Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan. *Scottish Fairy Belief*  

*Scottish Fairy Belief* is an enticing topic, and Lizanne Henderson and Ted Cowan do not disappoint. The tone of the discussion is lively and the book is filled with charming examples, but this is not what is most impressive. The true accomplishment of this book rests in the success of the authors in “present[ing] a reasonably vivid picture of what fairy belief once was and meant to the believers.” (5)

Henderson and Cowan explore countless witchcraft cases and ballads in search of fairies. It is these sources that they use as a guide for deciphering fairy belief. In the witchcraft cases they employ the framework of Carlo Ginzburg and explore the testimony of accused witches. 1 Ginzburg argues that we must not discard the testimony of accused witches as forced testimony or the ramblings of the mentally ill, but that the testimonies are significant historical sources because they offer much insight into what was believed by the accused. Therefore, the focus of the discussion is not whether the testimonies were accurate, rather they serve as a springboard for discussion of why these stories were plausible. The answer quickly emerges that fairies existed everywhere for the people of Scotland between 1450-1750; it is belief in these ‘friendly neighbours’ that offers historians a way to begin sketching a picture of popular Scottish beliefs the way in which they understood the world around them (which the authors refer to as *mentalité*).

The study begins with a historiographical survey of what has been gathered on fairy belief during the early modern period. In the second chapter the authors quickly move into the realm of belief in early modern Scotland. Popular beliefs of where fairies lived, what they looked like, their magical powers and connection with the dead, as well as their pastimes, and the political and social infrastructure of their communities are illustrated with numerous examples. Exploration through the contemporary belief structure continues through the third chapter which discusses perceived fairy powers over humans through enchantment and methods of disenchantment. Chapter four traces the changing image of fairies as they underwent the demonization process that was occurring throughout Scottish popular culture. The fifth chapter explores the re-ignition of fairy belief at the end of the
seventeenth century, and how their image and experience was changed forever when recorded by pen. Robert Kirk, a minister who was closely associated with fairy belief is the main subject of the sixth chapter. Kirk, a minister of Balquhidder and then Aberfoyle, revived fairy belief as he was a strong proponent of combining Christian and fairy belief to suppress atheism. The story of this exceptional character embodied many of the characteristics of Christian and supernatural belief. The final chapter explores the legacy of fairies in the literature of the modern era.

Fairy Belief in Scotland is a timely publication. Scholars have recently given a great deal of attention to the study of Scottish witchcraft and the witch-hunts. By illuminating how Scots viewed the supernatural world and how this world was intertwined with their own, Cowan and Henderson make a significant contribution to understanding the mentalité in which beliefs in witchcraft developed. Ecclesiastical pressure to remodel this world led to a process of demonizing elements of popular culture which had disastrous results closely connected to the events of the witch-hunts. Beyond the significant contributions that this work makes to the study of witchcraft in Scotland, it also makes a substantial contribution to understanding popular culture. Although fairies were only one aspect of popular belief, the success in which the authors had in teasing out the complex integration of the supernatural world into the temporal Christian world offers a solid basis in which to understand popular perceptions and beliefs in Scotland. By putting forward an ‘experience-centred’ framework and methodology, this study provides a basis from which to study popular Scottish mentalité within its own cultural context.

The topic is challenging, and in many ways it is fraught with difficulties which the authors readily recognize. They state that “belief is not the easiest of subjects to study” as it is very difficult to shed modern perceptions and reactions to the events studied and to know how those of the early modern world would have responded. The sources are also a challenge. Both the witchcraft trials and ballads were recorded by intermediaries who inevitably gave a distorted version of the events. This is further complicated by the fact that these sources offer some of the most comprehensive and insightful evidence of fairy belief (and popular culture) that has survived to the modern day. Despite these challenges, which are not new to folklorists, the authors recognize the
problems and persistently probe the sources in an attempt to understand the *mentalité* of those who lived in early modern Scotland. The study has been fairly successfully in reaching these goals within the context of fairy belief. It is in the broader goal set out on the first page where more explicit discussion would have been welcome. The authors sought “to reach some conclusions about the role of fairies as a cultural phenomenon”, yet there is very little discussion on this issue or on the wider significance of this study. For example, how does the study of fairies fit into our understanding of popular culture and everyday life during the period? How widely can this discussion be applied within the context of geography or economic and social status? How does this glimpse into the beliefs of the Scottish people contribute to our understanding of Scottish society and culture, and where should studies of popular culture go from here?

Cowan and Henderson have produced a creatively researched and compelling study of a significant aspect of popular culture in early modern Scotland and it provides a significant foundation on which to expand discussions and research of popular culture in early modern Scotland. The work is accessible to both academic and general audiences and offers a fascinating foray into the *mentalité* of early modern Scotland.

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**Endnotes**

2. The most recent publications include work done by the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft. This project has four scholars who are currently creating a database of witchcraft cases and trials recorded in Scotland between 1563-1736. See Julian Goodare (ed.), *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context* (Manchester, 2002); see also the work of Stuart MacDonald published in this journal and his book *The Witches of Fife* (East Lothian, 2002).