**Atonement**
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# Atonement

## Samuel Sewall regretted his role in the witch trials.

**BY DAVID WALDSTREICHER**

WHEN do leaders admit their mistakes? A rare event in any age, is it rarer still in ours? Kings could prostrate themselves before God, the putative source of their power, and pray for further guidance. When they did, word got around.

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**SALEM WITCH JUDGE**
The Life and Repentance of
Samuel Sewall.
*By Eve LaPlante.*
*338 pp. HarperOne/HarperCollins Publishers. $25.95.*

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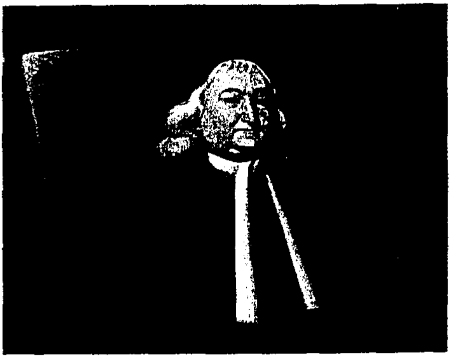

Our presidents just run for reelection, or run out their terms. Democracy means never having to say you're sorry.

"Salem Witch Judge," Eve LaPlante's touching biography of Samuel Sewall, who condemned 20 people to death on witchcraft charges, seems hauntingly timely. Beneath the sensational title is a figure more familiar than we may realize.

Sewall has long been the most quotable of early New Englanders. Mark Van Doren compared his diaries, which he edited, to those of Samuel Pepys, his English contemporary. Sewall was clever, introspective, rich and powerful. He knew almost everyone worth knowing in Boston. But his own story has been buried beneath the quest for the Puritan Mind, which he certainly represented.

LaPlante finds the ways in which Sewall was unusual fascinating, even redemptive. We meet him at 4 in the morning, watching over his dying newborn. This is not your textbook Puritan, damning the unconverted children for their sins. Four other young Sewall children died before 1692, a toll that made Sewall wonder, always, about his own particular sins. By taking us into the family tomb, LaPlante prepares us for the crisis that changed Samuel Sewall.

As a judge at the 1692 Salem witch trials, Sewall faced matters of life and death and God's will. When the accusations spread and the process of incrimination spiraled out of control, Sewall does not seem to have been one of the doubters. He seems instead to have been shaken by the fingering of some of his own peers as witches, the eventual turn in public opinion against the accusers, and the disdain for the witch hunt expressed repeatedly (but not, as LaPlante implies, immediately) by his own minister, the highly respected Samuel Willard of Old South Church. Suddenly Sewall found himself disinvited from Willard's private prayer meetings, which included Benjamin Franklin's father, a candle and soap maker. Such meetings meant a lot to Samuel, who had not been born to the high status he occupied as a paterfamilias and Harvard graduate who had married exceptionally well. Being recognized as pious — as saved — justified the authority that godly magistrates exercised. What if he was damned?

*Sewall was not a textbook Puritan, damning unconverted children for their sins.*

Something about the process of collective judgment, the community policing of the Puritan oligarchy of which he was a member in good standing, allowed Samuel Sewall to have second thoughts and to act on them. In 1697, at a public fast day service, he handed Willard a sheet of paper to read out in meeting. He asked "pardon of men" and God for his role in the trials, "sensible of the reiterated strokes of God upon himself and family." After the confession he experienced "spiritual relief," in LaPlante's words, but nevertheless began to wear a makeshift hair shirt. Within a few years he showed a more pacific attitude toward the Indians and published an important early antislavery tract, the first to appear in print in North America. He was thinking big, despite having been humbled.

LaPlante, a descendant of Sewall (and the biographer of another illustrious relative, Anne Hutchinson), tells us that the family genealogist, her Aunt Charlotte, loved "Samuel" because he had the capacity to change. We can only imagine which men in the family suffered by comparison. "Salem Witch Judge" upends popular stereotypes about Puritans; it also reminds us how quickly the conventional wisdom can shift, forcing even the powerful to move. LaPlante might have made more of the political contexts for the witch hunt and Sewall's repentance. She only briefly describes the crisis of imperial government or the devastating warfare with the French and the Indians. Both events involved the magistrate, and both set the stage for Salem. In 1691, Sewall's 3-year-old son Joseph (who would later become a minister) had spoken like an oracle: "News from Heaven. The French are coming. Canada." Salem villagers had reason to believe that they would be attacked by the devil's minions in the night.

Perhaps Sewall realized that his fellow worshipers had projected political as well as spiritual concerns onto personal affairs. There is no other way to explain the intensity of his interest in Indian and black rights after Salem. In the wake of crisis and fear, at least one leader's admission of failure actually helped him expand the circle of grace. □

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