



The Witch Hunts: A History of the Witch Persecutions in Europe and North America

By Robert Thurston



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Tens of thousands of people were persecuted and put to death as witches between 1400 and 1700 – the great age of witch hunts. Why did the witch hunts arise, flourish and decline during this period? What purpose did the persecutions serve? Who was accused, and what was the role of magic in the hunts? This important reassessment of witch panics and persecutions in Europe and colonial America both challenges and enhances existing interpretations of the phenomenon. Locating its origins 400 years earlier in the growing perception of threats to Western Christendom, Robert Thurston outlines the development of a ‘persecuting society’ in which campaigns against scapegoats such as heretics, Jews, lepers and homosexuals set the scene for the later witch hunts.

He examines the creation of the witch stereotype and looks at how the early trials and hunts evolved, with the shift from accusatory to inquisitorial court procedures and reliance upon confessions leading to the increasing use of torture.

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Editorial Review

Review

"comprehensive account of one of the most malign periods in European history" - Glasgow Herald

'Lively and readable. It is written in a style as personal and attractive as any I have encountered...It has just the right balance of magisterial detachment and personal insight.'

Ronald Hutton, University of Bristol

6 page feature article on book in History Today, November 2006

From the Back Cover

Thurston: The Witch Hunts

'...lively and readable... written in a style as personal and attractive as any I have encountered.'

Ronald Hutton, University of Bristol

'This book is an excellent and concise summary of scholarship on witchcraft history... It is the perfect introduction to the topic.'

Brian Hoggard, author of Crusader Castles: Christian Fortresses in the Middle East

Between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, the notorious witch hunts of Europe and America led to the execution of tens of thousands of people – the vast majority of whom were women. Under the growing influence of a variety of new or heightened tensions, such as fear of the Devil, attack from abroad and the plague, panic and aggression against 'witches' began to spiral out of control. As fear of the witches spread through Europe, the accused were convicted on the basis of reputation and circumstance rather than any hard evidence. They suffered erratic trials, torture and death.

In this revised edition, first published under the title of *Witch, Wicce, Mother Goose*, Robert Thurston explores the events of the witch hunts and the social and psychological factors which caused them. Increasingly negative images of women, revised judicial procedures and religious conflicts had their part to play in these strange times, as did ideas from sources as diverse as the Bible and folk beliefs. Original, insightful and moving, *The Witch Hunts* takes a long historical view of the witch persecutions, and puts into perspective the effects of fear and violence in even the most reasonable of societies.

Robert W. Thurston is Phillip R. Shriver Professor in the Department of History, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. His publications include *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941* (1996) and *Liberal City, Conservative State: Moscow and Russia's Urban Crisis, 1906-1914* (1987).

About the Author

Robert Thurston is Professor of History at the University of Miami.

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