
What makes the study of the witch-hunts in early modern Europe so fascinating – and challenging – is the variety of approaches scholars take to try to both understand and explain what was occurring. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, in his recent *Satan's Conspiracy: Magic and Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland* (Tuckwell, 2001), studies these early cases with a clear reference point – that of magic and occult beliefs. Maxwell-Stuart has already published two articles specifically dealing with aspects of the early Scottish witch-hunt: “The fear of the king is death: James VI and the witches of East Lothian” (1997); and, “Witchcraft and the Kirk in Aberdeenshire, 1596-1597” (1998). Other recent publications including *The Occult in Early Modern Europe: A Documentary History* (St. Martin’s, 1999), *Witchcraft: A history* (Tempus, 2000), and *Witchcraft in Europe and the New World, 1400-1800* (Palgrave, 2001) have all demonstrated extensive knowledge of beliefs and literature on magic and the occult. It is this perspective which allows him to produce a portrait which is, in his own words, “very different from the one which is normally painted.” (*Satan’s Conspiracy*, preface)

This clear focus is illustrated in both the subtitle and the organization of *Satan’s Conspiracy*. Magic is the focus, and it is to an explanation of early modern beliefs that the author turns in his key first chapter. People in early modern Europe believed in and practiced magic: “in every European society of this period there existed a constant level of magical activity, whether learned or traditional, which everyone took for granted.” (10) Maxwell-Stuart carefully outlines this view of the world in all of its complexity without ever falling into the trap of being condescending. He walks the reader through the different kinds of magic (ceremonial, artificial, natural, demonic) in which 16th century people believed, and how some uses of magic came to be understood as ‘witchcraft.’ A witch, as the author defines her, is someone who simply
practices witchcraft, and the latter is what witches do. Aware of the “circularity of these definitions”[3], the author nonetheless tries to illustrate the reality that more complex definitions involving the intellectual ideas of the elite do not necessarily work in terms of how witches were defined by those in the 16th century itself. Forget pacts and carnal copulation – the witch to those in the community was someone who could exercise power to heal or harm. Over time this could lead to a particular label being applied: “After a while, then, someone in the local community decides to attach the label ‘witch’ to this operator of preternatural or magical power.” (8) It is this reality, that it was others within a particular community who decided when and why one particular individual should be labelled a ‘witch’, that makes any definition of the term difficult. This is also a different definition from that developed by either the legal authorities or the church. Rather than being an elite fantasy, Maxwell-Stuart argues the witch was thus a local practitioner of magic, and he outlines in what circumstances tolerance of the local witch might end and the witch might come to the attention of the church and legal authorities. The author offers a careful description of the relationship between magic and witchcraft, and then moves on in the Introduction to discuss sithean (the Gaelic word for fairy which he chooses to use, given the manner in which the English word ‘fairy’ has been domesticated), charming, curing, magic wells, second sight, and divination. The book thus begins with the establishment of the belief system of people in the sixteenth century. Only after this has been offered as a serious discussion, does Maxwell Stuart move into a chronological survey of the early cases with this perspective very much in mind.

In Chapter 2 Maxwell-Stuart both begins the narrative which continues through the rest of the book. He also introduces his other major theme, namely that the concern of the established church in Scotland in regard to the subject of witchcraft was not primarily the result of demonic theory, but an attack on Catholics and Catholicism. After a run-through of the early cases, the chapter focuses on the passage of the
witchcraft act of 1563 with the author asking the pointed questions: what is the meaning of the act, at whom was it directed; and, why was it passed at that particular time? In terms of meaning, Maxwell-Stuart challenges Christina Larnèr’s understanding of the Act as having a sceptical aspect. Instead he suggests that this is one of the evidences that the Act was aimed at both the practice of magic in general and Catholicism, considered in sixteenth century Protestant eyes to have numerous superstitious elements. After discussing his other two questions, he concludes that the witchcraft act needs to be understood as “an integral part of the religious war against Catholicism then being waged by the Protestant establishment in Scotland.” (44) These themes of attacking both magical practice and Catholicism are central to Maxwell-Stuart’s analysis of the cases, both in this chapter and throughout the rest of the narrative that tells the story in a chronological fashion.

The result of these arguments is that the monograph is both stimulating to read and challenging to many of the major interpretative themes that have developed in the literature on the Scottish witch-hunts. The author again states the argument that he made in “The fear of the king is death”, that demonic theory was not introduced into Scotland by James VI (143). He is cautious about the use of torture, challenging Pitcairn’s contention that Elizabeth Dunlop was tortured when accused in Ayrshire in 1576 (72), and concluding that in this period that the “infrequent applications of torture to suspect witches were clearly illegal”(215) and not part of an inquisitorial legal process. Maxwell-Stuart does recognize that sleep-deprivation, which he distinguishes from torture, was used. (73) He is also cautious about the concept that there was a “hunt” for witches going on in the mid-1590’s, (198), and in the use of the term in general in this period: “But neither Kirk nor state appears to have embarked on any witch ‘hunt’, certainly not in the manner of some of those hunts which disfigured one or two places elsewhere in Europe.” (215) Instead, Maxwell-Stuart sees witch-trials as generally being conducted fairly, although at times such as the 1590’s he argues that “both Kirk
and state were not above using witchcraft trials on occasion to make political points.” (215) He finds only scattered evidence of concern for the demonic in this period, noting that it was only in the seventeenth century with the Covenanters that “renouncing baptism, receiving the mark, and making a pact tend to become common in Scottish witchcraft.” (185)

The argument which one suspects will gain the most notice – and challenge – is Maxwell-Stuart’s suggestion that there may, indeed, have been a magical conspiracy to destroy James VI. He sets the argument up early in the book, noting an attempt at witchcraft made at the time of James’ own birth (49). With this beginning assumption that there were people practicing magic in early modern Scotland, Maxwell-Stuart is willing to consider the possibility that they actually met together, not as Margaret Murray suggested in pre-Christian worship, but in order to more effectively cast spells. The discussion is lengthy and thorough, centering around two questions: was there a conspiracy; and, if so, was Bothwell in charge? (148) He anticipates objections to the meetings having taken place, and then carefully answers them. His suggestion that the meeting in North Berwick has many elements missing which are traditionally considered part of the witches’ Sabbath is one that needs to be considered carefully. Richard Graham becomes a central figure in the author’s interpretation, because he was both a practicing magician and connected to the Earl of Bothwell. The charges brought against Barbara Napier and Euphame MacCalyean are thoroughly discussed and demonstrate, in the author’s view, that both were indeed considered by their communities to be practicing witches. After reviewing the information related to the first question, Maxwell-Stuart argues: “That there was a conspiracy to kill the King by magic, it seems impossible to doubt. A review of earlier decades in the century has shown that people regarded this as a perfectly acceptable way of trying to commit murder and that they were quite prepared to hire others to do it for them, and to participate in the requisite operations.” (171) After reaching this conclusion, he turns to the second question – Bothwell’s role – and then to further questions. As one
can easily see, this does not represent a standard interpretation of the events of North Berwick. The lenses of magic and allegations of witchcraft being used to attack remaining Catholic beliefs are fundamental to the author’s perspective and argument.

Readers of book reviews want to know a few things: is it a good book? What’s new? What ideas are challenged? What are the weaknesses (if any)? How can I use it in my own teaching, research and understanding? They expect that the writers of the review have enough expertise to help them answer these questions. They also hope that the reviewer is being ‘objective’ in her or his comments about the book, not bringing some particular agenda to bear or axe to grind. Let all reading this review abandon all thoughts of ‘objectivity’. I do not believe objectivity is possible, certainly not in this specific instance. Instead, I believe it is better to name briefly one’s own position and possible conflicts of interest, then make one’s comments with the reader aware of these realities. There have been two recent monographs on the Scottish witch-hunt, the one being reviewed and one written by myself on the witch-hunt in Fife. Maxwell-Stuart and I cover some of the same ground, indeed some of the same cases. One temptation is to emphasize those areas in which there is agreement. The opposite temptation is to pick apart any areas where we disagree, or pick out the inevitable mistakes or typos that creep into any scholarly book. Having noted these temptations let me yield to each of them in turn. First, I would suggest Maxwell-Stuart is correct in challenging the view that torture was prevalent in the Scottish witch-hunt, downplaying the role of the demonic pact and demonic theory in the Scottish witch-hunt, in his wonderful portrait in the introduction of how an individual magical practitioner became labelled as a witch, and in his suggestion that the boundary between charming and witchcraft was fluid. One can deduce that on these points his work and my own, done independently, are in basic agreement or he has helped me understand key issues in a helpful way. There is some disagreement in other areas. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart may over-stresses the
attack on Catholicism rather than emphasizing more the other prong of his argument, namely that the Reformed church was out to eradicate any practice of magic that it discovered, regardless of whether it was or wasn’t related to Catholicism. His suggestion that the Earl of Bothwell was involved in a magical conspiracy against James VI at North Berwick, while fascinating, is not completely convincing. As a reader who is aware of at least some of my own biases, you can determine for yourself how much weight to give each or any of these opinions or those offered elsewhere in the review.

To damn Satan’s Conspiracy with faint praise, it offers the first comprehensive coverage of the early Scottish witchcraft cases. But this is a book that deserves more than faint praise. Because of his careful use of the perspective of magic and occult beliefs, Maxwell-Stuart has been able to offer new insights on many key interpretations of the Scottish witchhunt, a perspective that shows some of those interpretations to be incorrect, others to be dubious, and to raise questions which we need to at least consider before we dismiss them too readily. This is an accomplishment indeed – and a very important book.

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