Der Justizmord an Anna Göldi: Neue Recherchen zum letzten Hexenprozess in Europa (review)

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Abstract
The story of "Europe's last witch" is dramatic. In 1781 in the Swiss canton of Glarus the young daughter of a high-ranking citizen began to suffer pains and fits, caused, so it was claimed, by pins and needles magically placed in her milk and bread. The middle-aged maidservant of the family was accused and terminated from her position. She fled, but the child continued to suffer and warrants were issued for the maid's arrest. She was returned to Glarus, accused of being in league with Satan, put on trial, and tortured. Authorities enjoined her to perform magical healing rites, which supposedly cured the child, but this only further incriminated her. She was beheaded on June 13, 1782. Almost immediately, journalists in Germany picked up the story, decrying Glarus for its backwardness in executing a woman for witchcraft in a time of Enlightenment. In actuality, the term "witch" was never officially used in the case, but certainly the process against Anna Göldi followed the form of a witch trial.

Disciplines
European History | History of Religion | Oral History | Social History

Comments

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Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 6, Number 1, Summer 2011, pp. 95-96 (Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: 10.1353/mrw.2011.0005

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to see the wood in Buch’s enchanted trees. To be fair, however, no one has yet grappled with so great an amount of material in so voluminous a way. If magic operas arouse your intellectual curiosity, this is a place to start.

TIM CARTER
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The story of “Europe’s last witch” is dramatic. In 1781 in the Swiss canton of Glarus the young daughter of a high-ranking citizen began to suffer pains and fits, caused, so it was claimed, by pins and needles magically placed in her milk and bread. The middle-aged maidservant of the family was accused and terminated from her position. She fled, but the child continued to suffer and warrants were issued for the maid’s arrest. She was returned to Glarus, accused of being in league with Satan, put on trial, and tortured. Authorities enjoined her to perform magical healing rites, which supposedly cured the child, but this only further incriminated her. She was beheaded on June 13, 1782. Almost immediately, journalists in Germany picked up the story, decrying Glarus for its backwardness in executing a woman for witchcraft in a time of Enlightenment. In actuality, the term “witch” was never officially used in the case, but certainly the process against Anna Göldi followed the form of a witch trial.

The Göldi case is well known to historians of European witchcraft. The original research supporting the “new inquiry” promised by this book is actually slight. Hauser, a lawyer and journalist who is native to Glarus, discovered certain letters and a notebook belonging to Heinrich Ludewig Lehmann, one of the two German journalists who initially criticized the execution. These contain some information pertaining to the trial and the persons involved in it, but nothing that it terribly revelatory. Nevertheless, Hauser’s book is mostly solid. This is not intensely documented scholarship, but a good popular history of the Göldi case. The bulk of the book is a straightforward narrative of the accusation, arrest, and trial, surrounded by background biographical information on Göldi, her employer Johann Jakob Tschudi, other key figures in the case, the two critical journalists and others who opposed the trial, and more general digressions into the state of Europe in the late eighteenth century. For scholars familiar with the historical lay of
the land, this will be a quick read that brings little new to light. For others, it will be a good story well told.

In terms of historical analysis, Hauser develops two main points, although neither so thoroughly as to overshadow the narrative. In terms of the accusation itself, he suspects that Tschudi had an affair with Göldi, and possibly got her pregnant (both Tschudi and Göldi denied this). He therefore suspects that Tschudi accused Göldi of witchcraft before she could accuse him of sexual impropriety and destroy his reputation and place in the community. This is no more than speculation. From this, Hauser builds a larger point that Glarus, and European society as a whole in the eighteenth century, was undemocratic and dominated by small elites. The authorities in Glarus banded together against Göldi because they were a tightly unified group (the powerful town minister was also a Tschudi) that had a vested interest in preserving their status and privilege. Hauser closes the book with a broadbrush depiction of the Enlightenment challenging old elites and bringing a new age to Europe.

As historical analysis goes, this is hardly deep but is relatively harmless stuff, and may even be a fairly good interpretation of the Göldi affair. It neglects, in its depiction of wickedly conniving elites, the fact that many European witch trials were driven bottom-up, arising from accusations made by “common folk” against their neighbors and often opposed by skeptical elites. It also misses an opportunity to complexify the position of magical beliefs and superstition in the Enlightenment, as recent research has begun to do. But one would hardly expect cutting-edge analysis from a popular history. For what it is, this book is well done. Aside from writing about her, the author also sought to rehabilitate Anna Göldi, petitioning to have her conviction revoked as unjust. The short concluding chapter complains that, as of early 2007, the Glarus government had refused to issue any kind of official statement. Readers can be comforted, however, that the national Swiss parliament did officially rehabilitate Anna Göldi in September 2007—so there is a bit of a happy ending to the sad story of Europe’s last legal witch trial.

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Jill Galvan’s new monograph, The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, is a well-paced and fascinating