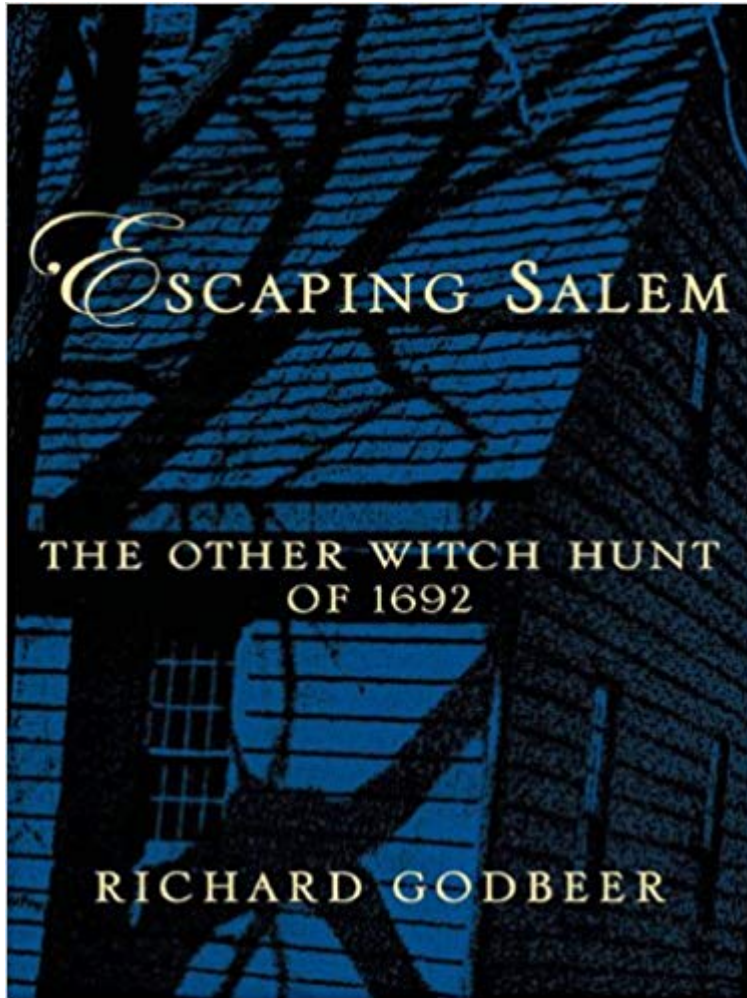


Hunting Witches . . . Responsibly



✘ Richard Godbeer, *Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692*. *New Narratives in American History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

In early 1692, Katherine Branch, the teenaged maidservant of Daniel and Abigail Wescot, was overtaken by “fits.” She claimed that she was under attack by invisible tormentors who pinched her, pricked her with pins, and spoke of women who assumed the shape of cats. Witnesses in her small New England Puritan community told of her violent convulsions and trance-like states. Soon several local women were accused of witchcraft. The story is a familiar one, but its setting is not. Instead of the much better known Salem in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, this episode happened in Stamford, Connecticut, hardly known as a witch-hunting hotbed. But young Kate Branch’s accusations began a witch-hunt so totally eclipsed by the events that same year in Salem that little has been written about it. This is too bad. In comparison to the events in Salem, which quickly exploded beyond the control of authorities, Stamford, Connecticut’s episode seems downright orderly.

Escaping Salem details this “other witch hunt of 1692” and is one of the first

volumes in a new series from Oxford entitled, *New Narratives in American History*. The series promises short studies that will “re-imagine the craft of writing history.” Copy from the marketing department aside, the structure of the book with a novelistic-narrative style and a separate afterword that discusses the process of writing a history provides both the engaging narrative the editors promise and a substantive section that will provide rich material for discussion in the book-club meeting or the undergraduate class. The credit for this success rightly belongs to the author, Richard Godbeer, who brings to this study the authority of his earlier work on religion and folk magic in early New England, *The Devil’s Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (Cambridge, 1992).

Like Mary Beth Norton and others who have studied Salem’s episode, Godbeer understands where the responsibility for the excesses at Salem are located and how Connecticut avoided them. While the accusations of children begin each episode, it is the action of the adults in the households of the afflicted and in the churches and courts that determined the experiences of each community. Godbeer clearly relates what was at stake in episodes of witch fears. The trial of a witch involved the whole community. As neighbors served as watchers over Kate Branch they became potential court witnesses. The failure to convict and execute true witches left those who testified against an acquitted witch at risk for “terrible revenge” (10).

To convict an accused witch, Puritans relied not on simple accusations but “careful observation and experimentation” of claims made by the victim and by witnesses: a system that Godbeer calls “scientific supernaturalism” (142). It was the deliberate use of this traditional approach by magistrates that ultimately saved Stamford from becoming a Salem in 1692. Trials also had a political dimension as the law was sometimes at odds with community notions of guilt and of justice. Other earlier witchcraft acquittals had angered communities convinced that the accused was indeed a witch. As those acquitted returned to their homes they met suspicion and even violence at the hands of terrified neighbors. Courts knew they had to move decisively but carefully.

Even in a time and place where witchcraft was not only a possible, but at times a probable, explanation for a case like Branch’s, the devout Puritan folk of Stamford disagreed about its sources. Some saw deceit and attention-getting tactics while others believed it was truly witchcraft. As in other cases in Puritan New England, the women named by Kate Branch were linked by certain factors. Goody Elizabeth Clawson and Goody Mercy Disborough fit the type of women upon whom suspicion usually fell. Clawson was “notorious for her argumentative nature and her vengeful spite” (5) and her long history of conflict with the Wescots. Goody Disborough from nearby Fairfield not only had a history herself of contentious relations with the Wescots but had been suspected of witchcraft by her own neighbors. Other women whose reasons for attacking this young servant in the Wescot household were less logical were accused. Despite the willingness of the grand jury to prosecute all the women named, the court found no reason to proceed against any but Clawson and

Disborough.

The Connecticut trial of Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough began on September 14, 1692, in Fairfield, just a week before the last eight of the convicted witches were hanged in Salem. But the jury in Fairfield failed to reach a verdict. The case was sent to the General Court at Hartford, which promptly sent it back. It was then that the court consulted with the ministers of the colony. In their written report the Connecticut Puritan ministers effectively eliminated the most crucial independent evidence. The results of the “ducking” of the accused were condemned as “unlawful and sinful” (116). The mixed results of an examination for “witches teats” done by midwife Sarah Bates and other women were also dismissed as unsatisfactory because not performed by a qualified physician. Kate Branch herself came under scrutiny as the ministers raised questions about “counterfeiting” and judged her not to be a “sufficient witness” in her own right (117).

The court again convened at Fairfield on October 28, 1692, to deal with the suspended prosecution of Disborough and Clawson. Again the jury was sent out. How long they deliberated and under what specific instructions is unknown but they returned with an acquittal for Clawson and a guilty verdict for Disborough. The magistrates clearly found this troubling and the jury was sent back to reconsider. Disborough was again found guilty and, under the laws of the colony, was sentenced to death. The court granted her a reprieve pending a review of the case by the General Court in Hartford, where she was ultimately acquitted.

Godbeer likens examining seventeenth-century witch trials through the surviving transcripts to watching “narrow-beamed spotlights that play upon an otherwise darkened landscape” as the accused and their accusers “made a brief and dramatic appearance in the records at the time of their trial and then returned to obscurity” (129). This indeed is the fate of Katherine Branch who was at the center of this episode. Goody Clawson, whose death in 1714 at the age of eighty-three is recorded, and Goody Disborough, who can be briefly glimpsed in probate records in 1709 as the survivor of her husband, are nearly as invisible. As the “spotlight” of the public record moved on they returned to the shadows of history that so many New Englanders, particularly women, lived and died in. Here in this small book the spotlight again returns. Whether this series will live up to its self-proclaimed goals depends as much on the authors as on the topics. But if the future selections are as careful as that of Richard Godbeer for *Escaping Salem* it is very likely to be a great success.

Further Reading:

For more on the general subject of witchcraft in North America, see: Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca, 1997); Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (New York, 1992); Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman:*

Witchcraft in Colonial New England (New York, 1987); John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York, 1982); and, David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989). For published documents relating directly to this episode, see: David D. Hall, ed., *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History, 1638-1693*, 2d ed. (Boston, 1999).

Salem's 1692 witch-hunt provides both a context and counterpoint for the episode in Connecticut that same year. Among the best books on various aspects of that event are: Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York, 2002); Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974); Bernard Rosenthal, *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692* (New York, 1993); and, Peter Hoffer, *The Devil's Disciples: Makers of the Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692* (Baltimore, 1996).

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