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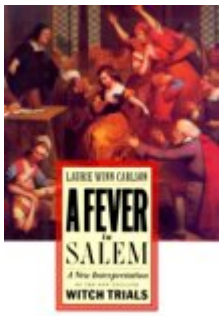

Laurie Winn Carlson. *A Fever in Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1999. xvi + 197 pp. $14.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-56663-309-3.

Laurie Winn Carlson. *A Fever in Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999. xvi + 197 pp , , .

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A Fever in Salem: Revisiting and Revising the Evidence from Salem

The hysteria that surrounded the events of 1692 has had a lasting impact on the study of witchcraft in America. Historians have been fascinated with the witchcraze that erupted in a fury that lasted for almost a full year and that led to the deaths of about two dozen individuals, directly or indirectly, and to accusations against well over one hundred individuals. The case of Salem has been so thoroughly explored by historians that one would think that new examinations could merely add nuances to the previously explored descriptions and explanations.[1] Yet Laurie Winn Carlson manages to construct a new and plausible hypothesis for the behavior, not of the accused, but of the accusers, in colonial America's most celebrated witchcraft episode.

In *A Fever in Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials*, Winn Carlson follows in the footsteps of others who have attempted to provide scientific explanations for the behaviors of the victims and accusers in the Salem witch trials and presents a medical explanation for the strange behaviors exhibited by many of Salem's inhabitants in 1692.[2] Winn Carlson's hypothesis is that many of the accusers in the Salem witchcraft epidemic were afflicted with encephalitis lethargica.

In presenting her case the author focuses on the symptoms of the victims in the Salem witch trials and then attempts to draw parallels between the residents of Salem and those suffering from encephalitis lethargica during an epidemic that occurred between 1916 and 1930. This comparison is the method via which Winn Carlson seeks retroactively to diagnose the residents of Salem as suffering from encephalitis lethargica. Focusing not on the witches but rather on their supposed victims, Winn Carlson thus provides a reasonable biological explanation for behaviors

that, at the time, could only be blamed on witchcraft.

The text is concisely arranged into eight chapters. Chapter 1 serves as a brief introduction to the witchcraze in seventeenth-century New England. chapters 2 and 5 present the evidence that supports the central hypothesis. Chapter 3 provides additional background information on related topics; it is devoted, in part, to re-telling the biographical details of the lives of Samuel Parris and Cotton Mather, two notable religious figures in Salem at the time of the witch trials. Parris was the minister for Salem Village's church, and the first cases of bewitchment occurred in his home. Mather was a minister in Boston who wrote extensively about witchcraft episodes. Chapter 3 also details the history of a number of disease epidemics in history (e.g., yellow fever, plague, small pox, and malaria) and presents some evidence concerning witchcraft accusations in neighboring Connecticut. Chapter 4, entitled "Mental Illness and the Persecution of Witches," is primarily a history of mental illness with some linkage to witchcraft. Chapter 6 is devoted to extrapolating her hypothesis beyond Salem and to a critical analysis of the landmark studies by historians John Demos and Carol Karlsen, among others.

Winn Carlson suggests the problem with much of the existing scholarship is that it subscribes to the "scapegoat theory of witchcraft," which fails to "examine the accusers or the 'afflicted.'" (p. 114) Although Winn Carlson makes some valid and thought-provoking points in her critiques, her assessment is somewhat akin to throwing the baby out with the bath water in that she does not seem to recognize any value in the analyses of other scholars. Many of the explanations that she discredits are not necessarily at odds with her own hypothesis, particularly given that she focuses on the "afflicted" whereas others have focused on the accused. Chapter 7 outlines alternative outcomes to witchcraft accusations in the years after Salem, and chapter 8 suggests that much more medical research on encephalitis lethargica needs to be done before the disease is fully understood.

The core of the text, however, is contained in chapters 2 and 5. In these chapters, Winn Carlson provides an admirable selection of evidence from the Salem trials and from the worldwide outbreak of encephalitis lethargica that occurred from 1916 to 1930 to support her hypothesis. The evidence suggests that the symptoms experienced by the victims in Salem (hallucinations, convulsions, hyperactivity, uncontrollable bodily movements, and partial paralysis) were similar to those associated with encephalitis lethargica. The text is rich in documentary evidence, although one would have liked to have seen her draw more clearly the parallels between the two events. The text is structured so that the Salem evidence is presented first, without overburdening the reader with a tremendous amount of analysis or commentary, primarily in chapter 2.

The various symptoms identified in cases of encephalitis lethargica in the twentieth century are similarly presented in chapter 5. Near the end of the text, a table directly compares the symptoms experienced in Salem with those experienced by victims of the twentieth century outbreak of encephalitis lethargica (p. 124). This is the most convincing presentation of the evidence in that readers are likely to accept that residents of Salem were indeed suffering from encephalitis lethargica when comparing the symptoms side by side. Until this point, readers must draw for themselves most of the parallels between those afflicted in Salem and those afflicted in the twentieth century.

Although contributing a fine explanatory hypothesis, the text suffers from some serious factual errors. It is disturbing to find yet another regurgitation of the undocumented notions of Margaret Murray in which the author suggests that "the ideology of witchcraft had evolved from beginnings as an ancient fertility cult" (p. 4). In a 1921 book,

The Witch-Cult in Western Europe, Murray hypothesized that witches were members of a secret and ancient fertility cult. Murray's ideas, although highly speculative and without documentary foundation, were perpetuated in the late 1920s when she was commissioned to write the entry for witchcraft for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Although Murray's ideas were rejected immediately by the academic community, the encyclopedia reprinted her interpretations for the next forty years. Her views were further disseminated by the publication of a second book, *The God of the Witches*, and by the acceptance of Gerald Gardner, the founder of the modern Wiccan movement.[3]

Winn Carlson similarly endorses another discredited notion--namely that midwives were likely to be accused of witchcraft--by identifying Elizabeth Morse as a midwife (p. 18) and by suggesting that midwives were tried as witches (p. 46). The notion of the persecuted female healer was championed by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English in their 1973 publication, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*. Historians, most notably David Harley, have painstakingly examined the evidence and have found that midwives, because of their status in their communities, were not likely to be accused as witches.[4] There are other factual errors sprinkled throughout the text, which may compromise its usefulness in undergraduate courses.

The study of witchcraft has generated thousands of books and articles. Amidst the chaos of the oftentimes-conflicting theories and analyses, Robin Briggs, who has recently examined the accusations of witchcraft in the Lorraine region, insists that there is a "need for multi-causal approaches, which avoid giving artificial prominence to any single theme."[5] Briggs's assertion makes a great deal of sense and had Winn Carlson adhered to it, she would not have found it necessary to expand her hypothesis so that it might explain all of the historical incidents of witchcraft worldwide. Her attempts to explain the spread of encephalitis lethargica, and thus incidents of witchcraft, via bird migratory routes (pp. 134-138) is only slightly more convincing than her attempts to apply her hypothesis to other historical events. She suggests, for example, that aspects of the encephalitis lethargica could have been responsible for the instigating the Great Awakening in the 1740s (p. 70) and that thousands hospitalized after World War I suffered not from shell shock but from "encephalitis lethargica, in its post-encephalitic form, in the form of catatonia" (p. 97).

Such broad brushstrokes are unnecessary; her central hypothesis is certainly logical and fits well with the known evidence surrounding the events at Salem and could be interwoven with the societal, economic, and religious explanations previously suggested to provide the multi-causal approach that Briggs suggests is necessary. Indeed, Winn Carlson's medical foundation is far more convincing than many of the psychological explanations that have been previously offered. Her hypothesis does explain the strange behaviors of the afflicted in Salem without suggesting that they were either mentally deranged or that they were simply pretending. As Briggs suggests, the witchcraft phenomenon in history is complex, and attempts to understand it are strengthened by a wide range of complementary explanations. In adding another piece to the puzzle, Winn Carlson's encephalitis lethargica hypothesis adds clarity to the overall picture.

Notes

[1]. For a variety of explanations see Paul S. Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974); David C. Brown, "The Forfeitures of Salem, 1692," *William and Mary Quarterly* 50 (1993); Wendel D. Craker, "Spectral Evidence, Non-Spectral Acts of Witchcraft, and Confession at Salem in 1692," *Historical Journal* 40, no. 2 (1997); John Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century

New England," *The American Historical Review* 75, no. 5 (1970); Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1987); and Bernard Rosenthal, *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[2]. Linda Caporael and Mary Mastossian suggest that the colonists' diet was responsible for the witchcraze, specifically their consumption of diseased grains. Ergotism is caused by consumption of grains that are contaminated with a fungus. The active ingredient in the diseased grain is lysergic acid diethylamide, commonly known in the twentieth century as LSD. A toxic condition, ergotism can produce psychotic delusions, nervous spasms, abortion, gangrene, and convulsions. See L. R. Caporael, "Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?," *Science* 192 (1976), and Mary Mastossian, "Ergot and the Salem Witch Trials" in *Poisons of the Past: The Role of Myotoxins in History*, edited by Mary Mastossian (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Anne Zeller suggests another natural cause of the Salem events in her article "Arctic Hysteria in Salem?" She posits that the original accusers were suffering from a condition called *pibloktoq* or *Arctic hysteria*. The condition, although not completely understood, is related to low levels of calcium, which affects the phosphate balance in the body. See Anne C Zeller, "Artic Hysteria in Salem?," *Anthropologica* 32 (1990). Finally, along similar lines, Sally Hickey posits a biological basis for the afflictions of animals. See Sally Hickey, "Fatal Feeds? Plants, Livestock Losses, and Witch-Craft Accusations in Tudor and Stuart Britain," *Folklore* 101 (1990).

[3]. Murray's critics have been numerous and virtually unanimous over the years. They include the following: Katherine Briggs, "Review of Murray," *Folklore* 74 (1963); George L. Burr, "Review of Murray," *The American Historical Review* 27 (1921); George L. Burr, "Review of Murray," *The American Historical Review* 40 (1934-35); Norman Rufus Colin Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt*, (New York: Basic Books, 1975); C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism: A Concise Account Derived from Sworn Depositions and Confessions Obtained in the Courts of England and Wales* (London: Heath Cranton Limited, 1933); C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Some Witchcraft Criticism* (London: Author, 1938); W. R. Halliday, "Review of Murray," *Folklore* 33 (1922); George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929); Eric Maple, *The Dark World of Witches* (London: Pan Books, 1965); Geoffrey Parrinder, *Witchcraft: European and African* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971); and H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The European Witchcraze," in *Witchcraft and Sorcery: Selected Readings*, ed. Max Marwick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970). See Jacqueline Simpson, "Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her and Why?" *Folklore* 105 (1994) for a thorough discussion of Margaret Murray, her discredited theory, and historians' attempts to eradicate belief in this flawed hypothesis.

[4]. For a complete discussion of the erroneous tie between witches and midwives see David Harley, "Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch," *Social History of Medicine* 3 (1990). Specific discussion of Elizabeth Morse can be found on page 18 of that article. Robin Briggs and Jane Davidson also discount the midwives link; see Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Viking, 1996), pages 77f. and 277-281, and Jane P. Davidson, "The Myth of the Persecuted Female Healer," *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 14 (1993): 115-129. Diane Purkiss has suggested that is was not midwives but rather laying-in nurses who were often accused; see Diane Purkiss, "Women's Stories of Witchcraft in Early

Modern England: The House, the Body, the Child," *Gender and History* 7 (1995).

[5]. Briggs discusses the need for multiple explanations in his text (see Briggs, ***Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft***, p. 397), and he underscores that assertion in a response to Euan Cameron's review of his text (Robin Briggs, Response to Euan Cameron's Review of ***Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft***. (***Reviews in History***, 1996 [cited December 29 2000]); available from http://www.ihrinfo.ac.uk/ihr/reviews/witch.html <http://www.ihrinfo.ac.uk/ihr/reviews/witch.html>).