

**NEW ENGLAND'S
PLACE IN THE HISTORY
OF WITCHCRAFT**

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New England's Place in the History of Witchcraft by George Lincoln Burr

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It is now more than twenty years since I reached the threshold of this theme. Happily it was to learn in time its perils. I was about to read before the American Historical Association a paper on "The Literature of Witchcraft" and my friend Mr. Justin Winsor naturally guessed that it must touch upon New England's share. "Don't be afraid," he encouraged me, "to say just what you please. If Poole pitches into you, I'll come to your support."

But what I had then to say about New England could give offense not even to Mr. Poole. The Salem panic was dismissed with a single sentence as "but the last bright flicker of the ghastly glare which had so long made hideous the European night," and in apology for ignoring the literature of American witchcraft I pleaded that in such a presence it would be a work of supererogation, if not an impertinence, to treat that literature with the brevity its place in the history of the delusion would demand. Perhaps these words satisfied even Mr. Poole that thus far I was no partisan. At any rate, though more than once it was my privilege to discuss with him New England witchcraft, he remained, like Mr. Winsor, till death my friend.

Till now I have been too wise to skirt the theme again. But age has brought temerity. Much as has been written, and well written, on the New England episode, no student has yet devoted a paper to its place in the history of witchcraft as a whole. Yet perhaps I should

not even now attempt it, had not two studies, both by members of our society and read before its meetings, done much to pave the way. In 1895 Professor Justin Winsor himself, in a paper on "The Literature of Witchcraft in New England,"¹ not only much more than made good what my own essay had lacked, but brought to light many a channel through which the thought of the old England told upon the new; and in 1906 a younger colleague of his and ours, Professor George Lyman Kittredge, in a paper bearing the modest title of "Notes on Witchcraft,"² went much further. Alleging the antiquity and the universality of belief in witchcraft, he pointed out more fully than had hitherto been done the relations of New England thought to English, the intelligibility of the superstition, the complexity of its problem on both sides of the sea, the inadequacy of its explanation by Puritanism or by pedantry, the relative slightness and transiency of the Salem episode; and, with the keen eye of the practised critic, he swept away a host of misstatements and exaggerations which have distorted the story. It is a service for which every lover of New England must be grateful; and, though there is much more to say and some things which I could have wished said otherwise, I could hardly, had he stopped with this, have cared to add a word. But when, in the generous zeal of his apology, he proceeded to lay down a body of theses which declare the belief in witchcraft "practically universal in the seventeenth century, even among the educated," and "no more discreditable to a man's head or heart than it was to believe in spontaneous generation or to be ignorant of the germ theory of disease," and which pronounce "the position of the seventeenth-century believers in witchcraft" . . . "logically and theologically stronger" than that of their opponents, and "the impulse to put a witch to death" "no more cruel or otherwise blameworthy, in itself, than the impulse to put a murderer to death,"

¹ Proceedings, N. S., Vol. X, pp. 351-373.

² Proceedings, N. S., Vol. XVIII, pp. 148-212.

he reached results so startlingly new, so contradictory of what my own lifelong study in this field has seemed to teach, so unconfirmed by the further research to which his words have stirred, and withal so much more generous to our ancestors than I can find it in my conscience to deem fair, that I should be less than honest did I not seize this earliest opportunity to share with you the reasons for my doubts—aye and to suggest a reading of history which, without undue harshness to the past, may leave it more intelligible how the present could honestly come to be.

If such a protest be anywhere in place, it is surely here. And if even here it seem too frankly polemic, let me plead that to take another's work so seriously is the best tribute to its weight, and to offer one's own in return the best gratitude for its help. In any case I could hardly diverge more widely from my predecessor than did he from his; and, so sweeping are his conclusions, any later study must choose between the disrespect of silence and the frankness of debate.²

And if to any here it seem treason to those who made New England to dissent from aught that can be urged in their praise, bear with me while I plead that, despite my birth and home in the wilds beyond the Hudson, there flows in my own veins none but New England blood; that that blood is almost wholly Puritan; that the English county which I believe the home of those who bore my name was that most deeply stained by this superstition; that the first who brought that name across the sea must at Springfield have had some part (though I trust it is only Dr. Holland's imagination that in *The Bay Path* gives him so large part) in the earliest New England witch-trial known to us in its details; that a few years later, at Fairfield, his son John Burr, my forebear, with Abigail his wife, had part unquestion-

² Perhaps I should not fail to add that the debate indeed has been opened by himself; for it is to questions involved in what his paper (else over-generous to my own) calls "the error into which Professor Burr has fallen" that the present study is chiefly devoted.

able in such proceedings; and that my other traditions are mainly of like ancestry and of a like ancestral faith.

Yet, to me, to urge in defense of those who in the seventeenth century—in New England or elsewhere—hung women as witches that the belief in witchcraft is universal seems a juggling with words. That belief which in the seventeenth century caused women to be done to death was never universal—in place or time. Let us define our terms. To assert or to deny anything whatever of witchcraft without a definition is to talk in the air: the word has had widely different meanings. When we affirm the universality of witchcraft or of the belief in it, it is in a sense which neither the etymology nor the history of that word suffices to explain. Only by analogy has its meaning gained so wide an application; and, unless I err as to what the anthropologists teach us, it is only in a sense that would make it inclusive of both religion and magic that witchcraft can be demonstrated universal. If, however, we discriminate between religion and magic, understanding by magic the art of winning supernatural aid, not by submission or persuasion, but by human cleverness or lore, and if then witchcraft be identified with magic, as is often done, we shall still, I fear, have fallen short of an excuse for its repression. But if, as is most common of all, we make witchcraft to mean “black magic” alone—and this is clearly what Professor Kittredge does, since he counts *maleficium*, harm to others, its essence—we come up against a difficulty not less grave. For to the devotees of a religion not only the users of black magic, nay not only all the users of magic, be it black or white, seem to employ illicit aid against their fellows; but, so fierce is the struggle for existence, the users of a rival religion are almost sure to be confused with these. And if the religion be monotheistic and claim monopoly, then *presto* all other gods and all other worships are branded with the stigma. Now, from almost or quite the first, this was precisely the attitude of Christianity, both toward all magic and toward all pagan faiths.

She did not deny the existence of gods other than her God. She did not deny them power. She denied them only goodness. They were "fiends," and those who sought their aid, for whatever end, by whatever means, were alike guilty of witchcraft. For now it is that we first meet that word. It belonged alone to our English forefathers, and before they were Christians they seem to have meant by it nothing evil. The word "witch," if scholars are right, is but a worn form of the word "witega," by which the Christian translators of that earliest day rendered into their own English the sacred name of "prophet." It can at first have implied in those who were known by it no graver fault than wisdom. Christianity it was that degraded it to a meaning wholly bad, the awful shadow of her awesome light, including within it not only all she learned to know of English heathendom, but darkening yet more the notion with all she remembered of Hebrew or Greek or Roman superstitions—for to her the Devil, like God, was one.

Yet all this was but the germ of her full-grown idea of witchcraft. A change more fundamental was in store. Thus far there was reality in the things she fought. However she might confuse them or exaggerate, the old superstitions were not dead. But a mass of them she had from the first despised or laughed away; and under her stern teaching their survivals fell ever more and more into neglect. As the danger lessened, her own bearing wisely grew less stern. The growing Canon Law punished now a practice, now the belief in it, and presently forgot to punish at all. However now and then superstition might well up in violence from the masses, it looked for a time as if under the enlightening care of Church and State its most cruel terrors might be outgrown.

Alas, what was swept out at the door crept in at the key-hole. The old ideas had found an anchorage in theology. The old names still lived on. As our fathers brought with them over the sea memories of robin or partridge, and their children, grown familiar with the