

Witch Hunt

"Thou shall not suffer a witch to live." —(Exodus 20, 18)

It is 1645 in the County of Essex, England. At the jail in the town of Chelmsford, the following prisoners are delivered under indictment.

Anne Leach of Mysley, a widow, on June 20 bewitched John Edwardes, the infant son of Richard, a gentleman. The indictment was endorsed by Matthew Hopkins, John Sterne, Richard Edwardes and Susan Edwardes, his wife.

Elizabeth Gooding, on October 5 did entertain two evil spirits each in the likeness of a young cat, one named Mouse and the other Pease. The indictment was endorsed by Susanna Edwardes, Matthew Hopkins, Grace Norman, Jonathan Freelove, and John Sterne.

Anne Therston, a spinster, did entertain two evil spirits in the likeness of a bird and a mouse and bewitched to death one black cow. Both indictments were endorsed by John Alderton and Samuel Wray.

All three were sentenced to be "hanged by the neck until they be dead," along with 23 other prisoners. For the people of England and much of Europe, there was an evil on the land: witchcraft.

On the Edge of Enlightenment

The belief in witches is ancient. As shown by the quote from the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites believed in witches, so did the Babylonians and the Romans. While witches have been prosecuted from the earliest times, the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe and England marked a peak. It has been called "the great witch craze." Before it was over, thousands would be executed or imprisoned. These centuries also marked the years of the High Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution.

Scholars are divided about what caused "the witch craze." Some point to the turbulent changes taking place in the societies of the 16th and 17th centuries. In such stressful times, people and institutions often look for others to blame and make scapegoats out of them. Since most of the victims of the witch craze were women, many of them unmarried or widows, some experts have argued that its cause can be traced to the hatred of woman by the male-dominated societies of the time.

Other experts believe that the "witch craze" had deeper roots. They claim that it represented a clash between established religions, Catholicism and Protestantism, and older folk culture and beliefs. Before the spread of Christianity near the end of the Roman Empire, a variety of older religions held

sway in Europe. Most worshipped a variety of gods and had their own religious practices. For example, the Celts, who lived in parts of Germany, France, Spain, Scotland, and Ireland, held ceremonies every fall to appease the spirits of the dead by building bonfires on tall hills. The ancient Wicca religion worshiped nature and held rituals to ensure good harvests. By the time of the 16th century, many of these practices had been suppressed or adapted by the church. For example, All Souls Day, a Catholic religious holiday, has its origin in old Celtic practices. Nevertheless, some rituals continued to be practiced, especially in rural areas. They became associated or confused with devil worship and the church viewed them as a threat that had to be severely repressed.

The Malleus Maleficarum

While the general cause of the witch craze may be debatable, many historians think it was energized by the actions of Pope Innocent VIII in 1484. In that year, the Vatican became increasingly concerned about what it perceived as the growing problem of sorcery and witchcraft, particularly in Germany. In December of that year, the pope issued a Bull (decree) condemning the practices of witchcraft and ordering the clergy to assist in stamping it out. While not the only church decree on the subject of witchcraft, it was the most powerful and influential.

To aid in these new efforts, the church had two inquisitors, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, who would lead the campaign against witchcraft. Both senior churchmen of the Dominican Order, Kramer and Sprenger pursued their duties with energy and determination. The first task was the writing of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witch Hammer), published as early as 1486. It was a handbook to be used by church and civil authorities alike for identifying, trying, and punishing witches. Widely distributed, the book continued to be printed and used well into the 1700s. Oddly, it was also widely used in Protestant countries.

By the mid-1500s, efforts to stamp out witches in Europe had reached their height. Some experts have estimated that as many as 300,000 people were tried and executed, usually by burning. The peak of the witch craze in England did not come until later. In 1559 during the reign of Elizabeth, concerns arose that laws against witchcraft were not strong enough, so a new statute was passed making witchcraft a felony. Over the next decades and well into the 1600s, prosecutions increased. While earlier historians believed that up to 100,000 people accused of witchcraft were killed, usually by hanging, modern estimates are much lower. Research of court records puts the number closer to 1,000 executions between 1542 and 1736.

The Trials of Witches

Procedures for trying witches varied from place to place. In this period, the distinction between religious and civil authority was blurred. The monarch of the land had both. Cases were controlled by overlapping religious and civil laws. In

general, church authorities were responsible for the souls of witches. The civil authorities were responsible for their bodies. A church court would try to determine if a person was a witch, get the person to confess the sin, and assign penance. People convicted would then be turned over to civil authorities for punishment. In England, after the passage of the statute making witchcraft a felony, the civil courts also began trying witches.

To modern eyes, the case procedures in a witch trial may seem both bizarre and unfair. But they were based on deeply held beliefs and could be quite complex. A case would often start with an accusation of a witness. A person could be accused of acts of sorcery, magic, using charms, or making a pact with the devil. Most often a person was accused of causing harm by using witchcraft. Failing crops, a horse gone lame, a dead cow, a person suddenly falling ill, or an unexpected thunderstorm—all could be the product of witchcraft. Sometimes the authorities employed professional "witchfinders." These experts could supposedly spot evidence of witchcraft and identify the person responsible. Matthew Hopkins served this role in England in the mid-1600s.

Once accused, the person could be held for examination. Conducted by judges or magistrates, the examination went through several stages. It began with the questioning of witnesses. The *Malleus* urged judges to carefully question witnesses to find out if they were being truthful or making claims based on a grudge against the accused. However, a person could be convicted of witchcraft on the words of a single witness.

The next stage involved questioning the accused witch. If the witch confessed, the process would end. If not, the questioning would proceed with the aim of gaining a confession. Because it was assumed that a witch would try to conceal the crimes of witchcraft, the court was prepared to go to great lengths to get to the truth. The accused were often deprived of sleep and questioned repeatedly. The court also could order any number of tests to determine if the person was a witch. He or she could be bound with cords and thrown into water. If the person floated, it proved he or she was a witch, if the person sank, and maybe drowned, it showed innocence. This test was based on the belief that water would not accept the witch's evil. Other tests included searching the accused's body for the "Devil's Mark." Moles, birthmarks, or odd scars could prove the person guilty.

If tests showed that the accused was a witch, but the person refused to confess, the process moved to the next stage: torture. First, the accused was shown the instruments of torture and questioned again. If that did not work, light torture was used, perhaps thumbscrews or an iron foot clamp. Then the questioning began again. As a last resort to get a confession, a judge could order the "third degree." Here the accused would suffer the agony of the rack, or being burned with red hot tongs, or being crushed by heavy weights. Few failed to confess during the third degree. In England, torture ran contrary to the common law and was rarely used against suspected witches. Still, many were roughly and brutally treated during examination. Those who confessed were encouraged to name

other witches, sometimes with the hint of lighter punishment. But often, they were executed anyway.

By today's standards, those accused of witchcraft had few rights. There was no presumption of innocence, no juries as we know them, and no right to an attorney. In fact, the Malleus counseled judges to keep lawyers or friends of the accused out of the courtroom so as not to confuse the process. In addition, those accused could be forced to testify against themselves, by torture or brutal treatment, if necessary. In truth, these rights of due process, as we know them, had not yet developed.

By the early 1700s the witch craze ended. In fact, America's own witch trials of 1692 in Salem came near the end of the cycle. While the witch craze ended at different times and for different reasons in other places, the Salem trials came to an end when the wrong people were accused of witchcraft and the authorities started asking questions. The young girls and woman who started the craze had accused hundreds of people. Some of them were important and wealthy. The accusers finally went too far when they claimed that Lady Phips, the governor's wife, was a witch. Unlike many of the previous victims who were poor and lacked political connections, Lady Phips was both well known and had powerful friends. It seemed inconceivable that she could be a witch. The authorities and people as a whole begin to question the whole process.

Soon the tide began to turn. Religious leaders and judges began to question the kind of evidence being used to convict witches. A minister, Reverend Petis, who had testified against six witches, admitted he had been in error and begged forgiveness. One of the witch trial judges, Samuel Sewell, confessed that he had wrongly convicted witches. Pending cases against accused witches were dismissed and several convicted were pardoned. The witch craze in Salem ended almost as suddenly as it had begun.