The War on Witchcraft

Andrew Dickson White, George Lincoln Burr, and the Origins of Witchcraft Historiography

Elements in Magic

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Abstract: Historians of the early modern witch-hunt often begin histories of their field with the theories propounded by Margaret Murray and Montague Summers in the 1920s. They overlook the lasting impact of nineteenth-century scholarship, in particular the contributions by two American historians: Andrew Dickson White (1832–1918) and George Lincoln Burr (1857–1938). Study of their work and scholarly personae contributes to our understanding of the deeply embedded popular understanding of the witch-hunt as representing an irrational past in opposition to an enlightened present. Yet the men’s relationship with each other, and with witchcraft sceptics – the heroes of their studies – also demonstrates how their writings were part of a larger war against ‘unreason’. This Element thus lays bare the ways scholarly masculinity helped shape witchcraft historiography, a field of study often seen as dominated by feminist scholarship. Such meditation on past practice may foster reflection on contemporary models of history writing.

Keywords: witchcraft historiography, history of science, Andrew Dickson White, George Lincoln Burr, masculinity

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