

New acquisition: Witchcraft : a history in thirteen trials

Friday, October 25, 2024 by Danielle Robichaud

With fall's spooky timeline in full swing, Special Collections & Archives (SCA) is here for you when it comes to seasonally appropriate reads and research support. Bringing a readable, scholarly lens to a long-standing and poorly understood social phenomenon, Marion Gibson's [*Witchcraft : a history in thirteen trials*](#) [BF1566 .G487 2024] delves into the historical and contemporary dimensions of witch trials.

Positioning witch trials against a backdrop of misogyny and the study of demonology by religious officials, Gibson offers thirteen case studies through which to examine the trials. She argues that moral panic(s) rooted in sexism, xenophobia and other exclusionary inclinations are often driving forces behind the persecution of 'witches' whether said witches are self-proclaimed or an identity imposed by others.

Understanding witch trials with help from archival collections

Although witchcraft and witch trials don't have an immediately obvious relationship with SCA, a closer look at Gibson's case studies points to opportunities for contextualizing her arguments through archival research:

English-born Joan Wright was the first to be accused of witchcraft in what is today the United States of America. According to her persecutors the proof of her guilt was, in part, rooted in her work as a healer and mid-wife, or put another way: an inclination toward independence and community care. SCA's [Women's Studies](#) holdings offer a wealth of records about women who forged their own paths and dared toil in the keeping of family recipes, the practice of handicraft, and the collection of pressed flowers and herbs.



A black cat pawing at snow outdoors from the Maines Pincock family fonds [GA64-219_006].

Scottish medium Nellie Duncan was the last person to be sentenced and jailed under England's Witchcraft Act. Prosecuted after being found to be producing fake ectoplasm, Duncan solicited payment from grieving individuals by offering seances during which she claimed to communicate with the spirits of the deceased. Mediumship and seances are both documented in SCA's [Spiritualism](#) collections. Combined these holdings offer first-hand accounts of what a seances is like, as well as insight into the why and how of seeking to commune with the dead and the lives of those who gained financially while purportedly helping people to do so.

Finally, several of Gibson's case studies examine how colonial settlement and missionary work has led to the demonization and persecution of those whose lives exists outside the norms of those in power. Examples highlighted by Gibson include the persecution of a Sami woman in the 1620s, the demonization of powwows in Pennsylvania, and the on-going and violent legacy of Christian teachings in certain African countries. SCA houses records that reflect multiple perspectives on colonialism from the records of missionary workers, like the recently acquired [Photograph album of Canadian and British missionaries in India](#) [GA 505], and a growing collection of contemporary [periodicals](#) and [zines](#) focused on and produced by

equity seeking communities who both re-claiming and celebrating cultural practices demonized and lost during colonization.

Check out the Archives Database to learn more about SCA's holdings and [contact us](#) to check out anything you find in person.