

Book Reviews

PAUL BOYER and STEPHEN NISSENBAUM, *Salem possessed. The social origins of witchcraft*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1974, 8vo, pp. xxi, 231, illus., \$10.00.

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Of all the outbreaks of witchcraft in the seventeenth century, that at Salem Village, Massachusetts, in 1692 is perhaps the most famous, having even been presented as a play, *The crucible*, by Arthur Miller in the early 1950s. Much has been written about it, but never before has the evidence been treated in the way that these two Associate Professors of History at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, handle it. They have subjected it to a minute and tough analysis characteristic of the best type of intellectual history, and they have used plans, statistics, maps, graphs and other modern ancillary historiographical methods, thus exemplifying the new approaches to history that have been advocated recently, for example, for the history of medicine,¹ as well as for other areas of history.²

The result is a revolutionary study which surpasses all previous attempts to elucidate the curious and apparently inexplicable events at Salem Village, which resulted in the killing of nineteen persons. The author's careful reinterpretation, based on a mass of primary sources, some previously unknown, hinges mainly on a study of the social context of the times and on a detailed consideration of each individual involved in the disaster. They can thus demonstrate the social and economic gulf that existed between two groups of villagers, each represented by a dominant family, and the antagonism to or support for the local pastor. These internal feuds and pressures had been building up for some time before 1692, so that the outburst was not so dramatic as has often been maintained. Accumulating antagonism, tension and fear set the scene. Clearly, social and economic factors are seen to be all-important, but this wider context has eluded previous historians.

As in the case of witchcraft elsewhere, it would be interesting to look more closely at the medical aspects of the epidemic, a few details of which are given here. No doubt the behaviour of the village girls, thought to be induced by the witches, was almost certainly a form of neurosis, but, organic disease in some cases might be a remoter possibility. In this regard, and as far as the witches themselves are concerned, it should be recalled that there is a proven link between Huntington's chorea in East Anglia and New England of the seventeenth century, both notorious witchcraft areas.³ Whether the two disorders are in any way connected warrants further study.

Boyer and Nissenbaum's outstanding book contributes to the history of witchcraft, to American social history, and to historiography itself. Their methods and techniques could be applied in the investigation of witchcraft elsewhere, or used for the exploration of similar problems in the social history of medicine that await elucidation. This book should, therefore, be carefully studied by a wide circle of scholars and students, but especially those in the history of medicine.

¹ E. Clarke (editor), *Modern methods in the history of medicine*, London, Athlone Press, 1971.

² *Times literary supplement*, 7 April, 28 July, 8 September, 1966; H. P. R. Finberg (editor), *Approaches in history*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

³ Macdonald Critchley, 'Huntington's chorea and East Anglia', *J. State Med.*, 1934, 42: 1-13.