

Review article: Witches and Fairies in Early-Modern Scotland

P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Satan's Conspiracy: Magic and Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland*, East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 2001, pp. 225, pb. £16.95, ISBN 1862321361; Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: a History*, East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 2001, pp. xi + 242, pb. £14.99, ISBN 1862321906; Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches*, Exeter, Exeter University Press, 2000, pp. 454, pb £16.99, ISBN 08589388X, hb £47.50, ISBN 0859896803

Scotland always figures in any general survey of witchcraft in these isles because of the stress which is, rightly or wrongly, placed on the figure of James VI. His central role in the North Berwick witch trials in the early 1590s, coupled with the publication of his *Daemonologie* later in the decade, place him as a central figure in the debates of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Because of this it has been postulated that he was a driving figure in the witch-hunts of the 1590s in Scotland, and was subsequently instrumental in fuelling similar events after his accession to the English throne in 1603. Although two English editions of the *Daemonologie* were put to press in the year he took the throne and there was subsequent public interest in the subject, James himself can not really be charged with fuelling interest in witchcraft after he came to the throne of England. As James Sharpe points out, 'A closer examination of James's track-record in instances of witchcraft while king of England . . . reveals that his attitudes were far removed from the propensity for rabid witch-hunting that has been attributed to him'.¹

James's presence, perhaps unsurprisingly then, is keenly felt in all the books under consideration here, and two of them – Maxwell-Stuart's *Satan's Conspiracy*, and Normand and Roberts's *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland* – closely engage with the question of James's role in the North Berwick trials and the subsequent witch hunts. In the former it is considered as part of a survey of

magic and witchcraft in the later sixteenth century, while the latter is solely concerned with the trials themselves; and in both books *Daemonologie* is convincingly shown to have had its genesis in the trials which preceded its composition. However, neither paint the picture of James as the instigator of the witch-hunts that followed in Scotland, but rather see them as driven not by the king but the Kirk. Of course the events at North Berwick no doubt lingered in the minds of the populace and had some bearing on what followed, but it was by no means part of a personal quest by James. Indeed the publication of *Daemonologie* actually marks the end of the witch trials, with James disbanding all the standing commissions to try witchcraft in August 1597, only a few months after the book was published in Edinburgh.

James's treatise is one of the key texts for any study of Renaissance occult works in English, and Lawrence Normand and the late Gareth Roberts have certainly provided scholars of witchcraft with a very important and useful resource by reproducing not only the text of *Daemonologie*, but also *Newes from Scotland*, and transcripts of the dittays as well as the examinations, confessions, and depositions of those accused of witchcraft. The latter are not found in Pitcairn's *Ancient Criminal Trials* and appear here in print for the first time. I am also much pleased to find they have even reproduced all the illustrations that accompanied *Newes from Scotland*. The texts themselves are richly annotated and thorough bibliographic descriptions are provided. I do however have two complaints with the edition. Firstly the documents themselves are not indexed in the bibliography, but only the introductions to the documents and the essays on the context, which together form the first part of the volume. Indeed even when dealing with the secondary material the Index is not as complete as one might wish it to be: for example the entry for 'Hemmingsen' makes no reference to his debates with King James in Denmark, which are mentioned in the text on pp. 34-5. This inevitably somewhat reduces the volume's usefulness. Secondly, the annotations to the text can be confusing. Two sets are provided, those they label 'annotations' at the foot of the page which provide glosses or elucidations for various words or phrases, and a series of notes at the end of the document providing additional information. Those given at the foot of the page are so numerous that it is frequently difficult to locate which annotation is connected to which phrase in the text, since they are all indicated by daggers. The problem with the notes, however, is only a minor criticism given the thoroughness that has gone into the preparation of the documents.

Both books are very thorough on the background to the trials, although they come at the subject from different angles. *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland* focuses more on the political context, while the other book locates it in the context of other witchcraft accusations. Given these differences in emphasis it is interesting to see how Maxwell-Stuart's interpretation of events differs from that given by Roberts and Normand in the first part of their book. The alleged gathering at the Kirk, which is so central to the story of the

witches' conspiracy, is a case in point. For Roberts and Normand it is a fiction constructed by those in power: the meeting at the North Berwick Kirk is seen as drawing on recent history when there was a community of Catholic nuns living there. It is suggested that this was drawn on, and twisted into a gathering of witches. There is no consideration that this is any more than a fantasy composed in negotiation between the accused and their accusers. The authorities are charged with weaving disparaging accusations of witchcraft into a monolithic narrative which encompasses treason. In *Satan's Conspiracy*, on the other hand, the possibility is explored that there potentially could be some form of phenomenon underlying the charges of witchcraft. In many cases the author postulates the possibility of visual hallucinations with attendant auditory phenomena to account for parts of the narratives provided by those accused, and in the case of the meeting of the Coven at North Berwick Kirk he suggests that an actual gathering may well have lain behind the stories which were later related. This theory was admittedly put forward in the early twentieth century by Margaret Murray, whose idea of witch trials being evidence of a native pagan fertility cult have long been abandoned, by and large because of her very selective use of the evidence. Maxwell-Stuart is not buying into Murray's hypothesis, but rather points out that such a meeting could feasibly have occurred if someone was minded to attempt to gather together individuals whose services were separately being employed to bring ruin on the King. This would not have been the first time that someone in Scotland had consulted witches in the belief that they could cause the death of a third party. Earlier in James's reign Katherine Munro, Lady Fowlis, had allegedly gathered a group of reputed witches in order to kill her stepson by magic. Maxwell-Stuart makes a good case for the reality of the conspiracy, if not of its effects. His hypothesis is worthy of further consideration, although there is not room to rehearse it in its entirety here. He argues that since the Kirk itself stood on a tidal island, which was not liable to be disturbed, the basic machinery was in place by which such a secret meeting might have occurred. His proposed reconstruction of events reveals details of the case and its context which have been previously overlooked by historians. Read side by side the two differing approaches to the case give a comprehensive and rounded view of all the possibilities which could have influenced, or lain behind, the narratives provided at the trials.

Continental beliefs are frequently seen as being more widespread in Scottish treatments of witchcraft than they were in English ones. And it has frequently been argued, even by writers of Christina Larner's calibre, that James was personally responsible for the introduction of Continental ideas about witchcraft into Scotland, particularly since he entered into dialogues with the theologian and writer on witchcraft, Niels Hemmingsten, during his stay in Denmark in 1589. Certainly the dialogues between the king and the theologian did occur prior to the North Berwick trials. However, in his public dialogues in Denmark the topic in question was predestination and

not the occult, a point that is made in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*. Roberts and Normand postulate that there were many channels through which such ideas could have entered the northern realm. Merchants were in frequent contact with Northern European traders, and books and ideas were transported into the kingdom as well as goods. Maxwell-Stuart concurs with this analysis, but goes even further and suggests that the key features of Continental witch theory did not play a significant role in Scottish trials, and that James's attitudes were largely shaped by Scottish beliefs and traditions. His re-appraisal of a native Scots approach to the subject is a welcome corrective to previous examinations of witchcraft in Scotland which have not even consciously entertained the notion that there was such a thing.

Another overlooked part of the Scottish traditions of the supernatural is fairy belief. Fairies were an integral part of the Scottish approach to magic and witchcraft, and they had a very tangible presence, both in the witch trials and in treatises on the occult. In the third book of his *Daemonologie* James VI considers the existence of fairies and concludes that demonic illusion is to blame for reports of people visiting the fairy realm. Despite fairies being found in such volumes historians such as Larner have generally dismissed any consideration of the fairy folk in relationship to witchcraft. Keith Thomas only briefly touches on them in his monumental tome, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, making them share a chapter with ghosts. Kathleen Briggs is perhaps the one scholar who has seriously treated the subject, but she dwelt on the fairy folk found south of the border. To the best of my knowledge no work has undertaken to locate them in the specific context of Scottish beliefs in witchcraft and the supernatural. *Scottish Fairy Belief*, along with *Satan's Dominion*, are welcome for their examination of an aspect which seems to have been last noted as significant by Walter Scott in his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* as long ago as the early nineteenth century.

Scottish Fairy Belief engages with the re-classification of various popular beliefs as pagan superstitions after the Reformation, and charts the way in which they were first re-classified as demonic, before later regaining their neutrality with Robert Kirk's reinstatement of older ideas in *The Secret Commonwealth* in 1691. The examination of the way that fairy beliefs were intertwined with accusations of witchcraft in the latter book will no doubt be of immense interest to historians of the subject. In order to avoid overusing the word fairy throughout the book Henderson and Cowan have employed a wide range of synonyms including the rather charming term 'lychnobious people', meaning twilight dwellers. Indeed they survey the various appellations which are applied to the fairies in documents from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Maxwell-Stuart prefers the Gaelic term *Sithian* and uses it throughout to describe the fairies in order to avoid associations with various twentieth century depictions of fairies. However, since Henderson and Cowan argue that we can see in the writing of J. M. Barrie and others the influence of the Scottish tradition this distinction seems an artificial one to make. Admittedly

the depictions Maxwell-Stuart explicitly wishes to avoid association with are the pictures of Richard Dadd and the Cottingham photographs, but given that in many ways we can still trace the continued influence of traditional beliefs even down to our day it seems over-scrupulous to employ the Celtic term *Sithian* throughout in deference to the more normal term Fairy, which was employed by many of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers.² Although Maxwell-Stuart is by no means ignorant of the subject, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, unsurprisingly, presents a fuller examination and more incisive analysis of the role of fairies within Scottish beliefs about the supernatural. One also wonders if he is slightly hard on James when he dismisses his view of fairies as demonic as containing 'an element of racial prejudice'. He locates James's view within a rejection of Highland belief and culture, which is an interesting conjecture, but it could equally be accounted for by the influence of the Calvinistic Reformed theology of the Kirk. To the Reformed way of thinking there was no obvious room for a neutral race of spirits such as fairies; they had therefore to be accounted for by reference to either angelic or demonic powers. Henderson and Cowan point this out as part of their consideration of the role James VI played in the shifts of belief that occurred in the sixteenth century. In fact from the later medieval period there had been a shift in belief, as creatures that did not strictly fit into the category of angel or devil were tolerated far less than they had previously been. With the Reformation the process was completed and fairies were demonized. Admittedly, much later writers, such as Robert Kirk, would not accept the strict binarism of the sixteenth-century Reformers, seeing fairies as belonging to an order and degree below the angels but in no way demonic. But Kirk was writing almost a hundred years after James VI and by that time various Neo-Platonic ideas of the nature of the universe with its different hierarchies and orders had become widespread among the universities, and it was by drawing on these that Kirk was able to postulate fairies as neither strictly angelic nor demonic. I would suggest that such a model would not have been seen as acceptable, or possibly even thinkable, in the more binaristic religious climate that James was writing in. Indeed in the case of Isobel Watson, Maxwell-Stuart recognises that the interrogators sought to re-configure her stories of fairy contact as encounters with evil spirits, in line with the theological world view they adhered to.

Both books have taken more seriously than most interdisciplinary approaches to their field. Maxwell-Stuart is aware of the psychological, or more properly parapsychological, analyses of his subject, and Henderson and Cowan are familiar with the various writings by folklorists on theirs. From these three publications it appears that traditional Scottish beliefs in the supernatural are now coming of age as an area of academic consideration, and I expect that following on from them we shall see more studies examining various aspects of this subject.

Notes

- 1 James Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter* (London: Profile, 1999), p.178.
- 2 Given Maxwell-Stuart's otherwise cautious and precise use of language it is odd that he should employ the anachronistic term 'spirit-guide' in describing the various entities which accused witches claim to have consulted. When he first uses it he even acknowledges the fact that the term properly belongs to four hundred years later. Given his concern over the use of such terms as 'fairies' it seems inconsistent for him to use the term 'spirit-guide'- even going to the extent of employing it in a chapter title. The term belongs to the seance room and to use it here is to invite inappropriate parallels between the early-modern witches and the mediums of a later age, and could possibly be seen as lending credence to the more populist and ill-informed notions that those persecuted as witches were possessed of psychic abilities or proto-Spiritists.

Address for Correspondence

John Newton, St Mary's College, Elvet Hill, Durham DM1 3LR, UK, e-mail: j.g.newton@durham.ac.uk