

FOCUS

'Witch-hunts': an integral part of women's history

BY JANET FRENCH

The era of "witch-burning" in North America and Europe was left behind long ago, but it certainly has not been forgotten.

The stereotypes associated with witches and witchcraft that date back to the 1400s are still evident in our society.

On Oct. 26 the Dalhousie Women's Centre presented "The Women's Holocaust" as one of many lectures in a series for Women's History Month.

The lecture was given by members of the Hysterix Coven, who emphasized that Wicca — the religion where witches are practitioners — is one of the oldest religions in existence and is definitely not related to devil worship.

The Hysterix Coven's principles are that "[they] work within nature for that which is contributory to our health and well-being."

The lecture included many visuals and a film depicting the torture and fear that rural women endured during the "witch-hunts" of Renaissance times. It was emphasized that much of the information about witch burning has been omitted from our history classes.

"[Some aspects of witchcraft] are about education and women's history that we're not taught at school," said Suzanne Adams, a member of the Hysterix Coven.

Don Adams, one of the guest lecturers from the Hysterix Coven, says that the witch hunts resulted in a loss of respect and control for women.

"The issue is women's control of women's bodies... especially reproduction," said Adams. "The thing that was held against them was their own sexuality."

Don Adams explains that in pre-Renaissance times women were the healers, wise people, sooth-sayers and midwives and

that misogyny is all that happened."

However, she stresses that it is still easy for politicians and use them as scapegoats, much like in the witch-hunts of the past. Early feels that a strong parallel can be drawn between the Renaissance witch-hunts and the current American presidential political scandal.

"The feminists in the United States are all very disturbed at how the right wing in America has been able to take this business with Bill Clinton and create a 'witch-hunt'. What's going on is a total loss of civil liberties for all of us. They're actually trying to impeach a President based on his sexual indiscretions," said Early.

However, Greg Hanlon, associate professor of History at

were highly respected in the community. He feels that the rise of patriarchal religions and the male-dominated medical and legal communities obliterated this tradition.

"Women were relegated to secondary status," he said.

Don and Suzanne Adams both emphasize that there is much to learn from the past.

"[The era of witch-burnings] is important today because of things like rape shield laws: women who were raped [come] to court to prosecute rapists and then find themselves suddenly being questioned about their sexual, medical and psychological history. It's a traumatic event," said Don Adams.

Frances Early, a History professor at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), explains that although women were the main target of the prejudiced witch hunts, they were not the only victims.

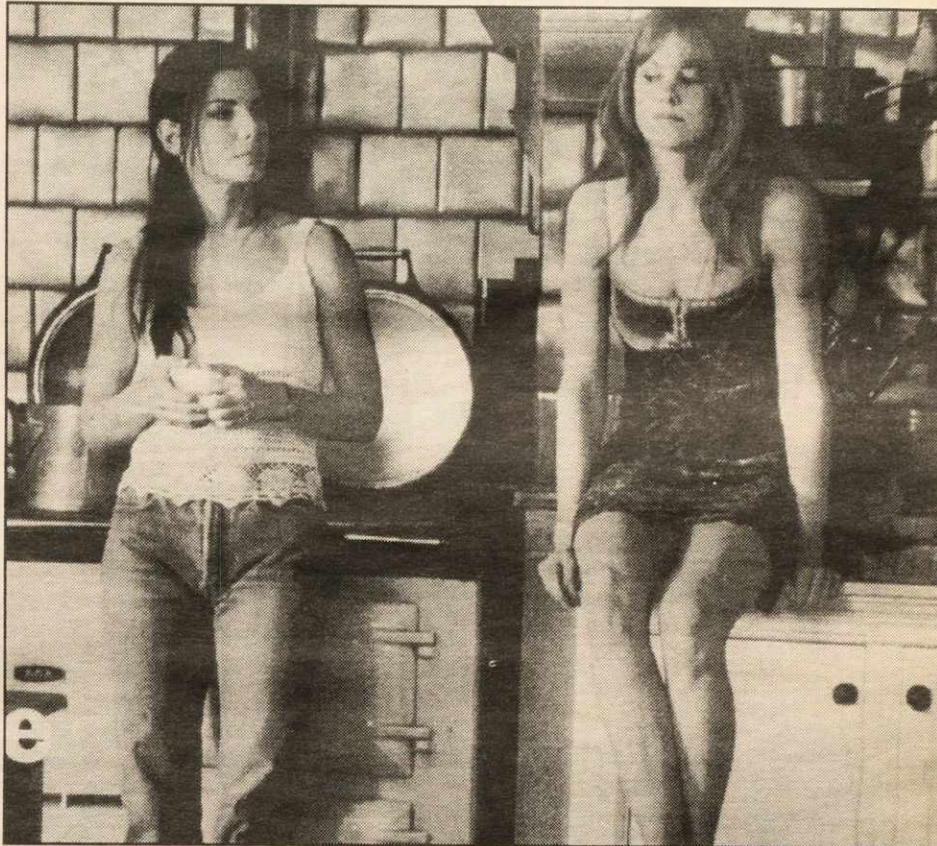
"It is bad history just to say

Dalhousie, feels that the history of witch-burnings should not be blown out of proportion.

"Like in science, it is important to study history from records left from that period and separate fact from myth," said

"The issue is women's control of women's bodies... especially reproduction. The thing that was held against them was their own sexuality."

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Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman manage box office magic in *Practical Magic*, a recent pop-culture movie take on witchy stereotypes.

Hanlon.

He says that people were quick to accuse their neighbours of being witches because witches did exist. People often feared for the safety of their children and were easily swayed by social norms.

"We should try not to throw stones at people that were acting in good faith over things that rightfully concerned them," said Hanlon.

He says that some extreme feminists extrapolate the witch-hunts unjustifiably into a reason for their feelings against men.

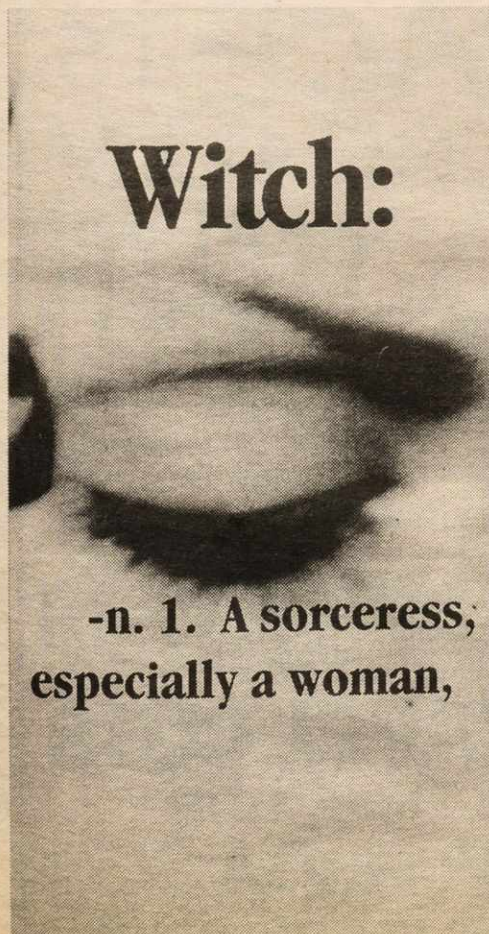
However, he says this extrapolation is based mostly on misinformation and improper sources.

As the old saying goes: if we

don't know our history, we are bound to repeat it.

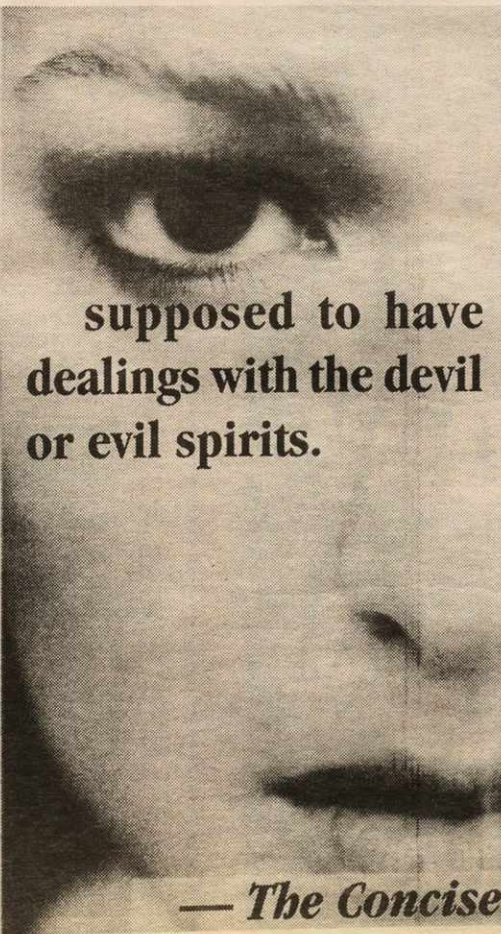
Randi Warne, associate professor of Religious Studies at MSVU says that our society should learn not to formulate inaccurate gender ideologies from the misconceptions of the era of witch-burning.

When asked if she believes that our society has learned from this era, Warne replied, "Some things have changed and just because they have, it does not mean that they have only changed for the better. The fact that they changed means that they can change back. So you need to be eternally vigilant and keep paying attention to what happens with regard to what gender ideologies are operative."



Witch:

-n. 1. A sorceress; especially a woman,



supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits.



2. An ugly old woman; a hag.



3. A fascinating girl or woman.

— *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 1990.*