

***The Secret History of the Jersey Devil: How Quakers, Hucksters, and Benjamin Franklin Created a Monster***

**Brian Regal and Frank Esposito**

**Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press**

**160 pages**

**ISBN: 978-1421424879**

**DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.160>**

“O, let this one be a devil!” So spoke a witch named Mother Leeds when pregnant for the thirteenth time. When born, the child had a head like a horse, wings like a bat, claws, and hooves. The newborn monster flew up the chimney and out into New Jersey’s Pine Barrens. Thus states one version of the origins of the Jersey Devil. Historical records, on the other hand, bring a Daniel Leeds into New Jersey in 1677. So began a myth, and so began a family history. Explaining the mystery of the Jersey Devil, and finding the history behind the mythology, bedeviled historians for generations to come. Brian Regal and Frank Esposito have set forth a historically precise resolution to the controversy.

The supernatural has long fascinated both students and more casual observers of colonial American history. David Hall and John Demos have published scholarly works focusing on New England. It is appropriate that the Jersey Devil, with its colonial era origins, should receive similar scholarly attention. Regal and Esposito have provided such attention in *The Secret History of the Jersey Devil*. The authors assert that “everything you think you know about the Jersey Devil, however, is wrong.” The authors then present an explanation for this legend.

The authors trace the devil’s origins to Daniel Leeds, who settled in Burlington, West Jersey, in 1677. The Leeds family was one of numerous Quaker families who settled there. Daniel Leeds involved himself in the colony’s religious and political life; he also became a printer, publishing the first almanac printed in New Jersey. It was there his troubles began, as the Burlington Monthly Meeting took offense at the “pagan” symbols in his publications.

Furthermore, Leeds allied himself with Lord Cornbury, the royal governor of New Jersey from 1702 to 1708, which added to his already vexed relations with religious authorities in Burlington. Daniel's son Titan Leeds followed in his father's footsteps as a printer, but also in arousing the ire of well-positioned individuals, including a Philadelphia printer named Benjamin Franklin. Franklin pointed to Titan's continued use of astrological symbols and signs. The authors analyze these theological and political entanglements, coupling them with contemporary beliefs in the supernatural. In this context, the story of the strange child of Mother Leeds originated.

That monster was "born" in an environment well suited for the development of such a legend. Colonial American and European beliefs in a "world of wonders" fused with local Lenape traditions of supernatural beings inhabiting the mysterious landscape of the Pine Barrens. In time, the legend was disassociated from the Leeds family of history, acquiring a life of its own. Regal and Esposito contend that the long-forgotten connection between the political and theological battles of Daniel and Titan Leeds led in time to the stories of a monster that haunted the Pine Barrens. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth hucksters drew on this contentious history.

Unnatural births themselves were already part of colonial folklore. In New England, Anne Hutchinson, banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for her heretical beliefs, gave birth to "a disturbing mass that bore little resemblance to a child." One of Hutchinson's friends, Mary Dyer, had similarly given birth to a deformed child. Regal and Esposito commendably include brief accounts of these events to contextualize the origins of the Jersey Devil myth. Challenges to political and religious elites lay at the base of these accounts of unnatural births. The key difference, though, as the authors point out, is that no extant contemporary records refer to such a birth in New Jersey. Daniel Leeds, not Mother Leeds, is "what remains."

Regal and Esposito attribute the popularization of the myth to the hucksters and sensationalists who really created the Jersey Devil. By the early twentieth century, the Pine Barrens “rattled with Jersey Devils.” Even though an exhibition in Philadelphia in 1909 presented a clear hoax, the myth did not die. Indeed, such publicity gave the Jersey Devil a new lease on life. It “haunted the dreams of a new generation,” and various “biographers” reported sightings in the foreboding forests and bogs of the Pine Barrens.

*The Secret History of the Jersey Devil* disentangles history from mythology. To do so, the authors delve into a complicated and contested history. Daniel and Titan Leeds both incurred the displeasure of those who held power and influence in their community for including symbols of the supernatural in their publications. Is it any wonder that those who held power and authority chastised them? Is it any wonder that father and son became the historical basis for the myth of a supernatural being? Brian Regal and Frank Esposito deserve commendation for presenting a credible and convincing account of the origins of one of New Jersey’s most persistent legends.

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