Judge Sewall's Apology: The Salem Witch Trials and the Forming of a Conscience


Item Type: Book


This is the biography of Samuel Sewall (1652-1730), a colonial American writer, intellectual, judge, and community leader. Its originality lies in the fact that it is the first biography written of this important figure and that it explores both the public and private existence of a puritan intellectual of the period. Its significance is that it sheds light not merely on the assumptions behind the Salem witch trials, but also on the perception of human psychology and the developments of religion and society during this period. The project was supported by AHRB funded research leave and a Writer's Award from Arts Council England. Its rigour lies in the way political, social, religious and personal elements are held in balance. Evidence of its significance lies in the fact that Margaret Drabble chose it as one of her three books of 2005 in the TLS and the fact that it was serialised in abridged form as BBC Radio 4's Book of the Week (22-26/08/05). It was widely and favourably reviewed. Hilary Spurling in the Telegraph described it as a 'timely and disturbing book'; David Aaronovitch in The Times referred to it as 'this marvellous book'.

Divisions: College of Liberal Arts

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Samuel Sewall (/ˈsuːəl/; March 28, 1652 – January 1, 1730) was a judge, businessman, and printer in the Province of Massachusetts Bay, best known for his involvement in the Salem witch trials, for which he later apologized, and his essay The Selling of Joseph (1700), which criticized slavery. He served for many years as the chief justice of the Massachusetts Superior Court of Judicature, the province's high court. Judge Sewall's Apology is an interesting book, based on extensive research and Sewall's own very detailed diaries. The Salem witch trials of 1692 form a key part of the narrative, but the scope of the book is much broader in its dealing with the "growth of the social infrastructure of colonial New England and the increasing secularization of its culture--with a shift from rural to urban values, in fact, and from traditional, almost medieval, ways of thinking to characteristically modern ones." Judge Samuel Sewall presided at these trials, passing harsh judgment on the condemned. Through this unsung hero of the American conscience -- a Puritan, an antislavery agitator, a defender of Native American rights, and a Utopian theorist -- we are granted a fresh perspective on a familiar drama.