

VIII

GEORGE LINCOLN BURR'S "NARRATIVES OF THE WITCHCRAFT CASES"*

This is one of the series of Original Narratives of Early American History. It includes all contemporary American

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contributions to this subject that can be counted classical. Most of them are now costly or unprocurable in their original form. The documents are thirteen in number, and each is placed and discussed as far as is necessary by a brief introduction. They include various court-records of cases, four essays of the Mathers and several others written in the same tenour, the Letters of Governor Phips to the Home Government on the Salem Witch Panic, the extraordinary attack against witch-hysteria by Calef, and Hale's *Modest Inquiry Into the Nature of Witchcraft*—a manly attempt by one of the witch-mongers to make amends for what he now felt to be a malevolent error which had shed much innocent blood. Thus every attitude of mind is laid bare. The book is wisely planned and ideally serves its purpose.

Weird though these narratives of witchcraft seem to us, says Professor Burr in his admirable and judicious preface, they were to thousands of men and women in seventeenth-century America the intensest of realities. To count witchcraft a local panic or even a passing madness of the Christian world is to take a narrow view of history. While witchcraft belongs only to Christian thought and to centuries called modern—theologians not having worked out their theory of human relations with Satan until late in the thirteenth century—still it took possession of entire Christendom for some hundreds of years.

The circumstantial quality of these papers must have been indeed convincing in an age when even the most scientific of minds and tempers were content with the loosest of deductions from physical phenomena. It is not surprising that people could not discern the absurdity of Ollendorffian devils who were perpetually offering to furnish pen, ink, and paper to sign a material contract with their victims, when one remembers that a scientist gravely explained the migration of birds by announcing that they flew straight up into the air until they got beyond the pull of the earth and there waited until the globe had suffi-

ciently revolved beneath them. Increase and Cotton Mather, as well as the rest of men less soberly inclined, state repeatedly that they set down only what they themselves do know. "This story of Goodwin's children, all made up of marvels," wrote Cotton Mather in *Memorable Providences*, "I was myself an eye-witness to a large part. I am resolved after this never to use but just one grain of patience with any man that shall go to impose upon me a denial of devils or witches. I shall count that man ignorant who shall suspect, but I shall count him downright impudent if he assert the non-existence of things which we have had such palpable convictions of." Add to scientific attitude the perennial ability of moralists sincerely to falsify life for didactic purposes, and convictions become doubly palpable. Increase Mather records in his *Remarkable Providences* that a man wished if he had stolen a sheep that God would cause the horns of a sheep to grow on him—whereupon a horn grew out of the corner of his mouth, from which he had cut seventeen inches, but was yet forced to keep it tied by a string to his ear to prevent its growing up to his eye. Probably the moralist never lived who could have resisted so delectable and tidy an illustration of the maxim Be sure your sin will find you out. "Her first familiarity with the Devil came by discontent," wrote Cotton, "and wishing the Devil to take That and 'Tother thing; whereupon a Devil appeared unto her, tendering her the best service he could do for her." As for the victims themselves, their state of mind is even more easily explained. "As long as the pretended afflicted shall be received as more valid to condemn than the plea of not-guilty by the supposed witehes to acquit." Robert Calef concluded his celebrated attack in which he brought satire and common sense to bear upon the panic—"and as long as the accused be forced to undergo torments for not confessing and have their lives and liberties confirmed on doing so, so long will God be daily dishonoured."

This famous pamphlet, which the vol-

ume includes in entirety was written in 1697 and, unable to find a printer in New England, was printed in London in 1700. Cotton Mather's diary, eloquent with vexation against the author, notes that he had prayed God in vain to let this cup of bitterness pass from him—"the volume of invented and notorious lies which a sort of Sadducee in this town hath raked together, a creel of libels wherein I am the chief butt of his malice, written on purpose to damnify my precious opportunities of glorifying my Lord."

What witch-trials the New York colony had, came as a result of the New England occupation. The early scepticism of sensible and practical Holland, which was throughout the seventeenth century a refuge for the victims of witch-persecution, showed in her colony. When New England asked her opinion, she sagely replied that if there was anything the matter it had arisen through Indian medicine men. As for the early Friends, though they did not formally differ from the Puritans as to witchcraft, their gentle mysticism had at bottom no place for the arch-fiend of Orthodoxy. Penn's writings show scarce a trace of the current demonology, and a witch meant to him a fortune-teller and a diviner merely. The only action for witchcraft in the Pennsylvania records was brought by the Swedish peasants on the further bank of the Delaware. The witch-terrors of the Cavalier colony found their source in folk-lore and not in theology.

The history of man's monstrous folly in support of the prevailing religious idea is not yet complete, and it may be possible that a coming generation will marvel at the depth of it in us as do we at these narratives. More often to support religion than to destroy it has the devil appeared as an angel of light. "Who that peruses these praeternatural Occurrences," thunders Mather, "can possibly be so much an Enemy to his own Soul, and irrefutable Reason, as obstinately to oppose himself to, or confusedly fluctuate in, the opinion and doctrine of Daemons, or Spirits and Witches! Certainly he

that does so must do two things more: He must temerarily unhinge or undermine the fundamentals of the Best Religion in the world; and he must disingenuously quit and abandon that of the Three Theologick Virtues or Graces through his unchristian and uncharitable Incredulity."

Graham Berry.