

A Trial of Witches

A seventeenth-century witchcraft
prosecution

Gilbert Geis and Ivan Bunn



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A Trial of Witches

In 1662, Amy Denny and Rose Cullender were hanged for the “crimes” of witchcraft, including causing the death of a child, overturning carts, bedevilling cattle, and lice infestations. *A Trial of Witches* is a study of this seventeenth-century witch trial, placing it in its social, cultural, and political contexts.

Through an examination of the major participants in the case and their institutional importance in the early modern period (the presiding judge was Sir Matthew Hale, whose work is still cited in English case law, and the verifying doctor was the influential Sir Thomas Browne, author of *Religio Medici*), the authors critique the official process and detail how it led to its erroneous conclusions.

The Lowestoft trial has even broader significance as it was cited as evidence thirty years later at the Salem trials, where many lost their lives. Through detailed discussion of primary sources, the authors explore the important implications of this case for the understanding of hysteria, group mentality and early modern social forces, and the witchcraft phenomenon as a whole.

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London and New York

First published 1997 by Routledge 11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to <http://www.ebookstore.tandf.co.uk/>.

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada by Routledge 29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data,

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data Geis, Gilbert. A Trial of Witches: a seventeenth-century witchcraft prosecution/ Gilbert Geis and Ivan Bunn. p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index. Summary: A case study of the witchcraft trial of two women in 1662 Lowestoft, England, including a description of the accusers and prosecutors and an analysis of the trial itself, which was cited as a precedent in the Salem witchcraft trials. 1. Trials (Witchcraft)-England-Lowestoft. 2. Witchcraft-England-History. [1. Trials (Witchcraft)-England. 2. Witchcraft-England-History.] I.Bunn, Ivan. II. Title. KD371.W56G45 1997 345.42'0288-dc21 97-8354 CIP AC

ISBN 0-203-99298-9 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN - (Adobe e-Reader Format)

ISBN 0-415-17108-3 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-17109-1 (pbk)

“God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please—you can never have both.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Intellect”

“For a clever man, nothing is easier than to find arguments that will convince him that he is doing right when he is doing what he wants to do.”

Aldous Huxley, *The Devils of Loudon*

To Dolores and in memory of Robley Geis

To Lesley, who has patiently lived with the Lowestoft “witches” for many years And
also for Dad who never saw the dream come true

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Preface

The present study of the 1662 trial at Bury St. Edmunds of two women accused as witches offers a comprehensive scrutiny of one of the most important of such cases in England. Besides the focus on witchcraft *per se*, the operation of the assize criminal court at the time is examined through the lens of this particular trial. Those who played major roles in the case and the court's procedures are scrutinized in some depth to show how they figured in the fate of the accused women. As Salo Baron recently noted: "penetrating studies of the personality traits and psychological impulses of...leaders have contributed much to the understanding of...historical events."¹

Two particular concerns underlie this element of the study: first, why did an official process, relied upon to discover the truth, reach so erroneous a conclusion? And, second, have the flaws in the beliefsystem been eliminated and the protections to defendants so broadened and strengthened in the ensuing three centuries that such a miscarriage of justice is now unlikely? "We are," the psychiatrist-historian Robert Jay Lifton reminds us in his study of the Nazi doctors, "capable of learning from carefully examined past evil."²

As we wrote this book, we had in mind the point, most recently stated by David Cannadine, that professional history is in danger of collapsing under the weight of its own erudition; "that more and more historians know more and more about less and less."³ Put more positively, Cannadine observes that "there has in recent years been a growing interest in the revival of narrative history, in the imaginative aspects of historical research and writing."⁴ Our aim has been to collect as many significant facts as possible that bear upon the case of the Lowestoft "witches" and to tell an interesting story that has important implications for the understanding of the witchcraft phenomenon. Perhaps the most notable lesson of contemporary relevance is that we should never senselessly succumb in the face of authority. Medical, religious, and legal officials may proclaim that their processes and hearts are pure and their methods impeccable. But they obviously fooled people (and likely themselves) with their high-sounding justifications of witchcraft verdicts in the seventeenth century, and they undoubtedly do so today in other contexts. Bertrand Russell put the matter well: "Most of the greatest evils that man has inflicted upon man have come through people feeling quite certain about something which, in fact, was false."⁵

A great deal has been written on the subject of English witchhunting in general, including five classic monographs: Wallace Notestein's *A History of English Witchcraft* (1911), Cecil L'Estrange Ewen's *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials* [1929]/(1971), George L. Kittredge's *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (1929), Keith Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) and James Sharpe's *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550-1750* (1996).⁶

There also have been regional studies, the most deservedly renowned being Alan Macfarlane's *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970)⁷ The closest thing to a one-volume study of an English witchhunt is Richard Deacon's *Matthew Hopkins: Witch-*

Finder General (1976), but Deacon deals with a whole series of trials in a relatively journalistic manner. Joyce Gibson, in her *Hanged for Witchcraft: Elizabeth Lowys and Her Successors* (1988),⁸ focuses on one trial for a few chapters, but then turns to a general and rather unsatisfactory history of English witchcraft.

There have been some very good short studies of particular trials. The best is Michael MacDonald's review of the Mary Glover case in his introduction to *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan England* (1991),⁹ from which we draw many insights and ideas in the present study. Edgar Peel and Pat Southern offer a fine study, *The Trials of the Lancashire Witches* (1969), and Annabel Gregory's "Witchcraft, Politics and 'Good Neighborhood' in Early Seventeenth-Century Rye" (1991)¹⁰ is also a first-rate examination of a local witchcraft prosecution. So too is Anne Reiber DeWitt's *Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community* (1994).

Nothing in the study of English witchcraft compares to the large number of treatises regarding the witch hunt at Salem in 1692 the best known of which is Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed* (1974), which recently has been challenged in some particulars in Bernard Rosenthal's *Salem Story* (1993) and reconsidered in Frances Hill's *A Delusion of Satan: The Full Story of the Salem Witch Trials* (1995). There is also nothing regarding England comparable to studies of specific European witch-hunts, such as Gustav Henningsen's

The Witches' Advocate (1980), which deals with the great Basque trials of 1609 to 1614, or Michael Kunze's *Highroad to the Stake* (1987), which relates the story of the prosecution of the Pappenheimers in early seventeenth-century Bavaria.¹¹ To this group we can add Carlo Ginzburg's *The Night Battles* (1983)¹² which deals with the prosecution of members of a fertility cult, the Benandanti, in the Friuli region in northeast Italy over the course of some eighty years. These prosecutions involved more than one trial, but they constituted a single witch-hunt in a particular locality.

The authors of the case studies noted above all have had the benefit of a considerable body of primary sources upon which to base their work. Henningsen had a very large cache of inquisitorial records at his disposal, including the papers of a leading inquisitor; Ginzburg also had access to some extraordinarily rich historical records. The materials available for Salem are similarly extensive; the court records alone fill three volumes of *The Salem Witchcraft Papers*.¹³

The result is that scholarship regarding the Salem trials has been something of a cottage industry in which successive scholars seek to put a new twist on what by now is very familiar source material. The social critic Russell Baker, only partially tongue-in-cheek, recently wrote that "[h]istory is constantly being revised these days. It's because there is a glut of historians. Revising history is the only way to keep them busy"¹⁴ Witchcraft history revisionists sometimes fall prey to the tendency to hit upon one or another partial explanation—or correlation—of what occurred and to elevate that singular point to an overarching thesis. In our analyses, we pay heed to Rosenthal's warning that "to create a unified theory to explain the Salem witch trial would be to distort the event, at times to trivialize it... The methodological challenge is to find reasonable conclusions, generalizations at times, that do more than impose one more myth upon the... trials." He adds: "Anyone who offers to adjudicate once and for all the various competing theories about the Salem witch trials should be a soldier not a scholar."¹⁵

There was no possibility that our intensive examination of one witch trial would permit us to offer a new and novel understanding of the witchcraft phenomenon. Beginners in social science learn early that you cannot generalize with safety and comfort from an N of 1. A case study, as a recent essay defined it, represents an “in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon. The study is conducted in great detail and often relies on the use of several data sources.”¹⁶ We have sought to portray in its narrative richness a notably important and instructive criminal proceeding, a proceeding that William Godwin called “one of the most remarkable trials that occur in the history of criminal jurisprudence.”¹⁷ We drew upon information from a variety of sources, both local and national, never before brought together. We have had to deal with the problem that assize court records tell us very little because the depositions were not regarded as official papers and therefore almost never have been preserved with the indictments. For the most part, historians of English witchcraft have had to rely upon the skeletal details of the indictments and, as we did, upon the occasional contemporaneously compiled report of a trial.

It is just such documents—the indictment of Amy Denny and Rose Cullender for witchcraft—and the fifty-nine-page report (included as an Appendix to the present volume), *A Tryal of Witches Held at the Assizes at Bury St. Edmunds* (1682), said to have been written by the judge’s marshal, that provided us with the core material for our study. We have fleshed out this information from other sources that tell us about the locale and the trial procedures. We also have examined in considerable detail the lives of the major participants in the case, the very rich and the relatively well-to-do townspeople who brought the charges, the officials who participated in the trial, the expert witness, and the two hapless women who sought to defend themselves against the accusation of witchcraft. Throughout, we have sought to match the details of our case history against the generalizations offered by historians such as Macfarlane and Thomas, who speculated about the general outlines of English witchcraft. Much of what these scholars discovered proves to be true in regard to this particular case, though there are small and larger discrepancies between what happened in Lowestoft and Bury St. Edmunds and their overall blueprint of English witchcraft.

Our examination of the lives and ideas of the individuals who brought about the denunciation and ultimate death of Amy Denny and Rose Cullender indicates, to us, the important role that idiosyncratic circumstances can play in an historical event. Broader political and cultural conditions have to prevail for certain things to happen, but these things—a particular witch trial at a particular place with a certain kind of outcome—do not necessarily follow.

The trial at Bury St. Edmunds did not proceed smoothly from accusation to sentencing; rather there were significant divisions and occasional conflicts between some of the leading participants. It is vital to appreciate that by 1662, English opinion no longer was widely consensual regarding the reality of witchcraft, a matter which allows us to discriminate in this case between the backgrounds of those who clung to the belief now being challenged and those who sought to discredit it. Rosenthal has made the same point forcefully about the Salem Village trials by documenting that many persons refused to buy into the witchcraft prosecutions and saw them for the travesty of justice that they were. Rosenthal notes: “The argument that we must see it from their perspective carries an implicit codicil that, given their perspective, they could not have seen it the way we

smarter moderns can,” and adds: “However, though patronized by future commentators, they saw it well enough—better, on the whole, than the theorists who have come to explain what happened to them.”¹⁸ “It is fair to assess the judges by honorable standards of their own day,” Rosenthal insists,¹⁹ and he does so by documenting the skeptical opinion about witchcraft held by prominent people of the time.

This analytical axiom notwithstanding, we have throughout our study sought to be sensitive to the very real concerns of seventeenth-century minds to the perils of witchcraft and to put events into the context of the times. In his recent review of cases which arose in Yorkshire, J.A. Sharpe reminds us that for “[t]hose on the receiving end of witchcraft in the early modern period...the witch was frequently a frightening individual who could, on occasion, do harm with terrible speed and terrible effectiveness.” “As we have tried to make clear,” Sharpe adds, “the experience of thinking oneself to be bewitched, or of thinking that the same fate had befallen one’s children or one’s cattle, was a deeply disturbing one.”²⁰

We totally agree with this, but we also would note that, while Sharpe is appropriately sympathetic to the terrors of the supposed victims, he does not attend (in what admittedly is but a brief paper) to the horror of being accused of witchcraft and the ultimate awfulness of being hanged for it. To understand the psychological and ideological climate that prompted the accusations is essential, but to appreciate—albeit by means of a present-day view—what was visited upon the accused is at least equally essential.

There is a further contextual note that needs to be recorded. By profession neither of us is an academic historian. Inevitably, because of our training in sociological criminology and local studies, we do not necessarily look at witchcraft in precisely the same manner as those scholars who traditionally have dominated the study of its occurrence in non-preliterate societies. This book, for instance, presents considerable detail about the manner in which a case of witchcraft was tried, a matter that has not attracted the attention of historians who study witchcraft. Our detailed examination of the views and backgrounds and interactions of the major establishment participants in the witchcraft trial, men such as Sir Matthew Hale, Sir John Keeling, and Sir Thomas Browne, provides much more of this kind of information than traditionally offered by witchcraft historians and offers insight in why *this* trial went as it did. We also present considerable details about the accusers, including their standing, background, and length of residence in the community than is commonly reported. Presumably, this material, combined with further studies of other witchcraft cases, can be crafted into more general statements about the phenomenon.

We also believe that there is something to be gained by looking at the subject in a manner slightly different to that commonly done. We would note, for example, that Kai Erikson’s *Wayward Puritans* (1966),²¹ a study based on events in Salem Village, may at times be regarded as rather inadequate history by historians, but is considered a classic insight and a theoretical breakthrough by sociologists of deviant behavior who turn to it constantly for interpretations of present-day research about social outcasts. For our part, we have sought historical integrity and have combed the extant historical literature seeking to incorporate its insights where they seem appropriate. At the same time, we have attended to adjacent concerns that generally do not fall within the historical perspective.

Details of our collaboration are worth noting. We met when, out of curiosity, Geis trekked to Lowestoft to follow up on work he had been doing at Cambridge University on the legal background of the crime of rape. He had learned that the pronouncements on rape by Sir Matthew Hale, the preeminent jurist of the seventeenth century, had established the way this offense was regarded for the following three centuries. He also had discovered that Hale had presided over the trial of two women accused of being witches at Lowestoft. A local historian, Hugh Lees, brought the two of us together and, for longer than we sometimes care to admit, we have pursued in tandem our intense preoccupation with seeking to determine what led to and followed the accusation of Denny and Cullender.

A few minutes in the local library during that initial visit established that every discussion of the trial had gotten one of the defendant's name wrong. Not long afterwards we were able to document, by securing a copy of the indictments from the Public Record Office, that a majority of the discussions, probably several hundred, also had misdated the trial. After those heady triumphs there was no turning back, though over many years we often have despaired and fretted about more fundamental issues regarding the case that we sought to learn about and to understand. Almost ritualistically, we occasionally return to St. Margaret's Church in Lowestoft and in silence peer down at the slab marking the grave of Samuel Pacy, the man who pushed the accusations of Denny and Cullender, as if somehow we could gather from our visit an understanding of what he would tell us were we able to discuss this case with him.

If at times it appears that we are harsh upon Pacy and those officials who aided the condemnation of Amy Denny and Rose Cullender we would partially defend our judgments by echoing the observation of John Acton, a leading nineteenth-century historian and essayist. Lord Acton believed that historians should be judges, exercising their right to condemn the sins of the past. In his famous letter to Mandell Creighton, in which he set out the axiom that "[p]ower tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," Acton insisted in the sentence before that pronouncement that "[h]istoric responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility," that is, that historians have the obligation to hold those who wield power to some moral standard.²² Creighton, who tended to obsequiousness in his own writings, later would maintain that "[i]t is a real support to them [those with power] that they will be judged by a higher standard than that of their immediate success."²³ Both postulations admit of many qualifications, of course. Certainly the standard by which persons are judged ought to be one that they reasonably should have been able to achieve. Besides, it is arguable how much influence the possible judgment of posterity exercises upon powerful people's actions, though we sometimes are told by the media that it is the verdict of history not the clamor of immediate approval that dictated one or another leadership decision.

We would also point to the words of George Burr, an eminent early witchcraft historian who thought that puritanism played a prominent part in European and American witchcraft prosecutions. Burr's knowledgeable insight has been overridden—indeed, largely repudiated—by later interpretations that highlight neighborhood quarrels, misogyny, political unrest, and numerous other concomitants of witchcraft prosecutions. Our information shows, as we shall subsequently indicate in detail, that at least for the Lowestoft case and its relationship to what went on in Salem Village thirty years later, theology appears to have been a significant contributing factor. Burr also favors making

judgments (albeit fairly and properly qualified) rather than exculpating those involved in pressing witchcraft charges by portraying them as no more than creatures of their time. “It is not because we think we are better than our fathers,” Burr wrote. “It is because deep within ourselves we still feel the impulses which led to their mistakes.... I fear that they who begin by excusing their ancestors may end by excusing themselves” and “repeat their faults.”²⁴ Burr’s rhetoric may be a bit overblown, but the point is worth taking to heart, particularly when as sophisticated a historian as Geoffrey Elton maintains that once the evidence is understood in terms of its times—of the attitudes and prejudices of the period—it is professionally desirable to pass judgment about what took place.²⁵

Acknowledgements

We owe a debt of gratitude to a large number of persons and institutions that have provided us with information and insights as we have sought to gather and interpret the facts and the dynamics of the 1662 prosecution of Amy Denny and Rose Cullender on charges of bewitching their neighbors. These include David Wright, the Local Studies Librarian in Lowestoft and David Butcher of Corton. David Butcher has been especially helpful in critiquing our work and offering results from his own research on Lowestoft. Others with whom we discussed one or another issue are the late Hugh Lees, Parish Historian of Lowestoft, Jack Rose, Michael Burgess, Richard Haxell, Denis Fletcher, Chris Want, Barbara Turner of CEFAS, and the late Eric Porter, all of Lowestoft. Sir Nicholas Bacon, Baronet of Raveningham, Diana Spelman of Norwich, Susan Moore of London, Eric Stockdale of New Barnet, Dr. G.H.Glanville of Richmond, Helen Phelan of New York, Douglas Salmon of Norwich, Terry Weatherly of Lowestoft, and Ruth Flowerdew of Basingstoke similarly have contributed to our work. Thanks also go to Pete Clements of Lowestoft for his critical appraisal of our manuscript.

Archivists and staff at the following sites were particularly helpful in aiding our research: the Suffolk Record Offices in Lowestoft, Ipswich, and Bury St. Edmunds, Lowestoft Central Library, the Suffolk Genealogy Society, and the Surrey Record Office. In London we received assistance at the Public Record Office, the British Library, Dr. Williams' Library, the Lincoln's Inn Library, the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple, the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple, the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, the Guildhall Library, and the Society of Genealogists.

The University Library at Cambridge was one of our prime initial sources of material. Elisabeth Leedham-Green, the assistant keeper of the University archives, was notably helpful in putting the trial indictments into contemporary language for us. Also at Cambridge

University we received assistance from Donald West, Nigel Walker, Alan Cromartie, Alan Macfarlane, J.H.Baker, D.E.C.Yale, David Thomas, and Richard Wright. N.S.Keeble at Stirling University in Scotland also was of considerable help in answering our queries about Richard Baxter, while Keith Thomas at Oxford provided information about Hale's education there, and J.S.Cockburn of the University of Maryland offered data regarding some of the intricacies of the assignment of judges to the assize circuits. Brian Levack of the University of Texas also provided excellent advice.

The Allegany County Historical Society and the Allegany County Museum, both in upstate New York, provided material regarding Samuel Pacy's descendants, while Susan Szpak of the Salem Public Library provided information regarding Lowestoft immigrants in the seventeenth century. Also in the United States, the librarians at the University of California, Irvine, the William Clark Andrews Library in Los Angeles, the University of Chicago Library, and the Huntington Library in San Marino all answered our questions promptly and fully. Samuel Guze, a professor of psychiatry at Washington University in

St. Louis, read the trial report and offered observations on how he viewed the behavior of the accusers.

The manuscript would never have been put into satisfactory shape without the intelligent and skilled work done for us by Carol Wyatt of the University of California, Irvine. Judy Omiya is a superb secretary. Also contributing to the effort on the California front were Dianne Christianson, Cindy Cooper, a skilled editor, Anna Maria Tejada, Ted Huston, Joseph Wells, Dennis and Lori Suzucki, Paul Jesilow, Steve Reynard, Mary Dodge, and Joseph DiMento. In New York City, Jeff Walsh and Richard Kim at John Jay College of Criminal Justice helped with some of the final library and word processing tasks, while Lesley Bunn and Jim Brown of Lowestoft helped with their proofreading skills and advice.

We want to express our deepest appreciation to all of these people and organizations for their help and to make it known that whatever deficiencies exist in this work are the result of our own shortcomings.



Figure 1 Portrait of Sir John Keeling

Note: The portrait bears signs of water damage suffered when the Guildhall was bombed in World War II.

Source: Portrait by John Michael Wright; Guildhall Library.

Part I
The case

Witchcrafts here resemble witchcrafts there

On Monday, March 17, 1662, in the English market town of Bury St. Edmunds, an assize site on the Norfolk circuit, two old women were hanged by the neck until dead. Four days earlier, the women had been convicted in a trial by jury for the crime of witchcraft.¹ Because their case was presided over by Sir Matthew Hale, by far the most renowned and respected judge of the time, and featured testimony by the prominent essayist, philosopher, and medical doctor, Sir Thomas Browne, the accused women gained a certain kind of immortality. Their names appear as one of the subject headings in the catalogue of the British Library, though it is ironic that both in the Library listing and in each of the hundreds of references to the case one of the women, Amy Denny, is erroneously called Amy Duny, probably because the composer of the printed summary of her trial erred in transcribing the handwriting of the person who had recorded it.

It is neither right nor decent that two elderly women should have been killed by judicial process for acts they had not done. But injustice is hardly an uncommon matter: it was not so then, and it is not so today. Such matters, it might be argued, should be overlooked—or at least not made much of—lest our knowledge of the sometimes whimsical and brutal nature of official procedures comes to make us uneasy. A nineteenth-century English divine believed so: he insisted that an innocent person about to be hanged ought not to protest, because to do so would undermine citizens' faith in the integrity of their judicial system.²

The fatuous attitude of the cleric requires no rebuttal, but it may be only meaningless rhetoric to insist that Amy Denny and Rose Cullender should not have died in vain. We all die in vain, and it will do none of us any real good to have our reputation rehabilitated posthumously. But it seems important to seek lessons from matters that involve gross injustice, lessons that hopefully will deter subsequent injustice. When two women are killed by the state for criminal offenses that they did not, and in fact could not, commit, after a trial involving persons with some of the keenest intellects of the time, something has gone seriously awry. A basic aim of our examination of the witchcraft case of Amy Denny and Rose Cullender is to determine what of present-day value can be learned from this sorry affair.

The trial tarnished evermore, be it only so slightly, the reputations of the two notable pages who played a major part in it—and in this too there are lessons to be learned.

Sir Matthew Hale, the judge, has been regarded, in the more than three centuries that have passed since the witchcraft trial, as a sage, compassionate, and decent human being. The Christian faithful probably best know Hale as the kind jurist who during the summer assize in Bedford in August 1661—seven months before the Bury St. Edmunds trial—paused and listened to the pitiful pleas of John Bunyan's wife for the release of her husband from prison after Hale's colleagues had scornfully brushed her aside.

Sympathetically, and predictably, Hale told her that there was nothing that he could do, although he explained the official procedures that she might follow to have her husband's petition reviewed in London.³ Hale's indulgence of Mrs. Bunyan has drawn high poetic marks:

Law's high chair is filled
 By one whose spirit ne'er was known to fail
 In gentleness—with goodness all instilled
 Mild, merciful, tho' still majestic Hale.⁴

Further fulsome tributes to Hale's wisdom, judicial brilliance, and integrity abound; he regularly is honored as one of the best minds in the history of English jurisprudence, possessor of an incisive analytical ability and an encyclopedic knowledge of the common law. But Hale's record also carries the slight stain of his action against Amy Denny and Rose Cullender; commentators persistently nag at his heels because of his role in the witchcraft case. Thomas Thirlwall, for instance, the nineteenth-century cleric who edited Hale's voluminous religious writings, cannot be altogether forgiving. Thirlwall eulogizes Hale's "learning, wisdom, piety and virtue, which shone in his life with such transcendent luster, and raised him to the highest eminence."⁵ But he also feels compelled to call our attention to the fact that it was Hale who "passed the sentence of death upon two crazy old wretches for that supposed crime."⁶

A standard early nineteenth-century biographical dictionary similarly



Figure 2 Portrait of Sir Matthew Hale

Source: Reproduced with permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

labels Hale's role in the witchcraft trial as "the most blamable passage of his life."⁷ John Lord Campbell, otherwise overflowing in his praise of Hale—he calls him the "most pure, the most pious, the most independent and the most learned of judges"⁸—notes that Hale "was not only under the influence of the most vulgar credulity, but that he violated the plainest rules of justice, and that he really was the murderer of two innocent women."⁹ An early nineteenth-century editor, annotating the diary of a contemporary of Hale, observes that Hale's decision at Bury was "unworthy of any judge," and that he "left for execution...two unfortunate women, on evidence which now appears to be utterly insufficient."¹⁰ Sometimes, when it has been important in legal disputes to

overcome one or another of Hale's powerful juridical pronouncements on the common law, the witchcraft case will be exhumed. Thus, in 1889, Rufus W. Peckham, a New York Supreme Court judge, dissenting in regard to the precedent value of Hale's position on government regulation of businesses affected with a public interest,¹¹ insisted bitingly that Hale's ideas on this subject were no more substantial than those he had entertained on witchcraft.¹²

The reputation of Sir Thomas Browne bears a similar taint. Browne, appearing in his medical role as expert witness at the 1662 trial, testified that the young girls accusing Denny and Cullender were afflicted with organic problems, but that they undoubtedly also had been bewitched.

Author of the esteemed *Religio Medici*, among other works, Browne has been acclaimed in hundreds of books and articles for the magnificence of his prose, and for his exceptional tolerance of the beliefs and behavior of those who differed from him.¹³ But many who write about Browne also feel compelled to attend, if only passingly, to his "unfortunate involvement"¹⁴ in the 1662 witchcraft case. Most often writers dismiss Browne's testimony as little more than a reflection of the ideas of the times: no man, it is maintained, can be held to standards higher than those of the keenest minds around him.¹⁵

By 1662, however, belief in witches was in retreat in England. As Wallace Notestein observes, the wide range of decisions rendered in English witch trials at the time "betrays the perplexity of judges and juries."¹⁶ Indeed, after 1620 the percentage of acquittals in witchcraft cases in Essex "rose enormously"¹⁷ Surviving Home Circuit records show that between 1647 and 1701, 103 persons were committed for trial for witchcraft, but only 14 were found guilty. Grand juries dismissed 28 cases, and trial juries returned not guilty verdicts in 61 of the 71 cases they heard.¹⁸ In 1664, as one instance among numerous others, Robert Hunt, a magistrate in Somerset, uncovered what he stoutly maintained were two covens of witches, but prosecution was aborted "by the cynical attitude of his fellow justices."¹⁹ In 1736, the witchcraft law under which Denny and Cullender were executed would be repealed. On the continent, doubts about witchcraft also were surfacing. Anne Barstow notes: "[B]y 1662, many French judges and doctors had become skeptical of demonic possession."²⁰ It needs to be kept firmly in mind that Browne and Hale represented not a mainstream position but rather one rapidly becoming anachronistic.

Some writers take the view that Browne had only an inconsequential impact on the outcome of the trial, a position neither easily rebutted nor defended given our inability to penetrate the minds of the jurors and judge. Certainly, on the face of it, the accusers' evidence alone (at least as it is conveyed in the trial report) would appear sufficient to convict, presuming those hearing it found it believable. But the fact that Browne probably was summoned from his home in Norwich (nearby, but not that close to Bury St. Edmunds in terms of the travails of seventeenth-century travel) might indicate that those pushing the case felt the need for his support.

Interpretations of Browne's performance continue to cut into the integrity of his intellectual and personal credentials. A man's reputation, it becomes obvious, can be permanently sullied by a few words uttered in an event that at the time appears to him to be of little consequence. No reference to the trial has been found in Browne's voluminous correspondence with his son and others:²¹ it apparently was not worth a mention.

The case against Amy Denny and Rose Cullender also strongly influenced the most notable of America's witchcraft prosecutions, the Salem trials of 1692. Indeed, the Salem witch-hunts might not have taken place if there had not been a trial at Bury St. Edmunds: the events at Salem notoriously imitated those at Bury. Cotton Mather in his *Wonders of the Invisible World* included a large number of excerpts and interpretations of the Bury trial in order to justify what happened at Salem.²² "It may cast some light upon the dark things now in America," Mather wrote, "if we just give a glance upon like things lately happened in Europe. We may see the witchcrafts here most exactly resemble the witchcrafts there; and we may learn what sort of devils do trouble the world."²³ John Hale, in his "sad, troubled, and honest"²⁴ account written shortly after the Salem trials, notes that the judges there made "a conscientious endeavor to do the thing that was right. And to that end they consulted the presidents [precedents] of former times & precepts laid down by learned writers about witchcraft ... [including] Sir Matthew Hales *Tryal of Witches*, printed Anno 1682."²⁵

Thomas Hutchinson, in his history of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, provides further particulars regarding the connection between the Salem trials and the 1662 English prosecution:

the great authority was that of Sir Matthew Hale, revered in New England, not only for his knowledge in the law, but for his gravity and piety. The trial of the witches was published in 1684 [actually 1682]. All these books were in New England, and the conformity between the behavior of most of the supposed bewitched at Salem, and the behavior of those in England, is so exact as to leave no room to doubt the stories had already been read by the New England persons themselves, or had been told to them by others who had read them. Indeed, this conformity instead of giving suspicion, was urged in the confirmation of the truth of both.²⁶

At Salem, 141 persons were accused of witchcraft. Of these, there are records of 122 having been imprisoned. Nineteen persons were hanged; one man, Giles Corey, was pressed to death, and two women died while in custody.²⁷ All, of course, were innocent of the accusations made against them. Those accusations were primarily made by two girls, one nine years old and the other eleven years old. The main accusers of Denny and Cullender, thirty years earlier, were of the same sex and the same ages.

Trials for witchcraft are among the most malevolent occurrences in the annals of the human race, and among the most pathetic. The power of the state is mobilized to stage a trial in which the search for justice often is caricatured. Personal grievances, scapegoating, misogyny, superstition, a quest for notoriety and advancement become transmuted and legitimized in witch-hunts. Accusations can also be leveled to relieve boredom. She did it for "sport, they must have some sport," one of the Salem "girls" would say, trying to explain herself.²⁸ In witchcraft cases, innocent persons are confronted with a capital charge which it is impossible to rebut in any literal way. How can those accused as witches satisfactorily demonstrate that they had not conspired with the devil to bring about the death of an infant in the neighborhood? How can they prove it was not their image that their accusers claimed to have seen cavorting just beneath the ceiling of the meeting house or in the corner of the bedchamber? It is only when the