



Anton Praetorius

by Jessica Clark

It appears to be a peculiarity of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the hysteria of the witch-hunts followed upon the “enlightenment” of the Renaissance and the intellectual and religious freedom of the Reformation. For nearly two hundred years, Europe was marked by witch-accusations, witch-hunts, witch-trials, and fantastical witch-confessions. By the time Anton Praetorius arrived on the scene as a pastor in Budingene, Germany in 1597, such things were a matter of course; yet Anton did not view the ill-treatment of a fellow human being or the misadministration of justice as a matter of course, and his voice rose alone in protestation of the events he witnessed.

While the contemporary age is filled with its own types of hysteria, it is hard to understand many of the

events of past centuries relating to the accounts of witchcraft. Academics propose various theories. Some believe the phenomena were



delusions; some that the phenomena really occurred;

some that the persecutions arose from social tensions and that people used witchcraft as an excuse to rid their communities of unwanted individuals.

What is known is that there are very strange accounts of events that members of that society took seriously, seriously enough to shed blood regardless of actual proof for the alleged crimes. According to many records, very few, either among Christian believers or natural philosophers, spoke out against or tried to curb the hysteria and enthusiasm of those who made accusations. In some ways, the treatment of alleged witchcraft seems to be an almost unifying theme

between believers and non-believers, Protestants and Roman Catholics. All believed in its existence, and all believed it should be rooted out. Anton Praetorius believed this as well, just not how it was executed in practice.

Many sixteenth century ideas regarding witchcraft, both what constituted it and how it was to be sought out and exterminated, were influenced by the fifteenth century document, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, written in 1486 by two members of the Dominican Order, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, and published in Germany in 1487. The work is divided into three parts (each part then addressing a series of sub-questions): 1) “The first part treating of the necessary concomitants of witchcraft, which are the devil, a witch, and the permission of Almighty God;” 2)

Above: Examination of a Witch by T. H. Matteson, 1853, Library of Congress

“Treating on the methods by which the works of witchcraft are wrought and directed, and how they may be successfully annulled and dissolved;” and 3) “Relating to the judicial proceedings in both the ecclesiastical and civil courts against witches and indeed all heretics.”

Alongside treatises such as the *Malleus*, wild accusations made by neighbors against neighbors, and local hysteria, there is also to be considered the fact that Martin Luther, John Calvin, and countless others spoke out against witchcraft in all sincerity of conviction. Their writings and preaching stated that this was not something to be treated lightly, but something to be avoided; people needed to be fortified against such attacks of the devil. Luther warned of the power of the devil and often mentioned the spiritual and physical attacks he experienced and attributed to Satan. In a sermon on Deuteronomy 18:10-12, Calvin preached, “But we know that in all ages and all Nations Sorcery or witchcraft has held sway, and even greater sway because it has rejected God’s truth....” Many men believed that the increased accounts of witchcraft were a sign of the end of the world.

This is the world into which Anton Praetorius was born in 1560 in Lippstadt, Germany. Anton was the son of Mattes Schulze. The surname Schulze was derived from the German schulteize, a



The cellar of Heidelberg Castle contains the Heidelberg Tun, a wine vat with a capacity of 220,017 liters (58,124 gallons). In 1859, following a trip to the castle, Anton Praetorius wrote a poem praising the size of the famed barrel.

word referring to the person in charge of collecting payments on behalf of the lord of the manor. According to one of the customs of the educated at the time, Anton chose to change his name to

the Latin equivalent of Praetorius.

Anton studied theology. One of his early jobs was as the principal of a Latin school in Westphalia. He married a woman named Maria, who bore him one son, Johannes. Maria died of the plague shortly after their marriage. Anton’s next position was in Dittelsheim, where he bore the distinction of being the first Calvinist pastor to that parish. In 1597 he received the prestigious appointment of pastor



Fanciful 1892 illustration of a colonial witch trial by Joseph Baker. Courtesy Library of Congress

to Wolfgang Ernst, the Earl of Ysenburg, Budinggen and Birstein. This occurred after the circulation of a poem Anton had written about the Earl, in which he entreated governments to enact a reformation of church and state according to Biblical and Calvinistic principles. In addition to poems, Anton wrote songs, a catechism, and books, one on Christian education for families and one on the Sacraments.

During his time as pastor for the Earl in his castle at Birstein, Anton witnessed the torture of four women accused of witchcraft. This event greatly impressed itself upon him and affected his future work. A court record states, “As the pastor has violently protested against the torture of women, it has therefore been stopped at this time.” But by the time the torture had been stopped, only one of the women survived. Anton’s interference incurred the wrath of the Earl who dismissed him from his post as pastor within a year of his arrival.

Records that exist show the brutality often used during these trials. It is hard to imagine witnessing such events. Imprisonment and torture could last for days, and it is no wonder Anton was moved by the condition of the women. In the case of one mayor of the city of Bamberg, there exists both the record of his torture and confession and of a letter he wrote to his daughter explaining that his confession was falsified. He bribed one of the jailors to smuggle out the letter to his daughter. In heart wrenching language, he tells her that regardless of his protestations, his accus-

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ers will not relent in their torture. He tried to bear the torture as long as possible. When he chose to confess in hopes of ending the ordeal, they continued to torture him until they convinced him to accuse other townspeople of witchcraft as well.

After his dismissal by the Earl, Anton moved to a parish in Laudenbach, which was near Heidelberg. Here he wrote his book *Thorough Report about Witchcraft and Witches*. When he first published the book in 1598, he wrote under the name Johannes Schulze, but when he republished it in 1602, he published it under his own name. It was published again in 1613 and posthumously in 1629. In it, he denounced the use of torture to extract confessions. He wrote, "In God's Word one does not find anything from torture, embarrassing cross-examines [or] confession by force and pain."

Praetorius clearly condemned witchcraft as a practice, but he was wary of the mania of witchcraft accusations. He was not driven by the hysteria surrounding him, the hysteria that had been going on and off since the early fifteenth century, where neighbors were quick to attribute any personal trouble or calamity to the alleged witches around them. The *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina*, the criminal law decreed by Charles V in 1530, was the law the courts were required to follow. Article 109 of the code stated that only witches who used magic to cause harm could be burnt, and witches who did not cause harm could not be punished by death but could be punished with

other penalties. While the article limited the amount of torture that could be used in a trial, it did not do away with it. The laws were often ignored, however, in much of Germany, particularly the smaller territories. More witchhunts, persecutions, and executions took place in Germany than in any other European country.

Anton thought the appropriate response to witchcraft was preaching, exhortation, and prayer. He believed in the punishment of crimes, but not if those crimes could not be proven. He objected to the disparity that often occurred in the treatment of men and women when it came to punishment for witchcraft crimes. And, above all, he thought that the administration of justice should never be based on torture or hearsay. For these beliefs, he was willing to risk his worldly good and renown.

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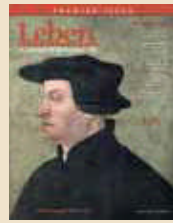
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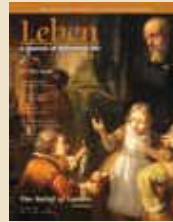
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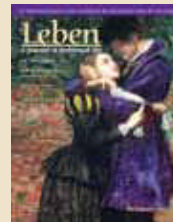
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