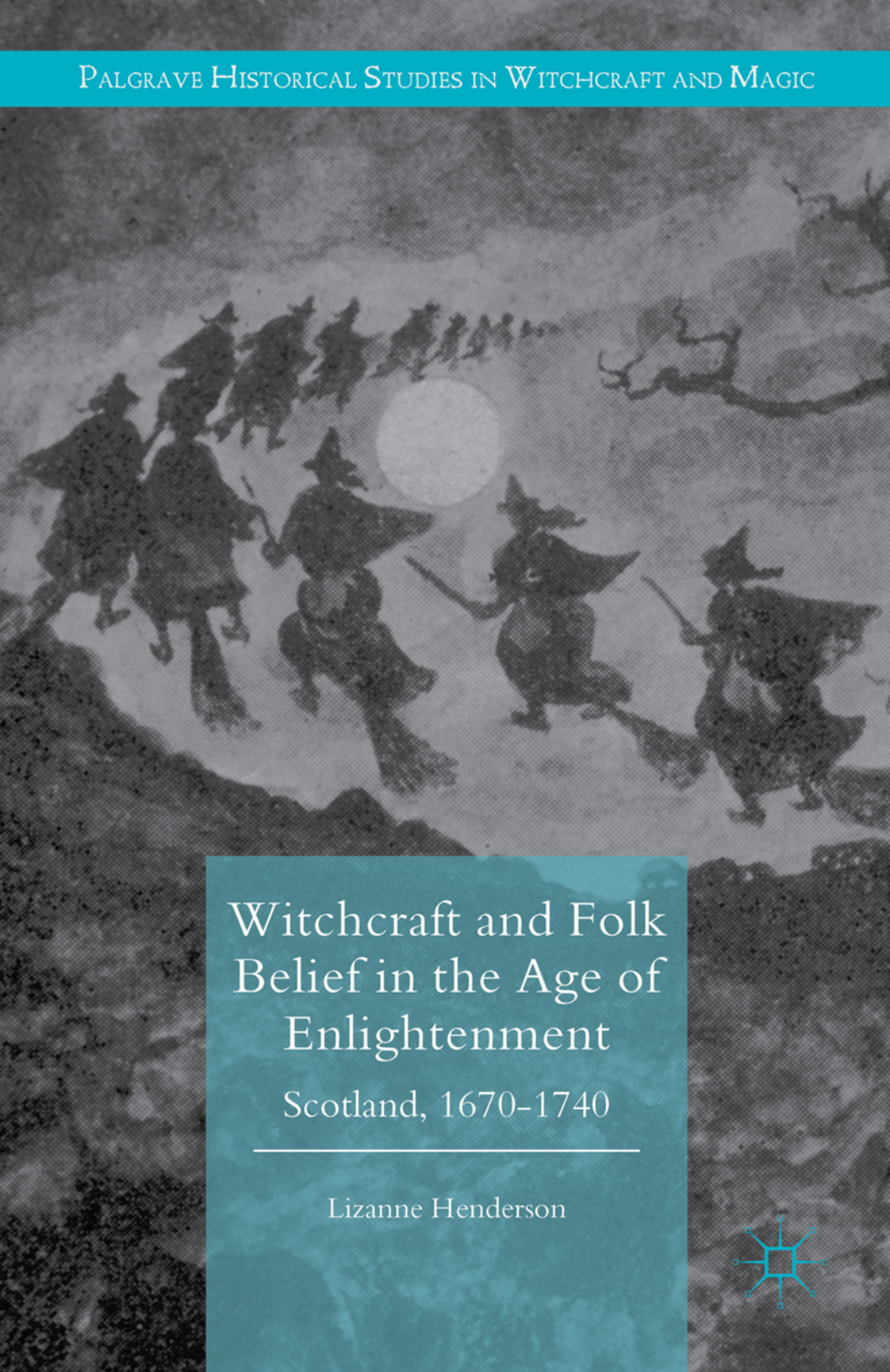


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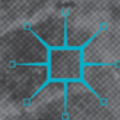


Witchcraft and Folk  
Belief in the Age of  
Enlightenment

Scotland, 1670-1740

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Lizanne Henderson



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# Witchcraft and Folk Belief in the Age of Enlightenment

Scotland, 1670–1740

Lizanne Henderson

*University of Glasgow, UK*

palgrave  
macmillan



WITCHCRAFT AND FOLK BELIEF IN THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2016 978-0-230-29438-7

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First published 2016 by  
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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of Nature America, Inc., One New York Plaza, Suite 4500, New York, NY 10004-1562.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

ISBN: 978-1-349-59313-2

E-PDF ISBN: 978-1-137-31324-9

DOI: 10.1057/9781137313249

Distribution in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world is by Palgrave Macmillan®, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

A catalogue record for the book is available from the British Library

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

*For Ted, who allowed me to imagine the past*

WITCHCRAFT, a kind of sorcery, especially in women, in which it is ridiculously supposed that an old woman, by entering into a contract with the devil, is enabled, in many instances, to change the course of nature; to raise winds; perform actions that require more than human strength; and to afflict those who offend them with the sharpest pains, &c. In the times of ignorance and superstition, many severe laws were made against witches, by which great numbers of innocent persons, distressed with poverty and age, were brought to a violent death; but these are now happily repealed.

*Encyclopædia Britannica* (First Edition, Edinburgh, 1771)

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# Preface

On 18 May 1671, Jonet McMuldritche, having been brought to trial at a Circuit Court and found guilty of witchcraft, was executed in the southwest market town of Dumfries. As was the normal method of dispatching of witches, she was strangled and her body burned to ashes, denying her a Christian burial. In order to recoup some of the expenditures of her trial and execution, possessions of any value were forfeited to the state, an action that put her surviving family at an economic disadvantage. Jonet lived at Airds on the shore of Loch Ken, Kirkcudbrightshire, where her husband was a tenant farmer and thus, potentially, a man of some moderate means. When the local bailie of the estate seized some of Jonet's livestock for unpaid rent she vowed to do him an "evil turn." When his cow and a calf died she indicated there was worse to come. After his child died he accused her of being a witch of long standing. Soon others joined in the chorus of slander and recriminations. One man's calves and his horse expired. Another man died after she cursed him. One farmer lost fifteen cattle, three horses and his wife. A child drowned in a peat bog. Other animals succumbed, neighbours fell ill – all, apparently after some altercation had taken place with Jonet.

The details of her desperate case suggest that a series of unexplained misfortunes and tragedies were laid at Jonet's door resulting in her execution. The high number of complaints against her, ranging from theft, straying animals, sickness and murder, suggests she was a highly unpopular local resident with no defenders; one might even go so far as calling her a scapegoat for community ills. It was repeatedly said by her detractors that she had been a witch "under evil report" for some considerable time, which could imply a certain level of community toleration of some duration. Her forthright character led her into numerous disputes and arguments, and she was not afraid to challenge male authority, including the bailie who initiated legal action against her. Indeed, men were her primary accusers. Elsewhere, it has been argued, such quarrels were typically between women of equivalent social status.

It is recorded in the trial documents that she was married, but the lack of any involvement or further mention of her husband, as well as the repeated, explicit references to Jonet's property, rent and goods, suggests that she was, quite likely, a widow. Her actions certainly suggest that she was struggling financially, hence the unpaid rent, theft of corn and attempts to borrow meal after her own ran out, while the numerous arguments relating to her animals straying onto other people's fields indicate she was failing to provide suitable grazing for her beasts.

What Jonet's understanding of her own predicament was, or the validity of the charges against her, cannot be fully known. However, a comment that she made, while attempting to discredit Jean Sprot, one of the female witnesses against her, was that Sprot's testimony should be rejected since "she was a witch as well as himself," able to tell fortunes based on watching the way a person walked. This might simply be interpreted as a desperate attempt to redirect attention towards another suspect in the hope that the charges would be dropped, or perhaps as an act of revenge, though no investigation of Jean was carried out. The comment could also suggest that Jonet believed, or came to believe, that she was indeed a witch. She was not a practising charmer or traditional healer, though it was thought that she had the ability to unwitch, or remove spells she had cast, and transfer the sickness to an animal. One of her victims implored her to unwitch him, but she refused and he subsequently died.

As was normal procedure, the minister and kirk session had gathered evidence against Jonet in April, prior to her formal trial, and she was executed just three days after pronouncement of a guilty verdict. The indictment against her, made by the Circuit Court, included having entered into a demonic pact, a feature that seems to have only emerged once her case got into the hands of the authorities, for this was not what had troubled the long line of witnesses who spoke out against her. Rather their concern was with the damage caused to livestock and illnesses, not to mention her murderous tendencies. The Glenkens community had been purged of a troublesome witch, and it would be over twenty years before another was found.

Elspeth McEwen lived alone at Boghall, in the parish of Balmaclellan, Galloway. She was said to be a woman of "superior education." One day, in 1696, the local minister, Thomas Verner, arrived at her door. He had received reports that she could bewitch hens into laying enormous numbers of eggs, or could stop them laying at all. She also used a wooden pin to steal milk from her neighbours' cows. When Elspeth mounted the minister's horse, to be taken before the kirk session at the local church, it trembled with fear and sweated blood. Verner was well known as a fundamentalist covenanting minister. When the kirk session decided that she had a case to answer she was transferred some twenty miles to Kirkcudbright for trial. According to reports, she was about to confess when suddenly she fixated "upon a particular part of the room and sank down in the place." The assumption was that the Devil had appeared to her in the courtroom, so reinforcing her guilt among the jurors.

The Old Wife of Boghall was sent to Kirkcudbright tolbooth, where she remained for about two years. Eventually the harsh prison conditions led to her confession; apparently she now craved death. She was executed on 24 August 1698. The financial cost of killing her survives. Ropes, tar, wood are all accounted for. The executioner drank a pint of ale costing two shillings

“when she was burning.” Before the ordeal was over he had consumed a further thirteen shillings’ worth.

The accusations levied against Elspeth were initiated by her neighbours, arising from the inconveniences and, presumably, a loss of income, when the hens stopped laying and milk yields went down. They took their complaints to the local minister, who was suitably convinced by the allegations to press for criminal charges. It is not stated where she acquired her supposed powers – no mention of a demonic pact or sex with the Devil, or any support from supernatural helpers or familiars – though there is a suggestion that the Devil appeared to her during her trial to prevent her from confessing, a detail that only emerges once she is in the hands of the authorities. She seemingly worked her magic alone and was not part of a coven. It is noteworthy that she was said to be elderly, single and well educated. The last point suggests too much so for her own good, rendering her the object of superstitious awe and possibly esoteric knowledge by the community. It is testament to her character that she did not confess to witchcraft until she had endured two years of abject horror in prison. It is unlikely that Elspeth believed herself to be a witch, though she may well have accepted knowledge of certain charms.

If any witches in Scotland can be described as “typical,” and it is a claim that I make with extreme caution, then perhaps these two women, who lived and died two decades apart, in the same rural community of the Glenkens in Galloway, might be reasonable candidates. It is possible that Elspeth knew about the execution of her one-time neighbour Jonet, some twenty-six years previous to her own incarceration, though we cannot know if the women ever actually met or knew of one another, prior to Jonet’s demise. The nature of their alleged crimes demonstrates certain similarities, concerned as they both were with maleficence against their fellow community members, of having held a long-standing reputation for witchcraft prior to conviction, and for the ways in which the initial allegations against them were subjected to a process of reinterpretation by the authorities, thus demonstrating the divide between popular and learned ideas about what constituted witchcraft.

Both Jonet McMuldritche and Elspeth McEwen’s houses were situated within a few miles from where I now reside in Galloway. Like Jonet, I have been known to challenge male authority, and, like Elspeth, I could be described as a woman of “superior education.” I think of them often when passing their former abodes. It is their lives, and others like them, that this book attempts to shed some light upon, asking why such people, my one-time neighbours, were so feared and despised at the dawn of Scotland’s age of Enlightenment.

# Acknowledgements

So many have contributed, on an intellectual or supportive basis, towards the research and writing of this book. I would like to begin by thanking Professor Richard Finlay (University of Strathclyde), for his tireless encouragement and confidence in me. I also owe much thanks to the late Professor James MacMillan (University of Edinburgh), for his early assistance when I first began this study, and to Willem de Blécourt (Huizinga Institute), who helped to guide me through the later stages of the writing-up process. Though I never had the opportunity to meet Christina Lerner, I feel she should also be thanked for laying the essential groundwork, and distinguishing the basic paradigm, which lies at the heart of all modern studies of Scottish witchcraft to date.

Countless others over the years who have provided me with information and good conversation include, in no particular order, Julian Goodare, Joyce Miller, Lauren Martin, Louise Yeoman, Christopher Smout, Éva Pócs, Rune Hagen, Stuart MacDonald, Christopher A. Whatley, Colin Kidd, Karin Bowie, Martin MacGregor, Dauvit Broun, Margaret Bennett, John MacInnes, Alison S. Inglis, John R. Young, David Buchan, A. E. Truckell, Caroline Oates, Juliette Wood, Jacqueline Simpson, Eddie Cass, Paul Smith, Douglas Gifford, Stephen Clancy, Kathryn A. Edwards, Charles Zika, Hugh Cheape, Maria Tausiet, Sybil Jack, Alastair Livingstone and Owen Davies.

I have had the opportunity to share and discuss aspects of this book at many local, national and international venues, such as the Early Modern Circle Seminar Series, at the University of Melbourne, Australia, where I was Visiting International Scholar in the School of Culture and Communication in 2014; Invited guest of the Scottish-Australian Heritage Council, Sydney, Australia; Centre for Scottish Studies, Simon Fraser University, BC, Canada; University of South Carolina, USA; St Andrews Society of California, Pasadena, USA; University of Wisconsin Madison, USA; University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, USA; Illinois St Andrews Society of Chicago, USA; ISFNR conference, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Pécs, Hungary; SIEF conference, University of Lisbon, Portugal; Beggars Descriptions conference, University of Groningen, The Netherlands; The Folklore Society, London; RWH1697 conference, Paisley Abbey; Scottish Medievalists, Pitlochry; Wigtown Book Festivals; local history societies and events in Annan, Ayr, Island of Bute, Carsphairn, Cromarty, Dumfries, Glasgow, Kirkcudbright, Largs, Linlithgow, Island of Mull, New Galloway and Selkirk; University of Edinburgh; Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen; University of Strathclyde; and the University of Glasgow. I have also had the great privilege of sharing my research while working aboard expedition ships with

the incredible tour company Adventure Canada across Britain and Ireland, Spitsbergen, Norway, the Faroes, Iceland, Greenland and Arctic Canada. Thanks, guys!

I owe a word of thanks to the many enthusiastic and enquiring undergraduate students who participated in my “Folk Belief and the Witch-Hunts” course, which I taught at the University of Glasgow from 2005 to 2015, but which despite its success and popularity, was sadly withdrawn in the perils of university restructuring. Through debates and discussions you helped me to uncover the importance and great relevance of this topic towards enhancing our understanding of both the historical and modern world.

The help and assistance I received from various institutions must also be recognized, with special thanks to the staff of Glasgow University Library Special Collections, National Archives of Scotland, the National Library of Scotland, Dumfries and Galloway Archives, Stirling Council Archives, Mitchell Library, Thomas Fisher Book Room of the University of Toronto, and Strathclyde University Library. Thank you to Edinburgh University Press and to Manchester University Press for allowing me to reuse portions of my previously published work, and to Julian Goodare for permission to use charts and data from the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft database. Much thanks is also extended to the entire production and editorial team at Palgrave.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Tembo and Soo-Koo'-Me for raising my spirits in my darkest hours, and the support and encouragement of my family and friends, especially Harry McGrath and Theresa Muñoz. My greatest debt must go to my long-suffering husband, Ted Cowan (Emeritus Professor of Scottish History and Literature, University of Glasgow), who gave me the drive and inspiration to keep on going and whose advice and (at times overly) critical feedback has been invaluable.

# List of Abbreviations

APS	<i>The Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland</i> , 12 vols. Ed. T. Thomson and C. Innes (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1814–75)
DGA	Dumfries and Galloway Archive Centre
Fastii Ecclesiae	Hew Scott, <i>Fastii Ecclesiae</i> , 9 vols. (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1915–61)
GUL	Glasgow University Library
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
JC	Justiciary Court Records (NAS)
NAS	National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh
NLS	National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh
NRS	National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh
NSA	<i>New Statistical Account of Scotland</i> , compiled by John Sinclair (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1845)
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
OSA	<i>The Statistical Account of Scotland</i> , compiled by John Sinclair. 21 vols. ((Edinburgh: William Creech, 1792–99) Gen. Eds. Donald J. Witherington and Ian R. Grant (Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1983)
Pitcairn, Trials	<i>Criminal Trials in Scotland</i> , 3 vols. Ed. Robert Pitcairn (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1833)
PSAS	<i>Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland</i>
RPC	Register of the Privy Council of Scotland
RPS	<i>The Records of the Parliament of Scotland to 1707</i> , K. M. Brown, et al. eds (St Andrews, 2007–2011)
SBSW	Christina Lerner, Christopher Hyde Lee and Hugh V. McLachlan, <i>A Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft</i> (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 1977)
SCA	Stirling Council Archives
SND	<i>Scottish National Dictionary</i>

SSWD	Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database
TDGNHAS	<i>Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society</i>
TGSI	<i>Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness</i>



# Introduction: Following the Witch

I longed much for an opportunity of sending you some informations that I promised you about witches and witchcraft.

Letter from James Fraser to Rev Robert Wodrow (1727)<sup>1</sup>

Over the centuries, both during and after the decades of the witch-hunts, many Scots must have sought “informations” about “witches and witchcraft”. This book seeks to explore these phenomena as they were experienced in Scotland, while being mainly concerned with the period of supposed decline of witch belief, an age that has been referred to as the “long eighteenth century”, coinciding with the dawn of the Scottish Enlightenment. It will be shown that the Enlightenment was undoubtedly a period of transition and redefinition of what constituted the supernatural, at the interface between folk belief and the philosophies of the learned. For the latter the eradication of such beliefs equated with progress and civilization, but for others, such as the devout, witch belief was a matter of faith, such that fear and dread of witches and their craft lasted well beyond the era of the major witch-hunts, a topic not hitherto fully investigated by historians of Scotland.<sup>2</sup> Hopefully the combined multi-disciplinary tools of history, folklore, narratology and ethnology can shed new light on the subject.

Max Weber famously speculated that the process of the decline of magic occurred at the time of the Protestant Reformation, an intermediary stage in

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter from James Fraser to Rev. Robert Wodrow, 18 April 1727, qtd in Robert Law, *Memorials; or, the Memorable Things that Fell Out within this Island of Brittain from 1638 to 1684*, ed. C. K. Sharpe (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1818) xcvi.

<sup>2</sup> Excellent exceptions to this, in a European context, are two edited collections by Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt, eds, *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), and *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

religious development, which began with magical cults and would eventually move towards a concept of transcendent divinity. His much repeated thesis that the “disenchantment of the world” (*Entzauberung der Welt*) came about with the rise of modernity can be challenged.<sup>3</sup> Belief in spirits, angels and devils continued to flourish within Protestant ideologies, and the reformers did little to quell the threat of witchcraft, but rather increased the alarm engendered by the phenomenon. The loss of magical and supernatural beliefs has also frequently been connected with the Enlightenment period, when such beliefs began to lose credibility, at least among “polite society”. However, it is argued here that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the level of debate and interest in the supernatural was actually on the increase. The revisionist view, put forward by Alexandra Walsham, that the wave of “resacralization” during the same period of time is a demonstration of the tendency towards the “desacralization” of religion and culture to rise and fall in a cyclical pattern, as opposed to a linear progression.<sup>4</sup> Even at the height of the Enlightenment, which for Scotland has been variously identified as extending from 1740 to 1780, or, more ambitiously, from c.1660 to 1830, the workings of the “invisible world” had not yet lost their attractions, continuing to hold an appeal well into the nineteenth century and beyond. It is questionable if belief in magic and the supernatural, let alone witchcraft, has ever really been quashed as there is evidence of survivals, albeit in different guises, in the present day, but perhaps what can be conceded is Euan Cameron’s point that over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “the *fear* of magic”, and by extension fear of witchcraft, diminished.<sup>5</sup>

The move towards scepticism should be viewed as an evolutionary process, but must also be appropriately contextualized as scepticism is not something that necessarily belongs to any one type or category of people at any set moment in time. From an intellectual point of view, there was not, as Stuart Clark found, any “real polarization” between those who wrote in defence of witchcraft and those who argued against it.<sup>6</sup> Theological opinions could also greatly vary on the topic of witchcraft, and often did embrace a sceptical position. The philosophical rise of scepticism did not,

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<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York and London: Scribners, Allen & Unwin, 1930) 105; idem, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); H. H. Gerth, C. Wright Mills and B. S. Turner, eds, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Alexandra Walsham, “The Reformation and ‘the Disenchantment of the World’ Reassessed”, *Historical Journal* 51/2 (2008): 527–8.

<sup>5</sup> Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason and Religion, 1250–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 14.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 203.

as will be shown, have a direct or demonstrable impact on the decline of witch trials. To deny or disbelieve in the reality of witchcraft is still a form of belief, or “unbelief”, and so the multivalent voices of scepticism, and what that meant in the context of Enlightenment Scotland, will be given due acknowledgement.

Although the focus of this study is mainly, though not exclusively, concerned with the period from the 1670s to the 1730s, Enlightenment Scotland is being used as a convenient term for an historical period, generally believed to have closed with the death of Sir Walter Scott in 1832. Quite when it began is still a matter of some controversy, as this study will discuss. Although most of my evidence is drawn from contemporary sources, much of value can be recovered from texts of the later eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries since many of the writers could be said to have emerged from the folk tradition themselves.

Scholarly interest, at least in Scotland, has mostly been concerned with the persecution of witches, with the origin of the witch-hunts, what kept them going, and how and why they came to an end. What has been less well understood or investigated is the experience of those who were accused of witchcraft – the opinions, attitudes and belief systems of the accused themselves. The impact such allegations had on family members of the accused, as well as community reactions to witchcraft, have similarly been an understudied aspect.

The study of Scottish witch beliefs can open up an understanding of the complexities of belief, the *mentalité* and worldview of past generations. How did people make sense of their world and their surroundings? What were people most afraid of, and how did they deal with those fears? For those living in Early Modern Scotland, at a personal level, one might fear for their own physical and spiritual health, for that of their family, and the prosperity of the community in which they lived and worked. There was an ever-present fear of disease and illness, anxieties about present dangers, such as riot and warfare, and concerns about livelihoods. At a national level, the reformed church, with the backing of the state, took action to cleanse and eradicate what it viewed as the moral and spiritual degeneracy of the country and its inhabitants by criminalizing aspects of popular belief and customary practice. Catholicism was a major target; so too were witches and charmers. Witchcraft had existed as a concept long before the mid-sixteenth-century legislative initiatives were enacted to suppress it, but witchcraft was fast becoming a far more terrifying and pervasive construct, aligned much more closely to the machinations of the Devil than ever before. The growing associations that were being made between witches and the Devil, from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, made witches a threat, not only to the individual but to society at large. In the process of countering this palpable menace, both church and state could be blamed with creating more fears and anxieties among the populace than they ever

successfully salved. They also produced the conducive, accusatory atmosphere that allowed for the large-scale persecution of suspected witches and heretical devil-worshippers. In the post-1662 period under investigation, in the years following the largest witch-hunt on Scottish soil, the atmosphere once again began to change and adapt. Other fears began to emerge or take precedence, such as the spread of deism and atheism.

The major driving force behind the purging of convicted witches was, without question, the church. It was part of the ministers' duties to assess and, if deemed necessary, process suspected witches for further investigation. Yet the arraignment of persons brought before the kirk session on suspicion of witchcraft was relatively uncommon, constituting just one of many social and moral misdemeanours that had to be dealt with in the pursuit of a "godly" society. The railings of the ministers against such things as witchcraft, charming, visitations to holy wells, swearing, dancing, and a host of other supposed moral outrages, have inadvertently provided the historian with an invaluable catalogue of customs, popular culture, insights into everyday life, emotions and attitudes towards gender and sexual mores. The vast number of concerns voiced by the kirk brethren were in relation to adultery, fornication, sexual activity or pregnancy out of wedlock, rape and sexual assault, or so-called "deviant" sexual behaviours. Another issue that appears with some frequency was Sabbath-breaking. It was unacceptable to engage in any sort of activity during the Lord's Day. In Ayr, for instance, a man was rebuked in 1671 for cutting grass on a Sunday. Drinking alcohol to excess was also frowned upon, on any day of the week, but was particularly disapproved of on the Sabbath. In 1691, the Ayr session empowered the town constables to inflict "such pains and punishments as they in their wisdom shall think fit" upon "wanderers on streets or drinkers in taverns" on the Sabbath.<sup>7</sup> In 1734, and again in 1755, the Arbroath kirk session enacted a sort of "neighbourhood watch" scheme to catch people in the pubs when they were supposed to be at church.<sup>8</sup> One eighteenth-century commentator in Caithness cheekily remarked that "the inn drew a much larger congregation than the Church".<sup>9</sup> Witchcraft was also considered to be a secular crime, and as such it is important to place it alongside other criminal offences for a fuller understanding of its place within the appropriate legal, cultural and social frameworks.

This book is not about the Scottish Enlightenment as an intellectual movement but rather seeks to assess the impact of Enlightenment thought on Scottish witch belief. Most thinkers of the time dismissed superstitions

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<sup>7</sup> David Murray Lyon, *Ayr in the Olden Times* (Ayr: Ayr Advertiser, 1928) 73, 75.

<sup>8</sup> 3 November 1734 and 8 May 1755, Arbroath Kirk Session Records, qtd in George Hay, *History of Arbroath to the Present Time* (Arbroath: Thomas Buncle, 1876) 240.

<sup>9</sup> John E. Donaldson, *Caithness in the 18th Century* (Edinburgh and London: Moray Press, 1938) 31.

as “the product of credulous ignorance, flourishing like mushrooms in dark places away from light”.<sup>10</sup> Although they would have dismissed witch beliefs as irrational, paradoxically one of the most effective ways of interrogating these beliefs is to act as if they are rational, that they make sense to the believer, an approach adopted in my earlier study *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001); I may not believe it myself but I accept that my witness does.

An underlying theme throughout this book is that belief in witches carried on in some quarters regardless of the Enlightenment, across a wide spectrum of society, surviving longer than was once assumed. As a spiritual and philosophical debating point, witchcraft was used and picked over by sceptics and believers to suit the purpose of their respective arguments. However, keen to write off supernatural beliefs to “the dustbin of history”, many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentators were guilty of a triumphalist view towards the past, regarding the era of the witch-hunts as a struggle between “reason and science on the one hand and intellectual obscurantism and religious bigotry on the other” – a battle fought and allegedly won by the proponents of enlightenment values.<sup>11</sup> The adoption and imposition of demonological ideas upon pre-existing witch beliefs, a process which in Scotland can be traced to the latter half of the sixteenth century, had a drastic effect on how witchcraft was viewed and treated by the religious and secular authorities, exacerbating witch-hunting and the prosecution of magical activities in general. The level of impact such demonological impositions subsequently had upon folk beliefs regarding witchcraft, and the course the witch-hunts took in Scotland, especially in a post-1662 context, is another concern of this study.

No society, at any time in the past, was bound by homogeneous thoughts about the supernatural. There are no clean lines between “folk” and “elite”, rural and urban, illiterate and literate, laity and clergy, when it comes to an understanding of what constituted the supernatural or degrees of belief. Bi-polar distinctions such as Peter Burke’s two-tiered model of the “great tradition” and the “little tradition”, in his highly influential *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), have now largely been overtaken. Social historians such as Roger Chartier questioned whether it is even possible to establish credible relationships between particular class or social groups and specific cultural practices.<sup>12</sup> Robert Scribner proposed that while social

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher J. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) 5.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Elmer, “Science, History and Witchcraft”, in *Witchcraft Historiography*, ed. Jonathan Barry and Owen Davies (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 33–51.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper, 1978); Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, trans. L. C. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. L. C. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

stratifications should not necessarily be ignored, popular culture is better understood as a unified system of shared values, social mores and attitudes, while Brian Levack calls for historians to view popular and learned culture as a “process of cultural negotiation and exchange”.<sup>13</sup> Understanding witchcraft belief, and how it may have operated among different types of people has, in many ways, moved on because we now accept, as Stuart Clark has pointed out, its relationship to “other areas of early modern European thought”:

debates about witchcraft in the context of religious, political, or other controversies, the cultural production, transmission, and contesting of notions of witchcraft, the filtering of witchcraft episodes in terms of gender and race, and, above all, the “language” or “rhetoric” of witchcraft – its symbolisms, idioms, classifications, and vocabularies, its metaphorical extensions, its narrative features, and so on.<sup>14</sup>

It has been observed that witchcraft scholars have often been “pioneers of new forms of historical study and interdisciplinary developments, as the subject touches upon many fundamental issues regarding the human experience both in the past and present”.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, there has yet to have emerged a single model or paradigm that can successfully be applied to the whole geographical and chronological expanse of the European witch-hunts. The complexities and individual nuances involved with each trial, and in every location where trials were held, does not easily permit this. Brian Levack, for one, has warned against monolithic descriptions of a single European witch-hunt or “craze” as they can be misleading, obscuring the fact that there were multiple trials held at different times and places, and ignoring regional and national diversity.<sup>16</sup> A major methodological breakthrough in the conceptual understanding of witch-accusation patterns was Alan Macfarlane’s social scientific regional study, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970), produced during a time when witchcraft was regarded by most historians “as peripheral, not to

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Scribner, “Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?”, *History of European Ideas* 10/2 (1989): 175–91; Brian P. Levack, “Introduction”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 7.

<sup>14</sup> Stuart Clark, ed., *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001) 9.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Barry and Owen Davies, eds, *Witchcraft Historiography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 1.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (1987; 3rd edn, Harlow: Pearson Education, 2006) 175.

say bizarre".<sup>17</sup> Close analysis of the Essex evidence revealed that witchcraft beliefs were "a normal part of village life, widespread and regular", placing such beliefs within the context of contemporary social relations. Moreover, Macfarlane convincingly demonstrated that accusations were rarely made at random but that a pattern could be discerned based on underlying tensions between richer and poorer villagers. A characteristic feature behind many accusations was thus, he discovered, the refusal of a more prosperous villager to aid a poorer neighbour who asked for alms or some other form of assistance. The arguments that frequently ensued from such conflicts could lead to an accusation of witchcraft if some misfortune could be linked to the disagreement. Macfarlane's thesis is commonly referred to as the "charity-refused model", and was given immediate recognition within witchcraft scholarship. Scotland's own Christina Lerner praised Macfarlane's innovations as opening "a door to the peasant economy and the peasant experience",<sup>18</sup> while her own groundbreaking study, *Enemies of God* (1981), was similarly influenced by sociological approaches, mostly relating to gender, social control, ideology and state formation.

The universal application of Macfarlane's model has, inevitably, since been disputed, including by Macfarlane himself who, in a later study, concluded that witch-hunting was not expressly linked to the rise of capitalism and that the role of individualism must be taken into consideration. More recently, Marko Nenonen finds the main problem with the charity-refused model is that there has not, as yet, been a detailed enough study that can unambiguously demonstrate a consistent link between witchcraft prosecutions and times of crisis or economic setbacks. Robin Briggs and Malcolm Gaskill wisely regard the charity-refused model as "only one of many possible scenarios", a perspective that applies to the Scottish evidence as well.<sup>19</sup>

The centre and periphery model, advanced by Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen in the 1990s, recognized that the witch-hunts were a dynamic process "in which the centre gradually imposes its values on the periphery",

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<sup>17</sup> Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (1970; London: Routledge, 1999); Keith Thomas, "The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft", in *Witchcraft Accusations and Confessions*, ed. Mary Douglas (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970) 47.

<sup>18</sup> Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981) 21.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978) 1–2, 59, 189; Marko Nenonen and Raisa Maria Toivo, eds., *Writing Witch-Hunt Histories: Challenging the Paradigm* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) 26–7; Robin Briggs, "'Many Reasons Why': Witchcraft and the Problem of Multiple Explanations", in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 91.

while useful in many contexts is, once again, not a one size fits all.<sup>20</sup> That said, it could have some meaningful application in a Scottish context when, for instance, discussing the Lowland–Highland divide or the central urban belt as opposed to the rural regions of the north and southern Lowlands.

Johannes Dillinger posits that the “holistic” comparative method is particularly well-suited to witchcraft studies. Taking account of anthropological, folkloristic, social, economic and political aspects, *Evil People* (2009) offers a highly comprehensive and sophisticated explanation of the tensions between the power of the state versus the role of the ordinary people in determining the course and development of the witch-hunts in Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier.<sup>21</sup> Dillinger’s study reveals that any number of conflicts could generate a suspicion of witchcraft, the “evil people principle” that acted as a general precondition to the witch persecutions. Furthermore, he detects that both regions were characterized by an underlying tension between the ordinary people, who were a major driving force behind the witch trials, and the territorial lord, who was often hesitant to respond to local demands. He picks apart aspects of community structures, social situations and everyday conflicts in order to uncover the root causes and genesis of witchcraft allegations, examining the structure and management of the witch trials and charting the “grapevine” along which suspicions of witchcraft travelled and were transmitted. His study reveals issues surrounding agrarian crisis, the impact of torture, and the sobering conclusion that while economic distress may have provoked witch-hunts, the expense involved in conducting such trials could also set limitations upon them. The benefits of comparative work bear fruit when assessing the impact of the trials upon neighbouring territories.

The comparative approach within witchcraft studies is relatively underdeveloped, though Dillinger has demonstrated how it can be done successfully. Larner concluded her study of the Scottish witch-hunts with a chapter on the comparative setting, establishing that the Scottish experience was among one of the worst in Europe, but she was careful to point out that Scotland “had its own distinct characteristics”. Another notable comparative study, of relevance for Scotland, is Liv Willumsen’s *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark* (2013), in which mainland Scotland is compared with the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland, and in turn with Finnmark, the northernmost county of Norway.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen, eds., *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries* (1990; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 10.

<sup>21</sup> Johannes Dillinger, *“Evil People”: A Comparative Study of Witch Hunts in Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier*, trans. Laura Stokes (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God* 197; Liv H. Willumsen, *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).



Potentially of great significance for how we study past belief systems is the area of narratology, the study of the structure and function of various kinds of narratives and their themes, representations and conventions. Narrative, put simply, is the process by which stories are told. The form that narration takes, how it has been transmitted, and the manner in which it has been presented, can affect our perception and understanding of the story.<sup>23</sup> Needless to say, there are a multitude of narrative voices and forms when it comes to the study of witch beliefs, and folk belief in general. At times these voices are quiet and difficult to hear, mere whisperings between the lines of the documents, while other voices shout loudly and clamour for our attention. Close readings of the evidence, paying attention to the point of view or particular bias of the narrator, can divulge the state of mind and the emotions of the people involved.

This book concentrates upon witchcraft, though a number of themes and examples of folk belief could have been undertaken for a study of this nature. For instance, festivals and calendar customs, or the rituals surrounding birth, marriage and death, would have merited discussion. Related supernatural phenomena, which may figure within the totality of witch belief, such as charms and charming, second sight, the appearance of ghosts, apparitions and poltergeists, the belief in fairies, brownies, kelpies, mermaids, and so on, would have also fitted nicely within the scope of this enquiry. Focus has been directed towards witchcraft for two main reasons: to give the study a concentrated testing ground, and also because it is in this particular area of supernatural belief that the most sustained levels of debate arose, from among the educated and non-educated alike. While evidence is used from the Scottish Borders to Orkney and Shetland, as well as the *Gàidhealtachd*, or Gaelic-speaking regions of Scotland, more detailed consideration focuses upon southwest Scotland, encompassing Ayrshire, Dumfriesshire and Galloway, partly because there is no modern study of the region, but also because of the area's rich complexity in matters cultural, historical and religious. Furthermore the southwestern counties provide a corrective to the somewhat widespread idea that there was somehow more folklore and superstition to be found in the Highlands than in other parts of Scotland. While the southwest did not engage in the systematic persecution of witches and charmers until a comparatively late date (Ayrshire excepted), it continued to pursue these particular social deviants for longer than some other parts of the country. In fact, the region proves to be a rich repository of information on surviving folk beliefs, which again may be deemed to have received reinforcement since they were exploited almost as weapons in the ongoing battle between centre and periphery, state and church, and

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<sup>23</sup> James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, eds, *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, eds, *What Is Narratology?: Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008).

in some cases between individual ministers and their congregations. The circumstance that Dumfries, Galloway and Ayrshire were centrally involved in the covenanting agitation lends additional interest, and there is fascinating documentation to suggest that women, in particular, were only too ready to challenge some of the more far-fetched delusions of fundamentalist men.

The geographical spread of witch beliefs has been largely restricted to discussing areas where witch-hunting occurred or, in other words, where there is evidence for witch persecution. In practice, there were several places in Scotland that never actually experienced a witch-hunt, or at least very few. In an ideal world, it would be advantageous to look more closely at those regions that were free from persecution and establish the nature of witch beliefs therein. This would allow for a more balanced picture of regional distinctiveness and a fairer assessment of the extent to which learned ideas infected or cross-fertilized with folk beliefs, but regrettably the surviving evidence does not easily permit this level of analysis. We are largely constrained by following the witches only in communities that sought to punish them, though there are other ways of accessing witch-related beliefs such as through the persecution of charmers, slander trials, contemporary literature, newspaper reportage and the writings of antiquarians. It is still unclear if people in the localities that hunted witches in greater numbers held stronger beliefs and attitudes towards witchcraft than in areas that did not feel the need, or have the opportunity, to prosecute witches, or, indeed, if there were noteworthy differences in belief between rural and urban settlements. Oscar di Simplicio's work on wider European trends has suggested that demographic growth had the "greatest impact on attitudes towards witchcraft, because the progressive anonymity of larger populations created circumstances in which accusations of *maleficium* were less likely to occur than in small-scale villages".<sup>24</sup> That eighteenth-century Scotland was experiencing a period of drastic change, with the onset of large waves of outward migration, population movements towards centres of industrialization, increased urbanization and a rapidly growing economy, suggests that there may well be grounds for linking the decrease in accusations with these wider social and economic changes. The classic village witch may have struggled to operate within these new urban centres, but fear of forces outwith one's control – which is essentially what also lies at the heart of witchcraft – would continue to stalk the human imagination long after the witches drew their last breath.

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<sup>24</sup> Oscar di Simplicio, "On the Neuropsychological Origins of Witchcraft Cognition: The Geographical and Economic Variable", in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 507–27.

# 1

## Fixing the Limits of Belief

Hard luck, alake! when poverty an' eild, [old age]  
Weeds [clothes] out o' fashion, an' a lanely beild, [shelter]  
Wi' a sma' cast o' wiles, should, in a twitch,  
Gi'e ane the hatefu' name, *A wrinkled witch*.  
This fool imagines, as do mony sic,  
That I'm a wretch in compact wi' Auld Nick;  
Because by education I was taught  
To speak an' act aboon their common thought.

Allan Ramsay, *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725)<sup>1</sup>

The history of seventeenth-century Scotland seemed to bear out the truth of Voltaire's assertion that "the most superstitious times have always been those of the most horrible crimes."<sup>2</sup> Before the Union of the Crowns in 1603 the country had experienced ongoing religious upheaval and witch-hunts, to which, after 1603, were added the uncertainties of the kingless kingdom, the covenanting revolution, bitter civil war, famine and plague, the execution of Charles I, occupation by the Cromwellians and the overturn at the Restoration of all that had been achieved, or foisted upon, Scotland (depending upon one's point of view) since 1633. Charles II cared little for Scotland and less for Scots, but with the exception of the perennial obsession of the Covenanters, religious fervour cooled somewhat in the later seventeenth century, and it is to the 1670s and 1680s that scholars would now assign the origins of the Scottish Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> Scotland

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Ramsay, "The Gentle Shepherd," *The Poems of Allan Ramsay*, 2 vols. (1800; Paisley: Alex. Gardner, 1877) 42–134, act 2, scene 3.

<sup>2</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. and trans. T. Besterman (1764; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 383.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Jane Rendall, *The Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment, 1707–1776* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1978); R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, eds., *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1982) passim;

did not escape the profound changes that were reverberating throughout Europe in the wake of the Cartesians. According to Jonathan Israel, the drama “profoundly involved the common people, even those who were unschooled and illiterate,” though in all probability the Scots were more affected by “the tremendous power of the traditionalist counter-offensive, a veritable ‘Counter-Enlightenment’.”<sup>4</sup> Thomas Munck agrees: “changes in attitudes and beliefs during the eighteenth century can be studied at least as fruitfully from the vantage point of more ordinary people.”<sup>5</sup> The late Donald Witherington takes this further, noting that the distinctive mark of Enlightenment in Scotland was “that its ideas and ideals were very widely diffused, in all areas and among a very wide span of social groups, in what was for the time a remarkably well educated and highly literate population in country as well as in town.”<sup>6</sup> This book explores and investigates this traditionalist stance, or offensive, in Scotland, a topic that, until recently, has hitherto attracted virtually no scholarly attention whatsoever.

By focusing upon witchcraft, this study considers the apparent conundrum that there was arguably more interest than there had ever been before, on the part of the elite and the learned, in folk belief, superstition and the supernatural, during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the decades that were giving birth to the Scottish Enlightenment. Despite what “enlightenment” terminology might imply, Scotland did not emerge overnight from some sort of preternatural gloom to the dazzling light of a new day. Rather, the dawn of the Scottish Enlightenment has been widely recognized as a period of transition when, perhaps ironically, the supernatural received unprecedented questioning, investigation and scrutiny. A further irony is that the Kirk, which had been attacking popular culture

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Roger Emerson, “Scottish Cultural Change 1660–1710 and the Union of 1707,” in *A Union for Empire: Political Thought and the British Union of 1707*, ed. John Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 121–44; Alexander Brodie, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Historical Age of the Historical Nation* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001) 6–14; Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots’ Invention of the Modern World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002) 1–91; Roger Emerson, “The Contexts of the Scottish Enlightenment,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Brodie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 9–30; Paul Wood, “Science in the Scottish Enlightenment,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Brodie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 94–116.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 5, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Munck, *The Enlightenment: A Comparative Social History, 1721–1794* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2000) vii–viii.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Witherington, “What Was Distinctive about the Scottish Enlightenment?,” in *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment*, ed. Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987) 9–19.

ever since 1560, now embraced and exploited the very superstitions that both church and state authorities had been seriously attempting to destroy, in order to defend religion against what were perceived to be the ravages of atheism.

The main intention of this study is to demonstrate that folk or popular beliefs – those of the subordinate classes – not only survived, but in some cases were actually reinforced by elite attitudes and interests. One figure who made a massive contribution to the dissemination of information and ideas about a wide range of such beliefs was Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832). Scott could be said to have founded his literary career on the collection of ballads, folklore and traditions of Scotland, particularly of his ancestral Border region. His *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–03) enjoyed immense popularity and influence as well as providing a useful quarry of information. A lifelong fascination with the subject led to the publication, very late in his career, of *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830). However, reviewing John Galt's Gothic novel *The Omen* in 1826, Scott argued that “belief in the superstition of the olden time, which believed in spectres, fairies, and other supernatural apparitions” could no longer be sustained. “These airy squadrons have long been routed, and are banished to the cottage and the nursery.”<sup>7</sup>

This study concentrates on the years after 1662 – which marks the last full-scale witch-hunt in Scotland – around which time it is generally recognized that the persecution of witches steeply declined.<sup>8</sup> Much of the material used in this book on the persecution of witches is concerned with pre-Enlightenment Scotland, or what I have referred to as the dawn of the Scottish Enlightenment. Though Enlightenment ideas had been evolving since the last three decades of the seventeenth century, 1740 is often used to mark the manifestation of the Scottish Enlightenment proper. David Allan noted that “1740 also marks a pivotal point in the problematic historiography of Scotland's intellectual life. Hereafter, Scotland is unashamedly regarded as a country in the grip of an Enlightenment.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> James Hogg, *The Three Perils of Man: War, Women and Witchcraft*, ed. Douglas Gifford (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996) xvii; Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001; Edinburgh: John Donald, 2011) 198.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Larner, *Enemies of God*, 78–9, 176; Brian P. Levack, “The Decline and End of Witchcraft Prosecutions,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. S. Clark and B. Ankarloo (London: Athlone Press, 1999) 1–93; Brian P. Levack, “The Decline and End of Scottish Witch-Hunting,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. J. Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 166–81.

<sup>9</sup> David Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993) 15.

The changing attitudes towards witchcraft and folk belief with which this study is concerned might loosely be divided into two transitional phases – 1663 to 1740 and 1740 to 1832 – representing a shift from one dominant ideology to another, encompassing the period from the dawn of the Scottish Enlightenment until the death of Sir Walter Scott. The situation during the “long eighteenth century” was remarkably fluid, representing the perennial conflict between the elite and the subordinate classes, but there was also considerable diversity of opinion within the ranks of the elite, and indeed of the folk themselves.

### Fixing the limits of superstition

The incomparable Voltaire believed that his childhood and youth coincided with one of the great revolutions in human history: “it was during the late seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth that superstition in general, and credulous dread of magical forces and demons in particular, first began unmistakably to recede throughout Europe.” It was a period when the greatest European minds “uniformly reviled bigotry and ‘superstition’ and discarded, if not expressly rejected, belief in magic, divination, alchemy, and demonology.”<sup>10</sup> It was difficult, said Voltaire, “to fix the limits of superstition”:

A Frenchman travelling in Italy finds everything superstitious, and is not mistaken. The archbishop of Canterbury maintains that the archbishop of Paris is superstitious. The Presbyterians bring the same charge against his lordship of Canterbury, and are in their turn called superstitious by the Quakers, who are the most superstitious of all in the eyes of other Christians.<sup>11</sup>

Superstition, as applied here by Voltaire, carried the meaning of unfounded, false, or the irrational religious beliefs of others. As he observed, while no one could agree about the nature of superstition, half of Europe in his own day was in full agreement that the other half “has long been and still is superstitious.”<sup>12</sup> Voltaire was by no means the first to consider such matters, but his was a powerful voice. At the same time others were arriving at similar conclusions, as the above quotation from Allan Ramsay suggests. David Hume wittily described how some “opposed one species of superstition with another” while others escaped to “the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 400.

<sup>11</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 384.

<sup>12</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 384.

<sup>13</sup> David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (London: A. Henderson, 1757) xv.

Superstition, like witchcraft, is a heavily loaded term, pejoratively applied to the beliefs of others. In classical times the word was used to condemn so-called barbarous, or non-Roman, religious rituals and practices. Etymologically, the word is derived from the Latin *superstitio*, meaning “irrational religious awe or credulity, particular superstitious belief or practice, foreign or non-orthodox religious practice or doctrine,” and Middle French, *supersticion*, which referred to “unorthodox or unfounded (especially non-Christian or heretical) religious belief, magical or occult practice.” “Superstition” thus entered historical discourse as a pejorative and an encapsulation of the beliefs and social mores of one’s enemies or opponents. In the Reformation era, the term retained a stress on religious beliefs, ceremonies or practices “considered to be irrational, unfounded, or based on fear or ignorance,” primarily in the context of Protestant criticism of Catholicism. In the Age of Enlightenment, the meaning of “superstition” retained much of the same emphasis as before. Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), while not the first English dictionary, nor the most comprehensive, was the most popular of its day. Johnson compiled his dictionary with an aim of capturing the everyday language people actually used, as opposed to the so-called “inkhorn” terms in Latin or Greek rarely used in ordinary parlance. Johnson’s definition of superstition makes no explicit note of the anti-Catholic resonances of the term, nor ties it to any particular sense of the supernatural, but keeps the focus on the idea of “false religion or worship.”<sup>14</sup> Other commentators of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were, however, beginning to use the term with further connotations of “irrational belief in supernatural influences,” such as John Brand, who was an avid collector of “superstition among the vulgar.”<sup>15</sup> By the late eighteenth century, in an era of growing empiricism, “superstition” could additionally be used in non-religious contexts, in the sense of an “unreasonable, groundless, or mistaken notion.” Scottish geologist James Hutton, for instance, spoke derisively about “men of science” whose beliefs in certain scientific theories were based on “prejudice or superstition, i.e. without having seen its evidence.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jack Lynch, ed., *Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary: Selections from the 1755 Work that Defined the English Language* (Delray Beach, FL: Levensger Press, 2004) 1–2. Johnson’s entry reads: “1. Unnecessary fear or scruples in religion; observance of unnecessary and uncommanded rites or practices; religion without morality. 2. False religion; reverence of beings not proper objects of reverence; false worship.”

<sup>15</sup> OED; John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities: Chiefly Illustrating the Origin of Our Vulgar Customs, Ceremonies and Superstitions*, 2 vols. Revised with additions by Henry Ellis (Newcastle on Tyne: J. Johnson, 1777; London: F. C. and D. Rivington, 1813) 99.

<sup>16</sup> OED; James Hutton, *A Dissertation Upon the Philosophy of Light, Heat, and Fire* (Edinburgh: Cadell and Davies, 1794) 107.

“Superstition” represented the “other” – the irreligious, the sinful and the diabolical. In the age of the witch-hunts heresy, or worse apostasy, was a significantly more severe crime for it implied “a conscious deviation from the truth,” while “superstition” incorporated “error through ignorance.”<sup>17</sup> From very early on in the polemics of Protestant reform, “superstition,” which included aspects of folk religion, was said to be undermining the foundations of Christianity. A sustained attack on some of the more visible apparatus of late medieval Catholic theological practice ensued; multiplication of masses, lighting candles, the consecration of material objects and the belief in transubstantiation, for instance, were all dismissed as “superstitious.” The Protestants were attempting to take the “magic” out of religious practice by pointing the finger of “superstition” at Catholicism. In so doing, they were simultaneously denying this label as a descriptor of their own beliefs and practices. The question over what constituted superstition was not, therefore, a minor quibble over trivial matters, but a serious debate over fundamental issues of spirituality, faith and religious doctrine.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the distinction between Protestant and Catholic theological interpretations of magic were actually not as profound as the reformers claimed, at times sharing more in common than either side would have liked to admit. For instance, providentialist interpretations were frequently read into monstrous births, freak weather events and suchlike signs, portents and omens of God’s displeasure with sinners. Both Protestants and Catholics in early modern Scotland “lived in a magical universe,”<sup>19</sup> but the Protestant contention – built as it was upon a foundation of rhetoric that sought to distinguish itself from what it viewed as the darkness and superstition of Catholicism – attributed all magical manifestations to the omnipotence of God. By the late seventeenth century it might be assumed that the process of distinguishing what was deemed superstitious, and what was not, might have been worked out and well understood, yet this was not the case. The lines between religion, folk belief and superstition were still blurred.

One of the acclaimed catalysts of Enlightenment was Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) who, though known as the “philosopher of Rotterdam,” was actually French. In a book about comets as supposed supernatural portents, he lamented the persistence of superstition and tradition, throughout history, owing to the antiquity and universality of beliefs, which had never

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<sup>17</sup> Helen Parish and William G. Naphy, “Introduction,” in *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe*, ed. H. Parish and W. G. Naphy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 2.

<sup>18</sup> Parish and Naphy, *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe*, 2–4.

<sup>19</sup> P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, “Rational Superstition,” in *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe*, ed. H. Parish and W. G. Naphy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 170–87.



been challenged by reason.<sup>20</sup> Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657–1757) in his *Histoire des Oracles* (1687), a book much favoured by Voltaire, argued that in the ancient and Christian worlds alike, oracles had been fraudulently maintained by the rich and powerful, in an unholy alliance between rulers and priests, to keep the people in ignorance. While professing orthodox Catholicism, he proceeded to debunk suspect supernatural beliefs, drawing a distinction between the fraudulent oracle craft of antiquity and genuine magic and Satanic power. Fontenelle drew upon the work of the Mennonite Dutchman, Anthonie van Dale (1638–1708), whose investigations of witchcraft concluded that the phenomenon was entirely bogus, as were sorcery, demonic powers, possession, divination, ghosts, soothsaying, and the supposed feats of which the Devil was deemed capable, belief in all of which he roundly condemned the churches for encouraging, in their own perverted interests. In his view, there was an intimate connection between credulity and despotism. Superstition, he argued, was used by rulers, statesmen and religious leaders as a device to control the people. Van Dale's reaction to Fontenelle's reworking of his ideas was mixed. While he admitted he was flattered he was also quick to point out a fundamental difference in the Frenchman's treatment, namely his failure to reject the reality of magic and the Devil's power over human thought and action as he himself had done. This reluctance, Van Dale conjectured, was so illogical to the overall thesis that Fontenelle must have been swayed by fear of Louis XIV and the Catholic Church to modify the argument.<sup>21</sup>

The most sustained attack of all upon witchcraft and every variety of superstition flowed from the energetic pen of the Frisian, Balthasar Bekker (1634–98), whose views generated total uproar in the Netherlands and beyond. One of the most comprehensive studies of demonology, witchcraft, magic and the spirit world of its day, *De Betooverde Wereld* (The Bewitched World) (1691–93) set out to “disenchant the world.”<sup>22</sup> So far as Bekker was concerned, there would be no magic at all if men did not believe in its existence. He did not deny the existence of Satan and angels, as found in Scripture, but he forcefully challenged the prevailing view that the Devil, or any form of spirit, through spells, witchcraft, demonic possessions, or any other form of magic, could cause physical harm, influence the human mind or interfere in any way with the law's of nature. Only God, Bekker insisted, had the supernatural power to affect human lives or change the course of

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<sup>20</sup> Pierre Bayle, *Pensées diverses sur la comète* (Rotterdam, 1682); Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 333–4.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Histoire des Oracles* (1687; new edn, Paris, 1698) 8; Anthonie Van Dale, *Verhandeling van de Oude Orakelen der Heydenen* (1687; new edn, Amsterdam, 1718) 537; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 359–65.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Hazard, *The European Mind, 1680–1715*, trans. J. L. May (1935; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964) 203.

nature. He argued there was no Scriptural support for the belief in possession or exorcism, and refuted the notion that God gave powers to the Devil to operate on Earth. On the contrary, God kept the Devil safely locked up in Hell. Bekker's most vehement criticisms were reserved for the witch trials, berating Protestant and Catholic clergy alike for encouraging superstitious beliefs among the credulous masses and putting pressure on secular law courts and magistrates to punish those charged with witchcraft.<sup>23</sup> Bekker's criticism against witchcraft and the Demonic Pact was not, however, what earned him the wrath of his fellow ministers, but more that he based his arguments along a Cartesian line of thought.<sup>24</sup>

All of these men were influenced to a greater or lesser degree by René Descartes (1596–1650) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–77). The latter opined that devils could not possibly exist, but he understood why people should think otherwise: "The desire men commonly have to narrate things not as they are but as they would like them to be can nowhere be better exemplified than in stories about spirits and ghosts."<sup>25</sup> Yet many thinkers, and nowhere was this more true than in Scotland, attempted to reconcile the demonic, magic and the rest within developing frameworks of new scientific enquiry. In this endeavour they were ably assisted by the Kirk, which was to fight a rearguard battle well into the era of Enlightenment.

Robert Heron asserted that the philosophy of Descartes "became known very early among the Scots and was taught for a while, with fond enthusiasm, in their universities, by some of the most eminent professors."<sup>26</sup> Some of the Cartesians sought refuge in the Netherlands where they could well have been encountered by members of the exiled Scottish community. The intellectual impact of the Netherlands upon Scotland has not, so far, been adequately investigated, but it has been pointed out that the Dutch Revolt against Philip of Spain undoubtedly influenced the Covenanters,<sup>27</sup> many of whom, throughout the seventeenth century sought refuge in the Low Countries. Other visitors and refugees included lawyers, merchants,

<sup>23</sup> Balthasar Bekker, *De Betooverde Wereld*, 4 vols. (1691–3; new edn Deventer, 1739) book 2 preface, 11–13, book 4 219, 243, 305; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 372–92.

<sup>24</sup> Hans de Waardt, "Witchcraft and Wealth: The Netherlands," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 232–48.

<sup>25</sup> Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Letters*, trans. S. Shirley (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1995) 262–8.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Heron, *History of Scotland from Earliest Times, to the Era of the Abolition of the Hereditary Jurisdictions of Subjects, in the Year 1748*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: R. Morison and Son, 1799) vol. 5, part 1, 1251.

<sup>27</sup> Edward J. Cowan, "The Making of the National Covenant," in *The Scottish National Covenant in its British Context, 1638–51*, ed. J. Morrill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990) 68–89, at 77–81.

students and political outcasts. There was ample opportunity for many of these to become familiar with Dutch authorities as well as other learned exiles.<sup>28</sup>

At the turn of the eighteenth century the boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds, religion and superstition, were still porous. Providential literature continued to be popular in the first few decades of the century, while men of science, such as Newton, believed that the entire natural world owed its existence to, and was governed by, God and that everything is “subordinate to him, and subservient to his Will.”<sup>29</sup> By mid-century, challengers of Newtonian opinion were reinterpreting the natural world with less, if any, emphasis on nature as a manifestation of God’s power. Hume, for one, was not convinced that active principles – or the movements of matter – were signs of God’s providence, but “it argues surely more power in the Deity to delegate a certain degree of power ... than to produce everything by his own immediate volition.”<sup>30</sup> Scientists, such as James Hutton, concurred with Hume, positing that the laws of nature were so deeply entwined with the fabric of the universe that they could not be altered or suspended by God.<sup>31</sup> The natural world was being elevated to a position above that of the supernatural world in Enlightenment discourse, causing ruptures in the theological foundations of society. Falling through the cracks was “superstition,” not as apparent, perhaps, above ground as it had once been but lying just below the surface, or transforming into alternative forms of expression and belief.

Within literary circles a shift has been detected from empirical demonologies towards supernatural fiction. The proliferation of pseudo-scientific demonological tracts in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries created a fertile breeding ground for other forms of literary expression, such as apparition and poltergeist narratives. George Sinclair, influenced by Glanvill’s *Sadducismus Trimphatus*, exploited the narrative potential of such stories to great effect in *Satan’s Invisible World Discovered* (1685), relaying cases of hauntings using the empirical method to prove their scientific credibility. While witchcraft was often used in demonological writings to support the reality, or otherwise, of the Devil operating in the world, apparition narratives were mainly concerned with proving the existence of

<sup>28</sup> Ginny Gardner, *The Scottish Exile Community in the Netherlands, 1660–1690* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2004) passim.

<sup>29</sup> Isaac Newton, *Opticks* (1704; London: Dover, 1952) 403.

<sup>30</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (1748; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 56.

<sup>31</sup> P. M. Heimann, “Voluntarism and Immanence: Conceptions of Nature in Eighteenth-Century Thought,” in *Philosophy, Religion, and Science in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. John W. Yolton (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1994) 393–405.

supernatural phenomena, notably ghosts, and, by extension, of God. The rise of the fantastic within literary culture came about despite, or perhaps because of, the emergent philosophical attempts to marginalize “superstition” and traditional belief. It has been argued that in pre-modern literary contexts the natural and supernatural were not conceived as being in opposition to one another, while in fantastic literature “the supernatural disrupts the regularity of nature.” In other words, “the fantastic reflects the ontological boundaries that emerged with the rise of the new science. At the same time, however, it conflates what is increasingly separate, mediating between the natural and the supernatural.”<sup>32</sup> Fictional texts were not, needless to say, constrained by the same epistemological concerns as non-fictional accounts, a freedom that would eventually allow for elements of the supernatural to undergo a process of radical transformation from “reality” to “unreality” – an aestheticization of supernatural belief – and the eventual birth of the Gothic novel.<sup>33</sup>

### Accessing magical beliefs

What constituted magic in the minds of early modern Scots? Was the understanding of magic the same across the social spectrum, or, could magic mean different things to different sorts of people? From at least the 1570s until the 1660s witchcraft was, for instance, treated by the authorities as *crimen exceptum*, an exceptional crime, and yet, for many people, witch beliefs were woven into the fabric of everyday life. Belief in fairies, ghosts and poltergeist activity was subjected to a radical process of demonization in post-Reformation Scotland, yet such entities, for the populace at large, were part of a more nuanced and complex system of folk tradition and shared cultural knowledge that extended into the eighteenth century and beyond. The use of charms and the role of charmers in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scottish society exemplify the complexities around magical and non-magical beliefs very well, and are discussed in Chapter 3. Magical charms and rituals often involved quite ordinary, household objects, temporarily imbued with supernatural meaning. The waters of designated healing and holy wells offered medicinal support.<sup>34</sup> The relationship between wild

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<sup>32</sup> Riccardo Capoferro, *Empirical Wonder: Historicizing the Fantastic, 1660–1760* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2010) 13, 103–50.

<sup>33</sup> On the rise of the Gothic, see C. O. Parsons, “The Interest of Scott’s Public in the Supernatural,” *Notes and Queries* 185 (1943): 92–100; E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Lizanne Henderson, “Charmers Spells and Holy Wells: The Repackaging of Belief,” *Review of Scottish Culture* 19 (2007): 10–26; Joyce Miller, *Myth and Magic: Scotland’s Ancient Beliefs & Sacred Places* (Musselburgh: Goblinshead, 2000).

and domestic animals with humans could also shift from the ordinary to the extraordinary in particular magical contexts.

Richard Kieckhefer has argued for a broad “common tradition” of magic that permeated every level of medieval society, around which a variety of particular beliefs and traditions gathered.<sup>35</sup> Stephen Wilson has observed that “historians have focused attention on the more sensational aspects of magic,” that is, on the witch trials. This is, he says, understandable given the topic’s fascination but, he warns, it is hard to understand the trials “without placing them in the wider context of witchcraft beliefs” that were, in turn, “part of a much wider system of magical belief and practice.” The circumstances that witch prosecutions began and came to an end at particular times has led some to think in terms of a “rise” and “fall” of magic, but, as Wilson points out, “general magical beliefs and practices existed over a much longer time span, in effect from Ancient times down to the modern era.” Magic held a place in the everyday existence of past Scottish and European societies, ranging from calendar customs and rites of passage, pregnancy and childbirth, baptism, death, hunting, fishing and agriculture, divination, charms, folk healing, and so on.

Over time, the attitudes of the learned merely fluctuated “above a bed-rock of popular belief and practice which changed very little down the centuries.”<sup>36</sup> This is, in effect, an advocacy of the idea of the *longue durée*, of deep time, a concept introduced by the *Annalistes*, the French school of historical thought in the early part of the twentieth century. Some historians remain uncomfortable with this concept for it can represent a somewhat static view of the past. Wilson, however, quite persuasively argues that beliefs in magic were not particularly dynamic, being very slow to change. He does admit that there were significant developments in pre-modern Europe, which had a bearing on magical belief, namely the introduction of a Christian element into magic during the early medieval period, the impact of demonology on popular magic from the late medieval period onwards, and agricultural change in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

On the first point, the cult of the saints is a particularly good example of magico-religious intermingling, with saints’ relics and shrines the focus of a wide range of ritual practices, from health and wellbeing to protecting the fertility of the crops.

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976). See also Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Karen Louise Jolly, “Medieval Magic: Definitions, Beliefs, Practices,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia: Athlone, 2002) 1–71.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2000) xxvii.

Second, clerical interpretations of magic, and especially harmful magic, were becoming linked more explicitly to the actions of the Devil. The demonologists, in turn, did not differentiate between devil-worshippers and witches or other magical practitioners. The growing body of demonological literature and ideology goes some way, therefore, towards explaining the onset of official witch persecutions in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. That said, argues Wilson, demonology had little impact upon everyday folk magic, though it did contribute to the division between “elite” and “popular” magic.

Third, with the decline of the traditional agrarian economy, magic began to slowly seep away. This does not imply that magic no longer had a part to play in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life, simply that it was adapting and changing to the times. Indeed, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it could be argued that magic has become modernized, and is generally viewed as an alternative to mainstream modes of explanation.<sup>37</sup> A particular strength of Wilson’s weighty tome is its breadth of coverage, allowing the reader to experience the cultural continuum of magical beliefs and their importance to European society and mindsets over time. Yet, in its strength lies its primary weakness, as the study lacks defined chronological and cultural distinctions and could stand accused of imposing a false homogeneity upon the past.

Magic is a highly complex word that carries multiple meanings and interpretations. Over millennia the word has been used to describe various acts of perceived religious deviance or to distinguish “official,” or mainstream forms of spiritual ritual and practice, from “unofficial,” or folk religion and popular beliefs. “Magic” and “religion” have therefore been typically understood as mutually exclusive terms.<sup>38</sup> “Magic” derives originally from the Greek *mageia*, which referred to ceremonies carried out by a *magos*. The *magoi* were a class of priest-magicians from the Eastern Babylonian Kingdom of Chaldea (southern Iraq) and Persia (Iran). Herodotus, the famed “father of History,” reported in the fifth century BCE that the *magoi*, or Magi, “are a peculiar caste, quite different from the Egyptian priests and indeed from any other sort of person.” They were skilled in dream interpretation but practised different rituals from the Greek priesthood, and thus were regarded with some suspicion. For instance, they whispered or sang during their rituals in a low voice, and to propitiate a river they allegedly sacrificed white horses and buried children alive.<sup>39</sup> The Greeks associated *mageia* with mysterious religious observances of a foreign priesthood. The term would

<sup>37</sup> Wilson, *Magical Universe*, xxviii–xxix.

<sup>38</sup> Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg, eds., *Defining Magic: A Reader* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013) 1.

<sup>39</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. A. de Sélincourt, intro. A. R. Burns (1954; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 91–2, 96, 99, 479, 508.

later broaden out, during Roman times, to embrace a wider range of activities, and not necessarily attributable only to foreigners, or males, as *magos* or *magi* came to be applied to females also. As time passed, new categories and definitions of magic emerged, covering a wide array of supernatural, religious and scientific meanings. In the medieval period, for instance, “natural magic” was a term used as a means of differentiating legitimate, or good magic, from illegitimate, or bad magic.<sup>40</sup> Enlightenment thinkers, in turn, rejected the concept of “natural magic,” or *magia naturalis*, adopting a mostly anti-magical stance as part of its “agenda of human rationality.”<sup>41</sup>

Eighteenth-century French thinker Denis Diderot’s article on “Magie” for the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751–80) furnishes a classic example of Enlightenment discourse while still demonstrating the ambiguities within this supposed anti-magical rhetoric. Proposing a threefold division between divine, natural and supernatural magic, Diderot accepted that divine revelations were a gift from God, while “natural magic” had been replaced by science. Only supernatural magic truly deserves the label “magic,” and it is upon this category that he heaped much of his contempt: “this black magic, that always takes offense, that leads to pride, ignorance and the rejection of science.” Magic is equated with fraud and is the bedfellow of superstition:

Fear is the daughter of ignorance; the latter produces superstition, which is, in its turn, the mother of fantasy, a rich source of error, illusion, phantoms, an over-heated imagination which creates imps, werewolves, ghosts and demons, which all jostle together. How can any mind in this state not believe all the fantasies of magic?

Only Philosophy, posited Diderot, could “finally disabuse humanity of these imaginary humiliations” for “it has fought superstition, even joining with Theology (with which it has rarely made common cause).” Thus in “countries where people think, reflect and doubt, demons play a small role and diabolical magic remains discredited and held in contempt.”<sup>42</sup>

A legacy of the Scottish, and European, Enlightenment was the intellectual rejection of all magical and supernatural phenomena, with the dismissal of such explanations as a sign of barbarism and primitivism fit only for an early stage of human development. And yet even during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were not always clear-cut distinctions made between magic, the occult, demonological theory and “science.” The

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<sup>40</sup> Owen Davies, *Magic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 2–5.

<sup>41</sup> Otto and Stausberg, *Defining Magic*, 18.

<sup>42</sup> Denis Diderot, “Magie,” in Otto and Stausberg, *Defining Magic*, 60–3.

combination of astrology and medicine, for instance, continued to play a role in some medical procedures.<sup>43</sup> Omens, portents and wonders were still taken seriously as signs of God's pleasure and displeasure with humanity or as warnings of the impending apocalypse. Scientific techniques were being employed by some in hopes of finding proof of the spirit world, second-sight and paranormal phenomena. People, in other words, continued to believe "as they always had believed, with greater or lesser degrees of scepticism, according to individual temperament and experience, and the prevailing social, religious, and political *mores* of their community."<sup>44</sup>

The study of magic and supernatural belief systems is not without challenges. Euan Cameron, for instance, has questioned if "superstition" can be an effective category for historical investigation. Traditional belief systems, he argues, lack an analytical framework, are insufficiently documented, and are "too much of the bedrock of the human psyche to be truly susceptible of historical analysis." On the other hand, it is possible, concedes Cameron, to effectively examine the "intellectual *response* to superstition."<sup>45</sup> The concept of "magic," as a critical category, presents us with several unresolvable problems. The semantic diversity of the word makes it difficult to pin down. A vast range of phenomena have been associated with magic, ranging from alchemy, astrology, divination and necromancy to charms, incantations, conjuration of spirits and sorcery, with much more in between. Nor is there an agreed understanding of the term among academics, let alone what constitutes "magic" or differentiates it from "religion." This has led, in some quarters, to accusations of ethnocentrism and the imposition or projection of set models and preconceptions of "magic" upon the cultures under study. Curiously, in terms of scholarship, magic is often associated with intellectual history and with Western esotericism, while the study of witchcraft has been the purview of the anthropologist and social historian.<sup>46</sup> The problematic nature of the term "magic" might lead us towards abandoning the word altogether, but what would we use in its place? Danish scholar of religion Jesper Sørensen warns against such an action, and argues that "by creating proper scientific models of its underlying traits, magic can be appreciated as an aspect of human ritual behaviour *everywhere* in the world and not as a vestige of primitive mentality past or present."<sup>47</sup> Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg have suggested that rather than discussing discrete

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<sup>43</sup> P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Wizards: A History* (Stroud: Tempus, 2004) 148, cites, for example, Franz Anton Mesmer's *Planetary Influx into the Human Body* (1766).

<sup>44</sup> Maxwell-Stuart, *Wizards*, 153.

<sup>45</sup> Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 18.

<sup>46</sup> Otto and Stausberg, *Defining Magic*, 1–13.

<sup>47</sup> Jesper Sørensen, "Magic Reconsidered: Towards a Scientifically Valid Concept of Magic," in *Defining Magic: A Reader*, ed. Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013) 229–42.



categories of magic it might be possible to identify “patterns of magicity” as this does not “automatically involve ‘magic’ (as the supreme meta-category), nor are they ‘magic’ (as referring to ontological features), but they are a way of dealing with cross-culturally attested observations.” Such a model, they persuasively argue, would allow us to “reflect and re-describe” different items from the long list of magical phenomena “without aiming to provide the single key to the whole of ‘magic’ in all of its amorphous multiplicity.”<sup>48</sup>

Cultural expressions and behaviours variously referred to as magic, the supernatural, popular belief, superstition and folk religion fall within the broad genre of folk belief within folklore studies. Folk beliefs “are often part of complex cultural processes that involve not only belief but also values and other behaviours, and that find expression in different genres of folklore,” such as folk medicine, folk narrative, ritual and folk custom.<sup>49</sup> As with most areas of folkloric practice, folk beliefs are not static but dynamic, shifting and adapting to the particular set of circumstances or contexts of a given individual, social group or society. The main folkloristic approaches taken towards explaining magical or supernatural beliefs are the cultural source hypothesis – based on the notion that beliefs are formed and shaped by the family, community or culture that one lives in or comes from – and the experiential source hypothesis – which acts on the premise of a person’s direct experience of supranormal phenomena. The theory that “traditions emerge and are dependent upon the culture that produces them”<sup>50</sup> has held much sway in Western academia. A given supernatural belief exists, in other words, because one’s community or culture tells you it is so. While few would deny the importance of culture to the existence and perpetuation of various supernatural beliefs, it implies that the experience is not in any sense “real” but taught.

The idea that some supernatural folk beliefs might be rooted in genuine somatic experiences was developed by David Hufford in the 1980s, and presented a major challenge to theories of belief that essentially regarded all encounters with the supernatural as delusional. Hufford’s focus upon the “phenomenology of spiritual belief” does not claim to explain all supernatural occurrences, but argues that some “spiritual beliefs are similar cross-culturally because they are based on similar somatic experiences that are part of the human condition.”<sup>51</sup> For instance, Hufford discovered that the “Old Hag” or “Mara” tradition in Newfoundland, described as a physical, crushing sensation of being pressed down and immobilized while lying

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<sup>48</sup> Otto and Stausberg, *Defining Magic*, 10–11.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas A. Green, ed., *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music and Art* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1997) vol. 1, 94–5.

<sup>50</sup> “Cultural Source Hypothesis,” *AFS Ethnographic Thesaurus*, [www.openfolklore.org](http://www.openfolklore.org).

<sup>51</sup> Regina R. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem, eds., *A Companion to Folklore* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012) 147.

in bed, is a global phenomenon that can be explained by a physiological disorder called sleep paralysis.<sup>52</sup> The sufferer's interpretation of this medical condition may vary according to their specific social or geographical context, ranging from an old woman or witch who is sitting on their chest, to evil spirits or an assault by demons, but they are essentially reporting an actual empirical experience and not an imaginary subjective projection of a culturally imposed traditional belief.

The "experience-centred approach," developed by Hufford, whose study of the "Old Hag" tradition, *The Terror that Comes in the Night* (1982), has been particularly influential upon my own work, stresses the need to be objective when conducting an investigation into supernatural belief traditions. A fundamental problem that Hufford had to overcome was the restrictions and cultural biases of language for, at the time of his writing, there was no commonly accepted term to describe supernatural assault traditions, the phenomenon being variously referred to as incubus, succubus, nightmare, witch-riding, the Old Hag or sleep paralysis. Hufford did not intend for his "experience-centred approach" to replace all others, but to be considered alongside other approaches, as a "stage of investigation that largely precedes theoretical interpretation."<sup>53</sup> For the historian or folklorist, reconstructing belief, using this or any other method, is a process of inference as opposed to observable fact.

Assessing the experiential dimension of witch beliefs is an area that can, however, significantly divide historians of the witch-hunts. In part this relates to the difficulties involved in piecing together the beliefs of past generations on the basis, in most cases, of very flimsy, ambiguous or fragmentary evidence. Those that have tried have often come under heavy criticism, including Carlo Ginzburg, who was working with a relatively good cache of documentary evidence when he put together his landmark study *The Night Battles* (1983), based on trial records from the Friuli region in northern Italy, followed by his somewhat controversial *Ecstasies* (1989), which focused on the folkloric origins of the witches' sabbath.<sup>54</sup> The supposed unusualness of Ginzburg's Friulian ecstatic cult has subsequently been laid to rest with the

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<sup>52</sup> David Hufford, *The Terror that Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centred Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions* (1982; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

<sup>53</sup> Hufford, *The Terror that Comes in the Night*, ix, x, xvi–xvii.

<sup>54</sup> For instance, scholars such as Richard Kieckhefer, review of *Ecstasies* in *American Historical Review* 97/3 (1992) 837–8 and Robin Briggs, *Witches & Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (London: Harper Collins, 1996) 37, have criticized Ginzburg's use of disparate chronological and geographical sources to prove his theory about pre-Christian antecedents of the witches' sabbath and claims of a shamanistic cult existing in several parts of Europe. See also Willem de Blécourt, "The Return of the Sabbat: Mental Archaeologies, Conjectural Histories or Political Mythologies?," in *Palgrave Advances in Witchcraft Historiography*, ed. Jonathan Barry

work of scholars such as Gustav Henningsen, Wolfgang Behringer and Éva Pócs, who have discovered compelling evidence of experientially rooted traditions elsewhere in Europe, while Emma Wilby has put forward similar, but perhaps less convincing, claims for convicted Scottish witch Isobel Gowdie.<sup>55</sup>

Trying to make sense of what might be considered the more fantastical or magical elements of witch belief has been a consistent feature of witchcraft studies ever since the first demonologists put pen to paper in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and it continues to exert an influence upon many modern-day researchers. While earlier authors turned to religion and philosophy for answers relating to such things as the ability of witches to fly or animal metamorphosis, the trend in recent years is to seek answers based on medical, psychoanalytical and cognitive sciences for explanations as to what people were “actually” experiencing. Edward Bever, for instance, asks “what basis did early modern beliefs about witchcraft and magic have in reality?,” and “to what extent did their activities have real effects, and their perceptions reflect objective events?” He is not trying to suggest that organized diabolical cults of witches really existed, but for people living within a society that largely believed this to be true, it could have had physiological impacts that produced somatic symptoms and effects. He is not the first to make such a suggestion, and will doubtlessly not be the last. Joseph Klaits, for instance, commented on how the “belief in a witch’s ability to do evil could give her real power ... psychosomatically induced symptoms ending even in death have resulted from the victim’s conviction that he or she is bewitched.”<sup>56</sup> Bever’s weighty interdisciplinary study makes for compelling reading and raises important questions about the extent to which people directly engaged with witch beliefs at both a conceptual and physical level. However, his somewhat one-dimensional, relativistic approach towards magical beliefs has produced presentist assumptions about the past, forcing modern understandings of cognitive neuroscience and brain function upon

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and Owen Davies (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 125–45, for a thorough reappraisal of Ginzburg’s sabbat theories.

<sup>55</sup> Gustav Henningsen, “The Ladies from Outside’: An Archaic Pattern of the Witches’ Sabbath,” in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 191–215; Wolfgang Behringer, *The Shaman of Oberstdorf: Chonrad Stoeckhlin and the Phantoms of the Night* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); Éva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead* (Budapest: CEU Press, 1999); Emma Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Klaits, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 15; Edward Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe: Culture, Cognition and Everyday Life* (2008; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) xvi, 12–13.



*Illustration 1.1* “The Witches’ Ride” (1909), by John Copland

Source: J. Maxwell Wood, *Witchcraft and Superstitious Record in the South-Western District of Scotland* (1911; Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1975) 4.

former generations, which ultimately fails to give due attention to how contemporaries viewed their own reality.<sup>57</sup>

In a Scottish context, supernatural topics, with the possible exception of the witch-hunts, have been, in general, among the least studied of all historical investigations. This has mainly been due to an academic bias against such beliefs on ideological grounds; namely, since such beliefs are erroneous they are not worthy of serious attention. The impact of Enlightenment thought towards the study of supernatural beliefs has largely been driven by the desire to demonstrate that such beliefs are false. The approach adopted here is that it does not matter whether a belief in witchcraft and magic is true or untrue, provable or unprovable, but rather why such beliefs were held to be credible, or otherwise, by contemporaries. Attempting to access the belief systems, opinions and attitudes of people who lived in the past sometimes requires us to temporarily suspend disbelief and set aside our own assumptions and preconceptions. It is, in my view, irrelevant for the historian to ask whether or not witches actually existed, for in the minds

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<sup>57</sup> For reactions to Bever’s book by Stuart Clark, Richard Jenkins, Rita Voltmer, Willem de Blécourt and Jesper Sørensen, including a response from Bever, see “Contending Realities,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 5/1 (2010): 81–121.

and experience of many people living in pre-Enlightenment Scotland they most certainly did exist, as certainly as the machinations of the Devil.

### Folkloristics and folk belief

One of the most challenging of historical topics is that of belief. Accessing what and why people believe in certain things is a difficult enough exercise to conduct among the living, never mind the long dead. The mental world, or *mentalité*, of past generations requires us to lay aside anachronistic attitudes and accept that our predecessors did not necessarily share our perceptions and views; what might seem impossible or ludicrous to us, could seem entirely logical and plausible to people in the past. This is by no means intended to suggest that former generations were somehow less intelligent, more credulous or naïve than ourselves, but simply to acknowledge that there are other mental frameworks and worldviews at play. It is tempting to dismiss the people who, at one time, believed in witches and the supernatural as crazy or deluded, and to assume that we, in the twenty-first century, are more “civilized” and less “superstitious.” It is an approach not unlike that taken by eighteenth-century proponents of enlightenment thinking who judged those who came before them as living in a state of darkness, as inferior to themselves. The model of history conceived by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, such as Adam Smith and William Robertson, was a story of universal progression from savagery, then barbarism, towards civil society.<sup>58</sup>

Folk belief has undergone several scholarly attempts towards a definition. A folk belief is one that is communally accepted as being true.<sup>59</sup> The degree or extent of belief may undergo subtle change over time, or may vary in intensity depending upon context or situation. The question is, why does an individual or a section of society regard an occurrence or happening as an event to be explained naturally, while others prefer a supernatural interpretation? It is quite easy to understand why a person who was actually involved in some kind of unusual experience should describe it as paranormal, but it is more difficult to comprehend why someone who was not personally implicated should advance a supernatural or hypothetical explanation. How could such a person possibly think that witches were capable of night-flying, of disappearing through holes in walls or meeting the Devil in the form of a cat without first-hand knowledge, or even without

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<sup>58</sup> Nicholas Phillipson, “Providence and Progress: An Introduction to the Historical Thought of William Robertson,” in *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, ed. Stewart J. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 59.

<sup>59</sup> On the psychological reasons behind modern-day ‘superstitious’ beliefs, see Stuart A. Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

having encountered someone who actually made such claims based upon personal experience? Culture and the culturally acceptable depends heavily on personal and societal interpretation. The individual who believes himself bewitched when all around him do not, is regarded as insane, as is the doubter in a community of believers.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when folk belief was under sustained attack, the primary aim was to separate “supernatural or magical beliefs, as held by the folk, from supernatural or magical beliefs, as expressed in religion.”<sup>60</sup> In later centuries, folk beliefs were debased as relics of bygone superstition, no longer relevant to enlightened and civilized times. In contradiction to this view was the rise of folklore; the term was invented by William Thoms (1803–85) in 1846, primarily to replace the term “popular antiquities,” but also in response to the fear that folklore was dying out and in need of saving for posterity.<sup>61</sup> Regrettably, “folklore,” and by extension folk belief, often carried a pejorative sense, a problem that has far from vanished from its current usage.<sup>62</sup>

In the past, references to “the folk” were generally reserved for the poorer, illiterate, uneducated masses, as opposed to the modern-day sense of the word, which tends to incorporate everyone, regardless of social status or level of education. Folklorists typically use “folk” to describe “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor,”<sup>63</sup> while “lore” encapsulates the various expressive forms within a given culture and the categories and genres used – such as folk custom, folk narrative and folk belief – in order to study them. Folklore is widely understood to refer to the informal, or “unofficial,” expressions of culture, orally transmitted or through direct observation. It is often connected with “tradition,” in the sense of something that has been passed on, from one person or group to another. Folkloric customs, practices and beliefs are assumed to be fluid, dynamic, adaptable and multivalent; there is, in other words, not one single correct version, belief or way of doing something, but potentially many variants and adaptations across time, place or folkloric group. In a European context, the study of “ethnology” is sometimes distinguished as

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<sup>60</sup> Lizanne Henderson, “Studying the Supernatural History of Scotland,” in *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture*, ed. Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2009) xvi.

<sup>61</sup> Using the pseudonym Ambrose Merton, Thoms coined the term ‘folk-lore’ in a letter written to the *Athenaeum*, 12 August 1846. William Thoms, “Folk-lore and the Origin of the Word,” in *International Folkloristics: Classic Contributions by the Founder of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999) 9–14.

<sup>62</sup> Lizanne Henderson, “Folk Belief and Scottish Traditional Literature,” in *Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literature*, ed. Sarah Dunnigan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013) 26–34.

<sup>63</sup> Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965) 2.

a distinct field from “folklore” (specifically concerned with oral tradition), and “folklife” (which is focused upon material culture). As with folklore, there is no concise definition of ethnology, as it too has undergone a process of change and evolution and forged alliances and partnerships with several other disciplines, such as sociology, history and social anthropology. Eminent Scottish ethnologist Alexander Fenton (1929–2012) favoured Sigurd Erixon’s definition of ethnology as “comparative cultural research on a regional basis with a sociological and historical orientation and with certain psychological implications.”<sup>64</sup>

Folkloristics is concerned with the historical artifact, describable and transmissible entities, culture and behaviour.<sup>65</sup> Depending upon the nature of the enquiry, the folklorist may emphasize one or more of these perspectives.<sup>66</sup> With influences coming from functionalist anthropology, there has been an emphasis upon discerning the “form,” type or genre under study, what function it serves within a given identified “folk” group, and how that “form” might be communicated, transformed and transmitted within the same or different contexts.<sup>67</sup> Alan Dundes referred to folklore as a process of analysing the “texture” – or the language employed – the “text” – or the particular version – and the “context” – or the specific social situation in which the “text” is employed.<sup>68</sup> Dell Hymes, Dan Ben-Amos and Richard Bauman introduced a behavioural approach to the discipline, reconceptualizing folklore as a communicative process, with less emphasis upon the “text” and more upon the “performative” aspects.<sup>69</sup> This approach has tended to centre on the individual experience, or at least demonstrates a heightened sensitivity to the problems of macro levels of analysis that are in danger

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<sup>64</sup> Alexander Fenton, “Ethnology as a Subject,” in *Scottish Life and Society: A Compendium of Scottish Ethnology: An Introduction to Scottish Ethnology*, ed. Alexander Fenton and Margaret A. MacKay (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2013) 13–48.

<sup>65</sup> Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones, *Folkloristics: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 22.

<sup>66</sup> On the skills employed by the folklorist, see Richard M. Dorson, “Concepts of Folklore and Folklife Studies,” in *Folklore and Folklife*, ed. R. M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972) 1–50; Michael Owen Jones, *Putting Folklore to Use* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

<sup>67</sup> Bob Trubshaw, *Explore Folklore* (Loughborough: Heart of Albion Press, 2002) 26.

<sup>68</sup> Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) 20–32.

<sup>69</sup> Dell Hymes, “The Ethnography of Speaking,” in *Reading in the Sociology of Language*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman (The Hague: Mouton, 1968) 99–138; Richard Bauman, “Towards a Behavioural Theory of Folklore: A Reply to Roger Welsch,” *Journal of American Folklore* 82 (1969): 167–70; Dan Ben-Amos, “Towards a Definition of Folklore in Context,” *Journal of American Folklore* 84/3 (1971): 3–15; Dell Hymes, “Breakthrough into Performance,” in *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, ed. Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein (The Hague: Mouton, 1975) 11–74; Richard Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performance,” *American Anthropologist* 77/1 (1975): 290–311.

of becoming universal generalizations. Though there has been a tension between these two approaches it is not a problem that is insurmountable. Taking a macro or micro approach towards the study of folkloric materials or behaviours is not necessarily incompatible, but the challenge is discerning the relationship between them.<sup>70</sup>

The methodologies employed by ethnology and folklore can be usefully applied to the study of Scottish witch beliefs. Folk belief, as a genre, covers a wide range of categories that may, or may not, relate to the supernatural, but given the pejorative connotations of “superstition,” it is the preferred terminology. The main belief narratives with which this study is concerned are legend and memorate. Legend is defined as a prose narrative, normally considered to be historically true, about human beings, who lived in the recent past.<sup>71</sup> Believability is the “cornerstone” of legend,<sup>72</sup> so distinguishing it from folktale, which often involves non-humans as well as humans, who inhabit an imaginary timeless past and whose story is not necessarily, indeed is very rarely, regarded as true. Memorates are personal experience narratives accepted as true because arising out of the narrator’s private knowledge.<sup>73</sup>

First-person accounts are difficult, or frequently impossible, to find in historical sources for the period studied in this book, but one potentially fruitful quarry reposes in the records of the witch trials. As I have suggested elsewhere, the testimony that emerged from the witch trials often had the appearance of folk narrative, with plots and motifs now recognized as folktale and local legend.<sup>74</sup> At one time the testimony of accused witches was dismissed as either the ravings of deluded old women, of victims viciously tortured beyond endurance, or as representative of the formulaic questions posed by the inquisitors, but in recent years historians have learned that all texts, however seemingly preposterous, have meaning which,

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<sup>70</sup> Roger Janelli, “Towards a Reconciliation of Micro- and Macro-Level Analysis of Folklore,” *Folklore Forum* 9 (1976): 59–66.

<sup>71</sup> William Bascom, “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narrative,” *Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1965): 3–20.

<sup>72</sup> Linda Dégh, “What Is the Legend After All?,” *Contemporary Legend* 1 (1991): 23–5.

<sup>73</sup> The term ‘memorate’ was coined by C. W. Von Sydow. See Lauri Honko, “Memorates and the Study of Folk Beliefs,” *Journal of American Folklore* 1 (1964): 12.

<sup>74</sup> Lizanne Henderson, “Witch, Fairy and Folktale Narratives in the Trial of Bessie Dunlop,” in *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture*, ed. Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2009) 141–66.; Lizanne Henderson, “‘Detestable Slaves of the Devil’: Changing Attitudes to Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland,” in *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland*, ed. Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011) 226–53.



sympathetically interpreted, may preserve the genuine voice of the folk and thus constitute invaluable repositories of popular belief.<sup>75</sup>

Folk custom is an integral component of culture, the latter best described in its broadest sense as what people, irrespective of status, creed or nationality, take for granted. Custom functions as an invisible framework, which informs and sustains all aspects of folk belief and practice, while also acting to reinforce social cohesion within society. When a woman consulted a witch or a charmer about her unborn baby her action was sanctioned as customary practice, whether or not she actually had confidence in the powers, magic, spells or medicine available. Such consultations represented normality because the pregnant mother walked the same path as her own mother and grandmother, as would one day her own daughter. When folk undertook a journey to a holy or healing well, it was customary practice that took them there, which may or may not have required a belief in the magical attributes of the well water.

However, at some indeterminate date in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the time varying according to location and circumstance, much greater and divisive distinctions between folk culture and elite culture, gradually emerged. "Manners" became the order of the day as the elite sought ways of emphasizing and demarcating their status in such areas as dress, speech, housing, sports and leisure activities. They did not necessarily *disbelieve*, for a spell or occult knowledge might still come in handy, but they increasingly rejected the supposedly ignorant and uncouth ideas of the subordinate classes while consigning them to script or print as the curiosities of times past. John Aubrey, who acquired much of his information from Scotland through correspondence with his Royal Society contacts, was fairly typical. He opined that "old customs and old wives-fables are gross things: but yet ought not to be quite rejected: there may be some truth and usefulness be elicited out of them: besides, 'tis a pleasure to consider the errors that enveloped former ages: as also the present."<sup>76</sup> Much more recently, the anthropologist Mary Douglas also addressed the ways in which we differ from our predecessors:

the real difference is that we do not bring forward from one context to the next the same set of ever more powerful symbols: our experience is fragmented. Our rituals create a lot of little sub-worlds, unrelated. Their rituals create one single, symbolically consistent universe.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Arguments in defence of using witch trial testimonies are found in the work of Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (1986; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 1–16, 156–64; and *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. R. Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1991) 10. See also Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, 1–6.

<sup>76</sup> John Aubrey, 'Remains', in *Three Prose Works* (Fontwell: Centaur Press, 1972) 132.

<sup>77</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; London: Ark Paperbacks, 1984) 69.

Her words have considerable validity in the context of early modern Scotland because Scots were tentatively beginning to move in increasingly individualized cultures, and “were no longer operating within a ‘symbolically consistent universe’ but were in the process of creating several different galaxies, each competing and jostling for position with the next.” Belief in witchcraft and charming was just one of several arenas of Scottish intellectual, political, social and cultural life to experience the “full brunt of a meteor shower,” though, as this book seeks to demonstrate, progress was slow while cultural roots were never quite severed.<sup>78</sup>

It has generally been assumed that the Age of Enlightenment was also the period when folk customary practices and supernatural beliefs began to dwindle. As pressure mounted from above to reform and erase folk culture, and oral tradition was being overtaken by literacy, it has been supposed that Enlightenment ideals and rationality trickled down from the *literati* to the ordinary people. Contrary to this view, it has been countered that attempts to reform or displace popular belief and culture were stubbornly and effectively resisted,<sup>79</sup> and the topic of the supernatural was in actuality at “the forefront of public discourse” in the Enlightenment era.<sup>80</sup> What can be stated with some certainty is that the gulf between folk and elite culture became ever more pronounced across Scottish and most of European society, a consequence of which led to a rise in antiquarianism and the eventual birth of folklore. That emergent gulf created a tension between participants and practitioners of folkloric custom and belief and those who wished to collect, record and preserve them, namely the antiquarians and early folklorist. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in part inspired by the great English ballad collectors such as Thomas Percy and Joseph Ritson, the Scots Allan Ramsay, James Johnson, William Motherwell and Peter Buchan, and American Francis J. Child, among others, the thirst for scholarly collections of “popular antiquities” became insatiable. For collectors such as David Herd, Robert Burns, Walter Scott, Robert Jamieson and James Hogg, there was the additional post-Union concern with preserving Scottish cultural identity.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Henderson, “Studying the Supernatural History of Scotland,” xx.

<sup>79</sup> See, for instance, E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin, 1991) 1; Tim Harris, ed., *Popular Culture in England, c.1500–1850* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1995) esp. chapter 1; James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001) 88; Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson, “The Last of the Witches? The Survival of Scottish Witch Belief,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 198–217.

<sup>80</sup> Colin Kidd, “The Scottish Enlightenment and the Supernatural,” in *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture*, ed. Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2009) 91–109.

<sup>81</sup> Suzanne Gilbert, “Scottish Ballads and Popular Culture,” *The Bottle Imp* issue 5 (May 2009).

The line between “traditional” and “invention” was often very difficult to distinguish during this period, and divided opinions greatly. For instance, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the controversy surrounding Macpherson’s Ossianic poems opened up the question of authenticity and its importance, while collectors such as poet Robert Burns felt no compulsion to stick rigidly to the authentic song, ballad or tale and frequently “improved” the materials he recorded. Some early nineteenth-century collectors, including such eminent worthies as Walter Scott, were similarly not averse to improving and, as they saw it, cleaning up traditional materials. Burns and Scott were, of course, at once both collectors and bearers of orally communicated traditions, and thus may not have viewed their folkloric productions with the same reverential attitude as other antiquarian collectors of their generation, such as Joseph Ritson, who were more focused upon the scholarly desire to preserve popular antiquities with due rigour and accuracy.<sup>82</sup>

John Gordon Barbour, in *Unique Traditions Chiefly of the West and South of Scotland* (1833), described Scott as the “great traditional novelist of Caledonia.”<sup>83</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* equates “traditional” with “traditionary,” but it has recently been suggested that in the context of the nineteenth century “traditionary” carried a somewhat different nuance, which implied “the privileging of tradition, of that which is handed down, often orally, from generation to generation.”<sup>84</sup> This observation is well-made and would allow us to regard some of the early collectors, such as Burns, Scott, Hogg and Allan Cunningham, all of whom have stood accused of excessive tampering with their folkloric sources, as “traditionary,” in the sense of holding a deep understanding of the folk tradition while at the same time creatively manipulating motifs from same sources. This was not a Hobsbawmian “invention of tradition,” as such, but rather an invention, or creation, spawned from within the tradition. For example, a folk singer or fiddle player may compose a song or tune that sounds traditional but is actually traditionary because the makar (poet) has created something new, albeit informed by and through an understanding of folk music. Thus the materials produced by the aforementioned quartet (Barbour et al.) may preserve genuine ethnological artifacts even though these may be somewhat embellished or distorted for effect. “Traditionary” conveys the sense of

<sup>82</sup> Tim Killick, ed., *Alan Cunningham: Traditional Tales* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2012) xvii.

<sup>83</sup> John Gordon Barbour, *Unique Traditions Chiefly of the West and South of Scotland* (1833; Glasgow: Thomas D. Morison, 1886) 11.

<sup>84</sup> Edward J. Cowan with John Burnett, “Broad-sides, Chapbooks, Popular Periodicals and Newspapers,” in *A Compendium of Scottish Ethnology*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction to Scottish Ethnology*, 14 vols. ed. Alexander Fenton and Margaret A. Mackay (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2013) 462–84.

having the appearance of traditional. These men quarried at the rock-face of tradition and then, knowingly or not, rearranged their findings for traditional purposes.

The idea that pre-Enlightenment Scotland was culturally divided neatly into two main competing aggregations of belief is problematic. The *literati*, the followers of “high culture,” comprising the learned, university-educated members of scientific and literary societies, represented a tiny, if expanding, section of the population but constituted an undeniably powerful and influential group. The vast majority of Scots were thirled to their occupations, mainly on the land, their lives centred on family and kirk. They depended upon a largely oral culture but were steadily becoming literate. The bridge between the two was provided by the middling folk for whom the Scots never quite found a label. Since the fifteenth century this group, consisting of merchants, some of the crafts, lawyers and professional people, had been demanding their literature, legislation and historical legacy in the vernacular, the Scots language. They saw education as the pathway to success. The situation in the *Gàidhealtachd* was not all that different as the families of chiefs and tacksmen were gradually becoming literate in Scots and English. It is true that Gaeldom was still more dependent on oral culture, but not as exclusively as some have suggested or pretended. The supposed division between “high” and “low” culture, which was also present in Orkney and Shetland where many of the landlords were Scots while their tenants spoke Norn, is also more apparent than real, representing the extreme differences rather than the many instances of overlap and integration to form a kind of “middle” culture. Folk are often not so easy to pigeonhole as historians would like, and belief is one of the most elusive of subjects.

Of Britain, in general, it was folklorist Richard Dorson’s view that “in the tranquil mood of the nineteenth century, the wars of church and state safely behind, and the battle of reason over superstition clearly won, Victorian gentry could smile at vulgar antiquities as the heritage of the unlettered and the unknowing.”<sup>85</sup> While the truth of this statement is debatable, it does, perhaps, encapsulate a particular Victorian mindset. The average, nineteenth-century literate household would most likely have possessed a copy of John Brand’s monumental *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777; revised 1813), which has been described as having “laid the foundations for the science of folklore.”<sup>86</sup> Though mainly English in content, a good deal of material was gleaned from various Scottish sources and from travellers’ accounts of Scottish tours, such as those made by Thomas Pennant in 1769 and 1772. Another popular acquisition for the curious-minded was William

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<sup>85</sup> Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) 19.

<sup>86</sup> Dorson, *British Folklorists*, 17.

Hone's *Every-day Book* (1825; 1830), a vast miscellany with entries organized, as the title suggests, on a day-to-day basis. While it drew upon some familiar works, such as Brand, Aubrey and Francis Grose, it also contained a great many Scottish references from sources such as John Sinclair's *Statistical Accounts* and from collectors such as Martin Martin, Anne MacVicar Grant and William Grant Stewart.<sup>87</sup>

The English antiquarians were seemingly happy to take on board the Scottish material when the opportunity presented itself, and were particularly interested in ballads, calendar customs and accounts of witchcraft. Unfortunately, this had more to do with the pursuit of discovering ancient and uncivilized cultures and their heathenish practices than it did with a respect for Scottish society. After all, to most English people of the eighteenth century and before, Scotland was largely uncharted territory and its inhabitants as strange and exotic as the native peoples of the Americas. This attitude was by no means only English, but could be found in the blossoming romantic movements in Germany, Hungary, Finland, Norway and other parts of Europe. If this was the stereotypical view from "outside" of Scotland, what then did the Scottish intelligentsia make of its own folk?

### **Historians and demonologists: the historiography of Scottish witchcraft and folk belief**

Tracing the historiography of witchcraft and charming, in a Scottish context, is somewhat akin to watching a great wave, which had begun to gather in the late seventeenth century, reaching its highest crest in the nineteenth, and crashing on to the shore on the eve of the twentieth century. The wave then receded, and did not really begin to gather force again until the 1970s and 1980s. Some of the luminaries involved in the beginnings of documenting witchcraft, such as George Sinclair, Sir George MacKenzie of Rosehaugh and Robert Wodrow, will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

In Scotland, a budding interest in investigations of supernatural phenomena can be detected in the late sixteenth century, but did not come into full bloom until the late seventeenth century. Many of these enquiries were seeking answers to profound spiritual questions, and should be seen in the context of much wider British and European trends. Attitudes towards demonology and witchcraft in early modern Europe have been described by Walter Stephens as "an uncomfortable halfway point between belief and skepticism, an attempt to maintain belief while fighting off skepticism." The attitude, therefore, of many "witchcraft theorists towards their theories was

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<sup>87</sup> William Hone, *The Every-Day Book: Or, the Guide to the Year*, 2 vols. (London: William Tegg, 1827). Hone reissued the *Every-Day Book* bound together with his *Table-Book* as a three-volume set in 1830.

not belief but rather *resistance to skepticism*." There was, in other words, a strong desire or "need to believe." Stephens argues that the sceptical tradition, which emerged in the mid-sixteenth century, and "overt expressions of disbelief grew ... directly out of increasingly unconvincing attempts to *construct* belief." The social viability of witchcraft had begun to fade post-1700, but resistance to scepticism remained strong.<sup>88</sup>

Folk beliefs were used, in conjunction with theological and philosophical theory, to great effect by men such as Episcopalian minister Rev Robert Kirk (1644–92), author of *The Secret Common-Wealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* (1691), a text that concentrates on fairy belief and second sight, though there is some commentary on witchcraft and charming practices in his native Perthshire. Kirk's alternative title was *A Treatise Displaying the Chief Curiosities among the People of Scotland as they are in use to this day*. With a view to sales, the blurb continues: "Being for the most part Singular to that Nation A Subject not heir to fore discoursed by anie of our writers. Done for the satisfaction of his friends by a modest enquirer, living among the Scottish-Irish 1692."<sup>89</sup> Kirk's "Scottish-Irish" were the Gaelic speakers of Scotland. Minister of Balquhidder from 1664 until transferred to his father's former post at Aberfoyle in 1685, he was engaged in the translation of holy works into Gaelic, notably for providing the first complete translation of the Scottish Metrical Psalms (1684) and, following a recommendation to Sir Robert Boyle (of Boyle's Law and the Royal Society), he was commissioned to go to London to oversee the printing of a Gaelic Bible in Roman script in 1689–90.<sup>90</sup> Kirk's contribution to Gaelic scholarship has been rightly recognized, but it is his manuscript on fairy belief and second sight that has attracted most attention. As Stewart Sanderson observed, one does not expect a minister of the church to write on such a subject.<sup>91</sup> Yet, when seen in the context of its times, it was not so unusual. It was Kirk's intention to gather "evidence" of the fairy folk in order to support his faith and fight against the rising tide of atheism.

Kirk's ideas about the supernatural were developing from at least the 1660s onwards. Since his student days at the University of Edinburgh, Kirk

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<sup>88</sup> Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 27.

<sup>89</sup> The most recent transcription of Kirk's text, produced with other texts relating to second sight, is Michael Hunter, *The Occult Laboratory: Magic, Science and Second Sight in Late Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001). See also Robert Kirk, *The Secret Common-Wealth*, ed. Stewart Sanderson (Cambridge: Mistletoe Press, 1976); Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, esp. chapter 6.

<sup>90</sup> It is a curious coincidence that Francis Hutchinson, the English sceptic, was also, later, involved in this project. Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs: The Life of Bishop Francis Hutchinson, 1660–1739* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008) 150.

<sup>91</sup> Sanderson, ed., *The Secret Common-Wealth*, intro. 1.

kept notebooks, which indicate that he attended lectures on logic, philosophy and natural philosophy, receiving a broad-based education on an “Aristotelian framework with ideas of more recent authors like Tommaso Campanella, Sebastiano Basso and Descartes.”<sup>92</sup> Later notebooks indicate he read Meric Casaubon’s *Of Credulity and Incredulity, in Things Natural, Spiritual and Divine* (1668–70), and was particularly interested in the power witches were alleged to have over nature. The diary he kept during his spell in London in 1689–90 contains several passages that would later appear in *The Secret Common-Wealth* and, naturally, many that did not, such as a particularly interesting sentence on the nature of spirits, “those obscure people (who live in their own Element, and are no more desirous of converse with us then Fishes are for Dry ground, or birds to live in fire).”<sup>93</sup>

Composition of *The Secret Common-Wealth* was completed sometime between Kirk’s return from London to Aberfoyle in 1690 and his untimely death in 1692. Though it was never published in his lifetime, the text stands as a massive contribution to our understanding of seventeenth-century Scottish supernatural beliefs. His treatise represents the greatest compendium on Scottish fairy belief ever written. It was Kirk who coined the term “fairy tale.” For him fairies exist in a different medium, as fish swim in water. He believed that fairies would one day be much better understood, on the analogy of other discoveries such as “the art of navigation, printing, gunning, riding on saddles with stirrups, and the discoveries of microscopes which were sometimes as great a wonder, and as hard to be believed.” With reference to the present study his importance lies in another short treatise he penned – on charms and spells – in which he refers to charmers as “white witches,” possibly the first Scottish commentator to do so.<sup>94</sup>

Kirk’s motivation for writing about the supernatural world was inspired by religious conviction, but other commentators of the day, such as Martin Martin (d.1718), were largely driven by science. Martin’s extensive Hebridean travels in the 1690s, published as *Late Voyage to St Kilda* (1697) and *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703), contain a great deal of information on a wide range of subjects, including second sight, charms and traditional medicine. In many ways, Martin was very much a man of his times; he possessed an insatiable curiosity and a burning desire to make a success of himself. He was that very rare commentator: a native Gaelic speaker writing about his culture from within it. With the financial backing of the Royal Society in London and later the government, he wrote about the Western Isles of Scotland to, “at once,” inform the wider world about

<sup>92</sup> The surviving notebooks, housed in Edinburgh University Library, have been examined by Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 12–21.

<sup>93</sup> Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, intro. 18.

<sup>94</sup> Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 100, 107.

his homeland, but also to bring the ideals of the “enlightened” world to his countrymen and women; he wrote “to enable its exploitation by the government, to enable the spread of modernity, to enable its people to enter a new imperial age,”<sup>95</sup> claims that, while thought-provoking, could be questioned.

Martin, from Bealach, Isle of Skye, was descended from a long-established family of tacksmen, or farm managers. Educated at the University of Edinburgh, from which he graduated in 1681, he was introduced to the London virtuosi and members of the Royal Society in 1695 by a fellow Episcopalian and Gaelic-speaker George MacKenzie, viscount Tarbat. Martin began to collect observances of natural history, Highland life and custom for Tarbat and his new acquaintances, notably the Ulsterman Sir Hans Sloane. It seems he received further patronage from the Edinburgh luminary and leading natural historian Sir Robert Sibbald, Geographer Royal of Scotland. The late 1690s, when Martin was undertaking his study, were fraught with difficulty and great hardship. King William’s “Seven Ill-Years” of crop failure and subsequent famine coincided with the worst weather experienced for decades in the Highlands.<sup>96</sup> The catastrophic failure of the Darien expedition, which had sought to establish a Scottish colony in Panama, left the country bankrupt.<sup>97</sup> Martin headed to London in 1701 to begin the process of collating his research for the *Description*, but on its completion in 1703, the governmental funds were no longer there. Unpaid, and now in debt, Martin was forced to return to Skye to escape his creditors, and would not receive payment for his book until the parliamentary Union of 1707. He went on to graduate in medicine from the University of Leiden in 1710, funding a further spell at the University of Reims with a second edition of the *Description* in 1716, a well-timed reprinting as interest in the Highlands peaked in the aftermath of the 1715 Jacobite rising.

It has been argued that, in terms of impact, Martin suffered from a “credibility problem” for he was, and always would be, considered an outsider by the London establishment.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, there was content in his writings that would have raised the eyebrow of suspicion, such as second sight, or in Gaelic *An Dà Shealladh*, which literally means “the two sights.”<sup>99</sup> It was

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<sup>95</sup> Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, “The Life of Martin Martin,” in *Martin Martin – 300 Years On: Proceedings of a Major 3-Day Event to Mark the Tercentenary of the Publication of Martin Martin’s Book on the Western Isles* (Ness, Isle of Lewis: The Island Book Trust, 2003) 5–14.

<sup>96</sup> Karen Cullen, *Famine in Scotland: The ‘Ill Years’ of the 1690s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

<sup>97</sup> Christopher A. Whatley, *The Scots and the Union* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) 167–82; Douglas Watt, *The Price of Scotland: Darien, Union and the Wealth of Nations* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2007).

<sup>98</sup> Stiùbhart, “The Life of Martin Martin,” 9.

<sup>99</sup> There are at least thirty or more Gaelic words to describe aspects of second sight, an indication of how important this phenomenon was within Highland culture. Among



a subject on which Martin showed himself to be extremely knowledgeable. However, by indicating that he believed in the reality of second sight, he inadvertently devalued his material in the opinion of those sceptics who already doubted the phenomenon, in much the same way that ministers who wrote about the reality of spirits were scorned as backward by the new disciples of reason. Although Martin had been commissioned to record “samples of such curiosities as he finds & useful remarks” while on his travels his apparent credulousness, particularly on the topic of second sight, seems to have backfired on his ambitions to succeed as a “British Gael.” Indeed, he considered the publication of the *Description*, a now much celebrated book, as “the most capital error as well as the greatest Misfortune of my life.”<sup>100</sup>

The interest in “popular antiquities” was strong throughout the eighteenth century, and the collecting of oral tradition was given a boost in the aftermath of James Macpherson’s phenomenally successful *Fragments of Ancient Poetry collected in the Highlands of Scotland* (1760). Now mainly remembered as a fraud, its impact was far-reaching and drew attention to the need for preserving balladry and Scottish oral tradition. The Enlightenment provided the impetus behind the systematic collection of data, on a wide range of issues, though mostly directed towards information that could be used by the state. Sir John Sinclair’s magisterial *Statistical Accounts* of the 1790s gathered evidence by use of a questionnaire, sent out to every parish in Scotland, asking for facts and opinions on everything from the state of agriculture, the size of population, economic prosperity and the religious devotion of each community. It remains to this day an important source of information for social and economic historians, and a venerable goldmine for ethnologists. Many of the clerical compilers of the *Statistical Accounts* were keen to downplay active belief in the supernatural, as they wished to portray their communities as progressive and “enlightened,” but there is still a surprising amount of commentary on popular belief and “superstition.” However, despite such attempts to downplay the persistence of belief in witches, fairies, and the like, the appetite for the occult and the supernatural was far from sated, as will be demonstrated in following chapters.

The next generation or two of supposedly “enlightened” commentators found an increasingly avid readership for folkloric and supernaturally themed writings. Among the most prominent and influential of these

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the first to undertake the collection and definition of the terminology regarding this faculty was Gaelic scholar and folklorist John Gregorson Campbell, *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1900).

<sup>100</sup> BL, Sloane MS 4068, fol. 18 and NL Scot., MS 1389, fol. 100, qtd in Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, “Martin, Martin (d. 1718),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, January 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18201>].

figures was Sir Walter Scott, whose Waverley novels are liberally embroidered with supernatural elements.<sup>101</sup> Scott also incorporated numerous ballads in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders* (1802–03),<sup>102</sup> and authored *Letters on Demonologie and Witchcraft* (1830). The format of the *Letters*, which consists of a series of ten letters addressed to his son-in-law, J. G. Lockhart, is fairly unconventional for a tract on demonology, though it could be seen as a variation on this type of dialogue,<sup>103</sup> belonging to a tradition that may be said to have originated in a Scottish context with James VI's *Daemonologie* (1597).<sup>104</sup> There is much of interest in the *Letters*, not just on the subject of witchcraft, but on ghosts, fairies, second sight and many other folkloric materials. The stories, legends and anecdotes that Scott presents are told in a style and from a point of view that was, by the 1830s, becoming familiar to the reading public of Scotland. Each letter forms an individual dialogue, a one-sided discussion to which we, the readers, are invited to listen. Scott informs us, in the very first letter, of his long-standing interest and curiosity in the “credulity of our ancestors,” and confesses that “among much reading of my earlier days, it is no doubt true that I travelled a good deal in the twilight regions of superstitious disquisitions.”<sup>105</sup> One of the key issues that he addressed in the *Letters* was the close relationship between the church, civil law and the persecution of witches. He studied the witchcraft trials, particularly those gathered and transcribed by Robert Pitcairn, who would later publish them, at Scott's suggestion, in his influential *Ancient Criminal Trials in Scotland* (1833); he also read every demonological tract he could lay his creative hands on.

Walter Scott, as with other Enlightenment authors, often described the folkloric materials he dealt with in terms of such perceived opposites as credulity and incredulity, belief and unbelief, savage and civilized, ignorance and enlightenment, black and white, and so on. This was, presumably, done in an attempt to distance himself from what might be considered foolishness and superstition. Nevertheless, his fascination with magic and the occult world emanates throughout his vast literary output. On questions

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<sup>101</sup> See Coleman O. Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott's Fiction, with Chapters on the Supernatural in Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964).

<sup>102</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border: Consisting of Historical and Romantic Ballads*, 3 vols. (Kelso: James Ballantyne, 1802–03; London: Thomas Tegg, 1839; 4 vols. Edinburgh, 1932).

<sup>103</sup> For this suggestion, see *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*, intro. P. Maxwell-Stuart. Myth, Legend and Folklore Series, in association with The Folklore Society (1830; London: Wordsworth Editions, 2001) intro. 6.

<sup>104</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie in Forme of a Dialogue. 1597* (London: The Bodley Head, 1924).

<sup>105</sup> Scott, *Letters*, 9–10.

regarding folklore and the supernatural, Scott was just as likely to be consulted as Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, well after his death in 1832.<sup>106</sup>

A close friend of Scott's was Robert Chambers (1802–71), originally from Peebles but who moved to Edinburgh when he was aged eleven. By the time he was twenty-two, Chambers had compiled the first Scottish study of urban folklore, *Traditions of Edinburgh* (1825), which included assorted tales and legends from the nation's capital, including the sensationalist account of witchcraft, incest and other sinister activities of Major Weir and his younger sister Jean. He dedicated the second volume to Scott, who had given him some material for inclusion. Scott also contributed to Chambers's next collection, *The Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (1826; 1841), as well as his third publication, *Scottish Jests and Anecdotes* (1832), which included several tales from Mrs Keith, one of Scott's main informants. Perhaps Chambers's finest work was *The Book of Days* (1862–64), which was inspired, in part, by other prolific antiquarians such as John Brand, John Aubrey and William Hone, as well as the groundbreaking work of men such as the Gaelic collector John Francis Campbell of Ilay, author of *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860–62) in four volumes.<sup>107</sup> The latter was in turn inspired by George Webb Dasent's translation of *Popular Tales from the Norse* by Peter C. Asbjørnsen and Jørgen I. Moe, issued by the Edinburgh publisher David Douglas in 1859.<sup>108</sup>

Another friend of Scott's was the poet and author Anne MacVicar Grant. Born in Glasgow in 1755, she spent part of her childhood living in Albany, New York, returning to Scotland when she was thirteen. Her father, a military man, was sent to Fort Augustus in 1773, where she resided until her marriage to James Grant, minister of Laggan, in 1779. After 1803 she moved first to Stirling and then to Edinburgh, where she remained until her death in 1838. Grant learned Gaelic in order, she claimed, to understand what she

<sup>106</sup> Douglas Gifford, "Nathaniel Gow's Toddy': The Supernatural in Lowland Scottish Literature from Burns and Scott to the Present Day," in *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture*, ed. Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2009) 110–40. See also Henderson, "Studying the Supernatural History of Scotland," xxi–xxii.

<sup>107</sup> Robert Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: William and Robert Chambers, 1824); idem, *The Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (Edinburgh: James Duncan, and London: William Hunter, 1826; Edinburgh, 1841); idem, *Scottish Jests and Anecdotes* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1832), *The Book of Days*, 2 vols. (London and Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1862–64); J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, 2 vols. (1860–62; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1994) and *More West Highland Tales*, 2 vols. (1940; 1960; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1994).

<sup>108</sup> Edward J. Cowan, "Scotland's Nordic Legacy: The Harvest of Battles and Beddings," in *Heritage and Identity. Shaping the Nations of the North*, ed. J. M. Fladmark (Aberdeen and Shaftsbury: Donhead Press, 2002) 79.

referred to as “the peculiarities of Highland manners.”<sup>109</sup> Her *Essays on the Superstitions of the Highlanders of Scotland* (1811) represents an early attempt at a semi-ethnographical treatment of Highland life and culture in which she suggested that the “entire exclusion of science ... from the rocky abodes of these primitive hunters and graziers” left the Highlanders “free to the illusions of the imagination and the emotions of the heart.” The *Essays* actually has very little to say on the topic of witchcraft, save only to point out that the worst manifestation of a belief in supernatural agencies is the belief in witchcraft, a “cruel and abject form of superstition.” There is discussion on second sight, spirits and apparitions, but the focus of the study was to examine how folk belief and superstition could be used to “elucidate some of the peculiarities of the highland character and manners,” and also as a means of explaining the creative poetic imagination of the Highlanders. No doubt with Ossian at the forefront of her mind, poetry, Grant argued, “was earlier born, and sooner matured here [Scotland] than in any other country,” while the poetic genius of the Highlanders could be explained as a result of an “imagination unchecked by sober and cultivated reason, and fed by all the peculiarities of awful and gloomy scenery, sounds of horror, and sights of wonder.” Native superstition was thus an inspiration and enrichment to poetry. Furthermore, studying Highland superstition was like opening a window on to centuries of unbroken and relatively unchanged tradition for, as Grant states, “wherever they remain in undisturbed possession of their own language and the prejudices connected with it, they think and act pretty much as they would have done a thousand years ago, unless where restrained by religion.”<sup>110</sup>

The brothers from Germany, Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, famed for their much-loved collection of folktales *Kinder und Hausmärchen* (1812–22), relied heavily upon the writings of one Scot in particular when putting together an introduction to their translation of Crofton Croker’s Irish fairy tales, *Irische Elfenmärchen* (1826).<sup>111</sup> He was William Grant Stewart, and his fresh approach to classifying supernatural phenomena into distinct categories in *The Popular Superstitions and Festive Amusements of the Highlanders of Scotland* (1823) is a format still prevalent today. While other writers, such as Scott’s *Letters* (published seven years later), preferred to stress the overlap between

<sup>109</sup> Anne MacVicar Grant, *Letters from the Mountains* (London: Longman, 1807) I.17.

<sup>110</sup> Anne MacVicar Grant, *Essays on the Superstitions of the Highlanders of Scotland*, 2 vols. (London: n.p., 1811) vol. 2, 3–4, vol. 1, 97–8, 117; Andrew Tod, ‘Grant, Anne (1755–1838)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11246>].

<sup>111</sup> Thomas Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (London: John Murray, 1825; Part II and III, 1828; new edn London: William Tegg, 1870), T. Crofton Croker, *Irische Elfenmärchen*, trans. W. Grimm (Leipzig: Friedrich Fleischer, 1826).

fairies and witches, or ghosts and fairies, Stewart took great pains to delineate the distinctions between such supernatural phenomena. He openly admitted to editing down the tales and legends he collected from the oral tradition:

the length of those primitive relations is necessarily much abridged, but a strict regard has been had to their original style and phraseology. The language is almost entirely borrowed from the mouth of the Highland narrator, and translated, it is hoped, in a manner so simple and unvarnished, as to be perfectly intelligible to the capacity of the peasant, for whose fireside entertainment this little volume may, perhaps, be peculiarly adapted.<sup>112</sup>

On the northeast coast, the polymath and famed geologist Hugh Miller was putting together, for the first time, a collection of oral narrative materials from his homelands of Cromarty and the Black Isle. Until recently, Miller's importance as a folklorist has been largely ignored, and his vast canon, in particular *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland* (1835),<sup>113</sup> has received limited acknowledgement as the first contribution to the folklore of the area.<sup>114</sup> Miller was not interested in variants, motifs or performance contexts, but simply wished to share his stories with the wider world, so ensuring their survival for future generations. He collected hundreds of legends, folktales, personal narratives and local history, though he had little interest in formal fairy tales or *märchen*. At the time when Miller was writing, there were few models for him to follow save for Walter Scott and Alan Cunningham, both of whom, to varying degrees, were known to "improve" or modify the stories and songs they collected.<sup>115</sup> It is difficult to ascertain to

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<sup>112</sup> William Grant Stewart, *Popular Superstitions and Festive Amusements of the Highlanders of Scotland*, (London: n.p., 1851) xv–xvi.

<sup>113</sup> Hugh Miller, *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland or the Traditional History of Cromarty*, ed. J. Robertson (1835; Edinburgh: B and W, 1994).

<sup>114</sup> An exception was Richard Dorson, who praised *Scenes and Legends* as exceeding "all expectation for a pioneer collection of local narratives and merits a recognition it has never received, as a superb record of folk traditions seen in their full context of village society and history". Dorson, *British Folklorists*, 138, 140. See also David Alston, "The Fallen Meteor: Hugh Miller and Local Tradition," in *Hugh Miller and the Controversies of Victorian Science*, ed. M. Shortland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); James Robertson, "Scenes, Legends and Storytelling in the Making of Hugh Miller," in *Hugh Miller in Context*, ed. Lester Borley (Cromarty: Cromarty Arts Trust, 2002).

<sup>115</sup> Alan Cunningham, editor of *The Songs of Scotland: Ancient and Modern* (1825), admitted, in a letter, that "these songs and ballads being written for imposing on the country as the reliques of other years, I was obliged to have recourse to occasional coarseness, and severity, and negligence, which would make them appear as fair specimens of the ancient song and ballad," qtd in Deborah A. Symonds, *Weep Not for Me: Women, Ballads, and Infanticide in Early Modern Scotland* (University Park, PE.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) 22.

what extent Miller did the same, in hopes of making the stories more cohesive or interesting, or simply to make them suitable for wider audiences.<sup>116</sup>

His decision to collect local and personal tales and legends, was inspired, like so many collectors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,<sup>117</sup> by concerns that the “lore of the people” was fast disappearing from the cultural map of Scotland. On the subject of witchcraft, one of Miller’s most memorable accounts is that of Stine Bheag o’ Tarbat (pronounced “Shteena Vaig”), presented to the reader as a local legend about events that actually happened. “Her history, as related by her neighbours, formed, like the histories of all the other witches of Scotland, a strange medley of the very terrible and the very ludicrous.” Miller then rehearses a complex tale involving the witch Stine, who conjures a storm, which destroys her husband and son, to prevent them revealing her attendance at a sabbat. He cites another incident, dated to 1738, when a crew of fishermen, unable to return to Cromarty owing to bad weather, consulted Stine Bheag for she was “famous at this time as one in league with Satan, and much consulted by seafaring men when windbound in any of the neighbouring ports.” When the fishermen entered her cottage they allegedly saw Stine sitting on a stool in front of the fire performing a spell and muttering a “Gaelic rhyme.” She lived in an almost stereotypical witch’s cottage, a raven atop it, with a familiar and a number of occultic objects. She obligingly performed a spell on the ship and the men set sail for home.<sup>118</sup>

Strangely, Miller does not seem to question parts of the accumulated legends surrounding Stine, which venture into rumour and gossip but which contain much that is verifiable from witchcraft lore. She was, in many ways, the recognizable witch of legend. It is Miller’s personal connection with so many of the episodes he relates that makes his contribution to the field all the more interesting.<sup>119</sup>

John Graham Dalyell, an aristocrat and wide-ranging scholar, was known best for his splendid treatise, *Rare and Remarkable Animals of Scotland* (1847). But Dalyell also had an interest in the dark side, as evidenced in his remarkable book entitled *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland* (1834), which was based upon a lifetime spent in the Advocates’ Library. While Dalyell was at times

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<sup>116</sup> Lizanne Henderson, “The Natural and Supernatural Worlds of Hugh Miller,” in *Celebrating the Life and Times of Hugh Miller*, ed. Lester Borley (Cromarty: Cromarty Arts Trust, 2003) 89–98; Henderson, “Folk Belief and Scottish Traditional Literature”.

<sup>117</sup> For instance, Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott, Allan Cunningham, James Hogg, Peter Buchan, Robert Chambers, William Grant Stewart and Anne MacVicar Grant, to name just a few. MacVicar Grant, a Scot who emigrated to America as a child, compiled *Essays on the Superstitions of the Highlanders of Scotland*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1811), which is a somewhat long-winded account of various ‘superstitions’ with an emphasis upon ghost narratives and second sight.

<sup>118</sup> Miller, *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland*, 269–76.

<sup>119</sup> Henderson, “The Natural and Supernatural Worlds of Hugh Miller,” 89–98; Henderson, “Folk Belief and Scottish Traditional Literatures,” 33–4.

guilty of excessive wordiness, he did make an effort to go beyond the presentation of a simple inventory of supernatural subjects. His discussion on the “doctrine of sympathy” was an attempt to interpret such phenomena, in the light of reason and rationality, as a form of sympathetic magic.

A contemporary of Dalzell’s was Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe. In 1819, he published an edition of Robert Law’s *Memorials; or the Memorable Things that fell out Within this Island of Brittain from 1638 to 1684*, a most odd enterprise for a Jacobite since, as the dates indicate, the book was primarily concerned with the Covenanters. Sharpe’s introduction was later published independently as *A Historical Account of the Belief in Witchcraft in Scotland* (1884).<sup>120</sup> Though he contributed ballads to Scott’s *Minstrelsy*, wrote some unremarkable poems and rendered engravings on historical topics, his artistic and aristocratic sensibilities ensured he remained pretty far removed from folk tradition: “It could be said of both men that their folklore researches reeked more of the lamp than of the peat fire.”<sup>121</sup>

When John Francis Campbell of Islay (1822–85) set out to collect the traditional stories of the *Gàidhealtachd*, the field methods he employed were unique for the times. While men such as Dalzell and Sharpe had concentrated their efforts on the archives and libraries of Edinburgh, Campbell was experimenting with something new and truly innovative; he employed a trained team of Gaelic speakers to go into the field, gather informants and conduct interviews throughout the Highlands and Western Isles. So great was the quantity of material amassed by Campbell and his team that the examples published in the *Popular Tales* represents a mere fraction of what was actually collected, while much of it still lies unpublished in the National Library of Scotland.

One of Campbell’s team, Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912), was inspired by his work and began assembling materials for his own edition of oral folklore, *Carmina Gadelica* (1900). The book is a vast digest of hymns, prayers, incantations and songs, but there are also sections on augury, fairy songs, birth, death and charms for healing. Carmichael’s importance and legacy has recently been the subject of a biography by Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, who has also been part of a team to transcribe and digitize Carmichael’s extensive, and hitherto unpublished, field notes.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>120</sup> John Graham Dalzell, *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland* (Glasgow: Richard Griffin and Co., 1835); Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, *A Historical Account of the Belief in Witchcraft in Scotland* (London and Glasgow: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1884).

<sup>121</sup> Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, 198–9.

<sup>122</sup> Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica, Hymns and Incantations, with Illustrative Notes on Words, Rites and Customs, Dying and Obsolete. Orally collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (1900; Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1997). See also Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, ed., *The Life and Legacy of Alexander Carmichael* (Ness: The Island Book Trust, 2008), The Carmichael-Watson Project online: [www.carmichaelwatson.lib.ed.ac.uk/cwatson/en](http://www.carmichaelwatson.lib.ed.ac.uk/cwatson/en).

Another correspondent of Campbell of Islay's was John Gregorson Campbell, Reverend of Tiree and Coll and author of *Clan Traditions and Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1895), *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (1900), and *Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (1902).<sup>123</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, the church-fuelled impetus to eradicate all traces of "pagan" or "popish" remnants began to wane from Scottish writing, to be supplanted with an anthropological and strongly ethnographic approach to "survivalisms." There was, naturally, a few exceptions, such as James Napier's *Folk-lore: or, Superstitious Beliefs in the West of Scotland within this Century* (1879), which defined superstition as "beliefs and practices founded upon erroneous ideas of God and nature."<sup>124</sup> But, for the majority of collectors, the primary concern now resided in the preservation of tradition from the standpoint of academic interest.

There are a number of works from the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that deserve a mention, such as Walter Gregor, a minister from Aberdeen, who put together *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland* (1881), the first field collection to be published by the fledgling Folk-Lore Society, founded in 1878. There was also W. H. Davenport Adams, *Witch, Warlock, and Magician: Historical Sketches of Magic and Witchcraft in England and Scotland* (1889); an article by Francis Legge on "Witchcraft in Scotland" (1891); Robert C. MacLagan's case study of the *Evil Eye in the Western Highlands* (1902); and J. M. MacPherson's *Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland* (1929).<sup>125</sup> George Fraser Black compiled an extensive study of Orkney and Shetland folklore in 1903 and, in 1938, he collated, for the first time, all known witchcraft trials in the form of a chronologically ordered calendar. Hugo Arnot had put together *A Collection and Abridgement of Celebrated Trials in Scotland* as early as 1785; witchcraft crimes figured quite substantively, though this was not intended to cover all known cases but rather to select trials of interest to the author and his readership. Black's *Calendar* was, therefore, a tremendously valuable starting point and remained the only work of its kind until *A Source Book of Scottish Witchcraft*

<sup>123</sup> John Gregorson Campbell, *Clan Traditions and Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (London: David Nutt, 1895); idem, *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1900); idem, *Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1902).

<sup>124</sup> James Napier, *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland* (Paisley, 1879; Wakefield: EP, 1976) 4.

<sup>125</sup> Walter Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland*, The Folk-Lore Society (London: Elliot Stock, 1881); W. H. Davenport Adams, *Witch, Warlock, and Magician: Historical Sketches of Magic and Witchcraft in England and Scotland* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1889); Francis Legge, "Witchcraft in Scotland," *The Scottish Review* 18 (1891): 257-88; Robert C. MacLagan, *Evil Eye in the Western Highlands* (1902; Wakefield: EP, 1972); J. M. MacPherson, *Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929).



was completed in 1977, which in turn has been superseded by the superb *Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database* (2003), available online.<sup>126</sup>

Various works have picked up on particular themes or motifs within the Scottish witch trial evidence. J. A. MacCulloch was the first to conduct an investigation into the relatively high incidence of fairy belief surfacing in the trial records in his 1921 article, which remained the only work available on this specific subject until the publication of my own work, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001), and a subsequent investigation of the confession of Ayrshire witch Bessie Dunlop.<sup>127</sup> Others, such as Diane Purkiss (2001), who takes a literary approach, and Emma Wilby (2005), have similarly found the fairy-related material significant when deconstructing witch narratives. Wilby has extended the relationship between witches and fairies to incorporate spirit guides and familiars.<sup>128</sup> The figure of the ballad witch is discussed by the American, Lowry C. Wimberly, in his book *Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads* (1928); otherworldly themes, including witchcraft, have been analysed by ballad scholar the late David Buchan in numerous articles.<sup>129</sup> In 1922, W. N. Neill looked at the role of the witch prickers and

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<sup>126</sup> George F. Black, *A Calendar of Cases of Witchcraft in Scotland, 1510–1727* (1938; New York: Arno Press, 1971); *County Folklore*, vol. III: *Orkney and Shetland Islands. Examples of Printed Folklore Concerning the Orkney & Shetland Islands*, ed. N. W. Thomas (1903; Felinich and London: Llanerch-Folklore Society, 1994); Hugo Arnot, *A Collection and Abridgement of Celebrated Trials in Scotland* (Edinburgh: The Author, 1785); Christina Larner, Christopher Hyde Lee and Hugh V. McLachlan, *A Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft* (Glasgow: SSR, 1977).

<sup>127</sup> J. A. MacCulloch, "The Mingling of Fairy and Witch Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Scotland," *Folk-Lore* 32 (1921): 227–44; Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*; Henderson, "Witch, Fairy and Folktale Narratives in the Trial of Bessie Dunlop," 141–66.

<sup>128</sup> Diane Purkiss, "Sounds of Silence: Fairies and Incest in Scottish Witchcraft Stories," in *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, ed. S. Clark (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2001) 81–98; Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005). See also Carlo Ginzburg, who incorporated evidence of Scottish fairy belief in witch trials in *Ecstasies*. Work on this topic has been done for other countries, for instance, Éva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead: A Perspective on Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age*, trans. S. Rédey and M. Webb (1997; Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999); "Fairies and Witches at the Boundary of South-Eastern and Central Europe," *Folklore Fellows Communications* No. 243 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1989). On the Sicilian fairy cult, see Henningsen, "'The Ladies from Outside': An Archaic Pattern of the Witches' Sabbath," 191–215.

<sup>129</sup> Lowry C. Wimberly, *Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928); David Buchan, "Ballads of Otherworld Beings," in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. Peter Narváez (New York: Garland Press, 1991) 142–54; "Taleroles and the Witch Ballads," in *Ballads and Other Genres*, ed. Zorica Raj Kovic (Zagreb: n.p., 1988).

the test they used to prove guilt or innocence of the suspects, a theme that was later picked up, from a medical and psychological perspective, by S. W. MacDonald in 1997.<sup>130</sup> Recent work on the subject of charms and charmers includes Mary Beith, *Healing Threads: Traditional Medicines of the Highlands and Islands* (1995), and Joyce Miller's work on the role of charmers, particularly in Haddington and Stirlingshire.<sup>131</sup> Louise Yeoman demonstrated the connection between the Calvinist conversion process, a source of trauma for some, and fear of the Devil.<sup>132</sup> The material culture of witchcraft and charming has been somewhat under-studied in Scotland. The solid foundations for work on the charms and amulets themselves was laid by George F. Black in 1893, and then neglected until Hugh Cheape's various important works on the subject in recent years.<sup>133</sup>

Regional studies on the dynamics of witch-hunting and its impact on the communities involved have been lamentably slow in taking hold. Walter Scott was particularly drawn to the Borders, but did not really undertake a specific study of witch belief for the area. Possibly the first to discuss aspects of witchcraft within the boundaries of Dumfries and Galloway appeared in the appendices of a controversial book, *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song* (1810; 1880), published by Robert Cromek but which contained many of Allan Cunningham's own compositions fraudulently passed off to both Cromek and his readership as ancient ballads and traditional songs. Cunningham, from Kirkmahoe, Dumfriesshire,

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<sup>130</sup> W. N. Neill, "The Professional Pricker and His Test for Witchcraft," *Scottish Historical Review* 19 (1922): 205–13; S. W. MacDonald, "The Devil's Mark and the Witch-Prickers of Scotland," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 90 (1997): 507–11; and "The Witch Doctors of Scotland," *Scottish Medical Journal* 43 (1998): 119–22.

<sup>131</sup> Mary Beith, *Healing Threads: Traditional Medicines of the Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1995); Joyce Miller, "Cantrips and Carlins: Magic, Medicine and Society in the Presbyteries of Haddington and Stirling, 1600–1688," Ph.D., University of Stirling (1999); Joyce Miller, "Devices and Directions: Folk Healing Aspects of Witchcraft Practice in Seventeenth Century Scotland," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. J. Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 90–105.

<sup>132</sup> Louise Yeoman, "The Devil as Doctor: Witchcraft, Wodrow and the Wider World," *Scottish Archives* 1 (1995): 93–105.

<sup>133</sup> George F. Black, "Scottish Charms and Amulets," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities of Scotland* 27 (1892–93): 433–526; Hugh Cheape, "Lead Hearts and Runes of Protection," *Review of Scottish Culture* 18 (2006): 149–55; Hugh Cheape, "Touchstones of Belief," *Review of Scottish Culture* 20 (2008): 102–16; Hugh Cheape, "Charms against Witchcraft: Magic and Mischief in Museum Collections," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. J. Goodare, L. Martin and J. Miller (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 227–48; Hugh Cheape, "From Natural to Supernatural: The Material Culture of Charms and Amulets," in *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture*, ed. Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2009) 70–90.

essentially conned Cromeck into believing that his contributions to the *Remains* was genuine, although in fact they were not. The former told his local minister “an honest and cheerful heart is almost all my stock. I fervently adhere to truth and, to close all, I have an independent mind.”<sup>134</sup> But “Honest Allan” he was not, and his deceit of Cromeck places a large question over how he treated the folk material he collected and reworked. His efforts might be regarded as “traditionary” rather than “traditional.” Cromeck’s book is still unwittingly plundered by historians and folklorists unaware of the possible dubious origin of its contents. The appendix, supplied by Cunningham for the *Remains*, devotes a sizeable section to the history of witchcraft sketched, as he claims, from “the popular tales of the peasantry of Nithsdale and Galloway.” Cunningham decided to proceed and produce his own collection of supposedly orally collected stories, *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry* (1822), a compilation that folklorist Katherine Briggs credited as the first British collection of folktales,<sup>135</sup> an accolade that he may not deserve – and in fairness is more applicable to Walter Scott or James Hogg – but also because there was very little that was truly “traditional” in this two-volume compendium, having apparently been largely derived from Cunningham’s own creative imagination.<sup>136</sup> Rather his tales could be described as “traditionary,” as suggested earlier in this chapter. There is a lively account of a witch who specialized in cursing ships which, by its very verbosity, has more of a literary flavour than an orally communicated story, though he was undoubtedly inspired by authentic legendry.<sup>137</sup> This was, of course, an age that was very forgiving of the interplay and overlap between genuine folk

<sup>134</sup> Rev David Hogg, *The Life of Allan Cunningham* (Dumfries: John Anderson and Son, 1875) 49–51, 70.

<sup>135</sup> Katherine M. Briggs, *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) 189. Folklorist Richard M. Dorson was not so complimentary, referring to Cunningham’s style as “high-flown,” “windy, wordy, artificial” and “verbose narrations ... that might more accurately have been titled ‘Literary Tales Faintly Suggested by Oral Tradition of the Scottish Peasantry,’” *British Folklorists*, 118–22.

<sup>136</sup> Robert H. Cromeck, *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song: With Historical and Traditional Notices Relative to the Manners and Customs of the Peasantry* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1810; Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1880); Alan Cunningham, *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry*, 2 vols. (London, 1822); Killick, *Traditional Tales*.

<sup>137</sup> Stories relating to the cursing and sinking of ships by witches have, for instance, been recorded in the Highlands and Islands, and are recognized migratory legends. See Alan Bruford, “Scottish Gaelic Witch Stories: A Provisional Type-List,” *Scottish Studies* 11 (1967): 13–47; Donald Archie MacDonald, “Migratory Legends of the Supernatural in Scotland: A General Survey,” *Béaloides* 62/63 (1994/95): 29–78, Type W40A Witch Sinks a Ship.

traditions and customs, and the improving, artistic flourish of a creative pen. The terms “invention” and “tradition” were almost inseparable partners in the nineteenth century.

The first to attempt a fuller regional study was J. Maxwell Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland* (1911). The next person to publish on this particular area was Alfred Truckell, drawing on his unrivalled knowledge of the local records, though his intention was primarily to catalogue the material, and as such there is limited detail or analysis in his work on the witches and charm-ers.<sup>138</sup> My own work has occasionally taken a regionalized approach, with specific studies on Dumfries and Galloway, the Highlands and Islands, and the Isle of Bute.<sup>139</sup> Stuart MacDonald’s, *The Witches of Fife* (2002) is a fine example of the sort of rewarding results that can be gathered from an intensive study of one region. Moving northwards, P. G. Maxwell-Stuart’s book on the sixteenth-century witch-hunts has a strong focus upon Aberdeen and the North East.<sup>140</sup>

Studies on individual witchcraft cases or the personalities involved have, until recently, been mainly concerned with James VI and his role in the North Berwick witch-hunts (1590–91). There is a vast literature on James, and so only a few works will be mentioned. Stuart Clark’s paper on James VI’s *Daemonologie* and what it may reveal about his attitudes towards kingship (1977) is, alongside Edward J. Cowan’s article on the alleged North Berwick plot against the king (1983), among the earliest to consider the importance of statecraft and witch-hunting. Jenny Wormald disputes the theory, first put forward by Christina Larner, that James was introduced to witchcraft theory during his six-month stay in Denmark (2000). Comprehensive coverage of the North Berwick episode has been undertaken by Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James’s Demonology and the North Berwick Witches* (2000). Heinrich Kramer’s *Malleus Maleficarum* and James’s *Daemonologie* are compared and contrasted by Elizabeth Mack (2009) in order to demonstrate

<sup>138</sup> J. Maxwell Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland* (1911; Wakefield: EP, 1975); Alfred E. Truckell, “Unpublished Witchcraft Trials,” *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society* 3rd. edn 51 (1975) and 52 (1976–7) 48–58, 95–108.

<sup>139</sup> Lizanne Henderson, “The Survival of Witchcraft Prosecutions and Witch Belief in South-West Scotland,” *The Scottish Historical Review* LXXXV, 1/219 (April 2006): 52–74; idem, “Witch-Hunting and Witch Belief in the Gàidhealtachd,” in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 95–118; idem, “The Witches of Bute,” in *Historic Bute: Land and People*, ed. Anna Ritchie (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 2012) 151–61.

<sup>140</sup> Stuart MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife: Witch-Hunting in a Scottish Shire, 1560–1710* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002) 183; P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Satan’s Conspiracy: Magic and Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2001).

the distinctions and developments in the understanding and definition of witchcraft over time.<sup>141</sup>

Since the 1970s, there have been significant gestures towards closer readings of particular witch-hunts or trials, helping to develop a much more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of Scottish ideas and experiences of witchcraft. The sensational trial of Major Weir in 1670 is the subject of David Stevenson's article (1972). The hunt of 1661–62 was ably handled by Brian Levack (1980); a more fulsome treatment has since been done by P. G. Maxwell-Stuart (2005).<sup>142</sup> Julian Goodare has taken a look at the 1597 Aberdeenshire panic (2001), while John Brims (1989) discussed the very late case of witchcraft in Rossshire in 1822.<sup>143</sup> The two major witch-hunts of the 1590s have been examined by Edward J. Cowan, who rather aptly referred to this period as "The Devil's Decade."<sup>144</sup> Paula Hughes has produced the first intensive study of the 1649–50 national witch-hunt, while John R. Young has examined parliamentary involvements and responses to this same witch-hunting period under the influence of the Covenanters.<sup>145</sup> Hugh McLachlan has investigated the Renfrewshire bewitchment case of Christian Shaw, which was given a fictionalized treatment in Isabel Adam's *Witch Hunt*

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<sup>141</sup> Stuart Clark, "King James's *Daemonologie*: Witchcraft and Kingship," in *The Damned Art: Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft*, ed. S. Anglo (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) 156–81; Edward J. Cowan, "The Darker Vision of the Scottish Renaissance: The Devil and Francis Stewart," in *The Renaissance and Reformation in Scotland: Essays in Honour of Gordon Donaldson*, ed. I. B. Cowan and D. Shaw (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983) 125–40; Jenny Wormald, "The Witches, the Devil and the King," in *Freedom and Authority: Scotland, c.1050–c.1650*, ed. T. Brotherstone and D. Ditchburn (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000) 165–80; Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000); Elizabeth Mack, "The *Malleus Maleficarum* and King James: Defining Witchcraft," *Voces Novae: Chapman University Historical Review* 1/1 (2009): 181–203.

<sup>142</sup> David Stevenson, "Major Weir: A Justified Sinner?," *Scottish Studies* 16 (1972): 161–73; Brian P. Levack, "The Great Scottish Witch-Hunt of 1661–1662," *Journal of British Studies* 20 (1980): 90–108; P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *An Abundance of Witches: The Great Scottish Witch-Hunt* (Stroud: Tempus, 2005).

<sup>143</sup> Julian Goodare, "The Aberdeenshire Witchcraft Panic of 1597," *Northern Scotland* 21 (2001): 1–21; John Brims, "The Ross-shire Witchcraft Case of 1822," *Review of Scottish Culture* 5 (1989): 87–91.

<sup>144</sup> Edward J. Cowan, "Witch Persecution and Folk Belief in Lowland Scotland: The Devil's Decade," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 71–94.

<sup>145</sup> Paula Hughes, "Witch-Hunting in Scotland, 1649–1650," in *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters*, ed. Julian Goodare (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 85–102; John R. Young, "The Scottish Parliament and Witch-Hunting in Scotland under the Covenanters," *Parliaments, Estates and Representation* 26/1 (2006): 53–65.

(1978), though she based her work on the primary sources.<sup>146</sup> Emma Wilby has undertaken a concentrated study of Isobel Gowdie, an accused witch from Nairnshire.<sup>147</sup>

Wilby's reading of the Gowdie case has demonstrated the usefulness of deconstructing the individual voices involved in a witch investigation. The application of "narratology" is also a technique that has been explored in some of my previous work, and also by Liv Willumsen, while Diane Purkiss has picked out the folkloric influences upon many witch narratives. The relationship between female speech, sexuality and witchcraft is handled by Sierra Dye.<sup>148</sup> In a variety of works Lauren Martin has proven the unmistakable value of anthropological concepts towards the study of Scottish witchcraft, particularly on issues surrounding gender, domestic foundations and social organization.<sup>149</sup>

Julian Goodare and Ronald Hutton have made a case for placing the Scottish witch-hunts within a broader, European and global perspective.<sup>150</sup> There are natural problems associated with comparative work, though it has been undertaken with some success by Liv Willumsen, *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark* (2013). Willumsen has made insightful discoveries on the process of transmission of witchcraft and demonological theory brought from Scotland by John Cunningham to Norway and the Finnmark.<sup>151</sup> Rune

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<sup>146</sup> Isabel Adam, *Witch Hunt: The Great Scottish Witchcraft Trials of 1697* (London: Macmillan, 1978); Hugh V. McLachlan, ed., *The Kirk, Satan and Salem: A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire* (Glasgow: The Grimsay Press, 2006).

<sup>147</sup> Emma Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).

<sup>148</sup> Diane Purkiss, "Sounds of Silence: Fairies and Incest in Scottish Witchcraft Stories," in *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Stuart Clark (London: Macmillan Press, 2001) 81–98; Sierra Dye, "To Converse with the Devil? Speech, Sexuality and Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland," *IRSS* 37 (2012): 9–40.

<sup>149</sup> Lauren Martin, "The Devil and the Domestic: Witchcraft, Quarrels and Women's Work in Scotland," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 73–89; Lauren Martin, "The Witch, the Household and the Community: Isobel Young in East Barns, 1580–1629," in *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters*, ed. Julian Goodare (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 67–84.

<sup>150</sup> Julian Goodare, "Scottish Witchcraft in its European Context," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 26–50; Ronald Hutton, "The Global Context of the Scottish Witch-Hunt," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 16–32.

<sup>151</sup> Liv H. Willumsen, "Seventeenth-Century Witchcraft Trials in Scotland and Northern Norway: Comparative Aspects," *History Research* 1/1 (2011): 61–74; idem, *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); idem, "Exporting the Devil across the North Sea: John Cunningham and the Finnmark Witch-Hunt,"

Hagen has also looked into Cunningham's career, while his important work on Nordic witchcraft and Sami shamanism might be said to share certain resonances with the Scottish experience.<sup>152</sup> James Sharpe and Brian Levack have both drawn materials together with Scotland's closest geographical neighbour, England, in some of their work in search of common ground, despite the drastic difference in prosecution rates.<sup>153</sup> Further Anglo-Scottish comparisons have been fruitfully undertaken by Owen Davies on the subject of charmers.<sup>154</sup>

Focus on the latter stages of the hunts, or the period associated with the decline of witchcraft and witch belief, has been somewhat overlooked in a Scottish context, though Christina Lerner gave some attention to examples of early eighteenth-century witchcraft tracts, and the exemplary work of Brian Levack on the reasons behind decreasing indictments should not be neglected.<sup>155</sup> Ian Bostridge's *Witchcraft and its Transformations* (1997) contains much Scottish commentary and provides a political backdrop to the repeal of the Witchcraft Act.<sup>156</sup> Alexandra Hill reveals the intricacies of witch-hunting behaviour in the period 1701–27, effectively demonstrating linkages between individual accusations and trials.<sup>157</sup>

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in *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters*, ed. Julian Goodare (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 49–66.

<sup>152</sup> Rune Blix Hagen, "At the Edge of Civilisation: John Cunningham, Lensmann of Finnmark, 1619–51," in *Military Governors and Imperial Frontiers c.1600–1800: A Study of Scotland and Empires*, ed. A. MacKillop and Steve Murdoch (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 29–51; Rune Blix Hagen, "Witchcraft Criminality and Witchcraft Research in the Nordic Countries," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 375–92.

<sup>153</sup> James Sharpe, "Witch-Hunting and Witch Historiography: Some Anglo-Scottish Comparisons," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 182–97; Brian P. Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008) 1–14.

<sup>154</sup> Owen Davies, "A Comparative Perspective on Scottish Cunning-Folk and Charmers," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. J. Goodare, L. Martin and J. Miller (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 185–205.

<sup>155</sup> Christina Lerner, "Two Late Scottish Witchcraft Tracts: *Witch-Craft Proven and The Tryal of Witchcraft*," in *The Damned Art: Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft*, ed. S. Anglo (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) 227–45; Levack, "Decline and End of Scottish Witch-Hunting"; Levack, "Decline and End of Witchcraft Prosecutions".

<sup>156</sup> See also Owen Davies, "Decriminalising the Witch: The Origin and Response to the 1736 Witchcraft Act," in *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, ed. John Newton and Jo Bath (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 207–32; Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations, c. 1650–c.1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). See also Ian Bostridge, "Witchcraft Repealed," in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 309–34.

<sup>157</sup> Alexandra Hill, "Decline and Survival of Scottish Witch-Hunting, 1701–1727," in *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters*, ed. Julian Goodare (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 215–33.

Thomas Davidson's *Rowan Tree and Red Thread* (1949) was an early attempt to bring together trial evidence with legends and balladry, while the multiplicity of articles and books by Alan Bruford often touched upon the witch figure within Gaelic folktale and legend.<sup>158</sup> However, there has so far been only one academic monograph on the entire subject of the Scottish witch-hunts; the highly acclaimed and pioneering *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (1981) by Christina Lerner, followed by the posthumous publication of *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Belief* (1984).<sup>159</sup> It would be no exaggeration to say Lerner inspired many, including this researcher, to pursue aspects of Scottish witchcraft, though mostly these works have been confined to scholarly articles rather than monographs. Here, the efforts of Hugh V. McLachlan and J. K. Swales deserve mention. They have between them produced a significant number of articles, many putting to good use the data brought together for the *Source Book* (1977), a project on which McLachlan and Lerner worked together.<sup>160</sup> Also notable are the various works of Brian Levack, a legal historian, who has been particularly interested in the judicial processes involved in Scottish witchcraft cases. Most of the chapters of his book *Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion* (2008) originated as previously published articles, but there are fresh interpretations on such topics as demonic possession and an in-depth investigation of the events leading to the witch-lynching in Pittenweem.<sup>161</sup> My own edited collection, *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture* (2009), contains focused articles on areas such as witchcraft, fairy belief, prophecy and second sight, the Enlightenment, material culture, literature and astrology.<sup>162</sup> Publications of collected essays, under

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<sup>158</sup> See, for instance, Bruford, "Scottish Gaelic Witch Stories," and (with D. A. MacDonald) ed., *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994).

<sup>159</sup> Thomas Davidson, *Rowan Tree and Red Thread: A Scottish Witchcraft Miscellany of Tales, Legends and Ballads; Together with a Description of the Witches' Rites and Ceremonies* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1949); Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, ed. Alan MacFarlane (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

<sup>160</sup> Articles by Hugh V. McLachlan and J. Kim Swales include "Stereotypes and Scottish Witchcraft," *Contemporary Review* 234 (1979): 88–94; "Witchcraft and Anti-Feminism," *Scottish Journal of Sociology* 4/2 (1980): 141–66; "Scottish Witchcraft: Myth or Reality?" *Contemporary Review* 260 (1992): 79–84; "The Bewitchment of Christian Shaw: A Reassessment of the Famous Paisley Witchcraft Case of 1697," in *Twisted Sisters: Women, Crime and Deviance in Scotland Since 1400*, ed. Yvonne Galloway Brown and Rona Ferguson (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002) 54–83.

<sup>161</sup> See also Brian P. Levack, *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013) for a contextual background to demonic possession.

<sup>162</sup> Lizanne Henderson, ed., *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2009).



the scrupulous editorial eye of Julian Goodare – *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context* (2002), *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland* (2008) and *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters* (2013) – is evidence that interest in this area of Scottish history has finally begun to be realized.<sup>163</sup>

This review by no means mentions every work ever published on the topic of Scottish witchcraft and witch-hunting, but it is intended to present an informed view of where scholarship has been and, hopefully, where it is heading.<sup>164</sup> What follows is intended as a modest contribution to the growing body of knowledge of this murky, yet fascinating, aspect of Scotland's past.

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<sup>163</sup> Julian Goodare, ed., *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002); Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller, eds., *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Julian Goodare, ed., *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>164</sup> See also Stuart MacDonald, "Enemies of God Revisited: Recent Publications on Scottish Witch-Hunting," *Scottish Economic and Social History* 23/2 (2003): 65–84; Julian Goodare, "Bibliography of Scottish Witchcraft," in *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters*, ed. Julian Goodare (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 234–45; Julian Goodare, "Witchcraft in Scotland," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 300–17.

# 2

## The Idea of Witchcraft

... tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraips, giants, enchanted towers, dragons and other trumpery ... cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy; but had so strong an effect on my imagination, that to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles, I sometimes keep a sharp lookout in suspicious places; and though nobody can be more sceptical in these matters than I, yet it often takes an effort of Philosophy to shake off these idle terrors.

Robert Burns, *Letter to John Moore* (1787)<sup>1</sup>

The idea of witchcraft has been around for a long time, can be found in many cultures around the world, and has generally been understood to be a supernatural evil. Witches carried out *maleficium*, known in Scotland as malice, acts of harmful magic. In the late medieval and early modern period, the gradual emergence of diabolical witchcraft, or the notion that witches were actively engaged in Devil worship, changed the nature of the crime from a basic felony to one of heresy and apostasy. The diabolical aspect of much European witchcraft has also been seen as a key distinguishing feature from understandings of witchcraft in most non-Western societies up to the present day.<sup>2</sup>

The scope and nature of powers possessed by practitioners of witchcraft were widely discussed and debated throughout the era of the witch trials, though full consensus as to what exactly constituted a “typical” witch was

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<sup>1</sup> James Currie, ed., *The Works of Robert Burns to Which Is Prefixed a Life of the Author. A New Edition*, 2 vols. (London: Thomas Tegg, 1824) vol. 1, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (1987; 3rd edn, Harlow: Pearson Education, 2006) 8–9.

rarely achieved. There was no single stereotype of a European witch ever fully agreed upon and, even at a local or country-specific level, variations in interpretation and understanding of what constituted a witch or witchcraft could, and did, occur. The situation has not really changed in modern times either, with regular confusion and misinformation being expressed among scholars, the media and the populace at large, over such things as witch-doctors, exorcists, Satanists or wiccans.

Interpretation and meaning are often influenced by disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches. Taking her cue from anthropology, Christina Lerner described sorcery, for instance, as “the use of words and actions (incantation and the manipulation of objects, substances, or livestock) to generate supernatural power,” while witchcraft is the “generation of supernatural power with or without particular performances and is therefore an umbrella term.”<sup>3</sup> Though some historians have treated sorcery and witchcraft synonymously, cultural anthropologists regularly distinguish between the two concepts, an inheritance of Evans-Pritchard’s pioneering work on the magical beliefs of the Zande where he encountered such divisions.<sup>4</sup> Sorcery has been defined as “the performance of certain magical rites for the purpose of harming other people” and as such is a “mechanical, manipulative process” of magic, which could potentially be used for beneficial as well as harmful purposes, and is an acquired or learned skill. Witchcraft might also be learned but it could also be an innate skill, “the practice of an inborn, involuntary, and often unconscious capacity to cause harm to other people” – a power, in other words, inherited by the witch through birth and rarely associated with beneficent magic.<sup>5</sup>

Similar confusion of terminology has arisen between witchcraft and charming. Coming at the problem from a different angle, and one that takes on board why people may have chosen to consult one magical practitioner over another, Willem de Blécourt has entreated scholars to “recognize the relevance of a categorical separation of two basic cultural processes, between attributed deeds and performed practices.” In an early attempt to reevaluate and distinguish the role of “unwitchment experts,” or cunning folk, from witches, de Blécourt suggested that while the notion of magical “expertise”

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<sup>3</sup> Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981) 8–9.

<sup>4</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). Subsequent researchers on African witch beliefs found that Evans-Pritchard’s dichotomy could not be universally applied, notably Victor W. Turner, “Witchcraft and Sorcery: Taxonomy versus Dynamics,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 34/4 (1964): 314–25.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Ferraro and Susan Andreatta, *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective* (Stamford: Cengage Learning, 2014) 347; Levack, *Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 6–7.

centred on the types of performed practices normally associated with charmers, “maleficent witchcraft” was more closely aligned with attributed deeds.<sup>6</sup> It is an important distinction, and one that also helps to make sense of the large number of suspected witches who did not, at least consciously, use witchcraft, but rather witchcraft had been ascribed to their actions and behaviours by their accusers.

Witchcraft is not an easy subject to study or to engage with for it can, at times, be hard to relate to or comprehend. It can be disturbing or deeply distressing. It can also be a frustrating topic to deal with, particularly in the face of inherent contradictions as to what is deemed believable or unbelievable or, indeed, problems with the sources when, and if, there are any. The very words “witch” and “witchcraft” are themselves problematic and not always easy to define with any accuracy for they embody concepts and ideas that have shifted over time and place.

Stuart Clark has described witchcraft as “a set of cultural practices” as opposed to a fixed set of beliefs.<sup>7</sup> In mid-sixteenth-century Scotland, in the early stages of the development of witch persecution, it may be fair to say that there was less of what might be considered “fixed,” as such, with regard to learned conceptualizations of the witch. It is, however, doubtful that this lack of fixity about what a witch was, or was deemed capable of, was still as pronounced by century’s end, and certainly by the seventeenth century it could be argued that a more uniform body of witch beliefs had established itself within legal, religious and wider institutional circles. The degree of fixity among folk traditions about witches is rather more challenging to assess, though the Scottish evidence would suggest, taking regional particularisms into account, that the basic core of popular witch beliefs remained relatively “fixed” before, during and for at least a generation after the period of the witch-hunts.

This book is less concerned with witch “practices” but rather with the interface between folk and learned beliefs about witches; beliefs which over time became more associated with the “peasantry” than with the “elite.” There is also “unbelief” to be considered, though in reality, there were no simple distinctions between believers and non-believers. A person sceptical about a witch’s ability to fly or transform into animals might still believe that witches exist. A critic of the witch-hunts could still believe witchcraft was within the realm of possibility. A non-believer in any form of witchcraft might still insist that the Devil had influence in the world. Beliefs, like

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<sup>6</sup> Willem de Blécourt, “Witchdoctors, Soothsayers and Priests: On Cunning Folk in European Historiography and Tradition,” *Social History* 19/3 (1994): 285–303.

<sup>7</sup> Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 459. See also Stuart Clark’s chapter on witchcraft and magic in early modern Europe in *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, vol. 4: *The Period of the Witch Trials*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark and William Monter (London: The Athlone Press, 2002) 97–169.

human beings, are complex and not infrequently contradictory. What we must acknowledge is that “there were different types and degrees of belief regarding witchcraft.”<sup>8</sup>

Learned ideas about what constituted witchcraft underwent some profound changes over the course of history. From biblical necromancers to semi-divine poisoners of the Classical era, the diabolical witch figure slowly began to take shape in the late medieval period. In Scotland, changing ideas about witchcraft can be traced in the sixteenth century,<sup>9</sup> and emerged fully formed by the turn of the seventeenth century. In the period post-1662 witchcraft theory went through further processes of transformation and redefinition. The diabolical elements associated with witchcraft went into recession and the folk concerns over *maleficium* returned. To be fair, these concerns never really went away, but had become overshadowed by the church and state’s obsessions over demonic power and a desire to police the morals of society. By the eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophies did little to shake off the idle terrors of which Burns spoke, though witches were most definitely beginning to lose their former status as public enemy number one. Other perceived enemies were surfacing to take her place. Stereotypes about witches would continue to carry some weight in literary and folk circles, far beyond the period of the Enlightenment, but she would never again take centre stage in the religious and political life of Scotland.

### The image of the witch: sin, sex and stereotypes

The nineteenth-century advocate and Scottish historian John Hill Burton described the Scottish witch as “a far more frightful being than her coadjutor on the south side of the Tweed.” Why? Because the Scottish witch is “sometimes seen to rise above the proper sphere of the witch, who is only the slave, into that of the sorcerer, who is master of the demon.” The English witch, on the other hand, is “the very perfection of stupid vulgarity ... she can disturb the elements it is true, but they go no further in their wrath than the souring of the beer, or the destruction of the butter.” Furthermore, the English witch is “an inveterate slattern, managing with an infinite variety of offensive operations to disturb the equanimity of the tidy, notable English

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<sup>8</sup> Brian P. Levack, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 9.

<sup>9</sup> Lizanne Henderson, “‘Detestable Slaves of the Devil’: Changing Attitudes to Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland,” in *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland*, ed. Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011),” 226–53.

housewife." Burton explained why the Scottish witch was an altogether more terrifying prospect as follows:

In a people so far behind their neighbours in domestic organisation, poor and hardy, inhabiting a country of mountains, torrents, and rocks where cultivation was scanty, accustomed to gloomy mists and wild storms, every impression must necessarily assume a corresponding character. Superstitions, like funguses and vermin, are existences peculiar to the spot where they appear, and are governed by its physical accidents.<sup>10</sup>

In one short passage, an entire universe of comparative cultural assumptions is opened up. Thus Scottish witches were more terrifying than English witches; Scotland was a more "superstitious" place than England because it was backward economically and socially. The imagery of the witches, and their believers, living within poor agricultural lands, surrounded by wild Highland scenes and rugged terrain is also of interest and raises the notion of landscape as an influence on mindscape.<sup>11</sup> Burton seems to be unaware that the overwhelming majority of accused witches lived in the agriculturally rich areas of the Lowlands. The idea that England was somehow more progressive, with regard to witch belief and superstition in general, is also quite erroneous. The last known person to be executed for witchcraft in England was Alice Molland in 1685, and the last conviction was against Jane Wenham in 1712.<sup>12</sup> The custom of swimming the witch continued to be practised, officially though mainly unofficially, in England well into the eighteenth century, while evidence of widespread witch lore was readily uncovered by the first wave of folklorists in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> John Hill Burton, *Narratives from Criminal Trials in Scotland*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1852) vol. 1, 240–3.

<sup>11</sup> Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001; Edinburgh: John Donald, 2011) 18.

<sup>12</sup> James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550–1750* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996) 226, 229–31; idem, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001) 74. C. L'Estrange Ewen notes an even later case in September 1717, of Jane Clarke, her son and daughter, who were brought before a Leicester jury on several counts of witchcraft. As many as 25 depositions were given in against them, from witnesses who alleged the suspects had caused a variety of unusual illnesses and could shapeshift into the forms of a cat and a dog. The suspects were blooded, searched for the witch's mark and were subjected to the swimming test. The informants claimed that the three had been found guilty through each of these tests, but the jury was unconvinced and acquitted them of the charges. *Witchcraft and Demonianism* (1933; London: Muller, 1970) 390.

<sup>13</sup> Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, 88. For examples, see Davis, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, 98–9; Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism*, 445, 460.

It was not just among historians, however, that the idea that witches were more plentiful in Scotland than in England flourished. Folklorists, too, added their own share of misinformation to the cultural baggage of the north. For example, William Henderson began his chapter on witchcraft with the observation that “belief in this evil power, once universal throughout Christendom, took deep hold of the Borderland, especially of the Scottish portion of it.”<sup>14</sup> The fact that the examples in his chapter are drawn equally from England, as well as other parts of Europe, seems to have escaped his notice. Though this book does not undertake a comparative study between English and Scottish witch beliefs, even a cursory look at the English material reveals that although England did not have as serious a witch-hunt in terms of prosecution rates, at village level, fear of the malignant power of the witch figure was very strong and, no doubt, as equally terrifying as anything found among the Scottish peasantry.

From the point of view of outside observers, Scotland suffered from the prevailing notion that the north was a more superstitious place, where one might expect to find magic and witchcraft, providing, as Hugh Miller put it, “a natural connection ... between wild scenes and wild legends.”<sup>15</sup> North is, of course, a relative term, or, as Alexander Pope put it in 1734, “Ask where’s the North? at York, ‘tis on the Tweed; In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there, At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where.”<sup>16</sup> The north is wild and savage. Classical authors dismissed the north as a barbaric and cruel place. In a Scottish context, the Highland and Gaelic-speaking region and the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland were viewed by Lowlanders with disdain and suspicion. Elsewhere, in Norway, Sweden and Finland, the homelands of the Sámi people, north of the Arctic Circle, had a strong reputation for sorcery and shamanism.<sup>17</sup> The Icelandic Sagas, and the poems of the Elder Edda, related stories of sorcery and magic throughout the Scandinavian world, but the Finns (or Sámi) were especially picked out as powerful magic workers and shapeshifters in *Historia Norvegiae*, composed in the second half of the twelfth century, and copied in Scotland c.1500:

A person will scarcely believe their unendurable impiety and the extent to which they practise heathen devilry in their magic arts. There are some who are worshipped by the ignorant masses as though they were prophets, since, whenever questioned, they will give many predictions to many

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<sup>14</sup> William Henderson, *Notes on the Folklore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (1866; London: The Folklore Society, 1879) 143.

<sup>15</sup> Hugh Miller, *The Old Red Sandstone* (1841; London: Dent, 1922) 214.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, ed. John Butt (London, 1734; Chelsea: Sheridan Books, 1963) Epistle II, 523.

<sup>17</sup> Rune Hagen, “The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Finnmark,” *Acta Borealia* 16/1 (1999): 43–62.

folk through the medium of a foul spirit which they call gand, and these auguries come true.<sup>18</sup>

The notion that Scandinavia was an abode of witches and sorcery was given strong reinforcement by the author Olaus Magnus, in *Historia De Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (*History of the Northern Peoples*, 1555), who was widely read in sixteenth-century Europe. Magnus remarked that a mythical hill called Blåkulla, or Blue Hill, was used at certain times of the year by Nordic witches for their meetings: "They compete in magic and superstitious arts. Those who are late for this devil's service are terribly punished." The journey, or witches flight, to Blåkulla was a central concept in several Scandinavian witch trials.<sup>19</sup> French demonologist Jean Bodin, in *De la Démonomanie des Sorciers* (*On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, 1580) continued the association when he remarked that "there are more witches in Norway and Livonia and the other Northern regions, than there are in the rest of the world, as Olaus the Great says."<sup>20</sup>

Scotland, and the cultural region of Sápmi (which extends over northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and the northwest tip of Russia, and was formerly known as Lapland), shared a reputation for magic and witchcraft, as evidenced in sixteenth- to early eighteenth-century texts. James VI's opinion that superstition was to be found in the northern regions was widely shared. Why should it be, he wondered, that superstition should be more prevalent in such "wild parts of the world" as Lapland, Finland, Orkney or Shetland? "Because where the Devill findes greatest ignorance and barbaritie, there assayles he grosseliest."<sup>21</sup> William Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* (1594) refers to "Lapland Sorcerers,"<sup>22</sup> and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1604) mentions "Lapland Giants."<sup>23</sup> John Milton wrote in, *Paradise*

<sup>18</sup> Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, eds., *Historia Norwegie*, trans. Peter Fisher (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003) 8, 61. See also Clive Tolley, "The Shamanic Séance in the *Historia Norvegiae*," *Shaman* 2/2 (1994): 135–56.

<sup>19</sup> The name itself is generally traced to German placenames, usually Brocken. There is also a suggestion that the hill was originally conceived as the home of trolls before it became associated as the meeting place of witches. Per Sörlin, "The Blåkulla Story: Absurdity and Rationality," *Arv. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* (1997): 131–52; idem, *Wicked Arts: Witchcraft and Magic Trials in Southern Sweden, 1635–1754* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 29–30.

<sup>20</sup> Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark and William Monter, *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, vol. 4: *The Period of the Witch-Trials* (London: The Athlone Press, 2002) 75–6; Jean Bodin, *De la Démonomanie des Sorciers*, trans. Randy A. Scott (1580; Toronto: CRRS Publications, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 69.

<sup>22</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors* (1594; Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2005) IV.iii.1–11.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (1604; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) A-text, scene i, 121–35.



*Lost* (1667): “Nor uglier follow the night-hag, when, called in secret, riding through the air she comes, lured with the smell of infant blood, to dance with Lapland witches, while the labouring moon eclipses at their charms,”<sup>24</sup> and the Scottish dramatist David Mallet’s poem *The Excursion* (1728) describes a north polar “land of fears” where “the secret hag and sorcerer unbles’s’d” hold their Sabbath meeting.<sup>25</sup> Daniel Defoe, in *A System of Magick* (1727), using terms not dissimilar from James VI, relegated most of the northern world to the dominion of the Devil:

the Devil has some little out-lyers and sculking operators in the world, and which he makes great use of, which may not be said to come under any of those denominations; as particularly our second-sighted men in Scotland, the wind merchants in Norway, who sell fair and foul weather, storms and calms, as the Devil and you can agree upon a price, and as your occasion require: Also in Lapland, Muscovy, Siberia and other northern parts of the world, he is said to act by differing methods, and governed his dominions by a more open and arbitrary method, not prescribed and limited to art and craft as he does here.<sup>26</sup>

Within Scotland, the north/south divide can be illustrated by the reputation that Caithness, Ross and Sutherland had acquired, as early as the sixteenth century, as the haunts of magic and monsters. According to poet Alexander Montgomerie’s *Flying of Montgomerie and Polwart*, his nemesis, Polwarth, was conceived and born, “Into the hinderend of harvest, on ane alhallow evin, When our goode nichtbouris [fairies] ryddis.” The infant Polwarth was to be nursed by Nicneven, the demon queen, who knew charms from the north country, Caithness and Ross, areas famed as the abodes of witches. Through the unnatural circumstances of his birth, banished as he was from decent society, he suffered utter destitution, and was forced to wander with werewolves and wildcats.<sup>27</sup> Learned opinion and

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<sup>24</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) book 2, 662–6.

<sup>25</sup> David Mallet, *Poetical Works of David Mallet, with the Life of the Author* (1728; London: C. Cooke, 1798) 17–41, lines 314–50.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A System of Magick; or, The History of the Black-Art* (London: J. Roberts, 1727), 227.

<sup>27</sup> Montgomerie’s opponent was Sir Patrick Hume of Polwarth, a well-established poet in his own right and master of the household of James VI. James Cranstoun, ed., *Poems of Alexander Montgomerie* (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1887) 69; George Stevenson, ed., *Poems of Alexander Montgomerie, Supplementary Volume* (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1910); Helena Mennie Shire, *Song, Dance and Poetry of the Court of Scotland under King James VI* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 80–99; R. D. S. Jack, *Alexander Montgomerie* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985) *passim*. See also T. van Heijnsbergen and M. G. Pittock, eds., *Scottish Literary*



*Illustration 2.1* “A Witch-Brew and Incantation” (1909), by John Copland  
Source: J. Maxwell Wood, *Witchcraft and Superstitious Record in the South-Western District of Scotland*, (1911; Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1975) 38.

popular belief were therefore united on the invincible association between unnatural creatures and their septentrional abode.

Stereotypes hold a powerful sway over the human imagination. Most people today will have a strong idea of what a stereotypical witch looks like and acts like. She will be a mature woman, with bad skin, crooked teeth, foul breath, a cackling laugh and a big nose that has a wart at the end of it. She will be wearing a black dress and a broad-rimmed, conical shaped hat. She is probably unmarried or widowed, and lives alone in a cottage at the edge of the village or deep within the forest. She may keep a cat, black of course, and there is likely a broomstick propped up against the cottage door that serves also to carry her to covens with her wicked sisters. She has a nasty temper and spends a lot of time muttering to herself, for she is not what you would call a popular person, often getting into disagreements with her neighbours. This wizened old crone knows how to curse and to cast spells, making potions from bat’s blood, eye of newt and the fat of unchristened babies. She collects and mixes herbs and is blamed for bringing death, destruction, bad weather and general misfortune to all who dare to cross her. The image

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*Journal: Alexander Montgomerie (1598–1998), Special Number* vol. 26 (1999). H. M. Shire, ed., *Alexander Montgomerie: A Selection from his Songs and Poems* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960) states that there was at Polwarth an old thorn associated with fertility rites, 82 note.

that has been conjured is of a recognizable Halloween witch, the figure that haunts children's bedtime stories or the exquisite "Wicked Witch of the West," played by Margaret Hamilton in the movie *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). This is the storybook image with which many of us have grown up, and it continues to be a prevalent icon. In the latter half of the twentieth century a competing witch figure has emerged: a younger, prettier version who has incredible powers, but uses them for good rather than evil. The most recent manifestations have steered clear of green-faced child-killers and, though they are almost always female, they have become much more glamorous, and much less threatening, aimed predominantly at a teenage audience.<sup>28</sup> And yet, from a historical perspective, though witches were once believed to have existed, they never quite fitted either of these prevailing stereotypes, in Scotland or elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

There was nothing frivolous about Scottish witches; they were emphatically regarded as evil. In Scotland, as with most Europeans in the early modern period, the threat posed by witches was quite real; even for those who had never personally been the target of a witch's curse, the possibility of attack remained constant. Within much witchcraft historiography attempts have been made to disentangle and separate folk attitudes and conceptions from learned ideas and impositions about witches and the dangers they posed. Concerns around the potentially heretical source of the witches' magical power – namely diabolical communications and demonic interference – is generally accepted to have been the primary focus of elite views, whereas the common man or woman was normally

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<sup>28</sup> There are a plethora of examples to choose from film and television, such as 1960s sit-com *Bewitched* (1964–72), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), Willow in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996–2003), *Charmed* (1998–2006), Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* series (2001–11), *True Blood* (2008–14) or Bonnie Bennett in *The Vampire Diaries* (since 2009). The cult classic *The Wicker Man* (1976) and TV movie *The Witch's Daughter* (1996) were set in Scotland, while Julie Walters provided the voice of the witch in the animated film *Brave* (2012).

<sup>29</sup> On modern-day and media representations of the witch figure, see Jes Battis, ed., *Supernatural Youth: The Rise of the Teen Hero in Literature and Popular Culture* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011); Carrol L. Fry, *Cinema of the Occult: New Age, Satanism, Wicca, and Spiritualism in Film* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing, 2008); Marion Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Hannah E. Johnston and Peg Aloï, eds., *The New Generation of Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Tanice G. Foltz, "The Commodification of Witchcraft," in *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America*, ed. Helen A. Berger (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) 137–68; Rachel Moseley, "Glamorous Witchcraft: Gender and Magic in Teen Film and Television," *Screen* 43/4 (2002): 403–22; Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, eds., *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Tanya Krzywinska, *A Skin for Dancing In: Possession, Witchcraft and Voodoo in Film* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000).

more worried about the direct impact acts of witchcraft might have upon themselves, their families and friends, their livestock or their livelihoods. In reality, the distinctions between learned and popular ways of thinking were probably never so clear-cut. As with most aspects of belief and opinion there were negotiable areas of overlap, intersection, reciprocity and exchange.

Defining what a witch actually was, and of what they were thought capable, did exhibit variation across early modern European societies, and so we must ask if there was anything particular or special about Scottish witches. The basic threats practitioners of witchcraft presented appear to be universally, and indeed globally, much the same – such as hurt, damage, infertility, destruction and interpersonal conflict – though the specific characteristics can differ across cultures and geographical regions. Many of those differences were closely related to the means of subsistence. Thus a vineyard owner living in seventeenth-century Swabian Austria might attribute the loss of his grapes to hailstorms and adverse weather caused by “witch-women,” while in coastal Finnmark witches were blamed with driving the fish away.<sup>30</sup> In Scottish Lowland farming communities, loss of livestock or interference with dairy yields were commonly associated with witchcraft, while in the coastal towns and villages, or in the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland, maritime issues, such as the sinking of ships, drownings or depletion of fish stocks, were occasionally attributed to the activities of witches.<sup>31</sup>

Associations between witchcraft and climate manipulation (thunder, hail, storms, floods, drought, frost) do not appear to have been as dominant within Scottish tradition as in some parts of central Europe or the northern Alpine regions.<sup>32</sup> Scottish witches were more regularly coupled with general misfortune and unnatural acts of malefice, or harmful magic. From the folk perspective witches usually acted alone or with the assistance of fairies, and occasionally ghosts. However, the authorities were troubled that witches

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<sup>30</sup> Johannes Dillinger, *‘Evil People’: A Comparative Study of Witch Hunts in Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier*, trans. Laura Stokes (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009) 99; Liv H. Willumsen, *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) 274.

<sup>31</sup> One of the most well-known instances of storm-raising was during the North Berwick trials. The witch’s ability to affect weather was a widespread belief associated with inland and coastal regions. Jonathan Durrant and Michael D. Bailey, *Historical Dictionary of Witchcraft*, (2nd rev. edn; Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012) 186.

<sup>32</sup> The ability of witches to control weather to the detriment of crops is not a particularly strong motif in Scottish trials, though elsewhere, such as in Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier, it was a central concept. Johannes Dillinger tracks the rise and fall of witchcraft persecutions here with agrarian crises in *‘Evil People’*, 48–9, 63–70, chap. 4.

achieved their malevolence through the agency of evil spirits, demons and the Devil.<sup>33</sup> Witches could employ charms, verbal cursing or chant magical incantations to effect damage or injury. In the Highland and Islands some witches possessed the “evil eye,” and dream interpretation played a more prominent role. Folk traditions throughout Scotland posited the witches’ ability to shapeshift into animal form, notably into cats or hares, a concept that was deeply divisive among learned opinion.

Within learned witchcraft theory, bearing in mind there was much cross-fertilization with folk belief, witches were thought to attend Satanic sabbat meetings with others of their kind; some contended that they were able to fly through the air to get to these diabolical assemblies.<sup>34</sup> At such nocturnal gatherings they would enter into a Demonic Pact, a formal ceremony at which time the witches renounced their baptism and received a bite or nip from the Devil to seal the agreement;<sup>35</sup> some had sexual intercourse with the Devil, although it was reportedly a painful and unpleasant experience.<sup>36</sup> Discovery of the Devil’s or witch’s mark, the spot where the witch had been bitten, pinched or bruised by the Devil, could be used as evidence in a court of law of the witch’s guilt. The mark itself was thought to be insensible to

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<sup>33</sup> Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (1976; London: Pimlico, 2005) 146–7; Robert Rowland, “Fantasical and Devilish Persons’: European Witch-Beliefs in Comparative Perspective,” in *Early Modern European Witchcraft, Centres and Peripheries*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 161–9.

<sup>34</sup> On witches’ flight, see Julian Goodare, “Flying Witches in Scotland,” in *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters*, ed. Julian Goodare (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 159–76. On the witches’ sabbat, see Larner, *Enemies of God*, 151–6; Carlo Ginzburg, “Deciphering the Sabbath,” in *Early Modern European Witchcraft, Centres and Peripheries*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 121–37; Willem de Blécourt, “The Return of the Sabbath: Mental Archaeologies, Conjectural Histories or Political Mythologies?,” in *Palgrave Advances in Witchcraft Historiography*, ed. Jonathan Barry and Owen Davies (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 125–45; Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 38–41; Martine Ostero, “The Concept of the Witches Sabbath in the Alpine Region (1430–1440): Text and Context,” in *Witchcraft Mythologies and Persecutions*, ed. Gábor Klaniczay and Éva Pócs (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008) 15–34; Willem de Blécourt, “Sabbath Stories: Towards a New History of Witches’ Assemblies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 84–100.

<sup>35</sup> On the Demonic Pact, see Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 144–6; Larner, *Enemies of God*, 145–51; Levack, *Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 37; Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 43–4.

<sup>36</sup> On sexual relations with the Devil, see Larner, *Enemies of God*, 146–50; Emma Wilby, *Cunning-Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005) 105–7; Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 47.

pain, hence the procedure known as “pricking the witch” with a long pin all over the body to detect it.<sup>37</sup>

The use of corpses for magical purposes, within the folk or learned tradition, does not seem to have played a particularly strong role in Scottish witch confessions. There are some incidences of corpse-raising in the North Berwick trials of the 1590s, and chief suspect Agnes Sampson was accused of utilizing dead people’s joints in her rituals. In 1603, Patrik Lowrie Dundonald, Ayrshire, confessed to exhuming a corpse for the purpose of performing a ritual, as too did John Brughe, in 1643, a folk healer from Kinross. Among the many alleged crimes of Isobel Gowdie, from Auldearn, tried in 1662, was making a potion from the body of an unchristened child.<sup>38</sup> In all of these examples the diabolical aspect, including entering into a Demonic Pact, was also present which might suggest that the notion of witches using human remains in their rituals was not a folk tradition but an imposed motif.

When hardships, misfortunes or disasters occurred, many may have believed that God was punishing them for sin, misdeeds or a weakness of faith. Others may have considered witchcraft to be an equally plausible explanation. The source of the witch’s power was extraordinary, unnatural, and, at least as far as the law was concerned, demonically inspired, yet the effects were almost always directed towards disrupting ordinary, natural and commonplace events. The witch figure, in other words, represented disharmony, imbalance and chaos in everyday lives. Witches were an enemy of the Church and a threat to the stability of society. But even more menacing was that the witch operated from within society, often a well-known member of the village or community. A witch might be a close relative or your next-door neighbour. Unlike demons or poltergeists, witches were not unseen, externally driven supernatural forces, but living, breathing people. For many, witches were a tangible reality and witchcraft a constant and ubiquitous threat.<sup>39</sup>

Witch beliefs were, of course, “neither monolithic nor hegemonic.”<sup>40</sup> Though there are consistent motifs and patterns to many witch confessions, there is no such thing as a “typical” Scottish witch trial; each has its own

<sup>37</sup> On the Devil’s or Witch’s Mark, see Lerner, *Enemies of God*, 110–11; Orna Alyagon Darr, “The Devil’s Mark: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Physical Evidence,” *Continuity and Change* 24/2 (2009): 361–87.

<sup>38</sup> Trial of Agnes Sampson (1591), Pitcairn, *Trials*, vol. 1, part 2, 209–54; Trial of Bessie Thomson (1591), Pitcairn, *Trials*, vol. 1, part 2, 239–41; Trial of Patrik Lowrie (1603–5), Pitcairn, *Trials*, vol. 2, 477–9; Trial of John Brughe (1643), NAS, *Books of Adjournal*, JC 2/8, 336–40; Trial of Isobel Gowdie (1662), Pitcairn, *Trials*, vol. 3, 602–15.

<sup>39</sup> Henderson, “Detestable Slaves of the Devil,” 227.

<sup>40</sup> Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, 78.



*Illustration 2.2* "The Witches of Delnabo," by James Torrance

Source: Sir George Douglas, ed., *Scottish Fairy and Folk Tales* (London: Walter Scott, n.d.) 188.

dynamic, unique conditions and set of circumstances. Some can tell us more about learned ideas of witchcraft, while others offer a glimpse into the everyday lives and opinions of the folk. Indeed, witchcraft trials can offer fascinating insights into mindsets, mentalities, attitudes, emotions, beliefs and customs of ordinary, and not so ordinary, people; they are a key to unlocking both commonplace experiences and extraordinary phenomena. The large majority, however, as indicated throughout the following chapters, are concerned with the everyday and the mundane.

### The glamour of words

Before the period of widespread European witch-hunting, there existed a remarkably rich lexis to describe different types of magical practitioners, many of which later became subsumed under a single word, “witch.” In the Greco-Roman world, for instance, the subtle distinctions that had once existed between such magical practitioners and entities as *Goêtes* (sorcerers), *Magoi* (mages), *Saga* (woman who casts lots, diviner), *Lamia* (snake-like female monster) or *Strix* (screech-owl and bird of ill-omen), as well as magical concepts such as *Goeteia* (lower form of magic), *Mageia* (magical ritual), *Curiositas* (an interest in magic), *Fascinatio* (form of bewitching), *Potio* (especially a love potion) or *Veneficia* (acts of harmful magic) would be lost once the catch-all phrase “witch” became more prevalent.<sup>41</sup> The point here is that “witch” or “witchcraft” can be a limiting term, covering a potentially vast range of magical practitioners and semantic meanings.

Words, however, are not always what they seem. Words as they are used and understood today may have carried alternative meanings in the past. Take “mascot,” for instance, which now carries the meaning of “a person or thing supposed to bring luck,” often manifested as a particular symbol or object of an organization, group or sports team, originally derived from the French *mascotte*, meaning “charm, or sorcerer’s charm,” which in turn derived from the Provençal word *mascoto*, meaning a “piece of witchcraft, charm, amulet,” and the feminine diminutive of *masco*, meaning “witch.” Ultimately, this word can probably be traced back to a medieval Latin word *masca*, meaning “witch, spectre.”<sup>42</sup> Another example is “fascinate,” from Latin *fascinare*, originally signified enchantment or to affect by witchcraft. It related in particular to the look cast by a serpent. Similarly “glamour,”

<sup>41</sup> Valerie Flint, Richard Gordon, Georg Luck and Daniel Ogden, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, Volume 2: *Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999) 97–101, 254–6; Matthew W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001) 12–17; Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 5–6, chapters 2–7.

<sup>42</sup> OED.



which was originally a Scots word introduced by the poet William Dunbar (c.1460–c.1520), meaning “magic, enchantment or spell” in the sense of inflicting a victim with the same. “Glamour” could also specifically refer to the “supposed influence of a charm on the eye, causing it to see objects differently from what they really are,” and so to “cast glamer o’er one” was to cause a “deception of sight.” Thus it was that witches were believed to wear amber beads – known in the Lothians as “glamer beads” – for the “purposes of fascination.”<sup>43</sup>

The word “witch” is a heavily loaded term, with a multitude of meanings. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes “witch” as “a female magician, sorceress; esp. a woman supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits and to be able by their co-operation to perform supernatural acts.” The definition here is explicitly female and her powers expressly linked to evil or the demonic; “witch” could also be used to describe a person with no particular supernatural powers, as “a contemptuous appellation for a malevolent or repulsive-looking old woman,” or “a young woman, or girl, of bewitching aspect or manners.”<sup>44</sup> Once again the gendering of the term is enforced, though with the added information of age and appearance; old woman equals loathsome and repellent, whereas young woman equates with alluring and enchanting. However, the Anglo-Saxon root of the word “witch” derives from *wicca* (male witch) and *wicce* (female witch), and originally carried the sense of a man or woman who used either good or bad magic, but by the sixteenth century “witch” was almost always reserved for practitioners of maleficent magic, acting in co-operation with the Devil or other evil spirits.

A significant proportion of those accused of witchcraft in Scotland were male, and the word “witch” was generally applied to them throughout the period of the witch-hunts. The term “warlock” derives from a different root than “witch” and carries the meaning “oathbreaker, traitor or devil,” or a “wicked person; a scoundrel, reprobate; a general term of reproach or abuse.” William Dunbar used it in this latter sense in his poem “The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis” (1513): “Catyvis [villains], wrechis [wretches] and ockeraris [money-lenders], Hudpykis [misers], hurdaris [hoarders] and gadderaris [money-grubbers], All with that warlo [warlock] went.”<sup>45</sup> It has also carried the meaning of “a savage or monstrous creature (hostile to men),” applied to “giants, cannibals, mythic beasts,” in the “Flyting between Montgomerie and Polwart” (c.1580): “Ane vairloche [warlock], ane woirwolf [werewolf],

<sup>43</sup> OED. John Jamieson, *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, 4 vols. (1808; Edinburgh: W. & C. Tait, 1825).

<sup>44</sup> OED.

<sup>45</sup> OED. William Dunbar, “Of Februar the Fyiftene Nycht (The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis)” c.1513, in *The Makars: The Poems of Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas*, ed. Jacqueline Tasioulas (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1999) 303–13.

ane wowbat of hair."<sup>46</sup> It is generally used, however, to denote "one in league with the Devil and so possessing occult and evil powers; a sorcerer, wizard (sometimes partly imagined as inhuman or demonic)," or as the "male counterpart of witch."<sup>47</sup> The idea of the warlock as a wizard-type figure, almost always male, who practises a learned and seemingly more sophisticated branch of the occult arts, is a popular understanding of the term in modern times, but it may be worthwhile pointing out that "wizard" was almost never used "in pre-modern sources as a male synonym for witch."<sup>48</sup> The concept of the warlock as the male equivalent of a witch has, however, been around in Scotland since at least the sixteenth century. In c.1580 Alexander Montgomerie could refer to "That witch, that warlok, that unworthy wicht, Turnis ay the best men tittest [totter/tremble] on thair bakis," while a century later, George Sinclair was looking back on the 1649 case of "an eminent warlock whose name was Robert Grieve, *alias* Hob Grieve" from Lauder.<sup>49</sup> In a sermon on witchcraft in 1697, James Hutchison mentioned "a warlock, that is a he-witch in our Scots language."<sup>50</sup> Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) defined "warlock" as a "male witch; a wizard," which he derived from Icelandic *vardlookr*, meaning "a charm" and the Saxon word *werlog*, meaning "an evil spirit." He also cited "warluck" as a term in Scotland that "applied to a man whom the vulgar suppose to be conversant with spirits," while a woman who "carries on the same commerce is called a witch."<sup>51</sup> The first complete dictionary of Scots was John Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1808; 1825), and he similarly described "warlock" as "a wizard; a man who is supposed to be in compact with the devil, or to deal with familiar spirits." Jamieson also supported its derivation from Icelandic "*vardlok-r*, an incantation, or magical song used for calling up evil spirits." He did not, however, agree with Sibbald that "warlock" was a corruption of the word "werewolf."<sup>52</sup>

<sup>46</sup> OED. "The Flying between Montgomerie and Polwart," in *Poems of Alexander Montgomerie*, ed. George Stevenson (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1910) 174, line 634.

<sup>47</sup> OED.

<sup>48</sup> Lara Apps and Andrew Gow, *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) 8. See also P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Wizards: A History* (Stroud: Tempus, 2004) 127–45.

<sup>49</sup> Stevenson, *Poems*, claimed "Tittest" also referred to a disease that afflicted horses, causing their legs to contract spasmodically. Alexander Montgomerie, "Ane Invectione Against Fortune," in *Poems of Alexander Montgomery*, ed. David Irving (Edinburgh: W. and C. Tait, 1821) 138; George Sinclair, *Satan's Invisible World Discovered* (Edinburgh, 1685; Edinburgh, 1871; Gainsville, 1969) 45.

<sup>50</sup> James Hutchison, "A Sermon on Witchcraft in 1697," *Scottish Historical Review* 7 (1910): 390–9.

<sup>51</sup> Lynch, ed., *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary*.

<sup>52</sup> "Warlock" and "Warwolf", Jamieson, *Dictionary*. On the importance of Jamieson's dictionary, see Susan Rennie, *Jamieson's Dictionary of Scots: The Story*

In Latin, the difference between male and female witches is only indicated by the masculine and feminine noun, *maleficus* (male evil-doer)/*malefica* (female evil-doer). The equivalent French term of “witch” is *sorcier* or *sorcière*, but in other European languages “witch” could mean something different from a “sorcerer.” In some German-speaking regions, for instance, *Zauberer/Zauberin* (magician or sorcerer) yielded to *Hex/Hexe* (witch) from around the 1420s and 1430s.<sup>53</sup> In northern Germany, Denmark and in the Netherlands (*Heks/Hekserij*, which corresponds to *Hex/Hexe*) this terminological transition was not apparent until the seventeenth century.<sup>54</sup> Early modern Germany also had a number of terms denoting the male witch, such as *Unhold*, *Drudner* and *Hexenmeister*.<sup>55</sup>

Throughout Scotland “witch” was the most commonly applied term, though “cummer,” “kimmer,”<sup>56</sup> “carlin” (an old woman) and “wyss wife” were also used as a periphrasis for a witch.<sup>57</sup> However, in the Scottish Highlands, there was no native Gaelic word for a “witch,” it only entering the language as an influence from the Lowlands at some point in the second half of the sixteenth century. Gaelic scholar and folklorist John MacInnes charts the Gaelic evolution of the concept of “witch,” noting that in the medieval period the canonical term to describe “a woman with supernatural powers, witch, hag, spectre” was *amaid*, which has survived, though barely and used only in its secondary sense of “a foolish woman.” The term that effectively displaced *amaid* was *buidseach*, “witchery, witchcraft,” from English “witch.” The implications for this adoption, claims MacInnes, are potentially of great importance for it might suggest that at some stage a “new kind of ‘witch’ came into Gaelic society, bringing new practices.” *Buidseach* refers specifically to a “male witch,” and is now largely confined to folktale. A more common word, with feminine prefix, is

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*of the First Historical Dictionary of the Scots Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> Robert W. Thurston, *Witch, Wicce, Mother Goose: The Rise and Fall of the Witch Hunts in Europe and North America* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001) 5; William E. Burns, *Witch-Hunts in Europe and America: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003) 295.

<sup>54</sup> Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, “Six Centuries of Witchcraft in the Netherlands: Themes, Outlines, and Interpretations,” in *Witchcraft in the Netherlands from the Fourteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. M. Gijswijt-Hofstra and W. Frijhoff, trans. Rachel M. J. van der Wilden-Fall (Rotterdam: Universitaire Pers Rotterdam, 1991) 1–36; Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, “The European Witchcraft Debate and the Dutch Variant,” *Social History* 15 (1990): 181–94.

<sup>55</sup> Apps and Gow, *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> *Cummer*, or *Kimmer*, carried several meanings besides “witch,” including “a gossip” or “godmother; a midwife; a young woman; applied to a female without respect to age, in contempt or displeasure,” Jamieson, *Dictionary*.

<sup>57</sup> In German *weissen-frauen* carried the same meaning, Jamieson, *Dictionary*.

*banabhuidseach*, and, as with the development of the English word “witch,” it has come to incorporate several categories of female magical practitioners. Other terminologies, such as *fiosaiche*, meaning “seer” or “wise man,” are generally applied to males, though the feminine counterpart, *ban-fhiosaiche*, is sometimes used.<sup>58</sup>

“Witch” formed a component of several compound words in Scots such as “witch-cake” (prepared for use in incantations), “witch-score” (a line cut with a sharp instrument on the forehead) or “witch’s branks” (halter or bridle used to punish witches). It was also applied to the name of fauna and flora such as “witches butterfly” (a type of moth), “witch-bells” (bell-flower, *Campanula rotundifolia*), “witch-gowan” (a yellow flower with a stalk filled with sap called “witches’ milk” that was said to produce blindness if rubbed on the eyes), “witches thimbles” (foxglove), and “witches knots” (matted bundles resembling birds’ nests, seen in thorn or birch trees, supposed to be caused by a stoppage of juices). “Witch-burd” referred to the supposed brood, or offspring, of a witch.

Other terms referred to bewitchment, such as to “forspeak” or to be “for-spoken,” or “to cast ill on one.” Indeed to be “ill,” in the sense of a disease or malady, also carried the meaning in Scots of the “evil, or fatal effects ascribed to the influence of witchcraft.”<sup>59</sup> The power of a witch might be described as a “glamour-gift” or “glamour-might,” meaning the “power of enchantment,” while a “Hallowmass Rade” was a “general assembly of warlocks and witches” and “Cantrip-time” was the “time for practicing magic arts.”<sup>60</sup>

Shifting concepts of what constituted a “witch” or “witchcraft” are detectable in Scottish literature. At the birth of the anti-christ, wrote William Dunbar in 1507, a whole retinue of demons and witches would descend upon the Earth: “Jonet the wedo on a bwsum hame rydand,/ Off wytchis with ane windir garesoun,” which translates as “Jonet the widow on a broom home riding, [among] witches with a strange/marvellous troop/company.” The reference to “Jonet the wedo” is obscure, though it has been suggested that it might have been a type-name for a witch.<sup>61</sup>

A further testimony to the fascination with witches and their enduring cultural importance is the large number of placenames with “witch” associations, a topic discussed in further detail in Chapter 8 below.

<sup>58</sup> John MacInnes, “Traditional Belief in Gaelic Society,” in *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture*, ed. Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009) 185–95.

<sup>59</sup> As in, “He’s gotten ill, he has been fascinated.” An “ill-ee” referred to the evil eye while an “ill-dread” was to feel an apprehension of something morally or physically bad. Jamieson, *Dictionary*.

<sup>60</sup> Jamieson, *Dictionary*.

<sup>61</sup> Priscilla Bawcutt, ed., *The Poems of William Dunbar*, 2 vols. (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literature, 1998) vol. 1, 114–15, vol. 2, 295–6, 352–4.

## **Crafting the witch: the role of gender**

Gender is a significant aspect of witch belief, not only in the context of witch-hunting but also in regard to the image, stereotyping and legends of the witch figure. The connotative, as opposed to the denotative, aspect of “witch” can vary quite significantly, for example, in Larner’s definition of the stereotypical witch as an “independent adult woman who does not conform to the male idea of proper female behaviour.” Personality-wise, she is “assertive; she does not require or give love (though she may enchant); she does not nurture men or children, nor care for the weak.” In other words, the witch is the exact opposite of what woman is supposed to represent within a patriarchal system: passive, loving, nurturing and submissive. In her passive role, woman/witch must seek power through other avenues, “she has the power of words – to defend herself or to curse.” Ultimately, Larner concludes, “all women threaten male hegemony with their exclusive power to give life; and social order depends on women conforming to male ideas of female behaviour.”<sup>62</sup> The ramifications of this are that the witch, or non-conformist woman, pits herself not only against men but other conforming women. She thus becomes alienated from both male and female society; she is the supreme loner and outsider. In an age in which the authority of the patriarchal unit was paramount, the imagery of a rebellious, subversive woman must have seemed incredibly threatening to men and women alike. It may be assumed that such traditional attitudes towards women and witches survived well into the nineteenth century in conservative, male-dominated and kirk-ridden Scotland. And yet, curiously, the stereotypical witch-figure was not as independent as she may have seemed, since, for one thing, in supposedly surrendering herself to the Devil, she had simply transferred from one patriarchal “master” to another.

The roots of gender-biased witchcraft accusations have been eagerly traced to the overall suppression of women living within a dominant patriarchal, and at times, misogynistic society. Such a simplistic model would certainly seem to solve many problems, but in fact, it probably raises more questions than it actually answers. One could argue that women have always lived, and continue to live, within male-centred societies of varying degrees, but not all of those societies, or communities within them, that retained a belief in witchcraft felt the need to persecute “female” witches. Why had witch-hunting been a relatively obscure crime before around 1450, and why did it slowly peter out in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? Were women only subjected to the domineering control of their male oppressors for these three hundred or so years? Nor can such a model explain the presence of male victims, or the fact that many of the initial accusations began with arguments between women.

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<sup>62</sup> Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 84.

The question of whether or not witch-hunting was, essentially, woman-hunting has been asked many times. On the face of it, the case seems to be a strong one. In Scotland, as in Germany, France and Switzerland, roughly 80 to 85 per cent of accused witches were female. In England and Russia, the percentage is even higher, reaching closer to 90 to 95 per cent. These statistics are consistent with most parts of Europe, and an entire body of literature has agreed that witch-hunting was indeed tantamount to woman-hunting. This model does not, however, work in all contexts, and there are notable exceptions, such as Normandy, Estonia, Finland and Iceland, where the percentage of male witches was equal to, or even higher than female witches. In Iceland, of 120 people tried for witchcraft, only 10 were female; 22 were executed, of which only one was a woman. In Finland, 50.7 per cent of the accused were female, while 48 per cent of executions were male.<sup>63</sup> It is safer to conclude that while witch-hunting was demonstrably gender-related it was, as Larner argued, not sex-specific. The male casualties of the witch-hunts, which in Scotland was somewhere around 15 to 20 per cent, must not be forgotten. The most recent statistics have identified 468 men and 2,702 women charged with witchcraft in Scotland.<sup>64</sup> Constraints with the evidence make detailed analysis of the data somewhat limited, and potentially unreliable, when it comes to some of the questions we might ask, such as how many of the accused were single, married or widowed, or what proportion were charmers.<sup>65</sup>

Though women were more likely to be arrested for witchcraft, there is no evidence to suggest that they were treated more harshly, in terms of the legal outcome, than their male counterparts. Moreover, "although a

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<sup>63</sup> Katherine Morris, *Sorceress or Witch? The Image of Gender in Medieval Iceland and Northern Europe* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991); Kirsten Hastrup, "Iceland: Sorcerers and Paganism," in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, ed. B. Ankarloo and G. Henningsen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 383–401; Antero Heikkinen and Timo Kervinen, "Finland: The Male Domination," in *Early Modern European Witchcraft*, 319–38; Ronald Hutton, "The Global Context of the Scottish Witch-Hunt," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. J. Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 16–32; Raisa Maria Toivo, *Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Society: Finland and the Wider European Experience* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>64</sup> On male witches, see Apps and Gow, *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe*, passim; Alison Rowlands, ed., *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), especially Julian Goodare's article, "Men and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland," 149–70; Rolf Schulte, *Man as Witch: Male Witches in Central Europe* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>65</sup> On marital status, for instance, the available evidence is that of the 468 male suspects, 78 (17 per cent) were recorded as married and five (1 per cent) were single men. None were reported as widowed. For the remaining 385 (82 per cent) no marital status was recorded. Goodare, "Men and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland," 168.

greater proportion of those women who were accused of witchcraft were executed (55.8 per cent against 52.3 per cent of men) a greater proportion were acquitted (21.7 per cent against 19.8 per cent).<sup>66</sup> Again, this supports Larner's thesis that witch-hunting was "sex-related," though not "sex-specific." She demonstrated that male suspects were almost always connected to a female suspect, either through family ties – father, husband, son, brother-in-law – or, through work or commerce. Similar discoveries have also been made in French and Swiss witch relationships.<sup>67</sup> Evidence from the court of justiciary, in which the Demonic Pact was more prevalent than in most other witchcraft trial records, raises some interesting distinctions between male and female witch suspects. While around 80 per cent of these cases involved quarrels between women, there are no examples, where quarrelling was pivotal, in trials of men;<sup>68</sup> it would seem that arguments between men were not a necessary precondition of accusation. Furthermore, while there are several accounts of female witches having sexual relations, albeit unpleasant, with the Devil, male witches rarely confessed to sex with Satan. If sex took place, it was only ever with female witches or, occasionally, with a female supernatural such as a fairy. In Scotland, at least, homosexuality was not explicitly labelled as a witch-like activity, though the punishment of burning was the same.

In a European context, there does not seem to have been any particular stereotype of the male witch in the same way as existed for women. While over half of female suspects were mature women, accused males were drawn from "a diverse cross-section of the peasant community."<sup>69</sup> Men, as with women, could also be subjected to gossip or slanderous allegations of alleged witchcraft or devil-worship. Even those of high social standing were not immune from this type of scandal. It was alleged of Archbishop Sharp, murdered in 1679 for his anti-covenanting viewpoints, that a tobacco box taken from his body contained a live bumble bee, a pair of pistol balls, nail

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<sup>66</sup> McLachlan and Swales, "Witchcraft and Anti-Feminism," 145. These statistics, based on the findings of the Larner, Lee and McLachlan, *Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft* (1977) have since been updated by The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft database project.

<sup>67</sup> Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 87, 61–2. See also E. William Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland: The Borderlands during the Reformation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976) 197, who points out that male witches were usually related to a female suspect. Larner indicates that the Scottish examples support this evidence. Monter's article "Toads and Eucharists: The Male Witches of Normandy," *French Historical Studies* 20/4 (1997): 563–95 is also useful on this particular gender issue.

<sup>68</sup> See Lauren Martin, "The Devil and the Domestic: Witchcraft, Quarrels and Women's Work," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. J. Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 73–89, esp. 83, 85.

<sup>69</sup> Robin Briggs, *Witches & Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (London: Harper Collins, 1996) 264.

pairings, a piece of silk and a sheet of paper with some sort of writing upon it. The bee was understood to be his familiar, a devil that did his bidding.<sup>70</sup> This type of politically motivated rumour must have appealed to Sharp's covenanting opponents who sought to discredit him, even after death.

Why women came to be so strongly associated with witchcraft, or at least why more women than men were punished for allegedly practising the black arts, is difficult to explain, though many have tried.<sup>71</sup> The attitude towards women in the Bible, and the teachings of the early Christian fathers, were most certainly factors. As is well known, suspicions about the "second sex" began with Eve, "the mother of all living," tempted by the infamous serpent in the Garden of Eden. The offer that "your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5) was a temptation that few, including Adam, could resist, but from that moment on, within Christian theology, woman has borne the pain, not just of childbirth, but the burden of responsibility for humanity's initial ejection from Paradise. Other significant passages from the Bible include "Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them" (Leviticus 19:31), and the better-known lines "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18). In the original Hebrew text of Exodus, it

<sup>70</sup> James Kirkton, *The Secret and True History of the Church of Scotland*, ed. C. K. Sharpe (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1817) 421; J. G. MacKay, *A History of Fife and Kinross* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1896) 147–8; John Ewart Simpkins, ed., *County Folk-Lore*, volume VII: *Examples of Printed Folk-Lore concerning Fife with some Notes on Clackmannan and Kinross-shires*, The Folk-Lore Society (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1914) 62.

<sup>71</sup> For instance, see Larner, *Enemies of God*, 100–2, 197; idem, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 84–8; Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1987); Brian P. Levack, ed., *Articles on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*, 12 vols. (New York and London: Garland Press, 1992) – vol. 10 deals specifically with 'Witchcraft, Women and Society'; Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus & the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Sigrid Brauner, *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995); Briggs, *Witches & Neighbours*, 259–86; Gerhild S. Williams, *Defining Dominion: The Discourses of Magic and Witchcraft in Early Modern France and Germany* (1995; Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Willem de Blécourt, "The Making of the Female Witch," *Gender & History* 12 (2000): 287–309; Brian P. Levack, ed., *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*, 6 vols. (New York and London: Routledge, 2001) – vol. 4 is entitled 'Gender and Witchcraft'; Alison Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Old Women in Early Modern Germany," *Past & Present* 173 (November 2001): 50–89; Éva Pócs, "Why Witches are Women," *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 48/3–4 (2003): 367–83; Jonathan B. Durrant, *Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Toivo, *Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Society*; Alison Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 449–67.



is a *kashaph* that should not be allowed to live. *Kashaph* carried the meaning of magician, sorcerer or diviner, but was not considered diabolical. In the Latin Vulgate, the passage was translated as *Maleficos non patieris vivere*: "You shall not permit *maleficos* to live." At one time, the term *maleficus* was applied to any sort of criminal, including wicked sorcerers, but in the era of the witch-hunts it came to be used almost exclusively to denote practitioners of diabolical witchcraft. When the King James Bible appeared in 1611, *kashaph/maleficos* was, perhaps deliberately, translated as "witch," as opposed to more fitting terms such as "wizard" or "magician."<sup>72</sup> The conscious selection of "witch" was presumably perceived to be more in line with contemporary usage and events, giving unquestionable biblical authority to the pursuit and persecution of witches. In other languages, more caution was observed. For instance, in Russian biblical translations the word chosen for this passage is *magesnitsa* (derived from *magiia*), which does not specifically denote black magic. French Bibles employ *la sorcière*, while in German *Zauberin* is used.<sup>73</sup>

As is often the case in interpreting the Bible, it is open to debate what is meant by "witch" or "magician"; the gender, for instance, of magical practitioners is not made specific. The assumption, perhaps erroneous, that the biblical "witch" was female may have been compounded by the story of Saul (I Samuel 28:3–25), who sought assistance from a woman at Endor who had a familiar spirit and was skilled at necromancy. Though Saul had banished all wizards and those who associated with spirits, he was able to persuade the woman that no harm would come to her if she would only raise the ghost of Samuel. She obliged, and Saul was able to communicate with the dead man. Though the woman has come to be known popularly as "The Witch of Endor," she is not specifically named a witch but is rather described as a woman who had a familiar spirit, a subtle yet distinct difference. In Hebrew she was called a *ba'alath ob*, "mistress of an ob" or "talisman," while in Latin she became *mulierem habentem pythonem*, "a woman possessing an oracular spirit."<sup>74</sup> She had divinatory powers and could raise the dead, but nowhere in the story is she associated with harmful magic.

<sup>72</sup> Jeffrey B. Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* (1980; London: Thames and Hudson, 2000) 32–3; Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, Volume 1: *Biblical and Pagan Societies* (London: The Athlone Press, 2001) part 2.

<sup>73</sup> Thurston, *Witch, Wicce, Mother Goose*, 60.

<sup>74</sup> B. B. Schmidt, "The 'Witch' of En-dor, 1 Sam 28, and Ancient Near Eastern Necromancy," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. M. Meyer and P. Mirecki (Leiden: Brill, 1995) 111–29; Marie-Louise Thomsen and Frederick H. Cryer, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, Volume 1: *Biblical and Pagan Societies*, series ed.. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) 122, 134; Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James*

It has been suggested that the perception of women as the “keepers” or “guardians” of life’s mysteries may have contributed to more females being susceptible to witchcraft accusation and prejudice in general.<sup>75</sup> Women gave life, but they were also the ones, in many cultures including Scotland, who prepared the dead for burial. Women were frequently referred to in learned texts and religious sermons as weaker, frailer, more easily corruptible and more lustful than men. And yet, the contradiction of the vulnerable and delicate female was in sharp contrast with woman as child-bearer, mother, enchanter, seductress. Women had more power when it came to sex and reproduction. The male relationship with, and sometimes fear of, the female body could have also played a part. Men may have had physical strength but the “gentle sex” nurtured a baby in her body, suffered the pains of childbirth, produced milk to feed that baby, and menstruated every month – all alien experiences to a man.

While a fear of feminine sexuality could account for the stereotype of the witch as a sexual predator, out to corrupt and seduce any male in her path, the majority of those accused seem to have fitted another, more prevalent stereotype; that of the “old hag,” well-past child-bearing years and as such, of diminished value and societal worth. Based on the known ages of accused witches, at least half and possibly more were over forty, with only around 14 per cent under thirty.<sup>76</sup> It is hard to be sure if the mature age of so many of the suspects is indicative of a prejudice, even debasement, of older women, or only a reflection of the importance that reputation played in witchcraft allegations. A witch rarely emerged overnight, in any given community, but built up a reputation for her malevolence over many years, a clear indication, incidentally, that witches were often tolerated by their communities. It might also have been thought that an older person would be more likely to resort to magic and witchcraft because they were, in effect, powerless to use other means of protection or revenge.<sup>77</sup>

A further stereotype of the witch is that she lived alone, was unmarried or widowed; a reinforcement of the dangers of uncontrolled and unsupervised women. In Scotland, however, the existing evidence on the marital status of accused witches indicates that a majority of 78 per cent were married,

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*VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000) 335–7, 368.

<sup>75</sup> E. J. Burford and S. Shulman, *Of Bridles & Burnings. The Punishment of Women* (London: Robert Hale, 1994).

<sup>76</sup> SSWD.

<sup>77</sup> Lauren Martin’s investigation of Isobel Young (1629) traces her reputation for witchcraft to the late sixteenth century and uncovers a long-standing feud between Young and some of her neighbours, in “The Witch, the Household and the Community: Isobel Young in East Barns, 1580–1629,” in *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters*, ed. Julian Goodare (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 67–84.

20 per cent widowed and a tiny 2 per cent single. It must be stressed that the paucity of evidence relating to marital status makes accuracy impossible and these figures are, at best, impressionistic.<sup>78</sup>

A once-prevalent notion in the historiography was the assumption that midwives were often accused of witchcraft. The mere suggestion of the possibility must have stuck terror into the hearts of every God-fearing citizen in the land. Midwives would have had the perfect opportunity to assist Satan in his work of taking souls away from Heaven. High death rates for both mother and child in this period could have also had a detrimental effect on a midwife's reputation. In grief over a lost child or wife, it is a common human response to lay the blame for the tragedy on to someone or something else. And yet, the stereotype of the witch/midwife has been proven to be erroneous. In an examination of close to 4,000 Scottish cases, only nine suspects were midwives by occupation.<sup>79</sup> The stereotype of the midwife/witch was strongly promoted in Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), and could possibly be reflective of attitudes and accusations in late fifteenth-century Alpine regions. However, the majority of existing European records do not support evidence of midwives as primary targets. Midwives did feature fairly prominently in English trials, but as examiners of suspected witches in search of evidence, such as the witch's mark or a teat from which an imp or familiar would suck. In Scotland midwives were sometimes charged with the lesser crime of charming, for example, a midwife, Janet Bailzie, was disciplined by the presbytery of Lanark in July 1645 for "repeating an oratione" while she was delivering babies.<sup>80</sup>

Demonic characteristics were, to judge from the evidence, largely absent from witch beliefs at village level where the witch was still typically regarded as female. The Devil seems only to make a significant appearance in central court cases and plays a minor (sometimes absent) role in local trials.<sup>81</sup> The demonic aspect was an importation from the continent

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<sup>78</sup> Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller, "Some Findings from the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 51–70.

<sup>79</sup> SSWD. See also a study by D. Harley, who found 14 Scottish and 2 English instances of midwives as witch suspects in "Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch," *Social History of Medicine* 3 (1990): 1–26. In support of the midwife-witch theory, see Joseph Klaitz, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 94–103.

<sup>80</sup> See C. A. Holmes, "Women, Witnesses and Witches," *Past and Present* 140 (1993): 65–75; J. A. Sharpe, "Women, Witchcraft and the Legal Process," in *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England*, ed. J. Kermode and G. Walker (London: UCL, 1994) 106–24; Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism*, 244–51; Charles Rogers, *Social Life in Scotland*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Grampian Club, 1884) vol. 2, 197.

<sup>81</sup> Compare Stuart MacDonald's discovery of low demonic content (around 20 per cent) in local trials in Fife with Lauren Martin's findings of a high incidence of the

and was overwhelmingly connected with learned and literate witchcraft theory.<sup>82</sup> In some confessions, which feature the Devil, it has been observed that the accused often spoke of their place, or rank, within the Devil's own authority-structure. Those with notable status were invariably all men. For instance, within Isobel Gowdie's coven, John Young was the "officer." Furthermore, in early eighteenth-century broadside and literary accounts females were more often than not "overcome" by the Devil, while males had greater success in fighting him off.<sup>83</sup> The personal relationship between Devil and witch could, in other words, be highly gendered. For the female witch, Lerner compared it to a "standard feudal relationship," while Martin has argued for something more akin to a marriage, or more specifically an "irregular marriage," which, in Scots law, was recognized through mutual consent of both partners. Goodare has opted for an alternative model – that based on the covenant – which might allow for a better understanding of male witches' perceived relationship with the Devil during the seventeenth century.<sup>84</sup>

An examination of witch accusations at grass-roots level does, however, reveal other aspects of crucial importance to the gendering of witch beliefs, namely the nature of women's work in the early modern period and disputes between neighbours. As far as most of the peasantry were concerned, witchcraft had little to do with nocturnal coven meetings supervised by Satan and his minions, but was connected to the more mundane or ordinary experiences of sex, childbirth, disability and death, not to mention concerns over such essential activities as agriculture, fishing and household economics. Several British and European studies have indicated that many accusations of witchcraft revolved around the female sphere of work, and thus are reflective predominantly of tensions between women.<sup>85</sup> However, caution must be used when discussing divisions of labour, which were not so gendered as they were to become with the advent of industrialization in the nineteenth century.

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demonic in central trials (around 75 per cent). See Stuart MacDonald, "In Search of the Devil in Fife Witchcraft Cases, 1560–1705," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 33–50; Martin, "The Devil and the Domestic," 77.

<sup>82</sup> Henderson, "Detestable Slaves of the Devil," 242.

<sup>83</sup> Goodare, "Men and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland," 159–60; R. A. Houston, *Madness and Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 307.

<sup>84</sup> Lerner, *Enemies of God*, 148; Martin, "The Devil and the Domestic," 77–84; Goodare, "Men and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland," 160–1.

<sup>85</sup> For examples, see Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 174; Briggs, *Witches & Neighbours*, 265–71. Elizabeth Ewan discusses tensions between women in "Many Injurious Words': Defamation and Gender in Late Medieval Scotland," in *History, Literature, and Music in Scotland, 700–1560*, ed. R. A. McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 163–86, though she makes no reference to witchcraft.

An assumption has been that those accused, whether male or female, were drawn from the very bottom of the social ladder. While it is true that servants, beggars, the indigent or the dispossessed were among those accused, their ranks also included labourers, artisans, agricultural workers and tenants. In Scotland, most accusations were the result of quarrels between “relative social equals, not between neighbours of higher and lower social status.”<sup>86</sup> Around 64 per cent of those whose socio-economic status was recorded were in the middle bracket, 29 per cent were from the lower bracket or very poor, and 6 per cent were in the upper bracket. It was rare, but not unknown, for members of the aristocracy to face witchcraft charges.<sup>87</sup> Nor did social status imply disbelief. Many wealthy farmers, as will be shown below, had no hesitation in consulting persons who were known to be witches.

### ***Incredulus Odi*: Scottish witchcraft and the Enlightenment**

What the major figures of Enlightenment shared in common was the desire for improvement of “both body and mind, both the individual and the social self, and improvement of his understanding of the natural world,”<sup>88</sup> and those of Scotland were no exception. The actual impact of Enlightenment thought upon the everyday lives of ordinary people was, most likely, of very small extent. Later observers have been keen to point out that the Scottish *literati* were both a marginal and highly exceptional clique.<sup>89</sup> There is some truth in this, and, for example, such luminaries as philosopher Thomas Reid (1710–96), historian William Robertson (1721–92), Alexander Carlyle (1722–1805), Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) and William Creech (1745–1813) were all sons of the manse, a new generation that almost totally rejected anything reeking of superstition, but who could not bring themselves to totally deny the existence of witches. However, many others emerged from the folk tradition, such as poet Allan Ramsay (1684–1758), poet Thomas Blacklock (1721–91), author James MacPherson (1736–96), poet Robert Burns (1759–96), historian Robert Heron (1764–1807), author Allan Cunningham (1784–1842) and philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881).

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<sup>86</sup> SSWD; Martin, “Witchcraft, Quarrels and Women’s Work,” 75.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Louise Yeoman, “Hunting the Rich Witch in Scotland: High-Status Witchcraft Suspects and their Persecutors, 1590–1650,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. J. Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 106–21.

<sup>88</sup> David Daiches, Peter Jones and Jean Jones, eds., *A Hotbed of Genius: The Scottish Enlightenment 1730–1790* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986) 2.

<sup>89</sup> David Allan notes that men such as Robert Mudie and John Gibson Lockhart have argued this point. David Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993) 3.

Many shared the view of philosopher and economist Dugald Stewart, who detected the “sudden burst of genius,” which seemed “to have sprung up in this country by a sort of enchantment soon after the rebellion of 1745.”<sup>90</sup> There are, of course, various theories as to why this alleged great awakening and thirst for knowledge came about. For instance, some have suggested that the loosening of religious ties after the re-establishment of the Church of Scotland in 1690 provided a more welcoming environment for the development of ideas and new philosophies.<sup>91</sup> The trend towards Moderatism is detectable throughout the eighteenth century, and a more tolerant religious climate was gradually, though not always harmoniously, replacing the fierce Calvinistic hold that had for so long dominated Scotland.<sup>92</sup> Few still argue that the Scottish Enlightenment was a consequence of parliamentary union with England in 1707, but it was once a popular theory held by historians of the period. A somewhat extreme, if not contemptible, position was taken by Trevor-Roper who turned the attentions of his poisoned pen to only a very small, and select few, major figures, dismissing all others as mere “camp-followers” and Scotland itself a predominantly “backward and moribund” country.<sup>93</sup> The notion that Union provided the impetus for Scotland’s future intellectual achievement was largely based on the assumption that political stability was gradually established as a consequence of the merging of the parliaments. The nature of Scotland’s economy, with better access to English and colonial markets, was also key. The necessary preconditions were thus in place, so the argument runs, for Enlightenment to take place.<sup>94</sup> The erroneous conjectures of commentators such as Italian historian Carlo Denina (1731–1813), who stated that “Scotland for a long succession of ages had hardly given birth to one author of eminence,” have in part contributed to the view that “the necessary impetus for enlightenment discourse” was

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<sup>90</sup> Dugald Stewart, *A General View of the Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical and Political Philosophy, since the Revival of Letters in Europe* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1822) 325.

<sup>91</sup> James K. Cameron, “Theological Controversy: A Factor in the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment,” 116–30, and Stewart R. Sutherland, “The Presbyterian Inheritance of Hume and Reid,” 131–49, in *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1982)

<sup>92</sup> Daiches, Jones and Jones, *A Hotbed of Genius*, 12–14.

<sup>93</sup> H. R. Trevor-Roper, “The Scottish Enlightenment,” in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 58 (1967): 1635–58. Agnes Mure MacKenzie stated that before 1700 “trade, farming, scholarship, the arts, were a desert,” *Scotland in Modern Times, 1720–1939* (London: Chambers, 1941) 4.

<sup>94</sup> Charles Camic, *Experience and Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983) 93–7. See also William Ferguson, *Scotland: 1689 to the Present* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1968); T. C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People, 1560–1830* (London: Collins, 1969) chapter 10; Roger L. Emerson, “The Enlightenment and Social Structures,” in *City and Society in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. P. Fritz and D. Williams (Toronto: Hakkert, 1979) 99–124.

essentially a foreign import. This suggestion does not explain, however, why Scotsmen should have suddenly taken an interest in continental intellectual ideas at that moment in history.<sup>95</sup>

Few would now doubt that the roots of the Scottish Enlightenment extend back into the later seventeenth century. Although it is true that a great number of English and continental works were readily available on university bookshelves and in the homes of educated and inquiring men by the early eighteenth century, few of these writings were of the Enlightenment proper. The European Enlightenment, as in Scotland, was still in a period of gestation. Furthermore, as Charles Camic has correctly pointed out, "it would have been extraordinary if the entry into Scotland of a few, or even a score, pre-Enlightenment documents dissolved the foundations of a religious system so widely accepted and so well institutionalized as Calvinism."<sup>96</sup> The Kirk itself would have a prolonged and acerbic debate about both enlightenment and superstition. The role played by the reform of the universities during the eighteenth century is not so much a theory as to why enlightenment happened, but of how its instigators were given fitting places to develop and thrive. Roger Emerson has also pointed out that various clubs and societies, largely dedicated to rigorous debate and personal enrichment, began to emerge very quickly thereafter.<sup>97</sup>

It should, however, be noted that Scotland was not a culturally or intellectually impoverished country before the sunrise of the eighteenth century supposedly cast its light over the dark recesses of post-Reformation Scotland. While the *literati* of the times would have wished posterity to believe this, it would be unfair to dismiss centuries of Scottish learning and achievement as if they did not quite match up to the standards set post-1700. If anything, the fact that from at least the beginning of the fifteenth century there were several Scots "of the highest intellectual calibre working creatively across the entire range of high culture, is crucial if we are to understand how the Scottish Enlightenment came into existence."<sup>98</sup> In other words, the origins

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<sup>95</sup> Carlo Denina, *An Essay on the Revolutions of Literature*, ed. J. Murdoch (London, 1771) 274, qtd in Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment* 5, which provides full bibliographical references, as does Mark R. M. Towsey, *Books and their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750–1820* (Leiden: Brill, 2010) 1–11. For an interesting discussion on the issue of the Treaty of Union 1707, see Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689–c.1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>96</sup> Camic, *Experience and Enlightenment*, 36.

<sup>97</sup> R. G. Cant, "The Scottish Universities and Scottish Society in the Eighteenth Century," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 58 (1967): 1953–66; Roger L. Emerson, "The Social Composition of Enlightened Scotland: The 'Select Society of Edinburgh', 1754–1764," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 114 (1973): 291–330; Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment*, 6.

<sup>98</sup> Broadie, *Scottish Enlightenment*, 13.

of the explosion of innovative and cerebral genius that we have come to associate with the Scottish Enlightenment, although the phenomenon is not the specific concern of this book, have much deeper roots in Scotland's past than has sometimes been credited.<sup>99</sup> Gordon Donaldson's shrewd observation that "too many who babble about 'The Enlightenment' of the eighteenth century have not taken the trouble to find out about Scottish culture in the seventeenth,"<sup>100</sup> has since been addressed and significantly revised.<sup>101</sup>

If, as on the continent, Enlightenment may be deemed to have evolved in the questioning of religion, in Scotland such origins may be detected in the defence of faith, in the dialectic of political and theological debate that had been developing since the drafting of the National Covenant in 1638, and which was refined during the polarizing decades that followed. In the rearguard action fought by the traditionalists against the dreaded deists, or atheists, from the 1670s onwards, folk belief, ironically, became the weapon of orthodoxy. At the same time the enlightened were united in their unanimous condemnation of "superstition."

It has been sensibly observed that "*Incredulus odi*, to disbelieve is to dislike, might be taken as the motto of enlightenment faced with the spectacle of superstition."<sup>102</sup> One who would have been proud to own the motto was David Hume, traduced in his own day as an atheist and the enemy of religion. It has been well said that "Hume was not in an unqualified sense anti-religion, but he was in an unqualified sense against what he identified as superstition, superstition being a form of religion unable to survive

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<sup>99</sup> There has been a convincing suggestion that the achievements, which have been identified as extraordinary intellectual activity, began long before the eighteenth century. Furthermore, this cerebral talent did not dissipate after the death of Walter Scott but continued to flourish into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and indeed is still thriving today. Broadie, *Scottish Enlightenment*, 5.

<sup>100</sup> Gordon Donaldson, "Stair's Scotland: The Intellectual Heritage," *Juridical Review* (1981): 128–45. David Allan's comment that the "importance of the late seventeenth century in explaining the later Enlightenment has been periodically canvassed but never wholly accepted," supports Donaldson's criticism. *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment*, 7. See also Campbell and Skinner, *Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment*, passim.

<sup>101</sup> See J. R. R. Christie, "The Origins and Development of the Scottish Scientific Community, 1680–1760," *History of Science* 7 (1974): 122–41; Roger L. Emerson, "Natural Philosophy and the Problem of the Scottish Enlightenment," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 242 (1986): 243–92; "Sir Robert Sibbald, Kt., the Royal Society of Scotland and the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment," *Annals of Science* 45 (1988): 41–72; I. G. Brown, *The Clerks of Penicuik: Portraits of Taste and Talent* (Edinburgh: Penicuik House Preservation Trust, 1987); "Critick in Antiquity: Sir John Clerk of Penicuik," *Antiquity* 51 (1977): 201–10.

<sup>102</sup> E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 2.



cross-examination before the tribunal of reason."<sup>103</sup> In his *Of Miracles* (1748) Hume asserted that his purpose was "to silence bigotry and suspicion and free us from their impertinent superstitions." He once contemptuously asked, "Does a man of sense run after every silly tale of witches or hobgoblins or fairies, and canvass, particularly the evidence?" His fellow luminaries agreed with him. Adam Ferguson wrote that superstition had been eclipsed by the "light of true religion, or the study of nature, by which we are led to substitute a wise providence operating by physical causes in the place of phantoms that terrify or amuse the ignorant," and considered that superstition, rooted as it was in doubts and anxiety, was fostered by ignorance. Both men would have agreed with Adam Smith in distinguishing science and philosophy as "the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition."<sup>104</sup> Hume well understood that primitive people had no way of understanding the destructive natural forces that beset them and had no notion of cause and effect; it was due to them that we all still "find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice or good will to every thing, that hurts or pleases us."<sup>105</sup>

Hume was born in 1711. For twenty-three years his life overlapped with that of Robert Wodrow (1679–1734), a minister and historian of the sufferings of the Church of Scotland, a man who had no problems whatsoever in detecting "armies in the clouds." Wodrow spent a large portion of his life recording the lives, times and deaths of the later Covenanters, particularly those of the 1670s and 1680s, and almost all of the men that he wrote about had personal experience of prodigies and apparitions. For example, Robert McWard, who believed that the Great Fire of London in 1666 was divine judgement on the city for having burned the covenants, was taken out, when dying, to view the comet of 1680, whereupon he thanked God that "he was not to see the woeful days that were coming upon Britain and Ireland, and especially upon sinful Scotland."<sup>106</sup> The calamities about to engulf the country were heralded by the battle of Bothwell Brig (1679), an event presaged

<sup>103</sup> Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, 41. For a more radical assessment, see Nicholas Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (London: Alan Lane, 2010) 64, 66, 242–4.

<sup>104</sup> Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols. (1776; Hartford: Oliver D. Cooke, 1811) vol. 2, 223; Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society, 1767*, ed. D. Forbes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966) 90–1; Edward J. Cowan, "Burns and Superstition," in *Love & Liberty: Robert Burns, A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. K. Simpson (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997) 229–31.

<sup>105</sup> David Hume, "The Natural History of Religion," in *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 141. See also J. Y. T. Greig, ed., *Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932) vol. 1, 153.

<sup>106</sup> Patrick Walker, *Six Saints of the Covenant*, ed. D. Hay Fleming, 2 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901) vol. 1, 36.

by numerous visions. Showers of swords and bonnets fell from the sky near Glasgow. At Crossford on the Clyde, near Lanark, there were reportedly similar torrents of headgear and weapons, as well as “companies of men in arms marching in order upon the water-side, companies meeting companies, going all through other, and then all falling to the ground and disappearing, and other companies immediately appearing the same.” Patrick Walker, who wrote chapbooks about these events, was actually present when folk saw these visions, though he did not.<sup>107</sup> Despite this, there is no doubt that he believed in the reality of what was reported, as indeed did many of his co-believers. Many leading Covenanters uttered prophecies, long remembered, before their deaths.<sup>108</sup> This was an aspect of the Covenanters well understood by Hugh Miller, who was greatly inspired and fascinated by the later phases of the movement, the so-called “martyrs” of the Killing Times of the 1680s, described by Walker as “that good ill time of persecution.”<sup>109</sup> Miller noted “a sort of wild machinery of the supernatural” supplementing the everyday aspects of their Christian belief: “The men in whom it was exhibited were seers of visions and dreamers of dreams; and standing on the very verge of the natural world, they looked far into the world of spirits, and had at times their strange glimpse of the distant and the future.”<sup>110</sup>

It can easily be argued that the covenanting tradition was much more important than any notion of enlightenment, at least at a popular level, right through the eighteenth century. A tremendously influential work that perpetuated traditions of the Covenanters was John Howie’s *Scotch Worthies*, which was published in 1775, the year before Hume died. The Covenanters claimed, and there were many who agreed, that they had anticipated the so-called “Glorious Revolution” of 1688–89. They remained suspicious of the policies of William II, and they were profoundly unsettled by the implications of the Union negotiations leading to the treaty of 1707. They feared that Jacobitism was simply a cloak for the return of Catholicism. In the South West the people known as the Levellers drew up a covenant to resist agricultural improvement and innovation.<sup>111</sup> In matters religious and secular they were deeply worried about creeping Anglicization. Indeed it

<sup>107</sup> Walker, *Six Saints of the Covenant*, vol. 1, 36–8.

<sup>108</sup> See, in general, Hector MacPherson, *The Covenanters Under Persecution: A Study of their Religious and Ethical Thought* (Edinburgh: W. F. Henderson, 1923) 83–92.

<sup>109</sup> Walker, *Six Saints of the Covenant*, vol. 1, 32. See also David S. Ross, *The Killing Time: Fanaticism, Liberty and the Birth of Britain* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2010).

<sup>110</sup> Hugh Miller, *My Schools and Schoolmasters or The Story of My Education* (Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, 1869) 31–2.

<sup>111</sup> John W. Leopold, “The Levellers Revolt in Galloway in 1724,” *Journal of the Scottish Labour History Society* 14 (1980): 4–29; Alistair Livingston, “The Galloway Levellers: A Study of the Origins, Events and Consequences of their Actions,” unpublished MPhil, University of Glasgow, 2009.

has been recently suggested that the Kirk's paranoia extended to support for the Union as its best defence given the threat of a possible Catholic revival under the Jacobites.<sup>112</sup> As it turned out, these most unreasonable of men had some reason on their side for the Kirk and its polity was the subject of the first infringement of the Treaty of Union when patronage on the English model was re-established by the House of Lords in 1712. Of them it could be said that they had a vested interest in the preservation and maintenance of folk belief for, to borrow Anthonie van Dale's thesis, credulity well served Kirk despotism.<sup>113</sup>

J. K. Hewison rather smugly, and with breathtaking, if misplaced, confidence remarked that

the punishment of witchcraft – a legacy from the Papists – was as much insisted upon by the educated laity and gentry as by the ministers, and the craze decreased during the ascendancy of the Covenant ... With the advent of Episcopacy there was an increase of witchcraft. ... it is noteworthy that superstition of an offensive character lingered longest where Roman Catholicism and Episcopal Royalism continued to resist the more enlightening influences of the faith, as expounded by the rigid Covenanters, whose imaginations were of the most ecstatic, spiritual nature.<sup>114</sup>

Enlightened the Covenanters most certainly were not, but how accurate was his assertion?

Ian Bostridge's plea, that we must try to understand the relationship between "writing, action and belief,"<sup>115</sup> is only really a valid suggestion when a significant body of written material exists. For instance, in his own work on the witch-hunts there is a recognizable body of texts and learned discourse available wherein the possible overlaps between writing, action and belief can be conjectured. This textual material is in existence because of a notable interest in witchcraft, for a variety of different reasons, among the educated classes. Areas of supernatural belief that, for one reason or the other, did not sufficiently interest or compel the literate to offer written contributions on the subject, are less well served.

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<sup>112</sup> Ted Cowan, "The Unions of 1707," *History Scotland* 8/2 (March/April 2008): 51–5. See also Jeffrey Stephen, *Scottish Presbyterians and the Act of Union, 1707* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

<sup>113</sup> Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 364.

<sup>114</sup> James King Hewison, *The Covenanters: A History of the Church in Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution*, 2 vols. (Glasgow: John Smith, 1913) vol. 2, 112.

<sup>115</sup> Ian Bostridge, "Witchcraft Repealed," in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 310.

# 3

## Demons, Devilry and Domestic Magic: Hunting Witches in Scotland

Witches are chiefly employed in plain mischief by hurting persons or their goods ... But they sometimes work mischief under a pretence or colour of doing good; as when they cure diseases, loose enchantments and discover other witches. All their designs are brought about by charmes or ceremonious rites instituted by the Devil.

William Forbes, *Institutes of the Law of Scotland* (1730)<sup>1</sup>

There are never any easy answers in history, but on the topic of folk belief and the persecution of witches, there are hardly any at all; “indeed it is difficult to think of any historical problem over which there is more disagreement and confusion.”<sup>2</sup> Theories as to why the European witch-hunts took place are plentiful, but satisfactory explanations are in short supply. It is no longer convincing to blame men, or the patriarchal system, or the religious upheavals of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, nor to suggest that witch-hunts were a consequence of warfare, famine and disease, or the social and political impact of state-building, or the rise of capitalism. While all of these developments, and many more besides, contributed to the overall story of the witch-hunts in Europe, no single event or episode was, or could be, fully responsible. There was, essentially, not one cause but many, and so it is necessary to adopt, as Brian Levack has aptly suggested, a “multi-causal approach” to this particular subject.<sup>3</sup> Why did witch-hunting occur in some places and not in others, or why did some individuals face prosecution while others did not, are just a couple of the potential questions that defy explanation. It is not even fully understood why witch prosecutions began

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<sup>1</sup> William Forbes, *The Institutes of the Law of Scotland* (Edinburgh: John Mosman and Co., 1730) 32.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (1987; 3rd edn, Harlow: Pearson Education, 2006) 2.

<sup>3</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 3.

to rise in the fifteenth century, proliferated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and then petered out in the eighteenth century. There are, therefore, no “answers,” as such, only questions. There are no *truths*, only speculations or conjectures, some of which, having particular relevance to the Scottish experience, are discussed in this chapter.

The developmental phases of learned witchcraft theory was a slow and complicated process, with roots going back as early as St Augustine of Hippo (354–430), one of the most influential of Christian theologians and author of *The City of God*. He condemned all forms of magic, paganism and heresy, which he connected to acts of the Devil, and essentially relegated pre-existing discrete categories of magical practice, such as *goetia*, or sorcery, under the umbrella of *superstitio*. He also suggested that magical practitioners, including *maleficos*, sorcerers or “workers of harmful magic,” entered into an alliance, or pact, with demons, a notion that did not really take hold until the fifteenth century:

Our adversaries try to distinguish certain persons who are devoted to illicit arts, whom they call sorcerers, and who, they say, practise witchcraft, from others who seem to them worthy of praise because they practise theurgy. In truth, however, both classes are equally bound by the false rites of the demons whom they worship under the names of angels.<sup>4</sup>

In 1437 Pope Eugenius IV issued a papal bull to all inquisitors, ordering all who practiced magic, worshipped evil spirits and entered into pacts with them, to be arrested and tried under canon law.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, the imagery of the witches’ sabbat was gaining momentum; frightening descriptions of heretical sects of witches who gathered together under cloak of darkness to perform unspeakable, unholy acts, in the presence of their master, the Devil. Among the more extreme continental sabbat descriptions are stories of depravity and grotesqueries, such as infant cannibalism and lurid sexual orgies, while in Scotland, if the sabbat is mentioned at all, such

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<sup>4</sup> Dyson translates *goetian* as “witchcraft,” but “sorcery” might be a more appropriate term. St Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, ed. R. W. Dyson (427; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) especially book X. See also *On Christian Teaching (De Doctrina Christiana)*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (426; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) book II, 19–25; Stephen A. Barney et al., *Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) book VIII.

<sup>5</sup> Eugenius included night-flying, weather magic and the desecration of the Eucharist among those punishable crimes. In 1440 he denounced Felix V before the Council of Basel for his toleration of *stregule* (witches) and *Waudenses* (Waldensian heretics). Jonathan Durrant and Michael D. Bailey, *Historical Dictionary of Witchcraft* (2nd rev. edn; Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012) 69; P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Witchcraft: A History* (Stroud: Tempus, 2000) 49.

depictions are relatively rare and the focus is directed more towards excessive drinking, eating and dancing.

Sometime around the mid-fifteenth century, the “cumulative concept of witchcraft” had been established, though a few elements of the stereotype were still to be added.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the notion that witches received an identifying mark or nip from the Devil, insensitive to pain, somewhere on their bodies, was not introduced until the early sixteenth century. English Puritan William Perkins referred to this mark as the *stigmata diaboli* or Devil’s Mark in his influential handbook *Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* (1608), while Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803) called such a mark the *stigmata sagarum*.

Witch-hunting, at what might be regarded “sustained” levels, that is, occurring on a regular basis, took a long time to develop, even in some of the worst-affected areas. One such was in the German territories where trials began in the 1480s but did not become “systematic,” so to speak, until the latter half of the sixteenth century. There were no large-scale witch-hunts in England until the 1560s or in Scotland until the 1590s, while the Basque country of France did not have any major persecutions until 1609. The zenith of European witch-hunting was from the 1570s and 1580s to the 1650s and 1660s, dates comparable to the Scottish experience. Thereafter the number of trials and executions underwent a process of decline. There are notable variations to this general pattern, such as 1670s Sweden and Finland, and across the Atlantic at Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, reflective, in these instances, of a general movement and “process of diffusion” from “core” to “periphery.”<sup>7</sup> The last-known execution in Europe for witchcraft was of Anna Göldi in Glarus, Switzerland, astonishingly as late as 1782.

The inspiration behind the Scottish witch-hunts, as elsewhere, came from the ruling classes, ministers and lay judges. Both Church and State were concerned about non-conformity and repressive steps were undertaken to discourage unofficial sources of empowerment, including witchcraft.<sup>8</sup> In rural and urban communities alike, the desire to purge any form of heresy and deviance took on greater meaning:

It was a battle that had been brewing for several generations before the first witch was sacrificed to the cause, but once it began it hit Scotland like a

<sup>6</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 32–51.

<sup>7</sup> Gustav Henningsen and Bengt Ankarloo, “Introduction”, in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, eds. B. Ankarloo and G. Henningsen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 10–12.

<sup>8</sup> On the significance of church discipline, see Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002). See also Margo Todd, “Profane Pastimes and the Reformed Community: The Persistence of Popular Festivities in Early Modern Scotland,” *Journal of British Studies* 39 (2000): 123–56.

series of earthquakes – some places were situated at the epicentre of a quake, many communities lay on the fractured fault lines they created, while others were spared entirely from the aftershocks and were relatively unaffected. The first tremors were felt in the mid-sixteenth century and gained in momentum by the last decade of the century.<sup>9</sup>

However, it can no longer be assumed that learned ideas about the Devil and educated witchcraft theory in general caused the witch-hunts but rather “the reverse is much more likely to have been true.”<sup>10</sup> An intermingling of belief, at all levels of society, helped to mould and shape demonic conceptualizations and discourse. Robin Briggs describes the European witch-hunts as “a coalescence between longstanding popular beliefs and the agencies for enforcing social and religious conformity.” Such a statement could easily be applied to Scotland in the last three or four decades of the sixteenth century. The structures of the Protestant church were spreading throughout predominantly Lowland regions of the country and the kirk sessions began, in part, to function as a sort of moral police force, guiding their parishioners away from sin, superstition, unlawful sex, immorality and corruption. Meanwhile, both Church and State grew increasingly worried about the possible dangers posed by Satan’s trusted minions, the witches, and began to see themselves as involved in a battle to save souls and protect kirk and country against the forces of evil.

Hunting witches is deeply ingrained in and related to the major forces of historical change – “The witch craze was not an aberration in the history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. On the contrary, witch hunting reflected the darker side of the central social, political and cultural developments of the time.”<sup>11</sup> Changes taking place within the legal system, the use of judicial and non-judicial torture, periods of bad weather, harvest failure, epidemics and plague, are issues that are also of great importance to the shape witch-hunting took.

## **The origins of Scottish witch-hunting**

Over the winter of 1589–90, King James VI was a guest of the Danish court as he celebrated his marriage to Anne of Denmark. On the journey back to Scotland, with his new bride, his ship encountered terrible storms, of such

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<sup>9</sup> Lizanne Henderson, “‘Detestable Slaves of the Devil’: Changing Attitudes to Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland,” in *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland*, eds. Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011) 236.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) vii.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Klaitz, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 6.

severity that witchcraft was thought to be the cause. The search for suspects was quickly underway and a great coven, of some three hundred witches, was uncovered. The witches allegedly met with the Devil at North Berwick Kirk and had thrown cats into the sea to create the tempest intended to destroy the king. Determined to stamp out this treasonable sorcery, James took charge of the trials that were subsequently conducted in Edinburgh 1590–91. Among those accused of principal involvement were Agnes Sampson, John Fian, Euphemia Makcalzane, and the king's own cousin, Francis Stewart Earl of Bothwell. In co-operation, the Danes held parallel witch trials, a development that is unique in the history of European witch-hunting.

What is now known as the North Berwick witch-hunt is reflective of changing attitudes that were taking place among the educated classes towards witchcraft, most notably an upsurge of interest in continental witch beliefs and the concept of the Demonic Pact.<sup>12</sup> Francis Legge's suggestion of 1891,<sup>13</sup> that James encountered and acquired continental ideas while in Denmark, has been continuously reiterated, though P. G. Maxwell-Stuart has seriously questioned the assumption, finding no solid evidence that James ever discussed witchcraft during his visit, or that either the Sabbat or the Demonic Pact were of central concern in Danish witchcraft trials.<sup>14</sup> His argument is not wholly convincing since James VI and Christian IV are known to have shared several common interests. Given that witchcraft was a current concern in both countries it seems very likely that it was, in fact, discussed.

In any case no one man – not even a king – could be solely credited with introducing witch “panics” to Scotland. Also, it is very likely that the Demonic Pact and other continental notions were familiar to judicial, religious, social and political elites well before 1590.<sup>15</sup> There were numerous other channels of information available to them, such as publications,

<sup>12</sup> See Henderson, “Detestable Slaves of the Devil.”

<sup>13</sup> Francis Legge, “Witchcraft in Scotland,” *The Scottish Review* 18 (1891): 257–88; A. H. Williamson, *Scottish National Consciousness in the Age of James VI* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1979) 61.

<sup>14</sup> P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, “The Fear of the King is Death: James VI and the Witches of East Lothian,” in *Fear in Early Modern Society*, eds. William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) 209–25. On Danish witch-hunting, see Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, “Lay and Inquisitorial Witchcraft Prosecutions in Early Modern Italy and Denmark,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 36 (2011): 265–78; Gustav Henningsen, “Witch Hunting in Denmark,” *Folklore* 93 (1982): 131–7; Jens Christian V. Johansen, “Denmark: The Sociology of Accusations,” in Ankarloo and Henningsen, *Early Modern European Witchcraft*, 339–65.

<sup>15</sup> Jenny Wormald, “The Witches, the Devil and the King,” in *Freedom and Authority: Scotland c. 1050-c. 1650*, eds. Terry Brotherstone and David Ditchburn (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000) 165–80, esp. 170–4.



travellers and traders, apart from the royal visit. However, there can be little doubt that the North Berwick affair, and the publications it generated, “schooled people at various levels of society in a theory of witchcraft and a knowledge of its practices.”<sup>16</sup>

James’s precise role in the North Berwick episode, and his contribution, if any, to Scottish witchcraft belief in general, remains a matter of debate. His involvement may have been no more than a political ploy, as some have suggested, and if so it was quite effective. It certainly placed him on the witch-hunting map, an accolade that would have satisfied his ego. An English chapbook, *Newes From Scotland* (1591), preposterously declared him Satan’s most formidable opponent: “the witches demaunded of the Diuel why he did beare such hatred to the King, who answered, by reason the King is the greatest enemy he hath in the worlde.”<sup>17</sup>

James went on to write about his hatred of witches and the damage they were doing to the country in his treatise *Daemonologie* (1597); “the greate wickednesse of the people ... procures this horrible defection, whereby God justlie punisheth sinne ... the consummation of the worlde, and our deliuerance drawing neare, makes Sathan to rage the more in his instruments, knowing his kingdome to be so neare an ende.”<sup>18</sup> By the time James had come to write on the topic of witchcraft, Scotland had experienced its first major witch-hunt and was about to engage in a second significant witch-purge in 1597. When James inherited the throne of England in 1603 his interest in witch-hunting greatly subsided, and he even questioned some of his earlier assumptions. However, his reputation as an adversary of demonic conspirators lived on; for instance, the three witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606) were possibly deliberately included to flatter, or possibly satirize, the king.

North Berwick may have been the first major witch-hunt in Scotland, but the criminal prosecution of witches actually dates back to the reign of James’s mother, Mary Queen of Scots, and the introduction of the Witchcraft Act of 1563 [see Appendix I].<sup>19</sup> It might be expected that the Act would provide a definition of what a witch actually is. It does not, and the word “witch”

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland. James VI’s Demonology and the North Berwick Witches* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000) 79.

<sup>17</sup> *Newes from Scotland, 1591* (London: The Bodley Head, 1924) 15; Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, ed. Alan MacFarlane (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984) 15.

<sup>18</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie in forme of a Dialogue. 1597* (London: The Bodley Head, 1924) 81.

<sup>19</sup> Goodare has suggested that the Witchcraft Act was first drafted at the General Assembly of December 1562 and thus pre-dates the English legislation. It also differs in several points, enough to indicate that it was “created ab initio, not adapted from the English one,” “The Scottish Witchcraft Act,” 8.

does not occur, except in the compound, “witchcraft.” One possible reason for this omission might have been that “the crime envisaged by the legislators was not the thought-crime of being a witch, but the practice of specific acts of witchcraft.”<sup>20</sup> There are, of course, indications of what witchcraft was thought to entail, such as “abominabil” and “vane superstition,” which carried the meaning of dangerous or false belief, and as Julian Goodare has argued, hints at the anti-Catholic subtext of the document.<sup>21</sup> The Act makes clear that no person, regardless of their station or condition in life, should use any manner of witchcraft, sorcery or necromancy, “nor gif thame selfis furth to have ony sic craft or knowlege thair of, thairthrow abusand the pepill.” The implication here is that magical practitioners were actively soliciting clients and making claims to knowledge that was expressly forbidden by God. The phrase “abusing the people” suggested that witches, sorcerers and necromancers were, in effect, tricking people into believing that their skills were desirable, even beneficial, but in reality the people were being misled as all such power was demonic in origin.

Whatever the potential shortcomings of the 1563 Witchcraft Act, further legislative acts followed. In 1573 the Privy Council decreed that witchcraft was to be treated as a *crimen exceptum*, or exceptional crime, and in 1575 the General Assembly set out articles that claimed “the Kirk hath power to cognosce and decerne upon heresies, blasphemie, witchcraft, and violation of the Sabbath day without prejudice always of the civill punishment.” The 1583 General Assembly was still not satisfied, for it issued a complaint to the king “that there is no punishment for incest, adulterie, witchcraft, murthers, abominable and horrible oaths, in such sort that daylie sinne increaseth, and provoketh the wrath of God against the whole countrie.”<sup>22</sup>

There had been a handful of cases prior to this legislation, and within a fortnight of the passing of the Witchcraft Act, two witches were executed, though large-scale “witch panics” did not immediately follow. As on the continent, there was not one continuous witch-hunt in Scotland but rather persecutions underwent considerable fluctuations. Thousands of individual prosecutions took place over some three hundred years, and five major peaks of intense, “national panics” were distinguished by Larner, the dates now slightly modified: 1590–91, 1597, 1628–31, 1649–50 and 1661–62.

<sup>20</sup> Goodare, “The Scottish Witchcraft Act,” 9.

<sup>21</sup> For various opinions on the wording of the Witchcraft Act, see Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981) 66–7; P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Satan’s Conspiracy: Magic and Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2001) 37–8; Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 90–1; and on the anti-Catholic context, see Goodare, “The Scottish Witchcraft Act,” 8, 12–15.

<sup>22</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, 68.

Another serious outbreak has since been identified in 1568–69.<sup>23</sup> It can be argued, however, that Scotland – or indeed any other country – did not truly engage in so-called “national panics,” on a nation-wide scale, as many areas of the country remained unaffected, even during the most turbulent years of persecution. Indeed, it has been estimated that between 1563 and 1736 approximately 65 per cent of Scottish parishes had no formal prosecutions at all and, by extension, no first-hand experience of witch persecution. Therefore, direct exposure to sustained, large-scale witch-hunting was not the norm, even within communities that prosecuted witches, and such episodes are therefore not representative of most people’s experiences of witchcraft.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout Europe, it is estimated that somewhere in the region of 100,000 women and men were tried for witchcraft, with around 50,000 to 60,000 executions, between 1400 and 1775.<sup>25</sup> During this period, Scotland had an estimated, but varying population, of approximately one million. In comparative terms, this small nation experienced some of the worst outbreaks of witch-hunting, with a total of 3,837 known formal accusations and an estimated 2,000 executions; 3,212 are known by name and 625 represent unnamed individuals or groups of witches whose names, or numbers of accused, were not provided in the original records.<sup>26</sup> Of the total number of formal accusations, 2,936 occurred before, and including, 1662. At least 458 of the total known accusations – representing around 12 per cent – were made after the last major witch-hunt in 1661–62, a high number, one might think, given the once strongly entrenched view that witch persecution was supposedly in rapid recession in this period.<sup>27</sup> Recent scholarship has begun to overturn that assumption (Figure 3.1).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, 60–1; Michael Wasser, “Scotland’s First Witch-Hunt: The Eastern Witch-Hunt of 1568–1569,” in *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters*, ed. Julian Goodare (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 17–33. Revised dates are in Goodare, “Witchcraft in Scotland,” 309.

<sup>24</sup> Lauren Martin, “Scottish Witchcraft Panics Re-Examined,” in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, eds. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 119–43.

<sup>25</sup> Estimates have greatly varied over time and among different scholars. For reliable statistics, see Brian P. Levack, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 5–6; Levack, *Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 21; Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) 149, 156–7.

<sup>26</sup> The previous total number of accusations given in the Larner, Lee and McLaughlan *Source-Book* was 3,069. The SSWD has revised all previous statistics.

<sup>27</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, 78–9.

<sup>28</sup> Lizanne Henderson, “Supernatural Traditions and Folk Beliefs in an Age of Transition: Witchcraft and Charming in Scotland, c.1670–1740,” Ph.D, University

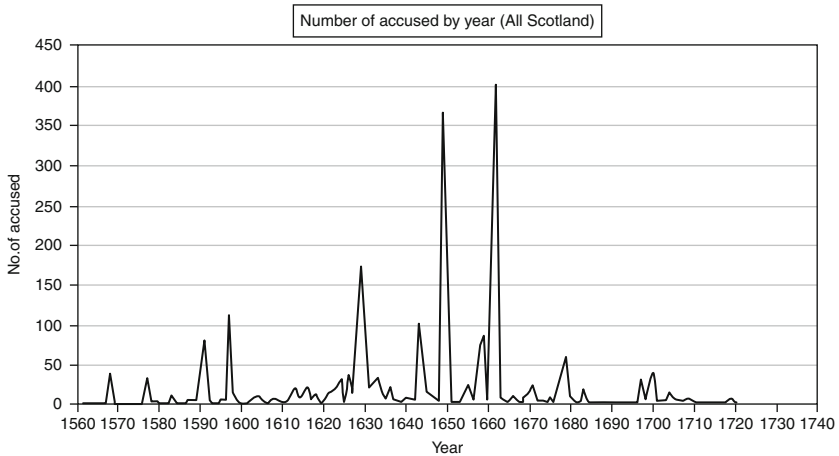


Figure 3.1 Number of accused in Scotland

Source: Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database © The University of Edinburgh.

As with the pre-1660s trials, the situation post-1662 was equally sporadic and geographically dispersed. Looking at the figures more closely by decade, although witchcraft cases would never again accumulate to the high levels previously experienced, they were by no means insignificant. In the immediate aftermath of 1662 there was a minimum of 38, and possibly as many as 50, known cases up until 1669, with only the year 1668 completely case-free. The 1670s experienced the highest burst of intensity, with something in the region of 187 to 193 cases throughout the decade, but particularly intense between 1677 and 1679. In the 1680s there were a total of 35 cases, mostly concentrated in the first three years of the decade, with none occurring between 1685 and 1687. During the last decade of the seventeenth century, counter to this pattern of decline, cases actually increased in number, with between 91 and 119 in the 1690s (only 1694 had no cases at all). In the first decade of the eighteenth century there were around 88 to 97 cases, with a large grouping in the year 1700, and no year was free of cases. It was

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of Strathclyde (2003); Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson, "The Last of the Witches? The Survival of Scottish Witch Belief," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 198–217; Brian P. Levack, "The Decline and End of Scottish Witch-Hunting," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. J. Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 166–81; and Alexandra Hill, "Decline and Survival of Scottish Witch-Hunting, 1701–1727," in *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters*, ed. Julian Goodare (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 215–33.



Figure 3.2 Witchcraft cases in Scotland, 1663–1736

not until the 1710s that there was a notable cooling off, with only 12 known cases, and somewhere between 7 and 19 cases in the 1720s. There were no formal cases at all by the 1730s.<sup>29</sup>

The gender ratio throughout this period remained heavily weighted towards females, with the exception of the year 1697 when a relatively high number of suspects, some 40 per cent, were male (see Table 3.1). Figure 3.2 provides an indication of the overall gender divide and is based on the minimum number of known cases by decade.

The areas of Scotland most affected overall by witch prosecutions between 1563 and 1736 were the Lowland and predominantly Scots-speaking parts of the country. Worst hit were the Lothians (32 per cent), Strathclyde (14 per cent) and Fife (12 per cent). Aberdeenshire and the Grampians were also badly affected with around 7 per cent of cases, and there was a slightly higher statistic for the South West and Border regions (9 per cent). Tayside

<sup>29</sup> Data gathered from the SSWD. The lower figure represents known cases. The higher figure is an estimate for cases when the number of accused is unstated. The SSWD team, in these instances, averaged these to 3 cases.

*Table 3.1* Gender ratios, 1660s to 1730s

Decade	Female	Male
1660s	90%	10%
1670s	85%	15%
1680s	89%	11%
1690s	80%	20%
1700s	85%	15%
1710s	90%	10%
1720s	100%	0%
1730s	0%	0%

had around 6 per cent of cases, with a similar percentage coming from the much larger Highland and Islands region (6 per cent). Some 5 per cent originated in Caithness, Orkney and Shetland, with only 2 per cent from the Central region (encompassing Clackmannanshire, Stirling and Falkirk). The remainder came from unknown areas.<sup>30</sup>

Future research, in relation to the geographical distribution of cases post-1662, requires further in-depth analysis. Ankarloo and Henningsen's "centre and periphery" model could have possible application for Scotland where the number of cases remained strong nearer to administrative centres, such as Edinburgh. Targeted regional studies can also help to build a sharper picture of the dynamics of witch-hunting and the potential interface between learned and folk beliefs. In the presbytery or county of Linlithgow, for instance, all of the 114 known trials occurred in the seventeenth century, between 1612 and 1680, save for the last in 1704. There were noticeable peaks in 1624, 1644, 1649–50, 1661–62, and 1679–80, not wholly incompatible with national averages, though the lack of cases in the late sixteenth century is noteworthy, as is the relatively large concentration of cases in Bo'ness in 1679–80, which involved 28 suspects. Several Bo'ness women confessed to a relationship with the Devil, who promised them gold, pearls and riches. The gender ratio of the 114 Linlithgow witches was 105 female (92 per cent) and 9 male (8 per cent), which was higher in favour of females than the national average.<sup>31</sup> Other features of the Linlithgow sample that emerge from the confessions is the relatively high demonic content, the Devil's promise of rewards and a better life, the prosecution of charms and healing rituals, the appearance of fairies, episodes involving shapeshifting, and the prominence of cases from coastal areas of the county.

But this researcher is not concerned with number-crunching. Though figures and statistics can of course yield helpful information, numbers alone

<sup>30</sup> SSWD.

<sup>31</sup> Data gathered from SSWD. See also Chapter 4 for more on the Bo'ness witches and the Devil.

do not address the complexities of living in a society where the threat of witches, or witchcraft accusation, could be just as powerful as the actuality of witch-hunting. One frustrating problem is that the records are at times incomplete, missing or lost, or just too vague to be sure what really happened and to whom, for names and specific details are not always provided.

### **The great Scottish witch-hunt?**

There was no single, “great” witch-hunt in Scotland but, as elsewhere, a series of prosecutions, trials and formal accusations, which took place across the length and breadth of the country, with varying degrees of intensity, and at different times. Neither did witch prosecutions exist in isolation, but should be measured against a wider cultural picture of social control and discipline. This was particularly so in the aftermath of the Protestant ascendancy in 1560, but can also be detected in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through the Kirk’s continued concern with moral and sexual behaviour. The Devil was not an abstract concept, trapped within the pages of the Bible, but could assume corporeal form. He prowled the streets, day and night, and could appear in any shape or disguise of his choosing. He may have spoken to you on your way to market, or entered your home with or without your knowledge. It was not important to actually see the Devil, as he could also enter your thoughts. Nurtured with such high levels of anxiety, it is not difficult to understand how the seeds of witch belief could blossom into full-scale witch persecution.

It must be remembered that witch-hunting was, essentially, a judicial process. Vigilantism was neither tolerated nor condoned by the Church or State since such behaviour only served to undermine their own authority. There is only one documented case in Scotland of villagers taking the law, so to speak, into their own hands and murdering a suspected witch – at Pittenweem in 1705. There are local legends and oral traditions about witch lynchings, but in terms of the available evidence it would seem this was not a common occurrence. The majority of witch prosecutions took place under the watchful eye of the church courts and the legal system. Local church courts, the kirk session and presbyteries were typically at the chalk-face, so to speak, of witchcraft allegations and would gather evidence and oral testimonies from witnesses and the accused in order to determine if the case should be passed on to a secular court.<sup>32</sup> Such courts included the

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<sup>32</sup> It has been noted that the Scottish clergy played a very active role in witch-hunting, but that their involvement in prosecution was curtailed by the fact that although witchcraft was a moral crime it was also a statutory offence. Therefore witchcraft had to be tried under a secular court. The initial investigations conducted by the kirk sessions and presbyteries, including recording of the suspect’s confession, a written document known as a process, would have been passed on to higher ecclesiastical or

Privy Council, committee of estates or parliament – the central authorities in charge of issuing commissions to hold a witch trial – or the Edinburgh-based Court of Justiciary, the highest court in Scotland, which presided over a large number of witch trials. Circuit courts, a travelling extension of the Court of Justiciary, were able to hold witch trials, whereas the sheriff and burgh courts were not involved in witchcraft cases as it was a crime beyond their jurisdiction. The majority of Scotland's witch suspects were tried by *ad hoc* local criminal courts set up after they were granted a commission by the Privy Council, committee of estates or parliament. Regrettably, few trial records of suspects tried under these courts are still in existence. Given that the judicial establishment of early modern Scotland was comparatively small, a significant number of trials were conducted by local authorities and led by individuals who, in many instances, had no formal judicial training.<sup>33</sup> The basic point is that a witch trial could only happen after a judicial framework was established. Likewise, witch-hunting activity could only cease after that same framework was disbanded and the law changed. Witches cannot be punished if the crime no longer exists in law.

It is perhaps necessary to comment briefly on the meaning of “hunt” in this context. The term “witch-hunting” is, after all, of fairly recent origin and would not have been used by the witch-hunters, or the hunted, themselves. The only contemporary usage cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is Ben Johnson's *Sad Shepherd* (1641): “You speake, Alken, as if you knew the sport of witch-hunting. Or, starting of a hag.” Thereafter, all references begin after 1885. The first Scottish reference comes from John Buchan's novel *Witch Wood* (1927): “David had once before seen a witch hunt – in Liberton as a boy – and then there had been a furious and noisy crowd surging round the changehouse where the accused was imprisoned.”<sup>34</sup>

For convenience, a distinction can be made between small-scale hunts, which consisted of only one, or no more than four, offenders and were generally restricted to single communities, and large-scale hunts, which might involve anywhere from ten to twenty individuals, eventually incriminating literally hundreds of suspects, with the possibility of prosecutions spreading

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civil authorities. The ministers would have also participated with the civil magistrates when submitting a petition to request a witchcraft commission from the privy council or parliament. Brian P. Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008) 30–2.

<sup>33</sup> Levack has suggested that the judicial situation in Scotland was an important factor in the higher conviction rates for witchcraft in comparison with England, where central court judges presided over the county assizes; *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ben Johnson was composing the ‘Sad Shepherd; or, A Tale of Robin Hood’ prior to his death in 1637, and it was first published, unfinished, in 1641; *The Sad Shepherd* (1929; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 38; John Buchan, *Witch Wood* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1927) 272.



to other communities.<sup>35</sup> Whatever the size of a witch-hunt it is important to bear in mind that each one had its own dynamic, individualistic features, peculiarities and level of impact; each witch-hunt was unique. Though official witch-hunting was conducted in Scotland over roughly a century and a half, there was not one continuous period of witch-hunting, which was also the case in other parts of Europe; prosecution rates fluctuated considerably according to local conditions and concerns.

The last, and the largest, sometimes referred to as the “Great Scottish Witch-hunt” due to its unprecedented scale, took place between the spring of 1661 and the autumn of 1662. At least 664 persons, and probably more, were accused, ranging over four counties, with a death toll somewhere around 300. The reasons why this particular “panic” came to an end, and the impact it had in ensuring there would never again be another witch-hunt on this scale in Scotland, has been competently addressed by Brian Levack. Questions were raised about the scale of the entire hunt. The Privy Council was concerned about such matters as the possibly illegal arrests of suspected witches and the whole issue of torture to elicit confessions. Rather than place the overall decline in witchcraft cases within a framework of disintegrating learned belief in witches – a model that is demonstrably wrong for Scotland – Levack pursues a legal angle, shifting the focus towards the judicial process and the concerns of lawyers and judges. He contends that attention should be paid to the “growth of a judicial rather than a philosophical scepticism, an outlook that does not question the reality of witchcraft but which does question whether specific individuals, and ultimately whether *any* individuals, could be proved guilty of this crime at law.”<sup>36</sup> However, it could be argued that it was initially philosophical scepticism that influenced legal opinion.

With the exception of a few high-profile cases, this is where the history of Scottish witch-hunting usually comes to an end, and yet the story was far from over. Although the excesses of 1662 would not be repeated, witch-hunting on a smaller scale continued well into the eighteenth century. Indeed, Michael Wasser has suggested that 1697 to 1700, a period that recorded 107 total cases, should now actually be recognized as the last significant witch-hunt in Scotland.<sup>37</sup> Witch beliefs, arguably, have never been truly extinguished.

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<sup>35</sup> Levack discusses the development of hunts in more detail in *Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 156–61.

<sup>36</sup> See Levack, “The Decline and End of Scottish Witch-Hunting”; Brian P. Levack, “The Decline and End of Witchcraft Prosecutions,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, eds. S. Clark and B. Ankarloo (London: Athlone Press, 1999) 1–93; and Brian P. Levack, “The Great Scottish Witch-Hunt of 1661–1662,” *Journal of British Studies* 20 (1980): 90–108.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Wasser, “The Western Witch-Hunt of 1697–1700: The Last Major Witch-Hunt in Scotland,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 146–65.

Studies of witch-hunting in Scotland, as elsewhere, have tended to focus on the ideas and opinions of the persecutors rather than their victims. The accused (usually women) have generally been dismissed as poor and thus powerless, ignorant, senile and no real threat to anybody.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, a majority of church historians have downplayed the witch-hunts or have even gone so far as to ignore them altogether.<sup>39</sup> Attention has been directed towards the shifting beliefs of the “chattering classes” or the interests of politics, government and the church.

Scottish historiography has been slow to assess the actual beliefs of the accused witches themselves or, indeed, the attitudes of their neighbours towards them.<sup>40</sup> Such approaches, while no doubt well-intentioned, are also condescending, since they reduce the victims to unthinking, child-like, gullible objects, totally unable to resist the forces of evil. As Diane Purkiss has persuasively argued, the witch has been treated as a passive figure, stripped of all societal and cultural significance.<sup>41</sup> If there has been a near absence of scholarly interest in folk beliefs about witches at the height of the witch-hunt, it is not altogether surprising that there should be so little curiosity about the survival of witch beliefs after the hunt had ceased. Some inroads have, naturally, been made. In particular, Stuart MacDonald’s concentrated work on the Fife witch cases includes those of a later date.<sup>42</sup> Both Hugh McLachlan and Michael Wasser have focused on what we should now consider to be Scotland’s “last” major witch-hunt of 1697 in Paisley.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

<sup>39</sup> For example, James King Hewison, *The Covenanters: A History of the Church in Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution*, 2 vols. (Glasgow: John Smith, 1913). There are notable exceptions, such as John Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland* (London, 1655) and Robert Wodrow, *The History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland*, 4 vols. (1721–2; Glasgow, 1823). A historian who neglected the witch-hunts is Gordon Donaldson, *Scotland: James V to James VII*, Edinburgh History of Scotland, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965).

<sup>40</sup> We still lack any Scottish study to match Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture 1736–1951*, or M. Gijswijt-Hofstra, B. P. Levack and R. Porter, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Volume 5. The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), or W. de Blécourt, R. Hutton and J. La Fontaine, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Volume 6. The Twentieth Century* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), despite the survival of good evidence for a remarkable number of late Scottish cases.

<sup>41</sup> Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 66.

<sup>42</sup> Stuart MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife: Witch-Hunting in a Scottish Shire, 1560–1710* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002) 67–8, 84, 110–13, and chap. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Hugh V. McLachlan and J. Kim Swales, “The Bewitchment of Christian Shaw: A Reassessment of the Famous Paisley Witchcraft Case of 1697,” in *Twisted Sisters: Women, Crime and Deviance in Scotland since 1400*, eds. Yvonne G. Brown and Rona Ferguson (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2002) 54–83; Hugh V. McLachlan, ed., *The Kirk, Satan*

Brian Levack's examination into the reasons behind the decline of Scottish witch-hunting has touched upon belief, as has his extensive work on the demonic possession cases at the turn of the eighteenth century, while P. G. Maxwell-Stuart has investigated magical beliefs during the age of the Enlightenment.<sup>44</sup> Alexandra Hill's treatment of the first three decades of the eighteenth century builds upon this work and reveals a pattern of "chain reaction prosecutions," supporting the assertion that the decline in witch-hunting happened less sharply than has been generally assumed.<sup>45</sup> My own forays into this aspect of the Scottish experience have also, it is hoped, played a part in proving the resilience of witch beliefs well beyond their supposed sell-by date.<sup>46</sup>

## Charmers

Posterity has often confused witches and charmers but while witches were sometimes charmers, the vast majority of charmers were not witches. As with witches there was biblical authority for the demonization of charmers, as in Deuteronomy 18: 11–12 "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter or a witch. Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer." Isaiah 19: 3, discussing "the confusion of Egypt" predicts that the inhabitants thereof "shall seek to the idols, and to the charmers, and to them that have familiar spirits, and to the wizards." Consequently the Church throughout medieval times was always suspicious of charmers but they were seldom, if ever, prosecuted in Scotland before the advent of the Witchcraft Act. During the entire period of the witch-hunts the folk did not lose faith in the powers of charmers and because they fulfilled a social need they often survived while many witches perished.

Julian Goodare has suggested that the magical activities of beneficent charmers, as opposed to demonic witches, may have been the original, primary target behind the Scottish Witchcraft Act of 1563 [see Appendix I].

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*and Salem: A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire* (Glasgow: The Grimsay Press, 2006); Michael Wasser, "The Western Witch-Hunt of 1697–1700: The Last Major Witch-Hunt in Scotland," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 146–65.

<sup>44</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 115–61; P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, "Witchcraft and Magic in Eighteenth-Century Scotland," in *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe*, eds. Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) 81–99.

<sup>45</sup> Hill, "Decline and Survival in Scottish Witch-Hunting," 215, 229.

<sup>46</sup> Henderson and Cowan, "The Last of the Witches"; Lizanne Henderson, "The Survival of Witchcraft Prosecutions and Witch Belief in South-West Scotland," *The Scottish Historical Review* LXXXV, 1, 219 (April 2006): 52–74.

In particular, the Act stipulated that “na maner of persoun ... tak upon hand in ony tymes heirefeter to use ony maner of Witchcraftis, Sorsarie or Necromancie, nor gif thame sefis furth to have ony sic craft or knowlege theirof, thairthrow abusand the pepill.” The folk this description most closely fits, argues Goodare, were the charmers, many of whom provided a range of services including healing, love magic, divination and counter-magical spells. People, as a general rule, would not have sought out the company or assistance of maleficent witches, nor were witches known to solicit clients. The suggestion put forth by Goodare is that in placing so much emphasis upon the “beneficent” charmers, the legislation of 1563, “did not directly intend to punish the witches who were actually convicted during the following century and a half of witch-hunting,”<sup>47</sup> though they may have retrospectively congratulated themselves on such convenient obfuscation. At this stage, the drafters of the Witchcraft Act, of whom John Knox was one, were perhaps more concerned with what they saw as overt signs of non-conformity and the illegal use of magic, and were not yet fully aware of the lurking menace of the demonic witch. Once the Protestant regime had time to bed in, and as more demonological texts went into print, it would not be long before the focus shifted on to the more terrifying vision of a diabolical witch.

Goodare’s observations are well-taken, though it is more likely that the learned authors of the Act were fully aware of diabolical witchcraft given that European demonological texts had been produced since the fifteenth century; they may also have acquired such knowledge during time spent on the continent where such ideas were already in circulation. Brian Levack has suggested that within Europe the “cumulative concept of witchcraft” had consolidated all of its basic elements with concepts of the Demonic Pact becoming more clearly articulated by the early sixteenth century.<sup>48</sup> The argument pursued by Christina Larner, among others, that Scotland did not adopt diabolical witchcraft and the pact with the Devil until after James VI’s visit to Denmark in 1590 has been challenged.<sup>49</sup> Regardless of when, precisely, educated continental witchcraft theory was officially recognized in Scotland, from a judicial standpoint, notions of witches’ sabbats or night-flying could have been heard of through a process of both written and oral transmission. If beneficent charmers were, indeed, the primary targets of the Witchcraft Act, then why was this not made more explicit in the wording of the document? Why restrict punishment to consultants and users of “witchcraftis, sorsarie and necromancie” and not include charmers in this

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<sup>47</sup> Goodare, “Scottish Witchcraft Act,” 11.

<sup>48</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 51–2.

<sup>49</sup> Goodare, “Scottish Witchcraft Act,” 12; Henderson, “Changing Ideas of Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland,” 241–2.

list of offenders? Charmers were, almost without question, more numerous and regularly solicited for their skills and abilities than maleficent witches, but a witch could be deliberately sought out, albeit occasionally, to provide counter-magical spells. It seems hard to accept that the drafter of the Act “might have had difficulty explaining exactly what he thought a witch was”,<sup>50</sup> but then failed to clearly describe a charmer, which was probably a much easier and better understood concept at the time of its composition. Finally, a further possibility regarding the aim and timing of the legislation is that Scotland introduced a Witchcraft Act in order to appear as a modern, progressive country, able to control and protect the spiritual needs and health of her subjects.

Chairmer, cannie-wife, cannie-man, spey-wife, wyss wife, wise woman, wise man, toad doctor, folk healer, conjurer and white witch are all appellations, among others, that have been used to describe a category of people who specialized in charming. The term “chairmer” or “charmer,” in a Scottish context, can be applied to a broad range of skills, activities and contexts. In England such individuals were known as “cunning folk,” a term not often used in Scotland, though it has become widely adopted as a catch-all phrase for all kinds of non-English charmers in recent literature on the subject.<sup>51</sup>

A “charmer” is “one who uses spells and enchantments, or who has magic powers; an enchanter,” while the practice of “charming” is “the operation or using of charms; the working of spells; enchantment, incantation” or “exercising magic power.”<sup>52</sup> In early modern Scotland, “charmer” was generally used to describe people who had superior herbal and medicinal knowledge and had an ability to heal, either through the use of magical charms or via supernatural contacts. In practice the distinctions between traditional healers who used magical, or indeed non-magical methods, were often blurred. Bone-setters specialized in fractures and sprains, while faith-healers cured illness by calling on the power of God through the recitation of prayers or conducting rituals. Charmers were frequently consulted to assist in matters beyond pure medical care, such as with the detection of thieves and locating lost property. Some practiced astrology and palmistry, while others could read information from the flight of birds or other natural phenomena. Many made love potions or protective amulets, and most were able to provide cures and counter-magical charms against witchcraft, fairies, or any other

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<sup>50</sup> Goodare, “Scottish Witchcraft Act,” 15.

<sup>51</sup> For instance, Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005) 27; Emma Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010) 28.

<sup>52</sup> OED

form of supernatural attack. As Owen Davis points out in his extensive work on English cunning-folk:

Quack doctors, spiritual healers, medical botanists, and bone-setters have all been subjected to detailed analysis. In contrast the practitioners of folk-magical healing have been largely overlooked. In their dual role as herbalists and witch-doctors, cunning-folk in particular were an integral element of the popular medical experience.<sup>53</sup>

While Davis has done much to rectify this gap and Stephen Wilson has provided an excellent framework for such study in a broader European context, there is, with a few notable exceptions, still much work to be done in this area for Scotland.<sup>54</sup>

The punishment of charmers was generally less severe than that of convicted witches, but similar to that meted out to adulterers, fornicators, abusers of the sabbath, observers of “superstitious” days and whatever else offended the godly. The kirk session and the presbytery were most often in charge of administering the appropriate penalty. The range of punishments was limited, and depending on the severity of the crime, the offender would have been subjected to at least one, or possibly more. Occasionally, however, there are cases, even in periods of more intensive persecution of witches and charmers, where the kirk session shows some hint of compassion towards the accused. Margaret Chapman in Stirling, for instance, was brought before the session in 1633, accused by a weaver’s wife of “charming hir milk from out of hir breast.” When Chapman explained that her intention was to procure a remedy for the condition, she was simply “humbled” for her wrongdoing.<sup>55</sup> In almost all cases, the charmer received either a private or public rebuke, or admonishment by the members of the session or presbytery, occasionally followed up by personal spiritual counselling and

<sup>53</sup> Owen Davis, “Cunning-Folk in the Medical Market-Place during the Nineteenth Century,” *Medical History* 43 (1999): 55–73.

<sup>54</sup> Owen Davies, *Cunning Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2003); Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2000) xxvii. On Scotland, see Mary Beith, *Healing Threads. Traditional Medicines of the Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1995); Joyce Miller, “Devices and Directions: Folk Healing Aspects of Witchcraft Practice in Seventeenth Century Scotland,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. J. Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 90–105.

<sup>55</sup> SCA, *Stirling Holy Rude Kirk Session Records 1597–1968*, 30 April 1633; Rogers, *Social Life in Scotland*, vol. 2, 199. The woman may have suffered from an inability to lactate, known as agalactia or agalactosis, caused by a lack of hormonal stimulation of the mammary glands or by emotional disturbances. See also Chapter 8 below on the breast milk motif in the Scottish ballads.

guidance. The payment of a fine, irregularly imposed, was normally used for poor relief. It was fairly standard practice to insist that the guilty party stand before the congregation to make a public apology, followed by a chastisement from the minister. The penitent was sometimes made to wear a sackcloth, to further the humiliation, and to sit on the "pillar," a stool that was generally placed in front of the pulpit for a determined number of Sundays.

The stereotype of the witch, rightly or wrongly, is firmly established as a mature, cantankerous female, disliked and possibly feared by her neighbours. Time and legend have further embroidered witch characteristics. However, there appears to be no corresponding stereotype for the charmer. Some of these practitioners of the occult arts lost their identities as they were subsumed into those of witches. Charmers, like witches could be female, but they were just as likely to be male. They could be young or old, popular or detested, a valued member of the community or a worrisome presence, best avoided. Sometimes charmers, like witches, inherited their powers, talents or gifts. In particular, seventh sons were thought to have the power to heal by touch. Others acquired their knowledge by other means. Their powers, though magical, were not necessarily demonically inspired, although often suspected to be so, particularly during the earlier phases of witch-hunting. Unlike witches, "who were labeled by others, charmers knew who they were and would label themselves as such."<sup>56</sup> Over time they were deemed less of a threat and more of a nuisance by the authorities, while to the folk at large they were a welcome source of comfort and relief, even during periods when charmers were demonized.

Sometimes entire families were credited with curative powers. Agnes Urquhart confessed her guilt to both the kirk session and the presbytery of Elgin in 1724–25 for using a charm with a Bible and key that could find items that had been stolen. The charm itself is not a particularly unusual one, but her confession also stated that she had "taught her daughter the said art."<sup>57</sup> The mother–daughter relationship is made explicit in this instance. Rev Walter Gregor, writing in 1881, knew of a family that could heal sprains, as well as dislocated and broken bones, by rubbing the area with the thumb and fingers. Other families were skilled in extracting "motes from the eye." The charmer put his hand over the affected eye and recited a Gaelic rhyme, which in translation reads, "The charm that the Great Origin made to the right eye of her good son; take the mote out of his eye, and put it on my hand."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Miller, "Devices and Directions," 91.

<sup>57</sup> William Cramond, *The Records of Elgin, 1234–1800*, 2 vols. (Aberdeen: New Spalding Club, 1908) vol. 2, 379. See also the case of John Fergusson below.

<sup>58</sup> Walter Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland*, The Folk-Lore Society (London: Elliot Stock, 1881) 36.

Some charmers, however, did not necessarily acquire their powers as a circumstance of birth, as was often believed; many learned their skill, either through observing and/or taking instruction from another charmer or, were said to have been granted the gift by a supernatural entity. Jeane Campbell from Rothesay was brought before the Bute session in 1660 for using “a salve to rub on her breast, which was good for comforting the heart against scunners [afflictions].” It was further reported that Campbell “gangs with the faryes,” by whom it was assumed, she was taught her charming skills.<sup>59</sup> A native of the Appin region, Donald McIlmichall, tried in Inveraray in 1677, was described as “a common vagabond,” and stood accused of stealing horses and cattle, and for “giveing out himself to have skill of discoverie and finding out all lost goods by which means he wes guiltie of cheating and abusing ignorant people and getting money from them for such discoveris ...” McIlmichall’s “skill of discoverie” came from the fairies, an admission that would ensure a more serious charge of “consulting with evill spirits.”<sup>60</sup> One of the women accused by the young Christian Shaw in 1696–97 of her bewitchment was Margaret Fulton, who was “reputed a witch, has the mark of it, and acknowledged that she made use of a charm which appeared full of small stones and blood.” Fulton claimed that her husband “had brought her back from the Faries.” Her reputation as a witch was “of an old date.”<sup>61</sup> Frustratingly, the record does not state whether or not she might have learned her “witchcraft” from the fairies, or how her husband was able to bring her back from their company. What is clear is that witches and charmers were still being identified with fairy belief at the turn of the eighteenth century.

Gender could also be a factor regarding particular charms. For example, in the Western Isles, Martin Martin was told of “women who have an art of taking a moat [*sic*] out of one’s eye, tho at some distance from the party griev’d; and this is the only charm these women will avouch themselves to understand, ... and several of these men, out of whose eyes moats were then taken, confirm’d the truth of it to me.”<sup>62</sup> A subtle, but important distinction, between charmers and witches can be detected in his writings.

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<sup>59</sup> Trial of Jeane Campbell, Rothesay, 1660; James King Hewison, *The Isle of Bute in the Olden Time*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1895) vol. 2, 264.

<sup>60</sup> Donald McIlmichall, 27 October 1677. J. N. R. MacPhail, *Highland Papers*, ser. 2, vol. 20: 3 (Edinburgh, 1928) 37–8; John Cameron, ed., *The Justiciary Records of Argyll and the Isles, 1664–1705* (Edinburgh: The Stair Society, 1949) vol. 1, 80–2; Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001; Edinburgh: John Donald, 2011), 42–3, 46, 62, 66, 172.

<sup>61</sup> Sir Francis Grant, Lord Cullen, *Sadducismus Debellatus; or, a True Narrative of the Sorceries and Witchcrafts Exercised by the Devil and his Instruments upon Christian Shaw* (London: D. Newman and A. Ball, 1698), 50.

<sup>62</sup> “Mote” is a particle of dust in the eye. Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, (London, 1703; Second edit. 1716; Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1976) 122.



During his travels through the Hebrides in 1695 Martin reported that it was “a receiv’d opinion in these islands, as well as in the neighbouring part of the mainland, that women by a charm, or some other secret way, are able to convey the increase of their neighbours cows milk to their own use.” The charmed milk did not produce the usual amount of butter and the curds were too tough to solidify or give weight to the cheese. Such depletion of milk quality amounted to economic disaster for the victims of such charms, or what Lyndal Roper has referred to as “the economy of bodily fluids.”<sup>63</sup> There was a way to determine the guilty party because the butter that had been “taken away” and mixed with the charmer’s butter could be discernible by a “mark of separation, viz. the diversity of colours; that which is charm’d being still paler than that part of the butter which hath not been charm’d: and if butter having these marks be found with a suspected woman, she is presently said to be guilty.” In order to be sure, a little rennet was taken from all the suspects and put into an egg-shell full of milk, “and when that from the charmer is mingled with it, it presently curdles, and not before.” Some of the women reportedly used the root of groundsel, putting it in their cream, as a protection against such charmers stealing their produce.

Writing just a few years earlier than Martin’s tour, Robert Kirk similarly spoke of “skilfull women” who used a hair-tether to convey “the pith of milk from their neighbours cows, into their own cheis-hold,” sometimes at a considerable distance, “by art Magic.” Recovery of the stolen milk might be achieved by performing a counter-charm but, in order to avoid the milk being stolen in the first place, “a litle of the mother’s dung stroakt on the calves mouth befor it suck any does prevent this theft.” Like Martin, Kirk did not refer to such women as witches, or even as charmers, but as “inchanters” or women skilled in the art of magic.<sup>64</sup> Evidence that the crime of milk theft was not necessarily considered to be an act of witchcraft, per se, but of charming, is supported in other instances as well. For example, the husband of Janet Morison went to the Culross session in 1719 to complain against James Mathie, whom he accused of slandering his wife as a user of charms. Mathie alleged that he had seen Morison go around her house before going to churn her milk, nor would she milk her cows in the same place where

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<sup>63</sup> Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994) 207–9. See also Alan Dundes, “Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye: An Essay in Indo-European and Semitic Worldview,” in *The Evil Eye: A Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes (1981; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992) 257–99, in which he argues, along Freudian lines, that the opposition between dry and wet substances (such as milk, semen, blood) can explain the folklore behind the evil eye.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Hunter, *The Occult Laboratory: Magic, Science and Second Sight in Late Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001), 81.

they calved. She also added salt to a glass of milk before giving it to anyone to drink.<sup>65</sup>

There is much of interest in these accounts. The crime is one specifically committed by women. In Martin's version, a trial of "proof" was undertaken before any of the suspects were named outright as the culprit. And, perhaps most significantly, these women were specifically designated "charmners," or by Kirk as "skilled women" and "inchanters," as opposed to "witches," a distinction not necessarily made with regard to this crime elsewhere in Scotland. The act of taking away breast-milk from nurses was, however, recognized as an act of witchcraft, and not charming. Martin was actually present when an allegation of this type was made. He had seen four women who had presented themselves as candidates for wet-nursing. After only three days of suckling the baby, the milk of the one chosen dried up. Another nurse was put in her place, but meanwhile, after the lapse of a further three days, the first nurse's milk returned to her, the process caused, some thought by "witchcraft by some of her neighbours."<sup>66</sup>

If stealing milk from cows or nurse-maids was the preserve of women, then it would seem that charms that interfered with the production of ale was a preponderantly male domain. Martin was told of charmners who had the "art of taking away the increase of malt," which resulted in an ale that lacked "life or good taste." A gentleman of his acquaintance found himself unable to produce any decent ale on his premises for a whole year. He was advised to collect some yeast from every alehouse within the parish, "and having got a little from one particular man, he put it among his wort, which became as good ale as could be drank, and so defeated the charm." Following this discovery, the gentleman banished the charmer thirty-six miles away.<sup>67</sup>

The relationship between charmners and witches seems to have been very close, and at times difficult to distinguish. Many of those who were compromised in the early witchcraft trials were clearly charmners or traditional healers, for example, Jonet Boyman in Edinburgh, 1572. Elsewhere I have argued that the Boyman trial is indicative of a process of demonization of folk belief and customary practice in the second half of the sixteenth century. The record of her trial strongly suggests that she was a practicing healer who invoked the "good neighbours" (a popular Scottish euphemism

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<sup>65</sup> No outcome is recorded though, considering the date, it is possible that Morison was cleared of the scandal. Charles Rid and Janet Morison his wife against James Mathie, Culross, 20 October 1719. David Beveridge, *Culross and Tulliallan or Perthshire on Forth. Its History and Antiquities* (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Son, 1885) 112–13; John Ewart Simpkins, ed., *County Folk-Lore vol. VII. Examples of Printed Folk-Lore concerning Fife with some Notes on Clackmannan and Kinross-shires*, The Folk-Lore Society (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1914) 111–12.

<sup>66</sup> Martin, *Description*, 122.

<sup>67</sup> Martin, *Description*, 122.

for the fairies) to enact her medications. She claimed to have consulted with her supernatural contacts at the “elrich well” on Arthur’s Seat, though her interrogators interpreted this as encounters with “evill spreits.” She was condemned as a “wyss woman that culd mend diverss seikness and bairnis that are tane away with the fayrie men and wemin [changelings]” and charged with witchcraft, sorcery, charming and diabolical incantation.<sup>68</sup>

Overlap between charmers and witches might also occur if the purpose of the charm was deemed malevolent. In 1703 Robert Bainzie was called before the kirk session of Oyne on suspicion of witchcraft and charming when it was discovered that he had carried out a magical ritual, involving animal sacrifice, just before he moved out of his house. The burial of a dead dog and cat underneath the hearth was most likely interpreted as intent to harm the next tenant. The session did not, on this occasion, find it necessary to pursue the charge of witchcraft and gave him a rebuke for his troubles.<sup>69</sup>

One clear distinction was that charmers were regularly consulted to break the spells of witches or to reveal to the victim the identity of the witch attacking him or her. Of course, one did not always need the services of a charmer to enact magical protection. A person might hang a perforated stone to a stable door to prevent witches from night-riding their horses, or drive an iron nail into a house beam to guard against the plague, but that did not make them charmers, as such. The Kirk strongly discouraged people from turning to counter-magical spells. In 1737, only a year after the repeal of the Witchcraft Act, the presbytery of Tain was obliged to consult the synod of Ross for advice regarding some persons within their bounds who continued the practice of cutting those suspected of witchcraft on the forehead until they bled, as a counter-spell against a witch’s malevolent magic. The matter was discussed at the synod’s meeting in Cromarty and, after lengthy deliberation, an act was passed with the following preamble:

taking into serious consideration how greatly God is dishonoured, the character and persons of innocent people injured, and peace disturbed by certain practices too common with ignorant and superstitious persons

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<sup>68</sup> Trial of Jonet Boyman, 1572, NAS, JC/26/1/67; Henderson, “Detestable Slaves of the Devil,” 244–8. There were others who may have been traditional healers, such as North Berwick suspect Gellie Duncan who, aside from standing accused of secret meetings with the Devil and witches from Copenhagen in the middle of the Moray Firth to plot against the King, was able to transfer sickness from one living thing to another. She preferred to transmit the disease from human to dog, but sometimes she was unable to prevent the sickness jumping to another human who subsequently died. Trial of Gellie Duncan, 1591, NAS, JC/26/2; Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 135–40.

<sup>69</sup> James Logan, “Ecclesiastical Collections for Aberdeenshire,” *Archaeologia Scotica: Transactions of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 3 (1831): 4–19.

in this province for countering charms and witchcraft, *real or only suspected*: such as cutting the suspected, and drawing their blood above the breath, taking, in an illegal and unwarrantable manner, the oaths of persons upon suspicion of witchcraft, or ill-will, and other such methods intended for countering of charms.

The act stipulated that all ministers, within their bounds, publicly instruct the people against the “evil and gross wickedness of such practices and most earnestly to exhort them against the same.” Any persons found guilty of using counter-charms “shall be proceeded against with censure suitably to the demerit of their scandal.” The presbyteries and kirk sessions were instructed to enquire carefully into the matter, to proceed with censures against every such case as they saw fit, to record the act within their respective registers, to read the act aloud from their pulpits after worship and to report back to next synod of their obedience thereto.<sup>70</sup> There is no mention of recent government legislation that prevented charges being pressed against those suspected of witchcraft. The tone of the synod’s act does not question the existence of witches, only that it is wrong to use counter-charms or spells against “real or only suspected” witches.

The Kirk was faced with a problem in trying to persuade people that using charms or consulting with charmers was evil. When threatened with hostile sorcery there were still many who would have preferred to deal with the wrath of their local minister than leave themselves open to the assaults of a witch. Charmers, therefore, retained a place in popular affections because they offered hope and comfort when faith, or conventional medicine, or both, failed the folk.

### **Folk belief and medicine**

A common area of overlap between charmers and witches was folk medicine. An Arran woman, Mary Stewart of Kilbride, was accused of witchcraft in 1705 “in regard that she frequently used charmes for the healing of diseases” but was let off with a lesser charge of charming.<sup>71</sup> Charms can be a major indicator of the everyday uses and applications of magic, particularly with respect to medical matters. The point about charms is that they were potentially accessible to anyone, although it was not officially recognized as an acceptable source of medicinal benefits. Remedial charms still, however,

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<sup>70</sup> Colin MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland, from the Revolution (1688) to the Present Time, Compiled Chiefly from the Tain Presbytery Records* (Inverness: Northern Counties Newspaper Printing and Publishing Company, 1915) 145–6.

<sup>71</sup> Mary Stewart, 3 June 1705, *Kilbride Kirk Session Records*, qtd in J. M. Balfour and W. M. MacKenzie, eds., *The Book of Arran*, 2 vols. (Glasgow: Hugh Hopkins, 1910–14) vol. 2, 294–5.

carried the risk of being associated with witchcraft or sorcery. In Stromness, Orkney, a crippled beggarwoman by the name of Katherine Taylor found herself in trouble with the session in 1708 on suspicion of transferring a disease from one of her patients to another man. Taylor had advised the wife of a bedridden man, William Stensgar, to bathe her husband and then pour the water into the common slap, or drain. The next person to pass by the drain was "overtaken by bodily indisposition" and took on Stensgar's illness. Taylor's apparent reputation for witchcraft and charming meant that she shouldered the blame for enacting the transference, rather than Stensgar's wife who was following her instructions.<sup>72</sup>

The use of charms and the role of charmers in early modern Scottish society exemplify the complexities around magical and non-magical beliefs very well. A minister in Atholl suffered a great pain in one of his eyes, so severe that it was thought life-threatening. One day a visiting country-woman asked the minister's wife if he had sought any means of relief. He had but all were ineffectual. The visitor knew of another woman who could cure him perfectly for a small reward "by using a charm." The wife rightly assumed that her husband would refuse, and indeed he intimated that he would choose "rather to suffer patiently under the hand of God, than go to the Devil for relief." Despite his protests the wife patronized a charmer who lived ten miles away. Her spell was described by the country-woman:

she takes up a mouthful of clear fountain water, casts back her head, and gargarises her throat therewith, and then spouts it out into a clean timber vessel of black-wood, and desires the woman to come near and see a louse which she had emptied out of her mouth with the water into the dish. The woman sees the louse clearly in the water. "Now" says the charmer, "the minister is perfectly cured, though I be not there to see it; for this same individual louse was in his eye, and was the cause of all that pain and torment which he suffered there."

Sure enough the reverend was cured at exactly the moment the charm was performed. Whether the patient changed his mind about the diabolical nature of the cure is not recorded but the story, written down in 1707, effectively illustrates the polarized perceptions about such matters.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Katherine Taylor, July 1708 to 5 September 1708, Stromness Session Register, qtd in George Low, *A Tour through the Islands of Orkney and Schetland; Containing Hints Relative to their Ancient Modern and Natural History Collected in 1774* (Kirkwall: William Peace, 1879) 201–3.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Wodrow, *Analecta; or Materials for a History of Remarkable Providences*, 4 vols. (Glasgow: Maitland Club, 1844) vol. 1, 99.

In the early modern period the relationship between folk belief and medicine was reciprocal: “superstition is apt boldly to intrude into the physician’s province, and proffer relief in every ill that flesh is heir to, by means which he does not condescend to recognise – that is, by charms and spells.”<sup>74</sup> The boundaries between “learned” and “popular” were often hard to define and, in any case, the cures administered by charmers were just as likely to prove efficacious as those of university-trained doctors; they were certainly cheaper. So far as many people were concerned there was a preference for folk-medicine, comprehending “charms, incantations, and traditional habits and customs relative to the preservation of health and the cure of disease, practised now or formerly at home and abroad.”<sup>75</sup> In an age when doctors were scarce and medical treatment expensive many continued to resort to local healers, while the emerging medical profession of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries borrowed from traditional practitioners to the point where their respective cures and panaceas were almost indistinguishable.

Charms, however, could prove double-edged instruments for not all charms were considered beneficial, and curses, also known as “prayers,” were much dreaded. Like witches, charmers had the power to spoil milk or ale, and to harm people or animals, but perhaps their greatest value to society lay in their ability to produce counter-charms, and to undo the evil of others, often unknown. As usual the Kirk condemned what it could not prevent. The official line on charms was to consider them all with suspicion, regardless of whether or not they functioned for good or ill, and to dissuade or punish both the charmer and those who consulted with charmers. For example, Eupham Ellies in Banff was arraigned before the kirk session in 1669 on “severall poynts of charmeing.” She denied all the charges, but the brethren, “finding the matter weightie,” sought counsell from the synod. Ellies was interrogated once again, by the moderator, and still maintained she was innocent. Her inquisitors thought differently, several of the charges “being clearlie proven,” and on the advice of the bishop and the synod, she was ordered to stand before the congregation in Banff in a sackcloth, with the further threat that if she was caught ever again performing charms she would be sent to the civil judge to be punished accordingly.<sup>76</sup>

As the seventeenth century entered its last decade, charmers were still coming into conflict with the church. John Young was summoned before the Culross session in 1693 accused of charming. He had cured at least three

<sup>74</sup> Henderson, *Folk Lore of the Northern Counties*, 108.

<sup>75</sup> Black, *Folk Medicine*, preface.

<sup>76</sup> Trial of Eupham Ellies, Banff, 31 March, 19 May 1669. William Crammond, *The Annals of Banff*, 2 vols. (Aberdeen: New Spalding Club, 1893) vol. 2, 40.

people, perhaps more, by using a ritual, which he described in detail. First, he rubbed his hand on a bare stone, and then he rubbed the affected person three times on the breast while saying:

Little thing hath wronged thee,  
Nothing can mend thee,  
But Father, Son, and Holie Ghost, all three,  
And our Sweet Lady. In eternitie,  
Let never wax, but away to the waine,  
As the dew goes of yeard and stane.  
I seek help to this distressed person in thy name.

The minister told him that his “cures were not effected without the help of the devill, and not only to forbear the same in tyme comming, but to mourn before God, and to seek mercie through Christ for using of the divell’s prescriptions.”<sup>77</sup> The Christian tone of his charm was no protection from evil or wrongdoing since witches and warlocks used God’s words and mentioned the names of God and Christ in their spells but, in this case, the echoes of Catholicism in the charm probably offended the cleric’s sensitivities.

The presence of foreign objects in the throat and mouth is another area of overlap between witches, charmers and the possessed. Demonic possession symptoms regularly included the coughing up of peculiar items. Christian Shaw, for instance, claimed that witches were trying to choke her with various bits of bones, sticks, hay, coal cinders and hair. She spat up parcels of plaited and knotted hair of different colours.<sup>78</sup> The famed physician Archibald Pitcairne wrote to a correspondent in 1694 regarding a twelve-year old girl who was coughing up “hairs of all colours.” Pitcairne explained that the hairs were clearly uprooting from the girl’s lungs, but that “some more religious than wise people call it witchcraft.” A “magpie-pie” was made for her of which she declared, “that the smell pleas’d her; & only because she knew it was design’d for her as bewitched, she wold not eat of it.”<sup>79</sup> Other Scottish traditions relate that the eating of a magpie’s leg was a cure for bewitchment. Elsewhere in Britain a mixture of ground-up magpie was used to cure epilepsy, based on the notion that as the magpie was a highly

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<sup>77</sup> John Young, Valleyfield, 29 June 1693. Beveridge, *Culross and Tulliallan or Perthshire on Forth*, 18–19; Simpkins, *County Folk-Lore Fife*, 110–11.

<sup>78</sup> McLachlan, *Kirk, Satan and Salem*, 171, 231.

<sup>79</sup> Archibald Pitcairne, *The Best of Our Owne: Letters of Archibald Pitcairne, 1652–1713*, collected and annotated by W. T. Johnston (Edinburgh: Saorsa Books, 1979) 21. The letter was written to Robert Gray, 20 December 1694. The girl was identified as the sister of Sir Thomas Murray.

vocal and chattering creature it would neutralize the “chattering disease,” as epilepsy was once called.<sup>80</sup>

In the counties of Ross and Sutherland, a number of cases that involved various aspects of charming came to light in the early decades of the eighteenth century. The presbytery of Tain in 1707 pronounced that Rachel Macleod be publicly admonished as a charmer before the congregations at Tain and at Fearn. Furthermore, the Tarbat session was asked to bring her before their congregation from time to time “for edification.”<sup>81</sup> It would seem that Macleod was being made an example, but unfortunately, the details of her alleged crimes are not reported.

In 1713, the synod of Ross and Sutherland complained that in several places within its bounds, some who were suffering an illness or had lost cattle, or suchlike misfortune, were demanding that people in their neighbourhood “whom they suspect to bear any malice, envy, or ill-will against them, to meet and swear on the Bible or on iron that ... they have not been the cause of their sufferings.” Such swearings or denials often took place on a Sunday, to the chagrin of the devout, “the practice being a horrid profanation of the Lord’s most holy name.” The synod therefore deemed it necessary to preach to the people “of the evil of that most heinous wickedness, intreating them in fear of the Lord to refrain themselves from such heathenish superstition.”<sup>82</sup>

More superstitious practices were condemned by the kirk session of Tarbat in 1714, at which Alexander Robertson and Jean Ross were cited to appear. Robertson admitted striking an axe into the couple-tree (rafter), immediately after his father had died in the house, though he claimed only to have done so at the bequest of Jean Ross. She claimed that she had seen the custom of striking the couple-tree three times with an axe performed by others when someone had died in a house to stop disease spreading to other members of the family. The case was referred to the Tain presbytery who advised the session to publicly rebuke both parties.<sup>83</sup>

In 1734, the moderator of the Elgin kirk session withheld a request made by Duncan Greggor to baptize his child after it became known that he was a reputed charmer. Greggor confessed that he could cure “hettick feavers” with a ritual using lead and cold water. The lead was put in the water and he recited “Rise up, heart, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.” He knew his patient was cured when the lead rose to the surface of the water “in the form of the heart of a fowl.” Greggor was sent to the presbytery in

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<sup>80</sup> Francesca Greenoak, *British Birds: Their Folklore, Names and Literature* (London: Christopher Helm, 1997) 188; Robin Hull, *Scottish Birds: Culture and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2001) 274.

<sup>81</sup> Rachel Macleod, 1707. MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland*, 50–1.

<sup>82</sup> MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland*, 72–3.

<sup>83</sup> MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland*, 77–8.



order to persuade him of “the evil of this practice” and to promise never to do the like ever again.<sup>84</sup> The records do not state whether or not Greggor’s child was eventually baptized, but it seems likely that it was approved after the rebuking he received from the presbytery.

## Perceptions and impacts

While charmers presumably believed themselves to be a benevolent influence in society, is it conceivable that there were some among the accused witches who were convinced that they were indeed capable of some or all of the diabolical activities with which they were charged? Or did those who stood accused of performing various heinous acts believe themselves totally innocent? Was a witch’s own interpretation as to what their alleged powers actually were, or where those powers originated from, the same as that of their accusers? There may never be completely satisfactory answers to questions such as these but perhaps there exist some clues, in the patchy evidence, to indicate that a not insignificant proportion of the accused would have conceded to possession of some level of magical ability, though not necessarily demonically inspired.

An in-depth microstudy of convicted witch Isobel Gowdie, from Auldearn in the northeast of Scotland, executed in 1662, has been undertaken by Emma Wilby, whose overarching hypothesis is to set about proving Gowdie was, in fact, a self-identified magical practitioner. The list of her supposed crimes was extensive and, it would appear, freely admitted without the encouragement of torture. Over the course of six weeks Gowdie gave four separate confessions, which included such admissions as involvement in a plot to harm Henry Forbes, the local minister, entering into a covenant with the Devil, shapeshifting into the form of a crow, jackdaw and hare, ruining crops and souring milk, raising an unbaptized child from its grave, flying through the air on murderous killing sprees with fellow witches and coven members, and keeping company with the king and queen of fairy. Much of Gowdie’s reportage is reasonably familiar and consistent with wider European witchcraft theory, such as meetings with the Devil, rebaptism in the Devil’s name and brandings with the Devil’s mark. Rather less familiar – in a European context though not so much in a Scottish one – is Gowdie’s confessed close relationship with the fairies.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, analysis of Gowdie’s confessions reveals them to be a potentially important reservoir of both learned and folk traditions about demonology, fairylore and magical practices in general, regardless of

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<sup>84</sup> Cramond, *Records of Elgin*, 335–6, 382.

<sup>85</sup> A significant number of Scottish witch trials contain elements of fairy belief. See Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*; Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), for further examples. Trial of Isobel Gowdie, 13 April, 3 and 15 May 1662, Pitcairn, *Trials*, vol. 3, pt 2.

whether or not she believed herself to be a magical practitioner. There are sufficient trial documents in existence to allow Gowdie's life, and the social and cultural environment in which she lived, to be carefully pieced together, and there are attempts, made by Wilby, to employ sophisticated psychological approaches relating to the production of false confession. An analysis of the performative aspect of Gowdie's confession, which has been compared to storytelling and bardic techniques, has also been attempted.

Where, perhaps, the argument becomes less convincing is the suggestion that Gowdie was part of a dark shamanistic dream cult that was operating in seventeenth-century Scotland, something along the lines of Ginzburg's Friulian *benandanti*. The application of a rather broadly defined "shamanistic paradigm,"<sup>86</sup> while simultaneously drawing comparisons with other cultures across a very wide space of time and disparate geographical locations around the world, seems somewhat forced and may not be the most suitable avenue into seventeenth-century Scottish witchcraft belief systems. However, Wilby's quest towards trying to understand what one convicted witch may have believed about the supernatural and the demonological charges levied against her is to be welcomed.

Wilby's overall thesis has also found some support from Julian Goodare's investigations into what he has claimed is evidence of a "shamanistic cult" existing in sixteenth-century Scotland, centred on the "seely wights," fairy-like nature spirits. Goodare draws comparisons with the Sicilian *donas de fuera* ("ladies from outside"), uncovered by Gustav Henningsen, and is rightly more cautious in his usage of the term "shamanism." His findings are exciting and tap into wider ideas about trance states, nocturnal spirit flight and visionary experiences, as well as engaging with how magical practitioners may have viewed themselves. Jonet Boyman, for instance, convicted in 1572, described the acquisition of her magical skills as a "craft," which she learned from another woman. Crafts, by definition, were skilled occupations, and so Boyman's choice of words might indicate that she regarded her magical services in much the same way as those from other, more conventional, occupations, learning her trade like any other apprentice. Goodare's suggestion that such visionaries – if that is what they were – used their experiences to "pursue careers as magical practitioners, in what we can now recognise as a 'craft'" is eminently sensible.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Wilby, *Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, 240.

<sup>87</sup> Julian Goodare, "The Cult of the Seely Wights in Scotland," *Folklore* 123 (2012): 198–219. On the *donas de fuera*, see Gustav Henningsen, "'The Ladies from Outside': An Archaic Pattern of the Witches' Sabbath," in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, eds. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 191–215. On Jonet Boyman, see also Henderson, "Detestable Slaves of the Devil," 244–8.

While most of those incriminated for witchcraft were clearly distressed, for good reason, by the accusation, some turned the situation to their advantage. This is by no means evidence that the accused, in such scenarios, regarded themselves as witches, or any other kind of magical practitioner, but simply highlights the nuanced responses and reactions a person might have once subjected to such allegations. An East Lothian woman, Catherine MacTargett, charged with witchcraft in 1688, not only readily confessed to her crimes, but encouraged her reputation as a witch for it brought her a certain degree of power and status: "you haveing continued under that common fame and repute for a longe tyme without complaineing to any magistrat that ye wer called ane witch, bot rather in a maner gloried in it."<sup>88</sup> As late as the turn of the nineteenth century, Jean Ford, a reputed witch in Newburgh, Fife, was exerting her influence over her landlord after he attempted to have her removed from her home. She appeared at his residence, and much to the perturbation of the servants and the landlord's wife, she began to mutter to herself and draw strange signs and symbols on the ground with her staff. Her actions produced the desired effect, and she was allowed to remain in her cottage. This was a woman who clearly knew how to use her notoriety to full advantage.<sup>89</sup>

The control and influence a reputation as a witch or a charmer could potentially bestow was, for some at least, a powerful force not easily ignored. For others, it was a burden too onerous to bear, and they fled their community to evade capture. Christian Wilkieson from Greenlaw in Duns, Berwickshire, was declared a fugitive from the law in 1708 after facing charges of witchcraft and charming.<sup>90</sup> Others were forcibly banished, which may have been a relief for some members of the community but not necessarily for all. Janet M'Robert from Dumfries was banished to Ireland in 1701, while Isobel Anderson from Dunnet, Caithness, was escorted out of her residence, with the aid of the local sheriff, in 1714 after being found guilty of fornication and witchcraft.<sup>91</sup>

The potential long-term impact witch-hunts could have on a given community is an intriguing, if difficult, question to answer. The events during a witch trial, and the years leading up to an accusation, are much easier to

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<sup>88</sup> Trial of Catherine MacTargett, 30 May 1688, *RPC*, 3rd ser., vol. 13, 245–62; Sir John Lauder of Fountainhall, *Historical Notices of Scottish Affairs*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1848) vol. 2, 872–3.

<sup>89</sup> Alexander Laing, *Lindores Abbey and its Burgh of Newburgh. Their History and Annals* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1876) 381; Simpkins, *County Folk-Lore Fife*, 56.

<sup>90</sup> Christian Wilkieson, October 1708, *JC26/86 f.* 249.

<sup>91</sup> Janet M'Robert, January 1701. J. Maxwell Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland* (1911; Wakefield: EP, 1975) 87; Isobel Anderson in Alfred W. Johnston and Amy Johnston, eds., *Old-Lore Miscellany of Orkney, Shetland, Caithness and Sutherland* (Coventry: Viking Club, 1910) vol. 3, 48.

access than the aftermath of a witch trial. After all, most communities, most of the time, lived with witches in their midst without the need, or experience of, a witch-hunt. Why some communities tolerated suspected witches more than others is probably unknowable, but according to trial testimonies some witches were tolerated for decades until nemesis struck and their heinous crimes caught up with them. On the other hand, it is certain that the witch, as a member of the community, represented an internal threat to neighbourhood harmony. While some may have feared that instigating a witch-hunt could do more damage overall to community relations than the machinations of one or two local witches, others might have viewed toleration as a sign of weakness, or as a failure of duty on the part of the minister and the kirk session. For those places that opted, or were forced, to actively pursue local witches we can reliably assume it took a toll on the wider community, both during and for some time after the investigations, especially, though not necessarily exclusively, affecting those directly involved with the case in some way. Suspected witches were generally known to their accusers, and the loss of even one individual in a rural hamlet must have been felt, for good or ill.

The question is, was the community fractured by a witch accusation, or did the inhabitants feel purged of the menace? Did some people flatly refuse to believe in the guilt of the accused? Did life quickly go back to normal, or did it take generations for the stain to fade from human memory? What of the accused person's family? Would they be forever tainted by the shame and embarrassment of a mother, brother or sister found guilty of cavorting with the Devil, or stealing the neighbours' milk? Anecdotal evidence suggests the likelihood that families were deeply affected in such situations. Stories surrounding a Selkirkshire witch, Meg Lawson, continued to circulate for decades after her indictment in 1700, passed on through the oral tradition, such that even her grandchildren's lives were blighted by her reputation.<sup>92</sup> If a suspect was found to be not guilty by the courts, would this be the verdict of the villagers also? Could life ever be the same again after such fiendish allegations? Or, was the community like an elephant: it will never forget?

According to Lord Advocate Sir George MacKenzie, the fractures to life in the community could run deep. He was well aware of the damaging impact an accusation of witchcraft could have, and his words are testament to the emotional and physical suffering endured by some of these unfortunates:

I went when I was a Justice Deput to examine some women, who had confest judicially, and one of them, who was a silly [simple] creature, told me under secresie, that she had not confest because she was guilty, but being a poor creature, who wrought for her meat, and being defam'd for a witch

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<sup>92</sup> Thomas Craig-Brown, *The History of Selkirkshire; or Chronicles of Ettrick Forest*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1886) vol. 2, 100–1.

she knew she would starve, for no person thereafter would either give her meat or lodging, and that all men would beat her, and hound dogs at her, and that therefore she desired to be out of the world; whereupon she wept most bitterly and upon her knees call'd God to witness to what she said.<sup>93</sup>

Tracing the history of a witch, after the dust of a trial or examination had settled, is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible in many instances. Larner speculated that a witch-hunt may have had a “psychological cleansing effect on a community,” while also acknowledging that this might not always have been so for the witch’s family members.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps the clearest indication that life after a witch accusation could turn out to be a life-long sentence are in situations when an individual faced multiple accusations over a span of years. Once a reputation for maleficent magic was made, it must have been exceptionally hard to overcome. Shetlander Margaret Watson, from Walls, first appeared before the presbytery for cursing and suspected witchcraft in 1708. At this time she was charged with being a “deluder and abuser of the people” and was released. In 1725 she was once again before the presbytery, involved in some sort of neighbourhood dispute when a woman refused to give Watson lodgings. The woman later claimed that she started having bad dreams and was out of her wits, suspecting Watson of causing her symptoms. This resulted in further charges against her for maleficium and cursing. During the trial she denied she was a witch but she readily admitted that she cursed people who had wronged her. Watson was no doubt believed to be a social pest, and many of her neighbours clearly thought her a witch, but the authorities decided that no such evidence of criminal behaviour could be proven, though she was once more charged with being a deluder of the people.<sup>95</sup>

Witchcraft, whether or not anyone ever actually believed themselves or others to be a witch, played with human emotions. The existing confessions and witness statements are a potentially rich, and relatively untapped, source for the study of emotions. While much has been made of the mental state of the accused, the emotional state, for which there is arguably sounder and more reliable evidence on which to base an opinion, has been largely overlooked. Feelings such as anger, fear, anxiety, worry, envy, remorse, jealousy, rage, love and hatred, among others, are frequently interwoven into allegations and trial depositions against witches, as also with regard to charmers, and open a door into the emotional lives of a cross-section of society.

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<sup>93</sup> Sir George MacKenzie, *The Laws and Customs of Scotland in Matters Criminal* (Edinburgh: Thomas Brown, 1678) 45–6.

<sup>94</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, 115.

<sup>95</sup> Margaret Watson, 9 June 1708, CH2/1071/1, 155, and 30 June 1725, CH2/1071/2, 300–15.

# 4

## Darkness Visible

Here Mousy lives, a witch that for a sma' price  
Can cast her cantraips and gi'e me advice;  
She can o'ercast the night, and cloud the moon,  
And mak the deils obedient to her crune.<sup>1</sup>

Allan Ramsay, *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725)

There sat auld Nick, in shape o' beast;  
A towzie tyke [shaggy dog], black, grim, and large,  
To gie them music was his charge:  
He scre'd [screwed] the pipes and gart them skirl [squeal],  
Till roof and rafters a' did dirl [ring].

Robert Burns, "Tam o'Shanter" (1790)

While the Devil does not figure prominently, and sometimes not at all, in earlier witch trials, by the end of the sixteenth century he had become a conspicuous presence, a figure that hovered close to every good and godly citizen in the land, a position reinforced from a theological standpoint and, by extension, through the teachings of the church. He leapt out of the printed pages of the Bible and walked among us, stalking and waiting for his opportunity to seep into human minds, bodies and souls. In the post-Reformation era, images and iconography of the Devil had been destroyed and almost entirely erased, yet he loomed large in the collective consciousness of Scottish society, instilled into the psyche through sermons and instruction by the clergy. In the near absence of native visual depictions of the Devil, it was left to the human imagination, verbal communications from the pulpit, and to centuries of traditional tales and legends, to put meat on his incorporeal

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Ramsay, *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725; Philadelphia: Benjamin Chapman, 1813) 30. "Cantraip" refers to a "charm; a spell; an incantation," while "crune," also "croyn" "crune" or "croon," refers to an incantation "uttered with a hollow murmuring sound." Jamieson, *Dictionary*.

bones. As a consummate shapeshifter, liar and deceiver, the form by which the Devil might appear to mortals was potentially limitless, guided only by the boundaries of our imaginative processes. The lack of a visual culture – which lasted until at least the eighteenth century when his image began to quietly surface once again – may only have served to drive the Devil deeper into the Scottish soul, forcing everyone, regardless of their social status, to examine their internal conscience, and not just their outward actions, with a closer degree of scrutiny than ever before. Fear of the Devil was not restricted to the unlettered and illiterate peasant but enveloped people from all walks and stations in life who adhered to the Christian faith. This chapter seeks to uncover the Caledonian version of Satan, the Father of Lies, variously known as Auld Nick, Auld Clootie or Auld Hornie, among other designations,<sup>2</sup> and to note a detectable change in attitude towards his physical and spiritual role over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Without the Devil, there would have been no witch-hunts in Scotland. As was the case in much of Europe, the criminalization of witchcraft in the mid-sixteenth century can be linked to the rise in the power of the Devil and his encroachments on the earthly world. Malefice, or *maleficium*, remained the bedrock of Scottish witch belief – before and after the era of the witch-hunts – but the theological framework that allowed the Devil a more important role in the everyday affairs of men and women provided an intellectual explanation for the origin of the witches' powers, and thus the justification needed to enforce judicial punishments. That said, his direct presence was not an explicit requirement to instigate a witch trial (at least not in Scotland), and there were voices of scepticism throughout the period of legal prosecutions. The precise role of the Devil in early modern Scotland awaits fuller analysis. But even when not explicitly mentioned, his presence might be assumed to swirl and hover over the proceedings of witch trials like a dark and menacing smoke. When that demonic vapour began to thin out and dissipate, sometime in the early eighteenth century, and in line with profound changes in the intellectual landscape of Scotland, the Devil was no longer given centre stage, and accusations for witchcraft began to lose their former strength. Belief in witches, like the Devil, slowly receded from public discourse and into the domain of private belief.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Other designations used in Scotland include Donald Dubh (Gaelic), the Goodman, the Halyman (in the North East), Auld Sym, the Auld Ane or One, the Auld Carl or Chiel, Auld Harry, Auld Sandy, Whaupneb and the Earl of Hell. Mahoun, from Mahomet, was used in Scotland since 1475 but probably dates from the time of the Crusades. John Burnett, *Robert Burns and the Hellish Legions* (Edinburgh: National Museums Scotland, 2009) 29; Edward J. Cowan, "Burns and Superstition," in *Love & Liberty: Robert Burns, A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. K. Simpson (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997) 234.

<sup>3</sup> Darren Oldridge, *The Devil: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 40–1.

In confessions where the Devil did play an overt part, he tempted men and women with the promise of a better life, as well as access to food, improved health, wealth and happiness. Culross widower Agnes Hendrie (1675) turned to the Devil to alleviate her poverty. Dalkeith midwife Bessie Gourlie (1678) was promised the Devil would make her well-liked by other women.<sup>4</sup> He offered a seemingly easy route to power and status. Renfrew sisters Jannet and Margaret Rodgers (1697) claimed the pipe-playing Devil they encountered told them they should want for nothing if they joined with him.<sup>5</sup> He might also proffer assistance for those seeking revenge on their enemies. Paisley miller John Stewart (1677) admitted that he turned to the Devil to seek revenge upon Maxwell of Pollock after he had taken his mother prisoner.<sup>6</sup> The Devil was the presumed or imagined source of the witch's power. Though men most certainly were vulnerable to diabolical temptations, there were societal assumptions and expectations that women were more likely to succumb. The highly gendered nature of much of the discourse surrounding witchcraft and demonology is also reflected in the punishment and admonishments towards women, particularly in relation to female sexuality, while cases of slander often reveal gendered tensions. But for many the reward for allegiance to the Devil was horrendous torture and brutal punishment.

### **Auld Cloutie: the Devil in Scotland**

The Devil was the ultimate personification of evil, “a dark shadow lurking in the background at every stage of the Western civilizing process,”<sup>7</sup> though the scope and nature of his powers have altered over time.<sup>8</sup> Relatively unobtrusive in the first millennium of the Christian era, he rose as a figure of greater prominence in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In Scotland,

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<sup>4</sup> Trial of Agnes Hendrie, 4 May 1674 to 29 July 1675, *High Court Process Notes*, JC2/14p.346–54; Trial of Bessie Gourlie, 7 September to 6 November 1678, *Books of Adjournal*, JC2/15 fos. 20v–22v.

<sup>5</sup> Trials of Jannet and Margaret Rodgers, *Circuit Court Books*, JC10/4 fos. 1r–81r.

<sup>6</sup> Trial of John Stewart, 3 January 1677 to 20 February 1677, *Circuit Court Books*, JC10/4 fos. 1r–13v.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Muchembled, *A History of the Devil from the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Jean Birrell (2000; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003) 2–3.

<sup>8</sup> There is a wide literature on the changing faces of the Devil. See, for instance, Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977); Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984); Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan: How Christianity Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics* (New York: Vintage, 1996); Peter Stanford, *The Devil: A Biography* (London: William Heinemann, 1996); Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Satan: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).



the Devil's status grew considerably from the mid-sixteenth century. John Knox lamented that, as a consequence of the Fall and Original Sin, human nature was "so corrupt, so weak, and imperfite" that people had the unenviable potential to become "ennemies to God, slavis to Sathan, and servantis to syn." Free will was God's way of allowing humanity a choice to take the correct path away from the "malice of Sathan," though, in Knox's view, the Devil remained an important instrument of God's will, as "reveillit to us in his word."<sup>9</sup> In concert with the tremendous religious and political disturbances taking place in post-Reformation Scotland, the strong relationship that was being forged between the individual and God's continual testing of faith was also, arguably, bringing Calvinistic Scots closer to the Devil's ploys. By the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Devil had grown in strength as never before, and was amassing a legion of demons in Hell and witches on Earth to bring unprecedented chaos and destruction to the world. His rise, and indeed decline, in power and influence mirrors the trajectory of the witch-hunts.

The Anti-Christ was the embodiment of evil, but how does one describe pure evil? Centuries of European theologians, artists and writers have made the attempt, but it is, as St Augustine warned, "like trying to see darkness or to hear silence."<sup>10</sup> The Devil, and all he stood for, was an inversion of the natural order, and the Devil's domain a place of eternal torment and suffering, where even God dared not tread. If Heaven was a place of light and everlasting joy, then Hell was its polar opposite. God's absence from Hell, and thus absence of divine light, is captured by Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667): "... yet from those flames/No light, but rather darkness visible."<sup>11</sup> Absolute blackness is an impossibility in the natural world but may not be so in the unnatural realm of Satan.<sup>12</sup>

The Devil makes regular appearances in Scottish poetry and literature. Early Scottish literature emphasized the monstrous appearance of demons. *Rowll's Cursing* (c.1500), for instance, portrayed glowing eyed, "vgly devillis" with long-tails, dragon-heads, and "warwolf nails," while William Dunbar described "devillis als blak as pik [pitch]."<sup>13</sup> Eldritch poetry, defined as

<sup>9</sup> David Laing, ed., *The Works of John Knox* (Edinburgh: James Thin, 1841) 89, 98, 107.

<sup>10</sup> St Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 481 (Book 1).

<sup>11</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London, 1668) l.62f.

<sup>12</sup> Robert J. Edgeworth, "Milton's 'Darkness Visible' and 'Aeneid' 7," *The Classical Journal* 79/2 (1984): 97-9.

<sup>13</sup> W. Tod Ritchie, ed., *The Bannatyne Manuscript*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1928-34), vol. 2, 282-3; Priscilla Bawcutt, "Elrich Fantasy in Dunbar and Other Poets," in *Bryght Lanternis: Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, ed. J. Derrick McClure and Michael R. G. Spiller (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989) 162-78.

that concerned with the “weird, ghostly, unnatural, frightful, hideous,”<sup>14</sup> emerged in the early sixteenth century, and is riddled with grotesque, deformed and animalistic demons, with horns, hooves, feathers and wings, who fly through the air, breathing down poison on the earth. Art, however, does not always mirror life, as such wild and exotic physical characteristics are not particularly redolent in witch confessions where demons, and even the Devil himself, can be somewhat mundane and unexceptional by comparison. Learned tradition imagined the Devil as a cloven-hoofed male with horns and a pointed tail. In contrast, folk tradition tended to describe the Devil as quite average or normal in appearance, with more than a hint of the trickster about him.

Although the Devil continued to be a potent force into the eighteenth century, he was also being used as a satirical literary device to criticize, or at very least poke fun of, religious ideologies. Robert Burns’s poem “Address to the De’il” (1786) is a fascinating mixture of Calvinist theology, which he indirectly attacks, and folkloric manifestations of Auld Nick. The poem begins with a quotation from Milton – “O Prince, O chief of many throned pow’rs/ That led th’embattl’d seraphim to war” – capturing Satan as he is described in biblical terms. However, Burns’s “Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick, or Clootie” has less in common with the vision set out in *Paradise Lost* than the opening lines would initially have us believe. Burns’s Devil is no princely figure, leading an army of angels into war, but is parodically cast almost in a humorous tone: “Wha in yon cavern grim an’ sooty/Clos’d under hatches/Spairges [sprays] about the brunstane cootie [dish of brimstone]/To scaud [scald] poor wretches.” He even goes as far as admonishing the Devil for his behaviour:

Hear me, auld Hangie, for a wee  
An’ let poor, damned bodies be  
I’m sure sma’ pleasure it can gie  
Ev’n to a deil  
To skelp an’ scaud [scald] poor dogs like me  
An’ hear us squeel.

The Devil that wandered across the Ayrshire countryside was at some remove from the terrifying, vengeful force that burst forth from the fire and brimstone sermons of the ministers, or had once infiltrated the trial and examination of so many for witchcraft just a generation before Burns’s lifetime. His Devil would have passed the test of enlightened sensibilities while at the same time still managing to sate the popular imagination.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> OED.

<sup>15</sup> Burnett, *Robert Burns and the Hellish Legion*, 28–36. See also Cowan, “Burns and Superstition,” 233–4.

There are at least two concepts where learned and folk tradition did seem to merge: the Devil is a black man – seemingly a reference to the colour of his skin, his hair, his clothing and, no doubt, his personality – and, the Devil is a shapeshifter, able to assume human, animal and spirit form. Some Scottish names are indicative of his bestial nature, such as “Auld Clootie,” from “cloot,” the foot of a cloven-hoofed animal, or “Whaupneb,” referring to the shape of his nose, or “neb,” which was like that of a “whaup,” or curlew’s beak.<sup>16</sup> In whatever guise he assumed there was often some feature that was out of place, betraying his true diabolical identity, his physical imperfections overtly representing a juxtaposition to divine perfection.

An early critic of the witch-hunts in England was Reginald Scot, who, guided by the doctrine of divine providence, put forward a distinctly Protestant argument against the prosecutions, mainly on the grounds that it constituted a weakness of faith, that the age of miracles was over and thus God would hardly permit the Devil to wield such power in the world. He did not deny the reality of witches, or angels, or the Devil, but he did challenge the idea that they could channel the same powers as God. He somewhat patronisingly dismissed the fearful descriptions of the Devil as “vaine apparitions,” seen especially by “sicke folke, children, women, and cowards,” as nothing more than the product of stories from childhood, fed to us by “our mothers maids,” of an ugly creature “having hornes on his head, fier in his mouth, and a taile in his breech, eies like a bason, fanges like a dog, clawes like a beare, a skin like a Niger, and a voice roaring like a lion.”<sup>17</sup> Scot’s monstrous hybrid is a very early, and explicit, racially motivated portrayal of the Devil as quite literally a black-skinned male.<sup>18</sup>

Unequivocal, racial associations between the Devil and people of African descent are not common in the Scottish evidence, though the Devil was repeatedly said to be black, wore black clothing, or assumed the form of black animals.<sup>19</sup> Eighteenth-century perceptions of blacks, in an age when

<sup>16</sup> Burnett, *Robert Burns and the Hellish Legion*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Reginald Scot, *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, ed. Montague Summers (1586; 1930; New York: Dover, 1972) 86.

<sup>18</sup> On the continent, another early example can be found in Henri Boguet, a Burgundian judge, who claimed that witches’ descriptions of Satan’s “ugliness and deformity” was due to the fact that he “couples with witches sometimes in the form of a black man ....” Boguet’s racial prejudices are explicitly revealed a little later on when he goes on to suggest that “certain lickerish men” in the West Indies had sexual intercourse with women while pretending to be gods. *Discours des Sorciers* [A Discourse on Witches], ed. Montague Summers (1590; new edn 1602; London: Dover, 1929) chapter XII.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Coleman O. Parsons, listing of the black motif in “Stevenson’s Use of Witchcraft in *Thrawn Janet*,” *Studies in Philology* 43/3 (1946): 551–71, at 561, and his description of a witch suspect, Isabel Heriot (who may be the same person as Isabel Elliot, executed in 1678), who had a “black complexion” and when she died her face “became extremely black,” 566–7.

the slave trade was still ongoing, despite staunch opposition from several key Enlightenment philosophers, was often confused and contradictory. It was possible to decry the injustices of the slave system while still harbouring prejudices against the enslaved.<sup>20</sup> A popular Scottish chapbook, entitled *The Folly of Witless Women Displayed; or, the History of Haverel Wives* (1781), attributed to Dougal Graham, is set out as a conversation between two women who are apparently exchanging memories through “what has been told to them by their forefathers” on a great many subjects including the era of the witch trials. They discuss such things as why Auld Nick is so named, whether the Devil really is as all-pervasive as the ministers would have them think, and comment on his appearance: “some say he’s like a bull, a bear or an auld beggar man.” The colour of the Devil’s skin is reportedly all black, which leads the women into a discussion about race, reflecting some contemporary negative perceptions about “blackamoors” whose coloration was said to derive from being “dipped in cat’s blood and burnt bear strae [barley straw],” among other preposterous claims. Given that a high proportion of the chapbook readership would have subscribed to racist views, the response from one of the female characters comes as a surprise when she retorts:

Hout awa daft creature, the blackamoors is fouk just like oursel, but only they hae a black skin on them, did ye never see a black sheep and white sheep, black horse and white horse, ye think they’re a’ de’ils because the de’il is black: I thought myself langsyne, they were made for the penny [*cheaply*], and sell’d the dearer o’ the black skin.<sup>21</sup>

It has been observed that the Devil’s role in allegations made against suspected witches is more complex than previously assumed.<sup>22</sup> In judiciary court trials, he is a dominant figure, but in local records, such as kirk session and presbytery minutes, his presence is often discreet or minimalist. Stuart MacDonald’s concentrated local study of Fife reveals that the Devil rarely put in an appearance, while only 392 trials, in total, mention demonic figures in the surviving records.<sup>23</sup> Joyce Miller’s examination of the Survey of

<sup>20</sup> On Scottish attitudes and involvement in slavery, see Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756–1838* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Edward J. Cowan and Mike Paterson, *Folk in Print: Scotland’s Chapbook Heritage 1750–1850* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007) 101–11.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart MacDonald, “In Search of the Devil in Fife Witchcraft Cases, 1560–1705,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 45–6.

<sup>23</sup> Of 420 known cases in Fife the Devil is explicitly mentioned in 83, which represents approximately 20 per cent of cases. MacDonald, “The Devil in Fife Witchcraft Cases,” 36; Stuart MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife: Witch-Hunting in a Scottish Shire, 1560–1710* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002) 180–1; Lauren Martin, “The Devil and the Domestic: Witchcraft, Quarrels and Women’s Work in Scotland,” in *The Scottish*

Scottish Witchcraft database findings has revealed that the Devil only featured in 226, or approximately 6 per cent, of all known Scottish witch trials, though she carefully explains the difficulties of establishing accuracy with the figures.<sup>24</sup> These studies do, nevertheless, throw up questions about the precise role and importance of the Devil in Scottish witch belief.

The relative opacity of the Devil in the surviving trial evidence does not, of course, imply a lack of belief in him, but might simply suggest that his influence in cases of witchcraft was assumed and taken for granted. In other words, the Devil may have been forever there, lurking behind the scenes, but he was not always cast in the starring role. On analysis, it would seem that while the state was centrally concerned with the more esoteric issues of witch practice – the Demonic Pact, coven gatherings, treason, heresy – the community focused more upon troublesome neighbours, cursing, begging and the like. If the Devil did make an appearance in these latter cases, it was usually after more mundane accusations had been made.

It was broadly accepted that the Devil could assume many guises, but he was usually only after one thing – a person's soul. To Catherine Sands in Culross (1675) he appeared "in the likeness of a Gentleman." Catherine was given a new name, "Serjeant," and a spirit by the name of "Peter Drysdale," after the usual ritual of renouncing one's baptism while putting a hand on the top of the head and the sole of the foot.<sup>25</sup> The latter expression was a survival of the medieval general excommunication where offenders were cursed sitting, standing, riding, walking, sleeping, waking, eating and drinking, as well as "fra the crowne of the hede to the soile of the fute." Tried at the same time as Sands was Janet Hendry, who was named "Major" and her spirit was "Lawrie Moor"; also Agnes Hendry whose spirit was called "Peter Selanday," but she could not recall the name she was given by the Devil.<sup>26</sup> Bo'ness witch Margaret Hamilton confessed she had been in the Devil's service for thirty years when she was questioned in 1679. He sometimes came to her in the likeness of a black dog.<sup>27</sup> Lillias Adie of Torryburn

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*Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 77; Joyce Miller, "Men in Black: Appearances of the Devil in Early Modern Scottish Witchcraft Discourse," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 144–65, at 145.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, "Men in Black," 145.

<sup>25</sup> Trial of Catherine Sands, Culross, 1675, in John Ewart Simpkins, *County Folk-Lore vol. VII. Examples of Printed Folk-Lore concerning Fife with some Notes on Clackmannan and Kinross-shire* (The Folklore Society. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1914) 99–100.

<sup>26</sup> David Patrick, *Statutes of the Scottish Church, 1225–1559* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1907) 6.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas James Salmon, *Borrowstounness and District being Historical Sketches of Kinneil, Carriden, and Bo'ness c. 1550–1850* (Edinburgh and London: William Hodge and Co., 1913) 118.

confessed in 1704 to being in compact with the Devil with whom she met regularly and had sexual relations. "His skin was cold, and his colour was black and pale, he had a hat on his head, and his feet were cloven like the feet of a stirk [bullock]." Sometimes he came to her house, entering "like a shadow and went away like a shadow."<sup>28</sup> Witch suspects were often asked why they thought the animals with which they interacted were the Devil. Beatrix Laing, suspected of causing the bewitchment of a blacksmith's son in Pittenweem in 1704, knew the black dog she encountered on Ceres Moor was the Devil because he changed out of his canine shape before her eyes. While still in animal form she stroked his back, which left some of his fur on her hand.<sup>29</sup>

Encountering the Devil in the shape of an animal was a relatively common experience, as was the ability of witches to shapeshift into various animalistic forms such as hares, cats or birds. Both Satan and his servants had a propensity to assume "natural," identifiable species, as opposed to mythical or anomalous animals, which might suggest their close relationship with nature, in spite of other "unnatural" characteristics and traits they supposedly possessed. That witches were widely considered to have some level of control over the natural world might further suggest such an innate connection.<sup>30</sup> Witches confessed not only to seeing the Devil in various animal guises, but that the animal in question was capable of speech. What, perhaps, is most surprising about many of these accounts is how such apparent fantastical abilities were treated in a matter-of-fact way, as if talking animals were "normal" and unexceptional. The witch was seemingly believed to be an expert inter-species communicator, capable of domesticating the Devil himself.<sup>31</sup>

When the Devil put in an appearance in witch trial confessions, the reported relationships were usually fairly long-term and sometimes of a sexual nature. He seems to have generally approached his potential quarry at times of vulnerability and susceptibility to his wiles, acting as a type of sexual predator. The society of the time considered women to be a soft target. The precise power relationship between the witch and the Devil was the

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<sup>28</sup> David Webster, ed., *A Collection of Rare and Curious Tracts on Witchcraft and the Second Sight; with an Original Essay on Witchcraft* (Edinburgh: Thomas Webster, 1820) 27–34.

<sup>29</sup> CH2/1132/21, 292–3.

<sup>30</sup> The French Calvinist theologian and minister Lambert Daneau wrote of the witches' ability to corrupt the elements, air and water, poison cattle and other domestic animals, and "enchant wild beasts and make them stand still, that you may take them in your hand." On the latter point, his precise meaning is unclear, but presumably having an ability to still wild creatures was another sign of witches' impressive control over the natural world. *A Dialogue of Witches, in Foretime Named Lot-tellers and Now Commonly Called Sorcerers* (1564; London, 1575) chapter III.

<sup>31</sup> The role of animals in the Scottish witch trials is the subject of my ongoing research.

subject of much speculation and debate among the demonologists, clergymen and legal profession; it was also a relationship that, at times, differed quite markedly from the folk tradition. Learned theories overwhelmingly placed the balance of power firmly into the cloven hooves of the Devil, for once the witch had succumbed to his advances, he ostensibly became the witch's master and commander. Yet, folk perceptions of the Devil were not always so subservient. Confessing witches sometimes spoke of outright resistance to the Devil, talking back to him in ways no supposed "servant" should speak to their "master." Bessie Wilson, one of the accomplices named by Isobel Gowdie in 1662, retaliated when the Devil used to beat them and "would speak crusty [ill-tempered], and be belling [bellowing] again to him stoutly." Revealingly, Wilson said that he wore black clothes like a gentleman and looked like her husband.<sup>32</sup> Wilson was not the only one to view her relationship with Auld Cloutie like that between husband and wife. One of the Bo'ness witches, Linlithgow widow Elizabeth Scotland (1680), was allegedly told by the Devil that he would be a good husband to her.<sup>33</sup>

The Bo'ness confessions of 1679–80 are notable for their high demonic content. Many of the 28 suspects confessed to a relationship with the Devil, which included experiences of a sexual nature. For instance, Elizabeth Scotland, the wife of a merchant, first encountered him at a dam where a woman had committed suicide. Dressed in black, but with the telltale cloven feet, he went by the name of Robin. On other occasions he appeared to her in the form of a black dog. She admitted that she gave herself to him, head to foot, and that sex with him was very cold. Evidence of their carnal relationship could be found as she bore the Devil's mark on her body. Elizabeth Hutcheson, also a merchant's wife, confessed that the Devil, whom she described as a "gallant young man," sometimes came into the shop where she worked, though when other people entered the shop he would mysteriously disappear. He promised her pearls and jewels if she had sex with him, and she eventually succumbed to his advances, exchanging the words "I am thyne and thow art mine."<sup>34</sup> Both of these women were married and had essentially confessed to adultery as well as compact with the Devil. Unattached and widowed women were also favoured for the Devil's attentions.

Executed in 1679, the twice-married widow Annaple Thomson from Bo'ness confessed that the Devil came to her, in the likeness of "ane black man," while she was between husbands. Expressing sympathy, he told her she was a "poore puddled bodie, and had ane evill lyiff and difficultie to

<sup>32</sup> Trial of Bessie Wilson, 28 June 1661 to 7 August 1661, Pitcairn, *Trials*, vol. 3, 600; *Books of Adjournal*, JC2/11; JC2/10 fos. 17v–20r.

<sup>33</sup> Trial of Elizabeth Scotland, 24 November 1679 to 27 March 1680, *Books of Adjournal*, JC2/15f.159r.

<sup>34</sup> SSWD.

win throw the world," but if she promised to follow him she "should never want, but have ane better lyiff." After entering into the Devil's service, she sometimes met with him privately on the "Coal-hill," and at other times at meetings with other witches at the Bo'ness Links. Gatherings took place regularly at her house, and at other unmarried witches' homes, to which the Devil brought his pipes and large quantities of ale, and there was much eating and drinking and dancing.<sup>35</sup> Annaple Thomson was not under the control or supervision of a husband when she fell into the path of Satan, though she did marry sometime thereafter. At the time of her confession, her second husband had passed away and so she was once more a widow. The church frowned upon, and was suspicious of, women who were unattached, for in its view they could not be trusted. The vision of reckless and spouseless women, feasting and drinking and cavorting with the Devil, was the epitome of decadence and depravity to the average seventeenth-century minister and law-abiding citizen. Such narratives may represent female defiance when subjected to charges they considered utterly ridiculous, or trivial in the extreme.

Two Ayrshire cases of "raising the Devil" came to light within a month of one another in 1682. The first instance, at Irvine, involved a servant-girl in the house of Major-General Robert Montgomerie<sup>36</sup> and is quite detailed, though the girl's name is not recorded. She used a complex ritual, which involved first drawing a circle around herself, and then "turning the riddle" from South to North. The latter practice involved balancing a sieve, the riddle, on a pair of shears. In her hand she held nine tail-feathers plucked from a black cock. She then recited the 51st Psalm<sup>37</sup> forwards and read Revelations

<sup>35</sup> Salmon, *Borrowstounness and District*, 116–18.

<sup>36</sup> Major-General Robert Montgomerie, fifth son of Alexander, sixth Earl of Eglinton.

<sup>37</sup> Psalm 51: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. 5 Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. 6 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom. 7 Purge me with hyssop [purifying herb], and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. 9 Hide thy face from sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. 11 Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. 12 Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. 13 Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee. 14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness. 15 O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. 16 For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are



11:19 backwards.<sup>38</sup> She claimed to have successfully raised Satan three times for the purpose of asking him questions regarding the whereabouts of some stolen property taken from her mistress, the theft of which she stood personally accused. Once her questions had been answered, she dispatched him by casting three of the feathers at him, charging him to return “to his place.” On each appearance, the Devil took on a different guise: as a man in “seaman’s clothing, with a blue cap,” a “black grim man in black clothing,” and on his last materialization he had a long tail.

During the ritual, which took place in the cellar, the Major-General and his wife were at home completely unaware of what was going on under their very feet. However, the couple reported that they had become inexplicably afraid and could hear all the dogs in Irvine making “a hideous barking.” The servant-girl came to them “as pale as death” to report that her ritual had been successful and the Devil had obliged with the requisite information about where the goods could be found. However, she did not get the reception she had anticipated, and although the silverware was indeed in the place she described, she found herself in graver trouble than before. The Major had her imprisoned, and she was later tried for charming and devil-raising. She confessed to her crime, adding that she had learned the ritual “in Dr Colvin’s house in Ireland, who used to practise this.” The outcome of the trial is not known.<sup>39</sup>

The second instance, at Ayr, involved an unmarried woman, Margaret Dougall, “alleged guilty of consulting and raising the devill.” She was delivered to the county sheriff and was then sent onwards to Edinburgh tolbooth to await trial. Once more, frustratingly, neither details of the case, nor of the verdict, survive.<sup>40</sup>

As was believed of witches, the Devil was often connected with threats to the productivity of the land and the health of livestock. In the seventeenth

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a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. 18 Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem. 19 Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thy altar.”

<sup>38</sup> Revelations 11:19: “And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple the ark of his testament: and there were lightnings, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail.”

<sup>39</sup> Trial of servant-girl, Irvine, February 1682, in Arnold F. McJannet, *The Royal Burgh of Irvine* (Irvine: Civic Press, 1938) 196–7; William Fraser, *Memorials of the Montgomeries*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: privately printed, 1859) vol. 1, 81–2; Alastair Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire: A Calendar of Documents* (May 1998; unpublished) case no. 159. For a modern retelling, see Anna Blair, *Tales of Ayrshire* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1983) 177–8. This case is not in Black’s *Calendar*, Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, or the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database.

<sup>40</sup> Trial of Margaret Dougall, Ayr, 2 March 1682, in *RPC*, 3rd ser. vol. 7, 350; Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire*, case no. 160.

and eighteenth centuries most North East coast parishes, for instance, kept an uncultivated plot of land that was dedicated to the Devil. It was known under a variety of names such as the Halyman's Rig, the Goodman's Fauld, the Black Faulie, the Gi'en Rig, Clootie's Croft and the Deevil's Croft. Offering the Devil a parcel of land was intended to appease him, thus saving the crops and the animals from his wrath.<sup>41</sup> In the year 1649, the Banff session was pleased to report that the keeping of "superstitious days," burials within the kirk, "or any plot of ground unlaboured dedicated to the Deuill, called the Gudeman's Croft" were not being observed in their parish.<sup>42</sup> However, other parishes were not able to make the same claim for the tradition was still observed in some places until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup> A similar tradition once existed in Galloway, known as an "aploch," which was a corner of a corn field or meadow left untouched during the harvest as an offering to witches. These traditions were about protecting the land through the inversion principle, in other words, the counterpart of "God's acre," a name for the churchyard.<sup>44</sup>

The specific nature and extent of the Devil's powers were frequently debated in Scotland, as elsewhere, thus introducing a note of scepticism. Could he really physically carry people or objects through the air as so many had claimed? George Sinclair included in his collection a letter, dated 1684, from "a person of great honesty and sincerity," with the intention of providing "evidence" that the Devil could indeed transport men and women through the air. The correspondent had gone to Culross some years before to witness a witch-burning. The unfortunate woman had to be carried to the place of execution in a chair by four men since her legs were broken. The injuries had allegedly been sustained from an incident involving an encounter with the Devil. The woman, who was imprisoned in the Steeple at Culross, had her legs put in the stocks while the guards were out of the room. She had not been left unattended for long when Satan came to her, took her out of her shackles and carried her out of the prison. They had not gone very far when the terrified woman cried out "O God, whither are you taking me!," and she was immediately dropped out of the air, breaking "her leggs and her belly" when she landed. The correspondent was among the many who was shown the spot, and he could see the impression of her

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<sup>41</sup> The men of Glakmarres were brought before the Elgin Kirk Session in 1602 for reserving a piece of "land to the devill callit the Gudmanis." William Cramond, *The Records of Elgin, 1234–1800*, 2 vols. (Aberdeen: New Spalding Club, 1908) vol. 2, 105.

<sup>42</sup> William Cramond, *The Annals of Banff*, 2 vols. (Aberdeen: New Spalding Club, 1893) vol. 2, 31.

<sup>43</sup> Peter F. Anson, *Fisher Folk-Lore: Old Customs, Taboos and Superstitions among Fisher Folk, especially in Brittany and Normandy, and on the East Coast of Scotland* (London: The Faith Press, 1965) 89.

<sup>44</sup> Burnett, *Robert Burns and the Hellish Legion*, 29.

heels on the ground. There is obviously a credibility problem with this story, which has parallels in folk legend. How it was that only the victim's heels made an indentation in the ground is unclear. The story reeks of a suspicion that the victim was maltreated and that the authorities were attempting to assert their innocence. It was alleged that for at least six or seven years no grass would grow there until, eventually, a stone dyke was built to cover the unholy place.<sup>45</sup>

Further evidence of the Devil's supposed influence can be seen in the account of Margaret Myles, hanged in Edinburgh in 1702 for witchcraft. She confessed to renouncing her baptism and entering into a covenant with the Devil. According to a contemporary account, on the day of her execution a preacher by the name of George Andrew asked Myles to pray with him, but she said that she could not pray as her pact with Satan prevented it. Undeterred, Andrew implored her to recite the Lord's Prayer with him, but when she tried to repeat the first line she could not say "Our Father which art in Heaven" but, though she tried, could only say "which wart in Heaven." Similarly, when he asked her to loudly state "I renounce the Devil," she voiced "I unce the Devil." Some indication of her penitence came in her last moments, for when the hood was put over her face she cried, "Lord, take me out of the Devil's hands, and put me in God's."<sup>46</sup>

The events surrounding the demonic possession of Christian Shaw in 1697, discussed in more detail below, and the resulting six executions for her bewitchment, are testament enough to the Devil's refusal to exit the country quietly. Indeed, the palpable rise in possession cases in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Scotland, often involving adolescent girls and boys, is evidence of the Devil's continuing vitality and ability to change with the times.<sup>47</sup> It might also be read as indicative of an identity crisis brewing within the Protestant ranks as they were under increasing pressure to defend the position of the church. As late as 1742, during the height of the Cambuslang evangelical revival, a number of adherents spoke of seeing the Devil in a variety of material, anthropomorphic forms. One young woman, for example, claimed that he came to her one morning, before the sun had risen, "like a brown cow with a white face, look'd in at me in the bed where I was lying waking, which frighted me terribly." Others experienced his presence in a more internal or psychological way, as

<sup>45</sup> George Sinclair, *Satan's Invisible World Discovered*, ed. Coleman O. Parsons (Edinburgh: John Reid, 1685; Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1969) 207–12.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Myles, Edinburgh, 20 November 1702. In Chambers, *Domestic Annals*, vol. 3, 217, who quotes from *Scots Magazine* (January 1810) "from a collection of pamphlets in the possession of Mr Blackwood."

<sup>47</sup> Brian P. Levack, *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013) 261.

he attempted to penetrate their hearts and minds, sowing seeds of doubt, to ultimately challenge their faith. "All the legions of hell were about me," cried one woman following an inspirational sermon, "going to drag me to hell."<sup>48</sup> Even towards the end of the eighteenth century ministers could report that their congregations often claimed direct experiences of the Devil, who "made wicked attacks upon them when they were engaged in their religious exercises."<sup>49</sup>

Despite these examples, by the second half of the seventeenth century the Devil's dominion on earth was increasingly expressed in spiritual terms and decreasingly as a corporeal manifestation; as a physical presence the Devil was slowly beginning to recede from learned discourse. However, the clergy, or at least some of them, were much more tenacious in their beliefs, which they doubtless reinforced in their congregations. The ability of the Devil to move and work bodily in the human world had always been a subject of great debate and controversy among theologians and philosophers. In the wake of Cartesianism, his strength as a material entity was being severely sapped, or, as Michael Wasser has argued, there emerged just enough degrees of judicial and philosophical doubt to question Satan's ability to directly interfere in worldly matters.<sup>50</sup> The growth of scientific rationalism cannot be said to have banished the Devil from Scottish soil, but, in the longer term, it may have played a part in the reconceptualization and redefinition of his role.

During the previous century contemporary perceptions that the power of Satan was stronger and more pervasive than ever before, shaped the way witch-hunting occurred. By the turn of the eighteenth century a subtle shift took place; while anxieties about demonic interference still existed, the emphasis within witch accusations returned overwhelmingly to *maleficium* and the concerns of daily life. The figure of the witch had largely detached herself from the Devil's side, and he was free to wander into the depths of the evangelical Protestant psyche to continue his torments afresh.

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<sup>48</sup> William McCulloch, *Examination of Persons under Scriptural Concern at Cambuslang during the Revival in 1741–2 by the Revd. William McCulloch, Minister of Cambuslang*, New College Library, Edinburgh, 'The McCulloch Manuscripts' MS. W 13.b.212. On the Cambuslang Revival, see T. C. Smout, "Born Again at Cambuslang: New Evidence on Popular Religion and Literacy in Eighteenth Century Scotland," *Past and Present* 97 (1982): 114–27; Susan O'Brien, "A Transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network, 1735–1755," *The American Historical Review* 91/4 (1986): 811–32; Matthew Smith, "Distinguishing Marks of the Spirit of God: Eighteenth-Century Revivals in Scotland and New England," *STAR (Scotland's Transatlantic Relations) Project Archive* (April 2004).

<sup>49</sup> OSA, Tongland, 328.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Wasser, "The Western Witch-Hunt of 1697–1700: The Last Major Witch-Hunt in Scotland," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 146–65.

## Lewd women, rough music and scurrilous tongues

Several commentators have suggested that the increased agenda on moral discipline in the wake of the Reformation, combined with male anxieties about female sexuality, led to the woman as witch stereotype. The Kirk's obsession with fornication, and the idea that witches had congress with the Devil, doubtless increased a woman's vulnerability.<sup>51</sup> Fears surrounding the rise of atheism in late seventeenth-century Scotland, as well as in England and parts of continental Europe, were tied to a sense that sinful and immoral behaviour was on the increase. Attitudes towards sin were closely articulated as a struggle with temptation and the false promises offered by the grand tempter himself. The Church never tired of pointing out that adultery and "lewd" behaviour were prime examples of the eroding the morals of society.

The kirk session records, of any given parish, leave one with the impression that Scotland was a hotbed of vice and sin. Unmarried or widowed women who fell pregnant were brought before the session for questioning. If she revealed the name of the child's father, he too was brought to account. Both would be ordered to repent their grievous sin before the congregation. In theory, the Kirk's mandate was to punish both equally, but in practice this was not always followed.<sup>52</sup> Often it was the woman who bore the brunt for crimes of a sexual nature, and the scandal intensified if pregnancy was a factor. The punishment for "lewd women" was humiliation; sitting in a sackcloth in front of the congregation to make a public apology was the preferred method. Rarely did anyone refuse to wear the sackcloth for fear of imprisonment. Banishment was also considered a suitable punishment for such fallen women. Some individuals, it would seem, did not make it easy for the ministers. In 1733 a woman, found guilty "four times of fornication," was sent to the kirk session and presbytery of Arbroath as she had "appeared twelve times before the congregation without any visible signs of repentance ... [and] had not given a true account of the father of her child." She was banished.<sup>53</sup>

As with children, women should be seen and not heard, or so it would appear from some kirk session records. It was the responsibility of the church to punish scolds, a word that was used exclusively to describe women who talked or nagged too much. In 1732 an Arbroath woman was jailed for scolding two male neighbours. Her husband and sister-in-law were

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<sup>51</sup> For example, see Julian Goodare, "Women and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland," *Social History* 23 (1998): 288–308; Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 30–2; Lizzie Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001; Edinburgh: John Donald, 2011) 121.

<sup>52</sup> Leah Leneman, *Alienated Affections: The Scottish Experience of Divorce and Separation, 1684–1830* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 3.

<sup>53</sup> 1733, *Arbroath Kirk Session Records*, qtd in Hay, *History of Arbroath*, 241.

able to provide bail, and she was released on condition that she would lead a more Christian, and presumably quieter, life.<sup>54</sup>

A particularly unpleasant form of punishment for scolds was the “scolds-bridle,” also called the “witch’s bridle” as it was used on them as well, though how often it was actually inflicted is unclear.<sup>55</sup> In Scotland, where it may have originated, it was known as the “branks,” meaning “to bridle, to restrain”; the name also applied to a type of halter used on horses, which, instead of leather, was joined on each side by a piece of wood that went across the horse’s mouth.<sup>56</sup> The bridle was a muzzle or helmet-shaped device, made out of iron ribs or slats, which was fitted over the woman’s head. There was a flat piece of metal, the bridle-bit, that was designed to fit inside the mouth, sometimes with spikes on it, and pressed down on the top of the tongue, thus preventing speech or the ability to eat. Like the “jougs,” an iron neck collar that could be attached to the kirk wall with a chain, and many of these headpieces also came with a fitting that allowed the bridle to be fitted to a wall, typically on an exterior wall of a church, town cross or tolbooth. These iron fixtures are still visible on many church walls to the present day.

The public display aspect of this punishment had a dual function: it was a form of ritualized humiliation for the transgressor, and a stern warning for the community not to slander, scold, spread gossip, or engage in magical activities. It has been noted that the women most often punished for “scolding” or quarrelsome behaviour were similar to the types of women accused of witchcraft.<sup>57</sup> The preoccupation with female deviancy, a hallmark of Calvinist Scotland, can be detected in this particular shaming ritual.<sup>58</sup> There is some evidence that this form of punishment was also used on men, at least in the sixteenth century, but by the seventeenth it was reserved for women.<sup>59</sup> The earliest known recorded use of the branks occurred in Stirling

<sup>54</sup> 1732, *Arbroath Kirk Session Records*, qtd in Hay, *History of Arbroath*, 243.

<sup>55</sup> Garthine Walker, for instance, notes that in England there is little evidence that the branks were regularly applied, whereas the pillory and whipping were relatively common. *Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 108–11.

<sup>56</sup> Jamieson, *Dictionary*.

<sup>57</sup> John G. Harrison, “Women and the Branks in Stirling, c. 1600 to c. 1730,” *Scottish Economic and Social History* 18/2 (1998): 114–31.

<sup>58</sup> Anne-Marie Kilday, “Hurt, Harm and Humiliation: Community Responses to Deviant Behaviour in Early Modern Scotland,” in *Shame, Blame and Culpability: Crime, Violence and the Modern State, 1600–1900*, ed. Judith Rowbotham, Marianna Muravyeva and David Nash (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) 124–40.

<sup>59</sup> Kilday, “Hurt, Harm and Humiliation,” claims that there are no recorded instances of men being “branked” after 1570. However, Patrick Pratt in Aberdeen was ordered to sit “bound to the croce of this burgh, in the brankis locket,” in 1591, *Aberdeen Burgh Records*, II. 71. An Inverness man was ordered to pass through the four ports of the



*Illustration 4.1* The Joughs, Moniaive Town Hall

Source: Photograph by Lizanne Henderson 2008 ©padeapix.

in 1546: “the claspis and calvill of irne devisit of befor ... to be put and lokit on hir for xxiiij [24] houris.”<sup>60</sup> Women could be branked for a range of deviant behaviours including violent crime, such as Anne Gilbert, who endured this punishment in 1698 following an attack upon her husband with a meat

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town and then the tron wearing the branks, following an altercation with another man whom he insulted and threatened with a knife. William MacKay and Herbert C. Boyd, eds., *Records of Inverness*, 2 vols. (Aberdeen: New Spalding Club, 1911–24) vol. 1, 59. See also Elizabeth Ewan, “‘Hamperit in Ane Hony Came’: Sights, Sounds and Smells in the Medieval Town,” in *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland, 1000 to 1600*, ed. Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011) 109–44.

<sup>60</sup> 13 August 1546, R. Renwick, ed., *Extracts from the Records of the Royal Burgh of Stirling*, 2 vols. (Glasgow, 1887–9) vol.1, 43. Another early example was in 1567, when a Bessie Tailiefeir or Telfer was sentenced in Edinburgh to be put in the branks and fixed to the town cross for one hour. She had apparently slandered the local Baillie, Thomas Hunter, by claiming he had been using false measures. Chambers, *Domestic Annals*, 37.

cleaver after he had criticized her cooking, or Isobel Nicol from Jedburgh who, in 1706, went after her father and brother with a smoothing iron and a broken bottle for refusing to allow her to attend a local dance.<sup>61</sup> During the eighteenth century the branks was outlawed, though many examples still remain in museums and private collections.

As official support for witch prosecutions became increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to secure, some people decided to take matters into their own hands. Sometimes this took the form of “rough music,” a sort of ritualized humiliation and expression of hostility, initiated by members of the community, and intended to publicly punish those who had transgressed certain behavioural or moral standards.<sup>62</sup> The worst-case scenario of this had been witnessed at Pittenweem, but there were other less dramatic methods of dealing with witches. Three men – John Munro of Obsdale, Hugh and John Munro of Alness – appeared before the presbytery of Tain in 1750 for attacking Margaret MacKenzie and her teenage daughter Katherine. The assailants came just after midnight to John Fraser’s house and dragged the women from their beds, “cast them on the hard and cold floor, without allowing them any time to put on any of their clothes, except their shirts, using most horrid and cursing and imprecations, calling them witches and devils.” One of the men then “scored and cut their foreheads with an iron tool to the effusion of blood.”

Next, they went to the home of a widow, Isobel M’Kenzie (possibly the sister of Margaret?), and her daughter Katherine, and treated them to the same indignity. Just to make sure they had covered all potential suspects, the Munros also paid a visit to Hugh Fraser and attacked both him and his wife, Annie Bain. When Annie began to argue with John Munro she was lifted off the ground, thrown on her back against the hearth, beaten with his fists, and then scored above the brow the same as all the others. In their frenzy of violence, the maid was also attacked, but when the girl shouted out that she was a Munro, they let her go.<sup>63</sup>

All three men received a serious rebuke before the congregations at Rosskeen and Alness for their “grievous scandal” – rather a mild punishment given the circumstances. By 1750, the ministers at Tain were clearly siding with the supposed witches rather than the alleged victims. One of the attackers, who blamed his consumption (tuberculosis) on the witches, claimed he was only

<sup>61</sup> NAS, Sheriff Court Records, SC20/5/1, SC62/10/13 and SC62/10/14.

<sup>62</sup> Rough music is also referred to as charivari. See Kilday, “Hurt, Harm and Humiliation,” 125.

<sup>63</sup> Tain Presbytery Records, 25 July 1750, qtd in Colin MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland, from the Revolution (1688) to the Present Time, Compiled Chiefly from the Tain Presbytery Records* (Inverness: Northern Counties Newspaper Printing and Publishing Company, 1915) 199–206. See also J. M. MacPherson, *Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929) 223.



trying to recover his health. But this was not a sufficient explanation for the session, which condemned folk who “for the cure of sickness and recovery of health have recourse to diabolical means and methods, so contrary to the faith” of the devout that they robbed all Christians of their reputation and good name.<sup>64</sup> In all of these assaults, the men took a piece of clothing from every victim, presumably in an attempt to counter the witchcraft. The cutting “above the breath” or “brow” was a fairly standard technique for removing a witch’s spell. The use of iron would also have been intentional as it was a well-known deterrent against malevolent forces. Thomas Pennant was also told of the continued practice of bleeding the witch to “preserve themselves from her charms” in the North East during his tour of 1769.<sup>65</sup>

Loose talk, as ever, could also be potentially dangerous. In 1694 John Gray in Pencaitland, East Lothian, objected that a mother and daughter had called him “witches gett” (meaning the offspring of a witch), wishing that his soul was soaking in Hell’s cauldron.<sup>66</sup> The kirk session of Elgin rebuked a woman in 1702 for calling a female neighbour a witch. The same session, in 1706, rebuked two more women for slandering their neighbours as witches. In the first case, Isabella Priest was ordered to ask God’s pardon, as well as Agnes Falconer’s, for accusing her of causing the death of a man and his cow by witchcraft.<sup>67</sup> At Grange, in 1714, it was reported that Isobel Kelman “had sitten on her knees with her face to the sun,” cursing all those who had called her a witch.<sup>68</sup> A woman in Perthshire (1716) was said to be very ill-disposed to flitting or moving house, and many feared her because her mother was “under the name of a witch.”<sup>69</sup> That a reputation for witchcraft provided some sort of security of tenure is further suggested by a much later reference from Inverness-shire to the goodwife of Barntown in 1794, who was considered “a formidable personage of supernatural powers in this place of ignorant belief,” and so much so that the individual charged with evicting her felt himself to be under the influence of her spells.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>64</sup> John Munro in Obsdale did not recover and died of consumption. MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland*, 204, 206.

<sup>65</sup> Pennant, *Tour 1769*, 141. The practice was fairly prevalent in parts of England also. It was also carried out on suspected werewolves in Brittany, Normandy and Germany. See, for instance, Henderson, *Folk Lore of the Northern Counties*, 144–5; Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves, being an Account of a Terrible Superstition* (New York: Causeway Books, 1973) 107.

<sup>66</sup> Pencaitland Kirk Session records NAS, CH2/296/1.

<sup>67</sup> Isobel Cock called a witch by Grisel Wilson, 20 July 1702; Agnes Falconer called a witch by Isabella Priest, 19 February 1706; Isobel Thomson called a witch by Marjory Baxter, 16 July 1706. Cramond, *The Records of Elgin*, vol. 2, 326–7.

<sup>68</sup> Isobel Kelman, New Crannoch at Grange, 1714, Cramond, *Grange*, 27, qtd in MacPherson, *Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland*, 195.

<sup>69</sup> NAS, GD190/3/279.

<sup>70</sup> NAS, GD23/6/300.

In a Scottish context, the criminality of women, and associated punishments for supernatural crimes such as witchcraft, or against children such as infanticide, have been relatively under-studied, though work by Christina Larner, Lynn Abrams and Anne-Marie Kilday, for instance, have done much to correct this. With a few exceptions, the history of female crime in an eighteenth-century context has also been somewhat neglected.<sup>71</sup> The women who stood accused of witchcraft at the dawn of the Scottish Enlightenment offer some insights into contemporary attitudes towards what constituted female criminal behaviour. It also highlights certain contradictions within ideological thinking at the time that assumed women were weaker, frailer, subordinate and less inclined towards engaging in violent crime than men, yet were more likely to be involved with “deviant” or “unnatural” crimes that were viewed as particularly threatening.<sup>72</sup> Scottish women, from what the evidence presented here suggests, were not afraid to challenge authority. Some were duly punished for their troubles.

## Punishing evil

Accusations of witchcraft were usually initiated by neighbours of the suspected witch or by other accused witches. From the available evidence it can be conjectured that having a bad reputation – *mala fama* or *difffamatio* to use the legal terminology – was often an important element, but it was not a prerequisite to accusation. Terms such as “rank witch,” “ill fame,” “of evil repute,” “open bruit and common fame,” and so on, were regularly applied to witch suspects and could be used as a powerful indicator of guilt in the courtroom. Not all lawyers approved of this measure. Sir George MacKenzie, for one, dismissed such evidence as nothing more than “confused noise.”<sup>73</sup> With the exception of cases when a person was accused on more than one occasion, “the point at which reputation and accusation led to arrest is hard

<sup>71</sup> See Larner, *Enemies of God*; Deborah A. Symonds, *Weep Not for Me: Women, Ballads, and Infanticide in Early Modern Scotland* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Anne-Marie Kilday, “Maternal Monsters: Murdering Mothers in South-West Scotland, 1750–1815,” in *Twisted Sisters: Women, Crime and Deviance in Scotland since 1400*, ed. Y. G. Brown and R. Ferguson (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002) 156–79; Lynn Abrams, “From Demon to Victim: The Infanticidal Mother in Shetland, 1699–1802,” in *Twisted Sisters: Women, Crime and Deviance in Scotland since 1400* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002) 180–203; Anne-Marie Kilday, *Women and Violent Crime in Enlightenment Scotland* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007); Anne-Marie Kilday, *A History of Infanticide in Britain, c.1600 to the Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>72</sup> Sandra Clark, *Women and Crime in the Street Literature of Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 41, 52; Kilday, *Women and Violent Crime in Enlightenment Scotland*, 20.

<sup>73</sup> George MacKenzie, *Pleadings in Some Remarkable Cases* (Edinburgh: G. Swintoun, 1672) 195.

to identify.”<sup>74</sup> Standing accused of witchcraft did not mean an automatic conviction, or even the instigation of formal legal proceedings, as the kirk session could, and often did, settle the matter “in-house,” so to speak, and could choose to impose a fine, make a public admonishment of the suspect or enforce banishment. Evidence was gathered by the session, typically in the form of witness statements against the accused, and the minister and elders would interrogate the suspect. If the session determined there was sufficient evidence to pronounce guilt, or they secured a confession, the case would be referred. By the late seventeenth century, for those who were taken to trial, acquittals were becoming more common than convictions. However, even if a suspect was found innocent of all allegations, the damage done to their reputation was a much harder stain to remove. One can imagine that in small, tight-knit communities the tarnish to their character might never come off.

It has been regularly suggested that the actual content of many witch confessions was a product of torture and leading questions. Torture has also been blamed for instigating large-scale witch-panics. In Scotland, judicial torture was generally only used for crimes against the state, such as treason or sedition, but was also applied in cases of witchcraft. However, specific warrants were required from central authorities before torture could legally be used. With such controls in place, the indiscriminate employment of judicial torture was largely avoided, a situation that did not exist in some other parts of Europe, in particular, Germany. In the years between 1590 and 1690, only 39 such warrants were granted by the Scottish Privy Council and the Scottish Parliament, of which only two were related to trials for witchcraft.<sup>75</sup> In 1689 the Scottish Parliament decreed that the use of “torture without evidence or in ordinary crimes is contrary to law.” This action had been taken not out of any sympathy for witches but in response to complaints regarding governmental excesses of previous decades.<sup>76</sup>

In regard to witchcraft cases, perhaps the obvious question should be, not how or why was torture applied, but was it actually used at all, and if so, to what extent? Stuart MacDonald, for instance, has revealed an absence of evidence that judicial torture was ever used in Fife witch trials, though, as elsewhere, what he has classified as non-judicial torture, such as “waking” the witch – keeping the suspect awake until she confessed – was used to obtain the required confession before a commission or trial could be sought. The excruciating torment of sleep deprivation as a way of extracting information,

<sup>74</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, 104.

<sup>75</sup> Brian P. Levack, “Judicial Torture in Scotland during the Age of MacKenzie,” in *Miscellany IV*, ed. Hector L. MacQueen (Edinburgh: The Stair Society, 2002) vol. 49, 191, 196.

<sup>76</sup> RPS, M1689/3/18, 4 April 1689; M1689/3/20, 7 April 1689; M1689/3/108, 11 April 1689. The 1689 Act specified that at least one witness was required as “evidence” before torture was permissible.

known as *tormentum insomniae* on the continent, “the choicest means they use in Scotland for discoverie of witches,” was common throughout the country, but other methods were also employed.<sup>77</sup> Disturbing evidence that torture may have been used more liberally, especially towards women, and in cases where the confession was allegedly obtained “without torture,” has emerged in Liv Willumsen’s survey of seventeenth-century trials.<sup>78</sup>

The sufferings endured by the Pittenweem witches in 1704/05, though not judicially applied, were horrendous by anyone’s standards. One of the victims was kept awake for five days while being pricked all over her body with pins until she bled profusely. She was also put in the stocks for several days and later dumped into a “dark dungeon where she was allowed no manner of light, nor humane converse”; there she remained for at least five months.<sup>79</sup> Pricking of the witch as a test of guilt or innocence seems to have been regularly practised and was a standard procedure to establish whether or not there were grounds for a trial. The object of the exercise was to prick the suspect’s body with long pins, known as “the brods,” until the Devil’s mark was found. Though Lord Fountainhall considered the witch-pricker “a drunken foolish rogue,” unable to explain “the principles of his vocation,” he had personally witnessed a suspect being stuck with pins “the length of one’s finger, and one of them was thrust in to the head” without any blood being drawn. The Synod of Glasgow considered the pricker so essential that, in 1699, it deliberated on the need for having “those in readinesse at the Justiciar Court, that has skill to try the insensible mark.”<sup>80</sup> Witch-pricking could, at times, be a fairly lucrative trade but it was one that was open to abuses. Occasionally, however, the over-zealous professional witch-pricker found himself in trouble. In 1678, David Cowan, who had learned his skills from the notorious John Kincaid, was imprisoned following a complaint from accused witch Katherine Liddell. She claimed she was kept awake and pricked “with pins in severall parts of her body to the great effusion of her blood and whereby her skin is raised and her body highly swelled.” Cowan

<sup>77</sup> MacDonald, *Witches of Fife*, 137. The torture of keeping the suspect awake was possibly invented by Hyppolytus de Marselis of Bologna. The Scots were credited with favouring this particular torture, see Edward J. Cowan, “The Darker Vision of the Scottish Renaissance: The Devil and Francis Stewart,” in *The Renaissance and Reformation in Scotland: Essays in Honour of Gordon Donaldson*, ed. I. B. Cowan and D. Shaw (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983) 127, and Black, *Calendar*, 15.

<sup>78</sup> Liv Helene Willumsen, “Seventeenth Century Witchcraft Trials in Scotland and Northern Norway,” Ph.D., University of Edinburgh (2008) 78–84, 104, 204; Liv H. Willumsen, *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) 85–90.

<sup>79</sup> Beatrix Laing, petition to the privy council, 1 May 1705, in David Cook, *Annals of Pittenweem; Being Notes and Extracts from the Ancient Records of that Burgh* (Anstruther: Lewis Russell, 1867) 124–5; MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife*, 161.

<sup>80</sup> Synod of Glasgow excerpt, 6 July 1699, MS. Advocates Library. Rob. iii. 4,14, qtd in John Graham Dalyell, *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland* (Glasgow: Richard Griffin and Co., 1835) 641–2.

was incarcerated for “presuming to torture or prick” the suspect without first obtaining a warrant from the Privy Council, and Liddell was set at liberty.<sup>81</sup>

That witches were being treated inhumanely during their internment is evidenced in many cases, such as that of Mary Sommerville, a prisoner in Jedburgh tolbooth in 1671. Although no one came forward with evidence against her, she was left to languish in prison “in ane sterving conditione” until eventually a petition was brought before the Justiciary court, which found in her favour and she was released.<sup>82</sup> In the same year, four, possibly five, women were held in Kirkcudbright tolbooth, within a “dark dungeon” in which they were kept in “a most miserable conditione being alwayes at the point of starving having nothing of ther own nor nothing allowed them for ther sustenance.” In the winter of 1671, one of the women, Bessie Paine, died “through cold hunger [and] other inconveniences of the prison.” Three were released in July 1672 until the next Justiciary meeting.<sup>83</sup>

While there may be evidence to suggest that the legal, judicially applied torture of witch suspects was much rarer than previously assumed, a question mark still remains over the full extent of illegal torture. Certainly the number of complaints made by alleged victims of torture, not to mention the anger expressed by men such as Sir George MacKenzie of Rosehaugh against the illegitimate use of torture, would indicate the problem was rife. One of the first things MacKenzie did upon becoming Lord Advocate in 1677 was to dismiss a number of witchcraft cases where he had found that torture had been used without a warrant.<sup>84</sup> At least two suspects from the 1679–80 Bo’ness witch-hunt were released from prison after the illegal use of torture was uncovered by the High Court.<sup>85</sup> Torture was eventually outlawed in 1708, making Scotland the first European country to abolish torture by law. Sadly, the law came too late for the majority of witchcraft suspects.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Trial of Katherine Liddell, 15 August 1678, Prestonpans, *RPC* ser. 3, vol. 5, 501, and vol. 6, 13.

<sup>82</sup> Trial of Mary Sommerville, Jedburgh, 3 July 1671. NAS, JC2/13. Transcript also in Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, 272. Suspected witch Andrew Laidly (place not known) and George Guislet in Jedburgh were released at the same time as Sommerville on the same grounds that no one came forward to testify against them. *Records of Proceedings of Justiciary Court*, Edinburgh, 1661–78, vol. 2, 56–7.

<sup>83</sup> Trial of Bessie Paine, Margaret McGuffock, Grissell Rae and Janet Howat, Kirkcudbright, 1671–72. NAS, JC2/13. See also transcript in Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, 269–74, and Chapter 7. On the punishment of women, see Burford and Shulman, *Of Bridles & Burnings*, and Kilday, “Hurt, Harm and Humiliation,” 124–40.

<sup>84</sup> Levack, “Judicial Torture in Scotland during the Age of MacKenzie,” 197; NAS, JC2/15/159.

<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Hutcheson and Margaret Whytt, SSWD.

<sup>86</sup> Levack, “Judicial Torture in Scotland during the Age of MacKenzie,” 187. On torture, see also R. D. Melville, “The Use and Forms of Judicial Torture in England and Scotland,” *Scottish Historical Review* 2 (1905): 225–48.

# 5

## Bemused, Bothered and Bewildered: Witchcraft Debated

CROSBIE: "... it is not credible, that witches should have effected what they are said in stories to have done." – JOHNSON: "Sir, I am not defending their credibility. I am only saying, that your arguments are not good, and will not overturn the belief in witchcraft ... And then, sir, you have all mankind, rude and civilized, agreeing in the belief of the agency of preternatural powers. You must take evidence: you must consider, that wise and great men have condemned witches to die." – CROSBIE: "But an act of parliament put an end to witchcraft." – JOHNSON: "No, sir! witchcraft had ceased; and therefore an act of parliament was passed to prevent persecution for what was not witchcraft. Why it ceased, we cannot tell, as we cannot tell the reason of many other things."

James Boswell, *A Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (1785)<sup>1</sup>

This chapter asks why there was so little debate about witchcraft in Scotland until the late seventeenth century. It is possible that one of the reasons may be the existence of James VI's *Daemonologie* coupled with the fact that much use was made in Scotland of English publications on the subject since witch belief was, after all, a British as well as a Scottish phenomenon. Another concern is the issue of when or if witch belief died out, a subject that has generated a good deal of speculation, much of it subjective, limited and unhelpful, but which, unlike the case for England has, until recently, attracted comparatively little scholarly attention in Scotland.

The witchcraft debate of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries involved not only thinkers and intellectuals who would prove

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<sup>1</sup> James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, with Samuel Johnson, LL.D. (1785; London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807) 33–4.

to be some of the luminaries of the Enlightenment but also the ministers and their flocks who feared the backsliding of values and the sinister, but unmistakable, signs of incipient atheism.<sup>2</sup> This debate was not confined to Scotland, embracing as it did both Europe and America, reinforced by new discoveries concerning the hitherto neglected worlds of “the people without history.” The decline in witch prosecutions did, of course, vary from place to place; most official European witch-trials had ceased by the mid-eighteenth century, though attacks on suspected witches continued well into the nineteenth, and even the twentieth, century,<sup>3</sup> while in many parts of the African continent witchcraft beliefs are a living tradition, and unofficial witch lynchings are still being reported.<sup>4</sup> It will be argued that the decline in witch persecution does not reflect, as often assumed, a decline in

<sup>2</sup> Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson, “The Last of the Witches? The Survival of Scottish Witch Belief,” *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 198–217.

<sup>3</sup> For the continuation of witch belief in other parts of Europe, see Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Gábor Klaniczay, *The Uses of Supernatural Power: The Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early-Modern Europe*, ed. K. Margolis, trans. S. Singerman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Willem De Blécourt, “On the Continuation of Witchcraft,” in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, ed. J. Barry, M. Hester and G. Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 335–52; Owen Davis, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture 1736–1951* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999); Willem De Blécourt, Ronald Hutton and Jean La Fontaine, eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999); Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, “Witchcraft After the Witch-trials,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. S. Clark and B. Ankarloo (London: Athlone Press, 1999) 95–188; Owen Davies and Willem De Blécourt, eds., *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Christina Tuczay, “The Nineteenth Century: Medievalism and Witchcraft,” in *Witchcraft Historiography*, ed. J. Barry and O. Davies (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 52–68; Jacqueline Van Gent, *Magic, Body and the Self in Eighteenth-Century Sweden* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009); Mirjam Mencej, “The Role of Gender in Accusations of Witchcraft: The Case of Eastern Slovenia,” *Český Lid* 98/4 (2011): 393–412.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1997); Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders, eds., *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (London: Routledge, 2001); Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Burghart Schmidt and Rolf Schulte, eds., *Witchcraft in Modern Africa: Witches, Witch-Hunts and Magical Imaginaries* (Hamburg: DOBU Verlag, 2007). The humanitarian crisis created by witch accusations is being alleviated by various aid organizations, and media coverage has attempted to highlight the problem. See, for instance, “Spellbound,” *The Herald Magazine* (16 July 2011) on the situation in northern Ghana.

witch belief, which clearly survived the repeal of the witchcraft legislation in 1736.

In some quarters, the witchcraft debate seems to have actually fostered belief in witches. Authorities such as George Mackenzie did not doubt the reality of witchcraft, but he did have problems with proving complicity.<sup>5</sup> Churchmen were also reluctant to shed their long-cherished fears about witchcraft and prolonged interest therein, the Seceders, in particular, displaying bitter opposition to the repeal of the witchcraft laws. All were involved in a fascinating debate, which engaged, among others, such commentators as Robert Kirk, George Sinclair and Robert Wodrow, who were emphatically opposed to the rise of sadducism, threatening as it did, in their view, not only the Kirk, but the very existence of Christianity.

Arguably, since the passing of the 1563 act, the prosecution of witches, and the laws against their alleged craft, never wholly coincided with the witch beliefs of the peasantry. It cannot be assumed that the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1736 was any more attuned with popular opinion. Nor does it follow that either learned discourse or popular attitudes towards witchcraft rose and fell with prosecution rates. From a folkloric perspective, witch belief or unbelief emphatically was not reliant upon the severity of witch-hunting though, admittedly, the trials may have had an influence. For someone living in the eighteenth century there was every possibility that a new witch-panic might flare up; removing the mechanisms of witch persecution did not, and indeed could not, ban belief. The laughter in Robert Burns's *Tam o' Shanter*, which appeared in 1791, is self-conscious and nervously anticipatory.<sup>6</sup> The challenge is, irrespective of the correspondence between legislation and folk sentiment, to "excavate the mental structures that underlie the fragmentary manifestations of popular culture and to analyze the interaction between popular and elite belief."<sup>7</sup>

It has been suggested that decreasing indictments for witchcraft, which in Scotland can be traced from the 1670s, most likely indicate a drop in witch belief among the learned. According to Christina Larner,

between 1680 and 1735 witch-belief disappeared almost without comment from the cognitive map of the ruling class, and retired to the secret,

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<sup>5</sup> The complexities of George Mackenzie's attitude towards witchcraft have been the subject of Paul Jenkins's postgraduate work, "Witchcraft on Trial? Sir George Mackenzie, Rebellion, and the Politics of Witch-Hunting in Late 17th-Century Scotland," MA, University of Saskatchewan (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Edward J. Cowan, "The Creation of Burns' *Tam o' Shanter*," in *Tam o' Shanter: A Tale by Robert Burns Illustrated by Alexander Goudie* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008) 1-12.

<sup>7</sup> Clive Holmes, "Popular Culture? Witches, Magistrates, and Divines in Early Modern England," *Understanding Popular Culture*, ed. S. L. Kaplan (Berlin: Mouton Press, 1984) 86.



uncharted areas of peasant exchange. Only the occasional summons at kirk sessions for superstitious practices gave evidence of its continued vitality.<sup>8</sup>

Larner's argument would suggest that the need, or desire, to punish witches dwindled as witches were no longer considered by the authorities to be a threat to society. Although this was once the orthodox view as to why the witch-hunts declined, not all would now agree entirely with this stance as there were a number of Scottish reactionaries, such as ministers and elders, who were active long after 1735. Among the first to challenge Larner's supposition was Brian Levack, who pursued a different angle, which focused upon changes in the legal system and increasing judicial scepticism as far more influential than any philosophical arguments coming from the establishment. "The problem of explaining the decline of witchcraft prosecutions in terms of a rejection of learned witch beliefs," argues Levack, "becomes insurmountable when we focus on Scotland." There was no equivalent sceptical tradition in Scotland as there had been in parts of Europe to compare with the likes of Weyer, Scot or Bekker, and there was not "even a hint of an argument that witchcraft was an impossible crime until long after decriminalization, which took place in 1736." What can be traced, posits Levack, is a drop in witchcraft prosecution at precisely the same time as tighter supervision of trials by central authorities came into action, as well as a more careful weighing of evidence and a reduction in the use of torture to obtain a confession.<sup>9</sup>

Significant changes in the way the church dealt with allegations of witchcraft must also be considered. In 1707, the General Assembly outlined the procedures to be taken by the kirk session against scandals such as "incest, adultery, trilapse in fornication, murder, atheism, idolatry, witchcraft, charming, and heresy." It was decided that the session was not to determine upon such cases alone, but was only to look into whether or not the case warranted further investigation. If good grounds were found for a process, the case was to be referred to the presbytery along with a minute of the procedure. Similarly, in situations where no confession was made, the session was not to proceed with the gathering of evidence or statements from witnesses until the matter was first brought to the attention of the

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<sup>8</sup> Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981) 78–9.

<sup>9</sup> Brian P. Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008) 132–4. See also Michael Wasser, who has put forward an intellectual argument based on the impact of the scientific revolution, "The Mechanical World-View and the Decline of Witch-Beliefs in Scotland," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 206–26.

presbytery to determine the next course of action.<sup>10</sup> The significance of this piece of church legislation, and the ramifications it would have upon future witchcraft and charming cases, is of great interest for it effectively removed power for independent action from the session in favour of a higher church court, thus removing the control or influence of the local community. Furthermore, the date of the act should be noted. Scotland entered into political union with England on 1 May 1707, an eventuality fiercely resisted by General Assembly from January through April.<sup>11</sup> As discussed below, the Kirk's right to prosecute witches was intended as a defence against Anglicization and possible deism.

The antecedents of "enlightenment" thinking and the ideas associated with the so-called "cult of sensibility" were slowly entering educated Scottish society in the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Refinement, delicacy, decency, propriety and culture comprised the new code of behaviour for a "civilized" Scotland that was turning her back on the supposed vulgarity, crudity, and the raw, untamed nature of her past. Within this framework, polite society allegedly had no more need for malignant witches, demonic fairies or any other evil spirit conjured up by previous generations. The reality was somewhat different.

## Demonology debated

The first publication to deal directly with Scottish witchcraft was the London chapbook *Newes from Scotland* (1591), which discussed the more lurid details of the North Berwick witch trials. James VI's *Daemonologie* (1597) was the first Scottish contribution to the European witchcraft debate, and is significant primarily because it was written by a monarch.<sup>13</sup> As such, it is a clear

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Pitcairn, ed., *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1638–1842* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing and Publishing Company, 1843) 411.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher A. Whatley, *The Scots and the Union* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) 313.

<sup>12</sup> Leah Leneman discusses the impact of the "cult of sensibility" on attitudes towards women, sexuality and its effect on issues such as divorce and adultery, in *Alienated Affections*, 4. See also, Katharine Glover, *Elite Women and Polite Society in Eighteenth Century Scotland* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011) 9–10, 67–8, 100.

<sup>13</sup> The broadsheet *Newes from Scotland* was allegedly based on a Scottish copy, though I personally doubt if this ever existed. For more on James VI and witchcraft, see Christina Lerner, "James VI and I and Witchcraft," in *The Reign of James VI and I*, ed. A. G. R. Smith (London: Macmillan, 1973) 74–90; Edward J. Cowan, "The Darker Vision of the Scottish Renaissance: The Devil and Francis Stewart," in *The Renaissance and Reformation in Scotland: Essays in Honour of Gordon Donaldson*, ed. I. B. Cowan and D. Shaw (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983) 125–40; Stuart Clark, "King James's *Daemonologie*: Witchcraft and Kingship," in *The Damned Art: Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft*, ed. Sydney Anglo (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul,

example of an educated and highly elite contribution to witchcraft lore. It is of great importance in the context of the present investigation because the status of the author ensured that it would attract little oppositional criticism, thus in part explaining why there is so little Scottish sceptical literature. Quite simply, James anticipated most of the arguments as he examined the views of sceptics in order to demolish them; such was his status that to question the existence of witchcraft could be interpreted as anti-monarchical.

It is not entirely clear when James began writing the *Daemonologie*, but there exists a fragmentary manuscript, in the king's own hand, held by the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and a complete scribal copy in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC. The first printed edition was produced by Edinburgh printer Robert Waldegrave in 1597. The work was reprinted in London in 1603, the year James ascended to the English throne, and was included in the folio edition of *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince, James*, in 1616. There were further editions in Dutch in 1603, and in Latin in Hanover 1604, Hanau 1607, London 1619 and Frankfurt am Main 1689. There were no reprintings throughout the eighteenth century, and the first modern editions did not appear until 1924, 1966 and 1969. The first scholarly modern edition appeared in James Craigie's *Minor Prose Works of King James VI and I* (1982), while the most reliable recent edition was produced by Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches* (2000).<sup>14</sup>

The format of the treatise is laid out like a Socratic debate between the sceptical Philomathes and the knowledgeable Epistemon, who is clearly a stand-in for the king himself. There are striking parallels between the

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1985) 156–77; P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, "The Fear of the King Is Death: James VI and the Witches of East Lothian," in *Fear in Early Modern Society*, ed. W. G. Naphy and P. Roberts (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) 209–23; Jenny Wormald, "The Witches, the Devil and the King," in *Freedom and Authority: Scotland, c.1050–c.1650*, ed. T. Brotherstone and D. Ditchburn (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000) 165–80; Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000); Julian Goodare, "The Scottish Witchcraft Panic," *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. J. Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 51–72; Elizabeth Mack, "The *Malleus Maleficarum* and King James: Defining Witchcraft," *Voces Novae* 1/1 (2009): 181–203; Lizanne Henderson, "Detestable Slaves of the Devil': Changing Ideas about Witchcraft in Sixteenth Century Scotland," *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland, 1000 to 1600*, ed. Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011) 226–53.

<sup>14</sup> Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 11–14; James Craigie, ed., James VI, *Minor Prose Works: "Daemonologie," "The True Lawe of Free Monarchies," "A Counterblast to Tobacco," "A Declaration of Sports"* (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1982).

structure and basic content of *Daemonologie* and other such tracts from the period, such as Lambert Daneau's treatise *De veneficiis* (1564) (later known as *Les Sorciers, Dialogue très utile et très nécessaire pour ce temps*), the first French-language book on the subject, translated into English as *A Dialogue of Witches* (1575). Daneau, a French Calvinist theologian, set up his argument as a debate between Theophilus, the believer, and Anthony, the sceptic. The rise of witchcraft was due to the "terrible judgment of God against us" for "shamefully and obstinately" rejecting the true faith. There are four main reasons why people choose to become "slaves unto Satan": distrust in God, vanity, poverty and power. The most likely sort to fall under his sway are the "country men, ignorant and poor people," as well as those who are vain and proud of mind, or those in search of knowledge, "being desirous to know things to come and foretell them to others ... by which means many of the honourable and learned sort are seduced by Satan." Ultimately, Daneau concludes, all magics that witches enacted were illusions of the Devil, produced by "natural means and causes," for only God can perform true miracles.<sup>15</sup>

It is often asserted, correctly, that the royal tract is not particularly original, but in a Scottish context it definitely was. James's concern was to resolve the doubts of many concerning "the fearefull aboundinge at this time in this contrie, of these detestable slaves of the Devill, the Witches or enchaunters."<sup>16</sup> It is of great interest that this tract, right at the beginning of the witchcraft debate in Scotland, was directed against the error of the Sadducees, who denied the existence of spirits, because that is where the debate would end over a hundred years later. James was particularly concerned to refute the sceptical views of Dutch physician Johann Weyer, author of *De Praestigiis Daemonum* (*The Illusion of Demons*, 1563), a treatise that has "conventionally been regarded as a landmark in the emergence of full-scale doubt" of witchcraft. He also sought to silence England's leading voice against the witch-hunts, Reginald Scot, who wrote *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584).<sup>17</sup> *Daemonologie* is important, first because it is the only such publication to be written by a king, and second because James anticipated many of the arguments that were to follow in subsequent years. Stuart Clark has patronizingly suggested that all James could achieve in Scotland was witch-hunting and a pamphlet on the Book of Revelation. He is equally

<sup>15</sup> Lambert Daneau, *De veneficiis* (Geneva: Apud Eustathium Vignon, 1564), translated into English as *A Dialogue of Witches, in Foretime Named Lot-tellers and Now Commonly Called Sorcerers* (London: Richard Watkins, 1575).

<sup>16</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie in Forme of a Dialogue*. 1597 (London: The Bodley Head, 1924) preface xi.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 198; George Mora, ed., *Witches, Devils and Doctors in the Renaissance: Johann Weyer, De Praestigiis Daemonum* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998).

misleading in implying that *Daemonologie* is somehow a more fulsome discussion of ideal kingship than either the *Basilicon Doron* or *The True Law of Free Monarchies*. However, Clark is right to indicate that James finds clues about correct regal approaches in his examination of the “other,” namely alleged diabolical activity. Thus James preserves a sceptical view of witchcraft alongside his warnings about Satan’s threat to the world.<sup>18</sup>

The discussion is introduced by Philomathes asking Epistemon what he thinks of the subject on everyone’s lips, namely witches. Epistemon replies that they are surely wonderful: “I think so cleare and plaine confessions in that purpose, have never fallen out in anie age or cuntrey,” somewhat of an exaggeration given continental precedents. The central question is whether witchcraft and witches exist, to which the confident response is that they are proven by scripture, daily experience and confessions. The detail in the various examples cited in the text are of less interest in a secular age than they were in one when many regarded the Bible as the most important book in existence. Suffice it to say, Epistemon relies heavily on scripture. For example, Satan can transform himself into an angel of light, which is to say he could take the shape or form of anything he wished. The reason God permits such things is related to the Fall in the Garden of Eden, which placed humankind in the hands of the Devil, to whom many succumb because “the greatest and grossest impiety is the pleasantest and most delightful.” There are two types who are ensnared by Satan: magi or necromancers, and sorcerers or witches. All human beings are tempted by three passions, namely curiosity, thirst for revenge and greed for wealth. Curiosity motivates the magi, who contemplate and interpret divine and heavenly sciences. The motives of witches are less laudable. Basically many of those who become witches do so through ignorance, whereas the learned acquire knowledge in return for some devilish trifles, which nonetheless represent a Faustian bargain, whereby the Devil obtains possession of body and soul, “a very inequitable contract!”<sup>19</sup>

The Devil’s rudiments include charms commonly used by “daffe wives” for detecting stolen goods and for preservation from the evil eye, through the use of herbs or rowan twigs. Other measures include the divinatory ritual of turning the riddle and using magical knots (*les novements d’arquillettesto*) to prevent married couples from conceiving. Learned men study astronomy, a useful and respectable subject, whereas astrology is evil because it is used to foretell the future, something known only to God.<sup>20</sup> Philomathes objects that many honest, well-meaning men and women use charms. To accuse

<sup>18</sup> Clark, “King James’s *Daemonologie*,” 167, 173.

<sup>19</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 2, 6, 7–8.

<sup>20</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 11–14. Robert Burns refers to magical knots as “mystic knots,” James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) vol. 1, 170. The phenomenon is central to Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

them of witchcraft seems excessive. However, Epistemon replies that the Devil is extremely crafty, always seeking to entrap humanity, thus endorsing the proverb “they that sup kail with the Devill have need of long spoons.” It is hinted that there is no harm in accusing the ignorant because, among them, devilry may always be present. Those who enter into a contract with the Devil may call upon him in the likeness of a dog, a cat, an ape or some such like other beast; his followers also receive special abilities.<sup>21</sup>

Philomathes finds it strange that some magistrates (or kings) who are severe punishers of witches are nonetheless great admirers of magicians. How could God allow Moses to acquire all the sciences of the Egyptians? He is told that rulers may act out of ignorance or contempt. There is no reason to suppose that all the sciences Moses learned included magic, and if he did acquire such knowledge he probably forgot it during forty years in the desert! Normally, proven magicians deserve the same punishment as witches, which is hardly surprising given the original sense of the word *maleficos*, which embraced both witch and magician.<sup>22</sup> The interest in these passages from *Daemonologie* lies in the democratic assumption that the learned are potentially as vulnerable to evil as anyone else.

In the second book, it is once again objected that many cannot believe there is such a thing as witchcraft. Scriptural citations seem to refer to magicians and necromancers rather than witches. Many of those who confessed to witchcraft were possessed of “very melancholic imaginations.” Furthermore, if witches had the power “of witching folks to death” no one would be left alive in the whole world. Epistemon responds that, according to the law of God, all magicians, divines, enchanters, sorcerers, witches and all that consult with the Devil are compromised. Melancholy, or depression, is dismissed as “a short cloak to cover their knavery with.” Such illness often develops into madness, while the afflicted grow pale and skinny, but those accused or convicted of witchcraft are often the opposite: rich, worldly wise, sometimes corpulent and merry.<sup>23</sup> As to the third point, witches are forbidden to wipe out the world’s population because God limited their power before the Creation. The debate continues to disappoint as it is explained how the Devil uses the promise of riches to seduce the poor and actual riches to suborn the wealthy. The lonely or the sick are also tempted by the Devil. In all cases he makes them renounce God and baptism, marking them in a secret place before he gradually schools them in the dark arts at subsequent meetings.

There follows a long rigmarole about the Devil seducing individuals; he prefers those who have “an entresse ready for him,” such as evil dispositions or contempt for God. The Devil operates by indulging in actions that are the

<sup>21</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 15–16, 19.

<sup>22</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 21–6. See also Chapter 1.

<sup>23</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 28, 30.

inverse of God's, but in other ways he imitates God by, for example, holding services in churches and occupying pulpits. Epistemon reports that even the kissing of the Devil's arse, though it may seem ridiculous, is in imitation of Moses in Exodus, viewing the hinder parts of God (Exodus 33:23).<sup>24</sup>

A very confused section concerns Philomathes' question as to how witches manage to attend their illegal conventions. Epistemon, presumably representing James's own view, admits that he thinks that in this case the witches are deluded. It might be possible for them to travel by normal methods, but it is also believable, says he, that they could be carried through the air, just as Habakkuk was transported by the angel. However, he draws the line at the assertion that they are transformed into little creatures that can enter buildings through tiny holes in the wall. Some claim that their bodies lie still "as in an ecstasy" while their spirits are carried off to other places. Indeed, witnesses testify that they see the bodies lying senseless while their owners report travelling afar.<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps surprising that Epistemon (or James) in a treatise arguing the reality of witches and witchcraft should admit to doubts about some of their supposed abilities, but such doubts are common in the works of contemporary demonologists, who did not seem to realize that to doubt some witch belief might lead to scepticism about all of it. Nicolas Remy, a judge from Lorraine and author of *Demonolatriy* (1595), expressed similar doubts about animal shapeshifting, but presented a case for the reality of the witches' flight to "nocturnal synagogues" or sabbats.<sup>26</sup> The exorcist for the duke of Lorraine, Francesco Maria Guazzo, was an Italian monk of the Order of St Ambrose and author of *Compendium Maleficarum* (1608), which also defended night-flying but adamantly rejected the notion of human-animal metamorphosis.<sup>27</sup>

For his part, Philomathes is reminded of "old wives trattles (while sitting) about the fire." Clearly coming round to his discussant's point of view, he considers that many of the bewitched's claims are illusory. His bias shows when remarking that to be shrunk "and yet feele no paine; I thinke it is so contrarie to the qualitie of an naturall bodie, and so like to the little transubstantiate God in the papistes masse, that I can never beleeve it." As to the form of spiritual transportation, he asserts that the soul leaving the body is the definition of natural death, "and who are once dead, God forbid wee should thinke that it should lie in the power of all the Devils in Hell, to restore them to their life again." Rather, he thinks, the Devil dulls their senses, possibly with the use of drugs (as the poets write of Morpheus),

<sup>24</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 32, 37.

<sup>25</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 38–9.

<sup>26</sup> Nicolas Remy, *Demonolatriy*, trans. E. Ashwin (1595; London, 1930) qtd in Brian P. Levack, ed., *Witchcraft Sourcebook* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004) 82–7.

<sup>27</sup> Francesco Maria Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, ed. M. Summers (1608; 1929; New York: Dover, 1988) 33–53.

rendering their bodies senseless while they dream of their fantastic journeys. Philomathes seems to have the North Berwick case in mind when he speaks of women removing joints from corpses to make powder.<sup>28</sup>

Concerning one of the heinous clichés of witchcraft literature, Epistemon is asked, why are there twenty women involved in the craft for every one man? The answer is simple: feminine frailty, as exemplified by Eve and the Serpent. There is further discussion on spells, the use of wax pictours or figures, and the affliction of illness by witches. The Devil does not discriminate. God permits him to tempt “three kinde of folks” – the wicked for their horrible sins, the godly who may be possessed of sins, infirmities and weaknesses of faith of which they are unaware, and third, some of the “best” sort – the great ones in society. No one is spared. All must daily fight the Devil in a hundred ways. Witchcraft affects humanity like the plague. The greatest defence against witchery is religion. In the time of papistry, says Epistemon, our fathers erring grossly, permitted the Devil to walk more familiarly among them, but matters have now improved. Part two concludes with the reflection that since the Devil is the very opposite of God, there could be no better way to know God than by the contrary:

by the falshood of the one to consider the truthe of the other, by the injustice of the one, to consider the Iustice of the other: And by the cruelty of the one, to consider the mercifulness of the other: And so forth in all the rest of the essence of God, and qualities of the Devill. But I feare indeede, there be over many sadducees in this worlde that denies all kindes of spirites: For convicting of whose errour, there is cause inough if there were no more, that God should permit at some-times spirits visiblie to kyith [appear].<sup>29</sup>

The third book opens by describing the four kinds of devils, which “affrayeth and troubleth the bodies of men.” The first is in houses or solitary places; the second where spirits follow individuals, troubling them at various times; the third, possession; and fourth, fairies. In this section we encounter possibly the first Scottish reference to diabolical landscapes: the devils haunt solitary places,

that they may affraie and brangle [confuse] the more the faithe of such as them alone hauntes such places. For our nature is such, as in companies wee are not so soone mooved to anie such kinde of feare, as being

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<sup>28</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 40–3; among Agnes Sampson’s diabolical crimes was the making of magical powder from the joints of unearthed corpses. Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 392.

<sup>29</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 42–55.



solitaire, which the Devill knowing well inough, he will not therefore assaile us but when we are weake.

A little later Philomathes asks why Satan is so active in wild parts of the world, like Finland, Lapland, Orkney and Shetland, to be told that where he finds the greatest ignorance and barbarity there he “assayles grosseliest.” Understandably, in Epistemon’s mind, the ignorant included more females than males. Some of these female witches had willingly succumbed to the Devil’s overtures and so became “feltred the sikarer [entangled more securely] in his snares.”<sup>30</sup>

Incubi and succubi are described in some detail. With the aid of such demons, sex becomes extremely ugly. Given its source, the Devil’s sperm is cold, for he steals it from dead bodies. If he wishes he can make his victim appear pregnant and then, at delivery, make her suffer great pains as in a natural birth, slipping into the midwife’s hands, a stalk, or some monstrous bairn brought from elsewhere. Some believe such things, but Philomathes does not.

The next topic is demoniacs, whose madness was manifested in pre-Reformation times by raging at holy water, retreating rapidly from the cross and their torment at hearing the name of God. Another sign was speaking in tongues. There follows a discussion of fairies, who were allegedly more numerous “in the time of papistrie.” They enjoyed the same pleasures as humankind, but according to Epistemon those who visited the glistening courts of Fairyland to meet the Fairy Queen were actually in a coma-like state induced by the Devil. Fairies could foretell death and could make themselves visible to the Devil as well as to humans. According to James, accused witches pretended that their supposedly diabolical experiences derived from the fairies in hopes of leniency. Consequently a good deal of fairylore survives in accounts of the witch trials.<sup>31</sup> The debate concludes with consideration of the proper punishment for witches, all of whom, irrespective of age, sex or rank, are to be burned, children included. It is admitted that the condemnation of the innocent, so allowing the guilty to escape free, is a great crime, something for which judges should be on the lookout. Witches multiply at the present day on account of the great wickedness of the people and because “the consummation of the world, and our deliverance drawing neare, makes Sathan to rage the more in his instruments, knowing his kingdom to be so neare an ende.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, the Apocalypse is imminent.

A number of points stand out with reference to James VI’s contribution to the demonology debate. The arguments he pursued were repeated time

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<sup>30</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 58, 69.

<sup>31</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 73–5. See also Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001; Edinburgh: John Donald, 2011), 125–6.

<sup>32</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 66–81.

and again over the next century. It is somewhat ironic that although the Presbyterians disagreed with James in every other respect they were at one in their witch beliefs, and the same was true of the Covenanters. King and Kirk were in harmony so far as the anthropology of witchcraft was concerned. James's status – he was, after all, the highest in the land – gave his tract almost invincible authority, even though parts of it, confused as they are, remain quite difficult to understand. James also initiated a cross-border debate in specifically mentioning Reginald Scot, an exchange that would remain in place a century later, when, rather than being internal to Scotland, it largely took place between Scottish believers and English saducees. This was especially true after the execution of Thomas Aikenhead (see below), as few in Scotland were prepared to overtly challenge the Kirk on any subject, let alone witches. A final consideration is that James was well aware that by publishing his material on witches he might “seeme to teach such unlawfull artes, nor to disallow and condemne them, as it is the duetie of all Christians to do.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, by discussing the subject he may inform and encourage its practice, a fear later shared by Francis Hutchinson.<sup>34</sup> Almost at the beginning of the Scottish witch-hunts, James is an exceptional example of the elite contribution to witch belief.

The absence of contemporary publications on witch trials, witch belief or scepticism in Scotland is noteworthy, particularly when compared to England, where many pamphlets on these topics appeared. While print culture was much less well developed in the northern kingdom, it is possible that the existence of *Daemonologie* discouraged rival publications. Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Catholics would largely have agreed with the monarch's arguments, mindful that the text from 1 Samuel, “Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,” was just as relevant when inverted. The Scottish view on witchcraft was thus pretty monolithic. It was almost a century before any Scot challenged the tenor of the king's pamphlet by writing anything remotely sceptical.

## Witchcraft contended

The English sceptic Francis Hutchinson was of the opinion that “the number of witches” throughout Europe increased or decreased in accordance with “the laws, and notions, and principles of the several times, places, and princes.”<sup>35</sup> This point of view has remained current, with a few exceptions, until the present day. The debate in Scotland may be deemed to

<sup>33</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, 77.

<sup>34</sup> On Francis Hutchinson, see section “Repeal and reaction” later in this chapter.

<sup>35</sup> Hutchinson was curate at Bury St Edmund's, which had been subjected to a serious witch-hunt in the mid-sixteenth century. Francis Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (London: R. Knaplock and D. Midwinter, 1718) 67.

have caught fire initially in the later seventeenth century, a period when scholarly discourse on the reality of the supernatural was not only far from moribund, but was actually on the increase. In the unsettled climate of post-Restoration England, a succession of publications appeared, stressing the reality of witchcraft and related supernatural phenomena; these would have been well known to educated Scots. As in Scotland, the authors of tracts in defence of witch belief were mostly concerned with the impending threat of atheism, while the sceptics railed against superstition, idolatry and popery. Polemicists on both sides of the debate utilized the rhetoric of the Bible in order to further specific religious, philosophical and political ideologies. Many English works expressed the view that they were living in a beleaguered community, which spiritually was in a state of siege, under assault as it was from all sides, and threatened by political and religious turmoil, immorality, atheism and sadducism.

Probably the most influential of such works came from the philosopher and member of the Royal Society, Joseph Glanvill and his friend Henry More, the "Cambridge Platonist." Glanvill's *Philosophical Considerations touching Witches and Witchcraft* (1666) went through many editions, and was republished with additions by Henry More as *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681). This collection was hugely significant, a fair number of copies surviving in Scottish libraries; it influenced several Scottish writers, including George Sinclair, Martin Martin and Robert Kirk. Glanvill expressed fears common throughout much of this type of literature, namely that atheists, "the common foes, enemies not only of religion, but to all Government and societies; to mankind,"<sup>36</sup> were as much a threat to ordered society as witches.

The royalist Meric Casaubon (1599–1671) manipulated witchcraft theory in his tract *Of Credulity and Incredulity in things Natural and Civil* (1668) to support his political and theological vision of a unified Christian state that had no place for witches or atheistical sceptics. The work was reissued a year after his death with a revamped title, *A Treatise Proving Spirits, Witches and Supernatural Operations* (1672). Among Casaubon's fiercest critics were John Wagstaffe, in *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* (1671) and the physician John Webster, in *Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (1677). Both Wagstaffe and Webster employed anti-Catholic language, and argued that the real threat of witchcraft came not from defenceless old women but from witchmongers such as Casaubon. However, even these two hearty critics of witchcraft did not deny the possibility of its existence. They chose rather to accept the redefinition of witchcraft as expounded by Thomas Ady, in *Candle in the Dark* (1656), which dismissed the notion that witchcraft was different from, or more heinous than, any other crime. All crime, from this

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *The Zealous and Impartial Protestant* (London: n.p., 1681) 44.

viewpoint, was inspired by the Devil. As Ady had shrewdly pointed out, “we never read in the Scriptures that the Devil may have any supernatural power ascribed to him.” Ady complained that the English were “so infected with this damnable heresie, of ascribing to the power of the witches, that seldom hath a man the hand of God against him in his estate, or health of body, or any way, but presently he cryeth out of some poor innocent neighbour, that he, or she hath bewitched him.”<sup>37</sup>

Richard Bovet, a great admirer of Glanvill and More, produced *Pandaemonium, or the Devil's Cloyster* (1684), which used a combination of biblical authority and his own acquaintance with popular attitudes towards witchcraft, to uphold his firm belief that the “Prince of Darkness hath a very large dominion among the sons of men,” maintaining his familiars in the dark region to assist him in the execution of his hellish purposes. From a political standpoint, at least to judge from his rhetoric, Bovet was simply adopting witchcraft theory to attack Roman Catholicism. He had followed the Somerset witchcraft trials in the 1660s with immense interest, though he was also intrigued by Scottish witchcraft cases. For instance, he cites the high-profile trial of Agnes Sampson (1590–91), and the alleged murder by witches of Sir George Maxwell of Pollock (1677–78). The book, unfortunately for the author, did not sell well, which suggests he had little influence on the literate public at large.<sup>38</sup>

Richard Boulton, who is generally regarded as the last English scholar to write in defence of the reality of witchcraft, produced his *A Compleat History of Magick, Sorcery and Witchcraft* in 1715. A doctor, he was familiar with recent developments in medicine and philosophy, applauding the work of Robert Boyle and citing John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* in support of the possibility of spiritual substance. Since he maintained that the “truth” of such things as witchcraft was “indisputable, being confirmed by the testimony of eye-witnesses, and the undoubted authority of both ancient and modern authors,” he felt no compunction to “trouble the reader with a tedious recital of arguments.”<sup>39</sup> Boulton defended the search for the witch's mark and the use of the swimming test as reliable “proof” of guilt, and drew upon numerous witch trials for supporting evidence, including the recent events at Salem (1692) and at Renfrew (1697).<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Ady, *A Candle in the Dark: Or, a Treatise Concerning the Nature of Witches and Witchcraft: Being Advice to Judges, Sheriffs, Justices of the Peace, and Grand Jury Men, What to Do, Before they Passe Sentence on such as Are Arraigned for Their Lives, as Witches* (London: For R. I. to be sold by Tho. Newberry, 1656) 31, 114.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Bovet, *Pandaemonium, or the Devil's Cloyster* (London: J. Walthoe, 1684) 162.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Boulton, *A Compleat History of Magick, Sorcery and Witchcraft*, 2 vols. (London: E. Curll, 1715) vol. 1, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Boulton, *A Compleat History of Magick*, vol. 1, 1–2. Fulsome coverage of the Christian Shaw case can be found in vol. 2, though there is nothing new in it. He seems to have

With the exception of *The Whole Prophecies of Scotland*,<sup>41</sup> published in 1603 to demonstrate that James's succession to the English throne had long been predicted, and a London reprinting of James's 1597 text *Daemonologie* in that same year, there was very little Scottish commentary on any form of supernatural phenomena until the latter half of the seventeenth century, when a number of significant works became available. John Maitland second Earl, later first Duke of Lauderdale, visited the infamous "Devils of Loudun" in France but was somewhat underwhelmed by the experience, remarking that there were more convincing witches in Scotland. Writing to Richard Baxter some thirty years later, he was saddened that sadducism, "the atheistical denying of spirits should so far prevail" as to be on the increase due to such Catholic impostures as exorcisms and miracles. Another reason was "the too great credulity of some who make everything witchcraft which they do not understand." A third cause, he suggested, was the ignorance of certain judges and juries, "who condemn silly melancholy people upon their own confession, and perhaps slender proofs." However, such considerations did not invalidate witchcraft as such. "It is impertinent arguing to conclude that because there have been cheats in the world, because some are too credulous, and some have been put to death for witches, and were not, therefore all men are deceived."<sup>42</sup>

Sir George Mackenzie of Rosehaugh is credited with relaxing the persecution of witches though, ironically, he is still best remembered as the "Bluidy Advocate Mackenzie," the relentless prosecutor of Covenanters during the reign of Charles II. From a legal standpoint he does not doubt the reality of witchcraft: "That there are witches, divines cannot doubt, since the Word of God hath ordained that no witch shall live; nor lawyers in Scotland, seeing our law ordains it to be punished with death." But because of the horrific nature of the crime, convincing proofs are absolutely essential: "I condemn next to the witches themselves those cruel and too forward judges, who burn persons by thousands as guilty of this crime." To them he offers a number of considerations. No one who knew of God's goodness, the rewards of Heaven

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extracted the information directly from the *Sadducismus Debellatus*. Much has been written about the Salem witch trials. See, for instance, John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (1982; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Frances Hill, *A Delusion of Satan* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996); Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> Edward J. Cowan, "The Discovery of the Future: Prophecy and Second Sight in Scottish History," in *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture*, ed. Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2009) 1–28.

<sup>42</sup> Lauderdale (letter) 12 March 1659, qtd in Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, *A Historical Account of the Belief in Witchcraft in Scotland* (London: Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1884) 219–20; Aldous Huxley, *The Devils of Loudun* (1952; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 273.

and the torments of Hell would ever accept the Devil, who has nothing to offer except lies, and whose followers have gained nothing except the stake. Many of those accused, as he knows from personal experience, are poor, ignorant creatures (often women) who do not understand the charges against them and who “mistake their own fears and apprehensions for witchcraft.” One accused woman asked if it was possible a person could be a witch and not know it. Such people come to grief once imprisoned because of fear, starvation and sleep deprivation, all of which generate profound melancholy, in which condition they will confess to anything. Confessions are almost always extracted by torture; some confess to gain relief from pain and release from miserable lives. The accused often confess to the ridiculous and the fanciful, such as transmutation and the ability to walk through walls. Witnesses frequently use the occasion to settle old scores. Members of commissions are often ignorant of diablerie and law, even though they may be well meaning. The accused have no defendants. Confessions should require proof and the specific charges should be believable – which many are manifestly not: “The Devil cannot transform one species into another, as a woman into a cat, for else he behoved to annihilate some of the substance of the woman or create some more substance to the cat, the one being much more than the other.” As the Devil can inflict diseases so too he can cure them. Mackenzie thinks a clear example of this is the marriage knot that blights conception. Sometimes his wisdom deserted him but, like Lauderdale, his doubts began to cause the appearance of cracks in the monolith of Scottish witch belief.<sup>43</sup>

Relentlessly defensive of the status quo was the tract produced by George Sinclair, professor of Natural Philosophy at Glasgow. He was a specialist in hydrostatics, specifically with reference to the mining industry, for which reason he dedicated his book to his patron the Earl of Winton whose coal mine at Newhaven was one of the wonders of the age. Sinclair’s influential *Satan’s Invisible World Discovered* (1685) was intended as a serious endeavour to persuade those sceptical of the supernatural world by providing:

A Choice Collection of Modern Relations, proving evidently against the Saducees and Atheists of this present Age, that there are Devils, Spirits, Witches, and Apparitions, from Authentick Records, Attestations of Famous Witnesses, and undoubted Verity.

Deeply concerned about the deterioration of belief in witchcraft and related phenomena, Sinclair was resolved upon attacking the “sadducees,” who, for

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<sup>43</sup> Sir George Mackenzie, *The Laws and Customes of Scotland in Matters Criminal Wherein Is to be Seen How the Civil Law, and the Other Laws and Customes of Other Nations Do Agree with, and Supply Ours* (Edinburgh: J. Glen, 1678) 80–108. More conveniently available in Levack, ed., *Witchcraft Sourcebook*, 158–62.

him, were nothing less than atheists. By providing “evidence” for the existence of witches drawn from Scotland, England and the continent, he was, in effect, demonstrating the existence of God. In a substantial introduction he asks why there is so much atheism in the world. The reasons are many, he writes, but he will mention only two:

Firstly there are a monstrous rable of men, who following the Hobbesian and Spinosian principles, slight Religion, and undervalue the Scripture, because there is such an express mention of Spirits and Angels in it, which their thick and plumbeous capacities cannot conceive. Whereupon they think, that all contained in the Universe comes under the notion of things material, and bodies only: and consequently, No God, no Devil, no Spirit, no Witch.

The second reason is the “absurd principles of the Cartesian Philosophy.” Witchcraft testimonials are not to be dismissed as the tricks of fraudsters, the rantings of deluded old women, or “the melancholious fits of distempered persons.” He takes his stance with Lauderdale and Mackenzie – the fact that innocent victims have undoubtedly perished during witch-panics does not, in his view, invalidate prosecution, for the guilty had suffered as well.<sup>44</sup> His importance lies in his having collected whatever printed evidence he could find of Satan’s occupation of Scotland. His collection of assorted bits and pieces was perfect for future plagiarization by the printers of chapbooks or partial looting for inclusion in other books. Sinclair thus most likely helped spread knowledge of witches and devils among folk curious about such matters, not least the increasing numbers of the newly literate who thus found the witch beliefs of their predecessors receiving reinforcement.

Motivated by identical sentiments to Sinclair was Rev. Robert Kirk. As discussed in Chapter 1, he completed the original, handwritten manuscript of *The Secret Common-Wealth* in 1691, gathering evidence, collected locally, on the reality of fairies and of second sight, an appropriate topic for a seventh son. In it he makes occasional mention of witches, revealing a curious blend of mainstream demonological convention peppered with distinct regional twists. Witches, he speculated, seem to have taken pleasure in “whistling and shreeking (like unluckey birds) in their unhallowed Synagogues and Sabbaths.” They made use of a “sleepie ointment,” an unction rubbed on the eyes that, when applied, “troubles their fantasie.” The eyes of the witch were unlike normal human eyes for in them “the beholder cannot see his

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<sup>44</sup> George Sinclair, *Satan’s Invisible World Discovered*, ed. Coleman O. Parsons (Edinburgh: John Reid, 1685; Gainseville: Scholars’ Facsimilies and Reprints, 1969) Preface, A 4 v.

own image reflected."<sup>45</sup> The significance of witches' eyes is furthered with a discussion about the evil eye for "some [witches] are of so venomous a constitutione, by being radicated in envy and malice, that they pierce and kill (like a Cockatrice) whatever creatur they first set their eye on in the morning."<sup>46</sup> A man who once lived in Aberfoyle, the same parish as Kirk, was said to have killed his own cow after commenting on its fatness, and "shot a hare" with his eyes after praising its swiftness, "such was the infection of an evil eye." He draws a comparison between the biblical woman of Endor (1 Samuel 28:7), who could, with the assistance of a familiar spirit, raise the dead, with the Highland "*Tabhaisder* or Seer" who could use a spell to summon the fairies. Further comparisons are drawn between the "astral" or assumed bodies adopted by witches and werewolves during their alleged state of metamorphosis, and it was stated that if injured while in that state, the wound would appear on their "true bodies."<sup>47</sup> Kirk makes reference to the "damnable practice of evil angels," who suck the "blood and spirits out of Witches bodys (till they drein them, into a deformed and dry leanness) to feed their own vehicles [bodies], leaving what wee call the Witches mark behind." It is uncertain if Kirk's "evil angels" should be understood to be equivalent to the incubus/succubus tradition or if he has familiar spirits in mind. There is no doubt, however, about the "Witches mark":

A spot that I have seen as a small mole horny and brown coloured, throw which mark, when a large brass pin was thrust (both in buttock, nose, and roof of the mouth) till it bowed and became crooked; the Witches, both men and women, neither felt a pain, nor did bleed, nor knew the precise time when this was a doing to them (their eyes only being covered).<sup>48</sup>

Kirk's phraseology here would suggest that he had personally been witness to the pricking of witches, though he makes no mention of when or where, or if it was during a formal trial or investigation.

Kirk's comments on witches and witchcraft, albeit relatively brief, suggest he believed in their reality as much as he believed in the existence of fairies and second sight. Much of his manuscript is taken up with his attempt to come to terms with conceptions about the soul, with the purpose behind supernatural communications, and making connections with (while also drawing distinctions between) angels, fairies and the dead. Unsurprisingly for

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Hunter, *The Occult Laboratory: Magic, Science and Second Sight in Late Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001) 80, 95.

<sup>46</sup> Kirk defines the Cockatrice as "a serpent killing man and beast with his breath and sight," known also in medieval bestiaries as the Basilisk. Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 95, 112.

<sup>47</sup> Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 82, 83, 95.

<sup>48</sup> Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 103.



a minister, Kirk refers to angels fairly frequently. Belief in angels was, even in post-Reformation Scotland, relatively uncontroversial for there was support for their existence in both the Old and New Testament. What is, perhaps, surprising was his conviction that the fairies, for which there was no biblical authority, made themselves apparent to humans as a means of providing evidence “of a Dietie, of Spirits ... of the orders, and degrees of Angels” against the arguments of the doubters and sceptics, the “Sadducees, Socinians and Atheists.”<sup>49</sup> Where, exactly, in a hierarchical sense, Kirk thought fairies might fit, in relation to angels, to humans and to Creation itself, is harder to establish.<sup>50</sup> There is much discussion in his treatise on the relationship between fairies and the dead, including a description of “creatures that move invisibly in a house, and cast huge great stones,” a phenomenon known elsewhere as a poltergeist. Kirk’s explanation is that this is caused by the restless dead, or “souls that have not attained their rest,” who desire to expose a murder or other injuries received, or to reveal hidden treasure.<sup>51</sup>

Physical disturbances believed to be created by spirits and poltergeists, or other supernatural beings, were also recorded in the Lowlands. The following two accounts, while not concerned with witchcraft specifically, are about the existence of the spirit world and the limits of its earthly manifestations, issues that lay at the heart of the concurrent witchcraft debate. Clergymen are also centrally involved in both stories.

Alexander Telfair (or Telfer) produced an account of poltergeist and other malevolent activity believed to be inspired by the demonic at a spirit-haunted house in the Galloway parish of Rerrick, printed at Edinburgh in 1696 with the title *A True Relation of an Apparition, Expressions and Actings of a Spirit which infested the House of Andrew Mackie*, and in London the same year as *A New Confutation of Sadducism*. Telfair, the local minister, published his account of the phenomenon to confute the

prevailing Spirit of Atheism, and Infidelity in our time, denying both in Opinion and Practice the Existence of Spirits, either of God or Devils; and consequently a Heaven and Hell: And imputing the Voices, Apparitions and Actings of Good, or Evil Spirits, to the Melancholick Disturbance or Distemper of the Brains and Fancies of those, who pretend to hear, see, or feel them.

Telfair also hoped to convince everyone to praise the Lord for destroying the Devil’s works, designed to propagate his Kingdom of Darkness. This

<sup>49</sup> Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 96.

<sup>50</sup> Lizanne Henderson, “Tündérek, angyalok és a holtak földje: Robert Kirk *Lychmobiuous People* című műve”, *Test, Lélek, Szellemek és Természetfeletti Kommunikáció*, Szerkesztette Éva Pócs (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2015) 368–85.

<sup>51</sup> Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 85.

episode, centred on the farm of Ringcroft, occupied by Andrew Mackie, his wife and family, was witnessed by Telfair and five other ministers, as well as the local laird, Charles Maclellan of Collin, and at least eight other local residents. It was reported to the minister that Andrew Mackie, having taken the mason-word, offered his first child to the Devil. The Masonic Order had been around in Scotland for over a hundred years but was still a little understood object of suspicion in many quarters.<sup>52</sup> Mackie denied that he knew anything about the Masons. There was a story that a previous tenant had some trouble with disturbances. but when a buried tooth was removed from the house's threshold there were no further problems.

However, shortly thereafter, Andrew's beasts allegedly broke free from their tethers, peats went on fire of their own accord and stones were thrown at the house. Furniture and household implements were moved around. The stone-throwing continued throughout. Telfair himself was a target; he and others were beaten with an invisible staff. Once at prayer he beheld "a little white hand and arm from the elbow down" before it vanished. Mackie, his three children and a friend stated they had encountered a boy of fourteen, presumably the owner of the arm, who disappeared before their eyes. The spirit then stepped up the pace, gripping Mackie by the hair and hauling him around the house, pulling the children's covers off their bed and beating them. It started to call out "Wisht, wisht"! The stones became bigger, folk bled, staffs rattled round the place. Then, under a stone on the floor, they found "seven small bones, with blood, and some flesh, all closed in a piece of old suddled [filthy] paper; the blood was fresh and bright!" The mysterious deposit was presented to Telfair. William MacMinn, blacksmith, was wounded on the head; a ploughsock and a trough-stone were thrown at him. None of these missiles, apart from the stones, appeared to harm. Fires broke out. Then Mackie found a letter written and sealed in blood, the words of which made no sense. Such missives were clearly satanic, but they were unusual in Scotland, being more common in New England, where they were known to record demonic pacts. All those who had lived in the house since it was built twenty-eight years earlier were summoned and made to approach the mysterious bones. This was an old test whereby if the bones were touched by the guilty party, that is the murderer, they would bleed. It failed to achieve a result.

The disturbances continued, the spirit became bolder and more vociferous, "wishting, groaning and whistling"; it was disappointingly repetitive and uninventive, but eventually it began to speak, threatening the occupants with being taken away. Fires continued to break out. In the final climax, when Maclellan the Laird was praying with some other neighbours,

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<sup>52</sup> David Stevenson, *The Origins of Free Masonry: Scotland's Century 1590-1710* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) passim.

“he observed a *Black Thing* in the corner of the barn, and it did increase, as if it would fill the whole house; he could not discern it to have any form; but as if it had been a *Black Cloud*, it was affrighting to them all.” It threw chaff and mud upon the faces of those present, many of whom were gripped or seized by the “thing.” This went on for a couple of hours until silence fell. Next day, which happened to be Beltane, 1 May, a small sheep house burst into flames, but the sheep were saved. Thereafter there was no more trouble. The narrative breaks down, nothing is explained, but most important of all, Satan has been overcome. The tract was clearly intended as a contribution to the anti-deist controversy. Telfair took care to emphasize that the spirit’s assaults tended to be directed at divines such as himself, and in his view the inclusion of so many ministers as witnesses to these strange happenings, not to mention the local laird, constituted proof positive that they had actually taken place.<sup>53</sup>

Another popular account, which was circulating in chapbook form throughout the eighteenth century, was the story of *The Laird of Cool’s Ghost*. Based on events that allegedly took place in the 1720s, it first appeared in print in 1762 and went through several reprints, including one in 1795, from the press of George Miller of Haddington, East Lothian, who reprinted it alongside *An Account of Some Imaginary Apparitions; The Effect of Fraud and Fear, Comical Sayings of Paddy from Cork*, as well as an almanac and items on the subject of prophecy, hurricanes and earthquakes.<sup>54</sup> The Laird in question was one Thomas Maxwell of Cool from the parish of Buittle, Galloway, who died in 1724. His spectre appeared before William Ogilvie, also a Galloway man, who was then minister of Innerwick, East Lothian, while he was out riding one evening. Ogilvie, for some unexplained reason, threw his cane at the apparition and watched as it passed right through it, landing at some distance away. The ghost then introduced himself as the Laird of Cool, and Ogilvie took the opportunity to question the restless spirit about the after-life; “give me some information about the affairs of the other world.” But Cool was evasive, preferring to talk instead about an unpaid debt and his

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<sup>53</sup> Alexander Telfair, *A True Relation of an Apparition, Expressions and Actings of a Spirit Which Infested the House of Andrew Mackie in Ring-Croft of Stocking, in the Parish of Rerrick, in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright, in Scotland* (Edinburgh: George Mossman, 1696); idem, *A New Confutation of Sadducism, being a True Narrative of the Wonderful Expressions and Actions of a Spirit Which Infested the House of Andrew Mackie of Ringcroft in the County of Galloway in Scotland, from February to May 1695. Containing, Amongst other Things, Predictions as to Future Times, in a Letter Writ with Blood, and Dropt by the Said Spirit* (London: Andrew Bell, 1696). The Edinburgh pamphlet was also reprinted in Law, *Memorials*, appendix, and T. G. Stevenson’s 1871 reprint of Sinclair, *Satan’s Invisible World*, supplement, xix–xxxix.

<sup>54</sup> Edward J. Cowan and Mike Paterson, *Folk in Print: Scotland’s Chapbook Heritage 1750–1850* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007) 15, 33.

desire for Ogilvie to relay his message from beyond the grave and find a way to repay the debt, which would, presumably, allow him to find eternal rest.

Ogilvie relays the narrative as a memorate, as a true encounter, but his interpretation of the meeting is unclear. As a minister he may have inclined towards viewing the incidence as a trick of the Devil, and to use the episode as an indirect argument against, rather than for, the existence of ghosts. The cover of the chapbook might suggest this interpretation as it sported a black Devil figure brandishing a sceptre, complete with horns, wings and cloven hooves. Ogilvie may have also intended the narrative to stand as witness to his religious convictions. When Cool tries to tell Ogilvie to fear him not, the minister is quick to reply, "I am not afraid; for I know He in whom I trust is stronger than all of you put together." Ogilvie asks if he has received his judgment from God, to which Cool responds, not yet for "there is no trial, no sentence till the last day. The heaven good men enjoy immediately after death, consists in the serenity of their minds, the satisfaction of a good conscience, and the certain hope of glory everlasting."<sup>55</sup> It is not even clear if Ogilvie wished the encounter to be shared in print, as it was published posthumously. Whatever the intention, stories like this one were still in demand from a growing reading public throughout the Age of Enlightenment and beyond.

Returning to tracts about witchcraft, the anonymous *Witchcraft Proven* (1697) and John Bell of Gladsmuir's *Tryal of Witchcraft* (1700 or 1705) both deal with witchcraft generally, rather than dwelling on particular cases.<sup>56</sup> It has been suggested that *Witchcraft Proven* was inspired by the publicity surrounding the Christian Shaw case in 1697 (discussed below), though the episode itself is not mentioned in the tract, of which only two copies exist, both in the Ferguson collection of Glasgow University library.<sup>57</sup> The author begins by attempting to prove the existence of spirits without which there would be no Heaven or Hell, rehearsing the old argument that

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<sup>55</sup> William Ogilvie, *The Laird of Cool's Ghost: Being, a Wonderful and True Account of Several Conferences Betwixt the Revd. Mr Ogilvie, Late Minister of the Gospel at Innerwick, and the Ghost of the Deceast Mr Maxwell, Late Laird of Cool. Written by Mr. Ogilvie's Own Hand, and Found in His Closet After His Death, Which Happened Very Soon After These Conferences* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1784; Dumfries: n.p., 1786).

<sup>56</sup> Christina Lerner, "Two Late Scottish Witchcraft Tracts: *Witch-Craft Proven* and *The Tryal of Witchcraft*", in *The Damned Art: Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft*, ed. S. Anglo (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977) 227–45. Probably erroneously, C. K. Sharpe names John Bell of Gladsmuir as the author of *Witchcraft Proven, Arreign'd, and Condemn'd, &c., by a Lover of Truth* (Glasgow: Robert Sanders, 1697), in his *History of Witchcraft in Scotland*, 259.

<sup>57</sup> GUL Sp Coll Ferguson Al-c.25, Anon., *Witchcraft Proven, Arreign'd, and Condemn'd in Its Professors, Professions and Marks: By Diverse Pungent, and Convincing Arguments, Excerpted Forth of the Most Authentick Authors, Divine and Humane, Ancient and Modern. By a Lover of the Truth* (Glasgow: Robert Sanders, 1697).

disbelief in witches amounts to disbelief in God. He describes the sabbat, the witches meeting in churches, black candles burning around the pulpit and the Devil offering praise for recent heinous acts, all slightly reminiscent of elements within *Newes from Scotland* (1591). The diabolical congregation often enjoyed meat, drink and music. By anointing themselves with ointments, made on the orders of the Devil, they were transported through the air. The Demonic Pact is then described, and he proceeds to describe six marks or characteristics of bewitchment. The first three are the inability of the bewitched to drown when submerged in water; their inability to cry; and their inability to repeat the Ten Commandments, The Lord's Prayer and the Confession of Faith. The other three marks are much less common in witchcraft literature. One is serpentine sight, which approximates to the Evil Eye. Bizarrely, another mark is the witch's habit of urinating when salt was burned, so supposedly conjuring memories of brimstone and therefore of the stench of Hell. A final mark is an evil odour emitting from the witch. Overall, however, the arguments put forward in *Witchcraft Proven* were becoming old-fashioned and dated.

The first part of Bell's *Tryal of Witchcraft* (1700 or 1705) investigates the bewitching of individuals by causing disease.<sup>58</sup> Many diseases, he argues, are due to natural causes, but illness resulting from witchcraft is one that has no natural explanation. Its manifestations include sudden swellings or fits, vomiting of strange objects and paralysis. A second section is concerned with how to unbewitch a person. Bell's answer is fasting and prayer while awaiting God's blessing: "if we would prevent Witches, and whatever else the Devil can do, let us always rely on God." Third, in a rather confused passage he deals with proofs and presumptions of witchcraft. He then discusses the Diabolic Pact. Bell is careful to cite his authorities. The late Christina Lerner makes the very interesting point that both tracts "use the words league and covenant" for the Demonic Pact, a neat inversion in this covenant-fixated decade.<sup>59</sup>

*A True and Full Relation of the Witches at Pittenweem* follows exactly the same theme in attacking the new sort of sadducees, who "as they deny the existence of good spirits, deny evil spirits also, and the possessing of, and covenanting with witches." The anonymous author claims that the evidence for witches is so overwhelming that it cannot be ignored. He too, unsurprisingly, examines the recent witchcraft trials at Renfrew to support his argument, touching on the classics and the Bible, while also alluding

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<sup>58</sup> John Bell of Gladsmuir, *The Tryal of Witchcraft: Or, Witchcraft Arraign'd and Condemn'd: In Some Answers to a Few Questions Anent Witches and Witchcraft. Wherein Is Shewed, How to Know if One be a Witch, as Also When One Is Bewitched: With Some Observations Upon the Witches Mark, Their Compact with the Devil, the White Witches &c.* (Glasgow: n.p., 1700 or 1705).

<sup>59</sup> Lerner, "Two late Scottish witchcraft tracts," 235.

to contemporary events in America – the Salem witch trials of 1692 were still a relatively fresh memory – and to Lapland, well known as the abode of witches and magic, all by way of introducing the current situation at Pittenweem.<sup>60</sup>

It has been argued that Scottish resistance to the cessation of witch-hunting and repeal of the witchcraft acts was in part conditioned by concerns about religion and identity arising from the Union of 1707,<sup>61</sup> and there is some truth in this. Throughout Lowland Scotland the covenanting revolution and its aftermath were recent, extremely bitter memories. The Covenanters were those who subscribed the National Covenant of 1638 and/or the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643,<sup>62</sup> the inheritors of the Presbyterian ideas of Andrew Melville together with the latter's anti-monarchical views and his dedication to the separation of church and state.<sup>63</sup> They believed that they had entered into a contract, or covenant in the Old Testament sense, with God that was valid for eternity and thus could not

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<sup>60</sup> *A True and Full Relation of the Witches at Pittenweem. To which is added by way of preface, an Essay for proving the existence of Good and Evil Spirits, relating to the Witches at Pittenweem, now in custody, with Arguments against the Sadducism of the Present Age* (Edinburgh: John Reid, 1704) 3–7. A notorious Scottish witch-hunter in Lapland was John Cunningham. See Rune Blix Hagen, "At the Edge of Civilisation: John Cunningham, Lensmann of Finnmark, 1619–51," in *Military Governors and Imperial Frontiers c.1600–1800: A Study of Scotland and Empires*, ed. A. MacKillop and Steve Murdoch (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 29–51.

<sup>61</sup> Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations, c. 1650–c.1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 21–37; idem, "Witchcraft Repealed," in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 309–34.

<sup>62</sup> Edward J. Cowan, "The Making of the National Covenant," in *The Scottish National Covenant in Its British Context, 1638–51*, ed. J. Morrill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990) 68–89; Edward J. Cowan, "The Solemn League and Covenant," in *Scotland and England, 1286–1815*, ed. R. A. Mason (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1987) 182–202.

<sup>63</sup> There is a vast bibliography on the Covenanters. See, in general, John Howie of Lochgoin, *The Scots Worthies, Containing a Brief Historical Account of the Most Eminent Nobleman, Gentleman, Ministers, and Others Who Testified or Suffered for the Cause of Reformation in Scotland, from the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century to the Year 1688* (1775; Glasgow: W. R. M'Phun, 1846); James King Hewison, *The Covenanters*, 2 vols. (1908; rev. edn Glasgow: John Smith, 1913); Gordon Donaldson, *Scotland: James V to VII* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965) 358–84; David Stevenson, *The Scottish Revolution, 1637–44: The Triumph of the Covenanters* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973); Ian B. Cowan, *The Scottish Covenanters, 1660–1668* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1976); Edward J. Cowan, *Montrose: For Covenant and King* (London: Weidenfeld, 1977); A. I. Macinnes, *Charles I and the Making of the Covenanting Movement, 1625–41* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1991). The classic account remains Robert Wodrow, *The History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland from the Restoration to the Revolution*, 4 vols. (1721–22; Glasgow: Blackie, Fullarton & Co., 1828) esp. vol. 4.

be broken. They orchestrated a revolution in pursuit of political, as well as religious, reformation, which led to a bitter civil war and the execution of Charles I in 1649, following which, sensing the imminent creation of their much sought-after theocracy, they prepared for the brave new world.

News of Charles's beheading reached the Scottish Parliament five days after the event. It had passed an act against consulters with devils and familiar spirits reiterating, as legislated in the act of 1563, that they and "all witches, sorcerers and necromancers" were to be punished by death. Consulters, wrongly and foolishly, did "yet dream to themselves with impunity because they were not mentioned in the act." Subsequent legislation of the same parliament prescribed death for worshippers of false gods, those subjects who "trade in their civil affairs with heathens, whose abominations they may possibly adorn and thereby be defiled and defile others." Children over the age of sixteen who were beaters and cursers of parents were to be executed; those under-age would be punished according to the seriousness of their crime, "that others may hear and fear and not do the like." There were also laws concerning sabbatarianism, fornication, incest, the poor, the abolition of patronage and the codification of the law; for blasphemy the sentence was death. The core icons of Mosaic law were to be regarded as sacred items carried forward to the next generation as part of covenanting religious and cultural baggage. In 1649–50 there were over thirty commissions for the trying or burning of witches, but there was no further relevant legislation after 1661.<sup>64</sup>

The restoration of Charles II heralded a second phase of covenanting activity, as the self-professed godly resisted what they perceived to be royal tyranny and state terror. Governmental excess led to rebellion in the name of religion and consequent further persecution. Humble men and women suffered for their faith through fines, imprisonment, torture, banishment and death, culminating in the "Killing Times" of the 1680s. They worshipped with their outlawed ministers in open moors and secret places, risking summary execution if caught. It seemed that many of their religious and constitutional demands were eventually met at the misnamed "Glorious Revolution" of 1688–89 when James VII and II, a Catholic, abdicated, according to the English Bill of Rights, but who was said to have "forfaulted his right to the Crown and the Throne has become vacant" in the Scottish parliamentary equivalent.<sup>65</sup> However, they were still uncertain about the security of the Kirk under William II, and even more apprehensive as Union approached in 1707, about the potential loss of the Scottish Parliament

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<sup>64</sup> RPS, 1649/1/62,63,129, 157, 192, 210, 240, 297, 306, 429 and 1649/5/25 to A1661/1/61.

<sup>65</sup> William Croft Dickinson and Gordon Donaldson, eds., *A Source Book of Scottish History*, Volume Three: 1567 to 1707 (1954; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1961) 202–3.

and thus of sovereignty and nationhood. Indeed, it could be argued that Protestants had shared similar fears ever since Reformation was proclaimed in 1560. The Scottish church was badly split throughout the “long seventeenth century,” when thousands died during the struggle for supremacy between king and kirk.

The Covenanters practised a simple fundamentalist faith in which the Bible was paramount and all that lacked scriptural authority was rejected. So far as they were concerned the Devil was no fiction. Indeed, his strength and power increased with the passage of time, as indicated by the recent wars, plague, a deteriorating climate, the severe famine years of the 1690s, the apparent European triumph of Catholicism in the Counter-Reformation and the treachery of monarchs, all of which seemed to herald nothing less than the Apocalypse as predicted in the Book of Revelation. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland prepared for contingencies by legislating an *Act anent the Atheistical Opinions of the Deists* of 1696, which described atheism and scepticism as “active factors for Satan and his kingdom of darkness.”<sup>66</sup> This followed an act of parliament the previous year prescribing death as the punishment for blasphemy, the legislation that would seal the fate of poor Thomas Aikenhead in 1697, discussed in the next chapter. The Assembly was again pro-active when, in 1699–1700, for the first time since 1640, it formulated a specific act against witchcraft and charming.<sup>67</sup> As the union debate developed, the covenants were more frequently invoked, and much of the covenanting pamphlet literature of earlier decades was reprinted.

Auld Nick, as the Scots dubbed him after Niccolo Machiavelli, crops up with some regularity in covenanting sermons. Taking as his text from Revelation on the martyrdom of Antipas, who perished in Pergamos where “Satan had his seat,” Alexander Shields, preaching in 1688, found many parallels between the sin city and Scotland – profanity, wickedness and “every abomination.” Just as the faithful were murdered in Pergamos, so the Lord’s people in Scotland had long been persecuted, and many were still “murdered on fields and scaffolds”:

Where a throne and judicatory of a land are working for the devil, seeking to destroy the kingdom of Christ, and to root out His followers, and to advance the kingdom of Antichrist, and the acts and laws of that throne and hierarchy, Satan hath been, as it were, at the contriving and making of them. They are wicked and bloody, and they endeavor all their force to put them in execution. I say, where all these are, Satan hath his seat and throne; and is not all this to be found in Scotland? For the throne and

<sup>66</sup> Pitcairn, ed., *Acts of the General Assembly*, 253.

<sup>67</sup> Pitcairn, ed., *Acts of the General Assembly*, 44–5, 288–9.



judicatories thereof are ruling for Satan. It is a throne of iniquity which is a throne of the devil. Are they not seeking to destroy the kingdom of Christ, and to root out His followers, and to advance and establish Antichrist, which is the kingdom of the devil? Are not their acts and laws made against the people of God, satanical? And have they not been and are endeavouring with all their might to put them in execution?<sup>68</sup>

The Rev. John Monteith of Borgue, Galloway, rejoiced in 1724 during the protests of the agricultural rebels, known as The Levellers, that “the government of the country was now in the hands of the tenantry.” In his *Testimony* he described Satan’s “horrible temptations and suggestions most blasphemous,” which troubled him at different times of his life, notably on 2 November 1695: “I was assailed by Satan with twelve different temptations.”<sup>69</sup> What these were is not divulged, but it may be suspected that Satan was a handy scapegoat for weak-minded ministers. Admittedly, three of those just quoted belonged to the covenanting, reformed, evangelical wing of the Kirk, but it was men of their ilk who would pass on a powerful, mythic legacy to the next two centuries. For all the scholarly discussion of enlightenment ideas and the perfectibility of human kind, arguably the most read texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at a popular level, were books such as John Howie’s *The Scots Worthies* (1775) and its many derivatives. The book essentially represented a covenanting martyrology and inspiration for political reformers, positive covenanting notions such as religious independence and political freedoms, which would influence posterity.<sup>70</sup>

The Rev. Robert Wodrow was minister of Eastwood, near Glasgow, from 1703 till his death in 1734. Best known as the author of a four-volume *History of the Scottish Church from Restoration to Revolution*, he also collected, throughout his life, what he referred to as “providences,” or examples of second sight, ghosts, charms and, occasionally, demonic possession and witchcraft. It almost seems as if he compartmentalized such material because, surprisingly, there appear to be only two references to witchcraft in his lengthy chronicle.<sup>71</sup> He also corresponded with a considerable number

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<sup>68</sup> James Kerr, *Sermons Delivered in Times of Persecution in Scotland by Sufferers for the Royal Prerogatives of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: Johnstone, Hunter and Company, 1880) 1779.

<sup>69</sup> Henry M. B. Reid, *A Cameronian Apostle: Being Some Account of John Macmillan of Balmaghie* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1896) 71–3.

<sup>70</sup> See Edward J. Cowan, “The Covenanting Tradition in Scottish History,” in *Scottish History: The Power of the Past*, ed. E. J. Cowan and R. J. Finlay (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) 121–45.

<sup>71</sup> Wodrow, *History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland*, vol. 1, 244, 334–5. At 244 Wodrow express surprise at the number of commissions for the trial of witches in

of people, including Cotton Mather, the prominent leader of New England puritanism and author of *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692) and *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions* (1689).<sup>72</sup>

In penning something of a jeremiad to a correspondent, the Rev. John Gib, Wodrow lamented what he perceived as a withdrawal on the part of the populace at large from the Kirk. He detected "an undervaluing of the ministry among persons of note and distinction," by which he meant the nobility and the gentry. People were becoming tired of the endless hair-splitting wrangles between members of the established church and the Old Dissenters, as those of covenanting sympathy who refused to rejoin the national church were labelled. The worst construction was put upon the statements or actions of the ministers. There were, as he said, "yet some few of the old antediluvian Christians among us, though but very few left, that are like a shock of ripe corn." On the other hand, those who had been raised during the Episcopalian regime seemed to him ignorant and fickle dead-weights. He was worried that increasingly the gospel impacted only upon the already committed, but made little impression upon those he considered to be most in need of it. Thus it was that Wodrow believed that he was living in what Gib described as "this dark time, wherein the Lord seems in great measure to have withdrawn from his servants, people, and ordinances." The afflictions suffered by the faithful (and of course the unfaithful as well) included "famine in its smaller measures, sickness, dearth, disappointment in national designs, the removal of our Parliament, and the liberties and sovereignties once we had." It could be argued that Presbyterians always tended towards pessimism, but in the circumstances described by Wodrow it is hardly surprising that he and his brethren attempted to seek some retributive solace as a measure of religious defence.<sup>73</sup> The covenants were frequently invoked in response to the perceived threat that such union appeared to pose to the very existence of the Kirk. A number of the more committed brethren and elders, many of covenanting sympathy among them, trapped as they were in an increasingly entrenched position, displayed a tendency to regard the persecution of witches as both a religious and a patriotic duty;<sup>74</sup> in their view to relax the laws against witchcraft was to oppose the will of God.

Wodrow, like many of his colleagues, was apprehensive as Union negotiations commenced in 1702, because although the Presbyterian establishment

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1661. The notes by the editor, Rev. Robert Burns, show that he was still engaged, in 1828, in the sadduceeism debate.

<sup>72</sup> The two began a correspondence in 1713, which lasted for twenty years, T. M'Crie, ed., *The Correspondence of the Rev. Robert Wodrow*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: The Wodrow Society, 1842) vol. 1, 386.

<sup>73</sup> M'Crie, *Correspondence of the Rev. Robert Wodrow*, vol. 1, 44–55.

<sup>74</sup> Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations*, 21–37.

appeared to be guaranteed in legislation of 1690, there was cause for concern as fears of English perfidy remained a source of constant anxiety and unease. He and his fellow ministers with their congregations, including those of moderate opinion, were now prepared to take on board some of the covenanting propaganda that appeared to have fed into the Revolution settlement. Wodrow was informed that William II, just before his death, had confidentially advised his successor, Anne, to “maintain the present Church Government in Scotland, assuring her that the Ministers there wer cordiall friends to him and to her real interest, and had a great sway with the body of the nation; and that if any alteration wer made, it would be of fatal consequences.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, it is now clear, thanks to a spate of recent books on the Treaty of Union, that the Kirk was a powerful player in the negotiations. Two key supporters of Union were William Paterson, who came from a covenanting background, and the Earl of Stair, a covenanting sympathizer and one of the chief negotiators. Ted Cowan has suggested that there was an understanding on all sides of the debate that the Presbyterians must be appeased, and that the outcome was as much a triumph for the Kirk as for any other party or faction. The separate act of 1707 guaranteeing the liberties of the Church of Scotland used to be considered by historians as something of an after-thought, but it was symptomatic of the strength and domination of the Kirk party during negotiations.<sup>76</sup>

At least one investigator of witch-hunting in England and Scotland was convinced that witch beliefs had more or less died out long before the repeal of the witchcraft act, and he was perplexed by those who still harboured such beliefs well into the eighteenth century. His erroneous comment, “it is a curious fact that educated Scotchmen ... retained their superstition long after the common people had abandoned it,”<sup>77</sup> was, in particular, aimed at men such as Professor William Forbes, of Glasgow, who published his *Institutes of the Law of Scotland* in 1730. Forbes spoke of witchcraft as “that black art whereby strange and wonderful things are wrought by power derived from the devil,” adding, “nothing seems plainer to me than that there may be and have been witches, and that perhaps such are now actually existing.”

Heavily influenced by George Mackenzie's *Laws and Customs of Scotland in Matters Criminal* (1678), the professor defined witchcraft as maleficence: “Witches are chiefly employed in plain mischief by hurting persons or their goods.” As a believer, he was also concerned to point out the demonic aspect of their crime: “They sometimes work mischief under a pretence or colour

<sup>75</sup> Robert Wodrow, *Analecta: Or, Materials for a History of Remarkable Providences*, 4 vols. (Glasgow: Maitland Club, 1844) vol. 1, 16.

<sup>76</sup> E. J. Cowan, “The Unions of 1707,” *History Scotland* 8/2 (2008): 51–5.

<sup>77</sup> W. H. Davenport Adams, *Witch, Warlock, and Magician: Historical Sketches of Magic and Witchcraft in England and Scotland* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1889) 376.

of doing good; as when they cure diseases, loose enchantments and discover other witches. All their designs are brought about by charmes or ceremonious rites instituted by the Devil." Legal and legitimate "proofs" of witchcraft encompassed the witch's threat or curse followed by an otherwise inexplicable misfortune, and included such considerations as the witch's reputation; his or her relationship with a known witch through family, friendship or work; the Devil's mark and an inability to cry or to recite the Lord's Prayer. His opinions were reflective of the unease felt by lawyers toward the crime of witchcraft, still a punishable offence, though Forbes was not personally involved in witch prosecution.<sup>78</sup>

### Repeal and reaction

During their tour of Scotland in 1773 the much-quoted Samuel Johnson and James Boswell met with many of the country's prominent citizens. On more than one occasion the subject of conversation turned towards the supernatural. A discussion over supper with the advocate Andrew Crosbie was typical of the sort of debates about witchcraft that were taking place throughout the eighteenth century. Crosbie, a man who apparently not only found belief in witchcraft incomprehensible but blasphemous, is depicted in Boswell's account as a "rational-minded" individual, though not necessarily a "logical" one. While Crosbie's disbelief in witchcraft may suggest an "enlightened" man, bereft of "superstition," his explanation for the demise of such beliefs, namely that an act of parliament was responsible for effecting a sudden change of attitude, was dismissed by the good doctor as an inadequate, if not naïve, interpretation. Johnson riposted that the witch beliefs of previous centuries could not be dismissed as untenable on the grounds that they were no longer held to be believable, nor could a belief be legislated out of existence. The legislation against witchcraft was a response to a change in attitude that had already taken place and was enacted only after these beliefs had dissipated. As to why the belief in witchcraft should have waned, Johnson disappointingly declined to supply an answer.

Later commentators on the witch-hunts have generally agreed with Johnson, that the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1736 was something of an afterthought. It has been widely assumed that some time around 1700 witchcraft beliefs serendipitously disappeared.<sup>79</sup> Only in the remotest of places or among an eccentric minority could such traditions have survived. Walter Scott, for one, believed that education and knowledge taught the

<sup>78</sup> William Forbes, *The Institutes of the Law of Scotland*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1730) vol. 2, 28–41, 371–3.

<sup>79</sup> For examples, see Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (1987; 3rd edn. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2006) 217–24; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991) chapter 18 and 22.

Scottish establishment, in the form of lawyers and ministers, to spurn the credulity of their forebears, though he admitted that “these dawnings of sense and humanity were obscured by the clouds of the ancient superstition on more than one occasion,” some of them enhanced, it must be said, by the “Wizard of the North” himself.<sup>80</sup>

Across the border, there were those who ruthlessly goaded the Scottish establishment with anti-covenanting pamphlets, such as Patrick Drewe’s *The Church of England’s Late Conflict with, and Triumph over, the Spirit of Fanaticism* (1710), which proclaimed that instead of renouncing the Devil and “the world of sin,” the Scots, “baptiz’d to Rebellion and Schism,” renounced monarchy and episcopacy.<sup>81</sup> Naturally, there were others who promoted healthy Anglo-Scottish relations and actively sought to suppress the more damaging of English vituperative utterances.

An important contribution to the witch belief debate was *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1718) by Francis Hutchinson, the English sceptic, a curate who became bishop of Down and Connor. His career was otherwise fairly unremarkable save for his whiggism, characterized by recent English historians as a desire for order in space, society and belief,<sup>82</sup> supposedly anticipating essential Enlightenment assumptions. Whigs were supporters of the “Glorious Revolution” and feared the might of Catholic France and were the architects of Union, which Hutchinson welcomed in a highly celebratory sermon.

His dislike of the French owed much to the cult of Louis XIV, but he also condemned the Huguenot prophets, a millenarian cult that appeared in 1688, confidently promoting miracles and winning some converts in England. He was particularly concerned that such prophets appealed to those he described as members of the weak-minded lower orders. The age of miracles had ceased, but he believed that “good and bad spirits” were a part of Christian faith; bad spirits were responsible for the delusion of the superstitious, a similar argument as that applied to those seduced by witches.<sup>83</sup> Other explanations he suggested were mental illness, demonic possession and outright deception. Hutchinson was undoubtedly a sceptic, but he was in no doubt that Satan and his evil spirits played a very active role in the temporal world, constantly possessing and deluding humankind. It is

<sup>80</sup> Scott, *Letters* (1884 edn) 267–8.

<sup>81</sup> Patrick Drewe, *The Church of England’s Late Conflict with, and Triumph over, the Spirit of Fanaticism* (1710) 30, qtd in Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations*, 33.

<sup>82</sup> Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs the Life of Bishop Francis Hutchinson, 1660–1739* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008) 88.

<sup>83</sup> Francis Hutchinson, *A Short View of the Pretended Spirit of Prophecy, Taken from Its First Rise in the Year 1688 to Its Present State Among Us* (London: n.p., 1708; reprinted Edinburgh: n.p., 1709); Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs*, 80–91.

noteworthy that *A Short View of the Pretended Spirit of Prophecy* was reprinted in Edinburgh in 1709.

Part of Hutchinson's motive in writing his *Historical Essay* resulted from his fear that Scottish witchcraft would spread south as a result of Union, leading to a new outbreak of English witch persecution. He certainly wrestled with the central issue of the entire controversy:

Tho' the sober Belief of good and bad Spirits is an essential Part of every good Christian's Faith, yet imaginary Communications with them, have been the Spring both of the worst Corruptions of Religion, and the greatest perversions of Justice.

He considered his contribution necessary because well over twenty books and tracts had appeared since 1660 arguing the reality of witchcraft. These books were in tradesmen's shops and farmer's houses, "read with great eagerness and continually levening [feeding] the minds of the youth, who delight in such subjects."<sup>84</sup> The implication is that knowledge about, and belief in, witches were both in danger of increasing. It has been noted that the publication of Hutchinson's tract was delayed for ten years by the reluctance of English bishops "to offend Scottish sensitivities,"<sup>85</sup> especially those of the clergy, it might be added, at the time of the Treaty of Union. Hutchinson's sermon on union rejoiced that ancient enmities were now over; never again would "Mortal Dissension" break out between the two nations, as in the reign of Edward I in wars that consumed "more Christian blood, and continued longer, than ever Quarrel we read of did, between two people in the world." He believed that "a free union in the midst of peace" was unprecedented in world history.<sup>86</sup>

The *Essay* is written in the form of a dialogue between "A Clergy-Man, a Scotch Advocate, and an English Jury-man." The first-named is clearly the author and the other two are anonymous. Juryman has been ordered to serve on a jury for a witch trial but would like to withdraw. He is invited to present his doubts about the subject to Clergyman and Advocate, who is said to have acted in many Scottish witch trials. Clergyman was glad that Juryman would benefit from both their views, hoping that "our happy Union of Interests and Counsels will be a means of improving one another

<sup>84</sup> Hutchinson, *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, vi, xiv.

<sup>85</sup> Bostridge, "Witchcraft Repealed," 313.

<sup>86</sup> Francis Hutchinson, *Sermon Preached at St. Edmund's-Bury, On the First of May, 1707 Being the Day of Thanksgiving for the Union of England and Scotland* (London: n.p., 1707) 6, 11. Many in the Church of Scotland would have been persuaded by the biblical text with which Hutchinson concluded his sermon: "And I will make them one Nation in the Land, and one King shall be King to them all: and they shall be no more two Nations, neither shall they be dividid into two Kingdoms any more at all."

in all useful Notions, as far as either of us have had the Opportunity of seeing farther than the other in any Case." The tract thus can be seen as part of the cross-border dialogue that, as was argued above, was initiated by James VI.<sup>87</sup> The advocate is depicted as an arch reactionary who is nevertheless, gradually persuaded by Hutchinson's enlightened views and thus may be regarded as a fair embodiment of English perceptions about Scottish thinking on the subject. Overall, however, Hutchinson's arguments are so verbose and dense that Advocate is at times reduced to the role of Scottish stooge.<sup>88</sup>

The discussion opens by considering the case of a bewitched woman who has a seizure as soon as an accused witch enters the room and thus does not actually see her. Advocate thinks that just as some people are allergic to cats so the afflicted person will relate to her tormentor by means of "some scent or secret communication of spirits, that are the common ground of all such antipathies." He objects that Clergyman seems to dispute the existence of spirits, though they were often mentioned in the pulpit. He deplores his lack of even-handedness in recounting ridiculous stories concerning witches, while ignoring evidence given on oath. He protests that though judges may have mistakenly condemned the accused they would have made a correct decision in most cases.<sup>89</sup>

In providing a chronological table of witch trials and executions since the beginning of history Hutchinson touches on Uther Pendragon, the Pied Piper of Hamlyn, Richard III and Nostradamus, but he does not ignore Scotland. He mentions George Buchanan's account (published in 1582) of the legendary King Duff, bewitched by means of a waxen image or "pictour" created by witches who were subsequently executed; "what judgement is to be formed concerning the witchcraft, I leave to the judgement of my readers, only noticing, that I have found no mention made of it in our more ancient records."<sup>90</sup> He also quotes the story of a bagpipe-playing dog with a candle under its tail from *Satan's Invisible World*, and notes the North Berwick witches and the cases of Major Weir, Janet Douglas and the Renfrew episode.<sup>91</sup> Since 1682 not a single witch had been executed in England, unlike in Scotland and New England. The author asserts that more witches had been executed since Pope Innocent's bull of 1484 than there had been "from the beginning of the world till then." He also touches on political

<sup>87</sup> Hutchinson, *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, 2.

<sup>88</sup> For an insightful discussion of Hutchinson's ideas about witchcraft, see Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs*, 99–126.

<sup>89</sup> Hutchinson, *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, 3, 10, 27, 47.

<sup>90</sup> James Aikman, ed., *The History of Scotland, Translated from the Latin of George Buchanan*, 4 vols. (Glasgow: Blackie, Fullarton and Co., 1827) vol. 1, 292–3.

<sup>91</sup> Hutchinson, *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, 18, 29, 32, 40, 41, 45.

ramifications, as he did elsewhere in his account; Protestants were accused of witchcraft by Catholics, and vice versa:

I make no great doubt, but that we have as many Devils now amongst us, as they had in other Ages; for we have as many Temptations, and Lies, and Thefts, and Adulteries, and Murders, that are the Devil's works: But our witches, for the present, are gone after the *Poet's Gods*, and *Modern Fairies*.<sup>92</sup>

Advocate, clearly feeling himself under attack by implication, reminds Clergyman that he had earlier claimed that witchcraft followed certain principles, as must the discovery of witches: "for if men believe none, it is not likely they should find any: But then, it may be, it is their Unbelief and wrong Principles that are the Reason why [witches] are neither found out, nor look'd for." He demands to be given a catalogue of principles and notions that operated in large successful witch-hunts, as well as those in which few were discovered, to find out which principles are more sound and rational. His idea is that successful hunts will generate sound arguments for the stance of himself and his countrymen.<sup>93</sup> The principles adduced for governing periods when little witch-hunting takes place include: not intruding into things unseen, not allowing neighbours to suffer for the Devil's actions, no contrived practices, such as ducking to detect a witch, and an abiding faith in God to sort things out. Large hunts happen because there is widespread belief in the Demonic Pact, spectral evidence, witches' touch, the efficacy of ducking, Devil's marks, the employment of torture and the idea that witches have familiars. In trials suspect evidence is regularly permitted, completely contrary to reason and law. Such principles are unscriptural, superstitious and false.

Advocate's response is to suggest that they review a number of cases with a view to arriving at a conclusion. In the course of these discussions Advocate is trapped into such utterances as "There was no need of proof," is forced to defend some outlandish statements of Richard Baxter and Cotton Mather, based upon their reputations as devout Christians, and is apparently forced to defend the use of torture.<sup>94</sup> After a lengthy consideration of the New England cases, Advocate appears to betray some doubts though he is far from being entirely convinced. He continues to believe that "a Spirit, by his own natural Powers can form his own Substance or Vehicle, or borrow'd Matter into the Shape of any Man whatever," but he cannot conceive that God would allow evil spirits to appear in the shape of innocent persons. He concedes that mistakes were made at Salem, but praises those who admitted

<sup>92</sup> Hutchinson, *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, 23, 49–50.

<sup>93</sup> Hutchinson, *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, 50–1.

<sup>94</sup> Hutchinson, *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, 59, 66, 72–3, 74, 75.



as much. Reflection on the sensational case of the 1669 Mora witches in Sweden leads him to accept the possibility of false delusions, and he seems to have no answer to the adage that “a confession of anything that is impossible or absurd is not the confession of a sound mind.” He even alludes to the possibility that the proofs that condemned the seven executed at Renfrew may have been unsafe. There is discussion of sorcerers and wizards in the Old Testament, who were simply false apostles and seducers, according to Clergyman.<sup>95</sup> On these and other matters Advocate’s failure to reply would suggest that he is losing the argument, but he is not necessarily in agreement.

Advocate has to concede that foreign laws and popish authorities are irrelevant in British courts, but he enquires about English legislation. A part of their exchange concerns Clergyman’s assertion that the English Witchcraft Act of 1604 repealed Elizabeth’s “more merciful law [concerning witchcraft] and made this new one ... for the more severe punishing of it.” The responsibility lay with England’s new king, James, from Scotland, “a Prince of good Natural Parts” and a learned man, but “he had the misfortune to be engag’d in dark and difficult subjects in his younger years.” Before he was twenty he wrote an interpretation of the Book of Revelation. At twenty-three he was caught up in the affair of the North Berwick witches, who acknowledged him as “a Man of God, that their Spirits had no Power over.” Clergyman (or Hutchinson) detects verbal similarities between the pamphlet *Newes from Scotland* and the language of the 1604 act, an insightful point on which the latest study of the act appears to be silent.<sup>96</sup> Throughout his discussion Clergyman refers to the “vulgar nations,” among which he clearly includes Scotland, “where till of late they have been more zealous in their persecutions.” Juryman congratulates Clergyman on having made a convincing case throughout, but warns that the “Word *Witch* in Scripture, with Two

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<sup>95</sup> Hutchinson, *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, 90, 91, 95, 100, 144, 151–4. The Mora witch trials, based largely on the testimonies of children, led to thirty accused and seven executions, and marked the beginning of Sweden’s largest witch-hunt, 1668–76. Reports of the trial spread throughout Europe and may have had some influence on the Salem witch trials of 1692. Mora was also referred to on both sides of the witchcraft debate, by believers such as Joseph Glanvill’s *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1683) and sceptics such as Balthasar Bekker’s *De Betoverde Weereld* (1691), translated into English as *The World Bewitched* (1695). See Bengt Ankarloo, “Sweden: The Mass Burnings (1668–1676),” in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, ed. B. Ankarloo and G. Henningsen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 285–317; Per-Anders Östling, “Witchcraft Trials in 17th-century Sweden and the Great Northern Swedish Witch Craze of 1668–1678,” *Studia Neophilologica* 84/1 (2012): 97–105.

<sup>96</sup> P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, “King James’s Experience of Witches, and the 1604 English Witchcraft Act,” in *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, ed. John Newton and Jo Bath (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 40–1, unconvincingly challenges the connection between North Berwick and the English act on the grounds that three other demonologists had discussed the same subject, but he does not mention Hutchinson.

or Three odd Accidents, and a frightful Story, shall weigh down all your Arguments, with our Country People; and I am afraid there is no way to prevent it." Clergyman responds that there is a way, and that is to charge with defamation those who make witch accusations against others. Advocate is depicted as keen to hear Clergyman's reply,

For these Notions [folk belief] and the cruel Executions that follow them, are not such honourable or desirable Things; but that even in *Scotland*, we should be glad to be free from them, if we can be so, without losing our Faith and Vertue.

"Even in Scotland"! Advocate has been trapped into collusion with the enemy! His part in the dialogue ends when Clergyman says he will review a number of famous cases involving impostures and delusions. The Scotsman's last words are: "then I suppose you will make your Inference; that because there are a Multitude of Bristol Stones, there are no true Diamonds in Nature."<sup>97</sup> That he believes the many will destroy the few shows that Advocate has not wholly come round to Clergyman's point of view. He is beyond reason. As Juryman tells him:

I pray, Mr Advocate, dare not you say the Sea is Salt, because you have not tasted all of the Water? If there be an error in this Case of Witchcraft, are you resolv'd to keep it till you have a particular Continuation of every Tale that was ever told? You are in a bad way, if that be your Resolution.<sup>98</sup>

Hutchinson was a convincing writer, and he ensured that he had the better of the argument, but his sense of frustration with Scots comes through. No Scot appears to have directly confronted him in print, since none seem to have been willing to taste all the water. The Englishman must have had Scotland in mind when, in closing his investigation, he concluded that he had plainly demonstrated that accusations, prosecutions and hangings did not cure the evil, but rather increased it:

when a Nation or People are in such a State, they are under a very great Calamity. ... When a Lye is made use of to support the Faith; the Effect of it is, that Nobody can be believed; but the Faith itself is thought a Fiction.<sup>99</sup>

A fierce opponent of repeal was Ebenezer Erskine, who seceded from the Scottish Church in 1733, and who considered one of the Kirk's most notorious

<sup>97</sup> Bristol Stone is a diamond-like rock crystal, OED.

<sup>98</sup> Hutchinson, *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, 182–4.

<sup>99</sup> Hutchinson, *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, 230.

sins was its failure to take a sufficiently active role in the persecution of witches. Such men, a hostile English commentator implied, were to be regarded as hopelessly behind the times, for “public opinion, as the result of increased intelligence, had numbered witchcraft among the superstitions of the past, and we may confidently predict that its revival is impossible,”<sup>100</sup> a confidence that many today might question. As Ian Bostridge has demonstrated, the process whereby the Witchcraft Act was repealed in 1736 is very poorly documented. He has, however, convincingly shown that the debates, for and against repeal, were as much to do with party politics as with scepticism or religion.

One of the main Scottish opponents was James Erskine, Lord Grange, a colourful individual, who resigned as a judge of the court of session to become MP for Stirling burgh. “He chose to make his maiden speech on the Witches Bill, as it was called; and being learned in daemonologia, with books on which subject his library was filled, he made a long canting speech that set the house in a titter of laughter.” Grange was an unlikely champion of the Kirk, described as “a Real Enthusiast, but at the same time Licentious in his Morals.” He was removed as lord justice clerk in 1714, and the family was politically disgraced when his brother, the Earl of Mar, led the Jacobite Rising of 1715. Grange could scarcely be described as a rational individual. He conceived a bitter hatred for Sir Robert Walpole, leader of the Government, and he is probably most famous for having marooned his insane wife, Rachel Chiesly, on the remote islands of St Kilda.<sup>101</sup> Slighted family honour and a sense of Jacobite nationalism combined bizarrely in a belated devotion to the “good old cause,” namely Calvinism. Like many of his contemporaries, what Grange feared above all was creeping Anglicization, particularly with reference to the Kirk, hence his opposition to repeal.<sup>102</sup>

It could be argued that those opposed to repeal received the highly significant concession of the Witchcraft Act of 1735, which acknowledged only pretended use or exercise of any kind of “Witchcraft, Sorcery, Inchantment, or Conjuraction,” and which permitted a maximum sentence of one year for offenders [see Appendix II]. Furthermore, it was only after the 1735 act was in place that the legislation of 1736 was made possible. Ironically, it was a decision of the House of Lords that extended the 1735 legislation to Scotland.<sup>103</sup> The Seceders were so bitterly opposed to the repeal of the witchcraft legislation that they published an act in 1743, reprinted at Glasgow in

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<sup>100</sup> Adams, *Witch, Warlock, and Magician*, 377.

<sup>101</sup> Margaret Macaulay, *The Prisoner of St Kilda: The True Story of the Unfortunate Lady Grange* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2010).

<sup>102</sup> Alexander Carlyle, *Anecdotes and Characters of the Times*, ed. J. Kinsley (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) 5–9.

<sup>103</sup> Bostridge, “Witchcraft Repealed,” 309–34.

1766, strongly condemning the action as “contrary,” they claimed, “to the express letter of the law of God.”<sup>104</sup>

### The season of the witch: the end of an era?

It can be seen how witchcraft theory was manipulated to prove or discredit a variety of political and religious points of view. The debate regarding witchcraft, which arose from the educated and learned members of Scottish society in the later seventeenth century, were concerned primarily with proving the existence of witches, and the real threat that they posed, in order to combat the growing tide of atheism, while others were engaged in the struggle against what they saw as gross superstition and backwardness. An important sceptical work, *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (1677), by the Yorkshireman John Webster, drew upon the medical and scientific knowledge of the day. It has often been referred to as a text that contributed significantly to the decline in witch-hunting, yet curiously Webster's aim was not to deny the reality of the supernatural, but rather to refute the Devil's influence upon the supernatural.<sup>105</sup>

Many Scots showed very little interest in, or concern with, the matter at all. Sir George Mackenzie of Rosehaugh defended the reality of witchcraft from a legal standpoint, George Sinclair expressed anxieties about the deterioration of witch beliefs, and John Bell of Gladsmuir set out to prove witchcraft in general terms, while Robert Wodrow amassed “providences.” Robert Sibbald, Robert Kirk and Martin Martin paid little attention to witchcraft, though these men had shown an interest in other folkloric customs and beliefs. Voices of open dissent against the witch-hunts are harder to come by. Scotland does not seem to have produced the equivalent, in the early days of witch-hunting, of a Johann Weyer or a Reginald Scot, or in the latter years of persecution, such as the Dutch Calvinist pastor Balthasar Bekker in *The World Bewitched* (1695).

Though scepticism about witchcraft was fast becoming the norm, it was still not total, even by the turn of the eighteenth century. Rejecting the idea of magic, witchcraft and the power of the Devil, out of hand, was still a step too far for many. A more prevalent attitude was to accept the abstract possibility of witchcraft, while refusing to believe the more fanciful tales about witches' supposed capabilities. The assumption that witchcraft beliefs, particularly among the educated classes, had pretty much vanished in the years following the last large-scale witch-panic needs to be re-evaluated.

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<sup>104</sup> George Frazer Black, *A Calendar of Cases of Witchcraft in Scotland, 1510–1727* (New York: Arno Press, 1971) 20.

<sup>105</sup> James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001) 80.

Given the wealth of books and pamphlets published in defence of the reality of witchcraft, and the fact that almost all of these tracts were produced in the very period when issues regarding the supernatural were allegedly of lesser interest than before, it is perhaps even more surprising that witchcraft persecutions did not continue for longer.

Elsewhere in Europe it has also been demonstrated that lack of belief, as such, was not the fundamental cause behind the collapse of witch-hunting. Johannes Dillinger's work, for instance, on Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier traces the decline in witch-hunting activity as a consequence of changing governmental structure and consolidation of territorial rule. The witch-hunts did not cease, it would seem, because of a diminished belief in witches, nor a lack in demand for witch trials from the people at large who continued to perceive witchcraft as a threat, nor because of drastic intellectual or theological change, but rather as a result of administrative restructuring.<sup>106</sup>

Stuart MacDonald's illuminating study of Fife has shown that "the breakdown in the solidarity of the elite towards witch-hunting" was central to the decline of witch-hunting in the area.<sup>107</sup> It was increasingly difficult to secure the necessary commissions to put suspected witches on trial. This was an issue that was not strictly about declining belief in witches among the elite, which remained strong in many quarters. What was at issue was not the reality of witchcraft but the ability to prove it. The difficulties involved in securing a conviction must have also acted as a deterrent for witnesses to come forward, for the whole exercise must have seemed pointless. The need to punish witches may have dwindled among a small, but very powerful minority, but what of the silent majority? While the ruling classes may have no longer regarded witchcraft as a threat to society, was this the case in all quarters of society? Was the season of the witch in its autumn years? Is it possible that the era of the witch was really over?

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<sup>106</sup> Johannes Dillinger, *'Evil People': A Comparative Study of Witch Hunts in Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier*, trans. Laura Stokes (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009) chapter 6.

<sup>107</sup> Stuart MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife: Witch-Hunting in a Scottish Shire, 1560–1710* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002) 183.

# 6

## “Worshipping at the Altar of Ignorance”: Some Late Scottish Witchcraft Cases Considered

Upon the whole, I do believe that there is scarcely a more rare providence of this nature in any true history, – a more exact caution in any enquiry or trial of this kind, – a more clear probation without confession of the panels themselves, – or a more just sentence, putting together all circumstances upon record.

Francis Grant (1698)<sup>1</sup>

A major concern of this study is to investigate the decline or otherwise of witch belief at the dawn of the Scottish Enlightenment and its relationship with folk culture. While the *philosophes* and *litterati* repeatedly rejoiced that superstition was dead or dying, the reality was that witch belief survived long after the views of the sceptics and the deists had been expressed. In this respect the role of the Kirk was crucial. This chapter investigates the rearguard actions of the Church, concerned as it was with issues of atheism and sadducism in the earliest stages of enlightenment. It also examines the ministers and their followers in prolonging witch belief and the lingering presence of demonic interference. From the late seventeenth century onwards, there was a palpable decline in the number of witch trials and executions, though not, as will be demonstrated, in expressions of witch belief. There are indications that, in the post-1663 phases of witch prosecution, the suspects were primarily accused of malefice. Several cases can be shown to highlight the nature of those accusations and the supposed activities of witches; others suggest that having a reputation for witchcraft

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Grant, Prosecuting Advocate in the Bargarran trial of 1697, in *A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire. A New Edition. With an Introduction, Embodying Extracts Hitherto Unpublished from the Records of the Presbytery of Paisley* (Paisley: Alex. Gardner, 1877) 176.

could have unexpected advantages, such as in the 1688 case of Catharine MacTargett of Dunbar, who appeared to almost luxuriate in her powers. Some trials are illustrative of how witchcraft could be used to further a particular cause or agenda of the day. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of the widely reported Christian Shaw episode (1696–97), and the events at Pittenweem (1704–05), details from the trials, confessions and observations of witnesses, were used as debating points in the printed literature over the reality, or otherwise, of witchcraft. While some commentators chose to use these cases as exemplars of fraud, deception or error, others interpreted them as evidence of the real threat posed by witchcraft and utilized the stories as a way of combatting doubt and atheism in the preternatural world. Demonic possession, while not a strong theme in Calvinist Scotland, was a feature of both of these cases, though it loomed particularly large in the trial surrounding the bewitchment of Christian Shaw. The horrific example of the lynching at Pittenweem seems to represent a popular reaction against the inactivity of the authorities. It could also be interpreted as indicative of changing attitudes of the state towards the legal processes against witchcraft coming into direct conflict with folk attitudes and the opinions of some ministers. A particular study is included of Gaelic-speaking Scotland in order to provide a context for what is deemed to be the last execution for witchcraft. Although it is often suggested that there was almost no witch persecution in Gaelic-speaking Scotland, closer examination of the evidence reveals that there was great concern, notably on the part of the ministers, about witch activity. The notorious case of Janet Horne in Dornoch may have furnished the last execution for witchcraft in Scotland, but she was by no means the last witch.

Not every witch or instance of witch belief will be documented; such an undertaking would entail an entire book rather than a chapter. There are, as a result, a few necessary, and perhaps, occasionally surprising, omissions. For instance, near the very start of the period under discussion, a brother and sister were executed in Edinburgh in 1670 for a series of crimes that both shocked and titillated the citizens of the capital. The case involved accusations of incest, adultery and bestiality. The incident in question is that involving Major Thomas Weir, remembered as one of Scotland’s most notorious warlocks, and yet he was never actually formally charged with witchcraft. His sister Jean, on the other hand, who *was* charged with witchcraft, was all too ready to smear a Satanistic gloss on her brother’s corrupt life. She confessed to incest but also to an association with the fairies. Both she and her brother had allegedly made a demonic pact. It was no doubt due to the depraved nature of the Weir’s various crimes that people turned to witchcraft and sorcery for an explanation. The tabloid press of the present day has continued the tradition of turning to adjectives such as “evil” or “demonic” to describe current instances of particularly violent, “unnatural”

or seemingly incomprehensible crimes. Thomas Weir was outwardly a committed covenanter and, it has been suggested, an anti-nomian.<sup>2</sup>

Though not concerned with witchcraft, a truly sensational case, which conveys something of the period's Kirk paranoia and societal anxiety, was that of Thomas Aikenhead, an Edinburgh student who was accused of blasphemy and stood trial for the offence on 23 December 1696. He was charged under the 1661 act against blasphemy, which demanded the death penalty for anyone who, "not being distracted in his wits shall rail upon or curse God, or any of the persones of the blessed Trinity," rather than the more lenient act of 1695, which adopted more of a "three strikes and you're out" policy before the death penalty was invoked.<sup>3</sup> Aged only twenty years, the precocious Aikenhead had been heard vigorously asserting offensive, though not particularly original, opinions such as that "the impostor Christ ... learned his magick in Egypt, and coming from Egypt to Judea, he picked up a few ignorant blockish fisher fellows, whom he knew by his skill in phisognomie, had strong imaginations," and that the Bible was "so stuffed with maddness, nonsense, and contradictions, that [he] admired the stupidity of the world in being soe long deluded by them." He also allegedly declared that he preferred Mohammad to Christ, and he hoped to see Christianity greatly weakened; indeed he was confident, "in a short tyme it will be utterly extirpat." He did not deny having made these, or other, statements to that effect, though he did protest that he was not guilty of having "practised magick," nor had he "conversed with devils."<sup>4</sup> Aikenhead was found guilty and was hanged on 8 January 1697. As Michael Hunter has pointed out, Aikenhead's rhetoric "belonged to a standard repertoire of anti-Christian polemic, which recurs frequently in early modern characterizations of atheists and can be

<sup>2</sup> Trial of Jean Weir, 1670, NAS, JC/2/13. Excerpts from this case can also be found in George Sinclair, *Satan's Invisible World Discovered*, ed. Coleman O. Parsons (Edinburgh: John Reid, 1685; Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimilies and Reprints, 1969) supplement; Robert Law, *Memorials; or, the Memorable Things that Fell Out Within This Island of Brittain from 1638 to 1684*, ed. C. K. Sharpe (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1818) 27, and *Minstrelsy*, vol. 2, 338–9. See also David Stevenson, "Major Weir: A Justified Sinner?," *Scottish Studies* 16/2 (1972): 161–73.

<sup>3</sup> *APS*, vol. 7, 202–3, vol. 9, 386–7.

<sup>4</sup> On the Aikenhead trial in 1696, see Hugo Arnot, *A Collection and Abridgement of Celebrated Trials in Scotland* (Edinburgh: The Author, 1785) 324–7; W. Cobbett, T. B. Howell et al., eds., *A Complete Collection of State Trials*, 34 vols. (London, 1809–28) xiii, 917–40 (no. 401); Michael Hunter, "Aikenhead the Atheist: The Context and Consequences of Articulate Irreligion in the Late Seventeenth Century," in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. M. Hunter and D. Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots' Invention of the Modern World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002) prologue; Michael F. Graham, *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead: Boundaries of Belief on the Eve of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).



traced back to early Christian times.” He did not say anything that had not been heard before, but it was perhaps his manner, his “deliberate offensiveness,” that got him into so much trouble with an audience that could not bear to witness such an affront upon Christianity.<sup>5</sup> His utterances perhaps represented the rebelliousness and careless talk of a young man trapped in the suffocatingly conservative institution that was the Church of Scotland.

No attempt was made by the General Assembly to intervene in the case, though they were in session at Edinburgh between 2 and 12 January. On the contrary, only two days before Aikenhead was executed, the Assembly composed a letter to the king exhorting him to enforce the laws that were intended to suppress “the abounding of impiety and prophanity in this land.”<sup>6</sup> If no sympathy was forthcoming from the Assembly, there is evidence to suggest not all were in favour of the harsh treatment Aikenhead faced. That six people out of forty-five summoned to serve as jury members refused any involvement “possibly shows a degree of unease about the case on their part.” Furthermore, an appeal brought before the Privy Council came within one vote of granting him a reprieve. In other words, it was a heavily divisive issue. It appears that one man was absolutely determined that the accused should suffer the ultimate penalty. The Lord Advocate, James Stewart of Goodtrees, who authorized the Bargarran case discussed below, was a man with a history of a strong attachment to the covenants.

It is interesting to note that Thomas Aikenhead was not the first to be condemned for his outspoken and “free thinking” views. In October 1696, a merchant’s apprentice by the name of John Fraser was similarly accused of denying the existence of God, the Devil and the immortality of the soul, and charged with blasphemy. Unlike Aikenhead, he recanted his views immediately. He was found guilty, ordered to give a public repentance in sackcloth and imprisoned until his release in February 1697. Also, unlike Aikenhead, Fraser was charged under the more lenient act of 1695. There is no doubt that the authorities were making an example of Aikenhead.<sup>7</sup> The point was not made at the time, but Aikenhead was close to being a witch himself. He was one of the Kirk’s own, the enemy within, just as witches were the enemies of the community. He spoke incredible nonsense in a nation of believers, voluntarily and without torture, just like some of the witches, but those parts of his reported speech that could be understood appeared extremely dangerous. If to deny the existence of the Devil was to deny the existence

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<sup>5</sup> Hunter, “Aikenhead the Atheist,” 242–4. In 1696, the Edinburgh booksellers were subjected to a kind of censorial “witch-hunt” by the Privy Council, when all texts considered “atheisticall, erroneous or profane” were put on a hitlist.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Pitcairn, ed., *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1638–1842* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing and Publishing Company, 1843) 258; Hunter, “Aikenhead the Atheist,” 237.

<sup>7</sup> Hunter, “Aikenhead the Atheist,” 226, 254, 236, 240.

of God, then Deism was to deny the existence of both. Others, like Fraser, were infected with the same horrendous doubts as Aikenhead. Thomas Halyburton, a classmate of Aikenhead's, wrote that "Satan, in Conjunction with the natural Atheism of my Heart, took Occasion to cast me into racking Disquietment about the great Truths of Religion, more especially the Being of a God." He was drawn, he said, to the writings of the deists "and other enemies to religion"; when praying, blasphemous thoughts came into his mind. He eventually became a professor of theology at St Andrews.<sup>8</sup>

At a time when some witches were being freed for lack of evidence, the Kirk could not afford that luxury in Aikenhead's case. A twenty-year-old student was sacrificed in order to propitiate a church that believed itself to be under siege. One example was adequate; as an early martyr to the Protestant cause George Wishart stated in 1543 "ane is sufficient for a sacrifice." To quote the most recent study of this repugnant episode, "the Aikenhead case was born in the initial collision between covenanted Presbyterianism and the countercurrents of Deism, biblical criticism, and religious scepticism."<sup>9</sup>

The trial and punishment of Aikenhead took place at the same time as Christian Shaw, a young girl in Renfrew, was exhibiting classic signs of bewitchment. The high-profile nature of these cases, one involving blasphemy and apostasy and the others demonic possession, caught the attention of commentators on both sides of the border. While there is no strong evidence to suggest that popular English opinion, at least as expressed in newspaper reports, was condemnatory of the events taking place in Scotland – on the contrary, coverage was generally supportive of the prosecutions<sup>10</sup> – some Scots felt threatened by perceived "foreign" criticism, not only of the Scottish legal system but of the integrity of the Scots themselves. Once again, worries of an English threat to Scottish independence and identity resurfaced. The minister, and staunch covenanter, Robert Wylie was particularly vocal on the subject. In a letter to William Hamilton, the laird of Wishaw, in 1697 he complained:

I have heard much of the censures past upon the Government here by some pious & charitable wits at London & elsewhere upon occasion of the sentence given against Aikenhead the Atheist. ... And when these witty criticks consider that reason, common sense and good manners do require

<sup>8</sup> Graham, *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead*, 79–80.

<sup>9</sup> Graham, *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Bostridge addresses this point eloquently: Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations, c. 1650–c.1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 32–3. Articles supportive of the Renfrew witch persecutions appeared in *The Flying Post* (23/1/1697 and 8/4/1697); *Lloyd's News* (26/1/1697); *The Protestant Mercury* (19–24/2/1697, 5–10/3/1697 and 19–21/5/1697); *Post Boy* (6–9/2/1697); and *Foreign Post* (2–4/6/1697). In March and April 1697, *The Flying Post* was also advertising Richard Baxter's *The Certainty of the World of Spirits*. See also L. Hanson, *Government and the Press 1695–1763* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).

that no man should in the face of a people spitefully revile & insult the object of their adoration, and that a Christian could not be innocent who should rail at or curse Mahomet at Constantinople, and consequently that their pleadings against Aikenheads condemnation were most unjust & founded upon mistake of the case and matter of fact.

Wylie was incensed by the English critics, not only of the Aikenhead trial, but of the Paisley trial as well:

One would think that after all this they should be more sparing cautious, at such a distance & under such uncertainty of report in passing their little rash judgements upon the late proceedings of this Government with reference to the witches in Renfrew.<sup>11</sup>

Sir Francis Grant, Lord Cullen, possibly the author of *Sadducismus Debellatus; Or, A True Narrative of the Sorceries and Witchcrafts Exercised by the Devil and his Instruments upon Christian Shaw* (1698), was another who shared Wylie's annoyance about incredulous English commentary:

There is scarce any need to take notice of a late scurrilous pamphlet, that has been printed in England, pretending to give an account of those proceedings: For any who reads it may find that the author has been either a fool or knave, or both; there being neither good language, sense nor truth in the most part of it.<sup>12</sup>

Other Scots, such as the former Secretary of State, James Johnstone, opted for a middle ground between Presbyterian enthusiasm and English moderation. In a letter to former colleague Lord Polwarth, he discussed the cases of the Renfrew witches and Aikenhead in tandem. Johnstone thought that there were sufficiently mitigating circumstances involved in the trial of the young Edinburgh student that Aikenhead should have been treated with more leniency than had been shown. As for witches:

that there may be such I have noe doubt, nor never had, it is a matter of fact that I was never judge of. But the parliaments of France and other

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<sup>11</sup> Letter from Robert Wylie to William Hamilton, laird of Wishaw, 16 June 1697, NAS, GD103/2/3/17/1. Also qtd in Hunter, "Aikenhead the Atheist," 238–9.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Francis Grant, Lord Cullen, *Sadducismus Debellatus; Or, a True Narrative of the Sorceries and Witchcrafts Exercised by the Devil and his Instruments upon Christian Shaw, Daughter of Mr. John Shaw of Bargarran, in the County of Renfrew, in the West of Scotland, from Aug. 1696 to April 1697, Containing the Journal of her Sufferings, as it was exhibited and prov'd by the voluntary confession of some of the witches and other unexceptional evidence before the Commissioners appointed by the Privy Council of Scotland to enquire into the same. Collected from the Records* (London: D. Newman and A. Ball, 1698) 46.

judicatories who are perswaded of the being of witches never try them nou because of the experience they have had that its impossible to distinguish possession from nature in disorder, and they chuse rather to let the guilty escape than to punish the innocent.<sup>13</sup>

Johnstone thus does not doubt the actual existence of witches but he has profound misgivings about proof. Whereas at one time the witchfinders' inadvertent destruction of the innocent had been deemed acceptable – for example, George Sinclair did not consider that the execution of a few innocents invalidated the prosecution of witches<sup>14</sup> – it was now considered preferable to let the guilty escape.

The cases discussed in this chapter are intended to illustrate variations of witch belief and some of the inherent problems involved in its investigation. They are drawn mostly from a fairly narrow chronological range, that is from 1688 to 1705, with some discussion of what was reputedly the last case in Scotland to result in an execution in 1727.

### **Catherine MacTargett: a vocational witch?**

By 1684, the King's Advocate had lost interest in prosecuting witches and some cases, such as that of 79-year-old beggar woman Marion Purdie, were never brought to trial. Charged with a variety of malefices including “laying on diseases, freinzies, &c.,” the former milk-wife from the West Port of Edinburgh was left to languish in jail, where she died “of cold and poverty” before ever seeing a courtroom.<sup>15</sup> Not everyone shared the Advocate's lethargy towards witch-hunting. Sir Alexander Home of Reston was so concerned about the lack of witch-hunting that he wrote to Lord Polwarth, a privy councillor, to complain that witchcraft was on the increase, particularly in Eyemouth. Home categorically laid the blame for this on the laxity of the judges, and proposed that “if some [witches] were apprehended, others would come to light.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet not so far away large-scale trials were by no means over. In 1688, East Lothian was rocked by the trial of a wife of a Dunbar weaver, Catherine MacTargett, who faced no fewer than twenty-seven charges while at least forty-six witnesses testified against her. The accusation was initiated by the

<sup>13</sup> Hunter, “Aikenhead the Atheist,” 236; letter from James Johnstone to Lord Polwarth, 1 April 1697, HMC, *The Manuscripts of the Duke of Roxburghe*, ed. W. Fraser (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1894) 132.

<sup>14</sup> Sinclair, *Satan's Invisible World*, Preface.

<sup>15</sup> Sir John Lauder of Fountainhall, *Historical Notices of Scottish Affairs*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1848) vol. 2, 561.

<sup>16</sup> Home's father had burnt seven or eight witches during his time as sheriff. Lauder, *Historical Notices*, vol. 2, 859, 860.

minister of Dunbar, Thomas Wood, who told the assembled commission that she had confessed herself a witch to him. She was formally charged with witchcraft, sorcery, necromancy, maleficium, use of charms, casting of spells, as well as terrifying and abusing the people; and as if these charges were not enough she was additionally rebuked for being an unlawful beggar. On 30 May the jury of fifteen found MacTargett guilty on all counts, and she was sent to prison.<sup>17</sup> Her fate is uncertain, but she was probably executed as she was taken to Dunbar on 12 July “to be burnt there, if her Judges pleased.”<sup>18</sup>

Most aspects of the indictment are fairly typical, indeed traditional; people falling ill and dying after an altercation with the suspect, a cow giving blood instead of milk, the witch causing or at least predicting a shipwreck, and a variety of curses being uttered and potions brewed. In virtually all of the testimonies the witnesses claimed that MacTargett had begged something from them, and when they did not comply with her request, grave misfortune swiftly followed. However, there are some remarkable features that are not quite so familiar. Of significant interest is the fact that she not only confessed to her crimes, but positively relished confessing them. It was pointed out by her prosecutor that MacTargett had no need to beg, for she and her husband (William Broun) had a “competent way of living.” Furthermore, it became clear that she encouraged her reputation as a witch and seemed to gloat in the power it gave her:

You have used such uncouth and strange words, gestures and practices as convinced the people quher you went a begging that you wer a witch; and you haveing contineud under that common fame and reputte for a longe tyme without complaineing to any magistrat that ye wer called ane witch, bot rather in a maner gloried in it, and terrified the people soe as you became insolent and imperious in your way of begging.

Not always happy with the alms she received, she would demand more, “quhich the people out of fear and terrour wer constrained to satisfie you in, and if any refused you used to threatne and predict damage to them,”<sup>19</sup> her behaviour here adhering to the “charity-refused” model. She was clearly pleased with her reputation as a witch for it gave her power, and perhaps a level of respect, in a world that rarely allowed women such advantages.

During an episode dating back to 1676, Sarah Aitchison testified that she had seen MacTargett entering her home carrying a hair tether. Aitchison’s husband, John Laurie, saw the witch throw the object on the floor. He subsequently became seriously ill and died four days later. The use of a hair tether

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<sup>17</sup> Trial of Catherine MacTargett, 30 May 1688, *RPC*, 3rd ser., vol. 13, 245–62.

<sup>18</sup> Lauder, *Historical Notices*, vol. 2, 872–3.

<sup>19</sup> *RPC*, 3rd ser., vol. 13, 245.

for conjuring a witch's spell is not unusual, but Aitchison, who saw her going into the house, also observed a large gathering of crows circling above. Laurie, during a delirious fit, was also said to have stared upwards crying, "ther she is, ther she is," perhaps a suggestion that the witch had assumed the form of a crow to further harass and terrify the dying man. On another occasion, crows in great numbers had been seen flying around MacTargett's own house. It is unclear if the crows were taken to be her "familiars," supernatural helpers, or as an omen of the witch's evil intent. In all likelihood it was the latter as there was not a tradition of animal familiars in seventeenth-century Scottish folk belief. Therianthropy (human-animal transformation) was, however, a relatively common folkloric theme so, perhaps, the witch was able to transform herself into the form of a crow and thus terrorize her victim undetected.

Shapeshifting into crows can be found in other confessions as well. Thomas Lindsay, the younger brother of one of the suspects in the Christian Shaw bewitchment in 1696–97, claimed that "if he pleas'd he could fly in the likeness of a crow, up to the mast of a ship." In 1704, six women were brought before the Carriden Kirk Session after a sailor, Robert Nimmo, accused them of attacking and chasing him as he walked home from Linlithgow to Carriden shore one evening. He tried to run away, but they pursued him in the shape of six cats and, as they neared his home, he saw all six transform into the shape of "muckle black crows." The witches, in bird disguise, followed him to his house, and there he watched them change back to their human form. The leader of this avian mob, Anna Wood, apparently had quite a reputation in her neighbourhood for shapeshifting skills, and was said to take the form of a black cat when it pleased her.<sup>20</sup> It probably came as no surprise when she escaped from prison while awaiting trial and was never heard of in Bo'ness again, at least not in human form!

The identification of the crow in the MacTargett case is slightly odd because hooded and carrion crows, unlike their more gregarious relatives the rooks, are mainly solitary. However, they are known to gather together in loose flocks over the autumn and winter and, as Laurie's bewitchment reportedly took place in October, it is likely that what was witnessed was perfectly natural behaviour for that time of year. From a folkloric perspective, crows were widely interpreted, in Scotland, to act as messengers or portents of death, and would therefore not have been a welcome visitor.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Grant, *Sadducismus Debellatus*, 25; Anna Wood, Bo'ness, January 1704, Thomas James Salmon, *Borrowstounness and District being Historical Sketches of Kinneil, Carriden, and Bo'ness c. 1550–1850* (Edinburgh and London: William Hodge and Co., 1913) 119–21.

<sup>21</sup> On the folklore of crows, see Francesca Greenoak, *British Birds: Their Folklore, Names and Literature* (London: Christopher Helm, 1997); Charles Swainson, *The Folk Lore and Provincial Names of British Birds* (1886; Felinbach: Llanerch, 1998) 84; Robin Hull, *Scottish Birds: Culture and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2001).

In 1683, while MacTargett was in Dunbar during the herring "drave," or fishing, a "dumb man" was seen to stick a long pin in her shoulder. She allegedly made no sound or indication that the pin caused any pain, and when the man extracted the pin, holding it up for the nosy onlookers to see, she called him a "dum devill" and walked away from him. It seems that MacTargett had been subjected to an impromptu "witch-pricking," and she had clearly failed the procedure as invulnerability to pain was a sure sign of guilt. The unofficial nature of this episode is intriguing as it shows that at least some people were all too willing to carry out their own tests to determine the identity of witches and establish "evidence" against them. That the witch-finder, in this case, was dumb is also of interest, since the notion that "dumb" men were endowed with special powers was fairly prevalent.<sup>22</sup> For example, one such, "who pretended to tell fortunes and find things lost," was investigated in 1684 by the magistrates of Ayr. A number of people, who had consulted him, were rebuked by the session.<sup>23</sup>

MacTargett's initiation into the diabolic arts makes no mention of the more colourful details found in confessions from the "glory days" of witch persecutions. There were no wild parties or sex with the Devil, no flying through the air or speaking with the fairies. MacTargett maintained that she entered into the service of the Devil through the instruction of a Highland woman called Margaret McLain, who told her what to do and bade her to renounce her baptism. That a woman from Dunbar should have claimed to have learned her art from a Highlander is perhaps more revealing than if she had declared the Devil himself had taught her, for Lowlanders would have had a poor view of Gaels at the time.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, in an earlier trial in

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<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, William Bond, *The History of the Life and Adventures of Mr Duncan Campbell* (London: E. Curll, 1720), a deaf and dumb seer who claimed his mother was from Lapland and his father a Scot. His fame for skilled predictions, finding lost property and curing witchcraft led him to London in the 1690s, where he mingled in aristocratic circles. The *Secret Memoirs of the late Mr Duncan Campbell, the Famous Deaf and Dumb Gentleman* (London: J. Millan; J. Crichley, 1732) were published posthumously, and include a chapter in defence of the reality of witchcraft. See also Owen Davies, "Decriminalising the Witch: The Origin and Response to the 1736 Witchcraft Act," in *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, ed. John Newton and Jo Bath (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 214–18.

<sup>23</sup> John H. Pagan, *Annals of Ayr in the Olden Times, 1560–1692* (Ayr: Alex. Fergusson, 1897) 106; Alastair Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire: A Calendar of Documents* (May 1998; unpublished) 86. Julian Goodare refers to "a dumme boy" who caught the attention of the Haddington presbytery in 1597. He "gangis about dissaving the people and giving answeris by signes." *Haddington Presbytery Minutes*, NAS, CH2/185/2, qtd in Julian Goodare, ed., *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 68.

<sup>24</sup> Dauvit Broun and Martin MacGregor, eds., *Miorun Mòr nan Gall, "The Great Ill-Will of the Lowlander"? Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands, Medieval and Modern* (University of Glasgow, 2007) e-publication: <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/scottishstudies/ebooks/miorunmor.htm>.

Edinburgh in 1656, convicted witch John McWilliam claimed the Devil appeared to him in the form of a “Highlandman.”<sup>25</sup>

Some cases demand that we consider what those who were convicted of witchcraft thought about themselves, what their own perceived powers actually were and where they came from. There are numerous examples of suspects attempting, usually unsuccessfully, to convince the authorities that their magical skills, if they admitted to possessing any, were not evil or diabolically inspired. There were many, for instance, who readily confessed to performing various charming practices, healing rituals, divinatory rites, to possessing second sight, or communicating with spirits of the dead or the fairies. There were far fewer who openly admitted to practising dark magic, but such individuals did seemingly exist. The presentist assumption that everyone who was ever accused of witchcraft was a “victim,” or did not really believe they were guilty of the criminal acts for which they stood trial, is too simplistic and requires closer scrutiny. It can be argued that MacTargett turned the situation of her “bad reputation” to her advantage, to such an extent that we might wish to regard her as a vocational witch. As a magical practitioner, she acquired her alleged skills through the teachings of a Highland woman, following a pattern of transmission, from one practitioner to another, documented in several other cases. She encouraged her notoriety as a witch. She was not the first person to do so and she was certainly not the last.<sup>26</sup> Power, even when negatively expressed or experienced, is an addiction that is hard to break.

## Diabolical Renfrewshire

The county of Renfrew experienced a total of 35 individual witchcraft trials (4 in 1650, 6 in 1677 and 25 in 1697),<sup>27</sup> including some of Scotland’s most high-profile witchcraft cases. Sir George Maxwell of Pollock accused six individuals (five women and one man) of causing his declining health through the use of a witchcraft charm – clay and waxen images stuck with pins.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> James Maidment, ed., *The Spottiswoode Miscellany*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Spottiswoode Society, 1844–45) vol. 2, 67; High Court Record Index No. 1 5/2/1656.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, the case of Jean Ford in Chapter 3.

<sup>27</sup> A further 24 suspected witches were indicted in 1699, but these cases were dropped in 1700 owing to insufficient evidence.

<sup>28</sup> Witnesses were produced who claimed that they had been present when the hidden clay and wax “pictures” were discovered in the suspects’ homes. There is also a suggestion that these images were destroyed along with their creators: “Considering all other circumstances of their case, committed them to the trial of a judicious inquest, who, being found guilty, were condemned to the fire to be burned, and their effigies with them.” John Millar, *A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire* (Paisley: J. Neilson, 1809) 39–55, at 53, reprinted in *A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire. A New Edition. With an Introduction, Embodying Extracts Hitherto Unpublished from the Records of the Presbytery of Paisley* (Paisley: Alex. Gardner, 1877).



He had been convinced of this by a young woman called Janet Douglas, who was allegedly deaf and mute, though it was discovered later that she had been pretending to her disabilities. Why she should deceive Maxwell in this way is unclear, but it is possible that she thought she would be more readily believed if she adopted this particular deception, since, as mentioned above, deaf mutes were often supposed to have occult powers. Unfortunately, the discovery of her fraudulent imposture came too late to save five of the suspects who were executed in 1677 for their alleged crimes, the sixth having escaped punishment owing to her young age.<sup>29</sup> There was, however, an even more striking case to come.

The seventeenth century went out with a roar thanks to the deadly whimperings of one little girl. The case of Christian Shaw, who figured centrally in the episode known variously as the witches of Renfrew, Bargarran or Paisley in 1697, was truly sensational. As it was of the greatest interest to those seeking evidence for their particular viewpoint on both sides of the great debate on sadducism and witchcraft, it is also one of the best documented of all Scottish cases. Three separate titles were printed immediately after the trial and executions,<sup>30</sup> one account appeared in 1775,<sup>31</sup> and at least two surfaced in the nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> Hugo Arnot included it among one

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<sup>29</sup> Jonet Mathie, her son Jon Stewart, her daughter Annabell Stewart, Margaret Jackson, Bessie Weir and Marjory Craig. Annabell Stewart was reprieved. *RPC*, 3rd ser. vol. 5, 95, 104–5; Sinclair, *Satan's Invisible World Discovered*, 1–18; John Graham Dalyell, *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland* (Glasgow: Richard Griffin and Co., 1835) 343–6; Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, *A Historical Account of the Belief in Witchcraft in Scotland* (London: Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1884) 138–42; Scott, *Letters*, 196.

<sup>30</sup> *A Relation of the Diabolical Practices of the Witches of the Sheriffdom of Renfrew in the Kingdom of Scotland, contain'd in their Tryals, Examination and Confessions. And for which severall of them have been executed this present year 1697* (London: Hugh Newman, 1697); *Narrative of the Sufferings and Relief of a Young Girl in the West (Christian Shaw, the Laird of Bargarran's Daughter), with Trial of the seven Witches condemned to be execute at Paisley* (Edinburgh: Watson, 1698); and Sir Francis Grant, Lord Cullen, *Sadducismus Debellatus; Or, a True Narrative of the Sorceries and Witchcrafts Exercised by the Devil and his Instruments upon Christian Shaw*. The *Sadducismus Debellatus* was published anonymously but is attributed to Grant by *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British America, 1641–1700*, compiled by Donald Wing, 2nd edn revised by J. J. Morrison et al., 3 vols. (New York: MLA, 1982–94) vol. 1, 687.

<sup>31</sup> *A Narrative of the Sufferings and Relief of a Young Girl Strangely Molested by Evil Spirits and their Instruments in the West: Collected from Authentic Testimonies, with a Preface and Postscript, Containing Reflections in What Is Most Material or Curious, Either in the History or Trial of the Seven Witches Who Were Condemned and Burnt in the Gallow-Green of Paisley* (Paisley: Alexander Weir, 1775).

<sup>32</sup> John Millar, *From Authentic Documents. A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire Who Were Burned on the Gallowgreen of Paisley, Published by the editor of the Paisley Repository* (Paisley: J. Neilson, 1809), and *A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire. A New Edition. With an Introduction, Embodying Extracts Hitherto Unpublished from the Records of the Presbytery of Paisley* (Paisley: Alex. Gardner, 1877).

of his *Celebrated Criminal Trials in Scotland* (1785), though in true enlightenment form, he could not resist criticizing those involved in the case as “worshipping at the altar of ignorance, superstition, and cruelty” while praising those responsible for repealing the Witchcraft Act.<sup>33</sup> There are a few modern assessments, one offering a postmodern analysis of the case of the “Bargarran Imposter,” and another providing a useful collation of the documents relevant to the Renfrewshire witch-hunt.<sup>34</sup> Michael Wasser’s insightful piece contextualizes the events at Bargarran by bringing into clearer focus a series of indictments made in 1699 against 24 suspected witches, also centrally concerned with two female demoniacs, which, taken together, he has argued “represent a major regional witch-hunt, the last to occur in Scotland, or indeed in the English-speaking world.”<sup>35</sup>

On the evidence of the eleven-year-old Christian, daughter of John Shaw, laird of Bargarran, 25 people were indicted in connection with the case,<sup>36</sup> and seven were convicted of witchcraft; one of them (John Reid, a blacksmith from Inchinnan) committed suicide in prison, and the other six were strangled and burned on Paisley’s Gallowgreen, on 10 June 1697.<sup>37</sup> In his speech to the jury, the Prosecuting Advocate, Francis Grant, spoke with absolute conviction about

the presumptions being so pregnant, to infer that these prisoners are the witches: concurring such characters, as by the observation of all nations and ages, are the symptoms of a witch; particularly the marks, fame, not shedding tears, &c. which are providential discoveries of so dark a crime, that like avenues, lead us to the secret of it.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Arnot, *Celebrated Criminal Trials in Scotland*, 411.

<sup>34</sup> S. W. McDonald and A. Thom, “The Bargarran Witchcraft Trial: A Psychiatric Reassessment,” *Scottish Medical Journal* 41 (1996): 152–8; Hugh V. McLachlan and J. Kim Swales, “The Bewitchment of Christian Shaw: A Reassessment of the Famous Paisley Witchcraft Case of 1697,” in *Twisted Sisters: Women, Crime and Deviance in Scotland since 1400*, ed. Yvonne Galloway Brown and Rona Ferguson (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002) 54–83; Hugh V. McLachlan, ed., *The Kirk, Satan and Salem: A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire* (Glasgow: The Grimsay Press, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Michael Wasser, “The Western Witch-Hunt of 1697–1700: The Last Major Witch-Hunt in Scotland,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 146–65.

<sup>36</sup> High Court of Justiciary, Circuit Court Minute Book, NAS, JC10/4. There were 26 names cited, but one of these seems to be a repetition. This trial was actually based on a commission of justiciary, granted by the Privy Council, and was nothing to do with the circuit courts. See Wasser, “Western Witch-Hunt of 1697–1700,” 146.

<sup>37</sup> The names of those convicted were John Lindsay, James Lindsay, John Reid, Katherine Campbell, Margaret Lang, Margaret Fulton and Agnes Naismith. McLachlan, *Kirk, Satan and Salem*, 317.

<sup>38</sup> Grant, *Sadducismus Debellatus*, 52.

What had happened to send six people to the gallows for witchcraft? Young Christian's symptoms came upon her following an argument she had with a house maid called Katherine Campbell. Towards the middle of August 1696, Christian accused the maid of stealing some milk, and reported this to her mother. In the ensuing argument, and in front of witnesses, Campbell denied she had taken the milk and cursed the girl saying, “the Devil harle [drag] your soul through Hell.” On 21 August Christian began to grow restless, could not sleep and cried out that she felt violent pains all over her body. Her symptoms gradually grew worse until her body stiffened, she went in and out of a delirious state and intermittently lost the power of speech. Physicians were called from Paisley to examine her, but could find no source for the terrible fits that now were so severe that the whole bed shook while her body went through various strange contortions. In September, during one of her episodes, Christian cried out that Katherine Campbell, and another woman Agnes Naismith, were cutting her body and generally tormenting her. Witchcraft was not immediately suspected, though that would quickly change, and Christian was sent on visits to nearby Glasgow to see the esteemed physician Dr Matthew Brisbane and apothecary Henry Marshall. By November she was swooning regularly and coughing up parcels of hair, some of it curly and some in plaits, coal cinders as large as chestnuts, feathers, egg-shells, pins, straw, hay mixed with dung and small bones. Her behaviour was increasingly taking on a strong religious dimension. At home, passages from the Scriptures were read to her, and she clung tightly to her Bible and would allow none to take it away from her. She started to engage in theological debates with those who came to pray with her, as well as with the Devil. She began to name further invisible attackers, this time four men, one of whom was a beggar man previously unknown to her, who had knocked on the Bargarran residence door. In the month of December, she started to see frightful visions of the Devil, in various shapes, who threatened to devour her. She also saw her tormentors coming into her room, carrying strange candles, though they remained unseen to others.

In the same month Mr James Brisbane, minister of Kilmacolm and Mr Andrew Turner, minister of Erskine, were commissioned by the presbytery of Paisley “to repair to Bargarran ... to take up a particular narrative of her [i.e. Christian Shaw's] whole trouble, of its rise and progress.” The Bargarran family worshipped at Erskine so Turner was their local minister. James Brisbane is described as a younger relative of Dr Matthew Brisbane. The combination of Brisbanes and locality might suggest suspicions of a rigging of the evidence in Christian's favour. Matthew was a distinguished medical man, city doctor of Glasgow, who furthermore had written a doctoral thesis on catalepsy and who originally suggested that Christian's symptoms were due to “hypochondriac melancholy.” He testified that he had actually observed the various trash and objects that came out of her mouth, which he noted were not wet but dry due to “artifice.” He made other notes such as

that the temperature of the objects was higher than that of her body, sometimes produced with severe fits, but at other times they took place when they were quietly conversing. He solemnly attested that if it were not for her gurgitation of foreign matter he would have been able to diagnose her other symptoms “in the catalogue of human diseases.” There is a hint, however, that Matthew became more convinced about witch involvement as matters progressed. It was stated that he did not believe in the Devil’s mark until he witnessed brutal prickings of Bargarran suspects who failed to bleed or feel pain when the needles were inserted.<sup>39</sup> It must also be significant, however, that James Brisbane had personal experience of malicious witches – he was convinced that his own child had been murdered by witchcraft, allegedly due to the use of a “pictour of wax until the chyld dyed.”<sup>40</sup> We may suspect that such a man was not completely dispassionate in his approach to witchcraft, and furthermore one that involved the use of “pictours.” It is to be noted that a number of other ministers, those of Bonhill, Kilellan, Renfrew, Paisley, Kilbarchan and Houston, were all members of the same presbytery and supposedly all witnesses to Christian’s afflictions. In addition, the first published *Narrative* of the proceedings at Erskine subjoined a long list of dignitaries, lairds, lawyers and tenants who also allegedly observed the girl’s torments.

On 19 January 1697 the Privy Council granted a commission to gather evidence. A schedule of visits for fasting and praying was arranged around the same time by the local minister and several church elders, who would sit by Christian’s bedside and read and sing psalms through her wails and shrieking. She cried out that cats, ravens, owls and horses were pressing down on her while she was in bed; one witness was able to confirm that they did see something moving under Christian’s bed-clothes about the size of a cat. The Devil came more frequently now, and threatened to carry her out a hall window and throw her down the well so that people would think she had “destroyed herself.” On several occasions, Christian could be heard arguing and shouting at the Devil, at other times she would sit quietly, staring into the corners of the room, at her invisible aggressors. She told her friends and family in February that the witches now asked her to join with them, with the promise of great riches and good health. She stubbornly declined their offer for she knew that the “Devil promises what he cannot perform.” One

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<sup>39</sup> McLachlan, *Kirk, Satan and Salem*, 477. The consultation of doctors in this case is interesting. Despite the example of Matthew Brisbane, medical intervention, over time, would have impacted adversely on witch belief.

<sup>40</sup> Brisbane’s personal loss of a child was attributed to a charm cast by Isobel Houstone, who made a “picture of wax” with which she tormented the child until it died. Much of this trial document is retrospective and given in a context that would suggest Brisbane’s child died before 1696. Houstone was not convicted of this alleged crime, however, and the case against her was dropped. Glasgow, May 1699, NAS, JC/26/81/D9, reproduced in McLachlan, *Kirk, Satan and Salem*, 336–63, at 347.

evening, when a beggar came to the door, described as an “old Highland fellow,” and asked for alms, Christian caught sight of him in the kitchen and immediately declared that he was one of her attackers. He was asked to take Christian’s hand, which he did, and the girl immediately reacted by falling into fits and screams of pain. The touch test was repeated the following day by a local minister, though this time with Christian’s eyes covered over, but the results were the same and suspicious about the man were confirmed. A commission was sent to Bargarran to investigate the allegations made by Christian, and to repeat the touch test with further suspects.

The minister began taking confessions and witness statements around this time, while the presbytery held a public fast on 11 February to assist in Christian’s recovery. The audacious youth claimed that the Devil had told her that during this church service Rev James Hutchison, minister of Kilellan, would stumble on his way to the pulpit, causing his wig to fall off and the congregation to laugh at him and, rather more seriously, that on his way home he would break his neck. Following the service, when none of these predictions had come to pass, Christian said the “Devil was a liar; for no such thing fell out as he had threatened.” The Council was suitably convinced by the mounting evidence to issue a trial commission, and proceedings began on 18 March. The assaults against the young demoniac continued throughout the initial stages of the investigation until one day,



*Illustration 6.1* Bargarran House

Source: Frontispiece of *A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire, A new edition, with an introduction*, Paisley: Alex. Gardner, 1877.

on 28 March, they ceased and she became “as well, sensible, and composed as ever.”<sup>41</sup> The trial reached its verdict on 19 May 1697.

In the years immediately following the tragic events in Paisley, the bewitchment of Christian Shaw was well known and most likely had a part to play in other emerging possession cases into the early eighteenth century, notably at Pittenweem. Initially her narrative was widely taken as evidence of the preternatural world and the machinations of the Devil, but as the eighteenth century progressed, Bargarran’s Daughter was just as likely to be thought of as Bargarran’s Imposter. Writing in 1785, Hugo Arnot surmised that the young, “hysterical” girl “seems to have displayed an artifice above her years ... and to have been aided by accomplices, which dullness of apprehension or violence of prejudice forbade the bystanders to discover.”<sup>42</sup> Such an interpretation, while attractive to the enlightened sceptic, does not attempt to explain why such a young girl should go to such lengths to pretend to be possessed, or how she was able to defraud so many learned spectators and educated gentlemen. The motivation of the “accomplices” is also unclear. Arnot’s explanation raises the uncomfortable question of how she could be “hysterical” but also capable of “fraud” on such a grand scale. Hugh McLachlan argues that the two explanations cancel one another out;<sup>43</sup> however, fraud and hysteria need not be incompatible. Twentieth-century interpretations have favoured equating Christian Shaw’s experiences with medical problems, such as epilepsy, or with mental health issues, as a girl in need of serious psychotherapy!<sup>44</sup> Neither of these explanations is particularly convincing either as she made a full recovery. Nor do they explain why a court of law believed she was under assault from the Devil and his witches.

To turn the problem on its head, in order to fully understand what happened at Bargarran, and why people were so willing to believe the Devil was responsible, we must look more closely at the *True Narrative of the Sufferings and Relief of a Young Girl, who was strangely molested by evil spirits and their instruments in the West*, which describes the events. Anonymously published in Edinburgh in 1698, it has been suggested that it was in fact written, or at least compiled by Rev. Andrew Turner and Rev. James Brisbane on the instruction of the presbytery, as noted above. An alternative candidate for authorship is Sir Francis Grant. Its similarity in style and tone with Rev. Deodat Lawson’s *Narrative of the Salem witch-hunts of 1692*

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<sup>41</sup> *True Narrative of the Sufferings and Relief of a Young Girl* (1698), reproduced in McLachlan, *Kirk, Satan and Salem*, 167–313.

<sup>42</sup> Arnot, *Criminal Trials*, 202.

<sup>43</sup> McLachlan, *Kirk, Satan and Salem*, 484.

<sup>44</sup> Adam, *Witch-Hunt*, 222; McDonald and Thom, “A Psychiatric Reassessment,” 152–8.

has also been noted.<sup>45</sup> One of Lawson's chief aims, beyond documenting the "true" events, was to affirm the existence of witchcraft, the Devil and God. It was, in other words, a tract against atheism. If the *True Narrative* is read in a similar light, as an exemplar of one little girl's fight against the forces of evil, then the entire tract should be taken as a defence of religion. Christian Shaw's experiences, or their interpretation and retelling of her story, were intended to persuade non-believers of the reality of witchcraft, as evidence of the Devil's influence in the world and as a sign of God's providence. The eradication of the witches who facilitated this demonic attack on the Shaw girl would restore God's favour once the sinners had been duly punished.

There are several notable features about this case. Its relatively late date is the most obvious, as well as physical attacks from "invisible witches," the youth of the accuser and the powerful impact of her accusations, notably against her family's maid and assorted beggars who had come to her home seeking alms, all of which echo Salem – which centred on accusations initiated by eleven-year-old Abigail Williams – as well as some continental cases that centrally involved children.<sup>46</sup> Some of those questioned in connection with the case were also minors. Thomas Lindsay (whose older brother James was accused by Christian of being one of her tormentors) was about the same age as the bewitched girl. He confessed, before several witnesses, that his father was the Devil, that he could shapeshift into a crow, and that he sometimes "caus'd a plough to stand, and the horses to break their yokes upon the pronouncing of some words, and turning himself about from the right-hand to the left, contrary to the natural course of the sun." All this he claimed he would do for any who desired it "for a half-penny." Perhaps this young lad, caught up in the excitement of the moment, naively seized the opportunity to share in some of the attention. Thomas's confessions must not have helped his brother James's defence, for he went on to claim he had entered into compact with the Devil, received an insensible mark

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<sup>45</sup> McLachlan, *Kirk, Satan and Salem*, 488. Wasser attributes the *True Narrative* to Francis Grant, "Western Witch-Hunt of 1697–1700," 148, 156.

<sup>46</sup> John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (1982; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 157–65; Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974) 22–30. For continental examples, see Robert Walinski-Kiehl, "The Devil's Children: Child Witch-Trials in Early Modern Germany," *Continuity and Change* 11/2 (1996): 171–89; Lyndal Roper, "Evil Imaginings and Fantasies: Child Witches and the End of the Witch Craze," *Past and Present* 167 (2000): 107–39; Per Sörlin, "Child Witches and the Construction of the Witches' Sabbath: The Swedish Blåkulla Story," in *Witchcraft Mythologies and Persecutions*, ed. Gábor Klaniczay and Éva Pócs (Budapest and New York: CEU Press, 2008) 99–124. A psychological approach is taken in Hans Sebald, *Witch-Children: From Salem Witch-Hunts to Modern Courtrooms* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books, 1995).

from him, and with his master had been present at several meetings that were also attended by James and some others.<sup>47</sup> It is noteworthy that at a time when witch-hunting was in sharp decline young Thomas Lindsay had a remarkably good knowledge, not only of the language of witchcraft, but also of the alleged activities of witches. Exposure to demonological concepts of witchcraft was, presumably, still commonplace and well integrated with folk understandings of witchlore.

Other notable features were the high proportion of males who were initially accused and those who were eventually convicted; three out of seven were men. The Shaw case was also centrally concerned with possession,<sup>48</sup> a characteristic that may have featured, but had not been conspicuous, during the earlier phase of the witch-hunts.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, according to Levack, such cases were not particularly common in Scotland and were tightly concentrated in a period lasting less than a decade, from 1697 to 1704.<sup>50</sup> Among the many symptoms, Christian displayed bites, bruises and nip marks where her tormentors, visible to her but unseen by witnesses, poked

<sup>47</sup> Grant, *Sadducismus Debellatus*, 25.

<sup>48</sup> For more on possession, see Brian P. Levack, *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013). Volume 9 of Brian Levack's edited collection, *Articles on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*, 12 vols. (New York and London: Garland Press, 1992) deals specifically with "Possession and Exorcism." Louise Yeoman's article, "The Devil as Doctor: Witchcraft, Wodrow and the Wider World," *Scottish Archives* 1 (1995): 93–105, considers the strictness of the Calvinist religion and problems sometimes encountered during conversion experiences and their possible connection to possession cases. For wider comparisons, in an English context, see D. P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits: Possession and Exorcism in France and England in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1981); James Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter: A Horrible and True Story of Football, Witchcraft, Murder, and the King of England* (London: Profile Books, 1999); Darren Oldridge's chapter on possession and exorcism in *The Devil in Early Modern England* (Stroud: Sutton Press, 2000) 111–33; Philip C. Almond, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On France, see Sarah Ferber, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern France* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>49</sup> See *A Relation of the Diabolical Practices of the Witches of the Sheriffdom of Renfrew* (London: H. Newman, 1697); *A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire* (Paisley: Alex. Gardner, 1877); Adam, *Witch Hunt*.

<sup>50</sup> Brian P. Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008) 147. However, there are indications in the records for Dunrossness, for example, that two women and a man were allegedly possessed in 1756, and another woman supposedly gave birth while in a possessed state. There were also cases of blasphemy in 1766 and 1801 against women who prayed that the Devil would "go down" their neighbours' throat, which could be interpreted as a residual form of possession. Extracts from the Kirk Session Records of Dunrossness, qtd in Gilbert Goudie, ed., *The Diary of the Reverend John Mill*, Scottish History Society (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1889) 19, 133, 136.



and prodded her. She vomited unusual objects, such as egg-shells, pins, hair, small bones, straw and so on, though modern medicine is now familiar with patients suffering from a condition known as pica, the craving for unusual substances unfit for consumption. Her seizures manifested in various ways that left her either stiff as a board or shaking so violently it took four strong men to hold her down. On one occasion she tried to throw herself into the fire. Sometimes her belly swelled and her eyes sank into the back of her skull. When the Bible was read out to her, she would break into fits of laughter. Christian claimed that she could see the Devil, and she had been often heard holding elevated theological discussions with him.<sup>51</sup>

There were four main signifiers of demonic possession: an ability to speak in languages previously unknown to the sufferer; clairvoyance, or a knowledge of other persons' thoughts and secrets; superhuman strength; and a revulsion and fear of sacred objects. Contemporary explanations for the causes of possession were generally limited to three major possibilities: the person was possessed by the Devil or a demonic spirit, the sufferer was afflicted with a disease, or the symptoms were faked and the entire episode was fraudulent. A fourth possibility, as seen in the Shaw case, was that witches were held responsible for the possession. In Scotland, there was a notable concentration of possession cases in the last decade of the seventeenth century, and it would seem that, in such cases, women and children, as allegedly the most impressionable section of the population, were most at risk. Many Scots were aware of the happenings at Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, while on home soil the terrifying assaults upon Bargarran's daughter were well known and widely discussed. Other less high-profile cases were also emerging and were possibly influenced by events in New England and Paisley. In Scotland some of the conservative, blinkered and devout, despite the high-profile female activity on behalf of the covenant, still regarded women as the corrupted and corruptible daughters of Eve, while children were often deemed to be born evil. Too much of the supposed evidence in Christian's case was reported, allegedly witnessed or attested by clerics who were predisposed to take advantage of a young girl's affliction and render it demonic. Their privileged place in the community would ensure that their views were respected and unquestioned by their parishioners, some of whom might have come to believe that they too had witnessed the phenomena described by the ministers. In a tight-knit society of religious persuasion, suggestion can operate as a powerful tool.

In 1699, Bessie Wanton of Cupar was accused of tormenting eighteen-year-old James Tarbot and causing him to exhibit possession-like symptoms,

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<sup>51</sup> Her symptoms are discussed in great length in contemporary pamphlets, such as *Narrative of the Sufferings and Relief of a Young Girl in the West* (1698), reprinted in *A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire* (1877).

such as falling into fits, which left him both deaf and unable to speak, and receiving pin pricks and nips on his body while he attempted to sleep. She also tempted him with promises of “bonnie things” should he choose to go away with her.<sup>52</sup> Mary Morrison, spouse of a Greenock skipper, became involved in a possession case in 1699–1700. Janet Shaw, Janet Laird and Margaret Murdock, who had been suffering from fits, alleged that the Devil had represented Morrison “as one of their tormentors.” Morrison was acquitted, possibly because of other witnesses who spoke of her “good fame and reputation during all her life and no wayes tainted with any public guilt or malefice to her neighbours.”<sup>53</sup>

Long after the Shaw bewitchment an episode involving the twelve-year-old son of Lord Torphichen in 1720 caused quite a stir. The boy was tormented with powerful fits and seizures, and strange happenings surrounded him, such as candles mysteriously going out and so on. He implicated some female suspects, and they were duly questioned. One of the women acknowledged that an image had been made of the youth, which was subsequently found in another woman’s house. Two of the women who admitted guilt claimed that the Devil would kill them for confessing. They both died shortly after. Robert Wodrow wrote to Cotton Mather about the incident, declaring “we are alarmed with the outbreaking of horrid witchcraft upon the family of a nobleman.” Wodrow’s concern is explicit: “let us pray that the visible and invisible kingdom of Satan may be weakened and destroyed, and do our best to promote our Redeemer’s kingdom.” He clearly saw Mather not only as an ally and foot soldier in the fight against evil, but as a general who had already won at least one battle – at Salem: “May you be long useful for grand services in it, as you have been!”<sup>54</sup> There is no evidence that he harboured any pity for the deceased women.

Returning to the Bargarran trial, the story was not yet quite over and another, very similar case was emerging in 1699. After the executions of June 1697 there were still several suspects being held, “in a starving condition,” in the tolbooth at Renfrew over a year later.<sup>55</sup> It remains unclear if these persons had been implicated in the Bargarran trial, if they were entirely new witch suspects, or a combination of both, but the point is the mood was such that the makings of another major witch-hunt was simmering. A witchcraft committee was formed by the synod of Glasgow in 1699, and among the several attendees was Rev. James Brisbane, a key witness in the Bargarran trial, who was soon to adopt a similar role in the subsequent

<sup>52</sup> NRS, Cupar Presbytery Records, CH2/82/2, 344–7.

<sup>53</sup> Mary Morrison, Glasgow, 1699–1700, SBSW, 278–9; NAS, JC3/1/87–8, JC26/81/D9, JC26/81/D2.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Robert Wodrow to Cotton Mather, 10 February 1720, in M’Crie, *Correspondence of the Rev Robert Wodrow*, vol. 2, 504–6.

<sup>55</sup> NAS, privy council, acta, PC1/51, 476.

investigations into witchcraft and possession later that year. In April, and again in November of 1699, the synod’s committee enlisted the aid of justice clerk Sir John Maxwell of Pollock to apprehend the suspects. Sir John was a keen supporter of the prosecution of witches ever since, presumably, his father George was bewitched in 1677, and had played a role as president of the first commission against the Bargarran witches early on in 1697, thus forming another important linkage between the two cases.<sup>56</sup>

The accusations levelled against the 24 suspects in 1699 centred on two demoniacs, Margaret Laird and Margaret Murdoch, who were exhibiting symptoms of demonic possession very similar to what Christian Shaw had experienced. There was also alleged evidence of the witches’ mark on four of the suspects’ bodies and of maleficium being performed against other community members, while a number of witness statements had been obtained to verify the claims being made against these supposed witches of long standing. For all intents and purposes there was every reason to assume that this investigation, which bore so many of the same hallmarks as the Bargarran trial, and had similarly strong supporters drawn heavily from the ranks of the local ministers, would have reached the same *dénouement*. And yet, in 1700, the case was dropped against all of the suspects due to a “defect of probation.”<sup>57</sup>

Michael Wasser has posited a number of convincing suggestions as to the reasons behind the drastic difference in outcome, such as concern over public opinion in England, which may have played a minor role, and the expense involved in holding another large-scale trial at a time when the country was essentially bankrupt following the failure of the Darien Venture in Panama. Alternative scientific approaches to determining whether the symptoms of possession were actually “demonic” or could be explained by medical or natural causes was on the increase, and there were growing worries about fraud and delusion. Indubitably of major significance were apprehensions within the legal profession regarding the reliability of evidence and the credibility of witnesses. Expressions of doubt were, of course, by no means a new thing in witchcraft trials; voices of caution, uncertainty and outright scepticism can be heard throughout the entire era of the witch-hunts, including during the Bargarran trial.

But where Wasser’s argument really comes to the fore is in the distinction between the courts charged with handling these two cases. The Bargarran trial had been conducted before a local commission consisting of gentleman from the region. The eminent lawyer Sir George Mackenzie was aware that convictions for witchcraft were more easily obtained under such

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<sup>56</sup> NLS, Wodrow MSS, Wod. quarto LXXIII, fos. 179r, 181r.–188r; NAS, JC2/19, 827–9; NAS, JC10/4, 1–58; Wasser, “The Western Witch-Hunt of 1697–1700,” 154–5.

<sup>57</sup> NAS, high court of justiciary, books of adjournal, JC3/1, 88–9.

circumstances, and had earlier made a recommendation that witchcraft trials be dealt with only by the justice court or its circuits. In 1699 the synod committee's request to the Privy Council for a local commission was denied and was turned over to the justice court, which, shortly thereafter, dismissed the case. The subtle "shifting spectrum of opinion" towards more caution when dealing with the evidence presented in witchcraft cases is apparent in these investigations. Moreover, the "experience of these years," Wasser contends, "proved decisive; never again were the Scottish authorities willing to issue multiple indictments or pursue a large-scale witch-hunt."<sup>58</sup>

The timing of these 1697–1700 cases is significant on theological and political grounds. Scotland in the 1690s was in crisis. The Jacobites were on the rise, allegiance to King William, who was extremely unpopular in Scotland, was sorely put to the test from incidents such as the massacre at Glencoe (1692) and the withdrawal of investment in the Darien scheme by the English and Dutch. A series of bad harvests resulted in widespread famine, there was mass emigration to Ireland, and a war was brewing with France. Presbyterianism had once more been restored, but on terms that bred unease among the presbyterians themselves. The high-profile blasphemy trial against Thomas Aikenhead had taken place in December 1696 and reached its sorry conclusion in January 1697. Perhaps in a show of support for the revelations at Paisley, the ministers at Irvine appointed 5 May 1697 "to be kept for humiliation and fasting," and the presbytery of Lanark "upon the recommendation of the Synod ... appoynts a fast to be kept upon the 28th, in regard to the great prevalence of witchcraft which abounds at several places at this time within the bounds of the Synod."<sup>59</sup> The condemned witches were executed on 10 June. In the same year as the Renfrew burnings the General Assembly issued an "Act against profaneness," specifically aimed against the "mocking of piety and religion, and the exercise thereof, fornication, adultery, drunkenness, excess tippling, Deism, blasphemy, and other gross abominable sins." Another act, specifically "Against Witchcraft, Charming, &c," was to follow in 1699–1700.<sup>60</sup> Presbyterian fears concerning morality and discipline were clearly being expressed.

The events taking place in 1690s Scotland reveal high levels of anxiety from all corners. Religious concerns surrounding heterodoxy were made clear in the cases of Thomas Aikenhead and John Fraser, while the little girl in Renfrew had inadvertently opened up the door to the diabolic and the battle that had to be fought between the forces of good and evil. The image of a child fighting, not only against the wickedness of witches, but the Devil

<sup>58</sup> Wasser, "The Western Witch-Hunt of 1697–1700," 147, 163–4.

<sup>59</sup> 27 April 1697, *Irvine Presbytery Records*, NAS, CH2/197, and Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire*, 78; Lanark Presbytery Records, qtd in James Napier, *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland* (Paisley, 1879; Wakefield: EP, 1976) 68.

<sup>60</sup> Pitcairn, *Acts of the General Assembly*, 288–9.

himself is an evocative symbol in a decade of tension and intense religious and political stress.

### Witch-lynching at Pittenweem

On 30 January 1705 Janet Cornfoot was set upon by the villagers of Pittenweem, tied with a rope, beaten and then dragged by her heels through the streets to the harbour. Here she was stretched on a rope, which reached from a ship to the shore, swung from side to side and pelted with stones. The rabble was still not sated. The poor woman was flung on to the beach, beaten some more, covered over with a door weighted with several heavy stones and eventually pressed slowly to death. Just to make sure that she had indeed breathed her last, a horse and cart was driven over her body several times. Her ravaged corpse was then dragged to the doorstep of Nicolas Lawson’s home. Janet’s torturers pondered whether or not this woman also merited the same treatment, “but some of them being wearied with three hours sport ... said, it would be better to delay her for another day’s divertisement; and so they all went off.”<sup>61</sup> This horrific attack took place with full co-operation from the Rev. Patrick Cowper, minister of Pittenweem, whose own family had been part of the mob, and the support of the burgh elite.

But what had this woman done to deserve such barbaric and vicious treatment from neighbours and villagers, most of whom she had undoubtedly known all her life? Why had the local authorities done nothing to prevent the whole sorry episode? And why did the Scottish government fail to bring her murderers to account?

Janet Cornfoot had been imprisoned on a specific charge made by Alexander MacGregor, a fisherman, that she, the Devil, and two other women had attacked him in the night while he was sleeping. During her time in the tolbooth, Cornfoot was guarded by a number of men who pinched and pricked her with pins, subjected her to regular beatings, including, she claimed, by the minister, and prevented her from sleeping for many days, constantly threatening her with death if she did not confess. The torture applied – *tortumentum insomniae*, or sleep deprivation – was fairly standard and produced the desired effect: a full confession of guilt from Cornfoot. When lawyers were brought in to take Cornfoot’s statement, she retracted her confession. She was then placed in solitary confinement but the keeper of the prison may have felt some sympathy for the woman as he

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<sup>61</sup> The harbour itself had been fairly recently repaired in 1687; Anon., *An Answer of a Letter from a Gentleman in Fife* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1705) 7–8; Robert Chambers, *Domestic Annals of Scotland: From the Reformation to the Revolution*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh and London: W. & R. Chambers, 1858) vol. 3, 299–302.



*Illustration 6.2* Pittenweem Harbour

Source: Photograph by Lizanne Henderson 2011 ©padeapix.

put her in a cell with a low window facilitating her escape. She fled to the neighbouring village of Leuchars, seeking refuge from the minister of that parish, Rev. George Gordon, but under enticement of a £10 Scots reward, Gordon made the arrangements to have her returned to Pittenweem. She was murdered that same day. She was lynched by an angry mob not to get a confession of guilt but, it would seem, out of frustration over failings in the trial process. It may have also been to serve as a warning to other suspected witches in the community.

The sequence of events leading up to the tragedy of Cornfoot's demise on Pittenweem's harbourside can be unravelled as the whole nasty affair is fairly well documented. The troubles seem to have originated with an argument between Patrick Morton, sixteen-year-old son of the local blacksmith, and fellow suspect Beatrix Laing. Morton had apparently refused to make some nails for her as he was already engaged in another job with a local fishing boat. After they had argued, Morton fell into what can only be described as a "possessed" state, though he did not exhibit all of the classic symptoms of demonic possession. For instance, he did not speak in a foreign language, levitate or vomit pins, but he did experience severe bodily contortions, fits, disturbed breathing, a distended abdomen, and his head would bend in an



*Illustration 6.3* Pittenweem Church

*Source:* Photograph by Lizanne Henderson 2011 ©padeapix.

unnatural position towards the back of his body. No satisfactory medical diagnosis was forthcoming, and so it did not take long before members of the community began to suspect the Devil's involvement behind the boy's condition. As Brian Levack has correctly pointed out, the afflictions suffered by Morton "followed a script that was part of late seventeenth-century Calvinist religious culture." How this young man came to know that script

was through the instruction of his local minister, Rev. Cowper, who read to him the narrative of the Christian Shaw case, which was in turn, as suggested above, influenced by Lawson's narrative of the Salem possessions. The narrative of Lancashire teenager Richard Dugdale, known as the Surey demoniac, and published in 1697, may have been a further influence. What can be suggested is that there was a common "Calvinist culture of possession" at the turn of the eighteenth century, which extended from Puritan New England, to Presbyterian Scotland, to dissenting Presbyterian households in England.<sup>62</sup>

Morton claimed that Laing had cursed him immediately following their argument, and so he blamed her for his condition. She was duly charged with *maleficium* and tortured until she confessed, "by keeping her awake without sleep for fyve days and nights together, and by continually pricking her with instruments in the shoulders, back, and thighs, that the blood gushed out in great abundance, so that her lyfe was a burden to her."<sup>63</sup> Under such horrific conditions, Laing admitted to renouncing her baptism and entering into a compact with the Devil, whom she had seen only once on Ceres Moor in the shape of a black dog. She implemented her spells by throwing a hot coal into a basin of water and sticking pins into a waxen image of her victim. She was also forced to name accomplices. The hunt spread to ten individuals in total, including one male suspect, Thomas Brown, who died during his imprisonment.<sup>64</sup> In the course of this particularly gruesome and repugnant case it transpired that Janet Cornfoot was one of the witches accused of assisting in the bewitchment of the blacksmith's son.<sup>65</sup> Cornfoot had also allegedly entered into a Demonic Pact and had attended several meetings with her fellow witches; all of these gatherings were presided over by the dark master himself.

Demonic possession in the case of Morton, as with Christian Shaw and the young girls of Salem before him, made a direct connection with witchcraft. In all of these examples witches were blamed with causing the onset of the possession. At Pittenweem, at least two of the women who stood accused of causing Morton's possession were relatively well off. Beatrix Laing was the wife of William Brown, the local tailor, who had also served as the town

<sup>62</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunt in Scotland*, 146–7.

<sup>63</sup> David Cook, ed., *Annals of Pittenweem; Being Notes and Extracts from the Ancient Records of that Burgh* (Anstruther: n.p., 1867) 124–5; Pittenweem Kirk Session Records, NAS, CH2/833/3; Stuart MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife: Witch-Hunting in a Scottish Shire, 1560–1710* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002) 161.

<sup>64</sup> Beatrix Laing, Janet Corphat or Cornfoot, Isobel Adam, Mrs White, Margaret Jack, Margaret Wallace, Lillias Wallace, Janet Horseburgh, Nicholas Lawson and Thomas Brown. MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife*, 72.

<sup>65</sup> The presence of the latter is of considerable interest because blacksmiths were thought to possess magical powers. See Chapter 7.



treasurer, while Janet Horseburgh was wedded to Thomas White, a mariner, who had also been one of the burgh’s bailies. By the time of the investigations, Horseburgh was a widow, but she had enough financial security to take legal action against her tormentors and was released. Nicolas Lawson was a farmer’s wife, but Janet Cornfoot’s social status is unknown, though she seems to have been unmarried.<sup>66</sup> Reputation may have had a part to play in this episode. Laing, the first to stand accused of wrong-doing, was an obvious suspect as she had already been before the kirk session in 1696 for charming. Lawson was widely reputed to be a witch, and had been previously asked by another woman to “learn her to be a witch so that she could wreak vengeance on the magistrates for sending her husband to Flanders.”<sup>67</sup> Cornfoot was also a known charmer and a “woman of very bad fame.”<sup>68</sup>

Reaction to the case was remarkably varied. The anonymous pamphleteer of *A True and Full Relation of the Witches at Pittenweem* (1704) was obviously delighted to find apparent confirmation of his Calvinist views towards the case in New England and Renfrew during the previous decade. Witches at home and abroad all shared the same things in common, “the Covenant betwixt the Devil and them, their renouncing their baptismal vows to God, and engaging to serve the Devil, and he promising them a better state of living.” The author, known only by his pen-name “A Lover of Truth,” is quick to note, however, that in this latter point the Devil is a liar, for “have we ever read or heard of any [witch] grown rich by witchcraft.”<sup>69</sup> When another pamphlet appeared, entitled *An Answer of a Letter from a Gentleman in Fife to a Nobleman* (1705), a divergence of opinion was made explicit. The author of *An Answer* described the whole episode as disorderly and shameful. He claimed that the minister, Rev. Cowper, had read Morton the pamphlets relating to the Christian Shaw possession case, the implication being that Morton was, perhaps subconsciously, aping some of the symptoms displayed by Bargarran’s daughter. In retaliation, the mysterious “Lover of Truth” produced a second publication, *A Just Reproof to the False Reports and Unjust Calumnies in the Forgoing Letters* (1705), disputing claims that any improprieties had taken place.

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<sup>66</sup> St Andrews Presbytery Records CH2/1131/1699–1705, 293; Privy Council PCI/53, 247–9, 358–9; Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 148. On the social status of the accused, see also Louise Yeoman, “Hunting the Rich Witch in Scotland: High-Status Witchcraft Suspects and their Persecutors, 1590–1650,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. J. Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 106–21.

<sup>67</sup> Jean Durkie testimony against Nicolas Lawson, CH2/1132/21, 294–5; Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 148.

<sup>68</sup> *A Just Reproof to the False Reports and Unjust Calumnies in the Forgoing Letters* (1705), 7.

<sup>69</sup> *A True and Full Relation of the Witches at Pittenweem* (Edinburgh, 1704) 6–7. All of the pamphlets relating to the lynching of Janet Cornfoot are in Webster, *Collection of Rare and Curious Tracts*.

That the inhabitants of Pittenweem decided to take matters into their own hands was no doubt a consequence of the changing attitudes of the state towards the arrest and punishment of witches. When inadequate support from the proper authorities was forthcoming, other measures were adopted, a phenomenon captured by Owen Davies's work on English incidents of village vigilantism against witches.<sup>70</sup> In a Scottish context, the case of Janet Cornfoot is not only the most fulsome account of a witch-lynching, it is the only documented example. Lack of documentation does not, of course, mean that no one else ever suffered a similar fate, but we have to assume that the events at Pittenweem were certainly not typical.<sup>71</sup> It has been suggested that the apparent absence of communal justice in Scotland may have been due to "the continued involvement of the Kirk and its ministers in investigating witchcraft allegations,"<sup>72</sup> which may have been so in most instances, though it should be noted the dominant role the Pittenweem minister played in this dreadful incident. The form that the lynching took, namely pressing to death, was also very unusual, at least in Scotland, a punishment that was used more in England, known as *peine forte et dure*, a judicial procedure to force the accused to enter a plea.<sup>73</sup> It is tempting to suggest that rumours circulating about Salem may have had some influence upon the Pittenweem lynching as pressing was used to force a confession from one of the Massachusetts victims, Giles Cory, though even in this instance, it was not typical procedure.<sup>74</sup>

Another consideration is that the inhabitants of Pittenweem were acting out a type of "rough music" upon Cornfoot that, unfortunately, when

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<sup>70</sup> Owen Davis, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture 1736–1951* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999) chapter 2.

<sup>71</sup> There are numerous legends, mostly unverifiable, that end in the witch being lynched by her fellow villagers. For instance, the Wilkie MS, referred to extensively in William Henderson, *Notes on the Folk Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1866) 165–6, furnishes such an example. Harry Gilles, the laird of Littledean, was out hunting a hare, when his dogs suddenly stopped the chase. An enraged Gilles exclaimed that they must have been hunting one of the witches of Maxton, at which point hares appeared all around him, "so close that they even sprang over the saddle before his eyes." In anger, Gilles killed all of his dogs, save one black hound, for refusing to go after the hares. The black hound set off in pursuit of a particularly large hare and the hunt resumed. Gilles captured the hare and cut off a forepaw. On seeing this, the other hares took off. The following day, Gilles heard that a woman in Maxton had lost her arm. He went straight to her home, produced the paw which, by this time, had transformed into an arm, and applied it to the stump. It was a perfect fit. The woman confessed to witchcraft, "and was drowned the same day in the well, by the young men of Maxton."

<sup>72</sup> Davies, "Decriminalising the Witch," 213.

<sup>73</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 145.

<sup>74</sup> "The event had an extremely unsettling effect on the populace, since pressing to death had never been practised before in New England. It never was again." Frances Hill, *A Delusion of Satan* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996) 184–6.

conflated with the anger over the failure to adequately prosecute her, and the threatening nature of her alleged crimes, had been taken too far. The public spectacle of the woman's treatment, and the immoral and deviant behaviour for which she stood accused, might suggest this. Elsewhere in Scotland, women who had transgressed certain community "rules," such as committing adultery, or had abused the patriarchal order, were sometimes subjected to a form of unofficial, community-led, shaming punishment called "riding the stang." The stang was a long wooden pole or tree trunk onto which the culprit was made to sit, with their arms tethered behind their back and legs tied together below the knees. The stang was then carried through the village, for all to see the humiliating scene, lifted high into the air and dropped down suddenly on several occasions, which had the effect of bruising, scratching and painfully cutting the thighs and genitalia. Anne-Marie Kilday's examination into crime and the punishment of women has found that Scottish episodes of "riding the stang" were staged as "expressions of communal justice," were often instigated by church officials, and could become manifestly brutal and violent. Kilday gives, by way of example, the harrowing account of a woman from Annan, Dumfriesshire, who, in 1721, was subjected to this form of punishment after she was caught in an adulterous affair with her husband's brothers. The woman was dragged from her home by the hair, stripped below the waist, and carried through the streets on the stang over some distance until her thighs were "dreadfully torn and shredded," and she suffered "an extraordinary flooding" from her genital area. She was eventually taken off the stang, thrown into a loch and later rescued by some of her neighbours.<sup>75</sup>

Whether or not the Pittenweem episode should be seen as a type of "rough music" gone wrong, no one was ever brought to trial for Cornfoot's demise. In the aftermath of her murder, Beatrix Laing was forced to petition the Privy Council in 1705 for protection against threats of abuse coming from her neighbours. In 1708, Rev. Cowper and fellow minister William Wadroper from Anstruther East once again brought charges of witchcraft against Laing and Nicolas Lawson. Though the case was promptly dropped, and the women released, by a circuit court judge, the men would not let it rest and issued another arrest warrant in 1709. The women were tried in Perth and found innocent.<sup>76</sup> The persistence of accusations even after the horrific attack on Cornfoot, and passions had a chance to cool, would suggest that many in the town did not believe any wrong had been com-

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<sup>75</sup> Anne-Marie Kilday, "Hurt, Harm and Humiliation: Community Responses to Deviant Behaviour in Early Modern Scotland," in *Shame, Blame and Culpability: Crime, Violence and the Modern State, 1600-1900*, ed. Judith Rowbotham, Marianna Muravyeva and David Nash (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) 132-4, citing the punishment of Margaret Petrie in 1721, NAS, JC/26/143-145/2601/2721.

<sup>76</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 160.

mitted. Indeed, there was no acknowledgement that anything illegal or immoral had taken place regarding the Pittenweem witches until 1710 when a former bailie, William Bell, finally admitted he was “convinced of the rashness, illegality and unwarrantableness of our proceedings,” adding that Morton, at the time, was “labouring under a melancholy distemper.”<sup>77</sup> Janet Horseburgh was the only victim who ever came close to justice when she sued Bell, and fellow bailie Robert Vernour, for wrongful imprisonment.<sup>78</sup>

Why Pittenweem, in particular, was the setting for one of the most extraordinary and truly horrific outbursts of witch persecution is not easy to explain. “In no other place in Scotland were witches hunted with such fervour as in Pittenweem” was the dubious honour bestowed upon the village by one local historian.<sup>79</sup> This is, unquestionably, an over-statement. However, in terms of numbers, the county of Fife had the third largest number of witchcraft cases (coming after East Lothian and Edinburgh), between 1542 and 1705. Pittenweem itself produced at least 28 cases within those years, but there were other Fife towns that yielded more, such as Inverkeithing, which had 51 known cases.<sup>80</sup> The relative proximity of the three highest witch-hunting counties to the centre of government was an important factor in explaining why these particular areas experienced the worst prosecution rates.<sup>81</sup> Fishing villages, in general, seem also to have contributed more than their fair share of witches. The coastal communities of Ayrshire, Aberdeenshire, Buchan, East Lothian and Fife were all major suppliers. While disasters associated with the sea, such as interference with fisheries, storms, drownings and shipwrecks, often played a part in witchcraft accusations they were not always present. No such elements were mentioned with reference to the alleged crimes of Janet Cornfoot at Pittenweem, for instance.<sup>82</sup>

The general soured mood among Pittenweem inhabitants, affected by concerns about the war against France, since 1700, may have been a contributing factor to the witch-hunt. Some of the soldiers stationed in the town, as part of the war effort, had been involved in violent attacks on the female population, including serious charges of sexual assault and rape. The moral rectitude of the town was being further challenged when townsfolk were caught drinking with soldiers on a Sunday. The soldiers’

<sup>77</sup> Cook, *Annals of Pittenweem*, 128–9; MacDonald, *Witches in Fife*, 162–3.

<sup>78</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 158.

<sup>79</sup> Raymond Lamont-Brown, *Discovering Fife* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1988) 160.

<sup>80</sup> MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife*, 38.

<sup>81</sup> Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981) 81–2.

<sup>82</sup> One of the Pittenweem suspects, Isobell Adam, was implicated in the suspected murder of a local fisherman. MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife*, 168.

disregard for the authority of the kirk session must have increased tensions and severely challenged the ministers to maintain discipline.<sup>83</sup>

Some indication of the pre-conditions of the Pittenweem case is perhaps to be traced in several Fife cases that preceded it. In July 1675, the minister of Crail sought the advice of the presbytery regarding Geilles Robertson, a suspected witch who was being held in the burgh prison. She was questioned several times over the course of the following two months, but would not confess to having caused any illnesses, or to witchcraft. However, because members of her own family, including her own daughter, had testified against her, the presbytery recommended that a commission to try her be sought. Robertson died in prison in December of that year before any further action was brought against her.<sup>84</sup> Also in 1675, at Culross, four women were charged with meeting with the Devil at an abandoned church, receiving the Devil’s mark and having sex with him “after the manner of a beast.” All four were executed.<sup>85</sup> What is a little unusual about this case is how much it conforms to the elite stereotype. References to the Devil and the Demonic Pact are actually not especially typical in Fife witchcraft cases; out of 420 known cases surveyed by Stuart MacDonald the Devil is present in only 20 per cent of them.<sup>86</sup> However, when the Devil was mentioned in the confessions, the outcome was generally disastrous.

Following Macfarlane’s “charity-refused” model quite closely, an Anstruther woman, Elizabeth Dick, was brought before the kirk session in 1701 on charges of turning the grain red after she had been refused alms at the mill. One of the people who had denied Dick quickly realized what had happened and went after her, offering the formerly grudged alms. She accepted and, having blessed the mill, she restored normality.<sup>87</sup>

Very shortly before Pittenweem erupted, Torryburn had experienced a relatively painful and rather drawn-out panic in the years 1703–04, which involved several suspects and at least three deaths. One woman in

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<sup>83</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 148–9.

<sup>84</sup> MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife*, 68.

<sup>85</sup> Trial of Katherine Sands, Isobel Inglis, Agnes Hendries and Janet Hendries. All were widows except Sands, who was married, and her mother had “suffered for the cryme of witchcraft” some time before. They were executed on 29 July 1675. NAS, JC2/14; *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club* (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1913) vol. 6, 130; John Ewart Simpkins, ed., *County Folk-Lore vol. VII. Examples of Printed Folk-Lore concerning Fife with some Notes on Clackmannan and Kinross-shires* (The Folklore Society, London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1914) 99–100.

<sup>86</sup> Stuart MacDonald, “In Search of the Devil in Fife Witchcraft Cases, 1560–1705,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 36, 42.

<sup>87</sup> Elizabeth Dick, Anstruther, 15 April 1701. St Andrew’s Muniments, Anstruther Kirk Session, CH2/625/2. See also MacDonald, “The Devil in Fife Witchcraft Cases,” 48, and Simpkins, *County Folk-Lore Fife*, 101.

particular, Lillias Adie, seems to have featured quite prominently in the investigations and was the source of the panic. After a night out drinking, Jean Bizet became highly agitated and was heard by witnesses to cry out, "O God, O Christ there is Lily coming to take me," and other statements to that effect. Adie was imprisoned, and during her interrogations she not only confessed to regular meetings with the Devil, who wore a cap covering his ears and neck, and had cloven feet like those of a stirk [bullock], but named all the women who joined with her in the midnight dancing parties. Of the things she witnessed, and of the participation of the other women she knew also to be involved, she swore, "it is as true as the sun shines on that floor, and dim as my eyes are, I see that." At least seven suspects were implicated. Though she had confessed to her crimes, "my guilt is as sure as God is in heaven," Lillias Adie died in prison before any pronouncement was made on her case.<sup>88</sup>

The events at Torryburn were probably, in part, influenced by the minister, Rev. Allan Logan (from 1695 to 1717), who regularly preached against witchcraft and had acquired a reputation for being knowledgeable in the detection of witches. During his communions it was said that he would frequently announce "You witch-wife, get up from the table of the Lord" and would wait until a woman removed herself. The records report that in 1709 Helen Key stood before the session for using disrespectful and inappropriate language regarding Rev. Logan. It seems that during one of Logan's anti-witch rants Key took up her stool and vacated the church, as she told a neighbour later, because she thought him "daft." She was found guilty of profanity and was rebuked before the congregation.<sup>89</sup> The persistence of "superstitious" belief was not always, it would appear, the prerogative of the common folk.

The Pittenweem outbreak did not occur at a time of intense witch-hunting, though the events at Paisley in 1697, and the subsequent flurry of activity around Glasgow until about 1700, were still relatively fresh news – the fact that the primary accuser was a youth may also have some undisclosed relevance. Pittenweem was, however, in an area that had been persecuting witches for over a century. As Lerner noted, "there seems to be a self-perpetuating element in witch-hunting. Where there were local memories of actual burnings it was relatively

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<sup>88</sup> Trial of Lillias Adie, 20 June, 29, 31 July, 19 and 29 August 1704, Torryburn Kirk Session Records, NAS, CH2/355/2; MacDonald, "The Devil in Fife Witchcraft Cases," 44–5; David Webster, ed., *A Collection of Rare and Curious Tracts on Witchcraft and the Second Sight; with an Original Essay on Witchcraft* (Edinburgh: Thomas Webster, 1820) 27–34.

<sup>89</sup> *Minutes of the Session of Torryburn*, qtd in Chambers, *Domestic Annals*, vol. 3, 299.



*Illustration 6.4* Pittenweem Harbour

Source: Photograph by Lizanne Henderson 2011 ©padeapix.

easy to stimulate them again."<sup>90</sup> It is also fairly safe to assume that not only was belief in witches strong among the general populace of this part of Fife, but also among its clergymen. The crucial role played by

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<sup>90</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, 82.

Rev. Cowper in convincing so many that Pittenweem had acquired its own Christian Shaw is unmistakable. The possible exploitation of Morton's affliction for religious purposes and the promotion of the Presbyterian faith should also be considered.<sup>91</sup> The members of the Pittenweem kirk session seem to have shared their parishioners' frustration that inadequate measures were being taken by the civil authorities against the witches: "... and tho' application was made by the Presbytery, Session & Magistrates to those who were impowered by Law to give a commission for the judging of these witches, yet they could never obtain it; and so they escap'd punishment."<sup>92</sup> The financial burden of imprisoning the suspects in the tolbooth while delays in their transport and examination to Edinburgh kept occurring would have added to the overall stress.<sup>93</sup>

Possession cases seem to have been on somewhat of a rise in the late seventeenth century, culminating in Pittenweem in the first decade of the eighteenth century. The comparatively high levels of demonic interference in these later Fife cases may also be significant. Though the Devil had not previously been a notable feature of Fife witch beliefs, his presence hung over the dark magics of the Pittenweem witches Beatrix Laing, Janet Cornfoot and the other eight suspects, like an angry cloud. When the storm finally came, it was, ironically, not by the hands of the witches but by a fear-driven community in search of catharsis. But what of Janet Cornfoot, who paid the ultimate price in this unsettling cleansing process? Perhaps posterity should remember her, not as scapegoat, but as martyr.

### Northern malefice

Although prosecutions in the Highland region, though far from absent, were fewer than in the Lowlands throughout the period of the witch-hunts, the region is infamous for having the last known witch execution in Scotland.<sup>94</sup> Between 1563 and 1736 some 230 individual cases, or 6 per cent of the national total, can be identified as deriving from the Highland regions, with many coming from the coastal parishes or those close to the Highland–Lowland line.<sup>95</sup> The lower prosecution rate is not, however,

<sup>91</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 156.

<sup>92</sup> 4 June 1705, Pittenweem Kirk Session, NAS, CH2/833/3; MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife*, 182.

<sup>93</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 153.

<sup>94</sup> Part of what follows on the Highland region can also be found in Lizanne Henderson, "Witch-Hunting and Witch Belief in the *Gàidhealtachd*," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>95</sup> Lauren Martin's analysis has demonstrated that, per head of population, the percentage of cases in the Highlands was higher than some other areas of the



reflective of diminished levels of belief in witches or witchcraft in the *Gàidhealtachd*, where people were just as likely to believe in supernatural forces as elsewhere in Scotland. The explanation for the limited number of witchcraft trials must have been related to other factors.

Several possibilities suggest themselves as to why there was a marked difference in witch-hunting experiences between the Highlands and Lowlands, such as a different conception of what constituted a witch or witchcraft, the low demonic content in Highland trials, a higher toleration of witchcraft in Highland regions, less exposure to pamphlets and demonological literature than in the Lowlands, or the tendency to ascribe misfortune to other supernatural forces. The introduction of a new Gaelic word for "witch," in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, might imply that a new type of witch entered into Gaelic society at much the same time as the Lowlands were embracing continental witch stereotypes. The adoption of new terminology does not, of course, in itself dictate that pre-existing beliefs and practices would change as a result, but it most likely broadened understanding of what "witch" might represent.

A comparison between the major motifs and characteristics found in witch trial confessions across the length and breadth of Scotland, curiously, does not reveal particularly strong regional distinctions, though this may change in the course of time and future research. A subtle Gaelic element can, perhaps, be detected in the confessions, such as the stress on charming, the use of fairy and Gaelic spells, the importance of dreams and the evil eye, though it must be pointed out that much of this material can be found in Lowland confessions as well. Where some level of difference does seem to emerge is with the demonic aspects, attendance at sabbats, entering into Demonic Pacts, sexual relations with the Devil and night-flying. While it would be true to say that demonic interference is relatively low in Highland witch testimonials, it is present. For instance, the Devil had a significant part to play in the Bute trials of 1662, though the islands' proximity to the mainland, and especially the counties of Renfrew and Ayrshire, may have allowed for easier access to Lowland demonological ideas.<sup>96</sup> The Devil's physical presence was not, as has been discussed above, a prerequisite behind a witchcraft accusation or trial. Furthermore, other regions of Scotland, particularly those further removed from central government, were also largely unconcerned with the demonic aspects of witchcraft theory. The folkloric figure of the Devil has, of course, been much more conspicuous within Highland folktales and legendry, known in Gaelic by

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country: Lauren Martin, "Scottish Witchcraft Panics Re-examined," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 125.

<sup>96</sup> Lizanne Henderson, "The Witches of Bute," in *Historic Bute: Land and People*, ed. Anna Ritchie (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 2012) 152.

a variety of different names such as *An donas*, “the bad one,” *Am fear nach abair mi*, “the one whom I will not mention” and *Dòmhnall Dubh*, “Black Donald.”<sup>97</sup>

The suggestion that the Highlanders were more tolerant towards witches than Lowlanders, and of the supernatural in general, might be possible but is improbable. While there are few official records of witch trials in the Western Isles, oral tradition indicates that unofficial persecution, and even executions, sometimes occurred.<sup>98</sup>

Similar to Ireland, which also had a low number of witchcraft trials, the Highlands did not produce much literature on the topic of witchcraft. The near absence of a print culture relating to witchcraft may, or may not, be significant. The lack of direct exposure to the same sustained levels of debate and controversy surrounding witchcraft theory could well have inhibited the drive for witch persecutions. Then again, England manufactured a massive amount of pamphlets and treatises on both sides of the debate regarding the reality of witchcraft, but it did not experience a particularly large witch-hunt.

Ronald Hutton’s proposition that Gaelic Scotland, again like Ireland, did not fear witches to the same extent because misfortune was ascribed to other supernatural forces, namely the fairies, is compelling, though this researcher remains to be fully convinced by this, or his additional suggestion that the Gaelic Highland fairy was more malevolent and fearsome than that of the Scottish Lowlands.<sup>99</sup> In non-Gaelic areas of Scotland belief in fairies was equally strong, yet so too was the desire to root out witches. As I have argued elsewhere, the demonization of fairy belief actually intensified witch-hunting in some contexts.<sup>100</sup>

This is in no way intended to deny the possibility of regional distinctiveness, which most certainly did exist, but to suggest there may be alternative explanations for the comparatively lower number of trials in the *Gàidhealtachd*. The sheer size of the Highland region, which was further away from central authorities and the legal frameworks and judicial courts that supported the prosecution of witchcraft, must surely be an important factor. It is no accident that Highland witch trials, when they did occur, tended to be near coastal ports and frontier lines, places where exposure to Lowland ways of dealing with witchcraft could have penetrated more easily.

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<sup>97</sup> Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, chapter 12. For more on the Devil’s appearance, see Miller, “Men in black,” and Chapter 4 above.

<sup>98</sup> I am grateful to Dr John MacInnes for sharing this information with me.

<sup>99</sup> Ronald Hutton, “The Global Context of the Scottish Witch-Hunt,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 31–2; idem, “Witch-Hunting in Celtic Societies,” *Past and Present* 212 (2011): 43–69.

<sup>100</sup> Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, chapter 4.

Another key issue which may have inhibited witch prosecutions, or at least prevented accusations from spiralling out of control, was the operation of the kirk session, which took longer to establish itself in the Highlands, and the involvement of the ministers. The large size of parishes and geographical distances that needed to be covered often led to complications or delays in regular church business. Ministers who faced particular challenges, through excessive travelling times or too much time spent away from their flocks, were given permission to attend fewer meetings. The role and attitudes of the ministers, alongside the kirk session's function as the typical, first port of call, when dealing with persons suspected of witchcraft, was often an integral stage in whether or not proceedings would continue. In some situations, the physical distance between neighbours may have similarly stalled accusations, allowing the suspicions to fizzle out, or at very least have allowed tempers to cool.

All problems aside, there is evidence to suggest that the ministers in the north of Scotland were deeply troubled by the extent of witchcraft and charming in their parishes. It has been noted, rather sarcastically, that "educated men though they were, the ministers were not so very far behind the people in their truckling to base superstition."<sup>101</sup> The most pressing issue for deliberation by the presbytery of Caithness in 1698 was news "that sorcery and witchcraft abounded much in the parish of Wick, and that sorcerers banished out of Orkney lurked there." It was unanimously decided to inform the magistrate so that he might "banish out of the town all such as dabbled in the black art."<sup>102</sup> It is not clear why Orkney was particularly singled out as a haven of witchcraft.<sup>103</sup> What is certain is that the bias against Orkney folk continued into the next century, for in 1701 the kirk session at Wick demanded from a recent arrival from the Orkney Isles that she provide a certificate from the session whence she had moved or else face banishment. It was noted that she was a reputed sorcerer and witch.<sup>104</sup>

In 1698, the presbytery of Tain heard complaints from their brethren in Sutherland "that they had good reason to fear the practice of witchcraft was common among their people, and they therefore desire to know the

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<sup>101</sup> John E. Donaldson, *Caithness in the 18th Century* (Edinburgh and London: Moray Press, 1938) 36.

<sup>102</sup> Caithness Presbytery Records, 1698, qtd in Donaldson, *Caithness in the 18th Century*, 36.

<sup>103</sup> It would be interesting to take a closer look at the Orkney material for this period to see if there were significant numbers of accused witches and charmers being banished to the mainland. That could possibly account for the attitude towards Orkney within the Caithness presbytery. It may also be that, as elsewhere, the Caithness people were suspicious of strangers, but they might also, like James VI, have believed that since Orkney was "remote" it was more likely to harbour witches than in the "civilized" mainland.

<sup>104</sup> Wick Kirk Session Records, 1701, qtd in Donaldson, *Caithness in the 18th Century*, 36.

Presbytery's advice and judgment." It was decided that in the parishes of Sutherland and Ross:

where there is ground to believe that spells, charms, or any other practice of witchcraft are practised, the ministers of these parishes shall preach on that subject and set forth the sin of witchcraft, and all the practices relating thereto, and to take action against all such who are charged therewith according to the rules of the Church.<sup>105</sup>

In other words, the Kirk would teach the craft, and the godly would give their congregations crash courses in the nature, practice and manifestations of witchcraft.

On the Black Isle, a warrant to examine the cases of three women in Fortrose was granted in 1699. The Laird of Suddie deponed that he, with his servants, had torn down the house of Margaret Provost because she had been "badlie reputed and bruted as a witch." Within a few days, a gardener who had assisted in demolishing the witch's house "swelled as bigg as two men" and gained the appetite of six men. Provost's son went to the gardener and told him that he would recover only if he could convince his master to give his mother her house back. Margaret Bezok was accused of killing an ox and causing at least one woman to fall ill. The woman remained in a weakened state until Bezok came and put her hands upon her, whereupon she recovered. A man apparently fell into an extraordinary and "unnatural" illness after quarrelling with Mary NicInnarich. He was cured after drinking some milk given to him by NicInnarich.<sup>106</sup>

In 1700, a commission was granted in Ross-shire to try twelve people for the "diabolical crimes and charms of witchcraft." Only two of the suspects were returned with a verdict of not proven while the Privy Council recommended to the commission that they carry out some "arbitrary punishment" as they saw fit. This case, according to Robert Chambers, represents one of the first signs that the central authorities were relaxing their attitudes towards witchcraft.<sup>107</sup> Nonetheless, the "extreme penalty" was still being enforced. In 1706, the Privy Council came to a more serious decision regarding

<sup>105</sup> Colin MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland, from the Revolution (1688) to the Present Time, Compiled Chiefly from the Tain Presbytery Records* (Inverness: Northern Counties Newspaper Printing and Publishing Company, 1915) 15.

<sup>106</sup> Trial of Margaret Provost, Margaret Bezok and Mary NicInnarich, Fortrose, 6 October 1699. SBSW, 275–7.

<sup>107</sup> John Glass in Spittal, his wife Barbara Monro, her mother Margaret Monro, Donald M'Kulkie in Drumnamerk, Agnes Desk in Kilrairie, Agnes Wrath, Christian Gilash in Gilkovie, Barbara Rassa in Milntown, Mary Keill in Ferintosh, Mary Glass in Newton, Erick Shayme and another Margaret Monro in Milntown. Chambers, *Domestic Annals*, vol. 3, 216–17; Case of John Glass, 1700, see also SBSW, 280.

the fate of two men, initially apprehended in 1704 for “witchcraft and malice.” They were executed in Inverness.<sup>108</sup>

A charmer was rebuked in Tain and another at Fearn in 1707, while in 1713, the synod of Ross and Sutherland grumbled that some persons, who were suffering from bad fortune or ill health, were forcing those they held responsible to swear on the Bible, or on iron, to break the curse or spell. Again in Tarbat, in 1714, two people were rebuked for performing a charm following a bereavement to stop disease from spreading. The synod of Ross passed an act in 1737 against using counter-charms, such as forcing them to swear oaths or scoring the suspected witch’s forehead.<sup>109</sup> Scoring above the brow, or breath, was a well-known way of forcing witches to undo their spells.

After the death of the minister at Fearn in 1740, a great ruckus developed over who would fill the vacancy. One of the candidates, Mr Donald Fraser, was a possibility, and though he had his backers, there was strong resistance to his being appointed. A libel, which consisted of several counts and a long list of witnesses, was brought against Fraser for various indiscretions ranging from being drunk and disorderly to being on too intimate terms with the spouse of the local surgeon and a minister’s wife. It was also alleged against him that on an evening spent drinking in May 1737, while Fraser was in his cups, he had “vainly and idly” maintained that “there were no witches.”<sup>110</sup> Fraser’s outspoken and sceptical views on the subject of witchcraft, not to mention his alleged drink problem, won him many enemies, and his claim for the Fearn post was eventually rejected. The law may have outlawed the crime of witchcraft but the Kirk, at least in Ross-shire, was not yet ready to let it go. The Bible, after all, stated that witches were real, so who was Fraser to question God?

There is, however, another side to this story. A completely different point of view is to be gleaned from Rev. Donald Sage, author/editor of *Memorabilia Domestica* (1889), and the grandson of Rev. Donald Fraser.<sup>111</sup> Sage speaks proudly of his mother’s side of the family, but “superior to them all, not only by reason of seniority in years, but also in gifts and graces, was my mother’s father, the Rev Donald Fraser.” While at college, Fraser was introduced to the clan chief, Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat, and seems to have made a very good impression for he was hired to privately tutor the chief’s sons at their residence, Beaufort Castle. When the appointment at Fearn became

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<sup>108</sup> Lachlan and George Rattray, Inverness, July 1706; Chambers, *Domestic Annals*, vol. 3, 302.

<sup>109</sup> MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland*, 50–1, 72–3, 77–8, 145.

<sup>110</sup> MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland*, 146–51.

<sup>111</sup> Donald Sage’s mother, Isabella, was the eldest daughter of Donald Fraser, minister of Killernan, and afterwards Urquhart. Donald Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica; or Parish Life in the North of Scotland*, intro. by D. Witherington (Wick 1889; Edinburgh: Albyn Press, 1975) 42–3.

available, Fraser applied for the position and, according to Sage, his grandfather was “on the eve of success, when suddenly, and from a quarter artfully concealed, arose a strong opposition.” Sage does not go into the details of the allegations, only to say that the opposition to Fraser’s appointment was based upon “certain alleged irregularities.” Sage claims only one witness was brought before the local presbytery, a woman, “whose statements were proved to be false.” Though the charges against Fraser were dropped, it was too late and he lost the parish of Fearn. In letters written by Lord Lovat to Donald Fraser, the chief expressed great anger about the events at Fearn and promised to get to the bottom of the matter, adding that, “when the defamer of his dear Donald is found out, he would bring him to punishment though it should cost him a thousand pounds.” As a final twist in the tale, Sage says that when the truth did eventually come out it was discovered that “the instigator of the plot was none other than Lovat himself, who adopted this course in order to secure his tutor’s services to his sons during the years of their minority.”<sup>112</sup>

Given what is known about Simon, Lord Lovat, it is all too believable that he would be capable of such maliciousness.<sup>113</sup> What is of particular interest is that Lovat should choose to depict Fraser as a non-believer in witches as a way to discredit his application. As it turns out, Fraser was a believer in witchcraft for he was himself the victim of it. After the debacle at Fearn, Fraser secured a position as minister at Killernan, Easter Ross, on the north shore of the Beaulieu Firth, in 1744. During his time there, the poor man was regularly overcome by somnolency while in the pulpit, and it was believed by the community, and Fraser himself, to be caused by witchcraft. In his desperation to find a cure, two female suspects were found. Tradition has it that Fraser had given offence to these women “who were dreaded as witches.” The minister’s symptoms, aside from falling asleep at inappropriate moments, included strange pains, which were reasoned to be caused by pins being stuck into a clay image made by the two women. No image was ever found, and given the absence of any legal measures to be taken against the alleged witches, no further proceedings took place. In 1756, Fraser took up a post at the neighbouring parish of Urquhart, which, says his grandson, was “more pleasant to himself and profitable to the people than at Killernan,” and very soon after the move he recovered his health. He remained there until his death in 1773, happy and apparently free from preternatural assaults.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica*, 43.

<sup>113</sup> On the calculating reputation of Lord Lovat, see W. C. MacKenzie, *Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat: His Life and Times* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1908); Sarah Fraser, *The Last Highlander: Scotland’s Most Notorious Clan Chief, Rebel and Double Agent* (London: Harper Press, 2012).

<sup>114</sup> Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica*, 45–6.

This was not, however, to be the case for his son, Alexander Fraser (uncle of Donald Sage), minister at Kirkhill, Invernessshire, about a month following his father's death. When Alexander was a boy growing up in Urquhart, "a fierce cat had broken into the manse cellar at Urquhart, and committed great depredations." The young Alexander was determined to destroy the intruder and, with another boy, cornered the cat and began pelting it with stones "until it was apparently dead." That evening, while the boys slept, Alexander's friend was woken by the sounds of a stifled groan coming from his room-mate. When he approached to see what the cause of the noise was, he was horrified to see the same cat, that they had left for dead, sinking its fangs into Alexander's neck. The boy rushed forward and strangled it immediately. In adulthood, Alexander Fraser developed a keen interest in prophecy. He published two tracts on the subject, *Key to the Prophecies of the Old and New Testaments which are not yet Accomplished* (1795) and *Commentary on the Prophecy of Isaiah, being a Paraphrase with Notes, showing the Literal Meaning of the Prophecy* (1800).<sup>115</sup>

The survival of traditional witch belief, rooted as it was in rumour and gossip, is well illustrated in the kirk session records of Kenmore. Thus, in 1730, one woman was accused of witchcraft, while another denied she slandered John Lumsden as guilty of the death of her children by witchcraft. The case of Margaret Robertson was heard at intervals between 11 June and 5 July 1747. She was accused of witchcraft and of uttering curses and imprecations against any who would attempt the removal of Patrick Tosach, presumably from his croft, or "garden" as specified in the documents. One, Archibald Cameron, clearly had set his sights upon Tosach's property, eliciting a curse from Robertson: "ill meeting and ill flitting might he have and ill might he thrive." She was further accused of working some kind of magic with her rock and spindle. Janet Walker testified that she had on several occasions heard Robertson curse those who plotted against Tosach, invoking a punishment of drowning for those who did so. Robertson denied that specific charge, but did acknowledge having said, "when in wrath, the Devil take them in the air that were the first instruments of Patrick Tosach's removal." She was found guilty of cursing and was sentenced to three appearances on the repentance stool, but was found innocent of witchcraft. Her complainants were also rebuked for their calumnies. Witchcraft was not specifically mentioned, though perhaps implied, when the two M'Intaggart sisters used charms and enchantments to restore their cows' milk and that of their neighbours. One of them had "ane egg shell with a little milk in it, concealed in her breast ... an effectual charm to recover the substance of their milk which was taken away." Both women were rebuked for their base practices. One Isobel Fletcher admitted that she had heard of a cure

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<sup>115</sup> Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica*, 46-7.

for halted lactation in cows, but had not advised Janet M'Intaggart on the matter. Another woman attested that she had asked Margaret M'Intaggart "are you come my lass with the egg shell in the Devil's name," which was denied. In due course the sisters were rebuked.

Janet M'Nicol, servant to Donald Thomson, was accused of having practised "some unbecoming things earlie of a morning crossing back and fore over a burn and bowing herself to the ground, as if she was taking something up out of the ground or putting something into it," at Beltane 1753. Donald Thomson and his wife Margaret Walker defended M'Nicol while also denying the allegations of his neighbours that his cows were over-producing milk due to charming, alleging that Margaret was using hairs from their cow's tail for the purpose. Margaret Walker was dismissed by the kirk session with a warning about charms, but M'Nicol was "publicly rebuked for the indecent practices proven against her." A final case, the conclusion of which is not recorded, concerned Anne M'Inucatar who was accused of having hidden a bottle in a cairn. This was a clear case of charming rather than diabolerie, but it was claimed that M'Inucatar was "a bold woman when provoked," her neighbours fearing that "she could do them hurt through her bad arts."<sup>116</sup>

An area of magical practice that may have been more highly tolerated in the Highlands than in the Lowlands was second sight and visionary experiences. Robert Kirk, among others, strongly defended the reality of second sight and offered up numerous examples of the phenomenon across the *Gàidhealtachd* as proof throughout his manuscript *The Secret Common-Wealth* (1691). "How do you salve," he asked, "this second-sight from compact and witchcraft?" By virtue of the fact that second sight is not a choice but something that is entirely natural to some persons; its derivation can, therefore, not always be wicked.<sup>117</sup> Though not described as witches, Kirk relayed a story about two individual women who, in 1676, and although living far apart from one another in a neighbouring parish to Balquhiddier, simultaneously had a shared vision, which revealed to them a hidden treasure buried within a hill called "*sith-bhruaich*, or Fairy Hill." The women allegedly travelled to the spot at the same time and, upon meeting one another there, began to dig. A large vessel filled with old coins was duly discovered, and the women split the spoils evenly between them. There was, at the time of the vision, a shortage of grain and so the women used the coins to buy meal. The authenticity of the tale is enforced by Kirk who said that there were many people "of undoubted credit" who still had some of the old coins the women used to pay for the meal in their possession. The truth of the event was not in question, but the source of the vision was as Kirk was unsure if it

<sup>116</sup> John Christie, ed., *Witchcraft in Kenmore, 1730–57: Extracts from the Kirk Session Records of the Parish* (Aberfeldy: Duncan Cameron and Son, 1893) 3–19.

<sup>117</sup> Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 102.



came from a good or bad angel, a fairy or from the "restless soul," or ghost, of the person who had hidden the money in the first place.<sup>118</sup> He does not, however, equate this type of magical experience with witchcraft, nor was there any mention that the women were punished in any way or disabused of the reality of their vision. On the contrary, the story is used as proof of the veracity of supernatural communications.

### The last of the witches? The case of Janet Horne

There is a fascination in the historiography with plotting the last witch execution. In 1685, Alice Molland met her end at the gallows in Exeter, becoming the last witch to be legally executed in England; the last prosecution was that of Jane Wenham in 1712. Germany's last official witch execution was in 1738; Slovenia's in 1744; Slovakia's in 1745; and Hungary's in 1777. The last legally executed witch of them all was of the maidservant, Anna Göldi, charged with *veneficium* (poisoning) and accused of entering into the Devil's Pact and using harmful magic and sorcery against her former employer's eight-year-old daughter. She was beheaded at Glarus, Switzerland, in 1782.<sup>119</sup>

Throughout Scotland, there are stories about the last witch in the local area. At Montrose, Meggie Cowie is claimed to be the last person to be burned for witchcraft in Angus, around 1670. One of her alleged crimes was the conjuring of a great storm, which destroyed the Dronner's (Drainer's) Dyke, built in an attempt to drain the lands of the Dun estate. It has been suggested that she was the same Margret Cowie, imprisoned in the tolbooth at Torryburn, Fife, on suspicion of witchcraft in 1666, though there is no direct evidence to support this claim.<sup>120</sup> Strathallan has claims (spurious) about Maggie Wall, and Dumfries's last witch was branded in 1709.

The dubious honour of hosting the "last execution" for witchcraft is now generally held to be in Dornoch, Sutherland, though the date has been disputed and the supposed incident is lacking in convincing documentation. The first person to report the atrocity was Captain Edmund Burt in his *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland* (1754) in which he related his encounters with the local Gaelic-speaking population while he worked as an engineer on the construction of a much-needed infrastructure of roads and bridges from the late 1720s until 1737. Burt is a fascinating writer, who

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<sup>118</sup> Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 85.

<sup>119</sup> Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts*, 190.

<sup>120</sup> Black's *Calendar* repeats MacKinlay in this assumption, but why would a Torryburn witch be executed at Montrose? Possibly she was banished to Angus in 1666. Meggie Cowie, 1670, in MacKinlay, *Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs*, 215–16; Trial of Margret Cowie, Torryburn, 8 September 1666, *RPC*, 3rd series, vol. 2, 192. She was imprisoned with suspected witches Elspeth Guild, Agnes Broun, Cristian May, Margret Home, Grissell Anderson and Margret Dobie.

was at first repelled by the savagery of the sublime Highland scenery but who gradually came to admire its beauty, just as he acquired a grudging respect for the Gaels themselves, who, he noted, in contradiction to more cynical commentators, adapted very well to the wage economy. However, he observed that while sensible educated English people no longer believed in witches such was not the case in the *Gàidhealtachd*, where “even among some that sit judicially” the belief persisted.

I have previously discussed this famous case at some length.<sup>121</sup> Burt related that two impoverished women from Loth in the county of Sutherland, were condemned to be burned for witchcraft in 1727. The younger was spared but the old woman “suffered that cruel death in a pitch barrel, at Dornoch.” Personally Burt did not believe in witches, who, he thought, were more often found in remote places rather than cities and who were credited with actions and powers that no reasonable individual could accept. In his view the witchcraft acts should be abolished; they were simply a mechanism for purging the undesirable and the unwanted. Not all agreed, since recently the life of an Englishman who questioned witch belief had been threatened by a couple of Gaels in Inverness.<sup>122</sup>

Other commentators suggested rival dates for the episode. The *Old Statistical Account* placed the Dornoch event sometime between 1717 and 1730.<sup>123</sup> Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe provided further embellishment, dating the execution to 1722. The victim, he wrote:

was accused of having ridden upon her own daughter, transformed into a poney, and shod by the devil, which made the girl ever after lame, both in hands and feet, a misfortune entailed upon her son, who was alive of late years. The grandmother was executed at Dornoch: and it is said, that after being brought out to execution, the weather proving very severe, she sat composedly warming herself by the fire prepared to consume her, while the other instruments of death were making ready.<sup>124</sup>

Sharpe’s account is very muddled. There is more than a hint of contemporary legend in the assertion that the aged mother transformed her daughter into a pony, which furthermore she rode upon. The additional circumstance that the beast had been “shod by the devil,” so causing the girl’s lameness,

<sup>121</sup> Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson, “The Last of the Witches? The Survival of Scottish Witch Belief,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 198–217.

<sup>122</sup> Edmund Burt, *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland to His Friend in London*, ed. A. Simmons (London, 1754; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1998) 124–7.

<sup>123</sup> OSA, Parish of Loth, vol. 18, 467.

<sup>124</sup> Sharpe, *Historical Account of the Belief in Witchcraft in Scotland*, 199–200. The material was originally published as the introduction to *Law’s Memorials*.

a misfortune also visited upon her son, is unquestioned. The picture of the victim warming herself by the fire against cold weather is also folkloric, though what "the other instruments of death" were, it did not occur to Sharpe to enquire. If they included the rope used to strangle her then the fire was prematurely lit. Scott added further obfuscation in solemnly reporting that the Countess of Sutherland had personally told him that she had dispensed charity to the daughter's lame son. Indeed, the countess would appear to have been the source of several traditions communicated to Scott and Sharpe. She recalled the date as 1722. She recounted that a porter at Dunrobin Castle had recently admitted two women, believing them to be witches and thus fearful of the consequences if he refused. The countess regretted the "everlasting shame" of the execution, relating that the daughter, a fishwife, "happened to have burnt her hands when a child, which contracted her fingers, and the common people ascribed that misfortune to her mother's witchcraft." On the very day that the countess corresponded with Sharpe her husband had encountered the victim's grandson, a beggar whose hands were similarly deformed. All of the family's descendants were still feared in the neighbourhood. Furthermore the countess's son in seeking clarification about the case could unearth little information, but he claimed to have encountered folk who knew people who had been present at the execution.<sup>125</sup> It is highly significant that all of these reporters, Sharpe, Scott and the members of the Sutherland family were supposedly reasonable and enlightened individuals who presumably no longer believed in witchcraft yet were content to add to its formidable store of folklore.

The presbytery of Dornoch minutes show that the godly in the far north had been concerned about occult matters for some time. In 1709 presbytery outlawed the taking of oaths from those suspected of "witchcraft, charming and the like." Robert Kirk Junior, son of the author of *The Secret Commonwealth*, became minister of Dornoch in 1713. That same year John Baxter in Inchnadamph told a man that the Devil would stop his mouth as he had his father's. There was further discussion of oaths. Those who believed themselves wronged – through illness or theft – insisted that persons suspected of malice or evil must swear their innocence on the bible or "on iron," "a horrid prophation of the Lord's most holy name, acknowledging the Devil in affiliations which should be taken from the Lord's hand and further a cherishing of a

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<sup>125</sup> Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (Edinburgh and London: Ballantyne and Company; John Murray, 1830; London: Wordsworth Editions, 2001) 272; Alexander Allardyce, ed., *Letters From and to Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, Esq.*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood, 1888) vol. 1, 344 (15.9.1808), vol. 2, 6 (2.8.1812); Hector M. Mackay, *Old Dornoch: Its Traditions and Legends* (Dingwall: North Star Office, 1920) 110., W. N. Neill, "The Last Execution for Witchcraft in Scotland, 1722," *SHR* 20 (1923): 218–21, is useful only for its discussion of human transformation into animals.

most abominable heathenish superstition." In 1718 several individuals were excommunicated for divination, but their sentences were relaxed within a few months. However, presbytery was by no means obsessed with diabolerie. More routine matters took up their time such as schools, church-repair, Sabbath-breaking, fornication and "promiscuous dancing at wakes."<sup>126</sup>

In 1718–19 there were more serious developments in neighbouring Caithness. William Montgomerie, a stonemason in Scrabster, claimed that his house was infested with cats. Farce swiftly became tragedy. Montgomerie's wife was terrified by the din the felines made, while his servant "heard the cats speaking amongst themselves." The irate mason killed two of them with his sword, injuring others, but no bleeding was observed. When a local woman, Margaret Gilbertson, fell ill, Montgomerie petitioned the sheriff for an enquiry into suspected witchcraft. He was refused because his allegations appeared incredulous and fabulous. Two months later, the woman's leg allegedly dropped off. She was arrested, subsequently confessing to a pact with the Devil, who appeared to her at different times as a man, a great black horse, a black cloud or a black hen. She confessed that she had indeed been in Montgomerie's house in the shape of a "feltered," a shaggy or unkempt, cat, and his sword had severed her leg.

Before she died, during two weeks of interrogation, Gilbertson incriminated others such as Margaret Olson, who protested that she and her associates meant no harm. The minister of Thurso solemnly countered that, "the disturbing and infesting a man's house with hideous noises, and cries of cats, was a great wrong done to him, having a natural tendency to fright the family and children." The Devil's mark, which was discovered on Olson's shoulder, eliciting her sad query, "Am I not an honest woman now?"<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Presbytery of Dornoch Minutes, NAS, CH2/1290/1, 72, 123, 125, 127, 130–2, 139; on divination, see NAS, CH2/1290/1, 173, 175, 218, 227, 229, 231, 232, 235, 236, 242, 245, 249, 250, 255.

<sup>127</sup> "In what part would the old woman have suffered, had the man cut off the cat's tail?" Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland in 1769* (Warrington: W. Eyres, 1774; Perth: Melven Press, 1979) 169. Pennant attempted to place some perspective on such accounts by citing the case in Tring, Hertfordshire in 1751 and with reference to the "ridiculous imposture in the capital itself" of the Cock Lane Ghost in 1762; Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Scotland*, 184–94. There may be some echo of this case in Burt's account of a Highland laird laying about a collection of feline witches with a sword. One of his victims in human form was found next day bleeding profusely, while under her bed "there lay her leg in its natural form." Burt, *Letters*, 249–51. On the folklore of cats, see Katharine M. Briggs, *Nine Lives: Cats in Folklore* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); Robert Darnton, "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin," in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) 75–101; Fred Gettings, *The Secret Lore of the Cat: The Magic of Cats in Myth, Legend and Occult History* (1989; London: Grafton Books, 1990); M. Oldfield Howey, *The Cat in Magic* (London: Bracken Books, 1993).

Local historian John Donaldson presumably refers to the same episode in which the kirk session "gleefully joined" in "rounding up all the old women to whom either popular report or malevolent gossip had ascribed the possession of supernatural powers." Some of the suspects were taken to Thurso, where the ministers decided to visit them and attempt to cast out the demons through exorcism. Apparently, at least one of the participating ministers was required to understand Gaelic.<sup>128</sup>

Having been informed of these matters Robert Dundas, Lord Advocate, wrote to the sheriff-depute of Caithness concerning "very extraordinary, if not fabulous, discoveries of witchcrafts and using of poisons." Dundas was apprehensive that although, by law, all precognitions had to be sent to Edinburgh, the local sheriff would go ahead and try the case on his own authority, a rumour subsequently denied. The civil authorities would have no truck with witch accusations, but the Kirk was, apparently, not to be denied. Some explanation of the strange goings-on in Caithness was offered by James Fraser of Alness, writing to Robert Wodrow in 1727. He mentioned a local minister who had reportedly died due to witchcraft in the 1690s, hoping that Wodrow perhaps had some information on the case. Fraser knew about the matter of the cats because his uncle was factor to the bishopric of Caithness, and thus he was also Margaret Olson's landlord, until he ejected her "for wickedness of behaviour," installing Montgomerie in her place. According to Fraser, Olson had pressured Gilbertson to damage the factor, but she had neither the power nor the inclination. He further believed that Gilbertson was murdered by the other accused in prison. Additionally, he reported "a great noise of witchcraft in the parish of Loth, Sutherland, by which the minister is said to have suffered." The women involved had been summoned before the presbytery. Fraser concluded by citing rumours of similar developments at Tarbat, Easter Ross, assuring Wodrow, "if there is any thing in these stories, and you desire to know more about them, I shall endeavor to procure the best information," but alas the testimony falls silent as his correspondence ceases.<sup>129</sup> Wodrow himself had received from two ministers in Ross "some pretty odd accounts of witches there of late, some of them prosecute." One of the witches when dying confessed that sorcery had rendered an episcopal minister blind.<sup>130</sup>

The evidence, such as it is, suggests a minor panic developing in Scotland's northern counties of Sutherland, Caithness and Ross during the 1720s.

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<sup>128</sup> Caithness Presbytery Records, 1719; Calder, *History of Caithness* (2nd edn) 279, 320; Donaldson, *Caithness in the 18th Century*, 37–8.

<sup>129</sup> Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Scotland*, 181–3.

<sup>130</sup> Robert Wodrow, *Analecta; or Materials for a History of Remarkable Providences*, 4 vols. (Glasgow: Maitland Club, 1844) vol. 3, 302. He made no mention of the Dornoch case, which he obviously knew about and which may be noticed elsewhere in the extensive Wodrow archive.

Of the two recent cases mentioned by Fraser, those of Loth and Tarbet may represent the earlier stages of the case that ended in execution at Dornoch. Burt also alludes to further undocumented cases: "in this county of Sutherland, as I have been assured, several others have undergone the same fate within the compass of no great number of years."<sup>131</sup> Sharpe's date of 1722 seems unlikely because Fraser had information about local cases back to the 1690s, and he would hardly have omitted an incident as recently as 1722. Thomas Pennant, during his 1769 tour, briefly mentioned "the last instance of these frantic executions in the north of Scotland," dated, "if I mistake not" to June 1727, a date that agrees with Burt.<sup>132</sup>

Most disappointing of all is the circumstance that there is an inexplicable gap in the Dornoch presbytery records during the period in which the last execution allegedly took place. The Witch's Stone in Littleton, Dornoch, supposedly marks the spot where the victim died, but there is much further uncertainty about this famous case. The most familiar parts of the story did not appear in print until at least 92 years after the event. There is a vague tradition that the victim had, in her youth, spent time as a lady's maid in Italy, a country long associated with the diabolical.<sup>133</sup> No one up to and including Scott even bothered to record the name of the accused, Janet Horne. Indeed, it is not absolutely certain when this attribution was first made, though it is widely used from 1920 onwards.<sup>134</sup> To complicate matters further, Jenny Horne seems to have been the generic name for a witch in the far north.<sup>135</sup> It is also a strange coincidence that earlier expositors falsely etymologized the placename Dornoch as *dorn-eich*, "horse's hoof."<sup>136</sup> It seems highly likely that the case went ahead in opposition to the wishes of the Lord Advocate, but this is not certain because the entire incident is very poorly documented, a circumstance that accounts for the confusion about the date. The truth about this case may never be known, but one thing is certain – the last witch executed in Scotland was not the last Scottish witch.

<sup>131</sup> Burt, *Letters*, 126.

<sup>132</sup> Pennant, *Tour 1769*, 169.

<sup>133</sup> Mackay, *Old Dornoch*, 93.

<sup>134</sup> Mackay, *Old Dornoch*, 110. Black, *Calendar*, names Janet Horne but gives no reference. Larner, *Enemies of God*, 78 and *Source-Book*, 229 cite Burt and Sharpe respectively, but neither names Janet Horne. Virtually everyone who has written since has erroneously followed Larner. A. Gunn and J. MacKay, eds., *Sutherland and the Reay Country* (Glasgow, 1897) 133–6 mentions the case but does not name the victim. Janet Horn is identified in Mackay, *Old Dornoch*, 93, and in C. D. Bentinck, *Dornoch Cathedral and Parish* (Inverness: Northern Counties Newspaper and Printing and Publishing Company, Limited, 1926) 280, 461–5.

<sup>135</sup> Rev. George Sutherland, *Folk-Lore Gleanings and Character Sketches from the Far North* (Wick: John O'Groat Journal, 1937) 50.

<sup>136</sup> NSA, Dornoch, vol. 15, 1 (repeated from OSA).



*Illustration 6.5* The Witch's Stone, Littletown, Dornoch. The stone marks the alleged spot of Janet Horne's execution, though it carries the incorrect date of 1722  
*Source:* Photograph by Lizanne Henderson 2015 ©padeapix.

Not even, it would seem, in Sutherland, for the last person executed for murder at Dornoch, on 26 May 1738, was credited in popular tradition with having pole-axed a hare, which turned out to be an old woman!<sup>137</sup>

In the cases discussed above the multivalent voices of belief and unbelief can be heard. Most of the essentials of witch belief were present as they had always been. The Devil still had an important part to play in at least some of the allegations, but his role is more complicated than previously thought and requires a proper re-evaluation. The trial of Catherine MacTargett (1688) has shown how one woman tried to take advantage of a bad situation – whether consciously or subconsciously will never be known – by actually exploiting her reputation as a witch in order to make a living, gain power and acquire a modicum of respect. The sensational possession case of Christian Shaw demonstrated that the testimony of a child could condemn suspects to the fire as late as 1697. In the same year anxieties about heterodoxy were strong enough to lead to the execution of Thomas Aikenhead.

The outrages at Pittenweem (1704–05), also founded on the testimony of a youth, seemed to indicate that there was still symbiosis, at least in Fife, between the clergy and the folk. It was also illustrative of the lengths this community was prepared to go to rid itself of evil through a particularly savage form of “rough music.” Diablerie surfaced in the Caithness and Sutherland cases, counties which thereby confirmed the reputations they had long enjoyed for the tenacity of superstition. The now famous last witch-burning of Janet Horne took place in Sutherland, but she would not represent the last witch in Scotland. How do we ever know, in historical terms, when the last of anything has occurred? The Kenmore cases seem to have involved defamation, careless speech, rumour and scandal about which the ecclesiastical authorities were clearly more concerned than they were about accusations of witchcraft, or for that matter, the lesser charge of charming. Some of the individuals discussed occupied a recognizable and, so far as the community was concerned, a practical and much-needed niche in rural society. Many of the accusations were still primarily concerned with everyday living, with health and wellbeing, or with dairy products, farm animals, sea-fishing or the weather, while others are indicative of community tensions and fraught interpersonal relationships. Folk belief about such matters, left to itself, might have returned to where it was before the era of the witch-hunts, but too much cultural baggage had intervened.

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<sup>137</sup> Mackay, *Old Dornoch*, 100–2. See Sutherland, *Folk-Lore Gleanings*, 75–80, for a version of this story.



# 7

## The Survival of Witch Belief in South West Scotland: A Case Study

Tales of Ghosts, Brownies, Fairies, Witches, are the frequent entertainment of a winter's evening, among the native peasantry of Kirkcudbright-shire. ... Few old women are now suspected of witchcraft; but many tales are told of the conventions of witches in the Kirks, in former times.

Robert Heron, *Observations Made in a Journey Through the Western Counties of Scotland* (1793)<sup>1</sup>

At the time of Robert Heron's travels through Galloway in 1792, legal prosecutions for witchcraft had long since ceased and the Kirk had turned its attentions towards other matters. Interest in witches, however, had not yet abated. In previous chapters it was argued that witch belief, as opposed to witch-hunting, has had a much longer and more complex history than was previously assumed by most scholarly inquiry. In this chapter, focus will be directed toward one area of Scotland, the South West – encompassing Dumfriesshire, a county in its own right, and Galloway, which combines the shires of Wigtown and Kirkcudbright. The county of Ayrshire will be included to a lesser extent, for although there is evidence to suggest that witch belief was still present into the eighteenth century, and possibly beyond, official action against witches was mainly over after the 1680s, ending several serious bouts of witch-hunting. Though the incident is poorly documented, what is claimed to be “the last trial for witchcraft by the Court of Justiciary in Scotland” occurred at Dumfries in 1709 when Elizabeth, or Elspeth, Rule was accused of cursing her neighbours and “corresponding with the Devil.” She was condemned to be branded on the cheek with a

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This chapter is an expanded version of my article “The Survival of Witchcraft Prosecutions and Witch Belief in South-West Scotland,” *The Scottish Historical Review* LXXXV, 1/219 (April 2006): 52–74. It is used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Heron, *Observations Made in a Journey through the Western Counties of Scotland; in the Autumn of 1792*, 2 vols. (Perth: R. Morison Junior, 1793) vol. 2, 227–9.

red-hot iron: "People living in 1790 have been told by their parents, that the smoke caused by the torturing process was seen issuing out of the mouth of the unhappy woman."<sup>2</sup> While branding is unusual in witch trials the legendary smoke causes further obfuscation and the accounts are late.

## The enlightening of the South West

Today the three southwestern counties of Dumfries, Kirkcudbright and Wigtown form Dumfries and Galloway region. Historically Galloway was an independent Gaelic-speaking province, which was gradually absorbed into the Scottish kingdom in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, by means of battle and bloodshed. In medieval times much of Galloway was a great hunting forest, other parts extending at times into Carrick in south Ayrshire, and to the east of Annandale. The inhabitants suffered greatly during the Wars of Independence owing to family feuds and civil war but also as the first line of defence against English invaders. Later they shared the tempestuous Border culture of raid, reiving, feud and carnage. By the seventeenth century the area was a hotbed of religious dissidence and government persecution during the phase of the later Covenanters, commencing shortly after the restoration of Charles II and petering out around 1689, although their legacy lived on. It was through the Covenanters that the South West acquired a more "radical" reputation than the rest of the country. Their stance in defence of religion in opposition to Anglicizing tendencies in the Kirk, and what was perceived to be the excesses of Stewart despotism, earned them sustained persecution by the government and increasing marginalization on the part of the Scottish establishment by the 1680s. Indeed, it is probably owing to the fascination displayed by Presbyterian hagiology for such legendary persecution that the subject of witch-hunting in the southwestern counties has been largely ignored, though it is quite well documented, acquiring its first historian as early as 1911.<sup>3</sup> The witch phenomenon in the region, however, has remained largely the purview of local historians.

The southwestern counties are well known as strongholds of the later Covenanters during the period of persecution in the reigns of Charles II and James VII.<sup>4</sup> It should, however, be remembered that despite their

<sup>2</sup> Trial of Elizabeth [Elspeth] Rule, 1709, SSWD. See also William McDowall, *History of the Burgh of Dumfries with Notices of Nithsdale, Annandale, and the Western Border* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1867) 434–5. Black's *Calendar* cites the *Southern Circuit Book 1708–1710* in MSS that I have so far been unable to locate.

<sup>3</sup> J. Maxwell Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland* (1911; Wakefield: EP, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Edward J. Cowan, "The Solemn League and Covenant," in *Scotland and England, 1286–1815*, ed. R. A. Mason (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1987) 182–202; idem, "The Making of the National Covenant," in *The Scottish National Covenant in Its British Context, 1638–51*, ed. J. Morrill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990) 68–89;

apparent prominence, the extremists – dangerous fanatics in the view of the government – represented a minority of the population. The religious establishment was Episcopalian. Covenanting ideology appeared to feed into the Revolution of 1688–89 and the establishment of Presbyterianism in 1690. It was only with the approach of Union in 1707 that the Church of Scotland, as a whole, took on board some of the covenanting arguments as a defence against the possible Anglicization of the church. The covenants were frequently invoked in response to the perceived threat that such union appeared to pose to the very existence of the Kirk. A number of the more committed brethren and elders, many of covenanting sympathy among them, trapped as they were in an increasingly entrenched position, displayed a tendency to regard the persecution of witches as both a religious and a patriotic duty<sup>5</sup>; in their view, as with Robert Kirk and his ilk, to relax the laws against witchcraft was to oppose the will of God. With this in mind, it is probably no coincidence that there was a fairly serious outbreak of witch cases in the South West at this period.<sup>6</sup> The region had recently experienced much persecution and bloodshed and, from the earliest years of the eighteenth century, was intent upon the mythologization, to a greater or lesser extent, of its recent past.<sup>7</sup> It is possible, however, to detect signs of profound change in the attitudes of clergy, the elite and eventually the folk at large, towards witch-hunting, although not towards witch belief, for there is strong evidence that known witches survived in Galloway well into the nineteenth century.

In 1684, Andrew Symson (1638–1712), minister of Kirkinner, published a favourable account of Galloway and its resources entitled *A Large Description of Galloway*, “large” meaning comprehensive. Revised in 1692, it was written in response to Robert Sibbald’s attempt to produce a kind of embryonic *Statistical Account of Scotland* later masterminded by Sir John Sinclair in the 1790s. Symson provided a gazetteer of the region, the entries for Wigtownshire proving much fuller than those for the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright. Much of the region was mountainous and given over to raising sheep and black cattle known as Galloways, a name also reserved for the local breed of horses. Cows were kept for their milk, butter and cheese; some pigs were also raised. Oxen were preferred for ploughing, sometimes

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idem, “The Covenanting Tradition in Scottish History,” in *Scottish History: The Power of the Past*, ed. E. J. Cowan and R. J. Finlay (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) 121–45.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations, c. 1650–c.1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 21–37.

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, suspected witch Janet Cornfoot was lynched in Pittenweem by a mob in 1705, and George and Lachlan Rattray were executed in Inverness for witchcraft in 1706. Lerner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, 150. See also Chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> Cowan, “Covenanting Tradition,” 125–9, 142–3.

as many as eight in a team, though through time horses were believed to be more efficient. There were a few tentative experiments with marl (crushed sea shells), which dramatically improved arable production. The main crops throughout the whole area were oats and bere, a type of coarse barley. There were abundant stocks of fish in the Solway, which provided a sea-route to England, Ireland, other parts of western Scotland and countries further afield, but, as Symson noted, there were far more good fish than there were good fishers.<sup>8</sup> Shellfish sustained the poor in time of famine. There were valuable salmon traps, known as cruives or doachs, at the mouths of most rivers and streams, with the Cruives of Cree and the Doachs of Tongland proving particularly rich. Haaf-net fishing was practised in some places while in others the fish were speared on leisters. For many years to come landowners further inland complained about over-fishing downstream seriously limiting their own catches.

Symson carefully noted fairs and markets. He celebrated the mansions of the great lairds, several of whom were adding new plantations to the notable natural woodlands on the banks of Cree, Fleet and Ken. In coastal communities such as Borgue trees were so scarce that peat was the only option for fuel. It was mixed with water, "kneaded, and formed into loaves, after the manner that the baker prepares his dough before it is put into the oven."<sup>9</sup> Improvement overall, however, was lamentably slow. Many ministers in the *Statistical Account* expressed frustration at "the blind prejudice of the rustic, who believes every thing to be absurd, that has not been recommended by ancient custom in the place."<sup>10</sup> It was the responsibility of the great and the good to rouse "the multitude from a state of ignorance or torpor, from which they are too often unwilling to be emancipated."<sup>11</sup> In 1780 there were still farms that remained unimproved. The bulk of the population still lived in "miserable hovels," often shared with their animals, as in Symson's time.

Pre-improvement the farms were joint tenancies managed as rigs or holdings. An act of parliament of 1695 encouraged the consolidation of the holdings, by which time a few single occupied farms are on record. Many eighteenth-century commentators remarked on the reduction of tenancies. Wigtownshire reported one example where two tenants were all that survived of an original twelve.<sup>12</sup> Only three farmers survived at Preston in Kirkbean parish out of a previous twenty-four.<sup>13</sup> Even then it was said that the farmer may expect "to find his ruin, either in the avarice of his laird, or

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Symson, *A Large Description of Galloway* (1684; 1692; Edinburgh: W. and C. Tait, 1823) 117.

<sup>9</sup> OSA, Borgue, 43–4.

<sup>10</sup> OSA, Glasserton, 397.

<sup>11</sup> OSA, Portpatrick, 488.

<sup>12</sup> OSA, Wigtown, 560.

<sup>13</sup> OSA, Kirkbean, 180.

in the envy of his neighbor.”<sup>14</sup> The cottars, who received a cot-house and a small croft in return for labouring services, all but disappeared in many districts. The creation of enclosures on farms and cattle parks was deeply resented because they were believed to cause unemployment.<sup>15</sup> Local lairds used their parks to fatten cattle imported from Ireland, their tenants objecting because people were no longer required to keep the beasts off arable land.<sup>16</sup> The inevitable squabbles that arise in any confined agricultural community were thus compounded by joint tenancies with disputes about boundaries, stray animals, the sharing of land and the profits of production. Weather was a major concern since the seventeenth century witnessed a cold phase, which ruined crops on several occasions, leading to famine and subsequently disease. Another irritant was rooted in endless confusion about weights and measures, which varied from place to place; merchants and millers were regularly accused of cheating their customers and clients.<sup>17</sup> In 1724, the Galloway Levellers drew up a covenant and proceeded to “level” and destroy the hated dykes and fences. Although there were few casualties and no deaths on either side, their action served as a warning to nervous members of the local elite for at least a century.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the troubles of the later seventeenth century the region produced some intellects of stature. Andrew Symson, for example, was also a poet, printer and publisher; one of his publications was the Rev. John Fraser’s *Deuteroscopia* (1707).<sup>19</sup> A more successful publisher and author was Peter Rae (1671–1748), minister in succession of Kirkbride and Kirkconnel, who was somewhat distracted from his ministry by his interest in science, mechanics, mathematics, agricultural improvement and the designing of type for his printing press. His *History of the Late Rebellion* (1718) is often claimed to be Dumfries’s first printed book, a distinction that belongs to *A New Method of Teaching the Latine Tongue* (1711), which Rae also published. He made a clock, which he presented to the Duke of Queensberry and which still

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<sup>14</sup> OSA, Buittle, 60.

<sup>15</sup> Alastair Livingstone, “The Galloway Levellers: A Study of the Origins, Events and Consequences of their Actions,” MLitt(R) thesis, University of Glasgow (2009).

<sup>16</sup> R. H. Campbell, “Cattle in the South-West,” in *Scottish Life and Society: A Compendium of Scottish Ethnology: Farming and the Land*, ed. Alexander Fenton and Kenneth Veitch (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2011) 529–30.

<sup>17</sup> Symson, *A Large Description of Galloway*, 122–3; OSA, Twynholm, 362–3.

<sup>18</sup> There is much rewarding discussion in Piers Dixon, “Rural Settlement in the Pre-Improvement Lowlands” and “Crops and Livestock in the Pre-Improvement Era,” as well as Margaret Sanderson, “Agricultural Labour in the Lowlands during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in Fenton and Veitch, *Farming and the Land*, chapters 2, 8 and 15.

<sup>19</sup> John Fraser, *A Treatise Containing a Description of Deuteroscopia Commonly Called the Second Sight* (1707; Edinburgh: n.p., 1754), also reprinted in Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 187–204.

survives at the magnificent Drumlanrig Castle built in the 1680s. William Paterson (1658–1719), born at Skipmyre in Tinwald parish, was the founder of the Bank of England and the inspiration behind the Darien scheme, Scotland's colonial experiment, which, though well-intentioned, ended badly. He was closely consulted on financial matters concerning the Treaty of Union in 1707. James Dalrymple, first Viscount of Stair (1619–95), wrote much of his ground-breaking *Institutions of the Law of Scotland* (1681) at his Culcreuch estate, Glenluce. A strong supporter of the covenants, which informed his lifetime philosophy, he had a glittering legal career and a gift for political survival. He was also a soldier, a regent at Glasgow University, a member of parliament, as well as a judge. He spent some time exiled in the Netherlands, a lifelong opponent of Stewart despotism.<sup>20</sup> If these men could not perhaps be described as “enlightened,” they were at least inspired by the new secular spirit of enquiry, which was affecting other parts of Scotland.

Later luminaries included John Paul Jones (1747–92) from Kirkbean, reputedly founder of the American navy and self-declared citizen of the world; Robert Burns (1759–96); and Thomas Douglas Earl of Selkirk (1771–1820), based at St Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, emigration advocate and founder of Canadian colonies in Prince Edward Island, Ontario and Manitoba. John Lowe (1750–98), poet on the Kenmure estate, emigrated to Virginia where he tutored the children of George Washington's brother. Another poet with transatlantic experience was John Gerrond of Kirkpatrick Durham (1765–1832), a blacksmith by profession who tried his hand at several trades in Canada and the US. John Loudon McAdam (1756–1836) from Carsphairn made his name as a welcome improver of communications, affectionately known as the “Colossus of Roads.” Alexander Murray (1775–1813), born in a shepherd's cottage in Minnigaff parish, was a pioneer in the history of languages who, in his short life, probably had doubts about his faith when he discovered that Hebrew could not have been the language of the Garden of Eden. In addition Dumfries and Galloway enjoyed the efforts of many improvers who founded agricultural societies, lairds, doctors, lawyers and legions of ministers who were increasingly interested in enlightenment ideas.<sup>21</sup>

An excellent study has recently shown how the Enlightenment impacted upon a prominent Dumfriesshire family, the Johnstones of Westerhall.<sup>22</sup> Another investigation has demonstrated, for the first time, that folk in

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<sup>20</sup> DNB.

<sup>21</sup> An engaging study of rural transformation and social conditions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century southern Scotland is M. H. Beals, *Coin, Kirk, Class and Kin: Emigration, Social Change and Identity in Southern Scotland* (British Identities Since 1707) (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires. An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Dumfries and Galloway were actually exposed to enlightenment literature through subscription libraries such as that established in Kirkcudbright in 1770, specifically for rural as well as burgh members. Through time three women inherited memberships from deceased relatives. There were seven women members of Wigtown Subscription Library, five of whom “accounted for 150 loans between 1796 and 1799, out of a total of 898 for the whole association.” Seven commercial circulating libraries were established in Dumfries, with two in Kirkcudbright and others in Annan, Castle Douglas, Lockerbie, Newton Stewart and Stranraer, while miners established collections at Wanlockhead and Westerkirk.<sup>23</sup> Dumfries Presbytery Library was founded in 1706 with one hundred books; by 1784 it had 2,350. The borrowing registers have survived for the years 1732 to 1826 showing, unsurprisingly, that by far the most regular borrowers were ministers, but lay people were by no means excluded. Mark Towsey has presented a valuable analysis of the holdings of the library and the titles that were borrowed, demonstrating that enlightenment publications were far from absent but rather were, according to the evidence, in considerable demand.<sup>24</sup> The minister of Carsphairn reported that some of his parishioners had some of the best authors in their personal “little libraries.” The reporter at Kirkcudbright asserted that owing to the existence of the library his flock had access to the best modern books and thus “to all the improvements in literature and politics.”<sup>25</sup>

One strangely ignored enlightenment figure is Robert Heron of New Galloway. He is best known nowadays as the first memorialist of Robert Burns, who not only celebrated the poet’s genius but also admitted his failings, much to the annoyance of Burns’s disciples ever since. However, he has been seriously misunderstood for he was a profound admirer of Burns whom he visited in Dumfries. Heron identified Burns as a fellow child of nature. Both men rose from humble backgrounds to achieve greatness. As children of nature Heron believed that both must return to their natural origins, as indicated by such failings as indulgence in drink and debauchery for which both shared a weakness. Heron was jailed for debt at least twice and he died in utter poverty, but he came closer than most to encapsulating the genius of Burns while demonstrating the bard’s empathy with Scotland’s rural population.<sup>26</sup>

Heron was a keen observer of landscape and cultivation, whose two-volume *Journey Through the Western Counties of Scotland* (1792/93) was undertaken to assess and explore the benefits and economic impact of

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<sup>23</sup> Mark R. M. Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden: Brill, 2010) 56–7, 63–5, 95.

<sup>24</sup> Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment*, 123–9.

<sup>25</sup> OSA, Kirkcudbright, 209.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Heron, *A Memoir of the Life of the Late Robert Burns; Written by R. Heron* (Edinburgh: T. Brown, 1797) 49–50.

improvement. Often dismissed as a hack-writer, he produced several books, legions of articles and an excellent *History of Scotland*, a huge project begun while he was imprisoned and extending over six years, which is noteworthy for the attention the author devoted to social and cultural history. He wrote eloquently and enthusiastically about the Scottish Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with particular reference to literature. His brief discussion of seventeenth-century culture suggests that it formed a bridge to the continuing renaissance of his own century as the Scots became familiar with such European authorities as Tycho Brahe (1546–1601), Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), Galileo (1564–1642) and René Descartes (1596–1650). Seventeenth-century Scots “who were the most enlightened by knowledge” studied astronomy, arithmetic and geometry “with a diligence not exceeded by the best labours of the most ingenious of other European nations.” Literature flourished, as did the universities. Religion, prejudice and errors aside, enlightened the people “in respect to the distinctions between right and wrong, between crime and duty.” However, the achievements of his own century surpassed all that went before. “In every science, the writing of Scottish authors furnish the best means of instruction.”<sup>27</sup>

Andrew Symson briefly mentioned such phenomena as the curative power of the waters of Loch of Myrton, Wigtownshire, but he could not approve of the popular belief that the water was more efficacious on the Quarter Days when patients were washed three times to effect a supposed cure. He referred to a spirit responsible for hauntings in Glenluce.<sup>28</sup> The only days favoured for marriage were Tuesdays and Thursdays, and then only during a waxing moon. Deaths were advertised through the burning of bed-straw. Reporters in the *Statistical Account* also noted something of popular culture. The folk of Kells enjoyed music and dancing. In Kirkpatrick Durham, “the wildness of superstition, and the bigotry of fanaticism [were] giving place to liberal sentiment, and rational religion.” The Wigtown minister believed that in his parish, the human mind had been “considerably opened.” The spirit of credulity had disappeared. “The belief in witches, in fairies, and other ideal beings, though not entirely discarded, is gradually dying out.” Sadly, though, we may think, “the ancient spirit of mirth, which arose out of the idle state of society, is almost entirely extinguished.”<sup>29</sup>

On his *Journey Through The Western Parts of Scotland* (1793), Robert Heron returned to his native Galloway to report that his superstitious countrymen still bound rowan into cows’ tails as protection against witchcraft. On long winter nights brownies and “gyar carlins” (supernatural old women, i.e.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Heron, *History of Scotland from Earliest Times, to the Era of the Abolition of the Hereditary Jurisdictions of Subjects, in the Year 1748*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: R. Morison and Son, 1799) vol. V, part 2, 1250–3.

<sup>28</sup> Symson, *A Large Description of Galloway*, 74, 78.

<sup>29</sup> OSA, Wigtown, 568–9.



witches) could be heard curling on frozen lochs and ponds.<sup>30</sup> He was by no means fixated on the supernatural and witches, but he was interested in Scottish popular beliefs that appeared “most strange to more enlightened times,”<sup>31</sup> He attributed such beliefs in “malevolent, rational beings” to the fears of Humankind who were conscious of their own depravity, the miseries of life, fear of wild beasts and surrounded by a savage, destructive Nature. Thus people became aware of good and evil. Most societies worshipped their own true gods, dismissing those of their enemies as “so many devils.” The priesthoods of rival religions regarded each other as sorcerers: “Hence the origin of the idea of sorcery or witchcraft.”<sup>32</sup> Christians were not immune; they believed that wizards and witches sold themselves to Satan and so were mercilessly persecuted:

It is extremely probable, though *not absolutely certain*, that there never were such persons as *witches* and *wizards*. Yet, to our *infinite* astonishment, we find that multitudes of persons, both men and women, actually believed and confessed themselves to have entered into compacts of *sorcery* with evil spirits; nay, and made such confessions, when, but for this evidence, they might have escaped that death by cremation, to which they were, upon their own acknowledgement, condemned.<sup>33</sup>

The italics in this passage are Heron's. It is of the greatest interest that this self-confessed product of enlightenment is “not absolutely certain” that witches never existed. He added that Protestants were much more zealous in the detection and punishment of witches than Catholics had been.

No unaccountable evil could befall any of these poor Presbyterians – and to such persons, how few unpleasing accidents could be other than accountable? – without exciting the suspicion of witchcraft against one another of his neighbours, who was at once odious to him, and unprotected by wealth and friends. A thousand absurd tests of witchcraft were tried, and, without any sound reason, were held to be the surest means of detecting its existence. The poor creatures accused, were frightened and tortured into a delirium of imagination; were thus brought to confess themselves guilty of a commerce of sorcery with the devil; and upon this confession, or without it, were consigned to the flames.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Heron, *Observations Made in a Journey through the Western Counties of Scotland; in the Autumn of 1792*, 2 vols. (Perth: R. Morison Junior, 1793) vol. 2, 228.

<sup>31</sup> Heron, *History of Scotland*, vol. 5, part 1, 257.

<sup>32</sup> Heron, *History of Scotland*, vol. 5, part 1, 259.

<sup>33</sup> Heron, *History of Scotland*, vol. 5, part 1, 261.

<sup>34</sup> Heron, *History of Scotland*, vol. 5, part 1, 262.

So feared were witches that those witnessing their execution showed no mercy whatsoever, yet these same people would have pitied dying criminals. Where “the delirium of witchcraft” was concerned Christians were just as superstitious as the pagans of antiquity. In Heron’s view, if there was such a being as the devil he must have been gratified by the

consequences of a frenzy thus fancying the existence of a witchcraft that had no reality, and impelling men to afflict and destroy one another on account of it – as could possibly have been gratified by all the effects which real witchcraft might accomplish.<sup>35</sup>

Heron also comments on fairies, who were regarded as tributaries of the Devil, to whom a human infant was sacrificed every seven years. The victim was stolen, leaving a weak and sickly changeling in its place. His ideas regarding them were unexceptional. He thought Scottish fairies derived from a blend of the nymphs of antiquity and the airy, viewless ghosts of Celtic mythology: “They were regarded, just as a different race of *beings*, dwelling amidst mankind, on the earth.” As with humans, some were good and others were bad. He briefly discusses ghosts universally understood to represent those in purgatory who had been denied last rites, but dismissed, for obvious reasons, by the reformers like much else that was “absurd and fanciful in the opinions of the vulgar.”<sup>36</sup> Thus was the “yoke of an enslaving superstition” destroyed.

### The hunting of witches

The evidence from Dumfries and Galloway witch trials reveals few overt signs of the demonic; the Devil seldom appears in material form. Rather, most cases are concerned with the problems of everyday life, disagreements between neighbours, arguments about livestock, family tensions, and the unpopularity of incomers to the community, among others; in short, with the grind, stresses, sheer drudgery and anxieties of daily existence.

The sternness of the southwest folk was noted by at least one traveller to Kirkcudbright in the early eighteenth century. John MacKy was a secret service agent in the employ of the British Government who was sent to Galloway to report on, and if possible to suppress, potential Jacobite plots. He observed, “Certainly no nation on earth observes the Sabbath with that strictness of devotion and resignation to the will of God.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Heron, *History of Scotland*, vol. 5, part 1, 263.

<sup>36</sup> Heron, *History of Scotland*, vol. 5, part 1, 263–6.

<sup>37</sup> John MacKy, *A Journey Through Scotland: In Familiar Letters from a Gentleman Here, to His Friend Abroad*, 3 vols. (London: J. Pemberton and J. Hooke, 1723) vol. 3, 3.

Much of the historical material in this chapter has been sourced from kirk session and presbytery records; ministers and elders were particularly obsessed with fornication, adultery, swearing, drunkenness and with punishing those who had been caught working or enjoying themselves on the Lord's Day. The daily chores of women were also disallowed on Sundays. In 1690 several women were rebuked by the Ayr kirk session for gathering kail and nettles and for carrying water on the Lord's Day.<sup>38</sup> Even a child's illness was not always taken as a valid excuse, as one woman discovered in 1697, when she was rebuked by the session for going to a neighbour to fetch some ale for a sick child. She was told that she should have had the ale in her house before the Sabbath.<sup>39</sup>

The behaviour of children was also an occasional issue with the brethren. In 1685 the session, perturbed by the numbers of children playing in the churchyard during the service, enacted that the parents should be reprimanded by the magistrates for allowing their children to profane the Sabbath. In 1698, the lockman (hangman/executioner) was paid two shillings a week to keep children, beggars and dogs from entering the church or churchyard.<sup>40</sup>

The point is that witchcraft was not always at the top of the session's list of priorities, but it was far from absent. It will be argued that the southwest of Scotland did take the practice of witchcraft, of charming and of wrongfully accusing someone of witchery, very seriously indeed and for perhaps longer than other parts of Scotland. However, it would be unwise to think that this was an obsessional interest, or that witches were being hunted down and scourged on a daily basis. Witch belief operated on a more subtle and complex level – there were peaks and troughs, and the outcome of an accusation was often very dependent upon the mindset of the minister involved. It was he who decided whether or not to recommend the instigation of judicial proceedings, to punish the accused himself – which in the period under study was the most common outcome – or to throw the case out altogether, either through lack of evidence or simple disbelief.

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<sup>38</sup> Jonet Henderson, Jonet Dyet, Mary Wilson and Anna Wilkie all appeared before the session in 1690. Similar cases also appeared in 1684 and 1691. Ayr Kirk Session Records, qtd in David Murray Lyon, *Ayr in the Olden Times* (Ayr: Ayr Advertiser, 1928) 75.

<sup>39</sup> Jonat Millar of Townhead, 1697, Ayr Kirk Session Records, qtd in Lyon, *Ayr in the Olden Times*, 76.

<sup>40</sup> Ayr Kirk Session, qtd in Lyon, *Ayr in the Olden Times*, 88–9. The “lockman” was so-called from “the small quantity of meal (Scots lock) which he was entitled to take out of every bowl of meal exposed at the local market.” Elsewhere the custom was commuted, but in Dumfries it survived until around 1800. John Jamieson, *Supplement to the Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: University Press Edinburgh, 1825) vol. 2.

The number of relatively late cases of witch belief in the southwest is quite significant. In comparison with some parts of Scotland – for example, in the North East or the Lothians where witch-hunting was well under way by the latter part of the sixteenth century – persecution in Dumfries and Galloway did not begin in earnest until the mid-seventeenth century. There was a noise of witchcraft in Galloway in 1614–15, according to the *Records of the Privy Council*, which issued commissions for the investigation of “sundry persons,”<sup>41</sup> with the first investigation in Kirkcudbrightshire taking place in 1628 and a further four in 1630. There were six cases in this county between 1642 and 1644, and a large outbreak in 1658–59 of 11 trials. After 1663 there were a total of 13 cases, with particular concentrations in the first decade of the eighteenth century.

The county of Wigtown had very few trials throughout the entire witch-hunting era, reporting its first case from Kirkinner in 1590, then Drongan in 1622.<sup>42</sup> Thereafter there were five in 1645, seven in 1650 and one in 1706.

The highest number of outbreaks in the region were in the county of Dumfries, its first case an investigation of a sixteen-year-old girl from the parish of Urr (which is actually in Galloway) in 1596. The most intensive was between 1628 and 1631, with up to 25 cases, and in 1649 to 1650, there were nine.<sup>43</sup> A woman may have been executed in Dumfries in 1657, and a further 13 investigations were carried out between 1658 to 1661. From 1663 onwards, the 24 remaining cases in the Dumfries area became much smaller in scale but were relatively consistent, like a drip-feed, until its last in 1709 (see Figures 7.1 and 7.2).<sup>44</sup>

The pattern in Ayrshire was different from the rest of the southwest. Surely one of the earliest Scottish references to “witch-naming” occurred in Alloway in 1537. Thome Fayre was instructed by the baillies to prove his allegations against Megge Rankyn, whom he had called a “theif carling and witche carling” who witched “uther folkis mylk.”<sup>45</sup> At this early date witch persecutions were extremely rare, and it was Fayre who found himself in

<sup>41</sup> *RPC*, x, 231, Commission to William, bishop of Galloway, 6 April 1614, and x, 327, Commission to the Steward of Kirkcudbright, 3 May 1615.

<sup>42</sup> *RPC*, xii, 720, Commission to John, Earl of Wigtown, 15 May 1622.

<sup>43</sup> *RPC*, 2nd ser., ii, 328–9, Commission to sheriff of Dumfries, 5 June 1628; *RPC*, 2nd ser., iii, 340, 345, Commission to sherriff of Dumfries, 6 and 12 November 1629; *RPC*, 2nd ser., iii, 446, 450–1, 550–1, various commissions, 4 and 9 February, 1 June 1630; *RPC*, 2nd ser., iii, 550–1, Commission to Sir Robert Grier of Lag, 1 June 1631.

<sup>44</sup> For further references, see Black, *Calendar*, Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, and the online Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database.

<sup>45</sup> Thome Fayre, 1537, *Court Book of the Barony of Alloway*, 4 vols., vol. 1, 624, MS Carnegie Library, Ayr, B6/28/1–4, qtd in Alastair Hendry, “Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire: A Calendar of Documents” (May 1998; unpublished). Elsewhere, Lanie Scot was convicted “*de magica arte vulgo witchcraft*” in Aberdeen (1536), and three witches were burned at St Andrews Castle (1542), Black, *Calendar*, 21.

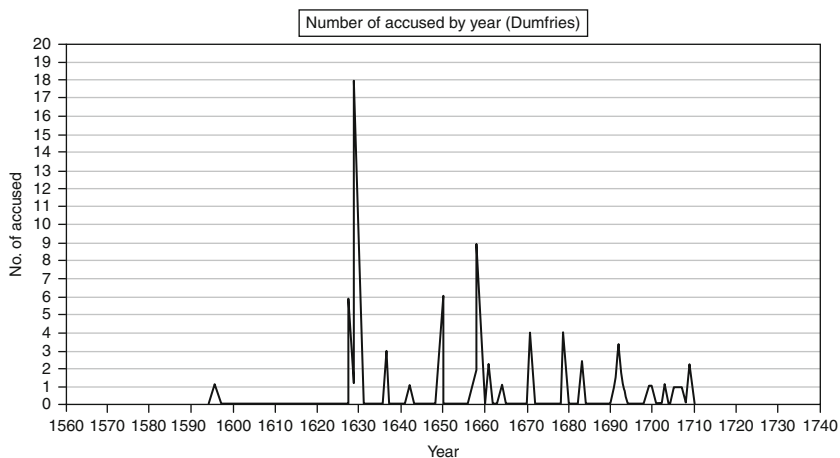


Figure 7.1 Number of accused in Dumfries  
 Source: Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database © The University of Edinburgh.

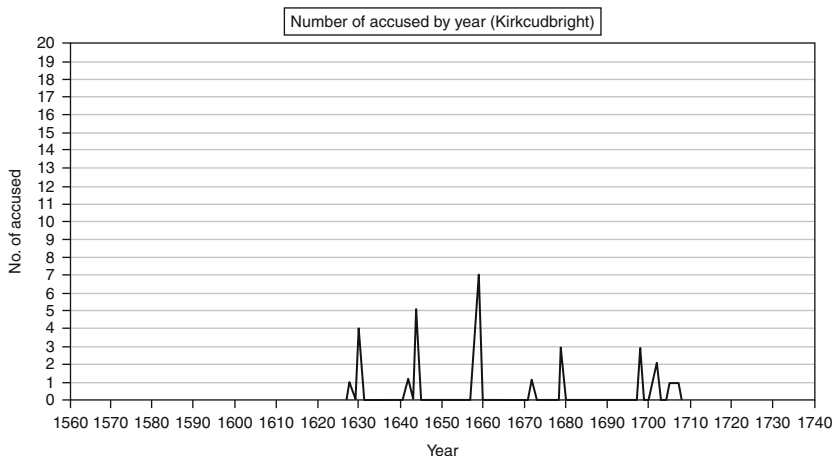


Figure 7.2 Number of accused in Kirkcudbrightshire  
 Source: Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database © The University of Edinburgh.

trouble. Almost forty years later, the situation was to change drastically. The first recorded instance of a witch trial and execution in Ayrshire was in 1572. Thereafter a steady pace of accusations and executions continued in every decade, peaked in the 1650s, and tailed off dramatically by 1683.<sup>46</sup> There

<sup>46</sup> Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire*.

Table 7.1 Minimum number of witchcraft cases in Dumfries, Kirkcudbright and Wigtown, 1563–1736

Region	Population	Witchcraft cases	Per head of population
Dumfries	39,788	78	1 in 510
Kirkcudbright	21,205	35	1 in 605
Wigtown	16,466	15	1 in 1097
Total	77,459	128	1 in 605

were still a few noteworthy allegations of witchcraft in Ayrshire beyond this date, including cases of slander. For instance, Margaret Hood stood before the Prestwick kirk session in 1698 for calling Agnes Cuthbertson a “witch-bird.”<sup>47</sup>

Of the 3,837 known formal Scottish witch accusations between 1563 to 1736, at least 128, and possibly more, of these trials took place in the Dumfries and Galloway region; 78 in the county of Dumfries, 35 in Kirkcudbright and 15 in Wigtown. A further 168 cases have been counted for Ayrshire.<sup>48</sup> It is hard to gauge, with any precision, what proportion of the population was affected by these accusations, as census data was not gathered until 1755. Alexander Webster’s unofficial census of that date calculated that there were 1,265,380 persons in Scotland. Using Webster’s figures, it is possible to estimate, per head of population, roughly how many individuals faced a formal accusation (see Table 7.1).<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Prestwick Kirk Session Records*, qtd in OED, ‘witch-bird’. This particular term was used in other pejorative name-calling contexts also, such as Janet Morton of Leith who, in 1672, “scandalized” or slandered Catheren Fairfull “in calling her witch bird”, or Jonet Wely of Dunfermline who, in 1646, slandered Grissell Walwood a “witch bird”, or Helen Donaldson who called another Dunfermline woman a “witch bird” in 1680. Leah Leneman and Rosalind Mitchison, *Sin in the City: Sexuality and Social Control in Urban Scotland 1660–1780* (Edinburgh: Scottish Cultural Press, 1998) 92, E. Henderson, ed., *Extracts from the Kirk-Session Records of Dunfermline from AD 1640 to 1689* (Edinburgh: Fullarton and Macnab, 1865) 17, 72. Its specific meaning is unclear though it may refer to a witch’s ability to shapeshift into the form of a bird, or to particular species of birds that were deemed unlucky, such as the Wheatear or Magpie, whose presence was taken as an omen of death. In Scottish folklore the Magpie was believed to carry a drop of the Devil’s blood under its tongue, while in Germany and Scandinavia it was ridden by witches like a broomstick. Venetia Newall, *Discovering the Folklore of Birds and Beasts* (Tring: Shire Publications, 1971) 43. The most convincing explanation, however, is that it is the Scots term “burd” meaning “offspring”, hence “witch-burd, the supposed brood of a witch”, John Jamieson, *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (Edinburgh: W. & C. Tait, 1825) ‘bird, burd’.

<sup>48</sup> SSWD.

<sup>49</sup> James Gray Kyd, ed., *Scottish Population Statistics Including Webster’s Analysis of Population 1755* (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1952) 82.

Since the national average for persons accused of witchcraft was approximately 1 in 330, the South West, and Wigtown in particular, was not an especially dangerous place to live with regard to the witch-hunts.

### **Galloway carlins**

Two women, Jonet McMuldritche and Elspeth Thomson, who were not so far as is known related, were brought to trial at a Circuit Court on 15 May 1671, found guilty, and executed in Dumfries three days later on 18 May:

betwixt tuo and foure houres in the afernoone to the ordinaire place of execution for the toune of drumfreis And their to be wirried at ane stake till they be dead And theirafter their bodies to be brunt to ashes And all their moveable goods and geir to be excheat ...<sup>50</sup>

These cases have been thoroughly scrutinized by Christina Lerner, providing some excellent insights into everyday life in rural Scotland but, as usual, the record does not quite tell us the whole story. Jonet McMuldritche, or McMurdoch, from Airds, on the shore of Loch Ken in the Glenkens, Kirkcudbrightshire, was charged with using witchcraft to kill cattle and horses, but more seriously, to murder two men with whom she had a falling out. Her husband, James Hendrie, was a tenant farmer of Airds. Her troubles began in May 1665 when John Moor of Barlay, Balmacellan, baron-bailie of the estate, uplifted some of Jonet's livestock for unpaid rent – on what basis is unrecorded – an action for which she vowed to do him an “evil turn.” Moor challenged Jonet when his cow and a calf died, to which she muttered that there was worse to follow. When his child died, “of an extraordinary sickness, sweating to death,” he accused her of being a witch of long standing. Before long, many others were similarly slandering her. John Murray of Laik claimed he had accidentally tripped up Jonet, so earning another curse. Shortly thereafter his calves and a horse died. Robert Brown of Castleton had driven McMuldritche's cattle off his pasture-land. She confronted him about it and, in the ensuing argument, lost her temper and cursed him. He died shortly after. One farmer claimed to have lost fifteen cattle, three horses and

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<sup>50</sup> Trial of Elspeth Thomson and Jonet McMuldriche or McMuldritche, 16 May 1671, NAS JC10/3 and JC26/38. The cases are discussed in chapter 10 of Stuart MacDonald, “Enemies of God Revisited: Recent Publications on Scottish Witch-Hunting,” *Scottish Economic and Social History* 23/2 (2003): 65–84. See also Alfred E. Truckell, “Unpublished Witchcraft Trials” *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society* 3rd ser. 51 (1975): 48–58, and 52 (1976): 95–108; William McDowall, *History of the Burgh of Dumfries with Notices of Nithsdale, Annandale, and the Western Border* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1867) 432. In Scotland married women retained their maiden names.

his wife. Another man's child drowned in a peat-bog. Further disputes about pasturage followed.

When William Gordon of Minibouie drove Jonet's bestial off his grass she cursed him to the effect that he would have fewer cattle to consume his provender next season. Twelve of his oxen and seven horses died. Jonet's daughter Isobell was employed in Boghall by Margaret MacLellan. One day the daughter was found disporting herself in the dung when she was supposed to be mucking out the byre. According to MacLellan, she was "playing some of her mother's devilish tricks," an insult that brought Jonet to her doorstep to complain about such slander against her and Isobell, whereupon MacLellan's husband fell ill. Reconciliation between the sparring women was reached, and Jonet was believed to have lifted the sickness from the man and transferred it to a horse. He swiftly recovered but his mare promptly died. Jonet did not extend this ability to unwitch to all of her victims. When Robert Cairns of Boghall found McMuldritche in his barn one Sunday he accused her of stealing a sheaf of corn, whereupon she "bade the Divill pyk out his eyn [eye]." When Cairns sickened he implored her to visit him and remove the curse, but she refused. He died, allegedly as a direct result of her imprecations, urging his friends to pursue her as a witch and necromancer. Folk recalled other incidents over the years.

Elspeth Thomson of Rerrick, on the Solway coast, was charged with cursing John Corsbie and his wife Rosina McGhie (her sister-in-law) because the couple had not invited her to the baptism of their child. Donald McGhie, Thomson's brother-in-law, spread rumours that she had used witchcraft to make the Corsbies sick. In response to his allegations Thomson's husband, William McGhie, confronted his brother Donald with a warning that things would not go well for him for calling his wife, who was also Donald's sister-in-law, a witch. Donald McGhie died shortly afterwards.

To make matters worse, eyewitnesses swore that when Thomson came to pay her last respects she touched the body; immediately blood "rushed forth from his nose, navell and ears and his corpse bleed all the way to the Buriall place." A bleeding corpse had long been regarded as proof of guilt in murder enquiries. James VI commented:

in a secret murther, if the deade carcasse be at any time thereafter handled by the murtherer, it wil gush out of bloud, as if the blud wer crying to the heaven for revenge of the murtherer, God having appoynted that secret super-naturall signe.<sup>51</sup>

Another example of the bleeding corpse was the case of Jonet Rendall, accused of witchcraft and "devilrie" in Orkney in 1629. According to her

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<sup>51</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie in Forme of a Dialogue*. 1597 (London: The Bodley Head, 1924) 80.



dittay, when she was brought into the presence of her victim, “the cors having lyin ane guid space and not having bled any, immediatelie bled mutch bluid as ane suir token” that she was the author of his death.<sup>52</sup> A man was executed in Kirkcaldy in 1662 for the murder of his father, the proof of his guilt determined by the blood that fell from the victim’s nose when he touched it.<sup>53</sup> In 1698 Mr William Fraser, a minister and step-son of the deceased Jean Gordon of Slaines, Aberdeenshire, was made, with others, to touch her corpse, as a result of which “there appeared nothing upon the body to make the least indication of her having been murdered.” The traditional ordeal of blood, although found wanting, was obviously still considered worthwhile.<sup>54</sup>

The case of Jonet McMuldritche was largely concerned with agricultural disputes, straying animals and theft. That of Elspeth Thomson was somewhat different. Though she shared with McMuldritche the reputation of possessing an ability to curse, with deadly results, her notoriety as a witch seems to have been formed, at least in part, by her husband’s relations who, for some reason, disliked or disapproved of her. More than half of the depositions given against her came from the McGhie brothers and their spouses. Her husband, William, did not actually testify against her, though incriminating stories that he had told to his family were raised by them.<sup>55</sup> Thomson was blamed for the death of one family member (Donald McGhie), while another (James McGhie) also claimed he had been a victim of her spells after he had refused to give her work. An intriguing feature of both cases is that men are the primary accusers. It has been argued elsewhere that typically such quarrels were between women.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Trial of Jonet Rendall, Orkney, 1629, qtd in G. F. Black, *County Folklore*, vol. III: *Orkney and Shetland Islands* (1903; Felinfach and London: Llanerch-Folklore Society, 1994) 104.

<sup>53</sup> George R. Kinloch, ed., *The Diary of Mr. John Lamont of Newton, 1649–1671* (Edinburgh: Abbotsford Club, 1830) 150–1; John Ewart Simpkins, ed., *County Folk-Lore vol. VII. Examples of Printed Folk-Lore concerning Fife with some Notes on Clackmannan and Kinross-shires* (The Folk-Lore Society. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1914) 117–18.

<sup>54</sup> *RPC*, October 1698, qtd in Robert Chambers, *Domestic Annals: From the Reformation to the Revolution*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh and London: W. & R. Chambers, 1858) vol. 3, 208–9. See also John Graham Dalyell, *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland* (Glasgow: Richard Griffin and Co., 1835) 36–43; J. M. MacPherson, *Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929) 274–5.

<sup>55</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, 125.

<sup>56</sup> For example, see Lauren Martin, “The Devil and the Domestic: Witchcraft, Quarrels and Women’s Work in Scotland,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 73–89; for England, see James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550–1750* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996) 169–89; idem, “Witchcraft and Women in Seventeenth-Century England: Some Northern Evidence,” *Continuity and Change* 6 (1991): 179–99.

Also in 1671, eight women appeared at an assize in Dumfries. The Steward Depute of Kirkcudbright ordered the magistrates of Dumfries to hand over five of the suspected witches – Bessie Paine, Janet Hewat, Grissall McNae (or Rae), Margaret McGuffok and Margaret Fleming – at sunrise, at the west end of the bridge of Dumfries for transportation to Kirkcudbright. They were to be tied with “small cords.”<sup>57</sup>

Very little information has survived about these women, with the exception of Bessie Paine, who was charged with a series of offences, which included charming oxen and cattle, and attempting to cure sick children and adults. While some of her patients recovered, others were not so lucky, and may well have been the reason she found herself in trouble, both with her neighbours and the law. From the available evidence it seems that her assistance was frequently sought. She cured an ox belonging to John Turner, elder in Ardwall, by feeding it with hay, bere and green kail stocks. She then waited until the ox licked its upper lip; failure to lick would have been a sign that the animal would die. Paine was also called upon to cure Robert Hutton’s cow, which she did by leading the beast through a hank of green yarn and uttering some words, none of which were comprehensible to the onlookers. At least one of her remedies involved transference, as in the case of Richard Crockett’s cow, which she cured, but with a warning that the first thing the cow should see, on recovering, would die. As foretold, the cow confronted one of William Wright’s oxen, which expired immediately.

The treatment of livestock was not her only speciality. When the wife of Cuthbert Browne of Craighend became ill he sent for Paine, who determined “that Agnes Rowan<sup>58</sup> had witched her.” Paine successfully cured the wife, hinting that the best way to combat the magic of a “black” witch was to deploy the skills of a “white” witch. Walter Paterson in Tarranauchtie sought Paine’s help to cure his sick child after he had “used all ordinarie means,” which had proved ineffectual; the child recovered. Another father, John Crockett in Lands, asked for help with his sick child, but after Paine described the ritual that would effect a cure, the mother of the infant was too frightened to go through with it, and so the child lay sick for two more years. Sometimes Paine’s powers were to no avail. Agnes Davidson deponed that when her father became sick, Paine requested some hair from his head and beard, and a sample of his nail clippings. She also commandeered his

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<sup>57</sup> Held at Dumfries tolbooth, Janet Hewat, Bessie Paine, Margaret Fleming, Grissall McNae and Margaret McGuffok, 6 June 1671, Letter from Glendonyng, Truckell, *Material No. 43*, 8, and DGA website extract; Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 72.

<sup>58</sup> There is no information on Agnes Rowan. She is not named in the SSWD or Black’s *Calendar*, nor does the Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book* assign her a case number even though she is mentioned in the transcripts section.

garters, which she wound round her arm three times from her finger to her elbow, but to no avail for, within a week, the father had died.

According to some who knew her, Paine also had a less benign side. Herbert Crockett complained that she had been responsible for the deaths of all seven of his cattle. During a lykewake, Crockett (obscurely) had cut a piece out of the cloak of Paine's husband, John Murray. Next day an enraged Paine threatened that "befoir it were long he should have ane other thing to think upon." A month later the cows were dead, and Paine was the obvious suspect. A further quarrel between Bessie Paine and John Crockett's wife involved the loss of cattle, though it may be suspected that Crockett was not the most efficient manager of livestock since, allegedly as a result of this altercation, for eleven years thereafter "he had no kyne [cows] at all that lives." The malevolent side of her powers was also experienced by Robert Sturgeon, who had taken a croft at Aird, formerly inhabited by Paine. Not long after he moved in, she paid him a visit and, while sitting on the hearth stone, stated, "all the witchcraft which I have I leave it here." It was common knowledge that within a year Sturgeon lost over thirty cattle. and "nothing he tooke in hand did prosper dureing his possession of that rowme [rental]."<sup>59</sup>

Paine's clients were both male and female. This was not particularly unusual, with the exception, perhaps, of the two fathers, Paterson and John Crockett, who took the initiative in the cure of sick children, a role that might be assumed to be traditionally female. It is possible that Paine regarded herself as a professional "white witch" or charmer. That she could unwitch a client hints at the possibility that she did not regard her special powers as evil, though some of her neighbours clearly thought otherwise. Regrettably, the suggestion must remain speculative as none of the depositions indicate whether Paine was rewarded in any way for her services.

Evidence that witches were often treated inhumanely during their internment is revealed in this episode. All five suspects were imprisoned within a "dark dungeon" of Kirkcudbright tolbooth, in which they were kept in "a most miserable conditione being alwayes at the point of starving having nothing of ther own nor nothing allowed them for ther sustenance." In the winter of 1671 Bessie Paine died "through cold, hunger [and] other inconveniences of the prison." Hewat, Rae, and McGuffok were released in the summer of 1672, on the grounds that they were "maliciously misrepresented as guiltie of the most horrid crymes," pending further notice. No mention is made of Margaret Fleming, who was presumably released.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Trial of Bessie Paine, Kirkcudbright, 1671, NAS, JC26/38. Transcript also in Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, 269–70.

<sup>60</sup> Trial of Bessie Paine, NAS, JC2/13; Grissell Rae [McNae], Margaret McGuffok and Janet Howat, released from Kirkcudbright prison, 15 July 1672, until ordered to appear before the next Justiciary at Dumfries, *Records of Proceedings of Justiciary Court, Edinburgh, 1661–78*, vol. 2, 104; Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, 269–74.



*Illustration 7.1* Kirkcudbright Tolbooth

Source: Photograph by Lizanne Henderson 2015 ©padeapix.

Elsbeth McEwen (variously M'Queen, M'Cowen and M'Koun), imprisoned for witchcraft from 1696 to 1698, was said to be a person of "superior education." She was an old woman who lived in a solitary house called Bogha (Boghall), on the farm of Cubbox, in the parish of Balmaclellan, Galloway. Curiously, Boghall was the same dwelling that was occupied by Margaret Maclellan, employer of Jonet McMuldritche's daughter, twenty years earlier. Allegedly, she could bewitch hens into laying an enormous number of eggs, or conversely, could stop them laying altogether. She also used a wooden pin<sup>61</sup> to steal milk from her neighbours' cows; the pin had only to touch the cow's udder for the process to take place. Tradition relates that the minister was sent to bring McEwen before the session, and that in the process his mare became very frightened, sweating blood on the hill near the manse, since remembered as the "Bluidy Brae."<sup>62</sup> It has been said, "one of the most convincing parts of the evidence against the accused was, that the minister's horse, which was sent to bring her up for trial, trembled with fear when she mounted, and sweated drops of blood." That Elspeth's contact with the horse caused it to bleed is reminiscent of the ordeal by touch, discussed above. According to another (hoary) tradition, she could assume the form of a hare.

The minister in question would have been Thomas Warner, or Verner, a graduate of St Andrews ordained in Balmaclellan in 1657. He was deprived of this post in 1662 for "labouring to keep the hearts of the people from the present government in Church and State." He was briefly involved in the Glenkens Rising of 1666 and was not reinstated until 1672, during which time he farmed at Lochinvar. In 1679 he was put to the horn for participating in field conventicles and for communing and corresponding with other declared traitors. His Balmaclellan congregation was discharged from paying his salary. He was fully restored in 1690. When he died in 1716, aged eighty-five, Robert Wodrow described him as "the last of the anti-deluvian Presbyterian ministers, that is, such as had seen the glory of the former temple and were ordained before the Restoration." As such, he would have remained a hard-nosed covenanting minister who had no compassion for suspected witches.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> This was a special pin inserted in the base of the rafters or kipples (couples) resting on the walls of a cottage, known as the "kipple foot." It was said that McEwen "was believed to have the pin at her command": that is, she could withdraw it from the kipple foot at will. Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 72–3; Jamieson, *Dictionary*.

<sup>62</sup> Maxwell, *History of Dumfries and Galloway*, 259, qtd in Black, *Calendar*, 81. No local tradition of 'Bloody Brae' survives in Balmaclellan, but a stone in the churchyard is said to mark her burial. With thanks to the late Logan Paterson of New Galloway for sharing this information.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Wodrow, *The History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland*, 4 vols. (1721–2; Glasgow: Blackie, Fullerton & Co., 1828) vol. 3, 4; *Fastii Ecclesiae*, vol. 2, 389.

Robert Wodrow was informed that at her trial in Kirkcudbright McEwen was about to confess when suddenly her eyes “fixed upon a particular part of the room and she sank down in the place.” It was assumed that the Devil had appeared to her in the courtroom, reinforcing her guilt among the jurors. He also recorded that she, and some of her coven, gained power over a man’s mare, which caused its rider great difficulty and the possibility of a serious accident, which may be an echo of the “Bloody Brae” story.<sup>64</sup>

Whatever the truth of the tale, “the old wife of Bogha” was sent to Kirkcudbright tolbooth, where she remained for about two years. Conditions were exceedingly harsh within prison, so it is a credit to McEwen’s strength of spirit that she endured it, though eventually the pain and hardship led to her confession. She was executed on 24 August 1698. The accounts for maintaining the executioner, William Kirk, before and during the burning, convey the cruelty of the whole affair. The provost of Kirkcudbright paid Kirk £2.16 shillings for carrying out the execution. Peat “to burn Elspeth with” cost £1, and additional coals 16 shillings. Ropes, small and large cost four shillings and a barrel of tar £1.4 shillings. Hugh Anderson was paid six shillings for carrying the peat and the coal. Robert Creighton received 8 shillings for drumming at her funeral. Perhaps the most shocking item was the 2 shillings paid for a pint of ale drunk by Kirk the executioner, “when she was burning.” It was hot work torching witches for he consumed a further 13 shillings worth of booze. The expenditure for the burning of Elspeth McEwen totalled £7.25 shillings Scots, about 12 shillings Sterling, or £68.42 in today’s money.<sup>65</sup>

At least one person stood up for McEwen: Janet Corbie was denounced for “endeavouring to dissuade her to confess,” vigorously asserting that people “sinned ther sowl” who said she was a witch. Unfortunately, Corbie proved a most unfortunate ally as she was a very unpopular character who abused the Lord’s Day and assailed her neighbours, from whom she stole such items as onions and cabbages, which she then sold for profit. Her presence could be tolerated no more, and the magistrates and town council of Kirkcudbright ordered that she be banished from the burgh.<sup>66</sup>

Although attitudes were gradually changing, Kirkcudbright, still in the grip of covenanting fervour at the turn of the century, could be a dangerous place for women. In 1701 witnesses came forward to complain about Janet M’Robert. Among her long list of crimes, she had caused a woman’s

<sup>64</sup> Robert Wodrow, *Analecta; or Materials for a History of Remarkable Providences*, 4 vols. (Glasgow: Maitland Club, 1844) vol. 2, 86–7.

<sup>65</sup> Based on 1698 to 2013 calculation at [www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com).

<sup>66</sup> Trial of Elspeth MacEwen, 24 August 1698, in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 72–82; C. H. Dick, *Highways and Byways in Galloway and Carrick* (London: Macmillan, 1938) 480–1; MacKenzie, *History of Galloway*, vol. 2, 37, 342–3, appendix 37–40; Trial of Janet Corbie, 31 July 1697, Kirkcudbright Burgh Records.



*Illustration 7.2* Balmaclellan

Source: Photograph by Lizanne Henderson 2015 ©padeapix.

breast to swell, so endangering her nursing baby. This M'Robert allegedly did because she was discontented with the quantity of chaff (hay or straw) she had received to feed her cow. On other occasions, she was blamed for contaminating a cow's milk, crippling a dog, driving another dog mad and cheating a girl out of her money. People told of hearing strange, unearthly screams coming from her house, and of having seen phantom lights flickering within. Elizabeth Lauchlon claimed that she saw M'Robert's spinning-wheel moving of its own accord, and when she tried to stop it, she was thrown back against the wall, injuring her head. Later on, in M'Robert's house:

the Devil appeared to her [Lauchlon] in the likeness of a man, and did bid her deliver herself over to him, from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot, which she refused to do, saying she would rather give herself to God Almighty.

After Satan disappeared, M'Robert swore Lauchlon to secrecy; when he appeared again she resisted his entreaties to accompany him. Though the evidence against M'Robert was weighty, and included allegations of Devil worship, a commission to try her was denied by the Privy Council. Not content with the verdict, the Kirkcudbright session banished M'Robert to Ireland instead.<sup>67</sup>

Janet M'Murray of Twynholm requested banishment in 1703, having survived multiple accusations over a period of ten years. As was the case with most suspected witches, she mostly took revenge on people who were unkind to her: she inflicted a woman with a stitch-like pain, which lasted until death; she spoilt milk, and killed at least three horses. Only a few years earlier, any one of these accusations might have led to M'Murray's execution.<sup>68</sup>

It is clear, in a letter dated 1704 from the Commissioners of the General Assembly to the presbytery of Wigtown, that the ministers, at least in the South West and presumably throughout Scotland, felt themselves to be under threat. The letter articulated fears of the "distressed state of diverse of the

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<sup>67</sup> Trial of Janet M'Robert of Milnburn, 6 and 12 February, 10 April 1701, Kirk Session of Kirkcudbright, qtd in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 82–7; MacKenzie, *History of Galloway*, vol. 2, appendix 40–2. See also Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson, "The Last of the Witches? The Survival of Scottish Witch Belief," in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 204.

<sup>68</sup> Trial of Janet M'Murray of Irelandton, Twynholm, 18 and 25 April, 2 and 9 May 1703, Kirk Session of Twynholm, qtd in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 87–91; MacKenzie, *History of Galloway*, vol. 2, appendix 42–4.



reformed churches” and the urgent need of the ministers to address in their sermons

the pernicious heresies, idolatries and superstitions of the Romish Church, and warn them [the congregations] with wisdom and prudence of the great and imminent dangers we are in of being overrun therewith.<sup>69</sup>

In this climate of Presbyterian moral panic, it is perhaps little wonder that a slight surge in the persecution of witches and charmers can be detected. They had been after all, for quite some time, the natural targets or scape-goats in times of social and spiritual crisis.

In this context it is no surprise to find the Wigtown presbytery genuinely frightened by Jean Brown, formerly from Kirkinner parish, later a servant in Skaith, in the parish of Penninghame. She came before the Penninghame session on 20 January 1706, but given the seriousness of the case, the session agreed to take it to the sheriff depute of Wigtown, who in turn referred the case to the presbytery. What had so alarmed the ministers was Brown’s claim that she conversed with spirits, which cured her when she was ill. The spirits, which she could not see but could feel, would “ly carnally with her as men and women do when they beget children.” They had killed a man on her behalf because she had quarrelled with his wife. They told her “that they who took the test<sup>70</sup> would go to hell,” but even worse, she claimed that these spirits were her maker, and that she prayed to them, particularly the spirit with whom she had sex, for he was “the Father Son and Holy Ghost”; “they are God and she knows they are God because none but God can lift persons from sicknesse to health.” Further blasphemy was implicit in her revelation that according to the spirits, “this world is to be destroyed.” Brown would not, under any circumstances, ask for repentance nor would she accept that the spirits were evil and of Satan. After much praying Jean Brown was detained in prison, a woman described as “under powerfull and satanicall delusions.”<sup>71</sup> The excessive praying, which took place before and during Brown’s presence, is not usually mentioned in cases involving witches. Fear

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<sup>69</sup> 6 September 1704, Letter from the Commission dated 8 August 1704, *Register of the Presbytery of Wigtown*, NAS, CH2/373/1.

<sup>70</sup> The Test Act was implemented on 31 August 1681. Though it was criticized on the grounds of inconsistency, most seriously its association with the right to the succession of the future James VII and II, a great many ministers were deprived for refusal to ‘take the Test’. *APS*, vol. VIII, 243, c.6. See also William Croft Dickinson and Gordon Donaldson, eds., *A Source Book of Scottish History*, Volume Three: 1567 to 1707 (1954; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1961) vol. III, 185–9.

<sup>71</sup> Jean Brown, 20 January 1706, Henry Paton, ed., *Penninghame Parish Records. The Session Book of Penninghame 1696–1724*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: n.p., 1933) vol. 1. 164–6. She appeared before presbytery on 29, 30 January 1706, *Register of the Presbytery of Wigtown*, NAS, CH2/373/1. No final outcome is recorded. There is a comparable case

of Brown's Satanic involvement evoked extra measures of protection; her alleged statements were clearly heretical. The prayers may have possibly functioned as a form of exorcism – the memory of high-profile possession cases in Pittenweem, Bargarran and Salem not yet extinguished – though the godly would have been cautious about such action given the Kirk frowned upon the practice as unscriptural and reminiscent of popery. There is also some evidence of exorcist-like activity at Rerrick.<sup>72</sup> Protestant measures did allow for prayers in such situations, so long as it was only God who was called upon for assistance. The emphasis, for Protestants, was on the spiritual, as opposed to the physical, effects of possession, regarded as a “struggle against demonic temptation and an effort to win the soul of the demoniac than an attempt to bring relief from the physical torments that the Devil inflicted.”<sup>73</sup> However, an alternative explanation was that the prayers were used against Brown, by the ministers, in self-defence.

### Diablerie in Dumfries

In Dumfriesshire, Sarah Smith, from Lochrutton was referred to the local sheriff by the presbytery on suspicion of witchcraft in 1692, but the case was eventually dropped a year later because the depositions, and all the relevant paperwork, were lost.<sup>74</sup> In 1699, Elspeth Goldie or Gaudie was released from prison and made to stand at the church door and was “rebuked on the pillar,” for using offensive, scandalous and revengeful language against her brother-in-law, as well as for consulting with a known witch, Janet Kennedy. Apparently, she had asked Kennedy to “witch” her brother-in-law's new wife to death.<sup>75</sup> One of the key aspects of the Witchcraft Act of 1563 was that it regarded consultation with witches as just as culpable as actually practising witchcraft, but this seems rarely to have been enforced.

The area around Caerlaverock, at the turn of the century, seems to have been a hotbed of witches. In 1692 three women, Marion Dickson from Blackshaw, Isobel Dickson in Locharwoods and her daughter Marion Herbertson in Mousewald, were sent to Edinburgh to be tried for their

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at Dumfries in 1691 concerning Janet Fraser who had Satanic visions. See Wood, *Witchcraft in the South-West*, 124–31.

<sup>72</sup> On events at Rerrick, see Alexander Telfair, *A True Relation of an Apparition, Expressions and Actings of a Spirit Which Infested the House of Andrew Mackie in Ring-Croft of Stocking, in the Parish of Rerrick, in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright, in Scotland* (Edinburgh: George Mossman, 1696).

<sup>73</sup> Levack, *The Devil Within*, 107, 111.

<sup>74</sup> Sarah Smith in Lochrutton, 31 May, 20 July 1692, 27 June, 11 July 1693, *Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1687–1695*, DGA, CH2/1284/2.

<sup>75</sup> Elspeth Goldie and Janet Kennedy, 23 February to 7 September 1699, *St. Michael's Kirk Session Dumfries*, DGA, CH2/537/15/1. I would like to thank Mr Ian Anderson for bringing this case to my attention and for kindly providing a transcript.

“many grievous malefices committed upon their neighbours and others.”<sup>76</sup> The outcome is unknown, though the local minister, Rev. Robert Paton, one of the investigators, was further involved in inquiries against other suspected witches, including another Caerlaverock woman, Janet Wharrie.<sup>77</sup>

The proceedings against Wharrie were actually instigated by herself when she approached the kirk session claiming she had been slandered as a witch. Witnesses were gathered, and Wharrie appeared before the presbytery in 1697 on various allegations, such as causing a neighbour’s cow to vomit grass. She had been seen down on her knees praying for the cow to vomit and “rowt” [bellow] till it died. The cow was then observed scraping a hole with its foot and spewing into it, a most unusual occurrence given that cows are unable to vomit! A cow has four digestive compartments of which one, the rumen, stores grass and allows the cud to be regurgitated and rechewed to aid digestion. Cows with toothache have been observed dropping some cud from their mouth, which could give the appearance of vomiting. The leaves of certain plants are poisonous to cattle and would cause an over-production of saliva which, again, might look like the cow was vomiting.<sup>78</sup>

A man alleged that Wharrie had approached him one day while he was ploughing, requesting him to go with her to see her sick mare, which was distempered. When he refused, she became very angry, at which point his plough ceased to work and the horses started to leap around, breaking their reins. Another man claimed something similar after he refused to plough some ground for her. She was also blamed for causing illness and had been heard uttering, against the wife of one of her enemies, an imprecation that she should have “many a bloody day & night,” which seemed to happen approximately five weeks later when the poor woman spat blood and vomited the same “in platefulls.” Witnesses to Wharrie’s mischief were not hard to find, and some claimed to have heard her begging that a man, whom she thought had come to wrong her, might be afflicted with the “Glengare” [Glengore or syphilis], which immediately came to pass. While it is highly unusual for witches to be credited with the onset of venereal disease, the witnesses presumably could think of no other way this man could have contracted it. Wharrie denied all the charges.

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<sup>76</sup> Marion Dickson in Blackshaw, Isobel Dickson in Locharwoods, her daughter Marion Herbertson in Mousewauldbank, 6 January, 23 February, 15 March 1692, *Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1687–1695*, DGA, CH2/1284/2. See also Chambers, *Domestic Annals*, vol. 3, 66; McDowall, *History of Dumfriesshire*, 378; Truckell, *Material No. 43*, 8. There was possibly a fourth witch.

<sup>77</sup> Rev Robert Paton, minister of Greyfriars, Dumfries 1696–1715, was involved in cases of 1692, 1699, 1700, 1705 and 1709. SSWD.

<sup>78</sup> Thank you to Mrs Alison Burgess (Local History Officer and Archivist, Ewart Library, Dumfries) for pointing this out to me, and to Mr Hugh Dickson (Bard Veterinary Group, Dumfries) for his thoughts on the matter.

The outcome of this episode is rather interesting for what did *not* happen, rather than for what did. The moderator was appointed to consult with a lawyer in Edinburgh. However, he was unable to get advice from “any able lawyer” owing to, as he stated, “their multiplicity of business at this juncture.”<sup>79</sup> It would appear there was a great reluctance, within the capital’s legal circles, to become involved any longer in regional witch disputes. Since there was such uncertainty about how to proceed, the case was delayed until more advice could be sought. The latter commodity was obviously hard to come by for Janet Wharrie’s case was not discussed again until two years later, alongside those of some other witches who posed similar problems: “Nothing yet being done with these women in prison suspected of witchcraft, nor with Janet Wharry in Caerlaverock.” The Lord Advocate was informed of the situation and, four months later, in 1700, he reported to the brethren that nothing could be done “effectually” because he judged the allegations against these women were “not so momentous as to require a commission to put them to tryall.” The jailer was paid and, presumably, though it is not actually stated, the women were released.<sup>80</sup> The evidence in this instance clearly suggests that while the local ministers – Robert Paton, Robert Blair, William Veitch and John Somerville – were keen to act, the central authorities felt no such compunction.<sup>81</sup> The fact that Wharrie (possibly together with the other women mentioned) was held for at least two years is indicative of the tenacity of local prejudice and assumption.

In 1705 it was once again brought to the attention of the Dumfries presbytery that “several persons” in the parish of Caerlaverock were suspected of witchcraft and possible, though not explicitly stated, demonic possession. Robert Paton, Robert Blair and John Somerville, among others, were involved. The ministers appointed to meet at Caerlaverock on 27 March, at which time “they prayed with the familie molested” and “discouraged,” that is, expressed

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<sup>79</sup> Case of Janet Wharrie, Caerlaverock, 21 September, 5, 11 and 15 October, and 7 December 1697, *Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1695–1701*, DGA, CH2/1284/3.

<sup>80</sup> 7 November 1699, 5 March 1700, DGA, CH2/1284/3.

<sup>81</sup> Janet Wharrie and the three unnamed witches were investigated by Robert Paton, Robert Blair, minister in Holywood 1698–1724, John Somerville, minister at Caerlaverock 1697–1734, and William Veitch, minister at St Michael’s Dumfries 1694–1715. Veitch was involved in the Pentland Rising, and after fleeing to England was imprisoned on the Bass Rock, February 1679 to July 1680. He helped Argyll escape Scotland in 1681 and acted as an agent for the Duke of Monmouth during his rising of 1685. He eventually became minister of Dumfries in 1694. There is no real evidence that he was a fierce persecutor of witches. One of his daughters, Agnes, married John Somerville of Caerlaverock. *Fastii Ecclesiae*; Kenneth W. H. Howard, *Marion Veitch: The Memoirs, Life & Times of a Scots Covenanting Family (1639–1732) in Scotland, England and the Americas* (Ossett: Gospel Tidings Trust, 1992) passim. William Veitch was misidentified as Alexander in my previously published article, “The Survival of Witchcraft Prosecutions and Witch Belief in South-West Scotland.”

disapproval of “all the persons suspected to be the instruments of the disturbance.” As the nine ministers appointed as investigators could not establish any proof that witchcraft had been involved the matter was referred to the King’s advocate for his advice and opinion. His response was fairly quick, abruptly telling them that “no criminal process can be raised against the persons suspected of witchcraft upon anything yet represented.” The presbytery then thought it fitting to let the issue rest, leaving “the matter to providence.”<sup>82</sup> No longer was an unsupported accusation sufficient for condemnation. The handling of this case suggests that the ministers were sympathetic to the opinions of their parishioners, in particular those who were demanding that action be taken against the alleged witches.<sup>83</sup> However, stricter demands regarding “proof of guilt” were by now well established. Although central government had taken a back seat in the prosecution of witches in general, the local ministers still had to deal with community frictions, and therefore found it necessary to “discourage” the suspects in order to pacify all involved.

In 1709 the minister at Kirkbean (situated in Kirkcudbrightshire, but in the presbytery and synod of Dumfries), Mr Andrew Reid, gave his deposition against a witch by the name of Janet Harestanes. Among her crimes were causing the minister’s newly built house to come tumbling down “in the twinkling of an eye”; only a day later, though he had escaped unscathed from the house, Reid nearly drowned on his way to Edinburgh. To add to his suspicions, she was unable to repeat the Lord’s Prayer without making mistakes in every line. Other people claimed that she had made them sick after quarrelling with her. It was recommended by the investigators, who included Robert Paton and Robert Blair once again, that she be banished from the bounds. That Janet was a menace to society was clearly felt by many who knew her, for this was not the first time she had been in trouble, nor, indeed, was it the first time she suffered banishment. She first appeared before the presbytery of Dumfries in 1699 on charges of witchcraft and charming. On 2 April 1700 the ministers decided to banish her; on 23 April, of the same year, however, she was back.<sup>84</sup> In 1704 she was causing trouble

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<sup>82</sup> 27 February, 27 March, 24 April, 26 June 1705, *Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1701–1710* DGA, CH2/1284/4. The entry for 27 March reads “all the persons suspected ... except Bessie Heslope, whom they could not find.” She is the only named accused.

<sup>83</sup> The nine ministers were Robert Blair, Holywood 1698–1724; James Guthrie, Kirkpatrick-Irongray 1694–1759; John Hutchison (no details); John MacMurdo, Torthorwald 1702–20; John Nisbet, New Abbey 1697–1722; Robert Paton, Dumfries 1696–1715; John Reid, Lochrutton 1690–92; John Somerville, Caerlaverock 1697–1734; and David Wightman, Terregles 1702–06. SSWD.

<sup>84</sup> Trial of Janet Harestanes, 1699, 1700, DGA, CH2/1284/3. Deposition of Andrew Reid, minister at Kirkbean, 1709, transcript by Mr Truckell. Robert Paton and the minister at Holywood, Robert Blair, who were involved in the investigations at Caerlaverock, were further involved in the Harestanes case, 3 May 1709. SSWD.

for the session at Glencairn (just north of Dumfries), which ordered a public announcement that “no heritor, tenant, or householder whatsoever within this parish resett or harbour Jaunet Harestanes,” for she is “reputed to be under the *mala-fama* of witchcraft.”<sup>85</sup> She was obviously quite a character and certainly very tenacious, but what is significant is that the clergy exhibited some tolerance in dealing with her cases, whereas a few decades earlier she would almost certainly have suffered capital punishment.

## Men in black

It has been pointed out that a systematic study and in-depth profiling of the people responsible for hunting witches has yet to be carried out. Julian Goodare distinguishes a “witch-hunter” as “men who did not merely carry out their duty in trials, but who went out of their way to orchestrate and promote them.”<sup>86</sup> The same points also stand for the role played by the ministers involved in witchcraft cases, as it was often considerable and could determine whether or not allegations would be followed up or formal charges pressed. Occasionally, in regard to witchcraft, the brethren banded together in times of perceived crisis, offering spiritual support to their congregations and one another. The ministers at Irvine, Ayrshire, for instance, appointed 5 May 1697 “to be kept for humiliation and fasting through the bounds of this presbytrie” in a show of support for those at Paisley investigating the Christian Shaw case.<sup>87</sup> The following year, the Irvine presbytery were involved in nominating one of their number to attend a meeting of parliament in Edinburgh, “for joyning with other Ministers sent from other presbyteries in prosecution of the recommendation of the Generall Assembly and Commission, against poperie, prophanity, schism, and to crave a new and plainer law against adultery, witchcraft” and other crimes.<sup>88</sup>

Ministers, or their families, were occasionally the target of Auld Nick’s attentions. In Galloway, the daughter of the Rev. William Boyd, minister of Dalry from 1690, was visited by the Devil in the form of a bumble bee, and on another occasion in the form of an attractive young man who seduced her into playing cards on a Sunday and then carried her off on his black horse. Luckily for her, or perhaps she thought unluckily, her father saw

<sup>85</sup> Janet Hairstanes, 10, 24 September 1704, *Glencairn Kirk Session Records*, qtd in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 132–3.

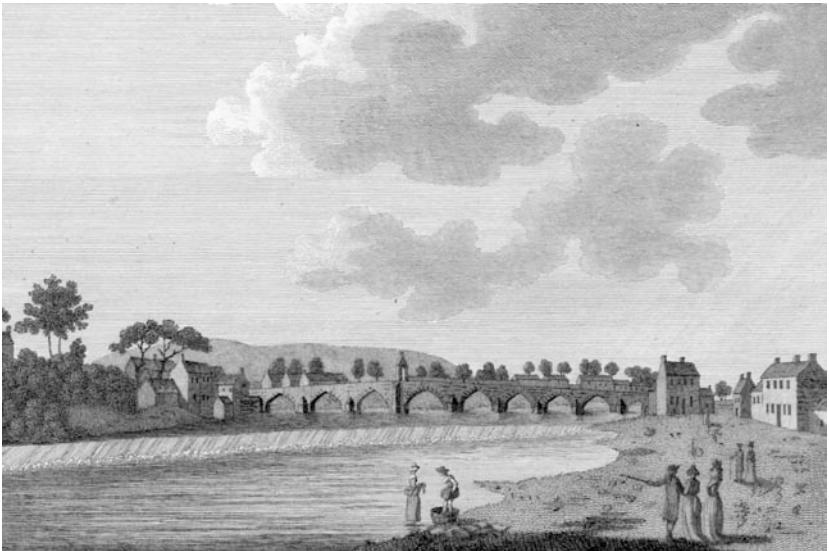
<sup>86</sup> Julian Goodare, ed., *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) intro. 3; idem, “Women and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland,” *Social History* 23 (1998): 152.

<sup>87</sup> 27 April 1697, *Irvine Presbytery Records*, NAS, CH2/197, and Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire*, 78.

<sup>88</sup> Rev. Patrick Warner was appointed to attend, 19 July 1698, *Irvine Presbytery Records*, NAS, CH2/197, and Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire*, 78–9.



Two artist impressions of the Whitesands. *Illustration 7.3* "The Burning of the Nine Women on the Sands of Dumfries, April 13 1659" (1909). John Copland's vision of 17th century Dumfries is in stark contrast to the 18th century (Illustration 7.4) depiction of a more "enlightened" time.  
Source: J. Maxwell Wood, *Witchcraft and Superstitious Record in the South-Western District of Scotland* (1911; Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1975) 114.



*Illustration 7.4* Dumfries Bridge and Whitesands, 1789  
Source: Francis Grose, *The Antiquities of Scotland*, 2 vols. (London, 1789) vol. 1, 159.

them and shouted on her to come back for Christ's sake, and the young man (the Devil) put her down from his horse.<sup>89</sup> This anecdote may be more effective as indicating father–daughter relationships than it is about witchcraft, but it does contain motifs found in other more reliable sources.

In the parish of Kirkmaiden, Rev. Archibald Marshall, ordained in 1697, was famous for having “laid the ghost of Galdenoch,” a castle north west of Stranraer.<sup>90</sup> He also had a reputation for being a zealous persecutor of witches, in which endeavour he not only employed a witchfinder, even at this very late date, but one who was, furthermore, a female. There is a story that the Kirkmaiden witches got their revenge, however, for one day when he was out walking, a hare crossed his path, and from that moment on he was unable to open his mouth in the Kirkmaiden pulpit and had to be transferred to Kirkcolm in 1700.<sup>91</sup> He obviously experienced a complete cure, for it was reported that “his voice was so powerful, that on a calm day he could be heard distinctly across Lochryan at the Cairn.”<sup>92</sup>

Of particular interest in this case was Marshall's reliance upon a woman from Wigtown in his detection of witches. There is a report that she determined guilt simply by sight. As communicants filed through the church she allegedly pressed on Marshall's toes so that he could record the names of those she suspected. Witchfinders of previous years had used a range of methods. In the last great witch-hunt of 1661–62, a witch-pricker, who adopted the name of Mr Paterson, employed a long brass pin. His method was to strip the suspects naked;

after rubbing over the whole body with his palms he slipt in the pin, and it seemes, with shame and feare being dasht, they felt it not, but he left it in the flesh, deep to the head, and desired them to find and take it out ... many honest men and women were blotted [calumniated] and broak [slandered and transgressed] by the trick.

In one session some twenty people were pricked by this individual, their heads first shaved and the hair carefully collected. Paterson was eventually discovered to be a woman “disguised in mans cloaths. Such cruelty and

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<sup>89</sup> *East Galloway Sketches (Dalry)* 349, qtd in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 34–5; R. deBruce Trotter, *Galloway Gossip or the Southern Albanich 80 years ago* (Dumfries: Courier and Herald, 1901).

<sup>90</sup> Andrew Agnew, *A History of the Hereditary Sherrifs of Galloway*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1864) vol. 2, 164–6.

<sup>91</sup> Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 97, citing Andrew Donaldson, *Guide to Kirkmaiden*, 40.

<sup>92</sup> Stranraer Session Register; Agnew, *Hereditary Sherrifs*, vol. 2, 166; *Fastii Ecclesiae*. Kirkcolm is on the west shore of Loch Ryan, exactly opposite Cairn Ryan, to the east.



figure was sustained by a vile harlot imposture."<sup>93</sup> Detecting witches by sight had been a skill of Margaret Atkin, "the great witch of Balwearie," who had herself been accused of witchcraft in 1597. She claimed that "they had a secret mark, all of that sort, in their eyes, whereby she could surely tell, how soon she looked upon any, whether they were witches or not." For three or four months, Atkin was taken from place to place to assist in the discovery of witches until, at last, she was found to be a fraud.<sup>94</sup>

The Rev. Peter Rae of Kirkbride, a man of many talents and a former law student at the University of Glasgow, was best known as the author of *The History of the Rebellion Rais'd against His Majesty King George I* (1718),<sup>95</sup> and for his mechanical skills. He was also a firm believer in the existence of witches. He was rebuked in 1706 for calling a woman a witch, for having demanded that she restore his health to him and for having attempted to break her spell by bleeding her on the forehead, thus scoring, or "striking above the breath, or the brow,"<sup>96</sup> a fairly common form of spell-breaking. For instance, at Glencairn in 1694 Margaret McKinch was approached by Robert Muir in Dunregon, who allegedly drew his knife and offered to "blood her above ye b[reath]." Margaret submitted a written list to the session of those who had, as she said, slandered her as a witch. In the 1690s Edward Maxwell of Hills granted damages to Janet Henderson who, accused of causing illness, had been cut above the brow.<sup>97</sup>

The Rev. John Taylor was deposed from his charge at Wamphray, by the General Assembly in 1718 for, among other things, his refusal to take the Abjuration Oath<sup>98</sup> and for his disgraceful conduct towards the presbytery of

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<sup>93</sup> James Fraser, *Chronicles of the Frasers; being the Wardlaw Manuscript*, ed. W. MacKay (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1905) 446–7. On the use of midwives as witchfinders, see also 'Gender' in Chapter 2.

<sup>94</sup> John Spottiswoode, *The History of the Church of Scotland*, 3 vols. (1655; Edinburgh: Spottiswoode Society, 1851) vol. 3, 66–7.

<sup>95</sup> Rev. Peter Rae (1671–1748) also published *Gospel-Ministers Christ's Ambassadors* (Edinburgh, 1733), *A Letter to the Honourable the Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture in Scotland* (1740), *A Treatise of Lawful Oaths and Perjury* (Edinburgh, 1749), and compiled "A Natural and Genealogical History of the Shire of Drumfries" (unpublished MS). Rae's *The History of the Rebellion Rais'd against His Majesty King George I* (Dumfries, 1718; 2nd edn London, 1746) was attacked in doggerel verse by Robert Ker in *A Glass wherein Nobles, Priests, and People may see the Lord's Controversies against Britain* (1719). See *Fastii Ecclesiae*.

<sup>96</sup> Truckell, *Material No. 43*, 10.

<sup>97</sup> Margaret McKinch, 9 April 1694, *Glencairn Kirk Session Record*, qtd in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 132; for Janet Henderson, see Truckell, *Material No. 43*, 9.

<sup>98</sup> The Abjuration Oath (1710), meaning an abjuration from Jacobitism and a declaration of loyalty to the Protestant succession. The Presbyterians had misgivings because of doubts about what type of Protestantism was intended. The Oath is printed in Wodrow, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 153–4.

Lochmaben, accusing them of favouring a “Jacobite design” for Scotland. For some time after arriving in Wamphray in 1697, he had preached vehemently against dissenters, denouncing them as “emissaries of Satan.” It seems Taylor was also a believer in witches for, when a woman in his congregation, Bessie French, was summoned before the session on charges of witchcraft, around 1709, he immediately presumed her guilt rather than her innocence. The situation was made trickier, so far as the minister was concerned, because French’s own brother, and a brother-in-law, were elders of the Kirk. However, French took matters into her own hands; she forthrightly denounced Taylor and her other accusers, refused to appear before the session, and instead took her case to the Lochmaben presbytery, hoping to clear her name. The presbytery found in her favour, a decision that sent Taylor into a rage, and he railed against his brethren for their laxity “with regard to the great sin of witchcraft.”<sup>99</sup>

John Taylor was a curious and complex character. Throughout the twenty-one years of his ministry there persisted an ongoing dispute about the precise bounds of his glebe. One of his first actions as minister was to petition the presbytery for a perambulation of the boundaries, but at his deposition in 1718 rumours still circulated that he had illegally moved some of the boundary markers. In a bizarre episode following a disagreement with his own church, he formed a “Presbytery of Protesters” consisting of himself and two elders. They held a conventicle on Wamphray Moor at which they denounced the Union, patronage and the Abjuration Oath. The substantial gathering apparently attracted a considerable amount of popular support, and proceedings ended with a solemn renewing of the covenants. Taylor ignored a summons to appear before the Lochmaben presbytery. He subsequently had disagreements with the commissioners of supply in Moffat, who had demanded an accounting of the number of the poor in the parish. Taylor, suspecting a ploy to press men into the army, forbade his elders to attend. When five of them did so, he attempted to discipline them for conduct “worse than Judas,” but they ignored him; one of the five was William French.

Bessie French was initially implicated when two men, John Bell and David Johnstone from Hillhouse farm, informed the session on oath that she was a witch. Describing some of her “malefices” and “gross Satanic practices,” they alleged that her mother before her “lay under the same scandal,” asserting that it was because of her family connections and friends that the matter had not hitherto been drawn to the minister’s attention. Although details are sketchy it would seem there was bad blood between the tenants of Hillhouse and those of nearby Wamphraygate (less than half a mile away), which latter included the family of French, Bessie and her brothers

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<sup>99</sup> John Paterson, *Wamphray: Pages from the History and Traditions of a Famous Parish in Upper Annandale* (Lockerbie: James Halliday, 1906) 91–105.

Matthew and David. Taylor should have been surprised at the accusation, for Bessie was a regular attender at church, but instead he blamed his elders for “neglective duty in hiding from him this flagrant scandal and gross iniquity going on in the parish for so long.” He insisted that the accused appear before the session. Her brother urged her to obey the summons in order to clear her name. Matthew French was reported as frequently stating that if his sister “were found guilty, he would be content to see her burnt.”<sup>100</sup> Taylor later published a *Vindication*, which repeated “these idle stories without probation” against Bessie French, thus revealing “a swatch of his unchristian and reproachful spirit.”

Contemporaries simply could not understand how the accused could be guilty since during at least twelve years of Taylor’s ministry he “did not scruple to admit her to partake of the Lord’s Supper.” One opponent asked, “where was his zeal against sin, especially such a horrid guilt as witchcraft for such a long time, that he never endeavoured to convince her thereof, or bring her to trial till of late?” Taylor later protested that, on one occasion, when he handed Bessie French the token that would admit her to communion, he said, “if thou be a witch, thou may take it, but the curse of God will go along with it, or something to this purpose.” Was he, in so doing, asked his critic, “separating the precious from the vile or keeping the children’s bread from dogs?” How, he asked, could a minister place a communion cup in the hand of a suspected devil? When the case was investigated by the Lochmaben presbytery they not only dismissed it outright but advised the accused to seek redress from a civil judge. Taylor’s response was to accuse the presbytery of favouring witches and witchcraft, which in his deluded fashion he somehow associated with support for Jacobitism. The minister accused another individual in Wamphraygate, James Fergusson, of being “a scandalous profane man, and one under the scandal of witchcraft and charming, a notour picker [notorious robber] and thief, yeah an Atheist.” Yet Taylor supplied Fergusson with poor relief.<sup>101</sup> The anonymous respondent to Taylor’s *Vindication* opined that the minister “should wear a paper hat [Dunce’s Cap] as a token of perpetual infamy, never to be believed afterward.” Other witnesses testified that Taylor accused those elders who opposed him in the matter of witchcraft of “having the marks of Hypocracie in their foreheads and taking the Devil’s part”; and he also asserted that Bessie French’s kin were “knit together against the gospel.”

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<sup>100</sup> *Mr Taylor’s Case Stated, or a Just Reply to a Book, Intituled, a Vindication of Mr John Taylor Minister of Wamphray* (Dumfries: Robert Rae, 1718) 63.

<sup>101</sup> Taylor’s *Vindication* also makes reference to James Fergusson, a charmer. Neither Bessie French nor James Fergusson are in Black’s *Calendar* or Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*.

Taylor's outrageous behaviour, his unsupported and ludicrous accusations against members of the Lochmaben presbytery and his failure to subscribe the Abjuration Oath led to his suspension in 1715 by the General Assembly. In a final bizarre episode, he was supposed to read notice of his own suspension after Sunday service. Members of the presbytery turned up to witness his failure to do so. Coincidentally the litigious Taylor had sued the laird of Wamphray for non-payment of his stipend and had retained the services of "a band of armed men in Nithsdale" to serve the necessary summonses. Incredibly, the laird paid up. A packed congregation looked on as armed men guarded the door of the Kirk and the members of the presbytery adjourned to a nearby hostelry to fortify themselves against that cold December sabbath. Taylor was finally deposed in 1718, retiring to Eskdalemuir. He promptly set to work on his *Vindication*, though curiously he failed to comment on two further articles of libel against him; first, that he had used some of the poor's money for himself, and second, that he "did habitually and constantly lye in bed in the same room where his sister Katharin Taylor her bed was." A formal complaint was made to the presbytery regarding the charges, but no libel was proven. He was, however, admonished by "several brethren" to cease sleeping in the same room as his sister.<sup>102</sup> He died in 1745, and tradition in Upper Annandale recounts that as his funeral procession advanced towards Kirkpatrick Juxta churchyard it met with part of the Jacobite army heading south. As a mark of respect the Highlanders formed a line and saluted the funeral bier, so greatly impressing the mourners. However, the latter emerged from the graveyard to discover that their horses had been looted by the pious Highlanders, a fitting conclusion to a remarkable career.<sup>103</sup>

It could be said of John Taylor as of Mr William Morrison of Cromarty that "a good deal of his religion consisted in finding fault, and a good deal more in the vagaries of a wild imagination." Morrison believed that the Bible itself was opposed to the Treaty of Union and the Abjuration Oath as well as the Act of Toleration (1712). He attributed "the deadness and carnality of the Church at this present time" to the role played by many of its members in the recent Act of Union, "of sorrowful memory, whereby our country's power to act for herself, both as to religion and liberty, is hung under the belt of idolatrous England. Woe unto thee, Scotland, for thou has sold thy birth-right!" He went on to lambast Erastianism, the Oath of Abjuration and, reaching a pitch of apoplectic indignation, the Union of 1707. He likened members of Parliament to:

<sup>102</sup> *Mr Taylor's Case Stated, or a Just Reply*, 79–80.

<sup>103</sup> R. E. Searcher (sic), "Notes on Rev. John Taylor Minister in Wamphray 1697–1718," *The Moffat News* 4 March 1948; R. E. Searcher (sic), "Notes on Rev. John Taylor Minister in Wamphray, 1697–1718," *Dumfries and Galloway Review* June 1948.

the worms of the earth, that creep, peep, and cry, appearing out of their dark holes and dens in this time of Scotland's dark night. ... It is in the night time that evil spirits and wild beasts seize on folk, and cry in the streets to fleg and flichter them; and such as they find most feared and apprehensive they haunt most. And so, oh Scotland! is thy Church affeared and flichtered with the sciekings and worryings of an evil Parliament.<sup>104</sup>

## Charming in the South West

While witchcraft was still undoubtedly considered the most serious of "supernatural" crimes by authorities in the South West, other preternatural misdemeanours were also punished, notably charming. Although considered to be quite a separate crime from witchcraft, it can be useful to compare the experience of charmers with that of witches. This has been done by breaking down the evidence from the three main regions of southwest Scotland.

As elsewhere, the majority of the charming cases in the region were primarily concerned with healing and beneficent magic. Some involved a divinatory aspect, a desire to know of a future event or to detect the whereabouts of lost property. The charms and medications were not, of course, restricted to humans but also included livestock. A piece of silver, known as "The Lockerbie Penny," was used to cure cows of madness. The penny was lodged in a stick of wood and stirred in well water, the water collected and given to the afflicted beast. Knowledge of the efficaciousness of the charm was fairly widespread and, as late as the mid-nineteenth century, a Northumbrian farmer allegedly sent a £50 deposit to borrow the Lockerbie Penny. Apparently, a dog had bitten his ass (donkey), and the ass, in turn, bit into his cow. "The dog was shot, the cuddy died, but the cow was saved through the miraculous virtue of the charm." On the farmer's death, it was reported that several bottles labelled "Lockerbie Water" were among his effects,<sup>105</sup> though containers of something more potent may have been responsible for the tale.

## Ayrshire

At Ayr in 1684 several people were rebuked by the session for both consulting with, and being entertained by, a "dumb man who pretended to tell fortunes and find things lost," but it is not known exactly how the man

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<sup>104</sup> Miller, *Scenes and Legends*, 149–50. Miller is quoting from a manuscript written between 1710 and 1713 by William Morrison.

<sup>105</sup> William Henderson, *Notes on the Folklore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (1866; London: The Folklore Society, 1879), 131.

conveyed his “pretended” knowledge.<sup>106</sup> The records reveal a fairly high incidence of charming throughout the South West. A scattering of charming charges appeared in Ayrshire, including that of James Hutcheson in Netherwood, who was brought before the Muirkirk session in July 1670 for cutting off the head of a live calf and burying it between “two Lordis landis for to prevente the Sturdye from the rest of his beastiall.” The sturdy is a disease affecting sheep, caused by the larva of a tapeworm producing a brain tumour. Symptoms are dizziness, staggering and eventual collapse. The crime was dealt with relatively quickly as Hutcheson agreed to “give ane public confessioun” of his misdemeanour on 9 August.<sup>107</sup> In 1682 there were two separate cases of “raising the Devil.” The first, at Irvine, involved a servant-girl who summoned Satan, using a complicated ritual, in order to obtain information about stolen property. In the second incident, Margaret Dougall from Ayr was sent onwards to Edinburgh to be tried for “consulting and raising the devill.”<sup>108</sup> In an apparent attempt to preserve their cattle from disease, three people from Ardrossan (no names or gender are recorded) were charged by the Irvine presbytery with charming in 1697. Though declaring they were ignorant of any wrongdoing, they were sent back to their own session to be rebuked.<sup>109</sup> A late case of charming in the Ayrshire area arose in Kilmarnock in 1709. Marion Brown was charged with “using charms and contumacy to the church discipline.” Though the case is mentioned in the Circuit Court minutes, no outcome is recorded.<sup>110</sup>

Bell M’Ghie, the so-called “last of the Ayrshire witches” (died 1836), was allegedly a victim of the evil eye, and thus of charming, when she was around six or seven. Her mother secured a counter-charm, which involved removing the child’s shift, outside-in, over her head, and turning it three times “widdershins” or against the direction of the sun. A piece of burning coal was then dropped through the shift three times, after which it was put back on the child and she was cured.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>106</sup> John H. Pagan, *Annals of Ayr in the Olden Times, 1550–1692* (Ayr: Alex. Fergusson, 1897), 106, and Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire*, 86.

<sup>107</sup> Trial of James Hutchesoun [Hutcheson], Netherwood, July 1670, Muirkirk Session Records, *PSAS* vol. XLIV, 336; Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire*, 85.

<sup>108</sup> Trial of servant-girl, Irvine, February 1682, in McJannet, *The Royal Burgh of Irvine*, 196–7; Fraser, *Memorials of the Montgomeries*, vol. 1, 81–2; Blair, *Tales of Ayrshire*, 177–8; Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire*, case no. 159; Trial of Margaret Dougall, Ayr, 2 March 1682, in *RPC*, 3rd series, vol. 7, 350, and Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire*, case no. 160. See also Chapter 3.

<sup>109</sup> Three people in Ardrossan, 1697, *Irvine Presbytery Records*, NAS, CH2/197, and Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire*, 85.

<sup>110</sup> Trial of Marion Brown, Kilmarnock, 5 May 1709, Circuit Court Minute Book 321, and Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire*, 85.

<sup>111</sup> A. MacGeorge, *An Ayrshire Witch* [reprinted from Good Words for private circulation] (London, 1886), 1–12. For more on Bell M’Ghie, see “Late Cases of Witches in Southwest Scotland” below.

## Dumfriesshire

In the Dumfriesshire area, William Anderson in Hall of Forest was found guilty in 1691 by the Irongray session of bringing his child to a blacksmith so that it might be charmed with the forge hammer. It is perhaps noteworthy that it is the father, not the mother or other female relative, who is responsible for securing a cure for his child.<sup>112</sup> Also, the role of the blacksmith is of significance for members of this profession were often credited with magical powers and an ability to heal. Suspected changelings were taken to the smithy and put on the anvil. The blacksmith would take up his hammer, swing it around his head, and threaten aloud to strike the baby. If it was a fairy it would jump up from the anvil and run away; the real child would be found soon afterwards asleep at home.<sup>113</sup> A variety of healing rituals has been described, such as placing the sick child naked upon the anvil, while the mother held one arm and another woman held the feet. The blacksmith put his left hand underneath the child's neck and would strike the horn of the anvil with his hammer to drive away the illness. A cure for rickets involved bathing the afflicted child in the blacksmith's water trough, putting him or her on the anvil and passing iron tools over the body, finishing with a final bath. In some places, the ritual would only work if the child was brought before sunrise to a smithy where three blacksmiths of the same name worked, a somewhat remote possibility, perhaps.<sup>114</sup>

Martin reported that there was a smith in the parish of Kilmartin who had a reputation for curing "faintness of the spirits." The patient, young or old, was laid face-up on the anvil. The smith brought his hammer down as if to hit the person but moved the hammer at the last moment, "tho at the same time he must do it so as to strike terror in the patient: and this they say has always the design'd effect."<sup>115</sup> In Galloway, there was allegedly a blacksmith who treated children suffering from chilblains. The smith would touch the sore area with a red-hot awl to effect a remedy, a brutal cure if true! Putting iron on an injury or skin complaint was a fairly common and widespread

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<sup>112</sup> William Anderson, Hall of Forest, 1691, Irongray Kirk Session, qtd in Truckell, *Material No. 43*, 10. See also Chapter 3 for fathers who assist in healing their children.

<sup>113</sup> Rev. George Sutherland, *Folk-Lore Gleanings and Character Sketches from the Far North* (Wick: John O'Groat Journal, 1937) 26.

<sup>114</sup> On the magical powers of blacksmiths and their tools, see Ronald Webber, *The Village Blacksmith* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973) 105–20. On the cure for rickets, see also Walter Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland*, The Folk-Lore Society (London: Elliot Stock, 1881) 45.

<sup>115</sup> Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London: Andrew Bell, 1703; Second edit. 1716; Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1976) 183.

cure. Sometimes iron keys were heated up and applied to the forehead of healthy people or animals to act as a prophylactic against disease.<sup>116</sup>

Keys could be used for other charms as well. John Fergusson in Cummertrees appeared before the Dumfries presbytery in 1697 for using a charm that involved two bibles and a key. The object of the charm was to discover the name of a thief who had stolen cheese and herring from one of Fergusson's friends. The process involved placing the key inside the Bible, with the handle protruding, while the two men present held on to it. The 50th Psalm, beginning at the 18th verse, was repeatedly read out, always naming a person before each reading. When the guilty person's name was reached, the key would fall out of the Bible. Apparently, the charm worked and thus they identified the name of their suspect, though the exercise was repeated three times just to be sure. John Fergusson defended himself to the ministers, saying that "he knew not there was any evill in it." The other men confessed that they had taken part in the charming, but only because Fergusson had threatened them when they were reluctant to participate: "the said John swore that if they refused him a bible to read a verse off, he would make bloodie work among them." Fergusson confessed to his "scandalous practice in charmeing & turning the key," and was appointed to stand on the pillar in Caerlaverock Church to be sharply rebuked.<sup>117</sup> An obvious, yet important, observation with regard to this case, and the one before, is that they involved exclusively men. While it was rarer, but not unknown, for men to face the more serious charge of witchcraft, it was not uncommon for males to be accused of, and punished for, charming.

Women were, of course, also involved. Only a few months after the Fergusson case, a woman called Janet Horner appeared before the Dumfries kirk session charged with charming. Horner seems to have been the one to start the proceedings when she presented a petition to the kirk session against some women who had begun calling her a witch after she helped to cure a sick girl with a ritual involving salt and water. Unfortunately for Horner, things were not to be dealt with as straightforwardly as she would have liked, and before she knew it she was being investigated for

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<sup>116</sup> Webber, *The Village Blacksmith*, 105–20.

<sup>117</sup> John Fergusson from Cummertrees, 18 February, 2 March, 12 April 1697, *Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1695–1701*, DGA, CH2/1284/3. The passage from Psalms 50:18–23, "18, When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him, and hast been partaker with adulterers. 19, Thou givest thy mouth to evil, and thy tongue frameth deceit. 20, Thou sittest and speakest against thy brother; thou slanderest thine own mother's son. 21, These things hast thou done, and I kept silence: thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes. 22, Now consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver. 23, Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God."



her “scandalous” charming. Witnesses were duly gathered who claimed that it was Janet who made the girl sick in the first place, and that she had been heard to wish that the girl would be deaf and dumb before nightfall, which came to pass. Why she should then cure the girl was never discussed. Attention focused on the method of her curing. Horner admitted that she had seen this ritual done many times, but she “could not (or at least) would not tell who she had seen do it.” After some lengthy deliberation the session appointed the moderator to rebuke Horner “judicially, for her charming &c” and “having acknowledged her fault (tho with reluctancy) [she] promised never to do the like again.”<sup>118</sup>

A gardener at Maxwellton, presumably Maxwellton House, Alexander Deuart, was interrogated by the Glencairn kirk session in 1707 for charming with herbs. He claimed he could retrieve stolen goods through the occult properties of certain herbs, incantations and appropriate gestures. By placing the herbs under his pillow he would induce dreams revealing where the stolen property was. He admitted that at Halloween he threw nuts in the fire and sprinkled herbs around his house. Seeing himself as something of a ladies’ man, he also claimed that he could induce any woman he fancied to follow him and, if he chose, make anyone in his company dance naked, including, he added rather cheekily, the minister. His reputation was fairly widespread, and much to the annoyance of the ministers, who could not decide if he was “a thief or a devol,” he was “sought unto by persons from divers corners of the country to the great scandal of religion.”<sup>119</sup>

## Galloway

Heading west, the Synod of Galloway met at Kirkcudbright in April 1669 for the Bishop and Synod had been informed there was “much wickednesse committed by Charmers and Necromancers, and by peoples going to and consulting with them.” In particular, the presbyteries of Wigtown and Stranraer were singled out as suffering the worst. It was therefore appointed that these presbyteries “use all diligence for the punishing” of these criminals. It was further recommended that the ministers within the diocese:

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<sup>118</sup> Janet Horner, 10 June, 2, 8, 29 July 1697, *St. Michael’s Kirk Session Dumfries 1689–98*, DGA, CH2/537/15/1. On 17 September Agnes Smith was called and confessed that “she blamed Adam Murray for her cloaths qch she wanted; and that she sd that ere she wanted them for altogether she would go to one that could raise the Divill.” She was appointed to be rebuked before the congregation and the minister to take occasion to “warn people agt charming and seeking to wizards.”

<sup>119</sup> Alexander Deuart, 14 November 1707, *Glencairn Kirk Session Record*, qtd in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 133–8.

use all meanes for the extirpating of such crimes and in particular publicly in their congregations to testify against such sinnes and to warne their people not to make use of any charmes or charmers as they would not incurre the wrath and displeasure of Allmighty God.<sup>120</sup>

Action must have been slow to take hold for later in the year, at the October Synod meeting in Wigtown, the Bishop and Synod renewed the act against necromancers and charmers “and particularly do seriously recommend it to the Presbyteries of Wigtown and Stenrauer to observe the same.” The message from the Synod was apparently not getting through, and at the April gathering in Wigtown in 1671, the act was once again renewed: “. . . taking to their serious consideration the great growth of charmers and charming (as it was this day represented to them).” The ministers were again persuaded to “use all means for the extirpating of such crimes and in particular publicly in their congregations to testify against such crimes and to warn their people not to make use of any charmes or charmers as they would incurre the wrath and displeasure of Allmighty God.” Furthermore, the ministers should undertake a “diligent search after such persons within their bounds as are guilty of the forsaid crimes,” and to punish them so that “these dregs of Atheism and infidelitie may be cast out, these pillars of the kingdome of darknesse may be pulled down and the wrath and vengeance of the jealous God due for such crimes may be averted and prevented.”<sup>121</sup> The association between the immorality and wicked transgressions of the people and the potentially bitter repercussions of the all-knowing, all-seeing, and not always all-benevolent, God could not be made more clear. And yet, such fear-mongering does not appear to have had the impact one might imagine, and many people continued to practise charming or visit charmers for quite some time. The wrath of the ministers was not enough to dissuade the populace at large from activities that did not necessarily seem wrongful, or disrespectful of God.

In Kirkcudbright, Bessie Paine, indicted for witchcraft in 1671, as discussed above, was questioned for her use of various charms. Paine’s skills were frequently sought, if the list of at least ten clients testifying against her is anything to go by. The court records report that some of Paine’s charms were effective but, unluckily for her, not always; it is easy to imagine that the lives of charmers must have been fairly stressful. Everyone wanted to know them when their charms worked, but it was quite another story when the magic failed. Witnesses brought against the defendant included Agnes Davidson, whose sick father Paine had tried to cure by taking some hair from his head

<sup>120</sup> Andrew Symson, *The Register of the Synod of Galloway, from October 1664 to April 1671* (Kirkcudbright: J. Nicholson, 1856) 134–5. Andrew Symson, author of the *Description of Galloway*, was the Episcopalian minister of Kirkinner.

<sup>121</sup> Symson, *Register of the Synod of Galloway*, 148, 181–2.

and beard, a few nail clippings, and winding his garter three times around "from the top of her finger to her elbow," but the man was dead within a week. Some of her clients were too scared to go through with the healing rituals prescribed by Paine upon hearing what was entailed. She advised a mother to take the shirt off her sick child, drag it along "the den of the bear"<sup>122</sup> and hang it up to dry on the north side of a "thorne bush." Afterwards, the mother was instructed to put the shirt back on the child and put her youngster in the cradle. Next, the fire was to be put out, the hearth swept clean, and everyone in the house was to leave except the child and herself. She was then to rock the cradle until "a man come in that wold cure the chyld."<sup>123</sup> This latter charm features some interesting motifs. The hawthorn bush, the sweeping clean of the hearth and the appearance of the man are all rather suggestive of a fairy experience. However, the mother of the child may have had a different interpretation than Paine. She perhaps believed it to be an invocation of the Devil, and she was not prepared to risk her soul to find out.

The presbytery of Wigtown punished Jean Cruin in 1698 for charming, with a further warning to the congregation at Kirkinner "not to haunt or have anything adue with persons of such scandalous practices."<sup>124</sup> The Minnigaff kirk session found an Irish nurse employed by the "House of Barcly [Bargaly]," Molly Redmond, guilty in 1702–03 of turning the riddle for the young Lady Tondershie.<sup>125</sup> Wigtown presbytery, in 1704, found William McGunion of Sorbie guilty of imprecating curses upon Daniel McIntosh and also for charming. At first he confessed, but later denied, that he had wished that Daniel, his neighbour, "might never thrive," and also that he had "casten wash over his oxen when he yoked them," though he claimed it was to "supple their necks."<sup>126</sup> Seemingly he did nothing to help his case for he was questioned about his unsuitable carriage towards the ministers, and on one occasion he failed to turn up when called before the presbytery because, as he explained, he thought it "needless for him to come," his minister being absent. He was admonished and rebuked before the congregation.<sup>127</sup> Incidentally, the presbytery had recommended,

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<sup>122</sup> Meaning is obscure but may refer to a former placename, as in Bearsden near Glasgow, or to a glen (dene) in which barley (bere) grew.

<sup>123</sup> Trial of Bessie Paine, Kirkcudbright, 1671. NAS, JC26/38. Transcript also in Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, 269–70. See also 'Galloway Carlins' above.

<sup>124</sup> Jean Cruin, Kirkinner, July, 16 August 1698, *Register of the Presbytery of Wigtown*, NAS, CH2/373/1.

<sup>125</sup> Molly Redmond, 1702–03, *Minnigaff Kirk Session Minutes*, qtd in Truckell, *Material No.* 43, 8.

<sup>126</sup> The wash was possibly stale urine used for cleansing, curing or magical purposes. Mairi Robinson, ed., *The Concise Scots Dictionary* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1985).

<sup>127</sup> William Mcguynone or McGunion, Sorbie, 14 December 1703, 11 January, 8 February, 7 March 1704, NAS, CH2/373/1.

the year before, to clamp down on penny bridals, which were regarded as expensive frivolities likely to generate a surfeit of pleasure. It also vowed to hinder the “spreading of erroneous books especially [Q]uaker books because there are such in the bounds,” that is, within presbyterial jurisdiction.<sup>128</sup>

The Penninghame session, in 1705, found Mary M’Narin, servitrix to William Dalrymple in Threave, guilty of charming and sorcery. Dalrymple, and his wife Elizabeth M’Harg, maintained that Mary spoke of a charm whereby young women going to the barn to winnow the grain on Halloween would catch sight of the men who would become their husbands. A short time later Elizabeth M’Harg heard the dogs barking for no apparent reason, and when she went to investigate, she saw the inquisitive young Mary leaving the barn. When asked if she had been performing the love spell, the girl admitted it, adding that she saw “the waff [apparition] of a man coming in at the one door and going out at the other door of the barn.” She said that the man was wearing a white cravat but could not distinguish the rest of his body. Furthermore, she exclaimed that “if ever she got a husband she would never get one of that likeness that appeared to her.” It is unclear what she meant by this. Was the vision handsome or loathsome? The girl confessed to the presbytery that she had used the spell but she claimed she knew no evil in it. Ignorance was no defence, and she was rebuked for her sin “of sorcery and consulting wicked arts.”<sup>129</sup>

Two further cases of charming were investigated by the Penninghame session in 1706. First was John M’Narin, found guilty of using a “peeled twig” to return a mare weakened by hunger to her stable. Witnesses testified that when the mare was sick and unable to stand, M’Narin was heard to say “is there no help for this? I am sure there is help.” It was understood by the witnesses that what M’Narin referred to was “help by charming the beast,” for which they warned him: “we forbid yow of it for ye will lose more by it.” M’Narin countered that his father had once sought this sort of assistance for an ox and experienced no loss afterwards. The next day the mare recovered, but when a stick of “green briar” white at one end and with its root attached, was found lying where the horse lay it was assumed to have been part of a charm and was thus reported. When M’Narin appeared before the session he denied the allegation, claiming that he meant only “lawful ordinary means” of healing the mare. The session, though deciding that

<sup>128</sup> 21 September 1703, NAS, CH2/373/1.

<sup>129</sup> Mary M’Narin, in Threave, 11, 18 November 1705, *Penninghame Parish Records*, vol. 1. 161–4. The term “waff” was also used in Yorkshire to describe a döppelganger. Henderson, *Folk Lore of the Northern Counties*, 30. The custom of winnowing corn secretly in the barn on Halloween in order to see one’s future husband is also noted by Gregor, *Folk-Lore of North-East Scotland*, 85.

charming could not be proven, rebuked M'Narin "for giving occasion to the witnesses to alledge he intended charming."<sup>130</sup>

The other case, concerning Agnes Forsyth of Penninghame, involved a death custom. The burning of the bed-straw following a bereavement was a common practice throughout Scotland. In some places the ashes were inspected for signs of a footprint, which, if found, presaged the death of another family member and most likely the person whose foot most closely fitted the impression. The folklorist William Henderson was clearly wrong in thinking this form of divination a purely Northumbrian tradition. In the southwest of Scotland, immediately after the corpse had been removed from the house, it was the custom for at least one person to take out and burn the bed-straws and heathers on which the body had lain. The Galloway minister Andrew Symson speculated that "there may be perhaps some reason for the burning thereof to prevent infection; but why it should be done just at that time, I know not well, unless it be to give advertisement to any of the people who dwell in the way betwixt and the church-yard, to come and attend the buriall."<sup>131</sup> Agnes Forsyth was cited before the session because, following the death of Thomas M'Haffie, she instructed a maid to remove and burn the bed-straw. She declared that "she knew no evil of it," but did it only because it was a custom where she had lived formerly. She was rebuked "for that old heathenish custom" and made to promise never to do it again. Whatever the explanation, the minister was charged with warning the people from the pulpit that "none use this heathenish inchantment of burning the bedstraw of deceast people, otherwise they shall be severely censured."<sup>132</sup>

An interesting late example indicates that professionals occasionally made use of folk cures. Robert Trotter (c.1736–1815), known as the "Muir Doctor," was based in the Glenkens. He often sent his patients to the physic well in the New Galloway parks. When his children caught "kenkhoast," or whooping-cough, they were sent in a cart to be put through the hopper at Gordonstone Mill since it was widely believed that such treatment would cure the disease. Elsewhere, the mill was set in motion in the presence of afflicted children. During Trotter's last illness, surrounded by his family, there was a rap on the table. "That's a call for me," he said. "My time here

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<sup>130</sup> John M'Narin, in Skaith, 27 January, 3, 10 February 1706, *Penninghame Parish Records*, vol. 1, 165–9; Truckell, *Material No. 43*, 9. Anne Gordon, *Death Is for the Living* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris, 1984), 13.

<sup>131</sup> Symson, *Large Description of Galloway*; 119, Napier, *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland*, 66.

<sup>132</sup> Agnes Forsyth, Penninghame, 14, 21 April 1706, *Penninghame Parish Records*, vol. 1, 170–1; Henderson, *Folk Lore of the Northern Counties*, 34. Another charming case surfaced in 1708 involving Margaret Hannay in Glenridder, who was accused of this crime but no outcome was reported. 6 June 1708, *Penninghame Parish Records*, vol. 1, 217–18.

will not be long." Well into the late nineteenth century it was a family tradition that such a rapping on a table or door heralded the death of a Trotter.<sup>133</sup>

### **Slander: Dumfries defamation and Galloway gossip**

Calling someone a witch without adequate proof to substantiate the claim was taken very seriously in this period. When looking at these allegations the challenge is determining when the person seriously meant them or when they were simply using "witch" as a pejorative, a put-down.

In 1673 in Dumfries, Jonat Edgar lodged a bill of complaint to her minister that one James Smith, a shoemaker, had called her and her daughter witches. The minister seems to have believed the Edgar woman innocent of the accusation for he had the shoemaker placed in the joughs, an iron collar put around his neck and attached by a chain to a wall or post. He was also forced to make a public apology in front of the assembled congregation on a Sunday. Furthermore, the members of the session enacted a statute that if ever James Smith, or any other, called these women witches they would be punished by the church.<sup>134</sup>

The response of the clergy on this matter raises more questions than it answers. Clearly the accusation made by James Smith was not held to be remotely credible, and indeed had worse consequences for him than the objects of his wrath. But why? Was the reputation of Jonat Edgar untarnishable, far too respectable to fall victim to such an allegation? Was James Smith seen to be guilty of no more than serious name-calling and slander as opposed to an accusation of malefice? Certainly no mention is made of any supposed crime against Smith. Given his occupation, it is entirely possible to speculate that perhaps the two parties had a falling out over shoes. It is also entirely possible that the minister of St Michael's quite simply no longer believed in witches.

There are no other cases pertaining to witchcraft in the Dumfries kirk session record from 1668 until 1697 (and that for charming), and no other cases of slander until 1704, when a woman complained that the wheelwright had called her "a devil and her daughter a witches get [illegitimate

<sup>133</sup> Alexander Trotter, *East Galloway Sketches: Or, Biographical, Historical, and Descriptive Notices of Kirkcudbrightshire, Chiefly in the Nineteenth Century* (Castle Douglas: Adam Rae, 1901) 296–7; John MacTaggart, *The Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopedia: Or, the Original, Antiquated, and Natural Curiosities of the South of Scotland* (London: Morrison, 1824; Strath Tay: Clunie Press, 1981) 293.

<sup>134</sup> Case of Jonat Edgar, 11, 25 May and 15 July 1673, *St. Michael's Kirk Session Dumfries 1668–88*, DGA, CH2/537/14. On 11 July 1680 the daughter of Jonat Edgar, Jonat Arthure, was brought before the same kirk session on charges of "fornicatioune with John Griersonne," and ordered to appear eight times at the public place of repentance dressed in a sackcloth.

child],” for which he was ordered to stand at the pillar and be rebuked. It was also recommended that he be fined.<sup>135</sup> Another woman complained in 1710 that a tailor had called her a “devil,” and again the session ruled in favour of the woman; the tailor was rebuked with a warning that if ever he or his wife and daughter should abuse this woman again they would be fined £20, a considerable sum of money for the time.<sup>136</sup>

There were, however, an overwhelming number of charges of fornication and adultery, a few instances of fathers being punished for failure to baptize their children, a wife abuser, and a handful of drunken and scandalous women, two of whom were banished from the town in 1685, while an adulterous couple were whipped through the town by the hangman in 1687. In 1701 a woman, Barbara Graham, got into trouble for calling Lady Colliston bad names. To be precise, she called her an “Elder-fac’d Elf,” a “Blasted wight” and “Blasted Gypsie wight,” adding, “Shame fall her blasted piz [shrivelled up thing] and face,” and for good measure alleging that if the Lady had been afforded the opportunity “she would [have] been the greatest whore in all Scotland.”<sup>137</sup> Graham was rebuked for her bad mouth. It is interesting that she should use language pertaining to fairy belief, as with elf, while “wicht” can also mean fairy, and a blast is something that fairies inflict upon folk they mean to harm.

In the Jonet Edgar petition, what is certain is that the minister took this instance of slander seriously enough to protect her from any potential harmful repercussions that might follow. The case also shows a substantial shift in attitude: that a woman could, by this time and in this part of the country, make a formal complaint against being called a witch and not only be taken seriously, but have her accuser punished for his actions.

Elsewhere we see a similar picture. Janet Sinclair was rebuked by the Irongray session in 1691 for slandering the wife of David Muirhead as a murderer and a witch, and in 1692, Janet Kirk found some support from at least one person when questions were raised about witchcraft.<sup>138</sup> Janet Tait from Kirkgunzeon complained to the presbytery in 1699 that she and her daughter had been called witches by a female neighbour. The neighbour denied the accusation, though she did admit that she had heard others speak of the matter, and everyone knew that they were witches. When pressed to offer evidence, the gossip declined. She was appointed to stand before the

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<sup>135</sup> Jane Fairbairn against Robert Wilson wheelwright, 9, 23 and 30 March 1704, *St. Michael’s Kirk Session Dumfries 1699–1712*, DGA, CH2/537/15/2.

<sup>136</sup> Janet Paterson against John Russell tailor, 22 June 1710, DGA, CH2/537/15/2.

<sup>137</sup> Case of Barbara Graham, 4 September and 13 November 1701, DGA, CH2/537/15/2. Her case was deferred to the presbytery and she was rebuked before the congregation.

<sup>138</sup> David Muirhead of Drumpark’s wife against Janet Sinclair, 24 September 1691, *Irongray Kirk Session Records*, qtd in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 120–1.

congregation to be rebuked and to apologize to the injured party.<sup>139</sup> In 1707, the Penninghame session half-heartedly investigated the grievances of Barbara M'Kie, who had been called a witch, and "other abusive expressions," by a neighbouring family. The session was well aware of the "discord and continuall contention" that existed between the two families, and so did not care to proceed further with the case but sent the minister to see the sheriff about punishing them, and reducing them "to good behaviour, which it is not probable that Church censure can do, the minister having dealt with them to no advantage."<sup>140</sup> As late as 1712, Jean Howatson complained to the Glencairn session against a woman for calling her "a witch and a resetter of witches." Both women were rebuked, and told if they were found quarrelling again, the process against them would be revived<sup>141</sup> fairly conventional fare, which does however indicate that a reputation for witchery, while still of importance within a tight community, was no longer always sufficient to encourage certain ministers to push any further criminal charges. Increasingly they were demanding more proof. It should be pointed out that the clerk of Dumfries presbytery at the time was Rev. Peter Rae, minister of Kirkbride, a convinced believer in witches, as mentioned above.

To return to Kirkgunzeon, an interesting case involving animal transformation followed immediately on the heels of the Tait case discussed above. The complainant was John Mcdill against Janet Thomson, whom he said had slandered his deceased mother. Thomson was alleged to have retorted that Mcdill's mother had, some time before, "hunted about the Barr-hill like a hair, & found [her] on the oyr [other] side of the hill as a woman & a peck<sup>142</sup> on her head." After consideration presbytery concluded that Thomson and Mcdill were as bad as one another, and so decided to punish both of them, "exhorting them to live in peace & love as becometh christians," while the minister at Kirkgunzeon was appointed to clear Mcdill's mother's name.<sup>143</sup>

Some cases are quite difficult to classify. William Drew from Newton Stewart, for instance, was called before the session of Penninghame in 1707

<sup>139</sup> Janet Tait against Agnes Blair, Kirkgunzeon, 16 May, 13 June 1699, *Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1695–1701*, DGA, CH2/1284/3.

<sup>140</sup> Barbara M'Kie against Patrick Hannay, both in Upper Barr, 13 July 1707, *Penninghame Parish Records. The Session Book of Penninghame*, vol. 1. 197–8.

<sup>141</sup> Jean Howatson in Nies against Margaret Nivison in Crichen, 13 July, 21 September, 26 October 1712, *Glencairn Kirk Session Record*, qtd in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 138.

<sup>142</sup> A peck is a dry measure, which varies according to district and commodity. It is also a vessel used to hold a peck measure, see SND. In Dumfriesshire, at the head of Annandale, the Devil's Beef-tub was jocularly referred to as the 'Annan peck' because the great hollow was shaped like a peck measure, OSA, vol. 9, 419.

<sup>143</sup> John Mcdill against Janet Thomson, Kirkgunzeon, 13 June, 29 August 1699, *Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1695–1701*, DGA, CH2/1284/3.



for beating his wife. When questioned, he confessed that he did beat her but he was provoked because she hit him with her elbow and threatened to “expose the report of his being blamed for a warlock, by her saying she should take the mask off his face.” The session tried to persuade Drew that his wife only intended to expose his former cruelty towards her. This enraged him further, and he refused to acknowledge that this might have been what his wife had really meant. Nor would he acknowledge that he was wrong to beat her, threatening instead that he would hereafter treat her worse than before. This discussion took place on 21 September 1707. On 19 October Drew’s wife came to the session for help, but was dismissed with the advice to “live as much as possible in peace with her husband and not to irritat his perverse disposition.” A month later Drew was back in front of the session, and not only was he adamantly refusing to amend his ways, he accused the minister, Rev. Robert Rowan, of lying, claiming that he asseverated that Drew did indeed go under the name of a notorious warlock. As proof, Rowan invoked several ministers of the presbytery of Kirkcudbright who declared that Drew had often been seen in the house of a woman, Jonet McKeoner, reported as recently burned for witchcraft in Kirkcudbright, though no official record of her seems to exist. The witch’s grand-daughter confirmed this report, adding that she had seen Drew, the Devil and her grandmother in the latter’s house. Drew admitted that he had often been in the witch’s house, but only because he bought hair from her daughter, “as his occupation served him” – he was a wig-maker.

It transpired that Drew was an Irishman who had arrived in Galloway via Glasgow. Testimonials from Irish and Glaswegian clergymen were deemed insufficient support for his subsequent request to have his child baptized unless he first consulted the session, who displayed some Christian charity by opining, “the assertion of one witch seemed not sufficient to debar a person from church privileges *especially in a matter so difficult to be cleared* [my italics]; upon which the minister baptised his child.” There matters might have ended happily, but Drew further incurred the wrath of the Penninghame session by accusing Rev. Rowan of asserting that the “Tron of Glasgow” was a “base and scurrilous place,” inhabited by a “pack of the meanest sort whose ordinary it was to be drunk twice a week or oftener and man and wife to curse, fight and beat on [one] another.” Rowan, who had been educated at Glasgow, had first-hand knowledge of this den of iniquity, and may well have thought that Drew should have remained there. The session ordered Drew to be rebuked for his false accusations, but in a supreme act of defiance, he declined rebuke and continued to display his usual insolent behaviour. Furthermore, “he told the session he would see them no more and was going. The session charged him to stay but he would not.” This finally earned him some serious attention. The Laird of Castle Stewart was contacted for support in persuading Drew to submit to the session, failing which the sheriff was asked to imprison him until he did. By the end of November 1707 there was no sign of Drew, but he returned in December 1708 to be rebuked and

to profess repentance. He apologized for his false accusations and insolence towards the minister and the session, and – as something of an afterthought – for his “barbarous carriage” towards his wife!<sup>144</sup>

### Late cases of witches in South West Scotland<sup>145</sup>

It is remarkable that although a writer such as James Hogg was convinced that the fairies had disappeared he firmly believed that witches were on the increase.<sup>146</sup> His contention was, at the very least, highly dubious of course, but a Galloway minister could report, at the end of the eighteenth century, that although witch belief was not entirely laid aside “the kirk session no longer indulges a spirit of inquisitorial investigation on a train of idle and vexatious processes.”<sup>147</sup> He was correct since the kirk session was generally no longer involved in later witch accusations, and had more or less lost interest in persecuting witches and charmers, though the same was not necessarily the case for their parishioners.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were still people living in Wamphray who had seen the Devil, or the fairies “dancing round them, a’ the colours of the rainbow.” There were housewives who had watched the cream, when the butter was coming too slow, poured out of the kirn and into a pot with pins thrown into it to “prick the conscience of the witch. Woe to the poor woman who happened to come to the door while the pot was on the fire, she was looked on as an uncanny person ever after and avoided.”<sup>148</sup>

It was also not unknown for suspected witches to be physically attacked. The *Dumfries Weekly Journal* carried an article in 1826 giving details of a woman in the neighbourhood of Annan, who was suffering a nervous reaction as a result of witchcraft: “We did not believe that people within sixteen miles of Dumfries laboured under a state of such superstitious ignorance in the nineteenth century.” The sister of the bewitched woman attacked an old woman believing her to be responsible. Armed with a knife, she tossed her victim to the ground, and “cut her across the brow!!! – a mode of dissolving

<sup>144</sup> William Drew in Newton Stewart, 7, 21 September, 19 October, 9 November 1707, 5 December 1708, *Penninghame Parish Records. The Session Book of Penninghame 1696–1724*, 2 vols. vol. 1. The Rev. Robert Rowan, minister at Penninghame, was ordained in 1696 and died in 1714, *Fastii Ecclesiae*. The church was, in theory, responsible for dealing with wife abuse, though comparatively few cases appear in the session records. A case of a man selling his wife appeared in the kirk session records of Elgin in 1698. Both the husband and the man who bought the wife were punished with a public rebuking and referred to the town magistrate. Cramond, *The Records of Elgin*, vol. 2, 320–1.

<sup>145</sup> For what follows, see also Cowan and Henderson, “Last of the Witches,” 198–217.

<sup>146</sup> Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, 201.

<sup>147</sup> OSA, vol. 5, Kirkpatrick-Durham, 248.

<sup>148</sup> Paterson, *Wamphray*, 186–7.

the spell considered by the witch-believers of former ages, and, it now appears, even at the present day, to be altogether infallible."<sup>149</sup>

One of the best documented of cases were the incidents surrounding Jean Maxwell, the Galloway sorceress, tried in Kirkcudbright in 1805 for "pretending to exercise witchcraft, sorcery, enchantment, conjuration, &c." Her crimes included pretending "to tell fortunes by tea cups." She also specialized in divination, diabolical lore, self-enrichment and extortion. She conjured several spells involving money, pins, pieces of clothing and a straw doll. She was arrested, following the intervention of a local farmer, and was tried, found guilty and sentenced to one year's imprisonment in Kirkcudbright tolbooth,<sup>150</sup> the maximum allowed by the Witchcraft Act of 1735, which acknowledged only "pretended witchcraft" [see Appendix II].<sup>151</sup> On market days once in every quarter she was placed in the jugs or at the pillory for the space of one hour.

Isabel or Bell M'Ghie, described as "the last of the Ayrshire witches," was actually born at Kelton, in Kirkcudbrightshire, in 1760, later residing at Beith in Ayrshire, where she was believed by many to have supernatural powers. Though not judicially charged with any crime, her notoriety was increased following an interview (which was later published) by a local archaeologist, Mr James Dobie, in 1835, the year before she died. M'Ghie claimed that "I don't pretend to skill. All I do is in the fear of the God, and if He blesses the means the praise is His." As a child she was a victim of the evil eye, for which her mother obtained a counter-charm. Whether or not this personal experience of "black magic" had the effect of increasing her own "white magic" was not stated.

M'Ghie's reputation mainly derived from healing both humans and animals, or from counter-magical charms, such as an elaborate ritual involving stalks of yarrow, as well as spoken and written versions of the Lord's Prayer, in order to restore the curdle in milk for cheese-making. Dairy problems seem to have been her speciality. Like Bessie Dunlop of Ayrshire, over two hundred years earlier, she was consulted by the wealthy as well as the lowly.<sup>152</sup> That

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<sup>149</sup> *Dumfries Weekly Journal* (7/11/1826).

<sup>150</sup> *Remarkable Trial of Jean Maxwell, the Galloway Sorceress; Which Took Place at Kirkcudbright on the Twenty-Eighth Day of June Last, 1805; For Pretending to Exercise Witchcraft, Sorcery, Enchantment, Conjuration, &c.* (Kirkcudbright, 1805) 1–24. See also Cowan and Henderson, "Last of the Witches," 212–13.

<sup>151</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, 78 states that no one was ever persecuted under this act, an understandable oversight. It was the passing of the 1735 act that made possible the repeal of pre-existing acts in 1736. The Scottish medium Helen Duncan was tried under the 1735 act in 1944. See now Malcolm Gaskill, *Hellish Nell, Last of Britain's Witches* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001) index.

<sup>152</sup> On Bessie Dunlop, see Lizanne Henderson, "Witch, Fairy and Folktale Narratives in the Trial of Bessie Dunlop," in *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture*, ed. Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2009).

she was rather more than a simple charmer is suggested by her own testimony that she had known many witches in her youth, notably a warlock named Douglas, whom she feared. He supposedly revived a dead horse and, on another occasion, cast a spell on a minister, which rendered him unable to preach in his own pulpit, though he could do so in others, a story reminiscent of that concerning Rev. Marshall at Kirkmaiden. M'Ghie's reporter may be deemed as credulous as herself for repeating the hoary tale of a man who shot a hare, which turned out to be an old woman known for witchcraft.<sup>153</sup>

Bell M'Ghie did not quite qualify as the last witch in the southwest for the antiquary, Joseph Train, published a gruesome account of witchery in 1848, "of a darker shade of benighted credulity than has perhaps taken place elsewhere in this country so near the middle of the nineteenth century." It concerned a Buittle farmer who was in poor health, having recently had an arm surgically amputated. A few weeks later a "cannie wife" advised that the buried limb should be exhumed and boiled to separate the flesh from the bones, whereupon "the middle joint of a certain finger should be taken" and used to work a cure. This was done using an open fire in the old parish churchyard. The story acquires credibility from its anti-climactic, yet completely plausible conclusion:

The unfortunate yeoman informed me afterwards, that though he had kept the bone in his pocket for a considerable time, he was not sensible that it had done him any good. In the ... old church the curious visitor may see a spot darkened by the smoke raised by this unhallowed incantation.<sup>154</sup>

A writer for *The Gallovidian* (1902), probably more concerned with folk-tale than reality, discussed a witch who allegedly lived at Hannayston in the Kells in the mid-eighteenth century: "Some say her name was Nicholas Grier, others that it was Girzie McClegg, but it matters little which now." She was blamed with stealing butter, causing cows to sicken and sucking milk from them in the shape of a hare. She also appeared as a cat walking on its hind legs. Anyone she disliked, she drowned by "sinking a caup [ale cup] in the yill-boat [ale barrel] in her kitchen." In the midst of so much incredible reportage it is striking that she was said to have muttered her incantations in Gaelic, a language that had probably died out in the area by the sixteenth century.<sup>155</sup> He added that "although the roasting of them [witches] alive has

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<sup>153</sup> MacGeorge, *An Ayrshire Witch*, 1–12; Cowan and Henderson, "Last of the Witches," 212–13.

<sup>154</sup> On Joseph Train (1779–1852), see Julia Muir Watt, *Dumfries and Galloway: A Literary Guide* (Dumfries: Dumfries and Galloway Libraries, 2000) 286–91.

<sup>155</sup> Alastair Livingstone, "Gaelic in Galloway: Part One – Expansion," *TDGNHAS LXXXV* (2011): 85–92.



*Illustration 7.5* A portrait of Bell M'Ghie

Source: A. MacGeorge, "An Ayrshire Witch" *Good Words*, ed. D. MacLeod (London: Isbister and Company, 1886) 607–11.

gone out of fashion now, the witches still exist in most Galloway villages, objects of fear and aversion to the natives." Feeling the need to excuse the survival of Scottish witch belief, he continued, "The English may hold us up to ridicule for believing such things, but they must not forget that they

are devoutly believed in all over England yet; even in London they are far from extinct."<sup>156</sup>

To the making of stories about witches there is apparently no end, before and after the period of the witch-hunts. In the sixteenth century the poet Alexander Montgomerie, whose family hailed from Ayrshire, wrote of "the Weird Sisters," "Nicneven and her Nymphes" and "thir venerable virgines whom the world call witches," who cast spells and rode on the backs of animals.<sup>157</sup> In the nineteenth century, a Mr McWilliam communicated a version of *The Witch of Kirkcowan*.<sup>158</sup> Allan Cunningham claimed to have collected the story *The Witches Tryst* – a meeting better known elsewhere as a sabbat – where "witches and warlocks of a county were assembled" and "are yet remembered among the peasantry with terror." He suggested that witch belief was not yet dead among the folk of Nithsdale and Galloway: "The noted tryste of ... warlocks and witches was held on a rising knowe, four miles distant from Dumfries, called 'Locher-brigg Hill'." Cunningham records, or perhaps invents, a fragment of an old song *The Witches' Gathering Hymn*, "too characteristically curious to be omitted":<sup>159</sup>

When the grey howlet [owl] has three times hoo'd,  
When the grimy cat has three times mewed,  
When the tod [fox] has yowled three times i' the wode,  
At the red moon cowering ahin the cl'ud;  
When the stars ha'e cruppen' deep i' the drift,  
Lest cantrips had pyked them out o' the lift,  
Up horsies a' but mair adowe,  
Ryde, ryde for Locher-briggs-knowe!<sup>160</sup>

According to him, witches liked to travel to these trystes on broomsticks constructed from murdered men's bones; the sources attest that witches

<sup>156</sup> R. deBruce Trotter, "No. III. The Witch of Hannayston," *The Gallovidian* 4/13 (1902): 40–4.

<sup>157</sup> David J. Parkinson, ed., *Alexander Montgomerie: Poems*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: The Scottish Text Society, 2000) vol. 1, 141–75. Although Montgomerie was almost certainly from Ayrshire, there is a Galloway tradition from the late seventeenth century that he was born at Cumstoun (or Compston) near Kirkcudbright. Watt, *Dumfries and Galloway: A Literary Guide*, 258–9.

<sup>158</sup> See Hannah Aitken, *A Forgotten Heritage: Original Folk Tales of Lowland Scotland* (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Academic Press, 1973) 45–6, 49–50.

<sup>159</sup> Robert H. Cromek, *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Songs: With Historical and Traditional Notices Relative to the Manners and Customs of the Peasantry* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1810; Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1880) 272–93.

<sup>160</sup> "Witches' Gathering" or "Gathering Hymn" collected by Allan Cunningham in R. H. Cromek, *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Songs* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1810) 276–7.

rode on stalks, bundles of straw or on the backs of animals, but they do not mention, so far as I am aware, broomsticks made from the bones of murder victims. Other witches, Cunningham reports, changed humans into horses using a magic bridle made from the shredded skin of unbaptized infants "with bits forged in Satan's armoury." The bridle worked by shaking it above the head of the intended victim. Two Nithsdale boys, Cunningham claims, once served a widow who owned such a magic bridle. One of the boys became very skinny and withdrawn, and the other lad asked what had happened to him, to be instructed, "lie at the bed stock an' ye'll be as lean as me." On Halloween, the second boy decided to try this out to find out what would happen. At the stroke of midnight his mistress appeared and proceeded to shake the bridle above his face while saying "Up horsie." To his astonishment he was transformed into a grey horse, the bridle was put over his head, with the bit between his teeth, while the widow climbed on his back and dug in her spurs. Within minutes they arrived at Locherbrigg Knowe, where he saw a gathering of witches, dancing and engaged in unspeakable obscenity. The boy was fastened to a tree, and there he recognized others similarly transformed into horses. He prayed to Heaven to help him escape, and his prayers were answered. He shook off the bridle and resumed his human shape. As the sun began to rise, and the witches returned to find their transport, the young lad's mistress approached him, and he quickly grabbed the bridle and shook it over her head this time. She was instantly transformed into a gray mare. He got on her back and galloped with great speed, digging the spurs into her sides until they bled. On reaching the stable, he removed the bridle and his mistress resumed her own shape, her feet and hands now lacerated. He promised never to tell of her part in the witches gathering; in return he was allowed to keep the bridle.<sup>161</sup>

This tale is related by Cunningham as a local legend, as events that had actually taken place in the not so distant past. His capacity to invent rather than record traditional materials should be remembered. However, in his defence, stories of the magic bridle are fairly widespread, and are by no means specific to Nithsdale, or even to Scotland. There is a Moray version and another from the Borders, *The Blacksmith's Wife of Yarrowfoot*.<sup>162</sup> Elements of the story can also be found in folktale, such as the tale-type of "the youth transformed into a horse," and "the magic bridle," which gives the owner power over horses.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Cromeck, *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song*, 277–80.

<sup>162</sup> James Grant, *Walks and Wanderings in the World of Literature*, 2 vols. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1839) vol. 2, 189–201; Henderson, *Folklore of the Northern Counties*.

<sup>163</sup> Tale-types "the youth transformed into a horse" and "the magic bridle," see Antti Arne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale* (1961; 2nd revision, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1987) AT 314 and AT 594.

Locharbriggs Hill, outside Dumfries, was only one of many sites throughout the southwest of Scotland that was associated with the legendary of witches. Some places had several, and even competing, associations: John Gordon Barbour debates the origins of the Carlin's Cairn, perched on top of the Rhinns of Kells: "Some say it was thrown together to commemorate the burning of a witch – others, that it was erected on the spot where an old female Covenanter was murdered by Grierson of Lag." Barbour himself preferred a third theory, that it was in fact erected by the wife of a miller in Polmaddie to commemorate the memory of King Robert Bruce, "yet" he implores us:

let it be recollected that neither cairn nor column rises to the memory of the saviour of his country, save one little rustic cairn on the summit of the Kells Rhynns, and that little cairn, not the work of a nation, but the laborious stone-gathering of a peasant and a woman.<sup>164</sup>

Cunningham relates the a story of *The Pawkie Auld Kimmer*:

Kimmer can milk a hale loan o' kye,  
Yet sit at the ingle fu' snug an' fu' dry.

The idea here is that the kimmer, meaning witch, possessed a magical milking peg, which could extract milk from any cow in the parish. This is an example of where folk narrative merges with documentation, for one of the crimes with which Elspeth McEwen (1698) from Balmaclellan was charged was using a wooden pin to steal milk from her neighbours' cows by placing the pin on their udders. Elsewhere Cunningham refers to the "insensible marks, which the second sighted searchers of witchcraft called 'little uncommon figures of strawberry leaves' found on the human frame."<sup>165</sup> This is a reference to the Devil's mark, though what is perhaps notable here is that the mark was infrequently referred to in southwest trial records, nor was it only the preserve of second-sighted individuals, elsewhere in Scotland, to have the ability to find the demonic spot. Cunningham's reliability as a source must once again be considered, as this may be an example of his creative fictions as opposed to genuine folk tradition. However, in his defence, it is likely that much of his lore derived from genuine local tradition.

Anecdotal evidence of the continued fascination with witches abounds in nineteenth-century local histories. Some of these tales are a mish-mash

<sup>164</sup> John Gordon Barbour, *Unique Traditions chiefly of the West and South of Scotland* (Glasgow: Thomas D. Morison, 1886) 31, 39.

<sup>165</sup> Paterson, *Wamphray*, 186–7; Cromeck, *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song*, 272–93.



of assorted traditions, all wrapped up and presented in new and interesting ways. Take Willie Wilken, for example, a notorious witch from Nithsdale, who was said to have continued to play his favourite sport of curling, even after his death, “to the great terror and annoyance of the neighbourhood, not much regarding whether the loch be frozen or not.”<sup>166</sup> The terrifying vision of the witch, as a dangerous member of the community, was morphing into a figure of fun and entertainment, or in this particular case an anti-social pest and another kind of “neighbour from Hell.”

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<sup>166</sup> James Hogg, *The Mountain Bard* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1807) 115.

# 8

## The Persistence of Witch Belief

There remains hope, however, that the grosser faults of our ancestors are now out of date; and that whatever follies the present race may be guilty of, the sense of humanity is too universally spread to permit them to think of tormenting wretches till they confess what is impossible and then burning them for their pains.

Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830)

Haply 'tis weened that Scotland now is free  
Of witchcraft, and of spell o'er human life;  
Ah me! – ne'er since she rose out of the sea,  
Were they so deep, so dangerous, and so rife.  
James Hogg, "Superstition" (1815)<sup>1</sup>

Rev. John Mill, minister of Dunrossness in Shetland from 1740 to 1803, expressed the belief that the Devil had the power to raise the wind, accusations that were frequently made against witches. Mill was heard grumbling, "Well, let him [Satan] do his worst; the wind aye in my face will not hurt me." His words were in response to a threat he claimed was made by the Devil to the effect that wherever Mill went the wind would always be blowing "in his teeth," the explanation given when he could not get passage off the island.<sup>2</sup> Mill, from the oral traditions and legends surrounding him, seems to have been quite the sagacious character when it came to Auld Nick,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Company, 1830; London: Wordsworth Editions, 2001) 233; James Hogg, "Superstition," *The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd: Centenary Edition*, 2 vols. (London: Blackie and Son, 1878) vol. 2, 394.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Goudie, ed. *The Diary of the Reverend John Mill*, Scottish History Society (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1889) xxix.

whom he had seen and conversed with on many occasions. He had also assisted those who were demonically possessed. People who overheard him speaking with his “unseen foe” said that he spoke in a language unknown to them.<sup>3</sup> One informant claimed that his father and grandmother were at Dunrossness Kirk when “Satan came in” but was seen off by the Rev. Mill:

He [Satan] dared not come in at the west door facing east; but came in at the east door, and took his place at the table [communion table]. Mr. Mill knew him, and began to speak in all the deep languages, last of all it may be in the Gaelic, and that beat him altogether. So he went off like a flock of doos [pigeons] over the heads of the folk out at the west door. Many people swooned.<sup>4</sup>

On other occasions, the Devil took the form of a black sheep, and would often attempt to lead or chase people over the cliffs to their deaths. When Mill was around, he would come to the victim’s aid by confronting the animal and breaking its spell.<sup>5</sup> The minister wrote in his diary about three individuals that he had tried to help when they became possessed by the Devil. A man came to Mill for help after he began experiencing a number of troubling incidents, which included the Devil walking on his roof and keeping him from sleep, appearing to him in the shape of a black pig and attempting to bite his heels, and also taking the form of a light and trying to enter his body through his mouth. The man was seen at all times carrying a Bible, but Mill cautioned him that the Good Book was not to be used as a charm, for “tis not Christ in the Word, but in the heart, that destroys his works.” The man did not heed Mill’s warning, and the Devil got hold of him.

Around the same time, the reverend attended two women who had also become possessed. One of the women gave birth while in a possessed state, and claimed that she felt no pain in labour. During his exorcism of the other woman, Mill expressed utter contempt for the Devil, but also his total lack of fear or regard for his adversary, calling him “a damned rascal for his lying impudence.”<sup>6</sup> In Mill’s conception of the supernatural world the power of

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<sup>3</sup> Goudie thought he was probably speaking in Hebrew. *Diary of the Reverend John Mill*, xxix.

<sup>4</sup> No specific date was given but since the informant was writing in 1876 his father could easily have been present during this incident as Mill was minister from 1740 to 1803. Goudie, *Diary of the Reverend John Mill*, xxvii.

<sup>5</sup> Goudie, *Diary of the Reverend John Mill*, xxviii.

<sup>6</sup> The notion that the Devil entered the body through the mouth was fairly widespread. In Shetland, Margaret Burgher was rebuked by the Dunrossness Kirk Session in 1766 (during Mill’s time there) for “praying the Devil might go down Elspet’s [Sutherland] throat.” In 1801, Barbara Hay was rebuked and ordered to pay half a crown to the poor for the same blasphemy of “praying that God would send the

the Devil was manifestly real. He used, what was to him, acceptable magic while showing very little patience for the unacceptable or “superstitious” kind. During his first wife’s labour to their second child, Mill called upon the services of a midwife, “but the ignorant creature having taken a table knife, and made crosses over the bed after the childbirth, according to her superstitious custom – the remains of Black Popery, my wife bid her begone with her devilry, and couldn’t bear to hear of her afterwards.” The midwife’s customary behaviour, variations of which were once practised throughout Scotland, was not a particularly Catholic custom such as Mill derides, but was done to protect mother and child from the influence of malevolent forces such as witches or fairies.<sup>7</sup>

It is remarkable that Mill’s editor, Gilbert Goudie, appears not to find his views on the Devil to be particularly worthy of comment: “Narrowness of view and harshness of dogma were almost unavoidable in his time and place, and should be interpreted rather as expressive of the spirit of the age in the circles of the orthodox than as his own special characteristics.”<sup>8</sup> Yet the minister has been described as a blend of Old Testament prophet, medieval saint and Scottish covenanter. His alleged discussions (in Hebrew) with the Great Beast savour of witchfinder as well as exorcist. His diary conveys the impression that such exchanges were almost taken for granted by his parishioners. Mill’s Satan is a fascinating amalgam in a remote community, of the folk version, the theological, the demonological and the reverend’s fervid, if tinged, imagination. He certainly merits further investigation.

There are a great many legends surrounding the powers of the Devil. Often it is the folly of witches that are blamed for some of his deeds. For instance, Donald Sage (1789–1869) recounted a legend about how *Ach nan nighean* (the maiden’s field), close to Learabail, came to be given its name. A curious underground passage of some considerable length, at the entrance of which once stood the only blacksmith’s shop in the parish, was the setting of the story. It was said that one day, two boisterous calves ran into this tunnel, which caused the two girls employed to look after them to follow suit. When the girls made it to about the halfway point, the girl who was in the lead suddenly vanished. The other girl, quite frightened, continued down the passage until it came to an end. Fumbling in the darkness, she found a loose flagstone on the roof of the cavern and was able to shift it. The girl emerged from under the floor of a house, giving quite a shock to the residents, who thought they were receiving a visitor from the underworld!

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Devil down her neighbours’ throat.” Goudie, *Diary of the Reverend John Mill*, 19–20, 133, 136.

<sup>7</sup> A piece of iron was put under the bed or pillow during and/or after labour, to keep evil spirits away. There are many references to this type of practice. See, for example, Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of North-East Scotland*, 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> Goudie, *Diary of the Reverend John Mill*, xxvii.

Once everyone had calmed down, and the girl told of her ordeal and her lost companion and beasts, it was concluded that as the missing girl was the daughter of a witch, her mother must have promised her to the Devil. Under the guise of two calves the Dark Master had come to claim his property. In memory of the event, the spot where she was last seen was called “the maiden’s field.”<sup>9</sup> Clearly as late as the nineteenth century, there was still a tendency to attribute such happenings to the supernatural.

The figure of the witch, her master the Devil and the landscapes that she inhabited were undoubtedly in a period of flux and reinterpretation but, it would seem, the Enlightenment had failed to quell or expunge witch beliefs entirely. Nor had it done much to disabuse outside opinion and perceptions of the Scots, and of Scotland, as a haven of supernatural beliefs and occurrences. The demystification of Scottish landscapes was still incomplete and, even today, continues to inform the Scottish tourist industry.

### A land of superstition

Throughout his tour of Scotland and the Hebrides with James Boswell in 1773, Samuel Johnson showed a keen interest in the supernatural. Given that Johnson only spent three months in Scotland, visiting when he was late in years and very ill, and, most importantly, bearing in mind his deep-seated anti-Scottish feelings and prejudices, his account must be treated with some caution.

Johnson’s Scottish journey was partly inspired by Martin Martin’s *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703), which, as we have seen, contained a vast range of information on Gaelic folk beliefs and examples of the paranormal. Martin’s account is a particularly rich source on second sight, a phenomenon that had attracted the attention of the London literati and men of science for some time, regarding the Highlands of Scotland as something of an “occult laboratory.” From this perspective, Martin’s writings “had to pander to already existing cultural stereotypes” of the Gael firmly held by his London-based reading audience.<sup>10</sup> Johnson’s interest in such phenomena was certainly greater than at least one of his biographers has allowed.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, many travellers who descended on Scotland in during

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<sup>9</sup> Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica*, 66–7.

<sup>10</sup> Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, “The Life of Martin Martin,” in *Martin Martin – 300 Years On: Proceedings of a Major 3-Day Event to Mark the Tercentenary of the Publication of Martin Martin’s Book on the Western Isles* (Ness, Isle of Lewis: The Island Book Trust, 2003) 6.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson’s interest in the supernatural is downplayed, for example, by W. Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (New York and London: HBJ, 1977) 352–3, as stemming from Charles Churchill’s rather extreme portrayal of Johnson as a credulous believer in ghosts. Churchill, author of *The Ghost* (1763), based his comments on Johnson’s

the long eighteenth century expected supernatural encounters, or accounts thereof, during their visits, since Scotland was regarded as a backward country, which reputedly preserved primitive cultures and superstitions.

Though Scotland as a whole was subject to such blatant stereotyping, the *Gàidhealtachd* was especially targeted. James Erskine, Lord Grange's report of 1724–25 for Viscount Townshend, Secretary of State, observed that the "barbarous" Highlanders "are much addicted to a kind of sorcery and charming; and it is commonly said that (in the remotest places especially) there are still several among them who deal with familiar spirits."<sup>12</sup> What Grange meant by "familiar spirit" was probably derived from biblical stories, such as the Woman of Endor, rather than from any understanding of Highland folk belief, but we cannot be sure since this was the same individual who bitterly opposed the repeal of the witchcraft acts and who disposed of his wife in St Kilda.

A gentler, yet crucial contribution to the mythologization of the Scottish landscape was that of James Macpherson, whose tantalizing *Fragments of Ancient Scottish Poetry* appeared in 1760. The controversy as to whether it was a forgery need not detain us. Macpherson claimed that his translations were based upon Gaelic poems, which he heard in his native Badenoch. These were concerned with the deeds of the great dead and lamentations for times past. The archaeologist Archibald Geikie believed that the "grandeur and gloom of the Highland mountains" was first conveyed to the world by Macpherson's poetry.<sup>13</sup> As Hugh Blair observed in his critical dissertation of Ossian's poems: "The events recorded, are all serious and grave; the scenery throughout, wild and romantic. The extended heath by the sea shore; the mountain shaded with mist; the torrents rushing through a solitary valley; the scattered oaks, and the tombs of warriors overgrown with moss; all produce a solemn attention in the mind," and "prepare it for great and extraordinary events." Ossian did not sing of witches, but he did preserve the ghosts of the dead. Before she dies the heart-broken Lorma follows the wraith of her beloved Aldo, "like the watery beam of the moon, when it rushes from between two clouds, and the midnight shower is in the field."<sup>14</sup>

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involvement with the investigations into the notorious Cocklane Ghost and his subsequent publication, "Account of the Detection of the Imposture in Cocklane," *Gentleman's Magazine* (February 1762). On Churchill, see *The Poetical Works of Charles Churchill*, ed. D. Grant (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

<sup>12</sup> "Account of the Highlanders and Highlands by Lord Grange for Viscount Townshend, Secretary of State," 29 December 1724 and 2 January 1725. NAS, GD/124/15/1263.

<sup>13</sup> Fiona J. Stafford, "'Dangerous Success': Ossian, Wordsworth, and English Romantic Literature," in *Ossian Revisited*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991) 49–72, at 61.

<sup>14</sup> Howard Gaskill, ed., *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996) 356, 123.

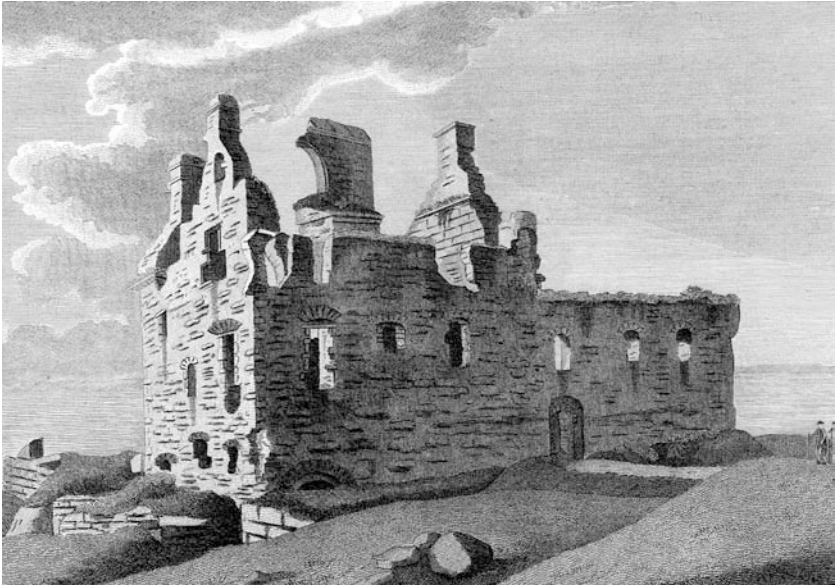


Illustration 8.1 “Dunskey Castle, 1789.” “This castle, like many other ancient buildings, lies under the report of being haunted with evil spirits; and it is particularly affirmed that a minister of the parish had here a bickering with the foul fiend Satan himself, whom he put to flight”

Source: Francis Grose, *The Antiquities of Scotland*, 2 vols. (London, 1789) vol. 2, 190–2.

The retired soldier, Francis Grose, published his *Antiquities of England and Wales* in 1777. He organized three tours between 1788 and 1790, researching his two-volume *Antiquities of Scotland*. When introduced to Robert Burns, the bard asked him if he could make a drawing of Alloway Kirk, where Burns's father was buried. Grose agreed but requested that Burns supply a witch story to accompany the illustration; thus *Tam o' Shanter* was born. Grose's antiquities are noteworthy for the author's association of landscape and superstition. As he said of Spedlin's Castle, Dumfriesshire, it had “a very gloomy and solemn appearance, favourable to the ideas of witches, hobgoblins and apparitions.” At Dunskey Castle, Wigtownshire, a minister had put to flight “the foul fiend Satan.” Alloway Kirk, Ayrshire, was famous as a place where witches met to prepare magical potions and dance to the pipes of “the muckle horned Deil.” Grose knew that such tales enhanced his text but they also served to suggest that there was much darkness in recently enlightened Scotland.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Francis Grose, *The Antiquities of Scotland*, 2 vols. (London: S. Hooper, 1789–91) vol. 1, 143–5, vol. 2, 191–2, 199–201.

Sir John Stoddart, a later English tourist, expressed no surprise that a country like Scotland should be “marked by superstitions” for the very landscape made it so: “the scenery here is very favourable to the excursive flights of the imagination.” For Stoddart, the ruggedness of the Scottish landscape was readily equated with ignorance, barbarity, gross superstition and irrationality, while the gentler plains of England represented civility and rationality.<sup>16</sup> The idea that certain landscapes were conducive to particular mystical or supernatural experiences had been developing throughout the eighteenth century, but took firm hold by 1760 with the publication of Macpherson’s Ossianic sequence. Contemporary philosophical and aesthetic discourse on “the sublime” would also prove hugely influential to how Scotland’s landscapes were being interpreted. By the early nineteenth century, notably in the works of authors such as Walter Scott, the symbolism of landscape as representative of mindscape was blossoming.<sup>17</sup>

Thomas Pennant, a fellow of the Royal Society much admired for his work on British natural history, was another to succumb to the lure of the North. He, perhaps, had also been inspired by Martin’s account, which he must surely have read. His first visit in 1769 gave him a taste for the land, which he would later describe in his autobiography as “a country almost as little known to its southern brethren as Kamschatska [Kamchatka].”<sup>18</sup> He returned in 1772 for a longer spell to complete the work he had left unfinished. During his first visit Pennant was intrigued to discover that “in spite of the intercourse [Perthshire] and the neighbouring parts have of late years had with the rest of the world, it still retains some of its ancient customs and superstitions,” though he was relieved to report “[superstitions] decline daily, but lest their memory should be lost, I shall mention several that are still practised, or but very lately disused.” However, his decision to include such customs and folk beliefs was intentional, though not without bias, for

such a record will have this advantage when the follies are quite extinct, in teaching the unshackled and enlightened mind the difference between the pure ceremonies of religion, and the wild and anile [weak-minded] flights of superstition.

<sup>16</sup> John Stoddart, *Remarks on Local Scenery & Manners in Scotland during the Years 1799 and 1800*, 2 vols. (London: William Miller, 1801) vol. 2, 58, 66.

<sup>17</sup> On this, see Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); James Reed, *Sir Walter Scott: Landscape and Locality* (London: Athlone Press, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Kamchatka peninsula is in the Russian Far East. Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland in 1769*, intro. B. Knight (1774; Perth: Melven Press, 1979). Pennant’s autobiography qtd in intro.



Pennant came across a variety of folklore practices and beliefs, still very much alive, associated, for example, with reference to the calendar, funeral and marriage customs, music and sports, but he also heard of the continued belief in second sight, fairies and charming. Some beliefs, such as those in witches, had seemingly died out in certain places, such as Perthshire, of which he wrote in a somewhat confused passage:

in this part of the country the notion of witchcraft is quite lost: it was observed to cease almost immediately on the repeal of the witch act; a proof what a dangerous instrument it was in the hands of the vindictive, or of the credulous.<sup>19</sup>

The drawback of being a tourist, even in the eighteenth century, is that knowledge acquired, and impressions formed, of the places visited are generally shaped by chance encounters with particular people en route. Had he ventured to Kenmore he might have been informed of a series of investigations into witchcraft and charming, the last of which occurred in 1753. As he progressed northwards, to Banffshire and Speyside, he discovered that witch beliefs were not yet extinguished, "even in this cultivated country." Farmers preserved their cattle from the potential harm of witches by placing boughs of rowan [mountain ash] and honeysuckle in the byre on 2 May, presumably as part of the Beltane observances. At other times, witches could be held at bay by red thread; attached to a pregnant woman the thread would prevent miscarriage, affixed to a cow it would protect the milk. It was said of persons who believed themselves to be the victims of malevolent magic: "they bleed the supposed witch to preserve themselves from her charms."<sup>20</sup> Forced to contradict his observations in Perthshire, Pennant seemed clearly puzzled to find witches more strongly entrenched in the richer farmlands of the North East than in the hardier landscapes of Breadalbane. From Caithness he reported the case of a house overrun with cats owing to witchcraft. When the owner cut of a cat's tail it later transpired that a local woman had lost a leg.<sup>21</sup>

Scotland's reputation as a land of superstition would continue into the nineteenth century, a perspective perpetuated even from within the country. For instance, John MacTaggart, author of *The Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopaedia* (1824), opined that "the Scots are a nation not only famous for

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<sup>19</sup> Pennant, *Tour 1769*, 95–7.

<sup>20</sup> Pennant, *Tour 1769*, 141. See also Robert Heron, *Observations Made in a Journey through the Western Counties of Scotland; in the Autumn of 1792*, 2 vols. (Perth: R. Morison Junior, 1793) vol. 2, 228. For more on "bleeding across the brow," see "Lewd Women, Rough Music and Scurrilous Tongues" above and "Boundaries of Belief" below.

<sup>21</sup> Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001; Edinburgh: John Donald, 2011) 207–8.

religion, war, learning and independence, but also superstition." Yet despite that reputation, MacTaggart wished to point out that superstition was actually in decline. He recorded the sentiments, and the dialect, of Andrew Sproat, an old man from Millhall on Kirkcudbright Bay, as his evidence:

Hech how, there's nae fun ava now among the fowk; they're a' grown as serious as our auld minister wont to be at a sacrament; nae meetings at ithers ingles to sing sangs, and tell divertin tales, nae boggles now to be seen about Hell's-Hole and the Ghaistcraft; nae witchwives about the clench [cleuch, a narrow gorge], nor warlocks about the Shellin Hill o'Kirkaners.<sup>22</sup>

It is doubtful that old Sproat was actually right as "superstition," and the folk traditions to which he refers do not so easily fade, but they do adapt with the times. What his generation was witnessing was a transformative process, which for Scotland had less to do with the Enlightenment, and was more aligned with massive agrarian change, rural depopulation and increased urbanization. By the nineteenth century, witches, fairies, and the entire panoply of bogles and spirits that had once helped the majority of folk interpret the landscape and understand the world in which they lived, were losing their rationale and were either being subsumed by alternative interpretations or replaced with new manifestations of supernatural belief. The rise of Gothic fiction and the fascination with the fantastic, horror and the sublime, which arose out of the Romantic movement, was one manifestation of this process.<sup>23</sup> Spiritualism and the Victorian love of ghost stories were another.

Scotland's reputation as a land of superstition, which would continue well after the period of the Enlightenment (some might say it still has that reputation), may well have been deserved, but no more so than any other country or culture on the planet. Wherever humans exist there is some level of engagement with the supernatural and the ability to hold on to beliefs for which there is no rational evidence or explanation.

### **Women, witches and the Scottish ballad tradition**

The ballad is, essentially, a story told in song. They have a strong narrative emphasis, which distinguishes them from other forms of song. They tend also to follow a distinctive pattern, usually involving incremental repetition,

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<sup>22</sup> John MacTaggart, *The Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopedia; or, the Original, Antiquated, and Natural Curiosities of the South of Scotland* (London, 1824; Strath Tay: Clunie Press, 1981) 25–30; John Burnett, *Robert Burns and the Hellish Legions* (Edinburgh: National Museums Scotland, 2009) 47–8.

<sup>23</sup> Jason Marc Harris, *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth Century British Fiction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

and employ stock motifs and phrases. In common with legends, the stories told in ballads are generally set in a knowable past, as opposed to folktales, which are often set in a mythical or unspecified time period. Unlike folktales, which are typically known for their eucatastrophe, or “happy ending,” the ballads can end badly for the protagonists, with tragic or even lethal results. Importantly, the ballads were handed down through several generations in the oral tradition, and are “rooted deeply in Scottish popular culture.”<sup>24</sup>

Ballads have been a somewhat under-utilized source in the study of folk belief and *mentalité*, although they could be considered to represent a rare and authentic avenue towards the voices of ordinary people. The main reason for their neglect has been the dismissal of ballad texts as unreliable, incoherent and representative of no particular historical event, folkloric belief or custom.<sup>25</sup> Even the great nineteenth-century American ballad collector Francis J. Child (1825–96) expressed scepticism towards the historical value of the 305 English and Scottish classical ballads that formed his impressive five-volume collection.<sup>26</sup> One of the most important ballad scholars of the twentieth century, the late David Buchan, did much to reverse the negative opinions about the historical worth of these folk compositions, and found that they were historical in rather extraordinary ways. The ballads, he contended, reflected a different kind of “historical truth,” one based on figurative and motifemic expressions, as well as “factual truths not found in the often scanty records, and they can contain emotional truths, the attitudes and reactions of the ballad-singing folk to the world around them.”<sup>27</sup> The question thus remains, are ballads a useful historical and ethnographic source? Can ballads offer any insights into the worldview of ordinary people? Is there anything they can tell us about folk attitudes towards witches?

The collecting of orally transmitted ballads and preserving them as written texts was undertaken, in a big way, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by antiquarians and early folklorists, and experienced something of a revival in the mid-twentieth century, mainly under the auspices of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. In the process of recording, and depending upon the integrity of the collector, it is now thought that many of these earlier ballad texts were “improved” or tampered with, while in some cases certain subjects or themes, such as the supernatural elements, were removed. James Hogg’s mother famously chastised Walter Scott for

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<sup>24</sup> Suzanne Gilbert, “Scottish Ballads and Popular Culture,” *The Bottle Imp* Issue 5 (May 2009) 1.

<sup>25</sup> Gordon Hall Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932) 161.

<sup>26</sup> F. J. Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols. (Boston and London: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1882–98).

<sup>27</sup> David D. Buchan, “History and Harlaw,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 5/1 (1968): 58–67.

putting her ballads into print for she said they were “made for singing an’ no for reading.”<sup>28</sup> The process of oral transmission was also responsible for shaping and changing the ballad stories, resulting in multiple variations and regional adaptations.

Witches do not feature prominently in the Scottish ballads, indeed they are hardly there at all; for instance, the Child corpus only recorded seven witch ballads. The supernatural in general is, however, quite a strong theme. These elements are not always central to the narrative, often acting in a peripheral vein, but taken as a whole can, as Hugh Shields has observed, enhance the “proper function of songs as a renewal of communal cohesion.”<sup>29</sup>

Despite the apparent setbacks, the Scottish ballads may still have something to add to the anthropology of the witch figure through an analysis of gender. The ballads preserve an image of woman as strong and assertive, sexually confident, displaying intelligence, and sometimes dominance, over men. It is generally accepted that females were important tradition-bearers of folk narrative, including ballads, and that they played a significant role in the development of ballad themes and texts.<sup>30</sup> As such, many of the existing ballads provide an insight into perceptions of gender roles, as well as escapist imaginings of a world in which a woman had more power and control, a vision far from her own, everyday reality: “the ballads present something of an idealised view of her world with much of the pain expunged.”<sup>31</sup> In the land of song, cruelty towards women, such as wife-beating, is rare, rape is not particularly common, and the experience of the witch-hunts totally erased, though there are a few that mention witchcraft. Incest, however, is a fairly common motif, as is premarital sex, which invariably results in pregnancy. In terms of specifically named female crimes, while witchcraft is infrequent, infanticide is not.

David Buchan’s work on *talerole* revealed that in the witch ballads – only recorded from the North East of Scotland – the main concern was not really about witchcraft per se; they seldom convey much information about the practice of witches or the nature of witchcraft. Rather, the cultural function of the witch ballads lies in human relationships, and particularly, though not exclusively, concerning women. *Willie’s Lady* gives, perhaps, the most

<sup>28</sup> James Hogg, *Anecdotes of Scott*, ed. Jill Rubenstein (1834; 1999; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) 38; Gilbert, “Scottish Ballads and Popular Culture,” 2.

<sup>29</sup> Hugh Shields, “Varieties of the Supernatural in Song,” *Béaloides* 60/61 (1992/93): 161–72.

<sup>30</sup> See David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (1972; East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997) 76; M. E. Brown, “Old Singing Women and the Canons of Scottish Balladry and Song,” in *A History of Scottish Women’s Writing*, ed. D. Gifford and D. McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) 44–57; Deborah A. Symonds, *Weep Not for Me: Women, Ballads, and Infanticide in Early Modern Scotland* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> Edward J. Cowan, “Sex and Violence in the Scottish Ballads,” in *The Ballad in Scottish History*, ed. E. J. Cowan (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000) 95–115.

direct information about actual witchcraft practice in that it includes a spell, “the nine witch knots,” to prevent a pregnant woman from giving birth. But the main narrative plot revolves around tensions between a mother, “that vile rank witch of vilest kind,” her son Willie and his wife, who has been bewitched by her mother-in-law. In *Allison Gross*, “the ugliest witch in the north country,” the witch has transformed a man who has rejected her sexual advances into an “ugly worm,” meaning snake, who is eventually rescued, and put back into his human form, by the Queen of Fairy. Witches were widely believed to be able to shapeshift themselves into animal forms as opposed to changing another human’s shape, as demonstrated in this particular ballad. In every witch ballad examined by Buchan he distinguished three taleroles: Bepelled, Bepeller and Unspeller. The Bepelled is the “recipient of the spell”; the Bepeller is the “witch who lays the spell upon the victim”; and the Unspeller is the “character responsible for the removal of the spell.” The role of Bepeller, his analysis revealed, is always played by a female character, thus reinforcing the stereotype of woman as witch.<sup>32</sup>

There are motifs that can be teased out of the ballads that are also found in the alleged crimes and practices of witches and charmers. Theft of milk, for instance, was a relatively common charge during the period of the witch trials and a persistent theme within the wider folkloric tradition, stolen from the udder of a cow or the breast of a nursing woman with potentially devastating results.<sup>33</sup> Margaret Chapman of Stirling, for instance, blamed with charming breastmilk away from the wife of a weaver, defended herself before the session in 1633, claiming she had intended to cure the woman’s inability to suckle her child.<sup>34</sup> “To milk the tether” was “a power ascribed to witches, of carrying off the milk of anyone’s cows, by pretending to perform the operation of milking upon a hair-tether.” It was also known as “trailing the tether,” and if someone had an “uncommon quantity of milk from one’s cows, it is usually said ‘You have been drawing the tether.’” On “Rood-Day” the fairies had similarly been known to “drag the tether over the clover, in order to take away the milk.”<sup>35</sup> Another example of magical control over

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<sup>32</sup> David Buchan, “Taleroles and the Witch Ballads,” in *Ballads and Other Genres*, ed. Zorica Raj Kovic (Zagreb: Zavod za Istrazivanje Folkloru, 1988) 133–40.

<sup>33</sup> On the continent, for example, Huguenot pastor Lambert Daneau commented: “I have seen them [sorcerers] who, with only laying their hands upon a nurse’s breasts, have drawn forth all the milk and dried them up,” *Dialogue of Witches*, chapter III.

<sup>34</sup> SCA, *Stirling Holy Rude Kirk Session Records 1597–1968*, 30 April 1633; Charles Rogers, *Social Life in Scotland*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Grampian Club, 1884) vol. 2, 199. The weaver’s wife may have suffered from agalactosis, an inability to lactate. For additional comment on Margaret Chapman see p.110, Chapter 3 above.

<sup>35</sup> Jamieson’s *Dictionary*. An example of the use of a “haar-rep,” or hair-rope, being used by a woman in Sweden for the purpose of stealing milk from her female neighbour’s cow, is also cited by Jamieson.

lactation occurs in the ballad of *Glenkindie*, which compares the excellent playing of the harpist with a series of impossible feats, including the production of milk from a virgin's breast:

He'd harpit a fish out o saut water,  
Or water out o a stane,  
Or milk out o a maiden's breast,  
That bairn never had nane.<sup>36</sup>

This unusual ability was the inverse of concerns about maternal nurture and the nature of womanhood.

Whether witch, fairy, mother or lover, women are frequently given strong and powerful roles in the ballads: "the picture painted by the ballad evidence departs at every critical juncture from the standard view of the submissive female enduring the patriarchal system."<sup>37</sup> It has often been suggested that many of the women who stood accused of witchcraft found themselves in trouble because they subverted conventional femininity and threatened patriarchy. Two independent-minded examples from many that might be mentioned were Jonet McMuldritche and Elspeth McEwen from Glenkens; Jonet was a woman of property and Elspeth was well educated. Equally praiseworthy was Jonet Corbie, banished for protesting that MacEwen was no witch. Somewhat reflecting the female roles portrayed in the ballads, which often represent a crossover point between fantasy and reality, both of the accused women died for a phantom crime, martyrs to the petty-mindedness of their neighbours, a pitiless kirk and a merciless state.

### Boundaries of belief

If the majority of ministers who compiled their reports for the *Statistical Account of Scotland* in the 1790s are to be believed, "the credulity of former times with respect to witches is almost extinguished," in the words of the Rev. Andrew Bell of Crail (Fife), "and the little superstitious fancies, which so frequently prevail among the commonalty, are gradually losing ground."<sup>38</sup> His observation can stand for many of similar sentiment. For instance, the Rev. Donald M'Queen in Skye told Samuel Johnson that when he first took over his charge women were frequently accused of stealing milk from cows by means of witchcraft. By 1773 he had personally eradicated such superstition through a combination of preaching and guile.<sup>39</sup> Not all, however, were

<sup>36</sup> Child, *English and Scottish Ballads*, 'Glenkindie' [67B].

<sup>37</sup> Cowan, "Sex and Violence in the Scottish Ballads," 112.

<sup>38</sup> OSA, vol. 13, Crail, 173.

<sup>39</sup> *Boswell's Journal*, 266.

able to report such supposed successes. At Tongland, in Kirkcudbrightshire, the minister acknowledged the “lower class in general were tainted strongly with superstitious sentiments and opinions, which had been transmitted down from one generation to another by tradition.” These traditions included a belief in “ghosts, hobgoblins, fairies, elves, witches and wizards.” Furthermore, “they used many charms and incantations to preserve themselves, their cattle and houses, from the malevolence of witches, wizards and evil spirits, and believed in the beneficial effects of these charms.”<sup>40</sup> Whose accounts are more accurate? Which ministers should we believe?

In the course of the eighteenth century, popular belief in the supernatural was under assault as never before. Virtually every major Enlightenment figure celebrated the passing of the old beliefs. David Hume believed that he had discovered an “everlasting check” upon all types of “superstitious delusion,” which would prove useful, he modestly thought, “as long as the world endures.”<sup>41</sup> Adam Ferguson, Lord Hailes, William Robertson and Adam Smith were among the many who spearheaded attacks upon the beliefs of the subordinate classes and widened the gulf between “elite” and “popular.”

It is quite likely that the literary interest in witches, as in all aspects of the supernatural, which developed during the post-Ossianic craze, reinforced witch belief in certain sectors of society. James Hogg was under the impression that while, in his own lifetime, belief in fairies was declining the number of witches was growing.<sup>42</sup> Burns successfully tapped into the human psyche and deep-seated worries that the Devil “in the human bosom pryin/Unseen thou lurks,” while simultaneously lampooning the activities of witches. He achieved this magical blend by adding just enough ingredients of fantastical fun to distance his readers from believing in witches, yet recreating a believable folkloric world in which they could conceivably still exist beyond the realm of the imagination:

Let warlocks grim, an' wither'd hags,  
Tell how wi' you, on ragweed nags,  
They skim the muirs an' dizzy crags,  
Wi' wicked speed;  
And in the kirk-yards renew their leagues,  
Ower howkit dead.<sup>43</sup>

The antiquarian fascination with folklore almost certainly fostered similar convictions. Supposedly learned books on witchcraft such as those by

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<sup>40</sup> OSA, Tongland, 328.

<sup>41</sup> T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, eds., *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, 4 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1874–5) vol. 4, 93.

<sup>42</sup> Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, chapter 7.

<sup>43</sup> Mackay, *Robert Burns*, 64.

Sharpe and Scott, while adopting a sceptical stance, served to confirm the once, and possibly future, reality of witches. During a tour of the Northern Isles at the beginning of the nineteenth century Scott met a woman in Stromness called Bessie Miller. She apparently earned a living by selling winds to sailors, for a fee of sixpence. Scott, never one to miss a creative opportunity, renamed Bessie "Norna of the Fitful Head" and added her to the cast list of his novel *The Pirate*.<sup>44</sup>

An abundance of sources reveals that witch belief continued to thrive in many parts of Scotland until well into the nineteenth century and beyond. The Commissary Court records of Argyll demonstrate that old assumptions were highly tenacious. In 1810, Margaret Mitchell claimed that John McMillan in Glenkerdoch had scandalously declared in front of a number of people that she was a murderer, witch and whore. The problem was the word "witch." The outcome of the case is unfortunately not recorded. When, four years later, Sarah Cameron was libelled as a witch she demanded a recantation, damages and a fine. In the past such occurrences might have led directly to an execution.<sup>45</sup>

Traditional witch practices figure conspicuously in the Ross-shire case of 1822 when Isabella Hay of Invergordon was imprisoned for witchcraft. She advertised herself as "cow and horse doctress," but she also had a reputation for fortune-telling and the recovery of stolen goods. Reasonably enough, she charged for her services, and it was the failure of one client, John Wallace, to pay her that led directly to her predicament, almost certainly exacerbated by her reputation for causing quarrels in the community. When Wallace's horses began to die, one by one, it transpired that Isabella had threatened that non-payment would result in the death of one horse for every shilling in the pound owed. When the two consulted, the alleged witch claimed she could cure the horse disease with a black hen, but John spurned her offer. As a result of his petition she was placed in the tolbooth at Tain, accused of witchcraft, but she was released when she agreed to banishment. When she changed her mind and delayed in the district, seeking other moneys owed, she was reconfined for a period of some two months. The Lord Advocate of the day, Robert Dundas of Arniston, was having none of it. On his pronouncement that "the charge of witchcraft is really too ridiculous," Isabella was freed.<sup>46</sup>

The Wilkie manuscript collection, made by a young medical student living in Bowden, Roxburghshire, c.1815, wrote of witches "as though they

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<sup>44</sup> James M. MacKinlay, *Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs* (Glasgow: William Hodge, 1893) 219–20.

<sup>45</sup> Argyll Commissary Court 1700–1825, NAS, CC2/2/109 (1810), CC2/2/113/6 (1814).

<sup>46</sup> John Brims, "The Ross-Shire Witchcraft Case of 1822," *Review of Scottish Culture* 5 (1989): 87–91.



were recognised members of society, to be met and spoken with every day." In fact, there was, he judged, "some difficulty in knowing how to act when a witch offers to shake hands with us." There was a risk of insult if one refused to take her hand, but there was also a risk if one did. It was, he continued, "unlucky to praise a witch, or indeed hold any conversation with her, and our only safety against sudden death soon after consists in having the last word." Another safeguard against a witch's tricks, should someone receive money from her, was to put it "at once into your mouth, for fear the donor should spirit it away, and supply its place with a round stone or slate." The old people in the district, according to Wilkie, were still in the habit of putting money in their mouths.<sup>47</sup>

A Fife man was allegedly carried by a whirlwind nine times round Kilconquhar Loch. He had been standing on Calliard Hill, a well-known meeting place of witches, just before he was whisked off. This type of narrative had been fairly common in previous centuries, and was often associated with fairy mischief.<sup>48</sup> In several publications, Hugh Miller of Cromarty preserved tales and oral traditions about witchcraft in his locality where several witches still allegedly practised, around 1830.<sup>49</sup> The minister of Kiltearn, on the north shore of the Cromarty Firth, reported in 1845 that "many of the superstitious notions, once so abundant in the Highlands, still continue to linger here; but they too, like their expressive and poetical language, are fast retreating before the tide of improvement which has set in from the south." The recession of superstition was not in equal measure, however, for while it was only "in the very remote districts that ghosts are seen, and fairies are now known only by name, the belief in witchcraft still continues deeply rooted."<sup>50</sup>

Physical assaults upon suspected witches continued to occur well into the nineteenth century. It was reported in the *Edinburgh Annual Register* (1814) that "in the upper end of Peeblesshire" a shepherd, who "shrewdly suspected" an old woman of bewitching his cattle, scored her above the breath to release them from her spell.<sup>51</sup> A letter that appeared in the *Glasgow Weekly Herald* (1876) claimed that, in Wigtownshire, c.1825, an old woman was cut across the brow with a nail taken from a horseshoe as she was suspected of

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<sup>47</sup> Wilkie MS in William Henderson, *Notes on the Folk Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1886; London: The Folklore Society, 1879) 143–4.

<sup>48</sup> John Jack, *An Historical Account of St. Monace, Fifeshire, Ancient and Modern* (Coupar: J. S. Tullis, 1844) 32–3; Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, esp. chapter 1.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Shortland, ed., *Hugh Miller's Memoir: From Stonemason to Geologist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) 38–9.

<sup>50</sup> NSA, vol. 14, Ross and Cromarty, 323.

<sup>51</sup> *Edinburgh Annual Register* (1814) cxxx, qtd in William G. Black, *Folk Medicine: A Chapter in the History of Culture*, The Folk-Lore Society (London: Elliot Stock, 1883) 24.

bewitching a farmer's cattle. The letter states that the farmer was prosecuted and imprisoned for the alleged attack.<sup>52</sup> William Grant, a fisherman in Portmahomack, was imprisoned in Dingwall jail for three months in 1845 for cutting a woman on the forehead, "above the breath." He declared that the loss of his new nets and subsequent failure in fishing for herring was due to the woman's "dark dealings in sorcery." He justified his attack, saying that the rest of the crew refused to go to sea with him while he was under a witch's curse.<sup>53</sup>

People growing up in Caithness and Sutherland in the 1870s "all believed in the reality of witchcraft" because they all personally knew witches. Bell Royal used her evil reputation to extort fish from the fisher folk. She was often consulted by lovesick girls and was welcomed into farmhouses in the district. Fortune John was a tramp who teased a bare existence out of the threat of invoking his occult powers. Like Scott's Bessie Miller of Stromness, Mammie Scott (no relation), also of Stromness, could control the weather by tying three knots in red thread. When Mammie died, tradition records that a swarm of cats entered her home, making it difficult to prepare her for burial, and a ferocious gale swept along the Orkney coast until she was put in the ground.<sup>54</sup> A trial held in Inverness, involving a clay image used to cause illness, was reported by the local paper in 1883. Isabella Macrae or Stewart, an elderly woman who stood accused of assaulting a young girl, stunned the court when she produced the four inch-long clay figurine, wrapped in green threads and stuck with pins, claiming it had been made against her by a witch. The legs had been broken off, and she maintained that her legs had since lost their strength. She refused to sell the charm doll to a gentleman who expressed an interest in purchasing it, explaining that if any harm came to the image she would be in grave danger.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Letter by F. A., *Glasgow Weekly Herald* (1876), in James Napier, *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland* (Paisley, 1879; Wakefield: EP, 1976) 37–8. Napier claimed that a woman in his village, c.1820s, was scored above the breath because it was believed she had put the evil eye on a neighbourhood child, causing it to have convulsive fits. He does not recall whether or not the child recovered.

<sup>53</sup> William Grant imprisoned for attack on the wife of Walter Munro, 8 October 1845, Jury Court, Tain, reported in *Inverness Courier*, 23 October 1845, but see also *Aberdeen Journal*, Notes and Queries, VII, 50, and J. M. Macpherson, *Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929) 224.

<sup>54</sup> MacKinlay, *Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs*, 220; R. Menzies Fergusson, *Rambling Sketches in the Far North and Orcadian Musings* (Edinburgh and Glasgow: John Menzies and Co., 1883) 35–8.

<sup>55</sup> *Macclesfield Courier*, 22 December 1883, in Macpherson, *Primitive Beliefs*, 203. Other clay figurines have been found, e.g. in Golspie near a burn in 1890, Nicholson, *Golspie*, 82, and in Glen Urquhart next to the door of an army officer's house, but in spite of the fears expressed by the workmen who found it, the officer presented it to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford where it still resides, Macpherson, *Primitive Beliefs*, 203.

A minister in Fife reported that he had personally spoken to an old woman in Aberdour who solemnly told him of a woman she remembered from her childhood, who was made lame following an injury she had received while in the form of a black cat. A man had struck the animal on the leg as it entered the witch-woman's cottage, and thereafter she was lame.<sup>56</sup> Another report from the region related the folktale-like story of a boy who visited a notorious witch to buy a pigeon from her. On his way home, the pigeon mysteriously vanished, and when he returned to the witch's cottage, he discovered it had returned to her. After an altercation, the boy recovered the bird and took it home. However, by morning, the bird was once more back at the old witch's abode. He sought advice from another old woman, who told him to return to the cottage for his pigeon, but this time he was to secretly cut off a piece of the witch's petticoat and when back home, he was to throw it on the fire. This he did, and when the fragment started to flame, the witch immediately appeared at his front door screaming that her heart was burning. She rushed forward, took the charred rag from the fire and vanished, never to be seen in the area again.<sup>57</sup>

Some elements would have been still part of people's reality, but for most they were the superstitious relics of a past that was no more. They are of interest to the folklorist or ethnologist because some of them mention the witch as a transitional figure and others contain elements that once appeared in witch trials, but were now moving in the direction of folktale and fairy tale. Burns's "Tam o'Shanter," for instance, contains a motif that is recognizably a variation of a migratory legend known as "Following the Witch," whereby a man finds himself at a female gathering from which he must escape. The poem belongs, therefore, to a complex of narratives labelled as "intruder legends."<sup>58</sup> Another well-crafted literary example, which draws upon several of the historical sources consulted in this book, is Robert Louis Stevenson's superb short story *Thrawn Janet* (1881).

Spells and anxieties involving milk, butter and cheese, and of course the weather, remained a common feature of these later witchcraft tales and narratives. So too did sudden or unexplained diseases or health complaints. One boy acquired a copy of Sinclair's *Satan Invisible World*, but to his chagrin

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<sup>56</sup> James Napier related a similar story of a witch who was shot, c.1828, while she was in the shape of a hare. Thereafter she had to use a crutch to get around. *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland*, 70. William Ross, *Aberdour and Inchcolme. Being Historical Notices of the Parish and Monastery in twelve Lectures* (Edinburgh: D. Douglas, 1885) 327.

<sup>57</sup> D. D. A. "Folk-Lore," *Notes and Queries* fifth ser., 2/31 (1874): 83–4; Simpkins, *County Folk-Lore Fife*, 55.

<sup>58</sup> Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Migratory Legends* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1958) no. 3045; Willem de Blécourt, "Sabbath Stories: Towards a New History of Witches' Assemblies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 88.

his father “did with the book what the authorities used to do with the witches themselves – he burnt it.”<sup>59</sup> In 1879, James Napier could report that he personally knew a woman who was bewitched. She had not been married long when she “took a sudden fit of mental derangement, and screamed and talked violently to herself.” After unsuccessful attempts to cure her with a combination of praying and medical aid, a relative of the woman took control of the matter. Several suspects were asked to come to the house, and a piece of clothing was secretly cut from their dresses and thrown into the fire. The woman returned to full health as quickly as she had become ill, thus confirming that the evil eye had been the cause of her sickness all along. Napier, who had himself been the alleged victim of the evil eye when he was a child, was of the opinion that “the abolition of the legal penalty did not kill the popular belief in the power and reality of witchcraft; and even now, at this present day, we find proof every now and again in newspaper reports that this belief still lingers among certain classes.”<sup>60</sup>

Another survival indicating supernatural power, “different from witchcraft, and which the Devil granted to certain parties,” was the Black Airt. Possessors of this power were mainly Highlanders. James Napier, writing in 1879, commented that “probably at this present day there are still those who believe in it.” Though the outcome of the Black Airt could be the same as if witchcraft had been employed, it was thought to be subtly different. It seems to have derived from a notion that those who had entered into a pact with the Devil could, from that moment on, afflict anyone they disliked with certain diseases, which could sometimes prove fatal. The illness was brought on by making an image (known in Scots as a pictour) of the target out of clay or wax, baptizing the figurine in a mock Christian ceremony, in order to inflict wounds on the victim. In the *Gentle Shepherd* (1725), Allan Ramsay referred to this practice, which had also been used long before by the North Berwick witches:

Pictures oft she makes  
Of folk she hates, and gaur expire  
Wi’ slow and racking pain before the fire.  
Stuck fu’ o’ preens, the devilish picture melt,  
The pain by folk they represent is felt.<sup>61</sup>

An informant of Napier’s had served with a farmer to the northwest of Glasgow who hired a young Highlander to be his herdsman. Initially, the

<sup>59</sup> Rev George Sutherland, *Folk-Lore Gleanings and Character Sketches from the Far North* (Wick: John O’Groat Journal, 1937) 49–86.

<sup>60</sup> Napier, *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland*, 77–8, 68–9.

<sup>61</sup> Allan Ramsay, ‘The Gentle Shepherd’, in *The Poems of Allan Ramsay*, 2 vols. (1800; Paisley: Alex. Gardner, 1877) 42–134, act 2, scene 2.

farm prospered, but by the winter the cows were producing much less milk. The Highland lad, who noticed that their neighbour's cows were producing a lot of milk, told the farmer's wife that he knew of a charm, known as "milking the tether," that could be used to draw off some of that milk, so that they need not go short any longer. Rumours quickly spread among the servants that the Highlander was proposing to use the Black Airt, and they grew nervous. Other observations started to surface, such as this lad's restlessness during family worship, and the fact that he always carried with him a deck of cards. Two of the servant men claimed that on one occasion he began to shuffle the cards, while muttering words they did not understand, telling them the names of the girls they were courting, information they were certain he could not have known by ordinary means. As the Highlander was creating too much of a disturbance, and some of the other men were refusing to work with him, the farmer was forced to let him go. As a precautionary measure, he was given gifts by the farmer and all the servants so that they might part on good terms. Napier's informant, though he believed himself to be "above superstition," related this story "as evidence of the truth of the Black Airt."<sup>62</sup>

Traces of the age-old relationship between witches and the dead could still be found in the late nineteenth century, enacted within customary funerary practices in the Highlands. In 1883 Alexander Carmichael recorded the practice of breaking the "carbads," or funeral biers, to prevent witches using them "in carrying away the bodies!" The broken carbads were thrown into the stream where, presumably, the witches were unable to retrieve them.<sup>63</sup>

Practitioners of witchcraft undoubtedly continued to function in many parts of Scotland, particularly in the *Gàidhealtachd*. In 1886 it was reported:

The belief in witchcraft is by no means dead in Gairloch, and to the stranger the very appearance of some withered old women almost proves them to be witches. Cases actually occurred in 1885 where persons were charged with the practice of these arts in connection with poultry. It seems better not to give details of them here, especially as it is said the poor folk are yet under suspicion.<sup>64</sup>

William Grant from Stratherrick, interviewed c.1900, was able to remember a legend about a "school" of witches practising in Invernessshire that was eventually disbanded through the efforts of a man known as *An Taillear*

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<sup>62</sup> Napier, *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland*, 75–7.

<sup>63</sup> Alexander Carmichael, "Note about Biers" (27 September 1883), Coll-97/CW120/159. The Carmichael-Watson Project.

<sup>64</sup> John H. Dixon, *Gairloch in North-West Ross-shire; Its Records, Traditions, Inhabitants, and Natural History, with a Guide to Gairloch and Loch Maree* (Edinburgh: Cooperative Printing Company, 1886) 163–73.

*Plocar*. Grant claimed that there had been many witches in the area, and that some still believed this to be the case. As for himself, he had personally known a woman who lived close to his house whom everyone believed to be a greatly feared witch.<sup>65</sup> One researcher, during a trip in 1921 with the fishermen on the Moray Firth coast, discovered that not only was witch belief still alive but so too an assortment of “superstitions” and customs ranging from the existence of fairies and sea-devils to omens and taboos. One fisherman confided that he believed “in the powers for good and evil held by ‘wise-women’, that is, witches.” On a less serious note, a popular saying on the northeast coast went “A hairy man’s a happy man, A hairy wife’s a witch.”<sup>66</sup>

Further reinforcement of folk belief in witches reposed in the sheer number of placenames that mentioned them, or their master, the Devil. Onomastic explanations, erroneous or otherwise, would be repeated from generation to generation. To cite only a brief selection, Glencoe has the “Devil’s Staircase,” while Angus has the “Devil’s Cradle” at Balgarthro. There is “The Devil’s” or “Satan’s Well” in Deeside, and a “Devil’s Cauldron” near the River Lednock, north of Comrie, Perthshire. “The Devil’s Point” can be found at the Lairig Ghru in the Cairngorms. Moffat boasts “The Devil’s Beeftub,” which traditionally earned its name from the spot where the Border Rievers concealed stolen cattle. More recently, “The Devil’s Elbow” on the Braemar to Perth road was so called because of the treacherous bends of the road. Natural features are sometimes credited as the work of Satan rather than the elements, such as the hilltop of boulders in Galloway known as the “Deil’s Putting Stane,” or the row of rocks on the beach south of Ayr referred to as the “Deil’s Dyke.”<sup>67</sup> Hollowed-out erosions on the edge of the small rock-pool of The Pot o’ Pittenyoul, which have the appearance and shape of a seat, were accredited, in local legend, to have been caused by the Devil who sat down at the pool and left an indelible mark: “The Pot o’ Pittenyoul, Fahr the deel [devil] gya the youl.”<sup>68</sup> “The Devil’s Well” on Turfhandle farm, near Abernethy, Perthshire, was named after the shape of a cloven hoof found on a nearby stone.

A legend attached to the large boulder on the Greystane property in Invergowrie, Perthshire, claims that it was flung across the Tay from Fife by the Devil, who objected to a church that was built there. Apparently his aim was not so good as he seems to have missed his intended target altogether.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Maclaggan MSS pp9019–20, qtd in *Tocher* no. 48/49 (1994): 431–2.

<sup>66</sup> Peter F. Anson, *Fisher Folk-Lore. Old Customs, Taboos and Superstitions among Fisher Folk, Especially in Brittany and Normandy, and on the East Coast of Scotland* (London: The Faith Press, 1965) 46.

<sup>67</sup> Burnett, *Robert Burns and the Hellish Legion*, 28.

<sup>68</sup> Gregor, *Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland*, 113.

<sup>69</sup> MacKinlay, *Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs*, 85.

A similar legend is attached to the Blue Boulder, which sits near St Mary's Kirk in Crail. The Devil apparently threw the large rock from the Isle of May when he heard that the church was under construction. He missed – the Devil's aim was clearly diabolical – and the missile split in two, one piece falling on Balcomie beach and the other outside the church, where it can be viewed today, complete with the Devil's thumbprint.<sup>70</sup> The *Statistical Account* mentions a natural phenomenon that was given an unnatural explanation by some of the locals. In the parish of Tannadice, Angus, there was an area of ground called the Deil's Hows or the Devil's Hollows. On many occasions, "within the memory of some alive, pieces of earth, of 150 or 160 stones weight, have been thrown out from the adjoining ground, without any visible cause." It was supposed that these unusual eruptions were made by the Devil to let those around him know of his "presence and power."<sup>71</sup>

There are a number of geological features or unusual rocks named after the activities of witches. The Witch's Stone at Forres, Elginshire,<sup>72</sup> and the *Clach na Buidseachd* at Tullypourie, Strathtay, are a couple of examples. The legends attached to these monoliths do not always specify the name of the witch, but other details, such as how the stone came to be in that particular spot or explanations for unusual markings, are often provided. The *Clach Mohr*, or Big Stone, in Glen Fernate, Strathardle, was dropped by the witch of Badenoch, and the Witch's Stone in Dunfermline was so heavy that it broke the apron-strings of the witch who was attempting to carry it through the air.<sup>73</sup> The Witch-Stone on Culross Muir is indented with a human footprint, left by a witch who landed on the spot from her broomstick.<sup>74</sup> Other local legends incorporate more detailed explanations for notable rock formations. The standing stones near Loch Maddy on North Uist, for instance, are called *Na Fir Bhreige* or the false men, and are said to be the frozen figures of three unfaithful husbands from Skye, punished by a local witch.<sup>75</sup> At Cromarty, there is the Witch's Hole, a small circular hollow to the west of the town. In the early nineteenth century it was known by the "children of the place" as the scene of a witch-burning during the reign of

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<sup>70</sup> Erskine Beveridge, *The Churchyard Memorials of Crail* (Edinburgh: J. and A. Constable, 1885) 61; Raymond Lamont-Brown, *Discovering Fife* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1988) 145.

<sup>71</sup> OSA, vol. 13, Fife, 652.

<sup>72</sup> MacKinlay, *Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs*, 152.

<sup>73</sup> Nancy Foy Cameron, *Witches in Atholl* (Clunemore: Atholl Brose, 1999) 32–3; David Milne Home, *The Estuary of the Forth and Adjoining Districts Viewed Geologically* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1871) 49; Maurice Fleming, *Not of This World: Creatures of the Supernatural in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2002) 161.

<sup>74</sup> James Hall, *Travels in Scotland by an Unusual Route*, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1807) vol. 2, 49.

<sup>75</sup> Joyce Miller, *Myth and Magic: Scotland's Ancient Beliefs & Sacred Places* (Musselburgh: Goblinshead, 2000) 118.

Charles II, but the name of the woman was no longer remembered.<sup>76</sup> Kate NicNiven's Craig, near Crieff, appears to be associated with the actual case of Catherine NicNiven (1615), but it is doubtful if similar connections exist at all sites bearing demonic nomenclature. Nonetheless, as the folk and the learned had long believed, the wild and desolate landscapes of Scotland preserved their own memorials to the witches of older times.

The question of the longevity and intensity of witch belief is worthy of further study. The nineteenth century, in particular, potentially offers a rich field for the recovery of legends and traditions about the servants of Satan who had so confidently been pronounced as extinct by the voices of the Enlightenment.

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<sup>76</sup> Hugh Miller, *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland or the Traditional History of Cromarty*, ed. J. Robertson (1835; Edinburgh: B and W, 1994) 80–1.



# Conclusion

... since Sir Walter Scott hath published his letters, all the demons, witches, fairies in Albion must lie dead for ever! They are entirely exorcised now; and that magical wand, which about twenty-five or thirty years ago, could call forth, and did call forth, sprites, spawwives, Orkney witches, and eidolons at pleasure, has now disenchanting them all.

John Gordon Barbour,  
*Unique Traditions Chiefly of the West and  
South of Scotland* (1833)<sup>1</sup>

This study represents the first in-depth investigation of Scottish witchcraft and witch belief in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It has demonstrated that while the perceived need to persecute witches was indeed dying out – a trend that has never really been in question – actual belief in and fear of witches continued to worry great swathes of the population for a much longer time than has previously been appreciated. The abundance of material on witch belief and charming surviving from this period is indicative of the mood of suspicion and terror that continued to linger among many Scots at all levels of society.

There has been a concerted attempt to understand how witch beliefs operated within Scottish society and to redress the balance of much past scholarship, which has tended to concentrate only on periods of major witch-hunting activity. The historiography of witch-hunting had, at one time, been dominated by a rationalist and predominantly white/conservative/male viewpoint, though thankfully this has now, mostly, changed. The bizarre viewpoints of writers such as G. R. Quaife, who

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<sup>1</sup> John Gordon Barbour, *Unique Traditions chiefly of the West and South of Scotland* (Glasgow: Thomas D. Morison, 1886), 5–6.

argued that witches enjoyed fantasizing about sex with the Devil, or Hans Peter Duerr, who speculated that female witches used unguents and broomstick handles for the purposes of masturbation, can now, hopefully be set aside.<sup>2</sup> There have been, regrettably, too many historical studies that have downplayed or entirely neglected to mention witch-hunting or any form of supernatural belief, though few would now dismiss the “witch-craze”, a loaded term in itself, as Hugh Trevor-Roper did, as “a disgusting subject, below the dignity of history”.<sup>3</sup> Such histories have found the entire subject an embarrassment, not out of any heartfelt sympathy for the victims but because such matters should be written off as an aberration – or worse, that such topics do not qualify as “real history”. The centrality of women in the history of witchcraft may have also contributed to the disdain with which it was once regarded. That belief in witches could have continued into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an era regularly defined in terms of Enlightenment philosophy and progress, has been, for many, simply inconceivable, despite the fact that only a tiny fraction of the population would have been exposed to the discourse of the supposedly enlightened brotherhood. The vast literature that is now available on the subject of the witch trials demonstrates the rising recognition of the importance of this topic, particularly towards enhancing our understanding of the social, economic and political frameworks of the early modern era. Studying witch persecutions and witch beliefs allows the historian an opportunity to concentrate his or her lens on the inner lives, thoughts and emotional states of people across the social spectrum. The inclusiveness of studying belief opens the door to history not just “from below”, but “from above”, and indeed from almost every conceivable angle and perspective.

This book initially investigated the writings and ideas of Scottish opponents of sadducism in the late seventeenth century. It called into question the assumption that witch beliefs disappeared in the years following the last large-scale witch-panic of the 1660s. Indeed, it could be argued that the works of George Sinclair, Robert Kirk and John Bell served to actually reinforce belief in witches, fairies and the occult in general during what has been distinguished as the dawn of the Scottish Enlightenment. The witchcraft debate in Scotland, as elsewhere in Europe, was not a straightforward competition between believers and sceptics, but “between people with different

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<sup>2</sup> G. R. Quafe, *Godly Zeal and Furious Rage: The Witch in Early Modern Europe* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1987) 99–102; Hans Peter Duerr, *Traumzeit: Über die Grenze zwischen Wildnis und Zivilisation* (Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1978) 174, qtd in Sigrid Brauner, *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1995) 21.

<sup>3</sup> H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 7.

degrees of doubt, who chose to emphasise different things".<sup>4</sup> Although the age of reason has appeared antithetical to the season of the witch, there is abundant evidence not only of witch belief but witch persecution well into the eighteenth century. Demonic possession cases thrived at the turn of the century, a marker of "Calvinist religious culture", continuing to offer proof of the existence of the Devil and other evil spirits.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the repeal of the Witchcraft Act (1736) can no longer be dismissed as "a mere footnote to the history of rationalism".<sup>6</sup>

Although Lord Advocates from the 1680s to the 1730s did not doubt the reality of witchcraft, they fully realized the difficulty of proof. It is clear that the reluctance of the central authorities to prosecute diablerie was not matched in the localities. Ministers and local elites often played a crucial role, not just in the continuation of witch prosecutions, but may have actively encouraged multiple accusations by coercing suspects to name accomplices. A regional study of the southwestern counties of Scotland demonstrates that individual kirk sessions and ministers remained intent upon the punishment of witches into the eighteenth century, though a shift can be detected in the period surveyed by this investigation. By 1740 the image of the witch was undergoing another transitional phase, and elders and ministers were much more likely to punish the accusers than the accused witches. This helped in part to diffuse prosecution because the ministers were well aware of the dangers such accusations posed for the peacefulness and integrity of the community. It is clear, however, that the "superstitions" so comprehensively denounced by Enlightenment writers, while not perhaps flourishing, were still deeply entrenched in society at large.

It has been demonstrated that during the early phases of the Scottish Enlightenment there was unprecedented learned interest in folklore and folk culture. Phenomena such as witch belief and charming, which in this investigation have been deemed representative of folk beliefs in general, to a greater or lesser extent, interested and impacted upon virtually all segments of Scottish society. At grass-roots level, magical beliefs continued to thrive, while among the educated there was a "mixed bag of beliefs".<sup>7</sup> Robert Burns

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Wasser, "The Western Witch-Hunt of 1697–1700: The Last Major Witch-Hunt in Scotland", in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 161.

<sup>5</sup> Brian P. Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008) 145–61.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Bostridge, "Witchcraft Repealed", in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 332.

<sup>7</sup> Roy Porter, "Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment, Romantic and Liberal Thought", in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, Volume 5: *The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, Brian P. Levack and Roy Porter (London: Athlone Press, 1999) 191–282.

once confessed that so deeply embedded were his “superstitious” notions that when visiting “suspicious places” on “nocturnal rambles” it often required “an effort of Philosophy the shake off these idle terrors”.<sup>8</sup>

This study has argued that the Scottish experience of witch-hunting and witch belief was distinctive. Of course, it shared many elements with other European countries, but explanations that have been advanced for the decline of witchcraft in Scotland’s nearest neighbour, England, are not necessarily valid or helpful with reference to the northern nation, though some undoubtedly are. Alexander Brodie’s observations on the uniqueness of the Scottish Enlightenment can also be applied to the country’s sufferance of witchcraft. Scotland after 1707 retained her own religion, law, education, universities, politics, languages and assumptions.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore unlikely that all suggestions about the demise of English belief in witches should apply with reference to Scotland, though some overlap and comparisons may be expected. As it happens, reasons generally advanced for the decline of witch belief are almost exactly paralleled by those for the emergence of Enlightenment, explicable in part by the self-regard of the *illuminati* themselves, who claimed to have liberated their homelands from superstition in one fell swoop. Most commentators hitherto have distinguished between decline in witch-hunting and witch belief, though sometimes they have confused discussion of the two.

Somewhat tentative proposals by James Sharpe and Michael Wasser, that the so-called Scientific Revolution played a part, do not convince for Scotland, while even in England progress was not rapid for the vast majority of the population. Just as influential, if not more so, in both countries was the slow growth and elaboration of “manners”, the widening gulf between the middle class and the “lower orders”, which demanded demonstrative differences such as dress, housing, amusements and other demarcations from the “rabble” and their ridiculous ideas and beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Wasser also foregrounds the role of science in scrutinizing George Sinclair of *Satan’s Invisible World* fame, notably the mechanical worldview, but again the claim of influence seems premature.<sup>11</sup> It should be understood that very few people in the British Isles possessed either the mindset or the vocabulary to even begin to understand scientific breakthroughs. True mass understanding had to await

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<sup>8</sup> Edward J. Cowan, “Burns and Superstition”, in *Love & Liberty: Robert Burns, A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. K. Simpson (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997) 236.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Broadie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 2–3.

<sup>10</sup> James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550–1750* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996) 256–74.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Wasser, “The Mechanical World-View and the Decline of Witch Beliefs in Scotland” in *Witchcraft and Folk Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 206–26.

the arrival of the great popularizers and synthesizers of the nineteenth century such as Darwin and Carlyle, Scott and Dickens.

The Royal Society of London, founded by Charles II in 1662, is often seen as another great game-changer. Although its first president was the Scotsman and freemason Sir Robert Moray, the society could be seen in a Scottish context as encouraging research into the paranormal and the supernatural, thus reinforcing long-standing folk beliefs rather than advancing a rational approach to the universe. As I indicated in Chapter 1, several Scots associated with the society, such as Robert Kirk and Martin Martin, were inveterate enemies of sadducism. There is no doubt that scientific ideas promoted by the Royal Society undermined old beliefs and assumptions in the longer term, but before 1800 they impacted on the very few rather than the many.

Brian Levack has written quite extensively on alternative approaches to the demise of the witch phenomenon in Scotland, where insistence on the reality of witches was clearly illustrated in the case of the Paisley witches, suggesting that sceptical arguments introduced from England had little impact.<sup>12</sup> He admits to surprise that a new vogue for Bible criticism made little headway in Scotland, though one might suggest that convinced Presbyterians were too distracted by hair-splitting arguments to take notice. Professor Levack notes that judicial scepticism played a significant role in other European countries, and points out that the 1661–62 panic forced many members of the legal profession to rethink their positions, with a consequent reduction in the number of trials, as I have noted. Contemporaneously the central authorities (i.e. Edinburgh) took greater responsibility for bringing charges rather than devolving the task to the localities, where men entrusted with dispensing justice “were not exactly acquaint with the nature of the crime”, and were often the very same individuals who had petitioned for prosecutions in the first place. Henceforward lawyers paid much more attention to evidence and proofs. Cases were transferred to circuit courts in 1671, between which date and 1709 they are known to have executed only two witches.

There was a reduction in torture, which could now only be applied with proper authority. Previously torture had been applied locally, the centre turning a blind eye. Post 1661–62 there were allegedly changes owing to the concerns that innocent folk, fearing or experiencing torture, had become implicated. Mackenzie, the “bluidy advocate” of covenanting tradition, defended torture in state trials, particularly those involving treason, but he prevented its judicial use by men who were not competent. There was an element of hypocrisy and a double standard where torture was concerned because in 1684, as the Privy Council was debating this matter the “fiendish thumbkins” (also known as pilliwinks or thumbscrews) was introduced.

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<sup>12</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 131–44.

One Scottish legal refinement was that witches had a right to counsel which, however, in the earlier phases was seldom offered or demanded. In the later trials an advocate might tender written pleadings on behalf of the accused, a procedure, as Levack indicates, more reminiscent of Europe than England. Lawyers appeared at Paisley attuned to such matters as hearsay, irrelevancy and procedural irregularities. There was a reluctance to accept confessions.

There were very few cases in the eighteenth century, as Peter Maxwell-Stuart has also shown. In 1700, 22 witch cases were deserted in one session; after 1720 they are virtually non-existent. According to Maxwell-Stuart, there were more cases of bestiality throughout the eighteenth century than there were of witchcraft, but many more cases of adultery.<sup>13</sup>

Some of the legal innovations can clearly be seen to have had an impact upon the witch problem, but one element is still missing, namely the ministers who were present, front and centre, throughout the entire period of the Scottish witch-hunts. The Witchcraft Act of 1563 was passed just three years after the Reformation Parliament legislated Protestantism as Scotland's new faith. The kirk leaders involved were John Knox, John Winram, superintendent of Fife, and John Erskine of Dun, superintendent of Angus, half of the six churchmen named "John" who had sat on the committee that drafted the *First Book of Discipline*, a programme of reform for the new church. It would be expected that such a high-powered and experienced trio would be very familiar with current thinking on the subject of witches, and perhaps even quite keen to show how in touch with contemporary developments and concerns the kirk was. However that may be – and the evidence we would like just does not exist at present – the Church of Scotland, from a shaky start, began to establish itself. In 1572 there was an elaborate witch trial involving Jonet Boyman and, as indicated earlier in this study, others swiftly followed. The church must have been delighted when James VI took such a personal interest in the North Berwick affair, but king and kirk fell out over many other matters.

The more radical Presbyterian wing of the church was always intent upon ridding the commonwealth of the curses of diablerie and witches, especially during the years of covenanting resistance, but ironically the most vicious hunts took place in periods of Episcopalian ascendancy; the eradication of witchcraft was not a sectarian matter, but it was prelates who spear-headed many of the prosecutions discussed in this book. However, some of the neuroses of later Stewart Scotland spilled over into the established church

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Maxwell-Stuart, "Witchcraft and Magic in Eighteenth-Century Scotland", in *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004) 81–99.

in the lengthy debates leading to union in 1707. It was not just Covenanters who energetically campaigned against union through means of the General Assembly before eventually coming to the conclusion that a treaty of incorporation might promise the best hope of salvation for the kirk. Many others were also persuaded.

Throughout the eighteenth century the Covenanters and their “martyrs” were portrayed as the true saviours of church and state. As indicated in Chapter 5, Bostridge has convincingly argued that witch belief and witch-hunting were closely bound up with kirk identity at a time when it believed itself to be under siege. People who were willing to execute one of their own students for blasphemy were not about to declare themselves in favour of enlightenment. While some ministers were at the forefront of intellectual developments the overwhelming majority were not. Furthermore the vast majority of communicants could be described as “low kirk” in a church that was by no means “high”, and ministers were often reluctant to step out of line with the kirk sessions and elders to whom they were beholden for their appointments. The evangelical wing of the church, along with significant numbers of non-conformists, were deeply opposed to the repeal of the witchcraft acts as contrary to the will of God just as, in their minds, the covenants remained as sacrosanct as when they were first penned. Ministers such as John Mill and Donald Sage were not alone in the nineteenth century in proving that the Devil did not die, nor did witches simply waste away. Their successors, irrespective of Christian persuasion, are still around in Scotland today.

Throughout the entire period surveyed in this study a majority of ministers were the sons of ministers and, no matter how well educated, they still preserved at least a remnant of beliefs dinned into them as children. Some clung on to such certainties about demons and witches, while others were no longer so sure, but again a great many never could quite relinquish what had long been unquestioned certainties. Each time such matters were mentioned in the pulpit popular prejudice was reinforced. Also many of the laymen discussed in this book as collectors of folklore and traditions came from the folk tradition themselves, passing on to the future what they, in good faith, considered to be the beliefs of the past, again with an element of cultural reinforcement.

Christina Lerner’s “anthropological truism”, that witch beliefs which are representative of an inversion of societal values, and can tell us more about the “concerns and interests of the ordinary farmers and fishermen” than “reading examples of sermons which were preached to them”, has been an underlying influence throughout this book.<sup>14</sup> An assumption that has

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<sup>14</sup> Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981) 134.

been drawn is that none of the people captured within the pages of this book, regardless of social status, age or gender, were passive objects, receiving information about witchcraft uncritically, but were “active creators of meaning”.<sup>15</sup> Beliefs are the product of internal and external dialogues, an exchange of ideas from within and without the social group, and a reinforcement of individual and shared practices and attitudes. Beliefs can bind a community, but can also rend it asunder. There is not one, single witch belief, just as there is not one historical truth, or one reality, but a multitude of beliefs, all jostling for position. Beliefs are rarely static and can change to fit the circumstances or adapt with the times. Beliefs about witches were subjected to adaptation and transformation over the course of history.

The changing face of eighteenth-century witchcraft was not so much a “dis-enchantment” but a “re-enchantment” of the world and the beginnings of a process of naturalizing the supernatural, the anomalous and the monstrous. In 1746, the French biblical scholar Augustin Calmet proclaimed: “Every age, every nation, every country has its prejudices, its maladies, its customs ... which characterize it and which pass away ... often that which has appeared admirable at one time, becomes pitiful and ridiculous at another.”<sup>16</sup> Commendable though his observations are, his words are much too mild. It is extremely difficult to retain any sort of historical objectivity when discussing the era of the witch-hunts. Judged by any criteria the death and pain inflicted upon so many individuals – and these often members of one’s own community – represent a massive stain on the centuries that hosted religious reformation and the Enlightenment. The executions and torture were as horrendous a blight upon Scotland as they were anywhere else, but the victims should not be forgotten or trivialized, as this book has attempted to emphasize.

The most important aspect of this study has, I hope, been the recovery of the whispered voices of the accused and so, with that in mind, the final word is given to Bessie Paine (1671), a woman who lost her life not to the gallows but through the “inconveniences” of prison while awaiting trial: “all the witchcraft which I have I leave it here”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kathryn A. Edwards, ed., *Werewolves, Witches and Wandering Spirits: Traditional Beliefs and Folklore in Early Modern Europe* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2002) ix.

<sup>16</sup> Dom Augustin Calmet, *Dissertation sur les Apparitions, des Anges, Demons et des Esprits, et sur les Revenants et Vampires de Hongrie, de Boheme, de Moravie et de Silesie* (*The Phantom World or, the Philosophy of Spirits, Apparitions, etc.*) (Paris, 1746; London: Richard Bentley, 1850). An English edition first published in 1759.

<sup>17</sup> Trial of Bessie Paine, Kirkcudbright, 1671, NAS, JC26/38, Larner et al., *Source-Book*, 269–70.



# Appendix I: The Scottish Witchcraft Act, 4 June 1563

## *Anentis Witchcraftis*

ITEM Forsamekill as the Quenis Majestie and thre Estatis in this present Parliament being informit, that the havy and abominabill superstitioun usit be divers of the liegis of this Realme, be using of Witchcraftis, Sorsarie and Necromancie, and credence gevin thairto in tymes bygane aganis the Law of God: And for avoiding and away putting of all sic vane superstitioun in tymes tocum:

It is statute and ordanit be the Quenis Majestie, and thre Estatis foirsaidis, that na maner of persoun nor persounis, of quhatsumever estate, degre or conditioun they be of, tak upone hand in ony tymes heirefter, to use ony maner of Witchcraftis, Sorsarie or Necromancie, nor gif thame selfis furth to have ony sic craft or knowlege thairof, thairthrow abusand the pepill: Nor that na persoun seik ony help, response or cosultatioun at ony sic usaris or abusaris foirsaidis of Witchcraftis, Sorsareis or Necromancie, under the pane of deid, aslweill to be execute aganis the usar, abusar, as the seikar of the response or consultatioun. And this to be put to executioun be the Justice, Schireffis, Stewartis, Baillies, Lordis of Regaliteis and Rialteis, thair Deputis, and uthers Ordinar Jugeis competent within this Realme, with all rigour, having powar to execute the samin.

# Appendix II: The Witchcraft Act, 1735

## 9 Geo. 2 c. 5

An Act to repeal the Statute made in the First Year of the Reign of King James the First, intituled, *An Act against Conjuraton, Witchcraft, and dealing with evil and wicked Spirits*, except so much thereof as repeals an Act of the Fifth Year of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, *Against Conjuratons, Inchantments, and Witchcrafts*, and to repeal an Act passed in the Parliament of Scotland in the Ninth Parliament of Queen Mary, intituled, *Anentis Witchcrafts*, and for punishing such Persons as pretended to exercise or use any Kind of Witchcraft, Sorcery, Inchantment, or Conjuraton.

Be it enacted by the King's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the Authority of the same, That the Statutue made in the first Year of the Reign of King James the First, intituled, *An Act against Conjuraton, Witchcraft, and dealing with evil and wicked Spirits*, shall, from the Twenty-fourth Day of June next, be repealed and utterly void and of none Effect (except so much thereof as repeals the Statute made in the Fifth Year of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, intituled, *An Act against Conjuraton, Inchantments and Witchcrafts*).

II. And be it further enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That from and after the said Twenty-fourth Day of June, the Act passed in the Parliament of Scotland, in the Ninth Parliament of Queen Mary, intituled, *Anentis Witchcrafts*, shall be, and is hereby repealed.

III. And be it further enacted, That from and after the said Twenty-fourth Day of June, no Proseccion, Suit, or Proceeding, shall be commenced or carried on against any Person or Persons for Witchcraft, Sorcery, Inchantment or Conjuraton, or for charging another with any such offence, in any Court whatsoever in Great Britain.

IV. And for the more effectual preventing and punishing of any Pretences to such Arts and Powers as are before mentioned, whereby ignorant Persons are frequently deluded and defrauded; be it further enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That if any Person shall, from and after the said Twenty-fourth Day of June, pretend to exercise or use any kind of Witchcraft, Sorcery, Inchantment or Conjuraton, or undertake to tell Fortunes, or pretend from his or her Skill or Knowledge in any occult or crafty Science, to discover where or in what Manner any Goods or Chattels, supposed to have been stolent or lost, may be found, every Person so offending, being thereof lawfully convicted on Indictment or Information in that part of Great Britain

called England, or on Indictment or Libel in that part of Great Britain called Scotland, shall for every such offence suffer Imprisonment by the Space of one whole Year without Bail or Mainprize, and once in every Quarter of the said Year in some Market Town of the proper County, upon the Market Day, there stand openly on the Pillory by the Space of One Hour, and also shall (if the Court by which such Judgement shall be given shall think fit) be obliged to give Sureties for his or her good Behaviour, in such Sum, and for such Time, as the said Court shall judge proper according to the Circumstances of the Offence, and in such case shall be further imprisoned until such Sureties be given.

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