

Johan Otten, *Duivelskwartier: 1595. Heksen, heren en de dood in het vuur* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2015, 438 pp., ISBN 978 90 6004 244 7).

What is perhaps most striking about the witch-hunt that engulfed Peelland, a territory in the north-east of the Duchy of Brabant in 1595, is how ‘ordinary’ it was. Ordinary is a word I use advisedly. The witch-hunt of Peelland was ordinary not because witch-hunts were a regular occurrence there as they were in parts of Germany. It also was not ordinary in the strict sense of the word; Johan Otten’s gripping account is filled with pathos and suspense. One cannot help but feel for the twenty-three tormented women – and the casualties were all women – who died horrible deaths. The witch-hunt was ‘ordinary’ only in the sense that it shares striking similarities with large-scale witch-hunts elsewhere.

For starters, the witch-hunt began, as quite a number did, with an attention-seeking child. Twelve-year old Heylken Brycken sought to impress her playmates with knowledge of a spell that her mother had taught her and which could be used to harm and kill men and livestock. Her mother Margriet had already been suspected of witchcraft. When a neighbour denied Margriet the use of a plot of land, she uttered a vague ‘You’ll-regret-this’ (‘Daar ga je spijt van krijgen’) threat which the neighbour well-remembered when he fell ill. It offers an almost textbook altercation that conforms to the famous charity-refusal model set out by Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane in the 1970s. Margriet seems to have confessed, in part, in a vain attempt to exculpate her daughter, repeatedly telling anyone who would listen that Heyken wasn’t capable of witchcraft, while her daughter stubbornly insisted that she was grown-up enough to be a threatening witch.

The witches’ confessions, too, were strikingly normal. The accused, in common with witches across the continent, reported that the devil’s semen was cold, but they offered little detail about the witches’ sabbath. No unbaptised children were apparently eaten there. Some of the accused even went to the sabbath on foot. As the witch-hunt spread from village to village it – equally predictably – changed character. The original accusations in the village of Cranendonck, against Margriet and others, were sustained by the suspicions and denunciations of their neighbours. Yet once torture was employed it was the mention of accomplices that fuelled further persecutions. The nearby Lord of Mierlo and Lierop, Erasmus van Grevenbroeck, seized his chance. He had long suspected the local pastor’s maid (and possibly the priest himself as well) of being responsible for his chronic joint pain. Five

women were executed on 18 September. Not satisfied, Van Grevenbroeck managed to interrogate, torture, and dispatch a further ten, all within a single week. Particularly shocking is the case of ninety-year-old Griet Mijnsheren. Senile and confused, she was unable to confess. Whereas the others had been strangled first, she was burnt alive on account of her 'obstinacy'.

These gross judicial irregularities do conform to another general rule; the fact that large-scale witch-hunts almost inevitably happen in the absence of oversight from central authorities. The stronger the state, historians have learnt, the fewer hunts take place. The Council of Brabant belatedly intervened and banned the swimming of witches (which had been used to gain evidence in the later trials) as a superstitious practice. A councillor was dispatched to investigate and even interrogate the trigger-happy local authorities. Documents from this investigation yield rich and unusual insights into these trials. Normally the witchcraft historian has to make do with the trial records, which inevitably are biased towards the interrogators and end with a sentence. The Brussels inquiry spoke not only with the officials involved but also with survivors and relatives of those executed. Otten uses these documents skilfully and judiciously to reveal dimensions that would have otherwise been hidden from view, such as the irregularities that led to a confused nonagenarian being burnt alive.

Otten offers a compelling and convincing narrative of this tragedy. His account is remarkably clear – no small feat given the expansive cast of characters involved – as well as even-handed. This book is not a persecution of Van Grevenbroeck and his (thankfully less successful) colleague Bernard van Merode, Lord of Asten. Whatever hidden motives these men may have held, this witch-hunt was no money-spinning venture. (Still, one cannot but feel sad that these men died peacefully in their beds.) Finally, if the witch-hunt of 1595 was 'ordinary', then that also suggests that it gives insights into wider patterns of witch-hunting, and as such, it may have something to teach historians of other parts of Europe as well. An English translation would be an excellent idea.

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