

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Why the preternatural matters

By David Winter, Ph.D.



Walking in Suður-Pingeyjarsýsla, Iceland

Why this research is important

Our research falls within the domain of cultural history or the “history of ideas.” The study of the “preternatural” is an evolving investigative category, which seeks to understand historical attitudes towards the uncanny, the spooky, and the diabolical. We are especially interested in how people before ca. 1750 claimed to understand and “experience” demonic powers. While this might seem obscure or odd, by examining how Western society developed the habit of seeing the world in such starkly oppositional terms, we can begin to explain why notions of cosmological “evil” still linger, and how demonization and Othering continue to occur in secular contexts.

What you need to know

Knowing Demons, Knowing Spirits in the Early Modern Period (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2018) is an edited collection of essays that looks at the many ways of knowing—and knowing about—“preternatural” beings, that is, demons, angels, fairies, and other spirits that premodern Europeans (i.e., before ca. 1750) believed inhabited their world. We examined how premodern people understood the various types of spiritual entities that they believed dwelled invisibly, but meaningfully, in the realm just beyond (and occasionally within) the limits of human perception.

How the research was conducted

Using primary documents from ca. 1500-1750, the contributors examined spirit belief during a period of profound epistemological disruption. Though “science” was gaining traction as an explanatory model, many Europeans also accepted, simultaneously, the “reality” of spirits and demons: they conducted exorcisms, believed in witchcraft and alchemy, and even used charms and crystals to summon demons. While some might view these “ways of knowing” as contradictory, we see them as logically consistent within the broad parameters of the early-modern worldview. Thus, we designed the book to emphasize the internal coherence of demonism in early

modern thought—something which historians of science have traditionally dismissed or rationalized away.

What the researchers found

The devil's existence as an explanatory mechanism still matters today in ways that people sometimes fail to appreciate. While the early modern era challenged and threatened to dethrone the devil of scripture, there remain substantial forms of secular demonization and Othering in the modern world. Our book has traced a significant part of that legacy.

How this research can be used

Knowing Demons, Knowing Spirits contributes to a substantial discussion among scholars about demonic epistemology in the early modern age. It has also served as a springboard to stimulate further research. For example, with my co-editors, I am organizing a major conference on the history of the devil to be held at King's College, Halifax, in November 2020. We have also submitted a book proposal to Routledge for a work to be entitled, "The Routledge History of the Devil in the Western Tradition." Independently, I will also explore the boundaries between the natural and the preternatural in a proposed sabbatical project: a translation of Bishop Oddur Einarsson's *Descriptio Islandiae*. This is a sixteenth-century natural history of Iceland that has never before appeared in English. In it, Oddur attempted to catalogue the flora and fauna of the island in proto-scientific terms and to describe the island's geology and volcanism, but—as a good Icelander—he also wanted to tell his readers about the habits of trolls and elves. The work will examine the introduction of humanist and scientific learning into Iceland and explore how Lutheran scholars such as Bishop Oddur, a student of Tycho Brahe, reconciled their pastoral obligations with an emancipated curiosity about the structure and operation of

the natural world—a world in which demons and spirits were vital constituents.

About the researchers

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Publications on this research

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