

The Secret of Bryn Estyn: The Making of a Modern Witch Hunt by R. Webster, Orwell Press, Oxford, 2005. 722 pp. ISBN 0-951592-24-6 (Hbk), £25.00

Richard Webster sets out to tell the ‘story of the story’ of Bryn Estyn, the approved school at the centre of the North Wales child abuse scandal. It’s a story that has everything: personal animus, fantasy, intrigue, alleged Masonic conspiracy, bizarre sex acts and courtroom drama. Webster leads us from the early investigations, which found no evidence of systematic abuse in children’s homes in North Wales, through the persistent rumours that led to the reopening of criminal and civil inquiries. He dissects the Tribunal of Inquiry set up under Sir Ronald Waterhouse and describes how the belief in organized abuse in children’s homes spread from North Wales to nearby Cheshire and Merseyside and to most police force areas in England and Wales.

Webster systematically deconstructs the ‘official’ version of what went on in North Wales. He locates the case in the interplay of circumstances which brought together a particular cast of characters at local level. However, this in itself was not enough to bring about the cataclysmic results it did. For that to happen, strange though it may seem, Clwyd had to meet California. The child protection movement that emerged there in the 1980s, under Roland Summit, propounded particular orthodoxies around believing children—no matter how seemingly bizarre their allegations—and repressed memory.

Now North Wales constabulary was unlikely to be taken in by such psychobabble, being used to old-fashioned evidence-gathering. And, of course, those making the allegations of abuse in North Wales were not children but adults. However, in coming out as ‘unbelievers’ in failing to find evidence of abuse in earlier investigations, the police were accused of being party to an elaborate cover-up. In this febrile and increasingly politicized climate, police officers were coopted to the child protection movement. To a greater or lesser degree, they swallowed the new orthodoxies about widespread organized abuse and affording ‘victims’ opportunities to disclose. All of this created a powerful narrative supporting the existence of wide-scale abuse. Ideology supplanted evidence.

When the claims came to be tested in court, the power of professional ideology was compounded by a legal system that applies differential standards of proof to sexual or moral matters. Evidence of similar fact (or similar allegation) was accepted as though volume equalled veracity. The conduct of the subsequent Tribunal of Inquiry under Sir Ronald Waterhouse was compromised from the outset in falling prey to the confirmatory bias that student social workers are cautioned to resist.

Webster is not content to expose the inconsistencies, and at times downright untruths, of so many of the allegations of abuse made in North Wales and elsewhere. He seeks to understand how such a situation could arise. This is where, as a cultural historian and biographer of Freud, he comes into his own. He locates North Wales

Book Review

Edited by Bernard Gallagher

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and the wider search for organized abuse in care homes within a persistent strand of the Christian tradition for demonological fantasy and resultant witch hunts, especially when children and sex are involved. Witch hunts, contrary to popular assumption, are not the preserve of the mob. They depend on the support of the wider establishment. In North Wales, it was broadsheets rather than the tabloid press that maintained the inquisitorial momentum. Quoting Montesquieu, Webster notes, ‘There is no crueller tyranny than that which is perpetrated under the shield of law and in the name of justice’ (p. 537).

There are a number of tantalizing ironies in Webster’s thesis. How could social workers, who might rail against the Hutton Inquiry (into the death of the government scientist Dr David Kelly) as an establishment cover-up, be so credulous when it came to Waterhouse? And how could the dominant humanistic rationalism of social work be so seduced by secularized, apocalyptic fantasy?

This is brilliant stuff. It is fair, measured and brave, seeking, not to blame, but to explicate. Webster does not deny abuse—only the assumption that it was endemic in residential child care. If his position is accepted (and he argues compellingly), then the social work agenda in relation to residential child care has proceeded over the past decade on a flawed prospectus—one predicated on the existence of widespread institutional abuse and the need to regulate it out. As Webster says, we compound a historical ingratitude to care workers by demonizing them.

This book should be read by anyone involved in child protection investigations and indeed anyone interested in the human condition more generally. It does not make comfortable reading. It raises profound questions about principles of natural justice in relation to child abuse investigations. Nevertheless, Webster brings an intellectual rigour to the subject that cannot be ignored. Child protection, in relation to residential child care in particular, cannot persist in a facile belief in demons and, even more questionably, in ‘whistleblowers’ to bring them to justice. The charge of complicity in witch hunts has been levelled at child protection before. In this case, if the author is to be believed, it is not without substance.

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