

The Salem Witch Trials A Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Community Under Siege

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Cooper Square Press (Nov 25, 2002)

Unknown \$35.00 (784pp)

978-0-8154-1221-2

"I petition not for my own life, for I know I must die, [but that] if it be possible, no more innocent blood may be shed, which it undoubtedly cannot be avoided in the way and the course you go in," said Mary Esty in her second petition to the governor, court, and ministers. She was hanged September 22, 1692. Twenty men and women were suddenly pulled from everyday life, falsely accused, and imprisoned in Salem between 1692 and 1693. They stood trial and were sentenced to death. Countless others were jailed.

Describing her chronological account of events from January 1692 through January 1697, the author, who holds a fine arts degree from the Massachusetts College of Art and is a contributor to *The Boston Globe*, writes: "Rather than argue a single theory to explain the tragedy, this book tells what happened to the people who lived through the events. It presents the story as a whole and tells it from scratch using original sources whenever possible."

She begins each of the sixty-one chapters with a quote from someone involved or an applicable quote from the Bible. The epigraphs range from this accusation by Thomas Maule: "Unbelief and rebellious living...was the sin of witchcraft before Him and His light" to Rev. Cotton Mather's plea for innocence: "Great hardships were brought upon innocent persons, and (we fear) guilt incurred, which we have all cause to bewail." Roach spent twenty years researching archival collections, and discovered that many recent books on the subject are either inaccurate or unsubstantiated.

The hysteria began as something simple. The slave Tituba had been showing at least two girls how to perform magic when they gathered at night around the kitchen fire. Perhaps the girls grew bored, or decided to make some mischief. Betty Parris began to act strangely, have seizures, and claim that spirits and the Devil had visited her. Some of those spirits took the form of local members of the church who were later accused of witchcraft. Soon other girls were having the same "symptoms" and claiming that more people were having a negative effect on them. It seemed as if no one was safe from accusations. Some were imprisoned; others were hanged.

When bad things happened in the village, like animals going lame and things going missing, it was easy to blame the witches. Everyone suspected everyone else, especially those who were unpopular. Mary Putnam denied accusations, declaring: "Some of my husband's children and relations have brought upon me inconvenient and unnecessary charges."

The author uses contemporary accounts of the trials, court records, wills, legal papers, almanacs, and artifacts. She lists "tide tables and the shape of the land itself" as sources, and includes appendices, endnotes, bibliography, and illustrations, including some of her own.

Roach has constructed a hauntingly accurate portrayal of the darkness of hysteria in Salem Village. (January / February 2003)

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