



A witch feeds her rod-ants. Woodcut of 1630. #2. English & Scottish Witchcraft: CHRISTINA LARNER
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Witch Beliefs & Witch-hunting in ENGLAND & SCOTLAND

Comparisons between the English and Scottish witch-hunts have been drawn from as early as 1591. Recent research on the subject both sides of the border makes a reassessment of their differences timely

OUR SCOTTISH WITCH IS A FAR MORE frightful being than her coadjutor on the south side of the Tweed. 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.

The writer was the Scottish historian, John Hill Burton, in 1852. He was but one exponent of a long rationalist tradition in which the relative severity of the Scottish witch-hunt is (correctly) noted, and the cause attributed (with some reason) to the zeal of the Scottish clergy and (falsely) to the severity of Scottish geography and climate.

The comparative tradition, however, was much older than rationalism. It

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began almost contemporaneously with the Scottish witch-hunt itself. *Newes from Scotland* was published in London in 1591. It described the treason trials of the winter of 1590-91 which James VI had just finished supervising in Edinburgh. In these, large numbers of people were accused of meeting with the devil at North Berwick in order to perform acts of sorcery against the person of the king. Accounts differ as to how many were involved, but the names of about seventy survive in the records. The tract is a propaganda exercise directed at the English on behalf of the next aspirant to the throne of England. He was described as 'the greatest enemy the Devil hath on earth'. It provides us with the only contemporary representation of Scottish witches: woodcuts from an Englishman's imagination.

Throughout the following century Scottish witch beliefs and witch-trials supplied the English reading public with tales of horror and mystery. When the Scottish presses towards the end of the seventeenth century started to produce their own versions these were usually republished in England with new titles almost immediately. The 1680s saw a number of such duplicated works. By the time that nineteenth-century writers in both England and Scotland were commenting on Scottish witchcraft (Lecky, Scott, Dalryell, Buckle and Mackay), the contrasts with England were already familiar. The romanticism also characteristic of most of these writers provided the new explanation of a dreadful and hostile geography. This theme was elaborated by such twentieth-century commentators as Summers and is still a favourite in popular accounts.

The long standing nature of comparisons between English and Scottish witch-

hunting is one reason why a reassessment of these comparisons seems reasonable. It is also timely in that it is only recently that enough research into records on both sides of the border has been done to make such a reassessment fruitful. There are, however, some reasons why such a reassessment might seem artificial. In recent years research in the criminal archives of the European Continent has shown that there is no form of witch belief and no form of witchcraft control that can be described as typically 'continental' and opposed to those characteristic either of the British Isles or of England or Scotland as separate entities. Instead we can now see during the period from late fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries a long continuum of severity of witchcraft accusation, ranging from the full diabolism of black mass and infant cannibalism through weaker forms of demonic belief to the simple and more or less endemic beliefs in village sorcery and the potency of malice. It is also clear that the more extreme forms of witchcraft control and diabolic concern were highly episodic and sometimes, as in Italy and Spain, single isolated events.

Within this wide range of the European experience of witchcraft, Scotland and England, despite their shared insularity, represent two quite distinct levels of intensity. Scottish witch beliefs should be placed fairly far up the scale of severity, being less intense than the German hunts but slightly more intense than the French or the Swiss. England should be placed fairly far down the scale, level with Denmark and Russia. England was less severe than Denmark so far as numbers executed were concerned, but English beliefs had, on the other hand, a more persistent demonic component than the Danish witch beliefs. It has recently

become fashionable to refer to English witchcraft as 'unique', but this is a very strong word even for historians to use. Witchcraft in England was not unique; it was merely taken less seriously by the authorities than in some European countries, and more seriously than in some others.

So far as the legal position was concerned, the period of persecution of witches in England and Scotland overlapped but was not identical. Witchcraft became a statutory crime in England from 1542, in Scotland from 1563; an act of the British Parliament in 1735 repealed these and all other acts against sorcery. This legal time scale - 1542-1735 for England; 1563-1735 for Scotland - represents the period during which witchcraft was a secular crime punishable by death, but in both countries the period of prosecutions was somewhat shorter. In England the peak seems to have occurred in the mid to late sixteenth century, coinciding with the beginning of the second and most severe period of continental prosecutions. Numbers steadily declined in the seventeenth century apart from the Essex outbreak of 1645 and the Lowestoft cases of 1662. The last person to be executed for witchcraft was hanged at Exeter in 1682. In Scotland, apart from a few cases, prosecutions only began with the treason trials of 1590-91, and continued, with troughs and peaks, until the 1670s when there was a sharp decline. There were a few cases thereafter continuing into the eighteenth century, certainly enough to keep the English entertained with Scottish exotica.

More striking than the later decline of witch prosecutions in Scotland, however, was the difference in the numbers involved. Unfortunately we are unable to present firm figures: too many criminal

records are lost; too many surviving records refer to unnamed suspects or even simply to 'many witches'; and too many known trials have no known outcome. It seems likely, however, that the figure of 1,000 executions in England, advanced in 1929 by C. L. Ewen, is considerably too high. In the first place Ewen to some extent extrapolated his total from the incidence of witchcraft in Essex and the Home Counties; yet subsequent research suggests that the offence was more commonly prosecuted there than elsewhere. Second, even in Essex, English law provided a variety of lesser penalties for acts of witchcraft and the proportion of those executed to those convicted in Essex was very low. Third, the fact that English witchcraft cases were rarely multiple meant that there was little chance of building up the large numbers found in Scotland and the Continent. If forced to choose a figure for executions something under 500 might be reasonable.

For Scotland, with a very much smaller population than England, the most reasonable estimate made after a recent survey of the central records, seems to be something slightly over 1,000 executed. About half the 600 who were tried in the High Court at Edinburgh were acquitted. The acquittal rate for the larger number tried locally on a Privy Council Commission appears to have been much lower, but this is not certain.

The numbers accused, banished, tried, fleeing, dying in prison, or given lesser penalties, could be enormous in relation to those executed and run into a few thousands. Witch-hunting operated at such a variety of levels, from personal to political, that the possibilities of quantification are almost infinitely recessive. We can only be certain that the execution rate was, exactly as it has always been



(Above) Doctor Fian practises his sorcery. (Right) James VI examines the witches Agnis Sampson and Agnes Tompson among others at Edinburgh; woodcuts in *Newes from Scotland*, 1591.



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represented, strikingly more severe for Scotland than for England. What is more, many of the prosecutions were of large groups of people. But as in England, these prosecutions were very local. Those executed were drawn not from the whole of Scotland but largely from the restricted area more closely controlled by the central government: Fife, Moray, Aberdeenshire, the Lothians and the Borders.

What, then, were the factors that made the prosecution of witchcraft more severe or the control of witchcraft more difficult, depending on one's viewpoint, in Scotland than in England? We can, I think, forget about thundering torrents, impenetrable mists, and high mountains. The witch-hunts of Scotland were concentrated in the relatively prosperous, more or less level, agricultural regions. The places where the accused confessed to having met with the devil were crossroads, barns, mills and churches.



If this (beinge
redie prepared
to receive her
death) she confessed
earnestly that she
had bene a wytche
and dyed suche ex-
crable sofferye the
space of. xv. yeres,
and had don many
abhorminable dede,
the which she repen-
ted earnestly a vn-
faynedly, and desyr-
ed almyghty God
forgeuenes in that
she had abused hys
most holy name by
her

The confession of Agnes Waterhouse of Hatfield in Essex, executed in 1566.

The sources of the differences are multiple and interrelated, and it is difficult with confidence to place them in order of primacy. Moreover, before looking at these differences in detail, we must remember that there was much common ground. An inhabitant of an Essex village in 1640 seems to have believed much the same about who were witches, and about the way in which witchcraft menaced his or her life as an inhabitant of East Lothian. A witch was a neighbour. She was most likely a mature female, though not necessarily elderly or solitary. She was likely to be at the more impoverished end of the village socio-economic scale, certainly poorer than those who accused her. She was likely to be quarrelsome. She might or might not have a reputation for healing as well as for harming, but above all she was deemed to have malevolent supernatural powers. These powers were activated by

quarrels and were directed against the property, livestock, relatives, and persons of those who offended the witch. On some occasions the operation of this malice (known as malefice or *maleficium*) could go as far as murder. The threat was directed against both personal and economic security.

Take the accusation of Frances Rustat in 1659 in Hertfordshire: she claimed that after refusing payment to Goody Free for some eggs, on the grounds that she had no small change, she had never been well. She was now 'strangely handled with great pain' and claimed that 'if she died of that distemper Goody Free was the cause of her death'. Similarly in a 1570 case, a man failed to invite the accused witch to a sheep shearing, which he should have done 'she being his neighbour', and she thereupon bewitched two of his sheep. In Scotland the sources of accusations and the close relationships between accuser and accused were the same. In Dumfriesshire in 1671 Elspeth Thomson's sister-in-law failed to invite her to the christening of her child. Her milk failed, the child died, and Elspeth was held responsible.

The type of person accused was similar on both sides of the border, although a greater proportion of men, about 20 per cent, were accused in Scotland. Most of them were related to women accused in the multiple hunts. The manner of their selection was also similar. They were preselected by reputation, and reputation could be built up early in life through being the daughter, niece or close associate of a witch. The reputation was often developed by the witch's reaction to an accusation. She would offer in response a conditional curse. In the case of Elizabeth Lewys¹ her accuser said 'yf it be as folke saye, thow art a wytche'. She replied, 'yf I be a wych the devell thee twytche'. The formula was the same, if not always in rhyme, in Scotland. Agnes Finnie of Edinburgh said to her accusers: 'If I be a witch, you or yours shall have better cause to call me so'. And soon, of course, they did.

There was a difference between England and Scotland, however, in the distance over which reputation was held. In Essex most accusations were between intimates and these accusations were concentrated not only within one village but sometimes within one section of a village. Reputations were rarely held over longer distances than five miles. In Scotland on the other hand, although intimates, relatives and near neighbours were frequently involved, accusations could come from as far as twenty miles away. The likeliest explanation for this is that the equivalent of the English

¹Quoted in detail in Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, London, 1977.

nucleated village was rare in Scotland except on the coast. Most peasants lived in small hamlets which had two separate points of focus: the estate farm, and the hamlet which housed the parish church ('the kirkton'). It was at the estate farm and at the kirk that the exchange of gossip took place for a widely diffused organisational area. The reputation of the witch was as broad as the parish and the overlapping area of the estate.

The kinds of misfortune for which witchcraft was held to be responsible were also the same for Scotland as for England. These were sudden illness, certain accidents, lingering illnesses for which no cause was clear, strokes, unexpected deaths, the failure of crops, especially if other people's were doing well, the drying up of milk, human or animal, strange behaviour in animals, and in fishing villages, disasters at sea.

This basic structure of peasant witchcraft accusations is similar for all witch-believing societies. The attributes of the witch vary according to the values of the society in question, for witch beliefs represent an inversion of these values but the patterns are widely similar.

Most accounts of European witchcraft, however, put forward a distinction between 'popular' and 'educated' witch beliefs. The category of 'educated' witch beliefs includes the demonic pact, in which the witch renounced her baptism and parted with her immortal soul in return for certain specific earthly benefits, and the witches' meeting at which they met with Satan, ate unbaptised babies, performed communal sorcery, and had sexual orgies. They also incorporated a variety of ordeals to determine whether or not accused persons had in fact made a pact with the devil. The most essential element in a conviction for this type of witchcraft was the witch's confession, and this was extracted through direct torture, threat of torture, or sleep deprivation. The essential difference between the popular and the educated conception of witchcraft was that the popular was concerned with particular acts of *maleficium*, while the educated was concerned with the condition of being a witch.

There are two difficulties about this very sharp distinction between a continental witchcraft which is essentially diabolic and an English witchcraft which is essentially about local malice, and these difficulties are highlighted by Scottish witch beliefs. The first problem is that of the extent to which popular beliefs became educated in the course of a witch-hunt, and the second is the extent to which popular concern about malefice continued alongside diabolic beliefs and buttressed even the most intensive continental panics.

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Execution of witches in England showing the witch-finder, right, receiving his payment.

These two problems emerge very clearly in the material on the Scottish witch-hunt. In England the accused was normally tried for the offence of which she had first been accused. In Scotland the original accusation was merely the trigger for the collection of evidence about the essential crime of being a witch. Village maleficence was produced in court as supporting evidence, but in a large number of cases the final indictment bore almost no relation to the original accusation. These final indictments were common form and asserted that

Ye, having shaken off all feare of god and reverence and regaird of the divyne ordinance Lawes and acts of parliament of this kingdom has betaken yourself to the Service of Satan the enimie of your salvation, engaged to be his servant. And taken his mark upon your bodie, practised used and exercised divers and sundrie develish charms witchcraft and sorcerie. And has thereby hurt and damnified his majesties subjects in their goods and persons - And also ye have severall tymes carnal dealing or copulation with the devill and so defylled that bodie of yours which should have been a temple of the holy ghost by giving the use thairof to the devill as said is . . .

There was another route to the dock in Scotland and in parts of the Continent than through neighbourly accusation, and this was accusation by a witch who had already confessed and was about to be executed. In the German panics this was often enough in itself and meant that individuals who did not fit the stereotype of a witch - respectable burghers and children, for example - were brought into the process. In Scotland, however, even during the major panics, it was unusual for anyone to be executed on the word of another convict without the corroborative evidence both of her own confession and the evidence of neighbours that she was of 'ill repute'. The term 'honest' was applied to women on both sides of the border to mean they were of blameless reputation. It was only when the supply of notorious scolds had been exhausted

- for cursing and quarrelling were the hallmarks of prime suspects - that 'honest' women were in danger in Scotland. The connection between the educated demonology of the indictment and the popular concerns demonstrated in the accusations was rarely lost sight of.

Popular beliefs, however, did not remain static, nor were they unaffected by pulpit indoctrination, by amazing confessions and by the visual lessons of the stake. Already in the early seventeenth century in Scotland the commonest ordeal for discovering witchcraft was pricking for the witches' mark. The devil was believed to leave an insensible mark on the person of the witch which would not bleed when pricked. A whole profession grew up, willing to travel around and search out witches for a fee. Accused persons and their relatives actually suggested that their innocence be proved by taking them to the 'brodder' or 'jobber', as the pricker was popularly called. This particular ordeal, unlike that of swimming the witch which was common in England but rare in Scotland, had no meaning whatever except in the context of diabolic (educated) witch belief. It

The swimming of May Sutton; woodcut from a pamphlet of 1613 *Witches apprehended, examined and executed.*



was also known in England. The English moreover, would search for supernumerary nipples from which the witch's familiar, a personal devil in the form of an animal, could suck. This was relatively rare in Scotland and on the Continent.

When it came to confession, the Scottish witches described the pact in the terms laid down in the indictment, they also added what the devil had promised them in return for their immortal souls. The price of a peasant woman's soul was modest. She should be free from want; she should have pleasure. On the much rarer occasions when English witches confessed to the demonic pact they used almost exactly the same phraseology as their Scottish counterparts. In both countries the devil gave small gifts of coins which then turned out to be stones.

The terms of the pact in Scotland, being the legal centrepiece, were highly formalised. Confessions of witches' meetings, which were legally less important, were much more varied. Some of the confessions included multiple copulation and direct devil worship. Most were more modest. The devil simply joined them at a party. There was singing, pipe-playing, dancing, eating and drinking, and, above all, disorder. In seventeenth-century Scotland communal occasions were feared and frowned upon. Gatherings of more than a small number under one roof were forbidden. Even bridal parties were hedged around with restrictions. The witches' fantasies of meetings simply featured a form of social pleasure which they were in real life denied. In East Lothian in 1659 Marion Angus described how they

had a meeting in the Gallowhop in the night time and there had a piece of flesh like beef. And after they had all eaten of the same the devil, having a bonnet on his head took Bessie Lacost by the hand and the rest having one another by the hand danced in a ring round about the broad stone in



'Black John chastising the Witches' from *Twelve Sketches illustrative of Sir Walter Scott's Demonology and Witchcraft*, 1830.

the Gallowhop and sung ane to another and then bade them guidnight.

English witches, in their rarer portrayals of communal witchcraft also ate beef and drank ale. In neither country were black masses celebrated. This is not surprising, since such a celebration would not have been an inversion of a revered institution; but one might have expected instead mockery of Protestant forms of worship. It seems that witches' meetings were of greater importance in Catholic countries. This, together with inquisitorial forms of legal process, produced the mass panics. In Calvinist countries the demonic pact and the devil's mark, the individual aspects of witch belief, were more important, and

witches were accused in smaller groups.

Practically all forms of diabolic witch belief found in Scotland were also known in England and featured in the works of Puritan witchcraft writers such as Perkins, and also in the 1603 Witchcraft Act. The principal difference between English and Scottish beliefs was not in the content, but in the relative significance of diabolism in the two countries and in the relative ferocity of the punishments for convicted witches.

There are a variety of factors that may have contributed to these differences. Of these the most important may well have been the differences in the legal system. The Scottish system was Roman, inquisitorial, and theoretical; the English based on statute law and pragmatic. A person accused of witchcraft under an inquisitorial system was tortured to confess and to name accomplices. The naming of accomplices produced the mass hunts characteristic of Scotland and parts of the Continent. The application of theories of diabolism produced the exotic stories of witches' meetings. Countries on the fringe of the system of Roman Law - Russia, England and the Scandinavian countries - produced mainly individual cases of village maleficence.

Equally important may have been the fact that witchcraft in Scotland was centrally controlled. Every case had to be processed individually through the Privy Council or Parliament. This meant that witch-hunting in Scotland could be

used for political purposes to stimulate national unity - a function it served in 1649 and again at the Restoration. It could not serve such a purpose in England for there witchcraft control was local. Other significant factors were the greater intensity of religious indoctrination in seventeenth-century Scotland and the network of Kirk sessions and presbyteries through which the comparative success of parishes in ridding the land of witches could be monitored. One minister was given money by his parish for a pair of shoes to enable him to attend a witch burning at a neighbouring parish.

The shock and horror exhibited by the Cromwellian military government in Scotland at the tortures inflicted on women awaiting trial there illuminates the difference between the countries. The sources of this difference are to be found in legal theory and organisation, in the relative state of scientific knowledge, and in the relative significance of religion in the sphere of politics.

NOTES ON FURTHER READING

Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson (London, 1971); and Penguin Books (Harmondsworth, 1973); Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, Routledge and Kegan Paul (London, 1970); Stuart Clark, 'King James's Daemonologie' in Sydney Anglo (ed.) *The Damned Art*, Routledge and Kegan Paul (London, 1977); Christina Lerner, Christopher Hyde Lee and Hugh V. McLachlan, *A Source Book of Scottish Witchcraft*, Glasgow University Press (Glasgow, 1977); Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland*, Chatto and Windus (London, 1981).

Postscript

The persevering reader who has perused all six articles on witchcraft in this 'special feature' will doubtless be left with some general questions about the European witchcraze of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Most obviously, one may ask how many people were tried and executed for sorcery? Alas, no acceptable answer can be offered. Even for individual countries such as England or France no totals can be calculated because of both the multiplicity of jurisdictions concerned with the punishment of crime and the widespread loss of legal record. Voltaire's educated estimate of 100,000 victims still seems plausible, but historians have found it impossible either to confirm or to deny this figure empirically. All that we can add is that very few areas indeed were entirely safe for witches to live: only the lands of the Orthodox Church in the East and - after 1610 - of the Dutch Republic in the West seem to have offered sanctuary. It is true that in

Spain and most of Italy witches were not burned after about 1610; but they were still severely punished in other ways, and they continued to be molested by the law long after the persecution ended in the rest of western Europe.

The reason why the witchcraze ended is another issue on which readers may search in vain for a convincing and intelligible answer. Almost every author in this feature has suggested one or more causes, none of which commands universal acceptance. Since these articles were written, yet another explanation has been put forward. The recent study of Brian Easlea, *Witch-hunting, Magic and the New Philosophy* (Harvester Press, 1980), suggests that the decline of Satanic influence in the affairs of men was the result of a new confidence acquired by the ruling élites of Europe in their ability to control nature, together with a new obsessive desire to exercise that control. The Devil was abolished, because there was no longer any place for him in the new mechanistic universe of the European intellectuals. The abolition of God, according to Easlea, was only prevented by the manifest advantages offered to the ruling class by the restraining influence

of the churches over their congregations, and by the formidable power of the ecclesiastical institutions. But even so, God was increasingly confined to a spectator's role in the universe He had created.

The 'Easlea thesis', however, has one defect: it has been framed solely with reference to north-western Europe. There is little discussion of its applicability to the Mediterranean lands, and none at all concerning Scandinavia or the East. Yet it is manifestly inaccurate to extrapolate from England and France to Poland or Spain. As the articles above show, every state seems to have treated witches differently, even in the West. Alas, we still do not fully understand the mechanics of sorcery and suppression in the East: we know so much less about witchcraft and magic in Prague and Kraków than in Paris and Edinburgh. Until this state of affairs is remedied, there can be no total view of the scale of the European witchcraze, the reasons for its appearance or the reasons for its end. Any explanation that leaves out Bohemia, Hungary, Poland or Scandinavia will remain tentative, incomplete and misleading.

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