Episode 341: Mairi Cowan, Possession and Exorcism in New France

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Liz Covart: 00:00:04 *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of The Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Liz Covart: 00:00:19 Hello and welcome to episode 341 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart. I hope you're ready for some tricks, treats, and time travel because we're about to travel back to mid-seventeenth-century New France to investigate a case of demonic possession and exorcism. Specifically, Mairi Cowan, an associate professor of history at the University of Toronto Mississauga, will introduce us to a young French woman named Barbe Hallay and take us through her demonic possession using details from her book, *The Possession of Barbe Hallay: Diabolical Arts and Daily Life in Early Canada.* Now, during our investigation, Mairi reveals the layout of Quebec City in 1660 and what it looked and sounded like, Catholicism in early New France and how it was practiced, and the case of Barbe Hallay and her demonic possession. But first, as it is the season of trick or treat, why not send yourself or the history lover or lovers in your life a real treat? A gift subscription to *Ben Franklin's World*? Subscribers to the *Ben Franklin's World* subscription program receive ad-free versions of each new episode and a short monthly bonus episode. To give this treat of early American history, visit benfranklinsworld.com/subscribe. That's benfranklinsworld.com/subscribe. And with that, let's go meet our guest historian.

Liz Covart: 00:02:07 Joining us is an associate professor of history at the University of Toronto Mississauga. She's a historian of the late medieval and early modern world who specializes in the social and religious histories of Scotland and New France. She's written numerous articles and a book, *The Possession of Barbe Hallay: Diabolical Arts and Daily Life in Early Canada*. Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Mairi Cowan.

Mairi Cowan: 00:02:30 Thank you so much, Liz. I'm really happy to be here and honored to be among such excellent guests for your program.

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Episode 341: Mairi Cowan, Possession and Exorcism in New France

Liz Covart: 00:02:37 Thank you Mairi, and thank you for joining us. Now Mairi, the reoccurring character in your book, *The Possession of Barbe Hallay,* is Barbe Hallay and I wonder if we could start with how we should pronounce her name. We know she was French. She lived in early New France, but as with all historic sources and characters, there's often many ways to spell someone's name and pronounce it, especially in this era before standardized spelling and grammar. So, could you tell us how you think we should pronounce Barbe Hallay's name?

Mairi Cowan: 00:03:08 There are indeed a lot of different spellings for her name. Also, people in the Kingdom of France in Barbe's time in the seventeenth century spoke a lot of different dialects of French, sometimes so different from one another that people couldn't understand each other. So, a pronunciation of her name is always a bit of a guess. I have been inclined to say something like "Barbe Hallay."

Liz Covart: 00:03:31 "Barbe Hallay."

Mairi Cowan: 00:03:33 Nice.

Liz Covart: 00:03:34 Well, I'll do my best. French has never been my greatest spoken language, but I will do my best to pronounce her name as correctly as we think is possible. Now the story of Barbe Hallay takes place in New France, specifically in Quebec City in 1660. Mairi, could you set the scene for us? Say we're visitors to Quebec City in 1660. What are we going to see here and possibly smell and who are we going to interact with as we wander the streets of this French colonial city?

Mairi Cowan: 00:04:03 So, New France as an idea was very big—as an idea in the mind of the French king. Its boundaries were actually very imprecise, as scholars like Allan Greer and Catherine Desbarats have shown, although we see it in modern textbooks with carefully delineated boundaries, in documents and maps from the time, from the seventeenth century, New France was an idea extending in a vast crescent from Newfoundland, along the St. Lawrence River, through the Great Lakes, and down the Mississippi into the Gulf of Mexico. Most people in that area were not French, and the French king wasn't even trying to rule most of that territory directly. Instead, the French king and his ministers were

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trying to build alliances with the sovereign Indigenous nations in the interior of the continent. And from a French imperial perspective, what they saw as the submission of Indigenous rulers to French authority made their territories part of a French empire.

Mairi Cowan: 00:05:07 Now, Indigenous rulers, not surprisingly, saw this very differently, and French efforts in places like the Illinois Country led to a lot of complex and interesting arrangements. Things scholars like Richard White have called "the middle ground" or Gilles Havard has called "bricolage." French settlement was concentrated really only along the shores of the St. Lawrence River. And this is the region in the seventeenth century that the French called Canada. Beyond this region and the St. Lawrence River, there were some French settlements in a region called Acadia, which is part of present-day Canadian provinces Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, and the US State, Maine. And there were some French missions in trading posts around the Great Lakes and down the Mississippi, but very few French people and not much French control. So, that's New France and as an idea, it was very big. The town of Quebec, by contrast, was very small. In 1660, its entire population was under eight hundred people.

Mairi Cowan: 00:06:15 Most of these people were migrants from France or children of migrants from France, but there were Indigenous people there too, including the Wendat, called the Huron by the French, and the Innu, called the Montagnais by the French, and there were probably people from farther away. We get glimpses of them in the records sometimes. For example, in the *Jesuit Relations* in the 1630s, we have information about man originally from Bengal. So, that's a little bit about the large size of New France and the small size of Quebec. If you were visiting the town of Quebec in the 1660s, you would be arriving by ship, so you would see it at first from the river and that would give you a good view of the settlement. You would probably first notice that it has both an upper town and a lower town. The upper town was built on top of a forty-foot-high cliff, and that is where the most prestigious buildings in the settlement were located.

Mairi Cowan: 00:07:13 These buildings included a college for the Jesuits, a convent, for Ursuline, nuns, a hospital, and the residents of the governor that

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had the very grand name of the Chateau St. Louis. In the lower town you would see a landing area at the shore of the river. This is where a lot of the commercial activity of the town took place. You would also see some of the houses of the residents here. Once you disembarked from the ship, you would get onto a boat which would take you to the shore, and then you could walk around the town to see it a little more closely. You would be able to go between the lower town and the upper town along a steep road and to the side of this road you would see a church for the inhabitants of the town. You would also see a group of dwellings for the Huron-Wendat, who were living there and what the French called a Native fort.

Mairi Cowan: 00:08:07 This was a palisaded enclosure, which was protection for the Huron-Wendat who had established themselves a few years earlier after being dispersed from their territories to the west. The houses of the French settlers you would see were constructed in a mixture of different French styles. Some were built out of stone, some were built out of wood. Most were probably built in what is called half-timbered construction, which is when houses are made from a timber frame and filled in with stone and mortar. Most of the houses had roofs made from wooden boards that were very steeply sloped, which was good construction for shedding wind and rain. The nicest of the houses might be two stories tall. They could have several chimneys and even white washed walls to the interior. Would you like to know what you would hear and smell?

Liz Covart: 00:08:58 I'd love to know what we'd hear. I am a little cautious about what we might smell in colonial Quebec City, but yeah, why don't you tell us?

Mairi Cowan: 00:09:07 It's better than what you would smell in most European towns at the time. So <laugh>, it's a happy story in a sense. You would definitely hear the sounds of the river. You would hear the water itself, you would hear the ships being loaded and unloaded, and of course you would hear people. The people could be speaking different languages. We know that the hymns being sung at one of the ceremonies in the hospital chapel were sung in four languages: French, Latin, Wendat, and Algonquin. Most of the people in the town would be speaking some form of French, and if you can understand modern French, you could probably

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understand quite a lot of what they were saying. You would hear bells, which were rung several times each day at regular intervals and also for celebrations and also to raise the alarm. The loudest sound you might hear would be cannon fire.

Mairi Cowan: 00:10:02 Cannons were fired in defense of the town, of course, as you might expect, and they were fired on other occasions, too. They were fired to announce the arrival of the governor and to mark occasions of civic and religious importance. Some sounds were notable for their absence. A prominent feature of the soundscape of most early modern European towns and colonial towns in the Americas were equine noises, horses whinnying, their hoofbeats, probably the sound of wheels clattering on streets. But there were no horses yet in the St. Lawrence Valley in 1660 at least. So you would not be hearing any horses. And I suppose this absence of horses would have some effect on the smells of the town. The town of Quebec would not have had as many strong smells within it as towns in Europe at this time and many travelers to Quebec wrote about the healthy air in that town. It's possible they were picking up on a lack of noxious stenches. So, the smells would not be so offensive to your modern nose, as would be the smells of Paris in the 1600s.

Liz Covart: 00:11:15 So it sounds like by 1660, Quebec City is really a diverse place, a place where Native Americans and First Nations peoples are intermixing with each other, as well as with the French colonists. Quebec was definitely a trading town. There were ships that would come in and out of the St. Lawrence and stop at its port. And it was also a religious place, a place where you can hear a lot of church bells, Catholic services and hymns. And, I wonder, speaking of these church sounds, if you could tell us a bit more about the religious history of Quebec, Mairi. What was Catholic religious life in Quebec by 1660 and was it the dominant form of religion?

Mairi Cowan: 00:11:54 There is a lot more to the religious practices than just hymns and bells. I can try to talk about the religious world of Quebec in the 1660s. Talking about the beliefs of the people is actually very challenging. We can find evidence of what people were supposed to believe, and we can find evidence for what people said they believed, and we can find evidence for what one person says another person is believing, but it's very hard to know what

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sincere beliefs were. For that we need to look at the evidence about what they were supposed to be believing, and what they were told to believe, what other people said they were believing, and compare this against the actions that we see in their documents. But having said all that, here is what we do know about the religious world of Quebec in the 1660s: it was supposed to be very Catholic.

Mairi Cowan: 00:12:49 In official directives from the crown, Catholicism was an important, central part of the identity of New France. Non-Catholic colonists by this time were officially excluded, although in practice there were some French Calvinist protestants, called Huguenots, in Quebec because France itself had both Catholics and Huguenots. Catholic leaders in the colony considered Protestantism to be heretical, not a real form of Christianity. And, in fact, in official documents, it's usually referred to by the abbreviation RPR, which stands for *Religion Prétendu Réformée*, the so-called Reformed Religion. The crown sent explorers and settlers to North America with instructions to bring the Christian faith to Indigenous peoples. So, religion was a reason for colonization. The crown benefited from cooperation with missionaries, who established and strengthened alliances with Indigenous people, and missionary orders also ran the schools and the hospitals in the colonies, so they provided a lot of civil services. New France, therefore, was officially very Catholic. But when we look in more detail at what's actually going on among the people, we can see that Catholicism was not so secure in reality as it was supposed to be in theory. The founders' ideal for a perfectly Catholic colony was receding from view and settlers now had to confront the reality that Indigenous peoples were not converting in the numbers that they had hoped and when they were converting, they were adopting a Christianity sometimes different from what the missionaries had expected. Meanwhile, the French settlers were not always as devout as their religious leaders thought they should be.

Liz Covart: 00:14:40 The story of New France, and Quebec City in particular, is a lot like what we see in other American colonies. On paper, the King of France has a map depicting a lot more territory than he could even dream of administering and govern. I guess he could dream of it, but he could never actually put it into practice, and on the ground the king's colonists, well, they act very differently than

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what the king's laws and rules actually called for. So, there's a difference between the imperial mindset of what colonization and colonies are and what's actually happening on the ground.

Mairi Cowan: 00:15:13 Exactly. So, we see quite a different story if we read the official documents telling us what is supposed to be going on versus if we look at the documents showing us what is actually happening. And those are both good ways to study history, but we should always be aware of what the documents are able to tell us.

Liz Covart: 00:15:31 Now, we are going to be talking a fair bit about demonic possession, and for some people that is the topic that falls under the realm of religion, while for others it's a topic that falls under the realm of the spiritual world. So Mairi, are the worlds of religion and the spiritual world distinct ideas in the seventeenth century, especially in seventeenth-century Quebec?

Mairi Cowan: 00:15:52 Well, no, I don't think they are, or at least they're not distinct ideas in the way twenty-first-century people in the Americas think of them as distinct ideas. The difference between religion and spirituality wouldn't make sense, I think, to a devout Catholic of the seventeenth century. If you found a devout settler in seventeenth-century Quebec and asked them that question, they would be perplexed. For that person, the correct way to approach the spiritual world—the world of the divine, the world beyond this material world—the correct way to approach that world is through religion and if they agree with your way of approaching that world, they will dignify your approach by calling it a religion. Whereas if they disagree with your approach, they may not call it religion. If they think that you are trying to do this in a Christian way, but you have the wrong form of Christianity, they might call you a heretic. If they think you belong to an entirely different faith, they may call you a heathen, or if they think you are using practices and rituals improperly they may charge you with using magic or superstition. So, what we often see is the same practice can look religious to one observer and superstitious to another. This distinction between religion and spirituality can sometimes be helpful for us when we are trying to understand what was going on, but we should keep in mind that the distinction may well not have made sense to people then.

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Liz Covart: 00:17:25 So how would witches and witchcraft have fit into the religious world of seventeenth-century Quebec?

Mairi Cowan: 00:17:30 Witchcraft was a crime. It was considered a very serious crime and an offense against God. So, we might think of it as a crime within the category of religious crimes and one that posed a danger to society as a whole. So, one that responsible leaders would have to be vigilant about and would have to be careful to prosecute.

Liz Covart: 00:17:56 Are there examples of witchcraft in mid- to late-seventeenth-century Quebec that you could share with us? Or could you help us better understand what kinds of practices someone in 1660 Quebec might have seen as witchcraft? I think in some ways I'm trying to ask you whether witchcraft in New France fits the model of witchcraft in New England and within the English colonies where most accused practitioners were single women.

Mairi Cowan: 00:18:21 We don't have many cases of witchcraft from New France and among those we do have the accused are often men, which was not unusual in parts of France either. I'm not sure we have enough cases to be able to come up with a pattern with much confidence, but in this case, at least, a person who ends up being accused of witchcraft is a bit of an outcast for several reasons and he is also behaving like a witch in that he has been refused something he desires and decides to go after it through illegitimate means.

Liz Covart: 00:18:58 Well, you've done a great job, Mairi. You've really set the scene for us. We now have a very good feel, smell, and I think we could even sort of hear those church bells clanging in 1660 Quebec, and I do think we have a better understanding of the scene that Barbe Hallay is about to enter. So, would you tell us a bit about Barbe Hallay and what we know of her early life and her arrival in New France?

Mairi Cowan: 00:19:21 For sure. Barbe Hallay as the subject for a history book does present some challenges because she could not read or write. We have very few of her own words in the historical record and the only thing I have found in her own hand is a mark she made on her marriage contract. Therefore, what we know about Barbe Hallay comes from other sources. It's a somewhat oblique

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approach. We do know that Barbe Hallay was born in the parish of Saint-Julien Le Coudray, which is about eighty-five kilometers southwest of Paris, near the town of Chartres in France. We know she came to Canada in 1659 with her mother and her father and two sisters on board a ship called the *Sacrifice of Abraham*. This transatlantic voyage probably took about two months and she landed at Quebec on the 16th of June.

Liz Covart: 00:20:18 So, Hallay was part of a family move to New France, which is a bit different from the stories we've heard from other scholars on this podcast when we've talked about women migrating to New France, they usually tell us that they were part of the *filles du roi*, or daughters of the king, program, where orphan girls were supplied a modest dowry by the king of France if they agreed to move to New France and help populate the colony. But Hallay seems to have different reasons for migrating. It seems she left France because her family left France. Mairi, were family moves a more typical type of transatlantic migration from France than the migration of orphans?

Mairi Cowan: 00:20:58 It wasn't quite typical yet. In the early years of French settlement, the crown encouraged movements by family — migrations by family units—and then they decided that was too expensive since they had children who couldn't yet contribute a lot to the economy, and it was more single people moving at Hallay's time. It was just a few years after she arrived that the filles du roi were brought in. She came at a time period, therefore, in between two different parts of the pattern of migration. One of the significant features of migration at Barbe Hallay's time was that men far outnumbered women. Depending on how we count the ratio, there may have been as many as twelve marriageable French men for every French woman at the time of Barb Hallay's arrival, which probably had an influence on how her case of possession worked out.

Liz Covart: 00:21:59 It really does sound like Barbe is moving into a situation where she would've had her choice of marriage partners, which really could have led to an improvement in her social standing and wealth given that women are outnumbered by men twelve to one in a marriageable situation. Do you think that's why her family moved to New France is so that Barbe and her sisters would've had more marriage prospects?

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Mairi Cowan: 00:22:24 <Laugh> Well, we don't know for sure because they haven't told us in the records. You're right, she would have had a lot of marriage prospects. It seems clear that women had more choice in whom to marry than men did. If you like to think of it this way, the marriage market was tilted in their favor. What they did not have though was the option of not marrying at all. Unless she joined a religious order it was expected that she would marry someone. It seems that remaining single was not considered a viable option. It's possible though that one of the motivating forces behind the move was so that Barbe and her sisters could find more marriage partners. It's also possible that they moved because they could have a better chance at having control over their own farmland. They may have been recruited to the move. We do know that her father had been in Canada a few years earlier and had taken possession of some land just outside Quebec and then he went back to France and brought his family over. So, they may have known some people in the colony by then.

Liz Covart: 00:23:27 Well, what we do know for certain is that not long after Barbe and her family arrived in Quebec, Barbe began to act in ways that her friends and neighbors described as possessed. So, right now, we need to express our thanks to our episode sponsor because we're grateful for their support and when we get back, Mairi, I hope you'll tell us about Barbe's behavior as a possessed person.

Hannah Farber: 00:23:49 Hi, I'm Hannah Farber. I'm an assistant professor of history at Columbia University and my new book, *Underwriters of the United States: How Insurance Shaped the American Founding,* published by the Omohundro Institute, is out now. Insurance is a quirky and strange business that leaves a very light paper trail in formal politics, but insurance has a vast influence on America's commercial affairs and because of that, insurance has a vast influence on American politics. *Underwriters of the United States* talks about the financial machinations that go around a world of warfare and it's about the kinds of things that national figures are doing in their private life. National figures like Alexander Hamilton, Robert Morris, Daniel Webster, we're not just looking at what they say in political affairs, we're looking at the whole commercial world that surrounds them and that makes them money. *Underwriters of the United States* tells that story.

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Liz Covart: 00:24:59 Mairi, could you tell us about the different ways that Barbe was acting that caused the people of Quebec to think that she was possessed?

Mairi Cowan: 00:25:06 Yeah, this is an interesting part of the story. At first, her friends and neighbors weren't sure that she was possessed. They did notice some very strange things going on. They spoke of seeing phantoms and hearing drums and flutes where she worked. At seeing stones detaching themselves from the walls and flying about through the air. Barbe Hallay herself said she saw terrifying demons and specters. Those who described these events, though, were not sure yet how to discern what they observed. One writer said she was afflicted by malefice. Another said she was vexed with demons and another that she was either possessed or obsessed. Their concerns about this case in particular were probably heightened by a general sense of anxiety in the colony. The crown was struggling to convince migrants, and especially female migrants, to come over. Indigenous neighbors were not assimilating in the ways the arrogant colonists had presumed they would.

Mairi Cowan: 00:26:16 And warfare had recently erupted again between the French and the five nations of the Haudenosaunee, whom the French called the Iroquois. The French, therefore, were really vulnerable to attack, and they were worried that their whole colonial enterprise might come crashing down. In the midst of these worries, they then received bad omens. In 1660, they saw a comet in the sky and then they saw a man of fire and a canoe of fire and a crown of fire in the air. They heard disembodied, strange, confused voices and lamentable, horrible cries. Some people, at least, interpreted these things as sinister portents, as signs that there were magicians and witches in their country. When these strange events began to coalesce around Barbe Hallay, people came to settle, eventually, on a diagnosis of possession because that fit what they expected. Brian Levack is a historian of witchcraft and possession in other contexts, and he has argued that people played roles and they followed scripts encoded in their religious cultures.

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Mairi Cowan: 00:27:29 That's what made their accounts believable. Here, we see Barbe Hallay's role believable in this anxious environment of seventeenth-century New France. She fit what people expected a possessed person to be like. If we look at people in early modern Europe who were believed to be possessed, a word we can use for that is "demoniacs." If we look at people believed to be demoniacs, we can see most of them were women or children. Hallay's age is difficult to ascertain, but she was probably in her early teens when she made the crossing. Many demoniacs were servants. Hallay was a servant, so she matched what people had expected in terms of her gender and her age and her occupation. As this vexing by demons progressed and Hallay's symptoms became worse, she eventually started to speak with a strange voice and thrash her limbs. These behaviors looked like possession to seventeenth-century French people and then Barbe herself identified someone using witchcraft to cause the possession.

Liz Covart: 00:28:38 So, I'm imagining people encountering Barbe as she makes her way to work or between the upper and lower towns, and they're seeing stones floating through the air and hearing her talk in strange tongues. And if I recall correctly, Mairi, I believe you said that Quebec City with its upper and lower towns had a combined population of less than eight hundred people, which makes this a very small place where everyone knows everyone else's business. So, without exception, everybody in Quebec would've known that Barbe was acting strangely and that strange things are going on about her.

Mairi Cowan: 00:29:11 I should think so. There were only about eight hundred people in the town of Quebec and by this point she is just outside the town. She's on a *seigneurie*, an estate, at Beauport, about six kilometers downriver. So yes, I think news of these strange events would have traveled very quickly. And that supposition is borne out by all the people who are writing about the events.

Liz Covart: 00:29:39 Yeah, so, how did those who wrote about these events respond to what was going on with Barbe. What did they say that they did when they saw Barbe Hallay walking through town? Did they run away? Did they try to confront her? Did they think that her possession was something that would be contagious and that they could catch and also become possessed?

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Mairi Cowan: 00:29:57 They don't seem especially worried about that, with one possible exception when she's put into the hospital. They do try to discern what is going on. But by this period, by the mid seventeenth century, a demoniac is not held to blame for their situation. They're considered innocent in all of this. She is the victim of the bewitchment, so they're not worried that she will do them harm from what we can see, but they are concerned with discernment. They want to be sure that they understand what is going on and they want to try to help Barbe Hallay. So the vicar apostolic, a figure who will later become the bishop of Quebec, he sends priests to exorcise the seigneurie where she is working. But it doesn't work because the manifestations get stronger. Hallay is brought into a hospital where it is reported that a nun battled against the demons, but that didn't work either because the possession continued. And then the person suspected of using the witchcraft is imprisoned.

Liz Covart: 00:31:01 Right. You did mention that Barbe claimed that she was the victim of witchcraft. Did Barbe identify the person that was causing her pain or offer any clues as to who her bewitcher was?

Mairi Cowan: 00:31:13 She said the person responsible for these events is someone named Daniel Vuil. Daniel Vuil came to Quebec on the same ship as Barbe Hallay. We know that he was a miller. We know that he was Huguenot, so he was Protestant, at least when he left France. And he seems to have had a bad reputation. He is described as a man of bad customs. There is an Ursuline nun in Quebec named Marie de l'Incarnation, who is very well informed from within the cloister about all of the goings on in this community. And Marie tells us that Vuil had wanted to marry Hallay and that she had been promised to him but then was refused. Vuil became angry at this refusal and to avenge himself, he used the tricks of his diabolical art to corrupt Hallay and then marry her.

Liz Covart: 00:32:11 Daniel really sounds like the perfect scapegoat for what is happening to Hallay, in the sense that he proposed marriage to her, she rejected him. They live in this town of less than eight hundred people, so everyone in town knows that Hallay rejected him. And Daniel was a Huguenot, a Protestant, in this very small but Catholic-majority community. So in a lot of ways he was an outsider.

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Mairi Cowan: 00:32:35 Yep, absolutely. He is not a trustworthy figure and he fit people's ideas of what a witch might be like. He is somebody who could be inclined to use harmful magic as retribution for something he desired, in this case a marriage. And he was suspicious for several reasons. He was a miller, which was a bit of a suspicious occupation. They worked apart from other people and they knew things about the machinery of a mill that many other people did not. And as you say, he'd been Huguenot, which very likely tainted him with additional suspicion.

Liz Covart: 00:33:11 Did the town ever look at any other suspects or once Hallay identified Vuil, that was it, he was their primary and only suspect.

Mairi Cowan: 00:33:19 From what I have seen, it's always Vuil. This is the person Hallay named. She seems to have been believed and then evidence was collected against him in particular.

Liz Covart: 00:33:32 Well, this definitely raises a question of the courts of justice and how they work in colonial Quebec City. So, was Quebec a place where you were innocent until proven guilty or is this a place where Daniel is going to have to prove his innocence?

Mairi Cowan: 00:33:47 This is a place where they weren't quite sure what to do in a case like this. Marie de l'Incarnation reported that Vuil was put into prison and she wasn't sure what would happen since these cases often take a long time to determine. Figures of authority, who might be expected to look after the case, were the governor and the vicar apostolic and they were in a long and sometimes petty quarrel about who would be in charge of what. And it seems that this quarrel spilled over into the situation of Barbe Hallay's possession and the possible involvement of Daniel Vuil. And the vicar apostolic and the governor bickered about who was supposed to be in charge of what was going to happen. So they weren't sure how to proceed.

Liz Covart: 00:34:36 But there's good news here, Mairi. You're a historian, you've done a lot of research into this case, you've looked at all the available records, so you know what happened. What did the court decide once the governor and the vicar apostolic figured out how the court was going to operate?

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Mairi Cowan: 00:34:53 I can tell you some of what happened. We are only certain about some of it. We know that evidence was collected. Evidence was collected about the demonic infestation, about the innocence of Hallay and there were proofs against Vuil that were gathered. Unfortunately, we don't have this evidence. We have an inventory listing what it was, but we don't have that evidence itself. We know that Daniel Vuil was executed. He was executed in October 1661. The sources disagree about the means of the execution and his crime. After a careful examination of archival sources, I think the execution was by musket—I think he was shot—and the crime could have been a combination of different things. I think it was some form of religious crime, possibly witchcraft, possibly blasphemy and profaning the sacraments, maybe a combination of all of them.

Liz Covart: 00:35:57 I know the historical record doesn't tell us a whole lot via its words, but is there a way we can use the method of execution to figure out whether or not the authorities thought that Daniel was a witch? And I ask because when we think about witches in witchcraft in the English and British context, they're usually burned at the stake or stoned or crushed by boulders or thrown into a river and drowned. They're not usually humanely executed by being shot. So, I wonder if this method of execution says anything about what the authorities were thinking.

Mairi Cowan: 00:36:29 The means of execution is odd <laughs> and calls out for some kind of explanation. The source we have of the execution that was written closest in time to the event itself is a journal kept by the Jesuits. And this was a source meant for internal reading—it wasn't meant for wide publication—it was internal for the order. And I think for these reasons, for the proximity in time and for why this source was kept, I think we need to give it a lot of weight. That source has a really interesting wording about the execution because it says that Vuil was "hanged, or rather shot," as if the scribe part way through writing this down had to correct himself. Hanging was the more common means of execution. We don't know why Vuil was shot. The few people who have examined this case think it could be because Vuil might have had some kind of military background. Perhaps the hangman simply wasn't available. We don't know. There had been another conviction for witchcraft a couple of years earlier in Montreal and that person who was convicted was not executed. He was

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banished from the town and he'd moved elsewhere and remarried. So this execution was unusual in many ways.

Liz Covart: 00:37:48 So Daniel Vuil was executed in October 1661. What is the timeline of events or how much time has elapsed since Barbe Hallay started acting possessed and Vuil was executed?

Mairi Cowan: 00:38:01 We don't have an exact date for when the strange events began, but this could have been about a year and a half.

Liz Covart: 00:38:10 So once Daniel Vuil was executed, did Barbe return to normal? Did she stop acting possessed?

Mairi Cowan: 00:38:17 She did eventually, but not right away. She was brought into the hospital in Quebec for treatment by the nuns, who kept her at first not in the main room for sick inmates, but rather in a parlor to the side of the main room, which may suggest some fear of contagion. This is the one clue we have that people may have been worried either that the possession itself could be contagious or that in her fits Barbe might pose a danger to the patients. So she was in this hospital for a while. There were nuns who battled against the demons. One of the nuns, Catherine de Saint Augustin, showed her confessor her arms which were as black as ink from the hits she had received. But this treatment did not succeed either. Barbe left the hospital and went back to work at the same seigneurie into her role of domestic servant. And it was here that the torments were finally concluded. The person who brought them to an end was named Marie Regnouard and she was the wife of the *seigneur*; she was the elite householding woman at Beauport.

Liz Covart: 00:39:30 Before we leave the hospital with Barbe. One of the fascinating aspects of Mairi's book, *The Possession of Barbe Hallay*, is that Mairi uses Barbe's story as a window onto the world of healthcare in seventeenth-century New France. Mairi, would you tell us what Barbe's story and her time in the hospital reveals about healthcare and early modern New France?

Mairi Cowan: 00:39:52 I honestly hadn't expected this story to yield a lot of information about the history of medicine when I started, but, as you noted, in following its trail I ended up looking a lot at healthcare in New France. And I discovered that healthcare took place in two

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main spaces. It took place where you might expect it to, in a hospital, and took place in the home. The hospital in Quebec City was run by an order of nuns. They had good training, both theoretically and practically, in medicine, but they considered healthcare to include care for the body as well as the soul. They had been missionaries in New France before setting up in the upper town of Quebec City and they brought something of this missionary energy with them, combining it with the tradition of hospitals in France that were places for the soul as well as the body in their institution in the upper town of Quebec.

Mairi Cowan: 00:40:50 So, some of the care she received was by nuns who were medical practitioners as well as spiritual experts in Quebec. Yet their treatment did not effect a cure. The cure was eventually effected by a lay woman in her house. And I learned through that how women in the household were responsible for the care of the body of everyone under their authority. We have a vibrant account in three copies of how Marie Regnouard wages battle against the demons who are tormenting her servant. One of the most fascinating things about this account is it's given in the register of healthcare. It's called a deliverance and a relief and a healing. When we look at what's actually happening though, it amounts almost to an exorcism. The steps look very much like a typical exorcism, if we can say there is such a thing, of the seventeenth century. Yet it's never called that and I pondered why that should be, and I've decided it's because a lay woman in seventeenth-century Europe is not supposed to be performing exorcisms.

Mairi Cowan: 00:42:06 This is effectively what Marie Regnouard is doing and everybody knows about it. The accounts are written down and passed along and kept by the Jesuits, but she's not supposed to be exorcising her servant. She can, however, heal her servant. She's a female head of a household, her husband was a surgeon at the hospital, one of her daughters was a nun at the hospital. So she is taking charge of this situation as a woman of her status would be expected to do, and her care slips between these registers of care for the body and care for the soul. It moves into what might in other circumstances be a forbidden spiritual domain. Yet she pushes through into that domain and she is finally the one who brings about the liberation of Barbe Hallay from her demons.

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Liz Covart: 00:42:55 This is another case where we can see how people were supposed to act one way in France per the king's laws and yet acted completely different on the ground in the colonies because circumstances were very different.

Mairi Cowan: 00:43:06 Exactly. These are frontier conditions and many scholars of the history of gender have pointed out that gendered expectations become more flexible by necessity in conditions like these.

Liz Covart: 00:43:20 So what were the steps of Barbe Hallay's exorcism? What steps did Hallay's mistress take while attempting to heal Barbe?

Mairi Cowan: 00:43:28 Late one evening, she heard her servant being tormented worse than she had been before. She went into her servant's room and with her she had the rib bone of Jean de Brébeuf. Now, Jean de Brébeuf is another important character in the story, although he was deceased. Jean de Brébeuf was a Jesuit priest who had died about thirteen years earlier. He was killed on a mission to the Wendat, and the French regarded him as a martyr. Regnouard's account says she took this rib bone of Brébeuf and held it against Barbe Hallay. She conjured the demon, which is a step in the exorcism, and commanded him to leave. They argued back and forth, the demon claimed the girl was his, Regnouard countered that the girl was hers, her father and mother had given Hallay to Regnouard, and insisted in the name of this martyr that the demon leave. She commanded the demon's name, who the martyr was. The demon gave the right answer. The demon shouted that he was being burned, that he could not tolerate it any longer. And after some shouts back and forth, contortions of limbs, strange voices emanating from the mouth of Hallay, finally, it was in the name of what Brébeuf had accomplished that Regnouard commanded the demon to leave and he went. Hallay could then say a prayer and she was delivered.

Liz Covart: 00:44:58 That sounds like it was a pretty involved process, and perhaps frightening experience, that Barbe and her mistress had. I also have to wonder about Barbe's reputation at this point because it seems like if you were possessed, that might be reputation damaging. So, what happened to Barbe after this possession? Was she able to have a life and be seen as a respectable member of the Quebec community?

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Mairi Cowan: 00:45:22 Considering all that had happened and considering the many people who wrote about the possession of Barbe Hallay, her life after the deliverance was remarkably unremarkable. Following her deliverance, she had one more very short run in with a witch <laugh>, but it did not last for long. And then she was back in the hospital, but now as a waged employee. Following that, she worked as a domestic servant in a different house in the town of Quebec and then she got married to a respectable French settler. They moved across the river, set up a successful farm, had some children, donated to the church, and she died. It seems as if this earlier possession left no taint on her subsequent reputation.

Liz Covart: 00:46:09 That seems quite remarkable. And yet, I can also see how it might have been commonplace to not taint someone's reputation over possession, especially in a fledgling colonial outpost where every person's labor counted and you have way more marriage-eligible men than marriage-eligible women.

Mairi Cowan: 00:46:26 Her behavior following the deliverance must have been entirely as expected for healthy people in New France and she seemed to get along just fine.

Liz Covart: 00:46:36 Now, before we move into the "Time Warp," I have to ask, when scholar study events like to Salem witch trials, for instance, modern-day scholars have been trying to figure out what caused those young women of Salem to act radically and as if they were bewitched and possessed. Have you likewise been trying to figure out whether Barbe Hallay was really possessed or if she was struggling with her mental health or perhaps a disease that was causing her to convulse? Or are these questions really beyond your scope? Were you just investigating this case from a purely historical standpoint, taking the community's word that Barbe Hallay was possessed?

Mairi Cowan: 00:47:10 I remain professionally agnostic on the question of whether she was actually possessed, and I haven't indulged much in the question of what was really behind the possession. What would we in the twenty-first century think of the possession? I've been more interested in how the community interpreted the possession and what that says about them. One thing, though, that I have been thinking about is how this possession offered Barbe Hallay a kind of authority she otherwise wouldn't have. When historians

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have looked at the preponderance of women and children and servants among the possessed, they have theorized that one reason for this pattern is that these are groups who normally don't have much authority. Children are expected to obey parents, wives are expected to obey husbands, servants are expected to obey employers. When a person is possessed, they have this contradictory authority. In theory, they lose authority over their own body and will, they're not responsible legally for what they do while possessed because it's seen as the possessing demon who is controlling their body.

Mairi Cowan: 00:48:21 So, in theory, they lose authority. But in a way they also gain it because in losing this authority they can voice opinions that otherwise would not be acceptable and they can behave in ways that otherwise would be attacked. If Barbe Hallay had in fact promised to marry Vuil, she might have been about thirteen years old and if she then decided she did not want to marry him, she had put herself into a bit of a difficult position. By law she was within her rights to break up the marriage contract and marry somebody else ff she chose. By custom, though, that could be difficult to do. An agreement was an agreement, and she wasn't really at liberty to not marry anyone at all. While possessed, however, she was for a time dispensed from these expectations, so I don't know. I have no idea whether she was putting on the possession deliberately as a strategy to avoid marriage or if it just happened to be a convenient way to avoid marriage or perhaps there is no connection at all. But I've wondered about the possibility of the social pressures on a young unmarried woman in mid-seventeenth-century New France and how that might have shaped her responses.

Liz Covart: 00:49:41 We've just spent an entire conversation talking about the story of Barbe Hallay, which in the grand scheme of history is what we call a microhistory. It's a story of an everyday teenager who we don't have a lot of records for, but it's a story that Mairi was able to use to see and say something about the community of colonial Quebec City and perhaps the larger picture of early American history. So Mairi, what can Barbe Hallay's story tell us about the larger picture of early American history and about the history of early Canada specifically?

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Mairi Cowan: 00:50:11 I'm so glad you asked this question because I think one of the most powerful things about microhistory is that it allows us to look up close at a very small thing but then ask big questions. So, this is a story of one case of demonic possession for just a few years in a really small settlement on the St. Lawrence. But I think the research does provide us with bigger insights about life in early America. It shows us the compromises that a colonial society made in its attempts to establish its traditions in a new environment. We can see this in the foods that people ate, in the houses they built, in the healthcare they delivered. And we can see this more deeply in how the French settlers adjusted their expectations for what a Catholic colony would look like when an earlier generation's ideals were fading and they needed to confront failures, or at least disappointments, in their mission.

Mairi Cowan: 00:51:08 The research also shows us how people acted to shape their lives in the midst of forces beyond their control. We can catch glimpses of people trying to understand why winter was so cold. We can see them trying to intervene in complex international relations. Most profoundly, at least for me, I think this research shows us how precarious the colonial project really was in New France in the 1660s. I first came upon this story while I was on a family vacation in Quebec. I was not studying the history of New France at the time, but we were staying near the old town of Quebec. And I had with me some letters by a seventeenth-century nun because apparently that's the kind of book I bring with me on family vacations. And I was immediately drawn into this story. I thought it was a fascinating account of possession. I was also struck by how anxious the colonists were about the future of New France and that anxiety made me think more about hindsight and the contingencies of history.

Mairi Cowan: 00:52:15 I could see from my perspective as a vacationer in twenty-first-century Quebec City that the settlement had thrived. In reading the account of the possession, though, I saw how the settlers living there in the 1660s could not know the future and they were really worried about whether their colony would survive. This story, I discovered, unfolded as it did in a context of deep anxieties about New Franc's place in the world. And I think those anxieties come through clearly in an analysis of why people acted as did when faced with claims of a demonic attack.

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Liz Covart: 00:52:55 And with that, we should move into the "Time Warp." This is a fun segment of we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently or if someone had acted differently. Mairi, in your opinion, what might have happened if more individuals had shown signs of demonic possession alongside Barbe? Do you think 1660 Quebec would've seen a witch hunt like the one we see in Salem, Massachusetts in the 1690s?

Mairi Cowan: 00:53:41 It's possible. If Barbe Hallay had accused other people by name of being witches beyond the one suspect, Daniel Vuil, perhaps they would have been investigated, too. And then if other people had claimed to be bewitched themselves or tormented by demons, that might have launched further investigations as well. Some of the conditions in Quebec were similar to Salem in the 1690s. There were tensions between more- and less-devout colonists. There was a sense of vulnerability from attacks both coming from without the colony and from within. So it's possible, but I'm hesitant and here's why. In the first place, and this seems like a small detail, there was no printing press in New France; therefore books and pamphlets about cases like this could not spread so quickly. Another reason I'm hesitant is that, interestingly, there were other people in Quebec who made accusations of witchcraft, and there were other people who displayed signs that looked like the bewitchment or possession to seventeenth-century Europeans, yet no witch hunt or mass possession ever took hold. The populace was willing to believe in the powers of witches and demons. But in the years following Hallay's torments, the people in charge were largely uninterested in prosecuting the crime of witchcraft, and when they saw behaviors that could resemble possession, they instead sought natural and physical causes.

Liz Covart: 00:55:16 So Mairi, now that you've indulged in some research about colonial Quebec City, what are you researching and writing about now?

Mairi Cowan: 00:55:23 Well, like most historians, I have a long lineup research projects, but the next in line is a research project that's going to take me back across to the other side of the Atlantic, again. I'm going to be looking at the marriage of James IV, king of Scots, to Margaret Tudor in 1503 and analyzing what effect the age

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difference between the partners had on their union and investigating also some of James's so-called natural children, meaning the children he had with women who were not his wife.

Liz Covart: 00:55:55 That sounds like another scandal-filled story.

Mairi Cowan: 00:55:58 <laugh> Oh dear, I seem to be drawn to such things.

Liz Covart: 00:56:01 Now, where can we reach you if we have more questions about life in colonial Quebec City and its religious culture?

Mairi Cowan: 00:56:07 The easiest place to find me is probably on my faculty webpage at the Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto Mississauga. If you Google my name and Toronto, you'll get there. My name is spelled in what may be an unexpected way. My first name is spelled M-A-I-R-I and my last name C-O-W-A-N. And if you Google that, you'll find me. I'm also on Twitter where I can be found as @Historian_Mairi.

Liz Covart: 00:56:37 I'll make it even easier. I'll include links on the show notes page to all of those places.

Mairi Cowan: 00:56:43 Wonderful. Thank you.

Liz Covart: 00:56:45 Mairi Cowan, thank you for joining us and for taking us through Barbe Hallay's story and helping us glimpse life in colonial Quebec City.

Mairi Cowan: 00:56:52 Thank you so much, Liz. I really enjoyed our conversation.

Liz Covart: 00:56:56 One of the many fascinating aspects of Barbe Hallay's case is that it allows us to see the compromises that French colonists, and really all colonists in the Americas, made on the ground in their fledgling frontier communities. As Mairi related, we can see compromises in the food people ate, the houses they built, and in the healthcare they provided. All of these traditions had to be adapted to North American environments. The foods and spices the French enjoyed were not often found in North America. Colonists had to bring cows, sheep, and pigs, as well as different varieties of plants from Europe, and sometimes plants and animals didn't thrive in the Americas the way they thrived in Europe. And the same goes for healthcare. Remedies were often

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plant and mineral based, and North America did not always provide access to the same plants and minerals that Europeans had found in Europe.

Liz Covart: 00:57:45 Colonists often had to adapt their European remedies to the natural resources of the landscapes around them. And similar adaptations also had to be made with religion and other traditions. When establishing a colony in the Americas, colonists often brought their European traditions and practices with them, and as we just saw in our story of New France, colonists brought Catholicism and Catholic practices with them. The colonial conditions sometimes meant that settlements lacked cathedrals and priests, relics, and enough people to perform services according to European gender roles. And this is exactly what we saw in the case of Barbe Hallay. A woman, not a Catholic priest, performed in exorcism on Barbe Hallay. Madam Regnouard made do with what she had. Using her authority as the wife of a surgeon, the mother of a nurse, and a devout Catholic, Regnouard took it upon herself to cure her servant girl of her bewitched afflictions.

Liz Covart: 00:58:38 To do so, she adapted the practice to the circumstances of Quebec. Rather than using the relic of a saint, she used the rib bone of a French colonial martyr and her knowledge of Catholic practices to perform her exorcism. Does that mean Madam Regnouard performed the exorcism as a priest in France would've practiced it? No. Her practice would've been against church law and custom in France. But in New France, where she lived in a settlement of fewer than eight hundred people, Regnouard's practice of exorcism had been allowed because New World circumstances called for adapting this Old World practice. And this is a reoccurring theme in the history of early America and in our study of this period. As much as colonists tried to exactly replicate Old World practices and traditions in the Americas, they were rarely successful. Conditions were just different. Access to materials was different and the people were different.

Liz Covart: 00:59:30 In fact, we often see that people who disagreed with European practices moved to the Americas because it offered opportunities to fix old ways that they did not like or to dispense with them altogether. Look for more information about Mairi, her book,

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Episode 341: Mairi Cowan, Possession and Exorcism in New France

The Possession of Barbe Hallay, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinsworld.com/341. Friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts. If you enjoyed this episode of *Ben Franklin's World*, please tell your friends and family about it. Production assistance for this podcast comes from The Omohundro Institute's digital audio team, Joseph Adelman, Holly White, Ian Tonat, And Dylan Holzer. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the AirWave Media podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit airwavemedia.com. Finally, are there other religious practices in early America that you'd like to explore? Or perhaps there's a specific place in early America that we have yet to visit and you'd like to hear more about? Let me know liz@benfranklinsworld.com. *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of The Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

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