# In the Devil’s Snare, by Mary Beth Norton & The Salem Witch Trials, by Marilynne K. Roach

reviewed by Kenneth P. Minkema in the April 19, 2003 issue

The early years of each decade seem to bring a new spate of books on the Salem witchcraft episode, as if to commemorate anew the tragic events that occurred in 1692-93. Beginning in January 1692 with the "affliction" of young girls--the daughter and niece of Salem Village's minister, Samuel Parris--the number of the bewitched grew, the search for witches and wizards spread, over 100 people were jailed, and a series of sensational and controversial trials ensued. Nineteen people were hanged and one pressed to death, with several more adults, children and infants dying in prison, in what has become a wrenching cautionary tale of complicity, pettiness and mass hysteria.

"Hysteria" has become integrally associated with Salem: thus the term "Salem witchcraft hysteria," which bespeaks the widespread interpretation of the events as originating in a mass delusion, a psychological aberration on a large scale. But this is only one of many interpretations put forward since the trials and executions.

Over the past century and a half historians and scholars of other disciplines have taken new approaches to the episode. Time and again, when it would seem that all that could be said had been said about Salem witchcraft, these new approaches have yielded fresh information and insight. To studies in psychology have been added studies in pediatrics and child-rearing, adolescent development and the "recovered memories" of abused juveniles. Medical and biological explanations have been offered: the behavior of the accused conforms, it has been argued, to the symptoms of encephalitis, or could have been caused by ergot poisoning from contaminated grain.

More traditional studies have pointed to the breakdown of governmental and judicial structures in the wake of the revocation of Massachusetts Bay's charter. The new

field of social history, with its emphasis on the experience of common folk, identified--most notably in Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's *Salem Possessed* (1972)--an intricate local network of family and community rivalries at the root of the witch hunts. Historians, sociologists and anthropologists seeking to reconstruct the contours of Puritan religious beliefs have looked at Salem in the context of the wider sweep of witchcraft accusations in early New England (epitomized in John Demos's *Entertaining Satan* [1982]), at the persistence of magic and occult beliefs and practices in Puritan culture, and at the role of demonic supernaturalism in Puritanism's brand of Protestantism.

Feminist historians such as Carol Karlsen, author of *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (1987), have noted that in Salem and in Europe it was primarily women who were accused of witchcraft. These historians have explored gender stereotypes and misogynist attitudes. And recently Elaine Breslaw, in *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem* (1996), has introduced the issue of race and ethnicity. Tituba was Parris's South American Indian slave and the first to "confess" to witchcraft.

To this list of innovative approaches and landmark books we can now add Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare,* a magnificent work that proves, yet again, that Salem still has unexplored facets. Norton is professor of history at Cornell University and the author of several books on early America, including the Pulitzer-Prize-finalist *Founding Mothers and Fathers* (1996). Best known as a women's studies scholar, Norton set out to provide a new feminist reading of Salem. But when she delved into the sources she found herself going in a different direction: down east.

Building on the thick descriptions that have characterized recent New England social and cultural studies, Norton aims to contextualize the witchcraft episode. But her scope widens to take in not only Salem but Essex County and even frontier regions such as the Connecticut and Hudson river valleys and, particularly, the Maine coast. From this perspective a "broader crisis" surrounding the trials emerges: the bloody and harrowing conflicts with the French and Indians that had been going on for nearly 20 years. Salem witchcraft, Norton claims, "can be fully understood only by viewing [it] as intimately related to concurrent political and military affairs in northern New England."

The role of war and its impact on society have been taken up by several historians--for example, by Jill Lepore in her award-winning book *The Name of War* (1999), an examination of King Philip's War (1675-76). If King Philip's War forms part of the

background in Norton's explanation of Salem, King William's War (1688-99), or the Second Indian War, is squarely foregrounded for its impact on the *mentalité* of Salem and its environs. English efforts to colonize Maine and to deal with the Indians were characterized by trading unfairly, ignoring treaties and selling Indians into slavery. Reprisals by various Indian tribes resulted in hundreds of dead, wounded and captured.

From June 1689 to January 1692--just before the afflictions in the Parris household began--French and Indian forces attacked Cocheco, New Hampshire; Albany, New York; and Salmon Falls, Falmouth, Wells, Casco Bay and York, Maine. Many English refugees fled to Essex County, where they lived with relatives or were placed as servants. Essex County residences, meanwhile, lost family members to Indian attacks.

Colonists connected their ongoing anxiety and disappointment over the Second Indian War with fears of witchcraft. The experience of war created conditions that allowed the witch hunts to develop and to be vigorously pursued. Accusers such as Mary Short, Mercy Lewis and Abigail Hobbs were war refugees or had close ties to the frontier. Successful prosecution of witches became a surrogate for the unsuccessful prosecution of the war against the French and Indians, especially for the judges who were involved in making bad decisions in fighting the war.

Those accused, meanwhile, were often associated with the frontier. Most prominently, George Burroughs was a Maine pioneer and minister who was the focus of much hatred. Other Maine men, such as John Floyd and John Alden, were accused (though never tried) because they were suspected of complicity with the enemy. For those who had experienced the horrors of the attacks and flight, post-traumatic stress could have contributed to their "fits"; for those frustrated by Massachusetts's failures, blame could be fixed on a demonic conspiracy between Indians and witches.

Has Norton identified the cause of the Salem witch trials? I don't think she would claim to have done that, nor does her evidence bear it out. For example, in several appendices she delineates accusers. Of the 20 she lists only half had explicit connections to the northern frontier. However, it is easy to see that the fears created by the war contributed to the overall atmosphere of uncertainty and retribution. The effects of the Indian wars must be put alongside other factors that impinged not just on Salem but on all of New England.

Historians, Norton points out, have relied on a "legal metanarrative" derived from the order of the trial transcripts. She claims that another unique aspect of her book is that she has pulled apart the transcripts and constructed a "chronology of the actual events," tracing "day to day dynamics." This, however, is precisely what Marilynne Roach has done in *The Salem Witch Trials*, as its subtitle--A *Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Community Under Siege*--proclaims. Roach, a journalist and the author of a children's book on Salem witchcraft, has taken Norton's approach further than Norton herself. The book is organized into parts, each representing a year from 1692 to 1697, with each part in turn divided into month-long chapters and each chapter divided into days. The result is a work that is at once a narrative for those wanting to see the larger sweep of things and a reference book for those who want to look at the events of a particular day.

Roach, too, stresses a wider context. She includes events occurring from New York City to London. Local events were only "a catalyst for problems that were regionwide," she states. The connection of the trials and executions to the wars in Maine and elsewhere become clear in the unfolding narrative. Particularly striking are the groupings of events--for example, admissions of false accusations and indications during the testimony phase that the afflicted were faking, all of which the judges ignored. And posttrial "visitations" prompted a reappraisal of the proceedings: the deaths, within a relatively short time, of Sheriff George Corwin; the Rev. Nicholas Noyes; Abigail Williams; Parris's wife, Elizabeth; and Judge Samuel Sewall's daughter and stillborn son.

But Roach does not provide analysis or interpretation. She lets the facts speak for themselves. One interesting aspect of her format is that everything is recounted in the present tense. "Spectral" occurrences are related as if they really happened: not "Tituba reported seeing a yellow bird," but "Tituba sees a yellow bird." The issue of perception or distortion on the part of the participants is not raised.

These two works, one a more scholarly treatment, the other more popular, complement each other in their approach, in their attention to context and in their close reading of the primary sources. Together, they set the bar even higher for further studies of Salem. But, if the history of Salem witchcraft studies is any indication, somebody will eventually reach this bar and top it.