

Principal Characters

Hugh Parsons, *a turbulent English brickmaker and jack-of-all-trades, in his thirties.*

Mary Parsons (formerly Lewis), *a maidservant from Wales, Hugh's wife (m. 1645).*

Hannah (b. 1646), Samuel (b. 1648) and Joshua Parsons (b. 1650), *their children.*

William Pynchon, *founder of Springfield, fur trader, magistrate and amateur theologian.*

Anne Smith, *Pynchon's daughter, mother of many daughters, confidante to Mary Parsons.*

Henry Smith, *her husband (and Pynchon's stepson), town clerk and sometime deputy magistrate.*

Margaret (b. 1646) and Sarah (b. 1647), *the Smiths' daughters, who perished in June 1648.*

George Moxon, *minister, whose daughters Martha and Rebecca were possessed or bewitched.*

Thomas Merrick, *a Welshman, town constable.*

Sarah Merrick, *Thomas's wife, implicated as a witch.*

Mercy Marshfield, *a widow of dubious reputation, who fled Windsor to resettle in Springfield.*

Sarah Miller, *wife of unlucky sawyer Thomas Miller and Widow Marshfield's daughter, who suffered fits and saw terrifying apparitions.*

John Stebbins, *whose wife Anne also had fits, and on whose homelot the witches met in secret.*

Mary Bliss Parsons (no relation), *who was troubled by spirits and roamed the meadow at night.*

Anthony Dorchester, *a poor, ambitious man and his ailing wife Sarah, Hugh Parsons's lodgers.*

Principal Characters

John Lombard, *a herdsman from Somerset, the Parsonsese' next-door neighbour, whose borrowed trowel mysteriously vanished.*

Blanche Bedortha, *a Welsh housewife, married to Reece, a carter, terrified of Hugh during her pregnancy.*

Pentecost Matthews, *also Welsh, wife of John, and first to notice Mary's witch obsession.*

William Branch, *the town barber, who was disturbed in the night and fell strangely lame.*

Griffith Jones, *a Welsh tanner, tricked at home by witchery.*

Thomas Cooper, *a Warwickshire carpenter, who heard Mary Parsons's shocking confession.*

George Colton, *William Pynchon's quartermaster, a principal witness against Hugh Parsons.*

Benjamin Cooley, *a weaver, Colton's brother-in-law, next-door neighbour to the Bedorthas.*

George and Hannah Langton, *who were convinced their steamed meat pudding was bewitched.*

Simon Beamon, *cobbler and servant to William Pynchon, prey to Hugh Parsons's impatience.*

Alexander Edwards, *who had known Mary in Wales, and whose cow gave abnormal milk.*

Jonathan Taylor, *a young married labourer, menaced in his bed by demonic serpents.*

Introduction

This is a true story about witchcraft in mid-seventeenth-century New England. At this time none of its colonies – New Hampshire, Plymouth, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut, sited along America’s east coast – was over thirty years old. Each was still finding its way in a new world. Unlike the icy shores of Newfoundland and Maine or the tropics of Virginia and the Caribbean, New England resembled the old, with hills and plains, forests and rivers. For much of the year the climate was mild – well suited to English bodies, colonists felt. Farmsteads produced cattle and corn. There were busy ports at Boston and Salem, and trade flourished. Yet life was fraught with peril. Settlers were far from home, assailed by sharp winters and sweltering summers and hemmed in by wilderness. By day a labourer could pretend he was still tending wheat in Kent or herding sheep in Wiltshire; but the illusion was easily dispelled, especially after sunset. Old World folktales where travellers were stalked by evil became reality, trapping colonists in nightmares of echoing isolation and heart-thumping panic. In these moments, New England, for all its hopeful beginnings, meant only the skin-prickle of being watched, the twisting grip of a curse and the terrors of the dark.

The setting for this story is a remote community in Massachusetts, a hundred miles west of Boston, named Springfield. There, on the border between what they saw as civility and barbarism, Springfield’s pioneers laboured to cultivate both land and a new way of living together, only too aware of how closely their fragile world was overseen by God and existed at his mercy. They contended with waves of epidemics, severe flooding and constant tension with the Native Americans they called ‘Indians’, whose possessions they appropriated. They also clashed with Dutch traders into whose territory they strayed, and with English planters further down the

Connecticut River valley. Mostly, however, they clashed with their own neighbours, competing furiously for material advantage: farmland, livestock, wealth and power. Whenever this fury subsided, consciences were apt to be pricked, guilt bubbling up in private thoughts, and in dreams where colonists saw their own self-serving desires wrestling with those of their enemies. But still they didn't yield; nor did they show remorse. Instead, conflicting emotions were batted away, projected onto a diabolic 'other' – onto witches – and thus assuaged.

Springfield's disquiet settled with lethal ferocity on a labouring couple, Hugh and Mary Parsons, whose ailing marriage epitomized deeper currents of animosity in the town. He was moody, taciturn, avaricious; she depressive and delusional, perhaps suffering from paranoid schizophrenia or postpartum psychosis. Years of quarrelling, gossiping and bitten-back suspicions among neighbours – suspicions festering even between husband and wife – accumulated until a tipping point was reached in the winter of 1650–51. Springfield's community could no longer bear the presence of witches. For the Parsons family the outcome was catastrophic.

All but forgotten now, the troubled lives of Hugh and Mary, interlaced with that of Springfield's overlord William Pynchon, were shaped by and reflect an age of upheaval and transformation. Only rarely do historians find such a fine-grained microcosm of change, a grand narrative told through the ordinary courses of daily life. For the birth of Springfield, like the colonization of America as a whole, belonged to an age of transition between medieval and modern ways of seeing the world: magic shading into science, tradition displaced by innovation, communities eroded by a more strident individualism. Ancient wisdom about everything from planetary motion to human physiology was being questioned, and new technologies deployed, notably in the production of print. Even humble people learned to read and became consumers of cheap spiritual and sensational literature. Commonplaces about the relationship between God and man were picked apart, and new religious orthodoxies were enforced by nation

states using the law as a formidable instrument of government. Nations strove for global pre-eminence, searching the oceans for commodities and land.

For all that, the birth pangs of this new order were both intense and protracted. Hardship, bloodshed and persecution blighted the whole century, and change was hesitant, often subtle. Lives adhered to the rhythms of the past, and the same old beliefs, with little sense of the underlying alteration of the world. Even colonists, once settled, swapped the drama of migration for routine: felling trees, pushing ploughs, making homes, feeding children.

Most characters in this book were low-born migrants from England and Wales. By the 1630s the British Isles were drifting into political crisis, due mainly to Charles I's absolutist 'personal rule', which in the following decade erupted into rebellion and civil war. Enmity between crown and parliament over how the nation should be governed, and by whom, divided families and communities. Conflict was fuelled by economic strife. England's population had doubled in a century, causing widespread poverty, hunger and dependence on charity. Young men struggled to set up their own households, and tenants were evicted to make estates more profitable in an era of soaring inflation. Crime and vagrancy escalated, and hungry people rioted; hundreds went to the gallows. Communities tried to help their poor, but families who themselves were hard up did so grudgingly. Sermons from the pulpit and ballads sung in alehouses lamented the passing of happier times.

Religion, too, was a source of bitter conflict. During the long ordeal of Europe's Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformations, every point of doctrine was debated – and no longer just by academic churchmen, but by ordinary people, for whom finding the true road to salvation was a matter of eternal life or death. Sacred devotions, furthermore, had become a touchstone for secular allegiance: to a suspicious political establishment freethinking meant sedition, dissent was construed as treason. Passions raged as reformers smashed 'idolatrous' art, and Catholic and Protestants alike burned 'heretical' books. In Britain, Charles I was detested not just as a tyrant but also

for restoring ornamentation to parish churches, whose interiors, like the liturgy, had been simplified in the first wave of the Reformation. Protestant idealists, derided by their enemies as ‘puritans’, who already craved a further cleansing of religion, were horrified by what they saw as Catholic backsliding and set their faces against Charles’s regime. Conversely, the crown censured puritan ministers for neglecting official ceremonies (which these ministers saw as superstitious, idolatrous even), and for preaching that the one true law was the word of God, Christ the one perfect monarch. For the duration of earthly life, though, the authority of kings and bishops prevailed. Puritans were gaoled or put to death. But there was one alternative left to them: to flee to the tolerant haven of New England, there to build a new life ordered by their faith.

Land in England was scarce. Across the Atlantic, however, it was there for the taking, and might enrich the English state and reduce the burden of relieving the poor if labouring families were settled there. This prospect attracted paupers desperate to raise a family and puritans craving freedom of conscience alike. In the seventeenth century 350,000 Britons sailed to America, 25,000 of them to New England, mainly in the 1630s during the ‘great migration’ to Massachusetts Bay. The prize was both glittering and attainable, and emigrants felt as if they were acting out a fantasy of prosperity and fulfilment. Many, too, were motivated by sheer desire rather than desperation and gambled comfortable lives in the old country for self-advancement in the new. The risks were huge. Some dreams came true; others perished on rocky shores and barren soils. Thousands of migrants slunk home: either because they had failed or to fight in the civil war between royalists and parliamentarians, which broke out in 1642 and would lead, momentarily, to the first and only republic in England’s history – and a brief feeling among puritans that they had prevailed against the forces of Antichrist. More stayed in America, measuring out their days in contentment or despair.

Life in New England was dominated by piety and toil. It was an existence colonists stoically accepted; they had, after all, gone there to carve out new lives. Beneath the surface of most settlements,

however, coursed dark currents of wrath. The mid-1630s were mired in controversy, as the intransigence of godly magistrates and ministers widened sectarian fault lines in puritanism that had existed long before anyone went to America. A shared commitment to bring change to the established Church of England, whose head was the English king, had never been enough to unite puritans. The question was what to change and how, and on these points there could be no agreement. Separatists and Independents cut ties with the English church, favouring self-governing congregations; Presbyterians preferred a national puritan church. And there were many shades of opinion besides – dizzying, fraught and, in the end, irreconcilable. Before the Reformation, religion had been a Catholic monopoly; now it was a free market, swarming with different Protestant interpretations – including of the Holy Trinity, and the identity of God and Christ – which governments on both sides of the Atlantic refused to tolerate.

In New England, challenges to religious orthodoxy were also challenges to political authority, and nobody was more sensitive to such defiance than Boston's governors: in their rhetoric and law, religious dissenters were defined as devilish heretics. The government in London, however, upon hearing of this ferment, cared only that a colonial scion was pulling away from its stock. The puritans' vision of New England as a 'city on a hill' was supposed to be an exemplar for the English church to which – in theory – they still belonged. Yet by 1640, if not earlier, Massachusetts Bay Colony was behaving like a free state, imposing its own orthodoxy on colonists, many of whom were either not puritans or, at the other end of the spectrum, held views more extreme than their governors. Old England tried to assert its control over the New – but it was 3,000 miles away across the Atlantic and animated by a fierce independent spirit that was difficult, ultimately impossible, to suppress.

In New England's communities, as between continents, there was no end of strife. Nor was religion the only bone of contention. Yearning to improve themselves in the New World, ambitious settlers locked horns and made gains in the acquisition of estates and

property at each other's expense. Puritan idealists who had predicted that charity between neighbours, which was waning in England, would be revived in America were proved wrong. Local quarrels were to an extent contained by litigation and arbitration but could also burst into violent rage. Passions were thought to emanate from without and within, volatile souls inflamed by heavenly or demonic forces. And at the crossroads of the human and the cosmic, at the core of local society, lurked the mundane evil of the witch.

Witchcraft was not some wild superstition but a serious expression of disorder embedded in politics, religion and law. Witches were believed to invert every cherished ideal, from obeying one's superiors to familial love. They were traitors and murderers, bad subjects and neighbours, delighting in spite and mayhem. Like other horror crimes, such as sodomy and infanticide, witchcraft represented the polar opposite of goodness and godliness, especially when, as in the mid-seventeenth century, such virtues felt gravely threatened. Although there had been witch-hunts in medieval Europe, and the belief in diabolism endured after the last execution in the eighteenth century, the so-called 'witch craze' occurred mainly between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, when every aspect of political, religious and economic existence was in turmoil throughout the Western world. Witches were tangible symbols of this chaos. Every witchcraft accusation, from muttered suspicions through to the theatrics of the courtroom, was driven by the malice imputed to witches and the zeal of accusers to annihilate them. Yet the need to be rid of witches, however pressing, was frustrated by doubts about legal evidence: could witness testimony be relied upon to put a suspect to death for such a secret misdeed, shrouded in hellish darkness?

The entwined tales of Parsons and Pynchon signify intellectual friction between old and new habits of thought, and political and religious friction within New England as well as between colony and motherland. Should truth depend more on proof than precept, on seeing rather than believing? Such questions, raised in situations where life and death hung in the balance, reveal stirrings of a shift

from an enchanted world towards a world of enlightenment in which demons and spectres vanished in the bright light of reason; and witches and heretics – for heresy is another thread of this story – no longer threatened the temporal dominion of God, the integrity of the state or the common peace.

But this disenchantment wouldn't be complete in their lifetimes; even forty years later, witchcraft still had the power to divide and wound communities in New England, as it did throughout Europe and the British Isles. For what happened at Springfield was both America's first witch-panic and an overture for Salem, America's last. The infamous witch-trials of 1692 would be similarly rooted not in pre-modern hysteria or the madness of crowds, but in reckless ambition and simple failings of compassion towards others. Whatever the rewards of such conduct, selfish hearts were beset by profound unease. In the precarious frontier town of Springfield, this manifested as anger and aggression, and was experienced by people like Hugh and Mary Parsons, William Pynchon and their neighbours as deadly hostility and terror.

1. *A Voice That Said 'Death'*

Once, beside a great river at the edge of a forest, there stood a small town. Time has erased its every trace, but we can imagine it, quiet and still, settled under a pall of late winter darkness. A man is hurrying home along the main street, to his left a trickling brook and a fathomless bank of trees, to his right a curve of clapboard houses with steep roofs and leaded windows. Down the narrow lanes between homesteads he glimpses the moonlit river, in spate from the thaw. The air is ice-sharp, tinged with smoke and resin, the only sounds the rush of water, the muffled bellows of cattle and the distant cry of a wolf. It feels like the edge of the world, and to those who have settled here it is. Beyond the mountains to the west lie uncharted lands, as mysterious as the heavens, inhabited by people of an unknown, perhaps hostile, disposition.

It is February 1651. The man's name is Jonathan Taylor, and he has had an unsettling day, which is not over yet. Arriving home, Taylor lifts the door latch, treading softly to avoid waking his wife, who is eight months pregnant, and their infant girl beside her. They have lived in the young plantation of Springfield for two years, labouring to make something of themselves in this new land. The family sleeps downstairs in one bed near the glowing hearth, which flickers shadows round the low-ceilinged room. Taylor undresses, slips between the coarse sheets. He closes his eyes. But then he's awake, the room suffused with light. He sits up rigid with fear, sensing movement on the floor. He forces himself to look. Three snakes are slithering towards him. He glances at his wife but doesn't rouse her, afraid the shock will hurt their unborn child. Nor does he want his daughter to see.¹

The smallest snake, black with yellow stripes, slides up the side of the bed. Taylor strikes it off, but it returns. Again he lashes out.

Heart pounding, he shrinks back against the bolster. Daring to raise his head again, he meets the snake's beady eye. With a flick of its jaws, the creature sinks its fangs into Taylor's forehead. The pain is excruciating, but Taylor is too petrified to move. In the deep voice of a man – a voice he recognizes – the snake breathes the word 'death'. Trembling, Taylor splutters that no man ever died from such a bite. Then, the room snaps back to darkness, and the snakes are gone. Taylor's tremors wake his wife. Unable to calm him, she asks if he's cold and whether she should warm his clothes. He replies that he's hot and sick and falls back on the bed, shaking and sweating. All that Thursday night he writhes feverishly, his mind a confusion of images. But in the morning Taylor is clear about one thing. He knows who to blame for his torment: the brickmaker, Hugh Parsons.

Jonathan Taylor is not alone in suspecting Parsons. Two days ago, on Wednesday, the constable arrested Hugh's wife Mary as a witch – the first that Springfield has known. Once, witches were unheard of in New England, but recently a plague of accusations has infected the colony. Back across the Atlantic, Old England has also been scourged by witch-panics, reports of which arrive by letter and word of mouth. Stories that by day are food for gossip, after dark fuel nightmares. Colonists fear God but also the devil and believe that witches can send beast-like demons to hurt them. Such thoughts were always present, but now witchcraft has become real among the settlements of the Connecticut valley, lonely outposts of piety and trade, of which Springfield is the most northerly. Meanwhile, rumours of heresy dog the town's all-powerful governor, William Pynchon. These days, anything seems possible.

Hugh Parsons is a working man in his thirties, who says little but radiates discontent. He left England several years ago, and has spent the last six in Springfield, at odds with the world. After Mary's arrest, he tossed and turned through Wednesday night – worrying for her sake, perhaps, but also for himself. The following morning Hugh came looking for the constable, a Welshman named Thomas Merrick, eager to know what was happening. The constable wasn't

around; Jonathan Taylor, labouring in Merrick's barn, was. Hugh asked Taylor if he knew who had pointed the finger at his wife. Taylor replied tersely that he – Hugh – would know soon enough. Just then Merrick appeared, marching Mary to the house of William Pynchon, who was also Springfield's magistrate, for questioning. Hugh did nothing. Strangely calm, he sat in the barn until dusk, waiting until Taylor had finished, then, as Taylor went up to Merrick's house, followed him. The constable was still not back, but his wife said the two men could help themselves to beer. Taylor went down to the cellar, but the barrel plug was so stiff it hurt to twist it. When Sarah Merrick tried, it came out easily. 'What are you, a witch?' quipped Taylor: a risky joke. Back upstairs, Goody Merrick made light of it all and was sorry about Taylor's sore hand, which she showed to Parsons. He said nothing, convinced that Taylor's joke was on him. The two men then went to their homes, Taylor scarcely imagining what lay ahead that night.

The next day – Friday – Taylor complains of what he described as 'fits' racing through his body. His panicked wife summons their neighbours. What if Jonathan were to die? She has a child of seventeen months and another in the womb. Angry and afraid, the townsfolk go to Pynchon and demand that Hugh Parsons be arrested. After all, others in the community have recently suffered at the hands of witches. Two years ago the town barber was traumatized in bed at night by a fiery apparition of a boy, for which he now blames Parsons.² The saturnine brickmaker is seized and bound with chains. Pynchon investigates, determined to restore peace, yet aware that he, too, is a fountain of dissension. From every corner of the town come disturbing tales and outbursts of anger and anguish. Hugh and Mary Parsons can only wait, thinking about the calamitous last few years and wondering what will become of them.

William Pynchon, the figure who presided over Springfield, was sixty years old. He had travelled far, taken huge risks and weathered storms, metaphorical and real. New England had proved a gruelling ordeal. His wife had died; his boat had been swept away; other

townships had censured him. With courage girded by a strong faith, he had journeyed far into the wilderness to trade with the Indians, standing his ground in tense, halting exchanges. Life was unpredictable, and there were few people he could trust. Pynchon had been stalked by war, hunger and pestilence. But he had never experienced anything like the events of winter 1650–51: strange accidents blamed on the Parsons household, their neighbours swooning and convulsing, eerie sounds and apparitions, and throughout Springfield a pervasive mood of dread.³

Pynchon was head to foot an English country gentleman: austere and determined with a godly passion for rectitude. He was a natural entrepreneur whose gaze took in the entire world, or as much of it as he might reach with a scheme. Calculating yet candid in negotiations, he spoke plainly and never flattered to deceive. He had no need to be loved; God's love was sufficient. To him, as to all migrant puritans, New England meant religious freedom and bringing the gospel to the natives, both of which would come from populating virgin land with hard-working Christians: prosperity and piety were companionable virtues.⁴ Pynchon was also a theologian, steeped in classical wisdom, including restraint of the tongue: he knew when to speak, and then with economy and precision. He lacked the rhetorical discipline of an Oxford or a Cambridge education, which made him self-conscious and cranky, yet also preserved in him a certain independence of thought.⁵ He read prodigiously and took pains with his writing, craving to be understood. Even his letters went through drafts, full of crossings-out and substitutions in his crabbed hand, the lines bunched to save paper.⁶ But Pynchon had never flinched or faltered – yet.

The town he founded fifteen years earlier stood at the furthest western limits of New England, high in the Connecticut valley. Unlike so many other plantations, Springfield had not grown out of a puritan congregation transplanted from England to the American wilderness. It was born of capitalist enterprise, godly yet commercial and confident. Nonetheless, it still comprised fewer than fifty households – a limit set by Pynchon to maintain coherence – on a

plateau two-and-a-half miles by one third. The homelots – house, barn and garden – formed parallel ribbons between the river and the main street. On the opposite bank of the river, to the west, lay planting grounds, and to the east, across the street and ‘hassocky marsh’ – named for its clumps of grass – lay upland woodlots, thick with maple, elm, birch, oak and pine. Every family was thereby provided with food, fuel and shelter. Streams meandered down the hillside, feeding fresh water into a brook beside the main street. At the top of a sharp bluff lay the unmanageable ‘pine barrens’ and, beyond, the long ‘Bay Path’ to Boston, a hundred miles east.⁷ Indians, the people whose land this had been since time immemorial, were employed as messengers and carriers; but mostly their dealings with the English were limited to farming and trade; and watching, as their ancestral homeland was transformed.

The greatest transformation lay in the town’s north end, where the principal inhabitants lived. This was the heart of Springfield’s civic life, centred on a main square. There was no grandeur to it, and it flooded when the marshes were saturated. The only prominent building on the square was the meeting house, forty feet long, faced in clapboard, its gable ends topped with turrets, one for a bell – a recent acquisition – the other a lookout post. All meetings were held there.⁸ From the square, a lane led down to the field where, once a month, Hugh Parsons and his fellow militiamen trained with muskets and arrow-proof corselets. There, too, lay the burying ground, a two-acre plot rapidly filling up, for these were days of raging infection – of smallpox and other diseases. Many children and babies had died: Springfield’s long-standing minister, George Moxon, offered reassurance about salvation and helped the bereaved master their grief.⁹ Besides Moxon, William Pynchon’s staunchest supporter was his stepson Henry Smith, who, as husband to Pynchon’s daughter Anne, was also his son-in-law: this was a close-knit community, in more ways than one. Smith, the town clerk, had signed its founding covenant in 1636; Moxon arrived the following year.¹⁰ Pynchon was also close to his other son-in-law, Elizur Holyoke, whose father was a friend at the port of Lynn, between Boston and Salem. The estates of

these men covered an area ten times the size of the holdings of other townsmen, many of whom rented land, houses, livestock or all three from Pynchon.¹¹ Moxon's house had bedrooms, a study, a south-facing porch, and – a real luxury – carpets. Pynchon's, by contrast, was plain yet spacious and imposing. Together these four neighbours – Pynchon, Holyoke, Smith and Moxon – were the hub of power in Springfield.¹²

Authority devolved to householders, who chose 'selectmen' to regulate highways, bridges, fences and ditches.¹³ In this, they resembled vestrymen in English parishes, a quasi-republican model of governance that Pynchon knew well.¹⁴ But the selectmen also oversaw land distribution, any plantation's most sensitive issue. Springfield abided by the Massachusetts law code, but like many settlements remote from Boston was largely autonomous. Ultimately, this was Pynchon's town, at his command. His main reason for sharing power at all was to avoid the friction between magistrates and freemen endemic in other townships.¹⁵ And Springfield's magistrate was, of course, Pynchon himself. His duties, stipulated by the General Court at Boston, included taking testimonies and hearing suits for slander, debt and breach of contract. He also saw himself as a mediator, a counsellor – a 'commissioner of the peace', as much as a justice of the peace. Pynchon was in everyone's life, like a lord of the manor from the Old World.¹⁶ Even the ties of patronage and clientage were similar. Men like Hugh Parsons sustained the customary illusion of independence, pretending to work for themselves when in fact they all worked for Pynchon. No other hierarchy in New England was quite like this – nor any town so industrious. Few Springfield folk would have admitted it, but burning ambition, made possible by Pynchon's power yet also constrained by it, undermined community and piety. The worst sin, apart from murder or witchcraft, was idleness.¹⁷

From March to September the working day lasted between ten and sixteen hours, 4.30 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. Shadows marked time: at noon a man could step on his own head. Fieldwork was paid at 20d per day in summer, 16d for shorter winter days: twice the rate in England, which had a surfeit of workers. There was no clear division