

This file contains pages 24, 26, 82-3 from *Matthew Hopkins: Witch Finder General*, by Richard Deacon, published by Frederick Muller, London, (1976).

Please scroll down to the required page. These are the best copies I was able to make.

Matthew Hopkins: Witch Finder General

neighbour of the farmer, decided to approach Dr Omand. The outcome of all this was that when Dr Omand called on the neighbour, the latter admitted that, following a quarrel with the farmer, he had placed a curse on him. A service of exorcism was carried out and almost immediately afterwards the disease which had been affecting the cattle disappeared.

Dr Omand was dealing in the latter half of the twentieth century with exactly the same type of case upon which Matthew Hopkins would pounce with fiendish glee in the seventeenth century. But then, when a farmer's cattle became sick and the farmer suspected some poor old hag living in a hut in an adjacent field, the Puritans would not have dreamed of sending for an exorcist (to their minds a Papist practice), but would simply have tried and condemned her on the flimsiest evidence. The vital fact to understand about the seventeenth century is that exorcism, which had worked for centuries as a satisfactory antidote to village quarrels and bitter hatreds, to hauntings and cursings, was finally denied to the people. Revenge through witch trials and punishment by death became the reactionary substitute. The Puritans, who prided themselves as modern and radical, had only succeeded in putting the clock back. Worse still, when there was no such evidence as that dealt with by Dr Omand, they invented it and sent innocent people to their doom.

Dr Omand has freely used the words of a service of exorcism which dates back to the Middle Ages: "Deliver this place from all evil spirits, vain imaginations and phantasms, projections and all deceits of the evil one. Bid them harm no one, but depart to the place appointed them, there to remain for ever. Go forth thou deceiver, full of all evil and falsehood, the enemy of virtue, the persecutor of the innocent. Give place thou wicked one; give place thou evil one; give place to Christ."

This brief account of an exorcist's experiences in the present century illustrates better than anything else the eternal element in the struggle between good and evil forces throughout the ages, the perpetuity of the human need to seek to eliminate what they do not understand and the recurring factor in occult happenings. Dr Omand does not believe in individual demons as they did in Elizabethan and the early Stuart period, but he accepts that there is a source of all evil. Or, as he puts it: "that evil can permeate mankind and all creation; can force itself into

Matthew Hopkins: Witch Finder General

This mood became imbued with religious undertones. Surely, people asked, the Black Death was God's instrument for punishing mankind? This feeling was shared by many of the clergy who vented their own sense of pessimism in finding scapegoats among the "thousands of devils which haunted the earth".

Witch-hunting became an hysterical craze which was practised as much by the emerging Calvinists as by the Catholics. Torturing and burning went on all over Europe. Witch jails were specially established, though they were only intended to house the victims from the time of their arrest to the hour of their execution. In one year more than a thousand witches were put to death in the area around Como, while in Toulouse four hundred people were executed in a single day on charges of witchcraft.

Exorcism was also practised and in 1585-1586 the Jesuits conducted a campaign of exorcism in England in an attempt to reconvert the nation to Catholicism. Up to the time of the Reformation an unbaptized child was supposed to be under the influence of an evil spirit and the Prayer Book of 1549 ordered the priest to bid the unclean spirit to come forth before he baptized a child. But it was not only the Catholics who practised exorcism in those days. It is recorded that in 1586 John Darrel, a Puritan priest, exorcized an evil spirit from Katherine Wright. Inquiries revealed that Darrel had exorcised a number of young people after having coached them in feigning symptoms of being possessed by the devil. In all cases these people were neurotic and hysterical and thus easily exploited. The Puritan priest's mischief was elicited by cross-examination at the trial of a witch named Margaret Roper. The magistrate ordered her to be released and threatened Darrel with imprisonment if he did not mend his ways.²

Gradually during Gloriana's reign England began to be affected with the hysteria which had surrounded witchcraft on the continent. Darrel, unshaken by the threat to have him imprisoned, continued with his nefarious exploitation of the feeble-minded and swore that he would "expose all the witches in England". He instigated witch trials in various places—Derbyshire, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire. Eventually his opponents caught up with him, obtaining admissions by some of Darrel's victims that they had been ordered to pretend to be bewitched. Samuel Harsnett, then chaplain to the Bishop of London, compiled a book entitled *A Discoverie of the Fraudulent*

Matthew Hopkins: Witch Finder General

her that night by taking her by the hand and leading her about the chamber, promising to be a loving husband until her death, and to avenge her of her enemies. She promised to be his obedient wife and to deny God and Jesus Christ. Having sent the Devil to kill the son of Thomas Hart, which he did within a fortnight, she took him for her God, and thought she could do as God."⁸

In Elizabeth Clarke's actual confession she admitted she had had "carnal copulation with the Devil six or seven years" and that he would appear to her three or four times a week at her bedside and lie with her half a night "in the shape of a proper gentleman, with a laced band, having the proportion of a man, and he would say, 'Bessie, I must lie with you.' And she never did deny him."

This was the "confession" of a one-legged octogenarian, let it be remembered, all carefully supported by evidence of other witnesses. It should be noted how carefully the Devil ritual described in the "confession" tallies with that laid down or described in most witchcraft trials of the era. It was important in bringing cases to trial that the evidence of contact with the Devil did not deviate from known practice, or historical testimony established over the ages. The prosecution had to show that the Devil was not some nocturnal prowler in quest of seduction, which, one suspects, was often the case. How many people blamed the Devil to cover up the fact that they had been seduced? Hence the statement that he was "as cold as clay".

Dr Margaret Murray, having studied a number of case histories of women who had copulated with the Devil, was impressed by the fact that they invariably reported afterwards that "the Devil was cold and his seed likewise". Her findings were not based on hearsay, but on written contemporary narratives of such happenings, often the evidence at witch trials. But it should be stressed that these reports were mainly of the sixteenth century or earlier. Possibly these reports had filtered through to England during the seventeenth century and Hopkins had read of them and borrowed some of this century-old evidence. The story was exactly the same whether told in England, Scotland, France or other parts of Europe. A Belgian witch in 1565 declared that the Devil "*était froid dans tous ses membres*". Isobel Gowdie, the Scottish witch, declared at her trial in 1662 that the Devil was "meikle blak roch man, werie cold".⁹ Sylvie de la Plaine in 1616

Compiling the "Devil's List"

confessed that the Devil's penis was "like that of a horse, and, in penetrating, it is cold as ice, and his semen likewise cold".¹⁰

Dr Murray's theory was that such testimony could not simply be attributed to hallucinations because it came from young girls, teenage girls, young women, widows, wives and old women alike. She believed that the explanation was that the Devil, or whoever was nominated to perform such witchcraft rites, had so many acts of copulation to perform within a short period that he relied upon an artificial phallus to carry out his operations. In true witchcraft activities the Devil not only disguised himself with a mask and horns, but sometimes operated from behind a screen or from within the hollow of a tree, placing his victim with her back to him and head averted. The possibility was that the artificial phallus was used to squirt water or some glutinous substance into the vagina to make for greater realism. As such ceremonies were performed in the open air and at night, the sense and feeling of coldness was understandable.

Such carefully contrived black magic rites were, however, relatively unknown in England, and it is not suggested that this was what happened in the case of Rebecca West. But there are two points to be borne in mind. First, she would be likely to have heard the story of the Devil's penis being cold: it would be quite easy, once she had been broken down to confessing, to make such an admission. Secondly, Hopkins would know all the lore about witchcraft, including continental rites, and therefore it would be important for him to extract an admission which would be further proof of the presence of the Devil. What better than that he was "cold as clay"?

There is another explanation for this "confession" by Elizabeth Clarke: that she was the victim of an *agent provocateur*. In other words, Hopkins could have paid an agent to pose as the Devil to Elizabeth Clarke in the middle of the night. Being old, she would be confused as to what was happening and not have the strength to do anything about it. In her evidence she may have nurtured a secret pride in the fact that an ugly old crone like herself had actually been favoured by the presence of a man. However, this "explanation" belongs more properly to a later chapter, as it is certainly not proven as far as Elizabeth Clarke was concerned, though it may well have been the case with other of Hopkins' victims.

In many of the prosecutions he initiated Hopkins concentrated