



Cultural and Social History

The Journal of the Social History Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfcs20>

The Last Witches of England: A Tragedy of Sorcery and Superstition

by John Callow, London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, xvi + 352 pp., £21.66 (hardback), ISBN: 9781788314398

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To cite this article: Brendan C. Walsh (2022): The Last Witches of England: A Tragedy of Sorcery and Superstition, Cultural and Social History, DOI: [10.1080/14780038.2022.2121557](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2022.2121557)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2022.2121557>



Published online: 28 Oct 2022.



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BOOK REVIEW

The Last Witches of England: A Tragedy of Sorcery and Superstition, by John Callow, London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, xvi + 352 pp., £21.66 (hardback), ISBN: 9781788314398

John Callow's *The Last Witches of England* is an exemplar of the microhistory genre, providing an evocative narrative of the 'Bideford Witches' and the events that led up to their convictions in 1682. Temperance Lloyd, Susanna Edwards, and Mary Trembles are the last group of women executed by the state for witchcraft in England with their deaths often interpreted as the last gasps of the witch-hunts. In *The Last Witches of England*, however, Callow argues that the Bideford Witches narrative 'does not easily fit with many of our contemporary assumptions about the nature of superstition, magic, and persecution during the Early Modern period . . . defying an increasing pattern towards refusing to prosecute or seeking a legal acquittal' of witchcraft cases (p. 6). A deeply ingrained belief in malefic magic was evidently still present across England, even in an affluent urban centre such as Bideford. This reality thus makes the terror and rage directed against these elderly and impoverished women in Bideford 'all the more inexplicable and unsettling' (p. 7). Throughout this volume, Callow carefully navigates through the socio-political dynamics that led to accusations being made against the women and provides a demonological explanation as to how these accusations led to a conviction. While there is an existing body of scholarship on this subject matter, *The Last Witches of England* is the first work to reclaim the personal history of the condemned women and highlight the human tragedy at the heart of the English witch hunts.

The Last Witches of England shines when it centres on the socio-political dimensions of late seventeenth century Bideford, a bustling port town on the estuary of the River Torridge in north Devon. Chapter 2 establishes an insightful sketch of Bideford through an impressive interrogation of the source material, highlighting the numerous fault lines that lay beneath its prosperous facade. This prosperity was the very thing that created suspicion and animosity towards individuals who did not share in this good fortune. 'What really did set them apart from others and drew them together – both then and in the eyes of posterity – was quite simply their poverty in the midst of plenty' (p. 33). Bideford, despite its outwards appearance, remained fractured from the Civil War with political and spiritual tensions gripping the populace. Religious nonconformity was a pressing issue for the town, further compounded by the recent appointment of Tory figures to key positions in Bideford's local government. There was a great deal of rage and resentment simmering in Bideford that, coupled with deeply ingrained beliefs in malefic magic and a total disregard for individuals that existed on the margins of society, was unleashed upon Lloyd, Edwards, and Trembles throughout 1681–2.

The three women at the centre of this book are treated with considerable sympathy, their stories vividly illustrating the political, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of early modern witchcraft accusations. Callow deftly rehabilitates the historical images of these women by sifting through the historical prejudices and agendas perpetuated in the judicial records, sensationalist pamphlet literature, and street ballads that they were the subject of during the late seventeenth century. Temperance Lloyd receives the most attention and her tragic story is entirely captivating. Lloyd arrived in Bideford shortly after the Civil War as a Welsh immigrant, hoping for a new start, yet she was abandoned by her husband in the late 1650s. She is subsequently beaten down by a life of unrelenting poverty, becoming

marginalised in the community. Witchcraft accusations were made against her in 1671 and 1679 yet it was not until 1682, following the inexplicable sickness of one prosperous merchant's sister-in-law, that any charge was made to stick. The accusations made against Lloyd also subsumed Susanna Edwards and Mary Trembles into the drama. Edwards was marked from birth: conceived outside of wedlock, widowed young, and eventually forsaken by her children and friends. She is left to beg on the streets. The final accused woman, Mary Trembles, was marooned in Bideford by the deaths of her Irish parents and never seemed to gain any significant form of social mobility. All three women exist in the margins of early modern society, victims of a male-dominated culture, and *The Last Witches of England* meticulously demonstrates the insidious ways by which the Bideford community fashioned them into witches.

If there is a historical 'villain' in the Bideford Witches story then it is Reverend Francis Hann, the figure largely responsible for spearheading the prosecution of the accused witches. Hann aspired to be a demonologist and was instrumental in guiding the thoughts of the townspeople towards witchcraft, subsequently reworking the accused testimonies to "make the 'facts' fit the ideology" of academic demonological theory (p. 146). Lloyd was thus cast as the leader of a coven, directing Edwards and Trembles to commit harm on the residents of Bideford. Hann's involvement in this case seemed to be the opening gambit of a much larger ploy. *The Last Witches of England* suggests that his ambition was to launch a campaign against witchcraft throughout the countryside, following in the footsteps of earlier witch hunters such as Matthew Hopkins. However, much to the satisfaction of Callow, Hann fell by the wayside. His final attempts to extract a confession from the witches at the foot of the Exeter gallows failed and there are no records of the lengthy lecture that he gave there. Hann thus missed the 'opportunity to stamp his own mark upon the case', failing in 'his attempt to be remembered as the man who had laid low the Bideford Witches' (p. 214).

The Last Witches of England excels in its first half yet briefly loses momentum in the latter sections as it begins to plunge into the historiographical quagmire that is the decline of magic. Chapters 7 and 9 pull back the focus to examine the broader historical status of witchcraft in seventeenth-century England. While this is important contextual information and a compelling counterpoint to the traditional disenchantment timeline, it takes the book into territory that requires far more space than the author permits. The execution of Temperance Lloyd, Susanna Edwards, and Mary Trembles in a prosperous urban centre like Bideford is certainly an indication that 'popular' belief in witchcraft persisted in the face of increasing judicial scepticism, yet it is difficult to provide broader conclusions to this notoriously problematic historiographical subject area through examination of this one case study. That is not to suggest that Callow is attempting to mount a broad disenchantment argument, but the framing of this source material in the opening sections does set up a bit more than what *The Last Witches of England* delivers. Ultimately, the book is most effective when it focuses on the historical nuances of this narrative and the women at the centre of it.

The final chapter brings a satisfactory conclusion to the historical narrative, examining the enduring legacy of these women in the present. These women finally found some support from parliament during the early 1950s when Lloyd, representing all the convicted witches, was cited during the debates that preceded the repeal of the English witchcraft acts. Interestingly, the Bideford Witches have since been reclaimed by second-wave feminists and Wicca adherents who were instrumental in establishing a 1996 memorial for the 'Devon Witches' in Rougemont Gardens, Exeter. As this final section illustrates, Callow is unapologetically sympathetic towards these historical figures and their modern reception is

presented as a form of reparation; a ‘posthumous triumph’ (p. 275). This sentiment is exactly what Callow has achieved with *The Last Witches of England*. The book’s principal success is that it finally reclaims the voices of these women from the pamphleteers that have long spoken for them and demystifies their legacy as the last victims of the heinous English witch hunts.

Notes on contributor

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2022.2121557>

