



# A Magical World: Superstition and Science from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment

*Derek K. Wilson*

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Spanning some of the most vibrant and fascinating eras in European history, Cambridge historian Derek Wilson reveals a society filled with an ardent desire for knowledge and astounding discoveries—and the fantastic discoveries that flowered from it. There was the discovery of the movement of blood around the body; the movement of the earth around the sun; the velocity of falling objects (and why those objects fell).

But these these thinkers were steeped in—and drew from—intellectual traditions that might surprise us. There was folk religion, which in its turn had deep roots in a pagan past. Others referred to spirits or tapped into stores of ancient wisdom and herbal remedies. This was the world of wise women, witches, necromancers, potions and incantations.

Even the mighty Catholic Church, which permeated all elements of life, had its own "magical" traditions. Devote believers and accomplished scientists alike both pursued alchemy. Astrology, also a rapidly developing field, was based on the belief that human affairs were controlled by the movement of heavenly bodies. Casting horoscopes was a near-universal practice, from the papacy to the peasantry. Yet from this heady cultural mix, the scientific method would spring.

But it was not just Europe where this tidal wave of intellectual innovation was colliding with folk wisdom to create something new. The twelfth-century Islamic polymath, Averroes, has been called 'the father of secular thought' because of his landmark treatises on astronomy, physics and medicine. Jewish scholars melded mysticism to create the esoteric disciplines of the Kabbalah.

By the mid-seventeenth century, "science mania" was in full flower. In 1663, The Royal Society in London received its charter. Just three years later, the French Academy of Sciences was founded, and other European capitals rapidly followed suit. In 1725, the word "science" was at last defined as "a branch of study concerned either with a connected body of demonstrated truths or with observed facts systematically classified." Yet just nine years before, the last witch had been executed in Britain. Fascinating and thought-provoking, *A Magical World* is a reminder of humanity's paradoxical nature—our passionate pursuit of knowledge alongside deep-rooted fears, superstitions, and traditions.

## A Magical World: Superstition and Science from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment Details

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Author : Derek K. Wilson

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## **From Reader Review A Magical World: Superstition and Science from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment for online ebook**

### **Samantha says**

A more accurate title for this book would have been:

Here Are Some Things I Know About European History.

It's all very correct, very competently written, and very diligently researched. But the information included has only a tangential relationship with magic and superstition.

While the text is an accurate history of science and religion and does a decent job of linking the two together, it fails to connect these things to the purported topic of the book, leaving the reader frustrated by a very misleading title and dust jacket summary.

Perhaps even more bothersome: What is the author actually trying to SAY? Very little that is unique, evidently. While all the information included is, as previously mentioned, correct and competently delivered, it's all well-established knowledge that could be gleaned from most college courses on European history.

Lovely, were the reader expecting a text book. But the author leads us to believe he has an original point which will surface out of all of this, yet it just never lands. The only point on which he becomes animated or even attempts to pose any sort of argument is in saying that "the dark ages weren't really all the dark." True, but also something that anyone with a decent liberal arts education already knows.

In all, a misleading title and publisher's summary combined with the author's failure to produce a single original point make this a huge disappointment. Might be a decent read if you're just looking for a refresher on European history, but in its supposed aim, it fails spectacularly.

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### **Rae says**

This was not quite what I expected. What is here is good, but it's stuff I already knew and very much like a condensed text book. I was fairly bored, but if the reader is new to this material, it will interest them.

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### **Fox says**

A Magical World was not a bad book - don't get my rating wrong - it was simply not the book that I expected it to be based upon the title and description. I was expecting, and hoping, for a book about the history of superstitious thought and how it changed over time. I was expecting reference to the fairy faith, and the very different way that the world was viewed before the advent of the scientific revolution. I was hoping for the analysis of how one could contend with something being both a stone and a troll at the same time. A world where dragons and giants exist, but not here, simply the next valley over... that sort of thing.

Unfortunately, that very much was not what this book was.

This book, instead, was a very interesting look at the change in religious and scientific thought over the period before mentioned. Each chapter focused upon different people, offering small biographies and commentary on how they changed the world around them - whether they were accepted in their time or not, and how their beliefs and discoveries were informed by the time in which they live. While the book was fascinating, and indeed very interesting, it was also a bit dry in its delivery of facts and not what I had hoped it would be.

So, this is a good book for what it truly is, and an interesting one. Just not what I was looking for. Still, quite a nice history of church and science and how the two intersect. Also, a rather more detailed biography of Newton exists in it than what I had ever read before... and it did a good job of correcting commonly held beliefs about Galileo, Bruno, Newton, etc. that still get passed on today. So, kudos to it for that.

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### **Mary says**

In spite of the title, this is neither a history of superstition nor a history of science. It is more about attitudes toward knowledge and learning, or how superstition and "rational inquiry" affected philosophy and religious thought than anything else. I'm still not sure what point the author was trying to make.

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### **Peter McLoughlin says**

A look at the scientific revolution and the intellectual culture around it going from the late middle ages into the 18th century and the philosophical, religious, occult and growing scientific thought of this grab bag of intellectual ferment in Europe during this period. This could be a much longer book but ideas are always generated in any age some good some bad and hopefully, the good ones stick when thrown against the wall. This book chronicles some of the ideas of the time both that made an impact on the scientific revolution and others (mostly occult) that were eventually swept aside.

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### **Ruth Feathers says**

Survey of the developing sciences through the enlightenment.

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### **Lysistrata says**

Or, "A Magical Word: A Vague History of the Church After the Middle Ages."

Will write a full review later.

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### **Gloria says**

A British historian offers a richly detailed whirlwind of great thinkers in the years leading up to the mid-18th

century. While many are familiar names such as Isaac Newton and Galileo, there are many others who contributed to the ultimate question of "How can I be saved?"

It is hard to understand today how slowly information moved then between countries and across oceans. This sheds light on key issues that emerged through several centuries. With so much famine, pestilence, and plague most people died quite young so "How can I be saved?" takes on special meaning. Should people turn to medicine which killed as many people as it saved, or turn to Christianity? Wilson does an excellent job of explaining why so-called witches were executed. Education was so sparse and inadequate that when a famine struck, people needed someone to blame.

Much more than today, religion had a particular hold over the thinking of those days. Power and wealth were tied to the church which then leads to understanding why absolutely ruthless wars were waged throughout Europe. Wilson I think attempts to not use overly scientific or lofty language though there is some of this. Rather he gives brief snapshots of many key figures and helps the reader understand how one influenced another either through support or defiance.

Belief in magic, mysticism, religion, science and philosophy juggle for their rightful place. It is interesting today still that some of the ancient belief systems are actually still in place as people show interest in psychics and miracles while retaining strife between science and religion.

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### **Erin says**

An interesting book although a bit dry to read. I loved learning more about famous scientists, etc.

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### **Devon Black says**

Not what it says on the tin. Title says "Superstition," but really this book is all about religion and science intersecting in the early modern era. The information is very interesting, and the book is enjoyable as vignettes. However, when put together, I can't make heads or tails of what Wilson's organizational scheme is. He discusses science and religion's intersection by briefly talking on different figures throughout the period, loosely in chronological order. I'm not sure what I was supposed to get from this.

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### **Gloria says**

I found this book very interesting it is a book about superstitions, religion, science and the surprising thing is the more you read it the more you begin to see that all of these things were interrelated not nearly as separate as people believe today, for instance churches were involved in educating people because they wanted them to be able to read the bible Etc. Church was not as far removed from science as people think monks were looking into many areas of study from astronomy to plants Etc. Very interesting to see that more things are close together rather than far apart. If you are interested in how some of these things got their start this is a good book to check out

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**Laura says**

So boring... Not even remotely about magic, and barely even about superstition. Astrology is mentioned frequently, but the rest is just a history of the Christian church, where evidently there is no superstition because super smart thinkers decided Christianity must be true so all the superstition is science instead. I'm not sure if any of the ideas or opinions belonged to the author or if it was all historical, but I disagree with some of the conclusions (like that atheists who called for the abolition of religion weren't actually atheists, but just wanted a clearer idea of God... News flash, atheists have always existed).

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**Sandi says**

A very interesting book about Europe in the Renaissance and the fears and

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