

Book Reviews

Tony Fels, *Switching Sides: How a Generation of Historians Lost Sympathy for the Victims of the Salem Witch Hunt*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018. Pp. 262. \$29.95

Many year ago, as a graduate student, I remember reading David Hackett Fisher's *Historians Fallacies: Towards a Logic of Historical Thought* (1970). My fellow students and I were amazed and terrified by the book – amazed at the numerous flaws Fisher was able to detect in the work of major scholars, and terrified that we might sometime be subject to a similar dissection of our work. Those feelings came back to me as I read Tony Fels's *Switching Sides*. This is a study of how the "Salem witch hunt" (as Fels prefers to call it), has been interpreted by students of the subject from Marion Starkey's 1949 *The Devil in Massachusetts* to the present day. Fels closely investigates what he considers the most influential studies of recent decades – Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (1974); John Putman Demos's *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (1982); Carol F. Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (1987), and Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (2002). In the process he offers a detailed analysis of their methodology and use of sources that uncovers flaws and raises important questions about certain aspects of those works. As with Fisher's work, there is much to learn from Fels' in-depth exploration of these books both in the text and in the extensive annotation. It is an important work for anyone teaching historiography and/or Salem witchcraft.

While the detailed dissection of the works examined by Fels are insightful, his own broad interpretation of the historians and their approaches are themselves questionable. Subjecting this work to the same close analysis that he employs leads to several issues. The title, *Switching Sides*, conveys his belief that

the authors of these books have neglected and in some respects dismissed the sufferings of those tried, convicted, and executed of witchcraft. But to focus attention on the factors which led to those individuals being identified and accused does not mean that one lacks sympathy for the victims. While it is true that Chadwick Hansen (*Witchcraft at Salem* [1969]) suggested that some of the accused might have actually been guilty of seeking to call down harm on others, this view has been an outlier among scholars and not something endured by the four authors whom Fels focuses on. While reading the works of Boyer and Nissenbaum, Demos, Karlsen, and Norton, I never felt that the authors lacked sympathy for the victims.

Fels categorizes the approach of the historians he focuses on as part of a “New Left” perspective. He refers to “a New Left era in Salem scholarship.” But I fail to see the sharply politicized perspectives found in the works of scholars who embraced that label such as Howard Zinn and Jesse Lemisch. If by “New Left” merely he means a desire to pay attention to groups in the past who had long been neglected – groups such as women, blacks, and Native Americans – most historians would see this as a salutary development. Fels does give them credit for some of their insights, but the thrust of his categorization is to tar them as extremists, which few would agree with. The labeling distracts from the methodological critique he offers rather than enhancing it.

In the introduction Fels bemoans that recent scholarship on Salem has neglected the religious dimension. I would concur with this, but while recognizing that the author is more focused on critiquing existing scholarship than offering a well-reasoned interpretation of his own, I am not impressed by the references to religion that he does make. He throws out phrases such as “the hyper-strenuous religious ideology of Puritanism,” (125) and “Puritanism and its propensity for intolerance” (131) which suggests little awareness of the extensive reevaluation of the

nature of Puritanism that is suggested in but not limited to works on English Puritanism by Patrick Collinson and Petr Lake, and on American Puritanism by Michael Winship. And he does not look at the works on witchcraft by Puritan writers such as William Perkins and John Winthrop's kinsman John Cotta. His analysis would be enhanced by more exploration of what such writers meant by possession and affliction, a critical difference in how the events of 1692 unfolded. This being said, an open-minded reevaluation of the role of religion would be welcome.

This is a book that will stir controversy. But it is also a book that will be a useful tool in introducing students to how history is studied and written.

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Joshua B. Freeman. *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018. Pp. 427. \$27.95.

Joshua Freeman's *Behemoth* is an insightful introductory text for anyone interested in learning more about what he calls "industrial gigantism" and the influence of large factories across the globe since the Industrial Revolution. It is a surprisingly simple summation of 300 years of history spanning three continents that leaves the reader amazed at the enormity of the size and scope of these institutions. From the mills in eighteenth-century England up through the modern giants in Asia, Freeman spends 300 pages illuminating the connection between these wonders and the human spirit, making it clear that what began as an enlarging force now sadly appears to exist only in a diminishing capacity. In this regard, Freeman's book reads almost like a tragedy of human ingenuity, an elegy for a once-great idea now turned on its head without hope for renewal. As he poignantly states in one of the final chapters, "The giant factory no longer represents a vision of