



Witch Hunt: History of a Persecution

Nigel Cawthorne

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This book examines the persecution and the religious hysteria that inspired the witch hunts of 1450-1750, tracing its roots back to the savage suppression of the heretical Waldensian sect by the Catholic Church.

Witch Hunt: History of a Persecution Details

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Author : Nigel Cawthorne

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Joe Paulk says

This reads like a poorly edited dissertation that actually added nothing to the field. Instead it is the historical equivalent of pulp fiction and Cawthorne treats his subject as more of a tabloid headline with little cohesion. The information was there, but the reader was constantly busy making mental edits. It had potential.

Kat says

I found it difficult to follow stories. There were a lot of spelling and grammar errors which made it difficult to sort who had done what. There is great information in this book, but it could have been written much better having the reader follow along easier.

Richard says

I read this book because my "education" about witchcraft was limited to the Salem Witch Trials, something presented as a small, isolated event in history. While reading the book Woman and Nature by Susan Griffin the misogyny of witch trials was mentioned and I went looking for a book that would give me detailed information about the where, when, how, and why of witch hunts.

Witch Hunt: History of a Persecution by Nigel Cawthorne gives a huge amount of information about the where, when, and how but not the why. The author explains in the introduction that there are many theories about what caused the witch hunts but he feels that he can't use his 21st century morals and education to honestly assess what took place between 1450 and 1750.

Cawthorne then produces, country by country and region by region, an extremely detailed account of the hundreds of thousands of witch trials and burnings. Horrific does not begin to describe the stories told in this book. While I had some knowledge of the torture and religious zealotism of the inquisition in Spain, the horrors outlined over the three hundreds years of history covered in this book make the inquisition seem minor in comparison.

This book reads more like a scientific paper than it does as a non-fiction book. It reflects what must have been thousands of hours of painstaking research and it would make an excellent jumping off point for a book exploring the psychological and sociological phenomena of "the madness of the crowd". Humans, when at their worse, use religion and politics to justify horrific behavior and this book gives two hundred pages of historical evidence of this sad fact.

Elisa says

Its dryness and almost non-existent editorial work makes this hard to enjoy.

GoldGato says

If you ever wanted a can't-put-this-book-down history of witches and witchhunts, then this is the book for you. Even the cover screams out in vibrant red colour, forcing you to look at the subject. The author does a nice job here. Even though I know he writes many books focused on sensational disaster-type subjects, he has it down pat.

He takes the reader through the persecution of witches in different countries and how those specific areas handled the tortures and stake burnings. He will even note where certain cities and city-states would refuse to persecute witches, even when the country or nation was doing it wholeheartedly. There is a chapter on Father Grandier, who was burned at the stake when he dared challenge Richelieu. The information on the entire history of witch hysteria relating to profit-making by the persecutors is astonishing. We look upon the history of witches as something in the past, but it really came about due to people (mostly women) who lived outside the norm or challenged the political system.

Book Season = Autumn (tail of the night)

Michael McQueen says

I could not get through this book. I love history in all forms, but this had no form. Cawthorne presented facts, sure, but not in any sense of readability or interest. Bummer.

Traci says

Two stars simply because some of the practices against witches was down-right insane. But seriously, no one proof read this book! I understand some mistakes sneak through to the final edition, but this was awful. It got to the point where I was looking for typos, instead of reading for content.

Ana Mardoll says

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I own and have read an extensive collection of books dealing with the history of witch hunts throughout the world in general and the Spanish Inquisition specifically, and I can honestly say that if you can only pick a single book to read on the topic, this is the one to read.

Cawthorne organizes his material painstakingly within the book, with each chapter dealing with a different country or geographical region. This puts to bed the common and mistaken notion that "only" Catholics/Protestants/Spaniards/what-have-you engaged in this systematic murder of innocents. Cawthorne carefully points out that witch hunting was both a Protestant and a Catholic obsession - something that many authors fail to do, usually as a result of focusing only on one geographical region or period of history.

Indeed, here we have all the evidence we need that just about everywhere in Europe engaged in witch hunts, regardless of the political and religious inclinations of each individual region.

Cawthorne has copious, carefully organized detail - in some cases, details that are difficult to find elsewhere. He cites his sources meticulously, with the final result being a very readable, very informative book. Did you know that a statue of the Virgin Mary in Madrid had arms covered in spikes and that she was capable of "hugging" her victims when a lever was pulled? You might not have, if Cawthorne hadn't found and presented this information. He also carefully links the witch hunts to other historical events, rather than falling into the too-common failing of treating historical events in a vacuum. For instance, did you know that one of the last major witch hunts in Germany incorporated the use of large ovens into the removal of the dead bodies? Witch hunts (which usually included Jewish victims) in Germany were, in many respects, practice for the Holocaust to come later.

This book is not light reading. The subject matter is horrible and Cawthorne does not soften it. But the writing is easy to follow, the level of detail is astounding, and the overall work is unimpeachable. I highly recommend this book.

~ Ana Mardoll

Anna Lato says

I am unsure of exactly how to rate or review a non fiction so I just put it as three stars since I did like it. I found the book to be very informative and quite entertaining in some areas. Some sections of the writing seemed a bit dull and part of the issue could have just been that I was mixing some of the people up. I do wish that in some areas it would have gone into a bit more detail but overall I believe that it was very well researched. The book was generally easy to understand, I only had to grab a dictionary a few times. It took me some time to get through it due to having either a test or a quiz everyday this week and having to study for them. I don't think it was completely a quick read but it wasn't a slow one either (medium speed I guess).

Reccomanding for witch hunters and people who want to learn more about witches alike?
(but seriously don't hunt witches... that's rude.?)

Nikki Mares-Wagner says

Not the best book I have ever read, but not the worst either. Makes a good coffee table book.

Jill Crosby says

Complete and thorough examination of the evolution of the witch trial BEFORE Salem in 1692

Brooke says

It was good. There are other witch books that are better.

David L. says

If it hadn't been for the numerous grammatical and spelling errors, this would've received a higher rating. Cases of witchcraft are given throughout the world and the horrors associated with being accused are unbelievable! Know going in that this book would be rated R at the very least for the disgusting things some of the accused and accusers said happened.

A.J. Howells says

While very informative, the book suffers in that Cawthorne cannot present any facts in an interesting manner, unless it is told from the point-of-view of an eyewitness (journal entries, letters, court testimony, etc.) While I'm grateful to see a book that concentrates on the European side of witch hunting, I'm sure a scan through the "Suggested Reading" in the back of the book will yield far more interesting accounts than this dreadful piece of non-fiction.

The European experience is talked about for the majority of the piece. Perhaps Cawthorne's intent was to focus on this and assume his readers are well-informed of the Salem witch trials. That being said, I don't think this is an excuse to focus on Salem for less than five pages.

The accounts that readers might not know of are, at best, presented in a lackluster manner, as they are simply stated briefly before moving on to another instance of witch hunting. As a result, one walks away from this book able to recall only the most graphic of witch hunts across Europe.

The book could be redeemed as a great source for researchers; in other words, if you're looking for a starting point for your own project, this might be a good place to begin. Actually, I should say it would be a good starting point if Cawthorne cited a single source. All we are given is the "Recommended Reads" in the back of the book, which I assume is a piss-poor excuse for a bibliography. The laziness of not citing comes off as lack of professionalism on the writer's part and the reader is forced to take everything stated with a grain of salt.

This lack of professionalism continues to be advanced upon the reader by the grammatical and spelling mistakes running rampant throughout the text. In fact, there are very few pages (if any) that are free from error. It boggled my mind how so many mistakes in structure and verb tense could exist in this book that I was forced to check the front of the book and verify that it had an editor. Amazingly, it did.

If you're casually interested in finding out more about the witch hunting craze, this might be informative; however, be cautious going in that it will be repetitive and boring. If you're more than just casually interested in the subject, I would do a little more research and find something better. It shouldn't be too hard.

Dale says

Good information but told in a repetitious manner that wore this reader down

Cawthorne's *Witch Hunt: A History of Persecution* is a recounting of the witch hunt craze that infected not only Salem, Massachusetts, a topic with which most Americans have at least a passing familiarity, but throughout Europe to a much, much larger degree. The back of the book says that this book "...examines this persecution and the religious hysteria which inspired it." To me the use of the word examination implies that the author will interpret this hysteria and make observations and insights throughout the reading. Cawthorne does not do anything close to this, with the exception of a brief, four page introduction. Rather, he recounts witch trial after witch trial, often going into great detail about the tortures used and the indictments brought against the accused witches.

While this is an impressive bit of research, the book felt half-done. Like Cawthorne had written up his research notes and then had to hurry off to write something else before he added his own touches. What he leaves us with is more than 200 pages of torture, false accusations and descriptions of supposed orgies between witches and Satan. The first dozen times I read about them, I was interested. By the 50th time, they become most wearisome. Not that they were not horrific stories, but there was just no analysis, no synthesis. This is not so much the work of a historian than a gathering of research...

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