

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: [Fleming, Neil (2024) Book Review: Hope and Fear: Modern Myths, Conspiracy Theories and Pseudo-History. By Ronald H. Fritze. Reaktion Books. 2022. 271 pp. ISBN 9781789145397. £20. History: The Journal of the Historical Association. pp. 1-3. ISSN Online: 1468-229X], which has been published in final form at [https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.13382]. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions. This article may not be enhanced, enriched or otherwise transformed into a derivative work, without express permission from Wiley or by statutory rights under applicable legislation. Copyright notices must not be removed, obscured or modified. The article must be linked to Wiley's version of record on Wiley Online Library and any embedding, framing or otherwise making available the article or pages thereof by third parties from platforms, services and websites other than Wiley Online Library must be prohibited.

***Hope and Fear: Modern Myths, Conspiracy Theories and Pseudo-History.* By Ronald H. Fritze. Reaktion Books. 2022. 271 pp. ISBN 9781789145397. £20.**

Hope and Fear is a companion volume to Professor Fritze's *Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science and Pseudo-Religions* (2009). Both books provide a series of case studies that trace the historical development of pseudo-history. His method is a 'combination of the genealogical and the evolutionary approaches to the history of the ideas being studied' (p. 14). In juxtaposition to the fanciful, bizarre, outlandish, and stubbornly popular claims that he surveys, Fritze's approach is sceptical, forensic, and grounded in scholarship. His frequent references to other debunkers of pseudo-history, pseudo-archaeology and pseudo-science make plain his debt to their labours, as do his end notes which demonstrate the range of scholarship that needs to be marshalled in tackling myths that, in some cases, invoke events that span centuries. Fritze recognises that not all consumers of pseudo-history take it at face value. Referring to the television series, *Ancient Aliens*, he concedes that some 'are simply curious about what its creators will get up to next' (p. 15). Even so, he also cautions that the promotion of pseudo-history by conspiracy theorists is 'potentially hazardous to civil society' (p. 17). *Invented Knowledge* contains the same message, but it is given a sharper edge in *Hope and Fear* by the 'anti-vax' crusade that achieved new relevance during the coronavirus pandemic, and the 'QAnon' phenomenon, which is said to have contributed to the storming of Washington's Capitol on 6 January 2021.

Fritze's determination to hold pseudo-history up to the scrutiny of historical research, along with his brief dismissal of postmodernism (p. 21), have animated critics of his approach. In particular, several suggest that he is unduly harsh in his attitude towards the consumers of pseudo-history, or that he is indifferent to the contexts that fuel their consumption. That is a matter of judgment, but Fritze's work, and that of other debunkers, can hardly be said to pose a serious challenge to the hothouse for conspiracy theories and pseudo-history provided by the Internet. Likewise, his detractors, especially non-historians, charge him with adopting a narrow approach, when he merely takes the trouble to historicise a phenomenon with which many historians are familiar, but few have taken seriously. If *Hope and Fear* does not delve into epistemology, or explore the anthropology of religion, it does include a chapter, 'Why Do People Believe Strange Things?', that draws on a range of disciplines in an attempt to provide some answers to that question. In the end, however, Fritze is more authoritative on the supply side than demand.

The recycling of out of date and disproven ideas is a marked feature of the pseudo-history examined by Fritze. This 'junk knowledge' feeds a 'cultic milieu'—the latter term is credited to the sociologist, Colin Campbell—that serves as a stockpile for successive proponents of new beliefs, hypotheses and supposed theories. In this way, pseudo-history writers are able to combine sensational and novel claims with seemingly familiar themes and tropes. At the same

time, unlike scholarly history, there is little or no consistency in the specific theses advanced, and many of the claims made are unfalsifiable by experiment or observation. What these works have in common, however, is the tendency to offer simplified stories, to prefer big events over little details, to conflate what is possible with what is probable, to emphasise random coincidence, to overestimate power, and to practise confirmation bias to the extent of refusing to engage seriously with alternative explanations.

Fritze is particularly informative in tracing the evolution and adaptation of specific ideas through the hands of multiple and successive pseudo-history writers. Claims advanced about shadowy and powerful secret societies have been remarkably tenacious. If Rosicrucianism originated as a prank, and if the majority of British Freemasons were content to trace the origins of their organisation to medieval guilds, then the unclear border between seventeenth-century scientific and occult knowledge provided later pseudo-history writers with the opportunity to depict these as secretive guardians of the lost wisdom of the ancients. There were later accretions, such as Freemasonry's supposed role in the French Revolution and its purported relationship to a global Jewish conspiracy. These ideas, in a variety of forms, influenced late-twentieth century claims about the 'new world order', with some going as far as adding an extra-terrestrial dimension. The latter theme is explored further in Fritze's chapter on the myth of Roswell, which also lays bare the many and various attempts to commercially exploit those who believe that our planet has been regularly visited by alien life forms. *Hope and Fear* also traces some of the more arcane expressions of white supremacy. It contrasts the beliefs of the British Israelite movement with scholarship on the supposed lost tribes of Israel, and it addresses how the former morphed in the United States into the Christian Identity movement. Likewise, Fritze examines the significant relationship between late-nineteenth century German Ariosophy and Nazism. The occult elements of the former appealed to some leading Nazis, but Hitler deliberately distanced himself from Ariosophic groups to boost his credibility, and to cultivate his image as the lone saviour of Germany.

The 1960s New Age movement, and more recently, the disposition of factual television channels to broadcast series that give credibility to outlandish conspiracies, are cited by Fritze as key moments in advancing the progress of such fringe ideas into the mainstream. He observes also that this process has found receptive audiences on the left as well as the right. Whether or not all consumers of pseudo-history take seriously its claims about secret societies, hidden knowledge, and decades-old cover ups, narratives that emphasise these themes remain popular and have arguably achieved their greatest visibility in recent years. As such, *Hope and Fear* provides a timely and engaging study that has the potential to enliven university reading lists on research methods and the purpose of historical research.

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