This article discusses the history of witchcraft in British America. The fear of witches was embedded within the culture which English migrants brought with them as they crossed the Atlantic to settle in North America, and so it is not surprising that witch-hunting became a part of the colonial experience. Over sixty trials for witchcraft took place in seventeenth-century New England, omitting the infamous Salem witch-hunt of 1692, which resulted in over 150 formal charges. Accusations of witchcraft occurred throughout the British colonies, but there were far fewer prosecutions in the middle and southern colonies than in New England.

Keywords: witchcraft prosecutions, British colonies, witchcraft, English migrants, witch trials, New England

FEAR of witches was embedded within the culture that English migrants brought with them as they crossed the Atlantic to settle in North America, and so it is not surprising that witch-hunting became a part of the colonial experience. Over sixty trials for witchcraft took place in seventeenth-century New England, omitting the infamous Salem witch-hunt of 1692, which resulted in over one hundred and fifty formal charges. Accusations of witchcraft occurred throughout the British colonies. But there were far fewer prosecutions in the middle and southern colonies than in New England. There was one execution in Maryland and five in Bermuda, whereas in New England at least thirty-three (and perhaps as many as thirty-five) women and men were hanged as witches. The disproportionate number of cases in the northern colonies was assuredly due to the powerful influence of religious culture in that region, as Puritan beliefs encouraged a preoccupation with evil forces that seemed to endanger individual souls and New England as a whole. This was also the case in Bermuda, where Puritan ministers who migrated to the island after being ousted from their parishes in England fought energetically against what they saw as the devil’s intrusions into their new home. Given Bermuda’s modest population, the twenty-one trials that took place there during the 1600s suggest an intensity of witch-hunting comparable to the northern mainland colonies. Yet most of the scholarship on witchcraft in British America has focused on New England, reflecting the richness of the evidence surviving from that region as well as a disproportionate interest in the northern colonies both inside and outside academia.

22.1 A Supernatural World

Seventeenth-century New Englanders believed that their world was filled with supernatural forces that could intrude upon their lives at any time. According to the worldview embraced by most New Englanders, God and the devil were constantly at work in their day-to-day lives, testing and tempting, rewarding and punishing as each individual deserved. God had ultimate authority over all that occurred in the universe, so that when the devil intervened in people’s lives, he was able to do so because God allowed it to happen. Any extraordinary event that seemed to interrupt the natural order—comets and eclipses, dramatic fires and epidemics, deformed births and inexplicable crop failures, dreams and visions—carried supernatural significance. Ministers argued that any unusual
occurrence or misfortune carried a divine message. When misfortune struck, God was usually prompting sinners to self-examination, repentance, and a renewed commitment to obey His commandments. On some occasions God inflicted the warning himself; on others he allowed the devil or even a human witch to act on his behalf. In either case, the appropriate response was to repent and reform. Yet at the same time, godly New Englanders looked outward as well as inward for the source of their afflictions; they often suspected and sometimes accused particular neighbours of bewitching them. There was nothing unorthodox about such a strategy: as the Bible declared, ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.’

Biblical mandate and religious ideology were not the only influences at work as New Englanders responded to adversities that might have been caused by witchcraft. Alongside Protestant Christianity there survived and flourished in New England less formal and yet influential folk beliefs that the settlers brought from England, including those which underlay the use of magic. Folk magic was based on the assumption that men and women could wield occult power for their own benefit. Many settlers believed that through the use of simple techniques, passed down from one generation to the next, they could predict the future, heal the sick, and protect themselves against witchcraft. Most divining, healing, and defensive techniques were quite straightforward, and so it was not unusual for colonists to experiment on their own. But in times of need New Englanders often turned to neighbours who had a reputation for occult expertise. These individuals, known as ‘cunning folk’, performed a valued social service, but they could also use their skills to harm or destroy those who crossed them. Neighbours who possessed occult powers were thus valuable allies, but also potentially deadly enemies.³

Many people did not see anything wrong with using magic for benevolent or defensive purposes; only those who deployed their skills for malign ends were a social menace. From this perspective, witchcraft was the misuse of otherwise benign supernatural skills. But ministers saw things differently. They insisted that scripture gave no sanction for such experiments and that human beings could not wield supernatural forces. The Puritan clergy did not doubt that magic worked, but according to them it did so because the devil intervened to assist whoever used it. Individuals might think that they were successfully harnessing occult powers, but in fact the devil was doing it for them and so luring them into his service.⁴ Ministers were horrified by the popularity of magical techniques, especially among devout settlers. Some colonists may not have understood why magic was objectionable from a theological perspective; others may have understood quite well their ministers’ objections, but quietly ignored official warnings or set aside their own misgivings—for the simple reason that magic answered a need for knowledge and control that Puritan theology reserved only for God. In general, colonists who turned to magic do not seem to have given much thought to where such powers came from. Their attitude was pragmatic: tradition taught that such forces existed and that they could be useful. When godly colonists turned to magic, they were not rejecting religious faith so much as turning to whatever supernatural resource seemed helpful at a given moment.⁵

The belief that magic could be used for both good and evil purposes placed people known for their magical cunning in an ambiguous and potentially perilous position. When New Englanders feared that they were bewitched, they often blamed men and women in their local communities who had a reputation for occult skill: such individuals might be using their skills to harm as well as to help their neighbours. Healers could easily become the target of suspicion if their patients grew sicker instead of recovering. And anyone known for their magical expertise had reason to worry if they argued with a neighbour who then suffered a mysterious illness or mishap.

22.2 Women as Witches

Women known for their magical skills were much more likely than men to be accused of witchcraft. The power wielded by cunning folk was potentially dangerous whether in the hands of a man or a woman, but it seemed especially threatening if possessed by a woman because it contradicted gender norms that placed women in subordinate positions. Neither belief in folk magic nor its practice were gender-specific: men as well as women resorted to and functioned as cunning folk. Yet suspicions that magical skill had been used for malicious ends were much more likely to be directed against female practitioners.

Witchcraft was perceived on both sides of the Atlantic as a primarily female phenomenon. Around four fifths of those New Englanders tried for witchcraft were women. Puritan ministers did not teach that women were by nature more evil than men, but they did see them as weaker and thus more susceptible to sinful impulses. Elizabeth Reis has pointed out that ‘colonists shared with their English brethren the belief that women’s bodies were physically
older adults, mostly women, of tormenting them. Karlsen has argued that in order to understand their behaviour, we need to be aware that children and young women were expected to accept a subordinate position within their households and communities. Many of those who became possessed had personal histories that further weakened their position within colonial society. A significant number of the possessed accusers in 1692 had been orphaned in recent Indian attacks and were now living with relatives or family friends, often as servants; they had little or no dowry to offer and so their marital prospects were dismal. In a society that valued women largely in terms of their husbands’ social and economic standing, they must have known that they were almost certainly doomed to obscurity. Having grown up in devout households and communities, these young women doubtless understood that any anger or resentment that they felt in response to their situation made them potential recruits for the devil’s cause. As good Christians, they would have feared rebellious emotions that they equated with disorder and evil, personified in the devil and his first recruit, Eve. Karlsen argues that possession mediated between a young woman’s rage at her place in the world and her reluctance to acknowledge or validate that rage. By claiming and perhaps convincing themselves that they were possessed, they could express anger and discontent without having to acknowledge full responsibility for such feelings: after all, the devil and his followers were speaking through them. And by accusing others of being witches, they shifted attention away from their own moral failings to those of the women and men whom they now accused of allegiance to Satan. They may also have relished the power that they exercised during the court’s proceedings, a power that children and young women would not otherwise have attained in seventeenth-century New England. Yet this is not to suggest that the possessed girls and young women were simply acting. They may have feared quite sincerely that the devil and his disciples were weaker than men’s and that therefore ‘the Devil could more frequently and successfully gain access to and possess women’s souls’. Ministers reminded New England congregations that it was Eve who first gave way to Satan and then seduced Adam, when she should have continued to serve his moral welfare in obedience to God; all women inherited that insidious blend of weakness and power from their mother Eve. Some women were much more likely to be accused of witchcraft than others. Throughout the seventeenth century, women became vulnerable to such allegations only if they were seen as having forsaken their prescribed place in a gendered hierarchy that Puritans held to be ordained by God. Puritan ministers insisted that women were not ‘a necessary evil’, as Catholic theologians had often claimed, but instead ‘a necessary good’, designed as a ‘sweet and intimate companion’ for men.7 As Carol Karlsen has pointed out, Puritan thinkers needed to believe that women could play a constructive role within godly communities because men needed female companions and helpmeets to work with them in raising self-disciplined children, who would grow up to become committed Puritans. ‘There was no place in this vision,’ Karlsen writes, ‘for the belief that women were incapable of fulfilling such a role. Nor was there a place in the ideal Puritan society for women who refused to fill it.’8 That caveat in Puritan gender ideology could prove fatal. Women whose circumstances or behaviour seemed to disrupt social norms and hierarchies could easily lose their status as ‘Handmaidsens of the Lord’ and become branded as the ‘Servants of Satan’. Especially vulnerable were women who had passed menopause and thus no longer served the purpose of procreation, women who were widowed and so neither fulfilled the role of wife nor had a husband to protect them from malicious accusations, and women who had inherited or stood to inherit property in violation of expectations that wealth would be transmitted from man to man. Women who seemed unduly aggressive and contentious or who failed to display deference towards men in positions of authority were also more likely to be accused.9 New Englanders sought to ensure a positive and respected place for women in godly society, yet the lingering fear of ‘women-as-witches’ complicated and compromised their celebration of women as ‘a necessary good’. Behaviour or circumstances that seemed disorderly could easily become identified as diabolical and associated with witchcraft: the devil had, after all, led a rebellion against God’s rule in heaven. Eve’s legacy as a female prototype was double-edged: on the one hand, a beloved and successful helpmeet in the Garden of Eden; on the other, Satan’s first human ally. Women as well as men internalized the claim that women were more vulnerable to the devil’s influence. As women accused other women, they participated in negative assumptions about their own sex.10 Prominent among these female accusers were girls and young women who claimed that they were not only bewitched but also possessed. During their fits, they engaged in disobedient and unruly behaviour: they questioned the authority of their parents, masters, and ministers; they refused to do housework, eat their meals, or to wash their hands; they shouted and screamed; they became violent, lewd, and blasphemous. And they accused older adults, mostly women, of tormenting them. Karlsen has argued that in order to understand their behaviour, we need to bear in mind that children and young women were expected to accept a subordinate position within their households and communities. Many of those who became possessed had personal histories that further weakened their position within colonial society. A significant number of the possessed accusers in 1692 had been orphaned in recent Indian attacks and were now living with relatives or family friends, often as servants; they had little or no dowry to offer and so their marital prospects were dismal. In a society that valued women largely in terms of their husbands’ social and economic standing, they must have known that they were almost certainly doomed to obscurity. 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after them: after all, their faith taught them that the resentment they felt made them likely recruits.\textsuperscript{12}

22.3 Malevolent Neighbours

When seventeenth-century New Englanders suspected that they were bewitched, whether by a woman or a man, the person they blamed was usually a close neighbour with whom they had a history of personal tension or conflict. In most cases the antagonism developed according to one of three scenarios. In the first of these, neighbour A requested a favour, such as temporary shelter or the loan of a household implement, from neighbour B, who refused and then felt guilty for having done so. Neighbour A was disappointed and resentful, perhaps cursing neighbour B and vowing to get even. Neighbour B now displaced his own sense of guilt onto neighbour A, blaming her vengeful anger for subsequent misfortunes such as the unexplained death of livestock or a mysterious illness within his family. According to neighbour B, witchcraft was at work and neighbour A was responsible. In the second scenario, an exchange of goods between neighbour A and neighbour B went awry; neighbour A considered herself the aggrieved party and was angry. In the weeks, months, or even years that followed, neighbour B’s family suffered a series of misfortunes and became convinced that neighbour A was taking revenge by using occult forces against them. In the third scenario, neighbour A and neighbour B quarrelled because one of them had allegedly damaged property belonging to the other. Again neighbour A was enraged. Neighbour B was subsequently troubled by mysterious misfortunes and accused neighbour A of bewitching him. The assumption underlying accusations of witchcraft in each scenario was that an individual who felt mistreated (neighbour A) had turned to witchcraft as a form of revenge. The victim of witchcraft (neighbour B) had failed to be a good neighbour, whether through lack of generosity or by questioning a neighbour’s honesty; they believed that the alleged witch (neighbour A) had retaliated by becoming the ultimately nightmarish neighbour, wreaking havoc and destruction among her enemies.\textsuperscript{13}

If we are to understand why so many accusations of witchcraft originated in disputes between neighbours, we need to consider a crucial intersection between social values and supernatural beliefs in early New England. John Demos has pointed out that this social element was closely linked to the circumstances in which most pre-modern men and women lived. Most New Englanders lived in tiny communities where the quality of life was ‘personal in the fullest sense’. Each resident not only knew everyone else in the town but also interacted with neighbours in many different roles and contexts. Personal interactions and influence were central to the experience of early New Englanders. It therefore made good sense to account for misfortune or suffering in personal terms. Witchcraft explained personal problems in terms of personal interactions. A particular neighbour had quarrelled with you and was now taking revenge for a perceived injury by bewitching you.\textsuperscript{14}

The tiny communities in which New Englanders settled were clustered precariously on the margins of empire, separated from each other by roads that were sometimes impassable and by no means always safe. Neighbours knew that they depended upon each other for their survival. Townsfolk and villagers helped each other to put up new buildings or harvest crops; they exchanged food and simple products such as candles or soap in a local barter economy; and they gave each other emotional support as they navigated life’s challenges and tragedies. The Puritan faith in which most of the colonists believed (albeit to varying degrees) taught that being a good neighbour had its spiritual as well as practical dimensions. Settlers must keep watch over each other, warn each other when they seemed to be in danger of giving way to sinful urges, and trust that others would keep an equally close eye on them.

The Puritans’ emphasis on community and mutual support meant that arguments between neighbours became not only irritating in their own right but also a betrayal of social and moral values on which their practical and spiritual welfare depended. It is, then, hardly surprising that such disputes gave rise to festering resentments. In many instances there was no institutional outlet for the tensions and hostilities that resulted. If someone trespassed upon a neighbour’s property or assaulted another town resident, a law had been broken and the malefactor would be dealt with accordingly. But refusing to lend a neighbour food or a tool was not a crime and so the resulting animosity could not be expressed or mediated directly through civil or criminal proceedings. Witchcraft allegations provided an outlet for feelings of guilt or hostility rooted in confrontations between neighbours over issues of mutual support and responsibility.

Yet we should beware of concluding that New Englanders used such allegations simply as a ploy to get rid of their
enemies. Most of those who accused their neighbours of witchcraft believed quite sincerely that they were guilty as charged. Allegations of witchcraft brought together three important components of pre-modern culture: the inability to explain or control illness and other forms of misfortune, a deeply embedded belief in supernatural forces that could be used to inflict harm, and the densely personal nature of human interactions. Given the density of interpersonal contact in these tiny communities, it is hardly surprising that one neighbour’s suspicions about another often spread from household to household in a ripple effect that encouraged other townsfolk to interpret their own misfortunes as the result of witchcraft. The mysterious and the supernatural converged with what John Demos refers to as ‘things most tangible and personal’. Along ‘the seam of their convergence’ emerged accusations of witchcraft.¹⁵

22.4 Witch Trials in Seventeenth-Century New England

Once New Englanders became convinced that a particular individual had bewitched them, they had the right to lodge a formal complaint and so initiate a criminal prosecution. In England and its New England colonies, allegations of witchcraft were handled by secular courts, not ecclesiastical courts of inquisition such as conducted witch trials in some European countries. New England’s legal system was rigorous and cautious in its handling of capital cases. Of the sixty-one known prosecutions for witchcraft in seventeenth-century New England, excluding the Salem witch-hunt, sixteen at most (perhaps only fourteen) resulted in conviction and execution, a rate of just over one quarter (26.2 per cent). Four of the accused individuals confessed, which made the court’s job much easier. If those cases are omitted, the conviction rate falls to just under one-fifth (19.7 per cent).¹⁶

New England’s witchcraft laws were framed in theological terms, treating witches as heretical servants of the devil and demanding proof of diabolical allegiance. Yet ordinary men and women were interested less in where a witch’s power came from than in the practical threat that she posed. Depositions in most witch cases prior to the Salem panic reflected that practical preoccupation and rarely made any mention of the devil. The evidence given against New England’s accused witches generally fell into one of four categories. Most frequently, witnesses described quarrels followed by misfortune or illness, presumably brought on by witchcraft. Witnesses sometimes claimed that the accused was known as a fortune-teller or healer; this established that the accused had occult powers which, if it was implied, had also been deployed for malign purposes. Witnesses also described having used defensive and retaliatory techniques such as burning the ear or tail of a bewitched cow so as to injure and thus identify the witch responsible; they reported the results of such experiments to the court as incriminating testimony. And, finally, neighbours of the accused would describe generally suspicious behaviour, such as extraordinary and perhaps superhuman strength.

Most testimony presented at witch trials in New England was circumstantial and unconvincing from the perspective of legal and religious experts. Magistrates were willing to convict and execute accused witches. But they generally refused to do so unless the evidence satisfied rigorous standards of proof: this meant either a voluntary confession, or at least two independent witnesses to an incident demonstrating the individual’s guilt. Those giving testimony against the accused assumed that their personal experiences and impressions would be treated as hard evidence.¹⁷ Yet judges were interested only in evidence that established the devil’s involvement—and even then worried about its reliability. The only occasion on which New England courts gathered extensive evidence of diabolical allegiance was the Salem witch-hunt, which was also the one occasion on which the authorities made illegal use of physical torture and extreme psychological pressure to extract a large number of confessions. (English law forbade the use of torture during judicial interrogation, except in cases of sedition or treason, and the New England authorities operated under English jurisdiction.)

Accusers expected to be taken seriously and sometimes refused to accept an acquittal. They conferred with each other, gathered new evidence against the suspect, and then renewed legal charges. Three New Englanders were each prosecuted for witchcraft on three separate occasions: another five appeared in court twice on charges of witchcraft. All of these cases resulted in acquittal.¹⁸ As the difficulty of securing a legal conviction for witchcraft became increasingly apparent, so New Englanders became less inclined to initiate legal prosecutions against suspected witches. There were nineteen witch trials in New England during the 1660s, but only six during the 1670s and eight during the 1680s. Yet the dramatic fall in prosecutions for witchcraft during the 1670s and 1680s was not due to any decline in fear of witches, as became abundantly clear in 1692.
22.5 The Salem Witch-Hunt

The Salem witch-hunt of 1692 was very different from other trials for witchcraft in seventeenth-century New England, both in its scale and in the intensity of the fears that gripped local residents that year. That crisis has become one of the most infamous events of early American history and has inspired a huge body of literature, including plays and novels as well as academic monographs and articles. Earlier scholars of the witch-hunt tended to focus on the issue of blame: some defended those involved as well-meaning if misguided; others condemned them as superstitious zealots or accused them of taking part in a murderous conspiracy.¹⁹ Recent scholars have been more inclined to seek explanations for why a witch panic of this magnitude erupted at this particular time and in this specific locale. Some of these explanations have proven more convincing than others. A graduate student in biology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, proposed in 1976, for example, that the fits suffered by Salem villagers were symptoms of a disease, convulsive ergotism, which came from contaminated grain. Scholars have scrutinized this argument and exposed its fundamental flaws, yet it has proven resilient outside academic circles.²⁰

Perhaps the most influential of recent attempts to explain what happened in 1692 focuses on the social and economic tensions within Salem Village, which contemporaries understood in supernatural terms. Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum have shown in Salem Possessed that the village in which the panic began was a deeply divided and dysfunctional community.²¹ Salem Village developed as an outgrowth of Salem Town, one of the region’s largest seaports. The village was situated within the territorial bounds of Salem Town and had no civil government of its own; it was legally joined with and subordinate to the nearby seaport. Some villagers wanted independence from the town, in part because the latter had proven remarkably insensitive to their concerns. The church in Salem Town, for example, was reluctant to let the villagers form a congregation of their own, despite the inconvenience of having to travel so far to the town meeting house. Some villagers also wanted to separate themselves from the commercial spirit that increasingly characterized the town. According to Boyer and Nissenbaum, villagers who saw that way of life as spiritually suspect tended to perceive neighbours who lived nearer to the town or associated with its interests as morally deficient and untrustworthy.

Salem Village became increasingly conflict-ridden as those who associated with the town aligned against those who were eager to separate and form an autonomous community. Because the village had no formal institutions of its own, it proved extremely difficult to resolve the disputes that arose between these two groups (just as the individual quarrels described by John Demos focused on issues that were not amenable to resolution through regular institutional channels). As a result, animosities and mutual suspicions deepened with each passing year. Proponents of separation from the town eventually secured the establishment of an independent church in 1689 and the ordination of Samuel Parris as their pastor. Parris proved to be an unfortunate choice: a failed and bitter merchant who resented those who succeeded in the world of commerce, he fuelled local hostilities. Parris gave a series of inflammatory sermons that translated factional division into a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil. In the minds of his supporters, Salem Town became the symbol of an alien, corrupt, and even diabolical world that threatened the welfare of Salem Village.

Because supporters of Samuel Parris perceived their enemies as nothing less than evil, it was but a short step for them to become convinced that those aligned with the town and its interests were servants of Satan. Boyer and Nissenbaum argue that divisions within the village were reproduced in the pattern of accusations in 1692: a disproportionate number of accused witches and their defenders lived on the side of the village nearest to Salem Town, while most of the accusers lived on the western side.²² Many of the accused had personal histories or interests that either associated them with Salem Town or otherwise marked them as threatening outsiders. But as Boyer and Nissenbaum emphasize, this was not just a cynical bid to dispose of enemies by labelling them as witches: villagers pointed the finger of accusation at particular individuals because they truly believed them to be morally deficient and thus likely members of a diabolical conspiracy. Those people who had become identified with forces of change, which their enemies construed as disorder and immorality, were now accused of having allied with radical evil, namely, the devil.

Critics of Salem Possessed have chipped away at various components of its argument, including the geographical divisions on which Boyer and Nissenbaum placed so much importance.²³ Yet the most serious problem with Salem Possessed is its focus on Salem Village, given that the witch-hunt of 1692 was, after all, a regional phenomenon involving two dozen towns and villages. Salem did not even produce the most accusations; that dubious distinction...
fled to Andover. Other scholars have argued that a more comprehensive explanation for the witch panic must involve stepping away from Salem Village itself and examining the broader fears that ignited that year into witch panic.

A succession of attacks directed against the settlements of New England during the two decades prior to 1692 created intense anxiety among those who lived in the region. Perhaps the most terrifying of these attacks were Indian raids that came in two waves, the first in 1675–6 and the second beginning in 1689. Many colonists were convinced that Indians worshipped the devil and practised witchcraft. Given that association and the widespread fear generated by Indian attacks in the early 1690s, it is hardly surprising that anxiety about this apparently demonic threat surfaced repeatedly in the trial depositions at Salem. As recent scholars have restored Indians to visibility as central players in early American history, so a growing number of studies have examined the links between Indian attacks and the Salem witch-hunt. The most recent of these is Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare*. Norton demonstrates the impact of Indian raids on the witch panic in much greater detail than any previous study. She notes the parallels between horrified responses to the Indians' mutilation of their enemies in contemporary accounts and the descriptions in 1692 of witches threatening to tear their victims to pieces. She shows that several male suspects who did not fit the usual witch stereotype became vulnerable to accusation in 1692 because of their association with the frontier. And, perhaps most strikingly, she suggests that the support given by Massachusetts leaders to the Salem court may have been due in no small part to their own lack of success in repelling the Indian attacks: rooting out those responsible for invisible assaults on the colony could deflect attention from, and appease, their sense of guilt for failing to deal effectively with more visible assaults. Norton and her predecessors show convincingly that the witch-hunt of 1692 makes most sense if we step back from events in Salem itself and place them in a broader context of military and political crisis.

Yet Indians were by no means the only enemies to have launched assaults on New England during the years preceding 1692. Political reforms imposed by the government in London had also threatened to undermine the colonists' way of life. In 1684 the Crown revoked the charter that had granted Massachusetts something akin to self-government. Two years later, the northern colonies were incorporated into a single entity, to be known as the Dominion of New England. There would henceforth be no representative assemblies and all power would be vested in the governor and his councillors. The new governor, Sir Edmund Andros, was a career soldier with an autocratic temperament. He was also an Anglican, much to the outrage of Puritans, who saw their new governor's religion as one short step away from Roman Catholicism, which they in turn associated with the Antichrist. Andros attempted unsuccessfully to negotiate a peace with the Indians, and then led an equally unsuccessful military expedition against them in Maine. Some suspected that he had travelled north to make a secret pact with the Indians and also French Catholics in Canada. It is, then, hardly surprising that when James II was deposed in 1688, the Bostonians carried out a coup of their own the following year, arresting Andros and reinstating their old charter of government until a new one could be negotiated.

But Andros was not the only purveyor of heresy into New England. In the summer of 1688, Quakers launched an evangelical campaign in the northern colonies. Quakers rejected many of the beliefs that other Protestants held dear and their egalitarian ideals horrified even those who did not care much about their religious views. Quakers claimed to receive revelation from God, but Puritans declared that these so-called revelations were really diabolical. The Quakers were so called because they tended to convulse when receiving revelation; the similarities between these convulsions and demonic possession did not go unnoticed by their enemies. And just as women who challenged social norms could end up being associated with Satan and his rebellion against rightful authority, so Quakers who refused to show respect for social hierarchy were seen as aligning themselves with the prince of disorder and sin. Though Quakers remained a tiny minority, the vehemence of anti-Quaker tracts that appeared in the early 1690s testifies to the danger that some Puritans saw them as posing.

What made matters worse was that the new charter of 1691 gave freedom of worship to all Protestants. Until 1684 only the male members of Puritan congregations had been allowed to vote in political elections, but now the right to vote would be based instead on land ownership (as in England and other North American colonies), which enfranchised property-owning dissenters such as Anglicans and Quakers. These two changes struck a direct blow to Puritan dominance in New England. Puritans had felt for some time that their godly society was under threat. During the second half of the seventeenth century the population became more diverse in its values and priorities: some of those who migrated in these later decades were drawn more by economic opportunity than by religious ideals, and as the original settlers produced children, not all of these native-born New Englanders grew up to share
their parents’ values. Those who identified closely with the religious goals of the early settlers feared that they were losing control of the region’s culture and that New England was in a state of moral decline. A more diverse population and a more worldly way of life struck them as the devil’s work.

That sense of decline and the siege mentality that it created among devout settlers provided an important context for the ways in which colonists responded to crises that struck New England during the years prior to the Salem panic. Indian raids, the authoritarian Dominion, Quaker evangelism, and the dramatic implications of the new charter left many colonists feeling imperilled. The colonists described these various threats in much the same language used to characterize witches: as alien, invasive, and malevolent. To be ruled by Andros and his cronies, to be attacked by Indians, or to be evangelized by Quakers was equivalent to being assaulted by Satan. From this perspective, the witch crisis of 1692 was not an isolated event but the climax of a devilish assault upon the region.

The pattern of witch accusations that year suggests an intense preoccupation with invasion: those who could be linked in some way to recent experiences of physical and spiritual assault proved most vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. A significant number of the accused had close Quaker associations. Fear of Indians resonated through the testimony given at the trials. And many of the accused were clearly perceived as outsiders, either literally or figuratively. The tense situation within Salem Village itself paralleled crises in the region at large, as those villagers who feared and resented Salem Town came to see all those associated with it as the agents of a corrupt and evil world that threatened to destroy their way of life. The afflictions in Salem Village unleashed fears of alien, invasive, and diabolical forces that had accumulated throughout the region during the last two decades. As one commentator wrote that year, ‘[t]he usual walls of defense about mankind have such a gap made in them that the very devils are broken in upon us’. The magistrates charged with handling the panic of 1692 proved much more willing to convict than those who had presided over previous witch trials. During the summer and early fall of that year, the special court tried twenty-seven individuals and found all of them guilty as charged. Yet with each passing month the court became more deeply mired in controversy over the evidence being used to justify convictions. In sharp contrast to earlier cases, the testimony accumulating at Salem contained plentiful evidence of the devil’s involvement in the alleged bewitchments. Over fifty of those indicted in 1692 confessed that they were indeed witches who had covenanted with Satan. Yet by the end of the summer many of these confessing witches had recanted, claiming that their admissions of guilt had been forced from them through the use of psychological pressure and physical torture. Apart from confessions, almost all of the testimony that made reference to the devil came from the afflicted girls and young women. Most of their information apparently came from demonic spectres that appeared to them in the form of human witches. The magistrates took the position that devils could appear in the image of a particular individual only with that person’s permission, so that the appearance of a spectre could be treated as proof that the individual represented was, in fact, a witch. Yet critics of the court argued that spectral evidence was unreliable as a basis for conviction. Because the devil was a notorious liar, any information subject to his influence might well be misleading and part of a scheme to incriminate the innocent. None of those attacking the court questioned the reality of witchcraft. What they did doubt was the possibility of proving who exactly was responsible for witchcraft, unless the witch freely confessed.

Once spectral testimony came under attack and once confessors began to recant, the court found itself in an extremely awkward position. An impressive number of townsfolk and villagers from communities across Essex County had come forward to testify against witch suspects; their depositions testified eloquently to a widespread and profound fear of witchcraft. But unlike the confessors and afflicted girls, these other witnesses rarely mentioned the devil’s involvement as the law demanded. As the eagerness of the court to convict collided with a growing chorus of opposition to its proceedings, the governor felt that he had no choice but to suspend the trials and reassess the situation.

Seventeenth-century critics of the court and most commentators since then have depicted the nineteen executions that occurred prior to the suspension of the trials as a tragic injustice. Yet from the perspective of people who wanted the courts to take decisive action against witches in their midst, the acquittal and release of so many suspects in the weeks and months following the suspension of the trials must have been both galling and frightening. That witch trials disappeared from the history of New England shortly thereafter was due as much to popular disillusionment with the legal process as to any reluctance on the part of officials to accommodate witch accusations. Yet belief in witchcraft and fear of witches would persist throughout the eighteenth century, despite
growing doubts about the reality of supernatural phenomena within educated circles. In the minds of many colonists witchcraft was still a very real threat.32

22.6 New Directions

Recent scholarship on witchcraft in New England has taught us much about the cultural and social assumptions that shaped the northern colonies. Scholarly focus on that region is hardly surprising given that so much of the extant evidence is concentrated in New England. Yet a more determined investigation of surviving documentation from other parts of British America, including Bermuda, would broaden and enrich our understanding of witch-hunting as it operated within the British colonial context. In particular, it would enable scholars to ascertain which aspects of New England’s supernatural lore and experience with witch-hunting were distinctive, and which were shared with other colonies. This is perhaps the most obvious and also elusive challenge awaiting scholars of early American witchcraft.

The case of Bermuda is particularly intriguing. In 1634 a ship returning to Boston from that island reported that clerical efforts to clean up the island had recently included the public exorcism of a man ‘possessed with a devil’. Puritan ministers who settled there seem to have taken very seriously the Bermuda Company’s call for ‘all sorcerers, enchanters, charmers, witches, figure-casters or fortune-tellers, and conjurers’ to be exposed and prosecuted. Between 1651 and 1696, twenty-one individuals (seventeen women and four men) were tried on charges of witchcraft; five of them were hanged. A cluster of trials in the early 1650s appears to have been caused in large part by political tensions: Bermudians on both sides of the political divide labelled their enemies as servants of the devil and sought to rid their island of evil influences through witch trials. In the eighteenth century a number of slaves were accused of having used supernatural means to poison or otherwise harm white islanders and other slaves.33 Examining the process whereby witch-hunting became racialized in Bermuda, along with the impact of Caribbean and African culture on witch beliefs and the kinds of evidence presented at witch trials, the ways in which colonial officials, ministers, and other inhabitants of the island approached the challenges of dealing with alleged supernatural threats, and the degree to which Bermuda’s witch-hunt in the 1650s resembled or differed from other early modern witch-hunts, would surely make a fascinating study.

There is also more to be done on New England witchcraft. Historians have paid close attention to contemporary witch beliefs, shaped as much by traditional folk culture as by Puritan theology. Yet in our eagerness to reconstruct popular attitudes and assumptions relating to witchcraft, we may have paid insufficient attention to the evolving perspectives of more educated colonial leaders and ministers. Attitudes towards the supernatural world, including witchcraft and demonology, were under constant debate in England and Europe during this period, and intellectuals in the colonies were very much engaged with those conversations.34 Scholars have paid considerable attention over the years to Increase and Cotton Mather, but much less work has been done on the impact of new ideas about the supernatural world on other members of the colonial elite. It would be helpful to know whether and to what degree New England ministers and leading lay colonists drew on Scottish and continental as well as English demonological ideas. Walter Woodward’s recent study of John Winthrop, Jr, reminds us that the attitudes of those in positions of authority could have a dramatic impact on judicial policy in general, and the handling of witch cases in particular.35

Elsewhere in the mainland colonies, leadership was doubtless important in shaping very different attitudes towards witch-hunting from those that predominated in New England. When a woman accused of witchcraft in Fairfield County, Connecticut, fled to New York in 1692, that colony’s attorney general refused to cooperate with those who wanted the suspect returned to Connecticut for trial.36 Whether sufficient evidence survives to enable a close study of official and clerical attitudes towards witchcraft and witch-hunting in other parts of British America remains to be seen. Yet fragmentary evidence suggests that popular belief in witchcraft and fear of the havoc that witches could wreak in their local communities were widespread throughout the mainland colonies. That evidence, including the records that survive from occasional witch trials, surely deserves more sustained analysis than has been attempted to date.37

Of those accused as witches in seventeenth-century New England, roughly four of every five were women, and recent scholars have paid close attention to the ways in which witch-hunting targeted women. But what of the remaining one in every five? Historians have pointed out that roughly half of the men charged with this crime were
married or otherwise close to accused women: they were, in other words, guilty by association. But at least some of these men were problematic in their own right and in ways that were clearly gendered. Take, for example, George Burroughs, one of the accused in 1692. Burroughs had links to the Indian wars and was implicated in Salem Village’s internal conflict, both of which made him a likely target. But his own personality and behaviour may well have contributed to his vulnerability. It now seems clear that women who seemed to contravene gendered expectations were especially vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. Yet the depositions against Burroughs suggest that this could also apply to men who violated masculine codes: in his case by failing in his duty to be a caring and protective husband. (John Willard, another male suspect in 1692, had also mistreated his wife.) Given the skewed gender ratio of witch accusations, it is difficult to imagine a satisfying examination of witch trials that does not take gender seriously. Yet, as a growing number of scholars now acknowledge, understanding gender is extremely difficult unless conceptions of manhood are thoroughly integrated into that emerging picture.

Bibliography

Further Reading


Notes:


(3) Godbeer, The Devil’s Dominion, esp. 24–54, and Jon Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 67–97. Indian and African cultures also included belief in magic and witchcraft, yet it is difficult to tell from the surviving documentation whether cunning folk or other colonists of European descent incorporated occult techniques from these other cultures into their own magical repertoire. White colonists may well have been unwilling to adopt occult charms proffered by peoples whom they believed to be pagans and devil-worshippers. The records do contain occasional hints of supernatural exchange across racial lines, but they are little more than suggestive. See Charles J. Hoadly, ed., Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven, 2 vols (New Haven, CT, 1857–8), ii, 80, 86; Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith, 94; and Elaine G. Breslaw, Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem: Devilish Indians and Puritan Fantasies (New York, 1996).

(4) Godbeer, The Devil’s Dominion, 55–84.

(5) Whereas Butler and I argue that many colonists combined magical and religious assumptions in a syncretic worldview, Richard Weisman depicts magical and religious beliefs in early New England as two ‘competing cosmologies’ and argues for a sharp conflict between ‘proponents of magic’ and the clergy; see Richard Weisman, Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts (Amherst, MA, 1984), 54, 66.


(7) John Cotton, A Meet Help (Boston, MA, 1699), 14, 21.


(9) Karlsen discusses the demographic, economic, and temperamental characteristics of accused witches in The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, 46–152.

(10) Reis argues that women were more inclined than men to see themselves as wholly ‘unfit and unworthy’. Whereas men differentiated between their sinful deeds and inner selves, women conflated the two. See Damned Women, 12–54 (quotation at 38).


(12) Karlsen, The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, 222–51; Godbeer, The Devil’s Dominion, 85–121, and Godbeer, ‘Chaste and Unchaste Covenants: Witchcraft and Sex in Early Modern Culture’, in Peter Benes, ed., Wonders of the Invisible World, 1600–1900 (Boston, MA, 1995), 53–72. John Demos suggests that adolescent girls may have accused older women who symbolized their mothers, against whom they could not openly rebel (and some of whom were no longer present); see John Demos, Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England (New York, 1982), 157–65. For a very different perspective on the afflicted girls in 1692 see Peter Charles Hoffer, The Devil’s Disciples: Makers of the Salem Witchcraft Trials (Baltimore, MD, 1996). According to Hoffer, some of the afflicted showed symptoms of child abuse. The psychological impact of that abuse would, he argues, help to explain at least some of their behaviour.

(13) See Demos, Entertaining Satan, 275–312.

(14) Demos, Entertaining Satan, 311–12.

(15) Demos, Entertaining Satan, 312.

(16) Godbeer, The Devil’s Dominion, 158; this section draws primarily on the argument developed in pp. 153–78 of that work.

(17) It is worth noting that New Englanders rarely accepted immediately or without question claims that a particular person was bewitched or that a specific individual was responsible. They were clearly committed to a process of empirical verification (even though the techniques they used might strike us as odd). See Richard Godbeer, Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692 (New York, 2005).


(22) Boyer and Nissenbaum, Salem Possessed, 34.

(23) See especially the recent forum, ‘Salem Repossessed’, in William and Mary Quarterly, 65 (2008), 391–534.


(27) For a more detailed version of the argument put forward in the following paragraphs, see Godbeer, The Devil’s Dominion, 182–203.


(29) Godbeer, The Devil’s Dominion, 201–2.

(30) Cotton Mather, Wonders of the Invisible World (Boston, MA, 1693), 80.

(31) That the accusers were now naming individuals from prominent families, including the governor’s own wife, doubtless also figured in the decision to halt the trials. But that decision seems to have been driven primarily by controversy surrounding the magistrates’ assessment of the evidence before them.


(37) For some suggestive comments in this direction, see Demos, *The Enemy Within*, 87–92.


**Richard Godbeer**