



Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft

By Paul Boyer

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Tormented girls writhing in agony, stern judges meting out harsh verdicts, nineteen bodies swinging on Gallows Hill. The stark immediacy of what happened in 1692 has obscured the complex web of human passion which climaxed in the Salem witch trials

From rich and varied sources—many neglected and unknown—Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum give us a picture of the people and events more intricate and more fascinating than any other in the massive literature. It is a story of powerful and deeply divided families and of a community determined to establish an independent identity—beset by restraints and opposition from without and factional conflicts from within—and a minister whose obsessions helped to bring this volatile mix to the flash point. Not simply a dramatic and isolated event, the Salem outbreak has wider implications for our understanding of developments central to the American experience: the disintegration of Puritanism, the pressures of land and population in New England towns, the problems besetting farmer and householder, the shifting role of the church, and the powerful impact of commercial capitalism.

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Editorial Review

Review

Provides an admirable illustration of the general rule that, in Old and New England alike, much of the best sociological history of the twentieth century has only been made possible by the antiquarian and genealogical interests of the nineteenth... This sensitive, intelligent, and well-written book will certainly revive interest in the terrible happenings at Salem. (Keith Thomas *New York Review of Books*)

The authors' whole approach to the Salem disaster is canny, rewarding, and sure to fascinate readers interested in that aberrant affair. (*The Atlantic*)

This is an 'inner history' of Salem Village that aims to raise the events of 1692 from melodrama to tragedy... It is a large achievement. This book is progressive history at its best, with brilliant insights, well-organized evidence, maps, and footnotes at the bottom of the page. (Cedric B. Cowing *American Historical Review*)

This short book is a solid contribution to the understanding of the 1692 witch trials. The authors use impressively rich demographic detail to support the thesis that the witch trials are best explained as symptoms of typical social tensions in provincial towns at the time. According to Boyer and Nissenbaum, Salem villagers played roles determined by economic, geographic, and status interests. (Richard Ekman *Canadian Historical Review*)

An important, imaginative book that brings new insights to the study of the 1692 witchcraft outbreak in Massachusetts. Building on Charles Upham's *Salem Witchcraft* (1867), Boyer and Nissenbaum explore decades of community tension and conflict in order to explain why Salem was the focus of this episode. The authors reveal a complex set of relationships between persons allied with the growing mercantile interests of Salem Town and those linked to the subsistence-based economy of outlying Salem Village. (Carol Karlsen *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*)

A provocative book. Drawing upon an impressive range of unpublished local sources, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum provide a challenging new interpretation of the outbreak of witchcraft in Salem Village. They argue that previous historians erroneously divorced the tragic events of 1692 from the long-term development of the village and therefore failed to realize that the witch trials were simply one particularly violent chapter in a series of local controversies dating back to the 1660s. In their reconstruction of the socio-economic conditions that contributed to the intense factionalism in Salem Village, Boyer and Nissenbaum have made a major contribution to the social history of colonial New England... [They] have provided us with a first-rate discussion of factionalism in a seventeenth-century New England community. Their handling of economic, familial, and spatial relationships within Salem Village is both sophisticated and imaginative. (T. H. Breen *William and Mary Quarterly*)

An illuminating and imaginative interpretation...of the social and moral state of Salem village in 1692. A sensitive, intelligent, and well-written book. (*New York Review of Books*)

A large achievement. This book is progressive history at its very best, with brilliant insights. (*American Historical Review*)

Salem Possessed is a provocative book. Drawing upon an impressive range of unpublished local sources, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum provide a challenging new interpretation of the outbreak of witchcraft

in Salem Village... A major contribution to the social history of colonial New England... Sophisticated and imaginative. (*William and Many Quarterly*)

About the Author

Paul Boyer was Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Stephen Nissenbaum is a cultural historian.

Users Review

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