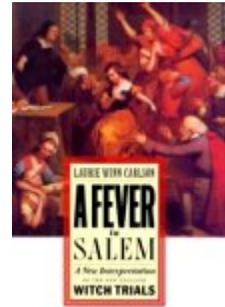


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Laurie Winn Carlson. *A Fever in Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1999. xvi + 197 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-253-9; \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56663-309-3.

Reviewed by Erik R. Seeman (Department of History, State University of New York at Buffalo)
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Great Awakenings! A New Look at Salem

In his book *Awakenings* (and later in the movie of the same name), Oliver Sacks described the strange case of a man with encephalitis lethargica, commonly known as sleeping sickness. Historians could not have guessed that there might be a connection between this malady—with its symptoms of fever, hallucinations, seizures, and sometimes coma—and the Salem witchcraft episode. But such is the argument of Laurie Winn Carlson in her new book on what may be colonial America's most-analyzed event.

Carlson begins with a fast-paced look at the surviving evidence regarding those who claimed to be the targets of witchcraft in Salem, focusing on the victims' physical symptoms. Although not surprising to anyone with a passing knowledge of early modern witchcraft, tales of fits, convulsions, and witches' bites (afflicting both people and livestock) always make for lively reading.

Jumping to the twentieth century, Carlson describes a worldwide outbreak of encephalitis lethargica that lasted from 1915 to 1930. This "forgotten epidemic" spared no part of the globe, ultimately striking perhaps five million people. Encephalitis remains something of a mystery to scientists, as it can be caused by a variety of agents (virus, bacteria, or spirochete), and it presents a wide and sometimes baffling range of symptoms. Carlson makes a great deal of the aspects of the early-twentieth-century epidemic that seem to parallel the course of events in Salem. The encephalitis epidemic struck mostly young people and more women than men. The disease was most prevalent in the spring and summer and tapered off in the

fall and winter. And, of course, the physical manifestations of encephalitis resemble those of Salem's victims: convulsions, hallucinations, neck spasms, and so on.

These parallels lead Carlson to posit that the victims in Salem were suffering from encephalitis lethargica, which residents mistakenly attributed to witchcraft. Essentially, then, this is an reworking of the ergot theory, which attributed the bizarre behaviors in Salem to rye infested with the hallucinogenic fungus ergot.[1] Like the funky fungus explanation, Carlson's encephalitis hypothesis is likely to receive greater attention from those who are not professional historians. In part this is due to Carlson's grab-bag approach to evidence: just when the reader thinks this book cannot get more speculative, Carlson wildly links European witchcraft to bird migration patterns (pp. 134-36) and tries to connect Salem with tree-ring data from North Carolina (pp. 141-43).

But the main reason academic historians (and especially historians of religion) will not pay this book much heed is that it seeks to answer a question that ultimately is not very interesting or important. It does not really matter to most scholars whether ergot or encephalitis lethargica or Satan's minions were responsible for the symptoms of the afflicted. Subscribers to this discussion list are more interested in the cultural meaning ascribed to the actions of the purportedly bewitched. Why were some colonists so willing to ascribe these mysterious symptoms to witchcraft, while others were reluctant to do so? What does it tell us about reformed Protes-

tantism at the dawn of the Enlightenment that so many New Englanders casually resorted to magic (as when several Salem residents tried to determine who was bewitching a child “by cutting pieces of the boy’s hair and frying it in a skillet in the fireplace, then tossing it on the floor” [p. 20])? These are the sorts of questions that have seemed relevant to most historians of American religion.

This is not to say there is nothing of value in Carlson’s book. *A Fever in Salem* is an engagingly written study that reads quickly and easily. Unlike those historians who treat with contempt the ministers who pursued prosecutions in Salem, Carlson is evenhanded in her discussions of Cotton Mather (p. 16) and Samuel Parris (p. 53). And most valuably, Carlson includes a feisty, critical evaluation of the witchcraft historiography (pp. 114-22), pointing to holes in the theses of Carol Karlsen and John Demos.[2]

Perhaps the best use historians will find for *A Fever in Salem* will be to recommend it to science-oriented undergraduates looking for a paper topic. For such students,

Carlson’s book may well serve to foster their interest in history by showing how science can shed light on historical questions. But professors should make sure that students they direct to Carlson’s book are well-equipped with critical thinking abilities, for it is a work with some serious problems in its use of evidence and its argumentation.

NOTES

[1]. Linnda R. Caporeal, “Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?” *Science* 192 (Apr. 2, 1976): 21-26.

[2]. Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, 1987); John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York, 1982).

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