

Casa Pia

The making of a modern European witch hunt

Richard Webster

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Webster's analysis of the British children's home paedophile panic of the 1980s and 90s, *The Secret of Bryn Estyn*,¹⁷ is one of the great solo investigations. Webster showed that the entire series of episodes, the result of a nation-wide 'trawling' by the police for paedophile networks preying on the residents of children's homes, was a fantasy; the result of sloppy journalism, public officials afraid of being blamed for ignoring a scandal, and lies told by some of the former residents who were motivated by the police promise of large compensation for any abuse. Webster dismantles the whole thing and concludes that many wrongful convictions ensued.

This much smaller book (Bryn Estyn was 750 pages; this is 105) describes a similar outbreak, again in a group of children's homes, Casa Pia, this time in Portugal. But while in the British witch hunt the tales of children being abused by the Great and the Good never got beyond rumour, in Portugal a group of public figures – politicians and Portugal's best known television personality among them – were accused and eventually tried and convicted in 2010. It is as if Ken Livingstone and Terry Wogan (among others) were found guilty of being part of a homosexual paedophile ring in children's homes in London.

Once again Webster shows that the evidence is false, the result of the same elements which caused the British version: amplification and invention by the media; the fear and incompetence of politicians, social workers and the prosecuting authorities; and the lies of some children, a key witness offered a plea bargain by the prosecution and one politician. The fact that the major witness and some of the

¹⁷ Discussed by Simon Matthews in *Lobster* 52.

children have recanted since the verdicts has not yet overcome the profound embarrassment of a huge section of Portugal's civil society at being swept along in the holy hunt for today's witches.

In his conclusion Webster suggests that in this secular age the human need for 'devils' has resulted in paedophiles becoming 'the most prominent of our modern evils'; and that 'human beings in modern cultures still seem to need the sense that they are battling against an evil conspiracy.' Of this second claim I am unconvinced. Webster's analysis of the Bryn Estyn case and this more recent one seems to me to explain how these mistaken beliefs came about without needing societal need for devils or evil conspiracies. In neither case would the nonsense have run as far as it did had journalists been more careful, had police and lawyers been a bit more sceptical (and more careful); and, in the case of Bryn Estyn, certainly, had more ridicule been applied to the nonsense about satanic child abuse, which was imported in the years before from American Christian circles and took root here in some Christian social workers (who believed in the literal existence of Satan).

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