

New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan. By JILL LEPORE. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. 347 pages. \$26.95 (cloth).

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Historians have been on the hunt for discrete episodes of the early American story that deliver narrative drama and historical significance, homing in on Indian captivity tales, the adventures of a midwife, and that sturdy favorite, the Salem witch trials. This same impulse has focused fresh attention on New York City and the “Great Negro Plot of 1741.” That episode, which unfolded in the streets, taverns, and courtrooms of Manhattan, was as blood drenched and theatrical as any event in colonial America outside its battlefields.

The “Plot” started in the spring with a burglary, in which a white tavern owner, his household, and two slaves were implicated. It gathered momentum over the next several weeks when ten fires erupted. It spiraled higher with tangled rumors of a conspiracy of Manhattan blacks in league with working-class whites to overthrow the government and seize the city. It culminated six months later in a bedlam of accusations, confessions, and denials that led to the arrest of 20 whites and 152 blacks, the transportation of 84 slaves, the suicide of 1 jailed slave, the hanging of 4 whites and 17 blacks, and the burning at the stake of 13 blacks. A total of thirty-four people were executed, compared with the twenty killed in Salem.

Jill Lepore tells this story in gripping detail. Of necessity she has drawn heavily on the central account of this ghastly affair, Daniel Horsmanden’s *Journal of the Proceedings in The Detection of the Conspiracy formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and other Slaves, for Burning the City of New-York in America, And Murdering the Inhabitants.*¹ One of three judges on New York’s Supreme Court, which conducted the trials, Horsmanden was also the main examiner of the accused and the key witnesses. He was the prime recorder of all legal proceedings, and he subsequently gathered the court documents for publication in his *Journal*. Every scholar who has approached this story has had to deal with Horsmanden’s powerful hold on the narrative. None has searched more diligently for additional evidence than Lepore, whose probes included a visit to the New York State Library at Albany where she found a few scorched trial records that survived the library fire of 1911.

But Horsmanden’s *Journal* remains the key document, and so Lepore’s presentation of the textual evidence differs little from that of previous accounts, including the first book-length treatment, Thomas J. Davis’s excellent *A Rumor of Revolt.*² In early 1741 a recession, a harsh winter, and above all Britain’s recently declared war against Spain had put New Yorkers on edge. This followed the arrival in New York of up to twenty “Spanish Negroes,” sailors captured from Spanish prizes who, though claiming to be freemen, had been sold as slaves to local owners. All writers, following Horsmanden, turn next to the burglary, a proven event—the culprits were caught with the stolen goods—and move on to the series of fires that broke out shortly thereafter. The fires, whether accidentally or deliberately set—here the truth begins to blur—led to charges against a number of slaves. These incidents alone might not have mobilized the full power of the law, given masters’ dependence on the labor of their slaves. But as fires continued to flare a cry went up: “The Spanish Negroes; Take up the Spanish Negroes” (160). And, indeed, five were arrested for what would increasingly be seen by New Yorkers as a conspiracy against the state. Next a number of whites and blacks stepped forward to implicate scores of others as the episode escalated from a

¹ [Daniel Horsmanden], *A Journal of the Proceedings in The Detection of the Conspiracy formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and other Slaves, for Burning the City of New-York in America, And Murdering the Inhabitants . . .* (New York, 1744).

² Thomas J. Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt: The “Great Negro Plot” in Colonial New York* (New York, 1985).

contradictory patchwork of charges, confessions, and refutations to an increasingly coherent narrative of planned insurrection. Toward the end it was further transformed into a Roman Catholic plot involving the Spanish Negroes, other blacks seduced by that “Hocus Pocus, bloody Religion” (192), as a prosecutor put it, and one John Ury, a mysterious priest and supposed ringleader who ended his days on the gallows.

Scholars’ dependence on Horsmanden’s *Journal* for evidence of what happened in 1741 has tended to frame, even to limit, their investigations. Lepore, on the other hand, employs it as a point of departure. Moving beyond the formal record, she embarks on a series of historical forays, laying out setting, atmosphere, and sensibility. She takes New York City into her hands and slowly turns its surfaces to the light, exposing each facet of the city’s life until it takes on new brilliance.

One of these explorations takes a literary direction, as Lepore surveys contemporary novels, pamphlets, and New York City newspapers for their depiction of conspiracies and uncovers the sheer conventionality of the narrative that unwound in New York. It displayed “plot dripping with plot, ripe to bursting with familiar characters and contrivances” (10) drawn from popular tales of highway robberies, pirate raids, and Indian massacres. Slave rebellions had been added to this genre by the late seventeenth century. A pamphlet published in London in 1676 detailed a Barbados plot in which a black “King” would be chosen to lead the slaves in “killing white men, burning their houses, and taking white women as wives” (11), all elements frequently repeated in the New York testimonies. Such conventions had been reinforced by slave rebellions in Jamaica, Saint John’s, Antigua, Virginia in 1730, and Stono, South Carolina, in 1739. Zenger’s *New-York Weekly Journal* had reported extensively on the Antigua slave conspiracy of 1736. Thus the formula for black rebellion was familiar to New Yorkers. To top it off, the plot of 1741 even included that most sinister of stock characters, a Catholic priest.

Another theme Lepore pursues is the perilous legal procedures that placed severe restrictions on the rights of defendants, especially black defendants. The adversarial system in use today, with lawyers doing combat before a neutral judge, had not yet emerged. In 1741 defendants had no legal right to counsel. Juries and judges engaged directly in the questioning of witnesses, with judges, if Horsmanden is representative, often ridiculing testimony they disliked. Hearsay of the most capricious sort found its way into the record. There was no right against self-incrimination. And the list goes on. One exception was that the accused were allowed to challenge jurors during the *voir dire*; they could also call their own witnesses. But trials centered on face-to-face confrontations between the accused and the witnesses against them. The jury, strongly guided by Crown officials, then determined who was telling the truth. Lepore lays all this out with flair and occasional embellishments: at one point birds “scatter[ed] from their perches on the cupola” (66) as the bell above the courtroom sounded, while Justice Frederick Philipse “cleared his throat” (67) before ordering the sheriff to open the first trial.

Lepore also explores the episode’s religious resonances. She notes that some New York slaves, especially those from Portuguese-influenced Angola and Kongo (from which there had long been traffic to the colony), may have first encountered Christianity in Africa. She discusses the work of Anglican catechists among city blacks and describes how some New York Protestants resisted the baptism of their slaves, fearing it would make them insolent or even turn their thoughts to freedom. She reports on laws that made felons of Catholic priests entering the colony, an omnipresent fear in a New York with French Catholics to the North and Spanish Catholics lurking offshore. Future writers might build on her insight that the “Negro Plot” transmuted into a white “Catholic conspiracy” (198) with the return of James DeLancey to the city and to his seat on the Supreme Court. DeLancey was the son of a Huguenot family that had fled Catholic France in 1685, leaving all but a few jewels behind. Was that a possible root of his anti-Catholicism? And what of the tendency of Crown lawyers and judges to lump all slaves together as heathens, though their own words often suggested otherwise? The slave Scipio clutched “his Bible in his Bosom” (188) during interrogation.

Dr. Harry, a Brooklyn slave, asserted that had he known of a plot, he would have confessed it to save his soul. The only “Spanish Negro” to be executed, Juan de la Silva, protested his innocence to the end, prayed, and kissed a crucifix. His compatriots were probably also Roman Catholics. Other accused slaves may have been Christians as well, since their owner families, among them Bayards, Philippses, Schuylers, and Van Hornes, were known to have their slaves prepared for baptism by Anglican catechists. Moreover court officials regularly used Christian exhortations to extract confessions from the suspects, threatening them with Heaven’s wrath, entreating them to beg God’s forgiveness, and graphically depicting the tortures of hell that awaited them if they did not. Whether Christian slaves may have been dealt with differently from their fellows merits further investigation.

Lepore’s rich narrative ranges widely over many topics: New York City firefighting, tavern life, the African origins of accused slaves, black social customs, black literacy, the Freemasons, and New York politics. As the subjects and cast of characters proliferate (there were, for example, seven slaves named Cato, eight Caesars, and eleven Jacks), one wants a guide through the maze. And lo, Lepore provides. Two maps of lower Manhattan chart the comings and goings of her actors. Three appendixes lay out Lepore’s database of people, places, and trial chronology; a table on accused slaves with the disposition of their cases; and a table on slave owners. The appendixes alone, as well as a detailed index, make this the book of record on the episode.

The author’s attempt to link the events of 1741 to the party battles of the Cosby-Zenger affair in the 1730s is less successful. Those partisan disputes had subsided by 1740, which she acknowledges. Yet many white New Yorkers, she suggests, saw the conspirators of 1741 as a kind of political faction, a “phantom black political party” (219), which aspired to displace the legitimate government with a black king or governor. Whether the threat was real or mere fantasy is less important to Lepore than the effect such doings had on New Yorkers’ perception of parties or, in a reprise of Edmund S. Morgan, on white attitudes toward slavery and liberty. She does not pull these disparate strands into a convincing pattern.

Surprisingly, Lepore offers no explicit conclusion about whether there really was a conspiracy, though she notes that the publication of Horsmanden’s *Journal* brought little acclaim and soon was “remaindered, at 3 shillings a copy” (220). Yet her own investigations leave little doubt that the prosecution’s case was spurious. Horsmanden, its chief architect, bewailed the drudgery of gathering evidence from blacks: their “unintelligible jargon” required one to “grope through a Maze of Obscurity; be obliged to lay hold of broken Hints . . . before he can . . . fix those Creatures to any certain determinate Meaning” (115). To the modern reader this remark is chilling, knowing that the record was indeed fixed to the page by a man apparently predisposed to conclude conspiracy when faced with a combination of uppity slaves, low-life whites, and a popish priest.

Lepore also casts grave doubt on the veracity of the confessions, showing that the prosecutors, supported by common lore, urged confession and the naming of coconspirators as the best way for the accused to escape execution. (The slave Will, “expert at Plots” [55], had earlier cheated death at both Saint John’s and Antigua by implicating others. One of the Catos bought his pardon at a cost of naming twenty-six alleged conspirators.) Further Lepore describes the testimony of Mary Burton—the sixteen-year-old indentured servant who gained her freedom and a £100 reward for serving as the court’s star witness—as “comically corrupt” (178). Still Lepore at times seems to drift along with the unreeling narrative of conspiracy as if it were true or at least partly true. This may simply be a literary device, adding drama as she merges her voice with those of the witnesses.

Even so, *New York Burning* is a marvelous book. A work of fertile imagination, it offers that rare combination: prodigious scholarship and superb writing. So vividly has Lepore brought the New York conspiracy trials of 1741 to life that they may soon take their rightful place alongside, or even above, those other trials in Salem.