

**The Salem Witchcraft Papers. Verbatim Transcripts of the Legal Documents
of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak of 1692**



Review Author[s]:
Alan MacFarlane

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helped him to a more sophisticated analysis of the content of religious literature. It is also a pity that he writes about the period 1660–1730 with his eye on what came after rather than on what went before, and has little to say about the survival of medieval religious traditions, despite passing references to ‘the four last things’ or to an eighteenth-century widow whose favourite reading included Mandeville’s travels. This study of literature and pulpit might have benefited had the author read, or reread, G. R. Owst. There is one serious criticism to make of the book’s structure. Dr Jenkins does not seem to have quite made up his mind about his aims: a history of religious literature in Welsh or in Wales? Despite the book’s title, the English-speaking inhabitants of the eastern counties do not get much attention. A history of religious literature, or a history of religious life? Dr Jenkins gives us a good deal more than the one, but something less than the other. Nevertheless, he has made an important contribution to Welsh cultural and social history. Like the eighteenth-century revivalist Evan Williams, he may be said to have ‘protected the identity and achievements of old Dissent’. His book is lively as well as scholarly and deserves attention outside as well as inside the circle of specialists in Welsh history.

University of Sussex

PETER BURKE

In 1692 at Salem there occurred one of the most curious and well-documented cases of mass hysteria known to historians. Several hundred people were accused, twenty executed and four died in prison. Since then a vast amount of research has been undertaken on the reasons for the trials. Each age has produced new interpretations. By 1970 it looked as if the law of diminishing returns must mean that there would be few significant advances in understanding. Then in 1972 Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum published *Salem-Village Witchcraft* (which contained a set of transcripts of contemporary sermons, tracts and town records), and two years later *Salem Possessed*. This advanced beyond the previous theories that witchcraft beliefs were delusions encouraged by unscrupulous individuals or the result of real physical illness caused through psycho-somatic processes. On the basis of a detailed analysis of economic patterns and social networks the authors showed that the accusers in the witchcraft cases lived in the poorer, more agrarian Salem Village, while the accused tended to live in the more prosperous, commercial Salem Town. They therefore interpreted the witchcraft accusations as part of the battle between new competitive individualism and the old agrarian community values. For its methods, as well as for its specific conclusions, the two works were of very considerable interest to historians. These authors have now put us further in their debt by producing a three-volume edition, *The Salem Witchcraft Papers. Verbatim Transcripts of the Legal Documents of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak of 1692* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977. \$95 the set), containing all the legal documents related to the Salem trials. The major part of the text had been assembled in a typescript version in the 1930s, but this was inaccessible to those unable to visit the Essex Institute. To this the editors have added a number of further records from published and unpublished

sources; these amount to about one fifth of the total. The volumes therefore contain verbatim transcripts of warrants, interrogatories, depositions, indictments, testimonies and other legal material, grouped in alphabetical order under the name of the accused person. An index prepared for this edition makes it possible to follow the complex web of inter-accusations. There has been very little modernization and no punctuation has been added. Those unfamiliar with seventeenth century documents and with legal processes of the time will find them difficult at first. Very soon, however, one is drawn into the vividly described world which they portray. Historians are well aware of how difficult it is to enter the lives of ordinary villagers in the past. The exceptional nature of witchcraft beliefs brings to our attention a mass of petty detail about ordinary life which normally escapes us. The three sets of material assembled by Boyer and Nissenbaum – the local background, the legal records and the analysis – now provide a unique teaching and research tool for historians. It will be of interest not only to historians of witchcraft or early America, but all those interested in the hopes, fears and usually unexpressed assumptions of men and women in the past.

University of Cambridge

ALAN MACFARLANE

The subtitle of Murray Cohen's *Sensible Words. Linguistic Practice in England 1640-1785* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins U.P., 1977. £8.75) is not a good indication of what the book contains. *Practice* implies the language in use, and one expects a discussion of vocabulary or structures; but Dr Cohen is concerned with changing theories of language as expressed by those who wrote about it, 'practitioners' in a professional sense. He surveys most of the major and many of the minor writers on various aspects of language during his chosen period – 'grammars, rhetorics, shorthand systems, universal language schemes, dictionaries, and spelling books', as his publishers summarize them – with the object of understanding their attitudes and aims in their own time, not simply as forerunners of opinions which have come to be approved by modern linguistic theorists. Dr Cohen takes 1640 as an approximate starting point because in his view this period saw 'the first burst of English linguistic activity that takes the vernacular seriously as an academic and intellectual subject'. This last qualification presumably is held to exclude such sixteenth-century writers as Smith, Hart, Mulcaster, or William Bullokar, though they might be thought as worthy of attention in a historical study of attitudes to language as many of the later eighteenth-century grammarians with whom the last chapter is largely concerned, 'practical linguists' rightly described as 'industrious compilers of the linguistic habits of a community of speakers and compliant recorders of the historical situation of contemporary English' (p. 122). It is true, of course, that the mid-seventeenth century saw a new attempt to relate language to reality, crowned by John Wilkins's *Essay towards a Real Character* but pursued also by a number of lesser figures, well studied in Mrs Salmon's *The Works of Francis Lodwick* (1972). Dr Cohen in three chapters traces the shift from this 'grammar of things' to the 'grammar of the mind' characteristic of early eighteenth-century linguists who