REVIEW


In this well-researched volume, Emma Wilby breaks away from the national and regional perspectives that have long dominated the field of Scottish witchcraft in favour of examining a single witch trial—that of Isobel Gowdie in Auldearn, 1662—in great detail. Wilby uses the original confessions of Isobel—long believed to be lost and rediscovered by the author herself in an un-catalogued box of papers at the National Archives of Scotland—as a lens through which to explore the potential for visionary experience and shamanistic practices among those accused of witchcraft in early modern Scotland. Following in the footsteps of Carlos Ginzburg and Éva Pócs, Wilby conducts an in-depth analysis of the content of Isobel’s testimony in order to show how Isobel’s confessions might have reflected an actual self-identification as a practitioner of harmful magic.

To this end, the author brings in evidence from other early modern studies of magic and religion, supplemented by anthropological research on shamanistic cultures outside of Europe. Wilby argues that, through visions and dreams, Isobel may have experienced communion with spirits and fairies, communication with other dream-cult members, and participation in harmful, self-defensive magic. Under the intense psychological pressure of repeated interrogation and sleep-deprivation, these visionary experiences might have been translated—through the processes of false-memory implantation and confession—into her testimony as serving the Devil, trafficking with other witches, and maliciously
causing harm to local authority figures and community members.

This volume offers several rewarding approaches in the field of witchcraft studies, particularly in its focus on a single trial. With many recent scholars emphasizing the primary role played by specific individuals and the local context of the witch trials, such a micro-historical approach is exciting. The prodigious amount of evidence that Wilby brings in allows her to explore not only the lives and personalities of the local laird, minister, notary, and alleged witch, but also the unique interpersonal dynamic that may have arisen as a consequence of their roles in the trial. Equally important is Wilby’s exploration of the acknowledged, yet rarely researched, possibility that some individuals’ accused of sorcery might actually have believed themselves to be witches.

Many scholars have argued that the demonological content of witchcraft confessions was the product of the imposition of elite witch belief onto folk belief through the process of interrogation; however, as Wilby points out, such an approach ignores the possibility that accused witches may have actually performed some form of malefic magic and consequently reduces all alleged witches to the status of victims.

Wilby’s study is not without significant drawbacks, however. Many of these methodological problems are readily acknowledged by the author, who is aware of the tensions involved in drawing generalized conclusions from a single example or study. Due to the lack of direct evidence on Isobel’s life, or for much of the Scottish population, such an investigation into the experiences and beliefs of such individuals must remain highly speculative. At times, the line between hypothesis-based-on-factual-evidence and conjecture-born-of-fancy seems to have been blurred if not blatantly crossed. While many of the author’s conclusions can be supported—or at least potentially accepted in the absence of contrary evidence—the glue that binds many of these
themes is speculation, which, when treated as fact, critically undermines the strength of her arguments. The extraordinary content and language of Isobel’s confessions, which has been commented on for centuries, poses another problem. The highly unusual nature of this case challenges the ability of the author to extrapolate on the existence of a shamanistic dream-cult in Scotland since little supplementary trial evidence can be brought in to substantiate such a claim. Using evidence from as far afield as modern Brazil sometimes exacerbates this lack of direct evidence rather than remedying it, leaving the reader unsure as to how Native American belief might reflect magical practices in Scotland.

Nevertheless, while Wilby is certainly interested in exploring the potential for the survival of animistic, pre-Christian dream-cults, her major project is to explore in-depth the particular circumstances and influences that came to play in Isobel’s trial in order to produce a plausible narrative of these events. Presented as a single possible scenario among many, readers may choose to agree or disagree with the author’s conclusions. The significance of Wilby’s project, however, lies in its reminder to scholars and novices alike that, for some people, witchcraft could indeed represent a lived experience. In emphasizing the subjective nature of “visionary experience,” Wilby points out that while alleged witches might not have actually flown to diabolical sabbaths on wisps of straw, they might have experienced something very similar through dreams and visions of flying, astral projection, and spiritual transformation. In making such an argument, Wilby restores agency and vitality to those individuals who are so often portrayed as the passive victims of a state or patriarchy-driven witch hunt, and offers a significant contribution to the field of witchcraft studies.

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