

## MAGIC IN MERLIN'S REALM

Belief in magic was, until relatively recent times, widespread in Britain, yet the impact of such belief on determinative political events has frequently been overlooked. In his wide-ranging new book, Francis Young explores the role of occult traditions in the history of the island of Great Britain: Merlin's realm. He argues that, while the enduring magus and artificer invented by Geoffrey of Monmouth was a powerful model for a succession of actual royal magical advisers (including Roger Bacon and John Dee), monarchs nevertheless often lived in fear of hostile sorcery, while at other times they even attempted magic themselves. Successive governments were simultaneously fascinated by astrology and alchemy, yet also deeply wary of the possibility of treasonous spellcraft. Whether deployed in warfare, rebellion or propaganda, occult traditions were of central importance to British history and, as the author reveals, these dark arts of magic and politics remain entangled to this day.

FRANCIS YOUNG holds a PhD in History from the University of Cambridge and is the author of fourteen books, including *Magic as a Political Crime in Medieval and Early Modern England* (2017). He is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society and routinely broadcasts for BBC Radio on history, religion and folklore.

‘Learned, judicious and rich in entertaining detail.

I haven’t enjoyed a history book this much in ages.’

– *Tom Holland, author of **Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind***

‘The history of magic – in comparison to the history of witchcraft in Britain – has been under-researched in the Anglophone academy. The relationship of occult traditions to the politics of the realm has thus far been virtually ignored. A ground-breaking study of the history of occult traditions – of ‘high’ magic (elite, literate, clerical and courtly) as compared to ‘low magic’ (popular, non-literate, non-clerical) – is therefore to be warmly welcomed. This book is full of fascinating and previously little-known vignettes on the significant influence of the role of magic and the occult in the history of British politics, most of which will be unknown to the non-specialist. It would be an excellent text for undergraduate and postgraduate programs in the history of the occult.’

– *Philip C. Almond, Emeritus Professor of Religion, University of Queensland*

‘A terrific book. Francis Young is quite correct to say that no such survey has been done before, and the evidence presented by him unequivocally demonstrates that politics in pre-modern Britain cannot be fully understood without some attention to the notion and practice of magic and the occult sciences in general, such as alchemy and astrology. The author has also brought together a tremendous amount of scholarship in this volume which is commendable in its own right.’

– *Frank Klaassen, Associate Professor of History, University of Saskatchewan*

‘This is an important and accomplished project which demonstrates that – contrary to received opinion, and in modernity as well as the past – magical beliefs are central to political, religious and social lives, as conventionally categorised. I think the book will provoke much interest and comment with its claim that magic is as important as religion, and think too that there are likely to be over the next few years a series of books and theses that render that claim stronger. Magic’s time has indeed come – and in that development the book will lead from the front. It will be accessible to a wide range of readers, written as it is with a light and engaging touch. The scope and detail never overwhelm, while the author’s definition of magic and his inclusions and exclusions are convincing.’

– *Marion Gibson, Professor of Renaissance and Magical Literatures, University of Exeter*

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*Merlin Dreams* by Alan Lee. A contemporary rendering of the great enchanter.

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*A History of Occult Politics in  
Britain*

FRANCIS YOUNG



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*In memory of a modern Merlin  
Peter John Payne (1924–2019)  
pioneer of computer-aided design*

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## PREFACE

Understanding the religious, philosophical and ideological beliefs of people in the past is essential for making sense of political events, yet historians have sometimes given short shrift to beliefs about magic and the occult in the realm of politics. It should come as no surprise that magic and politics are closely linked in history; both, after all, are concerned with the exercise of power. This book seeks to restore occult traditions to the central place they often occupied in the history of British politics. Monarchs from Henry III to William III and Mary II received (and occasionally acted on) the advice of magicians, who often modelled themselves on the character of Merlin – the original royal magical adviser. To give just a few examples, accusations of magic played a key role in the accession of Richard III, the downfall of Anne Boleyn and the success of the English Reformation. The idea of a global British empire was born out of the magical imagination of John Dee, while mystical Kabbalism inspired Britain's first experiment in the toleration of followers of a non-Christian religion. No less than religious belief, belief in magic is inseparable from the political histories of England and Scotland: the kingdoms of 'Merlin's realm' of Great Britain.

The idea for this book emerged while I was writing an earlier book, *Magic as a Political Crime in Medieval and Early Modern England: A History of Sorcery and Treason*

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(2017), which focussed specifically on hostile acts of magic (real or perceived) directed against England's monarchs. In February 2017, just as I was sending the final text of *Magic as a Political Crime* to press, reports emerged from the United States of a campaign by American witches and Neopagans to 'bind' President Donald Trump, using rituals remarkably redolent of ones I discussed in the book. I just had time to include a brief allusion to this phenomenon in the book before it went to press, but I was astonished that a book on what I then considered a rather abstruse dimension of medieval and early modern England suddenly seemed relevant to modern politics. It became clear to me that the entanglement of politics and occult thinking was far more important – and more enduring – than I had previously considered. A book dealing much more thoroughly with this theme was needed, not just for the advancement of historical knowledge but also to help navigate a new and unfamiliar landscape where talk of occult power was now part of political discourse.

As fevered political rhetoric has become ever more extreme (and, arguably, separated from reality) in an increasingly divided Europe and America, accusations of attempted thought control by infinitely evil adversaries and allegations of ritualistic Satanic conspiracies have become almost commonplace. Politics since 2016 has taken a turn into magical thinking that scarcely anyone would have foreseen a decade ago, leaving many political commentators incredulous and uncomprehending at the re-emergence of forms of political rhetoric that hitherto seemed more at home in the seventeenth century. For those who study the history of witchcraft and magic,



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Preface

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however, these are familiar developments: time and time again in British history, extreme political stress and uncertainty has resulted in people resorting to supernatural claims. Indeed, in many parts of the world magic and politics have never ceased to be intertwined. In light of these developments, this book is a historical ‘guide for the perplexed’ for those seeking to understand the origins of ideas of occult political power and influence that, contrary to all expectations, remain important today.

I am immensely grateful to my publisher, Alex Wright, for keeping faith with the idea of this book and seeing it through to publication. I thank Dr Graham John Wheeler for kindly reading and commenting on several draft chapters; Dr Joanne Edge for her helpful pointers on several matters; and the reviewers appointed by Cambridge University Press for their thorough and constructive comments on the draft manuscript. I thank the ever-helpful staff of the British Library, Cambridge University Library and the Bodleian Library, and I gratefully acknowledge the permission of the Trustees of the British Library Board, the British Museum and the Royal Museums at Greenwich to reproduce images from their collections. I extend my special thanks to Alan Lee for permitting the use of his artwork in the cover design. Last but not least, I am grateful to my wife, Rachel, and daughters, Abigail and Talitha, for bearing with my frequent imaginative journeys into Merlin’s realm.

Spelling has been lightly modernised in all quotations. Translations from Latin, Scots and other languages are my own unless otherwise stated. All dates are given as Old Style before 1752 and New Style thereafter, with the year starting on 1 January.

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