

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: University of Essex</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 30 – History</p>
<p>Title of case study: Correcting Myths and Challenging Stereotypes in the History of Witchcraft and Witch-Hunts</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Alison Rowlands’ research on witch-trials in Rothenburg ob der Tauber and its rural hinterland provides the first ever scholarly study of witch-trials in this territory. The findings of this research have challenged the stereotype of the witch as an old woman and have shown the motivations of witch-hunters to have been much more complicated than previously thought. This research has informed Rowlands’ public engagement programme ‘What is a ‘Witch’?’, which has corrected public misconceptions of the history of witchcraft, brought benefits to cultural institutions with which she has collaborated, and contributed to local and national Key Stage 2, 3, and A Level school teaching.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Public perceptions of witchcraft beliefs and witch-hunts are often shaped by misconceptions about these phenomena that distort the reality of their history. Central to these popular misconceptions are the ideas: that all parts of early modern Europe experienced sustained and large-scale witch-hunts; that most of those prosecuted for witchcraft were old, poor women; and that witch-hunters were straightforwardly wicked and villainous.</p> <p>Research undertaken by Dr Alison Rowlands (Lecturer at Essex from 2000, Senior Lecturer from 2002) has deconstructed myths of the history of witchcraft and reassessed these common stereotypes. Her monograph <i>Witchcraft Narratives in Germany: Rothenburg, 1561-1652</i> (2003) explored the witch-trials that took place in Rothenburg ob der Tauber (a German imperial city) and its rural hinterland. Early modern Germany is often portrayed as ‘the heartland of the witch-craze’; the assumption is that witch-hunts there were invariably large-scale and horrific in terms of the numbers executed and the torture used. Rothenburg, however, experienced very low levels of legal prosecution of witchcraft. Rowlands’ book is the first ever scholarly study of witch-trials in this area, and made a key contribution to the historiography by explaining the factors which worked to restrain enthusiasm for witch-hunts at both the popular and elite level in this part of Germany.</p> <p>The book also contains an analysis of the gendering of witch-persecution, and detailed case-studies of trials involving men and children tried for witchcraft. In articles published in 2001 and 2002 Rowlands critically analysed the stereotype of the witch as an old, poor woman, suggesting instead that a much wider range of people were imagined as witches in early modern Europe. In these articles she argued that other literature trivialised the experiences of accused individuals who were neither old nor female by over-emphasising the vulnerability of old women to accusations of witchcraft.</p> <p>This work was developed in an edited collection of essays (2009), which made male witches and the issue of masculinity and witchcraft its central focus. Rowlands’ own contribution to the collection draws on her work on masculinity in the history of witchcraft, as well as her research into elite male opinion about witchcraft in seventeenth-century East Anglia (2011). In her introduction to the collection Rowlands criticised existing scholarly explanations of the gendering of witch-persecution and suggested that those accused of witchcraft should be understood as ‘bad</p>

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neighbours' – those who transgressed the norms of Christian communal living – a category that was less gendered in some contexts than in others. She has also argued for more systematic analysis of the extent to which different codes of masculinity motivated and shaped the actions of the men who acted as witch-hunters in the early modern period. This research has built on her earlier case studies based in Rothenburg by studying the history of witch-hunts in East Anglia.

3. References to the research

- Rowlands, A. (2001) Witchcraft and old women in early modern Germany, *Past & Present*, 173 (1), 50-89. DOI: 10.1093/past/173.1.50
- Rowlands, A. (2002a) Stereotypes and statistics: Old women and accusations of witchcraft in early modern Europe, in S. Ottaway et al. (ed.) *Power and Poverty: Old Age in the Pre-Industrial Past*, Connecticut: Greenwood, 167-186. ISBN: 9780313311284
- Rowlands, A. (2002b) Eine Stadt ohne 'Hexenwahn': Hexenprozesse, Gerichtspraxis und Herrschaft im frühneuzeitlichen Rothenburg ob der Tauber [A city without 'witch-panics': witch-trials, legal procedure and lordship in early modern Rothenburg ob der Tauber], in H. Eiden and R. Voltmer (eds.) *Hexenprozesse und Gerichtspraxis [Witch-Trials and Legal Procedure] vol.6*, Trier: Spee Verlag, 331-347. ISBN: 978-3-87760-128-0
- Rowlands, A. (2003) *Witchcraft Narratives in Germany: Rothenburg, 1561-1652* Manchester: Manchester University Press. ISBN: 978-0719052590
- Rowlands, A. (2009) Not 'the usual suspects'? Male witches, witchcraft, and masculinities in the early modern world, in A. Rowlands (ed.) *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1-30. ISBN: 978-0230553293
- Rowlands, A. (2011) What did Thomas Plume think about witchcraft? Reconstructing the intellectual outlook of a little-known 17th-century English sceptic, *Essex Archaeology and History, Transactions, Fourth Series*, 2, 196-206. [available from HEI on request]

4. Details of the impact

Over the last five years Rowlands has engaged members of the public in the UK and in Germany to challenge received wisdom about the history of witchcraft. Over this time her public engagement activities have developed into a strategic dissemination programme entitled 'What is a Witch?'

'What is a Witch?' is both a public engagement and schools outreach programme which adapts Rowlands' research insights into the history of witchcraft and witch-hunts for popular consumption, designed to challenge commonplace stereotypes of witches. There have been two primary effects of the 'What is a Witch?' programme: informing the teaching of history in UK primary and secondary education and changing public understanding of witches.

Initial public engagement

Within the REF impact period Rowlands has given over 20 public lectures and radio appearances. Many of these appearances have been underpinned by her research on the history of witchcraft, and have been undertaken in order to correct common misconceptions, both in Germany and the UK, of the history of witches and witch-hunts. These public events include: two appearances on BBC Radio 4's *In Our Time* [downloaded since September 2011 at an estimated rate of 2000 per month; see corroborating source 1] and an appearance on Radio 4's *Making Histories* in August 2011; public lectures and papers on local history in Germany, including three presentations for the annual public conference *Arbeitskreis für interdisziplinäre Hexenforschung* and a public lecture for

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the Rothenburg Local History Society lecture series [see corroborating source 2]; and public lectures and talks on regional history in East Anglia, including a 2010 public lecture for the Centre for East Anglian Studies Public Lecture Series, a public lecture for the Essex Branch of the Historical Association in May 2011, a talk for the Sacred Hart Moot, Romford, Essex (a Wicca and modern-day witchcraft group; July 2012), and a public lecture for Treadwell's Esoteric Bookshop, London.

Feedback was collected extensively for the East of England events in particular. The Chair of the Essex Branch of the Historical Association confirmed of their event that 'those present derived a new understanding of the previously enigmatic East Anglian witch-hunts' [corroborating source 3]. 25 members of the Sacred Hart Moot attended Rowlands' lecture, at which 100% of questionnaire respondents confirmed they learned something new about witchcraft [corroborating sources 4 and 5]. Finally, feedback from the 25 audience members at Treadwell's Bookshop confirmed that questionnaire respondents were previously unaware that children were accused of witchcraft, and that the lecture had challenged the misconception that victims of witch-hunts were predominately old and poor women [source 6].

'What is a 'Witch'?'

These public lectures and talks led Rowlands to develop a strategic programme to make her research accessible to the public. 'What is a 'Witch'?' is an on-going public programme that combines public lectures and school outreach to achieve two impacts: educating the general public about the history of witchcraft; and supporting and influencing teaching in UK primary and secondary schools, with particular focus on history education and teaching the virtue of tolerance.

The first strand of What is a 'Witch'? is Rowlands' schools outreach programme. In 2013 Rowlands piloted a What is a 'Witch'? history of witchcraft workshop designed to aid the work of both primary and secondary school teachers. She piloted her workshop at both a primary (Millfields School, Wivenhoe) and a secondary school (Colne School, Brightlingsea). Her pilot with the latter consisted of a one-day workshop for year 8 pupils, aided by a group of history students from the University of Essex. The more extensive pilot at Millfields Primary was held for year 5 and year 6 pupils and contributed to their curriculum theme of 'Heroes and Villains' [source 7]. Rowlands used her work on local witch history, specifically her research into East Anglian witch-finders, to create a programme that asks the students to take a more considered approach to the judgement that local 17th century witch-finders were 'villains'. The programme's activities included presentations from Rowlands, follow-up classroom work for the pupils, and a final event held at the University of Essex's Lakeside Theatre.

The success of the pilots led Rowlands to develop a teaching resource pack for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 teachers. The pack includes four lesson plans supplemented with slide presentations and activity sheets for pupils, and can be used in classrooms without the need to have Rowlands running the workshop herself. In order to disseminate the resources to teachers nationwide she uploaded the pack on 18 July 2013 to the teaching resources section of the Times Education Supplement website. Though this is intended for uptake by teachers beyond the end of the REF impact period, by July 31 2013 the resources had already been viewed over 20 times [source 8].

The impact of the What is a 'Witch'? programme on local school curricula has been echoed at a national level, with Rowlands' work used in an exam by OCR. OCR has used an extract from her book *Witchcraft Narratives in Germany: Rothenburg, 1561-1652* (2003). This extract focuses in particular on the restraint and caution with which witch-trials were handled in Rothenburg. The

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extract was used in the exam for A2 GCE History B, Historical Controversies – Non-British History (unit code F986/01) November – December 2012. OCR have also used this material as part of their training courses for training teachers in their exam specifications [sources 9 and 10].

The second strand of the What is a 'Witch'? programme has built on Rowlands' public engagement experience with a new series of public lectures and family workshops. Rowlands has held family days at the University of Essex art gallery 'Art Exchange' and public talks in Thorpe-le-Soken and Colchester. The latter comprised three public lectures from May-July 2013 at local cultural centre, firstsite. Feedback for this second string of What is a 'Witch'? has been overwhelmingly positive and has shown that audiences have changed their misconceptions of the history of witchcraft as a result of her lectures. Feedback questionnaires from firstsite showed that the audience rated the lecture content an average of 4.8 of 5 [source 11], with one audience member writing to the University's Vice-Chancellor to note the lectures were 'a marvellous example of good 'Town Gown' relations' [source 12].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact [All sources saved on file with HEI, available on request]

1. Figures from producer, In Our Time, BBC Radio 4
2. Chairman, Verein Alt-Rothenburg
3. Chair, Essex Branch, Historical Association
4. Organiser for the Sacred Hart Moot
5. Completed feedback questionnaires for talk given for the Sacred Hart Moot
6. Feedback emails from attendees at the Treadwell bookshop talk
7. Deputy Headteacher at Millfields Primary School
8. Figure from Times Education Supplement website
9. Copyright Administrator, OCR
10. Copy of OCR exam script
11. Feedback questionnaire data from firstsite
12. Letter from audience member of firstsite lectures to the University of Essex Vice-Chancellor