

Six Women of Salem

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Book Review

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History A131

“The jurors for our Sovereigne Lord and Lady the King and Queen presents that Bridget Bishop alis Oliver the wife of Edward Bishop of Salem in the County of Essex Sawyer the Nineteenth Day of April in the ffourth Year of the Reigne of our Sovereigne Lord and Lady William and Mary by the Grace of God of England Scotland Ffrance & Ireland King & Queen Defendrs of the faith &tc and divers other Dayes & times as well before as after certain Detesable Artes called Witchcraft & Sorceries, Wickedly and felloniously hath used Practiced & Exercised at and within the Township of Salem Village in the County aforsed single woman by which said wicked arts the said Ann puttnam the sd Nineteenth Day of April in the fourth year abovesd and divers other Dayes & times as well before as after was & is hurt tortured Afflicted Pined Consumed wasted & Tormented agt Peace of our said Sovereigne Lord and Lady the King and Queen and against the forme of the Statute in the Case made & Provided.” (Roach 229-230)

This excerpt, written interestingly in the language of the time, shows the reader of the book, *The Six Women of Salem*, what to expect at this tumultuous time in our history and in the early stages of the new country. It brings together our devotion, attachment and loyalty to the King and Queen of England, the importance of the church in every day life, the detestable crime of witchcraft, and the overall fear that it invoked in the small hamlet and village of Salem, Massachusetts just outside of Boston. The excerpt also gives the

reader a glimpse of our early court and judicial proceedings decades before we declared ourselves as a country.

Six Women of Salem is the first work to use the lives of a select number of emblematic women as a microcosm to clarify the larger crisis of the Salem witch trials. By the end of the trials, beyond the twenty who were executed and the five who perished in prison, 207 individuals had been accused, 74 had been “afflicted,” 32 had officially accused their fellow neighbors, and 255 ordinary people had been inexorably drawn into that ruinous and murderous vortex, and this does not include the religious, judicial, and governmental leaders. All this adds up to what the Reverend Cotton Mather called “a desolation of names” and as a minister of the church in Salem he wrote letters to the judges that would hear the testimony of those indicted, being firmly convinced that witchcraft and acts of the devil were rampant in his community. When the confessed witches began recanting their testimony, Mather began to have doubts about some of the proceedings. This is all because if the accused agreed to say that if they did practice witchcraft their lives would, or could be spared. Later on in the proceedings Mather even changed his position on the use of spectral evidence, which is defined as evidence based on dreams and visions, and tried to minimize his own large role in consideration of the trials. Later in life he even questioned whether the supernatural even played any role as he first suspected.¹

¹ Cotton Mather. Accessed 5 November 2014. Internet webpage.

There have been many books and movies about the Salem witch trials some tell a historical account others are just scary tales. *Six Women of Salem* is replete with primary sources to support its account. It contains a nine page bibliography with such sources as; the Essex County Probate Court in Salem, MA², the Massachusetts Archives in Dorchester, MA³, and the Vital Records of Salem, MA⁴, just to name a few. *Six Women of Salem* also supports our course text, *The American Nation*⁵, which states that the witch trial episodes highlight the anxieties of puritan men and how they felt about women at the time. (Carnes and Garraty 70) What is interesting is *The American Nation* asserts that the accused women were of high social and societal status and some even owned property, which was rare at this time in history. (Carnes and Garraty 70) Did those issues alone put the women in a position of distrust amongst their neighbors and the men in the community? Another example is the movie *The Crucible* (1996)⁶ starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder. It is a vague interpretation of the witch trails as a historical event and the main characters play members of the community at the time with names

² Essex County, MA Deeds, vols. 8-9, microfilm F/72/E7/E87, NEHGS Library.

³ Massachusetts Archives, Dorchester, MA. General Court Records (Records of the Governor Council), vol. 6, April 18, 1689 to December 10, 1698 on one reel.

⁴ Salem. Vital Records of Salem, Massachusetts to the end of the year 1849. ^ vols. Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1916-1925

⁵Carnes, Mark C. and Garraty, John A. *The American Nation: A History of the United States*. 14th ed. Pearson. 2012.

⁶ *The Crucible*. Dir. Nicholas Hytner. Perf. Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1996. DVD.

such as John Proctor, Abigail Williams and Reverend Hale. The movie is based on the play *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller⁷. He also wrote the screen play adaptation for the film. Other books, movies and plays tell the story from a mostly fictional perspective with a dose of historical facts thrown in for good measure. Of course there are countless references to witches in popular culture and the stereotypical appearance of the accused which *Six Women of Salem* talks about considerably throughout the book. Most notably a term called “witch marks or teats” (Roach 226), which are described as raised bump(s) somewhere on a witch’s body. It is often depicted as having a wart-like appearance. These witch marks are typically characterized as the wart on the witch’s nose that we often think about during Halloween.

The town of Salem is a tourist destination now. There is even a museum that showcases the witch trials. In Salem, individuals and institutions now wrestle with overlapping and often conflicting perspectives to the witch trials. (Roach 399) The historical approach tries to find and present in context what actually occurred by citing what scraps of proof remain. The commercial perspective is what we would expect when the term, ‘witch’ is described. There are ‘witch walks’, parades, haunted house sleep-overs, and even wandering zombies on all hallows eve.

⁷ Miller, Arthur. *The Crucible*. New York, New York: Publisher, 1953. Play.

Six Women of Salem does its best to recount the story of the witch trials from a historical perspective, however the individuals that are involved are too often reduced to archetypal characters, distinguished by their flatness and become easy targets for cliches when accuracy is sacrificed to the authors imagination in order to tell a good story. The book is deluge of names and details that are hard to keep track of and the detail of this extraordinary time in history is showcased in such a way that the individuals involved were in fact, real living people and they deserve to be remembered. In remembering these specific people and their lives, modern historians and even novice history sleuths can benefit from a story with such intimacy.

By examining the lives of six specific women; Rebecca Nurse, Tituba, Bridget Bishop, Mary Warren, Ann Putnam, and Mary English, the author shows readers what it was like to be present throughout this horrific time and how it was impossible to live through it unchanged. The book takes the reader into a world that is often highlighted today on television court dramas and true crime shows that are very popular. Like any popular 'who done it' story the reader stays captivated until the very end clamoring for even more facts as the author takes us on the struggles of these highlighted women and those that were accused of witchcraft and other diabolical acts that today we would find somewhat even amusing. But back in the late seventeenth century the fear was indeed real and the community as a whole did their best to stifle those fears even if it meant a

hangman's noose. However, as time passes, the memory of those people actually involved in the original tragedy of 1692 can become lost, replaced by stereotypes or even disregarded. (Roach 400) This is a story of our past and a story that helped shape this country as we know it today.

The Salem witch trials, and the aftermath, resulted in the collapse of the colonists' belief in a theocracy. One could argue that in this brief time in our history it changed how we looked at religion, what our core beliefs were as men and women and how crime and punishment were handled in New England at a time well before the Constitution, the fourth, sixth and eighth Amendments and the basic right of confronting our accusers. But more than anything this book dealt with just how influential the church was at the time.

The colonists lived in a theocracy, meaning God and the government were one. Since that was the case, God was supposed to be speaking through the government officials, and the officials--as mouth pieces for God—could not do any wrong. They were ordained His holy ministers, when people were sentenced to hang for witchery, it was God's will being passed down through the chosen elect. However, shortly after the Salem witch trials, people realized that the government was wrong. Many of the accused were innocent, and they died needlessly. The colonists lost their faith in government. The colonists could no longer accept that God was working through the government, which meant that they had abandon theocracy and forged a new government.

Ultimately, this leads to a separation of church and state governing us to this day. You could certainly argue that the witch trials were an inevitable result of theocracy. Separation of church and state continues to be necessary even today or similar tragedies can occur. Could, or would, our modern society even contemplate a courtroom fiasco like this today?

Bibliography

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