

In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692

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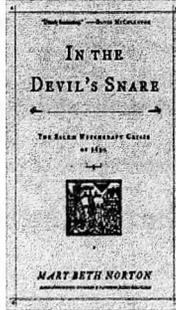
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Book Reviews

I

In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692

By Mary Beth Norton



Reviewed by Katy Missimer '06
(Graduate Class Review)

Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare* portrays the legal, cultural, and religious aspects of the 1692 witchcraft trials in Salem, Massachusetts. The author, a Harvard American History Ph.D. with half a dozen historically significant books published, presents an interesting hypothesis as to the causation of the witchcraft crisis. Norton contends that the crisis was an extension of raised tensions between New England colonists and the local Indians, the Wabanaki. The original relationship was peaceful as both cultures centered on hunting, gathering, and farming. However, the First Indian War, which Puritans deemed King Philip's War, ravaged the New England area and strained relations between the two neighboring peoples when New Englanders attempted to expand westward and confiscate Indian lands. The Indians led hit-and-run raids against the New Englanders. The two groups came to a short-lived "half-peace," but soon the Second Indian War, King William's War, erupted.

As opposed to far-fetched tales of magical meetings in secluded woods and fortune telling circles, Norton turns to the clashes of these two cultures struggling for control of the vast New England landscape as the spark of the cause of the witchcraft scare of the 1690s. Villages and towns ravaged by witchcraft, Norton proposes, were in actuality plagued by impetuous Indians, and then in turn by power struggles within colonial society. In the courtroom interviews, the afflicted often claimed to be tormented by a "black man," yet when asked to describe the specter, the afflicted actually alleged skin of an Indian tone. The conflict with the Indians was the spark that kindled the fire of the strict Puritan culture. The Puritan culture of Salem, Massachusetts had fostered an ambiguity of hatred spread to encompass Indians, blacks, and the devil. Hatred between the races was not the only problem—the battle between the sexes erupted, too.

Salem, in particular, was prone to this ethnic clash because of the ongoing frontier war in the immediate west. Salem was the primary port of Essex County and the northernmost point of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In order to prove her theory, the author goes beyond the small scope of Salem Village and includes an intense study of the surrounding Essex County. This method allows Norton to elucidate the forces in Salem that were not present in the surrounding areas which caused such a concentration of witchcraft accusations and convictions. Norton points out that the town magistrates that presided over trials were also the colony's government and military leaders. The magistrates' failure to control the Indian crisis forced them to reaffirm their power over a new crisis: witchcraft. Norton's unique hypothesis brings a new perspective to the repeatedly examined Salem witchcraft trials.

In addition to the landmark investigation of the role local Indians played in the process, Mary Beth Norton also outlines the importance of the roles of women within the Village during the 1690s period through individual case studies. The woman's role in Puritan colonial society was one of silence and obedience. Women were not expected to speak in court or in church, which made their sudden outbursts during "affliction" not only disruptive to the services but to the village way of life. While most of the accused and afflicted were women, men were soon accused simply for maintaining relationships with an accused woman. Men were also accused after making disastrous or "devilish" decisions in the Indian Wars, which offers even more support of Norton's thesis. Most of the afflicted and accused, as was the case in most of the colonies at this time, were related either by blood or marriage. Small, community-centered towns like Salem were governed by legacies of families reigning throughout the generations.

Highlighting the shift between the roles of women in the period, Norton further contends that these women were now entrusted as the sole witnesses and their testimony was the backbone of many of the court cases. Norton speculates that this was the reason the prosecutions died out as quickly as they began. Norton takes this concept one step further to say that these accounts eventually became viewed as "devil's testimony." The trials' critics realized that the most effective way to end the torments was to target the accusing girls and discredit their claims, reaffirming their own patriarchal supremacy. In her conclusion, Norton suggests that the strange shift that had placed women on top was righted and young women were reduced again to what the dominant males of the village saw as their "proper roles: servers, not served; followers, not leaders; governed, not governors; the silent, not the speakers" (304).

Although Norton's account is extensively researched and cross-referenced with various trial transcripts, letters, and diary entries, the author makes use of her introduction to account for discrepancies and assumptions made on her own part. The available evidence that Norton analyzed revealed interesting controversies that forced her to make certain assumptions. The conviction and execution rates of Salem were inconsistent because the very people making claims, the poor, unmarried Salem maidens, were forced to appeal to the colony's rich, prosperous, male magistrates for help. Those with the right influence and reputation could escape execution. Second, the investigations and prosecutions quickly shifted from massive community support for the trials to little interest. Norton therefore assumes that the Massachusetts magistrates listened to the pleas of the Salem women originally because they were not filed by women at all. Prominent men in the town filed the official complaints, not the women afflicted. In fact,

Norton notes that while the afflicted women hailed from Salem Village, the complaints were filed in Salem Town. Third, Norton suggests that the trials' reception in the community shifted so suddenly because of the frontier relationship. The First and Second Indian Wars had forced the Salem villagers to turn inward, away from the dangerous Indian frontier. However, after the victory over witchcraft, the failures of the Massachusetts military were no longer fresh in the minds of the colonists, and they were able to once again gain public support for campaigns in the west since they had surmounted their fear of the Indians. Mary Beth Norton's extensive research and personal involvement in the investigations makes *In the Devil's Snare*, published in 2002, a very credible account of the Salem witch crisis. In addition to the published letters, articles, and trial transcripts, Norton was also able to evaluate evidence collected by the Salem Town Museum in addition to items preserved over the past centuries by Massachusetts family legacies, many direct descendants of participants in the trials. In addition to this abundance of primary sources, the author also turns to others in her field to compare their theories with her own. Norton references studies and investigations by Bernard Rosenthal, author of *Salem Story*, Benjamin Ray, professor of religion at the University of Virginia, and Dr. Anthony S. Patton, owner of the Rea house in Danvers, Massachusetts. Joshua Scottow's "Narrative of the Planting of the Massachusetts Colony," written directly at the end of the crisis brought the Indian conflict to Norton's attention. Scottow alleged both Indians and witchcraft were inspired by God. Norton also has personal connections to the era, which helped fuel her intense investigations. Mistress Mary Bradbury, who was convicted as a witch but not hanged, was the author's ninth great grandmother. In addition, both sides of the Norton family hail from Salisbury, Massachusetts during the mid 1600s. Mary Beth Norton's personal interests obviously influenced the thorough detail and extensive research culminated in *In the Devil's Snare*.

Despite the excessive amount of credible information, Mary Beth Norton's actual presentation could be a cause for concern. As the book is structured, there are shaded boxes interspersed throughout the text in which the author further explains points from within the piece. While designed to be helpful, these explanations tend to confuse the reader rather than aid in understanding. As the boxes expand on one or two sentences from a previous paragraph, the reader has already read into the next point. This is especially a problem when Norton is discussing consequential Indian attacks and proposing causes of one while already introducing a later attack. Also, the wordiness of the account tends to cloud Norton's thesis. Readers can easily lose sight of Indians as Norton's focus as she thoroughly and intricately relays individual trials and afflictions of numerous case studies. Mary Beth Norton's obsession with detail and accuracy in her deliberation of the trials may in fact be a downfall when it comes to the portrayal of her actual thesis.

Thus, Mary Beth Norton's piece breaks new ground by refreshing and expanding Scottow's ancient theory on the tired study of the Salem witch trials. Her innovative theory involving the influence of the frontier Indians as an initial cause of the widespread panic that ravaged Salem in 1692 is extensively researched and well supported. Although her text becomes bogged down by wordiness, individual case studies, and interspersed explanations, the thesis itself is strong and thought provoking. Geared towards the American history scholar and professional audience, Norton's piece

highlights history previously ignored in the study of Salem's magic by relating the events surrounding Salem and the Massachusetts Bay Colony to the tragedy ensuing within the town.

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