

BOOK REVIEW

Visions of the Future: Almanacs, Time, and Cultural Change, **Maureen Perkins**, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 270 pp.; hardback; £40; ISBN: 0-19-812178-4

This is a brilliant book, combining thorough scholarship with original insight. It should deepen our understanding of a remarkable number of subjects. Essentially, it concerns a key part of the process of rationalisation that has been so instrumental in producing what we now recognize as modernity.

Perkins has much to tell us about astrological almanacs, to whose importance Keith Thomas first alerted us; in this capacity, she builds on and extends the excellent work of Bernard Capp. There is also fascinating material here on comic almanacs and Australian almanacs - the latter including an example of cultural influence by a colony (in the person of James Ross) on metropolitan discourse.

But more important is her use of almanacs to gain access to the world of popular belief, and the tensions in its relationships with elite opinion. Here the pioneer was Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* and Perkins' book easily holds its own with subsequent scholarship by David Vincent and others. (I can't help feeling it a pity, however, that she passed over E. P. Thompson's apt refinement of 'popular' as 'plebeian'.)

At the heart of her account is the campaign by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in the third decade of the nineteenth century against the Stationers' Company, monopolist publisher of almanacs. Led by Lord Brougham and Charles Knight, the SDUK targeted such long-standing annual titles as *Poor Robin*, *Partridge's* and especially *Vox Stellarum*, popularly known as *Moore's*, with its mysterious hieroglyphic and astrological prophecy. In 1800, a minimum of one person in every seven in England bought an almanac - which was read, of course, by several more - and far and away the most popular was *Moore's*. In 1838, its best year, it sold over half a million copies, netting the Company of Stationers £6,414.

Significantly, the editorial voice of *Moore's* was unimpeachably Whig, comprising a set of convictions shared by the SDUK. But the latter had correctly identified the former as a major site and source of 'the superstitions of the vulgar' (in the characteristic terms of the

Athenaeum, in 1828) and, as such, resistance to its desire to advance the scientific management and rationalisation of society. The goal, as Perkins puts it, was nothing less than 'a transformation of consciousness, from one which was connected to a pre-Enlightenment world of correspondences and humours perpetuated by popular almanacs, to one in which empirical observation and rational enquiry were the standard....[and] in which the natural world could be placed without recourse to 'irrational' concepts.' (p. 58)

Of course, the SDUK's empirico-rationalism was far from neutral, proceeding by a series of conflation linking 'useful', 'rational', 'scientific' and 'real'. In other words, this was a hegemonic struggle to replace one particular social construal of reality with another. (I should add, however, that Perkins is no wild-eyed student of cultural studies, however; a more sober and thoroughly documented account would be hard to imagine.) In this context, the dividing line between rationality and 'superstition' was bitterly contested. In a fascinating chapter on weather, Perkins tells the sad story of Admiral Robert Fitzroy, who pioneered efforts to take its prediction out of the hands of countrymen, astrologers and amateurs. In 1865, harried mercilessly by the press as a covert weather-prophet (and by astrologers on his other flank), Fitzroy took his own life.

Predictably, the overall results of the SDUK campaign were uneven and complex. In 1872, *Moore's* finally dropped the astrology, only to be severely punished by readers: sales dropped steadily to only 50,000 in 1895. It was farmed out to another publisher in the early twentieth century who re-introduced 'the voice of the stars', and still appears annually, though with nothing like its former circulation or influence. Meanwhile, in the 1830s, judicial astrology re-appeared in the metropolitan heartland, courtesy the new almanacs of Zadkiel and Raphael. These had a middle-class readership, and Perkins underestimates the significance of their success, which astounded Charles Knight; she could have made more use of them in grasping the complexity of mid-nineteenth-century middle-class discourse. She also succumbs to the temptation (which seems nigh-well irresistible to historians in this field) to perceive the 'death of popular astrology', this time in 1869-70 (p. 119); the evidence to the contrary in every daily tabloid newspaper, and even some broadsheets (to the disgust of others). True, Sun-sign columns aren't precisely early modern moon- and star-

lore; but they are much closer to it than to the highly individual analyses of judicial astrology.

Overall, however, Perkins is right to hand the palm to the reformers. Their relative victory was apparent in the new breed of almanacs such as *Whittaker's*, advancing a concept of time - and this is central - that was algorithmic, quantitative and clock-based. Banished to the social and intellectual margins - where it still survives - was the old communal, qualitative time incorporating planetary and lunar cycles, and their corollaries in the annual seasons.

This raises the question of whether a 'post-modern' suspicion of science, ecological crisis in our relations with nature, and a post-Newtonian quantum physics signal the imminence of a new popular sense of time, one that may have significant continuities with premodern cycles and qualities. Whatever the outcome, future historians will have to consult Perkins before setting out.

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