack of one’.⁷⁰ When it came to accounting for the declining reputation of astrology, for example, Thomas investigated a dozen possible explanations but drew no hard conclusions. Perhaps, as one early reviewer noted, Thomas’s achievement ‘was not to explain, but to explore’.⁷¹ Change — the rise and fall of mentalities — is exhaustively demonstrated in all of Thomas’s writings but rarely and then only reluctantly explained. His general account of historical change, ‘a modernisation narrative of a subtle kind’, would recede still further into

⁶⁸ Pallares-Burke, *New History*, 92; Peer Vries, “‘Historians Don’t Have Any Ideas of Their Own’”: In gesprek met Keith Thomas’, *Leidschrift: Historisch tijdschrift*, vi, no. 2 (1990), 101, 108; Thomas, ‘Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II’, 108.

⁶⁹ John Bossy, ‘Early Modern Magic’, review of RDM, *History*, lviii, 191 (1972), 399.

⁷⁰ Copenhaver, review of RDM, 423; E. William Monter, review of RDM, *Journal of Modern History*, xlv, 2 (1972), 264.

⁷¹ R. Keynes, review of RDM, *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, iii, 3 (1972), 157.

the background with every subsequent publication.⁷² Thomas's last two books dispense with a conclusion altogether. *RDM* is not devoid of theories, but they are buried under a trademark combination of quotative exposition and tentative supposition. After all, as Thomas has reflected, while 'most interpretations are ephemeral', humble ethnography withstands the test of time.⁷³

RDM's 'ethnographic' methods, which recreate a past world through the accumulation of anecdotes and quotations, contribute as much to the timeless quality of the book as does the absence of a theoretical framework. The ethnographic approach is also what makes *RDM* such a lively and readable text. The book introduces us to countless charming tales, such as that of the Cambridge scholar 'Ashbournner', who went missing after selling his soul to the devil in exchange for a doctorate and a round trip to Padua. Like its author, *RDM* delivers its stories with a characteristically dry wit. Thomas described magic as the early modern equivalent of 'drug-taking' in the twentieth century as 'the fashionable temptation for undergraduates'. Some of his captivating examples — the lynching of John Lambe, the case books of Simon Forman, the myth-making around 'fabulous' King Lucius, and the short-lived Society of Astrologers — formed the germs for important research by later historians.⁷⁴ His later works have a cast just as colourful: Locke's correspondent who thought Germans walked on all fours because they called gloves 'hand shoes'; Cardinal Wolsey working twelve-hour days without rising 'to piss nor yet to eat any

⁷² The final pages of *In Pursuit of Civility* in passing identify 'economic growth' and the 'growth of large cities' as contributing factors: 327, 329. For Thomas's 'modernisation narrative', see Keith Wrightson, review of Thomas, *Ends of Life*, *English Historical Review*, cxxv, 512 (Feb. 2010), 178, and our discussion below.

⁷³ Thomas, 'Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II', 108–9.

⁷⁴ Thomas, *RDM*, 564, 269, 412, 352–3, 504, 361. See, respectively, Alastair Bellany, 'The Murder of John Lambe: Crowd Violence, Court Scandal and Popular Politics in Early Seventeenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, no. 200 (Aug. 2008); the Casebooks Project, directed by Lauren Kassell, University of Cambridge; Felicity Heal, 'What Can King Lucius Do For You? The Reformation and the Early British Church', *English Historical Review*, cxx, 487 (June 2005); Michelle Pfeffer, 'The Society of Astrologers (c.1647–1684): Sermons, Feasts and the Resuscitation of Astrology in Seventeenth-Century London', *British Journal for the History of Science*, liv, 2 (2021).

meat'; the 'unpolished' theologian who when escorting a lady visitor around Oxford relieved himself against a wall, still holding her hand — the list goes on.⁷⁵ Anecdotes are the bedrock of Thomas's oeuvre. Individually these vignettes delight; collectively they inspire wonder, especially amongst younger scholars, about the possibility of assembling such a huge corpus of evidence before the digital revolution. Thomas has acknowledged that his later works are 'close to being a collage of quotations'.⁷⁶ Another reason for *RDM*'s enduring freshness, then, is the fact that it seems to convey the voices of early modern England directly, speaking in their wonderful diversity, as if *they* rather than Thomas are the true author of the work. As Thomas put it, *collector, non auctor, ego sum*.⁷⁷

The anecdotal foundations of *RDM* and this practice of collecting take us to Thomas's famous envelopes and the moment when, 'tipping out my notes onto the table' in a friend's cottage in Herefordshire, the writing of *RDM* began.⁷⁸ These notes — handwritten excerpts on paper fragments 'of all shapes and sizes' that Thomas organized in old envelopes — have become almost as famous as their author. In a 2010 article in the *London Review of Books*, Thomas reflected on his working methods, describing them in terms used by Geoffrey Barraclough: 'an *omnium gatherum* of materials culled from more or less everywhere'. 'Progress depends', Thomas wrote, 'on building up a picture from a mass of casual and unpredictable references accumulated over a long period'. He compared his approach to that of his old tutor, Hill: 'like him, I try to soak myself in the writings of the time', regardless of genre. In some ways like a cultural anthropologist, Thomas reads his sources 'against the grain', searching for 'what the text incidentally or unintentionally' revealed. The material he gathers is transcribed, filed and, when the time for writing arrives, emptied from its envelope and scrutinized until patterns emerge. Thomas admitted that the contents of his

⁷⁵ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (London, 1983), 132–3; Thomas, *Ends of Life*, 96; Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility*, 55.

⁷⁶ Thomas, *Ends of Life*, 5; Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility*, 9–10.

⁷⁷ Thomas, *Ends of Life*, 5.

⁷⁸ Thomas, paper given at Conference on '50 Years of Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic*'.

envelopes (which run into the thousands) occasionally ‘get loose and blow around the house’ and, in worst-case scenarios, have been known to disappear altogether, probably ending up in the waste-paper bin he keeps by his desk.⁷⁹ Such note-taking and filing practices appear less idiosyncratic when considered in the context of the middle decades of the twentieth century, when the organization and storage of one’s notes was a chief practical preoccupation of scholars. In the 1960s, the discovery of a new filing system could be felt to ‘transform’ a historian’s life.⁸⁰ Thomas’s inspiration came partly from Hill, later nicknamed the ‘Rolodex man’.⁸¹ Hill’s source-mining, or rather his ‘compulsive lumping’, was famously denounced by J. H. Hexter as unscientific in a *Times Literary Supplement* review that divided all historians into lumpers and splitters.⁸² In the *London Review of Books* Thomas conceded that ‘I am a lumper, not a splitter’.⁸³ This was the so-called ‘Oxford method’ embodied by student and teacher alike: history as a form of total immersion in the sources, to be captured through excerptation and then reproduced.

The evidentiary value of this ‘collection’, however, requires our attention. Thomas has described historical writing as simply ‘an art of representation’, but just how popular were the practices that Thomas re-presented in *RDM*?⁸⁴ Margaret Bowker’s early review had already made clear one obvious objection: ‘what is *not* justified is the use of example and counter example without *any* indication of normality or abnormality’.⁸⁵ Although Thomas defends the use of quotation, its status as proof is never articulated, perhaps because it is deemed self-evident.⁸⁶ Not only do the people of early modern England speak for themselves, it is assumed that they speak their minds. This accumulation of their apparently transparent thoughts may contain traces of Thomas’s old concern with quantification; in the *Times Literary Supplement* he argued that when historians generalize about

⁷⁹ Thomas, ‘Diary’.

⁸⁰ Macfarlane, *Oxford Postgraduate*, 9.

⁸¹ Mark Kishlansky, ‘Rolodex Man’, *London Review of Books*, 31 Oct. 1996.

⁸² J. H. Hexter, ‘The Burden of Proof’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 Oct. 1975.

⁸³ Thomas, ‘Diary’.

⁸⁴ Vries, “‘Historians Don’t Have Any Ideas’”, 106.

⁸⁵ Margaret Bowker, review of *RDM*, *Historical Journal*, xv, 2 (1972), 364–5.

⁸⁶ Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility*, 10.

societies and cultures they 'are implying regularities of a numerical kind'.⁸⁷ In *RDM*, Thomas regretted being unable to provide 'exact statistical data upon which the precise analysis of historical change must so often depend', coming to the conclusion that there was 'no genuinely scientific method of measuring changes in the thinking of past generations'. He therefore resorted to 'presentation by example and counter-example'.⁸⁸ Here E. P. Thompson's review is characteristically perceptive: '[Thomas] proceeds, again and again, by the accumulation of instances, presented in rapid sequence, with often no more than one sentence allowed to each . . . [At times] it is like flicking through a card-index, when every now and then one glimpses an unusual card and wishes to cry: "Stop!"'. Although seemingly an attempt to avoid 'the charge of untypicality', for Thompson this method produced only 'the gross reiterative impressionism of a computer'.⁸⁹ While their evidentiary status is never articulated, the implicit assumption is that the part may stand for the whole.

A further, equally unspoken, assumption is that *societies* have views, attitudes and, indeed, assumptions, and that these can be fenced off and analysed. In his later writings Thomas carefully carved out his native Wales from consideration as 'culturally distinct' from England.⁹⁰ Trevor-Roper's already-mentioned criticism of *RDM*'s 'Frankenstein' witch stemmed in part from his objecting to Thomas's excluding continental European witchcraft beliefs, while turning at the same time to modern ethnographic data from much further afield.⁹¹ Yet, for Thomas, the more immediate and profound methodological challenge was internal, not external: how to capture disparate beliefs within a society? Apparently unlike the anthropologists whom Thomas so admired, the task of the historian was 'infinitely harder', for anthropologists studied 'small homogenous communit[ies] in which all inhabitants share the same beliefs' while historians

⁸⁷ Thomas, 'Tools and the Job', 276.

⁸⁸ Thomas, *RDM*, x.

⁸⁹ Thompson, 'Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context', 50.

⁹⁰ Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility*, 11. See also Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 16; Thomas, *Ends of Life*, 3–4.

⁹¹ Christ Church College, Oxford, MS Soc. Dacre 2/1/24, fo. 05^r.

were faced with ‘dynamic and infinitely various societ[ies]’.⁹² *RDM*’s often neglected subtitle — ‘*Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England*’ — is notable in this regard. If England was the container, then this multiplicity of views and voices was a volatile liquid that proved difficult to stabilize. But how could difference be captured by accumulations of the anecdotal?

The solution came while Thomas was already writing *RDM*. As Bossy observed, Thomas ‘began by writing one book and finished by writing a different one’.⁹³ Working on astrology, witchcraft and other beliefs, Thomas arrived at the idea of ‘juxtaposing’ these ‘less esteemed systems of belief’ with religion.⁹⁴ While Thomas’s working title for the book in 1968 was ‘Primitive Beliefs in early modern/16th and 17th century/pre-industrial/Tudor and Stuart/ England’, he eventually arrived at a title that contained two ingredients that solved his central difficulty: opposing concepts (religion and magic) and the prospect of change (decline) over time.⁹⁵ All of Thomas’s later writings are similarly structured by juxtapositions, two yin and yang concepts at odds with each other whose fates are fundamentally intertwined.⁹⁶ Combined they can capture a society in transition and help make sense — or obscure from view — any contradictions. Together they create a legitimate space for beliefs that conflict with the central thesis, as either ahead of their time or relics of an earlier mentality. Constructions such as ‘as late as’ and their opposites (‘not new’) do good work in all of Thomas’s writings. A framework built on binaries and change over time can easily find a home for all manner of belief, but these anecdotes are effectively sleeper agents, ready to help a rebellious reader topple the author’s original edifice by rejigging the material. As

⁹² Thomas, *RDM*, 5. This assumption has unsurprisingly come under fire from anthropologists.

⁹³ Bossy, ‘Early Modern Magic’, 399.

⁹⁴ Thomas, *RDM*, ix.

⁹⁵ Thomas to Macfarlane, 19 Feb. 1968, in Macfarlane, *London School of Economics*, 164. In 1970, Thomas’s forthcoming book is cited as ‘Primitive Beliefs in Pre-Industrial England’ in Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (London, 1970), xiv.

⁹⁶ *Man and the Natural World* ends with a series of juxtapositions: town or country, cultivation or wilderness, conquest or conservation, and so on.

Thomas conceded in a 1998 interview, ‘one of the weaknesses of [RDM], which has also turned out to be a strength, is that you can find something in it that will support almost any position’.⁹⁷ This, too, contributes to the timelessness of the book: its ability to present a new face to successive generations of readers and historians.

The same comment can be made not just for the accumulated evidence presented in *RDM*, but for the book as a whole. *RDM* was itself a moving target, changing as it was being written. (Thomas did not write the chapters in order but started with the astrology section.) The work dispensed with a formal introduction, opening instead with a chapter cryptically called ‘The Environment’. While Thomas insisted in the preface of *RDM* that the sum was greater than its parts, he arranged the book ‘so that the reader who wishes to skip some of the sections can easily do so’.⁹⁸ Some early reviewers presented *RDM* as an encyclopaedia to be consulted rather than a work to be read.⁹⁹ Readers must wait for page eighty-nine for the first signs of a series of clearly articulated hypotheses, including some now commonly associated with the work: ‘How was it that men were able to renounce the magical solutions offered by the medieval Church before they had devised any technical remedies to put in their place?’¹⁰⁰ Unsurprisingly, early reviewers sometimes struggled to see the argumentative forest for the anecdotal trees, and the formidable task and interpretive problem of condensing the tome vexed many. Geertz was not alone in struggling to define Thomas’s ‘continuous and rather open search for relationships among his data’.¹⁰¹ And, as Michael Hunter recently pointed out, *RDM* devotes remarkably few pages to explicit discussion of magic’s ‘decline’.¹⁰² Writing on topics that would have raised eyebrows amongst more conservative historians, Thomas spent

⁹⁷ Pallares-Burke, *New History*, 97–9.

⁹⁸ Thomas, *RDM*, ix.

⁹⁹ Frances Yates, review of *RDM*, *British Journal for the History of Science*, vi, 2 (1972), 213.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas, *RDM*, 89.

¹⁰¹ Geertz, ‘Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I’, 71. See similarly Briggs, review of *RDM*, 168.

¹⁰² Michael Hunter, *The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment* (New Haven, 2020), 2.

much of his time demonstrating the pervasiveness of magic in the early modern period — and hence its importance to the historian — rather than focusing on how things changed. Indeed, one may not expect the final chapter of a work apparently devoted to the decline of magic to conclude that ‘the role of magic in modern society may be more extensive than we yet appreciate’ and to predict, as its final line, that ‘no society will ever be free from it’.¹⁰³ Magic’s endurance, however, makes sense within the yin–yang structure we have just laid out; to paraphrase *Hotel California*, magic may check out but can never leave.

A lack of historiographical mooring also contributes to *RDM*’s sense of timelessness as a work of scholarship, and this too must be reckoned as much a strength as a weakness. While *RDM* engages with anthropologists when their findings present parallels, there is rarely space for engagement with historians or historiography. Although their contributions are acknowledged in notes and paratexts, the names of living historians — even ‘the author of the best subsequent study of English civility’ (after Norbert Elias) — rarely trouble the pages of Thomas’s books.¹⁰⁴ The choice is intentional and logical, given the ethnographic project and the focus on early modern voices, but where *RDM* is concerned, it surely also reflected youthful ambition in which the author single-handedly mapped out a field of history that was previously *terra incognita*. These factors enable, but do not on their own explain, the appropriation of the book by witchcraft historians as a foundational text, eliding important works that inspired Thomas.¹⁰⁵ *RDM*, with its apparent lack of engagement with previous historians, offered a fresh start for a field whose early historiography was a source of some embarrassment. Indeed, the work plays an important role in a rather

¹⁰³ Thomas, *RDM*, 799–800.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas, *RDM* contains bibliographical notes on the history of astrology (335–6) and witchcraft (517–18). A rare exception occurs in his *Man in the Natural World* but the historians in question were wrong: 152. See also Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility*, 20.

¹⁰⁵ William E. H. Lecky receives a rare direct quotation at *RDM*, 594. For the often overlooked importance to *RDM* of other earlier works, by Wallace Notestein, C. L’Estrange Ewen and, perhaps especially, George Lyman Kittredge see Jan Machielsen, *The War on Witchcraft: Andrew Dickson White, George Lincoln Burr, and the Origins of Witchcraft Historiography* (Cambridge, 2021), 9–10, 45.

problematic and gendered historiographical narrative in which these subjects were ‘rescued’ out of the hands of ‘amateurs’, especially Margaret Murray, whose witch-cult theories had proven particularly durable.¹⁰⁶ The sense of timelessness that seems to surround *RDM* is thus in many ways manufactured.

This brings together the many reasons why *RDM* has such enduring appeal. As a framework of primary sources, seemingly unperturbed by the concerns of previous historians, *RDM* is a work out of time, its all-compassing nature giving it an air of finality. *RDM* is also fundamentally a polyphonous work because in many instances it is the people of early modern England who appear to be speaking in all their diversity. Thomas needed religion and magic, as well as chapters on witchcraft, astrology, fairies, and so on, because they are his fields and his fences. In 2010, Thomas described his books as ‘literary constructions’, ‘lack[ing] anything approaching scientific precision’.¹⁰⁷ In this sense, Thomas’s most revealing book is the one that is the least read: *The Oxford Book of Work* (1999), an ‘anthology’ of excerpts of ‘some intrinsic literary value’, which show ‘some of the ways in which the experience of work has changed over time’.¹⁰⁸ Thomas has conceded that ‘although I’ve written against the British empiricist approach, in the end I’m more a product of it than not’.¹⁰⁹ A 2006 essay reflecting on his social-scientific call to arms forty years later includes no overt retractions but expresses regret about its ‘arrogant’ tone as well as a great deal of hand-wringing about ‘the professional drift to intense specialization’ that once worried Trevor-Roper.¹¹⁰ These reflections make explicit what was there from the start, but visible only to the most astute contemporaries. While *RDM* breaks new

¹⁰⁶ For criticism of how Thomas and others framed their criticism of Murray, see Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London, 1996), 62–3; on the representation of amateurism as feminine, see Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

¹⁰⁷ Thomas, ‘Diary’.

¹⁰⁸ Keith Thomas (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Work* (first pubd 1999; Oxford, 2001), vi, vii.

¹⁰⁹ Pallares-Burke, *New History*, 95.

¹¹⁰ Keith Thomas, ‘New Ways Revisited’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 Oct. 2006; Pallares-Burke, *New History*, 93.

ground in terms of its subject matter and ambitions, the work was a battleground which pitted new social-scientific modes of history against the age-old tools of literary, empirical history. The latter won.

III

As we have indicated, over the past fifty years *RDM* has managed to withstand the shifting sands of early modern historiography remarkably well. It is difficult to find in recent scholarship arguments about magic and its 'decline' that were not already touched upon in Thomas's book. *RDM* is so wide-ranging, and its argumentative style so pre-emptive, careful and caveated, that Keith Thomas seems to have already thought of everything. At the same time, however, the field has developed in important ways and aspects of the book now look old-fashioned. This is particularly true for the concepts that structure it. If *RDM* contains the voices of early modern England, then the fences were of Thomas's own construction, as they are in his other works.¹¹¹ It would be wrong therefore to conclude that *RDM* is devoid of a conceptual apparatus. Three concepts that appear in the book's title — religion, popular beliefs and (the decline of) magic — are at the heart of *RDM*'s analysis, but their meaning needs to be divined. As Geertz observed in 1975, Thomas often uses 'his own words for classifying the beliefs and practices that he has unearthed' but 'his own assumptions about the workings of human societies and minds remain unexamined'.¹¹² Both as organizing principles and as categories of analysis, religion, magic and popular belief are key to *RDM* as they are to understanding the book's legacy in the discipline of history.

We have already suggested that historiographical overemphasis on the witchcraft chapters has led to misunderstandings of *RDM*. This preoccupation has also overshadowed what is perhaps an even more important theme of the book, one that was granted as many chapters as witchcraft: religion. Arguably *RDM* is as much about how early modern people experienced religion

¹¹¹ The concepts of 'fulfilment' and 'self-realization' at the heart of Thomas's *The Ends of Life* are, as he concedes, similarly anachronistic: Thomas, *Ends of Life*, 8, 12.

¹¹² Geertz, 'Anthropology of Religion and Magic', I, 74.

as it is about how they experienced magic. Both are crucial to the book's overarching argument, not only for the practical, organizational reasons we have already stressed but for conceptual ones as well. Here Thomas's debts to Max Weber's model of disenchantment are obvious.¹¹³ In *RDM*, not only did magic decline, but religion itself became more 'rational'. Thomas saw the medieval church — a tapestry of diverse rituals — as blurring the distinctions between two distinct concepts or categories, religion and magic, offering so many supernatural solutions to earthly problems that on a popular level it was viewed as 'a vast reservoir of magical power'. While Protestant reformers worked to 'take the magical elements out of religion', Thomas stressed that the practical problems for which the medieval church had provided answers had not gone away. He argued that the 'magical' solutions offered by various cunning folk filled the resulting gap in the market. The lack of clerical oversight that came with the abolition of the confessional, for instance, left a pressing need for guidance that Thomas suggested was ultimately supplied by astrologers and other 'wisemen'.¹¹⁴

This interpretation of the history of Christianity provided Thomas with an answer to the central problematic of his book: why intelligent people in the past took magic seriously, as a threat either to be refuted for intellectual (religious) reasons or as providing immediate, practical (magical) solutions for everyday problems. The opposition between religion and magic in *RDM* is underpinned therefore by more than envelopes and their discrete contents. It did not escape the attention of some early reviewers that the central question and answer of Thomas's book were both underpinned by a sense of incredulity. As Geertz pointed out, the book assumed that, 'as a means for overcoming specific practical difficulties, [magic was] necessarily ineffective' — hence Thomas's suggestion that when technological tools for solving mundane problems were eventually developed, magic declined.¹¹⁵ If magic *was* effective, Thomas's question would not

¹¹³ Discussed at n. 132 below.

¹¹⁴ See esp. Thomas, *RDM*, 51, 87, 182–8.

¹¹⁵ Geertz, 'Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I', 73. Cf. Thomas, *RDM*, 774–85. For Thomas's response, see Thomas, 'Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II', 95, 101–2.

need to be asked, at least not with the same urgency. This is in some ways a rather crude reading of *RDM*, as it ignores the extent to which it also discussed the intellectual and cultural frameworks of magic.¹¹⁶ Yet Geertz's driving point is still significant, particularly her insistence that 'those who performed the various rituals [Thomas] calls magical . . . did not consider the techniques ineffective, or mere placebos to quell anxiety'.¹¹⁷ To paraphrase her critique, functionalism ended up functioning as a way to 'rationalize' not just magic but also religion, enabling Thomas to focus on its material and social uses and largely avoid dealing with the fact that the witch-hunt occurred because early modern people simply *believed* in witches.¹¹⁸

In this regard, Thomas's handling of religion and magic is indebted not just to Weber, but also to his mentor Hill. By Thomas's own account, Hill's Marxism influenced neither his politics nor his scholarship. But it does seem to have shaped Thomas's interest in and materialist approach towards the social history of religion. Although the process of disenchantment sketched above is ultimately one about ideas, particularly about the forging of a more 'rational' religion, material circumstances are nevertheless fundamental. In *RDM*, both magic and religion offer solutions to immediate real-life needs. They are in many ways presented as rival products within a marketplace. It is not a coincidence, then, that the book's title recalls a work by an early member of the British Marxist school, although a Christian socialist: Richard Tawney's 1926 *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, which Thomas read while at grammar school. Moreover, as Geertz realized in 1975, the dry wit with which Thomas handles early modern beliefs and practices entails a crucial sense of distance between himself and his subjects. Thomas ultimately approaches religion as an outsider (and it is worth noting that he has been a patron of Humanists UK for many decades).¹¹⁹ In the 1960s and 70s, when the history

¹¹⁶ It also ignores the fact Thomas noted that many rejected magic *before* technological solutions arose.

¹¹⁷ Geertz, 'Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I', 74.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77–84.

¹¹⁹ Humanists UK could only tell us that Thomas's affiliation goes back to the 'pre-computer era' and therefore probably dates to the 1990s. We are grateful to Sophie Castle for her assistance.

of Christianity was increasingly written by ‘outsiders’ who were more detached and hostile to their subject, the book stood out to some early reviewers as overly ‘humane’.¹²⁰ Although apparently sympathetic to religion, *RDM*, in the words of Michael Bentley, still remains ‘a cultic statement of modernist secularism’.¹²¹ Thomas’s pose as author is reminiscent of a physician who is benevolent and kind, but nevertheless knows more — and knows better — than the patients they are diagnosing. Religion thus emerges as a symptom of or a response to some other, deeper need. Reading *RDM* fifty years later, we can even on occasion notice an undercurrent of wry amusement hovering underneath Thomas’s anecdotes. As Alexandra Walsham pointed out at our 2021 conference, there is an ambivalence in *RDM*, as if Thomas — like the early modern clerics whose writings he (like Weber) relied on — was ‘torn between fascination and disapproval, curiosity and censure’.¹²²

RDM’s reliance on the evidence offered by early modern clerics is critical to his approach to early modern religion and ensures that historiographically as well as methodologically the book looks both backwards and forwards. Thomas’s interest in ‘popular religion’ at a time when most historians of religion were preoccupied with the theology of elites was cutting edge. In taking popular religion seriously, *RDM* rode a new wave of scholarship, one that has since become a standard way of approaching early modern religion.¹²³ The book suggested that in separating religion and magic Protestant reformers ultimately produced a new conception of religion defined primarily by doctrine and belief rather than ritual and practice.¹²⁴ This was a pioneering

¹²⁰ Hugh McLeod, ‘The Long March of Religious History: Where Have We Travelled Since the Sixties, and Why?’ in Per Ingesman (ed.), *Religion as an Agent of Change: Crusades — Reformation — Pietism* (Leiden, 2015), 35. See Laslett, review of *RDM*, 8; Thompson, ‘Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context’, 55.

¹²¹ Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England’s Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 2005), 68. Bentley points out the similarity in outlook between Thomas and Trevor-Roper in this regard.

¹²² Alexandra Walsham, paper given at Conference on ‘50 Years of Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic*’.

¹²³ The Past and Present Society held a conference on Popular Religion in July 1966 which pointed to a new orthodoxy in the historiography of religion which placed ordinary lay people at the centre.

¹²⁴ See esp. Thomas, *RDM*, 88.

thesis that foreshadowed some recent scholarship and, as Robert Scribner pointed out, ‘might have led to a reconceptualization of the Reformation’s understanding of religion had less attention been devoted on [Thomas’s] discussion of witchcraft’.¹²⁵ On the other hand, *RDM*’s interpretation of popular belief, with its emphasis on a gulf between popular (practical) and elite (intellectual) religion, belongs to a distinct historiographical moment in the 1970s. In these years an elite/popular binary was based on the conviction that religious orthodoxies were poorly understood by the laity and that the religion of the majority was essentially pagan and superstitious.¹²⁶ Indeed, while Lucien Febvre had argued in his classic *Le problème de l’incroyance au XVI^e siècle* (1942) that there was no atheism in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, Thomas — much like Hill in *The World Turned Upside Down* — saw popular religion as essentially practical atheism. Medieval and early modern peasants, Thomas argued, had little to no knowledge of the Bible or of Church doctrine; they related to their religion via ritual, not dogma.¹²⁷ In making these claims, Thomas drew largely on the writings of clerics, who complained about the laity in exactly these terms. Thomas’s use of ‘religion’ and ‘magic’ similarly followed the vocabulary of divines who looked down on popular religion and increasingly lumped together — just like *RDM* — what was in reality a miscellaneous group of ‘magical’ practices that were often in rivalry with one another. (Historians have recently asked, for example, whether astrology really fits into a book about the history of magic).¹²⁸ Arguably, the perspective that guides the analysis of *RDM* is thus less ‘popular beliefs’ and more ‘elite ideas about popular beliefs’. Most of *RDM*’s examples are filtered through the lens of

¹²⁵ R. W. Scribner, ‘The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the “Disenchantment of the World”’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xxiii, 3 (1993), 476. For recent scholarship offering a similar reading of pre-modern religion, see Ethan Shagan, *The Birth of Modern Belief: Faith and Judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 2019); Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, 2015).

¹²⁶ See, for example, Jean Delumeau’s *Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire* (Paris, 1971); James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey, 1825–1875* (Oxford, 1976).

¹²⁷ A section in Thomas, *RDM* entitled ‘Ignorance and Indifference’ (189–97) cites Hill’s studies of plebeian irreligion.

¹²⁸ See, for example, Hunter, *Decline of Magic*, 2.

elite writers.¹²⁹ His later works, preoccupied with self-realization and civility, are similarly focused on elites and, indeed, are inevitably so, given that the source base on which Thomas built his ethnography was ‘dependent on the opinions expressed by the more articulate people of the time’.¹³⁰ By contrast, more recent work on lay religion, most notably Eamon Duffy’s *Stripping of the Altars* (1990), which literally takes *RDM* as its starting point, is resolute in its attempts to see early modern lay religion on its own terms, rather than as it was presented by usually hostile elites.¹³¹

Thomas’s reliance on elite voices also complements the book’s approach to the ‘decline of magic’. Once again, much like Weber before him, Thomas’s account of the history of Christianity largely took as straightforward the rhetoric of Protestant reformers, who saw the Reformation as mostly successful in overcoming ‘superstitious’ Catholicism. In Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5), the sociologist presented the Reformation’s rejection of sacramental magic as a critical moment in the West’s linear trajectory towards modernity: the famous ‘disenchantment of the world’. Thomas’s evident debts to Weber are not acknowledged in *RDM*, although in his response to Geertz in 1972 he described the book as a demonstration of ‘a hardening of mental divisions, between natural and supernatural, between the moral order and the natural order; which, I take it, is what Max Weber meant by the disenchantment of the world’.¹³² Although Thomas deviated from Weber’s model by suggesting that the Reformation accidentally (and temporarily) promoted the advance of astrology, ancient prophecies, etc., underlying his account is the same modernizing reading of the Reformation in which Protestantism emerges as ‘rational’ and Catholicism as backwards and superstitious.

In certain scholarly circles, particularly in the fields in which the concept originated, this modernizing model of disenchantment

¹²⁹ Examples of this pervade *RDM*; see for instance the citations on 189–97.

¹³⁰ Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility*, 9.

¹³¹ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven, 1992), 1–2.

¹³² Thomas, ‘Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II’, 98.

is alive and well.¹³³ To many historians today, however, *RDM*'s reading of the Reformation now seems a clear product of its time. Geoff Eley has reflected that 'the massive prestige of using developmentalist frameworks based on modernization theory' in the middle decades of the twentieth century meant that while historians 'wrote their own histories', they did so 'not always under conceptual conditions of their own choosing'.¹³⁴ After all, although most historians in the 1960s pushed back on attempts to absorb social scientific methods into the historical discipline, for a time it seemed to many younger scholars that this might soon be the only game in town. Of course, as suggested above, the victory of social-scientific modes of history was never complete. *RDM* shows that even its apostles did not quite practice what they preached. Developmental–evolutionary models of culture soon came under heavy criticism from social scientists as well as from historians, while social history has been overtaken by the cultural turn.¹³⁵ However subtle, the modernizing thesis implicit in *RDM* and Thomas's wider ethnographic project has not aged well. In comparison to the story presented in *RDM*, more recent work tends to present the Reformation as a slow, gradual process and emphasizes continuity over rupture.¹³⁶ Although the success of the reformers' separation of magic and religion was essential to Thomas's thesis, today the Reformation is more often seen as a failure.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that the now-standard periodization 'early modern' — which as we saw above Thomas considered using in his title — is itself tied up in older assumptions about the linear progression of history and the importance of this period in the

¹³³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2012). This tendency is present even in Euan Cameron's *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250–1750* (Oxford, 2010).

¹³⁴ Eley, *Crooked Line*, 41.

¹³⁵ See, for example, Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA, 1989); Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (eds.), *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, CA, 1999).

¹³⁶ Scribner's work was central to this shift. Cf. *RDM*, 85.

¹³⁷ Christopher Haigh, 'Success and Failure in the English Reformation', *Past and Present*, no. 173 (Nov. 2001).

making of ‘modernity’.¹³⁸ Indeed, in the last few decades the very concept of ‘modernity’ itself has been deconstructed and laced with ever more ‘complications, ambiguities, and seeming paradoxes’.¹³⁹

The ‘decline of magic’ framework has also attracted more general critiques.¹⁴⁰ With his own carefully caveated prose in the book’s ‘lame’ conclusion, Thomas may well have sown the first seeds of doubt. The usefulness of the model was already questioned by several early reviewers. Bowker remarked that perhaps we are not dealing with decline, but with the growth of tolerance, while Geertz argued that what really calls for explanation is not the ‘decline’ of magic but the emergence of the term ‘magic’ itself.¹⁴¹ Historians have since undermined the assumption of any decline of magic in real terms (which is, after all, as Thomas himself noted back in 1971, unquantifiable), and have pushed back the diminishing fortunes of magic amongst the middle classes from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.¹⁴² Even the twenty-first century, it turns out, is still enchanted.¹⁴³ Moving away from ‘decline’, some historians have experimented with alternative models and metaphors, including fragmentation, migration, marginalization and dislocation.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁸ Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas* (Cambridge, 2010).

¹³⁹ Karl Bell, *The Magical Imagination: Magic and Modernity in Urban England, 1780–1914* (Cambridge, 2012), 14. As Bruno Latour put it, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, Alexandra Walsham, ‘The Reformation and “The Disenchantment of the World” Reassessed’, *Historical Journal*, li, 2 (2008).

¹⁴¹ Bowker, review of *RDM*, 366; Geertz, ‘Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I’, 76.

¹⁴² See, for example, Thomas Waters, *Cursed Britain: A History of Witchcraft and Black Magic in Modern Times* (New Haven, 2019).

¹⁴³ Michael Saler, ‘Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review’, *American Historical Review*, cxi, 3 (2006).

¹⁴⁴ John Henry, ‘The Fragmentation of Renaissance Occultism and the Decline of Magic’, *History of Science*, xlv, 1 (2008); Alexandra Walsham, ‘Migrations of the Holy: Explaining Religious Change in Medieval and Early Modern Europe’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, xlv, 2 (2014); Rienk Vermij and Hiro Hirai (eds.), ‘Marginalization of Astrology’, special issue of *Early Science and Medicine*, xxii, 5–6 (2017); William G. Pooley, ‘Doubt and the Dislocation of Magic: France, 1790–1940’, *Past and Present* (2023 forthcoming), <gtad002, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtad002>>.

But much still remains to be answered. Even if we discard the disenchantment model, it remains undeniable that *something* changed across the period, but what, when, where, why and — crucially — for whom? Moreover, were these changes primarily economic, technological, social, cultural, religious, or intellectual? For Thomas, ‘much of what historians call social change can be regarded as a process of mental reclassification, of re-drawing conceptual lines and boundaries’, and in this sense *RDM* is also a contribution to intellectual history.¹⁴⁵ Although Thomas considered science’s role in magic’s decline, he remained puzzled by the strange fact that the intellectual legitimacy of astrology and witch beliefs deteriorated *without* the composition of new arguments against their reality.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, Hunter’s *The Decline of Magic* (2020) recently concluded that intellectual argument was *not* responsible for these changes.¹⁴⁷ As intellectual and cultural historians ourselves, however, we would suggest that intellectual history still has further contributions to make to many of the questions that remain unanswered in the knotty history of magic, religion and science — even if, as Thomas’s book taught us, historians should not forget the fact that beliefs and ideas gain much of their power and prestige from their social relevance.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, historians studying these questions would do well to turn once again, as Thomas did in the 1960s, to social scientists, who have been studying with renewed vigour belief and unbelief, the relationships between in- and out-groups, the formation of elite and other identities, and the processes through which we change our minds.¹⁴⁹

Upon discovering that he had post-dated the decline of the Roman Empire by over a century, Edward Gibbon shrugged his shoulders: ‘Where error is irreparable, repentance is useless’. The author of *RDM* has long taken the same view about his *magnum opus*.¹⁵⁰ Since he ‘corrected some errors and pruned a

¹⁴⁵ Thomas, ‘Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II’, 98.

¹⁴⁶ Thomas, *RDM*, 681.

¹⁴⁷ Hunter, *Decline of Magic*, 46, 197 ff.

¹⁴⁸ Thomas, ‘Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II’, 102.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, William Pooley, ‘Who Believes in Belief?’, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, xvi, 3 (2021).

¹⁵⁰ Thomas, ‘Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II’, 109; Thomas, paper given at Conference on ‘50 Years of Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic*’.

few extravagances' for the 1973 Penguin reissue, Thomas has not revisited the subject of magic.¹⁵¹ In his 1975 response to Geertz, he conceded that 'if I were to rewrite my field notes . . . I should probably now cast them into a slightly different conceptual framework'. But, he went on, 'that is something which the critical reader can easily do for himself'. When Geertz challenged his treatment of 'religion' and 'magic', Thomas wearily replied 'if the labels do not prove helpful we can discard them. The facts will be the same without their labels'.¹⁵² Thomas's response reminds us again of how *RDM* did not in the end herald in a new form of scientific history. Yet while it holds on to the empirical methods of old, as a work of ethnography (rather than theory) it continues to open up new areas for historical investigation. Ultimately, today Thomas's book sits in between older and newer approaches to the history of religion and magic. In its methods as well as its conceptual framing, it looks Janus-like simultaneously backwards and forwards.

* * *

What, therefore, is the legacy of *Religion and the Decline of Magic*? What is the value of the work for historians today? Most obviously, the book continues to embody the expansion of what historians study. In 2006, Thomas considered the broadening of history 'beyond recognition' the 'greatest triumph' of the *Times Literary Supplement* manifesto of 1966.¹⁵³ Yates's suggestion in 1972 that the book was one 'to keep on one's shelf for constant reference' has also proved prescient for many modern readers.¹⁵⁴ Like Thomas's other books, *RDM*'s kaleidoscope of colourful stories still functions as an invaluable sourcebook for students of early modern culture, its index a first port of call for many research projects. More unexpectedly, the book has also become something of a bible for occultists seeking to learn more about the history of their own practices. Ironically, given the work's supposed scientific origins, *RDM* has also joined the ranks of the great works of literary history. As early as 1979, Lawrence Stone observed that *RDM* represented 'a return to old [narrative]

¹⁵¹ Thomas, *RDM*, xi.

¹⁵² Thomas, 'Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II', 108–9, 97.

¹⁵³ Thomas, 'New Ways Revisited', 4.

¹⁵⁴ Yates, review of *RDM*, 213.

ways of writing history'.¹⁵⁵ The publication in 2012 of a handsome edition by the Folio Society cemented the book's status as a classic. In a preface later serialized in the *New York Review of Books*, no less a literary giant than Hilary Mantel called attention to 'The Magic of Keith Thomas'. Mantel pointed not just to the book's 'undiminished . . . richness and freshness' — the facets that propelled our analysis — but also to the ultimately literary reasons why the book is so loved: 'for its generosity, for its humor, for the rewards on every page'.¹⁵⁶ Thomas's prose cannot be called Gibbonian in the way Trevor-Roper's was — it is too understated for that — but in their practice and view of history and religion the two Oxonians were ultimately not that far apart.

RDM's timelessness notwithstanding, the decline of magic does look different fifty years on. Yet that detracts little from *RDM*'s value. While Thomas himself has reflected that, in this age of *Early English Books Online*, 'much of what it has taken me a lifetime to build up by painful accumulation can now be achieved by a moderately diligent student in the course of a morning', the truth is that qualitative research accumulated over many years is not that easily replicated, let alone dislodged.¹⁵⁷ Thomas once likened the writing of history to the painting of landscapes, claiming that historical interpretations do not supersede one another, any more than 'a landscape of Cézanne supersedes a landscape of Constable'.¹⁵⁸ A magical Cézanne, a 'Religion and the Dispersal of Magic', does not yet exist, but if it were to appear, it would sit comfortably alongside *RDM*. A work of literature, a work of reference, a polyphonous ethnographic

¹⁵⁵ Lawrence Stone, 'The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History', *Past and Present*, no. 85 (Nov. 1979), 18.

¹⁵⁶ Mantel, 'Magic of Keith Thomas'.

¹⁵⁷ Thomas, 'Diary'. For a more optimistic take on old versus new methods, see Anthony Grafton, *Worlds Made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 288–326.

¹⁵⁸ Vries, 'Historians Don't Have Any Ideas', 106; Peter Burke, Brian Harrison and Paul Slack (eds.), editors' introductory chapter 'Keith Thomas', in *Civil Histories: Essays Presented to Sir Keith Thomas* (Oxford, 2000), 21.

encounter with the people of England, and a spur to the historical imagination, this is a book that is difficult to exhaust, offering something new with every (re)reading, presenting different faces to new generations of historians.

Jan Machielsen, 
Cardiff University, UK

Michelle Pfeffer, 
Magdalen College, Oxford, UK