
Since Christina Larner’s research on witchcraft in Scotland, the topic has exploded like no other topic in Scottish history. Many scholars have explored Larner’s findings and have come to various explanations for the Scottish witch-hunt, politics is just one of the many issues which have been raised in this recent scholarship. Comparisons across borders reveal that while a norm did exist between countries, each country had its own unique pattern when it came to early modern witch-hunting. In this recent addition to the maturing subject matter, Julian Goodare *et al.* showcase the latest research on the Scottish witch-hunts and have addressed many of the issues raised by Larner and other historians, such as Carlo Ginzburg, whose fields range beyond Scotland. In so doing, the authors add their perspectives and definitions to past research, thus putting the Scottish witch-hunt into many different contexts.

In “The Global Context of the Scottish Witch-hunt,” Ronald Hutton gives a detailed account of witchcraft practices found all over the globe and reveals a worldwide pattern of characteristics attributed to the figure of the witch, while still exploring regional variables. Hutton also identifies these basic characteristics in historical models of witches in continental Europe, and it is these historical models which may prove to be most useful to those studying Scottish witchcraft. While Hutton’s international comparisons prove useful in drawing parallels between Scotland and the rest of the world, it is the historical models upon which Scottish witch beliefs were based. (pp.24-25)

Directly following Hutton’s discussion of international witch-hunt patterns is Stuart MacDonald’s study of a very important aspect of Scottish witch belief - the Devil and the demonic pact. In order to better understand the role played by the Devil in Scotland, MacDonald’s article, “The Devil in Fife Witchcraft Cases, 1560-1705,” takes a close look at witchcraft cases in Fife, the third most active shire in
terms of cases tried. By examining the source material and its origins, MacDonald reveals that the Devil appears most frequently in documents which arise from the central government. (p.36) Even more significant than this demonic presence in government records, is the relatively minor role which is attributed to the Devil. (p.45) This article attempts to explain why church courts and local nobility were so interested in pursuing witches when the role of the demonic, which has traditionally been interpreted by historians as the elite cultural perception of witches, seemed such a minor one. MacDonald examines this theme as an intricate part of a “broader programme” intended to control the thoughts, values and behaviours of the entire population. (p.49)

MacDonald’s detailed and informative exploration of the Fife witch trials is followed by a more general look at the witch scare of 1597 by Julian Goodare in “The Scottish Witchcraft Panic of 1597.” This chapter attempts to explain the panic by examining its various causes, the records which are still available, and the role played by King James VI in the rehabilitation of witch-hunting. A very detailed article, it does much to shed light on the circumstances of the 1597 panic.

Goodare’s chapter is followed by an examination of the role played by “the domestic” in witchcraft beliefs as explored by Lauren Martin’s “Witchcraft, Quarrels and Women’s Work in Scotland”. This chapter discusses two main aspects of the links which can be drawn between witch beliefs and the domestic work of women. Firstly, the demonic pact was an idea conceptually akin to marriage, and secondly, the domestic was the basis of quarrels which often led to witchcraft accusations. (p.74) This chapter presents a different way of thinking about witchcraft, and illuminates the unease with which early modern society viewed women, while giving the reader a good idea of what the image of the Scottish witch had become.

As early modern medicine was a far cry from the medical practices we know today, there existed a wide range of
devices and directions,” or folk healing in early modern society. Joyce Miller describes these beliefs and practices of folk healing in great detail to determine why “charmers” were sometimes prosecuted as witches. Her chapter, entitled “Devices and Directions: Folk Healing aspects of Witchcraft Practice in Seventeenth-Century Scotland,” begins with a discussion of the differences between a “witch” and a “charmer,” while relating charms and magical practices to the wider context of early modern health and disease. Miller then describes the folk healing practices themselves, the methods involved and the materials used. A very well-organized and informative chapter, Miller gives the reader an excellent understanding of what these charmers and healers were being prosecuted for, and how these practices came to be condemned as witchcraft.

While folk healers and charmers were not normally found in the upper classes - a group which had access to doctors and surgeons - there were as yet a number of nobility and members of the upper-classes who were put on trial for witchcraft, many of them women. In an attempt to determine what these trials of the elite tell us about the accused, their prosecutors, and the nature of witch-hunting, Louise Yeoman takes a closer look at propertied Scotswomen who were accused of witchcraft in “Hunting the Rich Witch in Scotland: High-Status Witchcraft Suspects and their Prosecutors, 1590-1650.” A recurring theme throughout this chapter is envy over inheritance and money sometimes involving feuds and disputes with those who had access to confessing witches. This chapter gives us excellent insight into how witchcraft, a phenomenon driven by the elite, affected the class driving it.

Closely related to the role played by the Scottish elite in the witch-hunts is that played by the Scottish state, which is discussed in detail by Goodare in “Witch-hunting and the Scottish State.” The chapter pays particular attention to the decision of whether or not to hold a criminal trial in the case of witchcraft accusations, the point at which, according to Goodare, central government became involved in the witch-hunt process. A very
concise and well-organized chapter, Goodare does much to explain the legal machinations involved in the Scottish trials.

The last four chapters of the book discuss the end of the Scottish witch trials and reiterate many of the issues discussed in previous chapters. Michael Wasser discusses the Renfrewshire witch-hunts and the conditions which surrounded the trials in “The Western Witch-Hunts of 1697-1700: the Last Major Witch-hunt in Scotland.” Brian Levack attempts to explain the decline in the number of witchcraft prosecutions in Scotland after 1662 in “The Decline and End of Scottish Witch-hunting.” James Sharpe provides a comparative analysis of historiographical problems in England and Scotland in “Witch-hunting and witch historiography: some Anglo-Scottish Comparisons” and Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson wrap it up with a discussion of continued witch belief from the seventeenth century right up to the nineteenth century in “The Last of the Witches? The Survival of Scottish Witch Belief” where they concentrated on folk beliefs after the end of the witch-hunts.

This collection is an excellent resource for anyone seeking to understand the Scottish witch-hunts and the different political, cultural and social contexts in which it occurred. There is an excellent flow between the articles, which fit together exceedingly well and follow a format which naturally leads the reader through the Scottish witch-hunts themselves, while at the same time examining in-depth the specific questions to which each article pertains. However, the collection is sadly lacking in religious content, a context which would no doubt lead the reader to a better understanding of the phenomenon. Although Goodare states that Scottish theology “presents an unsolved problem” and that “the place [of witchcraft] in systematic theology is unclear” (p.14), a discussion of the effects of Protestantism and Scottish covenanting, as well as other issues relating to the early modern Scottish church, would no doubt be of use to the reader.

Overall, Goodare has done an exemplary job editing and organizing these excellent and very “readable” chapters by
the various experts involved. The book as a whole sheds a great deal of light on issues concerning witchcraft and witch-belief in Scotland.

Stephanie Hill
University College of Cape Breton