

Fire & Roses: the Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834

By Nancy Lusignan Schultz

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A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

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In the midst of a deadly heat wave during the summer of 1834, a woman clawed her way over the wall of a Roman Catholic convent near Boston, Massachusetts and escaped to the home of a neighbor, pleading for protection. When the Bishop, Benedict Fenwick, persuaded her to return, rumors began swirling through the Yankee community and in the press that she was being held at the convent against her will, and had even been murdered. The imagined fate of the "Mysterious Lady," as she became popularly known, ultimately led to the destruction of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts on the night of August 11, 1834 by a mob of Protestant men.

After battering down the front door, the men destroyed icons, smashed pianos, hurled the Bishop's library into a bonfire, ransacked the possessions of both sisters and students, and finally burned the imposing building to the ground. Not satisfied even with this orgy of vandalism, they returned the following night and tore the lovely gardens up by the roots. The ruins sat on Mount Benedict, a hill overlooking Boston Harbor, for the next fifty years. The arsonists' ringleader, a brawny bricklayer named John Buzzell, became a folk hero. The nuns scattered and their proud and feisty Mother Superior Mary Anne Moffatt, who battled the working-class rioters and Church authorities, faded mysteriously into history.

Nancy Schultz brings alive this forgotten moment in the American story, shedding light on one of the darkest incidents of religious persecution to be recorded in the New World. The result of painstaking archival research, *Fire & Roses* offers a rare lens on a time when independent, educated women were feared as much as immigrants and Catholics, and anti-Papist diatribes were the stuff of bestsellers and standing-room-only lectures. Schultz examines the imagined secrets that led to the riot and uncovers the real secrets in a cloistered community whose life was completely hidden from the world. She provides a glimpse into nineteenth-century Boston and into an elite boarding school for young women, mostly the daughters of wealthy Protestants, vividly dissecting the period's roiling tensions over class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and education. Although the roots of these conflicts were in the

Puritan migration to America, it was ultimately the mob's perverse fantasies about cloistered women - in an independent community - that erupted in a combustible night of violence.

By unearthing the buried truth and bringing alive these fascinating characters, Nancy Schultz tells a gripping story of prejudice and pride, courage and cowardice in early nineteenth-century America that not only restores a clouded chapter in the country's history but also has a poignant resonance for our own times.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

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1. In what ways did Mary Anne Moffatt's personality contribute to tensions about the convent?
2. What do you think became of Moffatt?
3. Why did Bishop Fenwick, who had been such a supporter of Moffatt's before the fire, turn against her? Why did the church authorities ultimately view Mother St. George with such alarm that their perceptions of her began to approximate those of the working class rioters?
4. Although the wealthy men of Boston who sent their daughters to the convent school afterward decried the violence, why do you think they never supported the rebuilding of the school?
5. Discuss the ways that, in retrospect, the fates seemed to conspire against the Ursulines. This might include the community's battles with the scourge of tuberculosis, the mounting tensions against Catholics because of the new cemetery, the hot weather, including the lightning strike against the church and the collapse of the new church in New Haven. What does this tell us about the way histories are constructed to frame coherent narratives?
6. Convent schools run by Roman Catholic nuns stood unmolested in New Orleans and Washington DC during the same period the Ursuline convent was attacked. Was there something unique about New England culture in the 1830s which particularly lent itself to this kind of violence?
7. The behavior of the girls who were not awarded coronation medals in 1833, and during the selectmen's visit in 1834, provides a contrast to the decorous demeanor that the school's prospectus promises to instill. What are we to make of these lapses of decorum on the part of the students?
8. What could the selectmen and other officials have done to diffuse the tensions mounting in Charlestown around the Ursuline convent?

9. What do you think of the theory that the Rev. Lyman Beecher, who preached three anti-Catholic sermons on the day before the riot, and Benjamin Hallett, who helped ghost-write Rebecca Reed's narrative, *Six Months in a Convent*, were part of a conspiracy against the convent by the "better classes" who prodded the workmen into carrying out their plan?
10. Why do you think John R. Buzzell became a folk hero who was lionized by the *Boston Globe* after the event?
11. Ultimately, this story might really be about the difference in perceptions between Roman Catholics and Protestants. What to Catholics is "private" (confession, cloisters) to Protestants is "secret." Discuss the reasons that American democracy was/is unable to accommodate these differences in perspective.
12. Why do you suppose there were no Irish defenders of the convent on the night it was attacked?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Reprinted from <http://www.fireandroses.com/author.html>

Nancy Lusignan Schultz was born in 1956 in Pittsfield, Massachusetts and completed her B.A. *cum laude* in English and French at the College of the Holy Cross. Following a semester of study at both McGill University in Montreal and at the University of Paris, Sorbonne, she entered the Ph.D. program in English at Boston College, and received her doctorate in 1984. She was a visiting Associate Professor at Boston College from summer 1988-98. Schultz joined the faculty at Salem State College in Massachusetts in 1983, where she co-directed the College's Writing Center for fifteen years, and teaches writing and literature courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In 1999, she became coordinator of the College's graduate program in English and American Studies.

HELPFUL LINKS:

Author's website: <http://www.fireandroses.com/index.html>

Ursuline Convent Charlestown, MA Papers: <http://libraries.cua.edu/achrcua/ursuline.html>



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