

WITCHES, SCIENTISTS, PHILOSOPHERS:
ESSAYS AND LECTURES

THE WESTERN ONTARIO SERIES
IN PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

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ROBERT E. BUTTS

WITCHES, SCIENTISTS,
PHILOSOPHERS:
ESSAYS AND LECTURES

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PREFACE

Robert Butts (1928 - 1997) was a well known and respected historian and philosopher of science. He played an important role in establishing History and Philosophy of Science as a major field of study in Canada and the United States. He established and gave direction to the internationally respected research profile in HPS studies at the University of Western Ontario. He was a two term editor of *Philosophy of Science*, a leading journal in the field, and also was a long serving Managing Editor of the *Western Ontario Series in the Philosophy of Science*. He made significant contributions to scholarship on Kant and Leibniz, and was among the first to rehabilitate the work and reputation of Whewell and other 19th century philosophers of science.

After his retirement he continued to teach, offering an undergraduate course called “The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Witchcraft”, in which he applied many of the important lessons he’d learned in his HPS work. The course was proposed and developed in 1978 by Thomas Lennon and became very popular, attracting some 400 students per year when Butts taught it. General interest in the topic and Butts’s reputation as a scholar and lecturer led to an invitation to deliver a series of three lectures as part of the prestigious Tamblyn Lectures series at the University of Western Ontario. He gave the lectures over three evenings in March 1996.

Butts died in 1997, before he could make a decision about revising and publishing the Tamblyn Lectures. Members of the audience and various colleagues and students hoped the lectures would be published in some form or other. There is a good deal of popular interest in the history of the witchcraft persecutions, and the insights and perspective of a historian and philosopher of science deepen and clarify the issues.

This collection of Butts’s lectures and essays brings together the Tamblyn Lectures and a related lecture on witchcraft, and eleven papers on historically significant philosophers and on issues in the history and philosophy of science. Butts saw himself as a pragmatic realist, combining what he took to be the best aspects of logical empiricism with a historically informed neo-Kantian pragmatism deeply appreciative of the methods of science. His work on witchcraft is thoroughly informed by his expert grasp of basic issues in the philosophy of science and his respect for the place of science in culture. The papers on Leibniz, Hume, Husserl, and Kant, and on issues in history and philosophy of science, while more specialized than the lectures on witchcraft, are accessible and understandable (and of much interest on their own), and supply useful context for the witchcraft lectures. We see in these papers on philosophy and science that, for Butts, scientific rationality is the major defence we have against the various conditions which

encourage witch hunts and all the pain and terror that go with them. We see behind all the articles a fine philosopher at work, trying to locate the distinction between the rational and the irrational, trying to describe a kind of rationality useful, perhaps essential, in the struggle to avoid barbarism and preserve humane values.

Chapters 1 and 2 are lectures on witchcraft; Chapter 9 is a lecture on Kant on illusion; and Chapter 13 is a lecture on the history of scientific philosophy from the founding of the journal *Erkenntnis* to the publication of Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chapter 1 is the unrevised text of an invited lecture given to the Annual Conference of the Seminar for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, at the University of Western Ontario in 1992, and is a useful introduction to the Tamblyn Lectures, concisely expressing some of the philosophical interest he found in the topic of witchcraft. Chapter 2 is the Tamblyn Lectures. Some bibliographical footnotes have been added; otherwise the text is as it was delivered. Chapter 9 is a draft of a paper he had nearly completed and was circulating among friends and colleagues. Earlier versions of it had been given as invited lectures at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 1994, and at the University of Rochester in 1996. Chapter 13 is the fourth and last draft he was able to complete of a paper which was posthumously published in *Experience, Reality, and Scientific Explanation: Essays in Honor of Merrilee and Wesley Salmon*, edited by Maria Carla Galavotti and Alessandro Pagnini (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), pp. 1-14. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of Kluwer Academic Publishers.

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