

Keith Thomas, **Religion and the Decline of Magic**. Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1971.
Reviewed in **History Today**, 1981.

Ten years after the first publication of this work it is beginning to become possible to place it in historical perspective. We can now see it as a major achievement in the context of English historical writing during the last two centuries, for it effectively brought together two disciplines. The divorce of history and anthropology was of relatively brief duration. In the eighteenth century the great French and Scottish philosophers, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Ferguson, Hume, Millar, Smith, combined anthropological and historical material in pursuing their grand speculations. This tradition continued in the nineteenth century in the work of men like Morgan, Maine, Maitland and in the sociology of Marx and Weber. It was only in the relatively brief period between approximately 1914 and 1950 that the two disciplines grew apart, anthropologists rejecting 'conjectural history' and historians showing little interest in studies of 'simple' societies. In 1961 Evans-Pritchard gave an important lecture on 'Anthropology and History' which argued that they were almost identical disciplines. Among those most influenced was Keith Thomas who published an outline of the possibilities of collaboration some two years later in an article on 'History and Anthropology' in the journal **Past and Present**. Three years later a briefer account was provided in an article entitled 'The Tools and Job' in an issue of the Times Literary Supplement (7 April 1966) on 'New Ways in History'. It is one thing to preach the re-unification of a fractured tradition, it is another to practice it successfully. Historians and anthropologists therefore awaited a major work of synthesis with excitement tinged with scepticism. Their highest expectations were not disappointed. In 1971 there was published a work which is, in effect, four short books - on religion, magic, astrology and witchcraft - combined with four long essays - on ancient prophecies, ghosts and fairies, times and omens, with a general synthesis and conclusion. This work of 716 pages made an obvious allusion to Tawney's **Religion and the Rise of Capitalism**; it immediately became apparent that it was in the same class as the most important work of Tawney, Bloch or Maitland.

This is not the place to comment in detail on the book's influence on historical research. Yet it should be noted that it is within the discipline of history that its influence has been greatest. It opened up new ways of using well known sources as well as making historians in general aware of classes of material with which they were unfamiliar, for instance the records of the ecclesiastical courts, astrologer's notebooks and numerous minor literary works. The book mapped out new areas for research in the intellectual and social history of the past; topics such as fairy beliefs, popular prophecies, village healers, as well as innumerable others became legitimate subjects of research. The book also contrived to throw new light on older topics such as popular religion or the origins of science. It took hitherto neglected and despised beliefs seriously and showed their logical coherence. There can be little doubt that our whole idea of the early modern period in England has been transformed by this work. Furthermore, it made it plain that anthropological work on other non-industrial societies was of great value in understanding the past in England. The central theme of the book, Weber's 'disenchantment of the world' is a familiar one. Yet the virtuosity and erudition with which the central concern is pursued is dazzling.

It is perhaps this very virtuosity and erudition which help to explain why the book has had much less obvious influence within social anthropology. While it is true that it is one of the few works of English

Copyright: Alan Macfarlane 2002

history which are set as reading for undergraduates, alongside classics such as Bloch's **Feudal Society** of Cohn's **Pursuit of the Millenium**, the influence on professional social anthropologists is difficult to detect. There are a number of reasons for this. The book is inimitable and overwhelming. The clarity of style, the intelligence, the energy, the vast knowledge of contemporary literary sources cannot be copied. It is easy to see that the value of the work is in the detail rather than in any grand theory or message or even in a particular method. The book is particularistic rather than being filled with ideas than can easily be translated to use in other cultures. Indeed the theoretical side is not novel for anthropologists since it is very largely based on theories developed within British anthropology during the very period when the two disciplines had grown apart. For anthropologists, the book is a consummate piece of ethnography, the application of theories in a particularly interesting setting. There are two special reasons for excitement. Firstly, the author has 'brought anthropology home' to the very society from which many of the anthropologists themselves have come. He has turned the mirror on the society that created anthropology and thereby shown many of the historical roots of the very linguistic and social distinctions employed by anthropology. Secondly, he has been forced to adapt a basically timeless, synchronic, approach in order to make it useful in studying a long period of time. He has thus begun to show how anthropology can deal with historical change. A final obvious reason for a relatively slight influence within anthropology is that intellectual fashions have changed. The theories and ethnographies upon which Thomas based his work were under heavy attack in the very period during which he was writing. This onslaught is particularly associated with the French structuralism associated with the work of Levi-Strauss. This brand of structuralism is even more profoundly anti-historical than the structural-functionalism dominant in the period of the divorce of the two disciplines. It has been difficult to show that such structuralism has any real value for historians.

While the overt and obvious influence of the book within social anthropology is difficult to detect, there can be no doubt that potentially and at a deeper level it is of very great significance. As the 'primitive' societies which many anthropologists studied disappear, practitioners are turning in increasing numbers to historical material. **Religion and the Decline of Magic** opens up for them, as it does for historians, a vast new territory. It has furthermore been a major factor in bringing together the disciplines. While it is still difficult to point to successful attempts to combine history and anthropology, it is immensely reassuring to know that it can be done and done so well. As with the discovery of the atom bomb, it is not necessary to know in detail how to make it; the important thing is to know that it is possible.