



review



## Werewolf Histories

Willem de Blécourt (ed.), *Werewolf Histories*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2015. 260 pp., ISBN 978-1-1375-2633-5.

Werewolves have become an increasingly hot topic of late. They are on television, in novels, comics, and films, and now, werewolves are in our universities. Charlotte Otten, author of *A Lycanthropy Reader* and *The Literary Werewolf*, attributes the present pop-cult fascination with werewolves to continuing social interest in metamorphosis and the contentious relationship between animal and man. So popular are they that in September this year the *Open Graves, Open Minds* project held the conference, “The Company of Wolves’: Sociality, Animality, and Subjectivity in Literary and Cultural Narratives – Werewolves, Shapeshifters, and Feral Humans’ at the University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, a three-day conference which hosted academics of all disciplines from all over the world. Of the 40 + papers presented in Hatfield, only five presented werewolves in an academic historical perspective with most focused on the depiction of werewolves in popular culture of the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The reason for this may be, in the words of Willem de Blécourt, “there is no werewolf history” (DE BLÉCOURT 2015: 1).

Werewolves of the past, de Blécourt makes clear in the opening essay of his collected volume *Werewolf Histories*, have a long, fragmented and discontinuous history, wholly separate from the werewolves of public imagination; the werewolves of *Trueblood*, *Harry Potter*, and *Twilight*. Those werewolves, most often depicted as humans who change under the influence of the full moon and who can only be killed by silver bullets, are, rather, a creation of the American and British film industries with little connection to the werewolves of European folklore. While much has been published on these cinematic monsters, little has been produced on the narratives upon which they were modelled; the superstitions, myths, legends and morality tales of old. *Werewolf Histories* seeks

to rectify this, marking the first attempt to transition from popular werewolf publications to academic historical perspectives.

*Werewolf Histories* is a very welcome addition to the *Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic* series, a series designed to help illuminate the lesser known or little studied aspects of the history of European witchcraft and magic. Priding itself on looking beyond Western Europe, the series explores the relevance and influence of witches and other supernatural individuals, including werewolves, from the medieval to the modern periods in Eastern Europe as well. The editor of *Werewolf Histories*, Willem de Blécourt, who is also a series editor of the *Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic*, has published widely on werewolves in European folklore. A historical anthropologist and independent scholar, as well as Honorary Research Fellow at the Meertens Institute, de Blécourt has been working on a history of werewolves for over a decade. Despite the publishing of his monograph *Werewolves* failing to actualize in 2005, de Blécourt maintained his interest in these creatures and published numerous articles and book chapters in English, Dutch, and German with a specific focus on werewolves in European folklore, including pieces published in *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe* (2009), *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* (2013), and *Europäische Hexenforschung und Landesgeschichte – Methoden, Regionen, Vergleiche* (2016, in press).<sup>1</sup> De Blécourt thus represents one of the most active voices within this field of study and is imminently qualified to edit *Werewolf Histories*.

De Blécourt's opening essay, 'The Differentiated Werewolf: An Introduction to Cluster Methodology' is a 'state of the art' of historical perspectives on werewolves, drawing attention to the many methodological problems faced by historians attempting to research this topic and highlights the need for further study in this area. It is a thoroughly researched essay in which de Blécourt eloquently debunks common myths regarding the trials of supposed werewolves in medieval and early modern Europe while also drawing the readers' attention to the commonality between these numerous and seemingly unrelated events. His is the first of eleven clear and nuanced historical perspectives presented within

1) See e.g. Willem de Blécourt, 'Werwolfberichte. Der Fall Peter Stump und seine Folgen', in Rita Voltmer (ed.), *Europäische Hexenforschung und Landesgeschichte – Methoden, Regionen, Vergleiche*, Trier, 2016, in Press, Willem de Blécourt, 'Monstrous Theories: Werewolves and the Abuse of History', in *Preternature: critical and historical studies on the preternatural*, 2, 2013, pp. 188–212, Willem de Blécourt, 'The Werewolf, the Witch, and the Warlock: Aspects of Gender in the Early Modern Period', in A. Rowlands (Ed.), *Witchcraft and Masculinities*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009, pp. 191–213, Willem de Blécourt, 'I Would Have Eaten You Too: Werewolf Legends in the Flemish, Dutch and German Area', in *Folklore*, 118, 2007, pp. 23–43.

*Werewolf Histories* which together represent a more transnational and multi-lingual body of research than has previously been published.

As is apparent in the title of de Blécourt's opening essay, the guiding methodological principle employed by the essayists of *Werewolf Histories* is to identify what are referred to as 'geographical and temporal clusters' of culturally specific werewolf genres as a means of constructing a history. The aim of this is to overcome one of the biggest hurdles faced by historians interested in werewolves; the problem of equivalence in translation. As is made clear by most of the essayists presented in *Werewolf Histories*, the werewolf is a cultural concept that is not absolute but rather a relative entity defined by its context. Therefore "not all the 'werewolves' in different languages translate as one and the same 'werewolf'" (DE BLÉCOURT 2015: 1). The analysis of clusters thus allows the historian to identify the core concepts integral to regional understandings of werewolves and establish commonality in a broader geographic space, enabling a more sophisticated and contextualized history. It is for this reason that neither a conclusive definition of a werewolf, nor a list of its common characteristics are provided by de Blécourt in this introductory passage, leaving the reader somewhat in the dark as to what a werewolf actually is. This is particularly jarring when de Blécourt dismisses werewolf figures of regional histories as "strictly speaking, not werewolves" without any discussion as to why they are not, nor what characteristics would need to be imbued for these creatures to be considered werewolves (DE BLÉCOURT 2015: 11). While it is clear that a concrete definition is impossible due to the werewolf's cultural relativism, it is also evident that a basic understanding or description of werewolf genres is necessary for the reader to fully engage with the arguments made within this chapter.

Also jarring to the readers' understanding of werewolf histories is the limited, Eurocentric nature of the collection's scope. Many of the markers of 'werewolf activity' identified by the historians of this volume represent uniquely European and Christocentric experiences, with many focusing on the religious trails of those suspected to be werewolves due to a relationship with the devil. This suggests to the reader that werewolf histories are unique to Europe, something that is not true. Werewolves feature in Turkic folklore and are viewed in a reverential light. Additionally, there are numerous werewolf concepts to be found in North and Central American and Caribbean legends, all of which vary wildly from those of Western and Eastern Europe. While the narrow scope of this work is dictated by its being a part of the *Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic* series, a series concerned specifically with European experiences of

witchcraft and magic, the failure to incorporate broader perspectives in this collection without any discussion as to the privileging of European perspectives obscures the commonality of the werewolf phenomenon, denying a more complex and colourful global history. *Werewolf Histories* is nonetheless a fine collection of essays and a fantastic stepping-stone to further research. The aim of the collection is to encourage a more sophisticated, contextualized and differentiated approach to the study of werewolves and I certainly hope it succeeds.

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