

Malcom Gaskill. *The Ruin of All Witches: Life and Death in the New World.* London: Allen Lane (Penguin), 2021. 336 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-593-31657-3.



Reviewed by Paul Moyer (SUNY Brockport)

Published on H-Albion (February, 2023)

Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer Polytechnic)

Malcolm Gaskill's *The Ruin of All Witches: Life and Death in the New World* is a wonderfully engaging and painstakingly researched book that captures the mood of a time and place. It offers up an insightful exploration of the historical phenomenon of witchcraft and, more broadly speaking, a meditation on the darker side of community life and human emotion.

Gaskill's work is a self-proclaimed microhistory (p. 236) that uses the lives of mostly ordinary folk, albeit those who found themselves in extraordinary circumstances, to illuminate an episode from the past as well as the larger historical and cultural milieu that surrounds it. It follows in the footsteps of other successful microhistories that center on witchcraft and witch-hunting in early modern Europe and its New World empires, such as Thomas Robisheaux's *The Last Witch of Langenburg: Murder in a German Village* (2009) and Richard Godbeer's account of Connecticut's Stamford-Fairfield witch panic, *Escaping Salem: The Other Witch-Hunt of 1692* (2005). Like these books, *The Ruin of All Witches* skillfully interro-

ates sources to tell an engrossing story that puts a human face on the past.

In the narrowest sense, *The Ruin of All Witches* is about Hugh and Mary Parsons, a husband and wife living in Springfield, Massachusetts, who fell under suspicion for witchcraft and faced trial for that crime in 1651-52. But in keeping with the microhistory genre, Gaskill uses this episode to shed light on a much broader array of historical events, issues, and characters. He tells the story of early Springfield and its pioneering inhabitants, especially its powerful proprietor, William Pynchon. Indeed, Pynchon nearly garners as much attention as the Parsons, as Gaskill shows how the story of Springfield's pious founder, his efforts to establish a commercial entrepot on the frontier, and his fall from grace over theological views Massachusetts authorities perceived as heretical intertwine with the witchcraft case of Hugh and Mary Parsons. The book also looks well beyond Springfield, and its pages contain a wealth of insight on events in New and Old England during the seventeenth century, including witch-hunt-

ing and the transatlantic political and religious reverberations of England's civil war and its aftermath.

Gaskill's book is an artful work of historical narrative. The first sentence of the first chapter—"Once, beside a great river at the edge of a forest, there stood a small town"—reads like the opening of a fairytale, which is fitting for the dramatic story of tragedy and horror that follows (p. 3). *The Ruin of All Witches* is full of wonderful turns of phrase, such as when the author concludes a discussion of some of the challenges Mary Parsons faced in her life, with the comment that she "went back to work, prayed earnestly and kept her passions laced tight, like a pair of women's stays" (p. 60), or when he likens people circulating rumors of witchcraft in "Springfield's tight-knit world" to the spread of "smallpox on a packed ship" (p. 127). Besides such glittering gems of prose, Gaskill's narrative brims with historical detail, giving a wonderful depth to the story it tells. Furthermore, the author makes a choice that is relatively unusual in works of history by frequently writing about events in the present tense. Doing so gives Gaskill's account a sense of immediacy that well suits his efforts to reconstruct the fear, wonder, and anxiety from which accusations of witchcraft took shape. The author also periodically goes beyond what he could glean from the historical record and engages his historical imagination. He addresses this in a brief section of the book titled "Sources and Methods" where he states that in places in his narrative, he "filled gaps imaginatively and made plausible inferences" (p. 235). For instance, Gaskill writes that after Mary Parson's arrest for witchcraft, Hugh "tossed and turned through Wednesday night—worrying for her sake, perhaps, but also for himself" (pp. 4-5). Although the author identifies no source that supplied this detail, it is a reasonable assumption based on the context of the situation. In the end, such passages help to enrich Gaskill's storytelling, and he never creatively reconstructs individuals' thoughts and emotions in a way that undermines the credibility

of his analysis. In short, *The Ruin of all Witches* is a good story well told.

The narrative structure of the nine chapters that make up Gaskill's book is generally chronological. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 set the stage for the tale it tells and recount William Pynchon's efforts to establish Springfield in the mid-seventeenth century, the arrival of Hugh Parsons and his future wife, Mary Lewis, in the settlement, and the couple's marriage in 1645. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 detail the tragic descent of Hugh and Mary Parsons's union into a mutual enmity. Moreover, they chronicle the deepening suspicions Springfield residents harbored against the couple as well as William Pynchon's growing separation from Puritan orthodoxy. Chapters 7 and 8 focus on the Parsonses' arrest and trials for witchcraft along with Pynchon's simultaneous showdown with Massachusetts authorities over his religious views. The final chapter outlines what happened to the persons involved in the Parsonses' witchcraft case in the years and decades that followed. In addition, throughout his narrative, Gaskill periodically draws back from his focus on Springfield to discuss broader trends in witch-hunting, religion, and politics in New England and Britain.

Another impressive feature of this book is how it is so solidly grounded in primary and secondary source research. *The Ruin of All Witches* successfully engages scholarship on a wide range of topics linked to the study of witchcraft: how early modern Europeans understood black magic, the social context of witchcraft accusations, the profile of witch suspects, and the extent and limits of judicial efforts to combat black magic. Gaskill's work addresses these issues in a transatlantic context and successfully explores the social, emotional, and psychological dimensions of witchcraft without getting bogged down in historiographic discussions that would detract from his bracing narrative. The book is also an amazing accomplishment in terms of its reconstruction of a community and its inhabitants. Through the careful

and creative use of court documents, Springfield's town records, and the account books and records of its founder and first chief magistrate, William Pynchon, Gaskill does an outstanding job of piecing together the witchcraft case of Hugh and Mary Parsons and the community-level context surrounding it.

My criticisms of this book are mostly mere quibbles and do little to detract from Gaskill's accomplishments. For instance, it is perhaps not accurate for the author to refer to the Connecticut Valley's Agawam Indians as "hunter-gatherers" (p. 23), especially when earlier on the same page he mentions that they planted crops and considering that agriculture was a mainstay of subsistence for the Native peoples of southern New England. The only real error I found is that Gaskill mistakenly identifies Anne Cole as the person who confessed to witchcraft during the Hartford witch panic of 1662-63 and "admitted entertaining a demon that skipped like a fawn to seduce her, and to meeting with other witches, including her husband, who was hanged beside her" (p. 202). In reality, Anne Cole was a young, unmarried woman who Hartford's inhabitants believed suffered bewitchment and who ended up numbering among the panic's accusers rather than its accused. Instead, Rebecca Greensmith was the individual who confessed to meeting the devil and attending witches' meetings and who later hanged for the crime next to her husband, Nathaniel. But this is a relatively minor lapse in an otherwise outstanding book.

In sum, *The Ruin of All Witches* is an amazing piece of research and writing from a talented historian. It successfully interweaves the story of a married couple, a community and its founding father, a witchcraft episode, and larger events in New and Old England during the seventeenth century. It is a book that will both entertain those who simply want to read a good story about witchcraft in early America and impress scholars who will take pleasure in seeing how Gaskill skillfully and seamlessly interweaves decades of scholarship on

witchcraft and witch-hunting into an engaging, deeply researched narrative.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Paul Moyer. Review of Gaskill, Malcom, *The Ruin of All Witches: Life and Death in the New World*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. February, 2023.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58636>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.