

## DEODAT LAWSON, "WITCHCRAFT IN SALEM" (1704)

MICHAEL SEES, EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE, DR. JON MILLER, SPRING 2006

### Introduction

Of all the accounts of the Salem Witch Trials, be they first hand or historical, few are more curious, mysterious and perhaps least read and understood than Deodat Lawson's, minister of Salem Village's church from 1683-1688. Tempers flared quite often in the Village, and ministers were not assured stability. Four had come and gone before the outbreak of the witch accusations. One minister, Samuel Parris (Lawson's successor), was himself personally affected by the tragedy.

Not much is known, however, about Lawson himself. One of the best sources for biographical information on Lawson is Marilynne K. Roach's *The Salem Witch Trials*, which provides a small selection of details. His birth date is unclear as is what exactly he did before coming to Salem Village in 1683. He was the son of an English Puritan minister and a mother who wished for her son to enter God's service. After graduating from college, Lawson found his way to New England and preached on Martha's Vineyard. When the opportunity came to preach at Salem, Lawson was a member of Boston's Second Church, unhappily laboring at secular pursuits to support his wife Jane and their two children. What is known is that there was extreme division amongst the townspeople over Lawson's ascension to the position of the town's minister, with several people objecting to his permanent tenure at that post. As a result, Lawson was denied the position of full minister and was by some accounts very distressed. After leaving Salem, Lawson ventured to Maine in 1687, returning to Salem in 1688, when his wife and daughter died there unexpectedly. Sometime after, Lawson again returned to Boston and lived in some matter of seclusion until the outbreak of mysterious occurrences began in Salem, and he was summoned there again in March 1692. There he stayed for a month, witnessing some of the most fantastic incidents that

happened there first hand. Upon his return to Boston, Lawson wrote his account of what he witnessed in Salem (one of the first of its kind), under the remarkably descriptive title, *A Brief and True Narrative of Some Remarkable Passages Relating to Sundry Persons Afflicted by Witchcraft, at Salem Village which Happened from the Nineteenth of March, to the fifth of April, 1692.*

Several historical accounts of Lawson view him as a leader of the prosecution of the witches. Playwright Arthur Miller, author of *The Crucible*, has called Lawson "one of the great witch-hunting preachers . . . (rallying) his congregation for what was to be nothing less than a religious war against the Evil One."<sup>1</sup> Other accounts view him as at best merely ineffectual and passive, and at worst complicit in the hysteria that befell the village, but not actively evil. In Marc Aronson's book *Witch-Hunt*, Lawson is portrayed as contradictory and confused: "He gave a well-meaning, contradictory sermon that offered no clear advice but to 'pray, pray, pray.' . . . He urged his former congregation to understand that they had brought these ills on themselves. He knew first hand about the "fires of contention" that divided Salem . . . but did not take the next step of challenging the accusers."<sup>2</sup> This sermon was delivered on March 24, just days after his return to Salem, and indeed it may seem that Lawson was somewhat shocked by what he had witnessed, but let hearsay, circumstance and contradictory statements cloud his judgment. Lawson, it seems, thought the town and its people deserved the problems that they had wrought.

Lawson did have some contact with Samuel Parris, his successor as minister of Salem Village, and one of the historically agreed-upon agitators of the situation. Parris' daughter, Elizabeth, was one of the first to be "afflicted" by alleged witchcraft and also became one of the Village's first accusers. In fact, it is possible that Lawson was summoned back to Salem in March 1692 by Samuel Parris. Because of this and because of his

lack of support from the townspeople during his tenure as minister, Lawson may have concealed certain fallacies and helped spread the hysteria when it is clear that a calm voice could have reduced it.

Upon his return to Boston, Lawson became the minister at a church in Scituate, Massachusetts and remained there until 1698. In 1704 he wrote and delivered his sermon "Christ's Fidelity the only Shield against Satan's Malignity," to which the piece presented here, "Witchcraft In Salem," is an appendix.

Almost a summary of the ground covered in *A Brief and True Narrative*, "Witchcraft In Salem" is Lawson's account of what he witnessed there and its effect upon various townspeople as well as himself. One of the accused witches even suggests to Lawson that his wife and daughter were "sent out of the world under the malicious operations of the infernal powers."

Throughout the piece, Lawson offers evidence that malicious happenings occurred in Salem, and that those who were afflicted suffered severe hardships and pain as a result of the actions of the accused. Although he uses no names in the piece, some research uncovers who some of the various people Lawson mentions may have been. For example, his encounters with witchcraft accuser Susannah Sheldon, who was bound four times in two weeks, and experienced the terrible tortures of having pins pierced through the lips (which may have also happened to accuser Ann Putnam), are related to the audience in meticulous detail. Lawson may not have been passionate in his sermons of the time, but he was passionate in his belief that some form of Satanic evil was taking place in Salem and manifesting itself in these girls' sufferings. Two additional persons are suggested by Lawson to be the ringleaders of evil by the King and Queen of Hell, and in a deposition by Ann Putnam she declared that the "King" could have been a man named George Burroughs, who told her "that

he killed Mistress Lawson because she was so unwilling to go from the village and also killed Mr Lawson's child because he went to the eastward."<sup>3</sup>

It is clear, then, that Lawson had a personal stake in the events and the welfare of both the accusers and the accused. Whether or not this clouded his judgment remains unclear. But what is clear is that Lawson offered several accounts of the strange happenings in Salem Village and was at the center of at many of them. "Witchcraft In Salem," reprinted here for perhaps the first time since 1888, is Lawson's final statement on the subject. In it he tries to explain what evil befell the village of Salem and the efforts of the villagers and himself to deal with the fallout.

Relatively little information was available about the rest of Lawson's life. His 1704 sermons are his last known works.

*Note on the Text:* "Witchcraft In Salem" was written in 1704 and is an appendix to Lawson's sermon "Christ's Fidelity the only Shield against Satan's Malignity." The text is from Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson's *A Library of American Literature: From the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time, Vol. II.*, 1888, published by William Evarts Benjamin, New York, pgs. 106-114. The ellipses are Stedman and Hutchinson's.

Deodat Lawson

Minister at Salem Village (now Danvers), Mass., 1683 and at Scituate, Mass., 1686-98.

#### WITCHCRAFT IN SALEM.

{Appendix to "Christ's Fidelity the only Shield against Satan's Malignity." 1704}

It pleased God in the year of our Lord 1692 to visit the people of a place called Salem Village in New-England with a very sore and grievous affliction, in which they had reason to believe that the sovereign and holy God was pleased to permit Satan and his instruments to affright and afflict those poor mortals

in such an astonishing and unusual manner.

Now, I having for some time before attended the work of the ministry in that village, the report of those great afflictions came quickly to my notice; and the more readily because the first person afflicted was in the minister's family<sup>4</sup>, who succeeded me after I was removed from them. In pity, therefore, to my Christian friends and former acquaintance there, I was much more concerned about them, frequently consulted with them, and fervently (by Divine assistance) prayed for them; but especially my concern was augmented when it was reported at an examination of a person suspected for witchcraft that my wife and daughter, who died three years before, were sent out of the world under the malicious operations of the infernal powers, as is more fully represented in the following remarks. I did then desire and was also desired by some concerned in the court, to be there present that I might hear what was alleged in that respect; observing, therefore, when I was amongst them that the case of the afflicted was very amazing and deplorable, and the charges brought against the accused such as were ground of suspicious yet very intricate and difficult to draw up right conclusions about them. . . .

One or two of the first that were afflicted complaining of unusual illness, their relations used physic for their cure, but it was altogether in vain.

They were oftentimes very stupid in their fits and could neither hear nor understand in the apprehension of the standers by, so that when prayer hath been made with some of them in such a manner as might be audible in a great congregation, yet when their fit was off they declared they did not hear so much as one word thereof.

It was several times observed that when they were discoursed with about God or Christ or the things of Salvation they were presently afflicted at a dreadful rate, and hence were oftentimes outrageous if they were permitted to be in the congregation in the time of public worship. . . .

They affirmed that they saw the

ghosts of several departed persons, who, at their appearing, did instigate them to discover such as (they said) were instruments to hasten their deaths; threatening sorely to afflict them if they did not make it known to the magistrates. They did affirm at the examination and again at the trial of an accused person that they saw the ghosts of his two wives (to whom he had carried very ill in their lives as was proved by several testimonies) and also that they saw the ghosts of my wife and daughter (who died above three years before) and they did affirm that when the very ghosts looked on the prisoner at the bar they looked red, as if the blood would fly out of their faces with indignation at him. The manner of it was thus: Several afflicted being before the prisoner at the bar, on a sudden they fixed all their eyes together on a certain place on the floor before the prisoner, neither moving their eyes nor bodies for some few minutes nor answering to any question which was asked them. So soon as that trance was over, some being removed out of sight and hearing, they were all one after another asked what they saw and they did agree that they saw those ghosts above mentioned. I was present and heard and saw the whole of what passed upon that account during the trial of that person who was accused to be the instrument of Satan's malice therein.

In this (worse than Gallick) persecution by the Dragoons of Hell, the persons afflicted were harassed at such a dreadful rate to write their names in a devil-book presented by a spectre unto them; and one in my hearing said: "I will not, I will not write; it is none of God's book; it is the devil's book for aught I know." And when they steadfastly refused to sign they were told if they would but touch or take hold of the book it should do. And lastly, the diabolical propositions were so low and easy that if they would but let their clothes or any other thing about them touch the book, they should be at ease from their torments, it being their consent that is aimed at by the devil in those representations and operations.

One who had been long afflicted

at a stupendous rate by two or three spectres, when they were (to speak after the manner of men) "tired out" with tormenting of her, to force or fright her to sign a covenant with the prince of darkness, they said to her as in a diabolical and accursed passion: "Go your ways and the devil go with you, for we will be no more pestered and plagued about you." And ever after that she was well and no more afflicted that I ever heard of.

Sundry pins have been taken out of the wrists and arms of the afflicted and one in time of examination of a suspected person had a pin run through both her upper and her lower lip when she was called to speak;<sup>2</sup> yet no apparent festering followed thereupon after it was taken out.

Some of the afflicted, as they were striving in their fits in open court, have (by invisible means) had their wrists bound fast together with a real cord<sup>3</sup>, so as it could hardly be taken off without cutting. Some afflicted have been found with their arms tied and hanged upon a hook, from whence others have been forced to take them down that they might not expire in that posture.

Some afflicted have been drawn under tables and beds by undiscerned force, so as they could hardly be pulled out. And one was drawn half way over the side of a well and was with much difficulty recovered back again.

When they were most grievously afflicted, if they were brought to the accused and the suspected person's hand but laid upon them they were immediately relieved out of their tortures; but if the accused did but look on them they were instantly struck down again. Wherefore they use to cover the face of the accused while they laid their hands on the afflicted and then it obtained the desired issue. For it hath been experienced (both in examinations and trials) that so soon as the afflicted came in sight of the accused they were immediately cast into their fits. Yea, though the accused were among the crowd of people, unknown to the sufferers, yet on the first view were they struck down; which was observed in a child of four or five

years of age, when it was apprehended that so many as she would look upon, either directly or by turning her head, were immediately struck into their fits.

An iron spindle of a woolen wheel, being taken very strangely out of an house at Salem Village, was used by a spectre as an instrument of torture to a sufferer, not being discernable to the standers by until it was by the said sufferer snatched out of the spectre's hand and then it did immediately appear to the persons present to be really the same iron spindle.

Sometimes in their fits they have had their tongues drawn out of their mouths to a fearful length, their heads turned very much over their shoulders, and while they have been so strained in their fits, and had their arms and legs, etc., wrested as if they were quite dislocated, the blood hath gushed plentifully out of their mouths for a considerable time together; which some, that they might be satisfied that it was real blood, took upon their finger and rubbed on their other hand. I saw several together thus violently strained and bleeding in their fits, to my very great astonishment that my fellow mortals should be so grievously distressed by the invisible powers of darkness. For certainly all considerate persons who beheld these things must needs be convinced that their motions in their fits were preternatural and involuntary, both as to the manner which was so strange, as well a person could not (at least without great pain) screw their bodies into; and as to the violence also they were preternatural motions, being much beyond the ordinary force of the same persons when they were in their right minds. So that being such grievous sufferers, it would seem very hard and unjust to censure them of consenting to or holding any voluntary converse or familiarity with the devil.

Their eyes were for the most part fast closed in their trance fits, and when they were asked a question they could give no answer. And I do verily believe they did not hear at the time, yet did they discourse with the spectres as with real persons; asserting things and receiving answers affirmative or negative, as the

matter was. For instance, one in my hearing thus argued with and railed at a spectre:<sup>4</sup> "Goodn-- be gone! Be gone! Be Gone! Are you not ashamed, a woman of your profession, to afflict a poor creature so? What hurt did I ever do you in my life? You have but two years to live and then the devil will torment your soul for this. Your name is blotted out of God's Book and it shall never be put into God's Book again. Be gone! For shame! Are you not afraid of what is coming upon you? I know, I know what will make you afraid—the wrath of an angry God! I am sure that will make you afraid. Be gone! Do not torment me; I know what you would have," (we judged she meant her soul), "but it is out of your reach, it is clothed with the white robes of Christ's righteousness." This sufferer I was well acquainted with and knew her to be a very sober and pious woman, so far as I could judge; and it appears that she had not in that fit voluntary converse with the devil. For then she might have been helped to a better guess about that woman above said, as to her living but two years, for she lived not many months after that time. . . .

Some of them were asked how it came to pass that they were not affrighted when they saw the Black-man<sup>5</sup>. They said they were at first but not so much afterwards.

Some of them affirmed they saw the Black-man sit on the gallows and that he whispered in the ears of some of the condemned persons when they were just ready to be turned off—even while they were making their last speech. . . .

Some of them have sundry times seen a White-man appearing amongst the spectres, and as soon as he appeared, the Black-Witches vanished; they said this White-man had often foretold them what respite they should have from their fits; as sometimes a day or two or more, which fell out accordingly. One of the afflicted said she saw him in her fit and was with in a glorious place which had no candle or sun, yet was full of light and brightness, where there was a multitude in "white glittering robes," and they sang the song in Rev. v. 9, Psal.

ex. Psal. cxlix. She was loth to leave that place and said; "How long shall I stay here, let me be along with you?" She was grieved she could stay no longer in that place and company.

A young woman that was afflicted at a fearful rate had a spectre appear to her with a white sheet wrapped about it, not visible to the standers by, until this sufferer (violently striving in her fit) snatched at, took hold, and tore off a corner of that sheet. Her father being by her endeavored to lay hold upon it with her that she might retain what she had gotten; but at the passing away of the spectre he had such a violent twitch of his hand as if it would have been torn off. Immediately thereupon appeared in the sufferer's hand the corner of a sheet, a real cloth, visible to the spectators, which (as it is said) remains still to be seen. . . .

A woman being brought upon public examination desired to go to prayer. The magistrates told her they came not there to hear her pray but to examine her in what was alleged against her, relating to suspicions of witchcraft.

It was observed both in times of examination and trial that the accused seemed little affected with what the sufferers underwent or what was charged against them, as being the instruments of Satan therein. So that the spectators were grieved at their unconcernedness. . . .

They were accused by the sufferers to keep days of hellish fasts and thanksgivings and upon one of their fast-days they told a sufferer she must not eat, it was fast-day. She said she would; they told her they would choke her then; which when she did eat was endeavored.

They were also accused to hold and administer diabolical sacraments, viz. a mock-baptism and a devil-supper at which cursed imitations of the sacred institutions of our blessed Lord they used forms of words to be trembled at, in the very rehearsing. . . . At their cursed supper they were said to have red bread and red drink, and when they pressed an afflicted person to eat and drink thereof, she turned away her head and spit at it, and said: "I will not eat, I

will not drink. It is blood. That is not the Bread of Life, that is not the Water of Life, and I will have none of yours." Thus horribly doth Satan endeavor to have his kingdom and administrations to resemble those of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . .

Several of the accused would neither in the time of examination nor trial confess any thing of what was laid to their charge. Some would not admit of any minister to pray with them, others refused to pray for themselves. It was said by some of the confessing-witches that such as have received the Devil-Sacrament can never confess. Only one woman condemned, after the death warrant was signed, freely confessed, which occasioned her reprieve for some time; and it was observable this woman had one lock of hair of a very great length, viz., four foot and seven inches long, by measure. This lock was of a different color from all the rest (which was short and gray). It grew on the hinder part of her head and was matted together like an elf-lock. The court ordered it to be cut off, to which she was very unwilling and said she was told if it were cut off she should die or be sick; yet the court ordered it so to be.

A person who had been frequently transported to and fro by the devils for the space of near two years was struck dumb for about nine months of that time; yet he after that had his speech restored to him and did depose upon oath that in the time while he was dumb he was many times bodily transported to places where the witches were gathered together, and that he there saw feasting and dancing and, being struck on the back or shoulder, was thereby made fast to the place and could only see and hear at a distance. He did take his oath that he did with his bodily eyes see some of the accused at those witch-meetings several times. I was present in court when he gave his testimony. He also proved by sundry persons that at those times of transport he was bodily absent from his abode and could nowhere be found, but being met with by some on the road at a distance from his home, was suddenly conveyed away

from them. . . .

Whilst a godly man was at prayer with a woman afflicted, the daughter of that woman (being a sufferer in the like kind) affirmed that she saw two of the persons accused at prayer to the devil.

It was proved by substantial evidences against one person accused<sup>6</sup> that he had such an unusual strength (though a very little man) that he could hold out a gun with on hand behind the lock, which was near seven foot in the barrel, being as much as a lusty man could command with both hands after the usual manner of shooting. It was also proved that he lifted barrels of meat and barrels of molasses out of a canoe alone; and that putting his fingers into a barrel of molasses, full within a finger's length according to custom, he carried it several paces. And that he put his finger into the muzzle of a gun which was more than five foot in the barrel and lifted up the butt end thereof, lock, stock and all, without any visible help to raise it. It was also testified that being abroad with his wife and his wife's brother, he occasionally stayed behind letting his wife and her brother walk forward; but suddenly coming up with them, he was angry with his wife for what discourse had passed betwixt her and her brother. They wondering how he should know it, he said: "I know your thoughts," at which expression they, being amazed, asked him how he could do that he said: "My God whom I serve makes known your thoughts to me."

I was present when these things were testified against him and observed that he could not make any plea for himself in these things, that had any weight. He had the liberty of challenging his jurors before empanelling according to the statute in that case, and used his liberty in challenging many; yet the jury that were sworn brought him in guilty. . . .

It pleased God for the clearer discovery of those mysteries of the kingdom of darkness so to dispose that several persons, men, women and children, did confess their hellish deeds as followeth.

They confessed against themselves that they were witches; told how long they had been so, and how it came

about that the devil appeared to them, viz., sometimes upon discontent at their mean condition in the world; sometimes about fine clothes; sometimes for the gratifying other carnal and sensual lusts. Satan then, upon his appearing to them, made them fair though false promises that if they would yield to him and sign his book, their desires should be answered to the uttermost, whereupon they signed it; and thus the accursed confederacy was confirmed betwixt them and the prince of darkness.

Some did affirm that there were some hundreds of the society of witches, considerable companies of whom were affirmed to muster in arms by beat of drum. In time of examinations and trials they declared that such a man was wont to call them together from all quarters to witch-meetings with the sound of a diabolical trumpet.

Being brought to see the prisoners at the bar, upon their trials they did affirm in open court (I was then present) that they had oftentimes seen them at witch-meetings, where was feasting, dancing and jollity, as also at devil sacraments; and particularly that they saw such a man—amongst the rest of the cursed crew, and affirmed that he did administer the sacrament of Satan to them, encouraging them to go on in their way and they should certainly prevail. They also said that such a woman—was a deacon and served in distributing the diabolical element. They affirmed that there were great numbers of the witches.

They affirmed that many of those wretched souls had been baptized at Newbury Falls and at several other rivers and ponds; and as to the manner of administration, the great officer of hell took them up by the body and, putting their heads into the water, said over them: "Thou art mine and I have full power over thee;" and thereupon they engaged and covenanted to renounce God, Christ, their sacred baptism and the whole way of Gospel Salvation, and to use their utmost endeavors to oppose the kingdom of Christ, and to set up and advance the kingdom of Satan.

Some after they confessed were very

penitent, and did wring their hands and manifest a distressing sense of what they had done, and were by the mercies of God recovered out of those snares of the kingdom of darkness.

Several have confessed against their own mothers, that they were instruments to bring them into the devil's covenant to the undoing of them body and soul. And some girls of eight or nine years of age did declare that after they were so betrayed by their mothers to the power of Satan they saw the devil go in their own shapes to afflict others. . . .

Some of them confessed that they did afflict the sufferers according to the time and manner they were accused thereof, and being asked what they did to afflict them some said that they pricked pins into puppets made with rags, wax and other materials. One that confessed after the signing the death warrant, said she used to afflict them by clutching and pinching her hands together, and wishing in what part and after what manner she would have them afflicted, and it was done.

They confessed the design was laid by this witchcraft to root out the interest of Christ in New England and that they began at the village, in order to settling the kingdom of darkness and the powers thereof, declaring that such a man—was to be head conjurer, and for his activity in that affair was to be crowned King of Hell<sup>7</sup>, and that such a woman—was to be Queen of Hell.

Thus I have given my reader a brief and true account of those fearful and amazing operations and intrigues of the Prince of Darkness; and I must call them so, for let some persons be as incredulous as they please about the powerful and malicious influence of evil angels upon the minds and bodies of mankind, sure I am, none that observed those things above mentioned could refer them to any other head than the sovereign permission of the Holy God and the malicious operations of His and our implacable Enemy.

## Endnotes

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Hill, Frances. *The Salem Witch Trials Reader*. Da Capo Press, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Aronson, Marc. *Witch-Hunt*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003, pg. 120

<sup>3</sup> Hill. *The Salem Witch Trials Reader*. pg. 195

### "Witchcraft In Salem"

<sup>1</sup> Eilizabeth Parris, daughter of Salem Village minister Samuel Parris.

<sup>2</sup> Possibly Ann Putnam, who claimed an accused witch "stuck her with pins even as (the witch) was being questioned." Aronson. *Witch-Hunt*., pg. 111

<sup>3</sup> Possibly Susannah Sheldon, an accuser "who was bound four times in two weeks by two evil spirits and had to be cut free repeatedly . . ." Aronson. *Witch-Hunt*., pg. 111

<sup>4</sup> Ann Putnam, Sr., mother of Ann Putnam, Jr, who knew of George Burroughs. Aronson, pgs. 115-116

<sup>5</sup> Possibly George Burroughs, alleged killer of Lawson's wife and child and "little black minister who lived at Casco Bay." From a deposition of Benjamin Hutchinson in May 1692. Hill. *The Salem Witch Trials Reader*., pg. 199.

<sup>6</sup> Possibly, again, George Burroughs, who was tried and executed for his part in the happenings.

<sup>7</sup> Again, Lawson is possibly referring to George Burroughs.

### Bibliography

For a massive, well-researched book that covers the entire spectrum of the phenomenon, you can do no better than *The Salem Witch Trials* by Marilynne K. Roach (Lanham, Mass.: Taylor Trade, 2002). This book also contains the most biographical information on Deodat Lawson available.

More of Lawson's Witch Trials accounts are available in his *A Brief and True Narrative*, which offers more actual facts, names and incidents than the somewhat lyrical "Witchcraft In Salem." This pamphlet is still in print and available from several online retailers.

Marc Aronson's *Witch-Hunt* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003) was helpful in giving context to some of Lawson's participants, and is a useful, enlightening read about the myths and mysteries that have cropped up in the wake of history about the Witch Trials.

Frances Hill's *The Salem Witch Trials Reader* (Da Capo Press, 2000) contains actual depositions by several of the participants and is informative when concerning who's who with time specific textual evidence.

Finally Richard B. Trask's *The Devil Has Been Raised: A Documentary History of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak of March 1692* (Danvers, Mass: Yeoman Press, 1997) contains the only known reprint of Lawson's sermon "Christ's Fidelity." Any scholar interested in "Witchcraft In Salem" would love to read this book, but it is out of print, and somewhat unavailable. Trask is Danvers (previously Salem) Mass, town historian, and from the scans, photos and information on his web page <<http://www.mindspring.com/~bookdealers/trask-devil.html>> seems to have access to several historical documents and ephemera.

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