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The Case of Witchcraft at Coggeshall, Essex in the Year 1699 by Rev. J. Boys, A.R. Smith, 1901 - Reviewed by George Geib

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The Case of Witchcraft at Coggeshall, Essex in the Year 1699

by Rev. J. Boys, A. R. Smith, 1901

Reviewed by George Geib

It's common to see the age of Newton and Locke as an enlightened era. But out there among the public, older and darker thoughts and beliefs continued to exert a powerful hold on the imagination. This remarkable tract, written in 1712 from notes taken contemporary to the events in 1699, details the investigation of the Widow Coman in Coggeshall by her parish minister and by a number of his frightened neighbors. The account is literate, reading almost as if we were there at the interrogations when the widow kept confessing and recanting her communion with the devil. Many of the features that you think were the creations of Gothic literature, from witches teats to trial by drowning -- which the poor woman failed and ultimately died from -- are recounted with a voice of Christian credulity mixed with horror. It's a remarkable episode detailing popular violence and the survival of folk legend in rural England. Transcribed "from the manuscript in the possession of the publisher," only fifty copies were printed. It deserved a wider audience.

- George Geib is a professor of history at Butler University.