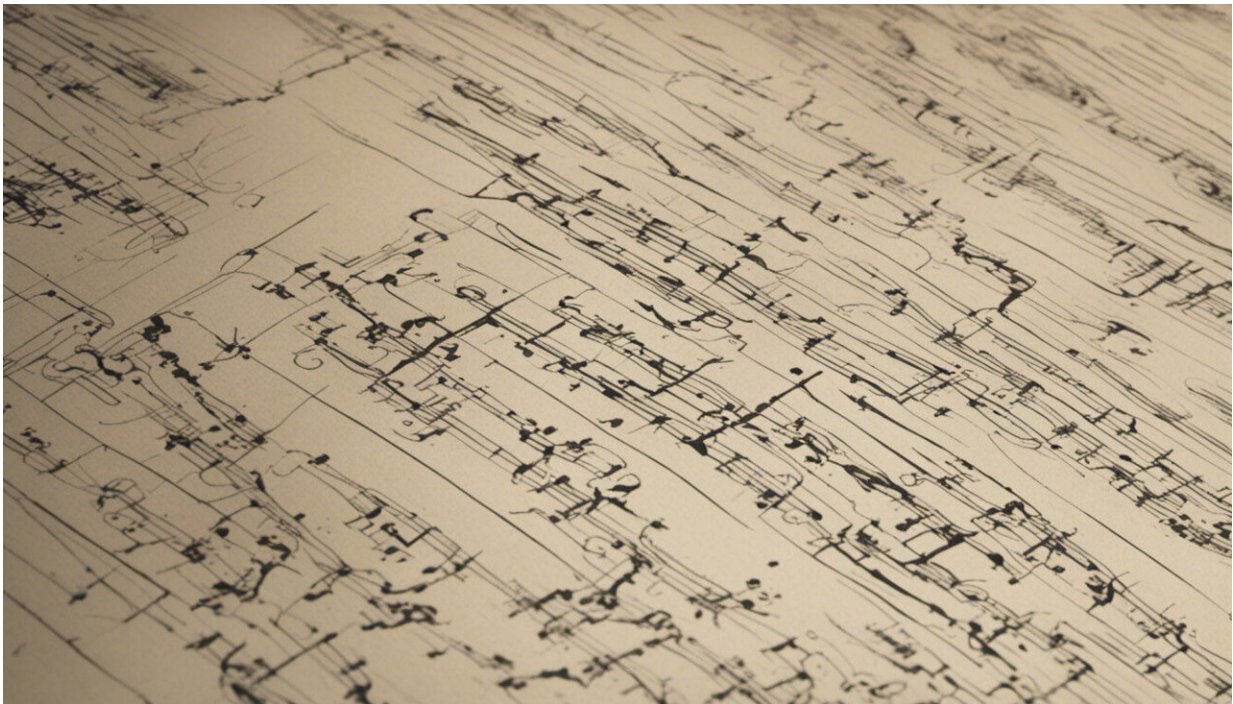


A tale of demonic possession and exorcism in 17th-century New France: Can we know what really happened?

October 21 2022, by Mairi Cowan



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During the autumn of 1660, colonists in and around Québec started to report some very strange occurrences.

In the sky they saw a man enveloped in flame and a canoe of fire. In the

air they heard lamentable cries and a thunderous, horrible voice. A teenaged domestic servant said that she was being terrified by demons.

People who tried to chase the malevolent spirits away described phantasmal music as well as stones that detached themselves from walls and flew by themselves. The servant accused a miller of witchcraft. After showing signs of demonic possession, this servant was brought to the hospital where she was treated by nuns. The miller was imprisoned and later executed.

When people learn that [my research](#) examines these stories of demonic infestation, they often ask: But what was *really* happening?

My first answer is simple: I don't *really* know. My next answer is better: Whether we believe the stories on a surface level or not, we can learn about the people who told them by asking historical questions.

Reason and historical sources

As a historian, I remain "professionally agnostic" about questions that cannot be answered using reason and the historical record: I accept that some things simply cannot be fully explained with the evidence I can access.

But a wise respect for the limits to our knowledge does not mean we cannot know anything at all.

Historical investigation is an exercise in trying to understand the past as best we can from the evidence that remains. As historians have shown with studies of [witchcraft](#), [demons](#) and [demonic possession](#), reports of supposedly supernatural phenomena provide valuable insight into past societies and our own time.

Everyday lives of ordinary people

The poor and humble are just as worthy of our attention as the rich and famous. "[Ordinary histories](#)" can be challenging to research, though, without sources by or about regular folk.

Barbe Hallay, the servant suffering from demonic torments in New France, could not read or write. The only thing we have in her own hand is the "marque" (a sign that she left in place of her signature) on her marriage contract.

People's concern with demonic possession generated documents that allow us to know more about her life, with glimpses into her experiences as a servant in a manor house and a patient in a hospital.

Through the approach of [microhistory](#), which looks up close at a small object of study in order to answer big questions, we can explore the deeper meanings and wider significance of her actions, and the actions of those around her.

How did colonists in New France make decisions? Their thoughts and deeds were shaped by the environment, as well as by ideologies of colonialism, class, gender and religion.

In studying how these forces influenced people in the past, we develop a clearer sense of how we too are subject to forces we might not control, or even perceive.

Seeing beyond the surface

Details of ordinary life appear almost accidentally in records of extraordinary occurrences. We can also consider these occurrences

themselves to investigate a society's underlying beliefs and assumptions.

Marie Regnouard was the [seigneuresse](#) (a female head of a [seigneurie](#)) at the estate where Hallay worked. She left a remarkable account of [her efforts to end the demonic torments using a rib bone from a recently deceased Jesuit priest](#). This account labels her actions as a "deliverance," a "relief," and a "healing."

Such words evoke [health care](#), but the procedure itself resembles a ritual that Regnouard, as a lay woman, would not be expected to perform: an exorcism.

Exorcism, while controversial, has also become more mainstream in some Christian churches. Exorcism can cause [real harm](#). In some cases, it [may amount to a criminal offence](#).

Exorcisms were controversial in the past too. People struggled to discern the [true causes of disruptive behaviour](#), and they [disagreed about who was qualified to decide](#).

For early modern people, an exorcism served functions beyond freeing someone from an evil presence. It demonstrated the power of the exorcist, and of whatever spiritual system that exorcist represented.

Why did Regnouard perform a ritual that was an exorcism in all but name? She demonstrated the fulfilment of her duty to care for members of her household (a responsibility widely acknowledged by those around her) and the authority to draw upon both medical and religious knowledge (domains that were contested, especially for women).

In looking beyond the labels of Regnouard's account to the actions she performed, we remember to pay attention not only to what things are called, but also to what they mean.

Our demons, ourselves

We can study what frightens us to learn about ourselves. Just as the [popularity of horror films today is probably a symptom of our cultural unrest](#), historical fears are signs of past anxieties.

French leaders had [planned for New France](#) to become a perfect society. With the [establishment of the Compagnie de Nouvelle-France in 1627](#), the king and Cardinal Richelieu wrote that New France, with divine help and the example of good behaviour by colonists, would bring people to knowledge of the true God. A few years later, in the words of Jesuit priest Paul Le Jeune, [it was to be](#) "a new Jerusalem blessed by God, composed of citizens destined for heaven."

Then the settlers came to realize that [Indigenous people would not simply assimilate to French norms as some back in France had arrogantly presumed](#), and trans-Atlantic migrants needed to compromise [traditional beliefs](#) and practices for new surroundings. They were isolated during much of the year and [vulnerable to attack](#) from other imperial powers and from Indigenous nations who were not allies of the French.

New France was precarious, and the colonists knew it. They did not know exactly if or when a final blow would fall. Such uncertainty can lead [to deep anxiety](#).

What were the colonists expressing through their fears of a demonic infestation? Probably many things, with a core of insecurity in the colonial project and anxiety about the unknowable future of New France. In studying their fears of the supernatural realm, we can also learn about the more tangible world around them.

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