Judge Sewall’s Apology: The Salem Witch Trials and the Forming of a Conscience


Item Type: Book


This is the biography of Samuel Sewall (1652-1730), a colonial American writer, intellectual, judge, and community leader. Its originality lies in the fact that it is the first biography written of this important figure and that it explores both the public and private existence of a puritan intellectual of the period. Its significance is that it sheds light not merely on the assumptions behind the Salem witch trials, but also on the perception of human psychology and the developments of religion and society during this period. The project was supported by AHRC funded research leave and a Writer's Award from Arts Council England. Its rigour lies in the way political, social, religious and personal elements are held in balance. Evidence of its significance lies in the fact that Margaret Drabble chose it as one of her three books of 2005 in the TLS and the fact that it was serialised in abridged form as BBC Radio 4’s Book of the Week (22-26/08/05). It was widely and favourably reviewed. Hilary Spurling in the Telegraph described it as a ‘timely and disturbing book’; David Aaronovitch in The Times referred to it as ‘this marvellous book’.

Divisions: College of Liberal Arts

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The Salem witch trials of 1692 have assumed mythical status. Immortalised by Arthur Miller’s ‘The Crucible’, the witch-hunt is now part of our vocabulary. Yet the actual events have been overshadowed by the myth. Biographer and novelist Richard Francis brings the reality back into focus with the story of Samuel Sewall, New England Puritan, Salem trial judge, publisher, entrepreneur and writer. Sewall's life encompassed the tensions that faced the second generation colonists, caught between the staunch conservatism of the Founding Fathers and the possibilities their new world offered. Biographer and novelist Francis looks at the Salem witch hunt of 1692 with fresh eyes, through the story of Samuel Sewall, New England Puritan, Salem trial judge, anti-slavery agitator, defender of Native American rights, utopian theorist, family man. The second-generation colonists were pitted against the pagan Native Americans and a hostile mother country intent on imposing control. Out of the struggle to maintain unity emerged the forces that drove the Salem tragedy. Five guilt-wracked years after pronouncing judgment, Sewall recanted the guilty verdicts, praying for forgiveness. This marked Judge Sewall’s Apology has 130 ratings and 24 reviews. Pete said: Great read. Enjoyed it more and more as it went on. Based on the rich diary of Samuel S... But the subtitle: "The Salem Witch Trials and the Formation of an American Conscience": is a little bit misleading, since the book isn't interested in Salem and doesn't provide any new insights. (I was very disappointed in Francis for heading straight down the FRAUD interpretation without really much nuance.)