



THE BURNING TIMES

STUDIO D

A FILM DIRECTED BY DONNA READ
PRODUCED BY STUDIO D, NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA



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“The superior learning of witches was recognized in the widely extended belief of their ability to work miracles. The witch was in reality the most profound thinker, the most advanced scientist of those ages. As knowledge has ever been power, the church feared its use in women’s hands and leveled its deadliest blows at her.”

— Matilda Joslyn Gage
Women, Church and State, 1893

THE BURNING TIMES

For several hundred years, their voices have remained shrouded in silence. “They” are the phenomenal number of women called witches, who, between 1350 and 1750, were accused of “pacts with the devil” and burned at the stake.

The effects of “the burning times” are still evident as we approach the 21st century. They are seen in the continuing widespread misogynist attitudes and male violence against women and our environment.

There are many names for the witch. She has been the priestess, the seer or diviner, prophet and wise woman. In Scotland, the original meaning of witch was “friend of man.” For thousands of years, women were the leaders and physicians of their communities. The female elders of early medieval England exercised great political power among the clans. They were respected and revered in the European countryside well into the 18th century.

The Burning Times explores the multidimensional factors that led to the witch persecutions that swept Europe just a few hundred years ago. The film outlines the process of accusations, interrogations and tortures instituted by the Christian Church and the trials and burnings carried out by the State. This turbulent period of history is brought to vivid life through selections from trial records, readings from the witch-hunting manuals written by secular as well as Church authorities, and the art and literature of the time. Interviews with scholars and historians Barbara Roberts, Irving Smith and Theodora Jensen; theologian Matthew Fox; and authors and teachers Starhawk and Margot Adler are featured.

At its height between 1560 and 1650, what has become known as the “witch hunt” spread with Christian missionaries and colonialists into the Americas, Africa and other territories. The death rates are shockingly unclear. The high estimates for Europe alone are that 9,000,000 people, 85% of them women, were killed. With them went a way of life that had endured for thousands of years, that of agrarian populations who revered the female and the earth, and perceived all life as sacred and interconnected.

What emerges as the greatest impetus for the “witch hunt” was the response of the Christian Church to resistance to its authority. As the Church tried to expand into rural areas, it found that most people continued to practice their established religion. They persisted in consulting the local wise woman rather than the priest, the midwife rather than the doctor. They also rebelled at Church and State attempts to seize traditional common land, rebellions which, according to historians Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, were almost always led by women. During “the burning times” these women were accused of heresy, then tortured and burned at the stake. Their persecution was a political ploy by the establishments who feared their power.

This film proposes that what led to the persecution of women as witches was the collision of two utterly different cultures and ways of knowing. On one hand, there were the Church and the State, with their emerging values of profit, power, domination and patriarchal authority. On the other hand were the ancient traditions that honored and revered both women and the earth. With the massive burnings, a matriarchal way of life was destroyed. Women’s control over their own bodies and reproductive systems became the business of men. Positions of religious authority and political power became exclusively male domains. Women were silenced.

JOAN OF ARC

Joan of Arc influenced the political events of her century more than any other woman of her time.

In 1429, at the age of 17, she led the French army to victory over the English at Orleans, near the end of the 100 Years War.

One year later, she was captured and tried, not as a military leader, but as a witch and a heretic. The judges pronounced that her prophetic visions, success in battle and religious beliefs were witchcraft. She was burned alive on May 30, 1431 at the age of 19.

Her legacy of courage and honor has survived history's attempts to discredit the power and influence wielded by women before "the burning times."

HOW MANY WOMEN WERE KILLED DURING THE "WITCH HUNT?"

The high estimates have been computed from 8,000,000 to 9,000,000. They include the people who were lynched rather than burned, the children who died of abandonment and the high numbers who are assumed to have died or committed suicide while in jails. These figures do not include the vast numbers who died in North America, Mexico, South America and Africa.

Researchers agree that 85 percent of those who died in the witch persecutions were women. This period of our history might therefore be called "The Women's Holocaust." The intent was to break down and destroy the political and spiritual influence held by women at that time.

"The killing of witches was the largest mass killing of human beings by other human beings not caused by warfare."

- Historian Gherhard Schorman
Der Spiegel D43 1984

The majority of historians of the witch-burning period rarely admit that such a phenomenon took place. The acceptability of witch burning in Renaissance society is evident by its absence in the writings of such prominent and prolific thinkers as Bacon, Grotius, Selden and Descartes who flourished in the early 17th century, the peak period of the "witch hunt."

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DEFINITIONS

Today, society equates words and language around the Old Religions with negative images. The following are the original meanings of some of these words.

Witch:

"The original word comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *wicbe*, which means to bend or shape. Bend or shape consciousness, and thus to bend or shape events in your life. Essentially, it is the remnants in the West of the old Shamanic traditions — the traditions of developing within yourself altered states of consciousness through meditation and very simple methods like chanting..."

— Starhawk

Hag:

"'Hag' used to mean a woman who had sacred knowledge. Old women used to be revered because they had this ancient knowledge and passed it on to others. So that it was wonderful to be an old woman."

— Thea Jensen

Conical hat:

A symbol of knowledge and representative of the cone of power raised by witches at their sabbats.

Cauldron:

A symbol of the origins of life and the power of women.

Heresy:

Thought or opinion held in opposition to the Catholic or Orthodox doctrine of the Church.

Peasant:

Traditionally defined as one who lives in the country and works on the land. The peasant class of "the burning times" can be compared to today's working and poor working class.

Pagan:

From the Latin *pagani*, it also meant country dweller. They were the rural people who clung to the Old Religions even after Christianity was well established in cities and among the ruling classes.

Heathen:

From the Germanic word *beiden*, "that which is hidden." When the Christian Church forbade the ancient rites of the Old Religion, the pagans continued to practice their ceremonies in secret.

Hallowe'en:

The last purely pagan festival we still celebrate. It was called Samhain (pronounced Sawen) in the Celtic language — the night of the year when the veil that separates the living from the dead is thin. It was seen as a night of magic dreams and divinations when the ancestral dead came back to share their wisdom and to bring sweets to the children of their living descendants.

MALLEUS MALEFICARUM - "THE HAMMER AGAINST WITCHES"

A book written by Dominicans James Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer in 1486, the *Malleus Maleficarum* included Pope Innocent VIII's 1484 edict that to even doubt the existence of witches was heresy. The book outlined elaborate torture techniques to extract confessions and listed a detailed series of questions to pose to the accused.

This inquisitors' handbook was assured wide distribution as the printing press had just been invented. It went through 13 printings. Ninety percent of witchcraft trials followed its publication.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. During "the burning times," institutions like the Church and the State blamed women and persecuted them as witches to avoid responsibility for widespread poverty and strife. Reflect on contemporary institutions and their actions in our culture and in others. Discuss similar evasions of responsibility effected by the persecution of identifiable groups.
2. What is the link between the persecution of women as witches and the continued widespread male violence against women? What are the connections between the "witch hunt" and the evolution of feminism and movements related to issues of race and class?
3. How is the content of **The Burning Times** connected to our current environmental crisis?
4. The "witch hunt" led to the oppression of women as a group, and in particular, to repression and control over women's sexuality (including contraception, midwifery and abortion). Does the link between the Church, medicine and law still exist?
5. In the film **The Burning Times** we see that the invention of the printing press aided greatly in the circulation of printed propaganda against women. How does our current print and electronic media contribute to systematic oppression of women and other marginalized groups?

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